

Hagiography and Historiography

CFP for Special Session

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Hagiography occupies a paradoxical place within English literary studies. Hagiography was the most popular genre of medieval literature, and Christopher Cannon has claimed that the composition of the “saint’s life had become central to a truly literary ambition” in the Middle Ages. While the “saint’s life maintained this quiet centrality in English writing well into the fifteenth century,” only in the last few decades have saints’ legends been analyzed as ambitious literary and historiographic productions.¹

Saints’ lives were adapted and repurposed many times, for multiple audiences and in different literary forms, languages, and media. Within scholarship, hagiography also seems particularly conducive to adaptation. Just as saints’ lives can reveal medieval political and religious debates, early scholarship on hagiography often reflected the ideological views of nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars. In the process, these medieval works accrued yet another layer of interpretation and adaptation. What is it about hagiography that makes it a mirror for contemporary concerns, both for medieval authors and artists and for modern scholars? Is hagiography’s formulaic structure related to its adaptability across centuries and its functionality both within medieval culture and within the academic study of medieval literature, art, and history?

This session invites proposals that interrogate the place of hagiography within historiography. How has hagiography been deployed within scholarly narratives about the medieval past? Saints’ lives were composed in many languages, artistic media, and geographical regions throughout the medieval world, and today they are cited within literary studies as well as religious studies, theology, art history, history, and musicology. How does hagiography feature within the historiography of various scholarly fields of study? Are certain types of hagiographic narratives privileged or neglected in scholarship?

Secondarily, participants might evaluate hagiography and historiography in relation to the boundaries between medieval “genres” and modern academic disciplines. Should hagiography be considered a form of historiography, of history writing? While the primary focus of the session will be on the place of saints’ lives within modern academic historiography, participants might also consider how medieval history writers utilized saints’ stories within narratives about local, regional, world, or biblical history.

Session organizer: Jenny C. Bledsoe, Agnes Scott College & Emory University

Submit a Participant Information Form and an abstract of 200–250 words (for a paper of 15–20 minutes) to jcbleds@emory.edu by Sept. 10, 2018.

Image: close-up of a woodcut of the saints in glory on the opening page of William Caxton’s c. 1483-1484 printing of The Golden Legend (Glasgow University Library, Sp Coll Hunterian Bg.1.1, fol. 1r).

¹ Christopher Cannon, *Middle English Literature: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), 160.