



Carolingian Culture at Reichenau & St. Gall

The Carolingian Libraries of St. Gall and Reichenau

[Site Home](#)

[About the Project](#) >

[Search the Library](#) >

[Resources](#) >

[Tours](#)

[The Plan](#)

[Deutsch](#)

Tours of the Libraries of Reichenau and St. Gall

Classical Manuscripts at St Gall and Reichenau

David Butterfield

The survival of Latin literature from the ancient to the modern world was a process fraught with difficulty, ever at the mercy of transient cultural tastes and the unpredictable vicissitudes of fate. Although the danger of irrevocable loss, through the attack of the natural elements, simple neglect or wilful destruction, threatened written texts continually from the very moment of their creation, four particular phases over two millennia of transmission can be regarded as crucial for the survival of Latin literature. The first was the transfer from papyrus roll to parchment codex, a process conducted approximately from the second to fifth centuries A.D.; for those texts not sufficiently favoured by their audience so as to be copied into these more modern, and more expensive, materials, physical degradation and destruction was unavoidable in a European climate. The second phase came with the disappearance of the Western Roman Empire from the fifth century onwards, in which the great majority of Latin texts were inextricably lost as the Imperial institutions of learning rapidly collapsed via desertion and depredation. The third phase was survival through to the renaissance of learning spearheaded by the Carolingian Age, when scribes active under Charlemagne (c.742-814) enlightened the Dark Ages through their renewed devotion to the furtherance of learning, copying classical as well as Christian texts; the broad interests of Carolingian scholarship brought rejuvenation to several Latin works who were otherwise faced with near-certain oblivion. The fourth and final phase crucial to the survival of Latin literature was to succeed in persisting until the Italian Renaissance of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, where in due course the revolutionary combination of humanist bookhunters and moveable type at last guaranteed permanence for these ancient texts.

In order to propel classical literature through the long and hostile medieval period, the favourable influence of Carolingian scriptoria were of paramount importance, and few centres were as significant in this process of reproduction and recirculation as St Gall and Reichenau. Evidence suggests that, almost from the very foundation of these two monasteries, the promulgation of ancient literature was a core feature of their existence: in the St Gall Plan, produced in the early ninth century for that monastery (albeit by monks at Reichenau), the inescapable significance of the scriptorium was highlighted by its central location, placed immediately beneath the abbey library, thus serving as both the physical and the figurative support of that crucial facet of monastic culture.

Since the survival of Latin literature from the decline of the Roman Empire through to the Italian Renaissance was placed almost entirely in the hands of explicitly Christian institutions, several bound by monastic rules that expressly condemned non-religious literature, the scribal activity at centres such as St Gall and Reichenau (like Murbach, Bobbio and St Riquier) remains of ineluctable importance in the history of classical scholarship. Although the monks of such scriptoria naturally devoted their primary attention to religious scripture, many 'pagan' (i.e. non-Christian) authors of the classical period still enjoyed considerable influence in monastic education, and thereby book production.

Of Roman poets Virgil held particular prestige throughout the medieval period not only because of his intrinsic literary excellence but also because his fourth *Eclogue* (often termed the 'Messianic Eclogue') was read through Christian eyes as prophetic of the birth of Jesus. Virgil's most significant poem, his twelve-book epic *Aeneid*, undoubtedly the most celebrated work of literature throughout the last half-millennium of the Roman Empire, was keenly studied in monastic circles, in both the school curriculum and wider literary activity. The preservation of Virgil's works throughout the medieval period thus dwarfed all of his pagan literary counterparts in both privilege and protection. Given this intense interest in the poet, it is surprising that no complete medieval copy of his works survives at St Gall; indeed, only the *Eclogues* and *Georgics* survive in full, and in manuscripts of the fifteenth century (Csg 856, 858), the latter also containing *Aeneid* I-II. Evidence of close engagement with Virgil throughout the Middle Ages can nevertheless be unearthed elsewhere: we find a splendid (but incomplete) tenth-century copy of Servius' commentary on Virgil's works in the Abbey Library (**Csg 861-862** [e-codices]). In a ninth-century catalogue of the library (**Csg 267** [e-codices]), we also find that the Abbot Grimald (in post from 841 to 872) presented his own copy of Virgil (the "**volumen Virgilii poetae**", added by a later hand on p.32) to St Gall; although this book does not itself survive, two of its pages are preserved in the so-called Book of Fragments (**Csg 1394, pp.109-12** [e-codices]),

one of the most celebrated treasures among the abbey's manuscripts. Representing a hotchpotch of fragmentary material varying widely in age and character, this *Sammelband* has among its most important contents several disparate leaves from a *de luxe* fifth-century Virgil, written in elegant square capitals in Northern Italy. These so-called *Schedae Sangallenses* consist of eleven leaves that cover parts of the fourth Georgic and Books I, III, IV and VI of the *Aeneid* and stand among the half dozen oldest extant codices of any Latin author. The text of these leaves was partly palimpsested (i.e. scraped or washed before a second layer of text was added) for the addition of Latin psalms and canticles during the thirteenth century. Yet more remarkably, although this manuscript is a "magnificent work which testifies uniquely to the remarkable opulence and exquisite culture of its initial owner"¹, much of it was used as material for rebinding other books in the abbey in the mid-fifteenth century!

An intriguing insight into the removal of *Vergiliana* from St Gall is given by a manuscript now in the Hunterian Library at Glasgow (U 6 8), a tenth-century collection of excerpts from Servius' commentary on Vergil's *Eclogues* and *Georgics*. Despite its Scottish location, the manuscript bears the heraldic device of St Gall and was evidently in the abbey's possession until the early eighteenth century, when it was removed during civil war. Having passed through the hands of the celebrated Dutch classical scholar Pieter Burmann the Second (1714-78), it was bought by the eagle-eyed William Hunter (1718-83), who bequeathed his splendid collection to Glasgow University. This book could be an immediate descendant of the "Expositio Servii in Virgilium" recorded in the earliest catalogue of the abbey (**Csg 728, at p.21**).

Such ninth-century catalogues for St Gall and Reichenau provide an eye-opening insight into the place of the classics in the cultural and educational life of these monasteries, and give us a broader picture than surviving codices can. In both libraries, whose collections were closely related², it seems that the presence of classical literature was not overwhelming in scale. The catalogue available for St Gall (**Csg 728**), produced under Grimald, contains no classical 'pagan' literature save for the aforementioned Servian commentary and the epitome of Pompeius Trogus' universal history (*Historiae Philippicae*), which covers material from the Assyrian king Ninus up to his own age (the principate of Augustus) and was abridged in the third or fourth century A.D. by Justinus.³ More illuminating is a Reichenau catalogue of the late ninth century (now **Stuttgart, Württembergische Landesbibliothek, Cod. Don. 191, pp. 322-8**) which evidences copies of Sallust's *Bellum Catilinum*, Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* and *Metamorphoses*, Vitruvius' *De Architectura*, the *Satires* of Persius and Juvenal, Justinus' epitome of Pompeius Trogus, Silius Italicus' *Punica*, Statius (presumably his *Silvae*), Seneca's *Epistulae Morales* and *Naturales Quaestiones*, Hyginus' *Astrologia*, Macrobius' *Saturnalia*, Claudian and Boethius. Although this range is less rich than the contemporary collections attested for the libraries at Bobbio and Murbach, it certainly reflects genuine interest in a broad spectrum of classical literature.

It is disappointing, therefore, that inspection of the codices transferred to Karlsruhe from Reichenau in 1804 turns up few volumes of classical content, with most relevant items found in the ninth-century catalogue having vanished. Almost the sole surviving medieval manuscripts of classical content are a ninth-century codex (**Perg. Aug. 73**) of Martianus Capella's *De Nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii*, an important tract discoursing upon the liberal arts, followed by the *Fables* of Avianus, a fifth-century adaption of the Greek fabulist Aesop, and two ninth- and tenth-century manuscripts (Perg. Aug. 186 and **116 [Karlsruhe BLB]**) of Servius' Vergilian commentary, which contain frequent glosses in Old High German. The more standard educational texts of Priscian, Donatus and Boethius are also attested (see, e.g., **Perg. Aug. 172**).

In St Gall, by contrast, the major classical authors for monastic communities of the ninth century – Horace, Persius, Juvenal, Statius, Terence, Lucan, Martianus Capella and Boethius – are all represented in some form, save for Statius, attested only in the tantalising ninth-century catalogue. The classical collection in the Stiftsbibliothek (primarily catalogued under the classmarks 850-913) thus seems to have profited in a field where Reichenau suffered.

In the medieval study of classical poets, after Virgil in popularity came Horace, Lucan and Ovid. Although St Gall possesses no complete Horace from the middle ages, an eleventh-century copy of his most-celebrated work, the *Odes*, does survive (**Csg 864 [e-codices]**). It may well be that the complete Horace in the Vadiana Library (312), which dates likewise from the turn of the eleventh century, was once located in the abbey library. Keen interest in Horace is evident elsewhere in extant books at St Gall, most notably in **Csg 868 [e-codices]**, a twelfth-century copy of medieval glosses and scholia on Horace's complete works.

To turn back to **Csg 864 [e-codices]**, however, we find no fewer than three other manuscripts written at St Gall in the early eleventh century bound together with the Horace, each of interesting classical content. The second element is a text of the most widely read epic poem after Virgil's *Aeneid*, namely Lucan's *Bellum Ciuile*, the blistering account of the Great Civil War between Caesar and Pompey, although the text breaks off halfway through the seventh of ten books. Not its source, but also surviving at St Gall, is a full text of the poem from the tenth century (**Csg 863**), a manuscript almost unique among the classical books at St Gall and Reichenau in containing six pen drawings of varying sizes (on pp. **47, 77-8, 230, 234, 270** [e-codices]) that illustrate the events of the poem. The third element in Csg 864 is Sallust's *Bellum Catilinum*, the prose narrative of the

Catilinarian conspiracy against Rome in 63 B.C., and also his *Bellum Jugurthinum*, which recounts the war between Rome and Jugurtha, King of Numidia, between 111 and 104 B.C. These two works of Sallust are also represented in the library by another eleventh-century codex (Csg 636). Intriguingly, this broad literary range in Csg 864 concludes with Ovid's *Amores*, three books of elegiac love poetry that often border upon the sensual and sexual – a text that was read perhaps more in private than in public. A similarly strange fusion of material is found in the eleventh-century **Csg 821 [e-codices]**, a work that contains for the most part Boethius' popular commentary on the *Categories* of Aristotle, but at its rear (**pp. 94-6**) gives the beginning of Ovid's scandalous *Ars Amatoria* (I.1-230), a poem on the art of seduction that may have been in part responsible for the poet's enforced exile from Rome.⁴

Among less renowned poets surviving at St Gall, one finds a twelfth-century copy of Statius' *Thebaid* (Csg 865), Ausonius' poem in praise of the river Moselle (written c. A.D. 370) in a tenth-century codex (**Csg 899, pp.22-45 [e-codices]**), and several poems of Claudian (**Csg 191, pp.119-46 [e-codices]**, and Csg 273, pp.49-57), who was active in the early fifth century, not evidently a convert to Christianity and effectively the terminus of pagan Latin poetry.

We have already mentioned Persius and Juvenal in passing, whose *Satires* (*Sermones*) appear to have appealed to the monks of St Gall and Reichenau; despite their difficult style, these powerful and splenetic poems seemingly pleased readers through their stern moralisation and forceful rejection of materialism. Nevertheless, although the mid-ninth-century catalogue of Reichenau records a composite volume of the two satirists, no medieval copy of Persius survives in either abbey; however, continued interest in the poet is evident from the appearance of his poetry in fifteenth-century manuscripts (Csg 203 and 858). In the case of Juvenal, by contrast, we find a complete manuscript of his works dating from the eleventh century (Csg 871), although its text is not of great critical significance. That Juvenal was read also in earlier centuries is clearly proved by **Csg 870 [e-codices]**, a ninth-century codex that contains *scholia* upon all of his satires. This particular manuscript, known as the *Florilegium Sangallense*, has much broader significance, however, for the reconstruction of the literary environment of St Gall in the ninth century: along with its detailed set of *scholia* upon the satires of Juvenal, it presents (**pp. 6-31**) 459 poetic citations drawn from dozens of authors ranging chronologically from Ennius through to Bede, of which 280 come from Juvenal's *Satires*. This florilegium seems to have had the primary purpose of illustrating prosody, that is the metrical scansion of less common words, by proving their form in hexameter verses from classical literature. The work thus has much in common with the anonymous *Exempla diversorum auctorum* and Mico of St Riquier's *Opus prosodiacum*, composed for similar reasons in the seventh and eighth centuries. What is fascinating is that the author appears to have had access to poets otherwise not evidenced at St Gall, including verses from Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*, apparently drawn from direct acquaintance with this rare text. Perhaps such manuscripts were merely lent to the monastery from an external source; perhaps they were once in the library but not recorded in existing catalogues.

Cicero's oratorical and philosophical works were hard to come by in the Middle Ages, and were effectively unknown at St Gall and Reichenau. Instead, the works on rhetoric, which in the monastic curriculum had a primarily theoretical role, were exclusively known. Foremost among these was the *Topica*, a stylised adaption of Aristotle's rhetorical theory; copies of this work survive in tenth- or eleventh-century manuscripts at St Gall (**Csg 818, 830, 831, 854 [e-codices]**), often with the supporting commentary of Boethius; Csg 818 is followed by *De optimo genere oratorum* ('On the best kind of orators'). We also find Cicero's *De Inventione* in tenth- (**Csg 820 [e-codices]**) and twelfth-century (Csg 852) manuscripts, the latter also containing the pseudo-Ciceronian *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, composed around 80 B.C. More broadly, the commentary of the late-fifth-century Macrobius upon Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis* ('Dream of Scipio'), inserted at the end of his *De Re publica* (late 50s B.C.), raised several wide-ranging cosmological and philosophical issues; St Gall possesses a tenth-century manuscript of Cicero's brief account followed by Macrobius' lengthy and learned commentary (**Csg 65 [e-codices]**).

Most popular among prose authors were works of potentially philosophical or theoretical significance, such as Boethius. There exist several translations of and commentaries upon Aristotle, including Boethius' translations of his *Categoriae* in copies of the ninth to eleventh centuries (Csg 274, **817, 818, 821, 825 [e-codices]**, **Perg. Aug. 172**). The literary engagement with these areas of the classics is most obviously witnessed in the activity of Notker Labeo (c. 950-1022), who, along with Terence's *Andria*, translated Boethius' *Consolatio Philosophiae* and Martianus Capella's *De Nuptiis* into Old High German. Csg 825 is Notker's translation of Boethius' *Consolatio*, primarily drawing upon the Latin text as found in **Csg 844** (ninth century); in **Csg 872 [e-codices]** (eleventh century) we find a text of Martianus Capella (Books I-II) with Notker's notes.⁵ Other similar manuscripts from St Gall and Reichenau include **Naples BN IV.G.68** (late ninth century), which contains Boethius' *Consolatio*, **Karlsruhe Perg. Aug. 172** (early ninth century), which contains Boethius' translations of Aristotle's *Categoriae* and *De Interpretatione* (along with Bede and Porphyry), and **Karlsruhe Perg. Aug. 73** (mid-ninth century), which contains Martianus Capella (along with Avianus).

Of historical texts, alongside the Trogus and Sallust mentioned above, there exists an important manuscript of the Latin version of Dictys Cretensis' fictionalised account of the Trojan War (**Csg 197 [e-codices]**, late ninth / early tenth century). More significantly, **Csg 627** is an attractive manuscript of Josephus' *Bellum Judaicum* written at St Gall in the ninth century. A broader interest in classical literature is amply attested by **Csg 250**, a late ninth-century compendium of astronomical and astrological works: it contains, *inter alia*, Hyginus' *Astronomica* and a Latin translation of Aratus' *Phaenomena*. A similarly varied volume is **Karlsruhe Perg. Aug. 167** (mid-ninth century), which includes several excerpts of computistic or astronomical significance, including an attractive image of the planets (**f.16r**).

Humour found its place in St Gall. In Csg 912, a Latin glossary, there exist occasional traces (pp.299-300, **313-14 [e-codices]**) of the comic playwright Terence in rustic capitals dating from the fifth century. We also find in the Book of Fragments (Csg 1394) tenth-century traces of Terence's *Eunuchus*, *Andria* and *Hecyra*, now palimpsested (**see p.112 [e-codices]**). In a similar vein, Seneca the Younger's mocking satire on the Emperor Claudian, the *Apocolocyntosis*, in which the *princeps* achieves apotheosis by metamorphosis into a pumpkin, is found in Csg 569 (pp.243-51, tenth century), which also contains, rather incongruously, the lives of several saints.

Since the knowledge of the Greek language was at a rudimentary level for almost all monks at St Gall and Reichenau, the complete absence of manuscripts of Greek literature should not occasion particular surprise. However, small traces of Greek knowledge can be witnessed in the online codices: note for instance the Greek *explicit* in Csg 94 (**p.112**): ΗΧΙΛΑΙCIT ΦΗΛΙΚΙΤΗΡ, a fanciful (and strictly inaccurate) transliteration of *explicit feliciter*; similarly incorrect is ΧΠΥCΘΥC for *Christus* in Csg 7 (**p.309**, bottom line), where the letter pi (Π) has been swapped for rho (Ρ) because – one presumes – of its additionally exotic nature.

Although the copying of texts at St Gall flourished in the ninth and early tenth centuries, it decreased after the death of Salomo III in 920. However, with the dawn of the Renaissance, the reawakening of interest in Latin literature and the redevelopment of scholarly networks, St Gall succeeded in expanding once more its repertoire of pagan literature significantly. By the sixteenth century we find in St Gall the complete works of Virgil (856, 858), Horace's *Epistles* and *Ars Poetica* (858), Ovid's *Remedium amoris* (858), Persius (858), a Latin adoption of Homer's *Iliad* (858), Seneca's *Epistulae Morales* (858, **878 [e-codices]**), Pliny the Younger's *Epistles* (896), some plays of Terence (856, 859), Cicero's *Epistulae ad Familiares* (859) and several of his philosophical works (850). Amongst Renaissance manuscripts at Reichenau, one finds in Perg. Aug. 131 fifteenth-century Latin renderings of Plato's *Phaedo*, *Apology* and *Crito*, as well as Plutarch's *Life of Brutus*; also attested here are several poetic works of Ovid, Persius and Sallust's *Bellum Catilinum*.

Although the Renaissance gave St Gall and Reichenau access to previously unknown works of literature, that same spirit of discovery put their own treasures in danger. Both monasteries were located perilously close to the fervent activity of the humanists who descended upon the Council of Constance in 1414-18, where Pope John XXII was deposed and Martin V elected. This event brought keen Italian bookhunters, such as Poggio Bracciolini, Bartolomeo Aragazzi da Montepulciano and Cencio Rustico, to northern Switzerland and southern Germany, who spearheaded the wide-scale removal of classical texts from nearby monasteries, not always making good their promises to return texts borrowed for copying.⁶ It is difficult to assess how many classical texts were removed from the abbey – these being the primary desideratum of Renaissance scholars – but anecdotal evidence states that two cart-loads of books left St Gall for Konstanz!

St Gall and Reichenau thus played a vital role in the survival of the classics, and several works, including Asconius' commentaries on Cicero and quite probably Statius' *Silvae*, depend for their existence upon the scribal activity of monks at these abbeys. Although much has regrettably been lost, close study of the extant codices allows us to peer through a fascinating window into the literary culture of two major monastic centres in the dark days of medieval Europe.

Footnotes

¹ These words translate the Latin of G.B. Conte, the most recent editor of Virgil's *Aeneid* (Teubner, Berlin, 2009, p.XI): "magnificum est opus et quod primi possessoris insignem opulentiam cultumque exquisitum singulariter testatur".

² It is worth noting that during the Hungarian invasion around 925 the books at St Gall were sent to Reichenau for safekeeping; contemporary anecdotal evidence suggests that the same number of books stowed away were returned to St Gall but not necessarily the same titles!

³This copy may be that which survives as Csg 623.

⁴ From a later age we still find Ovid well represented in thirteenth-century manuscripts of his greatest work, the *Metamorphoses* (Csg 866, complete save for the lost quire containing VIII.548-X.428), and his *Epistulae ex Ponto* (Csg 867), both perhaps copied from exemplars residing at St Gall.

⁵ These works have enjoyed close study in recent decades: Evelyn Firchow has edited the Latin and German texts from Csg 818 and 825 (Berlin, 1995 and 1996), 872 (Hildesheim, 1999) and 844 (Hildesheim, 2003); on 872 see also S. Glauch, *Die Martianus-Capella-Bearbeitung Notkers des Deutschen* (Tübingen, 2000).

⁶ For instance, when Poggio discovered a complete manuscript of Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria* in 1417, he may have turned it up in St Gall; no such manuscript now exists in the library.

Bibliography

- Bekker, G. (ed.), *Catalogi Bibliothecarum Antiqui* (Bonn, 1885)
 - Bolgar, R.R., *The Classical Heritage and its Beneficiaries* (Cambridge, 1954)
 - Clark, J.M., *The Abbey of St. Gall as a Centre of Literature and Art* (Cambridge, 1926)
 - Kaczynski, B.M., *Greek in the Carolingian Age: The St. Gall Manuscripts* (Cambridge, MA, 1988)
 - Reynolds, L.D. and Wilson, N.G., *Scribes and Scholars: A Guide to the Transmission of Greek and Latin Literature* (3rd ed., Oxford, 1991)
 - Reynolds, L.D. (ed.), *Texts and Transmission* (Oxford, 1983)
 - Lowe, E.A. (ed.), *Codices Latini Antiquiores, Part VII: Switzerland* (Oxford, 1956)
 - Scherrer, G. (ed), *Verzeichniss der Handschriften der Stiftsbibliothek von St. Gallen* (Halle, 1875)
-