

Session at HSS/ESHS 2026 (Edinburgh, 13–16 Jul 26)

Edinburgh, Jul 13–16, 2026

Deadline: Nov 27, 2025

Sandra Liwanowska

CFP 2026 European Society for the History (ESHS)/History of Science Society (HSS) Joint Meeting, Edinburgh.

Session Title: Reason and Wonder: The Science and Spectacle of Enlightenment 'Monstrosity'.

Session Convenors: Sandra Liwanowska (University of Cambridge), Juliana Beykirch (Independent Scholar)

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Submissions should be sent by 27 November.

Session Description:

This session explores how monsters and extraordinary bodies illuminate questions of human nature, identity, and bodily possibilities. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (1996) argued that monsters serve as cultural barometers, revealing societal fears, anxieties, and power dynamics. His seven theses highlight monsters' dual nature—both familiar and alien—showing how they reflect and shape identity and ideology within cultural, historical, and political contexts.

During the 17th and 18th centuries, extraordinary, supposedly monstrous forms were not merely anomalies to classify; they were ideals to contemplate, perform, and, at times, emulate. Scholarship on monsters often intersects with cultural studies, postcolonial theory, literature, gender studies, and psychoanalysis, using the construction of the "other" to examine marginality, fear, and deeper truths about human nature.

By examining monstrosity and extraordinary embodiment as both a scientific problem and a cultural performance, this session highlights the Enlightenment's uneasy entanglement of reason and wonder, revealing preoccupations with the limits and possibilities of the human body. We invite papers that explore how extraordinary bodies were understood, classified, and interpreted within scientific, medical, and philosophical frameworks, as well as the position which extraordinary embodiment and the extraordinarily embodied occupied in contemporary culture and performance - from theatre and court spectacle to public exhibitions and military demonstrations.

Submissions might examine, but are not limited to:

- Scientific study of extraordinary bodies, including anatomy, physiology, heredity, and classification of giants, dwarfs, or other "monstrous" forms.
- Cultural and performative display of bodily difference, including stage performances, court spectacles, travelling shows, and public exhibitions.
- Theoretical or conceptual explorations of monstrosity, including its symbolic, moral, or aesthetic

significance in the Enlightenment.

- Intersections of knowledge and desire, examining how extraordinary forms could be admired, emulated, or valorised rather than merely feared or ridiculed.

We welcome interdisciplinary approaches, including history, literature, philosophy, cultural studies, art history, and other relevant fields.

Submission Guidelines

- Abstracts should not exceed 2,000 characters (approximately 250 words).

- Please include a brief biographical note specifying your affiliation, position, and research interests.

Submissions and any questions should be sent to sal94@cam.ac.uk by 27 November.

Reference:

CFP: Session at HSS/ESHS 2026 (Edinburgh, 13-16 Jul 26). In: ArtHist.net, Nov 23, 2025 (accessed Jun 9, 2026), <<https://arthist.net/archive/51149>>.