

H-France Review Vol. 5 (December 2005), No. 141

Elaine Graham-Leigh, *The Southern French Nobility and the Albigensian Crusade*. Woodbridge: Boydell, 2005. xxviii + 187. Maps, genealogies, notes, bibliography and index. \$90.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 1-84383-129-5.

Review by John H. Arnold, Birkbeck College, University of London.

Starting in the late 1990s, after quite a long period of relative neglect, there has been a rapid and rather unexpected expansion of Anglophone work on all things Cathar and Languedocian. Textbooks, monographs, translated sources, and major journal articles have reassessed, from a variety of viewpoints, the heterodox world of southern France in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. However, one of the most famous features of that world--the Albigensian crusade of 1209-29--has been somewhat ignored (possibly because most of us working recently on the field have had intellectual sympathies tending more toward the social and cultural than the high political). Beyond a synthesis of Francophone secondary literature [1], and a servicable but pedestrian narrative many times reprinted [2], for serious scholarship on the topic one had to look to the 1970s, for work by Joseph Strayer, Walter Wakefield, Jacques Madaule, and, in the case of Pierre Belperron, right back to 1942.

All of this, I should say, until now. Elaine Graham-Leigh's book, focussed particularly upon the political and religious contexts of the nobility, is extremely welcome, not only as the first major attempt in sustained monographic form to reinterpret the crusade for some generations, but also for the particular insights and strengths she brings to the topic. Her starting point is simply to treat the crusade as a complex topic, rather than some Star Wars-style combat between good and evil; as she notes, past historiography of every stripe has taken this manichaeian view (whether for the south against the tyrannous north, or, like Belperron, for the north against the dissolute south). "The crusaders and the lords of Languedoc have not been seen in relational terms, merely as absolutes, and their interaction has often been assumed to have been conducted in accordance with these absolutes" (p. 9). Graham-Leigh, in a careful and scholarly fashion, thus attempts to reconstruct those interrelationships and their complexities, and provides a much more nuanced reading of the crusade from the perspective of the papacy, the crusaders, and the southern French nobility.

Her main argument is the importance of Cistercianism in the conduct of the crusade and its targets.[3] As she points out, the crusade was largely under Cistercian control: Arnaud Amaury, of the alleged "Kill them all, God will know his own" injunction, was abbot of Cîteaux, and perhaps even more importantly had previously been abbot of Grandselve, one of the major southern French houses--thus connected to Cistercian establishments throughout the region. The heart of her book focusses upon the Trencavel nobility, and reassesses their position as major "victims" of the crusade. They became targets, she suggests, not because they were particularly (or in some cases, in any way) connected to dualist heresy; but because their dependence upon Aragonese patronage cut them off from collaboration with the counts of Toulouse, and most of all because their religious patronage had failed to be directed, in any major way, toward the Cistercian establishments in their area. This, she suggests, was the heart of the problem: not that the crusaders, under Amaury's guidance, were cynically targetting those who had not supported his order; but that crusaders, asked to identify and eradicate the enemies of "the church," tended to interpret "the church" as a largely Cistercian edifice.

In similar vein, the earlier activities of others in the Languedocian nobility against certain of the region's episcopate, understood by the crusaders as "unworthy actions" against the church, should really

be read as politically-motivated attempts to control areas also claimed by Barcelona and Aragon (pp. 71-72). Again and again, Graham-Leigh argues that the nobility were not heretics, not particularly anti-clerical, and not concerned with abandoning or attacking the Catholic church. They were tied up, rather, within the confused political wrangles of their region; and when the crusade started, those tensions were of course exacerbated rather than eased. All of this could be read, however, by the papacy and crusaders as clear evidence for their perfidy, their apostasy, and their heresy. What destroyed the Trencavels was not a devoted adherence to Catharism—something that Graham-Leigh would almost completely reject—but an unfortunate tendency to be on “the wrong side in the patronage war” (the title of her fourth chapter).

These astute reflections, based upon a detailed knowledge of the political world of the period, form the core of *The Southern French Nobility*. But there are other strengths too. The author suggests that we should see the launching of the crusade not as an all-out attack by Innocent III against a Languedocian nobility of whom he had utterly despaired, but rather an attempt by the papacy to get precisely that group of nobles to *do something* about heresy in their region. “Innocent intended the crusade to be the vehicle, rather than the replacement, for local secular effort against heresy. Local participation was therefore of the utmost importance” (p. 50). I find this highly persuasive: it explains the otherwise rather vexing and confusing fact that Raymond count of Toulouse swiftly joined up to the crusade putatively launched against him. It also fits extremely well with the consiliar legislation produced in the immediate aftermath of the crusade, that was directed particularly toward ensuring that the local nobility cut off material support from those Cathars still present in their lands. Continuities of direction, stretching back into the twelfth century and also on past 1229, can be discerned; the crusade becomes thus less of a rupture (in terms of ecclesiastical policy) and therefore rather more explicable. To put it a different way, Graham-Leigh has implicitly given those of us interested in later, inquisitorial efforts against heresy in France a pressing reason to pay attention to the years 1209-29.

The second chapter of her book also provides some careful source analysis, with which those working upon the crusade must now engage. She applies to the sources the insights developed in the last thirty years of scholarship on orality and writing, with solid and dependable results. Also, in particular, she cautions against reading certain Troubadour works (particularly those by Raimond de Miraval and Guillem Augier) as directly connected to the context of the nobility, and makes a radical claim with regard to the composition of William of Puylaurens’s *Chronicle*, namely that it should not be connected to either of the Williams usually presented as author (a master Guillaume, rector of the church of Puylaurens in the 1230s and 1240s, and then episcopal and inquisitorial notary; or a master Guillaume who was chaplain to Raymond VII of Toulouse). Instead, she notes, another master Guillaume de Puylaurens can be found as a legal witness in 1273—rather close to the date of composition. From this, she argues, despite the chronicle’s explicit claims to the contrary, one should not see it as written by an eyewitness to events 1209-29, but by a later writer, looking back and depending upon oral tradition (pp. 37-39).

There is much to admire in this book. I have a few doubts about some areas, but I mention them here as points for future discussion rather than an attempt to denigrate. The argument regarding William of Puylaurens is suggestive, but not conclusive, and in part depends upon reading the words of the source against itself in a rather rigid way, perhaps not quite as sensitive to the compositional claims and techniques of the chronicle as she is to the political landscape it describes. At points, the desire to focus attention upon the Cistercians is a little overplayed; from the earliest period, the Dominicans were also clearly in Innocent III’s mind as key weapons to be used against southern French heresy. I am not convinced that the orthodox church was in quite as bad a state as she sometimes suggests, nor that episcopal “negligence” (as Graham-Leigh, following Innocent III, would have it) was a major cause of heresy; rather, a church that could only understand the rise of heresy as a product of weak diocesan leadership tended to react and talk accordingly.

Most importantly, whilst I am completely persuaded by her analysis of why certain nobles fell victim to the crusaders (the Cistercian patronage argument), I am not convinced by some of the paths she takes to get to this conclusion. At various points, the author essentially “defends” the nobles from the charge of heresy, and points to orthodox patronage they bestowed as evidence of their bona fides. Whilst noting that other recent work has given a strong sense of how confused and fluid heretical and orthodox allegiances could be among the ordinary laity, she argues that this could not be the case for the nobility, whose “relationship to the Church is unlikely to have resembled that of peasants in lacking an awareness of the ecclesiastical establishment” and thus would have prevented ‘the sort of merging of the heretical and orthodox’ found among the lower classes (p. 62). This has perhaps a rather naive view of the “peasantry” (a term which in any case rather misrepresents the breadth of non-noble support for Catharism); although I suspect that she is here partly led astray by the romanticism of some of the relevant secondary literature.[4] But does it not also have a rather rigid idea of how the nobility used patronage, the complex and fluid choices *they* made with regard to bestowing and receiving spiritual favour? Elsewhere, Graham-Leigh has a much more sophisticated view of the world inhabited by these noblemen, and one that could have allowed a different route to be taken to the same, important conclusion. But I should not end on a note of disagreement. *The Southern French Nobility and the Albigensian Crusade* is a piece of impressive, scholarly work, focussed upon one important and previously unconsidered facet of the period. It should be read not only by those working further upon the crusade itself (the possibility of such work being something that the book opens up through its reconsiderations) but also by anyone interested in the religious and political landscape of medieval Languedoc.

NOTES

[1] Michael Costen, *The Cathars and the Albigensian Crusade* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997).

[2] Jonathan Sumption, *The Albigensian Crusade* (London: Faber and Faber, 1978)

[3] This work thus forms an interesting counterpart to a study of Cistercian influence over the twelfth-century anti-heresy preaching: Beverley M. Kienzle, *Cistercians, Heresy and Crusade in Occitania, 1145-1229* (York: York Medieval Press, 2001).

[4] Mark Gregory Pegg, *The Corruption of Angels* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

John H. Arnold
Birkbeck College, University of London
j.arnold@bbk.ac.uk

Copyright © 2005 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. ISSN 1553-9172