

CML

Centre for Medieval Literature

Research programme

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1. Presentation

1.1 Description

Who administers the rich heritage of literary works from the European Middle Ages? Until recently the answer was simple: the national philologies and their institutions. University departments, national libraries and editorial societies each promoted their national 'literature' defined by language and modern territory. Most European nations claimed their own literary origins in the Middle

Ages, which were comfortably placed as the first chapter in a long narrative from the beginning to the present.

The study of medieval literature has reached a crossroads. Established accounts, framed within 19/20th-century nationalizing paradigms, are discredited. Political developments in Europe and debate about the role of European culture within the world demand we return to the past with new questions. Scholarly internationalization and the shift towards collaborative work in the humanities mean there is a community eager to rethink medieval European literature. Plans are afoot for new literary histories, translations, digital resources: all aimed at pan-European study of medieval literature. However, in trying to develop medieval literary history for 21st-century Europe, it is not enough to stitch together the old national narratives to create a new European story. Fundamental methodological groundwork is required. Otherwise, these new endeavors risk building on the unstable ruins of the national paradigms or projecting modern multicultural ideologies onto the past. Key questions, which will determine whether the study of medieval literature continues as a vital dimension of an *integrated* understanding of Europe's past, include three of definition:

- What is 'Europe' when seen through the lens of the medieval literary record? Was it born in the Middle Ages? What were its geographical, linguistic and ideological boundaries?
- What is 'literature' (a Romantic Western European concept)? Why is the Western tradition preoccupied with fictionality, known author and aesthetic sophistication and unity as defining features, to the neglect of textual diversity (e.g. historiography, hagiography, homilies, documents)? How can we work across modern

disciplinary divisions (esp. history and literature) to provide a capacious concept of 'literature' appropriate to the Middle Ages?

- What are the 'Middle Ages' (a Renaissance concept)? Does the period from c.500-1500 make sense as a separate written culture? How is understanding of the period framed by Antiquity and the Renaissance/Reformation? How does it map onto questions of East/West?

Openness about all three categories is essential for reorienting scholarly practice to supplant traditional habits of literary history. Our proposed center, CML, will deal with these fundamental issues through the development of *fully comparative* approaches and a set of concrete research strands, thus uniting disparate fields (separated by disciplines and nationalisms) into a single workable field of medieval European literature.

1.2 Argument

There is a growing hunger for genuinely inter-lingual and -regional study of medieval European literatures, as a proactive response to the decline of national paradigms. CML aims to play a key role in shaping the field of medieval literature for the 21st century, providing intellectual leadership in the area of comparative study. Through occupying ourselves *only* with comparison, new insights in basic research will be gained by:

- identifying literary practices (hidden by national philologies and the division of East/West) that cut across linguistic, regional, and chronological boundaries
- integrating study of the sacred languages (Latin, Greek, Arabic, Hebrew) and vernaculars; dissociating the latter from notions of

‘national language’; interrogating the categories ‘sacred’ and ‘vernacular’

- situating medieval book culture in a variety of concrete social networks; insisting on social readings of texts neglected by national scholarly practices and confessional attitudes
- reconceptualizing pre-print literature and its representation in emerging grand narratives of learning so that its study contributes to broader civilizational theories of pre-modern Europe

In terms of public outreach, this project aims to:

- influence university/high school curricula
- act as an exemplar for *multilingual* humanist research environments
- facilitate cross cultural access to medieval literatures; encourage making and use of translations
- work with museums/media to develop supranational integration and dissemination of this part of Europe’s cultural heritage

Why now? An ambitious center, addressing conceptual questions through the development of rigorous comparative methodologies, will capitalize on current desire for European literary pasts.

Why us? We are established scholars with track records of interdisciplinary, -lingual and methodologically innovative work. We bring rich experiences in working collaboratively with other scholars and one another. Our networks span the US and Europe, including the eastern Mediterranean.

Why organized as a 10-year center? This structure will enable fundamental questions to be posed, methodologies to be established and comparative accounts of medieval literature to be developed in

a richly collaborative context. The extended time frame allows production of high-quality outcomes of lasting impact and enables us to build on our research to contribute to the public understanding of the past. Long-term international integration of the field in Denmark and the UK will ensure the sustainability of the approaches developed by CML.

1.3 Strategy

CML will be a joint venture of the **University of Southern Denmark (SDU)** and the **University of York**; located in Odense and affiliated with the SDU Institute of History and Civilization. The leader, **Mortensen** (LBM), and senior member, **Høgel** (CH), work in the Institute in Latin, Greek, Classical Civilization and History. CML will also form part of SDU's interdisciplinary Centre for Medieval Studies (CMS) (one of four nodes of the Nordic Centre of Excellence for Medieval Studies (NCMS)). SDU CMS has a tradition of international cooperation, holding symposia with published proceedings for c.30 years.

The second node will be the CMS at York, the leading Anglophone CMS (together with Toronto), which attracts a large international community of staff/graduate students. It has an interdisciplinary collaborative research culture and two publishing series. It pioneered a distinctive multilingual MA for the study of medieval British literature, spanning Latin, French, Norse, Welsh, Irish and English. **Tyler** (EMT) (CML senior member) is affiliated to the CMS and the Department of English which combines the study of literature in English with that of other European and Middle Eastern languages. York is the top ranked UK English Department for research.

Apart from three senior members, CML will be staffed by **three postdocs and four PhDs** at any time, divided between Odense and York with overlap between the first and the second group (see Annex 3 for specifics). They will be recruited through open calls and with flexibility of research topic within the program to ensure the highest quality. Furthermore a number of senior scholars of medieval and classical studies from Odense and York will devote a part of their research time to CML activities (see below and Annex 3).

Coherence and synergy between the two nodes and a lively research community will be achieved by regular bi-weekly (virtual and real) seminars, common responsibility for workshops, conferences, publications, and short-term mobility. All three senior scholars will co-lead each of the three strands in the research program, each being the coordinator of one of them (see below). PhD and postdocs will be supported to work collaboratively and to develop international networks.

Around this core a group from across Europe and the US will take part in regular common activities. As 'Interfaces', these scholars have already collaborated in workshops organized by LBM and EMT (2009-11); they provide broad coverage of regions, languages, disciplines and access to the best younger scholars in Europe and the US and to other networks. The majority of the group will contribute to a common publication, *Rethinking Medieval European Literature*.

At the SDU and York CMSs members of CML will be KURT VILLADS JENSEN (SDU: History, comparative national history, sermons), LARS BISGAARD (SDU: History, urban history, religious culture), JESPER MAJBOM MADSEN (SDU: Ancient History and literature) TOM PETTITT

(SDU: English Literature, ballads), MATT TOWNEND (York: Norse, English), MICHELE CAMPOPIANO (York: Philology, Literature, Italian, Latin, Arabic), HENRY BAINTON (York: History, Literature, English, French, Latin). A new appointment in York (Medieval Studies) and at SDU (Classical Studies) will also be included as members.

On the national level we will coordinate our activities primarily with the following scholars in Denmark and the UK:

K FRIIS-JENSEN (Copenhagen: Latin) directs *Danish Historical Writing Before 1225 and Its Intellectual Context in Medieval Europe* supported by the Research Council (2011-13).

A LASSEN (Copenhagen: Norse) & K JOHANSSON (Oslo: Norse) lead a Nordic project on medieval translations into Norse (from Latin/French), which situates Norse literature in its European context.

M NÍ MHAONAIGH (Cambridge: Celtic, Latin) with EMT collaborate in Rüdiger's 'Political Diglossia' (below).

On the wider international scene key institutional links are:

SISMEL (Società Internazionale di Studi del Medioevo Latino): of which LBM is an elected member; linked to CML through a formalized contract with seminars in Florence and publication at their press. Major provider of translations, editions and studies.

Milan, Filologia Moderna (Borsa): with CML the department will set up an open access peer reviewed digital journal (*Interfaces of Medieval Literature*).

Fordham (NYC) (Wogan-Browne, O'Donnell): EMT is working with Fordham on multilingual models for medieval English literature.

Bergen, CMS: LBM was a co-founder of this center of excellence (concludes 2012); co-organizing conferences/seminars in 2011-12; younger Bergen scholars relevant for collaboration with CML.

Frankfurt, History: Collaboration with Political Diglossia in Medieval Europe workshop organized by the 'Political Language in the Middle Ages: Semantical Approaches' research group (led by Jussen and Rüdiger).

Ghent, History/Literature: co-led summer school, see 2.3.

A particular strength of CML is that our international team (and its networks) comprises scholars at every stage of their careers from PhDs to senior professors. We thus have colleagues ready to apply for **postdocs** and through our network we will attract the best international students for our **PhDs**.

The three senior scholars of CML possess extensive expertise in European medieval regions and languages (primary or secondary competences): English, French, Latin, German, Norse, Spanish, Italian, Greek, Arabic and Hebrew. Each has experience teaching philology, literature and history. For extending this range in the supervision of PhDs and for monitoring CML' activities, our international colleagues will act as collaborators.

2. Research Plan

2.1 Methods and Framework

CML aims to promote studies of medieval European literature based on comparative methods and focused on social perspectives. By combining these two neglected but central concerns, CML will contribute to developing new models and conceptualisations which

can reshape the field in the longer term, enabling it to tell coherent textual histories outside the usual national/monoglot modes. A helpful starting point in explaining how this can be achieved is to situate our approach in relation to Comparative Literature and to recent comparative trends in the study of medieval history.

For Comparative Literature, the main object of study is the literary text as aesthetic object. These literary texts tend to fall securely within the bounds of the modern category literature. This narrow understanding is at odds with the broad range of medieval texts. Even when fragmentary, anonymous, and non-fictional, medieval texts are major witnesses to learned discourse, rhetoricized communication, multilingual exchange and the social, practical and symbolic role of the handwritten book: taken together they are a more meaningful object for medieval literary history.

CML posits its object not in the texts exclusively but rather in their gravitational field, focusing on their social situations and the communication (written, performed, spoken) in which they take part. By keeping the agency of texts we avoid reducing them to mere sources for reconstructed discourses and by focusing on the social world around them we avoid the other extreme of absolutizing them as monuments of art.

We have learned much from recent trends in medieval history. Since the 90s historical study of the Middle Ages has undergone a 'comparative turn' (Bartlett 1993, Harms and Müller 1997, Wickham 2005, Borgolte 2006). In interdisciplinary contexts, Scandinavia has taken the lead in developing the comparative study of medieval societies: Bergen CMS and NCMS (LBM a member) have made major contributions to the understanding of the place of the North

within Europe. Interregional Mediterranean studies are an increasingly influential feature of work on the Middle Ages. It is now widely recognized that many traditional historical interpretations falter because they disregard comparison.

Comparative historicist methodologies have begun to impact on literary study. Wallace's 'Regeneration' project, which looks at the European networks of urban literary cultures (including N Africa/Middle East), from 1348-1418, is a recent pioneering example. Sharing this wide geographical focus (but with more Nordic emphasis) CML has a much wider chronological scope, thus we open up the broad range of horizontal and vertical social relationships within which medieval texts made their meaning. Initially, we see the main methodological value of comparative work as three-fold. 1) Most simply, comparison exposes a range of specific links which cross modern national boundaries and national languages. 2) Comparative study illuminates elements that national traditions take as exceptional but which are actually common. 3) Conversely, comparative approaches enable a better understanding of particularities. Since we are making comparisons within a civilizational complex (below) all three aspects are integrated.

Comparison will also question the reality of the dominance of certain medieval norms for authoritative writing. Two examples: CML will begin by using comparison to destabilize prevalent models which take Carolingian practice (enshrining Latin as a sacred and written language in contrast to the vernaculars) as 'naturally' normative for all of Western Europe. Likewise the centrality of Greek when seen in the context of the vernaculars (Georgian, Slavonic etc.) may be revised, placing Byzantine texts within a new framework. The wide range of CML, encompassing the

extraordinary diversity of relations between vernacular and sacred languages in medieval Europe promises to be highly productive.

Throughout the project a larger issue about European civilization must be kept in mind (Arnason 2003). Instead of asking about literary practices characterizing European civilization (a tautology), Europe is more fruitfully seen as part of a civilizational complex. A flexible approach may reveal that some of the salient characteristics are 1) more different between parts of Europe, 2) common for the Latin West and the Greek East, or 3) due to learned traffic within the civilizational complex including the Arab world. For this reason it is important to co-operate with scholars who do their primary work within ancient textual cultures; comparisons with Antiquity in all three strands (see below) will be important to identify (or reject) common features for all pre-print literature in Europe.

A comparative method goes hand in hand with the social approach that underpins our study of literature. Once the door to true comparison in this field has been opened, all self-enclosed linguistic, literary, religious, and cultural frameworks are jeopardized and the complex social worlds of text producers and consumers enter as the only possible stable reference point (allowing both for high degrees of similarity and difference). The anxiety that many historians harbor that the specificity of history will disappear faced with comparative or sociological thinking (Geary 2001), becomes irrelevant as the specificity of the texts within their context remains irreducible.

Although the social seems an obvious defining dimension of literary culture, among scholars of medieval literature, there has been a paucity of socially orientated inquiry and historians have long searched literary texts for the 'political' rather than the 'social'.

In the last two decades helpful trends have begun to emerge; one is the insistence on the 'social logic of the text' (Spiegel 1995, 1997), another is the emphasis on performance by scholars of oral traditions, liturgy and historians of legal culture, the urban scene and assemblies (Foley 1995; Green 1994; Reuter 2001, Holsinger 2003; Stacey 2007; Symes 2007; Bainton 2012, Mortensen & Lehtonen 2012, Tyler 2012).

CML's approach to literary tradition is also deeply social. Our commitment to the social life of texts demands that we replace the very concept of 'tradition' which obscures the dynamics and agency of texts and people in their specific concrete environments. Conceptualizing texts as positioned within a number of hierarchies of other texts, recent or old, is more productive. These hierarchies were incessantly being re-created, changed, and negotiated, and not in an abstract world of texts but in one of social positioning and dominance.

In taking this social and comparative approach, the fields of philology, literary criticism, linguistics, book history, manuscript studies and history will become our tools as we seek to study texts as embedded within social relationships. Bringing together social and comparative approaches to a range of texts will enable a major step change in the study of medieval European literature.

While the scope of the research program is ambitious in terms of framework, methodologies and research questions, the coverage is realistic because it is broken down into specific themes that cut across medieval Europe. The program is organized around three major strands:

1. **Interface between sacred and vernacular** must be thematized on a European level, with focus on the Romance/non-Romance

divide between North and South and on the comparison with the different situation of diglossia in the Greek and Arab world. The rise of written vernaculars is a phenomenon which has not been problematized by the individual philologies due to their nativist paradigm. Tyler will act as coordinator of this theme; research by Villads Jensen (SDU), Bainton (York) and Townend (York) will form part as well.

2. **The rise of fiction** in the 12th century as a new kind of contract between authors and aristocratic audiences has been keenly debated in the last 20 years (Green 2002, Tyler 2005, Agapitos & Mortensen 2012). Through our framework the positions in this discussion will be tested in terms of pan-European genres, especially saints' lives, with their intricate mechanisms of authentication and fabrication and considered in political and social contexts. Høgel will act as coordinator of this group; research by Madsen (SDU), and Pettitt (SDU) will contribute to this theme.

3. A critical approach to European medieval literary heritage demands reflections on **canonizing processes**. The choice of 'masterpieces' began in the Middle Ages, but our modern images of the canonical line of medieval works still depend on Romanticism and the rise of nationalism. Comparative studies of how editorial projects, curricula etc. made the national canons underpin our present consideration of the desirability of a European literary canon. New canons are easy to dismiss, but canonical choices are always at work in research/teaching, even when any hierarchy of texts is denied. Mortensen will act as coordinator of this theme to which Bisgaard (SDU) and Campopiano (York) will also contribute.

Attentiveness to the dynamic relationship between medieval and modern is essential to our ability both to pursue basic research about medieval literature *and* to contribute to debates about Europe's relationship with her past, thus we will include modern scholars in each of these strands.