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Alison Stones

Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/perspective/4401
DOI: 10.4000/perspective.4401
ISSN: 2269-7721

Publisher
Institut national d'histoire de l'art

Printed version
Date of publication: 1 June 2014
Number of pages: 113-120
ISSN: 1777-7852

Electronic reference
Alison Stones, « Scriptorium: the term and its history », Perspective [Online], 1 | 2014, Online since 31 December 2015, connection on 01 October 2020. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/perspective/4401 ; DOI : https://doi.org/10.4000/perspective.4401
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 Ceolfrith 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 bibliotheca ; fig. 1). 3

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), Adelard of Bath († c. 1152), and Peter Abelard († 1142), among others, for the use of the term scriptorium. 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, while a similar general approach was taken up again recently in Ralf Stammberger’s study of medieval manuscripts through scribes and scriptoria in 2003. 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. The term scriptorium has even been used to refer to manuscript production in non-western cultures such as that of the Minangkabau (Sumatra). 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. 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. In the case of Limoges, two of the most impressive books were owned respectively by the Cathedral of Saint-Etienne 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. 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: Citeaux, 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 Alcobaca 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 Luxemburg,\(^ {18}\) 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 online. 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...
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. 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). 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.

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. 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, 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 collections and Manuscripta Mediaevalia for German collections. 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, 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.
The product of a contemporary scriptorium: The Saint John’s Bible

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 proofreader, 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
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. 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. Avril has shown that Parisian illuminators, too, were working outside the monasteries and cathedrals by the early thirteenth century. 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. 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.

10. Danielle Gaborit-Chopin, La Décoration des manuscrits à Saint-Martial de Limoges et en Limousin du xve au xvi siècle, Paris/


29. 75,000 documents are available at www.manuscripta-mediaevalia.de (accessed January 1, 2014).

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.


Alison Stones, University of Pittsburgh
mastones@hotmail.com