

Ellen Arnold

Cultural and Religious Views of Rivers in the Middle Ages

At the Rachel Carson Center, I will be working on a project that explores medieval attitudes towards rivers and water resources. This project will draw on religious narrative sources and address questions of how rivers and water were understood to be a part of both human and saintly communities. I will be using a wide range of narrative religious sources (miracle collections, episcopal "gestae," saint's lives, and histories penned by religious authors) from German lands during Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages. These sources contain a wide range of descriptions of rivers, stories of miracles that take place on rivers, and depictions of the daily activities that took place on rivers and water systems, and when analyzed for environmental themes can reveal much about the ideas and values of medieval people.

This project will allow me to explore premodern views of the ways that religious ethics affected medieval use of natural resources. It would also help me continue to develop my research on the medieval "environmental imagination," understanding the ways that medieval people understood their role in (and obligations to) the natural world. This type of study helps us understand the ways that morality, spirituality, and awareness of nature intersected in a period before a clear "environmental movement," and I believe I would be able to contribute in unique ways to the emerging field of the environmental humanities. This project will also contribute to a growing body of research that has focused on reconstructing the ecological, social, and cultural history of major European waterways.