



# The Medieval Book Through the Lens of the Librarian

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Format and Content versus Reputation and Aura

7th European Congress of Medieval Studies

6 • 9 September 2023

University of Basel Switzerland



FÉDÉRATION INTERNATIONALE DES INSTITUTS D'ÉTUDES MÉDIÉVALES



### Organisation

**The 7th European Congress of Medieval Studies of the Fédération Internationale des Instituts d'Études Médiévales (FIDEM) will be organized by the Department of Arts, Media, and Philosophy of the University of Basel, Switzerland.**

### Subject

A book is first of all a book, with a physical appearance, a title, and a content. The content is perhaps the part that most of all determines the book's impact. But also the title and the physical appearance have their share, and perhaps also other aspects, such as the reputation of the author, the period in which the book was written, and the reception it received. The impact of these latter aspects is more difficult to trace, but they may produce a recognized quality, an aura that materializes itself when books come together in a physical or imaginary room, when they have to compete for identification and differentiation. One such room is the medieval library with its ordered system of bookshelves and bookcases. Here, both content and aura guide the librarian when giving a call number to the book, when putting it together with other works in a convolute, or when naming it in the catalogue.

The Congress intends to focus on the interplay of content and aura of books in the Middle Ages and the way they are balanced and shaped through the work of medieval librarians. For example, when a medieval librarian in his

catalogue calls all the volumes devoted to mysticism 'opuscula', not because of their small physical size, since some of them are huge, but because of their subject matter, which should make the reader humble. In this case, it is the common reputation of a devotional work that explains the decision of the librarian. More difficult to grasp, however, is what happens when the same librarian lists a devotional convolute not as usual under the title of the first work included, Thomas a Kempis' *Imitatio Christi*, but of the third one contained, pseudo-Bonaventure's *Stimulus amoris*. Or when he names Thomas a Kempis' *Imitatio Christi* in that same volume the *Liber Qui sequitur me*, although the print bears the title *De imitatione Christi*. Clearly for him, there is something special about these titles which makes them more distinctive. But what is it?

The above examples are all taken from the catalogue of the Carthusian Library St. Margarethental in Basel, compiled about 1520 by George Carpentarius, who through his work as a librarian wanted to guide the monks, to illuminate their minds and to inflame their hearts. But many other cases from other medieval libraries and other fields of interest, such as medicine, law, history, philosophy, theology, and works of literature can help us understand how the different medieval librarians responded to the different auras of their books, how they enforced, changed or added to them. Besides the contents, how common and persistent are these reputations, how are they produced, what are the distinctive aspects, and is there a change from the early to the late Middle Ages?

These auras not only guided the medieval librarians when cataloguing and ordering content. They are still active today, when modern librarians or their algorithmic familiars produce networks that link medieval works through metadata, with the intention to serve the medievalists. Again an example from Basel: when searching for a specific manuscript, the digital catalogue of the University Library – which contains many books of the Carthusian Library St. Margarethental – produces a virtual bookshelf on which it puts the manuscript together with a number of volumes not searched for, some of which medieval, but others also modern. Obviously, here it is not the librarian, but an algorithm that does the work. What auras are effective here? How do they affect the minds and the research strategies of modern medievalists? Does this modern phenomenon help us understand the mechanisms of its medieval equivalent, or is there no such equivalent?

By way of plenary talks and discussion sessions, specialists from different fields of medieval studies will share with the audience their views about the special character of medieval books that transcends the immediate content and becomes visible most prominently in the special environment of the library with its catalogues, bookshelves and bookcases, and above all the active and reactive mind of the librarian.

### Call for Papers

There is a number of slots for papers (20 minutes) and special sessions (90 minutes). Proposals should be submitted to Prof. Maarten J.F.M. Hoenen at <fidem@unibas.ch> by 30 April, 2023.

### Stipends

To facilitate attendance at the Congress, FIDEM stipends (500 €) are available for researchers under the age of 35, who will present a paper. Applications (including a letter of application, a CV and a letter of recommendation) should be submitted to Marta Pavón Ramírez, FIDEM Secretary General, at <secretary.general@fidem-web.org> by 30 April, 2023.

### General Assembly

On Friday, 8 September, the General Assembly of the FIDEM will take place in the Kollegienhaus of the University of Basel. At the General Assembly, the new board of the FIDEM will be elected. Further items of the agenda will be announced in advance.

### Registration and Information

Registration is free. To register, please send an email to <fidem@unibas.ch> by 15 July, 2023. In the next circular details on stipends, hotel accommodation and travel information will be provided. For further information, please visit <fidemweb.org> or contact Prof. Maarten J.F.M. Hoenen at <fidem@unibas.ch>.