TIPS FOR CONQUERING THE ARCHIVE
(OR, TIPS FOR NOT GETTING CONQUERED BY THE ARCHIVE)

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One thing that studying the Middle Ages will introduce you to is manuscript and archival research. Even if your work tends toward material culture, the chances are high that you will have to spend at least some time in an archive deposit or a manuscript library. Acquiring mastery of the many skills that can aid in archival research takes a lifetime, but gaining familiarity and basic competence in these skills is elemental to undertaking your research. Yet, at many institutions in the United States, graduate students are barely introduced to such areas of study, let alone given the time and supervision to develop any kind of familiarity with them. Faculty who are engaging in archival research for the first time for a new project can also find themselves at a loss when faced with fuzzy microfilms and the unfamiliar customs of foreign archives. As more and more graduate programs expect, demand, and require that Ph.D. students graduate in five or six years, at the same time that funding for overseas research is harder to receive, it will become more and more difficult for graduate students in medieval studies to acquire the skills they need. These same students, once full-fledged scholars, may find themselves underprepared to conduct manuscript and archival research later on.

How then can an enterprising scholar gain the tools she needs in order to conduct her research? The answer is simple in telling, though not in execution: perseverance, initiative, and diligence.

LANGUAGE SKILLS
The first area to tackle is foreign languages. Learn as many as you can, as early as you can. Many Ph.D. programs in different fields require some kind of foreign language
proficiency. Find out as early as possible what this means. If “proficiency” means only enough French or German to translate a paragraph with a dictionary, you will have no problems fulfilling your requirements, although you may have difficulties actually reading anything in those languages. This can become a problem later on if you develop a new project that requires the use of languages you supposedly learned in graduate school, but never kept up. If you haven’t read anything in Arabic or German or Occitan for a few months (or years), pick up a text in that language and re-familiarize yourself with it. One excellent way to keep your language skills honed is to translate a passage of something that has not been translated into English. Most importantly, don’t beat yourself up if you are not fluent in three or four languages by the time you finish graduate school. You have the rest of your life to achieve fluency, if that is what you desire.

**Manuscript and Archival Skills**

Given that you will have to consult manuscripts or archival materials at some point in your research career, it is imperative that you develop your abilities in various auxiliary disciplines as early as possible. Many universities offer one or two courses in paleography, bibliographic skills, and other ancillary areas of study. Before you elect to take one of these, talk to students who have taken the course in the past. Sometimes these courses cover so much material that you might find that you’ve spent a semester in a course with little to show for it. If these courses aren’t highly rated by former students, or if your university doesn’t offer any such courses, see if you can contact a faculty member who would be willing to supervise a course of independent study. If you are a faculty member, see if you can sit in on a graduate course in an area of scholarship outside of your own, such as art history. Another option is to organize an informal brown-bag lunch series for medievalists at your institution to cover
aspects of professionalization and auxiliary disciplines, such as how to integrate visuals into your lectures, how to use PowerPoint or a slide projector, or how to make contact with foreign archivists.

To gain familiarity with manuscripts, try contacting the rare books librarian at your institution to see if they might be able to be of some help, either in supervising you, allowing you to do an internship in the collection, or suggesting summer courses that would be helpful. Arranging an internship for a few hours a week may be especially convenient to graduate students who have a partner or children and are unable to attend a six-week summer course. The University of Notre Dame, the University of Toronto, the University of Virginia, and the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore all offer summer courses in areas such as codicology, paleography, and bibliography, that are open to faculty and graduate students in all disciplines, and they can be a wonderful way to make contacts with scholars from other institutions and in other areas of specialization. Libraries with special collections, such as the Free Library of Philadelphia, the Huntington Library in Pasadena, the Getty Library in Los Angeles, the Newberry Library of Chicago, and the Folger Library in Washington, DC, are also excellent resources and offer summer courses from time to time. If you are a graduate student and your program does not offer funding for all twelve months of the year, or if you rely on getting a summer job in order to pay your bills, you will need to be creative in figuring out how to afford a summer course. Your institution might offer assistance, especially if you can argue that a particular summer course is crucial to your scholarly development. Otherwise, the Medieval Academy of America offers competitive scholarships to graduate students so that they may attend the summer Latin palaeography programs at the University of Notre Dame and University of Toronto. Perhaps the easiest way to fund a summer program, either in a language or in manuscript skills, is to get a job during the school
year. Even working ten hours a week will add up to enough to pay for a summer course, and it can be a boon to have some time away from your studies for a few hours each week.

Another option that many people exercise is to get an M.A. in England. Universities such as Leeds, York, Oxford, and Cambridge offer M.A. or M.Phil. programs that provide detailed instruction in manuscript skills. It may even be possible (though daunting) to interrupt your Ph.D. in order to go abroad to get an M.A. One drawback, however, is that M.A. courses in Britain are very expensive, and funding can be hard to come by. However, if you look hard enough, you can often find full or partial scholarships to fund an M.A. course. Many American universities offer scholarships to alumnae, and several British universities offer a limited amount of financial assistance to overseas students. If you are not an American citizen, but come either from an E.U. or former Commonwealth country, it is often easier to find funding to do a year of study in Britain.

If you come from a developing nation, there are private foundations in the United States and in Britain that fund graduate study in Britain.

Perhaps the most important aspect of developing your manuscript skills is being able to view actual manuscripts or excellent facsimile copies, rather than photocopies or microfilms. If you are able to do this before beginning your research, you will have a less jarring introduction to the archive. If, when you finally do get to the archive, you find that you can’t read your texts, do not despair. That sinking feeling of “I have no idea what I’m looking at” is a common one. Reading archival documents and manuscripts takes a lot of practice and is about training your eyes to recognize unfamiliar patterns as much as anything else. The more you practice with medieval scripts, the easier it becomes to read them.

Finding Documents
Because the medieval period offers such a wealth of texts for scholars, trying to find out where you will need to do your research can seem very
difficult. First of all, be realistic about your goals. You will probably never find absolutely every last scrap of written material that you need for your project, especially given financial restrictions and time constraints. It can often be helpful to start your research in the archives if you narrow your search as much as possible. Once you have found what you are looking for, you can then more easily expand your research parameters. Secondly, look at secondary scholarship on your topic, and make careful notes of all primary source references you encounter. If you are working on texts that have been edited, read the introductions to these editions to find out what manuscripts the editors consulted and where they are located. Most libraries and archives have at least partial catalogues of their holdings, and you can consult these for further references. This can be a time-consuming task, so don’t get discouraged if you don’t immediately find anything useful. The reference librarians at your university will be happy to help you, and if you find that they cannot offer enough specialized expertise, go and speak to the librarian in charge of rare books and manuscripts at your institution.

If an archive or library catalogue doesn’t give you as much detail as you need, write a letter to the archivist or librarian. Find out before you write to them in what language they prefer to conduct their correspondence. Many European libraries and archives will be able to get by with English, although some, like the Bibliothèque Nationale (BN) in Paris, strongly prefer French. If you are not proficient in writing a formal letter in French, Dutch, Italian, or another language, try to get help, and make sure that you follow the epistolary conventions of each language. Many librarians and archivists at regional libraries and museums are extremely welcoming, and are thrilled to have scholars who are interested in their holdings. Manuscript librarians and curators at other, larger libraries (the BN, the British Library, the Vatican Library) are much busier and more exacting. Make sure you communicate your request in writing (or e-
mail) ahead of time and give the date that you will be arriving in town to view the materials, and be as specific as possible about what you will need to view. If you are a graduate student, you should also have a letter of introduction from your advisor or host institution declaring that you are a scholar in good standing and that you are conducting research for your dissertation or book.

After the Archives
Most archives and libraries will insist that you look at a microfilm or facsimile before seeing the original. Microfilms can often been very old and difficult to read, so be patient and rest your eyes often. If you have not been able to discover what you need by looking at microfilms or facsimiles, you can request the originals. You will frequently need to give a reason, such as the poor quality of the microfilm, or because you need to see codicological details only visible in the original, such as prickings and ruling marks or marginalia. Keep in mind that manuscripts and archives are extremely fragile. The better you behave around such precious documents, the more the staff will trust you. Respect absolutely the conventions of the archive and do not bring ink into the reading room, only pencil or a computer. Make sure that you have washed your hands before touching any manuscript, archival document, or rare book. Do not eat, drink, or chew gum while in a reading room, and do not pick up a book unless the curator has told you that you may do so. If you are taking notes with paper and pencil, do not have the pencil in your hand while you examine your document, as you might accidentally make a pencil mark on the parchment or paper. If your manuscript has a treasure binding or a seal attached, seek permission from the curator before you touch it. Some libraries will ask that you wear cotton gloves so that the oils from your skin will not interact with and erode the precious metals, wax, or silk. There are some European libraries in which the librarians or curators might have a more lax view of best practices in the archive, and you might see library employees smoking, eating, or drinking while handling manuscripts,
or placing eight-hundred year old manuscripts face down on a photocopier. For the sake of future scholars, these habits probably shouldn’t be imitated, and it’s better for the books and the scholarly community if you pay for the digital copies or microfilms rather than making illicit photocopies (or having the archivist make them for you).

**SHARE THE KNOWLEDGE, AND THE IGNORANCE**

One of the most valuable resources you have at your disposal is the community of scholars, both graduate students and faculty members, at your institution. Getting feedback from scholars in other disciplines can be invaluable, so take every opportunity to attend workshops and working groups in other departments. You can learn a lot about various archives, catalogues, research practices, and opportunities for further study by talking to people in other departments.

As we are in the business of fostering knowledge and understanding, it is important to share your knowledge (and ignorance) with your colleagues, and allow them to help you.

Lastly, insist upon your ignorance when you need to. While it might be embarrassing to admit that you don’t know how to find something or how to read something, it will make you a better scholar and teacher in the end.

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