

“Over water and over wind, carry me to Benevento walnut tree”

**The Legend of the Flight between
History and Folklore**

**Call for Papers for the International
Conference, 14-15 May 2026**



The Giuseppe Bonomo Laboratory, dedicated to the study of the history, folklore, anthropology and ethnology of witchcraft, is honoured to organise the first international conference, to be held at the Giustino Fortunato University (Unifortunato) in Benevento (Italy) on 14 and 15 May 2026. Those interested in contributing a presentation to the International Conference are invited to respond to this call by submitting proposals for presentations and accompanying papers.

Abstract

Beginning with the tradition of the flight to the Walnut Tree of Benevento, this conference seeks to explore the evolution of belief in the nocturnal flight of witches - an idea deeply rooted in classical, biblical, and folkloric traditions - through the lens of transvectio, the supernatural transportation of individuals by angelic or demonic forces. Long before early modern demonologists codified the witches' flight as a distinctive sign of diabolic activity, Greco-Roman literature described enchantresses capable of transforming into birds, while Norse sagas recounted spiritual or bodily journeys to distant gatherings. From Apuleius' winged enchantresses to the Icelandic gandræið, nocturnal flight occupied a liminal space between visionary experience and physical reality. Already in the early Middle Ages, Christian authorities such as Regino of Prüm and Burchard of Worms condemned the beliefs of women who claimed to ride with Diana or Herodias—figures associated with pagan goddesses cults and fairy traditions. These nocturnal processions, dismissed as illusions orchestrated by the Devil, progressively merged with emerging notions of heresy, culminating in the demonisation of female ecstatic experience. The once-ambiguous bonae res (“good things”) were ultimately subsumed into the image of the lamiae-horrific child-devouring beings associated with Lilith, the strigae, and other nocturnal entities. Drawing on sources such as (though not limited to) the Canon Episcopi, the Roman de la Rose, the Formicarius, and the Malleus Maleficarum, as well as folkloric materials from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the conference will examine, among other issues, the ways in which flying ointments-prepared either from psychoactive herbs or from the fat of unbaptised infants-fulfilled both literal and symbolic functions. Such substances were believed to induce trance states, hallucinations, or demonic transportation, fusing visionary ecstasy with bodily transformation. This gave rise to intense theological debate: some clerics argued that women were merely dreaming; others, at a later stage, asserted that they truly flew, carried by demons to remote Sabbats. Through close textual analysis, the study of witchcraft trials, oral testimonies, and folkloric material, the conference also aims to interrogate the possibility that beliefs about witches' flight acted as a nexus for anxieties surrounding gender, heresy, and the shifting boundaries between spiritual rapture and demonic illusion. Rather than dismissing such narratives as fantasy or delusion, early modern authors such as Jean Bodin and Heinrich Kramer systematised them into a theological and political framework that equated nocturnal female mobility with moral and spiritual transgression.

By tracing this trajectory, the conference seeks to situate the image of the flying witch within broader debates concerning visionary knowledge, the body, and the limits of the orthodox cosmos across different periods and cultural contexts. Finally, and not least, long before the invention of practicable flying machines, folklore and imagination profoundly shaped conceptions of flight. Such representations had a significant impact both on proto-science fiction and on the utopian visions of early modern thinkers. The conference therefore intends to examine the extent to which - if at all - the concept of witches' flight contributed, directly or indirectly, to the history of aviation as a whole.

Particular attention will be devoted, though not limited, to the following themes:

- The shifting perception of flight as a literal, visionary, or metaphorical phenomenon;
- The understanding of flight as dream journey, physical event, spiritual ascent, entheogenic experience, artistic motif, and psychoanalytic symbol;
- The role of pharmacological knowledge and psychoactive substances in the formation of beliefs;
- The gendered power dynamics implicit in both the condemnation and the romanticisation of flying women;
- The interaction between folklore, theology, and proto-scientific thought;
- The survival of motifs linked to witches' flight in art, literature, and the spiritual movements of the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries.

Following this trajectory, the conference seeks to present the witches' flight not merely as a fanciful superstition, but as a dynamic cultural signifier—capable of reflecting transformations in the ways the body, imagination, and dissent have been conceived.

Objectives

- To trace the genealogy of the motif of the witches' flight and its evolution in European history.
- To analyse how different periods have reinterpreted this motif in accordance with prevailing religious, scientific, and cultural discourses.
- To explore the ways in which the motif encodes anxieties related to gender, power, and knowledge.
- To investigate how the motif of the witches' flight has influenced culture beyond narratives explicitly concerned with witchcraft.

Methodology

The structure of the conference is grounded in an interdisciplinary approach, combining historical analysis, textual and iconographic interpretation, and folklore studies. Primary sources (including trial records, ecclesiastical texts, popular tales, and digital humanities resources) will be critically examined in dialogue with relevant secondary literature in the fields of witchcraft studies, the history of medicine, and gender theory.

Relevance

As contemporary culture continues to recycle and reinterpret the image of the witch, tracing the historical roots and transformations of her flight sheds light on enduring social structures - particularly those concerning gender, fear, and the boundaries of belief.

Call

Applications are now open for the submission of abstracts, to be written in both Italian and English, for either individual papers or panels (consisting of a minimum of three and a maximum of six participants). Abstracts should not exceed 500 words for individual papers and 800 words for panels. In the latter case, the submission must include both the overall panel title and the titles of the individual contributions. Abstracts should be sent to laboratoriobonomo@unifortunato.eu no later than 15 January 2026.

Submissions must include:

- the author's name,
- institutional or academic/scientific affiliation,
- preferred mode of participation (in person or online),
- a Curriculum Vitae including a list of scholarly publications.

Participation is particularly encouraged from scholars, lecturers, researchers, and experts in the fields addressed by this call.

Further Information

Travel and accommodation expenses for those attending in person will be borne by the participants. There is no fee for the submission of abstracts; however, upon acceptance of the abstracts, a contribution of €50 will be requested to cover organisational costs of the conference.

Publishing

All contributions presented, if approved and discussed during the conference sessions, will undergo peer review and will subsequently be published.

Manuscripts intended for publication, to be written in one of the two indicated languages and in accordance with the methodological guidelines that will be provided, should be between 5,000 and 6,000 words in length (including bibliography) and must be submitted to laboratoriobonomo@unifortunato.eu by 15 April 2026. The final publication of the conference proceedings will involve no additional costs for participants.

Organisers

Giuseppe Bonomo Laboratory in collaboration with the Giustino Fortunato University (Unifortunato)

Scientific Committee

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Debora Moretti (University of Hertfordshire)
Francesca Vera Romano (University of Roma La Sapienza)

Organising Committee

Paolo Portone
Debora Moretti
Francesca Vera Romano
Paolo Palumbo
Carmine Ricciardi