

# Sight and Light in the Late Middle Ages

KU Leuven, 12–13 June 2023

*organized by*

Francesca Galli, Lukáš Lička, and Mattia Mantovani



*conference venue*

Auditorium Emma Vorlat, Leercentrum Agora, Edward Van Evenstraat 4 , 3000 Leuven

<https://www.google.it/maps/place/AGORA+Learning+Center/@50.873697,4.7018153,17z/data=!3m1!4m5!3m4!1sox47c161285a20d147:oxfg82a9b9a7429b6f!8m2!3d50.873696!4d4.7039989>

The conference takes place on campus, but all talks can also be followed online via this link:

<https://radbouduniversity.zoom.us/j/82595769055?pwd=SHp4VzlCYnIvVW02NGx4dnZTTlCdzo9>

In case you plan to attend in person – and for any query – email [mattia.mantovani@kuleuven.be](mailto:mattia.mantovani@kuleuven.be)

*sponsored by*



Universität  
Zürich<sup>UZH</sup>



Swiss National  
Science Foundation



Institute of Philosophy  
Filosofický ústav AVČR



European Research Council  
Established by the European Commission

# Sight and Light in the Late Middle Ages

The Late Middle Ages are hardly singled out for consideration in the histories of optics, and score only slightly better as it comes to natural philosophy and perception theories at large. At a first glance, the science of sight and light – *perspectiva* – appears to have persisted unvaried throughout the centuries running from Roger Bacon to Leonardo da Vinci, not to say Kepler. A closer investigation, however, reveals a quite different story.

As the conference intends to show, between the mid-thirteenth and the fifteenth century *perspectiva* turned from a minor discipline, “taught in Oxford only twice and never so far in Paris” (as Bacon bemoaned), into a mandatory subject for most universities *curricula*. Many factors concurred to this shift in status. The Late Middle Ages saw crucial changes in the understanding of sight and light, with far-reaching epistemological, metaphysical and even theological consequences. Sight and light – the most “spiritual” of all senses and of all physical phenomena – often provided a paradigm for cognition and for causation in general, and prime analogies for the divine. Indeed, the conference intends to show that for most Late Medieval intellectuals “perspective” was not just about the blending of rays or the function of the eyes, but expressed an all-encompassing world picture.

The conference investigates the manifold aspects and implications of this momentous transformations and the concurrent emergence of an “optical literacy” in both Latin and the vernaculars. To this end, the conference examines a diverse array of sources: scientific treatises, *summae* and encyclopaedias, commentaries on Aristotle and on the *Sententiae*, sermons and disputations. Its topics of enquiry are equally varied: geometrical optics and the physics of light, astronomy and meteorology, human and animal perception, spiritual cognition while on Earth and in the Empyrean.

By means of this multifocal and interdisciplinary approach, the conference intends to provide a fresh insight into the Late Medieval understanding of sight and light and their larger implications for the scientific and philosophical debates of the time.



**MONDAY 12 JUNE – Auditorium Emma Vorlat, Leercentrum Agora, Edward Van Evenstraat 4**

09:00-09:10 Welcome Address

***The Rise of Perspectiva***

chair: Andrea Aldo Robiglio (KU Leuven)

09:10-10:10 **A. Mark Smith** (Missouri University)

Atmospheric Optics and Celestial Observation According to Perspectivist Analysis

10:20-11:20 **Aurora Panzica** (Université de Fribourg)

A Terrestrial or Celestial Light? The Milky Way: A Challenge to Aristotle's Cosmology

11:30-12:30 **José Filipe Silva** (University of Helsinki)

What Do You See? On the Nature of Objects of Visual Perception

12:30-14:00 *lunch break*

***Optical Literacy***

chair: Russell Friedman (KU Leuven)

14:00-15:00 **Maria Sorokina** (IRHT, CNRS, Paris)

The Luminous Bodies without Light  
The Empyrean Heaven and the Sphere of Fire

15:20-16:20 **Mattia Mantovani** (KU Leuven)

The Bestiary of the Eyes. Animal Vision in the Late Middle Ages

16:30-17:30 **Francesca Galli** (Universität Zürich)

Optics from the Pulpit at the Turn of the 13th Century

**TUESDAY 13 JUNE – Auditorium Emma Vorlat**

***The Institutionalization of Perspectiva***

chair: Clelia Crialesi (KU Leuven)

09:00-10:00 **Cecilia Panti** (Università di Roma "Tor Vergata")

From *linee radiales* to *linee visuales*, and Return  
The Swing of *perspectiva* in 13th-Century Theories of Vision

10:10-11:10 **Lukáš Lička** (Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic)

Between Peckham and Buridan. Visual Representation in 15th-Century Vienna Disputations

11:20-12:20 **Dominique Raynaud** (Université Grenoble Alpes)

Variations on the Principle of Least Time before Fermat

12:20-14:00 *lunch break*

