
FACULTY RESEARCH

Imagine sitting in a library in France, reading parchments and manuscripts, fragmented and in Latin, lost in the Middle Ages, immersed in a world of history. This is the ideal place where Professor Samantha Herrick enjoys pursuing her passion of researching saints' lives and hagiography. Hagiography is a category of documents that pertain to saints. The documents include the stories of saints' lives, their miracles and information about their relics (bodies) such as if they are moved, discovered or stolen.

Herrick's fascination with saints began when she was in college working as an *au pair* in Italy where she visited the church of Saint Ambrose in Milan and was intrigued by the fact that the body of Saint Ambrose was actually there in the church behind the altar even though he had died in the fourth century. *Why would people want to preserve a body for so long?* she wondered. That was a question that deserved some attention. From that point on, Herrick has researched saints' lives, their miracles and deaths with an unadulterated zeal.

This burning curiosity about saints' lives and medieval history has led Professor Herrick into numerous research projects. In March 2007, Herrick published a book entitled, *Imagining the Sacred Past: Hagiography and Power in Early Normandy*. Herrick describes *Imagining the Sacred Past* as "an examination of three saints' lives (Taurinus of Evreux, Vigor of Bayeux, and Nicasius of Rouen) from the duchy of Normandy, which was created in 911 when a Viking raider was granted territory downstream from Paris in return for converting and settling down. It dates the texts' composition to (probably) the early eleventh century, and argues that they imagine the origins of Christianity in what would later become Normandy in ways that legitimate the dukes' power by attributing the region's conversion to saints whose behaviors in many ways resemble the dukes'."

Herrick's research for this project was long and very involved. "The research for the book involved reading many saints' lives associated with Normandy and studying the duchy's history deeply, through reading what other historians have uncovered about it and a number of primary sources from charters to chronicles to archaeology. It also required examining many manuscripts closely – to see when the texts at the book's heart were recorded, where, how the texts varied from copy to copy, and how they were used. To see how the lives worked, I had to see how they used biblical and other religious sources. Finally, in order to understand how these texts were different from those of other regions, I had to read lots of hagiography from other regions."

Over the course of her research career, Herrick has read many interesting 'facts' about saints. Here is just one example: "One of the saints my book focuses on is said first to have had his assistant bind a dragon with his scarf and drag it into the saint's presence (where the saint smashed it to bits by making the sign of the cross), then after a Roman official had the saint and his assistants executed, the dead bodies rose, picked up their severed heads, and kept walking to the river they had been aiming for before their deaths. While hard to accept as 'true,' these stories make for interesting reading."

Saints' lives hold a lot of mystery. It's hard to understand their lives and their miracles, which is why Herrick is so intrigued by their stories. By studying and researching saints' lives, she attempts to make sense of things that are hard to understand.

Herrick's research journey usually begins with a question that she develops as she reads about saints' lives in various manuscripts. When she has her research question in mind, she begins to explore various documents to find more information on the question that currently engulfs her intellectual curiosity. While she is pursuing one research question, another question pops up in her mind that she wishes to examine further. Many ideas surface, but only one question can be studied at a time. Herrick describes this overload of questions as being like an airport in her head that is just backed up with ideas. But this is how she gets ideas for future research projects.

Herrick encounters many problems during her research journey. First of all, it's hard to find out information about the Middle Ages and saints' lives as much of the world doesn't really know about these societies during the Medieval period. Information found on saints' lives is usually in Latin and fragmented in lots of little pieces in numerous documents. At this point, the research project becomes like a puzzle. The documents need to be translated and put together piece by piece. As the puzzle is put together, only then can Herrick pull information out of the project.

Currently, Herrick is researching hagiographical legends from France, studying and researching parchments and manuscripts that were written between 700 and 1200. It was during this period that saints, according to 'history', are represented as apostles because of their preaching of Christianity and setting up numerous French dioceses. Herrick hopes her research project will "...explain what the concept of 'apostolicity' meant to medieval authors, how it changed over time, what agendas it promoted, and how such claims contributed to a particular understanding of French religious history." Herrick will be taking a leave of absence in Fall 2007 and she will be spending some time in France to do her research for this project. *Bon Voyage, Professor!*