CHAPTER THREE

BOOK PRODUCTION AS A MIRROR OF THE EMERGING MEDIEVAL KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY, 500–1500

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Introduction: What the Production of Books Tells Us

The first two chapters dealt with the emergence of efficient institutions to regulate market exchange in medieval Europe, including a discussion about how a legal tradition emerged in which the written word was considered of fundamental importance, which also gave rise to an increased demand for reading and writing skills. This chapter adds to this by looking at the written word, more specifically the manuscript and the printed book, as the carrier of knowledge, and at the rise of human capital that can be gauged from a study of the development of book production and consumption. To provide quantitative measures of how quickly the knowledge base in Western Europe expanded in these centuries, this chapter concentrates on estimates of the increase in the number of manuscripts and printed books produced in Western Europe in the course of the millennium between 500 and 1500. First, we indicate what can be learned from studying book production, and then we analyze the development of this index of knowledge and human capital. In this section we show how dramatic the increase in book production was, where it was concentrated, and most importantly, what drove the process.

Books were very strategic commodities. They were a crucial part of the information infrastructure of society, a kind of ‘hardware’ in which all ideas were stored – a function they continue to have until the present. The production and accumulation of books can therefore be used as a proxy for the production and accumulation of ideas – an important variable in endogenous growth theory (Kremer, 1993). The demand for books will also to a large extent be determined by the level of literacy in a given society, although other variables such as income per capita and the relative price of books also played a role, as well as cultural influences such as religion. In short, the production of books is linked
to several variables used in new growth theory, such as human capital and knowledge production.

Second, books and manuscripts are luxury products whose demand increases with income. Economic prosperity will therefore generally lead to the expansion of this industry; depressions (and warfare, invasions, and civil unrest) will result in a decline in demand and production.¹ Finally, we deal with real artefacts from the period itself, many of which have been preserved in libraries and private collections, and can be counted and analyzed. A substantial body of literature exists on the production of books in this period, which helps to date and count them. For manuscripts and printed books, information about where and when they were transcribed or published is often available, allowing us to develop datasets containing this information. These datasets form the basis for estimating the total number of manuscripts and printed books produced in the period from 500 to 1500.

These arguments suggest that the number of manuscripts and printed books produced in a given society are multifaceted measures of economic performance and societal capabilities, and are therefore a valuable guide to the study of long-term economic change. This was probably already true for the Carolingian period. As Rosamond McKitterick (1989, p. 163) argues:

Book ownership as much as land ownership was a mark of social status and means. As part of the trade in luxury items (which many would have regarded as necessities), the book trade deserves to be recognized as a crucial indication of what men and women were prepared to spend their money on. Furthermore, the books surviving from the Carolingian period are a clear and rarely fully appreciated index of Carolingian prosperity. No historian can afford to ignore the evidence of the book produced and owned when assessing the level and the range of economic activity under the Carolingian rulers. It was an economy in which the cultivation of literacy and learning played a fundamental part.

If this is true for this early period, which, as we will show, had a relatively low level of ‘investment’ in books, it must be equally true for later periods, when an increased portion of income was spent on this luxury product. Therefore, quantification of book production makes it

¹ On the basis of recent (ca. 1995) data, it is possible to establish that the correlation between book production and GDP per capita is very strong, $r$ being .90 or higher; data on the production of book titles from http://www.ipa-uae.org/statistics/annual_book_prod.html; GDP per capita from Maddison (2001).