

Shaping Knowledge in the Medieval World

Cross-Cultural Perspectives

International Workshop, Austrian Academy of Sciences, 24th April 2026

Abstracts

Floris Bernard (Ghent University)

Floating Among the Stars: Didactic Poetry on the Astral Sciences in Byzantium

This paper studies Byzantine didactic poetry on the astral sciences (astronomy and astrology), focusing on works produced in the 12th century, especially by Konstantinos Manasses and Ioannes Kamateros.

These poems operate as scientific discourse: they present structured bodies of knowledge, mark transitions with clear signposts, use internal cross-references to guide the reader, and anchor their explanations in authoritative (ancient) sources. At the same time, this material is shaped by the techniques of didactic poetry. The poems create a vivid teacher–student setting, stage the poem as an oral lesson unfolding in time, and use a personalized narrative voice that dramatizes the act of teaching. Here, the specific subject matter (the stars and their mythological stories) is a great aid to the so-called didactic plot.

This poetry was shaped by complex social conditions, as reflected by the manuscript transmission of these texts and some internal references. This poetry navigated a delicate terrain where science, religion, mythology and imperial patronage intersect. Thus, this study will situate these astral didactic poems against the background of courtly culture in 12th century Constantinople, refracted by the social context of the intellectual elite and its preoccupations, and by various literary and scientific traditions.

Philip Forness (KU Leuven)

Shaping and Organizing Knowledge Through the Formation of Homiliaries from Greek to Syriac to Arabic

Collections offer insight into how individuals and communities sought to shape how knowledge was transferred. The practices of gathering, arranging, and editing texts resulted in structured frameworks for encountering these writings. Readers did not read the works on their own but were offered a context for interpreting them.

Over the past decades, multi-text manuscripts and collections have received increased attention. This research has resulted in the refinement of definitions and terms for describing these compilations. It has also revealed the widespread nature of practices of collecting across many manuscript cultures and underscored the productive nature of comparative studies for understanding this phenomenon.

This presentation investigates how collection models developed within one linguistic setting were (1) transferred into another and (2) combined with existing models for collections in that setting. To shed light on these questions, it presents several case studies on the transmission of homilies within liturgically ordered homiletical collections known as homiliaries.

It begins with the transfer of Greek models for homiliaries into a Syriac milieu, where they also combined with existing traditions. It then turns to medieval Arabic homiliaries, where the influence of both Greek and Syriac models can be seen.

Pascale Hugon (ÖAW)

On the shoulders of Buddhas: Negotiating authority and creativity in the medieval Tibetan Buddhist tradition of learning

The blossoming of scholarly traditions that marked the second phase of the transmission of Buddhism to Tibet from the late tenth-century onward involved the translation of an important number of Indic works, including texts representing the Buddha's words, commentaries explaining their intended meaning, and many other supplementary treatises. Commentaries and treatises composed by Tibetan scholars soon flourished, both of which bear witness to these scholars' efforts to understand and organize the multifaceted tradition that they were receiving and to teach it to a Tibetan audience. These indigenous Tibetan works also reveal lively interactions within Tibetan intellectual circles and the rise of new interpretations and creative developments (formal, philosophical, conceptual, terminological, etc.), which were to shape the Tibetan Buddhist tradition of learning for the following millennia.

How did medieval Buddhist scholars in the Tibetan world conceive of themselves as commentators, authors, and thinkers? Did they endorse a traditional role of 'tradent,' passing on knowledge that originated from the Buddha, or did they make deliberate claims of originality? How did they navigate the tension between the assumed authority of Indian teachings and their own intellectual agenda, between respect due to one's teacher and diverging interpretation?

Drawing from early Tibetan scholastic works, I will flesh out various attitudes that their authors – who were in majority Buddhist monks – display towards putative authoritative figures and texts. I will also identify strategies deployed to manage disagreement and integrate novelty while avoiding accusations of contradiction with scriptures and “self-fabrication.”

Case-based considerations from the first centuries of the second millennium will offer a basis for comparison and contrast both with subsequent phases in Tibetan intellectual history – in particular the times of institutionalized monastic curricula – and with the processes at play in other traditions of learning within a religious context in the medieval world.

Johanna Jebe (Universität Tübingen)

Monastic Knowledge and Knowledge about Monasticism: History-of-Knowledge Perspectives on Religious Change in the Carolingian World

As its title suggests, my paper approaches the workshop’s theme from two complementary perspectives. First, the notion of “monastic knowledge”—that is, the knowledge monks possessed and mobilised in processes of knowledge production—serves to discuss some specific characteristics of monasteries as socio-cultural settings of knowledge production in the Latin West. As a case study, I trace the transmission of monastic rules through two manuscripts from St Gall and their subsequent cataloguing in contemporary book lists. This example shows how such bodies of knowledge were shaped not only by the specific contexts in which manuscripts were used, but also by deeper patterns of thought within monastic institutions and by the networks of those actors who, at a given moment, held positions of responsibility within their monastery. Building on these considerations, the second part turns to a more theoretical reflection on scholarly perspectives—that is, on “knowledge about monasticism.” Drawing on methodological approaches developed in my recent research, I discuss how adopting a broad concept of knowledge from sociology and cultural studies can help move the study of religious ways of life beyond the narrow focus on normative texts and theological elite debates. Such an approach, I suggest, also connects the study of monasticism and knowledge production more directly to current research on processes of social change in the Carolingian World.