

## CHAPTER - VI

### MANUSCRIPTS :

#### Extensive use of Manuscripts :-

Medieval period is very significant in the history of Assam's educational development since it was during this period that the Assamese language and literature were carefully nursed by a number of scholars patronised by kings, and was finally taken to the stage of maturity by the adroit hands of Sankaradeva who gave to it a masterly touch and made it a fit vehicle for expression of all shades of thoughts and feelings. This growth and development of Assamese language and literature took place side by side with the prevailing extensive Sanskrit culture, contributed by Hindu civilization and culture from time immemorial ; and the cultural homogeneity with the rest of the country was considered and transmitted through the puthis and the manuscripts. Being this within the hegemony of Aaryavarta, the Sanskrit learning and culture of Assam attracted Hiuen Tsang, Kavir, Sankaracharyya, Guru Nanak and Guru Teg Bahadur who visited Kamrup to imbibe the culture of the country in this land.<sup>1</sup> This inordinate love of learning and

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1. Bhuyan, S.K., Studies in Literature of Assam, p.47.

the simultaneous zeal for development of the mother tongue led to unprecedented production of manuscripts. There was a great impetus for writing original literature and copying the popular Sanskrit texts ; in view of which there developed the art of making materials for manuscripts and preservation of the same in medieval Assam ; and in this craft, the skill formation was of so high standard and so extensive that it must have been a matter of envy for other parts of the country.

#### Royal Patronage :-

The production of manuscript was a laborious process. It consumed much time and money. Manuscript writing called forth the artistic and orthographic ability and calligraphic skill of the writer. It required much training and dedication. Considering this it may be logically argued that only royal munificence made possible such a large number of manuscripts, and each manuscript produced in the royal - court now appears to be a priceless treasure of art for its calligraphy, uniqueness of materials used and wealth of information contained.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Basu, N.K., AAA, p.271.

### Growth of Professionalism :-

With the spread of learning and education, the demand for manuscripts increased ; and what was once an object of royal patronage became a thing of common public interest, for which calligraphers must come forward to meet the growing public demand. And in order " to cope with the universal use of manuscripts in Assam, there were distinct communities whose subsidiary means of livelihood was the transcription of manuscripts and their skilled and artistic penmanship was so much on demand that one scribe usually specialised in the copying of one particular book instead of becoming a free-lancer in his profession. "<sup>1</sup> The materials needed for writing were (1) manuscript leaves (2) ink and (3) pen or quill.

### Materials used for writing :

#### (1) Manuscript leaves :-

In the medieval age there were no books and knowledge and learning were preserved in beautifully illustrated manuscripts ; and people of different places had different

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1. Goswami, H.C, Descriptive Catalogue of Assamese Manuscripts, p. XV.

methods for manufacture of manuscripts for writing on. Preparation of writing materials and manuscripts involved elaborate laborious processes and required much time and patience . The Yogini-Tantra mentions earth, barks and leaves of trees, gold, copper and silver among writing materials. Clay seals of Bhaskaravarman for an instance, have been discovered in Nalanda. Books written on strips of bark of Sanchi tree (Aquilaria Agallocha ) were presented to king Harsha by Bhaskaravarman.<sup>1</sup>

There were also two varieties of manuscripts prevalent in medieval Assam. The first and the most spread variety was the sanchi-pat manuscripts ; and the second and less commonly used manuscript was the Tula-pat manuscripts.

(a) Sanchi-pat-Manuscripts :-

Sanchi tree is called Aquilaria Agallocha in English. The bark of the tree is thick. It is suitable for making heavy and thick manuscript leaves. The preparation

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1. Neog, M ; Sankaradeva and His Times ,  
p. 301.

of manuscript leaves from this bark, however, was not easy. It involved a laborious process of curing, seasoning and polishing raw slices before leaves could be made to ink.<sup>1</sup> Sir Edward Gait in an appendix to his History of Assam has given an elaborate description of the process of the manufacture of the sanchi-pat leaves for use as manuscripts. " A tree is selected of about 15 or 16 years growth and 30 to 35 inches in girth, measured about 4 feet from the ground. From this the bark is removed in strips, from 6 to 18 feet long, and from 3 to 27 inches in breadth. These strips are rolled up separately with the inner or white part of the bark out-wards, and the outer or green part inside and are dried in the sun for several days. They are then rubbed by hand on a board, or some other hard substance, so as to facilitate the removal of the outer or scaly portion of the bark. After this they are exposed to the dew for one night. Next morning, the outer layer of the bark (nikari) is carefully removed and the bark proper is cut into pieces of a convenient size, 9 to 27 inches long and 3 to 18 inches

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1. Bhuyan, S.K. ; Studies in the Literature of Assam ; p. 49.

broad. These are put into cold water for about an hour, and the alkali is extracted, after which the surface is scrapped smooth with a knife. They are then dried in the sun for half an hour and when perfectly dry, are rubbed with a piece of burnt brick. A paste prepared from matimah (*phaseolus radiatus*) is next rubbed in, and the bark is dyed yellow by means of yellow arsenic. This is followed again by sun-drying after which the strips are rubbed as smooth as marble. The process is now complete, and the strips are ready for use."<sup>1</sup>

The process of treating the strips with alkaline preparation of matimah is locally called Jaodiya (rubbing); and beams of old houses were used to make the strips smooth and shining. M. Neog in his 'Sankaradeva and His Times' says that sanchi pat, ink and painting materials like hengul (vermillion), haital (yellow arsenic), indigo and chalkdhal were found in abundance in Daksinakula.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Gait, E., HA, p. 375.

2. Neog, M., Sankaradeva and His Times, pp. 301-302.

Dr. S.K. Bhuyan in his "Studies in the Literature of Assam" has thrown a flood of light on the sizes of leaves in their varying aspects of use. "The sizes of leaves were of various dimensions and thickness. Big sized leaves measuring more or less six inches by two feet, were reserved generally for highly revered classics and scriptures, and for manuscripts prepared specially for kings and nobles. The leaves were numbered, the figures being inserted at the second page of a folio. The centre of each leaf was perforated for the fascinating string to pass through. Leaves thicker than those used in the body of manuscript were used for covers, and occasionally wooden pieces were also used. There were always some spare leaves or pages to record changes of ownership or other important events in the life of the owner or his family. These additional leaves were known as *Beti-pat* or attendant leaves. The whole manuscript was wrapped up again in a piece of cloth, or enclosed in a wooden box. These boxes in case of valuable manuscripts were coloured and painted and the pictures were generally appropriate to the subject matter of the book itself."<sup>1</sup> The manuscripts were of varying

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1. Bhuyan, S.K., SLA, pp.49-50.

shāpes, sizes and length according to the tastes of the writers or possessors. Invocations of Manasa Devi were bound in snake skins ; mini editions contain leaves of the sizes of 1½ inches by 3 inches ; Bakala puthis with strip of sanchi bark made into a folder to contain a number of pages of some text, an out standing example of which is ' Giter-Bakala ' 8 feet long and 6 inches broad folded in the shape of a small square book-let are some of the instances of the wide and chequered varieties of the beautifully designed and laboriously prepared medieval manuscripts of Assam.<sup>1</sup> "Most of the Sanskrit and Assamese manuscripts, so far discovered, have been found written on this material and some of them are in their original condition with fast coloured ink."<sup>2</sup> This shows that the process of the making of the manuscripts evolved in Assam was scientific and these manuscripts were self preserving which speaks volumes for the high level of technical skill attained by the people of Assam centuries ago.

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1. Goswami, H.C., Descriptive catalogue of Assamese Manuscripts, C.U., 1930, p. XV-XVI.
  2. Cheudhury, P.C., HCPA, p. 375.

## (b) Tula-pat manuscripts :-

Tula-pat is not as enduring as sanchipat. It is not as commonly used as sanchi-pat ; and in the charitas tula-pat is mentioned in connection with painting.<sup>1</sup> In fact the use of tula-pat in literary writing was very limited ; and it was mainly used for writing letters, documents and despatches ; and records relating to revenue grants, land titles, and judicial decisions were written in tula-pat.<sup>2</sup> Tula-pat looks more like fine lint than paper; and it was prepared by grining, felting and pressing cotton.<sup>3</sup> Rajata nanda Das Gupta in his "Tai Ahom painting in Assam" has high-lighted the traditional Ahom art of making tulapat. He has said that the Ahoms and other Shan people of the north eastern Assam knew the art of manufacturing strong and tough writing sheets, known as tula-pat from pulp prepared from selected species of trees such as maihari and yamen, the latter being tisa of the Shans and nuni in Assamese.<sup>4</sup>

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1. Neog, M., SHT, p.303.

2. Bhuyan, S.K., SLA, p.50.

3. Neog, M., SHT, p.303.

4. Das Gupta, R., 'Tai-Ahom painting in Assam'-Pragjyotisa Souvenir All India Oriental Conference, XX Session, 1965, p.88.

## (c) Other materials :-

The Ahom Age also displayed marked ingenuity in making experiments to write on various other materials as substitutes for sanchi-pat and Tula-pat, the processing of which involved much time, skill and energy. Bamboo strips, silk treated with matimah paste, palm-leaves (tal-pat) treated with lac-rasin, smoothed animal hides and even bamboo sticks were considered to be of a magic volve.<sup>1</sup> It needs be mentioned here that the medieval Assam did not consider cloth suitable for being used as manuscript leaves probably because it is less durable than other materials or more difficult to preserve. However verses from holy books are some times woven along with various floral designs into pieces of cloth, meant for Guru-asanas or as book covers.<sup>2</sup>

## (II) Ink :-

In order to write on the manuscript leaves the scribe must be provided with ink and pen since nothing could be written without these materials. Hence it is obvious

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1. Gogoi, L., Ahom Jati Aru Assamiya Sanskriti, pp. 126-129.

2. Neog, M., SHT, p. 303.

that much thought was given to ink preparation. The ink must have durable colour and must stand the test of time.

Since manuscript writing was a universal practice before the advent of printing press, the use of ink was common. But the process of making ink must have varied from country to country or even from one part of a country to another depending on the ingenuity of the people and availability of raw materials. R.L. Mitra in his book, 'Indian prescriptions for preparing ink in Gough's Paper' mentions that the use of ink was known in very early times in India and there are many references to ink preparation in early texts.<sup>1</sup> Inkpots were being used in ancient times for holding ink.<sup>2</sup> Discussing the method of ink preparation in details, K.R. Medhi in his article 'Likhari Sajuli' has said that the ink in Assam was mainly made from silikha (*Terminalia citrina*) a few fruits of which variety was kept in water in an earthen jar exposed to dew for nights together till the water

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1. Mitra, R.L., Indian prescription for preparing ink in Gough's paper, p. 18.
  2. Choudhury, P.C., HCPA, p.375.

turns black and percclates into a non-porous vase kept at the bottom to hold the black liquid called 'mahi' (ink) ; iron or iron-sulphate or blood of a variety of fish called kuchiya was added to make it more sticky.<sup>1</sup> Hem Chandra Goswami points out that there were different qualities of ink and manuscripts written with inferior ink faded after a short period of time, and there was a regular process of checking these faded scripts ; and that the superior quality ink was also prepared in Assam, referring to which he remarks, "The chief characteristic of Assamese ink is its tenacity to glossy and slippery surfaces. Its durability has been proved by the old manuscripts whose ink has not appreciably faded though folios have crumbled down through the destructive influence."<sup>2</sup> He claims that the Assamese ink was the product of the distillation of silika and the urine of bulls. It is very likely that when the bulls urine was used instead of water as claimed by Medhi, the quality of ink improved.

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1. Medhi, K.R., Likhari Sajuli, Assam Bandhava, Vol. I
  2. Goswami, H.C., Descriptive Catalogue of Assamese Manuscript ; p. XVI.

Other ingredients might have been mixed to impart thickness and permanence as claimed by Medhi. The sap of earthworms was used for invisible writings.<sup>1</sup>

(III) Quill :-

Quills of various make were in use. As P.C. Choudhury in his book, "The History of civilisation of the people of Assam to the twelfth century A.D." has remarked, "pen and pencils were made of bamboo, wood, reed, animal horns, metal, chalk etc. and were commonly known as lekhanī or varnaka. In Assamese they are known as kalama. The Yogini Tantra refers to holders and pens of bamboo, reed, copper, bellmetal, iron and even of gold."<sup>2</sup>

Illustrated Manuscripts :-

Illustrated manuscripts form a class by themselves and these constitute one of the most valuable ancient treasure of Assam. "The epics are generally illustrated

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1. Goswami, H.C., Descriptive Catalogue of Assamese Manuscript, p. XVII.
  2. Choudhury, P.C., HCPA, p. 375.

especially those prepared for entertainment of princes, nobles and the principal Gosains ; when pictures could not be inserted, illuminated margins occasionally made up the deficiency. Many manuscripts contain pictures of deadly sins, and of incarnations according to Hindu conception. The secular pictures usually represented kings and queens sitting on throne or elephants or soldiers in battle fields. The pictures are available in all combinations of colours the most prominent of these being yellow and green. Pictures of Sankaradeva sitting in a siksha mudra and surrounded by his apostles are met with occasionally in his biographies.<sup>1</sup> The first illustrated manuscript is the Ahom Phung chin Manuscript which dates back to 1473 A.D. and among the numerous illustrated manuscripts mention may be made of Sankaradeva's first half of the tenth skanda of the Bhagavata puran , Gita Govinda, Hastividya, Sankha churavadha, Lava-kushar yuddha, Darrang Rajvamsavali , Ananda-lahari, Dharmapuran , Syamanta Haran etc. which have all religious topics for paintings.<sup>2</sup> Regarding the skill in painting P.D.

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1. Ghuyan, S.K., SLA, pp.51-52.

2. Chaudhury, P.D., Ancient Treasures of Assam, Guwahati, 1984, p.40.

Choudhury remarks that on the whole the technical signs and finish of the works are like those in other parts of India although there are some local influences. In the paintings of Hastividya the influence of Mughal art is prominent.<sup>1</sup>

#### Calligraphic art :-

Like the illustrations the calligraphic art of the manuscripts also deserves mention. Although we have made a detailed discussion regarding the evolution of script, it must be pointed out that the calligraphic art of the Assamese manuscripts resembles the kutila style of writing which is itself a development of pan-Brahmi script. In course of time the Assamese script developed three distinct types-Gargaya, Bamuniya and Kaithali or Lakhari. The style of writing practised in the Ahom court Gargaon came to be known as Gargaya style was also adopted in Satra circles. The style of writing followed by Sanskrit pundits who were Brahmins in copying Sanskrit texts was known as Bamuniya

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1. Chaudhury, P.D., Ancient Treasures of Assam, p.41.

style. The kayasthas had developed their own style of writing in drafting official documents and keeping records. This was the Kaithali calligraphic style.<sup>1</sup> According to M. Neog, Sankaradeva might have practised the Kaithali calligraphic style, while the famous manuscripts of the metrical work on Arithmetic, Kitabat-man-jari, and Sukumar Barkath's Hasti-Vidyarnava were all written in this style.<sup>2</sup>

#### Preservation of manuscripts :-

We have seen that the manuscript leaves and the ink were prepared with a great care with much technical skill so that these may become self-preserving. In medieval times there were no libraries, as we have in our times; and the use of chemicals and other scientific devices to preserve books were unknown. However, the royal courts evolved their own system of preservation of manuscripts. The rulers of Ahom kingdom attached much importance to Buranjis and they took all possible steps to preserve the information

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1. Basu, N.K., AAA, p.319.

2.a) Neog, M., SHT, p. 308

b) Goswami, H.C., Descriptive Catalogue of Assamese Manuscripts, pp.65, 93-95.

contained in the Buranjis for the use of future generations. 'Attached to the palace of Ahom kings there was a set of apartments for preservation of royal manuscripts, records of letters, despatches and maps in charge of a high official named Gandhia Barua. There was another officer named Likhakar Barua, literally, the superintendent of scribes, who supervised the work of an army of clerks and copyists."<sup>1</sup> Evidences show that there were writers and officers who were associated with composition and preservation of manuscripts ; and these were Akshapatalika (keeper of grants), Lipikara (engraver) while the writers were variously known as Kayasthas, Karanas or Karanikas and Likhakas.<sup>2</sup> There are still some well preserved manuscripts of the great Vaisnava reformers of 15th-16th centuries found in the Vaisnava Satras ,<sup>3</sup> and this indicates the care taken by the Satras for preservation of the manuscripts.

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1. Bhuyan, S.K., SLA, p.53.

2. Choudhury, P.C., HCPA, p.376.

3. Ibid, p. 376.

It is apprehended that much of the valued manuscripts have been destroyed by the ravages of time, the rise and fall of dynasties and apathy of public.<sup>1</sup> Indeed the scholars have apprehended that the manuscripts in India were destroyed under conditions peculiar to the country." India is subject to such ravages of fire and water that each year we are losing in the shape of manuscripts, burnt or wasted or crumbled away, an amount of treasure, which could not be replaced in future even at the expenditure of millions of rupees ; and the callousness which the public displays towards this would be appalling anywhere else except in this unfortunate country."<sup>2</sup>

S.K. Bhuyan has pointed out the urgency of collecting the undiscovered manuscripts in the following words. "If an exclusive search is made for Assamese manuscripts and even if the manuscripts hitherto discovered and traced are thoroughly catalogued, we have a firm belief that a far greater percentage of Indian master-pieces will be found

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1. Choudhury, P.C., HCPA, p.376.

2. Extract of the presidential speech of Dr. Ganganath Jha in the Madras session of the All India Oriental Conference quoted in "Studies in the Literature of Assam by S.K. Bhuyan, p.61.

translated into Assamese than in any other vernacular literature - some manuscripts printer in Assam may come upon a manuscript which be as momentous as the Arthasastra of Kautilya, the dramas of Bhasa and the Samarangana of king Bhoja."<sup>1</sup> As H.C. Goswami has remarked, all that have been so far found were wrapped-up in their most part in pieces of cloth or enclosed in wooden boxes, some of which contain beautiful paintings.<sup>2</sup>

It is Rev. Nathan Brown who made his first attempt to collect manuscripts in Assam ; and he made some collections in between 1840 and 1850 with the help of his baptist associates. In 1895 Sir E. Gait conducted research into the realm of manuscripts under government patronage ; and in 1912 Hemchandra Goswami being deputed by Sir A.Earle, Chief Commissioner of Assam gave a collection drive and made a substantial collection as evidenced by the "Descriptive

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1. Bhuyan, S.K., Assamese literature- Ancient and Modern, Shillong, 1936. pp. 2-5.
  2. Goswami, H.C., Descriptive Catalogue of Assamese Manuscripts, p. XV.

Catalogue of Assamese Manuscripts."<sup>1</sup> Since Goswami's drive, the manuscript printing is still going on in Assam but not with that seriousness and sincerity as displayed by Goswami.

Ahom manuscripts :-

Ahom manuscripts form a class by themselves. The production of these manuscripts was quite extensive during the Ahom rule ; but their use was confined to persons who could speak and understand their language. Since the Ahoms themselves adopted Assamese, there is now hardly any expert to decipher the manuscripts. Indeed the Ahom manuscripts form the most substantial part of the vast treasure-house of medieval manuscripts in Assam ; but the major portion of them are still to be discovered and preserved." The Ahoms of upper Assam had an extensive manuscript literature of which only a few books were in public institutions. These works were written in an old form of the language no longer understood by the people in general, so that unless they are rescued, their term of future existence was problematical."<sup>2</sup>

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1. Bhuyan, S.K., SLA, pp. 58-59.
  2. Dr. J. Van Manen's remarks published in the Statesman, Oct-12, 1929 quoted in "Studies in the Literature of Assam" by S.K. Bhuyan, p.50.

The few discovered Ahom manuscripts throw a flood of light on the hidden treasure contained in them.

Min-Mang-phura-heng is the greatest work of the Ahoms, which deals with ahimsa in the form of a simple story while Pung-Gaokham is the Ahom version of the Ramayana.<sup>1</sup> The Ahom manuscripts are on diverse subjects. Much of the wealth of Ahom literature is being gradually lost to us because of the growing paucity of men to-day, conversant with the language and capable of translating the manuscripts. Even among the Deodhais and Bailungs, the remnants of the orthodox priestly clans of the Ahoms, there are only few who can read and interpret the Ahom language with any amount of accuracy.<sup>2</sup>

#### Sanskrit manuscripts :-

Almost every known branch of learning found a place in the Sanskrit manuscripts. Dr. P.C.Choudhury made a list of 443 Sanskrit manuscripts in his 'A Catalogue of

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1. Bhuyan, S.K., SHA, p.9.
  2. Bhuyan, S.K., SLA, p.57.

Sanskrit Manuscripts at the D.H.A.S. These manuscripts cover a wide variety of subjects such as Abhidhana, Ayurveda, Chandas, Darsana, Jyotisha, Kavya, Kriya-kanda, Nataka, Niti purana, Puja vidhi, Smriti, Stotra, Tantra and Vyakarans.<sup>1</sup>

Assamese manuscripts :-

Like the Sanskrit manuscripts the Assamese manuscripts are also extensive and these cover a wide variety of subjects. These include translations from the original Sanskrit texts, Neovaisnava literature, Bargits, Sakta literature, Buranjis, Vansavalis, Incantations and secular writings etc.

Role of manuscripts in education :-

(1) During middle ages there were no printed books; and the manuscripts were the chief carriers of Knowledge and civilisation from one generation to another. Ideas and thoughts of middle ages survive because of the manuscripts ;and

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1. Choudhury, P.C. ; op. cit.

without them there would have been no progress of civilization. The system of education would not have developed in absence of manuscripts because the knowledge and ideas of the ancestors would have disappeared along with them.

(2) The medieval system of education was partly formal ; and that limited formal education was possible for the existence of manuscripts. The scope of education was limited to a few because of limited circulation of the manuscripts, which was due to dearth of copies. In ancient times education was imparted orally ; but in the middle ages teaching was mostly done with the help of manuscripts. Manuscripts led to stabilisation of the formal education.

(3) Manuscripts rendered invaluable service in informal education. Discussion of various subjects such as religion, philosophy, medicine, history, science, literature etc. were embodied in manuscripts. Any one having the knowledge of the alphabets could go through these manuscripts and gathering of knowledge was considered the most important aim of education ; and, viewed in this light, manuscripts were the most important agency of informal education. Since medieval system of education was mostly informal, the manuscripts played the most vital role.

(4) Manuscripts rendered signal service in continuing education. The disciples could keep them abreast of the latest developments by consulting the new manuscripts after they have left their educational institutions.

(5) Manuscripts built up the vast treasure-house of knowledge. To acquire knowledge in a systematic manner one must go through a period of schooling ; and without the help of experts one could not have access to manuscripts on technical subjects such as medicine, philosophy, history, mathematics etc. Manuscripts perpetuated the system of formal education in middle ages.