

Books Before Printing: The Origins of the Paperbacks on your Shelf By Dr Lawrence Duggan

Consider your blessings. You have ready, cheap, reliable access to one of most important products ever of human creativity and knowledge—the book—and to the most important book ever created, the Bible. Most up-to-date versions of the Bible contain about 1,000 pages, are beautifully printed, sturdily bound, weigh perhaps 5 pounds, can be bought for \$10-\$20, and are usually readily portable. But let us use our imaginations for a moment and see what medieval book users had to contend with.

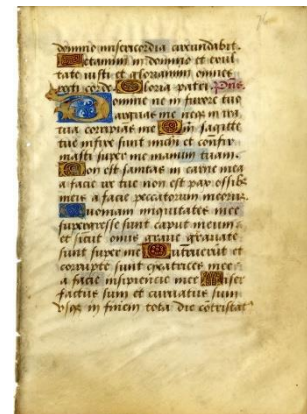
In the very long evolution of human beings, at various points people got the idea of making pictures, and then “word pictures” to record information (especially for what we’d call government or business purposes) and then to tell stories, often tales which had been remembered and recounted by generations of singers or bards. Among the ancient peoples to develop a body of written literature were the Hebrews, whose “Bible” (from a Greek word for “book”) came to be translated into Greek (known as the Septuagint). This and other important collections of stories and poems and wisdom were written down and kept together – the ancestors of what we find on Amazon and Alibris.



These early books were commonly written on papyrus, river reeds from Egypt which had to be carefully prepared to transform them into durable writing materials. Legend has it that around 194 B.C. another writing material, parchment,

began to be manufactured from the dressed skins of dead animals (especially sheep, goats, and calves). Whatever was worth recording was copied by hand on these sheets (each called a *codex*), which were then sewn together to produce *codices* or rolls. They were hard to use, and using them was also very hard on the materials.

In the 2nd and 3rd centuries A.D. the authorities of the rapidly developing Christian “church” decided on the texts of the Christian scriptures (the New Testament, which interestingly included texts besides the four gospels or lives of Christ), and decided also to include the Hebrew bible (what came to be called the Old Testament). This was ambitious enough (since a single copy of this Bible was now 1,000 pages long), but it was also being translated into other languages (Latin, Gothic, etc.—more than 2,000 down to the present, including Glaswegian most recently).



Rolled codices were now utterly impossible, and by the 4th-6th centuries A.D. the idea of the book as we know it was born—sheets of uniformly-sized writing material with writing on both sides, which would then be sewn together along one edge and then bound together as books. Furthermore, in the production of these sacred texts, another novel idea emerged of illustrating them with pictures, including “illuminated” initial letters. Such “books,” both sacred and classical, came to be produced in large numbers in this period (which used to be known as the “Dark Ages,” but is now much more positively evaluated as “Late Antiquity”), above all in copying-rooms (*scriptoria*) in monasteries and cathedrals all over Europe.

This all happened *before* the technology of printing (which probably arose first in China) arrived in Europe. So every book was hand-written. When in our own age handwriting seems to be a lost art, that might lead one to ask how long it might have taken to produce a book? And how much would it have cost? Precise historical details are spotty and it is likely that proficiency varied from writer to writer, but we have a few clues. Donald Jackson, the mastermind of the St John’s Bible, did his own experiment and found that, using a goose quill pen as the medieval writers would have, he was able to write 25 lines per hour. This matches up with one medieval source who recorded that he wrote eight pages per day. That works out to 125 hours (or 20 six-hour days) of writing to produce one thousand-page Bible. Keep in mind, that’s just the writing - the illuminating, stitching, binding, and covering took time and added cost too.



It is notoriously difficult to say what things cost across time, since all kinds of economic and social factors influence the measure and even the concept of value. Even so, we might get an idea by comparing incomes and prices at some time in history. A record from the 12th Century shows an illuminated Psalter (a book of the Psalms) was sold in England for 53 shillings. Around the same time and in the same area, a warhorse cost 50 shillings, an average laborer might earn up to 40 shillings per year, and a kitchen worker might earn as little as six shillings in a year. Clearly, books were luxury items.



The St John's Bible embodies many late post-ancient improvements in book production—rectangular cut folios (or two-sided “pages”) written on both sides with “illuminations” and clear lettering, spacing between words (mostly), sewn together along the left edge, and then bound together with stout covers and a spine. It is mostly very similar to what we would label “medieval” Bibles (produced in the period between the 9th and the 15th centuries). There are seven volumes altogether (the one we have comprises the four Gospels and Acts), containing 1,248 pages and weighing 113.2 pounds. This particular copy was printed on cotton paper, but the original copy was done by hand on calfskins (260 to be exact, which is very close to the general

scholarly consensus on the number of sheep or calves that died to produce one copy of the Bible in the Middle Ages).

Whereas most medieval Bibles were produced in Latin (because it was *the* sacred, liturgical, and scholarly language) and had variable illumination and enormous numbers of abbreviations, the St John's Bible was executed in English with (almost) no abbreviations and a very high degree of illumination. It does not quite get us back to a time when books carried Ferrari-level price tags, but it gives up an idea of the love and labor that went into making an item of great beauty and enduring significance.