

Nicole Archambeau, *Souls Under Siege: Stories of War, Plague, and Confession in Fourteenth-Century Provence*. Ithaca, N.Y. and London: Cornell University Press, 2021. xiv + 261 pp. Maps, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$49.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978150175366; \$32.99 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9781501753671.

Review Essay by Bruce L. Venarde, Independent Scholar.

Discussing the sources for her *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages*, Barbara H. Rosenwein remarks: “Always I miss what historians would look at first in the modern period—diaries, memoirs, interviews.”[1] Although the number and variety of sources for the study of medieval Europe increases greatly from the eleventh century, the only things resembling diaries recount spiritual experiences almost exclusively, memoirs are rare, and what we think of as interviews remain entirely absent. In her deeply researched and highly readable *Souls Under Siege: Stories of War, Plague, and Confession in Fourteenth-Century Provence*, Nicole Archambeau essentially treats the accounts by witnesses at a canonization inquest as interviews on the premise that “the testimonies of these sixty-eight pious people can provide insight into the experience of the crises of fourteenth-century Provence and perhaps much of Europe” (p. 2). It is easy enough to imagine that life in the violence- and plague-infested fourteenth century must have been a kind of hell. But *Souls Under Siege* shows us how individuals reacted and responded to the specific crises in one corner of Europe in the 1340s, 1350s, and 1360s. How did that hellish life feel to individuals and what changes did it bring about in them? Thanks to Archambeau, we have a very good idea.

In late 1360, the holy woman, Countess Delphine de Puimichel, died in Apt, a town in her native Provence, at the age of seventy-five. She was a onetime member of the royal court in Naples, the rulers of which were also the counts of Provence in the fourteenth century. Delphine lived in poverty and humility amidst Neapolitan opulence. Although a widow, she was a virgin: her marriage to Elzear of Sabran (d. 1323) had been chaste. Delphine returned to Provence shortly after 1343. Her reputation for holy acts and miracles was already widespread in her lifetime. According to a number of witnesses, upon her death her feet remained supple and performed miracles: a prostitute kissed them and immediately changed her sinful ways; a sick boy was cured when his mother wrapped Delphine’s feet around his neck; and someone else created healing properties in several objects merely by touching them to the dead woman’s feet (p. 96). But, as Archambeau says at the start, her book is not about Delphine. An inquest aimed at having her declared a saint began in Apt two and a half years after her death, lasting from May to October 1363. Sixty-eight witnesses gave testimony in those months, most of them doing so in the cathedral of St. Anne, in the presence of the two episcopal commissioners appointed by the pope, the archbishop of Aix-en-Provence, and the bishop of Vaison, as well two notaries, one appointed from Rome and the other local. The notaries translated the testimonies from Provençal into Latin, having been admonished to stick as closely as they could to the witnesses’ own words. The rather ragged Latin Archambeau provides in the notes shows that the notaries did their best to reproduce

the vernacular testimonies. The Latin reads like people talking. This book is about those people's experiences.

To understand the testimonies better, it helps to understand how they came about, which Archambeau helpfully explains in her introduction. A notary from Apt, Nicolau Laurens, had written in advance of the proceedings "ninety-eight articles of interrogation that summarized Delphine's life events, characteristics, living miracles, and posthumous miracles" (p. 11). They were read to each witness. These served as something akin—the analogy is mine, not the author's—to a reporter's list of questions. Witnesses chose whether or not to speak about each article or not to hear all of them, some testifying about only a few. Most articles were fairly specific, about one incident from the dossier Laurens had assembled, but the replies to the first and the thirty-fifth are the most revealing. Article one said, in effect, "Tell us anything you know about Delphine." Article thirty-five was similarly vague, asking witnesses about internal transformations, both spiritual and emotional, in themselves and others. As Archambeau emphasizes, these testimonies are not canned or scripted replies to the articles and hence get us close to the witnesses' understandings.

The book is structured around what Archambeau calls "moments of danger." These are, in the first four chapters, based on chronology, times when plague, violence, or both vexed Provence, and the rapidly evolving response to these challenges. The last two chapters concern moments of danger not anchored in a specific historical moment. Many witnesses spoke of difficulties with the sacrament of penance. Each chapter is centered around one witness, although each also discusses others. This framework offers an ever-deepening understanding of the experiences of worldly crises and spiritual ones among the people of fourteenth-century Provence.

The first chapter sets the stage and the pattern for the next three. "Bertranda Bertomieua and the Death of King Robert of Naples, 1343," spotlights the testimony of Delphine's maid and companion for almost fifty years. By 1363 she was too ill to leave her bed in the Holy Cross convent in Apt, so the archbishop, bishop, notaries, and Nicolau Laurens went to her. Bertranda responded to almost half the articles of interrogation, placing incidents in time with reference to Delphine's death or the *prima mortalitas*, the first mortality, which is how witnesses described the arrival of the Black Death in Provence in 1348. As Archambeau notes, the articles of interrogation did not mention plague, but numerous witnesses referred to it in response to article one (p. 15). But Bertranda also twice used the date of the death of King Robert of Naples as the point of reference. At this point Archambeau zooms out, as it were, to explain why Robert's death in 1343 was a watershed moment that was behind moments of danger to follow. She follows this procedure in the next three chapters, beginning with an individual before placing testimonies in their broad social, political, and military contexts, the historian's broad vista. This involves synthesis of a great deal of scholarly literature; the bibliography of secondary sources runs to twenty-eight pages and does not include everything mentioned in the notes. In short, Robert's sons predeceased him. When he died in 1343, he left his kingdom to his granddaughter, Johanna, whom he had married to her cousin, Andrew of Hungary. He left a will carefully designed to allow a peaceful transition of power and thwart numerous other claims to the throne. (A genealogical table would have helped here!) The will was broken almost immediately, and a power struggle broke out. Andrew was assassinated in 1345, and Johanna was rumored to have been involved. The political tensions rising from the breaking of Robert's will were behind troubled decades for the Kingdom of Naples and

therefore Provence. Tellingly, Bertranda associates Robert and Queen Sanxia with Delphine but never mentions Johanna, a silence that speaks to opinion. As Archambeau puts it, “Bertranda’s testimony opened a small window on a dangerous moment. Combining the historian’s bird’s-eye view with Bertanda’s perspective has helped us see that moment better” (p. 27).

Chapter two, “Bishop Phillipe Cabassole and the ‘War of the Seneschals,’ 1347-1349,” considers a feud between two Provençal nobles over the question of who was to represent the Neapolitan crown’s interests in the region. This second moment of danger coincided with the first outbreak of plague. Here a theme appears: the inquest witnesses did not, as modern historians would, distinguish or analyze separately plague and violence. For them, both problems, and the emotional states they created, “affected the physical and spiritual health of the region” (p. 40). Phillipe Cabassole was the bishop of Cavaillon, who operated in the highest circles in Naples, Provence, and Rome. He stressed that Delphine was a vital presence in negotiating a peace, a conference Delphine attended through considerable physical strain. Phillipe summoned her to speak to the feuding lords because she “could diffuse political discord with affection and heal the sickness caused by lordly violence with her own suffering” (p. 50). Archambeau here shows how medieval people connected—or, as we moderns might say, conflated—events and activities in ways that scholarly analysis has tended to treat discretely. For them, violence was illness that the suffering of a holy person could heal.

Chapter three centers on Nicolau Laurens and the disastrous invasion of mercenaries from Gascony in 1357-1358. Archambeau places this event, which witnesses struggled to describe because it was not war as they understood it, in the context of continued political strife in Naples. At least thirteen witnesses spoke of these times; many described the fear and spiritual damage that came from random violence that nobody was in a position to control. At the same time, the four articles Laurens drew up on the crisis of 1357-1358, and testimonies about it, are stories of protection from danger and inner transformation. More than a dozen people recounted how, as he was about to be executed, a captured mercenary named Durand Arnau de Rupa Aymeria made a plea to Delphine, about whom he had heard while marauding in Provence. He was saved from certain death and went to see the holy woman, living as a penitent for a time afterwards. That the story was known to an array of witnesses shows how people from various orders of society shared stories not only of horror but the restoration of spiritual health.

Bad as the first mercenary invasion was, chapter four, “Lady Andrea Raymon and the Great Companies, 1361,” tells the story of something far worse. A far greater number of mercenaries, whose disposal the 1360 Treaty of Brétigny between the kings of England and France failed to address, invaded Provence, wreaking widespread and multifaceted havoc on a fragile society, “disrupting food production, storage, and shipment; straining energy sources and sanitation; destroying infrastructure; and bring[ing] displaced populations into contact” (p. 98). These vast crowds of soldiers who had become central in the Hundred Years’ War had no legitimate reason to be in Provence at all: they were simply brigands, a leaderless mob, whose numbers totally overwhelmed local attempts to defend against them. To make matters worse, a few months after this new horde descended, so did a second wave of plague, possibly introduced by the mercenaries themselves. Here Archambeau highlights the role of women as protectors and healers in this awful year. Lady Andrea Raymon described what was by this time a posthumous miracle. She was traveling at the head of a small party when they were ambushed by a far larger group of

mercenaries. Upon promising to visit Delphine's tomb if she and her party escaped capture, she found her fear replaced by confidence and consolation. Her pursuers did not succeed in their kidnapping attempt. Similar inner transformations are important to the stories of release from plague and fever mentioned by numerous witnesses. To be the recipient of a healing miracle, witnesses testified, one had to change spiritual state, whereas a medical cure had no such requirement. However, the two worked together: "For Christians in the fourteenth century, medicine and miracle were not strictly separate healing methods" (p. 115). If physicians' medical treatment did not work—and the physicians themselves understood the body and mind needed to work together—the afflicted sought miracle cures. Here again, modern categorizations of phenomena do not match the experience of the inquest witnesses.

The final two chapters turn away from the chronological "moments of danger" of 1343, 1348-1349, 1357-1358, and 1361 to sacramental ones. Chapter five, "Master Durand Andree and the Sacrament of Penance," begins with the rather remarkable fact that more than half of the witnesses mention this sacrament, and a number describe difficulties with confession. The aristocratic and politically connected Durand Andree, this chapter's focus witness, was also Delphine's confessor. His testimony and that of others uncover how very demanding it was, physically and spiritually, to make a full and proper confession and to perform penance afterward. For the mostly elite witnesses, sin was often hard to understand, despite the various sources from which lay people could learn about it. One such source was a long vernacular poem, called *The Breviary of Love*. The text presents a paradox: the sinfulness of much common and enjoyable behavior is presented as an entertainment and sometimes in copiously illustrated manuscripts, luxury items. As Archambeau remarks, "The dangers of pleasurable activities and beautiful objects were being reinforced through the lavishly illuminated pages of an expensive book" (p. 132). No wonder it often took a conversation with Delphine or her exhortation to a group for both laywomen and nuns to realize that owning fancy clothes, jewelry, and objects made of precious metals was a sin. Hidden sins, too, might be hard to identify: an abbess realized through Delphine's words that her prayer was a form of vainglory, and Delphine refused to receive a pious visit from a nobleman because he was making a prideful show of it, damaging his soul (pp. 133-134). A proper confession required sincere intent not to sin this way again. But even though violence was spiritually damaging, how could a lord who led troops against mercenaries really intend not to repeat such an action? Social position sometimes made it impossible not to recommit a sin.

Furthermore, some people found their expectations of how they would feel after the sacrament of penance unmet, the subject of chapter six, "Sister Resens de Insula and the Desire for Certainty." This nun was sad and afraid because of pricks of conscience that persisted even after repeated confession. Apparently she and others expected they would feel relief. Twenty witnesses spoke to article thirty-five, one of the two open-ended questions, about how Delphine helped to change people's interior state. The holy woman's words, heard with good intent, allowed them "to feel restored in mind, consoled in spirit, and reassured about their doubts of conscience" (p. 147). Without such reassurance, lack of confidence affected mood and even physical health. Here is another example of how categories we usually consider separately, mental and physical health, were utterly entwined in the minds of fourteenth-century people. The doubts that pious people had extended from whether their confession and penance were adequate to whether they understood sacred texts and theological ideas properly.

I wonder about the relationship between the obvious, exterior moments of danger—violence and plague most of all—and the many concerns about spiritual health revealed in these last two chapters. As Archambeau notes, even in peacetime, it was a challenge or even an impossibility to be contrite, remember all one’s sins, express them clearly out loud, and intend not to repeat them. “The fourteenth century, however, was not a time of peace. The profound transition in warfare and the emergence of an epidemic illness that many felt was a divine punishment for sinful behavior likely made the stakes feel even higher, while the requirements of confession and penance could be unattainable” (p. 143). In other words, the facts of violence and plague may have exacerbated existing spiritual discomfort. But did people experience the chronological moments of danger more profoundly because they already had many spiritual doubts? How did individual consciences and circumstances interact?

To my mind, this excellent book manages to do four things well. First, through close reading, it provides real insight into how individuals experienced the challenges of their lives, whether violence, bodily illness, or spiritual pain. Secondly, it shows that those very things were interrelated in the minds of the people of fourteenth-century Provence in ways other than in modern minds: violence was sin; physical and spiritual health were intimately related; body and soul, and body and mind, were not separable entities.[2] In short, Archambeau’s subjects had different metaphysical understandings than we do. This is a kind of *histoire des mentalités* (a term Archambeau does not use) that does what microhistory does; in a sense, this is a microhistory, revealing a world through contextualized examination of individuals and small groups. Thirdly, *Souls Under Siege* shows us not Johan Huizinga’s drained, glum late medieval society, but people of remarkable resilience, resourcefulness, and in fact optimism. All the witnesses and other participants in the canonization inquest were survivors—“[t]hese miracle stories are also survivor stories that served as problem-solving narratives” (p.18)—and some had survived quite a lot. Finally, Archambeau writes clearly and vividly without parading her considerable expertise. Readers will need to read the notes to uncover the sociological, anthropological, and linguistic theories that underpin her approach to the testimonies. The main text of the book, as its subtitle announces, simply tells the stories. They are well worth hearing.

NOTES

[1] Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages* (Ithaca, N.Y. and London: Cornell University Press, 2006), p. 26.

[2] In this regard, there is a notable overlap between *Souls Under Siege* and another book published by the same press in the same year, Sara Ritchey’s *Acts of Care: Recovering Women in Late Medieval Health* (Ithaca, N.Y. and London: Cornell University Press, 2021). Ritchey uses an array of medieval texts to uncover female religious women’s health care in the thirteenth-century southern Low Countries that “mingles the physical, social, emotional, and spiritual” (p. 5). That is, it was a holistic medicine that worked according to understandings of sickness and health quite different from that of modern biomedicine. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Ritchey and Archambeau cite each other’s articles published before 2021.

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