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All that shines like vellum is not necessarily so

Vellum prepared from calfskins is considered to be the best quality parchment for writing purposes. Are all the manuscripts that have in the past been described in different library or exhibition catalogues as being written on vellum really written on calf parchment? It seems that the word 'vellum' became more or less synonymous with the parchment of fine quality that has been automatically assigned to certain manuscripts because of their significance rather than as a result of undertaking serious identification and description of the types of parchment used.

It might be found quite surprising that results of the examination of parchment types used for some of the most prominent manuscripts show that they were in reality not written on vellum but on very well prepared and indeed very shiny sheep parchment or even goat and deer parchment.

Results of my recent PhD research project show that the value of the identification of the animal species from which the skins were made for parchment has for several decades been underestimated and the physical description of many manuscripts contains in part misleading information.

With the combination of visual and biomolecular analyses of parchment with practical parchment-making experiments it has been possible to find correct answers and shed new light on the methods of production of parchment in different historical periods and geographical locations.