

Some Unique Medieval Bookmarks

Modern-day placeholders trace their roots to the Middle Ages, when readers or scribes used various means to 'mark their place.'

By Frank X. Roberts, PhD



EVIDENCE INDICATES THAT THE ANCESTRY of all modern bookmarks can be traced back to three basic types of bookmarks used in the Middle Ages. Variants of all of these types can still be found in situ in a number of medieval manuscript books preserved in cathedral and university libraries in England.

The first type (the *register* bookmark), made of thin cords of vellum, leather or string, was either sewn into the headband or knotted through a tab at the top of the binding of a manuscript. (Register bookmarks could also be unattached, as discussed below.) The register cords extended, between any two pages, to beyond the bottom of the book. Each cord had a knot in its lower end, for ease of handling.

Medieval manuscripts were usually written with two columns of text on both sides of each leaf or page. Some register bookmarks were designed specifically as *aides-mémoire* for readers or copyists in medieval scriptoria using manuscripts with this two-column page layout. Attached to the cord of this kind of register bookmark was a parchment disk pierced through its centre and held by a knotted string between two other pieces of parchment. These two outer pieces were either

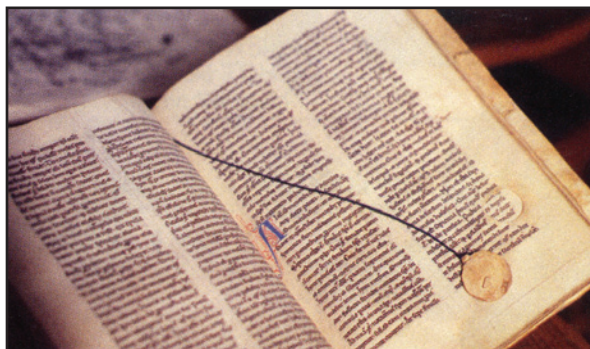
semicircular or cut back on one edge to expose a part of the rim of the inner disk. When rotated the disk revealed, one at a time, the Roman numerals I, II, III and IIII (*sic*), written close to its outer edge, in the position of the four points of the compass.

The numeral left showing served to remind the user at which column reading or copy-work had stopped (working from the left, i.e., column I, to the right, i.e., column IIII). Register bookmarks

with rotating disks, while rare, still exist in, for example, manuscripts in the libraries of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge University (MS 49 Biblia, 13th century), St. John's College, Cambridge (MS 90 *Gregorii*

Liber Pastoralis, 12th century), and the Hereford Cathedral library (MS P.V1.11 *Moralia Job*, 12th century).

A unique medieval register bookmark can be seen at the Bodleian Library, Oxford, in a 15th-century manuscript (MS *Lyell 60, Monastic Rules, etc.*) written with only one column of text on each page, like a modern book. The bookmark is unique not only in its rarity, but also because the parchment pieces attached to the register cord are in the shape of a cross, rather than a circle or disk. This cruciform attachment is made of two small rectangular pieces of parchment, the vertical arm



of which slides easily up and down through slits cut in the horizontal arm of the tiny cross. The number showing in the centre of the cross indicates the area of the page, on the left or on the right where the book is open, marked by the reader when work on the manuscript was interrupted. This particular medieval register bookmark in the Bodleian manuscript is, as far as is known, the only one of its kind extant.

Another more common (though still rare) kind of medieval register bookmark is the unattached variety. An example can be seen in a thirteenth-century manuscript in the library of Exeter Cathedral (MS 3515 *Missale*). This unattached register bookmark consists of a small rod or post made of tightly rolled vellum. Attached to the post are five vellum thongs that are meant to hang between various leaves or pages of a manuscript book to mark places in it.

The small rod or post to which the thongs are attached rests loosely on the top edge of the bound manuscript, allowing the whole device to be easily moved to another manuscript. A similar bookmark, but with six thongs, lives in a 12th-century manuscript owned by Pembroke College, Cambridge University (MS 180 *Hilarius*). And there is another of this kind in the library of St. John's College, Cambridge (MS 9 *Augustinus m Johannes*, 12th century). This has in place of vellum register thongs three white linen strings and two red, white and blue braided strings attached to a wooden pin that rests loosely on the top edge of the manuscript. Like the unattached register bookmark in the Exeter Cathedral manuscript, these latter two bookmarks could also easily be moved about for use in other books.

The second type of bookmark used in the Middle Ages (the *fore-edge* bookmark) was attached in various ways to the outer margin of a manuscript page. A 15th-century manuscript from Pembroke College, Oxford (MS 1 *Missale*), exhibits three kinds of fore-edge bookmarks, attached in three different ways. On the fore-edge of one leaf of the manuscript, a piece of black thread has been knotted through horizontal slits; it protrudes about a quarter of an inch to act as a marker. At a number of other leaves in the manuscript, small pieces of vellum have been doubled over and roughly sewn to the edge of the pages, sticking out slightly to mark various places.

An even rougher method (an early and extreme example of dog-earing) was also used. The fore-edge of a leaf in the manuscript was cannibalized by making a vertical cut down from its top edge, leaving a long strip of vellum hanging loose, but still attached. This hanging piece was then threaded back and forth through horizontal slits cut below it in the margin of the book, so that a small portion of its leading end projected beyond the fore-edge of the page to form a place-marker.

Not all fore-edge bookmarks in medieval manuscripts were such book-destroying and poorly crafted affairs. A 15th-century psalter (a book of psalms used in religious ceremonies) owned by the University of Leeds in Yorkshire contains fore-edge bookmarks that appear to have been produced with care, and with some art. Each marker is made of a doubled-over strip of vellum about one-half inch long and three-sixteenths of an inch wide, with a small coloured bead attached to one end. The strips have been slid over and glued down to both sides of the fore-edge of different leaves in the manuscript, where required. The coloured bead on the end of each strip protrudes beyond the edge of its page to mark a place.

The psalter itself is skilfully handwritten, with coloured illustrations, and large gold-leaved initials at the beginning of its major sections. The carefully created fore-edge bookmarks add both utility and beauty to the manuscript.

From the Middle Ages to today, readers have used a variety of common and exotic items between the pages of books to mark a place. In the Middle Ages such loose or *portable* bookmarks (the third type) could be well-made and artistically crafted, with thongs of woven silk and decorated knobs at the top. But readers in the medieval period also often used, for example, scraps of parchment, vellum or leather, lengths of string, small twigs, stems of plants and pieces of straw. The crumbled remains of these materials are still found in ancient manuscripts by librarians and scholars.

In the library of Balliol College, Oxford University, there is still in place in a 15th-century manuscript book (MS 161 *Andreas Billia*) a slip of parchment with Latin in a medieval hand written on it. And in another 15th-century book at Balliol (MS 209 *Duns Scotus*) there resides a larger parchment piece folded in two with writing in a

medieval hand between the fold. Both of these scraps are no doubt long-forgotten bookmarks.

Six more “bookmarkers” of like nature can be found in the library of Peterhouse College, Cambridge University. These were first described by R.H.B. Mynors in 1948 in a short article entitled “Some Bookmarkers at Peterhouse.” Perhaps because of Mynors’ article, or for whatever reason, there is now in a 13th-century manuscript in the Peterhouse College library (MS 132 Legenda Aurea), where three of these six bookmarkers reside, the following cautionary plea: “The three markers should be kept in their proper places in the MS at f.61, f.66 and f.102.” It is interesting to note that after 800 years these bookmarks, which started life as nondescript scraps employed to do a temporary service, have become an integral part of the book in which they were placed so long ago, and that now the manuscript would somehow be a different document without them in their “proper places.”

Today’s register bookmarks, usually made of silk ribbon or cord, are found mainly in bibles, hymn books, large dictionaries, one-volume encyclopedias and book club editions of the classics. The medieval fore-edge bookmark has evolved into our thumb-index. Modern loose or portable bookmarks, besides being reading tools, frequently provide users with humorous or philosophical comments, with advertisements and with appealing illustrations. And, unlike in medieval times, purpose-made portable bookmarks are now readily obtainable from libraries, from bookshops and other commercial establishments, and from tourist sites everywhere.

~ *An edited version of an essay in Frank X. Roberts, Essays on Bookmarks and Related Topics (2009). Roberts is a professor emeritus at the University of Northern Colorado. He lives in Greeley, CO.*

WELCOME, NEW MEMBERS!

The Alcuin Society wishes to welcome the following new members:

Bernice Miller, *Vancouver, British Columbia*

Chris Armstrong, *Prince Rupert, British Columbia*

Meghan Sprong, Benjamin Brown Books, *Vancouver, British Columbia*

Markus Fahrner, *Vancouver, British Columbia*

Murray Munn, *Whitehorse, Yukon*

Robert Coupe, *Burnaby, British Columbia*

Catherine Brody, *Red Hook, New York*

Justin Hanisch, *Edmonton, Alberta*

Brian Rogers, *Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania*

Carling Wong-Renger, *Vancouver, British Columbia*

Simeon Goa, *Victoria, British Columbia*

Laura Brady, *Bolton, Ontario*

Art Institute of Indianapolis, *Indianapolis, Indiana*

Alcuin Society membership is open to any individual, institution or organization with an interest in the book arts, the history of books, book collecting and reading. An individual membership is \$40 a year, while institutional membership is \$60 a year. Students may join at the rate of \$20 a year for up to three years. A patron membership is available at the rate of \$100.

Society members within Canada pay in Canadian dollars; foreign memberships must be paid in U.S. dollars. Payment may be made online using Paypal or via cheque or money order made payable to The Alcuin Society, P.O. Box 3216, Vancouver, British Columbia, V6B 3X8.