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THE MANUSCRIPTS OF MONTECASSINO AND BOBBIO AS VEHICLES OF KNOWLEDGE AND CULTURAL MEMORY

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ABSTRACT

This literature-based study examines the contribution of the manuscripts of Montecassino and Bobbio to the transmission of knowledge and the formation of cultural memory. Through a comparative examination of the history of the collections and the material characteristics of the codices, it investigates script, musical notation, decoration, book catalogues and the reuse of parchment. A central methodological requirement is to distinguish between the production, ownership and use of a manuscript. At Montecassino, the discussion highlights the relationship between local book production and successive reconstructions of the library. At Bobbio, it examines the diverse origins of the codices, the significance of palimpsests and the subsequent dispersal of the collection. The comparative synthesis argues that the preservation of written knowledge resulted from specific historical practices and choices, which involved both the care of books and the replacement of earlier texts. Contemporary educational and cultural uses of manuscripts require interpretation grounded in evidence, explicit acknowledgement of uncertainties and protection of the originals.

Keywords: Montecassino, Bobbio, Monastic Manuscripts, Book Production, Palimpsests, Cultural memory.

1 INTRODUCTION

In medieval Europe, the manuscript codex was both a valuable material object and a resource for everyday study and worship. Its production involved preparing the parchment, ruling the page, copying the text, binding and, where appropriate, decoration. Reading, correction and conservation added further elements to its history. A surviving codex transmits the text it contains while also preserving traces of the scribes, readers and institutions that used it. Examining these two dimensions makes it possible to study both textual transmission and practices of managing knowledge (Newton, 1996; Pantarotto, 2007).

This article examines two Italian monastic centres with different historical trajectories. Montecassino, associated with the Benedictine tradition of southern Italy, developed a long history of manuscript production and collecting. Bobbio, founded by the Irish monk Columbanus in northern Italy, assembled codices of different origins and became an

important centre of book production. A manuscript's association with a monastery does not automatically establish that it was copied there. The history of a collection requires a distinction between the place of production, the place of use and successive owners (MeMo, n.d.b; van den Hout, 1952).

The principal research question concerns how monastic practices of producing, using and managing books contributed to the transmission of knowledge. A second question addresses the conditions necessary for presenting this heritage to the public today. Historical analysis and proposals for cultural engagement form distinct levels of the discussion: studies of education and cultural tourism provide comparative perspectives rather than evidence for events in medieval Italy.

2 METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The article is a narrative literature review using a comparative historical approach. It draws on specialist palaeographical, codicological and musicological studies, together with institutional descriptions of the collections. The comparison focuses on the production and acquisition of codices, their material characteristics and uses, and the subsequent histories of the collections. It does not undertake a systematic inventory of manuscripts or new first-hand examination of the originals.

Evidence is distinguished from interpretation: information about particular manuscripts and historical periods is attributed to the relevant sources, while broader comparisons are presented as the synthesis developed in this study. Contemporary works on cultural heritage management are used only to discuss possible applications. These proposals do not constitute empirical findings concerning Montecassino or Bobbio.

3 THE MONASTERY AS A SETTING FOR BOOK PRODUCTION AND USE

Monastic life generated continuing needs for books. Worship required psalters, Gospel lectionaries, antiphonaries and other liturgical texts, while the study of Scripture and the Church Fathers and the education of monks required access to additional works. The library was therefore connected with worship, learning and the organisation of the community. In the case of Montecassino, the relationship between reading and the monks' religious and practical needs is also emphasised in the account provided by the MeMo research project (n.d.b).

The term scriptorium is used here to refer to the organised activity of manuscript production and does not necessarily imply the existence of a dedicated, unchanging workspace in every case. Making a book could involve several contributors: scribes, decorators, binders and, in musical manuscripts, those who added the notation. Corrections and additions could also be made later. Comparing scripts, materials and page layouts helps identify successive stages of work (Newton, 1996; Pantarotto, 2007).

Books also circulated between individuals and communities. They arrived through donations, commissions, exchanges and transfers from other places. They could serve as exemplars for new copies or be transferred again. The history of a monastic library therefore encompasses both local production and networks extending beyond the monastery. Institutional care supported the preservation of books, but this continuity remained vulnerable to movement, loss and reuse.

4 BOOK PRODUCTION AND RECONSTRUCTION AT MONTECASSINO

The history of Montecassino's library is connected with changes within the monastery itself. According to the library's official historical account, the collection expanded significantly after the monks returned in 949 and developed particularly strongly during the abbacy of Desiderius, from 1058 to 1087. The increasing number of codices and documents led to the allocation of new premises for the library (Biblioteca di Montecassino, n.d.). This development links the growth of the collection with the monastery's physical infrastructure and administrative organisation.

Montecassino preserves a substantial body of manuscripts produced in its own scriptorium, alongside books acquired from elsewhere (MeMo, n.d.b). Their coexistence allows local book production to be studied in relation to the history of acquisition and use. The preservation of codices within the same institution facilitates research, without ensuring that all historical periods are equally represented or that the collection remained unchanged.

Herbert Bloch (1946) situated Montecassino's artistic activity within southern Italy's political and cultural relationships with the West and Byzantium. His study shows that the forms of books did not develop in an isolated monastic environment. Images, decorative patterns and techniques could incorporate influences from wider networks. The monastery thus functioned as a place where forms were selected and transformed, rather than simply reproduced mechanically.

5 SCRIPT AND MUSICAL TRADITION AT MONTECASSINO

Beneventan script provides a clear example of the historical information conveyed by a manuscript's form. It is a script of southern Italy attested from the final decades of the eighth century. Montecassino was an important centre for the development of its Cassinese type, although its circulation extended beyond the monastery (MeMo, n.d.a). Graphic characteristics contribute to the dating and comparison of codices. Attributing a book to a particular place of production nevertheless requires other evidence to be considered, since the same script could be used in several centres.

The examination of musical codices broadens the study of manuscript transmission. Kelly (1985) investigates Montecassino's relationship with Old Beneventan chant, the region's earlier, non-Gregorian liturgical repertory. Surviving musical evidence allows aspects of a tradition that changed over time to be studied. Notation provides information about musical practice, but the reconstruction of historical performance remains dependent on the nature and completeness of the sources.

Brunner (1981) examines the southern Italian sequence through the second tonary of the manuscript Monte Cassino 318. The sequence is a type of liturgical chant, while a tonary organises chants according to musical modes. This study demonstrates the importance of musical collections for investigating the classification and transmission of repertory. The text, notation and position of a chant within a codex need to be examined together.

Montecassino's manuscripts thus contain different forms of historical evidence: religious and historical texts, scribal practices, decoration and musical notation. Newton's (1996) study of the care of codices from the eleventh to the fifteenth century draws attention to flyleaves, scribal subscriptions, the retracing of script and shelf marks. Codicology, the study of the material construction of manuscript books, makes it possible to connect these features with particular phases of use and conservation.

6 THE FORMATION OF BOBBIO'S LIBRARY

The monastery of Bobbio was founded by Columbanus in the early seventh century and developed into an important monastic centre in northern Italy. Its association with the Irish monastic tradition is insufficient to attribute every early codex to its first monks. Some manuscripts predated the monastery's foundation and entered its collection later. This diversity makes it necessary to examine evidence of production, transfer and ownership (van den Hout, 1952).

The monastery's catalogues are sources for the composition and organisation of the collection. They do not necessarily record every book available in each period or all the ways in which books were used. Stansbury's (2015) study of the ‘private’ books in the Bobbio catalogue raises the question of the relationship between the monastery's collection and books associated with particular individuals. The designation ‘private’ needs to be interpreted within its historical context rather than automatically equated with modern concepts of individual ownership.

Bobbio's importance as a centre of writing and collecting emerges from the combined study of surviving codices and catalogues. Examining the codex Milano, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, S 33 sup., Pantarotto (2007) reconstructs a process of assembling a collection of ecclesiastical canons and decretals using pre-existing material. This example documents specific work on a codex and allows book production to be studied as the selection and reorganisation of texts.

Manuscript decoration adds a further dimension. Lawrence Nees (2023) examines illuminated codices from Luxeuil and Bobbio and situates decorated letters within the study of the early medieval page. Decorated initials contribute to page organisation. They structure reading visually and make the beginning of a section a focal point. Their examination helps explain how communities organised the reading and presentation of their books.

7 PALIMPSESTS AND PRACTICES OF REUSE

A palimpsest is a manuscript in which an earlier script has been removed and the same surface used for a new text. Reusing parchment could result in the loss of the original writing. Where legible traces remained, however, portions of earlier works were preserved beneath the later text. The material survival of a text and the intention to preserve it are therefore not identical (van den Hout, 1952; Pantarotto, 2007).

Van den Hout (1952) examines Gothic texts surviving in palimpsests associated with Bobbio's collection. These include fragments of the Gothic biblical tradition over which later works were written. The association with Bobbio concerns the history of the codices and does not establish that the underlying Gothic script was produced at the monastery. Ownership inscriptions and early catalogues help identify provenance from the collection, while palaeographical examination addresses different questions concerning dating and production.

The study of palimpsests requires a more complex understanding of the monks' contribution to transmitting earlier texts. Communities selected books and materials according to their needs at a given time. Reuse could reflect the diminished usefulness of an earlier text or the need to make use of its parchment. The modern recovery of the underlying script may be an unintended consequence of this practice. The history of preservation therefore includes choices, losses and replacements, as well as acts of protection (Pantarotto, 2007).

Palimpsests also have methodological significance. They show that a manuscript may incorporate more than one date and more than one historical setting of production and use. The earlier script, later text, binding and ownership notes are not necessarily contemporary. Reconstructing their histories requires collaboration among philologists, historians, palaeographers and imaging specialists.

8 COMPARATIVE SYNTHESIS

The comparison of Montecassino and Bobbio highlights different ways of forming written memory. At Montecassino, the close relationship between many surviving codices and the local scriptorium makes it possible to trace changes in script, liturgical use and the collection within the same institutional setting. At Bobbio, the history of catalogues, donations and palimpsests more clearly reveals the convergence of books from different origins. This is an analytical distinction rather than an absolute division: Montecassino also received books from elsewhere, while manuscripts were also produced at Bobbio (MeMo, n.d.b; van den Hout, 1952; Pantarotto, 2007).

In both cases, the community's practices had consequences extending beyond the original use of the books. A liturgical book could later become a source for music history. A codex containing a patristic work could preserve a much earlier text beneath its script. A catalogue compiled by monks for practical purposes could enable modern scholars to reconstruct a lost library. Subsequent research value is not identical to medieval intention, but depends on the traces left by medieval practices.

9 DISPERSAL DESTRUCTION AND CONTEMPORARY ACCESS

The history of a collection also includes the movement of its books. Manuscripts associated with Bobbio are now held in different libraries, making the reconstruction of the earlier collection more difficult (van den Hout, 1952). Comparing catalogues and ownership inscriptions with the material characteristics of codices helps reconnect the evidence. Pantarotto's (2007) study provides an example of reconstructing the history of a particular manuscript held in the Biblioteca Ambrosiana. The trajectory of the physical volume and the transmission history of its text need to be examined separately and then related to one another.

Montecassino's collection also experienced losses and reconstruction. The official accounts of the library's history and present holdings refer to changes in the collection and the destruction of 1944 (Biblioteca di Montecassino, n.d.; Biblioteca di Montecassino, 2023). Information about the fate of the library as a whole should not be generalised to every category of material without specific examination. The preservation of substantial manuscript holdings coexists with the loss of other material and requires detailed historical investigation of individual collections and codices.

Digital reproduction facilitates comparison between manuscripts held in different institutions. Images allow the examination of script and decoration and can reduce handling of the originals. Studying quire structure, bindings and certain traces of conservation may nevertheless require additional documentation or first-hand examination. The approach proposed here combines digital images with detailed codicological descriptions and explicit acknowledgement of the limits of the available evidence.

10 EDUCATIONAL AND CULTURAL USES

Public presentation of manuscripts needs to explain their material construction, changes in use and uncertainties concerning their provenance. Trikalitis and Manola's (2024) study of monastic libraries in Greece examines the relationship between manuscripts, education and local development. It provides a comparative starting point for the contemporary dimension of this discussion. It is not used as a source for medieval book production at Montecassino or Bobbio.

Maniou and Mitoula's (2025) research on literary festivals examines the connections between literature, cultural activities and local development. By analogy, readings, palaeography workshops and presentations of the trajectories of particular codices could be developed. These are proposals made in the present study, rather than activities whose effectiveness has been demonstrated at the two monasteries. Their evaluation would require clear learning objectives and evidence of public understanding and participation.

The study by Manola, Maniou and Mitoula (2025) concerns the presentation of the Atatürk Museum in Thessaloniki and its relationship with cultural tourism and local development. Its different subject matter requires its comparative use to be limited. For manuscripts, a digital presentation is proposed that would connect images with descriptions, bibliography and information about successive owners. The potential to reconstruct Bobbio's dispersed collection would depend on the quality of these data. Any proposed identification should be accompanied by supporting evidence and a statement of its degree of certainty.

Maniou et al. (2025a) examine European literary parks as forms of cultural tourism connecting place, literary heritage and visitor experience. This approach may offer ideas for an educational itinerary at Montecassino focused on the library's history, Beneventan script and musical manuscripts. Its implementation would require adaptation to the monastic setting and the conservation needs of the codices. The narrative should also distinguish the place of production from the current place of custody and explain losses and movements within the collection.

The studies by Maniou et al. on the industrial heritage of Lesbos and Limnos (2025b) and Italian monuments on Kalymnos (2025c) examine different aspects of cultural heritage use and its relationship with local communities. Their comparative relevance concerns planning new uses and preserving the historical character of heritage assets. The adaptive reuse of buildings, however, is not equivalent to handling fragile manuscripts. In monastic libraries, educational activities must be designed around conservation requirements and may use digital surrogates when displaying originals is inappropriate.

The comparative discussion leads to the proposal that cultural uses of manuscripts should be assessed in terms of the quality of historical documentation, public understanding and the long-term protection of collections. Digital catalogues, educational programmes and partnerships between libraries and research and local institutions can broaden access. Their contribution to local development remains a question requiring dedicated empirical research and cannot be inferred solely from the cultural value of manuscripts.

The pivotal and constructive role of digital technologies within contemporary cultural preservation and education warrants systematic integration rather than peripheral acknowledgment. As creative markets digitize rapidly, traditional frameworks fail to equip emerging creative entrepreneurs with requisite interdisciplinary competencies. To fortify this field and cultivate resilient innovators, academic institutions and policy-makers must strategically deploy advanced digital modalities across all curricular levels. Educational frameworks must systematically absorb established technological paradigms. Mobile learning environments [5] democratize access to instructional resources, enabling flexible learning beyond traditional classroom boundaries. Concurrently, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) [6,10,25] provide the infrastructure for interactive simulations and digital marketplace modeling. Furthermore, integrating Artificial Intelligence (AI) and STEM Robotics [7,8,12,21] cultivates algorithmic thinking and technical fluency—skills indispensable for commercializing creative outputs within automated market landscapes. Rather than merely digitizing content, these advanced paradigms fundamentally optimize core educational mechanisms: evaluation, targeted intervention, and personalized instruction. Embedded within curricula, these modalities facilitate a transition from static instruction to adaptive learning pathways tailored to individual cognitive profiles and skill gaps. Crucially, implementing ICTs must not occur in a cognitive vacuum. Synthesizing digital tools with validated psychological frameworks—specifically models of metacognition, mindfulness, and emotional intelligence development [8,9]—significantly accelerates learning efficiency and student outcomes. When technology supports metacognitive self-monitoring, strategic reflection, and emotional regulation, learners cultivate the psychological resilience, empathy, and cognitive flexibility mandatory for cultural preservation and entrepreneurial survival.

11 CONCLUSIONS

Montecassino and Bobbio demonstrate that monastic manuscripts served as vehicles of knowledge because they were embedded in recurring practices of production, reading, classification and preservation. Their value extends beyond the works they contain. Script, decoration, musical notation, reused parchment and catalogues reveal how communities managed knowledge and determined their priorities.

The central conclusion is that preserving knowledge is a selective process that varies historically. At Montecassino, the continuity of local production is particularly apparent, together with its interruptions and subsequent reconstruction. At Bobbio, the complexity of the collection, the layers of palimpsests and later dispersal come to the fore. In both cases, cultural memory resulted from specific historical choices rather than a general intention to preserve every earlier text.

Studying codices as texts and material objects makes it possible to connect religious life with education, art and the history of reading. Documenting provenance and successive uses is essential to both historical research and public interpretation. This synthesis of the literature does not allow the contribution of each monastery to be quantified or

conclusions to be drawn about the developmental outcomes of contemporary activities. It does, however, highlight the need to connect access to collections with accurate description, protection of originals and a clear distinction between documented evidence and interpretative proposals.

STATEMENTS ON COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

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The Authors proclaim no conflict of interest.

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