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How (im)precise can a cook be? The case of medieval English recipes¹

ABSTRACT: Molti studiosi che si occupano di ricette culinarie medioevali concordano sulla loro scarsità di informazioni sulle misure, sui pesi e sui tempi (si veda ad esempio Hieatt e Butler 1985 Görlach 1992 Carroll 1999). Il presente lavoro si propone di illustrare che, nonostante l'opinione comune che le istruzioni di cottura medievale mancano di precisione, ci sono raccolte piene di termini che indicano le misure e tempi di preparazione dei piatti. La discussione sarà basata su 36 ricette presenti nel Harley MS 2378 (British Library). Le ricette sono state scritte da o per Nicholas Spalding, un proprietario del manoscritto del XV secolo.

ABSTRACT: Many scholars dealing with the medieval culinary recipes agree that they were very scarce in terms of information on measures, weights and times (see for instance Hieatt and Butler 1985, Görlach 1992, Carroll 1999). The present paper aims at illustrating that despite the common view that medieval cooking instructions lack precision, there are collections which are full of terms indicating measures and times of a dish preparation. The discussion will be based on 36 recipes found in the Harley MS 2378 (British Library). The recipes were written either by or for Nicholas Spalding, a 15th century owner of the manuscript.

PAROLE-CHIAVE: Ricetta, Arte Culinaria Medievale, Misura.

KEYWORDS: Recipe, Medieval Culinary, Measure.

¹ Project financed by the National Science Centre. Decision number: DEC-2013/11/B/HS2/02504.

1. Introduction

The available studies of the medieval recipes agree that the culinary texts are very scarce in terms of information on measures, weights and times (see for instance Hieatt and Butler 1985, Görlach 1992, Carroll 1999, Carroll 2009). Görlach (2004) calls them incomplete and imprecise, whilst Hammond (1993: 126) writes that «[t]he recipes do not give precise instructions, nor any indication of quantity, so quite how they were used is a mystery». Brears (2008) suggests that recipes served only as a means to refresh the cook's memory concerning the ingredients of the dishes which were not used on everyday basis, and so there was no need to include details such as measurements in the recipes. Henisch (2009: 16) claims that the cook was a professional of 'thorough knowledge', for whom «[a] sensitive palate is essential, so he [the cook] will be alert enough to discern by taste what is too salty or too flat.» This has been reflected in some medieval recipes which instruct the cook to add ingredients, such as herbs and spices as he thinks best, see examples (1)-(2).

(1) And if pou seest that hit hath to litull of the vinegre, or salt, or saffron, caste thereto more, after thi discrecion;
(*Boke of kokery_Gely*)

(2) & caste in a quantite as pu semest beste;
(*Gathering of medieval English recipes_eMus_Bake mete praty upon*)

On the other hand, following Scully (1995: 8), it is possible that the recipes were not written for the cook but by the cook, as a gift given to some noble guests of a household in order to please them, or a way of boasting, and thus precise quantities were not necessary, since the cook, in fact, did not want others to be able to reproduce a particular dish. Additionally, Scully notices that the majority of the surviving recipes are too clean to have ever been used in the kitchen. And finally, Carroll (2009: 58) ascribes the vagueness of medieval recipes to their function, which «was not to instruct at all, but was mere propaganda».

2. Measure terms in medieval recipes²

In their study of measure terms in the medieval medical and culinary recipes, Bator and Sylwanowicz (2014) divided measurements into three groups: specific, non-specific³ and container-related terms. Specific terms are those which belong to one of the metrical systems used at that time, such as *ounce*, *pound*, *pennyweight*, etc. They are the most precise of the quantifications found in the recipes. Non-specific terms are expressions such as *enough*, *a (great/good) deal of*, *much*, *a little*, etc. They seem to be rather abstract measure terms, especially because no reference point is given (the reader is by no means instructed how much is *enough*, etc.). The third category can be located somewhere in

² This whole section is based on the comparative study of measure terms found in the culinary and medical recipes of the 14th and 15th centuries, carried out by Bator and Sylwanowicz (2014).

³ Carroll (2009) refers to these as vague or approximated quantities.

between the two. The container-related terms are words such as *cupful*, *dishful*, *potful* or *spoonful*. They are less abstract than the non-specific terms, however, similarly to the latter, no reference or explanation as to the size of the container is offered. Thus, we do not know whether a *spoonful* refers to a table spoon or a tea spoon, etc.

Having analysed 1,471 culinary recipes from the 14th and 15th centuries, Bator and Sylwanowicz concluded that it is the non-specific category which is most frequently represented in the Middle English culinary collections, with almost 6 occurrences per 1,000 words in the 14th and 7.5 in the 15th c. (see Table 1). The specific terms, at first glance, seem not to have been very rare either (with 1.9 occurrences per 1,000 words in the 14th c.). However, the picture has been blurred by a few recipes for alcoholic drinks, which, for some reason, were extremely precise, containing most of the specific measure terms found in the 14th-century corpus, see examples (3)-(4).

	14th c.	15th c.
specific terms	54 [1.9]	32 [0.3]
container-related terms	2 [0.07]	32 [0.4]
non-specific terms	155 [5.6]	667 [7.5]

TABLE 1. The number of occurrences of the particular measure terms in a corpus of 1,471 culinary recipes. The relative frequencies are given in brackets, normalised to 1,000 words.

(3) Potus ypocras. Take a half lb. of canel tried; of gyngyuer tried, a half lb.; of greynes, iii unce; of longe peper, iii unce; of clowis, ii unce; of notemugges, ii unce & a half; of carewey, ii unce; of spikenard, a half unce; of galyngale, ii unce; of sugir, ii lb. Si deficiat sugir, take a potel of hony.
(Goud Kokery_1380)

(4) Ad faciendum brakott. Take xiiii galouns of good fyn ale pat pe grout perof be twies meischid, & put it into a stonen vessel. & lete it stonde iii daies or iiii, til it be stale. Afterward take a quart of fyn wort, half a quart of lyf hony; & sette it ouer pe fier, & lete it sepe, & skyme it wel til it be cleer. & put perto a penyworp of poudir of peper & i penyworp of poudir of clowis, & sepe hem wel togidere til it boile. Take it doun & lete it kele, & poure out pe clere perof into pe forseid vessel, & pe groundis perof put it into a bagge, into pe forseid pot, & stoppe it wel wiþ a lynnec cloop pat noon eir come out; & put perto newe berm, & stoppe it iii dayes or iiii eer pou drinke perof. Put aqua ardente it among.
(Goud Kokery_1380)

For a discussion on the ‘vagueness of medieval recipes’, see also Carroll (2009), who accounts for the lack of specific details in the analysed recipes by claiming that «this vagueness is less a linguistic vagueness than a vagueness of omission» (2009: 78).

3. The MS Harley 2378

The present study is based on the culinary recipes found in the MS Harley 2378, which is available from the British Library Digitised Manuscripts Archive. The manuscript contains medical, culinary and alchemical texts and recipes. Most of the recipes were

collected by a 15th-century owner of the manuscript, Nicholas Spalding, the others were added later to the blank folios by various scribes. The culinary section contains 36 recipes (ff. 155r - 168v) of various length. They form a corpus of approximately 814 lines. The folios range from 26 to 32 lines. Each recipe begins with a heading, which is in red ink.

3.1 Quantifications in the MS Harley 2378

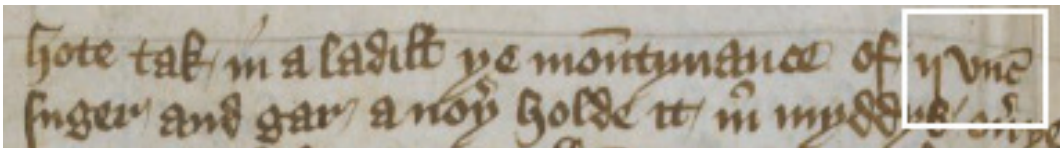
All of the recipes found in the MS Harley 2378 contained some form of measurements. The majority of the measure terms were specific, representing one of the dry weight systems used in the Middle Ages⁴ (see Table 2 for the exact numbers of occurrence of the terms representing each category of measure terms). Among the specific terms, the most common were ounce (70 records) and pound (60 records), see (5)-(6). Apart from these, the terms pennyweight, dra(ch)m and scruple were found, as in (7)-(9). In the analysed recipes, the measure terms were used both as full terms or they were abbreviated (as in examples (5b), (6b), (8), (9)).

	MS Harley 2378
specific terms	160
container-related terms	7
non-specific terms	15

TABLE 2. The number of occurrences of the particular measure terms in the culinary recipes found in the MS Harley 2378.

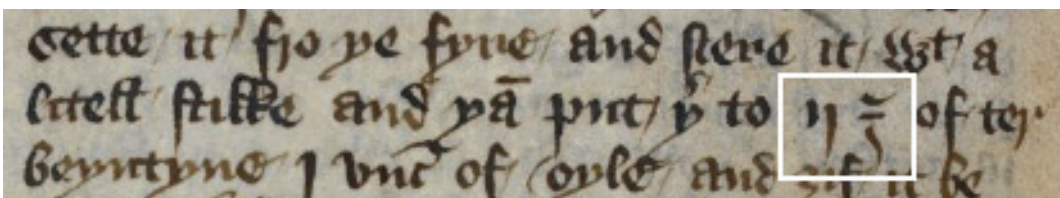
(5) ounce:

(a) [... tak in a ladih pe mōntynance of ij vnc suger ...]



(f. 156v, © The British Library Board, Harley 2378)

(b) [... and pā put p² to ij 3 of terbeyntyne j vnc of oyle and ...]

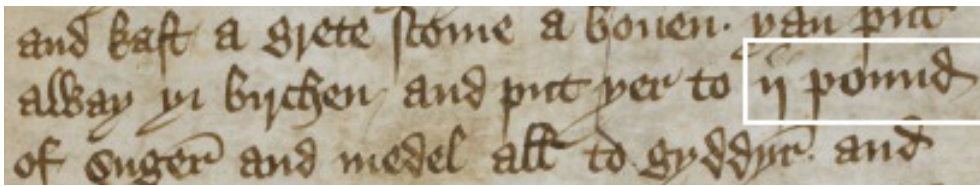


(f. 166v, © The British Library Board, Harley 2378)

⁴ Following Ross (1983: 16), at least 29 dry weight systems can be identified.

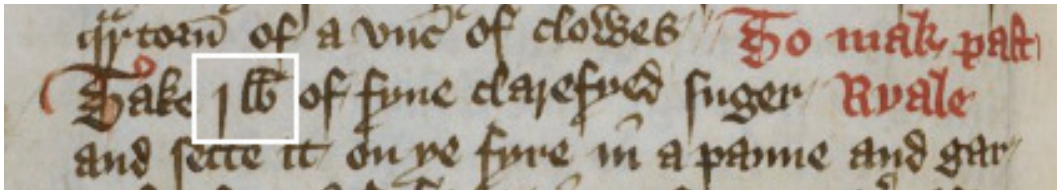
(6) pound:

(a) [... pan put away pi birchen and put per to ij pound of suger and medel all to gyddyr ...]



(f. 155r, © The British Library Board, Harley 2378)

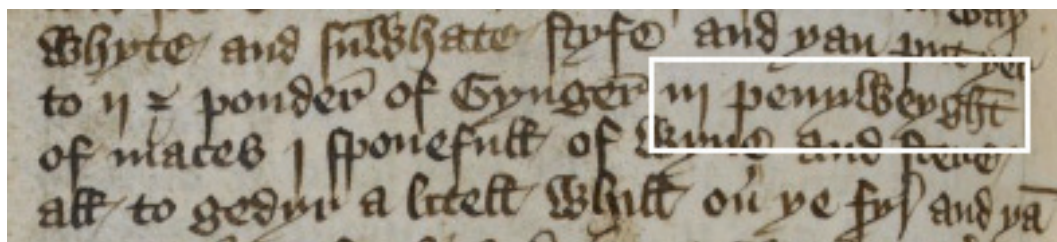
(b) [Take j lb of fyne clarefyed suger and sette it on pe fyre in a panne ...]



(f. 158v, © The British Library Board, Harley 2378)

(7) pennyweight:

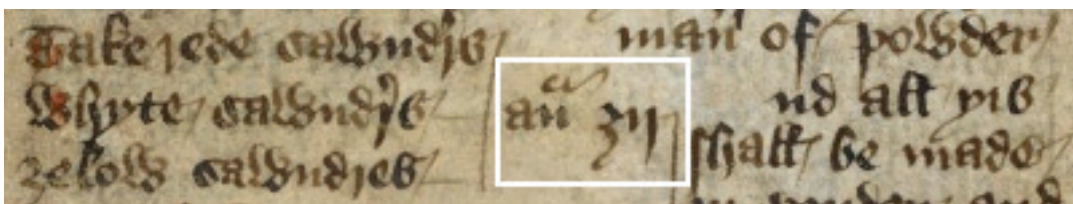
[... and pan put per to ij 3 pouden of Gynger iij penyweyght of maces j sponefull of wyne and stere all to gedyr a litell...]



(f. 161v, © The British Library Board, Harley 2378)

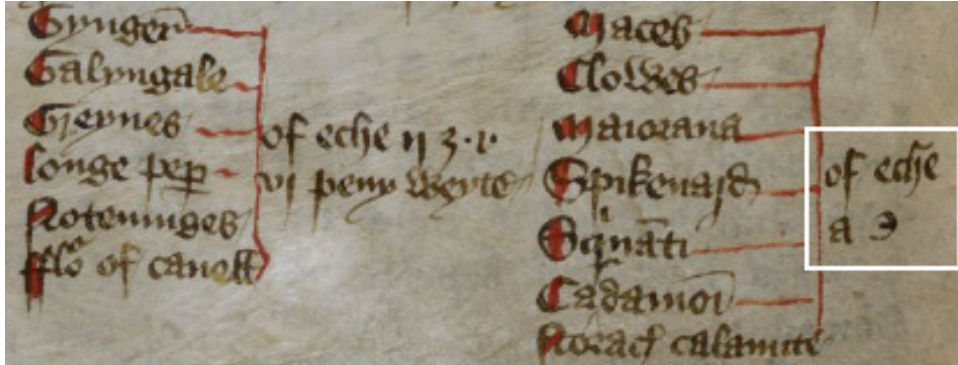
(8) dra(ch)m:

[Take rede sawndrs
Whyte sawndrs an° zij
Zelow sawndres ...]



(f. 166r, © The British Library Board, Harley 2378)

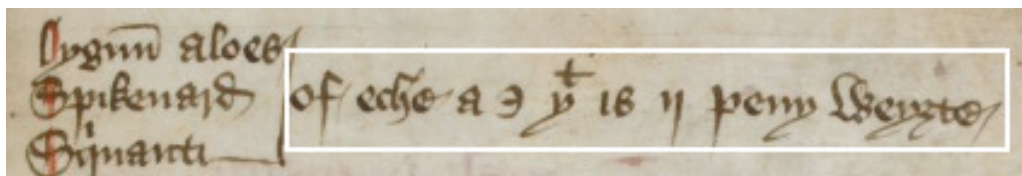
(9) scruple:
 [Maces
 Clowes
 Maiorana of eche
 Spikenard a ̃ ...]



(f. 164v, © The British Library Board, Harley 2378)

The range of measure terms used in the material shows that no single measure system was used within the recipes, but the terms used represent three different weight systems: the avoirdupois, the troy and the apothecaries.⁵ They share some of the units⁶(i.e., *pound*, *ounce* and *grain*), *dra(ch)m* is used in the avoirdupois and the apothecaries systems, whilst *pennyweight* is found exclusively in the troy and *scruple* only in the apothecaries system. It is argued that the scribe was aware of the existence of different metrical systems and that his intention was to make the measurements clear to the reader. Thus, in a number of cases the amounts are given in two systems at the same time, as in the example under (10), in which the scribe explains that a *scruple*, which belongs to the apothecaries' system, equals two *pennyweight* (which belongs to the troy system). On other occasions, the scribe combines terminology representing measurements belonging to three different systems within the same recipe, as in (11), where *dra(ch)m* (ʒ), *pennyweight* and *scruple* (̃) are used. The former two are used as if interchangeably with reference to the same group of ingredients. *Dra(ch)m* represents the avoirdupois⁷, whilst *pennyweight* the troy weight system. Within the same recipe *scruple*, which was found only in the apothecaries system, is attached to other ingredients.

(10) [... of eche a ̃ p' is ij peny weyte...]



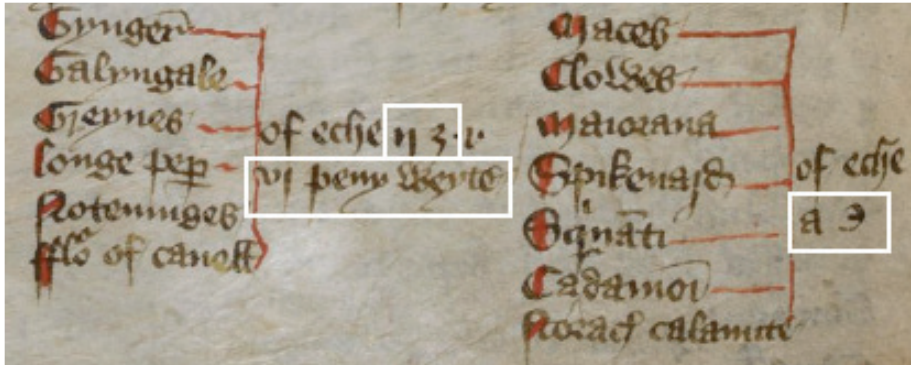
(f. 164r, © The British Library Board, Harley 2378)

⁵ For a discussion of the measure systems see for instance Ross (1983) or Andrew (2008).

⁶ Only the terminology is shared, the values for particular units differ in the three systems. For the exact values see the Appendix.

⁷ It could represent either the apothecaries or avoirdupois systems, however, looking at the values attached to these measure units, in this case it stands for the avoirdupois weight system.

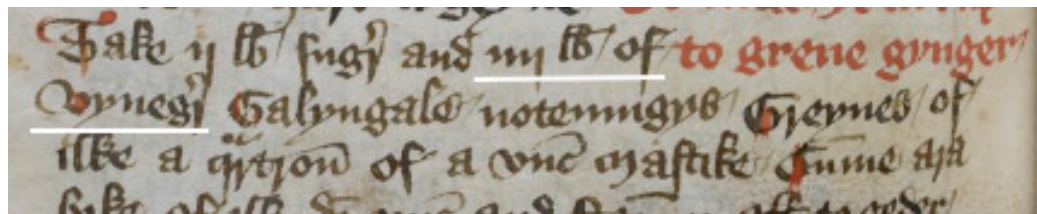
- (11)
 [Gynger
 Galyngale
 Greynes of eche ij 3 .i.
 Longe pep vj peny weyte
 Notemuges
 Flo^o of canell
 Maces
 Clowes
 Maiorana of eche
 Spikenard a 3
 ...]



(f. 164v, © The British Library Board, Harley 2378)

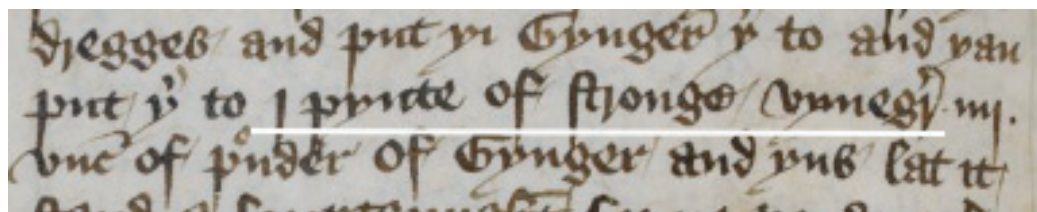
A certain confusion can also be noticed when it comes to the use of the dry and liquid measure units. The scribe is not consistent when it comes to some liquid ingredients. For instance, the amount of vinegar is specified with either *pound* or *pint*, as in (12).

- (12)
 (a) [Take ij lb sugr and iiij lb of vynegr ...]



(f. 162v, © The British Library Board, Harley 2378)

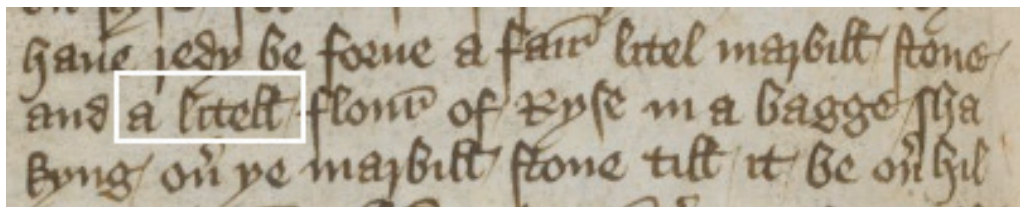
- (b) [... put p to j pynte of stronge vynegr ...]



(f. 162v, © The British Library Board, Harley 2378)

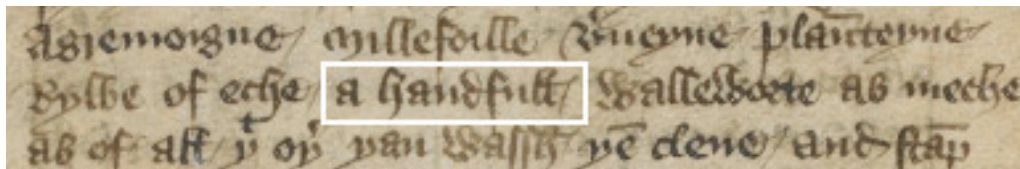
The only non-specific measure terms found in the analysed recipes were (a) *little*, *much* and *no*, see (13). Whilst among the container-related terms we found *spoonful*, *handful*, *potel* and *pipe*, as in (14).

(13) [... and a litell flour of Ryse in a bagge ...]



(f. 157v, © The British Library Board, Harley 2378)

(14) [... a handfull walleworte ...]



(f. 168r, © The British Library Board, Harley 2378)

Another aspect which deserves attention when it comes to the recipes found in the MS Harley 2378 is the way of presenting the ingredients. In a few texts some of the ingredients (mostly herbs and spices) are extracted from the body of the recipe and ordered in a column or two, as if the writer wanted to make them immediately visible (see example (11) earlier in this section). This way of presenting the ingredients is more typical of modern recipes rather than the medieval ones. In the latter the list of ingredients was usually incorporated into the preparation section and the reader would have to go through the whole recipe in order to learn what is required for the dish preparation (see for instance Bator and Sylwanowicz (forthcoming)).

3.2 Time specification in the MS Harley 2378

Apart from the ‘abundance’ of measure terms, the MS Harley 2378 is rich in time specifications, which is not typical of the majority of medieval cookbooks. Woolgar (1999: 137), for instance, writes that «[m]edieval cook-books were not instructional manuals, with quantities and cooking times». The most common references to times which can be found in the majority of recipes are:

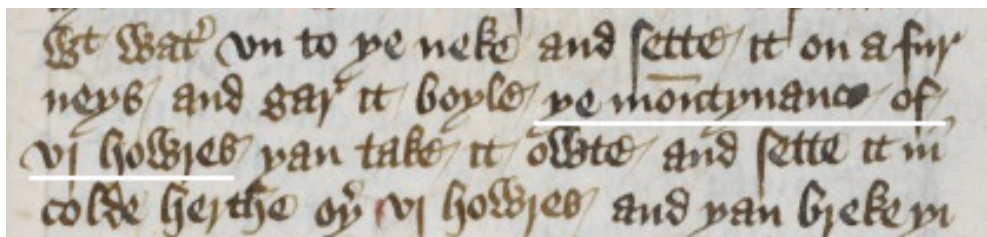
(15)

- (a) [...] & bake hym a lytel (*Bake Metis_Tartes of Frute in lente*)
- (b) [...] and whan hit hath boyled a while (*Boke of Kokery_Iusshell*)
- (c) And lete al boyle togidre a grete while (*Boke of Kokery_Oyle soppes*)
- (d) Boyle hem till they be ynowghe. (*Ordinance of Pottage_Conynggez yn clere broth*)
- (e) [...] & boyl hit tyl pe water be nere boyled yn. (*Gathering of ME Recipes_Rwl_Furmente*)
- (f) [...] toste hit tyl hit be sumdel brown. (*Gathering of ME Recipes_Rwl_Oylepevere for rosteded boef*)
- (g) [...] late rost tyl hit be drye. (*Gathering of ME Recipes_Rwl_Stekes of Veneson with a cyrop*)
- (h) And whan hit is at boyling, take it fro the fire... (*Boke of Kokery_Caudell*)
- (i) [...] & when yt is sufficiently soden... (*Gathering of ME Recipes_CUL_For to make jussell*)
- (j) Fry pame well & ... (*Gathering of ME Recipes_CUL_Fretour losenge*)
- (k) [...] an let boyle tyll pe Oynonys an pe Brawn ben euyne sothyn, an nowt to moche; (*Pottage Diverse_Auter brawn en peuerade*)
- (l) [...] and whan ze will wyte whan it is inow take perof a lytell on zoure tounge, & if it krase betwyxx zoure tethe pan it is nozt inow, and what it crase nozt pan it is inow. (*Goud Kokery_To mak blawnce pouder*)

In the MS Harley 2378, apart from such general statements as *enough, a while*, there are some specific times such as *hour, fortnight* (16). However, more frequently the cook is given some descriptive instructions concerning the duration of certain culinary procedures, see for instance (17). Additionally, some commonly known prayers are used as time indicators (see (18)), which adds to the repertoire of religious influence on food consumption. Albala (2011: 8), for instance, writes that «[f]ood has almost always been integral part of religious practice». The use of prayers whilst cooking indicates that we could also form a statement that ‘religion was an integral part of food preparation’.

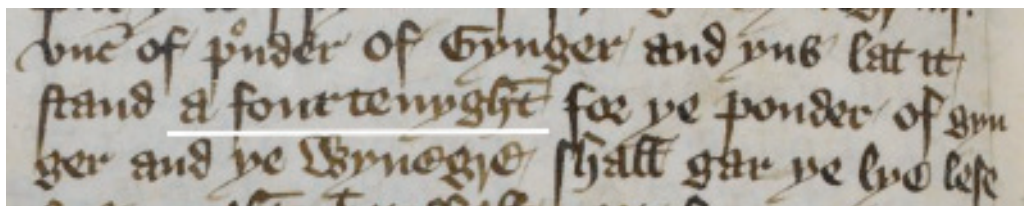
(16)

(a) [... and gar it boyle pe mōntynance of vj howres ...]



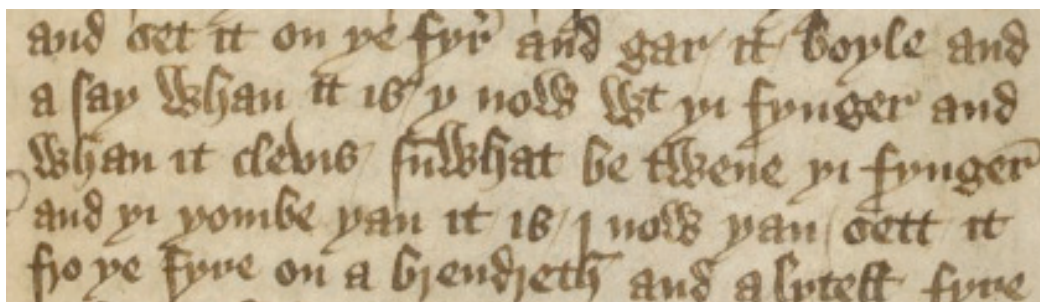
(f. 161r, © The British Library Board, Harley 2378)

(b) [... and pus lat it stand a fourtenyght ...]



(f. 162v, The British Library Board, Harley 2378)

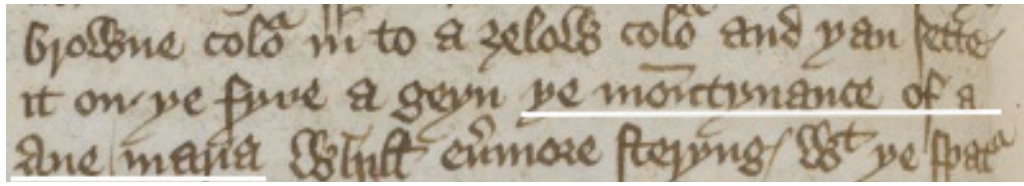
(17) [and set it on pe fyr and gar it boyle and a say whan it is y now w^t pi fynger and whan it clevis sūwhat be twene pi fynger and pi pombe pan it is j now pan sett it fro pe fyre ...]



(f. 156r, The British Library Board, Harley 2378)

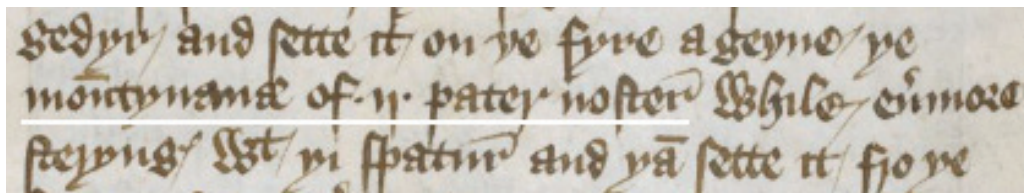
(18)

(a) [... and pan sette it on pe fyre a geyn pe mōntynance of a Ave Maria whill eu² more steryng w^t pe spat^r...]



(f. 157v, The British Library Board, Harley 2378)

(b) [... and sette it on pe fyre a geyne pe mōntynance of ij pater noster while eu² more steryng w^t pi spat^r...]



(f. 159r, The British Library Board, Harley 2378)

4. Conclusions

Hopefully, this paper has shown that despite the common view of the medieval recipes as imprecise and vague, this does not always hold true. The examination of 36 culinary recipes found in the MS Harley 2378 dated from the late medieval period proves that measure terms and time references do not have to be scarce in medieval instructions. In the analysed recipes specific measurements, which refer to one of the available metric systems, are much more common than imprecise expressions such as a little or much. Not only did the writer decide to include precise quantifications but he was also aware of the plurality and differences between the medieval metric systems. Additionally, the layout of some recipes, i.e. the way of presenting the list of ingredients, deserves one's attention. Instead of being incorporated into the body of the recipe, some ingredients are enumerated in columns with the exact amounts next to them. And finally, the recipes show a certain incorporation of religion in the kitchen.

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Appendix. The value of the particular units in the avoirdupois, troy and apothecaries' weight systems.

system		unit							
		stone	clove	pound	ounce	dra(ch)m	penny-weight	scruple	grain
apothecaries'	abbrev.	–	–	lb ap.	oz ap.	dr ap.	–	scr ap.	gr ap.
				1	= 12	= 96		= 288	= 5760
					1	= 8		= 24	= 480
						1		= 3	= 60
troy	abbrev.	–	–	lb troy	oz troy	–	dwt	–	gr troy
				1	= 12		= 240		= 5760
					1		= 20		= 480
							1		= 24
avoirdupois	abbrev.	st av.	cv av.	lb av.	oz av.	dm av.	–	–	gr av.
		1	= $\frac{7}{4}$	= 14	= 224	= 3584			= 98000
			1	= 8	= 128	= 2048			= 56000
				1	= 16	= 256			= 7000
					1	= 16			= $\frac{1750}{4}$
					1			= $\frac{875}{32}$	