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Joëlle Rollo-Koster, *Avignon and its Papacy, 1309-1417: Popes, Institutions, and Society*. Lanham, Md., and London: Rowan and Littlefield, 2015. xiii + 314 pp. \$ 75.00 US (cl.). ISBN 978-1-4422-1532-0

Review by Patrick Nold, The University at Albany, SUNY.

Unlike the Rhine River, the Rhône has never been suspected of “flowing into the Tiber.”[1] The papal escape to Avignon is usually treated as an aberrant episode in the history of the bishops of Rome—much like iconoclasm in Byzantium. But was it all that bad? Guillaume Mollat in his *The Popes at Avignon: “The Babylonian Captivity” of the Medieval Church* (1st edition, Paris, 1912; 9th edition and English translation: New York, 1965) sought to undermine the conventional view: “It was for long customary to judge the Avignon papacy only in light of the malevolent accounts of contemporary chroniclers, and the tendentious writings of Petrarch, St. Catherine of Siena and Brigit of Sweden. Since, however, the documents from the archives were published ... it has become possible to modify the judgment of history which had hitherto remained uniformly unfavorable to the Avignon papacy” (Mollat, p. 343). Despite Mollat’s best efforts, that judgement seems to have changed very little. Fifty years later, Joelle Rollo-Koster can still set out to “rehabilitate for the English-speaking reader the Avignon papacy from its ‘black legend’” (p. 289).

The Popes at Avignon was the book of a document man. Mollat knew his canon law and had catalogued the letters of Pope John XXII (1316-1334) in sixteen volumes, in addition to republishing, with updates, Etienne Baluze’s *Vitae Paparum Avenionensium*, a mammoth four-volume collection of primary sources. Rollo-Koster’s *Avignon and its Papacy* is primarily a synthesis of secondary literature from the last sixty years, with an emphasis on social and cultural history. The title reflects a priority of interest: Avignon first, papacy second. Rollo-Koster goes further chronologically than Mollat who broke off his narrative with the return of the papacy to Rome and the beginning of the Schism. Her book fills a gap in providing an English narrative of the “illegitimate” popes in Provence from 1378 until 1417, as well as bringing some new perspectives on the “legitimate” Avignon papacy to 1378. Written in an accessible style, *Avignon and its Papacy* will likely become the standard introduction to the subject for twenty-first century students.

The structure of the book is conventional enough. The first chapter, “Early Popes,” sketches the biographies of popes Clement V (1305-1314) through Benedict XII (1334-1342). Here, following in the footsteps of Sophia Menache,[2] she attempts to rehabilitate the first Avignon pope. So instead of seeing Clement V as a weak man eager to please the king of France and to enrich his Gascon relatives, Rollo-Koster casts him as a “brilliant diplomat” and “shrewd politician” who whose passivity in the face of the Philip IV was “pretended.” His frequent “temporizing”—as in the case of the heresy trials of his Italian predecessor Boniface VIII and of the Knights Templar—was part of a masterful balancing act. Rollo-Koster has Clement staying in France and Avignon because of these trials and because the political situation in Italy made Rome unsafe. Her answer to the charge of nepotism—dismissing it as “anachronistic”—is less convincing. As she herself notes, Clement’s dramatic tilting of the college of cardinals with the elevation of seven Gascons (five of whom were relatives) was unprecedented and did

shock contemporaries. The marginalization of Italians in the college was to cause an anarchic interregnum after Clement's death and eventually the Schism itself.

The electoral deadlock eventually yielded a compromise candidate who turned out to be anything but a compromiser. John XXII's eighteen-year reign (1316-1334) laid the bureaucratic, political and intellectual foundations of Avignon papacy. This "energetic 'micromanager'" (p. 288) turned the papal curia into an efficient administrative machine. But his heavy-handed treatment of the imperial claimant Ludwig of Bavaria in Germany and his 'Ghibelline' allies in Italy prevented any return to Rome. In terms of intellectual history, his pontificate was one damned thing after another, with the condemnations of Peter of John Olivi, William of Ockham, Marsilius of Padua, Meister Eckhart, and assorted groups of heretics. After John XXII came Benedict XII (1334-1342), the former inquisitor of Montaignou and a Cistercian monk (though he appears as a Benedictine on p. 110): his character was marked by "rectitude and dogmatism" (p. 56) and he devoted himself to reforming religious orders. In Italy, he abandoned John XXII's stick for the carrot, but was still unable to return to Rome. An additional complication was the outbreak of the Hundred Years War, since Avignon was better positioned for the papacy's mediation efforts.

The second chapter, entitled "Papal Monarchy," hits the apogee of the Avignon papacy with the Benedictine grandee and theologian Clement VI (1342-52), who famously remarked that his predecessors "did not know how to be pope." He was a man of confidence and culture—and it showed in everything he did, including buying Avignon from the queen of Naples and building a papal palace decorated with hunting scenes. With his interest in learning and his magnanimity, Clement "perhaps anticipated the interests of later humanist princes" (p. 84). Yet his diplomacy yielded no great results and he was powerless in the face of the Black Death that arrived in Provence in 1348. After Clement's death, the cardinals reacted to his lordly style by proposing that, should one of their number be elected, he would be more deferential toward the College of Cardinals and work within certain guidelines. They then elected a lawyer who took the name of Innocent VI (1352-62) and immediately repudiated this power-sharing agreement. With the death of Ludwig of Bavaria, Innocent enjoyed better relations with the Holy Roman Emperor (Charles IV). His main fights were against the cardinals and the Hundred Years War mercenaries who threatened to attack Avignon unless they were paid off. It seemed that Avignon might not be safer than Rome after all, and Innocent VI put Italian affairs in the hands of Cardinal Albornoz who 'pacified' Italy through war to prepare for a homecoming.

Chapter three, "Returning to Rome," begins with the Benedictine Urban V (1362-70), "a fastidious man" who "took his temporal and spiritual charges extremely seriously" (p. 115). Urban involved himself heavily in the day-to-day running of papal administration and cracking down on corruption, while founding educational establishments and encouraging scholars. He attempted to return to Rome in 1367, but, for safekeeping, he left his treasury and financial administration in Avignon. This proved to be the right decision as he returned after only three years, having found Italy too unstable politically with revolts in the newly conquered Papal States. He died disappointed but the public in Provence acknowledged his efforts by revering him as a saint. Following him was Gregory XI (1370-78), a learned lawyer who was not even a priest when elected pope: He had worked in the curia since his teens and was the nephew of Clement VI as well as a relative of six other cardinals. Against their wishes, Gregory put a return to Rome at the top of his agenda but was stymied by a war with Florence, previously a papal ally. Eventually he did return to Rome, where he was to die in 1378. The subsequent tumultuous papal election resulted in the first Italian being elected in 75 years: The bishop of Bari who took the name Urban VI. The French cardinals came to regret their decision when Urban proved to be unpredictable, and elected one of their own, Robert of Geneva, as pope. They retreated to Avignon and the Schism began.

In her otherwise straightforward march through the lives of these popes, Rollo-Koster occasionally pauses to examine ceremonies and their symbolism. We learn that before the popes settled in Provence,

already in the thirteenth century “rituals of accession had become detached from their Roman setting” (p. 25). Processions on the *Via papalis* from the Vatican to the Lateran were in Avignon reenacted indoors in the palace of the popes. *Ubi papa, ibi Roma*. Gregory XI’s elevated conception of office can be seen in the papal coronation parade that had been forgone by his ascetic predecessor Urban V. Rollo-Koster suggests that the return to Rome in 1378 involved a symbolic rebuke by the Roman people to the popes who were made enter the city through the carnival route from St. Paul’s to the Lateran. The Schism between Urban VI and the French cardinals is itself explained in metaphor. Applying a distinction made by Agostino Paravicini-Bagliani,[3] she suggests that there were two conflicting visions of the ecclesiastical body politic at the papal court: the cardinals viewed themselves as the trunk and limbs of the Church with the pope as her head; popes viewed themselves as the head *and* the body of the Church, thus not allowing any role for the cardinals. While this symbolic approach draws a memorable picture, students might be left with the impression that this is all there is to papal political theory, since the work of Michael Wilkes[4] or Jürgen Miethke,[5] who have contributed definitive studies on the extensive corpus of ecclesiological *tractati*, are not mentioned anywhere by Rollo-Koster.

Bureaucracy is what the Avignon papacy is best known for and there was a precise political reason behind it: “The popes understood that the Church’s independence rested on its financial autonomy. This financial self-rule was built from and rested on the Church’s administrative structure” (p. 150). Rollo-Koster has a dense chapter on administration where she outlines the various offices of the curia: Camera, Chancery, mint, Penitentiary, Rota and papal household are all clearly delineated. The most important office was the Apostolic Chamber, which was in charge of the papal court’s finances; its revenues came from administrative service fees and taxes. One of the greatest sources of income came from the granting of benefices—something that the popes monopolized in the fourteenth century. Here it would have been worth mentioning John XXII’s decree *Execrabilis* (1317) that increased the number of benefices available by prohibiting clerics from holding more than one with the cure of souls. No source illustrates better the power of patronage than the supplications for benefices submitted to the popes from University of Paris and it is a pity that they are not mentioned despite being recently edited.[6] The Avignon papacy not only gained revenue from fees associated the collation of benefices; it also gathered regular church taxes more efficiently through a new European-wide network of collectors.

All these administrative offices had an effect on Avignon—a small town that struggled to accommodate the burgeoning bureaucracy and the arrival of clerics in search of papal patronage or justice. Eventually, all curial offices would be housed in Clement VI’s massive *Palais des Papes*. But what about the people who worked there, from cardinals on down? Unlike the popes, the cardinals did not build new residences but tended to occupy existing buildings, which they frequently cobbled together into so-called *livrées*. Lower on the clerical ladder, some clerics simply slept in the *Palais*. The end of the chapter on the administration’s local effects flows into the most original and densest chapter in the book: “The Capital and its Population.” Here Rollo-Koster provides a topography of papal city, mapping out the various parishes as well as the spheres of influence of its religious houses. With every institution, she notes the surviving primary sources in the Municipal Archives. She also returns to her Ph.D. dissertation on the *Liber Divisionis*—a list from 1371 of around 4,000 heads of households. All sorts of conclusions about the social fabric of Avignon are drawn from this source, such as the fact that the majority of those living there at the time of the survey were not natives. The Italian community consisted primarily of merchants and bankers. It was sizable and left sources like the Datini letters, made famous by Iris Origo.[7] One striking Datini letter involves an Italian suicide named Filippo and a member of another “foreign” group in Avignon: Jews. Filippo was in debt and killed himself in a room he was renting from a Jew who “having discovered Filippo’s body ... called a barber to clean and treat it and a priest to administer last rights and confession” (p. 259). Rollo-Koster holds the story up as “a touching-example of Jewish-Christian rapport,” but its details are obviously wrong. The source says that the Jew discovered a *dying* man who had stabbed himself and a barber was called to take care of the wounds. The barber, seeing that the man was in danger of death, made him confess. No priest is mentioned as being involved, and the whole situation looks like *in extremis* confession to a layman.[8]

Avignon and its Papacy covers a little over 100 years of history and it is stronger on the second half of the period than on the first. There are a number of slips that—it is hoped—will be corrected in a subsequent paperback edition. The last Roman pope Boniface VIII (1294-1303) is described as sporting a “newly designed triple tiara” (p. 26), but the novelty was in fact John XXII’s (as is suggested on p. 154). Boniface VIII’s *Unam Sanctam* is said to have been “abrogated” by Clement V; the same word is applied to Nicholas III’s *Exiit qui seminat* under John XXII. In both cases, subtlety is involved and “abrogate” seems too strong. Certainly, John XXIII never uttered the sentence attributed to him: “Scripture can contradict the poverty of Christ” (p. 49). The relevant papal bull on Apostolic poverty is *Cum inter nonnullos* (1323); the author does not cite the text itself but rather its “title” (p. 65 n. 61) which is actually nothing more than the summary by a seventeenth century historian. The translation of this summary—speaking of an “extravagant [opinion]” of John XXII—is itself misleading. The Latin *extravagans* (lit: *wandering beyond*) refers to the decretal not being in an official collection of canon law rather than its content. The poverty of Christ made William of Ockham an opponent of John XXII but Ockham did not write the *Defensor Pacis* (p. 296) of Marsilius of Padua. The Dominican Ptolemy of Lucca could not have written anything about Gregory XI (1370-78) spending time in Perugia studying under Baldo degli Ubaldi (p. 128), because Ptolemy died in 1327.

The usefulness of *Avignon and its Papacy* for students is somewhat limited by problems in the notes. While the decrees of the Council of Constance (1414-18) are cited from the standard Tanner-Alberigo critical edition and translation,^[9] those of the Council of Vienne (1311-12) are referenced only from the internet site of the Eternal World Television Network. Standard editions of papal constitutions such as Jacqueline Tarrant’s *Extravagantes Johannis XXII* (1983) and Emil Friedberg’s *Corpus Iuris Canonici* (1879-81) do not appear. So students will not know where to go to read Boniface VIII’s famous bull *Detestande feritatis* prohibiting the dismemberment of corpses analyzed by the author. The same is true of the crucial and oft-cited *Ubi periculum* regulating papal elections. References to papal documents can be vague: “A papal bull condemned the Spirituals (labeling them *Fratricelli* for the first time) and in the next bull the pope advanced obedience as the greatest of all vows” (p. 49). It would have been helpful to at least provide the names *Sancta Romana* (1317) and *Quorundam Exigit* (1318) for these important constitutions—if not giving an indication of where they are published. Run-of-the-mill papal letters are not cited from a printed calendar (such as the one that Mollat prepared), but from a subscription database that few libraries can afford. In short, the book needs a more systematic discussion of primary sources and their print availability.

Likewise, though the author has a historiographical survey in her introduction and an annotated bibliography at the end, treatment of secondary literature is by no means comprehensive. In addition to the fundamental works of Wilkes and Miethke mentioned above, *Avignon and its Papacy* should have taken into consideration (or at least mentioned) the scholarship of Louis Caillet,^[10] Sylvain Piron,^[11] Louisa Burnham^[12] and Sylvain Parent^[13] for John XXII; Jan Ballweg^[14] and Irene Bueno^[15] for Benedict XII; and Étienne Anheim^[16] and Ralf Lützelshwab^[17] for Clement VI. It is unlikely that the works of these scholars would have altered Rollo-Koster’s fundamental arguments or even the shape of her fine (though by no means faultless) book, but they would have given this introduction to the Avignon papacy a greater texture for students to appreciate.

NOTES

[1] Cf. Ralph Wiltgen, *The Rhine Flows into the Tiber: A History of Vatican II* (Rockford Ill.: Tan Books, 1967).

[2] Sophie Menache, *Clement V* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[3] Agostino Paravicini-Bagliani *The Pope’s Body* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

- [4] Michael Wilkes, *The Problem of Sovereignty in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963).
- [5] Jürgen Miethke, *De potestate papae. Die päpstliche Amtskompetenz im Widerstreit der politischen Theorie von Thomas von Aquin bis Wilhelm von Ockham* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000).
- [6] *Rotuli Parisiensis. Supplications to the Pope from the University of Paris*, ed. William Courtenay and Eric Goddard, 3 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2002-2013).
- [7] Iris Origo, *The Merchant of Prato* (New York: Knopf, 1957).
- [8] For which see T. N. Tentler, *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), pp. 66-7.
- [9] *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Giuseppe Alberigo and Norman Tanner (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1990).
- [10] Louis Caillet, *La papauté d'Avignon et l'église de France: la politique bénéficiaire du Pape Jean XXII en France (1316-1334)* (Paris: P.U.F., 1975).
- [11] E. g. Sylvain Piron, "Avignon sous Jean XXII, l'Eldorado des théologiens," in *Jean XXII et le Midi*, Cahiers de Fanjeaux 45 (Toulouse: Privat, 2012), pp. 357-391.
- [12] Louisa Burnham, *So Great a Light, So Great a Smoke: The Beguin Heretics of Languedoc* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008)
- [13] Sylvain Parent, *Dans les Abysses de l'Infidélité. Les Procès contre les ennemis de d'église en Italie au temps de Jean XXII (1316-1334)* (Rome: École française de Rome, 2014).
- [14] Jan Ballweg, *Konziliare oder päpstliche Ordensreform? Benedikt XII. und die Reformdiskussion im frühen 14. Jahrhundert* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001).
- [15] Irene Bueno, "False Prophets and Ravening Wolves: Biblical Exegesis as a Tool against Heretics in Jacques Fournier's *Postilla* on Matthew," *Speculum* 89 (2014):35-65; eadem, *Defining Heresy: Inquisition, Theology and Papal Policy in the Time of Jacques Fournier* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).
- [16] Most recently Étienne Anheim, *Clément VI au travail. Lire, écrire, prêcher au XIV^e siècle* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2014).
- [17] Ralf Lützelshwab, *Flectat cardinales ad velle suum? Clemens VI. und sein Kardinalskolleg: Ein Beitrag zur kurialen Politik in der Mitte des 14. Jahrhunderts* (Munich: Oldenbourg 2007).

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