
Nicole Archambeau’s Souls under Siege is an outstanding study of the experience of spiritual and physical well-being in fourteenth-century Provence. Concentrating on the individual testimonies of 68 witnesses to the canonisation inquest of Countess Delphine de Puimichel in 1363, it opens an exceptional window on the anxieties that men and women endured when dealing with war, plague and penance at the time. Often, it is difficult for historians to get up close to the cares and concerns of the subjects under their scrutiny, when viewed through the distortive lens of the chronicler’s or institutional perspective. Crafted in response to the interrogations of master Nicolau Laurens under the auspices of the Church, the testimonies in Souls under Siege, too, fall somewhere between spontaneous and scripted narratives. However, some of the testimonies in this collection, including those mentioning outbreaks of plague, were articulated in response to rare, open-ended articles—in which no direct questions were posed. Through a patient, meticulous reading, the author is thus able to carefully and deeply contextualise the corresponding anxieties that surfaced in these numerous accounts. A picture emerges of shared concerns over several pivotal moments of crisis that are interconnected in the memories of the witnesses. Physical violence and disease surface as manifestations of spiritual sickness, caused by sin and remedied by confession.

Archambeau’s analysis contributes to a growing body of scholarship showing how mortal beings considered spiritual and physical ailment and alleviation to be deeply interrelated. The exploration of canonisation inquests, and miracle accounts, offers rich rewards for those seeking to understand these connections between spiritual and physical health, and ideas and practices. This has been demonstrated earlier by, among others, Sharon Farmer, Sara Ritchey, Jenni Kuuliala and Ruth Salter. Their work has in common that they take unfamiliar responses to matters of health—often considered ‘unscientific’—seriously, opening up much broader, relevant questions and perspectives on health and healing.

Souls under Siege considers moments of danger identified in the responses of the witnesses to in total almost one hundred questions. (An appendix listing these questions is absent and would have been useful.) The testimonies, delivered between May and October 1363 in the cathedral of St. Anne in Apt, Provence, revolve around Countess Delphine, a noblewoman with strong connections to King Robert and Queen Sanxia of Naples. The witnesses, each holding their own relationship to Delphine, largely belonged to the aristocracy. The moments of danger between 1343 and 1363 are subdivided into chronological and sacramental exposure. The first four chapters look at several political and social crises: first, the threat to healthy peace following the death of Robert of Naples in 1343 and the danger of war between Provençal lords in 1349, at the same time as the plague struck. This is followed by the crisis of the invasion of mercenaries in 1357–58 and the large-scale presence of disbanded cohorts of mercenaries in 1361, again alongside an outbreak of plague. In Chapters 5 and 6, the author then explores
the anxiety that went with the moment of confession over the state of the witnesses’ souls. These interwoven moments of crisis were approached by the witnesses through a moral worldview, in which the sinfulness of politics might lead to spiritual sickness.

A significant argument of this book is how violence and political discord were considered to lead to malaise of the soul, which the priest might remedy by delivering the sacrament of penance. Further building on the work of, among others, Daniel Lord Smail, Chapter 2 discusses how emotive and physical expressions of anger—making the blood boil—and love linked the health of soul and body, tying together politics, law and medicine. Violence—considered a more pressing threat to the soul than to the body—was negotiated through the healing presence of Delphine, transforming discord into peace. Chapters 3 and 4 accordingly discuss how the disruptions brought about by the thousands of roaming mercenaries not only endangered the physical well-being, food supplies and sanitary situation in the region. They also imperiled the population’s spiritual health, and first and foremost that of the mercenaries themselves fighting Christians. The final two chapters focus on the preparation for the sacrament of penance, considered to be one of the most dangerous moments for the health of the soul. Witnesses expressed the need to be worthy of God’s healing forgiveness and undergo internal transformation. They thereby sought Delphine’s voice and touch, as her proximity as a living relic helped to repair the relationship with God.

Souls under Siege shows us how the care for the soul and the body were perceived as intricately related, through the spiritual and material. Mediated by Delphine, we can see how individuals remembered and navigated threats to their spiritual and physical health, from warfare, epidemics, and power struggles. Thus, this book raises further salient questions about the intersections of the body politic and the individual body, religion and medicine, and ideas and practices in relation to violence and peace, distress and alleviation, emotions and ailments.

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