

1. Title: Power in feudal societies: the case of Montaillou

2. Knowledge and didactic objectives

- *Learning about the structure of medieval societies*
- *Power of different types (within larger societal structures, within family units)*
- *Understanding the impact of religious power in the middle ages*
- *Grasping the idea of microhistory and learning to consider both the macro and the micro levels in history*

3. Timing

120 minutes or more to be divided into several session.

4. Grouping of students

Individual work, whole class discussion

5. Historical thinking skills

Historical significance, historical empathy, interpretation of evidence

6. Development or sequence of the activity

The activity has five phases (A–E) the order of which can be changed by the teacher. However, it is recommended to start with phase A, so that sourcing precedes other phases.

- 1. Begin with providing the necessary historical context to students (https://historylab.es/wp-content/uploads/4_topic_plantilla.pdf). Students can discuss the key concepts introduced in the background information (nobility, aristocracy, feudal society etc.), either in small groups or with the whole class. (15-20 minutes)*
- 2. Phases using documents A– E worked on individually (alternatively in small groups). Although group work has advantages, individual work may benefit especially those students who tend to be less active in groups. Students are expected to construct written answers in phases A – E.*
- 3. It is recommended that the five phases are completed during several*

sessions/lessons. One phase can take time anywhere from 10 to 30 minutes.

4. After completing all the five phases, the teacher will organize a whole class discussion, which would focus on the concepts of micro and macro histories. Text F can be utilized as an introduction to the discussion and as an example of how historians consider the advantages and challenges of microhistory. This discussion also reflects on the historical significance of the topic studied: whether it is important to learn about cases such as Montaignou and if yes, why.

7. Assessment techniques and instruments

What to assess

Summative assessment in the form of an exam or test is not viable for this assignment because on the one hand, this activity is mostly concerned with the life of an individual village (Montaignou). Therefore assessing students' knowledge on broader issues of Medieval societies would not count as valid assessment. On the other hand, while assessing students' knowledge on the details of life Montaignou may be possible, it does not lead to meaningful learning. Instead, teachers can assess students' historical empathy through a short writing task:

Write a first-person narrative/description of what a day of a Montaignou inhabitant may have looked like. Choose what role that person has in the society, what gender they represent and what their religion may be (Cathar/non-Cathar). Take all these aspects into account when writing about a day in Montaignou. Use all the sources provided in the activity and if possible, look at some passages in Ladurie's book.

When to assess

Part of the assessment is formative and takes place during the final whole class discussion. After the activity the teacher assesses the task introduced above.

8. Complementary resources

Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie (1979). Montaignou: The Promised land of Error. New York: Vintage Books.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fq2TsHtbWpE>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ruEqXoAwPxI>

<https://jamespetersnell.wordpress.com/2015/11/03/montailou-and-memory/>

<https://www.nytimes.com/1982/12/12/books/taking-a-wife-in-southern-france.html>

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2001/08/06/good-and-evil>

Power in medieval life: the case of Montailou

The aim of this activity is to investigate different types of powers existing in a medieval society and look into the everyday lives of people. Although in general only little is known about the everyday lives of people living in the middle ages, there is vast source material concerning the village of Montailou located in present day France. The life in Montailou was well documented because a rigorous Inquisition was carried out there by Bishop Jaques Fournier in the early 14th century when Catholicism had been challenged by different types of heretical movements. Catharism (also known as Albigensianism) had been one of the main heretical trends in Christianity in the middle ages. During Fournier's Inquisition all the 200–250 inhabitants of the village were interviewed. Although the Inquisitors were mainly concerned with religious matters, the interviews have revealed a great deal about other aspects of people's lives. In 1975 a French historian Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie published a book *Montailou*, where he used the Inquisition Registers as historical evidence. This work is considered microhistory, as it focuses on one specific village and individual people. In the following you will examine excerpts from Le Roy Ladurie's work *Montailou*, both his own interpretations as well as primary sources included in the book.

Begin the activity by reading the historical background of the topic *Aristocracy, nobility and political power: changes and permanences in their position of power in Europe* (https://historylab.es/wp-content/uploads/4_topic_plantilla.pdf)

A. Evidence and interpretation

We know about the life in Montailou through Fournier's inquisition Records, which were then interpreted by Le Roy Ladurie in the 20th century.



- Consider the reliability and usability of the primary sources used by Le Roy Ladurie (the Inquisition Records). What should one take into account when interpreting them?

B. Types of powers

Read the following excerpt by Le Roy Ladurie (1975) which describes four different types of powers in Montailou. Afterwards, answer the questions. take a stand on four claims about the power structure in Montailou. Use also the background information.

"In the foreground, of course, were political and feudal powers. These exercised the chief controls – in theory. In the case of Montailou, political and feudal powers united in one hand, the noble though somewhat distant hand of the Comte de Foix [count of Foix]. The Comte was sovereign over the whole of the Pyrenean principality which was called the Comte de Foix and included Montailou. Apart from his over the principality as a whole, the Comte was also the lord of Montailou itself (other parishes had lords other than the Comte). The house of Foix had two on-the-spot representatives in Montailou: the châtelain and the bayle (...). The second power was theoretically nothing to do with that of the manor and the bayle. It belonged to the Dominican Inquisition in Carcassonne. The Inquisition had its own spies, semi-official police, and thugs. (...) The inquisition also possessed its notaries and jailers (...). The third power was the see of Pamiers [a seat of Bishop's office]. Theoretically ruled from above by the papacy [Pope] the Bishop in turn ruled the local 'hierarchy at Montailou: the priest and the vicaire (...). The fourth power, distant but endowed with much greater force of dissuasion, was the kingdom of France. The Comte de Foix was in a position of de facto dependence on France, which subjected him to pressures of varying intensity. It was always possible for the King, in Paris, to raise an army to come to the aid of the 'true religion'. So both France and its strength were hated by many mountain folk (...).

1. Take a stand on four claims about the power structure in Montailou. Use also the background information.
 - In medieval societies the power was decentralized and therefore weak.
 - Land was the most valuable form of possession/property
 - In feudal societies peasants were oppressed
 - The medieval society was unequal.
2. Compare the four powers described above and reflect to what extent same or similar powers have a hold on contemporary communities in Europe. What similarities and differences can you find? Is power nowadays more or less centralized?



C. Power experienced by Cathars

Read the following three accounts from the Inquisition Records and reflect on

- people's attitudes towards different powers
- what people considered the reasons for the Inquisition

"There are four great devils ruling over the world: the lord Pope, the major devil whom I call Satan; the lord King of France is the second devil; the Bishop of Pamiers the third; and the lord Inquisitor of Carcassonne, the fourth."

(Bélibaste, a Cathar of Montautou, p. 13)

"Bishop Jaques Fournier did us great wrong; he organized all the repressive against the people of Sabarthés, because they refused to pay him the tithes [one tenth of annual earnings, taken as tax to the Catholic Church]...he did this in order to seize the heretics' possessions"

(Bernard Clergue, a member of a prominent Cathar family of Montautou)

"I once knew a time when many noblemen in this region were believers in the goodmen [Cathars] and did not hesitate to speak freely on the subject...That time is past. The priests have destroyed these people and dissipated [wasted] their fortunes."

(Bertrand de Taix, a nobleman of the nearby area of Pamiers)

D. Nobility and peasants

Analyse the following excerpt and drawing. Compare the way they describe the relationship between nobility and the peasants. Explain possible differences.

The most important social divisions in Montautou seem not to have been between blue-blooded nobility and rural commonality. (...)The relationship of the various powers to the peasants of Montautou was not exclusively harsh or repressive. (...). The frontier between nobles and non-nobles was in general very fluid. A document of 1311, dealing with tithes [a tenth of annual produce or earnings] in upper Ariège, speaks of 'nobles', 'ignobles' [non- nobles], and 'those who pass or have passed themselves as nobles'(...)At the level of everyday life and the relations between men, and especially between women, but between men and women also, the relations of nobility to non-nobility were often pleasant and generally relaxed. Of course, they were tinged with a minimum of deference. But in themselves they gave no rise to problems.(...) Jaques Fournier's very



detailed account also shows that antagonism between nobility and non-nobility played no important role. (...) In general, in the period and the area with which we are concerned, this enemy was only an occasional and probably superficial phenomenon."

(De Roy Ladurie (1975). *Montaillou, the promised land of error*, pp. 10-13)



E. Power in families

Look at the three testimonies presented in the Inquisition Records. What can you conclude about the power structures in families? What kind of features seem to define power in families?

My son Raymond once used to carry victuals for the parfais in a scrip or a basket; and he never asked my permission to do so, for he was the master of my house

(Alazaïs Azéma, female. p. 34)

I am ruined, I have sold my possessions and enslaved my dependents, I live humbly and miserably in my son's house; and I dare not move.

(Stephanie de Chateuverdun, female, p.34)



I dare do nothing without my son's approval. Come back tomorrow, and he will lend you the mule.

(Bernard Rives, male, p. 34)

F. Common discussion

Montaillou is an example of microhistory because only one village is studied. Discuss,

- why we should care about the history of an individual village.
- what kind of knowledge can we gain from microhistory such as Montaillou?
- Is learning about Montaillou significant for understanding history in general?
- What would be an example of macrohistory?

For the discussion, read an excerpt written by a historian describing the advantages of microhistory:

"This article argues that microhistory (the intensive historical investigation of a relatively small subject) has four distinct advantages over traditional macro-oriented social history: it is appealing to the general public, it is much closer to reality, it conveys personal experience directly and, with all the lines branching out from the event, person or community in the focus of the investigation, it points towards the general. Since too heavy reliance on either of these four characteristics can produce specific distortions of the microhistorical work, historians should attempt to reach a balance."

István Sziujártó (2002) Four Arguments for Microhistory, *Rethinking History*, 6(2), 209-215

Disclaimer

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