

# The Cathars

## The Cathars

From the 12<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> Centuries groups of people called the Cathars lived quietly in various regions of Western Europe – Northern Italy, the Rhineland and, most especially, Southern France. They followed the moral teachings of Jesus, forsaking worldly goods and loving one another, but they did not believe in the basic theology of Christianity. They considered that the world was evil, that human beings were spirits imprisoned in the flesh, and that the soul could only be set free at death if one had lived a life of purity. The Catholic Church considered these beliefs heretical, and in 1208 Pope Innocent III called for a crusade to eradicate the heresy. Named after the inhabitants of the city of Albi which had a flourishing Cathar population, the Albigensian Crusade lasted from 1209 until 1229. After years of terrible violence and cruelty, most of those who professed Cathar beliefs were dead. All that now remains of these peaceful people are the ruins of the hilltop castles in which they sought refuge.

## Heresy and Dissent in the Middle Ages

The increasing secular power and the ostentatious luxury the Catholic Church were far from the life of poverty and compassion taught by Jesus. This contrast triggered dissent in various forms (Moore, 1985). In 1098 a group of monks left the Benedictine monastery and founded the order of the Cistercians. In 1135, Henry of Lausanne, who had taught throughout the South of France that the individual believer was more important than the church, was condemned as heretical. In 1143 and again in 1163, small groups of heretics who denied the authority of the Catholic Church were burned at the stake in Cologne. In 1173 in Lyons, a merchant named Valdes (also known as Waldo) began preaching a life of apostolic poverty as the way to salvation. His followers, who

became known as the Waldensians, were initially tolerated but later considered heretics.

The monk Eberwin of Steinfeld Abbey near Cologne wrote to Bernard of Clairvaux about the heretics of 1143. He was astounded by their fortitude in accepting death rather than disavowing their beliefs, and he tried to understand them:

This is their heresy: They say that the Church exists among them only, since they alone follow closely in the footsteps of Christ, and remain the true followers of the manner of life observed by the Apostles, inasmuch as they possess neither houses, nor fields, nor property of any kind. They declare that, as Christ did not possess any of these Himself, so He did not permit His disciples to possess them. 'But you,' they say to us, 'add house to house, and field to field, and seek the things of this world. So completely is this the case, that even those among you who are considered most perfect, such as the monks and regular canons, possess these things, if not as their private property, yet as belonging to their community.' Of themselves they say: 'We are the poor of Christ; we have no settled dwelling-place; we flee from city to city, as sheep in the midst of wolves; we endure persecution, as did the Apostles and the martyrs; yet we lead a holy and austere life in fasting and abstinence, continuing day and night in labours and prayers, and seeking from these only what is necessary to sustain life. We endure all this,' they say, 'because we are not of this world.' (Mabillon & Eales, 1896, p 390).

Bernard considered the danger of these apparently innocent heretics, and in his series of sermons on the *Song of Songs* (also known as the *Song of Solomon*), he expounded upon the verse

Take us the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil the vines: for our vines have tender grapes. (*Song of Solomon* 2:15)

He proposed that the vines are those of the Church and the little foxes are the heretics. He described the ways of their deceit:

They study, then, to appear good in order to do injury to the good, and shrink from appearing evil that they may thus give their evil designs fuller scope. For they do not care to cultivate virtues, but only to colour their vices with a delusive tinge of virtues. Under the veil of religion, they conceal an impious superstition; they regard the mere refraining from doing wrong openly as innocence, and thus take for themselves an outward appearance of goodness only. For a cloak to their infamy they make a vow of continence. (Mabillon & Eales, 1896, p 390)

In 1145 Bernard journeyed to Toulouse to challenge the teachings of the Henricians and to bring them heretics back to the teachings of the Church. The heretics refused to listen to him.

In 1184, Pope Lucius III, dismayed by the prevalence of heresy, issued the bull *Ad abolendam diversam haeresium pravitatem* (To abolish diverse malignant heresies). This initiated (or formalized) the Episcopal Inquisition: local bishops were empowered to try suspected heretics. Once convicted, heretics were handed over to secular authorities for appropriate punishment. The church did not wish to sully itself with their death.



Heretics were executed in various ways. However, the most common sentence was burning. The first such sentence to be carried out since ancient times was at Orleans in 1022 under Robert II (also known as the “pious”), King of the Franks. The fire gave the heretics a foretaste of hell “enacting in miniature the fate that awaited all those who failed to take their place within a united Christian society” (Barbezat, 2014; see also Barbezat 2018). An illumination from the *Chroniques de France* (1487) in the British Library shows the burning of the heretics. Noteworthy is the idyllic landscape in the background, and the complacency of the king and his followers.

### **Catharism**

Many of the heretics, such as those in Cologne and in the

South of France, were called "Cathars." The name perhaps derives from the Greek *katharoi* (pure ones), but the word may also have described the worship of Satan in the form of a cat. The heretics did not use the term; rather, they considered themselves "good men" (*bons omes* in the Occitan language of the South of France).

Most of what we know about the Cathars comes from the writings of the Inquisitors. The books and manuals that the heretics may have followed were burned. In recent years there has been much discussion and dispute (e.g., Frassetto, 2006; Sennis, 2016) about whether the Cathars were a linked group of believers (in essence a church) or whether that idea was a paranoid construct of the Inquisition used to establish terror and maintain the power of the established Church. Skeptics thus believe that a Cathar was anyone who disagreed with the teachings of the Catholic Church (Moore, 1987, 2012; Pegg, 2001). The more traditional view, followed in this posting, is that the Cathars were a specific congregation of believers linked to other sects such as the Bogomils in Bulgaria (e.g. Hamilton, 2006; Frassetto, 2008).

The Cathars were dualists, both ontologically – spirit and matter were distinct and antithetical – and theologically – one god created the spiritual world and a separate god created the material universe. In these beliefs they followed a long line of Christian heretics. The Gnostics of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century CE often considered the world in these terms. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century CE the Parthian prophet Mani taught that the spiritual world of light was separate from the material world of darkness. His followers believed that he was the reincarnation of earlier teachers such as Zoroaster, Buddha and Jesus. Saint Augustine of Hippo (354-430 CE) was a Manichaean before he converted to orthodox Christianity. In the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Centuries CE, a group of dualists called the Paulicians flourished in Armenia. In the 10<sup>th</sup> Century CE, followers of the priest Bogomil ("dear to

God" in Slavic) established in Bulgaria a sect of dualist believers that called themselves by the name of their leader (or vice versa). The Bogomils (Frassetto, 2007, Chapter 1) were condemned as heretics by both the Roman and the Eastern Churches but they persisted in their beliefs, and some of them travelled to Italy, Germany and France. A lost manuscript purportedly describes a meeting in 1167 between a Bogomil priest named Nicetas from Constantinople and several Cathar believers in Saint Félix near Toulouse (Frassetto, 2007, p 78). The authenticity of the document has been questioned, but the idea rings true.

The main beliefs of the Cathars were described by the Cistercian monk Peter of Vaux-de-Cernay who was with the army of Simon de Montfort during the Albigensian Crusade (Wakefield & Evans, 1991, pp 235-241), and are detailed in the 1245 testimony of Rainerius Sacconi, an Italian Cathar who converted and became a Dominican (Wakefield & Evans, 1991, pp 329-346) and in *The Book of Two Principles* written by an Italian Cathar, John of Lugio in the mid 13<sup>th</sup> Century CE (Wakefield & Evans, 1991, pp 522-591). Oldenbourg (1961), Roquebert (1999), O'Shea (2000), Smith (2015) and McDonald (2017) provide modern summaries:

(i) **Dualism:** The Cathars believed that there were two worlds – spiritual and material – and that each world had its own god. Human beings were spiritual entities imprisoned in the flesh. The spiritual world was the “Kingdom of Heaven” that Jesus described in his beatitudes and parables. In answer to Pilate’s asking him whether he was King of the Jews, Jesus had stated “My kingdom is not of the world.” (*John* 18:26)

(ii) **Reincarnation.** At death the soul migrated in another body. Such an idea is widespread in the religions of the East. There is no separate afterlife, no heaven or hell. Although the life of the flesh may itself be considered hell.



(iii) **Consolamentum**. If a believer wished to escape the eternal cycle of reincarnation, he or she could decide to live a pure life, abstaining completely from material goods and desires. Such people were called Perfects. The decision to become a Perfect was enacted through the ceremony of *consolamentum*, wherein one already a Perfect laid hands on the head of a believer who aspired to the life of purity. This was the baptism of fire. The illustration at the right shows an illumination from a 13<sup>th</sup> Century Bible in the Bibliothèque nationale de France: two Franciscan monks stand aghast at witnessing a ceremony of *consolamentum*.

If the Perfects maintained their state of purity, at death they would be released from reincarnation and united with the spirit of the good God. However, any lapse from the pure life – eating meat or any of the products of procreation (milk, eggs), indulging in sexual intercourse – would render them (and whomever they had provided *consolamentum*) no longer Perfect.

(iv) **Apostolic Life**: The Cathars followed in the basic teachings of Jesus. They used the Lord's prayer. They believed a compassionate life dedicated to the benefit of their fellows and in the rejection of all worldly possessions. In the latter they followed the injunctions of Jesus:

Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal:

But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal:

For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.  
(*Matthew 6: 19-21*)

(v) **Denial of Church Dogma:** Although they believed in the ethical teachings of Jesus, the Cathars rejected most of the teachings and sacraments of the Catholic Church. They denied the baptism by water, preferring the true baptism by fire. They refused the sacrament of marriage since they thought that procreation only served to maintain the endless cycle of reincarnation. They had no patience with the Trinity, and were uncertain about whether Jesus was God incarnate. Many of the Cathars in the South of France believed that Jesus was human and was married to Mary Magdalene.

(vi) **Oaths:** The Cathars refused to take oaths. In this they were following the instructions of Jesus

But I say unto you, Swear not at all; neither by heaven; for it is God's throne:

Nor by the earth; for it is his footstool: neither by Jerusalem; for it is the city of the great King.

Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black.

But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil. (*Matthew 5: 34-37*)

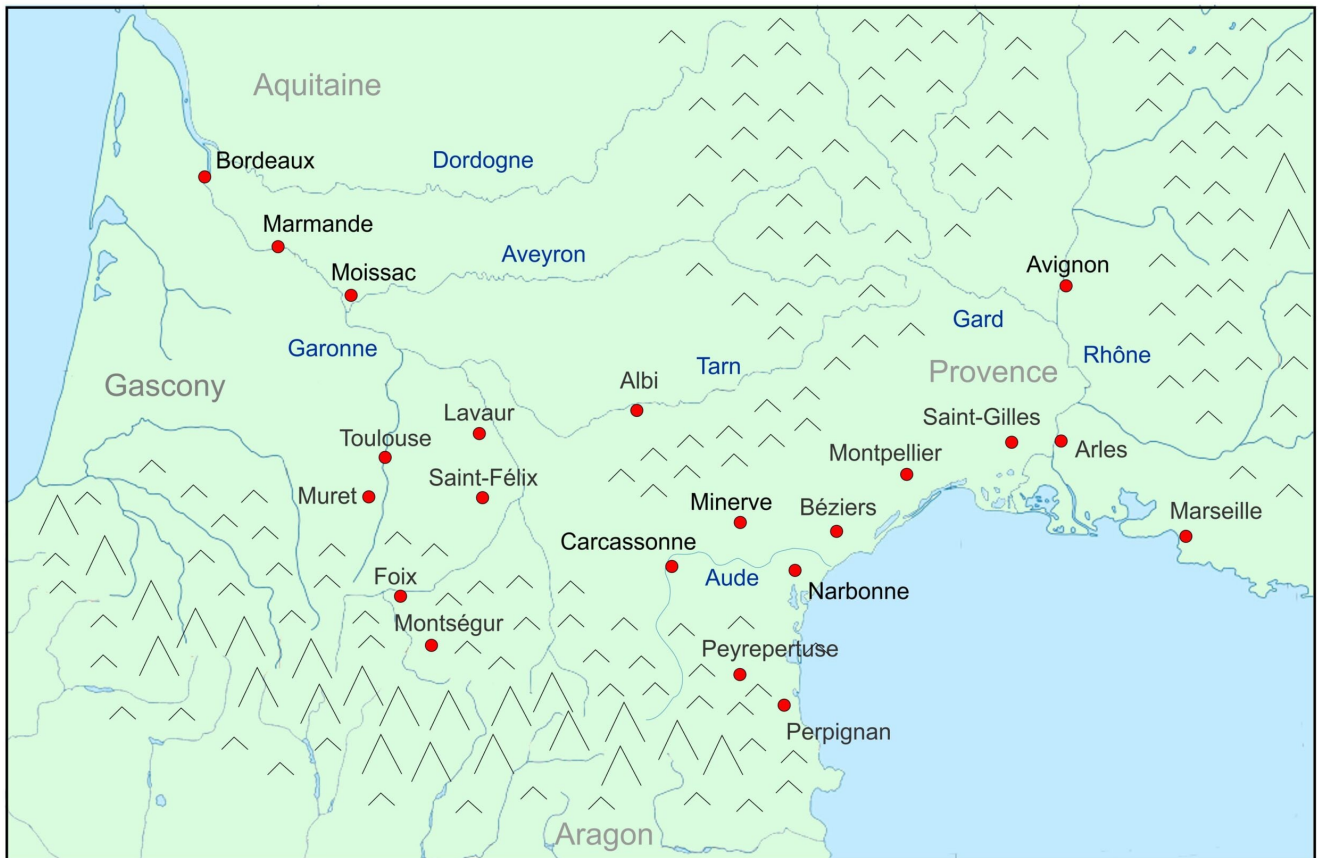
This was a severe problem in a feudal society, wherein all relations depended upon oaths of fealty.

(vii) **Role of women:** The Cathars denied that women should be subordinate to men. Many Cathar Perfects were women.

## Languedoc

By the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> Century the Cathar heresy had become widespread in the South of France. The language spoken in this region was Occitan or the *langue d'oc*. This Romance language used *oc* to mean "yes," unlike French or *langue d'oïl* which used *oïl* (later *oui*) or Spanish which used *si*. Each region spoke its own dialect of Occitan, the most prominent of these being Provençal in the east and Gascon in the west.

At that time, the Languedoc region, named after the language, was a patchwork of different political entities. The most prominent leader was Raymond VI of the Saint-Gilles family which controlled Toulouse and regions in Provence. Raymond-Roger II Trencavel governed the region of Carcassonne and Béziers. Raymond-Roger of Foix in the foothills of the Pyrenees was an important ally of Toulouse. His wife and sister had both become Cathar Perfects. All these leaders had feudal ties to Pedro II, King of Aragon in Northern Spain. The illustration below shows a map of the region:



Languedoc was flourishing. The land produced a bounty of wine, olive oil, and wool. Weavers abounded and cloth merchants became rich. The region was a major trading crossroads linking Spain and the Mediterranean to the North and West of France. Its leaders fostered tolerance. A large Jewish society fostered both trade and new learning. Much of the medieval development of the Kabbalah occurred in Provence and in Northern Spain (Boboc, 2009).

Life was to be enjoyed. Time was available for chivalry and courtly love. The poetry of the troubadours (Chaytor, 1912; Paterson, 1993) brought the rhymes and rhythms of Arabic poetry into the literature of romance languages. Dante called the Occitan poet Arnaut Daniel *il miglior fabbro* (the best [word]smith), and Petrarch called him the *gran maestro d'amore*. The following are a few lines with translation by Ezra Pound:

Tot quant es gela

Though all

things freeze here	
Mas ieu non puesc frezir	I can naught
feel the cold	
C'amors novela	For new
love sees here	
Mi fal cor reverdir	My
heart's new leaf unfold.	

### **Pope Innocent III**

In 1198 Lotario dei Conti di Segni became Pope Innocent III. He was aware of the dissension in the church and initially sympathetic to those who criticized priestly affluence. During his reign (1198-1216), he founded two new medicant orders: the Franciscans led by Francis of Assisi in 1209 and the Dominicans led by Domingo Félix de Guzman in 1216. The illustration below shows frescoes of Saint Francis (by a follower of Giotto c. 1300; Innocent III by and anonymous artist, c 1225 and Saint Dominic by Fra Angelico, c. 1440).



In 1202 Innocent III initiated the disastrous Fourth Crusade to the Holy Land. The crusaders, attracted by the hope of plunder and egged on by the Venetians, sacked Constantinople instead of freeing the Holy Land. Only a few crusaders refused to participate in the sack and travelled on to Palestine, among them Simon de Montfort.

Innocent III was particularly concerned by the Cathars in Languedoc and urged Raymond VI of Toulouse to contain their heresy. He sent many priests, among them Saint Dominic, to dispute with the heretics and to urge them to return to the church. Their efforts were to no avail. The following illustration shows two paintings by Pedro Berruguete from about 1495. The left represents a legendary meeting between Dominic and the Cathars. Books of Cathar and Catholic teachings were submitted to trial by fire. Only the teachings of the Catholic Church were miraculously preserved and rose above the assembled disputants. On the right Dominic presides over an *auto-da-fé* (Portuguese, act of faith) for the burning of heretics. However, there is no evidence that the saint participated in any trials of the heretics: he died in 1221 long before the Papal Inquisition was established in 1231. Berruguete's paintings were commissioned by the Spanish Inquisition founded in 1475. That institution with its frequent autos-da-fé was sorely in need of a founding saint, and was more concerned with terror than with truth.



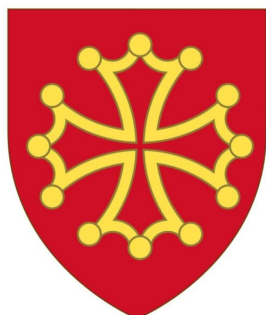
In 1207 the papal legate, Pierre de Castelnau, excommunicated Raymond VI of Toulouse. In January of 1208 Pierre negotiated with Raymond at Saint-Gilles but refused to absolve him. Pierre was then murdered at the Rhône River as he travelled back to Rome. No one knows who ordered his assassination but Raymond was held responsible. Raymond submitted to being scourged as penance for the death in June of 1209. However, by then the Pope had already called for a Crusade against the Cathars (or Albigensians) and Christian knights from the North of France had rallied to the cause, driven as much in hope for power and plunder as by desire to defend the faith. The Crusaders were led by the knight Simon IV de Montfort and by Arnaud Amaury (or Almaric), the 17<sup>th</sup> abbot of Cîteaux, mother house of the Cistercians. The following illustration from the

Les Grandes chroniques de France (14<sup>th</sup> Century, folio 374) now in the British Library shows Innocent III excommunicating the Cathars and the subsequent Albigensian Crusade.



Below are shown the coats of arms for the participants in the Albigensian Crusade. The upper line shows the powers of Languedoc and Aragon; the lower line the crusaders. The Pope's arms would have added a papal tiara and the keys of Saint Peter to the basic arms of the house of Segni. The kings of the Franks were from the house of Capet.

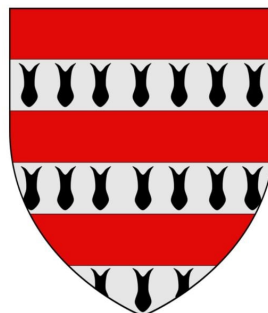
Toulouse



Aragon



Trencavel



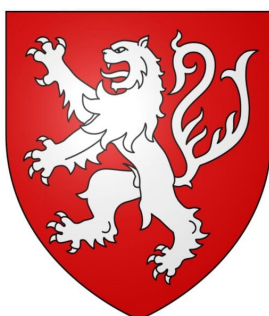
Foix



Segni



Montfort



Burgundy

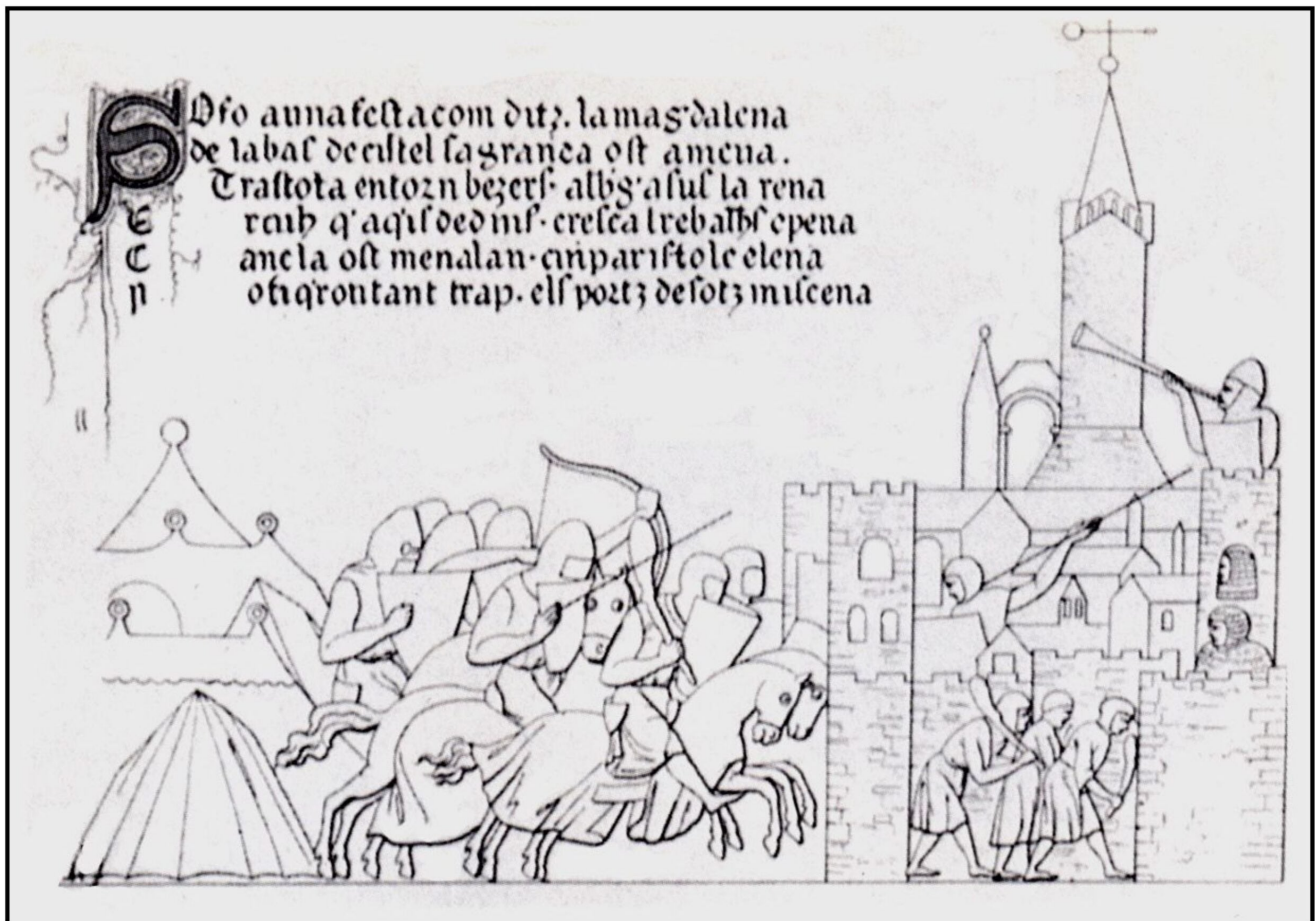


Capet



## Béziers

The first engagement of the Crusaders was the siege of Béziers, whose citizens were Catholic Cathar and Jew. The huge army encamped outside the city walls on July 22, 1209, the feast day of Mary Magdalene. The following picture is from the manuscript of the *Canso de la Crozada* (Shirley 2016). This epic poem was begun by Guillaume de Tudela and completed by another anonymous troubadour. The writing was likely finished by 1219 (the date of the last event it records), but the only extant manuscript comes from 1275. The illustrations were outlined in preparation for painting but, although the decorated initials beginning each section (or *laisse*) were illuminated, the outlines never were. (The actual illustration is from an engraving based on the drawing – the manuscript drawing is very faint):



The text in Occitan can be translated as:

On the feast of St Mary Magdalen, the abbot of Cîteaux brought his huge army to Béziers and encamped it on the sandy plains around the city. Great, I am sure, was the terror inside the walls, for never in the host of Menelaus, from whom Paris stole Helena, were so many tents set up on the plains below Mycenae (Shirley, 2016, laisse 18)

A minor skirmish between the defenders and the besiegers led to the gates of the city being left open. The camp followers and mercenaries stormed through and began looting the city. The knights followed. The result was a massacre. Various reports numbered the dead as anywhere between 10,000 and 20,000 people. No distinction was made between Catholic and Cathar. Everyone died.

A Cistercian chronicler later reported that Arnaud Amaury was

afraid that the Cathars in the city would falsely claim to be pious Catholics and escape to spread their heresy. When asked how to distinguish between believer and heretic, he is reported to have said *Caedite eos. Novit Dominus qui sunt eius* (Kill them all. The lord knows those that are his own). This may not be true, but he would have been familiar with the words, which derive from a verse in the New Testament describing how only true believers go to heaven.

Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his. And, let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity. (II Timothy 2:19)

## Carcassonne





The Crusaders then moved on and laid siege to Carcassonne on the banks of the Aude River. The city lacked its own supply of water and could not hold out for long. Under promise of safe conduct Raymond-Roger Trencavel therefore negotiated the surrender of the city. All the citizens of the city were spared but they were forced to leave without taking anything with them. The illustration on the right from *Les Grandes chroniques de France* shows them leaving the city without even the clothes on their back. Simon de Montfort was granted dominion over Carcassonne and Béziers. Raymond-Roger was imprisoned in his own dungeon in Carcassonne and died there within a few months.

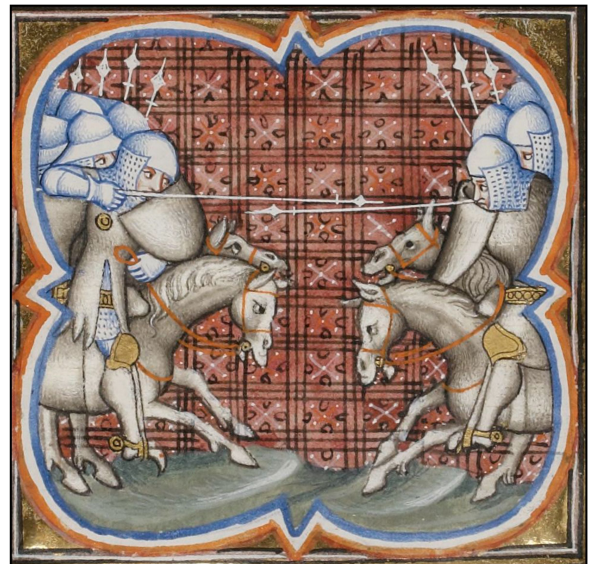
### **Mass Burnings**

After Carcassonne, the army moved on to besiege other Languedoc towns and cities. After a month of siege in 1210, Simon de Montfort accepted the surrender of Minerve, and agreed to spare its inhabitants. However, Arnaud Amaury insisted that they should all be asked to swear allegiance to the Catholic Church. One hundred and forty Cathar Perfects refused and were burned at the stake outside the town. This was the first of the many mass immolations that would recur throughout the crusade. Among the most heinous of these executions, four hundred Cathar Perfects were burned at Lavaur

in 1211.

## The Battle of Muret

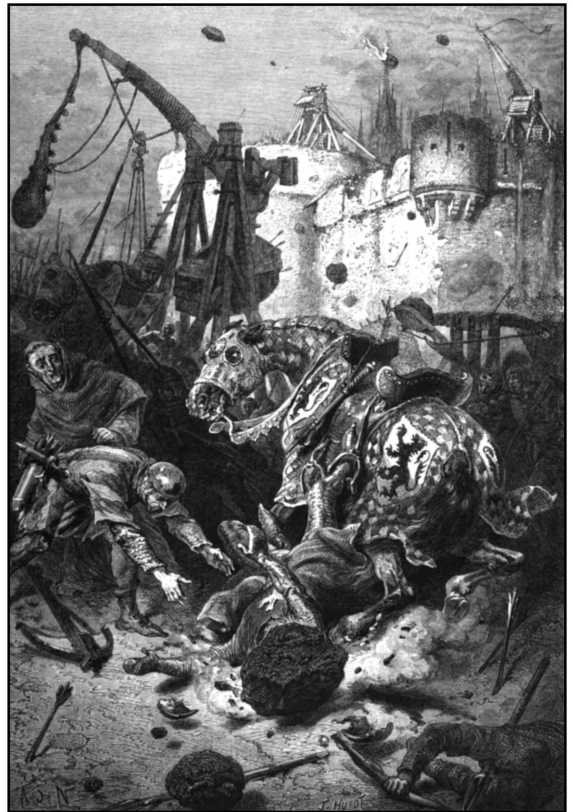
Simon de Montfort continued to take various towns and cities in Languedoc, but stayed away from Toulouse, which was large and well defended. Raymond VI of Toulouse negotiated support from Pedro II of Aragon and from Raymond-Roger of Foix and in 1213 a large army assembled on the plain outside the city walls of Muret just south of Toulouse, where the forces of Simon de Montfort were garrisoned. The crusaders were vastly outnumbered. Some reported a ratio of 10 to 1 although it was more likely 3 to 1.



Early in the morning of September 12, 1213, Simon de Montfort said his prayers and led his knights out along the Garonne River away from the encampment of the besiegers. After a while he turned and led a ferocious charge against the besiegers (see illustration on the right from *Les Grandes chroniques de France*). The southerners turned toward them but the knights of the Crusaders hit the besiegers at full speed shattering their defenses and breaking through their lines (O'Shea, 2000, pp 141-149). The result was a complete rout. Among the thousands of Toulousian and Aragonese dead was Pedro II. Less than one hundred Crusaders died.

## Toulouse

Toulouse remained unconquered. In 1215, the Pope convened the Fourth Lateran Council to broker disputes within the Christian lands. Raymond VI journeyed to Rome to plead the case for an independent Toulouse, but the council ultimately granted Simon de Montfort dominion over all of Languedoc. The crusaders, recently reinforced by prince Louis of France (later to become King Louis VIII), came to take up residence in Toulouse. In 1216, Raymond VI returned to regain his patrimony. Over the next two years the city changed hands several times.



On June 25, 1218, Simon de Montfort coming to the aid of his brother Guy who had been wounded in an assault on the city walls, was struck by a boulder launched by a catapult from within the city walls (illustration on the right from a 19<sup>th</sup>-Century engraving):

This was worked by noblewomen, by little girls and men's wives, and now a stone arrived just where it was needed and struck Count Simon on his steel helmet, shattering his eyes,

brains back teeth, forehead and jaw. Bleeding and black the count dropped dead on the ground (Shirley 2016, p 172)

The poet who wrote the latter parts of the *Canso de la Crozada* (Shirley, 2016) did not grieve the death of Simon. He reported that the crusaders took Simon's body to Carcassonne for burial, and imagined a fitting epitaph. The original version in Occitan gives a flavor of the rhyming of troubadour poetry:

Tot dreit a Carcassona l'en portan sebelhir  
El moster S. Nazari celebrar et ufrir,  
E ditz el epictafi, cel quil sab ben legir :  
Qu'el es sans ez es martirs, e que deu resperir,  
E dins el gaug mirable heretar e florir,  
E portar la corona e el regne sezir;  
Ez ieu ai auzit dire c'aisis deu avenir:  
Si per homes aucirre ni per sanc expandir,  
Ni per esperitz perdre ni per mortz cosentir,  
E per mals cosselhs creire, e per focs abrandir,  
E per baros destruire, e per Paratge aunir,  
E per las terras toldre, e per orgolh suffrir,  
E per los mals escendre, e pel[s] bes escantir,  
E per donas aucirre e per efans delir,  
Pot hom en aquest segle Jhesu Crist comquerir,  
El deu portar corona e el cel resplandir!

[Straight to Carcassonne they carried it and buried it with masses and offerings in the church of St Nazaire. The epitaph says, for those who can read it, that he is a saint and martyr who shall breathe again and shall in wondrous joy inherit and flourish, shall wear a crown and be seated in the kingdom. And I have heard it said that this must be so – if by killing men and shedding blood, by damning souls and causing deaths, by trusting evil counsels, by setting fires, destroying men, dishonouring *paratge*, seizing lands and encouraging pride, by kindling evil and quenching good, by killing women and slaughtering children, a man can in this world win Jesus Christ, certainly Count Simon wears a crown

and shines in heaven above. (Shirley, 2016, laisse 208)]

The word *paratge* in Occitan is difficult to translate. It derives from the Latin *par* (equal) and is thus similar to the English word "peerage." However, it had come to mean all that was good in Occitan society: equality, honor, chivalry, hospitality, *joie de vivre*.

### **The End of the Crusade**

After the death of Simon de Montfort, the crusade continued intermittently. Various strongholds in the domain of Toulouse were conquered by the crusaders. Louis VIII of France became the main leader of the crusade. He conquered the city of Marmande in 1219 but was unable to take Toulouse. Many of the Cathars retreated to mountain strongholds. Raymond VI died in 1222; Raymond-Roger of Foix died in 1223. Their heirs lacked their strength and charisma. Most historians date the end of the Crusade to 1229 when the Treaty of Paris was signed in Meaux, granting the Kingdom of France dominion over all the lands previously held by Toulouse.

In order to root out the remaining Cathars in Languedoc, Pope Gregory IX established the Papal Inquisition in 1231. Instead of allowing local bishops investigate heretics, the pope appointed itinerant inquisitors from among the ranks of the Dominicans and the Franciscans. Accompanied by clerks and lawyers, these inquisitors travelled throughout the region of Languedoc, seeking out heretics, bringing them to trial, and handing them over to the secular authorities for burning (Deane, 2011, Chapter 3) For their faithful service the Dominicans became known as the Dogs of God (*Domini canes*).

One of the last Cathar refuges to fall was Montségur (Occitan for "safe hill") a castle built on top of a steep and isolated peak known in Occitan as a *puog* (illustrated below). The castle was 170 m above the plain and the stronghold was virtually impregnable. In 1242 two inquisitors were murdered

by Cathars from Montségur. The French forces (now under Louis IX) began the siege of the isolated mountain stronghold in May 1243. Slowly and inexorably the French came closer to city until it was within range of their catapults. The castle finally surrendered in March 1244. About 220 Cathar Perfects were burned to death on the field below the puog. This became known as the *Plat dels Cremats* (field of the burned).



## **Saint Peter Martyr**

The Inquisition moved on from Languedoc to the Northern Italy. In 1852, Peter of Verona, a Dominican friar, was appointed Inquisitor in Lombardy. When returning from Como to Milan, Peter and his companion Domenic were assassinated by assassins hired by the Milanese Cathars. This is illustrated in a 1507 painting by Giovanni Bellini (see below). Despite the foreground violence one can see in the distance a countryside of peace and beauty. The woodsmen go about their work. The light from the harvest shines through the trees.



## **Albi**

In 1282 work was begun on the new Cathedral Basilica of Saint Cecilia in Albi, which was to become the largest brick building in the world. With its narrow windows and huge tower, it dominates the city like a fortress, a true bastion against heresy (see below). Above the high altar a vast fresco of the Last Judgement reminds the people of Languedoc of the torments that await those that do not follow the true teachings.



## **Peyrepertuse**

The history of the Cathars should not end with the formidable Cathedral of Albi. More fitting is the Cathar castle of Peyrepertuse (from Occitan *pèirapertusa*, pierced rock). It was finally surrendered to the French in 1240, and later became part of the French border defences.



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# **The Rise of Ravenna**

**The Disintegration of the Roman Empire**

Constantine the Great (reign 306-337) re-unified the Roman Empire and promoted Christianity as the imperial religion. For several decades after Constantine, the Empire remained stable. However, after the death of Theodosius I (reigned 379-395), the Empire fractured into Eastern and Western regions, each ruled by one of his sons.

In the 5<sup>th</sup> Century CE, the westward migration of the Huns into regions previously controlled by the Germanic tribes resulted in those tribes moving into the Roman Empire (Jordanes, 551; Heather, 1991, 1996; Todd, 1997; see map below). The Roman Empire often used warriors from the Germanic tribes as mercenary soldiers to help in the defense of the Empire from attack. However, it soon became impossible to integrate them into the empire, or to prevent them from establishing their own independent kingdoms. The Vandals moved through the Iberian Peninsula and settled in North Africa. The Visigoths (western Goths) occupied Northern Spain and Southern France. The Ostrogoths (eastern Goths) occupied the Balkans and the Dalmatian coast. Rome was sacked by the Visigoths in 410, and by the Vandals in 455.



During this time, the capital of the Western Empire moved to Ravenna, a city more easily defensible than Rome. This city grew rapidly in size, and became adorned with beautiful new buildings (Bovini, 1956; Bustachinni, 1984; Herrin, 2020). The two most important leaders during this growth period were the Empress Galla Placidia and the Ostrogothic King Theodoric the Great. Both were able to meld the best characteristics of the Roman and the Gothic cultures. Both left magnificent monuments lavishly decorated with mosaics.

## **Mosaics**

With the new Christian religion, religious architecture changed from temple to basilica. The inside of the basilica became a place for believers to congregate rather than for priests to consecrate. A whole new type of art arose to teach and to impress the faithful (Kiecol, 2019). Mosaics had previously been used to decorate floors but these had to be made of stone to support the tread of feet. Now mosaics were used to decorate the walls and the vaults of the churches:

Liberated from the scuffing of floors, mosaic could now include a wide range of fragile materials: colored glass cubes of saturated red and deep blue, iridescent fragments of mother-of-pearl, even gold and silver foil sandwiched in glass. Such reflective materials achieved a brilliance previously unknown ... The iridescent medium seemed actually to contain light in itself. A radically new aesthetic was in the making, a pointillism of glass. In so far as each cube had a slightly different cut to it, the play of light was endlessly varied ... In addition, the introduction of gold into the palette radically altered the balance of colors. Gold was at once the strongest and most spiritual color. Its possibilities fascinated the artist, and by the sixth century backgrounds of solid gold became common. Used as a sky zone behind the figures, gold created a timeless space that negated the succession of hours and seasons in our earthly skylines. By day it enveloped the figures in a haze of warm brilliance. By night, reflecting from innumerable oil lamps and candles, it blazed like a furnace in which the figures moved in unsubstantial silhouettes. (Mathews, 1993, p 95)

### **Galla Placidia**



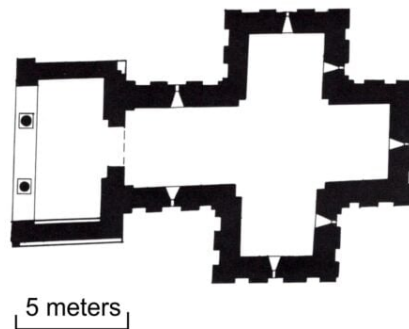
Galla Placidia (392-450), the daughter of Theodosius I, and

sister to the two Emperors, Arcadius of the East and Honorius of the West, was captured by Alaric, King of the Visigoths, during the sack of Rome in 410. A year later Alaric died in Southern Italy from a fever (perhaps malaria) and was succeeded by Ataulf. The Visigoths then moved to Southern France, and Ataulf married Galla Placidia in 412. They lived briefly together in Northern Spain, and had a child called Theodosius (after his grandfather) in 414. The child only lived a year, and infighting among the Visigothic leaders led to Ataulf's murder in 415. Famine led to the Visigoths negotiating with the Romans to become *foederati* (bound by treaty – *foedus*) within the empire. Galla Placidia was returned to Rome and married to Constantius III with whom she had a son Valentinian III in 419. Constantius III died in 421 and Galla Placidia became Empress Regent of the Western Empire until her son reached maturity. The gold *solidus* coin illustrated on the right identifies *D[omina] N[ostra] Galla Placidia P[ia] F[elix] Aug[usta]* (“our lady Galla Placidia, dutiful, fortunate empress”). Galla Placidia reigned as regent for 18 years from 425 to 437, and remained a force in the Western Empire until her death.

Galla Placidia built two new churches in Ravenna: the Church of St John the Evangelist and the Church of the Sacred Cross. In the last years of her life, she also built a special chapel off the narthex (western entrance) of the latter church as a mausoleum. The Church of the Sacred Cross went into ruin but the mausoleum remained. There has been much debate about the purpose of the chapel. Since Galla Placidia was ultimately interred in Rome, it is often termed the “So-called Mausoleum of Galla Placidia.” Mackie (1995) has suggested that the Emperor may have used it as a memorial chapel for her first-born son Theodosius, whose body she had transferred in a small silver coffin from Spain to Ravenna, although this was also sent on to Rome after the Empress died.

On the outside, the mausoleum is an unassuming brick building

in the shape of a cross, though the corners deviate a little from right angles (see illustration below).



Inside, the mausoleum is decorated with some of the most beautiful mosaics ever created. The ceiling dome shows a star-filled sky with a central cross. The four evangelists are represented in the corners of the dome by winged symbols: Matthew as a man, because he talks of Christ as the Son of Man, Mark as a lion because he begins his gospel with the roaring of John the Baptist, Luke as an ox because he described Christ's life in terms of a sacrifice, and John as an eagle because of the height of his rhetoric on the Logos:





Above the north entrance is a representation of Christ as the Good Shepherd. On the southern is a mosaic arranged around the window to show the gospels on one side and St Lawrence on the other. Beneath the window is the grill upon which St Lawrence was martyred.



The decorative work between the representative mosaics is gorgeously evocative. The blue ceiling work (see the above illustration of the Good Shepherd mosaic) has been described as suggesting the Garden of Eden, and the wall-like arch decoration is a marvel of light and geometry:



## Theodoric the Great

When the Ostrogoths threatened Constantinople in 461, the Empire negotiated a peace with the Barbarians. In return for gold the Ostrogoths would retreat to their lands; in order to guarantee their compliance Theodoric, the seven-year-old son of the Ostrogothic king was sent as hostage to the court of the Byzantine Emperor Leo I. Theodoric was educated in Greek and Roman and taught the ways of War and Politics.

After returning to his people in 470, Theodoric and the Ostrogoths spent a decade fighting against other Germanic tribes who were threatening the Empire. In 475 Theodoric became King of the Ostrogoths and the Ostrogoths became *foederati* of the Empire. In 479 Theodoric became the military commander of the Eastern Empire. The Goths were Christian but followed the beliefs of Arius, who had proposed that God the Father existed before God the Son. This differed from the Trinitarian concept espoused by the mainstream Catholicism of the Empire. However, the Arians were tolerated if they defended the Empire against the Pagans.

At this time Italy was in disarray. In 476 Odoacer, a warrior of uncertain Barbarian background, led a rebellion of the *foederati* in the Western army, deposed the Emperor Romulus

Augustulus, and installed himself in Ravenna as King of Italy. Most historians consider this to be the end of the Roman Empire in the West.



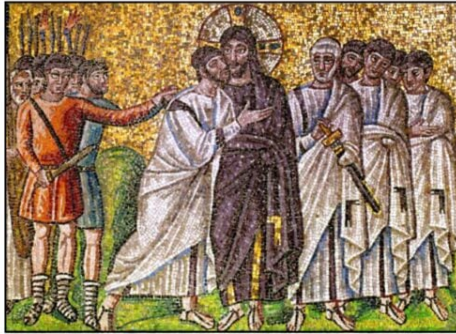
By 488 Odoacer had begun to threaten the Eastern Empire, and Emperor Zeno negotiated with Theodoric. In return for deposing Odoacer, Theodoric would be able to grant his people land in Italy. Over several years Theodoric moved his people into Northern Italy and fought against Odoacer. In 493, Ravenna was finally taken and Theodoric personally killed Odoacer. Theodoric became King of Italy, and effectively Emperor of the West. The large gold (triple-*solidus*) coin on the right shows *Rex Theodericus Pius Princ[eps] I[nvictus] S[emper]* (King Theodoric, pious ruler, forever invincible). He has a gothic moustache, and in his left hand he holds a winged victory. Theodoric arranged alliances with the Visigoths in France and the Vandals in North Africa. In this way he was able to maintain the Western Empire as a unified entity. He ruled justly without prejudice to either Roman or Barbarian.

During his 33-year reign, Theodoric was responsible for several wonderful buildings in Ravenna. He first built an imposing palace, no part of which now remains, although a façade was later built in imitation of what it might have looked like. Adjacent to the palace he built his magnificent

Church of Christ the Redeemer, which was dedicated in 504. The mosaics in the nave of this church are among the most important in the ancient world. Wikipedia has high-resolutions panoramic images of both north and south walls taken by Chester Wood, from which the following illustration was derived:



The small uppermost mosaics above the windows were the first set of mosaics in history to depict a sequence of scenes from the life of Christ (Cristo, 1975). The north wall shows Christ's miracles and teachings, and the south wall shows the events of the passion. Christ is clean-shaven on the north and bearded on the south. Although the image of Christ has varied between these two versions, the general tendency in the Byzantine Empire was to portray Christ as a *theios aner* (divine man) fully equivalent to the bearded God the Father. The beardless Christ on the north may be more Arian in its imagery (Mathews, 1993; Chavannes-Mazel, 2003). The following illustrations show the parable of the sheep and the goats (with perhaps the first visual representation of Satan in blue), the miracle of the loaves and fishes, the Last Supper, and the betrayal of Christ in Gethsemane.



Between the windows are the figures of individual saints or prophets, portrayed in a classical (Hellenic) style. Each figure holds a scrolls or codex. Most of the mosaics on the lower level of mosaics (below the windows and above the columns) were executed after the reign of Theodoric and are in Byzantine style. These show processions of saints and martyrs in a ravishing gold background, female on the north and male on the south, moving from Ravenna toward Mary on the north and Christ on the south. The following illustration is derived from photographs by Roger Culos on Wikipedia (north, south)

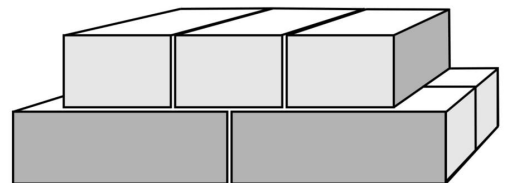


These processions are likely the source of what Yeats described in *Sailing to Byzantium* (1927):

O sages standing in God's holy fire  
As in the gold mosaic of a wall  
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,  
And be the singing-masters of my soul.  
Consume my heart away; sick with desire  
And fastened to a dying animal  
It knows not what it is; and gather me  
Into the artifice of eternity.

### **The Mausoleum of Theodoric**

In the last years of his life, Theodoric's hold on the Western Empire weakened. The Roman Senate attempted to revitalize relations with Constantinople; the Church in Rome wanted to eradicate the heresy of Arianism from Italy; the Vandals and Visigoths ceased their alliances with Ravenna. During this time, Boethius a onetime friend and counselor of Theodoric was accused of treason, imprisoned and ultimately executed (Bark, 1944). While in prison he wrote *The Consolation of Philosophy* (524).



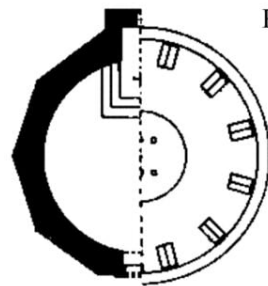
Sensing his own death, Theodoric built a tomb for himself just outside the walls of Ravenna. Unlike the brick buildings of the city, the tomb was constructed of marble blocks from the Istrian Peninsula in the Northern Adriatic. The walls were made of squared block of marble kept in place without mortar using the Roman technique of *opus quadratum* whereby higher

stones are centered over the joints between lower stones. A typical pattern is shown on the right.

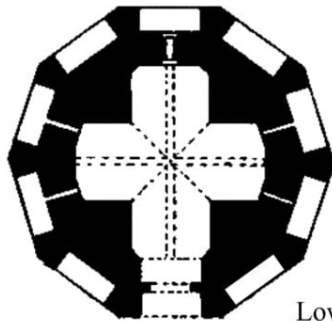
The mausoleum has a decagonal shape. The lower storey was likely used for memorial rites. The upper story contained a porphyry tub which served as a sarcophagus for the emperor's remains. The roof is made of a single circular slab of Istrian marble with a diameter of 10 meters and a weight of 230 tons. No one knows how this huge stone was erected over the walls. Some have suggested that this recalled the Neolithic dolmen monuments, in which a large table stone was supported vertical megaliths, but these date from millennia before the Goths.



10 meters



Plan of Upper Storey and of Roof



Plan of Lower Storey



The mausoleum is remarkably austere. Unlike the chapel of Galla Placidia, the tomb has no internal decoration. The upper chamber (illustrated on the right) has only the sarcophagus, oriented toward a small altar superimposed by a cross-shaped aperture. The roof has twelve spurs with the names of the apostles. A simple geometric pattern (shown below), likely of Gothic origin, is incised around its edge:



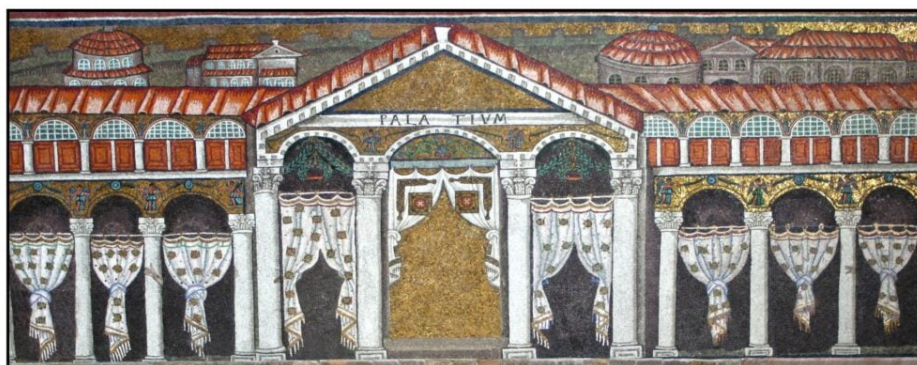
## Heresy

The Goths had been converted to Christianity in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century by Bishop Ulfilas (Gothic *Wulfila*, little wolf). A Greek who had grown up among the Goths, Ulfilas was baptised in 341 by Eusebius of Nicomedia, who had also baptised Constantine the Great. Ulfila created an alphabet for the Gothic language and translated the Bible. Eusebius, Ulfila and the Goths followed the teachings of Arius (256-336), who conceived of Christ as subordinate to the Father, created by Him and not co-eternal with Him. When the Council of Nicaea, convened by Constantine the Great in 325, settled on the essential beliefs of Christianity and wrote the Nicene Creed, Christ was proclaimed consubstantial or homoousian (*homos* same, *ousia* essence) with the Father. The homoiousian (*homoi* similar) view of Arius was thenceforth considered heretical. However, many Christians and even some of the early Byzantine Emperors, such as Constantius II (reign 337-361) persisted in their Arian beliefs. When Theodosius I (reign 379-395), the father of Galla Placidia, came to power, he held a Second Ecumenical Council in 381 to revise the Nicene Creed and make it unambiguously homoousian. Arian beliefs were eliminated from Roman and Greek Churches, but they persisted among the Goths.

After the death of Theodoric, the Byzantine Emperors exerted more and more influence on Ravenna. From 535-554 the Byzantine Emperor Justinian the Great (reign 527-565) conducted a war against the Goths. Ravenna was occupied by the Byzantine Army

and Theodoric's bones were removed from his tomb and scattered in the dust. The Roman Bishop Agnellus was placed in charge of the churches of Ravenna from 557 until 570. He proceeded to erase all evidence of Arianism in Ravenna. He reconsecrated Theodoric's Church of the Redeemer in 561 and renamed it after Saint Martin. (Years later in 856, the name was again changed to the Basilica Sant'Apollinare Nuovo).

It is generally assumed that Agnellus was responsible for changing the mosaics of the lower level in the church. The processional mosaics date from his time. It is not known what images they might have replaced. Most strikingly Agnellus altered the initial mosaics near the entrance of the church. On the south the mosaic of Theodoric's Palace likely contained portraits of Theodoric and his court. These portraits were replaced by curtains. On the north was a representation of the nearby port of Classe. No one knows who was portrayed in front of the port. That part of the mosaic was replaced by golden bricks.



These changes to Theodoric's Church were part of a *damnatio*

*memoriae*:

the modifications made to the space of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo can be considered an act of *damnatio memoriae* executed by a Byzantine administration that was eager to plant its hold in the West. Property was confiscated, images were destroyed, and the memory of Theoderic and his associates and successors was condemned. (Urbano, 2005)



However, the memory was not completely expunged. If one looks closely, one can see the hands of some of the courtiers on the arches of the façade (illustrated on the right). Theoderic's reign was not forgotten. And the goal of the Byzantines to reconsolidate the Roman Empire failed: the West devolved into multiple separate kingdoms and principalities. Ravenna persisted as a center of art and learning although not as an imperial capital.

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