

SPECIAL TOPIC

FIRES IN HISTORY: THE CATHAR HERESY, THE INQUISITION AND BRULOLOGY*

CATHARISME, INQUISITION ET BRÛOLOGIE

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The title of this article may seem unusual. For those who are not familiar with the history of Occitania, southern France. The Cathars are among the great burn victims of history. They preached an austere form of Christianity originating in the East and were opposed to a dogmatic, coercive Catholicism. They were exterminated by burning at the stake on huge pyres. This gives us the opportunity to describe the historical fresco of events that unfolded in southern France over nearly 150 years. The subject is of course a long way from our usual scientific preoccupations, but there is no reason why “brulologists” (burn specialists) should not take an interest in history and culture.

“Brulology*” is an anglicisation of the French term, brûlologie, or the specialty of burn care. The etymology of the French terms “brûlure” and “brûlologie” comes from the vulgar Latin “ustulare”, to burn (which led in current-day Italian to “ustioni”, burns), in combination with the Old Frankish (West Germanic) root “brenn”, burn. Taken together, these became “brustulare”, then “brusler” in the Middle Ages (as in the 12th century Oxford Psalter). This later became “brûler”, where the “s” is replaced by the circumflex accent on the “u”, a common process with mediæval words. The same root “brenn” in Old Norse (Nordic or Old North Germanic) gave rise to the English “burn”. Like many French and English words, burn and brulology thus share a common ancestry.

The tradition of burning at the stake is a very ancient one: punishment by fire was already used in antiquity, before Christ, and ranked high among violent methods of execution. But it was in the Middle Ages, with the Inquisition, that great bonfires came into widespread use, making it possible to eliminate the Cathars “en masse”.

Catharism designates a religious movement of Christian origin dating from the late XIIth century. Its follow-

ers were particularly numerous in Occitania, southern France. The Cathar vision of the universe was dualist: light and the spirit (good) confronted matter and darkness (evil). This belief led them to follow an ascetic way of life. Considered as heretics, the Cathars were decimated (the Albigensian crusade, initiated by Pope Innocent III). One of the most famous burnings took place at Montségur, in Languedoc, in 1244.

As I live in Cathar country, I thought it would be interesting to recollect for readers this fascinating period in the history of France and of brulology.

The origins of Catharism

Catharism (from the Greek “kataros”, pure) designates a religious movement close to Catholicism, which reached the height of its popularity in Western Europe at the end of the 12th century. Catharism did not originate in Languedoc, nor even in France, as is commonly believed. It had already co-existed, clandestinely or sometimes openly, with the Byzantine or Roman church. In Germany, the Cathars were known as Katter and in the north of France as Katiers, as they were alleged to worship the devil in the shape of a cat. In Italy, they were called Patarins from the name of the Patara movement, which was opposed to the clergy.

Catharism is the heir to Manicheism, a dualist philosophy dating from the IIIrd century, which was founded by Manes or Mani, born in 216 AD in Babylonia (Persia). This philosophy, originating in the Middle East, holds that absolute duality exists between two principles: good and evil, the spirit and the flesh, light and darkness, God and Satan. It is a syncretic form of Zoroastrianism (an ancient Iranian religion dating from about 600 BC) derived from

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Mazdaism which originated on the banks of the Indus, and of Gnosticism (IIIrd century AD). This doctrine was considered as the most fearsome enemy of all other religions, and of Christianity in particular.

From 297 AD onward, Diocletian fought against the followers of Manichaeism. In spite of ferocious repression, from the middle of the IIIrd century the doctrine spread to Palestine, Egypt and even Rome, and long held its place in Europe and western Asia. During the following century, it invaded North Africa where a notable recruit was Saint Augustine (364-430 AD), who had in fact been a Manichean before becoming Catholic and then bishop of Hippone (Bône in Algeria). It was Saint Augustine who first used the term Cathar, in his vigorous combats against the movement. At about the same time, around 270 AD, the Paulician heresy developed which took hold quite easily in Armenia and persisted until the beginning of the VIIIth century. In spite of much persecution, the Paulicians were sufficiently numerous to count as a political power. The seeds of dualistic thinking were thus introduced into the Balkans and another great dualist school developed in Bulgaria: Bogomilism, so called because its ideas had been spread around 950 AD by Theophilus, or Bogomil. In the Slavic language, Bogomil means "friend of God". The Bogomils believed that Saint Sophia, the famous cathedral of Constantinople, which was at the time part of the Bulgar kingdom, was Satan's dwelling and that the churches were the strongholds of his acolytes. It was senseless to imagine that God could inhabit dwellings of stone built by human hands. God was not to be found in anything that could be destroyed by time. Bogomilism spread quite rapidly towards the north-west and the west of the Balkan peninsula, in the countries of the former Yugoslavia (Dalmatia, Bosnia, Serbia) and northern Italy (the region around Milan, Tuscany and Lombardy). From there, it is easy to understand the penetration of dualism towards southern France, in Languedoc particularly. In the year 1167, at St Félix de Lauragais, a council was held with the Albigensian dualists and presided by the Bogomil pope Niquinta or Nicetas, who had come from Constantinople. Here the new Cathar churches of Toulouse, Carcassonne, Agen and Albi were founded.

The Cathar religion

The Cathar religion is based on gnostic dualism: on the one hand, the God of Light and good, with the soul and the spirit, which are in opposition to the God of Darkness (the Devil), which is the body and matter. The Cathars gave importance only to the spirit, which returns to God, and to the soul, which passes from one body to another by reincarnation. The body, on the other hand, is a mere envelope destined to rot. Only the body is consumed by fire, not the spirit. These dissident Christians adopted a pacifist and tolerant evangelism, rejecting dogmas (heresy means choice, and by extension separation) and so were adepts of a Christianity without a cross and without a eu-

charist (a church without a Pope). They disdained the sacraments, the cross, official forms of worship and churches, and they also rejected the Old Testament. Christ was the son of God, sent to deliver God's people, but he was not incarnate in "corrupt flesh" and the Passion was only apparent. The Cathars were rigorously ascetic, and ate no meat, eggs or cheese, or any other food except vegetables cooked in oil, or fish. Carnal relations were also forbidden. Their non-violence was absolute: it was forbidden to kill, to make war, to lie and to swear. Life was purely spiritual and the body was totally despised. They could administer the purification ritual of consolamentum (consolation) to those who requested it, and they preferred to let themselves die (endura) rather than to be no longer able to pray. Within the church, a hierarchy existed between two categories of the faithful: followers or believers, and priests or preaching brothers known as Parfaits (Perfecti, the perfect ones) or "bonshommes" (good men, good women). They wore a hooded black robe girded at the waist and the men were often bearded. They preached disobedience to the Roman clergy.

I will try to shed light on the tragedy of the Cathars by answering three essential questions:

- 1) Why were the Cathars burnt?
- 2) Why did the Cathars allow themselves to be burnt and exterminated?
- 3) How did the Cathars die?

1) *Why were the Cathars burnt?*

Methods of execution according to the situation and the crime. Robbers were punished by hanging, while noblemen were beheaded by the sword and the common people by the axe. (The guillotine only came into use much later, in 1792.) Death by stoning was the punishment for adultery and impaling for infanticide, while death by breaking on the wheel was reserved for highwaymen, regicides were drawn and quartered, and counterfeiters were boiled in oil. Punishment by fire could also take the form of roasting to death and burning on a gridiron (like St Lawrence in the third century, and in the New World the Conquistadors executed the Indians in this way). But death by burning at the stake, an ancient tradition, was reserved for heretics. Punishment by fire was already used in earlier times, before Jesus Christ, and ranked high among the violent methods of execution. But it was in the Middle Ages, with the Inquisition, that widespread use was made of the great bonfires which made it possible to eliminate the Cathars "en masse".

The Cathars were heretics; as such, they had to be burnt. The smallest trace of "sin" had to be extirpated, the corrupt body had to be destroyed and evil exorcised in the flames. Even corpses were disinterred and burnt if the deceased were suspected a posteriori of having been heretics. Burning inflicted a double punishment, both temporal and spiritual, since the Cathar church considered that burial of a body was a necessary condition for resurrection.

2) *Why did the Cathars allow themselves to be burnt and exterminated?*

On the one hand, because of the relentless pressure of the Roman church (the Inquisition) and on the other hand because of the French monarchy (the crusades) which wanted to make Occitania part of the kingdom of France.

This dissident faith could put up no real resistance to such repression. The Cathars were conquered because they were poorly armed; believers in non-violence, their aspirations were purely spiritual, and they wished to save their souls and not their bodies. Their faith sometimes went as far as saying that what happened to their body mattered little to them, if it could help them to be reincarnated in a better body. This explains how and why they threw themselves almost joyfully into the flames, individually or together, and chanting hymns! Their courage in the face of death, in the appalling form of being burnt alive at the stake, was considered as a form of suicide, above all by the Catholic Church. Persecuted and martyred, they were exterminated and disappeared completely in the XIVth century. Not even a clandestine Cathar faith survived.

3) *How did the Cathars die?*

It is easy to imagine their death, due to respiratory injury: lack of oxygen, inhalation of carbon monoxide, trachea bronchial oedema, ulcerations of the alveolar mucosa, haemorrhage, bronchospasm. Even before the fire truly got hold of the bodies of the condemned, the executioner could introduce refinements, such as a shirt soaked in sulphur to worsen the burns and accelerate asphyxia. The victim's body could be anointed with oil or salt, he or she could be left to die slowly by starting with the feet and legs, or small bags of explosives could be attached to the body. The quality of the wood could also vary: if the wood was dry, the victim was incinerated and burnt alive, while if it was green or damp, the victim died from asphyxia. At Montségur, it had in fact rained and snowed the previous day.

The Epic of the Cathars

It lasted for 150 years and arose through a combination of various factors and prominent figures :

- 1) The Kings of France, the Popes and their rivalry
 - the Kings: Philippe Auguste (1165-1223), then Louis VIII (1196-1226), Louis IX, known as Saint Louis (1214-1270) and lastly Philippe VI
 - the Popes: Innocent III, Gregory I, Benedict XII (1344)...
- 2) The Lords of southern France, their vassals and their desire to be independent
 - the Counts of Toulouse: Raymond V, who was an enemy of the heresy, Raymond VI, still called "the Cathar", who favoured it, and Raymond VII nicknamed "the Weak".

- the vassals of the Counts of Toulouse: the viscounts of Trencavel, who supported the heresy, Raymond Roger Trencavel and Raymond Trencavel, his son, called "the Little Shepherd".

- 3) The clergy in disarray. Whereas the regular Catholic clergy lived in opulence in splendid abbeys, the secular clergy (country priests) lived in poverty and ignorance.

The stages of the struggle

The first Albigensian crusade (or rather, the "crusade against the Albigensians")

It was so-called, although the Cathars were not more numerous in Albi than in other towns in Languedoc. The name may be explained by the fact that in the early years of the XIIth century, Sicard, bishop of Albi, had attempted to burn some heretics, who were in fact delivered by the people.

An important date: on 15 January 1208, the papal legate Pierre de Castelnau, a Cistercian monk, was assassinated at St Gilles, near Arles, and the murder was taken as justification for the crusade. Raymond VI was suspected to have instigated the crime and was excommunicated.

He repented publicly on 18 June 1209. Naked to the waist, he was whipped before a large crowd at the very place where the papal legate had been murdered, and swore to take the side of the crusaders. His repentance, however, was of short duration and quite soon he again took up the defence of the heretics. This crusade lasted from 1209 to 1213, in the name of Pope Innocent III who set up the process of the Inquisition and gave full powers to eradicate the heresy to its true head, both spiritual and military: Arnaud Amaury, abbot of Cîteaux and papal vice-legate, who had the full support of Simon de Montfort and the sanction of King Philippe Auguste. The vassals of the King of France joined this crusade and assembled at Lyon, descending the valley of the Rhône in considerable disorder. The belongings and provisions followed by boat, the crusaders rejoined it in Valence and then made their way up towards Languedoc.

During the same period, Dominic de Guzmán, who arrived from Spain in 1206, thought he had found the means of effectively combating the heresy; it would be enough to use the same arms as those of the heretics: to live in poverty and deprivation, to preach in the same way as the heretics and to engage them in discussion. The results were far from convincing and from 1209 he delivered the heretics up to the crusaders. The only positive outcome was the founding of the Dominican order, which took on the role of Inquisitor after the death of Dominic de Guzmán who was later canonised as St Dominic. The crusaders left Montpellier on 20 July 1209 and arrived the next day in sight of Béziers, where 400 heretics had taken refuge. Then followed the Grand Mazel (the great slaughter) which lasted an entire day.

In the church of the Madeleine alone, more than 7000 persons were massacred and an estimated 30,000 in the town. No-one escaped: heretics, Catholics, women and children were all killed indiscriminately. Arnaud Amaury had given the order "Kill them all, God will know his own". Carcassonne fell after a siege of two weeks, Raymond Roger de Trencavel was imprisoned and died a few months later in a tower in the city. Fear and consternation reigned in the country. Many castles surrendered to Simon de Montfort and to the abbot of Cîteaux.

Once the terror had passed, the Languedoc region recovered: the "War of the Castles" began.

In the lost valley of *Cabardès*, the four castles of *Las-tours* (*Cabaret*, *Tour Régine*, *Quertineux* and *Surdespine*), perched on rocky crags, spelt failure for Simon de Montfort in February 1210. He prudently waited until the month of June to lay siege to Minerve. On 15 June 1210, after a siege of six weeks, it became the first place to be martyred. It was the first massive pyre. One hundred and fifty Cathars went to the stake, singing hymns.

The castle of *Termes*, at an altitude of 470 metres, surrendered only after four months. Raymond de Termes defended the fortress with 20 knights and 450 men, harrying the supply convoys and demoralising the assailants, some of whom deserted. But the castle's water tanks were empty and Raymond de Termes wanted to negotiate, while Simon de Montfort, disheartened, was ready to accept his adversary's conditions. However, during the night torrential rain fell on the castle and filled the water tanks. Raymond de Termes changed his mind and continued to resist. Simon de Montfort talked of ending the siege and even of leaving military life, when one morning the crusaders found that the castle had been abandoned. In the night, the rain water in the tanks had been contaminated by rats, leading to an epidemic of dysentery. And so Simon de Montfort captured one of the strongest fortresses of the *Corbières*, the "protector of the *Cabardès*". According to legend, a long underground tunnel ran from the castle to Carcassonne.

In the same year, 1210, in the Aude region the crusaders took the castle of *Puilaurens*, a rocky spur standing at a height of 680 metres.

The fall of *Termes* and *Puilaurens* gave greater confidence to the leader of the crusaders, who now felt sufficiently strong to attack the Counts of Toulouse and Foix. But before doing so, he needed to strengthen his position by taking other strongholds. On 15 March 1211 he set siege to *Lavaur*, which was held by *Geralda de Laurac* (*Dame Guiraude*). With her brother, *Aimery de Montréal*, she had made her castle a place of refuge for the *Albigensians*. *Aimery* and his 80 knights were hanged, while *Geralda de Laurac*, an unrepentant heretic, was thrown alive into a well, which was then filled with stones until the unfortunate woman's cries were no longer heard. Four hundred Cathars were invited to embrace Catholicism; they preferred to go to the stake.

Raymond Roger, Count of Foix, did not adhere to the Cathar faith, unlike his sister *Esclarmonde*. However, he defended his lands and allied with the Count of Toulouse. He even became his strongest ally, helping him in his return to Toulouse. Just after *Lavaur*, Simon de Montfort besieged Toulouse, but did not stay long and at the beginning of September 1213, he tried to capture the castle of *Muret*. His army had been considerably weakened. Massive reinforcements of crusaders were no longer arriving. *Pedro of Aragon*, a Spanish prince, had decided to help Raymond VI. This was however a disaster for the *Albigensians*, as *Pedro of Aragon* was killed in the battle and a long massacre followed. Raymond VI and his men withdrew into Toulouse and finally, without a fight, and without losing a single man, the crusaders entered Toulouse which had been for some years the Rome of the Cathar faith. Raymond VI and his young son Raymond VII took refuge at the English court in June 1215. The destiny of Occitania and the Cathars could have seemed finally sealed, especially as the *Latran* council had granted Simon de Montfort the title of Count of Toulouse. However on July 16, 1216, the young Raymond VII landed at *Marseille*, laid siege to the castle of *Beaucaire*, defended by Simon de Montfort's brother, and forced him to surrender. Recapture had begun. Simon de Montfort was defeated and on September 13, 1217, Raymond VI re-entered the "Cité Rose" in triumph. Simon de Montfort found the humiliation unbearable and laid siege to Toulouse. He was killed by a stone thrown by a woman. This is commemorated by a plaque in the former gardens of *Montoulieu*. Simon de Montfort's son, *Amaury*, attempted to carry on his father's work but lacked his ability. He was defeated at *Baziège* and *Castelnaudary*. In 1222 both Raymond VI and King *Philippe Auguste* of France died. In January 1224, *Amaury de Montfort* left Carcassonne forever and took the road to Paris after an agreement was reached between the Counts of Toulouse and of Foix. So ended the first act of the *Albigensian* drama.

The second crusade

In January 1226, the hunt for heretics was given new impetus by Pope Gregory IX who wanted to eliminate the heresy. He granted full powers to the bishoprics of Toulouse and Albi and to the Dominican preaching order. This was the terrible time of the Inquisition, from 1226 to 1244. The effectiveness of the tribunals of the Inquisition was essentially based on terror and denunciation. Normal criminal proceedings were not followed. The Inquisition used torture as a lawful procedure and confiscated goods and property. Believers who recanted to avoid burning at the stake had to wear a shameful yellow cross on the back and front of their robes. The Inquisition was very active in Spain up to the XVth century (against Moslems and Jews) and it was officially abolished at the beginning of the XVIIIth century.

Foulques, a former troubadour who had become bishop of Toulouse, followed the papal directives on reform of clerical morals and of preaching, and was remarkable for his fanatical hatred of the Cathars. He organised what amounted to a private militia, the White Brotherhood, which persecuted Jews and heretics. In 1229 he took part in the preparation of the treaty of Paris, known as the Treaty of Meaux. This treaty sealed the failure of the Occitans and the submission of Raymond VII. The province of Languedoc now belonged to the Kingdom of France (to which it was attached in 1271) while Jacques Fournier, the Grand Inquisitor, bishop of Pamiers, became Pope Benedict XII in 1334.

Nevertheless, the Cathar heresy was not dead. The Faydits were an assembly of landless knights, exiles, and above all suspected Cathar heretics who had been chased from their homes by the crusaders and dispossessed of all they had. They came together at Montségur, the symbol of Occitan resistance, which the crusaders called the “synagogue of Satan”. An important synod took place there in 1232. The massacre of Avignonet (May 1242) was the murder of some inquisitors by a troop of Faydits knights who had come down from *Montségur*, led by Ramon d’Alfaro (who gave his name to a street in Toulouse, rue Pharaon). At the end of May 1243, the siege began of Montségur and its village, symbol of Occitan resist-

ance. The castle stands on a limestone peak at an altitude of 1207 metres, surrounded by cliffs 80 to 150 metres high. It was attacked by Hugues des Arcis, seneschal of Carcassonne, who captured *Montségur* after a siege that lasted 11 months. On March 13, 1244, the famous mass burning of 200 “bonshommes” took place in the Prat des Cramats, or field of the burned. Among those who died were Guilhabert de Castres, a Cathar bishop and head of the garrison, and the young Esclarmonde, countess of Foix. The extermination of the Cathars did not end there. The year 1255 saw the fall of *Quéribus*, on the borders of France and Aragon. The last Cathar Parfait, Béliabaste, who had been in hiding since 1305, was captured in 1320. He refused to recant and was burned in 1326 at *Villeroche-Termenès*.

Conclusion

The Cathars were thus decimated by fire on huge pyres during the Albigensian crusade in the Middle Ages. The most well-known burnings were those of Minerve in 1208 and Montségur in 1244. As I live in Cathar country, I wanted to tell the story of this tragedy which has a place in the history of brulology, and to contribute to better knowledge and understanding of this dissident religion which spread from central Europe to southern France during the Middle Ages, then dominated by the omnipotence of the Roman church. As a result of this religious conflict, the kingdom of France was able to extend its domination over Occitania in the south, leading to the assertion that it was a war of conquest and annexation rather than a holy war. This study has given us the opportunity to conjure up the beauty of the Cathar country and to bring back to mind those legendary sites, the castles that marked the history of the Cathar heresy. They are still known as the “citadelles du vertige”, the castles in the air, burnt by fire, the sun, wind and time: *Quéribus*, *Puilaurens*, *Peyreperouse* (“la Carcassonne céleste”, or the heavenly Carcassonne), *Lordat*, *Montaillou*, *Usson*, *Roquefixade*, *Aguilar*, *Termes*.

This article was written when I was a surgeon in private practice at the Clinique du Parc, in Toulouse. The address of the clinic is 33 rue des Bûchers: the Street of the Pyres. This is a true story!



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