

The decisive stage of parchment making.

Henk de Groot

It is worth remembering that the initial stages of working a hide are the same for both the parchment maker and the tanner, which are depilating, defleshing and stripping the hide of the soil substance, the gel-like protein substance in which the important collagen strands lie. All three operations are performed with hide placed on a tree trunk.

The bare, rinsed skin, stripped of hair, flesh and soil substance, then enters the decisive stage. The tanner puts the hide in tanning baths until it is leather, a complicated technical process. The parchment maker stretches the hide on the stretching frame until it is parchment, with complicated operations that rely on professional experience.

A cleaned hide, suspended by two points from the back legs, but not stretched, shrinks when drying. In length, the skin remains nearly the same. It is the two sides of the belly that contract the most.

When we compare such a dried hide with a finished parchment sheet, it is clear that there is a lot of work done before one obtains a manuscript parchment sheet.

The unstretched dried hide shrinks and darkens. It is hard, quite transparent, and not flexible, and can be a dangerous battle weapon.

The first thing we do is stretch the wet cleaned hide on a stretching frame. If we stretch the skin on the legs first, the skin remains most in its original shape. In this way, the belly regions remain the most stable and cannot be overstretched when the tension clamps do their work there as well. But the stretching should not be completely tight. Now begins the essential stage in machining into manuscript parchment.

A blunt half-moon knife is used to work the wet not fully stretched skin as if the parchment maker were a physical therapist. He must make sure that the collagen fibers detach from each other, but do not clump creating hard spots; that they can move, become supple and that the skin has an equal tension over the entire surface. This operation is performed with the blunt semicircular blade applying full force of the body. In this way, the residues of the watery soil are removed.

Then the wonder of transformation occurs: a less wet skin loses its transparency and turns white under the "torturing" knife. The altered skin is now opaque, has a compact, adhered fiber structure. **The white drawn parchment dawns.**

When two transparent circles at the end of the spine, one on each side of the spine line, can be seen in the parchment end product, it is a sign that the blunt semicircular knife failed to give here the skin an equal tension as the rest of the skin. The skin in those areas was wide because the skin was around protruding bones. A skin not sufficiently stretched out becomes turns into a transparent parchment. We also see this with the pieces between the tension clamps at the edge of the stretched skin.

The skin on the back and close to it is more rigid due to a firmer structure in these areas since the skin reacts here to external influences such as weather conditions. The belly sides are naturally more supple, mobile and thinner. To obtain an even skin, the blunt semicircular blade has, therefore, more work to do on the dorsal side.

The skin on the spine line from head to tail can only be stretched to a very limited extent. "Physical therapy" work will continuously stretch the skin, making it larger. Therefore, the parchment maker will have to continuously tighten the skin during this work until the skin, becomes homogeneously white, and is fully stretched. Then there is nothing left but to let the skin dry. But even then, the skin will have to be re-tightened in between. As if under constant tension, the skin gives in. It is important that the skin does not become too uneven in thickness and weakness as a result of stretching. This whole machining of the skin is the art of the parchment maker.

Often, we see that in a manuscript the main text is written on the most stable piece of parchment: close to the spine line. Then the decorated initials also lie nicely stably protected. The binding has the barely movable spine line in the spine. The belly sides can then contain comments etc. You can thus handle the manuscript page without touching the main text. It lies there within the book well protected. We often find this structure in paper printings as well.