

MMCD: A Collaborative Database for Medieval Studies

Kara Kersh and Alice Morandy

Kara Kersh is a historian of medieval Britain and Ireland whose research focuses on miracle collections, pilgrimage, and religious experience in the Middle Ages. Her work combines close reading with quantitative and digital approaches to explore patterns of devotion, healing, travel, and interactions between saints and their devotees. She holds a PhD in Medieval Studies from Trinity College Dublin and an MLitt from the University of Aberdeen.

Alice Morandy is a specialist of the social and religious history of rural communities in medieval France. Her research examines lived experience in thirteenth-century Normandy through the medium of miracle collections. She draws from gender and disability studies, socio-narratology, as well as the history of medicine and emotions to weave a story about ordinary people seeking extraordinary solutions. She holds an MA from the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales and a BA from the University of California, Los Angeles. Alice will defend her dissertation at Princeton University in May 2027.

Miracle collections contain a wealth of information about medieval life and can be approached from many different perspectives. The richness of this material, however, also presents a practical challenge. The more collections a scholar wishes to study, the greater the amount of time required to gather and organise the relevant information. Researchers must therefore often make choices about the amount and type of data they collect, particularly when working across substantial numbers of collections. This can make it difficult to explore the full range of questions that these sources have the potential to answer. Recent developments in digital technologies, combined with greater opportunities for scholarly collaboration, offer new possibilities for working with large bodies of material.

Inspired by these possibilities, we are developing the *Medieval Miracle Collection Database* (MMCD), an open-access collaborative resource designed to support a wide range of research questions and methodological approaches to miracle collections across different regions, languages, and periods. This article introduces the goals of the project, outlines its proposed features, and presents preliminary concepts for the database. At the end of the article is a link to a short survey, and we warmly invite anyone interested in the project to share their thoughts, concerns, and ideas as we work to build a resource that is as useful and relevant as possible for the scholarly community.

Benefits of a Database

The MMCD will address several longstanding challenges that have limited comparative research of miracle collections. One of these difficulties is the amount of time scholars spend collecting data from primary sources. Researchers studying similar collections often extract the same infor-



mation independently, despite working with many of the same texts. As a result, they frequently invest considerable time gathering data that another researcher may already have collected. The MMCD is intended to reduce this duplication of effort by providing a collaborative resource where scholars can contribute the data they have already gathered. Rather than repeatedly extracting the same information from the same miracle collections, researchers will be able to build upon one another's work. This not only streamlines data collection, but also encourages greater collaboration within the field, allowing scholars to devote more of their time to analysing evidence and developing new interpretations.
Even after scholars have finished collecting substantial amounts of data, another challenge often emerges as their research develops. Traditionally, researchers record only the data needed to answer their original research question. However, research rarely ends with a single question. As scholars begin analysing their findings, they often recognise that another element of the collection may help explain an unexpected pattern or open up an entirely new avenue of enquiry. At present, this usually requires returning to every primary source and collecting a completely new set of data. If a scholar has already examined fifty miracle collections, this can mean repeating months of work simply to record one additional variable. Since the MMCD is designed to record a broad range of information from each collection, researchers will be able to investigate new questions using data that has already been collected, making it much easier to pursue alternative insights without repeatedly revisiting the same texts.

Another important advantage of the MMCD is that it will encourage greater standardisation in the way information from miracle collections is recorded. At present, differences in the ways scholars catalog similar information can make meaningful comparison between studies difficult, even when they are examining the same phenomenon. Pierre-André Sigal highlighted this problem in his quantitative analysis of French miracle collections when he lamented his inability to accurately compare his findings with those produced by Ronald C. Finucane 'because this historian adopts a classification quite different from mine.'[i] By establishing standardised classifications, the MMCD will allow scholars to compare like with like, making it easier to draw meaningful comparisons across different collections while also providing a stronger foundation for future comparative research.

Our long-term goal is for miracle collection scholars from around the world, each working on different collections and pursuing different research questions, to contribute to the database. This collaborative approach will enable researchers to investigate questions that would otherwise require years of individual data collection. A scholar interested in gender in French miracle collections, for example, could compare their findings with those from English, Portuguese, Italian, and many other collections represented in the database. The MMCD will record a broad range of information about both the collections and the individual miracles they contain, allowing that same researcher to also explore how gender relates to multiple other aspects of miracle narratives. How often did writers report women seeing visions of saints? Did proximity to the shrine influence whether someone experienced a vision? How many of those visions resulted in a pilgrimage to the shrine? Did the type of ailment someone suffered affect whether they reported a vision? These are only a few of the many questions that become easier to investigate when scholars can draw upon a shared body of structured data. Although designed with miracle collection scholars in mind, the database will also provide a valuable resource for researchers interested in saints, miracles,



gender, medicine and illness, childhood, travel, particular regions, people, places, animals, and many other topics represented within the approximately fifty searchable elements of the database.

Preliminary Design and Functionality

The database will be accessible for anyone who has created a free account. Through this account, users will be able to search the database for the desired information and export it to other relevant programs. For example, information about which saints the miracle seekers first petitioned before turning to the saint about which the collection was written could be imported to a social network analysis software like Gephi to investigate the connections between all the saints mentioned in one or more collections. Users will also be encouraged, through their free accounts, to upload any relevant information they have found in their own research, enabling a broader dataset to be available to all scholars.

As the database is intended to be collaborative, ensuring the accuracy of user-contributed information is an essential part of its design. During previous discussions, concerns have been raised regarding how the quality and reliability of a collaborative database can be maintained. To ensure the accuracy of the information, all uploaded data will be placed in quarantine for verification before being made available within the database itself. Account holders will also only be able to modify their own work and will not be able to change or delete data uploaded by other users. Database administrators will have access to all the information from every account and will be available for communication if a user encounters information they believe to be incorrect. Administrators will then be able to investigate the information in conjunction with the user who originally contributed the data.

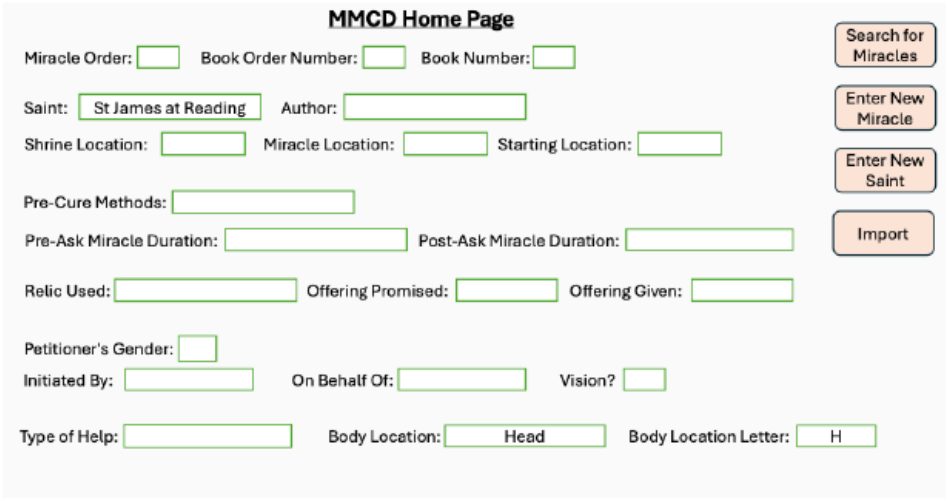


Figure 1: Medieval Miracle Collection Database Home Page

In an effort to be inclusive of our community's varying degrees of technological literacy, we are striving to make the interface as straightforward and intuitive as possible. The database will first direct users to a home page similar to the one shown in Figure 1. From that home page, users will be able to add new data, either by importing groups of data directly from com-

Open-access Miracle Database Survey:

https://forms.gle/zPRukY93cvv5vZkd6



patible sources, such as Excel, or by entering the data individually by miracle or saint. Users will also, from this page, be able to search various aspects of miracle collections, such as collection information, geographic information, the details of the miracle itself, and how the petitioner conducted their miracle journey. The advantages of this design mean that any combination of data points can be easily searched simultaneously.

Once the user enters the desired parameters of their search, a list of miracles, similar to that pictured in Figure 2, will be shown which encompasses all the miracles which fall into those selected categories. These findings can then be exported to another program or an individual miracle can be selected for further review. If selected, the user will be redirected to the 'Account General Information' page, which will show more information about that specific account.

Search Results

Saint	Miracle Order	Book Order Number	Book Number	Shrine Location	Miracle Location	Starting Location	Type of Help	Body Location Letter	Petitioner's Gender
St James at Reading	3	3		Reading	Reading	Barking	mute	H	M
St James at Reading	8	8		Reading	Reading	Essex	paralysis	A; H	F
St James at Reading	17	17		Reading	Reading	Cumbge	fever	H	F
St James at Reading	18	18		Reading	Reading	north England	eyes	H	M
St James at Reading	24	24		Reading	Reading	Stanford	fever	H	F

MMCD Home Page

Export

Figure 2: Sample Search Result Screen

From the 'Account General Information' page, users will be able to navigate to other details of the specific miracle, such as the miracle details, petitioner information, cure details, the miracle itself, and information about the saint. As mentioned previously, there will be prefixed options for data input to aid in comparison and avoid ambiguous elements. However, to account for the many miracles that resist standardisation, there will be areas for the contributor to add clarifying notes or details not accounted for by the database's collection standards, an example of which can be seen in Figure 3.

Account General Info

Miracle Order: 18 Book Order Number: 18 Book Number:

Saint: St James at Reading

Date of Book: c.1190 Author: Unknown Date of Miracle: c. 1163-1187

---------Location Info ---------

Shrine Location: Reading Location Type: Shrine

Miracle Location: Reading Distance from Shrine: 0

Starting Location: north England Distance from Shrine: 155 miles

Location notes:

waited at the shrine for a cure, none came, left, was told in a second vision to go back

Miracle Details | Petitioner Info | Cure Details | The Miracle | Saint Info | Edit | MMCD Home Page | Search Results

Figure 3: Sample Information Page

One question that was raised at the panel we organised at the IMC last year, "Digital Miracles: Expanding Methods in Miracle Collection Research," was what language the database would be in. While all the search boxes will be in English, the miracles themselves can be found in both English and the original language of the text. For example, as shown in Figure 4, under the 'The Miracle' button, the identification of the text and

location of the miracle within the text are given as well as the miracle in the original Latin and a summary in English. By including the original language we aim to retain the integrity of the primary source. However, as this database is intended to facilitate scholars broadening their research into works they might not have had the opportunity to work with, an English summary of all miracles will be provided. Thus, the needs of users interested in the specific wording of the original text will be met, while other users not fluent in, for example, Old French will still be able to conduct their analysis.

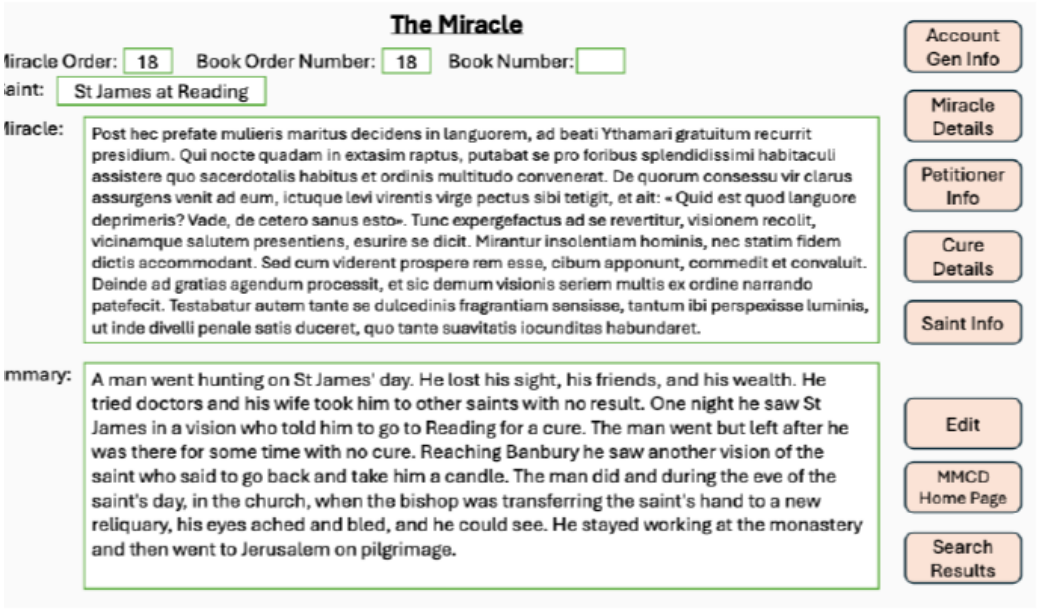


Figure 4: Sample Miracle Page

Help Shape the MMCD

The images above provide an overview of the most recent preliminary design of the database. As our goal is to develop a resource that is accessible to scholars with a wide range of technical expertise and research interests, the format will undoubtedly continue to evolve throughout its development. Advances in digital technology have greatly changed the ways in which scholars can access, analyse, and present their research, making collaborative resources such as the MMCD possible. We believe that miracle collection research, and indeed the research of anyone interested in the medieval world, will greatly benefit from a resource that pulls together many of the elements of miracle collections from different geographic regions, time periods, and writers. If you are interested in helping shape the project or wish to stay in touch, we invite you to respond to the linked survey. Let us know how we can make this database more relevant to your research and the scholarly community. There is so much more that can be learned through the study of miracle collections, and we believe that greater accessibility and collaboration will make new discoveries possible both within the field of hagiography and across medieval scholarship.

Note

[i] '*ne permettent pas une comparaison aisée car cet historien adopte une classification assez differente de la mienne*': Sigal, P.A., *L'Homme et le Miracle dans la France Médiévale (11-12 siècles)* (Paris, 1985), 275.