

BACK TO THE ORIGINALS

Marie Dejoux – In 1855, Edgard Boutaric, archivist in the history section of the Archives Impériales, made a discovery. In the *Supplément du Trésor des Chartes*, he discovered an unprecedented collection of documents: some thousands of grievances gathered during the inquests commanded by Louis IX in order to right the wrongly acquired gains of his administration. For the generation of historiens méthodiques, who aspired to turn history into a science, the inquests became the absolute proof, supported by the archive, of the love of the saintly king for justice. In this way these documents emerged abruptly from darkness into light and from obscurity to national fame and part of the heritage. Two registers were immediately extracted from the huge store and exposed in the new museum of l’Histoire de France, so that every citizen might admire what were presented at the time as notepads for grievances of the French revolution. A national monument was born. Already in the XIIIth century, these inquests acted as hagiographies to prove the holiness of Louis IX with a view to his canonization but for a good few historians, they were the proof of a different miracle: the increasing centralization of a state eager to stay informed, to monitor its executive and to construct an accurate record of state activities.

The history revealed by the manuscripts is nevertheless quite different and was totally missed by the mediaevalists who, for a whole century, contented themselves with the published version of the inquests. As for me, I chose instead to go back to the sources and get the originals out of their box. The first that I saw of them left me in a state of surprise, consternation even. Instead of monuments, spread out before me were a diverse mass of documents that were truncated, crossed out and laid out on various substrates: some were registers, a few rolls, several unconnected notebooks and masses of cédules – little pieces of parchment and paper describing the grievance of a single individual. Far from being a handicap to analysis, these material differences make it possible to retrace the different phases of assembling the testimony of the applicants and the work of the investigators. In Languedoc, all began by copying the cédules, which were then usually gathered together in aggregated form, on rolls as at Alès, or in registers as at Béziers, Nîmes and Beaucaire. More manageable than hundreds of cédules, these registers became for the judges the basis of their legal work. However might be convenient during their proceedings and often in a random manner, they recorded in the margins witness statements that supported the grievances, sometimes mere sentences. But these marginalia are equally laden with another lesson: they are all evidence of the procedure of an inquest under way, signifying that the lifetime of these documents

was limited to the inquest itself and that after this, they were abandoned. They were therefore not reused to organize new investigations, nor were they even edited as one can see. Going back to the originals thus makes it possible to demonstrate that the conserved documents were working documents, made for and by the investigators, and not memoranda destined for the king of France as has longtime been thought. They were established to aid the work of the judge at the time of the inquest and not to record the proceedings or to inform the sovereign of the state of his kingdom and his administration. The use of techniques as erudite as codicology, that is to say the material analysis of documentary artefacts, made it possible to contradict the centralizing vision that had prevailed until now: Louis IX wanted neither to keep records on his officers nor to be made aware of the complaints of his subjects. The efficacy of the restitution investigation lay on the contrary on the acts of the inquest in situ and on the sentences that they publicly returned. In summary, the king did not wish to understand, but to make himself understood and gain recognition from his subjects by organizing these investigations.

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