



HAIR, FLESH, SENSE

St. Ciarán loved his dun cow, though he had to be brought back from the dead to write on her skin. We can only imagine the saint's reaction upon his resurrection: finding the hide of his long-lost cow laid uncannily before him as a writing surface, joined with her again in the act of literary creation on this incarnate totem of her death. What might our Irish saint have been thinking about as he settled down with his parchment and began to write out and thus reinvent the *Táin* on this particular creature's flesh? What sentiments and emotions moved him as his fingertips once again rubbed the skin of his beloved cow?

My own fingers first brushed the surface of a parchment folio in Columbia University's Butler Library, during my initial semester of paleography. I was one of a dozen or so graduate students finishing coursework or drafting dissertation proposals. We all gathered around a long seminar table and gazed, most of us for the first time, at *actual medieval manuscripts*. Though we were there to learn, we shared a mostly silent thrill in the presence of objects invested with all the auratic charge of a Rembrandt self-portrait or a saint's relic.

Then we touched them, the pads of our fingers and thumbs separated by each folio. Our nerves discerned the gossamer thinness of fine vellum, the uneven thicknesses of the rougher parchments. We intuited the difference between the nearly pristine condition of one example and the discolored, much-thumbed aspect of another. Those who work with old books, whether parchment or paper, know such sensations well, though the variability of parchment from book to book and leaf to leaf can be a vivid lesson in the diverse character of a medium. Parchment books and records teach you quickly that a manuscript is a sensual object: each has a certain smell, a certain feel, a certain look and sound, all derived in part from the distinctive origin, treatment, and history of the animal membranes that comprise them, and from the oily human fingers paging through them over the intervening centuries. When we start touching and transcribing and reading from these books for

the first time, such realizations are vividly new. These reactions can be as memorable as the thrill experienced by the paleontology student brushing dirt from her first hominid bone.

One of the early reading assignments that semester was the first chapter of Bernhard Bischoff's *Latin Palaeography: Antiquity and the Middle Ages*. In those days Bischoff's was a standard text for introductory courses in medieval manuscript studies. Its opening chapter likely represents the first exposure by thousands of scholars of the last several generations to the nature of the medium that forms their primary objects of study. Section 2 of the chapter "Parchment" begins with a frank description of the craft process:

Parchment is normally prepared in the following way: the skin of the animal is not tanned but soaked in caustic calcium lye. This loosens the hair and removes the fat. Then the skin is cleaned with a sickle-shaped scraping iron and sometimes soaked a second time. It is then stretched on a frame to dry. Whether the parchment was further treated, and in what way, differed from country to country and from century to century, and seems to have depended mainly on the nature of the raw material (*Ausgangsmaterial*), that is animal species used.¹

Like many scholarly and pedagogical accounts of parchment making, Bischoff's begins postmortem. The verbs are passive (the skin is soaked, is cleaned, is stretched), the animal skin already conceived as "raw material" from its moment of entry into the manufacturing process. The colon bisecting the first sentence above thus stands in for complex agrarian processes of husbandry, selection, and seasonal butchering that yield the "skin of the animal" before its transformation into parchment can begin. Bischoff might have started a few steps earlier in the process: *Parchment is normally prepared in the following way: an animal is culled from a herd or flock, then killed and flayed. The skin of the animal is not tanned but soaked in caustic calcium lye.* A tendentious point, though worth an affective pause: that each folio we touch and read entailed the death of some individual calf or sheep whose life came to a premature end, at human hands, and whose remains now make up part of the book we touch. Indeed an individual skin makes up not one but two, four, eight, sometimes as many as sixteen or more separate folios depending on how many times each hide was folded and cut in the process of book production. The same beast whose skin gives a book its second folio may reappear as the donor of its seventh, or (in the case of very small books) its first sixteen, helping us recognize the potential extent of an individual animal's bodily contribution to a manuscript.

Now we turn a page. To lift a parchment folio and separate it from its sur-

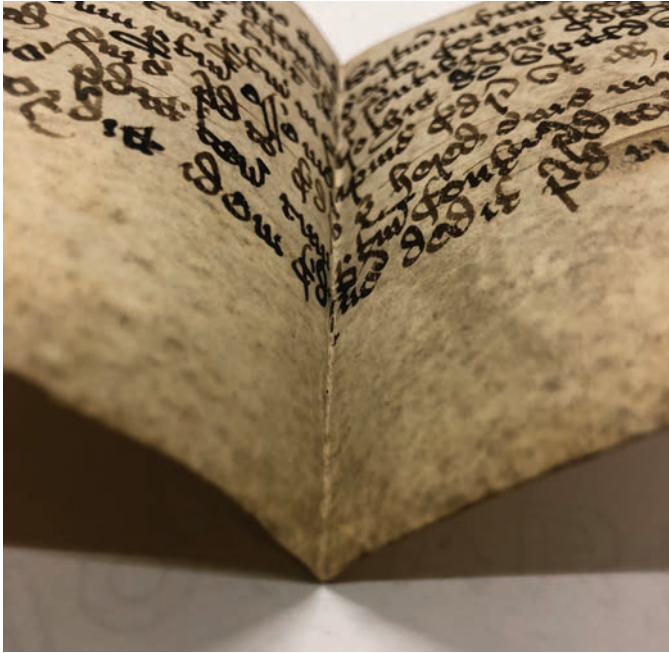


Figure 2.1.

A hinge in folded parchment allows for repeated opening and bending (here of a seventeenth-century notarial document). Westminster, 1667. Charlottesville, University of Virginia Ms. 9772-a, box 1, folder 51.

rounding volume is to see and hear in another way the creaturely life of the medium. “Through very careful treatment both sides can become equally white,” says Bischoff, “but even then they are distinguished by their curvature: the flesh side is convex, while the less stretchable hair-side is concave (!), a fact which can be very helpful in the reconstruction of manuscripts that are preserved only in a very fragmentary state.”² The exclamation point is Bischoff’s, and it speaks to the persistence of the animal body as the texture and contour of the page, as well as the often surprising contortions introduced into membrane by the process of parchment manufacture, by the animal still ghosting the book. It is this same stiff, fibrous quality of parchment that allows the membrane to bend without breaking. This peculiar flexion can create a membrane hinge (see fig. 2.1) that endures for centuries: an essential feature of the nested bifolium and thus the codex, as well as the folded charter.

Perdurance and delicacy. A hardy softness, gossamer and steel.



When scholars first learn about medieval manuscripts, whether through introductory textbooks such as Bischoff’s *Latin Palaeography* or in seminars on codicol-

ogy, bibliography, and book history, we inevitably learn about their derivation from the skins of animals: part of the “carnal dimension of texts.”³ There is no secret about this aspect of premodern literate cultures, plain to our senses in the presence of the era’s written objects, this “porous, almost palpable living quality” manifest in the parchment object.⁴ Indeed the animality of medieval manuscripts has long helped shape the canons and conventions of bibliographical description, in some cases for centuries. Several of the Old Norse kings’ sagas take their names from an eighteenth-century editor’s sense of the quality of parchment on which the copies available to him were written: there is the *Morkinskinna* (the book on moldy or rotten skin), the *Fagrskinna* (the book on beautiful skin), and the *Hrokkinskinna* (the book on wrinkled skin), all now standard monikers in the study of Icelandic literature.⁵ “Well, what is Insular vellum, Insular membrane?” the great paleographer Julian Brown asked a half century ago. “It has a kind of rough, suede-like finish. You can generally see the mark of the scraper on both hair and flesh side; and the hair-side and the flesh-side are very alike in surface as well as colour. When it is badly made, it can be transparent, greasy, stiff, too thick.”⁶ The codicologist as restaurant reviewer, commenting on the relative greasiness and thickness of a folio as if it were a tenderloin. Yet the same attunement holds true on some level for all who work on parchment books and documents. We see the skins there on the table, opened to our view. We touch them, smell them, listen to the whisper of turning pages, transcribe and read from them, even as we move beyond and beneath such surface impressions to experience them as the material phenomena that they are and as the affective subjects that we are.

A phenomenology of parchment: a rigorous openness to that earthy blend of stimulation, doubt, and intuition arising the moment we touch a membrane page; a set of experiences in which we bracket, even for a moment, the store of literary, historical, and bibliographical knowledge that recognizes the objects before us as familiar books or documents rather than peculiar assemblages of animal remains; a mode of consciousness that integrates a spatial and temporal awareness of parchment-qua-animal-skin into our embodied encounters with these objects without reducing such encounters to an amalgam of sense-data or surface impression; and an intuitive, even empathetic awakening to our intersubjective intimacy with the myriad creatures whose flesh constitutes that which we claim as our archive. Thus Catherine Brown calls for an “empathetic codicology”: a “feeling-into” the study of the manuscript codex as a thing of hand and flesh that fully implicates our affective selves into the processes of reading and reception; Jennifer Borland writes of “the consuming role of touch” in the experiencing of medieval manuscripts; and Sarah Kay proposes a “speculative phenomenology” of the parchment book “as an

extension of the reader's own skin."⁷ For modern readers of medieval manuscripts, the animal is a tangible and visible part of the reading process, always at the edges of our awareness, whether as the fuzzy folio that slips along our thumbpad or as the unrepaired flaw in the membrane allowing a glimpse of the next page.⁸

Such sensual reactions can delight and disgust. Open up some medieval codices and you will be greeted by a miasma of odor, the stink of slaughter and animal rot that has lingered there for centuries. And yet even the most seasoned of manuscript scholars can tend to shy away from exploring the olfactory dimensions of the medium. "I have no vocabulary to define this," Christopher de Hamel writes upon opening the Codex Amiatinus, "but there is a curious warm leathery smell to English parchment, unlike the sharper, cooler scent of Italian skins."⁹

Perhaps we need to recover some of our childish delight and repulsion, even our naivete in the face of these creaturely phenomena. This reaction, certainly, is the pose taken by the so-called Anonymous of Bern, a writer of the second half of the eleventh century who left behind a fragmentary treatise on the craft of manuscript illumination. The portion of the treatise that survives speaks in animated and loving detail about the tempering of color: *De Clarea* or "About Glair," a binding medium for pigments made of egg whites either beaten or pressed. A committed artisan, the writer is fiercely devoted to the craft, casting aspersions on the "many workers shirking perfection in their profession" by taking shortcuts, contaminating the whites with the dirt and grease of their fingers, paying insufficient attention to the particulars of their practice.

At one point in the treatise, the Anonymous pauses to apologize for his scrupulous and perhaps puerile insistence on detail. Here, a topos of childish triviality yields to an expertly geographical parsing of beasts and their varying skins:

I may reasonably be critized for taking time, that is in writing, for such childish and trivial matters [*puerilia seu inutilia*]; but God Almighty can convert these things to good fruits. He is my witness that it is not for vanity, but rather as a friendly response to the requirements of many people, that I write this work, which I now desire to carry out, with God's aid, for the purposes of instructing others.

Not every parchment will take a single tempering of color or glair, for this reason, that there are several sorts of parchment, namely, calf, sheep, goat [*vitulinum, ovinum, caprinum*]. But when sheep or calf parchment is uniform in color, that is, all white, and smooth and handsome [*planum et pulchrum*], like that of Flanders and Normandy, for instance, the tempering described above is suitable . . . But when the parchment is rough, and mottled, and thin, and very ugly, and uneven in color, gray and black and white, like the sheep parchment of Burgundy [*pargamenum* {sic}] . . .

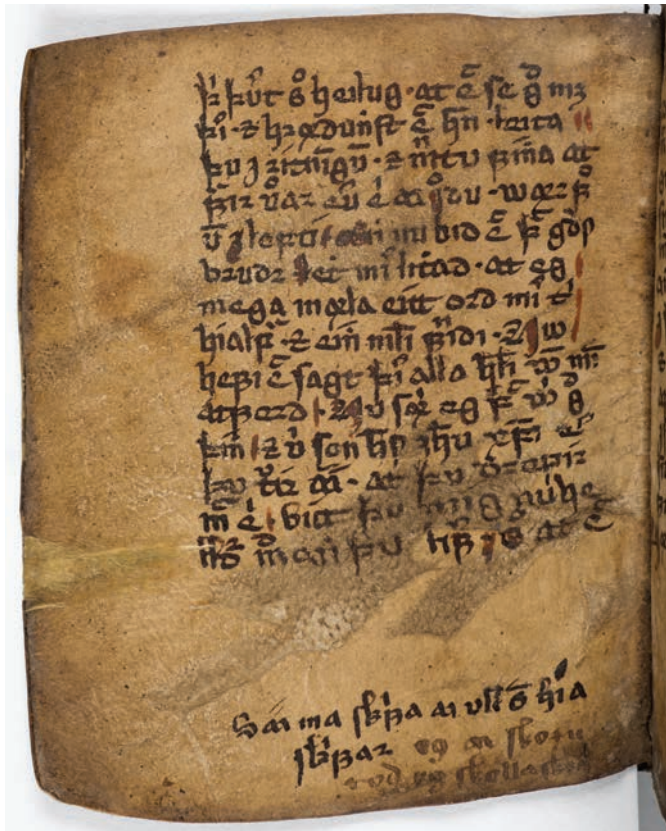


Figure 2.2.
Scribes complaining
about parchment
quality in the
lower margin of
the *Margrétar saga*.
Iceland, ca. 1500.
Reykjavik, The Árni
Magnússon Institute
for Icelandic Studies,
Ms. AM 433a 12mo,
fol. 25v.

ovinum de Burgundia)], which is very seldom found well painted by anyone, you conduct the tempering of the glair as follows.¹⁰

A bit of regional snobbery, perhaps, though also a discriminating sense of species difference and quality control in the continental parchment trade. The Anonymous takes some alliterative pleasure in counterposing the “smooth and handsome” (*plenum et pulchrum*) Flemish and Norman parchments against their “rough, and mottled, and thin, and very ugly” counterparts. *Hispidum, et maculatum, et macrum, et turpissimum*: joying here in the descriptors piled onto the poor Burgundian sheepskins that rarely lend themselves to art.¹¹

Premodern readers wrote and read with varying degrees of attunement to the sight, feel, and smell of the animal parts before them. Despite the era’s wide-ranging

theological investments in the medium, in practice they must often have regarded it as inconsistent at best, even an incidental annoyance, particularly in those periods and locales in which the fine vellums associated with later, more urban centers of book production were unavailable. In an Icelandic manuscript of the *Margrétar saga*, the main scribe comments despairingly on the poor quality of the sheepy parchment on which he must scratch: “He might as well write on wool [who] writes here.” A later scribe responds, “and on skate-skin and fox-hide.”¹² The book in question is rough to the touch, its drape poor, its folios blackened and almost cardboard-like in their consistency (see fig. 2.2). It is not difficult even centuries on to comprehend the scribes’ acerbic reactions to the resistant quality of the writing surface. In such phenomenal reactions to parchment we perceive the power of the empirical, the observed thingness of the book-as-animal-object, even as beyond and beneath it move those intuitive capacities of touch and recognition that render the parchment folio into an agent of transcendence: a rough-and-ready specimen of rendered animal skin yet also a transhistorical medium of cultural transmission, preservation, and survival. To take a medieval manuscript *zu den Sachen selbst*, as the thing that it is, entails an orientation toward embodied contact with that bookish object before us that awakens our intuition (these “childish and trivial matters,” in the words of the Anonymous of Bern) to the shared animality that parchment has always kept before our eyes and beneath our fingertips.



The classroom can be a natural staging ground for an affective openness to the animality of the archive. When I bring students into our Special Collections library, the derivation and the incarnate sensuality of parchment tend to provoke more comment than anything else. The creaturely medium is one of the aspects of medieval manuscripts that our students can find most fascinating, alluring, and also a bit eerie, like a visit to the catacombs or the Capuchin Crypt in Rome.

In recent years I’ve purposefully lingered over this most basic element of medieval writing, asking my students to think for a while about the fact that these books are made mostly of animal parts.

That’s the hair side. Can you feel the fuzz?

Omigod.

Ew!

I ask them what it’s like, to touch the skin making up each unique page, to realize the words they see are written on animal flesh. The responses vary widely.

It's weird.

Kind of gross.

Doesn't seem like a big deal.

A student leaves the room with a hand over the mouth.

One comment in particular crops up again and again: But there are so *many* of them!

To which another student sensibly responds by pointing out the obvious: Well, I mean, half of us are wearing leather shoes.

They look down at their shoes, back at the leaves and manuscripts, caught in that strange space between the marvel and the meh of the medium.



Early in Dante's *Paradiso*, the pilgrim gazes upward, at Beatrice's direction, and asks her to explain to him the origin and nature of moon spots. Beatrice in turn asks the pilgrim to relate his own explanation: "Now tell me: what are the dark marks on this planet's body that there below, on earth, have made men tell the tale of Cain?"¹³ The "tale of Cain" refers to the folk belief that Cain, as a punishment for the murder of Abel, was exiled by God to the moon, where he was forced to carry a bundle of thorns for all eternity, visible to humans on earth as the *segni bui* or "dark spots" on the moon's surface.¹⁴ In responding to his guide's query, the pilgrim repeats the explanation that Dante had earlier offered in the *Convivio*: that the relative density of matter at different points explains the varying amounts of light refracted through the moon.

Beatrice responds with a series of anti-determinist objections, including the following tercets against the theory of varying density:

Ancor, se raro fosse di quel bruno
Cagion che tu dimandi, o d'oltre in parte
Fore di sua matera sì digiuno

Esto pianeto, o, sì come comparte
Lo grasso e 'l magro un corpo, così questo
Nel suo volume cangerebbe carte.
(*PAR.* II.73–78)

And more, were rarity the cause of the
dim spots you question, then in part this planet
would lack matter through and through,

or else as, in a body, lean and fat
can alternate, so would this planet
alternate the pages in its volume.

Ernst Robert Curtius, in a classic reading of this passage, interprets Beatrice's simile in the second tercet as follows: "as fat and lean alternate in an animal body, or the pages of a book with one another."¹⁵ The passage turns to craftsmanship even at the heights of sublimity, and here the vehicles are, at first glance, mundane. While she rejects material causation as an explanation for moon spots, Beatrice draws an analogy with the messy materiality of a slaughtered animal. If the moon were of varying thicknesses, it would either be a void in places ("lack matter through and through"), an impossibility; or, just as implausibly, it would, like the carcass of a beast that is lean in some places and fat in others, alternate between thin and thick or light and dark in the quality and thickness of its pages.

The moon would be, that is, like parchment, its varying qualities the mark of its material inconsistency. Beatrice has turned from Cain's "dark spots"—from the stigmatized sign of the fallen human—to the rendered flesh of the animal. Particularly alluring in this sedimented metaphor is the displacement of one creaturely vehicle by another, *corpo* by *carte*. In *un corpo*, the carcass of an animal, fat and lean are marbled together, creating flesh of differing thicknesses and consistencies; in the *carte*, the parchment sheet, the distinctions between hair and flesh as well as the vagaries of the parchment-making process determine the relative feel, hue, and thickness of the page. Beatrice, though, cannot countenance either of the analogies she invokes. Neither marbled meat nor scraped hide, neither body nor page, *corpo* nor *carte*, the spotted moon is instead a manifestation of God's powers, its spots explicable not as concrete manifestations of the pilgrim's vulgar materialism but as signs of the ineffable yet fully rational diffusion of divine omnipotence throughout the universe.

As Beatrice's thoughtful if discarded analogy hints, however, the moon *looks* or *feels* like the slightly marbled surface of blank parchment, with patches of dark and light across its face—patches perhaps created by the uneven movements of the *lunellum*, the half-moon knife used to remove flesh from soaked animal hide during parchment manufacture; or from the goatskins common in Italian bookmaking of this period, mottled in ways that can indeed resemble the craters of the moon. The canticle heightens these effects of materialist exposition by immersing the subjects within the medium that Beatrice invokes. Throughout this exchange, the pilgrim and Beatrice stand within some mysterious space in the sphere of the moon, which receives the travelers like a water drop receives the sunlight, allowing their bodies to

occupy the same physical place as its corporeal substance in a way the pilgrim cannot fathom.

Later in the *Paradiso*, parchment appears in an equally immersive milieu, this time as part of an analogy explaining the effects of the Holy Spirit upon the believer. The pilgrim here encounters St. Peter, who asks him, “What is the origin of the dear gem that comes to you, the gem on which all virtues are founded?” Dante, reaching for a metaphor, finds his answer in an image of rainwater flowing over the incarnate pages of the Old and New Testaments:

E io: “La larga ploia
de lo Spirito Santo, ch’è diffusa
in su le vecchie e ‘n su le nuove cuoia,
è silogismo che la m’ha conchiusa
acutamente sì, che ‘nverso d’ella
ogne dimostrazion mi pare ottusa.”

And I: “The plenteous rain
of the Holy Spirit which is poured
over the old and over the new parchments
is a syllogism that has proved it to me
so acutely that, in comparison with this,
every demonstration seems obtuse to me.”
(*PAR. XXIV.91–96*)

Note the poet’s literalism in the midst of a dense allegory. The rain of the Holy Spirit suffuses not simply the pages, but precisely the *skins* of scripture: *vecchie e . . . nuove cuoia*. *Cuoia*, or treated skins, is the plural of *cuoio*, a term often referring to leather. The *silogismo* embeds a spiritual reversal of a mundane and ubiquitous threat for any medieval bibliophile: what would normally be water damage to a membrane codex becomes here a process of typological unification through the touch of the Holy Spirit that emphasizes the physical parchment Book as a thing of the material world.¹⁶ The image of the neglected but redemptive page had appeared just two cantos earlier, during the pilgrim’s encounter with St. Benedict, who laments the abandonment of his monastic Rule by the neglectful as a physical assault on the pages that transmit it: “e la regola mia / Rimasa è giù per danno delle carte” (“and my rule lies now neglected, a waste of the page”) (*Par. XXII.74–75*). Fat and lean, hair and flesh, moon and page, skin and scripture: a beautifully intuitive reach for a phenomenology of parchment, that medium of earthy animality

and spiritual transcendence that continually challenges the poet to push against the limits of metaphor and mere thought.



Few meditations on parchment's sensual materiality approach the sublimity of Dante's—and few can rival the visceral disgust apparent in an earlier and jazzily detailed account of the medium's shortcomings. Abū 'Uthmān 'Amr ibn Baḥr al-Jāḥiẓ was a theologian, traveler, and jack-of-all-trades who died in Basra in the late 860s. Al-Jāḥiẓ was also a prolific bibliophile (indeed a “bibliomaniac,” as one scholar has recently called him), and he lived during just the years in which parchment was giving way to paper as the preferred writing surface in the Islamic world.¹⁷

Al-Jāḥiẓ, it seems, was an eager adopter. Most of his writings survive in paper manuscripts, several of them in his own hand, though he would almost certainly have relied on parchment at many points in his career—much to his annoyance, evidently, for the work of al-Jāḥiẓ gives us the most extraordinary polemics against parchment to survive from the medieval world. One such rant survives in a long, complaint-ridden letter to a certain Muhammad, whose enmity al-Jāḥiẓ has incurred over certain obscure financial disputes. The letter covers a wide range of topics, from the politics of taxation to the immorality of gossip to the nature of male friendship, at one point coming around to the relative virtues of Chinese and Khurasani paper over parchment. Though the letter rings of tongue-in-cheek hyperbole, Al-Jāḥiẓ's assessment of parchment as a medium of writing and textual transmission leaves little room for doubt about his low regard for what had been a predominant medium in early Arabic-speaking lands since well before the coming of Islam. As he writes, “What is it to you if all my books are of Chinese paper or of Khurasani sheets? Tell me why you extol writing on skins [*al-naskh 'alā al-julūd*] and urge me to use parchment [*al-adam*] when you know that skins [*al-julūd*] are thick in bulk and heavy in weight?”¹⁸

The sense of bibliographic geography here is quite specific: the paper medium he touts derives from Khurasan, “the factory of Islamic culture,” as a recent history of paper describes it, and carries in its fibers all the prestige of its origin.¹⁹ His friend's parchments, on the other hand, exhibit all the wretchedness of their beastly derivation:

If water touches them, they are spoiled. If it is a humid day, they go limp. That they make their master hate a downpour and their owners dislike rain is sufficient warning for people to avoid them. You know that the copyist at those times does not write

a line or cut a single skin. When dry, they do not return to their shape but rather are much shrivelled and marred by contraction. They have a more fetid odor, are more expensive and more subject to counterfeiting . . . They are aged to remove their odor and to clear away the hair. They have more knots and bulges, more troughs and dips. They turn yellow faster. Writing on them is more commonly worn away quickly. If a scholar wishes to carry a sufficient quantity of them on a journey, a camel's load would not be enough.²⁰

Even in condemning the membrane book, al-Jāḥiẓ is alive to its familiar phenomenality: the thickness and weight of skins, the shape and shrivel of membrane sheets, the fetid smell even of the finished product, the knots, bulges, and dips marring its surface. Al-Jāḥiẓ speaks from experience here, experience grounded in intimate and years-long contact with the parchment books that would have made up a good portion of the writings he read, consulted, and carried with him over the course of his long career and travels.

The stinking, messy beastliness of the stuff! Only when al-Jāḥiẓ mimics the voice of the letter's addressee do the virtues of parchment manuscripts come in for some mention: "they hold up better under scratching out and correction, last better through successive borrowing and handling. They have a value even when discarded. Their palimpsests [*li-ṭirsihā*] are recovered and when restored can be substituted for new ones."²¹ These virtues, though, cannot convince the writer that parchment is a suitable substitute for the paper he adores. The phenomenal yields to the practical as al-Jāḥiẓ dismisses the membrane medium as an assault on written culture as well as on the human senses. For a lover of Khurasani sheets and Chinese paper, parchment will always carry with it the weight and stink of slaughter, the palpable signs of its origin in the animal bodies flayed and rendered for the making of books. The nature of this violent process of animal translation, from pen and pasture to pen and page, is the subject of the next chapter.