

“The Power of Wisdom


The Virgin Mary and Moral–Doctrinal Authority in the Middle Ages”

Francesca Dell’Acqua, Università di Salerno

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 Filozofická fakulta MU, Knihovna Hanse Beltinga,
Veverí 470/28, Brno, Budova K, přízemí

Lecture Abstract

 This lecture will explore a fundamental issue in the western society of the past as well as of the present: female leadership and authority. Some feminist thinkers of the twentieth century identified Catholic upbringing as one of the reasons for lack of participation in public life and politics on the part of women. In particular, these thinkers pointed at the ‘negative model’ offered by the Virgin Mary, for centuries branded by the Catholic Church as a role model for modesty, submission, and virginity. However, Mary was perceived as a very strong figure, as the mighty protector of capital cities such as Rome and Constantinople during late Antiquity, or as the embodiment of political and economic supremacy, as well as of religious and social identity, in major Italian city-states between the twelfth–fifteenth centuries. By presenting specifically a case study from southern Italy dated to the mid-ninth century, I will demonstrate how a comparative examination of medieval realities, especially through the lens of figural arts and material culture, can help us understand the bearing the Virgin had on the idea of female authority and leadership in a past that shaped our current world.