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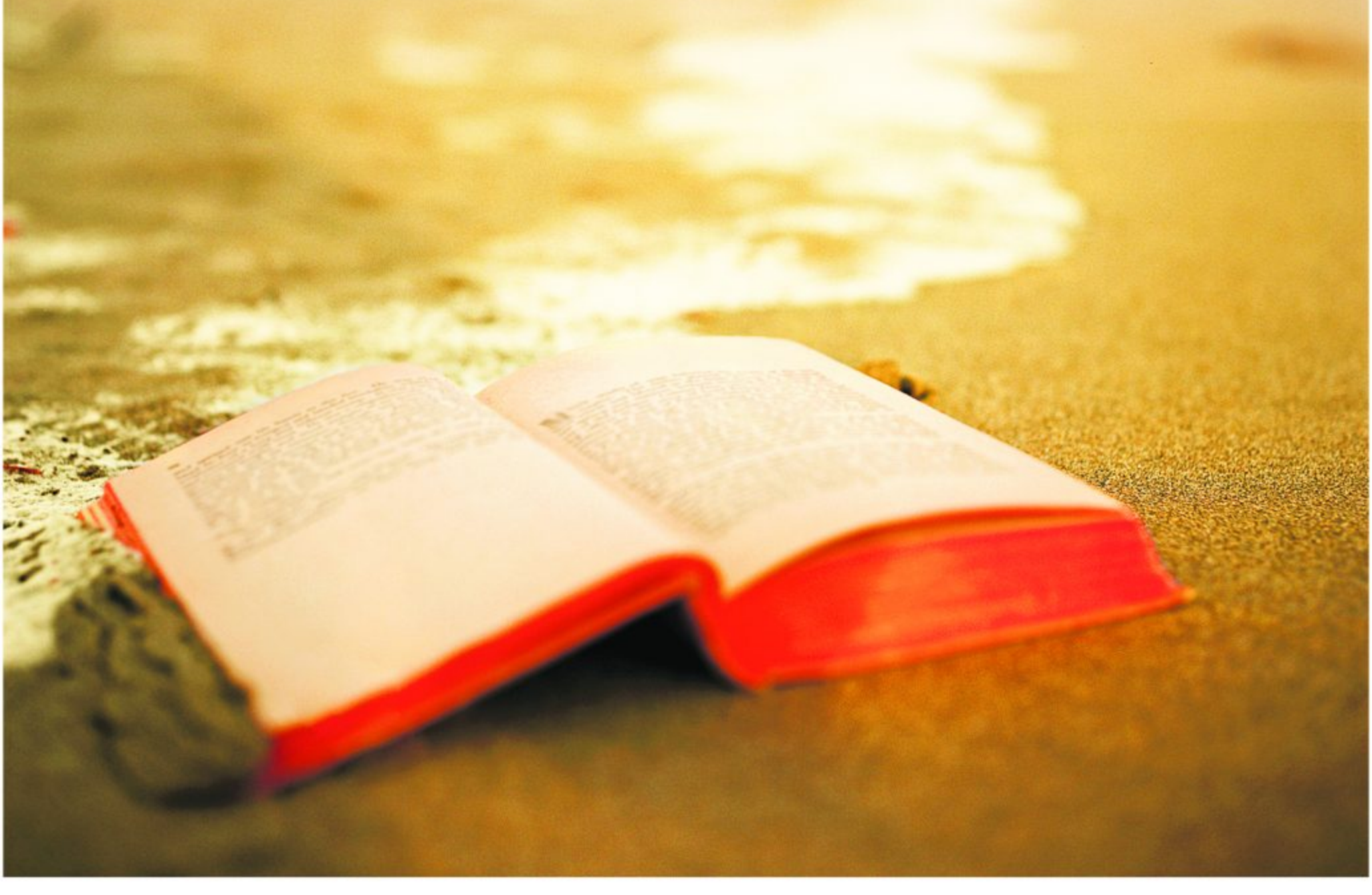

Here he lies

The sixteenth-century forged gravestone and the false Swiss legend

WILLIAM STENHOUSE

Arthur Freeman

JULIA ALPINULA, PSEUDO-HEROINE OF HELVETIA
How a forged Renaissance epitaph fostered a national myth
65pp. Quaritch. Paperback, £15.
978 0 9933762 0 7

In early AD 69, a Roman legion supporting the newly proclaimed Emperor Vitellius put down an uprising of the Helvetii, Gallic tribesmen who had remained loyal to Vitellius's predecessor. The Roman soldiers refrained from sacking the Helvetian capital city, Aventicum (now Avranches, Switzerland), but not before they had killed Julius Alpinus, one of the local leaders. Julia Alpinula, Julius Alpinus's daughter, a young priestess, begged unsuccessfully for her father's life; she died not long afterwards, at the age of twenty-three.

Julia's story of filial devotion is an inspiring one, and can be filed alongside other tales of indigenous resistance to the perfidious Romans, such as Boudicca's revolt, or the more successful uprising of Arminius, progenitor of Herman the German, which claimed three Roman legions. Julia duly took her place in various accounts of Switzerland in the Roman period – the Swiss lacked other female heroes – and, more prominently, was immortalized by Byron in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812–18). This is the Julia whose heart "broke o'er a father's grave". But, as Arthur Freeman shows in his entertaining and elegant investigation of the story's afterlife, there was one problem: while the uprising was recorded by Tacitus, Julia was not. In fact, she was an invention of Paulus Merula, a sixteenth-century classical scholar. Merula was not even Swiss: he was born in Dordrecht, matriculated at the University of Leiden in 1578, and seems to have become interested in the Helvetii while studying law in Geneva in the 1580s.

To invent this anti-Roman heroine, Merula forged a Latin inscription, which purported to be her epitaph. "Here I lie", it began, "the unhappy child of an unhappy father, priestess of the goddess of Aventia. I could not by supplication avoid the slaying of my father." Merula sent details of this text to the then Professor of History at Leiden, Justus Lipsius, who was editing a collection of epigraphic records for publication. Along with the Julia example, Merula supplied eighteen others, six of which were also forged. Lipsius included them in his edition. He gave his source as "Paulus Gulielmus", the pseudonym under which Merula, whose great-uncle had famously been burned for Lutheranism, travelled in Catholic areas. As a result, the inscriptions avoided much scrutiny, and with Lipsius's imprimatur, they appeared in subsequent collections. Only in the eighteenth century did scholars begin to have doubts about Julia, and in 1828 Johann Caspar Orelli condemned her epitaph in print. But by that point, Byron had discovered her, and embellished her story; Freeman has fun uncovering her roles as a tragic heroine in nineteenth-century Swiss drama.

Why did Merula invent the inscription? Freeman is too experienced a student of the peculiarities of literary forgery to posit a simple answer. But we can speculate. The sixteenth century was a high point for epigraphic forgery because of the confluence of two historical trends. First, in a period of rapid political change, families, institutions and states sought precedents in the past for their contemporary privileges and rights; at the same time, historians of antiquity argued that material evidence, including inscriptions, was a more trustworthy source than the narrative texts that had been vitiated by medieval copyists. If, however, Merula wanted to provide incontrovertible proof for a proto-nationalist heroine, sending the information to Lipsius, rather than a Swiss historian, was not the best way of doing so. Rather, he seems to have wanted to demonstrate his own mastery of the classical idiom by deceiving the new star at his alma mater. (In a similar vein, Merula was later to publish a pioneering edition of the fragments of Ennius, in which he included fifteen of his own creations.) Lipsius had made his name editing Tacitus; perhaps Merula hoped that he would recognize the connection with Julia and cite the inscription in new editions. Lipsius, however, did not take the bait, and Julia only found fame with the Romantics.

Arthur Freeman presents his essay as a footnote to his *Bibliotheca Fictiva*, a catalogue of literary forgeries across the ages (reviewed in the *TLS*, September 4, 2015). Readers whose critical faculties have been sharpened by Julia's story, however, will be sceptical of his description; his gently wry investigation stands alone as a delightful story of scholarly mendacity, carelessness and credulity.

Illuminating

A history of beautiful Jewish manuscripts

ILANA TAHAN

Marc Michael Epstein, editor

SKIES OF PARCHMENT, SEAS OF INK
Jewish illuminated manuscripts
288pp. Princeton University Press.
£41.95 (US $60).
978 0 691 16524 0

Skies of Parchment, Seas of Ink: Jewish illuminated manuscripts, edited by Marc Michael Epstein, provides a detailed survey of Jewish manuscript art from its beginnings in the medieval period to the present day. It represents the broad gamut of illuminated hand-written specimens produced by the Jewish people known as the People of the Book, and contains eleven essays by ten leading specialists, as well as many superb colour illustrations of manuscripts held in well-known library collections around the world, including the British Library, the Bodleian Library and the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York.

Owing to historic factors such as confiscations, expulsions, pogroms and public burnings, only a small quantity of Jewish hand-copied books has survived; these constitute valuable testimony to the rich and prolific tradition of manuscript production among the Jewish communities of the Christian West and the Islamic East. One of the fundamental ideas emerging from this book is that Jews were inspired by the artistic motifs and symbols present in the host environment, "but they always adapted them to their own purpose, in response to the circumstances in which they found themselves in particular times and places". A potent example is the unicorn, a motif borrowed from contemporary Christian art. In Christian manuscripts, the unicorn symbolizes Jesus, whereas in Jewish manuscript illumination, it embodies the final redemption of Israel.

Each essay introduces the reader to a single facet of Jewish manuscript illumination. One deals with the materials used in the production of manuscripts and the contributions made by the people involved in this labour-intensive process – scribes, artists, patrons and readers. The scribe fulfilled a key role, being essentially the project manager: his principal task was to plan the layout of the book, including the placement of the illuminations, initial-word panels and additional commentaries. He guided the illuminators, ensuring that their work conformed to the patron's requirements. In another essay, we learn about specific Jewish texts such as bibles and Passover service books (*Haggadot*) that were considered apt for decoration, and the limitations often imposed by religious authorities. During the thirteenth century, rabbinic leaders in Ashkenaz (Franco-German lands) attempted to instil piety and asceticism in their communities. In order to deter idolatry, it was strictly forbidden to represent the deity and human forms in manuscripts visually. Artists bypassed these strict rules either by defacing or veiling human faces, or by replacing them with animal heads.

Professor Shalom Sabar's essay on marriage and the family brings to the fore the significant role women have played in Judaism. The Jewish woman's realm has been depicted in a variety of manuscripts, particularly decorated prayer books written specifically for women, and *ketubbot* (marriage contracts). Decorated prayer books for Jewish women became popular in the eighteenth century in Germany and neighbouring countries, and were often commissioned as wedding gifts. The illustrations found in these hand-copied books depict the interiors of Jewish homes, and often show women performing obligatory commandments, such as the kindling of the Sabbath lights. With a history stretching back two millennia, the Jewish marriage contract is one of the earliest documents granting women legal and financial rights. The earliest decorated specimens date from around the ninth or tenth centuries, and the most lavishly illustrated contracts were produced in Italy in the seventeenth and eighteenth. Many of the decorative embellishments and verses featured in them reflected the ideals of a righteous housewife, and a good family life and marriage.

"Women learning together and with men in harmony" in the First Darmstadt Haggadah, fifteenth century; from *Skies of Parchment, Seas of Ink*

One of this book's great strengths is its exploration of aspects of Jewish manuscript art that are rarely discussed, or that until now have been only superficially addressed. Epstein himself offers a captivating assessment of Judaeo-Persian illustrated handwritten books of the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, which is backed up by an array of beautiful pictures; some of these are on display for the first time. Likewise, his focus on incidental details throws light on some of the marginal imagery often included in Jewish illuminated hand-copied specimens. In Jewish manuscripts, the meaning of marginal illustration can be clear, ambiguous, or obscure. The meaning should be seen in relation to the central illustrations and their narrative content. In some medieval manuscripts, the marginal illustration of a dog may be interpreted as a symbol of the nations that are trying to destroy Israel, whereas in others it may simply portray an innocent pet.

Equally exceptional are the contribution by Epstein and Professor Hartley Lachter dedicated to the embellishment of Jewish kabbalistic, astrological and calendrical works; and the engaging, detailed appraisal of contemporary Jewish manuscript art that has been created by prominent modern artists such as Barbara Wolf, Avner Moriah, Siona Benjamin and Ilene Winn-Lederer.

In *Skies of Parchment, Seas of Ink*, Epstein has managed to combine meticulous attention to detail (he includes, for example, "foci" – sub-sections intended to emphasize specific facts or points) with personal touches: the text is dotted with anecdotes and cameos. It is gratifying to welcome a book that celebrates Jewish manuscript illumination with such erudition and passion.