

Death & the Supernatural



The Late Antique and Medieval Postgraduate
Society's
Third Annual Conference

16 June 2017

The University of Edinburgh

9:00 - 9:30

Registration

9:30

Welcome

Anna McKay

9:45 - 11:15

Session One: *Cross-Cultural Connections*

Chair: Becky Wrightson

Katia Fernández Mayo

University of Edinburgh

**“Interactions between Viking-Age Scandinavia and the Islamic World:
Cultural Transmission and Religious Impacts”**

I would like to generate a discussion about the spread of Christianity and Islam in Scandinavia. The idea that Islam might have had a religious impact in Viking-Age Scandinavian societies could be based on the Islamic religious connotations that certain artefacts carried with them to Scandinavia. The spread of religious ideas and beliefs may be explained by interactions in intermediary sites of contact, such as marketplaces. Likewise, the analysis of long-distance connections and the spread of ideas and symbolic meanings may aid to the understanding of an Islamic religious impact in Scandinavia. Scholars, such as the archaeologist Egil Mikkelsen, have already suggested that Islam may have acted as a competitor for Christianity in Scandinavia by the end of the first millennium. Considering that Scandinavia was one of the last regions in Europe to convert to Christianity (not occurring until the late tenth century), and the close contacts of Scandinavians and Muslim peoples in Bulghar and Khazaria, it is then possible that there might have been converts to Islam, as suggested by Early Medieval Arabic chroniclers. Several archeological artefacts unearthed in Scandinavian burial sites may have had a religious meaning in their original Islamic context. At first glance, it appears that as the religious objects become translated to a different region with a completely different understanding of their use, their original religious powers are lost and new meanings acquired. Therefore, it seems reasonable to acknowledge a trend in objects with religious connotations becoming secular items that denote high rank or wealth. However, could it be also possible that ideas, beliefs and symbolic systems followed these foreign artefacts from one place to another through commerce, gift exchange, pillaging, missionary operations, or long-distance travel? By analysing the quick and effective Scandinavian conversion towards Christianity in the eleventh century, then a similar hypothesis could be postulated for Islam. There were a number of parallels between Old Norse mythology and Christianity that allowed for an easy conversion. Consequently, both Islamic and Christian practises would have seemed as a natural development from old pagan traditions. The question is whether Islam could have, or to what extent had, a similar religious impact.

Lorenza Gay

The Warburg Institute

"Deos Homines Fuisse? Illuminations of the Pagan Gods in French Medieval Manuscripts"

In French illuminated manuscripts of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, artists in Paris began to represent pagan themes more frequently than at any time since antiquity. The texts being illuminated were late medieval moralising compilations, such as the *Ovide Moralisé*, Christine de Pizan's *Epistre d'Othéa*, and the French translation of Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris*. In these works the gods were euhemerised and their divinity was dismissed as utterly false and as the result of the madness of the pagans. According to Boccaccio, for example, the ancient deities were pseudo-deities, ordinary men and women who, due to the folly and superstition of humanity had come to be revered as if they were gods.

The illuminators who illustrated these manuscripts were faced with a particular difficulty. How were they to represent the delusions and false opinions that were so strongly underlined by the texts, when depicting the pagan deities? The texts' focus on the negation of their divinity, on the fact they were mortals whose divinity existed only in the minds of the foolish pagans. How then to show the fact that they were *thought* to be deities, even though they were not?

In my paper I will outline in what ways the divinity of the pagan gods is visualised, how the present became a model for the antique, and how pictorial conventions from the contemporary Christian world were superimposed on pagan subjects. Furthermore, I will also focus on the complicated relationship between text and image that characterises these works. The illuminations subvert the apparent moralising intentions of the authors and present the pagan gods in a positive light, as actual deities, and not as symbols of an immoral past religion and as the result of demonic intervention.

Aparna Andhare

University of Edinburgh

"Reincarnation/Annihilation/Reunion: Glimpses of Death in (mostly) Medieval Indian Art"

Some of the most interesting stories told to children in India are those of Gods vanquishing demons. These tales are colourful, exciting and often fantastical. The destruction of a demon has connotations of morality, ingenuity, and the triumph of good over evil. My paper looks at many stories from Hindu and Islamic mythologies and the ways in which the moment of death has been depicted in manuscript paintings of Mughal India, with examples from the tales of Amir Hamza; and Hindu sculptures from Elephanta in Mumbai and central India, reflecting on an attitude toward death, in art and story-telling. I attempt to analyse the heroic, the demonic, and the ideas of retribution through the graphic representation of death and killing in the visual arts of India

11:15 - 11:30

Coffee

11:30 - 13:00

Session Two: Monsters and the Monstrous

Chair: Vaughn Sturdevan Feuer

Minjie Su

Linacre College

**“Winter, Werewolf, and a Psychic Vampire: Reading *Úlfhams rímur* in
Light of Seasonal Change”**

Úlfhams rímur, a late-14th-century rhymed poem composed probably based on a now lost *fornaldarsaga*, makes an excellent study of how the motif of seasonal change is exploited in literature and linked to the supernatural. Consisted of two parallel storylines – of Vargstakkr (‘wolf-coat’) and of his son Úlfhamr (‘wolf-skin’) - it presents two types of seasonality: alternation of winter and summer, and of night and day, both of which boil down to a darkness-versus-(sun)light binary. The *rímur* also presents two monster-encounters: cursed by the shield-maiden Vörn, Vargstakkr becomes a wolf every winter, which eventually leads to his doom; Úlfhamr, on the other hand, is trapped and mentally tortured (by sleeplessness) in the mound of Vörn, now become a *draugr* or undead.

In this paper, I aim to show that the winter/night/darkness-summer/day/light binary is valuable in revealing the characters’ experience on a psychological level. To achieve this, I will first give a full analysis of *Úlfhams rímur*, then discuss it in comparison to Grettir’s encounter with the *draugr* Glámr in *Grettis saga*. Lastly, I establish the parallel between the winter landscape and the werewolf’s mindscape, thus proposing to approach the werewolf’s psyche in terms of season and emotion.

Ryan Denson

University of Edinburgh

**“‘The Waters Underneath the Earth’ - Folkloric Traditions of Evil Arising
from the Sea.”**

The sea in the ancient world was generally viewed as being fraught with extreme danger, leading to a profound sense of anxiety when sailing. Roman sailors, for instance, were known to typically keep the shoreline within sight and avoided open sea travel when possible. Doubtlessly, much of this derives from the many uncertainties of sea travel, as well the human fear of the unknown. This uneasiness is reflected in the ancient folklore of the sea, which describes some of the terrors that sailors thought they might encounter, such as the legends of the Sirens and the Ketea. Furthermore, the sea was often depicted as a primordial place from which the Earth itself arose. This paper aims to explore some ways this folklore and mythology of the sea, as a perilous and primeval place, impacted Christian thought in the late antique and medieval periods, focusing on how these traditions impacted Christian perception of evil and its origins. One telling example is that demons were occasionally depicted as originating in the depths of the sea and coming on land to terrorize humans. With this topic, I hope to shed light on some sources for folkloric depictions of evil in these periods.

Joanna Witkowska

University of Edinburgh

**“Should Women Eat Their Offspring, the Children They Have Borne?” -
Cannibalism in John Mirk's 'Festial' as a Curse and a Blessing.”**

John Mirk's *Festial* contains an interesting story about a Jewish woman, a mother, who eats her son during famine sent on Jerusalem by God as a punishment for killing Christ. It is a case of 'standard' cannibalism, but it is not only the sin, but also punishment for transgression against God, which gives the narrative an interesting angle. This paper will explore how cannibalism, though a violation of laws of both God and men, plays a different role than most of the common sins of the *Festial*. The story has a more universal meaning, applying to the whole of society, or a nation, acting as a warning not against sinful behaviour itself, but against what transgression against God can lead to. This, however, is not the only example of anthropophagy in the sermon collection – religious cannibalism has a place in it as well. In the sermon on Corpus Christi a miracle of a bleeding host is recalled, most clearly revealing the nature of Transubstantiation, where a piece of bread becomes the flesh of Christ, and eating of it is a heavenly reward to the faithful. Thus, cannibalism becomes a topic acceptable in certain circumstances and condemned in others, depending on its form and meaning. This paper will aim to analyse the use of anthropophagy in the selected narratives, putting it in the context of England's contemporary struggles at the end of the 14th century and discussing the limits of acceptability of cannibalistic ideas and behaviour.

13:00 - 14:00

Lunch

14:00 - 15:30

Session Three: *Beyond the Grave*

Chair: Sarah Hutcheson

Maria Gordusenko

University of Edinburgh

**“Literal and Metaphorical Pilgrimage of Artists in Medieval Christian Art:
from Self-Representation to Self-Commemoration”**

Travelling artists were not uncommon in the Middle Ages. They may have perceived themselves as pilgrims and the work that they produced in foreign countries was a means to express devotion. A twelfth-century artist and bronze caster Barisano da Trani depicted himself at the bronze doors of the Cathedrals at Trani and Monreale kneeling in prayer before St Nicholas Pelegrinus, the patron saint of travelers.

References to the motif of the pilgrimage of a soul to Heaven occur in other artworks and inscriptions of medieval bronze casters and sculptors. Indeed, not only a pilgrimage may be interpreted literally, as a special journey to express devotion but it could also be understood in a metaphorical way, as a journey of a soul to God. The medieval sculptor Pelegrinus, whose name speaks for itself, carved an inscription in his relief, in which he calls himself a pilgrim and asks God for a place in Heaven.

This paper focuses on the idea of artists' metaphorical pilgrimages through their lives, as well as from life on Earth to heavenly Jerusalem. Such conceptions are present in the works of medieval sculptors and bronze casters, which were active on the both sides of the Alps and in different periods.

Elizabeth Skuthorpe

Unaffiliated Scholar

“Voices of the Dead: Speech Acts in Old Norse Narratives”

The dead occupy a unique grouping within the Old Norse-Icelandic literary corpus. From the oracular *vǫlva* of the Eddic poem *Vǫluspá* to the monstrous walking revenant and mound dwelling *haugbúar* of the *Íslendingasögur*, their presence in a variety of genres has attracted significant scholarly attention. While scholars including Hilda Ellis have looked to these appearances as indicative of the remnants of pre-Christian religions, Ármann Jakobsson has argued that the *draugr* (physical revenant) reflects attitudes to ‘frightening and unconquerable death’. However, to date, little research has focused on the role that language plays in the interactions between humans and speaking dead in these narratives. And, as representatives of the supernatural otherworld, the words of the dead often had specific and frightening power. This paper will discuss the ways in which the language of the dead impacts narrative and crucial scenes from *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* and *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* will be analysed with a specific regard to speech act theory. It will be argued that rather than functioning as mere plot devices dialogue scenes between protagonist and the dead assert and reinforce narrative roles and provide insight into how the dead were conceived by medieval Scandinavians.

Maud Bouvattier

University of Edinburgh

“‘From her to Eternity’; music and the lover’s death in the prose Tristan”

The Tristan legend makes interesting use of death and music as a means to express the characters’ emotion.

Death is introduced first as the consequence of Iseult’s rejections of love from a knight named Kaherdin. Kaherdin dies of love, and this episode works as a foreshadowing of the death of Tristan as consequence of his love for Iseult.

In the prose version death and suicidal lovers are used both as a means to warn the reader and create an internal rhythm, in this cyclic tale punctuated by exploits of the sword and of the harp. The wish for death, suicidal attempts and ability in music, continually separate Tristan and Iseult from the rest of the characters. By looking at the lover’s suicidal attempts, then the death of Tristan, I will try to show how death in the prose Tristan is at the same time a transgression, an expression of feelings, and a punishment for them.

15:30 - 15:45

Coffee

15:45 - 16:45

Keynote Lecture

Chair: Anna McKay

Dr. Debra Strickland

University of Glasgow

**“Medieval Ghosts: Death, Monstrosity and the Apocalyptic Supernatural in
the Painting of Hieronymus Bosch”**

16:45

Wine Reception



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