

## Jean-Claude Schmitt, *Le Saint Lévrier*

*Peter Jan Margry*

As a student, I traveled in the south of France during a visit to my sister, who was then studying at the academy of arts in Aix-en-Provence. On May 2, 1981, I stumbled upon the oldest bookshop in Aix, the Librairie de Provence on the Cours Mirabeau. One table was dedicated to recently published regional and historical books. My eye fell on one of those inconspicuous covers that are typical of French academic publications. The book I noticed bore an intriguing title: *Le Saint Lévrier* (The Holy Greyhound; Schmitt 1979). It looked like a serious scholarly study of a rather unconventional, not to say a bizarre topic: a centuries-old Catholic cult of a dog, including a pilgrimage.

I had not heard of the author at the time. He was a young French medievalist, Jean-Claude Schmitt (b. 1946), who was on the cusp of becoming a well-known scholar. Decades later, an appointment as director of the prestigious École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) in Paris crowned his career. Schmitt belonged to the fourth (or maybe fifth) generation of scholars of that famed historical renewal movement, the so-called École des Annales. Schmitt himself was an *élève* of Jacques Le Goff, a medievalist who had developed an historical-anthropological perspective. Le Goff, and other scholars of the New History, focused their research on everyday life, and in particular on the life of ordinary people, while looking at long-term trends (*la longue durée*) in history, and seeking the help of other disciplines besides history. Schmitt's holy greyhound monograph was interdisciplinary, used a long-term perspective, and dealt with everyday life in rural France; above all it was a weird, extraordinary story based on a unique thirteenth-century document. No surprise, then, that Le Goff chose Schmitt's work for

publication in his book series, the *Bibliothèque d'Ethnologie Historique*, which sought to throw new light on societies past and present by studying traditions and everyday mores and habits from an historical-ethnological perspective.

The blurb on the back cover enticed me to buy the book. My subsequent reading of it on the sun-kissed beach of the Saint Tropez peninsula was an experience that formed my later career. While the wannabe *beau monde* around me was mostly interested in stars and starlets on their posh over-the-top yachts in the port, I was engrossed in the ancient 'gossip' and opinions on the odd star of Schmitt's study. It is fitting and ironic that the same Schmitt two years later published an ingenious volume of collected essays which united these two worlds, apparently so different: *Les saints et les stars* (Schmitt 1983).

During the first years of my studies, my historical interest had been triggered by the seemingly paradoxical contrast between the mundane and the sacred, and I had already, to some extent, become acquainted with old and modern cults of the saints and the phenomenon of pilgrimage. While touring the Lot department some years earlier, I had scaled the cliff of Rocamadour. In the medieval shrine that stands atop, I had experienced my 'ethnological sensation' in the unexpected and fascinating encounter with an active and mysterious Marian pilgrimage cult. Later, in 1981, when I was studying medieval history, I was also working on a project and a book on contemporary places of pilgrimage, for which I documented old but still active devotional practices in the Netherlands with my Canon FTb and AE photo cameras (Margry 1982). My time scope already seemed to be of Schmittian proportions. But both experiences, in Rocamadour and the Netherlands, only had an impact on me years later when, in the late 1990s, I became involved in the discipline of ethnology at the Meertens Institute in Amsterdam. I got a job there thanks to the photo reportage of pilgrimages I had made years before.

Back to Schmitt and his greyhound. What was Schmitt's quest for a holy dog all about? The story dates from the early thirteenth century, when the papal inquisition in Rome was expanding and reinforcing its presence in France due to various heresies there, of the Cathars and the Waldensians, imposing stricter supervision upon those who deviated from the church's teachings. To that end, the pope appointed more inquisitors. The Dominican Stephen of Bourbon (1180–1261) received an early *mandato apostolico* in 1235. He set up base in the monastery of his order in Lyon, whence he supervised the rural areas to detect the presence of superstitions, heresies and demonic forces. While touring the Dombes region directly north of Lyon around 1250, he heard local peasants speak during confession about the unusual cult of a saint called Guinefort. He wrote down the stories he heard in a Latin report (Lecoy de la Marche 1877). He added this to his vast personal collection of exempla, the *Tractatus de diversis materiis predicabilibus*, which he used as material for his sermons, as warnings to the faithful against doctrinal errors. The main gist of the story that underlies the cult is as follows:

The lord and his wife lived in a fortified house near Neuville-les-Dames. Once while they were out, and while the nanny was otherwise occupied, a big snake

entered the room to strike their baby boy. But the lord's dog, a greyhound, was there and attacked the snake. The dog was wounded but managed to kill the reptile. During the fight, the cradle was knocked over, covering the baby, and shielding it from sight. As the dog was licking his wounds with bloodied mouth, the parents returned and mistakenly thought the dog had eaten the baby. In one blow the lord killed the dog with his sword. But then they found the baby alive under the cradle, and in the corner a dead snake covered with dog bites. It was only then that they understood the heroism of their dog. To honor the brave animal, they buried it in a well in front of the castle, covered the grave with stones and marked the spot with memorial trees. Not much later, the castle was destroyed through God's will.

Despite the disappearance of the castle, the rural population preserved a vivid memory of this extraordinary story about a brave and innocent animal martyr. Somehow the name Guinefort came to be associated with the beast, and people started to venerate it. Due to his role in the story, Guinefort began to be seen as a savior of children in peril and of sickly or feeble children, although the healing he brought did not come easily. The necessary rituality that emerged was not that of ordinary Catholic devotion. Apart from the fact that the veneration concerned a dog, inquisitor Stephen of Bourbon was especially intrigued by the strange rituals surrounding the cult, and he began to immerse himself in the case. Successive generations of ritual specialists, 'witch-like' old women, taught visitors to the shrine how to establish meaningful contact with the 'saint.' Rituals that Stephen of Bourbon noted included dunking a child nine times in the nearby Chalaronne river, tossing the baby back and forth between the mother and the old woman, offering salt, hanging pieces of clothing in the trees and hammering nails into the trees. But what struck him most was the ritual prescription for mothers to leave their sick baby fully naked between two of the memorial trees, place burning candles beside the child's head and then leave, go out of visual and hearing reach, until the candles were fully burned. In the meantime, the fauns and demons of the forest supposedly decided whether or not to take the child's illness from it. The involvement of fauns confirmed the superstitious and pagan character of the cult for Stephen of Bourbon. But the risky rituals sometimes caused the death of children thus left behind. The inquisitor no longer had any doubt as to his duty in this case: the cult had to be eradicated. He had the dog's bones dug up and burned, together with the sacred memorial trees which were chopped down. After the bonfire, he summoned the locals to the site and warned them earnestly that anyone who would ever support this superstition again, would be punished harshly. Stephen of Bourbon felt victorious and presumed that the destruction wrought and his speech were sufficient to stamp out the cult.

Despite the fearsome reputation of the inquisition in relation to heresy in those parts of France, the people continued their practices in honor of Guinefort. The healing of sick children more than outweighed the admonitions of church. Six centuries later, Schmitt found proof in the diocesan archives that a bishop who had made a pastoral visit in 1826 had encountered people who still venerated Guinefort

there, while learned clergy and lay historians at the time debated whether this saint had been a man or a dog. Stories and practices continued up to the 1930s, still facilitated by an old enchantress. Not only historians were puzzled: over the centuries, the church authorities failed to uphold their rigorous ban, as they permitted a Guinefort chapel to be built at the site; the chapel was still standing in 1632.

All that remains today in terms of visible objects is the ‘sacred’ forest. It is still named after the saint and is situated along the D7 road southeast of Châtillon-sur-Chalaronne. The archeological annex in Schmitt’s book mentions the possibility of remains on the site of a former thirteenth-century *castrum*, a castle or a fortified dwelling, as described in the story. The forest is easy to trace on Google Maps. The *Bois de Guinefort* is indicated with a marker on the map as one zooms in. To my surprise, it contains a link which describes the site as a ‘religious destination,’ whatever Google Maps may mean by that. It is probably a reference to the continuing story of Guinefort.

Schmitt’s in-depth study focuses on a specific ‘folkloristic’ practice over a very long period of time, in a very limited geographical space. He was alerted to its existence only through the lucky find of a document that, apart from the legal content, also mentioned the rituals practiced there and the legend upon which the case was based. Schmitt was able to unscramble the story, to distinguish old templates from ancient exempla, and biblical or patristic topoi from thirteenth-century or newer elements of the story. As it turns out, the story is a bricolage of later medieval accretions to an archetypical Indo-European storyline (Marzolph 2020: 45–48). This storyline, a primal legend, is about animals who save children, and it can be traced back to India’s Sanskrit literature, at least as far back as the sixth century BCE. The original legend featured a mongoose, not a dog, as the savior. Later, in the eighth century, an Arab version appeared, and translations of this circulated in Greek, Hebrew and Latin, and in the twelfth century also in Old French. Moreover, there were other popular saints called Guinefort, including the martyr Guniforto in Pavia, Abbot Guinefort in Bourges and Bishop Millefort, also known as Guinefort, in Picardy. Schmitt found no fewer than 59 sites where a saint called Guinefort was venerated in Italy and France, in all sorts of variations. The cult of ‘our’ Saint Guinefort was brought from the original shrine in Pavia to the Lyon region by monks, and subsequently became associated with the wondrous dog. With its specific local interpretation and rituals, the forbidden cult was able to survive in this rural area, where it still existed in the same location in the twentieth century, albeit in a somewhat modified way.

What struck me in this book in 1981 was Schmitt’s broad approach and his use of a wide variety of auxiliary and complementary disciplines to unravel the tangle of folktales, legends and hagiographies, as well as the attendant variations, mutations, confusions, misinterpretations and fantasies that were related over the centuries with this weird canine myth. Apart from historical analysis, with which he was familiar through training, Schmitt applied elements of ethnology, anthropology, archeology, onomastics, etymology, topography, iconography, chronology,

cartography, mythology, folkloristics, and hagiography in his study. He went *ad fontes*, to the original sources, but also did contemporary ethnographic fieldwork. This combination immediately appealed to me at the time, and it stimulated me to include more of these subsidiary fields in my own study. It felt as if I had encountered an older and wiser brother with whom I was united in professional kinship, although I actually never met him personally.

Rereading parts of Schmitt's work today, I realize that the book has aged somewhat. The unreflective designation of religious practices as *folklorique*, for example, has become outdated. Nor does the structuralist approach, so characteristic of French anthropology and of the *Annales* at the time, fully satisfy any longer. The nearly binary opposition that is implied between learned church culture and popular culture or 'folklore,' and the strong connection that is made with feudalism, feel too rigid and schematic to me. Admittedly, Schmitt's book is a splendid expression of the *Annales* creed—the *longue durée*. But at the same time, there is a huge gap in the six centuries that it spans: there is hardly any information on the period between 1250 and the nineteenth century. This is of course hardly Schmitt's fault, and we must instead congratulate him that his fluke find in the archives allowed him to write such a special study.

In the *New York Review of Books* (April 30, 1981), the American medievalist Lester Little compared Schmitt's study to Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's *Montaillou* (1975) and Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms* (1976), no less, as these two bestsellers were also based on accidental finds in inquisition archives. Little figured that *Le Saint Lévrier* could also become an influential model study of preindustrial culture in Europe. But as Schmitt operated differently, in an unpolished methodological, almost 'technical' way, his book never gained a similar public success and influence. Stephen of Bourbon's own story fared rather better, because in 1987 it was turned into the French film *Le Moine et la sorcière* (The Sorceress) by Suzanne Schiffman.

Since then, as things sometimes go, I had my own fluke find: a file in the archives of the Roman inquisition. It dated not from the Middle Ages but from 'my' own twentieth century, but it was no less extraordinary. In the meantime, I too had learned to apply various disciplines and I tried to 'polish' the narrative a little more thoroughly than Schmitt did, to reach out to a wider audience, in particular to the faith community of the Dutch diocese of Breda, which was itself involved in and traumatized by the events. They were still more or less unaware of what had happened in the village of Welberg when a very popular apparitional and stigmatist cult there was wiped out in 1951 by the Vatican in one fell swoop. Again, an historian-ethnologist had his opportunity to bring a surprising story to light (Margry 2021).

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