

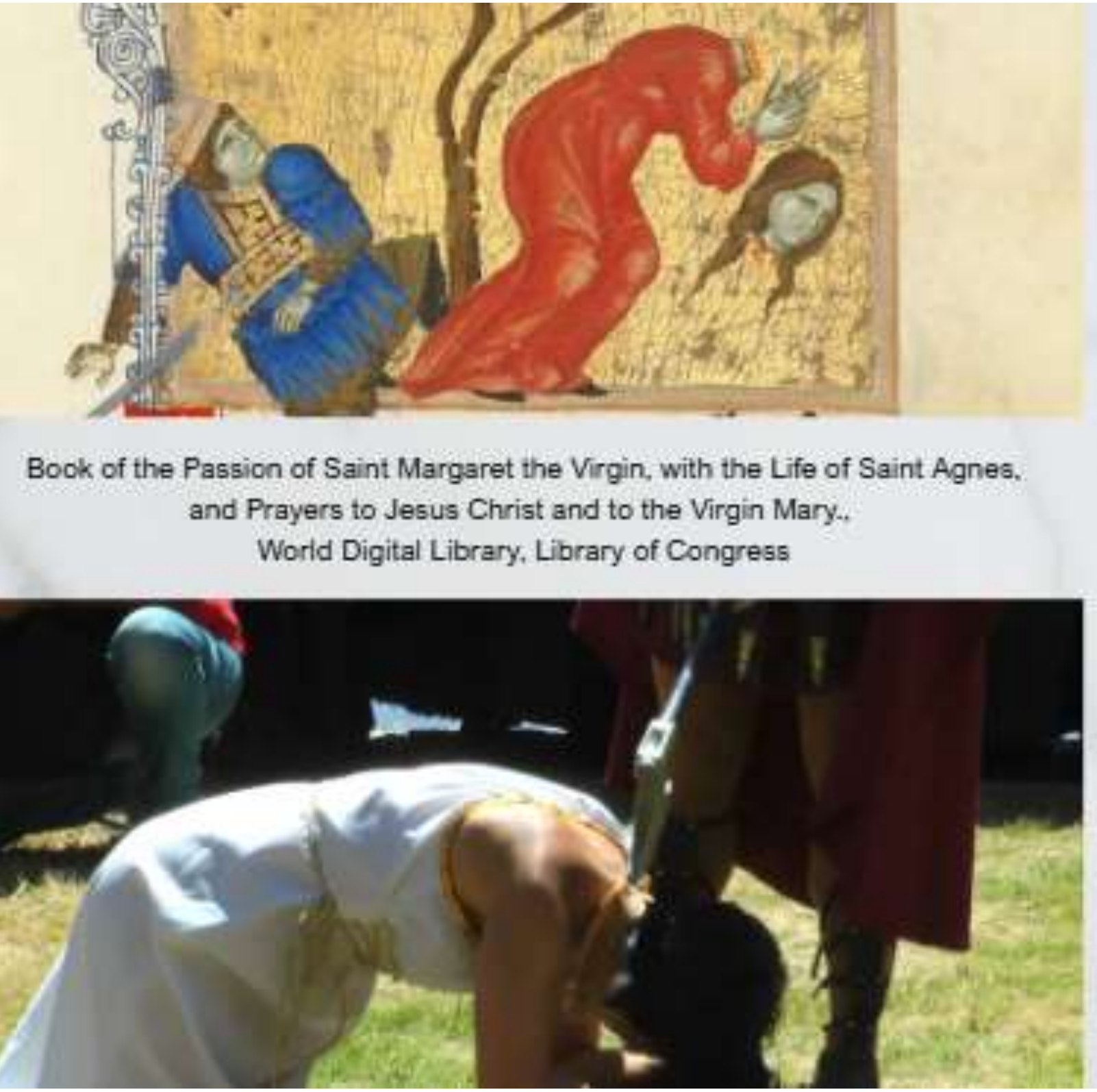
Seeking a medieval pattern in oral tradition: The worship of female martyrs in Galicia, Spain

Isadora Martins Fontoura de Carvalho
Marie Skłodowska-Curie PhD Fellow
University of Santiago de Compostela
isadoracristine.fontouradecarvalho@usc.es

Introduction

This work seeks to explore possibilities on the collaborative processes of communities in the elaboration and interpretation of cultural memory in Galicia, Northwestern Spain. Through the cults of two saints, Mariña and Thecla, preserved in two rural villages in the region of Galicia, we aimed to work with citizens to produce knowledge and interpretation about the memory that they keep of the ritual practices of the area. As a way of materialising this effort, we proposed the initiative of making a common repository for material and data they already have, such as footage and photographs depicting festivities and other local practices. This way, the community, alongside the researcher, can reflect on the relationship between memory, local identity and religion, and become citizen-curators of their own stories.

Augas Santas and A Guarda are two *pueblos* that conserve a rich natural landscape, which is encompassed by archaeological and cultural heritage. This layered heritage was appropriated by Christianity during Late Antiquity, which shaped its history and defined the landscape and the natural features through the cult of the saints.



Mariña is beheaded on the Ascension Day in Augas Santas (2014)

“What the Saint is trying to represent is that we don’t necessarily need to get married or have a marriage with a man... our lives don’t have to be based primarily on getting married and having children. For the time she lived in, she sought something more [and died for her values].”



Silvia Iglesias, 16 Years old,
elaborating on the meanings
of the legend of Saint Mariña
(2025)

“That’s what the shrine of Thecla was: a point of reference, an unmistakable sign that you were getting home. It meant return — that was absolutely clear.”



Tito Chirro, 82 Years old,
elaborating on the meanings
of the shrine of Thecla to local sailors
(2025)



The shrine of Thecla from the south, view from the beach, demonstrating its importance to sailors. 2025.

Methods

The project was conceived under methodological approaches related to ethnography and its principles of active participation and immersion into the cultural reality the researcher seeks to describe and analyse.

The experiments were structured around regular visits to the sites. The process was composed by two phases:

Assessment: This phase includes the mapping of the social dynamics of the villages, the attendance to the festivals dedicated to the saints and the scout for possible collaborators in an informal way.

Active collaboration: On this phase, actors mapped on phase 1 engaged in semi-structured interviews that were used as data to make the ethnographic analysis.

After-effects: The material collected will have to be thoroughly catalogued and stored. For that, a partnership with the *Terra e Memória* archive, housed at the *CISPAC (Centro de Investigación Interuniversitario das Paisaxes Atlánticas Culturales)* was achieved.

Discussion

The goal was to test the possibility of some legends and ritualisations circulating detached from the written records: that is what we tried to collect with the ethnographic interviews. We depart from the perspective that this *corpus* is a medieval heritage that can be recovered through citizen engagement and collaboration.

Therefore, we have tried to document the voice in action. In Paul Zumthor’s book about oral tradition in the Middle Ages, one of his main concerns is to capture the action of the voice through time; working with historical documents, he has to rely on what he calls “the simulacrum”: the oral tradition, while the voice is the true object. By conducting the interviews, we have the chance to document how the voice in performance has been carried to the present in order to give coherence to the tradition found in the present. To establish its relationship with the past, however, we also have to squint at the simulacrum and look for evidence of this tradition in the past and thus lies the function of analysis and comparison of historical sources in our methodology.

Conclusions and perspectives

The dissemination of hagiographies of female martyrs favoured a collective memory work, highlighting themes of “undeserving suffering, heroism, violence, religious conviction, gender performance and identity,” as defined by Elizabeth Castelli.

This was intrinsically connected to Paul Zumthor’s observations on orality in the medieval tradition, because the voice in action, as found in the field trips, is a medieval heritage.

We argue that this method of work is a path to be explored by medievalists, observing narrative patterns in the present. This could represent a new way to look at a documentation that is often fragmentary.

By working in this way, we were able to explain how these patterns travelled and were consolidated throughout the centuries and to think about how this Medieval heritage, present in many formats, is still responsible for shaping the communities of the present.

In this sense, it was crucial to collaborate with Citizens in the elaborations of the meaning of these narratives and in the interpretation of patterns and imagery