

FROM LATE ANTIQUITY TO THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

New Methods in the Production and Distribution of Books, and the 'Demise' of Ancient Libraries

Introduction. In A.D. 330, when Emperor Constantine the Great decided to move the capital of the Roman Empire to the East and Constantinople started to evolve into the 'New Rome', there were still twenty-eight public libraries functioning in Rome, according to Publius Victor.¹ To these we should add a large number of books that were either used by scholarly circles like that of Julia Domna, or were kept in aristocrats' villas, or belonged to the private libraries of men of letters and teachers, such as Flavius Philostratus and Serenus Sammonicus.² However, it is doubtful whether the public libraries in fora and bath-houses still enjoyed their old prestige or their status as the principal cultural meeting-places, especially considering that Ammianus Marcellinus describes them as 'tombs'.³ Meanwhile the publishing business had entered a period of gradual but radical change: authors no longer regarded Rome and Athens as the focal points of the publishing world but turned their attention to cities that were recognized centres with large numbers of students.

Rome itself did not have enough scriptoria nor the necessary publishing infrastructure for the distribution of books to the farthest corners of the Empire, though new administrative centres had been developing – and developing their cultural life as well – since the late second century A.D., especially along the northern frontier. Gaul, where the process of Romanization had spread far beyond Lyon, was a bastion of cultural life in Late Antiquity. Local schools grew into centres of learning in such cities as Marseille, Arles, Nîmes, Toulouse, Poitiers and especially Bordeaux, the birthplace of the poet Ausonius. Certainly it was no mere chance that led to the choice of Trier to be the capital of the Empire, the 'second Rome'. But that was not the main reason for the decline in the production of books in Rome for distribution in the Roman provinces: the recession was due not to the reloca-

*New cultural
centres*

1. Pope Gregory the Great at his writing desk, inspired by the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove, with copyists in the lower zone. Ivory codex cover dated between 850 and 1000. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum.

tion of intellectual activity from Rome to other cities in the North, but chiefly to the development of fresh literary talent in those cities and of a new genre of literature resulting from the spread of Christianity. Then again, the Christian literature of the West was not shared by the faithful of the Mediterranean basin, as it was in Roman times: this is attested by the public and private bilingual libraries in the Graeco-Roman world, where the works of the Greek and



2. Ausonius. Engraving from A. Thevet, *Les vrais portraits et vies des hommes illustres*, Paris, 1584, 488.

Latin Church Fathers circulated in book form only in certain regions of the East or the West. Nor was there any mechanism in place for translating Christian literature from Greek to Latin or vice versa: for example, Ambrose and Augustine were quite unknown in the East and Basil the Great and Gregory of Nazianzus very little known in the West. Another reason for the limited interest in reading Graeco-Roman literature was the Church Fathers' virtually unanimous attitude towards pagan writings, which influenced and severely marginalized the books already in existence and their reproduction.

Christians were not forbidden to read pagan writings, but they were forbidden to propagate pagan teachings. The philosophers were regarded as the 'patriarchs' of heretics, while the orators and poets were condemned out of hand as traitors to truth and morality. Meanwhile Christian thinkers – using the weapons of classical rhetoric, of course – proclaimed the superiority of Christian doctrine over the traditional Roman values. But at the same time there was some ambiguity in the Christian writers' attitude towards the usefulness of classical literature, an ambiguity evident in their own writings: Ambrose asserts that Holy Scripture contains all the material necessary for the formulation of Christian doctrine, yet he borrows from Cicero's *De officiis* in writing his *De officiis ministrorum*.⁴ Jerome, who asks,

'What has Cicero to do with [St.] Paul?', elsewhere encourages Christian churchmen to make use of the tools of classical learning.⁵ Similarly, in *De doctrina christiana* Augustine supports the teaching of the liberal arts, but elsewhere he argues against their importance.⁶

As regards the publishing process, the role of publisher was now played in the first instance by the author himself and his friends and then by a patron of literature, who distributed books to the market or to individuals who expressed an interest. Ausonius, writing in the fourth century and for the most part in his birthplace, Bordeaux, devoted himself heart and soul to the people living in that area. He worked as a teacher of rhetoric and gained great popularity with his poetry, which covered a variety of genres. He used to 'pre-publish' his poems by sending them to his friends and asking them for constructive criticism before bringing them out in their final form.⁷ Up to a point, that explains why his work had only a limited readership, which included Paulinus of Nola, Sidonius, Prudentius and Endelechius.⁸

The end of an era and of a whole civilization is the theme conveyed by the interests and preferences of Ammianus Marcellinus, also writing in the fourth century.⁹ Marcellinus, born of a prominent Greek family in Antioch, Syria, was not a member of the early Christian community: moreover, he was entirely irreligious, for he interpreted everything to do with the gods by the use of reason alone. He wrote in Greek, not Latin; he modelled himself on Julian the Apostate;¹⁰ and he was an unconventional character, for he chose to sign off by describing himself to his readers as *miles quondam et Graecus* ('an ex-soldier and a Greek').¹¹ In short, he was an intellectual living on the cusp of a new era and striving to make an impact with his work. But what was his new audience, his new readership, and what impact did his books in fact have?¹²

Marcellinus wrote his *Res gestae*, the last major historical work of the ancient era,¹³ and read excerpts from it to literary circles like that of the Symmachi. It is a treatise on Roman history from Nerva to the death of Emperor Valens (387), divided into thirty-one books. From Rome it was carried in book form into Gaul, where many Roman aristocrats had large estates. Although the books of the *Res gestae* dedicated to Julian aroused great interest among the senators in Gaul because Julian had treated that province extremely favourably, it would appear that not one copy ever found its way to the East. The first thirteen books were lost for ever in the early Middle Ages and just one copy from Gaul, containing the remaining eighteen books (XIV-XXXI), survived at Hersfeld Abbey in Germany. One copy of that manuscript, dating from the ninth century and probably intended for Fulda Abbey, also in Germany, is today our sole source of the work.¹⁴

The production and marketing of Christian books followed its own rules, with many exceptions in both the West and the East: for example, in the case of Jerome.¹⁵ Jerome, who was active from the late fourth century, tells us in his letters about the way he arranged for his writings to reach the public: this was similar to the method employed for the reproduction of books by most other Christian writers, who acted in general as their own publishers. As regards intellectual property rights, the normal practice remained as it had been in the Roman period: once a writer had handed over his work to anybody else, he had virtually no control over what happened to it. Some ecclesiastical writers enjoyed great popularity with the help of powerful personages who promoted their writings, as in the case of Jerome and his patron Paulinus of Nola. Let us not forget that from 386 until his death in 420 Jerome was living in Bethlehem, which means that his books were being published from the East to the West. Many copies of most of the works of St. Augustine (354-430) also reached the West from this end of the Mediterranean, as attested by a codex of *De diversis quaestionibus ad Simplicianus* now in St. Petersburg, which contains in addition the first two books of *De doctrina christiana*.¹⁶ What is more, the oldest Latin edition of the Bible was written in North Africa, as were the works of Tertullian and Cyprian.¹⁷ And Cassiodorus, in the mid sixth century, hoped to be able to obtain manuscripts from Carthage and elsewhere in Africa to enrich the library of the Vivarium.¹⁸

One of the exceptions that prove the rule was Jerome, who, according to Orosius, really believed that everybody in the West awaited his next work as if it were the Golden Fleece.¹⁹ Presumably Orosius was referring to Jerome's *De viris illustribus*, his *Letters* and, of course, his Latin translation of the Bible.

In Italy in the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries there still existed scriptoria where illuminated manuscripts were copied, as well as individual scribes who collaborated with miniaturists. The codex of Virgil now in the Vatican Museum and the excerpt from the Old Testament Book of Kings in the *Vetus Latina* version are two examples of manuscripts copied in the late fourth century; both may in fact have come from the same scriptorium. Two others showing an affinity with the manuscript of Virgil are the *Codex Romanus* and the *Codex Palatinus*, both written in the early years of the sixth century and showing clear indications of coming from the hand of one and the same *stationarius* working in Rome near the Church of San Pietro in Vincoli.²⁰ Furthermore, since the middle of the fourth century (in the lifetime of St. Martin of Tours, *ca.* 360), monks and nuns had been copying manuscripts on a commercial basis; and there is reliable evidence of manuscript copying in monasteries in St. Benedict's lifetime (480-543).

Another major factor that altered the parameters of producing and distributing books in the early Middle Ages was the reading public. Greek and Roman literature was addressed to a specific readership: schools, academies, philosophy schools, educated people, grammarians, teachers and the users of scattered libraries of one sort or another. A good knowledge of Greek and Latin went without saying in those circles, as well as a high standard of general education, so the readers would be familiar with the persons and things referred to in ancient poetry and prose and the divine symbolisms, the traditional customs and practices involved in pagan cults – in short, a whole world that was now gradually disappearing. Most Christians, on the other hand, possessed only a meagre vocabulary and were almost entirely unacquainted with that literary tradition. To strengthen their faith they needed didactic works expressing easily intelligible concepts in simple language, which they could assimilate from start to finish just as they were, such as martyrologies. But this kind of writing had no literary pretensions, nor did it require any publishing organization: all that was necessary for its diffusion was a copyist or a reader. And indeed martyrologies, with their suggestions of the divine Passion, were the first-fruits of Christian literature for the ordinary people.²¹

There is no doubt that the world of books in the Middle Ages, at least up to the twelfth century, was dominated by monks. Preachers, missionaries, advocates of the communal life, ascetics and others who renounced material pleasures founded thousands of monasteries following the rules of one order or another. Then, to give each and every monk a common intellectual grounding regardless of the order he belonged to, schools, scriptoria and libraries were established in the monasteries so that the superiors could control not only the monks but the laity as well. The wide extent of this practice is amply demonstrated by the abundance of copies of the Bible or parts thereof, which were produced in such great numbers



3. St. Jerome, Father of the Vulgate. Oil painting of the school of Quentin Metsys. Liège, Musée d'Art Mosan.

in the Middle Ages that the monks used them as pillows. But this trend did not follow a uniform course and there were many significant divergences, for there were inspired and learned Church dignitaries throughout the Middle Ages who had the power and the ability to change the intellectual outlook of their monasteries; and, by so doing, they gradually laid the foundations for the rebirth of book learning in the fifteenth century.

For the Monastery of the Vivarium, Cassiodorus (485 – ca. 583) drew up a rule specifying the subject matter of the books to be copied by the monks: his philosophy was to maintain the Graeco-Roman tradition, to institute a systematic programme for the translation of Greek works into Latin and at the same time to propagate Christian literature. His initiative died with him, but it had a decisive effect in that it led to monks being occupied not only with manual and practical work but also with copying books in the scriptoria and organizing their monastic libraries.²²

Until the time of Charlemagne (8th-9th centuries) the production and distribution of books and the formation and organization of libraries were all in the hands of monks. The presence of Alcuin at Charlemagne's court, the never-ending reappraisal of ancient literature and the intellectual bonds forged between Charlemagne's court and York gave a new dimension to laity's awareness of the formation of libraries in the context of a broader acquisition of general knowledge.²³ With the backing of Charlemagne himself, old grammar textbooks by writers such as Diomedes and Marius Victorinus were rescued from oblivion, helping to establish the liberal arts as subjects of study in the monasteries and leading to the foundation of schools outside the monasteries. This fresh approach to schooling gave a further boost to book production by increasing the demand for textbooks of arithmetic, astronomy, dialectic, geometry and rhetoric.

From about the eleventh century onwards the Graeco-Roman intellectual tradition and Christian religious writing were supplemented by a new genre of literature written for local or national consumption and in new linguistic idioms. From being a purely oral genre consisting of simple songs and ballads, this verbal art soon evolved into the form of longer romances and epics that were written down in books. The life and exploits of Alexander the Great or King Arthur were themes much favoured in aristocratic circles and princely courts. These heroes were role models for the nobles, who strove to prove themselves worthy peers of the great men. This gave rise to the courtly romances (*romans courtois*), which spread rapidly and established themselves as popular reading matter in the cities and large towns, as in the case of the much-loved *Roman de la Rose*.²⁴

Charlemagne
and education

The new
literature