The Body of the Scribe

That ancient scribal practice was strenuous on the body of the scribe is a misconception, popularized especially by the colorful lamentations of medieval European monastic scribes in their colophons (e.g. Clanchy 1993; Parkes 2008). Ancient Greco-Roman scribes, unlike many of their medieval counterparts, were not aristocratic, literary elite who viewed copying texts as an act of service or piety, but craftsmen who were viewed as low-status by the literary elite and who in many cases were slaves (Beach 2020; *inter alia*). Their crafts were their livelihoods; their *bodies* were their livelihoods. If the body of the scribe was too strained and damaged to function, the scribe's very existence was threatened.

Professional scribal praxis in the ancient Mediterranean world was thus optimized by scribes to take care of their own bodies and to use their bodies most comfortably and effectively. This reality emerges from my close study of ancient archaeological evidence alongside specialized artisan knowledge, preserved especially from the Ethiopian Ge'ez scribal tradition (continuous in the region since the 4th century CE and employing many of the same tools and techniques that were used in Roman Egypt). As I demonstrate, ancient Mediterranean scribes built their craft, their production of manuscripts, and the design and use of all their others implements and techniques around their most important tool: their bodies.

The use of "anthropic measures" for the ruling of manuscripts most clearly demonstrates this principle. This refers to the practical system of measurement of margins and intercolumns by human hand, used widely in Ethiopian Ge'ez scribal culture today (Winslow 2015). Appropriate space is apportioned in the margins of manuscripts by measuring these margins against the very fingers meant to interact with them, meant to hold and to turn them. The ultimate utility and

practicality of such a system is that it ensures all margins are spacious enough that the manuscript's user is able to comfortably handle the book without touching the text block.

Reconstructions of ancient scribal praxis reveal that the writing practices of copyists were built similarly on principles of practicality, clever simplicity, and comfort for the body. When learning to master writing with reed pen and ink, scribes are taught that it is the cut of the pen's nib and the angle at which it is held to the writing surface that produces a quality hand, not cramping and tediously-forced action of their fingers and wrist (Johnston 1932 [1906]; Swift 2017). A proper, comfortable pen angle was aided by a sloped writing surface, which a scribe created naturally when she reclined and laid her writing materials upon her bent knees (Parássoglou 1979, 1985; cf. Winslow 2015). Unlike depictions of medieval scribes seen in author portraits, ancient copyists did not strain their necks, backs, and eyes craning over a writing desk in a dimly-lit scriptorium.

In fact, the dark, cramped, indoor, desk-based "scriptorium model" would look wholly unfamiliar to an ancient Mediterranean scribe, who we understand worked in largely open-air settings (Parássoglou 1979, 1985; *inter alia*). There is a consensus among modern calligraphers and continuously practicing scribal traditions that scribal work must be done outside, or at least in abundant natural light, in order to both produce quality script and to preserve the artisan's precious eyesight (Johnston 1932 [1906]; Sergew Hable Selassie 1972; Winslow 2015). Given this consensus, the shift in late antiquity toward writing desks situated indoors and illuminated by artificial lamp light may help account for the increasingly widespread characterization of scribing as strenuous on the body and *especially* the eyes.

Mischaracterization of the ancient scribe's work undermines the lived experiences of these already marginalized individuals. My close study of scribal practices re-centers scribes' own voices in the conversation about their work and their bodies.

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