
Published in 2001, Mark Gregory Pegg’s *The Corruption of Angels: The Great Inquisition of 1245-1246* presents a compelling reading of the testimony gathered during an inquisition into heresy in Lauragais, in the French Midi. Examining primarily the proceedings against the good men and good women (*bon omes* and *bonas femnas*), Pegg also comments on medieval practices of courtesy, manuscript production and transmission, and the method of proper inquisition. Although the central concerns of *The Corruption of Angels* are with the European Middle Ages—the Church, its agents, and the people of the Midi, Pegg’s text holds interest for any who study the medieval Church’s efforts to eliminate heterodoxy.

As he places this Inquisition within a historical context, Pegg attempts to dispel two common misconceptions about the many thirteenth-century heresies: the confusion that all inquisitions were the same, and the belief that the heretics of Lauragais were Cathars or Bogomils. The widespread confusion among Inquisitions is particularly distressing to Pegg because, for medieval students “a monolithic institution comes into being, a bureaucratic entity that lacks not only historical specificity, but also historical reality” (33). The mistake of equating Bogomils, Cathars and *bons omes* demonstrates “a powerful, and enduring, intellectualist bias” (15). Even if all share dualistic theologies teaching in part that the creation of the physical world was the Devil’s work, Pegg writes that efforts to label as Cathars any heretical group of the thirteenth century must “rely on the detection of likeness, similarity, resemblance between ideas, irrespective of time and place” (16).

Pegg’s study is very specific to time and place. The Inquisition in Lauragais was in many respects a practical continuation of the Albigensian Crusade (1209-1229), which had, despite fifteen years of vicious fighting and lesser atrocities, ended with the Peace of Paris, where the Count of Toulouse, Raimon VII, swore submission to the Church and to the French king, Louis VIII. Even after Raimon’s submission and throughout subsequent political developments, the heresy of the good men and good women persisted until it became so widespread by 1245 that ecclesiastical authorities believed only a general inquisition could “cure” the “infection.”
Two friar-inquisitors, Bernart de Caux and Jean de Saint-Pierre, were sent by Innocent IV to Toulouse to inquire into the heresy. During 201 days of hearings, they questioned 5471 men and women of Languedoc. Although the original records of these testimonies are lost, they were copied around 1260 and this copy has survived in good condition as manuscript 609 in the Bibliothèque municipale of Toulouse. Pegg describes the record as showing how Bernart and Jean transformed the usual practices of the Inquisition by summoning individuals to their court at Saint-Sernin rather than questioning them in environments where they might be more comfortable. The record also shows that the inquisition of Bernart and Jean did not use torture, as it preceded Innocent IV’s bull authorizing torture to obtain confessions, *Ad extirpanda*. Instead, the friar-inquisitors conducted hearings that Pegg argues were “not unlike the Roman-inspired and canon-regulated *ordo iudiciarius*, those rules of procedure built upon written and oral evidence” (49). The inquisitors believed that by asking the right questions in the proper sequence, they would initiate a procession to the truth. In its emphasis on proper questioning, these proceedings resembled the *quaestio disputata* practiced in the schools.

For Bernart and Jean, proper questioning focused on actions rather than beliefs, as habits of behavior would supply more clues about the heresy than would investigations into the realm of ideas. Thus, the inquisitors’ questions were designed to explore actions that might demonstrate theological intimacy with the heretics: e.g., did an individual ask for or receive a blessing from a *bon ome*? Because of this focus on actions, Pegg finds in the manuscript “a curious sensation of vagueness” about the beliefs and practices of the good men and women (79). Yet a partial pattern of belief does emerge: the *bons omes* and *bonas femnas* were descendants of the fallen angels and so of the same substance as the heavenly father; sex, marriage, and procreation were all condemned as sinful acts because they were practices of the flesh; and to be a “friend of God” was to live a celibate life. But even with no systematic picture of the beliefs of the *heretici*, the inquisition of Bernart and Jean helped to break the heresy.

Of the 5471 people interviewed, 207 received sentences, but only 23 were imprisoned. The rest were required to wear yellow crosses on their clothes—a symbol not only to the individuals being punished, but to the rest of the people of Lauragais as well.

In part because of the success of this Inquisition, Bernart and Jean were commissioned by Innocent IV to collect their reflections “in a small