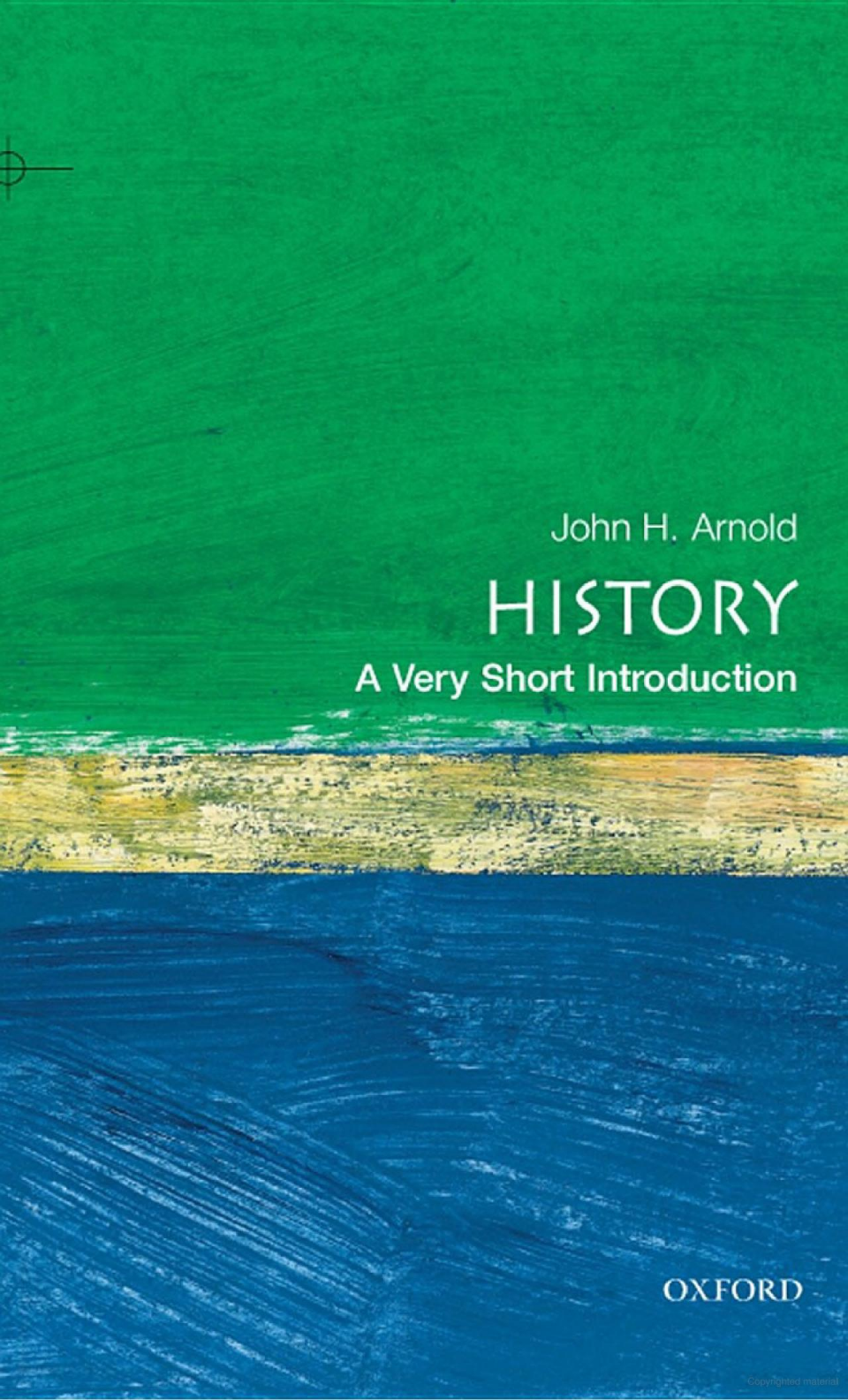

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HISTORY

A Very Short Introduction

John H. Arnold

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Chapter 1
Questions about murder and history

Here is a true story. In 1301 Guilhem de Rodes hurried down from his Pyrenean village of Tarascon to the town of Pamiers, in the south of France. He was on his way to visit his brother Raimond, who was a monk in the Dominican monastery there. The journey was a good thirty kilometres along the gorge of the river Ariège, and it would take Guilhem at least a day to reach his destination, travelling as he was on foot. But the reason for his trip was urgent: his brother had sent him a letter warning that both of them were in great danger. He had to come at once.

When he reached the monastery at Pamiers, his brother had frightening news. Raimond told him that a certain *beguin* (a kind of quasi-monk, who did not belong to any official religious order) had recently visited the monastery. He was called Guilhem Déjean, and he posed a real threat to the brothers. Déjean had apparently offered to help the Dominicans catch two heretics-Pierre and Guilhem Autier - who were based in the Pyrenean village of Montaillou. He knew about the heretics because a man, who had given him shelter for the night, up in the mountain villages, had innocently offered to introduce Déjean to them, thinking he might join their faith. Déjean had met the Autiers, and gained their trust; now he could betray them.

But what really terrified Raimond was that Déjean had also claimed that the heretics had a spy within the monastery. This spy, the *beguin* said, was linked to the heretics through his brother, a member of the laity, and a friend of the Autiers. The brother was Guilhem de Rodes; the alleged spy was Raimond de Rodes. 'Is this true?' demanded the frightened

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Raimond. 'Have you had contact with the heretics?'. 'No', replied Guilhem de Rodes. 'The *beguin* is a liar'.

This was itself a lie. Guilhem de Rodes had first met the heretics in the spring of 1298. He had listened to their preaching, had given them food and shelter, and was in fact related to them: they were his uncles. The Autiers had recently returned from Lombardy, having previously been notaries working for the small villages and towns around the Ariège river. In Lombardy they had converted to the Cathar faith, which had been dominant in southern France during the thirteenth century, but had died out in more recent years under the attentions of the inquisitors. Pierre and Guilhem Autier were to start a revival.

Catharism was a Christian heresy. Those who held the Cathar faith called themselves 'Good Christians' and believed that they were the true inheritors of the mission of the apostles. They also believed that there were two Gods: a Good God, who created the spirit, and a Bad God who created all corporeal matter. This 'dualist' belief was antithetical to Roman Catholic orthodoxy; and in any case, the Cathars believed that the Roman Catholic Church was corrupt - 'the Whore of Babylon' they called it. In the early thirteenth century there were several thousand Cathars, and many more believers, in the south of France. By the early fourteenth century, however, only fourteen Cathars survived, largely hidden in the Pyrenean villages. Nonetheless, such beliefs were not tolerated by the orthodox powers. Hence the eagerness of the Dominicans at Pamiers to take the opportunity to capture the Autiers. Hence too the danger that Guilhem Déjean posed to the de Rodes brothers.

Guilhem de Rodes left his brother and returned home to the Pyrenees. He travelled to the village of Ax (another thirty kilometres from Tarascon) to warn Raimond Autier (brother of the heretics) about Déjean. Once back in his home village, he also warned a man called Guilhem de Area, who lived in

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the neighbouring settlement of Quié. We do not know if he intended thus to set in motion the events that subsequently transpired.

Guilhem de Area was a great supporter of the Cathars. He immediately sought out the *beguin* Déjean, and asked him if he was looking for the Autiers. 'Yes', replied Déjean; so Guilhem de Area offered to lead him to them. Pleased, and unsuspecting, the *beguin* agreed. They travelled together to the village of Larnat, deeper into the mountains.

Guilhem de Rodes heard that later the same night, as the *beguin* reached the bridge outside Larnat, two men appeared: Philippe de Larnat and Pierre de Area (Guilhem de Area's brother). And this is what happened:

> Immediately they grabbed him [Déjean] and struck him so that he had not the strength to cry out. They took him to the mountains around Larnat, and there they asked him if it was true that he wanted to capture the heretics. He admitted that it was; and instantly Philippe and Pierre threw him off **a great cliff, into a crevasse.**

The murder remained a secret for many years. Guilhem de Rodes, Raimond de Rodes, and the Autiers were safe for the time being.

What are we to make of this long-forgotten murder? It was recorded in the registers of inquisition in the year 1308, when Guilhem de Rodes confessed what he knew about heresy and heretics. It was retold by three other witnesses. For his contact with the Cathars, Guilhem was sentenced to prison, along with sixty other people. It survives for us as a small, dark, fascinating vignette from the fourteenth century. This then is 'history': a true story of something that happened long ago, retold in the present. The past is brought to life once more, and the unequal contact between then and now has been re-

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established. Is the historian thus acquitted of his or her task, and this short introduction to History now concluded?

1. Towns and villages in Languedoc (southwestern France) in the middle ages. Guilhem Déjean's corpse presumably lies south of Larnat.

1. Towns and villages in Languedoc (southwestern France) in the middle ages. Guilhem Déjean's corpse presumably lies south of Larnat.

Let us not end our journey quite so soon. There are lingering questions about the murder of Guilhem Déjean, and questions waiting to be asked about history in general. The process of writing history ('historiography') is full of questions, as this book will show. We can use this first chapter to begin to examine these questions, some of which may have already sprung to mind. In many ways, history both begins and ends with questions; which is to say that it never really ends, but is a *process*.

Language can be confusing. 'History' often refers to both the past itself, and to what historians write about the past. 'Historiography' can mean either the process of writing history, or the study of that process. In this book, I use 'historiography' to mean the process of

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writing history; and 'history' to mean the end product of that process. As we will see, this book argues that there is an essential difference between 'history' (as I am using it) and 'the past'.

How, then, did the above story arrive upon these pages? There are several different answers here. We can begin with the simplest. Guilhem de Rodes appeared before an inquisitor called Geoffroi d'Ablis on four occasions in 1308. D'Ablis had come to investigate heresy in the Pyrenees on the authority of the Pope. He was allowed to command anyone and everyone to appear before him to answer questions relating to the orthodox faith, and to demand that they confess not only their own actions but also those of others, both living and dead. Having heard their confessions, the inquisitor could impose a penance or punishment, which ranged from wearing yellow crosses to indicate that a witness had been guilty of heretical activities, to being burned alive at the stake.

The investigation that caught up Guilhem de Rodes was initially prompted by Géraud de Rodes, another brother of Guilhem's, who came spontaneously to the inquisitor and named many people for their involvement in Catharism. His confession, Guilhem's confession, and those of at least fifteen others, were recorded in the inquisitorial registers. The witnesses responded to set questions asked by d'Ablis, and supplied some material of their own; their answers were recorded by the inquisitor's scribes, and stored for safe keeping and further use. Some of these registers have survived, so their fourteenth-century speech is still with us. This particular register has been edited and printed by a modern historian. I have used some of the material to bring you the story of Guilhem Déjean.

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The questions, however, do not end there. In a later chapter I shall say more about evidence, its uses, and its problems. For now, look back at the story. I hope that it engaged your attention; I chose it because it certainly engaged mine. It grabs us, perhaps, because it is a murder, and we are familiar with the guilty pleasure of sharing horror stories. It is also clearly a 'story' in that it has a beginning, middle, and end, which might make it more 'satisfying'. It may interest and surprise us, if we were not previously aware that medieval people got up to such activities. The people in the story were not kings or princes or saints or famous writers, they were everyday people. We may therefore simply be diverted to discover that we know anything about them at all!

Perhaps the story also interests us because of what is strange about it. It has been suggested (by the writer L. P. Hartley) that 'the past is a foreign country; they do things differently there'. Douglas Adams, the science-fiction author, posits an opposite case: the past is truly a foreign country, they do things just *like* us. Somewhere between these two propositions is the elusive element that attracts us to the past, and prompts us to study history. The story told above speaks to both statements. We understand and relate to sending letters, visiting relatives, journeys from our hometown. We know about fear of persecution and we know about murder, even if we have not experienced them at first hand. If I had translated the participants' names into your vernacular language ('Guilhem' would become 'William' in English) then they might seem even closer to us. The names I have used are from Occitan, the language of that time and period. Here in fact I have cheated slightly; the records are in Latin, so perhaps I should have employed that tongue, which uses the version *Guillelmus*.

But the names are strange to us in a different way. It seems odd to find so many people all called Guilhem; and we do not often use our place of birth to render our surnames ('de Rodes'

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meaning 'of the place called Rodes'). We know about religion, but we are probably unfamiliar with the concept of heresy, the workings of inquisition, and the belief in two Gods. Do we see this as a bizarre 'superstition'? Or as no stranger an idea than the Son of God descending to Earth, dying on the cross and then being resurrected? 'Heresy' can only exist where there is an 'orthodoxy' to define it: both medieval Catholics and medieval Cathars laid claim to being 'true' Christians. Whatever our current philosophies and religious beliefs, can we lay claim to a real connection with either group?

If we read more of the records, other elements of difference would strike us too. Although Guilhem de Rodes and his brother were clearly able to read and write (they communicated by letter) they are quite unusual in this: most people at that time would not have had as much access to literacy. Indeed, the concept of 'literacy' was rather different in the fourteenth century: if you were described as *litteratus* ('literate') this meant that you could read and write *Latin* and knew how to interpret scripture. Facility in vernacular languages did not count as 'literacy', no matter how useful that ability was. Reading and writing Occitan (or German, French, English, and so on) would still label you *illiteratus* ('illiterate'). These elements of familiarity and strangeness may prompt further questions.

Guilhem Déjean's murder was not the only event recorded in the inquisition registers. It was obviously not the only event to take place during 1301 in the Pyrenees, in southern France, in Europe, or the world in general. Historians cannot tell *every* story from the past, only some of them. There are gaps in the material that exists (some of the pages of d'Ablis's register are missing) and there are areas for which no evidence survives. But even with the evidence we do have, there are many more things that *could* be said than we have space to discuss. Historians inevitably decide which things can or should be said. So 'history' (the true stories historians tell about the past)

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is made up only of those things which have caught our attention, that we have decided to repeat for modern ears. As we will see in a later chapter, the grounds on which historians have selected their true stories have changed over the years.

Having picked Déjean's murder as a story we wish to repeat, we also need to decide how it will play a part in a larger picture. It would be unusual for a modern historian simply to present a vignette such as the one above, and to say nothing more. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries some historians did work in this way, collecting and translating interesting pieces of evidence they thought might appeal to a wider readership. Such books are useful treasure troves, and have led to detailed work by other historians. They can be a pleasure to read, infecting readers with their enthusiasm for the past. But for most modern historians, this is not enough. We need to *interpret* the past, not simply present it. Finding a larger context for the story is an attempt to say not just 'what happened' but what it meant.

Into what larger pictures can we fit the story of Déjean's murder? There are several possibilities. Most obviously, the account fits into a wider history of inquisition and heresy. It tells us about people involved with the Cathar faith, their actions and beliefs. It tells us of the history of Catharism itself: reading the d'Ablis register, we discover something about how many people were converted by the Autier heretics. We could note that people in the evidence do not talk of 'The Inquisition' but only of 'inquisitors'. This is because 'The Inquisition' did not exist as a formal institution in this period; there were only individual inquisitors (such as Geoffroi d'Ablis) who had particular jobs to do (in his case, to investigate heresy in the Pyrenean villages). 'Inquisition' meant the legal process that d'Ablis and others carried out. It had been established as a method of combating heresy in the early years of the thirteenth century. His register also shows us how the process of inquisition - how it set about

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investigating and recording heresy - had changed since that time. If we compared Guilhem de Rodes's confession to one made in the 1240s, we would find that Guilhem was encouraged to talk at much greater length and in much more detail than witnesses from the earlier years of inquisition. This was because the threat posed by heresy had changed, and the remit of the inquisitors was changing with it.

2. St Dominic combats Cathar heretics (depicted on the right). Books were thrown onto the fire: the heretical works burned, but the orthodox texts rose miraculously into the air. In reality, Dominic was not an inquisitor (although later members of his order were); but burning by fire remained the final punishment for unrepentant heretics. (Pedro Berruguete, late fifteenth century)

Alternatively, we could fit Déjean's murder into a history of crime. There are other accounts of murders in the Middle Ages, some of them quite famous. We could contrast this story with the murder of Thomas Becket in 1170, or the execution of William Wallace in 1304, or the alleged crimes

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of Richard III of England. Or we could concentrate upon crimes within the lower orders of society, using other kinds of court records to find them, and talk about the preponderance of violence in the Middle Ages, the methods used, the investigations and punishments, and the motives of the criminals. Yet again, the story could play a part in the history of Languedoc. 'Languedoc' means 'the tongue (or language) of Oc', and was the name given to this area of southern France, because its inhabitants used the word 'oc' to mean 'yes', rather than 'oui' which was used in the north. Because of the presence of heresy in Languedoc, the Pope had ordered a crusade against the land in the early thirteenth century. Previously, Languedoc had been almost a separate country, feeling more kinship with Catalonia than with the area around Paris.

This crusade against heresy resulted in the north of France taking political control of the south. It was a long while before Languedoc settled down under its new political masters, and in some ways the south of France still sees itself as very different from the Parisian north. The defence of Catharism (including, perhaps, Déjean's murder) was bound up in the history of French politics.

Finally, we could ignore the narrative of the story, and concentrate on its small details. I mentioned the matter of literacy above; this is a useful nugget for a historian interested in levels of learning amongst the laity. Déjean was attacked on a bridge outside Larnat; reading further records from the register we discover that there was a bridge outside Tarascon too, and other villages also. This tells us something about the geography of the land. Guilhem de Rodes mentions elsewhere in his confession that he once hid the heretics in 'a place under the floor used as a grain store'. Another time the heretics stayed in a hut that Guilhem owned in a field near Tarascon. In this way we can find out things about agriculture and architecture. Elsewhere Guilhem says that he travelled to the

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village of Ax on business; and that once he was away doing military training with the Count of Foix. We know, then, more about Guilhem's activities, and hence by extension, other people of his social class. Guilhem was often asked to give a date to the events he confessed. He usually referred to a saint's day, saying for example 'it was fifteen days after the feast of St John the Baptist' (some time in June). This gives us a picture of how Guilhem perceived the passage of time, and the importance of saints even to someone with heretical sympathies. If we mined the other inquisition records for further nuggets, we might amass a useful hoard of such information. There is a whole world surrounding Guilhem's confession; a world which he took largely for granted, which is revealed to us in tantalizing shards and fragments.

These are some of the pictures that occur to me as the possible contexts for the story of Déjean's murder. Other readers will think of other things. As we will see further on, historians in other times would have interpreted this story differently. Some would not have thought it important or intriguing at all. These choices are not just to do with chance or cleverness, but with what *interests* us. As historians, we are caught up in our own bundles of interests, morals, ethics, philosophies, ideas on how the world works, and why people do the things they do. The evidence of the records presents us with pictures and puzzles; challenges, in fact. Guilhem de Rodes does not explain every detail of his story. For example, the evidence does not tell us why no-one at the monastery questioned his brother; nor what Guilhem Déjean's motives were exactly (was he devoutly orthodox or hoping to gain the Dominicans' approval?); nor precisely what prompted Guilhem de Area and his accomplices to pitch Déjean into his dark and rocky grave (were they protecting the Autiers, or protecting themselves?) I have ideas about these things, but they are *my* ideas. Later in this book we shall talk more about how historians fill in these blanks, and the art of good guessing.

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