

**MONASTIC CAREERS AND SCIENTIFIC MERITOCRACY  
IN THE 13<sup>th</sup>-CENTURY CHURCH:  
ABOUT JOHN OF TOLEDO, ABBOT OF L'ÉPAU, THEN CARDINAL**

**International Conference, Abbaye Royale de l'Épau (Le Mans), October 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> 2025**



**Organization : Le Mans Université, [TEMOS](#) Research Unit**

John of Toledo, one of the most influential members of the college of cardinals between 1244, when he became cardinal, and his death in 1275, remains a little-known figure despite his fame and influence in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The recently established link with John, first abbot of l'Épau, with whom he can be identified, reveals both the richness of this character's career and the interest of taking a closer look at his career, as well as the intellectual and political milieu in which he evolved. English by birth, he followed a university curriculum that led him to the dignity of Doctor of Divinity, although his presence is not yet attested in Oxford or Paris. A renowned physician, Arabist and Hebraist, alchemist and astrologer, he may well have acquired his knowledge from the many specialized Arabic works preserved in Toledo's libraries (which would explain his toponymic surname), although the circumstances of his eventual stay remain unknown. As a Cistercian monk, he passed through the Abbey of Clairvaux before being elected first abbot of l'Épau, the house that England's dowager queen, Berengaria of Navarre, founded near Le Mans around 1230. From then on, John of Toledo played an important role in the General Chapter of Cîteaux, which led to exchanges with the Roman Curia, and to his being called to Italy in 1241 to take part in the Council. Promoted to the dignity of cardinal by Innocent IV in 1244, he was both a fervent defender of the Cistercian Order, earning the nickname "White Cardinal", and of the English Church. Such a career path raises questions about the mechanisms behind his rise from the monastic world to the top of the secular Church in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. This congress aims to shed light on the trajectory that led him from his birth in England to the important role he played in the Curia for over thirty years, at a crucial moment in the political and intellectual evolution of the medieval West.

Papers will therefore deal with the environment and the institutions in which John of Toledo has been active in order to understand the links between them. In particular, they may address:

- The link between the Universities, and in particular theological studies, the monastic world and the first circles of the Church in the first half of the 13th century. To what extent were monastic orders pushing their members towards this pinnacle of learning? What benefits did the presence of theologians offer the Roman Curia?

- The role of scientific knowledge, particularly medicine, in promotion within the regular orders and the high clergy.

- The workings of the General Chapter of Cîteaux and the mechanisms for choosing its intermediaries for exchanges with Rome.

- The role of “protector of the Cistercian Order” within the college of cardinals: did monastic orders lobbies exist in the Curia?

- The role of defender of the Church of England within the same institution: how did geographical origins determine the political positioning of cardinals?

#### Bibliographical suggestions

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FISCHER, Andreas, *Kardinäle im Konklave. Die lange Sedisvakanz der Jahre 1268 bis 1271*, Tübingen, Max Niemeyer, 2008, p. 56-72.

NICOUD, Marilyn, *Les régimes de santé au Moyen Âge. Naissance et diffusion d'une écriture médicale, XIII<sup>e</sup>-XV<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Rome, École Française de Rome, 2007, t. I, p. 87-145.

VINCI, Maria Gloria, « Il cardinale cistercense Giovanni da Toledo († 1275) e gli interessi per la medicina e l'alchimia alla corte dei papi del XIII secolo », *Rivista Cistercense*, 17-1, 2000, p. 5-32.

PARAVICINI BAGLIANI, Agostino, *Cardinali di Curia e 'Familiae' cardinalizie dal 1227 al 1254*, Padoue, Antenore, 1972, p. 228-255.

GRAUERT, Hermann, « Meister Johann von Toledo », *Sitzungsberichte der philosophisch-philologischen und der historischen Classe der k. b. Akademie den Wissenschaften zu München. Jahrgang 1901*, Munich, k. Akademie, 1902, p. 111-325.

Papers will last 25 to 30 minutes (according to schedule). As far as possible, the organization will cover mission expenses in Europe.

Proposals (1,500 to 2,000 characters, including spaces) are expected for February 3<sup>rd</sup> 2025. They will be sent to [colloquejeandetoledede@univ-lemans.fr](mailto:colloquejeandetoledede@univ-lemans.fr).

The conference will be followed by a publication. Texts will be expected by Spring 2026.

Working languages: English and French

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