

Dirty books reveal secret lives of people living in mediaeval times

April 24 2012, By Fiona MacLeod



(Phys.org) -- They feared illness, were selfish and fell asleep reading late at night, just like us, new research has revealed about our mediaeval ancestors.

For the first time a new scientific technique has allowed us into the minds and motivations of mediaeval people – through their dirty books.

A new technique invented by Dr. Kathryn Rudy, lecturer in the School of Art History at the University of St Andrews, can measure which pages in mediaeval manuscripts are the dirtiest, and therefore, the most read.

A machine called a densitometer allows the dirt contained within the

pages of books centuries old to reveal the inner thoughts of our [ancestors](#)

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Dr. Rudy's new technique with the machine, used on mediaeval [prayer](#) books, has shown people were as self-interested, and afraid of illness as today.

The ground-breaking research has even managed to pinpoint the moment that people fell asleep reading the same book.

For example one of the dirtiest pages in a selection of European religious books was a prayer to St Sebastian who was often prayed to because his arrow-wounds (the cause of his martyrdom) looked like the bubonic plague.

This shows us that the reader of the book was terrified of the plague and repeated the prayer to ward off the disease.

Similarly pages which contained the prayers for the salvation of others were less dirty than those asking for salvation for oneself.

As well as demonstrating mediaeval people prayed for their own assistance, the analysis showed the pages of a prayer to be said in the small hours of the morning were only dirty for the first few pages.

Dr. Rudy's extrapolates that it shows most readers fell asleep at the same point.

She said: "Although it is often difficult to study the habits, private rituals and emotional states of people, this new technique can let us into the minds of people from the past.

"Religion was inseparable from physical health, time management, and

interpersonal relationships in mediaeval times. In the century before printing, people ordered tens of thousands of prayer books—sometimes quite beautifully illuminated ones—even though they might cost as much as a house.

“As a result they were treasured, read several times a day at key prayer times, and through analysing how dirty the [pages](#) are we can identify the priorities and beliefs of their owners.”

Provided by University of St Andrews

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