



Palestini in Peter Comestor’s Historia Scholastica

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ABSTRACT

As participants in the *Historia Scholastica* Project, our obligation for the 2022-2023 academic year is the advancement of the transcription, translation and contextualization of Idaho’s oldest publicly accessible book, Peter Comestor’s *Historia Scholastica*. Boise State University’s manuscript was printed in the mid-late 1470s, 300 years after its original composition. Because of its wide popularity, *Historia Scholastica* was copied multiple times in various vernaculars and served as a biblical commentary, placing the world and events of humanity in relation to the events of the old and new testaments, from Genesis to Revelation. In order to accomplish this, Comestor utilized a variety of extra-biblical ancient Jewish and Greek sources. His use of these sources has provided both a research avenue, and a challenge to modern readers. The specific contextual issue we explore here is Comestor’s mention, reference, and discussion of the term *Palestini*. With contact flowing between the east and the west due to the Crusades, we strive to understand Comestor’s potential perception and understanding of *Palestini*, and how Palestine as its own distinct nation transcends into the complicated geopolitical issues and conversations of our modern era.

HSP overview:
The Historia Scholastica Project is the on-going transcription and translation of Peter Comestor’s *Historia Scholastica*, Idaho’s oldest printed book, sectioned by individual entries and initiated in August 2011. The primary objective of the Project is to take students’ understanding of the texts with which they work on a daily basis past the relative ease of translating edited and critiqued materials to the difficulties of deciphering symbols on an original document prior to creating a translation. The secondary objective is to make Comestor’s text accessible to Boise State University faculty and students of the arts, humanities and social sciences, scholars who may lack the necessary skills to read or decipher Latin, abbreviated or not, by creating a body of documents for donation to the Albertsons Library Special Collection Department. *Historia Scholastica: Genesis*, is the sixth of eight sections begun to date. The work presented here is of the 2017-2018 Latin First Year Cohort.

Provenance of Historia Scholastica:
Peter Comestor wrote the *Historia Scholastica* after his retirement from the position of chancellor of Notre Dame, Paris, in the early 1170s. A secular account of the Bible as a history, correlated with non-Christian events, the book enjoyed some three hundred years of popularity as a university text and as an inspiration for secular stories. It was originally written in Latin, by hand, on velum. As the world changed and works of literature were more frequently composed in vernacular languages, the *Historia Scholastica* was translated from Latin into the national languages of France, Germany, and England, among others.

The popularity of *Historia Scholastica* is evinced by the fifteenth-century copy owned by Boise State University, an *incunabulum* (Latin, “in the cradle”), a book printed on a press prior to 1500. Around 1479, Conrad Winters of Cologne, Germany, set the type for a new edition of Comestor’s text and printed the book that came to be owned by Boise State. Stamps on the inner cover and a book plate proclaim William Blades, the St. Brides Foundation William Blades Library and Boise State Junior College as owners. Boise State J.C. came to own the book when Librarian Ruth McBirney purchased it in London for £20 Sterling in 1955. At the time of her purchase, the front leaf was already missing and the book had been rebound in Moroccan leather. Two-hundred ninety-nine pages remain, set in double columns, with forty-two lines in each. The lettering is in Italian Renaissance, a hand that became popular as presses were developing and manuscripts were still copied manually, and there are enlarged, hand-decorated capital letters at the beginning of books and key paragraphs. A few marginalia show on the pages of the Book of Genesis, and little leather tabs mark off the individual books within the volume.

HSP Overview and HSP Provenance reprinted and adapted from
Wadley, Karen. “Foreword”, in *Translating the Historia Scholastica; Historia Scholastica: Ruth*, by Steven Humiston and Michael Arbogast, with contributions by Deanna Wiegel, Sam Kelley and Shawn Ragan. Hard-copy document donated to Boise State University’s Albertsons Library Special Collections Department, July 2012. Used with permission of author.

Citations:
Daly, Saralyn R. “Peter Comestor: Master of Histories.” *Speculum*. Vol. 2, No. 1 (Jan., 1957): pp. 62-73
Morey, James H. “Peter Comestor, Biblical Paraphrase, and the Medieval Popular Bible.” *Speculum*. Vol. 68, No. 1 (Jan., 1993): pp. 6 – 35.
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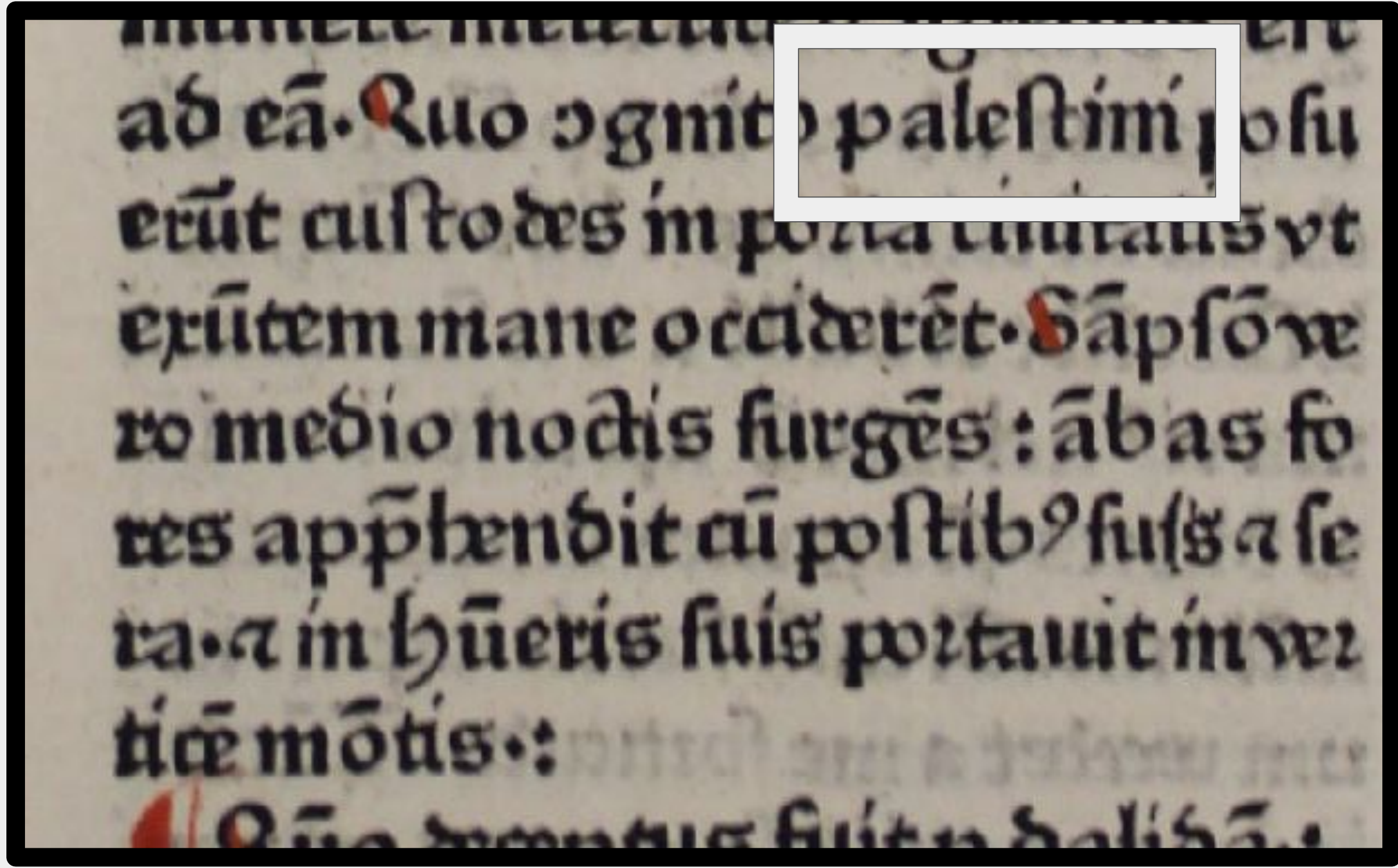
INTRODUCTION

Our responsibilities as members of the recurring Historia Scholastica Project (HSP) at Boise State University include transcribing, translating, and researching Peter Comestor’s biblical commentary of *The Book of Judges*. Our ultimate objective as an original research project is to cultivate the first annotated and contextually informed translation of Boise State’s copy of this particular manuscript which was highly popular, copied, and widely discussed in theological classrooms across medieval Europe. In discussing the story of Samson during weekly translation sessions, the student team discovered a passage for further inquiry: *Quo cognito palestini posuerunt custodes in porta civitates ut exeuntem mane occiderent*. We collectively determined our translation to be: *Which, when this was discovered, the Palestinians placed guards at the gate of the city, in order that they might kill him coming out in the morning*. The team was intrigued by Comestor’s specific use of *Palestini* rather than *Israel*, as is featured in the Bible, and of which he used with much greater frequency throughout *The Book of Judges*.

In order to meet our goal of creating a translation informed by the text’s historical context, our methodology has involved applying critical textual analysis and relevant historical discourse to compare the Boise State copy to the 198th volume of Jacque Paul Migne’s ecclesiastical magnum opus, the *Patrologia Latinae* (PL198). This process has allowed us to create a comparative textual transcription to note content and structural changes between manuscripts. Second, we have begun to research and compare through academic literature the origins and various understandings of the term “Palestine” via ancient source materials which might have influenced Comestor’s work. This contextual background hopefully will provide a clearer context for future student participants in the *Historia Scholastica* Project to create an informed translation of a portion of Boise State’s *Historia Scholastica*.

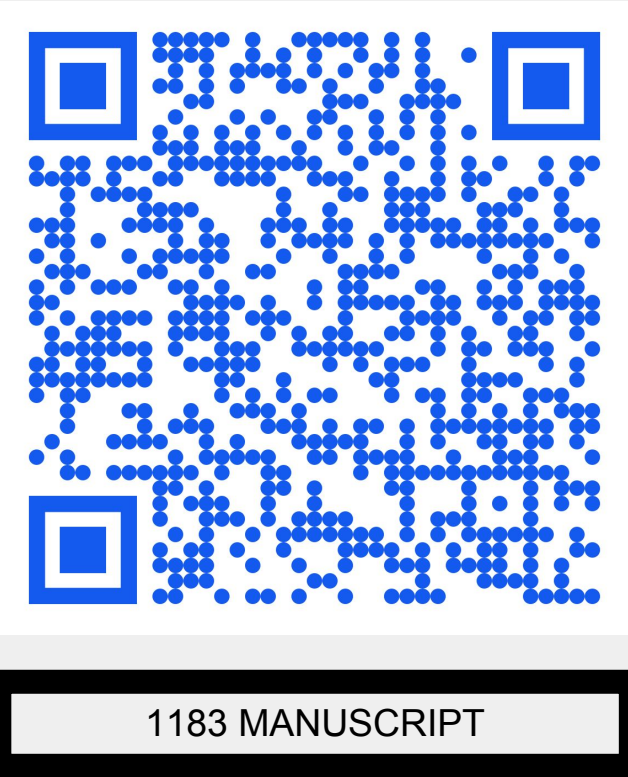
METHODOLOGY

- **Phase One:**
 - Transcribe and translate BSU copy, and compare to PL 198;
 - Annotate deviations or alterations between the two versions;
 - Discuss historical and cultural context to inform translation choices.
- **Phase Two:**
 - Conduct additional research concerning the scholars that Peter Comestor names in *Historia Scholastica*, as well as current scholarly sources and Biblical translations.
- **Phase Three:**
 - Glean relevant content from ancient scholars and sources to inform course discussion, translation, and understanding of events taking place in Comestor’s context.
- **Phase Four:**
 - Apply research to translation, and annotate.



Featured above: Section of Boise State’s copy of *Historia Scholastica*, with *Palestini* highlighted, to which this project refers.

Right: QR link to *The Bibliothèque nationale de France’s* copy of this section of the *Historia Scholastica*, c. 1183. This is the oldest version of the text that we have come upon, which we referenced to clarify whether the use of *palestini* was directly from Comestor himself, or from a later transcriber.



1183 MANUSCRIPT

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RESULTS

Over the course of our research we discovered we had three possible avenues for our results: A) we found our research into Comestor’s use of *Palestini* came from specific references to the area, and his own academic understanding of the world of the *Book of Judges*. This understanding was through his use and access to ancient sources, some of which are still extant, some of which are lost to time. Our second avenue, B) we have a solid foundational understanding of what Comestor was discussing and possibly conceptualizing when he discussed *Palestini*; we just do not know what that was, his reasoning, or intended goal for this specific word choice. Our third avenue, C) was the least desirable: that we see Comestor intentionally chose the word *Palestini* in relaying the story of Samson, but that this word choice was meaningless.

CONCLUSION

We conclude Avenue B: that Peter Comestor often intentionally deviated from the Biblical sources and Judaic texts he was using, but we don’t know his reasoning for the deviation. In this particular section, he employed the term *palestini* to describe an area that is more frequently referred to as *israel*. We posit that Comestor utilized a variety of ancient texts from Greek historians, Herodotus and Thucydides, to inform his word selection. We theorize that Comestor applied the terminology to draw upon their perceived authority. We know with definitive confidence that Comestor’s word choice of *Palestini* was absolutely not meaningless. At time of presentation, the team hypothesizes that Comestor was relaying word choices from Ancient Greek sources in order to better understand the geographical area around the Mediterranean Sea.

There is more risk today of geographical confusion due to our modern context and potential to mislead with “Palestine”, and it is the responsibility of the translation team to negotiate historical nuances.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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