Heresy, inquisition and society: southern France c. 1150-1320

Special Subject paper F

Professor John H Arnold

The south of France – modern day Provence and Languedoc - was, in the central middle ages, a society both rural and urban, mercantile and ‘feudal’, almost totally independent of outside rule, possessed of a strong local Troubadour culture, but accustomed also to the international passage of pilgrims and merchants. During what we might call the ‘long thirteenth century’, a heretical sect arose there that frightened the Catholic Church more than any other: the Cathars. Between 1209 and 1229 northern French crusaders, led initially by a papal legate, attempted to crush the south. By the mid thirteenth century, papally-appointed inquisitors had questioned literally thousands of ordinary people about their beliefs. Inquisitors and townsfolk clashed repeatedly in the coming decades, but by the third decade of the fourteenth century, the heresy was eradicated, whilst the process of inquisition had been refined into a powerful tool with a variety of applications. But did ‘Cathars’ really exist? That name was never used by the heretics themselves (they called themselves ‘good men’ and ‘good women’) and it has been argue that they did not actually hold the dualist beliefs alleged against them by orthodox theologians. Moreover, how much power did inquisitors really wield? They were small in number, were thrown out of various towns at different points in time, and were even murdered on occasion. And how did the particular contours of southern French society relate to faith and persecution? This was a period in which lordship was often shared and divided within families; in which notaries and a vernacular written culture were very important; and where women held a somewhat more equal status in certain regards than one would find in northern Europe. This Special Subject makes use of a range of evidence, including chronicles, literature, civic customs and charters to explore southern France in the central middle ages; and in particular, allows us to form our own understanding of both ‘heresy’ and inquisition through the extensive records left by the process of inquisition.

Across Michaelmas and Lent terms, this Special Subject will be taught via 16 two-hour classes, accompanied by 8 one-hour lectures on specific aspects of documentary analysis, and of historiographical context; with two further two-hour sessions focussed specifically on gobbets in the Easter Term. The main format will be seminar style document discussion throughout. Very short student presentations, based upon the analysis of particular documents, will be a feature of most weeks, aimed at opening up collective discussion. This will also provide a thoroughly integrated form of ‘gobbet’ preparation.

We start in media res, with a taster from the vast inquisition records of the mid thirteenth century; then look ‘back’ to examine the growth of heresy, and reactions to heresy, in the later twelfth century, leading up to the Albigensian crusade. We then look ‘sideways’ at key aspects of southern French society, particularly lordship, town customs, and notarial culture; and then (through Lent term) examine the beginnings of inquisition in the aftermath of the crusade, leading to a sustained focus on Catharism, society, and resistance to inquisition, from the mid thirteenth to the early fourteenth century.
Source material

There are two key volumes of sources in translation, from which selections will be made; some additional material will be provided on moodle.


Walter Wakefield and Austin Evans, eds, *Heresies of the high Middle Ages* (Columbia UP, 1991)

Students will need regular access to these two books and may wish to consider purchasing them, or ensuring that their college library has a copy.

Other translated materials will include


Indicative bibliography:

Christine Caldwell Ames, *Righteous Persecution: Inquisition, Dominicans and Christianity in the Middle Ages* (Penn, 2009)


A variety of journal articles pertaining to particular topics will also be included; and although there will be no requirement to read French to take the paper, some key francophone work (by Jean-Louis Biget, Uwe Brunn, Yves Dossat, Jean Duvernoy, Pilar Jiminez-Sanchez, Henri Maisonneuve, Julien Théry, and Monique Zerner) will be listed for those able to pursue it independently. The various arguments made by those Francophone scholars are, however, adequately represented and reported in the current Anglophone literature listed above.