Meeting in the Middle Ages
Interview with Dr. Michelle Brown, part 2 of 2

Ben: [00:06]
Today we're continuing our conversation with Dr. Michelle Brown, Professor Emerita of Medieval Manuscript Studies at the School of Advanced Study in the University of London. Let's rejoin her in the Middle Ages.

Ben: [00:21]
In your work, you've had opportunities to give people, through your writings, introductions to how to read these manuscripts, telling younger scholars, like myself, "Okay, this is the language that scholars use when they're doing this kind of work." And yeah, so I thank you for that great introductory work of helping others come alongside and access, you know, these beautiful treasures we have. And I think also with this most recent book on Bede, you're similarly—though in a different vein, through biography—bringing a broad audience to this great man and his great work, wide-ranging as it is and inviting as it is, as you've described.

Will: [01:17]
Yeah. And actually, touching on this idea of bringing this work to different audiences and encouraging the public to explore writers like Bede and these incredible manuscripts that people can go and see in these places like the British Library, you've also worked with TV, with radio, as a consultant. I was curious if you could tell us a bit about what those experiences are like, and how you have to adapt and adjust things for that kind of project.

Brown: [01:47]
Oh come on, Will. What goes on tour stays on tour.

So, for example, working quite a lot with Tony Robinson on Time Team, and I'm getting roped into being part of the digs and washing pottery sherds, et cetera, et cetera—which most manuscript people might not expect to do. But then again, when I came into studying, I wanted to ... it was the objects and the places and the archaeological sites and the objects that were my big point of entry. They're like open doors. And I wanted to study the artefacts and art of the period, but they made no sense to me outside of their historical context. So there weren't many places in which you could study history and history of art as a joint-honors when I started, doing so back in about 1980.

[02:39] And so when I'd gone through that, I decided that medieval manuscripts were the most complex artefacts because they got the whole lot: they've got the world of ideas, they've got the economics, they've got the physical-chemical processes, and everything. It's like excavating [???]. And so, when I came to do it at PhD-level, there wasn't anywhere that taught medieval manuscript studies per se. So I studied medieval archaeology in London University and paleography and codicology with

Julian Brown at King's, and put it together—and then obviously, the language skills that you need to work on any of the material of this period.

[03:24] So I'd already studied a lot of pot sherds back in the past. So, you know, it was like having a chance to go and play in one of your first elements. And it was great actually seeing how a team of specialists like that moved almost like a medieval progress, from project to project, program to program. And they just moved around the country, all living together, working together. And to parachute in on that is quite ... It's quite remarkable.

[04:02] And then I've done lots of things like, oh, In Our Time Radio programs with Melvyn Bragg and others, where you sit around a table, and you hope that you're going to be given the right question to answer, and the frustration when somebody else gets to talk about that one. But they're so professional. And the research and the amount of careful research that goes into briefing even the best of presenters, like Melvyn Bragg, is just awesome.

[04:31] And yeah, it fascinates me how we communicate anything to other people—and to actually be given an opportunity to be part of that process of the broader base of dissemination, and now to be able to work with you guys and others on podcasts and Ted talks, which I've done, and various things, is just brilliant. And I started in the British Library on medieval manuscripts. I went part time in the latter period, and I was Regional Outreach Officer throughout the UK for education at all levels, and I was also one of their first digital curators.

[05:12] And so that for me again ... And then in the University of London, the thing I was part of teaching and helping to start up was the History of the Book at the School of Advanced Study, which basically is books in their broadest sense, i.e. from cave paintings, the vehicles of communication, and how we bring that into an understanding of how, for example, medieval manuscripts were the biggest source of inspiration for the team who finally developed the first tablet technology, and moving away from the idea of having the printed book reading plain into something where words, sound, and image will actually meet as a complex whole within the pages of a codex, but one which has can have multiple windows open simultaneously with wrap-around text, with the imagery and the decoration doing as much to articulate and navigate, and to be able to open up other forms of reading and digging deeper into the text, and have wrap-around texts where you can actually create your own commentary on the text in the wider margins that have been left, as well as reading other people's commentaries like Peter Lombard's wrapped around the Psalms, etc., and the whole technological thing, and then thinking for so much of the time we're talking about how many people could read, and it's more variable than people might think.

[06:46] The printed book doesn't suddenly, immediately democratize access to reading and writing. It depends who you are, where you are, even, and gender. You know, if you're in the 14th century, and you're the son or daughter of the Duke of such and such, and his only passions are hunting, shooting, fishing and warfare, you're perhaps not going to get such a bite at education and books as you might

think, simply out of your wealth or your gender. Conversely, if you're a wealthy London merchant's daughter, and that family have an interest in vernacular literature and they're people of faith, you're going to have books in the house, and you're going to know as many languages and have as much literacy and numeracy ability as you need to turn a buck.

[07:34] So, you know, and it's actually thinking ... I once sat at Malcolm Park's feet by lamplight in Oxford late into the evening, with my poor husband sitting in a pub thinking, "Where the heck is she? We're going to need to go home." And I remember Malcolm saying to me, "Whenever you're presented with one of these, think yourself into the project. Think yourself into the number of choices and decisions that have to be made. And think about how human beings are part of that interface."

[08:11] Now, every project is different in medieval manuscripts, even if you're churning out near 200 Paris study Bibles a year. They're similar, but they're different. And there are all sorts of human factors that are the drivers in that. And it's getting yourself into that thing and not just thinking about these as dry copies. They are all individual witnesses. And they've had journeys, they've had biographies and provenances to get from there into your hands now. And it's the most wonderful investigative journalism, if you choose to make it so, as well.

[08:46] And the way in which you need to respect those materials whenever you handle one of these things. It's like having the opportunity to meet a Holocaust survivor, because whatever they are, they survive the holocaust of history, one way or another. And you have to make sure that you're in a position where, when you meet them, your journey and theirs eliding—it has to be the best possible time to do that for you to be able to interrogate them carefully and sensitively, and to be on receive as well as transmit, for the whole process to actually be a worthwhile one for them and for you, because you will be cutting down their time. And it's finite, like people. And it's then, having had that opportunity, it's how you then go on to mediate it to others and why you've requested it in the first place. So put the people back in the equation. If you're a person of faith, think about the opportunities it gives you to deepen and broaden your faith.

[09:53] And Bede did that. But he was also a writer. And one thing that he says in his autobiographical note is, "In this, as in all things of monastic humility, he was monk and priest. I was both author, notary, and scribe." Now, it's not usual for authors in antiquity and the Middle Ages to pick up the calamus or the quill and to write themselves. It's more like voice-activated computing. They usually dictate. But Bede says, "I thought it. I was my own PA, as we are. I wrote it, but I was also scribe." Now, there he's talking in the Old Testament sense of scribes and Pharisees, the scribe of Scripture.

[10:45] Now, the ethos of life in some of these early monasteries, and certainly in Lindisfarne, and I suspect Jarrow, was that you had to be a Bear Grylls, in terms of being spiritually fit enough to be entrusted with copying scripture. It's not like copying any other text, because you open up a dynamic moment in the act of writing. And they were listening, Æthelfrith and Bede, in their heads to the words of people like Cassiodorus and Cummian, the sage of Iona, that when you access Scripture, you

ruminate. As you copy, you chew it over. You then meditate and pray on the meaning. And if you do those two things successfully, you get *revelatio* ... *ruminatio*, *meditatio*, *revelatio*. That [???] aware for a split second that the human frame is almost too frail to take. You get it. And that is the dynamic moment, the dialectic moment, that transforms you and has the ability to transform the world.

[11:58]: And so that then set me looking for Bede's handwriting, which I think I may have found, but then many others, better than I, felt they have in the past, and their peers have obviously taken issue with it, as others will with what I've said now. But from a deep engagement with Bede and a deep engagement with good friends who have been far more Beden specialists than I over the years, like George Brown, Scott Gower—sorry, Scott DiGregorio and others. Scott is also a friend, and I've benefited from his learning in other areas. But these people who've really engaged deeply. And using all of that, I thought, "How would I start looking for Bede on the pages?" You haven't got the smoking quill. It doesn't write, "Bede, fake it." How do we know it's him? How might we know it's him?

[12:56]: I know one thing for sure. The three big Bibles that his beloved abbot Ceolfrith of Wearmouth-jarrow has commissioned from the community—and one of which he takes as a present to the Pope when he goes to Rome to retire in 716, and which survives still in the Medici Library in Florence, as the *Codex Amiatinus*—I know Bede's hand has to be in there somewhere. And the big thing about those Bibles is, when they came up ... Well, Ceolfrith dies *en route* in Burgundy. His friends take it to Rome. It does get to Rome. And basically, the inscription is later tampered with at Monte Amiata, and Ceolfrith's name is erased. And it's not until the late 19th century that it's recognized as having been made in England, because it was so convincingly Mediterranean and Italo-byzantine. The script, the purity of the text, the illusionistic Syriac style painting etc. Remarkable.

[14:00] And what that book has done has gone as an ambassador for the new English Church and people, which is really a figment of Bede's imagination as much as anything at that early stage ... has gone to say, you know, *the apostolic age has come only now on these islands, with the work that we did to actually amass one of the greatest working libraries of the post-Roman West, and our engagement with the liberal arts syllabus and with the whole process of learning*. And what they did, basically, was reconstruct the research path that Jerome had employed in the little cell in Bethlehem in the 380s. And when, in the 16th century, in the Counter-Reformation, they came to print the Vulgate for the first time ... the Vulgate is basically the common language of the day, the vernacular, the Latin of the Western Empire ... and when they came to print it, and they looked at as many manuscripts as they possibly could, the *Codex Amiatinus* was considered the best, if not the earliest, witness to Jerome's work.

[15:07] And it wasn't just that they had a brilliant copy of the Vulgate that they copied. They did the work. They re-engaged with Greek and Latin exemplars. Bede even knows some Hebrew and is very fascinated in Hebrew names and teaching the pronunciation, the sort of rabbinic fashion. And all of that is present in that book. And so, Bede must have been one of the major intellectual drivers of that. But he's also one of the scribes. And the reason I've chosen one of the seven hands that I think is Bede

is the way in which it engages with the text. So you've got markup, you've got marginal markup and graphic symbols that actually help you navigate.

Bede, a very humble scholar, once went out to dinner. He can't have gone out to dinner very often. But he was entrapped by some of the followers of Wilfrid of York, who had a very, very different churchmanship to that of Monkwearmouth-jarrow and of Lindisfarne. And they're basically trying to get him into trouble because he's too engaged in church politics as well. He didn't just keep his head down, he put it above the parapet. And they say, basically, "You can't just pick these ideas out of the ether. You know, you could well be guilty of the heresy of innovation. Innovation because you discover what's new from what's old."

[16:35] Like the legal process. Law of precedent. Of course, they weren't as well read as Bede. They didn't know that he was quoting Ephrem the Syrian or John Chrysostom, or etc. And so to get his revenge in part, but to protect himself, he invents footnotes. So he will write the initial of whatever author he's reliant upon in his thinking process, in the margin. And he invents the sort of yellow magic marker highlighter pen. He writes little lightning flashes in ink in the margins, which is part of the process of Roman schoolrooms: to highlight when he's quoting, for example, an Old Testament passage in the New Testament, etc.

And what this hand does, in addition to using those markups, is that he breaks any Hebrew names down into syllables—how to pronounce them—above and punctuates between syllables, which is part of the system of the teachers of the late Roman school, which Bede was employing himself in his own schoolroom in Monkwearmouth-jarrow. And so I think that markup language, for me ... and the fact that the two books that that hand is writing are Kings and Ecclesiastes, which are the two biblical books that he's engaged in writing commentaries on at around that same time, and which, of course, encapsulate his own feelings about himself being presented as a child to the Lord, as the equivalent of Samuel and Eli, the priest who raises him as his beloved child.

[18:20] And of course, they together are the makers of kings. And at the very end of his life, he gets embroiled in trying to protect the King of Northumbria, Ceolwulf, who's been deposed and forced to become a pseudo- monk in Lindisfarne. And he also gets involved in trying to stop attempts to abolish Lindisfarne and the other, more Celtic-Colomban style monasteries, which aren't popular with those intent on establishing centralized hierarchy and diocesan structures. Because they're supra-territorial, they don't owe allegiance and they don't operate in the same way. And of course, you've got women who are running double monasteries, and only a woman could be in charge of a monastery of both men and women because they have better property.

[19:08] And so, you know, you've got all of this going on. And then, the colophons ... the scribes write a colophon at the end of their stint of work, and they all say, "Pray for the scribe." Don't name themselves. They just say, "Pray for the scribe." This hand doesn't do that. It separates out one word from the text and uses it as the colophon: *la-bo-re*, divided into syllables and marked with these little

lightning flashes around it. “The work.” Whenever Bede speaks about himself, he speaks about the work, his vocation as a scribe of Scripture, and as a priestly monk. And so, that's where I think Bede's hand is. But I also think I've found something else that's important, too.

Will: [19:57]
Please tell us.

Brown: [19:59]
Can I?

Ben: [20:00]
Yes, please.

Brown: [20:01]
Well, for me, the big thing, it's his whole research program and how it all hangs together. I think, for me, which is the exciting thing ... And it's not new, but it is presented in a different way and new. Okay. But there's the handwriting. And then, on his deathbed in 735, his assistant, the priest called Cuthbert, says that he spent the last couple of weeks of his life sitting on the cell floor. He distributes his few meager little possessions with pepper, etc., to members of the community, but he's spending that time feverishly dictating his translation of what he calls “the little gospel” that speaks of the things that work of love—John, the mystic divine—to share with his own people, in his own language, not entirely free of the charges of heresy that would confront Wycliffe and Tyndale in a less tolerant, later medieval and early modern context, because it was a dangerous thing for him to do. And that would have been the earliest translation of any part of the Bible into any Western vernacular language since Jerome had worked on the Vulgate. And it was believed to be lost.

[21:17] But when I was doing my work on the Lindisfarne Gospels and had the opportunity to engage with it closely, forensically, one of the things that intrigued me that I'd always wanted to follow up on was the fact that, in the 950s, a new monk enters the community of Cuthbert after they've moved further south to Chester le Street—a Roman fort on a Roman road, a little way outside of Durham, where they would subsequently move—having helped to reintegrate England and overcome the Danelaw. But that's another story. And that monk must have had very good backing, because he's allowed to improve, almost the moment he enters the monastery ... to improve its leading visible relic, the Lindisfarne Gospels, by translating it from Latin to Old English between the lines. And he does that rather like a school exercise using a thesaurus and a dictionary equivalent. So it's like herring equals sardine.

[22:19] And, if you actually print it out, all this gloss, you won't get a readable, literary text. We can tell in places he’s part of the Reforming Party of Wessex, because things that really bug him—like nepotism, simony, and all the things that the reformers were concerned about—he'll go off into a sort of ten-line rant on that reads. But that's in doing something different. But parts of John's gospel, he

uses a different ink. Normally he uses a grey—sorry, a brown-black iron salts ink that's slightly faded now over time. But parts of John's Gospel are in red ink. And red ink, of course, is higher in status. And it's used to draw your attention to something which is almost paratextual. Okay, but it's part of the continuous gloss. But those parts read well in a literary fashion in Old English, and their grammar, etc. accords with other passages of Old English that we have from Bede.

[23:23] So I think that the Lindisfarne community had been able to keep a copy of John's best deathbed translation. It didn't go all the way through, but the part of John that he was able to translat, and that Aldred has honored and fossilized that, for us, in the red ink within his own gloss in John's Gospel ... and that now means that our physical representation of the Gospels in English goes back from 950 to 735, and to Bede.

Will: [24:01]
I think that's an incredible example of the way that scholarly work can be done sometimes. It's about really engaging with the text, knowing as much as possible the author—the way they write, the way they think, thinking of them as a person in three-dimensions—and then reading the text and seeing where these points of contact are.

I was also going to ask if we have other examples of Bede's handwriting from other texts. Do we have any other evidence where we can just do a really nice compare and contrast with different hands? Because sometimes that's what it takes.

Brown: [24:44]
No, we don't, Will. We have four early copies of Bede's *History of the English Church* and people that survived from the Wearmouth-jarrow scriptorium from within 20 years of his death. And that's an incredibly high sample of survival rate. So they must have been churning them out. And we know he became immediately in demand. And Charlemagne was still trying to get copies of his work sort of later, et cetera. But we don't have any that are thought to be in his own handwriting, unfortunately. I will say, however, that if I'm right about his hand in *Codex Amiatinus*, the other example of Wearmouth-jarrow which is closest to it is the little copy of the Gospel of John in Latin that was found in Cuthbert's coffin later.

[25:32] And the materiality matters too. Bede is interested in the material world. And in his *Life of Cuthbert*, he talks about the little copy of John's gospel that he studied with his master, Saint Boisil, in the monastery at Melrose, in his early days of training. And the number of gatherings—the quires that book is made of—correspond to the number of quires of the little Cuthbert Gospel that was found later in Cuthbert's coffin, and we think was written in Monkwearmouth-jarrow, and which has the earliest Western binding on it, which is made entirely in Coptic Egyptian fashion.

[26:15] So again, I think I can sense a little bit of a Bedian involvement in that as well. And I think the idea of creating a replacement volume—which honors a lost, earlier volume, which may or may not

have existed, but which is mentioned in hagiography—is something that I've also found in Ireland when I've been working on books from Armagh and replacement books that were made in the early 9th and the early 12th century to replace originals, which the hagiography said. One was written in Patrick's own hand and the other was given to Saint Patrick by an angel.

[26:54] So that's the only other one that I would say ... I'd be thinking perhaps might be Bede. But there might well be more out there. We do have things from Wearmouth-jarrow. But the other thing to remember is, you know, the losses to Alcuin when he's headhunted from York and is one of the team fueling the Carolingian Renaissance. He writes in a poem ... mentions about a thousand volumes from a library at York, and there isn't a single one that we can prove was from York that has survived.

[27:31] And when I started as a medievalist, when we were looking archaeologically back in the early 80s, I was taught that we have about 5% surviving materially of what we know would have been around, let alone what might have been around. When I left the British Library as a digital curator, our prognosis on the retention rate of born digital material from the first 4 to 5 generations was about 5%. You have to allow for the presence of the other 95%. So being a medievalist means you do have to be incredibly rigorous, and you face different challenges to the modernist who is overwhelmed by data. And I think we can learn a lot from each other if we if we look at each other's methodologies as well.

Will: [28:29]
Absolutely, absolutely. Yes. That's something which, even in different fields of medieval studies, I'm often struck by how much material some of my colleagues have to work with compared to the Old English corpus. And I think, again, this just shows the kind of work that needs to be done sometimes. Even somebody as influential and as famous as Bede, really, we generally can only read him through copies of copies recorded by other people, and we have to do that work to get back to the original text, or to try and find him in the text or ...

Brown: [29:09]
But believe me, Will, if you walk into Mount Wearmouth and Jarrow ... those buildings today, you meet him just as much as you do on the pages of his book. And going back to the codicology, et cetera, and the physicality of the matters ... every pot shard matters. And the data mining ... You might not have as many books, but, my Lord, have you got an awful lot of archaeological data potentially to deal with.

[29:39] And so I think setting these great minds within their day and fleshing it out and moving out into their world and thinking about how that relates to our own, is something which ... it gets you to a different place, and it's complementary to the close reading of texts and the analysis of texts and of image, because, of course, at this period, people read images even more than they read texts. And we're talking about images to be seen and words to be seen in terms of visual display, and images to be read. And even if only a few people got direct access to those books, it's how that shapes and how the message is disseminated out through other visual quotes of it, through preaching, etc. ... and how the

missing audio element really interacts with that that we have lost, but which is kept through the safe keeping of writing and of image.

[30:40] So I guess what I've always done as medievalist is try and—a bit like Bede—to be holistic in how you try and situate that piece of evidence within its world and then think all the time of how it … It doesn't have to be relevant to our own, but I think sometimes it does behoove us to think about relevance. And there are things in the pages of my approach to Bede that you'll see are very much geared to trying to get people to connect wires and think now …

[31:11] And just something that might amuse you—shortly before Covid, I was invited up to Westminster to give a talk along with Rory Stewart and a couple of other people … and politician, diplomat, diplomat. And it was for politicians, senior civil servants, and church people, senior church people. And they were wanting to look at the post-Roman period and what happened then, and to get more ginned up in preparation for where we are and where we're going now.

Will: [31:49]
Really?

Brown: [31:50]
And so at the end of our short talks, one of them said to me, "Oh, so do you think we're going back into the Dark Ages?" To which I replied, "Oh, I shouldn't imagine it will be that bright." But in actual fact, we don't talk about the Dark Ages anymore, because the only thing that was dark about them, we think now, was our level of knowledge. And in actual fact, it's an incredible moment of human dialectic history and a great transformational moment when, yes, things were lost, terrible things were lost. Yes, things changed. But out of that came new relationships, new cultural expressions, and a new phase of human history, which, due to the work of a few figures, of which Bede was a notable example, the wreckage of some of what was lost was actually preserved and interpreted and carried forward into a new age. And new technologies can do this, as well as new histories, the decisions of what you carry forward. And the accidental collateral damage of loss are very incidental, um … sometimes they're managed, and sometimes we greatly regret things that weren't … decisions that weren't made to carry things forward.

[33:11] And so, you know, we looked at this, and it was quite interesting to see their response. And I said to them a few moments later, I said, "Well, of course, yes, but you've got to remember that what made the difference then wasn't government policy. It wasn't the attempt to recreate another empire, another Reich, per se, or at least not immediately. That came a little bit later. It was largely ordinary men and women, and sometimes even children, putting themselves at great personal risk in a period, we're told by demographic specialists, is one of the worst periods to have been alive in terms of war, famine, pestilence, etc.—other than the Black Death and many parts of the world today in our own age … and that it was this that made the difference: people putting themselves at risk to create sustainable communities and to serve others." And that, for me, is what makes my choice in choosing this

particular period and these expressions of what came out of that period, as learning and inspiration points in terms of being Plato's think on the good that make them worth the labora today for me.

Will: [34:43]
I think that's a fantastic way to maybe start bringing this to a close. I think that's a powerful final statement about the value of studying this world.

Brown: [34:55]
Oh, well, paleography was right. It's been a lovely opportunity for me today to engage with two people who obviously have such a great commitment and enthusiasm about the way in which they communicate the past to the present. And thank you ever so much, both of you, for giving me the opportunity to meet you and to meet your audience. And it reminds me, of course, of the lovely opportunity that I had to come to ND and to teach and to meet some lovely people who are still friends today. So thank you.

Ben: [35:35]
Thank you for your time, Michelle. And in addition to us including links, by the time this episode comes out, our listeners will be able to pick up for themselves a copy of *Bede and The Theory*.

Brown: [35:48]
Now it's our birthday on the 1st of October.

Ben: [35:51]
Wonderful. Is there, in addition to this, anything else from your work or your online presence and other talks you've given, things that you'd recommend for a broader audience to maybe listen to or read more into if there had been intrigued by this conversation?

Brown: [36:10]
I would say the Ted talk, but they focus more on what they call booktubers than what I was trying to talk about. But it's a different route in.

Ben: [36:21]
That was the hook that they chose.

Brown: [36:23]
I noticed the hook that they chose. Yeah. Um, there was some of the In Our Time interviews that are up, they're Radio Four. And there was a nice interview with Radio Four, the Sunday program the other day. If you could bear to get in touch with Helen McCusker, who was the person at Reaction that put you on to me, she's got all the links to the other stuff about Bede that's coming out. History Here have done a podcast that's ... but that's not the same. It's similar in length to your own, shall we say, which is really engaged as opposed to just the shorter things. *The Lindisfarne Gospels: Society,*

Spirituality, and the Scribe is the other book that I think has tried to speak, although it's done it in a more academic way. But the last chapter of that I think is accessible and could speak to the same audience as the Bede one, and it's not in print anymore, but it is free on Google Books.

Ben: [37:26]
Okay, fantastic.

Brown: [37:27]
So people can just look that up online, and if they read the first chapter and the last chapter, they'll kind of get it. If they want to dig deeper in between, that's fine. There's, um ... I even wrote a novel once. I had the scribe of Lindisfarne, but that was very ill-judged, and I don't think I want necessarily ... It was commissioned by um ... oh, where is ... Arizona University Press, who ran a fiction in print called *Banquet and a Conference*. One and conference, um, as was one day the editor sort of gave me too much wine and said, "I think from hearing you speak, you'd be good at fiction." I said, "Oh, that's good. So do my students." But anyway, and he got me to write this thing, and I tried to respect whilst writing in the fictional voice what I saw as the ethos of the maker of the Lindisfarne Gospels, etc., but their imprint was, um, well, research fiction without gratuitous incest affair. So I can assure you, there's no gratuitous incest.

[38:37] But I don't necessarily want any of that pointed out. Um, other things. Oh. What else? *The Companion to Christian Art*, which goes much wider right up to the present. And what actually constitutes community. *Communicating Christianity Through Art And Communicating Christian Texts Through Art*. That's one. That's an interesting read, I think. And *How Christianity Came to Britain and Ireland*. That's another good one for this period. And I took all the photos for that as well. So it will encourage people when they're traveling to actually get out there in the field. And again if people's a landscape wonderful.

Will: [39:23]
That's a good point. Actually having these kinds of books can be brilliant if you're in the UK or Ireland on holiday as a whole. Different way of seeing the country.

Brown: [39:32]
Yeah, yeah, yeah. And I think that's why we're so lucky here, because, you know, other scholars tend to be, shall we say, text bound. Um, and they have a different, a different perception of text. And often the ones that actually come and engage with the physicality of the text tend to have a rather different way of reading the text than when you read, um, a printed text on screen or in a printed book, etc. because the way in which that's been shaped by its writer and its readers, as well as its author, um, you know. It's part of the physicality of it.

And I've got to go and work more on the Saint Catherine Sinai stuff there. And one day come and interview me about that, because that's really cool, because we're told that there was no direct

face-to-face contact between the Far West and the Middle East from the end of the Western Roman Empire in the fifth century, right up to the Crusades, and it's all very much predicated on conflict, et cetera, et cetera. And I didn't buy that. And I did one of the biggest exhibitions of Smith's Smithsonian has ever done. I curated Bibles before the year 1000 at the Smithsonian in 2006, and I got the new portion of *Codex Sinaiticus* that they'd found in the monastery, and I had to give them many, many, many camels.

[40:55] And so I also asked to borrow a couple of things to play a hunch that I had because I'd found so much evidence in the West of direct contact, archaeologically, etc. And through the books, I thought that that wasn't the case, and I thought some of the things that they had that they'd catalogued but never shown images of were actually Western rather than ... And lo and behold, the things I borrowed were in Latin, not in Glagolitic, as the monks had, because there was no Latin at Sinai. So they let me go over for a month and actually go behind the scenes in the library, which was very, very rare for women, especially to be able to do. And just being in the monastery for a month was a whole ... all sorts of interesting stories about that. And I found 60 early and parts of early Western manuscripts and rising that together create a very, very different picture. And I've got two Northumbrian scribes from the eighth century who are working in Saint Catherine's Monastery at that time. So backing up, you know, Bede's direct routes of contact through when in fact any tales of Anglo-Saxons travelling or Irishman travelling that far were thought to be like Prester John at the end of the Middle Ages. And, you know, before Marco Polo actually got there.

[42:13] But they're actually for real. And, of course, some of them are 4- or 5-level palimpsests. You might occasionally get 1-level palimpsest, where you've erased a text and written over. But because skins are so rare in the middle of Sinai, they had to keep reusing them. So we've been working with them, NASA and the Archimedes Palimpsest team, to actually be able to excavate 5 or 6 layers of text. And so I've got my Sinai sandwich, where the same bit of membrane has been written on in Sinai in Greek, has either come to Rome and been written on by two Italians in Gregory the Great's Rome, and then come to Anglo-Saxon England and then gone back to the Sinai. Or the more logical conclusion, which is that there's people from those orbits who've actually travelled to the Sinai. And so I've then fleshed out what the historical circumstances are and the evidence for that happening. So again, you move from the physicality of the fragments that you found, some of which you can't actually even identify the texts initially, but the physicality of the fact that it's written in insular minuscule with Visigothic and Lombardic features on paper, which wasn't available in the West. And then you start creating something that you can research out from.

Will: [43:34]
We'll have to have you back on to talk about that in more detail.

Ben: [43:38]
Yeah, that is quite the tease of future work. That's very exciting. Yes, yes. Well, doctor.

Brown: [43:46]
How are you both on a camel? Shall we meet out there?

Ben: [43:49]
Sure. Yeah.

Will: [43:50]
Let's get Notre Dame to fund that.

Ben: [43:52]
Yeah, yeah, let's make that happen. Well, Michelle, thank you so much for your time for sharing and we really appreciate it.

Will: [44:00]
Thank you everyone for listening in. And we will see you next time in the Middle Ages.

Meeting in the Middle Ages is sponsored by the Medieval Institute of the University of Notre Dame with a generous grant from the Medieval Academy of America. If you have any questions for a medievalist, send them to us at meetinginthema@gmail.com. You can follow us on Twitter, @MeetingintheMA and Instagram, @MeetingintheMiddleAges. For more information on some of the topics raised in this episode, head on over to the episode description. Thanks for listening.