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978-0-521-10880-5 - The Holy Greyhound: Guinefort, Healer of Children since the Thirteenth Century

Jean-Claude Schmitt

Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION

The medieval church extended Christianity's influence in society considerably, at the same time strengthening what clerics of the time defined as one of its basic features, the central importance to it of the Book. This characteristic explains the rise of a learned culture which derived most of its methods of reading, interpreting and diffusing the teachings of the Bible from the classical heritage, and which led to the development of a literate, Latinate, clerical culture that helped to build the power of the church but also tended to isolate the clergy from the main body of society.

The mass of Christians did not in fact enjoy such direct access to the Scriptures or to any sort of writing. Secular culture, the culture of those whom the clergy deemed 'illiterate', i.e., those who did not know Latin (and this was often the case even at the highest levels of society),<sup>1</sup> was predominantly an oral, vernacular culture.

The opposition of these two cultures would seem to me to have been one of the most important features of feudal society. Their relationship was a complex one, shifting between mutual incomprehension and overt hostility, but without there ever being a complete cessation of the exchanges that such conflicts sometimes fostered. We are now beginning to acquire a better understanding of the alteration of this relationship over time, and of the reasons for it. The part played by groups seeking ideological and social advancement, for example – the petty aristocracy of knights on the secular side, the new 'intellectuals' in the church – clearly allowed quite unprecedented cultural exchanges to occur in the twelfth century, even if they were often jeopardised in subsequent years.<sup>2</sup>

A vast amount of historical work, however, still needs to be done. Historians are far from having identified all the elements that distinguished lay and clerical culture. For each contained an infinite variety of cultural attitudes which need to be considered in relation to the whole range of social conditions. Most important of all, we need to understand what was at stake in this opposition between cultures, to know what part it played in the functioning of feudal society, and what transformations it underwent throughout its long existence.

This book is an attempt to offer tentative answers to some of these questions. It begins with a detailed examination of a thirteenth-century document, around which I have built the book. Let me therefore introduce the document itself.

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## 2 Introduction

In 1261, a Dominican friar, Stephen of Bourbon, died at the Dominican convent at Lyons. He had spent the last years of his life in the community writing a treatise, in Latin, on the Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit. He died without having completed his work, which has come down to us in an anonymous thirteenth-century manuscript, as well as in several later ones. For a long time the treatise remained unknown to scholars, only winning any real recognition in the hundred years since 1877, when the historian A. Lecoy de la Marche published a number of extracts from it and convincingly attributed it to Stephen of Bourbon.

The treatise is a theological commentary on the Gifts of the Holy Spirit, consisting largely of a collection of *exempla*, anecdotes, claimed to be authentic, and which were used by preachers in their sermons as edifying matter for the faithful, intended to lead them down the path of salvation. The use of *exempla* in preaching developed considerably in the course of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. From the first half of the thirteenth century they were assembled in collections, so as to facilitate the preacher's task. Stephen of Bourbon's work is thought to be one of the earliest collections of *exempla*.

Some of Stephen of Bourbon's *exempla* are derived from books like the Bible, or from ecclesiastical authors (*Lives of the Fathers*, Gregory the Great, etc.). Others were composed on the basis of narratives collected by Stephen of Bourbon from reliable witnesses, who gave him accounts of what they had heard or seen with their own eyes. Sometimes the oral testimony duplicates a written tradition, in which case the double transmission is taken to be an even stronger guarantee of authenticity. Thirdly, Stephen of Bourbon often composed an *exemplum* from his own experience, and it is an *exemplum* of this sort that is presented here; in it he recounts what he saw and heard in the Dombes, about forty kilometres north of Lyons.<sup>3</sup>

### *DE ADORATIONE GUINEFORTIS CANIS*

Sexto dicendum est de supersticionibus contumeliosis, quarum quedam sunt contumeliose Deo, quedam proximo. Deo contumeliose sunt supersticiones que divinos honores demonibus attribuunt, vel alicui alteri creature, ut facit idolatria, et ut faciunt misere mulieres sortilege que salutem petunt adorando sambucas vel offerendo eis, contemnendo ecclesias vel sanctorum reliquias, portando ibi pueros suos vel ad fornicarios vel ad res alias, ad sanitatem consequendam. [Title in the margin.] Sic faciebant nuper in diocesi Lugdunensi, ubi, cum ego predicarem contra sortilegia et confessiones audirem, multe mulieres confitebantur portasse se pueros suos apud sanctum Guinefortem. Et cum crederem esse sanctum aliquem, inquisivi, et audivi ad ultimum quod esset canis quidam leporarius, occisus per hunc modum. In diocesi Lugdunensi,

prope villam monialium que dicitur Noville, in terra domini de Vilario, fuit quoddam castrum cuius dominus puerum parvulum habebat de uxore sua. Cum autem exivissent dominus et domina a domo et nutrix similiter, dimisso puero solo in cunabulis, serpens maximus intravit domum, tendens ad cunabula pueri; quod videns leporarius, qui ibi remanserat, eum velociter insequens et persequens sub cunabulo, evertit cunabula, morsibus serpentem invadens, defendentem se et canem similiter mordentem; quem ad ultimum canis occidit et a cunabulis pueri longe projecit, relinquens cunabula dicta cruentata, et terram et os suum et caput, serpentis sanguine, stans prope cunabula, male a serpente tractatus. Cum autem intrasset nutrix et hec videret, puerum credens occisum et devoratum a cane, clamavit cum maximo ejulatu; quod audiens, mater pueri similiter accurrit, idem vidit et credidit, et clamavit similiter. Similiter et miles, adveniens ibi, idem credidit, et, extrahens spatam, canem occidit. Tunc, accedentes ad puerum, invenerunt eum illesum, suaviter dormientem; inquirentes, inveniunt serpentem canis morsibus laceratum et occisum. Veritatem autem facti agnoscentes, et dolentes de hoc quod sic injuste canem occiderant sibi tam utilem, projecerunt eum in puteum qui erat ante portam castrum, et acervum maximum lapidum super eum projecerunt, et arbores juxta plantaverunt in memoriam facti. Castro autem divina voluntate destructo, et terra in desertum redacta est, ab habitatore relicta. Homines autem rusticani, audientes nobile factum canis, et quomodo innocenter mortuus est pro eo de quo debuit reportare bonum, locum visitaverunt, et canem tanquam martyrem honoraverunt et pro suis infirmitatibus et necessitatibus rogaverunt, seducti a diabolo et ludificati ibi pluries, ut per hoc homines in errorem adduceret. Maxime autem mulieres que pueros habebant infirmos et morbosos ad locum eos deportabant, et in quodam castro, per leucam ab eo loco propinquo, vetulam accipiebant, que ritum agendi et demonibus offerendi et invocandi eos doceret eas, et ad locum duceret. Ad quem cum venirent, sal et quedam alia offerebant, et panniculos pueri per dumos circumstantes pendebant, et acum in lignis, que super locum creverant, figebant, et puerum nudum per foramen quod erat inter duos truncos [MS: truccos] duorum lignorum [introducebant], matre existente ex una parte et puerum tenente et proiciente novies vetule que erat ex alia parte, cum invocatione demonum adjurantes faunos, qui erant in silva Rimite, ut [MS: ubi] puerum, quem eorum dicebant, acciperent morbidum et languidum, et suum, quem secum detulerant, reportarent eis pinguem et grossum, vivum et sanum. Et, hoc facto, accipiebant matricide puerum, et ad pedem arboris super stramina

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cunabuli nudum puerum ponebant, et duas candelas ad mensuram pollicis in utroque capite, ab igne quem ibi detulerant, succendebant et in trunco superposito infigebant, tamdiu inde recedentes quod essent consumpte et quod nec vagientem puerum possent audire nec videre; et sic candele candentes plurimos pueros concremabant et occidebant, sicut ibidem de aliquibus reperimus. Quedam etiam retulit mihi quod, dum faunos invocasset et recederet, vidit lupum de silva exeuntem et ad puerum euntem, ad quem, nisi affectu materno miserata prevenisset, lupus vel diabolus in forma ejus eum, ut dicebat, vorasset. Si autem, redeuntes ad puerum, eum invenissent viventem, deportabant ad fluvium cujusdam aque rapide propinque, dicte Chalarone, in quo puerum novies immergebant, qui valde dura viscera habebat si evadebat nec tunc vel cito post moreretur. Ad locum autem accessimus, et populum terre convocavimus, et contra dictum predicavimus. Canem mortuum fecimus exhumari et lucum succidi, et cum eo ossa dicti canis pariter concremari, et edictum poni a dominis terre de spoliacione et redempcione eorum qui ad dictum locum pro tali causa de cetero convenirent.

**Translation***On the worship of the dog Guinefort*

Sixthly, I should speak of offensive superstitions, some of which are offensive to God, others to our fellow men. Offensive to God are those which honour demons or other creatures as if they were divine: it is what idolatry does, and it is what the wretched women who cast lots do, who seek salvation by worshipping elder trees or making offerings to them; scorning churches and holy relics, they take their children to these elder trees, or to anthills, or to other things in order that a cure may be effected.

This recently happened in the diocese of Lyons where, when I preached against the reading of oracles, and was hearing confession, numerous women confessed that they had taken their children to Saint Guinefort. As I thought that this was some holy person, I continued with my enquiry and finally learned that this was actually a greyhound, which had been killed in the following manner.

In the diocese of Lyons, near the enclosed nuns' village called Neuville, on the estate of the Lord of Villars, was a castle, the lord of which and his wife had a baby boy. One day, when the lord and lady had gone out of the house, and the nurse had done likewise, leaving

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the baby alone in the cradle, a huge serpent entered the house and approached the baby's cradle. Seeing this, the greyhound, which had remained behind, chased the serpent and, attacking it beneath the cradle, upset the cradle and bit the serpent all over, which defended itself, biting the dog equally severely. Finally, the dog killed it and threw it well away from the cradle. The cradle, the floor, the dog's mouth and head were all drenched in the serpent's blood. Although badly hurt by the serpent, the dog remained on guard beside the cradle. When the nurse came back and saw all this she thought that the dog had devoured the child, and let out a scream of misery. Hearing it the child's mother also ran up, looked, thought the same thing and screamed too. Likewise the knight, when he arrived, thought the same thing and drew his sword and killed the dog. Then, when they went closer to the baby they found it safe and sound, sleeping peacefully. Casting around for some explanation, they discovered the serpent, torn to pieces by the dog's bites, and now dead. Realising then the true facts of the matter, and deeply regretting having unjustly killed so useful a dog they threw it into a well in front of the manor door, threw a great pile of stones on top of it, and planted trees beside it, in memory of the event. Now, by divine will, the manor was destroyed and the estate, reduced to a desert,\* was abandoned by its inhabitants. But the peasants, hearing of the dog's conduct and of how it had been killed, although innocent, and for a deed for which it might have expected praise, visited the place, honoured the dog as a martyr, prayed to it when they were sick or in need of something, and many there fell victim to the enticements and illusions of the devil, who in this way used to lead men into error. Above all, though, it was women with sick or weak children who took them to this place. They would go and seek out an old woman in a fortified town a league distant, and she taught them the rituals they should enact in order to make offerings to demons, and in order to invoke them, and she led them to the place. When they arrived, they would make offerings of salt and other things; they would hang their babies' swaddling-clothes on the bushes roundabout; they would drive nails into the trees which had grown in this place; they would pass the naked babies between the trunks of two trees – the mother, on one side, held the baby and threw it nine times to the old woman,

\*The *O.E.D.* gives 'an uninhabited and uncultivated tract of country; a wilderness: a. now conceived as a desolate, barren region, waterless and treeless, and with but scanty growth of herbage. . . b. formerly more widely applied to any wild, uninhabited region, including forest-land.' It is in the latter sense that the word is employed here.*Tr.*

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who was on the other side. Invoking the demons, they called upon the fauns in the forest of Rimate to take the sick, feeble child which, they said, was theirs, and to return their child that the fauns had taken away, fat and well, safe and sound.

Having done this, the infanticidal mothers took their children and laid them naked at the foot of the tree on straw from the cradle; then, using the light they had brought with them, they lit two candles, each an inch long, one on each side of the child's head and fixed them in the trunk above it. Then they withdrew until the candles had burnt out, so as not to see the child or hear him crying. Several people have told us that while the candles were burning like this they burnt and killed several babies. One woman also told me that she had just invoked the fauns and was withdrawing from the scene when she saw a wolf come out of the forest towards the baby. If maternal love had not made her feel pity and go back for him, the wolf, or as she put it, the devil in the shape of a wolf, would have devoured the baby.

When a mother returned to her child and found it still alive, she carried it out into the fast-flowing waters of a nearby river, called the Chalaronne [a tributary of the Saône], and plunged it in nine times; if it came through without dying on the spot, or shortly afterwards, it had a very strong constitution.

We went to this place, we called together all the people on the estate, and we preached against everything that had been said. We had the dead dog disinterred, and the sacred wood cut down and burnt, along with the remains of the dog. And I had an edict passed by the lords of the estate, warning that anyone going thenceforth to that place for any such reason would be liable to have his possessions seized and then sold.

Although this document has been available to scholars for a hundred years it has never previously been fully studied. Graus, the great historian of early medieval hagiography, mentions it in a footnote, but his book, outstanding though it is, is grounded in a set of concerns and a methodology which prevents him from making fuller use of it. Most of the references to this document are by folklorists; some, notably Baring-Gould in England and Saintyves in France, are interested exclusively in the narrative of the dog's death, which they compare to similar narratives in medieval literature or in more recent popular literature, and some literary historians, Gaston Paris in particular, have shared this approach. Other folklorists have concentrated their attention upon the child-healing rite, so as to demonstrate the antiquity of ritual practices still surviving in the countryside. Finally, local historians

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have seen the text as a picturesque illustration of the ‘primitivism’ which has long been attributed to the inhabitants of the Dombes. Very few have sought to give this document the thorough investigation that it deserves.<sup>4</sup>

One can perhaps account for this silence, and for the inadequate treatment that this document has received in the last hundred years, in terms of a fundamentally ideological reluctance to admit that such a cult could have existed. One could also invoke the general positivism of the period, and the lack of contact between disciplines. This new attempt at an interpretation has not come about by chance, however, but is the outcome of a collective enquiry into the literature of *exempla*, the narrative genre to which this document belongs.<sup>5</sup> This enquiry is itself part of a broad current of research into ‘popular literature’, ‘oral traditions’, ‘popular culture’, ‘popular religion’ and so on. I do not propose, however, to survey the various and often contradictory approaches that these expressions cover,<sup>6</sup> nor even to situate my own work in relation to them. My approach and methodology will become clear as I proceed with the analysis of the text. Meanwhile, I shall simply set out the main questions that the text raises, and try to explain how I think one might answer them.

There is one question that is in urgent need of an answer. It concerns the relationship between the two cultures, one of which is literate, Latinate, urban, clerical, responsible for Christian orthodoxy, drawing its strength from its powers of temporal and spiritual coercion, and which produced this text, the other of which is popular (in the limited, sociological sense of the word), oral, vernacular, peasant, secular, Christian also (although in a different sense), and which, in the text, is the object of both a description and a repression. I shall follow the conventional usage, and call the former ‘learned culture’ and the latter ‘folk culture’. (The advantage of this latter term is that it avoids the ambiguities attached to the term ‘popular’, although it admits those attached to the term ‘folk’, or to ‘folklore’.) However, regardless of the customary use of the term (‘folk’/‘folklore’), my choice of ‘folk culture’ clearly situates the present work within a scientific anthropological perspective.

My second question ought properly to come first, for it is one that is invariably raised when one conducts research based upon documents from the past. If one considers the beliefs and practices described in the text, which are clearly quite startling, to be too startling to ‘be true’, and if one supposes that Stephen of Bourbon, for instance, misunderstood what he was told and that peasants could never, even as long ago as that, have venerated the memory of a dog and ‘canonised’ it,<sup>7</sup> one may as well abandon one’s research there and then. If, on the other hand, one thinks that there may be a meaning to it all, and that the document ought to be taken seriously, then that clearly provides a tremendous opportunity for a new

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approach to medieval history. Unexpected forms of mass culture may then come to light, which have hitherto been obscured by traditional hagiography's mode of presentation of a church culture whose heir, after all, it is.

This is indeed what I would hope to achieve. But new concerns and new approaches require a new methodology. Traditional methods, as I have said, have been incapable of solving the problems presented by a document of this sort. Traditional medieval history is for the most part unaware of the oral tradition, literary history is too concerned with a narrative's formal and aesthetic characteristics, religious history is too inclined to view 'popular religion' as a dim, deviant and irrational reflection of the religion of the élites, while folklorists all too often lack a historical perspective.

But the encounter between history and anthropology would now seem to permit a new methodology and a new set of concerns. Both disciplines may benefit from this encounter. The ethnology of 'complex societies' and the anthropology of 'preliterate' societies offer the historian not merely information but new methods (structural analysis, in particular) and a clearer perception of the problems of structure, and of the possibilities of comparison. But historians need to assimilate these borrowings whilst retaining the familiar analytical techniques and requirements of the chronological dimension (history's defining feature, albeit one that the other humane sciences are now adopting), without which it is impossible to study social structures and their transformations.

These are the circumstances in which 'historical anthropology' or 'ethnohistory' are taking shape. This book will, I trust, assist the emergence of these new disciplines.



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## PART I

# The inquisitor

The above text is of great interest for the understanding of thirteenth century folk culture, and if I have presented it so unceremoniously at the start of the book it is so that it might have the same impact on the reader as it did on me when I first read it. Such documents are extremely rare for this period.

It would, however, be wrong to treat it as direct evidence of folk culture. It is primarily a document from the learned culture, written in Latin by a cleric, produced in circumstances in which folklore was being brutally repressed, and it was ultimately intended to be used, in the form of an *exemplum*, as an argument against 'superstitions'.

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## STEPHEN OF BOURBON

Very little is known about Stephen of Bourbon, author of the treatise from which the *exemplum* is taken, beyond the few pieces of information to be gathered from the work itself and the details given us by Bernard Gui, the Dominican inquisitor, at the beginning of the fourteenth century.<sup>1</sup> He was born at Belleville-sur-Saône in about 1180 (his name merely indicating geographical origin rather than membership of the family that has since become famous). He began his studies at the cathedral school of Saint Vincent at Mâcon, where he was a *puer*, a scholar. At the beginning of the thirteenth century, in around 1217, when he was about twenty-five years old, he was a student (*juvenis, studiens, scholaris*) in the Parisian schools from which the University of Paris was created in 1231.

He joined the Dominicans some time after their arrival in Paris in 1217, and the foundation of the House of Jacobins the following year, entering the order by 1223 at the latest, and completing his theological training there. Yet the only convent to which he would seem to have been attached is the one in Lyons, founded in 1218. He was there in 1223, having returned to the region where he was born, and he died there in 1262. But he did not properly retire from the world until the end of his life, when he wrote his book.

In the interim he travelled widely in what is now the Rhône–Alps region, going as far afield as Burgundy, Champagne, the Jura, the Alps, the region of Valence, the Auvergne, Forez, and even to Roussillon. In the course of these journeys, Stephen of Bourbon collected various eyewitness accounts and had encounters himself which provided him with material for many of his *exempla*.

When Stephen of Bourbon recounts one of these personal experiences he very often indicates that it happened to him in his capacity as a preacher: ‘Cum ego predicarem . . .’, ‘When I was preaching . . .’. It is immediately clear that he was not a regular preacher restricted to an often narrow preaching area (*praedicatio*) or to the collection points (*termini*) of a single convent. His activities appear more like those of a preacher-general. These first appeared in 1228, and were chosen for their competence in theology (they were required to have studied for at least three years, rather than for the ordinary friars’ one year) and for their skill as preachers. They were appointed by the provincial chapter, of which they then became full members.<sup>2</sup> Yet Stephen of Bourbon travelled and preached well beyond the boundaries of the Dominican province of France to which the House of