

Sensing the Elements in the Experience of the Sacred (14th-16th century)

Recent scholarship on ecocritical theory is expanding towards an exploration of the agency of natural elements (Bennet 2010). This methodological framework has now been adapted to the study of the past, for example in the pioneering work of Harris (2014). Following this approach, in this series of sessions we will question the role played by the elements (water, fire, air, earth) in sacred spaces, as well as in the individual and collective experience of the sacred in the Mediterranean basin (broadly intended, from Western Europe to the Middle East and the Byzantine Empire).

Our definition of elements includes not only the four canonical ones described by Empedocle, Pitagora and Plato, but also other possible elements, such as the more abstract concept of aether or quintessence. We are interested in how these elements affected bodily sensations, behaviors, mindsets and/or were harnessed and incorporated into religious experiences as a whole. For example, it is acknowledged that water played a key role in monastic environments. But we also know that it was incorporated in processions (such as those in 15th-century Brittany following real and symbolic routes linked to the sea or around a fountain), and we can imagine how this shaped the encounter between the faithful and the divine. Similarly, the movement of air through liturgical fans, or big censers - as the one in the Cathedral of Santiago of Compostela in Spain - affected the individual experience of celebrating and attending mass, as did the feeling of warmth (intended as an effect of fire) produced by handwarmers. As for earth, it was brought back home by pilgrims as a token of their travel to the Holy Land.

To explore these topics, we encourage potential speakers to use a wide range of sources (textual, visual and material) and to consider the multisensorial dimension of the human experience triggered by the elements.

In the context of the ERC research project SenSArt – The Sensuous Appeal of the Holy. Sensory Agency of Sacred Art and Somatised Spiritual Experiences in Medieval Europe (12th-15th century), Grant Agreement nr. 950248, PI Zuleika Murat, Università degli Studi di Padova (<https://sensartproject.eu/>), we aim to organize four sessions, each dedicated to an element. With the aim of creating a fruitful conversation and a context for enriching debates, we accept proposals from scholars from various fields: art history, history, literature, etc. covering a wide range of geographical areas (Western Europe, the Middle East, and the Byzantine Empire) and considering different religious contexts (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) in the period 14th-16th century.

We welcome abstracts for 20-minute papers in English. Scholars may address the topic with a broad approach but always considering the sensorial experience of the natural elements in religious practices.

Please send a paper title (15-word maximum), a short abstract (200-word maximum), together with a short CV and personal data (max. 300 words), to the following emails: zuleika.murat@unipd.it; valentina.baradel@unipd.it, teresa.martinez@unipd.it, davide.tramarin@unipd.it, micol.long@unipd.it

Deadline: July 31, 2024.