

# Concerning an Aspect of the Historiography of Catharism

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## Abstract

One of the most important topics of discussion in recent years within the international research on Catharism is the construction of this movement's narrative as a historical and literary phenomenon. This process is likewise of prime importance as regards the historiography of Catharism in Catalonia, since not only does it put in place the elements necessary for determining how the historical narrative ('memòria') of Catharism has been constructed, but also acknowledges the impact that this narrative has had in distorting the image of the Cathars. This topic has constituted one of the themes of interest in my research. Under no circumstances, however, does the study of such a process presuppose that one has adopted as one's own the arguments expressed in such a construction. Here, I will respond to a misunderstanding on my view on this topic.

**Keywords:** philosophy; religion; heresy; historiography

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## Resum. *Sobre un aspecte de la historiografia del Catarisme*

Un dels tòpics de discussió més rellevants dels últims anys en la recerca internacional sobre el catarisme és el de la construcció narrativa de la seva memòria com a fenomen històric i literari. Aquest procés també és d'una importància cabdal en la historiografia sobre el catarisme a Catalunya perquè no només posa els elements per conèixer com s'ha construït la seva memòria històrica sinó també l'impacte que aquesta ha tingut a l'hora de distorsionar la imatge dels càtars. Aquest ha sigut un des temes d'interès de la meua recerca. Però estudiar aquest procés, no pressuposa en cap cas assumir-ne els arguments d'aquesta construcció com a propis, sinó al contrari, esdevé un exercici per comprendre els mecanismes mitjançant els quals es construeix aquesta memòria al llarg de la història i les representacions que se'n deriven. En aquest text, respondré a una malinterpretació sobre el meu punt de vista en aquest aspecte.

**Paraules clau:** filosofia; religió; heretgia; historiografia

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One of the most important topics of discussion in recent years within the international research on Catharism is the construction of this movement's narrative as a historical and literary phenomenon. This topic has constituted one of the themes of interest in my research, to which I have devoted various publications. Under no circumstances, however, does the study of such a process presuppose that one has adopted as one's own the arguments expressed in such a construction. Indeed, a study of this kind becomes an exercise in understanding the mechanisms whereby the narrative has been constructed throughout history, as well as in understanding the representations deriving from it. There are, however, historians who do not understand matters in this particular manner.

The fact that a historian should attribute a historiographical thesis to another author who has never espoused such a thesis—either in written or spoken form—is a very serious matter which calls into question the credibility, objectivity and professionalism of the historian. Here, we are referring to Carles Gascón Chopo, who, from 2013 until the present, has persisted in writing on various occasions that I endorse a highly specific thesis regarding Catharism which currently fails to hold any academic validity, namely, the links between the Cathars and the heretical traditions of antiquity. This claim is completely false, for the mere reason that I have never defended such a thesis; on the contrary, I have always insisted upon situating the origins of the Cathars within the social, religious and spiritual context of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

In one of his recent articles, where he sets out the current state of historiography concerning Catharism, Gascón asserts that: “Revealing his familiarity with the sources, Grau based part of his analysis [...] insisting on hypotheses that are no longer accepted in historical writing on the subject, such as that of [Catharism's] uninterrupted ancestry dating back to the time of the Apostles” (Gascón, 2020: 131). He first took the liberty of making this assertion in 2013 when he reviewed the book *Cátaros e Inquisición* [*The Cathars and the Inquisition*], a synthesis of the chief studies and documents regarding Catharism in the Crown of Aragon (Grau, 2012a). On this occasion, he did not hesitate to assert that “[Grau] endorses the very ideological arguments that the antiheretical polemicists of Late Antiquity had already employed in their treatises refuting the earliest Christian heresies” (Gascón, 2013).<sup>1</sup>

I do not know whether the books and articles of mine that he cites in order to attribute such a thesis to me have actually been read with rigorous attention, but the fact is that I have never argued that Catharism enjoys either doctrinal or historical continuity with the dissenting voices of antiquity—either in my books or in the articles I have written thereafter. Quite the contrary: in all of

1. In this review, Gascón (2013) already attributes these very views to me without there even being present any arguments to this effect on my part within the book. Above and beyond the presentation and analysis of all these matters, the conclusions are clear: there is no kind of doctrinal link between the Cathars and these prior heresies.

them have I endeavoured to provide an explanation of how the narrative surrounding the Cathars is constructed as an historical phenomenon and of how it is necessary to situate Catharism as a Christian religious movement arising within the context of medieval Latin Europe; a movement lacking any kind of historical or doctrinal link to either antique or prevenient heresies (Diago, 2013: 428; Ramis, 2014: 399; Mensa, 2015).

Indeed, this is the central question around which the book *La invenció dels càtars* [*The Invention of the Cathars*] revolves. In that book, I even devote a chapter precisely to this question (Grau, 2016: 81-94: Ch. 5: La construcció dels càtars [*The Construction of the Cathars*]); a fact which accentuates Gascón's tendentiousness when it comes to citing these books and ascribing to me a thesis which is not only absent in them, but is actually quite the opposite of what I contend.

One of my research topics has specifically focused upon the construction of the narrative surrounding the Cathars as a historical and literary phenomenon, as well as the process that has resulted in the construction of an image of this movement, which distorts its true essence. And in my writings I have advocated this viewpoint at length. I laid emphasis on this process in rudimentary form in my book *Cátaros e Inquisición* (2012a), where I analysed, above all, the arguments of authors (from antiquity to the present) who have maintained these theses. The fact, however, that in this book I analyse the arguments of authors who have championed such an influence, for example, from gnosticism to Priscillianism via adoptionism, does not presuppose in any instance—as does Gascón—that I take them for granted in my discussions and still less so given that the book's conclusions are evident: such doctrinal filiation lacks any historical foundation; it is a literary construction or, in other words, an invention, inasmuch as reasons and arguments are devised in order to convince the reader about certain matters.

Thereafter, and in a range of articles written from a critical perspective, I have delved substantially deeper into such mechanisms for the elaboration of historical narratives ('memòria'), and particularly into the construction of the abovementioned filiation. However, I have constantly argued for the literary creation of this filiation and never have I employed it to explain the religious or historical nature of the Cathars, whom I situate—at the risk of repeating myself—within the context of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

To this end, we published *L'herètica pravitat* [*Heresy*] (Grau et al., 2015): in these two volumes, we have brought together editions of almost 300 documents concerning Catharism, heresies and the Inquisition within the Crown of Aragon, a large proportion of which have been revised and corrected in relation to prior editions, while certain others among them were previously unedited, the majority of which, it must be said, are not even mentioned in Gascón's doctoral thesis (Gascón, 2016).<sup>2</sup> The aforementioned unedited documentation originates from the Arxiu de la Corona d'Aragó, the Bibliothèqu

2. The thesis itself entertains the same presuppositions as those noted above.

nationale de Paris, the Archives départementales des Pyrénées-Orientales in Perpignan, the Vatican Apostolic Library, the Arxiu Capítular de Mallorca, the Arxiu Històric de l'Arxidiòcesi de Tarragona and the Archivo Histórico Nacional de Madrid.

In *L'herètica pravitat*, have we published material ranging from the manuscript portions of the Doat collection [*Fond Doat*], which bear reference to the Cathars in Catalonia to editions of unedited manuscript documents (some even previously unknown) from all the above archives. One example dates from 1258 wherein King James I (Jaume I) ordered Arnau de Bosc, Bailiff ('batlle') of Lleida, to collect the fines imposed upon the inhabitants of the Prades Mountains who had been accused of heresy. Another dates from 1261 wherein the same king returned to the brothers Bernat, Arnau and Joan Elies of Lleida the houses he had confiscated from their father, who had been condemned for heresy. This latter document mentions one of the few ancient streets in Lleida for which we retain records wherein confiscations were carried out upon heretics, namely, the street "d'en Constantí" ("Constantine Street") in the parish of Magdalena.

The above are some examples that emphasise the manner in which *L'herètica pravitat* stands as a significant contribution to the history of Catharism within the Crown of Aragon; a fact which ought to have been brought to the fore in an academic article claiming to analyse the current state of research on Catharism. Such is the case for the reason that our book places at the disposal of researchers all the known documentation regarding Catharism and the earliest stages of the Inquisition in the Crown of Aragon, the entirety of which documentation has been revised, corrected and updated.

Nor does Gascón's article mention my own specific articles concerning the construction of the narrative ('memòria') regarding the Cathars in the Crown of Aragon, namely, my central theme, particularly in view of the fact that it is there that I lend prominence to all the documentary sources which serve to create this filiation as a historical construct, i.e. precisely those materials in which it is made manifest that such filiation is the cause of the distorted image that prevails with respect to the Cathars (Grau, 2013). The process described above is likewise of prime importance as regards the historiography of Catharism in Catalonia, since not only does it put in place the elements necessary for knowing how the movement's historical narrative ('memòria') has been constructed (above all via the Dominican chronicles of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries), but also acknowledges the impact that this narrative has had in distorting the image of the Cathars. A fundamental question as regards the historiography of the Cathars in Catalonia arises from the foregoing, namely, the fact of attributing to the Waldensians the vast majority of episodes which pertained to the Cathars (Grau, in press). This phenomenon began during that very period and, with the passing of the centuries, has ended up reinforcing a highly specific and characteristic image of the Cathars.

Let us look, in fact, at whether the aforementioned process holds any significance, a process which, within the Catalan sphere, goes beyond the realm

of religion and even finds itself circumscribed by the intellectual ambit of the eighteenth century via the figure of the Dominican and academic Josep Mercader (Grau, 2012b). To mention one of the examples to which we have directed our attention: on July 4th 1764, Josep Mercader delivered a brief discourse concerning the Waldensians (in which he also discusses the Cathars) at the Reial Acadèmia de les Bones Lletres de Barcelona, a discourse preserved in manuscript form within the Fons de Reserva de la Biblioteca Universitària de Barcelona.<sup>3</sup> Mercader embodies one of the clearest and most revealing examples as to how the chief stereotypes of Catharism lie firmly rooted within the image that has been created of this movement. Studying his case, surveying his sources and contextualising him historically and intellectually furnishes us with the necessary elements for understanding the manner in which the historical narrative ('memòria') has been constructed and in which the above-mentioned filiation between the Cathars and the heresies of antiquity has been established, particularly within Catalonia.

To go from here to asserting that I espouse such hypotheses for the purpose of explaining the nature of Catharism and hence to situate my work within the framework of certain hypotheses which are not accepted in the academic sphere, as does Carles Gascón, constitutes a tendentious misrepresentation—a fact which, indeed, calls into question his objectivity and neutrality as a historian. Let us hope that in the subsequent studies he undertakes, irrespective of all the criticisms which may be levelled at my works, he at least ceases to attribute to me the above hypothesis which I have never endorsed. Furthermore, I encourage him to develop a much more objective, critical and unprejudiced assessment such as the analysis of a researcher might demand.

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