Cultural Syncretism in the Literary Traditions of the European Middle Ages.
Encounters between Germanic Realities and Other Cultures.

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The concept of syncretism can broadly define all those phenomena of cultural mixing resulting from the encounter – or clash – between different cultures and civilizations. This process affects transversally and in a bidirectional way the societies involved, usually modifying their beliefs, memories, value systems and artistic productions.[1]

In the history of the Germanic peoples, episodes of syncretism occur constantly. From the first contacts with Rome (2nd century BC), through the period of the *Völkerwanderung* and the establishment of the Barbarian kingdoms (4th–6th centuries AD), the occasions and examples of cultural hybridization were numerous.

The Germanic populations that settled in the territories previously controlled by the Western Roman Empire adapted relatively quickly to the dominant Latin culture, without however completely forgetting their own roots.

A decisive catalyst in acculturative terms were Christian missionary activities, which, between the 4th and 11th centuries, led to the conversion of the pagan people of Germanic ancestry, allowing them access to a community with shared and well-defined cultural connotations. Latin, the *lingua franca* of the ecclesiastical and intellectual spheres of Christendom, was taught basing on models such as Virgil and other classical authors, along with their imitators and epitomists.[2]

Therefore, in the Middle Ages classical culture acted on the one hand as a *substratum* that the conquering people had never been able to eradicate, on the other as a *superstratum*, albeit in an "artificial" form, since it derived from a canonisation for educational purposes.

From a literary point of view, this peculiar circumstance resulted in the production of adaptations in the Germanic languages of works whose authorship by 'Roman[s] by descent'[3] is made explicit, but also of works that seemingly are not derived from the classics. In them, it is possible to observe motifs and *topoi*, which, although readapted, were already present in widely circulating Latin works; a well-known case study regards Virgilian influences in *Beowulf*.[4]

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[1] Hartman, Sven S., *Syncretism*, Almqvist & Wiksel, Stockholm 1969; Berner, Ulrich, *Untersuchungen zur Verwendung des Synkretismusbegriffes*, Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden 1982; Leopold, Anita M. & Sinding Jensen, Jeppe (eds.), *Syncretism in Religion: A Reader*, Routledge, London 2004; Boefsplug, François, *Le syncrétisme et les syncrétismes. Périls imaginaires, faits d'histoire, problèmes en cours* in «Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques» 90/2 (2006), pp. 273-295.

[2] See Barrow, Julia, *The Clergy in the Medieval World: Secular Clerics, their Families and Careers in North-Western Europe, c.800–c.1200*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2015, in part. pp. 170–207.

[3] See Helgadóttir, Þörbjorg (ed.), *Rómverja Saga*, vol. 2, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í Íslenkum Freðum, Reykjavík 2010, p. 230.

[4] See North, Richard, *The origins of Beowulf. From Vergil to Wiglaf*, Oxford University Press, Oxford & New York 2006, *passim*.

More direct influences of the Church work can be found in texts where distinctly Christian elements surface alongside others derived from the Classical and Germanic heritage, such as the Old High German *Muspilli,* the Old Saxon *Heliand,* and the Latin *Waltharius.*

Contacts with Rome were by no means an isolated instance: throughout the Middle Ages the Germanic peoples interacted in various ways with the Celtic world as well. This began as early as the 5th and 6th centuries, with the Anglo-Saxon invasion of the British Isles and the beginning of the evangelization carried out by Irish monks in the Rhine region, continuing during the formation of the Norse-Gaelic Kingdoms during the Viking Age (790–1066).

It is also worth mentioning the interaction between the Norsemen and the people of France; a notable case is that of Rollo and the establishment of the Duchy of Normandy in the 10th century, or the impact later exerted by the French courtly culture on the literature of the Germanic-speaking world. Some examples can be found in the *Minnesänger*, the *Riddarasǫgur*, the Middle High German translations of chivalric romances, etc.

Medieval Germanic literature displays significant influences and exchanges with the Romance tradition. The *Strasbourg Oaths* (842), composed in both Old French and Old High German, are particularly significant in this regard.[5] Linguistic coexistence is further evidenced by bilingual manuscripts, as exemplified by works such as the *Sequence of Saint Eulalia* and the *Ludwigslied*.[6] From the 12th century onwards, the German-speaking regions incorporated several French traditions, including the Arthurian and Carolingian epics, as well as the *Roman d'Alexandre*.

The Slavic sphere should not be overlooked when considering Eastern Europe, given the well-documented interactions between Scandinavian adventurers and the peoples of Kievan *Rus'* as well as the longstanding expansionist ambitions of the Danish crown and the Teutonic Order towards the Baltic region, exemplified by the Northern Crusades (12th –13th centuries). Furthermore, within the Byzantine context, it is essential to acknowledge the crucial role of the Eastern Roman Empire in the conversion of the Goths, as well as the prominence attributed in both Norse and Byzantine sources to the Varangians, the Scandinavian-origin bodyguards of the emperors of Constantinople.[7]

Phenomena of syncretism are not confined solely to the literary domain. In the legal sphere, the ancient Germanic customary law, originally oral and unwritten, underwent significant transformation under the influence of Roman legislation and ecclesiastical authority,[8] which led to its codification. In certain contexts, this process resulted in a diminished emphasis on the principle of personal legal status in favour of territoriality, a shift aimed at facilitating the peaceful coexistence of ethnically diverse groups.

From a linguistic perspective, the contribution of Germanic peoples to Romance languages was realised with varying intensity; for example, it was negligible in Romanian but conspicuous in French, whose vocabulary was enriched by Franco-Germanic influence. In Italy, the Germanic influence stems from later incursions and settlements, although some borrowings are already documented in the late imperial period. Most terms spread between the 6th and 9th centuries, due to

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5 McKitterick, Rosamond, *The Frankish Kingdom under the Carolingians 751-987*, Harlow, London 1983.
6 Bumke, Joachim, *Höfische Kultur. Literatur und Gesellschaft im hohen Mittelalter*, DTV, München 1990.
7 Blöndal, Sigfús, *The Varangians of Byzantium*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1978.
8 Dilcher, Gerhard, *Gesetzgebung als Rechtserneuerung*, in Becher, Hans J. et al. (Hrsg.), *Rechtsgeschichte als Kulturgeschichte. Festschrift für Adalbert Erler*, Scientia, Aalen 1976, pp. 13-35; Wormald, Patrick, Lex Scripta *and* Verbum Regis: *Legislation and Germanic Kingship, from Euric to Cnut*. In Sawyer, Peter H. & Wood, Ian N. (eds.), *Early Medieval Kingship*. University of Leeds Press, Leeds 1977, pp. 105-138.

the introduction of words of Gothic origin by the Ostrogoths and despite Theoderic's use of Latin in administration. Subsequently, the Lombards also made a significant contribution to the Italian lexical repertoire, as evidenced by place names.

Instances of cultural syncretism can be traced not only in strictly literary works but also in the form of transmedial interactions, referring to "transmediality" as an interplay of different media.[9] For instance, the *Ruthwell Cross* and the *Franks Casket* feature sequences of images and runic inscriptions that evoke diverse cultural and literary traditions of Germanic, classical, and Biblical origin.

We welcome contributions dealing with literary works featuring phenomena of syncretism between Germanic elements and other European traditions. In particular, we invite to submit studies on the reciprocal influences between Germanic cultures and other literary traditions of the European Middle Ages and the modalities in which they have shaped new symbolic, narrative and poetic languages.

We encourage submissions that highlight dynamics of cultural exchange, transformations of identities and possible reinterpretations of Germanic myths and legends through the encounter with other traditions, such as Celtic, Slavic, Greco-Byzantine, Classical, Christian etc.

Investigations based on transmedial approaches are also accepted, on the condition that they be based on a rigorous philological analysis of the literary sources.

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

Please send an **abstract of no more than 2000 characters** (including spaces), accompanied by a short bibliography and a brief biographical note, to the e-mail address convegnophd@aifg.it by Friday, 13th June 2025 (23:59 CET).

The call is **open to all PhD students and PhDs** who obtained the title from March 2023 onwards **in the fields of Medieval philology and linguistics** (Germanic, Latin, Romance, Slavic, Celtic philology and linguistics, etc.). The call is also extended exceptionally to scholars who have begun a research fellowship no earlier than 2023.

Each speaker will have a maximum of 20 minutes for their presentation, which will be followed by 10 minutes of discussion.

Acceptance will be notified via e-mail address convegnophd@aifg.it no later than 15th July 2025 (23:59 CET). Following the conference, the contributions accepted by the scientific committee will be considered for publication and subjected to a double-blind peer review process.

Working Languages: Italian, English, German.

Head of the Scientific Committee: Prof. Alessandro Zironi.

Scientific Committee: Prof. Alessandro Zironi, Salvatore Caccamo, Nicola Pennella, Martina Andriani, Andreea M. Toma, Stefano Ghiroldi.

Organising Committee: Salvatore Caccamo, Nicola Pennella, Martina Andriani, Andreea M. Toma, Stefano Ghiroldi.

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[9] Rippl, Gabriele, *Handbook of Intermediality. Literature – Image – Sound – Music*, in *Handbooks of English and American Studies*, 1 (2015), pp. 1-109.