



## THE SCRIPTORIUM

### What is a scriptorium?

A **scriptorium** was a room in a monastery reserved for monks or nuns, who would **copy, illuminate** and **bind** books.

It benefits from an advantageous, heated location near the library so that the books are accessible.

Specific furniture: a **table, cathedra,** and **writing desk** were placed near the windows to benefit from daylight. There are also **chests** where work tools and **parchments** were kept.

### Organisation of work in a scriptorium

1. The **copyist** was chosen for his mastery of **calligraphy** and **Latin** and copied the texts as faithfully as possible onto **parchment, using a quill** or a **reed (the calamus)** in the Mediterranean basin.

Parchment is made from **animal skins** (from goats, sheep, lambs or kids). For the most precious manuscripts, it was made from vellum (from a stillborn calf).

To write, the copyist would dip his quill in **black ink** (the black pigment, lampblack was obtained from calcination) or **brown ink (cuttlefish ink, also called sepia)** to which he then added a binder (acacia gum, honey, egg white, animal glue, etc...).

2. The **illuminator**, a true artist, then decorated the pages with **lettering** (ornate or historiated initials) or **miniatures**, from the term minium, a lead oxide that gives a red colour (figurative paintings that illustrate manuscripts) or **ornamental decorations in the margins**, in bright and contrasting colours.

The word illuminate comes from the Latin **illuminare**, meaning **to make luminous**. It was about celebrating the glory of God through decoration. But the function of the illuminations is also didactic: they must highlight the written texts to attract attention and fix them in memory.

From a technical point of view, the illuminator would begin by **sketching the design in graphite**. Then he prepared **his pigments for painting**.

In medieval times there were two kinds of paint: chemical paint, produced artificially from sulphur, mercury and lead, and natural paint (vegetable, animal or mineral) made from roots, sunflowers, insects and fish. For example, red was made from madder roots or cinnabar, yellow from saffron, orange from turmeric, and blue from woad or lapis lazuli. Gold, on the other hand, was little used during the monastic period until the 12th century.

3. Finally, the **bookbinder** assembled the different sections with a binding and made the book's cover.

## Writing and its evolution

The Latin script inherited from Roman antiquity, i.e. in the form of *capitalis monumentalis* (our current capital letters), underwent many changes in the Middle Ages.

The **uncial script** (3rd-9th centuries) was created from capital letters and the old Roman cursive.

It is distinguished by the roundness of its letters. The uncial script allowed the hand greater freedom of movement and was much more suitable for writing with a pen than the straight, angular capitals. This is why it was used to write the Codices. Originally the term codex (folded booklets) referred to the new form of the book, as opposed to the volumen (scroll).

The **caroline minuscule** (8th-11th century) comes from the Palatine school of Aachen directed by Alcuin, who was asked by Charlemagne to use a simple and legible script to facilitate the administration of his territories and to promote the Carolingian cultural renaissance.

From the 12th century onwards, the caroline minuscule evolved into the **Gothic script**, where the rounded form gave way to acute angles, just as the ogive and the pointed arch replaced the semicircular form at the same time in architecture. It also used more and more abbreviations.

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