

Call for Papers

“Stratigraphies of Knowledge, Memory, and the Self: Notebooks in the Medieval Euro-Mediterranean World”

Conference, Historisches Kolleg, Munich, December 11–12, 2025

Organizers: Tobias Daniels (LMU München), Alexander Riehle (Harvard University)

We are inviting proposals for papers on medieval notebooks and collections of notes in any language of the Euro-Mediterranean realm.

Research on the period conventionally referred to as the Middle Ages commonly focuses on sources that were created within and for educated and political elites, whether they be written documents, visual representations, or material artefacts. What is more, today we commonly encounter medieval textual production in carefully curated critical editions, which give the (often misleading) impression that they are based homogenous, neatly arranged, and impeccably transmitted manuscripts. However, medieval books in fact present a much more diverse, “messier” picture of written culture, one in which we can regularly see traces of multiple different forms and levels of literacy. Studying processual and unfinished aspects of writing in these manuscripts can help us gain insight into the experiences, cultural practices, and self-representation of individuals and their social milieus. This conference focuses on one specific, lesser-known “genre” of medieval manuscript culture: notebooks and collections of personal notes.

Most composite and miscellaneous manuscripts are of a philosophical-poetic nature (so-called florilegia or anthologies) or come from the mercantile sector, such as the abundantly preserved house or family books. In most cases, these codices belong to the late Middle Ages and the urban-bourgeois milieu. By contrast, notebooks and collections with personal records such as memories, lists, obituary notes, and private financial transactions—including those entered into the blank spaces of manuscripts of other content—are generally rare in the Middle Ages. Despite its relative scarcity, this diverse material has never been studied in any comprehensive way.

Since the 1980s, research on intellectual history has primarily focused on careers and networks. Particularly in the Germanophone realm, sociological approaches to the creation and transmission of knowledge have dominated the field. More recently, there has been a shift towards questions of intellectual techniques and their social and cultural-historical situatedness. Such avenues can build on the work of Goody, Clanchy, Mary and Richard Rouse, and Malcolm Parkes, who have connected the organization of writing to mental processes, and on recent work on page layout, the materiality of texts, the practice of commentary, and the use of diagrams.

The conference taps into such cultural-historical approaches to medieval written culture and utilizes codicological models for the “stratigraphy” and “architecture” of composite manuscripts to illuminate the complexity, multilayeredness, and fluidity of knowledge organization, memory processes, and self-representation in medieval notebooks. It pursues a comparative approach for the Euro-Mediterranean world, bringing research on notes and notebooks in the cultural spheres of the three major Abrahamic religions in Europe, North Africa, and the Near East (including Byzantium) into comparative dialogue.

Confirmed speakers: Patrick Andrist (Munich / Fribourg), Richard Corradini (Vienna), Ahuva Liberles (Tel Aviv), José Maksimczuk (Hamburg), Gabor Toth (Luxembourg).

Papers will ideally present case studies on one or more manuscripts, but other formats (e.g., discussion of a specific question or methodological issue) are also welcome. Scholars of all career stages, including graduate students, are encouraged to apply. Presentations can be in either English or German.

*Please email your proposal comprising a tentative title, abstract of 200–300 words, and short curriculum vitae (max. 2 pages) to the organizers (tobias.daniels@mg.fak09.uni-muenchen.de, ariele@fas.harvard.edu) by **April 30**. Speakers will be reimbursed for travel and accommodation expenses up to 300 EUR.*