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Lectio praecursoria

Information and Lived Religion in Inquisition Records from Medieval Languedoc (15.12.2023, Tampere University)

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In this *lectio praecursoria*, I would like to offer some reflections on the long research process that has resulted in the completion of the doctoral dissertation we have gathered here today to discuss. For reasons of stylistic preference, the dissertation itself was written in a rather impersonal manner. Thus, I feel that this is an appropriate opportunity to provide a more personal account of where the ideas in this dissertation came from and where I have ended up with them.

My research has been driven by a twofold interest in thematic and methodological issues. On the one hand, my thematic interest has been on investigating the practical and spiritual information behaviour of lay people involved in religious dissent in medieval Languedoc. On the other hand, my methodological interest has been on seeking to understand the epistemological implications of the process through which the information that is extant in medieval inquisitorial documents was constructed. In this *lectio*, I will first touch upon the methodological dimension of my dissertation, then I will discuss the thematic content of my work, and after this, I will end the *lectio* with some broader reflections.

It is fair to say that my doctoral dissertation is the culmination of a decade-long obsession with source critical issues related to the use of inquisitorial evidence as historical sources. What is it, exactly, that we can and cannot know about the past based on the documentary traces of medieval inquisitorial tribunals? This fundamental question has already vexed generations of historians before me who have discussed and debated the problem extensively. While epistemological issues are – or at least should be – relevant to all historians, these problems are especially pronounced when it comes to inquisitorial sources, as they constitute a hostile archive of persecution and control that, by its very existence, calls for critical deconstruction.

As a rule of thumb, nothing that is written in an inquisitorial document should be taken at face value. In fact, the veracity and trustworthiness of this material has been in question more or less as long as it has existed. Already in the Middle Ages, people who were critical of inquisitorial authority and tried to oppose it, accused inquisitors of distorting reality with their records and of finding proof of transgressions where none could really be found.

In modern academic historiography, the work of the German historian Herbert Grundmann in the 1920s initiated the discussion concerning the source critical issues of using inquisitorial documents as historical evidence. This discussion and debate has been going on ever since. At steadily recurring intervals, subsequent historians have revisited the issues pinpointed by Grundmann and have developed further source critical interpretations under the influence of the intellectual currents that have animated the academic climate of their own day. A relatively recent example of this is my

honoured opponent Professor Arnold, who drew on postmodern theories on discourse and power and made an influential contribution to these discussions in the early 2000s.

The most important lesson that we can draw from this extensive body of work that has accumulated over a century is that historians should be extremely vigilant about the ways in which the inquisitorial process shaped and conditioned the textual material it created, and that these sources should be approached and analysed with carefully sophisticated methodologies that emphasize their constructed nature.

Personally, I wholeheartedly acknowledge and embrace the enduring importance of this long source critical tradition. Over the years I have certainly drawn much inspiration and insight from it myself. That being said, I have also come to find many of its conclusions unsatisfactory. As I see it, a certain ambiguity continues to haunt the source critical *status quaestionis*, as opinions are still divided on basic epistemological questions. In a recent publication that came just before I began working on my dissertation, historian Antonio Sennis summarized this lack of proper consensus eloquently in the form of a rhetorical question. Discussing inquisitorial evidence, he asked: “[c]an we [...] retrieve at all the voices and experiences of the local individuals? Or, on the contrary, are those voices audible only through the amplifier of the inquisitor, an amplifier that distorts them to the point of rendering their sound unrecognizable and their meaning elusive?”¹ This question spoke to my intuitions. I took it as the methodological mission statement for my dissertation and set out to answer it.

Back when I began working with inquisitorial evidence as a student, I was initially more influenced by the critical voices of the source critical tradition and, over time, grew increasingly critical and pessimistic myself. Sharing in what seems to be a common experience for many who have studied inquisitorial sources, I originally began with the hope of using these records to uncover medieval daily life and religiosity in all its microhistorical colour. Over time, however, this began to seem more and more like an epistemological dead end to me. By placing emphasis on the negative aspects – the distortions and limitations that define inquisitorial evidence – I had painted myself into a corner with little room to manoeuvre. During an especially difficult time of struggling with the bleak implications of this predicament, a few chance encounters, which I have come to appreciate massively in retrospect, provided a beacon of light. When a colleague at a conference asked me what my research is about, I told him that I am studying the epistemological limitations of inquisition records. In response, he smiled and said optimistically that I should think in terms of possibilities, not just limitations. Likewise, when I gave a presentation to a group of students about the construction of inquisition records and the limits that their constructedness imposes on our knowledge about the past, one of the students who was seemingly frustrated by what she was hearing, asked me what is it, then, that we can actually know? These exchanges struck a chord and rewired my thinking on these issues. They prompted me to consider the positive and negative dimensions of the problem together, as two sides of the same coin. This led me to think of inquisitorial sources as both a constraint and an affordance for the historian.

Searching for ways forward, I resorted to thinking about the problem on a first principles basis: what are inquisition records exactly? The idea that struck me next seemed simultaneously

¹ Antonio Sennis, ‘Questions about the Cathars’, in Antonio Sennis ed., *Cathars in Question* (Heresy and Inquisition in the Middle Ages 4), York Medieval Press: York 2016, 1–20, at 9–10.

extremely obvious and profoundly revealing: inquisition records are information from the past that is extant in the present. Thus, the nature of information should be understood as information in these sources is the only possible point of empirical access to the past. After this realization, I immediately embarked on an extensive reading of information science and the philosophy of information, as well as the theory of historical sciences, such as archaeology, geology, and palaeontology, which have lately come to utilize informational concepts. The ideas that I was able to draw from this literature worked to bolster my initial intuitions and provided a lot of further technical nuance to develop them further.

Over the following years, these simple ideas gradually developed into the theoretical framework that can be found in my dissertation, which frames the central methodological question in terms of information flow from the past into the present. My goal has not been to step into the past through inquisition records but to understand how information about the past came into them. I have sought to understand inquisitorial evidence as materially embedded information that has been shaped and conditioned by a multi-stage sequence during which several historical actors acquired, processed, and transmitted information. The historian interfaces with the end product of this sequence of selective replication. This was done to facilitate understanding the epistemological implications of the different stages, actors, variables, and dynamics that influenced the construction of inquisitorial documents.

As I see it, my dissertation offers one way of solving the problem of delineating what can and cannot be known about the past through inquisitorial sources. I have found the suggested methodology adequate at least for my own needs, and I have made extensive use of it in the empirical analysis carried out in the dissertation. Other historians are free to criticize and adapt it to their own needs, as well as develop and nuance it further as they see fit.

The main argument is that inquisition records are amalgamations of information originating from many different sources. The information in these documents constitutes an inquisitorial abstraction, but these abstractions are nevertheless based on information from the deponents' experiences and memories, from talk in the inquisitorial interrogation, and from the act of textual appropriation carried out by the inquisitorial notary. This information blends so seamlessly in the records that – contrary to some earlier interpretations – they cannot be delayered or picked apart retrospectively to distinguish between authentic and corrupted sections or to uncover the “true voices” of the deponents. Even so, when we understand and account for the extant evidence in relation to its complex process of creation, we can use it to formulate carefully calibrated knowledge claims about the past.

I think that the relevance of my dissertation stems from this engagement with source critical methodology. For quite some time now, I have thought about this with the following tongue-in-cheek metaphor. The source critical problem of using inquisitorial evidence can be thought of as a crossroads through which anyone who uses these sources has to travel regardless of the direction they are coming from or the destination they are trying to reach. By writing this dissertation, I think of myself as lying down in the middle of this busily trafficked crossroad. Anyone who wants to travel by is more or less forced to somehow deal with me and my ideas, whether they agree with me or not. Time will tell what kind of dialogue this will promote.

Theory, I feel, is always best developed through practice. The methodological framework

presented in my dissertation is developed piece by piece alongside the empirical analysis of dissident lived religion, which—surprise surprise—is also conceptualized from an informational perspective. Communication as an element of dissident religiosity was of great interest to me already before I began working on my dissertation. Networks of heretical communication are prominently visible in inquisition records due to inquisitorial interest in mapping and dismantling these networks of dissent. This evidence opens up wide but underutilized possibilities for trying to understand religious and social life in the Middle Ages.

Up to that point in time when I realized the methodological utility of the concept of information, I had thought about my source critical and thematic areas of interest as largely separate issues. However, when I adopted information into my conceptual toolbox, it became only natural to also think about the thematic dimension of my dissertation in informational terms as communication, simply put, is the transmission of information. What began as a project on oral communication and heresy, was fine-tuned over time into a project on information behaviour and dissident lived religion. This application of information to both the method and the substance of my research provided an unexpected level of conceptual coherence to the work as a whole, and this was not something that was planned from the outset.

Information, I think, proved to be a powerful and productive perspective for a thematic analysis of heretical lived religion. The evidence indicates that in medieval Languedoc, the constant flow of information from one person to another served an important role in maintaining dissident activities and acted as the primary vehicle through which heterodox ideas circulated in the local communities. Tracking these information flows reveals the myriad ways in which Languedocian lay people who were involved in dissident activities were situated in and how they engaged with their social and religious surroundings through the medium of information. Information behaviour was an important dimension of religion-as-lived. To a significant extent, the individual and collective experience of participating in religious dissent consisted of searching for and acquiring information, processing information through evaluation and interpretation, sharing information with others and discussing its nuances, controlling the slippery spread of information, making choices and decisions in relation to available information, and utilizing information to various practical and spiritual ends.

Taken as a whole, the dissertation constitutes a systematic study of organic, social, and primarily oral information behaviour in the context of dissident lived religion in medieval Languedoc to the extent that its dynamics are visible as an abstraction in inquisitorial sources. It portrays lay people as active agents who navigated the predicament of their historical thrownness to the best of their abilities, constrained and afforded by the informational resources available to them in their environment. Moreover, the explorations carried out in the dissertation work to historicize information by reminding us that regardless of time, place, or available technology, human beings interface with their surroundings and communicate with one another via information.

Stepping back a little bit for some final reflections, I think that the dissertation can be summarized as an attempt to take a systems level approach to the methodology and the thematic analysis of history. What I have tried to do is take apart two distinct phenomena by exploring the processes of information flow from which inquisitorial evidence and dissident religiosity emerged. The explicit intention of this has been to understand both phenomena better by deepening our understanding of

the interplay of their various parts. While such a simple intellectual exercise may seem quite obvious from the outside, I believe that the dissertation has demonstrated that it can produce relevant insights when carried out systematically all the way to its logical conclusions. One might jokingly claim that I am genetically predisposed to this kind of thinking as I come from a lineage of engineers. On a more serious note, the approach as a whole reflects my metaphysical conviction that all phenomena emerge from intermingling subprocesses.

Having taken a retrospective look at the processes from which this dissertation itself emerged, I am acutely aware that I have not done it alone, as it is very much a product of the historiographical traditions in which I have participated. When I began working on inquisitorial sources as an undergraduate, I did not intentionally choose this field of study because of the sophisticated source critical theory that defines it. I have, however, come to think of this choice as a particularly lucky coincidence, because engaging with the methodological debates of the field and the fundamentally problematic sources produced by inquisitorial tribunals has been an optimal training ground for an aspiring medieval historian. Many of the lessons I have been able to draw from these engagements are, in my opinion, applicable to historical research in general.

Furthermore, I feel that the dissertation is also a reflection of my immediate intellectual home environment. The study of medieval lived religion from the perspective of communication and other information behaviour can be seen as a kind hybrid combination of the research interests of my supervisors. On a more general level, a dissertation that emphasizes the methodological issues related to the use of premodern legal records as historical sources and focuses thematically on the history of daily life and everyday religiosity of non-elite lay people is a manifestation of what can be called the Tampere style of doing medieval history. I present my dissertation as humble tribute to these traditions that have shaped and fostered my intellectual growth.

*Saku Pihko successfully defended his doctoral dissertation *Information and Lived Religion in Inquisition Records from Medieval Languedoc* on 15 December 2023 at Tampere University. The opponent was Professor John H. Arnold (University of Cambridge) and the custos was Professor Christian Krötzl (Tampere University).*

The abstract of the dissertation is available online: <https://trepo.tuni.fi/handle/10024/152724>. If you are interested in reading the dissertation, please email the author.