

Manuscript fragments in binder's waste – A forgotten relic of ancient times

In May 2025, a team of researchers made a curious discovery at Cambridge University Library: They discovered an old manuscript of Merlin's "Suite Vulgate" that was used as a binder's waste for an old printing. CNN reported¹. An old 13th century manuscript, a lost saga, that was used to stabilize a book cover in early modern times, i.e. late 15th or early 16th century.

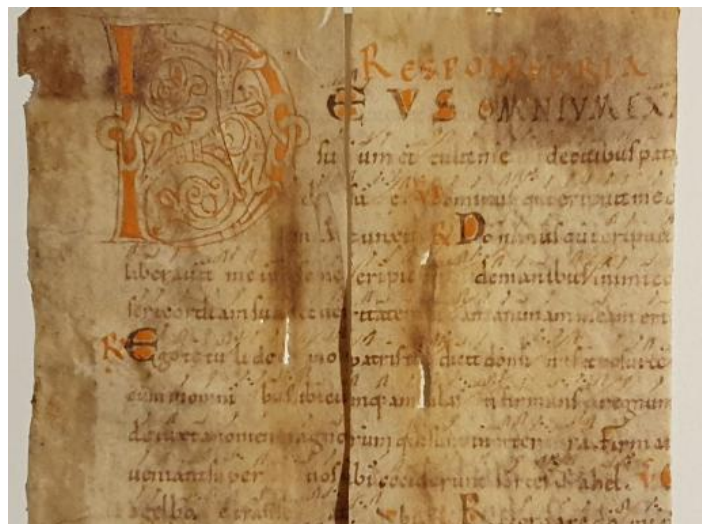
This technique, called "binder's waste" was used to stabilize books with parchment, when paper itself was a rare material. So, they used old manuscripts that were outdated as soon as books could be printed in larger numbers. People in that times did not see the necessity to keep old manuscripts, when the text itself could be published on a printed book.

When Gutenberg first used his printing press to print the "B42", the "Gutenberg Bible"² in 1454, his invention made it possible to copy a text more than once. Before that, texts were handwritten, and so, in most cases unique. But with that invention, the text got separated from the medium that it contained. Nowadays, from a literary point of view, it doesn't matter, how you read Dante's Divine Comedy, be it within an E-Book file, a modern printed book with an ISBN³ or an old incunable printing from 15th century. The text itself remains the same.

But when there were only manuscripts, the text was closely related to the materiality of the medium it has been written on. Each manuscript had its own origin, that told a lot: Where it was written, the historic contemporary context, the person who wrote it – all of these told a lot about the story of the manuscript itself.

Recently I made a discovery on my own. When I gave an old printing dated 1510 to my restorer, she set free an old manuscript fragment that really caught my eye. An obviously very old manuscript with a very nice initial "D", two stripes one in the front cover and one in the back cover were released.

From my point of view, this binder's waste was made in the late 11th, or maybe early 12th century. But that was just the impression I got while I first saw that manuscript fragment.



When showing that item to the society of "Bibliophiles", someone made a remark, that there are neumes within that text, too. Therefore, I wrote to the district cantor of Heidelberg,

¹ <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/05/09/science/merlin-king-arthur-medieval-manuscript-cambridge>

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gutenberg_Bible

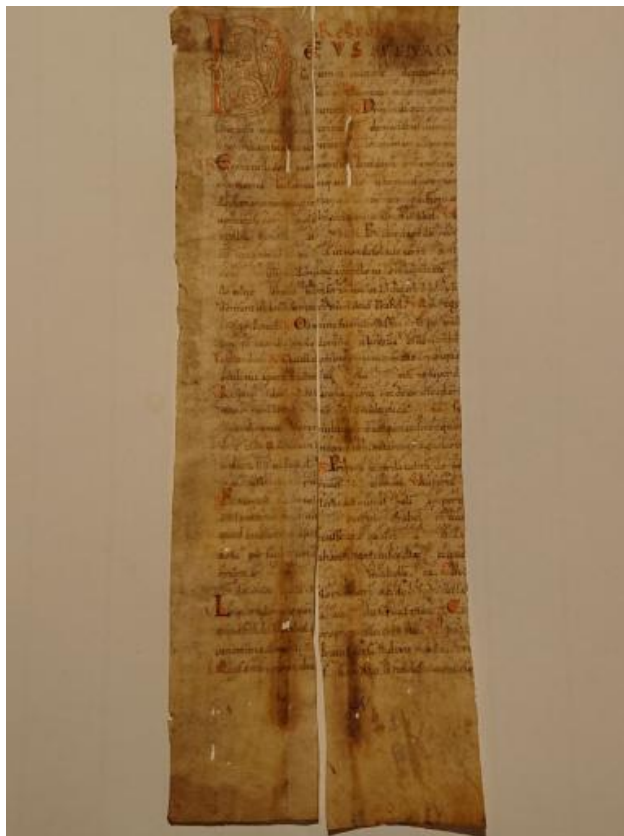
³ ISBN: International Standard Book Number, a unique number most of the books have got now.

Germany, showing him a scan of that item. His answer confirmed my assumption of the date of its origin. He also wrote something about its content:

Dear Mr. Schweiger,

Thank you for your email and the manuscript sample. After consulting with my doctoral supervisor, Professor Klöckner, I can confirm that this is probably a parchment from around 1100. It is an excerpt likely from a nocturnal, a manuscript containing the church's night prayer. The excerpt includes parts of the Responsoria Prolixa chants as well as readings shortly after the Feast of the Trinity. The neumes belong to the group of East Franconian neumes. The manuscript must therefore have been created somewhere between St. Gallen, Bamberg, and Klosterneuburg near Vienna.

*Best regards to Bavaria
Markus Uhl*



As I read that, I wrote to the Director of St. Gallen Monastery Library, Dr. Cornel Dora, asking him, if he possibly thought, that item could be identified as an early St. Gallen manuscript. St. Gallen monastery library (Stiftsbibliothek St. Gallen) is one of the four oldest libraries worldwide that permanently existed till now. It was founded prior to 719, the date it was first mentioned, so even before Charlemagne times. The library itself has made a lot of research about some of the writers that were at the library like “Notker the German”⁴, who made some early writings there.

A scientific researcher, deputy of Dr. Cornel Dora, Dr. Franziska Schnoor, answered to my mail, that, from her point of view, the manuscript fragment probably was not St. Gallen origin. She mentioned a few points that made her sceptic, such as:

[...] I'll try to offer a few clues, however: I'm most skeptical about the combination of the shapes of the initial and neumes, which I would rather place in different centuries in St. Gallen. The neumes, written with a relatively broad pen (i.e., with relatively large differences between hairline and shadow strokes), I would expect to date from the 12th century here. The shape of the torculus, with its almost closed left bow, also fits. However, if it were from St. Gallen, the initial looks older to me. A split-bar initial with braided knots is more likely to be found here in the 11th century; in the 12th century, split-bar initials don't have knots, but always have fittings (usually rivets).

[...] The text itself doesn't quite fit St. Gallen either. Beat von Scarpatetti describes the "preference for merging the upper center line" as a typical feature of St. Gallen scripts (not only, but also in the 12th century) – less so in the neumed sections of liturgical manuscripts, which always obey their own rules due to the smaller font size, but rather in the sections without neumes.

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Notker_Labeo

That indicates about the possible things you can tell about such an old manuscript that was used as a binder's waste for a book cover. One, that probably would have been lost forever, if somebody didn't have the courage to release it from the old cover. Like the old Merlin manuscript that was discovered in Cambridge, my manuscript waste also had its own curiosity, its own mystery, its own story that it has to tell.

What a shame that these manuscripts were used as binder's waste, cut, torn apart from each other. Because of that, many manuscripts are already considered lost. What a cultural heritage that would have been, if all these fragments remained in its original state, like they were written. A treasure, probably lost forever.

From my point of view, I regret that the materiality of a literal text doesn't matter anymore. In my collection of old books, there are a lot of different bindings, a lot of Ex Libris, that tell quite a lot of these old books. I wrote a short text:

Confessions of a Librarian

*I was recently asked what my old books mean to me.
There are many aspects that are important to me:*

Mostly, it's the fascination that makes these old books so special. They come from a time to which we cannot even set back our memories. For example, very few of us can re-trace their ancestors back to these times. Silent witnesses of a long-ago past that have much to tell: Of wars, suffering, and pain. Who held them in their hands and what did they go through? Furthermore, the covers also tell their own unique story: Who bought the book first? How rich were they? What kind of bindings could they afford? The engravings depicted in old books are also works of art, created by an artist over hours of painstaking work.

Ultimately, these books are always something special. It gives me great joy every time I hold one of them in my hands.

So, to me, a book is so much more than just the text that it contains. Also, Lauren Willig, an American author writing love novels, once said:

"Old books exert a strange fascination for me -- their smell, their feel, their history; wondering who might have owned them, how they lived, what they felt."

The spirit of these old books will always remain a curiosity, a mystery, a fantasy. Bibliophiles know, what I am talking about. Not only these old relics of binder's waste fragments tell a lot of their history, but every old book you can hold in your hand, that has survived long centuries, tells its own stories, as well. I want to encourage anyone of you to keep up that spirit, to keep their fascination alive.

In fact, there are many mysterious texts which have been transmitted into our modern times, like the "Comedy" of the Second book of Aristotle's Poetic, that was mentioned in the remaining first part that survived till today, a text that is considered lost. Perhaps, some day, when someone gives his old early printing to a restorer, that text might occur and be re-discovered like the "Suite Vulgate du Merlin" that was found in Cambridge now.

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