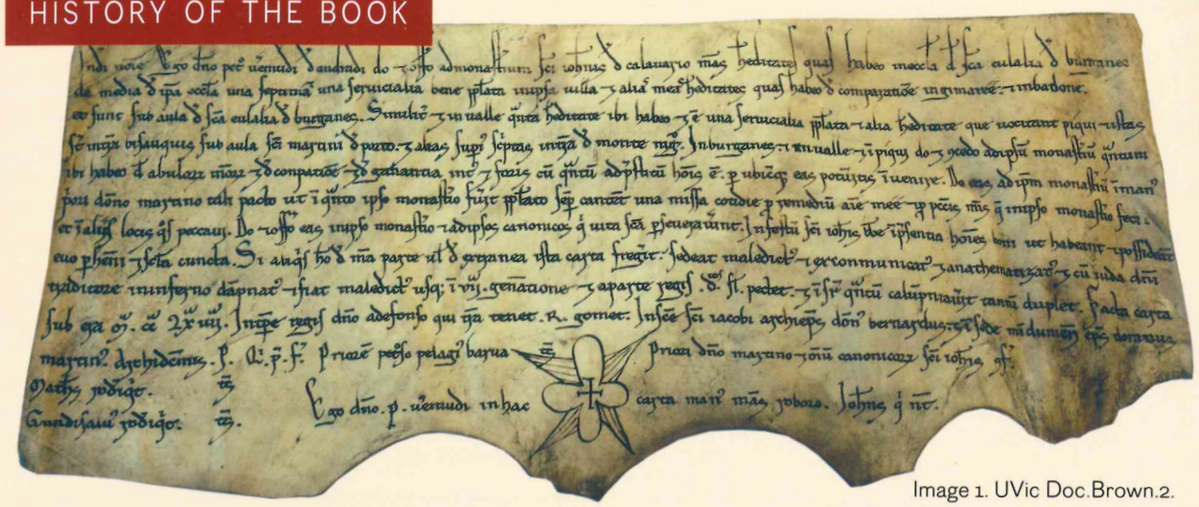


Image 1. UVic Doc.Brown.2.

The Medieval Book Historian as Archeologist

by Adrienne Williams Boyarin

Scholars of the Middle Ages pay special attention to book history. Books carry a great deal of our knowledge of the medieval past, but an old book tells more than what is written on it. It also communicates the story of its making and use – the layers of ordinary human interaction with the object. Revealing these layers can be compared to an archeological dig. A textbook I frequently use to teach university students about medieval books puts it this way:

> Every medieval manuscript presents its reader with a series of "strata," each of which was acquired by the writing support – paper or parchment – at a different stage… to investigate the history of the production and use of a manuscript is in many ways akin to an archeological investigation, except that, in the case of the manuscript, all strata are usually visible at once. (R. Clemens and T. Graham, *Introduction to Manuscript Studies*, Cornell University Press, 2007, p. 48).

When I look at old books, I look for these strata of production and use. I hope that the makers, writers, and readers of the book leave evidence of their existence, and I care not only about the beauty of medieval books but also about the messy accretions of time. Manuscript "strata" are the layers that build up on a book over months, years, and centuries of human interaction.

Medieval books were made and written by hand, and their strata are the visible residue of a relatively predictable series of actions. In roughly chronological order, these are as follows:

- Making the writing support (i.e., the surface for writing)
- "Pricking" and "ruling" the pages (applying guide lines in preparation for text)
- Writing the text
- Applying rubrics, capital letters, and decorated initials
- Correcting of the text
- Illustrating or illuminating the text
- Binding the book
- Adding annotations, finding aids, or other evidence of use and readership

It is useful to think of these in terms of archaeology: medieval book historians are interested in excavating the book, in uncovering and recording data that will allow accurate conclusions about the object or its component parts. As with a dig site, it is crucial to understand how the strata relate to each other in order to draw sound conclusions, discover unusual features, or even identify forgeries. As scholars we are less interested in the pristine object in its original state than in this stratification. The more we can see, the more interesting the story of the book.

At the University of Victoria (UVic), where I work and teach, we are fortunate in having a substantial teaching collection of medieval books and documents. Our library's Special Collections include medieval materials dating from the early thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries. When a student takes a class on medieval books with me, they survey this collection, and I teach them how to uncover the strata visible in each survival. This allows them to act as book "archeologists," to understand the stages of medieval book production as well as identify some of the ways medieval and later readers interacted with their reading material.

The Writing Support A wonderful example of how interesting it can be to think about the writing support is in this notarized Spanish charter concerning an estate donation to a monastery (***Image 1***). It was written in Latin on a stiff piece of parchment in 1226. Glancing at it, one might think it is carelessly cut, but the thick and wrinkled feel, along with its uneven bottom edge, show that it was executed on a piece of parchment that was not usable for the pages of a book. It was cut from the edge of the animal skin, where it had been stretched and knotted on the parchment maker's frame. We cannot tell if this edge-piece was used because of shortage or urgency (parchment was expensive and time-consuming to make), but understanding the nature of the writing support allows us to confirm that there is nothing damaged about this document. The medieval donor, in any case, felt his bequest was more important than the parchment it was written on. The charter ends with a curse: "if anyone of my lineage or anyone else should violate the provisions of this document, may curse and excommunication and malediction befall him, and may he be damned in hell like Judas, and may he be accursed unto the seventh generation"!

Pricking and Ruling After preparing the writing support, a scribe had to ready it for text. We can buy pre-ruled notebooks, but medieval scribes had to apply margins and lines by hand. There was some skill in this: one had to know the number of lines needed per page, the desired widths and margins, and the number of pages to prepare. The finest books show evidence of this planning on every leaf down to pre-ruled spaces for placement of illustrations. A scribe would first "prick" the edges of his or her pages with a knife tip or spiked wheel device, leaving small marks behind. These tiny holes in the outer margins allowed the scribe to create an even ruling pattern and control the size and appearance of the text. In one Bible leaf at UVic (***Image 2***), the pricking tells us something about how and when the whole Bible was put together. Its inner-margin pricking marks indicate that the pricking was done *after* the

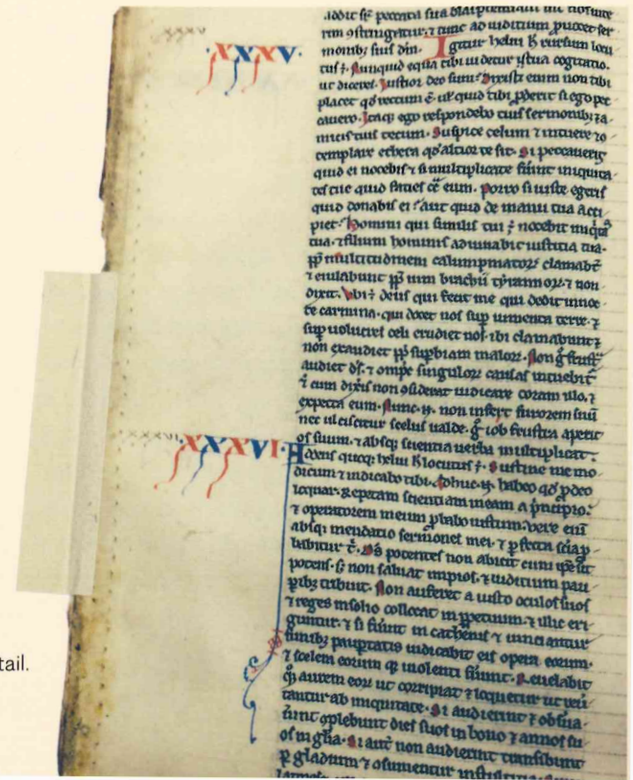


Image 2. UVic Fragm.Lat.6, detail.

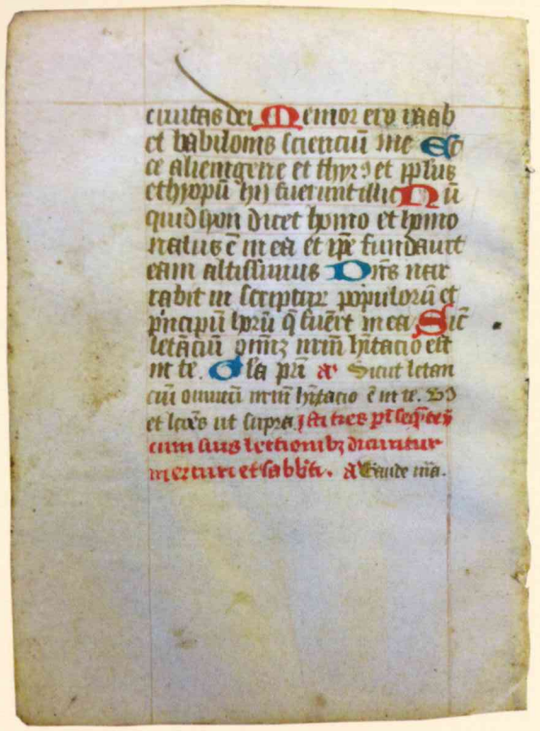


Image 3. UVic Fragm.Lat.16.

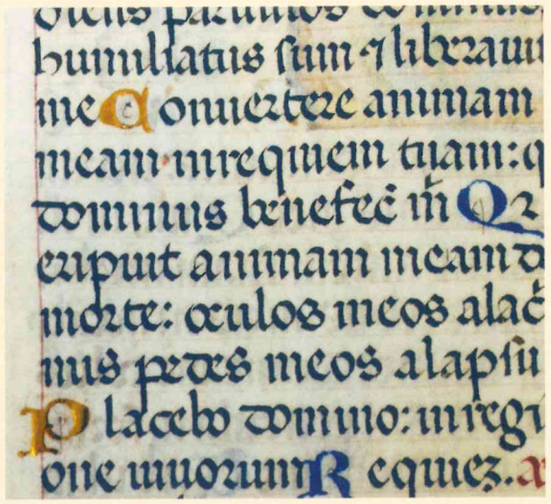


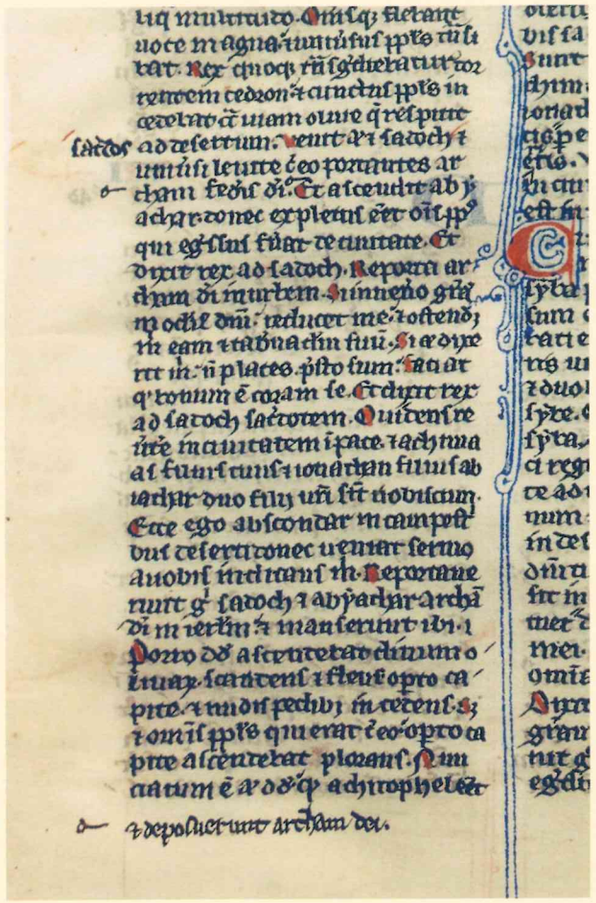
Image 4. UVic Fragm.Brown.Lat.6, detail.

prepared parchment sheets were already cut and folded into pages. This practice was in vogue between about 1250–1350 mainly on the British Isles and the Western part of the European continent. Though we have only one surviving page, this and other features of the script contribute to our knowledge that this Bible was produced around 1250, probably in France.

Text and Associated Rubrics, Capitals, and Decorated Initials The next two layers applied to a medieval book's pages were the text and, after the main text, the rubrics (i.e., section titles, called "rubrics" because often written in red, Latin *ruber*), as well as any larger capital letters or decorated initials that might structure and adorn the text. From the thirteenth century on, the people who undertook these steps were usually distinct, and they were trained to collaborate and work in a certain order. In this leaf from a small prayer book (***Image 3***), distinctions between phases of copying are evident in changes of script size and colour. The main-text scribe left space for later addition of rubrics and capitals. In this case, the planning was not quite right, and an uneven and variable script appearance results.

Scribes often left very clear directions for rubricators. If we go back to our Bible leaf (***Image 2***), we can see small "guide numbers" in the margin left by the scribe for the person who would later place the decorative chapter numbers. As another UVic prayer book leaf shows (***Image 4***), scribes also left "guide letters" for decorative capitals within the text. We can see the tiny letters inside the capitals here, left so that the decorator could work quickly, without having to read. All of this helps us to understand how books were crafted in the Middle Ages and specifically in what order book makers typically worked: scribes writing the main text first, rubricators and decorators working after them.

Corrections Before finishing the text, proofreading was necessary. A corrector would read through the text, compare it to its exemplar, and make changes as necessary. Medieval correctors were not concerned to hide their work: corrections showed that a book was carefully prepared and that the text was reliable (especially importantly in the case of scripture). Another Bible leaf at UVic shows a careful corrector at work in chapters of 2 Kings (***Image 5***); he made corrections in the outer and lower margins and included marks to allow cross-referencing, similar to how footnotes work today. For instance, the correction in the bottom margin is preceded by a mark that looks like a small key. On the inner left margin there is a corresponding mark and then another placed



Far left:
Image 5.
UVic Fragm.
Lat.7, detail.

Above:
Image 6.
UVic MS.Lat.3
("Codex Pollick"),
fol. 13r, detail.

Left:
Image 7.
UVic MS.Lat.3
("Codex Pollick").

between the lines. The corrector caught words the scribe accidentally omitted, wrote them in the bottom margin, and in this way shows the reader exactly where to insert the omitted words.

Illustration and Illumination Not all books were illustrated. This stage could involve master artists, to whom the otherwise finished book was delivered. Fine illustration and especially illumination (the application of metallic leaf to reflect light) was time-consuming and costly. Communal religious books and personal prayer books for wealthy ladies were among those that might be decorated in this spectacular way. A fifteenth-century Book of Hours at UVic shows a finely illuminated illustration of the Virgin and Child (***Image 6***). Many layers of colour application, pen work, and gold-leaf work were involved in making the floral borders, gold rubrics, and the delicate image itself. Such images inspired devotion in those who gazed upon them as they prayed. It is not unusual to find the faces of such images in devotional manuscripts smudged from touching or kissing.

Binding The final step in making a medieval book was its binding. Pages were kept together in folded quires, which were then sewn onto leather binding supports. During its recent rebinding, the same Book of Hours pictured above gave us a clear glimpse of the collation of its quires, how and in what pattern they were folded, and where they were sewn together (***Image 7***). UVic also holds a rare example of a wholly intact original medieval binding on a fifteenth-century Italian Breviary. This binding lost its leather cover at some point in its life – an excavation done long before the book was purchased for the University – and because it is so exposed, we can see the leather binding supports, how the quires were sewn to them, how the supports were attached to the boards, and the remnants of a leather cover and metalwork clasp that once kept the book closed

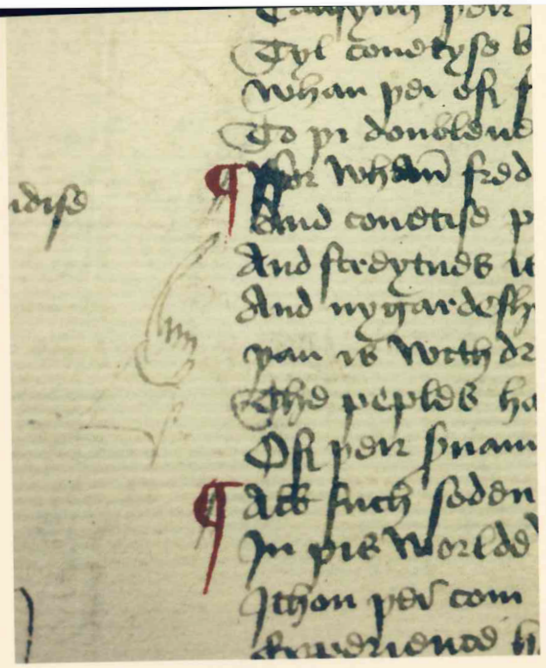


Image 9. UVic MS.Eng.1, fol. 45v, detail.

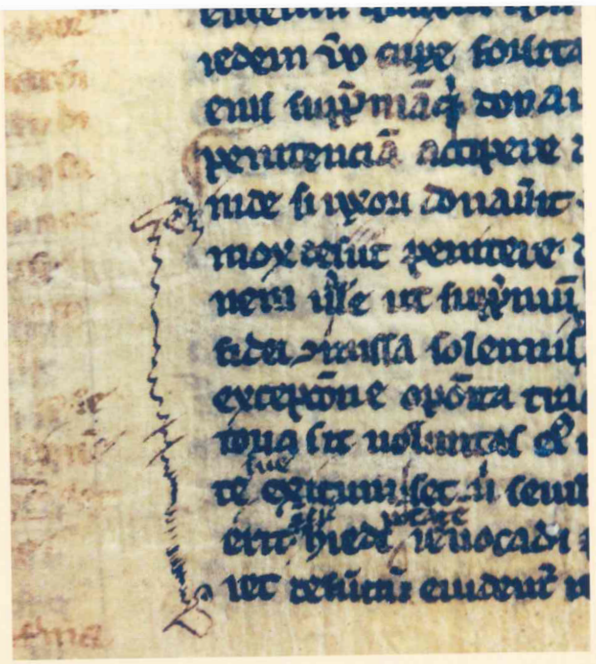


Image 10. UVic Fragm.Lat.2, fol. 2v, detail.

(***Image 8***). In this case, two different people wrote notes on the inside of the wooden boards, the later one dating himself to 1493. We know, then, that this book was bound sometime before that, probably about 1450.

Annotations, Finding Aids, and Evidence of Use

Readers who use the book after it was made, like the person who wrote on binding boards in 1493, create additional layers of historical evidence. It is often clear when a book lived among medieval children, for instance, because blank pages or margins might be used for alphabet practice or even funny doodles.

Image 8. UVic MS.Lat.2 ("Codex Lindstedt").

Religious texts from medieval England might show whether they were read during the Reformation period, because the word "pope" is crossed out, in accordance with King Henry VIII's order to remove the word from all service books after his break with Rome. These remains help us to place books in their historical contexts and to understand what texts were being read when and by whom, and even quotidian evidence of medieval readership provides thrilling connections to people from the past. For instance, one can very frequently observe *manicules* in medieval books, little pointing hands sketched by readers as personal finding aids, highlighting passages of subjective importance (***Image 9***). Medieval readers often had playful interactions with their books too, using margins for unrelated notes or framing significant sentences with quickly-drawn caricatures (***Image 10***).

Evidence of later, common readership has a beauty all its own. It reveals a complex and very human, social past around books, and in this way it creates a connection between now and then, between us and them. The medieval book, as an artifact, with all its strata visible at once, is a breathtaking thing to see. Without having to dig through dirt, it is possible to see centuries of writers, artists, binders, and readers at work in one object. And it really is a revealing experience. •

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