



# OUT OF THE BOX

## MEDDLING WITH MEDIEVAL MANUSCRIPTS

Two undergraduate students, one graduate, and their instructor work to transcribe and translate medieval Latin manuscripts in order to make them accessible to a wider audience. The official website of the Purdue Paleography Project is [purduepaleography.cla.purdue.edu/index.html](http://purduepaleography.cla.purdue.edu/index.html).

The year is 1490. A scribe hunches over a piece of parchment, quill in hand. He refers to another manuscript and hesitates. “FAC!” his master shouts. The quill of the startled scribe accidentally marks the parchment, allowing students at Purdue University to contemplate the meaning of the mark 526 years later.

The Purdue University Virginia Kelly Karnes Archives and Special Collections Research Center houses a collection of ancient and medieval manuscript leaves that date from 30 BCE through the fifteenth century, and are written in ancient Greek, Latin, ancient Egyptian, and Persian. It is believed that Purdue University came into possession of these leaves when librarian Eleanore Cammack ordered the manuscripts from a book shop in Southern California in the mid-twentieth century, as it was believed that acquiring manuscripts increased the importance of the library.<sup>2</sup>

Predating October 2014, Elizabeth Mercier, a continuing lecturer in the School of Languages and Cultures, brought the collection of leaves out of storage to provide never-before-available transcriptions and translations of those that were written in Latin. This includes a leaf from an *incunabulum*,<sup>3</sup> a leaf from a medieval antiphonary, leaves from St. Jerome’s Bible,<sup>4</sup> one leaf from a Book of Hours, one leaf from a Roman breviary, and one leaf from the twelfth-century theologian Peter Lombard.<sup>5</sup> Mercier also began the project with a desire to provide additional images and information about the leaves to allow for ease of access by anyone wanting to learn more. In the words of Mercier:

“The beauty of this project, for me, is being able to provide for students that incredible interaction with an unedited text. The wormholes, the primitive repairs to the parchment, the ink slips, all of these things instantly bring the student in direct contact with the history that the Latin language spans.”

For the spring 2016 semester, Mercier, graduate student mentor Dustin Meyer, and third-year undergraduate student researchers, Sabrina Mielczarski and Marissa Hicks, focused on designing their own website that supplements the digitized leaves, explains the project in detail, provides tutorials on how to read the manuscripts, and links to additional resources.



A website created by Mercier, Meyer, Mielczarski, and Hicks explains the Paleography Project in detail and provides those interested with tutorials on how to read the manuscripts, as well as links to additional resources.

# HISTORY OF PURDUE'S ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

**1904**

Librarian William Hepburn joins Purdue with a new library facility in mind.

**1913**

On June 10, Hepburn's vision comes to life: Purdue's new library is dedicated on this day.

**1978**

Keith Dowden is named Assistant Director for Special Collections, located in room 370 in Stewart Center. This location proves to be limiting to the Archives.

**1982**

The John Hicks Undergraduate Library opens, allowing the Bookstall to migrate to the Undergraduate Library. The Archives take its place in room 279.

**1986**

Helen Schroyer begins overseeing the Archives and Special Collections after Keith Dowden's retirement.

**1996**

Katherine Markee becomes the Special Collections Librarian and Interim Head of Special Collections. During her tenure, the scanning of the Amelia Earhart papers marks the beginning of the University's first major digitization project.

**2003**

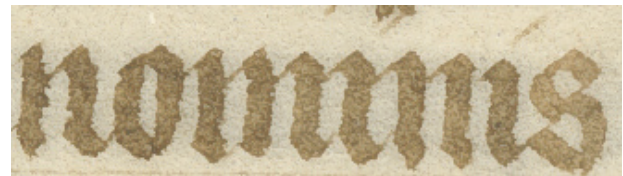
Sammie Morris becomes the first archivist at the Libraries. At this time, with support from the Dean of Libraries, space and staffing resources surge and, for the first time, previously separated rare book collections are united "for improved visibility, stewardship, and preservation," according to Morris. The archival collections, having grown tremendously, are finally being processed and catalogued. Guides to the collections become available online.

As stated by Mercier:

"As a Latin teaching tool, the value in these leaves is in their perfect imperfection. By that, I mean that these are one-of-a-kind, original, and unedited text samples and that allow students to engage with the language in a much deeper, much more active way. These texts throw the student into uncharted waters. There are no editor's notes to guide us. We have to follow the motions of the scribe's hand, mistakes, peculiar spellings, scribal abbreviations and all. Rather than be intimidated by the lack of the usual editor's aids, students are instead intrigued and energized. They buckle down and begin to apply everything they know about the language and its structure to tease apart the trickiest sections."

Alongside their work on building a digital repository, the team also focused on transcribing and rendering a first-ever translation of a leaf from a late fifteenth-century Italian Book of Hours.<sup>6</sup>

Before transcribing the manuscripts, the paleographer must have his or her eyes adjusted to the scribe's unique handwriting. The medieval scribe wrote using *minims*,<sup>7</sup> a perfect example of the textual challenges that transcribing presents.



"Nominis." Seven consecutive *minims* as seen in the Book of Hours, front page, column 1, line 24.

Dustin Meyer described the challenge:

"Before I had started working with these medieval manuscripts I had only been exposed to classical Latin, so I was bringing a set of orthographic expectations to these manuscripts that were not exactly as generative as I had assumed they would be. Each book-hand has its own unique conventions and methods of scribal shortcuts so with every new manuscript leaf we worked on I would find that I had to essentially re-train myself in a new system of abbreviations and markings."

Adjusting one's eyes to a scribe's hand is a difficult task, which can lead to errors in transcribing. If any confusion arises, the team must determine the proper transcription of a word. Occasionally, resources such as the *Vulgate*<sup>8</sup> can aid in how a word should be transcribed, but often there is no text for reference.



“Ap̄hendi,” with the omission mark standing for “re” apprehendi. As seen in the book of Isaiah, front page, column 1, line 3, word 3.

After transcription, the group focuses on translation. Most, if not all, students who study Latin study classical Latin; however, the manuscripts have been written in medieval Latin. This disparity can prove to be troublesome, but the overall process of translation allows for an intimate relationship to develop between the leaf and its reader. Translation allows the reader to interact with the text in a way that is most natural for them while maintaining the true meaning of the text. As stated by Dustin Meyer:

“There is something to be said about work that is both extremely detail-oriented and creative at the same time. You have to be very meticulous with the transcriptions, but you also need to think creatively to translate these manuscripts and try to retain the essence of what is actually said in the Latin. There is also this feeling of getting to know the scribe of each manuscript leaf because you spend so long analyzing his handwriting and making note of every time he writes something slightly different or every time he makes a slight error. There is also this sense of empathy you begin to feel. The manuscript leaves we are working on are all medieval copies of much older works, so you know that the scribe had a text in front of him that he was copying from just like we are copying from him.”

The project has come a long way, yet still has a long way to go. The website calls for additions, both in design and content. The group also plans to develop a functional mobile version of the website.

The Purdue Paleography Project invites collaboration with other academic disciplines, such as medieval studies, classical studies, digital humanities, computer science, and art history. The transcriptions, translations, and supplemental information provided by the team bring new life to the manuscripts. Not only does the Purdue Paleography Project shine a light on the library’s unique holdings, but it also allows for anyone to access the texts and learn about them.

## 2006

The now accessible e-Archives provides digitized documents ranging from the Earhart Papers to historical Purdue photographs. The Archives and Special Collections leads to the founding of the Susan Bulkeley Butler Women’s Archives, in order to detail the pioneering women who have contributed to the history of Purdue and of Indiana. The Archives and Special Collections also receives funding from the Betsy Gordon Foundation to institute collections that pertain to psychoactive substances research in combination with the work of David Nichols, a faculty member of Purdue University.

## 2008

The Archives and Special Collections begins to compile papers from Purdue alumni astronauts, such as Neil Armstrong, Eugene Cernan, Janice Voss, Roy Bridges, and Jerry Ross, among others. In this year, The Archives and Special Collections also moves to the fourth floor of the Humanities, Social Sciences and Education Library, and is renamed the Virginia Kelly Karnes Archives and Special Collections Research Center.

## 2009

Purdue President France Córdoba signs a resolution in April, delegating to the Archives the duty of stewarding and sustaining that which documents Purdue’s historical record.

## Today

The Archives and Special Collections continues to preserve important documents, both digital and physical. To learn more about Archives and Special Collections, please visit the following websites and social media pages:

Purdue Libraries: <https://www.lib.purdue.edu/spcol>

Facebook: Purdue University Virginia Kelly Karnes Archives and Special Collections

Twitter: @PurdueArchives

Instagram: @purduearchives

The Purdue University Archives and Special Collections blog, *Memoirs and Memories*: <http://blogs.lib.purdue.edu/asc/>

## NOTES

1. Loose translation: “Get to work!”
2. All information up to this point was found at the following citation: *Ancient and Medieval Manuscript Leaves Collection*, (30 BCE-18th century), MSP 136, retrieved from Archives and Special Collections, Purdue University Libraries.
3. A book printed before 1501.
4. Purdue University Libraries currently has one leaf from the books of Ecclesiastes, Isaiah, and Timothy.
5. The collection also includes Persian poetry and a papyrus fragment.
6. For information regarding the leaf from the Book of Hours that Purdue University Libraries owns can be found here: MSP 136, Ancient and Medieval Manuscript Leaves Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Purdue University Libraries.
7. A downward stroke of the pen.
8. The *Vulgate* is a late fourth-century Latin translation of the Bible.

## REFERENCE

*Ancient and medieval manuscript leaves collection*. (30 BCE-18th century). MSP 136. Retrieved from Archives and Special Collections, Purdue University Libraries.

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## Students



**Marissa Hicks** is a senior in the College of Liberal Arts. She is majoring in classical studies, and upon graduation she plans to attend the University of Washington in Seattle to earn her PhD in ancient philosophy.



**Sabrina Mielczarski** is a junior majoring in classical studies in the College of Liberal Arts. She plans to share her love of languages, both ancient and modern, with the world.

## Mentors



**Elizabeth Mercier** is a continuing lecturer of Latin and Greek for whom medieval manuscripts have long been a source of fascination.



**Dustin Meyer** is a graduate student in the Department of English pursuing a master’s degree in literary studies. He is interested in the intersection of Renaissance literature and classical studies.