

Between Invisibility and Autonomy: Negotiating Gender Roles in Manuscript Cultures Lecture Series

organized by Professor Dr Eike Grossmann & Dr Johanna Seibert
24.10.2022–23.01.2023, Mondays, 6–8 pm; hybrid (Pavilion CSMC; Zoom)

Women's contributions to the production and use of written artefacts have been neglected or even made invisible in many manuscript cultures. Their agency being written out is only one of the numerous blind spots when pursuing a gender perspective in the study of manuscript cultures. The aim of this lecture series is to explore precisely these blind spots by raising questions which enable us to grasp the multiple roles women have in manuscript cultures. At the center of each lecture lies the question of how women contribute to the production, circulation, and dissemination of manuscripts, inscriptions, graffiti, and other written artefacts. Did they function as patrons or scribes? If they were allowed to write in the first place, what kind of artefacts were they expected to produce? In which ways did female production of written artefacts subvert the existing order and modes of gendered dominance? Or did their actions possibly contribute to supporting, stabilizing, and perpetuating their own disadvantage? How was their exclusion then rationalized and explained in cases where they were denied active (and passive) participation in manuscript cultures?

It is through perspectives such as these that women's roles in historic and contemporary manuscript cultures become visible. Exploring a range of materials—liturgic, devotional, biographic, among many others, from ancient Assyria and Egypt to medieval Japan and Central Europe and on to today's Thailand and Northern Africa—the speakers shed light on new findings, give unique insights into their fields, and discuss methodological considerations.

24.10.2022

“Gender Studies and Manuscript Cultures: The Case of Assyriology”

Professor Dr Dr h.c. Cécile Michel

Centre national de la recherche scientifique, Nanterre / Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures, Universität Hamburg

The development of the feminist and post-feminist movements in social sciences and humanities is usually perceived to have occurred three overlapping waves. During the 1960s and 1970s, trying to establish women's studies in the academy, scholars looked for women in written artefacts in order to make invisible women visible and to integrate them into history. The term 'gender' was adopted by historians only during the 1980s, and by Assyriologists a decade later. The idea was to understand why women often appear in subordinated positions compared to men, why they were less present in texts and iconography, and how a society attributes roles to each sex. The post-feminist movement questions this binary male/female structure as well as the motivations and presuppositions of the scientific process itself. The focus is no longer centered on an androcentric approach but on differences, whatever they may be: social, ethnical, political, cultural, etc. Through written sources, the historian investigates the way in which the difference has been culturally invested by societies. In Assyriology, early studies on women were influenced by historical preconceptions based on the place of women in the classical world or in Islam, visible in the choice of the words 'harem' or 'veil' in the translations of cuneiform manuscripts. Since 2000, the number of studies dedicated to the topic of gender have grown exponentially and the fifth conference on Gender, Methodology and the

Ancient Near East (GeMANE 5) took place in Helsinki last June. In this lecture, after a general introduction on gender studies related to manuscript cultures, I will present the diversity of methodologies and approaches on women and gender studies applied to cuneiform texts.

01.11.2022

“In Her Own Voice: Asserting Autonomy Through Liturgy at Klosterneuburg”

Michael L. Norton, Associate Professor Emeritus

James Madison University (Virginia, US)

Founded in 1114 and transferred to Augustinian canons in 1133, the Augustinian canonry at Klosterneuburg offers a rare glimpse into how one community of canonesses asserted their liturgical voice under the watchful eyes of the cloistered canons responsible for their care. Located on the Danube a few kilometers north of Vienna, Klosterneuburg was one of several dual-sex communities founded or resettled in the wake of the Augustinian reforms emanating from the cathedral of Salzburg. Like the Benedictine monasteries spawned by the concurrent Hirsau reforms, these canonries incorporated both male and female communities in separate and often adjacent precincts, with the canonesses placed under the administrative and spiritual direction of the canons. Despite the illusion of male control, the canonesses of Klosterneuburg charted their own course in the celebration of their liturgy throughout the Middle Ages, particularly in their daily round of offices and liturgical processions. The canonesses also used a form of musical notation that varied from that used by the canons. Given their insistence in controlling their liturgical practice, a practice expressed in a form of musical notation to which they could also lay claim, canonesses likely served as scribes for both the liturgical text and music as well. To be sure, Klosterneuburg is an outlier in the extent to which medieval liturgical manuscripts have survived, with most manuscripts remaining in situ. Thus, the liturgical autonomy gained by Klosterneuburg’s canonesses cannot be assumed for other similarly situated communities. Yet, tantalizing clues suggest there may be more to find.

07.11.2022

“Women in Thai-Lao Manuscript Cultures: Alternative Worship of Text(ile) in Compensation of Monkhood”

Dr Silpsupa Jaengsawang

Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures, Universität Hamburg

Being regarded as possessing inferior religious status to males that have been ordained into the monkhood, females play a comparatively smaller role in the Sangha of Theravāda Buddhism. Females are generally allowed to be involved in the creation of items to be donated to the Sangha, except for the writing of religious manuscripts which require literacy in the Dhamma script; the skill belongs to monks and novices since the script is taught at monasteries. To compensate for not having the chance to obtain monkhood status, women weave textiles for wrapping religious books or donate their hair to bind palm-leaf manuscripts. Cloth-weaving skills compensate for their lack of literacy in the Dhamma script, whereas donated hair compensates for their lack of masculinity or monkhood. Besides, women can invest in tools, sponsorship, and financial support in the provision of commissioning religious manuscripts. Although women are scarcely allowed to get involved in the creation of manuscript texts, textile products and other kinds of compensation are acceptable.

21.11.2022

“Women as Scribes: Materials, Methods, and Motives in Medieval Italy and Beyond”

Dr Melissa Moreton, Research Associate

Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton

Female scribes produced an astounding number of texts in late medieval and early modern Italian convents. Creating manuscripts gave women agency over the texts they used, while the books they produced served as powerful tools to improve their communities’ standing within commercial, religious, and socio-political networks. As copyists, nun-scribes created high-end liturgical manuscripts for royal patrons, copied personal and communal devotional texts for in-house use, and produced books for a variety of secular and religious audiences. Convent scribes often worked in close-knit teams and collaborated with secular male illuminators and manuscript painters to complete a commissioned book’s border decoration and images. Such manuscripts were used in high-stakes gift exchanges to strengthen socio-political alliances, while convent book production provided income that put these women in contact with a broad book-buying clientele.

Within the gendered confines of the place and period, the convent offered monastic women a unique opportunity to pursue an artistic and intellectual life, one rarely afforded to their secular sisters who were typically obliged to give up writing, painting, and similar pursuits after marriage. As a pious act, book production served individual nun-scribes as a devotional activity that was at once an act of meditation and a path towards spiritual perfection. This lecture will explore how convent leaders and nun-scribes used their books and scribal skills to further their religious, economic, social, and political agendas. It will also touch briefly on the role of women as scribes and patrons of texts in Buddhist, Islamic, and Jewish manuscript traditions, contextualizing Italian religious women’s book production within the broader global middle ages.

28.11.2022

“Women and Their Multiple Roles in Manuscript Production in the Late Medieval and Early Modern Low Countries”

Dr Patricia Stoop

Institute for the Study of Literature in the Netherlands (ISLN) / Ruusbroecgenootschap, Universiteit Antwerpen

Many more women than we assume today participated in the intellectual and literary culture of the late medieval and early modern Low Countries, as owners and readers of books, but also as copyists, translators, and even authors. Some of these women, such as the mystic Hadewijch, the court poet Christine de Pizan, or the Antwerp poet Anna Bijns, have earned a place in the literary canon. But especially women in monastic communities were engaged in the production, reception, and circulation of literature. Sometimes they produced manuscripts for themselves or the community in which they lived; others wrote manuscripts for third parties, either for payment or not. In this lecture, we will consider the leeway that these religious women had to participate in manuscript production, to take up their pen, and even to shape a creative authorship.

12.12.2022

“Women as Scribes in Jewish Manuscript Cultures”

Dr Michael Kohs

Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures, Universität Hamburg

Jewish manuscript cultures have a multifaceted and diverse history of over 2500 years, beginning in Antiquity. Over a long time, men were dominant for the production and the use of manuscripts. This holds especially true for the making of liturgical manuscripts like the Torah scroll for which a handwritten form is required for synagogue services until today. The instructions for the production of Torah scrolls are determined in various halakhic regulations, i.e. the Jewish religious laws. Traditionally, the Halakha deemed Torah scrolls written by women ritually unfit for synagogal use. Therefore, the profession of Torah scribe was practiced by men exclusively. Only in recent years, a small but growing number of women scribes have begun to engage in writing Torah scrolls.

In the talk, we will look at the halakhic prescriptions and discussions concerning the production of liturgical and profane manuscripts. We will consider actual evidence of women as scribes and as users of manuscripts through the ages and will discuss the question of female literacy. Finally, we will reflect the current developments regarding female Torah scribes. The ongoing debate whether women are eligible to write manuscripts that will be considered as ritually pure also illustrates how the Halakha has been challenged and influenced by feminist approaches that affect traditional manuscript practices.

19.12.2022

“Patrons of Paper and Clay: Methods for Studying Women's Religiosity in Ancient Japan”

Dr Bryan Lowe, Assistant Professor

Princeton University

Women were not on the margins of Buddhist patronage in premodern Japan; they were squarely at the center. Scholars' tendency to rely on published texts, however, masks the contributions of women to the emergence of Buddhism in Japan. By considering colophons in manuscripts and excavated materials such as inscribed pottery and roof tiles from the seventh through ninth centuries, we can begin to recover women's religiosity that is otherwise lost from our historical narratives. My presentation will look at a range of objects from Buddhist sutras copied in scriptoria in the capital to earthenware bowls unearthed in the provinces of eastern Japan to assess the religious beliefs and practices of women across social class. I will consider the contributions of women both quantitatively and qualitatively and offer new methods for better representing women in our scholarship.

09.01.2023

“Nuns, Domestic Virgins, and Female Devotees in Late Antique Egypt: Evidence From Greek and Coptic Graffiti, Papyri, and Other Written Artefacts”

Leah Mascia, MA

Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures, Universität Hamburg

Epigraphic, papyrological, and other textual sources provide essential information on the role played by women in the Christian institutions of Late Antique Egypt and the numerous female devotees affiliated to this religion from the third century CE onwards. The revision of the documentation collected in past archaeological investigations and the examination of textual evidence unearthed in the course of the recent excavations carried out in several sites (i.e.

Oxyrhynchus, Antinoupolis, and Western Desert Oases) offer an insight into the names, religious offices, and private and official activities performed by female members of the Christian religious communities of Egypt. Furthermore, numerous written artefacts allow us to take a glimpse into the circulation of literacy among women, their writing practices, and to reconstruct their role in the early use and diffusion of the Coptic language in daily-life activities and the performance of ritual procedures. In particular, essential data are now provided by the Greek and Coptic graffiti, funerary stelae, and other written artefacts recently discovered in the area of the basilica of St. Philoxenos at the site of Oxyrhynchus. The present contribution will examine a heterogeneous corpus of textual sources aimed at presenting an overview of the various roles played by women in the manuscript culture of Late Antique Egypt.

16.01.2023

“Vanished from the Pages: The Female Scribe in the Codex Telleriano-Remensis and the Transformation of Mexican Manuscript Cultures in the Early Colonial Period”

Dr Anna Boroffka

KEK, Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin / Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures, Universität Hamburg

Pre-conquest sources and material artefacts indicate that women were involved in the production and ritual use of books in Maya and Aztec societies. However, in Mexican manuscripts from the early colonial period (1521 to ca. 1600), women’s involvement in book production is almost invisible and overlaid with colonial narratives and images suggesting a male tradition of the professions of scribes, soothsayers, and priests creating and interpreting manuscripts. Based on the few surviving sources, including the tomb of a Maya woman buried with book-making tools at Xultún, female scribes shown on Maya vases from the Classic period (ca. 250–900) and the depiction of a female Aztec scribe in the early colonial Codex Telleriano-Remensis (1560s), the lecture reconstructs how women’s participation in Mexican manuscript production changed under Spanish rule as the role of Mexican women was redefined with the introduction of the Christian faith and the establishment of a new colonial society.

23.01.2023

“Female Contributions to Islamic Text Production and Circulation”

Professor Dr Britta Frede

Islamic Studies / Africa Multiple Cluster of Excellence, Universität Bayreuth

This lecture looks at written testimonies of Islamic scholarship within contemporary Mauritania. Women scholars were active in local institutions of Islamic education for several centuries, and some are still running their own institutions teaching children and adult women in *sīra*, *tajwīd*, the *Qur’ān*, and further disciplines. A minority of these women are also engaged in producing their own texts dealing with Islamic issues. This lecture will look at unpublished writings of the recently deceased Islamic scholar Aïchatou Mint Hamidoune (1946-2021) and parts of her manuscripts. These originally hand written manuscripts have been typed by her daughter who handed them over to me during a field research in 2014. The lecture will reflect about Aïchatou Mint Hamidoune's visions concerning Islamic womanhood, piety, and obstacles of female contributions to local scholarly culture. Further, it will situate her contribution to Islamic knowledge production within local social hegemonies and gender norms.