

# The Medieval Magazine

Number 43

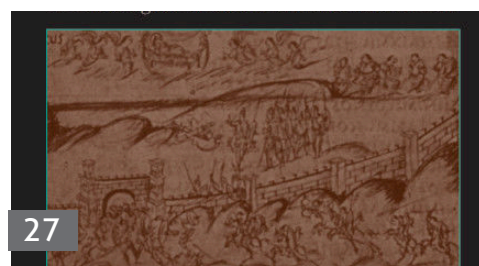
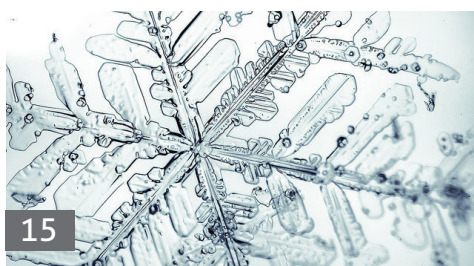
November 23, 2015



Getting under the skin

The Snow Baby

A Carolingian Mother to  
her Son



Is Ashgate Publishing about to close?





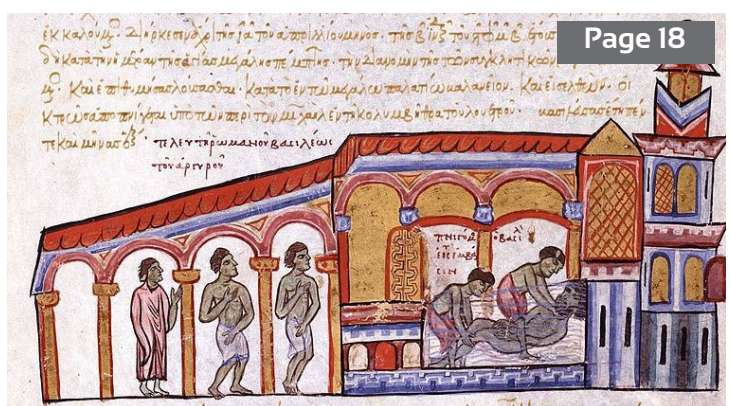
### Yale University acquires 'treasure trove' of medieval manuscripts

Otto F. Ege, an Ohio-based scholar and book dealer, made a controversial practice of dismantling medieval and Renaissance manuscripts and selling the individual leaves for profit during the first half of the last century.



### Is Ashgate Publishing about to close?

With Ashgate Publishing's American office closing this week, and its British office rumoured to do the same next month, it seems that days are numbered for one of the most important publisher's in the field of medieval studies.



### How to Murder a Byzantine Emperor

We take a look at three successful assassination attempts against the ruler of Byzantium



### The Anglo-Saxon Age: The Birth of England

Read an excerpt from the new book by Martin Wall

# Table of Contents

- 4 Yale University acquires 'treasure trove' of medieval manuscripts
- 7 Getting under the skin of a medieval mystery
- 10 "Releasing the Story of Sutton Hoo" project gets funding
- 12 Mosaic, wine presses, discovered in Israel
- 14 Is Ashgate Publishing about to close?
- 15 The Snow Baby: A Cautionary Tale
- 17 Isidore of Seville on... Emperors
- 18 How to Murder a Byzantine Emperor
- 24 The Anglo-Saxon Age: The Birth of England
- 27 Last Words from a Medieval Mother to her Son

## THE MEDIEVAL MAGAZINE

Edited by:  
Peter Konieczny

Website: [www.medievalists.net](http://www.medievalists.net)

This digital magazine is published each  
Monday.

Cover Photo: Death of an Emperor,  
depicted in the Madrid Skylitzes



# Yale University acquires 'treasure trove' of medieval manuscripts

By Mike Cummings

Otto F. Ege, an Ohio-based scholar and book dealer, made a controversial practice of dismantling medieval and Renaissance manuscripts and selling the individual leaves for profit during the first half of the last century.

Ege (pronounced EGG-ee) argued that his book-breaking served a noble purpose by providing people access to medieval relics that they otherwise would never be able to afford. Scholars lament the damage he did to numerous significant manuscripts.

When he died in 1951, Ege left to his family a collection of full manuscripts and manuscript fragments. Yale's Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library recently acquired Ege's collection, adding dozens of manuscript fragments and more than 50 complete manuscripts to the library's rich collection of medieval material.

"This remarkable collection will provide students and scholars with an unprecedented opportunity to study both a wide variety of hundreds of previously unknown manuscripts and fragments, as well as the complex man who collected them," says Raymond Clemens, curator of the library's Collection of Early Books and Manuscripts.

The Beinecke purchased the collection from Ege's grandchildren: Jack, Tom, Susan, and Jo Freudenheim.

"Otto Ege was a scholar and educator whose

passion was to make manuscripts and early printed books accessible to non-scholars and scholars alike," says Susan Freudenheim on the family's behalf. "The Beinecke's commitment to preserving his collection and to making the works he collected available to students, scholars and the public, both digitally and in the library, is very much in keeping with Ege's work."

Born in 1888, Ege was a longtime professor of graphic design and the history of the book, and later a dean, at the Cleveland Institute of Art. As a young man, he began collecting manuscripts from the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Over the course of his career, he broke apart hundreds of medieval and Renaissance manuscripts and early printed books, selling off the pages, or leaves. He would often sell combinations of leaves from different manuscripts as sets.

He defended his practice of unbinding books in "I am a Biblioclast," an essay published in the March, 1938 issue of *Avocations*, a hobby and leisure magazine.



Among the Ege acquisitions is this leaf from a 15th-century Italian liturgical volume. The miniature depicts the assumption of Mary. Image courtesy Yale University

"Surely to allow a thousand people 'to have and to hold' an original manuscript leaf, and to get the thrill and understanding that comes only from actual and frequent contact with these art heritages, is justification enough for the scattering of fragments," he wrote. "Few, indeed, can hope to own a complete manuscript book; hundreds, however, may own a leaf."

Lisa Fagin Davis, executive director of the Medieval Academy of America says that, in many cases, the books Ege took apart were unique and important.

"Ege left an indelible imprint on the landscape of early manuscripts and books in North American collections; there are more than 25,000 single leaves of early manuscripts in the United States and Canada, and it has been estimated that at least 10% of these passed through Ege's hands," Fagin Davis says.

She says that technology is allowing scholars to reunite Ege's "scattered leaves" and digitally reconstruct the manuscripts.

"But there has always been a missing piece," she says. "It was known to scholars that the Ege family retained ownership of a very large collection of leaves and books, but the collection was inaccessible and its contents unknown, the subject of rumor and speculation. The Beinecke Library's acquisition of this extraordinary treasure trove will yield immediate and important findings and inspire scholars and students for decades to come."

Clemens says that the more than 50 unbroken manuscripts, which had been on deposit at the Cleveland Museum of Art, are the collection's highlight.

"It appears that he never intended to break or sell these books and kept them together in a collection that appears to be designed to instruct students in the wide variety of

medieval manuscripts. He also had Greek, Arabic, and Ethiopic manuscripts," Clemens says. "The collection includes complete books in their original bindings, and in some cases, substantial portions of manuscripts that were broken up for sale, enabling us to date the manuscripts with much greater specificity than was possible before."

The Beinecke has several programs underway researching medieval fragments, mostly recovered from bookbindings that recycled medieval parchment when the text was deemed no longer important, often because print began to supplant manuscript copies in the 15th and 16th centuries.

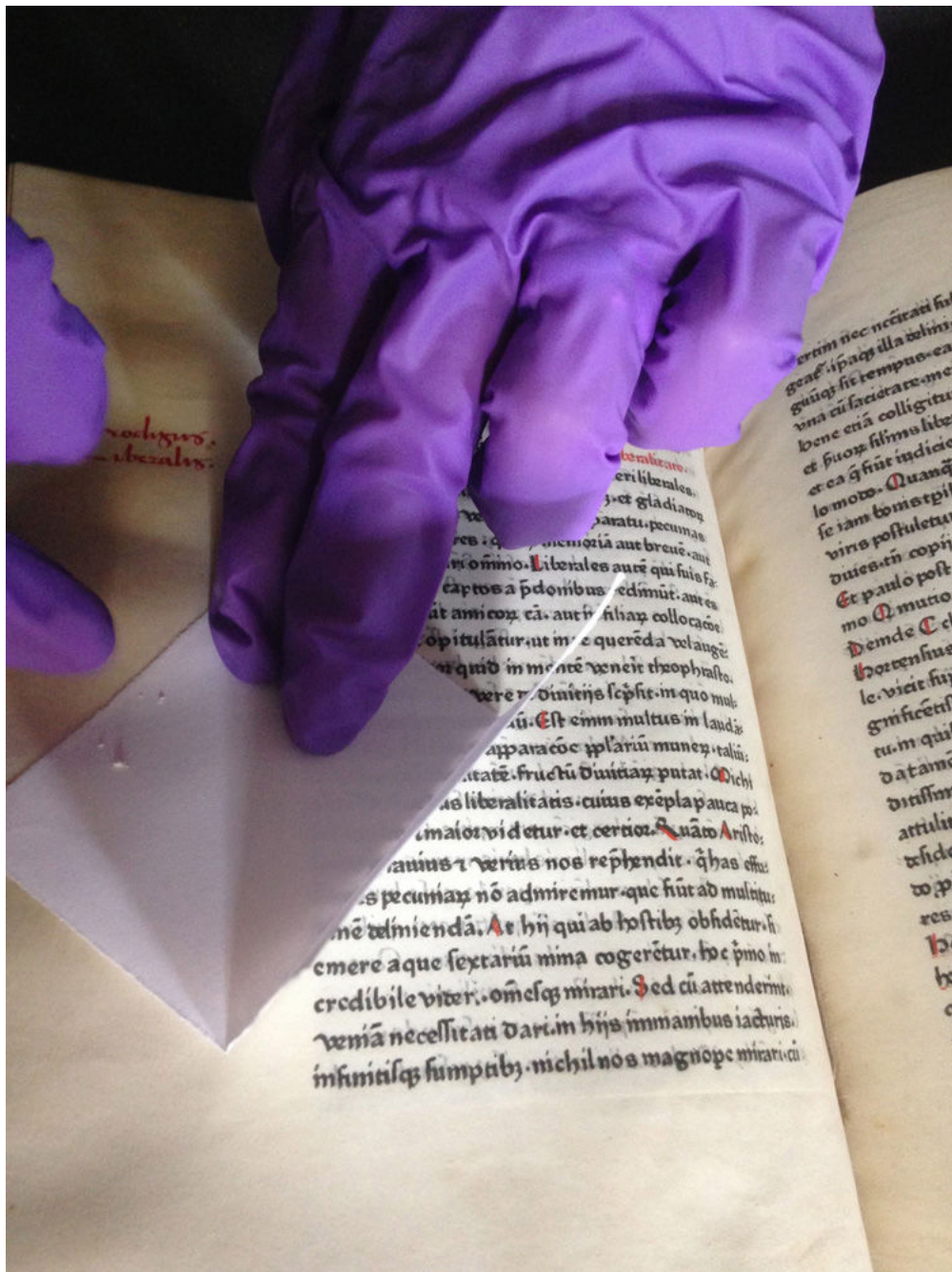
The collection will be available for research once it is cataloged. The Beinecke plans to host a conference on broken books and fragments in 2018.

***Our thanks to Mike Cummings and Yale University for this article***



# Getting under the skin of a Medieval mystery

A simple PVC eraser has helped an international team of scientists led by bioarchaeologists at the University of York to resolve the mystery surrounding the tissue-thin parchment used by medieval scribes to produce the first pocket Bibles



Non-invasive sampling extracting protein from parchment using eraser crumbs.  
Photo courtesy of The John Rylands Library, University-of-Manchester

Thousands of the Bibles were made in the 13th century, principally in France but also in England, Italy and Spain. But the origin of the parchment--often called 'uterine vellum' -- has been a source of longstanding controversy.

Use of the Latin term abortivum in many sources has led some scholars to suggest that the skin of fetal calves was used to produce the vellum. Others have discounted that theory, arguing that it would not have been possible to sustain livestock herds if so much vellum was produced from fetal skins. Older scholarship even argued that unexpected alternatives such as rabbit or squirrel may have been used, while some medieval sources suggest that hides must have been split by hand through use of a lost technology.

A multi-disciplinary team of researchers, led by Dr Sarah Fiddyment and Professor Matthew Collins of the BioArCh research facility in the Department of Archaeology at York, developed a simple and objective technique using standard conservation treatments to identify the animal origin of parchment.

The non-invasive method is a variant on ZooMS (ZooArchaeology by Mass Spectrometry) peptide mass fingerprinting but extracts protein from the parchment surface simply by using electrostatic charge generated by gentle rubbing of a PVC eraser on the membrane surface.

The research, which is published in Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS), involved scientists and scholars from France, Belgium, Denmark, Ireland, the USA and the UK. They analysed 72 pocket Bibles originating in France, England and Italy, and 293 further parchment samples from the 13th century. The parchment samples ranged in thickness from 0.03 - 0.28mm.

Dr Fiddyment said: "We found no evidence

for the use of unexpected animals; however, we did identify the use of more than one mammal species in a single manuscript, consistent with the local availability of hides.

"Our results suggest that ultrafine vellum does not necessarily derive from the use of abortive or newborn animals with ultra-thin skin, but could equally reflect a production process that allowed the skins of maturing animals of several species to be rendered into vellum of equal quality and fineness."

The research represents the first use of triboelectric extraction of protein from parchment. The method is non-invasive and requires no specialist equipment or storage. Samples can be collected without need to transport the artifacts -- researchers can sample when and where possible and analyse when required.

Bruce Holsinger, Professor of English and Medieval Studies at the University of Virginia and the initial humanities collaborator on the project, said: "The research team includes scholars and collaborators from over a dozen disciplines across the laboratory sciences, the humanities, the library and museum sciences--even a parchment maker. In addition to the discoveries we're making, what I find so exciting about this project is its potential to inspire new models for broad-based collaborative research across multiple paradigms. We think together, model together, write together."

Alexander Devine, of the Schoenberg Institute for Manuscript Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, said: "The bibles produced on a vast scale throughout the 13th century established the contents and appearance of the Christian Bible familiar to us today. Their importance and influence stem directly from their format as portable one-volume books, made possible by the innovative combination of strategies of miniaturization and compression achieved through the use of extremely thin parchment.





**Sarah Fiddymment (right) examines Codex in the Rylands Library, Manchester.**

through the use of extremely thin parchment. The discoveries of this innovative research therefore enhance our understanding of how these bibles were produced enormously, and by extension, illuminate our knowledge of one of the most significant text technologies in the histories of the Bible and of Western Christianity."

Professor Collins added: "The level of access we have achieved highlights the importance of this technique. Without the eraser technique we could not have extracted proteins from so many parchment samples. Further, with no evidence of unexpected species, such as rabbit or squirrel, we believe that 'uterine vellum' was often an achievement of technological production using available resources."

Since finishing the work, parchment conservator Jiří Vnouček, a co-author on the paper, has used this knowledge to recreate parchment similar to 'uterine vellum' from old skins. He said: "It is more a question of using the right parchment making technology than using uterine skin. Skins from younger animal are of course optimal for production of thin parchment but I can imagine that every skin was collected, nothing wasted."

The paper 'The animal origin of thirteenth-century uterine vellum revealed using non-invasive peptide fingerprinting' is published in *PNAS*. **Click [here](#) to read the article.**

# 'Releasing the Story of Sutton Hoo' project gets funding

The National Trust has received initial support from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) for a new project it is unveiling last week, called Releasing the Story of Sutton Hoo.

The £2.4million project will transform the experience visitors have when visiting the site of the world famous Anglo-Saxon burial mounds and release the full potential of the dramatic landscape and its fascinating story.

An HLF first round pass grant of £150,000 has now been awarded to help the Trust progress the project through its early development stages, which will see the overall plans take shape in consultation with National Trust members and the local community.

Sutton Hoo, near Woodbridge in Suffolk, is one of the most important archaeological sites in the world and the 7th-century burial mounds, excavated from the late 1930s onwards, have revealed items including the iconic Sutton Hoo helmet that have helped shape our understanding of the origins of English history. The landscape has been cared for by the National Trust since 1998.

Luke Potter, East Suffolk General Manager, said: "We want to enrich and enhance the experience people have when visiting Sutton Hoo. This special place is about so much more than the treasure, it tells the hugely significant story of how the first English people lived their lives. Their significance continues to resonate down the centuries in our language, our craft traditions and our connections to land and landscape.

"The project aims to release the power and magical inspiration of Sutton Hoo's history by untapping the human stories that reside within its landscape. We aim to create a layered experience that reaches out and appeals to diverse and new audiences, from the academic to the casual visitor."

Therese Coffey, MP for Suffolk Coastal, said: "I'm delighted Sutton Hoo has been successful in obtaining a grant from HLF. Creating a new interactive experience to showcase the story of this hugely important excavation is important for our national heritage and will attract many more visitors to Suffolk important for our local economy."

Robyn Llewellyn, Head of HLF East of England, said: "Sutton Hoo is one of the most important Anglo-Saxon sites in the world and it's exciting that thanks to National Lottery players, Sutton Hoo will be transformed for visitors from near and far. This is a great opportunity to share this amazing place and its stories from the past 6000 years."

Although still in the early development stage, Releasing the Story of Sutton Hoo will ultimately see visitors take a whole new route through the landscape, with the importance and setting of the burial mounds playing a central role.



**The mounds at Sutton Hoo - Photo by Justin Mimms / Heritage Lottery Fund**

Plans include building a raised platform to provide views over the entire burial ground and to the River Deben beyond, which itself played such a significant part in the Sutton Hoo story. It was from the river that the Anglo-Saxon ship was hauled up the valley before it was used in the burial chamber found in Mound One, where the famous treasure was discovered, and it is hoped that visitors will also follow in the footsteps of the final stages of this dramatic journey. New innovative interpretation will help bring both the landscape and the museum to life.

The aim of the project is to create an experience that will appeal to a wide range of visitors, whether they are holidaymakers looking for a family-friendly day out, local people who

regularly enjoy the landmark, students studying the Anglo-Saxon period or people from around the world with an interest in archaeology.

The project will bring a wide range of inclusive learning and hands-on/participatory opportunities for all visitors to Sutton Hoo, including an enhanced formal education programme, an art and craftsmanship programme and a range of new volunteering roles.

The project is scheduled for completion in 2021.



# Mosaic, wine presses, discovered in Israel

The Israel Antiquities Authority announced last week two new archaeological discoveries - a second mosaic at Lod, and the remains of a Byzantine village in the southern part of the country.



**Detail of the mosaic. Photo: Assaf Peretz, courtesy of the Israel Antiquities Authority**

The mosaic, which dates from late antiquity, was discovered near the site of another mosaic in Lod, a town near Tel Aviv. Measuring 11 × 13 metres, the mosaic depicts hunting and hunted animals, fish, flowers in baskets, vases and birds.

It was found as part of a villa dating back about 1,700 years. According to Dr. Amir Gorzalczany, excavation director on behalf

of the Israel Antiquities Authority, "The villa we found was part of a neighborhood of affluent houses that stood here during the Roman and Byzantine periods. At that time Lod was called Diospolis and was the district capital, until it was replaced by Ramla after the Muslim conquest. The building was used for a very long time".





**Byzantine wine presses discovered in Israel. Photo by Assaf Peretz, courtesy Israel Antiquities Authority**

Meanwhile, archaeologists working on outskirts of the Negev Desert have found the remains of a late Byzantine period village dating to the 6th and 7th centuries. One of the most impressive finds of the excavation is a sophisticated wine press that was used to mass-produce wine.

The site includes a workshop, various buildings and two wine presses. Fragments of marble latticework in the form of a cross and flowers indicate the existence of a public building. Other findings include tools used in daily life, such as clay cups, oil candles and seals.

Ilan Peretz, who supervised the dig for the IAA, noted that one of the most impressive finds of the excavation is a sophisticated

wine press that was used to commercially produce wine. He described the process: "First, the grapes were pressed. Then the juice was funneled through canals to a pit where the sediment settled. From there, the wine was piped into vats lined with stone and marble, where it would ferment until it was stored in clay bottles called 'Gaza jugs'" - hundreds of which have been found on the site.

On the basis of a cross etched into seashells adorning one of the vats of the wine press, the researchers determined that the site served the Christian community living there 1400-1500 years ago.

# Is Ashgate Publishing about to close?



With Ashgate Publishing's American office closing this week, and its British office rumoured to do the same next month, it seems that days are numbered for one of the most important publisher's in the field of medieval studies.

Founded in 1967, Ashgate Publishing is one of the largest publisher's in the humanities and social sciences, producing over 800 books a year. Many of them are about the Middle Ages, including series such as *Crusades Texts in Translation* and *Variorum Collected Studies*.

Earlier this year Ashgate was bought by Informa, owners of the academic publishing group Taylor & Francis, for a reported £20 million. At the time of acquisition, Ashgate commented on its own website that "we see this as a positive move for all our authors and the academic and professional communities we serve."

The US office, based in Burlington, Vermont, will be closing on November 24th, and rumours have circulated that the UK office, based in Farnham, Surrey, will follow in

December.

An online petition asking Informa to stop the closures has already garnered 6000 signatures. The petition states:

*Independent academic presses like Ashgate have offered a safe haven for scholars working in certain subfields as University presses closed entire publishing specializations and fired editorial staff in response to campus austerity measures. Academic presses are more than profit margins, income from the backlist, utility bills, payroll, and marketing campaigns. Ashgate flourished through the bonds formed between editors and authors, the care and attention of copy editors, and above all, the good will of authors and readers.*

An email was sent to Informa asking about the future of Ashgate Publishing. Louise Riordan, Head of Corporate Communications for Informa, responded "we aren't making any comments or statements at this time."

# The Snow Baby: A Cautionary Tale

By Danièle Cybulskie

In medieval France, a type of story grew up amidst the epics and romances that was focused on pure entertainment: the fabliau. Like fables, fabliaux are short tales, although their purpose is not to teach morals, but rather to get a good laugh. Most of the time, fabliaux are lighthearted and lusty, but occasionally they stray into dark humour, like "The Snow Baby".

Once upon a time, so the story goes, there was a merchant who traveled a lot. One day, the merchant set out on a long business trip. "He was gone for two whole years," says the anonymous fabliard, "and while he was away his wife, with the help of a young man she knew, got herself pregnant" (p.17). This was thanks to "Love, which lies always in wait" (p.17), especially in fabliaux about merchant husbands. When the merchant returned and asked his wife about it, she replied:

*Husband, once when I was looking out for you up there on the high balcony, all sad and sorrowful at your delay, I chanced to look up at the sky, and it being winter and the snow falling heavily, a little snow fell into my mouth. Before I was aware of it I swallowed it, and it was so sweet that from the little I swallowed I conceived this beautiful child. (p.18)*

blessed by God, but "in his heart, he did not believe her story" (p.18). (Maybe someone had already told him about swallowing watermelon seeds.) The merchant bided his time until the boy had grown to be fifteen years old, at which point the merchant told his wife it was time he took the boy on a trip, to teach him about the family business. The wife was wary, but had no choice but to let her son go with her husband.

They merchant and the boy travelled to Genoa, where "the merchant sold the boy to a man who took him to Alexandria to sell him on the slave market," writes the fabliard (p.19). The merchant then returned home to his wife, who (after myriad fainting spells) pleaded with the merchant to tell her what had become of the boy. The merchant replied:

The merchant exclaimed that they were





**A snowflake under the microscope – image by ZEISS Microscopy / Flickr**

*It was on a hot summer's day just about noon in the country where we were traveling, when I and your son went for a walk on a very high hill where the rays of the sun, which were very bright and burning hot, fell full on our heads. Alas, that walk cost us dear! For the boy, exposed to the full heat of the sun, all at once melted away. And it is no wonder that he did, for as we know he was made of snow.*

Thus the merchant had his revenge on his faithless wife, the fabliaud tells us, and his wife "had to drink what she herself had brewed" (p.20).

This type of dark humour isn't typical of fabliaux in general (although the character of the lusty, cheating wife certainly is), but the story seems to have roots in conventional folk tales, and is itself the first instance of a

popular type of baby-from-swallowed-object stories, according to Robert Hellman and Richard O'Gorman (p.20). Medieval listeners, it seems, would have appreciated the sinister wit of the merchant in the face of his cuckolding.

As the first snows begin to fall in the northern hemisphere this month, you may want to think twice about lifting your face up to catch a snowflake on your tongue. You never know what trouble you may end up getting into.

(The translation used here is from Hellman and O'Gorman's book, but for a great (and more complete) modern collection, I recommend Nathaniel E. Dubin and R. Howard Bloch's *The Fabliaux*.)



Isidore of Seville on...

# Emperors

What did Isidore of Seville, the 7th-century Archbishop of Seville and author of *Etymologiae*, have to say about the imperial title? Here is an excerpt where he describes cities of the origins of emperors from the Roman world:

For the Romans, the title imperator was at first given only to those on whom supremacy in military affairs was settled, and therefore the imperatores were so called from 'commanding' (*imperare*) the army. But although generals held command for a long time with the title of imperator, the senate decreed that this was the name of Augustus Caesar only, and he would be distinguished by this title from other 'kings' of nations. To this day the successive Caesars have employed this title. Indeed it is customary for later kings to use the name of the first one, as among the Albans all the kings of the Albans are called Silvii after the name of Sylvius; similarly for the Persians the Arsacidae, for the Egyptians the Ptolemies, for the Athenians the Cecropidae.

For the Romans, 'Augustus' is the name of the imperial office, because formerly the emperors 'enlarged' (*augere*) the republic by extending its borders. Originally the senate bestowed this name on Octavius Caesar, so that he might be honored in his very name and title for enlarging their territory. Moreover, this same Octavius was now called Caesar and emperor, or Augustus. Afterwards, when it was announced to him while he was watching the games that he would also be called 'Lord' (*Dominus*) by the people, he immediately, by gesture and with face averted, repressed this indecorous adulation and, as a human being, declined the title of Lord. On the next day he rebuked the whole populace with a very severe edict, and after this allowed no one to call him Lord, not even his own children.

***The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*** has been edited and translated by Stephen A. Barney, W. J. Lewis, J. A. Beach and Oliver Berghof, and was published by Cambridge University Press in 2006

**[Click here to visit the Publisher's website for more details](#)**

# How to Murder a Byzantine Emperor

By Peter Konieczny

An empire like Byzantium does not last for a thousand years without its own share of political intrigue. Many of its emperors would not go on to live full lives, for their position was often under threat by both external enemies and internal rivals. While an unlucky Byzantine emperor who found himself usurped could be exiled to a monastery (sometimes after being blinded or castrated), there are a handful of episodes where Byzantine emperors were murdered. Here are three accounts told by medieval chroniclers in vivid detail, in which the plot did not go as smoothly as the conspirators hoped, but in end resulted with a new man on the throne.

## **Leo V, murdered on December 25, 820**

The first account is told by John Scylitzes in his *Synopsis of Histories*, and tells of the death of Emperor Leo V, who reigned from 813 to 820. Scylitzes remarked that while this emperor was diligent and successful in managing the state, he was also very cruel and harsh, and had "earned the hatred of all his subjects."

The historian adds that "he was very proud of his voice and aspired to be something of a musician, but his natural gifts were not

commensurate with this aspiration. He could not keep time and he had little talent for signing in tune either." Still, whenever he was in church he would join in on the psalm-singing.

When word reached Leo that one of his generals, Michael of Amorion, was speaking ill against him, the Emperor sent out his spies to collect evidence. Soon enough, Michael was overheard plotting against Leo. He arrested and found guilty by a court presided over by the emperor, and sentenced to be killed by being tossed into the furnace that heated the palace baths. However, the

heated the palace baths. However, the Emperor's wife came out to plead for Michael's life. Leo eventually agreed, but said to the empress, "Woman, thanks to your ravings, I have done as you required. But before long, you will see that shoots that spring forth from my innards and what bad fortune is reserved for us, even though you have delivered me from sinning today."

The emperor had the Palace-keeper take Michael away and hold him, but he was still very uneasy about the situation and for many nights he could not get any sleep. Finally, he decided to go check on Michael and went over to Palace-keeper's quarters. John Scylitzes writes:

*As he entered the room, a sight met his eyes which left him dumbfounded. He beheld the condemned man lying gloriously ensconced in a high bed, whilst the Palace-Keeper lay on the bare floor. He approached and looked more carefully at Michael. Did he have the shallow and troubled sleep of those whom destiny tosses around and whose life is a gamble? Or did he, on the contrary, enjoy a calm, untroubled rest? When he found him sleeping calmly (he couldn't waken him even when he touched him) his anger became yet more inflamed at this unexpected revelation. He went off hurling terrible verbal insults not only against Michael, but against the Palace-keeper too.*

The staff of the Palace-keeper were worried about the situation, fearing that the Emperor would punish them as well, and they spoke with Michael, who came up with a plan. He asked for a priest named Theoctistos to come to his chambers so he could make his confession to God, but once he arrived Michael told him, "Now is the hour, Theoctistos. Threaten the conspirators that unless they make haste to get me out of danger, I am going to tell all to the Emperor."

Theoctistos did as he was told, and he met

with Michael's supporters. After debating what they should do, it was decided that they needed to make an attempt on the Emperor's life, and planned to attack him while he in the palace church for dawn service. John Scylitzes explains that they gathered outside the church:

*The conspirators mingled discreetly with the clerks, their daggers hidden in their cloaks, and went in with them. They then assembled in a dark corner of the church, awaiting the prearranged signal. As the hymn was being sung, the Emperor - who was already there - took up the refrain, as was his custom: "They poured contempt on the yearning of the king of all kings." (As we remarked, he had a fine voice which carried well.) It was then that the conspirators struck, en masse. Their first attack went awry because they mistook the master of the clerks for the Emperor, perhaps because he bore a certain physical resemblance to him; or because he was wearing the same kind of head-gear. For it was a cold winter night, so everybody was in heavy clothing and each man had covered his head with a tightly-fitting felt hat. The master of the clerks contrived to save himself by removing his felt hat, thus revealing that he was bald. When the Emperor realised that he was being attacked, he went into the sanctuary and seized the thurible by its chains (some say it was the divine cross) with which to ward off the blows of his attackers. But the conspirators attacked all together, not one at a time. He was able to resist for some time by parrying the sword-thrusts with the divine cross, but then he was set upon from all sides, like a wild beast. He was already beginning to flag from his wounds when, at the end, he saw a gigantic person about to deal him a blow. Then, with an oath, he invoked the grace which inhabited the temple and begged to be delivered. The noble was of the Krambonitai family; "This is not the time for swearing oaths, but for killing," he declared - and dealt him a blow*

*killing," he declared - and dealt him a blow which cut off the arm at the joint, not only severing the member, but also sundering an arm of the cross. Someone also cut off his head, which was already damaged by wounds and hanging down.*

The conspirators then released Michael from the Palace-keeper's quarters, although they could not remove the shackles from his feet. So Michael was placed on the Imperial throne, still wearing his fetters - he would go on to rule Byzantium for nine years.



**The dead emperor Leo V depicted in the 13th century manuscript Madrid Skylitzes**

## **Nikephoros II Phokas, murdered on December 11, 969**

Nikephoros II Phokas was a brilliant general before he took control of the Byzantine throne, with the help of Theophano, the wife of the previous Emperor. However, Nikephoros was done in by a plot launched by Theophano and his own nephew, John Tzimiskes. While John had helped his uncle in his wars and in gaining the throne, Nikephoros was apparently worried about his nephew's growing influence, and for a few years he was exiled away from Constantinople and from military command.

According to the History of Leo the Deacon, it was Theophano who convinced the Emperor to bring John Tzimiskes back to the

capital and into a position of power. What Nikephoros did not know was that Theophano and John were having an affair, and that he was using secret passageways into the Imperial Palace to send his hand-picked men inside and hide out in the empresses' quarters.

The plotting did not escape everyone's notice, and a priest handed Nikephoros a note saying:

*"Let it be known to you, O Emperor, that a terrible death is being prepared for you tonight. Because this is true, order a search of the women's quarters, where armed men will be apprehended who are planning to carry out your murder."*



The Emperor ordered a search to be done of the Empresses' rooms, but nothing was found. That night, the empress was with Nikephoros and explained she had to go check in on some guests. She said, "I am leaving to give some instructions about their care, and then I will come back to you. But leave the bedchamber open and don't lock it for now; for I will lock it when I come back."

As she left, John Tzimiskes was setting the final part of his plan into motion:

*The clock was just indicating the fifth hour of the night, a fierce north wind filled the air, and snow was falling heavily. Then John arrived with his fellow conspirators, sailing along the shore in a light boat and disembarking on land where the stone lion is seizing the bull (traditionally the place is called Boukoleon), whistling to his retainers, who were leaning out from the terrace above, he was recognized; for this was the signal he had given to the murderers. They let down from above a basket attached to ropes, and hauled up first all the conspirators one at a time, and then John himself. After thus ascending without being detected, they entered the imperial bedchamber with swords drawn. When they reached the bed and found it empty with no one sleeping in it, they were petrified with terror and tried to hurl themselves into the sea [from the terrace]. But a dastardly fellow from [the staff of] the women's quarters led them and pointed out the sleeping emperor; they surrounded him and leapt at him and kicked with their feet.*

One of the men struck the sleeping emperor on the head with a sword, leaving a wound along on his eyebrow. The bleeding emperor pleaded, "Help me, O Mother of God!", but Tzimiskes had his men seize Nikephoros and hold him on the bed. According to Leo the Deacon, John then began to monologue like an evil villain:

*"Tell me, you most ungrateful and*

*malicious tyrant, wasn't it through me that you attained the Roman rule and received such power? Why then did you disregard such a good turn, and driven, by envy and evil frenzy, did not hesitate to remove me, your benefactor, from the command of the troops? Instead you dismissed me to waste my time in the countryside with peasants, like some alien without any rights, even though I am more brave and vigorous than you; the armies of the enemy fear me, and there is no one who can save you from my hands. Speak then, if you have any grounds of defense remaining against these charges."*

*The emperor, who was already growing faint and did not have anyone to defend him, kept calling on the Mother of God for assistance. But John grabbed hold of his beard and pulled it mercilessly, while his fellow conspirators cruelly and inhumanely smashed his jaws with their swordhandles so as to shake loose his teeth and knock them out of the jawbone. When they had their fill of tormenting him, John kicked him in the chest, raised up his sword, and drove it right through the middle of his brain, ordering the others to strike the man, too. They slashed at him mercilessly, and one of them hit him in the back with an akouphion [a hooked hammer] and thrust it right through to the breast.*

With Nikephoros dead, John Tzimiskes walked over to the imperial throne room, and declared himself the new emperor. By now, the news of the attack in the palace was spreading. Leo the Deacon adds:

*When Nikephoros' bodyguards heard, too late, about the murder, they rushed to defend him, in the belief that the man was still among the living, and they tried to force open the iron gates with all their strength. But John ordered that Nikephoros' head be brought in and shown to his bodyguards through a window. A man named Atzypotheodorus came and cut off the head and showed it to the*



**The murder of Romanos III in his bath, as depicted in the Madrid Skylitzes**

*to his bodyguards through a window. A man named Atzypotheodorus came and cut off the head and showed it to the turbulent group of men. When they saw the monstrous and unbelievable sight, they let their swords fall from their hands, changed their tune, and with one voice proclaimed John as emperors of the Romans.*

John I Tzimiskes would rule as emperor until the year 976.

## **Romanos III Argyros, murdered on April 11, 1034**

The story of this death was told by Michael Psellus in his *Chronographia*. Romanos' six year reign was not a particularly successful one, and he was targeted with several conspiracies. In the end, his demise came at the hands of his wife Zoe, and her lover Michael the Paphlagonian. Michael Psellus explains that Emperor Romanos had been suffering an unusual illness that sapped him

of much of his strength. The chronicler, who was 16 years old at time, wrote that he saw the emperor himself:

*His whole face was swollen and the colour of it was no more pleasant to look upon than that of men three days dead in the tombs. His breathing was fast, and after moving a few paces he had to rest. Most of the hairs on his head had fallen out, as though he were a corpse, but a few strands, scattered here and there, were tousled round his forehead, moved, I suppose, by his breathing. The others despaired of his life, but he himself was by no means without hope. He had put himself in the hands of the doctors and he expected to be restored to health by their skill.*

Psellus thinks that illness might have been due to slow poisoning by Zoe, but he is not sure. However, since this was not acting fast enough, a new, more direct, strategy was implemented. The emperor had gone to his swimming pool:

swimming pool, and according to the chronicler:

*To begin with, he enjoyed himself swimming on the surface and floating lightly, blowing out and refreshing himself with the greatest of pleasure. Later on some of his retinue came in to support him and give him rest, according to his own orders... when Romanus plunged his head under the water - his usual custom - they all pressed his neck and held him down for some considerable time, after which they let him go and went away. The air inside him, however, caused his body to rise and it brought him to the surface, almost breathless,. There he floated about in a haphazard way, like a cork.*

*When he had recovered a little and saw in what an evil plight he was, he stretched out his hand and begged someone to take hold of it and help him to his feet. In pity for him, and because of his sad condition, one man did indeed go to this aid. Putting his arms around him, he drew him out of the water and carried him to a couch, where he laid him, just as he was, in a pitiable state.*

*At this an uproar ensued. Several persons came into the room, among them the empress herself, without any bodyguard and apparently stricken with grief. After one look at him, however, she went off, having satisfied herself with her own eyes that he was a dying man. Romanus gave one strong deep moan, and then kept looking around, this way and that, without being able to speak, but showing by signs and nods, what he wanted. Then, as still nobody could understand him, he shut his eyes and began to breathe more fast again. Suddenly his mouth gaped open and there flowed gently from it some dark-coloured, coagulated matter, and, with two or three gasps, he died.*

The next day Zoe and Michael were married, with the latter becoming Michael III. He would rule Byzantium for another seven years.

## Sources:

***John Skylitzes: A Synopsis of Byzantine History, 811–1057***, translated by John Wortley (Cambridge University Press, 2012)

***The History of Leo the Deacon: Byzantine Military Expansion in the Tenth Century***, translated by Alice-Mary Talbot and Denis F. Sullivan (Dumbarton Oaks, 2005)

***Fourteen Byzantine Rulers: The Chronographia of Michael Psellus***, translated by E.R.A. Sewter (Penguin, 1966)

# **The Anglo-Saxon Age: The Birth of England**

**By Martin Wall**

**Amberley Publishing, 2015**

**ISBN:: 9781445647722**

The discovery of the Staffordshire Hoard in 2009 has captured the imagination and stimulated renewed interest in the history and culture of the Anglo-Saxons. The discovery poses some interesting questions. Who owned the treasure and how did they acquire it? Was it made locally or did it originate elsewhere? Why was it buried in an obscure field in the Staffordshire countryside? To answer these questions, Martin Wall takes us on a journey into a period that still remains mysterious, into regions and countries long forgotten, such as Mercia and Northumbria.



## Read an excerpt from **Chapter 3: The Anglo-Saxon Conversion**

Many of us will recall the famous story from our schooldays. The year was AD 597, the place Thanet in Kent. A party of monks had been permitted to land there by King Aethelbert of Kent. Solemnly and with great trepidation, they processed inland singing the litany, following a silver cross and an image of Christ painted on a board. The king was awaiting them, not at his royal hall, but out of doors seated beneath an oak tree surrounded by bodyguards. He feared the potential for magical spells these strangers might cast. Eventually, the fierce pagan king was persuaded to allow the holy men to preach and win converts among his people and granted them land around the ruined old Roman church of St Martin in Canterbury which they were allowed to restore. A handful of intrepid monks led by Augustine had dared the dangerous sea crossing, risking their lives in a barbarian realm to spread the light of Christ to an uncivilised pagan island. It is a charming vignette but it is not quite as simple as it may seem.

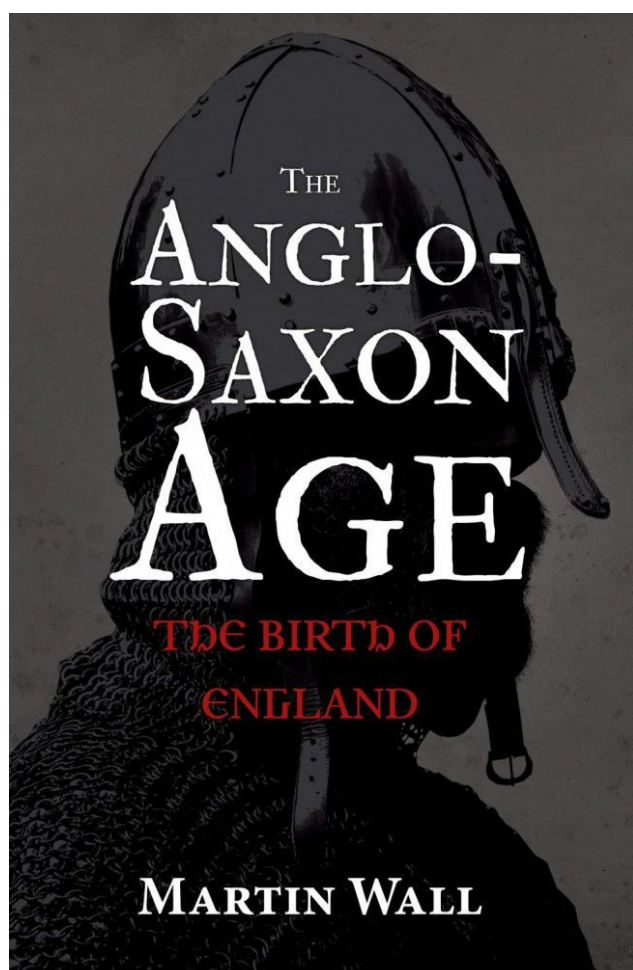
Firstly, there had already been a Roman Catholic presence in Kent for some time. Aethelbert was married to a Catholic Frankish princess, Bertha, who brought with her Bishop Liudhard, her personal chaplain. His influence was not just confined to the spiritual guidance and comfort of his royal charge and it seems he may have been allowed to refurbish St Martin's at Canterbury, before Augustine's mission had even set foot in Kent, and from this base he had been allowed to proselytise in a limited way with the tacit support of the king. This toleration must have been a signal to Pope Gregory the Great that here was a king ready to do business. Gregory had taken an interest in the affairs of the English for a long time. As a young man he had seen blonde-haired, blue-eyed children for sale in the slave market at Rome, and, enquiring as to their origins, had been told that they were Angles

from Deira, one of the territories of Northumbria. He is said to have replied that they looked more like angels from God. Aethelbert had his eye on developing wider trade with the Franks and imitating their law codes, their coinage and their planned towns. All these innovations were predicated on the unifying role of Roman Catholic religion, and there must have been many among the pagan priesthood and the warrior nobility who drew the line at abandoning the ways of their forefathers. But in 601 Aethelbert was finally baptised, and where a king went, his subjects were bound to follow. Gregory had not realised how much change had taken place in Britain and still thought there were grand cities there as in Gaul, in which new sees could be implanted. In fact, as we have seen, urban life had all but collapsed and the London he imagined as the centre for an archbishopric was a collection of half-timbered settlements located outside the Roman ruins. Soon, Canterbury and Rochester were diocesan centres and London followed, but it was not directly under Aethelbert's control. Instead, Canterbury, Augustine's first see, became the seat of the archbishop.

Secondly, there were of course Christians among the British in the far-off western lands. Columba, the Irishman whose distinctive Celtic Christianity was one day to spread the faith to the people of the north, had died in the same year that Augustine's mission had arrived. It was a signal of which way the winds of faith were blowing. Augustine presumed that the British Church would immediately bow to his authority and expected their cooperation in his project, but like Gregory, whose view of the English was based on the charms of pretty, wide-eyed children and maps of Roman provinces with grand cities which no longer existed, Augustine simply failed to understand the political realities of the island he had come to evangelise. In his mind, the relations between Britons and Anglo-Saxons did not seem so very different to those of the Gauls to the Franks, but the enmity between the two peoples was so toxic

to the Franks, but the enmity between the two peoples was so toxic that it threatened to undermine even Christian unity. However, seven British bishops, when they received a summons to meet with Augustine at a place on the borders between the English and the Cymric lands, agreed to meet with him to discuss terms. Where the meeting took place is unclear. Aust in Gloucestershire may be a contraction of Augustine, but there is a tradition that it could have been near Great Witley in the Abberley Hills of Worcestershire. Before going out to meet Augustine, the British bishops had visited a holy man, a hermit visionary, to take advice from him about how they should approach negotiations. The hermit's wise policy was to test the Catholic archbishop. If, when they arrived to meet him, he rose from the episcopal seat to greet them courteously then he was a man to be trusted, and to whom they should offer obedience, but if he remained seated then he was a proud haughty man whose arrogance precluded further discussions. Augustine, of course, remained

in his chair, and the chance for Christian unity had been lost. Augustine was not happy to be rebuffed in this way and is said to have prophesied that the British would 'suffer the vengeance of death' at English hands. The independent-minded British and Irish Christians of the west who had guarded the light of Christianity against every peril and fierce pagan foes for so long alone were not about to conform with Augustine's plan unless they received due respect from him. His mission had been a beginning, that was all, and for all they knew Kent could just as swiftly become apostate. So, the conversion was not going to be easy, and as the seventh century commenced there were three religious influences at work in the island. In the south-east, Augustine's mission; in the far north and the west, British and Irish Celtic Christianity; and in the vast majority of the English speaking areas, Germanic paganism. Two kingdoms were to prove particularly resistant to Christianity: Sussex and Mercia.



**Click here to visit  
the Amberley  
Publishing  
website to learn  
more about this  
book**

# Last Words from a Medieval Mother to her Son

By Danièle Cybulskie

Last week, I stumbled across a passage from the *Liber Manualis*, written by a ninth-century Frankish woman named Dhuoda to her fifteen-year-old son. Believing that she was dying (the date of her actual death is unknown), Dhuoda poured herself into the task of giving her son all of the life lessons she would not be able to impart herself. What is left to us is a unique example of the power and wisdom of a medieval mother's love.

At the time of writing, William and Dhuoda are separated, as she writes, "I have heard that your father, Bernard, has given you as a hostage to the lord king Charles [the Bald]" (p.126), but it's very likely that Dhuoda has not seen her son for years already at this point. Not only was it common for the nobility to send their sons away to be educated at other nobles' houses, but the Frankish conflict seems to have kept the family apart quite a lot: William's younger brother was only, Dhuoda says, "the second [child] to come forth from my body" (p.125), and his birth came fifteen years after William's. (Miscarriage might explain this somewhat, but long absence seems to have been a defining feature of Dhuoda's marriage.)

One of the tasks Dhuoda sets William is to pass on her wisdom and love to his younger

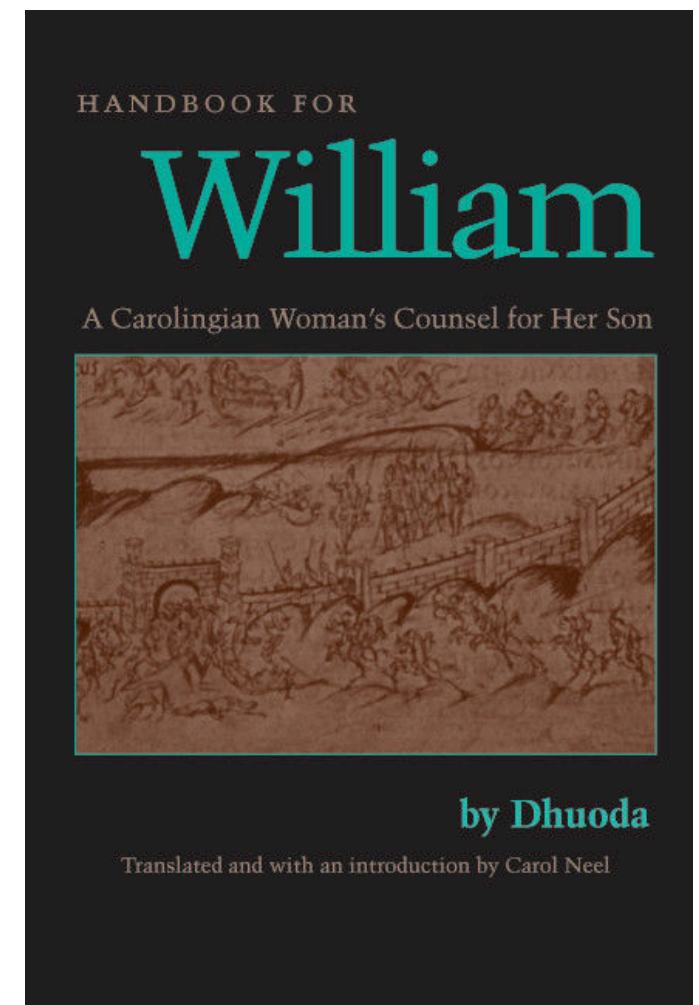
brother. In a heartbreaking example of the relative powerlessness of many medieval noble women's lives, Dhuoda's second son was taken from her by his father within days of his birth. Dhuoda says, "He was still tiny and had not yet received the grace of baptism when Bernard, my lord and the father of you both, had the baby brought to him in Aquitaine in the company of Elefantus, bishop of Uzès, and others of his retainers" (p.125). Dhuoda herself was not permitted to go with them, since, as she says, "my lord constrains me to remain in this city" (p.125). Although her son was born in March, when she writes the *Liber Manualis* between December and February, she calls him "your little brother, whose name I still do not know" (p.126). It seems Dhuoda was a virtual prisoner with little to no knowledge of her sons' whereabouts, well-being, or even the name of her own baby (his



the name of her own baby (his father, perhaps not shockingly, named the baby Bernard). It's no wonder that she says that the impetus for writing the *Liber Manualis* comes from feeling "anxious and filled with longing to do something for [William]" (p.124), or that she feels compelled to implore William to take care of his little brother on her behalf: "to teach him, to educate him, to love him, and to call him to progress from good to better" (p. 126).

Much of the *Liber Manualis* is advice on how to be a good Christian, but there are some other interesting bits of wisdom Dhuoda writes down along the way. Dhuoda sets out the goal for every noble boy when she writes, "What is essential, my son William, is that you show yourself to be such a man on both levels that you are both effective in this world and pleasing to God in every way" (p.125). In addition to teaching him all she knows about spiritual matters and the importance of relying on God in times of trouble, Dhuoda educates William on the important facts of his family life, setting down the dates of his parents' wedding, his birth, and his younger brother's birth. This is the type of knowledge that mothers still pass on to their children, and Dhuoda finds it critical enough that she sets it down in writing for William to be able to refer to it later. Interestingly, Dhuoda also asks William to be sure to read a lot, saying, "I urge you, O my handsome and beloved son William, that you not be distracted by the mundane cares of this earthly world from acquiring many volumes. In these books you should seek out and learn from the wise men of the church, the holiest of masters" (p.126). Finally, she asks him to carefully pay her debts if she should die before taking care of them herself, humbly admonishing herself for overspending from time to time.

What I love about the *Liber Manualis* is that, while she expectedly puts herself down for being unworthy of salvation, Dhuoda recognizes her own worth as a pivotal part of her sons' lives. She writes, "My son, my



firstborn son – you will have other teachers to present you with works of fuller and richer usefulness, but not anyone like me, your mother, whose heart burns on your behalf" (p.126). While she may be separated from her sons, she knows the strength and value of a mother's love, and part of her teaching is telling William (and, by proxy, Bernard) how much he is loved.

At the end of her book, Dhuoda calls for God's blessing on her husband and sons, that they may be "happy and joyful in the present world" (p.127), successful, and worthy of a place in heaven. For herself, she entreats William and any other readers to pray for her in her "fear and grief" (p.127) at the prospect of her own death. Dhuoda very specifically writes, "And as for any other who may someday read the handbook you now peruse, may he too ponder the words that follow here so that he may commend me to God's salvation as if I were buried beneath these words" (p.129).

Because I have shared other parts of her story with you, I think it's only fair to fulfill her last wishes and end with those words she is so concerned with. Here is Dhuoda's self-written "epitaph": the last words of a ninth-century Frankish mother:

*Find, reader, the verses of my epitaph:  
Formed of earth, in this tomb  
Lies the earthly body of Dhuoda.  
Great king, receive her.  
The surrounding earth has received in its depths  
The flimsy filth of which she was made.  
Kind king, grant her favor.  
The darkness of the tomb, bathed with her sorrow,  
Is all that remains to her.  
You, king, absolve her of her failings.  
You, man or woman, old or young, who walk back and forth  
In this place, I ask you, say this:  
Holy one, great one, release her chains.  
Bound in the dark tomb by bitter death,  
Closed in, she has finished life in earth's filth.  
You, king, spare her sins.  
So that the dark serpent  
Not carry away her soul, say in prayer:  
Merciful God, come to her aid.  
Let no one walk away without reading this.  
I beseech all that they pray, saying:  
Give her peace, gentle father,  
And, merciful one, command that she at least be enriched  
With your saints by your perpetual light.  
Let her receive your amen after her death.*

All quotes are taken from Women's Lives in **Medieval Europe: A Sourcebook** (the 1993 edition), but you can find the entire translation of Dhuoda's book in Carol Neel's **Handbook for William: A Carolingian Woman's Counsel for Her Son**.

You can follow Danièle Cybulskie on Twitter @5MinMedievalist

**Get Your Next Tote Bag  
from Medievalists.net!**



**Buy a Medievalists.net Tote Bag  
from Cafe Press for \$15.99**