

The Medieval Book

Carin Ruff — Fall 2025 — OLLI

Tuesdays, 1:45-3:15 pm, in person
7 weeks, September 30 through November 11

Contact: carinr@gmail.com

Course website: <https://ruffnotes.org/medievalbook/>

In this course we will explore the development of the book as artifact from Roman antiquity through the western Middle Ages. We'll consider how the physical form, script, decoration, function, and contents of books evolved in changing political, religious, cultural, and linguistic contexts, from the ancient scroll to the invention of printing. Participants will learn how to navigate the tens of thousands of digitized medieval manuscripts that are freely available online.

Recommended supplementary reading: Christopher de Hamel, *Meetings with Remarkable Manuscripts*, Penguin Books, 2019. ISBN 9780143110804 (or the hardback, e-book, or audiobook). Available in print from the DC Public Library and print, audio, and e-book from Montgomery County. No required preparation for class meetings, but participants may enjoy this book as an adjunct to our lectures and discussions.

Note: This course substantially repeats my Spring 2022 course “Medieval Manuscripts and the History of Script” and the first half of my Fall 2024 course on the History of the Book. I am planning a follow-up 7-week course in Spring 2026 on the history of the printed book from the 15th to the 20th century.

Schedule of topics:

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| Week 1 | The book in antiquity: rolls, tablets, and ancient Roman scripts. Introduction to, and of, the codex. |
| Week 2 | Books in Roman late antiquity: the codex, cont'd; new scripts for Christian texts. The Bible as book. |
| Week 3 | The great early English and Irish Bibles: Amiatinus, Lindisfarne, Kells, & al.
Suggested reading before or after this week: de Hamel, <i>Meetings</i> , Ch. 1-3 |
| Week 4 | The Carolingian Renaissance
Suggested reading before or after this week: de Hamel, <i>Meetings</i> , Ch. 4-5 |
| Week 5 | Gothic book design, the rise of the universities, and the Paris book trade
Suggested reading before or after this week: de Hamel, <i>Meetings</i> , Ch. 6-8 |
| Week 6 | Late medieval books and readers
Suggested reading before or after this week: de Hamel, <i>Meetings</i> , Ch. 9-10 |
| Week 7 | The 15 th -century book in manuscript and print
Suggested reading before or after this week: de Hamel, <i>Meetings</i> , Ch. 11-12 |