

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-78218-0 - The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain, Volume II 1100-1400

Edited by Nigel Morgan and Rodney M. Thomson

Excerpt

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## THE ROLES OF BOOKS

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[More information](#)

## 1

## Books and society

CHRISTOPHER DE HAMEL

There is a late Stone Age civilization known to modern archaeologists as the 'Beaker People' from the survival of large numbers of its distinctive clay pots. If a Beaker Person were to meet a modern prehistorian, he would probably be astonished and distressed to learn of his people's sobriquet and he would draw attention to their fine textiles, woodwork, painting, music, religion, language and poetry. Beakers, he would say, were only a small and not even central part of their culture. However, the name is applied simply because fragments of the indestructible pottery have survived and all the rest has vanished.

The question, then, is whether we are in danger of over-estimating the place of books in medieval society, simply because the books survive when so much else from England of c.1100–c.1400 has disappeared. Illuminated manuscripts are among the most famous and enduring relics of the Middle Ages. Thousands of English books from the period under discussion still exist, far more than any other moveable artefacts, easily and widely accessible now, and it is appealing to think of feudal England as a time when beautiful manuscripts must have been a visible and familiar part of daily life. Victorian Gothic and Arthurian paintings show illuminated books in profusion. In practice, very few medieval people ever came face to face with the pages of manuscripts. Their ownership was restricted to a very small fraction of the population, disproportionately well-documented, and most men and women of medieval England probably passed their lives without ever reading or even touching a book. The period is not static, of course. A great deal evolved during the three centuries from about 1100, when Viking raids were still a living memory, to 1400, approximately the birth date of Gutenberg, and we can watch aspects of the slowly unfolding growth of literacy levels and book ownership in England.

Until the twelfth century books must have been very rarely seen. No books are shown in the Bayeux Tapestry. It has scenes of church services and state ceremonies; it illustrates boats, altars, gilded metalwork, painted shields, tiles,

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decorated textiles, carved furniture, drinking horns, beakers even, but not a single book. The noble families must have had some books in private – two Gospel books survive, for example, from a gift made by Judith of Flanders (d. 1094), wife of the earl of Northumbria<sup>1</sup> – and of course monasteries had libraries, as we will see in a moment. There is a rare reference to a craftsman owning a book in the twelfth century. A builder or perhaps architect, Richard *ingeniator*, who was employed to work on Durham Castle by Hugh du Puiset, bishop 1153–95, had an illuminated manuscript comprising Gospel extracts and a Life of Saint Cuthbert, made even more precious by the enclosure of an actual fragment of the burial wrappings of Cuthbert himself, given to him by a monk of Durham. Richard used to wear the book around his neck. It is described as having pictures and historiated initials. Richard lost it while working in Berwick but, according to Reginald of Durham, it was miraculously restored to him through the help of Saint Cuthbert.<sup>2</sup> The book was evidently a talismanic charm to protect the wearer from danger, perhaps while up scaffolding. It is not necessary to assume that Richard could read it. Books were holy objects. Even to those unable to read, medieval Christianity was unambiguously a religion of the book. In a largely pre-literate society, before charters and documents became generally usable, Gospel books and sacramentaries were customarily employed for swearing public oaths to validate legal transactions, as effective as placing one's hands on the holy relics of a saint.<sup>3</sup> Records of manumissions of slaves, for example, were added on the flyleaf of an Old English Gospel book from Bath Abbey in the time of Abbot Aelfsige (d. 1087), presumably because they had been sworn on the book itself,<sup>4</sup> and the eleventh-century sacramentary once known as the 'Red Book of Darley' has a late medieval note, 'This booke was sumtime had in such reverence in darbie shire that it was comonlie beleved that whosoeuer should swere untruelie uppon this booke should run madd.'<sup>5</sup> The earliest inventory of an English parish church, that of Mere in Wiltshire in 1220, describes a 'very old' book ('vetustissimus' – even if it was then only a hundred years old this would take us back to the beginning of the twelfth century), with a cross on its cover, on which, it notes, oaths were sworn.<sup>6</sup> Such books would not actually need to be opened at all to fulfil their public purpose. The text inside the volume at Mere is not even specified in the inventory. The two late eleventh-century Gospel books of Judith of Flanders, cited above, are

1 PML, mss. M. 708–9, given by Judith to Weingarten Abbey, Bavaria.

2 Reginald of Durham, *Libellus Cuthberti*, caps. XLVI and LIV, pp. 94–7 and 111–12.

3 Wormald 1957, pp. 106–9; Brown 1969, pp. 29–43.

4 Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, ms. 140: Ker 1990, p. 48.

5 Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, ms. 422: James 1912a, p. 315; Budny 1997, p. 646.

6 *Vetus registrum Sarisberienae*, p. 291; de Mély and Bishop 1892, no. 1342.

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[More information](#)

## Books and society

in spectacular contemporary jewelled treasure bindings. This must suggest that at least part of their visible function was conducted with the volumes closed. Books around 1100 were precious, sacred, remote and almost magic, and to much of English society their transcendental value was more important than their text.

For this reason, books were regarded as essential components of monasteries. Religious houses needed the possession of books in order to provide a solid and tangible link with truth, and not necessarily for any reason beyond that. Compare the presence of relics in a medieval church: collections of sacred snippets and bones were enclosed and invisible to the congregation, but sanctity and validation of the church were provided by the knowledge that the relics were there. No one except the sacristan would actually ever need to see or handle the originals. For many monasteries, the books too were probably no less useful by being out of sight. Most people in England in the twenty-first century are able to know far more about internal arrangements of medieval monasteries than their ancestors ever did in the twelfth century, for we can all wander through the ruined buildings and we can read the very many published monastic chronicles and inventories which have survived from the period. We can document precisely, in a way that no medieval writer ever could, the rapid expansion of libraries in early Norman England,<sup>7</sup> and we can follow graphically the orchestrated campaigns of many Benedictine and new Cistercian and Augustinian houses in particular to build up great repositories of patristic and Christian learning. To us, in our highly book-centred culture, these records are utterly fascinating and agreeable. However, our view is very different from that of most people in the twelfth century. The important point about a monastery in the Middle Ages is that it was consciously cut off from the outside world. Its collections of books, if it had any, were invisible to the population at large and the detailed conventual library catalogues, accessible and familiar to us, would have been unknown to anyone but the compilers and a very few of their colleagues. Early library inventories were usually entered on endleaves of manuscripts themselves, kept with the rest of the monastery's book collections in lockable chests or cupboards in the monks' cloister. Secular builders or lay-brothers working in monasteries must sometimes have reported home with news of the monks' creation of library cupboards or other facilities for their books, and this information was doubtless received gladly by the public as reassuring evidence of neighbourhood sanctity in a physical format. The public would not see the books. A writer as late as Nicholas Trevet (d. c.1334)

<sup>7</sup> Ker 1960a, esp. pp. 2-9; Thomson 1986, pp. 27-40; and ch. 7 below.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## The roles of books

remarked how difficult it was to gain access to English monastic libraries.<sup>8</sup> *Piers Plowman*, c.1377, imagines that the life of a monk must be like living in heaven: ‘... all is buxumnesse there and bokes to rede’.<sup>9</sup> The laity would expect a monastery to have books – that is important – but what volumes were there and how they were used was almost certainly entirely unknown to anyone outside the monastic enclosure itself.

Even if we know about the books, however, we too are largely ignorant of when and how often the monks actually consulted the volumes which they preserved. We know of various major monastic scholars in England, who clearly had access to considerable numbers of different texts in their own abbeys and perhaps elsewhere. These include the Benedictines, Eadmer of Canterbury (d. after 1124), William of Malmesbury (d. 1143) and Laurence of Durham (d. 1154), the Cistercians, Aelred of Rievaulx (d. 1167) and Odo of Cheriton (d. 1247), and the Augustinians, Robert of Bridlington (d. after 1154), Clement of Lanthony (d. after 1169) and Alexander Nequam (d. 1217). Such exceptional men certainly used, read, comprehended and quarried information from many different books. Modern scholarship on monastic culture, quite naturally, tends to focus on such individuals. The presence and participation of scholarly monks in any abbey would doubtless have helped strengthen the collections and to fill gaps in the sets of books. Not all monks, however, were intellectuals. This is important too. Many English monasteries with reasonable libraries produced no known scholarship, and they were no less valid as religious communities in fulfilling the purpose for which they were founded. There are tales (usually sympathetic) of monks who were unable to learn to read at all, which was perhaps not unusual, especially since many novices must have been recruited from backgrounds where they had little or no working knowledge of Latin. For example, a twelfth-century monk of Durham, Robert of St Martin, despaired of ever learning to read and threw away the book the other monks had brought him and kicked it with his feet.<sup>10</sup> The Rule of Saint Benedict permits monks to read in the afternoons, not so much for the benefit of book learning but as a means of avoiding the sin of idleness, which is the enemy of the soul.<sup>11</sup> Monastic reading was a very leisurely and ruminative process, in which one would slowly mutter aloud a single sentence at a time, and then one would think about the sentence, contemplating its words and possible layers of

<sup>8</sup> *CBMLC*, II, p. cxlv.    <sup>9</sup> William Langland, *Piers Plowman*, p. 158 (x. 302).

<sup>10</sup> Reginald of Durham, *Libellus Cuthberti*, cap. lxxvi, pp. 158–60. A widely circulated story told of a Cistercian novice who was unable to learn any Latin at all except the two words ‘Ave Maria’ (Ward and Herbert 1883–1910, II, p. 634; the tale is illustrated in the Queen Mary Psalter, fol. 220v).

<sup>11</sup> Rule of Saint Benedict, cap. 48 (*PL* 66. 703).

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Books and society

meaning from many directions. This was itself a devotional exercise. It was not a technique of using books which was conducive to quick reading or rapid consultation of multiple texts. The Constitutions of Lanfranc, c.1070, laid down rules for the use of books in an English monastery. Annually, on the first Monday in Lent, the books of the abbey would be laid out in the chapter house and each monk would be required to return the one book he had borrowed for the previous year and could then choose a new one for the coming year. If he had not had the opportunity to read the book he had been assigned – evidently a real possibility, since it is legislated on – he should ask for forgiveness.<sup>12</sup> The implication is that most monks actually saw and handled very few books. The scholar monk, surrounded by piles of manuscripts like a renaissance image of Saint Jerome, was probably a considerable rarity in the 1100s. Extant English monastic manuscripts are often still in remarkably good condition. One might be forgiven for supposing that such books were not handled a great deal. Compared with (for example) fifteenth-century Middle English manuscripts, which are commonly extensively thumbed and crammed with jottings and scribbles from many generations of private owners and frenetic readers, former English monastic books are frequently in almost pristine condition with clean margins and they are surprisingly often still in their original undamaged bindings. There may be other explanations. The unused books may simply be those that survive. A monk reading slowly perhaps did not work with a pen in his hand. A book belonging to a community may have been treated more reverently than one privately owned by its user (though, in fact, as most of us know, the opposite is more likely to be the case). However, on balance, it is fair to suppose that many of the volumes in twelfth- or thirteenth-century monastic libraries did not form a significant part of the daily life of the monks; and that the intellectual impact of these books on people beyond the monasteries was absolutely nil.

Too little is still known about how many English monasteries had in-house facilities for making their own books. In 1100 some kind of scribal participation may have been an expected activity of many well-equipped religious houses. By the mid-thirteenth century it was almost certainly becoming unusual. Probably the single greatest shift in medieval intellectual history was the period in the middle third of the twelfth century when the old monastic monopoly of learning began to disintegrate and scholarship moved out into what eventually and slowly evolved into the medieval universities. The number of texts in circulation became so great that many monasteries seem to have abandoned

<sup>12</sup> Lanfranc, *Monastic constitutions*, p. 31.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## The roles of books

any attempt to maintain comprehensiveness. The ease and rapidity with which the traditions of monastic scriptoria were abandoned between about 1150 and 1200 confirms the impression that they were never very central to the monks' way of life in the first place. Certainly by the thirteenth century any English cleric or monk of academic inclination would not expect to fulfil his studies entirely from the boxes in the cloister but would be sent instead to the schools of Paris, Oxford, Cambridge or Bologna, for example, and might afterwards return home with books he had acquired while there. These volumes would then, or on the monk's death, join the accumulated resources of his monastery. Entries in monastic inventories from about 1200 onwards show clearly how the libraries there were constantly stocked or topped up by donations from named members of the house, often with multiple (and not even necessarily welcome) copies of old school texts such as glossed books of the Bible in profusion, the *Historia scolastica* of Peter Comestor, or the *Decretum* of Gratian. The early fourteenth-century catalogue of Christ Church, Canterbury, for example, included among bequests of named donors no fewer than thirty-one single-volume Bibles, twenty-four copies of Peter Lombard's *Sententiae*, and sixteen copies of the *Summa de casibus* of Raymond of Peñafort.<sup>13</sup> Librarians of monasteries must often have despaired when a deceased monk's cell was emptied and yet another almost identical collection of former university textbooks was sent round for accession. Names of those who gave books to monastic libraries were commonly entered on the flyleaves or first pages of the volumes themselves. They were generally members of the community. The names sometimes include the title 'magister', usually denoting a priest with a strong suggestion of qualification in an academic setting.<sup>14</sup> We see this trend at the upper end of ecclesiastical patronage too. Bishops and archbishops commonly endowed monasteries or cathedrals with great sets of manuscripts, either specially commissioned with presentation in mind or as the remains of a lifetime of private study.<sup>15</sup>

What is very striking about the donors of books to monasteries in the period 1100-1400 is that they were almost all clerics or monks. At Saint Augustine's Abbey in Canterbury, for instance, we know the names of 240 people who presented a total of 1,287 volumes to the monastery in the later Middle Ages: only one of these donors was a member of the laity, Juliana, countess of Huntingdon

<sup>13</sup> James, *AL*, pp. 13-145.      <sup>14</sup> And see below, ch. 7, pp. 157-8.

<sup>15</sup> They include bequests of very substantial private collections to Canterbury from Thomas Becket (archbishop 1162-70) and Robert Winchelsey (archbishop 1293-1313); to Durham from Hugh du Puiset (bishop 1153-95) and Richard of Bury (bishop 1333-45); and to London from Ralph Baldock (bishop 1304-13).

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Books and society

(d. 1367), who, as it happened, presented only a single book.<sup>16</sup> All the other 1,286 volumes were given to the abbey by men in holy orders, mostly monks of the house. The records of monastic collections, at least, give little evidence of book ownership by English society at large. The great medieval battlecry for book collecting, the *Philobiblon* written in 1344 by Richard of Bury, bishop of Durham, is not so much a celebration of a common practice but a lament that monks, friars and priests of his time did not collect and use books as much as they should. There is no mention of laity at all in the *Philobiblon* or any assumption of a book culture outside the Church.<sup>17</sup>

The two English medieval universities, Oxford and Cambridge, came into prominence as major repositories of books only towards the end of the period covered by the present volume. Their members were often in holy orders and all enjoyed many of the legal privileges and conditions of religious life. Patterns of book acquisition and disposal were therefore very similar to those in monasteries. Fellows of colleges were unmarried and had no descendants. Those who died in residence would frequently bequeath their personal book collections to their colleges, either by custom (or requirement) or simply in default of other practical options. The books in turn would become part of a common pool from which other fellows could borrow volumes on an annual basis, much as in monasteries, or would be chained for consultation on the desks. Quite often the volumes owned personally by individual fellows were almost pathetically few in number. There is no shame in owning ugly books but the general roughness of the majority of early English academic manuscripts is quite striking in comparison with the often lavishly illuminated textbooks from Paris or Bologna. They give the impression of poverty. Chaucer's Clerk of Oxenford, who famously would have liked twenty books at his bed's head 'clad in blak or reed, of Aristotle and his philosophie', was dreaming of almost unimaginable richness. In reality, only graduates who had made successful careers in the outside world would have had sufficient resources to acquire manuscripts in any quantity. They would sometimes give or bequeath their books back to their old universities or to monasteries. Brice de Sharsted (d. 1327), former fellow and bursar of Merton College in Oxford, became a priest in Kent and a canon lawyer in Rome and elsewhere. He left at least eight books to Merton, principally his textbooks on the arts, and two volumes

<sup>16</sup> Emden 1968, p. 20. The manuscript, an illuminated Apocalypse, is now Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, ms. 20. Another aristocratic donation to a monastery was that of Guy de Beauchamp (d. 1315) who in 1305 gave forty volumes to Bordesley Abbey, mostly French literature and including also another Apocalypse (*CBMLC*, III, pp. 4–10).

<sup>17</sup> Richard of Bury, *Philobiblon*.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## The roles of books

of canon law to Christ Church, Canterbury. He bequeathed his silver, however, to the bishop of Rochester.<sup>18</sup> It sounds as though he was dividing his wealth where it would be most appreciated. Thomas Farnelow (d. 1379) had been a member of Balliol and afterwards bursar of Merton, and he went on to become chancellor of York from 1369. He bequeathed a Bible bound in red to Balliol, four volumes to Merton, including one he had made himself, and he asked his executors to sort out the books apparently left to Oriel College by his fellow northerner, Walter de Wandesford.<sup>19</sup> Stephen de Kettelberghe (d. c.1358), canon of various cathedrals of England and Wales, left a small group of law books to Oriel on condition that his obit was observed there, together with that of his friend John Dynyton.<sup>20</sup> Simon Holbeche (d. 1335) was a medical doctor who had been a member of both Oxford and Cambridge universities. He bequeathed one of his books to Balliol (a volume which he had received from Master Stephen of Cornwall, also of Balliol), another to Peterhouse in Cambridge, and he gave a third to his friend Walter de Barton (d. c.1340), rector of Dry Drayton, who, in turn, passed it too to Peterhouse.<sup>21</sup> There are many examples like this: scholars with small groups of books husbanding them carefully and shepherding them eventually back into collegiate use.

As with monasteries, academic libraries occasionally benefited immensely from the generosity and wealth of bishops. William Bateman, bishop of Norwich 1344–55, was recorded as having given ninety volumes to his own foundation of Trinity Hall, Cambridge.<sup>22</sup> Even this was far eclipsed by William Reed, bishop of Chichester 1368–85, who gave over a hundred volumes to Merton, a hundred to New College, twenty-five to Exeter College, and ten each to Queen's College and to Balliol, together with considerable sums of money and precious plate.<sup>23</sup> The cost must have been enormous. Bishop Reed was helped in acquiring books by the generosity of his like-minded friend, Nicholas de Sandwich, a priest and the son of a wealthy Kentish land-owner.<sup>24</sup>

It is easy to look at the extensive records of early libraries of the universities and to imagine books in abundance. There certainly were, and are, considerable medieval collections in Oxford and Cambridge, but most of the famous comprehensive bequests – from Richard Flemyng (d. 1431), Duke Humfrey (d. 1447), John Tiptoft (d. 1470), William Gray (d. 1478), and many others

18 *BRUO*, p. 1681; Cavanaugh 1980, pp. 782–3.

19 *BRUO*, p. 668 (describing Wandesford's books as left 'with Queen's College') and p. 1978 (describing them as left 'to Oriel College').

20 *BRUO*, p. 1043; Cavanaugh 1980, p. 482.

21 *BRUO*, p. 945; *BRUC*, p. 309; Cavanaugh 1980, pp. 432–3; *CBMLC*, x, pp. 700 and 661.

22 *CBMLC*, x, pp. 661–2. 23 *BRUO*, pp. 1556–60; Cavanaugh 1980, pp. 689–714.

24 *BRUO*, pp. 1639–40; Cavanaugh 1980, pp. 759–62.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Books and society

– belong to the fifteenth century, beyond the period of this volume. Before 1400 both universities were still quite small and most of the great colleges had not yet been founded. The early donations of books give the impression of being haphazard and inward looking, with relatively small groups of academic friends and colleagues sharing each other's manuscripts and bequeathing them eventually to the colleges. As with monastic libraries, the general public would never have had or expected access. That is regrettably often the case, even now.

Friars might have let the public see books. The itinerant Dominican and Franciscan preachers owned manuscripts of a recognisable type, small, stout, utilitarian and suitable for a large pocket or travelling bags of mendicants.<sup>25</sup> The friars were established in England from the second quarter of the thirteenth century. The Dominicans especially became influential in the universities of Paris and Oxford, where their members seem to have been involved in various ways with the production and promotion of books. Surviving friars' books often show graphic evidence of constant use and sustained marginal annotation. The late thirteenth-century *Legenda aurea*, a Dominican text, tells of a priest who contemplated joining the Dominican Order but felt unable to do so since he did not own a New Testament; a young man miraculously appeared and sold him one, which the postulant then opened at random at Acts 10 and read of Christ's command to become a preacher, which he then did.<sup>26</sup> Thirteenth-century friars' Bibles often contain notes about sermons. It would be interesting to know whether a medieval friar actually carried a Bible while preaching in public places, as a modern door-to-door evangelist does. The picture of a characteristic Franciscan in the *Chronica maiora* of Matthew Paris, c.1240, shows a standing friar cradling a book which is held closed with a clasp.<sup>27</sup> The standard thirteenth- or fourteenth-century English iconography of Christ or Saint Paul preaching almost always depicts the speaker holding a closed book.<sup>28</sup> It seems likely that a travelling friar, preaching outside a church or at a market cross in rural England, would have held his Bible or other book as a symbol of authority and spiritual credibility. If so, that is significant in the present chapter, since for most of his medieval audience it would be an extremely rare glimpse of a real book, even if only the binding was visible.

One can assume that the congregation in a parish church in the Middle Ages would have had a distant view of books in use by the clergy. A Missal is physically

25 D'Avray 1980; and ch. 13 (1) below.      26 Jacobus de Voragine, *Golden Legend*, II, p. 49.

27 Lewis 1987, p. 63, fig. 28.

28 Saint Paul preaching is a standard subject for the Epistles in thirteenth-century Bibles as in *Survey*, IV, nos. 62, 65, 66, 70, 75, 135, 139, 142, 143, 164, 168, 180; an image of Christ holding a book to preach occurs, for example, on fol. 214r of the Queen Mary Psalter (Warner 1912, pl. 228).