

Vernacular Manuscript Culture 1000-1500: An Introduction

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This volume is devoted to a specific kind of manuscript: those written in a European vernacular language. Up until the thirteenth century, the vernacular languages played a modest role in written culture, given that Latin was the primary language used for most writing contexts, including administration, education, and Church affairs. There were exceptions in Europe, even well before the thirteenth century, that in some cultures the native tongue was used for these functions.¹ Despite the dominance of Latin in both written culture and educated society, however, some manuscripts did include short sections of vernacular texts, which were often documentary or utilitarian in nature. Some of these can be dated as far back as the Carolingian period. The oldest encounter in French, for example, are oaths dating to 842.²

In rare cases, substantial texts were copied in the vernacular,³ though it was more commonly employed in the peripheral sections of the page, such as lines of poetry scribbled onto flyleaves to test the scribe's pen. The oldest Dutch written literary 'text' survives in this context (*c.* 1100), and there are German examples that are even older (tenth century).⁴ Other early written stints of vernacular are glosses added to the Latin page by readers, perhaps reflective of a vernacular

1. For some early examples, see Smith, 'The Vernacular', 72.

2. See Gaunt and Kay, 'Introduction', 1.

3. In the 860s, a version of the Gospel story was produced in a dialect of the Southern Rhineland by Otfried, a Benedictine monk in Weissenberg. See Murdoch, 'The Carolingian Period', 2.

4. Kwakkel, 'Hidden in Plain Sight' (Dutch); Murdoch, 'The Carolingian Period', 32 (German).

5. Digital facsimile available at www.e-codices.ch.

6. For the vernaculars in general, see Smith, 'The Vernacular' and Havely, 'Literature in Italian, French and English'. For specific traditions, see Brand and Pertile, *The Cambridge History of Italian Literature* (Italian); Murdoch, 'The Carolingian Period' and Palmer, 'The High and Later Middle Ages' (German); Gaunt and Kay, *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval French Literature* (French); Kooper, *Medieval Dutch Literature* (Dutch); Wogan-Browne et al., *The Idea of the Vernacular* and Wallace *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature* (English). For twelfth-century roots, see Gaunt and Kay, 'Introduction', 1 (French); Usher, 'The Earliest Evidence', 3-4 (Italian); Palmer, 'The High and Later Middle Ages', 40 (German).

7. Van Dalen-Oskam, *Studies over Jacob* (Dutch) and Lobrichon, 'The Story of a Success' (French). See also Morey, 'Peter Comestor'.

8. Gaunt and Kay, 'Introduction', 1.

oral culture, which must have flourished among individuals who were also proficient in Latin. Sandwiched in between two lines of Latin, these kinds of vernacular glosses often clarified words or provided an equivalent meaning. In exceptional cases, these interlinear additions provided a full translation, albeit one that was grammatically challenged, as for example seen in a c. 800-copy of the *Rule of Benedict*, which features a word-by-word Anglo-Saxon translation above the Latin (St Gallen, Stiftsbibl., 916).⁵

For many cultures of Western Europe, it was in the thirteenth century that the vernacular reached maturity in relation to Latin, after a hesitant start in the twelfth century.⁶ In this period, the vernacular was used more regularly in written culture, even for texts of substantial length. Full translations from Latin to the vernacular appeared on the scene, particularly in religious and biblical texts, such as Peter Comestor's *Historia scholastica*, which was translated in both Dutch and French in the second half of the century.⁷ The verse form appears to have been favoured in the thirteenth century, although prose translations followed suit and quickly became more common. Translations from one vernacular language into another also began to appear (Old French being a particularly important source language).⁸ The knights of Arthur's round table, first made popular in French works by Chrétien de Troyes, started to make their appearance throughout Europe in other vernaculars, both in literal translations and adaptations customized for new audiences.⁹

The thirteenth century also saw the first serious diffusion of original compositions in the native tongues of Europe, religious and biblical texts being trailblazers. The first mystical works were written down in the vernacular (the Middle Dutch author Hadewijch was among the first to do

so), and translations of the Psalms and Song of Songs came into popular use.¹⁰ The transition from Latin to the vernacular for religious texts was not without its share of obstacles. Unease about the vernacular endured into the fourteenth century, at least for some genres. Near the end of the century, the *Super modo vivendi* of Zerbolt van Zutphen, who was a member of the Chapter of Windesheim, warned against the consumption of mystical works by Meister Eckhart.¹¹

The development of the vernacular as a written language was part of a much broader pattern of cultural change regarding the use of Latin. In the second half of the thirteenth century, the vernacular was gradually adopted by those working in administrative contexts – although there are also much earlier adoptions of the vernacular for documentary purposes.¹² Charters, account books, and institutional customs were more often copied in languages such as Dutch, German, French, and English, although Latin did not disappear entirely, and its use in administration would linger on throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Some religious practitioners, particularly preachers, also started to embrace the vernacular. The act of preaching, which had been exclusively conducted in Latin until the twelfth century, began to be performed on a massive scale in the vernacular during the thirteenth century – mostly as a means to match the laity's level of understanding and to reach larger audiences.¹³ Law codes, finally, also became available in the vernacular, such as Eike of Repgow's *Sachsenspiegel* and several other German codifications, which were available in written form in 1250–1300.¹⁴

How does the manuscript fit into these developments? This deceptively simple question is the main drive behind the present collection of essays. While the volume is too modest in scope to provide a comprehensive answer, the stud-

9. For Dutch adaptations, see Besamusca and Lie, 'The Prologue to *Arturs doet*'.

10. Scheepsma, 'Hadewijch und die *Limburgse Sermoenen*' (Hadewijch).

11. Besamusca and Sonnemans, '19. Gerard Zerbolt van Zutphen', 84.

12. Smith, 'The Vernacular'.

13. Vauchez, 'The Church and the Laity', 190.

14. Palmer, 'The High and Later Middle Ages', 81.

ies it presents all focus on aspects related to the vernacular culture of the book. While discussing specific manuscripts, the essays aim to address broad issues related to the vernacular culture that produced them. It is tempting, and indeed common, to study a particular book in Dutch, German, or English for what it is: an object filled with texts brought together for – perhaps even copied by – a specific reader, who used it at a specific moment and geographical location, and for a specific function. But what can be learned if we expand the focus to a *group* of manuscripts written in a given vernacular? This collective approach is justified first because vernacular manuscripts clearly form a distinct group: they have all *not* been written in Latin. And second because geographical spaces connected by the same vernacular appear to have their own speed and direction of development. This can be studied in general terms (Anglo-Saxon vernacular culture thrived long before other vernaculars did), and with respect to specific genres (mystical works were not accepted at equal pace throughout Europe), and processes (in some vernaculars, translations from Latin came later than in others).

It is this connectivity of books originating in the same linguistic space – and to a lesser extent their opposition to Latin book culture – that drives this publication. Given that authors, translators, and readers advanced vernacular written culture through the production and consumption of texts, the question arises of how scribes fit into this development. Makers of books were evidently part of the same literary constellation, because it was they who ultimately made vernacular texts available by designing and producing the books that contained them. What was their attitude towards the new body of texts that appeared? Can we observe patterns in how manuscripts in the same vernacular present their texts? Is there something typical

or unusual about books that share texts in the same language? And are there any distinguishing features in vernacular manuscripts copied by scribes active in the same linguistic space? The essays in this volume consider such issues of production and physicality – the practices, habits, and preferences of scribes making manuscripts in the same vernacular language.

The six chapters presented here have different points of entry. First, there are essays devoted to vernacular manuscripts with a specific text or text genre. The opening chapter by Kathryn Lowe studies the manuscript tradition of a single translation: the Old-English *Regula pastoralis* of Gregory the Great. Lowe gauges how this text was copied and read in a specific location – the cathedral church of Worcester in the early medieval period. What did the manuscripts look like? And how do they reflect the manner in which they were used? The three manuscripts at the heart of Lowe's study include one with annotations and corrections by the so-called Tremulous hand, showing how the Old English translation was received by later readers. The essay by Nigel Palmer focuses on another genre in another language: prayers in German vernacular. This essay brings us to the twelfth century, a period from which a large number of prayers survive. Palmer's study provides a first overview of the surviving material in its manuscript context, from fragments of booklets to vernacular prayers integrated into Latin volumes, which he studies from a codicological point of view. Next, focusing on the *Chroniques* of Jean Froissart and the *Grandes Chroniques de France*, Godfried Croenen studies the use of rubrics in these works. His observations are then placed against a broader backdrop of how rubrics were used in vernacular manuscripts. Why and how did rubrics become a standard part of textual production in French manuscripts produced in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries?

The second approach in this volume encompasses studies of a vernacular manuscript culture as a whole. Rolf Bremmer opens the discussion with a study on the production of manuscripts in the Frisian lands, focusing on their script and codicological features. Frisia was an anomaly because it was not united under one ruler but represented almost two dozen autonomous districts. These districts were nevertheless united in their shared use of the Frisian language. How did scribes respond to this diversity within the unity of a single language? Do the surviving manuscripts share features in their codicology and palaeography, or can material contrasts be pointed out? Addressing such questions for Frisian vernacular is all the more challenging because very little survives. This chapter is therefore also a study of the possibilities offered by manuscripts and fragments in a single non-Latin language; it considers how these surviving sources can be transformed into tools that shed light on the culture as a whole. A similar question is addressed by Sheryl McDonald Werronen in her study of manuscripts copied in the Icelandic vernacular. This is the first broad overview in English of how Icelandic manuscripts were produced, with detailed attention paid to both script and codicology. McDonald Werronen uses the text genre of sagas as a drive behind her broad study. Where Lowe, Palmer, and Croenen stay within this constellation of genre, the essay on Icelandic manuscripts presents observations related to the Icelandic tradition as a whole. Her essay is also the longest one in temporal reach. The Icelandic written tradition continued well beyond the Middle Ages, which allows us to gauge how medieval practices were continued beyond the end-date set for this book.

This volume's last chapter by Peter Gumbert († 2016) has a different approach.¹⁵ This essay is more confined in scope and

focuses on a peculiar material feature: quires that contained unusually higher numbers of bifolia than normally encountered in medieval manuscripts. Based on 180 manuscripts, this quantitative study compares and contrasts how scribes in a specific region of Italy dealt with this exceptional trait, both in Latin and the vernacular. The use of thick quires is contrasted with the use of *mercantesca*, a script local to Florence, while writing support material (parchment vs. paper) is also considered in the discussion. This combination of codicology and paleography is fruitful as it provides a look over two axes and identifies the clear preferences of Florentine scribes: about a third of manuscripts in *mercantesca* written on paper have unusually thick quires. While the rationale for doing so remains uncertain, this case shows how scribes with a shared geographical background broke the rules set by the Latin tradition.

As in the other volumes in this book series, this collection of essays points out how material features of manuscripts can generate insight into the broader cultural-intellectual context of reading and writing in the age of the handwritten book. The six essays united here show how scribes writing in a specific vernacular shaped their books materially, for example with respect to script execution, page design, reading aids, and quire structure. Some of these traditions run parallel with Latin book production, while others appear specific for vernacular manuscripts produced in certain geographical locations. There was room, this book suggests, for groups of scribes in Europe to develop their own preferences and practices, even if it meant breaking with existing – Latin – traditions. The essays ultimately highlight various ways in which codicological and palaeographical features of manuscripts help us understand the complex relationship between Latin and the vernacular.

15. Peter Gumbert passed away in the summer of 2016, when this book was being edited. He had seen and approved the final version of his text.

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