

Vitus Huber

TOWARD A MORE POSITIVE PERSPECTIVE  
ON NOCTURNAL ACTIVITIES IN THE MIDDLE AGES  
AND EARLY MODERN PERIOD:  
AN INTRODUCTION

*Post tenebras lux*

The expression *Post tenebras lux* is emblazoned on the main building of the University of Geneva in which the symposium took place that laid the groundwork for this volume. This Latin phrase translates as «Light after darkness». It stems from the Vulgate version of Job 17:12, where it says: *Post tenebras spero lucem* («After darkness, I hope for light»). Its abbreviated form became the motto of the Reformation at the time of its first centenary in 1617. In this context, it encapsulates the Protestant idea that after the times of false belief under the Catholic Church, the Reformation had ‘enlightened’ its followers, allowing them to see the truth<sup>1</sup>. Thus *post tenebras lux* alluded to the metaphorical dimension of darkness and light, in which darkness stands for evil or for ignorance and light for good or truth<sup>2</sup>.

1. Paul-Alexis Mellet, «*Post tenebras lux*: le temps et le corps dans la conversion aux XVI<sup>e</sup> et XVII<sup>e</sup> siècles», in Daniela Solfaroli Camillocci, Maria-Cristina Pitassi (eds.), *Les modes de la conversion confessionnelle à l'époque moderne: autobiographie, altérité et construction des identités religieuses*, Florence, Olschki, 2010, 21-40, at 21-22; Sebastian Kranich, «Der Geist der Zeiten: Protestantische Deutungsmuster in universitären Reformationsjubiläen», *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte*, 65/1 (2013), 18-31, at 21-24. – I am grateful to the Swiss National Science Foundation for the financial support.

2. Hans Blumenberg, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2010, 7.

While this slogan insinuates an utterly negative interpretation of darkness, darkness also functioned as an enabler. In heterodox settings, especially after the Reformation, confessional minorities saw themselves forced to practice their beliefs in clandestine gatherings. We know that such assemblies often took place in the night. The nocturnal darkness protected their secret meetings<sup>3</sup>. Thus, the expression *post tenebras lux* and its context remind us of the ambivalence of darkness. This latter ranges from devilish, dangerous, and destructive, on the one side, to holy, protective, and constructive on the other. Such a spectrum of ambivalence is similarly applicable to the night.

In most societies, the night is associated with danger, criminality, the liminal, or death, and pre-modern Europe is no exception. On the contrary, its image is embedded in the romanticized view of an age that feared the end of day. Despite abundant research on this aspect of darkness, there was another, less obvious attitude toward the night, which has seen much less scholarly attention: nocturnal activities that were cherished, sought after, or thought only possible during the nighttime. Such more positive attitudes *toward* and activities *of* the night feature the search for the relics of saints, nighttime prayers, the pursuit of astronomy or other sciences at the foot of a candlestick, or social events that took place when the labors of the day were over. In short, this volume scrutinizes the brighter sides of night in medieval and early modern times.

Ideally, this approach goes beyond a simple change of perspective, arguing for example that a thief conceives of darkness or the night as something positive, since it allows him to raid the larder without being seen, and so forth. Indeed, judgement regarding a nocturnal activity depends on one's point of view. But what seems more fruitful to us is to analyze the activities that took place during the night and ask to what extent it was the nocturnal setting that enabled them.

3. Craig Koslofsky, *Evening's Empire: A History of the Night in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011, 47-58.

*State of the Art*

These questions have received less attention in scholarship on the pre-modern night<sup>4</sup>. Nevertheless, the field has increased its dynamics in recent years, focusing on specific aspects such as sleep, dreams, and sleepwalking, and often including literary or sometimes material approaches<sup>5</sup>. Further topics feature the attempts at regulating and disciplining nightlife<sup>6</sup> or at nocturnal spiritual contemplation<sup>7</sup>. Since the field is still relatively young, others have dared to apply broader frames, offering more general histories of the night<sup>8</sup> or of darkness<sup>9</sup>.

4. For an exception and in regard to values of nocturnal facets in classical Antiquity, see James Ker, Antje Wessels (eds.), *The Values of Nighttime in Classical Antiquity: Between Dusk and Dawn*, Leiden, Brill, 2020.

5. Michael Beaumont, *Nightwalking: A Nocturnal History of London*, London, Verso, 2015; Sasha Handley, *Sleep in Early Modern England*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2016; Nadia Durrani, Brian Fagan, *What We Did in Bed: A Horizontal History*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2019; Claire Gantet, *Une histoire du rêve: Les faces nocturnes de l'âme (Allemagne, 1500-1800)*, Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2021 [German original 2010]; Gerrit Verhoeven, «(Pre)Modern Sleep: New Evidence from the Antwerp Criminal Court (1715-1795)», *Journal for Sleep Research*, 30/13099 (2021), 1-7.

6. Corinne Walker, «Esquisse pour une histoire de la vie nocturne à Genève au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle», *Revue du Vieux Genève*, (1989), 73-86; Birgit Emich, «Zwischen Disziplinierung und Distinktion: Der Schlaf in der Frühen Neuzeit», *WerkstattGeschichte*, 34 (2003), 53-75; Christian Casanova, *Nacht-Leben: Orte, Akteure und obrigkeitliche Disziplinierung in Zurich, 1523-1833*, Zurich, Chronos 2007; and Marco Cicchini, «Gouverner la nuit au siècle des Lumières: Entre tyrannie des heures noires et plaisirs noctambules», *XVIII.ch*, 2 (2011), 39-65.

7. Alec Ryrie, «Sleeping, Waking and Dreaming in Protestant Piety», in Id. Jessica Martin (eds.), *Private and Domestic Devotion in Early Modern Britain*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2012, 73-92; Rose Delestre, «Je me cuiday endormir: poétique de la vulnérabilité et identité nocturne dans l'écriture de Christine de Pizan», *Écriture de soi-R*, 1 (2021), 99-124.

8. Jean Verdon, *La Nuit au Moyen Âge*, Paris, Perrin, 2003; Roger Ekirch, *At Day's Close: Night in Times Past*, New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 2006; Alain Cabantous, *Histoire de la nuit (XVII<sup>e</sup>-XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle)*, Paris, Fayard, 2009.

9. Bryan Palmer, *Cultures of Darkness: Night Travels in the Histories of Transgression (From Medieval to Modern)*, New York, Monthly Review Press, 2000; Nina Edwards, *Darkness: A Cultural History*, Chicago, Chicago Univer-

One of these pioneering books, Craig Koslofsky's *Evening's Empire* of 2011, has suggested that during the early modern period the night was 'colonized.' Koslofsky has termed this process 'nocturnalization,' describing how diurnal activities extended increasingly into nighttime and how the night, in turn, created the space for new activities<sup>10</sup>. This observation fits well with the studies of the introductions of public street lighting and the use of artificial light at court<sup>11</sup>. Here, certain caution is required to navigate around teleological traps, since increasing nocturnal activities during the early modern period imply neither a 'dead' medieval night nor a linear development thanks to technological inventions, such as improved lighting methods. Finally, studies of the non-European night have equally indicated that there lies a vast potential for further research<sup>12</sup>.

### *Characteristics of the Night*

To describe the types of nocturnal activity and define the characteristics of the night respectively, one must consider geography and culture. In probably most cultures, people have had a

sity Press, 2018; Nic Dunn, Tim Edensor (eds.), *Rethinking Darkness: Cultures, Histories, Practices*, London, Routledge, 2020.

10. Koslofsky, *Evening's Empire*.

11. Craig Koslofsky, «Princes of Darkness: The Night at Court, 1650-1750», *Journal of Modern History*, 79/2 (2007), 235-73; Darrin McMahon, «Illuminating the Enlightenment: Public Lighting Practices in the Siècle des Lumières», *Past & Present*, 240 (2018), 119-59; Sophie Reculin, 'Le règne de la nuit désormais va finir': *L'invention et la diffusion de l'éclairage public dans le royaume de France (1697-1789)* diss. thesis, 2017, online: <https://tel.archives-ouvertes.fr/tel-01915183>.

12. See among others Cemal Kafadar, «How Dark is the History of the Night, How Black the Story of Coffee, How Bitter the Tale of Love: The Changing Measure of Leisure and Pleasure in Early Modern Istanbul», in Arzu Öztürkmen, Evelyn Birge Vitz (eds.), *Medieval and Early Modern Performance in the Eastern Mediterranean*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2014, 243-69; Laura Hollsten, «Night Time and Entangled Spaces on Early Modern Caribbean Sugar Plantations», *Journal of Global Slavery*, 1 (2016), 248-73; Angelika Koch, «Nightless Cities: Timing the Pleasure Quarters in Early Modern Japan», *Kronoscope*, 17/1 (2017), 61-93; Nancy Gonlin, David Millard Reed (eds.), *Night and Darkness in Ancient Mesoamerica*, Boulder, University Press of Colorado, 2021.

concept of day and night. In the Christian world, the first few lines of Genesis 1 already describe the connectivity of darkness and night as well as the separation of day and night. Having invented light, «God sees that the light is good and separates it from darkness, calling the light day and the darkness night»<sup>13</sup>. Certainly, this radical dichotomy seldom holds its ground when one considers that the transitional phases of dusk and dawn, or evening and early morning, render the night a liminal and opaque phenomenon. Moreover, neither the night nor the day are perceived exclusively as unities if we think of monikers like ‘afternoon’ or the monastic dividing of the night<sup>14</sup>. Also, the varying amount of daylight or dark hours depends on season and latitude, influencing the behavior of both humans and nature.

In the latitudes of this volume’s authors, darkness is one of the most eminent qualities of the night. It offers a) protection from being seen, which is beneficial to illegitimate love or sexual encounters or suppressed spiritual devotion, among other activities; and b) protection from distraction. This would improve spiritual meditation, astronomy, and artistic or intellectual production. The idea of the latter was called *lucubratio*, a concept already known to ancient Greeks and Romans<sup>15</sup>. For the topic of nocturnal activities it is interesting to examine whether these effects of darkness were limited to nighttime or could also appear during the day, inside a dark room, a cellar, tower, or cave. The more general question to ask is: to what extent were the nocturnal activities really linked to the night? To what degree were they enabled by darkness or by the nighttime as a temporal entity or by a combination of the two? Or whether none of

13. Genesis 1:1–5.

14. Cf. the chapters by Anne-Lydie Dubois and Jean-Claude Schmitt in this volume; and Christina Sanchez-Stockhammer, Jenny Arendholz, «*Abend ward, bald kommt die Nacht ...: Die Korrelation von Tages- und Uhrzeiten im deutsch-englischen Vergleich*», *Lebende Sprachen*, 57 (2012), 139–61.

15. For details on *lucubratio* see for example, Mark Vessey, «Erasmus’s *Lucubrationes*: Genesis of a Literary œuvre», in Stephen Partridge, Eric Kwakkel (eds.), *Author, Reader, Book: Medieval Authorship in Theory and Practice*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2018, 232–62; and James Ker, «Nocturnal Writers in Imperial Rome: The Culture of *lucubration*», *Classical Philology*, 99 (2004), 209–42.

them were preconditions for the activities, but were due to a combination of circumstances that happened to take place at night as well, such as, for example, social gatherings, sexual intercourse, spiritual devotion, etc.

Further characteristics of the (pre-modern) night include on a *natural level* limited visibility, but better observability of the stars and the moon. On a *sensory level* relative silence dominates the night, at least in areas where people live. It would be interesting to know more about the bodily difference in perceiving noise during the day as opposed to the night, with less visual distraction. The relative silence has to do with the next point that is a specificity of the night on a *social level*: reduced activity. As diurnal animals and most humans are asleep – albeit nocturnal animals are awake – noisy movements decrease during the night-time in areas inhabited by humans. Diminished activity comes with limited mobility owing to closed town gates or the above-mentioned factors. The closing of city entries leads to the *juridical level* of specific laws for nightlife. For example, by night, each person on the streets was obliged to make themselves visible by carrying a lantern or torch or by hiring a linkboy<sup>16</sup>.

Most of these points characteristic of nighttime are interconnected or even interdependent. For example, darkness impedes some diurnal activities. Such circumstances invite people to stay at home or go to sleep, which leads to reduced outdoor activity. This again increases silence or protection from being seen or from distraction, which consequently enable deeper concentration on meditation or *lucubratio* or astronomical observations and so forth. Such interconnections render the essentials of the night more complex to grasp. They require careful analysis so as not to jump to conclusions about cause and effect.

Two last aspects of this brief definition of the night regard its temporal and spatial dimensions. On the one hand, the night functions as a temporal entity. Specific rhythms of the night show that this entity did not necessarily mean a temporal *unity*,

16. For an analysis of legal characteristics of the night see: Emich, *Zwischen Disziplinierung und Distinktion*; Casanova, *Nacht-Leben*; or Cicchini, *Gouverner la nuit au siècle des Lumières*.

as mentioned above<sup>17</sup>. Thus, one may ask, what makes the night a particular time? Or the other way around: to what extent is the night influenced by concepts *of* and attitudes *toward* time? On the other hand, the night is not only a time, but also a place. At least, this is the case if you consider that the night is covering half of the planet at any given time, even if continuously shifting around the earth<sup>18</sup>. Hence, its location always depends on temporal factors – and vice versa: its time depends on its position.

Location moreover influences the person who asks questions. Owing to the constellation of the group participating in the conference in Geneva in June 2022, it so happens that the following chapters discuss the topic from predominantly European or at least Westerners' points of view. The reason for this lies in limited resources rather than lack of interest or awareness. Future research should aim for more global approaches, as intercultural and interregional comparisons promise to be fruitful, too. In contrast to Christian attitudes, in some cultures, for example in Polynesian cosmologies, night and darkness were considered as the sacred part of daytime, while day and light referred to the profane<sup>19</sup>. At the very least, this volume aims at a critical reflection upon the evaluation of pre-modern nights.

### *Interrogating the Night*

In order to explore these aspects *of* and attitudes *toward* the night, the book raises a set of questions. In particular, our attention is geared toward the *materiality* of nocturnal activities, such as the conception of beds or lighting. Furthermore, we want to understand the *social implications* of nighttime activities, and how

17. See furthermore Jean-Claude Schmitt, *Les rythmes au Moyen Âge*, Paris, Gallimard, 2016, 253–337.

18. Christopher Kyba et al., «Night Matters: Why the Interdisciplinary Field of 'Night Studies' is Needed», *Multidisciplinary Scientific Journal*, 3 (2020), 1–6, 2.

19. Christa Bausch, «Das Nachtmythologem in der polynesischen Religion und seine Auswirkungen auf protestantische Missionstätigkeit», *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte*, 22/3 (1970), 244–66; also mentioned in Koslofsky, *Evening's Empire*, 281.

these activities, in turn, *shaped pre-modern societies*: Who participated in nocturnal practices? And were gatherings at this time of day more intimate and private, or decidedly public? To what extent did a cultural alignment of night with divine forces of creativity, a perceived closeness to the otherworld, and the ideal of concentration beyond daily and mundane disturbances play a role in making this a preferable time for philosophical reflection, art, and science? What effects did a legal framework have on pre-modern nightlife? For example, did prohibitions change society's view of activities that for such reasons were forced to be nocturnal, such as alchemy, prostitution, and human dissections, among others?

Further questions refer to historiography and regard established ways of periodization. Ingrained in our definition of epochs in the history of our continent, we can easily detect how metaphorical references to light or dark were used to discredit – or at least to characterize – the differences between modernity and its immediate forerunners. The name 'Enlightenment' already uses a wordplay that associates the age of Voltaire with the modern times. The Middle Ages, though, are often described as the night that came before the sunlit day of the Enlightenment<sup>20</sup>. Certain exponents of German Romanticism in the early nineteenth century used this trope but twisted its meaning into a somewhat more positive perspective: «One has termed it [= the Middle Ages, V.H.] a night lasting over a thousand years. But this night is at least lightened up by stars. In it, stellar constellations are rising and falling, which are invisible in a time when the shadeless noonday sun glooms over the crown of men»<sup>21</sup>. With these words Ludwig Uhland praised the Middle Ages in his *Introduction to Medieval Poetry* around 1830 at the University of Tübingen particularly *because* of its nocturnal association. Two

20. John V. Fleming, *The Dark Side of the Enlightenment: Wizards, Alchemists, and Spiritual Seekers in the Age of Reason*, New York, W. W. Norton, 2013, 10.

21. Ludwig Uhland, *Uhlands Werke. Dritter Teil: Zur Geschichte der Dichtung und Sage*, ed. by Adalbert Silbermann, Berlin et al., Deutsches Verlagshaus Bong, [n.d.], 14 [our own translation]. I thank Romedio Schmitz-Esser for providing me with this quote.



centuries later we might ask whether such a way of framing the medieval period in terms of light or darkness is useful at all. Combining essays on the medieval with those on the early modern night, as this volume does, allows for a reconsideration of ruptures and continuities beyond the common borders of epochs.

Finally, we hope to stimulate reflections on the approaches and best practices in the field. What are the methodological difficulties in discussing the everyday experience of night in our sources? What implications do they have for our research, and how can we overcome such challenges? We should always ask ourselves why certain sources have been produced and conserved and what implications this has for our image of the night and of nocturnal activities. The *discourses* on night and nocturnal activities provide only limited insights into the *practices* of the night. Generally, in regard to intellectual endeavors such as literary or philosophical writing and spiritual contemplation, the night enjoyed a favorable image. In contrast, in social aspects it often had a restricting reputation, not least because the night opened up spaces<sup>22</sup>. We should therefore try to distinguish between intellectual or theoretical ideals and socio-political reality.

To get a grip on the history of nocturnal activities, we encourage the use of multiple and interdisciplinary approaches, as nocturnal activities are tricky to detect. As can be seen in Jan Steen's painting *Ace of Heart*, the night was full of joyful activities (see fig. 1). To discover the sources that speak of such nocturnal life we often need to look very closely. It might well be that we have to peek behind – or even through – a glass of beer to find the source that *enlightens* the scenery of nocturnal activities. Pursuing an interdisciplinary approach facilitates the quest to detect the actors and actions positioned in the darker spaces, like the smoking man at the back.

The papers take different aims and discuss individual aspects in this long list of questions, but their common focus is on the night as enabler, as a time of day that offers chances and possibilities that a sunlit workday could not provide. This urges us always to consider and challenge the specificity of the nocturnal in such

22. Cf. Cabantous, *Histoire de la nuit (XVII<sup>e</sup>-XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle)*, 29.

night activities. Could these activities also have taken place during the day? And, if so, what then made them *nocturnal* activities? Only the time when they happened, or other factors too?

*This Volume in a Nutshell*

Uniting approaches from medieval and early modern, cultural and criminal history, from material cultures, medieval literature, and art history, this book offers an interdisciplinary and transversal look at the night. The volume comprises four sections, starting off with three chapters on the connection of the nocturnal with devotion and salvation in «Nightly Watchfulness».

Jean-Claude Schmitt begins his study of the rhythms of the night with the separation of day and night in Genesis. He underscores the fundamental role of the night in the temporal structuring of Christian medieval culture. The Rule of Saint Benedict and the books of hours stipulated a liturgical schedule, requiring believers to interrupt their nightly sleep at specific times for prayers. The ecclesiastics tirelessly endeavored to measure and identify the middle of the night, since midnight marked the pivot of this circadian rhythm.

The foundations of these monastic preoccupations found their echo in medieval German spiritual poetry, as the literary scholar Agnes Rugel demonstrates based on the figure of the watchman. In medieval lyric, the watchman represents the main enabler of cherished nocturnal activities, namely of watching, sleeping, and expecting. The night sets the scene for the vigilant watchman as idealized Christian, not only to allow everyone else to sleep in peace, but also to stay watchful toward God and await the light of dawn, symbolizing salvation.

Anne-Lydie Dubois spins this thread further, as she analyzes the role of the night in medieval practices of sleep deprivation. Catherine of Siena serves as a particularly telling example – and a model to pious followers. Dubois highlights the reinforcing effect of the night for these ascetic practices, as staying awake during the day requires less discipline and devotion. Only during the nighttime did these exercises allow believers to fully prove their merits and holiness.

Following on from this, in the second section, «Liberties and Sanctities of the Night,» Romedio Schmitz-Esser revisits the image of the medieval night as associated with the fear of demons and death. Instead, he shows how ecclesiastics and devoted Christians sought contact with the dead. Especially concerning the creation of saints in the High Middle Ages, it was the night that set the scene for highly esteemed spiritual acts, such as re-embalming and pre-inspecting potentially holy bodies.

In his chapter on the night on Caribbean sugar plantations, Adrian van der Velde demonstrates how the nightly hours allowed enslaved Africans and African-descended people to gather. Protected by the darkness, they strengthened their community by social or spiritual rituals or even organized and launched attempts to rebel or escape and achieve freedom. Besides these nocturnal activities, the enslaved people also had to work in sugarcane production during the night. These nightshifts corroborated the importance of the Caribbean plantations for the Industrial Revolution.

The third section, «Lighting up the Dark,» is composed of two essays on the material culture and political challenges of in- and outdoor lighting. Maria Weber focuses on the materiality of lighting in late eighteenth-century England. Based on public debates in newspapers and Parliament on the taxation of candles, she scrutinizes the common consumption of candles. By depicting the diversity of candles and their spectrum in terms of brightness, endurance, soot, smell, and price, Weber looks beyond the material variety of lighting practices to highlight that these practices and the qualities of the candles simultaneously functioned as markers of social distinction.

Sophie Reculin describes the discussions that led to the installation of street lighting in France. Comparing evidence from several French towns, she shows how differently the people involved reasoned in favor of or against the introduction of streetlights. Her case brings to the fore that defying obscurity enabled an increase in nocturnal activities, but the causalities also worked the other way around, when increased nocturnal activities led to endeavors to light up public space.

In the fourth section, «Materiality of Sleep and Sleeping Spaces,» the art historian Ilaria Hoppe illustrates the centrality of

beds in the homes and courts of the Italian Renaissance elite. As the bed was commonly not in a secluded room but rather visible and accessible to visitors, it was a medium of social distinction, serving functions beyond sleep and sexual intercourse. With many graphic illustrations, Hoppe traces these different levels of agency and considers the bed as an enchanted, almost magical object.

Moving from the bed as a multifarious piece of furniture to the most frequent activity performed in it, Sasha Handley outlines the project on early modern sleep care that she has recently started with her team at the University of Manchester. It inquires into the practices of sleep and the ways in which environmental factors influenced how people in the British Isles and in English overseas settlements endeavored to slumber well.

In his Afterword, Craig Koslofsky guides us through the different waypoints of the night, starting from 'daytime,' 'evening,' and 'midnight' to 'the heart of the night' and finally to 'pre-dawn.' Koslofsky identifies those nocturnal activities discussed in the essays which were typical for the different phases of the night. He thus presents a chronological tour through the night, emphasizing its enabling power.

This volume is but a first attempt to find answers to the questions raised in this introductory essay. Given the comprehensive nature of the topic, the contributions assembled here suffice only as cones of light that may serve as selective orientation for further work. With this introduction to the brighter sides of nights, we aim to present nocturnal activities as more nuanced than a simple black or white dichotomy and hope to stimulate further research on the topic.

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ABSTRACT

Vitus Huber, *Toward a More Positive Perspective on Nocturnal Activities in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Period: An Introduction*

This introductory paper discusses both, the state of the art regarding the history of the premodern night and the corresponding desiderata. It gives a brief definition of the particularities of the night and reflects upon the implications of their specificities as factors related to space, time, and culture. It states that historiography has considered night and darkness as predominantly negative phenomena. Instead of condemning this time of the day as the sphere of ignorance, deviance, devilish temptation, and crime, the text pleads for a more nuanced perspective on the night, highlighting the more positive nocturnal activities. To this end it raises the central questions of the volume, encouraging further research especially to examine night as an enabler. It closes with a synthesis of the volume's interdisciplinary contributions.

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SISMEL - EDIZIONI DEL GALLUZZO



Fig. 1. Jan Steen, *Ace of Hearts*, Stockholm Nationalmuseum (before 1679).