

The Sinister Side of Medieval European Scribes

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Abstract

Left-handedness, or sinister, a Latin word which originally meant “on the left side”, has been an actively repressed trait for many centuries. The word sinister slowly developed a negative meaning and left became associated with unluckiness, unfavorable, or evil. However, this has not always been the case. Most medieval European scribes were right-handed, but there were a select few who were left-handed. These scribes would have had to overcome the inherent difficulties of working in a right-handed world much like today. Many of these difficulties would have been similar to those lefties face today. As the languages the scribes wrote in are written from left to right, a scribe would have to avoid disturbing the ink just as today a left-handed writer has to be careful not to smudge their writing. Pencils today don’t affect much, but quills are cut a certain way that makes the pull of a right-handed writer easier than the push of a left-handed writer. Over the course of my research, I will determine the frequency of left-handed scribes, explore their cultural reception, and analyze the methods used to identify handedness. To this end, I will make use of the UNC databases and library in addition to other outside sources. My preliminary research has revealed that some sinister scribes took pride in overcoming the inherent difficulties by leaving a note at the end of a text saying that it was written with their left hand. I hope to find more evidence of this. My research will also likely turn up that left-handed scribes were as uncommon at the time as left-handedness is today.

What did Scribes do?

Medieval scribes were individuals, often in a monastery, who were tasked with creating or recreating various texts. Scribes in Europe used quills and ink to write on parchment primarily, but also on papyrus and paper. Each page of the manuscript they worked on had to be painstakingly handwritten and illustrated if the manuscript was of a high enough quality. A completed text would be the work of anywhere from weeks to years depending on the length of the text and the level of detail included.



Why was being a left-handed scribe so much harder?

Scribal work is already hard enough. Scribes would work at an angled desk for hours on end each day. Their hands would cramp from excessive work, backs would develop problems from being hunched over all day, eyes would deteriorate after years of working by candlelight. Mistakes (if discovered) would be corrected by either scraping the offending ink off the surface of the parchment or pasting a correction on the page. Add on top of that the challenges of being left-handed in a world designed by right-handed people and you begin to see the picture. As mentioned in my abstract, quills work better when pulled for each stroke. As a left-handed scribe pushing is more natural, but also more difficult to do while maintaining a quality of work.

Research to be done

I plan to research ways to identify left-handed scribes beyond the colophon so that I may find more than just those who boldly state it. One such avenue is paleography. Beyond that I will look into more peer reviewed work regarding the commonality of left-handed scribes. I will also need to see if we know how these scribes were received by their peers.

Works Cited

- Cyrus, Cynthia J. *The Scribes for Women’s Convents in Late Medieval Germany*. University of Toronto Press, 2009.
- Parkes, Malcolm B. *Their Hands before Our Eyes: a Closer Look at Scribes*. Ashgate, 2008.

What evidence is there of left-handed scribes?

At the end of a text, scribes would often leave notes called colophons. These notes vary from details on the cost of the text, praises for God, complaints, to boasts. One colophon from a medieval German scribe stated “Margaretha von Schonbergk has written this with her left hand” (Cyrus 148). Paleography, or the study of ancient writings, also has methods of analyzing handwriting to identify specific scribes. One famous example is the Tremulous Hand of Worcester. By looking at the writing of a specific scribe, historians were able to find out more about scribal practices. These methods can also be applied to discovering left-handed scribes.

