

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.

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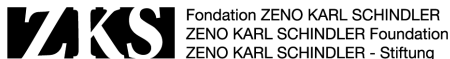
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Fragmentology is published annually at the University of Fribourg. For further information, inquiries may be addressed to fragmentarium@unifr.ch.

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Review

Hannah Ryley, *Re-using Manuscripts in Late Medieval England: Repairing, Recycling, Sharing* (York Manuscripts and Early Print Studies, 4), York: Medieval Press 2022, 240 pp., ISBN 9781914049064.

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This study of medieval books focuses on the ways in which manuscripts were reused in fifteenth-century England. The introduction sets out four key questions which frame the discussion. How were manuscripts made and how did they become so durable? In what ways were manuscript book materials recycled? Were books reused for purposes other than reading? And what happened when books changed hands? Four substantial chapters then explore these areas, keeping the two closely linked concepts of durability and recyclability in mind throughout.

Chapter 1 offers a highly detailed account of parchment-making. Starting, literally, in the field, it contemplates the animal pre-history of the book, from farm husbandry to the supply chains of the meat trade, re-evaluating all the stages in parchment production “from farm to writing table” (p. 19). In imitation of a “nose-to-tail” approach (p. 19) where every part of the slaughtered medieval animal was pressed into use, the discussion also covers by-products such as gelatine and glue, ink, quills, and pigments. Paper gets a nodding mention, as does the debate around uterine vellum, but the sustained focus is on craftsmanship and the processes involved in creating a durable product, including methods of repair when the product’s durability was imperilled. Continuing with the theme of waste and reuse, Chapter 2 starts by showing that even unpromising-looking offcuts of parchment could be used to make books. The main emphasis in

this chapter is on the structural ways that parchment manuscripts were reused in medieval book production – as reinforcing strips, quire guards, flyleaves, pastedowns, and limp covers. Attention is also paid to the practice of making palimpsests. Chapter 3 focuses on the reuse of written manuscripts as locations for further writing, considering marginal notes, doodles, and texts (typically lyrics, recipes, charms), that were jotted down by those who handled medieval books. In Chapter 4 this concept of subsequent use is expanded into a wider consideration of second-hand books that incorporates the creation of common profit books and the pledging of books in loan chests. These main chapters are book-ended by an introduction that sets out the book's aims and scope, and a briefer conclusion that reinforces those aspects. There is also a bibliography, a well-prepared index, and twenty figures comprising one table, four diagrams, and fifteen reproductions from manuscripts, most of which are in colour; all the illustrations are of good resolution, and generally this is an attractively and attentively produced volume in which I could spot no typographical errors.

The book concerns itself with manuscripts that were “made in England and are dated or datable to the long fifteenth century” (legitimately understood to encompass the period 1350–1550), and manuscripts that were “made earlier but are considered for the signs of their circulation in the fifteenth century” (p. 8). Such generous scope should have generated an evidence base of thousands of codices, but in fact the study confines itself to the much smaller group of vernacular manuscripts. The exclusion of Latin manuscripts (which vastly outnumber vernacular ones) is problematic. Nor are fifteenth-century vernacular (meaning “English”) manuscripts necessarily as homogenous as this division suggests: many codices are multi-lingual and contain Latin as well as English and French texts. This plurality is ignored, problematising the book's claim to offer “an inclusive narrative of reuse” (p. 187). Its evidence-base is further narrowed by a heavy reliance on Oxford repositories. Oxford's manuscript holdings are certainly rich, and it should be acknowledged that pragmatic considerations will have played a part here in that, during the period of writing, Covid restrictions will undoubtedly have frustrated any intention to free-range more widely. But scant

attention is paid to the potential effects of this restriction. Certain reuses, such as book-pledging, will have been more common in an academic environment. Similarly the restriction of the survey of marginalia in Chapter 3 to just the Douce and Laud collections will have had some impact on the study's findings, since these were collections assembled by individuals whose own personalities and roles will have cast an influence on the types of books they collected, and therefore on the kinds and frequencies of annotations that are likely to be found in them. It would have been helpful if such points had been more clearly foregrounded.

The book makes some welcome links between book history and medieval writing, and it is good to see Middle English recipes, still a comparatively under-researched genre, feature in Chapter 1. There is some unnecessary scepticism about the practical use of such recipes, and the discussion also assumes that prescriptions for parchment-making were wholly oriented towards the production of writing supports. Though it may have been hard to make good parchment on an amateur basis, medieval households, especially those situated remotely, had to be as self-sufficient as possible, and parchment that was needed for other purposes such as food-wrapping or cleaning need not have been perfect (and need not have been second-hand either). This is one instance where the monograph's strong focus on book production proves unhelpful; similarly in Chapter 2, the discussion of the reuse of parchment offcuts could usefully have been expanded to consider documentary needs: notarising small local transactions would have needed only small pieces of parchment, and cancelled documents were themselves sometimes repurposed as book bindings.

Much of the content of this monograph will not surprise specialists of medieval book history, but the book has a real value in drawing together specialised information that is otherwise disparately located. Technical terms and processes are explained clearly and straightforwardly, and the writing is couched at an accessible level throughout. These aspects will make it a very useful source for graduate students and others who are encountering the environment of the medieval book for the first time. Its most novel angle is its concentration on the fifteenth century, and the evidence that

it presents for the reuse and recycling of medieval manuscripts in that period. In English contexts it is much too easy to attribute such reuses to the Reformation and the destruction of monastic libraries, and to the demands of the printed book trade. Ryley's study is a welcome reminder that the recycling of parchment manuscripts was a longstanding practice that pre-dated the seismic changes of the sixteenth century.