

HIST 349: Reading Guide – Virgins, Saints, and Relics

1. What is it about the Virgin Mary that appealed to medieval people? How was Mary perceived by medieval people? How do written sources about Mary help to support her appeal?
2. Based on the popular sources that we read, what level of theological sophistication did the readers of these sources have?
3. Are the miracles performed by Mary and the saints a pathway to understanding Christianity or are they a mechanism to help explain and control the natural world?
4. Compare the two readings by Guibert of Nogent (“The Traveling Relics of Laon” [in our book] and “Saints and their Relics” [online]). Does Guibert give us different insights into his beliefs in these two readings? Are there any contradictions in what Guibert says from one source to the other?
5. How much gullibility do we find in this society when it comes to relics and miracles? How much skepticism? Is there any reason to think that people would have more reason to write about one than the other?
6. Which of the miracles are most believable to modern readers? Which ones are least believable? Why?
7. What type of Christian behavior did the lives of the saints hope to promote if any? Do they have a moral agenda or are the saints such unusual individuals that imitating them would have been beyond the reach of most medieval readers?
8. Think about possible research papers that you could write using only miracle collections like the ones we read. What topics could you write on and what could you argue?