

Interview with Prof. Dr. Merle Eisenberg



Hi Prof. Dr. Merle Eisenberg. Welcome at the ZAZH – Zentrum Altertumswissenschaften Zürich! Please introduce yourself.

Thanks! I am an assistant professor of history at Oklahoma State University, where I just started in the fall of 2021.

What is your field of research? What are you interested in generally?

I am a historian of late antiquity and the early middle ages and I am generally interested in how people reacted to “big” moments of historical change, such as the Fall of the Roman Empire in the 5th century CE or the outbreak of the first plague pandemic, known as the Justinianic Plague, in the 6th century CE.

What are you currently researching?

I tend to work on a number of projects at a time, but my main project at the moment is writing a new history of the Justinianic Plague as part of an answer to a larger question: why has disease increasingly been seen as a major cause of great changes in history?

Why are you researching this topic? What motivated/motivates you?

I started researching disease and pandemics several years before Covid, but our initial and long-term reactions to living in our own pandemic has certainly motivated me even more. I’ve gotten ever more curious about why we think about ancient pandemics so differently from modern pandemics. Once you acknowledge the assumed higher mortality, why do

we make ancient pandemics so exceptional in the changes they caused?

What are the biggest challenges in your research right now?

Trying to keep up with all the new work (for good reasons!) on disease that is now appearing at a rapid rate.

Which ancient person would you most like to have a coffee with?

I would love to chat with Bishop Caesarius of Arles (d. 542 CE). He was bishop of Arles for 40 years and managed to get along with multiple rulers who conquered the city, so just how he did that and wrote some really influential sermons at the same time has always impressed me.

What do you like the most about Zurich?

I really enjoyed walking around the new Kunsthaus and taking in the modern and contemporary art.



What are you doing / enjoying to do when you are not researching?

I have two small kids, so I enjoy teaching them new types of fun things from riding a bike to making sure that they are fans of the University of Connecticut’s Women’s Basketball team.

What advice would you give to your younger self who is just about to enter the academic world and wants to pursue a career?

Read as widely as you can in as many different fields as you can. I learn not just interesting history from colleagues in other geographic and chronological fields, but also new questions to ask and bring back to your own field. Also, while it is exhausting at times, working on really different projects makes you excited about each project over and over again.

The interview was conducted by Barbara Holler and Ajla Prasovic. Photos: Ajla Prasovic

