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Hanging by a medieval thread? Textile curtains in manuscripts at St John's College, Cambridge, UK

Introduction

Much like modern 'lift-the-flap' books for children, the pictorial contents of medieval manuscripts were often once hidden behind fabric curtains. When encountered by the viewer, these curtains were raised to reveal images through an interactive process involving choice, heightened anticipation, and tactility. This textile component of medieval manuscripts formed part of an elaborate, multi-layered reading process that, by all indications, was popular amongst western Christian learned society throughout the High and Late Middle Ages.

To answer questions surrounding curtain use, this project undertakes a comprehensive examination of the 13th-century manuscripts in the Library of St John's College, Cambridge (SJCC), documenting evidence of curtain placement.

It is important that curtains be considered in the scholarly study of medieval illuminated manuscripts, as their existence provides a more complete picture of medieval book-use and image-viewing processes. Their former presence profoundly impacts the way scholars should be thinking about image-based devotional practices in the period. Yet evidence for the presence of these textiles has been largely overlooked and data collection of their remains has only just begun. As a result, critical questions surround their use and existence.

It is unclear whether most curtains represent later additions. Trace evidence of their placement survives in volumes created as early as the ninth and as late as the 17th century (Sciaccia 2007; Couvrat Desvergnies 2015). The earliest textual evidence noting their existence survives from the early 12th century (Sciaccia 2007). This establishes curtain placement as a medieval practice but it is unknown how widespread this practice was and in which medieval periods it thrived. It is doubtful that later book owners added veils to medieval volumes when they were not doing this

for their new ones (Simms Adams 2020). However, instances in which thread was sewn through paint and gold leaf, chipping it, suggests this took place and may reflect later interest in medieval materials. It is also unclear whether the intended function of these textiles was primarily to protect the images they covered or to create the revelatory reading practice they most certainly generated (fig. 1).



Fig. 1: Detail of gold leaf chipped by the sewing of a now lost curtain in SJCC MS K.21 (fol. 59v) (Image: Sommer Hallquist, © by permission of the Master and Fellows of St John's College, Cambridge)

Background to the project

To-date, there exists only a small corpus of literature dedicated to the issue of manuscript curtains. Documentation of their remains and trace evidence is scarce, even within library catalogues and databases. This may be because needle holes located above or beside painted images – indicating the former adherence of curtains – are easily mistaken for pricking marks created in the process of page ruling. When descriptions and scholarly considerations do appear, this is most often within monographs dedicated to individual manuscripts (Rushforth 2007; Kidd 2008; de Hamel 2012; Kauffmann 2017).

A pioneering chapter by Christine Sciacca in the 2007 volume *Weaving, Veiling and Dressing, Textiles and their Metaphors in the Late Middle Ages* represents the most useful introduction to the issue of manuscript curtains produced thus far. The work notes how one is able to identify evidence of their former presence and provides a useful, albeit cursory, overview of examples (Sciacca 2007). Sciacca has since produced an encyclopaedia entry on the topic, which highlights curtain presence in Byzantine, English, Spanish, French, German, Ethiopian and Flemish manuscripts (Sciacca 2012).

A recent furtherance to this work is a chapter by conservator Morgan Simms Adams that explores evidence of curtains found within medieval manuscripts in the Morgan Library & Museum in New York (Simms Adams 2020). This represents the first sustained study of curtains within a collection and shares data. A recently published article by historian Henry Ravenhall notes the presence of curtains in medieval secular French volumes and explores the impact their haptic quality had on reader experience (Ravenhall 2023). Art historians engaging with these textiles have primarily focused on their allegorical associations, exploring the revelatory nature of lifting such covers to show images beneath (Sciacca 2007; de Hamel 2012; Rudy 2016; Kauffmann 2017; Bücheler 2018; Ganz 2018). Most of these publications do this whilst promoting curtains as essentially protective in function (Sciacca 2007; Kidd 2008; Sciacca 2012; Couvrat Desvergnès 2015; Kauffmann 2017).

This practical idea stems from the two surviving medieval references to manuscript curtains, both of which outline a protective purpose. The earliest, from Turgot's 12th-century *Life of Queen Margaret*, refers to the curtains in Margaret's gospel book as "little sheets of silk that had covered the golden letters to prevent their being dimmed by contact with the leaves" (Anderson 1922, 80; Sciacca 2007). The other, a late 15th-century note from an illuminator to a patron,

similarly relates that pieces of silk should be sewn into a copy of the *Songe de Vieux Pèlerin* to protect the miniatures (Paris, BrF 22542; Alexander 1992; Sciacca 2007). Despite this seemingly clear function, it is debatable whether these fabric pieces were actually effective in this purpose (Sciacca 2007). As Christopher de Hamel noted in his description of the 14th-century *Corpus Apocalypse* (Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, MS 20), the repetitive act of lifting curtains may have caused more damage to images via abrasion than if they were omitted (de Hamel 2012). Although many appear to be silk, not all were of smooth material (for example, a thick linen curtain survives in the Bodleian Library, MS. Bodl. 862). Furthermore, if curtains were known to be protective, it is curious that they seem to have remained a practice of personalisation rather than becoming a part of the fairly standardised way of manuscript making in scriptoria and workshops.

The personalisation processes of later medieval owners have been rigorously explored by Kathryn Rudy in her 2016 volume *Piety in pieces: how medieval readers customized their manuscripts* (Rudy 2016). Two of Rudy's points are particularly salient here: 15th century readers appear to have regularly added curtains to new books they acquired and these curtains did not prevent tactile interaction with the images they covered (Rudy 2016).

Curtains need to be studied more broadly to enable the accurate determination of what was common and what was unique in their use, such as where, when, and by whom they were placed. Only after widespread and detailed data collection can it be postulated why this practice formed and thrived in specific locations, at certain times, and amongst specific societal groups. A chronology of manuscript curtain use will enable their history to be written. The information collected in this research process pertaining to the remains of historical textiles will reveal much concerning their trade, valuation, and associations in the medieval and early modern period.

The issue of dating is most prominent. How can it be determined not just when extant curtains were created but when curtains were actually placed in medieval manuscripts? And can scholars accurately rely on the sewing of curtains through paint, gold, and silver as an indication of later placement? While determining creation dates for surviving curtain examples represents a valuable line of inquiry, it does not aid in securing dates of initial curtain placement; textiles were likely reused and later replaced. Furthermore, it is often the case that only needle holes survive to indicate the former presence of sewn-in curtains. How, then, is it possible to date curtain placement?



DATA COLLECTION POINTS	
<i>Manuscript Information</i>	<i>Curtain Evidence</i>
Catalogue Number	Folio number
Type (for example, 'psalter' or 'bible')	Location of evidence on folio
Texts included	Material covered by curtain
Date of Creation	Type of adherence (sewn, loose, looped around quire)
Location of Origin	Type of evidence present (trace and/or physical)
Provenance (Ownership history)	Trace evidence catalogued: Needle hole count per centimetre recorded; Needle hole arrangement recorded; Imprinted thread documented; Imprinted weave structures documented
Binding History	Physical evidence catalogued: Textile remains (Curtain fragments, adhering threads, & securing knots) documented; Colour, shape, transparency, length, and width recorded; Notes on possible material type, dye type, recycled nature, expense, location and date of origin recorded
Approximate Expense	Curtain evidence cut off by folio resizing?
Ornamentation Included (Penwork flourishing, diagrams, drawing work, marginalia, figural work, painting, illumination)	Curtain evidence previously noted in scholarship?

Table 1: Data collection points for the study of curtain placement in the 13th-century manuscripts at St John's College, Cambridge (UK)

The hypothesis of the present project is that the answer lies with an analysis of sewing methods. These needle holes are, after all, sewing holes that represent trace evidence of the stitch types used to adhere curtains to parchment. Where knots survive, knot-tying methods, too, can be analysed.

Another pressing question is that of primary intended function. Peter Kidd's statement that "numerous surviving examples make it clear that such curtains were used specifically to protect areas of paint or gold" (Kidd 2008, 75) is tested here. Is there an association between how much gold was paid for inclusion within a manuscript and the permanent adherence of curtains? Were curtains reserved mainly for veiling figural images? It is also important to determine whether curtains had a traditional association with specific manuscript types. A final set of questions includes: Where did this practice of adorning manuscripts with textiles originate? Did it have monastic or lay associations? Were only certain types of book owners placing them? What can these extant curtain fragments tell us not only about book use, but about textile production and associations in

the Middle Ages? Finally, in the art historical mindset the study of medieval textiles remains intricately tied to issues of female artistic production and patronage. But it is unclear whether there is any connection between these coverings and female involvement.

Methods

This preliminary study examined all manuscripts dating to the 13th century in the collections of SJCC for evidence of curtain placement. This included non-illuminated and unpainted material in order to test the association between curtains and painted and illuminated imagery noted within the literature. The SJCC manuscripts have provided an initial sample with which to explore a systematic method of recording manuscript curtains with a view to a more comprehensive future study.

Evidence of curtain placement includes trace and physical evidence, with trace evidence representing needle holes and imprints of textiles upon the parchment and physical evidence representing extant textiles (sewing thread and curtain fragments). Such evidence was recorded – noting its positioning, colour,

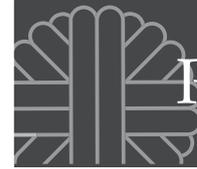


Fig. 2: Detail of an historiated hymn initial in SJCC MS. K.21 (fol. 59v) showing an extant textile curtain fragment and purple threads. Needle holes highlighted in yellow (Image: Sommer Hallquist © By permission of the master and fellows of St John's College, Cambridge)

and size – alongside the contents, date, and patronage history of each volume. Results are currently being analysed for chronological trends in curtain placement (based on manuscript age), positioning within volumes, and correlation with patron types (lay, monastic, female). Needle holes and surviving textiles were documented according to the textile recording guidelines (Walton and Eastwood 1983).

Current work is undertaking the establishment of relative dates for extant textile fragments. Base material, weave structure, dye-type, and sewing method are being visually analysed as far as possible to determine period of creation and placement, expense, and place of production. Links to medieval trade networks and societal class may be revealed, providing critical information concerning the social and financial implications of including veils in manuscripts. Curtains shown to pre-date their manuscripts will offer information concerning the reuse of textiles. Those coeval with or post-dating their manuscripts will reveal a time frame in which the practice of curtain placement was ongoing. Data

from this study will be analysed to produce a social, chronological, and geographical map of curtain use (table 1).

Preliminary findings

Although 18 of the 73 manuscripts under study contain illumination, only four display evidence of the former placement of textile curtains (SJCC MSS K.21, K.26, K.30, D.6). Each of these either are or were once possibly psalters of English origin. All four feature illumination, and two feature evidence of curtains placed over non-illuminated material (MS. K.21 and K.26). Three of the four volumes have monastic connections, while one (MS. K.26) has a probable lay provenance. Three contained curtains sewn directly to their parchment and one (MS. D.6) included curtains that were evidently only loosely placed.

Manuscript K.21

This late 13th and early 14th-century work consists of Latin canticles, hymns, and an illuminated Christological narrative in Anglo-Norman French. It appears to be the surviving portion of an extended psalter created for use at St Augustine's Abbey, Canterbury (James 1913; Sandler 1986; Kauffmann 2003; Binski 2005a). The 103 miniatures in the narrative sequence were originally covered by textile curtains, as indicated by irregular needle holes. The size and placement of these curtains varied, but were at least one per folio. Only eight of the 11 illuminated historiated initials received sewn curtains, adhered along the top or fore-edge side of the image. Notably, manuscript K.21 contains a large number of textile fragments, including brightly-coloured threads and undyed curtain fragments. Some needle holes penetrate the paint, gold, and silver in the manuscript (fig. 2).

Manuscript K.26

This manuscript consists of 46 prefatory images from around 1260, attached to a later psalter of circa 1400. Its patronage lies likely with English elite laity (Henderson 1959; Morgan 1988; Binski 2005b). Needle holes and thread indents above each prefatory image (some puncturing paint) indicate the presence of at least one textile curtain per opening. Among the 46 painted images, only 15 are illuminated. The placement of illumination on both recto and verso suggests that curtains were not placed solely to coincide with the gold elements. The needle holes predate the most recent resizing of the manuscript, providing a *terminus ante quem* for the curtain attachment. Ongoing research investigates the date of the resizing event. Needle hole



Fig. 3: An opening of SJCC MS K.26 (fols 4v & 5r) showing curtain needle holes and thread indents above prefatory psalter images (Image: Sommer Hallquist, © by permission of the master and fellows of St John's College, Cambridge)

arrangements include a chevron pattern throughout most of the sequence and a straight but irregular line on three folios. The later psalter section features a painted and illuminated Zodiac Man and eclipse table without curtains (fig. 3).

Manuscript D.6

This early 13th-century manuscript includes a glossed psalter, Sarum Hours of the Virgin, canticles, litany, and Office of the Dead. It is of unknown origin but was owned by Abbot Robert de Lindsey at Peterborough Abbey before 1222 (Brieger 1957; Morgan 1982; Friis-Jensen and Willoughby 2001). Due to prolonged exposure to damp and pressure, the manuscript contains imprints of textile weave structures throughout, indicating the former presence of loosely placed curtains. These imprints are found upon or beside the small golden initials and large gold-grounded historiated initials but are not present in the entirety of the painted calendar

section, nor near the illuminated prefatory psalter images (fig. 4).

Manuscript K.30

This psalter dated 1190 to 1200 features illuminated depictions of the labours of the month in its calendar section, along with numerous illuminated ornamental and figural initials of varying size in the psalter text (Webster 1938; Morgan 1982). There is no indication of curtain placement in the calendar sequence, but a majority of the subsequent initials are accompanied by irregular lines or clusters of needle holes, resembling the clusters of three in the *Corpus Apocalypse* (de Hamel 2012).

Conclusions

It is clear that analysing needle holes represents a valuable method of discerning distinct types of curtain sewing. The survey recognises three types: cluster, chevron, and irregular line. This indicates the

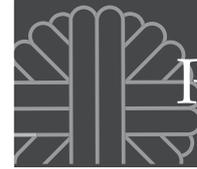


Fig. 4: A weave structure imprint from a now lost textile curtain located over an historiated initial in SJCC MS D.6 (fol. 74v) (Image: Sommer Hallquist, © by permission of the master and fellows of St John's College, Cambridge)

existence of a certain degree of standardisation within a practice that appears to be primarily driven by individual preference. As data collection progresses, these curtain sewing methods may reveal regional and temporal patterns. For example, if chevron patterns are exclusive to manuscripts from a particular period

and did not form part of the same collection, it could be hypothesised that this sewing style was prevalent during the production of those manuscripts (fig. 5).

The survey also suggests the effectiveness of textile curtains in preventing pigment spread caused by water introduction. It may be that curtains were adhered in manuscripts intended for damp climates or which were anticipating travel. Project results highlighting the existence of loosely placed curtains suggest that it cannot be said that any medieval manuscript did not once have a curtain. The sewing of textile curtains into the parchment of medieval manuscripts – a permanent alteration to the volume – becomes a distinct area of study within the broader practice of curtain placement, warranting special attention and analysis.

Future research

The limitation of this study is its focus only on 13th century manuscripts within SJCC. While this has provided telling results, the chronological scope and location of materials needs to be expanded to gain a sense of curtain use over time and to avoid collecting bias. Statistically analysing data from additional collections will enable significant insights into the chronology of medieval manuscript curtains, their geographical distribution, and connection to specific societal groups. Minimally and non-invasive scientific investigation is also needed to determine the age, origins, and dye-types of extant textiles, which will shed light on their historical value and connection to trade networks. The approach of this study based on archaeological textile analysis complements the art historical method in recording the textile curtains, as

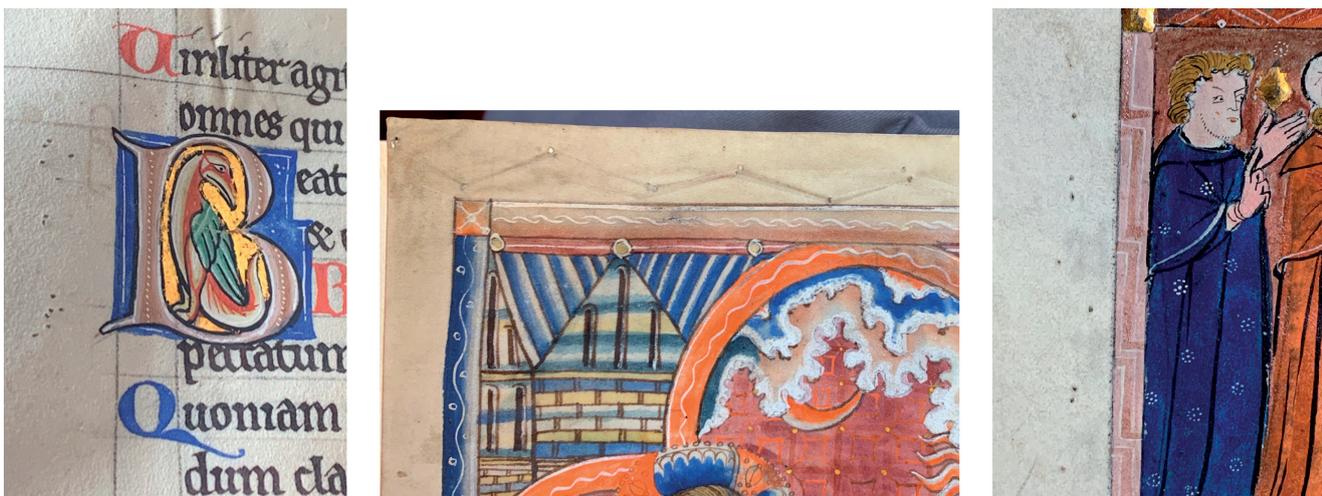


Fig. 5: Detail of the three identified curtain sewing types showing the visible difference between: a – cluster as in MS K.30 (fol. 31r); b – chevron as in MS K.26 (fol. 3v); and c – an irregular line as in MS K.21 (fol. 46v) (Images: Sommer Hallquist, © by permission of the master and fellows of St John's College, Cambridge)



CURTAIN EVIDENCE SUMMARY				
Manuscript	Date	# of Images with Curtain Evidence	% of Curtains \geq Image Size	Extant Textiles
K.21	late 13th & early 14th c.	111	100.00%	Thread & curtain fragments
K.26	c.1260 & c.1400	46	71.7%	Thread fragment
K.30	12th-13th c. (c.1190-1200)	21	100.00%	None
D.6	early 13th c.	Indeterminable	Indeterminable	None (Weave structure imprints)

Table 2: Summary of curtain evidence in the survey of 13th-century manuscripts at St John's College, Cambridge (UK)

results will contribute to art historical discussion of image reception, luxury critique, and gendered book culture. Depending on the findings within Islamic and Jewish manuscripts, this work may also reveal the widespread existence of cross-cultural image personalisation practices.

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