In general dry-point glosses are not fundamentally different from their inked relatives. They, too can be added interlinearly or marginally with the same difficulties of association with the correct lemma of the L. base text. One property, however, that results from the manner in which they are added to the MSS, namely without ink, sets dry-point glosses off from ink glosses quite markedly.

2.2 Writing without Ink in Anglo-Saxon England

2.2.1 Stylus and Wax Tablets in Britain

The notion of hand-writing taking place without a colouring agent in the MS context would seem foreign from a modern perspective. While it is possible to apply dry-point writing to present-day paper, it is not a form of writing that we are accustomed to. Hence, most people will not take notice of dry-point writing on a piece of paper, unless it is pointed out to them explicitly. As a consequence, it is not readily clear to the modern mind why writing should take place without any pigment left behind on the page. Non-colouring writing implements have seen a revival ever since hand-held personal digital assistants started to be furnished regularly with plastic-tipped styli in the late 1990s. However, those styli were never intended to be used on paper. It can be assumed that the presence of the styli in the office world may have led to the spontaneous creation of such writing, and especially doodles, in isolated cases, but I am not familiar with any reported systematic use of non-colouring writing in the present era. In that respect, the medieval situation was markedly different. Bischoff (BMS 1: 88) points out that the medieval stylus had similar functions as today’s pencil: it was used for taking notes by professionals and students alike, it was used for ruling the MS page and it was used by illuminators to make first draughts on the MS page. The main writing medium of the stylus, however, was not parchment, but wax.

Wax tablets were one of the many cultural imports introduced to Britain after the Roman invasion in the 1st c. AD, and extant Romano-British wax tablets have been found in more than twenty archaeological sites throughout Britain so far, despite the fact that their organic material could only endure in favourable, i.e. water-logged, conditions. Some of these finds are of remarkable size, such as those from Vindolanda, a Roman fort near Hadrian’s Wall, where fragmentary and completely intact specimens of more than 1,400 writing tablets have been unearthed since the 1970s. Editions of the remaining legible text of more than 750 of these tablets have been published since the early 1980s (cf. most recently

---

6 Cf. also John Pearce’s “Progress Report” at the website “A Corpus of Writing-Tablets from Roman Britain.” URL: <http://www.csad.ox.ac.uk/RIB/RIBIV/jp5.htm>.
in Bowman et al. 2010). There is no archaeological evidence that the writing tablet continued to be in use after the Romans withdrew from Great Britain in the 5th c., although the notion seems likely. Certainly after the re-establishment of Christianity in Great Britain, both from Ireland and the Continent, in the late 6th c., stylus and wax tablets must have been household items again, at least in the monastic context. The Rule of St Benedict, for instance, while condemning the personal possession of styli and wax-tablets (Ch. 33), places the abbots under the obligation to provide their brethren with stylus and wax-tablet (Ch. 55) – "ut omnis auferatur necessitatis excusatio" – that is in order to keep the monks from claiming that they were not able to do God’s service for lack of appropriate tools. It is reasonable to assume then that most monks, even those who did not adhere to Benedict’s Rule, either had styli on them at all times or did not have to look far to get hold of a stylus. The presence of styli in the scriptoria is also well-established by their manifest use in the process of preparing the MS page for later writing, and the details of pricking and ruling (commonly in dry-point) are usually studied with great care by codicologists.

The active use of the stylus must have been familiar to all literate members of an Anglo-Saxon monastic institution, as their first writing lessons were confined to the use of the writing tablet during their trivium studies (cf. Savage 2006 [1911]: 63–64; Brown 1994; Brown 2008: 179). The use of stylus and wax tablet is well documented in Anglo-Saxon and early Irish literature, too (cf. Wattenbach 1896: 51–89 and Fisher 1921: 194). Aldhelm, for instance, composed a riddlic poem on the wax tablet around AD 700, from which we can gather the interesting information that the tablets were commonly bound in leather. The “Benedictional of St Æthelwold”, London, British Library Additional 49598 [G:301], written in the late 10th c., features a miniature of Zechariah writing in a large wax tablet using a stylus (cf. Brown 1994: 9 [Fig. 6]). And from Anselm’s (Archbishop of Canterbury from 1093 until 1100) biographer Eadmer, we know that it was Anselm’s custom to compose his treatises on wax tablets before they were committed to parchment (cf. Southern 1962: 30–31; Clanchy 1993: 119).

---

7 The translation reads: ‘My origin was from (the wax of) honey-bees, but my other outer part grew in the woods. Stiff leather provided me with my shoes. Now the iron point cuts into my comely face with its wandering movements, and carves furrows in the manner of a plough; but the holy seed for the crop is brought from heaven, and it produces abundant sheaves from its thousand-fold harvest. Alas, this holy harvest is destroyed by fierce weapons!’ (translation by Lapidge & Rosier 1985: 76).

8 For the actual use of the stylus in the creation of the “Benedictional of St Æthelwold”, see below p. 51.
Archaeological finds from the Anglo-Saxon period attesting to the use of wax tablet and stylus are also numerous.\(^9\) Styli, ranging in material from bone to silver, have been found in various archaeological contexts.\(^{10}\) From the site of the former priory at Blythburgh in Suffolk, a fragment of a writing-tablet made from bone is preserved in the British Museum, dated to sec. viii. While the wax has perished, both the upper surface and the surface of the recess that contained the wax show runic letters, which are set in irregular rows. They are assumed to be “trial letter forms not intended to make much sense”, perhaps added by a person “attempting Latin verbal forms” (Webster & Backhouse 1991: 81 [no. 57]).

The 14\(^{th}\)-c. York Tablets (cf. Brown 1994), featuring both L. and ME writing in anglicana cursive, on the other hand, provide an example of physical evidence for the continued use of the wax tablet in the later phases of the Middle Ages.\(^{11}\)

We find a very detailed 11\(^{th}\)-c. French description of a wax tablet by Baldricus of Bourgeuil (edited in Mabillon 1709: 51), in which the wax tablet is said to accommodate about eight hexameters – with the wax tablet held in landscape orientation. The French author emphasizes the fact that his wax tablet features green wax, as opposed to black wax, to help his eyes. From this description Todd (1846: 10) concludes that black must have been the common colour of the wax.\(^{12}\)

\(^9\) Incidentally, they are also well-attested from archaeological sites in Ireland. An early example of wax tablet usage in Ireland is provided by the Springmount Bog Tablets, dated to the 7th c. (Hillgarth 1962: 184 and Fig. 2), which still features early cursive Insular writing in the partly intact wax. A late example of an Irish wax tablet is provided by the Maghera Bog Tablet, dated to the 14th c. (Todd 1846, with facsimiles).

\(^{10}\) Webster & Backhouse (1991) list the following examples, each of them presented in a photograph: one copper-alloy stylus, sec. vii/viii, and two copper-alloy styli, sec. viii(ix, from Brandon (Suffolk) (86–87 [nos. 66 (r–t)]); an iron stylus, sec. viii, and two copper-alloy styli, sec. viii(ix, from Barking (East London) (90 [nos. 67 (i–k)]); a silver stylus, sec. viii(ix, and a copper-alloy stylus, sec. viii(ix, from Flixborough (Lincolnshire) (100 [nos. 69 (v–w)]); two copper-alloy styli, sec. vii/viii, from Jarrow (Tyne and Wear) (140 [no. 105 (d)]); a copper-alloy and silver stylus, sec. vii/viii, a copper-alloy stylus, sec. viii, and a bone stylus, sec. viii(ix, from Whitby (North Yorkshire) (142–143 [nos. 107 (c–e)]); and two copper-alloy styli, sec. viii(ix, from Bawsey (Norfolk) (231 [no. 107 (b–c)]). It is questionable whether the copper-alloy stylus, sec. viii, from Whitby (143 [no. 107 (d)]) really was used as a stylus, as it is comparatively narrow and suspiciously bent; Peers & Radford (1943: 64 [no. 76]) consider it to be an example of a group called “‘styliform’ [hair] pins”, distinguished by the lack of intermediate mouldings, with “the flat head being used for parting the hair and for the application of pomade”. Peers & Radford (1943: 65 [Fig. 15]) show drawings of five bronze styli (nos. 80–84) and a flat bronze stylus head (no. 85), as well as a photograph of two of them (1943: plate XXVII (c) [nos. 80–81]), all of them from Whitby.

\(^{11}\) On wax tablets in the European Middle Ages, cf. also Büll (1977: 785–894) and Lalou (1992b).

\(^{12}\) An observation, which is also borne out by the list of late antique and medieval wax tablets presented in Büll (1977: 809–812).