

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 9781501753666; \$32.99 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9781501753671.

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In his seminal work based on canonization processes, *Violence and Miracle in the Fourteenth Century*, Michael E. Goodich defined the fourteenth century as a fear-ridden, transition period when “the lives of many were endangered by war, pestilence, famine, and other ills.”[1] Nicole Archambeau follows his lead, not only in temporal scope and theme but also in using similar source material. Archambeau analyses how political struggles and constant violence between different branches of the Angevin royal family affected the population in Provence; devastation was intensified by waves of plague and the use of mercenary troops. While Goodich used a wide collection of hagiographic material and canonization processes, Archambeau focuses on one, less studied dossier, namely the canonization inquest of Delphine de Puimichel (AD 1363). By this choice, what may have been lost in the width of geographical scope is gained in the depth of contextualization. As the title implies, Archambeau concentrates on events in witnesses’ lives, which she defines as “moments of danger,” dividing them into chronological and sacramental categories. The book has, in addition to an introduction and conclusion, six main chapters that follow these moments of danger. The chosen perspective is both individual and communal, and each witness testimony is set in the frame of the social and political sphere of fourteenth-century Provence and the canonization hearing. All chapters are also well contextualized in current historiography.

The first chronological moment of danger, that is, the first chapter, focuses on the death of King Robert of Naples in 1343 and the turbulent state of affairs during the unsecure succession to the throne before Queen Johanna secured her position. An aftermath of this, the “War of Seneschals” of 1347-1349 is tackled in the second chapter. The Mercenary Invasion of 1357-1358 is at the core of the third chapter and the threat posed by the Great Companies in 1361 of the fourth. After this the gaze is turned toward the sacramental dangers of penance and uncertainty of the faith of the soul in the fifth and sixth chapters, respectively. A separate chapter is not dedicated to the most obvious peril of the fourteenth century, the plague, but the “first mortality,” as the witnesses referred to the Black Death, is analysed in various parts of the book.

The people whom we encounter in the first four chapters are many and the events dramatic; they include successful and failed plans for marriage, attempts and accusations of murder, various political machinations, and enduring violence. Archambeau explains the social and cultural aspects framing these events in an excellent way without losing sight of details. Times were turbulent indeed, and the number of events, protagonists, and their networks and interconnections is so great that a chart of networks and a timeline could have facilitated the read—at least for a reader who is not an expert in Provençal political history. Angevin politics were directly or indirectly behind many of the dangers, and many protagonists came from the higher ranks of society. However, the book takes account of how the various perils affected people from different backgrounds and in various places connecting micro and macro levels. For example, problems in sustenance and

sanitation during war affected the whole society. Problems in food production and energy supply quite easily come to mind when thinking about experiences of warfare and survival within captured cities; less obvious are problems caused by the results of digestion. There were, roughly speaking, fifty thousand mercenaries in Provence during the mercenary invasion in 1350s. Handling the human waste in over-populated cities was one way that foreign troops and sieges affected daily experiences, causing concrete health hazards, as Archambeau shows.

In the last two chapters, Archambeau ties these physical dangers to moral ones. Health and healing were not something affecting only the body and physical properties. Health of the soul and body were often linked together, as violence posed a threat, considered as a sickness, to the soul, too. Penance provided a remedy, but a proper confession was difficult to accomplish. The uncertainty of the fate of the soul after death distressed many. Therefore, confession could also be considered as a moment of danger, as Archambeau argues.

In the middle of all this turbulence was Delphine, a living saint performing living miracles. She alleviated pain and fear and rescued witnesses from moments of danger. Her identity as a “holy countess” was obviously also a result of a process of construction, not a fixed category. This process of seeing Delphine as a saint was heavily affected by the act of interrogation at the canonization hearing. The canonization process is at the core of Archambeau’s work, even if it is not mentioned in the title. Since it provides the core empirical evidence for the book at hand, a bit more thorough investigation and explanation of the organization would have been beneficial for the main argument. The basic structure and implementation of the canonization inquest are explained in the introduction and in some of the subsequent chapters, but a comparison with some of the other contemporary hearings could have given valuable information on the specific nature of this source. For example, how were the witnesses selected? Typically, being summoned as a witness in a canonization hearing was a sign of privileged status and a result of careful pondering by the organizers.[2] There were only sixty-eight witnesses in Delphine’s hearing, so a more nuanced analysis of their background could have been feasible. Obviously, a comparison with other sources of the era would have been most interesting; it may have provided more profound information on these witnesses and their networks. This is exactly what Robert Bartlett has done in his *Hanged Man*, a work that Archambeau sets out as a model for her own methodology.[3] Many elite and better-off witnesses in Delphine’s hearing may have been traceable in other sources, but, obviously, this would have required a massive amount of archival work for an uncertain end. However, a closer reading of the canonization dossier alone could have revealed more information. A bit more systematic analysis of the selection process as a whole—who were selected to be interrogated, and why (for a specific article or for possessing information of a specific place, etc)—would have been useful for the argumentation.

Archambeau does pay attention to the social background of witnesses as well as to the fact that all the witnesses did not answer to all the *articuli* but rather, only to a selection of them; sometimes they responded only to one. *Articuli* were a pre-set series of questions formed by the proctor of the process, Master Nicolau Laurens. Laurens’s role was crucial in the hearing; he was also responsible for collecting witnesses for the hearing. Thus, he controlled what was asked and who got to answer. Therefore, the image of “holy countess” did not only emerge from the witnesses’ stories of their moments of danger, it was heavily shaped by one man. This phenomenon is further underlined, since, in addition to the aforementioned duties, Laurens had also known Delphine for a decade and was an active promoter of her cult. The analysis of his relationship with other officials carrying out the hearing, namely papal commissioners and notaries, would have illuminated what was recorded, how, and why.[4]

A more thorough explanation of the structure of the process and the content of the *articuli* would have helped to understand the responses, too. Clearly, the individual articles were long, and their verbatim translation would not have been reasonable (or readable), but a short explanation of all of their content would have clarified what kind of a saint Delphine was seen to be. As Pierre Delooz observed, a saint is essentially a saint for others and by others, and this construction process is an important part of research methodology as well. Similarly, according to Delooz, an event can only be defined as a miracle if someone sees it as such; it is an event that expresses the saintly quality of a person who is presumed by the community to intervene in that way.[5] “What is a miracle?” seems to be a particularly fruitful question for Delphine’s canonization process, as many of the recorded cases do not seem to correspond particularly well with a general category of the miraculous. Among the events, there are some typical rescues and recoveries, but many cases could rather be labelled as an “inner transformation,” and the miraculous in the chain of events remains obscure. Can a more secure feeling after a confession of sins be deemed a miracle? The witnesses in Delphine’s hearing seemed to think so, but, obviously, in a judicial hearing this was not only a matter of opinion; after all, the purpose of a canonization inquest was to provide undisputable judicial proof of the holy life and divine grace performed through the candidate.[6]

To be fair, many of the above points are handled in the book, but sometimes this is done quite quickly and not systematically in one place. Interest in the background and practicalities of the inquest may be a fascination of a canonization enthusiast; after all the hearing itself is not the focus of the book. These elements are, nevertheless, an inseparable part of methodology as well. Consolation, assurance, and alleviating fear were crucial in the way Dauphine was seen and constructed as a saint; this all had an undisputable effect on the way people told stories about her, and these stories are at the very core of Archambeau’s interest. This point leads to my most critical comment regarding the book.

In addition to chronology, the book’s chapters are each structured around one testimony. One witness’s testimony is chosen as a perspective to discuss a specific moment of danger, and this choice is reflected in the chapter titles as well. So, it is (mainly) Bertranda Bertomieua’s testimony that informs us of dangerous times around the death of King Robert, and it is Bishop Philippe Cabassole’s point of view that comes forth when discussing the dangers caused by the “War of Seneschals.” This method works better for some of the chapters than for others; sometimes one testimony does not provide enough material for the whole phenomenon, and Archambeau needed to handle several testimonies equally in the text despite the title of the chapter. As mentioned, the events described in the depositions are contextualized with care, but Archambeau manages to retain the narrative character of the depositions in the text. The book is a very pleasurable read. As Archambeau writes, “The book uses witness *stories* [my emphasis] of war, plague, and confession to reflect on larger events from the witnesses’ perspective” (p. 17). As a research task this is excellent and functions well, but I find this perspective to be methodologically problematic. She continues, “The inquest documents show that Delphine’s witnesses told some of their stories of miraculous survival again and again to multiple audiences over a span of time” (p. 18). No disagreement there. The problem is that we cannot capture those stories, as the remaining textual material does not directly replicate them. What we have at hand is a judicial dossier, and the material we may analyse are sworn testimonies given in an official hearing—to call them just “stories” does not do justice to them and is even misleading.

The *articuli* discussed above—even the ones with open-ended questions—affected which details and elements were brought up; the act of interrogation itself did the same. It was not a friendly, unofficial gathering to share experiences or gossip. According to canon law, a good reputation was an essential qualification for a witness, and the opportunity was regularly reserved for respected

members of the community. The personal choices of the witnesses affected the outcome of records as well; we only know of details the witnesses were willing to make public in an official hearing. People seem to have taken the opportunity to testify quite seriously. They were willing and able to narrate past events, which had taken years, sometimes even decades before the actual interrogation. Here at stake are also personal and communal memories. Surely, both of them are connected to oral stories circulating in the community. Memory, however, is a changing thing: past events were formulated to better suit the needs of the present and plan for the future. In all likelihood, the stories changed and evolved as the times changed.

Therefore, what we see in the records is a frozen version of oral narrations, narrations that were heavily shaped by the passage of time, the act of interrogation, *articuli*, and other requirements of implementing a canonization hearing. They were a result of personal and collective memory, shaped by social circumstances at the time of interrogation as well as a wish to present oneself in a favourable light, not mere stories.[7] Clearly, choice of vocabulary does not undermine the findings of the book. Archambeau is aware of the methodological issues behind the final written version, the deposition. She writes, “This book embraces testimony as crafted narrative shaped by the inquest format, audience and purpose” (p. 18). In my view, “crafted narrative” would have been a more fortunate choice of vocabulary to be used throughout the book, instead of “story.” Crafted narrative captures quite nicely the essence of the source material: in addition to aforementioned mechanisms, the hagiographic genre was one undisputable background element affecting this “crafting.” More didactic miracle narrations shaped the way the witnesses comprehended their experiences and formed narrations of them.[8]

Despite the criticism presented above, Archambeau’s book is an important contribution to the history of fourteenth-century Provence as well as to the history of canonization processes. The cult of saints always had its political side, and opening an official canonization inquest was also a political decision of the papacy. Carried out during the Avignon era, Delphine’s process was an integral part of Provence’s history from many perspectives. The way political relations were shaped and shown in the testimonies of the miraculous is thus far a less studied element of these hearings, and the book at hand is an important contribution to this field. Archambeau knows well both the socio-political milieu as well as the canonization inquest weaving the details of personal moments of danger into the broader political and cultural world of mid-fourteenth-century Provence. She produces new information of experiences of war, plague, and confession. This carefully researched book is a must read for everyone interested in the interconnection between medieval religion, politics, and culture.

NOTES

[1] Michael E. Goodich, *Violence and Miracle in the Fourteenth Century: Private Grief and Public Salvation* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. ix.

[2] Didier Lett, “La parole des humbles comme ressource. L’utilisation de la procédure inquisitoire par les postulateurs de la cause dans le procès de canonisation de Nicolas de Tolentino (1325),” in Paolo Golinelli ed., *Agiografia e culture popolari. Hagiography and popular cultures. Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Verona (28–30 ottobre 2010)* (Bologna: Clueb, 2012), pp. 233–241.

[3] Robert Bartlett, *The Hanged Man: A Story of Miracle, Memory, and Colonialism in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004).

[4] Christian Krötzl, “Prokuratoren, Notare und Dolmetscher. Zur Gestaltung und Ablauf der Zeugeneinvernahmen bei spätmittelalterlichen Kanonisationsprozessen,” *Hagiographica* 5 (1998): 119–140.

[5] Pierre Delooz, “Towards a Sociological Study of Canonized Sainthood in the Catholic Church,” in Stephen Wilson ed., *Saints and Their Cults: Studies in Religious Sociology, Folklore and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 189–216.

[6] Thomas Wetzstein, *Heilige vor Gericht. Das Kanonisationsverfahren im europäischen Mittelalter* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2004) and Gábor Klaniczay ed., *Procès de canonisation au Moyen Âge – Medieval Canonization Processes* (Rome: École française de Rome, 2004).

[7] Sari Katajala-Peltomaa, *Demonic Possession and Lived Religion in Later Medieval Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 15–18 et passim and Sari Katajala-Peltomaa, “Narrative Strategies in the Depositions: Gender, Family, and Devotion,” in Christian Krötzl and Sari Katajala-Peltomaa eds., *Miracles in Medieval Canonization Processes: Structures, Functions, and Methodologies* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018), pp. 227–256.

[8] Anders Fröjmark, “Telling the Miracle: The Meeting between Pilgrim and Scribe as Reflected in Swedish Miracle Collections,” in Christian Krötzl and Sari Katajala-Peltomaa eds., *Miracles in Medieval Canonization Processes. Structures, Functions, and Methodologies* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018), pp. 131–155; Laura Ackerman Smoller, *The Saint and Chopped-Up Baby. The Cult of Vincent Ferrer in Medieval & Early Modern Europe* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2014); Gábor, Klaniczay, “Ritual and Narrative in Late Medieval Miracle Accounts. The Construction of the Miracle,” in Sari Katajala-Peltomaa and Ville Vuolanto eds., *Religious Participation in Ancient and Medieval Societies. Rituals, Interaction and Identity* (Rome: Institutum Romanum Finlandiae, 2013), pp. 207–223; Didier Lett, “De la dissemblance à la ressemblance: construction sociale et métamorphoses des récits de miracles dans le procès de canonisation et l’abbrevatio maior de Nicolas de Tolentino (1325–1328),” in Monique Gouillet and Martin Heinzelmänn eds., *Miracles, vies et réécritures dans l’occident médiéval* (Ostfildern: Jan Thorbecke verlag, 2006), pp. 121–147.

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