

BOOK REVIEW

Bruce Holsinger. *On Parchment: Animals, Archives, and the Making of Culture from Herodotus to the Digital Age*

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022. Pp. 448. \$40.00 (cloth).

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The production and use of parchment has a long and fascinating history, which continues into the present day. This attractively designed publication provides a different take on this history and the material's impact on the cultures that used it. As Bruce Holsinger explains in the Introduction, "My aim in what follows is to defamiliarize the animal medium in ways that allow us to examine it both up close and from a distance, and thus to avoid easy generalizations about historical conceptions of parchment that could be quite diverse in their moral, theological, and practical resonance" (5). This publication also stands apart in that it includes a significant stage for the author, who weaves himself into the narrative in a pronounced manner: "I wrote *On Parchment* in part as an attempt to explore my own enduring enchantment with a medium I have come to know ... as a student ... literary scholar ... occasional editor ... teacher ... and as a novelist" (7). The author aims to reach an audience of both specialists and readers who have never "read from, seen, or smelled a parchment book" (7).

The volume consists of three parts. The first is titled "The Medium and Its Making" and touches on familiar aspects in the study of parchment: its production (chapter 3: "Gristle, Stink, Skin"), animalic origins as visible on the page (chapter 4: "The Flayed Folio"), vellum made from unborn animals (chapter 5: "Uterine Vellum and the Page Unborn"), and a quantitative discussion of the number of animals that were turned into books (chapter 6: "Questions of Quantity: Membrane and Archival Scale"). The discussion in these chapters covers Antiquity and the Middle Ages, with an emphasis on the latter period. In addition, in chapter 1 ("The Book of the Dun Cow") the author reflects on parchment as it was perceived by those who used it ("parchment cultures") and the ethics and morality of using animals for books and distributing written information. Chapter 2 ("Hair, Flesh, Sense") focuses on the experience of handling a page made of animals—and includes entertaining anecdotes from the author's classroom experience. The narrative and images in this first part produce an attractive and informative assessment of parchment as a writing material.

The second part is titled "The Medium and Its Messages" and touches on a variety of topics that are not commonly encountered in publications on parchment. While the first part of this book is mostly historical, if not book-historical in nature, the second part provides strong connections to literary studies. Several chapters focus on literary texts and how parchment as a material and medium is regarded by authors and poets in Antiquity (chapter 8, on St Augustine), the Middle Ages (chapter 9, on parchment in Old English, Old French, and Old German literature; Chapter 10, on human skin and the body of Christ), and the early modern period (chapter 12, on Shakespeare). These chapters connect most clearly to the author's ambition to present more than just a historical narrative, i.e., to "recover

some of the many ways that the written cultures of the past conceived of themselves through those creatures whose skins would carry them into the future” (4).

The third and shortest part, titled “The Medium and Modernity,” focuses on current novelties in parchment research: Biocodicology (chapter 13) and Ecocodicology (Chapter 14), as well as the use of parchment in art (chapter 15). The concluding Epilogue of the book, “Digital Vellum,” turns to the digital survival of parchment, touching on its successes in social media and digitization. This third part is a fascinating inclusion and I found myself wishing it were more extensive.

The blend of historical investigation and personal reflection in this publication is unusual, and the author is to be applauded for balancing the two so successfully. At the same time, the ambition to reach both inexpert and expert readers comes with a price for the latter group. While the chapter titles are clever, for example, they do not form clear sign posts for those looking for specific information (there is a detailed Subject Index, however). Footnotes are sparse and it can be challenging to find the sources used for the many highly interesting examples and stories that are sprinkled throughout the chapters. Moreover, for those who turn to this book primarily for the historical dynamic, the “literary” narrative style can be distracting at times.

Overall, however, *On Parchment* is a joy to read; its attractive design and spectacular images add significantly to this experience. The reader is introduced to a wealth of information, from the historical origins of production and early adoption in Antiquity, to how the material was key in medieval written culture, and how the imperfections on the skins came to be. In addition, there is significant attention for what is written *on* parchment sheets, from its early days up to the modern era. Given the publication’s contents and scope, and considering how the personal voice of the author rings through the volume, the book’s title, *On Parchment*, is particularly well chosen.