

THE MARGINS OF MANUSCRIPT CULTURE



Figure 81. Late fourteenth-century roll kept in book-shaped box, probably from eighteenth century (discussed at p. 160). The Hague, KB, 130 E 26. With permission.

INTRODUCTION

This section deals with exceptional creations of medieval written culture: its focus is not on regular manuscripts, the main object of inquiry so far, but on unusual manuscripts, as well as non-book objects produced with quill and ink. The first three chapters highlight manuscripts that break with the regular material format of such objects. Rules and norms were very important in medieval life, and that extended to manuscript production. Remarkably, scribes often executed various stages of book production in the same manner, even when they were not working in each other's vicinity. We have encountered examples of this in [Chapter 1](#), where it was shown that scribes in the same period or region shaped their letterforms in more or less the same fashion. Another example is the uniform use of footnotes in Europe, discussed in [Chapter 4](#). While the bulk of medieval manuscripts generally share certain key features, like quires and the proportions of the page, it so happens that some books were designed a bit differently. [Chapters 19–21](#) introduce three such objects.

As outlined in the General Introduction, the design of medieval manuscripts was usually connected to their intended post-production use. [Chapters 19–21](#) show that the same goes for bookish objects that were shaped in more unusual ways: here, too, future use was the driving force behind the design, even if it was slightly off mark. [Chapter 19](#) is devoted to written artifacts that dramatically expanded in size. In addition to the roll, which became bigger as you unrolled it, two types of books are observed: “bat books,” which consist of a single sheet that was folded several times over; and accordion books, which are effectively rolls that are not rolled but folded. The two book types are very rare, yet they show the strong connection between form and function. The same goes for the unusual book type discussed in [Chapter 20](#), books so remarkably narrow that they break noticeably with the medieval norms of height and width. Although standards for a manuscript's proportions were quite strict, for some manners of use it was necessary to break the rules. The third book type, discussed in [Chapter 21](#), is the hornbook. It would be a stretch to call this a real book, even though it carries

the name: it consists of a single sheet placed on a wooden tablet with a handle. As **Chapter 21** demonstrates, these not-quite-books had everything to do with reading, as they were held in the hand to teach children to learn to read. Here, too, the manner of use was the rationale behind its peculiar design.

While hornbooks can be called books if we bend the rules a bit—not unlike the people who created them did—it would be a stretch to do so for the creations of written culture introduced in the remaining chapters of this section. They nevertheless matter for understanding medieval written culture because they were made with the same materials (ink, parchment, paper), by the same producers (scribes), and for the same people who read the manuscripts that feature in the other chapters—that is, readers with a variety of backgrounds. In **Chapters 22–25** our view expands beyond the book: the focus is on written artifacts that are flat and consist of a single “page.” **Chapters 22 and 23** discuss tiny slips of paper and parchment that were used to communicate messages and to make notes on. **Chapter 22** rifles through the scrappy notes of individuals and their households, while **Chapter 23** handles some notes jotted down by scholars and ultimately meant to be discarded. **Chapter 24** deals with a most rare strip with text: name tags pinned on the clothes of orphans. Combined, these two chapters show that written culture encompassed notably small objects as well. Most of these were ephemeral and eventually lost, although the ones that survive show that these tiny artifacts, too, were versatile and served different purposes.

By contrast, **Chapter 25** focuses on a much larger non-book object: the poster. Ubiquitous in our society, in the Middle Ages there was also a need to display information on the wall. Although equally as rare as the small slips, surviving posters contribute to our understanding of the breadth of written culture. The last component of this section, **Chapter 26**, expands our view even further: it shows how regular objects, such as manuscripts and early printed books, are at home in the margins of book culture because of unusual additions given to them. The examples in this chapter, such as pop-up sundials and calculators with moving disks, are not unlike our modern smartphone apps in that they expand the original intended use of the device.

More so than in other parts of this book, this section ultimately highlights the breadth of medieval written culture: manuscripts were sometimes given unusual shapes and add-ons if their purpose demanded it. Moreover, as this section shows, handwritten books were part of a much broader constellation of products made with quill and ink. In that sense, it hardly seems right to separate books from (or even emphasize them over) other written artifacts, as is common practice in academic scholarship and even in this book. However, this choice is in part pragmatic and sparked by what survives: manuscripts have come down to us in greater numbers than have the artifacts discussed in this section.



Chapter 19

THE INCREDIBLE EXPANDABLE BOOK

This section opens with a manuscript with a peculiar shape and format. Like most objects, books are confined to the space they occupy, obedient as they are to the laws of nature. That is to say, unlike the Incredible Hulk, they do not expand beyond the limits of their own physicality. This chapter will challenge your beliefs if you agree with this. It draws attention to a manuscript type that *does* expand: with a flick of the finger or a gesture of the hand the dimensions of these special objects increase dramatically, up to ten times their original size—or more. As if defying the laws of nature, this miraculous expansion increased the available writing space in objects that were principally designed to be small and portable. What do these objects look like? And what was the drive behind their production?

Bat Books

Produced in England in ca. 1415–1420, the small manuscript in [Figure 82](#) contains a calendar as well as astrological tables and diagrams. The information was used by physicians to diagnose and prognosticate, while the calendar provided information about religious feasts. The Leiden codicologist Peter Gumbert (d. 2016) coined the term “bat book” for this type of manuscript, alluding to its expanding nature: the book stretched its wings, as it were, when used. Moreover, in an unused state the book would be hanging from the owner’s belt in an upside down orientation, like a bat.¹ Gumbert’s inventory holds sixty-three items, and many of them look more

¹ See Gumbert, *Bat Books*, for an inventory and study of folding almanacs.

Figure 82. Folding almanac, ca. 1415–1420. London, Wellcome Institute, Archives and Manuscripts, 8932. CC 4.0 International. Source: www.wellcomelibrary.org/collections/digital-collections.

scruffy than the handsome specimen in the Wellcome Library. Folding almanacs were especially popular in late-medieval England, if the surviving specimens form an accurate representation.

These bookish objects are especially interesting from a material point of view. During production, folding almanacs looked very much like a regular book: the scribe filled regular pages with text. However, in a completed state, when the binding was added, the pages were folded in a very clever way, giving them an “unbookish” look. The two different states (a small package when closed, irregular dimensions when unfolded) were chosen with care: closed, it was a portable book that could dangle from the owner’s belt, while in its extended state the reader was provided with expansive information at a glance.

The Accordion Book

The almanac in [Figure 82](#) provides six times more writing and reading space in its expanded form, which is quite an enlargement. However, this is still considerably less than another type of expandable manuscript: the “accordion book.” An excellent example is Copenhagen, Kongelige Bibliotek, NKS 901, a calendar made in Denmark in 1513. While in its folded state it is as small as a matchbox, it expands to a full page of considerable proportions, comparable to a regular-sized medieval book. Curiously, the calendar has a most unusual way of unfolding: sections of the sheet expand independently, like little flaps from a pop-up book.

The Copenhagen accordion book is a very small, portable object. Even though in its expanded state it becomes much larger, due to the limited length of the object, the expansion still only produces a rather modest writing and reading surface. The remarkable thing about accordion books, however, is that their surface space had considerable potential, despite the puny proportions of their folded forms.

Leiden University Library owns an accordion book from fourteenth-century Russia which is only 12 cm in height ([Figure 83](#)). Folded, it shares the approximate dimensions of an iPhone. In its expanded state, however, the book stretches to a breadth of no less than 375 cm, meaning that the surface actually increases by an astonishing factor. The object has a clever design. It presents full pages of text (a calendar as well religious songs), yet each page is folded in half so that the object shrinks in size and forms a longish book. The user could simply unfold the page and the full width of the textblock would then present itself, spreading lines across two half pages, so to speak (note in the image how each line is spread across two pages). There is little gained space-wise, but the book became smaller and easier to carry around in one’s pocket.



**Figure 83. Accordion book from Russia, fourteenth century. Leiden, UB, SCA 38 B.
Photo by Giulio Menna.**

Rolls

The oldest expandable bookish object is the roll. Rolls had been in use for a long time by the time the book appeared on the scene in the fourth century, as explained in the General Introduction. During the Middle Ages the roll format remained in use longest in administration. It was not until the late thirteenth century that cities in northwest Europe switched to the book form to record their income and expenses; the city of Bruges still used rolls for this purpose in the 1290s.²

Rolls can be quite long. One of the longest that survives from the medieval period is a mortuary roll that was carried to 253 monasteries, convents, and cathedrals across England and France during the 1110s. Mortuary rolls were produced to commemorate the death of a prominent person, in this case Abbess Mathilda of Holy Trinity Abbey in Caen. Like writing a joint birthday card today, clerics in France would add their say to the roll, which grew and grew, until it finally reached a length of 22 metres (72 feet).³ Chronicle rolls could also be quite long. The one seen in [Figure 84](#) is 50 cm wide and 10.4 metres long (34 feet). The figure shows only a small segment of it, because if the page displayed the entire object the image would only be 1 cm wide.

² De Smet, Vandewalle, and Wyffels, *De rekeningen van de stad Brugge*, pp. 805 (1280–81), 862 (1294–95), 898 (1296–97), and 920 (1300).

³ Friedman and Mossler Figg, *Trade, Travel, and Exploration*, pp. 417–18 (mortuary roll).



Figure 84. Chronicle roll of 10.4 metres or 34 feet (detail), ca. 1470–1479. Boston, Public Library, MS pb Med.32. Public domain. Source: www.digitalcommonwealth.org.

The text contained on the roll, copied in France in the 1470s, is the *Chronique anonyme universelle*, which records the history of the world from Creation until the production of the roll. Besides text, there are quite a few scenes painted on the parchment, including those showing popes, emperors, and the kings of England and France—the usual suspects of such chronicle rolls. The skins of sixteen cows were used for its production: they overlap by about 1.5 cm so they could be pasted together. These full skins each measure around 65 cm × 55 cm, which is about average for northwest Europe, as discussed in [Chapter 25](#).⁴

From time to time unusual rolls are encountered, like the one seen in the Royal Library of the Netherlands in The Hague ([Figure 81](#) at p. 153). This one is special because the fourteenth-century object comes rolling out of a book (of slightly later date), which functions as its sleeve. The end of the roll (which is holding a calendar) is simply pasted into the book. The full roll measures 130 cm (a little over 4 feet). One wonders whether the owner created this remarkable hybrid because it allowed for easy storage on the bookshelf. A book placed among its peers, albeit with an unusual secret tucked away inside.

Doing More with Less

What these incredible expandable books share is an effort to hold a significant amount of text in an object that occupies a modest amount of

⁴ A description and image of this *Chronique anonyme universelle* roll is available in the Massachusetts Collections Online “Digital Commonwealth” at www.digitalcommonwealth.org/search/commonwealth:np193j76j.

space, usually in one's pocket (but not, obviously, the chronicle roll in [Figure 84](#)). When there is a dire need to take information on the go with you, medieval readers were quite inventive, as [Chapter 30](#) shows. Interestingly, the expandable information carrier lives on in our own day. Not only are there still book designers who produce accordion books in the medieval fashion, but the foldaway almanac described here has actually become ubiquitous in the form of pocket maps, displaying such information as the layout of cities and subway stations. In the same way as for our medieval peers, ease of use and portability are the driving forces behind getting plenty of information onto an object with a tiny footprint. "Doing more with less" is clearly a universal urge.

Chapter 20

BOOKS ON A DIET

It is not just through expansion that a medieval manuscript can be tagged as uncommon or breaking with the norm. This chapter is devoted to a relatively rare kind of manuscript that is much *slimmer* than what you would expect (Figure 85). “Expect,” because the relative proportions of manuscripts—the width in relation to the height—form a surprisingly stable feature in medieval book production. In fact, the vast majority of surviving manuscripts have the same relative proportions as our modern pages: their width is around 70 per cent of their height, which is about the same as our standard-format books today.¹

This stability ought to surprise you. While readers of printed books have little choice as to the physical appearance of the object they read, owners of manuscripts handled a book that was usually made especially for them. Consequently, they would normally specify what it should look like, as explained in the General Introduction. You might think that medieval readers would go overboard and abuse this freedom of choice, ordering polka-dotted books with pink letters written upside down on triangle-shaped pages. The opposite turns out to be true. Book owners before print are predictable in that they mostly opted for regular features: their choices are typical, almost conforming to some unwritten rules. It is probable that scribes, who knew the rules, attempted to keep deviations from the norm at bay.

This striking act of conformation results from what is a driving force behind the chosen physical features: the anticipated use of the book. For example, if you anticipated that you would scribble an excessive number of notes in your book,

¹ Gumbert, “The Sizes of Manuscripts.”

Figure 85. Holster book with Ovid’s *Fasti* produced for classroom use, twelfth century. Leiden, UB, VLQ 73, fol. 16v. With permission.



Figure 86. Ivory book plaque, Aachen, early ninth century. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1977.421. CC0 1.0 Universal. Source: www.metmuseum.org.

width of the tusk (Figure 86). Interestingly, however, manuscript-makers sometimes made the book equally narrow. This was probably done for visual reasons: it looks better when the relative proportions of book and decoration are aligned. Moreover, keeping the book slim meant that more visible space was covered with ivory.

you would specify to the scribe to extend the size of the margins. And if you knew that you would take a book with you when you left the house, it would make sense to have that copy produced in a suitably small and light format. This strong link between form and function is good news for us: we may infer that narrow books—sometimes called holster books—were put on their diet for good reason.²

Ivory Decoration

One reason to slim books down had to do with their binding; or, more precisely, with its decoration. The most prestigious decorative element of a medieval binding was ivory plaques, slabs of elephant tusk into which elaborate scenes were cut. They were attached to the front and sometimes also to the back of a manuscript's binding, usually embedded in the wood of the boards. Book projects that involved this costly decoration sometimes produced manuscripts that were much narrower (or taller) than the norm. The plaques themselves had to be narrow given the limited

² For this type of book, see Kwakkel, "Dit boek heeft niet de vereiste breedte"; Kwakkel and Newton, *Medicine at Monte Cassino*, chap. 4.

This tendency to keep a book narrow when ivory decoration was added is mentioned in a remarkable account by the historian Ekkehart of St. Gall (d. 1022). Referring to what is now St. Gall, Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. Sang. 53, he states that this manuscript was made tall and narrow for good reason (it measures 39.5 cm × 23.2 cm, meaning its width is 58 per cent of its height). Among the abbey's treasures, he reports in his chronicle, were two ivory plaques forming a diptych. According to Ekkehart, they once belonged to Emperor Charlemagne (d. 814), who used them as his wax tablet, which he kept next to his bed as part of his failed efforts to learn to write. When it was decided that the plaques would be used to decorate the bookbinding of a newly produced gospel book, the scribe—named Sintram according to Ekkehart—was asked to design the book in such a way “that it matched the height and width of the ivory,” which another monk-artisan, Tuotilo, had beautifully carved with a scene of the abbey's namesake. Ekkehart calls the gospel book that is the result of Sintram and Tuotilo's labour the “*Evangelium longum*” (long Gospel book), the name by which it is still known today.³ The relative width of the manuscript appears to have been so striking to him that he used this pronounced visible feature as an identifier of the book.

Books for Soloists

A second reason to produce a slim book in the Middle Ages is pragmatic rather than artistic. When one examines what these oddly tall manuscripts contain, it turns out that a fair number hold texts that were sung by soloists during Mass. Take the cantatorium and troper, for example, two frequently used musical books. When one limits the view to the period before 1200, it so happens that most surviving copies are formatted in the slim dimensions discussed here.⁴ Another famous example is the St. Gall Processional (Cod. Sang. 360), which is not just very narrow at 25.5 cm × 8 cm (the width is only 30 per cent of the height), but also very thin: it holds only thirty-four pages. The manuscript is not held in a proper binding, but instead is stored in a book box, few of which survive from the Middle Ages.⁵

³ For this story, and on Tuotilo's carving, see De Wald, “Notes on the Tuotilo Ivories in St. Gall”; Duft and Schnyder, *Elfenbein-Einbände*, pp. 18–22. Cod. Sang. 53 has been digitized by the Virtual Manuscript Library of Switzerland (e-codices), and can be found at www.e-codices.unifr.ch/en/list/one/csg/0053.

⁴ Huglo, *The Cantatorium*, pp. 96 and 99, tables 3.1a and 3.2 (Cantatoria); p. 97, table 3.1b (Tropers).

⁵ Cod. Sang. 360 has been digitized by the Virtual Manuscript Library of Switzerland (e-codices), and can be found at www.e-codices.unifr.ch/en/list/one/csg/0360.

The reason why these musical books are designed so awkwardly (in that they break with the norms of medieval book production) is related to how they were used: while held in one hand. The effect of the narrow shape was that the weight of the book rested on the palm when it lay open in your hand. This meant that the soloist could easily hold it up for a long period of time. Also, the format allowed the reader to move about while holding the book, which was essential for such processions as Cod. Sang. 360. Books with regular dimensions, by contrast, execute much more pressure on the fingertips and the thumb when held in one hand. This is unsurprising, of course, because they were not designed for holding: they were supposed to rest on a desk or podium while in use. Moreover, narrow books are often also quite thin, which reduces their weight. As with the shift in the pressure points, the weight loss helped the reader hold the book up for longer.

Classroom Use

For the same reason—easy holding—the narrow format also became popular in education in the monastic school.⁶ A considerably high number of surviving holster books have texts that are known to have been popular in an educational context, especially the classics. The classical poets were used for teaching rhetoric, grammar, and dialectic, commonly in an oral teaching situation. The narrow format allowed the teacher to move around the classroom while holding a book in one hand. (With the coming of the university this changed: the teacher would now generally place his book on a lectern and teach from the front of the classroom.) The other hand was available for pointing out things, and perhaps even for slapping young novices over the head; corporal punishment was thriving in medieval education. These narrow books commonly have a width that is 50–60 per cent of their height. The example in Figure 85 at p. 162, a copy of Ovid's *Fasti* produced in ca. 1150–1200, measures 24 cm × 12 cm and thus has a relative width of only 0.5 (compared to the height, which is 1.0). This is evidently a teaching copy. Not only was Ovid particularly popular in teaching the *Trivium*, the manuscript also holds an *accessus*. This tool is an academic prologue that highlights to the student such things as the intention of the writer, the life of the poet, the title of the work, the quality of the poem, and the style of writing.⁷

⁶ Kwakkel, “‘Dit boek heeft niet de vereiste breedte,’” pp. 40–44.

⁷ A discussion of the *accessus* and those made with the intention of later additions is found in Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, p. 15.

A Long Tradition

While the examples given above focus on the period before 1200, the practice of making slim books thrived in the later medieval period as well. In the fifteenth century, for example, municipal clerks made narrow literary manuscripts, probably conforming to chancery practices. Moreover, there appears to be a real tradition of slender paper books in Middle English literary culture. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 228, a copy of *The Romance of Richard Coeur de Lion*, is the slimmest manuscript I know. It has been argued that this particular manuscript was made for minstrels; this makes perfect sense, as they could hold it up with a single hand to read the text while they performed.⁸

Overall, ivory decoration and handheld use are two significant factors in this long tradition of making “slim” books. When faced with a slender book, we can therefore speculate: was the binding perhaps originally fitted with ivory decoration? After all, the precious material was often stolen from the books in later periods. Or, if this seems unlikely because the parchment and handwriting suggests a cheap production, perhaps it was made for handheld use, for example, by a performer or teacher.

A Librarian Speaks Up

While there were good reasons for making such slim medieval manuscripts, they were indeed regarded as unusual by people in the period. This is confirmed by the label “long Gospel book” given to St. Gall, Cod. Sang. 53, as discussed, but also by a striking remark by Hector of Moerdrecht (d. 1465), librarian of the Charterhouse Nieuwlicht in the Dutch city of Utrecht. In two narrow manuscripts, Utrecht, UB, 102 and 159, he critiqued their format. On the flyleaf of the first of these manuscripts he wrote:

The Epistles of Paul with interlinear gloss [...], which we previously did not have in their entirety, in conformity with which the rest of the books were formed, so that it might be made into one volume and bound more conveniently, although it is not a good format since it is tall and not as broad as it should have been [...].

(Item epistule pauli cum glosa interlineari [...] non ex toto quas antea habuimus, secundum quas libri ceteri formati sunt ut fieret unum volumen

⁸ Mills and Rogers, “Popular Romance,” p. 51. MS Douce 228 has been partly digitized by Oxford’s Bodleian Library, and can be found by searching for its shelfmark on their Luna Catalogue at <http://bodley30.bodley.ox.ac.uk:8180/luna/servlet>.

et commodius ligarentur. licet non sit bona formacio cum sit longa et non secundum exigenciam eius lata.)⁹

Even though Hector was biased (he was the community's librarian and thus involved in book production on a "professional" level), his critique was precisely because the two books indeed broke the rules for medieval page proportions: their width is 63 per cent of their height. As [Chapter 14](#) showed, Carthusians were keen on presenting text in a "proper" manner. It makes sense, in this light, that we encounter a librarian from the same monastic order who is a bit fastidious about a book's design.

⁹ Gumbert, *Utrechter Kartäuser*, p. 139 (citation); p. 141 for the similar remark in the other manuscript.

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz & a c i o u
A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q
R S T U V W X Y Z

a c i o u	a c i o u
a b e b i b o b u b	b a b e b i b o b u
c a c e c i c o c u	c a c e c i c o c u
d a d e d i d o d u	d a d e d i d o d u

In the Name of the Father, and of the
Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

OUR Father, which art in
Heaven, hallowed be thy
Name; thy Kingdom come, thy
Will be done on Earth, as it is in
Heaven. Give us this Day our
daily Bread; and forgive us our
Trespases, as we forgive them
that trespass against us: And
lead us not into Temptation, but
deliver us from Evil. *Amen.*

Chapter 21

BOOKS ON A STICK

This chapter moves even further away from the normal medieval book. The main focus is a peculiar bookish object that thrived in the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries, but which has medieval roots, as this chapter shows. The object in question is the “hornbook” (Figure 87). Given the definition of “book” discussed in the General Introduction (see pp. 4–5), we have to conclude that the hornbook is not even a book (i.e., an object made out of quires). Nevertheless, it does emphasize the close connection between the design of objects used for reading and human anatomy. Speaking to the diversity of medieval written culture, this chapter shows that objects to read from were not just made from parchment or paper, but also from gingerbread.

Hornbooks

The hornbook is a primer: a text used by children as they were learning to read. It usually contains the alphabet and some additional short texts, such as the Lord’s Prayer or Hail Mary, which the new readers—helpfully—should have already known by heart. These texts are found, for example, in the specimen in Figure 87, which measures only 11 cm × 6 cm. The hornbook’s design reflects perfectly how artifacts to read from were customized for use by human beings—which is sensible, of course, because these were their consumers. This particular device, for example, enables those new to reading to hold it up at eye level, as close to the face as needed to examine the unfamiliar shapes in front of them. The other hand was free to practise writing the letters, perhaps with the help of a slate tablet.

Figure 87. Hornbook with printed text, seventeenth century. Boston, Public Library, Call No. G.Cab.3.52. Public domain. Source: www.digitalcommonwealth.org.

Materials

Most surviving hornbooks are made out of wood. In the Early Modern period the pupil's "required readings" were usually printed on a sheet of paper that was subsequently covered by a thin slice of animal horn for protection—hence the object's name. The result is a remarkably sturdy object, which could be dropped without damaging it; a minimum requirement, it seems, for any device used by young children.

Surviving hornbooks show that they were also used to teach adding and subtracting. The one seen in [Figure 88](#), which dates from the eighteenth century and measures 28 cm × 18 cm, has a nifty add-on to this end: an abacus, which is mounted on top. This particular specimen shows the end of the hornbook's development, which appears to have become more sophisticated over time. The hornbook in [Figure 88](#) contains another novel feature: the sheet of paper can be removed from behind the horn and reversed, or replaced by another sheet.

While hornbooks could also be made out of other materials, such as ivory or lead, one particularly unusual type is worth mentioning: a wooden mould survives that was used to produce a gingerbread version of the hornbook, handle and all (New York, Columbia University Library, RBML Plimpton Hornbook 20).¹ The tradition of this particularly tasty hornbook goes back to the eighteenth century. The English poet Matthew Prior (d. 1721) mentions it in one of his poems:

To Master John the English maid
A horn-book gives of ginger-bread
And that the Child may learn the better,
As he can name, he eats the letter;
Proceeding thus with vast delight,
He spells, and gnaws from left to right.²

The gingerbread hornbook arguably wins the prize for best pedagogical tool: what better reward for a pupil than to eat the letter successfully read aloud?

Medieval Period

While the heyday of the hornbook was no doubt the Early Modern period, the bookish device was also used during the Middle Ages. Although, unfortunately,

¹ See Columbia University Libraries' Online Exhibition "Our Tools of Learning": George Arthur Plimpton's Gifts to Columbia University, at <https://exhibitions.cul.columbia.edu/exhibits/show/plimpton/hornbooks>.

² Prior, *The Poems of Matthew Prior*, Vol. 1, p. 211.



Figure 88. Hornbook with abacus, eighteenth century. Washington, Library of Congress, Z1033.H8 W6 1800z. CC0 1.0 Universal. Source: <https://lccn.loc.gov/2007700160>.

none survive, there is sufficient visual evidence to support this claim. The oldest known scene that includes a hornbook is an Italian manuscript with an unidentified devotional text about the life of Mary, the mother of Christ (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Canon. Misc. 476, fol. 47v). Based on its script, the manuscript's



Figure 89. Hornbook in action, fifteenth century. New York, Columbia University Library, Plimpton 184, fol. 10v, detail. With permission.

production date can be placed around the middle of the fourteenth century.³ The image shows Christ being brought to school by his mother. He is bringing his “text-book” with him to class: a hornbook, which dangles from his wrist by a string. (Surviving Early Modern specimens have a hole in the handle, probably to accommodate a similar manner of transportation.) While confirming that the hornbook is a medieval invention, intriguingly, we are also shown how young children carried their reading material to school.

The second visual evidence from the medieval period takes us to Germany in the 1440s–1460s. It concerns a scene in New York, Columbia University Library, Plimpton 184 (Figure 89) showing an allegory involving Algorism (who is the

³ MS Canon. Misc. 476 has been digitized by Oxford’s Bodleian Library, and can be found by searching for its shelfmark on their Luna Catalogue at <http://bodley30.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:8180/luna/servlet>.

teacher) and his pupil. Holding a hornbook displaying Arabic numerals, *Algorism* states (according to the text bubble in Eastern Upper German): “Ich pin algorismus genant | das raitt(e)n han ich in mein|ner hant” (My name is *Algorismus* and / I carry the reckoning tablet in my hand).⁴ (Note that in this image, too, a string is visible at the end of the stick.) While this illustration was produced somewhat later than the Italian example discussed before, the setting in which the hornbook was used is the same: an educational environment where basic information about letters and digits is conveyed to young pupils. As with learning the ABC from eighteenth-century hornbooks, the device they were holding was perfectly suited for this task.

While the hornbook may defy our definition of “book,” its design is as functional as regular manuscripts. Moreover, it emphasizes how much the objects we use for reading—then and today—were designed to accommodate the needs of our human bodies as we read. Regular books can be kept open with ease by applying gentle pressure on the outer margins of the pages. Release the pressure with your right hand and a page lifts up in the air, just enough to be conveniently flipped. The hornbook may not have pages, but its design works perfectly for the purpose for which it was made: handheld use. It is light and durable, both essential features of a device used by children, and it has a handle that enables the user to hold the text up, close to the eyes. The object may look a bit strange, but its design is both clever and, in many ways, timeless.

⁴ The citation of the German is taken (and slightly amended) from the manuscript description that can be found by searching for its shelfmark in Digital Scriptorium’s catalogue at <http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/digitalscriptorium>. The correction in the second line (*hav* > *han*) is by Nigel Palmer (Oxford), who also localized the language and provided the translation.



Chapter 22

SLIPS, STRIPS, AND SCRAPS: MESSAGING

Leaving the world of actual and “almost” books behind, the concluding four chapters of this section deal with artifacts that have a casual relationship to manuscripts, but an evident affiliation to written culture. The present chapter and the next deal with flat materials of small proportions cut from larger sheets or lifted from the recycling bin. Because of their cheap (or even free) nature, many of the slips, strips, and scraps discussed here are ephemeral and written hastily: they were meant to be read and thrown out. Yet, fortunately for us, they were not. The text on them is often written in a special language of short and abbreviated words, and it was probably understood that they may contain “typos.” The speed, short lifespan and cursory nature of the artifacts discussed here are familiar to us today: we send each other short, hastily written messages all day, and they are notoriously filled with abbreviations and typos. And we, too, use small, redundant scrap materials for drafting short lists and notes intended to have a short lifespan. This chapter observes the historical roots of this practice, while the next one explores another, more scholarly use for such slips.

Roots

Ephemeral written culture predates the Middle Ages. Early surviving examples are wooden tablets that were written on almost two thousand years ago, between 97 and 103 CE. The tablets were dug up in a Roman army camp called Vindolanda just south of Hadrian’s Wall in Northern England, and they now rest in the British Museum. Some four hundred wooden tablets with correspondence were found in the house of Flavius Cerealis, prefect of the Ninth Cohort of Batavians. Remarkably,

Figure 90. Medieval and Early Modern waste material, fourteenth to eighteenth centuries. Maastricht, Regionaal Historisch Centrum Limburg, Box 384.

Photo by the author.



Figure 91. Vindolanda tablet with birthday invitation, 97–103 CE. London, British Museum, 1986, 1001.64 (= Tab. Vindol. II 291). CC BY-SA 3.0. Source: Wikimedia Commons (Photo by Fae).

the Vindolanda tablets are only 1–3 mm thick and about the size of a modern postcard. An especially charming and personal one is Tab. Vindol. II 291 (Figure 91). It invites the commander's wife, Sulpicia Lepidina, to her sister's birthday party at a neighbouring fort. Claudia Severa writes:

On 11 September, sister, for the day of the celebration of my birthday, I give you a warm invitation to make sure that you come to us, to make the day more enjoyable for me by your arrival, if you are present. Give my greetings to your Cerialis. My Aelius and my little son send him their greetings. Farewell, sister my dearest soul, as I hope to prosper, and hail.

Astonishingly, with this tiny object of about 22 cm wide we have in our hands a two-millennia-old text message sent from one sister to another, concerning a matter as routine but personal as a birthday party. As scholars have remarked, this tablet holds one of the oldest surviving specimens of a woman's handwriting.¹

Produced with wooden pens with stuck-on nibs, the four hundred surviving Vindolanda tablets also include correspondence from the field, probably sent by courier. The sub-commander Masculus writes to Flavius Cerealis, his superior: "Please, my lord, give instructions as to what you want us to have done tomorrow. Are we to return with the standard to the crossroads all together or [only half of us? Also,] my fellow soldiers have no beer. Please order some to be sent" (Tab. Vindol. III 628).² This oldest known order for beer was no doubt meant

¹ Information and citation from the British Museum's Collection online (search for the inventory number, 1986,1001.64, at www.britishmuseum.org).

² Cuff, "King of the Batavians."

to be thrown out, yet it survives because the earth preserved the wood on which it was written.

Paper Slips

Similar short logistical messages survive from the Middle Ages, although their manner of survival is different. [Figure 93](#) shows waste material discovered by my students in Leiden University's Book and Digital Media Studies programme. A total of 132 paper slips were pressed together to form a sort of papier-mâché "card-board" which was used to support (and be covered with) the leather of the book-binding ([Figure 92](#) shows merely a selection of the slips). The material originates from quite an unusual place: the recycling bin of a small court near Heidelberg. It concerns ephemeral material that is generally lost from the Middle Ages, such as letters and scrap paper.

A particularly interesting category is the equivalent to our modern-day "yellow sticky notes": strips of paper that were sent from one servant to another. For example, one note in the pile requests that wild roses be purchased in Heidelberg, while making sure "to include some that are still in bud." The note was written on behalf of Philip, Count Palatine of the Rhine (d. 1508), and we may assume that the other recycled materials in this archive are also affiliated to his court.

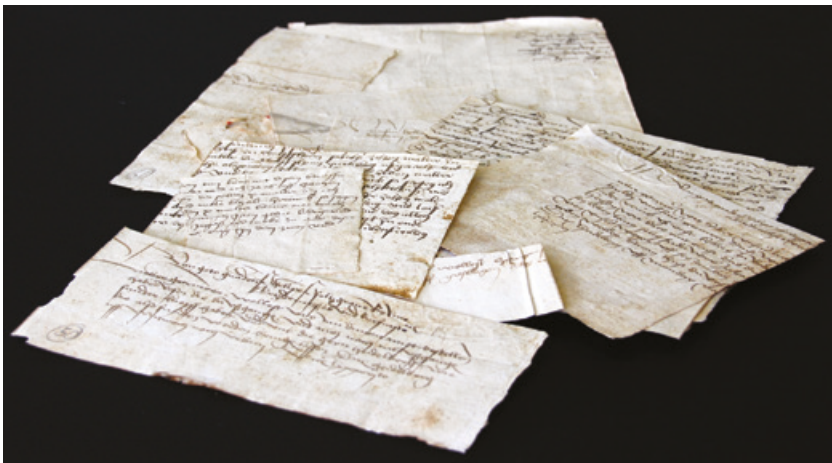
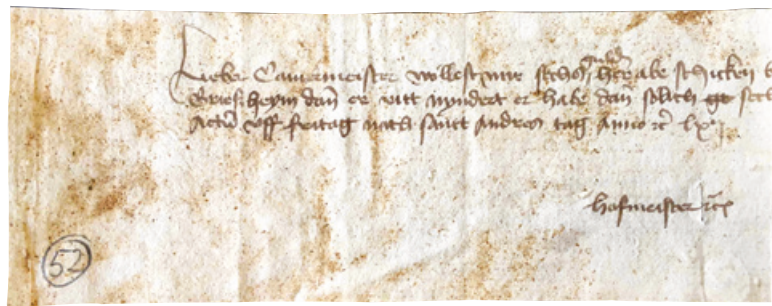


Figure 92. Part of archive found in bookbinding, fifteenth century. Leiden, Bibliotheca Thysiana, Inv. Nr. 2200 H. Photo by the author.

(a)



(b)

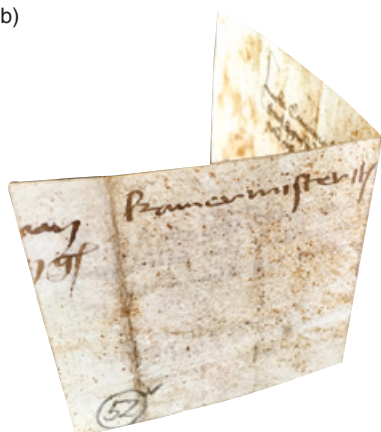


Figure 93. (a) Recto side, showing inside of note, asking chamberlain to fetch money; (b) Verso side, identifying the recipient: “kamermeister” (chamberlain), fifteenth century. Leiden, Bibliotheca Thysiana, Inv. Nr. 2200 H, item 52. Photos by the author.

Another message was written by the housemaster (“hofmeister etc.”) and it requests the amount of six guilders from the duke, whose servant, the “Camermeister” or chamberlain, is the recipient of the message (Figure 93a):

Lieber Camermeister, wollest mir sechs gulden her abe schicken b[...]
 Griessheym dann er uitt nyndert er habe dann solich ge sech[s] ...
 Actum uff fritag nach sanct Andres tag anno etc. [14]61.
 hofmeister etc.³

3 Transcription by Ed van der Vlist (Royal Library The Hague).

The note was cut on the right side, which makes it impossible to provide a full transcription and gauge its precise meaning besides the request for money, which was apparently for somebody from Griesheim, a city a few kilometres to the west of Darmstadt in Germany.

The back of the message (Figure 93b) also adds to our understanding of this hidden world of medieval text messaging. It shows to whom the note needed to be delivered (the “kamermister”), but also that it was folded for transportation. Even today the slip still wants to take on the form of a folded message, as if the paper has muscle memory. Many of these slips were produced from recycled charters or account books. The messages were either written on their back, or on a strip that was cut from their margin, as is visible in on the back of the note in Figure 92b: note the half-words next to the word “kamermister.” Why use a good sheet of paper if the message would be discarded immediately after use?

Time Capsule

The Vindolanda tablets and the medieval slips in Leiden form a time capsule in that they preserve ordinary conversations that do not normally survive from the past. We meet everyday people doing everyday things. Their manner of expressing themselves is untainted in that they do not try to be literary or witty, but merely convey a brief and routine message for short-term use and, ultimately, destruction. It makes perfect sense, therefore, that these “text messages” were written on surfaces that were easily available: pieces of wood and slips of waste paper from the recycling bin.

While the caches from Vindolanda and Leiden are remarkable, there are actually plenty of time capsules still out there. The average archive in Europe contains several boxes filled with medieval waste, which usually includes a wide range of recycled “transitory” material, such as letters and notes (Figure 90 at p. 176). The material seen here has never been studied systematically, nor, does it seem, have most comparable scraps. If such paper and parchment slips are the medieval equivalent of today’s text messages, written in a cursory fashion and forgotten about almost immediately after receipt, these archival boxes are not unlike our phones’ memories. They allow us to read conversations meant to be deleted hundreds of years ago.

Subsistentia aut unus cuiusq; psonae hoc ipsum qd ex
stat et subsistat ostendat. Ideoq; ppter sabellum. Sim
tres ee subsistentias constituendas qd quasi tres subsistentes
psonas significare uideretur. Candidus

Indagandum quid e essentia & essentialitas quid existentia
et existentialitas quid substantia et quid substantialitas
sed aliud et aliud non recipitur circa eadē non it. in alio ut
aliud est. ut accedens in subiecto. Differt aut existentia ab
existentialitate qm existentia iam in eo est ut sit ei esse. at
vero existentialitas potentia est ut possit esse. nondū est. ipsū
esse. Multo aut magis existentia a substantia differt. qm exis
tentia ipsum ee est & solum esse. & non in alio esse. aut
subiectū alterius. sed unū et solū ipsum esse. Substanti
a aut non ee solū habet sed & quale aliquid esse
subiacenti in se positis qualitatib; & idcirco di
citur subiectum. ON. substantia dicitur ON
TOT HC. substantialitas. quae post gen
tas ab existentia & existentialita
te. deus aut ipse est unū & so

Chapter 23

SLIPS, STRIPS, AND SCRAPS: SCHOLARLY NOTES

While the medieval examples of ephemeral artifacts discussed in [Chapter 22](#) involved paper, other examples, explored here, were made from parchment. In the Middle Ages, such slips were called *schedulae* (singular *schedula*). The ones discussed here were in essence the by-product of parchment production. While the waste material became used for the production of small books, which can be recognized by their uneven pages ([Figure 94](#)) and translucent patches (see [Figure 4](#) at p. 9), the scraps were particularly popular for note-taking.¹ Before exploring a rare surviving scholarly note that I happened upon by chance in the collections of Leiden University Library, let's first explore how the material itself came to be.

From Skin to Parchment

In order to make an animal skin into parchment, it needed (among other steps) to be stretched taut on a frame. This stretching, combined with the natural shape of the animal's body, resulted in very uneven edges. The longer sides were slightly narrower in the middle where the animal's stomach had been, which gave them an elongated dent, while the shorter sides had various smaller dents around the locations where the head, tail, and legs had been. The edges needed to be removed to make a tidy sheet to write on. What was left over when this job was

¹ For the use of offcuts, see Kwakkel, "Discarded Parchment" (note-taking at pp. 243–44). Kwakkel, "Classics on Scraps" presents a case study of classical manuscripts produced from offcuts.

Figure 94. Manuscript made from offcuts, showing uneven edge of page and discolouration, ca. 1000–1025. Leiden, UB, VLO 92, fol. 124r. With permission.

done were small pieces of parchment, called offcuts (see [Figure 94](#) and the General Introduction, p. 8).

The strips were not only deemed unsuitable for book-making because of their odd size (long and skinny), but they were also riddled with deficiencies, such as stains, discolouration, and translucent patches, either by virtue of their location on the animal's body, or because of the stretching process. Unwieldy as they were, such "offcuts" were primarily acceptable for texts of limited length that did not need to look spiffy, such as notes, short draft texts, letters, horoscopes, wills, or addenda attached to charters.² When used as a writing support, offcuts have an informal air about them, which is also reflected by the grade of script with which they are filled. The texts are often written down in a cursive hand or in a book hand with a cursive element, showing that they were copied at high speed.

The casual appearance of the offcut matches the nature of the texts they hold: notes and drafts, and even letters, none of which were usually made to be kept permanently. This is why it was not seen as a problem to use scrap materials, although the small dimensions of the parchment offcuts did pose a particular problem for the letter writer: they had to be brief. Both Anselm of Bec and Bernard of Clairvaux apologize for the brevity of their letters: they would have loved to have written more, but were unable to. Knowing the materials they had to work with, we can perhaps guess why. Charles of Orléans states it even more plainly in one of his letters: "For lack of space, I am writing no more to you."³ We have to take this very literally.

Scholarly Note

The ironic thing is, of course, that because they were intended to have short lives, offcuts that do survive are valuable. They shed light, after all, into corners of medieval written culture that have remained dark. A good example is a parchment strip of 5 cm × 10 cm discovered in Leiden University Library ([Figure 95](#)). The Leiden *schedula* is filled with notes made by a person affiliated to a medieval university. The text on the upper half of the scrap can be dated to the second half of the thirteenth century, while the lower part, written by a different person, is from ca. 1300. The slip was folded in the manuscript and the second writer was probably a later owner of the manuscript who added text to an existing note.

² Kwakkel, "Discarded Parchment."

³ Kwakkel, "Discarded Parchment," p. 243.

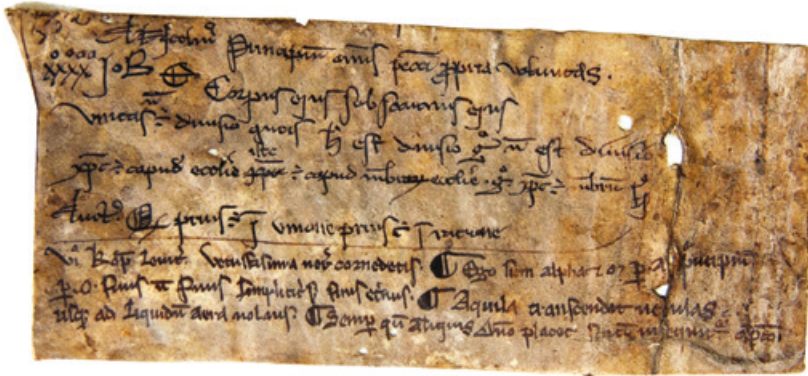


Figure 95. Parchment strip with notes, thirteenth century. Leiden, UB, BPL 191 D, unfoliated. Photo by Giulio Menna.

We can envision the scholar (perhaps it was a student?) pondering various themes that were popular at a thirteenth-century university. According to his notes, he is sparring with the notion of *propria voluntas* (self-will or personal choice) and how it relates to sin. We can also see how the student might have been struggling to keep up with his teacher's lecture; he wrote at high speed in a cursive hand and used many abbreviations. What it shows us is a welcome addition to what we already know about note-taking from primary sources. *De disciplina scholarum*, a study manual written by Pseudo-Boethius made in Paris in the 1230s, advises that students bring such *schedulae* with them to class for note-taking. Evidence suggests that the strips were kept with the textbook, folded into the quires like the Leiden specimen.

The Leiden scrap is right at home in the manuscript to which it is now appended. The host codex is dense with texts used in education, most of which are also heavily glossed. The most notable of these texts, the first in the manuscript, is the very study manual by Pseudo-Boethius that prescribes the use of *schedulae* for note-taking. Evidently, the users who filled this tiny parchment strip took the advice in that manual to heart.

Tradition

The tradition of using scrap material for taking notes (and subsequently sticking the note in the book) took off in the thirteenth century. Browsing through scholastic (that is, university) books from that period reveals these stowaways from time to time. The tradition was continued, however, into the age of paper (Figure 96).

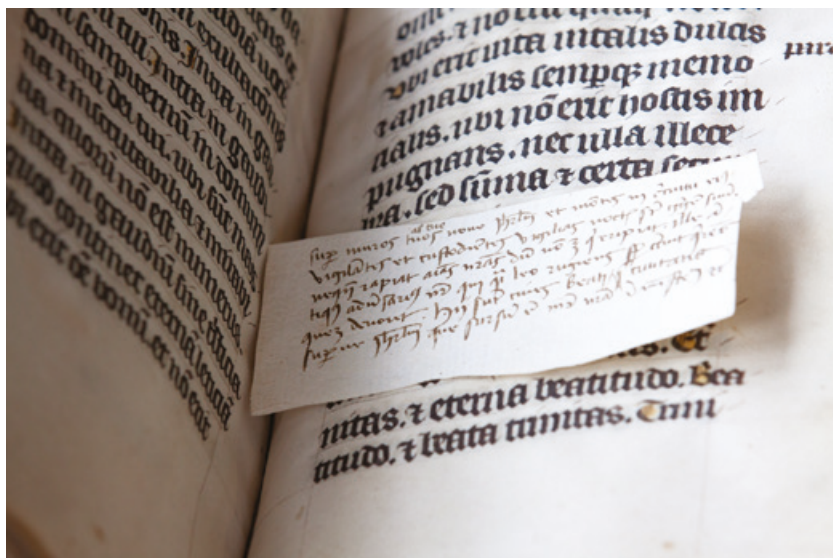


Figure 96. Paper strip with annotation, fifteenth century. Leiden, UB, BPL 139 unfoliated. Photo by Giulio Menna.

This material came into common use during the fourteenth century, and during the production of paper books there were sometimes scraps left over (blank parts were sometimes cut from partly failed leaves), though not as systematically as in the production of parchment manuscripts. These paper leftovers were perfect for taking notes. Just like its parchment counterparts, the paper slip in Figure 96 has uneven edges (right side and bottom), which suggests that it, too, was a leftover from another job. The note is filled with text written in a quick cursive script and it is riddled with abbreviations: it was no doubt jotted down for personal and short-term use by the student or scholar who wrote it. Notably, the use of these paper strips is comparable to our modern use of scraps of paper fished out of the blue recycling bin: any snippet will do, even if it looks a bit scruffy, as long as it has a blank surface.

33
H ons is en kint an ghecomē souden maem
des sonnensdax vaer synre pieter's dach
ad vinctula en vj gietten pieter
mit iacq rō en ii- en was gheleit in
onsser vrouwen kerck onder een bank

14 ons is en kint an ghecomē dach
na synre vyllichoets dach d pē end tye
in synre pieter's kerck by synre kerkrecht
outen end hadde en kint by hem
dat dat pieter souden gieten end was
en nukenen kint

15 ons is en kint an ghecomē saterdachs vreesing
katerinen dach dē 20^e in 17^e wort gheleit dē vreesing
in onsser vrouwen kerck en was out ontant
in 17^e

Ons is en kint an ghecomē gē op dē gheleken
an dē dach an dē 20^e in 17^e en synre maem ja 17^e
in dē herten an dē gheleken an dē 20^e in 17^e
maem by hem en hadde dach dē 20^e in 17^e

Chapter 24

MEDIEVAL NAME TAGS

Extending the discussion of small ephemeral slips in the previous chapters, the focus remains on tiny objects that are not supposed to exist anymore. Kept in the massive vault of the regional archives in Leiden (*Erfgoed Leiden en Omstreken*), these tiny slips tell a powerful story. In fact, more than in any other medieval document I have encountered, no more personal and intimate view of medieval life is offered than the small name tags discussed here. A fair warning is appropriate, however; make sure you have a tissue at hand.

Name Tags

These fifteenth-century strips are written in Middle Dutch and are part of the archive of the medieval Holy Spirit Orphanage (Heilige Geest- of Arme Wees- en Kinderhuis) in the city of Leiden.¹ Founded in 1316, the orphanage was connected to the parish of St. Peter, and was in operation until the 1980s. The building survives and is situated less than a hundred metres from the massive Church of St. Peter (Hooglandse Kerk), which can be seen towering over the city from miles away. Until the middle of the twentieth century, the charitable organization was responsible for the care of foundlings and children.

The paper slips, some of which are as small as 1 cm × 3 cm, add a real-world dimension to what we know about medieval orphanages. The example shown

¹ For a history of the orphanage (including a brief discussion of the name tags), see van der Wiel, *"Dit kint hiet Willem."*

Figure 97. Booklet describing intake of foundlings, dated 1502. Erfgoed Leiden en Omstreken, HGW, Archiefnr. 519, Inv. nr. 3384. Photo by the author.

here reads: “This child’s name is William” (*“Dit kint hiet Willem,”* Figure 98). Each slip shows a pair of holes as well as the indent of a pin, which explains what we are looking at: name tags pinned on a foundling’s clothing as they entered the orphanage. As far as I know, this is the only surviving collection of medieval name tags, and it is a mystery why they were kept in the orphanage’s archive for five centuries.

Who Wrote Them?

The tag collection can be divided into two categories. Some were probably written by one of the masters of the orphanage. The one seen in Figure 98, for example, is done by an experienced, professional hand. Others, however, are written in a less

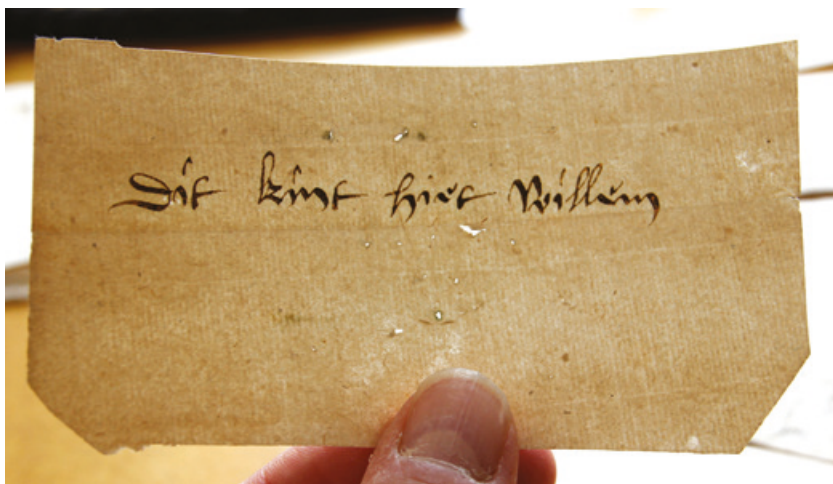


Figure 98. Name tag of foundling “Willem,” fifteenth century. Leiden, Erfgoed Leiden en Omstreken, HGW, Archiefnr. 519, Inv. nr. 3384. Photo by the author.

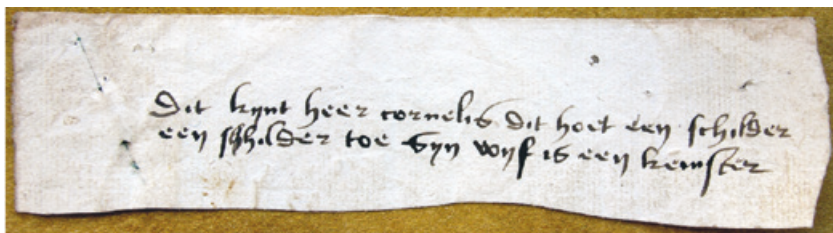


Figure 99. Name tag of foundling “Cornelius,” fifteenth century. Leiden, Erfgoed Leiden en Omstreken, HGW, Archiefnr. 519, Inv. nr. 3384. Photo by the author.

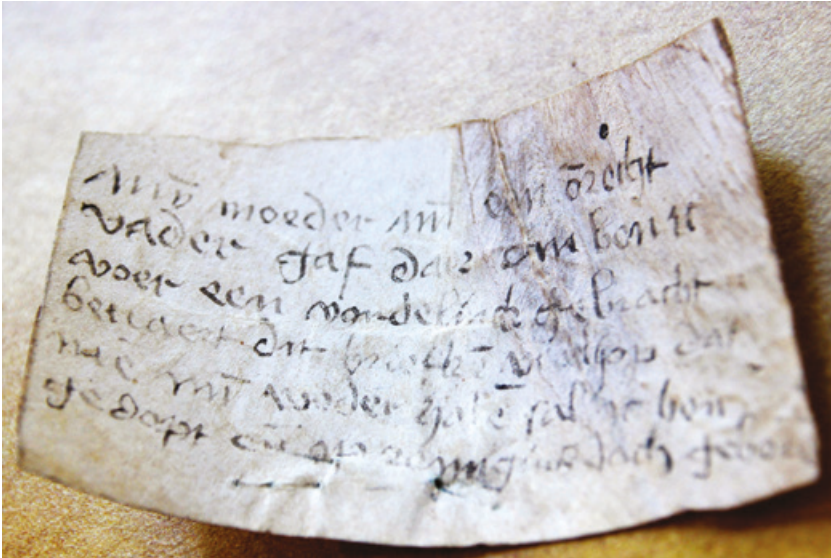


Figure 100. Name tag of anonymous foundling, fifteenth century. Leiden, Erfgoed Leiden en Omstreken, HGW, Archiefnr. 519, Inv. nr. 3384. Photo by the author.

experienced hand, less accustomed to writing. These were probably written by the children's parents. This is supported by the observation that these tags provide more details about the child.

The one in [Figure 99](#) (again with a clear pin mark) reads: "This child is called Cornelius and belongs to a painter whose wife is a wool comber" (*"Dit kijnt heet cornelis dit hoet een schilder een schilder toe zijn wijf is een kemster"*). On another tag we read "This child is baptized and her name is Mariken" (*"Dijt kijnt is ghekorstent ende haerren name is mariken"*). Both show how some children—whether found in the street or dropped off at the orphanage—entered the orphanage with some family history literally attached to them.

The only parchment tag among these paper scraps provides a particularly detailed history ([Figure 100](#)). It reads "My mother gave me an illegal father, which is why I was brought here as a foundling. Keep this note so that they can pick me up again later. I was baptized and born on St. Remigius Day" (*"Mijn moeder min een onrecht vader gaf daer om ben ic voer een vondelinck gebracht, bewaert dit briefken v[...] opdat nae min weder halen sal ic ben gedopt ende op Remigius dach geboren"*). As in the case of the scrap in [Figure 99](#), the information on this note was most likely to have been provided by the parents, probably as they dropped off their child.

Accompanying Booklet

The paper slips are kept together with a booklet of ca. 1500, in which they may, in fact, have travelled through time (Figure 97 at p. 188). The title on the booklet's first page tells us what we are dealing with: "The Child Book: How the Children Came Here" (*"Item dat kinderboock hoe dat die kinder hier ghecomen sijen"*). The booklet confirms the origins of the slips: they were indeed attached to the orphans. An entry for the year 1510 reports, "A child came into our care the day after St. Willebrord's day in the year 1510 in St. Peter's Church at the altar of St. Hubrecht and he had a note with him stating that his name was Peter. He was a newborn child" (*"Item ons is een kynt anghecomen daechs na Synte Wylleboerts dach anno [1510] in Synte pyters kerc by synte hubrecht outer ende hadde een brief by hem dat dat pyeter soude hyeten ende was een nuboren kynt"*).

The booklet forms the counterpart to the labels, for it registers the orphans and provides information about the location where they were found. We may presume that the foundlings entered the house, often as babies, were tagged, and were then processed for care. However, the entries in the book also contain brief reports from people who found these children in public spaces and came by to drop them off at the orphanage. The stories on the fifty-odd pages are truly heartbreaking.

The top entry of page 33 features the following entry (Figure 97, p. 188):

Item, a child came into our care without a name on the Thursday before the feast of St. Peter in Chains. And we named him Peter, in the year 1502, for he was found in the Church of Our Lady under a bench

(Item ons is en kijnt an ghekoemen sonder naem des donnersdach voer sijnte pieters dach ad vynckula ende vij hietten pieter int jaer 1502 ende vas gheleit in onsser vrouwen kerc onder een banck)

On page 7 a story with an unhappy ending is penned by two scribes under the heading "anonymous" (*sonder naem*). The first writes "Item, a child was found in the Church of St. Peter and we named him Luke, on the Sunday before St. Luke [18 October] in the year 1491. He looked like a newborn child to us, and he had been placed on the altar of St. Agnes." A second scribe, using a slightly browner ink, added a short line, sometime later: "Luke died around St. Catharine's Day [November 25] in the same year." (Scribe 1: *"Item een kijnt ende vas ghevonden in sinte pieters kerc ende wij hietent Lucas op die zonnendach voer sinte Lucas anno 1491 ende was een nuo borun kijnt als ons dachten ende lach op sinte aegten altaer."* Scribe 2: *"Lucas starf omtrent sinte katrinen dach actum voerseit."*) The second scribe then crossed out the entry in the register.

These narratives form a powerful accompaniment to the paper slips. They report how and where the foundlings were found, and when they came to the

orphanage with paper name tags pinned to their clothes. Handling the paper slips in the archives is a touching experience: to think that they were made for the sole purpose of providing information about a child whose life was about to change dramatically. The handwriting underscores the emotions that must have been felt by the parents: the text is written in a scruffy manner, often with mistakes in spelling and grammar. For them it must have been a difficult task to write down these mini histories, in more ways than one.

Where thou shalt of all manner of breade of what cōtyme of coene forer of be. It shall waue after the forthcome two left. The fourth shall waue left the the waile. y. because of the forerage. And the forthcome right left shall waue more then the waile because of the forerage. **W**here the halthe breade waite left shall waue in the waile white leaue. And the waile leaue of all manner of coene y. halthe breade white leaue shall waue. And the waile shall followe in euery waile for bakinge for coene and for waueing. **W**here the waile men and the forer. **W**here y. ob. for salt ob. for Ester. ob. for candle ob. a be the waile ob. and y. waile to the waile. **W**here

Chapter 25

POSTERS BEFORE PRINT

We remain in the realm of flat objects, albeit those under scrutiny now are quite a bit larger than the tiny pieces of parchment and paper explored in previous chapters. In the Middle Ages words were not just written in books and on small paper or parchment slips, but also on full—*plano*—parchment skins: the full animal skin was the largest writing surface available in medieval written culture. Many of these “posters” were produced to be mounted on walls. While very few survive, and even fewer in one piece, they show how (and what) information was put on public display, both indoors and outside.

Advertisements

Commercial scribes and Early Modern printers marketed their goods and services in order to draw a crowd to their shops. In [Chapter 6](#) we encountered the commercial scribe Herneis, who tried to lure clients into his bookshop by adding spam to the books he produced. He identified the street where he was situated: Rue Neuve Notre Dame. Parisians would go to this street for their French books, whether to buy them or to have them decorated or bound. For Latin manuscripts they went to the Rue St. Jacques, in the Latin Quarter, where students and teachers lived.

Because medieval tradespeople kept their shops in the same neighbourhood as other artisans of the same craft, customers knew precisely where to go when they needed a book, a candle, a good chair—or all three, the perfect combination.

Figure 101. Full skin with regulations for bread-making in Winchester, England, sixteenth century. Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Libraries, LJS 238. Public domain. Source: www.openn.library.upenn.edu.



Figure 102. Advertisement sheet of professional scribe Herman Strepel, ca. 1447.
The Hague, KB, 76 D 45 Nr. 4A-B. With permission.

In Brussels the commercial booksellers, scribes, and decorators were situated in the Bergstraat (or Rue Montagne). The street is strategically situated across from the city's cathedral, which is a location preferred by book artisans in other cities as well.¹ The canons of the cathedral chapter, as well as many of its visitors, could read and were, therefore, potential clients. This location-sharing by people selling the same goods also presented a problem: how to convince the reader to step into *your* shop and not your neighbour's. This is where the first poster comes in: the advertisement sheet (Figure 102).

This fragment was once part of a much larger sheet, which displayed many different types of scripts (The Hague, KB, 76 D 45 Nr. 4A). Another fragment from the same sheet also survives (Nr. 4B). Given that each fragment measures 25 cm × 33 cm, the full sheet must have been quite large. The poster states that it was made by Herman Strepel, probably of Münster. With this poster, Strepel could show off to his potential clientele how well he could write and just how many different scripts

¹ Kwakkel, "Dit zijn die Dietsche boeke," pp. 170–71 (Brussels) and 165n134 (examples of other cities).

he had mastered. Like a good businessman, he displayed the names of the scripts in gold: how can you resist ordering a book written in such pretty letters?

The back of such advertisement sheets are generally empty and in some cases their corners display rust-edged holes, which suggests they were pinned to a wall, like a menu in a fast-food restaurant today. A German sheet from 1516 invites the beholder to “come in,” showing that this particular sheet acted as a mini window display outside the shop. Because such sheets also presented the names of the scripts, the client could simply enter and tell the scribe in what kind of script he wanted his book to be copied, for example in *fracta*, *rotunda*, or *modus copiistarum* (Figure 19 may show such a transaction between a commercial scribe and his client).² These posters show just how advanced the book trade was even before the invention of print: a jargon had emerged that united artisans and connected clients to commercial makers of books.

Maps

Another kind of poster is the wall map, though these, too, survive in small numbers. Perhaps the best-known specimen is the Hereford Mappa Mundi, which was produced around 1300 and measures an astonishing 1.59×1.34 metres (about 5.25×4.25 feet). This particular map was first put on display in Hereford Cathedral for the benefit of pilgrims, although references suggest that by the seventeenth century it was placed in the library, perhaps so it could be consulted for study purposes. The map contains over a thousand inscriptions and legends, such as that of the Mandrake, the creature immortalized by the Harry Potter series. The Hereford map is thought to have been made of a single sheet, but this is simply not possible.³ As an inventory of skins has shown, animals used for the production of manuscripts in northwest Europe (mostly cows) usually measured around $68 \text{ cm} \times 48 \text{ cm}$, while the largest specimens measured around $80 \text{ cm} \times 56 \text{ cm}$.⁴

Much larger than the Hereford specimen is the older Ebstorf Mappa Mundi, which measured 3.6×3.6 metres and was produced in the late thirteenth century. This beast of a poster, which would cover a full wall in a modern bedroom, was produced from the skins of no fewer than thirty goats. The Ebstorf map, which was sadly lost in the Allied bombing of Hanover in October 1943, was produced for contemplative purposes for the inhabitants of the Benedictine nunnery of

² For advertisement sheets, see Wehmer, “Die Schreibmeisterblätter,” quotation at p. 154.

³ A dedicated website for the Hereford map is found at www.themappamundi.co.uk. The single-sheet claim is found here, among other places.

⁴ Gumbert, “Sizes and Formats,” p. 236 (n. 17 for disputing sizes over 80 cm in height).

Ebstorf. It allowed the beholder to observe God's creation, the world, in all its details. Thankfully a full-size facsimile was made before its destruction, allowing this enormous map to live on in kind.⁵

Wall Catalogues and Inventories

Surviving artifacts highlight the existence of a third category of medieval posters: library catalogues and inventories. Again, these are fairly large sheets, sometimes composed of several animal skins. The information on these posters is of a most practical kind, given that it showed readers where in the library they could find copies of certain texts. The catalogue was one of a series of instruments that helped readers find their way around the collection of books in the monastery.

The poster in [Figure 103](#) dates from ca. 1500 and originally measured 80 cm × 59 cm. It displays the books present in the library of the Abbey of St. Jerome (known as “Lopsen”), a community in the Congregation of Windesheim situated on the outskirts of Leiden. Considering the holes in its corners and its blank verso, it was apparently pinned to the wall, probably in the library. The inventory is divided into categories, such as *libri refectoriales* (books read during meals) and *libri devoti et utiles* (books for personal spiritual development). Within these categories books are numbered with Roman numerals. This is clearly an inventory more than a catalogue. The absence of proper shelfmarks, like the ones discussed in [Chapter 17](#), meant the reader or librarian had to hunt for the copy they sought when they arrived at the lectern that held a certain category of books. Even if the copies in this particular library were fitted with a title shield (see pp. 89–90), effort was still required to track them down.

Regulations

The final poster artifact discussed here is a sixteenth-century government document from the city of Winchester, England ([Figure 101](#) at p. 194). Under the heading “The statute of wynchestre” it provides detailed regulations for bread-making in the city. The document, now kept at the University of Pennsylvania Libraries as LJS 238, gives prescribed weights and costs for bread loaves produced from different grades of wheat, namely “quarter symnell” (the finest bread you

5 A searchable digital facsimile of the Ebstorf Mappa Mundi (Ebstorfer Weltkarte) is hosted online by Leuphana Universität Lüneburg at www2.leuphana.de/ebskart/ (in German).

could buy in medieval England), “farthing wastel,” “white lofe,” “wheten lof,” and “household lof.”⁶ These categories are found in columns 2 through 5. The different breads are depicted above the relevant column (faintly visible in the image), while the first column shows a bag of grain.

Like the other specimens discussed in this chapter, the regulations were written on parchment. This material was ideally suited for displaying information on a wall: it was durable, it could handle moisture, and the full skin provided a more or less poster-sized format. Even though the Statutes of Winchester poster is smaller than the other examples (it measures 44 cm × 34 cm), the oddly shaped corners at the top of the statutes show that a full skin was used for its production. This narrower part of the parchment sheet was once the base of the animal’s neck, an uneven area that was usually cut off. As described in [Chapter 23](#), these offcuts and slips could subsequently be used to take down notes. For these regulations, however, this part of the skin remained in place because it was perfectly shaped to hold the clarifying prose that needed to be part of this medieval poster.

⁶ LJS 238 has been digitized by the University of Pennsylvania Libraries and can be found in its Lawrence J. Schoenberg Manuscripts online repository at <http://openn.library.upenn.edu/Data/0001/html/ljs238.html>, from which these details are gathered, together with Devine, “Food for Thought,” *Unique at Penn* (blog), <https://uniqueatpenn.wordpress.com/2013/04/08/food-for-thought>.

Figure 103 (overleaf). Book inventory placed on wall in library of St. Jerome Abbey, Leiden, ca. 1500 (recycled as book cover). Leiden, Erfgoed Leiden en Omstreken, Kloosters 885 Inv. Nr. 208A. With permission.

[Faint handwritten text from another page, likely bleed-through or adjacent folio.]

Ἰἄβι βῆ ἀγγυλίου ἐπὶ πυρὸς ἑστῆ.

[illegible]

ij. *De uisitatione marie*
 iij. *De nativitate marie*
 iij. *De assumptione marie*
 iij. *De dormitione marie*
 iij. *De resurrectione marie*
 iij. *De ascensione marie*
 iij. *De transfiguratione marie*
 iij. *De glorificatione marie*
 iij. *De coronatione marie*
 iij. *De uisitatione marie*
 iij. *De nativitate marie*
 iij. *De assumptione marie*
 iij. *De dormitione marie*
 iij. *De resurrectione marie*
 iij. *De ascensione marie*
 iij. *De transfiguratione marie*
 iij. *De glorificatione marie*
 iij. *De coronatione marie*

¶ Sup. exequatur. r. m.
 ¶ Sup. quibus paula. n. certu.
 ¶ Sup. pfallerit. m. m. l. v. r.
 ¶ Sup. alios. i. p. m. l. v. r. v. r. r. r. r.
 ¶
 ¶
 ¶

[illegible]

De diuina potestate et ratione conceptus.
 ij. Sup. cantica amaron.
 iij. Sup. Quid est ubi. mare. et
 iiii. De statu iherosol. hie. et
 v. De spino nabugodonosor. et.
 vi. Sup. psalmi. Afferre. et alijs.
 vii. De constitutione iherosol.
 viii. De trinitate. et sup. anse hyddes rex.
 ix. De p. apocalypsin.
 x.
 xi.
 xii.

1. Ethimolegari liba viginti.
 4. De summo tino, liba tres.
 11. Aug. eius testamenti. Interpretationes.
 11. Sup. ceteris rationibus.
 15. Ad florentinā sorore suā liba duo.
 ut
 vij
 om

[illegible]

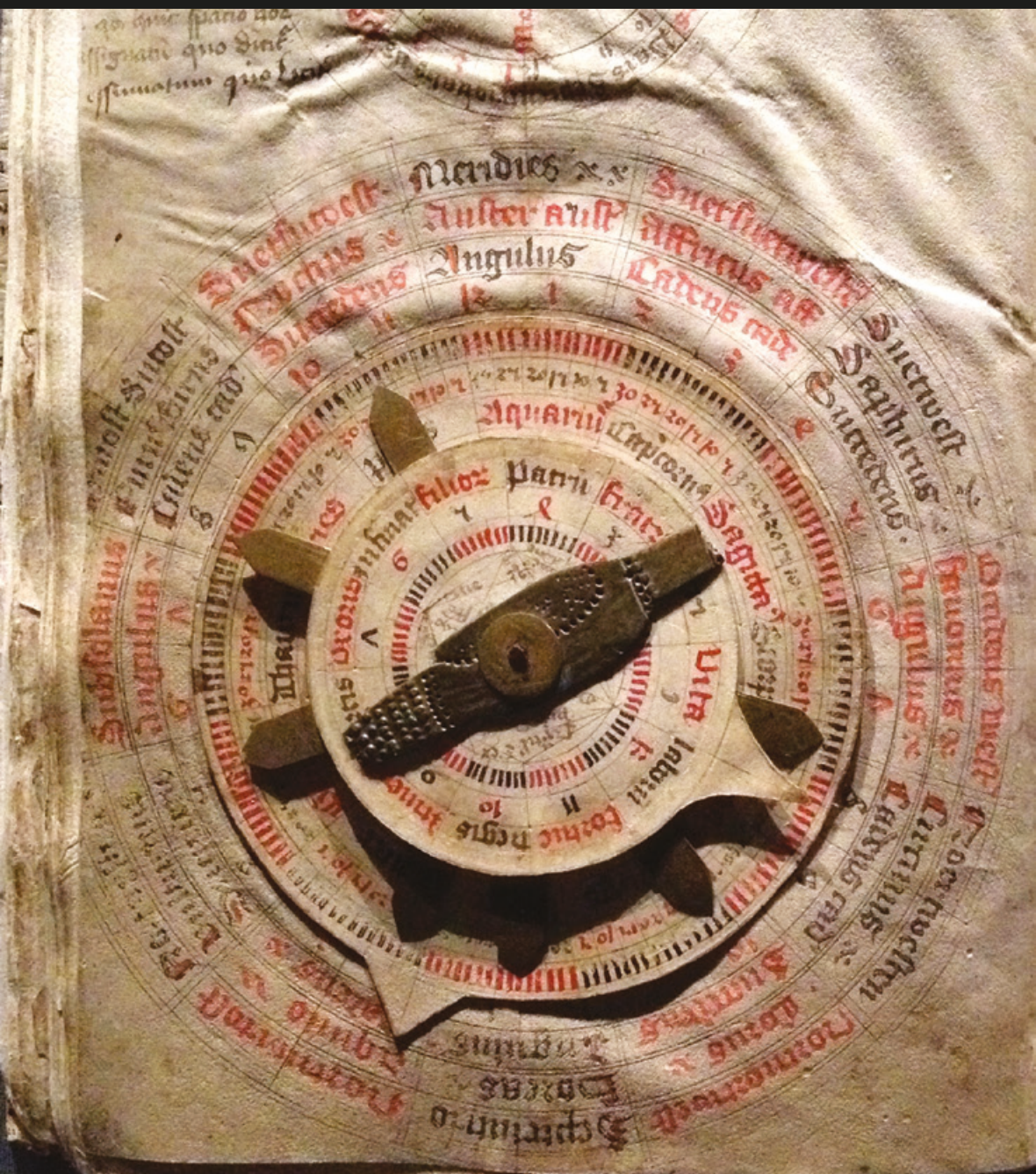
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 96. *...et ...*
 97. *...et ...*
 98. *...et ...*
 99. *...et ...*
 100. *...et ...*

- i. *Quia dicitur tollit uera pira.*
 ii. *Idem uolumine collationum pmi.*
 iii. *In prima scilicet parti.*
 iiii. *Sobrie domachos.*
 v. *Williamus sup. antea.*
 vi. *Verus florentissus collector sup. psalmi.*
 vii. *Cleofanus sup. utriusq. testamenti.*
 viii. *Emile episcopus missus ad monachos. et.*
 ix. *Disputum athenasi ad an. artii. etc.*
 x. *Peritus religiosus.*
 xi. *Emendator religiosus.*
 xii. *Epil. misit l. emendat. re. scripti mundi.*
 xiii. *Episcopus cesari. sine. etc. item.*
 xiiii. *Episcopus huius ordo. etc. de episcopia.*
 xv. *Corbanus theologus.*
 xvi. *Cartanus de diuina sustentacoe. etc.*
 xvii. *De u. de. et de opificio. l. etc. etc.*
 xviii. *Innocentius de offio misit. et. quid. etc.*
 xix. *Gratiacensis basilis. et. ecclesie.*
 xx. *Octo libri georgii nazarum.*
 xxi. *Flores poetarum.*
 xxii. *Epistole bti. epiani.*
 xxiii. *Epigramma asper. etc.*
 xxiiii. *Collationale dni. antonini. et.*
 xxv. *Preceptum totius iudee.*
 xxvi. *Idem. de. etc. etc. etc. etc.*

- [illegible]

- [illegible]

- [illegible]



Chapter 26

MEDIEVAL BOOK APPS

In the last chapter of this section the spectrum of medieval written culture expands once again, not just in the material sense, but also regarding the kind of book under scrutiny: for once, the discussion includes objects from the era of print. Here we examine books with remarkable tools and instruments physically attached to them, a genre that is both rare and versatile—and, frankly, a bit weird as well. Mounted onto the page or the bookbinding, these added instruments extended the book's primary function as an object that one reads into a utilitarian piece of hardware. Some of these add-ons functioned as a calculator, others—astonishingly—even allowed the reader to tell time. As unusual as this enhanced functionality was in the Middle Ages, to a modern person it seems very familiar. Apps on our smartphones, after all, do precisely the same: they extend the function of the phone far beyond its original parameters. Let's examine how medieval books were sometimes more than books.

The Volvelle

The most common piece of “hardware” added to the book is a calculation tool named a “volvelle.” It breaks with the tradition that a book provides 2D information, because it consists of one or more rotating disks mounted on the page (Figure 104). Volvelles allowed the reader to make a variety of complex calculations, such as the position of the sun and the moon, or the precise date of Easter—which, like the volvelle, moved. The oldest volvelles are connected to the scientific explorations of Ramón Llull, a thirteenth-century scholar working in the kingdom of Majorca, who imported the clever device from Arabic scholarly culture. He introduced them in his *Ars Magna* (The Great Art) of ca. 1305. This explains why the earliest volvelles

Figure 104. Volvelle in housebook of Houcken family near Münster, ca. 1450–1500. Maastricht, Regionaal Historisch Centrum Limburg, 22.001A. Photo by the author.