Project: The Horn and the Relic: Mapping the Contours of Orthodoxy and Authority

Over the course of July 2010 I had a wonderful opportunity to spend a month in Barcelona conducting research and interacting with scholars as a participant in the NEH Summer Institute on “Cultural Hybridities: Christians, Muslims, and Jews in the Medieval Mediterranean.” My month overseas was invaluable on both a professional and personal level, as it permitted me to finish up research on a new article-length project, “The Horn and the Relic: Mapping the Contours of Orthodoxy and Authority.”

In my study, which is currently a work-in-progress with an expected completion date of November 15, 2010, I investigate the techniques used by two particular Catalan count-kings whom I have studied in the past, Joan el Caçador and Martí l’Humà. In my investigation, I discuss the dichotomous natures and personalities of Joan and Martí and how they constructed their claims to both religious orthodoxy and secular authority during their respective reigns. I argue that these two count-kings of the late medieval Crown of Aragon used the acquisition and transfer of tangible objects, respectively pieces of unicorn horn and Christian relics, to help construct their authority.

Over the course of the month, discussions with participants, visiting scholars, and the directors of the Institute, especially Yuen-Gen Liang, Stephen Epstein, and Brian Catlos, helped me frame the parameters of the article itself. Most of the month, however, saw me in the venerable institution of the Archive of the Crown of Aragon. I was able to use the library in this institution to acquire copies of secondary studies that are not readily available in my home institution in the States. More significantly, I was able to analyze closely the primary sources that largely pertained to Martí’s interest in, appropriation of, and transferring of various relics. The best known aspect of Martí’s interest in acquiring the remnants of the Christian holy dead appears in the 1403 translation of the relics of the bishop of Barcelona, Sant Sever. Within the hierarchy of Christian relics, for a local saint, he was of particular importance as one of the earliest and most important bishops of Barcelona. Martí’s unflagging support of Sant Sever was due to the saint’s intercession in a crisis surrounding a potentially fatal leg injury, as Martí risked both the loss of his leg and his life. Sever purportedly visited the ailing king while sleeping and cured him; the king ascribed his survival and complete recovery to the miraculous intercession of the bishop and thus successfully petitioned Pope Benedict XIII in 1404 to move the relics from the monastery of Sant Cugat des Valles to the cathedral in Barcelona. But these were not the only relics which Martí sought...
and acquired. Others included the heads of Saint Barbara and Sant Jordi, pieces of the True Cross, and the Holy Grail, which is supposed to be housed in Valencia.

In addition to studying the documents, discussions with other scholars, especially Núria Silleras-Fernandez, provided me the opportunity to take an interdisciplinary approach to my study, as she directed me to the Museu Diocesà de Barcelona, to behold and investigate personally the sixteenth-century painting of Martí’s injury, miraculous intercession of Sant Sever, and translation of the saint’s relics.