



**Caterina Bruschi.** *The Wandering Heretics of Languedoc.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. ix + 222 pp. \$99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-87359-8.

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## Agency, Mobility, and the Quest for the Historical Cathar

In *The Wandering Heretics of Languedoc*, Caterina Bruschi undertakes the seemingly quixotic task of attempting to recover the voices of Cathar heretics from amidst the historical and literary constructions of inquisitorial registers. Bruschi is well aware of the difficulties posed by this goal; inquisitorial sources as they survive today are, after all, the product of intensive editing, deliberate omissions, and formulaic interrogations. They also emerged from a judicial process that was predisposed to finding, categorizing, and eliminating deviant religious beliefs and practices. The sources chosen by Bruschi, which comprise volumes 21 to 26 of the *Collection Doat*, present an additional problem. While the *Collection* details over fifty years of thirteenth-century inquisitorial depositions given in and around Toulouse, these volumes were subsequently edited in the 1660s, an act of preservation that introduced another, invisible layer of editorial activity into the texts. In spite of these difficulties, however, Bruschi shows a remarkable persistence in discovering and illuminating the traces of Cathar sympathizers, believers, and leaders that have been almost accidentally preserved in her sources. Through an exhaustive focus on this single source and an intensive analysis of one aspect of Cathar identity and practice—mobility—Bruschi provides a model for the ways in which contemporary scholars can look past the screens that have obscured the dialogic nature of the processes that produced inquisitorial texts.

Underlying Bruschi's method of reading and inter-

preting her sources is an important historiographical goal. Throughout *The Wandering Heretics of Languedoc*, she is quite candid about her desire to redress a scholarly imbalance that portrays individuals brought before inquisitors as "silent and ignorant actors" (p. 7). For Bruschi, such a portrayal propagates three faulty assumptions: that these individuals had no agency in opposing Catholic authorities; that dissenting organizations (in this case, the Cathar church) were, at best, loosely organized and intellectually fragmented; and that it was only the popes and canonists who granted a defined, collective identity to these organizations under the rubric of dangerous and conspiratorial heresy. This book demands that we acknowledge both the existence of a Cathar church and the ability of individual dissenters to turn inquisitorial proceedings into a forum for assertions of their consciously deviant religious identities. Bruschi's insistence on the deponents' agency leads her down new paths of interpretation for well-known sources, where the performance and admission of certain activities before an inquisitor became a profession of religious "alterity," rather than merely a forced confession of guilt.

Bruschi's study of Cathars in thirteenth-century Languedoc includes four chapters. The first, "Stories, and How to Read Them," is largely methodological and deconstructs the process of reading inquisitorial records. Here, Bruschi elaborates on a series of "filters" that influenced the final content of the extant Doat volumes. Many of these will be familiar to scholars of heresy and medieval

inquisitions, and they include the difficulties inherent in the translation of depositions (from Provençal to Latin), the formulaic nature of the interrogations and the inability of deponents to speak freely, the time constraints that limited interviews and led to the excision of digressions, and the role played by personal motivations and local social tensions in accusations of heresy. Bruschi turns these limitations into opportunities, however, by paying attention to the so-called surplus features that survive in the depositions and complicate the heretical formulae that so many trial records produce. The persistence of vernacular expressions in a description of Cathar ritual, a witness's "fixation on disease" (p. 33), and the survival of six radically different descriptions of the murder of inquisitors at Avignon in 1242: Bruschi extracts the unique and irregular features from each of these in order to recreate the mental and religious landscapes of accused heretics. In so doing, she shows individuals who were not simply passive spectators in their own trials, but active interlocutors who shaped the records of their own beliefs and practices.

The second and third chapters of the book focus on one such practice and its myriad meanings in both orthodox and heterodox contexts. The first, "Catharism and its Mobility," explores the history and culture of movement among Cathars, beginning with the migration of eastern European dualists to western Europe in the twelfth century. Interrogating the trope of the "wandering heretic," Bruschi argues convincingly for the continuing importance of movement within Catharism at both a local and regional level, drawing attention to migration as both a means of avoiding persecution and a way of maintaining ties between the "ecclesiastical cells" that formed the basic structure of the Cathar church. Bruschi illuminates the network of hospices, safe houses, and workshops that functioned as way stations for traveling Cathars; she also highlights the role played by messengers who scouted routes for traveling Cathars and facilitated their movement between local communities. These messengers were the sinews that bound the interpersonal and fluid church structure of Catharism together, so their intimate knowledge of heretical networks made them prized witnesses for inquisitors. If they could be turned, messengers became ideal "exploratores": collaborators who penetrated and revealed the inner workings of heretical communities. Although the canonical permissibility of using such spies was dubious, they came to be essential in local inquisitions' hunt for perpetually moving targets.

The precise nature of these targets is the subject of the third chapter, "Heretical Itinerancy," in which Bruschi

contextualizes Cathar mobility within the broader contours of thirteenth-century Christian practice. Comparing Cathars to both Waldensians and the Order of Preachers, Bruschi arrives at the conclusion that Cathar mobility was largely instrumental. As opposed to the "apostolic" itinerancy of the Waldensians, in which movement was an essential feature of the true Christian life, or the hesitant mobility of the Dominicans (according to their own Master General, Humbert of Romans), Bruschi asserts the existence of a distinctively Cathar "sacramental" itinerancy. This pattern of mobility made a practical and pastoral response to the fact that Cathar Good Men and Women ministered to scattered communities and were often pursued by Catholic authorities. In this analysis, the preaching and administration of the sacraments by traveling Cathar priests became the central practices of a church that imagined itself as the sole bearer of religious truth in medieval Europe.

It was a commitment to the continued existence of this church that spurred many individuals to maintain their faith, despite coming before inquisitorial courts. The final chapter of this book, "Patterns of Fear and Risk," explores the dynamics that underwrote this decision. Using Mary Douglas's theories of risk acceptability to good effect, Bruschi argues that individuals who came before the inquisitors' courts were not only subject to a fear of discovery and punishment; they also faced conflicting pressures from their families, religious communities, and local leaders who instilled a fear of exclusion and abandonment in them. This push and pull of competing fears thus established a range of acceptable risk for deponents, who were forced to make a decision about which threat (persecution or exclusion) was direr. The emotions that lay behind depositions are, of course, hidden from the modern historian. Here again, though, Bruschi shows real sensitivity in detecting how family ties and religious commitments shaped depositions and the efforts of individuals to conceal and protect those they cared about. She ultimately (and persuasively) concludes that in the game of verbal "hide-and-seek" that formed the core of an inquisition, the individuals before the courts exercised an agency in hiding that was as significant as the inquisitors' seeking.

In her conclusion to the book, Bruschi proposes several "starting points" for future research. The central one is her contention that historians must view Catharism as a "living church" with an organization structure that "undoubtedly would have been strengthened, formalized, and encouraged by the climate and the feelings sparked by persecution" (p. 194). In demonstrating "the reality

of an organization” to Catharism, and in showing the agency of individual Cathars before inquisitorial courts, Bruschi is successful. She performs an act of historical salvage in which she weaves the surplus features that hint at distinctively Cathar beliefs, practices, and institutions into a persuasive image of an actual, heretical church composed of committed individuals. Throughout the book, Bruschi displays considerable candor about her historiographical commitment to this image. Although that openness is refreshing, as are her frank admissions of the limitations of the study (particularly concerning the lack of German secondary sources in the bibliography), there is a concomitant danger here of Bruschi’s

candor undercutting her conclusions. Has her dedication to restoring the agency and unity of Cathars and Catharism led her to producing a sort of fiction in the archives? I believe not, but at times it seems a close call between textual analysis and historiographical wish fulfillment. The benefits of walking this narrow way, however, are that old sources produce new insights and that a more nuanced portrayal of Catharism in thirteenth-century Languedoc emerges from inquisitorial registers; ultimately, this portrayal of Catharism as a living, mobile, and nonconformist church rings true in the echoes of the individual voices that Bruschi has heard in her texts.

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