

The Medieval Scriptorium

Making Books in the Middle Ages

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REAKTION BOOKS

To my family

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CONTENTS

Introduction	II
<i>One</i> The Beginnings	19
<i>Two</i> Monasticism and Manuscript Production in the West, 500–1050	57
<i>Three</i> <i>Locus Scribendi</i> – The Place of Writing	III
<i>Four</i> Material World: Parchment and Ink	161
<i>Five</i> Illumination and Painting	192
<i>Six</i> The Twelfth-Century Renaissance	235
<i>Seven</i> The End of the Scriptorium	275
Conclusion	310

GLOSSARY 315

REFERENCES 321

FURTHER READING 337

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS 339

PHOTO ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS 341

INDEX 343

illuminated Books of Hours. We see developments in parchment making, resulting in parchment in the thirteenth century so thin as to be almost translucent. The range of pigments expanded as new manufacturing techniques were developed and more trade routes opened. Bookbinding improved dramatically, creating such strong structures to hold the text block that many still survive today. And all of this was done because of the simple desire to learn and to share knowledge. No matter how long and arduous the process, it was all worth it to have the finished product. Manuscripts became not just carriers of knowledge, but physical objects in their own right – and so monastic book production took off in medieval Europe, with experiments and developments in writing and decorating styles showcasing the beauty of the written word.

One

The Beginnings

Bethlehem, fourth century CE

Paula rises just before dawn, putting her rush sleeping mat to one side in the grey light. Wearing a simple tunic, already patched in several places, she draws back the blanket across the entrance to her rickety wooden hut and steps out as the sun is rising. Shivering slightly, she inhales the early morning air, smelling the dust mingled with the spicy scent of the wild irises. She says her thanks to God for this morning and enjoys a moment of perfect stillness before walking serenely towards the communal prayer courtyard. Signs of the day beginning are all around her, and as she walks down the central path of the women's quarters, she hears her fellow sisters in their shared rooms talking quietly, gently laughing or humming. Despite the buzz of activity, there is an air of calm tranquillity that encompasses the whole monastery. They chose this site specifically, herself and Jerome, to be near to the birthplace of the Lord. What better way to keep God's message in their hearts than by basing themselves in the very place that it all began, and with the Church of the Nativity so close, their double monastery was becoming a beacon, not just for pilgrims, but those curious of the new religion.

All the residents of the monastery come together every morning for the dawn recital of the psalms. As they file into the courtyard lined with palm trees, the sun creeps over the stone buildings and wooden huts of their humble community, chasing the shadows

away. The courtyard reverberates with voices blending together, male and female, old and young, faces turned heavenward in their morning song.

Once the morning psalms have been sung, Paula gathers her equipment into a small leather bag, including meagre rations for her lunch. She leaves her instructions for the day with her daughter Eustochium, reminding her to prepare the rooms for the weary pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem. She sets off to her private cell on the hillside, away from the familiar hum of the monastery so that she can have perfect silence to absorb herself in her writing. As she walks down the street, she watches the monastic labourers going about their daily tasks purposefully, the ploughman tilling the soil and singing alleluia in a low, resonant tone, the reaper wiping the sweat off his brow while chanting the psalms, and the vinedresser carefully pruning the leaves with his curved blade while singing the Song of David. The sounds of the compound gradually fade away, leaving her only with the sounds of the birds, her feet slapping on the bare ground and her steady breathing. The heat of the sun intensifies as she walks alone along the scrubby path and she concentrates on the beauty of the reds and golds of the desert hills on the horizon to distract her from her growing thirst. She reaches her small square hut, her scriptorium for the day, and is grateful for the shade.

She starts to unpack her bag and lays out her materials on the dusty floor – a wooden board to use as a desk, blank sheets of papyrus rolled up in a bundle, a sealed terracotta pot of ink, a reed pen and a knife. She remembers the beautiful books she saw when she lived in Rome, made of purple-stained parchment and glittering with gold letters and jewels, but now she prefers the humbler papyrus. Like Jerome, she thinks it is the words that are important – no need for unnecessary decoration. The folded-book format, rather than the scroll, and the iron gall ink, are still new to her as writing materials; she was taught as a girl to write on papyrus

scrolls with carbon ink. The older ones at the monastery still frown upon this new technology, but she believes a new religion needs a new way to express itself. The folded papyrus codex is much easier to use, with no endless rolling and unrolling of the scroll to find a certain passage. And the oak galls used by her grandfather to dye his hair black now have a new use as a long-lasting ink. Lastly, she pulls out the wax tablets, with Bible passages crammed with Jerome's notes scratched by his stylus into the soft wax surface. These words are like alchemy to her – from God himself, captured first in Hebrew on the holy scrolls of the old Bible and then into Greek, flowing from one mind to another through stylus and wax, pen and ink, papyrus and parchment. Now Jerome and Paula are transforming them into an everyday Latin text, to allow a greater audience to witness the word of God and understand His message.

Sitting on the floor and using the wall of the hut as a backrest, she flattens the first sheet of papyrus on the wooden board, propped up by her knees. She takes a small drink of water and a morsel of bread to sustain her. The sunlight streams through the open doorway, and she will measure the day by the shadows shifting across the room. Closing her eyes in prayer, she asks God to assist her with her writing, her understanding of His words and her interpretation of them. Then, dipping her pen into the pot of ink at her side, she leans over her makeshift desk and begins to scratch the first words: 'In principio creavit Deus caelum et terram'.

Paula works silently and steadily, the ink forming neat lines of shapes, woven together by her dextrous hand. She is totally absorbed in her task, her mind focused on how the words fit together, flowing from her stream of consciousness, through her hand, onto the page. She does not stop at the third hour, the sixth hour and the ninth hour to recite the psalter – this, then, is her prayer to God, the worship of His words, word made flesh. The sun makes its familiar journey across the sky, insects scuttle in and out of her hut and flies buzz lazily through the dry air, yet Paula is oblivious to

all worldly things, lost in the reverie of holy words. When the shadows start to lengthen and the heat starts to go out of the day, Paula brings herself back to her earthly surroundings. She lays down her reed pen and rotates her aching hand, then stretches her neck from side to side. She lays out the text before her, examining the script she has written, checking for any mistakes. Tomorrow she will show this text to Jerome, and then pass it onto her group of women scribes at the monastery to copy, instructing them to write neatly and quickly. She is driven by the need to spread the word of God to the Latin-speaking Christians, so they can understand the power of His words in their own language.

Sensing the coolness of the early evening air, Paula packs up her writing materials and gets to her feet. Stretching and yawning, she feels the satisfaction of a day given to God's work. Stepping out into the desert, she once again attunes to her surroundings, noticing a lizard standing on a pile of rocks, skin shimmering gold and green in the evening sun before darting through a gap in the stones. She smiles at his hasty retreat, and hiking her bag up over her shoulder, she heads back to the monastery with her heart singing.

To begin with, let's think about the word *scriptorium* (plural *scriptoria*). It is a Latin word: the first part, *scriptor*, means writer, and the suffix *-ium* denotes a grouping, so literally it means a group of writers. In classical times the term referred to a writing room or writing desk. So, if we take that definition, there are many situations through history to which the term 'scriptorium' could be applied – children writing in a classroom, people working in a private study at home, accountants jotting down figures in a ledger, customs officials checking goods at the docks or clerks copying letters to be sent out to customers. Yet the word 'scriptorium' conjures up so much more than the indifferent

movements of hands dutifully scratching words on paper. The term is intrinsically bound up with the medieval monastery, where the inhabitants would copy religious texts in the belief that knowledge should be disseminated. The definition given in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is: 'A room or area in a monastery set apart for writing, esp. one used by scribes copying and illuminating manuscripts.'

In the early days of Christianity, the idea of sharing knowledge was crucial to the spread of the new religion. The word 'gospel' means 'good news', and so copying the gospel texts and sending them far and wide to share the news of the kingdom of God became a vital part of the mission. This spirit of sharing knowledge was also intrinsic to the notion of the scriptorium, and this book shall explore its development in the medieval period. We have evidence of government clerics and bureaucrats clustered in writing rooms, copying records and accounts from the earliest times up until relatively recently, but it is not the purpose of this book to examine those kinds of writing rooms. We are looking specifically at the medieval Christian period in Western Europe and the growth of manuscript production. The dissemination of knowledge is the very essence of the term 'scriptorium', with texts that are copied for a higher religious purpose, and with the intention of keeping sacred words alive. As we will explore, evidence for a physical writing room within a monastery is hard to find, so 'scriptorium' in this book is generally defined as 'a centre of manuscript production', rather than a specific room within a monastery. While the focus of this book is medieval scriptoria, we first need a brief overview of the history of writing.

The Evolution of Writing

Between 12,000 and 8,000 years ago, a shift occurred in the hunter-gatherer mindset. Tribes started to swap nomadic lifestyles for a settled, agricultural existence, growing and harvesting crops and domesticating animals. One of the earliest places this happened (if not the earliest) was in Mesopotamia, a region in west Asia. As these settlements grew and developed, trade became a vital part of the functioning society. At a certain point, about 3200 BCE, the number of accounts and transactions needed to govern a society increased beyond human capability. To aid our insufficient little brains, a system evolved of recording transactions with pictographs on a piece of clay with a stylus – and just like that, writing was invented. This type of writing became known as cuneiform, wedge-shaped marks pressed into a slab of wet clay from the riverbank with a reed stylus, used by the Mesopotamian people up to the first century CE. The Mesopotamians were fiercely proud of the writing system they had developed, worshipping their own scribal gods, Nabu and Nisaba, and passing down myths about the invention of writing. It was common for scribes to include a dedication to Nabu and Nisaba in their work. Scribes were held in high regard in the Mesopotamian world, writing down hymns, prophecies and scientific and astrological texts. Their role was to copy sacred texts to pass down to later generations, thus preserving their heritage.

Scribes prepared their own clay tablets – using wet clay collected from the riverbank, then kneading and shaping it into the size they needed. Once the correct shape had been moulded (mainly rectangular, but it could be circular, square or cylindrical), the tablet would have been held in the left hand while a reed stylus was held in the right, pressing it gently into the damp clay to form a wedge shape. The text was written from left to right,

with no spaces between words. Cuneiform symbols are made up of a combination of three strokes – a vertical wedge, a horizontal wedge and a slanting wedge. The scribe would have been against the clock, trying to finish the text before the belting Mesopotamian sun dried out the clay.

Wax tablets were also used for writing by the Mesopotamians, although few have survived due to natural decay. These wooden or ivory boards were flat with a recess carved out of the middle to hold the wax. The recess was scored with diagonal lines to allow the wax to adhere to the surface. Molten wax was then poured into the recess and left to set. Like clay, the wax also made a soft and impressionable writing surface, but it had the advantage of being more portable and easier to take notes on – unlike clay, it would not dry out. It was also much more forgiving, as mistakes could be easily erased and rewritten, and if you wanted to start afresh, you could just scrape out all the wax, melt it down again and refill it. A pointed stylus made of wood, bone or metal was used to write in the wax, often with a flattened end to smooth over any mistakes made. The flat boards were often joined together with a hinge, allowing the tablet to be opened and closed like a book, with the soft writing surface on the inside protected. It was even possible to join several boards together, creating a concertina effect. The wax tablet was such an effective tool for note-taking that it survived for millennia across many different cultures, and we shall see it often.

Not far from Mesopotamia, Egypt was developing its own form of writing around the same time. Like cuneiform, the Egyptian writing system started with a form of pictographs that became known as hieroglyphics. Hieroglyphics means ‘holy writing’ in Greek, translated from the ancient Egyptian phrase *medu netjer*, meaning ‘the word of god’, indicating its sacred properties. Unlike the Mesopotamian cuneiform on clay, the Egyptians used rush brushes dipped in ink to create hieroglyphs on papyrus

sheets pasted together (papyrus is where the word 'paper' comes from). The sheets were then rolled up in a scroll.

The Egyptians also had their own scribal gods: Thoth, and his female counterpart, Seshat. Egyptian culture embraced the idea of the immortality of the scribe, understanding that even though the scribe had died, the written word would live on: 'a man has perished and his corpse has become dust . . . but writings cause him to be remembered in the mouth of the reciter.'¹ Egyptian scribes enjoyed a high status with a choice of many different specialisms, such as royal scribe, inspector of scribes or military scribe, and often had dual roles, such as scribe/judge or scribe/priest.²

Writing surfaces in Egypt included papyrus (the most widely used), ostraca (pieces of pottery), wooden boards, leather and even linen. Papyrus (*Cyperus papyrus*) is a native African aquatic plant that grows in shallow water and was abundant along the banks of the Nile. Unfortunately we don't know exactly what type of subspecies of *Cyperus papyrus* was used to make ancient Egyptian papyrus, as the reed ceased to grow in Egypt by the late eighteenth century, but from studying existing papyri and from classical accounts such as Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* (c. 77 CE), we can work out how papyrus was made.³ The green outer layer of the plant was removed and the white inner core cut into even strips. The strips were then aligned in a vertical layer, with another layer put over the top horizontally. Once the strips were laid over each other, they were pressed together or beaten with a mallet, and allowed to dry. The side with the horizontal strips outermost was called the recto, and the vertical side the verso. When dry, the sheets were pasted together to form a roll. Generally, only the recto side was written on, with the verso left blank – the vertical side was harder to write on as you were going against the direction of the fibres.

The early scribes constantly drew on their environment to create materials – the rushes and reeds that grew in plentiful

supply by the fertile rivers were easily adapted into writing implements. Egyptian scribes used a thin rush (*Juncus acutus*) with a width of just 1–2 millimetres to write on papyrus. These rushes have an internal fibrous structure and chewing or hammering on the end of the rush splays it out to create a brush-like tip. The rush was held about 5 centimetres away from the end – much more like a paintbrush than a pen.⁴ So, since writing on cuneiform tablets may more accurately be described as printing on damp clay with a stylus, writing on papyrus may more accurately be described as painting on papyrus with a brush. By about the fourth century BCE, thicker reed pens started to be used. They were made from a piece of dried reed (*Phragmites communis*) about 20 centimetres long, with one end shaped into a nib with a slit at the top to hold the ink. The reed pen would have been held much the same way we hold pens today.

The Egyptians used a black carbon ink made of soot, another readily available material that had been used for thousands of years. Soot was collected from burning wood or bone and ground up with water and a binder, such as the sticky resin from a plant.⁵ The binder helps the ink to attach to the surface of the papyrus and not brush off when dry. Egyptian scribes wrote both left to right and right to left. They are commonly depicted sitting cross-legged, sometimes with one leg raised with their kilt stretched taut to act as a 'desk' for the papyrus.

Alongside cuneiform and hieroglyphics, another writing system emerged around 1900–1700 BCE, which used letters to represent consonants. This proto-alphabet spread out and developed into other alphabet systems, including the Phoenician alphabet (c. 1400–1000 BCE). The Greeks, influenced by Phoenician traders from the Levant, created their own alphabet system circa 800 BCE. Crucially, they added vowels to the consonants to make an alphabet of 24 letters, and it is from this Greek alphabet that all modern European alphabets descend.

Greek scribes would have written on papyrus imported from Egypt, with a reed pen (*kalamos*) dipped in carbon ink. Wax tablets were also used, as was ostraca (and this is where the word 'ostracize' comes from – Greek citizens could vote to have a person exiled by scratching their name onto a pottery shard). Classical scribes were not revered in the same way that Mesopotamian and Egyptian scribes were – there was a clear distinction between 'writers' as the creators of intellectual works (citizens/free men), and 'scribes' who did the actual physical labour of writing or copying (the majority of whom were enslaved people or formerly enslaved people working as freelancers). Some enslaved scribes were highly educated, but generally held a low status in Greek society, with writing regarded as mere manual labour.

Although papyrus was the most common writing material throughout the ancient world, in the first century CE Pliny the Elder, the Roman author, naturalist and natural philosopher, makes this comment on the rise of parchment in the second century BCE:

owing to the rivalry between King Ptolemy and King Eumenes about their libraries, Ptolemy suppressed the export of paper [papyrus], parchmenta was invented at Pergamum; and afterwards the employment of the material on which the immortality of human beings depends spread indiscriminately.⁶

This is quite misleading – parchment (animal skin) was definitely not 'invented' at Pergamum (a city in Turkey), but was already used as a writing surface throughout the Mesopotamian and Egyptian world. It is much more likely that papyrus was expensive to import (especially with the Egyptians having the monopoly on the market) and the abundance of goats and sheep

in the landscape made parchment a much more feasible option. Yet Pliny highlights an important shift from papyrus to parchment, and it is quite possible that the process of parchment manufacture was significantly improved at Pergamum. Also, he is not wrong when he says that parchment, which gave humans the ability to live on through its recording of deeds and stories, spread rapidly throughout the ancient world. Papyrus continued to be used, certainly in the Eastern Mediterranean, until about 1100 CE, but parchment grew in popularity and became the standard writing surface across Western Europe until the introduction of paper towards the later medieval period.

The Romans (as usual) copied the customs of the Greeks, using enslaved people or hired hands as copyists. Yet plenty of citizens were able to write – we see many depictions of writing equipment on surviving wall paintings, and many physical objects (like styli) have survived, indicating the pervasiveness of the written word. Also like the Greeks, the Romans continued to write on papyrus with a reed pen. They would have used a carbon ink, or a metal-based ink made from oak galls, often stored in beautifully designed inkwells made of terracotta or metal. Pens and inkwells were stored in leather cases. Ink could be dehydrated into pellets and rewetted when needed, to allow easy transportation. Red ink was used for titles and headings, and was made from either cinnabar or red lead (minium) pigment. Wax tablets were a popular tool for everyday writing, with styli of metal, wood or bone. Writing accessories for the scribe around town included a wax spatula to smooth or scrape out wax, a stone to sharpen the stylus and a portable stylus case.⁷ Leaf tablets (like the Vindolanda letters) were made of thin sheets of wood, written with ink, and laced together with notches and string. Ostraca continued to be used. Parchment was also used in folded notebook form (*pugillares membranei*) – although parchment seems to have been regarded by the Romans as an alternative to wax

merely for notetaking and jotting down thoughts, rather than being considered a suitable medium for permanent texts.

The Latin alphabet evolved circa 700–600 BCE, from a version of the Greek alphabet that was used by the Etruscans. By the classical period, there were several different Latin writing scripts – square capitals, based on the angular letterforms used in monument inscriptions; rustic capitals, a more undulating script used for literary works; and old Roman cursive, an everyday script (cursive comes from the Latin word *currere*, which means to run – so literally the pen runs over the page). The formal scripts were written without any spaces between the words (*scriptura continua*) and no punctuation, which makes for difficult reading. There was a hierarchy within the professional scribal system – calligraphers were expert at writing beautifully, whereas notaries were trained for more bureaucratic purposes. While the majority of scribes seem to have been male, it was not unusual to have female scribes, particularly serving the female upper class. Suetonius' *Lives of the Caesars* (c. 121 CE) makes a reference to Vespasian's mistress, Caenis, who is described as a 'freedwoman and copyist of Antonia'.⁸

Jewish scribes had their own significant scribal culture, but unfortunately there is not as much surviving evidence from the ancient era. There were two types of professional Jewish scribes – those who recorded official documents and court records, and those who copied religious texts (called *sofers*). Jewish writing culture seems to have developed significantly after the Babylonian exile in the sixth century BCE, when there was a greater need to cement their identity in a permanent format. Most of the books of the Hebrew Bible were written down in this period, rather than just being passed on through oral tradition – the Torah (the first five books of the Bible – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy) was probably completed by the fourth century BCE. Hebrew script is made up

of 22 letters using an abjad system, which means that there are no vowels, only consonants, and it reads right to left.

Jewish religious scribes were held in high regard, being learned in the Law of Moses (the Torah), and therefore having a direct link to him. Scribal status is mentioned frequently in the Bible – King David is described as a scholar and a scribe and Ezra (fl. 480–440 BCE) as a priest and scribe. Ancient Jewish scribes were not necessarily mere copyists, but could fulfil many different editorial roles, expanding and adapting texts as necessary – so they would have been highly educated. Little evidence survives, but they probably learnt their scribal craft in the temple school, or perhaps from their father, as it was often a family profession. Scribal access to the scriptures, and their role to read, understand and interpret the text, gave them a respected status in Jewish society.⁹

The oldest known Hebrew manuscripts are the Qumran Caves Scrolls (also known as the Dead Sea Scrolls), which date from the third century BCE to the first century CE, providing fascinating evidence of Jewish scribal history. They are scrolls of religious texts written in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek, mainly on parchment, but also papyrus and even copper. Scribes used a carbon-based black ink, written with a reed pen, and the few examples of red ink have been identified as cinnabar.¹⁰ These materials were typical of the time and culture.

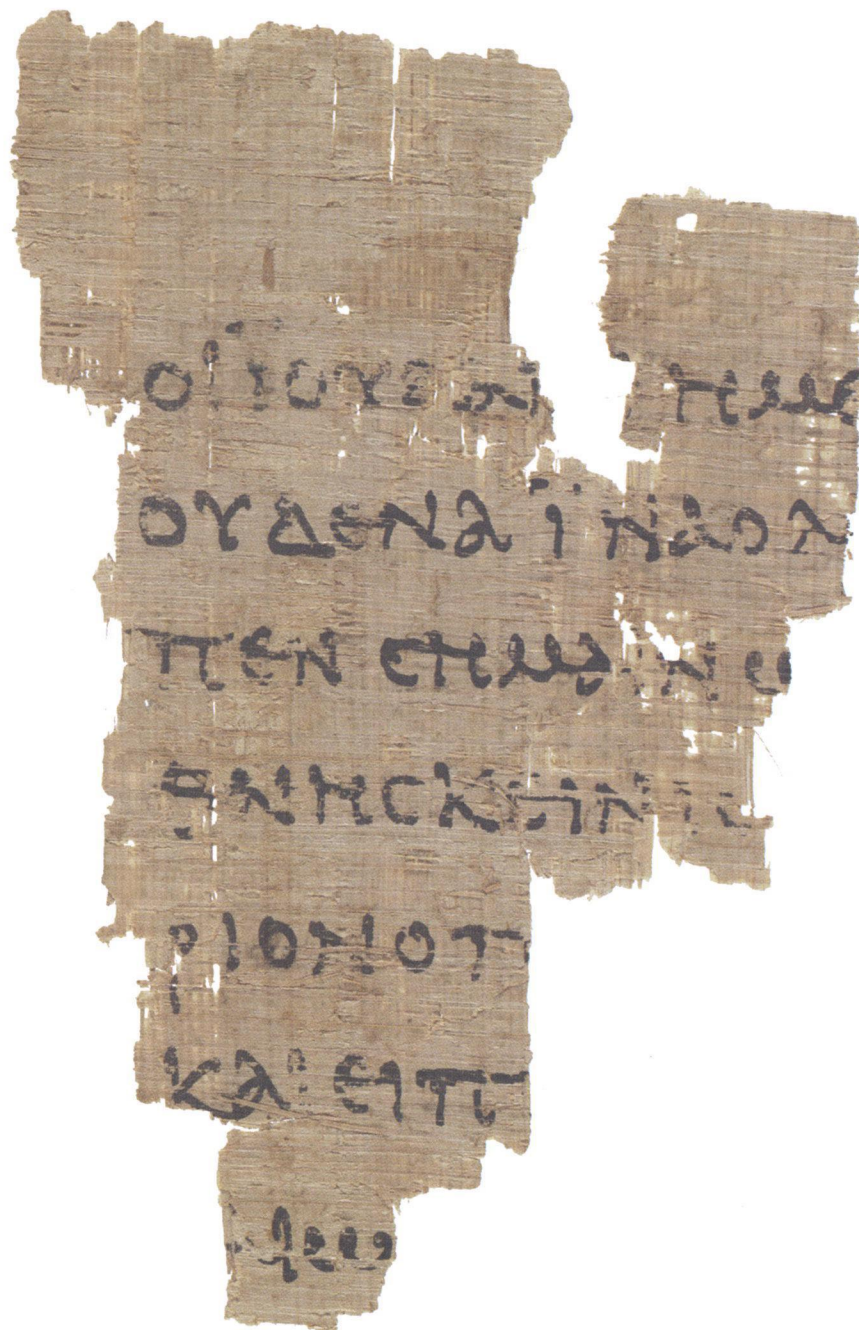
In the ancient world, a strong relationship between writing and religion was established by the Mesopotamians and Egyptians, and scribes were revered for their intellect. In the classical world, literacy spread further, although the scribal craft lost its high status and many were regarded as mere copyists (apart from Jewish scribes). Writing surfaces varied from clay tablets to papyrus to parchment but were always accompanied with a stylus of one form or another, with the wax tablet remaining a constant aid to notetaking. The Mesopotamians and Egyptians

had scribal gods with myths surrounding the invention of writing, and the Egyptians regarded hieroglyphics as coming from the mouth of god, which tells us just how much importance they placed upon the written word. This is a central theme that we will see again in the medieval world. Let us now move forward to the beginnings of Christianity and see how the concept of the scriptorium developed alongside the rise of the Christian faith in the medieval world.

The Beginnings of Christianity and the Codex

In the first century CE, a man proclaimed to be the son of God was crucified near Jerusalem. The story of this man, known as Jesus Christ, spread throughout the Roman empire and gave rise to the most-practised religion in the world – Christianity. An important part of early Christian doctrine was to go out and spread the word of Jesus. His teachings were recorded in the New Testament, including the four canonical gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, which told the life of Jesus. The word ‘gospel’ comes originally from the Greek word *evangelion* (good news), which became *evangelium* in Latin and *godspel* in Old English (*god* means good and *spel* means news). So, spreading the good news of Jesus and the coming of the kingdom of God was a fundamental mission of the early Christians – it was expected all to happen imminently, which really mobilized the movement. The teachings were first spread orally, but as those in living memory of Jesus and his apostles started to die out, it became important to create written records.

Christianity and the codex are inextricably bound together. From about the second century onwards, the book format that we are so familiar with today (the codex) – with pages folded in half, sewn together and sandwiched between two covers – started to be used by the early Christians (although the format



Fragment of the Gospel of John (recto), 2nd century CE.

did not gain widespread popularity in the Roman empire until the fourth century). In a belief reminiscent of the early Egyptians, Christians also believed that copying out religious texts was a sacred duty and that these words were literally the 'words of God', a power within themselves. The early Christians first used codices made of folded papyrus – for example, a fragment of the Gospel of St John dating from the second century was written on both sides of the papyrus, indicating it was from a codex rather than a scroll (Rylands Library Papyrus p52). There are many other examples of early Christian papyrus codices, including the Nag Hammadi library – Christian and Gnostic texts that were written on papyrus codices around the fourth century, bound in leather and secured with straps wound around them. Most of the surviving Christian papyrus codices have been found in Egypt, probably because of the ubiquity of the plant material and the right conditions for text preservation (that is, extremely dry).

These early Christian texts were not particularly polished or professional looking, indicating that the people probably copied them themselves, among their communities. As it was thought that Judgement Day was at hand, there was a real urgency to the movement. The priority of the early Christians would have been to circulate their texts among their communities, rather than producing lavish documents. Also, early Christianity was very much an underground movement, so ostentatious volumes would not only have gone against the basic principles of Jesus's teachings but could well have invited unnecessary attention.

It is not entirely clear why the Christians embraced the codex format so enthusiastically, rather than continuing with the traditional Roman/Jewish scroll format. There could be a number of reasons, including transportability and easier navigation of the text. Substantially more text can fit into a codex

than a scroll, making it ideal for longer works (such as all four gospels of the New Testament). The codex format allowed compilations of different texts to be bound together, whereas the classical scroll tended to be one work by a single author. Also, there's a lot to be said for the easier navigation of a codex compared to a scroll. You need to find something quickly in a book? Flip it open in your hands, leaf through the pages. Easy. You need to find something quickly in a scroll? Unroll the twenty papyrus sheets stuck together and quite literally scroll through the columns. Not so easy. Another thing in the codex's favour is its design – having the precious inner text clasped between two hard protective covers immediately creates an outer shell for preservation.

There may have been a more personal reason for the early Christians to use the codex – as a form of identity. It was a new movement, starting out, so perhaps they wanted to distance themselves from the Roman/Jewish traditions of the classical world and use a different medium that would be associated with their new religion. The papyrus scroll was still used for less important, non-canonical Christian texts, but almost all surviving examples of the Old Testament and all surviving examples of the New Testament were written in codices.¹¹ A significant number of fragmented Christian texts from the second and third centuries have been found in ancient rubbish pits just outside Oxyrhynchus (el-Bahnasa) in Egypt, an early hub of Christian activity and book production.¹² These discarded papyri include many fragments from Christian codices – with all of the New Testament material in the codex format, giving a sense of identity to these new texts.

By about the fourth century, parchment codices started to replace papyrus codices. Papyrus does not actually lend itself so well to the codex format, where the custom is to write on both sides of the page. As we saw in the Egyptian scrolls,

scribes preferred to write on just the recto side of the papyrus, as the vertical fibres running down the verso side made writing difficult. Also, papyrus is quite a fragile structure, so folding it in two creates a weakness in the crease, as does stitching the leaves together through the crease – which over time leads to the papyrus pages splitting and detaching. Parchment is hardwearing and flexible; therefore, it gradually became established as the preferred medium for the codex. It was easy to write on both sides and many more sheets could be sewn together. Crucially – although making parchment was much more labour-intensive than cutting down a few papyrus reeds and pressing them together – papyrus only grew in specific areas along the Nile, which allowed the Egyptians monopoly on the market and control of the supply of exported papyrus. In contrast, the supply of parchment merely required livestock (which was everywhere) and someone handy with a knife.

We know that at least by the mid-fourth century there was a conscious effort to transfer Christian papyrus texts to parchment, as Christian scholar Jerome mentions that Euzoius took on the task of copying ‘the already damaged library of Origen and Pamphilus’ onto parchment (*in membranis instauere*).¹³ However, papyrus carried on being used in some parts of the Mediterranean until around 1100, and parchment scrolls and papyrus codices were also used as valid forms of recording information throughout the medieval period, so the parchment codex did not completely usurp other formats.

Parchment may have been preferred over papyrus as a space-saving device (because using both sides meant you could write double the amount) – yet the examples we have of early manuscripts don’t seem that keen on saving space, as they have generous margins and widely spaced text. Early Christian texts were often written in a script now known as ‘reformed documentary’ or ‘informal uncial’. This was an everyday, cursive script

rather than a highly trained calligraphic hand.¹⁴ This informal script probably reflects the social status of early Christians – many came from lower social groups, such as artisans and clerks, so this may have been the script they were familiar with.¹⁵ This may also explain the generous spacing on the manuscript page (unlike the *scriptura continua* text, with no word separation, familiar in classical texts), rendering the texts more accessible to those less educated and reflecting the inclusive attitude among the early Christians and the socio-economic status of the newly converted.

Early Christian scribes copied a variety of texts. The 27 canonical texts of the New Testament were affirmed by the Church around the end of the fourth century, comprising four gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John), the Acts of the Apostles, fourteen Pauline epistles (letters), seven general epistles and the Book of Revelation. There were many other texts about Jesus in circulation (known as Apocrypha) that did not make it into the official canon, but they continued to be copied and disseminated anyway. This is just as well because many of these stories are highly entertaining. The Infancy Gospel of St Thomas, for example, depicts a volatile young Jesus who indiscriminately kills his playmates when they irritate him, including withering one poor boy into a corpse. The Acts of Paul and Thecla relate the adventures of the young noblewoman Thecla, who follows the apostle Paul on his missionary work. At one point she is sentenced to be thrown to the beasts by the Roman governor but is protected from death by a lioness in the arena. Then Thecla decides to baptize herself by plunging herself into a vat of water filled with hungry seals, but before the seals can attack her, they are killed by heavenly lightning. Thecla then rises triumphantly from the water, surrounded by a cloud of fire and dead sea-creatures. This version of Thecla sounds magnificent, and the fact that these texts continued to be copied by

scribes indicates the fluidity of early Christianity and shows just how much the early and medieval Christians loved a good story.

Christianity and scribal culture developed alongside each other. The early Church was dominated by the Church Fathers, religious men whose teachings shaped Christianity (women have largely been written out of the story, but that is not to exclude them from their important role in the development of the religion). Eusebius of Caesarea (260/265–c. 339 CE) is known as the father of Church history and thanks to his *Ecclesiastical History* we have a chronology of the development of Christianity from the first to the fourth century. In his account of Origen of Alexandria (Christian scholar and ascetic, c. 185–c. 253 CE), Eusebius tells us that Origen dictated his commentaries on the divine scriptures to ‘more than seven shorthand writers . . . and as many copyists, as well as girls trained for beautiful writing’.¹⁶ As lovely as this sounds, it is probable that these girls were enslaved – this description fits into the hierarchy of the scribe system in Roman society.

However, we soon start to see a shift in attitude from classical snobbery towards copying to a desire for Christians to copy texts as a form of religious devotion. Pamphilus (d. 309 CE) was a biblical scholar who developed the theological school and library at Caesarea Palaestina (also known as Caesarea Maritima, now modern-day Israel) and collected a great number of Christian texts. Jerome wrote that Pamphilus was ‘so inflamed with love of sacred literature, that he transcribed the greater part of the works of Origen with his own hand and these are still preserved in the library at Caesarea. I have twenty-five volumes of Commentaries of Origen, written in his hand’.¹⁷

Yet Eusebius, a pupil of Pamphilus, conformed to the traditional hierarchy. In 331 he was commissioned by Emperor Constantine I (306–337 CE) to produce

fifty copies of the sacred Scriptures, the provision and use of which you know to be most needful for the instruction of the Church, to be written on prepared parchment in a legible manner, and in a convenient, portable form, by professional transcribers thoroughly practised in their art.¹⁸

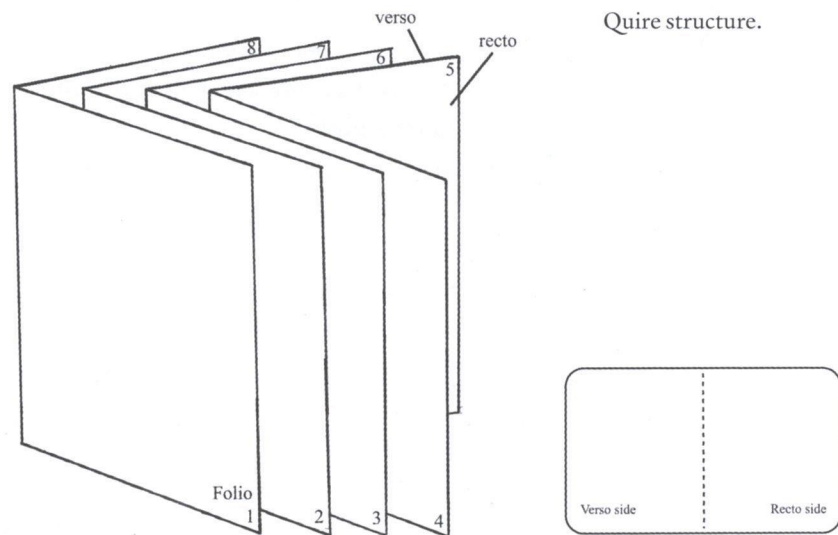
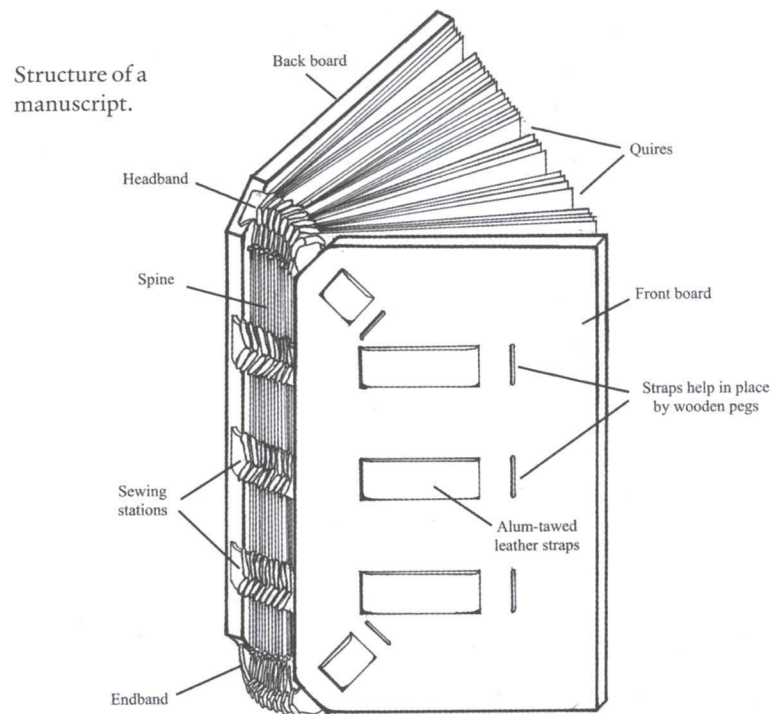
Eusebius was affiliated with Pamphilus’ library – which probably also housed a centre of manuscript production capable of carrying out Constantine’s demands. Eusebius tells us that Constantine’s order was followed by ‘the immediate execution of the work itself, which we sent him in magnificent and elaborately bound volumes’. So, not only was the task able to be done quickly, but attention was paid to the binding of the codices to produce attractive volumes with fine covers. This demand for high-quality copies saw a shift from simple codices being produced ad hoc by small communities to a considered push to create valuable documents. Certainly the emperor had the finances to back up this particular commission, but when he acknowledged Christianity as a religion in 313, he created the conditions for an influx of new converts and for a whole new audience. The Christian book starts to emerge as a sacred object – rather than merely a carrier for the text – made sacrosanct by the fact that it contains the word of God. Thus greater attention starts to be paid to the decoration, inside and out. Admittedly, it was not just the early Christians who adopted the codex format in the classical world, but the enthusiasm with which they embraced it drove forward the development of the codex, and by the fourth century it became increasingly popular among non-Christians too.

ANYTHING that holds text can be a ‘book’ – a clay tablet, a papyrus scroll, a wax tablet, a bamboo slip – but the codex is the format that is familiar to most of us today, and what we best understand

by the term 'book'. The word 'codex' comes from the Latin *caudex*, meaning block of wood – a nod to its development from folded wooden wax tablets and of the early wooden manuscript covers.

The pages of the codex were made by folding sheets of parchment inside each other. A single sheet was called a bifolium, which when folded in half became two folios (or four pages). Like the papyrus, there is a recto and verso side to the folio, with the recto being the right or front page and the verso being the reverse side. In an open book, the left side is the verso and the right side is the recto. 'Folio' comes from the Latin *folium*, meaning leaf. To avoid the bulkiness of folding multiple sheets of parchment (or papyrus, or paper) inside each other, it was usual to create 'gatherings' or 'quires' instead – by folding four bifolia inside each other to create eight folios or sixteen pages (although the number of bifolia can vary from one to ten, or more). The individual quire was then stacked on top of other quires and sewn together along the spine to form a text block. The text block was then often (but not always) attached to a front and a back cover of wood, or parchment or leather.

There were also some features that came to be identified specifically with the text of early Christian codices. As mentioned, the early Christians wrote in a script called reformed documentary, a slightly more refined version of the everyday script used for administrative, bureaucratic purposes. (However, it should be noted that there is a huge range within the reformed documentary script, with many Christian hands coming in at the higher end of this range, and many classical hands coming in at the lower end.¹⁹) This script was often written with gaps between words, rather than the *scriptura continua* used in classical literary texts, and the text was written in one single column (known as longlines), rather than a multi-column layout.²⁰ These created immediate visual differences between classical and Christian texts.



Another feature of Christian texts were the *nomina sacra*, the abbreviations of sacred words, such as Jesus, God, Lord and Christ, into two or more letters with a horizontal line over the top. Jesus Christ in Greek is ΙΗΣΟΥΣ ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ and so this was abbreviated to ΙΗ ΧΡ, a practice that carried on through the medieval period. Although these words were abbreviated, it was not intended initially as a space-saving device, but as a way to signify the sanctity of these words, and seems to have been employed fairly regularly throughout the early Christian world, indicating an early standardized scribal practice.²¹

The reformed documentary script was common in Christian texts up to the fourth century, until it was replaced by an 'uncial' script. It is likely that this uncial script developed out of square capitals, the formal script for carved inscriptions, and the rustic capitals used for literary texts, both of which were quite angular, with each line formed by a single stroke. Uncial script must have come as a bit of a relief then for scribes, as it is all gorgeously rounded and therefore much easier to write a whole letter with one stroke of the pen. An uncial 'O' has a lovely, fluid curviness, compared to the four sharp single strokes needed to make a rustic capital 'M'. Uncial is a majuscule script, which means the letters are mainly capitals and fit between two parallel lines, with no ascenders or descenders above or below. The rounded uncial letters don't touch, so they need a lot of room on the page. Uncial manuscripts tended to be written in *scriptura continua* but separated into paragraph-like chunks. At this point of manuscript development, there is not much decoration or illustration in Christian manuscripts, but red ink (either red lead or cinnabar) was often used for the beginning of a new section.

An early example of uncial script is in the *Codex Sinaiticus*, a Greek copy of the Bible produced in the mid-fourth century. This was once thought to have been one of the fifty Bibles mentioned earlier that Constantine commissioned Eusebius to produce,

and while there is no direct evidence for this, nonetheless it is representative of the type of books the early Christians were capable of producing. The *Codex Sinaiticus* is a large volume, written on parchment and measuring 38 by 34.5 centimetres. It contains part of the Old Testament (including the Septuagint), the New Testament, the Epistle of Barnabas and parts of the *Shepherd of Hermas*. (The *Shepherd of Hermas* was a very popular early Christian allegorical text composed in the second century. The work recounts five visions of Hermas, followed by twelve commandments and ten parables.) The *Codex Sinaiticus* was written by three, possibly four scribes, and it has an unusual format of four columns per page, suggesting it may have been imitating the scroll format. Many examples of *nomina sacra* can be found, and there are also many corrections to the text marked up in the margins, indicating it was checked by a senior scribe at the point of production. It comprises over four hundred folios (so eight hundred pages) and was made from both sheep and calf parchment, written with iron gall ink. The high quality of the parchment and overall book production shows just how far manuscript making had come in a few hundred years, from the papyrus codices of the early days of Christianity to this impressive volume.

This uncial script, like the parchment codex, was not unique to Christianity, but again became something that was closely associated with Christianity. Uncial was adopted throughout the Greek and Western world by the fourth century and was the script used in notable early medieval English manuscripts, such as the *Codex Amiatinus* and the St Cuthbert Gospel, both produced in the early eighth century. A slightly more informal 'half-uncial' script also developed alongside uncial. This was a minuscule script – which means that some letters had ascenders and descenders, such as the ascenders of *b* and *l* that rise above the topline of the text and the descender *p* that carries on below

the baseline (see, for example, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. Lat. 3375, fol. 11v).

Although Christianity was pushing forward, it is important to point out that fine texts were still being produced in late antiquity by non-Christian Romans. The *Vergilius Vaticanus* (Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. Lat. 3225) and the *Vergilius Romanus* (Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. Lat. 3867) are fifth-century deluxe copies of the works of the Roman epic poet Virgil, written on high-quality parchment codices. The *Vergilius Vaticanus*, written in the early fifth century, may have been one of the first copies of Virgil that was copied from a scroll into a codex format, indicating the move from the older technology to new technology in the wider Latin world.²² It is 22.5 centimetres high by 20 centimetres wide, so of a size that could comfortably fit in your hand. It is estimated it would have originally had 440 folios and 280 illustrations, although today only 76 folios remain intact. It is written in rustic capitals in brown ink in longlines, with the first line (or lines) of a new section written in a red pigment (probably cinnabar). The codex is illustrated with colourful images showing scenes from Virgil's *Georgics* and *Aeneid*, in text or sometimes taking up a full page. The pigments used were probably the same ones found in classical wall paintings, which include Egyptian blue, red ochre, cinnabar, green ochre, yellow ochre and calcium carbonate (white).²³ There is even some gold illumination decorating the frames surrounding the images and gold highlighting on costumes, trees and ships. This new codex format may have also been more suited to adding illustrations – the constant handling of a scroll would have placed extra stress on heavy applications of pigment, making it more likely to crack and flake off – whereas the structure of a codex naturally protects the flat page.

The *Vergilius Romanus* was written slightly later during the fifth century and is less accomplished artistically. It differs from

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the *Vergilius Vaticanus* in that it is much larger, originally measuring 33.5 by 32.5 centimetres, so would probably have been read from a stand rather than handheld.²⁴ It might also suggest an element of conspicuous consumption – this was a display object intended to be looked at and admired, perhaps more so than being read studiously. The illumination has developed into complete frames of gold around the images. Silver illumination is also present, for example, on the spear tip of a Trojan soldier on fol. 106r. So, while the early Christians adopted the codex as their preferred form of written communication, by circa 400 non-Christians were also transitioning to parchment codices, and clearly had sophisticated workshops to produce these items – although the culture of Roman society suggests that these continued to be enslaved people or hired scribes and artists.

In the years that followed, it's worth remembering that the late antique and early medieval period was a world in flux, particularly in Western Europe. The decline of the Western Roman empire led to much destabilization, with warring factions carving up the land and dismantling the systems of government. Christianity did not suddenly appear and fit neatly into the vacuum. Apart from anything else, there wasn't even a single 'Christianity' – there were many different interpretations of it. So, while this book may follow a trajectory of Christian development and book culture, in reality things were not that straightforward, and many splinters of Christianity and other religious beliefs existed alongside the version of Christianity we recognize today.

Early Christian Monasticism

In the early days of Christianity, the religion gained popularity among those with less of a voice in the classical world, such as women and enslaved people. The idea that eternal salvation was available to anyone who believed in Jesus was a

powerful incentive; it was open to all, regardless of social status. Christianity promoted a universal family of God (the term 'catholic' originally meant universal), and men and women following Christ were responsible for spreading the word. The religion first grew underground, with informal church meetings in households up to about the mid-third century. The vast expanse of the Roman empire was extremely beneficial to the new movement, as it meant that preachers could travel along established routes to teach people about Jesus (as the apostle Paul did). Copies of the second-century Christian text the *Shepherd of Hermas* composed in Rome were found at the archaeological site of Oxyrhynchus, Egypt, dating from the late second/early third century, which gives an idea of just how quickly ideas and texts could spread throughout the classical world.²⁵

There was also a movement among early Christians to embrace a more reclusive and ascetic way of life, living as a hermit in a small cell or setting up communities in secluded places such as the Egyptian desert. The early days of monasticism were undefined, but they were united in a common ideal to live a simple, celibate life devoted to the worship of Christ. The ascetic lifestyle was not something unique to Christianity, it evolved from Eastern and Greek religious and philosophical traditions, but like the codex, Christianity adopted it wholeheartedly and fashioned it to its own purpose. From these early Christians choosing to live a life of spiritual contemplation in the desert grew a monastic way of life that became widespread across medieval Europe, with women and men either living alone or in groups in cloistered communities, away from society, following daily rituals of prayer, study and work. The solitary, hermetic type of monasticism is known as eremitic, and communal monasticism is known as coenobitic. Due to the emphasis on study, over time Christian monasteries became natural centres of learning, education and book production.

Around 320, a coenobitic community was founded in Egypt by Pachomius, a conscripted Roman soldier who converted to Christianity. Pachomius' community was the first known organized monastic dwelling, with connected male and female houses following a set of rules that encouraged asceticism, learning and teaching, and working together for the sake of the community.²⁶ Pachomius also placed heavy emphasis on the importance of studying – insisting that all members must be literate. If any new members came in unable to read, they had lessons three times a day until they had mastered the skill (Rule of Pachomius, 139, 140). There also seems to have been an ample supply of books, as Rule 25 states *codicem si ad legendum petierint* (if they ask for a book to read, they may receive it), and Rule 100 specifies that members could not go to worship or to the refectory with a book that was not fastened (*codicem non ligatum*). These little comments give an insight into the daily life of books and their bindings within the monastery. Rule 100 also goes on to say that books should be returned to the alcove in the wall, which, as we shall see later, remained a popular storage place for medieval manuscripts. So, these examples from the *Rule of Pachomius* in the early fourth century already outline how intrinsic books and learning were to monastic life. Although the *Rule of Pachomius* was soon superseded by the *Rule of St Basil*, the central principles of monastic life remained the same: community life, study and prayer, and manual labour.

Women were just as active in the foundation of monasteries, and some become known as the Desert Mothers. Melania the Elder (c. 350–c. 410) was a wealthy young widow who moved from Rome to establish two monasteries on the Mount of Olives, Jerusalem, in the 370s. Her granddaughter, Melania the Younger (383–439), was also an important founder of monasteries and famed for producing her own books. An account of her life relates how she studied the scriptures, then 'copied them

herself and furnished copies to the saints by her own hand'.²⁷ Like Pamphilus, the act of copying scripture in her own hand is seen as an act of religious devotion, rather than a low-status task, and it is significant to see this positive reference to female book production in the early days of monasticism.

Informal Christian communities also existed, such as the female monastery set up by Marcella (c. 325–410) in her house on the Aventine Hill in Rome. Marcella retired to her (very large) house after the death of her husband, and led a life of seclusion, devoted to prayer, study and charitable works. Marcella's establishment drew many other female Christians, influenced by the ascetic ideal of the East, who would meet at Marcella's house to discuss scripture. One of these women was Paula of Rome (347–404), who, like Marcella, came from a wealthy noble Roman family, and became increasingly involved in the Christian movement after her husband died. They soon became acquainted with Jerome (c. 347–420), a rising Christian scholar and secretary of Pope Damasus, who had made a name for himself translating the gospels and psalms from Greek into Latin. While staying in Rome, Jerome became part of this network largely consisting of wealthy female widows, whose status gave them a certain amount of autonomy in Roman society. However, not everyone in Rome was impressed with the pope's star pupil, and others suspected him of preying on wealthy women, imposing on them a too-strict ascetic regime and possibly having improper relations with them. When things got too uncomfortable for Jerome in 385, he was forced to flee from Rome to the Christian East.

Jerome, even by his own account, was difficult and hot-headed, and quick to press his opinions on others (particularly women). However, an intense friendship developed between Jerome and Paula and her daughter, Eustochium. In his correspondence, he praised Paula endlessly for her intellect and asceticism, claiming that 'of all the ladies in Rome but one

had power to subdue me, and that one was Paula' (Letter 45). Disillusioned with the hedonism in Rome and drawn to the ascetic lifestyle in the East, Paula and Eustochium followed Jerome to Antioch, to begin a pilgrimage to the holy lands. After visiting Melania the Elder's monastery in Jerusalem and the monasteries in Egypt, Paula and Jerome settled in Bethlehem, the believed birthplace of Jesus. Here the Desert Mother Paula founded (and funded) a female and male monastery, and a hostelry for pilgrims. Having these single-sex monasteries meant that the women and men lived, ate and worked separately in their respective establishments, but would come together for prayer and chanting psalms.²⁸ Paula in particular embraced a life of severe ascetism, including strict fasting and a fastidious application to studying scripture. She was also fluent in Greek and Hebrew.

Jerome believed that fully immersing himself in his monastery in the land of Judea led to a greater understanding of the scriptures (that he learned to study in the original Hebrew). He produced many of his most famous works during his time in Bethlehem, including the *Biblia Vulgata* (the Vulgate Bible), a translation of the Bible intended for the everyday Latin speaker that would eventually become the official Catholic version. Jerome updated the existing Latin translations of the New Testament from Greek versions and, radically, included a translation of the Jewish Bible from the original Hebrew (rather than from Greek). As the patron and founder of Jerome's monastery, Paula was fundamental in the production of this Latin version of the Bible, financing the materials needed.²⁹ However, it is possible that Paula, as Jerome's equal and an educated woman in her own right, co-authored or at least co-edited the Vulgate with Jerome. Jerome himself referred to Paula's superior grasp of Hebrew, saying that once she decided to learn it, 'she succeeded so well that she could chant the psalms in Hebrew and

could speak the language without a trace of the pronunciation peculiar to Latin' (Letter 108). Jerome records in his works that Paula was the driving force behind many of his works, and he dedicated many of them to her and Eustochium.³⁰

Christianity was definitely the latest fad in Roman settlements, attracting wealthy patrons keen to support the new religion. However, this created tension between those who devoted themselves to emulating the humble life of Jesus and those who liked to throw money about. Jerome drew a line between simple and accurate book production from a monastery and the sumptuous tomes that were being produced for the 'metropolitan elites' in Rome. In a letter to Eustochium that thoroughly disapproves of the lavish lifestyles of the women in Rome, Jerome is also appalled that 'parchments are dyed purple, gold is melted into lettering, manuscripts are decked with jewels, while Christ lies at the door naked and dying' (Letter 22). He picks up this theme again in his prologue to Job, grumbling, 'Let those who will keep the old books with their gold and silver letters on purple skins . . . if only they will leave for me and mine, our poor pages and copies which are less remarkable for beauty than for accuracy.' Jerome also implies that papyrus, rather than parchment, was used at the monasteries in Bethlehem – in Letter 71, he checks copies that have been transcribed for a friend at his monastery *in charteceis codices* (on papyrus codices).³¹ Although parchment was becoming increasingly popular by the fourth century, we can see that at least in Paula and Jerome's monasteries, the emphasis was on the humble and simple papyrus codex, rather than the 'magnificent and elaborately bound volumes' that Eusebius produced for Constantine. There are also disparaging mentions from Christian intellectual heavyweights John Chrysostom (347–407 CE) and Augustine of Hippo (354–430 CE), the former railing against those who boast of the gold letters in their books

rather than the textual content, the latter condemning 'parchment and fancy covers fashioned from beautiful leather'.³²

Yet the desire for fancy books persisted, and it is worth examining here the books of purple parchment and letters of gold that Jerome and John Chrysostom found so abhorrent. Purple, particularly when combined with gold, has always been associated with the highest echelons of society – such as Roman emperors. The architect and author Vitruvius (d. 15 BCE) wrote in the first century that purple 'above all other colours, has a delightful effect, not less from its rarity than from its excellence'.³³ The association with opulence and prestige came about because creating a rich purple dye was a complicated and labour-intensive process in the classical world. Pliny tells us that 'Tyrian' purple or imperial purple came from sea snails (*Murex trunculus*) that were harvested in great numbers and crushed to remove their glands, which were then boiled to create a deep, long-lasting purple. Purple also became the ideal colour to represent the majesty of Christ, and Christians soon embraced the use of purple in the codex. Despite Jerome's disapproval, Christian biblical texts continued to be produced in this way well into the medieval period. To add to the opulence, these purple dyed pages were written in beautiful uncial script in gold and/or silver. The *Codex Veronensis*, a fifth-century Latin gospel, and the *Codex Petropolitanus Purpureus* (St Petersburg, National Library of Russia, MS Gr. 537), a sixth-century Greek gospel, are wonderful examples of this style. As Tyrian purple was so expensive, it is likely that a more affordable purple pigment was used, such as orchil or folium, with possibly a thin overlay of Tyrian purple. It is not certain how the purple dye was applied, but from recent experiments it is suggested that the parchment was prepared in the normal way on a frame, removed and soaked in a purple dye bath, and then re-stretched afterwards (parchment needs to dry under tension to give a

smooth surface).³⁴ The letters were made with finely ground gold or silver mixed with a binder, and probably written with a copper stylus, as a reed pen was not suited for applying thicker-grained metal inks.³⁵

The new texts that Jerome produced in the fourth century were laid out in a format that was easier to read. In his prologue to Ezekiel, Jerome explains that his text, broken into short sections and 'written in words with spaces . . . gives a clearer meaning to readers'.³⁶ This was a type of punctuation known as *per cola et commata* – not invented by Jerome, but promoted by him – where each clause or phrase is divided into chunks. Think of it like the reverse to our modern paragraphs: we start a new paragraph with an indentation on the first line with the lines that follow flush to the margin; *per cola et commata* starts each new section with the first line flush to the margin and then the lines underneath are all indented to the right (see BL, Harley MS 1775). Even though it is the opposite layout to our paragraphs, the design clearly gives a visual signal for the beginning of each section, and makes it easier to digest – although many texts were still written without spaces between the words. The *per cola et commata* system was based on older texts to indicate when a breath should be taken when reading out loud.³⁷ Presenting the text in this way certainly makes it easier to read, but also to absorb the meaning. The spaces between the sections allows for a mental pause, to reflect and internalize the words before moving on to the next section.

IT MIGHT SEEM that all the exciting monastic innovation was happening in the Christian East, but it didn't take long for the West to follow suit and establish their own monasteries. Rufinus of Aquileia (344/5–411), companion of Melania the Elder, was a key figure in straddling the Christian East and

West. He translated the *Rule of St Basil* into Latin, and in the prologue informs us he wrote it at the request of Ursacius, abbot of the monastery in Pinetum, Italy, who wanted the monasteries in the West to follow the Rule. Rufinus tells Ursacius that now he has fulfilled his promise 'make it your task to provide copies also for other monasteries, so that, after the likeness of Cappadocia [Basil's monastery], all the monasteries may live not by different, but by the same institutes and observances.'³⁸ This seems to indicate that the monastery at Pinetum had the facilities to copy manuscripts on a large scale and disseminate them throughout the Latin-speaking West.

There is also evidence of scribal practice in the monastery founded in Marmoutier, France, by Martin of Tours around 372. Martin was a Roman soldier stationed near Amiens, who became one of the first Christians to establish a monastic way of life in the western reaches of the empire. His life was written by his hagiographer, Sulpicius Severus, who describes the monastery as full of eighty men who gave up all possessions to devote their lives to prayer and fasting. They lived in separate cells made of wood or carved out of the rock and were much more aligned to the eremitic way of monastic life – living in isolation, with no communal activities. Severus goes on to say 'no craft was practised there, with the exception of the scribe's, and even this was entrusted to the younger men, while the older ones remained free for prayer.'³⁹ So even in this northwestern corner of the Roman empire, by the end of the fourth century monasticism was not just establishing a presence, but anchoring the scribe's duty as a key role, even when no other duties were undertaken. Across the Christian world, from East to West, we see these gatherings of ideas and resources, centring upon communal houses devoted to work, prayer and study. And absolutely embedded in this movement was the need for books, to produce them, to study them and to share them.

Another person credited with introducing the monastic system to the West is John Cassian (360–c. 435), Christian monk and theologian. He had lived in a hermitage in Bethlehem and had visited many monasteries in Egypt before founding two monasteries in Marseilles, France – the Abbey of St Victor for men and the Abbey of St Sauveur for women. Unlike Martin's establishment in Tours, the emphasis here was on the communal life that Cassian had seen operating in Egypt. He wrote his *Institutes of the Coenobia* in 420, a guide to monastic life that highlighted the importance of routine and order and coming together at set times of day to recite the psalms – in contrast to the unstructured life of Martin's monks at Tours. This is where we see the beginnings of the canonical hours (regular hours of prayer) set down, which were to become so definitive of monastic life. Cassian's *Institutes* promotes manual labour, although makes no mention of scribal work. However, there is a mention of book production. Referring to the *Institutes*, Cassian says 'these little books, which we are now arranging with the Lord's help to write' (Book 2, ch. 9). It seems here that Cassian was organizing some push to distribute his works among the monastic communities.

So, by the fifth century, monasticism was starting to be established in the Christian West. With the parchment codex now fully integrated into the Christian religion, and scribal practice an accepted part of religious life, the seeds were sown for centres of manuscript production to flourish at monastic foundations. One wonders if those early Christians clandestinely meeting in their houses, swapping ragged sheets of papyrus about the life of Jesus, would have any idea how those words would spread, going on to influence the furthest reaches of the Roman empire. Would they have imagined that their hastily scribbled notes would become the foundation stones for the skilfully scribed, highly decorated volumes that would

be produced by men and women in houses built for the worship of God?

Two

Monasticism and Manuscript Production in the West, 500–1050

Francia, c. 600 CE

‘Brother Ciarán! The Lord does not reward idleness!’ the senior monk reprimanded the new scribe, who had been staring dreamily into space. ‘Sorry, Brother Eoghan,’ said Ciarán humbly. He shifted uncomfortably on his wooden bench, laid his quill down carefully next to his parchment and flexed his stiff hand. He sighed heavily and leant back on the cool stone wall, looking out at the unfamiliar Frankish landscape. He had only arrived at Luxeuil monastery a few days ago, having been sent from his hometown of Bangor Abbey after Abbot Columbán requested Abbot Comgall send his finest scribes to join him at Luxeuil. Abbot Columbán, in his quest to spread the good news to heathen tribes in the Merovingian kingdoms, needed to produce Bibles and the texts of the Church Fathers to distribute among his new foundations. Many monks desired to travel to distant places to spread the good news and to convert pagans to the way of the Lord, but not Ciarán. Ciarán had been quite happy where he was at Bangor, surrounded by his books and copying out the words of God in his neat and practised hand. He had been raised at the abbey, taken into the monks’ care as a young boy when he had been suddenly orphaned, and knew no other life. The monks had given him a home and an education, and though strict, they had cared for him too, showing him kindness and patience.

Here, everything was different. He missed the fresh, bracing air of home, and the lush green fields with the cattle gently lowing. Oh,

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