

**Fig. 1:** This marginal decoration from the *Roman de la Rose* manuscript depicts husband and wife, Richard and Jeanne de Montbaston, a couple of illuminators and sworn-in *libraires* living and working in Paris during the first half of the 14th century. They specialized in making copies of the *Roman de la Rose*. In this illumination they are both working individually on sheets of parchment while completed sheets are hanging to dry.

Bibliothèque nationale de France. Département des Manuscrits. Français 25526, f. 77v  
*Roman de la Rose*, Paris, first half of the 14th century

For a closer look:  
<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b6000369g/f160.item.zoom>

In the preceding folio (f. 77r) Richard is writing while his wife Jeanne is mixing colors.

**Fig. 2 (below):** An historiated letter 'D' from this three-volume Bible written for the Dean of the Hamburg Cathedral depicts a monk buying some parchment sheets off a parchmenter.

In Paris, parchment shops were located in *rue des Ecrivains* (which became *rue de la Parcheminerie* in 1397). Parchment was sold under the tight control of University regulation.

Royal Danish Library. Hamburgbiblen GKS 4, f. 183r  
 Hamburg Bible, Hamburg, circa 1255



**Fig. 3 (right):** A gash in the parchment has been mended with parchment lace stitches.

Bibliothèque nationale de France. Département des Manuscrits. Latin 1118, f. 168r  
*Auch Troper*, France, ca. 990-1010

For a closer look:  
<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8432314k/f345.item.zoom>

## MEDIEVAL BOOK PRODUCTION:

### MANUFACTURING MANUSCRIPTS

The sheer amount of extant medieval manuscripts shows that although in medieval society only a small fraction of the population had access to written texts (and was capable of reading them), the Middle Ages were not without written culture. As a matter of fact, the flourishing medieval book trade was a driving force for cultural transmission. Written text had value and authority, and reading was not only visual but oral. Text could also be enjoyed through the gestures it inspired, its decoration and its vibrant illuminations. In fact, the "Dark" Middle Ages were not dark at all. During this age, the transmission and preservation of ancient and medieval knowledge was ensured through time.

Up until the invention of the movable type printing press in the 1450's by German inventor Johann Gutenberg, all books were manuscripts, that is, written by hand. From early monastic *scriptoria* that produced the sacred scriptures that monks and clerics could meditate over, passing through 12th century urban workshops laden with academic texts for university students, to courtly literature for the education and amusement of 14th century aristocratic bibliophiles, methods and techniques of manuscript production were perfected throughout a period of about fifteen hundred years, and well into the era of the printed book.

The medieval manuscript took on as many forms as its users required, modifying its appearance as well as its conditions of manufacture and trade. A handwritten book required the participation of a series of skills which included: preparing the writing support, laying out the page, copying the text, revising it, decorating and illustrating it, sewing together the quires and binding them. With time and growing demand, this long and meticulous process went from being exclusively the stuff of monks and monasteries to becoming a well-organized secular trade, giving rise to dedicated professions, guilds and regulations.

Author: Paloma Pucci

### THE PARCHMENTER

Three types of writing supports were used throughout the Middle Ages: papyrus, paper and **parchment**. Made out of animal skin or "membrane" (goat, sheep or calf skins), parchment's great success throughout most of the Middle Ages was due to its resistance to the ravages of time and wear (as well as the dissolving action of certain acidic inks), and its fine texture and translucency.

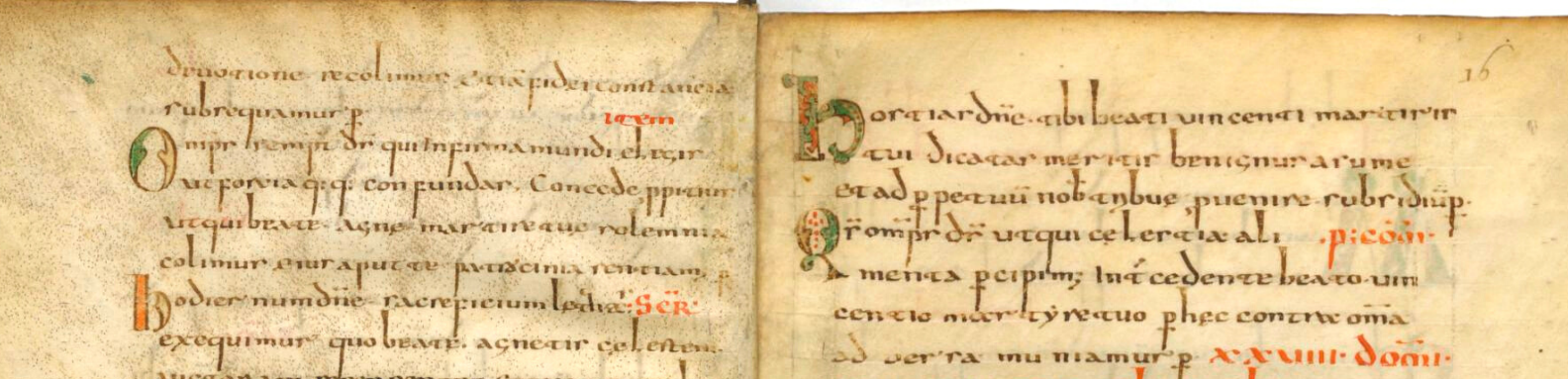
The **parchmenter** or *percamenarius* prepared the animal skins in specialized workshops located in cities or near monasteries. Calf skins allowed for the finest quality material, **vellum**, resulting in a more expensive and luxurious product. Skin preparation was long and tedious, and involved cleaning, bleaching, stretching, scraping and polishing the skin's surface until it became a clean white surface suitable for writing. Depending on the treatment used, parchment preparation could result in a thick or thin sheet varying in color from ivory to yellow. For more luxurious manuscripts, parchment could be tinted with purple or black.

Skins were first soaked in a solution of water and lime in order to loosen the hair. They would then be stretched hairside out tightly over a beam (a curved wooden surface) and scraped with a curved knife, removing the hair and revealing the porous skin underneath (this side is known as the **grain side**) (Fig. 4). The skin would then be flipped over, revealing its **flesh side**, and scraped once more.

The second part of this process is what actually turns the skin into parchment. It consists of stretching the skin and alternating scraping with wetting and drying in order to create more tension. This is done on a wooden frame from which the skin is suspended from strings attached to adjustable pegs. During this stage, the skin becomes so tense that any small gashes made during the scraping and hair-removal process, may stretch out becoming holes on the surface. Many manuscripts have holes that have been mended, decorated or written around (Fig. 3). The skin would lastly be treated with a mixture of chalk or lime (this prepared it to receive writing ink) and polished with pumice.

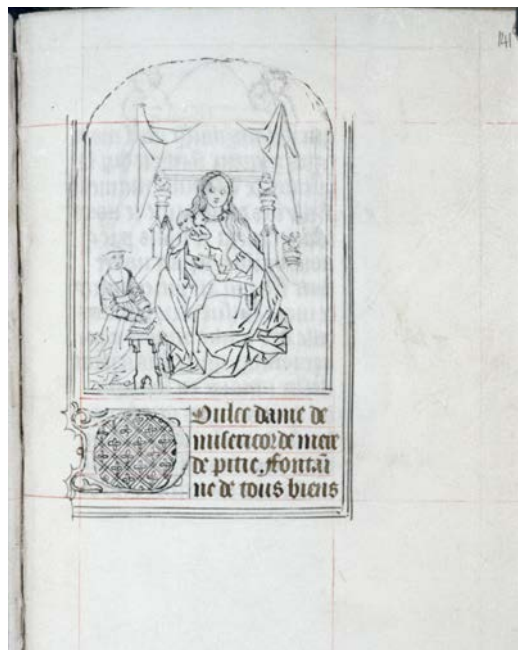
Parchment became ever thinner as the Middle Ages wore on. By the 13th century (notably in tiny Paris Bibles), it could be stretched tissue thin.





## THE SCRIBE

Different artisans participated in the fabrication of the book, the first one to intervene being the **scribe** (or scribes), men or women who wrote the text by hand using quills and ink (that they often made themselves). In the Early Middle Ages, parchment was sold in large rectangular sheets, which the scribe had to cut into smaller sheets (the size depending on the book's format). These sheets, as well as the exemplar, could be distributed among one or more scribes in order to accelerate production. Scribes would then plan the page layout, establish the text-margin ratio and prick and rule the sheets using a stylus or the back of a knife. In the 11th century, we start seeing graphite or lead being used instead, and from the 13th onward, pen and colored ink make their appearance. As with modern notebooks, these lines served as guide for the script. By the 14th century, parchment could be bought in pre-ruled **gatherings** or **quires**, ready to be written on.



**Fig. 5 (above):** This unfinished book of hours illustrates how, after the page layout had been established and the text copied out, the illuminator started to sketch out the scene just when their work was abruptly brought to an end. It goes to show that miniatures were added last.

Bodleian Library MS. Douce 267, f. 141v  
Book of Hours

For a closer look:

<https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/0726162e-8fb5-43ed-8b6a-d1b2cc9687e0/>

The style of script in which the scribe chose to write changed according to the times. **Uncial script** was used between the 4th and 8th centuries, the **Carolingian minuscule** was used from the second half of the 8th century and well into the 13th century (resurfacing once more during the Italian Renaissance), **Blackletter** or **Gothic script** was used from ca. 1150's and can still be found in books up until the 17th century. All of these were subject to as many variations as there were centers of production. Some scripts (such as the Carolingian minuscule) took on such a symbolic and traditional value that they continued to

be used well after their time. Explore some of the different scripts used throughout the Middle Ages in this short video:

[Scripts](#)

Besides knowing calligraphy and punctuation, scribes had to know the abbreviations that would allow them to save time and material. **Tironian notes** (medieval shorthand) were often used in the empty spaces where special ornate titles or **historiated initials** were to go. When the scribe and the illuminator were not the same person, these instructions informed the painter of what had to be represented. They could sometimes be as precise as what colors were to be used. Text was most often copied in black ink. Gold could also be used to emphasize the importance and authority of the text (or for contrast if the parchment had been tinted).

Many manuscripts received **rubrication** (from the Latin *ruber*, meaning red). This process consisted of writing-in headings, running-titles and initials in red or blue ink, sometimes with flourishes and ornamentation, in order to mark out different sections of the text, thus facilitating the reader with navigating the book. Sometimes, the scribe would insert 'bookmarks' to highlight important passages, or write down cross-references in the margins in order to allow for discontinuous consultation. Watch this short video on [Discontinuous Reading](#).

Once the copying had finished, the revision process would begin. Corrections had to be made directly on the page. In monastic contexts, besides the scribes themselves, the best scholars of the monastery would often be called upon as revisers in order to insure the quality of the copied version.

Writing was an arduous task and monks would interrupt short periods of work with prayers and other duties. It is estimated that a scribe was able to copy only about 2-3 pages per day. Traces left by scribes in medieval manuscripts provide useful information on how they worked. To further understand what these traces are able to tell us take a look at this short video: [Traces of Scribes](#)

Some books show the traces of having been written on more than once. Parchment being as expensive as it was, when a text had lost its relevance, it could be scraped or washed off, leaving a fresh parchment sheet for another scribe to write a new document on. These documents are called **palimpsests**.

## THE ILLUMINATOR

Most medieval manuscripts received some form of decoration, not only for ornamental purposes (making the book more beautiful and appealing) but also for pedagogic purposes (providing commentary and explanation in order to better illustrate the text). This was a task for **illuminators**.

The word 'illumination' in the strictest sense refers to the use of **gold or silver leaf** (or powder) in the decoration of a manuscript. Gold leaf had to be applied before any pigment was applied to the pages. This was done in order to avoid the metal leaf from adhering to any prior painted surface and to protect the pictures from being smudged or scrapped by buffing and polishing finishes. On the other

**Fig. 4 (above):** As opposed to the **grain-side** (f. 15v) the rougher surface of which is laden with dark pores marking where the animal's hair follicles used to be, the **flesh-side** (f. 16r), which faced the animal's flesh, has no pores, is whiter, softer and smoother to the touch. Sometimes, the skins were so well prepared that hair-side and flesh-side are indistinguishable from one another.

Bibliothèque nationale de France. Département des Manuscrits. Latin 12048, f. 15v (left) and 16r (right)  
Cellone Sacramentary, France, 780-800

For a closer look:

<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b60000317/f38.double>

**Fig. 6 (below):** Jean Miélot, a scribe in the court of the dukes of Burgundy, copying a text on rules parchment from an exemplar that he has propped up in front of him. This folio also reveals many aspects that make up a typical page layout: ruling, rubrication, a decorated initial, and an illuminated scene painted in *grisaille* (using only shades of gray).

Bibliothèque nationale de France. Département des Manuscrits. Français 9198, f. 19r  
Vie et miracles de Notre Dame, Jean Miélot, Netherlands, 3rd 1/4 15th century

For a closer look:

<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8451097/f49.item.r=fran%C3%A7ais%209198#>



hand, gold powder was applied with a pen or brush after the color. Gold leaf is more commonly found in manuscripts from after 1200; applied over a layer of *gesso*, giving it a certain relief on the page so that as the brilliant metal catches the light from various angles, it quite literally illuminates the page.

Once the gold or silver leaf had been applied, painting could begin. However, illuminators had little freedom over what their paintings would look like. Decisions on the type, size and extent of the miniatures were settled long before the illuminator came into the picture (either by the patron and the scribe or the scribe's agent). In fact, they usually received a sheet of parchment containing the text in which empty spaces had been left, often containing instructions as to what paintings had to be executed. From these written instructions we may infer that the artists in charge of completing the manuscript could read. In fact, most known scribes prior to the 10th century also exercised as illuminators. Not all monasteries however had people qualified for the task, and a growing amount of evidence shows itinerant artists travelling from monastery to monastery to illuminate books. As with the copying phase, different illuminators could participate in the illustration of one single manuscript. There were different types of illuminators: **letter illuminators**, **border illuminators** (specialised in decorating the margins), and **history painters** (providing the historiated scenes).

The first decorated initials appeared in 6th century liturgical manuscripts and developed in quality and inventiveness during the 9th, 10th and 11th centuries. Since medieval manuscripts did not have title pages, the first opening initial had the purpose of announcing the beginning of the text, and was often decorated according to its importance in order to facilitate consultation. In fact, decoration not only served as illustration or commentary; every element on the page was configured to guide the reader's eyes to and from the text. For further examples of how page layout helped readers navigate the contents of the book, watch this short video: [Structuring the Medieval Page](#)

The 15th century, on the other hand, witnessed the rise in importance of borders and historiated scenes. Borders became ever more complex, detailed and realistic (containing elaborate vegetal motifs, flowers and botanical drawings, animals, human figures, coats of arms and miniature scenes), and scenes took on the dimensions of half or full-page miniature pictures that often rivaled with panel paintings.

Pattern books also played an important part in manuscript decoration. Extant pattern sheets contain not only isolated pictures but also examples of ornamented initials and decorated borders. Some of these compositions became characteristic of individual artists and their workshops, notably in Paris during the first half of the 13th century. These patterns could be traced from one copy to another using transparent paper called *carta lucida* or a process called **pouncing** (pricking holes into the parchment and dabbing them with a bag full of colored powder).

The illuminator charged by the number and size of each decoration, multiplying them out. Labor was cheap but the materials were expensive.

## COLORS AND PIGMENTS

Illuminators disposed of a large range of pigments that they would turn into colors by grinding, mixing and tempering them. To name a few available pigments: **red** (the most common color in medieval manuscripts) could be made from grinding cinnabar (mercuric sulphide), from heating mercury with sulphur (Vermilion) or from plant extracts.

**Blue** (the second most common color) could be made from azurite (a stone), from the seeds of the *Crotophora* plant, or from lapis lazuli, also known as 'ultramarine blue'

(the most expensive pigment, found only in the mountains of Afghanistan). **Green** came from malachite (a copper carbonate) or from verdigris. **White** came from white lead and **yellow** was made with orpiment (arsenic sulphide) or saffron.

These pigments could be mixed with egg whites (egg tempera), or gums made from fish lime or boiled animal skins (including scraps leftover from the parchment preparation process).

## THE BOOKBINDER

A manuscript was only finished once it was bound. This was the last stage of production. All loose quires would be collected and reassembled in order for them to be stitched up and bound together. In the Early Middle Ages and in the monastic context, this task was for a member of the community who knew how to bind (if there was one) or for an itinerant binder. In the Late Middle Ages, this task was left to the **stationer** or **bookseller** (the person who had taken the order and organized the labor by distributing the quires among different scribes and illuminators in the first place). The stationer would assemble the quires by matching numerical or alphabetical **signatures** written on the bottom margins of the last and first pages of each quire or **catchwords** linking the last word of one page to the first one of the next.

Once the quires had been assembled in sequence, they would be sewn together through their central fold onto bands or cords that ran at right angles across the spine. From the 12th century onward, a wooden frame would be used to tighten the cords (that would make up the spine of the book) so as to be able to sew each gathering individually through each cord and around it.

The main characteristic of most medieval bindings are the sturdy **wooden boards** used to form the book's front and back plates. Solid bookbinding was, in fact, paramount. During the Early Carolingian Empire, binding books was declared a necessity in order to insure the conservation of their quires or gatherings (and avoid their dispersion). Moreover, as they were initially stowed flat on library shelves, the pressure applied by the weight of the bindings helped to keep them shut and avoid the parchment sheets from curling due to moisture and temperature changes (this problem could also be solved by applying clasps or leather belts that kept them shut even when stored vertically). Throughout the Middle Ages, simpler (and cheaper) bindings could also be made from parchment or **pasteboards** (layered and glued waste paper or parchment forming a type of cardboard). These bindings became ever more common in the late 14th century, notably in southern Europe.

In monasteries, some books could be composed of separate booklets of text, gathered and bound to form one single volume (thus preventing loose leaflets from getting damaged or lost). To learn more about mixed books watch this short video: [Composite Volumes](#)

Bindings would usually be covered in leather (sometimes stamped with patterns) or fabric, and fitted with protective metal corner-pieces, decorative metalwork, jewels, enamels



Fig. 7 (above): British Library, Royal MS 6 E VI/2, f. 329r  
*Omne Bonum*, by James le Palmer, ca. 1360-1375

Inside this historiated "C" that opens the entry for "Color" in this encyclopedia, an artist is seen mixing colors in his workshop.

For a closer look:  
[http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=royal\\_ms\\_6\\_e\\_vi2\\_f269r](http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=royal_ms_6_e_vi2_f269r)

Fig. 8 (right): The bands that cross the spine of this Late medieval book of hours are being reinforced by modern leather bands during a restoration campaign.

Béatrice Lucchese, Bibliothèque nationale de France  
Restoration of the Boussou Book of Hours, ca. 1490



and paintings. They reflect the changing tastes and preferences of the times. A great number of medieval manuscripts have, in fact, gone through one or more re-bindings in order to suit the preferences of each new possessor.

The rise of private aristocratic libraries in the 14th century launched bookbinding into its golden age. Wealthy bibliophiles had a taste for personalized bindings that would represent the book's belonging to their personal collection. However elegant these personalized bindings may have been, liturgical books remained undefeated in their luxury and beauty. In fact, because of the authority of the sacred texts they contained, these books were often carried around in processions in front of worshipers, stored as treasures and exhibited as relics. Their bindings were decorated with luxurious ivory carvings, encrusted jewels and delicate metalwork. Their outer container confirmed the sacred nature of the text within. For more examples of medieval bindings, watch this short video:

[Bindings](#)



**Fig. 9 (above):** This luxurious Carolingian psalter, copied by the scribe and illuminator Liuthard for his patron Charles the Bald, is contained within two wooden boards, decorated with a central carved ivory scene and jewels embedded in delicate metalwork.

Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des Manuscrits, Latin 1152, front plate  
*Psalterium Caroli Calvi*, The Psalter of Charles de Bald, ca. 842-869

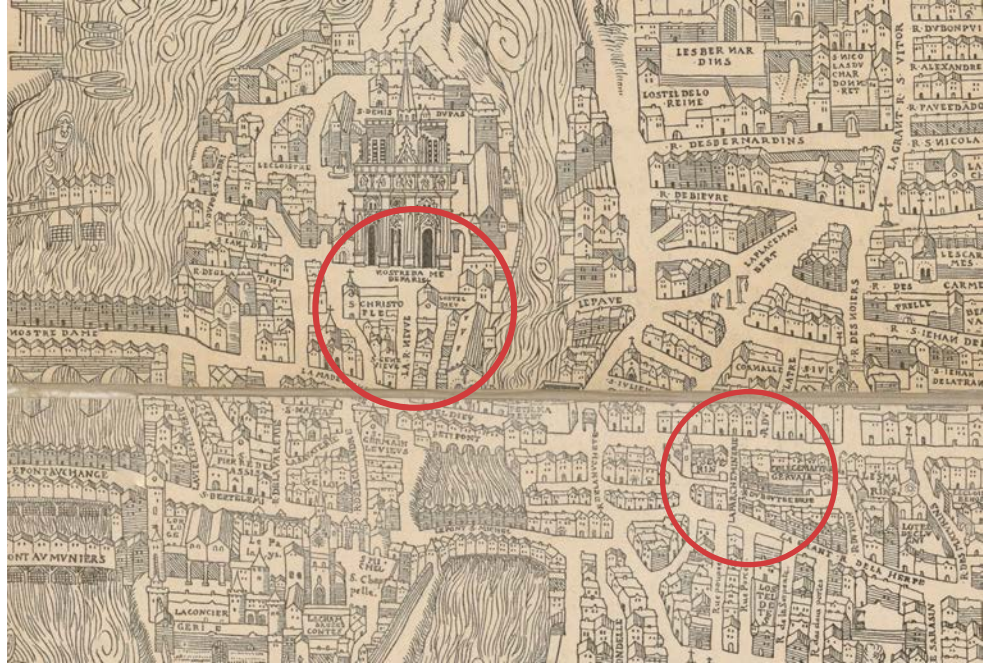
For a closer look:  
<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b55001423q/f1.item#>

## FROM MONASTERIES TO URBAN WORKSHOPS: THE PARIS BOOK TRADE

Book manufacture changed considerably during the Middle Ages, from the 1200's well into the 1400's, Paris became one of the most important centers of commercial book production in Europe.

In the Early Middle Ages, manuscript production was almost exclusively ecclesiastical, that is, centered around monastic workshops called *scriptoria*, where book-making was accomplished on-site by monks. These books were largely destined for liturgy and private meditation, and were used either by ecclesiastics or by the highest literate aristocracy (bibles, psalters, gospelbooks, sacramentaries, benedictionaries, troparies, missals, *computus*, etc.).

The manufacture process was organized by the figure of the *armarius*, a type of librarian whose job was to keep and repair books as well as organize the labor and provide the necessary materials for all writing activity in the monastery.



By the 12th century, the *armarius* would also be expected to hire lay scribes and illuminators from urban centers such as Paris for specific commissions. In fact, during the second half of the 12th century, Paris was well on its way to becoming one of the most important centers of book production in Europe due to several factors: the city's booming population, its religious institutions (and the patronage of their wealthy ecclesiastics), the stable presence of the king and his court in the city (as well as their patronage), and the supremacy of the University of Paris.

During the 13th and 14th centuries, the population of Paris grew with impressive speed, surpassing all other European cities. The foundation of the University of Paris (the most important university in Europe during the 13th century) resulted in the arrival of students and masters from all over Europe thus spurring an ever-growing demand for academic books at accessible prices. Increased book production entailed not only the translation and copying of Biblical texts and ancient classics, but also the strict control of their quality and price. In this context, the University rigidly regulated book production, supplanting the guild system that other important cities such as London and Bruges had established to regulate their book markets.

By the latter part of the 13th century, the University of Paris controlled the artisans (their rights and obligations), the division of labor, the quality of the text and of the writing support, as well as book prices. In this fast-evolving lay book trade an emerging figure was that of the *libraire* (a bookseller or bookshop owner). The *libraire* or *librarius* controlled the supply of books, employing various scribes and illuminators (often working as scribes themselves), and distributing portions of the text among different artisans so that they could be copied simultaneously (if pressed for time). Furthermore, they were obliged to swear an oath of obedience to the University which was meant to ensure that they would not defraud their clients nor accept excessively high commissions. These conditions were also imposed on the *parcheminiers*.

Not only did the University control the selling and buying of existing books and parchment but also the rental of exemplars that students and masters could copy or have copied for their own use. By the second half of the 13th century, exemplars could also be rented out one quire at a time to different copyists so that each one could make several copies of a different part of the text simultaneously. This system was called the '*pecia*' (quire) system, and had originated in the early 13th century in Italian university cities. Scribes would leave annotations at the end of each *pecia* so that, once they were gathered, each quire could be inserted in its correct order.

However important the University was for the Parisian book trade, it was not as all-encompassing as it has been made

**Fig. 10 (above):** At the heart of the Parisian book trade were two adjacent neighborhoods joined by a bridge (the Petit-Pont). One was located on the Ile de la Cité, on rue Neuve Notre-Dame (which opens up to the façade of the Notre-Dame Cathedral). This is where most *libraires* or booksellers were. The other neighborhood was located on the Left Bank around the St-Séverin Church on rue des Ecrivains (which later became rue de la Parcheminerie) and rue Errembourg de Brie. On these streets one could find *libraires*, but also scribes, illuminators and parchmenters.

Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Cartes et plans, GE C-9034  
 Detail of a map of Paris during the reign of Henri II, Olivier Truschet and Germain Hoyau, ca. 1551, 1552

For a closer look:  
<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b53093892/n/f1.item#zoom#>

out to be. Schoolbooks were cheap, unadorned and plain. The impact that wealthy students and masters from powerful families all over the continent had on the Parisian book-trade was not as much a result of their scholarly activity as it was of their particular taste for luxurious gilded psalters, epistles, and bibles. The presence of rich and powerful patrons in the city must also be taken into account.

Paris was, in fact, a royal city as well as an episcopal city. It was home to the king, his court, and to a large and wealthy bishopric as well as a cathedral chapter. This cadre of wealthy patrons who resided in Paris commissioned luxurious manuscripts in both Latin and vernacular. Their acquisitions reflected not only their interests but also their tastes; patrons acquired books not only for their personal education and private devotion but also for pleasure, amusement and display. In 14th century aristocratic libraries, bibles, psalters and books of hours were present in the same measure as scientific treatises on plants or the history of science, historical chronicles, books about jousting tournaments and combat, courtly romance, and books on travel and adventure (all beautifully illustrated and bound).

Around the year 1300, Parisian illuminators had been adopting styles from all over Europe and were becoming well-known for their craft (the two most famous were Maître Honoré and Jean Pucelle) as well as highly requested. Paris's renown (impulsed during the second half of the 14th century by the cultural policies of the bibliophile King Charles V) attracted patrons from all over Europe who either went to Paris themselves to buy these books or sent their scribes to have them copied according to Parisian style and taste.

## USERS AND USES:

The rich variety of manuscripts produced in the course of the Middle Ages came in many shapes and sizes, as the book changed and adapted to its function and to its users. Watch a short video on: [Dimensions and Forms](#)

Liturgical books such as gospelbooks and sacramentaries were meant to be read during liturgy by the officiant himself. Their dimensions were moderate (not too different from modern-day books) in order for them to be easily carried around by one person and manipulated during mass. Because they contained the Sacred Script, these books were often luxuriously illuminated with golden lettering and ornamentation and bound with delicately carved ivory plates, encased in metal filigree and jewels. They were often carried around during rituals and displayed as relics. The materials that composed these books as well as the quality and quantity of decoration they received reflected the importance of the text within (and the wealth of their patron), as is the case with the [Psalter of Charles the Bald](#) (Fig. 11).

Wealth was not only expressed by how much space was occupied by figures and decorations but also by how little space was occupied by the text. Parchment was so expensive that a scribe trying to respect a limited budget might reduce the margins in order to fit in as much text per page as possible. Whereas a rich patron, unconcerned with the price, might appreciate large and airy margins that implied his limitless wealth.

Books containing hymns, called tropers, were used by singers during mass. They were relatively small and contained **neumatic notation** (musical notation) which accompanied the text. Some also received decoration. [The Auch Troper](#), for instance, responds to the melody of its text through a series of illustrated musicians dancing and playing the instruments that were surely meant to accompany the singer's voice (Fig. 12). Choir books, on the other hand, were meant to be sung from by many people simultaneously while propped up on a lectern during mass. (which explains their monumental dimensions).



Fig. 12 (left): Text, musicians playing and dancing and neumatic notation.

Bibliothèque nationale de France. Département des Manuscrits. Latin 1118, f. 112v  
Auch Troper, France, ca. 990-1010

For a closer look: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8432314k/f734.item#>

Books meant for personal devotional use such as the [Psalter of Saint Louis and Blanche of Castile](#) were used not only by monks and nuns but also by wealthy laypersons. They were used to recite the Book of Psalms during the day, and they slowly evolved, in the course of the Middle Ages, into breviaries and books of hours. The book of hours in particular became very popular in the latter part of the 14th century because it contained a selection of prayers that lay men and women could recite privately throughout the day. Like the [Book of Hours of Anne of Bretagne](#), for example, books of hours were as small as the palm of a hand and were commissioned for personal use, their decoration very closely reflecting not only the artistic tastes of the times but also the personal taste of their patrons (Fig. 13).



Fig. 11 (below): The initials "VD" for *Vere dignum* open the Mass preface. In this psalter, commissioned by the Emperor Charles the Bald, the luxuriating golden vegetal decoration catches the light as the page turns.

Bibliothèque nationale de France. Département des Manuscrits. Latin 1152, f. 4r  
Psalterium Caroli Calvi, The Psalter of Charles de Bald, ca. 842-869

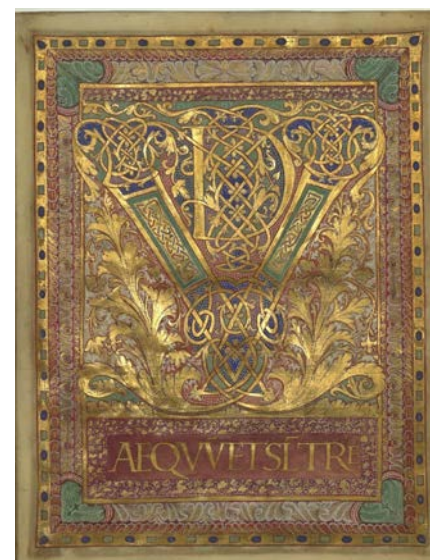
For a closer look: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b53019391x/f7.item#>

Fig. 13: This wonderfully decorated manuscript illustrates how marginal decorations become ever more important in books commissioned by aristocratic patrons. The parchment used for this book of hours is quite thick, most probably in order for it to support the abundance of full-page illustrations and marginal decorations.

Bibliothèque nationale de France. Département des Manuscrits. Latin 9474, f. 17v

Horae ad usum Romanum, The Book of Hours of Anne of Bretagne, Jean Bourdichon (illuminator), Tours, 1503-1508

For a closer look: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b550093038/f99.item#>



Moralized bibles such as the [Bible moralisée, BnF, MS, Latin 11560](#) dominated the Parisian book market in the first half of the 13th century. They associated biblical verses in Latin to moral commentary and illustrated them with 8 scenes per page. These scenes were selected from the Old and New Testaments, and allowed the reader to make connections between the two. These bibles were monumental projects of standardized illumination, employing scores of artisans and totaling (for the larger bibles) over 5,000 illuminations. Large initials decorated with blue and red filigree dressed themselves in vegetal and animal ornamentation, closely imitating the shapes and colors of stained glass and Romanesque and Gothic monumental sculpture. Their success among royal patrons (for few others were able to afford such a book) testifies to the place that images had, not only in personal contemplative reflection but also in the ostentation of power and position.

With the rise of princely and aristocratic book collections all over Europe in the course of the 14th and 15th centuries, the book market sought to satisfy an ever-expanding demand for a variety of texts in both Latin and vernacular. These texts ranged from history, science, nature and meteorology ([Albucasis, Observations on Nature...](#) ([Fig. 14](#)), to jousting ([The Tournament Book of René d'Anjou](#)), travel and adventure ([The Book of Travels of Marco Polo](#)), and courtly literature on chivalry and romance ([Roman de la Rose](#)). The rich illuminations that illustrate many of these aristocratic commissions testify not only to the amount of resources that these wealthy bibliophiles were willing to dedicate to their cultural projects, but also to the true sensory pleasure and amusement that they found in flipping through the pages of these manuscripts. Moreover, the fact that many of these books were decorated with their patrons' coats of arms and insignia shows that these books were truly representative of their patrons' interests, passions, and social status.

In great contrast with the luxury and beauty of liturgical, devotional and aristocratic manuscripts, schoolbooks produced for academic use were quite plain. Most students could not afford to have luxuriously decorated books personally made for them. In fact, an important part of the Parisian book trade regulated by the University of Paris was the selling and renting of used books and academic texts for students to copy. At a short glance, academic books were easily distinguishable having larger margins to allow for extensive study, commentary and note-taking. From the 13th century onward, universities promoted the use of **glosses** or commentary, which sometimes became as important (if not more) as the original text ([Fig. 15](#)).

The main text would usually be presented in one or two columns in the middle of the page with the glosses filling in the margins all around it, marking the different parts of the text. Notes could also appear between the lines, and ornate initials helped not only to mark the beginning of the text but also to separate certain glosses from each other. These books testify to how medieval readers were actually encouraged to mark and annotate their books and how ornamentation could function not only as decoration but as a structuring element on the page. For more examples watch this short video: [Traces of Users](#)

**The keen observation of a medieval manuscript allows us not only to identify the defining (and unique) aspects of its patronage and production, but offers us a peek into the lives of its users.**



**Fig. 14 (above):** Bibliothèque nationale de France. Département des Manuscrits. NAL 1673, f. 46r

*Albucasis, Observations sur la nature et les propriétés de divers produits alimentaires et hygiéniques, sur des phénomènes météorologiques, sur divers actes de la vie humaine, etc.*, first half 15th century

For a closer look:

<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv/b105380445/f1231em#>



**Fig. 15 (below):** A glossed academic text on Canon law.

Bibliothèque nationale de France. Département des Manuscrits. Latin 3895, f. 12v  
*Decretum Gratiani, 1301-1400*

For a closer look:

<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv/b8555838f/f521em#d=decretum%20gratiani#>

[For further reading.](#)

ALEXANDER J.J., *Medieval Illuminators and Their Methods of Work*, New Haven/London, 1992

DE HAMEL C., *Making Medieval Manuscripts*, Oxford, 2018

ROUSE M.A, ROUSE R.H., *Manuscripts and Their Makers. Commercial Book Producers in Medieval Paris, 1200-1500*, London, 2000



# GLOSSARY

**Antiphony:** Liturgical book containing the passages sung during the Mass.

**Armarius:** A sort of monastic librarian in charge of conserving books as well as organizing their production.

**Benedictionary:** Book containing the lists of the blessings giving by the bishops during the main feasts of the liturgical year.

**Blackletter (Gothic script):** Also known as Gothic minuscule or *Textura*, was a script used throughout Western Europe from ca. 1150 until the 17th century.

**Book of Hours:** a popular Christian devotional book, containing a collection of texts, psalms, prayers, for private devotion in the Middle Ages.

**Carolingian minuscule:** A standard script developed in the Carolingian Empire to standardize texts and make them easier to read. It was used between ca. 800 and 1200, but was re-exhumed by Italian humanists during the Renaissance.

**Catchword:** A word placed at the foot of a page anticipating the first word of the following page. This system allows separate sections of the same text to be copied individually and then gathered and bound in the right order.

**Flesh side:** The soft and smooth side of a parchment leaf to which the animal's flesh is attached.

**Gloss:** Commentary that accompanies a text, placed either in the margins around the main text or between the line.

**Grain side:** The porous side of the sheet of parchment to which the animal's hair was once attached.

**Historiated initial:** An ornamented letter containing an illustration.

**Illumination:** A miniature illustration painted inside a body of text.

**Illuminator:** Artist dedicated to painting and decorating a manuscript.

**Lectionary:** Book containing the lectures on the Holy Scriptures to be read during Mass.

**Libraire:** A book seller or merchant (usually sworn-in to the University), in charge of organizing the different tasks involved in making a manuscript.

**Neumatic notation:** The basic element of Western and Eastern systems of musical notation prior to the invention of five-line staff notation.

**Palimpsest:** Is a manuscript page from which the text has been scraped or washed off for it to be reused for another text.

**Parchment:** Animal skin, especially prepared to be used as a writing support.

**Parchmenter:** The person that produces parchment or the person that sells it.

**Pasteboards:** A stiff board made up of pasted layers of paper or parchment, used in bookbinding.

**Pecia (Latin):** A copy unit (or quire) to be copied individually according to the system invented by book merchants in the 13th century.

**Pouncing:** Method of transferring a drawing from one surface to another. Holes are pricked around its outline. The drawing is then placed over a second surface and tapped with charcoal powder so that it transfers through the holes, leaving the imprint of the original.

**Quire (gathering):** A collection of sheets of paper or parchment placed one within another in a manuscript or book.

**Reviser:** Person charged with revising and correcting the copied text.

**Rubrication:** From the Latin "*ruber*" (red). The use of script of a different color on a page, derived from the practice of highlighting liturgical directions and headings in red.

**Sacramentary:** Book containing the prayers read by the officiant during Mass.

**Scribe:** A person that practices writing and copying of texts by hand.

**Scriptorium (Pl. scriptoria):** From the Latin verb "*scribere*" (to write). Within a medieval monastery, a workshop where books were written, copied and decorated.

**Signature:** Letter or sign placed on the bottom of the first or last page of a quire, indicating its order within the text.

**Stationer:** A medieval bookseller.

**Tironian notes:** A type of shorthand. A set of signs dating from the 1st century BC and named after its inventor, Tiro, secretary to Marcus Tullius Cicero.

**Uncial script:** A mayuscule script (capital letters) used from the 4th to the 8th centuries AD.

**Vellum:** Veal skin used for the most luxurious books.