Panel report:

Humility on the Surface: Managing Visibility in the Late Middle Ages

Lucerne, July 8, 2025, Seventh Swiss Historical Congress

Organizer: Silvia Negri

Participants: Francesca Galli / Katharine Stahlbuhk / Hanna Hirt / Roberto Leggero

Report by: Jennifer De Biasio, University of Lucerne

The panel's overarching question revolved around the visibility and performance of humility in different late medieval contexts. In her introduction, **SILVIA NEGRI** (Zurich) explained that the term 'humility' was translated into English from different scholarly sources and used in the panel in three ways: as a source term, an analytical term, and as a function. When seen as a foundational value of late medieval societies, humility as a lens allows for the exploration of medieval history as well as the situatedness of individuals in relation to others. Humility was closely linked to public and aesthetic representations – from clothing, to art, to *spectacula* – which translated into specific practices.[1]

FRANCESCA GALLI (Zurich) explored the connection between humility and visibility in visual sources from the 13th and 14th centuries, charting the transmission of knowledge from optical representations through scientific and theological treatises to instructive visual materials intended for lay people.[2] The critical aspects of geometrical and optical depictions like size, distance, position, shadow and light that directed the viewer's gaze were central to their instructive function. Galli concisely showed that humility and invisibility were closely linked to one another in scholarly notions of the 13th century and later adapted by the clergy to teach the broader population through analogies in images, preachings, and teachings.

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[1] The panel was organised within the SNF project "Humility in theory and practice. Historical approaches across cultures (1250-1500)" carried out at the University of Zurich. For more information, see: Silvia Negri: Humility in theory and practice. Historical approaches across cultures (1250-1500), Schweizerischer Nationalfonds - Datenportal, <https://data.snf.ch/grants/grant/218236>, accessed: 17.07.2025. For a concise description of the various uses, approaches, and opportunities that come with 'humility' as a lens, e.g. Silvia Negri: Introduction. Representations of Humility Now and Then, in: Negri, Silvia (ed.): Representations of Humility and the Humble, Firenze 2021, S. VII–XX. Online: <https://www.zora.uzh.ch/id/eprint/213511>, accessed: 17.07.2025.

[2] Galli drew on the following source material: Bartolomeo da Bologna: *Quaestiones de assumptione* (i.e. part III), c.1270; Peter of Limoges: *De oculo morali*, c.1285; Konrad of Halberstadt (junior): *De liber similitudinum naturalium*, c.1350.

Other important aspects of visual representations were material and color, as **KATHARINE STAHLBUHK** (Florence) demonstrated through the example of Siena's mural of the Church Fathers in Santa Maria della Scala and Donatello's statue of Maria Magdalena. Their different materials and colors represented two differing notions of late medieval humility. Where the sand in Siena's mural led to the self-identification of the friars with the Church Fathers and their humble lives in the desert, the wooden statue of Maria Magdalena denoted the taking of sin upon oneself and thereby set a public ascetic example of humility as a *colonna* (pillar) of Christianity.

How the concept of humility was situated in social contexts was explained in **HANNA HIRT**'s (Heidelberg) presentation. Hirt elaborated on the meaning of humble funerals by members of the elite in the 14th and 15th centuries. The choice to forgo pompous funerals in favor of simpler ones often represented a breach of ritualized displays of status and was depicted as a voluntary choice, a humble departure for the soul's salvation in the afterlife. Even though the families often ignored the deceased's request, Hirt showed that display and performance of humility were privileges of the rich, staged as an *exemplum* of virtue to the public.

Another *exemplum* was discussed by **ROBERTO LEGGERO** (Ticino), who questioned the function and strategies of inclusion and exclusion of Beldì, a woman possessed by the devil in the Italian city of Lodivecchio in the 12th century. The woman was depicted as an instrument of the devil who had in turn been ordered by God to possess and speak through her. According to Leggero, the humbling and exclusion in this case are to be interpreted as positive, as a way to make the woman shine in her own light and to bring this light into her family.

The discussion showed that humility as a foundational value was highly ubiquitous in late medieval societies. Since the discussed sources were elite-centred, one audience member specifically asked about the dissemination of humble notions to the broader population, or if the emphasis on public displays rather stemmed from a need to humble the elite. The panelists agreed that great effort was put into the distribution of various notions – through preachings in the vernaculars or the simplification of learned concepts – not only for the humbling of the elites who had the means to lead extravagant lives, but to instruct the broader public. However, the omnipresence of humility should not lead to the assumption that these practices were universally applicable. Negri's question to the panelists in how far the practices and techniques were gendered led to Galli's realization that even when using physical materials as a starting point for research, there were noticeable gendered aspects, often centering on men. Leggero and Stahlbuhk agreed that gender was an important aspect in their respective sources, since it led to the display of differing notions or ideas around humility. Hirt, in re-

sponse to the discussion, drew attention to possible biases that come with the precarity of source material that focused more on male-gendered aspects over female ones, especially when studying burial rites. She then gave examples of popular versions of humble funerals, thereby bringing up the question of whether the differences in practices and displays of humility might be class-rather than gender-related.

Whether by focussing on materiality or practices, this panel highlighted the potential that humility as a lens holds for the analysis of the Late Middle Ages and the many questions that are sure to follow from the SNF project's upcoming publications.

<div align="right">Jennifer De Biasio</div>

Panel overview:

Francesca Galli: A Deep Virtue and its Place in the Sun. Charting Humility through Medieval Geometry and Optics

Katharine Stahlbuhk: Material and Colour in the Visualization of Humility

Hanna Hirt: Displaying Humility in Late Medieval Burials

Roberto Leggero: Humility and Triumph. The Woman Possessed by the Devil and the Devil Possessed by God

This report is part of the infoclio.ch documentation of the 7th Swiss Congress of Historical Sciences.