Manuscripts and illuminations from Early Medieval Europe provide a unique glimpse into the past – allowing us to see how knowledge was constructed and distributed during this time period. Secular and religious words and images reveal the place knowledge held in society during this time, and through these texts and images we see how important written knowledge was even in a world where most of the residents were illiterate. Though certainly places of worship, monasteries were also the intellectual hubs of this time period, forming a vast network across Western Europe. Their religious status generally protected them during wartime - thus they were able to preserve written works for centuries in the face of a rapidly changing political landscape. The manuscripts that survive today provide us with valuable insight into Early Medieval Europe.

Cover: Stavelot Bible (1095)
Inner Foldout: Codex Amiatinus (7th Century)
Below: Fulda Sacramentary (970-975)

If You Give a Monk a Manuscript...

To see the process behind creating this exhibition and other videos from behind the scenes, go to www.youtube.com/carlhist137

For more information on the exhibition and manuscripts on display, visit our website at https://wp.carleton.edu/monkmanuscript/

We would like to give a special thanks to our community outreach groups for their efforts to bring this exhibition to the attention of students in the greater Northfield area. Also, special thanks to the many people outside of our class who have helped make our exhibition a reality.

Overview

Constructing Knowledge in the Early Middle Ages

Presented by Carleton History 137 Students
The Early Medieval Scribe

In the Early Middle Ages, the Roman bureaucracy and its exclusive literary culture were weakening. Latin, the language for both kings and clergy across Europe, but from c.500 - c.750 it was the clergy who assumed the position as the new literary elite. During this time, education, literacy, and book learning remained mostly within the domain of the Church. At monasteries, scriptoria collected and reproduced manuscripts, made possible due to substantial funding from local and regional nobility. All the manuscripts in this exhibition were created at monasteries; thus they cover predominantly religious themes.

Case 1: The Ashburnham Pentateuch

The Ashburnham Pentateuch (5th-7th Century) contains the first five books of the bible. It is filled with contemporary Christian symbols, essentially claiming Jewish history as a mere precursor to Christianity. The manuscript’s successful incorporation of illustration with text makes it an invaluable religious teaching tool. With the Ashburnham Pentateuch, monks were able to study from detailed illustrations while reading biblical text. Its simplistic and elegant formatting makes it particularly readable. The organized text, full-page illustrations, and large margins show that the Pentateuch was designed with its readers in mind.

Case 2: The Psalter: Illuminating Holy Poetry

A psalter is an illuminated book of psalms, poems written by King David that can be read or sung. During the Middle Ages, psalms were part of the liturgy of worship. They were recited as penance for sins or as a form of meditation. Some clerics were known to recite the entire 150 psalms twice daily! Monks also used the psalms as a tool for increasing literacy. The Psalter played an important role in gift giving; the manuscript served as a physical gift, while the psalms themselves provided the recipient with spiritual wealth.

Case 3: Before Wikipedia: A Christian Encyclopedia by Monks for Monks

The De Rerum Naturis, or On the Nature of Things, is an encyclopedia written by Rabanus Maurus in 842-47 AD in Hesse Germany. During the early to mid-11th century, monks at Monte Cassino in Italy recopied and illustrated the manuscript. The added illustrations were not merely aesthetic, but instructed the reader on the textual content. The monks rejected decoration without a function, which is why the pictures are simplistic compared to other manuscripts. The division of the encyclopedia into 22 books references the 22 books of the Old Testament, highlighting Rabanus Maurus’s belief of God’s involvement in every aspect of life. De Rerum Naturis provided monks and others a view of the world through a religious lens.

Case 4: Medieval Manuscripts in a Busy World

Manuscripts did not solely exist for religious purposes, nor were they intended only for the monks who created them. In a world with limited record-keeping and communication, manuscripts were the preferred method of legal documentation in both secular and religious spheres, as we see in the Collectio Hispana and the Land Grant Diploma. The Collectio and the Warmund Sacramentary also showcase the role of manuscripts as the most reliable way to ensure standardization of information. But, being limited in number and laborious to produce, documents would often be needed to serve multiple functions, as illustrated by the Exultet Roll.

Case 5: Word and Image Interact on the Page

Like those in the Ashburnham Pentateuch, illustrations in many manuscripts were used to convey and reinforce the text’s meaning. The Trier Apocalypse, Egbert Codex, Wandalbert’s Lothar, and Beatus de Liebana Codex Urgellensis demonstrate how illustrations from the Carolingian and Ottonian periods do more than represent what is written. Images like these may provide extra information, reinforce a broader narrative theme, tell us something about the book itself, or interact with the text in other ways. Pictures here are not incidental or secondary to the text. They help to shape the meaning of each manuscript as a whole.