



UNIVERSITY OF CAGLIARI



**LITERATURE, LANGUAGES AND
CULTURAL HERITAGE
DEPARTMENT**

PHD PROGRAMME IN PHILOLOGICAL-LITERARY AND HISTORICAL-CULTURAL STUDIES

Rotating Indological Seminar

The Origin and the Legacy of Magic and Healing Knowledge in Indian Literature and Arts



**Great Hall “B. Motzo” – 2nd Floor – Sa Duchessa
Via Is Mirrionis, 1, University of Cagliari**

Documented attendance at the event and the submission of a written report will entitle students (L-10; LM14/15; LM-84) to 1 CFU.

For more information, please refer to alessia.manca3@unica.it or pontillo@unica.it

SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE
Rajendran Chettiartodi (Calicut University)
Martin Hribek (Charles University of Prague)
Cinzia Pieruccini (University of Milan)
Lidia Sudyka (Jagiellonian University of Cracow)
Danuta Stasik (University of Warsaw)
Alessia Manca and Tiziana Pontillo (University of Cagliari)

PROGRAMME

Day 1: Thursday, September 10th, 2026
Great Hall “B. Motzo” – 2nd Floor

1:50-2:00 PM Official welcome

Chair: Danuta Stasik

2:00-2:30 PM: Giuliano Boccali (University of Milan) – Opening remarks

2:35-3:05 PM: Chettiartodi Rajendran (University of Calicut/Kalady) – The magician as a situation saviour: Representation of magic in *Ratnāvalī* of King Harṣa and *Līlavatī* of Rāmapāṇivāda

3:10-3:40 PM: Lidia Sudyka (Jagiellonian University of Cracow) – Magic Healing in the *Kathāsaritsāgara* of Somadeva

3:45-4:15 PM: Fabrizio Ferrari (University of Padua) – The revivification of Rādhā in the *Śrīkrṣṇakīrtan*. A story of revenge and repent in medieval Bengal

4:15-4:45 PM: Coffee Break

Chair: Chettiartodi Rajendran

4:45-5:15 PM: Danuta Stasik (University of Warsaw) – *Māyā* as a narrative device: ‘magic twists’ in Tulsīdās’s *Rāmcaritmānas*

5:20-5:50 PM: Piotr Borek (Jagiellonian University of Cracow) – Pain and Healing: Ritual, Violence, and Agency in Susham Bedi’s novel *Havan*

5:55-6:25 PM: Alessandra Consolaro (University of Turin) – Magic and Magical Realism in *Harī ghās kī chappar vālī jhopṛī aur bonā pahār* by Vinod Kumar Shukla

Social Dinner h. 19:30

Day 2: Friday, September 11th, 2026
Great Hall “B. Motzo” – 2nd Floor

Chair: Alessandra Consolaro

9:00-9:30 AM: Małgorzata Sacha (Jagiellonian University of Cracow) – Between Ritual and Therapy: Traditional Healing and the Cultural Unconscious in Indian Psychiatry

9:35-10:05 AM: Weronika Rokicka (University of Warsaw) – Attitudes of contemporary Indian Muslims towards magic and healing practices in Ismail Darbesh’s novel *Tālāśnāmā*

10:10-10:40 AM: Maria Puri (Jagiellonian University of Cracow) – The Power of the Word (*Śabd*): Healing the Self through *gurbani* with special focus on *Anand Sahib*

10:45-11:15 AM: Coffee Break

Chair: Lidia Sudyka

11:15-11:45 AM: Bryan De Notariis (University of Venice) – Magic and Magical Thought in Pāli Literature: Mundane Practices, Meditative Powers, and Medical Applications

11:50-12:20 AM: Raffaele Torella (La Sapienza, University of Rome) – “Of the beginnings, the ends, the intermediate spaces”

12:25-12:55 AM: Karolina Kłoszewska (University of Warsaw) – From Literary Narratives to Ritual Embodiment: Healing, Possession, and Ritual Performance in Tamil Traditions

12:55 AM–2:05 PM Lunch

Chair: Robert Leach

2:10-2:40 PM: Frank Köhler (Eberhard-Karls-Universität Tübingen) – Magic in the Rig Veda

2:45-3:15 PM: Elisa Mapelli (University of Milan) – The Healers of the Gods. The Myth of the Aśvins’ Restoration of the Sacrifice and Its Relationship to the Myth of Dadhyañc Ātharvaṇa

3:20-3:50 PM: Paola M. Rossi (University of Milan) – The medicine of the gods: *mádhu*

3:55-4:25 PM: Coffee Break

Chair: Paola Rossi

4:25-4:55 PM: Kristen De Joseph (Leiden University) – ‘Demons’ in Early Vedic Medicine between Enchantment and Disenchantment

5:00-5:30 PM: Alessia Manca (University of Cagliari) – *Śaunakīya Saṃhitā* 8.6: about demons and dangers for a pregnant woman

5:35-6:05 PM: Robert Leach (University of Zurich) – Magic, Medicine and Marginalisation in the Atharvaveda (and beyond). On Kaśyapa and Agastya, and their sons

Day 3: Saturday, September 12th, 2026
Great Hall “B. Motzo” – 2nd Floor

Chair: Raffaele Torella

9:00-9:30 AM: Cinzia Pieruccini (University of Milan) – Veterinary medicine, animal health and protection: Aśoka’s inscriptions and *Arthaśāstra*

9:35-10:05 AM: Alessandro Giudice (Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich) – Call It Magic, Call It Truth? Ordeals Between Theory and Practice in Premodern South Asia

10:10-10:40 AM: Anita Borghero (University of Cagliari) – Remedies for another life? A Vedic lexical and textual study starting from A 5.2.92

10:45-11:15 AM: Coffee Break

Chair: Cinzia Pieruccini

11:15-11:45 Massimo Vai (University of Milan) – Grammatical Features of the Magical Hymns of *Atharvaveda Śaunaka II*

11:50-12:20 AM: Eleonora Lusci (University of Cagliari) – AVŚ X.8 and the Care of the Soul: The Therapeutic Aims of Reflection on *Brahman*

12:25-12:55 AM: Tiziana Pontillo (University of Cagliari) – Making the poison sapless (*arasa-*): how does Book 4 of the *Śaunakīya Saṃhitā* resort to magic

ABSTRACTS

Day 1: Thursday, September 10th, 2026

Great Hall “B. Motzo” – 2nd Floor

2:35-3:05 PM: Chettiartodi Rajendran (University of Calicut/ University of Kalady) – The magician as a situation saviour: Representation of magic in *Ratnāvalī* of King Harṣa and *Līlavatī* of Rāmapānīvāda

This paper investigates the representation of magic as a narrative instrument of crisis resolution in two Sanskrit plays of different species: the *Ratnāvalī Nāṭikā* by King Harṣa and the *Līlavatī Vīthī* by Rāmapānīvāda. It argues that magical intervention in these texts is a convenient technique used deftly by the playwrights to resolve crisis, and restore order. As contrasted with divine intervention, magic creates a very dramatic effect in the play and enhances its overall impact. In *Ratnāvalī*, magic is employed to create an illusory fire and in *Līlavatī*, a deadly serpent. Such manifestation of a sudden calamity results in a panic situation which has a frightening effect on all the characters on the stage. When its spell is over, apart from a lingering cathartic effect, the crisis in the play is seen dissolved with an attitudinal change in characters responsible for the crisis. By situating these works within broader discourses of kingship, polygamy, dramaturgy, and cultural imagination, the study demonstrates that magic is a sanctioned mechanism through which narrative tension is dissolved and harmony restored.

3:10-3:40 PM: Lidia Sudyka (Jagiellonian University of Cracow) – Magic Healing in the *Kathāsaritsāgara* of Somadeva

The *Kathāsaritsāgara* (“Ocean of the Streams of Stories”) compiled by Somadeva in the 11th century, is overflowing with magic—hundreds of tales where the supernatural feels like a natural part of life. Magic healing appears in a number of stories within the collection, reflecting the broader Indian cultural blend of folklore, religion, and early medical ideas. There are various forms of magical healing used to help the protagonists of those stories, ranging from the use of rare herbs and potions to divine intervention. As we shall see, very often a combination of different methods (i.e. psycho-physical means as well as animal and vegetal remedies) results in a restoration of health. We shall also examine the figure of a healer-sage.

3:45-4:15 PM: Fabrizio Ferrari (University of Padua) – The revivification of Rādhā in the Śrīkṛṣṇakīrtan. A story of revenge and repent in medieval Bengal

The *Śrīkṛṣṇakīrtan* of Baṛu Caṇḍīdās is the earliest extant work in Bengali, likely to have been composed towards the end of the 14th century. Divided into thirteen chapters (*khaṇḍas*) it details a disturbing love story between Kānāi (Kṛṣṇa), the dark Lord of Bṛndāban, and Rādhā, a barely pubescent cowherd girl (*gopī*) from Gokul. After a series of failed attempts at courting Rādhā, Kṛṣṇa resolves to strike her with Madan's flower arrows in order to win the *gopī*'s love and enjoy her youth. In fact, Rādhā dies. The paper will explore how the theme of supernatural revivification is represented in the ŚKK and in other Middle Bengali texts and how Kṛṣṇa resorts to yogic powers to overcome both grief and (erotic) desire.

4:45-5:15 PM: Danuta Stasik (University of Warsaw) – Māyā as a narrative device: 'magic twists' in Tulsīdās's Rāmcaritmānas

In the *Rāmcaritmānas*, *māyā* appears as a concept influenced by *viśiṣṭādvaita*, which regards sensual perception of the world as illusory, with meanings shaped by the diverse theistic tradition of *rām-bhakti*. It is also used to denote 'supernatural power' or 'magical power, magic', with its effects signified by Hindi synonyms such as *indra jāl* and *jādū* ('magic'). Analysing the problem of liminality in Tulsīdās's imagery of the Laṅkā battlefield (Milan 2019/2023), I referred to episodes involving *māyā*'s use, noting that they function as narrative tools that cause a significant shift in the course of events. In my presentation, I propose examining the most prominent instances of the use of *māyā* throughout the poem as part of a strategy that functions as 'magic twists' in its narrative. I will view them as storytelling devices by tracing their intrinsic influence on the story's flow and on how they define the characters' subsequent actions by introducing supernatural elements.

5:20-5:50 PM: Piotr Borek (Jagiellonian University of Cracow) – Pain and Healing: Ritual, Violence, and Agency in Susham Bedi's novel Havan

In order to protect their identities and cope with everyday tensions and predicaments brought about by the displacement, it is common for the migrants to take refuge in the performance of familiar rituals. Such rituals, being an integral part of their cultural memory, become recurring elements in the diaspora literature. Scholarship often views reinstatement of rituals and/or ritual behaviour among the diaspora as easily accessible, effective tools of psychological healing, e.g. anxiety reduction.

In *Havan* (1989), the ritual of fire sacrifice, performed in New York, provides framework for the whole narrative and thus becomes a means through which Guddo, the main protagonist, revisits traumatic memories, negotiates fractured identity, and attempts to heal herself in an unfamiliar

environment saturated by incessant violence experienced by her and other women in her family. In my reading, the fire ritual—contextualised in VAW (violence against women)—operates on multiple levels, e.g. as a conduit of memory, therapeutic mechanism rooted in traditional concept of purification, instrument of empowerment/diasporic strategy for reclaiming agency in an alien environment.

5:55-6:25 PM: Alessandra Consolaro (University of Turin) – Magic and Magical Realism in *Harī ghās kī chappar vālī jhopṛī aur bonā pahār* by Vinod Kumar Shukla

This paper investigates the role of magic and magical realism in Vinod Kumar Shukla's *Harī ghās kī chappar vālī jhopṛī aur bonā pahār* (2011). It examines how Shukla presents magic not as an extraordinary rupture of reality, but as an ordinary dimension of rural life, childhood perception, and poetic imagination. The novel's title, evoking a hut with a green grass roof and a dwarf mountain, already suggests a small, concrete world that opens gradually into wonder, mystery, and cosmic connection.

The paper focuses on the integration of magical elements into everyday experience: children play "with the sky," a mysterious hole appears bottomless, Bolu speaks only while walking, and the moon seems to rise from the green grass roof and travel with the children. These events are not narrated as supernatural exceptions, but as part of the characters' lived reality. Shukla's magical realism therefore differs from fantasy: it does not construct an alternative world, but reveals the hidden strangeness and poetry of the real one.

The paper also explores the relationship between magic, childhood, and nature, showing how Shukla gives agency to the village landscape, the sky, the moon, the hut, and the mountain. Ultimately, it argues that magic is not an escape from reality, but a deeper mode of attention to it."

Day 2: Friday, September 11th, 2026

Great Hall "B. Motzo" – 2nd Floor

9:00-9:30 AM: Małgorzata Sacha (Jagiellonian University of Cracow) – Between Ritual and Therapy: Traditional Healing and the Cultural Unconscious in Indian Psychiatry

This paper examines the relationship between traditional healing practices and contemporary psychiatry in India through the lens of the cultural unconscious. It argues that practices such as ritual healing, Ayurveda, yoga, and meditation are not external alternatives but remain embedded within Indian psychiatric frameworks. Drawing on Indian psychoanalysis—particularly the works of Girindrasekhar Bose and Sudhir Kakar—as well as critical perspectives from Ashis Nandy and

clinical insights from Dinesh Bhugra, the paper demonstrates how the unconscious is culturally structured through myth, religion, and historical experience. The space between ritual and therapy is conceptualized as a dynamic interface where integration, critique, and clinical application coexist. This interplay highlights the need for culturally grounded approaches to mental health care in India.

9:35-10:05 AM: Weronika Rokicka (University of Warsaw) – Attitudes of contemporary Indian Muslims towards magic and healing practices in Ismail Darbesh’s novel *Tālāśnāmā*

This paper will focus on changing attitudes towards magic, the use of talismans and traditional healing methods among Indian Muslims (especially in the context of Bengal), and tensions between indigenous traditions, modern Islam and Western modernity. The advent of British colonisation, arrival of Western medicine and proliferation of the idea of modernity sparked heated debates among South Asian Muslims and led to the emergence of intellectual and social movements in the community in the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century. Most of them exists until today and continue to influence Indian Muslims’ views on magic and healing. This paper will look into this debate through analysis of a Bengali novel *Tālāśnāmā* (2021) by the contemporary Indian Muslim author Ismail Darbesh. Darbesh portrays a Muslim-majority village in West Bengal, fractured by polarisation and inequality, which debates legitimacy of traditional healing practices while being in need of healing itself.

10:10-10:40 AM: Maria Puri (Jagiellonian University of Cracow) – The Power of the Word (*Śabd*): Healing the Self through *gurbani* with special focus on *Anand Sahib*

The sacred book of Sikhism, *Ādi Granth* (1604, c.1700), styled by the faithful as the *Guru Granth Sahib* (henceforth the GGS), is a compilation of the utterances (*śabd*) of the Sikh Gurus and other personages whose compositions reflect the worldview of the founders. All texts found in the GGS are referred to as *gurbani*, the word of the guru. Sikh worship, which eschews belief in miracles, is text-oriented, with recitation and singing of *gurbani* as the most fundamental expression of piety. *Anand Sahib*, the subject of current presentation, is a forty-stanza composition by the third Sikh guru, Guru Amar Das (1479–1574). It is recited early in the morning; its six stanzas (the first five and the last) are chanted at all Sikh rituals, irrespective of the nature of the event; also, the short, six-stanza arrangement forms a part of the evening prayer, *Rehras*. In the present paper, I propose to look at the text itself as well as its liturgical uses, especially on occasions of sorrow and grief (e.g. death ceremonies, memorial services, etc.) with a view of expounding the Sikh notion of healing the self — conceived holistically, without the dichotomy of body and soul—through the Word (*śabd*).

11:15-11:45 AM: Bryan De Notariis (University of Venice) – Magic and Magical Thought in Pāli Literature: Mundane Practices, Meditative Powers, and Medical Applications

In this contribution, I examine the categories of *magic* and the *magical* through selected elements of Theravāda Buddhism as represented in Pāli literature, drawing on both canonical and exegetical sources. First, I discuss a range of practices attested in Buddhist texts, including the use of spells, oneiromancy, astrology, and, notably, medical treatments. I then turn to the development of extraordinary abilities (*iddhis* and *abhiññas*), often described as magical powers, which are cultivated through meditation. Focusing on their presentation in the exegetical literature, I highlight features that point to the existence of a form of “magical thought” – that is, a mode of reasoning that corresponds to certain scholarly definitions of magic. Finally, I explore how these extraordinary abilities may have medical applications, paying particular attention to the relationship between meditative attainment, healing, and therapeutic practice.

11:50-12:20 AM: Raffaele Torella (La Sapienza, University of Rome) – “Of the beginnings, the ends, the intermediate spaces”

Why should the incompleteness of something, e.g. of an emotion, elicit a stronger aesthetic reaction than its completeness? Or, to put it in more general terms, why is the moment in which something is being born or is near to extinction felt as more vivid or powerful than the stage of its full existence? In the texts of nondual Śaivism we meet with a general condemnation of the intermediate zone in favour of the extremities. Yet even *madhya* has its nobility. Saṃsāra is the world of continuity, an uninterrupted chain of experiences which cover the shining of consciousness just as a blanket smothers fire. A way to escape from it is to appeal to discontinuity by exploiting the void between two cognitive acts, two emotions, etc., when the continuity of everyday experience is disrupted or loosened. By resorting, alternatively, to the power of the initial, final, and intermediate states the nondual Śaiva guru heals the adept from the illness of saṃsāra.

12:25-12:55 AM: Karolina Kłoszewska (University of Warsaw) – From Literary Narratives to Ritual Embodiment: Healing, Possession, and Ritual Performance in Tamil Traditions

This study examines Tamil folk performing arts, focusing on *cāmiyāṭṭam* and related possession rituals as a continuous system linking early Tamil literary traditions, and contemporary village goddess cults. It argues that *cāmiyāṭṭam*, *veriyāṭṭu*, and *kāvaṭiyāṭṭam* form a long-term grammar of embodied devotion in which narration, trance, and healing are inseparable. Drawing on the *Cilappatikāram* and related textual and devotional sources, it traces recurring motifs of affliction,

crisis, and divine intervention associated with Murukan, Cālinī, and village goddesses. These patterns endure in practices where divinity is manifested through possession, ecstatic movement, and oracular speech. It argues that *cāmiyāṭṭam* operates as a therapeutic system where affliction is transformed through ritual, producing healing and restoring balance. Across Caṅkam *veriyāṭṭu* and Bhakti *kāvaṭiyāṭṭam*, the body functions as a medium of divine articulation, where suffering becomes grace and restoration.

2:10-2:40 PM: Frank Köhler (Eberhard-Karls-Universität Tübingen) – Magic in the Rig Veda

Magic and sorcery are an integral part of Vedic culture, yet at the same time, their practice is frowned upon. Traces of this can also be found in the Rigveda: incantations - for example, those clearly intended as curses - appear here alongside an emphatic refutation of the accusation of sorcery. At the same time, the Rigveda hymns as a whole stand in a peculiar tension with the phenomenon of magic; by their very nature, they are intended - in connection with rituals, and perhaps even through mere recitation - to manipulate conditions in the world without direct contact, and thus they would possess a magical character per se. In this talk, following a brief definition of terms, the ways in which magic and sorcery are explicitly mentioned in the Rigveda hymns will be examined. Then the question of whether and in what form the tension between disreputable magical practices and the positively regarded recitation of hymns is addressed within the Rigveda itself will be explored.

2:45-3:15 PM: Elisa Mapelli (University of Milan) – The Healers of the Gods. The Myth of the Aśvins’ Restoration of the Sacrifice and Its Relationship to the Myth of Dadhyañc Ātharvaṇa

The myth of Dadhyañc Ātharvaṇa – already alluded to in RV 1.116.12, 1.117.22, 1.119.9, and in RVKh 1.9.3-6 – is told in ŚB[M] 14.1.1.18-25 and in JB 3.126-127, within the story of the restoration of the ‘head of the sacrifice’ (*vajñāsya śīras-*), and has been variously studied by scholars (e.g., van Buitenen 1968; Kramrisch 1975; Heesterman 1985; Witzel 1987, 2004; Houben 1991). The aim of this contribution is to highlight the connection between the two stories (in their respective variants), particularly through the presence of elements related to healing and magic. The patronymic of Dadhyañc is *ātharvaṇa-*, so suggesting a relationship with the Atharvavedic healing practices; moreover, Dadhyañc (in the RV and the RVKh) reveals the *mádhu*, i.e., the *sóma*, which may also possess healing properties (cf. RV 10.97.18, 19, 22, 8.79.2) to the Aśvins; lastly, the act of ‘substituting’ (*prāti-īr-*) Dadhyañc’s head with a horse’s one recalls the act of ‘restoring’ (*prāti-√dhā-*) the ‘head of the sacrifice’ (cf. TĀ 5.1.7, KĀ 2.115). Variants of the myth, in which the Aśvins are asked to ‘heal’ (*bhiṣajyá-*) the sacrifice (AB 1.18, GB 2.2.6), reinforce this interpretation.

Selected References

van Buitenen, Johannes A. B. 1968. *The Pravargya. An Ancient Indian Iconic Ritual Described and Annotated*. Poona: Deccan College.

- Heesterman, Jan C. 1985. "The Case of the Severed Head". In Heesterman, Jan C. (auth.), *The Inner Conflict of Tradition. Essays in Indian Ritual, Kingship, and Society*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 45-58 [already published, in slightly different form, in *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Süd- und Ostasiens* 11 (1967): 22-43].
- Houben, Jan E. M. 1991. *The Pravargya Brāhmaṇa of the Taittirīya Āraṇyaka: an ancient commentary on the Pravargya ritual*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Kramrisch, Stella. 1975. "The Mahāvīra Vessel and the Plant Pūtika". In *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 95, No. 2 (Apr.-Jun., 1975): 222-35.
- Witzel, Michael. 1987. "On the origin of the literary device of the 'Frame Story' in Old Indian literature". In Falk, Harry (ed.), *Hinduismus und Buddhismus. Festschrift für Ulrich Schneider*. Freiburg: Hedwig Falk, 380-414.
- Witzel, Michael. 2004. *Kaṭha Āraṇyaka. Critical edition with a translation into German and an introduction*. Cambridge, MA: Department of Sanskrit and Indian studies, Harvard University.

3:20-3:50 PM: Paola M. Rossi (University of Milan) – The medicine of the gods: *mádhu*

As is well known, the term *mádhu* in the Vedic Sanskrit denotes a sweet substance or juice; it is recurrently related to the soma, the sacred beverage, so that it is frequently interpreted as its synonym; in the other hand, the soma is defined as *tīvrá* 'pungent'. As to the Indo-European studies, it has been highlighted that PIE *méd^hu-* is attested in manifold Indo-European languages with both the meaning of 'intoxicating drink', like the Indo-Aryan *soma*, and of 'honey', as the substance produced by the bees. The relationship between soma and honey with reference to the term *mádhu* has been much debated by the scholars (cf. Houben 2003, McHugh 2021), however, in Indian medical tradition, *madhu* as honey is considered a substance with powerful healing properties, particularly in the field of surgery (*śalya*): in the *Sūtrasthāna* section (45.7) of the *Suśrutasamhitā* *madhu* is defined as 'purifying and healing, grasping together' (*śodhanam ropanam samgrāhi*), and in the *Cikitsāsthāna* section (1.4) is confirmed that 'the combination of honey (*madhu*) and clarified butter is intended to put together' (*saṃdhānārtham madhudhṛtaprayogam*). The use of *mádhu* as a medicine is well documented in the Vedic texts, particularly in connection with the Aśvins, the divine physicians who restore the head of the sacrifice — just as they did with the head of Dadhyañc — through the science of the *mádhu*. And indeed, this myth of the Aśvins as healers is recounted at the very beginning of the *Suśrutasamhitā*, as one of the founding myths of the medical science. In the Rigvedic and especially in the Atharvavedic tradition the Aśvins are endowed with a 'honey-whip' (*madhukaśá*), and in the so-called *madhu-sūkta* (ŚS 9.1 ~ PS 16.32) *mádhu*, as a sort of cosmic medicine, is the Brahman, the king, the milch-cow, the draft-ox, rice, barley, which nourish the cosmos. The 'madhu-ization' of the cosmos is also mentioned in BĀU 2.5.1-19, together with the reference to the myth of Dadhyañc Ātharvana. Lastly, the pre-śrauta form of the *pravargya* rite, that is, the solar rite performed

without any somic interference and associated with the *vrātya* culture (af Edholm 2021; White 2023), the *mádhu* was included: it is precisely thanks to this that ‘the hero’s head’ ascends to the heaven. This paper aims to explore the hypothesis that in the pre-*śrauta* cultural phase the term *mádhu* indicated a specific healing substance, reserved to the warriors able to attain heaven like gods.

4:25-4:55 PM: Kristen De Joseph (Leiden University) – ‘Demons’ in Early Vedic Medicine between Enchantment and Disenchantment

In a recent talk on ‘demonological’ language in the Atharvaveda, I explored the rhetorical features that accompany the beings so frequently referred to as ‘demons’ in English-language research. But, as one listener would later point out, why continue to use the term ‘demon’ at all? In the first part of this paper, I survey how ‘demons’ have been treated in the Western Indological literature and conclude that, on the one hand, the term remains embedded in the discursive tradition of European Indology and continues to provide a useful point of comparison with earlier scholarship; on the other hand, it carries theological and popular associations that do not map straightforwardly onto early South Asian sources.

Drawing on debates within Indology concerning ‘demons’ and ‘magic’, together with anthropological discussions of enchantment and disenchantment, I suggest that the notion of Vedic ‘demons’ must not only be considered as a culturally specific ontology, but also in light of the composite character of the textual tradition itself. As recent work has emphasized, the agents described in healing texts need not be understood exclusively as supernatural beings; depending on context, they may also encompass hostile humans, animals, or other harmful agencies. Attempts to impose either a uniformly enchanted or a retrospectively disenchanted worldview risk obscuring this complexity.

Instead, I propose treating ‘demon’ as a heuristic category whose usefulness depends upon careful qualification rather than uncritical acceptance or outright rejection. Such an approach preserves continuity with the history of Indological scholarship while avoiding the primitivization of early Vedic communities or the projection of post-Enlightenment assumptions about rationality onto the past. By foregrounding the plurality of possible ontologies encoded within early Vedic medical discourse, this paper argues for a more historically reflexive vocabulary for discussing disease-causing agents in the Atharvavedic tradition.

5:00-5:30 PM: Alessia Manca (University of Cagliari) – *Śaunakīya Saṃhitā* 8.6: about demons and dangers for a pregnant woman

The paper proposes the analysis of hymn 8.6 of the *Atharvaveda*, in the *Śaunakīya* recension, as a case study for the exploration of the depiction of demons within the Atharvavedic tradition. The hymn

is a rather long recitation, situated halfway between a healing chant, of the *bhaiṣajya* type, according to the scholars' classification (see for instance Bloomfield (1899: 8), Orlandi-Sani (1992:18)), and a chant to ward off demons and bad influences. Most interestingly, the field on which the battle between the poet and evil beings is played is a woman's body: thus, the representation of demons mirrors the dangers that a woman might incur into, and reflects the concrete fears of the Atharvavedic man. Therefore, the hymn addresses the social issues of a physical distress, and displays the metaphysical yet real conditionings of everyday life.

References

- Atharvaveda. Inni Magici*, Italian translation by Chatia Orlandi and Saverio Sani, UTET, Turin 1992.
- Atharvavedasamhitā der Śaunakaśākhā - Eine neue Edition unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Parallelstellen der Paippalādasamhitā*, critical edition by Jeong-Soo Kim, Würzburg 2021.
- Atharva-Veda Samhitā; translated with a critical and exegetical commentary by William Dwight Whitney*, English translation by William Dwight Whitney, Harvard Oriental Series VIII, Massachusetts Harvard University: Cambridge, 1905.
- Ferrara, Marianna (2022), Donne a misura di dharma nell'India antica, in A. Lirosi and A. Saggiaro (eds.) *Religioni e Parità di Genere: Percorsi Accidentati*, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura: Rome, pp. 17-40.
- Rao, S. K. Ramachandra (1985), *Encyclopaedia of Indian Medicine – Vol.1 Historical Perspective*, Popular Prakashan Bombay.
- Sahgal, Smita (2018), Constructing 'Vedic' Masculinities: Animal Symbolism, Mythic Constructions and Ritual Practices, in *Social Scientist*, Vol. 46, pp. 23-41.
- The Atharvaveda*, English translation by Maurice Bloomfield, Strassburg K.J. Trübner and University of Toronto: Toronto 1899.
- Whitaker, Jarrod L. (2004), Ritual Power, Social Prestige, and Amulets (mani) in the Atharvaveda, in A. Griffiths and J.E.M. Houben (eds.) *The Vedas: Texts, Language, & Ritual. Proceedings of the Third International Vedic Workshop*, Leiden 2002, Egbert Forsten: Groningen, pp. 565-580.
- Zysk, Kenneth G. (1985), *Religious Healing in the Veda*, Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, New Series, Vol. 75, No. 7.
- Zysk, Kenneth G. (1991), *Asceticism and Healing in Ancient India. Medicine in the Buddhist Monastery*, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, Delhi.

5:35-6:05 PM: Robert Leach (University of Zurich) – Magic, Medicine and Marginalisation in the Atharvaveda (and beyond). On Kaśyapa and Agastya, and their sons

The Atharvaveda (PS 12.7.1 ~ ŚS 4.37.1) identifies the legendary seers (*ṛṣi-*) Kaśyapa and Agastya, along with Kaṇva, as Atharvans. These three figures, all of whom have non-Indo-European names, are also linked with each other already in the Rīgveda, including through a shared close association with the Aśvins and the Maruts. Families of poets tracing their lineage back to Kaśyapa and Agastya contributed notably abstruse *sūktas* to the younger layers of the Rīgveda, and Kaśyapa and Agastya themselves were, in certain formulations, late additions to canonical lists of the seven (or, with Agastya, eight) primordial ṛṣis. This points to their status as ‘newcomers’, a consequence, perhaps, of their non-Indo-Aryan origins. Their descendants, the Kāśyapas and Agastis, engendered some hostility from other Vedic lineages (as did the Kāṇvas), and it is striking that in the late-Vedic and early post-Vedic periods, each of these groups appears to have settled far from the Vedic heartland of Kuru-Pāñcāla—the Kāśyapas in the North-East, around Magadha, and the Agastis in the South. As with the Kāṇvas in Kosala-Videha, the Kāśyapas, especially, seem to have formed links with heterodox traditions of renunciation and asceticism, including Jainism and Buddhism. Kaśyapa and Agastya also lent their names to important medical textbooks in the traditions of, respectively, Ayurveda and Tamil Siddha medicine.

In this paper I will examine the roles of Kaśyapa and Agastya, and the relations between them, in the Atharvaveda. Both of these poet-priests emerge in these Saṁhitās as makers of powerful formulations and as healers, with Kaśyapa in particular enjoying an especially prominent position in the *Paippalāda-Saṁhitā*. By studying a few select passages in this work, I will seek to ask to what extent the Atharvaveda can help explain and augment the biographical trajectories sketched above, as well as what we can learn from these ṛṣis about the figure of the Atharvan, and thereby about the Atharvaveda more generally.

Day 3: Saturday, September 12th, 2026

Great Hall “B. Motzo” – 2nd Floor

9:00-9:30 AM: Cinzia Pieruccini (University of Milan) – Veterinary medicine, animal health and protection: Aśoka’s inscriptions and *Arthaśāstra*

In the famous RE II, Aśoka expresses his commitment to promoting medical treatments for both humans and animals and to making medicinal herbs available, even beyond the borders of his kingdom: an exercise of soft power towards neighbours, that can be interpreted within the context of the ‘empirical-rational’ medicine (Zysk, Bronkhorst) practised in Magadha. Elsewhere (PE V is

particularly relevant), Aśoka sets out to establish limits on the killing of and cruelty towards animals. Protected areas (*abhayavana*) are alluded to in the *Arthaśāstra*. In this work, actual veterinarians are also mentioned, essentially for elephants and horses, the most important animals in the royal courts. These specialists are referred to as *cikitsaka*, just like doctors who treat humans. Drawing on the contributions of various scholars (besides Zysk and Bronkhorst, notably Olivelle and Wujastik), this paper offers a reflection on the ‘royal’ approach to the care of animals through the textual sources in question.

9:35-10:05 AM: Alessandro Giudice (Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich) – Call It Magic, Call It Truth? Ordeals Between Theory and Practice in Premodern South Asia

The Hindu ordeal, classified in Dharmaśāstra as a divine means of proof to be employed in a lawsuit, includes numerous ritual elements, some of which may be described as “magical”, including, for instance, the recitation of Vedic mantras during the procedure (see e.g. Gāyatrī mantra: PiSm 1.96). Regarding these (magico-)ritual elements, a distinctive tension between theory and practice emerged between the medieval and early modern periods. This paper investigates the two trajectories along which this tension developed. On the jurisprudential side, Dharmaśāstra authors such as Bhāruci (7th c.) and Medhātithi (9th c.) address objections concerning the apparently “counter-natural” operation of ordeals: how can fire fail to burn, or water fail to drown, the undergoer? Is this due to the power of herbs or mantras (*mantraśadha*; see Bhār ad MDh 8.116)? The two jurists reject this explanation in different ways. On the practical side, texts from different regions of South Asia increasingly continue to incorporate (magico-)ritual elements into prescribed procedures. Two examples will be discussed:

- a) In Nepal, Maṇika’s Sanskrit-Newar Nyāyavikāśinī (Bhaktapur, 1380 CE) introduces several ritual elements into the ordeals absent from the Sanskrit source, the Nāradaśmṛti. These include, for instance, worship through the five offerings (*pañcopahāra*; e.g., NV 20.13).
- b) In Bengal, Raghunandana’s Divyatattva (16th c.) adds previously unattested ritual actions, such as the recitation of the life-giving mantra as taught in the tantric Śāradātilaka (ŚāTi 23.72–23.76ab) to the ordeal by drawing lots (see DiTa 316–320).

References

Avalon, Arthur. 1933. Śāradā-Tilaka Tantram. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

[Bhār] Bhāruci’s Manuśāstravivaraṇa on the Mānavadharmasāstra. Ed. Derrett 1975.

Derrett, Duncan. 1975. Bhāruci’s Commentary on the Manusmṛti. Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner.

[DiTa] Divyatattva. Ed. Lariviere 1981.

- Giudice, Alessandro. 2026. The Smṛti of Pitāmaha in Medieval Indian Jurisprudence: A Critical Reconstruction of the Pitāmahasmṛti and a Critical Edition of the Divyaśuddhi, with a Historical-Religious Study of Indian Ordeals. PhD dissertation. University of Cagliari.
- Giudice, Alessandro. In progress. The Transplantation of Indian Legal Procedure in Medieval Nepal: The First Critical Edition and Annotated Translation of the Nyāyavikāsinī (c. 1380 CE), the Earliest Extant Old Newar Legal Code Based on the Sanskrit Nāradaśmṛti. Ongoing postdoctoral project, LMU Munich.
- Lariviere, Richard W. 1981. The Divyatattva of Raghunandana Bhaṭṭācārya: Ordeals in Classical Hindu Law. Delhi: Manohar.
- [NV] Nyāyavikāsinī. Ed. Giudice (in progress).
- [PiSm] Pitāmahasmṛti. Ed. Giudice 2026.
- [ŚāTi] Śāradātilaka. Ed. Avalon 1933.

10:10-10:40 AM: Anita M. Borghero (University of Cagliari) – Remedies for another life? A Vedic lexical and textual study starting from A 5.2.92

A 5.2.92 introduces the lexical item *kṣetriya-*, which denotes a specific pathological condition. The same rule better qualifies the mentioned disease with the expression *parakṣetre cikitsyaḥ*, a formulation that the KV explains ‘curable in another body, and therefore in another life’.

However, healing traditions preserved in ancient texts such as the AV appear to envisage possible remedies for the *kṣetriya-*, see, e.g., AVŚ 2.8.

On the basis of the Sāyaṇa comment to this hymn, which refers to A 5.2.92 using *putrapāutrādiṣarīre* as a glossa for *parakṣetre*, Bloomfield (1899:60) interprets *kṣetriya-* as ‘inherited disease’; Whitney (1905:48) shares the same conclusions, explaining it as ‘infectious disorder’ ‘appearing in a whole family, or perhaps endemic’.

This paper investigates Pāṇini’s *usus scribendi* and the Vedic textual evidence to understand the possible authentic sense of *kṣetriya-* and *parakṣetra-*.

References

- [A] *The Aṣṭādhyāyī of Pāṇini* ed., tr. by R. N. Sharma, 6 Vols. New Delhi, Munshiram Manoharlal, 1987–2003.
- Bloomfield, Maurice. 1899. *The Atharvaveda*. Strassburg: K.J. Trübner.
- Whitney, W. Dwight. 1905. *Atharvaveda Saṃhitā*, tr. By Whitney, W. Dwight. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University

11:15-11:45 Massimo Vai (University of Milan) – Grammatical Features of the Magical Hymns of Atharvaveda Śaunaka II

The magical hymns of Book II of the Atharvaveda Śaunaka display a number of recurrent grammatical features that contribute to the formal organization of the corpus. This paper examines first-person performative clauses, correlative constructions (*yaḥ... tam, ye... tām*), analogical patterns (*yathā... evam*), protective formulae (*pāhi, pātu*), identificational formulae based on the pattern *X asi*, and recurrent verbal patterns of ritual removal, especially those built on *muñc-*, *vṛśc-*, and *vi-vṛh-*. Particular attention is devoted to recurrent grammatical templates, in which the same syntactic pattern is systematically repeated with limited lexical substitution within individual hymns and across groups of related hymns. These constructions are analysed from a formal and formulaic perspective and, where appropriate, compared with cognate Rigvedic patterns. Their recurrence and distribution reveal a distinctive grammatical profile of the magical hymns of AVŚ II and contribute to a more systematic description of Atharvavedic magical language.

References

- Insler, Stanley. 1998. *On the Recensions of the Atharva Veda and Atharvan Hymn Composition*. Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens 42: 5–21.
- Kim, Jeong-Soo. 2021. *Atharvavedasaṃhitā der Śaunakaśākhā. Eine neue Edition unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Parallelstellen der Paippalādasamhitā*. Würzburg: Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg. DOI: 10.25972/OPUS-27703.
- Leach, Robert, Oliver Hellwig, and Thomas Zehnder (eds.). 2025. *Studies in the Atharvaveda. Proceedings of the 3rd Zurich International Conference on Indian Literature and Philosophy*. Worlds of South and Inner Asia 15. Berlin–Boston: De Gruyter.
- Whitney, William Dwight, and Charles Rockwell Lanman. 1905. *Atharva-Veda Saṃhitā. Translated with a Critical and Exegetical Commentary*. 2 vols. Harvard Oriental Series, 7–8. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University.

11:50-12:20 AM: Eleonora Lusci (University of Cagliari) – AVŚ X.8 and the Care of the Soul: The Therapeutic Aims of Reflection on *Brahman*

Hymn AVŚ X.8, dedicated to the *skambha*, represents one of the most significant expressions of philosophical speculation in the Atharvaveda Saṃhitā. At the end of an extensive survey of images intended to portray the manifold forms of *skambha* and *brahman*, in its final stanzas the text reaches a soteriological conclusion of great relevance: within the body, enveloped by the three *guṇas*, there lies a ‘wonder endowed with *ātman*’ (*yakṣām ātmanvāt*, “soulful prodigy” according to Whitney, 1905; “prodige consistent en le Soi” in Renou, 1956). The final state described in the hymn, in

particular the longed-for absence of desire, bears evidence of an early interest in the topic of salvation according to the teachings of Sāṃkhya and Yoga, as Michel Hulin noticed (Hulin, 1978). The present paper will analyse the imagery used in the final stanzas (43-44) of this hymn, with a special focus on the doctrine of the three *guṇas* and the image of the body as a lotus with nine doors.

References

- Hulin, M. 1978. *Sāṃkhya Literature* in *A History of Indian Literature*, vol. VI, Harassowitz, Wiesbaden.
- Renou, L. 1956. *Hymnes spéculatifs du Vēda*, Gallimard, Parigi
- Whitney, W. D. 1905. *Atharva-veda Saṃhitā*. Translated with a Critical and Exegetical Commentary, revised and brought nearer to completion and edited by Ch. R. Lanman, 2 voll., Harvard University, Cambridge.

12:25-12:55 AM: Tiziana Pontillo (University of Cagliari) – Making the poison “sapless”: how does Book 4 of the Śaunakīya Saṃhitā resort to magic

The boundary between disease and demonology is evanescent, and prayers often fade into magic spells within the Atharvaveda sources. The aim of Vedic magic varies from the removal of hostile influence to attraction of beneficial things and divination (see Sharma 2023: 121). In the fourth book of the ŚS magic does not play a prominent role, but the speaking voice seems to be in a state of permanent danger and often claims to be in need of care (*nāthita-*). A typical formula (ŚS 4.23.7; 24.7; 26.7; 27.7; 28.7; 29.7) is: “I sing praises (*staumi*) to god X: having been caused to search for help, I repeatedly invoke (*johavīmi*) X: may X free me from anguish (*sa no muñcatv aṃhasaḥ*)!” Another common aim is to make “poison harmless” (trans. Whitney), literally “sapless”, or an arrow impotent, or magical powers ineffective (ŚS 4.6.6; 6.8; 7.2; 18.1). So, when a god is invoked to emasculate all one’s enemies, as for example in ŚS 4.22.1, what does this refer to? Is the so-called black magic excluded from this text? What is the often mentioned “anguish”?

This paper will attempt to answer these questions and to contextualise the topic chosen for the fourth book, also drawing on some interesting Vedic parallels.

References

- Sharma, K.K. *A cultural Study of the Kauśikasūtra of Atharvaveda*, Shimla, Indian Institute of Advanced Study 2023

- ŚS [Śaunakīya Saṃhitā] J-S. KIM (ed.), Atharvavedasaṃhitā der Śaunakaśākhā: Eine neue Edition unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Parallelstellen der Paippalādasamhitā, Universität Würzburg, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.25972/OPUS-27703>
- Whitney, W.D., (1905). Atharva-Veda Saṃhitā: Translated with a Critical and Exegetical Commentary. Revised and Brought Nearer to Completion and Edited by Charles Rockwell Lanman, 2 vols., Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press.