Medieval Manuscripts

Today, when books are taken for granted and, some people believe, about to become obsolete, it is illuminating to think back to a time when they were new and special. Medieval books were a different kind of object to today's: they were rare, valuable and, perhaps most importantly, written by hand, and very few people could read them. How did people think about books, when they were accessible to so few? Who owned and used them, and how? What did the books look like, how were they made, by whom, and of what materials? What kind of texts did they contain, and where did these come from? How can we tell where and when manuscripts were made, and what does that tell us? What was the role of reading and writing in medieval society and culture more widely? In this module we'll explore these and related questions, looking at the material objects themselves and examining their place in medieval culture, society, and even economy. We shall cover the whole of the middle ages, from c. 700 to c. 1500 AD, drawing most of our examples from England.

Introductory Reading

Alexander, J. G. G., Insular Manuscripts, 6th to 9th Century (Harvey Miller, 1978)

Brown, Michelle P., A Guide to Western Historical Scripts from Antiquity to 1600 (British Library, 1990 etc.)


Clemens, Raymond, and Timothy Graham, Introduction to Manuscript Studies (Cornell UP, 2007)

de Hamel, Christopher, A History of Illuminated Manuscripts (Phaidon, 1994 etc.)


Duffy, Eamonn, Marking the Hours: English People and their Prayers, 1240–1570 (Yale UP, 2006)

Parkes, M. B., Pause and Effect: An Introduction to the History of Punctuation in the West (Scolar Press, 1992)

Roberts, Jane, Guide to Scripts used in English Writings up to 1500 (British Library, 2005)


Temple, Elzbieta, Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts, 900–1066 (Harvey Miller, 1976)