



Scribes

Citation

Blair, Ann. "Scribes." In *Information: A Historical Companion*, eds. Ann Blair, Paul Duguid, Anja-Silvia Goeing, and Anthony Grafton, 759-763. Princeton University Press, 2021.

Link

<https://nrs.harvard.edu/URN-3:HUL.INSTREPOS:37374423>

Terms of use

This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Open Access Policy Articles (OAP), as set forth at

<https://harvardwiki.atlassian.net/wiki/external/NGY5NDE4ZjgzNTc5NDQzMGIzZWZhMGFIOWI2M2EwYTg>

Accessibility

<https://accessibility.huit.harvard.edu/digital-accessibility-policy>

Share Your Story

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.
Please share how this access benefits you. [Submit a story](#)

To appear in Ann Blair, Paul Duguid, Anja-Silvia Goeing, and Anthony Grafton eds.,
Information: A Historical Companion Princeton University Press, 2021, pp. 759-63.

scribes

In the many historical contexts when writing was a rare and difficult skill, scribes were the specialists entrusted with producing written documents. They played crucial roles both in creating the first written record of an oral text or transaction, and in making copies of an existing text for transmission across time and space. Scribes developed special skills for the physical act of writing (including the preparation of the surface, the posture and tools for writing) but also for the composition of texts. They mastered and honed the protocols for legal documents, conventions of polite address, and spelling and punctuation, among other topics. In some contexts, they were also responsible for reckoning and keeping accounts and for managing documents. Scribes are viewed as brokers and transmitters of information, but in writing and copying texts they also shaped and transformed them, both intentionally and unintentionally.

Writing is one of the longest-lived tools of information management, defined as the representation of spoken language with signs and symbols. Most writing systems can be classified as logographic (as in Chinese characters), syllabic (as in the Linear B script of Mycenaean Greek), or alphabetic. When writing was a recent invention (e.g., starting in Mesopotamia or Egypt ca. 3500 BCE, China ca. 1200 BCE, or Mesoamerica ca. 300 BCE), scribes were highly respected and powerful figures. The scribe's skills in making cuneiform marks on clay tablets or inscribing stone or bamboo strips or *papyrus required extensive training, often passed on from father to son. Political and religious leaders relied on scribes to produce authoritative documents and records. Sumerian scribes active circa 2100 BCE were also responsible for the oldest surviving work of literature, the epic of Gilgamesh, inscribed on clay

tablets discovered and deciphered in the nineteenth century. Statues and bas-reliefs of Egyptian, Sumerian, and Assyrian scribes—seated or standing and ready to write—attest to their elite status although we rarely know their names. Their activities also ranged from divinatory and religious practices to codifying languages in dictionary-like lists.

Alongside this direct evidence of ancient scribes in durable media like stone and clay, we have indirect evidence of the activities of generations of scribes throughout the ancient world from the transmission of texts that they copied over and over again on fragile media such as papyrus, palm leaves, or plant-based paper. Most ancient texts we know—including Greco-Roman literature and philosophy, the Hebrew Bible, the Indian Vedas or the Chinese classics—have come down to us only because scribes had made new copies of these texts by the time the old ones wore out. The papyrus roll, for example, which was the principal medium for long-term storage in ancient Greece and Rome, rarely lasted two hundred years in ordinary circumstances, judging from Pliny the Elder's surprise at seeing such an old roll in the first century CE (*Natural History*, XIII.26.83). Texts had to be copied onto new rolls every few generations in order to remain available. As a result many ancient texts have been completely lost, and even the knowledge of their existence has been lost. In the European tradition the ancient texts that have come down to us were those copied onto much more durable *parchment, by early Christian scribes in the fourth to sixth centuries, and importantly again in the new minuscule scripts introduced during the Carolingian *Renaissance of the ninth and tenth centuries. Those Carolingian copies were most often the ones that the humanists recovered and put into circulation again some five hundred years later.

We know very little about the work of the scribes responsible for the first and many subsequent copies of ancient texts that preceded the earliest copies that can be examined today.

Nonetheless we know that in Greco-Roman antiquity educated slaves served as readers and scribes and also as teachers of *literacy to both free and enslaved children. Reading and writing texts were often two-person activities, as depicted on Attic vases, with slaves available to read aloud from and take dictation on scrolls held open on the lap. Whereas in Greco-Roman antiquity the scribe was generally distinct from the user of the text, early Christians often copied or corrected themselves the texts they wished to own and use, perhaps in some cases (e.g., when they otherwise would have had the means to hire a scribe) owing to their special concern for accuracy in copying a sacred text. Early Christian scholarship also produced some long and unusually elaborate scribal projects, such as the hexapla of Origen (184–253), in which six different versions of the Old Testament (one in Hebrew, one in Hebrew transliterated into Greek, and four in Greek) were laid out in parallel columns, or the chronicles of Eusebius (ca. 260–340) in the second part of which the histories of different ancient peoples were laid out in a table format. Each of these projects was carried out by a group of highly skilled scribes working collaboratively in the best possible conditions, in Caesarea with access to the rich resources of the library there and with generous funding from a wealthy lay patron named Ambrose (in the case of Origen) and the emperor Constantine himself (in the case of Eusebius, who served as presbyter in Caesarea).

The survival of hundreds of thousands of manuscripts from medieval Europe makes it possible to study more closely the impacts of scribal copying. Medieval scripts varied considerably by time and place. Thanks to scholarly analysis of scripts underway since the seventeenth century and the dates recorded in some manuscripts, the handwriting and scribal habits displayed in a manuscript serve as crucial evidence for locating the place and date of its production. While many identifications offer estimates of a half century and a region, in some

cases scholars can identify the production of specific monastic *scriptoria (e.g., Wearmouth-Jarrow in England in the seventh and eighth centuries or Mont Saint Michel in Normandy in the late tenth to twelfth centuries). Monastic scribes worked mostly in anonymity for the greater glory of God and their order. Women also worked as scribes and illuminators in convents, including Guda, a German nun who named and depicted herself in a manuscript in 1180. Scribing was physically difficult and slow; in a closing statement or *colophon scribes occasionally recorded relief at finishing a manuscript or complained of a sore hand. A considerable survival bias has favored the transmission of beautifully produced and illuminated manuscripts over more ordinary ones, which were likely produced in much larger numbers than are now extant. *Illuminations were often produced by scribes with specialized skills. The nobles commissioning manuscripts would pay dearly for the work of sought-after scribes and illuminators and could negotiate specific requests for the cost and production values, including particular colors or themes in illuminations. By the later Middle Ages manuscripts were also produced commercially in major centers. The spread of literacy created new readers and buyers of manuscripts who valued speed, functionality, and lower cost over beauty and prestige. Scribes working for them favored new *cursive scripts, which were about twice as fast to write as the earlier *“book hands” and also packed more text onto a page, leading to lower production costs. Paper became available across Europe starting from Italy in the thirteenth century and spreading northward, cutting the cost of materials by a factor of four by 1500. Paper was first used for archival documents and letters, then spread into *genres of all kinds.

In copying scribes often introduced changes. Some were no doubt unintentional errors—among them words or lines skipped or repeated or reversed. But there is also good evidence that scribes in medieval Europe often felt it was appropriate for them to improve the text while

copying it. When faced with a passage they did not understand, they might add an explanation in the text or in the margin, which might be integrated into the text by a later scribe; they could also transform the text to make it more easily understood, for example, by changing a word or two. These practices documented in the stemmata of medieval manuscripts led to the formulation of two philological principles still valued today: **“brevior lectio potior”*—that the shorter version is the better one (coming earlier in the chain of transmission since scribes usually added to rather than shortening a text); and **“difficilior lectio potior”*—that the more difficult version is the better one (because scribes tended to make a difficult passage more intelligible and simpler to understand). *Philologists, starting in the Renaissance, have been motivated by the awareness of these changes to correct the “errors of the scribes,” which in the case of ancient and biblical texts had accumulated over centuries of copying. Overzealous correction provided opportunities for further interventions by later scholars, and for continued discussion of optimal critical methodologies.

Nevertheless, in some contexts scribal copying was remarkably free of changes. Daniel Wakelin documents examples of scribes working in English literary texts who replicated originals with great care not only to the text but also to punctuation and layout, which were generally expected to be variable. The *sofrim* or scribes of the Torah scrolls used in Jewish worship were famously attentive to strictly accurate copying following numerous rules to ensure that each copy reproduced the authorized text and its layout with precision.

The introduction of printing in mid-fifteenth-century Europe was rapidly perceived as a challenge to existing scribal practices. Although autography had been on the rise since the thirteenth century as a means of composing a text, scribes were still responsible for making multiple copies of a text for sale or gift. With printing the task of making multiple copies could

be mechanized thanks to the financial investment of the printer and the labor of all those working in the printer's shop. Surprisingly, just as the computer revolution has mainly increased our use of paper, the printing press also encouraged the use of handwriting by the elites who used it not for mere copying, but to signal an especially personal or private form of contact. Scribes scrambling to monetize their skills given the competition from printing used the new medium to disseminate manuals about the virtues and methods of handwriting. Contemporary humanist pedagogues also lent their weight to the notion that handwriting was a skill appropriate for the elite to master. Once the merely mechanical function of handwriting could be filled by printing, the art of handwriting gained a new prestige. Fewer scribes were needed, but the profession perdured.

Scribes taught handwriting, and some devised systems of *shorthand, which were marketed in England starting in 1588 and spread to the continent only after 1800. Through the seventeenth century scribes were also employed to produce multiple manuscript copies of texts that could not be printed, because they were dangerous (owing to political or religious content) or were designed to be secret (alchemy, or private newsletters) or were needed in only a few copies (such as musical parts). Through the eighteenth century the Vatican scriptorium produced illuminated parchment manuscripts of liturgical texts commissioned by cardinals on their appointment, perpetuating the skills developed for the production of medieval manuscripts. Strong writing skills were also valued in amanuenses and secretaries hired by individuals, and in the legions of clerks working in offices at every level of the state or other bureaucracies through the nineteenth century. A good scribe could write in different scripts, as Jean de Beauchesne, a French Huguenot in London, advertised in a one-page sampler of seven elaborate scripts, including mirror writing (see figure 1). A scribe's ability to imitate the handwriting of his

employer, whether an individual or an official, was another valued skill, which generated apparently autograph manuscripts without the personal effort that they represented; but occasionally the skill could be turned to dishonest ends, as a few court cases attest. Indeed, forgeries emerged wherever written documents carried authority, for example as early as the ninth century in England when documents started to be valued over oral witness in legal proceedings. But the ability to forge a document successfully depended on a mastery of the shifting conventions of scripts and layout. That expertise was present long before it was formalized in seventeenth-century reference works of paleography and diplomatics, which surveyed past forms of handwriting and document production.

{~?~COMP: Blair_Scribes_Fig 1.jpg ABOUT HERE}

In the twenty-first century the merits of handwriting are under discussion as school systems decide how much to emphasize a skill long valued for the discipline of hand and mental attention that it instilled. The term “scribe” surfaces mainly in the names of software and hardware tools for recording and writing. But any transition of a text into writing or a new copy, whether aided by a person or a device, has the potential to introduce modifications (as can be experienced in scans resulting from *optical character recognition rather than photographic reproduction, for example), so verification and an understanding of the sources of error remain essential measures of quality control, continuing a tradition in which scribes have been engaged since the beginning of writing.

Ann Blair

See also ARCHIVISTS; DOCUMENTARY AUTHORITY; ERROR; PROOFREADERS; SCROLLS AND ROLLS; SECRETARIES; TEACHING

Further Reading

Peter Beal, *In Praise of Scribes: Manuscripts and Their Makers in 17th-Century England*, 1998;

C. de Hamel, *Scribes and Illuminators*, 1992; Malcolm Parkes, *Their Hands before Our Eyes—a Closer Look at Scribes: The Lyell Lectures Delivered in the University of Oxford 1999*, 2008; L.D. Reynolds and N.G. Wilson, *Scribes and Scholars: A Guide to the Transmission of Greek and Latin Literature*, 4th ed., 2014; Colette Sirat, *Writing as Handwork: A History of Handwriting in Mediterranean and Western Culture*, 2006; Daniel Wakelin, *Scribal Correction and Literary Craft: English Manuscripts 1375–1510*, 2014.

{~?~caption}

Figure 1. Jean de Beauchesne, calligraphic specimen, 1575. Harvard University, Houghton Library Ms Typ 232.