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Mellon Foundation Area and International Studies Fellowships for Incoming Graduate Students

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This past summer, the Mellon Recruitment Award enabled me to spend three months doing pre-dissertation research in France and Germany. My goal was to explore the departmental archives of Seine-Maritime in Rouen and library holdings in Munich, looking specifically for cases of conflict over honor and hierarchy within the Catholic Church in the eighteenth century. Ultimately, I hope to contribute to our understanding of the seismic shifts that modified profoundly the roles and structure of churches and religious cultures on the eve of modernity.

At the archives in Rouen, where I spent six remarkably fruitful weeks, I soon decided to focus on the extraordinary and richly documented case of the abbesses of Montivilliers: women who wielded quasi-episcopal spiritual and jurisdictional power over more than a dozen parishes from the Middle Ages to the French Revolution. I discovered that many archbishops of Rouen contested the abbesses' right to exercise that power. One especially fierce dispute occurred in the mid-eighteenth century, in the form of a legal case brought before the council of King Louis XV. This affair has left an impressive and exciting paper trail, primarily on the abbey's side. Within only a few weeks, I was able to collect what may become a significant part of the evidentiary base for my dissertation: legal writs, royal ordinances, correspondence between the abbess and the archbishop, letters sent by the abbess and her collaborators to potential supporters at the royal court or to other powerful abbesses and abbots both in France and abroad, and a host of other documents.

The archbishop eventually abandoned his assault on the 'exemption of Montivilliers,' probably because political circumstances were changing in the abbess's favor and because her resistance had proven both sophisticated and unflinching. The Abbey of Montivilliers did not survive the French Revolution, but its buildings were largely restored in the late twentieth century and I got to visit them on a weekend trip to the Le Havre/Montivilliers area. Moreover, I consulted local archivists and librarians and worked in the libraries of the University of Rouen to make sure I would not miss any previous research that has been done on the abbey's history; it turned out that historians have so far paid very little attention to the eighteenth-century abbesses and nuns of Montivilliers.

I spent another six weeks in Munich, working mostly at the Bavarian State Library, one of the world's most important research libraries for European historians. There, I got hold of a great number of rare books that allowed me to better understand the context and significance of the spiritual authority wielded and defended by the abbess of Montivilliers. Among other things, I learned that the case of Montivilliers was not a completely isolated one; female monasteries endowed with similar privileges existed elsewhere in France, but also in Italy, Spain, and the Holy Roman Empire, where more than a dozen prince-abbesses even had seats at the imperial diet. The history of Montivilliers, though certainly exceptional, has the potential to shed light on a larger issue that mattered to people all across eighteenth-century Europe—the issue of female authority, especially in an institution as male-dominated as the Catholic Church. Several conversations with faculty members and Italian and Spanish visiting scholars at the Historische Seminar of the University of Munich also helped me assess the importance of the research questions I can answer based on the archival material I had found and photographed in Rouen.

All things considered, I profited massively from the three months of research funded by the IRIS Mellon Award, and I am sincerely grateful for having been given this opportunity.