

Permanent Seminar on Manuscript Analysis, Description, and Documentation

First series: *Forms of manuscripts and their description*

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Fig. 1 - title

M. Maniaci, *Greek and Latin Vertical rolls/scrolls*

Research on Medieval rolls (or scrolls) – which were used in the Greek and Latin Middle Ages for a wide variety of documentary, liturgical and paraliturgical, practical and literary purposes – is in a particularly lively phase, as it is witnessed by the organization of conferences and workshops and by the activity of dedicated research groups.

Fig. 2 - Bibliography

For those who wish to know more, a few recent references, with further bibliography, are shown in this slide.

It must be said, however, that beyond specific cases, the many works dedicated to single rolls pay limited or almost no attention to their bibliographical peculiarities: in fact, they concentrate mostly on their contents and on their historical-functional contextualization. My task today is therefore to show the interest of a grid of analysis which should be applied in an extensive way to a significant sampling of artifacts from different eras, contexts and types.

Fig. 3 – Harvard Database

The difficulty of producing reliable estimates of the quantity of surviving rolls – and even more of those which were originally produced – is due to a series of concomitant factors, including the diversity of areas and situations of use and of the current conservation sites (archives, libraries or museums); the separate placement of the rolls in special funds or in a marginal position within book collections; the mechanisms of selection that have influenced the loss rates.

Some categories of rolls were in fact conceived as ephemeral writing supports, and their state of intrinsic ‘precariousness’ is confirmed by the high number of incomplete or fragmentary witnesses, many of which are currently preserved in the form of loose sheets, cut out and bound in volumes, reused as flyleaves or reinforcement strips in manuscript or printed books, or even recycled as palimpsests.

The uncertain vicissitudes of the transmission make it difficult – or impossible – to quantify the fortune of the roll in a non-purely impressionistic manner. For the Latin context, the *Medieval Scrolls Digital Archive* promoted at Harvard University represents – with the approximately 680 rolls and fragments of non-documentary content ranging between the seventh and eighteenth centuries – an undoubtedly useful starting point. However, the census is an incomplete collection of data of a mostly second-hand nature, very heterogeneous in terms of quantity and quality of the information surveyed.

As for the Byzantine context, a preliminary survey allowed me to collect a corpus of about 240 non-documentary rolls: figures that are certainly destined to rise, considering the indefinable number of specimens which are still preserved in difficult-to-access Eastern collections, and the remains concealed within palimpsest manuscripts.

Fig. 4 – Chronological distribution

The picture that emerges with regard to the chronological distribution of the rolls is therefore purely indicative.

Yet the period of greatest diffusion of the vertical roll undoubtedly coincides in both areas with the Late Middle Ages – starting from the twelfth century – but the extent to which the roll was represented in the previous centuries and its continuity or discontinuity with respect to ancient rolls are both questions that have not received convincing answers until today, due to the scarcity of surviving specimens of early dating.

Fig. 5 – Contents of Latin rolls

As far as contents are concerned, Medieval Latin rolls show a very varied distribution, which makes a univocal classification somewhat problematic: 22 classes appear in the Harvard University database, which allows the search for liturgical, ecclesiastical, prayers, lives of saints, obituaries, pilgrim maps, chronicles, Christ's genealogies, genealogies of the kings of France and England, amulets, medical-alchemical texts, poetry, theater, music, heraldry, recipes, calendars, statutes, archival scrolls, ect.

Fig. 6 – Contents of Greek rolls

On the contrary, contributions relating to non-documentary Greek rolls usually classify them according to their liturgical content. The majority of the known copies transmits the text of the Eucharistic liturgy of St. John Chrysostom and St. Basil (sometimes also transcribed, whether simultaneously or not, on the two sides of a single roll), but one can also find the liturgies of St. James and St. Mark, the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts, and the Vespers of Pentecost; some scrolls contain prayers for specific occasions, such as communion or marriage, or liturgical requirements for performing minor offices.

Greek literary rolls of non-liturgical contents seem to have been sporadic, even if of exceptional interest.

Fig. 7 – Latin Exultet rolls

For this presentation, I will focus the attention on a Latin and a Greek liturgical example, but I will also refer to other examples in order to give you an idea of some characteristics which can take different forms in the various rolls, even of the same type.

My Latin example belongs to the well know category of southern Italian *Exsultet* rolls, which are long rolls of parchment made and used in Southern Italy in the Middle Ages. These rolls contained the texts and chants of the *Exsultet* ((the hymn sung during the Easter Vigil announcing the triumph of the light of resurrection over the darkness of death), accompanied by various illuminations related to its contents. In the liturgical staging (*mise en scene*) the roll would be unrolled

by the deacon over the ambo as he sang the *Exsultet* from it, thereby permitting the faithful to see the related iconography.

Fig. 8 – Greek rolls

Contrary to the *Exsultet*, the Byzantine ceremonial prescribed that the whispered recitation of the “secret prayers” take place in the sacred space delimited and hidden by the iconostasis, the decorated dividing wall located between the presbytery and the nave, which conceals (more or less totally) the altar to the sight of the faithfuls.

Fig. 9 – London, British Library, Add. 30337

My first example is a lavishly decorated *Exsultet* roll in the so-called Beneventan minuscule, made at Montecassino in the second half of the 11th century, today kept at the British Library and fully reproduced on its website. It is interesting to look at the (unusually analytical) description associated to the reproduction.

Fig. 10 – Città del Vaticano, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. gr. 2282

My Greek example is a roll kept at the Vatican Library (also reproduced on the library’s website), dated at the second half of the 9th century and localized in Syria in the diocese of Damascus (basing on the commemorations of local bishops). It is one of the oldest known liturgical rolls, written in a very slanted ogival writing + an upright ogival writing (for the rubrics) + a so-called 'mixed writing'; in some of the 16 sections there is a also parallel text in Arabic. It contains on the *recto* and *verso* the liturgy of James (an initial section is missing), written by one hand.

Fig. 11 – Bibliological features

In catalogues, monographs, descriptions associated to digital reproductions of rolls, these are mostly described in summary terms, especially as regards the details of the manufacture, usually limited to the subject matter, to the overall length and width of the strip and occasionally to the number of its sections: the way of connecting the single pieces is rarely specified, as well as their dimensions; the external description may include more or less summary references to writing and decoration, while the preparation of the page and the parameters of the layout usually get little or no interest. The description of the contents is highly variable.

In the following minutes, I will propose an overview of the main bibliological aspects which would be worth considering in describing a vertical roll.

Fig. 12 - Parchment

Both Latin *Exsultet* rolls and Greek liturgical rolls are made of parchment (and I will therefore concentrate on parchment rolls in my presentation).

The animal species of the parchment used for the rolls will have to be investigated and if possible recognized (also in order to compare them with those used for the manufacture of contemporary codices); the thickness should be also measured and analysed (if or not homogeneous within the same roll, and if similar or different from that of the parchments used in the making of codices), as well as the aspect of the parchment’s surface (if uniform or differentiated for the two faces of the roll, also depending on whether the writing appears on only one of them or on both).

For instance, in the case of the parchments used in the manufacture of the Exultet rolls, Marco Palma measured a greater thickness (of a few hundredths millimeters) compared to that of contemporary codices, and explained it with the tension that the roll had to sustain when it was exposed to the public by unrolling it from the ambo; but one could also hypothesize, as an alternative explanation, a less energetic processing of the face which was meant to remain empty. The absence of comparative data makes the interpretation problematic.

Fig. 13 – Colored parchment and inks

The sporadic dyeing or colouring of the surfaces has also to be mentioned (as in the case of the southern Italian Greek roll Borg. gr. 27, which alternates blue and burgundy red sections).

The characterization of writing materials also includes the description of the inks, with the possible mention of the – rare – use of gold or silver (both attested in the Borgia roll) for the writing of the entire text or only for the headings.

Fig. 14 – Dimensions of BL Add. 30337 and Vat. gr. 2282

The dimensions of the rolls are among the few information given in the descriptions.

Fig. 15 – Length of Greek and Latin rolls

The dimensions of the rolls are obviously influenced by the natural properties of the raw material. In the case of parchment they are conditioned by the maximum size of the usable surface of the skins, which in turn depends on the size of the animals from which they are obtained. Of the two dimensions of the parchment roll, the total length is the least subject to constraints and in fact it is characterized by an extreme variability: for Latin scrolls it ranges from a few tens of centimeters in the case of specimens composed of a single rolled up skin (one wonders if these cases actually fall within the typology of the roll) up to more than 30 meters (the very short rolls are mainly fragments).

As for Greek rolls, the lengths attested in my reference corpus rarely exceed 10 m (I know of a single case touching 13 m).

In assessing the extension of the rolls it is necessary to systematically distinguish between those of originally defined length, meant to remain stable over time (such as most liturgical rolls) and those programmatically intended to evolve through the addition of further sections to an original nucleus (as it happened for instance in the case of mortuary rolls). Except in the case of rolls consisting of a single skin or portion of skin, the total length is the result of the aggregation of several sections of which the total number is rarely indicated in the descriptions (but it should be); the individual heights of the sections are even more sporadically specified. In the absence of this information, it is impossible to assess whether and to what extent the more or less high variability of the height of the sections is related to the technical quality of the rolls and can therefore constitute one of the elements for its evaluation.

Fig. 16 – Width of Greek and Latin rolls

Also the width of the rolls varies considerably, with values ranging from a few centimeters up to the total width of the skin. It is interesting to observe that between these two extremes, the range

of the attested widths shows peaks of greater frequency around values corresponding to submultiples of the average width of the skins (a quarter, a third or half, respectively equal to about 15, 20 or 30 cm, considering that a sheep or goat skin was on average about 60 cm wide). To judge by the not insignificant number of Latin rolls whose width is between 40 and 50 cm, the division of the skin into two or three strips of equal width seems not to have been the only choice and the possibility of asymmetrical subdivisions is not to be considered as an exception.

Fig. 17 – Skin subdivision

What about the width of Greek rolls? As it is known, in the manufacture of Byzantine codices artisans show a tendency to intensify the exploitation of parchment surfaces, by subdividing the widest skins into three bifolia instead of two, thus placing a limit on the production of large volumes. Similarly, also in the preparation of liturgical rolls Greek artisans tend to cut the skins in narrower strips with respect to Latin ones: in my sample of about 150 artifacts the maximum concentration is around 25 cm, and the rolls less than 20 cm wide are also well represented.

Greek rolls which are about 20 cm wide (or less) are probably the product of a non-random strategy aimed at obtaining three parallel rectangles instead of two from a standard-width skin; vice versa, rolls larger than 30 cm, limiting the “exploitation balance” to a single section for each skin, are almost absent from my sample.

Fig. 18 – Shaped or irregular endings

It must be also taken into account that the initial and final sections can present – in analogy with the thickness of initial and final quires in codices – position-related anomalies, such as a specific shaping or the use of skins whose original perimeter remains visible.

Fig. 19 – Methods of composition

If the roll consists of several sections, the ways they are joined should be investigated and documented, by examining – in the case of parchment – the orientation of the skins (provided that it can be deduced from visible signs such as traces of *lisières*, armholes or backbone); the sequence, be homogeneous or not, of hair and flesh sides along the strip and their position with respect to the rolling direction. As for this last aspect, it is likely that the artisans normally tended to favour the spontaneous tendency of the skin to roll up with the hair side inside, but this hypothesis requires an archaeological verification.

Fig. 20 - Sewing (BL 30377)

Also the connection between the sections is made with a variety of (never systematically surveyed) techniques, whose distribution and relative diffusion is ignored.

In our *Exsultet* roll (as in many other ones) the sections are joined through the passage of thin membranous strips inserted in a succession of vertical slits.

Fig. 21 – Sewing without overlapping (Vat. gr. 2282)

In the Greek Vat. gr. 2282 the sections are sewn by means of a string (without overlapping).

Fig. 22 and 23– Sewing with overlapping

In other rolls the sections are sewn with overlapping, more or less accurately, and in this case the entity and direction of the overlap must be detected (depending on whether the following section is put above or below the previous one). The formulations used in the descriptions (for instance “sewn end to end”) do not always allow a clear identification of the techniques used.

Fig. 23 - Gluing

The sections can also be glued (as it happens especially in paper rolls)...

Fig. 24 – Mixed technique

...or joined using a mixed technique (gluing + sewing), as in this case.

Fig. 25 – Pricking and ruling

Pricking and (above all) ruling of the rolls are only occasionally mentioned in the descriptions and not always visible in the reproductions, even of good quality, available online. In parchment rolls pricking can appear at a more or less wide distance from the two side edges of the strip (if it has not been removed by trimming) or possibly it can be aligned with the vertical justification of the written area.

Fig. 26 – Blind ruling

Pricking acts as a reference for hard point or colour tracing of the writing lines: in hard point ruling the side of the parchment on which lines are traced has to be specified (maybe more frequently the internal side?).

Fig. 27 – Color ruling

In colour ruling the substance used to trace the line (“lead” or “ink”, according to conventional definitions) should be mentioned, although it cannot be identified without the help of scientific analysis.

Fig. 28 – Ruling and images

In both cases, ruling may evenly be traced across the roll or be interrupted in presence of illustrations or decoration (as in our *Exsultet* roll BL 30377).

Fig. 29 – Single or double vertical lines

Ruling, where present, serves as a reference for the layout (*mise en bandeau* rather than *mise en page*) of writing, graphic elements, major initials, decoration and illustrations. In the absence of a segmentation in pages, the layout of the scroll doesn't show the richness of ruling types attested to by Latin and Greek codices: however, the range of possibilities may vary from extremely simple patterns – a single column, with the text possibly delimited by simple or double vertical justification lines and guided by a set of more or less widely spaced horizontal lines...

Fig. 30 – Complex patterns

...to highly complex patterns, such as those represented by Latin genealogies or chronicles.

Fig. 31 – Opisthograph rolls

The *mise en bandeau* also includes the placement of the writing on the inner side of the roll (more often probably the flesh side) or on both sides, in the case of opisthograph rolls. In the latter the text on the *verso* can be the continuation of the one on the *recto*, placed in the same sense or, more practically, in the opposite direction, from the bottom to the top of the strip, so as to allow the reading to continue without interruption by keeping the roll from the lower end and overturning it by 180° (as in Vat. gr. 2282). But the text on the *verso* may be, on the contrary, a different one, coeval or added at a later time, similar in contents to the one written on the *recto* or totally extraneous to it.

Fig. 32 – Text and images (*Exsultet*)

Finally, the analysis of the layout of the rolls includes an examination of the relationship between textual content and images. In *Exsultet* rolls the images (which are frequently present) are integrated within the written area, and they can be inversed with respect to the text, in order to be seen by the faithfuls while the celebrant read the text, as in BL 30377 and in the majority of the other *Exsultet* rolls.

Fig. 33 – Greek rolls

Vat. gr. 2282 is not decorated, as the majority of the Greek liturgical rolls. In the image you see one of the few lavishly illuminated Greek rolls, where the images are arranged outside the written area and the text is framed by a decorated band.

Fig. 34 - Writing and decoration prior to manufacture (BL Add. 30377)

Studying the writing and decoration of the rolls entails, in addition to the palaeographic and historical-artistic description and the distinction of the hands of scribes and illuminators, the need to investigate the sequence of the manufacturing steps, the working methods of the scribe or scribes and the interaction between these and the artists, in the case of illustrated rolls. Scribes and illuminators had in fact the possibility of working on loose parchments or on the already composed roll: their *modus operandi* is revealed by clues of various weight and nature.

Exsultet rolls are mostly written and decorated on separate sheets, as it is shown by the presence of stitches superimposed over decorated areas, imperfectly aligned borders when passing from one parchment to the other or traces of writing (text or initials) hidden under the joints (as in the image)

Fig. 35 - Writing and decoration prior to manufacture (Vat. gr. 2282)

The same may also happen in Greek rolls, as in our Vat. gr. 2282.

Fig. 36 - Writing and decoration after the manufacture

But on the contrary, both in Latin and Greek rolls the making of the strip could precede the transcription of the text, as shown by the non-infrequent cases in which writing or ornamental elements do cross the joints.

Fig. 37 – Sticks and cases

Once manufactured, the roll could simply be wrapped around itself like a carpet or equipped with one or two sticks or rods (made of wood, silver, or ivory), welded to one or both short sides (similar to the *umbilici* attested for ancient rolls). As in the case of the bindings of codices, current sticks are not always the original ones or may have been added to a roll that was originally devoid of them: their presence is only occasionally mentioned in the descriptions.

Fig. 38 - Laces

Little interest is also reserved to the presence of strings, composed of thin parchment stripes or of cases of various shapes and materials (leather, parchment or metal cases or cloth bags which could be hanged to the waist), possibly enriched with more or less elaborate writings or decorations.