

## **Call for Contributions: The Christian and the Supernatural in Late Antiquity**

Magical spells, even for so benign a purpose as healing one's sick horse, are anathema to God – so declared the sixth-century hermit Barsanuphius of Palestine in response to a letter from a fellow Christian. Such healing incantations and other customs such as apotropaic amulets were commonplace within the cultures of the ancient Mediterranean, but were frequently denounced by Christian authorities as inherently sinful. These practices were, in effect, deemed as inappropriate or demonic uses of the supernatural. Yet, no consensus ever existed among Late Antique Christians on defining and delimiting one's relationship(s) with supernatural forces. Some, such as Barsanuphius, deemed the only appropriate source to be derived directly from the Christian God through prayer or another means. Other Christians of the Late Antique world would be less hostile towards these traditional practices and customs. The corpus of amulets examined in Theodore De Bruyn's *Making Amulets Christian* (2017) serves as an example of the latter, negotiating a different relationship with the supernatural, incorporating, rather than shunning, such conventional means of utilizing supernatural power into a Christian worldview.

Recent works, such as Mark Letteney's *The Christianization of Knowledge in Late Antiquity* (2023), have examined shifting knowledge in contexts such as historiographical and legal texts as a result of Christianization. Relatively few studies, however, have devoted attention directly towards examining the transitioning nature of the supernatural itself due to trends in Christianization. The primary focus of this volume is just such an examination, exploring how earlier conceptions of the supernatural intersected with, impacted upon, and reacted against Christian thought in Late Antiquity. Here, we broadly define the 'supernatural' as an indefinite classification for ideas and beliefs that stand outside of what is deemed to be 'natural' in the modern secular imagination. The term serves as a convenient, albeit artificial, category for a broad range of phenomena in folkloric, mythological, and religious contexts from monsters and divinities to marvels and extraordinary abilities. Studying the cultural conceptions of the supernatural allows us a window into possibilities and alternative means of considering reality beyond the arbitrary dictates of modern 'rationality.'

Our edited volume, entitled *The Christian and the Supernatural in Late Antiquity*, is under contract with Trivent as part of their *Advances in the History of Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion* series. We seek additional contributions of c. 10,000 words that explore this complex nature of the relationship between Late Antique Christians and the supernatural as we have broadly defined it here. Chapters already included within the volume involve topics such as healing

spells on Aramaic incantation bowls, curse tablets, dreams, and conceptions of demonic bodies.

Other contributions might include, but are not limited to:

- Uses and perceptions of supernatural power(s) by Late Antique Christians
- The (un)reality of monstrous figures and other supernatural entities
- Marvels/adynata and their place within Christian epistemology
- Veneration/rejection of different supernatural forces
- Narratives and folkloric motifs involving supernatural elements

Abstracts of c. 250 words, a provisional title, and a short bio should be sent to Dr. Ryan Denson ([r.denson@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:r.denson@exeter.ac.uk)) and Dr. Charlotte Spence ([c.spence2@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:c.spence2@exeter.ac.uk)) by March 1, 2024.