



Writing in Context:

Introduction

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This volume presents six essays related to manuscript culture in Britain. At the collection's core are books made between c. 500 and c. 1200, but other objects that contain writing are discussed as well, including charters and metalwork. In addition to augmenting our understanding of different areas of Insular manuscript culture, the essays highlight, in different ways, the tight relationship between a manuscript's palaeographical and codicological features, and the culture in which the object was produced and used. How may page dimensions be used to say something about the potential origins of a manuscript? How may a manuscript's artistic programme illuminate our understanding of a book? Can layout help reconstruct how an object was used and understood? What do script features reveal about the cultural background of a scribe? Such questions are both viable and important because the manuscript as an object (i.e. the total of its material features) mattered a great deal to those who used it. A manuscript was made at considerable effort and cost, which promoted careful planning and presupposes reason behind a book's design. The fact that it was made with a specific purpose in mind adds further weight to this assumption.

Because of the care and attention that normally went into the choice of material features, precipitated by the circumstanc-

es of production and use, this volume advocates that such traits may be used as a tool to shape our ideas and understanding of the culture of the book in a certain geographical space or given era. The collection traces written culture in Britain through to the end of the Anglo-Saxon period, highlighting where possible notions of change, development and continuity. Indeed, to allow specialists in the field to appreciate the link between late Anglo-Saxon book culture and that of the early Anglo-Norman period, the year 1200 is taken as terminus. The essays, which are presented in the chronological order of the manuscripts they discuss, seek different ways to explore the materiality of manuscript culture. Mary Garrison and Francis Newton each focus on material aspects of a single manuscript, shedding light on the object's production circumstances. Michelle Brown and Teresa Webber, by contrast, each investigate a 'segment' of written culture in Britain at a particular moment and geographical location, namely the kingdom of Mercia in the seventh and eighth centuries, and the early Anglo-Norman period, respectively. The essays by Kathryn Lowe and Erik Kwakkel, finally, focus on a specific material dynamic of manuscript culture, namely codicology and palaeography, respectively.

In the opening chapter, Michelle Brown writes the history of the book in the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Mercia, tying together some of the most important surviving manuscripts from the age, including the Vespasian Psalter (700-50), the Lichfield Gospels (mid eighth century) and the Book of Cerne (early ninth century). Placing central the question of what recent studies of such Mercian manuscripts may reveal about the society that produced and used them, her study emphasises how the books function as a 'cultural portal', shedding light on such concepts as human communication, the distribution and reception of ideas, and literacy. Brown's focal point is not re-

stricted to books, although they do form the main ingredient. Her synthesis includes for example an analysis of a remarkable and very early specimen of Insular writing found in the Staffordshire hoard, a strip of gold from the mid seventh to early eighth century containing a Psalm extract. She discusses the script against the backdrop of other such early writing specimens, drawing attention to a potential Irish influence in seventh-century Mercian book culture.

In Chapter 2, Mary Garrison focuses on one of the most remarkable of Leiden's *Vossiani*: Pliny's *Naturalis historia* in Leiden, Universiteitsbibliotheek, VLF MS 4. Produced in eighth-century Northumbria, the Leiden Pliny is not only the earliest copy of the *Natural History* made North of the Alps, it is also one of only three extant early Anglo-Saxon manuscripts of a classical text. From a material point of view the codex stands out because it is one of the largest early-medieval classical codices. A remarkable book in every way, VLF 4 is also a mystery: where and why might this gigantic copy of a book about natural history have been made? Garrison proposes, for the first time, a likely context for the book's production, namely in the milieu of Alcuin, at York. Her arguments are refreshing and rest upon a broad range of observations, including those related to the manuscript's well-known close relatives and a never before adduced script-match.

Similarly, in Chapter 3 Francis Newton studies the material features of a single manuscript in order to illuminate aspects of its production context. His object of investigation is Hannover, Kestner Museum, MS WM XXIa 36, a Gospel Book from c. 1020 copied by Eadui (Eadwig) Basan, arguably the most important scribe in late Anglo-Saxon England. Newton focuses on two aspects of this manuscript. He first turns to the scribal colophon, which gives us the scribe's name and his *cognomen*-

tum, or family name – the mysterious ‘Basan’. The colophon has never been correctly edited to show what was Eadui’s original text and what he subsequently added. Newton first re-edits the text and proposes an explanation of the name. The essay then turns to the decoration programme of the Hannover Gospels, which was likely developed under the supervision of Eadui, considering in particular the unique miniatures of the Evangelists. Newton shows how Eadui clearly placed an intentional emphasis upon the pens held by these scribes and the remarkable culminating scene in which St John’s work results in the heretic Arius being trampled underfoot. The sequence has been correctly understood as reflecting Cassiodorus’ passage on scribes, but a mistranslation of that passage has meant that the Evangelists’ miniature-sequence (including also the miniature of Christ on one of the Canon-Table leaves) has not been fully explained in its amazing subtlety. Thus Newton gives a new and powerful voice to two material aspects of interest in the Gospel Book, encouraging us to rethink the profile of the enigmatic scribe Eadui.

In Chapter 4 Kathryn Lowe turns to the layout of Anglo-Saxon charters from the seventh to the eleventh century containing lawsuits. The charters prompt a most intriguing cultural-historical conundrum, which is placed centre stage in her essay. Considering that they were made for laymen, who could not read or write, what could such readers make of the lawsuits unaided? Tapping into ‘the grammar of visual design’ she shows how the physical presentation of the text evolved over time to accommodate such illiterate readers. Instruments were added, Lowe argues, that came to their aid. The inclusion of white space before the beginning of a witness list and at the start of a clause, for example, functioned as anchors for individuals who relied on such visual markers (rather than the mean-

ing of the words themselves) to make sense of the document. Lowe suggests that such changes to the layout of lawsuits allowed laymen to engage with a charter's text in an unmediated way, thus facilitating growth of what Michael Clanchy called the 'literate mentality'.

With Chapter 5 we shift from Anglo-Saxon to Anglo-Norman manuscript culture. Teresa Webber investigates in what respects English book production changed and remained unchanged when Anglo-Saxon book culture gave way to Anglo-Norman practices. Her study is sparked by one of the masterpieces of English palaeography, N.R. Ker's *English Manuscripts in the Century after the Norman Conquest*, published in 1960. She shows how this book has functioned as a roadmap for other scholars, who used its framework and methodology for studying the communal books produced at English religious houses during the later eleventh and twelfth centuries, an era which Ker regarded as 'the greatest in the history of English book production'. Webber uses these studies to synthesise how Anglo-Norman book production developed and in what ways it embodied a continuation of the Anglo-Saxon past. She discusses, for example, new script features and draws attention to the fact that Anglo-Saxon and early-Norman individuals attached very different meanings to the concept of a library, and that their libraries were filled with very different texts.

Also devoted to Anglo-Norman book culture is the concluding chapter of the volume. In this essay I focus on two early eleventh-century manuscripts containing Aelfric's Old English homilies (Bodleian, Bodley MSS 340 and 342). At the time of the Conquest the two manuscripts were at Rochester Cathedral Priory. Under the new Norman bishop Gundulf, who arrived in 1077, the community was turned into a Benedictine abbey, which received as many as sixty new monks from Christ

Church, Canterbury and Norman houses, including Bec. The essay focuses on the numerous pen trials found in the back of the two Bodley manuscripts, showing that at least five of the individuals who tested their pens in these books were trained not in England or Normandy, but Germany, Italy and the Low Countries. The implication of their presence in the community, explored at the end of the essay, is that we cannot label the body of monks that arrived simply as 'Norman', but we need to take into account that individuals trained elsewhere in Europe were also among the monks that arrived in English houses such as Rochester, potentially influencing book production in England with a variety of local European mannerisms. This final chapter thus shows how palaeographical traits aid to our understanding of the culture of the book in a given monastic house.