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Translingual premodern literature in the digital age: The case of *The Seven Sages of Rome/Book of Sindbad*

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This introduction lays out the rationale for this special collection: rethinking premodern literary studies on the basis of recent digital opportunities, translingual theories and collaborative methods. It also gives a brief overview over the complex transmission of *The Seven Sages of Rome/Book of Sindbad* story matter.

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1. Introduction

Modern scholarship tends to divide medieval story matters – often adapted and translated across vast territories and timespans – into individual works set in separate national contexts. Hundreds of academic books, for example, discuss Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* on their own terms, in the context of Chaucer's oeuvre or of English-language literature. But there is no book tracing how Chaucer's story of the truth-telling crow, who witnesses a woman having an affair and pays for its honest report with its life, was already old when, around 1100CE, a courtier called Michael Andreopoulos wrote it down in Anatolia (where the crow was still a parrot), and a century later, when a French translator turned the parrot into a local magpie, and when another 130 years later a scribe entered it into the famous Auchinleck manuscript in London, where Chaucer – or the people from whom Chaucer heard stories – may have encountered it as the basis for his 'Manciple's Tale'.

Advances in information technology, however, now allow us to bypass these academic conventions and to encounter the crow's tale again as the famous old story of the truth-telling bird, not just as Chaucer's isolated innovation. While most modern printed editions of medieval stories – think the classic *Riverside Chaucer* – offer a standardised, normalised, single-language text that fits between two book covers, digital editions can give a wider and more flexible overview of the rich medieval multilingual traditions. Academics and librarians assisted by computers can now digitise, share, transcribe, edit and translate manuscripts and rare books electronically with relative ease. With a few clicks we can then assemble and see in parallel many different versions of each medieval narrative. Though these technological opportunities seem ultramodern, they paradoxically make it much easier to approach medieval literature again as many people at the time understood it: not as unique inventions by individual authors, but as old stories constantly adapted, where an author's achievement and a listener's or reader's pleasure and profit lay in finding fresh angles and eloquent expressions of an important tale.

The story of the truth-telling bird is an extreme case in point. It was often told as part of a longer narrative known in English by titles such as *The Seven Sages of Rome*, *The Seven Wise Masters, The Book of Sindbad, Dolopathos* or *The Book of Syntipas* (in the following referred to as *Seven Sages/Sindbad* for short). This is one of the most widely transmitted secular narratives that has survived from the Middle Ages and the early modern period. Academics have identified at least 140 distinct versions of the *Seven Sages/Sindbad* story matter, written down from the late 11th to the 16th century and into the present day, across at least 31 languages of the Middle East, Western Asia, Northern

Africa and Europe (Bonsall, Bildhauer and Nöth, 2024–26).[1] We currently know of around 600 manuscripts and 300 print editions, each subtly – sometimes drastically – different from the others. Around 450 of the manuscripts and 150 of the print editions, spanning 24 languages, date from before 1600. Only a few other premodern narratives such as *Kalila and Dimna* and *Barlaam and Josaphat* come close in terms of temporal and geographical spread. Of *The Canterbury Tales*, only around 84 manuscripts and four incunabula editions are extant. Acclaimed works such as *Beowulf*, *El Cid* and Ibn Hazm's *The Ring of the Dove* each survive in one single manuscript.

The open-access *Seven Sages of Rome* database (Bonsall, Bildhauer and Nöth, 2024–26) for the first time provides a single starting point that gives an overview over the versions, manuscripts and prints, and includes links to digitisations of the manuscripts, to research literature and to digital library catalogues with further information. This digital repository has turned *The Seven Sages/Sindbad* from a prohibitively large and often inaccessible tradition into an ideal case for studying the multilingual transmission of premodern narratives. This special collection probes what new perspectives the database offers. What happens if we consider *The Seven Sages/Sindbad* as an interlinked multilingual story matter, rather than as 140 different individual versions?

2. Digital opportunities for reframing premodern literature

Crucially, digital presentation is not a neutral tool. Its structures and limitations shape research practice and influence research findings, just as much as traditional humanities methods of knowledge organisation such as academic books and library catalogues do. Databases rely on 'reduction and simplification to operate' because they were developed to store and administer commercial data efficiently, and specifically designed to discourage users from exploring and requesting costly tweaks (Oldman 2021: 131). This restrictive format meant for *The Seven Sages of Rome* database that together with the web designer Maximilian Nöth, we found ways of including narrative elements, for example, through our encyclopaedia-style descriptions of the different versions and embedded stories. This allowed us to combine the nuance and context

[1] According to the current (preliminary) overview provided by Bonsall, Bildhauer and Nöth, 2024–26, the languages in which *Seven Sages/Sindbad* versions have survived from before 1600CE are (1) Arabic, (2) Catalan, (3) Czech, (4) Danish, (5) Dutch, (6) French, (7) English, (8) German, (9) Greek, (10) Hebrew, (11) Hungarian, (12) Icelandic, (13) Italian, (14) Latin, (15) Occitan, (16) Persian, (17) Polish, (18) Scots, (19) Spanish, (20) Swedish, (21) Syriac, (22) Turkish, (23) Welsh and (24) Yiddish. The languages into which it was translated after 1600CE are (1) Armenian, (2) Bulgarian, (3) Gaelic, (4) Lithuanian, (5) Rumanian, (6) Russian and (7) Serbian, with possible additional late translations into languages such as Croatian, Georgian and Ukranian.

given in narrative academic publications with the clarity of a digital dataset. In practical terms, for example, the sorting function demanded that we entered dates by numerical value rather than verbally, as is common in scholarly publications ('end of the eleventh century', 'early sixteenth century'), though we retained some verbal elements in cases where too much detail would be lost (e.g., 'before 1350' can mean vastly different timespans, depending on context). This numerical dating put into sharp focus how arbitrary any division into premodern and modern transmission is. The year 1500CE, the traditional cut-off between the Middle Ages and early modernity in what is now considered Europe, for *The Seven Sages/Sindbad* was just one date among many, with manuscripts and prints simply continuing to be written, published, bought and read across that threshold: while the Geneva-based printer Jean Belot was probably still selling his 1498 French-language edition, Mikuláš Bakalář in Plžen brought out a new Czech-language edition sometime between 1501 and 1508, and the enterprising German-born printer Wynkyn de Worde had gone to London, where he published an English-language version in 1506. None of them cared that the Middle Ages were supposed to have ended. The same tight continuity undermines any cut-off point of 1600, which we had initially postulated for the project, or even of 1700, 1900 or 2000. Icelandic, Turkish, Bulgarian and other writers wrote manuscripts by hand well into the nineteenth century, and sometimes even beyond. Adaptations of *The Seven Sages/Sindbad* continue seamlessly throughout the years and centuries and even into the present day, with both creative writers and academics still retelling, modernising and editing the narratives. The texts analysed in this special collection take this continuity into account by considering versions from 13th-century Hebrew and Latin (Doherty-Harrison) via 17th-century Yiddish (von Bernuth and Schmid) to 21st-century Scottish adaptations (Black and Bonsall) as distinct but nonetheless related parts of the same tradition, each of which can illuminate the whole.

The schematic approach enforced by the database format, which formalises the established scholarly practice of identifying a version in part through the identity, number and sequence of stories embedded in the frame narrative, also made us reconsider some existing groupings. We realised that a cluster of French-language manuscripts, for instance, shared the same distinctive sequence of stories and in this sense constitutes its own version (the 'A/L' version), rather than straddling two different versions (A and L), as previous scholarship had suggested. The clarification of the contours of this specific 'A/L' version then allowed Jane Bonsall (forthcoming) to understand the distinctive conception of voice and narrative authority in this iteration of the story-matter.

At the same time, the searchability and tagging that is a particular feature of digital data has shown up similarities between different stories that had previously gone unnoticed, for example, the surprising persistence of motifs like bathing, medicine or magic across very different plotlines. Bettina Bildhauer and Moss Pepe in this special collection, for example, have identified the repeated occurrence of gender change motifs in a group of manuscripts. That geographical locations can be visualised on a map has helped to determine hot spots of transmission more easily than just lists of locations, meaning that Bildhauer and Pepe could identify North-Eastern French-speaking lands between 1175 and 1350 as a centre for retelling, augmenting and translating *The Seven Sages/Sindbad* and related stories of gender change.

The embedding of digital links in the database has also, perhaps unexpectedly, allowed contemporary users to encounter the *Seven Sages/Sindbad* story matter no longer as a purely written transmission, but to recover some of the verbal and visual elements that characterised medieval storytelling, and to gain rather than lose nuance in this respect. The easy links to digitised prints and manuscripts allowed contributors to see the texts in their material form as books, with traces of use, scribbles, images and juxtapositions with other texts, which give indications of the reactions of past readers, listeners and illustrators to the stories. An audiobook recording of Rita Schlusemann's recent edition of the Dutch verse text, accessible open access alongside the written text, captures an impression of how medieval performances may have sounded to their audiences (Schlusemann, 2025).

3. The transmission of *The Seven Sages of Rome/Book of Sindbad*

So how and why exactly did this story matter travel so far across time and space? The newly assembled dataset is as yet incomplete and invites more detailed analysis, but has already yielded one major realisation, expressed by Jutta Eming in this special issue: that the traditional separation into a 'Western' and an 'Eastern' or 'Oriental' branch, while broadly useful, needs to be updated and modified, not least due to its Orientalist history and Eurocentric assumption of a strict intellectual divide between East and West. Geographically, both branches overlap, with two of the earliest manuscripts of the 'Eastern' Hebrew and Arabic versions likely originating in the far west of the Eurasian mainland, in Champagne and Andalucia respectively. We here instead follow Nico Kunkel (2023) in calling the 'Eastern' versions *The Book of Sindbad*, because variations of this title have been assigned to most of its iterations, and referring to the 'Western' versions as *The Seven Sages of Rome*, again because variations of this title are used for many of its versions. In the following overview, we also suggest some further modifications to this binary division.

Across all versions, according to the information assembled so far, the core of the plot is a false accusation of attempted rape made against a prince by his father's second wife or consort (who is not the boy's mother). The young prince had been sent away from court to be educated, but when he returns, he does not speak, because he or his teacher has read in the stars that harm will come to him unless he remains silent for a certain number of days (usually seven). The ruler's partner attempts to make the son speak by taking him to a private bedchamber, where she makes an outrageous proposal that is either sexualised or murderous or both, which he rejects. The woman then raises the false accusation that the prince had tried to rape her. The ruler immediately sentences his son to death, but the son cannot defend himself against the accusation due to his vow of silence. A wise man now steps in and tells one or more stories to make the king delay or rescind the execution order, and to bridge the time until the son is allowed to speak again. This pattern is repeated every day until the deadline has passed. When the son can finally tell his father what happened, the woman is instantly found guilty.

The fact that these plot elements remain the same, while the embedded stories and many other characters and motifs vary, means that it must have been this basic narrative as well as the possibility of its variation that ensured the story matter's broad spread and longevity. What made this narrative attractive to adapters and audiences across so many different languages, regions and times must have been its structure – both rigid and finite in its numbered daily pattern, and flexible in the number, sequence and identity of the individual embedded stories – as well as the suspenseful, high-stakes and polarised plot that invites audiences to get emotionally involved, take sides, discuss, augment and rewrite the story.

While all versions follow this basic narrative, there are characteristic differences between the *Book of Sindbad* and *The Seven Sages of Rome*. In the *Book of Sindbad*, the young prince is the son of a king (usually of India, Persia, Judea or an unnamed country) and one of his female consorts. The prince's education is commonly described in some detail, sometimes with embedded stories. When the prince returns to court and remains silent, a different consort of the king makes an immoral proposal in private, usually that the two of them should kill his father and that the son then should marry her.[2] The boy rejects her proposal, and she quickly turns the situation around by injuring herself and accusing the prince of attempted rape. The king immediately believes her and sentences his son to death. Seven sages – usually the king's advisers or viziers – then over seven days tell two embedded stories each to the court, and the king's consort counters with her own stories, normally just one per day. After each

[2] In at least one version, the *Mishle Sendebar*, she also kisses and embraces him against his will.

tale, the sages and the woman also give an interpretation. The sages most commonly tell stories discrediting women and warning against rash decisions, and the consort's stories tend to show sons and advisers in a bad light. When the boy reveals the truth about the false allegation of attempted rape, the woman is found guilty, but then nevertheless pardoned. Additional stories are often embedded in the ending.

The *Book of Sindbad*'s many versions, all of which share this basic plot, evolved along the following main lines in Persian, Arabic, Syriac, Greek, Hebrew and Spanish, as far as we can tell from the information currently assembled in the *Seven Sages of Rome* database:

- **c.* 200–800CE (?) Persian: Presumed Persian version. Though no copies of this early Persian version have survived (Krönung 2016, Perry 1960), most but not all scholars agree that it must have existed, because the authors of the later Greek and Persian versions state that their story had earlier Persian precursors: Michael Andreopoulos (who gives Mousos as an author name) and az-Zahiri (who even speaks of two versions). The dating varies considerably. Some scholarship also presumes that there was an even earlier Indian written version, mentioned by ninth-century Arabic writers, but no traces have been found.
- **c.* 500–900CE (?) Arabic: Presumed Arabic version translated from Persian. Several 9th- and 10th-century Arabic historians mention books entitled *Kitāb al-Sindbād* [Book of Sindbad] and *Al-wuzarāʾ al-sabʿa* [The seven viziers], but these have not survived (Krönung 2016). Most scholars agree that this version existed, not least because the later Syriac version is likely to have been translated from Arabic.
- *c.* 1000–1090CE Syriac: *Ktābā Sindbān* [The book of Sindban]. Oldest surviving manuscript: *c.* 1400–1450CE. This version was translated from Arabic (Krönung 2016). Scholars agree that it was the source for Michael Andreopoulos' later Greek version. The only surviving Syriac manuscript is much later and fragmented, but preserves a text that is close to Andreopoulos' version, leading most scholars to assume that they may have worked from the same source.
- *c.* 1090CE Greek: Michael Andreopoulos, *Biblos Syntipa tou Philosophos* [Book of Syntipas the philosopher]. Oldest surviving manuscript: *c.* 1250–1300CE. This was written probably in Melitene in Eastern Anatolia (in present-day Türkiye), and can be relatively securely dated on the basis of its dedication. Andreopoulos' claim that this is adapted from a Syriac text is deemed plausible by most scholars. Several other Greek versions appeared later and were eventually translated into Bulgarian, Rumanian and Serbian.

- *c.* 1161–1164CE Persian: az-Zahīrī Samarqandī, *Sīndbād-nāmah* [Book of Sindbad]. Oldest surviving manuscript: *c.* 1201–1225CE. This version was written in Middle Persian in Samarqand in present-day Uzbekistan, probably based on an earlier Persian version that is now lost. The earliest manuscripts are among the oldest material remnants of any *Seven Sages/Sindbad* version (Marzolph 2011). Azod Yazdi versified the *Sīndbād-nāmah* in Shiraz in present-day Iran around 1330CE. A shorter version of the *Sīndbād-nāmah* also survives as one of the stories told in some manuscripts of Ziya' al-Din Nakhshabi's *Tutinama* [Tales of a parrot] (dated to *c.* 1375CE).
- *c.* 700–1400CE (?) Arabic: *Al-wuzarāʾ al-sabʿa* [The seven viziers]. Oldest surviving manuscript: *c.* 1234CE. This version was written in Arabic in North Africa or in Andalucia in present-day Spain and transmitted initially as one of the stories told in *Mʾiat layla waʾlayla* [A hundred and one nights] (Ott 2012). The oldest manuscript of *Mʾiat layla waʾlayla* comes from Andalucia and has a colophon mentioning the year 1234CE, though there is still some scholarly controversy about its dating, and considerable uncertainty about the date of composition of this version (Marzolph 2011). *Al-wuzarāʾ al-sabʿa* was also transmitted independently (version A, presumed to date from *c.* 700–850CE, but first attested in a manuscript from *c.* 1533–1535CE), as well as embedded into some late versions of the *Alf layla waʾlayla* [A thousand and one nights].
- *c.* 1100–1275CE Hebrew: *Mishle Sendebar* [Tales of Sendebar]. Oldest surviving manuscript: *c.* 1215–1275CE. The earliest extant manuscript comes from the Champagne region in present-day France and is one of the earliest surviving witnesses of the entire *Seven Sages/Sindbad* tradition, though the text is usually presumed to have been composed in the South of France (Epstein 1967). It was later translated into Latin.
- *c.* 1253CE Spanish: *El libro de los engaños/Sendebar* [*Book of the lies (of women)/ Sendebar*]. Sole surviving manuscript: *c.* 1300–1400CE. This was written in Castilian and can be securely dated on the basis of its dedication as part of a wave of translations from Arabic surrounding the royal court of Alfonso X.

An outlier that is not often considered part of the *Seven Sages/Sindbad* tradition, but should be included insofar as it shares the basic plot structure sketched above, is the following:

- *c.* 1446CE Turkish: Ahmed-i Misrî, *Ḥikāyet-i Ḳırḳ Vezīr* [History of the forty viziers]. Oldest surviving manuscript: *c.* 1446–1481CE. This version was written in Ottoman Turkish and is loosely based on an Arabic or Persian version, but

with a monogamous ruler and a unique and much larger set of embedded stories, stretched here over forty days. It enjoyed a long and lively transmission in the Ottoman Empire.

A distinct branch of the story matter's transmission, known in scholarship as *The Seven Sages of Rome*, started in Latin or potentially French. With the setting being moved to a monogamous court in ancient Rome, the prince is now the son of the Roman emperor and his first wife. The mother here dies while the child is still young. The emperor remarries, and the new empress proposes to the son not that they kill his father and get married, but instead that they have sex, which she tries to initiate despite the son's resistance. Following her rejection and her false accusation of attempted rape, she tells her first story, after which seven sages (here commonly the son's teachers who show up at court) tell only one story each. The embedded stories are different from the ones told in the *Book of Sindbad* and vary in number, sequence and identity, though a few are found across both branches. At the end, the woman is punished by death for her treachery, and the narrative ends with different further embedded stories, extensions and sometimes moralising interpretations of the whole narrative.

The likely earliest version in this branch of the *Seven Sages of Rome* tradition is also an outlier, insofar as it is set at the King of Sicily's rather than the Roman Emperor's court and has its own distinctive corpus of usually ten embedded stories (missing out 'The bird', for instance), which are all told by the sages, not the queen:

- *c.* 1184–1212CE Latin: Johannis de Alta Silva, *Dolopathos*. Oldest surviving manuscript: *c.* 1250–1300CE. The *Dolopathos* was written in the Cistercian abbey of Haute-Seille near Metz in present-day France, and can be securely dated on the basis of its dedication. This version was later translated into French by the troubadour Herbert around 1222–1225CE under the title *Li roman de Dolopathos*. A German translation of some of the embedded stories also survives in one fifteenth-century manuscript.

The version that came to dominate across premodern Europe is first attested in a different French adaptation that shares a common – though still flexible – corpus of embedded stories with the subsequent translations:

- *c.*1180–1225CE French: *Le roman des sept sages de Rome* (version A). Oldest surviving manuscripts: *c.* 1200–1300CE. The circumstances of this translation are unknown. It was widely copied and (directly or indirectly) translated into Dutch, English, Gaelic, German, Italian, Latin, Scots, Swedish and Welsh. It also probably

formed the basis of – or shared a source with – several other distinct versions in French with relatively small transmissions, distinguished by different names for their main characters, variations in the embedded stories, and sometimes a setting in Constantinople:

  - *c.*1155–1190CE French version K. Sole surviving manuscript: 1285–1290CE. This has the same stories as versions A and D, but in a slightly different order.
  - *c.*1200–1250CE French version L. Oldest surviving manuscripts: 1200–1300CE. This follows version A up to the eleventh story, but then has a very different ending with new embedded stories. This was also translated into Catalan and Occitan.
  - *c.* 1250–1300CE (?) French version A/L. Oldest manuscript: 1250–1300CE. This group of manuscripts combines elements from versions A and L in a consistent pattern.
  - *c.* 1250–1350CE French version M (Male marastre). Oldest surviving manuscript: 1300–1350CE. This has six unique embedded stories.
  - *c.* 1275–1325CE French version C. Sole manuscript (fragmentary, now lost): *c.* 1275–1325CE. The surviving fragments, one in prose, one in rhyme, attest a different story order from the other versions.
  - *c.* 1275–1500CE French version D (Derimée). Sole surviving manuscript: c. 1450–1500CE. This prose version, presumed to have been adapted from a rhymed source, is set primarily in Constantinople and the empress in the end twice unsuccessfully tries to avert her death.

- *c.* 1250–1400CE Italian: *Il Libro dei Sette Savi di Roma* [The book of the seven sages of Rome]. Oldest surviving manuscript: *c.* 1301–1400CE. This Italian version is distinct from the direct Italian translation of the French version A. Scholars have subdivided this version further into six different secondary versions that vary in the embedded stories, and some end with the empress killing herself. The oldest version (C) dates from the fourteenth century, four others (M, L, R and *L'Amabile di Continentia*) from the fifteenth. The sixth and youngest version, the prose *Erasto*, written in 1542CE, achieved particularly wide popularity with 31 print editions before 1600CE, and was translated into English, French, Hebrew and Spanish.
- *c.* 1323–30CE Latin: Jean Gobi, *Scala Coeli* [Stairway to Heaven]. Oldest surviving manuscripts: *c.* 1301–1400CE, 1377CE. A short version of the *Seven Sages*, most closely related to the French version L, was included by the Dominican friar Jean Gobi in the monastery of Saint Maximin in Provence in present-day France in his

collection of exempla, which achieved wide circulation and was translated into Spanish. One of the earliest manuscripts is only vaguely dated to the fourteenth century, and it is therefore unclear if the 1377 manuscript is older or younger.

- *c.* 1325–42CE. Latin: *Historia septem sapientum* [Story of the seven sages]. Oldest surviving manuscript: *c.* 1325–1342CE. This Latin version is distinct from both the *Dolopathos* and the *Scala Coeli,* but is based loosely on the *Roman des sept sages*. It was written probably in Alsace in present-day France and Germany. The earliest manuscript is from Tyrol in present-day Austria, with about 200 Latin manuscripts extant, some of them inserting the *Seven Sages* as one of the narratives in the *Gesta Romanorum* [Deeds of the Romans]. The *Historia* became the most influential version of the story matter, and was directly or indirectly translated – often several times – into Armenian, Czech, Danish, Dutch, English, German, Hungarian, Icelandic, Polish, Russian, Swedish and Yiddish, with at least another 100 additional manuscripts of translations of the *Historia* surviving in these languages. Its popularity continued into print, when it became one of the most widely printed texts of early modernity, with over 100 print editions extant before 1600 in Czech, Danish, Dutch, English, French, German, Hebrew, Hungarian, Latin, Polish, Scots and Spanish.

In chronological order, the earliest extant manuscripts of the main versions, marked as either belonging to the *Sindbad* or the *Seven Sages* streams of the tradition, are as follows:

- 1201–1225CE Persian: az-Zahīrī Samarqandi, *Sindbãd-nãme* (*Sindbad*)
- 1201–1300CE French: *Le roman des sept sages de Rome* (versions A and L) (*Seven Sages*)
- 1215–1275CE Hebrew: *Mishle Sendebar* (*Sindbad*)
- 1234CE (?) Arabic: *Al-wuzarāʾ al-sabʿa* (*Sindbad*)
- 1250–1300CE Greek: Michael Andreopoulos, *Biblos Syntipa tou Philosophos* (*Sindbad*)
- 1250–1300CE Latin: Johannis de Alta Silva, *Dolopathos* (*Seven Sages*)
- 1301–1400CE Italian: *Il Libro dei Sette Savi di Roma* (*Seven Sages*)
- 1301–1400CE Latin: Jean Gobi, *Scala Coeli* (*Seven Sages*)
- 1301–1400CE Spanish: *El libro de los engaños/Sendebar* (*Sindbad*)
- 1325–1342CE Latin: *Historia septem sapientum* (*Seven Sages*)
- 1400–1450CE: Syriac: *Ktābā Sindbān* (*Sindbad*)
- 1446–1481CE Turkish: Ahmed-i Misrî, *Ḥikāyet-i Ḳırḳ Vezīr* (*Sindbad*)

The main versions ordered strictly chronologically by the earliest date assumed for their composition (rather than by manuscripts) are as follows:

- **c.* 200–800CE presumed Persian version (*Sindbad*)
- **c.* 500–900CE presumed Arabic version (*Sindbad*)
- *c.* 700–1400CE Arabic: *Al-wuzarāʾ al-sabʿa* (*Sindbad*)
- *c.* 1000–1090CE Syriac: *Ktābā Sindbān* (*Sindbad*)
- *c.* 1090CE Greek: Michael Andreopoulos, *Biblos Syntipa tou Philosophos* (*Sindbad*)
- *c.* 1100–1275CE Hebrew: *Mishle Sendebar* (*Sindbad*)
- *c.* 1161–1164CE Persian: az-Zahīrī Samarqandi, *Sindbād-nāme* (*Sindbad*)
- *c.* 1180–1225CE French: *Le roman des sept sages de Rome* (*Seven Sages*)
- *c.* 1184–1212CE Latin: Johannis de Alta Silva, *Dolopathos* (*Seven Sages*)
- *c.* 1250–1400CE Italian: *Il Libro dei Sette Savi di Roma* (*Seven Sages*)
- *c.* 1253CE Spanish: *El libro de los engaños/Sendebar* (Sindbad)
- *c.* 1323–1330CE Latin: Jean Gobi, *Scala Coeli* (*Seven Sages*)
- *c.* 1325–1342CE Latin: *Historia septem sapientum* (*Seven Sages*)
- *c.* 1446CE Turkish: Ahmed-i Misrî, *Ḥikāyet-i Ḳırḳ Vezīr* (Sindbad)

These chronological overviews make clear the extent to which different ‘branches’ or rather interlinked streams co-exist. New versions appeared across diverse languages, while older versions continued to be copied; and in addition, embedded stories circulated separately; and similar frame narratives were told. There is no single point graspable at which *The Book of Sindbad* became *The Seven Sages of Rome*, though is tempting to imagine, for example, that a manuscript of the Greek *Syntipas* might have travelled from Anatolia through crusader networks to North-Eastern French-speaking lands, where Jewish or Cistercian scholars might have been able to translate it (Gabriel of Melitene, to whom the Greek book is dedicated, married his daughter Morphia to the crusader king Baldwin II, who was from Champagne). Traders, diplomats, courtiers, intelligence agents, enslaved people, long-distance brides, monks, churchmen, scholars, pilgrims and others might also have brought manuscripts or verbal stories with them. The Caliphates and the Persian, Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman empires as well as religious networks linked huge territories and fostered multilingual exchange, where stories were shared in oral as well as written form (Belcher, 1987). More important than pinpointing routes or branches of direct translation or copying is an awareness of the constant sharing, retelling and rewriting of this narrative tradition across vast regions and many languages, making its transmission more like an ever-changing river than like a stable tree or stemma.

4. A translingual approach to premodern literature

Not only digital innovation, but also the rise of transnational approaches and theories has transformed literary studies in the past 15 years (e.g., Burns and Duncan, 2022). These approaches have opened the national philologies, which traditionally approach each literary work as part of a canon of works in the same language, to considerations of the enmeshment of creative writing across different countries and cultures; to questions of translation, multilingualism, migration and globalisation of authors, texts, readers, and publishers. For premodernity, 'global medieval studies' have been especially successful as an attempt to break out of the Anglo- and Eurocentrism of the field, and to bring attention to the transregional connections between people, goods and cultures, as well as to issues of translation, trade and travel. But this research area has still been dominated by the English language, by US-American scholars and by the disciplines of History and English, and has in this way ended up bolstering the Anglocentric structures and modes of thought that the approach had set out to challenge (see Eming in this special collection; Berend, 2023; de Souza, 2024).

Rebecca de Souza (2024) has suggested an alternative framework for premodern literary studies: translingualism, the attention to the connectedness of what we might today consider different national languages. Developed in linguistics and modern language pedagogy (e.g., Vogel and García 2017; Li Wei 2022), the translingual approach revolutionises our understanding of what language is, neuropsychologically as well as politically: less a fixed set of vocabulary and rules that is divisible into languages named according to national boundaries, and more a means of flexible expression and communication adapted to each particular situation. This fits medieval understandings of translation as situational, often oral interpreting, rather than as a 1:1 transfer from one monolithic written text to another (Stahuljak, 2024). It also works for literary studies: story matters that were retold within and across languages can be considered as communicating variations of the same content, rather than as separated by national or proto-national literary traditions. While medieval authors certainly compared themselves to others working in the same local vernacular, they also set themselves in the context of precursors writing in other languages. Isolating the iterations of say, the stories of King Arthur in English from those in Welsh, French or German, or Chaucer's story of the truth-telling bird from those in Arabic, Greek, Latin or Persian, is a limited way of understanding medieval literature.

In concrete terms, for literary studies of *The Seven Sages/Book of Sindbad*, this means considering the story matter as a translingual whole, not as a series of individual texts and translations in the context of their respective monolingual traditions. This was the foundational gamble on which we based the wider AHRC-DFG UK German collaborative research project in the humanities, *The Seven Sages of Rome: Editing and reappraising*

a forgotten classic from global and gendered perspectives, led by Bildhauer and Eming, from which this special collection grew. On the basis of existing comparative work by folklorists, literary scholars and philologists in many disciplines, we hypothesised that by considering the different versions together, and paying attention to the processes of translation and adaptation, we would see literary and thematic patterns that were otherwise obscured. Several contributions to this journal have proved this to be true. For example, Lilli Hölzlhammer's visual juxtaposition of Sanskrit, Hebrew and Greek versions of the 'Canis' tale, which is part of the *Seven Sages/Sindbad* as well as other narratives, shows up the relative absurdity of this Greek version, which has so far gone unnoticed. In Sanskrit, 'Canis' is about a faithful pet mongoose who protects a baby against a snake, while the baby's father mistakenly thinks it was the mongoose who mauled the baby. He kills his innocent pet before he notices and bitterly regrets his error. In the Hebrew adaptation, the mongoose is adapted to the local context to become a pet dog; in Arabic a pet weasel, but in the Greek, surprisingly, it is the baby's own mother who is suspected of having mauled her baby. Though this was probably initially a translation mistake, Hölzlhammer points out how implausible this tale is in comparison to the previous pet stories. For Jordan Skinner in this special collection, a translingual approach reveals a pattern by which translations of the 'Puteus' tale of *The Seven Sages* into French, Italian and English are the first attested occurences of the word for 'curfew' in these languages, predating historical records of the actual practice of imposing a nightly deadline. This draws his attention to how a curfew enforces domestic order in both historical reality and the narrative, but also how it creates suspense in the *Seven Sages*' frame narrative in French and English versions, where the sages have to filibuster to literally suspend the prince's death for another night.

A translingual approach also emphasises the high prestige of translated texts in the Middle Ages and early modernity. Rather than seen as secondary and derivative, as they are today, literary translations created cultural capital if they originated in a scholarly, fashionable, holy or 'exotic' language, or engaged with texts written in those languages. 'Sounding foreign' to Byzantine readers might have been an attractive feature of Andreopoulos' Greek *Syntipas*, which retains some of the Syriac style of its proclaimed precursor (Minets, 2023). Citations from sacred texts could also increase a text's prestige, even when they were not translated: biblical citations in Latin give the *Historia septem sapientum* an air of learnedness and religious value, just as biblical citations in Hebrew do for the *Mishle Sendebar*, as Hope Doherty-Harrison shows in this collection. These intertextual references, she argues, also allow readers and listeners to engage with the long-standing moral debates about self-injury and forgiveness sparked by the religious texts, but in a safe fictional rather than doctrinal space. Similarly, Yasmina

Foehr-Janssens's approach in this special collection of seeing the French *Sept Sages* and its continuation, the *Roman de Cassidorus*, in the context of the apocryphal biblical story of Joseph and Asineth, told in many languages, allows her to demonstrate the literary ambition of *Cassidorus*. She shows that while the text's complex negotiations of heterosexuality and interreligious relationships may have been relatively new to French courtly literature, they had a long pedigree in multilingual biblical narratives. Foehr-Janssens and Doherty-Harrison's contributions are highly sensitive to the gender expectations of their texts across languages, as are Ruth von Bernuth and Achim Schmid, who focus on the role of the wicked stepmother as particularly developed in the Yiddish tradition, in contrast to preceding versions, and who perceptively link this to Jewish theological conceptions of exile. Finally, Black and Bonsall's article in this special collection demonstrates that the polyglot roots of the sixteenth-century Scots *Buke of the Sevyne Sagis*' attracted 21st-century Scottish poets to the text, allowing them to understand Scottish literary history as cosmopolitan rather than inward-looking. The same, Black and Bonsall hypothesise, may have been true for medieval adapters, to whom the *Seven Sages* story matter may have appealed because it was from a far-away place and yet felt topical and timely for local issues.

5. Collaborative methods

The final component of this special collection's approach to premodern literature is our collaborative working method necessitated by the complexity of the tales' transmission, and perhaps encouraged by its discursive structure that invites discussion and debate. Hans R. Runte had already founded the groundbreaking Seven Sages Society for academics from different disciplines working on this tradition, keeping them up to date with recent scholarship through regular photocopied newsletters and an early website, which was archived in 2014. A fresh starting point were two sessions on different versions of *The Seven Sages/Sindbad* at the International Medieval Congress in Leeds 2021. For a special issue of *Das Mittelalter* on *The Seven Sages/Sindbad* (Bildhauer, Eming and Schmid, 2023), contributors started to meet monthly in online author workshops. Following a workshop on *The Seven Sages/Sindbad* organised by Jutta Eming and Ida Toth in Oxford in 2022, we founded a monthly online reading group, familiarising ourselves with scholarship and the many versions of *The Seven Sages*, and getting to know and trust each other. We gained momentum through the AHRC-DFG collaborative project in the humanities, meeting in person for advisory board meetings in St Andrews, Leeds and Berlin, and at one memorable point in Barcelona, kindly hosted by Simone Ventura and Yasmina Foehr-Janssens' *Canoniser les Sept Sages* project. In the final phase of preparing this

special issue, the authors met monthly online to read foundational research in digital humanities, translingual studies, global medieval studies and gender studies, as well as each others' draft chapters at three different stages of the writing process.

A consequence of this collaborative method has been a greater width of shared knowledge. We have profited massively from the diverse linguistic expertise in our group, as well as from the range of backgrounds, migration experiences across different academic and public cultures, genders, neurodiversity, disabilities, illnesses, ages, ethnicities, nationalities, caring responsibilities and career stages that our members brought to the group and experienced over the past five years. Through sharing our different interpretations of the old stories, we influenced and enthused each other, and as a group became particularly interested in discussing gender, storytelling and economic trade. As Catherine Holmes and Naomi Standen observe of their own – admittedly more structured – collaborative interdisciplinary methods for studying medieval history on a 'global' scale, such methods are 'characterized by a high degree of intellectual, even reputational, risk: it is easy to appear or feel stupid when we move away from our core specialisms' (Holmes and Standen, 2018: 22). The changing cast of active members of our reading group were brave enough to take those risks, and to help the project with contributions to this special collection as well as to the database, together assembling and supplying information that went far beyond any one individual's linguistic expertise.

For all the digital opportunities provided by databases, Artificial Intelligence and online editions, then, it has been scholarly networks and friendships that have proved essential to creating our database and special collection. Acknowledging these prominently is part of our method of care and community-building. We are grateful to our authors and our reading group participants over the years, and in particular for the advice and information provided by the AHRC-DFG project's advisory board, Ruth von Bernuth, Yasmina Foehr-Janssens, Csilla Gabor, Bea Lundt, Ulrich Marzolph, Emilie van Opstall and Ida Toth, and postdoctoral researcher Rita Schlusemann. We fondly remember our advisory board member Mohsen Zakeri, whose untimely death early on in our project deeply saddened us and left a hole that we still feel. Our anonymous peer-reviewers provided thorough and generous feedback on the draft articles. The database was truly co-designed by Maximilian Nöth at the *Zentrum für Digitalität und Philologie* at the University of Würzburg, Bonsall and Bildhauer. Nöth and his team's willingness to meet our every new query and idea with endless skill, patience and creativity was unmatched. The content of the database was largely provided by the tireless research and work of Jane Bonsall. Identifying and providing the information across all the *Seven Sages/Sindbad*'s languages would not have been possible without the paid and unpaid

help of many researchers, first and foremost student researcher Elisabeth Böttcher in Berlin, as well as Alfie Watkins and Marjolijne Janssen as part of Ida Toth's Einstein BUA/Oxford Visiting fellowship project at the Freie Universität Berlin. In St Andrews, student researchers Ava Byrne, Jack Kornowske, Ana Ross, Annabel Lloyd Wrafter and Sining Yun found and entered huge quantities of information. The St Andrews students in the Medieval Short Stories module 2024/25 helped to give feedback on the database, and Erica Keanie in particular translated into English some of the Dutch verse *Seven Sages*, edited and translated into German by Rita Schlusemann. Masami Nishimura graciously shared unpublished translations of his monumental Japanese overviews of the transmission. Bettina Bildhauer and Jutta Eming as lead investigators, Rita Schlusemann and Jane Bonsall as postdoctoral researchers and Eliza Hähnke and Elisabeth Böttcher as student assistants ensured the success of the wider AHRC-DFG project. This special collection in this sense is the latest round of retelling and discussing an age-old tale that still provokes, stimulates and builds community. Thank you, ありがとうございます, merci, dank u wel, danke, köszönöm.

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