

The Cluster of Excellence
Understanding Written Artefacts
at the Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures (CSMC)
cordially invites you to the workshop

The Material Traditions of the Psalms

Thursday, 25 June 2026, 9:45 am – 6:00 pm CEST

Friday, 26 June 2026, 10:00 am – 5:30 pm CEST

Warburg-Haus, Heilwigstraße 116, 20249 Hamburg

Organised by Karin Becker (University of Hamburg),
Erene Morcos (University of Cologne),
and Hanna Wimmer (University of Hamburg)

Registration:

<https://www.csmc.uni-hamburg.de/register/workshop77>

For over two millennia, the Psalms have served as a source of devotion, identity, and artistic inspiration across cultures and traditions. While their textual traditions are relatively well studied, the extent of the Psalms' rich material and visual heritage—transcribed on parchment, carved in stone, woven into textiles, and integrated into diverse media—has never been fully investigated. This conference seeks to explore the Psalms not simply as text, but as a vast collection of objectified, visualised, and embodied traditions. Sessions will explore the visual and material expressions of this sacred poetry with particular attention to material choices, modes of transmission, and the dynamics of fragmentation and reproduction. Tracing how these sacred texts move across languages, technologies, and formats, this conference invites conversation on the Psalms as a materially embedded and expanding written tradition.

Programme

Thursday, 25 June 2026, 9:45 am – 6:00 pm

9:45 – 10:00	Arrival and Registration
10:00 – 10:45	Warburg-Haus Tour with Hannah Neufang
10:45 – 11:30	Introduction
11:30 – 12:00	Coffee Break

Section I – Sound and Substance within and beyond the Codex

Chair: Karin Becker

12:00 – 12:45	Oliver Huck (University of Hamburg) <i>Written Music in the Psalter and the Psalms with Music in Medieval Western European Manuscripts</i>
12:45 – 1:30	Chrysi Kotsifou (Niedersächsische Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen) <i>The Coptic Psalms and their transmission on papyrus, parchment, stone, and clay</i>
1:30 – 2:30	Lunch Break

Section II – Origins and Transmissions

Chair: José Maksimczuk

2:30 – 3:15	Justin Willson (Yale University) <i>Textual Survivor: The Psalter in Slavonic Author Images</i>
3:15 – 4:00	Ronny Vollandt (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität) <i>Arabic translations of the Book of Psalms: A survey</i>
4:00 – 4:30	Coffee Break

Section III – The Materiality of Sacred Writing

Chair: Hanna Wimmer

- 4:30 – 5:15 Uta Lauer (Universität Hamburg)
From Faith to Life-Style Product – Psalms and Chinese Cultural Conventions
- 5:15 – 6:00 David Ganz (Universität Zürich)
Psalms in Golden Splendor

Friday, 26 June 2026, 10:00 am – 5:30 pm

Section IV – Visual Frameworks

Chair: Hanna Wimmer

- 10:00 – 10:45 Grace Clipson (Yale University)
Constructing Devotion: Architectural Frameworks in the Queen Mary Psalter
- 10:45 – 11:30 Marco Pavan (Università degli Studi Roma Tre | Pontificia Università di San Tommaso d'Aquino)
The Internal Segmentation, and Graphic Arrangement of Hebrew Poetry at Qumrân. The Dead Sea «Psalms» Scrolls and the Hodayot as a Case in Point
- 11:30 – 12:00 Coffee Break

Section V – The Canon and Innovation

Chair: Erene Rafik Morcos

- 12:00 – 12:45 Sophia Dege-Müller and Jonas Karlsson (University of Hamburg)
Continuity and Innovation in the Ethiopic Tradition of the Psalms
- 12:45 – 1:30 Georgi Parpulov
The Seven Penitential Psalms in Greek
- 1:30 – 2:30 Lunch Break

Section VI – Shield and Shelter: Apotropaic Practices

Chair: Michael Kohs

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| 2:30 – 3:15 | Anastasia Tsacheiridou (Αριστοτέλειο Πανεπιστήμιο Θεσσαλονίκης)
<i>Whoever Dwells in the Shelter of the Most High (Psalm 91/90): Psalms and Apotropaic Practices in Byzantine Minor Art</i> |
| 3:15 – 4:00 | Giovanni Ruffini (Fairfield University)
<i>The Psalms as Nubia's Shield</i> |
| 4:00 – 4:30 | Coffee Break |
| 4:30 – 5:30 | Roundtable Discussion |

Abstracts and Contributors

Grace Clipson (Yale University)

Constructing Devotion: Architectural Frameworks in the Queen Mary Psalter

Friday, 26 June 2026, 10:00 am – 10:45 am

The Queen Mary Psalter (London, c. 1310-20) contains a series of striking, yet under-studied, illuminated architectural frameworks. Diverging from scholarship that portrays manuscript borders as decorative pleonasms, my paper examines how these archimorphic containers actively structured the manuscript's broader devotional use.

The Psalter exhibits a marked bifurcation between its two sections: the Old Testament preface employs architecture primarily for narrative legibility, while the psalter proper utilizes ornate architectural structures that recall contemporary, shrine-like *ars sacra*. These latter structures—drawing on the micro-architectural rhetoric of reliquaries, altarpieces, and diptychs—would have visually interacted with their physical counterparts within the user's devotional space, creating sacred webs that amplified both the immediacy and potency of the illuminated containers. These dynamic visual exchanges heightened this psalter section's aura of sanctity, encouraging the viewer to venerate its Christological scenes with appropriate devotion. Far from being decorative parentheses, these mimetic architectural renderings in the Queen Mary Psalter were, I argue, instrumental to constructing the devotional experience itself.

Using the Queen Mary Psalter as a case study, this paper ultimately explores psalters' wider investments in the dialogue between the codicological and architectural (both micro and monumental).

Sophia Dege-Müller and Jonas Karlsson (University of Hamburg)

Continuity and Innovation in the Ethiopic Tradition of the Psalms

Friday, 26 June 2026, 12:00 pm – 12:45 pm

No text has permeated Ethiopian and Eritrean culture as much as the Book of Psalms. Translated from Greek during Late Antiquity and continuously copied in parchment codices since then, it remains one of the most frequently attested texts in Geez (Classical Ethiopic).

Although the text of the Book of Psalms has remained remarkably stable over the centuries, the framing of the book has undergone numerous changes. This concerns features closely tied to the text of the Book of Psalms, such as layout, rubrication patterns, stichometric indications, and

psalm titles, as well as the various other texts that typically accompanied the Book of Psalms in Ethiopic Psalter manuscripts. Furthermore, both full psalms and shorter excerpts from the Geez Book of Psalms appear in a wide range of other contexts, stretching from their use as *məsbāk* (broadly corresponding to *prokeimena* in the Byzantine tradition) before the Gospel reading during the Eucharistic liturgy to their frequent attestation in magic scrolls. This presentation will begin with a broad introduction to the Book of Psalms in the Geez tradition, then present in detail one of the patristic texts that occasionally accompanied the Book of Psalms in medieval Ethiopia, namely, the Introduction to the Psalms by Eusebius of Caesarea (CAe 6719).

David Ganz (Universität Zürich)

Psalms in Golden Splendor

Thursday, 25 June 2026, 5:15 pm – 6:00 pm

My paper deals with the use of gold lettering for the Psalms in the early Middle Ages. The use of gold ink for the text, sometimes in combination with purple-dyed parchment, was the highest form of material distinction for texts in early medieval book culture. It connects the collection of the Psalms with the Gospels, which could be decorated in a similar way. My paper takes a comparative perspective on psalters in gold lettering and examines the specific aesthetic and political concepts that underlay the use of gold in the context of the Psalms.

Oliver Huck (University of Hamburg)

Written Music in the Psalter and the Psalms with Music in Medieval Western European Manuscripts

Friday, 25 June 2026, 12:00 am – 12:45 am

While one might expect the manuscript tradition of the Psalter to have included musical notation alongside the psalms, this is not the case. Unlike the individual lines taken out from psalms for use in various liturgical contexts such as in an introit or in an antiphon and which are to be found with music in various liturgical books, music accompanying entire psalm texts is almost entirely absent from Western European psalters throughout the Middle Ages. Thus, the paper examines not only music in the *psalterium feriatum*, but also medieval manuscripts beyond the psalter including music for the psalms such as music manuscripts and music treatises, it highlights the *Venite exultemus* as the exception from the rule for a psalm with music in the in the invitatory of liturgical books for the office as well as polyphony as a comment to the psalter in historiated initials and as a division marker of its parts.

Chrysi Kotsifou (Niedersächsische Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen)

The Coptic Psalms and their Transmission on Papyrus, Parchment, Stone, and Clay

Thursday, 25 June 2026, 12:45 pm – 1:30 pm

The Church Fathers and monastic typica always stress the importance of Psalms in the life of both laymen and especially monastics. Forty-six Sahidic manuscripts of different lengths and dates underscore the relevance of Psalms in the daily life of Egyptians during the late antique and medieval eras. The Psalms were crucial for the Liturgy and a compulsory part of the ascetic practices of both men and women in terms of their spiritual development.

At the same time, though, numerous ostraca and inscriptions that contain parts of the Coptic Psalms attest to the employment of these texts for educational purposes or for magical and apotropaic uses. Both the codices and the sub-literary Psalms witnesses date from the fourth to the tenth centuries CE.

After a brief introduction of the surviving early codices of Coptic Psalms and some of their unique features, this presentation will explore how the Coptic Psalms featured in magical texts and amulets and school exercises. The survival of the above-mentioned ostraca and inscriptions from Egypt offers us a unique perspective of the reception of the Psalms by monastics, clergymen, and laymen in their everyday lives and away from the strictly prescribed liturgical practices by the Church. This paper will also examine how this 'documentary' material compares to the canonical Sahidic Psalms and what insights it can offer us in terms of reuse of writing mediums or whether one material was considered more appropriate than the other for specific uses of the Psalms.

Uta Lauer (University of Hamburg)

From Faith to Life-Style Product – Psalms and Chinese Cultural Conventions

Thursday, 25 June 2026, 4:30 pm – 5:15 pm

Christian teachings first reached China in the seventh century CE, but it was not until the nineteenth century, that the complete Bible and with it all the Psalms were translated. Translators typically imitated classical styles of Chinese poetry. A similar approach was taken when representing the Psalms, both as texts as well as images, on liturgical objects. This paper will explore the material and visual presentation of Psalms in different media, ranging from blue-and-white porcelain, cloisonné, lacquer, ink-cakes, and paintings to calligraphic renditions from the sixteenth century to the present day.

Georgi Parpulov

The Seven Penitential Psalms in Greek

Friday, 26 June 2026, 12:45 pm – 1:30 pm

A few pocket-sized parchment codices copied in Western Europe in the second half of the fifteenth century contain the Greek text of the Seven Penitential Psalms (LXX 6, 31, 37, 50, 101, 129, 142):

Aix-en-Provence, Bibliothèque Méjanes, 1229;
Athens, Gennadius Library, MS 13.1
Baltimore, John Hopkins University Library, MSB 34;
Bern, Burgerbibliothek, 703;
Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, MS 325
Durham NC, Duke University, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Greek 63;
Naples, Biblioteca Nazionale, II A 35.

These same Psalms were also included in the Greek Book of Hours printed by Aldus Manutius in 1497. I will discuss the reasons for their popularity and try to trace their manuscript tradition.

Marco Pavan (Università degli Studi Roma Tre | Pontificia Università di San Tommaso d'Aquino)
The Internal Segmentation, and Graphic Arrangement of Hebrew Poetry at Qumrân. The Dead Sea «Psalms» Scrolls and the Hodayot as a Case in Point
Friday, 26 June 2026, 10:45 am – 11:30 am

The segmentation, delimitation and graphic arrangement of definite portions of text were tools used by ancient scribes to create specific expectations and interpretations in readers. In Qumrân scholarship, researchers have long recognised and categorised the various ways in which scribes indicated internal text divisions or, in some cases, graphically arranged them to highlight their potential poetic structure (stichography). A notable example in this respect is the book of Psalms, for which both ancient and medieval manuscripts demonstrate variations in internal segmentation, numbering and stichographic arrangement, which can be attributed to various key figures in the history of the tradition of the poems (editors, copyists, scribes, etc.). Building on previous research, my analysis will focus on the differences in internal segmentation and graphic arrangement in the Dead Sea «Psalms» scrolls, highlighting how the text of the Psalms was received and interpreted in the final centuries of the Second Temple period. A fresh comparison with the scribal techniques attested in the Hodayot scrolls will demonstrate that

these techniques reflect the creativity of the reception process of the Psalms in the Qumran period rather than textual fluidity.

Giovanni Ruffini (Fairfield University)

The Psalms as Nubia's Shield

Friday, 26 June 2026, 3:15 pm – 4:00 pm

The corpus of Psalms from Christian Nubia is small, no more than 25 texts in Nubian, Greek, and Coptic. But this small sample lets us see the dim outlines of a wider pattern of uses for the Psalms which places Christian Nubia firmly in the context of mainstream Nile Valley and Mediterranean Christianity. Nubia's Psalms appear in educational texts, lectionaries, wall paintings, phylacteries, and funeral texts. Nubia's most common Psalms are some of those most common in Christendom more generally. Nubia's most curious Psalms—with bilingual texts in alternating Greek and Old Nubian—suggest considerable learned engagement with the text and a highly educated reading and listening audience. The cumulative impression from the chosen texts and their findspots is that the Psalms served as a form of protection for Christian Nubia against the world's forces of evil.

Anastasia Tsacheiridou (Αριστοτέλειο Πανεπιστήμιο Θεσσαλονίκης)

Whoever Dwells in the Shelter of the Most High (Psalm 91/90): Psalms and Apotropaic Practices in Byzantine Minor Art

Friday, 26 June 2026, 2:30 pm – 3:15 pm

Inscriptions with excerpts drawn from different Psalms often adorn objects of the Byzantine minor arts, investing them with additional meaning and power. This paper will focus on the apotropaic use of the Psalms in the Byzantine minor arts, and more precisely on the particular prominence of Psalm 91(90) (Ὁ κατοικῶν ἐν βοήθειᾳ τοῦ ὑψίστου), a distinctly apotropaic psalm widely regarded as a source of protective power. Drawing on a corpus of small devotional and prophylactic objects (amulets, enkolpia, inscribed armbands, rings) the study investigates how selected psalmic verses were materialized, circulated, and employed in daily life as safeguards against any physical and spiritual danger. The study highlights the interaction between text and image, showing how psalmic excerpts were combined with Christian iconographic motifs and various apotropaic symbols. These combinations created objects whose efficacy drew on sacred words, divine intermediaries, and visual markers of power. Variations in wording, orthography, and textual arrangement across different artefacts reveal intentional or unintentional choices

made by craftsmen and commissioners, reflecting personal piety as well as broader cultural patterns.

The widespread appearance of Psalm 91(90) in protective contexts attests to its resonance within the Byzantine devotional culture during the early Byzantine period. Psalms functioned not only within liturgical settings but also as ritual technologies embedded in material practice—recited, inscribed, worn, touched, or simply carried. This contextual repositioning provides valuable insight into, when, how and why Byzantine used a fusion of scripture, image, and matter in order to seek divine protection.

Ronny Vollandt (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität)

Arabic Translations of the Book of Psalms: A Survey

Thursday, 25 June 2026, 3:15 pm – 4:00 pm

My lecture will examine the early Arabic translations of the Book of Psalms as preserved in manuscripts from Sinai and Damascus, highlighting their historical, linguistic, and cultural significance. Drawing on manuscript evidence, the study situates these translations within the broader context of the transmission of biblical texts. The Arabic Psalter emerges as part of a dynamic process of textual adaptation, in which translators sought to render the Greek Vorlage with remarkable literal precision, often preserving word order, grammatical structure, and lexical choices at the expense of idiomatic Arabic style.

Particular attention will be given to the manuscript sources, including both bilingual Greek–Arabic codices and later monolingual Arabic copies, which reflect different stages in the development of the text.

Justin Willson (Yale University)

Textual Survivor: The Psalter in Slavonic Author Images

Thursday, 25 June 2026, 2:30 pm – 3:15 pm

The focus of this study is two Slavonic psalters from Novgorod and Moravia: the Simonov (Moscow, State History Museum, Khlud. 3) and the Serbian Psalter (Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek Slav. 4). Both dated to the fourteenth century, the codices reveal a pronounced interest in the origins of the Psalms text. In prefatory cycles and miniatures, their painters depicted David and the prophet Ezra generating an edition of the book. On the one hand, David “compiled” the initial version of the Psalter, rendering it in a written form and setting aside thousands of other songs—all by Israelite poets, prophets, and teachers—that were not to be

transmitted to posterity. On the other hand, Ezra instantiated the text in its final codex form, whence it passed into the canon as a disorderly corpus, an arrangement that mirrored his accidental discoveries in the Israelite archives. This was in the years immediately following the return of the tribes to the Promised Land after the Babylonian exile. In short, as a songbook, the Psalter reflected loss on two sides: to the vicissitudes of oral ephemera, often not written down, and to the ravages of war and collective trauma. Incorporating commentaries on this genealogy of the text within books of the psalter, Slavonic scribes and painters thus framed the transcript as a fortuitous survival. Situating the Simonov and Serbian image cycles alongside that of other Slavonic psalters, I argue for the artifactual nature of their texts. If the words of the Psalter were divinely inspired, they also were the result of aural ethnography and a chance find, nearly forgotten or lost if not for the industry of ancient compilers and editors. To an exceptional degree, author images in the Slavonic psalter represented an archaeology of the transcript of scripture.