

A Survey of Book Production and Book Cultures in Early Medieval Britain

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Abstract:

Volume I of the series *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain* covers aspects of book production and use from Roman Britain to the Norman Conquest. The emphasis of the 39 essays lies on outlining chronology and broad developments. Care has been taken to give a geographically balanced account of book cultures in Britain despite the lack of extant material from the Celtic realms and Wales. The result is a balanced, comprehensive, and considered survey on early books in Britain. An occasional break from the chronological survey of material – the highlighting of a particular book, for example, or presenting of findings from a theoretical or critical perspective – would have made the volume a more refreshing read.

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Gameson, Richard (ed.): *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain. Volume I c.400-1100.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. 848 pages, hardback, €139. ISBN: 978-0-521-58345-9

The series *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain* covers more than one-and-a-half millennia of book production and use on the British Isles. The seven volumes, of which six have already been published, testify to a renewed interest in the book as an object which has been developing across academic disciplines over the past decade. This development is undoubtedly a comeback caused by the recent focus on alternative media for the distribution and reception of texts and images in everyday life. The series as a whole is the most comprehensive publication on the issue to date, addressing a wide readership.

Volume I is the most recent publication in the series and covers the oldest material. It encompasses a longer period than any of the other volumes in the series, following the history of the book from its beginnings in Roman Britain to changes in bookmaking following the Norman Conquest. The timeframe of 400-1100 given in the title is slightly misleading, as the editor's introduction refers to "the first millennium" and to the first Roman invasion of Britain in 55 BC (p. 1), and the beginnings of the book in Britain under Roman rule are subsequently discussed in chapter 15 by R.S.O. Tomlin. The publication has 39 chapters – with 827 pages of text – which are structured into four thematic parts and a coda. The thematic parts are "The making of books", "The circulation of books", "Types of books and their uses", "Collections of books". The 32 contributors to the volume are established scholars who have already published widely on the subject and are based mainly in Britain (with three contributors based in North America). The editor of the volume, Richard Gameson, is at the same time the main contributor, having written six chapters himself (in other words: almost a quarter of the book).

The great potential of the publication lies in the possibility of viewing the book as an object rather than a mere substrate for texts and images, which it can too easily become in text-based research and art historical studies. The breadth of disciplines represented by the contributors – History, English Language and Literature, Paleography, Archaeology, Theology, and Art History – reflects the multifaceted nature of the book, its different forms, constitutive parts, and contents. The variety of approaches is counterbalanced by a unity of structure in the individual essays, most of which proceed chronologically within their respective topics. A

strength of the volume lies in the effort that has been made to include all areas of Britain despite great differences in the amount of extant books, and in introducing readers to less well-known authors of early medieval Britain.

Needless to say, a single volume discussing over a millennium of book production and use cannot cover all aspects. However, it is notable that none of the 39 chapters directly addresses current theoretical perspectives or methodologies. Recent research on the relationship between text and image, on books and gender, or on visual communities, for example, is not represented by chapter topics. In his coda, Richard Gameson warns of the pitfalls of critical theory as applied to the study of books, which "may mean imposing the present on the past and failing to be sensitive to the latter" (p. 719). In light of the amount of studies on the book that have been published from a variety of theoretical perspectives in recent decades (most of which, I would maintain, are aware of the danger outlined by Gameson), one would at least expect to find an appraisal of the current state of research.

Throughout the volume, there is an emphasis on major developments. Some closer inspection of individual books and critical assessment of their interpretation by scholars would have been refreshing. As it stands, there is a certain amount of overlap between essays, which, of course, is not a disadvantage if the reader is using the volume as a reference work. It does suggest, however, that some topics might have deserved a chapter of their own. A case in point is the patronage or commission of books, which could have balanced and contextualised the focus on book production and makeup in Part I. Judith of Flanders, for example, is discussed as patron and owner of books in essays by Richard Gameson (p. 270 f., 278, and p. 362), Richard Marsden (p. 424), and Patrick McGurk (p. 442 ff.).

Part I, "The making of books", contains ten chapters on the material construction of books, on those who produced them, on writing, script, and decoration inside and out. Chapters 2 and 3 on "The material fabric of early British books" and "Anglo-Saxon scribes and scriptoria" by Gameson are very clearly written and provide comprehensive and useful accounts of book production in early medieval Britain. Several chapters on writing and script follow. An important addition to the chapters on book illumination is Michael Gullick's essay on book bindings, an aspect which is often overlooked in (art) historical studies. The exterior of a book in many cases would have been what medieval viewers saw more often than what was contained within it.

The three chapters of Part II focus on the routes along which books travelled. The essays by Rosamond McKitterick and Richard Gameson together comprehensively cover the influence of exchanges between Britain and the Continent on book production. The chapter by Helen McKee analyses the circumstances behind books circulated between England and the Celtic realms – a task made difficult by the lack of physical evidence but arguably of central importance to a survey of the history of the book in Britain.

Parts III and IV are concerned with different ways of grouping books and thereby studying their distribution and function. In Part III, the essays distinguish different types of books. This provides authors with a chance to collate the different aspects of makeup and layout discussed in Part I for each category of book. This is a particularly fruitful approach for types of books that have survived in large numbers, such as gospel books and psalters (by Patrick McGurk and Jane Toswell, respectively). In Part IV, the essays discuss collections of books available to an author at a certain time, for example by looking at sources referred to in texts written at a particular ecclesiastical centre (e.g. Adomnán, Aldhelm). The chapters are arranged chronologically, starting with the first half of the fifth century and ending with two Welsh authors writing in the last quarter of the eleventh century, Rhygyfarch and Ieuan ap Sulien. Only one essay is not focused on an individual: M.R. Godden's account of literacy in Latin and the vernacular in Anglo-Saxon England, which provides the backdrop for the topic, albeit limited to the situation in England and from the seventh century onwards. An effort has been made to include essays on authors whose writings have not been studied widely, as well as accounts of famous figures such as the Venerable Bede.

The volume as a whole presents a comprehensive survey of the material available to those studying books of late Roman and early medieval Britain. The essays discuss questions of how and where books were made, their makeup, the people responsible for their production, distribution, and collection in a balanced way, referring to famous and less well known examples alike. Many chapters presuppose knowledge of the terminology used in manuscript studies. The addition of a glossary would have made the volume more user-friendly and attractive for non-specialists. The excellent bibliography and index make the volume a useful tool, and references to individual manuscripts can be looked up in a separate index. Some chapters – especially chapters 2 and 3, as well as chapters from Part III – serve well as a starting-point for the study of manuscripts from any disciplinary angle.