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*Looting Letters: the Papacy and the Latin Canon of Greek Literature in the Medieval West*

Current scholarly emphasis on the scarceness of Greek materials and of linguistic competence in the medieval West seems to imply certain randomness and lack of direction in the Latin translation movements. On the contrary, I argue that canons of translations were shaped not so much by the limitations of the resources, but by the cultural and political horizon of the institutions and individuals involved. Both Byzantium and the Latin West are constantly measured and evaluated only as irresponsible and ignorant custodians of a classical heritage that was then fortunately salvaged by the Humanists. Instead, if we approach this period setting aside the classical canon as built by the Humanists, and look at the ways Byzantines and Latins built their own canons, we find a rich and engaging heritage of texts crisscrossing the Mediterranean.

These translation projects were not carried out in a secluded manner. The translators of the Middle Ages were often go-betweens as interpreters, diplomats, legates. Translation movements were supported by patrons, and were mostly carried out in the social setting of a medieval court. While imperial and royal courts were ephemeral and rather mobile constructions, there was one court that could boast with a continuity and stability greater than the others: the papal curia in Rome. The medieval papacy took an active role in filtering a both Pagan science and Eastern religiosity, whether the Aristotelian canon, ancient medical corpora, ecclesiastical historiography, hagiography or theological documents. As commissioners or dedicatees, from Late Antiquity onward, popes figure in many translators' prologues. There was no linear and unchanging pontifical policy implementing this appropriation, rather a constant preoccupation, with various motivations and directions, that illustrate how translation is a strategic site from which institutions can control the impact of other cultures on their own, and implicitly shape the cultural identity of their community.