

«Dark Renaissance» - 51. Basler Renaissancekolloquium

Outline

While the European Renaissance is typically associated with major artistic, technological, and scientific advancements, their concrete social and political ramifications remain comparatively underexplored. The 51st Basel Renaissance Colloquium will seek to discuss these forgotten sides of Renaissance history: Dark Renaissance invites us to consider the Renaissance as a period of disruption and upheaval. In particular, we propose to focus on three interrelated thematic axes, giving rise to the following lines of questions (among others):

- **Violence & War**

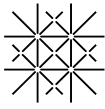
Was there a specific Renaissance brand of violence? Did the re-orientation towards classical antiquity also restore corresponding attitudes towards violent practices? What is the specific Renaissance relationship between warfare and its representation within cultural and aesthetic ideals? Could Renaissance culture even be regarded as an extension of the European Dark Ages, that is, a period particularly prone to violence and violent behaviour as well as social decline? How was violence (and its social and political justifications) renegotiated in light of new theological and/ or humanist impulses and moral ideals?

- **Political Culture**

The Renaissance is often thought of as a period of emerging institutions that laid the (theoretical, constitutional, administrative) foundations of the modern state, but can Renaissance political culture truly be regarded as progressive to the wider contemporary experience? To what extent were phenomena such as exile, conspiracy, revolt, and censorship defining characteristics of Renaissance politics and society? How did political actors conceive of political authority and its enforcement, and to what extent was there a conflict between political thought and practice (e.g. Machiavellian vs. humanist ideals; monastic pacifism vs. knightly militarism; miles christianus as a unitary model of political authority combining ecclesiastical and secular elements)?

- **End of Times**

How did the Renaissance experience of mass death (through the technological intensification of warfare, the rapid spread of infectious disease through established trade routes etc.) affect contemporary perceptions of humankind and the cosmos? How did notions of imminent apocalypse define popular imaginations and contemporary scholarly discourse? To what extent did military and pandemic catastrophes trigger cultural shifts in terms of daily practices, modes of artistic expression, theological and philosophical orientations, and/ or political organisation? The meeting is intended to address these and related questions from a multitude of angles, including (but not limited to) visual and material culture, political thought, family and gender, political institutions, mentalities, and/ or social practices. We particularly welcome contributions that cut across the outlined thematic scope by combining perspectives from cultural, social, political, and art history and/ or the history of science and medicine.



Abstracts

Marta Celati (Pisa): Conspiracy and Political Conflict in Italian Renaissance Literature: Rebellion, Obedience, and a New Model of the State

Conspiracy was the main way through which insubordination to central authorities was carried out in Renaissance Italy. A considerable number of literary works were devoted to this topic, especially in the second half of the fifteenth century, when the development of this strand of literature proves to be associated with the emergence of a centralized political ideology in Italian states. Indeed, the issue of internal political conflict, in connection with the intertwined themes of rebellion and obedience, acquires a crucial position not only in narratives of conspiratorial events, but also in works aimed at defining the ideal prince and a new model of the state: a model that, at the same time, appears in its concrete actualization in the accounts of contemporary history. Thus, this multifaceted literary output reveals the fruitful interplay between historiographical, political, and literary elements in shaping humanist political thought. The interdisciplinary analysis of some significant sources selected as case studies allows us to point out the key function played by recurring themes (e.g. violence, revenge, *concordia*), narrative techniques, and ideological angles in the representation of the topic of conspiracy, and to identify the pivotal role of political literature in the development of a blossoming contemporary theory of statecraft.

Scott Nethersole (London): The Representation of War in Renaissance Florence

It was rare for Florentine artists to depict battle scenes from recent history. But they are not unknown and two of the most celebrated commissions of the Renaissance relate to wars fought in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries: Paolo Uccello's depictions of the battle of San Romano, and Leonardo and Michelangelo's planned battles for the sala del Maggior Consiglio. Whether from the 1430s, or the early years of the sixteenth century, these images are (or were to be) highly contrived, with little relationship to the chaos, violence and terror of actual war. On the whole, Florentines had no experience of the battlefield, at least before the billeting of French troops into their homes in late 1494, begging the question of how Florentine artists came to imagine war? Why did their images look the way they did? And what meaning did their representations have for those who gazed upon them? This paper will explore relationships to the bellicose festival culture of Renaissance Florence and seek answers in a developing aesthetic of violence in the later fifteenth century.



Samuel Cohn (Glasgow): The Dark Side of the Black Death Silver Lining in Early Renaissance Italy

I will introduce this talk by revisiting my earlier reflections on violence and the repression of popular rebels in early Renaissance Italy. I then will shift gears to explore a less violent but more pervasive dark side of the Renaissance for nonelites. This concerns the so-called ‘silver lining of the Black Death’, its demographic consequences that spawned high living standards for workers, artisans, and peasants and greater with greater expenditure on luxury items. In addition, these conditions produced the longest period which historians can presently calculate quantitatively when the gap between rich and poor narrowed. Less studied has been the impact of these economic changes on other spheres of activity. Against this favourable backdrop (in fact, I hypothesize because of it), nonelites suffered politically and within the cultural realm. To understand these losses, I will return to my introduction on political repression to raise a new hypothesis.