

East and West in the Early Middle Ages: Translation across Communities

The multilingual culture that characterized many intellectuals in antiquity became increasingly rare in the early Middle Ages. From the fourth century onwards, fewer intellectuals could work confidently in both Greek and Latin. Yet knowledge continued to pass between eastern and western communities. This gave translation new importance and placed translators at the centre of intellectual exchange. Their work was neither mechanical nor neutral. Rather, by selecting words, framing arguments, and controlling access to texts, translators could reshape meaning and gain considerable authority over the knowledge they mediated. Translation could return forgotten works to circulation, generate interest in unfamiliar texts, or channel (and sometimes intensify) religious controversy. It also created social relationships of dependence, trust, suspicion, and power, while allowing translators to emerge as recognised intermediaries and cultural ambassadors.

This linguistic divide between the Greek- and Latin-speaking worlds is often reproduced in modern scholarship. Scholars of Greek sources tend to examine eastern communities, while those working with Latin sources focus on western societies. The suggested sessions seek to bridge that disciplinary gap by treating translation as a point of contact between communities. Bringing together different regions, periods, genres, and approaches, the session speakers will explore the intellectual, cultural and religious impacts of translations, offering a more nuanced picture of the Mediterranean basin, and illuminating a striking but still understudied feature of the early medieval world.

We invite proposals for papers examining translation and translators in encounters between eastern and western communities from a range of disciplinary, geographical, and chronological perspectives. The (non-exhaustive) list of topics to be considered includes:

- Greek, Latin, Syriac, Armenian, Coptic, Hebrew, and early Arabic texts in translation
- Transfer of knowledge: the circulation, reception, and reuse of translated texts
- Translation and the construction of authority and communal identity
- Translation at courts, monasteries, schools, and scriptoria
- Translators as cultural brokers, intermediaries, and ambassadors
- Patronage and the social status of translators
- Translation in religious controversy
- Resistance to and the backlash against translation
- Erroneous translation
- Retranslation, revision, and competing translations
- Translation practices, including paraphrase, abridgment, adaptation, and compilation

Proposals of ca. 200 words, along with a short academic bio, should be sent to Mor Hajbi and Oz Tamir (mor.hajbi@mail.huji.ac.il; oztamir@illinois.edu) by September 15, 2026.

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