

“A Human Technology: Medieval Manuscript Leaves from the Ege Collection”

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Slide 1: Title

Slide 2: U of S

The University of Saskatchewan (Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada) is not the most obvious place to go to look at medieval manuscript material. But it has some bits of medieval manuscript: a set of fifty leaves from the 12th to the 16th centuries, detached from their original codices in the collection of Cleveland collector Otto Ege, assembled in a box and purchased by the university in 1957. The purpose of my talk is to introduce this collection to you, to say a few words about why it is of interest to us, and to show pictures; this last strategy is to enable you to stay awake for the pictures even if you are tempted to somnolence by my talk. I am not a librarian; I'm an English literary scholar, a medievalist. I am not even a medievalist who specialises in the type of material I will be discussing here today; my area of specialisation is Middle English secular literature, not Latin devotional and liturgical texts. I therefore have the advantage of being almost as unspecialised as the general public with respect to this material, and so in this talk I wish to say a few words about why the Ege manuscript leaves might be of interest to a nonspecialist.

One of the first questions we are asked when people hear that a box of medieval manuscript material exists at the University of Saskatchewan is ‘does the box contain anything really important?’ If you mean anything of original literary or artistic significance, a new aria by Bach, or a hitherto unknown portrait of Shakespeare – well, no, there's nothing of the sort here. When you learn that maybe forty-nine other similar boxes, of different leaves from more or less the same manuscripts, are scattered around North America and a few abroad, the less likely it seems that the world will beat a path to Saskatoon to look at a few pieces of parchment, even if some of the pictures are rather charming.

Slide 3: Ege 15

Maybe the most well-known of the manuscripts represented in the Ege portfolios is the Beauvais Missal, which is a beautiful object and has a fairly well-documented history but which is hardly a household name. Indeed, most if not all the items in the Ege boxes are of no literary merit at all, if the conditions of literary merit are originality of thought and textual uniqueness. Rather, these leaves represent some of the most common products of medieval manuscript culture. They are devotional, liturgical, and theological texts: Books of Hours, psalters, missals, breviaries, Bibles, and commentaries. They are all in Latin. The names of their makers are unknown.

Slide 4: Ege 49

As visually striking as is a leaf from the Beauvais missal, any other leaf in the set is just as likely to look like a page from Ege 49, another missal: pleasant but not breathtaking. Why, then, should we want to pay any attention at all to these bits of parchment, inscribed in a language which no one uses regularly any more, recording completely unoriginal ideas? To begin to answer such a question, I will, in the circuitous manner of an academic, invite you to consider a riddle.

Slide 5: Exeter 1

Some time near the middle of the tenth century, an English scribe wrote these words onto the pages of a manuscript which has since become very well known to scholars of Old English literature as the Exeter Book. Now these words don't look like poetry in the manuscript itself; I wasn't able to get a picture of the manuscript page, which is in Exeter. A typical modern edition tidies up the text to conform to the expectations of Western print culture; for example, word divisions and punctuation are controlled by the editors, and the words themselves are laid out to look like poetry (in the manuscript they are written in continuous lines like prose). To spare you the agony of trying to read the Old English, I will read you my translation into present-day English:

A certain enemy deprived me of life,
took my physical strength, wet me,
dunked me in water, took me out again,
set me in the sun, where I quickly lost
the hairs that I had. Then the edge of a knife
cut me hard, ground me down with cinders;
fingers folded me, and the joy of a bird
trailed all over me with useful drops,
swallowed the dye of a tree over a brown brim,
took a measure of liquid, then stepped on me,
leaving dark tracks. Then a man enclosed me
in protecting boards, covered me with hide,
ornamented me with gold; thus the intricate work of smiths
decorated me, surrounded by wire.

When I give this riddle to my students, they are usually stumped. The Exeter Book scribe did not provide answers to his riddles, but all scholars agree that the solution to this one is: a book. My students are confounded because they are unfamiliar with the process of making a manuscript book, but that is exactly the process being described here. An animal – a sheep or calf – is killed and skinned; its hide is soaked in a solution and then stretched out to dry; the skin is cut, scraped, and rubbed smooth with pumice, and then folded. A quill pen is filled with ink from an inkhorn and makes dark tracks over the parchment. Finally, the pages are enclosed in boards covered with hide and decorated with gold.

Slide 6: Exeter 2

The riddle continues. It tells us that this object is valuable not for its materials nor for its making, but for its use:

Now those ornaments and that red ink
and those glorious attributes declare abroad
the protector of the people, not foolish punishment.
If the children of men would make use of me,
they will be sounder by it and more sure of victory,
bolder in heart and happier in mind,
wiser in spirit, have more friends,
more loved and companionable, more honest and virtuous,
more good and faithful; honour and blessing
will be added to their bounty, and grace and kindness
will be laid on them, and they will be held fast
in the embrace of love. Ask what I am called,
useful to people. My name is well known,
advantageous to men and holy itself.

These claims make sense if the inventor of the riddle had in mind specifically a Bible or a copy of the gospels. If we didn't know that, we might think that these claims sound glibly familiar to a twenty-first-century society guided by the recommendations of Oprah's Book Club, a society that has inherited the earnestness of the Victorian self-help manual: read this book, you'll be a better person, you'll make more friends, you may even improve your sex life. But this familiarity will be superficial and illusory. We live in a society in which literacy is considered a fundamental social skill; but these words in the Exeter Book come out of a society in which writing was still a new technology, when Alfred the Great could lament just half a century earlier that he could hardly find any clerics who could read their services, even in English, let alone in Latin. In the world of the medieval poet who composed this riddle, making a book meant the physical process of creating and assembling the object itself, not the intellectual work of coming up with the words to put into it. Modern readers think of texts as words in the abstract, as mental constructs that might appear in any font on a printed page or, given the right configuration of electrons, on the computer

screen. But for the medieval poet, and for the scribe that wrote this riddle down (probably not the same person), words were physical things, whether shaped in air by the mouth or shaped in ink by the hand (Another well-known Exeter Book riddle, *Moððe word fræt*, ‘a moth ate words’, could refer in the tenth century only to the destruction of a physical book by a parchment-munching bookworm and not to the obliteration of electronic text by a pernicious computer virus.). And so this box of leaves from medieval manuscripts provides for us today a singular opportunity to make contact with that other and older world, where the physical and the spiritual intersect within the human in ways that will seem both familiar and foreign to us, we who are the products of a print culture and the inhabitants of a digital universe.

Slide 7: Mec

Let me go back to the first line of the riddle. As Walter Ong reminded us three decades ago, a long tradition associates writing with death. As 2 Corinthians 3.6 reminds us, the spirit – *pneuma*, breath – gives life, but *gramma*, the letter, kills. Whatever the theological, philosophical, metaphorical implications of this idea, in a medieval manuscript culture it was literally true; the technology of writing in the Middle Ages meant that text was inscribed on the skins of dead animals, just as the technology of print today means that text is laid down on the processed pulp of dead trees. But a medieval manuscript reminds us, more readily than the modern printed book does, of this residue of death.

Slide 8: Ege 28

Parchment often shows the follicles where the animal’s hair once grew.

Slide 9: Ege 13

It shows the imperfections of that biological physicality, as in a tiny hole in the parchment that the scribe has had to accommodate, for example by writing the word carefully around it. Looking at these pages, we are reminded that the process described in the Exeter Book riddle required painstaking physical labour. Soaking the hide, de-hairing it, scraping it, cutting it to size, rubbing it smooth – these actions would have depended on muscular, not mechanical, action.

Slide 10: Ege 5

At least as laborious would have been the process of inscribing and decorating the page. Again, the traces of that labour remain visible: little pinholes pricked along the edges of the page to provide reference points for the ruler, lines ruled across the page to guide the layout.

Slide 11: Ege 6

Tiny letters and numerals are left by the scribe as directions for the rubricator who would put in the coloured initials.

Slide 12: Ege 9

One of the most extraordinary items in the Ege collection is a page from a small Bible. The height of the page itself is 17 cm. The space filled by the text itself, however, is only about 11 cm high, which means that there are about five lines to the centimetre, or (conversely) that the words are less than 2 mm tall. The steadiness of hand and keenness of eye (at a time when spectacles for reading were not yet widely available, having been invented in the late 13th century in northern Italy), the attention to detail, the sheer patience and discipline needed to produce such a manuscript stagger my modern imagination. It just so happens that this page records the story of Baruch and the king, from the book of Jeremiah. Baruch is a scribe. The prophet Jeremiah dictates to him a message from God, and Baruch dutifully writes it down in *volumine libri*, ‘in a volume of a book’, which would have been a scroll, presumably. Baruch then gets the unpleasant job of going to the temple and reading in public the contents of this book, which basically describes what an awful mess the country is in. One of the court officials gets a hold of this controversial book, takes it to court, and reads it aloud before the king, who is sitting quite comfortably before the

fireplace and, as one might expect, is not interested in hearing what a mess the country is in. The king therefore takes a scribe's knife (*scalpello scribae*) and, as the book is read, cuts off chunks of the scroll (the Latin has *tres pagellas vel quattuor*, 'three or four pages') and tosses them into the fire. It is the most heartrending story of book destruction in the Bible, at least from a scribe's point of view. And a medieval scribe could appreciate, in ways that we surely cannot, the painstaking labour that would have gone into the making of the book so casually sliced up and burnt.

Slide 13: Ege 4

Such craftsmanship may be admirable, but I find equally attractive the imperfections of the human process that created these manuscripts. In a page from Ege 4 the indentation on the left margin is a gap left by the scribe for the initial T in the word *thronus*, in a quotation from the Psalms.

Slide 14: Ege 18

Whoever was supposed to have filled in the coloured initial evidently did not get to this part of the book. On another leaf the scribe has inadvertently repeated the words *quod ait* (a scribal error known as *dittography*).

Slide 15: Ege 42a

When the same scribe, or a different rubricator, was filling in the headings with red ink, he noticed the mistake and crossed out the extraneous words. Another way of erasing an extra word was to scrape it off the parchment,

Slide 16: Ege 42b

and such an act might create a little gap in the text; or a musical note might be erased and then rewritten on the correct line.

Slide 17: Ege 40

Ege 40, a copy of a commentary by Aquinas in the humanistic script of the fifteenth century, seems to approach the regularity of print, but a tiny word in the left margin of the U of S leaf, along with the delicate caret to indicate the point of insertion shows that the scribe left out the important word *non* and had to correct it in this way.

Slide 18: Ege 23

But of course the most obvious sign that this is the product of a organic, human labour, rather than of an mechanical process, is the close relationship – one might even say the identity – of two realms that have since grown further apart: text and art. Over and again the medieval scribe busts out of those carefully ruled lines that are supposed to control the layout of the page – as in Ege 23, where the intricate play of the pen erupts in red and blue squiggles out of the columns and toward the edges of the page.

Slide 19: Ege 50

Or, in a copy of the Psalms, in the line 'neither let him slumber that keepeth thee', the word *dormitet* breaks into a graceful flourish that, coincidentally or not, gestures toward the loving care of God.

Slide 20: Ege 10

In a German psalter, a line of a psalm ends with a smug-looking fish.

Slide 21: Ege 8

Little animal heads appear at the end of a doodle,

Slide 22: Ege 19

or in a decorated initial.

Slide 23: Ege 22

In a missal, faces peer from letters in the chants: are they quirky decorations? superfluous doodling? portraits of choir members? In any case, they remind us of the real faces that once bent over these pages, the real voices that read or chanted these words aloud.

For let us remember that these manuscripts were created in a world where reading was primarily a public and communal activity, not so often a private indulgence. We, on the other side of the Renaissance, have come to consider a book 'the precious life-blood of a master spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life', to use Milton's words. In my discipline, English literature, my students (and many of my colleagues) find themselves attracted to the idiosyncrasies of a Geoffrey Chaucer, the unruliness of a Margery Kempe, the personal difficulties of a Thomas Malory. They feel unanchored, uncertain, when confronted with the anonymity of most medieval texts. To understand the world from which these manuscripts come, we will have to set aside our assumptions that originality is a virtue, our post-Romantic expectation that a book ought to be an expression of individual personality.

Slide 24: Gif

Our Exeter Book riddle says 'Gif min bearn wera brucan willað' – if the children of men would make use of me; Old English brucan meant to use, to spend, to enjoy. We would be mistaken to think that these medieval books were meant to be read in our modern sense – purchased or borrowed by an individual; perused silently and privately at a desk, in an armchair, in bed; appreciated for their eloquence or striking ideas or original insights; finally shelved or returned to the library or recirculated at a garage sale. By contrast, these medieval books were to be used as much as read, and more often than not used in the communal context of a church service.

Slide 25: Ege 32

The words, read aloud from the page, committed to memory, joined the reader to a community of worship, a unison of voices, a conversation of readings and responses.

Slide 26: Ege 1

This was the case not only for liturgical books but also for the oldest item in the Ege portfolio, a Bible in which the text from the gospel of John is surrounded and even infiltrated by commentary in at least two later hands; the interlinear glosses and the copious marginalia do not, however, represent the readers' own reactions to the text but are passages from commentaries by the Church Fathers. These books, then, were clearly not mere technologies of communication and containers of information, which is how we think of books today; rather, they were, for medieval people, technologies of communion and containers of spiritual value. The manuscript, bearing on its stippled, scraped, inscribed skin the marks of the labour that created it, was not so much an object of devotion as itself an act of devotion. In the Middle Ages, one did not ordinarily spend parchment and ink, paint and gold leaf, long hours of concentrated work, on merely private musings, on one's own daily affairs or one's personal opinions. Anything worth such expense and effort had to be something one knew beforehand had been approved by authority, tested by time, useful to many. These manuscripts do represent what people in the Middle Ages considered important (I often remind my students that the bestselling English text in the late Middle Ages, the text of which the highest number of manuscript copies survive, was not anything one ordinarily studies in medieval literature courses, not Chaucer or Malory or the Gawain-poet, but a penitential manual called *The Prick of Conscience*.) Cynics will perhaps contend that the abundance of this kind of religious material tells us only what certain very powerful institutions in the Middle Ages – moreover, institutions that controlled the

means of producing manuscripts – considered important. That may be true. But it is also hard to escape the feeling that a sense of value, of participating in something larger than oneself, something longer than a human lifetime, something perhaps that signified eternity, touched the medieval people who touched these pages. Many of these manuscripts have obviously seen heavy use, even though they were also costly and precious objects.

Slide 27: Ege 16

Otto Ege suggests that one breviary represented in the portfolio may have even been buried with its owner.

Well, we have come again to death, and if we want to be even more morbid we can mention dismemberment. For anyone in Saskatoon can come to the University of Saskatchewan today and stare at a nine-hundred-old piece of parchment because a Cleveland art historian extracted leaves from his own collection of medieval and Renaissance manuscript books, assembled these detached leaves into boxed sets, and sold them. This democratic move on Ege's part is the kind of thing that, I am sure, ties knots in the intestines of archivists, bibliographers, and scholars of all kinds who work with very old books. Some might see it as an act of book-slicing not too far removed from that of the Judean king who shredded Baruch's work. But of course Ege meant to promote access to these manuscripts, not to destroy them, and we now have an extraordinary opportunity to reassemble, in virtual space, the manuscripts that Ege dismembered: to ask owners of Ege boxes or individual leaves to contribute digital images of those pages to a collective project, remaking these scattered leaves into books again through the medium of the internet.

Slide 28: Dante

As you are doubtless aware, our precedents are exalted ones. Take, for example, this quotation from Dante's *Paradiso*: Dante, having toured hell, purgatory, and paradise, comes at last to the Beatific Vision, a glimpse of the divine and cosmic order, which of course, by definition, is ineffable, beyond words. Dante, being a poet and thus in the business of describing the indescribable, tries description nevertheless. This ecstatic vision of the wholeness of God looks to him, he says, as if all the disparate phenomena of the universe are like scattered pages that have been gathered and bound by love into one volume:

Nel suo profondo vidi che s'interna,
legato con amore in un volume,
ciò che per l'universo so squaderna:
sustanze e accidenti e lor costume
quasi conflati insieme.

Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso* 33.85-89
(Translation by Allen Mandelbaum)

Slide 29: Donne

Or you may recall John Donne's well-known *Meditation 17*:

All mankinde is of one Author, and is one volume; when one Man dies, one Chapter is not torne out of the booke, but translated into a better language; and every Chapter must be so translated; God emploies several translators; some peeces are translated by age, some by sicknesse, some by warre, some by justice; but Gods hand is in every translation; and his hand shall binde up all our scattered leaves againe, for that Librarie where every booke shall lie open to one another.

Well, we're perhaps stretching it to imply that by gathering these scattered leaves of the Ege manuscripts we are replicating the work of God. And Dante and Donne obviously weren't thinking of the internet when they employed this metaphor of the remade book. But the power of the metaphor suggests that books are worth making – and remaking. This is the case even when the books being remade are centuries old and written in a language that no one speaks any more.

Slide 30: Ege 3

Consider a page from Ege 3. It is taken from a 12th-century lectionary, a selection of readings from the Bible. The leaf in the U of S portfolio comes from a section that brings together gospel passages about the resurrection of Christ on Easter morning. The parchment and ink were prepared, the words meticulously written out, by people who have been dead for over eight hundred years now. Have we any points of contact with that other world? Well, this leaf itself is such a point of contact. In our world, a world that tamed the electron and manufactured Cheez Whiz, a world of instant messaging and desktop publishing and computer animation, it is reassuring, challenging, perhaps even a bit disturbing to encounter these fragments of another world, these manuscripts, these organic objects, these artefacts so obviously, palpably human, to come out of the abstraction of text to the physicality of texture – to the the smooth feel of the parchment, the glint of light off the gold. Digital images, even of the highest resolution, cannot completely capture the reality. But they can provoke a desire to know the reality, a curiosity about the objects themselves, and the contexts in which they were created.

The Exeter Book riddle with which I began contains a paradox. Written out, like these pages we have been considering, on the skin of a dead animal by a person now dead, the book itself speaks – ‘mec feonda sum feore besnyþede’: I was bereft of life, I died, but now I speak to you as if alive. Gif min bearn wera brucan willað, ‘if the children of men would make use of me’, they too might come to a richer life, find a community of friends, see their way through the letter to the spirit. We are inhabitants of a primarily secular society and many of us are unaccustomed to the look and sound of Latin. I doubt that any of us will use these manuscripts in the ways their makers intended. But these fragments may still be useful to us, because they are human objects. Like the riddle of the speaking book, they have, I trust, the power to intrigue, to raise questions, to compel imagination, to recall those people like us who, touching death, enacted life, and recorded their hope of resurrection.