

# **The Virgin as *Auctoritas*: The Authority of the Virgin Mary and female moral-doctrinal authority in the Middle Ages**

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**Francesca Dell'Acqua**, Università degli studi di Salerno, [fdellacqua@unisa.it](mailto:fdellacqua@unisa.it)

This session aims at exploring a fundamental issue: female authority through the lens of visual/material culture. It involves prominently the Virgin Mary – as well as figures of female authority in the medieval world – because in the late decades of the 20th century, feminist thinkers pointed at the ‘negative model’ offered by the Virgin Mary since for centuries she had been branded by the Catholic Church as a role model for modesty, submission and virginity. However, between late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, the Virgin Mary emerged as Queen of Heaven through preaching and liturgical texts, visual arts and public assemblies – that is, the ‘mass media’ of that time. Mary was pictured as a very strong, authoritative figure, rather than weak and compliant.

Already during late Antiquity, Mary was commonly perceived as the mighty protector and spiritual stronghold of capital cities in the Mediterranean. Between the 8th and the 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, the role of royal women came to the fore, especially in Byzantium and in Ottonian Germany. Very striking is also the case of a number of major Italian city-states between the 12th and the 15th centuries where the Virgin Mary came to be identified with political and economic supremacy. But how did the preaching and missions of mendicant orders affect her image? How has a prominent role for female authorities been transmitted through visual arts and material culture? And what about the roles that women held in Africa and Asia and in other religious traditions?

In sum, this session can help understand what bearing the figure of the humble Virgin Mary eventually had on female leadership, and also how female leadership evolved or not. Topics may include but are not limited to:

- The Virgin Mary as a figure of authority and wisdom in texts and images
- The Virgin Mary in medieval preaching/arts: ‘only’ a model for humility and mercy?
- Female political authority and the Virgin Mary as a role model in texts and images
- Female moral, doctrinal, political and religious authority within and without the Christian *oecumene* in texts and images
- Women and power: a difficult relationship.