

Princes, Prelates, and the Problem of Moneylending in Late Thirteenth-Century Western Europe

In 1274, the prelates assembled at the Second Council of Lyon issued a series of measures aimed at stemming the rising tide of moneylending in Western Europe. Most dramatically, they ordered all secular and ecclesiastical authorities to expel from their territories any foreigners who were engaging in usury; refusal to do so would result in automatic suspension, interdict, or excommunication. The very severity of the expulsion decree – only heretics had previously been subject to such a penalty – was a tacit admission that even the severest of spiritual and sacramental punishments for Christian usurers had apparently failed to impede their activities. The Church was therefore turning to the secular arm for assistance, hoping that earthly persecution might achieve what the fear of infernal torments had not.

The responses to the decree – enthusiastic cooperation, on occasion, but more commonly deliberate obstruction or simple indifference – not only highlight the dynamics of the interaction between secular and spiritual powers in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries; they also expose the fault lines in contemporary attitudes toward a rapidly expanding credit economy and its associated practices. This is especially evident in the conflict that arose over efforts to expel foreign moneylenders from the Brabantine town of Nivelles (twenty miles south of Brussels). At the behest of the prince-bishop of Liège, the abbess of the local monastery of St.-Gertrude's initially cowed the moneylenders into submission. They soon resumed their activities, however, this time armed with assurances of protection from the duke of Brabant. The resulting dispute spurred debates over the limits of ducal jurisdiction, threats of excommunication, and a sentence of interdict that remained in force for over three decades. By examining this conflict in the broader context of the decree's implementation, this paper aims to deepen our understanding of the crucial period toward the end of the thirteenth century when the increasing availability of credit suddenly emerged as a pressing and provocative issue for ecclesiastical and secular authorities alike.