

*The Fonds d'Armagnac: Some Archival Resources for the
History of Languedocian Women*
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New research, often based on archival sources, has mounted a strong challenge to Georges Duby's pessimistic but influential depiction of a "*mâle moyen âge*" for women above the Loire.¹ The political and legal lives of secular medieval women in the Midi, on the other hand, remain largely unstudied. This is particularly true for the period after the Albigensian Crusade in the thirteenth century, when many scholars consider that a "golden age" for southern women came to an end.² With the defeat of the Occitan nobility, troubadour poetry disappeared, and following the reinvigoration of Roman law consequent on the Capetian's take-over, women's legal status is thought to have declined sharply.³ This neglect of women in later medieval Languedoc ought to be rectified. The putative decline and fall of southern women in the later Middle Ages has never been demonstrated except in the domain of normative prescription, whose actual effect must be rather measured with reference to documents of practice (e.g. judicial, notarial, and other quotidian sources). Moreover, even should it turn out to be true that women exercised substantially less agency in this period than they had had previously, there are still important questions familiar to any scholar of oppressed groups

about how this subjugation was experienced and negotiated.⁴

There are many resources available for the recuperation of late medieval Occitan women's history, including the documents published in the *Histoire Générale du Languedoc*,⁵ and the Bibliothèque nationale's *fonds Doat*, which comprises seventeenth-century copies of records from the medieval and early modern Midi. One particularly rich but very underexploited collection is the so-called *fonds d'Armagnac*. This collection originated as the late medieval *trésor des chartes* of the count of Armagnac, who was one of the most powerful lords in the post-Albigensian South, with a domain stretching from the Massif Central to the Pyrenees.⁶

The bulk of the *fonds d'Armagnac* constitutes almost the entirety of series A at the Archives départementales of Tarn-et-Garonne in Montauban, where it was moved in the seventeenth century as part of a royal consolidation of administrative documents. In addition to this collection, substantial materials belonging to the medieval comital holdings but which escaped this move are found in series B and E of the Archives départementales of Pyrénées-Atlantiques (formerly Basses-Pyrénées) in Pau and in series C of the Archives départementales of Aveyron

in Rodez. These holdings are also referred to as part of the *fonds d'Armagnac*. The exact size of the fonds is not precisely known; my conservative estimate would be several hundred registers and perhaps several thousands of unbound pieces. While a handful of documents hail from Carolingian times (mostly charters of monastic foundations whose authenticity cannot be taken for granted), the bulk of the material dates from the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries. The documents range in type from notarial and judicial registers to household accounts, and from treaties of alliance to personal letters. They concern the life of the lordships and municipalities that recognized the Count of Armagnac as overlord, as well as the affairs of the house of Armagnac itself. None of the three collections have been inventoried thoroughly or recently, and in the nineteenth-century style, the inventories generally note only those documents "of interest" under a particular *cote* (call number or shelfmark).⁷ The combination of the frailty of the guides and the fonds' grandeur—not to mention the archives' distance from Paris—have conspired to leave the collection neglected. Yet, it offers many opportunities for research into the history of medieval secular women. Fruitful areas of possible inquiry include biographical studies, issues of law and property, and the experience of material culture.

Case studies of elite

women have proved useful for the exploration the extent of women's authority above the Loire. For the pre-Albigensian South, we can signal Frederic Cheyette's biography of Ermengard of Narbonne,⁸ but similar efforts have not been undertaken for Languedocian women in the later period. Though researchers must also have recourse to the Bibliothèque nationale and Archives nationales, the *fonds d'Armagnac* affords opportunities to studies of several of the most prominent female figures connected with Armagnac. The Countesses Marguerite de Comminges and Bonne de Berry seem particularly suitable subjects based on the available sources and the interest of their life histories. The former, sole heiress to the county of Comminges, was forcibly married at the age of eleven to Jean III, future Count of Armagnac, in 1377, after her mother's diplomatic machinations failed to shield them from Armagnac's expansionist appetites. However, Marguerite's is not a story of helpless victimization. Later in life, she and her second husband went to war against one another over Comminges because the young groom had naïvely imagined himself to have acquired governance over it consequent to his marriage. With the aid of Count Bernard VII of Armagnac, Marguerite's party emerged victorious.⁹

Bonne de Berry's life trajectory is less well known than Marguerite's, but is quite

intriguing. A contemporary of Marguerite, she married Bernard VII in 1393, and brought with her considerable property, including lands in Savoy over which she seems to have maintained administrative control.¹⁰ Following the death of her husband in 1418, Bonne, who lived for another seventeen years, seems to have acted in concert with her son, John IV, though he was twenty-two at the death of his predecessor.¹¹ The homages they received jointly are preserved in Montauban under *cotes* A 83 and 85. From these we learn that Bonne styled herself "[...] by the grace of God, countess of Armagnac and Rodez, as female lord, governor and possessor of usufruct for her life by reason of her dowry which [came] from the disposition and ordination of the eminent prince [...] her husband [...]."¹² It would be most interesting to know more about Bonne, the extent of her power, and her relations with her son.

For scholarship on medieval women in more general terms, questions of agency and relative legal freedom revolve around property, meaning marriage settlements and inheritance rights. Consequently, marriage contracts and wills elucidate this area of medieval women's lives. The *fonds d'Armagnac* possesses these types of documents in great number. The inventories signal seventy marriage contracts over the course of the twelfth to fifteenth centuries. In reality, this is far fewer than the number

actually extant since, as noted, the old-fashioned inventories do not offer complete analyses of the items inventoried. Many of these contracts relate to the great women of the land, but there are also contracts for women from the lower aristocracy, and at least seventeen contracts for common-born women's marriages. These contracts outline provisions for dowry and in some cases also detail dower, as well as providing instructions for the disposal of this property after each of the spouse's death.¹³ Almost all of the marriage contracts for the countesses and daughters of Armagnac appear to be preserved, as do most of those for the ladies of the barony Isle-Jourdain, inviting a study of the development of late medieval marriage settlements among the southwestern nobility.¹⁴

More broadly, a survey of the marriage contracts from the notarial records of the *fonds d'Armagnac* may be able to provide a fuller understanding of the economic and legal reality of late medieval southern women of all property holding classes, and its relation to the relatively well understood situation of the Languedocian family.¹⁵ In this line, we may also note some examples of litigation related to dowry and dower property in the *fonds d'Armagnac*. One example is Jeanne Cote's suit against her husband for reimbursement of 100 *livres tournois* of her dowry on the grounds that he had impoverished them.¹⁶ In addition, the hundreds of wills in this *fonds* may make it possible

to trace the relationship between marriage settlements and the hereditary status of married women with regard to their natal family's property. This is an area where comparison with French northern women would probably prove fruitful, since it has been suggested that the deleterious effect of dowry and patrilineal primogeniture on the status of women north of the Loire has been overstated.¹⁷

Further elucidating questions of women and property in the South are the testaments of women themselves. The inventories note twenty-five female wills, half of which are those of common-born women, and many more female testaments probably survive but went unnoted. Here one can gain a sense of the extent to which women held and controlled property. In addition, legacies bequeathed to survivors and to religious or charitable institutions offer insight into late medieval Languedocian women's social networks and their affective and spiritual lives. The latter is especially interesting given the peculiar tendency of southern religious women, prior to the Albigensian period, to live as vowesses in their own homes or under the protection of a bishop, rather than in convents, and women's oft-supposed prominence within the Cathar heresy.¹⁸ However, it can be difficult to discern the extent to which female wills expressed the testator's autonomous desires rather than the compelling (but now invisible) demands of her family and husband. One study

that compared the testaments of Anglo-Saxon women to that of their father found female autonomy illusory; the women seem to have been following a previously elaborated program.¹⁹

Curiously, the information gleaned from wills about women's giving patterns and spiritual commitments may be the principle material offered by the *fonds d'Armagnac* for patronage *sensu stricto*. There seems to be little record of literary, musical or artistic patronage among the women of even the most exalted courtly rank. This is especially intriguing considering that for the early fifteenth century, the Countess of Armagnac was Bonne de Berry, daughter of the Duke of Berry, the greatest patron of fourteenth-century France, who had himself once married an Armagnac woman.²⁰

However, if we move beyond the concept of patronage to consider the experience of material culture in broad terms, then the *fonds d'Armagnac* has much to offer. In particular, attention should be paid to the extant household accounts from the comital households and those of their allied lines. As an example, the accounts of the vicecounty of Fézensaguet, a cadet branch of Armagnac, have survived for the years 1365-72.²¹ Although their existence was highlighted over a century ago in an attempt to arrange their publication, they have received no recent attention.²² These registers offer a relatively full picture of the material life of the vicecomital women, including

quite detailed information about clothing, furniture, and food. They also detail the constitution and management of the viscountess's household, which was separate from that of the viscount. Since we also learn quite a bit about the vicecomital men's consumption from these registers, it would be possible to compare male and female standards of living, and perhaps even their tastes. Analogous comital household accounts for the fourteenth century offer similar opportunities and a broader context.²³

Though the *fonds d'Armagnac* is one of the largest seigneurial collections from Languedoc, its richness is not unique among the medieval holdings of France's regional archives. Similar research possibilities exist for the documents of the house of Albret, or for the notarial registers of Toulouse and those of many other southern municipalities. Moreover, related deposits at the Bibliothèque nationale and the Archives nationales augment these collections. Ample resources exist to write the history of late medieval women in Languedoc, a project too long neglected.

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NOTES

Abbreviation: AD=Archives départementales.

¹ Particularly exemplary in this regard are the articles in Theodore Evergates, ed., *Aristocratic Women*

in *Medieval France*, (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1999). The introduction specifically addresses the challenges presented to Duby's thesis by new research based on documents of practice.

² E.g. R. Howard Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love*. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1991), esp. pp. 186-97. However, the perception that Occitan women were more capable of exercising agency than their Northern counterparts prior to the Albigensian Crusade has come under increasing attack. See for example Linda M. Paterson, *The World of the Troubadours: Medieval Occitan Society, c. 1100-1300* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP), pp. 220-28, and the remarks of Jennifer Smith, "Unfamiliar Territory: Women, Land and Law in Occitania, 1130-1250," in *Medieval Women and the Law*, ed. Noël James Menuge (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2000): pp. 19-22.

³ Marti Aurell i Cardona, "La détérioration du statut de la femme aristocratique en Provence (X^e-XIII^e siècles)," *Le moyen âge* 91 (1985): 5-32, and Jean-Marie Carbasse, "La condition de la femme mariée en Languedoc (XIII^e-XIV^e siècles)," in *La femme dans la vie religieuse du Languedoc, Cahiers de Fanjeaux* 23 (Toulouse: Privat, 1988): pp. 99-112 are two representatives.

⁴ The work of anthropologist James C. Scott on the ways in which the nominally powerless may exercise agency even under extremely adverse circumstances may be of interest to medieval feminist historians. See in particular *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1985).

⁵ Claude Devic and Jean Vaissete, eds., *Histoire générale du Languedoc*, rev. ed., 16 vols. (Toulouse: Privat, 1868-1905).

⁶ Charles Samaran traces the history of the *fonds d'Armagnac trésor des chartes* in

his introduction to *Inventaire sommaire des Archives départementales antérieures à 1790: Tarn-et-Garonne, Archives civiles: séries A, Fonds d'Armagnac*, ed. R. Maisonobe (Montauban: Imprimerie du Sud-Ouest, 1910): pp. v-xvi. All further references in this article to the *fonds's* history draw upon this introduction. For the history of Armagnac's expansion in the later Middle Ages see Philippe Wolff, "The Armagnacs in Southern France (14th-15th Centuries)," *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 20 (1943-44): 186-91 and Charles Samaran, *La maison d'Armagnac au XV^e siècle et les dernières luttes de la féodalité dans le Midi de la France* (Paris: Picard et fils, 1907): pp. 2-25.

⁷ For Montauban the inventory is *Inventaire sommaire: Tarn-et-Garonne*, op. cit. For Pau, *Inventaire sommaire des Archives départementales antérieures à 1790: Basses-Pyrénées, archives civiles*, ed. P. Raymond, 6 vols. (Paris, Paul Dupont, 1863-67). For Rodez, *Inventaire sommaire des archives départementales antérieures à 1790: Aveyron, archives civiles: séries B, C et D*, ed. Henri Affre (Paris: Paul Dupont, 1866).

⁸ Fredric Cheyette, *Ermengard of Narbonne and the World of the Troubadours* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2001).

⁹ Charles Higounet, *Le Comté de Comminges: de ses origines à son annexion à la Courronne* (Toulouse and Paris: Privat and Didier, 1949): pp. 544-55; 650-58, relates some of Marguerite's adventures. In the *fonds d'Armagnac*, documents related to her are at AD Tarn-et-Garonne A 33, 36, 38, 47, 59, 31. Of particular interest is the record of negotiations between her and her second husband, A 59, part of which is published in P. Durrieu, *Documents relatifs à la chute de la maison d'Armagnac-Fézensaguet et à la mort du*

comte de Pardiac, Archives historique de la Gascogne, 2nd series, fasc. 2 (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1883): pp. 40-44.

¹⁰ For Bonne's marriage: AD Tarn-et-Garonne A 36, 262. For the administration of Savoy and other property AD Aveyron C 1374, 1375, 1376, 1377, AD Tarn-et-Garonne A 210, AD Pyrénées-Atlantiques E 246, 284.

¹¹ Samaran, *Maison d'Armagnac*, pp. 45-51.

¹² "[...] dei gratia, comittisse Armanhaci et Ruthenensi, tanquam domine, gubernatricis et usufructarie ad vitam suam, tam ratione sui dotalicii quam ex dispositione et ordinatione egregii principis [...] viri sui [...]" Excerpted from AD Tarn-et-Garonne A 83 in *inventaire sommaire: Tarn-et-Garonne*, p. 103.

¹³ An edited example taken from royal chancery registers is that for Jeanne d'Armagnac published in Françoise Autrand, "'Hôtel de seigneur ne vaut rien sans dame:' le mariage de Jean, comte de Poitiers, et de Jeanne d'Armagnac, 24 juin 1360," in *Guerre, pouvoir et noblesse au Moyen Age: Mélanges en l'honneur de Philippe Contamine*, ed. Jacques Paviot and Jacques Verger, Cultures et civilisations médiévales, no. 22 (Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 2000): pp. 57-61.

¹⁴ For Armagnac and allied lines, see AD Tarn-et-Garonne A 23, 31, 33, 36, 43, 57, 60, 61, 262; AD Pyrenées-Atlantiques 237, 240, 242, 243, 246, 249, 269. For Isle-Jourdain most marriage contracts are preserved in the great cartulary called the "Saume de l'Isle," AD Tarn-et-Garonne A 297.

¹⁵ See Anne-Marie Landes-Mallet, *La Famille en Rouergue au moyen âge (1269-1345): étude de la pratique notariale* (Rouen: Publications de l'Université de Rouen, 1985). Jean Hilaire, *Le régime des biens entre*

époux dans la région de Montpellier du début du XIII^e siècle à la fin du XVI^e siècle (Montpellier: Causse, Graille & Castelnaud, 1957).

¹⁶ AD Tarn-et-Garonne A 228. On the aristocratic level of society, the fonds also contains many examples of cases stemming from marriage settlement disputes, such as that of Catherine de Penne over the castle of Saint-Cosme in 1397 (AD Tarn-et-Garonne A 66), and the long-running fifteenth-century dispute over the dowry of the countess of Comminges (AD Tarn-et-Garonne A 47, of which certain items have been published in Durrieu, *la chute de la maison d'Armagnac-Fézensaguet*).

¹⁷ E.g. Amy Livingstone, "Aristocratic Women in the Chartrain," and Theodore Evergates, "Aristocratic Women in the County of Champagne" in *Aristocratic Women in Medieval France*, pp. 44-73 and 74-110, respectively.

¹⁸ For the living arrangements of spiritually inclined women in the pre-Albigensian period see Elisabeth Magnou-Nortier, "Formes féminines de vie consacrée dans les pays du Midi jusqu'au début du XII^e siècle" in *La femme dans la vie religieuse du Languedoc, Cahiers de Fanjeaux* 23 (Toulouse: Privat, 1988): 193-216. The preponderance of women within Catharism was convincingly challenged, however, by Richard Abels and Ellen Harrison, "The Participation of Women in Languedocian Catharism," *Medieval Studies* 41 (1979): 215-51.

¹⁹ Kathryn A. Lowe, "The Nature and Effect of the Anglo-Saxon Vernacular Will," *The Journal of Legal History* 19 (1998): 23-61.

²⁰ Timur Pollack-Lagushenko is exploring the contributions made to the culture of the court of Armagnac by Bonne and other northern wives of southern noblemen using their death

inventories. Some of his conclusions will be presented as a conference paper entitled "The Political and Cultural Role of the Armagnac Household during the Late Middle Ages" at the Second Annual Symposium of the International Medieval Society – Paris, June 30 to July 2, 2005.

²¹ AD Tarn-et-Garonne A 56, 57, 58.

²² Édouard Forestié, "Comptes et mandements des receveurs et maîtres d'hôtel du vicomte de Fézensaguet (1365-1372)," extract of *Bulletin d'histoire et philologie du Comité des travaux historiques et scientifiques* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1898): pp. 229-42.

²³ AD Tarn-et-Garonne A 169, 317; AD Aveyron C 1237, 1330, 1332, 1333, 1343, 1361, 1362.