

Medieval Scriptorium

A scriptorium (plural scriptoria) is a room devoted to the hand-lettered copying of manuscripts. Before the invention of printing by moveable type, a scriptorium was a normal adjunct to a library. After the active destruction of classical libraries in the wake of the Theodosian decrees of the 390s and the collapse of public institutions in general, scriptoria were entirely in Christian hands, from the early 5th century onwards.

The information about Greek and Roman scriptoria is more extensive than that about the Early Christian scribes, their organization and control, their tasks and social status. Publication of texts in Classical Antiquity involved having multiple copies efficiently produced in scriptoria. In these workshops, a manuscript would be carefully dictated to a large group of scribes working simultaneously. This allowed many duplicates to be produced at once, with some control over the accuracy of the transmission.

In the monasteries, the scriptorium was a room, rarely a building, set apart for the professional copying of manuscripts. Cassiodorus initiated the tradition of Benedictine scriptoria, where the copying of texts not only provide materials actually needed in the routines of the community and served as work for hands and minds otherwise idle, but produced a desirable product. The earliest commentaries on the Benedictine rule imply the labor of transcription as the common occupation of the community. Jerome saw in the products of the scriptorium a source of revenue for the monastic community.

Papyrus, the writing surface of choice in Antiquity, became prohibitively expensive as commercial supplies dried up probably through over-harvesting and was replaced by parchment and vellum. During the 7th through the 9th centuries, many earlier parchment manuscripts were scrubbed and scoured to be ready for rewriting. Such overwritten parchment manuscripts, where the original text has begun faintly to show through, are called palimpsests. Many of the works of Antiquity often said to have been preserved in the monasteries were only preserved as palimpsests. In the 13th century paper began to displace parchment. As paper became cheaper, parchment was reserved for elite uses of documents that were of particular importance.



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