Research Internship: Sewanee Medieval Studies

This summer, I was granted a research internship with The University of the South’s Medieval Studies department. For the first five weeks, I worked to translate the book of Esdras from the Aurora. Esdras is an apocryphal book, and furthermore interesting because this version was an anonymous Latin versification which was added to Peter Riga’s Aurora (a popular versification of the Bible, which influenced many medieval authors, such as John Gower). The Aurora’s Esdras exists in only one manuscript and is not included in the leading and only transliteration of the Aurora.

Translation has been a difficult task. The poem is relatively short – 446 lines – but the author is fond of rather contorted Latin, and often a mere two or three lines will take twenty of thirty minutes to untangle. The author is also fond of Leonine couplets; between these and the coupling end-rhymes he employs, it is no wonder that our anonymous poet had to jump through so many grammatical hoops in his composition. The majority of my translation has been done independently, with occasional correction and clarification from my supervising professors.

While not translating, I spent study sessions with supervising professors Dr. Batkie and Dr. Irvin, in which we discussed philosophy of translation, transliteration techniques, and proper handling of manuscripts. I was given much supplementary reading and practiced transliterating digitized manuscripts as the weeks progressed. I was also able to handle a beautiful 15th-century Italian book of hours (a popular type of small, ornate book, often worn around the neck or waist;
books of hours held such contents as lists of feast days and prayers) and practice codicological analysis on it.

For the final segment of my internship, I traveled with my supervisors to Cambridge, England, and spent three full days at the Fitzwilliam Museum, transliterating marginalia from the Esdras manuscript. This was a large task – each folio’s margins were crammed thick. Much of the marginalia was evidently drawn from Bede’s biblical quotations.

The manuscript itself was gorgeous. It was frankly the medievalist’s equivalent of a manuscript pinup – florid rubrication and gorgeous illustrations with striking gilding; the occasional delightfully twisted marginal doodle; a beautiful gothic hand with abounding (and, unfortunately for me, crammed to the point of near-illegibility) marginalia. Transliteration of this manuscript has been the only sort of work I have ever done in which five hours can go by in the blink of an eye.

Though my weeks at Sewanee and Cambridge this summer are over, my work on this project has an excellent start. A careful translation suitable for publication – what I hope to produce – takes much consideration. I eventually intend to seek publication of a translation of the poem and transliteration of the marginalia, with appropriate commentary and formatting diplomatic to the state of the original. The task of taking what is essentially a little pocket of the medieval era, now lying in Fitzwilliam library, and expressing it with concision and honesty as something readily appreciable to an English-speaker of today: this is a Herculean task, even for a minor poem like the Esdras of the Aurora. I intend to continue my work in distillation of both poem and marginalia over the next year (or longer, if that is what it takes), but even in these short weeks
my experience at this internship has given me a priceless window into the world of medieval studies.

Manuscript studies is something one usually can find only at the graduate level of study; in addition to receiving rather unprecedented education, I was also able to converse at length with my supervising professors and colleagues of theirs, making valuable connections and gaining insight into the fields of teaching and research (as well as general living conditions and career expectations). My dip into codicology and paleography has only solidified my desire to pursue medieval studies to its fullest extent, and I am incredibly grateful to be able to have spent the summer in such a worthwhile pursuit. I fully intend to complete a degree in medieval studies at Sewanee, and afterwards to earn a doctorate; hopefully I will gain a sustainable career as a medievalist.