

**Around Theophilus:
an expert meeting towards new standards in Theophilus scholarship**

Workshop organized by Mark Clarke (Amsterdam) and Ad Stijnman
at the Herzog August Bibliothek
Wolfenbüttel, 14. bis 15. Januar 2010

Status quaestionis

The treatise known as „De diversis artibus”, or the „Schedula Diversarium Artium”, or simply the „Schedula”, attributed to ‚Theophilus’, also known as ‚Theophilus presbyter’, is one of the most important, and certainly the most cited and most discussed, of all mediaeval craft treatises. Book I describes the craft of painting, Book II that of glass, and Book III that of metalwork, including working precious materials, the construction of organs and the founding of bells.

Described in bibliographies of the sixteenth century, the text first attained prominence in 1774 when G. E. Lessing, who was at that time the librarian of the HAB, first published a notice and extracts from Cod. Guelf. 69 Gudianus latinus in his „Vom Alter der Ölmalerei aus dem Theophilus Presbyter” (Braunschweig: in der Buchhandlung des Fürstlichen Waisenhauses). This twelfth-century MS is today believed to be one of the two earliest surviving manuscripts of Theophilus. Subsequently, four principal relatively complete copies of the „Schedula” have been identified, and extracts are found in dozens of other MSS.

The extracts published by Lessing were instructions for painting in oil. Theophilus immediately attracted international interest, as the „Schedula” provided the first-known concrete and irrefutable evidence for the use of oil paint, centuries before its supposed invention by the van Eycks in the early fifteenth century – an attribution derived entirely from „Le Vite de’ più eccellenti architetti, pittori, et scultori Italiani” published by the Italian art historian Vasari in 1550, over a hundred years after the death of van Eyck, which had long been taken as gospel (and which indeed retains some currency today).

Despite extensive debate since 1774, considerable uncertainty remains as to the authorship and date of composition of the original „Schedula”.

Based on internal textual evidence, various dates have been suggested, ranging from Lessing’s ninth century to Eastlake’s thirteenth century. The parts of the „Schedula” that have most been used by scholars to attempt a closer dating are the prologues to each book. These have been taken to be responses to certain theological disputes on the role of decorative arts in the Church, including Bernard of Clairvaux, Petrus Alphonsus, Hugh of St Victor, and Rupert of Deutz, and thus datable to c.1110-c.1140. However, with attempts to date the text based on observed parallels between surviving artefacts and the technical processes described within, the date range widens remarkably: parallels have been suggested for pre-1100 book on illumination, for twelfth-century painting, and for metalwork from the tenth to thirteenth century at least.

Concerning authorship, based on the pseudonym ‚Theophilus’, the ascription ‚presbyter’, and the identification ‚qui est Rugerus’ (added in a later hand to Wien ÖNB Cod. 2527), taken together with the regions from

which the major MSS originate, and regional peculiarities of the craft practices described, a range of attributions have been made to named individuals or to classes of individuals, including Roger of Helmarshausen c.1100, Bruno of St Pantaleon in Köln, the twelfth-century medical compiler Northungus, or (as suggested at the HAB meeting) Bernward of Hildesheim c.1000. ‚Theophilus‘ may have been working or travelling in northern and central Europe, perhaps around Braunschweig, or Reichenau, or the Upper Rhine, or specifically in Köln, but anyway most likely in Germany – in which case perhaps we should call him ‚Gottlieb‘!

While Theophilus may indeed have been a ‚monk and priest‘, it is unclear whether he was also a practicing craftsman. It has not even been possible to agree on why the text was written: whether the author was principally trying to transmit or promote certain standards and techniques in craft, or whether he was primarily concerned with contributing to the theological debate on the „artes mechanicae“ and Church ornament. These questions are confused by the variation in its subsequent reception and use, which were clearly scholarly in some cases and practical in others.

The past two centuries have produced an ever-increasing volume of published art-historical, art-technological, and conservation-restoration scholarship that is based wholly or in part on Theophilus. It has become impossible to refer to Romanesque art, or indeed any mediaeval European painting, glass or metalwork, without reference to the „Schedula“. This means that the lack of agreement on such basic questions as where and when it was composed should be a matter of immediate concern.

The meeting

It was decided that an attempt should be made to assess and review this vast mass of contradictory literature, and to attempt to synthesise an agreement on at least a common acceptable range of possible dates and geographical regions. The HAB generously offered to host a meeting in which it was hoped such a consensus could be reached. This meeting was arranged in collaboration with the International Council of Museums Conservation Committee working group on Art Technological Source Research (ICOM-CC ATSR), and took place at the HAB on 14-15 January 2010. On both days the two HAB Theophilus MSS (Cod. Guelf. 69 Gud. lat. and Cod. Guelf. 1127. Helmst.) were made available for inspection, as were other MSS containing art-technological ‚recipes‘ or of art-technological interest such as a tenth-century interpolated Vitruvian epitome (Cod. Guelf. 132 Gud. lat.) along with a number of early and important publications concerning the „Schedula“. *Christian Heitzmann* also presented the „Wolfenbüttler Musterbuch“ (Cod. Guelf. 61.2 Aug. 4°), which, like the approximately contemporary „Schedula“, was an important vector of Byzantine artistic ideas north to Braunschweig and beyond. In a similar context, the Wolfenbüttel State Archive kindly facilitated a viewing of the marriage contract of the Byzantine princess Theophanou, who married the German Emperor Otto II in 972.

As a stimulus to the main business of the meeting, *viz* discussion, the participants briefly presented their recent work on issues of authorship and date, on Theophilus‘ idiosyncratic technical vocabulary, on the treatise’s reception and use, on technical and archaeological parallels with the treatise, and on historical bibliographies of the MSS.

Participants

The HAB kindly hosted sixteen participants:

Germany: *Christian Heitzmann*, *Almuth Corbach* and *Patrizia Carmassi* (HAB), *Robert Fuchs* and *Doris Oltrogge* (Fachhochschule, Köln), *Andreas Speer* and *Ilya Dines* (Thomas-Institut, Universität Köln), *Hiltrud Westermann-Angerhausen* (Schnütgen Museum, Köln)

England: *Jo Kirby* (National Gallery, London)

Italy and France: *Elisabetta Neri* (private scholar)

Netherlands and Belgium: *Mark Clarke* (Universiteit van Amsterdam)

Netherlands: *Ad Stijnman* (private scholar), *Arie Wallert* (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam)

Spain: *Stefanos Kroustallis* (Spanish Ministry of Culture, Madrid), *Jordi Camps i Sòria* and *Manuel A. Castiñeiras González* (Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona)

Regrets were received from Anna Bartl, Christoph Krekel, Manfred Lautenschlager, Jilleen Nadolny, and Claudio Seccaroni.

In addition, *Bertram Lesser* (HAB) kindly presented his observations on indications of a further ‚missing‘ HAB Theophilus MS.

This was an inter-disciplinary group of scholars working in conservation-restoration, art history, codicology, archaeology, and the history of technology. The meeting was primarily an expert meeting of those who have thought deeply about Theophilus' treatise per se, from different points of view.

Communiqué of conclusions

The primary aim of the meeting was to attempt to reach a consensus on fundamental questions of authorship, date and purpose.

The sessions were chaired by *Mark Clarke*, who in his opening statement suggested that the contradictory evidence (and consequent divergent conclusions and interpretations) are best explained by understanding that the „Schedula“ is a composite text, rather than a coherent text by a single author. If different parts were composed by different individuals with different objectives, writing in different locations and environments, and at different dates, then it follows that different parts reflect different practices, and that in consequence arguments over the date as indicated by one part of the treatise (for example, references to datable theological debates in the prologues) need not be contradicted by arguments based on evidence from other chapters (for example, datable technical parallels). It was gratifying to find that all participants were able to agree with this conclusion.

An argument that was felt to be particularly probable was that ‚Theophilus‘ was the compiler who brought together texts which already existed in some form, (perhaps Books I and II), edited them and added the prologues (in this model, Book III would be a later addition). This most probably occurred c.1100, most probably in Germany, most probably by a supervisor of works.

One consequence of this new paradigm is that from now on it would be preferable to talk not of an individual author, ‚Theophilus‘, but rather of a composite text, the „Schedula“. Another crucial consequence is that it is no longer possible to talk of ‚incomplete‘ or ‚complete‘ „MSS of the „Schedula“: rather, it should now be the task of scholars to establish which parts formed the „Schedula“ as it was originally composed and compiled by ‚Theophilus‘, and which parts pre-existed (and in what form, e.g. perhaps in Byzantine Greek), and which parts were added later (and ideally determine when and where they were added). Early editors (Escalopier 1843, Ilg 1874, Hendrie 1847) included chapters now not considered canonical. Subsequent editors, however, have accepted such chapters as those on pearls, organs and bells in Book III. Participants in Wolfenbüttel however, were able to suggest various sections of the „Schedula“ that their own researches indicate to be anachronistic or otherwise intrusive and inconsistent when compared with the bulk of the text, such as bell

casting (*Neri, Dines*), organs (*Dines*), certain of the instructions for casting censers (*Westermann-Angerhausen*), and probably ink and tinkering (*Clarke*). Indeed, language analysis suggests that the whole of Book III may perhaps be separated. Furthermore, certain variant fragments of the „Schedula” found in other MSS may now be reconsidered as not necessarily corrupt, but as possibly representing stages in the accumulation of components.

It has long been assumed that the intention and use of the „Schedula” was practical. An alternative school of thought is that it was polemic: i.e. that it was theological, justifying the use of craft and luxurious objects; perhaps to be used to the ‚corporate identity’ of a specific brand of monasticism and promote the use of sumptuary arts to the wilds east of the territory of the German Emperors, or the barbarous French or English. More recently it has been realised that the intent could have been both, i.e. polyvalent, both practical and spiritual, like so much in the mediaeval world. (For example, the instructions for casting censers are both technical instructions and a theological vindication of the „artes” in the service of the church.) It has been noted that Theophilus seems to have enjoyed a ‚general’ readership, i.e. readers that were not craftsmen, but who were interested in the natural world. This is certainly so, but it is not the whole story. Whatever the original intention of the author was, at least some of the subsequent Theophilus MSS were clearly intended for practical use by craftsmen.

The participants were in agreement that in general, while parts of the „Schedula” provide excellent technical descriptions (notably for metalwork), others are inadequate (notably painting): the consensus is that the core or Ur-„Schedula” was most likely intended not for craftsmen but for overseers of craftsmen, or perhaps for patrons.

It is the expressed wish of the participants that this new paradigm and new consensus will become the basis for all future research either on Theophilus per se, or any art historical or archaeological research that uses or even depends on Theophilus.

All the participants were also unanimous in thanking the HAB for its generosity and hospitality and for making this most productive milestone of a meeting possible.

The „Schedula” and issues arising will be discussed further at a forthcoming conference: „The Schedula diversarum artium: A compendium of Medieval Art?”, an international conference co-organised by the Thomas-Institute (University of Cologne) and the Museum Schnütgen (City of Cologne), 9-11 September 2010, at the Museum Schnütgen (contact: andreas.speer@uni-koeln.de).

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