Neglected Voices in Premodern Sciences, from Persia to Iceland

Most of the studies about Pre-modern European sciences have been dedicated to the role played by a relatively small number of primary characters (Avicenna, Albert the Great, Roger Bacon, Nicole Oresme, Nicholas of Cusa, to name but a few) who had a significant impact on knowledge, culture and modi pensandi of the Latin West throughout and beyond the Middle Ages. However, this presentation has led to two closely related consequences. The first consequence is that while the works of the “main” authors tend to be thoroughly studied and thus their ideas continuously observed and reinforced, those of other, less known characters, have received little, if any, attention, or have simply been forgotten, primarily when they evolved on the fringe of the mainstream. The second consequence is that Pre-modern and Medieval science is often perceived as a monolith, one composed, and shaped, only by a few inspired authors.

In response to this observation, this book aims to shed light on these neglected voices in Pre-modern sciences and to give a voice even to those ‘underrated’ actors (authors, scribes, compilers, copyists, readers, users…) who nevertheless have somehow contributed to the formation of Medieval science. Within this perspective, the volume addresses these issues from the point of view of both ideas and practices, which are particularly delicate to interrogate when dealing mainly with textual material. For this purpose, several axes (not exhaustive) have been defined:

1) Authors against the tide: This section is particularly interested in authors who, in various ways, went against the major scientific tendencies of their time and developed their science as “free electrons” by contrast to their contemporaries. Several cases are to be considered: (1) authors whose scientific involvement goes against the traditional ways of thinking by exploring original and even daring theories and practices in opposition to what was in vogue at their time; (2) authors who evolved outside the main intellectual centers and networks of the time. This can be due either to their geographical situation on the periphery of the traditional radiating places in the development of sciences or because they did not belong to any organization, institutional group or religious order promoting the diffusion and assimilation of knowledge.

2) Actors in the “physical” margins: This point focuses on those who added scientific contents into the “broader margins” of a Late Medieval work, i.e. in the actual margins, at the beginning or end of a manuscript or of a codicological unit. The contributions can analyze the authors’ identities, if they can be reconstructed, as well as the new contents which were added (ideas, sources, relationships with the main texts, reasons for which they were inserted, circulation…). Moreover, the texts considered can be both paratextual additions (comments, glosses, scholia…) or actual “guest texts”.

3) Unknown actors: This point questions the role of discrete authors, almost invisible and unknown, in the development and diffusion of Medieval knowledge. It aims to bring to
light unpreserved authors who are known only through other posterior works. Within this perspective, one could consider both characters who left no written traces and authors whose works have been lost and are only known by later quotes. Papers focusing on figures evolving in an “oral culture” (for instance in the pre-Islamic context), who provided a basis for further scientific developments, will be particularly welcome. Similarly, the scientific contribution of teachers, whose ideas and practices were kept through the writings of their students, deserves to be taken into account. Finally, papers highlighting the role of oral witnesses, practitioners and merchants, who might contribute to the transmission of knowledge by bringing empirical data taken from their daily practice, will be highly appreciated.

4) Authors between traditions: Another line of research will be dedicated to the study of the dissemination and use of scientific knowledge in areas outside the scientific field (art, literature…). In the first case, this volume is interested as much in the depictions of the figure of the experimenter or the scholar as in the artistic exploitation of the scientific disciplines. In the second case, a particular attention will also be paid to the integration of scientific knowledge into the literary domain. The sciences, as well as some scientific figures, become motifs and themes with specific narrative functions. Conversely, one might also consider the way in which scientific discourse is fed and expressed through a literary medium.

5) Authors on the fringes of historiography: Finally, this book also wants to give a voice to authors who received less attention despite their actual importance and significant contribution to premodern sciences. In particular, the historiographical readings and the appreciation of an author’s significance have been oriented, among other criteria, by their impact on European thought. Nevertheless, this attitude tends to exclude certain important characters from our usual research horizons. This is notably the case of authors who were not translated into Latin during the Middle Ages and who hardly reached European Latin scholars at that time. From this point of view, this book gives the opportunity to reassess the original contribution of such authorities and even to reevaluate their possible influence on later works in more indirect ways, outside the scope of the translations.

Abstracts (250/300 words) should be sent to:
Meyssa Ben Saad (mbs.bsaad@gmail.com), Mattia Cipriani (mattia.cipriani80@gmail.com), Grégory Clesse (gregory.clesse@uclouvain.be), or Florence Ninitte (Florence.Ninite@univ-nantes.fr).

Contributions can be in English (US), Italian and French.

Abstracts submission deadline: on the 30th of November 2021.