My Favourite Things

Object Preferences
in Medieval and Early Modern
Material Culture

edited by

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Desire for Contact

I want to touch the Middle Ages. I want to hold all of the works of art in all the museums. I want to turn the pages, not by touching a screen or mouse in the British Library’s *Turning The Pages™* app, but by touching vellum in the British Library’s reading room. I want to open and close the wings on altarpieces, to feel ivories warm in my hand, to drink from the Mérode Cup while achieving checkmate with the Lewis Chessmen. I have even been tempted, like John, to eat the occasional book (fig. 1). Lead paints (and laws) make this a bad idea. Some of this is impossible; some is not. With a bit of planning and funding and effort, I can get myself to the British Library, where the generous librarians allow me access to wonders. With the right letters of introduction and negotiations, I can gain access to other collections, other treasures, other experiences, but I will never drink from a medieval cup, I suspect. I am deeply fortunate to have the sorts of access I have, and I try not to push my luck, so that such privileges may continue and expand.

Fig. 1: Saint John Eats the Book Received from the Angel, Getty Apocalypse. Los Angeles, The J. Paul Getty Museum, MS Ludwig III 1, fol. 15v. England (probably London), ca. 1255–1260. Digital image courtesy of the Getty’s Open Content Program
Michael Camille, though so dedicated to the “image” that the term opens the title of his most prominent work,1 nonetheless remained committed to haptic experiences. He argued against the dominance of the “linguistic model,” writing in 1996:

We cannot treat works from the past […] as things only to be read in our heads. Our images are not just about networks but about textures. They are not read on screen but felt on flesh, and pushed out of matter even to the level of pain.2

Openness about scholarly lusts for physical contact has become more frequently expressed in the two decades since. Angela Bennett provides a particularly open, even naked example of such desires in her “Touched for the Very First Time: Losing My Manuscript Virginity.” She invokes Barthes’ *The Pleasure of the Text* in writing that:

I had […] expected to encounter a Barthesian erotic body of bliss within the page, one that would adumbrate the shape of the creators as I thumbed through the pages of the codices. Instead, what I encountered was a multiplicity of bodies reaching out through the pages. Seeking a lover, I stumbled upon and into an orgy.3

Though it was avoided for generations of medieval studies, sexualization of contact with manuscripts is easy, owing to their fleshly pages, pungent scents, and their fetish-bindings of leather and clasps and chains. Owing to all the wonderfully sexual imagery in the margins of Gothic manuscripts, all the penises and penetrations, which after a while become a bit overwhelming in their flowering profusion (fig. 2). – Owing to tremulous, fevered poems written on the pages of these volumes and animating medieval objects, such as the riddles of the Exeter Book. Riddle 33/91, for example, tells us:

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Min haefod is homere gehuren,
seropila wund, sworfen feole.
Oft ic begine bat me ongean stiach,
oppe ic biutan seade, bringum gyrded
hearde wið heardum, bindan pyrel
forh ascufan bat frean mines
mod P freopad middehithum.
Hwilum ic under hae bregde nebbe,
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byrde þæs hordes, ponne min blæford wile
lafe þicgan, para þe be of life het
wælcræfte awrecan willum sinum.4

My head is beaten with a hammer,
wounded with sharp tools, scoured by a file.
Often, I gape wide at what stabs against me,
when I, girded with rings, must strike,
hard against hard, pierced from behind,
must shove forth what protects my lord’s
heart-joy, at midnight.
Sometimes I drag with a beak under my back
when, guardian of the horde, my lord wishes
to take the relics of those he had ordered
driven from life by slaughter-craft for his own purpose.5

Fig. 2: Nun Picking Fruit of the Penis Tree, Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Le Roman de la Rose*. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS Français 25526, f. 106v (detail), France, fourteenth century. Image in the public domain

5 My thanks to Susan M. Kim for her advice on the translation of this riddle.
What is the object speaking here? It is not, ultimately, clear, but it is still pretty hot. As Sarah Higley argues, the text of some of the riddles may well be intentionally unclear, making the pious monk struggle and sweat over exactly what prurient meaning is concealed in the vague grammar of the poem.\(^6\) The Onion riddle is a clear joke, and tricks my students into sexual readings of innocent objects, just as surely as it did Anglo-Saxon monks:

\[
\begin{align*}
Ic & eom \text{ wunderlicu wib} \quad \text{wifum on byl}te \\
\text{burgsittendra} & \quad \text{nympe bonan anum} \\
\text{sta}p\text{o}l \text{ min is steapheab} & \quad \text{stonde ic on bedde} \\
\text{nepan r}h \text{athwar} & \quad \text{nepo}h \text{ hul}wam \\
\text{fal cy}r\text{t}e\text{n}u & \quad \text{ceorles dek}\text{st}or \\
\text{modwlonc meowle} & \quad \text{pa}t \text{ beo on nec grip}e\text{b} \\
\text{ras}e\text{d} & \quad \text{mec on rondne} \\
\text{ræ}g\text{e}d & \quad \text{mec on fasten} \\
\text{mines gemotes} & \quad \text{se}\text{he me}c \text{near}\text{w}a\text{b} \\
\text{wif wund} & \text{ēn locc} & \text{wart bid }\text{ past}.
\end{align*}
\]

I’m a wonderful thing, a joy to women, useful to neighbours. I scathe no city-dweller except only my destroyer.

My position is tall and lofty over the bed; Down below, I’m hairy in unknown places. Sometimes dares a fully beautiful churl’s daughter, a proud damsel, to grip me. She rushes me to redness, plunders my head, connects with me firmly, soon feels my meeting, seeks to squeeze me, a woman with braided locks. Wet is that eye.

I love it. The riddle is a beautiful exercise in Anglo-Saxon alliteration and linguistic play – *sta*po*l min is st*ea*pheab  *stonde ic on bedde* – full of clever misdirection and clear intent to fool by playing to base interests. This is a moment of human contact across a millennium. My students may have quite a lot of trouble connecting with medieval mystical practices or abstruse theological debates, but they, like so many humans before them, still titter at sex jokes. But while I agree that there is sexual content all over manuscripts and other medieval objects – oh, the pilgrimage badg-

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\(^7\) Baum, *Anglo-Saxon Riddles*, 74/25.
es! – and I love the provocative writing of Camille and Segler, the act of sex is, I think, too easy an answer, to rough a metaphor, to describe my desire to hold manuscripts, anyway. The experience of handing thousand-year-old books is exciting, no question, but not arousing. It is, at least for me, nothing at all like sex. How else, then, can we move to describe the experience?

The other obvious metaphor for the experience of traveling long distances to spend meaningful time with resonant objects comes from within the period we study, the Middle Ages. It is autochthonous, authentically medieval in a way that post-Freudian readings of manuscript use cannot really be. *Id est:* Our desire for the objects of our attention is like that of medieval pilgrims for the relics they traipsed across the world not only to see, but to touch, taste, imbibe, to be anointed with, to strap to their ailing bodies, to sleep next to, or even with (linking back to Camille and Bennett).

But this is also too easy, too facile a comparison. Surely, our goals are not theirs. As Peter Brown writes, the earliest Christians sought contact with “men – raw individuals who believed that they were the agents of vast forces,” but that this soon gave way to an interest in things. As he writes, these objects lasted while mere men came and passed away. The new devotion was an upsurge of loyalty to holy things, while the enthusiasm of previous centuries had concentrated on holy men. In Rome and in Gaul, the relic and the martyr’s grave totally ousted the living holy man in the popular imagination.

Brown italicized “things” and “men” to highlight the shift he was tracking in early pilgrimage practices, but the key commonality linking these nouns is the adjective that proceeds both: “holy.” Christian pilgrimage began with travel to the so-called “Holy Land,” and this was the main destination until the Umayyad conquest of the

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We often talk about these pilgrims as proto-tourists, and cite texts like *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Book of John Mandeville* as evidence of medieval pleasure-travel. For example, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen describes travel to Jerusalem as “this pilgrimage that all serious medieval tourists eventually take.” But is this the right metaphor?

Early in its history, as the practice of pilgrimage became more common, the importance of travel to the “Holy Land” diminished. As Jaś Elsner and Joan-Pau Rubíés write:

> By the end of the fourth century, the entire landscape of the Roman empire would be dotted with martyria, shrines and churches marking the specific spots where important saints had lived, the places where their bodies finally came to rest, and the location of significant artefacts associated with them, such as the True Cross.

The cities in the “Holy Land” were replaced by portable objects distributed throughout Europe. Gregory of Tours, as Peter Brown notes, described how “relics were everywhere, scattered throughout the entire Christian world. In every region, there were specks of dust unlike all other specks of dust, fragments of bone unlike other fragments, tombs unlike other tombs.” Similarly, the medieval objects we now travel to find are scattered from their original locations. Yes, the Hereford Map, probably produced around 1305 for and perhaps in Hereford, is still in the Cathedral, where I have seen it several times. The Franks Casket, a complex eight-century carved English box, is still in England, or rather, again in England after a sojourn of unknown length in Auzon, France, where it was discovered in the nineteenth century. Since we do not know where in England it was made, we do not know how far from its point of origin its current resting place, the British Museum, is. However, one panel from the English Franks Casket has been de-

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15 Thomas de Wesselow, “Locating the Hereford Mappamundi,” *Imago Mundi* 65/2 (June 2013): 180–206, 184, concludes that “a variety of evidence proves that the map triptych was made sometime around 1300.” Marcia Kupfer, *Art and Optics in the Hereford Map* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 1, also places it “c. 1300.”
tached since the time of its sale “presumably in the first half of the [nineteenth] century” to “a Professor Mathieu of Clermont Ferrand, in Auvergne, who in vain offered a reward for the missing end, which had quite disappeared.” In order to see this “missing end,” missing no longer, we must – “must” – head to Florence, as it is now housed in the Museo Nazionale del Bargello (fig. 3). Things do not generally stay where they were made over the span of several hundred years and more. Even buildings sometimes wander. I can visit the twelfth-century chapter house of the Cistercian monastery of Santa Maria de Ovila, built in Trillo, Guadalajara, Spain, just by driving ten miles up the road from Chico, California to the Abbey of New Clairvaux in the tiny town of Vina. Their Spanish-style wines are a nice compliment to the strangely displaced architecture, intended as one of William Randolph Hearst’s medievalist fantasies, but abandoned in the Depression. It might have become an indoor swimming pool for Hearst’s mother, but instead has become reincorporated into a monastery.

Fig. 3: Right panel, Franks Casket. Florence, Museo Nazionale del Bargello. England, eighth century. Photo: Asa Simon Mittman

These are my travels, but what do they have in common with those of medieval pilgrims? There are objects at the core of both, but this is a thin thread of connectivity. What were they after, all of these pilgrims traveling to these relics, be they in Bethlehem or Bristol, Cavalry or Canterbury? Some sought travel and pleasure, of course, but a great many sought healing, contact with the divine, and experiences that were otherworldly. From the earliest pilgrims, such as Paula, an early Christian disciple of Saint Jerome, to Margery Kempe in the fifteenth century, pilgrims claim to have not only visited places in the present, but to have witnessed events in the past, as if there and then. At Bethlehem, Paula claimed

17 Napier, Franks Casket, 3.
that she could behold with the eyes of faith the infant Lord wrapped in
swaddling clothes and crying in the manger, the wise men worshipping Him,
the star shining overhead, the virgin mother, the attentive foster-father, the
shepherds coming by night to see the word that had come to pass.19

Similarly, Margery Kempe said that “sche saw Seynt Anne gret wyth chylde,”
that she wept and sobbed so plentifully as thow sche had seyn owyr Lord wyth
hir bodfyly ey sufferyng hyr Passyon at that tyme. Befor hir in hir sowle sche
saw hym veryly be contemplacyon, and that causyd hir to have compasyon. And
whan thei cam up onto the Mount of Calvarye … in the cite of hir sowle sche
saw veryly and frescly how owyr Lord was crucifyed. Beforn hir face sche
herd and saw in hir gostly syght the mornyng of owyr Lady, of Sen John and
Mary Maudelyn, and of many other that lovyd owyr Lord.20

These medieval pilgrims see the divine events of salvation history unfolding before
their eyes, because of their proximity to the sites and objects connected therewith.
I, on the other hand, do not seek divine visions, healing, or other otherworldly
phenomena. I seek knowledge, understanding, contact with the human, and expe-
riences terrestrial rather than extra-terrestrial. And while I enjoy the sexualized
vocabulary of fleshly contact with manuscripts, I reject sloppy pseudo-mystical ter-
minology to describe the experience of contacting medieval works of art. They are
fascinating, charged objects, which build up their potential over the centuries, but
they are human artifacts, not meteors that fell from heaven.

I have been on a few pseudo-pilgrimages, long treks to bring me into physical
proximity to relics and “relics,” to bits of human bone and blood relinquished by
saints, and to bits of animal bone and skin relinquished by or ripped from beasts
before being wrought by human hands, and then cast into deep history, enduring
the same vicissitudes of chance that have taken so many of their similars and simul-
acra from us. As Dario Gamboni, reminds us regarding all artefacts, “it is their
normal fate to disappear.”21 This is particularly true of early medieval work. Anglo-
Saxonists have dwelled on this sorrowful fact at length, so much so that comments
on loss are something of a trope with which surveys on the period tend to begin.22

C. R. Dodwell provides a list of many forces that destroy art, medieval and mod-
ern: grave robbers, fire, reconstruction of churches, reclaiming of precious metals

series, vol. 6 (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1893).
20 Lynn Staley, ed., The Book of Margery Kempe (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996),
lines 406, 1568–77, available online at The Book of Margery Kempe (no date)
2018).
21 Dario Gamboni, The Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism since the French Revolution (New Ha-
22 See Asa Simon Mittman and Susan M. Kim, Inconceivable Beasts: The Wonders of the East in the
and gems, tithings, raiders, and on. Some losses were rooted in altruism and self-preservation, as when St. Æthelwold and others “all sold off treasures to pay for food for themselves and others during various famines.” These losses are profoundly distorting. Leslie Webster notes “the very obvious fact that what survives today represents but a tiny fraction of the rich art treasures that once filled the halls and courts, churches and monasteries.” These poor rates of survival “give a totally inadequate picture of the splendours and grandeur” of some Anglo-Saxon arts, most particularly gold work, textiles, and wall painting. In a sense, then, all works from the period are precious relics, odd, chance survivals that dodged the many forces that claimed the majority of contemporary creations. Each object that slipped through – by dint of centuries of protective care, or by complete accident – is a wonder, a marvel, a treasure, a time capsule, a time machine.


25 Leslie Webster, Anglo-Saxon Art (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 9. It is worth mention that David Wilson argued against this trend, particularly referencing Dodwell. Wilson argues that there are enough survivals for “a true sequence of Anglo-Saxon art [that] can, despite all the losses, be built up on the evidence of what survives.”
26 Dodwell, “Art Survivals,” 12.
I have laid my hands on a few purported actual relics: The skull of St. Balbina, a virgin martyr, enshrined in an ornate, naturalistic reliquary bust in Belgium, c. 1520, and now housed in The Cloisters Museum in New York City (fig. 4); the blood of Christ, or, at least, a rock crystal vial containing his blood (fig. 5); or a glass cylinder surrounding the rock crystal containing his blood; or someone’s blood; or something’s; or something. These contacts were perhaps disrespectful, since I did not approach them with anything like devotion. I have seen people genuflect before them. I have seen them cry. But I did not, would not. Rather, I unintentionally played into the medieval trope of the doubting Jew who mocks the power of relics and the credulousness of those who seek them out, until the moment in the tale where I should be miraculously affected, but at each contact, I am neither punished nor healed. My experience runs counter, for example, to the familiar apocryphal story of a Jewish attack on [Mary’s] funeral procession

[…] a Jewish leader assaults Mary’s bier […] but his hands become stuck so that he cannot remove them, his arms palsy and wither, he feels agonizing pain, and every Jew in the mob that accompanies him is immediately struck blind.27

Fig. 5: Relic of the Holy Blood, Basilica of the Holy Blood, Bruges, Belgium, 1388. Photo: Ayack. Image courtesy of Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported

Numerous images of this narrative survive, such as a bas-de-page in the fourteenth-century Taymouth Hours (London, British Library, MS Yates Thompson 13, folio 133v) (fig. 6). Here, the Jew – small, stunted, in full profile to show off his bulbous nose – is suspended from the purple cloth draped over Mary’s bier. She is hidden from view, but the power of her relics is witnessed by the pain suffered by

the Jewish man who seems barely noticed by the apostles who hold her, and therefore him, aloft.

The *Golden Legend* contains a pointed version of this tale, centered on a figure known only as “the prince of the priests,” who assaults the Virgin Mary’s funeral bier:

*Tunc ad arma concurrunt et se mutuo hortabantur dicentes: venite, omnes discipulos occidamus ac corpus illud, quod seductorem illum portavit, ignibus comburamus. Princeps autem saeculorum hoc videns obstupuit et ira repletus ait: ecce tabernaculum illius, qui nos et genus nostrum conturbavit, qualem gloriam nunc accipit. Et hoc dicens inanus ad lectum misit volens illud evertere et ad terram deducere. Tunc manus eis subito ambae aruerunt et lectulo adhaeserunt, ita ut ad lectulum, manibus penderet et nimio cruciatu lamentabiliter ejularet, reliquis autem populus ab angelis, qui erant in nubibus, caecitate perassus est.*


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Fig. 6: Bas-de-page scene of the Funeral Procession for the Virgin, Taymouth Hours. London, British Library Yates Thompson MS 13 f. 133v, England (London?), 1325–1350. Image courtesy of Creative Commons Public Domain Mark 1.0
Then all ran to arms, and urged one another, saying: ‘Come, let’s kill all the disciples, and with fire burn the body that bore the deceiver.’ Astonished and filled with wrath, the prince of the priests, seeing this, was struck with wonder at the sight, and filled with rage, and he said: ‘Behold the tabernacle of that one, who has thrown us and our people into confusion, and what glory it now receives!’ Saying this, he reached out to the bed, saying he wanted to overthrow it and bring it to the ground. Suddenly, his hands withered, and both adhered to the bed, so that he hung from it by the hands, and, under great torture, wailed and lamented. The rest of the people were struck with blindness by the angels who were in the clouds.

Following the trope of the Jewish witness, he will eventually repent and convert and be healed. Of course. Unlike this fictional medieval Jewish figure, I bring no animosity to the relics I have touched; unlike the many medieval Christians – fictional and historical – who touched relics, I bring them no devotion. None of the medieval narratives remotely approximate my experience with them. My vision remains as impaired as ever, my neck as stiff, my teeth as brittle, but my hands also remain, at least for now, as free.

I have also traveled long distances to touch so-called “relics” of the Middle Ages, art objects that come down to us from the period. The Great Google tells me that it is over five thousand miles from Chico, California, where I live, to London, England, where I conduct much of my research: The Old English Illustrated Hexateuch (London, British Library, Cotton MS Claudius B.iv); the Beowulf Manuscript (British Library, Cotton MS Vitellius A.xv); maps by Matthew Paris (British Library, Royal MS 14 C.vii), and so on; more recently, the astonishing Franks Casket, down the road in the British Museum. My contact with Christian bodily relics amused me. My contact with some of these icons of medieval art history has made me tremble and sweat. I had trouble breathing when a curator at the British Library handed me the Beowulf Manuscript. Why? I did not experience anything like this when I touched facsimiles of it, or when I looked at images on-screen, or even when I stared through the Plexiglas vitrine, smudging its surface as I banged my forehead in my attempt to get closer. I am neither medieval pilgrim nor modern tourist. When I travel to the British Library or Parker Library, much as I generally enjoy the experience, I am a professional practicing my craft. The tax write-off is not a scam; this is my job.

Contact

So: several pages in, and I have covered what contact with medieval objects is not: Not sex; not religion. What is our experience with these objects, then? How else could we describe this? Many have turned to phenomenology, since as James Elkins notes, it “is not only the best available account of sense-transcriptions, it is
effectively the only one.” But, Elkins continues, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the foundational figure in the field, “does not provide the vocabulary to describe individual artworks,” and so “talk about materiality in art history and theory is effectively detached from the sources on which it depends.” Others have employed the hard sciences to see what they can yield. For example, how rough is a piece of parchment? As Angela Bennett writes, “I want to know if we can quantify the different feels of the various textures on parchment surfaces.”31 Bombard the surface with laser beams and measure the backscatter, and one can quantify just how rough that parchment is, but this is, in a sense, less information than we get rubbing our fingers over the surface. It is good to be able to say more than “pretty smooth,” and “kinda rough,” and such data might allow us to answer questions of provenance and production, but the data does not get at the human experience. Using a microscope and spectrograph photon detector, and feeding the input through data collection software is an indirect method to experience the texture of vellum. This produces black and white images that do not look anything like the surfaces of manuscripts (fig. 7). They are abstractions.

Fig. 7: Algorithmically reconstructed surface imaging produced with Princeton instruments IsoPlane Spectrograph, corrected for astigmatism. Image courtesy of Angela Bennett and Jason P. McClure

Similarly, Catherine Karkov and I are in the process of organizing a team of humanists and scientists to re-examine the Franks Casket. It has not had much careful scientific analysis since a Professor E. Ray Lankester “took a small fragment of the casket bone with him for microscopical examination,” with the help of a Dr. Ridewood and Prof. Charles Stewart, who compared the fragment to samples of bone from the Museum of the Royal College of Surgeons.\textsuperscript{32} They did this in time to receive mention in a footnote in Arthur Napier’s publication on the Casket from 1900. We are now, 118 years later, hoping to raise funds to have the Casket tested using the latest in proteomics by York’s \textit{ZooArchaeology by Mass Spectrometry} team. We might soon know more about the bone than Lankester, who was “certain that the bone of the casket is the bone of a whale, but [I] cannot say of what species or what size.”\textsuperscript{33} If collagen survives in the bone fragments, we may learn the species of whale (a beached sperm whale is the current thinking, which is, of course, the best possible answer), and possibly if all the panels actually come from a single whale, as the runic text on the front of the casket suggests (reading “hronesban,” whalebone), or if they are from multiple whales, if, like Bennett’s manuscript, we have “a multiplicity of bodies reaching out” to us as we reach out to it. I am hoping that this knowledge will impact my experience of the object, and I will only know if and how it will do so once the scientific research has been funded and conducted.

Thing Theory and Object Oriented Ontology are now giving art historians a new set of terms that seem to be proving powerful. These approaches encourage longer, slower looking and more focused analysis of the materials out of which objects are wrought. Medieval artisans were cognizant of the practical strengths and limitations of different materials, and medieval writers attributed quasi-magical properties to many. Being attentive to the specifics of the materials is therefore not anachronistic, even if it tends now to be more firmly rooted in Bruno Latour, Jane Bennett, Ian Bogost, and Bill Brown than in medieval lapidaries and Aldhelm’s \textit{Ænigmata}.\textsuperscript{34} One of the strengths of Thing Theory is that it takes seriously the activity and agency of objects without recourse to mysticism or magic. Objects do have their own activities and affect changes on their human interactants.

\textsuperscript{32} Napier, \textit{Franks Casket}, 6, n. 1.
\textsuperscript{33} Napier, \textit{Franks Casket}, 6, n. 1.
Objects slowly (or quickly) transform on their own, without our help. They rust and tarnish and rot and crumble, they fade and fray. These all might seem to be degradations, but only if we insist on stasis. The beach erodes, as we see it, but that sand is merely moving somewhere less convenient for tourists, home owners, and piping plovers. Its new location is likely no less amenable to the quartz, basalt, and mica, coral and shell fragments, and other bits of debris that comprise it, nor to other organisms living where it comes to rest.

Art, too, like all objects, changes over time, and has differing impacts on us as it does so. Even gold, precious precisely because of its resistance to change over time, does alter over the course of centuries. The Crowland Psalter (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 296) is famous for its calendar crammed full of Anglo-Saxon saints – Augustine of Canterbury, Æðeldreda, Cuthbert, Dunstan, Guthlac, and others all make an appearance. Its illuminations contain gold that surely has impurities. It has become coarse, flaky, almost bubbly. Turning the pages causes the gold to spark and catch fire (fig. 8). It is variegated and beautiful, striking in a way that better preserved gold accents rarely are. The gold is flaking off in places, but rich and warm in tone, even reddish. A note on the flyleaf claims that the gold is tarnished. Of course, pure gold does not tarnish, but truly pure gold is a rarity, and thankfully so, as it is mixings and minglings and blendings that make for much of the interest in the world. I suspect others would also find beauty in this curious form of decay; the Anglo-Saxons by and for whom this manuscript was made prized a particular variety of beauty described by the Old English fah, “meaning hostile or guilty but also beautiful or decorated in variegated colouring [...] both beautiful and deadly.”

This is, in principle, always at the root of the beauty of gold, which refuses to be a single colour or shade but instead must always reflect and refract the colours and lights around it. It is most effective not only in person, but also in motion, as I gently turn the stiff vellum of this folio that holds its form like a sheet of cardboard, but for the flex about an inch from the gutter, where it buckles. Turning the folio reveals a wide variety of tones within the gold – reds, silvery sections, straight golds. First, the left bow of the “O” catches the light, which courses along its double-curves. Then the warrior’s helmet and shield ignite, and then, along with the right bow of the letter, each golden dot on the dragon’s back scintillates in se-

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sequence. Then, my attention is snapped back to the text as the light jumps to the
text of the opening verse of this psalm: “Quid gloriaris in militia: qui potens es
iniquitate?” [“Who are you, who finds glory in wickedness, whose power is in iniq-
uity?”].

Fig. 8: Warrior and Dragon, Crowland Psalter. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 296, England,
1025–1036. Photo: Asa Simon Mittman

Who is this little dragon-fighter? Elżbieta Temple has tentatively identified the
man as St. Michael, but this is untenable. 37 He is too human in his little peaked
helmet and stockinged legs, too vulnerable without any armour (unless his techni-
color tunic is meant to represent mail) and, of course, he is rather wingless for the
mightiest of the archangels. But more importantly, he is too dynamic, too active to
be a miraculous defeater of evil. He strikes me as entirely human, as human as I am
while holding this book. On the recto of this folio, an impressive, massive figure of
Christ effortlessly tramples a small lion and dragon. Turning the leaf over, we find
a much smaller man and a larger dragon. While our erstwhile hero battles the ob-
vvious danger below him, another beast lurks, unobserved, leering at him from
above. Christ stands with both feet firmly planted on the beasts; the little warrior
carefully avoids stepping on the fearsome dragon. The text of Psalm 90 does not
read “Christus conculcabit” [“Christ will trample”], but rather, “conculebis
leonem et draconem,” that is, “you will trample underfoot the lion and the dragon.”
Read in sequence, as they are placed in the manuscript, these two images yield new
meaning. The first image shows us the divine power of Christ to overcome all
dangers. The second exhorts us to face our own dragons, even though we are but
small and weak in comparison with Christ. In this manner, we are exhorted to join

37 Temple, Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts, 96.
Christ in the battle, to stand by “Crist ðu goda hyrde” [“Christ, you good shepherd”] as Wiglaf stands by Beowulf, the “folcès hyrde” [“shepherd of the people”], when he faces the dragon by which he is ultimately overcome.38

If he is not Saint Michael, just who is this little warrior, steadfastly facing down the dragon? Is he a figure out of Anglo-Saxon history or myth? Is this the great, unique, unidentified image of Beowulf, himself? He is well-armed, with a round shield and a long sword, as well as an elaborate, wonderfully stylized mail coat. His oversized sword might recall Beowulf’s “sweord . . . gomele lafe, ecgum unlaw,” [“sword . . . the ancient, sharp-edged relic”].39 His armour might also recall the brunfagne hlem [“burnished helmet”] and bringde byrnan [“mailcoat fourmed of rings”] worn by Wiglaf when he rushes to his lord’s side and joins the battle against the “hringbogan heorte gefysed sæcce to seceanne,” [“the coiled serpent, its heart incited to seek battle”].40 And yet, just as he seems too modest in scale and in confidence to be Michael, so too, he can hardly be the bragging warrior Beowulf. Might the warrior be a rare early depiction of the saintly dragon slayer, Saint George? This seems unlikely, as George – at least in later images – is usually depicted on horseback, haloed, defeating the dragon with a long spear.41 Or could this little warrior even be Saint Guthlac, the eighth-century founder of the monastery at Crowland, where this manuscript was likely produced?42 A warrior and marauder early in his life, Guthlac experienced a divine calling and sought a monastic life. He first joined the monastery of Hrypadum but after two years “þa ongan wilnian westenes” [“at that time he began to wish to enter the desert.”]43 The “desert” he desired was a most remote island in the “rugan fennas . . . þe man hateð Cruwland,” [“wild fens that men call Crowland”].44 Once there, Godes cempa [“the soldier of God”] began to fortify himself for the struggles ahead:45

38 R. Morris, ed., The Blickling Homilies, EETS, vol. 73 (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 191, and R. D. Fulk, Robert Bjork, and John Niles, eds., Klaeber’s Beowulf, 4th ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), line 2644. For the full account of the battle with the dragon, see lines 2529–2723. J. R. Clark Hall, A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996) cites hyrde as a variant of hirde, which he defines as shepherd and herdsman, and then as guardian, keeper and pastor. Joseph Bosworth and T. Northcote Toller, An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary, Based on the Manuscript Collections of the Late Joseph Bosworth (Oxford: The Clarendon press, 1882) treat byrde as a variant of birde, translated as herd, shepherd, pastor, and so on. These terms were used for both military and religious leaders.

39 Beowulf, lines 2562–64.

40 Beowulf, lines 2615 and 2561–62.

41 Surprisingly, Saint George does not seem to have been a popular subject for illustration in the Anglo-Saxon period. There are no entries for him in Thomas Ohlgren, Insular and Anglo-Saxon Illuminated Manuscripts: An Iconographic Catalogue, c. A.D. 625 to 1100 (New York: Garland Publishing, 1986). This is, no doubt, a topic worth some consideration.

42 Temple, Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts, 96.


44 Ibid., 20 and 22.

Da sona wið þam scotungum þara werigra gasta þat he bine mid gastlicum weapnum
gescyld, he nam þone sceyk þas Halgan Gastes geleāfan; and byne on þare byrnan
ggearnwede þas beonfonician hilstes; and he him dyde boelm on beafod clerna gehcana;
and mid þam strælum þæs halgan sealmsanges a singallice wið þam averigedum gastum
scotidoe and campode.\textsuperscript{46}

Then, immediately against those missiles of those cursed spirits, that he
might shield himself with spiritual weapons, he took up faith in the Holy
Ghost as a shield; and he equipped himself with the armour of heavenly
exultation; and he took as his helmet on his head chaste thoughts; and with
the arrows of holy psalm-singing, he fought always continually against the
attacks of accursed spirits.

The Croyland warrior, with his shield and helmet, reminds the reader that the sur-
est weapon with which to assail the accursed spirits of the devil is the Psalter, the
very text he helps to form. The layout of this folio reinforces my reading of the
man as a stand-in for the \textit{Godes cempa}. This initial actually accompanies Psalm 51,
which begins:

\begin{quote}
Quid gloriaris in malitia qui potens es in iniquitate? Tota die iniustitiam cogitavit lingua
tua sicut novacula acuta feceisti dolum.
\end{quote}

Who are you, who finds glory in wickedness, whose power is in iniquity? All
day, thinking about injustice, you have done treachery with your tongue,
sharp as a whetted razor.

This text snakes its way around the initial, which divides a few words from one
another. However, the initial also cuts one word in two: iniquitate. The dragon's
body is inserted within the Latin word for iniquity, for sin. This small helmed,
armed warrior is not only battling for his life. He is also battling for his soul, striv-
ing to conquer the dragon of sin. And, sitting in my hand, I am personally exhorted
to do the same. The workings of this image are intimate, and rely on turning the
page by hand, being guided by the light's movement over the pitted, variegated
surface of the gold, and connecting with the small warrior on a personal and indi-
vidual level.

This is what I am after each time I hop a plane to Europe, as I did to reach
Salzburg, Austria, for the meeting on which this volume is based. I am angling for
an experience, to learn the things I cannot know any way other than through phys-
ical proximity and contact, to \textit{know} the works – not in a biblical or spiritual sense –
but in the personal sense, so that when I see them again, years later, trapped be-
hind Plexiglas, I'll be able to say, “I \textit{know} you!” When I write applications to see
those most select of objects, the ones that require special application and long
negociation – \textit{Beowulf}, the Franks Casket, and so on – I list all of the tiny details I

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 24.
know I need to consult: the sequence of production, revealed in the layering of inks and paints; the nature of stray dots on illuminations, as they appear in reproductions; the subtle differences in colours from folio to folio; and so on. All of these are absolutely true. The first draft of the letter Susan Kim and I wrote to the British Library to request access to the *Beowulf* Manuscript was nearly as long as the first draft of this essay, and quite precise; ultimately, though, what we needed was to know what we did not know, to experience what we could not in any reproduction, to learn in the most fundamental and unsurpassable way, through personal contact. And yes, we came away having answered most of our detailed questions, for instance: “What is the dark crescent directly above the figure’s right hand?”; “Is there any demarcation of a boundary at the top of what would be a skirt/kilt, or not?”; “Are the genitals highlighted with any colouration?”; “Is the darker tone a ground beneath the colour?” (Answers: a bit of debris; no; no; and no.) (fig. 9). But more importantly, we left the library with our understanding of the manuscript fundamentally transformed in ways that we could never have anticipated. The *Beowulf* Manuscript is, I was rather shocked to discover, beautiful, grand, powerful, and impressive, all in ways I had misunderstood, and in ways that all then-published scholarship on the manuscript (largely based on poor reproductions) had profoundly underestimated. The manuscript is a wholly different sort of thing than we had all been saying it was, and it was holding it that taught me this.

My favourite of medieval texts is located in this very manuscript – the odd, laconic Anglo-Saxon *Wonders of the East*. This peculiar text fights against my desire for contact with the Middle Ages and its surviving representatives. A few of the wonders (barely) contained by the text and images defy even narrative contact. On the second folio of the *Beowulf* Manuscript’s version of the *Wonders*, we confront the Burning Hens (see fig. 9). This is a text containing giant, fire-breathing, anthropophage, dog-headed people and hundred-and-fifty-foot dragons, so a pair of chickens seems pretty innocuous at first glance:

> Sum stow is mon fereð to þære readan sa seo is haten lentibelsinea þaem beoð henna acened onlice þonne þe mid us beoð reades hewes , gif hi hwylc man niman wile oþþe him o æthrineð þonne forbærnað hy sona eal his lic[.] þ[a]t syndon ungefægelizu liblac.\(^{47}\)

There is a certain place, as one travels towards the Red Sea, which is called Lentibelsinea, where hens like our own red hens are born. If any person wishes to take hold of them or ever touches them, *they at once burn up all of his body*. Those are inconceivable witchcrafts.\(^{48}\)

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\(^{47}\) Mittman and, *Inconceivable Beasts*, 41, emphasis added.

\(^{48}\) Ibid., 58, emphasis added.
The Burning Hens are said to live at an impossible remove from their Anglo-Saxon audience, at the far end of the inhabitable world, but even were they around the corner, contact would be impossible, or, at any rate, fatal, and so knowledge transmitted by that contact could never be acted upon.

This short passage is something of a metonym for the basic ontological enterprise: try to know what something is, reach out for it, achieve the most fleeting of contact, and be changed beyond recognition, perhaps even be obliterated by this experience. In the closely related passage from the \textit{Wonders} that follows the Burning Hens, the two-headed, eight-footed “inconceivable beasts” press the incendiary nature of the contact between humans and wonders further:
Wild beasts are also born there. When they hear the voice of a person, the beasts flee far. Those beasts have eight feet and the eyes of Valkyries and two heads. If any person wishes to seize them, they set fire to their bodies.

They are inconceivable beasts.

The pronouns are slippery, so it is not clear who is burned up. Who? bodies? It might be those who wish (why?) to seize them, or the beasts themselves (is the conjoined creature already plural, or is the text claiming that there are multiple such beings?). Perhaps it is both. Human and wonder, the text implies, cannot come into contact without producing radical, even deadly, transformations.

I hope I survive all my meetings with medieval objects. What I want as I reach out to touch them is somewhat inconceivable, something akin to the impossible. I can cross vast spaces with relative ease. I traveled some 5,782 miles as the crow flies to get from Chico to Salzburg, which is more than twice the distance Matthew Paris contemplated on his list maps that chart the journey from London to Jerusalem as a series of “journey” increments – that is, the distance that can be traveled in one day. His theoretical journey half-way across the world of which he knew would take at least 46 days. Mine took about 20 hours, door to door. Tiring, yes, but hardly epic. But the journey I might like to make is as impossible as the Anglo-Saxon’s voyage to Lentibelsinea, by the Red Sea. My desire is not some tacky Michael Crichton fantasy of academic time travel. For all I know, that will be possible sooner than later, and would almost surely be a horrifying experience. What I want to feel, as I reach out to a medieval work, is not merely the past, but all the intervening moments between the time of the object’s genesis and my precisely present moment. Sitting in the stifling, airless back office of the Bargello, holding the detached panel of the Franks Casket, what I wanted was to experience everything from the whale’s life, to its beaching on the shore, to the box’s moment of manufacture, to its presentation as the gift it likely was, to its long use, reuse, abuse, breaking up for sale, reassembly, presentation, preservation, curation, and on, right up to the moment that the curator handed it over in a surprisingly casual manner for Susan Kim and my utter ravishment.

In the margins of a manuscript are the traces of the animal from which the folio was made, the parchment maker, scribe, illuminator, binder, patron, readers, book dealers, collectors, librarians, and scholars. And, somehow, absurdly, me. This
is the “multiplicity of bodies reaching out” that Bennett encountered in her manuscript. The touch I seek is not singular but multiple, not divine but historical, not rooted in “quod autem relictus erat,” that which was left behind, but rather, that which has moved forward, that which has survived and endured and which transmits all of its history, in fragmented and fracturing ways, as it reaches out to touch me back.