

1027, August. Monastic Scriptoria

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Monasteries: These sacred places, where precious parchments were changed into books costing a vineyard apiece, but where the empress gets two of the books (codices) and doesn't even wait for the monks to copy them! This happens in St. Gall in what is now present-day Switzerland. It was important to let the emperors and empresses get their way, because they supported the monasteries where books were written and/or copied. Politics, religion, power, "standardization" of a language are all involved in this story.

Introduction: Empress Gisela visits Saint Gall

In August in the year 1027 Empress Gisela, wife of Emperor Conrad II, visited the monastery of Saint Gall for the express purpose of having copies of two of Notker's works copied and sent back with her. The prices of folios at that time could vary greatly. But no matter the price, the time required to create a copy was a large investment. This investment was a testament to the Monastic tradition to hold education and knowledge in incredibly high esteem. Not only did the various monasteries dedicate themselves to preserving the gospel, but also to preserving whatever literature from ages past that they had access to.

When the Empress was unwilling to wait for a copy of the precious folios, the monks at Saint Gall pulled off a feat that remained unrivalled for centuries. Instead of the minimal 6 weeks' time to copy such valuable manuscripts, the monks at Saint Gall copied them to wax tablets in 14 days. Then the Empress took the originals with her.

The Rise of Monastic Tradition

After the fall of the Roman Empire, the Old World was in an ensuing chaos that strangled commerce, and even went so far as to cause many regional industries, such as the pottery making in Britain, to completely disappear. In the northern regions of Europe the Germanic tribes consolidated and created Hegemonies which soon replaced the old Roman civil structures upon which so many had relied. Christianization continued apace and these rulers eventually fell under the rule of the Church. The Church, in fact, during the period of intense upheaval between 500 AD and 800 AD, was the sole unifying influence in the face of eroding Roman Empirical holdings caused by the Muslim conquests all along the Mediterranean areas. There was also a rapid decrease in urban areas due to the social and geopolitical changes.

The Church, as always, emphasized education and maintained its holdings of the ancient writings it possessed in diverse locations. The network of Bishops was a civilizing influence throughout all the old

Roman areas even to the point where the Germanic rulers converted to Catholicism and left behind their traditional beliefs.

Monasteries in the years following Benedict's changes to the older monastic traditions brought from Ireland and the East, while being less harsh, were more geared toward spreading the gospel. Charlemagne had tried to use monasteries as a civilizing influence during his reign, but his efforts weren't nearly as effective as those of the Abbey of Cluny and its hierarchical organization structure, which spread throughout western monastic culture. Monasteries became centers of art and culture as well as education.

With the Church's main mission being that of spreading the gospel, Monasteries seemed to believe that not only encouraging an educated class of monks who could then read the scriptures to the uneducated was necessary, but also that the scriptures themselves needed to be distributed as much as possible. Hence the development of the *Scriptoria*. This is where monks were trained in the disciplines of folio making and copying. It was a time-consuming and costly endeavor. Not only that, but the physical rigors of folio creation and manuscript replication were very demanding on those who performed this daunting task.

To duplicate a manuscript, first a folio had to be created. A folio was a large booklet made of parchment, animal skin, that was then cut into double pages and bound together. These folios were meant to lay down flat and so were not bound with stiff or hard covers which were often beautifully illuminated. The folio's pages were then lined with a metal stylus which actually made indentations for the scribe to use. At this point the copying began. While you and I might imagine a monk sitting, hunched over, at a desk, often the reality was much more severe. Monks would often squat upon a bench, while the folio was held upright. The monk then would hold his arm out perpendicular to his body and write. Holding the pen was also an exercise in rigid discipline, as only two fingers and the thumb were used, in honor of the Holy Trinity, and those digits were held straight to grasp the pen.

Rulers and Monks

While the Empress Gisela, wife of Conrad II, was not the first monarch to visit Saint Gall. She was, however, the first of the new **Salian Dynasty**. Her visit was a demonstration that the good relations between monarchy and monastery would continue. Monarchs depended on good relations with local religious leaders and by extension with Rome, for support for their rule, while monasteries depended on the financial support of pious noblemen.

Monasteries relied heavily on noble support, whether political or patronizing. In fact, monasteries were generally founded with a contribution of land as well as its serfs to a monk who was usually from the nobility. The contributions were usually on the condition that the monastery perform specific masses either for beloved deceased individuals, or to educate members of the contributing nobility. This elevated monks and their monasteries into the nobility. While the serfs did all the menial labor, the monks were free to study and teach. Monasteries then attracted many of the best and brightest in Europe, and they became the producers and storehouses of education and knowledge during the Middle Ages. Nobles would send their sons to study, and it was a natural consequence that artifacts of antiquity, namely ancient manuscripts, came to rest in their *Scriptoria*.

Saint Gall

Saint Gall is located in the Alps, in the eastern canton of the same name. The Abbey was founded in 720, about a hundred years after the death of the Irish monk Gallus, who built a hermitage on the river Steinach, although hagiographic tradition places its founding in 612. The Abbey was raided during the Hungarian invasion that took place in 926. In that raid the Benedictine nun Wiborada, now known as the first woman canonized by the Catholic Church and the patron saint of libraries, ordered the entire library of Saint Gall moved to the monastic island of Reichenau. The books were spared and were later returned intact with a few notable exceptions. The count of books remained the same; however, records show that some books were exchanged with some from the Reichenau scriptorium.

Indeed, from the earliest years of the Saint Gall scriptorium, the manuscripts were treated with the special care often reserved for relics of the saints themselves! And what is even more amazing, is that the scriptorium did not only house sacred scripture, but also the more earthly works of Tertullian and Aristotle, whom Notker III translated into Allemannisch. Certainly, education and knowledge were prized as highly as religious devotion.

Today the Abbey of Saint Gall exists as a **UNESCO World Heritage Site**, and is still occupied by pious people who tend to the still existing Scriptorium. It is considered to house the largest and most important collection of medieval literature in Europe, contains over 160,000 books, 2100 of which are handwritten and 400 of which are over 1000 years old. (CESG)

Notker III

Notker III was a well-known and respected monk in the monastery of Saint Gall. He also had the name Notker the German as well as Notker Labeus. He was skilled in Latin and is credited with translating many Latin classics into the German dialect. He has several claims to fame in this modern age, only one of those being the Psalter he translated from Latin into German. He was also the most notable German translator prior to Martin Luther, and in this, he developed by serious study, many rules by which Old German became more standardized. One aspect of this standardization of Old German is that it then became more of a literary language.

Notker was also a teacher and compiler of textbooks. His writing showed a consistency in spelling that was not present in any other contemporary scholar, and to this day his achievements are still being studied and soundly applauded. (Grotans)

Of the two manuscripts taken by Empress Gisela, only one still exists today: the **Psalter**, the only complete copy of which still resides at Saint Gall. As wonderful as Notker's translation of this Psalter is, his greater and more far reaching contributions were in his linguistic studies. He codified the Initial Sound Rule, and paved the way for the development of Umlauts through his own use of diacritics in his translations from Latin into the Allemanisch dialect, which was spoken in the areas surrounding Saint Gall. (Grotans)

Looking back

In our very literate society, it comes as a very sobering experience to meditate on the cost, both monetary and physical, that was paid for the privilege we have of reading the great classical authors of the distant past. In our society it isn't a problem to go to the bookstore and pick up a stack of books to read merely for pleasure. I personally own over 500 books and have them in my home at this moment. Throughout my entire life I have owned thousands of books. This number doesn't seem very large when we look at the

sheer volume of books written and brought into print each year, yet it is far more than all the folios that the Saint Gall Abbey had in its possession at the time of Notker III.

When I think of the dedication to transcribing the precious manuscripts of the past I am reminded today of various projects like **Project Gutenberg** and **LibriVox**. Project Gutenberg is, with the help of volunteers, dedicated to converting the texts of old to the new formats present on the internet for the express purpose of allowing continuing access to works of literature that might otherwise be lost. LibriVox volunteers take the public domain editions available on Project Gutenberg and make them available for the hearing impaired as well as those who prefer to listen to their literature. **Google Books** is also dedicated to preservation of literature through its own project where Google volunteers scan the pages in old books (a great many forever out of print), and make these freely available to the public via the internet. **The Internet Sacred Text Archive** also has volunteers transcribing sacred literature from public domain works and makes these available for reading, also.

And in this way we see how the people of yesterday held the same desire for future generations that we also hold for our future generations: to press ever forward, learning new things, without forgetting the knowledge gained in the past, or the price that knowledge exacted.

On the surface, this article appears to be just about a monastery, a monarch, a monk, and a manuscript. However, when one looks deeper, the true meaning emerges: namely the continuing quest for, preservation of, and dissemination of, knowledge.

External Sources

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