

James B. Given, *Inquisition and Medieval Society: Power, Discipline, and Resistance in Languedoc*. New York and London: Cornell University Press, 1997. xiii + 255 pp. Tables, plates, bibliography, and index. \$37.50 US (cl). ISBN 0-8014-3358-4. Review by Kathryn A. Edwards, University of Southern Mississippi, for H-France, December 1998.

The Inquisition and Political Sociology

At first glance, a reader might wonder what need there is for another work on the inquisition, heresy, and society in medieval Languedoc given the frequency and quality of previous studies drawing on that region's inquisitorial registers.⁽¹⁾ There are many excellent studies on the inquisition, certain inquisitors, Catharism, the Albigensian crusades, and village society of which Given is well aware, as demonstrated in his footnotes and bibliography. Such a first impression, however, would wrongly slight the importance and contribution of Given's work. Building on these previous studies, the inquisitorial register of Jacques Fournier, bishop of Palmiers, and the manuals and treatises of Bernard Gui, inquisitor of Toulouse, Given argues that the medieval inquisition in Languedoc can also be viewed from the perspective of political sociology. Offering a work which is both a "case study in medieval governance and administration" and "an investigation of the nature of political power in a medieval society" (p. 3), Given makes the case for the elaboration of more coherent, centralized, and invasive governing methods in medieval Europe. The Languedocian inquisition thus becomes a case study of the attempts by medieval authorities to increase their institutional effectiveness and thereby to strengthen their power through greater control over their subjects.

The medieval inquisition has been typically treated as a means of enhancing the power of more distant secular and spiritual authorities through its control over the bodies and minds of those it examines. For this reason, Given begins his analysis with a brief introduction to the society of medieval Languedoc and the debates over the meaning of "power" in social theory. Rather than examine the definition of "power"--a topic which deserves a book in itself--Given dismisses the problem in two paragraphs, arguing that his focus is on power's practice rather than its definition. In doing so, he portrays himself as a historian who has "merely tried to ask a few questions... about the exercise of power" (p. 4). Despite the disingenuousness of such a statement, Given's focus throughout is on the practice and perception of political power, which demands at least an implicit assumption as to what power is, what it means, and what its effects might be. Given first suggests what this perception might be in his useful introduction to medieval Languedoc. In this section he emphasizes Languedocian uniqueness, its sense of independence, and its heretical and political vicissitudes. By implication, the power of the inquisition, according to Given, attempts to bring Languedoc into the inquisitors' perception of common, appropriate political conduct

and attitudes. As such, inquisitorial power is the ability to control the actions and attitudes of Languedoc's population, whatever their type and degree of Christianity.

In order to explore the processes of political control in medieval Languedoc, Given divides his work into three sections. In the first, he offers an unusual and convincing perspective on the inquisition by focusing on what he terms its "technology". Processes of information storage and retrieval, coercion, and punishment all are means by which the inquisitors attempt to gain sufficient power to extirpate what they defined as heresy. In the "decentered political arena" (p. 19) of medieval Languedoc, such techniques aided the inquisitor to control in his competition for political power. His most original and intriguing contribution in this section is the detailed study of the marginalia and other notations found in inquisitorial documents and Bernard Gui's *Liber sententiarum*. He argues that these notes prove that the inquisitors were engaged in a documentary dialogue and developed information retrieval systems which facilitated their interrogations and prosecutions. In so doing, inquisitorial practice was far more elaborate and sophisticated than that used in other courts in Languedoc. Moreover, the community at large apparently recognized the centrality of such documents to the inquisition, although not necessarily their meaning; this recognition can be seen in the popular attacks levied against these records when possible. According to Given, medieval Languedocians would not have tried to destroy these records unless they also recognized their instrumental role in helping the inquisition further its power.

Chapters two (on coercive imprisonment) and three (on punishment) develop themes seen in other studies on different periods and regions: the coercive nature of incarceration, the body as a site of cultural dispute, and the social significance of spectacular punishment. Given's contribution here is to explore the Languedocian circumstance. In both chapters, he clearly describes the inquisitors' use of these techniques to gain power and challenges Durkheimian approaches which see punishment as integrative, that "[t]hrough the act of punishing the offender, the members of society reaffirm their group solidarity and restore the sacred moral order" (p. 72). Instead, Given uses case studies of key coercive and penal methods to argue that the actions of Languedoc's inquisitors are best appreciated "within a Gramscian problematic: as part of a struggle to impose a cultural and spiritual hegemony on the masses of Languedoc, to win their active assent to the myths that justified the existing distribution of power and authority" (p. 72). Inquisitors in this contested region sought to create a collective consciousness, not to punish violators of a preexisting one. "To accomplish this end, the inquisitors acted as though their penitential system were a species of theater. The imposition of punishment was a performance in which the church's official version of correct spiritual order was acted out in a grandiose and impressive public fashion. The subjects of this performance were as much the

members of the audience as they were the people whom the inquisitors sentenced" (p. 73). Part of the dialectical process which Given sees as essential to Languedocian politics is that the observers of these penal rituals can, and did, reinterpret them according to different needs and perspectives. Punishment is thus a "means of communication" (p. 90), albeit a problematic one given that the inquisitors' control over the observers and subjects' interpretations was precarious at best.

The author pursues his dialectical theme by focusing on the reception of and resistance to the inquisition's practices. Although Given rightly notes that we can only know about popular resistance in Languedoc through prosecution records--in other words, the accounts of those who failed--these stories themselves provide case studies of different forms of individual and collective resistance. For the individual, the most common responses appear to have been evasive testimony, the intimidation of threatening witnesses, the playing of one inquisitor off against another, and flight, with the latter option far more feasible for men than women. Given notes with some surprise the relative scarcity of collective rebellions against the inquisition and aggression against the inquisitors themselves. Over an almost one hundred year period (1233-1329), he has found only forty-four "violent acts of resistance" (pp. 113-115). Given ascribes the absence of collective resistance to the weakness of competing socio-political institutions and networks, such as kinship and seigneurial clientage; given the political dislocations of and the crusade in twelfth-century Languedoc, few of the traditional avenues for mobilizing resistance had equal power to the inquisition. The towns appear to have offered the most effective and violent resistance to the inquisition, but this challenge often depended on the dynamism of a particular leader. Given also examines ways by which Languedocians attempted to coopt inquisitorial power for their own ends. Again following the case study method, he describes an environment where it was difficult but not impossible to pervert the inquisition's purpose. The case of Pierre de Gaillac and Guillaume Tron provides a particularly telling example of the way some inquisitorial cases could be manipulated to serve local hatreds and could take on a life of their own. Gaillac regularly denounced his neighbors to the inquisition, and, when Tron criticized him for it, he denounced Tron, too. Even after Gaillac's death, his allies continued to levy accusations against Tron. Although Tron was innocent, Gaillac and these allies were able to continue their attacks on Tron through the inquisition for approximately fifteen years before the inquisitors learned that they had been manipulated.

Given situates the patterns he has found in the social and political context of Languedoc. Although this section might seem to fit better at the beginning of his work, by placing it here Given adroitly prevents his reader from falling into the trap of structural determinism, of interpreting inquisitorial power relationships as direct products of social, political, and judicial institutions. These structures, however, are

fundamental for Given: "often unacknowledged and unperceived by those embedded in them, [they] play a major role--at times perhaps even a determining role--in deciding the success or failure of any course of action" (p. 167). Social fissures allow openings for the inquisition to penetrate and even control local society; the inquisition itself also exacerbated preexisting stresses among a variety of social networks. Given goes so far as to argue that in Languedocian society "various forms of Languedocian social organization were marked by certain characteristic forms of social strain and that these patterns of strain helped the inquisitors to pry apart social organizations that might otherwise have effectively resisted them" (p. 189). The Inquisition itself was not immune from such structural weaknesses. Over several pages Given describes an inquisition which did not support a "developed" bureaucracy because it lacked a central, guiding authority and it lacked sufficient revenues. The inquisition was thus a poor career move for "an ambitious ecclesiastic" because there was no institutional ladder which the successful inquisitor could climb to higher office. Inquisitors had to rely on members of their *familia* to find heretics; they were distracted by their numerous ancillary duties; and they suffered from loose supervision. Finally, there were few ways of eliminating or punishing "lazy or inappropriate" inquisitors or staff. As such, the inquisition depended on active cooperation from other social and political powers to carry out its mission, and these powers were frequently reluctant to cooperate. Even the papacy itself acted at times to undermine the authority and powers of its inquisitors in Languedoc for other, political reasons. Although the medieval Languedocian inquisition was a powerful institution, Given rightly and convincingly stresses the constraints under which it operated and the limits to its claims.

Given concludes by noting the apparent paradoxes in his analysis: "At the end of this study, we are left with an impression that may seem rather ambiguous, if not outright contradictory. On the one hand, the work of the inquisitors testifies to just how draconian and compelling the exercise of power could be in medieval society; on the other hand, it reveals the existence of rather severe limits to even the most determined efforts to exert discipline and control" (p. 213). His willingness to accept and illuminate such processes is, however, one of the strengths of his work. Although conversant with key interpretations of political power and sociology, Given refuses to force the medieval Languedocians into any particular mold, accepting them with all their contradictions. In the process Given urges his reader to reconsider the more common interpretation which sees the imposition of internal and external self-discipline on a Foucauldian model by an outside repressive "state". As such, he also challenges the interpretation which situates the development of a "disciplinary" state in early modern Europe. In thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Languedoc, such processes were already underway.

This excellent regional monograph has few weaknesses and they are predominantly organizational. Because of his chapter divisions, Given returns repeatedly to several themes when describing the reasons for the patterns and mechanisms he has found. One example is found in chapter five when he explains the dearth of popular collective opposition to the inquisition in the following way: "The Cathar religion denied any religious or moral value to those social ties around which collective resistance to the inquisitors could most readily have been fashioned" (p. 140). While this explanation is quite convincing, it had already been given as an explanation in previous chapters and is returned to in succeeding ones.

His strengths are far more numerous. Given's writing is both precise and clear, reflecting an attention to detail also found in his interpretations and research. When addressing the problem of defining the inquisition--always necessary and always a challenge given the many misconceptions that exist concerning it--he cuts to the heart of the difference between the medieval and early modern inquisitions and stresses the plurality of inquisitions in both eras (p. 15). Rather than a Roman-based inquisition supervised by a Grand Inquisitor (one of several early modern alternatives), the inquisition of medieval Europe was staffed by members of competing religious orders and followed varying spiritual and political mandates. Moreover, there were few attempts to ensure unity in their purposes or procedures. Through his emphasis on the dialectical process of power negotiations in general and for Languedoc in particular, Given avoids a schematized representation of an authoritarian inquisition. The inquisition in Languedoc which Given so intelligently portrays is embattled and, at times, unaware of the problems which beset it, but is a realistic reflection of the ambitions of and accommodations made by medieval institutions attempting to focus and wield power.

Notes

1. Among the best-known books, see Jean Duvernoy, ed., *Le Registre d'inquisition de Jacques Fournier (1318-1325)*, 3 vols. (Toulouse, 1965); Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou: The Promised Land of Error*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York, 1979); Jean-Marie Vidal, *Le Tribunal d'inquisition de Palmiers* (Toulouse, 1906); Walter L. Wakefield, *Heresy, Crusade, and Inquisitors in Southern France* (Berkeley, 1974); Elie Greffe, *Le Languedoc cathare et l'inquisition (1229-1329)* (Paris, 1980). The number of excellent articles is too long to cite here, but can be found in Given's bibliography.

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