Cathy Jamieson

The BAA generously awarded me £210 to cover the costs of travel and accommodation for the 2022 Graduate Conference of European History, held at the University of Oxford. The theme of the conference was ‘Nature, Culture, History’ and I successfully presented my first conference paper, ‘Animal Bodies, Sacred Space: Interpreting the 14th-century oak carvings at Winchester Cathedral choir through an Ecocritical Lens’. The paper, based on my undergraduate History of Art dissertation, explored the potential of ecocriticism and posthumanism for understanding the carvings of animals, plants, green men and hybrid monsters found in the early 14th-century choir at Winchester Cathedral. These carvings are a magnificent example of medieval craftsmanship but have not received much in the way of scholarly attention.

My paper used contemporary theological ideas about the Incarnation to consider the choir as a space in which the natural world was continually re-vitalised by the miraculous presence of Christ in the material world. It also considered the animal body as a site for imagining what it means to be human, and as an integral part of the choir’s decorative scheme, rather than merely a comedic, marginal addition. My aim was to analyse art in an architectural context by relating it to the rituals of that space (particularly the Mass and the movement of pilgrims around the cathedral towards the shrine of St Swithun), and by locating meaning in the experience of the viewer as well as in the motives of the craftsman. I wanted to consider the choir as a space in which nature was continually experienced and re-imagined by its monastic users, rather than as a set of symbols to be ‘decoded’.

My paper opened up a great discussion afterwards about the nature and function of misericords, the development of the green man motif in English cathedrals, and the theological implications of bringing nature into the cathedral. The conference also enabled me to develop my understanding of ecocriticism and environmental history, subjects I am keen to learn more about and use in my research going forward. I had the chance to hear a range of brilliant papers exploring the potential of these approaches for various subjects of historical enquiry, and to meet other young scholars working on making relationships with nature an integral part of human history. Thank you to the BAA for making this enriching experience possible.