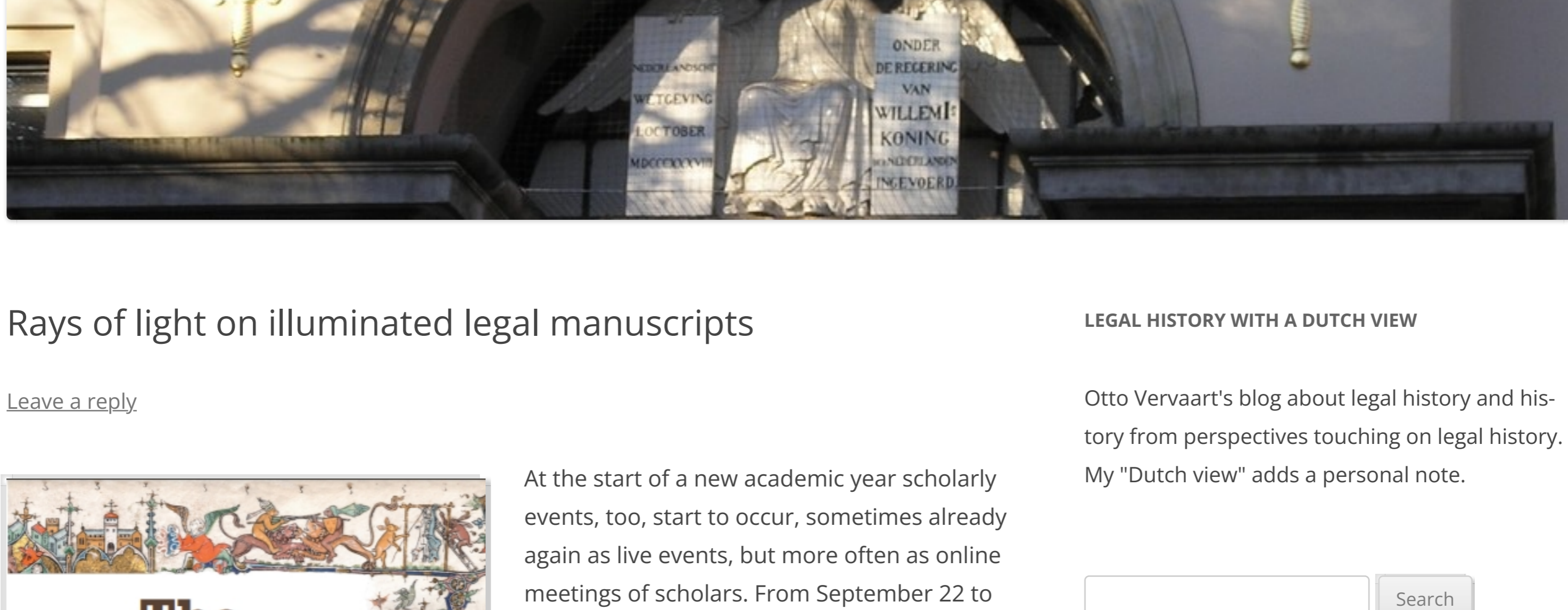


# Rechtsgeschiedenis Blog

Legal history with a Dutch view

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## Rays of light on illuminated legal manuscripts

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At the start of a new academic year scholarly events, too, start to occur, sometimes already again as live events, but more often as online meetings of scholars. From September 22 to 25, 2021 an online conference took place concerning *The Illuminated legal manuscript from the Middle Ages to the digital Age - Forms, iconographies, materials, uses and cataloguing*. Three institutions cooperated to organize this event, the [Ius Illuminatum research team](#) led by Maria Alessandra Bilotta (Lisbon), the [Biblioteca Capitolare di Vercelli](#) and the [Biblioteca Capitolare di Verona](#). With its eight sessions and various key note lectures on different themes connected with medieval legal manuscripts and art history this conference addressed a wider audience than just art historians and specialists in legal iconography or medieval book production, and thus fit for a post here. Last week my own time schedule made it impossible for me to follow all sessions, and therefore only a number of themes will come into the spotlights here. Hopefully other participants, too, will report on this interesting event.

### Focus on the Mediterranean

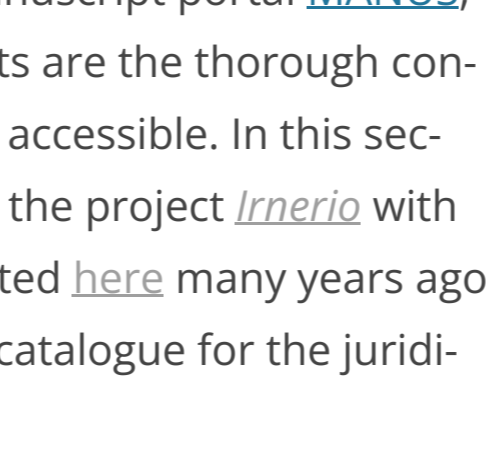
Surely one of the most visible aspects of this conference is the partnership for this conference between scholars and two libraries crossing national borders. The [Ius Illuminatum](#) team at the Universidade Nova de Lisboa is known for the research by Maria Alessandra Bilotta on medieval illuminated legal manuscripts created in Southern France, in particular in Toulouse. The library in Vercelli is famous for the Vercelli Mappamundi, the Vercelli Book with texts in Anglo-Saxon, and two manuscripts containing the *Leges Langobardorum*. The library in Verona is renown for its holdings with a number of medieval manuscripts and in particular palimpsests as unique witnesses to texts from classical Antiquity, foremost among them the Institutes of Gaius. Both libraries have also a museum. A live virtual tour of the library in Vercelli focusing on two manuscripts was a nice addition to the conference.

Let's briefly look at the themes of the sessions. Manuscripts held in Salamanca, manuscripts from France kept in the Biblioteca Nacional de España, legal manuscripts in Salamanca and Naples were the subject of the first session centered around libraries. In the second section a number of individual case studies were grouped together. The third section focused on legal iconography. The cataloguing of (illuminated) legal manuscripts was the theme in the fourth session. The fifth session with just one contribution looked at vulgarisation of law. Medieval city statutes were presented in the sixth session. Two special sessions were devoted respectively to the materiality of illuminated legal manuscripts and to the connection of heraldry to medieval law and illuminated manuscripts. In my view bringing together these themes is already most useful to raise awareness about their interconnections and limitations.

A number of keynote lectures could theoretically be placed within a particular session, but it was perhaps right to set them apart. The lecture by Susanne Wittekind (Universität Köln) stands out for its dense information and insightful comparison of the manuscript illumination in the *Codex Albedensis*, a tenth-century manuscript at the Escorial with at first sight just a miscellaneous collection of texts, and the *Tercer Libre Verd*, a manuscript with statutes of Barcelona, also discussed by Rose Alcoy (the *Universitat de València*). The miscellany is in a well-structured manuscript showing graphically a legal and graphic order of legal and religious texts. Making comparisons and structuring your presentation were elements definitely missing in some presentations without the use of slides, as was being aware of the limited number of themes you can address within thirty minutes, and awareness of the need for structure and clear questions.

### The importance of repertoires and catalogues

One of the limitations for studying medieval legal illuminated manuscripts is the state of catalogues and repertoires for this genre. It was therefore most welcome to hear a lecture by Gero Dolezalek (University of Aberdeen) on the current state of affairs of the [Manuscript Juridica](#) database in Frankfurt am Main. Only a few canon law manuscripts have yet been entered in this database originally devised for manuscripts with Roman legal texts and commentaries up to 1600. Sadly it seems little progress has been made in the past few years. Illumination has not been consequently recorded. At Turin Maria Alessandra Panzanielli Fratoni is working at two interrelated projects, a new portal called [IUS COMMUNE ONLINE](#), to be launched in October 2021, with an integration of data on manuscripts and early printed editions from existing online resources, and a new section of the Italian manuscript portal [MANUS](#), called [MANUSJuridica](#). The main strengths of these two promising projects are the thorough conceptual preparation. It is not yet clear when [MANUSJuridica](#) will become accessible. In this section Andrea Padovani (Bologna) talked about the new phase and face of the project [Inerzio](#) with digitized legal manuscripts at the Colegio di Spagna in Bologna - presented [here](#) many years ago - and Silvio Pucci (independent scholar) about the online version of the catalogue for the juridical manuscripts at the [Biblioteca Comunale degli Intronati](#) in Siena.

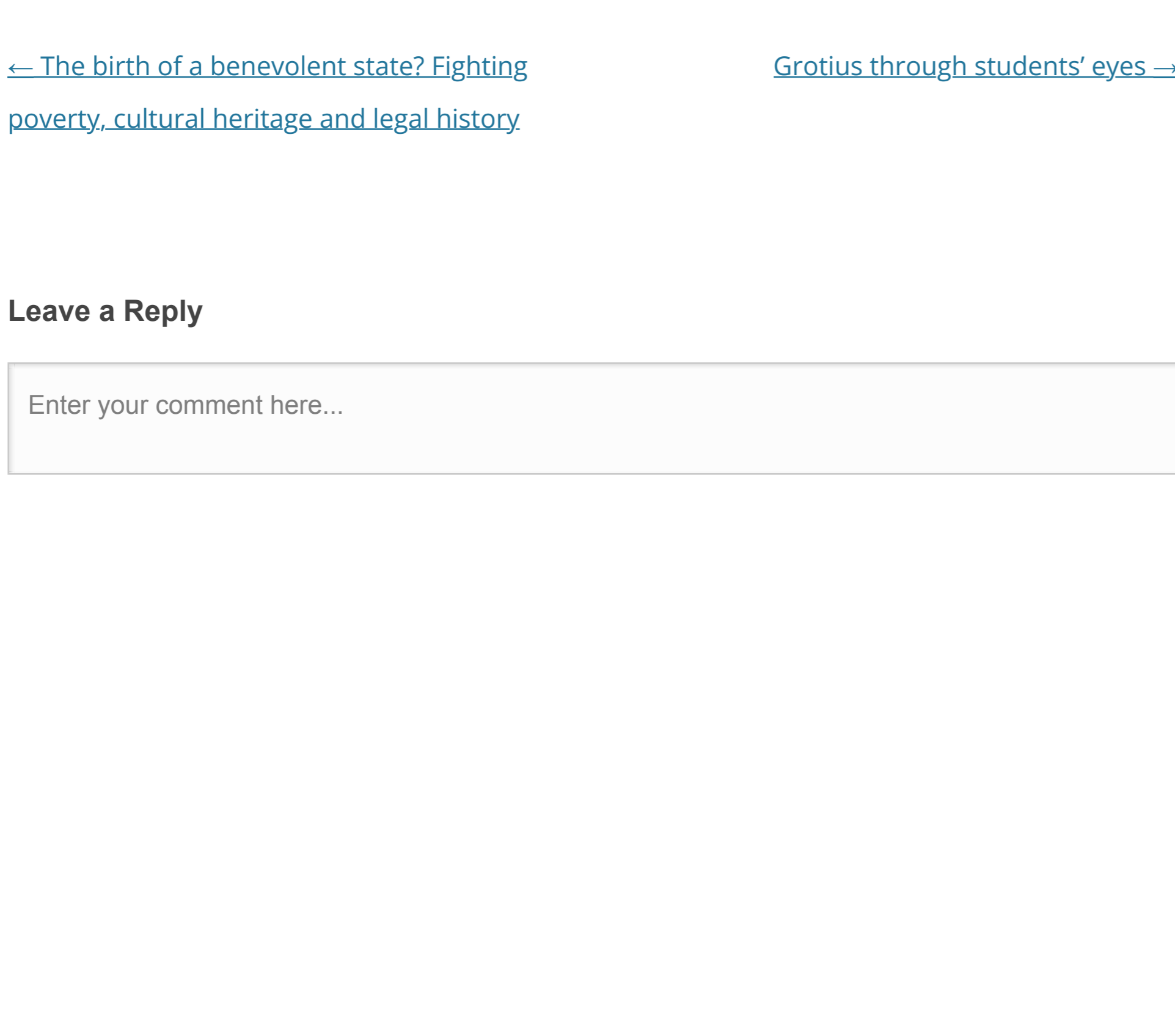


It is important to remember the study of medieval canon law still faces the lack of a full manuscript repertoire, a paradoxical fact after the appearance of the model given by Stephan Kuttner in his *Repertorium der Kanonistik 1140-1234, I, Prodomus glossarum* (Citta del Vaticano, 1937). Was his level simply too high to follow for others, or did it simply lead to a strong and not completely justifiable focus on the classic period of medieval canon law? Luckily we have for the early Middle Ages the excellent guide by Lotte Kéry, *Canonical collections of the Early Middle Ages, ca. 400-1140: A Bibliographical guide to the manuscripts and literature* (Washington, DC, 1999).

### Legal iconography and heraldry

In the section for the more classic legal iconography papers were read about the illustration of the two powers at the beginning of manuscripts with the *Decretum Gratiani* (Gianluca del Monaco, Bologna), accompanying the very incipit *Humanum genus*, the iconography of last wills in some manuscripts of the *Institutiones Justiniani* and the Digest (Viviane Persi, Lille), the representation of public justice in the *Vidal Mayor* (Rogério Ribeiro Tostes, Évora), and the development of legal iconography in medieval Scandinavia (Stefan Drechsler, Bergen).

The very last section dealt with a subject often associated with medieval law, heraldry and the use of distinctive signs by knights and noble families, but interestingly medieval law did not set clear norms for unique claims on the use of a particular blason or sign. In 2012 I looked [here](#) at this very theme. Bartolus de Sassoferrato (1313-1357) did certainly influence later lawyers with his most often copied treatise *De insignis et armis*, but in particular Martin Sunnqvist (Lunds Universitet) made it refreshingly clear that this treatise does not help us to understand the rise of heraldry from the twelfth century onwards. The lecture of João Portugal (Instituto Português de Heráldica) on Early Modern heraldic rights in Portugal showed essentially how showing a relation with the king was as important as having a official blason at all. Matteo Ferrari (Universite de Namur) took us to a painting at the Palazzo di Comune in San Gimignano with a deliberate use of heraldic arms above the text of an important ruling around 1300.



Coutumes de Toulouse, around 1296 - Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, ms. latin 9187, f. 1r (detail) - image BnF

Finally Laurent Macé (Université de Toulouse) looked at the use of earlier blasons from the former county and the counts of Toulouse in a manuscript with the *Coutumes de Toulouse* from the late thirteenth century ([Paris\\_BnF\\_ms\\_latin\\_9187](#)). Macé argued these blasons and other signs helped showing continuity to readers in a new period under the French crown.

### The forest and the trees

Even with only a partial review of lectures and keynotes the variety of this online conference with an attendance between twenty and forty scholars cannot be doubted. For those thinking the choice of subjects is too wide or simply unfocused the contribution of Carlo Federici (Scuola di Biblioteconomia, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana) on the archaeology of the book served as a necessary reminder how leading palaeographers and codicologists in the second half of the twentieth century advocated an integral approach of medieval manuscripts, archival records and book production, away from a choice for studying only either texts, scripts, bindings or scripioria.

The materiality of manuscripts matters indeed. Thus in my view including a lecture on legal fragments kept at the Archivio di Stato di Arezzo by Maura Mordini (Università di Siena) is not a bow to what someone in 2021 jokingly called the minor industry of studying fragments. Far more often than we are willing to acknowledge we forget you deal with traces and fragments *per se* when studying history. So many things are irrecoverably lost forever or only seldom in front of us. Not every tiny bit is important, but there are bits and pieces pointing to larger contexts. As for projects with fragments, I try to list relevant [projects, catalogues and exhibit catalogues concerning medieval fragments](#) as part of my [Glossae](#) blog on pre-acursian glosses.

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