



Image I took as I headed into Palace Green Library on 2 March, when I was still able to work there

The coronavirus pandemic has made 2020 a difficult year for everyone. Having started my Zeno Karl Schindler Barker Priory Library fellowship on secret writing and cryptography in Priory Library manuscripts in November last year, I had a scant five months to work before lockdown and building closures – together with the uncertainty and deep sense of crisis that we have all shared – made further research much more challenging. But despite these lows, there have been many high points as well, particularly the community of people I met in Durham, which has continued to function and provide mutual support online, and the fantastic resource represented by the Priory Library digitisation project, which has enabled me to meet some of my research goals remotely.

As a result, I have been able to accomplish what I had hoped I would – that is, to conduct a case study on medieval book ciphers that would reveal why they were so common and what stood behind them, since it has been clear for many years that they were not simply light relief for bored monks. I have discovered that ciphers were part of the widespread medieval practice of encoding. They went one step further, however, by hijacking the visual and linguistic codes everyone already knew, and using their messages to communicate whatever the cryptographer wished. Ciphers were used to establish networks of patronage, a sense of communal belonging, and political or literary credibility. Cryptography in medieval books therefore expressed social and intellectual identity. This is a new discovery that I was able to present at the Dark Archives digital conference organised by Medium Aevum (the Oxford Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literature) at <https://aevum.space/darkarchives>. The paper is due to be published next year.¹

The research that has come from my fellowship is therefore ground-breaking, and as the successful case study that I had hoped it would be, it will support a future investigation. In the next two years, as planned, I intend to organise a workshop on medieval and early modern cryptography together with a colleague at the University of Wuppertal in Germany, and to apply for a major research grant to investigate the questions raised by ciphers across a much broader range of evidence. Although I am sad to have missed the opportunity to take full advantage of everything Durham and IMEMS have to offer, I feel that my fellowship has been enormously enjoyable, successful and productive – despite the odds – and that it will make a real difference to my future career. I'm leaving Durham with a sense that my research was valued and encouraged. I'm deeply grateful to Joanna Barker and Jacqueline Schindler, whose support has made these achievements possible.

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¹ A. Dorofeeva, 'A reconsideration of the function of ciphers in medieval manuscripts', *Crafting Knowledge in the Early Medieval Book: Practices of Collecting and Concealing*, ed. S. O'Sullivan and C. Arthur (Brepols, forthcoming in 2021).