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Pillar-Biters: Columnar Devotion as a Trope and Reality in Early Modern Europe

Friday, 4 March 2022, 2:00 p.m. (Toronto time) via Zoom. To attend this talk, please send email to Megan Armstrong at marmstr@mcmaster.ca and ask her to register you for the talk. One day before the event you will receive an email containing access information to the lecture.

A common motif in late medieval and early modern Northern European art is the “pillar-biter” – a man, or occasionally also a woman, biting into a column. The iconographic meaning has been established: the motif denoted religious hypocrisy and the dissimulation of piety. But why exactly did premodern Europeans associate religious hypocrisy with columns? This question leads into a larger (and largely unstudied) issue: an unease with columns that runs deep in the Christian tradition. The case of the pillar-biter motif can serve as a starting point for a broader discussion of this phenomenon. To the modern beholder, the column may seem a mere architectural element, but, as this talk argues, premodern viewers associated it with a host of religious and devotional practices that have since fallen into oblivion.
