

Armenian in the Middle: Afterlives of a Language that Lost its Kingdom

Middle Armenian, or the medieval Armenian vernacular, is fundamentally a language in the middle: not only because it emerged in-between the rise of Classical Armenian and the modern Armenian dialects, but more importantly because it was formed against the backdrop of the great languages of the Mediterranean Sea, absorbing loanwords and literary models from Old French, Persian, Arabic, Latin, and Greek. This is no coincidence, as Middle Armenian first was admitted to writing on a widespread scale in the Kingdom of Armenia in Cilicia, where it flourished for a time. In this lecture, I tell the story of a language that did not remain at home, however, but rather that survived the downfall of its kingdom to the Mamluks in 1375. The unruly language of Middle Armenian slipped between principalities and kingdoms, attracting inadvertent language workers in unlikely places, from Ottoman-conquered Constantinople to the lagoons of Venice. Most importantly, it continued to interface with other languages and bodies of knowledge present in these other communities, even in surprising ways. I therefore seek to tell a particular chapter from the life of a language in the middle, fashioned from its birth and peregrinations across the "sea in the middle."