



**UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)**

**[Review of: M.A. Vargas (2011) Taming a brood of vipers: conflict and change in fourteenth-century Dominican convents]**

Geltner, G.

*Published in:*  
The Medieval Review

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Geltner, G. (2012). [Review of: M.A. Vargas (2011) Taming a brood of vipers: conflict and change in fourteenth-century Dominican convents]. *The Medieval Review*, 2012(3).

**General rights**

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

**Disclaimer/Complaints regulations**

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.



[The Medieval Review](#) 12.03.17

Vargas, Michael A. *Taming a Brood of Vipers: Conflict and Change in Fourteenth-Century Dominican Convents. The Medieval and Early Modern Iberian World*. Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2011. Pp. xii, 354. 128 EUR. ISBN 978-90-04-20315-0. . .

Reviewed by:

Guy Geltner  
University of Amsterdam  
g.geltner@uva.nl

---

With scandal and disorder afflicting many of their close competitors, the Friars Preachers have long stood out as the most organized, cohesive, and focused of the medieval mendicant orders. The Dominicans' precocious constitution and their reputation as the papacy's weapon of choice as missionaries but especially as inquisitors combined to create a lasting image of a highly--indeed, at times ruthlessly--efficient outfit. Not that the brethren lacked opposition or challenges. Yet in Dominican historiography, much of it produced by the Order's learned members themselves, the main catalysts of decline were more often inclement external circumstances, including the Black Death and the papal schism, than internal strife. In stark and conscious contrast to its main mendicant rivals, then, the Dominican Order was construed as perfectly designed and, if only left to its own devices, unstoppable.

To this medieval perpetual-motion machine, Michael A. Vargas's *Taming a Brood of Vipers: Conflict and Change in Fourteenth-Century Dominican Convents* takes an iconoclastic hammer by exposing the structural deficiencies of the Dominicans' organizational culture, mainly focusing on the Province of Aragon, a territory covering much of present-day northeastern Spain. The book is revisionist through and through, offering both new evidence and a fresh reading of well-known sources, which expose and challenge key assumptions of mendicant historiography. As its title (a quotation, significantly, from a Dominican administrator) implies, the book is not untouched by sensationalism, and some of Vargas's conclusions will surely stimulate debate, above all concerning the applicability of his case study. For, as its subtitle underscores, the book does not argue for a multiplicity of Dominican experiences. Rather, it stresses how managing the Order's rank and file was everywhere as dangerous as it was unpleasant, and that that was a logical outcome of the Dominicans' famed but misunderstood constitution. Ultimately, attempts to address laxity and antagonism led to a major recalibration of the Order's original form of government, which Vargas typifies as "gentle totalitarianism," and "ushered in a wave of authoritarian extremism, first local and provincial, and finally, with the others' complicity, universal" (217).

After situating at some length the Aragonese Province within the context of its order and region, the book proceeds to dispose of a traditional narrative of the Order's thirteenth-century rise (in the face of adversity), fourteenth-century decline (as a consequence mainly of external impositions), and fifteenth-century reform. Instead, Vargas spotlights perennial problems provincial administrators faced and which merely surfaced under later circumstances as well as points to a continuity in behavioral patterns that came to be defined as deviant spectacularly late. Normative violations far exceeded what Vargas calls "bad-boy friars": both before and well into the fourteenth century "avidity, status-seeking, and thirst for competitive gain" were practiced alongside the pursuit of the better-known ideals of poverty and humility espoused by St. Dominic (152). There were other bugs in the Order's DNA, not least of which was a jarring de-emphasis on obedience, a staple of monastic discipline, and a visceral resistance to even supervised wandering, placing Dominicans uneasily close to the *gyrovagi* so vehemently detested by St. Benedict. Rather than a meteoric rise followed by a sudden, tragic decline, this book invites us to observe, first a "slow creep towards laxity" (159), then the creation of a "legitimacy gap," and finally the unfolding of "a crisis of honor" (279) which the Order's leaders struggled to address well into the fifteenth century.

So much for the Order's alleged golden age. In parallel, Vargas dismisses some of the usual explanations given for the Order's fourteenth-century "decline." Nothing if not thorough, his own brand of reforming zeal can however make too little of the available evidence. For instance, while Vargas convincingly demonstrates in Chapter Three that the Order was quick to recover numerically from the onset and ensuing visitations of the plague (as against a common emphasis on the brethren's decimation

during the Black Death), he ignores the potential harm of such ostensibly indiscriminate recruiting, if not for the Order's professionalism then at least for its public relations. There is, no doubt, some power in numbers. Yet, and to follow grumpy mendicant and non-mendicant observers (some of whose voices have been gathered in Rosemary Horrox's superb reader *The Black Death*), the Order's relative "stability" in this sense could have come at the expense of proper training as well as exacerbated its reputation for opportunism.

By far the book's main strength and enduring contribution lies in its sensitive use of the Dominican Order's provincial chapters' *acta* or annual proceedings. The Province of Aragon is unique in that many of its medieval protocols are not only extant but also published and accessible, and Vargas has done us a great service by indicating their presence and demonstrating their usefulness. Only Rome has a comparable series (also published), while other provinces have left only fragmentary records behind. Students of the Order have found these texts' amalgam of prescriptive and descriptive information highly appealing, but none to my knowledge have mined the Aragonese sources with such profit. In Vargas's able hands they are subjected to various kinds of analysis, from the statistical to the literary to the administrative, generating important insights about officialdom's capacities, its perception of the brethren's moral laxity, and the attendant dangers for the Order's reputation. One can, however, become too excited about the *acta*, as is evident from the ubiquity of long quotations of these already-published sources and their privileging above others. On the other hand, given the book's pursuit of broader statements, the Aragonese protocols are too infrequently juxtaposed with those of other provinces.

Indeed, and without diminishing from its achievement and often persuasive arguments, *Taming a Brood of Vipers* can at times be overly ambitious. Its movement from periphery to center and back again is at once too detailed for a monograph and too imbalanced in its coverage of parallel primary sources for a survey of early Dominican history, which at some level it is trying to be. I certainly hope that Vargas, or someone building upon his methodology and engaging insights, will one day produce a Dominican equivalent of John Moorman's *A History of the Franciscan Order*, albeit one even further removed from the Order than the latter, and certainly less reverential than William Hinnebusch's *The History of the Dominican Order*. Yet as it stands the volume's scope and structure pushes Vargas into all sorts of debates (such as medieval "national" identities) that lie far outside his focus and that might undermine less interested readers' willingness to profit from his extensive research.

This monograph, finally, is under-edited in perhaps less significant but certainly more annoying ways. An occasionally weak focus and overly long quotations from printed sources are more easily ignored than the numerous infelicities that beset the text and the notes. The ultimate responsibility for this lies with the author, of course, but it would be fair to say that the publisher has done a very poor job of bringing the manuscript to press. It contains dozens upon dozens of typos and grammatical and stylistic errors, and, more disturbing, there has been no serious attempt to standardize the critical apparatus, which cites authors and books one way in one note and another in the next, chapter after chapter after chapter. Nor has the index been spared: it is one thing to look for "Dante Alighieri" but I doubt that those curious about one eminent monastic historian will seek him under "David Knowles." From a book priced at well over EUR 100 and published as part of a prestigious series by a leading press we could, indeed should, expect much more.