How did new literatures begin in the Middle Ages and what does it mean to ask about such beginnings? These are the questions this volume pursues across the regions and languages of medieval Europe, from Iceland, Scandinavia, and Iberia through Irish, Welsh, English, French, Dutch, Occitan, German, Italian, Czech, and Croatian to Medieval Greek and the East Slavonic of early Rus. Focusing on vernacular scripted cultures and their complicated relationships with the established literary cultures of Latin, Greek, and Church Slavonic, the volume’s contributors describe the processes of emergence, consolidation, and institutionalization that make it possible to speak of a literary tradition in any given language. Moreover, by concentrating on beginnings, the volume avoids the pitfalls of viewing earlier phenomena through the lens of later, national developments; the result is a heightened sense of the historical contingency of categories of language, literature, and territory in the space we call ‘Europe’.

Mark Chinca is Professor of Medieval and Early Modern German Literature at the University of Cambridge. His publications span medieval romance, lyric, chronicle, and religious literature. His most recent book is Meditating Death in Medieval and Early Modern European Devotional Writing: From Bonaventure to Luther (2020).

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This series of critical books seeks to cover the whole area of literature written in the major medieval languages – the main European vernaculars, and medieval Latin and Greek – during the period c.1100–1500. Its chief aim is to publish and stimulate fresh scholarship and criticism on medieval literature, special emphasis being placed on understanding major works of poetry, prose, and drama in relation to the contemporary culture and learning which fostered them.

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LITERARY BEGINNINGS IN
THE EUROPEAN
MIDDLE AGES

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Acknowledgments

This volume stems from three colloquia, two in Cambridge and one in Princeton, in which contributors presented, discussed, and refined sketches of what would become the finished chapters of this book. It is a pleasure to record our gratitude to the various organizations and bodies without whose generous support these meetings could not have taken place: the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the D. H. Green Fund of the University of Cambridge, and the Princeton Humanities Council. Two individuals deserve special mention for their role in the Princeton colloquium: Marina Brownlee, for the generosity of spirit with which she secured the possibility in the first place, and Silvana Bishop, for her seamless management of the practicalities.

Our thanks go also to Linda Bree at Cambridge University Press, who first encouraged the project; to her successor Emily Hockley for overseeing it from proposal through to the final product; to Daniel Wakelin, the General Editor of Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature, for so enthusiastically hosting us in the series; to the anonymous reviewers, for their careful reports which enabled us to fine-tune our approach in innumerable ways; and to Stephanie Sakson for meticulous copyediting. Dr Puck Fletcher prepared the manuscript for submission and, at the other end of the process, Tanya Izzard compiled the index, both of them with exemplary efficiency and attention to detail – qualities the volume was able to benefit from thanks to a grant in aid of publication from the D. H. Green Fund.

The work of Dennis Green, our teacher and mentor, was marked by the simplicity of the question it posed and the rigour of the search to answer it. The question on which this volume is based emerged from one of his early terrains – the literature of the early Middle High German period, which runs from the mid eleventh to the late twelfth century – and a three-year research programme to read our way through this corpus and consider it anew with a group of talented doctoral students and visiting scholars.
Confronted with, and delighted by, the sophistication of the early texts we were encountering, we were forced to reconsider the origins and history of the literature of which they formed a neglected part. We wondered if colleagues in other fields shared similar concerns and fascinations. ‘When and how did literature begin in your vernacular?’ we asked them – a question as deceptive in its simplicity, it transpired, as it was rich in its potential.

The search for answers has been a genuinely collaborative enterprise. Colleagues approached the topic openly, helped give the question clearer definition, and listened intently to each other as they framed their responses in an iterative process that brought the majority of them together on more than one occasion and all of them together in a collective, strenuous endeavour. It is to our contributors therefore that we owe our greatest debt of gratitude. Their example offers a model of how different philological traditions and expertises can combine to learn from and, we are confident, enrich each other.