The Preservation of Parchment

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Abstract

This article discusses some of the problems that archivists and curators come across in their quest to preserve parchment documents. Some of the problems that they encounter relate to proper storage facilities, repairing damaged pages, and the proper treatment and usage of these ancient texts. Parchment documents are an important part of our history and culture and therefore need to be preserved accordingly.

Keywords: Parchment, Vellum, Conservation, Preservation, Relative Humidity
Introduction

The preservation of parchment documents is very important to our society. They often represent important events in our history and our culture. The necessity of preserving such objects for scholars and future generations leads us to many predicaments and conundrums, some of which include repair, storage, and treatment of the parchment documents.

Background

Parchment and vellum are often used interchangeably to mean made from calfskin, goatskin, or sheepskin that was prepared into a material on which things were written, though vellum comes from the French veau meaning calfskin (U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.). For the purpose of this paper, the term parchment will be used. Parchment is made by an extensive process. The skin is removed from that animal and the hair is scraped off. Often lye and water are used to clean and soften the skin. Then the skin is stretched on a wooden frame and is kept taut so that it will not wrinkle. After the skin is stretched, a pumice stone is used to finish the skin and sometimes a chalk is used to prepare the skin for ink absorption (U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.). Few people still make parchment because it is such a laborious and expensive process.

Historically, parchment was very expensive to make as well. The word parchment is derived from Pergamena, or “belonging to Pergamus” because he is credited with first creating parchment (Montague, 1890, p. 333). According to Montague (1890), Pergamus was not the first to use prepared skins to write upon because Herodotus alluded to doing such two hundred years earlier. Parchment became popular because, if scraped or washed appropriately, it could be recycled and used again. The term for this process is called palimpsest. Manuscripts have
been found to have been reused and repurposed by monks and other religious figures (Montague, 1890). The repurposing of parchment illustrates just how very expensive it was to make and the durability of it as a writing material.

The parchment that is often used today is made from cellulose fibers, usually from cotton or flax and is of a higher quality than paper that is used for everyday purposes. It is also more available than traditional parchment. The term parchment usually refers to writing materials of a higher quality because traditional parchment was used for important documents, with which one would want to use a higher quality product, such as legal declarations, religious texts, and land records. Cellulose parchment is often used for important documents because it is much more expensive than regular wood pulp paper. Given that the documents that were written or printed on parchment were important, it is necessary to preserve those documents.

Preservation

The preservation of parchment documents has been in the forefront of the minds of curators and scholars for hundreds of years. Given the nature of the documents, they are seen as extremely important to our history, and therefore should be kept safe and preserved accordingly. The preservation of parchment has changed over the years according to how important the document is viewed at the time. Currently, saving the completely intact document is of the utmost importance, with “intact” being the key word. Now it is common practice to custom build acid free boxes or containers to store items that are of unusual size or dimensions, if the item is deemed important. In 1916, J.C. Fitzpatrick, the assistant chief of the manuscript division of the Library of Congress stated, “[w]here papers are too large to be stored when opened to their original size, they should be deliberately cut (with straight-edge and knife, never with the
scissors) to the size most practicable, and at the same time necessitating the least number of cuts” (Fitzpatrick, 1916, p. 393-394). He believed that the contents of the document outweighed the worth of the material used to create the document. This is still a prevailing thought among many archivists and curators, as seen in the need to digitize everything, though many archivists and curators will try to keep the document complete. Fitzpatrick also stated that “it is better to make a clean cut between the lines of writing and fully protect the manuscript with a hinge” (Fitzpatrick, 1916, p. 394) because folding the manuscript would eventually lead to breakage, which he believed was more damaging than making a predetermined cut in the parchment. His entire concept of manuscript preservation can be summed up in one thought, “One fold in a manuscript is a step from the path of righteousness, two a misdemeanor, while three should be classed with felony” (Fitzpatrick, 1916, p. 393).

Occasionally, parchment that has been bound into a manuscript form must be rebound for preservation purposes. For instance, the Doomsday Books have been rebound several times over the centuries and each rebinding has reflected the views of the societies that conducted the rebinding. According to Forde (1986), the original binding was lost through the centuries, but the parchment reveals the remains of several different bindings. The evidence suggests that the books were rebound in the thirteenth century, the sixteenth century, the seventeenth century, the eighteenth century, and the mid nineteenth century. A few of the rebound covers were kept with the books, which have assisted scholars in their erudition of the history of the books. Each rebinding, as far as the researchers can estimate, demonstrated prevalent materials used during the era. For instance, the Victorians covered the folios with “…heavy card, covered with black stamped leather. Silver bosses at the corners of the boards and silver edges provided the sumptuousness demanded by the Victorians” (Forde, 1986, p. 53). The books were again
rebound in the 1980s by conservators from the Public Records Office. They decided to separate the books into smaller, more manageable sections so that the text could be preserved and more easily bound.

Another consideration for preserving parchment is repairing damaged pages. Historically, tears and rips in pages were sewn back together with a needle and thread. Then, centuries later, starch pastes were used because they were thought to be less damaging, even though this process uses water, which is very harmful to parchment (Woods, 1995). Woods (1995) also discusses other techniques used to repair damage to parchment. Some of those processes include using Goldbeater’s skin, treated parchment pieces with gelatin paste, humidification, and collagen sausage-casings. Wood (1995) believes that it is important to be able to reverse all repairs that are done to parchment, but few are reversible and many are actually more harmful than leaving the parchment as it is. During the conservation and preservation of some land enclosure awards in Wales, Allen (2010), used some of the same techniques as Wood and agreed that Goldbeater’s skin is very good, but very expensive. He affirmed that many techniques that are used today are possibly dangerous to the parchment and all repairs are expensive and time consuming.

Another preservation component of parchment is storing parchment in proper facilities. Hansen, Lee, & Sobel (1992) did a study to determine the proper relative humidity (RH) for the storage of parchment. They took samples of three different types of parchment and tested how they responded to different RH. The three types of parchment that they used were Modern, Medieval, and Talmudic. These labels describe process in which the skins were treated when they were made into parchment, not the age of the parchment (Hansen et al, 1992, p. 329). Hansen, et al. concluded that the parchment needed to be stored at an RH between 25% and 50%.
Their conclusions seem to be the accepted standard today for parchment storage. Occasionally, these conditions cannot be met easily. Morris (2007) discusses how the Norlin Library at University of Colorado—Boulder has trouble meeting this criteria. She states that the heating and cooling system at Norlin is built in such a way that it is impossible for them to keep their RH constant. Instead it fluctuates daily, but it has not damaged any of their collections (Morris, 2007). Subsequently, Morris (2007) does stated that since parchment is so susceptible to RH changes that Norlin has made special arrangements to store their parchment documents in a closed stack where the RH remains between 50%-55%. Norlin’s use of a special stack just for their easily damaged collections illustrates a more acceptable solution to the problem of fluctuating RH than changing their entire heating and cooling system.

Conclusion

Each of these tribulations reflects some of the issues that archivists and curators face with the preservation of parchment documents. The need to preserve these documents outweighs the difficulty of the processes that parchment documents need to be usable by scholars and the public. The preservation of parchment through proper storage, repair, and treatment is vital to the continued use of the documents. The difficulties are vast and complex, but they are absolutely necessary for the preservation of parchment.
Bibliography


