

LIV INGEBORG LIED – BRENT NONGBRI, *Working with Manuscripts: A Guide for Textual Scholars*. New Haven: Yale University Press 2025. viii+179 pp. – ISBN 978-0-300-26442-5

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To the uninitiated, the study of manuscripts can be quite intimidating, even disorienting. *Working with Manuscripts* gently guides fledgling scholars into a world very different from the one that most modern humans inhabit, a world of unique artifacts, artifacts which are often hard to locate, sometimes challenging to access, and frequently difficult to understand.

The *Introduction* makes a convincing case for the importance of manuscript study in the broader work of textual scholarship. Manuscripts, the authors argue, should not be left to specialists in codicology and paleography. More than mere containers of variant readings, they are ‘three-dimensional artifacts’, each with their own story to tell. While I remain unconvinced that the ‘line between copying and composing’ was blurred quite as often as the writers seem to suggest, it seems to me beyond dispute that manuscripts are indeed much more than merely ‘containers of good or bad readings’, and are worthy of study in their own right by scholars in a wide variety of fields. Chapter One, *Manuscripts as Artifacts*, provides a compact yet thorough introduction to the physical formats and textual layouts encountered in a wide variety of manuscript traditions. The careful and systematic definition of terms, as well as the illustrations, make this chapter perhaps the most useful in the volume, and the single best orientation for beginners that I have yet encountered. It should become a standard supplemental reading assignment for a wide variety of courses on the ancient world.

The second chapter, *Finding Your Manuscript*, provides a helpful key to the maze through which ancient manuscripts must often be tracked down. While information about some well-known ones can be relatively easy to find, locating others may require a complex combination of print and digital resources. Given how many different specialized tools are involved in the diverse sub-disciplines of manuscript studies, the coverage in this section is necessarily thin, and those looking for manuscripts in a particular field may find themselves needing additional guidance. Nevertheless, it still provides both a useful place to start, and an idea of the kind of resources for which

one should be looking. This section is helpfully supplemented by brief case studies on how to locate information about five specific textual traditions: Greek Ezekiel, Philo, Syriac Susanna, the Psalms commentary of Didymus the Blind, and fragments of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The third chapter, *Provenance and Why It Matters*, dives into some of the most hotly debated aspects of manuscript studies today. While some practices (e.g. using one's scholarly expertise to increase the value of objects known to have been stolen) are clearly unethical, others (e.g. working with manuscripts in public or private collections for which the provenance is unclear) remain contested. While they make their own positions explicit, the authors seem to me to do a reasonably fair job of including voices from both sides of the aisle. Rather than making ethical decisions for their readers, or overtly shaming them for making choices different than their own, they focus on exploring the potential legal and career implications for scholars working in good faith.

Chapter Four, *Getting Access and Planning Your Stay*, provides practical guidelines for making the jump between identifying a manuscript shelfmark and actually holding that manuscript in your hands. While their point that the ability to access particular manuscripts can sometimes depend on matters outside one's own immediate control (economic status, ethnicity, national origin, gender, etc.) is undoubtedly and unfortunately correct, I must confess that I found myself wondering about the utility of reiterating it quite as often as the authors seemed to find necessary. On a more practical note, I would suggest adding to the list of recommended supplies in Box 4.4 a portable power bank for the recharging of one's cell phone or other digital camera – imaging a manuscript can drain a battery incredibly fast, and many manuscript rooms do not have convenient access to power plugs.

The remaining chapters can be summarized more briefly. Chapter Five, *In the Reading Room with Your Manuscript*, provides a brief orientation to actually working with manuscripts, as well as navigating the libraries in which they are kept. Chapter Six, *Back Home – What Now?*, introduces best practices for managing images and notes taken while on location with your manuscript. While the authors mention methods for manipulating image metadata, it is also worth noting that a number of dedicated software programs enable the batch renaming of the images themselves (e.g. A Better Finder Renamer for Mac): this can be a very useful tool both for keeping images organized and for linking those images to transcriptions. Chapter

Seven, *Asking for Help*, introduces the ethics and pitfalls of consulting experts not yet personally known to you. The final chapter, *Publishing and Permissions*, provides a guide to the common challenges encountered when you seek to include manuscript images in your publications. The book concludes with a very useful glossary of the key terms discussed throughout. I should also note that each chapter ends with helpful suggestions for further reading.

This is, above all, a very *useful* book. While it makes no attempt to provide aspiring textual scholars with ‘everything they need to know’, it successfully introduces them to the strange and wonderful world of manuscript studies, tells them where to start, and helps them to avoid both career-damaging *faux pas* and countless hours of wasted effort. The authors deliberately cast a very wide net, focusing wherever possible on the features that all ancient manuscripts have in common. Future specialists – in Byzantine studies or any other field – need a beginner-friendly introduction today. LIED and NONGBRI have done an excellent job of meeting that need. Undoubtedly, many who are now themselves experts, when reading the book in order to recommend it to others, will find themselves wishing both that it had been given to them when they were first starting out and that they had thought of writing it themselves.

Keywords

manuscript studies