

The Body of the Text: Williram of Ebersberg's Song of Songs Commentary in Its Manuscript Transmission

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Abstract: Williram of Ebersberg presents his Latin-German *Expositio in Cantica canticorum* (ca. 1080) as an engagement with the text as ‘body’ which relates to the love poetry of the Song of Songs and realises it on the parchment in a specific layout. The essay argues that the unity of the text and commentary in the visual layout is transmitted differently from the eleventh to the sixteenth century and is an expression of a monastic manuscript culture.

Keywords: Song of Songs, page layout, Old High German, medieval Latin, *opus geminum*, Bible commentary, authorial publication

Dedicated to Christoph Huber, our esteemed teacher, on the occasion of his 80th birthday.

The commentary on the Song of Songs by Williram of Ebersberg (died 3 January 1085) is one of the most influential texts of the German Middle Ages. The Benedictine abbot conceived his Latin-German *Expositio in Cantica canticorum* around 1060. From then on there

was continuous manuscript transmission until the early modern period, when the work seamlessly passed into print (Molther 1528) and became one of the earliest philologically studied medieval texts (Merula 1598; Junius 1665). Along the way, it inspired other vernacular readings of the Song of Songs such as the ‘St. Trudperter Hohelied’, based on Williram’s German translation. Much of the work’s appeal lies in its complex layout, in which the Vulgate text, vernacular translation and prose commentary, Latin verse paraphrase and verse commentary are arranged in 150 sections in a five-part structure: the Vulgate in the middle column in larger letters, the Latin verse in indented lines in a left-hand column, and the German prose in a right-hand column. All are internally structured and highlighted by rubrics, initials and rhetorical punctuation (Fig. 3). Williram describes this in his preface being ‘like a body positioned in the middle, girded by those [verse and prose explanation] on both sides’ (*ut corpus in medio positum’ his utrimque cingatur*, P 7).¹ This language of the text as ‘body’ is parallel to that used when speaking about the bride of the biblical dialogue, whose different body parts are praised for their beauty and for the ornaments of her dress. Our essay argues that Williram developed his commentary on the Song of Songs into a unity of text, visually powerful layout and commentary in the form of direct dialogue, and that over the centuries this aesthetic potential was realised anew in each materialisation of the text on parchment and paper. Every manuscript of the *Expositio* presents the text in its own way and is an expression of a specific manuscript culture.

Williram of Ebersberg

Due to his monastic background, we know more about Williram of Ebersberg’s biography than for any other author of German texts before the fourteenth century, except for his fellow Benedictines Otfrid of Weißenburg (c.790–875) and Notker Labeo of St Gall (c. 950–28 June 1022). As abbot, Williram features regularly in the Ebersberg records, and he talks about his background in his works (Rupp 2013). Crucial for understanding this are the dedicatory letters for his works: for his *Expositio* to the king, later emperor, Henry IV, and in 1071 for his *Vita sancti Aurelii* to the reform abbot Wilhelm of Hirsau who had commissioned the Life of the patron saint of Hirsau (Lähmann 2010). In one of the two oldest manuscripts of the *Expositio*, Munich, Staatsbibl., Cgm 10 (Eb), probably created in Ebers-

¹ The essay is part of the preparation of an English-language expanded version of our edition of the *Expositio in Cantica canticorum* (Lähmann and Rupp 2004), referred to in the following as *Expositio*. The original edition was dedicated to our academic mentor Christoph Huber on his sixtieth birthday; this survey of the textual tradition of the text now marks the anniversary twenty years later. Citations according to the edition: P = *Praefatio*, L = Latin, D = German, Ct = Vulgate version of the Song of Songs (*Cantica Canticorum*). The breath marks in the text (‘) stand for the original punctuation of the oldest manuscript (Br). Manuscript sigla are according to Gärtner (1988: 19–27). Literature on individual manuscripts is only listed below if it goes beyond what is cited there. Parts of the essay are based on an earlier study by the authors on the Song of Songs commentary as a text ensemble (Lähmann and Rupp 2006).

berg during Williram's lifetime, a quire with his poems precedes the Song of Songs commentary (Dittrich 1939). The poems are written in the same or a closely contemporary hand but, judging from the smudges on fol. 9r (which is now the start of the second quaternion), the first quaternion was added slightly later, possibly for a 'complete edition' of Williram's works. This might have happened in two stages. The bulk of the poems is written consecutively on fols 1r–7v. The outermost pages, fol. 1a and fol. 8 (see Fig. 1), have a decidedly lower-quality parchment, slightly shorter than the inner leaves, with a patch at the bottom of fol. 8; fol. 1a has only half the width of the rest of the manuscript and two big tears have been carefully sewn but are clearly visible—leaves of inferior quality were likely intended to be used only when the stock of immaculate folio-sized writing material had been exhausted. But its status as a 'wrapper' has been effectively used. Leaving fol. 8r blank, the dedication of the *Expositio* to King Henry IV (which is only extant in three manuscripts) is placed as last poem on fol. 8v, opposite the prologue. For fol. 1a, also only the verso is written on. It is the *Epitaphium Willirami Abbatis*, a life review written in the first-person singular. Williram's works open thus as if spoken by the author himself, presenting a first-person *accessus ad auctores* as a cautionary tale about how to study.

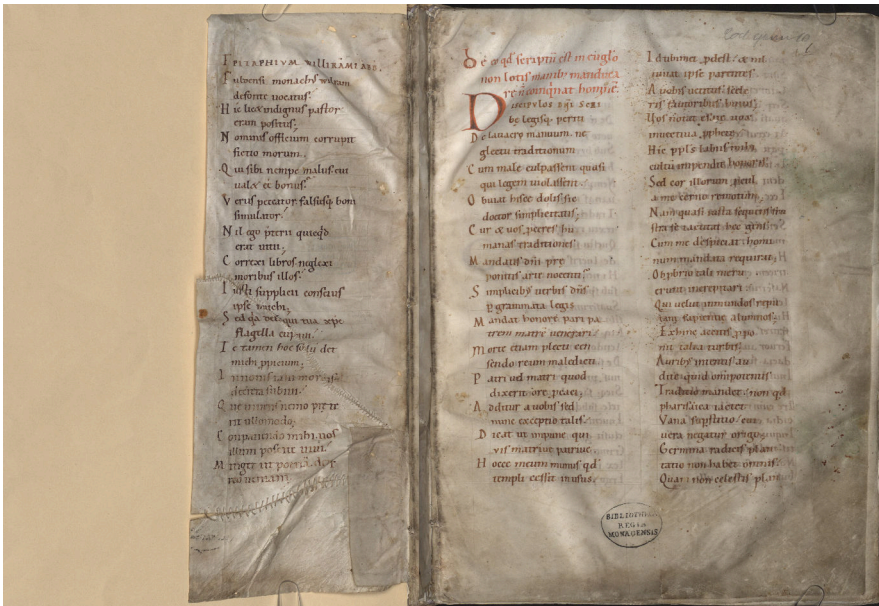


Fig. 1: Munich, Staatsbibl., Cgm 10 (Eb), fols 1a verso–1r, *Epitaphium Willirami Abbatis* (<https://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/de/view/bsb00059252>, accessed October 2025). Public domain.

It begins:

- Fuldensis monachus Wilram de fonte vocatus:*
Híc licet indignus pastor eram positus.
Nominis officium corrumpit fictio morum.
Qui sibi nempe malus – cui valet esse bonus?
- 5 *Verus peccator falsusque boni simulator:*
Nil ego praeterii quicquid erat vitii.
Correxi libros – neglexi moribus illos,
Iusti supplicii conscius ipse michi. (Dittrich 1939: 51)

Williram, monk of Fulda, called from the source: I was placed here as shepherd despite my unworthiness. The pretence of morality undermined the dignity of the office attached to the name. How can someone who is bad turn out to be good? A genuine sinner and a false claimant to goodness: I left out nothing of any vice. I have corrected the books—I have neglected them by my habits, aware myself of the just punishment.

The epitaph is written, like all the poems and the Latin verse in the *Expositio*, in Leonine verse, a poetic form which fuses classical metre with rhyme, which had become an established form for Christian hymn-writing. The pages are drypoint ruled with a stylus in two columns, with a separate line for the verse initials. This means that each verse fills two lines, with the second half indented. Williram uses the clear bipartite structure of Leonines, created by the caesura rhyme, to set up stark contrasts: in line 3, the difference between the office of abbot he held and the moral standards he claims to have neglected (*officium ... morum*); even stronger is the contrast in line 7 between the correction afforded to books and the negligence supposedly shown in life. Although the rhetoric—true to the form of the reflection of one’s own life—presents this as a self-accusation (the form of the books was more significant to me than their moral message), this does not detract from the importance of philologically correct manuscript production for the Benedictine monk. Equally relevant for understanding Williram’s work and the significance of its manuscripts is the poem’s opening with his training in the monastery of Fulda, the centre of philologically correct text production. Regardless of whether the *fons* (line 1) from which he was called refers to life or to Fulda, with which it alliterates, and whether the *híc* (line 2) means the earth in general or Ebersberg in particular, Fulda is clearly the reference and starting point for text production.

Models for Williram of Ebersberg: Rabanus Maurus and Alcuin

Since Rabanus Maurus (c.780–4 February 856) had taken over as head of the monastery school at Fulda until 822, an education there was the best any Benedictine abbey could offer. Rabanus' complex figural poem *De laudibus sanctae crucis* (completed in 814) set new standards in manuscript aesthetics. The manuscript was written in Fulda around 825 and dedicated to the bishop of Mainz, but it then returned to Fulda, so that Williram could have seen and studied this or similar manuscripts produced there under Rabanus' direction. The continuously written verse of *De laudibus* was arranged in a way that additional internal text was enclosed in the figures drawn around sections of a text. As a result, the poems were so encoded that the meaning could not be understood without the following prose explanation, turning it, like Williram's *Expositio*, into an *opus geminum*, a genre beloved by early Christian Bible epics to render a topic or story in the twin form of poetry and prose, allowing on the one hand poetic licence while maintaining prosaic clarity for dogmatic purposes. The first poem after the table of contents also depicts the 'body of the text' figuratively.² The body of Christ is inscribed in the text, element by element, with outstretched arms in the field of red letters, with the centrally placed black 'o' doubling as navel.

Another station in Williram's life is then mentioned as rubric before the prologue: as *Babinbergensis scolasticus* he studied at the Michelskloster in Bamberg, another important manuscript centre, which was the strongly emerging new institution in the eleventh century, freshly endowed by Emperor Henry II with precious manuscripts (Kaiser-Heinrich-Bibliothek), including a commentary on the Song of Songs written on the island of Reichenau, now part of a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The opening double page (Fig. 2) shows on the left the procession of the elect from baptism to the cross, from which the personified Church hands the chalice to the crowd of pilgrims; on the right, Church, adorned as the bride of the Song of Songs with golden bracelets and necklaces, points to Christ as judge of the world in the O initial fashioned as a gloriole, under which the opening words of the Song of Songs continue in golden rustic capitals (*Suckale-Redlefsen* 2004: 85): [O]sculetur me osculo oris sui (May he kiss me with the kiss of his mouth). The following text is then written in large script in the centre, divided into blocks of speech by the indications of the speakers in golden display script and surrounded on both sides by glosses in small script that allegorically develop the text. These glosses go back to Alcuin (died 19 May 804), the influential Carolingian theologian who was the teacher of Rabanus and one of the driving forces behind the development of the Caroline minuscule.

² https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Reg.lat.124/0022. (Accessed October 2025.)



Fig. 2: Staatsbibliothek Bamberg, Msc. bibl. 22 (<http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:bvb:22-dtl-0000087146>), fol. 5r / 5v, beginning of the glossed Song of Songs. Public domain.

Alcuin's glosses, an institutional reading of the Song of Songs, take the dialogue as that between Christ and different manifestations of the Church through the ages, beginning with Synagogue. She speaks the opening lines, turning the initial 'O' into a form of speech-bubble for her sigh of longing for Christ. Christ is descending towards her like a *deus ex machina*, appropriate for the dramatic style of the dialogue. This institutional reading is systematised in the commentary of the next generation, particularly in that of Haimo of Auxerre (died c. 865) who was the direct source for Williram. He explains, partly based on Alcuin's glosses:

Ct 1:1a *Osculetur me osculo oris sui*. Desiderantis vox est Synagogaie adventum Christi. Quasi diceret: Toties mihi adventum suum promisit per prophetas, veniat ergo iam, et *osculetur me osculo oris sui*, id est per se ipsum mihi loquatur.

Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth. This is the voice of Synagogue longing for the coming of Christ. As if she were saying: He promised me his coming through the prophets so many times, therefore he now should come, and *kiss me with the kiss of his mouth*, i.e. speak to me himself.

The Preface to the *Expositio in Cantica canticorum*

This educational background explains why Williram starts the preface to the *Expositio in Cantica canticorum* with a rueful survey of the current state of learning and looks back to 'golden times' of biblical studies. He claims that in his generation study is deficient (*defecit studium*), specifically the study of Scripture (*divina pagina*), for which classical authors (*libri gentiles*) should only be propaedeutics (P 2). Williram counters this by reintroducing poetry to the Song of Songs and making it more accessible (*planiora reddere*, P 7) by turning it on the one hand into verse and on the other into German (*et versibus et teutonica*, P 7). He keeps this as one entity by using the speaking voices also in the commentary parts, claiming thus to make the text more delightful (*delectabilior*) to read and of greater authority. With this 'dramatic self-interpretation of the word' (Ohly 1995: 101), Williram counters a criticism by Haimo of Auxerre that the Song of Songs is an extremely unintelligible book (*obscurissimus liber*) since no speaker roles are given and it runs unstructured as a dramatic dialogue (*comico stylo*) (see Lähnemann and Rupp 2004: 4).

Beginning and conclusion of the preface are structured as rhyming prose by cadences, as a practical demonstration that the author is intending to present the Bible as poetry. Williram enacts that by demonstrating how classical authors can be used and reinterpreted as preparatory reading for the Bible. He quotes Horace's musing whether he was inspired by the Gods (*Carmen III.4–5: auditis an me ludit amabilis / insania? do you hear me or does a lovely insanity delude me?*) before presenting himself as being inspired by the true God in succession to Solomon, using the biblical image of the divine dew of inspiration.

*Nescio an me ludit amabilis error'
aut certe qui Salomoni pluit'
mihi etiam vel aliquantum stillare dignatur;
interdum mea legens' sic delectabiliter afficior'
quasi haec probatus aliquis composuerit auctor.*

I do not know whether a lovely error is deluding me or whether he who rained on Solomon has honoured me too with a little trickle; sometimes, when I read what I have written, I feel as pleasantly touched as if it had been written by an experienced author (P 11).

Insofar as Williram provides the bride and bridegroom with new text in the commentary sections, he becomes a co-author of the Old Testament poet-king Solomon. Williram thus

sets out to bring Christ and Church into a polyphonic dialogue in Latin verse, German prose and Latin-German commentary.

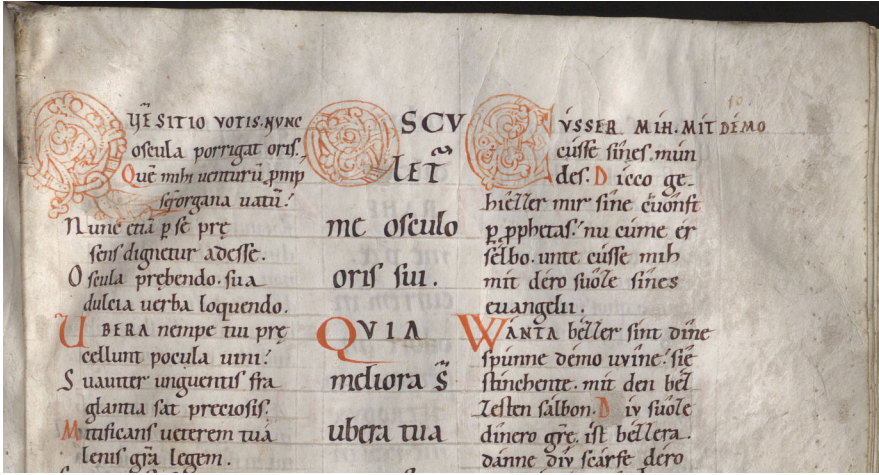


Fig. 3: Munich, Staatsbibl., Cgm 10 (Eb), fol. 10r: Commentary on Ct 1:1 (https://daten.digitale-sammlungen.de/bsb00059252/image_25, accessed October 2025). Public domain.

The drypoint ruling of the parchment with a stylus is carefully arranged. The text field is divided by four pairs of vertical lines, a narrower middle column flanked symmetrically by the side columns which have nearly double its width. The horizontal ruling must have been done later, for every second line skips exactly the middle column to produce double-height textboxes in the centre which allow for the larger script. The red initials for the biblical text in the three columns are aligned at the beginning of each section and have double height; the very first section (see Fig. 3) opens with knotted four-line high initials which form a string of pearls at the top, helped by the fact that all three initials have a round shape (*Quem* / *Osculetur* / *Cússer*), with the left-hand one being inhabited by a small dragon whose long neck forms the stroke of the Q around the round frame. The commentary in the side columns follows directly from the translation and is therefore not aligned between the two side columns. The verse text starts, as for Williram's poems, on a new line for each verse with an initial which sits inside the left-most pair of vertical lines; the second part of the hexameters then continues inside the textbox as continuous text. The verses do not necessarily break at the caesura but in many cases a speaking pause is indicated by a punctuation mark (*punctus*, *punctus elevatus*, *punctus flexus*, and *punctus interrogativus*) which helps set up the text for being read out aloud. The German text additionally has the accent markers *acutus* (´) for signalling the stressed syllable and *circumflexus* (^) for long vowels,

based on the form of neumes.

1	Quem sitio votis' nunc oscula porrigat oris. Quem mihi venturum promserunt organa vatum' nunc etiam per se præsens dignetur adesse' oscula præbendo' sua dulcia verba loquendo. (L1:1–4)	Osculetur me osculo oris sui. (Ct 1:1)	Cússer míh' mít démo cússe sînes mún-des. Díc-co giehîez ér mír sîne cúonft <i>per prophetas</i> , nu cúme ér sélbo' unte cússe míh mit déro sôoze sînes <i>Evangelii</i> . (D1:1–2)
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The logical sequence of this complex arrangement starts with the biblical text in the middle (Ct 1:1 *Osculetur*), moving to the Old High German translation on the right-hand side (D1:1 *Cússer míh*), which is explained then in the directly following Old High German prose commentary (D1:2 *Díc-co giehîez*), which then makes it possible to understand the Latin verse paraphrase in the left column: L1:1 (*Quem sitio*) as paraphrase of the biblical text as given in D1, and L1:2–4 (*Quem mihi*) as paraphrase of the commentary in D1:2.

Ct 1:1 Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth.

D1:1 May he kiss me with the kiss of his mouth. 2 Often he promised me his arrival through the prophets, now he may come himself and may kiss me with the sweetness of his gospel.

L1:1 He whom I thirstily desire with pleas, may now offer me kisses of his mouth. 2 He whom the instruments of the seers foretold would come to me, 3 may now grant his personal presence, 4 offering kisses, speaking his sweet words.

Williram's German translation reproduces the Vulgate text as exactly as possible, down to the top position of the verb and the contracted form *Cússer* for *Osculetur*. The following interpretation gives a prosodic and logical form to the interpretation of the wish in the optative for the coming of Christ promised by the prophets by ending each of the two half-sentences with a Latin syntagma: *per prophetas* and *Evangelii* respectively. This establishes the link between the Old and New Testaments: between Synagogue before the coming of Christ and Church after the Incarnation. As in the introduction to a drama, one of the secondary characters (Synagogue) announces the appearance of the protagonist (Christ).

The left-hand column is structured in the same way as the right-hand column. First comes a paraphrase of the biblical text in which the Vulgate phrase is recast in Leonines. The start of the interpretation is signalled by a red initial but linked syntactically to the first verse. The fact that the Latin verse speaks about Christ's coming only becomes clear if the German text with its Latin technical terms 'prophets' and 'gospel' has been read beforehand. Here, *vates* (the seers of antiquity) prophesy, and the kisses spring from the *dulcia verba* (sweet words). The latter are a translation of *evangelium*, but one which can also be understood in a completely secular way. This set-up keeps poetry and dogma in a precarious balance, one that Williram insists in his preface should be kept as he devised it with the Bible at the centre and each of the sides with their clearly defined function. Every copyist faces the challenge not only of transmitting the words but also their relative position to each other. To keep the three-column structure requires a folio format; when writing in smaller scale quires, the relative position of each part and their mutual interdependence have to be indicated by other means than the horizontal alignment. Now that we have explained the importance of the columnar layout for the text, the following section explores—after a chronological list of the manuscripts discussed—first a number of folio copies and then the rearrangement in quarto and even octavo copies.

The *Expositio* Manuscripts

The following chronological list of the *Expositio* manuscripts discussed in this essay is based on the Handschriftencensus,³ which lists thirty manuscripts with German elements.⁴ This excludes purely Latin versions of Williram's text, of which Gärtner (1988) lists sixteen, but there are probably more uncatalogued, since copies are frequently unattributed. Our focus on the layout means that we have concentrated on innovative solutions for guiding the reading of the text, including one Latin-only manuscript. The manuscript transmission reflects the strong network of imperial abbeys across all dialect regions; several of them, such as the Einsiedeln manuscript (Ein), have never left the library for which they were written.

- Br (late eleventh century), Wrocław, City Library, Cod. R 347⁵
written probably in Ebersberg during Williram's lifetime, preserving an earlier state; the manuscript has been lost since WWII, but photographs exist (Fig. 4)

³ <https://handschriftencensus.de/werke/430>. (Accessed October 2025.)

⁴ The Oxford Song of Songs manuscript, Bodleian Libr., MS Germ. e. 10 (<https://handschriftencensus.de/20939>, accessed October 2025), which offers a free adaptation of Williram's German translation of the Latin Vulgate text only, is a special case which should be treated as a separate text, parallel to that of the 'St. Trudperter Hohelied'.

⁵ <https://handschriftencensus.de/15107>. (Accessed October 2025.)

- Eb (late eleventh century),⁶ Munich, Staatsbibliothek, Cgm 10⁷
written probably in Ebersberg during Williram's lifetime, representing a later state (Fig. 3)
- Pal (late eleventh century), Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Cod. Pal. lat. 73⁸
written shortly after the first two manuscripts in a Bavarian monastic scriptorium (Freising?), in three columns separated by architectural borders
- Ley (ca. 1100), Leiden, University Library, BPL 130⁹
an early adaptation of the vernacular part of the commentary into Old Dutch, probably in the Benedictine abbey of Egmont, in one column (Fig. 6)
- St (first half of the twelfth century), Stuttgart, Landesbibliothek, Cod. theol. et phil. 4° 48¹⁰
layout in one column (Fig. 7)
- Ein (second quarter twelfth century), Einsiedeln, Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. 34 (407)¹¹
layout in two columns; written in the Benedictine abbey Einsiedeln (Fig. 8)
- Wo (second half twelfth century), Wolfenbüttel, Herzog August Bibliothek, Cod. Guelf. 131 Gud Lat. 2^a,¹² fols 27r–72v
Latin only, no Handschriftencensus number, two columns
- May (end of fifteenth century), Augsburg, University Library, cod. Oettingen-Wallerstein III.1.8. 8°,¹³ fols 27r–72v
German only, one column
- Nb (1497), Nuremberg, Stadtbibliothek, Cod. Hist. 150.2°2¹⁴
original layout; copied in Nuremberg (Fig. 5)
- Bg (1523), Bamberg, Staatsbibliothek, Msc. Bibl. 73 (formerly Q.IV.22)¹⁵
original layout; copied for the Bamberg Dominican nuns

⁶ <https://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/de/view/bsb00059252>. (Accessed October 2025.)

⁷ <https://handschriftencensus.de/7992>. (Accessed October 2025.)

⁸ <https://handschriftencensus.de/10472>. (Accessed October 2025.)

⁹ <https://handschriftencensus.de/15116>. (Accessed October 2025.)

¹⁰ <https://handschriftencensus.de/15120>. (Accessed October 2025.)

¹¹ <https://handschriftencensus.de/7079>. (Accessed October 2025.)

¹² <https://resolver.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/HSP0004F51B00000000>. (Accessed October 2025.)

¹³ <https://handschriftencensus.de/11212>. (Accessed October 2025.)

¹⁴ <https://handschriftencensus.de/15118>. (Accessed October 2025.)

¹⁵ <https://handschriftencensus.de/13502>. (Accessed October 2025.)

Manuscripts with Williram's Layout

Each piece of text in this five-part outline has its own special function, but they can only be fully read together or, to stay with the metaphor, the body only works organically in the interplay of the limbs. In this way, even those who only want to read classical poetry (which is what the left-hand column with the Biblical text recast in verse stands for) are to be won over to reading the Bible and can enjoy its presentation in the luxury three-column form. Williram seems to have issued his work with this layout, since the two manuscripts from Ebersberg written during his lifetime (Br and Eb) show an almost identical arrangement; Eb, the manuscript discussed at the start of the essay (Fig. 3), seems to represent a slightly revised version with a few hexameters added or swapped in comparison to Br (Fig. 4).

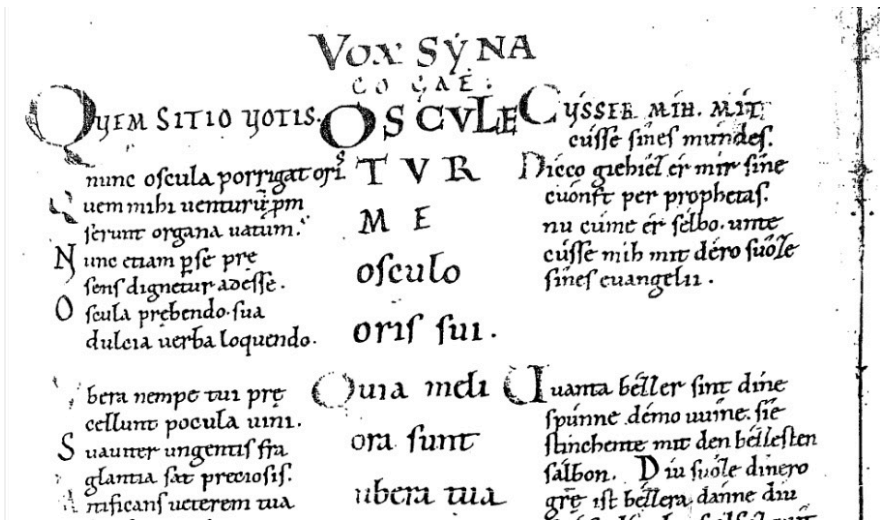


Fig. 4: Br (late eleventh century)—Wrocław (Biblioteka Uniwersytecka we Wrocławiu), University Library, cod. R 347, fol. 2v: Commentary on Ct 1:1. Microfilm: Wrocław University Library. The manuscript is lost, only surviving in black-and-white photographs.

The Earliest Ebersberg Manuscript (Br)

In the first line of the German translation the article *démo* is added in Eb in the margin (see Fig. 3), which can be understood as a slight shift towards a more idiomatic rendering since, unlike in Latin, an article would normally be expected in the vernacular. On the other hand, Br preserves, at least in the first part of the manuscript, the indication of the speakers, here *Vox Synagogae* (see Fig. 4), which were normally marked in medieval Bibles but were left out in Eb, avoiding additional interruptions of the three-column layout.

The Separation of the Columns (Pal)

This view, that the columns were seen as the main organising principle, is particularly visible in an early manuscript from the eleventh century, Cod. Pal. lat. 73¹⁶ (Pal) in the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, written probably in another Bavarian Benedictine abbey, which interprets the support function of the commentary in a literal way by presenting the side columns as aisles to the nave of the biblical text (fol. 2r).¹⁷ This gives more autonomy to both the Latin verse and the German prose—it encourages reading the left-hand side as a love poem in its own right, one that could rival classical authors such as Ovid; and it paves the way for extracting the German translation and combining it with a new commentary such as happens in the ‘St. Trudperter Hohelied’. The horizontal alignment of the opening initials of each section is kept intact, even if it means leaving blank space at the top of a page to account for different length of commentary. The section 52 on Ct 3:9–10 *Ferculum fecit sibi rex Salomon de lignis Libani' columnas eius fecit argenteas' reclinatorium aureum' ascensum purpureum' media' caritate constravit: propter filias Hierusalem* starts on fol. 15r¹⁸ with the top part of the left column empty to place the initial next to that of the initial for Ct 3:9 in the middle. The section is so long that the last page of it, fol. 16r,¹⁹ would not have had any Vulgate text at all if it had not been for the decision to use the letters of the last word (*Ihervsalem*) as building blocks for a tower crowned by a cross—a reminder of the many layers of the word and place Jerusalem.

The consistent layout of this family of manuscripts suggests that Williram issued his work through the network of imperial Benedictine abbeys in which he moved. Sixteen manuscripts transmitting the complete text were produced up to the end of the twelfth century (Gärtner 1988: 11) and more than a dozen in the following centuries.

¹⁶ <https://handschriftencensus.de/10472>. (Accessed October 2025.)

¹⁷ <https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.12787#0009>. (Accessed October 2025.)

¹⁸ https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/bav_pal_lat_73/0035/image.info. (Accessed October 2025.)

¹⁹ https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/bav_pal_lat_73/0037/image.info. (Accessed October 2025.)

Late Copies (Nb and Bg)

Remarkably, the intricate structure of the 150 sections of the Song of Songs in three columns, with the prominent Bible text in the middle, Latin verse left, German prose right, each of the side columns indicating with red initials where the commentary parts start, is accurately preserved in eight folio-sized copies, right into the sixteenth century. The only element to change is the dialect of the German prose, shifting from late Old High German via Middle High German to Early New High German: *Cússer mîh' mît démo cússe sînes mûndes. Dícco gíehêz ér mîr sîne cúonft per prophetas, nu cúme ér sêlbo' unte cússe mîh mit déro sîuoze sînes Evangelii.* (D1:1–2) becomes *Kusse er mich mit dem kusse seines mundes. Dick hat er mir seine zukunfft gesagt per prophetas. Nu kume er selber und kusse mich mit der susse seines ewangelii* in the Nuremberg manuscript Nb (Fig. 5), written and dated 1497 (Schmid 1989).

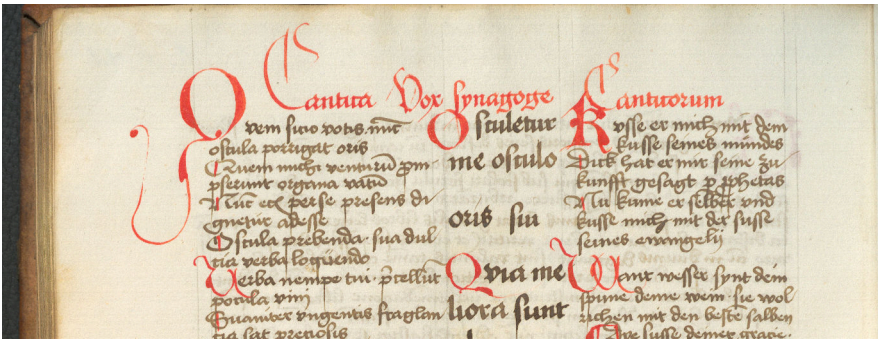


Fig. 5: Nb, Stadtbibliothek Nuremberg, Cod. Hist. 150.2^o, fol. 1v: Commentary on Ct 1:1. Photograph courtesy of the Stadtbibliothek Nuremberg.

This Nuremberg manuscript is the penultimate manuscript copy of Williram's commentary. It was copied in 1523 by Ambrosius Brunner for the Bamberg Dominican nuns (Bg), whose confessor he was. The hand for this manuscript is using a modern bastarda script but other than that the overall optical display is an exact copy of the manuscripts written half a millennium earlier. The three-column layout with the Voces is still extant even if the separation of translation and commentary section is limited to occasional paragraph marks, sometimes combined with the note *mystice*, at the beginning of the commentary section in the right-hand column. Ambrosius underlined the Latin phrases within the German commentary, which Nb had not provided, making the bilingual nature of the prose transparent for the nuns.

Manuscripts with a Rearranged Layout

In parallel to the transmission of Williram's commentary in its original layout, it was also copied in new arrangements. Copying the text ensemble into a smaller scale manuscript requires scribes to rethink the layout of the text. When turning three parallel columns into a consecutive text, an editor is forced to prioritise one language or one side of the twin work over the other because the dissolution of the synoptically arranged structure makes a reading sequence mandatory. Three different variants develop. The first two start with the Vulgate as the source text. The position at the start of each section replaces the larger script which was used for the middle column in the original layout as marker of importance. Variant 1 then has German prose translation and commentary and ends with the Latin verse; the reader thus encounters first the source text, then the translation and plain explanation in prose and finally the linguistically most difficult Latin verse version. Variant 2 has the Latin verse paraphrase follow the biblical text and end with the German prose which keeps the languages together and makes the German appear as a conventional straight translation of the Latin verse. This ends up as a similar form of *opus geminum* to Rabanus Maurus' figurative poems which provided the prose at the end as a crib for the verse. The third option is to read the original layout from left to right, producing the sequence of Latin verse, Vulgate, German prose.

The Leiden Williram (Ley)

The Leiden Williram (Ley) which presents Variant 2 is one of the earliest manuscripts which regroup the three columns. In the late eleventh century, a Benedictine scribe from Egmond Abbey (North Holland) adapted the text to his dialect, making it one of the earliest medieval Dutch texts. The dissolution of the horizontal arrangement in three columns results in a new presentation in sections. The redactor of the Leiden manuscript has reorganised the text by always grouping together as many verses of the biblical text as are spoken by one voice, which is noted (as *vox*) above each such section. This is followed by all the corresponding hexameters in the Latin column and finally the corresponding passages in the German column. The correspondence between Vulgate verses and the hexameters translating and then commenting on them is preserved by small marginal letters, in the case of the first section 'a' (*Osculetur*) to 'd' (*Ideo adulescentule*), repeated then before 'a' (*Quem sitio*) to 'd' (*Unde places*) (Fig. 6).

Since no change in layout from the continuous prose of the preface to the five-part 'body' of the text is now required, the meta-text with the explanations of the author and the biblical text with the self-explanation by the speakers of the bridal dialogue are more intricately linked. It is as if Williram had become one of the 'voices' of the text. His name (*Prologys*



Fig. 6: Leiden University Library, BPL 130 (c. 1100) (Ley), fol. 13v–14r. Public domain.

Willerammi Eberspergensis Abbatis in Canticis Canticorum, fol. 12v) is rubricated in the same way as the speaker indications of the Song of Songs. The first section of the text proper starts on the same page (fol. 13v), directly after the end of the prologue and a rubric which gives the explicit of the prologue, the incipit of the Song of Songs, and the first speaker (*Vox Synagoge*). There follows the Vulgate text of the first four sections which is the whole speech of Synagogue (Ct 1:1–2) with initial and highlighting capitals for the first part (Ct 1:1), then the corresponding Latin text of L1–4 which runs until the middle of the next recto-page, bringing the German translation of Ct 1:1 in line with the Vulgate. The quarto format signals a scholarly text rather than a display copy, reducing the ornamental element. This involves active editing in converting the text to the single-column format. The Benedictine monk who was the scribe at Egmont gave up the visually compelling structure of the 150 three-column sections which suggested a parallel to the 150 psalms but gained a new unity to the text. By making it possible to read the whole text as a continuum, the dramatic sequence of the conversation is emphasised, each voice repeating its message in different poetic forms and languages multiple times.

The Stuttgart Manuscript (St)

The Stuttgart manuscript from the first half of the twelfth century (St) offers the 'Expositio' in quarto format in a single column in the order Bible text, German and finally Latin column. The individual sections of the Bible text begin with an indented red initial but are the same script and size as the rest of the text; the majuscules at the beginning of the German translation and the German commentary are highlighted in red, although the commentary begins in the running line, as in the oldest manuscripts. In contrast, each Latin verse begins on a new line with a capital letter highlighted in red. Apart from the separation of Bible paraphrase and commentary in the Latin column, which is only sporadically marked by the red marginal gloss *exp[ositio]*, all sections of the original layout are thus separated from each other, but without the relationship between the parts still being recognisable through the positioning of the text (Fig. 7).

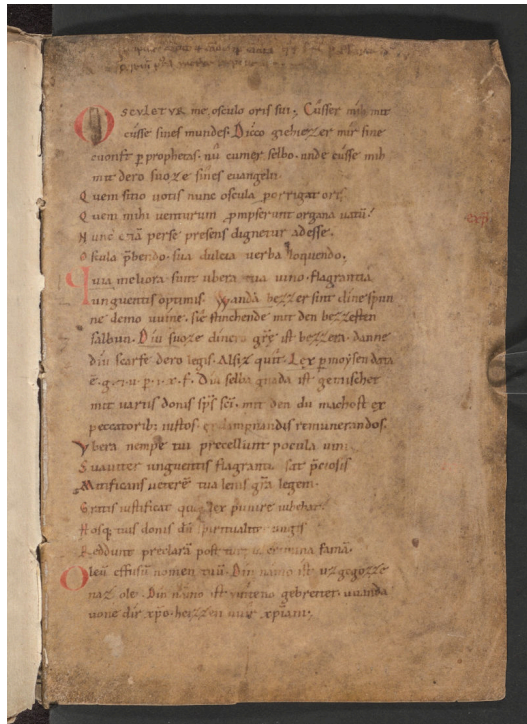


Fig. 7: Stuttgart, Landesbibl., Cod. theol. et phil. 4^o 48 (St), fol. 1r in the sequence Vulgate—German prose (following in lines with initials highlighted in red)—Latin verse in lines with initials highlighted in red. Photograph courtesy of the Württembergische Landesbibliothek Stuttgart.

The form of the *opus geminum*, the twin work clearly distinguishing between Latin verse and German prose, is blurred in this way. With the loss of the ability to compare across the three columns, the correspondence between the German translation and the Latin verse phrase at the beginning of each section is no longer apparent, and so the congruence of the two commentary sections is no longer obvious; instead, the prose and verse form self-contained text units. In this division, the manuscript takes on more the character of a manuscript copy for scholarly use.

The Einsiedeln manuscript (Ein)

The scribe of the Einsiedeln manuscript (Ein) from the second quarter of the twelfth century experimented with another possibility. He chose a two-column layout, since the format of the quires available to him (287 × 205mm) made a representative three-column spread difficult; but a single-column presentation would have resulted in confusingly long lines and, above all, the verse-by-verse presentation of the Leonines, which is observed throughout the entire tradition, would have left half of the writing space unused. After the 'Præfatio', which as a prose text simply passed from the first to the second column of fol. 3v, he wrote the first two verses in the rest of column 3vb in the sequence Vulgate, Latin column, German column. He then used the beginning of the new page (fol. 3*r; due to an old counting error, two fols 3 follow each other; the second one is labelled 'fol. 3*1' to distinguish it) to redistribute the original three columns into two (Fig. 8).

On the left is the Vulgate text in red, below it in black ink is the text of the Latin column, to the right of which the former third column appears in full in the second column. The symmetry of the two commentaries in relation to the biblical text between them has been broken. The text ensemble is thus divided here according to language: on the left the Latin prose of the Vulgate and the Latin verses, on the right the German prose. The linguistic contrast is emphasised more clearly here by the double juxtaposition of Latin v. German and verse v. prose. With this system, the scribe had to struggle with coordination difficulties from the outset, as he still had to transfer the end of the German commentary from verse 2 to the new page. As the German column was written last in the chosen sequence, he consequently moved versicles 2 D2b-3 (from *gratia* to *remunerandos*) to the right-hand column (fol. 3*rb). This meant that the German translation of verse 4 began further down in the right-hand column than the corresponding Vulgate text, which could begin right at the top of the left-hand column. This difference could no longer be evened out, although the scribe resorted to using reference letters, as was customary for commentary glosses, and also wrote the German text across both columns for the last verse on this page (Ct 1:10), as the space opposite the Latin column labelled with *h* was still completely taken up by the remainder of the German explanation of Ct 1:11, labelled with *g*. The scribe then wrote the



Fig. 8: Ein (second quarter of the twelfth century) Einsiedeln, Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. 34 (407), fols 3v–3*r. Photograph courtesy of the Stiftsbibliothek Einsiedeln.

German text across both columns. Below this level equation, the scribe then began with verse 11 (on the left the red Vulgate text *Filii matris meae*, on the right the German translation *Nu fernemint*, each glossed .i.), but then gave up the attempt. He began the next page again with verse 11, now arranged in a column one below the other. In this brief attempt in two columns, it becomes much clearer than in the numerous single-column versions how strongly Williram’s work is dependent on the guidelines for understanding the text implied by the three-column layout. It is therefore not surprising that attempts were rarely made to develop alternative layout forms for the *Expositio*.

The Wolfenbüttel manuscript (Wo)

Another attempt to arrange the text into two columns is made by the Latin-only Wolfenbüttel manuscript (Wo), produced as early as the twelfth century, probably directly dependent on Br, one of the original Ebersbach manuscripts. Its layout is similar to the Einsiedeln manuscript, with two columns. On the right is the respective Vulgate verse with the following prose commentary, which is translated from German into Latin; on the left is the versified biblical text above the verse commentary, that is the unaltered Latin column. The Bible

text has been moved from the centre above the prose commentary in place of the German translation, which has become unnecessary due to the translation of the entire column into Latin. If the redactor organised the Einsiedeln manuscript into Latin and German, the Wolfenbüttel manuscript is divided into verse and prose. By removing the biblical text from the centre and reducing it to one language, we find the *Expositio* here more decisively arranged as a monolingual Latin *opus geminum*, in a form that originally belonged entirely to Latin literature.

The Maihingen Williram (May)

More common is the selective interest in one of the marginal columns. The so-called Maihingen Williram (May) from the late fifteenth century only reproduces the Bible translation and the German commentary consecutively. Much more frequently, the Latin column was separated out and copied individually. Gärtner (1988) identified seventeen such manuscripts; there may be more, since a systematic study has not been conducted. This means that the one German annotated translation contrasts with many cases in which the *Expositio* presents itself as a purely Latin Bible poem with verse commentary.

The manuscripts discussed mark anything but a development in which the peculiarities of the text were gradually watered down out of ignorance or carelessness. The scribes seem to have made a conscious decision in favour of their own format and use various structural signals to flag that the original layout was different, even if the change had removed the symbolic representation as a body of text strengthened by the symmetrical support structure on both sides. The tradition of the *opus geminum*, in which the poetic and prosaic parts could be handed down separately, may have suggested the use of individual parts for practical purposes. In any case, the analytical consideration of the work led as a logical consequence to the creation of new types of text ensembles that emphasised a language, a genre or even a particular reading of the ensemble. Even the heavily abridged editions are never arbitrary but show a precise view of Williram's complete works. As a rule, the surviving text passages have been included in the manuscripts in their entirety and not distorted or abridged. In contrast to didactic texts in the vernacular, for example, which show a great openness to editorial intervention to the point of a complete distortion of meaning, Williram issued his *Expositio* with an almost philological claim. His presentation of the text as body exerted its influence even when, with the dissolution of the layout and the elimination of the preface, this claim was only conveyed via parts of the text—and via later editors. Williram appears to have published his work through monastic networks, in which the intellectual agenda of the right-hand column would have been understood as *ruminatio*, which set a high standard for interventions.

The Print Tradition

The first printed edition by Menrad Molther in 1528 is further evidence of the intellectual standard of editors dealing with the *Expositio*. Its source cannot be clearly identified. Comparisons of the text variants indicate that it was close to the second Ebersberg manuscript (Eb). The octavo format of the print edition led to a single-column presentation, within which, however, the design possibilities of the typesetting are used to mark the different hierarchical levels: the individual parts of speech are demarcated by the voces set in small capitals, the Vulgate is emphasised by antiqua, the Leonine verses that follow are printed in smaller italics and set off verse by verse, with the beginning of the prose text indented (Fig. 9).

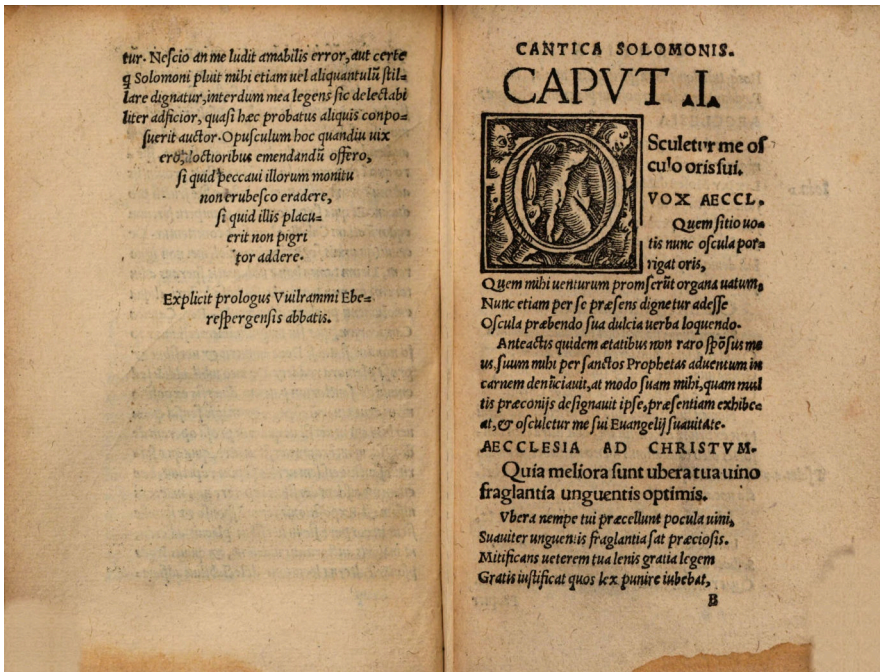


Fig. 9: Menrad Molther: *Wilrammi Abbatis olim Eberespergensis in Cantica Solomonis mystica explanatio*. Hagenau: Wilhelm Seltz. 1528. Copy BSB P.o.germ. 1628a (<https://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/de/view/bsb00033222?page=21>, accessed October 2025), B1r. Public domain.

Cross-references within the commentary to other biblical passages are given as marginalia—a scholarly foundation reflecting the demand for biblical studies in Wil-

liram's preface, which at the same time adapts the *Expositio* to the humanistic print layout. In his dedicatory letter to Konrad Peutinger, the editor, like Williram at the time, criticises a monastic academic establishment that has lost sight of the essentials and only engages in superficialities and scholastic subtleties. To demonstrate the value of past scholarship to his addressee Peutinger, he presents him with Williram von Ebersberg's explanation of the Song of Songs, which testifies to the truly Christian religiosity of the ancestors (sig. A3r). The recourse to Williram stems from Molther's interest in early German texts which combined humanist and Reformation agendas (Rupp 2015). He wanted to show that even half a millennium earlier there had been official attempts at translating biblical books into German. The linguistic form of the German column seemed negligible to Molther, and so he honours it as an erudite game that has a counterpart in the contemporary humanistic juxtaposition of Greek and Latin (which he presented at the same time), but which, since Williram wrote it *sua dialecto*, is no longer comprehensible to all readers. Since many Latin words and biblical quotations were already interspersed anyway, as editor he translated the German column into Latin *quam simplicissime potui* ('as simply as possible', sig. A4v) for the sake of better comprehensibility—even if he makes much more extensive use of the creative possibilities of contemporary Latinity than Williram's prose would suggest. The first commentary sentence D1:2 (cf. the textual example above), which Wo renders simply as *Sepe promisit mihi suum aduentum per prophetas. nunc ueniat ipse & osculetur me. dulcedine sui euangelii* ('He often promised me his coming through the prophets. Now let him come himself and kiss me with the sweetness of his Gospel', fol. 27v), here becomes the paraphrastic showpiece *Anteactis quidem ætatibus non raro sponsus meus suum mihi per sanctos Prophetas aduentum in carnem denunciauit, at modo suam mihi, quam multis præconijs designauit ipse, præsentiam exhibeat, & osculetur me sui Euangelij suauitate* ('In past ages, my bridegroom often announced his coming in the flesh to me through the holy Prophets. But now, let him present to me his presence, which he himself foretold with many proclamations, and let him kiss me with the sweetness of his Gospel', sig. B1r). Williram's dogmatically correctly formulated Latin–German prose is also adapted to the ideal of aesthetically committed Latinity, which in Williram was reserved for verse. In justifying his paraphrastic principle, Molther deliberately uses a formulation from Williram's prologue: *Nihil addidi, nihil decerpsi sententiæ, sed bona fide sola lingua mutata transferens reposui* ('I have added nothing and taken nothing away from the meaning but have translated it in good faith, only changing the language', sig. A4v; the echo of Martin Luther's *sola fide* [by faith alone] which he two years later defended vehemently in his 1530 *Sendbrief vom Dolmetschen* is probably not a coincidence). The success of Molther's adaptation was later judged differently. In 1733 Johann Georg Lotter provided information about the rediscovery of Molther, and at the same time criticised the translation of the German column into Latin. In the eighteenth century an anonymous user of the Stuttgart manuscript (St), who wanted to complete missing passages in the text and angrily stated

that this was only possible to a limited extent, as *Wilrammi paraphrasin prosam Germanicam in sermonem Latinum convertit (: seu potius pervertit :) Moltherus* ('Molther converted or rather: perverted Williram's German prose paraphrase into Latin text', St, unnumbered flyleaf). Nevertheless, Molther stands among editors who have handed down Williram's *Expositio* in changing forms, sometimes intervening, sometimes remodelling, but always aware of the context and the original structure.

Conclusion

Williram presents his *Expositio in Cantica canticorum* as a special text in the interplay between organic structure and analytical approach. Its aesthetic body could be read as an intellectual arrangement and regrouped from there. During its reception, an intertextual network with its own dynamic develops from the interplay of different language levels, genre modifications and layout solutions. The possibility of reading this text selectively in individual verses or columns, even in individual parts of the columns, creates the framework conditions for a simultaneously philologically responsible and creatively proceeding transmission. The localisation of the individual witnesses of this intertextual network in the field of tension between text and text ensemble shows the different interests of medieval and early modern readers who turned to Williram's text body.

Williram's *Expositio* is his attempt to preserve these seemingly irreconcilable aspects of poetry and order; he was successful in this to the extent that those who followed for centuries measured themselves against his concept and no longer had 'the same work' with the text, but were able to confirm or modify the precarious balance of poetry and order on the basis of Williram's text ensemble.

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