

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 978150753671.

Review Essay by Elizabeth Casteen, Binghamton University, SUNY

In 1363 in Apt, a papal commission gathered testimony from sixty-eight witnesses about the life and possible sanctity of a recently deceased countess, Delphine de Puimichel (d. 1360). From their stories—some quite brief, others based on nearly a lifetime’s experience—Nicole Archambeau seeks to recover how Provençaux of differing ages, genders, and religious and social statuses experienced and understood the crises, including repeated waves of plague and war, they survived between 1343 and 1363. Analyzing the witnesses’ testimony, given in response to ninety-eight articles drawn up by the notary, Nicolau Laurens, Archambeau uncovers “how they wove events and people into a moral worldview that included crisis” and demonstrates that those crises overlapped and bled into one another. She approaches witnesses’ stories as “survival stories” (p. 18). She argues that their tellers were less interested in modern historians’ questions regarding bodily survival than they were in more pressing questions regarding their own spiritual health and salvation. Archambeau contends that “war, plague, and difficulties with the sacrament of penance” were, in the minds of those who spoke about Delphine’s sanctity, interrelated sicknesses, in large measure because physical crises were also spiritual crises (p. 7). To that end, while the story Archambeau tells in *Souls under Siege: Stories of War, Plague, and Confession in Fourteenth-Century Provence* is about how people survived and made sense of twenty years of unremitting calamity, she frames the stories she examines as reminders that fourteenth-century Christians linked the suffering of body and soul and “did not strictly mark some dangers as physical and other as spiritual” (p. 163).

The witness testimony that Archambeau reads and carefully contextualizes belongs to a moment suspended between cataclysms. Witnesses had already lived through the Black Death, which tore through Provence beginning in 1347, only to return in 1361-62, and they had weathered repeated mercenary violence connected to the early stages of the Hundred Years’ War (1337-1453). They were soon to experience further recurrences of plague and the massive upheaval of the Great Schism of the Western Church (1378-1417), which was particularly intense in Provence. Thus, *Souls under Siege* provides a window on the region’s cultural imaginary on the eve of the Schism, whose *imaginaire* Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski has charted and for which this book serves as something of a prequel.[1] Whereas Blumenfeld-Kosinski describes an apocalyptic *imaginaire* that emerged during the Schism, the one that Archambeau describes is less focused on eschatology than on personal survival and reform. It is colored by doubt generated by political instability and unpredictable violence, leading people to seek healing and comfort in a local holy woman rather than from pope or queen. The testimonies Archambeau examines provide windows on grave concerns—political, social, and personal—but, as she points out, the voices she listens to are not

those of saints and philosophers but of nuns, minor nobles, and servants seeking “consolation and certainty about their souls” during profoundly uncertain times (p. 166). They were concerned about sin’s corrosive effects, and they perceived the successive waves of fourteenth-century crisis as “symptoms of widespread spiritual sickness” (p. 5). At the same, while they sought consolation in the sacrament of penance, Archambeau argues, those who sought spiritual healing through Delphine had often failed to find consolation in penance, generating a “quiet crisis of confession” that marks the *imaginaire* of this moment (p. 5).

Delphine de Puimichel’s life intersected with many of the major events in fourteenth-century history; those who testified regarding her sanctity interpreted those events through the lens of the comfort and consolation she offered. Born in 1284, Delphine married Elzéar of Sabran, lord of Ansois, who became Count of Ariano in recognition of service to Robert of Anjou, King of Naples and Count of Provence (r. 1309-1343). Elzéar (canonized 1369), was famous for his asceticism, while Delphine was noted for her extreme piety and her demand for a chaste marriage, to which Elzéar agreed. Though a noblewoman of considerable influence who moved within the inner circle of Robert and his wife, Sanxia of Majorca, Delphine was revered in Provence for her lifelong virginity, as well as for fasts, vigils, prayer, and charity. As a close confidant of Sanxia of Majorca, Delphine was present in Naples when Robert died in 1343, and she had a close view of the chaos that engulfed Naples during the troubled early reign of his successor, Johanna I (r. 1343-1382). When she returned to Provence, Delphine formed a bridge between the Provençal aristocracy and the distant Neapolitan court, and she was a source of stability during political turmoil, plague, and mercenary predations.

Drawing on linguistic anthropology and discourse analysis, Archambeau examines how witnesses described these events, which she identifies as “moments of danger” (p. 19) around which deponents structured their memories of Delphine and conception of the past. The first four chapters survey moments crisis: the death of Robert of Naples, which served as a key marker of time for some witnesses and occurred just before (and became entangled in memory with) the first outbreak of plague in 1347; political factionalism in Provence after Johanna’s succession, which also occurred in concert with the plague; the mercenary invasion of Provence in 1357-1358; and the recurrence of both mercenary activity and plague in 1361. The last two chapters shift from a chronological focus to a spiritual one, examining accounts of struggle with confession and doubts about the sacrament of penance. In each chapter, Archambeau moves back and forth between the testimony and its broader context, situating each figure within regional and transregional networks and reading what each witness said and how each paired events and outcomes against the broader history of pestilence and unrest. The end result is a richly observed study of storytelling and memory making that sheds light on how an array of people coped with crisis.

In chapter one, Archambeau relies primarily on the testimony of Bertranda Bertomieua, who spent the better part of fifty years as Delphine’s companion, including at the Angevin court in Naples in 1342 and 1343. Archambeau argues that Bertranda’s testimony—delivered orally from her sickbed in Avignon—constitutes a series of carefully selected tales that both revealed her knowledge of the putative saint and reflected the turmoil and anxiety of the preceding twenty years. Archambeau contends that for Bertranda, as for others, Robert of Naples’s death, although rarely explicitly referenced, was the “root of several dangers they all faced” (p. 26), and she positions Bertranda’s testimony about the events of 1343-1347 against the backdrop of the factionalism and scandal that

surrounded Johanna's succession, most spectacularly after the assassination of her first husband, Andrew of Hungary (1327-1345). Archambeau sees Bertranda's narrative, which celebrates Robert and Sanxia but ignores Johanna, as implicitly comparing the turmoil after Robert's death with the pious order that preceded it. Bertranda weaves Delphine into the story of the last years of Robert's and Sanxia's lives, making her a key figure at their court and invoking them as key players in the story of her sanctity, while giving the commission "an insider's view of Delphine's life in Naples" (p. 37).

Problematically, much of Archambeau's argument in this chapter comes from lack, based not on what Bertranda and other witnesses said but on what they did not. Archambeau argues that it is telling that Robert and Sanxia figure so prominently in Bertranda's rendition of Delphine's life while Johanna, still the reigning queen and countess of Provence in 1363, does not, and she argues—probably rightly—that Bertranda's silence about Robert's successor "placed Delphine in opposition to Johanna" (p. 37). This is a plausible and even compelling argument, but it at times feels overly speculative. For instance, at one point, Bertranda told the story of Delphine's miraculous healing of the noblewoman, Johanna de Meleto, shortly before Robert's death; asked to explain who Johanna of Meleto was, Bertranda identified her as from the lands of the Duke of Calabria, the title of Johanna of Naples's not-yet-murdered husband. Then, Bertranda identified Johanna of Meleto's daughter, Maria, as one of the people present when the miracle occurred. Archambeau proposes that this grouping of names would have recalled to the papal commissioners' minds Johanna I, her younger sister, Maria, and Johanna's then-consort, Andrew, and would have recalled the events surrounding Andrew's murder not long after. These people and events would then have been in the minds of Bertranda's interlocutors as she began to describe Delphine's departure from Naples after Robert's death. Archambeau argues, "In Bertranda's story, *this* Johanna was transformed from sick to healthy by speaking with Delphine. *This* Johanna worked with the medicine offered by King Robert and associated herself with Queen Sanxia. *This* Johanna was healthy in body and soul. All of these details would have highlighted what *Queen* Johanna had not done" (p. 35). The argument here seems tenuous, particularly given how very common the names Johanna and Maria were, and given that Queen Johanna had associated herself with Sanxia in the 1350s by seeking to have her canonized.[2]

Chapter two centers on the testimony of Bishop Philippe Cabassole regarding the period of the so-called "war of the seneschals" (1347-1349). The struggle between the partisans of two rivals for the office of Seneschal of Provence emerges for Archambeau as the first key moment of danger, as the first event described by more than five (in this case, six) witnesses. In this instance, Delphine restored peace and healed a rift between two Provençal factions, averting what could have become a disastrous civil war. For Philippe Cabassole and others, the peace that Delphine facilitated—and that confused Neapolitan policy threatened—was inseparable in time and context from the first wave of the plague, so that memory of the one was necessarily memory of the other. Here again, Archambeau posits that there was much Philippe Cabassole, a key figure in both Angevin and papal politics, could not say, particularly given the importance of Johanna's potential support for Delphine's canonization. Thus, Philippe did not tie the dangerous competition for power between Ugou de Baux and Raymon d'Agoult to Johanna, but he did refer to division, scandal, and war in ways that would have brought the well-known context to mind, and that would have underlined Delphine's connections to Raymon d'Agoult—whose soul she proclaimed healthy at the time of his death—and her role as peace-maker during a moment of danger rooted in Angevin policy.

Similarly, the commission would have been aware of the fate of Uguo de Baux, who fell spectacularly from grace after intervening in Neapolitan politics on Johanna's behalf, only to abduct and force the marriage of her sister, Maria, to his son, a betrayal that led to Uguo's death and his sons' imprisonment (a series of violent events rendered puzzlingly anodyne in Archambeau's account). Archambeau argues convincingly that how Philippe and others told the story of Delphine's peace-making stressed the order and control that Delphine could confer during "a time when thousands died of a mysterious illness while political leaders fought each other for worldly power" (p. 65).

The third chapter examines the second moment of danger, the mercenary invasion of 1357-1358, which coincided with a lull in the Hundred Years' War. The violence the unemployed mercenaries committed was all the more horrifying for being without clear purpose, making it difficult "to make peace...in any of the standard ways that relied on the political emotions of hatred and love" (p. 73). Archambeau argues that those who spoke of it "struggle[d] to name this violence so that they could describe it to the papal commissioners" as they recalled their efforts to protect themselves and come to terms with violence apprehended as "both physical and spiritual" (p. 67). Delphine's miracles protected local people from violence and, in one instance, prompted the conversion of a mercenary whose integration into the society on which he had preyed was a powerful moment of reconciliation. Archambeau contends that witnesses struggled not just with memories of physical hardship and danger but also with ambivalence and even guilt at having to defend themselves through violence. What emerges from Archambeau's analysis is a fascinating and surprising discomfort with the need to kill in self-defense: one of Delphine's miracles saved the life of a nobleman by laming his horse, thus sparing him the necessity of killing, while others prevented attacks on cities whose residents feared being not only victims of violence but also perpetrators. Delphine thus operated as a healer who offered hope that violence could be averted and killers restored to the Christian community.

Mercenaries returned along with plague in 1361, another moment of danger. Chapter four, built around the testimony of a noblewoman named Andrea Raymon, examines the way that women's stories highlight "women's protective and leadership roles in their communities and how those roles could expand during times of heightened violence" (p. 104). The miracle Andrea received made her brave in face of danger and enabled her to escape from mercenaries after she "hastened to Lady Delphine in her heart" (p. 105). Archambeau interprets such miracle stories as means of coping with the horrors of mercenary invasions, which included the destruction of crops and livestock, the privations of siege, and the omnipresent threat of rape and captivity. Witnesses associated these horrors with plague and fever, illnesses that spiritual contact with Delphine could transform into health. Archambeau convincingly argues that we should not see tales of miraculous healing as distinct from stories of mercenary attack, because "for witnesses they were deeply linked" (p. 121). Delphine's power to affect transformations both internal and external offered witnesses hope of healing during a period of devastating change, as they coped with recurrent plague, invasion, and political instability.

Chapters five and six examine the sacrament of penance as a moment of danger. Archambeau focuses on the fears that over half of the sixty-eight witnesses described experiencing at "a moment...when they believed that things could go terribly wrong" (p. 122). She argues that witness testimony reveals acute anxiety about sin and penitence, as about continuing spiritual

suffering after the sacrament, which “could unsettle more than console” (p. 123). Archambeau’s argument hinges on recognizing the physical ills described in the first four chapters as spiritual ills; those moments of danger heightened normal anxiety about penance, particularly when war or illness placed confession and the sacrament out of reach. Witnesses worried about known sins, but even more about those that might be hidden. Delphine’s miracles allowed people to apprehend their sinfulness and transform themselves—for instance by discarding elegant clothes or shearing vanity-inspiring hair—and to find the trust in God required to experience consolation. The sixth chapter, “Sister Resens de Insula and the Desire for Certainty,” examines the questions raised in the previous chapter, pondering what witnesses expected from the sacrament of penance and how they understood it. For many, Delphine’s voice was balm for their “unhealthy internal state” (p. 146). Across the moments of danger Archambeau tracks, pious Provençaux sought certainty and internal transformation from Delphine; the quest for transformation that dozens of the witnesses describe “helps modern audiences to see that most people wanted to feel consolation, joy, or simply a release from doubts of conscience and confusion” (p. 161). That consolation was crucial for those who survived epidemics of plague and violence, and who had to continue to live with grief, loss, and uncertainty.

*Souls under Siege* provides compelling analysis of how people in mid-fourteenth-century Provence coped with physical and spiritual struggles. Archambeau’s argument that spiritual and physical illness were connected, and that the health of body and soul were interdependent, adds to growing scholarship that demonstrates that soul and body were inextricably linked in European thought, from at least the time of the Carolingian *correctio*.<sup>[3]</sup> Clearly they were linked in the minds of people reeling from two decades of pestilence, war, violence, and doubt, who sought transformative healing from a local holy woman during a time when nature and society must have seemed to be conspiring against humanity.

## NOTES

[1] Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Poets, Saints, and Visionaries of the Great Schism* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006).

[2] On Sanxia’s (or Sancia’s) reputation for sanctity and Johanna’s efforts to canonize her, see Ronald G. Musto, “Queen Sancia of Naples (1286-1345) and the Spiritual Franciscans,” in Julius Kirshner and Suzanne Wemple eds., *Women of the Medieval World: Essays in Honor of John H. Mundy* (Oxford, U.K.: Blackwell, 1985), pp. 179-21, at p. 189; Aislinn Loconte, “Constructing Female Sanctity in Late Medieval Naples: The Funerary Monument of Queen Sancia of Majorca,” in Elizabeth L’Estrange and Alison More eds., *Representing Medieval Genders and Sexualities in Europe: Construction, Transformation, and Subversion, 600-1530* (Farnham, U.K.: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 107-126, esp. pp. 112-113; and Elizabeth Casteen, *From She-Wolf to Martyr: The Reign and Disputed Reputation of Johanna I of Naples* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2015), p. 161.

[3] Meg Leja, “The Sacred Art: Medicine in the Carolingian Renaissance,” *Viator* 47 (2016):1-34; see also Meg Leja, *Embodying the Soul: Medicine and Religion in Carolingian Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, forthcoming 2022). Archambeau cites the work

of Katharine Park, Joseph Ziegler, Sara Ritchey, and Jacalyn Duffin. See also Peter Biller and Joseph Ziegler, eds., *Religion and Medicine in the Middle Ages* (York, U.K.: York Medieval Press, 2001); Bonnie Effros, *Caring for Body and Soul: Burial and the Afterlife in the Merovingian World* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002); Andrew T. Crislip, *Thorns in the Flesh: Illness and Sanctity in Late Ancient Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013); and Georgios T. Halkias, "From Reflections to Membranes: Transcripts on the Body in Religious Discourse," in Alexandra Cuffel, Ana Echevarria, and Georgios T. Halkas eds., *Religious Boundaries for Sex, Gender, and Corporeality* (London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 1-10.

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