

ABSTRACTS

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Lectures' Abstracts

Serra Ağırman Yilmaz

The Definition of Deafness in Ottoman Medicine, the Attitude of Ottoman Physicians Toward the Deaf, and the Place of the Deaf in Ottoman Society

This study examines definitions of deafness and attitudes toward the deaf in early modern Ottoman medicine. Deafness was defined in three different ways in early modern Ottoman medicine: *tarash*, *vakr*, and *shamam*. Deafness causes and medication shaped on these definitions. "Shamam" has been defined as a blockage in the ear, a closed ear canal, or complete deafness, and is generally incurable. shamam usually results in muteness. It has been recommended that compassion and kindness be shown to people with shamam. "Vakr," on the other hand, is described as severe impairment or loss of hearing. It is used to describe people who can hear loud sounds but cannot hear soft ones. "Tarash" is used for partial, not total, deafness. It refers to a deficiency in hearing, weakness in hearing, or mild hearing loss. There is no evidence that hearing loss or related disabilities, such as being mute, led to social isolation in Ottoman society. On the contrary, Islamic law contains specific provisions for the deaf and mute regarding marriage, divorce, and inheritance. Thus, agreements are made valid through solutions such as sign language and written consent. The employment of the mute in the Ottoman palace was particularly notable during the 16th and 17th centuries. It is known that, due to their reliability, they held positions among the sultan's confidants and executioners.

Iqbal Akhtar

Speech Without Sound: Deaf Legal Personhood in Islamic and Rabbinic Law of the Medieval Mediterranean

This paper examines how Islamic and Jewish jurists of the medieval Mediterranean theorized the legal personhood of the deaf, and argues that their divergent treatments rest on competing intellectual categories of speech, intention, and communication rather than on a shared notion of bodily impairment. Rabbinic law inherited from the *Mishnah* a triad—the *heresh* (deaf-mute), *shoteh* (mentally incompetent), and *katan* (minor)—whose members

were largely excluded from legal agency, binding the deaf person's incapacity to a presumed absence of da□ at, or settled mind. Islamic jurisprudence took a strikingly different route. Rather than locating the problem in cognition, jurists across the Sunnī schools and the Ja'farī tradition asked whether the comprehensible gesture (*ishāra mafhūma*) of the akhras could carry the legal weight of speech, validating it for marriage, divorce, sale, and bequest; the deaf signer thus became, in effect, a speaker. Reading fiqh manuals alongside rabbinic codes and responsa—with Maimonides, the jurist-physician of Ayyubid Egypt, as a hinge figure writing in both traditions' shadow—the paper traces how each system converted a sensory condition into a question of will and expression, and how those choices shaped concrete exclusions and accommodations. Situating these debates within a shared Mediterranean legal culture, it advances the conference's history-of-ideas framing by showing that "deafness" was never a single object but a category continually remade by the discourses asked to define it.

Davide Astori

Deafness and Deaf Gods in World's Mythologies

This paper explores the representation of deafness in mythological, religious, and traditional narratives across different cultures and historical periods. While sensory impairment has received increasing attention in the study of ancient and premodern societies, deafness remains comparatively underrepresented, especially when compared with blindness or physical disability. Yet a cross-cultural survey reveals a diverse range of narratives in which deafness assumes significant religious, symbolic, and etiological functions. The evidence includes deities or supernatural beings explicitly described as deaf, such as the Akan divinity Temina in Ghana and the Chinese "Celestial Deaf" Tianlong, as well as traditions in which hearing loss results from a mythical event, curse, divine intervention, or supernatural agency. Other narratives use deafness to explain the origin of particular communities or hereditary conditions, as in traditions recorded in West Africa and Southeast Asia. In still other contexts, deafness or the inability to hear becomes associated with secrecy, liminality, punishment, divine power, or miraculous healing. Ancient Mediterranean and biblical traditions likewise preserve episodes in which deafness, muteness, and the restoration of hearing or speech acquire religious and narrative significance. Rather than attempting to identify a single universal meaning of deafness, the paper proposes a comparative typology of its mythological and religious functions. Particular attention is paid to the distinction between deafness as a permanent attribute, an acquired or temporary condition, an etiological explanation, and a symbolic or ritual motif.

Ilaria Cariddi

The Language of Deafness: Representations and Cultural Conceptions of Hearing Impairments in Ancient Egyptian Literary and Para-literary Texts

'Hearing' occupies a prominent place in ancient Egyptian elite conceptions of human behaviour, communication, and social cohesion. Paraenetic texts emphasise its fundamental role in the acquisition of knowledge, the cultivation of proper conduct, and the maintenance of harmonious constellative relations within the human and divine spheres. The emphasis on the virtues of hearing and 'perfect speech' may have contributed to obscuring experiences of aural ailments, within a cultural framework shaped by ideology, decorum, and concerns for bodily integrity after death. D/deafness has thus received comparatively little scholarly attention in Egyptology, partly owing to the often 'invisible' nature of the condition, both in societal records and in the bioarchaeological evidence. This paper examines the representations of deafness in a wide range of ancient Egyptian literary and para-literary texts, focusing on the terminology used to describe the condition and the contexts in which it occurs. The analysis brings together references from medical, protective, funerary, legal and documentary sources with literary depictions of physical impairment, temporary hearing loss and hardness of hearing, and possible allusions to the use of sign language. Particular attention is devoted to figurative uses of 'deafness': drawing on Conceptual Metaphor Theory, the paper explores how bodily experience is mapped onto nonsensory domains, with 'moral deafness' serving to express forms of non-responsiveness and insensitivity. These representations shed light on the perceptions and possible social impact of hearing-related disabilities in ancient Egypt, offering grounds for hypotheses concerning the lived experience of D/deaf individuals, and the ways in which bodily difference could be mobilised to articulate broader social expectations.

Donata Chiricò

Rights, Signs, and Cognition: The Redefinition of Deafness between Innocenzo III's Rome and Girolamo Cardano's Milan

How did the perception of deaf people evolve from that of individuals deemed "incapable" and voiceless to the recognition of their full cognitive and communicative capacities? This paper examines a pivotal turning point in Mediterranean intellectual history between the Late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, tracing the historical and conceptual trajectory that connects the Rome of Pope Innocent III (1198–1216) to the Milan of Girolamo Cardano (1501–1576). At the beginning of the thirteenth century, the Roman Curia was confronted with practical questions concerning everyday life and religious practice: could a deaf person marry? Could they express legally valid consent or take religious vows? Navigating the constraints of Roman law, Aristotelian theories, and pastoral care, the legal reasoning of Innocent III opened up an unexpected possibility: for the first time, the Church acknowledged that gestures and signs could possess genuine legal and evidentiary force, recognising that intention and consent

could be expressed through means other than spoken language. Three centuries later, in the humanist milieu of sixteenth-century Milan, the physician and philosopher Girolamo Cardano took a decisive step forward. Challenging centuries-old prejudices, both medical and otherwise, Cardano recognised the independence of thought from hearing: the human mind does not require sound in order to understand, but can establish direct associations between ideas, visual signs, and written language. Drawing on papal decretals, pontifical correspondence, and Renaissance medical treatises, this paper argues that the Rome–Milan axis represents a crucial prehistory of deaf education and the recognition of Deaf culture. It traces an intellectual journey that dismantles the myth of the cognitive inaccessibility of "silence" and marks the first fundamental transition towards a plural understanding of deafness: one in which deafness need not be conceived merely as a "deficiency" (*deafness*), but can instead be understood as a distinctive way of being that gives rise to its own forms of identity and knowledge (*deafhood*).

Cassandra Dagani

Challenges and Strategies for a Linguistic Research on Signs in the Pre-Modern Age

Reconstructing the history and etymology of signs in the premodern era entails confronting two distinct challenges, one methodological and the other conceptual. The first lies in the absence of a single, universally applicable method. This does not mean that no methodology is available, but rather that the possibilities offered by different methodological approaches cannot be ruled out *a priori*. This necessity arises from two factors: the chronological distance separating us from the historical period under investigation, and the particular nature of some of the surviving sources, which provide mediated accounts through third-party descriptions, effectively excluding deaf people themselves from the discourse. Historical, linguistic, and etymological research must therefore be understood, in the words of Franco Crevatin, as a comprehensive form of cultural inquiry. The conceptual challenge, on the other hand, consists in investigating the life of a sign before its status as such had been recognised, in a period when the theoretical framework necessary to conceive of signs as expressions of a fully fledged language was still lacking. Yet tracing this history backwards, in search of the etymological origins of signs still used today in Italian Sign Language (LIS), necessarily involves adopting a retrospective diachronic perspective, an approach that etymology, by its very nature, fully legitimises. It is precisely within this ongoing tension, however, that the possibility emerges of uncovering, behind the signs themselves, the social fabric, the lived experiences of deaf people, and the society in which those signs were created and transmitted. These are all essential elements for understanding and investigating their etymological origins.

Lucas P. Depierre

Teresa de Cartagena: The Juridical against the Theological Deaf Person in Fifteenth-century Castile

Teresa de Cartagena (ca. 1425 – after 1478) was a writer whose experience of deafness as a young adult shaped her entire intellectual contribution. I have previously challenged the interpretive paradigm according to which her deafness should be understood primarily as a form of imprisonment, arguing instead for a model of absence, one more closely aligned with the lived experience of deafness. Continuing this reconstruction, I will examine the juridical dimension of Teresa's self-defense in the *Admiración operum Dey*, the text she composed in response to male critics of her first book. The juridical grid was, moreover, not abstractly available to her: her family were jurists and she claims to have studied at Salamanca. A theological grid made hearing the channel of faith so that the deaf person stands as structurally disobedient: *fides ex auditu* (Rom 10:17), with Augustine's notorious use of the congenitally deaf man as a limit case in the Pelagian polemic (*Contra Iulianum* III), and the semantics of *ob-audire*. The juridical grid, as expressed and experienced in Teresa, stands in tension with this one. Justinian's Codex 6.22.10 dismantles the undifferentiated *surdus et mutus* into a taxonomy – congenital against adventitious, deaf against mute, literate against illiterate – and recognizes full testamentary and contractual capacity in the person deafened after acquiring letters. In other words, literacy, not hearing, is the criterion of legal personhood and this lies precisely at the heart of Teresa's positioning and defense. That taxonomy reaches Castile through the ius commune taught at Salamanca and through the *Siete Partidas*.

Ninon Dubourg

The Silence of the Senses – Deafness and Speechlessness in Medieval Religious Experience

In the Middle Ages, Christian life was profoundly shaped by sound. Bells called the faithful to Mass, chants structured the liturgy, sermons conveyed the divine word, and sacraments such as confession and marriage relied on words that had to be spoken, heard, and understood. What happened, then, when some believers could not hear, could not speak, or could not participate in ritual life according to expected sensory and communicative norms? Drawing on miracle narratives, religious images, legal texts, and ecclesiastical sources, this lecture explores deafness, speechlessness, and lived silence in medieval society. It argues that silence was not merely the absence of sound. It could mark exclusion from shared ritual experience, raise concrete problems for the reception of the sacraments, and function as a powerful religious metaphor. Yet silence could also become a space of adaptation, negotiation, and invention. By following the traces of deaf and non-speaking people, this paper examines how medieval Christians navigated the boundaries between presence and participation. Some learned by watching the gestures of others; some communicated through signs or bodily practices; others depended on relatives, neighbors, or clerics to gain access to worship. Rather than treating

deafness only as symbol of spiritual lack, this paper asks how deaf people could have taken part in religious life, how communities responded to them, and how their experiences invite us to rethink the relationship between sound, silence, and the sacred in the medieval world.

Stephanos Efthymiadis

Cases of Curing Hearing Impairment in Middle and Late Byzantium: The Evidence of Greek Hagiography

Miraculous healings as performed by a living holy person or as having occurred in a particular shrine are well attested in most hagiographical writings dating from the Middle and Late Byzantine period (eighth to fourteenth c.). As recorded in saints' Lives, edifying stories, or, in particular, collections of miracles, the healing power of a saint or the healing record of a shrine extends to people whose disability may have resulted from congenital anomalies or malformations or have been caused by an accident or a defect developed. Compared to other kinds of disability, hearing impairment receives a modest attention in the Greek hagiography produced in Middle and Late Byzantium. This paper will bring together and discuss a fairly representative number of miraculous stories which refer to deaf people, pinpointing common traits and narrative themes as well as singling out cases that do not conform with the norm.

Grant Hussong

"For the Other One I Count as No Son of Mine": Critical Disability and Croesus's Other Son

Gamification, understood as the application of game-based techniques to educational contexts, I propose a critical disability reading of King Croesus's deaf, non-verbal son in the first book of Herodotus's Histories. Rather than suggest that Croesus's son represents the general treatment of deaf persons in ancient Greece, I argue that he must first be situated within the semiotic development of Herodotus's narrative, following critical work on the use of disability as an emplotment device (Mitchell and Snyder 2000; Quayson 2007). The son operates as a sign for Croesus's overdetermined misfortune to come. The unnamed son is negatively compared to his exceptional brother Atys, who stands out for his masculine prowess (1.34; 1.38), suggesting his disability has a queering/trans-ing function (McRuer 2006; Smilges and Greenberg 2025), leading to his failure to fulfill the category of son altogether (1.38). Atys's subsequent death, ironically killed by his caretaker, characterizes Croesus' fate by leaving him 'sonless,' which misfortune Herodotus labels divine nemesis (1.33). The role of disability and divinity is further cemented in a series of oracles Croesus receives concerning deafness and speech (1.48; 1.85). As predicted, Croesus hears his son's voice the day his kingdom falls, fulfilling an intergenerational curse (1.91). Afterwards the son becomes non-disabled, and Croesus a wise figure. This ironic transformation demonstrates, I argue, the extent to which the son's deafness is embroiled as a form of meaning making in Herodotus's narrative explanations at the level of divinity, fate, and

individual action. Once its function is complete, it is written out of the narrative.

Christian Laes **Deafness in the Graeco-Roman World**

This presentation looks at the evidence for deafness in the Graeco-Roman world, broadly defined from the earlier period into Late Antiquity, drawing on very diverse sorts of written sources. The evidence for mere deafness — not accompanied by problems in oral communication — is very sparse, and I will look at the reasons for this. Special attention will be paid to Greek and Latin terminology for deafness.

Giovanna Ligorio **"Si Vero Obstrusa Sensus Morietur in Aure". Vocabulary and Definition of Deafness in Quintus Serenus' "Liber medicinalis"**

The present paper aims to examine chapter XII of the *Liber medicinalis*, entitled Aurium vitiis succurrendis and devoted to ear diseases, considering both the possible distinction drawn by the author between partial and total hearing loss and the terminology used to define them. This chapter forms part of a collection of pathologies, which the author presents in 1107 hexameters, organised into 64 chapters according to the classical nosological scheme a capite ad calcem. The use of technical and scientific terminology coexists in the poem with a lexicon of an epic-didactic nature, which, in conjunction with other aspects, gives rise to questions concerning the objectives and intended audience of the *Liber medicinalis*. Chapter XII opens with an allusion to a generic *saevus dolor* afflicting the *teneras aures* (v. 161) and proceeds to discuss hearing loss, which appears to be partial in one instance and total in another: the former is articulated through a periphrasis (v. 171: *si vero obstrusa sensus morietur in aure*), wherein the term sensus is central; the latter, conversely, contains a reference to the term surdus (v. 174), whose actual semantic value in this context will be examined. This paper therefore intends to analyse, also in the light of a comparison with other medical authors such as Pliny and Celsus, the vocabulary employed in the *Liber medicinalis* by Quintus Serenus – an otherwise unknown author and perhaps a physician-poet – to define and describe deafness in his pharmacological poem.

Nazan Maksudyan **Silence of the Sultans: Mute Servants and Sign Language in the Early Modern Ottoman Court**

Many early modern accounts of the Ottoman Empire describe mutes as a distinctive category of servants within the Ottoman bureaucratic and courtly structure. At the Ottoman palace, mutes are known to have served from the time of Mehmed II (1470s), functioning as attendants in confidential meetings and as couriers of sensitive messages. They communicated through what European observers variously called the "language of the Mutes"

(*à la muette*, *alla Mutescha*) or *ixarette*, a corruption of the Turkish word for "sign," *işaret*. In the centuries that followed, the palace continued to recruit mutes, while sign language was reportedly taught at a palace school for use among pages, female members of the imperial household, and their servants. The Ottoman court thus encompassed a substantial community of people who knew how to sign and could communicate with d/Deaf people through sign language. Drawing on Ottoman and European written and visual sources, I examine these early modern hybrid forms of sociality and communication, which enabled forms of conversation beyond speech. I argue that the employment of mute servants and the use of sign language at the Ottoman court served, above all, a symbolic function: they reinforced the deliberate and ceremonial silence associated with sultanic rule and its semidivine status. From a disability studies perspective, I further explore the significance of the term "mutes" (*dilsiz*, literally "tongueless"), used in Ottoman Turkish to designate d/Deaf people, and consider what this terminology reveals about the relationship between speech, bodily difference, and political authority. Finally, I trace the gradual disappearance of sign language as an accepted medium of Ottoman governance in the early 1800s. As the administrative order increasingly privileged spoken communication, standardized procedures, and bureaucratic legibility, Deafness and muteness came to be constituted as increasingly disabling conditions.

Domenico Giuseppe Muscianisi

"In the Deaf We Trust": Kings and the Deaf at the Hittite Court

This study examines the position and functions of deaf individuals (Sumerogram LÚ/MUNUSÚ.HÚB) in Hittite religious and social life on the basis of cuneiform documents from Boğazköy (the court of Hattuša). Evidence shows that deaf personnel occupied a defined, hierarchically organized role, particularly within Hattian-derived festivals and rituals. Working near the king and queen alongside other palace and cult officials, they performed duties including carrying water, sprinkling, presenting libation vessels and bread, handling ritual objects, cleaning ceremonial spaces, and assisting ritual practitioners. Although evidence for their broader social status remains limited, their recurrent ritual responsibilities suggest that deaf personnel held an established and significant position within Hittite court culture.

Nicola Reggiani

Deaf and Deafness in the Graeco-Egyptian Papyri

Deafness in the ancient Graeco-Roman world was understood through a complex interplay of medical theories, social perceptions, and legal restrictions. Although literary and medical sources provide valuable insights into ancient attitudes towards hearing impairment, Greek documentary papyri from Egypt offer a more fragmentary but equally

significant perspective on the everyday lives of deaf individuals. This paper examines the evidence for deafness in Greek papyri from Graeco-Roman Egypt, placing it within the broader context of ancient medical knowledge and social practices. Particular attention is paid to the terminology of deafness, especially the semantic ambiguity of the Greek term *kōphos*, which could refer to deafness, muteness, or intellectual impairment. References in tax registers, lists of individuals, private accounts, petitions, and correspondence raise important questions about the identification, social integration, and economic activities of people described as *kōphoi*. The discussion then turns to ancient medical interpretations and treatments of deafness, drawing on Egyptian, Hippocratic, and Galenic traditions. By combining documentary and medical papyrological evidence with ancient medical literature, this paper explores both the possibilities and the limitations of reconstructing the experience of deafness in antiquity. It argues that, despite the scarcity and ambiguity of the surviving evidence, Greek papyri provide important insights into the relationship between bodily impairment, medical practice, and the social visibility of deaf individuals in Graeco-Roman Egypt.

Mara Rescio

Inhabiting Marginality: Beyond the Rhetoric of Healing. The Deaf between Gospel Narratives and Documentary Papyri

This study examines the representation of deafness in the Gospel miracle stories, seeking to restore socio-historical depth to figures too often reduced to mere discursive functions. Building on an approach developed in previous research on blindness, it proposes a shift in perspective from Jesus as healer — traditionally at the center of scholarly attention — to the people he healed, drawing on Greek documentary papyri to recover the social worlds behind the texts. Within the Gospel tradition, deafness is typically encoded through κωφός — a label at once ambiguous and uninformative, covering both hearing and speech impairments while revealing nothing about the nature or extent of the condition. Compounding this terminological opacity is a wider narrative silence: with no reference to name, age, or social standing, those afflicted remain ciphers, their lived experience irretrievable from the Gospels alone. Equally telling is the near-total absence of women: deaf women leave virtually no trace, pointing to a distinctly gendered dimension of impairment — a 'marginality within marginality' whose causes, whether rooted in historical reality or in the selective logic of transmission, remain to be explored. To move beyond these limits, the Gospel accounts are placed in dialogue with documentary papyri and cognate magical and medical semi-literary materials. Widening the semantic field of hearing impairments allows for a systematic examination of how different terms functioned as social markers in everyday contexts — whether deployed derogatorily or as neutral designators, and whether imposed by external parties or adopted as forms of self-identification. By bringing these bodies of evidence into sustained conversation, the paper challenges miracle-centered rhetoric, illuminating how deafness was understood, categorized, and negotiated in the ancient

Mediterranean — thereby recovering otherwise hidden aspects of the daily existence of those who lived with it.

Catherine Shepard Bloomer

Deaf Desire: Punitive Soundscapes in Dante's Commedia

Dante's *Commedia* imagines an afterlife in which sound can be punitive and deafness protective. In Inferno 6, Cerberus' thunderous barks make the souls wish they were deaf. Here, deafness offers an imagined escape from divine punishment. The comparison is extreme—Hell is so unbearable that deafness becomes preferable to hearing—yet that preference itself, the moment of "deaf desire," offers a new reading of Dante's afterlife as a punitive soundscape in which sensory capacity acquires meaning and value through the relation between bodies, souls, and the environments they inhabit. Drawing on Deaf Gain and disability-gain theory, I interrogate disability not simply as bodily deficit or "impairment," but through its productive capacities. While Dante figures deafness as an imagined form of relief, I historicize this apparent gain by placing the *Commedia* in dialogue with contemporary understandings of deafness, hearing, and sensory difference. I situate Dante's representation of deafness within a longer lyric tradition that associates deafness, blindness, muteness, and desire, asking how these sensory states intersect rather than function as discrete categories of disability. Rather than retrospectively imposing a stable modern category of deafness upon the *Commedia*, I use Dante's own language to recover a historically situated understanding of sensory disability. "Deaf desire" ultimately reconsiders the presumed opposition between disability and sensory advantage in the medieval world and its imagined afterlives.

Rachele Sprugnoli
Federica Iurescia

Exploring Deafness in Latin through the LiLa Knowledge Base

The history of deafness in the premodern Mediterranean is deeply intertwined with the ways in which language encoded, transmitted, and negotiated concepts related to hearing, speech, communication, and disability. This proposal explores the Latin concept of deafness through the Knowledge Base developed within the LiLa (Linking Latin, https://lila-erc.eu/) project. The LiLa Knowledge Base is a Linked Open Data infrastructure that interconnects lexical and textual resources for Latin around a shared lemma bank with the aim of overcoming the fragmentation of digital Latin resources by enabling interoperable, cross-resource exploration of linguistic data. The contribution presents a methodological experiment in concept-oriented research. Starting from the main Latin lemma conveying the concept of deafness (surdus and its lexical family), we investigate how it is documented across the resources currently connected to LiLa, including dictionaries, lexicons, and corpora. The analysis highlights the semantic associations, textual attestations, and linguistic contexts through which deafness was

represented in Latin sources from different periods and genres. The paper argues that the picture emerging from the available evidence remains necessarily partial, yet it already demonstrates the potential of interoperable linguistic resources for reconstructing historical conceptualizations of deafness. At the same time, it shows how the integration of new linguistic resources into LiLa can progressively enrich and refine this exploration. By combining Latin linguistics and computational methods, the contribution proposes LiLa as a laboratory for investigating the evolving meanings of deafness in Latin.

Maria Tagarelli De Monte — **Silence in Colors. Deaf Artists and Artistic Mobility in Pre-Modern Italy**

This presentation examines deaf artists in Italy from c. 1450 to 1750, focusing particularly on painters active between 1590 and 1720. Through case studies of Aurelio Martelli (1644–1725) and Bernardino di Betto, known as Pinturicchio (c. 1454–1513), it explores artistic training, mobility, patronage, and visual communication, recovering overlooked careers while critically questioning the idea of a distinctive "deaf style".

Fotis Vasileiou — **Deafness, Muteness, and Communication in Late Antiquity**

This paper explores representations and social implications of deafness in Late Antiquity through hagiographical, legal, and autobiographical sources. A small corpus of miracle narratives both illuminates the social position, agency, and means of communication of deaf individuals and reveals the hagiographical construction of deafness as a condition requiring restoration. Such cures do not provide transparent access to deaf people's lived experience but reflect the expectations of the hearing and speaking communities that produced these texts. Justinianic law offers a different perspective, distinguishing among deaf persons, mute persons, and those described as both deaf and mute, as well as between congenital and acquired conditions. Participation in particular legal acts depended not upon a blanket assumption of incapacity but upon the ability to hear, speak, write, and express one's will in a legally recognized form. A revealing counterpoint is provided by Gregory of Nazianzus' self-imposed silence during Lent in 382. During this period, Gregory continued to communicate in writing, presenting the pen as a medium that could "speak" and address words to the eyes. His case demonstrates that the absence of speech did not necessarily entail a loss of agency when literacy, material resources, and communicative networks were available. Drawing on insights from Deaf and Disability Studies, the paper therefore approaches deafness not merely as a bodily condition but as a relationship between the body, available forms of communication, and social structures.

Muxin Yan

When Not Hearing Heals: The Discipline of Hearing in Late Antique Religious Controversy

Christian preaching privileged hearing as a route to understanding and faith, yet non-hearing was not invariably negative in early Christian thought. In religious controversy, closed ears could signify either spiritual illness or salutary discipline. This paper asks how physical deafness, metaphorical deafness, and deliberate refusal to hear were distinguished and connected in late antique Christian discourse. The paper takes Christian polemic against Manichaeism, one of Christianity's major religious rivals in the late Roman world, as a case study. Drawing on anti-Manichaean writings in Latin, Greek, and Syriac, with particular attention to St. Augustine's sermons, I first examine the relationship between physical hearing and the "inner ear." I then consider how words and teaching were imagined as affecting the listeners' bodily and spiritual health. Finally, I explore how this medical-theological model developed into a discipline of hearing: listeners were taught not simply to listen, but to practice selective non-hearing by closing their ears to teachings harmful to health and salvation. The case study therefore complicates our understanding of Christian auditory culture in late antiquity, in which auditory capacity was classified according to the object and perceived effects of hearing. Failure to hear divine words could be pathologized, while refusing rival teaching could be therapeutic. Rather than a dichotomy between hearing and deafness, this paper reconstructs a spectrum of auditory ability, impairment, and cultivated non-hearing, showing how theological controversy participated in the moral and medical construction of sensory capacity..



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