

Reviews

Introduction to Manuscript Studies

by Raymond Clemens and Timothy Graham

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Manuscript studies are not a mainstream research field, mostly due to the requirements a researcher has to meet in order to become a skilled practitioner. For this reason it may seem fair to take a closer look at publications dealing with the “have-to-know” aspects of codicology and paleography in order to acquaint oneself with the most rudimentary knowledge of manuscript studies. In their thorough book, Raymond Clemens (Illinois State University) and Timothy Graham (University of New Mexico) seek to introduce elaborate and thorough information about this subject matter. At the same time they provide a well-structured and easy to read volume filled with over 250 illustrations.

The basic principle which the authors seek to introduce is the rejection of encyclopaedic structure in favour of a division into three sections, each dealing with different aspects of manuscript lore. Furthermore, each aspect presented is followed by an example, and usually several illustrations, which allows the reader to fully grasp the notions discussed. The book’s structure allows, following the process of a manuscript’s creation, the ways in which it was written and deciphered or understanding the purpose of several manuscript genres.

The first part of the book, “Making the Medieval Manuscript” explains how different materials and implements were applied in the process of writing and registering intellectual achievements. The section is divided into four chapters. The first chapter deals with writing materials and analyses the majority of writing surfaces used throughout history, with a special reference to parchment and the way it was prepared

for writing, starting from the way animal skins were processed to the final stages of cutting up parchment sheets or repairing damage within the sheet structure. It is worth noting that parchment was still the favoured writing surface in the Middle Ages long after paper was introduced. Even though paper seemed more economical, initial fear and mistrust towards its usage lasted until the 12th century. Parchment, considered a more prestigious material, was therefore the preferred writing surface of the Middle Ages. The second chapter presents the tools which were used for writing along with text decoration techniques. Much attention is paid to the way quills or pen-knives were used in the process of transcribing text onto parchment. Furthermore, the authors describe how inks and pigments were created and the stages of text illumination. It is worth noting that the richness of illumination depended on the patron who ordered a given manuscript. The third chapter describes the processes of correction, glossing and annotation of manuscripts. Both checking and glossing used to be carried out by a senior scribe or copyist with a broader understanding of the writing process and greater expertise. The most common errors and numerous ways of their correction are meticulously described and supported by several illustrations. The authors point here also to the means by which medieval scribes and readers used to annotate manuscripts or to numerous alternative functions manuscripts may have fulfilled. In general, manuscripts were valuable possessions which might serve as collateral for loans or as tokens of luck, health and wealth. The fourth chapter concludes the first section of the book. Its main premise is to describe the means by which manuscripts were bound and the emergence of monastic and private libraries.

The aim of the second part of the book, “Reading the Medieval Manuscript”, is to familiarise the reader with the peculiarities of decipherment and reading. Chapter Five, therefore, presents guidelines for handling delicate manuscripts, as well as techniques of transcribing data. In order to avoid mistakes during the course of transcription, Chapter Six acquaints the reader with the rules of medieval punctuation and abbreviation. Even though it may seem less significant at first glance, medieval punctuation varies fundamentally from what is known and applied nowadays, as it was used to accomplish different goals. Medieval punctuation sought to aid the oral delivery of a text and indicate pauses or to clarify numerous grammatical inconsistencies. The authors point to the first usage as the most common one. It is worth noting that the chapter also provides a very thorough list of medieval abbreviations along with explanations and commentaries. Readers may compare individual abbreviations with the illustrations of manuscript pages provided in this chapter and “try” to transcribe several passages for themselves. The following three chapters provide valuable information about practical aspects of manuscript assessment. Chapter Seven focuses on the procedures of handling

damaged manuscripts and discusses numerous situations in which manuscripts can be, intentionally or unintentionally, damaged. Chapter Eight may prove to be useful for future adepts of codicology, as it explains the rules of assessing manuscripts' origin and provenance (history of ownership). Chapter Nine lists the most important elements in constructing a resourceful and adequate description of a manuscript. The final chapter in the second section of the book discusses sixteen selected scripts and provides an illustration to each of them. It is worth noting that even though the authors chose only a few scripts on the basis of their popularity and importance, the scripts are meticulously described. At the same time each script is presented in separation and the chapter avoids any larger attempts at their comparison.

The third section of *Introduction to Manuscript Studies* encompasses details about specific manuscript genres, their construction and purpose. Chapter Eleven describes biblical translations and the role of commentaries, often more elaborate than the source text. The authors point to the fact that commentaries were not limited to glosses alone, as they could also include rich and elaborate tables or concordances, as well as calendars, described in detail in Chapter Twelve. This particular chapter also explains the purpose of liturgical books – missals, breviaries and other mass and sermon aiding manuscripts. Chapter Thirteen focuses on books of hours, a manuscript intended for laymen in their participation in the daily round of prayers. One peculiarity is that this specific kind of manuscript was usually ordered for women, and included calendars to indicate which saint was being commemorated. Chapter Fourteen describes the preparation of charters and cartularies. Much attention is paid to the medieval means of validating documents. Apart from seals, autograph signatures, registers or chirographs, all of which were quite widespread and popular throughout the Middle Ages, the most sophisticated means of countering forgery were devised within papal and church chanceries. Chapter Fifteen deals with all sorts of maps used throughout the medieval period. The authors pay attention to the issue of validity, which was not usually a significant aspect of medieval cartography. Thus it was not unusual to see a map of a town with many of the terrain or topographic features exaggerated or added in accordance to the cartographer's viewpoint. Finally, Chapter Sixteen focuses on scrolls and rolls, used while creating royal proclamations or various religious texts, including large, complex images or genealogies of Christ. It was also common to create scrolls as a result of conducted business, as the numerous still existing exchequer rolls of annual royal audits show.

The third section of the book is followed by an Appendix with information and hints on studying Medieval Latin, which might prove useful for a budding medievalist. The Appendix includes a topic-based list of publications, provided as suggested reading

materials. The book also features an alphabetical index of terms and notions and, finally, an extensive glossary structured in alphabetical order and bibliography with all of the positions assigned to correspond to specific chapters of the book.

Introduction to Manuscript Studies is a well-written, well-organised publication. Its primary goal, acquainting the reader with elementary knowledge on the functioning of medieval manuscripts, is a task well done. The book's structure, based on the lifeline of a manuscript, gradually introduces the reader to the milieu of a niche field of study, yet it manages to do so without throwing up immense amounts of new terms, or attempting to explain everything at once. In terms of contents, the book encompasses not only the most basic information, as the authors' intention was to provide a publication with self-study and do-it-yourself elements, which prove to be both useful and, at times, entertaining. In this regard it is worth noting that the high quality illustrations provided not only depict actual manuscripts, but may also serve as material for initial attempts at deciphering, transcribing or translating a manuscript. The terms provided within the Appendix are well explained, yet any future edition of the book might be made more useful with Appendix page references within the text in order to avoid excessive thumbing. The authors provided adequate footnotes, and a well-organised bibliography section which is easy to comprehend and gives valuable information on what to read next. The language used within the book is accessible and understandable for both academics and undergraduate students, as well as curious, knowledge-seeking laymen. The book is a must-have for academic libraries seeking to acquaint students with elementary knowledge of the Middle Ages. While priced at around £30, it could also be a valuable possession for a self-study medievalist. Finally, the book can be recommended as a starting point for any manuscript-oriented discussion or seminar, as well as a textbook for a variety of academic subjects.