



# Life and Work in Medieval Monasteries

## Copying Books at Monasteries

Sep 25, 2009 [Diane Evans](#)

Some of the most important work carried on during the Dark Ages was done by humble monks copying ancient manuscripts in cold, dark monasteries.

The printing press had not yet been invented and all documents were [copied by hand](#) on parchment. Scribes copied thousands of Bibles and classical works for circulation in the Christian areas of Europe. Theirs was the labor that would lift the western world out of the darkness of ignorance and illiteracy.

## Fortress Protection From Viking Barbarian Attacks

Viking invasions were a major danger for the peaceful monastic communities in Europe. The scriptorium was the most important room in a monastery next to the chapel itself and for this reason, these writing rooms were often built at the top of an attack-proof fortress tower with curved walls resembling a tall cylinder. The towers were separate buildings enclosed within the walls of the compound. The monks climbed 15 to 20 feet up a ladder to the scriptorium and then pulled a ladder up after them. This made it almost impossible for the attacking warriors to reach them.

## A Monastic Scribe's Workday

After lauds, the morning prayer, each scribe entered the scriptorium and worked hunched over at a tiny table while seated on a backless stool. The desk was placed in front of a small window that provided the only available light in the room. No candles or fires for warmth were allowed because of the flammability of the parchment

material. They worked in these conditions no matter how cold or wet the weather might be.

Each scribe had only a few simple tools. He kept his quill pen in his right hand and dipped it in an inkpot nearby. His left hand held a small knife for scraping off mistakes or sharpening the quill. The devout monk always began his work by writing a prayer in the upper left hand corner of his first sheet. Then he practiced his letters in an abecedarian sentence which contained every letter of the alphabet. An example today used in keyboarding is “The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog.”

Copying fragile, ancient manuscripts was a tedious and mind-numbing task which demanded the scribe’s full attention to detail. It was easy to slip into mistakes without realizing it. Misspelled words might be incorrectly placed in the sentences, and it was a concern that such errors might be copied over again into different manuscripts sometimes changing the entire meaning of a phrase.

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## **Titivillus, the Demon of the Monastery**

Because of the worry about errors being introduced and replicated by the clerics, a little, imaginary demon named [Titivillus](#) was born. The scribes used Titivillus’s humor to make a point about the problem. He slipped around peeking over their shoulders in search of mistakes. Upon finding a blunder, he seized it and threw it into his backpack. The little devil was required to fill his pack 1000 times a day. If he had trouble meeting this quota, this demon might inspire the scribes to make careless slips. Then he recorded the mistakes in a ledger book and tallied them to be used against each monk on Judgment Day.

## **A 12th Century Bible**

It took five years to make one copy of the Bible and the monastic scribes protected their work zealously. The theft of a manuscript was a serious crime and often a monk might write a warning at the beginning of the volume such as this one which was found in a 12th Century Bible: “If anyone steal this book, let him die the death; let him be fried in the pan; let the falling sickness and fever seize him; let him be broken on the wheel and hanged. Amen.”

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