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## Materiality of Religious Books: A Brief Sketch of Sometimes Disregarded Aspects of Book Culture

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# Materiality of Religious Books

## A Brief Sketch of Sometimes Disregarded Aspects of Book Culture

### Abstract

Engagement with Christian manuscripts – Eastern and Western – and with ancient and rare printed books makes evident a growing interest in material and codicological aspects of our book heritage. In other words, it evinces an emerging curiosity about the non-textual realities of books – at least of ancient books. This shift is particularly true for manuscript studies. The question of materiality remains unavoidable, however, even today, when we decide to edit a book in hard copy along with electronic or digital versions. As has always been the case, there is a direct correlation between the quality of materials used, the production/confection techniques and the external appearance of a book. Normally, one would not expect to find the finest inks, paper or parchment in the hands of less-skilled scribes or illuminators. This article sets alongside immediate material aspects corresponding, and usually expensive, issues like sewing and binding techniques, layout (*mise-en-page*) and decoration. They too condition our assessment – even unconsciously – when we meet religious books.

### Keywords

Materiality, Palimpsest, Parchment, Book Destruction

### Biography

Erich Renhart is professor of liturgics at the University of Graz. In 2005, he founded VESTIGIA – The Manuscript Research Centre of Graz University (<https://vestigia.uni-graz.at>), which is dedicated to research into and the restoration of hidden, lost and re-used manuscripts. As director of this institution and director of the Special Collections Department at the University Library Graz, Renhart conducts research within Manuscript Studies, on text editions (Latin, Greek, Armenian, Syriac) and for Digital Humanities.

# Introduction

It is a wonderful task to deal with the materiality of religious books. Yet which books are to be considered “religious”? The range of book forms and genres can seem overwhelming. For the purposes of this article, I propose that biblical books, liturgical books, prayer books and other devotional books fall into the category in question.

When we look at Christian manuscripts – Eastern and Western – and at ancient and rare printed books, we observe a growing interest in the material and codicological aspects of our book heritage.<sup>1</sup> In other words, a new emphasis on the non-textual realities of books is emerging – at least for ancient books. This shift is particularly true for Manuscript Studies.<sup>2</sup> However even nowadays, when we decide to edit a book, often in hard copy along with electronic or digital versions, issues of materiality cannot be avoided.

As has always been the case, a direct correlation exists between the quality of the used materials, the production techniques, and the external appearance of a book. Normally, we would not expect to find the finest inks, paper or parchment at the same time as less-skilled scribes or illuminators. Here, together with the immediate material aspects we should consider corresponding and often costly issues such as sewing and binding techniques, layout (*mise-en-page*) and decoration. They too will condition our assessment – even unconsciously – as we encounter religious books.

Based on my experience with and knowledge of historical books, this article explores various aspects that cast light on the weight of the material character of religious books and their interpretation. The article will make evident that materially speaking, there is no single way of understanding our religious books, for multiple aspects precondition the fabrication of books in general and of religious books in particular. That is to say, materiality is inherently complex.

This article examines the hypothesis that adequate expression of the most venerable content (e.g. God and God’s Word) requires the most precious ma-

1 Maniaci 2015, 69–88.

2 Zammit Lupi [forthcoming]: “This chapter is about ritual, reading and the senses. It discusses elements of the book that go beyond the reading of the text and its visual beauty. The velvety touch of parchment, the smell of leather bindings, the crisp sound of paper, the coldness and click of a metal clasp and the bulk and weight of heavy tomes are what make viewing a manuscript more than just any reading experience.” Only now is research perceiving historical books as a multisensory experience.



Fig. 1: A feature of book luxury: the head band of a book of high artistic quality.  
(Photo: E. Renhart)

terials (fig. 1). In the document *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, article 122, which also speaks of sacred art more generally, the Second Vatican Council stated:

Very rightly the fine arts are considered to rank among the noblest activities of man's genius, and this applies especially to religious art and to its highest achievement, which is sacred art. These arts, by their very nature, are oriented toward the infinite beauty of God which they attempt in some way to portray by the work of human hands; they achieve their purpose of redounding to God's praise and glory in proportion as they are directed the more exclusively to the single aim of turning men's minds devoutly toward God.<sup>3</sup>

Is this theorem applicable also to religious books – no ifs or buts?

3 [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19631204\\_sacrosanctum-concilium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html) [accessed 3 December 2020].



Fig. 2: Detail of a cloth book cover. An otherwise poorly furnished book is wrapped in fabric, which might be a sign of “emotional appropriation”. (Photo: E. Renhart)

## Categories of Religious Books

Three categories of religious book, roughly distinguished, are considered in this article and can be characterised here in a few words.

It is beyond question that the Bible – be it the complete Bible, Old Testament, New Testament, or individual biblical books (e.g. the book of Psalms, the Gospels) – is of utmost significance within the Christian book tradition. The biblical books are the primordial basis from which all other types of religious book examined here are derived or by which they are inspired. Biblical books are authoritative. Sometimes large volumes, they are intended to be consulted not just once, but instead regularly and over long periods of time. As a consequence, they must be robust. Do we find these realities mirrored in the material quality of such book production past and present?

Liturgical books<sup>4</sup> – lectionaries, missals, choir books<sup>5</sup> etc. – these too are deemed to have authoritative power, evident in their very prescriptive rubrics. Li-

4 Palazzo 1998.

5 For an in-depth study of a choir book's codicology: Zammit Lupi 2011.

turgical books intertwine biblical texts with hymns and chants and with prayers which appear to be regulated down to the last syllable. Usually, liturgical books provide texts (and musical notation) that are to be performed aloud. In addition to their authoritative character, they are performative and interactive. Are these requirements manifest in these books' materiality and presentation?

When it comes to the category "devotional books", we are confronted with an immeasurable variety of book types, from prayer books to pilgrim books and miracle books. For our purposes, we will consider only prayer books, and among them specifically Books of Hours. In some aspects like biblical texts, devotional books are focused on the formation of the reader's private spirituality and need therefore to be attractive to the individual and easy to handle. How do these requirements affect the material appearance of such books?

This brief characterisation of book genres already suggests different requirements with regard to their manufacture. Additional fundamental aspects can also be decisive for a book's material presentation (fig. 2).

## Crucial factors

Book makers have always been confronted a quartet of concerns that determine the framework for their activity: availability of materials, affordability, technique and number of copies.

### Availability of Materials (and Technical Skills)

From the very beginnings of book production and right up to the present day, the material quality of books has always been largely dependent on the availability of the most elementary "ingredients", i. e. writing surface (stone, clay, parchment, leather, paper, etc.) and inks and dyes (fig. 3). Some materials are highly durable, while others are more ephemeral (e.g. papyrus) and survive only under very favourable climatic conditions. Yet producers did not always have a choice of materials, often having instead to make do with the material available. In times of war and economic scarcity, for example, older books were often recycled by effacing a previous text and filling the folios with new content. Throughout the history of book confection – and the greater part of this history was dominated by the production of religious books, as our old and rare book collections attest – book makers were at times forced to use



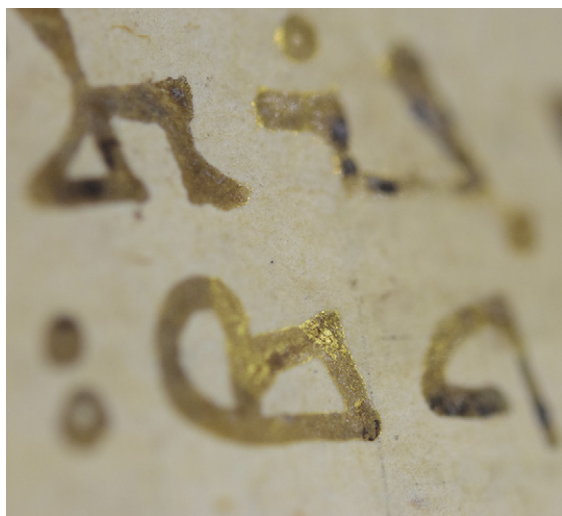


Fig. 3: Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate ms. syr. 39: Gold-lettered header, placed in the upper margins of the page. (Photo: E. Renhart)

cheap materials, even for the most noble content. If the only available paper was of low quality, they would have to use it for the Bible and other prominent books; if they had no gold-pigmented colour, they would instead use a yellowish dye of vegetable or mineral origin.

The technical skills of the people involved in book manufacture contribute to the quality of their production. A high-quality book requires not only professional scribes and illuminators but also well-trained experts for its sewing and binding (fig. 4). They could help ensure the stability and durability of the book block and protect it with a cover, which might bear highly attractive leather ornamentation. Thus, they too contribute to the physical appearance of the book and to its robustness.

## Affordability

Today we continue to assess how much money we are prepared to spend on a book, and various factors determine the decision we make: whether the book has a hard cover and perhaps a jacket; whether it has thread stitching or an adhesive binding; whether the paper is certified in some way (woodfree coated or uncoated) or is perhaps cheap groundwood paper which will soon degrade and turn yellowish; whether the print is four coloured throughout or only black and white. Such factors are influenced not just by the commissioner's taste but also by their economic situation.

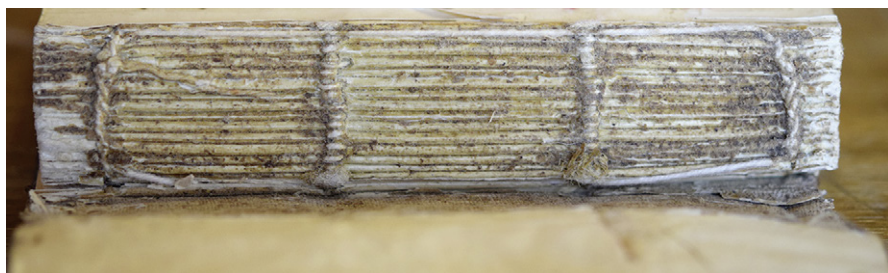


Fig. 4: The spine of a book with high-quality sewing of the quires (Yerevan, Matenadaran MM ms. syr. 203). (Photo: E. Renhart)

Economic potential is always a factor in book production. We cannot conclude that the esteem in which a book is held (e.g. a Bible or a Gospel book) will necessarily be reflected in its materiality.<sup>6</sup> The Holy Scriptures may appear in disguise, poorly clad in the hands of the rural poor or at times of scarcity, catastrophe or war. Book ownership could be a mark of achievement and engender satisfaction irrespective of the material quality of the book itself.

We do encounter, however, some marvellously manufactured and decorated books for public and private use. The numerous outstanding Books of Hours are a case in point. Intended for private use, they were often commissioned by the wealthy, mostly members of noble families. These books – highlights of contemporary book culture – were the fruit of the combination of precious materials and the highest craftsmanship, and as such they functioned as expressions of social distinction and aristocratic prestige.

Affordability was, however, a concern for consumers. Opulent books contrasted with the daily life of toil experienced by the majority, far from any kind of luxury. Medieval critics stigmatised such vain book production with a range of arguments, e.g.:

Following about haughtiness with books. From this haughtiness are suffering those who want to have gilded books.

Fourth then, that it is childish to love and become enthralled by gold and silver letters.

Eighth, that this beauty is of minor value since it does not satiate humans.<sup>7</sup>

6 An edition of the Bible was produced in 1982 for schools in Austria. The two volumes were of low quality, with cheap paper and a poor cover (in an unattractive red). Here was the paragon of a book whose materiality was out of step with the value of its contents.

7 Steinmann 2013, 476: Bibliothèque nationale, ms. lat. 12401, fol. 171r-v (13th century): *Sequitur de superbia librorum, qua specie superbie laborant qui volunt habere libros*



## Techniques of (Re)Production

The history of book fabrication involved a series of modifications, alterations and reinventions. Such shifts can readily be seen by looking at materials (e.g. papyrus or parchment, parchment or paper) or at book forms (scroll versus codex), and are all the more evident with regard to techniques for the reproduction of texts, musical notation, images, graphics, maps and the like, both handwritten or printed. What techniques are preferable and what are the consequences of realising those preferences? To answer this question, I turn now to two paradigmatic situations: (a) the shift from handwritten books to printed books, which marked the beginning of a new era, and (b) the transition from printed books to their virtualisation, so to their dematerialisation in our own time.

### From Manuscript to Print

Gutenberg's mid-15th century invention resulted in vivid discussions, sometimes indeed in disputes between the traditionally minded and the more forward-looking. This struggle is mirrored in many colophons, scribal notes and pamphlets. In 1494, Johannes Trithemius recorded in his treatise *De laude scriptorum* (*In Praise of Scribes*):

Who ignores the difference between manuscript and print? The manuscript if written on parchment might outlive a thousand years; though the print, being a matter of paper – how long would it subsist? If the script can survive 200 years in a book made of paper, this will be an ambitious estimate.<sup>8</sup>

During the first decades of book printing, the natural inclination was to imitate what was found in the medieval manuscripts. Accordingly, printers designed the letters after the handwriting they were used to seeing in manuscripts.<sup>9</sup>

deauratos [...] Quarto vero hoc quod puerilitas est litteras aureas et argenteas amare et in hiis delectari. [...] Octavo hoc quod parum valet ista pulcritudo scripture. Non enim hominem sariat.

8 Steinmann 2013, 902.2: Trithemius, *De laude scriptorum* (7, anno 1492): Quis nescit quanta sit inter scripturam et impressuram distantia? Scriptura enim, si membranis imponitur, ad mille annos poterit perdurare; impressura autem, cum res papirea sit, quamdiu subsistet? Si in volumine papireo ad ducentos annos perdurare potuerit, magnum est.

9 Many fonts and other expressions of modern typography bear the names of early printers: e.g. Garamond, Bembo, Aldus, Didot.



Fig. 5: Birds in the marginal arabesques of a luxuriously decorated manuscript (University Library Graz, ms. 48). Such opulence could not be produced by book printing for centuries, meaning that ancient books written and illuminated by hand remained exclusive and even exotic. (Photo: E. Renhart)

The new technique was able to provide “stable” texts,<sup>10</sup> which, taken from manuscripts with corrupted texts, were not always the best choice possible, initially. And the printers could produce far more copies. But they were not yet able to reproduce the illuminations and decorative elements that appeared in manuscripts (fig. 5); such elements were added by hand following the printing process. The result was a long-term and dramatic reduction of book illumination.

The new technology also had considerable impact on the non-textual multiverse of religious books. The quality of the materials used by the printers tended to decrease, since printing houses had to survive economically. Initially parchment was used as a carrier for the printing ink – a sumptuous practice which soon was reserved for extraordinary, expensive and high-status commissions.<sup>11</sup> In this context, the material was again suited to signalling societal distinction, but this durable writing surface, so appreciated for many hundreds of years, fell out of use for the vast majority of printed books. As the new technique of printing replaced hand-writing, short-lived paper also replaced parchment.

10 This development also marks the beginnings of religious, political and ideological censorship on a large scale.

11 E.g. the first edition of the *Theuerdank*, Emperor Maximilian I's autobiography of 1517, see Renhart 2020, 63–70.

## From Printed Books to Virtual Books

Towards the end of the second millennium, we witnessed another change of paradigm: the shift from materiality to virtuality. The conventional form of the book in its entire materiality was challenged by the electronic book, which can exist in dematerialised form, as an agglomeration of dots, the sophisticated outcome of the mathematical units “+” and “-”. It was now possible for a book to exist without ever having a physical reality.

Even deprived of its material being, this kind of book reclaimed the richly illuminated and illustrated book – a development that had started some 150 years earlier with photography and would reach a new peak in our time. The new technologies allow for all opulence imaginable in terms of colour, size and format, writing font, layout, script, etc. Despite all these options, the book as a material emanation still exists. The pluriformity of books produced a pluriformity of setting, giving the reader a new choice – *where* to access the book. The religious book is one of the cases where we tend to turn to the conventional form of the codex – possibly due to emotional aspects.

## The Number of Copies

The number of copies of a book that are produced is often directly tied to its material quality. In the age in which books were the product of a scribe's hand, any kind of luxury was imaginable for every volume (fig. 6). With book printing came industrial reproduction and an almost immediate loss of individuality. Nevertheless, prominent singular occasions still called for individually tailored books. Veneration of the book is one such occasion, as I now explore.

## The Book as Object of Veneration

Throughout the history of Christian literature, we encounter books as objects of veneration. Here I highlight three situations: the enthroned book (*hetoimasia tou thronou*); the kissing of books in the liturgical context; and the private veneration of a book expressing pious devotion. Such distinct situations demand extraordinary books of a quality that is in some sense remarkable.

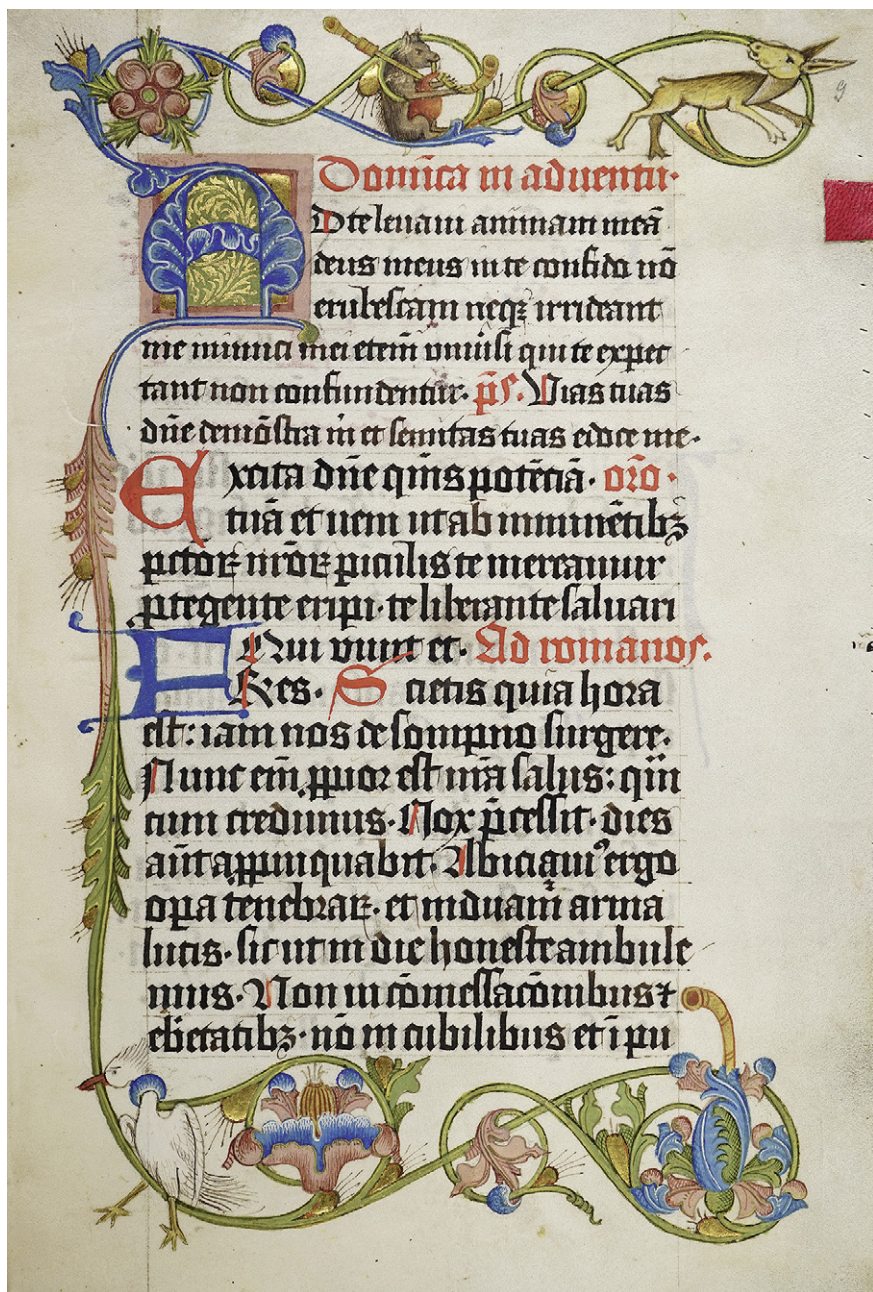


Fig. 6: University Library Graz, ms. 299, fol. 93. A marvellously decorated 15th century missal. (Photo: E. Renhart)



## The Book's Enthronement

In the ecclesial tradition we find the remarkable phenomenon of a book displayed on a decorated seat, representing a throne scene.<sup>12</sup> Christian iconography contains plenty of frescoes depicting the enthroned book, for example on wall paintings in many Orthodox churches, with the book usually resting on the pillow of a throne-stool. Sometimes we encounter this motif miniaturised in a manuscript or realised architecturally, for example as a *bema* throne cut in stone in North Syrian churches of the first millennium.

The opened book stands for the *praesentia Domini* – the Lord's presence. This iconographic representation was chosen for a limited number of situations, such as the opening of a synod or ecclesiastical council<sup>13</sup> (the message: your discussions and decisions here are performed before God's eyes and with the help of the Holy Spirit; the open book displayed the pericope of Pentecost, or the Last Judgement, with its unwavering final decision).

Such extraordinary cases give the book (the Bible or Gospel book) a central place in expressing a theologically most important idea. We cannot imagine a similar significance if a paperback book was enthroned. These are cases where we intuitively expect a book in its best material form. We should feel a dignity emanating from the book itself, even before or without reading from it. I propose an equation here: the most important ideas (contents), demand the most noteworthy materiality (form).

## Liturgical Veneration

In various liturgical celebrations we find acts of book veneration. The most frequent and most readily perceived involves kissing the Gospel book.<sup>14</sup> I cannot recall any case in which a liturgical book itself (missal, sacramentary, choir book, breviary, etc.) has been the immediate object of veneration. Rather, reverence is expressed towards God, God's Word (Holy Scriptures) and especially God's life (Gospels). It is no wonder that these books are given most attention among all our religious books and most sumptuous material expres-

12 Renhart 1995, Von Bogyay 1960, 1971, 1973 and Durand 1867.

13 See the famous depiction in Cod. graec. 510 of the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris: Walter 1970 and Brubaker 1985.

14 Other such acts include processions and the act of transferring books. On kissing (of the altar, Gospel book and Cross) as part of the liturgy see Vereecke 1990, esp. 511, and Jungmann 1951, 210–211.

sion in terms of script, decoration and confection. Although sometimes also finely executed,<sup>15</sup> other categories of liturgical book were broadly speaking considered more auxiliary. However, the Gospel book has always retained its distinguished ranking among religious books. Many parishes of various confessional denominations have their standard lectionary for everyday use and a considerably more lavish Gospel book for special solemnities during the liturgical year or for use on other specific occasions.

## Object of Pious Devotion

The Book of Hours, largely associated with the Middle Ages, is possibly the category of ancient book best known today, as a good number have been produced in facsimile. They lend themselves well to engagement with today's audiences on account of their marvellous physical appearance – the presentation of the text, the opulent illumination and decoration<sup>16</sup> and the exclusive binding – as a product of pure luxury.

The Book of Hours was designed and designated for private use, a kind of breviary for noble lay persons. Christopher De Hamel's description is helpful:

By the late thirteenth century the fashion among the secular nobility was for a new type of portable devotional compendium in which selected psalms and prayers were already prearranged into an appropriate order for recitation by the laity at times of the day corresponding to each of the old monastic hours from Matins to Compline. These short cycles were dedicated to specific religious themes or saints, principally the Virgin Mary, whose cult was becoming increasingly prominent in the later Middle Ages.<sup>17</sup>

The Book of Hours provided two points of access for its user: texts for private recitation in line with the official prayers of the church (spiritual nourishment) and many distractions in the form of places on the page where the eye might linger, remaining with a gilded initial letter here, with the drolleries, flowers, animals or arabesques and tendrils there, or with manifold other features in the margins. It is evident that such a book would foster its user's emotional appropriation. At the same time, this book tells of social status and distinction.

<sup>15</sup> Renhart 2010, 39–51.

<sup>16</sup> On account of their opulent illuminations, a number of such books came to be designated “très riches heures”, as in the case of the Book of Hours of the Duc du Berry.

<sup>17</sup> De Hamel 2016, 387.



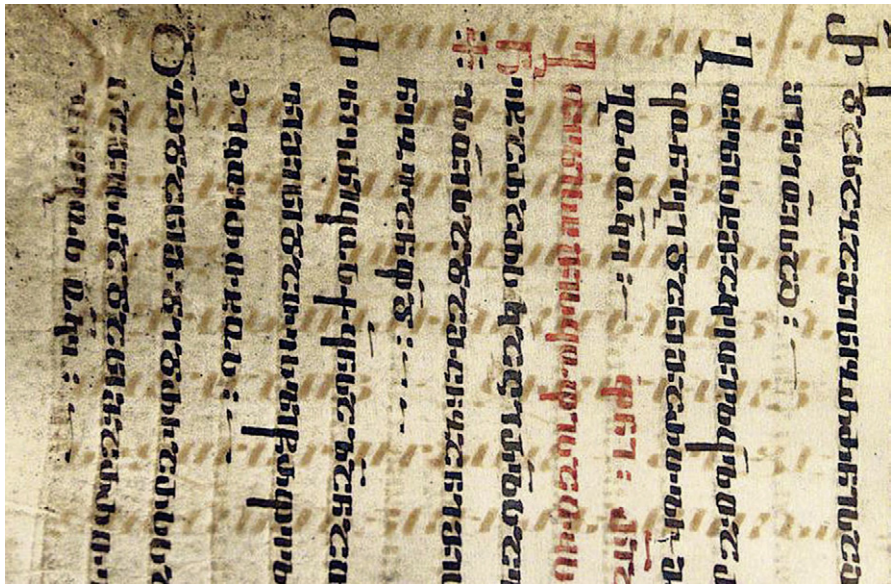


Fig. 7: Detail of a palimpsested folium. The previous writing layer – remnants of the first book – is easily discerned (University Library Graz, ms. 2058/2). (Photo: E. Renhart)

A considerable democratisation of the private prayer book would set in only centuries later, in the baroque period, reaching its peak in the 18th and 19th centuries. The material character of those subsequent books for private spirituality was neither exclusive nor exquisite.

## Destruction of Books

Brief mention can be made here of the destruction and degradation of religious books, highlighting three particular circumstances.

### The Palimpsestation of Books

The disassembling of a book made of parchment and construction of a new one from the debris was a common practice (fig. 7). For this purpose, book makers effaced the text and prepared the leaves for re-writing (*palimpsest*).<sup>18</sup>

18 Renhart 2015, esp. 46–47, and Renhart 2020, 17–27.



Fig. 8: A box of maculated folios: the debris of at least two liturgical books (containing the Psalms and biblical cantica). The parchment strips served to repair the holes of a wooden organ's pipes (courtesy Diocesan Archive Graz). (Photo: E. Renhart)

Any text which was no longer useful could fall victim to this procedure, for a variety of reasons. Even biblical and liturgical texts might meet this fate. This metamorphosis of a book discarded its original contents, with the original book surviving only in its materiality.

### The Maculation of Books

The decades and centuries following the invention of book printing saw the maculation<sup>19</sup> of medieval manuscripts (mostly made of parchment) in grand style. Thousands of ancient books for which new printings were now available were dismantled into pieces. The resulting materials were used for a myriad of purposes, for example for repairing and enveloping other books or for stuffing the holes of organ pipes (fig. 8). Even biblical and liturgical books with illuminations were not exempt from maculation. These actions suggest a disregard for book heritage and have left us today with many thousands of fragments – the rudimentary remnants of a vast hidden but, alas, irregular library.<sup>20</sup>

19 Neuheuser-Christ/Schmitz 2016.

20 Renhart 2013 and 2016.



Fig. 9: A partly burnt codex (Yerevan, Matenadaran, MM. ms. syr. 8). (Photo: E. Renhart)

## Burning Books

While libraries have gone up in flames accidentally,<sup>21</sup> there is also a rich record of deliberate burnings of books, even up to today. The act of burning a book can express many things. Historically, it has often been an act of censorship or aggression or a response to offence-taking born out of political or religious ideology (fig. 9). In this sense, the annihilation of the book not only exterminates the object but also challenges the identity, even the soul, of a person or social group. In some cases, we can speak of “cultural genocide”, when we see a deep disdain of books or even fear-created by their mere existence.

A very different custom in connection with book burning can be observed in some Eastern churches: religious books which have fallen out of use, which are too tattered to be repaired, for example, are prescribed to be destroyed by fire. This practice constitutes a ritual burning of religious books when they have come to the end of their life (fig. 10).

21 See e. g. Báez 2008.



Fig. 10: The act of throwing books into the fire – the catastrophe of book annihilation depicted in its most lovely form – executed with very fine line and gilded (University Library Graz, ms. 32, fol. 5r). (Photo: E. Renhart)



## Neglect and Disregard

This response appears to be the most common reason for the destruction or at least severe degradation of religious books. People forget books that they do not actively engage in their lives. As a result, these books are not kept in the preservative context they require. This neglect suggests an overabundance of books.

## Conclusion(s)

The more we are aware of the history of book confection (recent or ancient), the more able we will be to apply traditional materiality to religious books today. This statement holds in terms of the selection of materials, layout options and the use of decorative elements. Such factors dictate and constitute the dialogue between user and book – be that book of religious character or not.



Fig. 11: SOP 192: A ribbon for marking one's place in a book flows from the head band. Such attractive details might contribute to the owner's/reader's emotional appropriation. (Photo: E. Renhart)

We cannot claim that a religious book always requires the best quality materials. Equilibrium or tension has always characterised the relationship between a book's contents and their presentation. Books preserve their written content, and the material artefact that is the book has a contribution to enact. That involvement is shaped by the authority and weight of the content, economic and societal realities, piety and veneration, and emotional, spiritual and intellectual appropriation.

Such factors are still valid today and will presumably remain so for a long time to come. Appreciation of the religious book's materiality is tied to its use and to the emotional impact of turning to it (fig. 11). My own emotional response starts with the book's appearance and the feel of its surface; it continues with the layout of the page and the lettering (writing fonts) used, and climaxes with the bounty of the margins and, last but not least, with the quality of the paper and bindings – all together they compose an elegance of style and expression.

And finally we return to the hypothesis stated at the beginning of this article. The material quality of a book does not in fact necessarily correspond to

Fig. 12: University Library Graz,  
ms. 763, fol. 152r. A delicately  
repaired tear in the parchment,  
executed with care and  
remarkable skill.  
(Photo: E. Renhart)



the value of its contents and possibly never has other than in those few cases of economic independence and for a handful of people (fig. 12). However, the emotional appropriation of books can give even meagre material quality meaning, transgressing the limits of materiality.

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