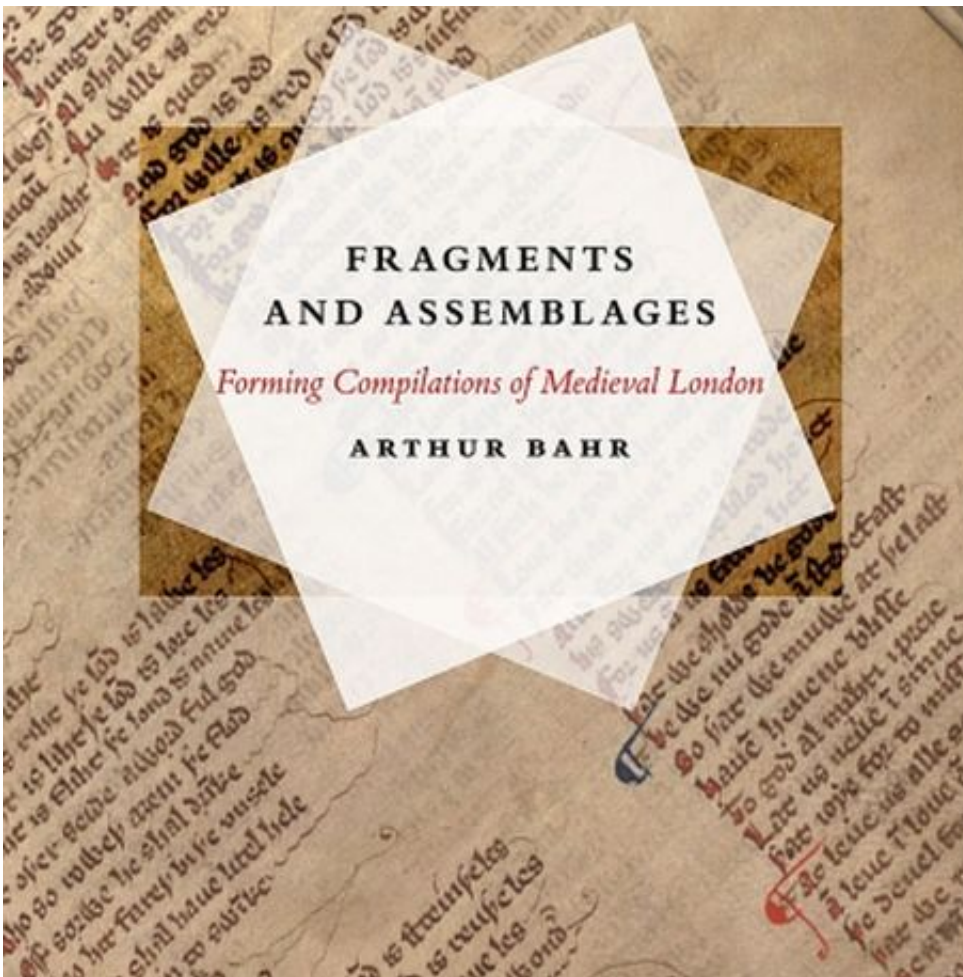


The strangely familiar browsing habits of 14th-century readers

May 23 2013, by Peter Dizikes



Today we constantly switch from one text to another: news, blogs, email,

workplace documents and more. But a new book by an MIT professor reveals that this is not a new practice: In the 14th century, for instance, many people maintained eclectic reading habits, consuming diverse texts in daily life.

Consider Andrew Horn, the chamberlain for the city of London in the 1320s—meaning he was essentially the lawyer representing London's interests in court against the king, who was Edward II for most of that time. The bound [manuscripts](#) in Horn's possession, handed down to the city and preserved today, reveal a rich mixture of shorter texts: legal treatises, French-language poetry, descriptions of London and more.

Perusing such diverse texts, within bound volumes, was all in a day's reading for a well-educated person, asserts Arthur Bahr, a professor of literature at MIT. Now in his book "Fragments and Assemblages," published by the University of Chicago Press, Bahr says we must reconstruct how medieval people compiled these bound volumes in order to best grasp how they thought and wrote.

"Medieval manuscripts usually survive as fragments, and at the same time they are also very often assemblages of multiple, disparate works," Bahr says. "The interesting literary-historical question is why specific assemblages got put together the way they did."

When we realize that individuals read this way, Bahr notes, we can see that the practice of throwing together all kinds of texts in a single bound manuscript may have influenced the composition of the most famous piece of literature of the period, Geoffrey Chaucer's late-14th-century work "The Canterbury Tales," a rich collection of linked stories.

"The ability to see the potential of textual juxtapositions is the cultural ground out of which the Canterbury Tales springs in the late 14th century," Bahr says. "Chaucer's invitation to readers is a kind of

interactive process of composition. He has an idea about what ordering of the tales makes sense, because he creates links between them, but he's encouraging us to participate. We don't think of older writing as being that radical, but it is."

Reading before the printing press

To see why readers 700 years ago jumped between texts so much, recall that this was prior to the invention of the printing press, which was introduced in Europe in the middle of the 15th century. Before single books could be mass-produced more easily, manuscripts were copied out by hand, then bound together. This process led people to have many different types of texts bound together, rather than a single text being the entirety of a bound volume.

In the case of Horn's manuscripts, Bahr says, London's chamberlain collected "detailed records of all the rules and legal precedents that give the city power and autonomy. But he included poetry, and bylaws for a poetic society, and a little Latin poem that doesn't seem to go with anything else. Thinking about the literary, and being able to read in literary ways, as well as practical ways, was a skill he thought was important."

But Horn was not just throwing a bunch of texts together and expecting readers to bounce around wildly from one to another, Bahr observes. He had a deliberate method to his assemblages of texts.

"Horn actually uses the construction of his books to create literary puzzles for his reader," Bahr says. "One poem just doesn't make sense, but if you read the poem in juxtaposition with the legal treatise that comes after, then the two pieces make sense. He's suggesting that the law and literature are sort of the yin and the yang, you need both. And that is kind of amazing, really."

In the book, Bahr looks at additional 14th-century manuscripts that compiled works of many authors, but also reinterprets Chaucer through the lens of these reading practices.

"Chaucer is able to conceive of the literary project that he undertakes in large part because those early figures created a literary culture that was attuned to these sorts of textual juxtapositions within literary manuscripts," Bahr says.

Consider, Bahr adds, the Miller's Tale, in the prologue of Chaucer's great work. "It's a very funny tale about a miller, his adulterous wife, and her lover," Bahr says. "As Chaucer is getting ready to tell it, he says, [in effect], 'If you don't like dirty stories, just turn the page and look at something else.' This has been taken as a joke, but it's a serious joke, because we can turn the page, and we're being invited to think about the effect of different textual juxtapositions. If we put these pieces in a different order, what would that do to the work as a whole?"

Among other things, Bahr points out, it would lead readers to skip about more freely within "The Canterbury Tales" and, in effect, create their own distinctive versions of it.

A polyglot culture

"Fragments and Assemblages" has been well-received by other medievalists. James Simpson, a professor of English at Harvard University, calls it "deeply learned and technically skillful," while Maura Nolan, a literature professor at the University of California at Berkeley, says that Bahr successfully "stitches together the divided 14th century and demonstrates that literary production during the period was an ongoing and continuous project."

Among other insights we can glean from reading [medieval manuscripts](#),

Bahr notes, is the polyglot culture that existed among learned people in the 14th century. Following the Norman conquest of England in 1066, French was the language of the aristocracy and upper bourgeoisie, and Latin was the language of the church and most of the state.

"It's interesting how multilingual these manuscripts can be," Bahr says. We tend to think of England as having one language, but ... if you were a social climber, you needed good French. You have at least a trilingual nation, and then there is Welsh, and other [regional] languages. Because Chaucer wrote in English, it's easy to lose sight of how, even in the Middle Ages, people were still actively engaged with French and Latin."

So medieval readers browsed around a lot, read linked stories in creative ways, and lived in a diverse, even globalized intellectual milieu: plus ça change.

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