

Seeing through the ‘Priest’s Eye’: Teaching Medieval Codicology and Book History through William of Pagula’s *Oculus sacerdotis*

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In 1281, John Pecham, Archbishop of Canterbury, promulgated his *Ignorantia sacerdotum* (*On the Ignorance of Priests*). A clarion cry to all clergy under his authority, the *Ignorantia* condemned the woeful state of priestly education and training in England during the late-thirteenth century, asserting that the ignorance of priests leads people into doctrinal and moral error and cheats them of a true understanding of God. Pecham’s decree did more than just condemn his subordinates’ ignorance, however. It also set forth the framework for the systematic teaching of priests—and by extension the people to whom they ministered—in the basic literacy of Christianity. Over the course of the following century, a number of learned priests put quill to parchment in an effort to provide their less knowledgeable brethren with books explaining these fundamental principles of the Christian faith. Chief among these texts was the *Oculus sacerdotis*, or *The Eye of the Priest*, written in the 1320s by an English clergyman named William of Pagula, vicar of Winkfield, a small parish in Berkshire in south-central England.¹

The above paragraph encapsulates the basic background information I give to my students when introducing them to Ohio State’s manuscript copy of Pagula’s influential fourteenth-century text. But as significant and interesting as its historical context and textual content may be, in most cases in which I might use this manuscript to teach, the substance of its text actually counts for very little. Written entirely in Latin and never before edited or

fully translated into English, the manuscript’s textual contents remain inaccessible to most students; and even if they are fluent in medieval Latin, they would still have to contend with the manuscript’s paleographical idiosyncrasies, the absence of modern punctuation, and the complex system of lexical abbreviations used by the scribes who penned the text. On first glance, then, it would seem that for general teaching purposes OSU’s copy of the *Oculus sacerdotis* is nothing more than an inert esoteric object, a historical curiosity, an “empty” text. If this is the case, a fundamental question arises: What is the point of using a manuscript like this in the classroom?

As a curator who frequently teaches with medieval books in upper level courses such as “Medieval Manuscript Studies,” as well as in course-integrated sessions across the university’s humanities curriculum and in occasional instructional scenarios targeting primary, junior high, and high school audiences, it is my job to find ways to help students see past these linguistic and textual obstacles and teach them to recognize that there is more to read and examine in a book than its textual content alone. Its very physical qualities and appearance, I try to demonstrate, serve as active texts encompassing their own peculiar language of signs and symbols telling us about the circumstances and process of the book’s own production, the culture in which it was born, the people who made and read it, and the history of its use and transmission. By using a man-

uscript copy of the *Oculus* as a lens through which we can examine the complex intellectual, cultural, artistic, and material histories underlying medieval books and their production, we can figuratively and literally see through the *Eye of the Priest* and realize that we do not need to look at or understand a manuscript's textual content in order to make use of it as a powerful and practical pedagogical tool.

The particular copy of the *Oculus* I use in my classes is ideally suited to teaching students about medieval textual culture and codicology. Although my use of and focus upon the manuscript varies depending on the curricular needs of each class, generally speaking I ask my students to “dissect” the manuscript by examining it closely from the outside in. We begin with a simple assessment of its size and format and progress inward to analyze its binding structure, its pagination and foliation, the condition and quality of its parchment, its textual layout and appearance, and any paratextual additions or reader-added comments it contains. By considering such features closely, we can learn much about the manuscript's possible origin and provenance, its process of production, how it was used, and the people who used it. Taken together, all of this evidence opens our eyes to the significance of the *Oculus* as both physical artifact and intellectual text.

So what does the Ohio State *Oculus* tell us about itself? The first things we notice are its size and external appearance. The manuscript can be described as a small- to medium-sized folio, perfectly situated between larger typical academic or reference codices intended for communal or institutional service, and smaller devotional treatises produced for individual or personal use. It is bound in tanned, decoratively-stamped, semi-limp leather covers held together by four laced-in leather thong sewing supports. Beyond providing us with a physical description, what might these features suggest about our manuscript? First of all, its intermediate size is perfect for packaging a large amount of information while at the same time remaining com-

pact enough to facilitate easy transportation and use. Additionally, the qualities of the binding make the manuscript both flexible and durable. Its four closely spaced sewing thongs provide strength and resiliency, and its tanned leather covers have been crafted to withstand the rigors of frequent handling and exposure to the elements. Such bindings were common across Europe in the later-medieval period and were valued as an inexpensive, yet sturdy and reliable, means for constructing and protecting books. In apparent contrast to this rugged functionality, however, the binding also features on both its front and back covers extensive blind-stamped decoration consisting of a small ornamental frame set within a larger frame festooned with decorative medallions. Taken together, the binding's functional and decorative characteristics suggest that while the manuscript was intended for heavy use, its textual contents—the fundamental principles and policies of the Christian religion—were esteemed enough to warrant the modest, but extra, expense necessary to provide a small amount of artistic embellishment. Given the fact that the *Oculus sacerdotis* was a highly regarded and often used sacerdotal reference work, it seems hardly surprising that this copy of it would feature both durability and aesthetic appeal in its external physical construction.

While our external analysis of the manuscript would seem to indicate that it survives in its original fifteenth-century binding, we need to turn to an analysis of its internal structure in order to determine if it has come down to us from its original creators in a complete and intact state. The first step in this internal analysis, I show my students, is an examination of the codex's endpapers and flyleaves, or in other words, the scraps of parchment positioned before and after the main text block that are used to solidify the binding and protect the manuscript's primary textual contents. At the front of the book we have a bifolium of clean parchment, half of which is pasted down to the inside front cover with the other half left unglued as a free leaf. Immediately follow-

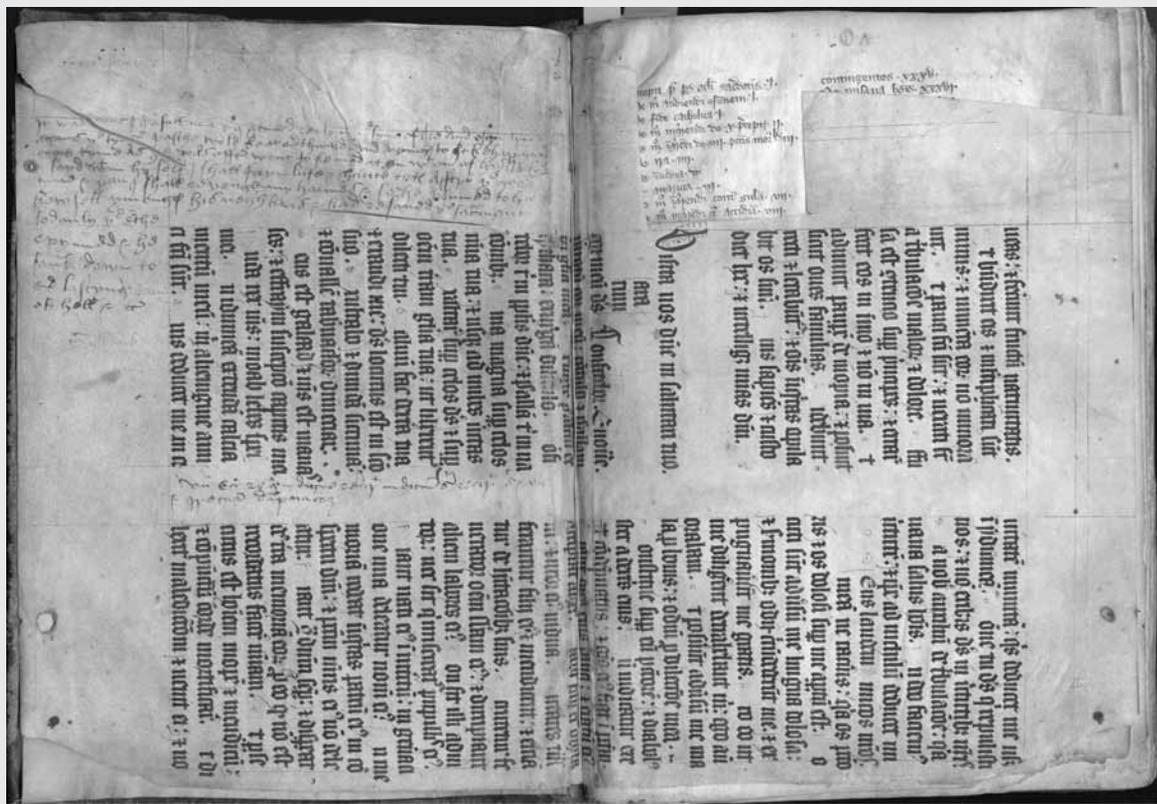
ing this appears a large parchment sheet of a disused manuscript service book that has been turned sideways and folded in half to create an additional bifolium of two flyleaves (figure 6.1). The same basic structure occurs inside the rear cover. I ask my students to look closely at the bifolium of flyleaves at the front of the codex, paying particular attention to the gutter, or fold, in the sheet. They quickly discover that at some point in this manuscript's long history, these flyleaves either were re-set, or possibly removed from another manuscript's binding and inserted in this copy of the *Oculus*. Two things make this conclusion apparent: the presence of parallel stress lines running the length of both of the bifolium's leaves on either side of the gutter and the survival of earlier, now superfluous, sewing holes.

Although this evidence concretely shows that the manuscript's front-matter has been meddled with, it

only suggests that the *Oculus* itself may have been rebound sometime in its past. To prove this, I lead my students further into the manuscript to examine the individual gatherings of bifolia within the main text block where we quickly determine that the entire manuscript, indeed, once had been rebound. A quick look into the gutters of each bifolium's centerfold reveals the same superfluous sewing holes apparent in the bifolium of flyleaves at the front of the book. But, I show my students, additional, more specific evidence confirming this rebinding emerges if we carefully collate the manuscript to search for clues the original scribe(s) would have left to help guide the binder as he constructed this book.

The basic physical constituents of any medieval manuscript book are its gatherings, or quires, of several bifolia nested inside each other and "tacketed" (stitched) together to form a short booklet. Medi-

Figure 6.1. Rare Books & Manuscripts Library of the Ohio State University Libraries. MS.Lat.1, front flyleaves



eval codices consisted of any number of these quires assembled collectively, arranged one after the other, and sewn consecutively into a common binding. In order to facilitate the organization and sewing of these gatherings in proper sequence, scribes employed a variety of textual tools, including numbering each individual quire, inserting signature marks on leaves within numbered quires, and writing catchwords at the bottom of the last page of a quire that matched up with the first words at the top of the first page of the following gathering. Upon examining our copy of the *Oculus*, I show my students that its original makers used all three of these tools when preparing their text. At first glance, the manuscript looks complete and intact. Its binding is solid and tight; there are no gaps indicating the absence of large portions of text; and it consists of ten individual quires, including a preliminary gathering of four leaves followed by eight gatherings of twelve and what looks to be a single gathering of ten leaves lacking its final leaf. A careful review of scribal and binding evidence, however, reveals a few substantial problems with this picture. First of all, the first gathering of twelve leaves is bound out of order. While its first three bifolia are nested correctly, the fourth has been bound in reverse order and the sixth has accidentally been nested prior to the fifth bifolium. This muddled arrangement results in the following leaf order: 1, 2, 3, 9, 6, 5, 8, 7, 4, 10, 11, 12. A second problem with the binding becomes apparent when we analyze the surviving catchwords and quire numbering in each gathering. Gatherings 2, 3, 5, 6, and 10 clearly retain their original quire markings at the bottom of the first leaf of each quire, while portions of the quire markings for the seventh and ninth gatherings are still visible. Coupling these marks with the catchwords present at the end of each gathering, we can quickly see that the catchwords at the end of the seventh quire do not match the text at the start of the quire immediately following it. This successive quire's catchwords, however, match the first words of the clearly marked tenth

gathering. This codicological evidence, then, proves that the codex is missing what would have been its eighth quire—a full twelve leaves of the manuscript are absent.² Finally, a closer look at the tenth quire reveals that rather than being a simple gathering of ten leaves lacking its final leaf, it is actually a gathering of eight leaves lacking its final leaf, but with two single leaves inserted between the quire's fifth and sixth leaves.

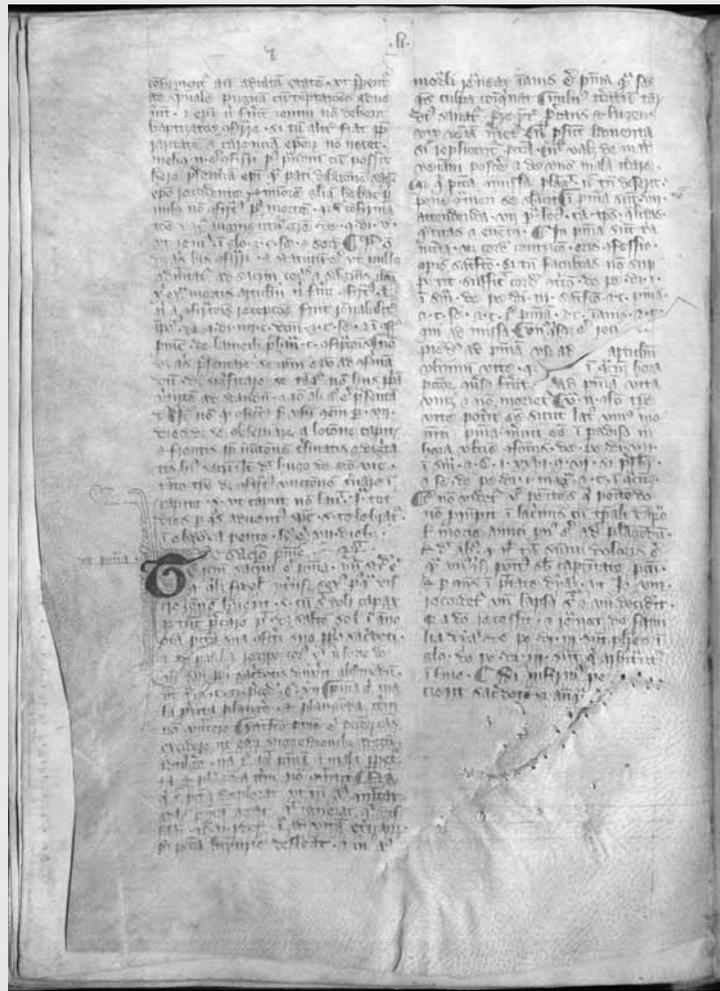
But what does all this tell us? Our close analysis of the *Oculus*'s binding structure reveals an incomplete manuscript that was likely rebound somewhat carelessly in the later-fifteenth, or perhaps early-sixteenth, century. While none of the evidence we have uncovered provides exact information identifying the book's original creators or readers, our observations do tell us that this copy of the *Oculus* was likely used heavily from the moment of its completion and was reckoned to be an extremely valuable resource worthy of rebinding and continued use, in spite of the fact that it lacks a full quire's worth of text.

While our investigation of the manuscript's binding configuration tells us much about how it was constructed, a close examination of its parchment leaves, the writing on each leaf, and the codex's overall *mise-en-page* reveals a great deal of useful information about book production, scribal practice, and reading activities in the later Middle Ages. For instance, the quality of the parchment is rough and uneven at best. While age has definitely contributed to some of the artifact's wear—it is 600 years old, after all—it is clear that the parchment used to make this book was of an exceedingly low standard to begin with. Parchment preparation was a very time- and labor-intensive activity that necessitated converting the skin of a living animal, complete with all its own unique flaws and blemishes, into a smooth, clean, supple surface that could easily be written upon. Parchment intended for high-quality manuscripts required painstaking preparation and precluded the use of skins with significant

imperfections. The parchment used in the *Oculus*, in contrast, is full of flaws (figure 6.2). Many leaves are wrinkled and yellowish in tone; hair follicles and vein patterning are prominent throughout the book; rough, uneven scar tissue from insect bites, cuts, and scrapes mar the pages; individual leaves are uneven, bearing the marks of untrimmed shoulder and neck contours and the hasty, imprecise cutting of the parchment-maker; and many holes—the result of torn scar tissue or careless knife-work during the skinning of the animal or later preparation of the parchment—are rife throughout the codex. In many instances, there is evidence showing how the book's creators attempted to repair such faults, including small skin patches over holes and stitches in long gashes and tears. The overall condition of the parchment indicates that functionality, utility, and economy were the main factors considered in the production of this book. This copy of the *Oculus* was a simple working priest's text, not a lavish art-piece intended for idle display.

The text written upon these imperfect leaves also reveals much about how the book was produced and for whom it was written. Pricking and ruling, the process of piercing the margins of a leaf with regularly spaced holes that guided the ruling of the page, is apparent on each leaf and illustrates for students a fundamental step in medieval scribal practice. The heavily abbreviated Latin text tells us that the manuscript was created for a specialist audience of educated clerics. Its writing is arranged in two columns, a typical layout for scholarly texts like the *Oculus*, and is pep-

Figure 6.2. Rare Books & Manuscripts Library of the Ohio State University Libraries. MS.Lat.1, fol. 47v.



pered with rubricated characters that help punctuate the text and set off different sections of the treatise. These colored letters and symbols work alongside the thematic headings at the top of each leaf, the chapter summaries and short sectional titles written in the margins, and the topical index inserted at the beginning of the book to help readers better navigate the *Oculus's* complex text.

In addition to these scribal contributions pointing out how the book's creators intended it to be used, reader-added marginal annotations and homemade bookmarks show us how its audience

actually used the book. For instance, a note on folio 2^r points out where a discussion of the sacrament of confession occurs, while on folio 72 a series of parallel slits into which is threaded a folded parchment fragment serves as a simple homemade bookmark. Tangible, unique marks of use like these (and there are many more to be found in the manuscript) bring to our attention small sections of text that were of particular interest to one of the manuscript's readers and reveal valuable details about contemporary private reading practices. While students may not be able to read and understand the *Oculus's* actual text, a close assessment of physical and visible evidence such as the features described above can still teach them much about medieval book production, reading processes, and textual culture.

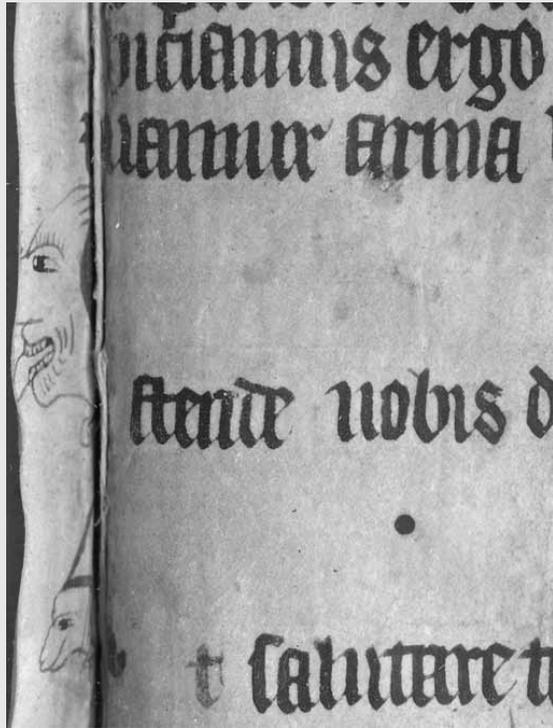
As well as providing us with information about the creation and reception of medieval manuscripts and its own place within those processes of production and use, the Ohio State *Oculus* also contains evidence that can help shed light on its particular origins and provenance. When considering the text's origins, we know that William of Pagula wrote the text known as the *Oculus sacerdotis*, although he did not personally write the copy owned by Ohio State. Occasionally medieval manuscripts will provide us with direct testimony in prefatory or colophonic statements explaining who penned the text, where it was written, and who commissioned it. Unfortunately, our copy of the manuscript includes no such information. Instead, I tell my students, we are left to hazard a guess about its origin based on a variety of physical and textual clues. First of all, we can determine the manuscript is of English origin by identifying its paleographical style as a form of *Anglicana cursiva*, a type of cursive handwriting that first developed in England in the thirteenth century and continued to evolve throughout the remainder of the Middle Ages. Peculiar morphological details of the script help us date the script to sometime in the early fifteenth century.

Other features that might help date and localize the manuscript can be found in its binding. Al-

though its semi-limp binding structure was a common feature of many books in the Middle Ages, the blind-stamped patterns decorating its front and back covers offer clues about its origins if we compare them with other contemporary bindings featuring similar structures and decorative patterns. For instance, a comparison of the *Oculus's* decorative tooling with rubbings of known and recorded binding stamps and tooled marks provides a match with a decorative scheme known to have been used on other English bindings as early as 1495 and as late as the second quarter of the sixteenth century.³ While it is possible that our manuscript was rebound earlier or later than these dates, the binding's decorative scheme does give us a relatively firm *terminus ante quem* and *terminus post quem* for its rebinding.

Additionally, the manuscript fragments used as flyleaves suggest further avenues for exploration. By identifying the texts included in these scraps—a Psalter, in the case of the front endleaves, and a Missal for the rear endleaf—we might be able to tease out details about the evolution of liturgical or devotional rituals and practices specific to particular geographical areas and how these rites changed over time. These recycled fragments also potentially can tell us much about the milieu in which the manuscript was rebound. Other odd details, such as the illustration of a grinning man sticking out his tongue in the gutter of the rear manuscript fragment endleaf (figure 6.3), when compared to other sources, might also shed light on the book's history. When considered together, the fragmentary service book endleaves and the illustration of the grinning man could suggest a connection with Worcester Cathedral and its medieval library, where a fourteenth-century monk named Richard Bromwych was known to have decorated a number of manuscripts with humorous profiles of monks' heads.⁴ This possible conclusion, it should be noted, is highly speculative, but it illustrates to students ways in which we can use a manuscript's physical evidence—no mat-

Figure 6.3. Rare Books & Manuscripts Library of the Ohio State University Libraries. MS.Lat.1, detail of gutter of rear flyleaf



ter how seemingly insignificant—to help us see into its own past with greater clarity.

A variety of clues offering clearer insight into the manuscript's provenance, or history of ownership, is also apparent when we analyze it. Laid into the book is an old return address label identifying the book dealer from whom Ohio State acquired the *Oculus* decades ago. A pair of bookplates affixed to the front pastedown testifies to the manuscript's current and previous ownership, while between them lies a brief, printed description of the codex taken from a dealer's catalogue. Supplementing this evidence of the manuscript's more recent ownership history is an intriguing anonymous inscription found on the verso of the first flyleaf at the front of the book (figure 6.1). Written in fifteenth-century Middle English, the inscription could possibly be an *exemplum*, or short story with a moral or salutary

lesson used by preachers to enliven their sermons and instruct their listeners. This particular passage concludes with a description of how a man was presumably saved from sin by partaking of the Eucharistic sacrament, after which the earth opened up before him and he was able to witness hell and its punishments. The presence of such a text here is appropriate supplemental information for a priest's handbook concerned with teaching its readers about the sacraments and offering advice on how to deliver sermons. And the fact that it appears in the vernacular reveals that this particular nameless fifteenth-century owner was likely a priest literate in both English and Latin who probably employed the material discussed in the *Oculus* in his work with the lay folk under his spiritual care. Our picture of the *Oculus*'s provenance might be incomplete, but the bookplates, dealer descriptions, and inscriptions it contains can still tell us much about who owned it, how it has been used, and how it has passed from owner to owner over the past 600 years to finally settle in central Ohio.

Although the comprehensive codicological exploration of a source like the *Oculus sacerdotis* might de-emphasize the manuscript's textual contents, such an analysis makes visible to even the most inexperienced student a medieval manuscript's potential to teach us about how books were produced and consumed during the Middle Ages. This approach need not be limited to a study of this one particular manuscript, however. Rather, this overview of how I approach the *Oculus* not as a literary text, but as a physical artifact charged with historical significance communicating itself to us through its own particular language of signs and symbols, serves as a model for how other curators, librarians, and teachers can use the medieval books in their own care to help students see manuscripts not just as historical curiosities or texts accessible only to an initiated few, but as valuable artifacts of cultural memory that offer a clear and vibrant picture of medieval life.

NOTES

1. The first, and still most complete, look at William of Pagula and his influential text, including a handy list of over sixty manuscripts of the *Oculus* housed in British and American collections, is L.E. Boyle's "The *Oculus sacerdotis* and Some Other Works of William of Pagula," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, ser. 5, 5 (1955): 81-110.
2. The full collational formula reflecting the manuscript's existing structure reads: $\pi^4 1-7^{12} 8^{12} (-8^{12}) 9^{12} 10^8$ (10 canc.; + 2 singletons between 5 and 6). I have incorporated the "pi" symbol in accordance with standard bibliographic collational practice for early printed books to represent the addition of "unsigned" preliminary leaves to the main text block.
3. See J. Basil Oldham, *English Blind-Stamped Bindings* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1952). Roll HM.a (17), pictured in plate XLVII, matches the larger external decorative frame, while roll FP.a (8) matches the inner frame. Oldham cites examples of this combination from 1495, 1519, and 1530-51 (p. 52). Based on this evidence, it seems likely that the binding was executed in London or Oxford. For discussions of Oxford as a center of production for blind-stamped bindings, see Strickland Gibson, *Early Oxford Bindings* (Oxford: Printed for the Bibliographical Society at the Oxford University Press, 1903), and G.D. Hobson, *English Binding Before 1500*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1929).
4. R. M. Thomson, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Medieval Manuscripts in Worcester Cathedral Library* (Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 2001), xxvii.