

**SOMERSET ARCHÆOLOGICAL AND
NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY NORTHERN
BRANCH; SOMERSET MEDIÆVAL LIBRARIES
AND MISCELLANEOUS NOTICES OF BOOKS
IN SOMERSET PRIOR TO THE DISSOLUTION
OF THE MONASTERIES; PP. 10-199**

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Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society Northern Branch; Somerset Mediaeval Libraries and Miscellaneous Notices of Books in Somerset Prior to the Dissolution of the Monasteries; pp. 10-199 by Thomas Webb Williams

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THOMAS WEBB WILLIAMS

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SOMERSET

MEDIÆVAL

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*T. Chaundler presenting a copy of his works to
 Bishop Bekinton.*

[From a MS. in Trinity College, Cambridge.] See p. 119.

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SOMERSET
ARCHÆOLOGICAL AND NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY
NORTHERN BRANCH

Somerset Mediæval Libraries

*AND MISCELLANEOUS NOTICES OF BOOKS IN SOMERSET
PRIOR TO THE DISSOLUTION OF THE MONASTERIES*

BY
THOMAS WEBB WILLIAMS

BRISTOL
J. W. ARROWSMITH, 11 QUAY STREET

1897.

silence in the library and scriptorium are printed by Martene ("de antiquis monachorum ritibus") in a chapter "De silentio et signis." When a book was required the applicant was to extend his hand and make a movement as if turning over the leaves of a book. If a missal was wanted he was to add the sign of the cross; if a psalter, he placed his hands on his head in the shape of a crown (a reference to King David); for the Gospels, the sign of the cross on the forehead; for a gradual, to make the sign of the cross and kiss the finger; for a lectionary, he pretended to wipe away the grease (which might easily have fallen upon it from a candle); for a capitulary, to make the general sign and extend clasped hands to heaven; for a tract, to lay one hand on the stomach and apply the other to his mouth. When a pagan work was required, the general sign was to be made, and then to scratch the ear with the hand after the manner of a dog, because infidels are not unjustly compared with such creatures.

Besides the monastic scribes and illuminators, there were three classes of secular scribes who, if required, worked in the monasteries, or, if not, at their own homes: they were, *Illuminatores*, whose name explains itself; *Librarii*, ordinary hack scribes; and *Notarii*, who drafted what are generally called notarial acts and legal instruments.¹

¹ For fuller information on scriptoria *vide* Hardy, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Materials relating to the History of Great Britain and Ireland*, preface to vol. lii., xi. *et seq.*; Madan, *l.c.*, p. 36; and Edwards, *Memoirs of Librarians*, book ii., cap. vi., from which books the above remarks on them are taken.

The first tendencies to the formation of national handwritings are found in the 7th and 8th centuries A.D., resulting in the Merovingian or Frankish hand, the Lombardic of Italy, and the Visigothic of Spain. And in the 7th century, when our earliest existing Irish MSS. were written, we find not only a style of writing (or indeed two) distinctive, national, and of a high type of excellence, but also a school of illumination which, in the combined lines of mechanical accuracy and intricacy, of fertile invention of form and figure, and of striking arrangements of colour, has never been surpassed.¹

Sir E. M. Thompson² says: "The development of the border is extremely interesting to follow; and so regular is its growth, and so marked are the national characteristics which it assumes, that the period and place of origin of an illuminated MS. may be accurately determined from the details of its borders alone."

This test, alas! has not assigned any MSS., of which the provenance is otherwise unknown, to any Somerset house.

The mediæval monastic scribe was, in some respects, perhaps, better off than the modern collier: for he had only a six-hours' day.

Assuming him to be starting the transcription of a new book, a section of parchment was brought to him to be written on, each sheet still separate from the others, though loosely put in the order and form in which it would be subsequently bound; generally four pieces were taken, each roughly about ten inches high

¹ Madan, *l.c.*, p. 28. ² *English Illuminated MSS.*, p. 37.

and eighteen inches broad, and were folded once across, so that each piece formed four pages (two leaves) of what we call a quarto volume.¹ These pieces were fixed one inside another, so that the first piece formed the first and eighth leaves, the second the second and seventh, the third the third and sixth, and the fourth the two middle leaves of a complete section of eight leaves or sixteen pages, termed technically in Latin a quaternio, because made of four (*quatuor*) pieces. A sufficient number of quaternions were put together to form the projected book; then the size and general style of the handwriting had to be fixed: this would be a matter of custom, the largest style being reserved for psalters and other books to be used for public services on a desk or lectern: this determined, the sheets have to be ruled.

When the scribe has the ruled sheets before him, his pen and ink in readiness, and the volume to be copied on a desk beside him, he may begin to transcribe. A simple task to all seeming! He is strictly forbidden to correct, but must simply copy down letter for letter; no responsibility, except for power of reading and for accuracy, is laid upon him. Yet all who know human nature, or have studied palæography, or even had to examine deeds in a lawyer's chambers, will acknowledge that the probability against two consecutive leaves being really correctly transcribed is about 100 to 1.

The frequent use of the word "dictare" in connection with writing has led some to think that scribes did much of their work from dictation. The evidence on

¹ See Madan, *l.c.*, p. 13.

the question in classical times is so scanty that we are driven to conclude that scribes, almost invariably, copied from a volume in front of them in silence, as was certainly the case in the scriptoria of monasteries. Alcuin, who describes the copying work at York, seems to know nothing of it. The only dictation which was common was when a letter or a message was dictated by its composer to swift-penned notarii¹: the usual meaning of the word "dictare" in connection with writing is "to compose," not "to dictate."²

The necessity and importance of the scribe's work was strongly felt, and there are many tales which illustrate this.

Theodori, Abbot of Evroul, in Normandy, in the middle of the 11th century used, we are told, to lecture his monks against idleness, and "also he was wont to tell them this story:"

"There was a monk in a certain monastery who was guilty of many transgressions against its rules; but he was a writer, and, being devoted to writing, he of his own accord wrote out an enormous volume of the divine law. After his death, his soul was brought before the tribunal of the just Judge for judgment; and when the evil spirits sharply accused him, and brought forward his innumerable crimes, the holy angels, on the other hand, shewed the book which that monk had written in the House of God, and counted up all the letters of that enormous volume, as a set-off

¹ Madan, *l.c.*, 32.

² Ducange, *Glossarium*, says dictare=scribere orationem, epistolam componere.