

**Call for Papers for the 17<sup>th</sup> Symposium of the Medievalists' Society  
(Mediävistenverband) at the University of Bonn,  
19<sup>th</sup> – 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2017**

## **Secrets in the Middle Ages**

Secrets constitute society and culture; their “invention [...] is the formative act of culture” (Aleida and Jan Assmann). The limits of the knowable form a clear line between the common knowledge of a society or culture, that is to say between what everybody knows (about each other), and the stock of knowledge restricted to a few. Secrets themselves, as well as those limits, are as integral to cultures as the limitations of knowledge attainable only through human curiosity, like the arcana of nature. Likewise, the limits of knowledge about matters, which are conceived of as being not (yet) knowable and which do not reveal themselves entirely in revelations (such as the nature of the otherworld or the attributes of God), for example, play a similar role. Non-Christian religions, in particular, often demonstrate an ambivalence towards secrets.

The symposium aims to investigate the function of these phenomena in different “medieval” (hence: pre-modern European and non-European) forms of society. The veil, the door, the mirror, the treasure and the book are recurrent manifestations of the secret. Furthermore, the concept and phenomenon of the hidden can be connected with spaces and objects beyond one's kin and to their respective functions in societies, such as treasure chambers or the objects retained in them. Individuals and groups of people put out of reach are often surrounded by mystery and belong to this category.

Against this backdrop, the following subject areas dealing with secrets/the secret and the hidden provide potential topics for the symposium in Bonn. However, they should not be seen in isolation but as related to each other and interconnected.

### **1. Limitations, means and approaches**

The focal point of the first theme is the limits and the setting of limitations accompanying the secret and the hidden, which inevitably will be broken when exposing them. Of equal concern are the ideas and the imagery related to them, taking into account their dimension of constituting culture and society. Case studies taken from all areas of medieval studies and disciplines concerned with other regions of the world allow insights into basic structures of the societies and cultures under consideration. This also includes the means and approaches used to disclose the secrets of nature and humanity, in particular because – unlike today – all new discoveries had the aura of the mysterious. Which secrets could be revealed by which means, at what times and under which conditions? What happened to secrets in the field of tension between a system of religious norms of a church or religion and the way it is

imparted? What was the role of mysticism as a special path to divine secrets? We will also have to consider the techniques, such as cryptographs, that were used to protect what has once been identified as a secret, resp. to impart it, or to identify it as a secret in the first place.

## **2. Elites and their way of dealing with secrets and the hidden**

Elites as administrators and as producers of secrets, and as guardians of hidden spaces and objects, can either appear at the center of a society – for instance at court, as clerics or as scholars – or in rather peripheral areas with secret knowledge that has not been written down. These elites can make use of cultural techniques restricted to a minority, like the art of writing, or they can initiate and establish a tradition of oral transmission that reaches down generations. Furthermore, secret knowledge can be distributed according to gender and age. Thus, the question concerning the specific selection and the socialization of different types of persons entrusted with secret information can be investigated. The form of narration or interpretation and the control of elites – such as the clergy of the court or religious scholars and the Poet Laureate – competing with them in this field over a stock of knowledge that is thought to contain secrets may be a topic of discussion, as well as trivialized forms of secrets, such as recipe collections. Finally, the assumption that there are no secrets at all (i.e. the notion of a general deception of society by priests, in German: “Priesterbetrug”), belongs into this category.

## **3. Secrets and the hidden: Individuals and societies**

The main focus with this thematic area will be on how secrets and the hidden can be positioned between the public and the private spheres, and how those borders shift in the course of time. The role of self-discovery and the development of confession as a search for the secrets of an individual would be a possible topic in this section, as well as innovations in the media such as the (self-) portraits and biographies and their connection with the process of self-discovery. What did people *not* want to know?; what was the role of the shifting boundaries concerning modesty or shame and of emotions in the sphere of the secret and the hidden? On an intercultural level, it is of interest to examine what certain cultures considered mysterious or hidden when coming into contact with others. In doing so, attention is drawn to (foreign) cultures that were thought of as the keepers of secrets and hidden knowledge or as being predestined to be just that. Occasionally, popular contemporary notions of the secret and the hidden in the Middle Ages could be critically evaluated as forms of an appropriation of this era, a development that takes its origin in a non-scientific cognitive interest.

We kindly ask for proposals for panels or individual contributions, as well as interactive workshops, in any of the **three subject areas** mentioned above:

**Duration of a panel:** as a rule 1½ hours and three presentations (incl. time for discussion)

**Duration of presentations:** no more than 20 minutes.

The organizers of panels and workshops will ensure that the time allotted to presentations and discussions does not exceed the allotted 1½ hours. Furthermore, in accordance with the interdisciplinary structure of the association, at least two out of three speakers (resp. three out of four) should represent different disciplines.

The organizers are very grateful if your **exposé** is structured as follows:

- Number of the subject area (see above, 1–3)
- Your address (incl. e-mail); when submitting proposals for panels, please include the address(es) of those in charge
- Exposé containing a maximum of 7000 characters (proposal for a panel) or 1500 characters (single contribution, workshop)

The organizers kindly ask that individual exposés not be submitted, if they belong to a proposal for a panel. We expressly welcome young researchers.

Please send your proposals by **28<sup>th</sup> February 2016**, preferably via e-mail with attachment, to the following address:

Prof. Dr. Stephan Conermann

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<http://www.mediaevistenverband.de/verband/satzung/17-symposium-2017/>