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Life and Health Concerns of a European Monastic Scribe During the 14th Century

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Scribble, scribble, scribble, monks hard at work: translating, copying, and sharing works handed down from generation to generation. Writing quietly to yourself in a candle-lit room may sound romantic to a modern audience, but monks during the Middle Ages would not necessarily agree. Long hours accompanied with bouts of disease distorts one's impression of peaceful monastic life. Additionally, monks did not have access to medicine and surgical procedures of the 21st century. When medical problems arose, uneducated surgeons attempted to cure ailments such as cataracts. Although monastic life sounds more horrific than hygge to the modern audience, monks believed their duty was to copy works such as the Bible, Psalms, and musical works. The everyday battles they faced were only a means to a goal that transcends their lifetime. Monks' struggle codifies their mission to spread Christian ideologies and add works to collections such as the *Roman de Fauvel*.

Historically, monasteries have been modestly built stone buildings that housed and trained monks. Aside from neighboring churches, Medieval monks spent the entirety of their days in these buildings where they ate, slept, worked, and worshipped.<sup>1</sup> Along with alignment to the monks' vows of chastity and obedience, monasteries perfectly encapsulated the poverty and humility that monks swore to abide. While many people tend to picture religious buildings as large, beautiful structures of stained glass and marble, monasteries were usually cold, cramped spaces where monks would live in extreme discomfort.<sup>2</sup> Famous monasteries such as Cluny and Monte Cassino gained their reputations for their population of monks and significant impact on the religious community.<sup>3</sup> However, few people recognize the less-than-ideal living conditions of these places, even for the time.

Monasteries served as primary production centers of sacred manuscripts throughout the Middle Ages. While much writing at the time was dedicated to music, monks also engaged in copying texts for books and writing legal documents for the aristocracy and the Church.<sup>4</sup> Whether isolated or a civita (monasteries in populous areas), the location of a monastery influenced the types of texts monks produced. For example, Irish monasteries existed as civiti and were frequently built on land from lords or wealthy families.<sup>5</sup> In exchange for using an elite family's land,

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<sup>1</sup> Elise Alonzi, Niamh Daly, Gwyneth Gordon, Rachel E. Scott, and Kelly J. Knudson. "Traveling Monastic Paths: Mobility and Religion at Medieval Irish Monasteries." *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* (2019): 57.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Julie Kerr, "Health and Safety in the Medieval Monasteries of Britain," *Blackwell Publishing*, (2008): 3.

<sup>4</sup> W. Scott Jessee, "Monks, Monasteries, and Manuscripts: Archival Sources for Eleventh-Century France." *The American Archivist* 52, no. 3 (1989): 384-90.

<sup>5</sup> Alonzi, "Traveling Monastic Paths: Mobility and Religion at Medieval Irish Monasteries," 55.

monks were required to produce large volumes of manuscripts, many of which were illuminated with decorative art. The monks living in civitas were well equipped to handle this work since monasteries provided many resources, such as scriptoria's dedicated writing spaces (Example 1). The scriptoria importance is further illustrated in the schematics for the Abbey of St. Gall that included plans for a large scriptorium.<sup>6</sup>

Today, anyone who has access to a computer can simply press ctrl + c on their keyboard and instantly copy their document. However, during the Middle Ages, all copying was done by hand, using only a pen and ink. Regardless of the tedious practice, writing was necessary to society, especially to the Catholic Church.<sup>7</sup> With books, Catholicism grew in popularity and consolidated its traditions, making worship uniform.<sup>8</sup> The need for books came with scribes and artists to copy, illuminate, and bound books for distribution.

It is no surprise that the Catholic Church trained many monks in these trades. Saint Benedict outlined, in his guidelines for monastic life at Monte Cassino, that reading and scribing were part of a monks' daily labor.<sup>9</sup> Monastic leaders also provided scribes with detailed instructions on how to write and illuminate texts, as exemplified in *The Book of the Art of Cennino Cennini*.<sup>10</sup> A scribe worked for about six hours a day. Some of the best worked longer hours, even throughout the night.<sup>11</sup> Writing these documents took incredible skill and long hours, taking several weeks to write one copy. Ideally, monks began writing at dawn with their desks oriented next to a window so that the light hit their paper. Monks would change the orientation of their writing space such that they have ideal light.<sup>12</sup> Although the scriptoria provided dedicated writing space, they were a dark, isolated, quiet place, causing monks to suffer depression.<sup>13</sup> In order to preserve their hands for writing and illuminating, those who produced texts were encouraged to live by certain standards: "Your manner of living should always be regulated as if you were studying theology, philosophy, or any other science; that is to say, eating and drinking temperately at least twice a day, using light and good food, and but little wine; sparing and reserving your hand, saving it from fatigue as throwing stones

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<sup>6</sup> Walter Horn and Ernest Born, "The Medieval Monastery as a Setting for the Production of Manuscripts," *The Journal of the Walters Art Gallery* 44 (1986): 16-47.

<sup>7</sup> Christopher de Hamel, "From *The European Medieval Book*," In *The Oxford Companion to the Book* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010): 38.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Victoria Corwin, "Medieval Book Production and Monastic Life," Dartmouth Ancient Books Lab, last modified May 24, 2016, <https://sites.dartmouth.edu/ancientbooks/2016/05/24/medieval-book-production-and-monastic-life/>.

<sup>10</sup> Cennino Cennini and Christiana Jane Powell Herringham. *The Book of the Art of Cennino Cennini*. London,: G. Allen & Unwin, (1922): 8-15.

<sup>11</sup> Corwin, "Medieval Book Production and Monastic Life."

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

or iron bars".<sup>14</sup> Additionally, it was recommended that scribes spend time alone when done with their work: "Then always retire alone, or with companions who are inclined to do as you do, and are not disposed to hinder your work".<sup>15</sup> Living in accordance to such standards was thought to be an important factor when generating illuminated texts and other artistic works.

Even with countless hours of writing, monks made mistakes in their copying. Monks could detect errors before they became permanent by gently etching words onto parchment before adding ink. Alternatively, they drafted manuscripts using lead and erased mistakes before writing with ink.<sup>16</sup> While the guidelines above were intended to be standard, scribes rarely practiced them. Most monasteries did not provide the necessary conditions or tools to produce manuscripts following the known writing ideals. Expectations also played a role in how monasteries applied manuscript guidelines. Smaller monasteries were concerned with quantity rather than quality, producing the number of manuscripts requested rather than the quality. These monasteries enforced monks only to write what they saw on the page, not fix errors they saw on the template. However, copying became more difficult when the monk could not understand what was written on the page, especially if the document was foreign.<sup>17</sup> Often, scribes would make mistakes and could not recognize their errors. Prominent monasteries such as St. Gall and Cluny, which had closer relationships with the authority with the Catholic Church, were expected to produce manuscripts of the highest standards.<sup>18,19</sup> To meet these standards, the Church provided prominent monasteries with high-quality materials and access to the most skilled scribes available.<sup>20</sup>

Once monks finished the text, writers took the pages to the illustrator and finally to the bookbinders.<sup>21</sup> Since these jobs require much skill, scribes, illustrators, and binders would be professionally separate and occasionally not at the same monastery. Throughout Europe, writers and illustrators crafted pages differently, distinctly marking the practices of each region.<sup>22</sup> Books, or parts of books, were transported to different monasteries

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<sup>14</sup> Cennini and Herringham. *The Book of the Art of Cennino Cennini*, 23

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 24

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>17</sup> Corwin, "Medieval Book Production and Monastic Life."

<sup>18</sup> Kenneth John Conant, "New Results in the Study of Cluny Monastery," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 16, no. 3 (1957): 3-11.

<sup>19</sup> Walter Horn and Ernest Born, "The Medieval Monastery as a Setting for the Production of Manuscripts." *The Journal of the Walters Art Gallery* (1986): 44.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Corwin, "Medieval Book Production and Monastic Life."

<sup>22</sup> de Hamel, *The European Medieval Book*, 42.

until the book was complete.<sup>23</sup> These books were kept at the monastery or sold throughout Europe. 13<sup>th</sup>-century booksellers in Paris crafted and sold textbooks for students, bibles for friars, and illuminated psalters/books to lesser aristocracy and upper-middle class.<sup>24</sup> Circulation of these books provided the Catholic Church's influence and endurance throughout Europe.

The lives of Medieval European monks are riddled with stories that are, frankly, difficult to hear. For them, burden accompanied devotion hand-in-hand. In fact, by all accounts, life in a European monastery was deadly. Monks in medieval monasteries were susceptible to blindness, skin disorders, and the various plagues that swept through Europe.<sup>25</sup> Though acts of devotion were not physically intense (aside from the fatigue that accompanied such a large amount of alertness and chant), the monasteries themselves acted as a commune where everyone pitched in for work and maintenance. For example, monks' backs would break, ringing the large, burdensome monastery bells.<sup>26</sup> Records from Canterbury Cathedral that no less than sixty-three men were required to ring their five large bells.<sup>27</sup> Even physical accidents were frequent, paired with the requirement to ascend tall ladders for roof maintenance and tend to structurally unsound buildings.<sup>28</sup>

Aside from that which would physically ail them, the Catholic monk's organized, regimented schedule brought enough stress and exhaustion to cripple them and worsen any preexisting physical complications. Sleep deprivation was a significant factor in the monks' fatigue due to the communal sleeping arrangements and consistent rise in the middle of the night to celebrate Vigils.<sup>29</sup> The plague on proper rest would get so bad at different monasteries that some houses would disciplinarily remove snorers and sleep-talkers from the sleeping area so that the others would be able to get the rest they desperately needed.<sup>30</sup>

Even so, European monks living in these monasteries would never wane from their devotion to the job. There were abundant cases of monks being so committed to upholding their vows to the community that they ignored their ailments and carried on, only making things worse for themselves. One specific account from Bernard

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<sup>23</sup> Corwin, "Medieval Book Production and Monastic Life."

<sup>24</sup> de Hamel, *The European Medieval Book*, 44-45.

<sup>25</sup> Julie Kerr, "Health and Safety in the Medieval Monasteries of Britain," *Blackwell Publishing* (2008): 1.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>30</sup> Julie Kerr, "Health and Safety in the Medieval Monasteries of Britain," *Blackwell Publishing* (2008): 6.

of Clairvaux tells of his gradually deteriorating digestive system, which had almost ceased functioning towards the end of his life. Even with this affliction, he continued to play a part in his community life through his discomfort, with many doctors reporting their immense surprise at how someone could ignore that much pain.<sup>31</sup>

Composing, writing, and illustrating decorative manuscripts like *Roman de Fauvel* took utmost artistic precision and vision. When an artist's vision deteriorates, their condition hinders their craft and livelihood. Currently, cataracts are a common medical condition, occurring in 70 percent of people over 75 years old and 50 percent in people between 65-74 years of age.<sup>32</sup> People with cataracts may experience cloudy vision, color vision problems, glare, changes in glasses prescription, and double vision.<sup>33</sup> Cataract surgery is common practice today, but patients during the 14<sup>th</sup>-century experienced far worse than those today. During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, couching was a typical cure to cataracts, involving a sharp poker to depress an occulted crystalline lens to the bottom of the eye (Example 2).<sup>34</sup> This procedure allowed for the patient to see light and shapes. Oculists, who examine eyes medically, often had little higher education or experience with current surgery or medical practice.<sup>35</sup> They typically had booths found at major marketplaces, where people could receive couching surgery.<sup>36</sup> However, oculists were not the only ones to perform surgery on the eye. Barber-surgeons, learned surgeons, and physicians (who held university degrees) operated on patients, especially with couching.<sup>37</sup> For many of these operators, couching was their primary, or possibly supplemental, source of income.<sup>38</sup> These practices, however, were not unified. Different fields analyzed the eye differently and concocted other solutions according to their field of study: anatomy, optics, and natural philosophy.<sup>39</sup> Couching, before 1700, was believed to remove the concretion to allow light and color to enter the lens; however, surgeons depressed the lens itself. Therefore, many assumed that couching could restore sight, but this surgery caused more damage than treatment.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Julie Kerr, "Health and Safety in the Medieval Monasteries of Britain," *Blackwell Publishing* (2008): 5.

<sup>32</sup> *Britannica Academic*, s.v. "Cataract," accessed October 24, 2021, <https://academic.eb.com/levels/collegiate/article/ataract/20772#article-contributors>.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Tawrin Baker, "The Oculist's Eye: Connections between Cataract Couching, Anatomy and Visual Theory in the Renaissance," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 72, no. 1 (2016): 51, doi:10.1093/jhmas/jrw040.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>39</sup> Tawrin Baker, "The Oculist's Eye: Connections between Cataract Couching, Anatomy and Visual Theory in the Renaissance," 52.

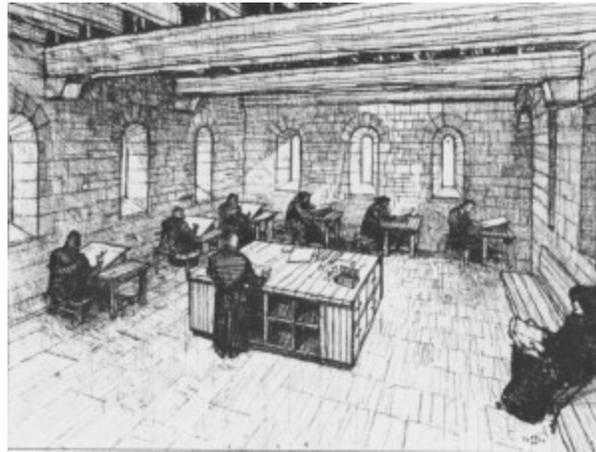
<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

Though these monks faced such crippling ailments, constant discomfort, and challenging work, they recognized their contribution was more significant than themselves. Their contributions to the Church and the educated were born from the devotion that even blindness could not stall. Cities such as Paris became large-scale book havens because of these monks who could persevere.<sup>41</sup> Without these monks copying and producing these manuscripts, the world would never have seen pieces of art like *Roman de Fauvel* on that scale, stimulating the growth of the intellectual community around the world. This feat is even more impressive given the physical and mental hardship they had to face.

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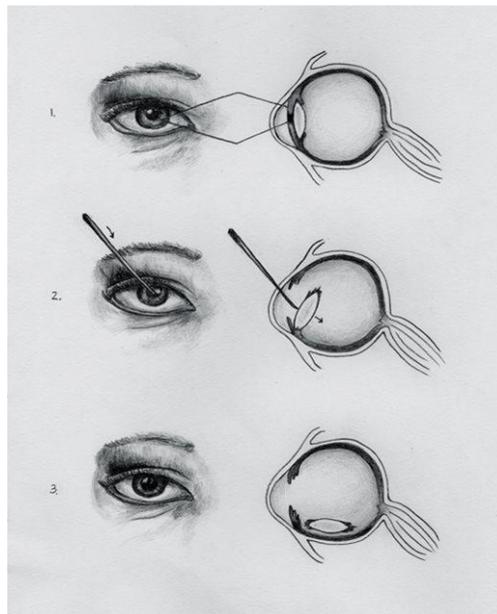
<sup>41</sup> Julie Kerr, "Health and Safety in the Medieval Monasteries of Britain," 3.

### Example 1



A depiction of a monastery's scriptorium, the isolated workshop the scribes would work in. (Courtesy of Horn et al, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20169021>)<sup>42</sup>

### Example 2



Couching, surgery for cataracts, performed on the human eye<sup>43</sup>  
(<https://www.uniteforsight.org/traditional-eye-practices/module3>)

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<sup>42</sup> Corwin, "Medieval Book Production and Monastic Life."

<sup>43</sup> "Couching," Unite for Sight, accessed Dec 2, 2021, <https://www.uniteforsight.org/traditional-eye-practices/module3>.

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## Abstract

Writing in a quiet, candle-lit room may sound hygge to some, but monks during the 14th century would describe their work on the scriptorium as cold, depressing, tedious, mundane, and exhausting. The copying of all texts, including biblical and musical, was done by hand with monks working around the clock copying, illuminating manuscripts, and binding books. With the regimented schedule of monastic life, the Church worked scribes till exhaustion which created health problems and aggravated underlying conditions. Though cataracts were a common problem, commoners performed surgery on each other to restore sight, but it only made the situation worse.