International conference “Body and Clerical Order in the Middle Ages: Body and Communication”
(Dresden, 25 to 27 November 2026)

Organised in cooperation between:

Ruhr University Bochum, Department of History
TUD Dresden University of Technology, Research Center for Comparative History of Religious Orders (FOVOG-Dresden)
University of Zagreb, Faculty of Croatian Studies

Organising team:

Daniela Bianca Hoffmann (Dresden), Marko Jerković (Zagreb), Lucija Krešić Nacevski (Zagreb), Jan Lemmer (Bochum), Matthias Weber (Bochum)

Venue:

TUD Dresden University of Technology
Research Center for Comparative History of Religious Orders (FOVOG-Dresden)
Budapester Str. 34b
01069 Dresden

Tuesday, 24 November 2026

Arrival and dinner at “Feldschlösschen Stammhaus“

Wednesday, 25 November 2026

9:00 Welcome

Section I: The Disciplined Body

Moderation: Matthias Weber (Bochum)

9:15–10:00 Nicolangelo D'Acunto (Milano): The Ascetic and Penitential Dimension of Clerics between Interiority and Exteriority (9th–14th Centuries)

10:00–10:45 Mirko Breitenstein (Dresden): Disciplined Bodies, Purified Souls: Monastic Ideals and Corporeality in Caesarius of Heisterbach

10:45–11:15 Coffee break

11:15–12:00 Marko Jerković (Zagreb): Disciplinary Norms and the Dominican Body. An Anthropology of Corporal Functionality

12:00–12:45 Josip Vučković (Zadar): The Body as a Site of Corruption and Spirituality in a Croatian Vernacular Confession Guide for Nuns

12:45–14:45 Lunch

14:45–15:30 Kai Hnida (Cologne): Symbolic Communication through Living and Dead Bodies – Public Punishment in Late Medieval Strasbourg

Section II: Outward Appearance and Clothes

Moderation: Matthias Weber (Bochum)

15:30–16:15 Lucija Krešić Nacevski (Zagreb): On the Physical Descriptions of Martyrs in the Oldest Latin Hagiographies

16:15–16:45 Coffee break

16:45–17:30 Jörg Sonntag (Bielefeld): Religious Hair in the Context of High Medieval Canon Law: A Systematic Approach

Dinner

Thursday, 26 November 2026

Section II: Outward Appearance and Clothes (Continuation)

Moderation: Sandra Groß (Dresden)

9:00–9:45 Meta Niederkorn-Bruck (Vienna): Clothing, Colour and Corporality? – Theological Frames for the Interpretation of Dante's Purgatorio

9:45–10:30 Jan Lemmer (Bochum): „Nec placere presentibus, nec posteris placiturum". The Protest of Rainald of Dassel against Bernard's Ban on the Wearing of Fur

10:30–11:00 Coffee break

11:00–11:45 Daniela Bianca Hoffmann (Dresden): Making a Monk-Bishop – Thomas Becket and his Three-Layered Clothes

11:45–12:30 Vera Henkelmann (Dresden): Jewelry of Ecclesiastical Dignitaries in the Middle Ages: Between Representation and Interiority

12:30–14:30 Lunch

Section III: Sick and Poor Bodies

Moderation: Marko Jerković (Zagreb)

14:30–15:15 Gerhard Lubich (Bochum): Sick Saints, Ailing Bishops and Ill Monarchs. Medical Findings Compared

15:15–16:00 Enrico Frosio (Brescia): The Body of the Ailing Brother: Conceptualisations, Practices, Communication

16:00–16:30 Coffee break

16:30–17:15 Sabine Schmolinsky (Erfurt): The Poor and the Needy: Bodies in Franciscan Communication

Dinner

Friday, 27 November 2026

Section IV: Holy and Unholy Bodies

Moderation: Mirko Breitenstein (Dresden)

9:00–9:45	Mija Oter Gorenčič (Ljubljana): Analysis of Body Language as a Way to Understand Hidden Meanings – the Example of Judas Iscariot
9:45–10:30	Željka Metesi Deronjić (Zagreb): Seeing the Sacred: Sensory Perception in the Croatian Version of *Planctus Mariae*
10:30–11:00	Coffee break
11:00–11:45	Manuel Kamenzin (Würzburg): The Murdered Body: Medieval and Modern Discourses on the Remains of Engelbert I of Cologne
11:45–12:30	Lisa-Marie Richter (Dresden): Of Calves' Heads and Devil's Claws: The Deconstruction of the Ascetic Body in Sixteenth-Century Polemical Prints
12:30–13:00	Final Discussion

Abstracts of the papers

Nicolangelo D'Acunto (Milano): The Ascetic and Penitential Dimension of Clerics between Interiority and Exteriority (9th–14th Centuries)

This paper explores the role of the ascetic and penitential dimension in the construction of clerical identity in the Middle Ages, within the broader framework of the relationship between body, communication, and ecclesiastical order. Practices of bodily discipline, penance, and asceticism functioned not merely as instruments of spiritual perfection, but also as powerful devices of clerical self-representation and legitimisation. Through such practices, the clerical body became a visible site for the interiorisation of the Leitideen associated with the clerical condition and with the normative structures governing it.

The paper will examine the dialectic between interiority and exteriority that characterised these forms of bodily discipline, demonstrating how they contributed to complicating processes of clerical self-awareness beyond a merely functional differentiation from the ordo monachorum. At the same time, the emphasis placed upon penitential and ascetic practices enabled the clergy to mark a clear distance from the laity, rendering perceptible a distinct hierarchy of behaviours, values, and bodily models.

Adopting a long-term perspective, the paper will highlight the principal turning points in this dynamic through the analysis of normative, homiletic, and narrative sources produced both within the clerical milieu and by external observers.

Mirko Breitenstein (Dresden): Disciplined Bodies, Purified Souls: Monastic Ideals and Corporeality in Caesarius of Heisterbach

This paper examines the relationship between bodily discipline and spiritual perfection in the Dialogus miraculorum and related works of Caesarius of Heisterbach (c. 1180–1240). Drawing on recent scholarship on medieval corporeality and monastic culture, it argues that Caesarius constructs the disciplined body not merely as a precondition for spiritual progress, but as its visible sign and instrument. Fasting, labor, sleeplessness, and the endurance of illness emerge in his narratives as practices through which the monk's soul is gradually purified and made transparent to divine grace. At the same time, the paper explores the tensions inherent in this model: the body remains a site of temptation and demonic intervention, and Caesarius's exempla reveal an acute anxiety about the permeability of the boundary between bodily and spiritual states. By situating these themes within the broader context of early thirteenth-century Cistercian reform ideals, the paper offers perspectives on the role of corporeality in the construction of monastic identity and sanctity.

Marko Jerković (Zagreb): Disciplinary Norms and the Dominican Body. An Anthropology of Corporal Functionality

Monastic body is not only a site of ascetic struggle. It is not merely a form within which temptations occur; a form that must be therefore purified and punished. Monastic body is not only a natural form, given by birth, corruptible and materially perishable. Monastic body is a multi-functional platform, endowed with meanings by the religious environment (a community or order) within which it exists and to which it is subjected. I will demonstrate this by unfolding the corporal functionality in the Order of Preachers. This example is especially instructive, since the Order combined innovative institutional and mission-oriented developments with more conventional cloistered practices. My focus is on the norms related to the regulation, regularization, and rectification of bodily actions, postures, and penitential rituals. Yet, my approach is not purely historical; it does not aim to determine discrepancies between the ideal and the "objective" reality. Rather, the paper tends to anthropologise normative texts, viewing them as expressions of institutional thinking about the purpose and the purposeful results of corporal disciplines. It is concerned with the question how the disciplined body reflected a system of values and virtues, how it shaped the individual and, ultimately, how it formed the desired type of religious community.

Josip Vučković (Zadar): The Body as a Site of Corruption and Spirituality in a Croatian Vernacular Confession Guide for Nuns

The little-known Croatian vernacular confession treatise *Početak od vsake kriposti, milosti i duševnoga utišenja* (*The Beginning of All Virtue, Grace, and Spiritual Consolation*) survives in a single copy preserved in MS R3662 (Zagreb, National and University Library), a manuscript written in Latin script in 1532 and used by a nun from a noble Zaratine family. Although I have previously contributed to the discussion of the codex's origin by identifying the divergent origins of the two dodecasyllabic poems interpolated into the treatise (one originating in Dubrovnik and the other in central or northern Dalmatia), I have not previously examined its overall function beyond noting its role in shaping the religious and emotional habitus of its intended female readers. In this paper, I further explore the treatise's function through an analysis of its conception of the body, showing how the body was construed both as a locus of corruption and as a vehicle of spirituality.

Kai Hnida (Cologne): Symbolic Communication through Living and Dead Bodies – Public Punishment in Late Medieval Strasbourg

This paper's case study analyses the staging of bodies as a form of symbolic communication in 15th-century Strasbourg. It specifically asks about the performative aspects and public space's use in bodily and penal punishments. In order to secure the urban community's validation, performing public punishment with expressive bodies of the punished was instrumental for the city council. Therefore, the councillors needed to ensure the use of prominent public spaces, like important streets and market squares, during the punishment's execution. Bodily punishments could entail either a temporary humiliation, e.g. the pillory, or

permanently inscribing the crime into the delinquent's body, e.g. amputation of body parts or beatings. Executions can be seen as the ultima ratio of the aforementioned. By performing and inscribing the punishment, the crime was visible to everyone in face-to-face communication. Therefore, this paper's case study provides a deeper understanding of the bodies' utilisation in late medieval performative communication within urban contexts and spaces.

Lucija Krešić Nacevski (Zagreb): On the Physical Descriptions of Martyrs in the Oldest Latin Hagiographies

Early hagiographic Latin texts approach the physical descriptions of the first martyrs in various ways. In the earliest texts, such as the Acta Martyrum Scillitanorum—written in the form of official court transcripts—such mentions are entirely absent. The body is represented only by the voice, not by physical appearance. In later Latin hagiography from the 3rd and 4th centuries, certain physical descriptions begin to emerge, whether associated with female martyrs or introduced in contexts where appearance and physicality play a distinct role in the narrative. Within this context, the "problematic of beauty" (pulchritudo) and the "problematic of ugliness" (turpitudo) arise, serving as vehicles for specific moral categories, symbolism, ideas, and values. This presentation will provide and analyze concrete Latin examples from various texts, connecting the text with its context.

Jörg Sonntag (Bielefeld): Religious Hair in the Context of High Medieval Canon Law: A Systematic Approach

This paper investigates the treatment of religious hair practices in major canonical collections of the High Middle Ages, including Burchard of Worms' Decretum, Ivo of Chartres' compilations, and Gratian's Decretum. By systematically searching these texts for references to hair, tonsure, shaving, and related forms of bodily presentation, it explores whether and how hair functioned as a legal and symbolic category within medieval canon law. The study compares similarities and differences between the collections and examines the normative expectations they articulate. Finally, these legal prescriptions are contrasted with historical evidence for actual religious practice in order to assess the relationship between canon law and lived experience.

Meta Niederkorn-Bruck (Vienna): Clothing, Colour and Corporality? – Theological Frames for the Interpretation of Dante's Purgatorio

Based on Dante's Purgatorio, the contribution will focus on the perception of the dead's afterlife in context of imago, persona, corpus et anima. The significance of rank and name in this world and the importance of clothing in color and material tempts us to transfer the formal language of this world to the afterlife. Numerous pictures show the requiem and burial; the dead 'embedded' in their status. The images of the resurrection of the dead show us naked corpora rising from the graves. Why and at what point do the dead lose status symbols

and clothing, and do they (Bonaventura, Nudatas veste luminis tui , Confessiones 13,8) – and when – do they get both back? Against this background, the ability of souls to feel joy on the one, to suffer on the othe hand is discussed in the context of 'imago, persona, shadow, soul and body'; „Adhaesit pavimento anima mea … scias, quod ego fui successor Petri“ (Purg. XIX, 73 … 97-98); - „Frate, / non far, chè tu se‘ ombra vedi „ „Or puoi la quantitate comprendere dell‘ amor ch‘ a te mi scalda; quand‘ io dismento nostra vanitate, trattando l’ombre come cosa salda“ (Purg. XXI, 134-136). What influence do academic discourses (Bonaventure, Thomas Aquinas, John Duns Scotus) have on the view of the afterlife?

Jan Lemmer (Bochum): „Nec placere presentibus, nec posteris placiturum“. The Protest of Rainald of Dassel against Bernard’s Ban on the Wearing of Fur

Through its vestimentary code, clothing offers a multitude of ways to express political or social implications through the body. My presentation explores why Rainald of Dassel rejected Bernhard’s ban on wearing fur and how this relates to Rainald’s political position. The body is thus analysed as a surface for social contexts.

Daniela Bianca Hoffmann (Dresden): Making a Monk-Bishop – Thomas Becket and his Three-Layered Clothes

Thomas Becket was not only a controversial figure during his lifetime; there was an equally heated debate among his contemporaries as to whether his violent death should be regarded as martyrdom. As has been highlighted several times in research, both his secret ascetic lifestyle and his secret ascetic attire played a major role in the assessment of his death as martyrdom. It is said that Becket wore a *cilicium* (a penitential shirt associated in particular with the hermitic life) and a monk’s habit beneath his outer garment; both items of clothing are said to have been discovered only after his death, and the monk’s habit in particular served as ‘proof’ that Becket had been a martyr. Research has so far paid little attention to the fact that the sources contain highly contradictory statements regarding Becket’s clothing, that the narrative of Becket’s three-layered attire only gradually took shape, and that the sources thereby asserted that Becket had validly become a monk under canon law. This paper aims to examine the context and background in which the various statements about Becket’s clothing were made, and the different purposes these statements served. It will demonstrate how various monastic and clerical groups sought to claim Becket as their own by attributing specific clothing to him, thereby portraying him as a member of their group and enhancing their own interests.

Vera Henkelmann (Dresden): Jewelry of Ecclesiastical Dignitaries in the Middle Ages: Between Representation and Interiority

Jewelry of ecclesiastical dignitaries of the Middle Ages, traditionally regarded as a medium of representation, served as insignia designed to externally convey the dignity, power, and virtue associated with the office and its holder. However, its purpose extended beyond mere external

display. Such adornments were also intended to exert a reciprocal influence on the wearer's body, mind, and—ultimately—soul, ensuring that the individual could meet the exacting demands of their office by embodying the virtue and worthiness befitting their authority. For ecclesiastical dignitaries, this introspective dimension was inherently Christocentric, aiming both to heal the wearer´s soul and to provide self-assurance as a representative of Christ. This paper explores this dual function through a case study of selected medieval bishop's rings from Mainz and Trier, distinguished by their exceptional craftsmanship and well-documented historical contexts, which permit a relatively precise attribution to individual wearers. As a comparative outlook, these objects will be briefly contrasted with medieval pectorals of ecclesiastical dignitaries from less well-defined contexts of origin.

Gerhard Lubich (Bochum): Sick Saints, Ailing Bishops and Ill Monarchs. Medical Findings Compared

Using selected examples, this lecture demonstrates how sick saints, ailing bishops and sick monarchs were portrayed in medieval historiographical and hagiographical sources. The aim is to investigate whether the descriptions of the sick bodies differed for the three groups under consideration, and whether a specific conception of the body lies behind each of them.

Enrico Frosio (Brescia): The Body of the Ailing Brother: Conceptualisations, Practices, Communication

This paper examines the conceptions and practices relating to the body of the sick member of a religious order as they emerge from normative monastic sources of the High Middle Ages. Going beyond a mere reconstruction of care practices, the research is structured around three main themes.
Firstly, it analyses the ideological-rhetorical conceptualisation of the infirm body, understood as 'disabled' with respect to community life; it explores the relationship between soul and body and assesses any awareness of gender and age differences in pathologies.
Secondly, therapeutic and control practices are explored, examining, for example, how interventions such as phlebotomy served as instruments of bodily discipline and how the consumption of electuaries aimed to optimise the monks' performance.
Finally, considerable attention is devoted to the communicative dimension. In this sense, the aim is not merely to study how illness impacts a monk's ability to communicate in practical terms, but also how the sick body can become a genuine symbolic vessel, capable of conveying profound meanings and complex ideological strategies.

Sabine Schmolinsky (Erfurt): The Poor and the Needy: Bodies in Franciscan Communication

Among the Mendicant Orders the brothers of the Franciscan Order are known to adhere to the strictest concept of poverty which was established in the early 13th century. It required not

only individual poverty but also that of the community. This interpretation of voluntary poverty forced the Franciscans to strive for their living by begging thereby competing with the socially disadvantaged for public space and attention. Thus differing bodies shared the public places and struggled for the ressource of urban willingness to charity. How were the soon arising conflicts managed? Which arguments were presented by the new intruders in an existing system of practices of providing involuntary poor with alms? This paper will ask for Franciscan perspectives on bodies and their needs. How did they communicate their interpretation of evangelical poverty? Did they reflect on the variety of bodies? Which types of texts or other media did they use?

Mija Oter Gorenčič (Ljubljana): Analysis of Body Language as a Way to Understand Hidden Meanings – the Example of Judas Iscariot

The analysis of the body and its gestures is an important methodological approach to understanding medieval artistic representations. This paper examines how medieval artists, through their depiction of the body, created, expressed, and perpetuated negative representations of Jews, reinforcing entrenched social stereotypes, religious prejudices, and anti-Jewish sentiments that were widespread in medieval Christian society. Particular attention is given to the depiction of Jews in medieval painting, with a special focus on the figure of Judas Iscariot, the ways in which his body is depicted, his compositional placement within scenes, and his bodily relationship to other figures. Based on a selected case study, this paper demonstrates that a detailed analysis of the manner in which the body is depicted, its gestures, and its compositional placement can serve as an important tool for interpreting visual representations and can reveal subtle meanings that would otherwise remain hidden. The body is revealed not only as a narrative tool, but also as a semiotic instrument of central importance for the construction and mediation of meaning.

Željka Metesi Deronjić (Zagreb): Seeing the Sacred: Sensory Perception in the Croatian Version of *Planctus Mariae*

This paper examines the role of sensory perception in the Croatian version of *Planctus Mariae*, one of the most important texts of medieval Passion devotion. Rather than merely recounting the events of Christ's Passion, the text employs affective and sensory strategies that encourage emotional participation in Christ's suffering and Mary's grief.
Particular attention is devoted to motifs of seeing, tears, wounds, and bodily suffering, through which the text directs the reader's or listener's perception toward the sacred. These motifs function not only as descriptive elements but also as means of establishing an affective relationship between the Passion narrative and the believing community. Christ's suffering body thus becomes a place of encounter between the divine and the human, enabling the sacred to be experienced rather than merely understood.
Drawing on the Croatian *Planctus Mariae*, the paper explores the relationship between perception, emotion, and devotion in medieval religious culture. It argues that sensory perception plays a crucial role in shaping religious experience by transforming the act of

seeing into a form of participation in the sacred, enabling a deeper engagement with the mystery of Christ's Passion.

Manuel Kamenzin (Würzburg): The Murdered Body: Medieval and Modern Discourses on the Remains of Engelbert I of Cologne

In 1225, Archbishop Engelbert of Cologne was killed in an ambush. Both contemporary accounts and modern scholarship have drawn attention to the large number of wounds inflicted on his body. This paper brings together medieval descriptions of Engelbert's wounds and archival material relating to the examination of his remains when his shrine was opened in 1978. In doing so, it explores how the archbishop's murdered body was described, examined, and interpreted in both medieval and modern contexts.

Lisa-Marie Richter (Dresden): Of Calves' Heads and Devil's Claws: The Deconstruction of the Ascetic Body in Sixteenth-Century Polemical Prints

Based on a selection of illustrated pamphlets and broadsheets from the 16th century, this conference presentation explores the visual and semantic deconstruction of the ascetic body. The analysis focuses on the bodies of monks and nuns and the transformation of their representation in Reformation polemical prints, which were increasingly directed against religious orders and were instrumental in initiating and supporting their dissolution in German Protestant regions. According to the monastic ideal of the self, ascetic control of the body was seen as both the key to and a method for attaining salvation ahead of all other estates and for overcoming the sinfulness of the world. However, Reformation invectives negated this connection: in these representations, the monastic body functions as a visual and semantic sign exposing the monastic institution's sinfulness and its purported ties to the world and the devil. The depiction of corpulent monks, for example, visualized an alleged fundamental departure from ascetic ideals and emphasized the supposedly immoral nature of this way of life. The strategy of animalizing the ascetic body by associating it with animals carrying negative connotations – such as calves, donkeys, or wolves – offered a particularly wide range of semantic possibilities for disparaging and denigrating monasticism. The addition of diabolical attributes to the ascetic body, on the other hand, was primarily intended to demonize the monastic system and served as visual proof of its unholiness.