

SCRIBES: The Writers Behind

Medieval Manuscripts

The Lives of Scribes

Who were They?

Scribes were people who copied documents. They were fairly common before the invention of the printing press. They can be thought of as professional copiers and were typically hired by wealthy nobles, kings, queens, towns or regions. Scribes were taught how to write and copy in schools or monasteries (FIGURE 2). Most scribes were either monks or nuns who dedicated their lives to copying text.

Although they were mostly men, there were actually quite a lot of women. This is surprising, as women had less rights at the time than men. Women were educated alongside men in co-ed monasteries and schools (FIGURE 2). However, in many cases, women were not allowed to write religious pieces.

Some of the best scribes may have very well have been young teens. This is in part due to physical advantages of younger people:

- Scribal writing requires good eye sight,
- Stamina and endurance are required for the repetitive and boring task,
- Fine motor control of the hand are important

Public view of Scribes

Public view of scribes was quite good. Although their lives were not as nice as royals, they were much better off than the average person. They received more food and always had a place to sleep. They were considered part of the royal court which provided scribes with many benefits, as follows:

- They were not conscripted to the army
- They did not pay taxes
- They were exempt from manual labor

Female scribes were held at a high regard than other women.

Introduction

Scribes have been around for thousands of years. We know about ancient cultures thanks to scribes and the work they put into recording. The first scribes were of Mesopotamia, but the practice stayed until the invention of automatic print. In this poster, we look at the lives of Medieval scribes in the years leading up to printing press in 1440. We examine their lives and what they left behind in order to answer some compelling questions about the social-political, religious and cultural norms hundreds of years ago.

What were the work environments for scribes like? What were the working conditions? How were scribe's lives different than the rest of the public? What was the public's opinion of being a scribe? Did scribes record their thoughts or feelings in addition to the required material?

What They Left Behind

As discussed under *Work Environments and Challenges*. Scribes face many frustrations and challenges as they completed their boring task. We can find examples of tired scribes getting out there thoughts and tension on the margins of many documents. These expression are found in the form of doodles and notes.

Doodles

It is surprisingly common to find small drawings in ancient manuscripts. But is this unexpected? School children do it all the time. Scribes had reasons to doodle in the blank space. To test out a new pen or quill, or to just be sure that the ink was flowing properly. In addition, good parchment was a rare commodity that most did not have access to. If the scribes wanted to draw, they couldn't do it anywhere else.

Example of these doodles can be found in FIGURES 5 and 6. This is evidence that an empty spot on a page always seems to attract a creative hand.

Writing

Almost always, the notes found in the margins of pages were negative. Whether it was to complain about their over-seer, the previous writer's work or even to prove they could do a better job at translating. Usually these messages were in a different colored ink, typically lighter. This was in order to make it clear to the reader that the material was not relevant to the book's contents.

Quotes

Quotes and statements from scribes were commonly found in the margins of manuscripts. They were regarded as "Marginalia," and example of these can be seen in FIGURES 7 and 8. Some translated examples of these included:

- "Let me not be blamed for the script, for the ink is bad, and the vellum defective, and the day is dark."
- "A curse on thee, O pen!"
- "Cithruadh Magfindgaill wrote the above without chalk, without pumice, and with bad implements."
- "Now I've written the whole thing, for Christ's sake, give me a drink."

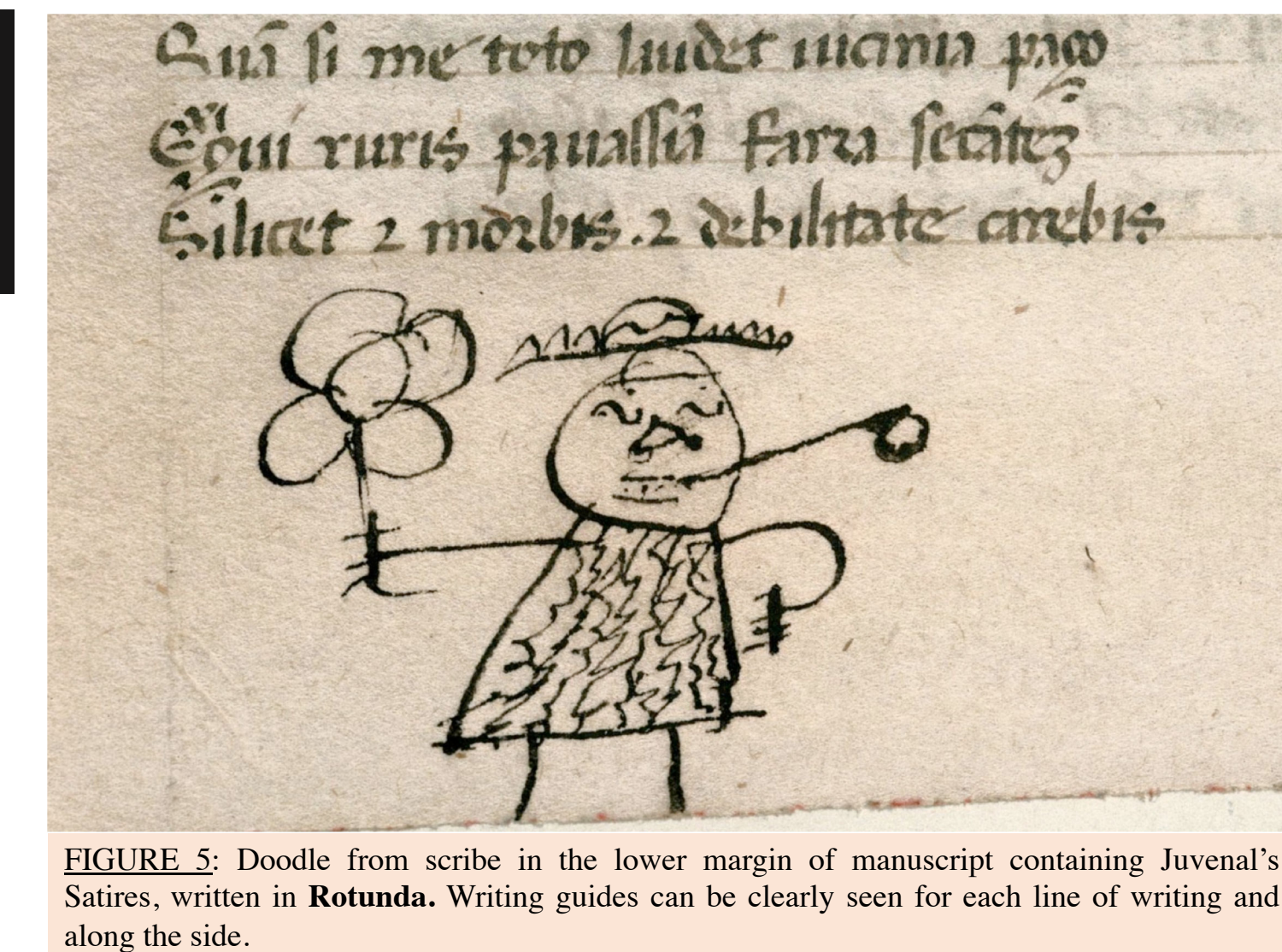


FIGURE 5: Doodle from scribe in the lower margin of manuscript containing Juvenal's Satires, written in Rotunda. Writing guides can be clearly seen for each line of writing and along the side.



FIGURE 6: A smiley face doodle created by a scribe who was writing in Angular Gothic Script/Black Letter. Guides for writing can be seen in a light ink, both vertically and horizontally.



FIGURE 7: Notes written in the margin of document written in Rotunda and also containing a pointing hand. This *Manicula* (Latin for "little hand") was used as a book mark in order to reference back to things in the future.

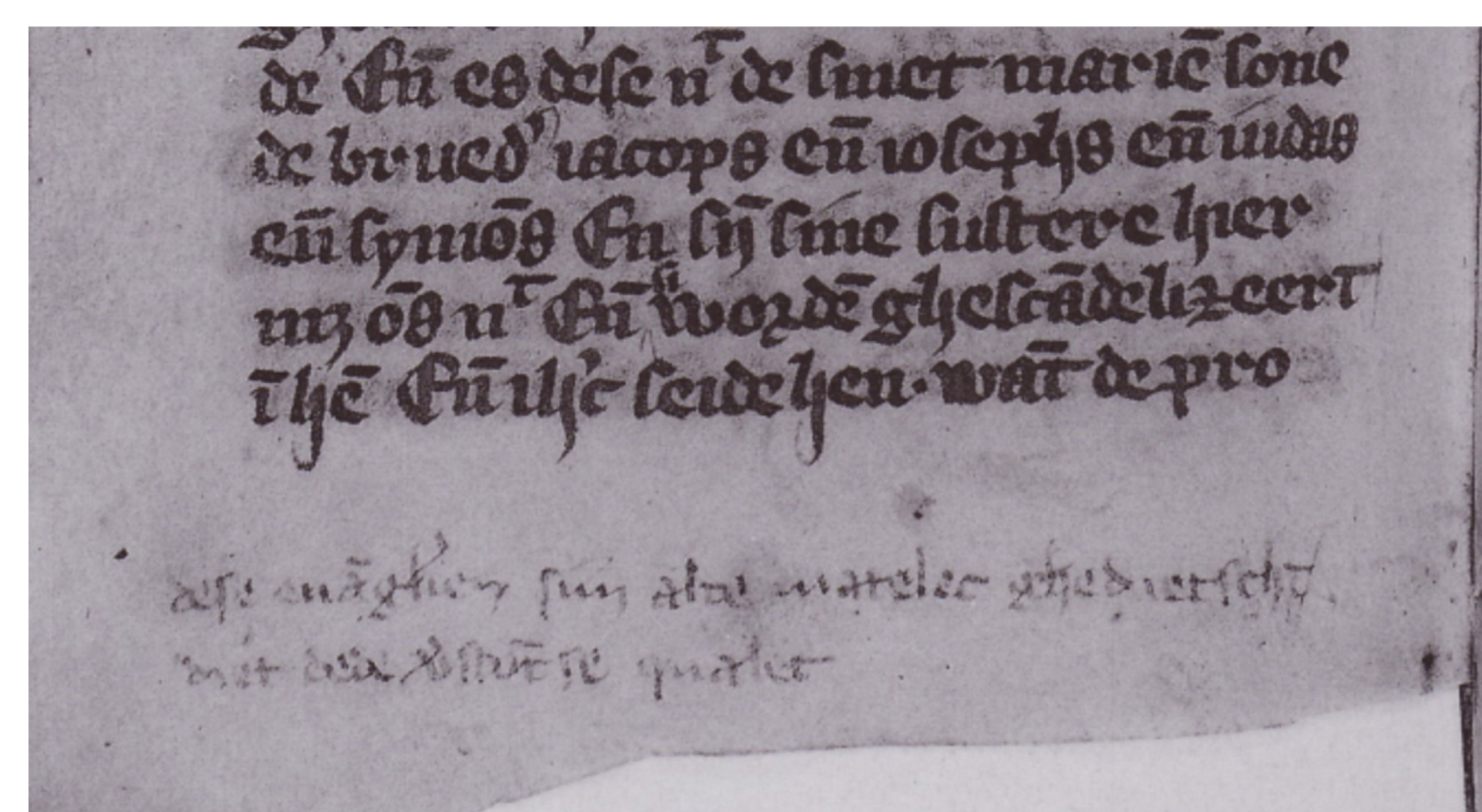


FIGURE 8: A scribe writes "Whoever translated these Gospels, did a very poor job!" in an empty space of the piece written in Rotunda.

Work Environments and Challenges

Being a scribe was hard work. The job came with long hours, boring work and not the most desirable environment.

It was time consuming for scribes to complete their work. They worked no matter the weather, in the cold and heat. So long as there was enough light to see, sunlight or candle light, they were expected to work. They worked constantly and received only one "lunch" break each day. Although much of their lives were spent writing, Sundays, the day of worship, were dedicated to prayer and rest. One other days, they may have been given permission to skip prayer services.

Being a scribes was also very tedious. The work of copying pieces of writing was repetitive and not very exciting. Scribes averaged six hours a day. Apart from religious duties, they were always expected to be working. Some of the scribes may not have even understood the material they were writing as they didn't need to read in order to copy the work. This caused many mistakes in the writings. In an effort to "correct" the text, scribes would replace uncommon or unfamiliar words with those that were less strange but incorrect. Not being able to understand the text also made it quite easy for scribes to lose their place after taking a break.

Another time consuming factor for scribes was planning the layout of their books. They created guidelines for writing by putting down horizontal and vertical ruling. (SEE FIGURES 2, 4, 5 & 6) These guides were done with a sharp object created to indent into the page. Scribes also would have to re-dunk their pens constantly into the ink, making writing cumbersome.

As far as their working environments, the tables and chairs were very uncomfortable, especially when spending long periods of time working. Scribe's desks were tilted at an angle typically greater than 45 degrees. (FIGURE 1) This was necessary to get the ink to flow effectively out of the pen. Scribes even had to produce the ink, pens and parchment they used. Gathering and preparing the ingredients were extremely time consuming.

The thin and fragile animal skin on which the scribes wrote had its own challenges. The parchment could, at times, be rough and even hairy, making it difficult to write accurately. The best skin was reserved for the "master" scribes working on important religious work (FIGURE 4). This means that many had to work on difficult parchment causing ink to run. Also, in an effort to save money on less valuable pieces, it was common for the writing to become closer together and more compact to save space on the parchment and to write fast (FIGURE 3). The difference between expert and casual writing can be seen in Figures 3 and 4.

Housing

Scribe's normally lived in the monasteries in which they worships and learned their practice. When they were required to copy a piece, they would have to travel to the location of the writing. The scribes would than have to be hosted by those they were staying with for the people whom hired them. Scribes worked for kings, nobles, temples and cities. So their living conditions would have been much better than most citizens.

DID YOU KNOW?:
Scribes could spend up to years copying a single piece of work.

Nutrition

Scribes ate better than most peasants as their meals were provided by the establishments and people for whom they worked. Although they may not have been eating like nobles, their diets consisted of some high-class foods, such as venison or other game meat. Similarly, they would eat staple items common to people at this time, such as cabbage, beans, eggs, oat and brown bread. Another popular product was bear or ale, which was available for all classes.

It is estimated that scribes consumed around 6,000 calories on a normal day. This was more than a typical peasant which consumed 4,000 calories. However, they did not have as much physical activity than the peasants, so scribes tended to be well-fed and plump. Although these amounts may seem rather high compared to today's recommended consumptions of 2,000 calories for the average person, they were appropriate at the time. The lack of transport, heating and cooling systems meant that a large amount of energy had to be spend on getting from one place to another and staying at an appropriate body temperature.

FIGURE 1: Art piece of a scribe in the 1300's France depicting the sloped desk scribes used in copying manuscripts. Writing below in Angular Gothic Script/Black Letter

FIGURE 2: French art piece of a scribe demonstrating writing skills to his pupils, both male and female. The writing of this piece is French Batarde. Writing guides can be seen, created in a light ink, both vertically and horizontally.

FIGURE 3: Piece of writing that was done on a less than ideal piece of parchment. This is evident with letters and words closer together than average (in order to save space and use less parchment), lack of color, and the writing seems to have been quickly done. This was done in French Batarde.

FIGURE 4: A page from The English Rochester Bible. It is a important piece of writing that was likely given a better quality piece of parchment, as with most religious texts. This must have taken a fair amount of time to create as indicated with colors and details. Guides can be seen along the right side of the page, helping the scribe to set up and space their work. This is done in Rotunda and was likely done by a prestigious and experienced scribe as it is a religious piece and was clearly meticulously done.