Summary and Keywords

Medieval European literature is both broader and deeper in its basis than what is usually offered in literary histories with their focus only on a narrow canon and on vernacular languages. One way to see this bigger canvas is to consider technical and statistical book-historical factors together with the authority of the two Roman Empires (Western and Eastern) and of their religious hierarchies (the papacy and the patriarchate). A coordinated reading of developments in the Latin West and the Greek East—though rarely directly related—brings out some main features of intellectual and literary life in most of Europe. With this focus, a literary chronology emerges—as a supplement to existing narratives based on either national or formal (genre) concerns: the period c. 600 to c. 1450 can be considered a unity in book-historical terms, namely the era dominated the hand-written codex. It is also delimited by the fate of the Roman Empire with the Latin West effectively separated from the Greek Empire by c. 600 and the end of Constantinople in 1453. Within this broad framework, three distinctive phases of book- and intellectual history can be discerned: the exegetical (c. 600–c. 1050), the experimental (c. 1050–c. 1300), and the critical (c. 1300–c. 1450). These three headings should be understood as a shorthand for what was new in each phase, not as a general characteristic, especially because exegesis in various forms continued to lie at the heart of reading and writing books in all relevant languages.

Keywords: Europe, Middle Ages, empires, papacy, literature, intellectual history, book history, Latin, Greek, vernacular, Rome, Constantinople

If an unprepared modern reader opens one of the late medieval canonical works by Dante Alighieri (1265–1321), Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–75), Francesco Petrarca (1304–1374), Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1343–1400), Christine de Pizan (1364–c. 1430), or François Villon (1431–1463), s/he will immediately recognize them as “literature”: strongly authored as well as multi-voiced, fictional, or lyrical, and written in a “national” language and clearly intended both to entertain and to connect critically, ethically, and emotionally with a
mixed audience. These towering figures are indeed symptomatic of specific late medieval developments, but their canonicity in the modern age also works to hide a vast spectrum of verbal art and intellectual and emotional insights before, below, and beside them.

In what sense is medieval Europe a valid literary geography and chronology? Prominent postwar endeavors of taking a European view of medieval literature by Ernst Robert Curtius and Erich Auerbach saw Western, Latin Europe as the obvious unit to investigate. Byzantium and the entire Orthodox world of Eastern Europe was bypassed as irrelevant, not to speak of Arab and Hebrew writing on the European continent. Even the eastern and northern periphery of Latin Europe, such as Scandinavia (including Iceland and the entire Baltic area), Hungary, Poland, Bohemia, and Palestine, was in practice excluded. The rich Arab (and Hebrew) literary heritage in Spain was also sidelined in mainstream scholarship until a groundbreaking book by María Rosa Menocal from 1987, and only in recent decades is this being researched and presented as an integral part of Spanish and European writing. In the more recent surge of European views, a much more inclusive approach has thus been adopted, most clearly in the extraordinary recent survey edited by David Wallace; still Europe defies strict definition, as intersecting networks and cultural transfers across the Mediterranean or involving, farther afield, Armenia, Georgia, or even Persia and India remain relevant for any story on a European level.

Nation-states and a post-2004 vision of Europe (after the large expansion of the EU) are both modern impositions; but so is “Christendom,” excluding pagans, Muslims, and Jews living on what is otherwise treated as uncontested “European” soil; in addition, Christian communities existed throughout the period in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. Furthermore, Christendom in Europe provided little perceived unity: strong heretical movements and the predominantly poor communication and lack of respect between papal and Greek Orthodox camps provide clear testimony to the contrary.

That being said, by far the most writing included even in a generous definition of European literature was under the spell of two sets of texts coming out of antiquity, both mediated and spread by the Roman Empire: (1) the Bible and its innumerable paratexts (paraphrases, commentaries, theology, liturgy, etc.), and (2) ancient Roman (and Greek) imperial history and myth, including the ubiquitous tale of Troy and histories/tales of Alexander. A continuous engagement with these two sets of texts did broadly characterize literature within European Christendom as well as played defining—if partly negatively delimiting—roles for scholarship and literature within European Muslim and Jewish communities.

Co-reading developments in the Latin West and the Greek East (defined as spheres of a dominating, “imperial” written language and of Roman and Greek rites) enables a reading of comparable literary- and book-historical trajectories for the whole sphere of European Christendom, even if this only rarely can be understood in terms of direct exchange between East and West.
European Literature and Book History in the Middle Ages, c. 600-c. 1450

As a designator of the period between c. 500 and 1500, “medieval” is a category that many specialists would prefer to leave behind (however unrealistic at the beginning of the 21st century); it helps to reify a remarkably diverse and dynamic millennium as a static period, and carries either highly negative or strongly exoticizing connotations, both incessantly recirculated by contemporary popular visual culture and both unhelpful in each their way.

In the context of books, literature, and intellectual culture, however, the period from c. 600 to c. 1450 can be seen as a meaningful entity for most parts of the wider European space; this chronology is worked out as an alternative to the many competing chronologies of the national canons, languages, or literary forms, or of national or dynastic political chronologies. It should be seen as a supplement to these other periodizations and is adopted here as an attempt to balance book-historical factors with intellectual and political history in a wider European geography. It is based on a conviction that literary history must hand a large role to media studies—in this case book history—and that the more technical and statistical aspects of book history must, in turn, be supplemented with one or more relevant parameters that are informed by the contents of books. The guiding line here is the connection between book history, textual authority, and the political and religious universal powers: the Roman Empire of the East and of the West, including the patriarchate and the unique institution of the papacy. This obviously tilts the attention toward certain core areas of Europe and toward books written in Greek and Latin, but this vantage point can be defended by the authority that did radiate from Constantinople and Rome to each of their European peripheries (and not vice versa) and by the fact that by far the greatest number of books copied and produced in each of the spheres were written in Greek or Latin or derived from Greek or Latin models, even in the late Middle Ages when other book languages became successful.

Chronological Frame

In line with this, the period from c. 600 to c. 1450 can be seen as coherent in the following way: at the beginning of the period, the Roman Empire contracted significantly and became linguistically uniform, Greek taking over all the domains of Latin and basically cutting off the cultural memory of empire that was not already expressed in Greek (which of course it was to a very large extent). The remembrance of Latin Rome naturally continued in the West, where Latin (or early Romance) was widely spoken, but here the time around and shortly after 600 was marked both by the continued political disintegration and the implosion of the Roman educational system. The last cultured members of the senatorial class and great landowners (such as the influential authors Boethius and Cassiodorus) finally disappeared and were completely substituted by local lords of no learning, and by bishops and abbots who now saw themselves heading an educational system with another basis, entirely different goals, radically lower recruitment, and much smaller and fewer libraries. Even in the imperial East, the
decades after 600 became some sort of watershed as the empire contracted dramatically in a battle for survival in the 7th century, lost its connection to Latin as well as great centers of Greek learning (Alexandria, Antiochia, and more), and saw its elite becoming increasingly militarized. It is symptomatic that we can still find great authors before c. 600 such as Boethius in Latin and Prokopios in Greek so attached to the traditional rhetoric, learning, and library culture that serious (though wrong) doubts about their Christian faith have in fact been leveled by some scholars. After c. 600, there are no authors within Christendom whose Christian credentials are not immediately there for all to see. This is not to state that “Byzantine” literature begins at this point (the term usually covers the period already beginning in the 4th century), but only that the system of learning takes on a new character that is comparable to that of the Latin west.

The other end of the chronology can be defined by the invention of moveable-type printing (c. 1450) and the end of the (Eastern) Roman Empire in 1453 with the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople. Although book history across the manuscript/print divide should be cultivated much more than it has been, and although moveable type print would never have been devised without the late medieval hand-copied book market, in terms of book history, it still signals a significant and quite sudden change. This is also true for the European periphery where local printing came considerably later (e.g., Iceland, Muscowy) because the reorganization of literary and scholarly writing through print impacted all of Europe in a variety of ways only decades after c. 1450. This does not imply that everything printed represented an entirely new order, economically, practically, or epistemologically, but the gradual spectrum from copying through redacting and commenting to authoring was broken with the introduction of print. To understand how fundamental copying by hand was for defining a large zone between literary re-creating and creating, it is helpful to repeat the distinctions made by a leading theologian and philosopher of the 13th century, Bonaventure (1221–1274): beyond the word-for-word copying by a scriba (which always, we must remember, introduced errors/corrections and presented the text in a new layout and context), we have the compilator who “adds other material, but not of his own”; next is the commentator who “writes both other material and his own, but the other takes pride of place whereas his own is added for corroboration,” and finally the auctor who “writes both other and his own material, but his own takes pride of place whereas the other is added for corroboration.” After the introduction of print, publishing was normally quite different from having few and unique copies done by hand, and the previously fluid boundaries between copying through compiling, commenting (and rewriting and translating), and authoring, described by Bonaventure, solidified. Although “publication” certainly existed before print, it was not one moment, but rather a series of moments. In terms of knowledge organization and textual references, Elizabeth Eisenstein is still right that the radical long-term effects of having a number of identical copies of a text available cannot be underestimated; the world of texts acquired a new standard of fast production, fixity, survival, and dissemination that it had never had before (including medieval Chinese printing).
The effects on European learning and literature of the crisis of the Eastern Empire in a way made themselves felt already in the century before the fall of Constantinople in 1453 when Greek scholars were bringing books and language skills to the West, but the actual demise of the (Eastern) Roman Empire reconfigured the cultural geography in a lasting way: Greek culture was dissociated from a contemporary polity, which, eventually, gave rise to ideas of Muscovy as the imperial heir of orthodoxy (“the third Rome”), ideas of “Europe,” and of Western scholars as the real champions of the Greek literary heritage.

While this very long period, c. 600–c. 1450, can claim book- and text-historical unity in the sense that it was the age of the hand-copied parchment codex (with paper as an alternative in the last centuries), of the continuous existence of the Roman Empire (in the East), and of a division of most of Europe into a Greek and a Latin sphere of domination (in terms of rite and high-register language), it must be broken down into smaller time frames to make sense of major developments in literary and intellectual life: the exegetical (c. 600–c. 1050), the experimental (c. 1050–c. 1300), and the critical (c. 1300–c. 1450).

Exegesis (c. 600–c. 1050)

Around the beginning of this period, the following forces were at work:

— the almost complete separation of Greek and Latin written culture,
— the final victory of the parchment codex over the papyrus roll as the standard book format,
— new educational systems centered on scriptural learning and on Christian service and liturgy, and
— the disappearance of large private libraries around the Mediterranean (with some exceptions especially in the imperial Greek territories) and in the lands that previously belonged to the empire.

These changes were accompanied during the 7th and early 8th centuries by the swift expansion of Islam, which remained a key demarcating as well as enabling factor for the literary geography of Europe throughout the Middle Ages. These features mark important transformations from the ancient to the early medieval world. A new order of authority was slow to establish itself in both the East and the West, but the late 8th and the 9th centuries constitute an important juncture in the middle of this period, for both cultural and political reasons, one revitalized and one reinvented empire now facing each other, while in the same period the bishopric of Rome had slipped from the Byzantine to the Frankish imperial sphere and thus became the exclusive Western/Latin ecclesiastical authority.
Both in the Christian heartlands around the Mediterranean and in the insular, Germanic, and Slavonic space into which Christianity became rooted during these centuries, the needs of the Christian service, including biblical, parabiblical, and liturgical texts, were at the center of book culture. The fact that scriptural exegesis and its various reenactments in ritual can be claimed as the defining characteristic of this literary period does not mean to imply that the early Middle Ages were more pious than the preceding or subsequent Christian centuries, merely that other concerns were very rarely seen to be relevant to have entered into books. The relative scarcity of books can be illustrated by a recent estimate for the total production (by far most of which consisted of copies of already existing texts) of books in Latin script during these centuries: c. 11,000 in the 7th century, c. 44,000 in the 8th, and a significant rise in the 9th century with c. 202,000, then 136,000 in the 10th century—a rate of production that seems to have been upheld until c. 1050 (the total for the 11th cent. is c. 212,000). These are rough estimates and do not include books written in Greek, Glagolithic, or Cyrillic (beginning in the 9th century), but there is little doubt that the overall trends are the same in the East (while the book production in Arabic in the emirate and caliphate of Cordoba [756–1031] was probably more prolific in relative terms).

The Bible itself in Latin, Greek, and Church Slavonic (partial, second half of the 9th cent.) was usually found in separate books (by far the most popular were Psalms and gospels), while lectionaries, missals, antiphoners, and other liturgical volumes were equally vital for Christian service; they were often lavishly crafted, and their appearance and ritual handling by the clergy projected an image of books as a sacred object that is likely to have impressed people at the time. In the West, books were rare, had symbolic, ritual power, and contained sacred knowledge (some books were actual relics in themselves). The production of books was in the hands mainly of monks, and their preservation was taken care of by religious houses or by priests and bishops. In the East, book production, storage, and handling were more varied and the continuation of patterns from antiquity more pronounced. Even so, the Christian hierarchy of books was clearly operative, and biblical and liturgical volumes were also revered as holy objects.

Most new writing in this period can be understood as sediments around the biblical and liturgical core of learning. A main scientific impetus was centered on calculating Easter (Frankish and Irish computists, Bede); the composition of poetry was preponderantly related to liturgical performance and mostly anonymous, but some highly sophisticated and influential poetry is known to have been authored by renowned monks such as Theodore the Stoudite (d. 826), Symeon the new Theologian (d. 1022), and Notker the Stammerer (d. 912), as well the political poetry by John Geometres in the 10th century.

The creativity applied to exegesis can be exemplified through the pioneering work of Otfrid of Weissenburg (c. 790–c. 875). In his Evangelienbuch he undertook to rewrite a harmony of the four gospels into German rhymed verse (one of the few specimens of Old High German). His Latin introduction carefully explains the aims and challenges of carrying out this bold idea, and it is clear that the translation is a service to the original and not intended to substitute it. What is also apparent from Otfrid’s reflections is the
importance of *grammatica* as the art underpinning all kinds of exegesis. For the basic linguistic skills and their didactic and theoretical superstructure, the inheritance from the Roman school system was considerable: any proper reading of the scriptures and other sacred texts demanded systematic linguistic knowledge, as did the production of new texts, not least when one leapt into a hitherto-unwritten language.\(^{15}\)

The dominant type of new narratives in both East and West was saints’ lives. An old stock of apostles and early martyrs was shared by Latins and Greeks, but otherwise their saintly population differed widely, and all regions made much of their own local additions to sanctity. The local and more recent saints made up a crucial link between the paradigmatic suffering and sacrifice of Christ as described in the New Testament and the here and now. In the same way, new hagiographic writing was a natural extension of the biblical story, and it informed sermons and liturgical compositions just like the biblical text itself. The writing, rewriting, or translation of saints’ lives served as yet another way of understanding and approaching the ultimate holy as represented in the Bible and as reenacted throughout the ecclesiastical year. In the Latin West, there were some attempts to gather important saints lives into comprehensive “legendaries” in one or more volumes, but by far the most ambitious project of this kind was carried out in Constantinople toward the end of the 10th century by Symeon Metaphrastes, whose imperially supported team not only gathered saints’ lives according to the church calendar, but actually rewrote most of them in a more ornate style.\(^{16}\) This collection was a watershed in Greek hagiography.\(^{17}\)

The historiography of the period also served to codify the links between the holy of *illo tempore* and of the present, and to display this nexus for contemporary and future readers. Sacred history was entangled with imperial history. In the Eastern Empire, the continuity back to the first Christian emperor and his foundation in the early 4th century of Constantinople was straightforward. The West presented a more muddled picture, but one in which a remembered Latin Empire played an important role; this became more directly articulated beginning with the Frankish king, and emperor, Charlemagne (771–814). The fundamental annalistic overviews of Christian “world history” were composed before 600, namely by Eusebius (early 4th cent.) and Malalas (mid-6th cent.) in Greek, and by Jerome in Latin (late 4th cent.), texts that continued to be copied and formed the skeleton for new important redactions (Isidore, Bede, Synkellos, Theophanes) and translations and updates (Frankish Annals in Latin, Malalas in Church Slavonic, Anglo-Saxon and Irish Annals). Much more marketable to modern reading habits are the lively narrative histories by Gregory of Tours (Francia, c. 590), Bede (Northumbria, c. 730), Paul the Deacon (Italy, Francia, c. 790), Widukind (Saxony, c. 960), and Dudo (Normandy, c. 1000), while they still all conform to an exegetical scheme: contemporary local history was narrated as an extension of the exemplary biblical and imperial past through patterning or connecting via genealogies, topographies, and saints.

When Christendom, during late antiquity and the early Middle Ages, expanded beyond the realm of spoken Latin (Romance) and Greek, an exegetical demand for translation emerged. Biblical or parabiblical texts, sermons, saints lives, prayers, and more had to be
transferred, and some of this effort led to the establishing of written standards of Gothic, Armenian, Georgian, Irish, Anglo-Saxon, Old High German, and Church Slavonic (and Syriac in the Middle East). While these written languages had very different fortunes and held complex relationships to the continuous presence of the imperial Latin or Greek (in the West, Latin was also the universal liturgical language), they all served the pastoral and exegetical aims typical of the time; especially Anglo-Saxon literature displays highly interesting political and imperial themes in its translation program (stretching from late 9th to the mid-11th cent.).

Most types of texts taken down in this period relate to an exegetical/pastoral purpose, and the epics of later fame, *Hildebrandslied* (c. 830) and *Beowulf* (c. 1000), were outliers in their context as much as the Latin epics *Waltharius* (10th cent.) and *Ruodlieb* (c. 1030) were among Latin books.

Related to the multilingual challenges on the edges of the Greek and Latin spheres was the development of minuscule script in both Greek and Latin: this was a remarkably contemporary innovation (late 8th and 9th centuries) emanating from Constantinople and Francia. Together with other new features (such as space between words), texts were now easier to approach, not least for readers without Greek or Romance as the mother tongue. The late 8th and 9th centuries are also known, in both the East and West, for a certain new interest in “classical,” pre-Christian works of literature. This was in both cases a narrow elitist interest, and it remains difficult to explain in terms of the needs for standardization of written language, as the art of grammar had survived Christianization well, and as there were excellent rhetorical and stylistic models to find among Christian authors such as Basil the Great, Augustine, and many others. This interest also spawned little new literature of longer impact (though some excellent Carolingian court poetry in Latin does stand out in its own period). The main effect of this “classicism” lay in the copying of ancient texts. While these copies were quite few in number, it is no exaggeration to say that the 9th century basically saved classical ancient Greek and Latin literature—a phenomenon that would have immense impact after c. 1050 and continuously up to the present age.

The reason that it was possible was that there were still some tenuous paths that connected back to the world of ancient libraries. Most famously the library of the patriarch of Constantinople Photios (c. 810–c. 893), described in his great work of excerpts called *Library*, contained an unusual number of ancient Greek works, many of which were later lost, but many of which survive due to 9th-century copies that must have drawn on ancient books still extant in the city. Isidor of Seville also had access to an impressive library in the early 7th century, quoting in his influential *Etymologiae* numerous ancient Latin works subsequently lost. The main source of books behind the Carolingian copies of classical Roman literature, however, is likely to have been Rome: the papacy and Roman nobles must have had access to many ancient books still in private or ecclesiastical possession—but other bishoprics in Italy or Gaul may also have delivered precious book gifts or loans to the Carolingian court.

There are some striking imperial texts from the period that clearly point beyond exegetical concerns and for this very reason have also attracted modern scholarship and readership. Two are classicizing imperial biographies, that of Basil 1 (867–886), written by his grandson, Emperor Constantine 7 (912–958) and that of Charlemagne, written by...
the monk Einhard around 840. Another is the antiquarian compilation *Book on Ceremonies*, also by the Emperor Constantine, offering an ideal version of ceremonies at the Constantinopolitan court. A contemporary writer in Latin, Liutprand of Cremona (c. 920–973), also stands out for his remarkable chronicle, *Antapodosis*, and his brief but vivid description (*Relatio*) of his visit to Constantinople in 968 as an ambassador of the German emperor Otto I (ruled 936–973, crowned emperor 962). Although a bishop, Liutprand puts little emphasis on exegesis and the backdrop of biblical history (but some on classicism), and his writings read more like those of a civil servant; this reflects the emergence of lay notaries in 10th-century Italy, which would soon become a dynamic factor in written culture. Remarkably, Liutprand sets out to write the contemporary history of “all of Europe”—a concept otherwise very little used. In reality, this covered the imperial West (German and Italian lands) and the East (Constantinople); the importance of the Caliphate of Cordoba, however, is not entirely beyond his vision, as the *Antapodosis* is dedicated to a Christian bishop and counselor of the Caliph, Recemund. In this way, Liutprand points to the two most sophisticated and learned cities of Europe at his time, Constantinople and Cordoba, both holding books that would shape significant intellectual change in the 11th and 12th centuries.

**Experiments (c. 1050–c. 1300)**

During this period of book and literary history, a number of remarkable new developments occur, and one should resist a teleological narrative: when many of these new features appeared, there was rarely, if ever, any clear plan where the opening up of new intellectual and literary spaces would lead (least of all to the powerful critical voices of the later Middle Ages or to the national literatures of modernity). The term “experimental” to describe this period also conveys the pioneering spirit that must have accompanied much of the writing of the time. While exegesis was still a key concern in textual culture, a number of other textual practices only loosely, or not at all, concerned with exegesis emerge. The most striking features, often interconnected, were the following:

— the diversification of book production, circulation, and storing (including incipient book markets and private libraries);  
— a new appeal to textualized reasoning as an authority in legal, political, and religious disputes;  
— the appearance of lay writers such as lawyers, notaries, literate merchants, and aristocrats dictating books;  
— an unstoppable rise of ironic and satirical voices (including bawdiness);  
— the rise of mixed or blatant fiction in books, and its theorization;
— a new space for “fast” composition and consumption of texts in books, as a supplement to ornate writing and contemplative and sophisticated reading;²⁶
— the emergence and solid establishment of a number of new book languages (as they will be called here instead of “vernaculars”);²⁷
— a new organization of top-level research and knowledge (and its books) through schools and universities, including the (re-)emergence of philosophy as a vibrant field;²⁸
— the great wave of translations in Europe, mainly from Greek to Church Slavonic (and Georgian), from Arabic and Greek to Latin, and from Latin to a number of new book languages;
— an intensified, broader, and more sustained engagement with a growing number of pre-Christian “classical” texts, in both East and West, and in both places often tied to an imperial understanding of past and present.²⁹

The statistical estimates of books copied in Latin script by Buringh easily indicate the magnitude of what happened: while the 11th-century production was up from the poor performance of the 10th, it was still not much larger than that of the relatively prolific 9th century (c. 212,000); but the 12th century saw more than a tripling (c. 769,000) and the 13th more than the double of that (c. 1,762,000).³⁰ So the 13th century itself, in which the first universities were established, easily brought out more handwritten books than all of the previous medieval centuries together (something that would, amazingly, also be true of both the 14th and 15th centuries). Connected to this development is a similar meteoric rise of the number of documents in the 13th century, making it abundantly clear that many more people were involved in formal writing and that the importance of written testimony and written discourse took on a new role in society in this age of experiments.³¹

To set the beginning of this expansion around the middle of the 11th century ties in with intellectual and book history, but there is also broad consensus among historians that a general economic and demographic growth in Europe (and beyond) correlates well to this chronology.³²

The success of the legal profession in Latin Europe in this period provides one background to understand the expansive world of books and learning. At the beginning of the period, the formal freezing point between the Eastern and Western Churches (the Great Schism of 1054) was followed by the imperial pretensions of the so-called Gregorian Reform (initiated before Pope Gregory 7 (1073–1085) and evolved into the Investiture Contest (1076–1122); this opened up a new demand for legal expertise on either side of the sharply contested domains of authority of the Pope and the Western emperor.³³ The appeal to written legal arguments based on canon and Roman law stimulated the professional study of both and eventually led to the rise of legal schools, most importantly in Bologna from the early 12th century. The papacy led this arms race toward bureaucratization (popes were usually trained in law from the 12th century onward) with imposing legal collections such as Gratian’s Decretum (1140s, second version c. 1150) and Gregory IX’s Decretals (1230); a number of kingdoms followed suit.
with monumental law codes in new book languages mainly in the 13th century, often penned by professionals who had university training: Grágás (Iceland), Assises of Jerusalem (Jerusalem and Cyprus), Alfonso X’s Siete Partidas (Castile), Sachsenspiegel (Saxony), Jyske Lov (Denmark), Magnus Lagabøters Landslov (Norway), and more. The written legal culture also manifested itself widely already on lower levels through guilds’ statutes, town customs, and so forth, especially in highly urbanized northern Italy and the Low Countries. Such codification is sometimes characterized as a movement from “finding the law” in the early Middle Ages to “giving the law” in the High Middle Ages, a development that holds obvious book-historical implications.

The new demands and practices of persuasive, and legally binding, document writing were quickly theorized, most conspicuously in a long series of artes dictaminis—new rhetorical manuals—a genre that blossomed in the 12th and 13th centuries. Symptomatically the first of these treatises was composed during the beginning of the Investiture Contest (c. 1080) by an influential papal supporter, Alberico di Montecassino, but soon the genre and much of the actual letter writing that accompanied it would come to express both communal and imperial interests as well, and would bring with it a blossoming of the study of ancient Roman rhetoric in the Latin world.

While laypeople (with formal Latin or Greek education) were thus beginning to participate in mainstream intellectual trends, more lay voices in literature were added in a surprising way, by authors without Latin: the nobility in the West capitalized on the opportunity offered by the new book languages to express themselves directly through the writing or dictation of histories or memoirs; a few examples of this are Geoffrey of Villehardouin’s Chronicle (French, c. 1210), and the voluminous kings’ sagas in Norway and Iceland, for example the celebrated Snorri Sturluson’s Heimskringla (Old Norse, c. 1240), Philippe of Novara’s Chronicle (French, c. 1250), and King James of Aragon’s Book of Deeds (Catalan, c. 1270); in the same manner, merchants without Latin learning joined the fray—most famously Marco Polo dictated his Divisement du Monde (French, c. 1298). Laypeople contributed not only narratives, but also collections of sayings and other types of wisdom literature, conveying advice that tapped into clerical (and classical) writings but was clearly turned toward educating and refining a lay noble audience whose main interest was war and its code of honor: outstanding specimens are Kekaumenos’s Strategikon (Greek, c. 1070), Thomasin von Zerclaere’s Der wälsche Gast (German, 1216), and Philip of Novara’s L’ages d’hommes (Cyprus, c. 1260). This literature is a testimony that lay nobles and merchants began to possess book collections and that books now were found outside ecclesiastical contexts in significant numbers, and hence began to appear less invested with solemnity than in the previous period.

A changed attitude toward books can be seen on the concrete level of writing and reading speed. In the Greek, Slavonic, and Latin (and Hebrew) spheres, more economic and space-saving book layouts and handwriting developed. This happened on the high level of execution (formal angular Gothic, for instance, which compresses much more writing onto a page than the Carolingian hand), but also in the diversification of faster cursive book hands, not least in the Western university environments. Equally, many new texts
were composed in a faster mode; either they simply reported at length without much intertextual concern, such as French and Old Norse prose chronicles beginning around 1200, Latin reports as for instance by Henry of Livonia (c. 1225), the travelogue by the friar Rubruk (c. 1255, on his journey to Mongolia), the long and loosely associative Latin Chronicle by Salimbene (Italy c. 1280) or the Greek contemporary chronicle by Georgios Akropolites (c. 1270), and other Greek prose works from the 13th-century literary environment in Nicaea, characterized by Panagiotis Agapitos as a “more associative, more informal way of writing.”

Related to the proliferation of writing is also the appearance of a new figure: the author seeking patronage. While many texts, even from the exegetical period, included dedications and pleas for protection and support, this usually happened within an already secure ecclesiastical institution and a well-established relationship between institution, patron, and writer: the dedication often provided a sacred blessing of the work. By the 12th century, however, authors describe a (real or imagined) situation in which there is no certainty, perhaps not even any preexisting acquaintance between author and patron. This self-image of the begging poet is cultivated, for instance, by the leading lyrical poets Theodoros Prodromos (in Greek, fl. c. 1130–1150) and the Archpoet (in Latin, fl. c. 1160) and other of his anonymous colleagues of the well-known Carmina Burana collection (12th/13th cents.); but the active moving from court to court as singers or poets can also be documented in the cases of the canonical figures of Walther von der Vogelweide (lyric poet, in German, c. 1170–1230) and Chrétien de Troyes (writer of verse romances in French, c. 1130–1190). Such wandering professional poets and singers are also found before the 12th century, but the difference is that now some of them glimpsed the prospect of having their poetic creations collected in books. During the 12th and especially the 13th century, poetic anthologies in many languages appeared: most famously with 13th-century books transmitting provençal troubadour lyric from the 11th and 12th centuries (thorized by Ramon Vidal around 1200) and sagas quoting skaldic and eddaic verse (thorized by Snorri Sturluson around 1230) as well as with the 13th-century Sicilian school of song (thorized by Dante Alighieri just after 1300). Such a process, in the words of Marisa Galvez, turned songs into literary objects. This trend was also inspired through the strong classicist interest in the ancient Roman poets and their model collections (the reading of especially Horace and Ovid started to gather pace in the 11th century).

While studies of ancient Roman law were resuscitated in Byzantium already in the 9th century, the combination of interests in law and classical studies can be seen clearly after 1050 with the influential jurist Johannes Xifilinos (c. 1010–1075, patriarch as Johannes VIII from 1064), who was a great promoter of the study of ancient philosophy. A new wave of literature after c. 1050 was furthered especially by the classically inspired poet and letter writer Johannes Mauropos (d. c. 1075) and his famous pupil, the rhetorician and historian Mikael Psellos (1018–1078). Psellos’s remarkable Chronographia, a strongly authored and literarily unified series of ruler biographies covering the period 976–1078, includes an early instance of another effect of the professionalization of writing: irony. While intellectual writing created both legal and theological expertise (and vice versa)
and a higher level of theorizing and philosophizing, invariably it also created the distance and space in which both irony and satire would thrive. The literary play with the historical narrative so masterfully achieved by Psellos did not, however, spring from self-irony; on the contrary, it was his self-aggrandizement in the narrative as a courtier that drove him to this careful authorial staging of characters and plots, a strategy that is related in kind to the pretended self-pity in Prodromos and the Archpoet. The authorial distance to bookish matter materializes in yet another form with the Loire poets in the decades around 1100, top-level prelates who devised sophisticated intertextual games with the Roman love poet Ovid and assumed literary personas in the process, while at the same time developing a serious new discourse on Christian love, ethics, and love of poetry.

The scene was now also set for satire. Although there was no doubt much to deride before c. 1050, relatively little humor, irony, or satire creeps into books before this time, as their scarce numbers in general also left less room for diversity in the modes of writing. By the second half of the 11th century, however, the lid was off. One prominent way of satirizing in writing was the beast fable, helped along by the models provided by the early medieval Arabic (ultimately Sanskrit) tale *Kalilah wa Dimnah*, adapted into Greek by Symeon Seth (*Stephanites and Ichnelates*, Constantinople, second half of the 11th cent.) and the classical fables by Aesop and Phaedrus. Prominent Latin examples are *Ecbasis Captivi* (Germany, c. 1060) and Nivard of Ghent’s *Ysengrimus* (Ghent, c. 1150) giving rise to a number of translations (into French, German, Dutch, etc.).

Satire continued to thrive in the allegorical mode, most famously in the second installment of the extremely influential, if ambiguous, didactic poem on love, the *Roman de la Rose* (Jean de Meung, France c. 1270), but it also surfaced with literal social address as, for example, in the anonymous dialogue *Timarion* (Constantinople c. 1130–1140) imitating the ancient satirist Lucian, in Nigel of Longchamp’s *Speculum Stultorum* (Mirror of Fools, England c. 1190) targeting the various religious orders, or the framed short stories displaying the illusions of court life by Walter Map (England c. 1180, *De nugis curialium*, Courtier’s Trifles).

The fictional character of framed stories in general, long practiced in books in the Indian, Persian, and Arab worlds, surfaced in this period in Europe, continuing into late medieval literature, and partly developed through a keen interest in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, beginning in the late 11th century. The early European examples came from the areas closest to Arab inspiration, such as the 11th-century Greek adaptation *Syntipas* (The Tale of the Seven Sages) and an influential work from Iberia, namely the Christian convert Petrus Alfonsi’s *Disciplina clericalis* (c. 1100).

The distance between storyteller and audience created through the writing of books was fully exploited in long fictional narratives, traditionally categorized into romance and epic (or *Chansons de geste*); the distinction is a modern one, and the habit of authoring/taking down long adventurous tales (mainly in verse) should, in this period, be seen as one unified phenomenon of aristocratic entertainment via books. There are certainly
differences between epic and romance in terms of meter, possible layers of oral composition, overt play with fiction, dominant themes—love and adventure in romance and warrior heroism in epic—but the impressive number of texts (mainly in Greek, Latin, French, High German, Castilian) from the experimental period do not fall neatly into these two piles, and also crosses with history writing. In Constantinople, a major inspiration was the renewed reading of ancient Greek love novels, sparking the first wave of verse romances there, for instance by Theodoros Prodromos (*Rhodanthe and Dosikles*, c. 1130–1150). Soon they are followed in the West by a long series of verse romances in French, beginning with anonymous adaptations of the tales of Troy, Thebes, Eneas and Rome, and then by the canonical Arthurian stories authored by Chrétien de Troyes in the 1160s and 1170s—imitated and expanded in German around 1200 (e.g., Gottfried von Strassbourg, *Tristan*, and Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival*). Finally a long series of “historical” epics were composed, mainly in Latin, such as the trendsetting and much copied *Alexandreis* by Gauthier de Chatillon (c. 1180), but also in Greek (*Digenis Akritis*, second half of the 12th cent.), French (*Chanson de Roland*, first half of 12th cent.), German (*Niebelungen*, c. 1200), and Castilian (*El Cid*, c. 1200).

This quite dramatic rise in the number of books containing long tales (including all the individual copies of the same text) is strongly correlated to two factors: (1) books were beginning to be possessed privately by the nobility (this also included Latin books to be mediated by clerics), and (2) books were now be written for direct entertainment in some versions of the common tongue (or, in new book languages), mainly French, Old Norse, Castilian, Catalan, low-register (or “vernacular”) Greek, German, and more. A special expansion of aristocratic reading (and being read to) took place in Old Norse and French with a burst of prose writing (history and fiction and mixed forms) in the beginning of the 13th century, a textual development that indirectly attests new habits of reading and book possession among non-Latinate nobility.

A final crucial feature of the experimental period for book and intellectual culture and the ways it projected authority were, in Latin Europe, the universities emerging in the 13th century. Although very ad hoc institutions in their early forms of organization, they soon became a primary locus of authority in theology and jurisprudence, promoted and protected as they were by the papacy and partly staffed with the intellectual luminaries of the new prestigious orders, the Franciscans and the Dominicans. Textual production connected to the universities, ranging from students’ notebooks through new translations of Aristotle and his Arab commentators to luxury theological and legal volumes, probably outweighed all other book production in the otherwise prolific century. In broad terms the 13th century accumulated enormous amounts of new knowledge and opinions, stimulated by the disputational character of academic life; this led to an increasing need for systematization in the form of *summae* (surveys) and encyclopedias. Although there were certainly open disagreements among professors and special priorities of different institutions, the learned 13th century is largely characterized, like the booming economy of all Europe, as a phase of accumulation and system building. The main results of the
new philosophical, theological, and legal books were assimilated into papal, Franciscan, Dominican, and other networks, and the leading university professors spoke on behalf of the highest authority, including that of the university itself.

Even in the Greek world, the 13th century can, to some degree, be seen as a period of further experimentation and expansion. The Frankish-Venetian occupation of Constantinople from 1204 to 1261 sent the city itself into sharp decline, but the exile imperial court in Nicaea supported an impressive range of writers setting new trends; furthermore, a fruitful exchange of books and linguistic skills between East and West was now facilitated through the presence of Latin and French books, Latin friars, and other learned people: French romances became relevant for Greek writers, and a number of Roman classical works (by Cicero, Ovid, and more) were translated into Greek (by Maximos Planoudes, c. 1255–1305). When Emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos took over the city again, in 1261, Greek learning and literature still appeared to be a thriving and lasting resource of authority (“the Palaiologan revival”).

To the strongly accumulative and encyclopedic nature of 13th-century books in Latin Europe was added yet another twist: ambitions of transferring the Latin “library” of knowledge into new book languages. Most strikingly a comprehensive translation and codification program was set in motion by the Castilian king Alfonso X, “The Wise” (1252–1284); though only completed to a small degree, the Castilian texts produced were so voluminous that many of them are still awaiting basic research.46 A number of more private initiatives were also taken, such as the encyclopedia in French by the Florentine exile Brunetto Latini, *Le Trésor* (c. 1265), focusing on the virtues needed to govern a city, or the immense literary production of the philosopher and missionary Ramon Lull (1232–1315), for a great part in Catalan, all destined to assist a peaceful conversion of Muslims. The most famous encyclopedic work in the common tongue was composed just after 1300, namely Dante Alighieri’s idiosyncratic *Commedia* (c. 1310–1320). While this transfer of knowledge from Latin books into French, Castilian, Catalan, and Italian ones in one way grips the essence of the of the experimental period, it also points to the rise of private voices in books that would become so prolific and troublesome to institutional authority in the 14th and 15th centuries.

**Critique (c. 1300–1450)**

In this last period of the European handwritten book, the continuation and diversification of both exegesis and experiments constitute an obvious feature; in fact, many of the disputes and much of the intellectual energy in these 150 years were concerned with exegesis. But the age can, in addition, be claimed to be “critical” due to the confluence of several factors.
First of all, the 14th century has long carried the heading crisis due to the moral and demographic shock of 1347–1349 (and subsequently recurring plagues): the population of Europe only reached 13th-century levels again in the 15th century. The crisis of the 14th century also normally refers to the serious famine of 1315–1317, to popular uprisings, and to the incessant warfare between France and England (the Hundred Years War 1337–1453); furthermore, the crisis was apparent, seen from the point of view of the Eastern Roman Empire and from Christendom in general, in the form of the strong expansion of the Ottoman Empire, achieving a stranglehold on Constantinople that was in practice reduced to a vassal state at the mercy of the Ottomans already in the late 14th century. Finally, the authority of the papacy was continuously questioned as it was uprooted from Rome and moved to Avignon under the control of the French king (1309–1377) and went through a number of schisms and the profound challenge of the conciliar period (1378–1417 and 1431–1449), in which the principle surfaced that a council could have higher authority than the elected pope.

The period was also critical in two other senses—related to criticism and critique. While the age of experiments had produced a wealth of satire, their aim was to show, through mockery, that better behavior by certain social groups and religious orders was required. What we see in the 14th and 15th centuries, across a wide range of literature, is criticism of the societal, epistemic, and ritual order as such—linked in the last resort to the erosion of patriarchal, imperial, and papal authority and, more concretely, to the growing number of independent lay or clerical voices claiming to be able to establish their own religious or intellectual authority.

Finally, in terms of literary critique, the epoch offers the new phenomenon of aesthetic and intellectual validation between and within new book languages, sometimes without recourse to the imperial languages of Latin and Greek. At the same time classical Latin and Greek are strongly upgraded in the rebellious, and soon victorious, discourse of the early humanists, claiming the classics as the critical linguistic and literary standard. The riches and diversity of textual culture in this period—now also comprising further new book languages such as Czech, Middle English, Low German, and Swedish—is such that the few paragraphs devoted to it here must be even less representative in the examples than the previous two period sketches; fortunately a large part of the period is covered magisterially by the very inclusive overview edited by David Wallace in Europe: A Literary History 1348–1418. This last period also stands out because its key features are meant to characterize the expanding world of the Latin West much more than the contracting one of the Greek East. While some features are still shared and there are more points of contacts with the West, the fortunes of the Eastern Empire were such, especially in its last century, that also in learning and literature it follows its own collapsing and fragmentizing logic rather than some general trends.

Looking again at the numbers of handwritten books estimated by Buringh for the Latin West, we find that the explosive pattern continues: the 14th century represents a significant rise from the 13th (2,747,000, up from 1,762,000), and the figure for the 15th century (excluding print) almost doubles that of the 14th century: 4,999,000. While the
demographic crisis had had some negative impact in the world of books, two key factors pulled in the other direction: (1) the breakthrough of the paper codex and (2) growing lay literacy and book markets. Although paper appears in Al-Andalus already in the 11th century, its real impact on European book production was not felt before the late 14th century. An improved technique of producing paper was invented in Italy in the 1260s, and paper production spread gradually in the core European regions in the 14th century. Increased use of paper can also be observed in the Eastern Roman Empire, although through imports rather than own production. Uwe Neddermeyer has identified a dramatic surge in book production in the Western Empire, Italy, and France from c. 1370, and from around 1400 books copied on paper began to outnumber those on the more expensive writing material of parchment, both speeding up production and lowering prices. Thus paper reinforced the spread and use of books across and outside institutions, and it helped expand book markets so that they became a focus of business incentives that would soon lead to the invention of moveable-type printing around 1450. As demonstrated by Neddermeyer, a veritable mass production of paper-manuscript codices was reached in the 1430s, 1440s, and 1450s (and lasting through the 1460s, when the breakthrough of print made the numbers plummet dramatically).

A fundamental distrust of imperial and patriarchal authority was already unleashed in the Eastern Empire in the last quarter of the 13th century, following Emperor Michael VIII’s sudden push for a formal reunion with the Western Church at the council of Lyon in 1274. There was very little popular or elite will in the Greek Orthodox world to actually bow to the authority of the pope, and the union was finally repudiated after the death of Michael and the replacement of his patriarch, but not without much bloodshed and mobilization of partisan theology on both sides. In the early and mid-14th century, a new fundamental crisis of the imperial/patriarchal nexus was rekindled by the controversy surrounding the mystically inspired teachings of Gregorios Palamas (c. 1296–1359) and his movement known as hesychasm. The controversy triggered enormous divisions in the empire and beyond (and became entangled with civil wars), and although Palamas’s teachings were officially approved in 1351, one can imagine the result of decades of uncertainty of who were in power and what doctrine was to be respected. Less than a hundred years after Michael VIII had recovered the city, there was little left of the promised return to Constantinopolitan intellectual and religious leadership and the last hundred years of the Greek Empire until 1453 was characterized by intellectual fragmentation (with centers in Mount Athos and elsewhere), the elite turning to Western contacts and help, and even conversions to the Roman rite by leading figures.

The character of hesychasm, in which a primordial divine light may be glimpsed by certain individuals, also highlights the challenge to institutional hierarchies always present in mysticism, namely the possibility that, in effect, some people can become their own religious interpreters and even prophets. This was to become a major trend in the Latin West in the 14th century. Some of the books produced by these self-authorizing voices (clerical and lay, male and female) drew on modest education while others had the imprint of university learning. As Ian Wei has pointed out with a felicitous phrase, one can discern, just around 1300, a new group of “anti-intellectual intellectuals” reacting to, but...
also capitalizing on, the edifice of 13th-century learning (notwithstanding that establishment thought of course kept developing in the 14th century). One such prominent thinker was the Dominican preacher Eckhart (c. 1260–c. 1328), himself a university man, but also one who engaged with audiences of men and women in German. Appealing to individuals by cultivating non-knowledge and losing their selves, ultimately seeing the divine in the uncreated light inside themselves that the hesychasts also spoke of, Eckhart ended up questioning the value of his own education as well as of the ecclesiastical hierarchy that administered the sacraments (and was called to defend himself). During the same decades, Dante Alighieri took his immense learning into his own hands and assembled, in a prophetic voice, the evidence against the primacy of papal power over secular, imperial power (in Monarchia, 1312/1313, and similarly in the Commedia); this was only one of many 14th-century treatises dealing with the problem of ultimate authority in the Latin West. The building of the learned systems of the 13th century had reached saturation and too great a diversification of voices to remain stable; the fact that the papacy had been transferred to Avignon also undermined its previous authority to a significant degree. In a recent reading by Unn Falkeid, such different prominent authors as Dante (1265–1321), Petrarch (1304–74), the political theorist Marsilius of Padua (c. 1275–1342), the franciscan philosopher William of Ockham (c. 1288–1347), and the visionaries (later pronounced saints) Bridget of Sweden (1303–1373) and Catherine of Siena (1347–1380) can all be seen as critics of the Avignon papacy. The criticism became radical in the writings and teachings of two other university people, John Wycliff in England (c. 1325–84), and Jan Hus (1369–1415) in Bohemia; they both built on their great learning and its transfer into books into respectively English and Czech to lead their religious movements, now openly questioning the priestly hierarchy and some core teachings of the Roman Church—and at the same time promoting writing and reading in the common tongue.

Criticism of the order of books and the authority they represented around 1300 in the Latin world and its universities came not only from university people themselves. Numerous lay notaries, lawyers, and administrators of the rich Italian towns were learned, and concerned with writing and speaking eloquently, but not necessarily with the debating methods of the universities and the sermon style of the friars, nor with determining the right solution of a theological issue. These aspirations gave rise to early humanism, which cultivated Roman eloquence, a historically aware Latin philology, urban values, and, usually at least, exalted the local survivals of antiquity in the face of the universal powers of papacy and empire. In the period in question (c. 1300–c. 1450), with Petrarch as a key promoter (though not the first), the humanist discourse, literature, and taste went from strength to strength, inviting fugitive Greek scholarship in, and began to spread to France, and beyond. This intellectual movement also received its energy from critique, namely of the immediate past and present through the admiration of the distant past, and can therefore be tied together with other forms of critical discourse of the 14th century, not in its aims, but in its anti-authoritarian roots.
While the experimental period already saw direct literary exchange between new book languages, mainly radiating from Occitan lyric and French romances, the critical period brought this traffic to a new level, now with a distinctive stamp of the prominent “author” and his fame. Dante, Boccaccio, Petrarch, Chaucer, Christine de Pizan, and Villon were all active in a period when new book languages had reached such a dissemination and maturity that self-canonizing via the formal, poetic, and linguistic qualities in these languages began to carry weight. The obsession with personal fame as writers/poets can be seen in the ironic, though still self-important, early piece by Chaucer, *The House of Fame* (c. 1380). Chaucer is also a prime example of literary validation through non-Latinate models in the inspiration he drew from the Italian and French poets. This cultivation of authorial fame did have some predecessors in the earlier period, and it was not developed only within the literary field—we now also know the names of famous builders, painters, singers, and other craftsmen—but it is significant that the modern search (since the 19th century) for the beginnings of the genius author almost always leads to the 14th century. What is certain is that the lyrical fame and impact of a figure such as Petrarch, as an admired personality and as the label of a body of writing in Italian, was unimaginable in Western Europe in the 13th century. This situation also gave rise to literary critique and commentary in the common tongues and between them, a critique that had previously been concerned with writing in Latin (and Greek).

The age of the handwritten book and of the Christian possession of Constantinople both came to a close around 1450, and three remarkable but also symptomatic books can be singled out for the sense they give us of the contemporary perception of epochal change.

One is a complex meta-critical work by the famous Renaissance architect and humanist scholar Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472). In a long Latin prose work finished in 1450, *Momus*, he revives a little-known figure of classical mythology, the god of satire and criticism, and casts him both as a critic of Jove and as an anti-hero for whom a tragic end is in store. The work has been read as criticism of the papacy (Jove who wants to reorder the entire world), but the critic himself, along with almost every possible social group, is being thoroughly mocked along the way.

The second is a very sincere booklet, but equally fantastic, in which the unity of the faiths of all peoples (including Greeks, Bohemians [Hussites], Muslims, Hindus, Mongols, and more) is theoretically established. *On the Peace of the Faith* was written in 1453, under the immediate impression of the fall of Constantinople, by the German philosopher, scientist, humanist, papal legate, and cardinal Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464). He played key roles in the Council of Basel and as a diplomat traveling to Constantinople in 1437–1438 in the last attempt to bring the churches together. The treatise sets out to face the new situation for humanity after the Ottoman victory, and proposes the radical idea—coming from a papal establishment intellectual—that all faiths are in fact united and worship the same deity (although a number of people still need to understand the concept of Trinity) and should be allowed different rituals to do so.
In this way, the fall of Constantinople brought about a new religious and geographical vision to Western intellectuals, although not only concerned with appropriating Greek learning and peaceful dreams of unity. Nicholas’s long-time friend, colleague, and widely traveled diplomat, the humanist Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini, was a prolific writer before he was elected pope (Pius II, 1458–1464). His outstanding chronicle on Europe was finished just before his papal election in 1458, and the idea to write it was also occasioned by the shock of 1453. Although his grand tour of contemporary European peoples and kingdoms was presented as an imperial history—and was only known as Europe in its unplanned success as a printed book—the theme of Europe and the importance of the Ottoman expansion is clear from the text. When the author became pope, his vision of unity was less peaceful than that of Nicholas of Cusa, but his writing testifies to the effect of the new geography of “Europe,” ironically becoming a vision only after the West understood what it had lost with the fall of Constantinople. The imperial and religious geography of Europe had now changed fundamentally, and so had the main medium in which to discuss it.

Discussion of the Literature

There are numerous excellent language-specific literary histories as well as genre histories, but there is no single narrative that attempts to cover all of medieval Europe, neither in an old-fashioned sense of Latin Europe, nor in the wider sense including the Byzantine and Slavonic world and Al-Andalus. The closest one gets is the multivolume and multi-authored thematic Lo spazio letterario del medioevo, a highly impressive editorial effort covering medieval Latin, vernaculars, Byzantium, Slavonic, Arabic, Hebrew, and so on with excellent bibliographies and more, but still mainly conceived of as separate literatures representing different “cultures.” It is to be recommended for its unusual, strong emphasis on medieval Latin and Greek, often sidelined in mainstream literary history, as well as on book-historical mechanisms of textual production and dissemination, but it offers encyclopedic guidance into selected topics rather than a single vision or storyline. One-volume narratives of medieval Latin literature are hard to come by, but now there is excellent guidance by Paolo Chiesa in his recent overview (with strong emphasis on the period before 1200). For Byzantine literature, a highly useful short overview, although restricted to handbook-like entries, is provided by Jan Olof Rosenqvist; this can be read together with Panagiotis A. Agapitos’s reflections on the fundamental problems of writing the history of Byzantine literature.

A sophisticated placing of European medieval literatures in a global context is offered by Alexander Beecroft in An Ecology of World Literature, especially strong on comparing the hierarchies and functions of written languages in the premodern world. Beecroft’s (and others’) characterization of Latin, Greek, and Arabic as cosmopolitan languages is supplemented here by the term “imperial languages,” coined by Christian Høgel.
The power of literary history that crosses between Latin and a number of vernacular languages is evidenced in the classic study by Peter Dronke on *The Medieval Lyric*. The same holds true of, for instance, Alastair Minnis’s *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, Elizabeth M. Tyler’s *England in Europe*, and Karla Mallette’s *The Kingdom of Sicily, 1100–1250: A Literary History*. A comprehensive vision of European literature from the post-plague decades (1348–1418) is the aforementioned town- and trade-route–based history edited by David Wallace.

The challenges of European medieval literary history in the early 21st century are addressed in the journal *Interfaces: A Journal of Medieval European Literatures* (2015–); see especially the programmatic essay in issue 1. For an elaboration of the canon formation of medieval European literature—in the wide sense used here—aligned with the narrative employed here, there is a supplementary article by the present author.

**Further Reading**

For the hypercanonical authors mentioned at the beginning of this entry as well as for the anonymous “national” epics like *Beowulf* and *Niebelungen*, it is easy to find editions, translations into many modern languages, introductions, handbooks, and professional websites. Beyond these, here are a few suggestions of exciting reads in English translations from different genres and geographies of European medieval texts (these are also translated into a number of other modern languages):

**Historiography:**

Psellos, Michael. [*Chronographia*, Constantinople, c. 1078]. *Fourteen Byzantine Rulers*. The translation by E. R. A. Sewter (1953) is available [online](#).

**Philosophy:**

Hazm, Ibn. *The Ring of the Dove* [a treatise on love, Cordoba, c. 1022]. The translation by A. Arberry (1951) is available [online](#).

**Travelogue:**


**Epic:**

Autobiography:


Notes:


(4.) As far as any “pagan” or pre-Christian literature beyond the fringes of the Roman and Carolingian Empire has survived, e.g., in Irish and Old Norse or through Latin renditions and descriptions, this was always due to Christian book culture, which strongly framed such texts; see for instance Annette Lassen, Odin på kristent pergament: en teksthistorisk studie (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2011).


(7.) Neddermeyer, Von der Handschrift, shows very clearly that during 1460s the hand copying of books in the core European regions plummeted.


(9.) This is a paraphrase of Bonaventure’s prologue to his commentary on Peter Lombard’s Libri sententiarum (c. 1250) from Francine Mora, “Auteurs affichés, auteurs dissimulés: le recours aux citations dans le Commentaire sur l’Enéide attribué à Bernard Silvestre,” Interfaces: A Journal of Medieval Literatures 3 (2016): 129–142. Bonaventure’s precise description is also quoted and discussed in a seminal work on medieval authorship by Alastair Minnis, Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages (Aldershot, UK: Wildwood House 1988), 94–95. For the gliding scale from copying through rewriting to authoring, see also Douglas Kelly, The Conspiracy of Allusion: Description, Rewriting, and Authorship from Macrobius to Medieval Romance (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 1999) and the wide-ranging essays collected by Slavica Ranković et al., eds., Modes of Authorship in the Middle Ages (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2012).


(20.) See the theme issue of *Interfaces* 3 (2016) with further references: *Rediscovery and Canonization: The Roman Classics in the Middle Ages*.


by Anselmo da Besate was composed just on the brink of this period, around 1046; see Monika Otter, “Medieval Sex Education – Or: What About Canidia?,” Interfaces: A Journal of Medieval Literatures 3 (2016): 71–89.


Comparative Approach to the Convergence and Divergence of Medieval Civilizations,”

(33.) Melve, Inventing the Public Sphere.


(36.) See Mortensen, “The Sudden Success of Prose.”


(41.) Some exceptions were the presumably parodic grammar by the so-called Virgilius Maro (7th cent.), the epic poem Waltharius (9th cent. see above), some works by high-ranking authors such as Greek Archbishop Leo “The Philosopher” (d. c. 870) and the bishop and (Western) imperial logothete Leo of Vercelli (d. 1026).

(42.) For an overview see Barry Taylor, “Frames Eastern and Western,” in D’Orient en Occident: Les recueils de fables enchâssées avant les Mille et une Nuits de Galland
European Literature and Book History in the Middle Ages, c. 600-c. 1450


(44.) Mortensen, “The Sudden Success of Prose.”

(45.) Agapitos, “Literature and Education in Nicaea.”


(47.) On the importance of lay literacy in a book-historical perspective in this period, see de Hamel, “The European Medieval Book.”


(50.) For the conditions of book culture in its last phase of copying by hand, see the outstanding case study of a leading Western intellectual (Jean Gerson) by Daniel Hobbins: Authorship and Publicity Before Print. He reproduces one of Neddermeyer’s key statistics on pp. 8–9.

(51.) Wei, Intellectual Culture, 392–408.


The text of *De Pace Fidei* and an English translation by Jasper Hopkins can be found at the *Cusanus Portal*.


*La letteratura latina del medioevo Un profilo storico* (Rome: Carocci editore, 2017)


