

## Polyphonic Tenth Century: Christian Arts Across Afro-Eurasia (Brno, 3-4 Nov 25)

Masaryk University, Nov 3-04, 2025

Deadline: Jul 30, 2025

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The Polyphonic Tenth Century: Christian Arts Across Afro-Eurasia.

The tenth century in continental “Western” Europe has long been cast as a time of crisis: a historical vacuum brought by the collapse of a strong centralised power following the disintegration of the Carolingian Empire. Dominant historiographical traditions have painted this era almost exclusively in terms of fragmentation, conflict among locally important forces, the so-called “pornocracy” and the decline of the papacy – absorbed in bloody power struggles – and an overarching cultural and artistic stagnation. What was once viewed as a period of decline now appears, more accurately, as an age of both rupture and continuity: a period in which new powers were consolidated (e.g. the Ottonian Empire), and new cultural expressions emerged, poised between tradition and innovation, between the legacy of the past and new necessities for self-representation. A comparable narrative unfolds in the Christian kingdoms of Ethiopia, where the tenth century has similarly been framed as a time of chaos and decline. A decline, and this is essential for the diverse historiographies, connected with a moment seen as challenging the Christian identity of the region.

By contrast, the tenth century in Byzantium has traditionally been viewed as a time of political and economic rebirth after the Iconoclastic crisis. This notion of rebirth has also shaped interpretations of the region’s artistic and cultural production, most famously exemplified by the label “Macedonian Renaissance.” Yet the validity of this term has long been debated: Renaissance or renaissance? A recovery of which antiquity? And with what repercussions beyond the narrow circle of the Constantinopolitan court? If we shift our gaze to the South Caucasus – particularly to Armenia and Iberia – historiography and art history alike have presented the tenth century as a period of remarkable flourishing. The Cathedral of Ani, the expansion of communication and trade routes, or the frescoes of Chvabiani in Svaneti all stand as striking examples of cultural vitality. This moment of success should not be dismissed as a retrospective construction of local pride: the case of the Armenian architect Trdat, designer of the aforementioned Cathedral of Ani and entrusted with the reconstruction of the dome of Justinian’s Hagia Sophia confirms the transregional recognition and artistic significance of this area in the tenth century.

Across the territories considered here, material realities and historiographical myths together produce a strikingly complex panorama. Until recently, the tenth century in “Western” visual and material culture was largely neglected, treated as a sort of historical void or “black hole”. In stark contrast, the Eastern Mediterranean and Western Asia, have long benefitted from a sustained scholar-

ly focus on this period. The persistent dominance of “Western” frameworks in mainstream scholarship has meant the tenth century is rarely approached from a transcultural perspective – one attentive to connections across geographical, linguistic, cultural, and religious boundaries. For centuries, Eurocentric narratives have imposed a reductive pattern of alternating “Renaissances” and “declines.” Such a view is not only partial and ideologically charged, but also obscures the complexity of cultural interactions, which are often considered only at the level of imperial centres or grand exchanges, while more subtle, lateral connections between traditionally marginalized contexts remain neglected.

Adopting a transdisciplinary and transregional approach, this conference aims to reexamine the visual and material cultures that shaped the diverse landscapes of tenth-century Christendom through a synchronic lens. Rather than privileging a single centre or narrative, the interventions will seek to illuminate the multiplicity of artistic worlds active across Afro-Eurasia during this pivotal century. The discussion will encompass a wide geographical arc – stretching from East to West – including but not limited to medieval Armenia and Iberia, the Byzantine imperial court and its provinces, the Christian kingdoms of Ethiopia the North Alpine territories of the Ottonian Empire, the Italian peninsula, Gaul, and the various cultures of the Iberian Peninsula.

The conference will be held at the Hans Belting Library, Department of Art History, Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic, from November 3 to 4, 2025. The organization will cover the costs of accommodation, meals, and offer reimbursement – within reasonable bounds – for travel expenses. This conference is organized within the project “De-Marginalising Lombardy: The Roots of a Cultural Centre at the Turn of Millennium”, funded by the Czech Ministry of Education.

Organizers:

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We welcome submissions from scholars across disciplines, including art history, history, heritage studies, cultural studies, and related fields. Please submit an abstract (300 words) and a short bio (150 words) by July 30, 2025 to [irene.quadri@unil.ch](mailto:irene.quadri@unil.ch).

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Reference:

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