

## **The Newberry alphabet**

*with a note on provenance by Paul F. Gehl*

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### *Corrections*

None.

## The Newberry alphabet: a note on provenance

Paul F. Gehl, The Newberry Library

Wing MS ZW 141.481 ('Alphabet of constructed roman capitals'), sometimes called the Anonymous Chicagoensis, was, like many rare books at the Newberry Library, once part of the collection of Coella Lindsay Ricketts (1859–1941). It was one of two early constructed alphabets that Ricketts owned. Its provenance cannot be traced very far, but the book has fascinated scholars and printers for almost a century. Its origins remain unclear.

C. L. Ricketts was born in Ohio and trained at the Ohio University in Athens. He taught and wrote about handwriting for much of his life, and in 1885 he opened an engrossing studio in Chicago. Located for many years in the First National Bank Building in the city's Loop business district, he styled his firm The Scriptorium. This studio eventually housed his collection of over 600 printed books on handwriting. A second collection of hundreds of manuscripts and manuscript fragments was kept at his home in Wilmette, Illinois, north of Chicago. Many of these he purchased on trips to Europe from 1892 into the late 1920s. During these trips he also studied and copied medieval manuscripts. After his death, his medieval manuscripts were sold, most to the Lilly Library in Bloomington, Indiana, while his printed calligraphica was acquired by the Newberry Library as a combination sale and gift. His heirs specified that the gift portion of the transfer was to include the manuscript of 'Roman capitals which Mr Ricketts thought were probably by Leonardo da Vinci'.

Ricketts was not closed-mouthed about the sources of his books, but alas, he sometimes told more than one story. His heirs downplayed his opinion of the author of the alphabet, but he was absolutely convinced that it was a work of Da Vinci, no doubt because Luca Pacioli (d. c. 1514) was thought to have been a student of the divine Leonardo. No one else ever seems to have arrived at this conclusion about Ricketts's manuscript with the sole (but notable) exception of Frederick W. Goudy (1865–1947). After Goudy published the attribution in a 1926 issue of *Ars Typographica*, it was refuted (indeed ridiculed) by Raffaello Bertieri in the 1929 *Gutenberg Jahrbuch*. Here in Chicago Ricketts often told the story of his Leonardo and of having to smuggle the book out of Italy in his luggage, fearful that the customs authorities would forbid its export if they too knew of its distinguished origin. This smuggling story, though charming, is belied by the note Ricketts permitted to be published in Seymour de Ricci's *Census of medieval and renaissance manuscripts in the United States and Canada* (1935), to the effect that the manuscript came from the firm of Jacques Rosenthal in Munich. De Ricci reproduced Ricketts's claim about Leonardo but he also cited Rosenthal's May 1900 auction of the Andrea Tessier collection, where our manuscript appears as lot number 895. When the supplement to De Ricci appeared in 1962, readers were advised to delete the reference to Leonardo. No doubt the Newberry librarians had long since tired of being asked to see the piece and then having the reader inform them with self-righteous vehemence that the attribution was false.

Cavaliere Andrea Tessier (1819–96) was a Venetian antiquarian, literary historian, and bibliophile. His collection was rich in manuscripts, illustrated books, and bindings of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The auction in 1900 fetched record prices for many items. Our manuscript appears in the section of the catalogue called ‘Ornemens’ along with several rare printed books on calligraphy. Rosenthal and/or Tessier modestly described the piece as ‘exécutede en Italie vers 1500’, without reference to Leonardo or any other artist. Further back than Tessier we cannot really go, since this omnivorous collector acquired books and manuscripts everywhere. It would be tempting to think that he had turned it up in the Veneto, where it had lain hidden since it was written, especially since his collection included many Venetian manuscripts that had gone on the market after the depredations of the Napoleonic period. But the sales rooms of Milan, Florence, and Rome were far more active in the mid nineteenth century than those of Venice; and Tessier bought in Paris, London, and Vienna as well. So there is really no knowing where he found the manuscript alphabet.

Figures 1–29 show the Newberry alphabet at actual size.

*Shelfmark and location*

Wing MS ZW 141.481 (‘Alphabet of constructed roman capitals’), The Newberry Library, Chicago, Illinois.

*Dimensions*

190 mm height, 144 mm width (individual leaves). The leaves were severely trimmed for a modern binding.

*Foliation*

24 leaves; three gatherings of eight leaves each, i.e. folios 1–8, 9–16 and 17–24.

*Binding*

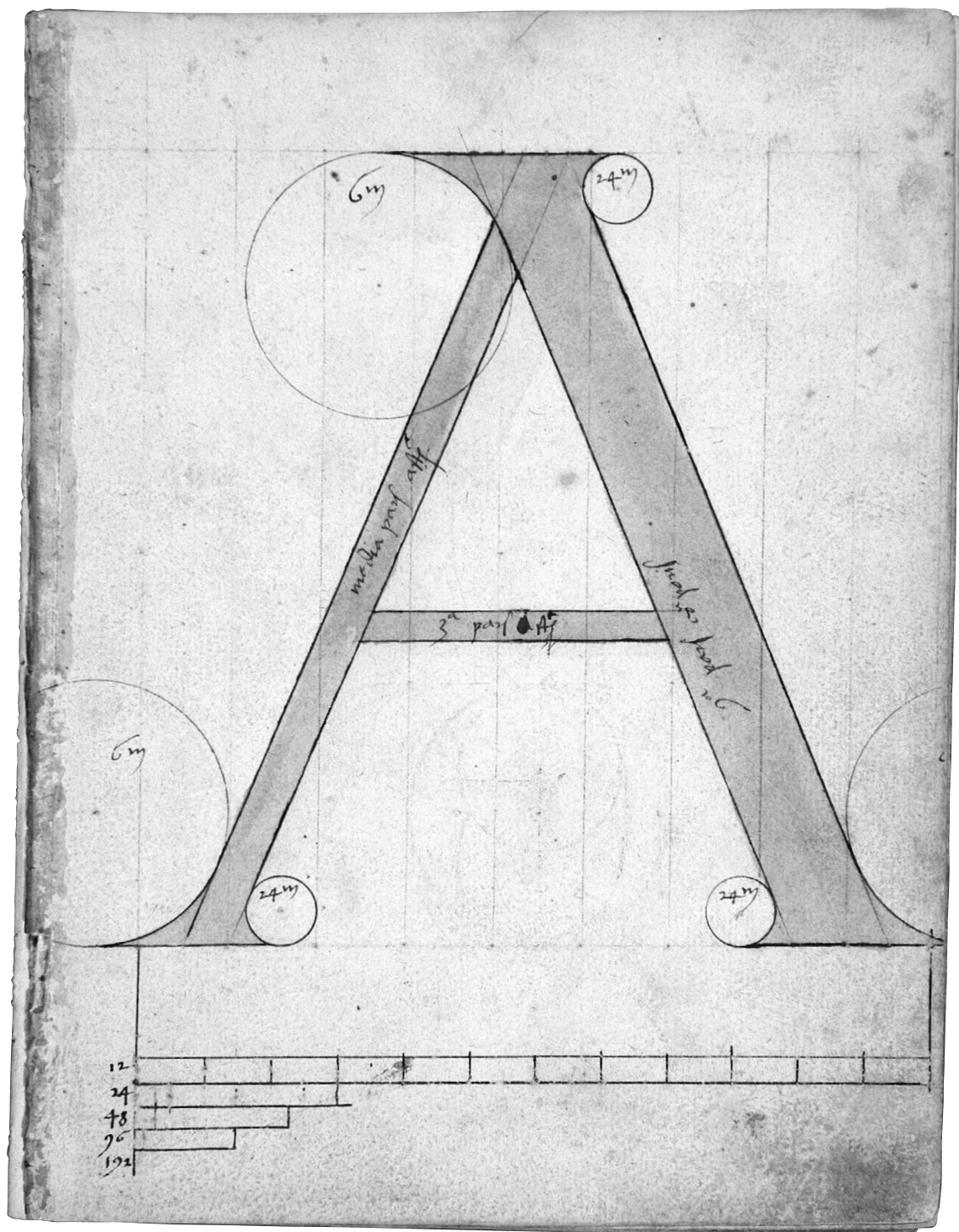
Disbound, probably at the Newberry Library in the 1940s or 50s; the gutters show signs of binder’s glue. De Ricci describes it as bound in ‘modern boards’.

*Substrate*

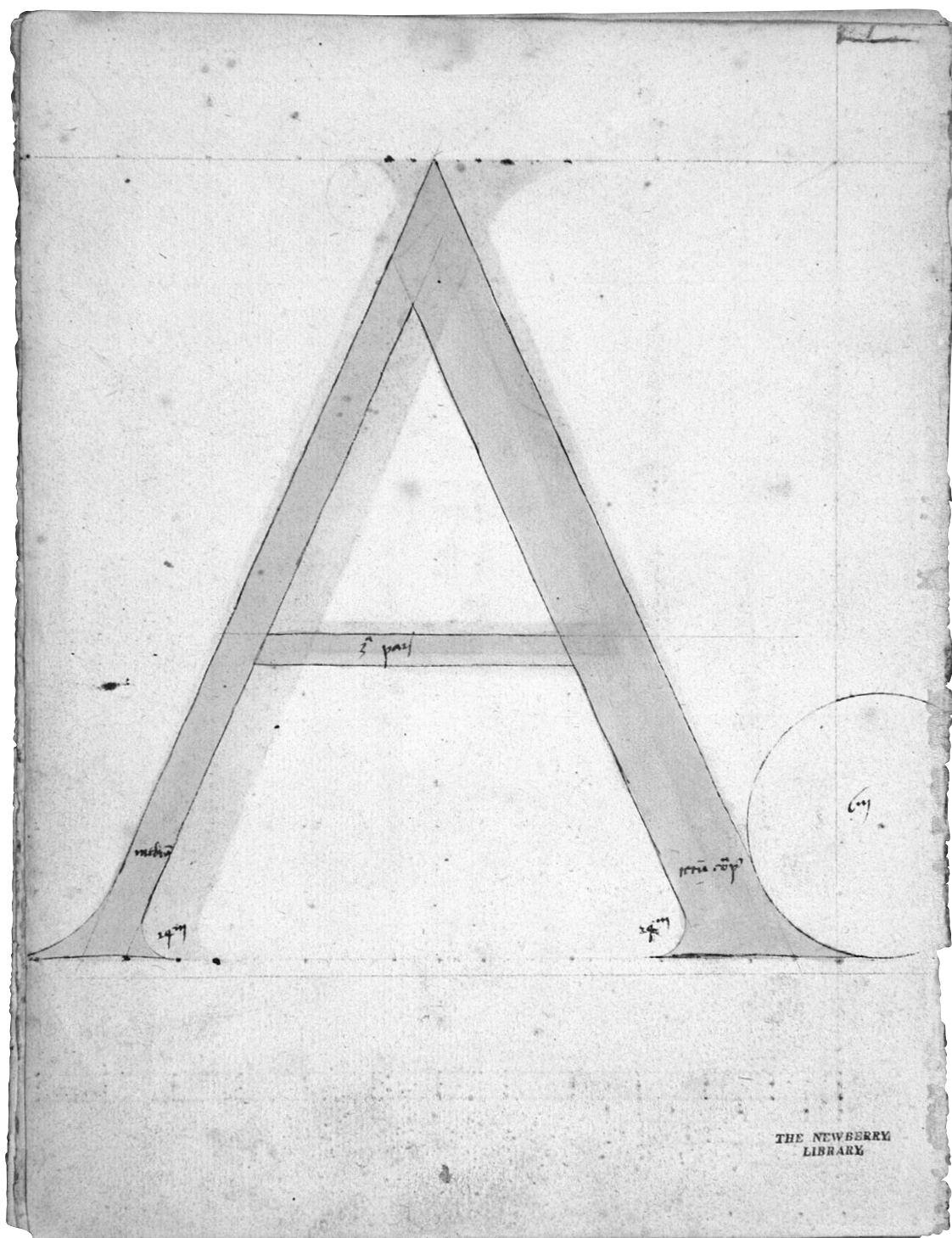
Paper, bearing a common Veneto watermark of a drawn bow and arrow measuring 33 mm in both height and width. There is no exact equivalent in Briquet or Zonghi, but the type is that of Briquet nos. 814–18 (which date from 1482 to 1515).

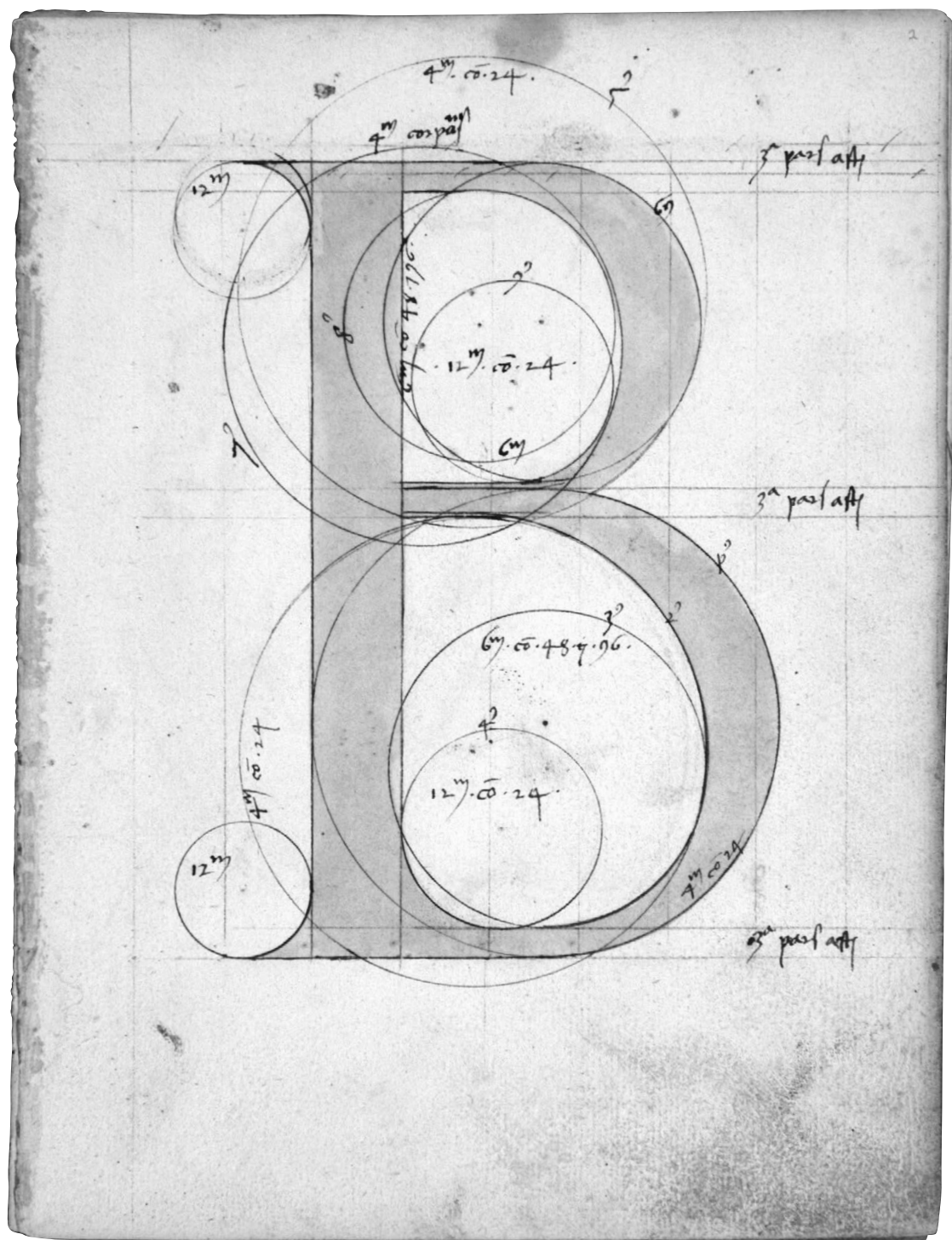
*Photography*

Photographed by Catherine Gass on 13 October 2004, using a Nikon D100 digital camera fitted with a 24–85 mm zoom lens, at 200 ISO, f.6 at 1/60th of a second, two 500-watt halogen lamps.

Figure 1. Folio 1<sup>r</sup>



Figure 2. Folio 1<sup>v</sup>

Figure 3. Folio 2<sup>r</sup>



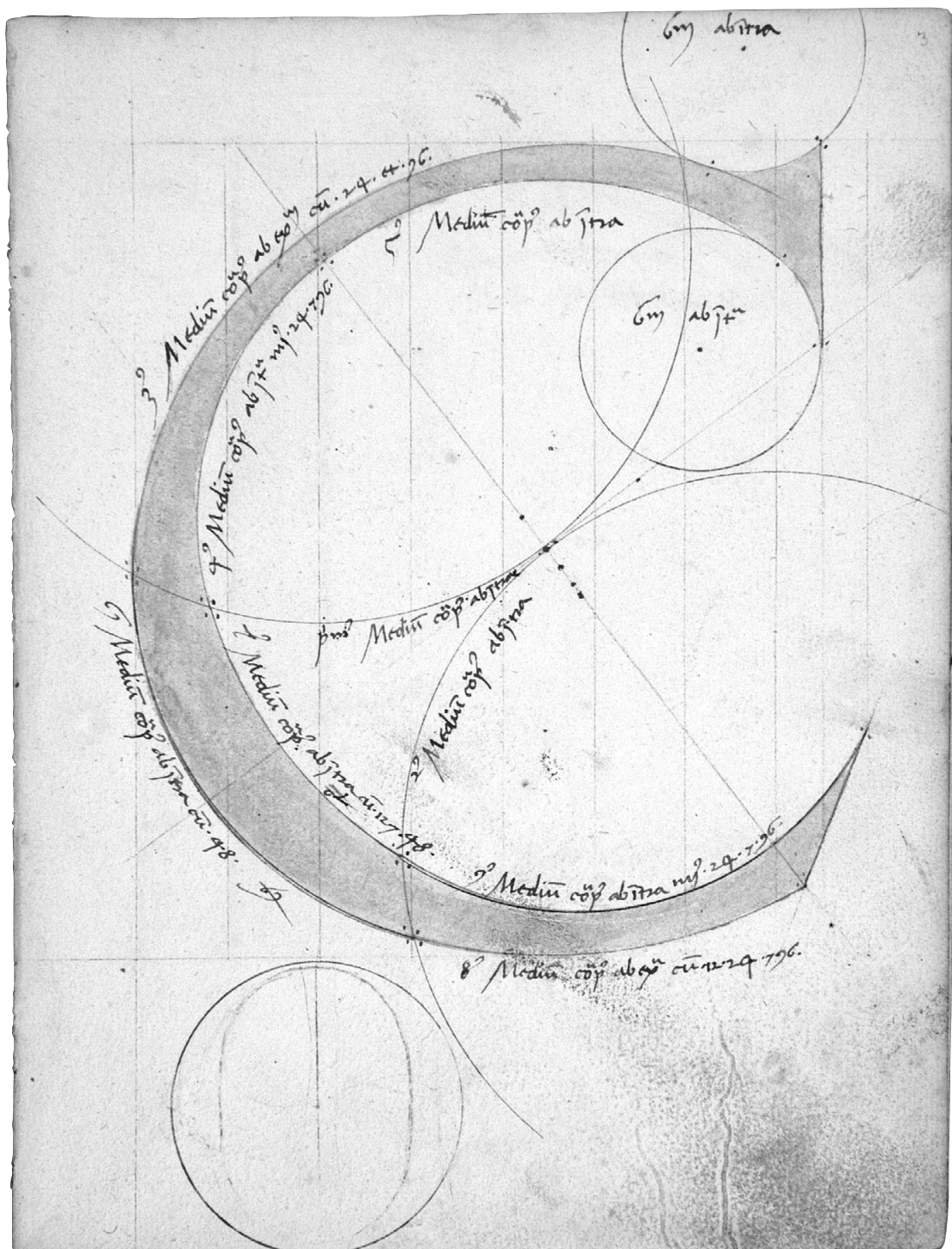
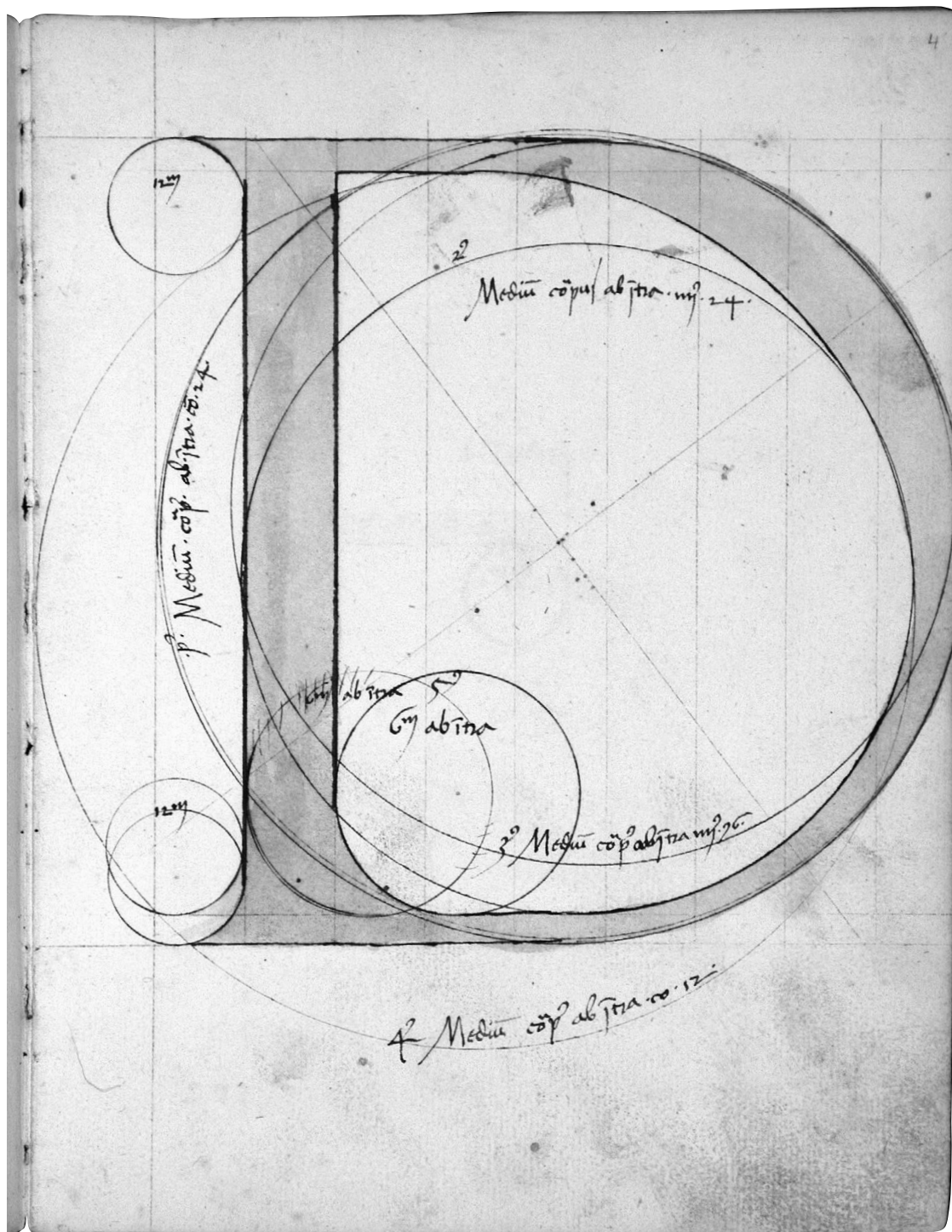
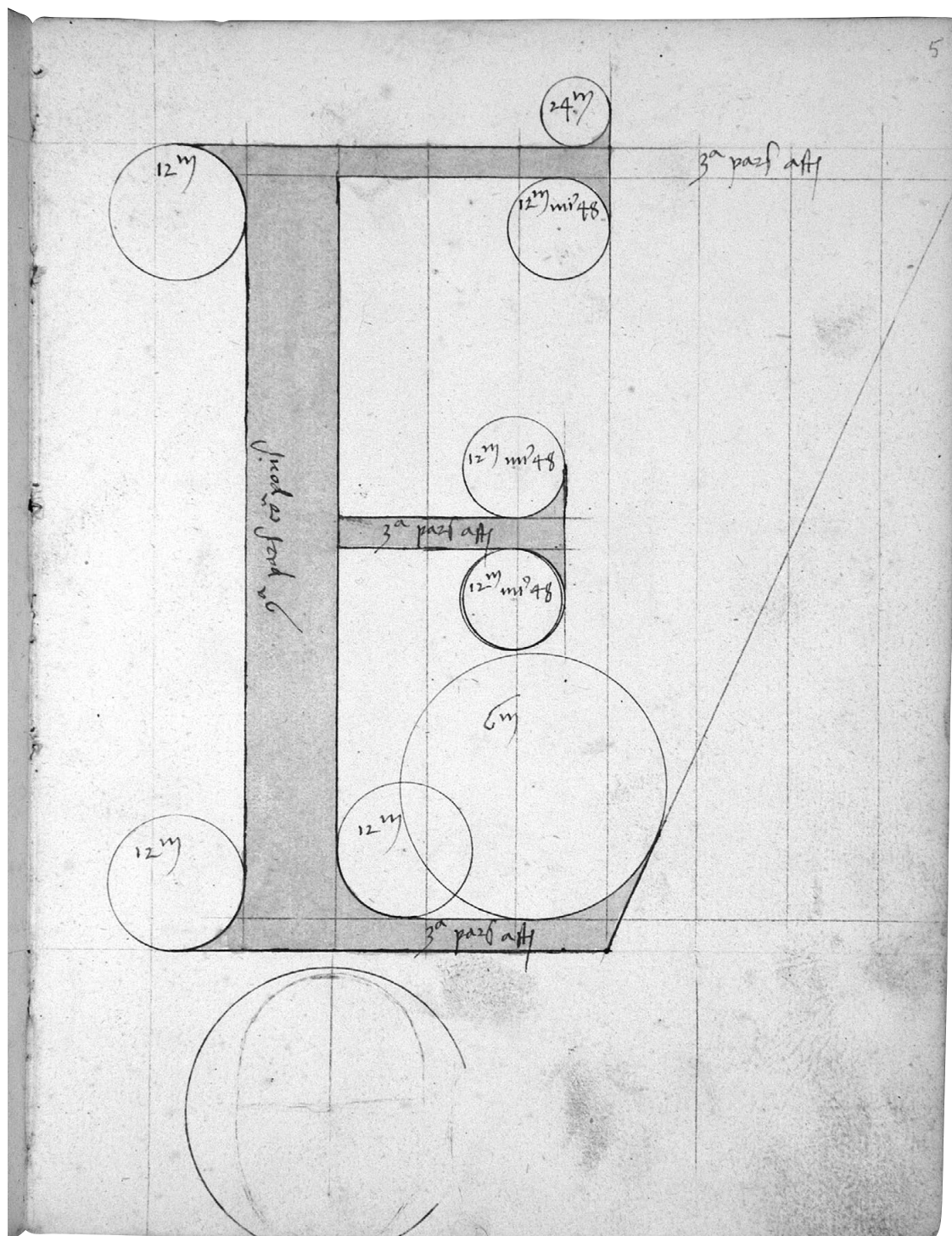


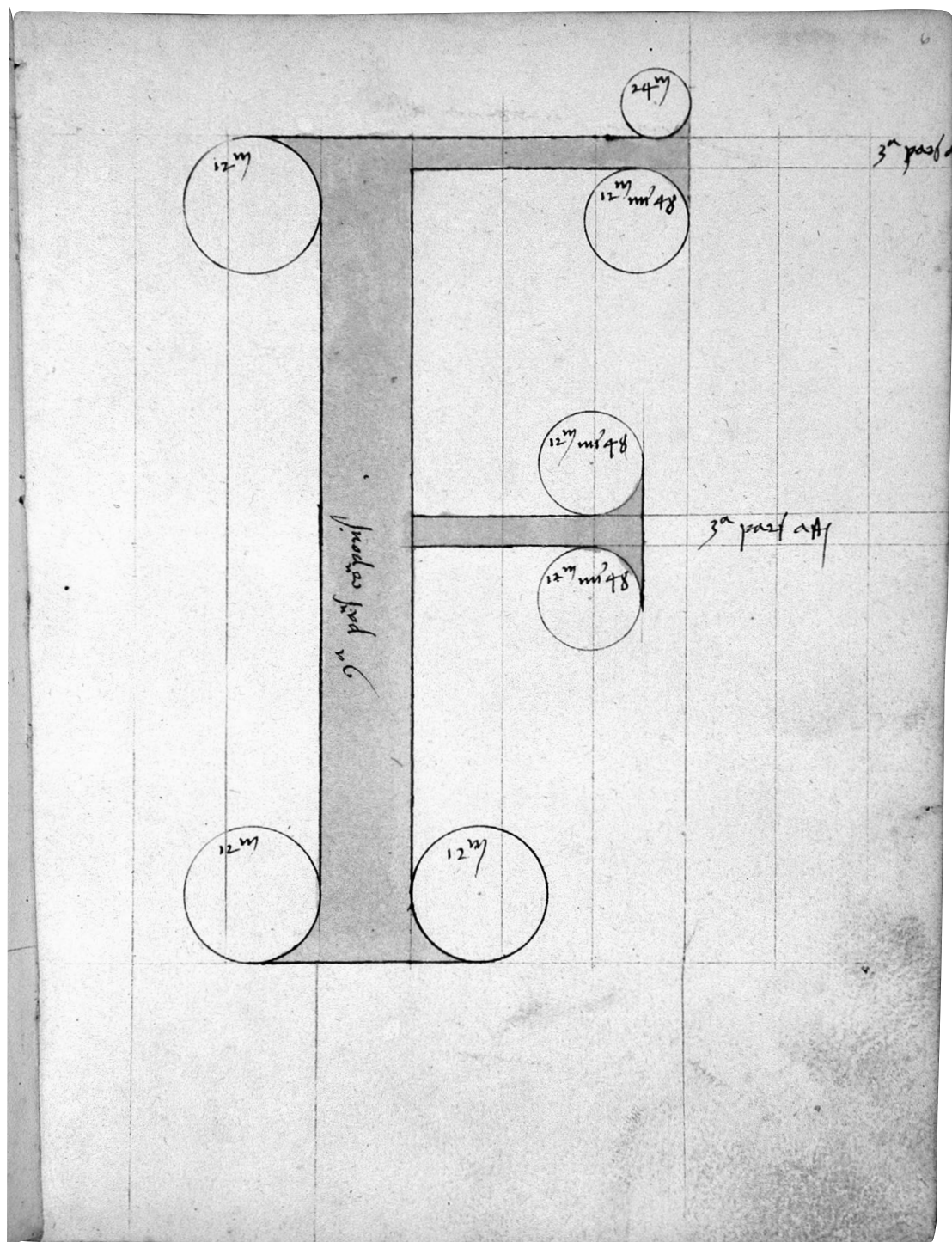
Figure 4. Folio 3<sup>r</sup>

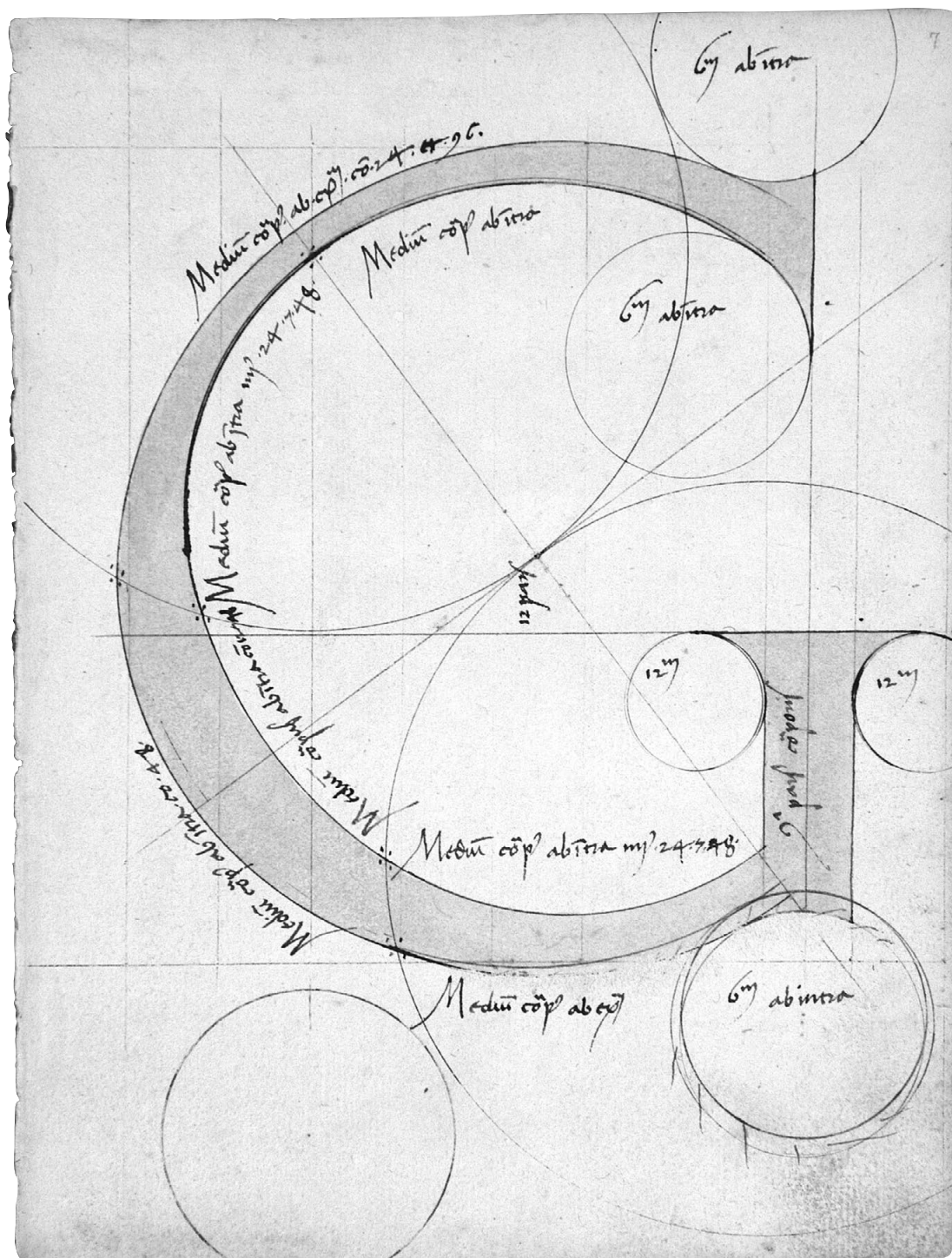
Figure 5. Folio 4<sup>r</sup>



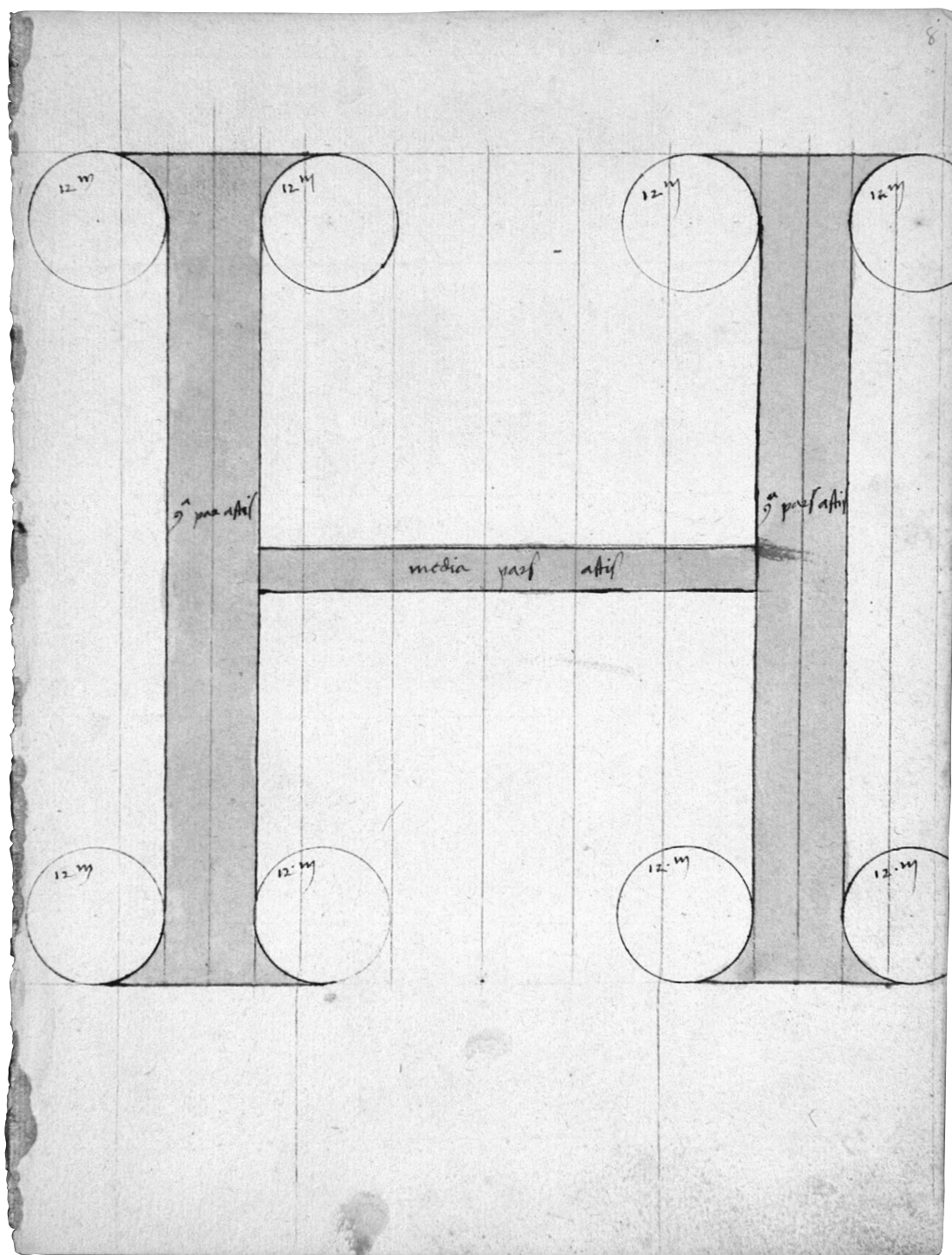
Figure 6. Folio 5<sup>r</sup>

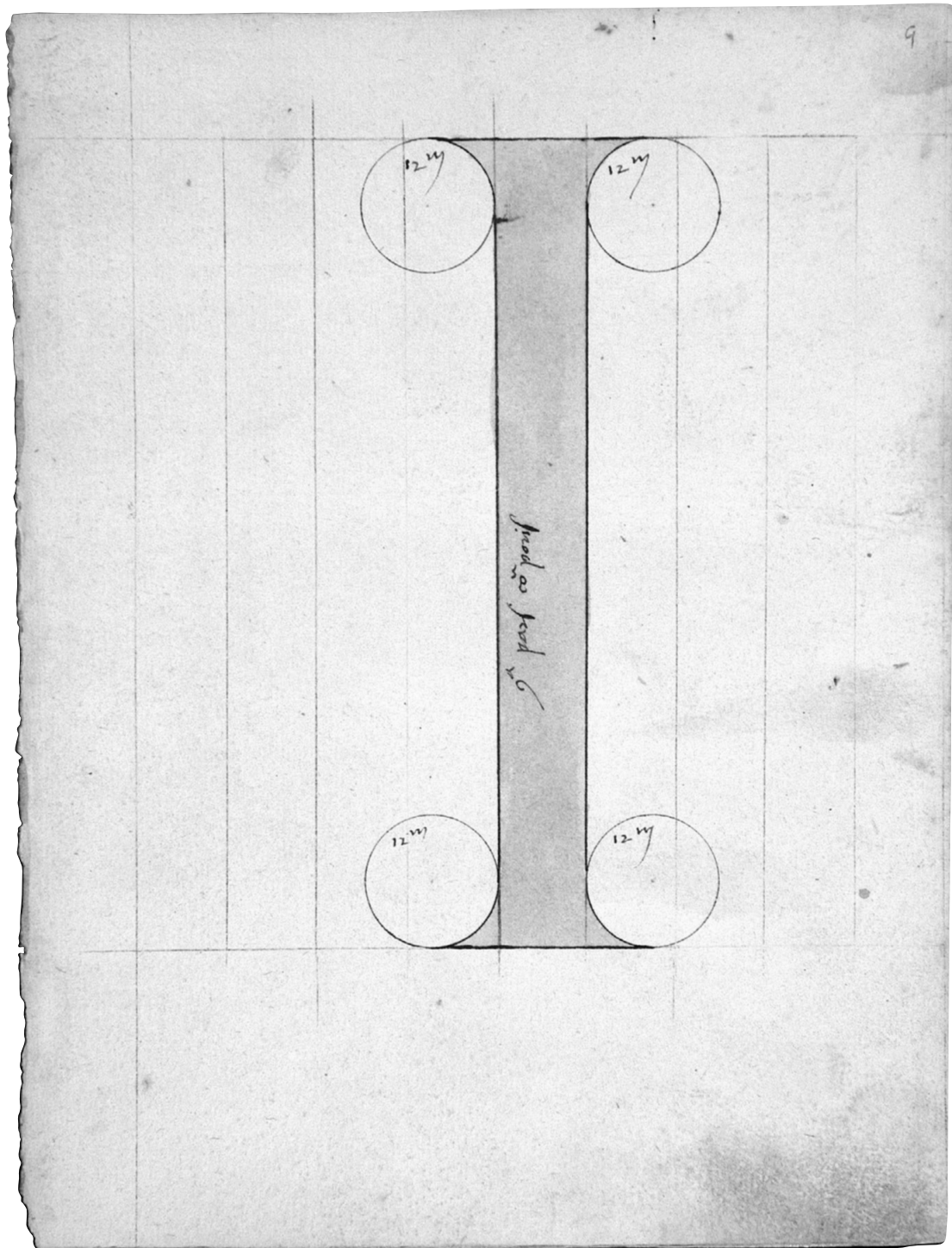


Figure 7. Folio 6<sup>r</sup>

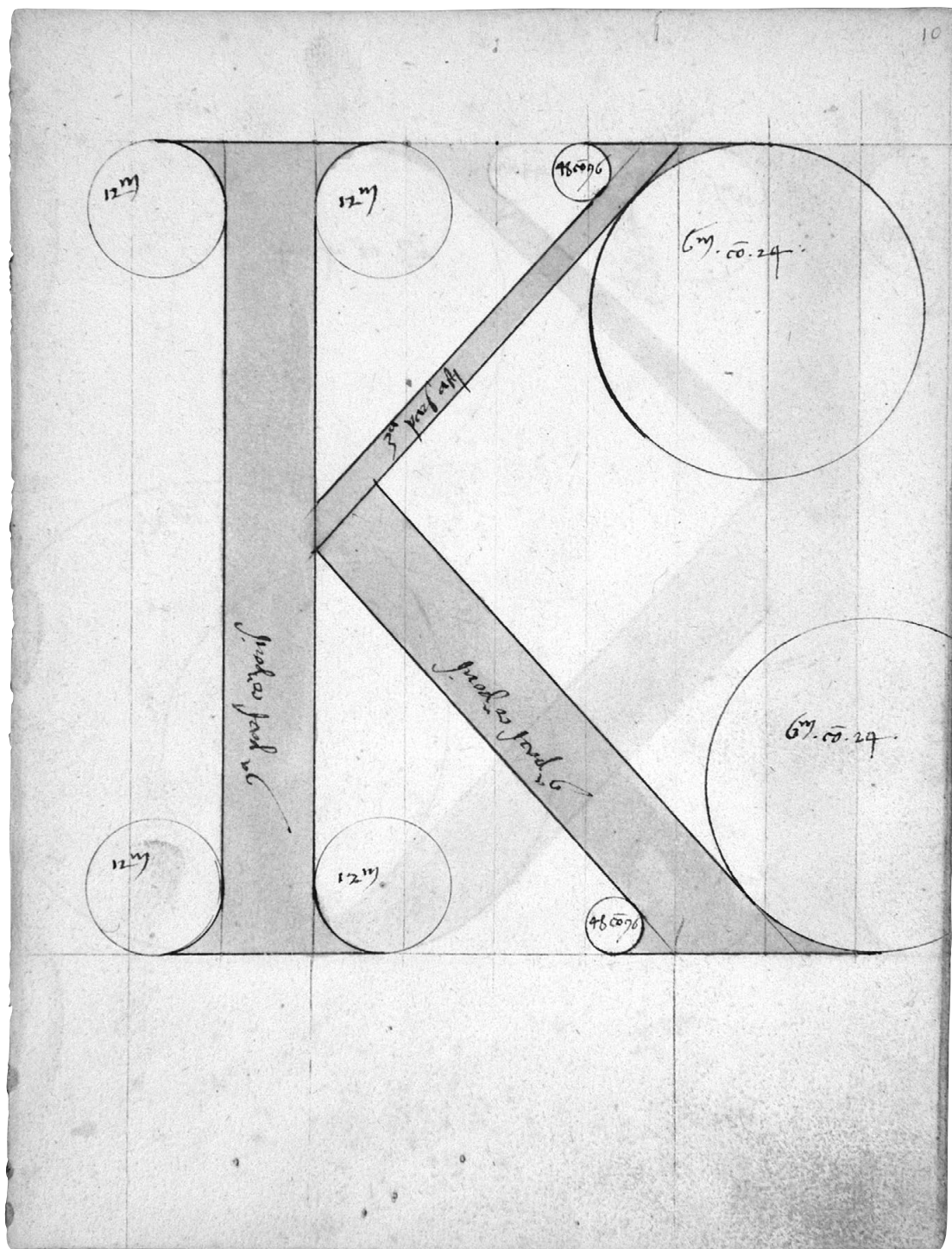
Figure 8. Folio 7<sup>r</sup>



Figure 9. Folio 8<sup>r</sup>

Figure 10. Folio 9<sup>r</sup>



Figure 11. Folio 10<sup>r</sup>



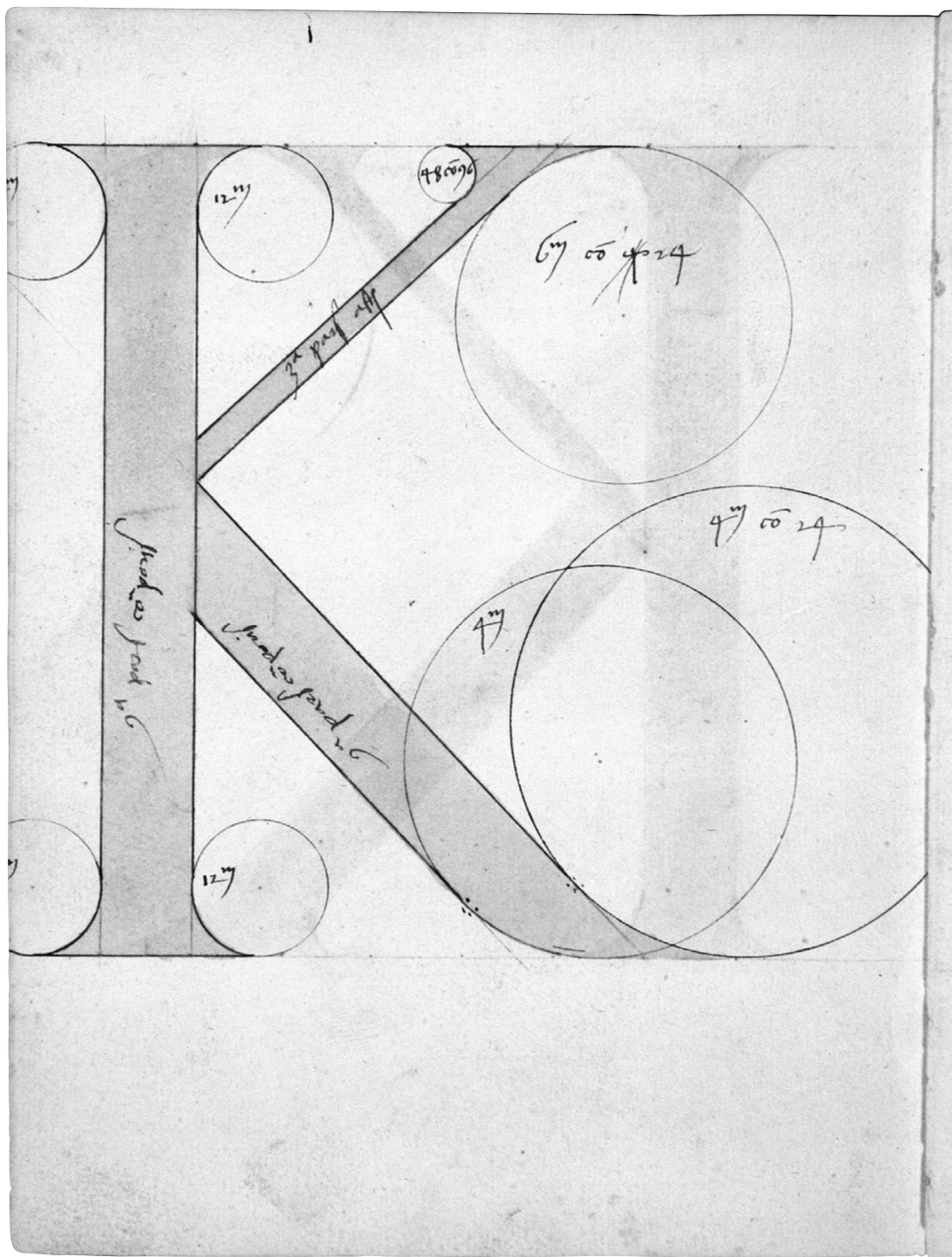
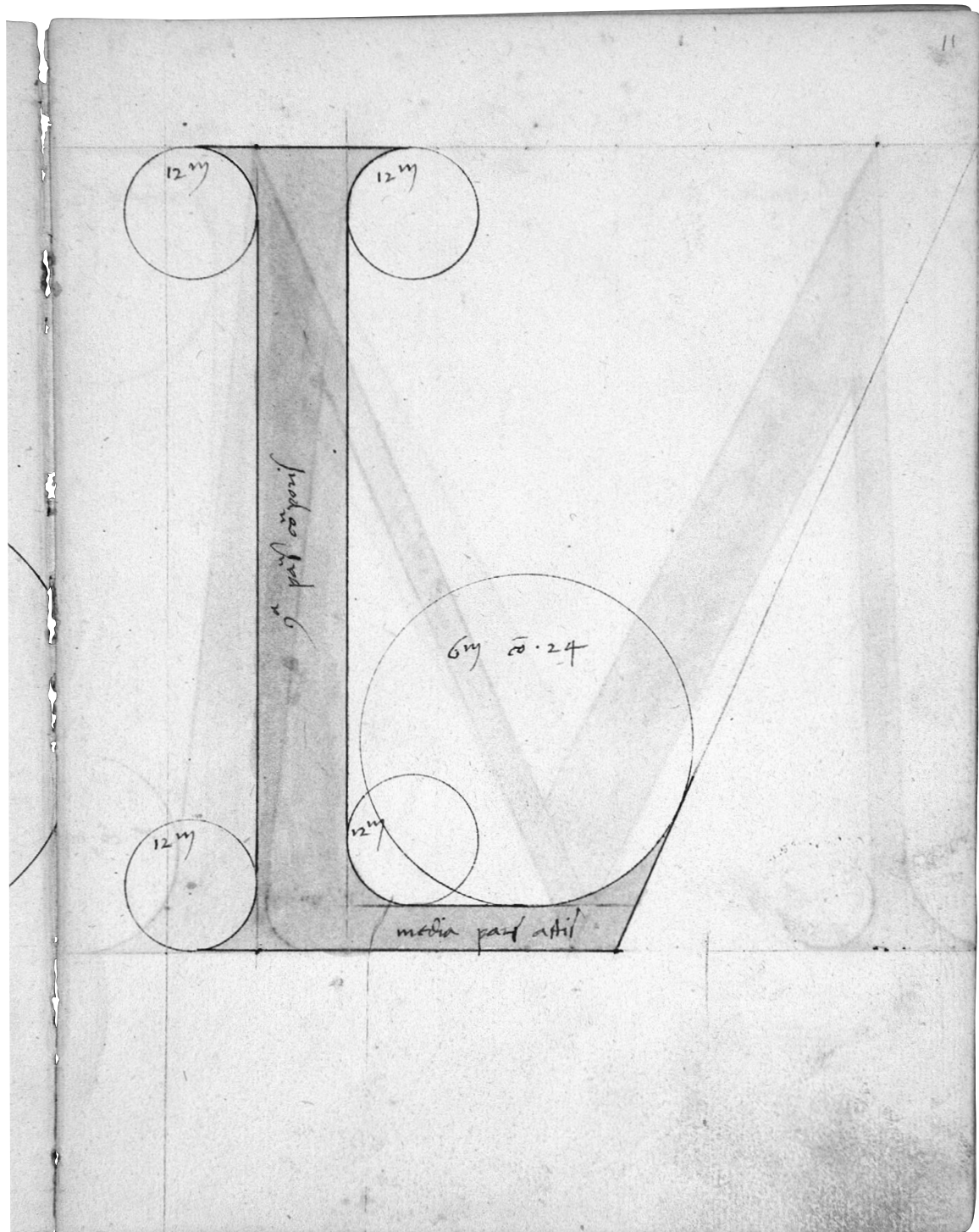
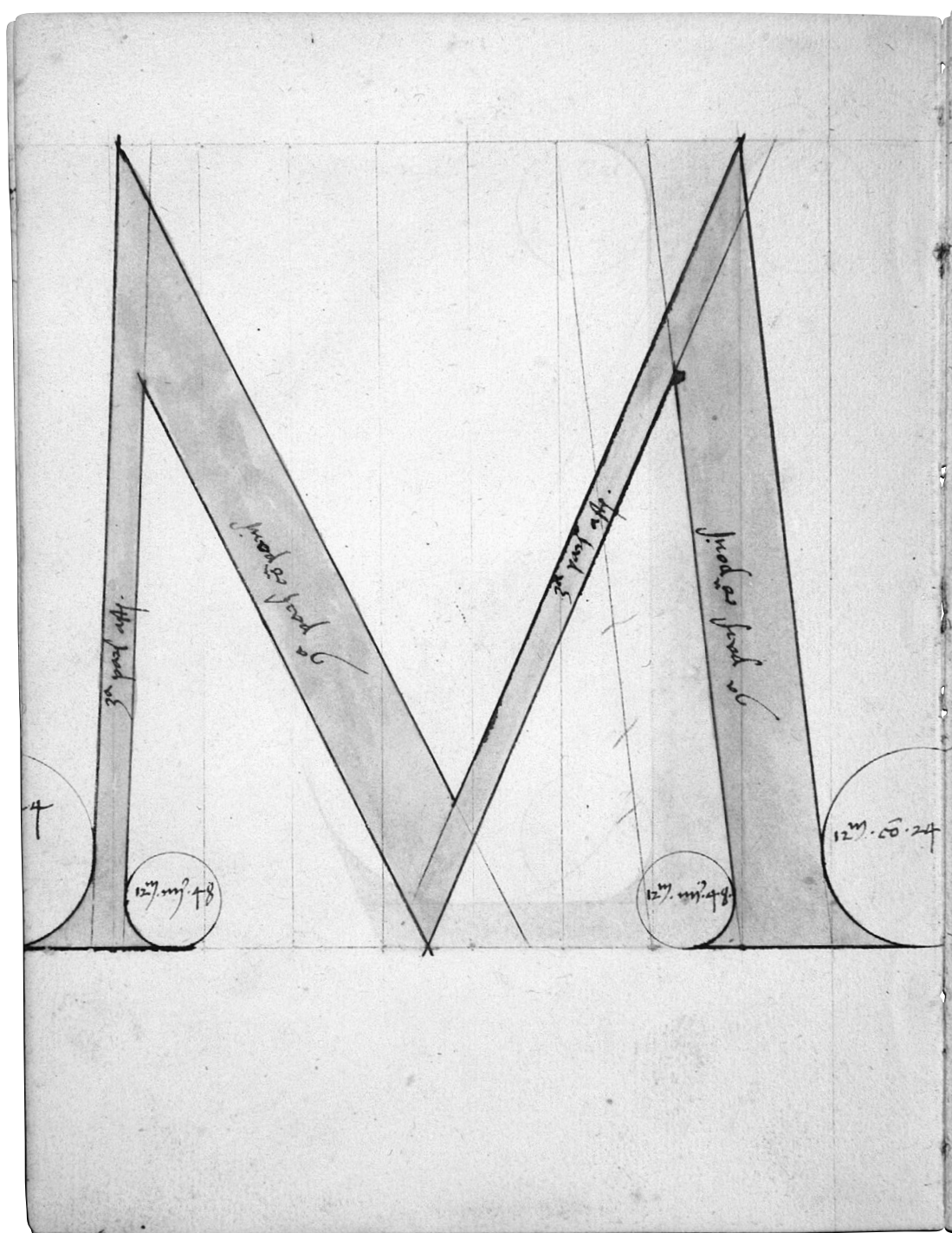
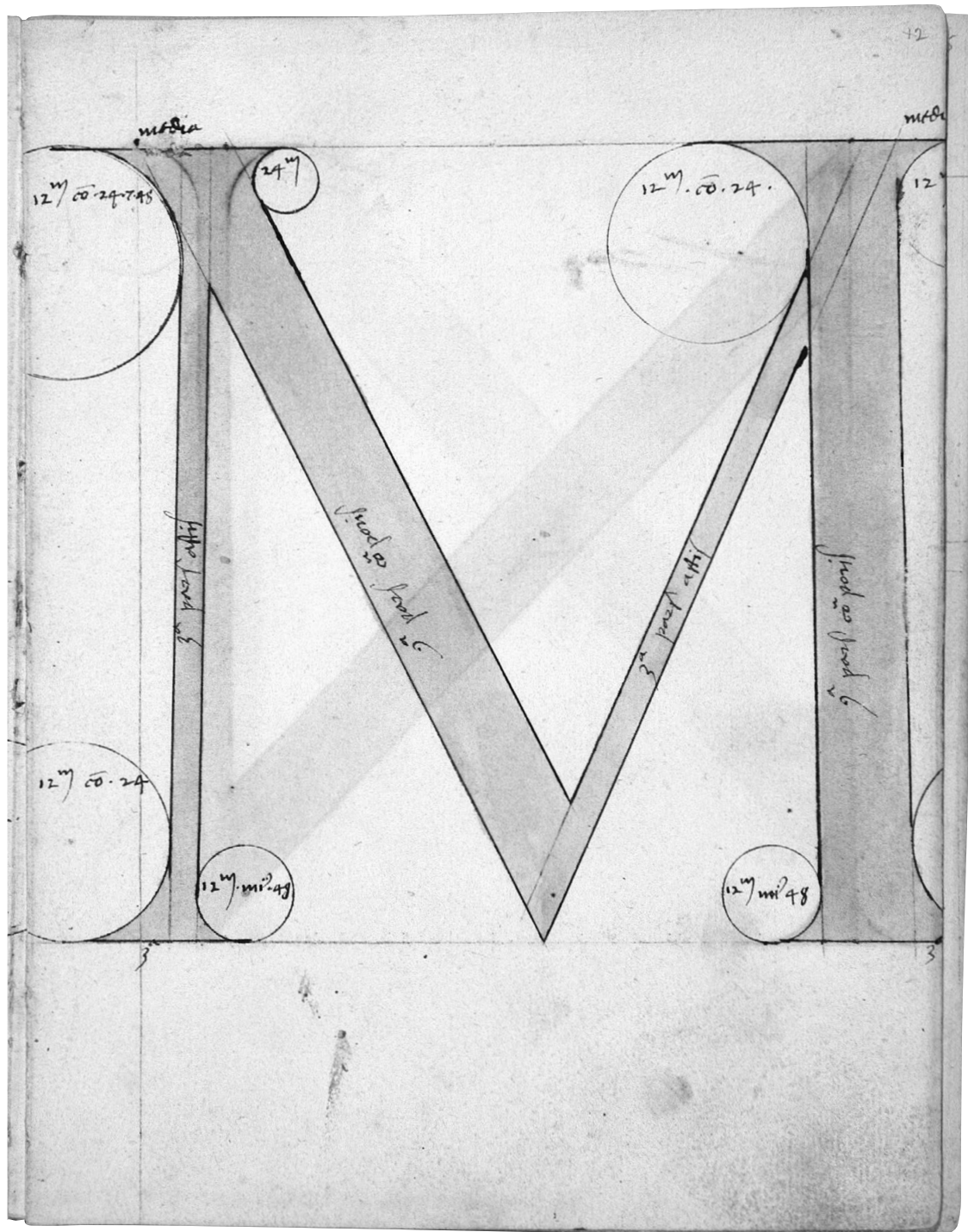


Figure 12. Folio 10v

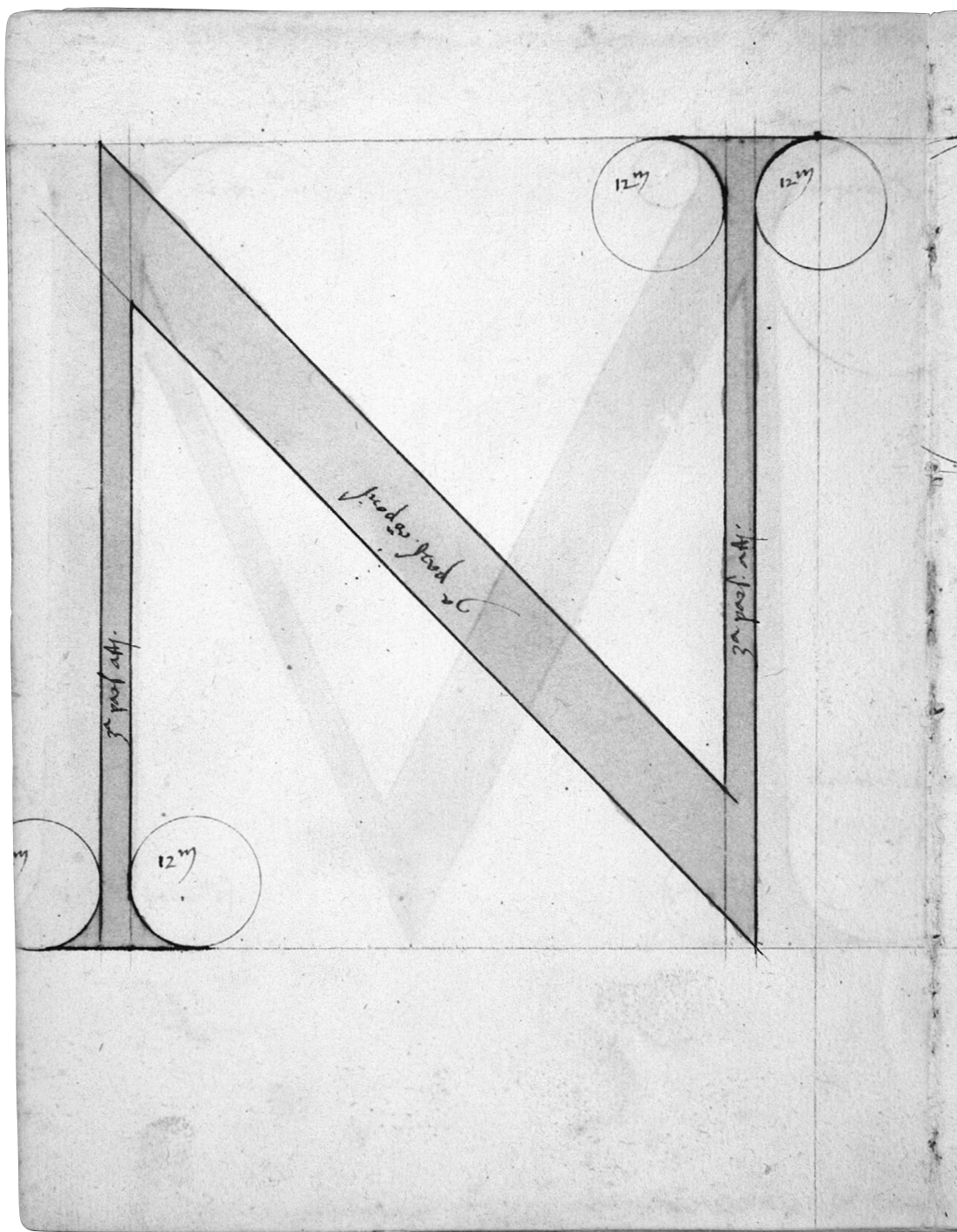
Figure 13. Folio 11<sup>r</sup>



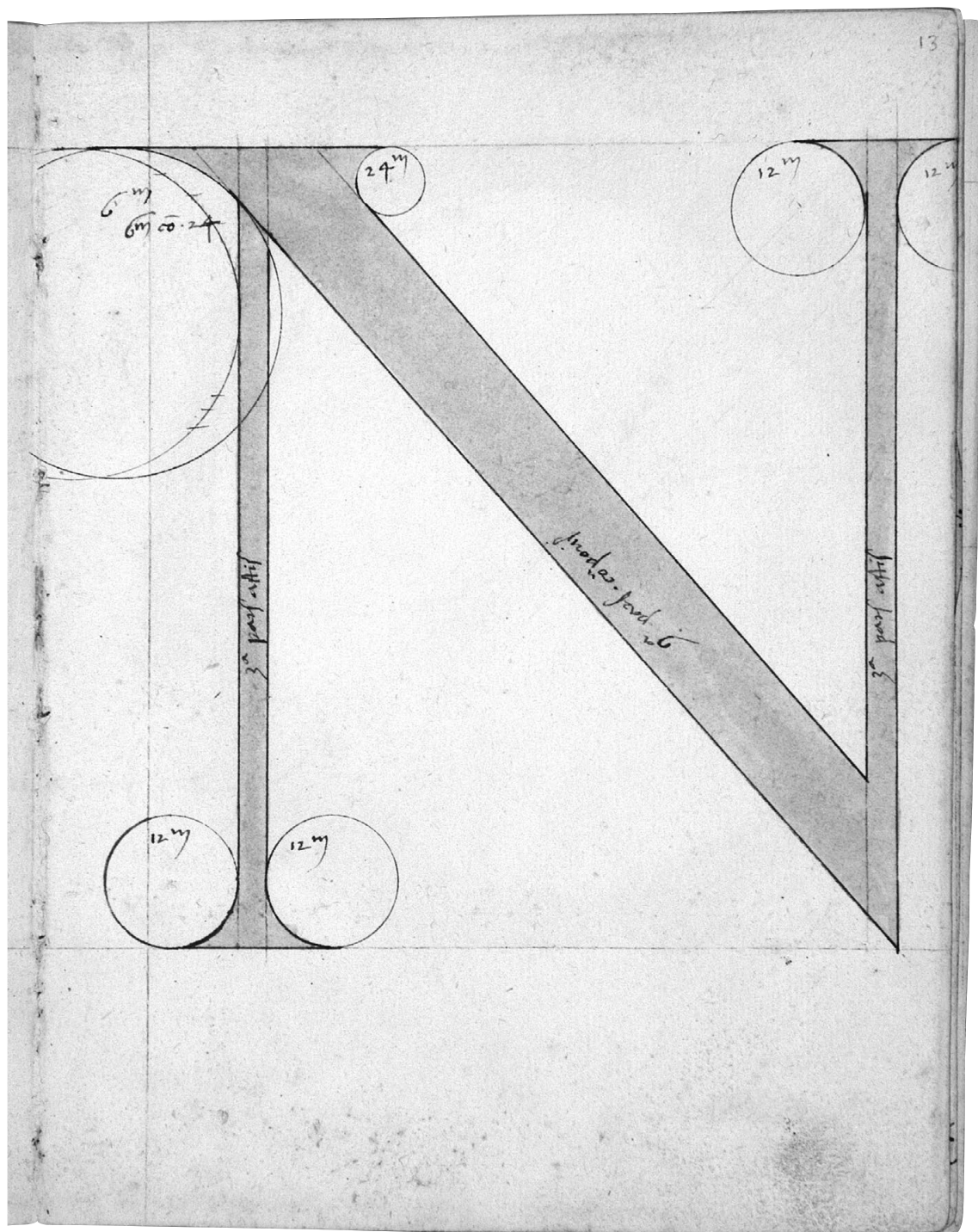
Figure 14. Folio 11<sup>v</sup>

Figure 15. Folio 12<sup>r</sup>



Figure 16. Folio 12<sup>v</sup>



Figure 17. Folio 13<sup>r</sup>

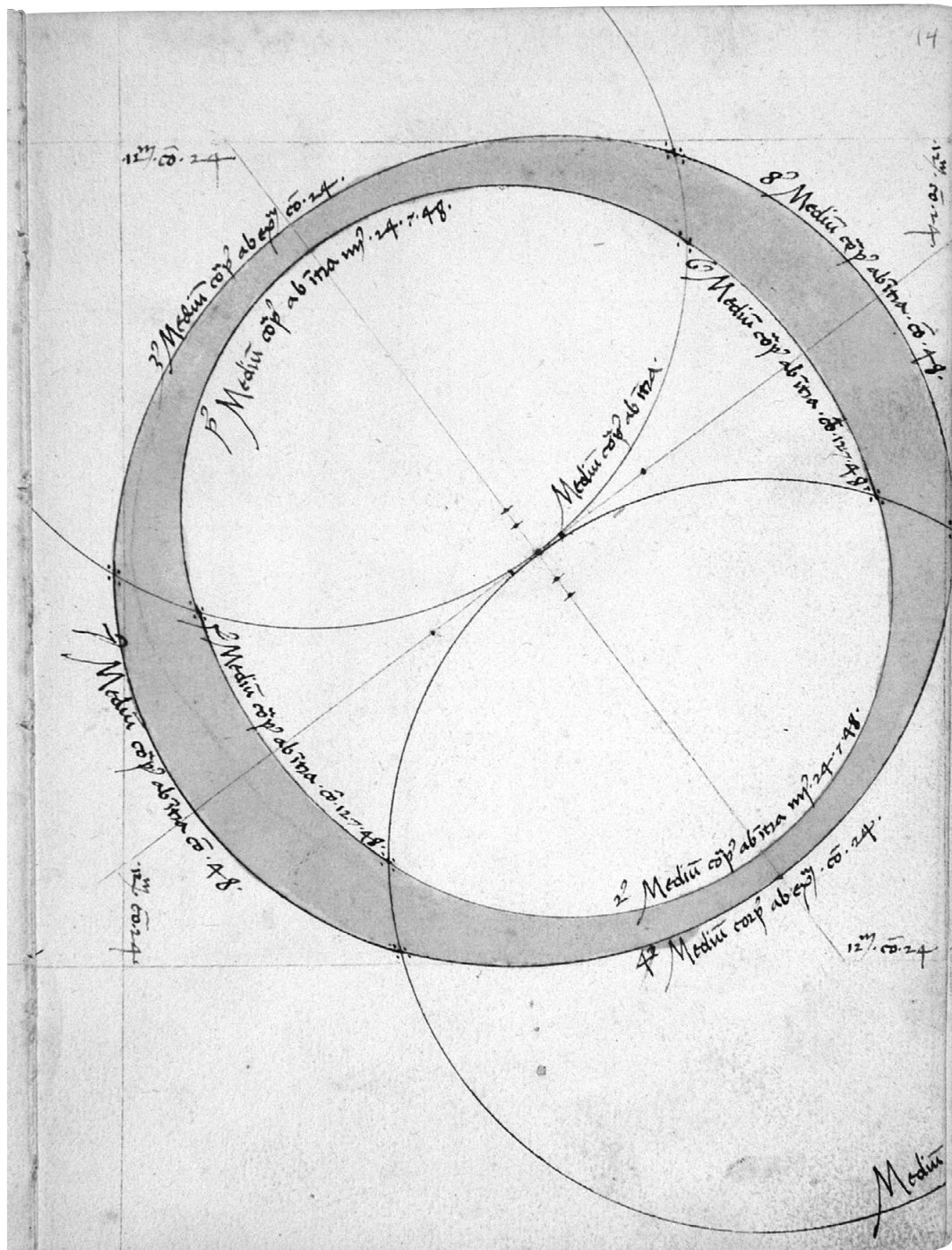
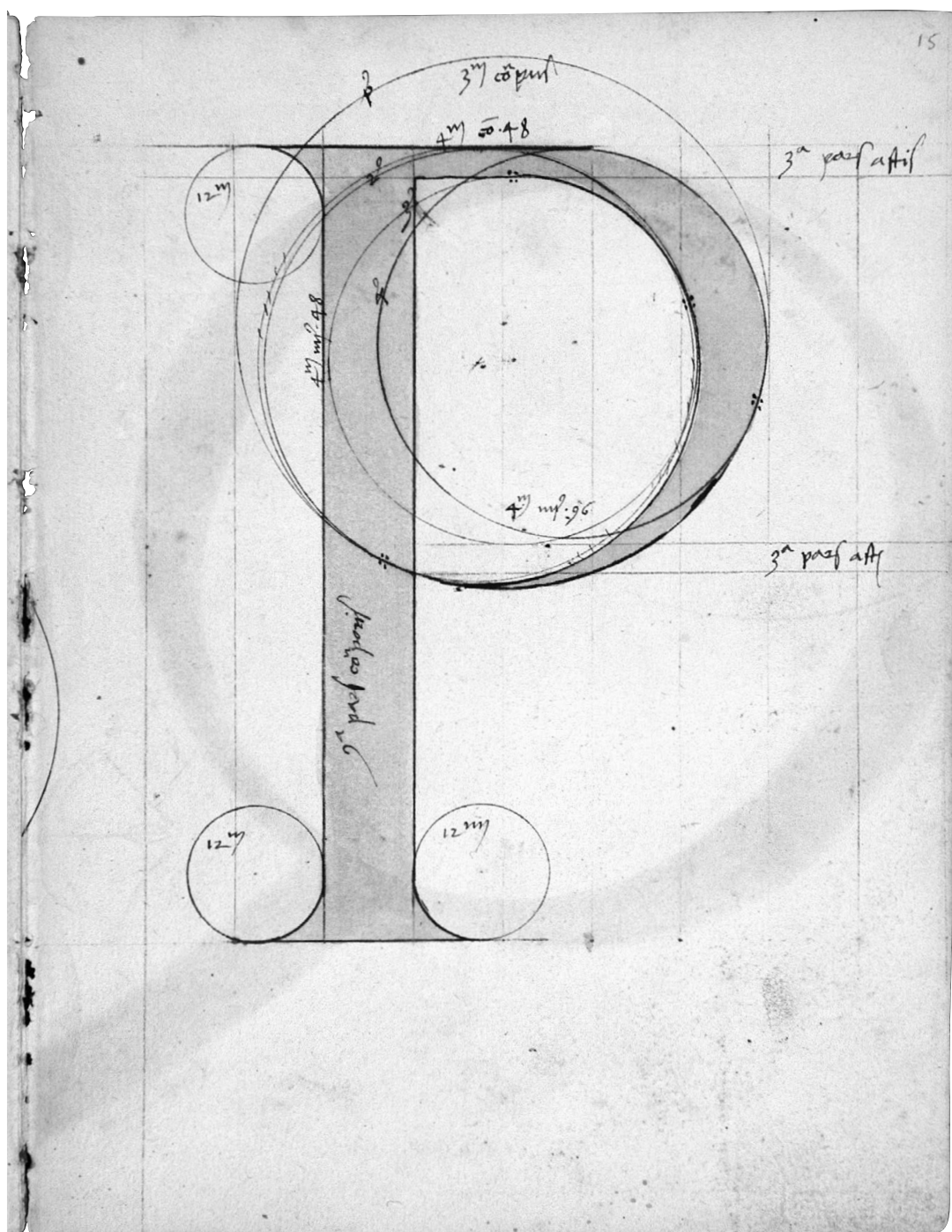


Figure 18. Folio 14r



Figure 19. Folio 15<sup>r</sup>





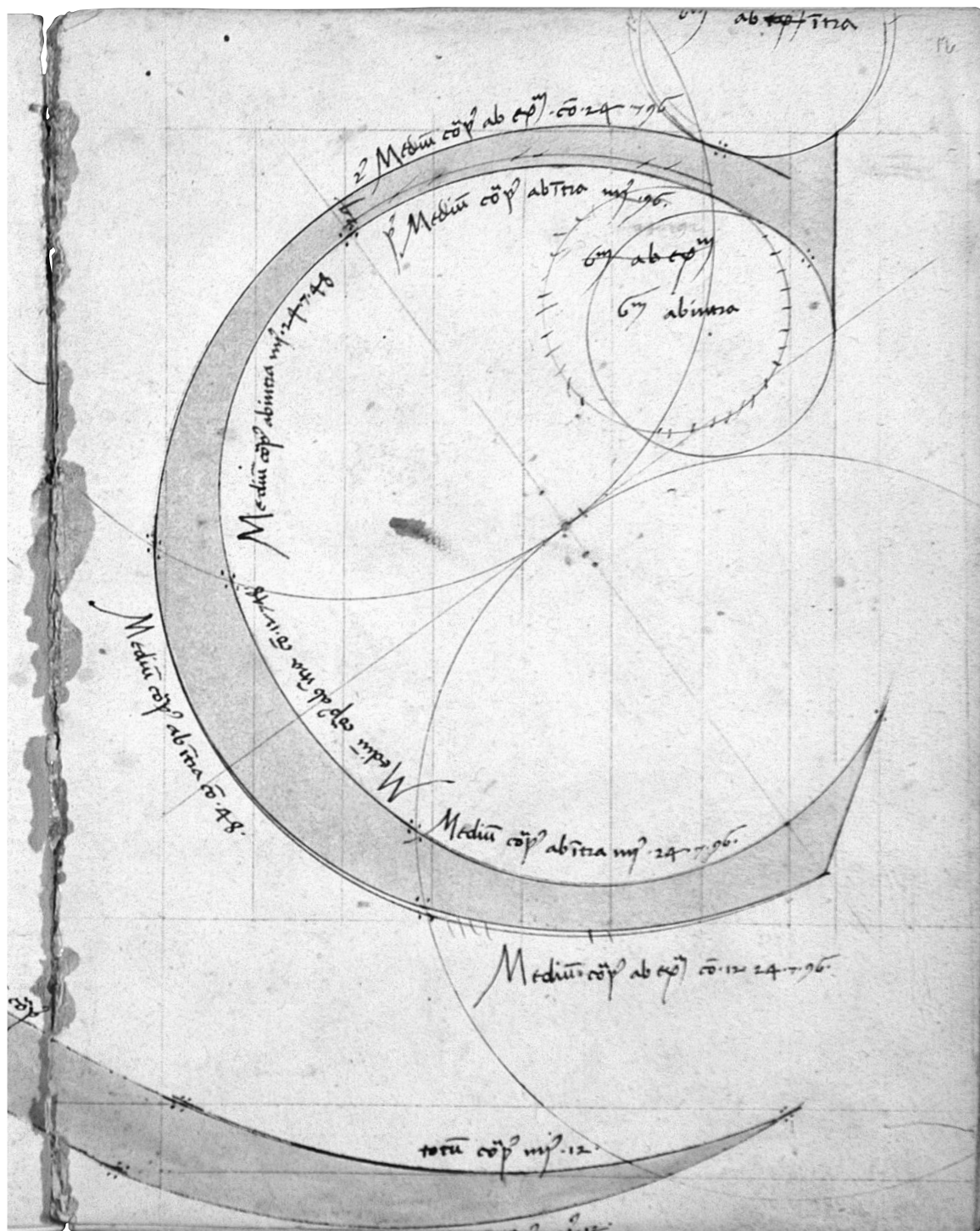


Figure 21. Folio 16<sup>r</sup>





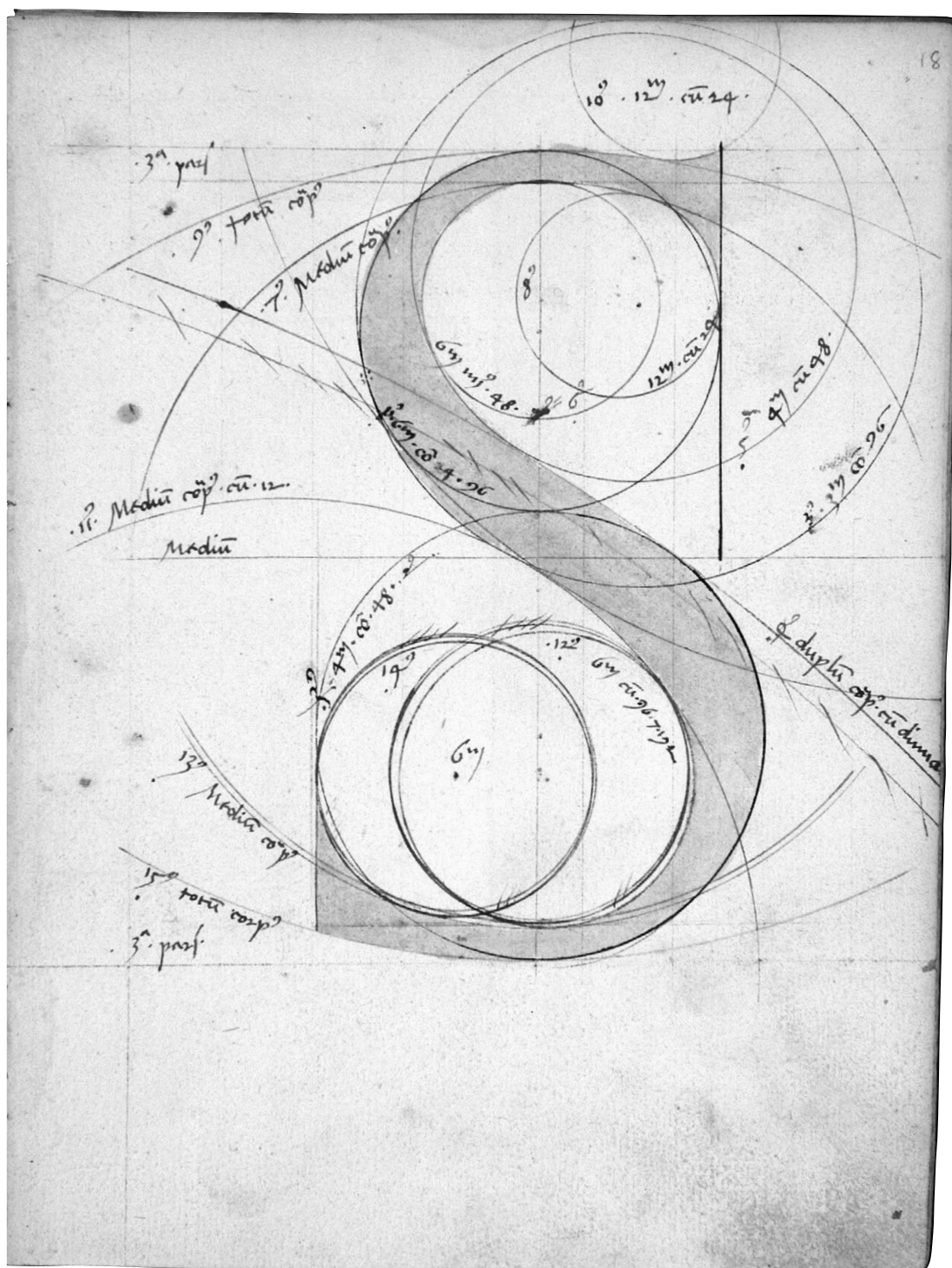
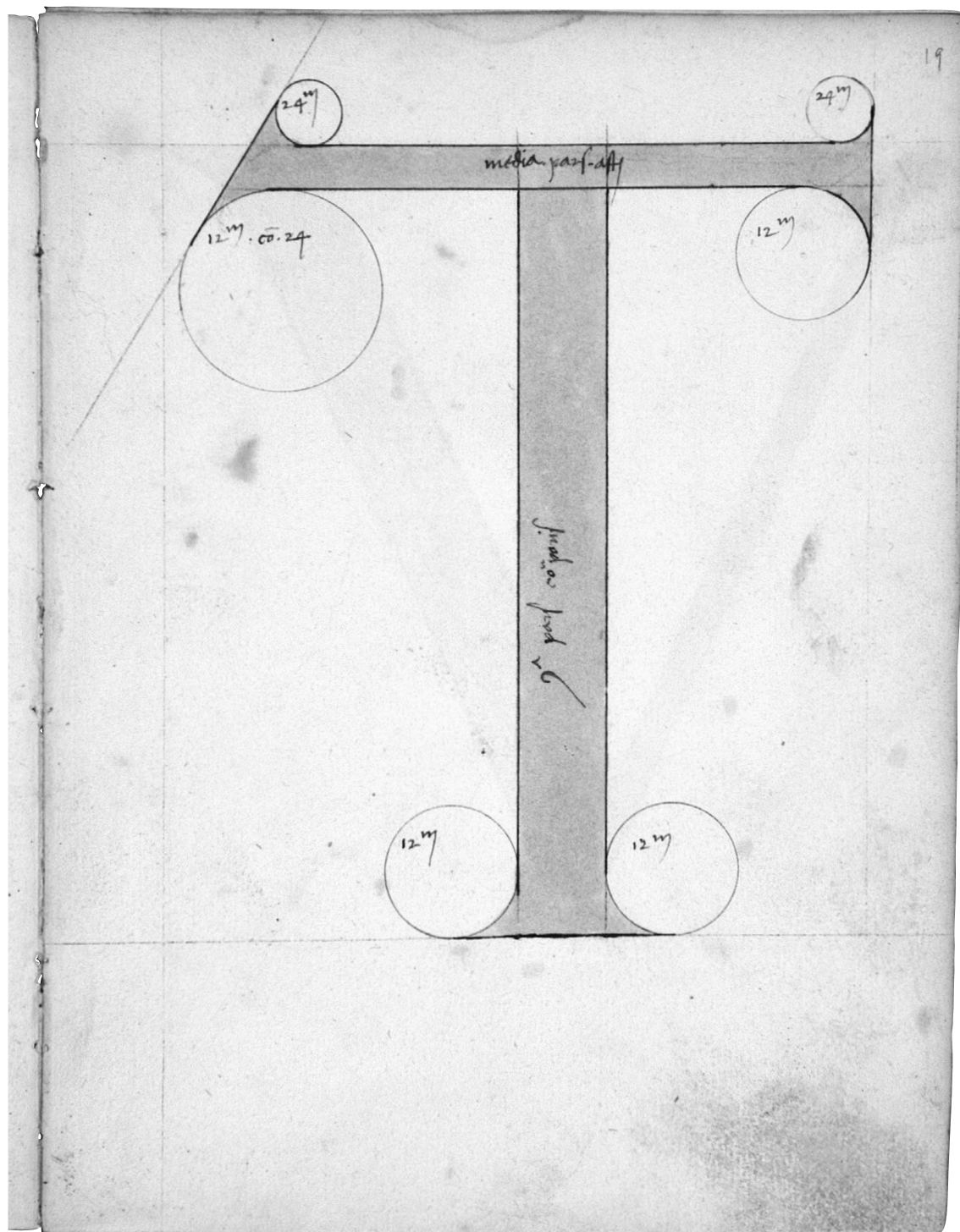


Figure 23. Folio 18<sup>r</sup>



Figure 24. Folio 19<sup>r</sup>

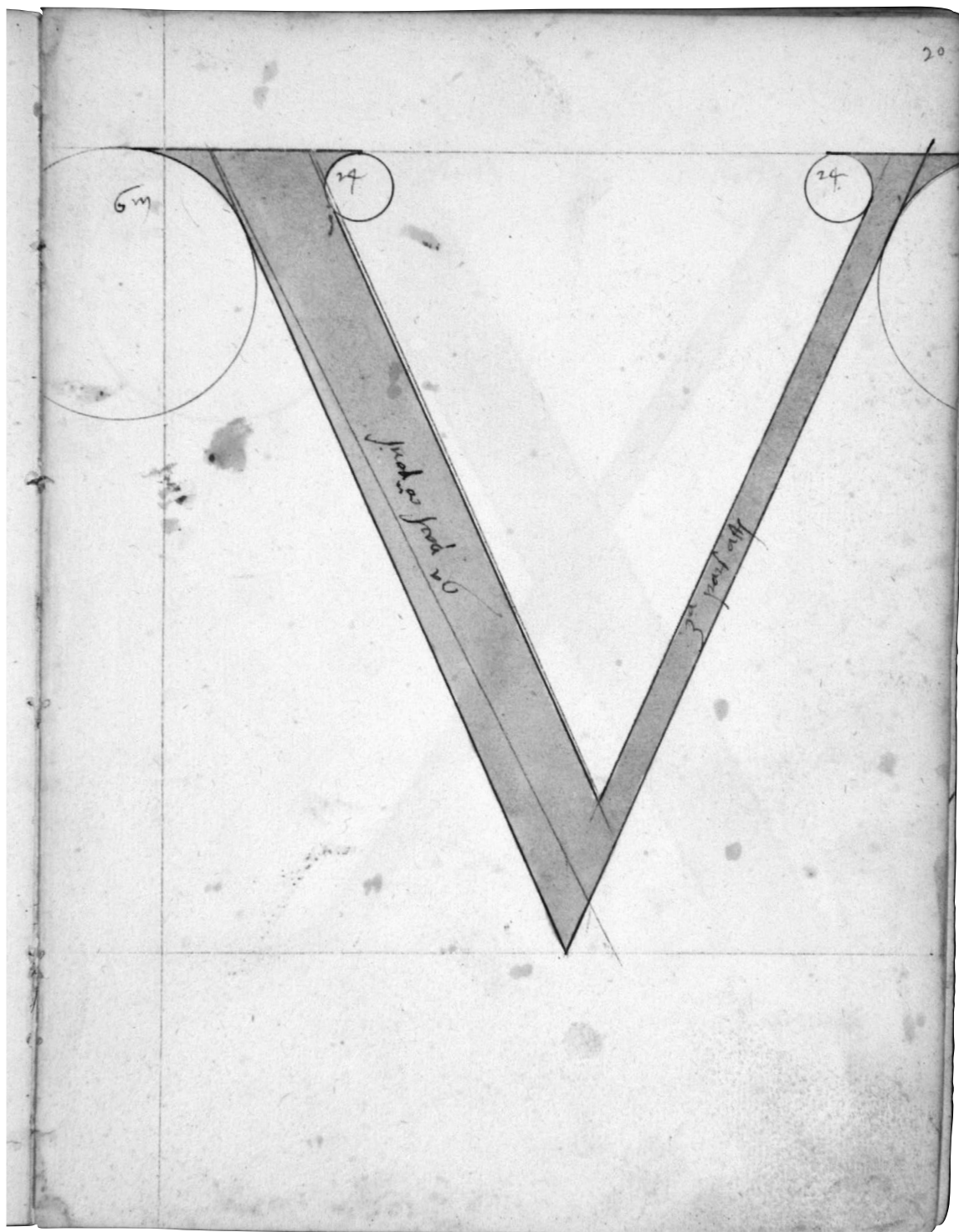
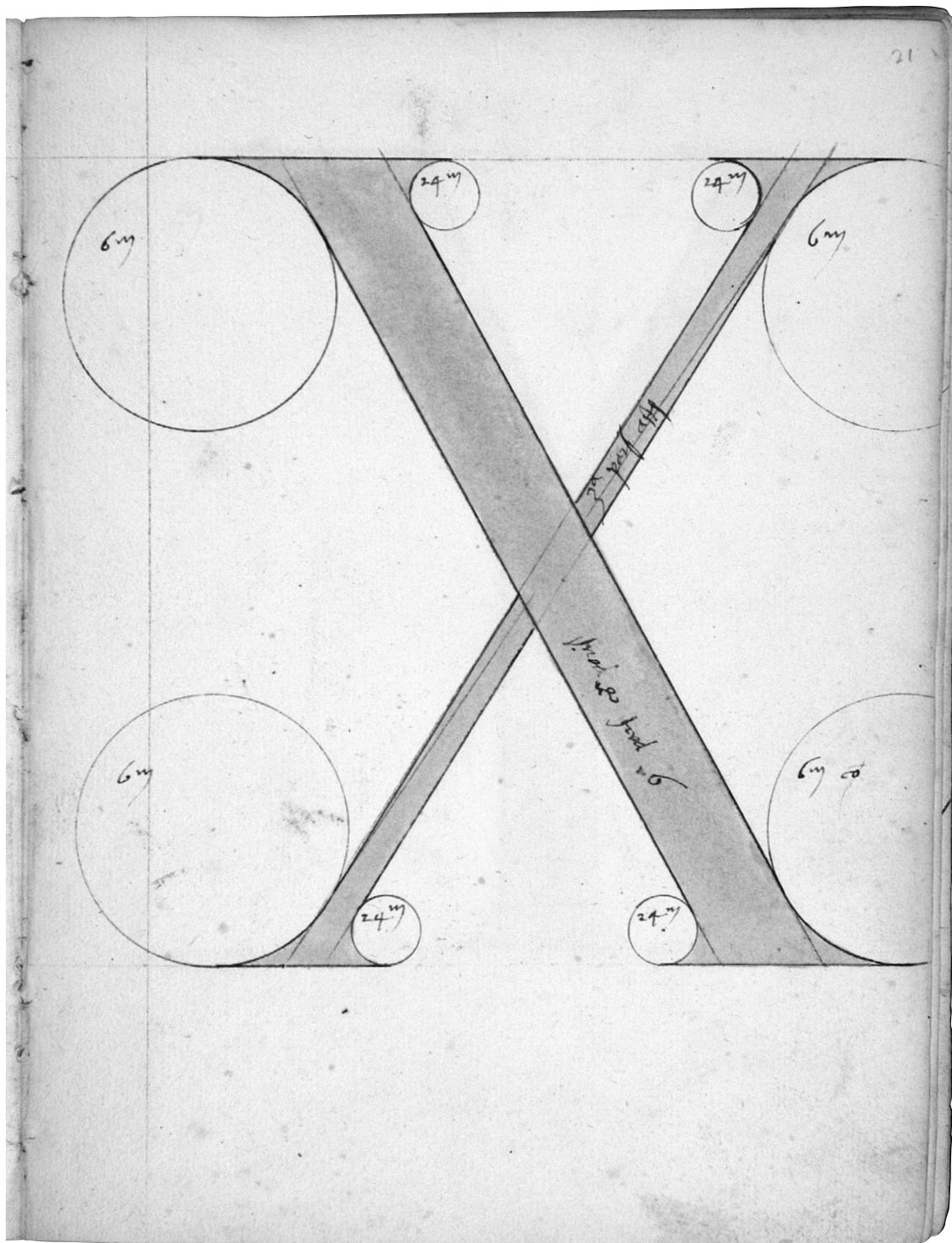


Figure 25. Folio 20r



Figure 26. Folio 21<sup>r</sup>

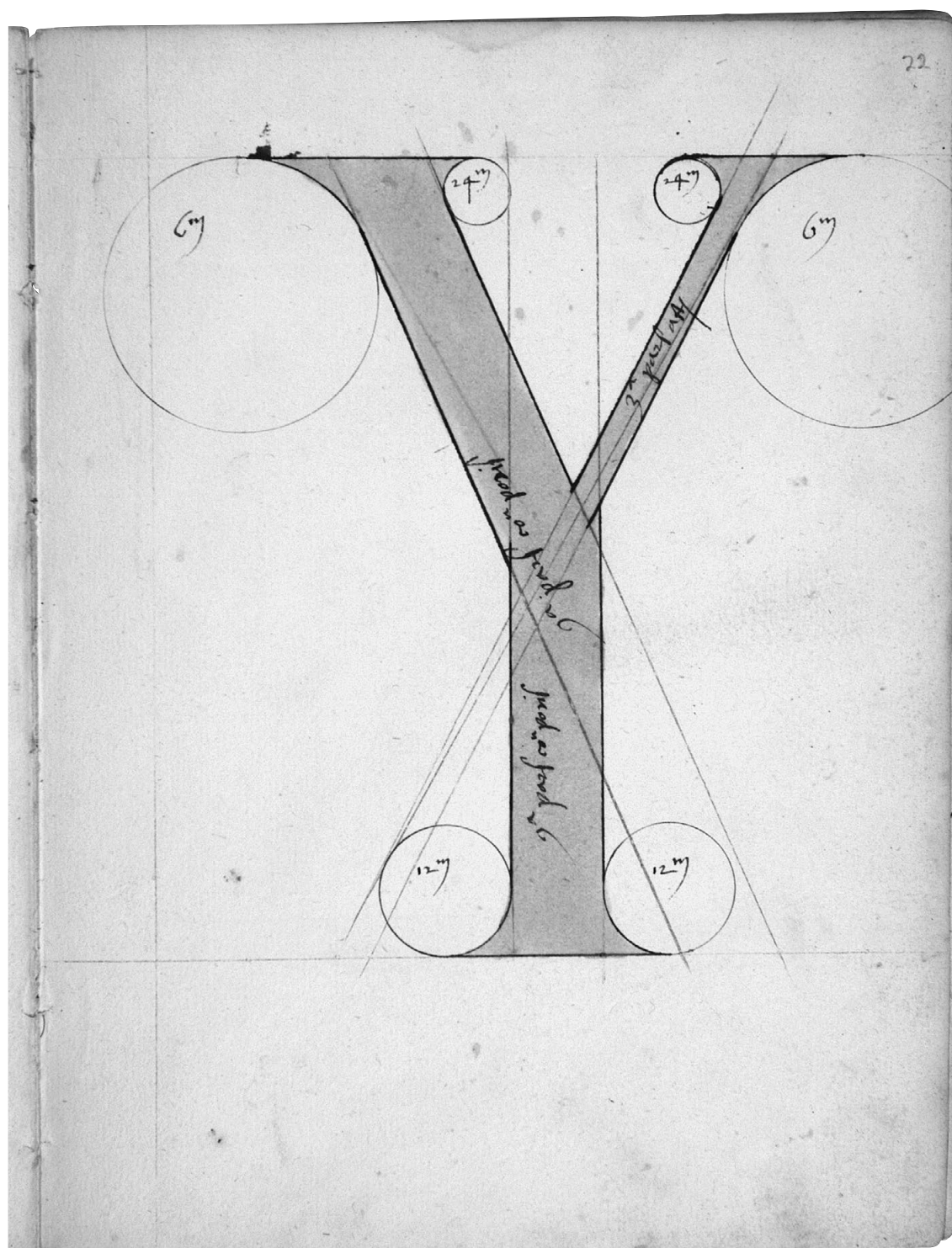
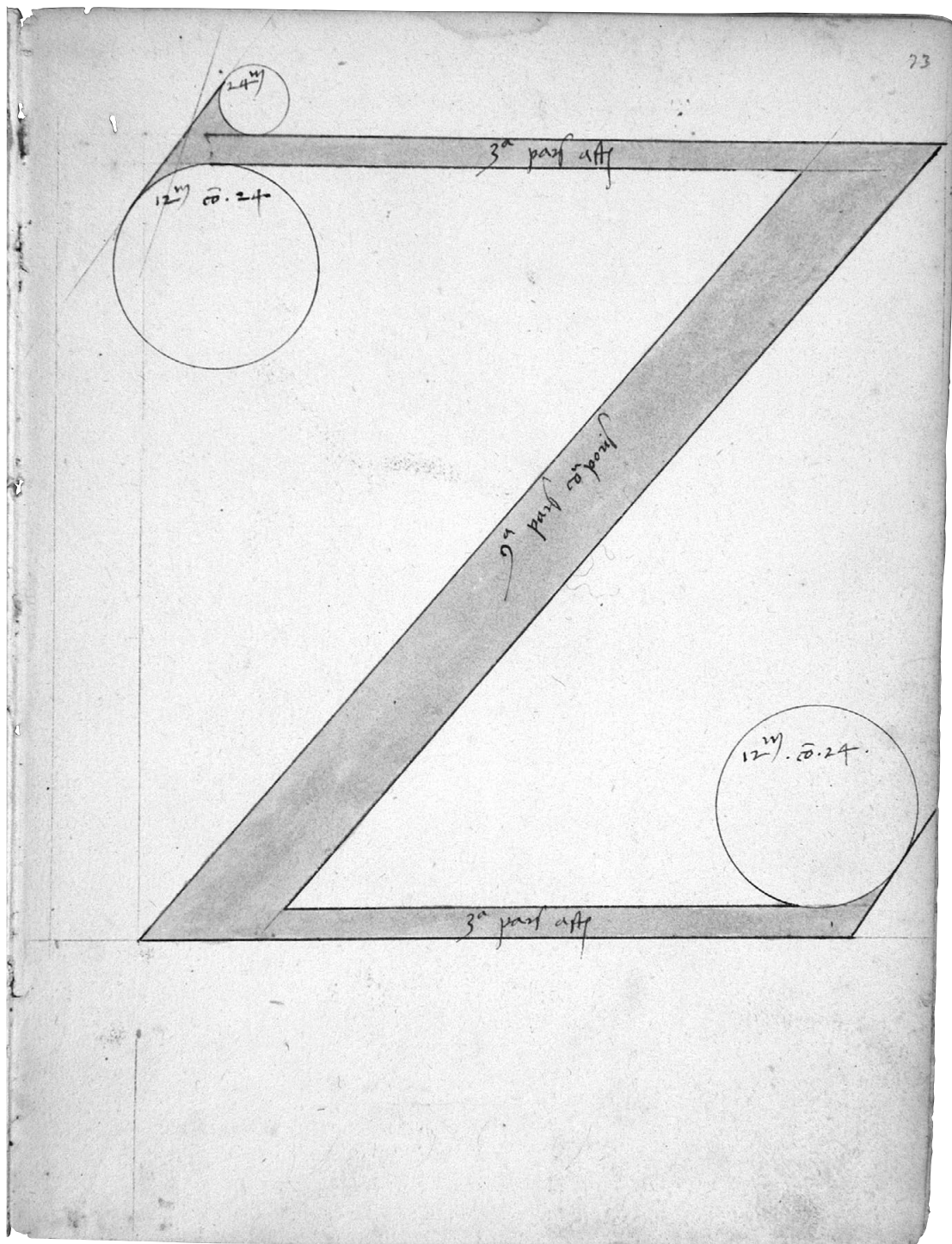


Figure 27. Folio 22r



Figure 28. Folio 23<sup>r</sup>

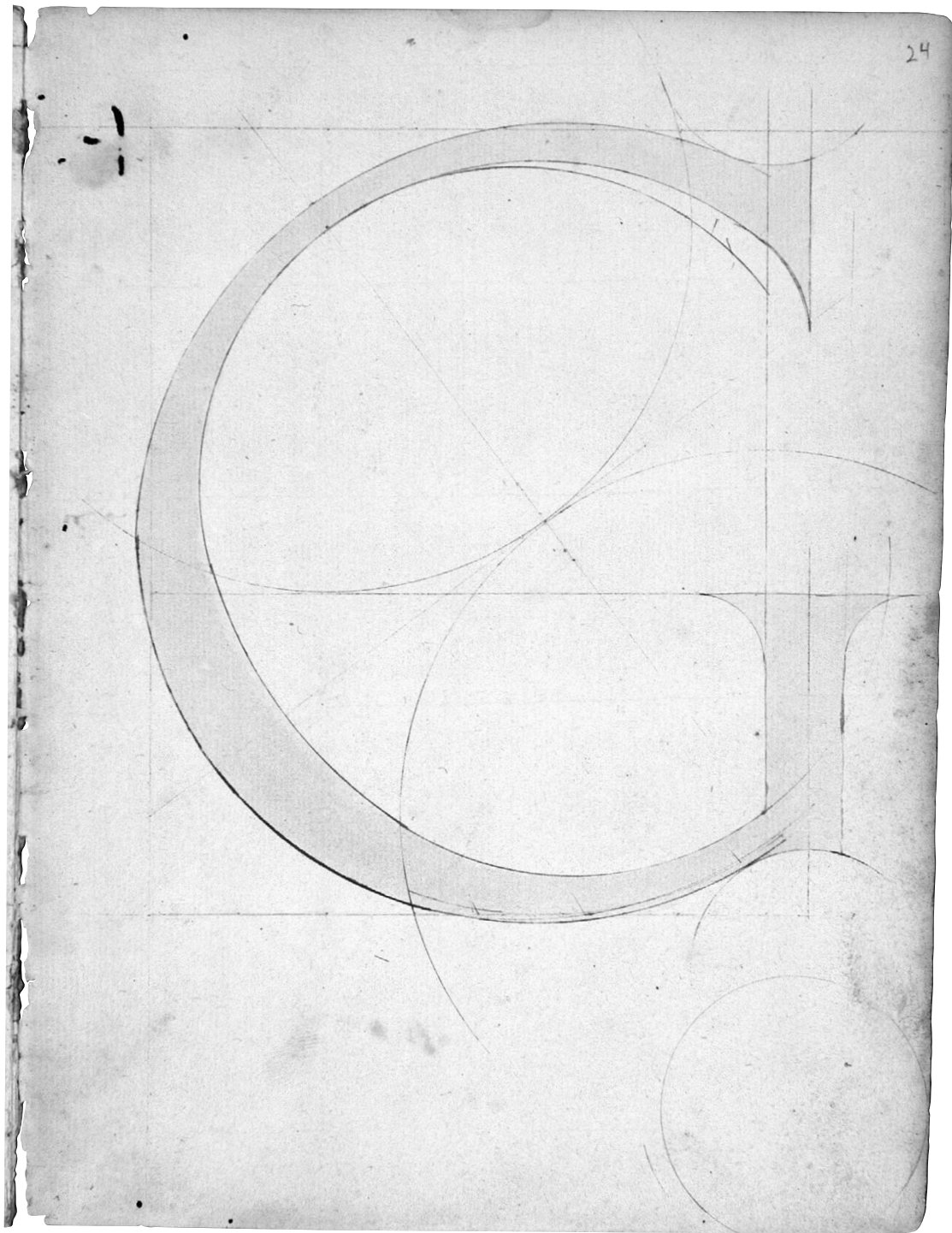


Figure 29. Folio 24r