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# Medieval Female Scribes Were Far More Common Than Previously Thought. At Least 110,000 Medieval Manuscripts Were Copied by Women

New study uncovers the silent contributions of women in medieval bookmaking.



by **Tibi Puiu** — March 12, 2025 in **Anthropology, History, News** Reading Time: 5 mins read

✓ Edited and reviewed by **Zoe Gordon**



📷 Credit: ZME Science / Midjourney.

For centuries, the image of a monk hunched over a desk, painstakingly copying manuscripts by candlelight, has dominated the history of scholarship in the Middle Ages. But what about the women? A new study reveals that female scribes played a far more significant role in medieval manuscript production than previously thought. And their contributions have been hiding in plain sight.

Researchers from the University of Bergen in Norway have conducted the first large-scale analysis of medieval manuscripts to quantify the role of women in scribal work. They examined over 23,000 colophons, the brief notes scribes sometimes left at the end of manuscripts. And they found that at least 1.1% of these texts were copied by women.

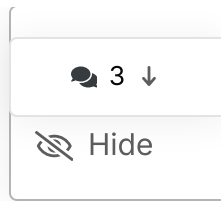
While this number may seem small, it translates to an estimated 110,000 manuscripts produced by female scribes across the Latin West (Italy, Gaul, Hispania, North Africa, the northern Balkans, territories in Central Europe, and the British Isles), with around 8,000 still surviving today.

This is a conservative estimate, according to the researchers led by Aslaug Ommundsen. The real number could be much higher.

## The Silent Scribes

The study relied on a massive catalog of colophons compiled by Benedictine monks in the mid-20th century. These colophons often include the scribe's name, the date and place of production, and sometimes even personal reflections. For female scribes, identification was possible when they signed their names or used feminine terms like *scriptrix* (female scribe) or *soror* (sister).

One such colophon was written in the 15th century by a nun named Birgitta. It reads: "I, Birgitta Sigfus's daughter, nun in the monastery Munkeliv at Bergen, wrote this psalter with initials, although not as well as I ought. Pray for me, a sinner."



📷 Birgitta's colophon. It has entry number 2235 in the Benedictine collection.

The vast majority of female scribes remain anonymous. Many likely worked in convents or lay workshops, their contributions overshadowed by the male-dominated institutions of the time. Some may have even hidden their gender, signing their work with male or gender-neutral names to avoid scrutiny.

The researchers found evidence of female scribes from as early as the 9th century through the 16th century. Interestingly, the number of female-authored colophons surged around 1400. The trend coincided with a rise in vernacular manuscripts — books written in local languages rather than Latin. Women may have found more opportunities to participate in scribal work as the demand for accessible, non-Latin texts grew. Necessity trumped prejudice.

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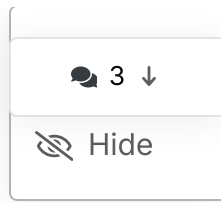
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📷 Self-portrait of the female scribe Guda. The text band in the letter reads “Guda, a sinner wrote and painted this book”.

Yet, even at their peak, female scribes remained a small fraction of the overall manuscript production. The study estimates that women copied just over 1% of medieval manuscripts, though many more may have been penned by a male pseudonym. Manuscripts from female religious institutions were often less likely to survive the upheavals of the Reformation and the dissolution of monasteries, which is another thing to consider, the researchers wrote in their study that appeared in Nature’s [\*Humanities and Social Sciences Communications\*](#).

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# A Challenging Profession

According to Welsh medievalist Elaine Treharne, overwhelmingly, medieval manuscripts were penned anonymously and left unsigned. Treharne's work in the digital project [Medieval Networks of Memory](#) has pointed out the significant discrepancy between the education, training, funding and resources received by female versus male scribes. Women scribes of the medieval period lived under much harsher conditions than their male counterparts, and had to make do with less of everything, from training, to food, to funding.

One of the surprising discoveries of a female Medieval scribe [came in 2019](#). Scientists came across a lot of ultramarine particles in the dental plaque of a woman buried in the 11th or 12th century in a German monastery. The brilliant blue pigment was worth more than gold in weight. It was prepared from the mineral lapis lazuli, which at the time was mined exclusively in remote Afghanistan.

“We wondered how on earth a woman at this early date, in a kind of backwater location, came into contact with this incredibly expensive mineral,” says Christina Warinner, a molecular archaeologist at Harvard University and the Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History. They explained that the woman was a scribe who used the pigment to illustrate sacred manuscripts.

“While the number of verifiable female scribes is low, at the same time our study suggests that there must be several female scribes and book-producing communities that have not yet been identified,” conclude the researchers of the new study that appeared this week in *Nature*.

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