

# *Filigrana*



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Today, the twenty-six of September 2024, I Danica Abela am with Professor Catherine Rider at the Cathedral Archives part of the Filigrana Project.

Danica Abela: Firstly, thank you for accepting our invite to be part of this project. The first question is you is how your upbringing in Sussex and how did it influence your academic journey

Catherine Rider: Firstly, thank you it's nice to be here, thank you for inviting me. I grew up in Sussex quite near London and I was always interested in history. My mum in particular was also interested in history, so we went to a lot of museums, we went to a lot of castles and those kind of things in the local area. I always kind of continued with that interest. I had a teacher in school as well who was very encouraging and when I was ten or eleven in the last year of primary school, she did a project on 19<sup>th</sup> century church records. She was friendly with a local vicar, and she persuaded him to let her photocopy all of the 19<sup>th</sup> century parish records and we did projects on them as a class, tracing families, thinking about their lives and so on. And we really liked it and it really sparked my interest in wanting to be a historian.

DA: And I think that from that on you started your Bachelor's and then your Masters and it was all from this background I believe of your relationship so I say with primary sources that mostly interested you in continuing your studies?

CR: Yes, I think so I really enjoyed the process of researching of finding out about people's lives. I also become very interested in Medieval history and I think that goes back to when I was a child, I read a lot of books about King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table and a lot of fantasy books in that setting, and it made me to know more about that period. But at that time, they did not really teach Medieval history in schools in Britain, so we did a lot of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Industrial Revolution and all of these things but we didn't do much earlier history. So, when I went to university, I went to UCL, and one of the reasons why I went there was because they had a really good reputation for Medieval Studies they had a professor who did an Early Medieval Celtic History which coming from King Arthur I was very interested in and, I took a lot of that courses on all kinds of Medieval topics, on marriage, on crusades, on Celtic history and I just became really really interested in it. And my PhD work came out of a particular course with Professor David D'Avery on the history of marriage in the Middle Ages and we read a lot of romance literature, again King-Arthur-type-of stories and it got me thinking about the role of magic in the stories and the role of love magic in particular and that was how I ended up in a PhD in the area of magic.



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DA: You basically said the answer to my second question. How did you come up with this very particular topic because your PhD research is about magic as a cause of sexual impotence. How did you come up with this very particular topic and what interested you most about it?

CR: This is rather particular and people used to joke about it all the time because it does sound a bit comic. I came to it from that course in UCL thinking about marriage where we read romantic literature, but we also read a lot of Canon Law to do with marriage and Professor D'Avery was very interested in that. I went back to him, and we talked about lots of different PhD topics. I knew that I wanted to do something on magic, but I was interested in history of marriage, history of sexuality, religious history and eventually we tried various ideas, and he said "do you know that Canon Law is very interested in magic causes of impotency" because in the Middle Ages it was one of the ways you could annul a marriage sometimes. So, there is quite a lot of legal discussion about what the rules are, how you prove it and what if one partner says one thing and the other says something else and all these kinds of issues. So, I started looking at that and as I was doing it, I found that there's actually quite a lot of information in medical texts as well where they treat the illness to be cured, theologians talk about it again in a slightly more theoretical way because they are interested in marriage and marriage rules. So, I was lucky that there was enough material there to give me a PhD where I could think about how different learning disciplines think about impotency and also think about how they engaged with popular beliefs. It seemed very clear to me that the whole idea that magic could make you sick or make you impotent was a popular belief. And the clergy who wrote those texts were trying to engage with that and trying to make sense of it. So, it was quite niche but it worked.

DA: Can you tell us how your relationship with Malta started? And what sparked your interested in researching at the Cathedral Archives?

CR: Well that was much later because my training was as a medievalist, I worked particularly on the 12<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup> centuries and a lot of my early research focused on that period as well, looking at the history of magic and the church relationship with magic and so on but my relationship with Malta I realised started about ten years ago this autumn from the first time I came to Malta. It came through a colleague at Exeter Professor Dionysius Agius who worked in the archives of Malta for many years. He wanted us to do a project on a particular inquisition case of Sellem bin al-Sheikh Mansour which we will talk about in a minute, and he was looking for a collaborator. He knew, he had somebody lined up to be a postdoctoral researcher. He knew he was interested in the relationship between Christians and Muslims and these Muslim



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slaves' lives, but he wanted someone who could help look up magic and think about church history, look at some of the lasting of the document. So, he approached my colleague Jonathan Berry who said, "you should ask Catherine". And he wrote to me and said would you like to come and collaborate on this project. I've never been to Malta I did not know very much about Maltese history, but I knew about magic, and I thought well, that sounds really interesting. Obviously, he had to apply for funding and the chances are always quite difficult with getting it so I thought to myself "oh yes I will do that but I won't really have to do it, I won't really get to do this project" but then he got the money so we came and we worked on this one case for some years, then did a follow-up project looking up the relationships of Muslim slaves with healing more broadly so the research went from that initial case and from colleague Dionysius.

DA: Where did the Cathedral Archives come up in this project that you are mentioning?

CR: They hold as you know all the records of the Roman Inquisition in Malta so they had this case that Dionysius wanted to work on and many many other cases where people, Christians, Muslims, men, women came before the inquisition accused of lots of things but there are quite a lot of cases to do with magic. So we did a lot of the research here in the Cathedral Archives and it was nice for me because I wouldn't have thought to come here if I haven't been working with someone who could worked in the archives for many years before. He knew what was here and knew the potential of it I guess.

DA: As you said worked on a couple of Maltese related projects including a very recent publication about Sellem Bin-al-Shiekh. Can you tell us something about your involvement in studying and translating the processo and eventually your micro-historical commentary of this lengthy trial.

CR: Well, I should say first of all most of the credit of the translation and the commentary goes to Alex Mallett who is the post-doctoral researcher on the project and did a lot of that work I worked with Alex particularly on translating the Latin, on translating some of the more difficult Italian we puzzled out together and then writing the commentary. It took us some years, we thought it would be I think, as all historical research, it takes a lot longer than you think it's going to take, I had other commitments, he [Mallett] had other commitments, Dionysus had a lot of other commitments, and it took longer than we thought. But it was detailed work, it is a long inquisition case, much much longer than many of them, it's complex, there's a lot of witnesses, there's a lot of accusations. Some accusations kind of drop away, other accusations come in, something that the inquisition could prove some things



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that can't. So, there was quite a lot of just to make sense of what was going on in this case who all these people were, what they accusing Sellem of, because he is accused of lots of different types of magic. So there was quite a lot of detailed work just making sense of that, and making sense of the kind of beliefs it talks about. I remember it took us a lot of long time that one of the witnesses says that he sees a *gatto mammone* at one point and we couldn't point out what this was. And eventually we worked out that it's an Italian word for a kind of big scary demonic cat and so there's some kind of folk belief going on but one of these witnesses thought that Sellem called up this demonic cat for him. Things like that took us a lot of time to figure out and then to kind of put into context, to think about the commentary what it tell us witchcraft, should be concerned in the period where it tells us about Christian-Muslim relations. So there was quite a lot of detail work to do but it was very interesting as an insight into lives of that period.

DA: It seems that Islamic magic in the 17<sup>th</sup> century encompasses a fascinating intersection of cultures, practices and beliefs including Maltese that learned Islamic sources of magic and some of which can be proved using our archives. There is a particular case between Vittorio Cassar and Sellem. Who was Sellem and how did Cassar got involved?

CR: Well, Sellem was a Muslim man from Cairo, he was enslaved by the Knights of St. John at some point before 1605 as so many people were, a lot of slaving both ways in the Mediterranean in this period, and he was a rower of the galleys but at some point before the trial he had an accident and was left disabled and walked with crutches. This is the thing all the witnesses say he's the guy with crutches that is how they identified him. He was clearly an educated man, he could read and write in Arabic and he said that he learnt astrology and a form of divination with geometric from his family, and geometrics where you draw dots at random and then by you can interpret that to know about the future, or to know information about the present. So he knew these kinds of slightly, type of magic and he seemed to be practicing in Malta, we have witnesses who claim to do this for them but in particular he had this relationship with Vittorio Cassar and Cassar as your listeners would probably know but more about Cassar because he was a more famous figure as an architect but he was also someone who was quite interested in magic, he comes up before the inquisition for owning magical books. He clearly had a reputation who knows about magic and at some point, he and Sellem met each other and started off – Cassar starts off that Sellem teaches him Arabic. Later on, Sellem also seems to teach him geometry we have, we know this because there are treatises that are preserved in the trial records that give instructions on how to perform geomancy probably, they belonged to Cassar and not to Sellem because they are in Italian and probably if



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they were Sellem's they weren't. But they seem to be collaborating over this form of magic from there, Cassar says that Sellem offered to teach him something that he calls *roca negra* which is how to summon demons. Sellem denies this completely and said "I never offered to teach him that, I do not know how to do that" something that the inquisition takes incredibly seriously so he is not going to admit to that, but they clearly have this kind of ongoing relationship. Cassar is learning from Sellem at least Arabic divination in a way that is quite unusual in the trials, usually you don't see that in the inquisition records, most of the cases are much shorter but it does seem that there was a real collaboration between two educated people here at least until all goes wrong and Sellem gets arrested.

DA: Malta possibly portrayed the highest proportion of accused Muslims in relation to its population in all Europe between the late 1500s and the early 1600s. What do you think that triggered this phenomenon?

CR: I think a lot of it has to do with the particular position and particular history that Malta has. Its position right between Europe and North Africa, it is ruled by the Knights of St. John who has this large naval fleet and are involved in taking Muslims from North Africa and from the Middle East as slaves to row on their galleys, so Malta has really quite a high population of slaves Muslims particularly around the harbour cities particularly in Valletta where the slaves' prison is. In a way that its unusual for compare with other places in the Mediterranean is not completely unique, there's some of the Italian cities also had a quite large slave populations and an Italian scholar called Cesare Santos looked at Livorno in particular where you see some of the same patters on a smaller scale. It has a Muslim population, it has a slaves' prison you have cases of Muslims doing magic there as well, but Malta the scale of it seems to be rather different because you do have a large population of slaves Muslims and it clearly worries the inquisition that you have this large population of non-Christians who could when they are not rowing on galleys they can get around and about, they can earn money in Malta, they can interact fairly freely with the Christian population. And the inquisition worries that would do to the morals and the faith of the Catholics of Malta. They worry about Muslims slaves leading Catholics estray by doing magic, also things like sexual mixing between Muslim men and Christian women, they worry about Christians who might be tempted to convert to Islam so there are a whole series of concerns about this kind-of interaction between Christians and Muslims and again, for that reason they are quite interested in prosecuting it if they can find evidence. So, I think partly it is a lot of it going on because they have a large population of Muslims. Also, we hear a lot about it because it worries the authorities.





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DA: In your research it transpires that Muslims were not unique in offering love magic or healing and perhaps Christians, including Maltese, might have practiced similar needs. What was the Inquisitor's approach towards Muslim and Christian prosecutors?

CR: Well in many ways it was quite similar, in cases we have for both Christians, Muslims who were accused of magic. You have these very short cases where somebody would come usually they would be sent after making confession to their parish priest and they say, I was ill, or I had a problem, and I called on this person to do magic for me. And usually, the case doesn't go very far beyond that, so the person comes in, they tell the story they say I am really sorry, and I won't do it again and the Inquisitor sends them away. So, in that sense they deal with kind of accusations of Christians and Muslim magic practice quite similarly. Just occasionally if testimonies build up if they keep hearing about the same person, then the Inquisitors will launch the case which is probably what happened to Sellem, get a whole series of testimonies and think "ah there is something going on with this guy". But they do that sometimes with Christians as well there are some quite big cases where Christian women were accused of offering magical healing for example. So, the procedure is often very very similar, what worries the inquisition is magic and how you prove it rather than necessarily just it might being practiced by a Christian or a Muslim.

DA: Your research shows that magic seemed to have made up a significant proportion of inquisitorial business throughout the first decade of the 16th century. What do you think it as the common factor, factors of all this?

CR: I think its really answers a lot of needs for people. A lot of the people who come to, or at least admit before the inquisition they wanted cures for illness for example, they have problems in their relationships, and they want love magic, they worried about maybe family or friends or lovers who are abroad they want to know what's happening. So, I think magic answers these really common needs that they can't necessarily answer in any other way or ways and as we discovered during the research among other scholars who've looked at magic in Malta is the late 16th, early 17<sup>th</sup> century are particularly unique here. Cases of magic in Malta are really quite high for as long as we have inquisition records obviously, up to the 18<sup>th</sup> century and that doesn't seem true to all the inquisitions, but it does seem to be true in Malta. I think the reason is that actually people have these problems here medicine can do some things in the early modern period but there are a lot you can't do. They are other ways to help with love magic or anxiety about a loved one people want to win at gambling there are very universal human needs and almost everyone in this



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period believes that magic work. They might think that it is bad, and you shouldn't do but they believe that it can work. And, so, a certain number of them would try it. There is also some fuzziness with some types of magic about whether or not it's legitimate and it is quite hard to tell exactly what people thought here because there is the story that they tell to the inquisition to make themselves look less culpable and then there is what they really thought. But quite often people would come for healing remedies for example they all say or "I didn't really realise this was wrong, I thought that it was just medicine, I thought it was just herbs, I didn't realise that this was magic" and that might be a way of making yourself to look less guilty before the inquisitor so that he would send you home but I wonder if there's also a grey area about somebody's form of magic were. People can think that broadly legitimate, maybe doesn't look obviously look demonic, maybe it doesn't look suspicious and people think well lets give it a try and quite often they will talk about using it as a last resort as well I mean, again, its hard to know whether this is just how they just wanted to tell things in front of the inquisitor but will all say I went to doctors and they couldn't help, I went to a priest and he prayed on me and it didn't help but then I went to this Muslim practitioner or Christian practitioner and they could help me so they think it is effective, maybe it is effective in cases where other things aren't effective. There are a lot of reasons why people turn to it, why it comes up so often in the records. It was probably quite a round-about answer, but I think magic is really key in this period, it addresses a lot of needs that people have.

DA: Can you tell us any prospective projects you intend to conduct especially in our archives?

CR: Well at the moment I am continuing really with a project that Dionysius Agius and I had been working on for years on popular healing and particularly the role of Muslim slaves in offering healing. It is a project officially ran from 2019 to 2022, it was funded by the British Academy which looks at the cases the Muslim healers, the cases of Christian healers and compares what the two do how similar they are. So, I am continuing with that. We wrote another article with Gabriel Farrugia who used to work here looking some of the aspects of Muslim slaves and their practice of magic. But I'd like to write another article which looks more at sort of the experience of magic in all of this, what's it like to think you are bewitched, what people do, what kinds of decisions they make about how to go to, and how they tell that later on the inquisitor. So, what I am doing mostly is that I am going back over at some of the cases we looked at, in the popular healing project, and checking them and looking for more details about what people say the experience is like and how do they talk about it and there is lots of, I'm looking at case this morning, which is a lady who is ill for quite a long time, like a lot of people she said so "I went to doctors but they didn't





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help, I went to the priest and it didn't help and so eventually I called in this Muslim healer" but she talks quite a lot about why they did that what she thought it was happening, did she think these remedies magical, she blames it all on her husband and says I was too sick my husband just brought this man in and he cured me. But there are also quite a lot of testimonies from her family and her husbands' family where clearly there's a lot of whole family dialogue going on about what do we do about Antonina's illness, what we think it is, what caused it, who do we call in. So I am looking at some of those sources where people talk about they think about illness and I would like to turn that into an article but it's quite an early stage. I am also doing a little bit of work on a project that Dionysius Agius will tell you more about I am sure that you will get the chance to interview him at one point looking at the *Sultana*, this ship that's captured by the Knights of St John around the 1700s roundabouts of the something about Christian-Muslim relations in the case so I am going to call up some of the educated from the same kind of period and what other evidence we can find for how Christians and Muslims are interacting. So that is my job this afternoon and tomorrow. But is wonderful to be here because there's such rich sources it is like listening to people talk in a way, you have all these testimonies where people say I thought this, I went to the shop I met this person. I mean you have to take it with a pinch of salt because people tell lies to the inquisitor, and they leave things out and try to make themselves look better and blame other people. But they are very detailed vivid sources of what life was like in that time.

DA: And finally, do you have any advice for historians who are starting to research?

CR: I think, I mean not necessarily just in the Cathedral Archives, I will come to that in a minute, but I think you need to find something that you are really really interested in it because if you are thinking about doing a PhD spend three years or more depending on where you study with just you and your thesis working on that stuff, it's got to be something you are passionate about and something you can keep yourself motivated. It's also got to be something that you think there's a gap in the scholarship that is important. Say you need to think about, or has it been done, what will it add to our understanding of the past if I do this topic, you can fill a gap but why it is important to fill this gap. So, I think thinking about some of those big questions about what you want to do and why do you think it's important early on it is really important. Your ideas will evolve as you go through your studies but to have some ideas in the start it's really important. And you also need, and this is where it comes the Cathedral Archives, good chunk of source material. sometimes I get approached by people who are thinking on PhD I would like to work on this topic, and I say that's great, but I am not really sure where the evidence is. We usually talk and we come with something that works but it's worth being aware of where the evidence is. If you



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are sitting on a resource like the Cathedral Archives, there are so many things you can do with it. My other advice is to read up on what other people had done but also speak to the people in the archives, speak to researchers who worked on these things, speak to archivists such as yourself who often know a huge amount who else is working on these sources what else is there, and, not here but I have had students who've gone to archives that are really quite poorly catalogued and the archivists says, "we have a box of medieval stuff we do not know what's in it, do you want to take a look!" "so, speak to people what you want to do because there are all kinds of knowledge out there which isn't necessarily all written down in academic papers and you just have to put a lot of hard work really. If you find something really exciting to research, then that's not necessarily such a hardship.

DA: I think from my end that's it! Thank you for very much for making time to meet you!

CR: Thank you!

DA: I hope that you find something new to add to your research in these two days that you have with us.

CR: It's a quick visit this time but hopefully I will come back and next time I have to bring my children because they are very cross that I haven't brought them this time.