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Preaching with the Hands: Notes on Cassiodorus' Praise of Handwriting and its Medieval Reception

Abstract: Pre-modern Western book production is first and foremost a matter of manuscript culture. Hence, the role of copyists – and in the early period of this tradition they were mostly monks – is of outstanding importance: no handwritten books without the dedicated work of scribes! In fact, instead of addressing the laborious physical effort of copying, the idealization of scribes tends to focus mostly on religious dimensions. The starting point of this tradition is the emphatic praise of handwriting by the late antique Roman statesman and scholar Cassiodorus, who spiritualizes scribal activity as a form of 'manual' preaching. The article attempts to trace the medieval reception of this seminal concept, particularly popular within the Carthusian tradition, up to Jean Gerson's *De laude scriptorum* of 1423 and the homonymous treatise of the German Benedictine abbot Johannes Trithemius, published in 1492 as a printed book (!).

1 The springboard: Cassiodorus Senator (d. *c.* 585) and his valuation of manuscripts copying

> I admit that among those of your tasks which require physical effort that of the scribes, if they write correctly, appeals most to me, for by re-reading the Divine Scriptures (*relegendo Scripturas divinas*) they wholesomely instruct their own mind, but by copying (*scribendo*) the precepts of the Lord they also spread them far and wide.
> Happy their design, praiseworthy their zeal, to preach to men with the hand alone, to unleash tongues with the fingers, to give salvation silently to mortals, and to fight against the illicit temptations of the devil with pen and ink. Every word of God written by the Scribe is a wound inflicted on Satan![1]

1 *Ego tamen fateor votum meum, quod inter vos quaecumque possunt corporeo labore compleri, antiquariorum mihi studia, si tamen veraciter scribant, non immerito forsitan plus placere, quod et mentem suam relegendo Scripturas divinas salutariter instruunt et Domini praecepta scribendo longe lateque disseminant. Felix intentio, laudanda sedulitas, manu hominibus praedicare, digitis*

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This stunning praise of the copyists of biblical codices, frequently quoted by scholars dealing with medieval manuscript culture, occurs in Chapter 30 of the first part of the *Institutiones divinarum et saecularium litterarum*, a guide conceived by Cassiodorus Senator (d. *c.* 585) for the organization of intellectual life at Vivarium, founded in the 550s by the author as a unique synthesis of monastery and school on his family estate in Calabria.[2]

Cassiodorus' intellectual attitude is deeply marked by his position at a historical and cultural threshold: 'in Cassiodoro vi è una sintesi di idee pagane e idee cristiane, armonizzate con grande sapienza, ma dissimulate con naturalezza'.[3] In fact, the novelty of the educational program developed by the *Institutiones* may be boiled down to their attempt to amalgamate classical intellectual heritage with Christian theology and spirituality: a momentous alliance, as before long Cassiodorus' opus was to cross the Alps and circulate in the high-ranking institutions of Latin Europe.[4] Nevertheless, at least at first glance, his praise of scribes seems to be fundamentally indebted to what, in the wake of Claudia Rapp's impressive overview, we might term an early Christian awareness of 'Scriptural Holiness',[5] understood as the 'projection' of the dignity and sanctity of the divine Word onto the biblical text, extending even to the materiality of the codices transmitting this message and thus to 'the letters that convey the Word of God'.[6] Cassiodorus' promotion of the copying of biblical books to an act of preaching appears to be a rather specific idea; yet the notion of a particular spiritual benefit for those producing books through the work of their hands in order to disseminate Holy Scripture to the use of other readers can be found equally, if less frequently, in the context of late antique Christianity, as Rapp has been able to show.[7]

An aspect of Cassiodorus' approach that is, however, particularly conspicuous is its strongly bodily note: no less than three times the opening section of

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linguas aperire, salutem mortalibus tacitum dare, et contra diaboli subreptiones illicitas calamo atramentoque pugnare. Tot enim vulnera Satanas accipit, quot antiquarius Domini verba describit (Cassiodorus, *Institutiones* I, 30, 1, ed. Mynors 1937, 75; English translation: Webber Jones 1947, 35 with some minor changes).

2 The bibliography on this unique institution and its famous, if widely dispersed, library is abundant; cf. among others Troncarelli 1998; Schindel 2008, 1–15.

3 Troncarelli 2020, 7.

4 Perhaps with the papal library at the Lateran Palace as an important pivot of this dissemination, cf. Lapidge 2005, 18–20, and Troncarelli 2020, 97–103.

5 Rapp 2007, 194–222.

6 Rapp 2007, 200.

7 Rapp 2007, 209–212.

Institutiones I, 30 brings into play the copyists' fingers holding the pen: the *tres digiti* (1) are celebrated as 'unleashing the tongues' of the future readers,[8] but (2) also boldly associated with the Holy Trinity[9] and (3) with Yahweh's finger carving the Decalogue in the tablets of stone (Ex. 31:18).[10] The act of copying is obviously credited with a strong 'theological' potential: a supercharging that recalls a passage of the *Letter to Melania* by the fourth-century monk Evagrius Ponticus that presents beautiful handwriting as a metaphor for God's creation of the world.[11]

Interestingly enough, in this section of the text we can observe a short but surprising opening toward the classically oriented cultural program that constitutes the second wing of Cassiodorus' treatise. I am referring to the short parenthesis on the potential faults of the monks dealing with the holy text: 'if ever they write correctly' (*si tamen veraciter scribant*).[12] Copying an exacting text such as Holy Scripture demands orthographical skill; both the scribes and the correctors, Cassiodorus insists, should thus study the appropriate textbooks: *orthographos antiquos legant* (I, 30, 2). At first sight, such a recommendation in this context, with its strong theological connotations, might appear rather unexpected and even intriguing. Yet, considering the wording of the chapter's title – *De antiquariis et commemoratione orthographiae*, i.e. 'On scribes and on remembering orthography' – Cassiodorus' insistence on scribal correctness turns out to be a substantial part of his message.

If the *saeculares litterae* are thus assigned a place in the heart of what we might call a theology of copying holy books, this striking prominence demonstrates *in nuce* why the *Institutiones* are considered a seminal document in the history of Western European monasticism. In fact, Cassiodorus' attempt to tie together religion and learning[13] proved to be momentous. Emblematic documents such as Charlemagne's *Epistula de litteris colendis* (arguably going back to Alcuin)[14] reveal that, at least since the so-called Carolingian Renaissance, the antique liberal arts program found fertile ground in the educational curriculum

8 *Felix intentio* [...] *digitis linguas aperire* (I, 30, 1, see n. 1 above).

9 'By three fingers is written what is said by the virtue of the Holy Trinity': *tribus digitis scribitur quod virtus sanctae trinitatis effatur* (I, 30, 1).

10 'In some way, they [the scribes] seem to emulate what the Lord did when writing his law by operating with his almighty finger': *factum Domini aliquo modo videntur emitari, qui legem suam, omnipotentis digiti operatione conscripsit* (I, 30, 1).

11 Rapp 2007, 215.

12 See n. 1 above.

13 Brunhölzl 1975, 39.

14 Wallach 1951.

of clerical and monastic schools.[15] This process turned out to be instrumental in two senses: (1) for the survival of at least part of the classical intellectual culture beyond the end of the ancient world and (2) for the promotion of the written book – and consequently of book production! – to a place at the heart of pre-modern Christian culture, especially in the context of monastic education. As John Contreni has put it (in reference to the Carolingian situation at houses such as St Gall, Lorsch, or Corbie): 'An active and influential school depended for its vitality on the resources necessary to copy books or to obtain them from other centers'.[16]

Before returning to our topic, on the hunt for traces of the medieval afterlife of Cassiodorus' praise of handwriting, it might be of note to ascertain an earlier source that may have inspired his metaphor of preaching with the hands, namely, John Cassian (*c.* 360–*c.* 435), 'another bilingual monk with extensive eastern experience', recognized by Cassiodorus who was apparently familiar with the former's writings as those of 'a monastic and stylistic soulmate'.[17] In his treatise *De institutis coenobiorum et de octo principalium vitiorum remediis* X, 10, commenting on Saint Paul's claim that he had worked night and day not to be a burden to the members of the community (II Thess. 3:6–10), Cassian coins the phrase *idcirco evangelium praedicans meis manibus* ('preaching the gospel with my hands'), which he puts in the Apostle's mouth,[18] making him appear to some extent a worker-priest *avant la lettre*, i.e., by his self-sustaining way of life. If I am right in this surmise, Cassiodorus might have drawn on this concept, transforming and intellectualizing Cassian's phrase into his own formula *manu hominibus praedicare,* while applying it to his monks who were charged with copying biblical texts.

Yet, this view of Saint Paul as a worker is far from eclipsing his authorship of the corpus of pastoral letters that was to form a substantial part of the New Testament canon: in fact, the caption *Sedet hic Scripsit* ('here he is sitting as he was writing') of the full-page miniature in the manuscript Stuttgart, Württembergische Landesbibliothek, HB II 54 (*c.* 820–830, probably hailing from St Gall), arguably one of the earliest author portraits of the Apostle in Western manuscript tradition, stages him exemplarily as a scribe (see Fig. 1).

15 Contreni 1995, 725–747.
16 Contreni 1995, 724.
17 Stewart 1998, 25.
18 Petschenig (ed.) 1888, 183.

2 Twelfth- and thirteenth-century Carthusians as Cassiodorus's heirs?

The earliest evidence of an echo of Cassiodorus' understanding of the monk as a 'manual preacher' which I have been able to find occurs in the first Customs of the Carthusian Order elaborated by Guigo I, the fifth prior of the Grande Chartreuse, in the late 1120s.[19]

If it is the Carthusian book culture of the later Middle Ages and its 'tremendous impact on devotional reading by other religious, and also by lay people'[20] that presently attracts substantial scholarly attention, it is equally obvious (and those specializing in this field insist on this continuity) that these fifteenth-century efforts dedicated to writing, translating, and copying works of devotional literature actually 'fulfill the founders' mandate'.[21] In fact, what Michael Sargent so aptly termed 'the *literary* character of the spirituality of the Carthusian Order'[22] is already fully palpable in Guigo.[23] His astonishingly detailed description of the items a monk needed in his individual cell for the making of codices, contained in Chap. 28 on the standard equipment of the monk's *cella*,[24] is of highly 'technical' interest and probably remains 'the most complete contemporary record of bookmaking supplies available to modern codicologists.'[25] For the present article, however, the reflections on the spiritual aspects of writing books are of even greater interest, and it is here, in fact, that we meet with a Cassiodorian echo:

19 See the edition of Laporte, Guigues I (1984). For reasons of the precarious availability of library holdings, however, I shall quote Guigo's Latin text from vol. 153 of Migne's Patrologia Latina (PL 153 in what follows here), electronically processed by Philipp Roelli <http://mlat.uzh.ch/MLS/xanfang.php?tabelle=Guigo_I_prior_Carthusiae_cps2&corpus=2&allow_download=0&lang=0> (accessed on 2 Feb. 2021).

20 Brantley 2007, 47.

21 Patterson 2011, 136.

22 Sargent 1976, 240 (italics mine).

23 For the following, cf. Brantley 2007, 47–50.

24 Chap. 28,2 (PL 153, 693). Remarkably, Guigo mentions the fact that it happens very rarely that utensils for crafts other than book making are needed, 'for, if possible, we train almost everyone we receive in the art of copying' (*omnes enim pene quos suscipimus, si fieri potest, scribere docemus*).

25 Brantley 2007, 48.

> We desire that the books be made with the greatest attention and kept very carefully, like perpetual food for our souls, *so that because we cannot preach the word of God by our mouth, we may do so with our hands*.[26]

A glance at the Latin text makes it obvious that it was exactly Cassiodorus' comment on the vocation of the *antiquarius* at Vivarium that Guigo had in mind:

Cassiodorus	**Guigo**
Felix intentio, laudanda sedulitas, *manu hominibus praedicare*, digitis linguas aperire, salutem mortalibus tacitum dare, et contra diaboli subreptiones illicitas calamo atramentoque pugnare.	Libros quippe tamquam sempiternum animarum nostrarum cibum cautissime custodiri et studiosissime volumus fieri, ut quia ore non possumus, dei verbum *manibus predicemus*

Can we reconstruct the circumstances that led Guigo to draw on and recontextualize the late antique reference text?

The phrase *manibus praedicare* was quoted and credited to Cassiodorus in a Carthusian Chronicle of around 1260:[27] an argument for supposing an awareness, at least in the thirteenth century, of its Cassiodorian background. But what about Guigo himself? Dennis Martin's hint at the use of the phrase by Guigo's contemporary, Peter the Venerable, turns out to be an important clue:[28] in his Letter 20, the abbot of Cluny celebrates Gilbert, a recluse at Senlis, as a 'silent preacher of the Divine Word whose hand will loudly sound in the ears of many people while his tongue remains silent'.[29] Like Guigo, Peter addresses the activity of a scribe, living in self-chosen seclusion but 'travelling', as it were, in his manuscripts over land and sea (*in codicibus tuis terras ac maria peragrabis*), 'a hermit by profession whose devotion, however, turns him into an Evangelist' (*professio te heremitam, devotio faciet evangelistam*).[30]

The underlying idea is clearly the same as in Guigo's Chapter 28, and again a glance at the Latin (quoted in n. 29) makes the connection appear even more striking: in its bold metaphor of the hand (*manus*) sounding with loud voices (*clamosis vocibus*) and hence transforming the copyist into a *taciturnus praedicator*, Peter's wording very closely approaches that of Guigo's *Dei verbum*

26 Guigo, Chap. 28:3 (PL 153, 693; English translation: Brantley 2007, 48).

27 Martin 1992, 232, n. 173.

28 Martin 1992, 232.

29 *Sic plane sic verbi divini poteris fieri taciturnus praedicator, et lingua silente, in multorum populorum auribus manus tua clamosis vocibus personabit*. Constable 1967, vol. 1, 38. See also Constable 1996, 213.

30 Constable 1967, vol. 1, 38.

manibus predicemus. Yet the question of exactly how (and at which moment) Cassiodorus comes into play remains uncertain: based on chronology – Constable dates the letter to Gilbert 'probably in the early 1130s'[31] – the hypothesis that Guigo, writing in the late 1120s, may have been inspired by Peter appears rather unlikely. Should we then rather assume that Cassiodorus' notion of the 'preaching copyist' was more widely received among religiously fervent intellectuals of this period?

Still, if almost six centuries later Cassiodorus' *laus scriptorum* surprisingly resurfaces, times and circumstances have decidedly changed, not only with regard to the distinctive timbre of this 'swansong' of ancient civilization by the former Roman statesman,[32] but chiefly for the changing status of written culture: 'Die Schriftlichkeit hatte sich gewandelt; der gleiche Gedanke, vom sechsten in das zwölfte Jahrhundert transponiert, musste einen anderen Sinn erhalten', as Johan Peter Gumbert insists.[33]

While reflecting on this cultural change, several of its aspects should be emphasized:

(1) An important difference is immediately obvious on the level of content: while Cassiodorus' metaphor of the copyists preaching with their hands focused on the *verba Domini*, i.e., on scriptural texts, the production of the Carthusian scribes mainly concerns the field of theology and, in later periods, devotional genres as well as, increasingly, vernacular texts. At the time of Guigo himself, we remain of course in the realm of Latin, but the shift to non-biblical texts is obvious. Again, this tendency is paradigmatically confirmed by Peter the Venerable: in his often-quoted Letter 24 to the prior of the Grande Chartreuse,[34] we find a list of manuscripts, exclusively encompassing patristic writings,[35] which obviously refers to a shipment of books sent with the letter at Guigo's request (*sicut mandastis*, as Peter adds to the first item of the list).

(2) Peter's mention of a textual problem in a Cluniac manuscript,[36] a corruption obviously corresponding to and thus compromising the value of the Carthusian copy, indicates that at least some of the manuscripts brought from Cluny were destined to serve as master copies in the Grande Chartreuse's scriptorium. At the same time, such details attest a mutual familiarity with the

31 Constable 1992, 320.

32 'Il timbro inconfondibile dell'affascinante canto del cigno della civiltà antica' (Troncarelli 2020, 14).

33 Gumbert 1974, 310.

34 Constable 1967, vol. 1, 44–47.

35 Constable 1967, vol. 1, 46^{39} to 47^{15}; cf. Brantley 2007, 49–50.

36 Hilary's *Commentarius in Psalmos*, Constable 1967, vol. 1, 47^{7-8}.

holdings of the other side of this 'intellectual commerce'.[37] Perhaps we might even suppose an exchange of library catalogues provided with indications similar to the famous *Desideratenliste* of the ninth-century catalogue from the Alsatian abbey of Murbach in which important but absent works of a given author are listed by means of rubrics like *adhuc quaerimus*, *adhuc non habemus*, *desideramus* etc.:[38] this system presupposes 'interlibrary loans', most likely within the Cluniac confraternity system as was the case earlier with Murbach and its network.[39]

(3) Equally revealing is the mention of a big codex (*maius volumen*) of the Chartreuse's own library containing a series of epistles of Augustine. Peter asks for this book so that it could be copied in Cluny and aid the restoration of an analogous volume which had been partly destroyed by a bear.[40] Apparently, thus, the exchange works in both directions, and we may even be allowed to assume a continuous to-and-fro of reading and copying material between the two houses. But there is even more, as in Peter's accompanying letter we are met with revealing evidence that such exchanges were not limited to the Chartreuse and Cluny: in the case of Prosper of Aquitaine's anti-Pelagian writing against John Cassian (*De gratia Dei et libero arbitrio*), the abbot informs his Carthusian correspondent that he had sent a messenger to the Cluniac abbey of St-Jean d'Angély near La Rochelle in order to procure from there a copy of this apparently very rare text.[41] Perhaps, in this case, Peter relied upon the mediation of a well-connected figure: the Cluniac prior Henry, a former bishop of Soissons, who also filled the position of abbot at St-Jean (intermittently) from 1104 to 1131.[42] At any rate, Gumbert's view that the Carthusian copyists, far from emulating the wide diffusion of codices which Cassiodorus claims in his eulogy of the Vivarium scribes (*Domini praecepta scribendo longe lateque disseminant*),[43] chiefly worked for their own small community,[44] clearly underestimates

37 Brantley 2007, 49.

38 Milde 1968, 62–130.

39 For Murbach see Heinzer 2017, 311.

40 The somewhat enigmatic indication that this happened *in obaedientia* must refer to a priory: Peter's Statutes mention the administration of dependencies outside the monastery (*extra claustrum*) as being charged to take care of *alicuius obedientiae* (Constable 1975, 72). Cf. equally the mention of one of the four priories of Marmoutier near Tours, Cluniac since the late tenth century, which is also called *obedientia* (Constable 1996, 60 n. 61).

41 *Ad sanctum Iohannem Angeliacensem in Aquitania misimus*, Constable 1967, vol. 1, 47.

42 On this rather colorful figure, see Constable 2010, 347–348.

43 The topical *longe lateque,* obviously one of Cassiodorus' pet phrases, recurring almost a dozen times in his writings, is purposefully chosen to rhetorically enhance his claim.

the performance of the librarians and copyists under Guigo's leadership. In this period, thanks to its relations to Cluny, the Grand Chartreuse was embedded in a far-flung network reaching even beyond the realm of its own order.

3 Jean Gerson and his *De laude scriptorum* of 1423

The first independent work on scribal practice[45] is a long time coming: *De laude scriptorum doctrinae salubris* ('On Praising the Scribes of Healthy Doctrine')[46] was written in April 1423 by Jean Charlier de Gerson (1363–1429), probably one of the most prolific and popular writers of the fifteenth century. This opuscule, which is structured in twelve rather short articulations, actually represents, as the short preface indicates, a response to a request by a Carthusian (*quaesivit quidam de monachis domus Carthusiae*),[47] arguably a monk of the Grande Chartreuse,[48] on the issue of the permissibility of copying manuscripts on feast days. Taking this rather scrupulous question[49] as a stepping-stone, Gerson turns before long to a more general perspective. Of course, books – and just to recall, at that time they were all still handwritten books – would not exist without the dedicated work of those copying them. Gerson underlines this point in the preface: *qualiter habebuntur [scripturae] si non scribantur?* he asks rhetorically. Still, if he expresses appreciation for the (good) scribe, the gist of the treatise is actually a matter more and more common among authors in this period, namely, anxiety about whether their intellectual production was faithfully reproduced

44 'Glaubte Cassiodor noch, an die weite Verbreitung der geschriebenen Exemplare erinnern zu müssen oder zu dürfen, so arbeitete der Kartäuser-Schreiber in erster Linie für die kleine Gemeinschaft, der er selbst angehörte', Gumbert 1974, 310.

45 Hobbins 2009, 2 and 166.

46 The phrase *doctrinae salubris* seems to be part of the original title, as the manuscript evidence suggests; see Hobbins 2009, 227 –228 (n. 10 of p. 2).

47 For Gerson's regular practice of such activities as a consultant, especially replying to inquiries on behalf of Cartusians, see the short mention in Glorieux 1961, 136.

48 This date of inquiry and answer perfectly fits the situation of Gerson's retirement in Lyon from the end of 1419 up to his death in July 1429: a period marked by frequent corresponding with the (relatively) close-by Grande Chartreuse (Glorieux 1961, with more details); this surmise is well-matched by the indication of the questioner's provenance as a monk of the *domus Carthusia*.

49 On the typical tinge of religious anxiety that marks a good deal of the questions posed to Gerson, often dealing with details of Carthusian daily routine, see again Glorieux 1961, 144.

by the *scriptores quasi mechanici et manuales librorum* (as Gerson, again in his preface, calls them). Indeed, the real concern, 'just beneath the surface of this entire work', is in fact 'authorship itself'[50] including the ability of authors 'to control the reception of a text.'[51]

However, now re-focusing our attention on the *topos* of the copyists' preaching with their hands, the preface of the treatise leaves no doubt about Gerson's familiarity with this tradition, as he states that 'a good copyist busy with books of healthy doctrine ... may indeed be said to be preaching. In fact, while his tongue is silent, *his hand is preaching*, and sometimes even in a more fruitful way in that Scripture thereby reaches a wider audience than a transitory sermon.'[52]

Less clear is the question of the source of this awareness. While we cannot *a priori* exclude the possibility that he drew directly on Cassiodorus, I am rather inclined to consider that Gerson was indebted to the Carthusian tradition, given his obvious familiarity with this context. The wording itself unfortunately does not help us to solve the riddle.

At the end of the short introduction, the idea of the preaching scribe is taken up again. Gerson introduces the twelfth *consideratio* of his text with three hexameters, each of them consisting of four cue-like elements, thus acting as a succinct (and easily remembered) poetic abstract of what follows:[53]

> [I] *Praedicat* atque [II] studet scriptor, [III] largitur et [IV] orat
> [V] Affligitur, [VI] sal dat, [VII] fontem [VII] lucemque futuris,
> [IX] Ecclesiam ditat, [X] armat, [XI] custodit, [XII] honorat.

Remarkably enough, the Windesheim Canon regular Gabriel Biel (1420–1495), in his programmatic *Tractatus de communi vita clericorum*, written to urge the semi-religious Brethren of Common Life in Germany to take the direction of a regular (Augustinian) form of life,[54] quotes the three emblematic verses in his chapter on the *labor scribendi*.[55] The borrowing per se is not all that surprising, given Gerson's popularity among the partisans of the 'Devotio Moderna'; in fact

50 Hobbins 2009, 72.

51 Hobbins 2009, 167.

52 *Scriptor idoneus et frequens librorum doctrinae salubris* [...] *praedicare dici potest. Certe si lingua silet manus praedicat et fructuosius aliquando quanto scriptura venit ad plures uberior quam transiens sermo*, ed. Glorieux 1973, 424. – See also the statement by Peter the Venerable, quoted above, p. 952, n. 29.

53 The twelve cues appear again as captions at the beginning of every *consideratio*.

54 Van Geest 2017, 123–125.

55 Faix 1999, 64–65, 82, 363 (edition of the text).

Biel refers to Gerson in other contexts as well.[56] Nonetheless, Biel's borrowing of the notion of 'manual' preaching in a lovely way confirms Gerson's own assessment of the far-reaching agency of *scriptura*.

4 In guise of a conclusion: Johannes Trithemius' printed praise of scribes if 1492

It seems natural to let the medieval career of Cassiodorus's dictum come to its end with Johannes Trithemius, abbot of Sponheim, who composed his own *Praise of Scribes* in 1492, a little less than a century after Jean Gerson.[57] This short lapse of time, however, spans a momentous media change: after 1450 in Europe, thanks to Gutenberg's innovation, making a book can mean two technically and economically rather different manufacturing processes. This shift had far-reaching consequences for the *scriptor* and his status. It is therefore of note that Trithemius published his treatise in commendation of the art of handcopying in the new way, having it printed by Peter Friedberg in 1494 at Mainz, the emblematic place of Gutenberg's seminal achievement.[58]

This is not the place for an in-depth discussion of either the universal aspects of this epochal change or of what Noel Brann termed the consequent 'monastic dilemma' standing behind Trithemius' choice. I should, however, join Brann in emphasizing that the Sponheim abbot, far from being 'a reactionary in the face of the printing revolution', was actually one of its 'most vigorous advocates'.[59] Trithemius argues for the value of the book as such, be it handwritten or printed, as a key agent in what he deems the heritage of monastic erudition; viewed from this perspective, there is no contradiction in Trithemius' dissemination of a work in praise of manuscript copying, by means of printing. His intention is actually twofold: while idealizing the work of monastic manuscript copying, he aims (1) to return to its pristine state 'the glorious idea of *vera eruditio monastica*'[60] with regard to both learning and sanctity as a signature quality of the Order's 'golden centuries', which he consistently evokes and augurs; and

56 Faix 1999, 62–63.

57 Arnold 1973.

58 For a panorama of the ideological exaltation of this medio-historical innovation, celebrated by fifteenth- and sixteenth-century 'progressivists' as an achievement most dramatically underscoring 'the advancement of modernity over antiquity', see Brann 1979, 164 (n. 1).

59 Brann 1979, 151.

60 Brann 1979, 163.

(2) to emphasize this activity as the most appropriate form of the *labor manuum*, requested and elevated to a noble status by the Benedictine rule as an integral part of the monks' daily life.

If Trithemius differs fundamentally from Gerson in so far as he had the option to make use of the new technology of book publishing, the concept of his opusculum as an independent work on the topic clearly emulates the latter's, including its programmatic title: *De laude scriptorum*. But there is obviously more: Trithemius does not shy away from lifting material from his model.[61] On the very first side of the prologue (a IIIr)[62] the statement about the necessity of copyists for the existence of texts (*absque scriptoribus non potest scriptura diu salve consistere*) is clearly indebted to Gerson's *qualiter habebuntur [scripturae] si non scribantur*[63] and the ensuing celebration of the wholesome effects of the scribe's ministry begins by drawing verbatim on the beginning of the third of Gerson's emblematic verses (also quoted by Gabriel Biel, as we have seen): *Unde ipse ecclesia ditat*. And as if that were not enough, the entire package, quoted above (p. 956), reappears at the end of Trithemius' Chapter V: *Quidam* – Gerson is not named – *sic cecinit: Praedicat* [...] – [...] *honorat*![64]

Perhaps even more worthy of note is that the starting point of the chain we are observing here itself resurfaces. In fact, Trithemius remarkably returns to Cassiodorus here, mentioning him in Chap. IV:

(1) as the figurehead of a catalogue of abbots, all of them Benedictines (evidently with the exception of Cassiodorus himself) celebrated for their fervent engagement with the copying of ancient works and their solicitude for the libraries of their monastic houses;[65]
(2) immediately thereafter, this time connecting him with Peter Damian,[66] as a pair of authors who published *singulares ac preclaros tractatus de hac industria* (i.e. about the meritorious work of scribes).[67]

61 Wakelin 2014, 25.

62 I refer to the digitized copy of the Mainz print of 1494 (GW 47538), now housed in Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek <https://daten.digitale-sammlungen.de/0003/bsb00037424/images/index.html?fip=193.174.98.30&id=00037424&seite=1> (accessed on 2 Feb. 2021).

63 See above, p. 955.

64 GW 47538, a VIII^{v}.

65 *Cassiodorum, Bedam, Alcuinum, Rabanum, Reginonem* [Regino of Prüm], ibid., a VI^{v}.

66 Trithemius may have in mind strophe 8 (*Scriptores recta linea* / *Veraces scribant litteras* etc.) of a poem (Carmen 8) whose attribution to Peter Damian is now considered rather doubtful: Giordano Lokrantz (ed.) 1964, 145.

67 GW 47538, a VII^{r}.

Other passages of *De laude scriptorum* reveal an even closer (and more explicit) familiarity with Cassiodorus and his key text of *Institutiones* I, 30. In Chap. VI of Trithemius' treatise, the phrase *Monachi autem scribendo libros divinos … cum sermone praedicare non valeant, manu et calamo voluntatem domini longe futuris annunciant*[68] obviously draws on the passage from Cassiodorus quoted at the beginning of this article: this applies to the qualification of the divine books (*libros divinos*) as well as to the pair *manu et calamo*, as neither the specification of copying biblical books nor the mention of the reed pen are found in either Guigo or Gerson, and must therefore go back to Cassiodorus' discussion of *scripturas divinos* and his celebration of the scribes' fight against Satan *calamo atramentoque*.[69] Moreover, in his Chap. VIII (*De orthographia*), Trithemius brings back into play an aspect particularly cherished by his sixth-century role model: the concern for textual correctness, so prominently placed, as we remember, in the title of Cassiodorus' chapter: *De antiquariis et commemoratione orthographiae*.

Things are coming full circle here – an impression given weight and corroborated by a final observation on an element that we found in Cassiodorus but have not again come across in this *parcours* until now: the scribes' fingers. Trithemius, again in his Chap. VI, comes back to that theme, while alluding to a monk 'in one of our cloisters', exceptionally zealous as a copyist, whose three writing fingers with which he had written so many volumes (*quibus tot volumina scipserat*), after many years (*post multos annos*) when his grave was opened, were still preserved (*integri et incorrupti*) while the rest of his corpse had entirely disintegrated down to the bones. As the author comments, it was a miraculous attestation of the holiness of this office before God Almighty (*quam sanctum hoc officium, apud omnipotentem deum iudicetur*).[70] This very bodily projection of the copyist's saintly achievement onto his hand or, more precisely and more pointedly, onto his fingers, proves to be another tribute to the late antique reference, even though the tribute's 'materializing' approach might seem to be in conflict with Cassiodorus' analogical and highly spiritual interpretation of the effort of the human scribe's *tres digiti* to multiply the *caelestia verba* on the parchment as an 'embodiment' of the message uttered by the Trinitarian God.

Hence, at the end of this survey we should yield the floor for the final say to those who are the real protagonists of this paper: the copyists themselves. The attempt to spiritualize manual production of texts and books by Cassiodorus and his medieval followers has a haunting counterpart in the guise of a well-

68 GW 47538, b I^{r}.
69 See above n. 2.
70 GW 47538, b I^{v}.

known colophon, attested in many variants from as early as the seventh or eighth century:

> *Tres digiti scribunt et totum corpus laborat*.[71]
> Three fingers write, but the entire body strives.

If this phrase equally evokes the triplicity of the scribe's writing fingers, as a call from the 'shop floor' – unobstructed by idealizing superstructures as it was in Cassiodorus's association of the scribal act with the Holy Trinity's self-communication – it rather sternly reminds us that copying of manuscripts was first and foremost painstaking and laborious travail.

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71 Schaller and Könsgen 1977, nos 16451 and 16452.

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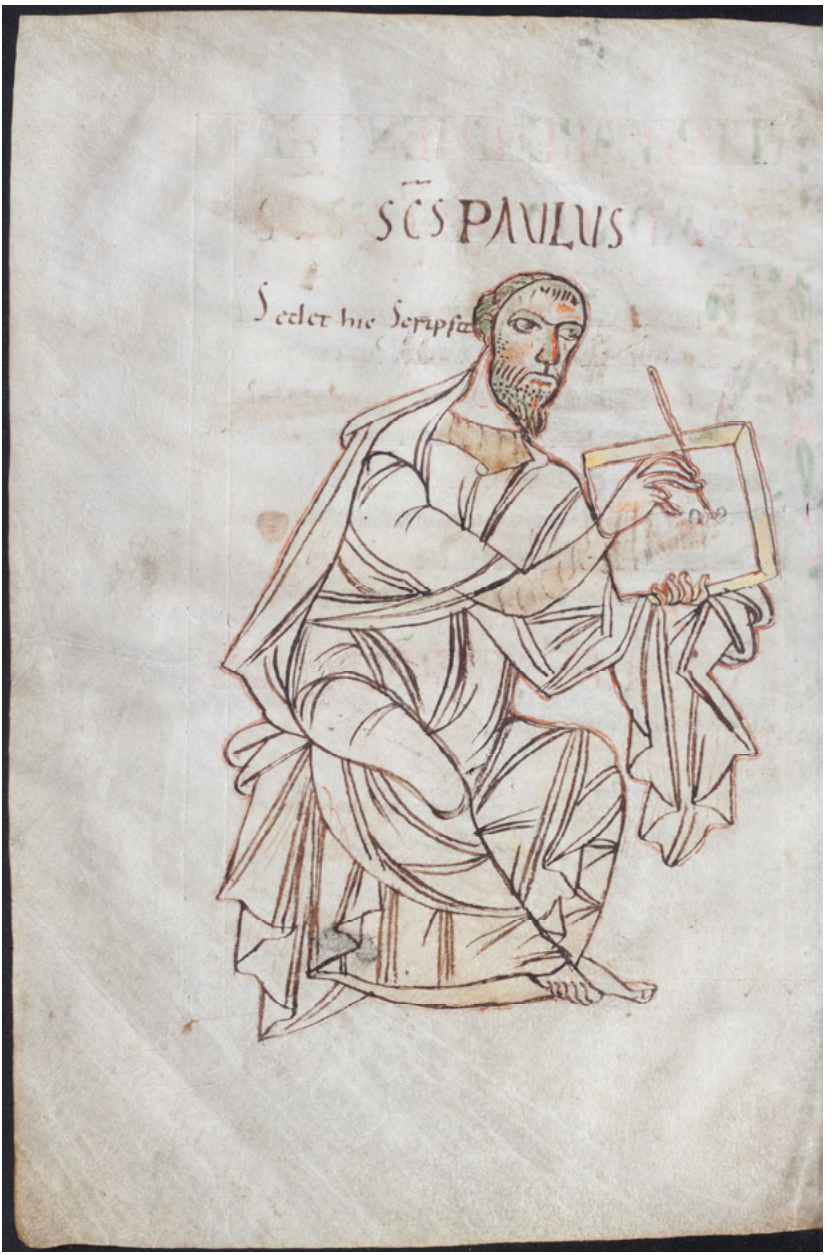

Fig. 1: Saint Paul as a scribe; Stuttgart, Württembergische Landesbibliothek, HB II 54, fol. 25^{r}; early ninth-century, probably hailing from Saint Gall. © Württembergische Landesbibliothek in Stuttgart.