Pilgrim, Pastor, Pauper, Spy: The Case of Pierre de Praxelier

OVERVIEW

This book project examines the intersection of pilgrimage, poverty, illness, and crime along the border of Spain and France during the wars of religion in the late sixteenth to mid seventeenth centuries. Early modern Europeans experienced over a century of nearly continuous warfare, famine, displacement, and economic crises, much of which stemmed directly from cataclysmic political realignment of the European superpowers in the aftermath of the Reformation. I investigate how existential anxieties over security, safety, and belonging were expressed by ordinary people, and how against the backdrop of religious war, localities initiated their own processes of exclusion and turned the law upon the poor and those living on the margins of society. Some of these impulses to exclude were centuries old, yet they acquired new urgency during the early modern crises.

I investigate these critical issues of borderland tensions and fear of foreigners through the human story of an unfortunate traveler named Don Pierre de Praxelier. Praxelier was a sick priest, on pilgrimage from France through Spain, who was arrested on charges of espionage in Navarre in 1636. Praxelier’s identity was uncertain, as he was suffering from epilepsy and memory problems, and he was carrying multiple conflicting travel passes and alms licenses. Like so many other marginalized individuals in the early modern period, he did not fit neatly into the categories of pilgrim, pauper, nor vagrant criminal. His arrest initiated a complex investigation, in which municipal, church, and royal authorities struggled identify him and verify his backstory by drawing upon remarkably complex forensic technologies.

This mystery-laden narrative makes my project a perfect fit for Paul Oscar Kristeller research fellowship, for it embraces the ways in which the past puts into historical perspective the human costs of modern crises and anxieties. I approach Praxelier’s trial comparatively, contextualizing it alongside primary source material from archives in Spain and France, and the result is a story that is much bigger than that of a simple sick priest. Set in the world of expanding courts and nascent nation states with a growing interest in policing their citizens and defining communities by exclusion, Praxelier’s dossier illuminates the contrast between credulity and reason, and the role localities could assume in protecting national security. Most importantly, it shows how and why communities attacked the marginalized, labeling them as threats and non-members.

INTERVENTION

This project revises key assumptions that have shaped how historians conceptualize premodern views of foreigners and the permeability of borderlands, as well as epistemology, evidence, and law in the early modern period. Intellectually, my project contributes to our understanding of the practice of early modern criminal law, how ordinary people evaluated proof and weighed facts, and the sophistication of forensic technologies. Following Praxelier’s arrest, the townspeople and authorities coordinated resources to launch a complex investigation involving medical observation and the re-enactment of travel routes to verify Praxelier’s intentions and alleged identity. They drew upon the testimony of “expert witnesses” to weigh charges of espionage against the possibility of mental illness. Praxelier’s epileptic fits were recorded in detail: authorities observed him as he seized, fell down, and lost his recent memory.
Together they coordinated efforts to recreate his alleged path, and to test his alibi—essentially combining their local and jurisdictional expertise to determine the truth of his narrative. The dossier also provides a glimpse into the ways in which early modern authorities and communities sought to identify foreigners and unknown individuals, including constructing a blind criminal line-up: something that should have been impossible, based upon how early modern people understood and documented identity vis-à-vis clothing and physical markers.

In my hands, Praxelier’s story becomes an apparatus for testing the variability of archival interpretation. Shepherding readers through this world of crisis, this book considers how the same evidence looks different, depending on what questions we ask of it: if we are interested in the treatment of the mentally ill, how would we read Praxelier’s trial? By contrast, if we are interested in early modern pilgrimage, or diocesan reform, or local policy, how would we approach this trial differently? I will divide the book into eight chapters, arranged loosely under the four themes of Pilgrim, Pastor, Pauper, Spy (i.e., the Pilgrim section has twin chapters on pilgrimage and identification of foreigners; Pastor on crimes among and reformation of the lower clergy; Pauper on treatment of the poor and mentally ill; while Spy addresses espionage and tensions along border regions). Each chapter guides readers through one historiographical perspective, while also grounding the trial alongside related records from other archives in Northern Spain.

**Research Plan**

An RSA short-term research fellowship will help support two months of critical archival research in Spain and France, from May–June 2022. The archives for this project are all open for only limited hours each day, and in my experience, I have found it works well for me to transcribe documents in the morning and write in the afternoon. I will base myself for the first month in Pamplona at the Archivo General de Navarra and the Archivo Diocesano de Pamplona. From Pamplona, I will take short trips to other archives. Essentially, I will follow (via the archives) the route Praxelier allegedly traveled and that functionaries tried to recreate during the investigation by visiting the smaller archives in Aragon (Zaragoza, Huesca, and Jaca) that figure into the earlier stages of Praxelier’s journey before his capture. The first week of June will bring me to France to the departmental archives in Pau and Toulouse. During the middle two weeks of June, I will collect evidence on the capture of spies and concerns about migrants and travelers crossing the Iberian borderlands at the Archivo General de Simancas (Valladolid) and the Arxiu de la Corona d’Aragó (Barcelona). I will spend the last week in Madrid at the Biblioteca Nacional and the Archivo Nacional de España, working on social control and the institutionalization of the poor. I anticipate having a final manuscript of the book completed by early 2024.