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Malcanton Marcorà
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Aula Valent
Dorsoduro 3484/D,
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Introduction by prof.
Pietro Daniel
Omodeo

Guest hosted by
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Workshop ERC EarlyModernCosmology

Religious Contexts of Discourses on Nature
The Comet of 1577 in Early Modern Germany

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The schism of the Christian church in Latin Europe after the Reformation impacted not only theological beliefs but also more general conceptions of the world in Early Modernity. This study uses the case of comets as intrinsically inter-disciplinary boundary objects with a strong cultural connotation and scientific relevance to illustrate how confessional convictions informed theoretical ideas about nature.

German vernacular pamphlets and broadsides on comets of the 16th and 17th centuries offer a unique insight into a multifaceted discourse on knowledge of heavenly phenomena. This literature reflects various but interrelated approaches to comets that led to manifold views on their nature, their interpretation and their relevance. Socio-culturally speaking, the discourse is shaped by the interaction of “high” and “low” culture and thus represents an early form of popularization and democratization of knowledge.

In the early modern age, comets were regarded as frightening, near-inexplicable phenomena sent by God. It was the specific historical situation of an era when religious and political instabilities and the crumbling of social and intellectual orders made people insecure, and the need to explain nature and cope with daily life was expressed with reference to the celestial sphere and its curious phenomena. Within the background of the fruitful intellectual renewal brought by the Renaissance and humanism, comets became the condensation core of experiments in knowledge and meaning production.

In the framework of ideological and confessional struggles for cultural and scientific hegemony, it is not trivial to ask, who had the power to define and interpret comets as transitional objects between explanation, causation and meaning.

The thesis of my paper is that both the theoretical conceptualization and the symbolic interpretation were interconnected and strongly influenced by the religious settings of the cometary discourse. Interpreting comets as divine signs is an element of Christian theology and a perspective on nature that took different forms according to religious confession in the aftermath of the Reformation. I will focus on the reception of the Great Comet of 1577 in order to examine these denominational differences in the conception of natural phenomena. Specifically, I want to analyse the cometary pamphlets of the catholic authors Johann Rasch and Johann Georg Schinbain in contrast to the protestant ones by Jacob Heerbrand and Bartholomaeus Scultetus. This comparative investigation will be closed with a brief outlook on the developments in the 17th century.