

BOOK PRODUCTION IN THE MIDDLE AGES



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Books in the Middle Ages were hand-written, usually on parchment. Parchment refers to any animal skin prepared for writing on (e.g. sheep, goat, deer, pig, hare or squirrel), while “vellum” refers specifically to the skin of a cow. The pelts were first soaked in a lime solution to loosen the fur, which was then removed. While wet on a stretcher, the skin was scraped using a knife with a curved blade. As the skin dried, the parchment maker adjusted the tension so that the skin remained taut. This cycle of scraping and stretching was repeated over several days until the desired thinness had been achieved.

Paper became available in Europe from around the twelfth century, but was mainly used for work that didn’t need to last a long time. Parchment continued to be the preferred medium for recording matters that were important or needed to be preserved, such as the Bible and [Books of Hours](#). In fact, parchment was so durable that it was often recycled, by scraping off the surface and writing over it. Some manuscripts retain traces of the original writing that was effaced (called a *palimpsest*), a practice common between the seventh and ninth centuries. These palimpsests have proven to be a valuable source for ancient texts.

After the surface had been prepared, the parchment was ruled, usually with leadpoint or colored ink. Ruling lines helped the scribe to write evenly and were part of the design of the page. The



*In this prayer book, you can see the ruling in red ink.
From the J. Paul Getty Museum*



A medieval-style quill pen.

See an excellent site on the tools and technique of medieval writing at: <http://www.notaquadrata.ca/scribesIntro.html>

scribe wrote with a quill pen made from the feather of a goose or swan. The end of the feather was cut to form the writing nib. A slit cut into the middle of the nib allowed the ink to flow smoothly to the tip of the pen. The tip needed to be sharpened regularly with a knife. The medieval scribe used both hands to write: one to hold the quill, and the other to hold the knife for sharpening the quill and scraping off mistakes. The quills were dipped in inkhorns or inkwells, which contained ink made either from charcoal or from oak galls (a parasitic growth from trees mixed with iron sulfate and burned wool).

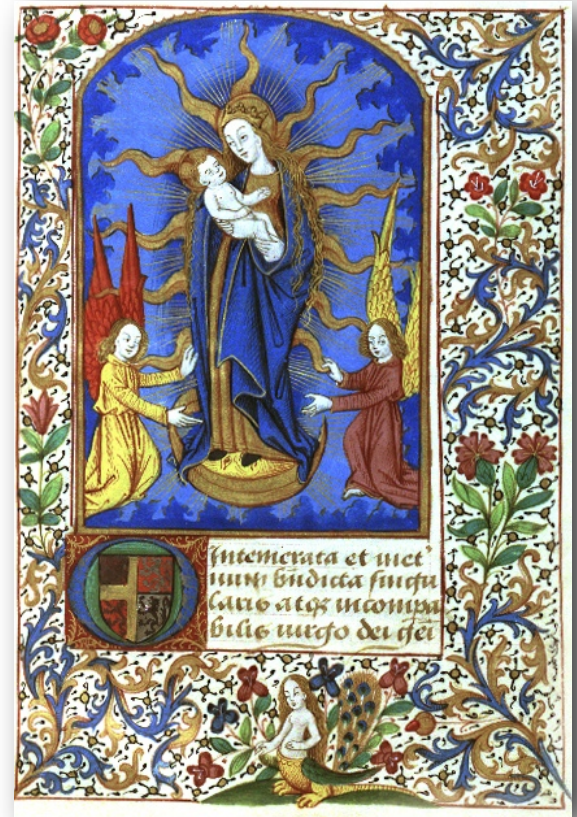
Once the writing and illuminating had been completed, the parchment sheets were folded and nested into groups called gatherings. The gatherings were ordered in their proper sequence and sewn together onto cords or leather thongs that served as supports. Once the sewing



A leather-covered Medieval book



A monk working on a manuscript



A typical illustrated page of a book of hours.

was finished, the ends of the supports were laced through channels carved into the wooden boards that formed the front and back covers of the book. The binding was usually then covered in leather or a decorative fabric.

Manuscript books were mainly produced in Europe in the scriptoria of religious houses. There were secular illuminators and scribes who worked on a fixed charge. Books made of parchment could be on religious topics, such as the Bible or legends of saints; they could be on secular topics, such as history and romances; and they were also used as textbooks. The Bibles, stories of saints, Books of Hours, histories and romances were often beautifully illuminated with colours and gold and became luxury items that reflected the wealth and the taste of the owners. Manuscripts of learning, however, tended to be more humble, limited in decoration and colour.

Most medieval universities required the professors to deposit a master-copy of the text at the university stationers, who in turn lent out parts (called *pecia*) of 10-12 sheets at a time for students to copy them. This lending out of text by parts (the '*pecia*' system) ensured that a small number of master copies could be circulated efficiently.

Excerpted from information found in more detail on:

<http://www.hps.cam.ac.uk/starry/medbooks.html>

<http://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/making/>



A hand-illustrated page from the bible. The earliest printed versions mimicked the style, including the letter forms.