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Fire in the Middle Ages

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Introduction

A Brief Interdisciplinary Reflection

Ancient and medieval science and philosophy were predicated on the fundamental notion that the world consists of the four elements, fire, air, water, and soil. Each one of them was considered to be present in countless forms, combinations, and manifestations, sometime in pure form, but mostly in composites. In some ways, this concept was not completely wrong, though we consider all this in rather different terms today. Nevertheless, if we want to understand the pre-modern world in its cultural and spiritual terms, it proves to be critically important to study what each one of those four elements meant by itself in a variety of contexts. Without the study of this concept, we would misread much of the pre-modern medical sciences, astrology, astronomy, philosophy, theology, but then also literature and the visual arts [1]. But medieval thinkers were not at all the first ones to probe this model; instead they derived it directly from their ancient forerunners, especially the Greek philosopher Empedocles (fifth century B.C.E). In fact, studying those four elements and the history of their role in pre-modern science, we can easily recognize in them major indicators of the continuity of fundamental ideas about the make-up of the world from antiquity to the Middle Ages, and from there far into the modern age [2].

Fire, above all, is ever-present in many religious contexts all over the world and throughout time. The ancient Greek myth of Prometheus speaks volumes about the fundamental importance of fire for human civilization. Fire creates and destroys; it has an extensive power, wherefore alchemists have resorted to it consistently in their efforts to transform base materials into gold, for instance. Fire is also intimately associated with Hell where the lost souls are burning in eternity, as both Dante in his Inferno and countless artists depicting the hellish scenario (Giotto in the Scrovegni chapel, Padua, or the frescoes in the Albi cathedral) illustrated most vividly. Fire appears in a myriad of contexts and constitutes a great danger for the body, unless it is harnessed and put to good use. However, throughout the late Middle Ages and far beyond, alleged witches and heretics were burned at the stake to eliminate the body and to liberate the soul, if it could be salvaged. Similarly, the fire in the imagined Purgatory served God to cleanse people from their sins and thus to help them to proceed from that nether world toward Paradise. From earliest times to the present, the Christian Church has utilized fire in the form of candles to light the dark space, to illuminate the altar, to accompany holy acts (baptism, the Eucharist, etc.), and thus to invite the Holy Spirit into the Christian community. Significantly, this experience continues to be with us, if we think, for instance, of the custom of burning a specific number of candles for each of the four Sundays before Christmas, the days of Advent, that is, one, two, three, and four candles. Similarly, in the Jewish tradition, the burning of seven candles on the Menorah matters critically, symbolizing the Temple and hence Judaism itself. Further, the Hanukkah Menorah (nine candles, eight for the eight nights and the ninth, the Shamash, serving to light the others) represents the recovery of Jerusalem and the rededication of the Second Temple. In Islam, candles do not hold any specific symbolism and are not referred to in the Qu'ran. Nevertheless, light, as produced by fire, certainly matters in this and in virtually all world religions because, as pure energy, it transforms the physical element into light and heat, leaving behind ashes, for instance.

Without candles, i.e., fire, no medieval (monastic) scriptorium could have operated effectively, especially during the long and dark winter months, so, without light, no writing or reading, which simply means that medieval culture and education depended on the energy of fire. Fire was also critically important for warmth in housing and for cooking in all secular spaces, and this is the case until today, of course. Most meal preparations have relied on fire, so the fire in the kitchen has always been a central point in human life. In short, medieval culture and all others beyond that period intensively operated with fire as a source of energy, light, and warmth. In this regard, the middle Ages dealt with fire virtually the same way as we do today, but pre-modern people probably viewed it with much more respect and caution, and also with a different perspective and approach. In addition, fire has also always carried deeply religious symbolism. One of the best-known examples presented in countless narrative copies and manuscript illustrations was the fire lit on a mysterious island by St. Brendan's followers in the Old Irish hagiographical account (Vita and Navigatio; eighth or tenth century). In a night vision, God told the saint about the true nature of the island, and the next morning, when the brothers had started a fire to prepare their meal, the island began to move. The brothers were all saved, but they had to leave their utensils behind because the island was really a fish, maybe a whale. As we learn in the tenth chapter of the Latin Version, "Then the island moved out to sea. The lighted fire could be seen over two miles away" [3]. As Brendan then explained: "Where we were was not an island, but a fish the foremost of all that swim in the ocean. He is always trying to bring his tail to meet his head, but he cannot because of his length. His name is Jasconius" (35). Beyond that incidence, there are many other situations involving fire, often associated with Hell and its infernal creatures threatening the company from the distance but helpless in their efforts to hurt or kill them. Throughout the middle Ages, the blacksmith assumed a highly symbolic function, being the master of fire, the creator of wondrous swords, tools, and armor [4]. In late medieval and early modern heroic poetry, such as the Lied vom Hürnen Seyfried, the protagonist apprentices with a blacksmith and demonstrates his intimate connection with the power of fire, although he is too strong for his master and destroys the tools when he hammers the anvil too hard. When he encounters a wilderness filled with dangerous dragons, worms, and other reptiles, he throws whole trees on them, secures charcoal from the coal-maker, and burns them all [5]. But none of that associates Seyfried with the devil or Hell; it only highlights his extraordinary strength and superpower with which he can exert almost unlimited control over beasts and humans. Later, however, when confronting the dragon, he almost dies in the hot flames the monster spews forth. Later, having recovered from the heat for a while hiding in a cave below the mountain top, he returns and can then hit the dragon so hard that its skin covered by horn opens up, and this then enables the protagonist to kill the monster.

At first sight, we do not find significant references to fire in other medieval European heroic epics because, as I suspect, there, the focus rests primarily on the protagonist's physical prowess and heroic character, which needs no external support, such as through weapons or armor created by a blacksmith. In short, fire in the ordinary context does not matter in Beowulf (apart from the fire-spewing dragon), the Chanson de Roland, El Poema de Mío Cid, the Nibelungenlied, Kudrun, or Egil's Saga. But we hear about a hero's breath that burns like fire in some of the so-called Dietrich epic poems, and there it is the human protagonist who emits that fiery breath once he has become infuriated and turned, so to speak, into a berserk [6]. One major exception to the rule that fire mattered fairly little in medieval literature, but then limited to ordinary military conflicts among human heroes, can be found in the Icelandic Njál's Saga (eleventh century?) where the protagonist, along with his wife and their grandson, is burned to death during a siege, which brings to an end all his efforts to maintain law and order through peaceful, i.e., legal means. Despite all negotiations between him and Flosi, during which the latter makes several offers to preserve the protagonist's life and that of his wife, Bergthora, Njal refuses, and so does she, because he does not want to abandon his own sons. As he responds to Flosi: "'I will not leave, for I'm an old man and hardly fit to avenge my sons, and I do not want to live in shame'" [7]. The victims return to their house and lie down on the bed, covered by the hide of a recently slain ox: "Then they crossed themselves and the boy and put their souls in God's hands, and this was the last that people heard them speak" (221). Surprisingly, however, their bodies are not burned, and when people later inspect the corpses, Hjalti observes: "'Njal's countenance and body seem to me so radiant that I've never seen a dead man's body as radiant as his'" (230). Burning to death is very painful, but it happens many times, both in the middle Ages and today see the horrible wildfire burning down the entire city of Lahaina on Maui'i in August 2023 [8]. Authority figures have regularly relied on fire to threaten and destroy opponents, but this does not make fire automatically to a negative force at all. Instead, it has no moral qualities and operates simply as a form of energy transforming matter by burning it down. Fire becomes destructive and horrifying only in the hands of people, unless it breaks out naturally (forest fire, lava) and then engulfs everything and everyone in its way without any moral, ethical, religious, or philosophical concerns. So, fire does not have an agency by itself, we might say, and yet it proves to be extremely powerful, beneficial and destructive at the same time.

Altogether, if we want to understand cultural history, such the Middle Ages, it proves to be heuristically relevant to consider the multifarious impact of fire, as the contributors to this volume do.

Other scholars have also already offered studies where fire is supposed to matter centrally, but at closer analysis, this then mostly does not turn out to be the case [9]. But if we consider everyday culture in the pre-modern era, fire certainly appears as a major factor in many different contexts [10]. Major reference works on the Middle Ages such as the Lexikon des Mittelalters [11], might include references to fire in the context of alchemy or Greek Fire, or simply to the fireplace within the household [12], and the multi-volume Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographe, reflects on this essence only in the context of the four elements [13]. Fire, however, by itself, as an element, as a force, as an agent, and as a symbol, certainly deserves further investigations, just as water, which has such a profound impact on all life [14]. It might be inappropriate because anachronistic for the current context, but I would like to add to this brief foreword one of the poems by the famous German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), who identified himself with fire at some point and formulated this powerful and also rather ominous statement in his Thus Spoke Zarathustra (1883–1885): "you must be ready to burn yourself in your own flame; / how could you rise anew if you have not first become ashes?" And in his equally meaningful Ecce homo (1888, not published until 1908), he created this poem:

Yes! I know where I come from!
As insatiable as a flame,
I smoulder and consume myself.
Everything I seize turns into light,
Everything I let go turns into coal:
Surely I am a flame! [15]

Pre-modern poets or writers would not have embraced such a radical, rather heretical position, but we recognize here nevertheless a universal perspective of fire as an all-consuming force that cannot be fully contained once it has broken out and moves forward, such as molten lava from a volcano. Hence, theologians have consistently associated fire with Hell because the eternal sin has existed throughout time until Christ died on the Cross for humanity, descended to Hell, and broke its harrows in order to rescue the souls of the righteous and to take them to Heaven. Tragically, of course, this has not brought to an end the impact of sin on human life, as the entire world of medieval Christianity confirms and as we all know only too well. Whoever considers fire in cultural-historical terms, turns his/her attention to all creation myths and the questions of what constitutes nature and human life. Fire represents condensed energy in its pure form, both constructing and deconstructing, all depending on the context and situation. The gods or God rest in the fire, as Moses had experienced when he encountered the burning bush (Exodus 3): "There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight why the bush does not burn up." Once he has tentatively approached the bush, God Himself spoke to him but kept him in a specific distance to communicate with him His will for the Israelite people. Fire is also the essential media for many religious rituals throughout the world regularly requiring a sacrifice which the flames then consume, which offers additional explanations for Nietzsche's radical, non-Christian statements about himself and the flame.

Moreover, the Old Testament is riddled with references to fire because it contains, in many different contexts, an allusion to God the Almighty. In the New Testament, the relevance of fire is reduced, but not eliminated. There are comments about fire being used for legal judgments and punishments, especially with regard to infertility and death of plants (Matthew 3, 10 and 12). Finally, during the Apocalypse, eternal fire will burn (Matthew 18, 18; Apoc. 20, 10, 14-15) [16]. We should also consider the miracle of the Pentecost when flames settle on the heads of the apostles which then made them able to speak all languages of the people assembled in Jerusalem (Acts 2:1-31). For an art-historical example, in the fifteenth-century Speculum humanae salvationis (The Morgan Library Museum, MS M.385, Fol. 034r, Bruges, Belgium), we see the human creature standing in a sea of flames, but God lifts him out of the fire and rescues him from death (https://ica.themorgan.org/manuscript/page/64/77328), that is, elevates the person from the chains of material, physical existence which the flames consume, and lifts him/her up to the celestial sphere. For medieval artists and their patrons, fire was a mighty medium to destroy human life and to bring about the very moment when God would intervene and rescue the faithful Christian. Fire consumes, but it also provides life and health, all depending on the context, such as in a scene in Heinrich von dem Türlin's Diu Cróne (ca. 1290), where King Arthur tries to warm himself up near the open fireplace after he had spent some time outside in the wintry landscape [17], or in the Tacuinum Sanitatis, Nova 2644 fol. 55r Winter: In front of the fire, from(vellum) (https://www.mediastorehouse.com/fine-art-finder/artists/italian-school/nova-2644-fol-55r-winter-fire-22216310.html), or in the anonymous (Sir John Stanley?) Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (1387) [18], where the frozen protagonist, having crossed the Welsh wilderness for three days and nights and having reached the castle of Hautdesert, is taken to a corner where a fireplace provides warmth, which is mentioned twice: "A chair by the chimney corner, where charcoal burned, / Was prepared for proud Gawain, promptly with fabrics" (875–76); and, in the company of the two ladies: "They take him between them, with talking do lead him / To a chamber's chimney corner, and clearly then order / Spiced cakes, that unsparingly men speeded to bring them" (977-79).

Admitted, the focus then immediately turns to the foodstuff and clothing, but the contrast between the cold winter landscape and

the warm interior of the castle remains a significant factor influencing the subsequent events [19], highlighting the contrast between the death of a frozen world and the blossoming of human culture inside of the castle's walls. The same is indicated in the illumination for the month of February in the Book of Hours by the Limbourg Brothers for the Duc de Berry (ca. 1412–1416; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tr%C3%A8s_Riches_Heures_du_Duc_de_Berry#/media/File:Les_Tr%C3%A8s_Riches_Heures_du_duc_de_Berry_f%C3%A9vrier.jpg), where the lady and the peasant couple stretch their feet out toward a fire to warm up. The fire itself is hardly visible, but the comfort that it provides is very noticeable. The flames rise up out of a narrow vent, so it seems, and there is no smoke at all. While the lady decently lifts her dress only slightly, both the male peasant and his wife have, without any shame, their entire lower body exposed to attract as much heat to them as possible.

Conclusion

Altogether, as we can summarize, fire was not only one of the four base elements, it also represented sinfulness, energy, warmth and pleasantry, punishment and death, and it served also as a catalyst to transform other elements and to reduce them to their essential signatures (alchemy). Studying fire in the pre-modern period, hence, makes possible the investigation of numerous fundamental issues pertaining to the natural sciences, theology, philosophy, morality, ethics, literature, warfare, workmanship, medicine, and energy. After all, fire represents power, and it can be a destructive force or a most welcome medium for cooking, working, producing, and warming up people and houses. Depending on the context, it could symbolize divinity, human sinfulness, the threat of the afterlife, and the temptation by the devil. Or, on a rather mundane level, it was the crucial source of energy to make human life possible (cooking, warming up, alchemy, etc.). Virtually everything has at least two sides, such as water or air, and fire and soil are no exceptions to that rule. People need fire for countless processes in their lives, but fire can also engulf and destroy them. Discussing this important element, apart from the three others, facilitates the identification of one of the central forces and elements determining all life high and low, material and spiritually, philosophically and theologically, in the Middle Ages and beyond. Fittingly, recent research has begun to address fire from many different perspectives, considering its material, spiritual, celestial characters and its role in sciences and medicine [20]. So, we can learn about the fire of a volcano, saints on fire, cooking in the kitchen as a theological symbol, fire in economic and scientific contexts, such as fire as a source in the production of glass, and even about the role of fire in calendars. Intriguingly, this topic invites strong kaleidoscopic approaches, including the topic of fire in Jewish and Muslim thought, in art history, and in non-European cultures. Indeed, fire, like water, air, and soil the four natural elements must be studied through an interdisciplinary and interchronological approach because humanity, hence life, without fire has never existed. But, turning this situation around, we can always inquire about how certain cultures or peoples have perceived or treated fire, or have utilized it for their purposes, and then conclude how to evaluate that culture.

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