

THE HISTORY OF WOMEN'S LIVES IN THE ARCHIVES OF LANGUEDOC

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It is possible to study women in Medieval Occitan society without archival research.

In some areas, probably ninety percent of the existing corpus of charters and related material is in print in one form or another. Enormous collections like *Histoire générale de Languedoc* unify literally thousands of charters from a staggering spectrum of localities over a period of more than a thousand years. Active archeological societies in the 19th century published cartulary after cartulary. Other material has been published piece meal over the last few centuries, in collections like *Spicilegium*, or in journals such as *Mémoires de la Société archéologique de Montpellier*, or more recently *Annals du Midi*.¹ The resources are rich, and when approached with a new question and a fresh vision, frequently provide abundant fodder for thought and analysis. As recently as 1991, a scholar wrote, “[f]or the period down to about 1250

almost everything of value in the documentary and literary heritage of the medieval world has been published in modern editions.”² It is possible to work profitably without archival material, but at what cost?

For some sub-specialties, perhaps, little remains untouched, but for historians of social and economic history, there is still a relative abundance of unpublished archival material in the archives of Languedoc from before 1250 CE, and still more for the centuries following. For example, the Archives Départementales de l’Herault has only recently completed the inventory of the charters of the Hospitalers of Saint John and of the Knights Templar once dwelling in Montpellier.³ For historians studying women, perhaps even a greater relative abundance waits, since it was not the great venerable Benedictine religious houses for men which were inventoried last, but the

small religious communities of women.⁴ Not only do these collections record the holdings and provide evidence of the structure of the community, but also in some areas at least, women were better represented among the donors to institutions serving women.⁵

Take for example the small religious house, Sainte-Marie-Madeleine de Bonlieu, also known as Vignogoul, because of the institution's viticultural holdings. An eventual dependency of the Benedictine monastery Valmagne, Sainte-Marie-Madeleine de Bonlieu, lacks a foundation charter. The first surviving charter dates from 1150, when the Lord of Pignan, a vassal of the Guillems and the probable founder, provided the religious house with its core property.⁶ It is clear from early donations, that monks as well as nuns dwelled in Sainte-Marie-Madeleine. Until 1180, a male *procurator* administered Sainte-Marie-Madeleine. After his death, or retirement, a series of prioresses administered Sainte-Marie-Madeleine.⁷ This small house, "probably never home to more than fifty women," was

nonetheless one of the larger female religious communities in the area. A few more than forty archival documents survive for this institution from before 1213—and more for the next century. The documents include many donations, several wills and various other charters involving the property of the community.⁸ In 1994, the ink on the loose-leaf inventory was barely dry. The charters of another house, Saint-Félix de Montseau, were still spread out on the archivist's desk, waiting attention.⁹

Donations to religious institutions provide some of the only evidence of the propertied but not necessarily aristocratic members of society. Before notarial records begin around 1250, testaments and small pious donations by a poorly defined group of minor landholders, householders and burgesses in and around Montpellier provide the only evidence of nascent middle class. This group appears to have echoed, but not duplicated, the eleemosynary activity of their social superiors. This is true of the great printed cartularies of nearby monastic institutions,

but it is also true of smaller religious houses whose records survive only in the archives—and often, it seems, in this particular locale, that smaller institutions drew a disproportionate amount of their support from the less powerful strata of society.¹⁰

These manuscripts also preserve evidence of transitions. Among several changes in testamentary practice around the year 1200, was the inclusion of dowries for poor girls among the testamentary gifts *pro salute anime*. One of the earliest examples of this kind of bequest, the testament of an importer of spices, survives only in manuscript.¹¹ Similarly, for those studying the shadowy emergent years of self-governing communes, the best records are not preserved in printed editions, but in the municipal archives. The monumental lay cartulary, *Liber instrumentum memorialium*, published in the 19th century ends abruptly in 1202/1203 with the death of the last legitimate male in the seigneurial line.¹² The cartularies of the young commune begin almost immediately after that date—but

two of three exist only in manuscript.¹³ Evidence of the role of women in this process survives in a handful of charters, such as a loan made by the wife of one of the communes—oligarchs to the communal counsel in 1205.¹⁴

There are also charters previously disregarded by earlier compilers of print collections, perhaps because their prosopographical significance had been overlooked. One such is the will of a certain Guillemette, Viscountess of Nîmes and Agde. In 1183, this widow retired to a small community of women in Sète, near Agde. She bequeathed the institution's overseers everything she had inherited from her husband.¹⁵ This is one of the very few testaments surviving for women from her class in the area, and one of the still fewer providing evidence of retirement to a monastic community after an active public life. This woman was not only the widow of a local magnate, she had governed in her son's name for fourteen years, and was the sister of the lord of nearby Montpellier.¹⁶ In spite

of all these connections, her testament had been preserved by chance in the collection of charters not from the small religious house she joined, but in a mixed collection of charters from one of the oldest and largest Benedictine monasteries in the area, Aniane, which controlled the coastal town of Sète. Such a windfall permitted the loose reconstruction of her life from her marriage around 1145 until she disappeared from public life.¹⁷ It also provided evidence of an otherwise little known religious community.

Material which has never been in print is perhaps the most exciting of the archival holdings, but the original charters often contain information in addition to that in the print version—whether the charters are still preserved as individual leaves, or copied and bound into a manuscript cartulary. For example, *Layettes du Trésor des Chartes* reproduced the first redaction of the customs of the young commune of Montpellier, and the accompanying oaths sworn by Marie, Lady of Montpellier, and her husband, Peter II, King of Aragon

and Count of Barcelona.¹⁸

A manuscript version of the customs is preserved in a small cartulary known simply as *Le petit thalamus*, which was itself edited and published in 1840, and yet another manuscript version of the oath in an early 13th century hand survives in the folio-sized cartulary *Grand thalamus* in the Archives Municipales de Montpellier. Both charters are important documents, not only from the perspective of dynastic alliance and royal administration, but also the emergence of independent coastal communes and the codification of customary law. However, the print versions raise as many questions as they answer.

At first glance, it seems probable that the documents were reproduced in their entirety. The print versions of the two documents appear to be complete, no lacunae or ellipses are evident. The redaction of the 1204 customs printed in *Layettes du Trésor des Chartes*, varies subtly from that preserved in *Le petit thalamus*. Both versions have the same number of articles, numbered slightly

differently, but variations in the text suggest those producing the two versions had slightly different agendas. Completely absent from the version in *Layettes du Trésor des Chartes* is the Occitan translation of both customs and oaths. The customs hold a wealth of information on customary norms including intestate disposition, legal majority, adultery, libel, the capacity to form contracts and other niceties. Unlike the customs, the Latin text of the oaths in both print editions follows the manuscript version verbatim—to a point. However, the extensive list of witnesses was truncated in both print editions. Only following comparison of the two documents with a manuscript original does the truth come to light.¹⁹ Either the manuscripts preserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale of France differ from those preserved in Montpellier, or the editors took certain liberties with reproduction, or both. To achieve a clear picture of the *boni homines* and the communal privileges of Montpellier in 1204 it is necessary to consult the manuscript versions in the municipal archives.

Manuscript charters—especially those outside of cartularies—often preserve additional details. Whereas many print versions of documents do not reveal whether or not a list of names is simply witnesses or actual signatories, there is usually no question, which is the case in an individual manuscript charter. An autograph of a woman making a gift of property to a religious house reveals something about lay literacy, and something about female literacy as well. A document ending with a list of names in a notarial hand with a simple cross by each name also reveals something about literacy—or the lack thereof. Seals are another treat. For *Languedoc*, many have been reproduced as line drawings, but seeing and handling the actual artifact may reveal elements a nineteenth-century artist overlooked.

There are certainties in terms of the charters themselves, which must remain a matter of trust when a printed edition provides the data. At the most basic level, it is possible to personally verify the language and contents, rather than rely

on another's transcription.

There are other bits and pieces of evidence that may prove important. For example, is it possible to establish whether or not the charter is the original or a contemporary copy, or a later transcription. Does the script appear to be appropriate to the date on the document? Does the date make sense?

There is at least one impossibly dated charter in the Archives Municipales de Montpellier, which as a result has implied an erroneous *terminus ante quem* for at least one female religious foundation. Physically, the document looks perfectly plausible—which means it remains a minor mystery.²⁰

The archives in Montpellier are extremely easy to use.

The great inventories of the nineteenth and early 20th century are available in at least a few domestic research libraries, as are volumes of the modern inventories of the same archives.²¹ In the municipal archive, the older identifiers were in the process of being superseded by a new system—the transition was nearly complete ten years ago, and is

probably now a *fait accompli*.

In 1994, many of the newest inventories were not available as bound volumes, but dwelled on bookcases in the reading room of the archive of the Herault in loose-leaf binders.

The materials described in the inventories—for the period before 1250 in any case—were diverse. Cartularies, loose charters, transcriptions dating from anything from a few years after the original document was created to several hundred years later. There were papal bulls, donations, enfeoffments, sales, exchanges, contracts, testaments, oaths of fealty, marriage contracts, and less easily categorized charters as well. Some documents had seals, but most did not. As noted above, many of these manuscripts had been published in a printed edition at some time in the past. Some documents that would have been welcome, but which did not seem to survive in these archives, were letters and other documentary detritus of private life.

One final benefit of traveling to the archives to explore the documentary riches stored there is less intellectual. There are intangible acquisitions in addition to the reams of notes, stacks of disks, and photocopies to digest at leisure. Visiting the onetime home of the population of a study allows a researcher to experience the slant and the color of the light, the color and texture of the stone, and enjoy the scent of sun-warmed plants. Walks through a city reveal distances in human terms. None of this information may end up in a formal study, but it enhances understanding.

For the area in and around Montpellier from the period before 1250, the archives do not hold a numerical profusion of unpublished charters. In contrast to the several thousand charters available in print, only hundreds survive in manuscript alone. The importance of these texts lies not in their abundance, but in the documentary lacunae they fill—the charters of small religious institutions, the wills of burgesses, and texts recording communal

development—and the details they provide. However, because religious houses serving women were small, and because the urban environment of the young commune did offer different opportunities than the countryside, even the relatively small number of charters surviving in manuscript alone adds tremendous texture to the study of women and their place in medieval Occitan society. The omission of these materials would mean settling for a more fragmentary understanding of a distant reality already difficult to decode.

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END NOTES

¹ Claude Devic and J-J. Vaissete, *Histoire générale de Languedoc*, new ed., 16 vols. (Privat: Toulouse, 1876-1892), hereafter HL; Luc d'Achery; *Spicilegium: sive Collectio veterum aliquot scriptorum qui in Galliae bibliothecis delituerant*, ed. Joseph de Barre. 3 vols. (Paris: Montalant, 1723); *Mémoires de la Société archéologique de Montpellier*, 1ère series (Montpellier: Imprimerie Dehan, 1835-); *Annales du Midi* (Toulouse: Privat, 1889-)

² Norman Cantor, *Inventing the Middle Ages: The Lives, Works, and Ideas of the Great Medievalists of the Twentieth Century*, 1st ed. (New York: William Morrow, 1991), p. 30.

³ *Archives Départementales de l'Hérault*, hereafter AD, 55H. The surviving charters for both institutions are found in 55H.

⁴ AD, 58H and 59H.

⁵ Elizabeth Haluska-Rausch, *Family, Property and Power: Women in Medieval Montpellier, 985-1213*, Ph.D. Diss.; Harvard, 1998, pp. 179-232.

⁶ AD 59H15.

⁷ HL, vol. 4, 827; AD, 59H4, 59H15.

⁸ AD, 59H.

⁹ AD, 58H.

¹⁰ AD, 58H.

¹¹ *Archives Municipales de Montpellier*, hereafter AM, EE299.

¹² *Liber instrumentorum memorialium: Le cartulaire des Guilhems de Montpellier*, ed. Alexandre Germain and Charles Chabaneau (Montpellier: J. Martel ainé, 1884-1886).

¹³ AM, *Grand thalamus, Livre Noir*. Ferdinand Pégat and others edited the third. *Thalamus parvus: Le petit thalamus de Montpellier, publié par la première fois d'après les manuscrits originaux*. Ed. Ferdinand Pégat, Eugène Thomas, et al. (Montpellier: J. Martel ainé, 1840).

¹⁴ *Grand thalamus*, f. 3v (May 1205).

¹⁵ AD, 1H4.

¹⁶ Haluska-Rausch, *Family, Property and Power*, pp. 152-153.

¹⁷ *Layettes du Trésor des Chartes*, ed. Alexandre Teulet, et al. 5 vols. (Paris: H. Plon, 1863-1909), vol. 1, no. 93, hereafter LTC; AD, 1H4.

¹⁸ "Consuetudines et libertates ville Montispessulani," *Thalamus parvus*.

¹⁹ LTC, no. 721, J. 339. AM, *Grand thalamus*, f. 1r-1v (15 August 1204).

²⁰ AM, EE 299.

²¹ AD, *Inventaire sommaire des archives départementales antérieures à 1790. Hérault*. (Montpellier: Ricard, 1918-), later called *Répertoire numérique*; AM, *Inventaires et documents. Publiés par les soins de l'administration municipale*. (Montpellier: Impr. Serre et Roumégous, 1895-).