complement

DAMAGED GOODS: A PHOTO ESSAY

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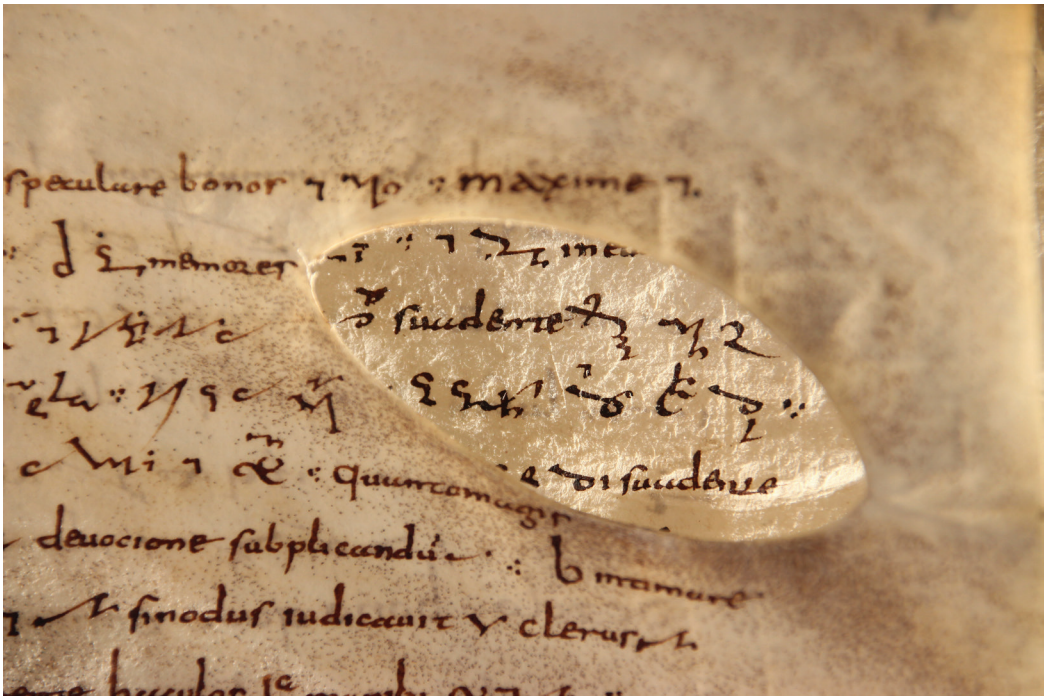
To say that the written word carried a lot of weight in the Middle Ages would be an overstatement. After all, before the printing press arrived, every word was handwritten. However, in medieval times some written words carried more weight than others. Readers of Saint Augustine or Aristotle could be overheard saying 'I have it on good authority that...', simply because these authors were just that.

Curiously to our modern eyes, the pages of authoritative medieval texts, whether filled with the truisms of a Church Father or a philosopher's wisdom, do not necessarily convey authority in a material sense. Medieval book producers were pragmatic and they did not share our modern sentiment that an important text should *look* important too: They had no issues writing the Bible on heavily damaged sheets or keeping important texts in mouldy corners of the library.

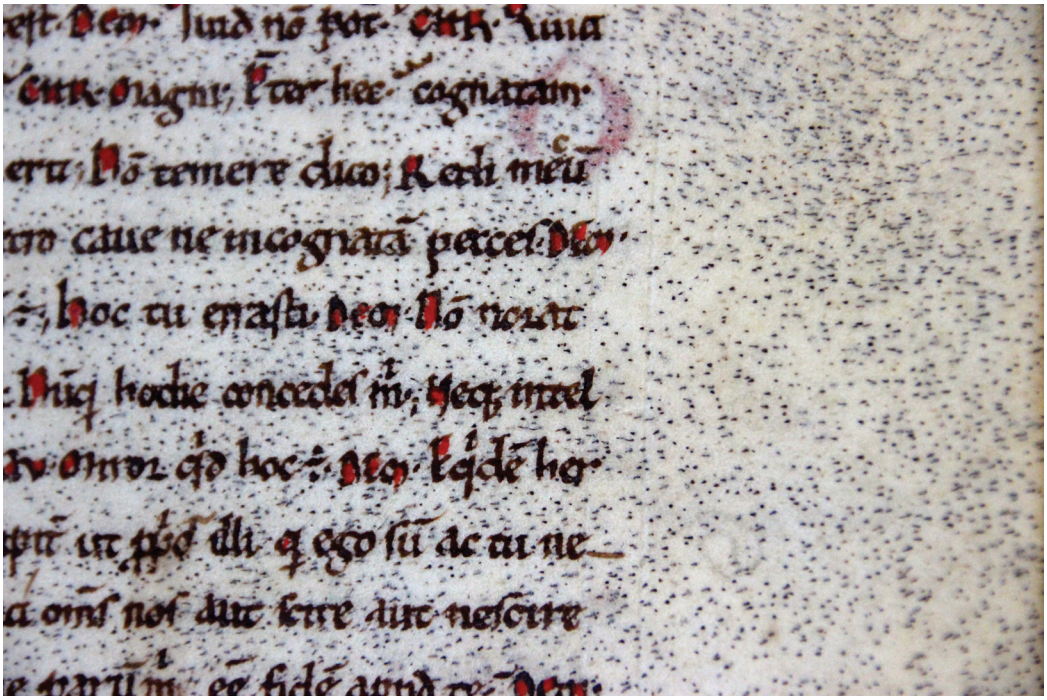
It is the juxtaposition of status – and consequently authority – and poor appearance that is highlighted in this photo essay. The images on the following pages show just how telling damage can be: It sheds light on the attitude of scribes, who simply ignored holes in the page; and of readers, who perceived Saint Augustine and Aristotle as authoritative even if their words were written on scarred and ripped materials. This essay ultimately shows that while the velvety softness of perfect skin is appealing, getting to know imperfect parchment is in the end more interesting and rewarding for the historian of the medieval book.



Leiden, Universiteitsbibliotheek, VLF 94 (Lectionary, 9th century). Photo: Erik Kwakkel.

Mind the Gap

What was grazing in the meadow in May, could easily be a Bible in June. This peculiar truism is sparked by the fact that until the thirteenth century, books were made of parchment (processed animal skin). Medieval manuscripts show their beastly nature in a particular type of damage, caused by the parchment maker's lunellum, the crescent-shaped knife that was used to remove hair and bits of flesh. To clean the skin, it was strapped to a wooden frame, tight like a drum. If that drum was accidentally punctured, a gaping hole appeared. The imperfections were usually repaired by the parchment maker, but at times there were simply too many, as seen here. Scribes simply wrote around the holes, seemingly without a care in the world.



Leiden, Universiteitsbibliotheek, VLO 31 (Terence, 12th century). Photo: Erik Kwakkel.

Stubble

A major skin problem was the animal's hair follicle, the organ that produces hair. Follicles usually show themselves as soft black dots on the white page. As seen on this page, they are sometimes quite pronounced. Scribes, desiring a smooth and cream-coloured surface, tried to sand the follicles away, but they were not always successful, especially when the follicles ran too deep. Some scribes wrote around these bad, stubble-like patches, while others, like this brave soul, simply soldiered on and wrote right over them. Follicles are useful too. The distance between them tells the book historian what animal the skin belonged too, which in turn may point to a region of origins – a goat's skin, for example, most likely means the manuscript was produced in Italy. That's not bad for a page that needs a shave.

Leiden, Universiteitsbibliotheek, BPL 2001 (Pliny, 12th century). Photo: Erik Kwakkel.

Dog Ears

We all do it from time to time, even though we are not supposed to: Folding the corner of a page so that we may find our way back to it later. It is a millennium-old habit, as this twelfth-century copy of Pliny's *Natural history* shows. The reader of this book also wanted to find his way back, but unfortunately parchment was not easy to fold. So he made an incision in the corner and folded the curly strip that appeared through another incision he had made. The manuscript contains several of these smart bookmarks, marking chapters that were particularly enjoyed by this reader. They allow us to gauge something that normally remains hidden from book historians: A medieval reader's literary taste, which is caught in these dog-eared pages.

Leiden, Universiteitsbibliotheek, BPL 2896 (Psalms, c. 1100). Photo: Erik Kwakkel.

Colourful Damage

Damaged parchment may also provide information about medieval keepers of manuscripts, for example that a book was stored in an unsuitable location. Damp places, for one, could leave a permanent mark, as shown by this manuscript, which is known as the 'Mouldy Psalter' – for mouldy it is. Nearly every page shows a colourful rash. It scarred this Book of Psalms, a key medieval authority, for life. While the mould is no longer active, the purple stains remain and show just how dangerously close the book came to destruction: On some pages the parchment already started to crumble away. Staring at the mesmerizing colours makes you realize just how beautiful damage can be.