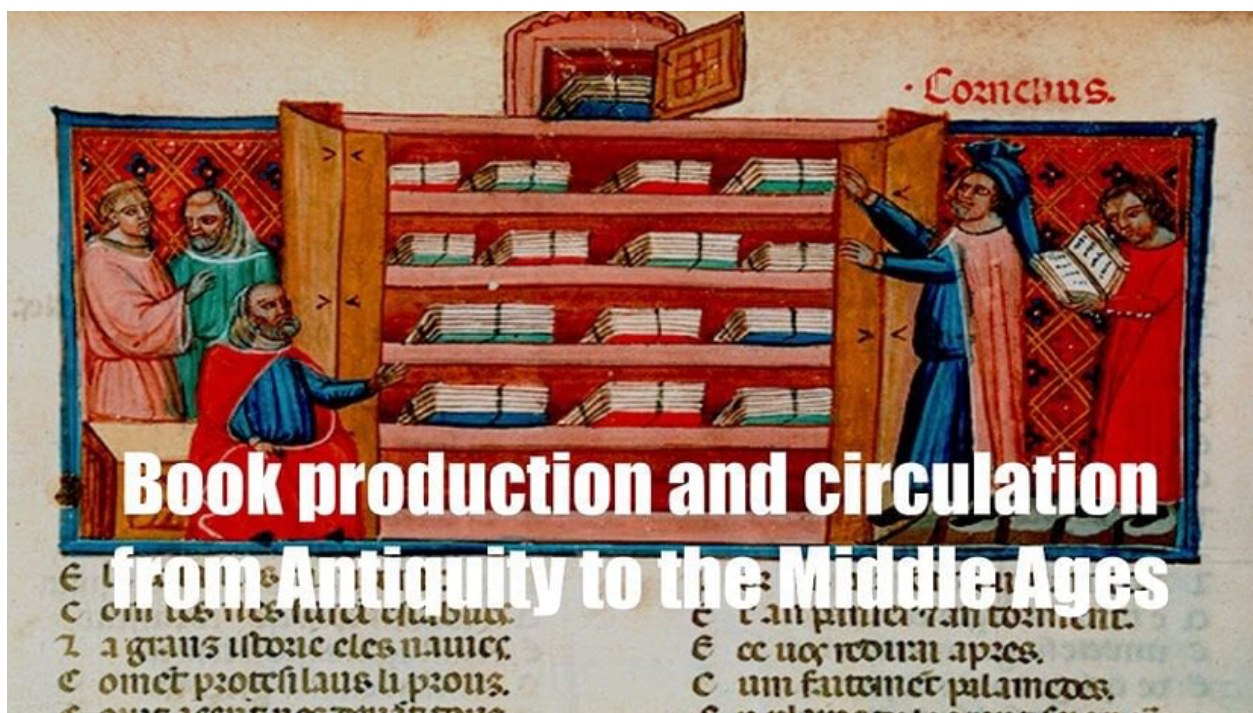


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FEATURES

Book production and circulation from Antiquity to the Middle Ages

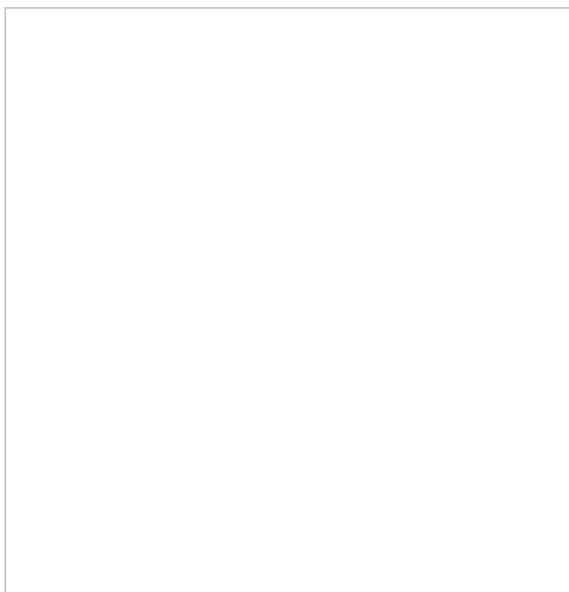


By Riccardo Macchioro

The influence and impact of a written piece do not depend only on the piece's content, or its author, or its readers. External factors are often to be considered also: the social and economic circumstances, the existence of a market, the possibility to trade books according to the rules of supply and demand, and, especially, the presence of a structured educational system.

A mini-series of three episodes will lead us from the Classical Age to Late Antiquity, and then to the Middle Ages, illustrating the powers that can steer the success of a literary piece, and, sometimes, determine its fate. Unforeseen developments may always be lurking just behind the corner – as usual, where the transmission of

texts is concerned.



Cicero holding a scroll from a 12th-century manuscript –
British Library MS Additional 16984 fol.3

Episode I

We begin in June 50 BCE, at Tarsus (Asia Minor, currently Turkey), on a journey: Marcus Tullius Cicero, the famous Roman orator, philosopher, and politician, realizes that he has committed a mistake in one of his works. In book 2, chapter 4 of his masterpiece *De re publica* (meaning “The State”, which partly translates and partly develops from Aristotle’s long-running bestseller *Politics*) he had addressed the inhabitants of the Greek city of Phlious as Phliountios, whereas the right word should have been Phliasios. In a letter sent to Atticus directly from Tarsus (*Epistulae ad Atticum* – “Letters to Atticus” – VI ii 3), Cicero asks him to take care of the correction of the text, ensuring that he would do the same with the copies within reach of him.

A close friend of Cicero, Titus Pomponius Atticus was of noble birth and one of the wealthiest men in Rome. As an entrepreneur, he had invested a lot of capital in the book production business, and was in charge of what we could properly identify as a publishing house, thus supporting the demand for cultural, philosophical and literary works that was growing more and more popular in Republican Rome. Dozens of learned men, and copyists, presided over the realization of copies of the works at the request of aristocracy, cultural élites, and those who attended schools and were able to read. Although these were still a minor part of the population, we should not overlook that the quality of the school system implemented at the time – and more or less functioning until the 5th century – was outstanding, and would not be met again until the late Middle Ages.

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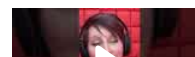
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At first sight, this might appear to be an almost irrelevant episode in the ocean of meta-literary references within classical Latin literature; in fact, it proves unsuspectedly telling with regard to the book production and the book market in that age. In order to disseminate a work, an author could safely lean on a well-established system. After he had completed the autograph manuscript, the author entrusted the manuscript to an actual *atelier*, that was responsible for the production of copies, and for selling them. No doubt, the factory kept a model of a specific work in its archives, so that it could be copied again when a new commission was submitted.

As a consequence, such a system also allowed for possible errors to be corrected once identified, exactly as with Cicero's *De re publica*. In addition, it is not unlikely that there also existed records of those who had bought a certain book, something that enabled Cicero and Atticus to (try to) reach those who were already in possession of a copy of *De re publica* in order to report about the necessary correction. In the end, it was a matter of no more than some dozens copies at the maximum; the invention of the printing press was still some 15 centuries away, and – despite the very advanced cultural milieu for the age – the circulation of manuscript copies remained by all means rather limited.

Nevertheless, what happened for Cicero's *De re publica* is possible only within a system that foresees precise and well-established channels for the diffusion of the books. It might be likened to the *errata corrige* leaflets that sometimes are found in books printed by 20th-century classy publishers: when an error was retrieved after a book had been published, in case of a re-print the publisher used to enclose with the new copies a leaflet, or a tiny booklet, that contained the corrections, just because setting up a new matrix was too expensive. With modern digital techniques, of course, the process is way smoother, and this operation is no longer required. Sometimes, copies of the leaflet were also sent to the book dealers, so that they could attach them to the copies still on sale.

When, instead, a text is directly and completely entrusted to the receivers (or those who come across it later on), it is only up to them to decide whether to keep it intact or to modify it. This is often the case with books copied in the Medieval age, but also for texts or information published online. The opportunities of the web strongly boost and favour the spreading of texts and knowledge to a much wider audience than was possible before (if for no other reason than that it is largely free of charge), but of course, also require a stronger responsibility on the side of those who receive them.

The relevance of Cicero's anecdote to the relationship between a writer and the diffusion of his work is clear: at least in principle, the author used to retain some power over his writings, and to a certain extent could try to steer their production and circulation.

Episode II

Fast forward to the end of the 4th century, still in Rome. Around 380 AD, in the *schola Traiani* (a well-known school for rhetorical education, located in the forum erected by the emperor Trajan almost three centuries earlier), two famous masters – Ierius and Dracontius – were pondering the available options in order to assemble a rhetorical booklet for the education of their pupils. The choice fell on the *Declamations* (“Discourses”) by “Quintilian”, their illustrious forerunner as a teacher of rhetoric in the 2nd century. From a *corpus* of several dozen pieces, they eventually selected nineteen. This story is told by the subscription (a sort of extended signature, where late-antique savants used to explain the nature of the philological work conducted) that they added at the end of their booklet, which is still preserved by some medieval manuscripts of the collection.

What about all the other *declamations*? Their fate was sealed: none of them have survived. In the Middle Ages, the collection of the Nineteen Declamations of “Quintilian” was commonly employed for education, to the point that there are almost 80 extant manuscripts, a rather impressive number. If one wonders why “Quintilian” stands between quotation marks, well, the answer is easy: the real Quintilian has never written any of these texts. Nevertheless, in the time span of two centuries, an entire literary genre developed, to the point that Ierius and Dracontius were no longer able to distinguish the original from the spurious pieces. In the end, their act of selection determined which pieces would make it through the Middle Ages, and finally to us; as another consequence, though, medieval readers would always have a misleading impression of who the original Quintilian – [one of the giants on whose shoulders they stood](#) – actually was.

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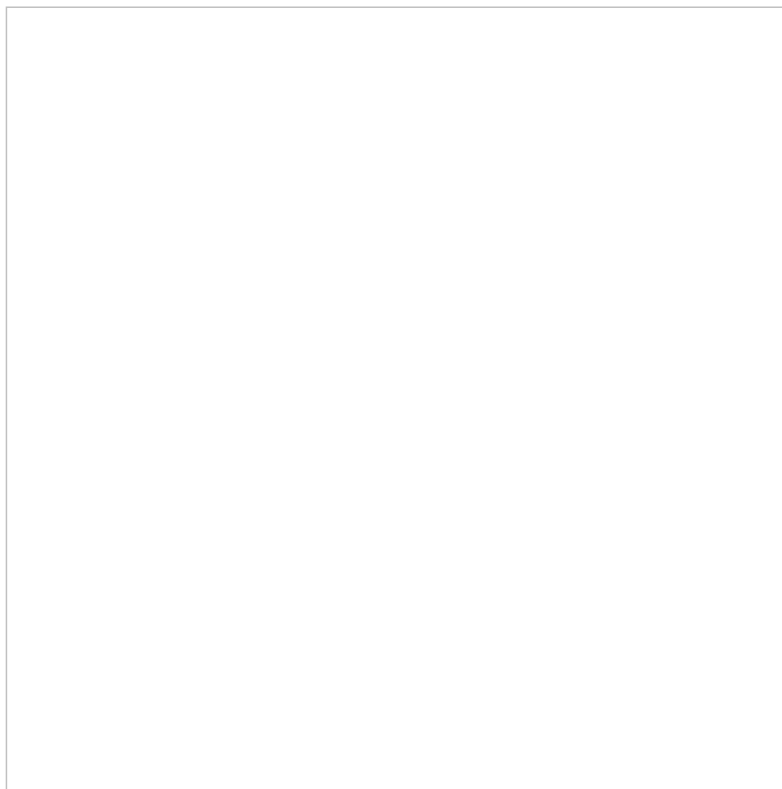
Episode III

From the 6th century onwards, the school system that had been established in every corner of the Empire collapsed. With it fell the socio-economic conditions that allowed for book production to be consistent, and easy. Papyrus had almost disappeared from the West, due to the fading of long-distance trade in the

Mediterranean; parchment was expensive, and the skin of sheep and calves was better suited for clothes and furs than to be inked. But, most of all, it was barely possible to find someone able to read. A book market as a commercial enterprise – based on the laws of demand and supply – would not be seen again until the 13th century, fostered by the expansion of universities.

In the meanwhile, medieval scholars had to cope with the hardships of the times. In the absence of a book production system, the autograph manuscripts lay on their desk, waiting for someone to make a copy – hopefully, a faithful one. The reader might remember Augustine of Hippo, around 420 AD, [lamenting his writings being taken, and modified, without his approval](#). In more flourishing times, at any rate, the conditions were not that much better. The 9th century was an age of revival of culture and literary studies that, not by chance, is known as the “Carolingian Renaissance”. Alcuin of York, Claudius of Turin, and Hrabanus Maurus are some protagonists of this renewal, especially active in composing commentaries on the Bible. We know from their letters that they were frequently requested to lend a copy of their own commentaries so that their interlocutor could copy them. And still, before sending the manuscript, they had to beseech the receiver to give it back, pointing out – not without worries – that otherwise they would no longer be in possession of their own writings, since they were shipping the only exemplar they had.

For a large part of the Middle Ages, the survival – and the integrity – of a written piece is poised on a sharp edge: it relies fully on the goodwill of the recipient.



A palimpsest page of ms. Vat. lat. 5757 – Wikimedia Commons

Epilogue

Regardless of the authorial intent or historical circumstances, the vicissitudes of textual transmission have often had the last word. There is currently only a single surviving manuscript of Cicero's *De re publica*. What is more, it was only discovered in 1819: no medieval scholar has ever read this masterpiece. The codex is a magnificent palimpsest, a manuscript of which the original text was scratched away so the parchment could be reused. Its folios had been filled with *De re publica* in the 5th century, and then re-written in the abbey of Bobbio during the 7th: it is now held in the [Vatican Library, shelf mark Vat. lat. 5757](#). Cicero and Atticus would

not be happy to know that, in spite of their efforts, it bears the wrong reading: Phliountios.

Shari Boodts, Iris Denis, Riccardo Macchioro and Gleb Schmidt together make up the team behind a European research project on the reception of patristic sermons in medieval manuscripts (PASSIM), housed at the Department of Medieval History at Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands. You can learn more about their work on the [project website](#).

Read their previous articles: [The medieval scribe as influencer](#) and [How to gain an audience and influence readers in the Middle Ages?](#)

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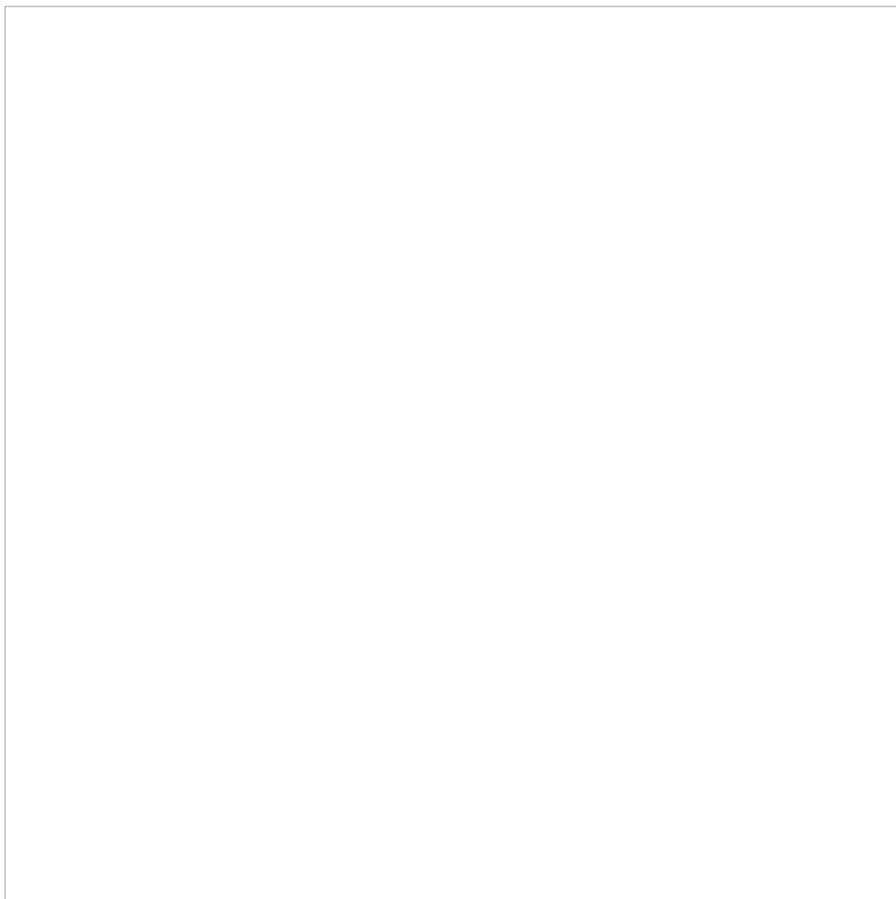
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