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Preservation – Renewal – Change: Introduction to Special Issue

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Preservation – Renewal – Change: Introduction to Special Issue

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The theme of this special issue and *Dies mediaevales 2024* conference, held on 7–9 March 2024 in Helsinki, is ‘preservation, renewal, and change’. We can approach the theme from several different perspectives. On the one hand, we can study the theme from a historical perspective. How were ideas, their textual or visual representations, or the material objects preserved renewed and changed in the Middle Ages? On the other hand, we can examine the theme from the perspective of contemporary research. What materials have been preserved, and what changes they may have encountered over centuries? Could new sources, methods, theories, and viewpoints challenge or even change our knowledge of the medieval era? In the articles on this issue, these various perspectives are present.

It is worth noting that the terms ‘preservation’, ‘renewal’, and ‘change’ are not univocal. Preservation can denote an active process but is closely related to concepts of accidental survival and loss. Similarly, renewal is not necessarily transformative but can also refer to reformation. In addition, sudden changes and reforms are often culmination points of slow and gradual processes that do not leave clear visible traces but only clues scattered along the way.

Preservation, renewal, and change from a medieval perspective

The Middle Ages has played a prominent role in history as an era that preserved ancient knowledge. The preservation process, here, does not refer to a static storing of information but the constant production of new copies. The emergence of the parchment codex as the primary medium of written culture marked a significant step forward for the preservation of texts. Very few texts have survived in ancient copies, and then only by chance. The production of new copies meant active choices and evaluation of what to preserve by those institutions that produced or commissioned the copies, especially monasteries and later universities.

During around a thousand years of the Middle Ages, people renewed and changed their ideas, texts, objects, artefacts, artworks, buildings, etc. Biblical passages are a fine example of a text that circulated in different forms and channels and gained new interpretations. Medieval writers quoted them in almost every literary genre and used them to support even diverse ideas. As the quoting conventions were not established, the phrases were also freely adapted to fit the new textual context by changing a few words or paraphrasing the content. One could also renew the interpretation of the text by situating it within the context of other texts or by incorporating paratexts and annotations. An example of the flexible and practical approach to objects is the liturgical calendars, which local clergy often adapted to the diocese’s practises by adding or erasing feast days. Parchment allows such changes to be made quickly; one could even erase the entire text and reuse the leaf for new content. Objects, like a book, could also gain various meanings as a mediator of an idea, a

preserver of a text, or a sacred item.

Regarding ideas, perhaps the most drastic changes happened within the church. The same organisation has often been blamed for sustaining the stagnation. Preservation of the faith meant constant theological discussions throughout the Middle Ages. Those were stimulated by status and power struggles of internal institutional actors, such as the pope and religious orders, and external pressure from secular rulers and dissenting movements. The Reformation, which is considered one of the endpoints of the Middle Ages, was part of the continuum of renewing the doctrine, although the result was more radical than before. The following centuries were to create a still prevalent—at least in widespread discussion—image of the Middle Ages as a stagnant era. Therefore, the task of medieval scholars, in addition to participating in scientific discussions, is to change attitudes and bust myths about the Middle Ages.

Preservation, renewal, and change from the modern perspective

From today's perspective, one essential question is what has been preserved and why. Naturally, the same process of choosing what to keep and what to copy, perhaps in slightly altered form, continued through the centuries after the Middle Ages and continues today. Conversely, we can also ask what has been lost and why and whether there are any possibilities to gain knowledge about those lost materials. As the loss of materials has occurred several times over the years, we sometimes have second-hand sources, such as catalogues, copies, or even photographs, hinting at the original matter. A good example is documents relating to land ownership that were copied over centuries into new formats when the land changed owner. Naturally, in these cases, the data could be, intentionally or unintentionally, renewed or changed.

Similarly, people have renewed various types of objects according to changing dogmas, needs, and trends. Thus, they often survive today in modified or fragmentary forms. Art historian Elina Räsänen, one of the conference's keynote speakers, pointed out how important it is for medieval scholars to understand the later phases of the object to understand its origins and avoid any misinterpretations. She was talking from the view of wooden sculptures, but the same notion applies to other artefacts. For example, in recent decades, one of the most promising sources for understanding medieval literary culture in Scandinavia has been the thousands of manuscript fragments preserved as covers of early modern account books. To understand them, we need to contextualise them and assess what they testify to: is every piece a testimony of an individual object or are some coming from the same source? In the case of manuscript fragments, it is often easy to identify which pieces are from one copy of a work, but it may be impossible to say whether that copy has included a full or partial text. In addition, it is not always easy to determine whether the surviving text was part of a compilation or a composite volume, typical formats for circulating texts in the Middle Ages. These are all essential to interpreting how the text was used and understood.

A preserved object or text alone can tell you very little. An important part of research is contextualising and recontextualising the historical materials, thus broadening understanding of the matter. For example, a manuscript copy of a certain text without background or provenance testifies of general interest in the text. Still, localisation and date already give us a historical context of why the interest appeared. The more information we can link to an object, the more interesting the story it tells. In the issue in hand, J. Rodriguez Viejo's article on bishop Sigebert of Minden as

commissioner of a sacramentary produced in the Abbey of St Gallen in the 1020s recontextualises the reading of the manuscript's illustrations as representations of the bishop's career ambitions and spiritual interests.

The research can also renew itself through the research methods. We can study the same material in various ways and with a variety of tools. Tuomas Heikkilä's and Kirsi Wikman's article on the late-medieval use of the Koberger's breviary (printed in 1485) in Turku Diocese shows how new tools and methods can enhance our understanding of issues that were previously widely accepted in this case, the Dominican dominance of the liturgy in the diocese of Turku. The article also points out that objects slowly change over the years of use, sometimes so tiny, like the build-up of dirt, that you don't even think to notice it. These minor traces can tell a fascinating story of how people used the object.

The last perspective is the need to review previous research. The study of the medieval era and the production of resources, such as printed copies, editions, and catalogues, has continued for centuries. As knowledge is a cumulative process, academics and amateurs often utilise old resources, although those carry the interpretations of their time with them. Without any critical commentary, this can lead to misinterpretations. In this issue, Antti Ijäs's article that discusses Skúli Þórðarson Thorlacius's eighteenth-century description of historical Nordic wrestling reminds us that the need for edition is not necessarily the ability to read the text in modern letters but to provide the context for the text and distinguish various layers in the historical documentation. The translation of the text also serves the interests of amateurs involved in the subject.

Eventually, preservation, renewal, and change in research are the results of evaluations. What area, object, text, question, or theme are important enough to spend time and resources? We make these evaluations constantly; they are affected not only by new sources, methods and scientific discussions but also by attitudes and trends. There is also a question of publication channels and accessibility. Is only old, i.e. copyright-free material, available online? What is significant enough to make it into a popular book or a school textbook? What objects are on display in museums, and how are they contextualised? The academic community plays a key role in determining which stories are shared within the community and with the public.

Finally, I would like to thank everyone involved in organising the *Dies mediaevales* conference and contributing to the publication of this issue for their efforts. Special thanks to the peer reviewers and editorial board members who have generously devoted their time to support the work of their colleagues.