

Introduction

The word ‘manuscript’ today conjures up a private or personal piece of writing: a manuscript letter, for example, is handwritten by its author, unlike a letter typed on a computer. Before the invention of printing – the first Latin printed books date from the period 1450–80 – everything was written by hand, letters and legal deeds as well as books intended for reading. After the introduction of printing, while letters and deeds continued to be handwritten, as well as secret, esoteric texts, or those which would not have sold enough copies to be worth a printer’s while, most books were printed.

Our libraries contain millions of manuscripts that are very different from the printed books we are accustomed to: they include clay tablets, papyrus or parchment codices and scrolls and wax tablets. They are written in many different languages, but they all have one thing in common: each of them is unique. Each handwritten book has its own personality, its own individual character; each was written by an individual person in a specific place at a particular moment of time. Each of them, if we only know how to address them properly and put the right questions, is capable of putting us in touch with a human being who is long dead but who lives on in the trace of his or her hand.

How should one address a manuscript? That is the question that this book attempts to answer, in one specific area. In the realm of manuscripts it may seem rash to generalise, since each specialist is only familiar with one area of history. Having spent more than 40 years of my life in the company of medieval manuscripts written in Hebrew characters, I feel I know them a little: I can speak to them, and they answer me. It is about this friendship that I wish to write.

An encounter with an unknown manuscript is always exciting: will this scribe introduce us to new ideas or personal details? Rediscovering a manuscript one has studied for several months some years previously is like rediscovering an old friend: you find that you have never noticed this or that detail, that you have missed some note or misunderstood a text. Because you never know everything about a manuscript: even if you copy it out letter by letter, there will always be new questions to ask. Does the writing become jerky here? What happened there to produce a bigger gap between two words? The questions you put to a manuscript change because your research is constantly changing.

2 *Hebrew manuscripts of the Middle Ages*

Fortunately the manuscript waits patiently, and tomorrow it will reply to our grandchildren's questions. It remains alive so long as it is there, always ready to bring the person who made and wrote it back to life.

The questions one can put to a manuscript belong to three different but complementary disciplines. The history of texts involves two very different studies: philology and the history of ideas. The second approach, the history of books themselves – their materials, forms and techniques of production – is known as codicology. Finally, the history of writing is called palaeography.

We shall be concerned with manuscripts written in Hebrew characters in the Middle Ages. Since these manuscripts were written by Jews, we might have described our subject more simply as 'Jewish manuscripts from the Middle Ages'. However, this would be an oversimplified description, because the Hebrew alphabet, the Hebrew language and Jewish texts only partially overlap.

Languages and alphabets

When we speak of the Hebrew alphabet we mean the one that is in use today. It has 22 letters, all representing consonants although two also function as semi-vowels (ill. 1). It is written from right to left, like other Semitic alphabets, and like them it can be read without vowel signs.¹

This alphabet replaced a palaeo-Hebrew alphabet (ill. 2), whose older letter forms were derived from the west Semitic alphabet that is the ancestor of all alphabets.² It was in use in Palestine from the ninth century BCE, but it was not alone. The Hebrews also used the Aramaic alphabet, another branch of the older alphabet, just as they used the Aramaic language. With the Assyrian conquests of the ninth to eighth centuries BCE the Aramaic alphabet had become the international writing system. Like cuneiform before it, Aramaic writing was in use all over the Near East, to record several languages.

After the conquest of the Persian empire by Alexander the Great, in 333 BCE, this writing became regionalised, and that is the origin of the square or 'Assyrian' Hebrew writing that is still in use in Israel today.³

These two scripts, the older palaeo-Hebrew and the newer Hebrew alphabet, remained in competition with one another into the Christian Era.⁴ The former was used by the priests in the Temple; it symbolised national independence and

¹ On the history of writing systems see most recently P. T. Daniels and W. Bright, eds., *The World's Writing Systems* (Oxford, 1996) and F. Coulmas, *Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Writing Systems* (Oxford, 1996), and the review of both of these by W. C. Watt, 'The Old-fashioned Way', *Semiotica*, 12 (1998), pp. 99–138.

² J. Naveh, *The Early History of the Alphabet* (Jerusalem, 1982).

³ A. Yardeni, *The Book of Hebrew Script* (Jerusalem, 1997).

⁴ *Ibid.*, esp. pp. 41–66.

3 Introduction

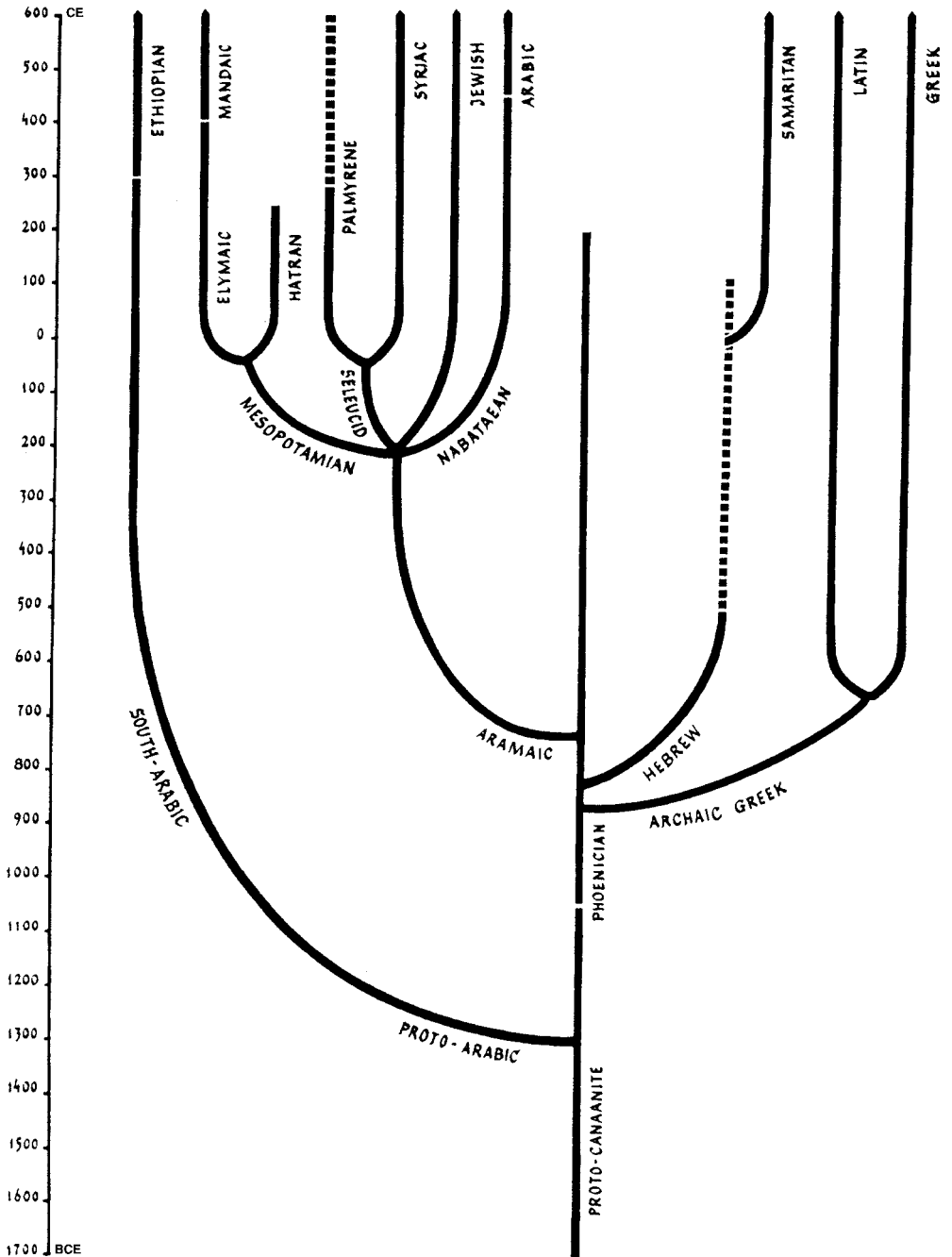
א	not transliterated (')
ב	b
ב	v
ג	g
ג	g
ד	d
ד	d
ה	h
ו	v – when not a vowel
ז	z
ח	h (h)
ט	t (t)
י	y – when vowel and at end of words: i
כ	k
כ, כ	kh
ל	l
מ, מ	m
נ, נ	n
ס	s
ע	not transliterated (')
פ	p
פ, פ	f
צ, צ	ts (z, s)
ק	k (q)
ר	r
ש	sh
ש	s
ת	t
ת	t

1. The square Hebrew alphabet and its transliteration (*EJ*, vol. I, col. 90).

was stamped on the coinage. It is still used by the Samaritans. The latter formed part of the ambitious programme of the Pharisees, who held an important position in social and political life.

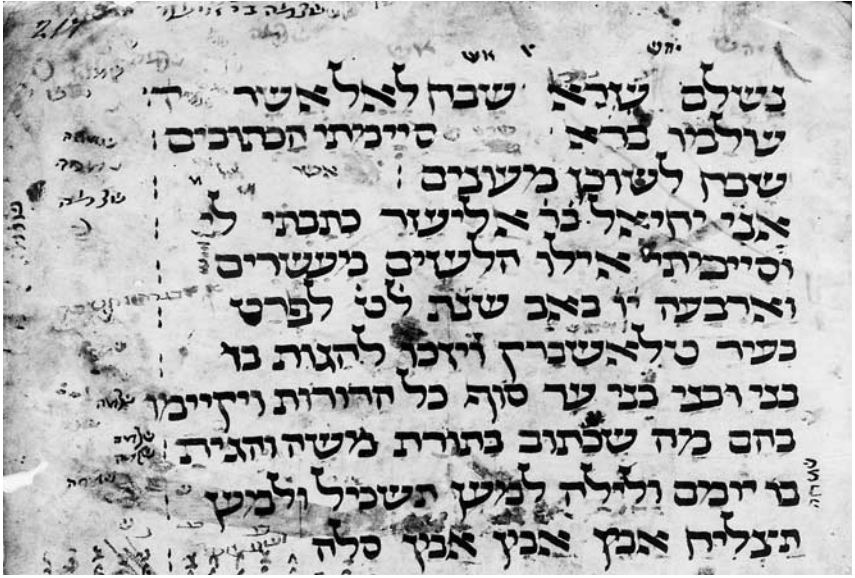
Although this latter script is called Hebrew, it is used to write other languages, embracing both Semitic tongues like Aramaic and Arabic and non-Semitic ones

4 Hebrew manuscripts of the Middle Ages



2. Family tree of the early alphabetic scripts.

5 Introduction



3. Hebrew colophon of Yehiel ben Eliezer (Parma, Biblioteca Palatina, MS ebreo 2924, top of fol. 217r).

such as Greek and Latin, French, Italian, Spanish, Turkish, Persian, and even Chinese.⁵

Such transcriptions were made easier by the introduction in the eighth to ninth centuries CE of vowel signs written under the lines of consonants. They are used in textbooks, sacred texts and poetry.

Let us take a look at a copy of a glossary of biblical words in Hebrew and French (ill. 3) (now in the Biblioteca Palatina in Parma, MS ebreo 2924). It is entirely written in Hebrew letters. At the end the scribe has written a 'colophon', a personal statement giving the title of the work, and the date and place of completion. As we shall see, in manuscripts the title was only rarely written at the beginning of a book. Title pages only became common after the introduction of printing, during the sixteenth century.

This colophon, on fol. 217r of the manuscript, is in Hebrew, and the first three lines are in rhymed prose:

Here ends the Book of Ezra, / Blessed be God who created the world. / I have completed the Hagiographa, / Praise be to Him who dwells on high!

I, Yehiel ben Rabbi Eliezer, have written for my own use [lit. for me] and completed these vernacular glosses [*le'azim*]⁶ on the 24 books [of the Bible] the 16 Av of the year 39 of the shorter reckoning [5039 Anno Mundi or 1279 CE] in the town of Delsberg.⁷

⁵ R. Loewe, 'Hebrew Linguistics', in *History of Linguistics*, vol. I: *The Eastern Traditions of Linguistics*, ed. G. Lepschy (London and New York, 1994), pp. 97–163.

⁶ Plural of *la'az*, see M. Banitt in *EJ*, vol. X, cols. 1313–1315.

⁷ Now Delemont in the Swiss Jura, and not Strasbourg (in Alsace), as I mistakenly wrote in *Du scribe au livre: Les manuscrits hébreux au Moyen Âge* (Paris, 1994), p. 8.

Cambridge University Press

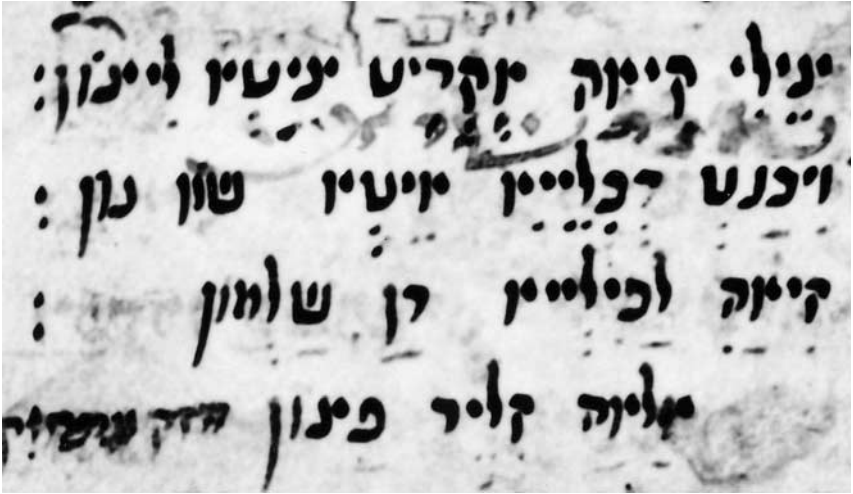
978-0-521-09023-0 - Hebrew Manuscripts of the Middle Ages: Colette Sirat

Edited by Nicholas de Lange

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 Hebrew manuscripts of the Middle Ages



4. Note in French by Vivant (Yehiel ben Eliezer) (Parma, Biblioteca Palatina, MS ebreo 2924, detail of fol. 216v).

May my sons be accounted worthy to read them, and the sons of my sons to the end of generations. May the words that are written in the Law of Moses be accomplished for them: You shall meditate in them day and night, that you may be happy and prosper [see Joshua 1:8]. Amen, amen, amen. Selah.

In this colophon, written in fine square letters, the Hebrew has no vowels; on the previous folio, however, there is a note in French (ill. 4), and here the writing is cursive and the vowel signs have been written under words whose pronunciation might be ambiguous:

*çeli qià écrit çète liçon
vivant de belei été son non
qià lafilye dan Salmon
alâ clèr façon*

*He who has written this manual
is named Vivant de Belley
who has [as wife] the daughter of Sir Solomon
a right fair woman.*

Vivant de Belley, whose Hebrew name was Yehiel ben Eliezer, wrote this manuscript on quaternions (quires made up of four sheets of parchment stitched together). The quality of the parchment is not uniform: in the first seventeen quires the parchment is coarser and there are more holes and repairs. The beginning of the text is lacking (probably a single quire of eight folios); what remains is 218 folios written on both sides, or in modern parlance 436 pages. At the time, folios were not numbered. For the scribe transcribing the text, as well as for the reader if the book was not bound (a frequent occurrence), the sequence of the quires was ascertained with the help of ‘catch-words’: the first word or

7 Introduction



5. Explanation of difficult words in Job 21:23–22:9. 255 mm × 170 mm (Parma, Biblioteca Palatina, MS ebreo 2924, fol. 195v).

8 *Hebrew manuscripts of the Middle Ages*

words of the next folio were written at the end of the previous one. In this manuscript all the catch-words are ornamented. Before beginning to write the scribe had to make guidelines, by pricking the end-position of each line with an awl and then, with the help of these holes, ruling lines by means of a dry point. Wherever the ruling was not sufficiently visible, he would go over the line with black lead, the medieval equivalent of a pencil. Following the custom that prevailed in northern France and throughout the region of Ashkenaz (which included France, England and Germany) the lines of writing are enclosed within two ruled lines, at top and bottom, so that the double written page is set within a ruled frame, like a picture.

This glossary was probably intended for teaching purposes.⁸ The first (right-hand) column contains the Hebrew words to be explained; the second gives the French translation, followed by an equivalent, a biblical quotation or another French word. The French words are vocalised (ill. 5), since they could not be read without the insertion of vowel signs.

The number of manuscripts in Hebrew characters

The manuscript just described is an almost complete volume. Many medieval manuscripts are less complete than this. Most, even when they are complete, carry no indication of date or place. The word 'manuscript' has a range of meanings. It may refer to an entire volume, but such a volume may be made up of several works copied by different scribes either at the same time or at different periods. A manuscript may also be a fragment consisting of a few folios or even a fragment of a single folio, and in some libraries each fragment may have its own classmark. So the term 'manuscript' may be applied to a letter, or part of a letter, or a document such as a marriage contract or a bill of divorce, a list of goods or a horoscope. Anything written by hand counts as a manuscript. It is consequently difficult to give an estimate of the total number of manuscripts in Hebrew script in existence.

One may, however, estimate the number of volumes. Roughly speaking, there are some 70,000 such volumes in public and private libraries throughout the world. Of these, probably 40,000 or fewer are medieval.⁹ To these, we must add the fragments from the Cairo Genizah and those in St Petersburg.

⁸ Six glossaries of this type and seven fragments from other volumes have come down to us. See M. Banitt, *Le Glossaire de Bâle* (Jerusalem, 1972), introduction, and the other volumes of the *Corpus Glossariorum Biblicorum Hebraico-Gallicorum Medii Aevi*.

⁹ In 'Les manuscrits en caractères hébraïques, réalités d'hier et histoire d'aujourd'hui', *Scrittura e Civiltà*, 10 (1986), pp. 255–256, I gave an estimate of \pm 80,000 volumes, of which 45,000–50,000 date from the Middle Ages. The estimate given here is that of M. Beit-Arié in *Manuscripts of East and West*, p. 8, because the manuscripts of St Petersburg are now counted separately, and included with the fragments and not with the volumes.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09023-0 - Hebrew Manuscripts of the Middle Ages: Colette Sirat

Edited by Nicholas de Lange

Excerpt

[More information](#)

9 Introduction

The term 'genizah' comes from the Hebrew root GNZ, meaning 'to hide'. From the beginning of the current era the Hebrew alphabet has been considered sacred. Texts written in Hebrew script may not be destroyed but have to be buried. Books that are no longer usable or documents that are not needed were buried in the cemetery. While awaiting burial, they were put to one side, generally in a cupboard in the synagogue.¹⁰ In one of the three synagogues of Fostat (Old Cairo), the House of Ezra, a whole room was given over to books and documents intended for burial. From 1050 until the end of the nineteenth century manuscripts and, later, printed texts piled up here. These were discovered in the late nineteenth century by collectors; although some were published by scholars before 1900 it was only from the early twentieth century that most of them began to be studied. If we add to these some fragments recovered from various Jewish cemeteries in Egypt we have more than 210,000 fragments, consisting of religious and secular texts, letters and documents, some of them written by well-known personalities. Most were written at Fostat, but some come from Tunisia, Palestine, India and other places. The majority were written earlier than 1250.¹¹

The Firkovitch collections, held in the Russian National Library in St Petersburg, have lately been opened up to foreign scholars.¹² They contain some 15,000 fragments, also from the East, in part from Genizot; they are from the same period and origin as those from the Cairo Genizah.

Of course there is generally no relationship between the place where a manuscript is kept now and the place where it was originally written. We have already seen that a manuscript written at Delsberg, in Switzerland, is now in Parma, in Italy. Sometimes documents have been kept where they were drawn up: for example Hebrew documents written in England and Spain have remained in those countries. But in the case of handwritten books, with the sole exception of those from Yemen, which was virtually cut off from the outside world at the end of the Middle Ages, it is rare for them to remain in the place where they were written.

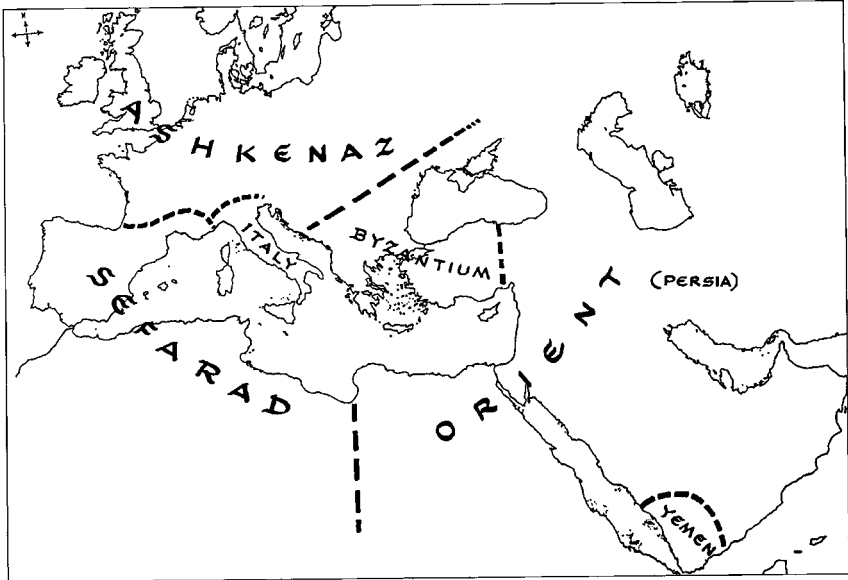
Manuscripts, like their Jewish owners, wandered from land to land. Some found a permanent haven in the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when Christian scholars in Western Europe collected Hebrew books, especially Bibles and kabbalistic texts. Their collections were eventually sold or bequeathed to the great royal or university libraries, and these form a major part of the

¹⁰ See most recently M. Beit-Arié, 'Genizot: Depositories of Consumed Books as Disposing Procedure in Jewish Society', *Scriptorium*, 50 (1996), pp. 407–414; P. Lambert, *Fortifications and the Synagogue: The Fortress of Babylon and the Ben Ezra Synagogue* (London, 1994); S. C. Reif, *A Jewish Archive from Old Cairo: The History of Cambridge University's Genizah Collection* (Richmond, Surrey, 2000).

¹¹ See Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, vol. I, pp. 1–70.

¹² M. Beit-Arié, 'The Accessibility of the Russian Manuscript Collections: New Perspectives for Jewish Studies', in *Jewish Studies in a New Europe: Proceedings of the Fifth Congress of Jewish Studies in Copenhagen, 1994, under the Auspices of the European Association for Jewish Studies*, ed. U. Haxen *et al.* (Copenhagen, 1996), pp. 82–98.

10 Hebrew manuscripts of the Middle Ages



6. Geocultural regions of medieval Hebrew manuscripts (after Beit-Arié, *The Codicological Data-Base of the Hebrew Palaeographic Project*).

manuscripts that we can study today. As we shall see in Part III, manuscripts that remained in Jewish hands had a less fortunate destiny; the Jewish libraries set up in the nineteenth century and later have less homogeneous collections of manuscripts, and many of them were ravaged during World War II.

The date and place of writing of a manuscript are useful to know, because they allow us to situate it in its original historical context. Not many manuscripts, however, contain this information. We know of some 3,000 dated medieval manuscripts, constituting some 10 per cent of the total, and only some 3 per cent of these have a precise indication of place. If the place is not mentioned, it is generally possible to form some idea of the wider cultural area from which the manuscript comes (ill. 6).

The geographical and chronological distribution of the dated manuscripts is given in ill. 7. We may note a gradual change in their distribution as between eastern and western regions: at the beginning of the Middle Ages there are virtually no dated manuscripts in Europe; in the course of the thirteenth century the number of European examples rises, to exceed those produced in the East by the end of the Middle Ages.¹³

The number of Hebrew manuscripts written in Europe by the end of the Middle Ages increases further if we take account of undated manuscripts, and also of another 'genizah' which is currently being discovered. Particularly in the sixteenth

¹³ See M. Beit-Arié, 'The Codicological Data-Base of the Hebrew Palaeography Project: A Tool for Localising and Dating Hebrew Medieval Manuscripts', in *The Makings*, pp. 41–73.