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Scriptorium: the term and its history

Alison Stones

What is a scriptorium and how does it fit into the notion of *atelier*? Broadly speaking, both terms have come to refer to places where people met in the past or meet today to work together on collaborative projects. While the term scriptorium is usually associated with the writing of religious books in a monastic context in the early Middle Ages, the notion of a place of communal work, workshop or *atelier* is in place in the *Livre des métiers* composed by Étienne Boileau († 1270).¹ Boileau describes the rights and privileges of the Corporations of Guilds that regulated production in Paris of a wide range of crafts – books, panel painting, sculpture, metal, glass... – as well as who did the work (primarily lay craftsmen and women), and where it was done (a home or shop in an urban setting). We shall see that the scriptorium underwent a number of shifts in meaning in the Middle Ages and in modern perceptions, while modern case-studies can shed light on how a pre-modern scriptorium most likely functioned.

Origin of the term scriptorium

For Isidore of Seville (c. 560-636), the word scriptorium referred to a metal instrument or “style” (stylus) used for writing on wax tablets.² The early monastic rules of Pachomius (c. 345), Benedict (c. 529), and Ferréol (c. 560) make mention of writing and reading as necessary skills of the monks, but the term scriptorium is absent. Did the monastery of Cassiodorus

(c. 485-585) at Vivarium have a purpose-designated room set aside for writing? What was it called? Although a tinted drawing of Cassiodorus’s monastery in a manuscript in Bamberg (Staatsbibliothek Msc. Patr. 61, f. 29v) does not indicate the location of the scriptorium, we do know that it was important enough for one of its products, a prized pandect (a complete Bible in one volume) to be acquired a century later in Rome in 679-680 by Benedict Biscop and Ceolfriht of Wearmouth-Jarrow and used in Northumbria as a model for three more pandects, of which one, the Codex Amiatinus, survives in the Biblioteca Medicea-Laurenziana in Florence (MS Amiatinus 1).

Much uncertainty surrounds the origin of the concept of the scriptorium as a room for writing, as it has come to be known. Even the plan of the monastery of St. Gall from the early ninth century identifies only the benches and desks of the scribes but does not name the room in which they are found on the plan, occupying the north-east corner of the ground floor of the abbey church with the library above (*infra sedes scribentium, supra biblioteca*; fig. 1).³

1. Plan of St. Gall, writing-room, in Codex Sangallensis 1092, ca. 810-830, Abbey Library of St. Gall (after Horn, Born, 1979, cited n. 3, p. 145-147).

The eighth-century English abbot Alcuin, in his Poem 126, refers to a place where scribes were working; the seventeenth-century thinker du Cange cites Aelfric of Eynsham († c. 1010), Adelhard of Bath († c. 1152), and Peter Abelard († 1142), among others, for the use of the term *scriptorium*.⁴ Yet it is unclear how many monasteries and cathedrals had a permanent space allocated to copying manuscripts and whether, as has been said of Tournai in the eleventh century, monks, nuns, and clerics wrote in the cloisters of their monasteries. The key question as to how many and which books were copied “in-house” and which were acquired from outside can only be answered on a case-by-case basis.

A shift in meaning: scriptorium as product

More generally, in the secondary literature, the term *scriptorium* refers not so much to the place of production but rather to its products, books sharing similar characteristics of structure and layout, script and decoration, which are presumed to have been made by the same team of craftsmen or women and in the same place. Numerous older publications pioneered an approach aimed at reconstructing and re-clustering the products of scriptoria in an age when the books had been dispersed far from their place of origin. This approach is now widely practiced, from studies of the beginnings of book production in Northumbria to contemporary analyses of monastic and cathedral products and holdings throughout Europe and beyond. Émile Lesne paved the way with a general study of books, scriptoria, and libraries published in 1938 and reprinted in 1964,⁵ while a similar general approach was taken up again recently in Ralf Stammberger's study of medieval manuscripts through scribes and scriptoria in 2003.⁶ Elias Alvery Lowe's studies published in the 1920s of French manuscripts from the scriptoria of Lyon and of the Northumbrian monasteries under the influence of Cassiodorus were among the early monographic works on particular scriptoria and offered models that have been generalized widely throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.⁷ The term *scriptorium* has even been used to refer to manuscript production in non-western cultures such as that of the

Minangkabau (Sumatra).⁸ But most studies that include the term *scriptorium* in their title assume that the products in question derive from one and the same monastic scriptorium.

I draw together here some of the monographic analyses of scriptoria published over the last twenty years, and occasionally earlier, by country, many of which use the term *scriptorium* in their title (of course, many earlier studies did as well). In all of them, an underlying assumption is that of local production, whether it be in a cathedral, abbey, collegiate church, or even a royal court. The Benedictine abbeys and their products and holdings have been an important focus since the early works of Lesne and Lowe, followed by the Cistercian abbeys and their manuscripts and scriptoria. For Britain, the Benedictine abbey (now cathedral) of Saint Peter at Gloucester and the Cistercian abbey of Margam have been the focus of recent monographs.⁹ In France, key studies of the manuscripts associated with the Benedictine Abbeys of Moissac and Saint-Martial de Limoges published in the late 1960s and early 1970s brought to the fore the important question as to whether and which among the surviving manuscripts known to have been owned by the respective abbeys were made in situ or imported, for instance from the mother-house of the reforming abbey of Cluny.¹⁰ In the case of Limoges, two of the most impressive books were owned respectively by the Cathedral of Saint-Étienne at Limoges and the Collegiate Church of Saint-Yrieix. Were these books made at the Benedictine Abbey of Saint-Martial or rather at a scriptorium attached to one of the secular establishments?

Similar questions are raised in the exhibitions and catalogues devoted to the early manuscripts of the Benedictine Abbey of Saint-Vaast at Arras and at Albi Cathedral.¹¹ But the majority of recent studies of monastic scriptoria in France, Belgium, and elsewhere have focused on the Cistercians. The question is, again, the degree to which the manuscripts owned by the Cistercian abbeys were made there or imported from a mother-house and transmitted to daughter-houses of the same filiation: Cîteaux, Clairvaux, Haute-Fontaine, Igny, La Charité, Cheminon, Montier-en-Argonne, Pontigny,

Fontenay, Villers, Chaalis, Cadouin... (fig. 2).¹² The Cistercien abbeys elsewhere in Europe have also been foci for monographs, on Aldersbach in Bavaria,¹³ Zwettl in Austria,¹⁴ Sitticum in Slovenia,¹⁵ and Alcobaça in Portugal.¹⁶ From all these monographic studies, it is only now becoming possible to assess the important issues of production and transmission in and among these major manuscript collections.¹⁷ Meanwhile, other monastic and secular orders have also been receiving important monographic treatment: St. Benedict's monastery of Monte Cassino and the Benedictine Abbeys of San Galgano in Italy, Bosau in Austria, Echternach in Luxembourg,¹⁸ the Praemonstratensian Imperial Abbey of Weissenau in Baden-Württemberg,¹⁹ the Augustinian canons of St. Maria Magdalena in Frankenthal,²⁰ and the Dominican nuns of St. Katharina at St. Gall.²¹ What are the links among the products of these houses? The publication of monographs on the holdings and products of other monastic and clerical establishments will pave the way towards comparative studies that will be the focus for future research.

Appropriations and extensions of the term scriptorium

Several more broadly-based activities have already addressed comparative questions, both in print, in a museum context, and more recently on line. They represent different efforts on the one hand to understand how the medieval scriptorium worked and on the other hand to provide the means to reconstruct and regroup the products of centers of production whose manuscripts

are now widely dispersed due to such destructive activities as the dissolution of the monasteries, the French Revolution, the sequestering of manuscript collections during the Second World War, or the dismemberment of complete manuscripts and the removal of illustrations to make "pictures" or scrapbooks.

The journal of manuscript studies entitled *Scriptorium* was founded in the immediate post-war period by Frédéric Lyna and Camille Gaspar under the general editorship of François Masai. Its first volume appeared in 1946-1947, and it continues to publish both scholarly articles on manuscripts and (since 1957) a bibliographical appendix with indices of manuscripts cited. Today, among many other functions, the website allows searches of manuscripts cited in the journal and *Bulletin codicologique*.²²

A different approach is to be found at the Scriptorial of Avranches, a purpose-designed museum dedicated to the 203 manuscripts of Mont-Saint-Michel, transferred in 1791 to the Bibliothèque municipale d'Avranches along with other manuscript holdings of the region, from the Abbeys of Montmorel and Lucerne, and from the Cathedral Chapter and Bishopric

2. Origen's commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans (tr. Rufinus of Aquileia), ca. 400, 12th century, in Périgueux, Archives départementales de la Dordogne, MS 50, f. 12, 12th century.

3. Vision of St. Aubert, from the Cartulary of Mont-Saint-Michel, ca. 1100-1130, Bibliothèque municipale d'Avranches, MS 210 f. 4v (after facsimile, Poulle, Bouet, Desbordes, 2005, cited n. 24).

of Avranches. This is a physical representation of the approach to understanding scriptoria addressed in the monographs on the manuscripts of particular abbeys. The Scriptorial, opened in 2006, incorporates the cellar of an early thirteenth-century house and presents the manuscripts of Mont-Saint-Michel in their historical context, surrounded by objects of daily life, pilgrim badges, coins, liturgical vessels, models of the abbey and explanatory plaques.²³ There are permanent exhibitions in ten rooms, a temporary exhibition space, and a film projection area. Original manuscripts, notably the spectacular Cartulary of Mont-Saint-Michel MS 210 (c. 1149-1150), are on display in the area called the Treasury (fig. 3).²⁴ This enterprise provided the impetus for the re-edition of Monique Dosdat's catalogue of the manuscripts of the scriptorium of Mont-Saint-Michel, for which Geneviève Nortier in 1957, Michel Bourgeois-Lechartier and François Avril in 1967 and J. J. G. Alexander in 1970 had laid the ground-work.²⁵

A third kind of approach is represented by online manuscript projects that provide the visual and informational means for scholars to embark on projects of reconstruction and analysis of manuscripts now widely scattered: *scriptoria* can be reconstructed from the data provided. One example is the Digital Scriptorium (DS), a growing image database of medieval and renaissance manuscripts that unites scattered resources

from many institutions into an international tool for teaching and scholarly research.²⁶ Launched on the Web in November 1997, DS has undergone many transformations and currently hosts images and data from some forty institutions – universities, seminaries, abbeys, public and private libraries, museums – in the United States and at the American Academy in Rome. It offers simple searches by text and shelf mark, and advanced Boolean searches allow selection and grouping of items from the database according to keywords. DS is only one of many online manuscript databases, together with the Cambridge-based website Scriptorium: Medieval and Early Modern Manuscripts Online,²⁷ that make use of the term scriptorium in its name. Other manuscript online databases have adopted more neutral names, such as e-codices – Virtual Manuscript Library of Switzerland for manuscripts in Swiss collections²⁸ and Manuscripta Mediaevalia for German collections.²⁹ Still other databases concentrate on the holdings of particular institutions, including Gallica, Banque d'images and Mandragore for the Bibliothèque nationale de France; Corsair for the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York; Digitised Manuscripts for the British Library; Digital Images from the Bodleian Libraries Special Collection, Oxford; and Parker Library on the Web for Corpus Christi College Cambridge (by subscription only). Many other websites are devoted to single manuscripts, among which I

single out Verdun BM 98 and 107, the Missal and Breviary made for Renaud de Bar, digitized by Arkhênum,³⁰ as well as his Pontifical, divided between the Narodni Knihovna in Prague and the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge (fig. 4). Collectively, these databases are changing the way research is conducted, the kinds of questions that can be asked about scriptoria, and what was made in particular centers and outside them.

4. Pontifical of Renaud de Bar, ca. 1300-1316, in Prague, National Library of the Czech Republic, MS NK XXIII.C.120, f. 1.

The product of a contemporary scriptorium: *The Saint John's Bible*³¹

How can a contemporary scriptorium shed light on a medieval one? Donald Jackson is scribe and calligrapher to Queen Elizabeth II and to the House of Lords Crown Office of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. His base of operations is his home and studio in Wales, where he and his team of scribes and illuminators have worked together to produce, among many other manuscripts, *The Saint John's Bible* (fig. 5). It is a contemporary manuscript product in seven volumes and 1,150 parchment pages of calfskin made over thirteen years in a modern-day scriptorium headed by Donald Jackson. Officially commissioned in 1998 by Saint John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota, after three years of preliminary discussions, *The Saint John's Bible* was brought to a conclusion in May 2011. The text is the New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition, of the Bible. Two teams were set up: the Saint John's team consisted of theologians, bible scholars, and historians whose function was advisory; the Wales team comprised twenty members, including project and studio managers and assistants, planners, and coordinators, a computer graphics specialist and a proof-reader, six scribes, six artist calligraphers, and four collaborative artists. Donald Jackson and Sally Mae Joseph were both scribes and artist

calligraphers. New scripts were designed by Donald Jackson, who trained the scribes. The text was written with quill pens of goose wing feathers and black ink mixed from Chinese stick ink; vermillion and blue made from a mixture of azurite and ultramarine were used for the start of paragraphs, verse numbers, and marginal notes. The text format is two columns of fifty-four lines, and the design layout was planned on computer. Footnotes, headings, chapter numbers, capitals, and Hebrew text

were added at various stages. Time taken to copy one page by hand varied between seven and a half and thirteen hours.

The passages from the Bible to be illustrated were chosen by the Saint John's committee. Preliminary sketches were made by Donald Jackson and guest artists and sent with explanations to the Saint John's committee for approval; after that work could start on the illustrations by Donald Jackson and additional artists. The Wales team members worked both in sessions at Donald Jackson's contemporary scriptorium in Monmouth, Wales, where team members could work as a group and discuss their work together, and in the private studios of the artists and collaborators. For the most part, two of the six scribes worked mainly in the scriptorium, but four of the scribes did most of their allocated work in their own studios. The entire scribal team did come together at the scriptorium at six- to seven-week intervals to work together, compare hands, check progress, and ensure their scripts were staying as close to each others' as possible. The finished product will be bound in Welsh oak boards and permanently housed and displayed at the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library at Saint John's Abbey and University in Collegeville, Minnesota. A limited Heritage Edition of full-size reproductions, a reduced-size Trade Edition and fine art prints of any page are

5. Donald Jackson, "Christ our Light," the opening page of the Gospel of Saint John, from *The Saint John's Bible*, reproduced from Donald Jackson, 2006, Saint John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota.

available for purchase. The working methods demonstrated by Jackson and his team – partly in the scriptorium in Wales, partly elsewhere, in the homes or workshops of the participants – no doubt resemble what happened in the high Middle Ages, once the activity of the monastic scriptorium had given way to the more flexible lay scriptorium, atelier, or workshop based in an urban setting.

From scriptorium to atelier

Whereas *The Saint John's Bible* is a very special book, made in a very special scriptorium, the move away from ecclesiastical production per se had begun by the twelfth century and gathered momentum in the thirteenth century. Lay production did not entirely replace monastic and clerical production but, already in the *Liber ordinis* of the Parisian abbey of Saint-Victor (c. 1139), mention is made of scribes from outside the abbey writing for pay.³² By the early thirteenth century, the university had developed a structure for controlling book production in Paris, and activity was based in the homes of parchmenters near the Sorbonne and those of scribes living in proximity to the cathedral of Notre-Dame.³³ Avril has shown that Parisian illuminators, too, were working outside the monasteries and cathedrals by the early thirteenth century.³⁴ To what extent was the work group-based and done in a single place? Avril's use of the term *atelier* makes eminent sense for illumination, for which materials are costly, including gold and silver and expensive pigments, and better kept locked up and made available under supervision – on the model of the ecclesiastical scriptorium.³⁵ Once production took place outside the controlled environment of the scriptorium, other people were involved in the administration of commission and production. By 1400, the activities of the *marchand*, or book-dealer, had come to dominate the book trade, and the scriptorium as such had given way to the *atelier*.³⁶

2. Isidore, *Etymologies*, 6, 9, 2, cited in Charlton Thomas Lewis, Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary, Founded on Andrews' Edition of Freund's Latin Dictionary, Revised, Enlarged, and in Great Part Rewritten*, Oxford, 1879, and by Jan Frederik Niermeyer, *Mediae Latinitatis Lexicon minus*, C. Van de Kieft, G. S. M. M. Lake-Schoonebeek, eds., Leiden/New York/Cologne, (1976) 1997. Ronald Edward Latham, ed., *Revised Medieval Latin Word-List from British and Irish Sources*, London, (1965) 1973, gives *scriptorium regis* as “scribal department c. 1178, 1200” and *scriptoria* as “penner 1234; scriptorium (monastic) c. 1266, c. 1330.” Niermeyer also cites Thangmar's *Vita Bernwardi* (before 1013), in which *scriptorium* has a second meaning as a “monastic writing-room.” See also Denis Muzerelle, *Vocabulaire codicologique : répertoire méthodique des termes français relatifs aux manuscrits*, Paris, 1985, p. 66, para. 2., heading *Locaux et mobilier : scriptorium* 212.01: “Locaux d'un établissement ecclésiastique où s'effectue le travail de copie des livres.” See also Olga Weijers, *Vocabulaire du livre et de l'écriture au Moyen Âge, (Études sur le vocabulaire intellectuel du Moyen Âge, 2)*, Turnhout, 1989.

3. Codex Sangallensis 1092. Walter Horn, Ernst Born, *The Plan of Saint Gall: A Study of the Architecture and Economy of, and Life in, a Paradigmatic Carolingian Monastery*, 3 vols., Berkeley/Los Angeles/London, 1979, vol. 1, pp. 145-147. Along the north and east walls are seven desks for writing (big enough to accommodate two monks at each desk) and seven windows. In the center is a large square table set on a plinth (www.stgallplan.org/en/index_plan.html, accessed January 1, 2014).

4. Charles du Fresne sieur du Cange, et al., *Glossarium mediae et infimae latinitatis*, rev. ed., Niort, 1883-1887, vol. 7, col. 370a (www.ducange.enc.sorbonne.fr, accessed January 1, 2014).

5. Émile Lesne, *Les Livres : « scriptoria » et bibliothèques du commencement du VIII^e à la fin du XI^e siècle*, (Lille, 1938) New York, 1964.

6. Ralf M. W. Stammberger, *Scriptor und Scriptorium: Das Buch im Spiegel mittelalterlicher Handschriften*, Graz, 2003.

7. Elias Alvery Lowe, *Codices lugdunenses antiquissimi : le Scriptorium de Lyon, la plus ancienne école calligraphique de France*, Lyon, 1924; Elias Alvery Lowe, “A key to Bede's Scriptorium: some observations on the Leningrad manuscript of the ‘Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum’,” in *Scriptorium*, 12, 1958, pp. 182-190; Malcolm B. Parkes, *The Scriptorium of Wearmouth-Jarrow* (Jarrow Lecture), Jarrow, 1982.

8. Em Yusupha, *Katalogus manuskrip dan skriptorium Minangkabau = Catalogue of manuscripts and scriptorium in Minangkabau*, Tokyo, 2006.

9. Robert B. Patterson, *The Original Acta of St. Peter's Abbey, Gloucester, c. 1122 to 1263*, (Gloucester Record Series, 11), Gloucester, 1998; Robert B. Patterson, *The Scriptorium of Margam Abbey and the Scribes of Early Angevin Glamorgan: Secretarial Administration in a Welsh Marcher Barony c. 1150-c.1225*, Woodbridge, 2002.

10. Danielle Gaborit-Chopin, *La Décoration des manuscrits à Saint-Martial de Limoges et en Limousin du IX^e au XII^e siècle*, Paris/

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- Geneva, 1969; Jean Dufour, *La Bibliothèque et le scriptorium de Moissac*, Geneva/Paris, 1972; Chantal Fraïsse, "Quelques observations sur le Scriptorium de Moissac au début du XII^e siècle," in *Mémoires de la Société archéologique du Midi de la France*, 52, 2002, pp. 29-50 and www.societes-savantes-toulouse.asso.fr/samf/cadrgpu.htm (accessed January 1, 2014).
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22. Much is now on line at www.scriptorium.be/index.php?lang=en (also in French, Dutch, German; accessed January 1, 2014).
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26. Cited from DS homepage at <http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/digitalscriptorium> (accessed January 1, 2014).
27. See Scriptorium: Medieval and Early Modern Manuscripts Online at <http://scriptorium.english.cam.ac.uk> (accessed January 1, 2014).
28. Holdings from 39 libraries in Switzerland, Swiss manuscripts in Austrian, German, French, Russian, and US collections, totaling 1,054 manuscripts: www.e-codices.unifr.ch (accessed January 1, 2014).
29. 75,000 documents are available at www.manuscripta-mediaevalia.de (accessed January 1, 2014).

30. See www1.arkhenum.fr/images/dr_loorraine_ms/MS0107/index.html (accessed January 1, 2014). Other manuscripts made for Renaud de Bar are digitized at www.manuscriptorium.com/apps/main/en/index.php?request=show_tei_digidoc&virtum=1&client= (Prague, Narodni Knihovna XXIII.C.120); www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/pharos/collection_pages/middle_pages/MS.298/FRM_TXT_SE-MS.298.html (Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum 298); www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/record.asp?MSID=8114&CollID=58&NStart=8 (London, British Library, Yates Thompson 8).

31. The *Saint John's Bible* is the result of collaboration between Donald Jackson and his team and Saint John's Abbey in Collegeville, MN. I thank Donald Jackson, Matthew Heintzelmann, Tim Ternes, and Linda Orzechowski for providing the information given here, some of which is also on the Web (www.vam.ac.uk, www.saintjohnsbible.org; accessed January 1, 2014). See also Christopher Calderhead, *Illuminating the Word: The Making of the Saint John's Bible*, Collegeville (MN), 2005.

32. Françoise Gasparri, "Scriptorium et bureau d'écriture de l'abbaye de Saint-Victor," in Jean Longère, *L'Abbaye parisienne de Saint-Victor au Moyen Âge*, (Biblioteca vitorina, 1), Paris, 1991, pp. 119-139; Gilbert Ouy, *La Bibliothèque médiévale de l'Abbaye parisienne de Saint-Victor : première partie, les manuscrits catalogués par Claude de Grandrue, 1514*, 3 vols., s.l., 1993.

33. See especially Richard H. Rouse, Mary A. Rouse, *Manuscripts and Their Makers: Commercial Book-Producers in Medieval Paris, 1200-1500*, 2 vols., London/Turnhout, 2000, especially. pp. 17-49.

34. François Avril, "À quand remontent les premiers ateliers d'enlumineurs laïques à Paris," in Françoise Hospital et al., *Enluminure gothique*, (Dossiers de l'archéologie, 16), 1976, pp. 36-44; J. J. G. Alexander, *Medieval Illuminators and Their Methods of Work*, New Haven/London, 1992.

35. Jean-Luc Deuffic, *Du scriptorium à l'atelier : copistes et enlumineurs dans la conception du livre manuscrit au Moyen Âge*, Turnhout, 2011.

36. Brigitte Büttner, "Jacques Raponde, 'marchand' de manuscrits enluminés," in *Médiévales : langue, textes, histoire*, 14, 1988, pp. 23-32; see also Rouse, Rouse, 2000, cited n. 33.

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