

Manuscript Research in Cambridge

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With the assistance of the Helen Cam award, I was able to undertake a research trip to Cambridge, to view a variety of medieval medical manuscripts. My PhD thesis focuses on pregnancy diagnosis in the later middle ages, in medical and legal contexts. I have been working to reconstruct the ways in which the medieval medical establishment understood pregnancy and women's bodies, by working through medical manuscripts held in research collections around the country. A large number of these are held in Cambridge, making this research trip an essential part of my efforts to collect the source material I need to complete my thesis.

I spent most of my time in the University Library, a large and imposing 1930s building, designed by Giles Gilbert Scott. Here I was able to take advantage of the university's vast collection of medieval material to view copies of a number of texts, particularly on the topic of uroscopy – the visual inspection of urines for diagnostic purposes. Uroscopy was one of the most significant methods for diagnosing pregnancy in the middle ages, which is rather ironic given that modern methods of pregnancy diagnosis rely on the detection of hormones in women's urine. These medieval texts, however, relied on a very different set of rationales and methods to conduct diagnosis. Uroscopy forms a significant part of my thesis, and having the opportunity to examine a number of uroscopy manuscripts, including Henry Daniel's *Liber Uricrisiarum*, and Gilles de Corbeil's influential text, *De urinis*, has helped me to clarify my thinking on the topic.

I was also able to visit some of the college libraries while in Cambridge. I spent a particular fruitful day in St John's College Library, and had the chance to handle a beautifully illuminated copy of the *Articella*, a collection of texts which formed the backbone of university medical education for centuries in the middle ages. This particular manuscript was previously owned by St Augustine's Abbey in Canterbury, and was clearly a high-status object. Personally, I have a preference for less formal manuscript volumes: the sorts of volumes in which people collected together all sorts of information, just in case it might be useful one day. With this in mind, the most interesting manuscript I viewed on this trip was St John's College MS K.49, a manuscript including all sorts of medical information, methods for predicting the future, and semi-magical methods of pest control – holy water mixed with the herb vervain would apparently make an excellent form of fly repellent.

On my final day in Cambridge, I visited Magdalene College to view manuscripts in the Pepys Library. This beautiful neoclassical building holds the private library of the famed diarist and MP Samuel Pepys, a collection of around 3,000 volumes still kept in original seventeenth century book cases. When you view manuscripts from the collection, you are placed at a desk in the corner of a long room filled with these bookshelves, which makes for an atmospheric setting in which to examine texts on pregnancy diagnosis. The items I viewed were medieval manuscript compilations of medical texts, including uroscopic information and texts on the signs of pregnancy. One can only speculate whether these texts were of interest to Pepys himself – he and his wife Elizabeth did not have children, nor did any of his mistresses bear him an illegitimate child.

Overall, I was able to view more than twenty manuscripts in my time in Cambridge, dating from as early as the eleventh century. The vast majority of these manuscripts contained methods for diagnosing pregnancy, and this substantial body of texts will form a significant part of the source material for my thesis. The prevalence of these texts adds weight to my argument that there was a

great deal of interest in recognising pregnancy as early as possible in the middle ages, and my time spent in Cambridge has been instrumental in informing my thinking on the significance of this material in the middle ages.