Making Tracks: Ellen Arnold

29 August 2013
Making Tracks

In the “Making Tracks” series, RCC fellows and alumni present their experiences in environmental humanities, retracing the paths that led them to the Rachel Carson Center. For more information, please click **here**.

Academic Platypus, or “How I Became a Medieval Historian in Six Easy Steps”
By **Ellen Arnold**

The project that I am pursuing at the Rachel Carson Center on medieval cultural and religious ideas about river systems brings me back in an unusual way to my first year of college, when I wanted to study river ecosystems in the hope of someday becoming a marine ecologist. It’s admittedly a long way from there to medieval historian, and I was delighted to spend my time at the RCC remembering all the reasons why I was so fascinated by water ecosystems, and also all the reasons why I was ultimately drawn to history and the environmental humanities in the first place.

As a college freshman, whose high school heroes had included Jacques Cousteau, Carl Sagan, Bob Ballard, and then-Senator Al Gore (interestingly, I had not yet been exposed to the work or life of Rachel Carson, who I now realize fits quite naturally into this group—perhaps telling of the curriculum of my high school science courses), I was eager to make my mark in the ecological sciences, and to begin a career that would let me work with marine and aquatic ecosystems, turning my fascination for the exploration of the sea and space towards an environmental purpose. As a budding scientist, I thought that meant politically- and ecologically-minded scientific work; what I didn’t yet realize was that another thing that bound all of these figures together was not just science, but also a deep sense of the role of people in science; of the power of outreach and storytelling; and an appreciation of the power of history and human culture.

The slow sea-change in my goals and aspirations began during my freshman year, when I took a class on US environmental history, where I was exposed to the field-shaping works of Alfred Crosby, William Cronon, Carolyn Merchant, and, most significant

to me, Donald Worster. What really captured my attention was *Nature's Economy*, which introduced the significance of tracking the history of how ideas about ecology and ecological values developed. Looking back now, I realize that what drew me into that book is similar to what pulled me into *Cosmos* and *Comet* and the essays of Stephen Jay Gould, which I had been reading for years—a fascination with not only what people know about nature, but also with *how* they know it, and with how both the knowledge and the systems of knowing change over time. I was hooked; I continued to take environmental history classes—but it took me several years to fully commit to history. For that decision, the tipping factor was not environmental thought, but medieval culture.

As a child, I lived for several years in Darmstadt, Germany, where my father was serving in the Army. My parents made sure that we spent as much time as possible exploring Germany. As a result, my childhood memories are soaked in castles and Volksmarches and small medieval towns with cobbled streets and crooked houses in the way that many Americans' are filled with camping trips to National Parks, trips to DC, and tours of Civil War battlefields (of course some of those experiences would come my way too, once we moved back Stateside). In very real ways, my *experience* of the past was in a European medieval setting. This may help explain how I took to medieval history courses in college like a duck to water (nature metaphors really are hard to avoid when you study them for a living!). I devoured classes on medieval culture, ancient history, Byzantium, England, the crusades, archaeology, the medieval church, etc. In all of this, the period that really sparked my interest was Europe before 1000. As I often tell my students, I was captivated with the degree to which even the most detailed and prominent books on this period were full of the subjunctive tense: people who "might or might not have been" kings of England, places that "should perhaps be considered" among the earliest port cities, etc. This element of unknowable-ness appealed to me, and I was intrigued by the way that early medieval historical work could (as with the sciences) be just as useful when proving a null hypothesis as when generating new information. This was an incredible and broad undergraduate training (I realize this more and more over the years as I myself am developing medieval curricula), and by my senior year I was convinced that there was a way to combine my conversion to environmental history with my fascination with medieval culture, religion, and society.

Luckily, though there wasn't a clear path for how to pursue this, and the field of medieval environmental history had not fully coalesced (Richard Hoffmann's American Historical Review article "Economic Development and Aquatic Ecosystems in Medieval Europe" appeared while I was still in college), I found supportive faculty at the University

of Minnesota, and also a network of mentors and peers through conferences. Over the course of working on my Master's thesis and then my dissertation, I realized that although there was a lot of fascinating work developing on the materiality of the human interaction with nature in the Middle Ages, I was drawn to the blurry edges of that interaction—to the ways that human actions, religion, memory, and storytelling intersected, and in particular the ways in which nature and natural resources were drawn into concepts of sanctity.

This interest has led to both a book on monastic environmental imagination and my current project, which I am pursuing here at the RCC. In it, I am surveying the literary products of Late Antique and early medieval Gaul and Germany to assess the ways in which rivers, springs, fountains, and other sources of fresh water were perceived by medieval society, and how their use of and attempts to control water were described and characterized in histories, saints lives, and miracle collections. Through this project I am hoping to access not just the practical and tangible ways that people and rivers were connected, but also the abstract ways that rivers worked their way into broader medieval culture, knowledge, and values. I've also reconnected with my fascination with river science!

As a medievalist I sometimes worry that it will be too hard to communicate across the modern/pre-modern divide, but my time here at the RCC has already shown me not only how possible it is but also how rewarding. It has been invaluable to have daily reminders of the lessons we teach our students; that the human history of interacting with the non-human world has deep roots, and that it matters that we both understand modern concerns and issues and also where they came from. I am convinced that the opportunities I've had here to learn about modern city-river interactions, environmental political theory, and twentieth century German ecotourism will give my own work greater depth and context, and will also help me frame the pre-modern world in ways that help me communicate with the concerns of modernists, and that this is what the greatest benefit of my time at the RCC will have been.

***

Ellen Arnold blogs at **Adventure Shoes!**