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Between Carelessness and Wilful Destruction

The Demise of Texts and Their Manuscripts in the Medieval West

On 29 October 2015, armed, masked police raided a Moscow library specialising in Ukrainian literature and carted off books that the authorities called illegal anti-Russian propaganda. As Reuter's reported:

Russia's Investigative Committee said it had opened a criminal case against Natalya Sharina, the director of Moscow's Library of Ukrainian Literature, to determine whether she was guilty of inciting ethnic hatred and "denigrating human dignity". Investigators had confiscated "anti-Russian propaganda", including "extremist" writings by Dmytro Korchynskiy, a Ukrainian nationalist author banned in Russia, the committee said. If convicted, Sharina could face up to four years in prison. Employees at the library, an unassuming green first floor building in central Moscow, told Reuters armed masked men, accompanied by investigators, had detained Sharina, 58, in the early hours of Thursday morning after searching the building all day on Wednesday and carting off around 200 books and pamphlets. "They came at 8 in the morning", said Tatyana Muntyan, a library employee. "Comrades in masks with machine guns. They ran in and told her to sit down and not call anyone". Investigators had also removed computers, servers and the library's catalog, she said. State TV showed a masked man clad in black and grey camouflage leaving the library with a large white plastic bag.¹

This is merely the latest instalment in the sheer endless list of libraries that, for one reason or another, over the course of history have been raided and sacked,² the best-known case being the famous classical library of Alexandria.³ We may assume that the Russian police had the books they took from the library destroyed. We need to distinguish, however, in this case as in the many documented medieval cases of the destruction of books, between the libraries in which the destroyed books were kept and the books themselves. And we also need to distinguish, of course, between the books and the texts copied in those books. In the case of the Ukrainian library the police seemed to have a fairly good idea which books contained texts they considered to contain anti-Russian propaganda; they left most of the books in the library unharmed.

In medieval times, too, the contents of the books selected for destruction were identified—although, as we will see, there were also cases in which groups of books

¹ Osborn, Andrew, "Russia raids Ukrainian library in Moscow, arrests head", <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/10/29/us-ukraine-crisis-library-idUSKCN0SN0VI20151029#ECBhf01ph6RvvF3.97> (last accessed: 29.10.2015).

² For general surveys see Bosmajian 2006; Fishburn 2008.

³ Canfora 1986 remains one of the best treatments of the story of the library of Alexandria; see also the contribution by Gereon Becht-Jördens to the present volume.

were destroyed indiscriminately, e. g. because of the language in which they were written. In the case of the wilful destruction of books, it was almost always their contents, the texts expressing certain ideas, that were the reason for their destruction. The books themselves were destroyed because they were the physical support of the ideas that were expressed in the texts written down in them; the aim of the wilful destruction of books is the destruction of the ideas contained in written texts. The ultimate aim of the wilful destruction of books is the destruction of ideas, whether they be transmitted in written form or can be found in the minds of the texts' authors or scribes.

Conversely, authors and scribes will do their best to safeguard the texts they produce from the changes of meaning that might come about through careless copying, resulting in mistakes that need rectifying. Both authors and scribes and their opponents are in the end concerned with the same thing: with the havoc that may be wrought by mistakes, their eradication and prevention. That is why authors and scribes try to do their best to defend the written tradition against mistakes, by correcting texts, by stressing the link between mistakes in copying and mistakes in thinking.

The wilful destruction of texts and books is something quite different from the carelessness and mishap that might lead to the accidental destruction of books. Wilful and accidental destruction of texts therefore have to be considered as different events, even if there are cases in which carelessness may be construed as criminal negligence.⁴ And in the end the books that are destroyed are lost, whether their destruction was premeditated or not.

As always when dealing with books, it is useful to distinguish between the authors whose ideas are 'incarnated' in the texts they produce, the scribes (or, later, printers) who multiply the ideas and the texts of the authors in the copies they produce, the copies of the texts (usually in the Middle Ages in the form of the codex, the 'book' as we know it), and the institutions which keep those copies (most often libraries or archives). I will here concentrate on those texts and manuscripts which were usually kept in libraries, because texts liable to wilful destruction more often than not could be found in institutional or personal libraries. We will follow the events that led to the destruction of books and libraries to their source. First, we will see what can be known about the accidental destruction of libraries and books. Next, we will have a look at the wilful destruction of the ideas expressed in the written texts copied through the destruction of the books that contain the texts in which those ideas found their written expression. And finally we will say a few words about the destruction

⁴ One may think of the difference between the carelessness which led to the disappearance of the dossier of excerpts from authoritative texts made by Abbot of Fleury very shortly after his death in 1004 (Aimoin of Fleury, *Vita et Passio Sancti Abbonis*, c. 7, ed. by Bautier/Labory 2004, 60–62) and the criminal negligence with which nineteenth-century librarians might leave heaps of manuscripts and printed books for hours in courtyards where they were an easy prey to the elements and thieves alike, see Maccioni Ruju/Mostert 1995, 62.

of the people who believed so wholeheartedly in the ideas contained in proscribed books that they were willing to give their lives for their beliefs. For it was the 'errors' of the ideas that needed to be eradicated, whether they were merely found in books or ensconced in the spirit and soul of their authors, scribes, readers, and believers.

In putting together the following survey, I have been helped considerably by two books. First, by Martin Steinmann's *Handschriften im Mittelalter: Eine Quellensammlung*, which came out in 2013.⁵ This book contains 905 excerpts from written texts, presented chronologically, that deal with medieval manuscripts. The original text is always followed by a German translation. The excellent index of names and subjects allows one to find those excerpts which deal with the destruction of books and manuscripts, or with the care taken to defend textual traditions from corruption. Needless to say the book is not complete; nevertheless, it provides a very large sample of textual sources about the making, keeping and using of manuscripts in the Middle Ages.

The second book is *Den Irrtum liquidieren: Bücherverbrennungen im Mittelalter* by Thomas Werner, which came out in 2007.⁶ This massive book, which began as a very thorough dissertation, contains as Appendix ('Anhang A') an account of 'Schriftenvernichtung im Mittelalter: Eine chronologische Darstellung', starting with the repeated burning of Manichaean books in Rome around 500 and finishing with the ordering by the Fifth Lateran Council of 1515 of the burning of any books printed anywhere without approbation. In this long list Werner distinguishes between book burnings for which we possess the order and for which we know that the execution of the order has taken place, and cases which are merely mentioned in literary, narrative texts. Thus it is possible to differentiate between actual book burning and opinions about book burning.⁷

These two books provide us with enough reliable arguments to form an image about the ways in which books and texts were destroyed in the Middle Ages. Let us start with a survey of some of the evidence for the accidental destruction of books and of (parts of) libraries.

⁵ Steinmann 2013. Reference will be made to the numbered texts; the editions can easily be found back through the indications of Steinmann. Only when an edition gives more than merely the text (e. g. a facsimile) is a full reference given to the edition used.

⁶ Werner 2007.

⁷ Werner 2007, 547–652. Reference will be made to the instances of the destruction of books in this appendix by referring to the first footnote to the text relative to each instance. This is necessary, because Werner failed to number the items in his list. It is difficult to find fault with Werner's work; he missed Hamilton 1972, however. Herrin 2009 gives additional information about book burning in Late Antiquity.

1 The Destruction of Books and Libraries

Books were precious items, so that measures were taken to prevent their destruction. Nevertheless, calamities could and did happen.⁸ Parts of the monastery of Fleury (at Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire), for instance, the monastery of Saint Benedict himself, were the victim of fires in 974, 1002, 1005, and again in 1026.⁹ This must have entailed the burning of some of the books.

Elsewhere, water was an enemy of the book. When books were saved from water, the miracle was sometimes mentioned. A famous example are the verses about the rescue of the gospel book of queen Margaret of Scotland, in the second half of the eleventh century. The rescue was recorded both in verses that were entered in the gospel book itself, and in the *Life* of Margaret by Simeon of Durham.¹⁰ The book had fallen into a river, and when its loss was remarked, it was seen on the riverbed, open; but when it was taken from the water, its text was not damaged in the least! Not always was the outcome as miraculous as this case, however. In the *Recette générale des ducs de Bourgogne* of 1435/6 mention is made of a trunk containing a missal and breviary which had fallen into the water. The repairs cost 8 francs.¹¹

Vermin such as maggots, insects, worms, and mice were enemies of the book of another kind: they might eat the texts, thereby damaging them and rendering them (partially) illegible. In the second quarter of the twelfth century, abbot Peter the Venerable even mentions, in a letter to the Carthusians, a manuscript which he cannot send, because ‘unfortunately a bear has eaten a large part of our manuscript when it was in a priory’.¹²

Invasions and wars also led to library losses. The Viking raids of the ninth century, for instance, caused the monks of Fleury to flee their monastery, situated as it was on the navigable Loire river. Monks from Brittany brought their own books to Fleury for the same reason.¹³ And the Vikings coming up the Rhine led to the temporary abandonment of the bishop’s administration at Utrecht, which caused grave problems with the episcopal archives when the bishop finally returned to Utrecht after a prolonged absence at Deventer.¹⁴

8 A pleasure to read is Büch 1988, who, unfortunately, has not been translated; Blades 2012 is available in German, with an excellent introduction by the translator. Both concentrate on the printed book, but also take into account manuscripts.

9 Mostert 1989, 25; on the basis of Bautier 1968, 88f.

10 Steinmann 2013, 235–236, No. 289 (taken from MS Oxford, Bodleian Library, Lat. Liturg., f. 5 (29744), f. 2r after Dowden 1894, 249, and the facsimile of Drogin 1989, 71), and 245, No. 300 (Turgotus Dunelmensis, *Vita Margaretae Scotorum reginae*, 11).

11 Steinmann 2013, 676, No. 734.

12 Steinmann 2013, 293–294, No. 351: ... *magnam partem ... in quadam obaedientia casu comedit ursus*.

13 Mostert 1989, 24 (see also the index for Breton manuscripts).

14 See Henderikx 1986 and Van Vliet 2004, on the knotty matter of the *Cartularium Radbodi*. A survey of the medieval culture of the written word in the diocese of Utrecht remains a desideratum.

Fire, water, invasions, and wars—as well as hungry bears—have to be considered as calamities which could not possibly be foreseen. Nor did medieval librarians have any remedy against maggots, insects, and mice.¹⁵ The losses caused by failing to properly bind manuscripts, however, can be imputed to them. This led to the first and last leaves of manuscripts being worn away through use. Lack of surveillance may also have led to damage. Richard of Bury writes in his *Philobiblon* of 1343–1345:

There are thieves who severely damage the books and who, to write their letters, cut off the margins of the leaves, leaving nothing but the text; they even take the flyleaves to use – or rather: misuse – them. This kind of sacrilege ought to be forbidden on pain of anathema!¹⁶

Similar practices are forbidden already in a council of 692.¹⁷ There are, however, also cases of the destruction of texts which are ordered by abbots (or their librarians). The reuse of parchments by removing its text and using the (costly) parchment for another, new text, thereby producing palimpsests, is inconceivable without the scribes' superiors' permission.¹⁸ Sometimes (parts of) manuscripts needed to be rewritten because the old leaves showed signs of wear. In 1146 abbot Macarius of Fleury ordered the annual payment of a certain amount to the *cantor et armarius* because 'the books in our library are in decay because of the gnawing of moths and worms'.¹⁹

Lending books from your library was another risk. Within the early medieval republic of letters, scholars knew whom to ask for copies of particular works—and sometimes undertook lengthy journeys to obtain those manuscripts on loan, or to make a copy on the spot.²⁰ And sometimes a library was depleted when books were given to churches or monasteries which were reformed by a spiritual centre. Fleury, for instance, in the tenth century gave books to Sens and Chartres.²¹

Lending books could imperceptibly turn into theft when the books were not returned to their libraries. Writing an anathema against 'those who take books with

¹⁵ See the text in the book on the lectern of scribe Hildebertus, in the depiction of his place of work, when a mouse is eating his lunch: 'Worst of mice, all too often you provoke my anger, may God destroy you!' (*Pessime mus, sepius me provocas ad iram, ut te Deus perdat!*), in Trost 1986, 23, after MS Prague, University Library, Kap. A. XXI. f. 133r (c. 1140).

¹⁶ Steinmann 2013, 510–513, No. 585.2, at 511: *Sunt iterum fures quidam libros enormiter detruncantes, qui pro epistolarum chartulis schedulas laterales abscindunt littera sola slava; vel finalia folia, que ad libri custodiam dimittuntur, ad varios abusus assumunt; quod genus sacrilegii sub interminatione anathematis prohiberi deberet.*

¹⁷ Steinmann 2013, 67, No. 64.

¹⁸ See Steinmann 2013, 439–440, No. 511.3 (Salimbene de Adam, *Chronica*, under 1253).

¹⁹ Mostert 1989, 27–28; Steinmann 2013, 272–273, No. 332. A more recent edition than that used by Steinmann is Prou/Vidier/Stein 1900–1937, vol. 1, 343–347, No. 151 (the longer of the two versions has: ... *videns bibliotheca nostre codices vetustate nimia cariosos et teredine ac tineae rodente corruptos* ...).

²⁰ A good example is the autobiographical account by Richer of Reims of his difficult journey from Reims to Chartres, at the end of the tenth century, see Latouche 1937, 2, 225–230.

²¹ See Donnat 1975.

the intention not to return them', which threatened the thieves with the fate of Judas, Caiaphas, and Annas,²² apparently did not always succeed in preventing theft. The theft of books—and on occasion the story of their miraculous retrieval—is relatively often mentioned. Sometimes the thieves were not so much interested in the books themselves as in the gold leaf of the initials.²³ More often the thieves tried to sell the books. Not even chained books were safe from thieves, and sometimes the thieves could be found among the monks of the institution whose books were stolen. In 1417, for instance, three Fleury monks were condemned for the theft of a bible.²⁴

After the Middle Ages, the threats to medieval libraries if anything increased. The damage done by humanists, the Reformation, revolutions, scholarly research, bibliophiles, and acidity is, however, another story.

2 Taking Care of Texts

Most of the medieval stories about books being miraculously saved from fire or water, or returned after being stolen or having fallen in the hands of warring parties, are concerned either with biblical or with liturgical manuscripts. These contained the texts that were central to the beliefs of Christians and the ways in which they maintained contact with the supernatural powers. These were also the texts that most often benefited from careful corrections. When, in 1109, the Cistercian abbot Stephen Harding noticed that there were considerable differences between different copies of the Old Testament, he went so far as to consult Jews in order to establish the original text of the Latin translation. When these Jews pointed out that Harding's chosen manuscript had additions that could not be found in the original text, the abbot had these additions carefully erased, and asked his readers as follows:

Now we ask all those who read this volume that they will refrain from adding the said additional passages again to this work. For it is clearly visible where they have been, as the erasure of the parchment does not hide these places. We also forbid in the name of God and of our Order, that anyone treat this work, which has been elaborated with great cost, without respect or presumes to indicate something in the text or in the margin with his fingernail.²⁵

²² The Fleury anathema, see Mostert 1989, 39; Drogin 1983.

²³ Steinmann 2013, 234–235, No. 288 (the *Cantatorium sive Chronicon sancti Huberti Andaginensis*, on an event which had taken place half a century before, in the first quarter of the eleventh century): *Sed et ipsi nostris temporibus vidimus quosdam, quos nec nominandos censuimus, qui quasi occasione non curande vetustatis multa incenderunt ex eisdem auro textis ornamentis, re autem vera hoc moliti cupiditate auri exinde rapiendi.*

²⁴ De Meyier 1947, 96.

²⁵ Steinmann 2013, 249–251, No. 306: *Nunc vero omnes qui hoc volumen sunt lecturi rogamus, quatinus nullo modo predictas partes vel versus superfluos huic operi amplius adiungant. Satis enim lucet in quibus locis erant, quia rasura pergameni eadem loca non celat. Interdicimus etiam auctoritate dei et*

This is a rightly famous passage, as it shows twelfth-century textual criticism at work, with the assistance of Jews no less, whose books and learning were to be censured a century later. It shows an awareness of the variants between manuscripts, an implicit understanding that no manuscript was without failings, and an explicit choice for this manuscript (which survives in the Bibliothèque municipale of Dijon),²⁶ despite its failings, as the preferred exemplar for any copies Cistercian communities might need to make.

From the earliest times of the Latin textual tradition in theological matters we have demands not to change anything in copying texts. Rufinus of Aquileia, around 400, is eloquent:

I want to oblige anyone who wants to copy or read these books, in the presence of God the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost, by law, and convene with him because of the kingdom of heaven to come, because of the resurrection of the dead, because of him, who has prepared for the devil and his angels the eternal fire: if he is not to remain for ever and ever in that place where is wailing and gnashing of teeth, where the fire does not extinguish for anyone and the worm does not die, he is not to add anything to this writing, not take anything away from it, not add anything to it, change nothing, but compare it with its exemplars, from which he has copied, [but] to correct the texts letter for letter and add punctuation, and he will not suffer an incorrect or unpunctuated volume, lest the difficult content becomes additionally obscure in a book without punctuation.²⁷

Nothing must be changed; correction of the text and the punctuation has to be made after the exemplars. This will be echoed down the centuries: make faithful copies, correct the text. Why? So that the textual tradition does not become corrupt. Sometimes correcting grammatical mistakes in the exemplar is allowed;²⁸ more often *any* change is forbidden.²⁹ Books of the Bible ought to be checked no less than three times, if we believe the testament of a canon of the cathedral of Vercelli, made in 1194.³⁰ Why is it so important that the texts are transmitted faithfully? Because if not enough

nostrę congregationis ne quis hunc librum multo labore preparatum inhoneste tractare vel ungula sua pe scripturam vel marginem eius aliquid notare presumat.

26 MS Dijon, Bibliothèque municipale, 13 (9 bis), f. 150v.

27 Steinmann 2013, 24–25, No. 13: *Illud sane omnem qui hos libros vel descripturus est vel lecturus in conspectu dei patris et filii et spiritus sancti contestor atque convenio per futuri regni fidem, per resurrectionis ex mortuis sacramentum, per illum qui prae paratus est diabolo et angelis eius aeternum ignem, sic non locum aeterna hereditate possideat ubi est fletus et stridor dentium et ubi ignis eorum non extinguetur et vermis eorum non moietur: ne addat aliquid huic scripturae, ne auferat, ne inserat, ne immutet, sed conferat cum exemplaribus unde scripserit et emendat ad litteram et distinguat, et in emendatum vel non distinctum codicem non habeat, ne sensuum difficultas, si distinctus codex non sit, maiores obscuritates legentibus generet.*

28 Steinmann 2013, 162–163, No. 200, and 438f., No. 511.1.

29 E. g. Steinmann 2013, 590–591, No. 646, and 559f., No. 624 (Giovanni Boccaccio prefers an uncorrected text to the correct wording of corrected texts!).

30 Steinmann 2013, 320–321, No. 384.

care is taken in copying texts, changes might occur which amount to heresy. For this reason the librarian of Fleury, around the year 1000, is responsible not only for the making and keeping of books, but also for their contents: ‘the correction of books, the lessons to be read, answers on the catholic faith and the refutation of heretics, and of anything that resists healthy doctrine, belongs to his duties’.³¹

The notion that carelessness in copying books may lead to heresy and therefore to eternal damnation is not only expressed in words. In the MS Evreux, Bibliothèque municipale, 131, f. 1r, a twelfth-century manuscript, an illuminated initial ‘B’ can be seen at the beginning of Saint Augustine’s *Enarrationes in Psalmos*.³² It is the first letter of the first verse of the Psalms, *Beatus vir qui non abiit in consilio impiorum*, and king David, the alleged author of the Psalms, is shown playing his harp in the letter, between his fight with a lion (above) and his defeating Goliath (below). More important for our purpose, however, are the excessive foliage and thorns which surround these lively scenes. According to the art historian Laura Kendrick they have a meaning, which can be summarised as follows: beware all of you who grapple with the written tradition. You need to beware of its thorns and snares. You are at risk unless you proceed with caution. Do not presume to meddle with the text and take care not to change it, thereby endangering your immortal soul!³³

3 Wilfully Destroying Texts

It seems but a small step from guarding a textual tradition against heresy or other errors to the destruction of those texts which obviously contain errors that go against the faith as perceived by the ecclesiastical authorities of the day. There was in fact a biblical precedent for destroying heterodox books—according to the Acts of the Apostles, at Ephesus Saint Paul found many practitioners of magic:

Many of them also which used curious arts brought their books together, and burned them before all men: and they counted the price of them, and found it fifty thousand pieces of silver. So mightily grew the word of God and prevailed (Acts 19:19-20).

The burning of books is here presented as a voluntary renunciation which symbolises conversion and removes temptation to relapse into the use of magical books. It reminds one of the renunciation promises contained in early medieval baptismal promises, with the obvious difference that the Ephesians were literate magicians

³¹ Steinmann 2013, 174–175, No. 221. See also Davril/Donnat 2004, 182–185, here 184: *Emendatio librorum et termini lectionum et responsio fidei catholice et hereticorum confutatio et, si quid sane doctrine obstiterit, illum attinet*.

³² Reproduced in Kendrick 1999, opposite 183.

³³ Kendrick 1999, 110–146.

while the (Germanic speaking) heathen of the north were illiterates.³⁴ The public burning of books is often used as a ritual renunciation of the ideas contained in the texts written in those books, as we will see in a moment.

But what kind of written texts were willfully destroyed in the Middle Ages? While the scholars of medieval Europe tried to save the orthodoxy of the texts that they had to work with, the books which contained texts that went against the current orthodoxy were the most likely to be destroyed by the church authorities. All through the Middle Ages the enemies of the faith went by the same three appellations. They were pagans, heretics, and Jews. In practice the heretics were the most dangerous to the Church, because the heretics considered themselves to be Christians, although they might consider themselves to be better Christians than their opponents among the ecclesiastical hierarchy that branded them as heretics. It is always a Church that makes its own heretics.³⁵ The pagans, on the other hand, changed over the centuries; when it comes to the destruction of books, they are almost always to be identified with Muslims. And the Jews always remained the same, in the eyes of the Christians. The thing that changed with time, however, is the attitude taken towards the Jews, ranging from the acceptance of their superior knowledge of Hebrew to the destruction not only of their books but of the Jews themselves.

We have evidence of the destruction of books by burning heretical, pagan and Jewish books. These are definitely the most important categories of written texts that were destroyed in the Middle Ages. But there are other texts as well that are thrown into the flames, such as magical texts, scientific texts, political texts (all with a few exceptions from the fourteenth century onwards), and there is one case where the inspiration seems to be mainly moral in nature (in the fifteenth century). Together, these categories seem to coincide roughly with the headings under which censors until the present have put the texts they considered incriminating. There are also a few examples of other types of texts (such as tax books,³⁶ charters [real and forged ones],³⁷ legislation for religious orders,³⁸ penitentials,³⁹ and, somewhat surprisingly, the early biographies of Saint Francis of Assisi⁴⁰), but we will leave these aside for the moment, as these cases are relatively rare and it is therefore difficult to draw valid conclusions from them.

Instead, I would like to focus on three more general observations. First, it is interesting that the development of the burning of books (which seems to have been the

³⁴ Mostert 2013, 95–97.

³⁵ Cf. Moore 1987.

³⁶ Werner 2007, Appendix A, No. 9.

³⁷ Werner 2007, Appendix A, Nos. 201, 217, 263, 266, 273, and 339 (forgeries of papal bulls). See also Mauntel 2015.

³⁸ Werner 2007, Appendix A, No. 184.

³⁹ Werner 2007, Appendix A, No. 26.

⁴⁰ Werner 2007, Appendix A, No. 133.

most current way of disposing of written or printed texts) roughly follows the development of literacy. Areas which can be considered to have come under the influence of the written word later, generally show evidence of book burning later than areas which were introduced to writing earlier. In the areas bordering on the Atlantic, the northern North Sea and the northern shores of the Baltic, there seems to be no evidence of book burning whatsoever.

Secondly, there is always a chance that texts were wilfully destroyed without any explicit orders for their destruction, or at least without explicit evidence of the execution of such orders having survived. The case of the intertestamentary apocrypha springs to mind.⁴¹ We also know that versions of apocryphal gospels were in circulation in late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages in Latin versions. As these gospels were not acceptable to Catholic Christianity, extant copies were destroyed so effectively that in most cases we now have merely versions of those gospels in other languages.⁴² Similarly, texts produced in the great heterodox currents of late Antiquity were eradicated later on to such extent that hardly anything else of these texts survives except for the quotations from these texts in the works of their detractors.

And in the end, I want to insist once more that the book burnings of which we have evidence, had the aim of rooting out the *ideas* in the *texts* that were copied in those books. The same ideas might as well circulate orally, and we have ample evidence of heretics being burnt without the texts in which their heterodox ideas were written down or the texts which had inspired them. The first heretics in Western Europe after the millennium, e. g., who were executed in Orléans in 1022,⁴³ do not make an appearance in Werner's excellent book, because there is no evidence that the texts which contained their ideas were destroyed with them – although the heretics were erudite clergy who must have had access to books and heresy was widely documented by contemporary observers. Nevertheless, possibly inspired by the story in *Acts* of the Ephesian magicians, we do know of some cases in which heretics were executed together with their books.

Let us now have a brief glance at the various categories of texts that were wilfully destroyed, more or less in the order in which they first make an appearance in the sources.

⁴¹ *Ecrits apocryphes chrétiens* (1997–2005) gives reliable translations.

⁴² For a survey, see Hennecke/Schneemelcher/Wilson 1963. For a current bibliography, see Leonardi et al. (1980–), under *Fortleben* → *Biblia sacra* → *Apocrypha*.

⁴³ Fichtenau 1991.

4 Heretical Texts

By far the greatest number of cases in which books were wilfully destroyed during the Middle Ages, 95 cases to be exact, concern heretical texts. After the texts of several groups of heretics are mentioned (West-Gothic Arians and Manichaeans, in the sixth century)⁴⁴ for several centuries we are dealing with individuals (Aldebert, Gottschalk of Orbais, Berengarius, Abelard and Arnold of Brescia),⁴⁵ after which, from 1200 onwards, groups and individuals, most often seen as named representatives of groups, have drawn the attention of ecclesiastical authorities upon themselves. The groups of heretics that are mentioned start with the Waldensians, for the first time in 1200,⁴⁶ followed by Paris university professors who are hostile to the mendicants (in 1255/1256),⁴⁷ the Spiritual Franciscans (around 1300),⁴⁸ Beguines (around 1318),⁴⁹ and the Turlupins (heretical Begards whose books and clothes were burnt on the Place de Grève in Paris on 4 July 1372).⁵⁰ Next come John Wyclif (from 1384 onwards)⁵¹ and his followers, the Lollards,⁵² who are often mentioned individually as well, starting with John Claydon. He was a London fur trader who had been in prison for about five years as follower of the Lollards before he was taken again in the summer of 1415, when several Lollard books in English were burnt on 19 August on the orders of Henry Chichele, the archbishop of Canterbury. A copy bound in leather of the *Lantern of Light* was burnt together with its owner on 10 September.⁵³ Also in 1415, at the Council of Constance, Jan Hus was burnt on 6 July, together with all his writings, not just those in Latin but also those in Czech and translations in other languages, in particular his *De ecclesia*. The execution of the council's order took place in public, before the Münster.⁵⁴

Two developments are worth mentioning. First, it is notable how often books in the vernacular are mentioned. This started already in 1200, when the Song of Songs in French was burnt;⁵⁵ but especially from the fourteenth century onwards, the fact that

⁴⁴ Werner 2007, Appendix A, Nos. 1–3 (Manichaeans), 10 (West-Gothic Arians).

⁴⁵ Werner 2007, Appendix A, Nos. 19 (Aldebert), 29 (Gottschalk of Orbais), 53 and 55 (Berengarius), 62 (Abaelard), 64 (Abaelard and Arnoldus of Brescia), and 68 (an anonymus).

⁴⁶ Werner 2007, Appendix A, Nos. 72, 90, 336, 384.

⁴⁷ Werner 2007, Appendix A, No. 112.

⁴⁸ Werner 2007, Appendix A, Nos. 142, 169.

⁴⁹ Werner 2007, Appendix A, No. 169.

⁵⁰ Werner 2007, Appendix A, No. 236; cf. also Nos. 274 (concerning a Rule for Beghards), 166, and 380 (mentioning Beghards).

⁵¹ Werner 2007, Appendix A, Nos. 248, 277, 288, 290, 307, 394.

⁵² Werner 2007, Appendix A, Nos. 346, 376, 435, 437, 439.

⁵³ Werner 2007, Appendix A, Nos. 312 (John Claydon), 330 (John), 343 (William Redhead), 349 (John Woodhull(e)).

⁵⁴ Werner 2007, Appendix A, Nos. 310, 406; cf. No. 456.

⁵⁵ Werner 2007, Appendix A, No. 74.

the heretics' books are written in the vernacular (in English or in Catalan, or simply in 'the vernacular', without mentioning the particular language of the books) is adduced as evidence.⁵⁶ Let me give you two examples: in 1369, the emperor Charles IV ordered all heretical or blasphemous writings, especially those written in the vernacular, to be burnt. This kind of writing could be found among Jews, unbelievers or bad Christians, among ecclesiastical orders or lay people, but predominantly lay people, and the books that were actually burnt belonged mainly to Beghards and Beguines. The imperial order was executed mainly in the German parts of the Empire.⁵⁷ And in 1498, in Valencia, Bibles and Psalters in the vernacular were ordered to be burnt (together with the Talmud and other Hebrew books of the Jews, Qurans and other books of the Muslims in the vernacular, and all books against the Christian faith in general).⁵⁸

Why were the books written in the vernacular deemed to be extra dangerous? I can think of two reasons. The ideas contained in vernacular heretical texts were more likely to reach large numbers of people than the same ideas in Latin texts, which first needed to be translated for those who did have insufficient Latin. And when books of the Bible were at issue, the dangers to the textual tradition (and therefore the risk of errors dangerous to the soul) were increased by the dangers of mistranslation. It was less dangerous to read the Bible in Latin than it was to read it in any translation. The church authorities have long been in two minds about spreading the very words of the Gospel (rather than merely its message as they understood it) to laymen in their own vernacular, which led to views ranging from tacit approval (especially after the printing press brought the vernacular Bible to more people than before, if only because of the prohibitive cost of copies) to stern prohibition. Because of what was at stake, one can understand that they had a tendency to err on the side of caution.

The second development has to do with the fact that, from the fourteenth century onwards, the orders for the destruction of heretical books become less specific. In 1452, for example, King Henry VI of England condemns seditious and heretical writings which have been published on church doors or have been distributed in other manners. These writings have to be destroyed by tearing them up or cutting them to pieces.⁵⁹ And in 1458 Friedrich Reiser, a Waldensian and Hussite preacher and bishop was burnt on the Rossmarkt at Strasbourg together with *Bücher, darinne die Artikel stant* (on the basis of which he was condemned), or simply *etwie vil siner Bücher, alle, die do warent ...*⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Werner 2007, Appendix A, Nos. 81 (theology in French), 229 (vernacular books), 241 (Raymundus Lullus in Catalan), 249 (Pedro ça Plana in Catalan), 318 (vernacular (English)), 369, 371, 374, 382 and 394 (Reginald Peacock, some of whose works are specified as written in English), 377 (vernacular Bible), 446 (vernacular Bibles).

⁵⁷ Werner 2007, Appendix A, No. 229.

⁵⁸ Werner 2007, Appendix A, No. 446.

⁵⁹ Werner 2007, Appendix A, No. 367.

⁶⁰ Werner 2007, Appendix A, No. 377.

After the introduction of printing we find, in 1501, an order by pope Alexander VI against printed books that contain statements contrary to the faith (and everywhere, but especially in the ecclesiastical provinces of Cologne, Mainz, Trier, and Magdeburg, the order was executed).⁶¹ The next year king Ferdinand and queen Isabella of Spain more or less repeat this order, specifying that ‘unauthorised prints’ are meant.⁶² And this will be the solution to the question, how to decide which (printed) books are contrary to the Faith. In 1515, pope Leo X and the Fifth Lateran Council order the destruction of all books printed without approval.⁶³ A year earlier, in 1514, a London draper, Richard Hunne’s *diverse English bokis prohibitt and dampnyd by the law* had been condemned.⁶⁴ This still left some room for debate, because could everyone know which titles in particular had been forbidden by law? The explicit ecclesiastical approval suggested by Leo X and the council fathers of 1515 put an end to this uncertainty, as the approval could be printed in the approved books itself. This order was executed everywhere.⁶⁵

But let us quickly move on to other types of proscribed texts. We will have to pass over in silence the 25 recorded cases of condemned magical texts, which almost always were in the possession of singular (mainly learned) individuals.⁶⁶ Let us rather consider, in the short space that is left, the books of the Jews and pagans (i. e. Muslims).

5 Jewish Texts

In the 27 cases of the prohibition of Jewish books, apart from the writings of Maimonides (condemned in Montpellier in 1232 by inquisitors, apparently acting on information gathered from Jewish opponents of Maimonides)⁶⁷ and Nachmanides (whose disputation with the Dominican Pablo Christiani was condemned in Barcelona in 1265),⁶⁸ the Talmud is the text most often mentioned as worthy of destruction, from 1239–1242 onwards (when Pope Gregory IX orders the destruction of *universos libros*

⁶¹ Werner 2007, Appendix A, No. 463.

⁶² Werner 2007, Appendix A, No. 466.

⁶³ Werner 2007, Appendix A, No. 484.

⁶⁴ Werner 2007, Appendix A, No. 482.

⁶⁵ The following cases mentioned by Werner 2007, Appendix A, can also be understood as the destruction of heretical books: Nos. 75, 82, 120, 126, 135, 138, 144, 146, 151, 159–160, 177, 206, 208, 212, 219, 231, 249, 325, 327, 332, 337–338, 340, 352, 359, 362, 395, 397, 399, 403, 410, 447–448, 467, 474, and 477. For reasons of space we pass these cases over in silence.

⁶⁶ Werner 2007, Appendix A, Nos. 24, 84, 189, 205, 222, 225–226, 233–234, 237, 245, 256–257, 260, 284, 334, 350, 356, 361, 363, 386, 391, 418, 433 and 472. The three cases in which scientific texts were destroyed, may be mentioned here as well: Nos. 180, 190 and 207.

⁶⁷ Werner 2007, Appendix A, Nos. 85, 128 and 129.

⁶⁸ Werner 2007, Appendix A, No. 130.

Judaeorum, an order executed in France, England, and the Iberian Peninsula),⁶⁹ until 1498 (when, as we saw already, at Valencia the Talmud and other Hebrew books of the Jews, together with Bibles and Psalters in the vernacular and Qurans and other Muslim books written in the vernacular, were condemned).⁷⁰ The famous destruction, in 1242, of Jewish books in *maxima multitudo* at Paris (ordered by an ecclesiastical court inspired by the masters of the university and executed with the assistance of king Louis IX)—24 wagon loads in one day on the public place, followed by six wagon loads on another occasion⁷¹—sadly was no exception.⁷²

From the middle of the fifteenth century onwards we also hear of the books of the *conversos* on the Iberian Peninsula (Jews or Muslims who had converted to Christianity, but whose true beliefs were suspect in the eyes of some Christians). In Valencia, around 1450, eight or nine Bibles translated from the Hebrew into Romance were destroyed before the cathedral, due to an order of an ecclesiastical censorship committee.⁷³ Later on, Hebrew ‘bibles’ are receiving the same treatment as well.⁷⁴ Finally, the case of Johannes Reuchlin is noteworthy: in 1514, the inquisitor Johan van den Heuvel, a Dominican, found that this humanist, lawyer, and lay theologian’s *Augenspiegel*, which had been printed in 1511, had to be burnt. This text was a defence of Reuchlin’s approval of the year before of Jewish literature—against the ideas of Johannes Pfefferkorn in the ‘Battle over Jewish books’.⁷⁵

6 Muslim Texts

Finally a few words on the books of the ‘pagans’, who are almost always identified with Muslims.⁷⁶ Only four cases of the destruction of their books can be documented. In 866, Pope Nicholas I writes to Boris I, the first Christian prince of the Bulgarians, who had been baptised the previous year, that the profane books, *quos a Saracenis vos abstulisse* have to be burnt; this duly happened.⁷⁷ It is unclear what kind of texts

⁶⁹ Werner 2007, Appendix A, No. 91.

⁷⁰ Werner 2007, Appendix A, No. 442.

⁷¹ Werner 2007, Appendix A, No. 93.

⁷² For other burnings of the Talmud, see Werner 2007, Appendix A, Nos. 105, 108–109, 111, 128–129, 136, 155–156, 172–173, 176, 229, 322–323 and 347.

⁷³ Werner 2007, Appendix A, No. 364. Other instances of *conversos* are Nos. 364, 408, 421, 425 and 431.

⁷⁴ Werner 2007, Appendix A, No. 441–442. Cf. also No. 473.

⁷⁵ Werner 2007, Appendix A, No. 479.

⁷⁶ The only exception seems to be Werner 2007, Appendix A, No. 51, which may refer to the pagans in the North.

⁷⁷ Werner 2007, Appendix A, No. 35.

are meant. As the pope calls the books ‘profane’, we may have to think of translations of pagan Greek texts; but this is not certain.

We have to wait until 1498 for the next case, that of Valencia which we mentioned before, as both books in the (Romance) vernacular and Jewish books were mentioned in one breath with the books of the Muslims.⁷⁸ Around 1500, the Franciscan bishop of Toledo orders the destruction of the books of the Moors (the *Mudéjares*) in Granada, which consist of Qurans and other Muslim texts – with the exception of medical texts, which apparently served salutary purposes.⁷⁹ And the next year king Ferdinand and queen Isabella repeated the order of the bishop. This time, Qurans and all other religious writings of the Muslims are specified.⁸⁰

7 Conclusion

Clearly Muslim religious writings could be perceived as a threat on the Iberian Peninsula. But the actual destruction of Qurans seems to have been less widespread than it has been in recent times. The recent problems in the Middle East and in the countries of Western Europe in which Muslims, as workers and, more recently, as refugees from violence, are perceived by sizeable parts of the so-called ‘indigenous’ populations as threats to ‘Judaean-Christian values’, have led to the burning of books by ministers of the Church in Florida (in 2010)⁸¹ and by American soldiers in Afghanistan (in 2012).⁸² Not to mention the film *Fitna* by the Dutch Muslim-basher Geert Wilders, in which the Quran is not treated with the respect Muslims give to their scripture.⁸³ The identification of ideas and texts with the books in which they are written down reminds one of the intentional destruction of books in the Middle Ages. But the circumstances, aims, and possibly even the nature of these modern book burnings are different from their medieval (and early modern) predecessors. Even the partial ‘destruction’ of the Ukrainian library in Moscow with which I began this paper was different—in yet another way—from the wholesale destruction of books in the Middle Ages. Before we can start a comparative study of book destruction of the past and the present destructions, we need to realise the differences between the various sets of circumstances in which these acts of violence took place.

⁷⁸ Cf. *supra*, note 68.

⁷⁹ Werner 2007, Appendix A, No. 454.

⁸⁰ Werner 2007, Appendix A, No. 465.

⁸¹ Wikipedia, “Terry Jones”, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Terry_Jones_\(pastor\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Terry_Jones_(pastor)) (last accessed: 02.07.2017); on further modern examples see also Bosmajian 2006, e. g. 134–139, 166–180, and 195–205.

⁸² Wikipedia, “2012 Afghanistan Quran burning protests”, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2012_Afghanistan_Quran_burning_protests (last accessed: 30.07.2017).

⁸³ Wikipedia, “Fitna”, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fitna_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fitna_(film)) (last accessed : 02.07.2017).

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