

HIST31292: INVISIBLE WORLDS: SUPERNATURAL BELIEFS IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

Course Tutor: Professor Sasha Handley



What's it all about?

Reports of ghostly encounters, demonic possessions, monstrous births and avenging angels shaped the physical, psychological and emotional worlds of early modern people across the British Isles. This course will help you to understand why supernatural beings of many different kinds inspired fear, comfort, inspiration and sometimes laughter. Supernatural encounters help historians to understand how people's daily lives were shaped by the forces of religion, by the explosion of print, and by the spread of new scientific philosophies, which challenged existing understandings of the links between the natural and supernatural worlds. The changing meanings and significance of supernatural beliefs between c.1500 and 1700 will be examined alongside controversial claims that the Protestant

reformation, and the rise of natural philosophy, contributed to a process of 'disenchantment' that resulted in a more 'rational' understanding of the world that rejected the interventions of non-natural forces. By examining reports of possessions, hauntings, and two-headed babies alongside visual images and physical objects, we will explore the extent to which supernatural beliefs were diluted by these transformations whilst also considering the reasons for their survival and adaptation in a challenging cultural climate.

Assessment:

1. Primary Source Analysis, 1,500 words (40%)
2. Essay, 3,000 words (60%)

SEMINAR THEMES
Magic and Religion before the Reformation
Reformation & Disenchantment
Ghostly Visions
Magical Healing
Possession & Exorcism
Supernatural Landscapes
Angels and Angelology
The Occult Laboratory of the Royal Society
Haunted Households and Archaeological Evidence



*A Declaration of a strange and Wonderfull Monster:
Born in Kirkham Parish in Lancashire (1646)*

Indicative Reading:

- D. Oldridge, *Strange histories: the trial of the pig, the walking dead, and other matters of fact from the medieval and Renaissance worlds*
- A. Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England*
- S. Wilson, *The Magical Universe: Everyday Ritual and Magic in Pre-Modern Europe* (2000)
- D. P. Walker, *Unclean Spirits: Possession and Exorcism in France and England in the late Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries*
- L. Daston and K. Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*
- K. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*

Dissertation Topics:

Students on this course have written dissertations on topics such as gender and supernatural reports, medical explanations of monstrosity, the prominence of women as 'victims' of demonic possession, magical healing practices and the material culture of household protection. In 2018 Abigail Greenall won the History Today undergraduate dissertation prize for her dissertation 'Magical Materials and Emotion in the Early Modern East Anglian Household,' which was linked to this course.