2 · Names of Scripts:
A Plea to all Medievalists

Let me start by offering a warm welcome to Oxford, on behalf of the British participants in this Symposium, to all our friends from abroad. It gives us very great pleasure to see so many of you here and to know that we are about to enjoy your company for a week.

We owe this pleasure to the generosity of the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (D. A. A. D.), to whom we are most grateful for it; and I am sure I may speak for you all, wherever you come from, and express our collective thanks to the D. A. A. D. for their patronage and to Frau Schmitz, Dr Kent and Professor Ganz for all the hard administrative and academic work that has gone into the preparation of what is surely destined to be a memorable Symposium.

Much of what else I am going to say will be personal, for reasons which will appear in a moment, and unworthy to be recorded; but I will try to be partly serious. The 'Role of the Book in Medieval Culture' is a complicated affair, and not even the sixteen learned speakers whom we are to hear this week will be able to cover it with any approach to completeness. But we are certainly going to hear, under each of the headings that Peter Ganz has selected, exemplary treatments of important themes; and the volume in which the lectures are to be published will be much more than the sum of its parts — a collection valuable not only for the content of each paper but as a guide to five crucial aspects of the medieval book as a historical phenomenon.

The aspects of medieval books which engage my own attention and affection — namely their physical characteristics, their handwritings, their decoration and their illustration — will not be in the foreground, I suspect, in any of the papers we are going to hear; but it will still be fair to say at the end of the week that everything we have heard has depended on sound knowledge of things like that; what Bob Delaissé used to talk about as l'archéologie du livre.

I came up to this college as an undergraduate on 17 January 1941, knowing little about it except that it was 'done' to call it 'the
House, not Christ Church, and certainly not Christ Church College. Snow had fallen the night before and the crumbling Headington stone of which most Oxford buildings then consisted looked more than usually time-honoured against the pure whiteness on the ground and the blue of the sky. I was enthralled and started a journal which never got beyond its epigraph, taken from W. H. Auden, who had been an undergraduate at the House in the '20s and was to return to it at the end of his life as a part-time resident:

Since you are going to begin today,
Let us consider what it is you do.

One possibility I failed to consider was that on the Sunday afternoon of 26 September 1982 I should be standing here talking to you. How then has it come about?

My first tutor at the House, R. G. Barrington-Ward, was a distinguished exponent of a traditional Oxford approach to the Classics, in which what counted was the ability to forge Greek and Latin prose and verse by authors such as Plato and Sophocles, Cicero and Ovid; and yet he more or less ordered me to take, in my first examination, the optional paper in Greek sculpture. This meant classes with Paul Jacobsthal, a Student (meaning Fellow) of the House and Reader in Celtic Archaeology. The former Professor of Classical Archaeology at Marburg had come to Oxford as a refugee because it was the home of his friend of pre-1914 student days in Germany, J. D. Beazley. A weekly class on sculpture with Jacobsthal, attended by one other undergraduate, and two lectures a week on Greek vases by Beazley, attended by half a dozen others at most, for four terms, marked me for life. Barrington-Ward was a master of his trade — as Deputy Public Orator he was busy writing dozens of Ciceronian eulogies on the political and military pillars of the Allied war effort on whom the University was assiduously conferring honorary degrees (and he was very apt to read them to his pupils at tutorials); but there were too many false quantities in my verses, though I did well enough in the sculpture paper, and the result was a second-class in the first half of the degree. In the second historical and philosophical half, for which I came back to Oxford from the mock battlefields of Salisbury Plain in 1945, I got another second-class, after which I let myself be dissuaded from a career in classical archaeology on the grounds that there were too many better men ahead of me in the queue for a mere handful of jobs. After a number of unsuccessful attempts to find employment in the real world, a series of accidents, of which I will spare you the details, led me into the Department of Manuscripts at the British Museum, where I soon found that the Early Middle Ages offered congenial scope to a historical sense attuned to the variety and discontinuity of the sources for Greek history and archaeology down to the Peloponnesian War.

Will you forgive me if I recall the reactions of the two men from whom I learned most as an undergraduate at the House to my attempt to enter the British Museum? Though his published work was confined to a handful of short notes on Greek history (the manuscript of his commentary on Thucydides was stolen with his luggage from a wartime train), R. H. Dundas was a brilliant teacher who was proud to have taught Stanley Robinson, Humphrey Payne and Alan Blakeway; and if his colleagues in other Colleges — Wade-Gery, Meiggs, Andrewes — were better informed, I doubt if they were better critics. To my request for another reference, Dundas's characteristically needling reply was: 'You'd better get this job. I'm sick of writing for you'. Jacobsthal had more to say: 'Why the Museum? You should go into the City and make some money, like Rendel [a promising pre-war pupil who came back in 1945 only to find it was too late for him to take up where he had left off]. You are not a scholar, but I will write a reference for you. You have good manners, and that is important in the Museum. It is a good club. You will be happy there'.

Jacobsthal's ability to talk to his pupils as if they were people and not merely undergraduates distinguished him, in my experience, from any other don I encountered. The references did the trick; and I even discovered years afterwards, on an overnight stay, that at least one person in the House had thought well of my academic prospects, namely Adams, the scout who looked after my rooms in 1941-42: 'So you're a Professor in London now, sir. I always expected you'd be staying here with us'.

If I had stayed here it would have been as a classicist and I might never have met Francis Wormald, whom I had the good luck to follow in the Museum and after that at King's College in London. I should have no doubt have met Richard Hunt, Neil Ker and Roger Mynors; but I should not have understood from the inside the extent of their influence on medieval studies in this country — an influence which has been growing steadily in the thirty-odd years.
since I went to the British Museum and which, I believe, has
permanently and most beneficially re-adjusted the balance of
interests among British medievalists.

That Neil Ker’s death just a month ago should have deprived
us of the opportunity to meet him at this Symposium is an deep sorrow
to us all: he was loved for more than his learning, and his loss will
be felt as a personal loss by many people in many places. Though
the strictly palaeographical and codicological side of his learning
was both very wide and very deep, direct expression of it was more
or less confined to English Manuscripts in the Century after the
Norman Conquest and to the introduction to The Catalogue of
Manuscripts containing Anglo-Saxon; but the distinction as a cata-
logue of medieval books on which his future reputation, as with
Humfrey Wanley and M. R. James, will mostly depend, had his
mastery of the archaeology of the book as its indispensable
bedrock. Again, as his new handbook so clearly demonstrates,

nothing knows more about Latin palaeography than Bernhard
Bischoff; and yet I once heard him say that he looked forward to
finishing his list of ninth-century manuscripts because that would
allow him to give more time to important work. Again, if you like,
Bertold Ullman’s Origin and Development of Humanistic Script
has been as fundamental to Latin humanistic palaeography as
Montfaucon’s book, sub-titled De ortu et progressu litterarum
Graecarum, was to Greek palaeography; but Ullman himself saw it
as an essential preliminary to the edition of Catullus, towards
which he had been working for many years and which he never
completed.

Since most books exist to be read, and since full appreciation
even of a picture book depends on understanding its iconography,
which is usually to be explained in terms of literature, there is no
doubt in my mind that a working philologist, provided he can also
look at manuscripts in the kind of way that Jacobsthal looked at
sculpture and Beazley at vases, is likely to be the most effective
student of manuscripts; by effective I mean not only comprehen-
sive in his approach but able to draw the historical conclusions —
in the widest sense of ‘historical’ — which justify the hard labour
of collecting and analysing archaeological details, much as gold
justifies the hard labour of mining and refining the ore.

Of course, there are good palaeographers of another kind. A
London colleague who attended E. A. Lowe’s classes in Oxford
many years ago told me that he never came down below the ninth
century — which was rather disappointing for her, since her re-
search concerned bishops’ registers of the thirteenth century; but
that her attitude to her materials was none the less revolutionized.
As a case in point, she evoked the elegant little figure writing an
uncial a on the blackboard, stepping back to contemplate it for a
moment, and then turning round with a delighted smile on his face
to say: ‘Isn’t that a beautiful letter?’ Aesthetic discrimination of a
high order contributed much to the dependably high quality of the
judgements in CLA; and a palaeographer who tries, as some do, to
work as if there was no such thing as quality in handwriting, is
working with one eye shut. Jean Mallon was still alive when this
lecture was delivered, but now that I come to write it down I
cannot bring myself to pretend that the warmth and vigour of his
personality are not, alas, subjects only to be remembered, not again
to be experienced at meetings such as this. If quality is important,
dactus is fundamental; and Mallon was the first palaeographer to
take adequate account of changes in the way in which written
forms were constructed by separate movements of the pen.

The index to his collected papers, published by the CNRS very
soon after his death as De l’écriture: Recueil d’Études publiées de
1937 à 1981 (1982), reveals no references to Edward Johnston,
whose pioneering work in the revival of formal calligraphy in the
early years of the century was known to Lowe, whose own copy of
Writing and Illuminating, and Lettering was well worn when I saw
it on his shelves at Princeton in 1966, but not much exploited even
in his papers on handwriting. Mallon’s own account of the origin
of his method — doodling providentially interrupted by a tele-
phone call — is perfectly in keeping with the originality of which
his life and work contained so much.

And this brings me to my main point. Interested as he was in the
dynamics of handwriting as the key to its development, Mallon was
acutely, indeed obstreperously, aware of the silliness of the names
for Roman scripts which we have inherited from the age of
Mabillon and the Two Benedictines.

Silly though they undoubtedly are, most of us have declined to
accept Mallon’s contention that the scripts should be renamed in
some manner that reflects their natures and historical relationships
to each other: for one thing, they are too deeply embedded in the
literature, and for another we all know what they mean. Traube’s
introduction of the term 'Insular' has enabled early specimens of handwriting from the British Isles to be compared with Continental script without begging the question of whether they were Irish or Anglo-Saxon in type or origin; and the attribution of suitable names to distinct local types of pre-Caroline minuscule on the Continent has greatly reduced the area of uncertainty in what Traube called the 'transitional period' between Late Antiquity and the Caroline remota. Lowe's use of 'Insular majuscule' in CLA was unfortunate; and I myself prefer to use—in preference to Lowe's binary system of majuscule and minuscule—a more elaborate set of definitions for the various grades of Insular script: one inspired by Gerard Lietinck's set of definitions for Gothic cursive, as expounded in his part of Nomenclature des Écritures littéraires (1954), the work which includes Bischoff's definition of 'gothique primitive' as the link between the Caroline and Gothic book scripts.

Thanks to Nomenclature and to applications of Lietinck's principles such as Malcolm Parkes's English Cursea Book Hands, 1250-1500 (1969), the old dispensation under which all late medieval handwriting was either 'book hand' or 'charter hand'—to use the English terms for an international concept—has been, or ought to have been, superseded. When I was examined in philosophy in 1948, Wittgenstein was beginning to enter the collective bloodstream of Oxford philosophy and I came away with one proposition of his which I sometimes think I understand: 'Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schwiegen'. I find that with the help of Lietinck and Parkes on litera cursea and of S. J. P. van Dijck on litera textualis ('An Advertisement Sheet of an early fourteenth-century Writing Master at Oxford', Scriptorium 10, 1956, 47-64)—not to mention Martin Steinmann, 'Ein mittelalterliches Schriftmusterblatt', Archiv für Diplomatik, 21, 1975, 450-6, and work by J. P. Gumbert, including 'A Proposal for a Cartesian Nomenclature', in Miniatures, Scripts, Collections, Essays presented to G. I. Lietinck, 4, Amsterdam, 1976, 45-52—one can discuss late Medieval scripts with students in a way that was impossible with nothing but a binary system of book hand and charter hand. Nomenclature was intended to prepare the way for the use of adequate definitions in the international catalogue of dated manuscripts which owes its existence to Charles Samaran—who died all too severe loss to be mourned since this lecture was delivered; and it is a disappointment to me that only Lietinck himself has had the courage to offer definitions according to his own system. The reason, I think, is that the editors have worried far too much about what are in fact only minor discrepancies between one region and another: the exact forms of letters may differ, but basic types and/or grades of textualis and curiosa are general enough within the Northern European and Italian systems of scripts in Late Medieval Europe to justify the assumption that two corresponding sets of definitions can be applied overall: of course there are many trees, but there are also two perfectly good woods.

So I should like to urge all those who write about medieval books, whether as editors of texts, as historians of art, or—as cataloguers, to make use of the available terminology, even if their interest in the history of scripts is only incidental. Between them, they see so much and find out so much, in their own ingenious ways, about the dates and origins of books, that by making their lists and descriptions a little more informative, they will be helping themselves by helping the few palaeographers who specifically write about scripts to identify more instructive cases in the still largely uncharted ocean of Late Medieval manuscripts.

Traditional descriptions like 'Codex membranaceus sancti fortissimi duodecimi' or 'Codex chartae sanctae quinto decimo pulchre exaratus', and their vernacular equivalents, are no longer quite good enough although an occasional pulchre or negligentor is better than no comment at all.
A Palaeographer's View
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