

Course Themes

Every session lasts 75 minutes and has a mixed lecture/seminar format

Fabrizio Conti

- **Magic, Paganism, and the Christianization Process in Late Antiquity**

It is in an age of change and transition as late antiquity that Christian identities took shape through processes at the centre of which lies the preached word employed as a means of Christianization. Several preachers and bishops offer interesting material for discussion from this point of view. Among the less-known figures, bishop Maximus of Turin (d. after 465), flourishing in the period following Emperor Theodosius' Edict of Thessalonica, composed and preached more than one hundred sermons that still need to be analysed and contextualized. Through Maximus' sermons one can reconstruct the themes, methods, and strategies used by those churchmen to shape a specific Christian identity in opposition to beliefs and practices that were placed under the categories of magic, superstition, and paganism.

- **The Classical roots of beliefs in witchcraft**

This seminar will discuss the main cultural substrata giving shape to witch-beliefs, shedding light on their process of amalgamation. Classical literary motives were intertwined with folkloric traditions in the fifteenth century by Franciscan and Dominican preachers, to produce a coherent picture of witchcraft-related beliefs and to give shape to a figure of the witch often centered on that of the *strix*. A number of ancient and Classical texts will be analysed and discussed against medieval texts to compare motives and roots of witch-beliefs.

- **Debates over the reality of witchcraft in Renaissance Italy**

This seminar aims at discussing the difficult path leading to the consideration of witchcraft as an unreal phenomenon and the debates growing around this issue between the later medieval and the early modern periods. The opposition between different stances pointing to the reality or the unreality of witch-beliefs became prominent in the Renaissance in works such as the *Strix* by Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola (1523), which affirms witch-beliefs to be true. The skeptical approach towards witchcraft has a long tradition, however, starting at least with the famous 10th -century canon *Episcopi* and going on up to the later Middle Ages when the realistic stance becomes the norm with the *Malleus maleficarum* (1486). A specific attention will be devoted to the early development of the skeptical point of view among the 15th -century Milanese Franciscan Observant community and the intellectual debate between the Franciscan Samuele Cassini and the Dominican Vincenzo Dodo at the beginning of the 16th century.

Gabor Klaniczay

- **Witchcraft Prosecutions in Hungary and in East-Central Europe**

General overviews on the spread and regional variations of witchcraft prosecutions in Europe usually lack data from East-Central Europe (Bohemia, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, Ukraine and Russia). Although this can partly be explained by linguistic difficulties, in the recent decades a significant amount of new research and publications in German or English have changed the availability of information in this field. A comparative overview of witchcraft beliefs and persecutions can also provide an insight into differences between the attitude of Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox churches in this domain, and allows new answers to the more general

questions of social and political preconditions of witchcraft prosecution.

- **Sainthood and Witchcraft: The Ambivalence of the Supernatural Status of Humans**

A rarely explored aspect leading to the evolution of the mythology of the witches' Sabbat is the impact of the concepts related to and the criticism addressed at late medieval ecstatic-visionary female sainthood. Seen from this angle, sainthood and witchcraft are two sides of the same coin: in both cases supernatural capacities are attributed to real human individuals. These capacities can be positive or negative – miracle or malefice, white or black magic, heavenly or diabolical vision, blessing or curse, benediction or charm, etc. And more than this, the supernatural status can be ambivalent: saints and visionaries could end up being condemned as the devil's allies (see the case of Joan of Arc), healers can be accused as witches, and malevolent witches can be asked to heal. A specific theological genre developed for seeing more clearly in this matter: the *discretio spirituum*. We will study texts by Jean Gerson and Johannes Nider who were dealing with (and caught by) this ambivalence.

- **Healers, Cunning Folk, Midwives, Shamanistic Sorcerers in the Witch-Trials**

In witchcraft accusations and related conflicts, a constant actor is the person of the healer: a role that can be played by a variety of cunning folk. These “positive” magicians are providing a healing strategy for their clients by directing their suspicion, frequently by divination techniques, to blame a human agent for their misfortune and get remedy by an action against them – denouncing them as witches and get them executed, or just constraining them to “lift the bewitchment” by other means. This ambivalent role is, however, dangerous for them, because they themselves get sooner or later accused to be witches by their professional rivals, or by their clients, convinced that those who can heal, can harm as well with their magical expertise.

Marina Montesano

- **Folklore, Magic, and Witchcraft: Cultural Exchanges in Medieval Europe**

“Cultural exchange” is not the circulation of objects and ideas as they already are, but their relentless reinterpretation. The study of folklore, magic, and witchcraft offers a wide range of possibilities to cultural historians, and especially to those interested in cultural exchange, because everything in the domain of Western magic speaks of it: geography, language, religious issues, and politics together forged a world of knowledge that was constantly changing and adapting.

- **Heresy, Magic and Witchcraft in the Trials of Joan of Arc**

Joan of Arc was accused and condemned as a heretic in a politically charged trial. Among the heretical practices alleged by her accusers, in addition to the voices of saints she said had served as her guides, and those of cross-dressing, are those of magic and witchcraft. Although it is a unique trial for several reasons, it is also a key to understanding the relationship between heresy and sorcery.

- **Witchcraft in the Movies**

Witchcraft has served as a central theme for horror as well as for comedies. The conference, however, will be based mainly on films that do not consider witchcraft as an ancillary element of the discourse, but that try to convey a vision of the phenomenon. In addition to the classics of film history, new productions that have added important elements to the perception of witchcraft in the media will be discussed.

Elizabeth Ann Pollard

- **Witchcraft Accusations Against Women in the Ancient World**

Students who know something of the *Malleus Maleficarum* or the Salem Witch Trials assume that there must have been widespread accusation of women's witchcraft in antiquity or witch hunts in ancient Greece and Rome that were comparable to those in Early Modern Europe. Perhaps surprisingly, very few historical sources from ancient Greece and Rome describe what we might think of as witch trials; only one pseudo-transcript records a trial (Apuleius's *Apologia de Magia*); and that source is recounted after-the-fact by the male who was accused of using magic! Nevertheless, some evidence survives for women accused of magic. From Theoris the condemned witch/*pharmakis* from Lemnos (323BCE) and Cornelia and Sergia --- along with 168 other matrons who were found guilty of poisoning their husbands --- in Republican Rome (311 BCE) to the women implicated in the first century CE treason trials in the Roman imperial court, this lecture explores the evidence for women accused of magic in ancient Greece and Rome. That sparse historical testimony, when balanced with an examination of contemporary laws and literary witches, suggests why women may have escaped mass persecution as witches in antiquity but not the suspicion of being capable of witchcraft.

- **Lead Tablets, Papyrus Scraps, and Gemstone Amulets - Material Evidence for Greco-Roman Magic**

Hindering a rival at business. Attempting to lure a lover. Begging to cure an ailment. There was a spell for that --- and much, much more --- in ancient Greece and Rome. This lecture explores the wide range of material evidence for witchcraft in antiquity: lead tablets scratched out with desperate (or calculated) pleas then folded, nailed, and dropped into a well; elaborate scrolls and codices chock-full with dozens of magical formulae for a range of purposes; scraps of papyrus on which those formulae were enacted; and beautiful and expensive gemstones expertly etched with images and magical words. Each of these types of material evidence offers a view into magical practice in ancient Greece and Rome, the magical economy of customers and practitioners (as well as how experts came by their expertise and ingredients), and the palpable reality that magic was far more common in Greece and Rome than one might think!

- **Classical Magic in Modern Comic Books & Graphic Novels**

Witches abound in modern comics. Casual comic book readers are likely familiar with some of them: Scarlet Witch and Agatha Harkness from the Marvel Universe; Sabrina Spellman, the "teen-aged witch" from the world of Archie; and Wonder Woman's nemesis Circe and Zatanna from DC. But a host of other less well-known witches haunt the pages of comics from 1950s horror to 2020s webtoons. This lecture showcases a range of witches in comics, compares these more modern popular depictions of witchcraft with imaginings of witches from ancient Greece and Rome, and investigates the extent to which modern comic book witches merely draw on vague witchy stereotypes or intentionally (or unintentionally) echo magical themes from antiquity.

Michael Bailey

- **Magic, Witchcraft, and Gender from Antiquity to the Middle Ages**

This lecture will explore the complex role gender has played as a component of magic and witchcraft across time. Beginning with classical stereotypes, magic has often been associated with women. In the early Christian period, magic began to be masculinized and certain kinds of magic became hyper-masculinized in the medieval period. Demonic witchcraft was then powerfully re-

feminized in the late medieval period, culminating with the *Malleus maleficarum*.

- **Demonic Magic and Heretical Witchcraft in the Middle Ages**

Beginning with the fundamental association of magic with demonic activity in early Christianity, this lecture will examine changes in demonology and levels of concern about demonic power across the Middle Ages. It will culminate with the confluence of demonic magic and heretical depravity that characterized stereotypes of witchcraft in the late medieval period.

- **Witch-Hunting and Skepticism in the New World: Salem and Beyond**

The famous Salem witch hunt is often taken to be characteristic of colonial American witchcraft altogether. This lecture will survey the (relatively light) intensity of witch trials elsewhere in the Anglo-American colonies, including in New England. More detailed attention will then focus on the abortive witch hunt in Stamford, Connecticut, also in 1692. Unlike in Salem, initial accusations in Stamford did not generate excessive fear on the part of either authorities or the community. Ultimately, only one person was convicted, and even she was later acquitted.

Rita Voltmer

- **Demonology and witch-hunting in Early modern Europe and Its Colonies**

Demonology crossed political, confessional, linguistic, and social boundaries in Europe and its colonies. So-called demonologists (e.g. Jean Bodin, Peter Binsfeld, Nicola Rémy, Martin Delrio, James VI of Scotland), some of them judges and witch-hunters, scribes, and legal advisers, as well as bystanders, witnesses, and accused witches themselves, all participated in the demonological discourse and in the practice of witch-trials. In witch-trials, learned concepts of demonology were popularized, reshaped, and adapted to their own local religious, local, and social milieux. The lecture shows the impact of demonology during the witch-hunts in early modern Europe and its colonies, especially how witch-hunts were triggered by a certain “political demonology”, and how vice versa witch-trials became the laboratory to prove the “truth” of demonological thinking. The lecture, likewise, gives an overview to the witch-hunts in the different religious milieus of Europe (Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox).

- **Circulation of knowledge - The sabbat imaginaire in the Media (pamphlets, broadsheets, images)**

Ideas of demonology and witchcraft were transferred, exchanged, negotiated, and elaborated with the help of the media. Sermons, tracts, pamphlets, broadsheets, and images transmitted – sometimes in translation – these ideas into local and regional milieus of Europe. The circulation of knowledge happened through the medium of texts and images (e.g. pamphlets, leaflets, tracts, correspondence), in specific situations (e.g. trials, exorcisms), and – most of all – because of travelling, reading, hearing, and speaking of individual persons. The lecture focuses at the imaginations about the witches’ sabbath, invented in the 15th century, which had a very special importance. Without this concept, mass persecutions could hardly develop. On the other hand, we find many Dutch images about the witches’ Sabbath (so-called witches’ kitchens or the witches’ Sabbath in Roman ruins), which were designed completely separately from witch trials. The lecture focusses on the iconography, the visual narratives, and the religious polemics, inherent in the sabbath imaginaire, and how this textual and visual images were constructed, transferred, and reshaped.

- **Sceptics, Satire and Enlightenment (16th-18th c.) - Demonology in Decline?**

During the whole period of witch-hunting, between the 15th and the 18th century, skeptical voices accompanied the belief in witchcraft and the thinking with demons. Witch hunters and demonologists rarely acted unchallenged. Representatives of both the elite and the populace refused to believe in the construct of a dangerous witches' sect or in an omnipresent, and corporael devil. Witchcraft was also attacked and ridiculed with the help of satire. Nevertheless, belief in demons and witches remained present during and after the Enlightenment, even after the witch trials had ended. The lecture introduces the most important skeptics, their arguments, and anti-demonologies. It also asks why it was during the Enlightenment that thinking with demons once again regained an important impetus: whereas witch-trials declined, demonology did not.

Teo Ruiz

- **Magic, Hermeticism and Astrology in Spain's Golden Age**

This seminar will explore the traces of magical, hermetic, and astrological ideas present in Spanish literature from *La celestina* to *Life is a Dream* or even the work of Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz in 18th century Mexico.

- **Witchcraft in Early Modern Spain**

This seminar will provide a brief introduction to the witch craze and will emphasize the presence, and most notably, absence of a witch craze in Iberia. Special attention will be given to the social and cultural context in the Iberian world, the identification of some native practices in the New World as forms of witchcraft, and the treatment of witches in parts of the sprawling Spanish monarchy.

- **Witchcraft and The Terror of History**

This lecture contextualizes witchcraft and witch-hunts on the background of a reflection on Western humanity's efforts to escape from history and its terrors – being witchcraft precisely one of these - from the existential condition and natural disasters to the endless succession of wars and other man-made catastrophes. Drawing on historical episodes ranging from antiquity to the recent past, and combining them with literary examples and personal reflections, this seminar explores the embrace of religious experiences, the pursuit of worldly success and pleasures, and the quest for beauty, power, and knowledge as three primary responses to the individual and collective nightmares of history. This is an invitation to a profound meditation on how men and women in Western society sought to make meaning of the world and its disturbing history