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Modelos de implantación, filiación, promoción y devoción
en la Península Ibérica, Cerdeña, Nápoles y Sicilia

edición de

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Overlapping Networks. Beguins, Franciscans, and Poor Clares at the Crossroads of a Shared Spirituality

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During the last quarter of the thirteenth century, the Order of Saint Francis underwent a crucial period in the definition of its own identity, while, at the same time, lay communities of men and women were already sensitised both to the idea of spiritual poverty and to the Joachite prophecies announcing the advent of a new era of illumination. In the case of southern France, the influence of Spiritual Franciscans at the beginning of the fourteenth century was undeniable, so much so that their extreme pauperistic discourse and their apocalyptic expectations pervaded lay society, resulting in the Beguin movement of Languedoc that would ultimately be persecuted as heretic. It is a fact that the region was also crowded with Clarissan convents, but, apparently, Spiritual Franciscans and Poor Clares remained within independent spiritual spheres. The goal of this paper is to outline the diaspora of the Beguins of Languedoc and the persecuted Spiritual Franciscans in order to search for the confluence between them and the female rigorist branch that shared their same spiritual roots, that is, the Order of Saint Clare.

Middle Ages; 13th - 14th centuries; Languedoc; Beguins; spiritual Franciscans; Poor Clares; networks; apocalyptic views; poverty.

Rixendis of Narbonne was a laywoman who defined herself as a visionary and established around her a close spiritual circle, mainly formed by women. Her case was brought to the attention of the archiepiscopal authorities of Narbonne in 1288, and around thirty people were summoned as witnesses. Among the accusations against her was the fact that Rixendis claimed to have a letter of divine origin allegedly written by none other than Saint John; a letter that was copied several times and distributed around. The records of the case bring together a surprising group of actors: Beguines, Franciscans, and Poor Clares¹.

¹ The proceedings of the case have been edited in Théry, *'Inquisitio' contre Rixende*.

The surprise comes neither from the fact that at this moment in time, in Narbonne, there were women who called themselves Beguines and were recognised as such, nor from the appearance of Franciscans in unorthodox spiritual circumstances, but from the alleged involvement of the Sisters Minor². Despite the different circumstances that gave birth to the dissemination of Clarissan convents across thirteenth-century Europe, a common feature among them was their compliance with orthodox views. To all purposes, the nuns seem to have remained oblivious to the woes of the rigorist branch of the Franciscan Order at the end of the thirteenth century and the beginning of the fourteenth. The fact, however, is that such a connection has barely been explored.

There is substantial evidence about the relationship between the so-called Spiritual Franciscans and their Conventual brethren in the region of Languedoc, where the most extremist Franciscan groups were especially active³. During the last quarter of the thirteenth century, the Order of Saint Francis underwent a crucial period in the definition of its own identity, while, at the same time, lay communities of men and women were already sensitised both to the idea of spiritual poverty and to the Joachite prophecies announcing the advent of a new era of illumination⁴. In the case of southern France, the influence of Spiritual Franciscans at the beginning of the fourteenth century was undeniable, so much so that their extreme pauperistic discourse and their apocalyptic expectations pervaded lay society, resulting in the Beguin movement of Languedoc that would ultimately be persecuted as heretic⁵. It is a fact that the region was also crowded with Clarissan convents, but, apparently, Spiritual Franciscans and Poor Clares remained within independent spiritual spheres; or did they? The goal of this paper is to outline the diaspora of the Beguins of Languedoc and the persecuted Spiritual Franciscans in order to search for the confluence between them and the female rigorist branch that shared their same spiritual roots, that is, the Order of Saint Clare.

The inquisitorial records concerning the persecution of the Beguins of Languedoc –which took place between 1318 and 1334 approximately – show that their only options for survival were clandestinity and escape routes, and

² For a discussion on the evolution of the *sorores minores* (Sisters Minor) and their common misidentification with the more officially established Poor Clares for most of the thirteenth century, see Alberzoni, *Clare of Assisi*, especially pp. 113-154. Throughout this paper I will use both expressions interchangeably on the understanding that the nuns who lived in the convents mentioned here, although sometimes referred to as Sisters Minor, were already at this point Poor Clares that belonged to the approved female branch of the Franciscan Order.

³ See Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans*, for a detailed discussion on the validity of the term “Spirituals” to describe the different rigorist factions within the Order of St Francis.

⁴ On Joachite prophecies and their influence see Reeves, *The Prophetic Sense of History*, and Rusconi, *Giocchino da Fiore*.

⁵ Here the term Beguin refers to the lay communities related to Spiritual Franciscans in southern France and, in particular, to the figure and views of Peter of John Olivi. In the following pages I will also use the expression “Olivian Beguins” to distinguish these groups that shared a radical notion of poverty and the same apocalyptic expectations; some of them took vows and formally joined the Third Order of Saint Francis. On the beliefs and the persecution of this movement see, among others, Manselli, *Spirituali e beghini* and Burnham, *So Great a Light*.

indeed many chose to flee towards the Mediterranean and the island of Mallorca. During most of this period, Prince Felip of Mallorca occupied the regency of the insular kingdom. Felip was the brother of the late King Sanç I and the uncle of the future King Jaume III, and he was well known for his radical Franciscan views. A group of Beguins gathered around him, and some of them ended up accompanying the Prince to the kingdom of Naples and the safe haven provided by none other than Felip's sister, Queen Sança of Mallorca, who was in turn married to King Robert of Naples. By tracing the spiritual networks involved in this tumultuous period of Franciscan history, I will try to shed some light on the stance of the Poor Clares and their connection with the different factions involved in this conflict; a connection that has been frequently overlooked, probably because of the dearth of direct data, and which, in my opinion, was embodied, in particular, by some members of the royal House of Mallorca.

1. *The actors enter the scene*

Around 1710, a Minim friar named François Laporte, who was the librarian of the archbishop of Narbonne, copied several medieval documents with the intention of publishing an edition dedicated to his protector and employer. The vicissitudes of fortune and his poor health prevented him from fulfilling this task, and the copies remained in the Bibliothèque municipale de Toulouse until Michelle Fournié discovered them in the twenty-first century. Among other documents bound together in what is today Manuscript 625, Laporte included the proceedings of the case brought against a woman named Rixendis in the year 1288⁶. The original document was probably in poor condition and Laporte's copy is incomplete in several spots, but it seems that this laywoman from Narbonne first attracted the attention of the ecclesiastical authorities for her public support of the Waldensians⁷. However, Rixendis's main suspected wrongdoings were more related to her self-confessed experience as a visionary and the unorthodox cult that emerged around her. The testimony of the witnesses summoned by the official of the archbishop – a certain R. Leuterii – and the cathedral chapter, as well as Rixendis's own deposition, draw a very revealing picture of the spiritual scene of Narbonne at the end of the thirteenth century, which makes her case a fitting starting point for the analysis of the overlapping networks that will be presented below.

There is little information about Rixendis's life prior to her appearance before the episcopal tribunal. According to the beginning of her deposition,

⁶ Up until Fournié's discovery, the case was only partially known through the undated, unreferenced nineteenth-century edition in von Döllinger, *Beiträge zur Sektengeschichte*, pp. 706-711.

⁷ «et dicta Rixendis de fide valde», Théry, *'Inquisitio' contre Rixende*, p. 66.

she was married to a certain Bartomeu⁸, a native of Montredon, but was probably widowed, given that most of the events described by the defendant and the witnesses happened at her house but her husband is not mentioned anywhere else throughout the trial. The most likely explanation is that he was already dead, but the words that follow his name and birthplace, where the adjective *quondam* (late) would have been if that were the case, are marked as illegible in Laporte's copy⁹. The deposition also shows that Rixendis had an illegitimate son, the name of whose father she refused to reveal, for, according to her, the members of the tribunal were not her confessors and she didn't feel obliged to confide this information to them¹⁰. Her parents were dead and she had at least one sister who had also passed away.

Apparently, Rixendis had started experiencing raptures eight years before, in 1280, around the feast of Saint Matthew. During one of her spiritual sojourns in heaven, she was in the presence of Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and Saint Francis, but on some other occasions she had visions of the purgatory, where she met her parents, her sister, and other relatives. Her parents assured her that her mediation had saved many souls from purgatory, including them, as she herself was able to confirm when she saw her father and mother once again, this time in paradise. Thus, it seems that Rixendis had been granted a direct communication link to the celestial sphere, which she accessed during her frequent raptures – one of which took place before her judges¹¹. This link allowed her access to a wealth of privileged information: on the one hand, she received doctrinal instructions while on the other she was granted glimpses of her own future.

At some point, during one of these raptures, Rixendis received a letter from Saint John. The angelic voice – «vox, quam dicebat angelicam»¹² – that dictated the epistle, instructed her to keep the letter and not to engage in certain activities on Sundays, that is, it promoted a sort of sabbatarian agenda. According to the testimonies of some of the witnesses, the letter was copied several times and distributed around; it was seen as a message from the Divinity and accordingly praised and venerated – «dixit quod epistola (...) laudabat, ratificabat et ampliabat; et dicebat ipsam epistolam esse veram»¹³. The

⁸ Throughout this paper I will use, when possible, the Occitan or Catalan versions of the names of the people involved in the different cases. Only if the names do not seem to have a recognisable equivalent in these languages will I maintain their Latin form.

⁹ See Théry, *'Inquisitio' contre Rixende*, p. 65 for an image of the first page of Rixendis' deposition.

¹⁰ «Item requisita a quo habuit filium quem habet, dixit quod ipsum non habuit a marito suo; et aliter pluries requisita a quo habuerat, noluit exprimere nec aliter respondere; sed dicebat quod ipsa confessa fuit suo confessori et domini qui ipsam requirebant et inquirebant cum ea non erant confessores sui nec eis tenebatur revelare», Théry, *'Inquisitio' contre Rixende*, p. 69.

¹¹ Her judges, however, saw it as a ruse, «in presentia dictorum dominorum, fingebat se raptam et non loquebatur», Théry, *'Inquisitio' contre Rixende*, p. 67.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 68.

¹³ Deposition of Gaià, *ibidem*, p. 71.

revelation of heavenly letters was certainly not a novelty in Western Europe¹⁴. Only thirty years before, in 1251, a letter from the Virgin Mary had legitimised the first Shepherds' Crusade, and in the 1260s, German flagellants had based their movement on an alleged letter from Christ – full of apocalyptic connotations and echoing Joachite prophecies – which, among other things, berated humankind for their neglect of the Sabbath. At any rate, the reach of Rixendis's epistle is one of the main factors that make the records of her trial an interesting source not only for the study of late medieval female visionaries, but also for the analysis of religious effervescence in the Languedocian area during this period; specifically, for the spiritual milieu in the city of Narbonne that would be closely connected to the Beguin movement and the most extremist side of Franciscanism a few years later.

Gaià, one of the few men involved in the trial of Rixendis, as will be shown below, recounts in his testimony how a Beguine named Alissenda gave him the letter at the request of one of Rixendis's closest supporters, a woman named Jordana Maynard. Gaià, in turn, gave it to a Franciscan, a certain Jacme Morena, who finally returned the letter to Jordana. It is precisely the said Jordana who, in her own deposition, confirms that she had the letter copied and that one of those copies ended up at the convent of the Sisters of Saint Clare in Narbonne – «et dixit quod bene erat sua et illam fecerat scribi et exemplar habuit a sororibus sancte Clare monasterii de Narbona»¹⁵. Although she later retracted her allegations, at least partially, she still placed the copy in the hands of a certain *frater Petrus* who was usually there – «qui moratur in domo ipsarum sororum minoritarum»¹⁶. In short, the letter was read by half of the witnesses, and seen by many others; for instance, Maria Maynard, Jordana's sister, admits that she saw it but was unable to read it, and Aladaisis, a married woman, testifies that her brother – whose name has not been preserved – also had a copy.

It is true that the content of the letter does not seem especially remarkable nor dangerous¹⁷, even if it came from Saint John – the Evangelist, or the Baptist, none of the depositions specify it. But nobody seems to have questioned its authenticity, and most witnesses were interrogated about the epistle, which confirms that the judges deemed it an important matter. Rixendis claims that several women were present at the specific rapture during which the letter was revealed, and that all of them heard the angelic voice. Even if none of these women actually confirmed it, they all attested to her frequent raptures and participated in a sort of budding cult at the centre of which we find Rixendis. Indeed, the true danger this woman posed lay in the extent of her following. As the first part of the document indicates, at the time of these

¹⁴ For a review of heavenly letters and their role in messianic and millenarian movements, see Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*; see also, Kaup, *Pseudo-Joachim Reads*.

¹⁵ Théry, *'Inquisitio' contre Rixende*, p. 73.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 84.

¹⁷ Dyan Elliott goes as far as to call it banal, see Elliott, *Proving woman*, p. 200.

events, the archiepiscopal see of Narbonne was vacant – «ad audientiam pervenit venerabilis capituli sancte ecclesie Narbonensis, sede vacante»¹⁸ – but nonetheless the case aroused enough interest for it to be examined by a tribunal brought together to question the suspicious Rixendis and her group of followers. Despite her initial support of the Waldensians, she was not accused of belonging to this group; if she had, the inquisitor of Carcassonne would probably have examined her case. However, so far, we have found no mention of Rixendis in the extant inquisitorial records of Carcassonne (partly extant in the seventeenth-century copies that form the manuscripts of the *Collection Doat*, kept in the Bibliothèque national de France).

The major concerns of the episcopal *inquisitio* were Rixendis's visionary experiences and her influence on the inhabitants of Narbonne. Almost thirty people were summoned for questioning, twenty-six of them were women, and three are described as Beguines – *biguina*. According to their depositions, they believed that Rixendis was a saintly woman who led a saintly life and performed miracles; God revealed secrets to her, she had numerous raptures, had witnessed many divine apparitions, and even foreseen her own future, for she knew how and when she was going to be captured and brought in for questioning, and that she would die from the disease she already suffered. People visited her house and kneeled before her asking for her blessing, dined with her, brought bread for her to bless, and sent her money and food; but Rixendis also visited some of them in their own homes and, interestingly enough, she used to frequent the church of the Sisters Minor in Narbonne¹⁹.

For instance, it was there that she met a certain Peire Alaràs a few times, and, according to him, she talked about God and the Passion, and was a good and saintly woman²⁰. It would be tempting to identify him as the same *frater Petrus* who, at some point, had in his possession the alleged letter from Saint John, but some details advise against it. Whoever the said *frater Petrus* was, the fact that he is addressed as *frater* could suggest that he was in fact a friar, probably a Franciscan, given that he frequented the convent of Saint Clare and we know for certain that another Franciscan had received the letter, the aforementioned Friar Morena²¹. However, the deposition of Peire Alaràs indicates that he had a house of his own – that Rixendis herself visited. He could still be a Franciscan Tertiary, for they were sometimes addressed in this manner, but he was one of the few witnesses that was not questioned about

¹⁸ Théry, *'Inquisitio' contre Rixende*, p. 66.

¹⁹ On the convent of Sisters Minor of Narbonne, see Roest, *Order and Disorder*, p. 107; and Devy, *Les fils de saint François*, p. 58; Devy, *Narbonne au XIVe siècle*, p. 50; and Michaud and Cabanis, *Histoire de Narbonne*, p. 185.

²⁰ «cum ipsa Rixendis esset in ecclesia sororum minoretarum et diceretur quod bona mulier erat», *ibidem*, p. 84.

²¹ «Et dixit quod eam portavit fratri Jacobo Morena de ordine fratrum Minorum», *ibidem*, p. 72.

the epistle, which would be unlikely if he was indeed the same *Petrus* already mentioned in other depositions precisely for having a copy of the letter²².

Rixendis's alleged endorsement of Waldensians draws attention to the question of poverty, one of the most important issues surrounding the spiritual life at the end of the thirteenth century, which will be further discussed below. Although she was not a belligerent preacher who maintained extreme pauperistic positions, she was indeed concerned with excessive displays of wealth and sumptuousness in female attires. She explicitly condemned those who carried gold and silver, for they carried demons with them – «portabant diabolos supra se»²³. She went as far as to say that those who wore brooches (*fiblays*) or bodices (*cossexs*) would not see the face of God – «non videret faciem Dei»²⁴. Furthermore, she criticised women who wore necklaces (*pittrals*) and trains (*rossex*) in their gowns and were praised for it, instructing her followers never to wear such things nor to praise those who did²⁵.

The experiences of Rixendis shaped a lay community that was mainly formed by women. Many of them were married, and although their husbands themselves did not usually join the cultic activities surrounding the saintly woman, it is no less true that they were aware of and supported their devotion, at least tacitly, as some of the depositions evince – «et jacuit bene ibi per tres noctes et preter voluntatem sui mariti»²⁶. Moreover, some of Rixendis's followers were women who described themselves and were known by others as Beguines. The implications of such a term in this region and period will be discussed in the following section, but the fact that there are no men – Beguins – mentioned among them, probably indicates that these women responded to the characteristic profile of late medieval Beguines. Leading an active life, they were usually engaged in attending to the sick and the poor, while at the same time they participated in the spiritual life of the community they belonged to. Although there is no direct evidence that the Beguines that followed Rixendis were especially involved in the Franciscan milieu of Narbonne, or in the concerns that troubled the Franciscan order at the end of the thirteenth century, we cannot dismiss the likelihood of such a connection; after all, episcopal authorities were probably more concerned with the influence of Rixendis, and the danger that she and her heavenly letter posed, than with the stance of those Beguines regarding the theological debates within the Order of Saint Francis. Only ten years later, the situation would change dramatically.

Finally, the repeated mentions to the convent of Minoresses of Narbonne, where Rixendis and several others spent their time and in whose church they discussed spiritual matters, is also remarkable. The house of the Sisters Mi-

²² See the reference to Jordana Maynard's deposition in note 15 above.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 81.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 76.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 81.

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

nor and the Franciscan convent of Narbonne were close to each other, and both nuns and friars seem to have been somehow intertwined in the tight network weaved around Rixendis and the letter of Saint John. All in all, Rixendis's case brings to scene most of the actors that, during the last quarter of the thirteenth century, would build up an intense spiritual climate in the city of Narbonne, and, as will be noted in the following pages, in other areas of the Western Mediterranean.

2. *On nuns, friars, and Beguins*

There are no extant remains of the convent of Sisters Minor of Narbonne. As many other houses of the Order of Saint Clare, it was first founded outside the city walls during the first half of the thirteenth century, in this case, at the Breuil, a floodplain to the north-west of the city formed by a meander of the Aude. Later, around 1247, the nuns moved to a spot within the city walls, as evidenced by a document dated 1248 in which Guilhem de la Brouë, archbishop of Narbonne, donated a plot of land in the parish of Saint Felix to a certain Abbess *Francisca*²⁷. Without going into further detail about the location of Clarissan houses with respect to the urban plot, or into the criteria used in the selection of a suitable spot for them, such as the proximity of a Franciscan house²⁸, the truth is that the Franciscan priory of Narbonne, founded around 1230, was barely within a 5-minute walk from the parish of Saint Felix, and both establishments were still there during Rixendis's time²⁹. This is an important detail because it gives us an idea of the overall Franciscan background of the area: the only church Rixendis visited was the church of the Minoresses, and the only religious men in her inner circle also belonged to the same spiritual sphere, which, at this moment, was a troubled one.

In the last quarter of the thirteenth century, the Franciscan world was in turmoil. By mid-century, the term *spiritualis* started to be associated with a specific form of sanctity, an extreme capacity of imitating Christ, but also with a certain Joachite apocalyptic flair³⁰. Eventually, the term ended up designating the rigorist faction of the Order of Saint Francis, as opposed to the "conventual" side, also known as the Community, who favoured a less strict interpretation of the Franciscan Rule. Between 1270 and 1290, the dissensions were maintained at a provincial level, especially in southern France and northern Italy, and while physical violence was extreme in some cases, the intervention of ministers and provincial councils got things back on track.

²⁷ Devic and Vaissete, *Histoire générale*, pp. 688-689.

²⁸ On this matter see, among others, Graña Cid, *Religiosas y ciudades*; and, in this volume, Costa, Sancho, Soler, *Monacato femenino y paisaje*.

²⁹ See note 18 above; see also Dellong, *Carte archéologique*, p. 139.

³⁰ See note 2; for an excellent overview of this subject as well as for an analysis of the different ramifications of the Franciscan conflict, see Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans*.

The conflict was mainly based on the different conceptions of poverty implied by the Rule. While the Conventuals believed that their vows only forbid them from owning personal or collective properties, the Spirituals felt that they also were forbidden from making an excessive use of the property of others, that is, their vows involved the notion of *usus pauper*.

The main theorist of this position was Peter of John Olivi, a Franciscan theologian born in Sérignan who also added another controversial component to the situation. He was a Joachite, like many other Franciscans, and thus believed that the Apocalypse and the advent of the Antichrist were at hand. According to him, these final events would pave the way not for the Last Judgment and the end of the world, but for the Era of the Holy Spirit, in which the chosen ones would enjoy the *intellectus spiritualis*: an unmediated access to the Divinity. Olivi was the author of numerous opuscles and, in particular, of a commentary on the Book of Revelations, the *Lectura super Apocalipsim*, that he wrote in Latin and completed in 1297, just one year before his death³¹. This work was swiftly condemned in 1299 by the Provincial Council held at Lyon, but by then a vernacular translation was already in circulation³². It is no coincidence that the earliest actual trace of the group known as the Beguins of Languedoc is the censure some of them received during that same year, particularly, for preaching that the end of the world was near and that the time of the Antichrist had virtually arrived – «finem mundi instare et iam adesse vel quasi tempora Antichristi».

The previous section already noted that the Beguines mentioned in the *inquisitio* against Rixendis did not seem to be especially related to the Franciscan milieu, nor did they entertain any apocalyptic notions; but that is certainly not the case for the millenarian Beguins that were rebuked at Béziers. While some authors assume the existence of a link between the latter and the influence of Olivi³³, others argue that the lack of explicit connection allows us to see them as a movement that was mostly independent from the views of the Franciscan theologian³⁴. At the end of the thirteenth century, lay men and women were on the lookout for new ways of spiritual commitment, for a more direct experience of sanctity; in other words, they sought new mediators with the divine, one of the traditional roles of saints. The case of Rixendis exemplifies how spiritual references were searched for outside the Church, and suggests that there was a community of Beguines living in Narbonne in

³¹ This is probably Olivi's most studied work; see, among others, Manselli, *La Lectura*; Burr, *Olivi's Peaceable Kingdom*; Burr, *Olivi, Prouis*; Boureau and Piron, *Pierre de Jean Olivi*; and most recently Burr, *Olivi, Christ's Three Advents*; Burr, *Olivi, Maifreda, Na Prouis, and Pietro di Giovanni Olivi*.

³² Proof of this early translation and dissemination of the *Lectura* is the case of a Franciscan friar who arrived in Rome in 1299 carrying translated Olivian works; he had fled his convent and was accompanied by lay men and women. A full account of this episode can be found in Manselli, *Spirituali e beghini*, pp. 41-46; and Lerner, *Writing and resistance*, p. 191.

³³ Burnham, *So great a light*, p. 34.

³⁴ Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans*, p. 92.

the 1280s. In my view, these spiritually committed groups and the Olivian message coexisted and converged at this particular time and region, and their interaction consolidated as the century progressed.

It seems clear that, at least from the last decade of the century, in the area of Languedoc, there were communities that supported the views of the Spiritual friars and their Olivian beliefs. However, although Olivi spent his last years in the city of Narbonne, I wouldn't go as far as to affirm that some of the Beguines involved in Rixendis's case appeared again more than thirty years later – in the decade of 1320s – among the accused of professing the so-called “heresy of the burned Beguines,” as some authors have claimed on the basis of coinciding birth names and places of origin³⁵. That is not to say that there was no relationship whatsoever between ones and the others; on the contrary, I do think that they all shared the same spiritual background and commitment, for, as will be shortly discussed, there are many other cases outside the city of Narbonne, but within the same religious-historical context, that in my opinion evidence how closely knit these realities were.

The papal bull *Exiit qui seminat*, issued by Nicholas III in 1279 – and drafted with the aid of Olivi, among others – had opened the door to the inclusion of the *usus pauper* in the Franciscan vows³⁶; but in the 1290s the disputes within the order became a global concern that prompted the subsequent pontiffs to take matters into their own hands. The following two decades would witness a period of extreme polarisation of the Order of Saint Francis and, especially in southern France, the most rigorist friars were all but persecuted and tortured by their Conventual brethren³⁷. In 1309, Pope Clement V ended up establishing separate houses for the different factions, and the superiors who had abused the Spiritual friars were removed from office. But things were about to take a turn for the worse, and after the death of the Pope in 1314, the disgruntled superiors resumed their priorates, which in turn led to an upheaval in the convents of Narbonne and Béziers³⁸; from then onwards, the conflict only escalated. On 7 May 1318, four Franciscan friars died at the stake in Marseille. They had been turned over to the secular arm by the inquisitor of Marseille, Michel le Moine, who had condemned them for heresy at the behest of Pope John XXII³⁹. Their crime was denying papal authority on matters related to the Rule of Saint Francis, which they

³⁵ See Montefusco, *Per l'edizione*.

³⁶ On the *usus pauper* and the controversy on poverty see Flood, *Peter Olivi and Franciscan Poverty*, Speelman, *The Franciscan usus pauper*, and Lambertini, *Die Kontroverse*.

³⁷ On the progressive polarisation of the Order of St Francis in this period, see especially Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans*, pp. 107-110.

³⁸ For the rebellion of the Spirituals in the convents of Narbonne and Béziers and its aftermath see *ibidem*, pp. 168-177.

³⁹ The letter from the Pope – extant in Ms 34, *Collection Doat*, ff. 143r-146v – assigned Michel le Moine the mission of “exterminating the foxes whose poisonous bites seek to destroy the fruits of the sacred orchard of said order” («dicti ordinis sacra plantatio exterminantis vulpeculis quae illum venenosis morsibus demoliri resumunt fructus»), *ibidem*, f. 145r. See Burnham, *So Great a Light*, 47-48, n. 137, for a discussion on the election of the inquisitor of Provence for this task.

considered evangelical, and therefore beyond the reach of papal power. This execution marked the decisive turning point, and just over a year later, in October 1319, in the city of Narbonne, the inquisitors surrendered to the secular arm the first groups of lay men and women accused of adhering to the radical positions of the Spiritual friars. How had the Beguines of the 1280s turned into the millenarian Beguins of Languedoc that died at the stake maintaining their beliefs in the advent of a New Era?

By the beginning of the fourteenth century, the apocalyptic traditions at hand were the book of Revelations, the sibylline prophecies, and the works of Joachim of Fiore⁴⁰. At the end of the twelfth century, Joachim had proposed a new interpretation of the history of salvation whose true innovation was not so much its division into three ages, but the fact that the break between the second and the third age was nearly at hand, somewhere in the near – imminent – future, and would bring about the advent of the Holy Spirit and the age of the *intellectus amoris*, where the righteous would thrive. As I have already mentioned, during the next century, Joachim's views had a major influence on the Franciscan order, and, in particular, on the thought and works of Olivi, who was, doubtlessly, a major figure within the Joachite Franciscan tradition⁴¹. Olivian prophecies were contextualized by his followers, the Beguins of Languedoc, and the aforementioned condemnation of the works of their spiritual master – barely a year after his demise – seems to have cast the first stone that triggered the radicalization of their views.

I have discussed elsewhere the network formed by spiritual Franciscans and Beguins in the villages of Languedoc⁴², but it is necessary to cast a wider net in order to fully grasp the influence of the debates around poverty and apocalyptic expectations that took place within the Order and set in motion the chain of events I have just outlined. In addition, this perspective could shed some light on the stance of the Second Order, that is, the Minoresses, in the midst of a climate of unrest they could not possibly remain oblivious to. The questions whether the nuns radicalised their views and, if so, to what extent, remain open. Despite the lack of evidence related to the Sisters Minor in the inquisitorial records concerning the Beguins of Languedoc, it still seems somehow unlikely that women who were committed to poverty – at least in theory – and sometimes even shared the apocalyptic views that were essential to the Olivian Beguin movement – as will be shown below – were all but absent from this dramatic episode.

⁴⁰ Reeves, *The Prophetic Sense of History*, pp. 40-72 and 269-316.

⁴¹ For an analysis of Olivi's true adherence to Joachite views, see De Lubac, *La posteridad espiritual*, pp. 93-96, and Rusconi, *A la recherche des traces*.

⁴² Nieto-Isabel, *Qui spiritu ambo sunt unum*.

3. *A diaspora of dissent*

Most of the inquisitorial trials against the Beguins of Languedoc took place between 1319 and 1334. The sources for this period allow us to identify the names of more than two hundred people who were brought before the inquisitors for questioning about their involvement in the so-called “heresy of the burned Beguins”⁴³. Half of them ended their days at the stake while the other half saw their lives changed forever. In less than two decades, the Beguin communities of Languedoc would disintegrate and disappear, but they left a lasting spiritual legacy whose impact can be surmised from a variety of documents.

Some of these Beguins and persecuted Franciscans decided to flee from their hometowns and convents and stay away from the area controlled by the inquisitors. The deposition of Alaraxis Biasse, a woman from Sauvian, near Béziers, who is presented by the record as none other than Olivi’s niece, gives us an idea of the ways in which the fugitives managed to evade the authorities⁴⁴. Runaway Franciscans disguised themselves, but refused to abandon the habit that marked them as legitimate members of their order, despite what the Pope and their own superiors had to say in the matter – «in seculari habitu, scilicet in vestibus de blavo desuper et habitu ordinis desubtus in dicta domo sua receptavit»⁴⁵; it is from Alaraxis’s testimony, among others, that we also learn about the Mediterranean escape route that led these fugitives to safe havens such as Mallorca – «et quadam nocte sabbati intraverunt omnes sex Fratres predicti cum dictis duobus hominibus barca[m] predictam et in ea simul transfretaverunt et iverunt usque Maioricas»⁴⁶. The island was both a stopover in a longer journey towards southern Italy – Sicily and Naples – and a final destination of its own.

In 1319, just as the executions began in Narbonne, a man named Antich de Vich bought a property in Palma de Mallorca that would serve as the house for a group of Beguins⁴⁷. The names of these Beguins remain unknown, but 1319 seems too early a date as to suggest that these were fugitives from the Languedoc, which in turn hints at the existence of a Beguin community in the island prior to that year. During this period, several Beguins from Mallorca are documented in other cities of the Crown of Aragon, always involved in inquisitorial or episcopal trials for their Olivian views⁴⁸. In 1325, in Mallorca, the Franciscan friar Bernat Fuster was denounced for his dangerous views on *facto fidei*, and several compromising letters were found in his possession

⁴³ The sources used for this study are Manuscripts 27 and 28 of the *Collection Doat*; Pales-Gobilliard, *Le livre des sentences*; Manselli, *Spirituali e beghini*, pp. 331-345; and the Beguin martyrology edited in Burnham, *So great a light*, pp. 189-193.

⁴⁴ Deposition of Alaraxis Biasse, Ms 28, *Collection Doat*, ff. 216v-219v.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, f. 216v.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, f. 218v.

⁴⁷ Llompert, *La població hospitalaria*, p. 81; Binimelis, *Nueva historia*, p. 320.

⁴⁸ Pou i Martí, *Beguinos y fraticellos catalanes*, pp. 279-284.

where he apparently shared such views with some citizens of Girona⁴⁹. He eventually confessed, which resulted in a long incarceration – first in Mallorca and later in Avignon – and in the intervention of several remarkable figures such as King Jaume II of Aragon, his sons, Princes Alfons and Pere, and several cardinals. Just as interesting as the political implications of this case is the fact that Bernat's father was a well-respected Franciscan Tertiary also named Bernat Fuster, and his sister, Geraldona, was one of the members of the Beguin community of Vilafranca del Penedès – the hometown of the Fusters, and an important trade centre about 30 km east of Barcelona – that was subjected to an inquisitorial investigation in 1345⁵⁰.

The case of Bernat Fuster, being only one among many, reveals an underlying network of spiritual and doctrinal relations that linked the Beguins and spiritual Franciscans of Mallorca with the cities of Girona and Vilafranca; but, as the documentary evidence shows, that network was far more intricate, and also connected these communities to their counterparts in Languedoc. On 29 December 1345, Geraldona Fuster was questioned about her brother's acquaintance with a certain Peire Fort, a Languedocian Beguin who had been hiding for a while in her father's house in Vilafranca twenty years earlier, in 1325⁵¹. This detail, as well as the fact that the Beguins of Vilafranca seem to have known Peire Trencavel, one of the most renowned fugitives of the Languedocian movement, leaves little doubt about the partaking of this community in the beliefs and adversities of the northern Olivian Beguins. The links to the Beguin community of Girona seem just as evident, with Olivian books going back and forth between these two cities⁵²; and, of course, their connection with the Beguin community of Barcelona, strongly influenced by the figure of Arnau de Vilanova, who in turn wrote a treatise addressed to the Beguins of Narbonne, must also be stressed⁵³. In 15 July 1312, two Beguins from Vilafranca were present in Barcelona when Guillem Martí, the leader of the local Beguin community publicly protested against the allegations that had been presented claiming that this group was trying to found a new order⁵⁴. These two Beguins were the already mentioned Bernat Fuster father and Guerau Pere, whose relations with the community of Barcelona ran deep, and whose sister, Agnès, was a nun at the Clarissan convent of Santa Clara de

⁴⁹ For a detailed account of the events related to this case, see Perarnau, *Una altra carta*.

⁵⁰ The records of the inquisitorial trial of the Beguins of Vilafranca are edited in Perarnau, *Beguins de Vilafranca*.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, p. 87.

⁵² Perarnau, *Noves dades*.

⁵³ There were also communities of Olivian Beguins in Tortosa, Tarragona, and Valencia during this same period; for a detailed account see Pou i Martí, *Beguinos y fraticellos catalanes*. On the Beguin community of Barcelona and the figure of Arnau de Vilanova, see Perarnau, *Lalia informatio beguinorum*; on the relation between Arnau de Vilanova and Spiritual views, see also Mensa i Valls, *Confrontació de les tesis*.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 134.

Vilafranca⁵⁵. What does this information imply about the stance of the Sisters Minor in the midst of this delicate moment for the Order of Saint Francis?

The data are few and far between, but we know that one of the members of the Beguin community of Vilafranca that was involved in the trials of 1345, the priest Raimon Punyera, chose to be buried at the convent of Saint Clare instead of opting for the Franciscan house, which was clearly aligned with Conventual views⁵⁶. The similarities between the convents of Minoreesses of Vilafranca del Penedès and Girona are also quite interesting. Members of the House of Barcelona founded both of them at the beginning of the fourteenth century. Queen Blanca of Anjou, the second wife of King Jaume II of Aragon, founded Santa Clara de Vilafranca around 1308, and her son, Prince Joan, founded Santa Clara of Girona in 1319. As we have already seen, these cities also shared an active community of radical Beguins related to the spiritual Franciscans, and both Clarissan convents were built near a hospital – which was not unusual for the nunneries of the Order of Saint Clare, as the case of Sant Antoni de Barcelona, near the old hospital of Santa Marta shows⁵⁷. Moreover, Santa Clara de Vilafranca was based on an earlier community of Beguines who were devoted to the care of the sick⁵⁸.

There is no single pattern that can account for the foundation of all Clarissan nunneries, and the differences between the lifestyles of the different houses are undeniable, but the religious life of these nuns was not impervious to the influence of the circumstances of each foundation process⁵⁹. As I have already mentioned for Santa Clara de Vilafranca, many convents of the Order of Saint Clare started as communities of women connected to hospitals and charitable work, which certainly must have pervaded their ways, even if a member of the Royal House performed the official foundational act⁶⁰. In particular, in the cases of Vilafranca and Girona, it is rather difficult to deny all relationship between the radical views of Spiritual Franciscanism, so present in both cities, and the Clarissan approach. Even though most convents of Poor Clares have been repeatedly seen as being under the care of Conventual Franciscans, in certain contexts, their spiritual commitment was closer to the pauperistic views of the Spiritual friars. Given that the House of Barcelona

⁵⁵ See *Santa Clara de Vilafranca* in *CLAUSTRA. Atlas de espiritualidad femenina en los Reinos Peninsulares*. Institut de Recerca en Cultures Medievales IRCVM, Universitat de Barcelona. Available at URL: < <http://www.ub.edu/claustra> > [consulted 15 November 2015].

⁵⁶ Perarnau, *Beguins de Vilafranca*, pp. 65-66.

⁵⁷ On the foundation and development of the convent of Sant Antoni in Barcelona, see Jornet-Benito, *El monestir de Sant Antoni*. See also *Sant Antoni i Santa Clara de Barcelona* in *CLAUSTRA. Atlas de espiritualidad femenina en los Reinos Peninsulares*. Institut de Recerca en Cultures Medievales IRCVM, Universitat de Barcelona; available at URL: < <http://www.ub.edu/claustra> > [consulted 3 April 2017].

⁵⁸ See *Santa Clara de Vilafranca* in *CLAUSTRA. Atlas de espiritualidad*.

⁵⁹ See, among others, Roest, *Order and Disorder*, pp. 72-74.

⁶⁰ For instance, the convent of Narbonne discussed above was based on an initial group of women that settled near the road to Perpignan in the early 1240s; Roest, *Order and Disorder*, p. 107.

and its cadet branch, the House of Mallorca, were so close to Franciscan spirituality and, in particular, to its most extremist facet, their choice to found convents of Minoreesses is not incidental. Committed to lead a life of poverty, these nuns also embraced, or at least were exposed to, the apocalyptic expectations that were essential to the Olivian Beguin movement, as the Neapolitan case seems to suggest⁶¹.

Indeed, the network would not be complete without taking into account its easternmost ramifications, which, precisely at the hands of the members of the House of Mallorca, found a sort of spiritual asylum in the kingdom of Naples. Around 1313, Angelo Clareno, one of the most outstanding and vocal figures of Franciscan extremist views, stayed in Mallorca for a brief period before embarking for the Languedoc, where he would witness the massive celebration of the feast held on the anniversary of Olivi's death in Narbonne⁶². On the island, he spent some time with Prince Felip of Mallorca, and their friendship, which had probably started during Felip's stay in Avignon a couple of years before, would last throughout their lives. Felip belonged to a family with clear Franciscan inclinations; his own brother Jaume, the first-born and heir to the throne, had renounced his rights and joined the order of Saint Francis, and Felip's radical views on poverty prompted him to successively reject the positions of archbishop of Tarragona and bishop of Mirepoix – in 1316 and 1317, respectively⁶³. In 1324, the second-born, King Sanç I of Mallorca, died without legitimate offspring; the future Jaume III, his nephew, was named heir while still a child, and Felip occupied the regency. Only two years later, in 1326, Pope John XXII would reprimand the regent for the radical Franciscan flair of the education he was providing the future king with. Finally, in 1329, Felip left the island for the kingdom of Naples and the court of his sister, Queen Sança, and her husband, Robert of Naples, where he would stay until his death. Surrounded by his entourage of Spiritual Franciscans and Beguins – some of whom had left Mallorca with him – he actively maintained his Olivian views to the point that in 1340, around the time of his death, he was still the subject of a letter from Pope Benedict XII to his brother-in-law requesting the King to admonish Felip for his extremist positions⁶⁴.

The sympathies for extremist Franciscanism were also present in the spiritual and political trajectory of Sança of Mallorca, for the Queen was precisely one of the clearest links between spiritual Franciscans, Beguins, and Poor Clares⁶⁵. On the one hand, Sança, who had married the King of Naples in

⁶¹ For a Joachite interpretation of the building project of Santa Chiara of Naples, see Bruzelius, *Queen Sancia*. pp. 82 et seq. See also Mario Gaglione's discussion on this point in Gaglione, *Ipotesi "gioachimite"*.

⁶² Burnham, *So great a light*, p. 7.

⁶³ On Felip of Mallorca see, among others, Pou i Martí, *Beguinos y fraticellos catalanes*, pp. 235-254; Evangelisti, *Relazioni di potere*; and Vidal, *Procès d'inquisition*.

⁶⁴ See the letter in *Annales Ecclesiastici*, t. XVI, annus 1340, pp. 64-65.

⁶⁵ On Sança of Mallorca, see, among others, Musto, *Queen Sancia of Naples*; Jornet-Benito, *Sança of Majorca*; Gaglione, *Sancia d'Aragona-Maiorca. De regina*; and Gaglione, *Sancia*

1304, sponsored the celebration of General Chapters of the Franciscan Order in Naples, and participated in the debate between Conventual and Spiritual Franciscans; eventually, once the persecution started, Sança and Robert's court protected the Spirituals and Beguins who sought refuge in their kingdom⁶⁶. On the other hand, the close relationship between the Queen and the Order of Saint Clare is widely known. In 1311, she asked the Pope for permission for two Poor Clares to live *in hospitio sue*⁶⁷, and she founded a convent of Poor Clares in Aix-en-Provence⁶⁸ (she was the countess of Provence by marriage) and two others in the city of Naples, Santa Chiara and Santa Croce di Palazzo. The latter was the convent she herself joined taking the name of Sister Clare after the death of her husband, and she would be buried there in 1345 wearing the habit of a Poor Clare. The convent of Santa Chiara, founded around 1310, was a massive endeavour aimed at becoming a royal mausoleum, but the building of an adjacent Franciscan friary turned it into a sort of dual monastery that served as a virtual refuge for Spiritual Franciscans when the need arose. In contrast, the convent of Santa Croce was much smaller and closer to the original model of San Damiano⁶⁹. It is not by chance that a queen with the strong pauperistic convictions that Sança showed through her continued support of the Spiritual cause, chose Santa Croce as her final resting place, thus embodying the convergence of two spiritualities that were not too far apart from each other: Franciscan radical views and the quiet commitment of the Sisters Minor.

4. Conclusions

The depositions surrounding the case of Rixendis mention the convent of Minoresses of Narbonne, and seem to establish a common background in which nuns, friars, and lay men and women actively participated and exchanged their views outside the constraints imposed by ecclesiastical authorities. In contrast, the records of the inquisitorial prosecution of Spiritual Franciscans and Beguins in the Languedoc do not mention the Sisters Minor, and the direct data that point to a close relationship between nuns, on one side, and radical friars and their supporters, on the other, are scarce at best. Does this lack of direct evidence imply that there was no actual connection between these groups? As I have tried to establish throughout this paper, the indirect evidence seems to suggest otherwise.

d'Aragona-Maiorca tra impegno di governo.

⁶⁶ On the involvement of Robert and Sança in the protection of Spiritual Franciscans, see Kelly, *King Robert of Naples*; Musto, *Franciscan Joachimism*.

⁶⁷ See Jornet-Benito, *Sança of Majorca*, p. 131, and Andenna, *Zwischen Kloster und Welt*.

⁶⁸ Brunel-Lobrichon, *Diffusion et spiritualité*, p. 268.

⁶⁹ See Gaglione, *Francescanesimo femminile*, and Andenna, "Francescanesimo di corte."

The network of Beguin communities and Spiritual Franciscans and at least part of the network of Clarissan convents shared a common space and background, and although assuming that this was a sought-after coincidence that did not respond to many additional factors would be extremely rash and unwise, imagining a reality in which the sisters of Saint Clare were completely deaf or closed to the events happening outside their doors seems equally ill-advised. Even if foundation processes respond to different initial situations, purposes, and even spiritual concerns, indirect evidence keeps pointing to a part of the Order of Saint Clare being closer to the ideals of Spiritual Franciscans than to the most moderate positions within the First Order. Is this an argument *ex silentio*? If so, the iconographic programmes centred around apocalyptic themes that can be found in Clarissan houses (Santa Chiara of Naples), and the depiction of motifs drawing on the writings of rigorist Franciscans – such as the *albero della vita* that Pacino di Buonaguida painted around 1310-1315 for the convent of Monticelli based on Ubertino da Casale's main work and full of apocalyptic references⁷⁰ – are a sort of silence that seems to speak volumes; at the crossroads of it all we find the House of Mallorca – and also the House of Barcelona, suffice it to recall the intervention of King Jaume II in the case of Bernat Fuster – who actively fostered both Spiritual Franciscanism and the spirituality of the Sisters Minor.

Finally, in my opinion, the spiritual spheres of Olivian friars and Clarissan nuns were maybe not so independent as they seemed to be, which in turn would suggest that the beliefs of the women that joined some of the convents we have mentioned – let us insist on the fact that there is no possible generalisation here – were no so different from the views that moved Olivian Beguines. In this case, the choice between being a Beguine and a Poor Clare would be not so much deciding between heterodoxy and orthodoxy, that is, between a moderate and a radical approach, but rather between more or less active lifestyles that involved different degrees of interaction with the social fabric these women belonged to. All in all, their shared background turned these overlapping networks into intertwined expressions of the same spiritual substrate.

⁷⁰ Saint John holds a scroll with the verse of Revelations 22:2, while the prophets Ezekiel and Daniel occupy a privileged spot surrounding the mystical pelican. See, Boskovits and Tartuferi, *Dipinti: Dal Duecento a Giovanni da Milano*.

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