



# Societas Magica Newsletter

Issue 14

Fall 2005

## Approaches To Teaching the History, Practice, and Material Culture of Magic: A Roundtable on Pedagogy

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### I. SUMMARY

There is an increasing call from within a variety of university disciplines for courses addressing the scholarly and historical study of magic and related topics. Yet magic, conceived as a domain of knowledge, has historically been fiercely excluded from university curricula since the time when the universities were first founded. In response to what was overwhelmingly felt to be a growing need to address the problems of introducing this subject into the curriculum, the Societas Magica convened a roundtable discussion at the 40th International Congress on Medieval Studies (5 May 2005), which brought together a panel of veteran teachers and a knowledgeable audience to consider approaches to teaching the subject of magic. Panelists included Patricia Aakhus (University of Southern Indiana), Richard Kieckhefer (Northwestern University), Geoffrey McVey (University of Calgary), Robert Mathiesen (Brown University), and David Porreca (University of Waterloo). The study of magic is rooted in the disciplines of philosophy, history, and anthropology, but these medievalists were trained in a wide variety of humanitarian disciplines (Religious Studies, Classics, English, Slavic Linguistics, and Art History). Likewise, the courses they teach are typically offered in interdisciplinary contexts, reflecting one way that the study of magic has come to be seen as offering insight into the world views and cultural products of ages past.

We began with participants' discussion of the organizing principles and themes in their courses. Mathiesen, working not only out of his scholarship but a family tradition of magical practice, focuses on the question of what practitioners actually do. Why do they do it? What kind of success

## Roundtable cont'd

do they apparently have? Although these queries may seem to ask the dead-end question of whether magic “really” works, Mathieson finds that the answers are in fact subtle and require complex cultural analysis. Responding to a similar impulse to explain magic, perhaps, Porreca develops skepticism as a sub theme in his course, using chapters from Carl Sagan, *The Demon-Haunted World* (NY: Random House, 1995).

Kieckhefer noted that “one challenge of a course on magic or witchcraft is that it often enrolls students who are drawn to the idea of an entertaining subject more than to the serious business of historical analysis.” Or, as phrasemaker McVey put it, we must indeed deal with “Harry Potterism” and “paperback paganism” in the classroom. For this reason, it is important for many teachers to stress the academic foundations of our studies. There was general agreement that the theories of Durkheim, Frazer, and Thomas are not as illuminating to our current understanding as they might be, based as they are on notions of binary opposition between magic and religion. But these authors who have defined our terms provide a pedagogical point of departure in introductory classes and a disciplinary foundation at the upper levels. Kieckhefer recommends using cross-cultural comparisons and case-studies to test and refine the theories. Likewise, throughout her course, Aakhus continually revisits the received definitions of magic and religion to allow students to explore their developing understandings of the distinctions. One side note emerged from this dis-

cussion: is it perhaps time for the Societas Magica to revisit formally the works of our founding theoretical fathers?

An important goal in many of our courses is to get students to understand “magical thinking.” Suggested helpful texts included Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (NY: Pantheon Books, 1970, 1<sup>st</sup> American ed.), Tanya Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989) and Stuart Vyse, *Believing in Magic: The Psychology of Superstition* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1997). Students might also respond to analysis of everyday situations in which their own behaviors tend in this direction: “baseball magic,” for example, or the machinations of their love lives. McVey finds the intersection of magic and desire a particularly fruitful way to bridge the gap between the concerns of today and the purposes of Renaissance mages. The consideration that Jesus was a magician might help students who come to the course from a Biblical background; a suggested starting point here was Morton Smith, *Jesus the Magician* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978). A number of panelists find that by studying Tables of Correspondences (or generating them in class exercises), students can begin to restructure their world in a way that usually affirms both magical categories and their own intuitions.

Many teachers face problems when their Christian students confront the magical worldview. Individuals might refuse to draw a pentagram, for example, or worse, complain to the authorities if they feel that their

religious sensibilities are violated. Some teachers felt it vital to issue cautionary warnings about course subject matter to students enrolled, and even to have them sign waivers, although it is doubtful whether this precaution really shields a teacher from legal action. Many urged that teachers be assured of the full support of department chairs and deans before venturing into this pedagogical territory at all. However, no formula emerged for predicting when difficult situations might arise. Those reporting problems seemed generally to be working in public educational systems, and factors like school location in a “Bible Belt” or whether the teacher was tenured or untenured did not seem as significant.

But is it, indeed, appropriate to require students to draw pentagrams or manipulate magical texts as class work? Not everyone felt that a course on magic was a “lab science.” As McVey pointed out, religious studies departments tend to discourage faculty from having students do practical religious exercises. Do we expect students studying Catholicism to dress up as priests and re-enact a mass? While affirming the value of both experiential and analytic ways of knowing our subject, the panel could not agree on a hard and fast line for what should and should not occur in a course about magic. Kieckhefer suggested that “we address the question of what limits to such practical experience we ourselves would find ethically compelling.” Yet overall our discussion was tentative and hesitant, perhaps reflecting our own ambiguous relationships to the belief systems of magic. Here is another topic that might merit further exploration by

## Roundtable cont'd

the Societas Magica.

Panelists and audience members alike were generous in sharing specific ideas for texts and class units. In addition to the titles mentioned above, other works were so frequently cited that we developed a sense of the required reading for students in our field: original sources such as the Greek Magical Papyri, anthropological theorists like Malinowski and Victor and Edith Turner, Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (NY: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989), and the useful titles in the *Magic in History* series. More information about course topics appears in the panelists' abstracts included below. The syllabi and other resources available in the session may be accessed at the Syllabus Project section of the Societas Magica website (<http://merlin2.alleg.edu/employee/a/acarr/smsyllabus/>). Societas members are welcome to submit their course materials to Amelia Carr, [acarr@allegheny.edu](mailto:acarr@allegheny.edu) for inclusion on the website.

While the session brought to light some of the challenges, so, too, were the rewards of teaching the history, practice, and material culture of magic made apparent. Each course discussed bore the imprint of its individual creator, but the commonalities between them were frequent and comforting. There is a growing consensus on our discipline's canon and an increasing number of resources available to use in classes. We carry out our pedagogical endeavors less in isolation and more in an academic community than ever before. Many thanks to the panelists and members of the Societas Magica for a lively,

# The University of Pennsylvania Press

is pleased to announce a new journal:

## *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft*

A serious, rigorously peer-reviewed scholarly journal, *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* will draw from a broad spectrum of perspectives, methods, and disciplines, offering the widest possible geographical scope and chronological range, from prehistory to the modern era and from the Old World to the New. In addition to original research, the premiere issues will include book reviews, editorials, and lists of newly published work.

Two debut issues will be published in 2006; thereafter the journal will publish quarterly.

The journal is now accepting submissions for the 2006 volume. Please send all manuscripts for consideration, preferably in Microsoft Word format, to:

Michael D. Bailey  
Iowa State University  
Department of History  
603 Ross Hall  
Ames, IA 50011  
[mdbailey@iastate.edu](mailto:mdbailey@iastate.edu)

Additional details about the journal, including ordering information, will be made available at the journal's website, coming soon to the University of Pennsylvania Press journals homepage (<http://journals.pennpress.org>).

We look forward to an active partnership with the Societas Magica and its members. Please join us celebrating the launch of this much needed scholarly journal.

**Roundtable cont'd**  
informative, and supportive session.

## II. COURSE DESCRIPTIONS OF PAT AAKHUS, RICHARD KIECKHEFFER, GEOFFREY MCVEY, AND DAVID PORRECA

### 1. Pat Aakhus

Richard Kieckhefer notes in his syllabus for Religion and Magic at Northwestern University (1998) that “one reason for examining Asian religions before turning to Western traditions is that fewer students bring to the topic preconceived ideas about what constitutes ‘religion’ and how it differs from ‘magic’, and it is thus relatively easy to show the complexity of the relationship.” This is a crucial issue for students in my senior seminar “Alchemy, Magic and Mysti-

cism” at a midwestern university of 10,000 students (University of Southern Indiana).

In an attempt to offer common ground for discussion of religion/magic, I open the course with an introduction to Babylonian, Egyptian, Greek and Judeo-Christian cosmologies, looking at creation, death and resurrection motifs, planetary spirits and concepts of the soul--ideas and iconography found in magical and alchemical texts as well as in mainstream Western art and literature. Discussion of Pythagoreanism, Orphic cults and Eleusian mysteries precede readings of Plato’s *Timaeus*, the Myth of the Afterlife and Myth of Er, portions of Macrobius’ *Dream of Scipio*, and the Cupid and Psyche myth from Apuleius’ *Golden Ass*. From readings in Greco-Roman magic, Arabic

alchemy and medieval magic, we look at how these motifs and attitudes about magic have infiltrated Romanesque and Gothic art, Arthurian romance, Faustus and the Tempest, Molière’s *Magic Flute*, Jung’s theory of archetypes, the poetry of Baudelaire and Yeats, and the Surrealists Breton, Cocteau and Ernst. The course ends with a comparison of *Timaeus* to concepts in theoretical physics, such as string theory.

By the end of the semester, students successfully identify magical and alchemical motifs in film, art, literature, science and psychology. Even so, I have been harassed by members of the Young Republicans for teaching students about pentagrams (discussing Phi and the Golden Mean), and forcing my “atheistic” ideas (Plato’s *Timaeus*) on them; every semester several students

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# Notes and Queries

## Notice of the *Liber juratus* in Early Fourteenth-century France

Jan Bulman, Auburn University Montgomery

Preserved in the Archives départementales de la Lozère in Mende, France are two copies of a black magic trial, shelf numbers G 936 and G 937.<sup>1</sup> Both are registers, the former comprised of twenty-four parchment folios and the latter of eleven paper folios. The regent of the ecclesiastical court of the officiality of the bishop of Mende, Albert Lordet presided over the trial, which took place in the diocese of Mende and lasted through the months of November and December 1347. The accused, an apostate priest named Etienne Pepin, was tried for fashioning a wax image of the bishop of Mende, writing the

name of the bishop on the figure, inscribing the names of six or seven demons across the chest, speaking words of magic before the image, baptizing it, and then hiding the figure in a wall in the castle of one of the bishop’s enemies, Guerin d’Apecher VI of Chateauneuf-Randon.

Pepin testified that he learned and practiced his knowledge of the magical arts, in part, from the *Liber juratus*. The British Library holds the three known extant manuscript copies of the Latin text of the *Liber juratus*; the editor of the critical edition of the Latin text, Gösta Hedegård, believes all three to be of English provenance, or written in English hand, the earliest dating from the first half of the fourteenth century, based on paleographical evidence.<sup>2</sup> Pepin’s testimony pro-

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## Roundtable cont'd

refuse to read excerpts from the *Magical Papyrus*, fearing that the text will release its demons. How can we best approach traditional issues such as natural versus demonic magic, or ritual and ceremony, and undermine preconceptions which obstruct objective study of the subject of magic?

## 2. Richard Kieckhefer

I passed out two syllabi. The first was for an advanced undergraduate course on Religion and Magic, which I have taught more than once in the Religion Department at Northwestern. The impetus for development of this course was a request from departmental majors for classes dealing with themes in cross-cultural perspective. I begin the course with an introductory lecture on classical theories of magic and religion; I sketch the theories

of Frazer, Durkheim, Malinowski, and others, only to suggest that they tend to make the mistake of assuming the relationship between religion and magic is one of binary opposition, and that none of them can substitute for conceptual categories actually used within historical cultures. For later medieval Europe, I insist that we respect the distinction between natural and demonic magic, not because it is fully adequate to magical practice in the era (it actually does not accommodate angel magic), but because the definitions themselves are cultural products that historians must recognize and analyze. Subsequent class sessions are devoted to a sampling of Asian contexts (e.g., the Sri Lankan sorcery shrines that Obeysekare discusses, Central Asian weather magic), the Mediterranean world of late antiquity (and the *mélange* of Graeco-Roman, Egyptian, Hebrew, and Christian practices in that

context), the later Middle Ages, and the twentieth century. The course closes with reading and discussion of T.M. Luhrmann's *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft*, which I have found helpful as a basis for discussing questions about the rationality of magic (even if Neopagans tend to find the work problematic).

The other syllabus is for a graduate seminar that I taught at the Newberry Library on "Medieval Magic and Renaissance Mages." The working hypothesis for this class is that Burkhardt's thesis applies at least as well to magicians as to artists and statesmen: magic of medieval Europe tends to be anonymous or pseudonymous, while the later fifteenth century sees the rise of the scholarly, humanist, sometimes courtly Renaissance mage. The course was designed to explore the implications of this shift.

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## Call for Papers: Esotericism, Art and the Imagination

The Association for the Study of Esotericism is seeking paper and panel proposals for its second North American Conference on Esotericism to be held 8-11 June, 2006, at UC Davis.

As the title suggests, we especially seek proposals on topics pertinent to art and the imagination; however we are interested in all aspects of the study of Esotericism and hope to run sessions including papers on American and European spiritualism, folk magical traditions in North America, nineteenth-century occultism, magic and secrecy, antique, medieval and modern theurgy and mysticism, gnosticism and hermeticism, alchemy, astrology, new religious movements, and Asian influences on Western traditions, among others.

We welcome scholars from a wide range of perspectives, including anthropology, American studies, art history, history, history of religions, literature, philosophy, religious studies, medieval studies, sociology--the full range of academic disciplines and fields that bear upon

this area of study. This is an interdisciplinary field of research, and we believe everyone will benefit from the cross-fertilization of perspectives.

If you wish to submit a paper proposal for review and possible presentation at the conference, please send it by regular email to conference organizers at [ASEconf2006@yahoo.com](mailto:ASEconf2006@yahoo.com).

In order to encourage graduate study in the field, again we will offer a modest prize for the best graduate student paper presented.

No attachments, please: simply copy and paste your abstract into ordinary email. Please limit abstracts to a paragraph or at most to one single-spaced page. Please indicate your academic affiliation and/or other academic qualifications.

For more information on the ASE and our previous conference in June, 2004, see our website at <http://www.aseweb.org>

### ***Liber Juratus* cont'd**

vides 1347 as a definitive *terminus ante quem* for the book. Pepin tells his interrogators that he acquired the *Liber juratus* from another alchemist during a visit to the court of the king of Majorca, James III in Perpignan. The book evidently circulated through south-central and south-western France in the mid-fourteenth century, a regional association heretofore not widely noticed by historians. Pepin's testimony provides quite an extensive description of the book's contents, leaving no doubt that the book he used was indeed the *Liber juratus*, although likely an alternative version of the book perhaps descended from the same archetype as those held in the British Library. For instance, he notes that the book contains about ninety-three chapters, divided among four books or *opera*, as do the extant versions. His elaborate description of the book's prologue, which recounts the supposed context in which the book was composed, follows the British

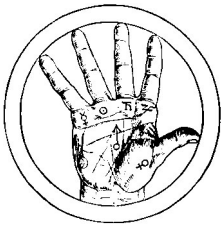
Library versions closely, although not identically. He testifies that the chapters of the first book concern beatific vision, the absolution of sin, the evasion of falling into mortal sin, the recognition of the divine power, and so on. In the fourth or final book, he relates that two of the chapters dealt with "philosophy" that was prohibited, because it was against God's wishes, specifically the creation of animals from the earth and the resuscitation of the dead.

The trial is of particular interest and importance because it delimits the range of dates for the composition of the *Liber juratus* based on diplomatic evidence, it substantiates the dissemination of the text into southern France, and it places the practice of ritual magic in the socio-political context of this remote and mountainous region of France. I am currently working with materials relevant to this trial, situating it in its wider historical context, preparing a Latin transcription of the

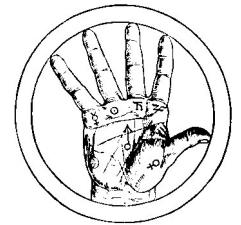
trial based on the two manuscripts, translating the text from Latin to English, and exploring links between Pepin's account of the book, the extant copies of the *Liber juratus* and other texts of ritual magic. I welcome dialogue with and input from interested members.

1. A general summary of the trial and a flawed transcription of the Latin text, based on G 936, is found in Edmond Falgairolle, *Un Envoutement en Gévaudan en l'année 1347* (Nîmes: Catélan, 1892).
2. Surviving Latin manuscripts are London British Library, Sloane 313, Sloane 3854, and Sloane 3885. For the complexities of manuscript identification Jean-Patrice Boudet, "Magie théurgique, angélologie et vision béatifique dans le *Liber sacratus sive juratus* attribué à Honorius de Thèbes," *Mélanges de l'Ecole française de Rome* 114, no. 2 (2002): 852, n. 5 and Gösta Hedegård, ed., "Liber Juratus Honorii" *A Critical Edition of the Latin Version of the Sworn Book of Honorius*, Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis, Studia Latina Stockholmiensia, 48 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2002), 13, n. 37.

## The Societas Magica invites proposals for essays to run in future issues of the newsletter.



We are looking for short essays (1500 to 2500 words) announcing new developments deriving from research in the study and teaching of magic and its related topics. We are especially interested in writing which engages magic in tension or dialogue with other rhetorical and ritual constructions: magic and the law, medicine and magic, magic and modernity, magic and the secularized world.



We are also looking for smaller pieces for our notes and queries column. News about dissertations in progress or completed, manuscript discoveries, or other such items are all welcomed. Proposals for essays, smaller pieces, or notes on topics of potential interest to members of the Societas Magica will be welcome. At the moment we are especially interested in writing which looks at periods other than medieval, but most topics are acceptable as long as they involve fresh research.

Please contact Lea Olsan: [olsan@ulm.edu](mailto:olsan@ulm.edu)

For more information about the Societas Magica see our website at <http://brindedcow.umd.edu/socmag/>

## Roundtable cont'd

### 3. Geoffrey McVey

The subject of “magic” as a category of religion, and its relationship to the study of religion in general, is one that has appeared in several of the classes that I have taught, and that I have presented to undergraduates of varying levels as well as graduate students. In teaching it, I have found that any attempts at analysis may only come after students are able to understand the frames of mind -- the worldviews -- that constitute so-called “magical thinking.”

The difficulty is not so much founded on religious grounds (fear of being associated with the demonic, or with witchcraft, however students define those), but on scientific ones. The first question that invariably arises is, “But does it work?” It is not a question that comes up in the context of Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, or other practices -- I have yet to be asked if marriage “works” (at least not in the same sense) -- but regardless of the religious orientation of a particular magical text, there is an apparent need on the part of students to test it scientifically. Responding to that question leads in two directions.

The first is to introduce students to the history of the study of magic in the academy, especially the influence of the theories of Sir James Frazer. This, in turn, leads to a broader examination of reductionistic interpretations of religion, interpretations that students are more than willing to acknowledge as either problematic or outdated, whose methods may then be turned back to the question of magic. My goal in making this move is not to answer the question, “Does it

work?”, but rather to show students that the question itself is not a very interesting one, nor is it one that should be the focus of their writing.

The second step is to lead students towards alternative methods for understanding the logic of magic in its proper contexts. Because the classes that I have taught are either broad (“Religion & Magic” begins with Greek love spells and ends with Neopaganism) or only cover magic as a subsection, I cannot always give students the depth of historical context that I would prefer; there is, however, a shortcut of sorts that enables them to work through magical thinking. Asked to treat the elements of magical practice “poetically,” as a collection of signs as well as materials, students have shown themselves able to interpret texts more easily. While it gives them access to the texts, it also opens up the conversation for a more careful study of differences between their expectations and what certain elements of magical ritual meant to their practitioners. That, in turn, serves to teach them about the dangers of comparison -- a theme that has become important in the study of the history of religions, and that allows them to go on to make more nuanced comparisons in the future.

### 4. David Porreca

The class I am teaching is a fourth-year undergraduate seminar entitled “Magic and Astrology in Antiquity and the Middle Ages,” open to senior Classical Studies and Medieval Studies majors at the University of Waterloo. I have set it up sub-topically (e.g., “Texts & Transmission”; “Magic and Religion”; “Magic and the Law”; “Methods of Divina-

tion”; “The Ancient and Medieval Cosmos, the Hierarchy of Being and the Theoretical Foundations of Magical Practice”). I plan on deploying a significant critical-thinking component to the course by examining the reasons why people thought that magical practices work. Sceptical articles by Carl Sagan (e.g., chapters from his book *The Demon-Haunted World*), among others, are on my reading list, in addition to the PGM, R. Kieckhefer’s *Magic in the Middle Ages* and G. Luck’s *Arcana Mundi*. The relative success and reactions to the sceptical slant of my teaching will constitute the majority of my presentation.

The issue of whether or not to include a practicum exercise to help students better understand the magical world-view was a primary concern in my course design. By “practicum,” I mean that each student would pick a spell, from the PGM for example, perform it and report the results - or lack thereof - to the class. Although a potentially valuable teaching tool, there was some concern that requiring a practicum might also cause some negative blowback from conservative elements in society. So, I made the practicum an optional exercise. Only one student chose to do it, everyone learned a lot from it, and several of the other students expressed regret after the fact for not having seized the opportunity to do their own practicum.

#### Correction Notice:

In issue #13, Marco Pasi’s name was inadvertently printed as “Mario” with his article, “The Idea of Magic in the Occultist Current in England, 1875-1947.”

# Calls for Papers

Proposals are invited for papers for sessions sponsored by the Societas Magica at the thirteenth International Medieval Congress to be held at Leeds, U.K., 10-13 July 2006.

Magic and Emotion  
Magic, Emotion, and Gesture

If you wish to propose a paper, please send title, abstract, affiliation, address and email and audio-visual needs to Sophie Page ([ucraspa@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:ucraspa@ucl.ac.uk)) for session 1 or Catherine Rider ([cath\\_rider@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:cath_rider@yahoo.co.uk)) for session 2.

Deadline: September 30.

More information about the Leeds Congress and the theme of Emotion and Gesture can be found at <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/imi/imc/imc2006/imc2006.htm>

Proposals are invited for sessions sponsored by the Societas Magica at the Forty-First International Congress on Medieval Studies at Kalamazoo, Michigan, 4-7 May, 2006.

1. Magical Manuscripts and Incunabula (co-sponsored by the Research Group on Manuscript Evidence)
2. Magic and Medicine (co-sponsored by Medica)
3. Magical Objects: Pentacles, Talismans, Scarabs
4. Picatrix

If you wish to propose a paper, please send title, abstract, affiliation, address and email and audio-visual needs to Claire Fanger ([cfanger@bmts.com](mailto:cfanger@bmts.com)).

Deadline: September 30.

More information about the Medieval Congress can be found at <http://www.wmich.edu/medieval/congress>

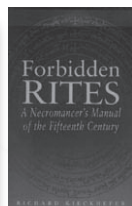
## Conference Announcements

Charms, Charmers and Charming, a two-day international conference dedicated to charms studies takes place at the Warburg Institute, Woburn Square, London, WC1H 0AB, on 23rd-24th September, 2005. It is organised by the Folklore Society and part-funded by the British Academy. Speakers include: Jacqueline Simpson, Leander Petzoldt, Éva Pócs, Lee Haring, David Hunt, Henni Ilomäki, T.M. Smallwood, Andrei Toporkov, etc. etc. Suggested contribution £10 per day - doors open 10am each day.

'The Unorthodox Imagination in Late Medieval Britain' is the theme of The Neale Lecture and Colloquium 2006 to be held at University College London, 31 March - 1 April. The Neale Lecture by Professor Jean-Claude Schmitt (École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris) will open the program at 5.30 p.m. on Friday, the 31st. The aim of this colloquium is to examine diverse approaches to the universe, especially in relation to late medieval Britain, focusing on three particular areas: Belief and Wonder; Ritual and Deviance; Nature and Imagination. For more information about the topic, the full program of speakers, and registration details, see the colloquium website <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/history/conferences/neale2006/inx.htm> or contact Dr. Sophie Page at History Department, University College London, Gower Street, London WC1E 6BT, [sophiepage@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:sophiepage@ucl.ac.uk).

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