

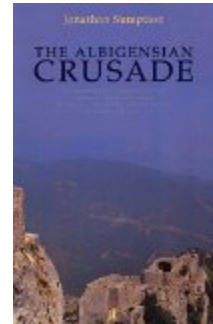
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Jonathan Sumption. *The Albigensian Crusade*. London and New York: Faber and Faber, 2000. xv + 269 pp. \$15.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-571-20002-3.

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Published on H-Catholic (February, 2001)



Heresy, Conquest and the Unification of France: The Albigensian Crusade

Heresy, Conquest and the Unification of France: The Albigensian Crusade

Faber and Faber has reprinted *The Albigensian Crusade*, a military and diplomatic narrative account of the infamous thirteenth-century crusade against the Cathars in the south of France that first appeared in England in 1978. The author, Jonathan Sumption, was a history fellow at Oxford University's Magdalene College until 1975. He is currently a QC practicing at the English commercial bar.

The Albigensian Crusade will be easily read by the general audience it targets. The text is highly readable and Sumption does a wonderful job retelling this complicated story, successfully recreating through detailed description the events as they unfolded. The author's chronological approach enables the reader to more easily comprehend the complex tale, which he tells in sixteen short chapters. The first four reconstruct the background: "Languedoc" outlines the social, political and economic states of the region on the eve of the crusade; "The Dualist Tradition" discusses the rise of dualist religion in twelfth-century Europe; "The Cathar Church" explores the membership, beliefs and practices of the Cathar churches; and "1194-1208: Raymond VI" focuses on the count of Toulouse in whose dominion many of the Cathars lived and whose own orthodoxy was often in question.

Chapters five to fourteen recount the events of the crusade, from its launch in 1208 to its end with the Treaty of Paris in 1229. The penultimate chapter covers Pope

Gregory IX's establishment of an inquisition in southern France to root out residual heresy and underground Cathar colonies. It is followed by an epilogue that briefly discusses the lasting consequences of the crusade and its effects on the relationship between France and Languedoc. Like Joseph Strayer, whose well-known book on the Albigensian Crusade appeared in 1971 (and has since been updated in a second edition with a new epilogue by Carol Lansing), Sumption notes that the crusade was a landmark in the unification of France. Their emphases, however, are slightly different. Strayer focuses on how the Albigensian Crusade was a major step in the political unification of France whereas Sumption highlights the process of cultural unification as the *langue d'oil* gradually replaced the *langue d'oc* and the French monarchy used the Gothic style to etch its cultural and political influence into the south.

Though Sumption's narrative tale is stimulating, the book is not without flaws. There is a frustrating lack of footnotes; there are a total of thirty for 269 pages. Perhaps this lack of documentation can be excused if we keep in mind that the book is intended for a general audience. Yet the select bibliography appears to address the needs of a scholarly audience, pointing the reader to Latin and French sources. The scant footnotes coupled with a bibliography containing foreign language sources create a strange tension.

Yet perhaps the greatest shortcoming of this reprint edition is that no attempt has been made to incorporate the important scholarship of the past twenty-two years.

Sumption's effort to reconstruct the social, religious and economic backdrop of the crusade in the book's first four chapters needs to be revised. The work done by Brian Stock on the implications of literacy for medieval heresy could be considered as could Lester Little's discussion of the relationship between economics and heresy in *Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe*. Another important book that could enrich Sumption's study is R.I. Moore's, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society*, which explores the relationship between heresy and the centralization of political power. Malcolm Lambert's recent scholarship could also be addressed. None of these is mentioned and the bibliography is stalled, remaining where it was in 1978. With that said, as a historical narrative, Sumption's tale of the crusade remains an entertaining read.

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Citation: Dawn M. Hayes. Review of Sumption, Jonathan, *The Albigensian Crusade*. H-Catholic, H-Net Reviews. February, 2001.

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