



The Public Defense of the Doctoral Dissertation in Medieval Studies

of

Fabrizio Conti

on

**PREACHERS AND CONFESSORS AGAINST “SUPERSTITIONS”.
THE *ROSARIUM SERMONUM* BY BERNARDINO BUSTI
AND ITS MILANESE CONTEXT.
(LATE FIFTEENTH CENTURY)**

will be held on

Wednesday, 14 September 2011, at 11:00 am

in the

**Gellner Room - Monument Building
Central European University (CEU)
Nádor u. 9, Budapest**

Examination Committee

Chair György Endre Szőnyi (Central European University)

Members György Galamb
(University of Szeged)
Gerhard Jaritz
(Central European University, Budapest)
Gábor Klaniczay - Supervisor
(Central European University, Budapest)
József Laszlovszky
(Central European University, Budapest)
Letizia Pellegrini
(Università degli Studi di Macerata)

External Readers Letizia Pellegrini (present)
(Università degli Studi di Macerata)
Tamar Herzig
(Tel Aviv University)

The doctoral dissertation is available for inspection in the CEU-ELTE Medieval Library,
Budapest, 6-8 Múzeum krt.

Doctoral Dissertation Abstract

This research is situated at the intersection of three different but complementary areas of exploration: preaching, confession, and the issue of “superstition” with the emergence of ideas involving witchcraft.

The main focus will be on the Observant Franciscan order, more specifically on some representatives of its later phase of development who I define as a “third generation” of friars, mainly preachers and confessors connected to the friary of St. Angel in Milan, active between the second half of the fifteenth century and the first decade of the following century.

In this regard, my main source will be the *Rosarium Sermonum* compiled by Bernardino Busti of Milan (d. 1513) and published for the first time in Venice in 1498. In particular, sermon 16 deals extensively and specifically with various forms of “superstition,” constituting almost a synthetic but comprehensive tract on the matter, examining them as offences against the First Commandment. Other texts of Observant Franciscans will be considered in a comparative perspective. From this point of view, especially when dealing with witchcraft-beliefs, the analysis will be enlarged to consider some texts written by Dominican friars, in order to highlight the dialogue and the opposition between the representatives of the two main Mendicant orders. The paradigmatic case will be the *Questiones lamearum* (1505), written by an Observant Franciscan particularly linked to Busti and his confrere at St. Angelo’s, Samuele Cassini, and the *Apologia Dodi contra li difensori de le strie* (1506) compiled in reply to it by the Dominican Vincenzo Dodi.

This study is divided into three main parts. The first part will situate Bernardino Busti, his *Rosarium Sermonum* and the other main texts to be used as reference points within the development of the Observant Franciscan movement. Moreover, a discourse on preaching, confession, and the relevance of sin will be approached. Finally, the development of multifaceted grids to classify sin and the final choice of the Decalogue as the main one will be also dealt with. The second part will focus on the core issue of “superstition,” precisely within the specific genre of the pastoral approach based on the Ten Commandments. Within the issue of “superstition” I shall show how the problem of witchcraft-related beliefs arose. The third part will analyse, how a specific Observant Franciscan approach appeared within this context, focused on fifteenth century Milan and Lombardy. Busti’s specific approach, confirmed and deepened by Cassini, was in favour of a confident defence of the unreality of some elements related to witchcraft-beliefs, first of all the mythology of the *ludus Diane*.

A personal memory probably played a role in my interest in analysing some aspects related to a complex phenomenon such as witchcraft-beliefs. I was just a child when my maternal grandfather told us how once he found some barrels in his cellar broken and the mane of his mare

completely braided. To my surprised question on who could have done all that, his reply was without any hesitation: “le streghe!” He explained further how witches like to make mischief in cellars. He had once even had a personal experience while hiding with a friend of his among the barrels; they heard a terrible hit on one of them. This constituted the old heritage of tales and myths, apparently and amazingly still meaningful for a vineyard man born in 1911 in the countryside near Rome.

To sum up, the goal of the present research is threefold:

a) To highlight the place and role of Bernardino Busti and the other preachers belonging to St. Angelo’s in Milan within the development of the Observant Franciscan movement as a whole. This means contextualizing their work in the revival of pastoral efforts shown by the elaboration of preaching and confessional texts;

b) To identify “superstition” as a specific issue dealt with through the Decalogue, a specific pastoral scheme of a classification of sins. I shall attempt to trace “superstitions” back to their proper thematic areas: “vain observations,” learned or ritual magic, and witchcraft-related beliefs, and analyze the representative features of Busti’s treatment of “superstition” and Cassini’s way of dealing with witchcraft, elucidating their particular line of approach in comparison with that of some Dominicans operating in the same geographical area in the same period;

c) To evaluate the overall role of the texts analyzed as a means used to moralize and ultimately control the customs and behavior of the faithful. This implies saying something about the relationship/connection between the pulpit and the nave or, in other words, on what made the friar a “fisherman of people,” as Busti himself writes.

Sermons will constitute the major genre of sources that I will be using in this research; I must make it clear that I do not intend to investigate them for themselves. I intend rather to use this type of source to reconstruct a “case study” concerning the treatment of “superstitions,” and within that, the treatment of witchcraft in diverse and more specific texts, such as the one compiled by Cassini. An “eclectic approach,” as suggested by Kienzle, will be adopted when dealing with sermons, since this will allow the possibility of grasping some meaning in a complex and multifaceted issue such as that of “superstition.”

First of all, the texts will be examined to extract some of the Observant Franciscans’ main lines of approach concerning sin in general and the sin of “superstition” in particular. As Marina Montesano has showed, Observant Franciscan were bearers of a specific way of interpreting “superstition,” placing their own experiences on the pastoral ground within the scheme of classification proposed by Thomas Aquinas, basically based on the Ten Commandments and the consequent primary importance attributed to idolatry. Busti and the other “third generation” Observants from Milan built their dealings with “superstition” along the lines of the Observant

Franciscan tradition. However, as I shall highlight especially in the case of Busti, they introduced a much more developed treatment of this issue, both contextualizing it within their general pastoral discourse as preachers and confessors, and taking into consideration witchcraft-related stereotypes more thoroughly, until one of them, the *ludus*, was examined in depth by Cassini. Thus, understanding the process of the formation of the witches Sabbath among educated members of the Church, may benefit from the identification and the categorization of the new interpretive elements which I propose to consider through my sources.

Regarding preaching and confessional texts as devices to moralize and thus change people's habits, a question has arisen. At the beginning, while thinking about this research, I embraced the hypothesis that some "superstitious" elements, connected to folklore or to forms of "popular" beliefs, lay behind the interpretive lines in which they were presented and identified in sermons, which might be seen a process of "acculturation" introduced to the faithful on a more or less general scale by the preachers. After debates and discussions during seminars and meetings, I have decided to leave aside the difficulties related to the use of the concept of "acculturation" in this context. When possible, I will be relying on the results and suggestions of historical anthropology though, especially when dealing with issues that imply the creation or representation of meanings, symbolism and contacts among various spheres, such as the case of religiosity.

The reason for choosing the Observant Franciscans as a "case study" on the treatment of "superstition" at the end of the fifteenth century was their role in society at the time. The phenomenon of the "Observances," which spread after the Council of Constance (1414-1418), did not only concern the Franciscan Order. However, Kaspar Elm has already emphasized to what extent Franciscan Observance distinguished itself from the others in its aim to reform urban society. A series of other scholars, from Bernadette Paton to Marina Montesano, to Letizia Pellegrini, have pointed to the role played in the society of their time by Observant Franciscans, "the new religious order" of the fifteenth century. Thus, what Pellegrini has defined "the apotheosis of the Observants" mirrors precisely such a situation of their increasing presence on all the main fronts of civic life.

Such an emergence of the role of Observant Franciscans revolved around the link between preaching and confession. After the promulgation of *canon 21* of the Lateran IV in 1215, Rusconi described what for him was a process through which an area of individual consciousness could be strictly subjected to pastoral control on the part of the clergy. The offshoots of this disposition were fully developed only a few centuries later, when Observant preachers started to compose texts and manuals whose aim was exactly to produce a means for spreading a culture of penitence. That was much more effective in that century, both for the development of the Observances themselves and for the introduction of movable type printing, of which Observant Franciscans were, without a doubt, massive users.

Thus, what Ovidio Capitani has defined as an “everyday law” or a penitential law linked to the annual obligation to confess one’s sins needs to be taken into account in this research. This can be considered an aspect of what Adriano Prosperi has recognized as the long process that, through the late medieval age until the modern times after the Council of Trent, allowed the Church to re-establish its “presence” and “hegemony” - to use his words - in the political and social history of the Italian peninsula. A coherent line connects various points in all this discourse: Prosperi’s analysis has showed how confession constituted one of the main means through which the Church could base its action to keep the faithful’s souls after the Protestant crisis; Busti’s *Rosarium* itself was one of the most reprinted manuals for preachers beyond the Council of Trent; finally, at the beginning of the Protestant schism, in 1520, the *Summa angelica*, composed for confessors by Angelo da Chivasso, a confessor of St. Angelo’s in Milan, was publicly burned by Luther as representing Catholic doctrine and a principle source of power. One part of the interest of this research lies, I believe, in identifying the early development of a process whose evolution became clear only later.

As I shall point out, the aim to orientate the faithful through the various times of the liturgical calendar is very clear in the texts I shall examine. The aim of Busti’s *Rosarium* was to lead the penitent to celebrate Easter through a large number of doctrinal and pastoral indications provided by the preachers who constituted the readership of his handbook. This is well shown by the consideration of “superstitions” and witchcraft-related elements as offences against the First Commandment, while introducing a preaching cycle the aim of which was to establish doctrinal foundations for the faithful to prepare well for the compulsory Easter confession. From all these points of view, the texts of these later Observants of the Franciscan friary of St. Angelo in Milan represent privileged *loci* of observation.

Fabrizio CONTI

EDUCATION

Since 2005/2006: **PhD Candidate in History - Medieval Studies**, Central European University, Budapest.
Doctoral thesis title: *Preachers and Confessors against "Superstitions". The Rosarium Sermonum by Bernardino Busti and its Milanese Context in the Late Fifteenth Century*.
Supervisor: Prof. Gabor Klaniczay.

Between 2006/2008: Co-tutorship with University of Rome III.

2009: Certificate in *Corso di iniziazione alle antichità cristiane*, "Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana", Rome.

2005: Certificate in *Archivistica*, "Scuola di Paleografia, Diplomatica e Archivistica", "Archivio Segreto Vaticano", The Vatican City.

2001: **Laurea in Lettere** (equivalent to a MA in Humanities), University of Rome "La Sapienza", final grade: 110/110 with distinction.

Thesis in Medieval History, titled: "The Christianization of the Anglosaxons through the Letters of Pope Gregory the Great", supervised by Proff. Ludovico Gatto and Carla Delzotto.

RESEARCH AND TEACHING INTERESTS

Learned traditions concerning late-medieval and early modern religious behaviour and "superstitions" in Europe; Late Medieval preaching; the emergence of witchcraft in early modern Europe; interdisciplinary and comparative approach (anthropology; religion; iconography; literature) in the study of religious behaviour and history in general; Christian and medieval art & iconography (3rd to 16th centuries); religion and international relations.

VISITING STAYS

2011 - Spring: **UCLA - University of California, Los Angeles** (US), invited research stay at the Department of History for consultation on and presentation of the results of my on-going thesis.

2009 - Fall: **Ouachita Baptist University**, Arkansas (US), invited visiting scholar, School of Humanities, delivering guest lectures for students, one faculty colloquium and one public lecture.

PUBLICATIONS

- "*Mulieres Religiosae* tra santità e stregoneria nella tarda Osservanza Francescana", in *Proceedings of the 7th International Congress AISSCA - "Hagiography and Popular Cultures"*, University of Verona, 28 - 30 October 2010 (in preparation).

- "Preachers and Confessors against "Superstitions". Bernardino Busti and Sermon 16 of his *Rosarium Sermonum*", *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 1 (2011): 62 - 91.

- Review of *Renaissance Medievalisms*, ed. by Konrad Eisenbichler (Toronto: Center for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2009), *European Review of History* 6 (2010): 903 - 906.

- "Bernardino Busti. Some themes and tendencies of *Quattrocento* society in a late Franciscan Observant", in *Proceedings of the IV.e Congrès Européen d'Études Médiévales, Coexistence et Coopération au Moyen Âge*,

FIDEM - Fédération Internationale des Instituts d'Études Médiévales, Palermo, 23 - 27 June, 2009 (In preparation).

- "Church and "superstitions" in Italy at the end of the 15th century. Suggestions from a research proposal: the case of Bernardino Busti, Franciscan Observant", in *From Ancient to Modern: Essays from the 6th International Conference on European History*, ATINER, Athens (forthcoming).

- Chronicle of "Seminario di formazione in Storia religiosa e Studi francescani (secoli XIII - XV), Assisi 28 giugno - 8 luglio 2006", *Franciscana* 8 (2006): 335 - 341.

- "Gregorio Magno e gli Anglosassoni: considerazioni sullo sviluppo di una strategia missionaria", *Studi Romani* 3 - 4 (2005): 460 - 481.

- Review of Massimiliano Albanese, *Gli storici classici nella biblioteca latina di Niccolò V* (Rome: Roma nel Rinascimento, 2003) 3 - 4 (2005): 697 - 698.

TEACHING

2011 - Spring: **Middlebury College**, Vermont (US), Department of History: guest lecture on "The Features of Witchcraft and the Issue of its Reality in Late Medieval Italy".

2011 - Winter: **ELTE**, State University, Budapest (Hungary), Department of Italian Studies: invited guest lectures in Italian on: "La predicazione religiosa nelle città italiane del 15° secolo: l'Osservanza Franciscana"; "Introduzione all'Italia del '500. Sviluppi politici e culturali"; "Roma: cenni di iconografia e architettura sacra della prima età cristiana".

2010 - Spring: **University of Dallas, Rome Campus** (Italy): lecture on "Constantine the Great (ca. 273-337)" for BA level students, within the team-taught course on "People and Places of the European Past" coordinated by Dr. Peter Hatlie.

2010 - Winter: **Central European University**, Budapest (Hungary): teaching assistant to Prof. Gabor Klaniczay's course on "Mendicant Orders and Late Medieval Culture": giving two lectures for MA and PhD level students on "Franciscan Spirituals and Franciscan Observance - Bernardino of Siena and John of Capistran", and "The fight Against Superstitions by Franciscan Observants" with my article on "Preachers and Confessors" as mandatory reading.

2009 - Fall: **Ouachita Baptist University**, Arkansas (US), Department of English: total of five invited guest lectures in Italian Medieval literature (*Chaucer: Love Poetry, Dante, and Boccaccio; Western Letters: Dante, Renaissance Humanism, Love Poetry*) for BA level students.

CONFERENCES AND PUBLIC LECTURES

2011: Third international "Muhu Workshop" - "Flight and Emigration in Medieval Space and Mind" - Gryka e Valbones (Albania), August 20 - 22. Paper presented: "Exiles and Fugitives in Religious Orders: The case of Early Franciscan Observance".

2011: International Medieval Congress, University of Leeds (UK), July 11 - 14. Session 1621 "The Morality of Money: Lending, Welfare, and Identity through the Market", paper presented: 'Mutuum Date Nihil Inde Sperantes': Fighting Usurers, Lending Money in Franciscan Observants's Reflections Concerning 'Montes Pietatis'.

2011: The Fifty-Seventh Annual Meeting of the Renaissance Society of America, Montreal (Canada) 24 - 26 March, paper title: "Natural, Unnatural and Supernatural Features of the Female as Witch In Franciscan and Dominican Observants' Tradition".

2010: 7th International Congress, AISSCA - Associazione Italiana per lo Studio della Santità, dei Culti e dell'Agiografia, "Agiografia e culture popolari - Hagiography and Popular Cultures" in collaboration with the Hagiography Society, University of Verona (Italy), October 28 - 30, paper title: "*Mulieres Religiosae* tra santità e stregoneria nella tarda Osservanza Francescana".

2010: International Medieval Congress, University of Leeds (UK), July 12 - 15. Session 1508 "Magic, Superstition, and Wicked Spirits", paper title: "*Superstitiones, maleficia, incantamenta* in the Italian Learned Tradition at the End of the 15th Century".

2010: Forty-fifth International Congress on Medieval Studies, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, Michigan, (US), May 13 - 16. Session 412 "Politics, Condemnation, and Sorcery in the Fourteenth Century", paper title: "*Maleficae et Maledictae Feminae*: Sources for Learned Interpretation of Witchcraft in Italy between the 14th and 15th Centuries".

2009: Henderson State University, Arkansas, (US), Department of History, invited talk on "The emergence of witchcraft among superstitious behaviours in early modern Italy", 7 October.

2009: Ouachita Baptist University, Arkansas, (US), Faculty Colloquium, invited talk on "Learned traditions on superstitious rituals in early Renaissance Italy", 5 October;

2009: Ouachita Baptist University, Arkansas, (US), School of Humanities, invited public lecture on "Early Christian Art & Iconography in Rome", 29 September.

2009: International Medieval Congress, "Heresy and Orthodoxy", University of Leeds (UK), 13 - 16 July. Paper: "Preachers and confessors against superstitions. Bernardino Busti and sermo 16 of his Rosarium Sermonum", delivered at session 316.

2009: IV.e Congrès Européen d'Études Médiévales, *Coexistence et Coopération au Moyen Âge*, FIDEM - Fédération Internationale des Instituts d'Études Médiévales, Palermo, (Italy), 23 - 27 June. Paper presented: "Bernardino Busti. Some themes and tendencies of *Quattrocento* society in a late Franciscan Observant".

2008: "6th International Conference on History: from Ancient to Modern", ATINER - Athens Institute for Education and Research, Athens, (Greece), December 29. Paper presented: "Church and "superstitions" in Italy at the end of fifteenth century. Suggestions from a research proposal: the case of Bernardino Busti, Franciscan Observant".

SCHOLARSHIPS

2010: The Fifth School in Jewish Studies and Comparative History, "Hasidism, Continental Pietism and Religious Awakening", **The Hebrew University of Jerusalem**, Institute for Advanced Studies, Jerusalem (Israel), June.

2008: Summer School "Centre and Periphery in Medieval Europe", Nordic Centre for Medieval Studies, **University of Bergen**, Bergen (Norway), September.

2006: *Seminario di formazione in Storia religiosa e Studi francescani*, "Centro Interuniversitario di Studi Francescani" and "Società Internazionale di Studi Francescani", Assisi (Italy), June.

OTHER WORK EXPERIENCE

2006: Assistant Archivist at the "Archivio Segreto Vaticano".