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The Search for Books in Uncharted Territory, *c.* 800–1500

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INTERFACES

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The Search for Books in Uncharted Territory, *c.* 800–1500

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Introduction: the Medieval Experience of Book Searching

Abstract

The introduction outlines how the searching for texts by medieval scholars has been under-researched, and why the art of bibliography was radically different in the age before the printed book. Key questions are sketched and related to the articles published in the issue.

1. Unique books

In a celebrated short story from 1940, *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, Jorge Luis Borges plays many tricks on his readers, some of them particularly startling from a book-historical point of view. The supposedly real place of Uqbar in ancient Mesopotamia cannot be traced in any reference books, except in one unique copy of a volume of a standard encyclopedia which the narrator's friend has happened upon in a second hand bookstore. The extra four pages in this copy describe Uqbar in dry encyclopedic fashion, including the inhabitants' literary fantasy world of Tlön – about which apparently a whole body of mythological knowledge had been developed, in fact, an entire encyclopedia of just that is hinted at. By a series of coincidences the narrator later inherits vol. XI of this hitherto unknown encyclopedia. Its title page gives no date or publisher. The mysteries continue, but in this context we can stop here and reflect on how Borges achieves his astonishing effects for modern readers habituated to the world of printed books.

First, it obviously makes little sense to us that a single copy of a volume of a standard encyclopedia contains a unique article – of course we expect all copies of the same edition or print-run to contain identical texts. Secondly, the appearance of an entirely unknown

book, volume XI on Tlön, defies all bibliographical expectations by its uniqueness and by its lack of date and printer. True, these details are also missing in some real printed books such as many incunabula, underground literature etc.[1] But we have few doubts that any printed book, in fact, is a product of a very specific time and place. The subversion of expectations that Borges pulls off here, however, would not have worked in the era before the printing press. In the medieval world of books all copies were unique, additions and alterations freely made, and a book was not a product of a frozen moment, but often of a long (or even continuing) process. Most ancient and medieval texts did entail a place and time of publishing, but again, this was a process rather than an instant, and the subsequent copies made could not uphold an unambiguous one-to-one relationship to the exemplar.[2]

The elements of textual indeterminacy, surprise, loss, search, and discovery in the ages of the handcopied book have been employed as the core of the plot in modern historical fiction too. Most famously perhaps in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1980) that centers around the unique copy of the second book of Aristotle's *Poetics*, only to be lost forever as the action unfolds. More recently Anthony Doerr, in his sprawling multitemporal novel *Cloud Cuckoo Land* (2021), has turned the fragmentary and precious survival of an ancient Greek fantasy novel – in the style of *The Golden Ass* – into the unlikely centerpiece of a story that celebrates stories. His words about the survival of ancient literature through the Middle Ages are worth quoting (spoken by a Byzantine scholar just before the Fall of Constantinople in 1453):

> Time. Day after day, year after year, time wipes the old books from the world. The manuscript you brought us before? That was written by Aelian, a learned man who lived at the time of the Caesars. For it to reach us in this room, in this hour, the lines within it had to survive a dozen centuries. A scribe had to copy it, and a second scribe, decades later, had to recopy that copy, transform it from a scroll to a codex, and long after the second scribe's bones were in the earth, a third came along and recopied it again, and all this time the book was being hunted. One bad-tempered abbot, one clumsy friar, one invading barbarian, and overturned candle, a hungry worm — and all those centuries are undone.

The uncertainties of survival or loss, and of the simple identification of possibly extant texts, were also put to good use in medieval litera-

1. Johns argued that many features were as messy during the early period of print as they had been before – anonymous works, pamphlets in many different versions, pirated works, no copyright etc. But in the longer term there is surely a large difference. First of all, the publication of a printed text usually ensues in many surviving identical copies, creating a wider horizon of reference to one and the same text – however faulty this text or edition might be. But even with poor quality printed texts, the accumulation of knowledge (and corrections) is a much more linear process, because reference is easy. Secondly, the moment of publication is a single one – there is a very clear before and after (even if not always known). From another angle Asdal and Jordheim also argue that the printing press represents a major divide: after that we can begin to treat texts as 'immutable mobiles'.

2. On medieval publishing, see Niskanen, Tahkokallio.

ture itself. In the eleventh-century Persian national epic, *Shahnameh* (c. 1010), there is a recurrent reference to "the book" behind the narrative, as is also the case in the twelfth-century German *Kaiserchronik* (c. 1150). The truth in both cases is more likely to be a mixture of textual sources plus a good amount of invention – rather than a specific book. In blatant fictions we also find this ploy, as in the unprecedented Constantinopolitan romance by Chrétien de Troyes, *Cligés* (c. 1176), and in the counterfactual twelfth-century *Gesta Herewardi* in which an Anglo-Saxon hero is imagined having given William the Conqueror real resistance. The author had found and old manuscript on whose authority we should believe this story, but unfortunately, he reports, it was already disintegrating and cannot be consulted by anyone now.[3] The most famous case of inventing a book behind the book was perhaps that of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Gesta Britonum* published in 1137/38: not only does he claim to have translated the entire chronicle from an old book in the ancient British language, he even taunts his fellow prominent historians of his day that they have no way of matching this, as they do not have access to that book.[4] One of these historians, Henry of Huntingdon, was in for something of a shock when he was notified about Geoffrey's unique pre-Christian history of the Isles, which he then attempted to work into his own work in a later installment.[5]

2. Key questions about medieval book searching

The history of exciting manuscript book discoveries is often concentrated on the hunt for classical Roman texts by fifteenth-century Italian humanists. But, as Kathryn Kerby-Fulton maintains:

> ..so many medieval book hunters (were) concerned to acquire a text with guaranteed authorial authenticity and completeness. […] The fact that this concern is today so often thought to of as merely a humanist or 'Renaissance' preoccupation is in part because the serious medieval attempts to address it have still too rarely been highlighted.[6]

With the present collection we want to fill part of this gap. The case studies in this volume argue that anonymous or little-known medieval scholars deserve a large part of the credit for the survival of both pagan and patristic texts from antiquity into the Middle Ages and beyond.

The survival of the Roman classics we first owe to Carolingian scholars who – in a process that is mostly lost to us – salvaged late

3. Schmidt, 77.

4. For these cases, see Agapitos and Mortensen; Geoffrey of Monmouth, *De Gestis Britonum*, Prologus 2 and XI.208.

5. Henry of Huntingdon, *Historia Anglorum*, ed. D. Greenway, Introduction ci; book 8, Epistola Warino Britoni (pp. 558-559): "Hoc tamen anno, cum Romam proficiscirer, apud Beccensem abbatiam scripta rerum predictarum stupens inueni. Quorum excerpta, ut in epistola decet, breuissime scilicet, tibi dilectissime mitto." ("But this year, when I was on my way to Rome, to my amazement I discovered, at the abbey of Le Bec, a written account of those very matters. Of this I send you, dear friend, some excerpts, greatly shortened so as to fit into a letter.")

6. In her afterword to Johnston and van Deussen, 249.

antique exemplars from Italy, copied them (and then to a large degree discarded the ancient books). The impressive results of this process are known to us, but we can only guess at how organized or haphazard this search of old texts was.[7] But from the ninth century onwards – in both the Greek and the Latin world – there would be a number of intellectuals who conversed about and sought out old volumes, in the style of Thomas Becket (c. 1115-1170) as reported by his biographer Herbert of Bosham: during Becket's exile in France, his excitement over the presence of Carolingian treasures (classical and patristic) turned him into a great searcher of texts:

> In quarumque ecclesiarum omnibus armariis nullum audiebat in Galiis esse antiquitatis uel approbatae auctoritatis librum, quem transcribi non faceret…

> (He did not hear about one single book of great age or acknowledged authority in every book chest of every church in Gaul without having it copied).[8]

This anecdote illustrates another point made by Kerby-Foulton, namely that book history is "the history of intellectual desire." A desire for texts, whether already famous or canonical, or yet unknown, or just heard of, but in all cases a desire for the authentic, genuine, original form of a text.[9] They pursued their objective with admirable perseverance. Cicinnius, a tenth-century translator of hagiographical texts from Naples, when trying to locate the Greek original of the story of Saints Cosmas and Damian, had to first break the resistance of the Greek monks who were initially reluctant to share it. Roger Bacon claimed that he had been searching for Seneca's *Dialogues* for over twenty years. The twelfth-century anonymous translator of Ptolemy's *Almagest*, upon hearing about the arrival of the book from Constantinople to Sicily, described his mythological struggles of reaching the desired object:

> rei diu multumque desiderate spe succensu, Scilleos latratus non exhorrui, Caribdim permeavi, ignea Ethne fluenta circuivi, eum queritans a quo mei finem sperabam desiderii.

> (fired by the hope of (obtaining) something so long and ardently desired, I did not shudder at the thought of howling Scylla, I passed through Charybdis, I negotiated Etna flowing with lava, as I sought out the man, who, I hoped, would furnish me with the object of my desires.)[10]

7. For the Roman classics this is documented in depth by Munk Olsen in the chapter "Recherches des modèles et copie des manuscrits" 90-151.

8. Munk Olsen, 90.

9. Kerby-Foulton, 250, argues that this desire of original, authentic texts is so strong that it even has as its counterpart, "a genuine fear of the sloppy extract."

10. Gutas, 520, quoted and discussed in this issue by Beullens.

11. Dolbeau, 150.

12. Reynolds, 360–61.

Anonymity is one of the difficulties in uncovering medieval book search. We know next to nothing about the translator of Ptolemy. The other difficulty is that medieval scholars tended to be very selective, when describing the particulars of their discovery: Cicinnius omitted crucial details such as the location, the name of the monastery, and the identities of the monks involved.[11] Bacon, when in 1266 he announced to Pope Clement IV that he had found a manuscript of Seneca's *Dialogues*, described the text as excellent quality and very rare. Still, Bacon had not provided the pope with any specifics about the manuscript. Instead of sending a copy to the pope, he had only made excerpts from the manuscript, which then constituted the third part of book seven of his *Opus Maius*.[12]

Despite the difficulties presented by the various sources, the articles in this volume manage to answer a series of crucial questions that allow us to see some patterns, some typologies emerging. These could be grouped in the following categories:

Who were interested in searching for books?

The scavengers ranged from high-profile actors such as diplomats, bishops, scholars to anonymous agents barely leaving any trace. They often received support from various institutions, including royal, papal, and imperial courts, bishoprics, monasteries, and universities. These scholars were seldom solitary, but parts of a network, engaged in an exchange of books with each other, like the Carolingian court intellectuals (Keskiaho), or the Italian humanists (Pade).

Why did they desire a particular text? What constituted its value?

The protagonists in this volume were mostly interested in authoritative texts, whether Christian, such as works of patristic authors as Augustine (Keskiaho, Jensen) or pagan, like works of Greek science and philosophy (Beullens). Sometimes their effort consisted in finding not only one, but several copies of the same text with the purpose of collating them and establish a correct reading or even to correct intentional falsifications (Keskiaho) or to prepare obtaining whole and good quality texts (Jensen). They had tried to supplement deficient texts: Aulus Gellius' *Attic Nights* constituted a combersome case for humanists, because his text is littered with Greek that was often corrupted during the transmission, and the correspondence of Guarino Veronese testifies to this effort of recovering the correct Greek passages (Pade). Sometimes, rare texts were used to fill lacunae in other textual collections: the Latin translation of a Greek homily by Eusebius for example had 'left' its

original context (as part of a large book that travelled from Italy to the North to be part of a Carolingian library) and had been used in a Latin homilary that lacked texts concerning the period of Easter (Conti).

What was their purpose with the text?
Medieval scholars searched for texts for various reasons. The obvious first reason was that they searched for the sake of their own learning. Testimony to this are the many glosses that accompany the texts in question, important sources of information about the readers' use of such texts, such as for example the notes in the *Astronomica* of Manilius, discovered by Gerbert of Aurillac in the library of Bobbio in the tenth century (Rossetti). Often these texts would constitute primary materials for their own writing projects; or, in case of translations, the basis of their translation projects. In this case the quality of the text was especially important, as it would bear on the quality of the translation (Beullens).

Finding materials for debates and controversies fuelled the urge of collecting and compiling authorities. Alcuin of York's interest in Augustine's works was motivated by his implication in the contemporary debate about the origin of the soul. Hincmar of Rheims used a whole group of assistants to find usable Augustinian arguments for the predestination controversy (Keskiaho).

Institutional concerns could also be at play: at the turn of the eleventh century, Herbert Losinga, bishop of Norwich went to great length to create a cathedral library at his new workplace (Niskanen).

The arrival of print did not put an end to manuscript search; indeed, the search just turned more feverish. Several early printing projects had veritable manuscript hunting expeditions at their core: the printed edition of the *Postillae* of the thirteenth-century scholastic theologian Hugo de Sancto Caro by Anton Koberger and Johann Amerbach left us a documentation of twenty-nine letters by the two men involved in unearthing the manuscripts needed for their publication (Jensen).

Where would they look? What circuits facilitated such hunts?
Ideal locations for book hunting included cities like Rome and Constantinople (Keskiaho, Beullens), as well as various courts (papal, episcopal, royal, and imperial), and libraries (both monastic and personal). Gatherings such as synods and councils also provided opportunities for finding texts. For contemporary works, a successful strategy was to contact the author directly. For instance, Peter of Nonantola wrote directly to Amalarius of Metz to obtain his works (Keskiaho).

Through what channels had the texts reached these places?
Books circulated as gifts, through diplomatic channels, with envoys frequently involved in searching and requesting books (Beullens). However, scholarly networks were perhaps the most efficient method. Numerous letters attest to the extensive exchange of books through intellectual connections. Keskiaho's analysis of the Carolingian scholarly correspondence of Alcuin of York, Hrabanus Maurus, and Lupus of Ferrières highlights many instances of such successful searches. Similar epistolary networks were those of Herbert Losinga (Niskanen), or Guarino Veronese (Pade).

What were the ways of acquiring one's own copy?
The desired text could unexpectedly appear as a gift, such as the Galen manuscript given to Robert of Anjou (r. 1309–1343) by the Byzantine Emperor Andronicus III (r. 1328–1341). Unexpected treasures could also be found during travels. For instance, Burgundio of Pisa discovered the commentary of John Chrysostom on the Gospel of John, which he had ordered to be copied while conducting business, allowing him to translate it on his return journey (Beullens). Lending books often caused significant anxiety, with owners reluctant to part with such precious objects even temporarily, often requiring strong persuasion (Keskiaho, Rossetti).

The print business has left us valuable documentation about the costs of such searches, including not only the price paid for the manuscript but also related expenses like travel, borrowing, or copying costs (Jensen).

The most extreme form of 'finding' (apart from stealing) was likely forging the desired text as seen in the thirteenth-century forgery of the so-called *de Vetula*, claimed to be a poem by Ovid, supposedly buried with him in his grave (Beullens).

3. Bibliography before print

Another consideration also lay behind this issue, one closely related to the theme of search: how was the art of bibliography practised before the age of print? Obviously, one had reasonably good track of the books of the Bible, the great patristic authorities, and the canonical classical works – although even here one was often faced with deficient copies, misattributions, unauthorized additions and other problems that did not have an immediate solution: there simply was

no archimedic point of textual reference in a world where every book was unique. There were admirable efforts by scholars to supplement, clean, and mend corrupt texts or to re-attribute them; this amounted to a certain accumulation of bibliographical knowledge in the most learned circles within certain disciplines, but it was, we believe, still a radically different situation than the world after print.

If one ventured beyond the most canonical and was interested, for example, in more recently composed works, bibliography was an impenetrable jungle, based on hearsay, specific networks, interests etc – and with absolutely no guarantee of any overview. There were book lists for some institutions, but there were no lists of the lists. Sometimes even for orientation in one's own institutional library, the use of multiple, complicated and incomplete documents were necessary.[13] The auto-bibliographies or self-commentaries of high-profile authors like Galen, Augustine and Dante were meant to weed out misunderstandings and additions that had accrued to their oeuvre in this wild bibliographical west.[14] But one thing is for a famous author to state that "that work is not mine, but this one is", it is much worse to guess the identity and authority of new or old works that suddenly surface, or to assess whether a reference to an otherwise unknown text carries any weight.

The fake books mentioned above were in a way the negative of the uncontrollable bibliography before print. The positive was that there were actually important texts – whether ancient or modern – hiding in some book collection of which no one had yet heard. We know this fascination in the most direct way from the testimony of the humanists, but the principles of haphazard navigation in the 'dark' bibliography was exactly the same before the early fifteenth century, although we have fewer names, dates and direct descriptions of book hunting. But indirectly, we believe there are many stories to be discovered about privileged access to rare texts, and we hope that the present essays may be helpful to open up this field.

13. Kaska, 2018.

14. See Marchesi, Singer; for a transnational perspective see Pizzone and Blankinship.

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