Proposed Programme: Power and the Sacred in the Medieval World (5th - 15th century)

Session Titles To Be Confirmed.

9:30-10:00 Welcome and Refreshments

10:00-11:30 Session 1 (Chair: Dr. Philip Shaw, University of Leicester, School of English)

**David H. Varley (Durham University):** The Mead of Poetry and the Witch’s Potion: An Old Norse Method of Conceptualising Gender Conflict.

**Dr. John Shafer (Durham University):** The Conclusion to Beowulf: A Proposed Source.


11:30-11:40 Break

11:40 -12:30 Keynote Lecture

**Dr. Rosalind Love (Robinson College, Cambridge):** Constructing women’s power in the Latin Lives of Anglo-Saxon Saints.

12:30-1:30 Lunch

1:30-3:00 Session 2 (Chair: Prof. Jo Story, University of Leicester, School of Historical Studies)

**Daniel Reynolds (University of Birmingham):** Monks, Muslims and Sacred Monopoly in Early Islamic Palestine.

**Javier Martinez (University of Oxford):** Bishops and Urban Water Supply in Late Roman and Visigothic Spain.

**Dr. Isaac Sastre de Diego (University of Oxford):** A Royal Chapel of the King of Asturias (AD 9th Cent.)
3:00-3:20 Break

3:20-4:20 Session 3: (Chair: Dr. Helen Foxhall Forbes, University of Leicester, School of Historical Studies)

Meg Boulton (University of York): And the Word was with God, and the word was God: Considering the institutional and eschatological implications of the Codex Amiatinus.

Emily Goetsch (University of Edinburgh): The Use of the Image of the Palm Tree as an Expression of Christian power in Tenth-Century Spain.

4:20-4:30 Break

4:30-5:30 Session 4: (Chair: Ms Deidre O’Sullivan, University of Leicester, School of Archaeology and Ancient History)


Martin Locker (University College London): An Upholder of Ancient Liberties Against a New-Fangled Tyranny: The Cult of ‘St. Thomas of Lancaster’.

5:30 - 6:00 Break

6:00-6:50 Keynote Lecture

Dr. Ken Dark (Research Centre for Late Antique and Byzantine Studies, University of Reading): The rise of Nazareth as a Byzantine pilgrimage centre.

6:50-7:00 Closing Remarks

7:30-9:30 Dinner (TBC)
Session 1 Abstracts:


Although the vast majority of Old Norse skaldic poetry records historical events, a handful of verses preserve stories of the pre-Christian gods. One such poem – Eilífr Goðrúnarson’s Þórsdrápa – tells the myth of Þórr’s journey to the home of Geirröðr, and the god’s battle with the jötnar he meets there. Descriptions of Þórsdrápa frequently note the oddity of a truly ‘pagan’ myth recorded in skaldic poetry without considering why the composer chose this highly complex form, why the poem’s narrative deviates from that of its extant prose analogues, or the reasons behind its innovative use of the names of contemporary political and cultural groupings. The radical rereading of the poem offered in this paper suggests that Þórsdrápa is not a mythological poem in the traditional sense, but rather an extended metaphor. In performance, such a conceit would cast the poet’s patron – the fiercely pagan Jarl Hákon – in the role of Þórr, peerless warrior and defender of mankind, thereby equating the Jarl’s enemies with the destructive and treacherous jötnar, and imbuing the Jarl himself with sacral power. Such an interpretation is a departure from the highly literary nature of most scholarship concerned with Þórsdrápa, and seeks to consider the social context of the poem, and the political uses to which it – and pre-Christian religious imagery more generally – may have been put in the increasingly Christianised society of ninth-century Scandinavia.

David H. Varley (Durham University): **The Mead of Poetry and the Witch’s Potion: An Old Norse Method of Conceptualising Gender Conflict.**

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that, within the context of Old Norse literature and mythology, the mead of poetry and the witch’s potion serve as physical embodiments of opposing supernatural powers that are divided along gender lines and encapsulate the complex politics surrounding human sexuality and gender relations. The starting point will be Bragi’s encounter with a troll-woman in Skáldskaparmál: this episode portrays a binary opposition between the quasi-religious power of poetry, a creative and positive social construct which is essentially masculine in nature and origin, against an impulse for destruction and chaos that is specifically feminine in this cultural context. This dichotomy will be interrogated through the further analysis of symbolism. Focussing primarily on Völsunga saga and Haralds saga hárfastra, the paper will indicate that the recurring motif of the witch’s potion is an opposing symbol to the more well-known mead of poetry: whereas the mead of poetry is a divine creative force associated with aristocracy and belongs to the masculine sphere, the witch’s potion, which also has strong aristocratic connotations, is a destructive supernatural agent and primarily belongs to the feminine sphere. The paper will map out the network of parallels and contrasts between these opposing symbols. At the heart of this analysis is the consideration of royal power, and how it is defined and opposed on both the human and divine levels: the constant aggression toward the rigid divine patriarchy by monstrous women is mirrored in the efforts of human kings to protect their sovereignty from invasive female influence. In conclusion, it will be suggested that the witch’s potion is a dark inversion of the sacred mead of poetry, and is thus a potent symbol in the negotiation of gender-based power.
Dr. John Shafer (Durham University): The Conclusion to Beowulf: A Proposed Source.

The last third of the Old English epic poem Beowulf is explicitly concerned with power, specifically the power of the Geat nation to maintain its autonomy in the face of the imperial ambitions of its larger and more militarily powerful neighbouring peoples and, most crucially, the heirless death of its leader. I will argue that this last portion of Beowulf is also concerned with the sacred, specifically in a possible source for this addition to the extended version of the traditional Bear’s Son narrative that makes up the first two-thirds of the poem. The (from a Christian perspective) natural end of heathenism is a recognised theme of the story of Beowulf’s death, and I will draw connections between this story and another heroic narrative from which Anglo-Saxon Christians may have gathered similar themes about the lifespan of their own religion and an inspiration for the inclusion of the dragon-slaying episode of Beowulf. Primary texts will include Ælfric’s homilies, antique scriptural commentaries and those of the Venerable Bede, and the Vulgate. A range of secondary sources will be consulted, including such classic scholarship as Tolkien’s 1936 lecture on the poem’s monsters and critics and such recent scholarship as Christine Rauer’s 2003 monograph on the Beowulf dragon.
Session 2 Abstracts:


The collapse of the western Empire in the fifth century was a slow process of transformation in a period of stress, during which the social patterns that had developed in earlier centuries accelerated. This is particularly true of the decline of the *curiales*, which after the fourth-century administrative reforms began to lose power. The decline of their authority and of classical euergetism meant that many old public services were slowly abandoned and fell out of use. In Spain, however, in the late sixth century there was a period of urban renewal under the patronage of the Visigothic monarchy that favoured the re-emergence of city elites as urban benefactors. In this period the bishops had become the most prominent figures and most of the urban patronage was done under their authority. As leaders of their communities, the bishops of Barcelona, Tarragona and Valencia maintained and repaired the water supply systems of their cities. Recent archaeological excavations in these sites indicate that the large episcopal complexes built in this period were closely related to water-consuming structures: not only baptisteries, but also fountains, baths, and cisterns. These works closely linked to the episcopal complexes may also indicate a semi-privatisation of the water supply. This process had already been noticed in Italy, but it is only now that it appears in Spain. And this does not mean that local urban elites had lost power to the bishop, as many times they had abandoned the public administration for the ecclesiastical one, but rather that in order to maintain their position and reinforce their status, the church looked back at the Roman aqueducts, and by repairing them, they linked to the past public benefactors, further legitimizing their position.

Dr. Isaac Sastre de Diego (University of Oxford): A Royal Chapel of the King of Asturias (AD 9th Cent.)

Santa María del Naranco (in the north of Spain), was built by King Ramiro I, in the mid-9th century. It is one of the most spectacular and emblematic buildings in Early Medieval Iberian Peninsula. In addition, its altar is an exceptional piece, different to earlier examples, following a new typology and style, and with a new meaning. Nevertheless, many scholars consider this building and its altar as models that characterize the Asturian Prerromanesque churches. In this paper I aim to defend the opposite consideration: Santa María del Naranco was a *unicum* in the Asturian kingdom and in the Iberian Peninsula during the Early Medieval Age. It is not possible to explain this monument on the basis of local features and from a regional perspective. Thus, one must look for external factors to understand the meaning of this construction. In the contemporary Carolingian and Longobard world it is possible to find similar buildings and altars as distinctive as Santa María del Naranco. Such as the ‘Tempietto sul Clitunno’ near Spoleto (Italy), which has similar characteristics. In the European context, it is possible to understand that Naranco’s altar is not an eucharistic church altar, but a votive altar for the Asturian King, which was meant to function in the context of a royal chapel, like the relic objects offered by other European monarchies and aristocracies, with a very important ideological and personal purpose. One of the keys to understanding this ideological purpose in Naranco is the altar’s inscription. The secular epigraphic formula (the name of the bishop is not mentioned, nor the *consecratio* and the *depositio*, which are the most important rites that are usually attested in an altar’s inscription) can be explained better if it’s a private altar devoted to the oration. Hence, Santa María del Naranco can be considered a dinastic building, wich belonged to the palace complex built by the King in Mons Naranco. Moreover, it served to the memory of the family, for the activities of pity developed by the King and his wife. This type of evidence will acquire development in the next centuries, spreading among the nobility.
Within a region of great religious significance for both Christians and Muslims, monastic communities played a vital role as custodians of holy places which provided avenues of intercession for both communities. Contrary to popular perceptions, which tend to stress early Islamic hostility to holy sites (excepting Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem), a growing corpus of epigraphic and papyrological data indicates the presence of Muslims at pilgrim sites (associated with biblical/Quranic figures) under the custody of monastic communities. The integration of monastic communities into localised elite power networks throughout Palestine continued to facilitate their role as venues where sacred and temporal power converged; a relationship which fostered continued financial investment into monastic communities into the eighth century. But this situation did not remain unchanged. The accelerated rate of conversion to Islam over the course of the 9th-10th centuries, alongside the growing coherency of antagonistic Islamic attitudes towards Christianity, prompted rapid monastic abandonment across the region. Monasteries experienced an abrupt cessation of patronal intervention and a progressive process of impoverishment. This communication seeks to explore the archaeological pattern of this change between the 7th-10th centuries. Accompanying these physical transitions was an ongoing intellectual dispute between Muslims and Christians regarding the latter’s monopoly on salvation. Alongside the systematic polemical works compiled by Muslim theologians against Christian doctrine, an emerging genre of Islamic court satire, which presented monks as sexually perverse and immoral deviants, began to undermine the intercessory role of the Christian monk in popular elite perceptions—a role progressively appropriated by the emerging number of Muslim ascetics and awila. Rather than treating them in isolation, this paper seeks to present both the archaeological and literary material as components of the same process of social change which witnessed the increasing struggle over ‘sacred power’ and ‘sacred authority’ in the early medieval Holy Land.
Session 3 Abstracts:

Emily Goetsch (University of Edinburgh): The Use of the Image of the Palm Tree as an Expression of Christian power in Tenth-Century Spain.

Religious art during the medieval period is full of symbols that promote the messages and ideals most important to those commissioning that art. Provided the religious shifts and struggles that occur throughout the Middle Ages, expressions of power and triumph are undoubtedly major components in such religious works. As such, this paper will examine the various applications of one such symbol, that was used continually from Antiquity through to the medieval period and beyond, as a way of denoting the success and authority of the religious groups and historical leaders—the palm tree. More specifically, this paper will analyse the use of the image in medieval Spain, where a range of traditions from the Arab world to Western Europe were coming together in a prominent way. Primarily, it will evaluate the unusual incorporation of the palm tree image into the most prominent and apocalyptic manuscript tradition of medieval Spain, the Beatus manuscripts. By analysing earlier uses of the palm tree in a range of historical and cultural settings, this paper will suggest the how established associations with such an emblem of triumph impacted the earliest of the Beatus manuscripts that date to the tenth-century. It will argue that the images were included in the illustrative programme as a way of promoting Christian power and authority during this period in Spain in which the Christians were subjected to continuous conflict due to Muslim invasion and the subsequent loss of political control, restrictions placed on religious practices, forced conversion and high taxes. Furthermore, this discussion will seek to demonstrate that the manuscripts were developed as an expression of ultimate Christian dominance during a period when those principles were most challenged.

Meg Boulton (University of York): And the Word was with God, and the word was God: Considering the institutional and eschatological implications of the Codex Amiatinus.

The Codex Amiatinus has long been recognised in the scholarship as a contentious object within the field of Anglo-Saxon manuscripts. For much of its history its institutional identity and origin was intensely debated; with opinions heavily divided between a Continental and Northumbrian provenance for this pandect. Having been established as Anglo-Saxon; much discussion has been offered as to the reason for this ambiguity of identity; with the early consensus being that the scale, sophistication and complex Italianate ‘style’ of the manuscript decoration, (particularly the Ezra page), would have disallowed the possibility of its being a product of an Insular scriptorium, as the prominent figural art would suggest familiarity with a classical/late antique tradition of ornament. However, further scholarship has established that this Northumbrian Codex was intended as a gift to the papacy and, as such, the classical vocabulary employed within the pages of Amiatinus would have been a highly charged attempt to equate the traditional vocabulary of the Church of Rome with the emerging institution of the Anglo-Saxon Church. Therefore it may be suggested that this object, intended to travel geographically through the earthly Church was in fact a symbol of the completion of that church; of the exchange of equivalent vocabularies and institutional identities between the margin and centre of the Church. Moreover, it can be suggested, the much studied full-page illustrations of the Amiatinus manuscript arguably go beyond this evocation of the Universal nature of the earthly Church: they can, in fact, be seen to provide a complete evocation of the past, present and future of the Church and its heavenly counterpart, which would become apparent at the Last Judgement, a theme evoked through a series of representations of ‘Jerusalem’: the metaphysical embodiment of the Heavenly city, actualised within the sacred space of the book.
Session 4 Abstracts:


The refashioning of English churches and saints’ shrines in the late eleventh and twelfth centuries meant that holy relics were displayed in ever grander and more splendid settings. The sense of sacrality was heightened by spatial strategies which more rigidly set apart the sacred from the mundane, and focuses of popular devotion were increasingly located in areas of limited access. As noted by the anthropologist Mary Douglas, holiness implied both power and restriction, and women in particular found themselves more than ever spatially distanced from holy relics and other sources of sacred power. This paper explores some of the medieval spatial policies and practices which influenced, and frequently defined, women’s relationship with the saints in institutional contexts. Two contrasting perspectives are considered, based on evidence from a range of English twelfth-century cults. First, the paper demonstrates how structures of time and space imposed by ecclesiastical authorities often regulated women’s movements and restricted their access to sacred places. Second, the paper looks at hagiographical constructs of sacred space. Miracle collections, describing pilgrims’ devotions at twelfth-century shrines, present readers with an idealized world which – unlike the social reality sought by modern scholars – is largely unhindered by barriers of time, space and gender. Women’s relationships with the saints are represented in homely and intimate terms, and the line between the mundane and the sacred is effectively blurred. How might we account for these radically different perspectives, and what can they reveal about the ways in which ecclesiastical authorities conveyed notions of the sacred to the laity in general, and to women in particular? In looking for answers to these questions, the paper draws on the work of cultural anthropologists such as Mary Douglas and Victor Turner, and suggests how monastic cult centres managed to balance the devotional aspirations of female pilgrims with the institutional policies of the Church in the wake of the Gregorian reform movement.

Martin Locker (University College London): An Upholder of Ancient Liberties Against a New-Fangled Tyranny: The Cult of ‘St. Thomas of Lancaster’.

During the reign of Edward II, one of the greatest magnates Thomas of Lancaster was captured at Boroughbridge and subsequently executed on grounds of treason in 1322. Within weeks of his death Thomas became a symbol of resistance against the king, popularly declared ‘the upholder of ancient liberties against a new-fangled tyranny’ (Wilkinson,1969, 127). Miracles occurred at his tomb in the priory church at Pontefract, and the king swiftly closed the site hoping to avert the inception of an anti-royal cult. However, weeping crowds started to convene at the site of Thomas’ execution, combined with more miracles claimed on his behalf, and demands were being made for official recognition of this unofficial saint. Despite its origins as a relatively local cult in the Leicester region, it briefly a rallying point for all adversely affected by Edward II’s governance style, and tokens and souvenirs bearing St Thomas’ image were found as far afield as London. This paper will explore the growth of the cult in terms of spiritual influence and material culture, how it became a figurehead for those disenchanted with monarchical rule, and the manner in which it was defused and skillfully suppressed with by Edward II’s successor Edward III – effectively ending a struggle for hearts and minds between the king and the memory of an unofficial saint or folk hero.