



The Yellow Cross: The Story of the Last Cathars' Rebellion Against the Inquisition, 1290-1329

René Weis

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The Yellow Cross is a harrowing tale of a desperate people in a small corner of France who defied the kings of Europe and the Pope. The Cathars, whose religion was based on the Gospels but contradicted the tenets set forth by Rome, found themselves the focus of ruthless repression. In systematic waves of brutal persecution, thousands of Cathars were captured, summarily tried, and burned at the stake as heretics. Yet so ardent was their faith that during the years 1290 to 1329, the Cathars rose up one last time.

René Weis tells the dramatic and moving story of these thirty years, offering a rich medieval tale of faith, adventure, sex, and courage. Having spent years exploring a rich trove of untouched information, including trial records and interrogation transcripts, Weis creates a remarkably detailed portrait of the last great gasp of the movement and the day-to-day life of the individual Cathars in their villages. This is an exceptionally vivid re-creation of a fascinating, and otherwise lost, world.

The Yellow Cross: The Story of the Last Cathars' Rebellion Against the Inquisition, 1290-1329 Details

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Jay says

This book is a marvel of scholarship and research about the last days of Catharism in the Languedoc area of southern France in the early 14th Century. The sheer volume of detail about personalities, events, and relationships that the author was able to glean from, mainly, records of peoples' testimonies before the Inquisition would be amazing if it dealt with events from 50 years ago; that these events took place almost 700 years ago makes it all the more astonishing.

Unfortunately the book is almost impossible to read. In large part this is because of the very large cast of characters, and the fact that they have very similar names. Most of them have one of only about half a dozen surnames--Clergue, Authie, Maury, Maurs, Rives, or Baille--and a seemingly even smaller set of Christian names, especially for the men. The number of Pierres, Arnauds, and Guillaumes is impenetrable. The author also chose to make many references to events or people who were to come later in the narrative, but who had not yet been introduced. This jumpy timeline might be all right for someone who was already pretty familiar with the general flow of events in the 30 or so years that the narrative covers; but for a novice it makes it impossible to get a feel for the overall timeline.

What you get from reading this book is a wonderful detailed impression of life in small mountain towns and villages in mountainous southwest France in 1290-1320, with its daily chores, family feuds and alliances, employment opportunities, and the vague terror of being persecuted for your beliefs by a powerful church whose authority in your remote area was tenuous. This extended to having to be careful about who you assumed to be of your heresy, to the point of having to work out a whole jargon to allow you test someone's beliefs without betraying your own. You also learn a number of Cathar ceremonies and beliefs, and how some of those beliefs (such as the tenet that all sex was sin, and sex within marriage the most sinful of all) influenced the behavior and culture of the heavily Cathar regions.

What you don't get from this book is a feel for the general rise and spread of Catharism, and how it came to be concentrated in the Languedoc and adjacent regions of Catalonia and Northern Italy. To be fair, the book never promises this, as it correctly claims to be focused on the suppression of the last outburst of Cathar heresy between about 1290 and 1325; but finishing "The Yellow Cross" made me want to find a more general history of Catharism with a little less detail and a little smoother narrative style.

One final note: this book is replete with maps, which I found enchanting and laudable. Almost every location mentioned in the text is on at least one map, and maps overlap nicely for a comprehensive geographical picture of the area and the journeys of the principal subjects. The historical (and in some cases, somewhat conjectural) maps of the villages, with long-gone houses of individual families shown, are not only beautiful works of diagramming but of historical research, and I loved them.

Dottie says

Somehow something I saw or read on one of our outings while in Belgium set me off looking at things

religious tied to the diasporas and Jewish and Muslim and Catholic interactions and this book fell into my hands thereafter. Fascinating reading to my thinking. Maybe not everyone's idea of that however.

I'm thinking the lovely church across the plaza from the Royal palace in Madrid may have been what set me off on this binge but I can't verify dates at the moment having packed most of my Belgian items up temporarily.

Gregory Lamb says

This is a fascinating history of a little known movement at a precarious time. The most interesting aspect of the story of the Cathars is that the idea is still alive and the unique language is being preserved. Don't pick up this book if you want an easy relaxing read though. It is more like a graduate level textbook than a story.

Sue says

I really wanted to like this book because my husband was so enthusiastic about it, but I found the multitude of characters with similar names confusing. Yes, I do realise it's history, rather than a novel and that the names are as they are, but a family tree or two at least might have been useful in pinning down who was who. The basic subject matter of cathar "heretics" trying to evade the persecution of the inquisition ought to be fascinating, but I have to admit to finding this a tedious read.

Lelietje says

A thoroughly investigated and fluently written story about the last stronghold of the Cathars in the south-east of France. The author followed in their footsteps and made the main characters come alive, which is a big accomplishment considering there are 6 centuries between us and them.

The only problem I had in reading this book is keeping track of all the people mentioned, despite the very clear maps. I applaud the maps, they were very good and helpful in visualising the events and surroundings.

Ericthehamster says

"Came across the Cathars from reading Stuart Gordon's fantasy ""the Watcher's"" trilogy. This is a history of the end of the time of the Cathars and after their earlier persecutions. This marks the end of the Albigensian crusade, and I highly recommend it for those interested in this period of history."

Karen says

A really interesting and informative read about the last of the Cathars. The people who feature in this story are very diverse and most are not that devout, either as Cathars or Catholics - lots of people using religion to

control people and further their own interests.

Mary Ann says

This book was an excellent read. It was very detailed but it reads as easily as a novel. Apart from the historical interest, Weis's description of the individuals make them come to life. His description of the landscape and towns make it easy to visualise these individuals going about their daily lives in their native settings.

I did not read this book in one stretch; in fact, I read it over several months. While I sometimes had to skim a previous chapter as I'd forgotten some of the events that had already been described there was overall no problem with picking up the book after not having read it for a few weeks.

What made me buy this book (a great second-hand find!) was my interest in medieval and religious history. This book would probably appeal to people who may not usually read factual historical books, but if you have an interest in medieval historical fiction I'd recommend giving this book a try. Definitely one that went back into the bookcase as I am sure to read it again in several years' time.

J.A. Gilbert says

A very interesting book on a period of history that is often overlooked. I was amazed at the amount of detail that had been recorded in the archives.

Ruth says

c2000. For a non-fiction book, this was "utterly absorbing" as per the quote from the Daily Telegraph. Five words from the blurb: heretical; bloodshed; gripping; Vatican; exterminating. I did like the way that the author interspersed the factual recounts of the story of the last Cathars with his own personal observations and travels. I found it incredibly difficult to sort through the persona dramatis as there were so many similar names and surnames to battle through. However, that is the same for much of history - I know one person who is always totally confused with the two Cromwells (Oliver vs Thomas) that pitch up at various stages of English history! So, the combination of commonality and unusual and archaic names did make it a trifle hard going and that is, by no means, the fault of the author. There is so much interesting information about the Cathars and religion in this age that it is worthwhile wading through the names. The map of the towns were useful and, in my opinion, a family tree or linked connection map of the various families may have made it all a bit easier. The writing is straightforward but there are some wonderful "quips" as well. I enjoyed the recounting of the various things that happened to the main Catholic - Fournier. Extremely ironic as was the cause of his death - gangrene - not a pleasant ending at all especially in those days. "In the ensuing years they zealously littered the country with yellow crosses, the symbol of shame which those regarded as heretics were forced to wear on their tunics and coats.....Moreover they were instructed not to 'move about either inside or outside' their houses without openly displaying the crosses". Remind you of anything?? Recommended!

Dianna says

The Cathars religion was based on the Gospels but somewhat contrary to religious Catholicism and therefore they were labeled 'heretics'. They were persecuted by the Roman Catholic church and most including children and women were burned at the stake. The majority lived in the Pyrenees mountains of Southern France and upper Spain.

This book was readable, historical, accurate but somewhat hard to keep track of all the people. So many with the same names made it difficult - you almost needed to sit with a notebook and write down the names and make a geneology of same and their villages.

One interesting belief (not surprisingly they believed all sex 'intercourse' was sinful) but the most surprising was that they also believed married sex was sinful in fact, was even more sinful than sex outside of marriage - since married people usually never thought about them being sinful when having sex. So therefore, they encouraged men to have sex with their brides sisters thereas to be 'less sinful'. Very odd, and I personally believe used somewhat as a convenience to just have sex. Odd thinking at any rate.

Kimo says

The story behind the reasoning for the Albigensian Crusade, and a step by step detailed analysis based purely on source material. If you love to read about the history of the Church, then this is a must.

Carolyn says

Fascinating narrative derived from 700 year old depositions taken by the Inquisition in their relentless pursuit of heretics. Although the detail is at times overwhelming, the author succeeded in vividly depicting the lives of ordinary people of Languedoc during the middle ages, most of whom died for their rebellion against the Catholic church.

Grace says

This book was infuriating to begin with. Far too much time spent on the geography of the area - at one point he spent nearly half a page describing how he worked out exactly where a rock referred to in one of the depositions actually was. I didn't care and I still don't! There was also the problem of everyone having one of about five names and either being related or having an affair. It could have done with some family trees to refer to. The first 250 pages were slow but then amazingly I got very caught up in it and started to remember who people were. The section actually dealing with the process of the inquisition was fascinating. I find books which draw heavily on diaries/transcripts of people hundreds of years ago really interesting (like the book about Morbath I read a few months ago) and this book includes a range of early fourteenth century voices based on transcripts of their various interrogations by the inquisition around 1307-08 and 1321-22. Definitely worth sticking with.

Siria says

Pretty decent introduction to the Cathars, a fascinating heretical Christian sect which flourished in what is now southern France and Catalonia during the Middle Ages. Weis focuses on the movement in its death throws, as it faded away thanks to protracted persecution on the part of the Catholic church. It's a coherent account of the events which Ladurie would examine in microcosm in his *Montaillou*; a good place to begin if you don't want to start that more famous work blind.

(Cate, I actually think you'd like this book, or another introduction to the Cathars: there's lots of really interesting women/gender work that's been done on them)
