

# **Book Review: The Pigments of British Medieval Illuminators**

Submitted by sharragrow on 24 Jan 2025

Image



**THE PIGMENTS OF  
BRITISH MEDIEVAL  
ILLUMINATION**  
A Scientific and Cultural Study

**A review of The Pigments of British Medieval Illuminators: A Scientific and Cultural Study**

*The Pigments of British Medieval Illuminators; A Scientific and Cultural Study, By Richard Gameson, Andrew Beeby, Flavia Fiorillo, Catherine Nicholson, Paola Ricciardi and Suzanne Reynolds (Archetype Publications Ltd: 2023) 471 pages ISBN: 978-1-909492-96-7*

Reviewed by Jane Eagen

For personal reasons, I approached with delight this review of a new and authoritative work on pigments in British medieval manuscript illumination. As a book conservation student in 1993, I remember well the challenge of finding any technical information on the pigments used by illuminators. Details were sparse, and identification relied mainly on visual observation and educated guesses. How many of us remember making our own tables, in an attempt to work out what was used and when, so that we could better understand what we were looking at and ultimately how pigments fared over time. How we would have welcomed a systematic scientific and cultural survey of British illuminators' pigments! And how fortunate we are to have this well-designed and illustrated publication from Archetype, by Richard Gameson et al.

'Team Pigment' was founded at Durham University in 2013, centred around the exhibition of the Lindisfarne Gospels at Durham University's Palace Green Library, which presented this iconic manuscript alongside artefacts from the same period. The exhibition provided the opportunity for a small collaborative team—book historian Professor Richard Gameson and chemists Professor Andrew Beeby and Dr Kate Nicholson—to analyse the inks and pigments of a group of early Northumbrian manuscripts. *The Pigments of British Medieval Illuminators* is the culmination of Team Pigment's, and their partner MINIARE's (Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge), broader investigation and survey of over 300 representative British manuscripts written from the seventh to fifteenth centuries.

*The Pigments of British Medieval Illuminators* claims to be the 'first-ever history of British medieval illuminators' pigments', and is aimed at a wide readership including historians, conservators, librarians, and heritage scientists (pp. xv, xvi). Chapter I, 'The Pigments, Dyes, and Inks, and How Best to Identify Them' (pp. 1-42), outlines techniques for non-invasive, non-destructive analysis, their applications and limitations, with detailed specifications of equipment provided in Appendix III (pp. 423-428). These invaluable, concise summaries of techniques are followed by a section on pigments, dyes, and inks; their response to analytical techniques; and the best procedures for identification. This first chapter gives a clear indication of the thorough and rigorous scientific basis of the project and is essential for introducing the colourants and other materials—such as binding media, grounds, and metals—that feature throughout the rest of the work.

Five substantial sections follow covering circa 900-1485. Each section begins with a historical introduction and description of the book culture of the time before breaking into centres of scribal production; regional/related palettes; trade and supply of pigments; observations on paint application and technique; reactions between pigments; pigment deterioration; and detailed comparisons of major manuscripts with reference to contemporaneous objects such as wall paintings, polychrome sculpture, and metalwork. Pigments identified are tabulated, sometimes comparing 'fine' manuscripts to those considered 'non-deluxe', library versus service books, and groups of giant Bibles, resulting in illuminating comparisons. The chapters conclude with summaries about the use of pigments, sources of colourants, regional and scriptorium variations, and a summary of pigment identifications made by the authors. This incredibly dense main text is supplemented by notes found at the end of each chapter, including helpful references to published full-colour illustrations, enlargements, and facsimiles (including manuscripts not illustrated in *Pigments*), allowing for further visual study of illuminations. The bibliography is impressive and includes many early works by well-known historians (some of whom may have fallen into obscurity), demonstrating the authors' deep knowledge of the subject, accrued over many years.

The final chapter, 'Conclusion: Chronology of Colour' (pp. 387-394), provides a diachronic view of the main trends in pigment use in the British Isles during the period covered, from the seventh to fifteenth century. This summary proceeds concisely, colour by colour, offering a pared down version of the 'more elaborate and discursive treatments of developments, fashions and anomalies in the previous chapters' (p. 387). If pushed, one could turn to this simplified overview as a quick guide to a particular pigment, but that would mean missing out on the richness of the deeply satisfying synthesis of science, history, connoisseurship, and technical art history.

Appendix I, 'The Earliest Recipe Collections in British Books' (pp. 395-412), reproduces the earliest manuscript notes on the tempering of colours for writing and illuminating. Four early texts are compared and contrasted, with English translations of the original Latin and French. Another appendix (Appendix II, pp. 413-422) includes relevant extracts from a set of late thirteenth-century Royal Household accounts, shedding light on the supply and purchase of writing and painting materials, as well as payments and gifts to scribes. The usual scholarly apparatus follows—bibliography, index of manuscripts, and of people and places—making it easy to navigate and locate a particular manuscript, source, scribe, patron or centre.

*Pigments of British Medieval Illuminators* will be required reading for anyone with an interest in manuscript/book culture. It is, of course, relevant to conservators examining early manuscripts, but equally so to other conservation disciplines involving pigments, as well as those engaged in technical analysis, and textual as well as art historical research. It is a model of interdisciplinary collaboration led by two outstanding research groups who have produced a hugely valuable publication in an under-explored area that will hopefully be widely read and cited. The authors and team members should be congratulated on bringing readers 'closer to the sequence of individuals who prepared the inks and pigments and applied them to those pages. The names of these myriad workers are lost, for the most part, but their handiwork lives on, rich in information' (p. 37).

### **Author bio**

From 2004-2023, Jane Eagan ACR FIIC was Head Conservator of the Oxford Conservation Consortium, working in the library/archive collections of 16 colleges of Oxford University. Jane was editor of *The Paper Conservator* (2002-2007), an editorial board member for *Icon's* refereed journal, and an advisor to the Hamilton Kerr Institute and West Dean College's book conservation programmes.

*Read this review and all the other fantastic articles in the December-January 2025 "News in Conservation" Issue 105.*