

<b>Institution:</b> University College London		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 28 – History		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Enriching public understanding of, and inspiring creative practice through, the history of magical thinking		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2007-2019		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Prof. Sophie Page	Professor	October 2002-present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> Jan 2016-December 2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> No		
<b>1. Summary of the impact</b> (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p>Professor Sophie Page co-curated the exhibition <i>Spellbound: Magic, Ritual and Witchcraft</i> (31 August 2018-6 January 2019), which drew upon her research into the history of magic and attracted 45,585 visitors to the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. Visitors gained a better understanding of the changing roles of magic in the past and examined their own habits of “magical thinking.” The exhibition attracted a new audience of 25–34-year-olds to the Ashmolean. A wall hanging created for the exhibition by Fine Cell Work improved the wellbeing of the prisoners who made it, and creative collaborations with artists Ackroyd &amp; Harvey, cartoonist Hannah Sackett, musician Hayden Chisholm and storyteller Olivia Armstrong engaged audiences in emotional and artistic ways, and influenced the artists’ own creative practices.</p>		
<b>2. Underpinning research</b> (indicative maximum 500 words)		
<p>The history of magic emerged in the 1990s as an increasingly important field of medieval history. Magic was practised at every level of medieval society and engaged the greatest minds of the time; contrary to a previous historiographical focus on crude superstitions, magic texts reveal medieval people’s syncretic, sophisticated and morally ambiguous understanding of their universe. Page’s ground-breaking and innovative work has been formative and central to a new conceptualisation of late medieval attitudes to magic. Specifically, it demonstrates that some types of magic were viewed positively by monastic and ecclesiastical authorities (<b>R1, R2, R3</b>). This narrative of the “positivization” of magic has moved contemporary research in new directions and continues to suggest new fertile grounds for historical inquiry.</p> <p>Until recently, scholars engaged only intermittently with the visual and material culture of magic to explore these questions. Page’s publications — and particularly her use of visual sources (rather than texts) to address key questions about belief systems — opened up new methodologies and areas of inquiry (<b>R2, R4</b>). She was one of the first scholars to investigate magic’s relationship with the natural world, demonstrating that the boundaries between God, animals and demons were relatively firm in medieval culture but that the border between animals and humans was more fluid (<b>R5</b>). Most importantly, Page’s publications have aimed to change our understanding of medieval attitudes to learned magic by showing that it was tolerated or even valued by diverse people and institutions, including religious insiders—though intermittently, and in complex, sometimes ambiguous ways.</p> <p>Page initiated and co-edited with Dr Catherine Rider (Exeter University) the <i>Routledge History of Medieval Magic</i> (<b>R1</b>). This important book has 34 contributions by academics from 11 different countries and includes methodological reflections and “future directions” sections in all thematic chapters. Page’s chapter demonstrates how magical figures are useful to exploring the relationship between image and text in learned magic and for explaining why some medieval critics identified magic texts as deviant.</p> <p>As Co-I on the Leverhulme funded project “Inner Lives: Emotions, Identity, and the Supernatural, 1300-1900” (2015-2018), Page collaborated with Malcolm Gaskill (UEA) and Owen Davies (University of Hertfordshire). Page led research in three significant areas: recovering and interpreting the visual and material culture of magic (<b>R4</b>); identifying how interactions with the</p>		

supernatural revealed the emotional experiences and interior lives of medieval people (R4); and assessing the diverse ways in which cosmological ideas circulated in the late Middle Ages and stimulated the creation of new models to address questions about the nature of evil (R4, R6).

Co-curating (with professional curator Marina Wallace) the major exhibition *Spellbound: Magic, Ritual and Witchcraft* at the Ashmolean Museum in 2018 enabled Page to expand her research beyond the Middle Ages to the modern eras. Page used contemporary ideas about magical thinking (the belief that our thoughts or wishes may influence the world around us or that one event happens as a result of another with no plausible link of causation) to make significant connections between ideas, emotions, practices and experiences of magic in the past and present in her contributions to the accompanying exhibition catalogue (R4).

### 3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- R1.** Page, S., Rider, C. (Eds.), (2019). *The Routledge History of Medieval Magic*. Routledge. 550pp. Page co-wrote the Introduction and authored chapter 30, "Medieval magical figures: Between image and text." Shortlisted for the 2019 Folklore Society Katharine Briggs Award. The judges commented that it was "a very important intervention into the study of magic more generally, and an essential reference point for future study." Submitted to REF 2021.
- R2.** Page, S. (2017). *Medieval Magic*. In Davies, O. (Ed.), *The Oxford Illustrated History of Witchcraft and Magic*. (pp. 29-64). Oxford: Oxford University Press. "Engages in contemporary conversations... pertains to every discipline in the humanities and social sciences concerned with issues of power and alterity." – Martin LePage in *Reading Religion. A Publication of the American Academy of Religion*.
- R3.** Page, S.L. (2013). *Magic in the Cloister: Pious Motives, Illicit Interests and Occult Approaches to the Medieval Universe*. University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press. 248pp. A review in the *Cahiers de Recherches Médiévales et Humanistes* (2013) described it as a remarkable book that handles a complex subject with great clarity.
- R4.** Page, S., Wallace, M. (Eds.), (2018). *Spellbound: Magic, Ritual and Witchcraft*. Oxford: Ashmolean Museum. 176pp Page co-wrote the Introduction and authored chapter 2. "Love in a Time of Demons: Magic and the Medieval Cosmos." 9.1% of visitors to the exhibition purchased the catalogue. This was a higher percentage than the preceding 4 exhibitions at the Ashmolean. Research for this output was assisted by a peer-reviewed Leverhulme Research grant (i).
- R5.** Page, S.L. (2007). "Good Creation and Demonic Illusions: The Medieval Universe of Creatures." In Kalof, L., Resl, B. (Eds.), *A Cultural History of Animals: vol. 2, The Medieval Age (1000-1400)*. (pp. 27-57). Oxford: Berg. This output went through rigorous peer review.
- R6.** Page, S. (2019). "A Late Medieval Demonic Invasion of the Heavens." In Collins, D.J. (Ed.), *The sacred and the sinister. Studies in medieval religion and magic*. (pp. 233-54). University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press. This output went through rigorous peer review. Submitted to REF 2021.

### Grants

- i. Co-Investigator on the Leverhulme Research Grant "Inner Lives: Emotions, Identity, and the Supernatural, 1300-1900" (GBP249,524 awarded from October 1st, 2015, for 36 months). Wellcome Grant for *Spellbound* (co-application with the Ashmolean Museum): award of GBP50,000: Grant reference number: 208889/Z/17/Z (awarded 14th September 2017).

### 4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The exhibition *Spellbound: Magic, Ritual and Witchcraft* (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, 31 August 2018 – 6 January 2019) enriched public understanding of the history of magic and the place of magical thinking in all our lives and pursued ways of using that knowledge for its psychological, social and creative benefits. Page led on creating the exhibition proposal, finding a professional curator to collaborate with (Marina Wallace, Artakt) and successfully pitching the idea of

*Spellbound* to the Ashmolean. She had additional curatorial assistance from Malcolm Gaskill (UEA), Owen Davies and Ceri Houlbrook (University of Hertfordshire). The exhibition brought together more than 200 exhibits from the twelfth century to 2016 in an antechamber on magical thinking and three rooms focused on the medieval cosmos, the modern home and the early modern community. The medieval room, in particular, engaged visitors with Page's research, demonstrating that medieval people had rich and diverse cosmological views (R6), positive approaches to magic (R3), and linked magical practices to their inner lives and emotional experiences (R4).

### **Attracting a New Audience to the Ashmolean and Enhancing Museum Practice**

*Spellbound* stands out among all recent Ashmolean exhibitions for “reaching a wider, different audience, a younger audience,” according to the Ashmolean Exhibitions manager and Co-ordinator film (A). It attracted 45,585 visitors, surpassing the Ashmolean target of 30,000 by more than 50% (A). The Ashmolean is one of Arts Council England's (ACE) National Portfolio Organisations. ACE stress the importance of museums attracting and engaging young and diverse visitors in their 2010-20 strategic goals, which include: “Everyone has the opportunity to experience and to be inspired by the arts, museums and libraries” (B). Responses to the Ashmolean's survey showed that the number of respondents who had never visited the Ashmolean before was higher for *Spellbound* than for any other exhibition for which data had been analysed. The data also showed a large increase in the proportion of respondents in the 25–34 age bracket, accounting for about 35% of the total (roughly double the Ashmolean exhibition norm) (C).

ACE's strategic framework highlights the essential role of museums in “fuel[ing] children's curiosity and critical capacity” and supporting their learning and creativity (B). *Spellbound* helped the Ashmolean to meet this strategic goal. *Spellbound* was seen by 497 school pupils on educational visits, and visitors included an additional 1,137 under-12s (more than any of the four preceding exhibitions) and 3,610 12–17-year-olds (C). To facilitate engagement, Page produced a *Spellbound* Top 10 Trail teachers' resource for secondary schools, advised on the exhibition family trail and ran a Saturday morning workshop for A-level art students with artist Katharine Dowson. The Ashmolean's Learning Officer called this “A fantastic workshop. The young people clearly enjoyed it, got a lot out of the session and made some really interesting work” (C).

Page and Wallace's collaboration with the Ashmolean also **enhanced cultural heritage preservation and interpretation**. *Spellbound* involved more objects, private lenders and small local museums than the exhibition team normally deploys (A). The **benefit to local museums** included an “extra level of support” provided by the Ashmolean team of technicians, registrars and conservators “to enable them to lend” (A). Page's new research findings on several objects (R4) enhanced their interpretation: notable examples included a seventeenth-century ceremonial sword at the Ashmolean (now recognised as a betrothal gift), magic square talismans at the Pitt Rivers, a seal matrix at the Museum of the History of Science Oxford and an extremely rare magic mirror loaned by the Mathematisch-Physikalischer Salon, Dresden.

### **Enriching public, critical and cultural understanding of the significance of magical thinking**

Over half of visitors surveyed between 24 September and 22 November 2018 felt that *Spellbound* changed their understanding of the role of magic in the past. Page designed an antechamber to the exhibition with questions linked to her research on magical thinking (R4) that helped visitors to reflect on how, as a visitor put it, “we still use ritual and superstition as coping mechanisms for living in a complex world” (D). A key example linking modern and medieval magical thinking was love. Page collaborated with Ceri Houlbrook to create a display of medieval inscribed love tokens and modern love locks (padlocks affixed to bridges) based on their research (R4). One review (on the website of the marketing company culturecalling.com) termed this display “the most overwhelming evidence that we're still magically minded” (E).

In the medieval room, Page showed how the creation of medieval images and objects was driven by emotions and by different ways of relating to the cosmos, as well as by creative choices (R1, R2, R6). One visitor acknowledged this, tweeting: “[It made] me think about our relationship with

objects and the meaning with which we invest them” (F). Another responded with self-conscious magical thinking: “John Dee’s crystal ball is something that I would touch alone but with people around me I would not touch just in case something did happen” (D) and others explicitly **reflected on the continued presence of magical thinking today**: “The presence of enchanted mirrors gave me a feeling of dread... and curiosity... Coming out of this exhibition, I reflected and asked myself: despite my apparent rationality, do I really think that differently from them?” (F).

68.5% of survey respondents felt that *Spellbound* made them more aware of magical thinking in their own lives; **visitors’ knowledge and understanding of human behaviour in the twenty-first century were enhanced by their knowledge of its historical precedents**. The exhibition enabled visitors to understand the complexity of ritual actions: one commented that it was “important to realise that magic is not simply spells but is emotional” (D). In a *Times* review (31.8.18), Rachel Campbell-Johnson wrote, “this history of magic is surprisingly moving... [T]he hidden presence of magic as it permeates our history and our human psyche is revealed” (E).

*Spellbound* attracted more than 98 reviews, features, interviews and blog posts in UK and European media outlets, **recognising the significance of magical thinking today and in the past** and extending the reach of the exhibition. In *The Times Literary Supplement* (26.10.18), Jane Jakeman declared that it was “an exhibition more intelligent and thought-provoking than any big metropolitan collection has managed” (E). Sir Philip Pullman, the Carnegie-Medal winning children’s author, wrote in *The Guardian* (01.09.2018), “I think this exhibition is full of illuminating things, and the mental world it illustrates is an important – no, an essential part of the life we live” (4,910,000 hits and 3,933 shares in the first months) (E).

#### **Enhancing prisoners’ wellbeing through craft in partnership with a UK-based charity**

In collaboration with the prisoner rehabilitation charity Fine Cell Work (FCW), *Spellbound* displayed a specially commissioned wall hanging titled “Magical Thinking.” This piece was hand-stitched in four British prisons by 12 individuals, based on Page’s research into medieval and modern understandings of human fate constrained by powerful environmental pressures (R4, R6). This had a positive impact on participant wellbeing in line with FCW’s objective to train prisoners in needlework “to enable them to build fulfilling and crime-free lives” (G). FCW emphasises the therapeutic aspect of sewing: “Needlework provides a sense of calm and relieves stress as the needle becomes a tool to channel the inner – and outer – turmoil of prisoners” (G).

The FCW Design and Commissions manager reported that the most rewarding part of interpreting Page’s research was “seeing designs by prisoners who responded creatively, personally, with thought-provoking images to the brief” (G). In a piece for the Fine Cell Newsletter (Winter 2018), “Remembering my grandfather through magical thinking,” one participant explains how his design featured a talisman made by his grandfather from an empty artillery shell in France, 1915 (G). Another stitcher wrote, “Within my Fine Cell piece is my journey... I’m more accepting of magical thinking in others [after completing the stitching]” (G).

#### **Inspiring and informing artistic practice leading to the production of new cultural artefacts**

*Spellbound* included major new works of contemporary art which were commissioned for the exhibition. Page and Wallace selected the artists and directed their collaborations with Gaskill and Davies between September 2016 and August 2018. These collaborations informed and enriched artistic practice, leading to the creation of several new artworks for *Spellbound*. Page’s own collaborations with artists resulted in **the co-production of new art works which enriched artistic practice**: a sculpture tableau (Ackroyd & Harvey), an interactive music piece (Hayden Chisholm), a modern wall hanging (FCW), a comic book (Hannah Sackett) and a story-telling workshop (Olivia Armstrong).

Ackroyd and Harvey’s work *From Aether to Air* consists of an elevated crystalline human figure, a backdrop of angels and two small demons, which was influenced by Page’s research demonstrating how medieval cosmic models emphasised human agency in response to environmental pressures (R6). The **artists drew inspiration** from “our conversations about microcosmic man and this sense of being under siege from planetary forces.” Working on

*Spellbound* with Page **influenced their choice and use of materials**: it “has pushed us to use different materials and to look at materials in a different way ... we work intuitively so some of the things we’ve touched on with the knowledge from Sophie – it will remain there and influence work to come” (A).

Page worked closely with Armstrong (five performances attended by 123 children and 140 adults). Armstrong explains that “medieval magic... was something that I knew a little bit about, but not in great depth... [Page] had a real ability to disseminate that knowledge and make it very clear so I could understand it” (A). Writing about his interactive music piece, “The Medieval Jukebox,” Chisholm said, “Sophie’s work and research [i.e. R4 and R6]... **informed my whole work, inspiring me** to create the soundscape and the composition... the jukebox itself really set some things alight for me as a composer and performer and I hope to use some of the ideas again” (G). Hannah Sackett’s comic, *The Magician’s Lament*, was inspired by the idea that magicians sought, and sometimes achieved, respectability, drawing upon Page’s research (R1, R2, R3). She notes, “I’ve benefitted artistically... I’ve worked with new images, new ways of drawing and creating page designs... it’s also leading me into other comics I want to make in the future” (A).

Page’s collaborations with artists continue to generate new ways of thinking and making. In 2019 and 2020, Page worked with the artist Annie Cattrell on a film, *Then in Now*, that is “intended to reappraise the continuity and timelessness of medieval thinking in the here and now” (I). The film compiles Cattrell’s “thoughts, imaginings and responses” to Page’s research on the cosmos (R3, R4) alongside Cattrell’s observation of Page’s “interpretations of medieval manuscripts at the Wellcome Library, London” (I). Cattrell documented the collaboration on her Instagram account, which has 1980 followers. In 2020, Page also collaborated with the artist Katharine Dowson on a sculpture in the form of a mirrored, glass heart, titled *Bewitched* that draws upon Page’s research on the multiple meanings associated with the medieval heart (R4) and the *Spellbound* exhibition (I). The planned physical display of the two works was prevented by COVID-19 restrictions. However, Cattrell’s film and photos of Dowson’s sculpture, along with the artists’ descriptions of collaborating with Page, have been exhibited online since 26 November 2020 and were viewed 248 times in the first month, engaging a public audience with new ways of considering contemporary resonances of medieval magical thinking through creative practice.

##### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- A. Filmed interviews with artists Ackroyd & Harvey, comic book artist Hannah Sackett, storyteller Olivia Armstrong and Exhibitions manager and Co-ordinator Agnes Valencak & Catriona Pearson (Video testimonial) <https://innerlives.org/2019/02/07/magical-thoughts-the-making-of-spellbound/>
- B. Arts Council England, ‘Great Art and Culture for Everyone’: 10-Year Strategic Framework, 2010 -2020, 2nd edition 2013
- C. Ashmolean exhibition evaluation data on: visitor numbers, a marketing summary, an exit survey. [Confidential] Email from Learning Officer.
- D. Interviews and Observations made at the *Spellbound* Exhibition by Jack Ford and Emma Zürcher, September and October 2018.
- E. Reviews of *Spellbound: Culture Calling*, *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *Times Literary Supplement*.
- F. Responses to *Spellbound* on social media.
- G. Testimony from Fine Cell Work; “Healing mental health,” Fine Cell Work blog post; Fine Cell Work Newsletter Winter 2018; participant stitchers’ feedback questionnaires.
- H. Testimony from musician Hayden Chisholm (Audio testimonial available on request)
- I. Artists statements: Annie Cattrell and Katharine Dowson (Video Testimonials) <https://bit.ly/3dBA37y>