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Binding the World, Withholding life Poetry Books in the Medieval Mediterranean

International Workshop

31 May 2024
Exeter College, Oxford and online

An activity of the TORCH Network
Poetry in the Medieval World



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Poetry needs space. As music relies on its opposing silence; to be recognisable at first sight, poetry needs blanks. Transmitting texts in the Middle Ages was also a matter of space but rather concerned with the cost of writing material and the lack thereof. As a result, single poems were squeezed into the page at the expense of those defining blanks. Inevitably, large collections and vast anthologies densely occupied handwritten *folia*.

Nowadays, established traditions and criteria rule the process of compiling poetry books. But what was the awareness that ruled these processes in the Middle Ages? This is the topic of the workshop. The broad question is what idea of poetry and poetry books can be gleaned from this process. Is gathering just a necessity, or does it conceal a conscious poetic message? If conscious, what role does the physicality of the manuscript play for the poetic unit?

Medieval poetry books can be either multi-authorial anthologies or single-authorial collections, and many are the ways in which those poetic books could have been formed. Poems of different authors could have been selected around a common theme, or with a chronological criterion; authorial collections could be made by authors themselves, their students, or other members of their circle. These books could contain a macrostructure and, therefore, an overarching narrative; they could reflect a specific time of the author's activity or summarise a life-long production. The way poems were arranged in 'big containers' and transmitted directly affected their readership, reception and their current literary status.

From the perspective of literary theory, the arrangement in medieval manuscripts opens an array of crucial questions: the relationship between the single poem and the poetry book, the way – supposedly different – in which long and shorter compositions were treated and the correspondence between its parts. Furthermore, how much was the idea of a single-thematic unit present in the minds of the compilers? Was this book to be read cover to cover, or something to read out or perform with music? And how does the layout of poetry, including the absence of those defining blanks, impact the reader's experience?

Within this framework, the workshop focuses on the circulation of poems in the medieval Mediterranean, which is used as a case study to explore medieval literature.

The event is part of the activities of the TORCH Network *Poetry in the Medieval World*.

Date: 31st May 2024

Venue: Exeter College, FitzHugh Auditorium (Walton St, Oxford OX1 2HG) and online

Convenors: Ugo Mondini (University of Oxford) and Alberto Ravani (Austrian Academy of Sciences)

[Register via Eventbrite for online attendance.](#)



Friday, 31st May 2024

9:45 a.m. **Registration**

10:00 a.m. **Welcoming address**

Barney Taylor (Sub-rector, Exeter College)

Marc D. Lauxtermann (Faculty of Medieval and Modern Languages)

Introduction

Ugo Mondini (Faculty of Medieval and Modern Languages)

Alberto Ravani (Austrian Academy of Sciences)

10:30 a.m. **First Session**

Chair: Marina Bazzani (Faculty of Classics)

From Chansonniers to Whole-World Poetics: The Poetry Book as a Mode of Worlding

Marisa Galvez (Stanford University)

11:15 a.m. Coffee break

11:30 a.m. *Between Chaos and Order: Dynamics of Formation of Medieval Latin Verse Collections*

Adriano Russo (École française de Rome)

12:15 p.m. Lunch

2:30 p.m. **Second Session**

Chair: Tahera Qutbuddin (Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies)

Byzantine 'Poetry Books': From Embers and Sparks of Classicising Learning to Tokens of Literati Self-Fashioning?

Niels Gaul (University of Edinburgh)

3:15 p.m. Coffee Break

3:30 p.m. *Mapping Verses: Ibn Sa'īd al-Maghribī's Poetic Geographies*

Marlé Hammond (SOAS)

4:15 p.m. **Concluding remarks and discussion** followed by drinks

Dinner for the speakers