

“Sacred Monarchs and the Science of Myth: Spain in European Context”

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In histories of medieval and early modern royal myths, Spain seems to live up to its reputation as being different. The English and French monarchs, whose thaumaturgical powers miraculously healed the condition known as the “king’s evil,” represented the epitome of sacred rulers, the dominant model of premodern political authority. However, Spanish monarchs in general did not make such claims. In fact, Teófilo Ruiz has called Castile, which did not conduct coronation ceremonies, an “unsacred monarchy.” My talk starts out from the premise outlined by Carlo Ginzburg that the encounter between different cultural traditions can open “a profound and unexpected viewpoint on reality.” Rather than treat Spain as an anomaly because it does not seem to fit certain historical models, a Spanish perspective can be ideal to challenge historical assumptions about early modern history. For example, setting Spanish royal myths in a European context reveals the importance of a “science of myth” whose chief goal was to yield practical guidance and real-world solutions to the enormous challenges early modern rulers faced. Instead of arguing over whether monarchs were sacred or not, the focus of much modern scholarly debate, early modern observers viewed royal myths as a problem about the role of religion in politics. From this viewpoint Spanish myths were only a variation on a set of common themes across cultures and historical periods. Ultimately, my talk hopes to reaffirm what the scholar of myth and religion Bruce Lincoln has argued is the value of comparing apples and oranges.