

Old books hide even older secrets from Middle Ages

By Paula Simons, Edmonton Journal October 20, 2012



An 18th century Latin dictionary published in Switzerland hides inside the fragments of an early 13th century Italian manuscript of the Justinian Code at the University of Alberta's Bruce Peel Library in Edmonton on Oct. 18, 2012.

The book before me is huge and heavy, bound, not in paper or cardboard, but with planks of solid oak, held together by thick cords.

It looks like a prop from a fantasy film. It's actually a Latin dictionary, published in the early 1700s.

It's normally held in a vault in the Bruce Peel Special Collections Library, underground at the University of Alberta. The library has no record of when or how this book arrived in its collection. But as old as the dictionary appears, it hides a secret far older.

Inside the heavy oak cover is a parchment liner. Other pieces of the same parchment are stuffed into the spine, to bind the book block together.

The parchment wrapper is far older than the dictionary: a medieval manuscript, hand-written on calfskin vellum.

[Erik Kwakkel](#), 42, is a codicologist — an expert on books as physical objects — at Leiden University in the Netherlands. His particular expertise is the history of 12th and 13th century manuscripts. He’s in Edmonton this month as a [distinguished guest lecturer](#) at the U of A — and at the moment, he’s leading an enthusiastic group of students and staff on a treasure hunt.

“It’s your chance. Get your hands dirty. Touch the Middle Ages,” Kwakkel teases. “This is a very exciting thing to do.”

We’re prospecting for lost medieval book pages blithely recycled and reused by commercial printers, centuries later, to create durable bindings for “mass-produced” books hot off the post-Gutenberg presses that put those long-forgotten scribes out of work.

The time-travelling stowaways aren’t actually hard to find. Some of the books are wrapped in dust-jackets made of 800-year-old sheet music, or illuminated manuscripts with real gold leaf, still sparkly after all these centuries. In other cases, they’re smaller scraps, peeking out from the spine. Big or small, students carefully catalogue them all.

It seems callous that 17th and 18th century bookmakers simply cut up gorgeous hand-crafted manuscripts for scrap. But Kwakkel says many books, written on calf, deer, or kidskin, were lost forever, rendered for glue.

“We are actually excavating medieval remains from the bookbinding of a modern product,” he says. “They tend not to be very valuable, because they’re kind of scruffy. But the value is not so much that they provide us a new text, but that they are blips on the radar of medieval textual culture.”

The parchment I’ve found is a perfect case in point.

Kwakkel opens his laptop, to Google Books. He picks out some phrases from the Latin text, in an ornate Gothic hand — “est pignora” which means “to give a lesser pledge” and “sine dubio” which means “without doubt.” Within seconds, the search engine identifies the text — it’s a copy of the Justinian Code, the foundational books of laws inherited from the Roman Empire, upon which medieval law was largely based.

Once, only highly educated, multilingual scholars would be able to look at a scrap of medieval text and be able to place it. Now, anyone with a smartphone and Google Books can make an instant ID. It’s a radical democratization of arcane knowledge. Ironically, the medieval scribes who were displaced by the printing press are now having their work rediscovered via the very technology that is displacing the print text.

“Ten years ago, this work would not have been possible. I love the irony, but also the blend,” says Kwakkel, who often [live-tweets](#) his treasure hunts. “The one complements the other. A very modern medium is pulling these texts together.”

Kwakkel believes “my” copy of the code was crafted by an Italian scribe in the late 1200s. It doesn’t have gold leaf or fancy illustrations. In the margin, though, some medieval law

student has sketched a doodle of a man with an absurdly-long nose and a fishy body. Kwakkel thinks the cartoon fish-man was a sort of book mark, the nose pointing to an important legal point someone wanted to remember.

As I run my finger over the 750-year-old Gothic letters, the silly, delightfully human doodle, I feel a kinship with the anonymous artisan who crafted this page. These days, with pundits routinely predicting the imminent end of print, I often feel like a monk in a scriptorium myself, swept up in a digital revolution. Somehow, it's both humbling and reassuring to see that the handiwork of a 13th century Italian scribe has been accidentally preserved by the serendipity of history, only to wind up — no one quite knows how — in an Edmonton library.