
WORKING WITH MANUSCRIPTS: A FIELD GUIDE FOR STUDENTS

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Manuscript Books

One of the best parts of my profession is the opportunity to work with ancient and mediaeval manuscripts. The nature of my research dictates that I work chiefly with *western manuscripts*, a designation that covers Greek and Latin manuscripts, as well as those written in the vernacular languages of mediaeval Europe: Anglo-Saxon, Middle English, Old French, and so on. I also consult *oriental manuscripts*, a broader category that embraces manuscripts written in the languages of the Middle and Far East, including Hebrew, Aramaic, and Syriac. The labels ‘western’ and ‘oriental’ might sound a bit old-fashioned nowadays, but to my ear they seem appropriate to a discipline whose masters are still sometimes known as ‘Keepers of Manuscripts’.

The word ‘manuscript’ derives from the Latin *manuscriptus* and simply means ‘handwritten’, as opposed to ‘mechanically printed’. Handwriting, of course, is not limited to the medium of paper. Words may be carved in stone, incised in metal (cf. the Dead Sea “Copper Scroll”), or impressed onto moist clay tablets which would later be baked hard. Words may be scribbled on walls, cliffs, or statues, and

in this form are called *graffiti* (sing. *graffito*). Pieces of broken clay pots, or *potsherds*, were a common writing medium in antiquity; the technical term for these is *ostraka* (sing. *ostrakon*). Wax *tabula*, too, were widely used (cf. Luke 1:63), certainly by students in schools and, I should think, by scribes, businessmen, merchants, or any other profession that required a ready, reusable surface to compute figures and tally accounts.

That being said, the distinction between *handwritten* and *mechanically printed* is usually made in cases where the writing medium is thin, flat, and reasonably flexible – qualities that are more associated with papyrus, skin (leather), bark, or paper.

From the standpoint of history, the printed word is actually a relatively new invention. In the West, mechanical printing only developed towards the middle of the early fifteenth century, and it took at least another century before the age of the manuscript closed for good (it lasted a lot longer elsewhere). Printed books from this early period, specifically before the sixteenth century, are called *incunabula* (sing. *incunabulum*, or ‘incunable’), whose root is the Latin word for ‘cradle’, since this

was the period when printing was in its infancy. Many of these early books were printed in cities associated with the early Renaissance. One of the most famous printers was Aldus Manutius, whose dolphin-and-anchor device became one of the first internationally recognised trademarks, along with the golden orbs of the Medici. His Venetian publishing house popularised what would come to be known as the *italic* font, and his editions of the classics, known as Aldine editions, were favoured by scholars and students alike. I could go on about the history of printing in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but that would take us in the wrong direction, so to speak.

In general, manuscripts exist in one of two forms, *scrolls* or *books*. Scrolls were the preferred technology for the cultures of classical antiquity and the ancient Middle East: Greek and Roman libraries of antiquity were filled with scrolls, the community of pious Jews who lived near the Dead Sea had a library of thousands of scrolls, and of course the 'books' of what would become the Hebrew Bible were in those days scrolls, as they still are today in synagogues.

Books were harder to manufacture than scrolls, but were handier to use and probably easier to transport. More importantly, they could accommodate far more script than a scroll, and were the ideal vehicle for binding together a collection of texts. 'Binding' and 'collection' are the key words, since any well-made book, ancient or modern, is really a collection of booklets, or *gatherings*, that have been bound together.¹ 'Quire' is another name

for 'gathering', although it has different meanings as well.

A gathering is created by taking a large sheet of writing material and folding it one or more times. Take a sheet of foolscap and fold it in half along its shorter edge so that you create a brochure of two leaves, or *folia* (sing. *folio*), with the fold along its left-hand edge. Numbering the front (*recto*) and back (*verso*) of each leaf yields four pages, although in reality most mediaeval manuscript books are not paginated in the modern sense (see below). A second fold will produce four leaves, three folds will make eight leaves, and so on. More folds equal more leaves, but the leaves become correspondingly smaller – in bookmaking, as in thermodynamics, the law of conservation holds true: no matter how many times it is folded, a single sheet has a finite surface area. The number of folds, then, determines the size of the book. In former days, booksellers and bibliographers used to record a book's size as well as its title and author. A *folio* book was one whose size was equivalent to a broadsheet that been folded once, into two leaves. A *quarto* (or 4°), about the size of a modern large hardcover, had its sheets folded to make four leaves, an *octavo* (8°) into eight, a *sixteen-vo* (16°) into sixteen, and so on. In better libraries, oversized books are sometimes shelved separately under their correct name: *folio* volumes.

Next, a series of gatherings is sewn together along their inside edges. At one point, the top, bottom, and outside edges of the leaves are trimmed to remove their folds, thus separating them from one another. Modern books differ from ancient books in some details, but a close examination of the spine of any well-made hardcover book will confirm that

¹Modern paperback and so-called 'perfect' bindings use a different process.

it consists of a series of gatherings that have been arranged in their correct sequence, sewn together, and glued within two covers. Most book covers today are cloth, to the point that the word has become synonymous with ‘hard-cover’ (as opposed to ‘paper’ or ‘paperback’). But for most early books, including the mediaeval examples, bindings were made from leather, or very occasionally wood.

Books were typically associated with the early Christians, and there is evidence to suggest that the technology was popularised by them. The Gnostic Christian texts from Nag Hammadi in Egypt are bound together in books, or, to use the Latin word, *codices* (sing. *codex*). The *Apocalypse of Adam*, for example, is known as NHC V, 5, or the fifth text contained within Nag Hammadi Codex V. Indeed, from a book-binding perspective the New Testament is no more than a codex constituted from a sequential collection of discrete texts: four gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, a double handful of letters, and an apocalypse.²

Over time, the technology of the codex gradually rendered the scroll obsolete, with the result that the vast majority of mediaeval Christian manuscripts are in fact *manuscript books*. I do, however, occasionally encounter the odd mediaeval manuscript scroll, which usually contains a brief text or texts, the sort that might be used for everyday consultation and could be tucked away upon one’s person. Yale

University MS 504, for example, is a small scroll containing three copies of the *Reuelatio Esdrae*, or *Revelations of Ezra*, a short text that forecasts the quality of the upcoming year on the basis of the day of the week upon which either Christmas or New Year’s Day falls.

Fragments from manuscript scrolls of books are quite common. Most famous are the scroll fragments from the Dead Sea caves, which in their provenance are ancient, not mediaeval, and which in their numbers far exceed the total of partially or completely preserved scrolls. Most ancient papyri that have been recovered from among massive hordes in Egypt are also fragments. These number well into the hundreds of thousands, and contain all sorts of literary and documentary texts, some of the most significant of which are available to scholars in microfiche format. Sometimes scrolls can become ‘petrified’ (the term is inexact), like those recovered from Herculaneum, which were preserved after the city had been interred after the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 CE, or, more rarely, in the case of certain Dead Sea scrolls (e.g., 11Q18).

Similarly common are manuscript *book fragments*. Not only can they be found in most modern manuscript libraries, stored in acid-free boxes or between glass plates, but they were a regular feature of the mediaeval world as well, since even in those times new books were constructed out of bits and pieces of older ones. Imagine a ninth-century copy of the apocryphal *De nativitate Mariae*, bound in a Northern Italian manuscript book of the same date. A century later, the book is transported to the Loire Valley and disassembled for an unknown purpose. Our imaginary text survives, however, along with several others,

²Although ‘Bible’ is derived from *biblia*, a Greek noun which with a definite article translates as ‘the books’, the word refers less to the technology and more to the idea of an assembly of authoritative writings, regardless of their medium. The word ultimately derives from the name of a Phoenician city, Byblos, which was famous for its papyrus, the ancient world’s paper – but this, too, is a story best reserved for another time.

in a group of gatherings sewn together without a cover. Another two hundred years pass, and the group is broken up because someone desires one of the other texts it contains. Our text again miraculously endures, but this time only as loose leaves, and in fact its last two leaves go missing. By the fourteenth century our now-incomplete text is in England, where its new owner decides to bind it in a manuscript book together with other apocryphal Marian texts he has managed to collect. The modern scholar is thus left with a defective, ninth century North Italian copy of the *Nativitate*, preserved with other Marian writings of diverse provenance and date in a fourteenth century English codex. In this fashion it becomes part of the full apparatus of the extant manuscript evidence for the text, from which a critical edition may be prepared. If there is a message in all this, it is that *the effective lifespan of mediaeval manuscripts is often measured in centuries*.

Many texts have come down to us through equally convoluted circumstances. In some instances, a complete copy of a text, originally in its correct order, might be reassembled in a different order in a later manuscript book. I even know of cases where the first half of a text is preserved in one place in a codex, and the second half is located fifty or even a hundred leaves later on, separated by other writings, or where what should be the end of a text actually precedes its beginning!

Likewise, in a curious twist of fate, the first Dead Sea Scroll was actually discovered fifty years before all the rest. In the 1890s, Solomon Schechter received permission to investigate the genizah of the Ben-Ezra Synagogue in Old Cairo. A genizah is a storeroom where

manuscripts deemed too precious or sacred to discard casually are deposited after they have been worn-out by use. Among the horde of mediaeval Jewish manuscripts that he found in the genizah (while working in what must have been unbearably stifling conditions) were two mediaeval copies of a text which he recognised as being ancient in origin, and which he published under the title *Fragments of a Zadokite Work* (Cambridge, 1910). Five decades later, when the contents of the Dead Sea caves came to light, other copies and versions of the same text were found, and this of course is the famous *Damascus Document*. The bulk of the manuscripts from the Cairo genizah are now held in the Cambridge University Library, and it is no exaggeration to say that even though their full contents are only now being revealed via catalogues, they have already revolutionised our understanding of mediaeval Judaism. For further reading on manuscripts and their sojourns, I recommend M.R. James's delightful little handbook, *The Wanderings and Homes of Manuscripts* (London: SPCK, 1919).

Manuscript recycling in mediaeval times also extended to the individual leaves themselves, which sometimes had their original text erased and new texts written over top. Such leaves are called *palimpsests*. Sometimes the erased text, or *undertext*, of a palimpsest can be recovered. In the nineteenth century, Cardinal Mai, librarian first at the Biblioteca Ambrosiana in Milano and later at the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, recovered from palimpsests many precious biblical and classical writings that had been lost since antiquity. Similarly, Cardinal Mercati discovered a palimpsest in the same Ambrosian Library whose undertext preserved large portions of

the Hexapla of Psalms. Their methods, which were mechanical and largely destructive to the overtext, have since been replaced by modern radiosopic technologies.

However, despite the prevalence of scrolls, and despite, too, the great multitude of scroll fragments and scraps, what one normally encounters in the libraries and institutions in Western Europe and North America are Christian manuscript books from the Middle Ages. From this point on, when I use the word ‘manuscript’ or ‘manuscripts’, I mean *western mediaeval manuscript books*.

Although this field guide is not the vehicle for an extended discussion of handwriting, or *palaeography*, I should say a word on the subject. While styles of handwriting vary from century to century and across geographic regions, scholars make a broad distinction among the formal square script of late antiquity, which consists of capital or uppercase letters (*majuscule*), the *uncial* script of the early mediaeval period, which is also majuscule, though more rounded, and the lowercase (*miniscule*) scripts of later centuries. In this way, over time, MANVSCRIPTVS became MANUSCRIPTUS and then *manuscriptus* (and then, in the printed italics of Manutius’s volumes, *manuscriptus*). Uncials are older and therefore rarer, but are relatively easy to read. Miniscule scripts are quite common, but vary widely, and some can be nearly impossible to decipher. Compounding the issue is the fact that spelling in manuscripts, or *orthography*, is notoriously inconsistent, since it was really only with the advent of printed dictionaries that the spelling of words came to be fixed. Even worse, mediaeval scribes were addicted to abbreviations, the full roster of which requires

a small volume in itself. Modern editions of texts usually expand words that are abbreviated in manuscript, and indicate this through either italics or underlining, e.g., *manuscriptus* or manuscriptus, or otherwise expand the text silently (i.e., without notation).

The standard abbreviation for the word ‘manuscript’ is ‘MS,’ the plural being ‘MSS.’ The forms ‘Ms’ or ‘ms,’ without the full slate of capitals, are probably more common, and I must confess to a personal stubbornness in such matters. French sources, following their rules of capitalisation, normally use ‘ms’ and ‘mss.’ In German, the abbreviations are ‘Hs’ and ‘Hss,’ which stand for *Handschrift* and *Handschriften*.

Manuscript Repositories

Since the Enlightenment, the principal repositories of mediaeval manuscript books have come to be the great national and university libraries of Western Europe. Each scholar’s list will be slightly different, but most rosters of the important manuscript libraries will contain the following names:

- Berlin, Staatsbibliothek preußischer Kulturbesitz
- Cambridge, Cambridge University Library
- Cambridge, the libraries of the major university colleges
- Firenze, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana
- Heidelberg, Universitätsbibliothek
- London, British Library
- Manchester, John Rylands University Library
- Milano, Biblioteca Ambrosiana
- München, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek
- Oxford, Bodleian Library, Oxford University
- Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France

- Città del Vaticano, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana
- Venezia, Biblioteca (nazionale) Marciana
- Wien, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek

In addition to these libraries, many churches, monasteries, civic libraries, and universities in Europe have their own manuscript repositories, the total number of which must number into the thousands. Most of the oldest church and monastery libraries, however, have long since disappeared, their books dispersed and frequently broken up or otherwise lost. In Paris, for example, along with the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF), there is the Bibliothèque de l' Arsenal (part of the BnF), the Bibliothèque Mazarine (part of the Institut de France), the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève, the Archives nationales, and a galaxy of smaller libraries and institutions. Not only that, but manuscripts are also located at multiple sites in most of the cities, towns, and villages across the rest of France, and the same holds true for England, Germany, Italy, Austria, Spain, and across the rest of the countries of Europe.³

The best way to make sense of the holdings of the hundreds of manuscript libraries and repositories is through their *manuscript catalogues*. Not every manuscript collection has been catalogued, and not every catalogue does what it is supposed to do, but the ideal example will cover a set collection of manuscripts from a given library, and identify each manuscript and describe its contents. If we take our

³ Researchers who are interested in documents from the modern period face their own set of problems. Many state papers are preserved in the same large, national libraries as the British Library, the Archives nationales, or the Library of Congress, but where mediaeval manuscript books are found in churches, monasteries and local libraries, researchers who wish to consult state and private papers will find much of their material held in national and ministry archives, and in private, local, and university libraries.

example of the Parisian libraries, there are catalogues of the BnF Latin manuscripts, as well as catalogues of its Greek manuscripts and French manuscripts. These catalogues also helpfully describe the formation of its collection, informing us that certain manuscripts were originally held at the Sorbonne, others at the abbey of St-Germain-des-Prés, and so on. In addition to the BnF catalogues, there are seven additional volumes devoted to the Arsenal manuscripts, four volumes to the Mazarine manuscripts, and two volumes to the Ste-Geneviève manuscripts. Finally, there is a series of catalogues, which currently runs to several dozen volumes, addressing the manuscripts of the *départements*, or regions, of France. In this series there might be two volumes devoted to the manuscripts at Chartres, a volume listing the manuscripts in the Rouen area, and likewise across the rest of France.

Regrettably, most of the other European countries do not employ this systematic approach, and in fact most catalogues were composed as independent units. One of the best cataloguers of all time was M.R. James, author of the aforementioned *Wandering and Homes of MSS*, who devoted four decades to cataloguing the manuscripts held by the major college libraries of Cambridge University, as well as the holdings of several other major English collections.⁴

But many other manuscript collections are inadequately catalogued, only partially catalogued, or have yet to be catalogued at all. For this reason, large survey studies such as the *Summary Catalogue* of western manuscripts in

⁴ He was also a Fellow of King's College, Cambridge, later became the Provost of Eton, and to this day remains the best author of ghost stories in the English language. His catalogues, by the way, still hold up remarkably well.

the Bodleian Library or N.R. Ker's volumes of mediaeval manuscripts in British libraries are invaluable. Other similarly helpful resources exist, but the limitations of space permit me to list just two further examples: F.E. Cranz's *Microfilm Corpus*, which in thirty-eight reels preserve the microfilmed images of the indexes of hundreds of printed catalogues of Latin manuscripts, and J.-M. Olivier's *Répertoire des bibliothèques et des catalogues de manuscrits grecs*, the third edition (1995) of M. Richard's original work. It is worth noting, too, that manuscript catalogues are beginning to appear online, either in the form of searchable databases (e.g., the Beinecke or Pierpont Morgan collections) or as digitalized copies of the original print catalogues (e.g., James's descriptions of collections of St. John's College and Trinity College at Cambridge, or the catalogues of the Biblioteca nacional de España in Madrid, among others).

So whether you are visiting a library to consult a specific manuscript, or are more interested in browsing through a group of promising manuscripts, you should first determine whether a catalogue exists and, as the saying goes, do the legwork. It makes little sense to waste your research trip to a manuscript library working with catalogues that might have been studied beforehand. I hasten to add, however, that while visiting a library you should always check the on-site copies of the catalogues of its own holdings, since more often than not their librarians will have made handwritten corrections and additions in the catalogue's margins. There is, by the way, a substantial amount of literature on the subject of marginalia, mediaeval and modern, and several of the prognostic texts in which I am academically interested were frequently scribbled in

manuscript margins. Alternate readings to biblical books were also marginalised, and some of these preserve variants from translations that are otherwise no longer extant.

Spending time with the manuscript catalogues will also introduce you to the library's system of classification. The holdings of the Vatican Library and the British Library, for example, consist of a series of collections (*fonds*), within which each manuscript is identified by its own individual *class mark* (or *shelf number*). Those new to manuscript research are often perplexed by an unfamiliar class mark. The notation "Pal. lat. 235 f.39va-c" might seem like gibberish to the uninitiated. But to the trained eye, it is a reference to a specific text, located at the Biblioteca apostolica Vaticana, Latin codex Palatinus 235, folio 39, columns a to c. Similarly, the code words "BM Cott. Tib. A.iii, art. 26" direct one to the British Library in London (*olim* the 'British Museum', hence 'BM'), and more specifically to the twenty-sixth text in the codex known as Cotton Tiberius A.iii.

Furthermore, if you read more about the history of the Cotton manuscripts, then you will learn that its nucleus is the superb collection amassed by Sir Robert Bruce Cotton, which before they became part of British Library were stored in a series of cabinets, each of which was surmounted by the bust of one of the Caesars (or, in two cases, famous women of antiquity). So a manuscript with the class mark, 'Cotton Tiberius', was for a long time shelved in a cabinet over which the old brute, Tiberius Caesar, surveyed, no doubt with the "sneer of cold command" that Shelley describes. You might additionally discover that in 1731 a substantial portion of the Cotton

collection was consumed by a fire, with the result that some of the oldest western manuscript books in existence perished or were severely damaged. I cannot speak for every researcher, but to my mind, an understanding of the texts should be inseparable from an appreciation for the manuscripts in which they are written.

As for manuscripts in North America, and perhaps contrary to what one might assume, there are some very fine collections. Here I highlight the collections of Harvard, the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale, the Garrett Library at Princeton, the Huntington Library in California, the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library (HMML), and the Pierpont Morgan Library. All have been expertly catalogued. The Fisher Rare Book Library at the University of Toronto also has some important manuscripts.

Several American institutions also house *microfilm copies* of manuscripts from major European collections. In the Vatican Film Library at Saint Louis University, one may consult microfilms of the majority of the Greek and Latin manuscripts from the Vatican collection, while the library of the Medieval Institute at Notre Dame holds microfilm copies of manuscripts from Milan's famous Biblioteca Ambrosiana. The Library of Congress in Washington contains quite a collection, obtained in a series of expeditions immediately following the Second World War designed to photographically preserve manuscript treasures of Europe. The Hilander Research Library holds a very good, if eclectic collection of microfilm copies, and is particularly known for its

Slavonic holdings.⁵ Lastly, the manuscripts from a few important collections (the Cotton is one) are available on microfilm.

Of course, before one visits a manuscript library he or she must have a good working knowledge of the ancient or mediaeval languages, and a fair understanding of manuscript abbreviations, palaeography, and orthography. That being said, there is no substitute for the experience of working with manuscripts: only by building birdhouses does one build better birdhouses.

Consulting Manuscripts: Two Examples

If the first step is to review the manuscript catalogues, then the second is to consult the manuscripts themselves. This is not as easy as it sounds. Access to manuscript collections is strictly regulated, and security is high. Moreover, manuscripts are not printed books such as one finds on the stacks of a university library. You cannot withdraw manuscripts or consult them at will, and more often than not they will be hand-delivered to your desk by a librarian.

The processes involved with consulting manuscripts can be complicated, and preparation is the key. Know the manuscript library that you plan to visit, and research its catalogues thoroughly. You should understand beforehand where you need to be, how you intend to travel there (international and local), what it will cost, what special circumstances you might

⁵For more information, the reader should consult my note on "Microform Manuscript Collections in the United States," *Bulletin de l'Association pour l'étude de la littérature apocryphe chrétienne* 17 (2007), 14-16

have to address, and which manuscripts you will want to consult.

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Let me describe two examples of the process, wherein a researcher visits: 1) the BnF in Paris and; 2) the Beinecke Library in New Haven, in order to consult some mediaeval Latin manuscripts. My senior colleague, Professor Charles Kannengiesser, who over a generation ago spent many years in close study of manuscripts of the Church Fathers, informs me that the procedures of the BNF Richelieu as I describe them remain essentially unchanged.

1. The Latin manuscripts of the BnF are principally held in the western manuscripts reading room of the BnF Richelieu, which is located in the second *arrondissement* in central Paris. Some BnF manuscripts are held in the Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal, a thirty-minute walk to the south-east, in the fourth *arrondissement*.

Our researcher’s initial task is to obtain an access card. At the BnF Richelieu, after passing through a metal detector and security check-point at the front gate on rue Richelieu, the researcher visits the administrative office, where he provides the administrator with his passport and a brief, official letter of introduction from the department chair or an advisor. *I strongly urge all researchers (students and professors alike) to obtain such a letter before visiting any European manuscript library.* A photo-identification access card is created on site. Although the BnF has the facilities to take photographs, researchers should always carry a few extra passport-sized photos. In 2008, a year’s access to the BnF costs 53.00 Euros.

The western manuscripts reading room is located on the second floor. It is everything one might expect from a Parisian library: a very long, elegant rectangular room with thirty-foot ceilings. It is lined with books, wood paneling, spiral staircases, large mirrored cabinets, and, along one wall, unbelievably tall French windows that open to a sunny cobblestone courtyard below. In the middle of the room is a central island, where several librarians work and assist the *lecteurs* (the researchers).

Upon entry, at one end of the reading room, our researcher presents his access card to the attendant and is handed three items in return: a key to lockers outside the room (on lockers, see below, ‘Handling Manuscripts’), a green or blue plastic plate about the size of CD case, and an exit slip. The plate has a number, which corresponds to the number of a desk inside the room that will be the researcher’s private workspace for the day.

In order to consult a manuscript, our researcher needs to complete a manuscript request form [see Plate I, p. 85]. At the BnF, researchers may consult up to five manuscripts per day. Part of the information required on these forms is the microfilm number of the manuscript, the information for which is stored in a separate card catalogue. If the manuscript is available on microfilm, and unless one can offer a good reason otherwise, researchers are obliged to consult the reproduction of the manuscript rather than the manuscript itself. I have had several occasions to request to consult the original manuscript even when a microfilm copy exists; this is accomplished through yet another official form, available from the central island.

Once the manuscript request form is completed, our researcher presents it and his numbered green plate to a librarian at the end of the room opposite the entrance. If his requests may be filled by microfilm, the librarian will assign the researcher a microfilm machine number, and the microfilms will be left (one at a time) at that machine. If the manuscript itself will be consulted, a librarian will bring it to the researcher's desk. Whatever the case, the researcher's green plate is exchanged for an orange plate, on which again is the number of his desk.

At this point our researcher returns to his desk to await delivery of the manuscript book, or moves to the assigned microfilm reader, ready to read the manuscript on a microfilm reel. One may temporarily leave the reading room and/or the library, but one's access card always remains at the front desk. When he is ready to leave for the day, the researcher must return the last manuscript (or microfilm) to the desk at the end of the room, and re-exchange his orange plate for the green one. Then, with all his papers in hand and his desk clear, the researcher presents the green plate and the exit slip that he received at the start of the day to the librarian on duty at the central island. The green plate indicates that the researcher has returned all his manuscripts, yet still the librarian will check his papers thoroughly before signing the exit slip. Only then can the researcher retrieve his access card from the front desk.

Reproductions of BnF manuscript folia are available for a fee. Forms must be completed and submitted to the reproductions department, which is located elsewhere within the BnF Richelieu. Services range from photo-

copies and photographs to microform reproductions (microfilm, microfiche, or slides) to digital reproductions, where page and text are converted to JPEG, PDF, or TIFF formats. One should expect a turnaround of several months before receiving the requested material.

2. The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University is everything one might expect from a modern library: a sleekly elegant building that is set partly below ground level and contains a temperature-controlled atmosphere. As with most North American manuscript libraries, the process of consulting manuscripts is more streamlined than in European libraries.

Once at Yale, our researcher enters the Beinecke at the ground floor and deposits his coat and bags in an area monitored by security guards before proceeding downstairs to the central desk. First-time visitors initially register online at a nearby computer terminal (this may be done in advance), and then re-register, with two pieces of photo identification, with a librarian at the central desk. Our researcher next signs the day book and receives a key to a locker for his personal effects (on lockers, see below, 'Handling Manuscripts'). Once ready for work, he submits completed manuscript request forms [see Plate II, p. 86] at the central desk. The manuscripts are retrieved from storage and brought to the desk, usually within twenty to thirty minutes.

Only one manuscript at a time is permitted in the special, atmosphere-controlled reading room nearby; the researcher retrieves it from a librarian at the desk and carries it to one of twenty-odd rectangular tables in the reading

room. In rare cases the library staff will themselves convey large or especially rare items to one's desk. In fact, during our last research trip, in October 2007, two librarians carried a life-sized granite bust of a 1930's French politician directly to the table of my wife, Diane. The thing must have weighed forty or fifty pounds!

When finished with the manuscript, our researcher returns it to the central desk and obtains the next manuscript. There is no limit to the number of manuscripts that may be consulted daily. Researchers who retire for the day should expect that their bags will be thoroughly checked by the security guards before they are permitted to exit the building.

Microfilm readers are available but their use is not enforced in the way that it is at the BnF. Reproductions of manuscript folia are available for a fee. Forms may be completed and submitted to the central desk, where payment may be made by credit card, or orders may be sent via e-mail. A full range of services is available. If one is on-site, special slips are used to "flag" the specific pages in a manuscript for reproduction. In all cases, expect a turnaround of two to three weeks for your order to be filled.

When consulting manuscripts, research trips of a week or less normally demand intensive library time, with evenings spent collating the day's work and preparing for the next day's tasks. However, for stays that last several weeks or even months, I suggest approaching your task in terms of a marathon rather than a sprint, working no more than six hours a day. In the spring of 1999, as an ABD doctoral student during my first research trip to Paris, I

spent several weeks in one of the libraries of the Catholic Institute, near the Luxembourg Garden. There I worked at a desk near some Italian scholars, who each day took hour-long breaks for lunch. I have never forgotten this lesson. Since most manuscript libraries are located in the world's most beautiful cities, a light lunch can be accompanied by a short stroll around Paris, Rome, Vienna, or London, from which one will return feeling completely refreshed and ready for the afternoon's work. Few persons are fortunate enough to be able to work in such a convivial environment.

When visiting a manuscript library, my advice is to dress as if you were attending an academic conference. Suits are common among professional European academics of both genders. North American scholars are generally less formal. For gentlemen, the combination of blazer and dress shirt is entirely appropriate, although a pullover rather than a blazer, or the combination of a sport shirt and slacks will not be out of place, either.

Handling Manuscripts

Briefcases and bags are normally not permitted in manuscript reading rooms, and lockers are often provided where such items may be stored. Sometimes researchers employ an opaque plastic briefcase to transport their materials from the locker to the reading room, as they are required to do in the British Library and Archives nationales (where they provide the cases). Cellular telephones should be turned off or, better yet, left in one's locker.

Pencils are the preferred writing tool; researchers are expected to know enough not to bring ink into a manuscript reading room. Manu-

script libraries do not usually permit the use of electronic document scanners, although I have noted an increase in the use of digital cameras.

When consulting manuscripts, you will require your notebook computer, a few pencils, research material, some blank writing paper, and a high-quality magnifying glass. I also carry a pair of gloves for manuscripts that can no longer tolerate the touch of human skin, although in such rare cases the library may provide these (e.g., as they do for the manuscripts at the Osler Library at McGill University).

Expect to use *futons* and *snakes* when reading manuscripts. A 'futon' (also called a 'pillow' or some similarly evocative term) is a heavily padded, rectangular cloth, about an inch thick and covered in velvet or some other plush material. It comes in various sizes, the most common being approximately a yard long and a foot wide. The researcher scrolls his futon from each end, so that its middle part ends up laying flat on his desk and its scrolled-up ends form two cushions perhaps three inches high. The manuscript book is positioned on the futon so that the spine of the book rests in the low part in the middle, and its open covers are supported by the higher, rolled-up parts at either end.

Some libraries prefer to use large foam wedges instead of futons. In this case, the researcher aligns two foam wedges along their narrow edges in order to form a v-shaped trough. The spine of the manuscript book is placed within the trough, and its open covers are supported by the flat planes of the foams.

'Snakes' are foot-long, inch-wide, soft velvet

tubes in which are contained hundreds of tiny ball bearings. The idea is that one uses these flexible weights to hold down the pages of the MS book as it lies on the futon, since the pages have a tendency to creep towards the vertical (this is an effect of the binding). In other libraries, weighted strings or other devices perform the same function.

The net effect of futons/foams and snakes/strings are to support the manuscript book in an open position without breaking its binding, which might be eight or more centuries old. *Never force open a manuscript book flat against a desk, or use one's fingers or hand to keep a folio page open.* The researcher who ignores these rules risks having a librarian come to his desk to deliver a brisk and occasionally public scolding. I have seen this happen several times.

Most mediaeval manuscripts are foliated rather than paginated. The front (*recto*) of first leaf (*folio*) is numbered '1' but the back of the leaf (*verso*) does not contain a number. Instead, the next folio is numbered '2,' and so on. Thus, a text that starts on folio 1 and ends on the back of the following leaf is said to run from fol. 1r to 2v (sometimes 1a to 2b). Often the text extends across the full width of the leaf, as with a modern book, but other times it is written in two or more columns. Columns of text are normally indicated by lowercase letters, e.g., fol. 1ra-b (or 1r a-b).

In many instances, bindings are not original, and, as I mentioned earlier, many manuscript books consist of gatherings and sometimes even single leaves from various earlier manuscript books or booklets. While manuscript books are often devoted to a single author or, more commonly, a specific general subject, it

is not unusual to find examples where a variety of texts are contained within the covers of a single book.

While manuscript pages from the sixteenth century onwards are normally composed of paper, almost all of the mediaeval examples from the eighth to fifteenth centuries are fashioned from prepared animal skins. There is great diversity in their colour and texture. Some pages are browned, stained, coarse, ripped, or otherwise damaged. Yet the pages of some of the oldest manuscript books I have seen have an almost translucent whiteness. It never ceases to amaze me that eight-hundred year old manuscripts leaves have managed to survive in a better state than many of the books from the first half of the twentieth century. One reason for this is that the pages of these modern books were composed of highly reactive paper that within a few decades had already begun to become brittle and crumble. That being said, it is in an unfortunate fact that many manuscript books have been irrevocably damaged by persons who over the centuries have torn out or cut away their illuminations. Many old maps, too, which today hang like trophies on office or studio walls, used to be old maps in old books.

Manuscripts are organic phenomena, and have an aroma about them that, in rare cases, can be quite potent. To my nose, their aroma recalls bridle leather, wet autumn earth, or occasionally dried wild mushrooms. Those with allergies or asthma might suffer, however, and for this reason should be careful to ensure that appropriate medical remedies are handy. Dust is not so much a problem with mediaeval manuscripts as it is with modern collections of state or personal papers. I imagine that

some mediaeval books might be moldy, but am unqualified to offer additional information. I have seen a few manuscripts that have been much damaged by mice.

Afterword

Many researchers request a manuscript, consult a specific text, and then return the manuscript as soon as possible, as if one were renting a DVD from the local *dépanneur*. While the limitations of travel, time, and expense inevitably warrant a measure of dispatch, you might want to spend an extra few minutes considering each book that crosses your desk. Examine its binding, especially if it seems original. In some of the old great mediaeval libraries, books were chained in place, and sometimes one sees manuscript books that have remnants of the catches and clasps on their covers. Are there minor texts written on the flysheets or endpages? Are the leaves of the book pricked, or are they ruled, either by ink or drypoint? Are the letters of its texts rubricated? Are there marginal or interlinear notes or illustrations? If you can, spare a few moments to review the other texts in the book. Many manuscript books were assembled for a purpose: a Book of Hours, a volume of the Lives of the Saints, a collection of scientific treatises, or a Commonplace book. Time and again I have encountered a hitherto uncatalogued copy of a biblical apocryphon simply while browsing through a manuscript book. You never know what you might discover.

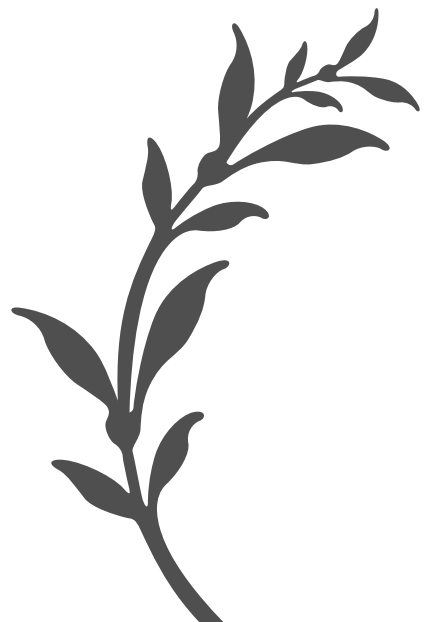
Above all, pay special attention to the illuminations, whose colour and detail can be magnificent, and all the more so if you happen to have a manuscript that was illustrated by a master. Yale MS 404, also known as the

Rothschild Canticles, is, for example, among the most beautiful books in the Beinecke Library. Fol. 113r, which is reproduced in Plate III (p. 87), contains the beginning of a strange story about Adam and the origin of monsters, part of a large corpus of mediaeval teratological literature. From top to bottom, the three illustrations portray Adam warning his daughters that they will conceive monsters if they eat the fruit of certain herbs, a swan-headed humanoid (do children *ever* listen?), and a pair of *cy-noscephalae*, which literally mean “dog-headed men”. The other illustration, reproduced in Plate IV (p. 88), is drawn from a series of Sibylline prophecies that are preserved in Yale MS 411. These prophecies, however, are not part of the famous *Sibylline Oracles* of the “Old Testament Pseudepigrapha”, but rather one of a diverse collection of *oracula* of late antique or mediaeval vintage. Here, on fol. 57v, we have a representation of the famous Tiburtine Sibyl, accompanied by a brief prophecy in the cartouche at the bottom of the page.

As magnificent as these images are, however, they pale in comparison to the experience of having these precious books propped open on your desk, where for a timeless moment, the articulation of the hand and the luminosity of the brush speak to you across the void of the centuries, voices from our past that connect us with the universal fellowship of human achievement.

I thank my faculty colleagues Charles Kannengiesser (Theology) and Sean Alexander Gurd (Classics) for reviewing a preliminary draft of this paper.

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**BEINECKE RARE BOOK
AND MANUSCRIPT LIBRARY**

CALL NO. **CASE**

AUTHOR

TITLE

DATE REQUESTED

NAME (PRINT) **CLASS EXHIBIT**

Plate II: MS request form, Beinecke Rare Book and MS Library, Yale University, New Haven

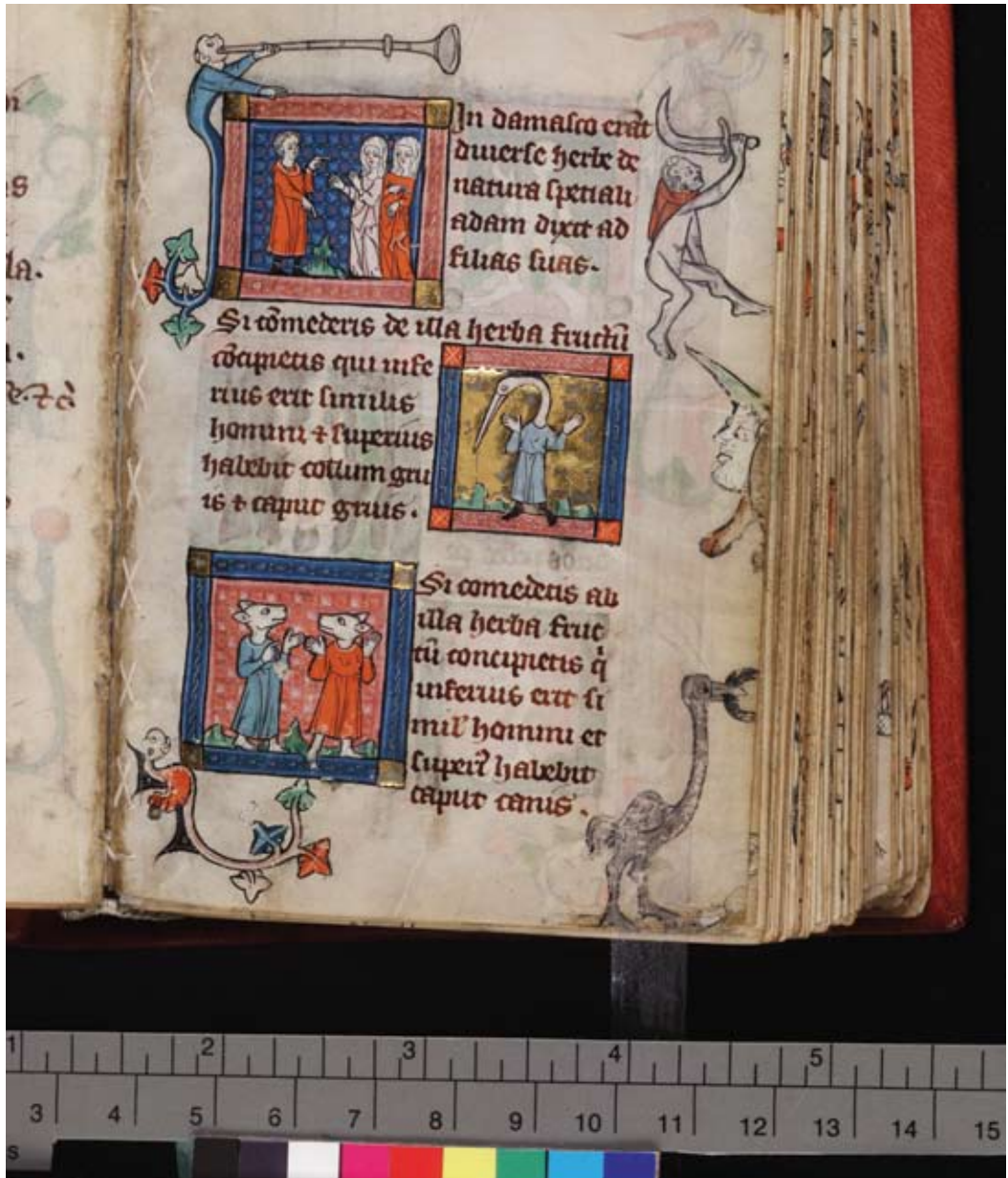


Plate III: Beinecke MS 404 (Rothschild Canticles), fol. 113r. *Courtesy Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University*

