

Occitania? Yes, Occitania! A Brief Comment About a Great and Forgotten Civilization

Abstract

Let us talk about Occitania, a very important place for all those who praise freedom of speech and all other values that served as basis for the emergence of what we call nowadays “Western Culture”. Especial emphasis is given to the fact that Occitania contributed in a fundamental way to the very survival of West Europe as a cultural entity.

Keywords: Occitania, Freedom, Western Culture, André Dupuy, Dante Alighieri

*If you tell the truth, you don't
have to remember anything.*
Mark Twain

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Portugal, the exception

Who remembers Occitania, that small flourishing medieval kingdom which – together with Burgundy, Aragon, Flanders, Lotharingia, Palatinate and many others of the same kind – ended up by becoming a territorial part of one of the Western European countries (in this case, France), geopolitical entities brought to life during the Early Modern Period (c. 1450-c. 1850)? Excepted from this ruling is Portugal, whose current shape is practically identical to that of the Late Middle Ages: “During the Reconquista period, Christians reconquered the Iberian Peninsula from Moorish domination. Afonso Henriques and his successors, aided by military monastic orders, pushed southward to drive out the Moors. At this time, Portugal covered about half of its present area. In 1249, the Reconquista ended with the capture of the Algarve and complete expulsion of the last Moorish settlements on the southern coast, giving Portugal its present-day borders, with minor exceptions”.¹ History tends to concentrate itself in the so-called “major issues”, let us say, the rise and fall of the Roman Empire – which is, by the way, the central theme of one of the most celebrated historical books of all times, namely, Edward Gibbon’s *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, whose six volumes were published by the first time between 1776 and 1789 – and the already mentioned Reconquista: “The *Reconquista* (Spanish and Portuguese for ‘Reconquest’) is a name used in English to describe the period in the history of the Iberian Peninsula of about 780 years between the Umayyad conquest of Hispania in 711 and the fall of the Nasrid kingdom of Granada to the expanding Christian kingdoms in 1491. The completed conquest of Granada was the context of the Spanish voyages of discovery and conquest (Columbus got royal support in Granada in 1492, months after its conquest), and the Americas – the New World – ushered in the era of the Spanish and Portuguese colonial empires”.²



Carcassonne, one of the most famous and beautiful cities of Occitania and of France itself (Photo taken by the Author)

Land of “Yes”

In Roman Times, most of Occitania was called Aquitania, a name derived from the earliest attested inhabitants of the land, the Aquitani, a people more akin to the Iberians than to the Celts. There is reason to believe that the Aquitani spoke Proto-Basque, “a reconstructed predecessor of the Basque language, before the Roman conquests in the Western Pyrenees”.³ The term Occitania can be interpreted in different ways: a) since 2018, *Occitanie* designates an administrative region in Southern France that succeeded the regions of Midi-Pyrénées and Languedoc-Roussillon. In terms of area, it is a small

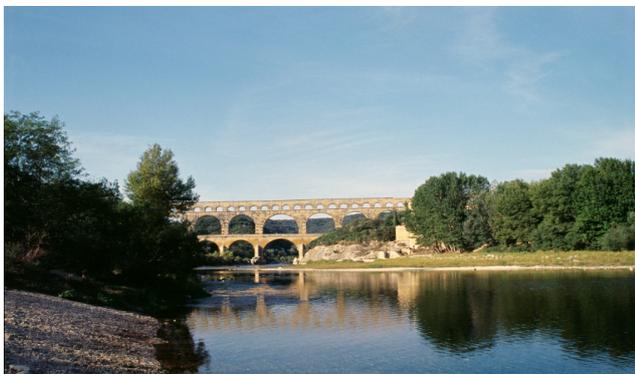
³Cf. Ricardo Gómez et alii. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proto-Basque_language. “Whether this Aquitanian language (Proto-Basque) was a remnant of a Vasconic language group that once extended much farther or it was generally limited to the Aquitaine/Basque region is not known. One reason the language of Aquitaine is important is because Basque is the last surviving non-Indo-European language in Western Europe and it has had some effect on the languages around it, including Spanish and, to a lesser extent, French” (Robert Bartlett et alii. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aquitaine>).

¹António Araújo et alii. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portugal#History>.

²Charles Julian Bishko. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reconquista>.

part of “historical Occitania”, so to say.⁴ b) Historically speaking, Occitania is a southern Europe’s region, which encompasses southern France, along with fractions of Catalonia, Monaco and even of Italy (Occitan Valleys and Guardia Piemontese); its common denominator is the language, the Occitan: main language spoken in the middle Ages, second language spoken nowadays.⁵ Stemmed from Medieval Latin, the very name *Occitania* has an alluring background, which has everything to do with this specifically human faculty which is language: *occ* comes from *oc* and means “yes” in Occitan, as opposed to *oïl* – “yes” in the medieval dialects spoken in the northern part of what is now France –, which turned out to become *oui* in modern French. “Languedoc”, geographically speaking a territory contained in Occitania, means, literally, “the language of *oc*”; and denotes, in a wider context, a place where people say *oc* when they mean “yes”, affirmative particle used to “give a positive response to a question”, “to accept an offer or request, or to give permission”, “to tell someone that what they have said is correct”, “to show that you are ready or willing to speak to the person who wants to speak to you, for example, when you are answering a telephone or doorbell”, “to indicate that you agree with, accept, or understand what the previous speaker has said”, “to encourage someone to continue speaking” and so on.⁶

On the same topic, Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), prince among poets of all times and places, wrote on the eve of European Renaissance: *nam alii oc, alii sì, alii vero dicunt oïl* (“some say *oc*, others say *sì*, others say *oïl*”).⁷ According to him, the *langue d’oïl*, ancestor of Modern French, prevails when it comes to prose, notably narrative and didactic; the *langue d’oc* (= Occitan, as already seen before), in turn, deserves first place in terms of sweetness and elaboration, let alone the merit of having been the raw-material used by the first West European poets who preferred to write in vernacular instead of in Latin, among them, Dante Alighieri himself and his friend Cino da Pistoia (1270-1336).⁸



Ancient times in Occitania: Pont de Gard, one of the best preserved of all Roman aqueducts (Photo taken by the Author)

⁴“A historical region are geographic areas which at some point in time had a cultural, ethnic, linguistic or political basis, regardless of present-day borders. They are used as delimitations for studying and analysing social development of period-specific cultures without any reference to contemporary political, economic or social organisations” (Marko Lehti et alii. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historical_region).

⁵“Currently about 200,000 to 800,000 people out of 16 million living in the area are either native or proficient speakers of Occitan.[although the languages more usually spoken in the area are French, Catalan, Spanish and Italian. Since 2006, the Occitan language has been an official language of Catalonia, which includes the Aran Valley, where Occitan gained official status in 1990” (Pierre Bec et al. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Occitania>).

⁶Jane Bradbury et al. *The Collins-Cobuild English Dictionary*, London, HarperCollins, 1995, pp. 1.946-1.947.

⁷*De vulgari eloquentia*, I, 9, 2.

⁸See, for instance, Marie-Françoise Cachin et alii, in Laffont-Bompiani. *Le nouveau dictionnaire des oeuvres de tous les temps et de tous les pays*, Paris, Robert Laffont, 1994, t. II, pp. 2.179-2.181.

Saviour of Western Europe

Born in 1928 at Lavit-de-Lomagne, the Occitan historian André Dupuy – with whom I had the pleasure to talk personally in the year 2000 – considers Occitania “a country with bad luck”, in his *Encyclopédie Occitane*.⁹ Indeed, political fragmentation has been the rule for this beautiful land, cradle of queens like Eleanor of Aquitania (1122[?]-1204), patron of literature and Commander-in-Chief of a Crusade,¹⁰ painters like Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864-1901) and Paul Cézanne (1839-1906), and polymaths like Blaise Pascal (1626-1662), who was mathematician, physicist, inventor, writer, philosopher and theologian. It is also important to stress that Occitania, in the Early Middle Ages (more precisely, between 721 and 972), played a major part in the defence of Western Europe against the Muslim aggressor, who had already spread havoc in the Middle East, North Africa and many parts of Europe, notably the Iberian Peninsula.¹¹ In other words, thanks to Occitania, we, Western people, were saved from slavery and annihilation. Occitania? Yes, Occitania!



André Dupuy at home, in 2000 (Photo taken by the Author)

Acknowledgments

None.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares there is no conflict of interest.

⁹André Dupuy. *Encyclopédie Occitane*, Geneve, Slatkine, 1997, p. 9.

¹⁰“As a member of the Ramnulfids (House of Poitiers) rulers in southwestern France, she was one of the most powerful and wealthiest women in Western Europe during the High Middle Ages. She was patron of literary figures such as Wace, Benoît de Sainte-Maure, and Bernart de Ventadorn. She led armies several times in her life and was a leader of the Second Crusade” (Martin Aurell et alii. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eleanor_of_Aquitaine).

¹¹See, for instance, Robert Spencer. *The Politically Incorrect Guide to Islam (and the Crusades)*, New York, Regnery, 2005, p. 3sq et passim; and Udo Ulfkotte. *Mekka Deutschland. Die stille Islamisierung*, Rottenburg, Kopp, 2015, p. 10sq et passim.