

Circulation in Premodern World Literature: Historical Context, Agency, and Physicality¹

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Recent discussions on world literature have stressed the importance of circulation as a criterion of worldliness, in both a literal and figurative sense. This paper focuses on how to correlate circulation with premodern world literature. More specifically, I deal with those works either produced in or associated with Outremer that enjoyed a wide circulation within western Europe in contrast to works that, despite not having enjoyed such a wide circulation, encapsulate the world in their physicality.

Keywords: world literature / medievalism / literary mediation / cultural space / cultural circulation

To David Damrosch

During recent years some scholars—whether medievalists by training or not—have voiced concerns about the degree of attention medieval literatures (or, in broader terms, “premodern” literatures) receive from two “disciplines”; namely, comparative literature and world literature. In her contribution to the 2004 report on the state of comparative literature for the American Comparative Literature Association, Caroline D. Eckhardt has surveyed the presence of studies on medieval literatures in the ACLA conferences from 2001 to 2005 and concluded that “ACLA presentations by medievalists may be mostly adventitious, or dependent on the energies and professional networks of particular session-organizers, rather than representing the participation of scholars who feel integrated into the association as a whole,” because out of the approximately 2,600 papers presented only fifty-nine were devoted to “evidently medieval topics” (142). The situation described by Eckhardt does not seem to have undergone any substantial change since 2005. Of the 190 seminars proposed for the 2011 ACLA conference held in Vancouver, only two seminars dealt with medieval topics. In turn, David Damrosch has called attention to the fact that discussions on the canon have had the undesirable result of a shift

of focus from “earlier to later periods” (16). Contrary to this tendency, Damrosch advocates world literature as “multitemporal as well as multicultural” (16), and therefore as a corrective force against “the insistent *presentism* that erases the past as a serious factor” (17).

Two questions seem to be of primary importance in relation to the status of medieval literatures within the disciplines of comparative and world literature. First, is this situation restricted to these two “disciplines” and their professional associations? A glance at the Modern Language Association might a priori provide a positive answer because the MLA has a specific division and a discussion group devoted to “Comparative Studies in Medieval Literature.” However, if one examines MLA publications, one notices that the association has published several books on individual medieval works, but that none of them either includes the terms “comparison” or “comparative” in the title or presents itself as a comparative study in medieval literature. Second, is this situation restricted to U.S. academia? Two European examples show that this is not the case. The French Society for General and Comparative Literature has organized thirty-five conferences since its foundation in 1956, of which only three conferences (in 1964, 1977, and 2002) dealt with medieval topics. In addition, of the eighteen conferences organized by the Spanish Society for General and Comparative Literature, which was founded in 1977, only two (in 2004 and 2009) included medieval topics. The situation is no more favorable in the International Comparative Literature Association, which has included medieval topics in only one of its conferences so far (in 1988).

The reason I have placed the term “discipline” in quotation marks when applying it to comparative literature and world literature is rather simple. After being diagnosed with a “crisis” by René Wellek in the 1950s, comparative literature has been declared dead as a discipline, both in the U.K. during the 1990s (Bassnett 47) and in the U.S. during the first years of the twenty-first century (Spivak). The extinction of many departments of comparative literature at American universities seems to ratify the death of the discipline, although I am not quite sure whether the causality is in fact not in reverse. What I mean by this is the following: is it not easier for deans to suppress comparative literature departments when comparative literature scholars themselves state that the discipline has died? As for world literature, whereas some scholars advocate it is a new discipline or even a new “paradigm” (Thomsen 2), others argue that world literature is at best a further extension of comparative literature.

The situation of medieval literatures within comparative and world literature studies as well as the situation of the two disciplines themselves are in marked contrast to the situation of medievalists, who do not seem to expe-

rience any difficulty with either their object of study or their discipline. An exception to this is the brief period, in the 1990s, of the “revisionist movement in Romance medieval studies” (Nichols 1) titled “New Medievalism.” What is more striking is the fact that medievalists consider themselves to be *comparatists avant la lettre* because their field of expertise requires competence in several languages and a dismissal of translation as a primary research tool. I am interested here neither in the discussion of discipline borders between comparative literature and world literature, nor in the intrinsic comparative dimension of medievalism advocated by medievalists. Although I am not sure whether arguments from personal experience are scientifically acceptable, I have found that being trained in both disciplines—medievalism and comparative literature—has proved to be a productive “paradox” because each field has posed questions to the other one that, at least in my case, would not have been asked had I not had this dual training.

One question that such a dual training may lead one to ask is what medieval world literature is. Whereas neither medievalism nor comparative literature has thus far posed such a question for distinct reasons (Europe, wherever its borders are, is the “world” for medievalism, and comparison is a method that according to comparative literature may be only applied to “modern” literatures); world literature studies are believed to have provided an answer without, ironically, having posed the question, simply as a result of including “medieval masterpieces” in anthologies of world literature. For obvious reasons, I do not intend to provide here a definitive answer to the question of medieval world literature. My objective is much more limited. On the one hand, I test the applicability to the medieval period of a definition of world literature as provided by Damrosch due to its important impact in world literature scholarship. Because Damrosch’s definition stresses the relevance of circulation, my analysis focuses on a specific and most important cultural route, the one between continental Europe and Outremer in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and on a specific work that circulated not only from Outremer to continental Europe, but also from continental Europe back to Outremer and widely across continental Europe. I am referring to William of Tyre’s crusading chronicle *Historia rerum in partibus transmarinis gestarum*. On the other hand, I test the suitability of medieval artifacts for world literature scholarship in accordance with the tenet whereby definitions of world literature based upon circulation should not overlook the issues of historical context, agency, and the “book’s” physicality. Otherwise, circulation will be at best an empty and metaphorical signifier. The *Lindisfarne Gospels* are the medieval artifact selected for such a test. The essay ends with some final remarks that may help clarify the relevance of a collaborative work between comparative/world literature and medievalism.

The “medieval” of world literature: William of Tyre’s circulating library

William of Tyre was a “colonist” born in Jerusalem circa 1130 who—as was and would later continue to be the case with the offspring of wealthy colonial families—was educated at the most prestigious metropolitan universities (theology in Paris and Orleans, and civil law in Bologna). He spent almost twenty years in Europe before returning to the colony—the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem—in 1165 (Edbury and Rowe 13), where he was immediately granted a prebend at Bishop William of Acre’s cathedral, most probably as a result of the bishop’s need to “recruit someone trained in the Bolognese school of civil law to his staff” (Edbury and Rowe 15).

The importance of an intellectual such as William of Tyre, trained in the leading European centers of education, did not pass unnoticed among the authorities of the Latin kingdom. In 1167, King Amaury, after returning victorious from his campaign in Egypt to marry the Greek princess Maria Comnena, succeeded in granting William the vacant archdeaconry of Tyre. After that William was employed as a servant of the crown, especially in international diplomacy missions, for which his knowledge of the “world” languages of the time (Latin, Greek, and Arabic), besides his native language (probably French or Italian), would most certainly have been instrumental to his appointment. King Amaury died in 1174 and was succeeded by Baldwin IV, a thirteen-year-old minor that suffered from leprosy and was therefore often incapable of ruling and could have no children of his own. As a result of the growing external pressure from the Muslims under the rule of Saladin and the internal problems of the Latin kingdom, two factions developed. One group was formed by King Amaury’s second wife (Maria Comnena), Maria Comnena’s second husband (Balian of Ibelin), his brother Baldwin, and Raymond III, count of Tripoli. The other group was formed by King Amaury’s first wife (Agnes of Courtenay), her son Baldwin IV, the count of Edessa Joscelin III, Guy of Lusignan, and Gerard of Ridefort. Whereas Agnes’s group was “made up of her kinsmen and a group of *curiales* and newcomers to the East,” Maria Comnena’s group was “largely the party of the old-established aristocracy” (Edbury and Rowe 18).

Because William of Tyre’s service under King Amaury coincided with the years of the marriage to Maria Comnena, he had no contact with Agnes. Furthermore, Raymond of Tripoli managed to get himself accepted as regent of Jerusalem during Baldwin IV’s minority and took William under his wing. By the end of 1174, William was appointed to the office of chancellor, and about one year later he was elected archbishop of Tyre. As chancellor, William was in charge of the royal writing office; as arch-

bishop of Tyre, he ranked second only to the patriarch of Jerusalem in the ecclesiastical hierarchy of the kingdom. He combined both offices for the next ten years, the period during which he wrote a chronicle of the colony in Latin (see Appendix, Figure 1), an account of the decrees of the Third Lateran Council, and a history of the Muslim world (*Gesta orientaliū principum*), the latter two now lost.

The Latin chronicle of the colony—later to be known as *Historia rerum in partibus transmarinis gestarum* or *Hystoria ierosolimitana*—is “in no sense an ‘official’ history of the Latin East,” but an account addressed to “his fellow-prelates of the Church” (Edbury and Rowe 25). Built upon the foundational myth of the battles in the seventh century between the Byzantine emperor Heraclius (heir of the Christian and Latin traditions; see Figure 2) and Muhammad (“primogeniti Sathane,” according to William), William’s *Historia* justifies the Latin colonization on the grounds that Syria was both the *haereditas domini*, for it was a territory sanctified by Christ’s life and passion, and part of the Latin *imperium*, both in political (under the rule of Heraclius’s brother, Theodorus) and religious terms (under the rule of bishop Modest). As a result of Heraclius’ battles against the Arabs in Syria and the recovery of Christ’s cross for Jerusalem, the emperor was considered a predecessor of the crusaders, who were not conquering Syria from the eleventh century onwards, but returning to their “home.”

William’s chronicle is divided into twenty-three books and recounts the history of the crusades from 1095 to 1184, with an introduction devoted to Heraclius. The chronicle is almost a library in itself because it includes materials from previous chronicles, such as the anonymous *Gesta francorum et aliorum hierosolymitanorum*, Raymond of Aguilers’s *Historia francorum qui ceperunt Jerusalem*, Fulcher of Chartres’s *Gesta francorum Iherusalem peregrinantium*, Albert of Aachen’s *Historia hierosolymitana*, and Baldric of Dol’s *Historia hierosolymitana*, not to mention the Arabic sources. Only nine manuscripts and a fragment of a tenth of the *Historia* as written by William in Latin are known; they date from the early thirteenth century to the fifteenth century (Edbury and Rowe 4; Huygens). Besides his most immediate audience—mainly ecclesiastical—in the Latin kingdom, the above-mentioned manuscript tradition shows that William’s Latin chronicle had a limited circulation, restricted to France and England. However, when William’s chronicle was translated into French in the thirteenth century—a version known as *L’Estoire de Eracles*, *Livre d’Eracles*, and *Chronique de la terre d’Outremer*—“it proved to be a major success” (Edbury and Rowe 4), if by “success” one means a wide circulation, a larger audience, the power to produce continuations and translations into languages other than French, and the creation of a new literary genre.

The details of all these facts cannot be discussed here. Suffice it to say that between 1205 and 1234 a French crusader, perhaps from the Île de France or Champagne, translated William's chronicle into a French version (Pryor 289) that covered the same period (1095–1184). This crusader is responsible for a major innovation of far-reaching consequences: the introduction of materials from a different genre. He included excerpts previously turned into prose from the *Chanson d'Antioche* (Pryor 291), an epic poem that forms part of the first French crusading cycle. Furthermore, he simplified William's narrative techniques and either omitted or compressed all the "passages of purely ecclesiastical interest" (Edbury and Rowe 5). As a result, his version appealed to an audience not only of clerics, as up to that moment, but also of laymen (Edbury and Rowe 4) and the nobility (according to Pryor 277, this first translation into French may have been commissioned by the Capetian dynasty, with kings Louis VIII and Louis IX seriously involved in the crusades at that time).

The interest aroused by the *Livre d'Eracles*, which cannot be considered a simple translation from Latin into French due to these massive changes, resulted in the writing of continuations after 1184. These continuations have been grouped into four manuscript traditions in accordance with the last year reported (1232, 1261, and 1275; see Riant, and Folda) and a French version (the *Chronique d'Ernoul*), which has relationships with the French continuations, although it depends neither on William's Latin chronicle nor on the first French translation (see Morgan). Each manuscript family is not simply a continuation based upon the previous one(s) because several changes were introduced, including abridgments within the continuations themselves. There are at present seventy-five manuscripts containing these distinct versions in French that circulated between Outremer and continental Europe and back to Outremer, as well as across continental Europe. Furthermore, and no less striking, although some of these manuscripts were produced in continental Europe, many were produced in the colonial scriptoria, especially in Acre and Cyprus, two of the last Christian bastions in Outremer.

As for translations into languages other than French, only in the Iberian peninsula was the *Livre d'Eracles* translated—into Castilian at the end of the thirteenth century, into Catalan at the end of the fourteenth century (a version now lost, but most probably based on a manuscript from the scriptorium in Cyprus), and into Galician-Portuguese at the end of the fourteenth century or beginning of the fifteenth century (the version included in the *Crónica de 1404*). Of these translations, the Castilian is the most interesting because the writer took to its extremes the narrative technique of mixing chronicle sections and prose versions of epic poems,

as applied by the first French translator. Commissioned by King Sancho IV, the *Gran conquista de Ultramar*—as the Castilian version was later to be known—is a translation of a continuation of the *Livre d'Eracles* until 1275, expanded with prose versions of several epic poems of the first French cycle; namely, *Naissance du Chevalier au Cygne*, *Chevalier au Cygne*, *Enfances Godefroi*, *Chanson d'Antioche*, *Chétifs*, and *Chanson de Jérusalem*. No other translation across Europe combined such an enormous number of prose versions of epic poems with the *Livre d'Eracles*, not even in France, where all these works were well known and easily accessible.

The prose epic expansions should have captivated the audience, especially those related to the Swan Knight in his situation as an ancestor of Godfrey of Bouillon, the first ruler of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem. The textual family represented by MS Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional, 2454, for example, omits the first section of the *Livre d'Eracles*, which centers on Heraclius (the character that gives the work its title), and replaces it by a Castilian translation of *Naissance du Chevalier au Cygne*, *Chevalier au Cygne*, and *Enfances Godefroi*. Thus, a new foundation myth around the Swan Knight was created. However, this time it was not a foundation myth for a crusading chronicle, but for a different genre: the book of chivalry. In early sixteenth century, Garci Rodríguez de Montalvo included in the preface to his *Amadís de Gaula*, one of the best examples of the book of chivalry, a metaliterary reflection about how this genre was born. Books of chivalry are *historias fengidas* (fictional stories), according to Rodríguez de Montalvo, and as such they were not created based on chronicles, but on stories wherein truths and lies were mixed. For Rodríguez de Montalvo, a theoretician of the chivalric genre, the best example of such a hybrid genre was precisely the expanded Castilian version of the *Livre d'Eracles*, whose *editio princeps*, titled *Gran conquista de Ultramar*, was published in 1503. That this was not a process exclusive of Iberia is proven by the inclusion of the Swan Knight story in the Arthurian romances during the period of the *Livre d'Eracles*'s circulation across Europe, as practiced by Wolfram von Eschenbach in *Parzival*.

The “worlding” of medieval literature: The *Lindisfarne Gospels*' quietism

The *Lindisfarne Gospels* are a Latin Gospelbook made in Northumbria; more specifically, in the tidal isle known as Holy Island, or Lindisfarne, circa 710–25, according to Michelle P. Brown, a noted specialist in this book. Not only are we in a completely different time period and geogra-

phy in relation to the *Historia rerum in partibus transmarinis gestarum*, but also in a completely different “literary setting” as far as agency and physicality are concerned. The book’s colophon attributes the writing and decoration to Eadfrith, bishop of Lindisfarne from 698 to 721, the binding to Aethilwald, bishop of Lindisfarne from 721 to 740, and the metalwork cover to Billfrith the Anchorite (Brown 104). Lindisfarne was at that time a small monastery whose wealth was associated to the cult of a former member of the community, St. Cuthbert, an Anglo-Saxon nobleman who was bishop of the monastery at the time of his death in 687 (Brown 6).

This book enjoyed a circulation in no way comparable to William of Tyre’s chronicle. As a consequence of Viking raids from 793 to 875, when a permanent Viking military force established itself in the area, the community left the island and “embarked on a nomadic period” (Brown 86) not very far from its original location. The *Lindisfarne Gospels* are mentioned again by Symeon of Durham in relation to the re-establishment of the shrine of St. Cuthbert in the new cathedral of Durham at the beginning of the twelfth century. According to an inventory of 1367, the book was still at the cathedral’s library at that time. By 1605, the *Lindisfarne Gospels* were at the Tower of London (Brown 122). Some years later, the book was in possession of the antiquarian Sir Robert Cotton, whose library was donated to the nation by Cotton’s grandson and now resides at the British Library, including the *Lindisfarne Gospels*, known as BL, Cotton MS Nero D.iv.

What makes the *Lindisfarne Gospels* a unique manuscript is the combination of cultures from around the world (Figure 3). According to Brown (1), its pages include “testimonies to the learning . . . of the Graeco-Roman world, of early Byzantium, papal Rome, Lombardic and Ostrogothic Italy and Frankish Gaul.” Furthermore, the “pivotal role of the Middle East, of Jerusalem, Palestine and Coptic Egypt . . . is acknowledged and celebrated within its pages too” (4). Written in Latin, the inscriptions accompanying the depictions of the evangelists “draw not only upon the capital letters of ancient Roman inscriptions . . . but upon Germanic runes and Greek letter-forms” (4). The ornamental openings combine Celtic, Germanic, and Mediterranean influences (236). The book was embellished with a “wide palette of pigments akin to that encountered in Mediterranean art” (280). The incipit pages are adorned with a style of abstract and zoomorphic art linked to Celtic and German tastes (288). Around the 950s–960s, a word-by-word translation of the Latin into Old English was added between the lines by a priest, Aldred; something that represents a landmark in the history of the language (4). For Brown, the material and literary culture of the *Lindisfarne Gospels* proclaims that Lindisfarne was “no provincial outpost,

but a vibrant, integrated part” of an apostolic mission that had “reached and embraced the far ends of the earth” (408).

* * *

For David Damrosch, world literature encompasses “all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language” (4). Although Damrosch has expanded this definition in several directions, such as gaining in translation, elliptical refractions, and mode of reading, in my opinion three important factors have been overlooked in accordance with the tenet whereby “literary works” do not circulate by themselves in an aesthetic vacuum. Otherwise, circulation will be at best an empty and metaphorical signifier, which dangerously resonates with traditional definitions of classics or masterpieces as works that circulate through time.

These three factors are historical context, agency, and physicality. Had these three factors not been taken into consideration, it would not be possible to achieve the aims of both reintegrating medieval literatures within the scope of comparative literature (see Eckhardt) and avoiding presentism in world literature studies (see Damrosch). As for historical context, consider how in the *Lindisfarne Gospels* during the mid-tenth century and in William of Tyre’s chronicle during the early thirteenth century the “big world” of Latin communication was replaced by “local,” vernacular languages (English and French), and how both works nevertheless enjoyed a widespread circulation, although in different ways. Sheldon Pollock’s opposition between cosmopolitanism and vernacularism may prove to be instrumental in this regard. Whereas cosmopolitanism is a kind of “literary communication that travels far, indeed, without obstruction from any boundaries at all, and, more important, that thinks of itself as unbounded, unobstructed, unlocated” (22), vernacularism is a kind of literary communication that is “practically finite and bounded by other finite audiences” (17). At least two factors should be highlighted here. Literary history proves that neither “cosmopolitanism” means widespread circulation per se, nor “vernacularism” means restricted circulation per se. When the anonymous French crusader decided to translate William of Tyre’s chronicle, the French version—and not the Latin original—met the world and produced a new literary genre. Furthermore, when several kinds of literary communication are distinguished, one may undertake world-scale research and observe, for example, the defining features of Latin/Sanskrit cosmopolitanisms versus European/Indian vernacularisms and their historical consequences (European vernaculars as a key tool for the

production of the nation-state, Indian vernaculars as a key tool for the production of what Pollock calls “vernacular polity”).

Because it is obvious that literary works do not travel by themselves, research on the history of the role of works within the literary institution is imperative. Both the *Lindisfarne Gospels* and the *Historia rerum in partibus transmarinis gestarum* were produced as a result of ecclesiastical patronage: an economically modest and territorially restricted patronage in the first case, and an economically powerful and internationally connected patronage in the second. However, in both cases, the limits of circulation and the extension of the audience appealed to seem to be more dependent on literary issues (style, narrative techniques, topics, etc.) than on economy. When the passages of ecclesiastical interest in William’s Latin chronicle were replaced with fictional passages by the French crusader, the *Livre d’Eracles* met a massive audience across Europe and entered into literary history by producing a genre of powerful and lasting resonance.

Finally, when world literature is simply defined as encompassing “literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin” (Damrosch 4), and a “world literary work” as one that is “read as literature” (Damrosch 6), both the history of literature as concept and the institution and the physicality of literary works should not be neglected. Manuscripts did not circulate as printed books do, and e-books do not circulate as printed books. Whereas the *Lindisfarne Gospels* were produced in a remote, modest, tiny scriptorium, the *Livre d’Eracles* was produced and reproduced in several scriptoria with powerful international connections between Outremer and continental Europe and across continental Europe. It is obvious that these factors have serious implications for the works’ circulation.

In my view, historical context, agency, and physicality are crucial when addressing questions about medieval or premodern world literature. The works I have dealt with here show the need for research at the crossroads of medievalism, comparative literature, and world literature. And yet, based on all the data one might conclude that the *Lindisfarne Gospels* are not a “world literary work” because they never circulated beyond their culture of origin. Here is where historical context, agency, and physicality may make us rethink current concepts of both world literature and circulation. Do the *Lindisfarne Gospels* not deserve to be a “world literary work” even though the “world” is inside its materiality? For me this is an interesting paradox that results from medievalism, comparative literature, and world literature working in collaboration. It is a paradox as fruitful as the fact that neither the *Livre d’Eracles* nor the *Gran conquista de Ultramar*—despite their circulation and genre-production roles respectively—form part of the national canon of French or Spanish literature.

Appendix



Figure 1: William of Tyre writing the *Historia rerum in partibus transmarinis gestarum* (*Histoire d'Outremer*. MS Bibliothèque Nationale Française, 2631, fol. 1)



Figure 2: Emperor Heraclius carrying the True Cross (*Livre d'Eracles*. MS BL Royal 15 E 1, fol. 16)

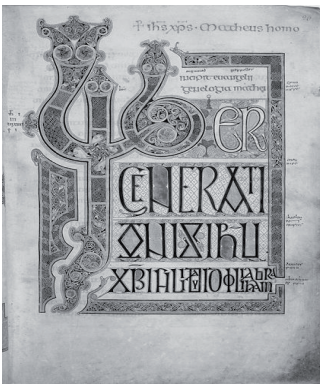


Figure 3: Incipit from the Gospel of Matthew (*Lindisfarne Gospels*. BL, Cotton MS Nero D.iv, fol. 27)

NOTE

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Obtok v predmoderni svetovni literaturi: zgodovinski kontekst, posredništvo in fizičnost

Ključne besede: svetovna književnost / srednjeveška književnost / literarno posredništvo / kulturni prostor / kulturni obtok

Novejše razprave o svetovni književnosti so poudarile pomen obtoka kot kriterija za svetovnost, tako v dobesednem kakor v prenesenem pomenu. David Damrosch na primer trdi, da so »dela svetovne književnosti zaživela novo življenje, ko so se premikala v širši svet« (*What is World Literature?*, str. 24). Po njegovem je to novo življenje povrh precej odvisno od prevodov. Moj prispevek ima za izhodišče Damroscheve argumente proti »prezentizmu« v raziskavah svetovne književnosti, posveča pa se vprašanju, kako postaviti obtok v razmerje s predmoderno svetovno književnostjo. Natančneje, ukvarjal se bom z deli, ki so bila proizvedena v prekomorskem svetu (»*outré-mer*«) ali pa so bila z njim povezana; v zahodni Evropi med 1250 in 1350 so imela ta dela širok obtok. Omenjeni stoletni časovni razpon se zdi še posebej primeren za literarni obtok v predmoderni dobi, vsaj v skladu z dokazi iz analiz Janet L. Abu-Lughod; te kažejo, da »nikdar prej ni prišlo v medsebojni stik toliko območij starega sveta« (*Before European Hegemony: The World System AD 1250–1350*, str. 3).

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