

Syllabus: Medieval Manuscripts and the History of Script

Course website: <https://ruffnotes.org/olli>Carin Ruff
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March 2-April 20, 2021**Overview of meetings and topics**

(This schedule is likely to ebb and flow according to our interests, progress, and digressions.)

- WEEK 1 Introduction and overview. Describing script: majuscule vs. minuscule; the parts of letters; ductus; the meaning of "cursive". Paleography, codicology, and papyrology. Scripts of Roman antiquity and the origin of our capital letters (1st century BCE to 5th century AD).
- WEEK 2 Scripts of Roman antiquity, cont'd. Ancient books and writing surfaces. The emergence of the codex. Introduction to the structure of medieval codices. Introduction to digitized manuscript repositories and navigating codices online: knowing where manuscripts are found, understanding shelfmarks, reading manuscript descriptions.
- WEEK 3 Scripts of Christian late antiquity. The origins of our lower-case alphabet. Introduction to abbreviations. (3rd-6th centuries)
- WEEK 4 Books and script in England and Ireland in the early Middle Ages. How to recognize and navigate biblical manuscripts. More online repositories: working with the British Library site. (7th-9th centuries)
- WEEK 5 Precaroline scripts in the abbeys of Francia. Caroline Minuscule and books of the Carolingian Renaissance and beyond. A virtual visit to the Walters Museum's manuscript collections. (8th-11th centuries)
- WEEK 6 Gothic script. Transformations in page layout. New techniques of book organization in the era of the universities. (12th-13th centuries)
- WEEK 7 New kinds of books for new reading audiences. Gothic cursives and humanist scripts. (14th-15th centuries)
- WEEK 8 Printing with movable type: what did Gutenberg invent and what were the limitation of his invention? How are early printed books similar to and different from manuscripts? (15th century)

Visit and bookmark <https://ruffnotes.org/olli> for course resources, links, handouts, and more. It will be helpful to have that page open during class for quick access to the digitized manuscripts we'll be exploring.

NB: Each week before class, I will email you links to images, sites, and occasionally a short video to explore, and then after class I will send more info on anything interesting that came up during class. I'll always post those materials at <https://ruffnotes.org/olli>, too, so you can find them there.

Please do email me any time with followup questions or topics you'd like me to address in our next meeting. I'm happy to shape our discussions to your interests as far as possible.

Technological note

Figuring out what is possible for each of us with our bandwidth and devices will be a work in progress. My hope is to be able to explore digitized manuscript sites with you live on the web as we talk via Zoom, but I know that image-intensive web-browsing *plus* Zooming can significantly slow down the speed of all processes. My plan is to provide you with image files before each class that you can download and interact with offline and/or print out and peer at in hard copy, so we will still be able to look closely at images of manuscript pages together even if browsing while Zooming becomes impossible. I ask your patience as we discover what works best. In any event, I strongly recommend joining class with the largest-screen device available to you so you have a big surface on which to view images. A laptop or large iPad is fine; an external monitor or a desktop is even better. A phone or iPad mini will probably be too small to be feasible.

Further reading

There is no required reading for class, but if you are intrigued by what we cover and would like to read more, here are some starting points that are reliable, accessible, up-to-date, in print, and affordable:

Christopher de Hamel, *Making Medieval Manuscripts*. Bodleian Library, 2018.

A short guide to the techniques of manuscript book production by one of the world's great manuscript experts. A \$25 paperback.

Christopher de Hamel, *Meetings with Remarkable Manuscripts: Twelve Journeys into the Medieval World*. Penguin, 2017.

An engrossing travelogue as de Hamel visit and investigates a dozen famous manuscripts, including several we will discuss in class. A good read and a remarkable value at only \$25 or so, and widely available used for \$15-\$20.

Michelle Brown, *Understanding Illuminated Manuscripts: A Guide to Technical Terms*. Revised Edition. J. Paul Getty Museum, 2018.

This is an illustrated glossary of terms used in manuscript studies by a longtime British Library curator of manuscripts. \$20 in paperback; also available in Kindle edition.

Raymond Clemens and Timothy Graham, *Introduction to Manuscript Studies*. Cornell UP, 2008.

This is an in-depth guide to manuscripts as physical objects, beautifully illustrated with photos of objects in the Newberry Library's collections. It's geared towards students learning to work with manuscripts for research, but it's very accessible. Because of its focus on the manuscript as physical object, it is a particularly helpful supplement to our all-virtual curriculum.