The Materiality of Medieval Manuscripts: Interpretation Through Production

Detailed Description

A return to the manuscripts characterizes contemporary approaches in many fields of medieval studies. Codicology and palaeography—study of the physical form of a book and of the handwriting within it—have long been fundamental tools for scholars of the Middle Ages, both those trained in the old and the new philology, yet few medievalists have cut a quill or written on parchment with oak-gall ink, still less scraped and stretched an animal skin, cut and folded parchment, then designed and organized text and decoration on the resulting pages. This seminar will enable participants to do precisely those things. Under the expert guidance of contemporary book artists and conservators who work today with medieval techniques, seminar participants will discover the insight that hands-on engagement with the material aspects of medieval book production can provide for the understanding of history and the interpretation of texts. Such an approach is all the more valuable in the present age of online resources that provide unprecedented access to high-quality images of medieval manuscript pages. This seminar will revel in the opportunities provided by such access and yet also consider what gets lost when manuscript studies surrenders all senses except that of sight. In this seminar, we will revel in the tactile and the olfactory as well as the visual engagement with manuscripts. Rather than providing access to an archive of manuscripts, this seminar will provide access to an array of experts, who will enable participants to answer interpretive questions about manuscript issues that most interest them. Participants will advance their own research projects by applying the maker’s knowledge acquired during the seminar to the specific research questions that they bring to it. We will also gain insight into the paradox of materiality in the digital age both through sharing projects and through discussion of common readings that engage ideas of craft, materiality, and remediation. Open to medievalists in all fields, including literature, history, art history, music, religion, and philosophy, the work of this seminar will inform a return to the manuscripts both in theory and in practice.

Intellectual Rationale

Books and the mentalité of literacy that they spawn have been the subject of exciting study for scholarly generations now. Walter Ong and Jack Goody uncovered the magnitude of the shift from orality to literacy, a shift which in Western Europe occurred during the Middle Ages, while Jesse Gelrich, Mary Carruthers, and others have discussed a medieval sense of the book and explored nuances of how books worked in pre-print cultures. The European Middle Ages is a fascinating period for study of the book, dominated as it was by a religion of the book (the opening of the Gospel of John nicely forefronts the logos, while surviving gospel books illuminating this text provide a high point of medieval artistry), even as it also represents a period of severely restricted literacy in which reading was the preserve first of a clerical elite and then of an expanding professional and mercantile class. Books mattered in the Middle Ages.

Books preserve, of course, and most literature and history, philosophy and science, and much art survives from the Middle Ages only because it got written on parchment by hand in manuscript books that chanced not to get destroyed. It is no wonder, then, that medieval manuscripts have long been subject to intense scrutiny by a whole range of scholars interested in the Middle Ages. From making editions to interpreting context, manuscripts are fundamental to
medieval studies, giving us moderns access to life and thought from a millennium or so ago. Yet that access is never direct and rarely easy: manuscripts from the Middle Ages got defaced and reused, rebound and recompiled, sometimes neglected, at other times fetishized. A scholar of the Middle Ages needs to be acutely sensitive to the clues provided by a manuscript and able to read and interpret signs of use and see through signs of abuse. Books matter to medievalists.

Medievalist scholars have long examined parchment and paper, rulings and prickings, writing and corrections, gatherings and bindings, and used their knowledge to unpack an understanding of literary or historical, religious or philosophical texts and to understand artistic and cultural production. Yet there is one source of deep engagement with manuscripts that has rarely been exploited by medievalist scholars: those makers of fine press and artist books today who use medieval techniques of parchment preparation or of paper production, of lettering and decorating, and of binding and stitching. A remarkable collection of such book-makers thrives within an academic environment at the University of Iowa Center for the Book, where they collaborate with historians and literary scholars, art historians and scholars of religion. The radically new approach that this seminar will develop is to engage traditional scholars with the hands-on practice of book creation through the help of modern practitioners in the book arts. The result will be new insight for contemporary medievalist scholars who, through expanding their understanding of books as constructed artifacts, will bring new understanding to the culture, history, and texts of the Middle Ages.

The value of such an approach is considerable. On the one hand, even very brief engagement with the crafts of book production can bring new sensitivity to contemporary scholars. Scholars who have tried their hand at parchment making, quill cutting, writing on parchment pages, and the like, are far more conscious of the skills of the medieval craftsmen and women who made those books that survive. Seminar participants are certainly not going to achieve a level of mastery in these skills—something that philosopher Richard Sennet estimates takes some ten thousand hours of apprentice work in a craft—but they will be better able to understand what such mastery involves and to glimpse how a master practitioner might think as much with the body and the hand as with the mind.

Such an insight helps academics to understand the objects of their study in a new way. It becomes possible to estimate how long it would take to make a particular book. (Michelle Brown has some fascinating estimates for the high-status Lindisfarne Gospels as the pious labor of one specific individual.) It also becomes easier to read some enigmatic clues. The round stain on the back of the Exeter Book was long held to be the slops from a beaker of ale, suggesting that this book of Old English poetry was devalued and left lying in the kitchen. A scholar sensitive to book production suggested instead the more probable insight that the stain is the remnants of fish glue, commonly used in medieval bindings, indicating that the book was getting abused lying around in the scriptorium rather than in the kitchen. And evidence of a book’s creation can elucidate important historical questions. Sensitivity to the compilation of a book through multiple stages suggests that the official narrative of the foundation of the Cistercian Order smooths over a complicated process of accretion that can be recovered by close attention to the formation of an important founding Cistercian Customary (according to the work of Constance Berman).

Many inferences about the chronology and formation of medieval texts are based on readings of handwriting. Seminar participants will be encouraged to imitate the handwriting of a scribe whose work is important to them and will find how that scribe sequenced strokes to form his or her letters. Having scholars imitate a particular scribal hand gives them greater ability to
interpret a particular manuscript. It also encourages greater understanding of the limits of the evidence, establishing, for example, that it is difficult to tell apart the stints of different scribes trained to match hands. At the least, such knowledge increases the ability of a contemporary scholar to read the work of the medieval scribe and to spot corrections and revisions; at the most, such close attention to scribal practice can upset established wisdom. Kevin Kiernan, for example, famously disrupted the reigning orthodoxy that Beowulf was a poem first written in eighth-century England through close examination of the sole surviving manuscript, suggesting, instead, that it is the creation of the eleventh-century scribes who wrote the manuscript, particularly the second scribe, whose revision process can be seen in a palimpsest passage. Even if Kiernan’s argument has not found clear support among other Anglo-Saxonist scholars, he has undeniably overturned old confidences and has demonstrated how attention to even the most famous of manuscripts can lead to new interpretive insight.

While this will be the first such NEH Seminar for College and University Teachers, I am confident about its potential since it is based on a pilot project: the University of Iowa 2008 Obermann Summer Research Seminar, “Medieval Manuscript Studies and Contemporary Book Arts: Extreme Materialist Readings of Medieval Books.” That pilot project drew ten scholars, both medievalists and contemporary book-makers, for two weeks of discussion and practical sessions on medieval manuscripts and their creation. All who participated were excited by the work of the seminar, and subsequently shared their work in conference presentations and in a volume of essays which I edited, Scrapped, Stroked, and Bound. All agreed that the concept of the seminar has great potential for enriching medieval studies more widely, particularly if the seminar was focused more exclusively on training suitable medievalist scholars and provided more time for those scholars to absorb the information and use it in their own work. That is precisely the opportunity that the present NEH Seminar for College and University Teachers intends to offer.

Details of the Seminar
This seminar will proceed through four stages, overlapping for maximum effectiveness (a detailed schedule is provided under *Week by Week* [LINK]). You will first be introduced to the various skills involved in the creation of medieval manuscripts. While informed by the best scholarship on these issues, it is axiomatic to this seminar that people learn best by doing. We will thus work as a group on each of the skills and techniques of manuscript creation under expert guidance. Following that, you will work individually, with the help of the expert craft practitioners, on creating a model that is most useful for your particular research issues. Most often this will involve modelling and trying to recreate a single page that raises important issues, although some modelling may be more ambitious, involving recreating page layout or illustrations or replicating binding technique. At the same time, we will discuss common readings. These will include discussion of the manuscript turn in medieval studies, notably new philology, particularly as exemplified in key studies that use material evidence to understand specific manuscripts. A further line of reading and discussion will engage with the very idea of craft that underlies both this seminar and what some have termed the new materiality. Discussion of materiality will also be fuelled by recent work on what is at stake in digitization and the idea of what is lost and gained in moving between media. In addition to such discussion of common readings, participants will also work on their own research project—some question or issue within your discipline that can be answered or advanced through extreme attention to the details of manuscript evidence that will lead to an original publication—and the last part of the seminar
will involve both one on one discussion of such projects with the seminar director and presentation to the group for full discussion.

1. Manuscript-Making Skills

*Parchment*

Parchment is fundamental to medieval manuscripts in every possible way, yet most medievalist scholars know little about it. Surviving pages are considerably affected by the quality of the preparation of the parchment as well as by the raw material, while many forms of damage to medieval texts (rips, roughness, erasure, abrasion) can be understood better by knowing the ways in which parchment is prepared and wears. Jesse Meyer, one of the very few commercial parchment makers active in the United States today, will lead seminar participants in the preparation of parchment. Starting with the skin of an animal (traditionally mostly calf or sheep), participants will dehair this in a quick-lime solution, stretch it on a traditional frame, and scrape. The quality of the finished product depends heavily on the scraping process, which we will attempt with a traditional lunellum and sand paper, but conclude if necessary with powersanders. With considerable help from Mr. Meyer (who will part-prepares some of the skins) and the seminar assistant, and with stretching and drying overnight, each seminar participant will have a skin of parchment quality at the end of two days, from which to cut at least one bifolio and some scraps.

The process of creation will both boost our knowledge of technique and lead to a new tactile sense of the medieval page. Touch and smell are evoked throughout this process almost more than sight, and awakening these senses can assist medievalist scholars in the archive and in the act of interpretation. Mr. Meyer will also bring some of his extensive stock of parchments and we will have the opportunity to feel, smell, and look at many different skins in differing states of preparation as well as asking a living practitioner questions about the craft.

*Calligraphy*

Handwriting was, of course, essential to all books before the age of print and gives its name to the manuscript form. While there is a continuity in the basic skill to today (even if some think this threatened by the predominance of typing in the current transition to an internet age), writing by hand is an incidental and marginal practice for most of us. With the revival of book arts, though, some practitioners of calligraphy have revived something close to the professional engagement with handwriting of the medieval scribe. Cheryl Jacobsen, who teaches contemporary calligraphy and historical letterforms at the UI Center for the Book, is such a practicing scribe: an accomplished book artist who makes a living from her writing, which includes the commissioning of complete handwritten books. Ms. Jacobsen will guide us first in the basics of creating quill and ink, then in the fundamentals of writing, starting with special attention to pen angle. After a session of experimenting with writing on paper, we will be ready to begin attempting writing on parchment, using scraps and edges for experimentation, and knowing that errors can always be scraped off with a pen knife. You will briefly practice writing a couple of historical letterforms before focusing on recreating one particular scribe’s work that is of particular interest for your research.

Three sessions will be devoted to learning to write and to questioning and learning from a living practitioner of this craft. Experience of the pilot seminar in summer 2008 suggests that participants will be utterly engaged by this process. After three sessions of instruction by Ms.
Jacobsen, supported by the seminar assistant, participants will be ready to make a model that will aid their interpretation of the past.

**Page Design**

Layout of the page is fundamental to the look of a manuscript and remains a concern for book designers. One of the biggest differences between books created in a manuscript culture and those created in the age of print has to do with the relative fluidity of design. Ironically, contemporary electronic page design is beginning to allow something that approaches the fluidity of the manuscript page. Participants will be guided in the details of page layout by Sara Sauers, who teaches letterpress printing and page design at the UI Center for the Book, where she is an Adjunct Assistant Professor. She has long practiced as a book designer, including for the University of Iowa Press, and will share that experience with the group. An initial session will show participants the basic skills of the craft and have them practicing on computer and on paper. In a second session, we will work on issues in relation to medieval manuscript layout. As throughout the seminar, participants will gain interpretive insight into medieval practice by talking with a contemporary practitioner.

**Papermaking**

While parchment is the material of choice for most medieval books from Western Europe, the craft of papermaking reached Spain and Italy by the twelfth century and is relevant for understanding some medieval manuscripts. Timothy Barrett, Associate Professor and Director of the UI Center for the Book (and MacArthur Fellow), who teaches papermaking, is currently researching the high quality and strong endurance of medieval paper samples. He will provide participants a brief introduction to papermaking as well as to his research. As is axiomatic to the seminar, participants will learn best by doing, and so they will both hear about the history of papermaking techniques and pull paper samples, experimenting with different materials and techniques.

**Bookbinding**

The final fundamental skill in book creation is the binding of the book. In this, we will be guided by Julie Leonard, who is Associate Professor at the UI Center for the Book, where she teaches bookbinding, and a practicing book artist, with extensive experience in book creation, edition bindings, and historical and innovative book structures. Participants will learn about the evidence available from binding, view binding models in the UI conservation studio, and create their own medieval book structures using kits created by the UI Center for the Book. Understanding how bindings were made will open up new avenues for interpreting existing evidence for many medieval scholars. Once again, participants will be able to discuss specific medieval issues of binding and book structure with an expert book creator.

**The Whole Book**

In the course of working over these individual skills, the seminar will move for two sessions to the UI Libraries Special Collections, where we will be able to use our newfound sensitivity to book production and material evidence while looking at surviving medieval manuscripts and fragments. We will also view some contemporary books that have been created in part using medieval techniques, looking at some of the work of Cheryl Jacobsen and at the St John’s Bible.
and discuss how these, too, can add to our ability to interpret the past.

2. Making a Model
Each seminar participant will use the skills acquired during the first part of the seminar and apply them to creating a model that is relevant for his or her own particular research issue. Often this will involve recreating a medieval page of particular interest. Participants may also try to replicate damage of critical areas, or create a palimpsest, or mock up an interesting binding. Work on such individual projects will be the primary activity for afternoons throughout the second week. The book artists and crafts people will be available to assist you as needed at this stage, in addition to the seminar director and a special seminar assistant. Based on the experience of the pilot seminar, I expect that Cheryl Jacobsen, the calligrapher, will be in high demand at this stage, as well as Sara Sauers and Julie Leonard.

3. Seminar Discussion: Common Readings
In addition to the hands-on work will be discussions of shared readings led by the seminar director. We will repeatedly return to the issue of how engaging in the crafts of production allows us better to interpret medieval history and culture and to understand medieval texts. We will consider Richard Sennet’s argument in *The Craftsman* that craft provides a neglected avenue for understanding the history of ideas. We will look at recent work on remediation inspired by discussions of the web, such as the work of David Boulter, and its application to the Middle Ages, such as Martin Foys’s *Virtually Anglo-Saxon*, to consider what happens when text gets presented in a new form, such as digital facsimiles of medieval manuscripts. We will also discuss fundamental medievalist engagements with the idea of the book and with book crafts and some exemplary studies that model such close attention, such as Michelle Brown’s study of the Lindisfarne Gospels and Michael Camille’s study of the Luttrell Psalter.

We will also engage and explore a further paradox of materiality in the contemporary age of transition to a digital culture. Since it is (generally) impossible to bring medieval manuscripts to the seminar, in most cases participants will share digital images of the manuscript of interest to them. Such digital facsimiles often provide a stunning level of detail of the manuscript page, allowing us, for example, to see the sequence of pen strokes in detail, and yet always lack the tangible and sniffable quality of the original. Participants will be able to supplement these visual images with the model they have been working on and we will discuss the aura of the original, the value of the digital and tangible facsimile, and issues of interpretation.

Sample readings are listed in the detailed schedule (see *Week by Week* LINK), while a fuller bibliography is available under *Academic Resources* LINK.

4. Individual Research Projects
Participants will each bring to the seminar their own research topic which centers on a specific manuscript question. I expect insight from the seminar to help each member of the seminar as they work throughout the seminar on an essay or book chapter for publication. These individual research efforts will be the explicit center of discussion for the second half, where everyone will share their work in progress, along with their model. In addition to group discussion, each participant will meet individually with the project director to discuss his or her own project. Individual research time will help to ensure that everyone can make good progress on their own project for publication while the ideas sparked by the seminar remain at a white heat.
If the group so chooses, and if the research projects fit together well, there is a possibility of publishing a volume of essays that cohere around the theme of the seminar and illustrate the value of the approach adopted here. The director will discuss such a possibility with the group as the seminar proceeds. We may also choose to present research coming from the seminar as a panel at appropriate medieval or book-centered conferences.

Participants will come away from the seminar with new-found or newly-honed hands-on skills and with fresh ideas about manuscripts and materiality. Both the experience of the seminar and the resources taken from it will help inform and revitalize our collective teaching practices. I hope that the project website will serve as a continuing resource for gathering such teaching and research materials.

Project Faculty and Staff
This seminar will be directed by Professor Jonathan Wilcox, who wrote a study of Anglo-Saxon homiletic manuscripts for his Ph.D. (Cambridge, 1989) and has been studying and publishing on medieval manuscripts ever since. My publications include extremely close attention to manuscripts in descriptions provided for the Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts in Microfiche Facsimile project, namely *Homilies by Ælfric and Other Homilies*, ASMSMF 17 (Tempe: Arizona, 2008) and *Wulfstan Texts and Other Homiletic Materials*, ASMSMF 8 (Tempe: Arizona, 2000). I used manuscript evidence to publish an edition, *Ælfric’s Prefaces*, Durham Medieval Texts 9 (Durham, 1994), and I have since published broadly on the nature of medieval manuscript culture, as in the essay, “Transmission of Literature and Learning: Anglo-Saxon Scribal Culture,” in *A Companion to Anglo-Saxon Literature*, ed. Phillip Pulsiano and Elaine M. Treharne (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), pp. 50-70. For fuller details of my publications, see my cv under *Director* LINK.

Currently chair of the English Department at the University of Iowa, I have long maintained a close association with the University of Iowa Center for the Book, having served as Interim Director and as Coordinator. This seminar builds on my experience directing a somewhat similar research seminar, “Extreme Materiality: Medieval Manuscript Studies and Contemporary Book Arts,” as the University of Iowa Obermann Center 2008 Summer Research Seminar, which led to the crossover essay collection, *Scraped, Stroked, and Bound: Materially Engaged Readings of Medieval Manuscripts* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013).

In addition to the director, the seminar will draw on the expertise of leading book artists for the different stages of producing a book, as listed under *Seminar Faculty* LINK. These experts, and the area they will teach, are as follows:

- **parchment**: Jesse Meyer, one of the very few contemporary US parchment makers, who came to this craft from leather making, in which business his family have been engaged since the fifteenth century;
- **calligraphy**: Cheryl Jacobsen, Adjunct Assistant Professor at the UI Center for the Book and practicing calligrapher;
- **page design**: Sara Sauers, Adjunct Assistant Professor at the UI Center for the Book and past book designer for UI Press;
- **binding and structures**: Julie Leonard, Associate Professor at the UI Center for the Book and a leading creator of contemporary and historical binding structures;
- **paper making**: Timothy Barrett, Associate Professor and Director of the UI Center for the Book, winner of a MacArthur Foundation “genius grant,” and a leading researcher on medieval paper.
Seminar participants will be supported during their hands-on work by an assistant with skills in the book arts.

**Participant Selection**

Participants will be selected by the director of the seminar and by two scholars who exemplify the theoretical and the craft-centered approaches to book studies pursued here, namely Matthew P. Brown, Associate Professor of English and past Director of the UI Center for the Book, and Cheryl Jacobsen, Adjunct Assistant Professor at the UI Center for the Book, who will be the calligrapher serving the seminar. For details about applying, see the section *How To Apply* LINK.

**Iowa City and the University of Iowa**

The University of Iowa (UI) is a major national research university located on a 1,900-acre campus in Iowa City, Iowa. The population of Iowa City is approximately 70,000. The larger Iowa City area, including the adjacent city of Coralville, has a population of 100,000. Iowa City is located in southeast Iowa, on the Iowa River near the intersection of U.S. Interstate Highways 80 and 380. Iowa City has all the resources necessary for the academic and practical needs of participants and has the added attraction of the UNESCO designation as a City of Literature, reflecting the richness of book-centered life available in the city.

As NEH summer scholars, you will be treated as UI faculty members for purposes of access to university libraries (including on-line resources). Part of the program’s orientation will be to provide participants with a Hawk ID and training to access these and other online resources. The University of Iowa Libraries Special Collections contains a small selection of medieval manuscripts and fragments that will be a focus for the seminar during one visit. It also holds an impressive range of facsimiles of medieval manuscripts that will be available to seminar participants as needed. The UI Libraries include excellent holdings in scholarship on book studies and on a range of medieval studies which will be available to seminar participants. The Conservation Lab at the UI Libraries contains a remarkable collection of models of book structures that will be used by the seminar.

The University of Iowa Center for the Book has been bridging the gap between book arts and technologies and the academic study of the book since 1988. It is the institutional home for many of the specialists contributing to this seminar. It also includes further specialist facilities for papermaking, printing and typography, and bookbinding that can be drawn on by seminar participants if appropriate.

The seminar will take place in part at the University of Iowa Obermann Center for Advanced Studies and will make full use of the talented staff assembled there, overseen by its director, Professor Teresa Mangum, and drawing on the expertise of a dedicated staff Director of Operations, Erin Hackathorn. The Obermann Center will serve as an interface to the UI’s IT support and will help with practicalities throughout the seminar.

**Travel To and Around Iowa City**

For travelers arriving by plane, there are two airport options that service the Iowa City area, with the best option being the Eastern Iowa Airport (generally known as Cedar Rapids Airport).

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Iowa City is approximately a four-hour drive from Chicago and a five-hour drive from Minneapolis/St. Paul, St. Louis, and Kansas City.

Although most of the UI campus is within comfortable walking distance, the UI also has the Cambus service. The Cambus is a free service (no ID required) that UI provides students, faculty, staff and campus visitors. All parts of the campus can be reached through the Cambus system. ([http://www.uiowa.edu/~cambus/](http://www.uiowa.edu/~cambus/)). In addition, both the cities of Iowa City and Coralville have low cost bus systems that serve the UI campus as well. The area is also served by several taxi companies that provide call-in service. In addition, the central campus and downtown area have multiple paid parking ramps available. Those participants who may elect to drive to campus each day will be provided additional information in May on the cost of parking and advice on free street parking within a 10 to 15 minute walking distance.

For accommodation options, see the section on *Housing*:
[http://www.uiowa.edu/manuscript-materiality/housing](http://www.uiowa.edu/manuscript-materiality/housing)