

What is Palaeography?

by Julian Brown

Palaeography means, in the strict sense, the study of ancient handwriting, and its basic objects are these: first, to read ancient texts with accuracy; secondly, to date and localize their handwriting. As such it is a major component of two other more complex disciplines; of diplomatic, which studies all aspects of documents and records; and of paleography in the wider sense, which studies all aspects of books produced by hand (manuscripts). It is to the palaeography of Western Europe in the wider sense that this paper is intended as an introduction; but the handwriting of documents--a subject which the handbooks of diplomatic generally leave to palaeography--will be included in the account of Latin and vernacular handwriting on pp. 60-72. Books are complex things. Their purpose is the communication of thought, mainly through texts to be read but also through illustrations designed to expound or expand the message of the texts. Every text and every cycle of illustration has a meaning and a history of its own, the elucidation of which is work for historians of language, literature and art, who use many different kinds of evidence, both internal to the texts and illustrations themselves and external. As a student of books, the palaeographer must naturally understand these larger branches of history, and that for two reasons: first because they provide him with invaluable help in his own special tasks of reading, dating and localizing books; and secondly because his own conclusions about the dates and origins of particular books are often vital parts of the evidence used by historians of literature and art. They, in return, are under a similar obligation to understand the methods and potentialities of palaeography. The ultimate justification of palaeographical research lies in its power to contribute to the history of thought, and especially of the long historical process by which all classical and medieval literature and much of medieval art have been transmitted to the present.

The exact place of palaeography in the history of thought will be easier to define when we have considered what aspects of the manuscript book are the concern of palaeography and of no other discipline. Text and illustration apart, a book is still a complex physical object, with a long and often eventful history of its own; and there is much to be said for defining palaeography as the study of manuscript books as objects in themselves, and of their individual histories. the questions that palaeographers try to answer about a book are these. How, when, where, by whom, and for whom was it first made? How has it been altered since? Who have owned it and used it?

Handwriting, with which--as the name implies--palaeography began, is only the most obvious and important of a whole group of operations involved in the manufacture of a book; and the division of labour, especially in the later Middle Ages, often meant that several different craftsmen worked on the production of the same book. The organization of the book trade is, therefore, part of our subject; and so, when we turn to the fates of books after their manufacture, is the history of libraries, public and private.

The physical aspects of a manuscript book that have to be considered are these, in the order in which they come in the process of manufacture: (1) the writing material (papyrus, membrane, or paper); (2) its arrangement to form either a roll in which each sheet of material is fastened to the one before, or else a codex, in which groups of sheets are folded to form quires; (3) the ruling of the sheets in preparation for the writing (with subsequent

numbering, etc., of the quires); (4) the writing of the main text, often by more than one scribe; (5) its correction and annotation, not necessarily by any of the scribes who wrote it; (6) the writing of titles etc. at the beginning and/or end of chapters, books and texts: which it is convenient to call rubrication; (7) the decoration, which may include several distinct operations, from the provision of simple coloured initials, through the painting of more elaborate illuminated and/or historiated initials and borders, to the drawing or painting of illustrations, generally called miniatures; (8) the binding of the book, which includes the method by which the quires of a codex are sewn together as well as the materials and decoration of the covers (most manuscripts have been rebound at least once since they were first written).

Knowledge of handwriting--palaeography in the strict sense--is relevant mainly to the central operations of writing the text, its correction and annotation, and its rubrication; and of course to the evaluation of notes of ownership and other additions made after the book was first completed. It is a complicated subject in itself, and includes the very important matter of the history of abbreviations, as well as subsidiary matters like punctuation and orthography. Knowledge of the other five aspects of book production listed above, and especially knowledge of the decoration, can supplement, often in a very revealing way, what can be learned about a book from its handwriting; and during the last twenty years the word 'codicology' has been widely used in Europe as a name for the study of the aspects of manuscript books other than handwriting. It corresponds to the German term *Handschriftenkunde*, which was introduced early in the nineteenth century. In the English-speaking countries, however, palaeography is generally understood in the wider sense, as including the subjects dealt with by codicology or *Handschriftenkunde*. We may now consider in more detail, in the light of this account of the immediate aims of paleography, what it can contribute to the study of texts and of illustration in manuscripts. The basic element in the study of texts is textual criticism, which seeks to recover, by comparing the more or less faulty versions that survive in manuscripts, and thereafter by emendation, what ancient authors actually wrote. The textual critic uses palaeography for two main purposes: first, to read his manuscripts correctly; and secondly, during the process of recension and reconstruction, to date and localize them as a means of discovering which of them are likely to have been copied from others that survive. The textual critic whose sole aim is the recovery of his author's text tries to be economical in the number of manuscripts he collates, and the ability to date and localize manuscripts with a view to eliminating the copies of existing manuscripts can, with some but not all classes of texts, lighten his labour very considerably. The textual critic who goes further and arranges in textual families all the surviving manuscripts of his text, whether or not they help him to reconstruct its original form, and then--with the help of palaeography--determines their date and origin and the hands through which they have subsequently passed, contributes thereby to the history of the text, what Ludwig Traube called *Überlieferungsgeschichte*. Here textual criticism and palaeography join forces to collaborate with literary history in discovering the paths by which ancient texts have been transmitted to our own day. Without the contribution of palaeography, our knowledge of the history of scholarship and thought would be much poorer than it is, since we should have to rely for our information about literary traditions mainly on quotations or paraphrases of, and references to, one author by another.

Thanks to palaeography and the study of library catalogues, we can learn when, where and by whom texts were, or could have been, read, even if the readers were not themselves authors. Occasionally, palaeography can even reach back beyond the oldest surviving manuscript of a text, by explaining their errors in terms of scribal misunderstanding of letter forms or abbreviations in lost exemplars written in different scripts from those of the surviving manuscripts: a ninth-century scribe writing Caroline minuscule might divide words in the wrong way, if his exemplar was ancient and written in scriptura continua; mistake E for F, or I for T, if its script was rustic capitals; or misunderstand certain abbreviations, if its script was Insular or Spanish.

Books are by no means the only medium in which late antique and especially medieval art has been transmitted to us--carvings in stone and in ivory, and metalwork are common enough for most periods; but paintings on walls are rare before the twelfth century, and paintings on panels before the fourteenth. Without the miniatures preserved, and generally well preserved, in books our knowledge of medieval art in Europe would be far poorer than it is; and for some areas, including England, it would hardly exist. The best illuminated manuscripts contain the finest and most advanced examples of painting in any period; and since books were portable, they share with ivory carving and metalwork an important role in the diffusion of new styles. The contents of a library have often survived when the church or palace in which it was housed has been destroyed or defaced, along with the rest of its furniture.

Like all archaeological disciplines, palaeography works outwards from the known to the unknown; and many different aspects of a book can be used as evidence for its date and place of origin. The regular development of all the various crafts, including handwriting, that were involved in the manufacture of books enables us to arrange our material in the right order; notes by scribes or illuminators sometimes allow us to assign exact dates and localities to particular books in a series; some kinds of texts, such as the kalendars and litanies in liturgical manuscripts, contain variable elements which reveal when, where and for whose use book was made; the subsequent history (provenance) of a book may suggest the place from which it originally came; textual history can often contribute; since styles of decoration and illustration in books changed more rapidly, from time to time and from place to place, than styles of handwriting, and since they always kept more or less in step with changes in other branches of art, archaeology and the history of art are invaluable guides. The palaeographer's work is indeed complicated, but its very complexity enables him to receive much help from, and give much help to, specialists in other fields. It is often laborious, but need never be lonely.