

Fragmentology

A Journal for the Study of Medieval Manuscript Fragments

Fragmentology is an international, peer-reviewed Open Access journal, dedicated to publishing scholarly articles and reviews concerning medieval manuscript fragments. *Fragmentology* welcomes submissions, both articles and research notes, on any aspect pertaining to Latin and Greek manuscript fragments in the Middle Ages.

Founded in 2018 as part of *Fragmentarium*, an international research project at the University of Fribourg (Switzerland) funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation, Stavros Niarchos Foundation (SNF), and the Zeno-Karl-Schindler Foundation, *Fragmentology* is published by the University of Fribourg and controlled by the Editorial Board in service to the scholarly community. Authors of articles, research notes, and reviews published in *Fragmentology* retain copyright over their works and have agreed to publish them in open access under a [Creative Commons Attribution](#) license; images may be subject to other licenses. Submissions are free, and *Fragmentology* does not require payment or membership from authors or institutions.

Founding Editors: William Duba (Fribourg), Christoph Flüeler (Fribourg)

Editor: William Duba (Fribourg)

Associate Editor: Veronika Drescher (Vienna)

Editorial Board: Lisa Fagin Davis, (Boston, MA), Christoph Egger (Vienna), Thomas Falmagne (Frankfurt), Scott Gwara (Columbia, SC), Nicholas Herman (Philadelphia), Christoph Mackert (Leipzig), Marilena Maniaci (Cassino), Stefan Morent (Tübingen), Åslaug Ommundsen (Bergen), †Nigel Palmer (Oxford)

Typesetting: Trine Wismann (Fribourg)

Instructions for Authors: Detailed instructions can be found at <https://fragmentology.ms/about/submissions/>. Authors must agree to publish their work in Open Access.

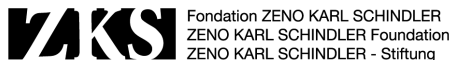
Fragmentology is published annually at the University of Fribourg. For further information, inquiries may be addressed to fragmentarium@unifr.ch.

Editorial Address:

Fragmentology
University of Fribourg
Rue de l'Hôpital 4
1700 Fribourg, Switzerland.

tel: +41 26 300 90 50

Funded by:



Review

Leah Tether, Laura Chuhan Campbell, and Benjamin Pohl, with the assistance of Michael Richardson, *The Bristol Merlin: Revealing the Secrets of a Medieval Fragment*, York: Arc Humanities Press 2021, 150 pp., ISBN 9781641894142 (paperback: 9781802700688).

Reviewed by **Elizabeth K Hebbard**, Indiana University, Bloomington

ehebbard@iu.edu



Many collaborators had a hand in the production of this unique, multidisciplinary study of seven in situ binding fragments transmitting a continuous passage from the Old French prose romance known as the *Suite Vulgate du Merlin*. The thirteenth-century fragments were used as pastedowns in a four-volume set of Jean Gerson's *Opera omnia* in the sixteenth century, and later turned into flyleaves when the volumes were rebound in the nineteenth century. The authors Leah Tether (a scholar of French Arthuriana), Laura Chuhan Campbell (a scholar of medieval French and Italian *Merlin* narratives), and Benjamin Pohl (a book historian and paleographer) worked alongside Special Collections librarian Michael Richardson, who initially found the fragments, as well as literary scholar Richard Trachsler, who is currently re-editing the *Suite Vulgate*, and Andrew Beeby, a specialist in the non-invasive imaging techniques permitting the identification of pigments used in medieval manuscripts. This interdisciplinary group came together to study these fragments that the authors collectively call the *Bristol Merlin*, and to recreate their journey from manuscript copy to binding material to pastedowns and finally to flyleaves. The strength of this volume's contribution is precisely in the way that the *Bristol Merlin* project adopts the varied perspectives of all these specialists in order to

combine their many insights into a “holistic approach” (p. 3) to the fragments’ content and context.

The book presents the team’s work in two parts, Context (1) and Text (2). **Section 1: Context** is divided into four chapters, each of which focuses on a different aspect of the fragments’ histories: “1. Codicological and Palaeographical Analysis” places and dates the copy of the Bristol *Merlin* to France in the third quarter of the thirteenth century, and recreates the configuration of the leaves in their hypothetical original quire and in their two subsequent arrangements in the Gerson volumes. Next, “2. Bindings” identifies two potential binders—one in Cambridge and one in Oxford—of the Gerson volumes that were originally printed in Strasbourg. “3. Provenance” speculates about possible owners of the volumes between their binding in the early sixteenth century and their entry into the collections of what is now the Bristol Central Library. Finally, “4. Redaction, Language, and Localization” returns to the fragments themselves and determines that they represent the α redaction of the *Suite Vulgate du Merlin*—sharing one peculiar reading with only two other witnesses of that redaction—and that the graphemes of the Bristol *Merlin* represent the Francien dialect. A short conclusion then briefly reviews the findings of Section 1. After an introduction laying out editorial and translation principles and describing the multispectral imaging that aided the team in reading the fragments’ damaged sections, **Section 2: Text** presents an edition of the fragments with a facing page English translation. An appendix (not listed in the table) gives concordances with major editions, including Trachsler’s forthcoming one, and a bibliography and index conclude the work. The volume includes a number of plates and figures, the most welcome of which are the color plates of each of the *in situ* *Merlin* fragments (recto and verso). There are in addition a number of black and white images of inscriptions and binding details; a visual reconstruction of the ways the leaves were used within the Gerson bindings; a figure comparing letterforms of the two scribal hands at work in the *Merlin* fragments; and one of a standard image of the text alongside a processed multispectral image (both in black and white) showing how this imaging technology improves readability. These latter three figures will be particularly

helpful in demonstrating for non-specialist readers the techniques and technologies deployed in the study.

As the preceding account makes evident, this little volume does a great deal. The method it proposes is clear and systematic, but as a model of that method, in places it unfortunately falls short of individual disciplinary expectations, or of making fully accessible to non-specialists the contributions of individual disciplines and their approach to manuscript fragments. As an example of the first critique, paleographers might wonder why the script of the fragments is identified as “gothic,” which is then parenthetically called a “traditional if slightly imprecise term” (p. 8), though the Derolez volume in the bibliography (among others) offers many subcategories of gothic scripts and their features that would allow for more precision. Regarding accessibility, readers who are unfamiliar with the complex *Merlin* tradition might easily confuse its components (the Vulgate Cycle and its continuation, the *Suite Vulgate du Merlin*, being altogether distinct from the Post-Vulgate Cycle and its continuation, the *Suite du Merlin*), which are mentioned but whose differences are not fully explained. This potential confusion is perhaps compounded by the fact that the discussion of the Bristol *Merlin* text and its relationship to the textual and manuscript traditions of the *Suite Vulgate* and the related Vulgate Cycle (also known as the Lancelot-Grail Cycle) is split across chapters 1 and 4. Chapter 1 refers to two different accounts of the number of manuscript witnesses of the *Suite Vulgate* (p. 7), but does not elaborate on the nature of the discrepancy, nor clarify which manuscripts the authors considered and why. In chapter 4, in a discussion of the “verbal alterations” that distinguish the version of the text in the Bristol *Merlin* and its two most closely related sources (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, fr. 344 and fr. 98) from other witnesses, two versions of the unique readings are given (p. 42), but none from other copies against which to compare that of the Bristol *Merlin*. A fuller discussion of the *Suite Vulgate* manuscript tradition and a reference to an existing or forthcoming edition of this passage would be useful to textual critics and non-specialists alike.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the discussion of provenance gives a great deal of space to a theory of ownership of the

Gerson volumes by Tobias Matthew (1546–1628) that is entirely circumstantial, having left no concrete trace in the books themselves or in Matthew's or the Bristol library's records. After this, direct evidence of the volumes' possession by London bookseller Cornelius Bee (active 1636–77), in the form of an autograph inscription accompanied by a price-code, is presented as potentially but not necessarily complicating the theory of Matthew's ownership. This is not a critique of speculation, an integral part of the study of the past, but rather of the structure of the argument; concrete evidence should take precedence over and shape speculation, not complicate it after the fact.

Balancing depth and breadth, as well as accessibility, within the authors' proposed holistic method is a true challenge, as the critiques above highlight. Nevertheless, the authors have produced a great deal of information about the Bristol fragments and the study is indeed a welcome example of the potential of collaborative research in the humanities. The book is generous in identifying many fruitful questions that remain to be pursued, from the study of the formation of the Bristol Central Library's collections to the first edition of the α redaction of the *Suite Vulgate*. Above all, it asserts—wonderfully, excitingly—that fragments, particularly those in situ, open many avenues of inquiry to researchers, and invite the application of an array of tools and expertise to best understand them. As for the secrets of the Bristol *Merlin* fragments, despite this study's subtitle, they happily remain mostly still to be revealed.

Erratum: a previous version of this review inaccurately listed the authors of the work being reviewed.