

Scriptorium

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Writing-room, specifically the room in a religious house set apart for the copying of manuscripts. The word is found used in this sense from at least the 10th century. The Rule of St Benedict (c. 530) legislates for private reading by monks (as well as for the communal performance of the divine office, which also requires the provision of books), but does not comment on the circumstances in which books should be made. The greater part of early medieval book production—even commissions for secular patrons—seems to have been carried out in monastic houses, which, after the collapse of the Roman Empire, were the main socio-economic units with the stability and resources necessary for the task. Thus manuscript production by and for the use of religious communities largely took the place of that by and for members of a literate public; and the whole process of production, from the preparation of parchment to binding, could be carried out within the one complex (*see* Manuscript §II 1.).

There were three possible locations for medieval scribes and readers: the common room, the individual cell, and the cloister. Rooms near the kitchen or calefactory (warming house), were always desirable locations for writing rooms and libraries because the heat kept materials in good condition and manuscripts dry. Surviving physical evidence for the circumstances of book production in medieval monastic houses is sparse: hence the importance attached to the plan of St Gall Abbey (c. 820; St Gall, Stift.-Bib., MS. 1092; for illustration *see* St Gall Abbey), which may represent an attempt to establish ideal guidelines rather than to depict the layout of any actual structure. The *sedes scribentium* are shown housed next to the church in a ground-floor room between the presbytery and north transept, beneath the library. Seven tables are arranged along the north and east walls of the room, with windows between them. Benches are shown along the west and south walls; a large rectangular piece of furniture in the centre of the room may represent some form of storage for books. Where the facilities for writing partially survive—and the evidence is largely later medieval—they do not always conform to the image of a single common room. At Gloucester Cathedral the south walk of the cloister is furnished along its entire length with a row of 20 stone cells, built 1370–1412, that were apparently intended for reading and writing. This arrangement in the cloister was not exceptional; before the end of the 14th century, few English monasteries had separate writing rooms. To build cells in the cloister, wooden partitions were constructed in front of cloister windows, which were blocked with glass, paper, or rush mats for insulation. These ‘carrels’ formed by a small desk and seat beneath a cloister window resembled church pews in wood or stone. At Bury St Edmunds, Westminster, and Canterbury, carrels were less than a metre wide and three to a window, allowing the occupant little space and comfort for his physically demanding task.

To some extent, arrangements varied according to monastic order: for the semi-eremitical Carthusians, for example, writing was a solitary activity carried out in small cells (see Carthusian Order §3). In the Benedictine monasteries it was more likely to find a large room where monks worked side by side. By extension, the term scriptorium is also used to describe the 'house style' of script and decoration associated with the manuscripts produced at a particular centre; the cooperative nature of book production and the desire for uniformity of appearance tended to subordinate the individuality of particular scribal and artistic personalities. Thus the study of illuminated manuscripts is heavily influenced, especially for the early Middle Ages, by the desire to group manuscripts as the products of individual scriptoria—although the attempt can be seriously undermined by an underestimation of the contacts between different centres. A further question concerns the relation between the copying and decoration of books and that between scribes and artists. In the early Middle Ages there is some evidence that these two activities were often performed by one person.

Within larger religious houses, however, there were classes of scribes and artists, assigned work according to skill and experience: *antiquarii*, or seasoned scribes, received the finest assignments, whereas novice *librarii* or *scriptores* were assigned secretarial work, such as copying letters and records. The scribe making copies duplicated the original content exactly, including errors. In monasteries where scribes and artists were different people, decorative elements were added by rubricators, miniators, and illuminators. Itinerant lay professionals probably also worked side by side with monastic craftsmen, as depicted in a miniature in the Echternach Book of Pericopes (1039–43; Bremen, Staats- & Ubib., MS. b. 21, fol. 124v; for illustration see Echternach), in which monk and layman are shown sitting at separate desks, one behind the other; little can be gleaned about the physical setting from the conventional arcaded architecture. Itinerant professional artists probably lived temporarily in the monasteries where they found employment. On the whole, it seems safest to assume that the most basic forms of decoration, such as minor decorated initials, identify scriptoria with the greatest certainty, since the most elaborate illumination is the element most likely to have been carried out by visiting masters (see Romanesque §IV 2., (ii)). The head librarian or precentor delegated work based on the abbot's instructions; no work was assigned without the abbot's authorization, and no scribe could refuse or exchange the task assigned to him. Sometimes parts of a manuscript were assigned to multiple scribes to expedite production.

Furniture and tools, mostly manufactured in-house, were distributed by the librarian. These included writing utensils (ink, pen, penknife); parchment or paper; a pumice stone to smooth the writing surface, an awl to prick guidelines, and perhaps a metal style to rule the surface; an exemplar, if the scribe was to copy it; and so forth, the inventories and costs of which survive from some monasteries. Setting to task at his desk, the scribe silently took up the pen in his right hand and the penknife in his left to begin writing, a quire at a time. The finished text was later proofread and perhaps decorated. Medieval craftsmen usually worked by natural light to avoid the potential hazards of candles and oil lamps, enduring long hours to make the most of daylight.

From the 13th century a trend towards professionalization and the division of labour is more clearly identifiable. In the context of the newly emerging universities, the demand for books was met by new methods of organization and control (see Manuscript §II 1.; Gothic §IV 2., (i); and Bologna §II 1.). The records of book production and property ownership in 13th-century Paris and Oxford suggest that

publisher–booksellers, scribes, illuminators, parchmenters, and binders were more likely to operate out of neighbouring houses in particular areas of town than to work in the kind of single large unit suggested by the term scriptorium. Furthermore, many scriptoria traded and exchanged manuscripts. To increase inventory, monasteries borrowed manuscripts from others and copied them; or sent a scribe to copy the desired items on premises; or requested a transcription; or traded duplicates for new books. None of these activities went unrecorded, and possibly a deposit of sorts was required

The decline of scriptoria in religious houses dates to the end of the 13th century and the rise of the university system (i.e. thepecia system). Further information on specific scriptoria is given in this dictionary within the relevant articles on religious houses and within cities (where subdivided, under the headings ‘Art life and organization’ or ‘Centre of production’).

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