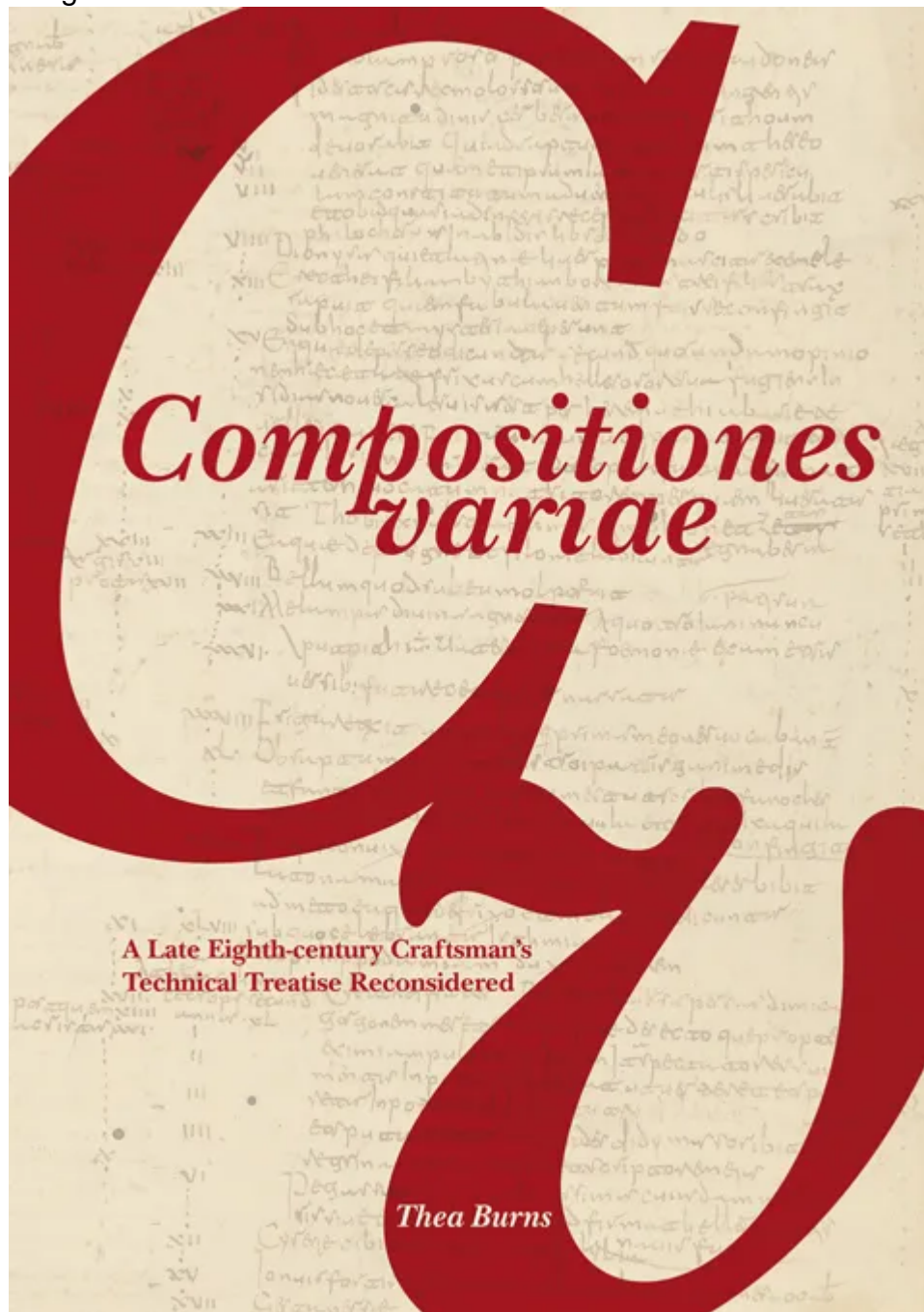


Book Review: *Compositiones variae*: A Late Eighth-century Craftsman's Technical Treatise Reconsidered

Submitted by sharragrow on 18 Jul 2024

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Compositiones variae: A Late Eight-century Craftsman's Technical Treatise Reconsidered, Archetype Publications Ltd: London (2017), Paperback / £35. 204 pages, ISBN 9781909492486

Reviewed by Jo Kirby

The *Compositiones variae* is a collection of recipes for materials used in decorating artefacts, which forms part of a larger compilation mainly consisting of liturgical and historical texts. This compilation was copied in Lucca, Italy, around 800 CE and is now housed in the Biblioteca Capitolare Feliniana, Codex 490. It acquired another name by which it is well known, the *Compositiones ad tingenda musiva*, from Ludovico Antonio Muratori (1672–1750), its earliest transcriber and first publisher, in 1739. The text is in Latin, translated from a late antique Greek (possibly Alexandrian) original. The translation itself may have been carried out in Rome, where an active Greek community existed from the early seventh century CE.

Since its first publication, the *Compositiones variae*, its precursors and its links with other texts have been extensively studied. This is partly due to some of its content appearing in another, slightly later technical collection known as the *Mappae clavicula*. In her book, Thea Burns, renowned for her expertise as a conservator of works on paper and parchment, as well as for her work on drawing and writing materials, takes a broader approach. She examines the treatise as a material object, as part of the compendium as a whole and within its social and historical context. The *Compositiones variae* recipes themselves have been published several times, most recently by Adriano Caffaro in 2003,¹ and Burns only discusses them briefly, also summarising the complicated relationship between this collection and the *Mappae clavicula*. In her introduction, the author outlines the methodology typically used by researchers investigating such texts. Additionally, in a later chapter, she categorises the recipes as “Descriptive”, “Incomplete instructions” (fragmentary useful reminders), and “Fuller instructions”, many of which originated in antiquity. One such example, for lead white (basic lead carbonate), dated back centuries, and its use continued for many more. Other examples include instructions for the synthesised form of the red mineral cinnabar, vermilion, and coloured glass for mosaic tesserae.

No earlier extant source for the *Compositiones variae* is known, although there are parallels between its content and recipes in two fourth-century Hellenistic papyrus codices found in Egypt, now housed in Leiden and Stockholm. It is now thought that the text is a fragment of a larger Hellenistic/Roman collection known as the *Corpus artium*, separate from the *Mappae clavicula* group. An early manuscript of this latter group, contained within a 10th-century CE compendium at Sélestat (Bibliothèque humaniste Ms. 17), includes *Compositiones variae* recipes grouped together, but its index indicates that the Sélestat collection nucleus originated from a different source. The history of, and relationship between, these sources has long been and remains the subject of debate, as referenced by the author.

In Chapter 2, Burns describes the physical attributes of the compendium, aided by the fact that the text block remained unbound after treatment around 2007. During this time, it was digitised and given a thorough bibliographical analysis, updating the work carried out by the palaeographer Luigi Schiaparelli in the 1920s. As well as a description of the characteristics, possible defects and preparation of parchment to be used as a writing surface, she explains how

the sheets were organised to make a quire, the patterns of pricking the folios in preparation for writing and interprets the patterns of staining. Causes include prolonged contact between a folio and the leather or wooden boards of the binding, microbial action and earlier interventions, such as the use of Giobert's tincture to enhance faded iron gall inks on some folios. Unfortunately this reagent, essentially a weakly acidic solution of potassium hexacyanoferrate(II), reacts with iron in iron gall ink, resulting in Prussian blue pigment which tends to spread across the page, making the text unreadable.

A 1920s comparison of the scripts used throughout Codex 490 with Lucchese documents in the diocesan archive indicates that it was written in Lucca between the late eighth and early ninth centuries. In her third chapter, Burns gives a succinct and extremely useful historical background to explain why the range of texts found in Codex 490 might have been compiled during this period. Lucca served as the capital of the Lombard Duchy of Tuscany, which was conquered by Charlemagne in 773–774. As a result of Charlemagne's instruction to upgrade the standards of the local clergy to those of Rome, there were significant educational, liturgical and architectural developments. The city's strategic location on a north–south road, coupled with its important churches housing relics of saints, made it a significant pilgrimage site. Texts were essential for religious practice and study, and the acquisition and copying of texts in cathedrals and churches was encouraged during the Carolingian period. Burns discusses in detail the actual writing of the text and the organisation of possible scriptoria. The scribe responsible for much of the *Compositiones variae* also contributed other folios of the compendium. Assuming these scribes were local, the treatise must have been copied from a text passing through Lucca or from a borrowed text, possibly at the request of a bishop overseeing church building projects at the time. In the final chapter, Burns considers architectural and artistic production, both sculptural and decorative, in Lucca in this Carolingian context. Codex 490, which, apart from some enriched initials, is modestly decorated, is not exceptional from this point of view, but the *Compositiones variae* text would certainly have been relevant as an aid to someone responsible for decorative projects. Although Burns does not explicitly mention this, recipes for varnishes and 'golden' tin might well have interested a reader beguiled by the prospect of glossy surfaces and inexpensive embellishments.

When bound, the codex is substantial: 355 parchment folios in 47 quires, containing about 35 different texts. The organisation and structure of the quires are discussed at length due to the complexity of the codicological analysis. There have also been suggestions that some treatise folios are now missing. It is generally agreed that the contents of the codex can be broadly divided into three parts based on the coherence of the subject matter they contain and on physical evidence (handwriting, prickings, signatures and quire marks), some of which dates from the 11th or 12th century. Only the first work in the compilation, a summary of Eusebius's *Chronological Canons* translated by Saint Jerome, bears the note of a date (787 or 796, variously interpreted); the dating of the rest of the codex is based on internal evidence from the contents.

Many texts included in the compilation, particularly in the first two parts, were necessary for liturgical reasons or were widely copied at the time. The third part of the compilation, including the *Compositiones variae* on folios 217r–231r (quires 30–31), is more varied in content. The heavier discoloration on the outer folios of many of the text units suggests that they were used as independent booklets or libelli. Based on her consideration of the historical and ecclesiastical

background and her study of the structure of the compilation as a whole, Burns hypothesises that the texts became outdated and all, including the *Compositiones variae*, were stored away in their unbound pamphlet form. Evidence of 11th- or 12th-century quire markings on the first 24 quires of the codex suggests that the libelli were consulted again at this time and the final binding of the whole collection of booklets perhaps took place in the 15th century.

This book is an erudite, balanced discussion of a complex subject. It is not a book to be read rapidly; even now I am not sure that the order of its chapters is ideal. Initially the omission of the *Compositiones variae* text itself seemed strange; however, this methodological decision, made at the outset, does make sense. The whole point of this book is the discussion of Codex 490 in Lucca and its history as a material object; Thea Burns is exceptionally qualified for this task. Extant European literary sources from the medieval and slightly later periods are often interconnected in some manner, with the *Compositiones variae* serving as a good example. Thea Burns's book describes another way of approaching the problem, suggesting that other such compilations might benefit from similar analyses. Whether or not the compilation of texts became outdated, elements of the *Compositiones variae* had a long history, still appearing in Italian manuscripts into the 14th century.

Endnote

1. Adriano Caffaro, *Scrivere in oro: Ricettari medievali d'arte e artigianato (secoli IX–XI) Codici di Lucca e Ivrea*, Naples, Liguori, 2003.

Author bio

Jo Kirby studies the history of western European painting materials and methods, including the documentary sources illuminating this history, formerly at the National Gallery, London. She served as IIC Secretary-General from 2010–2019.

Read the review in the June-July 2024 "News in Conservation" Issue 102, p. 46-49