

Book Review

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BOOK REVIEWED: GEORGES DECLERCQ (ED.), *EARLY MEDIEVAL PALIMPSESTS*, BIBLIOLOGIA 26 (TURNHOUT: BREPOLS, 2007), VI + 155 PP. ISBN: 9782503524801.

The phenomenon of palimpsesting, that is of erasing or washing away of the original text of a manuscript and its replacement with a new text, is, undeniably, connected with the early Middle Ages at least since the days of E. A. Lowe, who published the seminal study on the early medieval palimpsests in 1964. It is now widely accepted that in the course of those several centuries, which marked the transformation of the Roman world into the early medieval polities in the West, palimpsesting as a practice enjoyed greater popularity than at other times. As a result, we now possess several works of Classical Antiquity, which would have been otherwise lost, only as the lower text in the *codices rescripti*, and for many other works, palimpsests provide valuable witnesses with regard to textual traditions.

With the exception of the contribution of Virginia Brown, this volume is a result of a one-day conference dedicated to the early medieval palimpsests that was held in Brussels in February 2002. The articles touch upon different aspects of the palimpsest culture in the early Middle Ages, some being more general (the Introduction by Georges Declercq, and the contributions by Yitzhak Hen and Virginia Brown), while others are more particular, focusing on a single manuscript (those by David Ganz and Mark Mersiowsky). This is certainly not a shortcoming of the volume, since all the contributions are of high quality, but it is nevertheless a pity that, in this manner, not all aspects of the palimpsest culture were covered. For example, there is no contribution touching specifically upon

the palimpsesting of manuscripts containing Classical texts, although this is mentioned both in the Introduction and in the concluding remarks by Rosamond McKitterick.

In his Introduction to the volume, Georges Declercq provides a good overview of the phenomenon: the palimpsesting techniques, the modern re-discoveries of palimpsests and the history of their research, and the overall character of the 141 manuscripts identified as palimpsests. Declercq focuses on the distribution of the palimpsests across time and space and makes observations concerning the regional differences between Italy and other parts of the early medieval Western world as well as the chronological difference between the seventh and other centuries in terms of the quantities of palimpsests produced. Already in the Introduction Declercq makes an important point that resonates throughout the collection as a whole, that is the palimpsesting should not be simply viewed as a process that had to do with poverty or parchment shortage, but that it was governed by other factors that were as important, such as the quality of parchment and the bad physical state of the *libri inutilis* destined for palimpsesting, or the presence of a second copy of the text to be palimpsested in the foundation where palimpsesting took place. The contribution by Natalia Tchernetska is the only paper in the collection that is concerned with scholarly methodologies rather than with manuscripts. Drawing on her experiences in working with Greek palimpsests at Cambridge and Saint Petersburg, she provides useful tips on how to use freely available hands-on digital tools to enhance the digital manuscript images. David Ganz devotes his paper to the British Library, Harley 3941, a copy of the *Etymologiae* of Isidore of Seville made in an unknown learned Breton centre at the end of the ninth century, for which a late fifth- or early sixth-century exemplar of the *Chronicon* of Eusebius-Jerome was utilised as support. Ganz discusses the significance of the lower text for the textual transmission of the *Chronicon*, since the Harley palimpsest is one of the oldest surviving copies which may shed more light on the development of the complex layout of this work. Yitzhak Hen provides an overview of thirty-two liturgical palimpsests preserved in twenty rewritten codices that survive from before 1000. He connects the re-writing of these palimpsests and their general higher level of obsolescence before 800 with the liturgical reforms of the second half of the eighth century. He also remarks that most of these palimpsests come from a single area stretching between Fulda, Lake Constance, and Benediktbeuern, and concludes that the palimpsesting zeal in this region correlates with the active participation of the centres from this region in the Carolingian liturgical reforms.

In his second contribution, Georges Declercq discusses the Munich, Clm 6333, a copy of *De viris illustribus* made at the abbey of Benediktbeuern, which was made out of eleven distinct palimpsested units. Moreover, it is argued that these lower texts were produced, given their content and the script, relatively shortly before their palimpsesting took place. Declercq demonstrates that the majority of the palimpsested texts became outdated quickly after their production and thus, he concludes, it was the obsolescence of the text that designated them as a material suitable for palimpsesting. What follows Declercq's article is another examination of the very same manuscript, the Munich, Clm 6333 by Mark Mersiowsky. Focusing on the two letters preserved as the lower texts in the manuscript and comparing the form, rather than content, of these with known original letters surviving from the early Middle Ages, Mersiowsky shows that they, too, should be considered originals and that their discarding is indicative of the standard treatment of original letters in the

early medieval period. Virginia Brown provides a thorough repertory of 104 palimpsested manuscripts with the lower text in Beneventan script copied between the ninth and the thirteenth centuries. Brown examines several trends in the palimpsesting in the Beneventan area, such as that most of the codices were palimpsested in the twelfth century, that most of them contained liturgical texts and only few Classics or other non-theological texts, that the texts were likely palimpsested because of their perceived obsolescence, and that Monte Cassino, Salerno and Naples were the main identifiable centres of palimpsesting. As a sort of conclusion, Rosamond McKitterick sums up the main themes of the volume and points out some important conclusions that can be derived from the individual contributions in it. She stresses that it was not the poverty or scarcity of material, as once postulated by Lowe, but rather the perceived obsolescence of a text that lead to palimpsesting (a recurrent theme in many of the papers in the collection as already mentioned). She also notes that the palimpsests were not necessarily re-used in the same centres in which they were palimpsested and that the physical context of palimpsesting is far from understood. She further argues that the unfamiliarity of script might have been a factor that contributed to palimpsesting and that majority of the palimpsests are not in fact works by pagans or even Classics substituted by Christian texts but rather it is the case that Christian texts are replaced with other Christian texts. She also elaborated that the majority of the palimpsested material was actually liturgical or pragmatic in nature (e.g. letters, charters etc.) and not literary.

Although the papers in this volume were written as separate pieces, they fit well together as they voice many common themes. Perhaps the most strongly expressed common thread throughout the volume is the need to focus on the obsolescence as the major factor behind palimpsesting, rather than the poverty of the centres in which palimpsesting took place or the desire for censorship or destruction of material. Many of the papers also pay close attention to the physical aspects of the palimpsesting and of palimpsests (e.g. the format and the script of the manuscripts that were palimpsested), which is, a new and important direction in the study of palimpsests. Overall, much can be gained from reading this volume from cover to cover. The only pity is that not all potential themes are covered by the contributors, and that even after reading this volume there remain gaps that badly deserve to be filled.