

THE BEAST OF GEVAUDAN - LA BÊTE DU GÉVAUDAN



THE GÉVAUDAN, A WEATHER-WORN, HIGH, QUARTZITE PLATEAU NESTLED IN THE MARGERIDE MOUNTAINS IN THE LOZÈRE DÉPARTEMENT. FAMOUS FOR THREE YEARS OF HORROR IN THE 18TH CENTURY.

The terror began one summer's day in June 1764, during the reign of Louis XV

Compiled by SDG 

On this day, a young peasant girl from the village of Langogne was tending her family's herd of cattle in the Forêt de Mercoire. Without any warning, a tremendous wolf-like animal lurched out of the forest, heading towards the girl. Her dogs turned tail and ran in total terror. Her cattle charged at the creature, undeterred the beast aimed for the young shepherdess; the cattle charged it once more, this time driving it back into the forest.

Another witness to these first encounters was a farmer who rose early to scythe his wheat harvest by moonlight. He noticed some movement coming towards him through the tall crops but the animal itself was hidden by the wheat. The farmer must have sensed straight away that he was being stalked. By the time the creature was on him he was ready with his scythe and managed to fend it off. On arriving home he was apparently unable to speak for some hours, being paralysed with terror.

On the 30th June 1764 the beast killed for the first time. Jeanne Boulet, a girl of 14 from the village of Les Ubos, was found with her throat torn out and her blood drained.

It was soon clear that the region had a real and serious situation as gruesome attacks became more and more frequent. One young girl, her little brother having been snatched from her by the beast, bravely rushed into the wood after him and found him peacefully lying there on his back, apparently intact but in fact lacking liver, entrails and blood. A Madame Merle had her eyes scratched out in a feline-like attack and 'La Bête' spat a stream of her blood over approaching witnesses. - "*There's a big wolf behind you!!!*", was the last thing one young girl heard. Her sister having shouted this warning turned and ran, only to see her sister's head bowling along the ground like something from an exaggerated film.

It seemed to be the young girls of the community who were it favoured. Easily accessible as they tended their flocks and easy to outrun. The enclosed fields were particularly dangerous because of the drystone walls of this area which hid the beast until it attacked. It was said that La Bête would plough straight through a flock of sheep, without interest to get at the shepherdess. However, it was much more wary of cows, which were sometimes found spattered with regurgitated blood that it ejected at them in defence. Its lack of fear of fire, dogs and people, but fear of cattle were consistent features.

Women and children were now too terrified to tend their sheep and cattle on the lonely pastures and the men were constantly called away from fieldwork to hunt La Bête. The resulting neglect was sufficient to tip the scales of this fragile and poor economy and send it into a quick decline. Life in the Margeride Mountains, a harsh region, described by the locals as 'nine months of winter and three months of hell' was not conducive to easy farming.

Louis XV and his court took this matter very seriously. The beast prowled a region where Huguenot/Jesuit tensions were high and the King feared that this creature, plus the arms and aggression massing there, would spark a minor version of the revolution rumbling in the near distance. The Gévaudan was part of the 'Independent States', whose recognition of the French Crown's sovereignty was not at this time fully recognised.

La Bête was tracked by Antoine de Beauterne, the King's Gun bearer, who posted his hunters in pairs on paths all over the district. The creature was reportedly shot in an abbey estate by Antoine de Beauterne on 21st September 1765. Antoine was keen to prove that he had killed the beast and called on a survivor of an attack, La Pucelle, the young girl who was now famous for fending the animal off with a spindle. The dead animal in question here *was* a wolf, and there are two versions of the testimony of La Pucelle at the Château of Besset. One says she firmly refused to identify it as La Bête, the other that she did but only doubtfully, from a wound on its shoulder possibly made by her spindle, which she had used like a lance.

In any case, it was soon proved to be irrelevant. The creature was seen at Marsillac on 26th, 27th and 28th of that month. On the 21st December, the remains of Agnès Mourges, 9 years, were discovered, - 'insufficient remains for burial'. In March to June 1766 there were 14 attacks by the beast within 6 miles of Paulhac. So, the creature was very much alive. Incidentally, the old village of Paulhac concluded its history tragically, being burned by the German army in 1944.

Under the Kings orders France's greatest ever communal hunt was launched against the beast with all its resources of châteaux, thoroughbred horses and, not to mention, a considerable detachment of Dragoons. Though, this was perhaps merely an opportunity to send troops into an increasingly unruly district.

One desperate measure adopted against the beast was the extensive use of poison, sometimes applied across whole mountainsides. The King's Wolf catcher, Monsieur Denneval, the surly Norman squire, who had 1274 (1200 previous ones and a share of 74 while hunting La Bête) wolves to his credit, was an early advocate of poisoning. This was after his hounds, the best in France and excellent trackers but more suited to the flat, open countryside of Normandie than the rugged, wooded Gévaudan, had failed to catch the killer.

Descriptions of la Bête Anthropophage du Gévaudan (the man-eating beast of Gévaudan) varied widely, but most agreed that it was *at least* wolf-like. Its chest was wide; its tail long and thin with a lion-like tuft of fur at its end. Its snout was like that of a greyhound, and large fangs protruded from its formidable jaws. The beast was believed to be incredibly agile - it was credited with taking leaps of up to 30 feet. An account of the beast, published in the English Saint James' Chronicle, stated that the beast was probably a member of "a new species".

But there are some unusual elements to this story. There was the mysterious case of the three women of Pompeyrac, going to church near the wood of Favart, when a dark man offered to escort them through the wood. They refused and on leaving he touched one of them with a fur-covered hand. Dragoons arriving on the scene warned the terrified women not to go into the wood, because La Bête had just been seen there. Some witnesses claimed to have seen the beast in the company of a man.

There were also the two bodies found roughly re clothed after death. Six-year-old Marguerite Lèbre was killed in front of six firm witnesses, all testifying to Curate Giberque at la Pauze, Lorcières, who also recorded reports of a smaller boar-like Bête



seen 3 days later. Fear induced monster-mania?

Records of porcine or feline beasts in addition to the wolf-like creature are too frequent to ignore and add another dimension to the mystery.

This point of view was affirmed by Denneval, the King's Chief Wolf catcher, the greatest expert on wolf hunting in France, La Bête, he states, was definitely no wolf. Other explanations offered by the learned folk of the day held that the beast was a bear, a wolverine, or even a baboon. Some modern researchers believe it to have been a serial killer who took advantage of a wolf in the area. Another popular theory is that the beast was a wolf-dog hybrid. What is clear, is that surviving witnesses had difficulty identifying the creature.

A similar creature was referred to as the arenotelicon in medieval bestiaries. The arenotelicon, which was thought to dwell in wild forests, was widely believed to be a European relative of the hyena or tiger. The creature had a serrated ridge down its spine, feet armed with prodigious claws, a maned neck (a feature which appears on some depictions of the Beast of Gévaudan), and was either hairless or covered in short hair. A creature similar to the arenotelicon was supposedly captured around 1530. According to some sources this happened in the Hauberg Forest, Saxony, Germany, while others say it occurred in the Fannsberg Forest, Salzburg, Austria. It was "yellowish-carnation" in colour.

On the other hand, Denneval, the greatest wolf expert in 18th century France and having the advantage of actually being there, firmly and officially asserted that there was indeed something very strange going on in Gévaudan but that "La Bête is no wolf". Perhaps that was just because he couldn't catch it.

He considers that one explanation of La Bête is there was more than one and they resulted from a natural cross breeding between large dog, possibly of an Italian hunting breed, and wild wolf. His explanation for the Bête phenomenon is supported by reports published elsewhere of vigorous hybrids between wolf and large dog, for example the wolf of Argenton, killed in 1884.

During the years 1764 to 1767 a final tally numbered some hundred human victims, and 30 mutilated survivors.

On at least 5 occasions beasts rumoured to have been La Bête ranging from large wolves to a baboon-like animal were killed; it would be interesting to know more about that baboon! But after each of these cases the killings continued except for the last, a not very formidable deformed wolf-like creature was killed in June 1767 by Jean Chastel.

Jean Chastel, a local farmer, was already known in this story through his goading of a Royal huntsman. Jean and his son had lured the arrogant and clumsy chevalier into a swamp. They spent a spell in prison for this slur on society. But the country folk were

that way inclined towards the ill-dressed visitors and the Dragoons, whom they regarded as an occupying army.

Jean loaded his gun with bullets blessed by the parish priest and, it is said, succeeded in killing the 'Beast of Gévaudan'. It was embalmed and taken from town to town where people flocked to see the animal (for a small fee). Jean was invited to Versailles Palace to display the creature, but when he arrived near Paris the creature's corpse had disintegrated due to the poor embalmmnt. One week after the monster's death, a giant she-wolf was also shot, believed to be its mate.

Interestingly, there is some unusual stuff written about this chap Chastel. There are differing opinions among authors on La Bête as to the character of the Chastels - father and son. Pourcher records Jean Chastel as being a man of very good character whereas, for example, Chevalley, in his semi-fictional novel, regards him with suspicion, even to the extent of surmising he might have been involved in some deception or cross-breeding involving a hyena. Ownership of wild animals was generally an exclusive hobby of the very rich, animals from Africa were shipped over by the slave traders, and these creatures must have often escaped.

It is alleged that Chastel had been a prisoner and tortured in a Middle East dungeon. What on earth was he doing there? Rather late for the Crusades? Incidentally, the hyena species, which hunts as much as it scavenges, is genetically more similar to cat than dog, being of the feline family Feloidae.

Robert Louis Stevenson possibly based his 'beautiful shepherdess' stories on a girl from Paulhac who was killed, and includes the beast in his famous 'Travels with a donkey in the Cévennes'. Written in 1879, he admires the creature's bravery in attacking during daylight a party of couriers armed with pistols and swords. "If all wolves had been as this wolf they would have changed the history of man."

Another author apparently influenced by La Bête was Jakob Ludwig Grimm who published Red Riding Hood as 'Rotkäppchen' in 1812, a work recognized as having deep significance.

Incidentally, the first clearly recorded Red Riding Hood fairy story is attributed to a Frenchman, Charles Perrault, a great classical historian. It appeared in his book 'Stories of Times Past' in 1697.

Oh, and the beast was last seen near Sarlat in September 1767.



Visit this great website to learn more about Gévaudan and see the wolf sanctuary. Also, in English!
www.loupsdugevaudan.com



'Brotherhood of the Wolf', 'Le Pacte des Loups', a film by Christophe Gans. Follows our story, more or less, but adds all the necessary accoutrements to make the sponsors pay their investment. You may love it or you may hate it!

Inspiré par des fait réels survenus sous le règne de Louis XV, le film de Christophe Gans, "Le Pacte des Loups" revisite l'un des rares mythes français: celui de la "Bête du Gévaudan" qui tua plus d'une centaine de personnes avant d'être abattue dans des circonstances mystérieuses.

LANGUEDOC ROUSSILLON

by Sharon Black



Camargue bull / taureau camarguais

copyright Régine Coeffey

LANGUEDOC-ROUSSILLON

WITH ITS LONG SANDY BEACHES ON THE MÉDITERRANÉE, RUGGED MOUNTAIN PEAKS AND MEDIEVAL HILLTOP VILLAGES, THE LANGUEDOC-ROUSSILLON BOASTS ONE OF FRANCE'S MOST DIVERSE LANDSCAPES.



OT Aigues-Mortes

Ramparts of Aigues-Mortes

**OFFICIALLY THE SUNNIEST REGION IN THE COUNTRY, IT IS ALSO
FRANCE'S LARGEST WINE GROWING AREA.**



J.L.P.O.T. Aigues-Mortes

Peace and tranquillity in Languedoc-Roussillon



copyright Régine Godfrey

Travels with a donkey



LANGUEDOC-ROUSSILLON

BORDERED BY THE SPANISH PYRÉNÉES, THE LAVENDER FIELDS OF PROVENCE AND THE ROCKY MASSIF CENTRAL TO THE NORTH, THE AREA IS NOTED FOR ITS RELAXED PACE OF LIFE AND IS A POPULAR HIDEAWAY FOR THOSE SEEKING PEACE AND TRANQUILLITY.

Being fortunate enough to live here, I know how much more slowly the hours pass in the south of France than in Britain. You don't need a watch here. The moving of the shadows along the limestone walls is enough to tell the time by. The frequency with which the local *boulangerie* opens and closes its doors tells me when it's almost lunchtime. And then, of course, there's always the slow, a-rhythmical chiming of the church bells on the hour and half-hour.

Few French regions are more steeped in history than the Languedoc, home of the heretical Cathars. I love this area, but didn't know it as well as I wanted to, so I decided to do some exploring.

Being a nature lover and keen hill-walker, the dense, green peaks of the *Cévennes* national park was nothing short of paradise to me. Its pine and chestnut-tree covered slopes, dry stone terraces, isolated hamlets and wealth of animal and bird life, can all be discovered from its 300 looped footpaths. As an authentic gastronomic reward for my walk, the local goat's cheese, *pélardon*, was second to none.

Spurred on by an exhilarating day's hiking to loosen my muscles further, I headed west for the *Gorges du Tarn* which I had heard were among the best in Europe for watersports. Each summer, hundreds of kayaks become at one with its emerald waters. A white water rafting expedition nearly had me in the water on several occasions, not because of the rapids (there weren't many) but because the group of us were laughing so much at our lack of paddle co-ordination. Next on my itinerary was the city of **Nîmes**. With its

TOP TIPS:

For a quick hop in the Languedoc-Roussillon, Buzz Airlines fly to *Marseille, Toulouse* and *Gerona*. Ryanair: *Carcassonne, Montpellier, Nîmes, Perpignan*.

Why not read Robert Louis Stevenson's humorous 'Travels with a donkey'? The famous Scot, (author of *Treasure Island*) trekked through the *Cévennes* for twelve days with a stubborn ânesse named Modestine.

LANGUEDOC-ROUSSILLON is...

5 *départements*, 1/20th of France, only 3,9% of the French population

Aude (11- Carcassonne *La Médiévale*)

Gard (30- Nîmes *La Romaine*)

Hérault (34- Montpellier *La Dynamique*)

Lozère (48- Mende *La Lozérienne*)

Pyénées-Orientales (66- Perpignan *La Catalane*)

perfectly preserved Roman *Maison Carrée* and *Arènes*, this is the best example of a Roman town outside Italy. A few kilometres away, the *Pont du Gard* site- a spectacular Roman aqueduct spanning the river Gardon - is popular with bathers. In the first week of September, it was still warm enough for some to swim in the crystal clear waters, although I opted for the slightly less chilly activity of waving to passing canoeists.

It's only half an hour's drive on the autoroute from Nîmes to **Montpellier**. A university town with a quarter of its population under the age of 25, Montpellier is one of France's most thriving and dynamic cities. Its huge pedestrianised centre is filled with *cafés* - an ideal place, I discovered, to sit and watch the world go by. A labyrinth of winding back streets brimming over with boutiques and restaurants forms the city's historic centre.



Petite Camargue, flamingo paradise

AIGUES-MORTES...



OT Aigues-Mortes

Ramparts of Aigues-Mortes



copyright Régine Godfrey

Louis IX 'Saint Louis',
Notre Dame des Sablons
church

Squeezed between the two towns lies the peculiar beauty of the **Camargue** - a vast, low-lying area of 37 salt-water lakes. Driving along the road through the marshy lagoons, I watched in awe as a flock of pink flamingos rose overhead like slow-motion confetti. Only the western part named *Petite Camargue* belongs to Languedoc-Roussillon, whilst the famed *Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer* claims Provence status.

The towering ramparts of **Aigues-Mortes** which form the boundary between the two Camargues are truly magnificent. They recall the area's crusading past under the auspices of Louis IX who later on became Saint Louis. Fifteen fortified towers and ten gates entrap the square city situated near the saline fields in order to ensure protection from invaders and warmth from the wind.

The highlight of village life is the August *Fête Votive*, a five day festival dominated by chivalry pursuits and the black bull, le *taureau camarguais*.

Here the bull has always been a cult without however killing the animal. I had been in this corner of France on previous occasions and the striking sight of a dozen white horses - their riders wearing the traditional brightly coloured gardian shirts and flat black hats - chasing a charging bull through the streets, still lingers in my memory along with the hypnotic song of the ever-present cicadas.

Heading west, I found the town of **Albi**, famous as the home of the diminutive artist Henri Toulouse-Lautrec, whose paintings and sketches of the colourful nightlife in Paris took the Impressionist art world by storm in the late 1800s. It is also home to the largest brick building in the world, the *Cathédrale Sainte-Cécile*, built in the 13th century. Apart from being big, it is one of the most striking examples of Gothic architecture in France. Although now in the administrative *Midi-Pyrénées* region, Albi was an integral part of the old Languedoc province where the *langue d'Oc* (oc meaning yes) was spoken.

Toulouse, France's fourth largest city, governs the *Midi-Pyrénées* but was once the supreme capital of Languedoc. The thriving metropolis with an excellent shopping centre is renowned for its attractive gardens and opera singing. Watching the sunset from my hotel balcony made me understand why it is called *la ville rose*. Most older buildings in the city centre are in pink-red brick and the experience was truly like sitting in the middle of an unfolding flower.



copyright Régine Godfrey

Aigues-Mortes, Place Saint Louis

Another relaxing way I had heard of to savour the area's attractive countryside is to cruise with a barge along the **Canal du Midi**, a 240km 'liquid' route linking Toulouse with the Mediterranean coast. But time was pressing.

My next stop took me to the walled city of **Carcassonne**, the largest fortress in Europe. I was struck by the immensity of its fairytale silhouette, so much stone, so perfectly preserved and so similar to a gigantic grey-white lego structure.

After all that history and culture, I fancied a spot of beach bumming. Fortunately, the stretch of coastline between the Camargue and the Spanish border offers some of the best bathing in the country. Over 175km of virtually uninterrupted sandy beaches and secluded coves hug the sparkling waters of the Mediterranean - a Mecca for watersports enthusiasts. Several purpose-built resorts bustle with summer visitors, including the futuristic-looking **La Grande Motte** and **Cap d'Agde**, Europe's largest naturist area. I lazed the day away splashing in the waters at *Plage de l'Espiguette*, surrounded by enough families (mainly French) to give it a buzz, but not enough to be uncomfortably crowded. On your way south, try not to miss Sète, the region's first fishing port and homeland of two great poets, Paul Valéry and Georges Brassens.

If, on the other hand, you've come to fill your wine trolley - and I had a few feet of boot space reserved for this purpose - the area is full of pleasant surprises. The Roussillon's vast tracts of vineyards produce an abundance of excellent, if under-rated wines, such as Banyuls, Corbières, Côtes du Roussillon, Fitou and Minervois. Naturally, I considered it my duty to complete a self-conducted tour of the area's wineries caves - an enjoyable way to see the *vignobles* and, with bottles priced as low as 65p a litre, it could almost pay for your trip in savings alone!

Capital of the Roussillon with 108.000 inhabitants, **Perpignan** is surrounded by a mosaic of olive and fig groves, vineyards and



Carcassonne, la Médiévale

vegetable fields. Just as much Spanish as French, it ranks as the third largest Catalan city after Barcelona and Lleida in Spain. Should you be after street parties, it is one of the best places to bop till you drop. As such, it has a lively calendar of fiestas - many of them featuring the *sardane*, a high-spirited Catalan dance. On my last evening, I enjoyed a typical restaurant offering dishes such as bull stew, paella and *crème catalane* - a *crème brûlée* with a hint of aniseed and cinnamon. I chose the seafood speciality *Bouillabaisse Languedocienne*, one of the best I have ever tasted and a feast for all the senses.

In contrast, the nearby dramatic beauty of the **Pyrénées** peaks - 4200ft to 8500ft - is home to around 35 ski resorts providing all the joys of cross-country, Nordic or downhill skiing. **Font-Romeu**, the number one station, boasts scores of athletics and football teams training in its pure air. Further east, spa towns noted for their thermal springs attract *curistes* seeking a treatment for a multitude of ailments. As far back as the 12th century, the kings of Majorca would come because of their asthma!



copyright Peter Garwood

COLLIOURE...

Finally, I reached the local charm of *Occitania* just a few miles away from the Spanish border where there is no shortage of picturesque ports and secluded coves. Catalan in ambience and language, **Collioure** has been crowned the marvel of this vermilion coastline. Its luminous light provoked the birth of fauvism art and the *Hostellerie des Templiers* - hotel/restaurant still owned by the Pous family - is a heaven of 2000 paintings by Picasso, Matisse, Derain, Dali or Dufy .

Your palate will be dazzled by its fresh fish and anchovy dishes.

And if, like me, you attend a *sardinade* lunch in the village - sardines barbecued at ground level - you will mix with the local folks and join hands afterwards to dance the *sardane*!



Sea and sun : Collioure beach



copyright Régine Godfrey

Collioure, gem of the *côte vermeille*



Collioure, Hostellerie des Templiers



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Collioure, art gallery



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Collioure, Catalan country, dancing La Sardane

NÎMES LA ROMAINE...

JEAN LAFONTE, BULL IMPRESARIO



In the Camargue, the bull has earned far too much respect for the local inhabitants to imagine that it could actually be tamed. Nevertheless, in the region, there are a dozen or so farms (*"manades"*), raising over 2,000 head. These are destined for the numerous *"courses camarguaises"*, otherwise known as *"courses à la cocarde"*, a display of skills akin to bullfighting, in which the bull is not killed, the *"razeteur"* (runners) instead having to snatch a rosette from its horns using a hook-like instrument. The level of dexterity,

precision and bravery nonetheless required is of the highest order. The *'cocarde'* to be snatched is actually made up of a number of different elements, and these have to be removed in a specific sequence. First of all, the *"coupe"*, a small piece of red material tied to the centre of the forehead by string. Secondly, the *"cocarde"*, a red ribbon. Thirdly, the *"glands"*, little pompons of white wool attached to each horn with an elastic band. Fourthly, the *"frontal"*, a piece of string linking the two horns. The final challenge is to remove the *"ficelles"*, the lengths of string wrapped round each horn. According to the standing of the event, some of which are held in the tiniest of villages, substantial cash prizes are awarded.

The beasts receive particular care and attention from the bull herders who raise them on their prime pastureland. Probably the most well-known of them all is Jean Lafonte, who runs the oldest *manade* in the Camargue. Experts reckon that the high quality of his bulls comes from the particular attention he has paid to maintaining the purity of the breed. This special care led to the most famous of his bulls, *"Baraille"*, winning the *Bious d'Or*, the prestigious award for best bull of the year, on three separate occasions. His success stems from careful selection in the breeding process. From the age of three, the bulls take part in the competitions in the nearby villages, with young *"razeteurs"* attempting to grab the cockade from the bull's horns. The best of the bulls are kept for breeding purposes, and go to the games in the bigger arenas.

THE FASCINATING STORY OF DENIM JEANS!

Blue jeans, once the trousers worn by the American pioneers, are familiar to all and sundry today. But few of those who don their denims most days are aware that the famous cloth was originally produced in the city of Nîmes. During the Middle Ages the town's textile industry began exporting this cheap, supple, and hard-wearing serge all over Europe. Denim was then used in a number of ways: as sails, sheeting, and even at this early date, for trousers. Sailors from Genoa had the denim cloth dyed in indigo, the colour of their uniform. In due course some of the cloth was exported to the United States where a Bavarian immigrant, Levi Strauss, started selling it to those who had "won the West". The word "Denim" comes from Nîmes, and "Jeans" from Genes (Genoa): thus what we today know as denim jeans were born.



THE PALM TREE AND THE CROCODILE

To understand the origin of the town's coat of arms one has to travel to Egypt. In 31 BC, Octavius defeated Anthony and Cleopatra's fleet in the battle of Actium, and thus ensured Roman control of the Empire. Caesar Augustus was born. A coin was struck in Nîmes to celebrate the event. On one side were the profiles of the Emperor and his son-in-law, the wartime leader Agrippa. On the reverse side was a



crocodile chained to a palm tree surmounted by a laurel wreath, symbolizing the conquest of Egypt. The inscription "Col Nem", the Colony of Nîmes, suggests that victorious legionnaires had been granted land near Nîmes. But in fact Nîmes was simply the place where the coin was minted. Over the centuries, the people of Nîmes became attached to these relatively common coins. In 1535 they were authorized by King Francois I, to adopt the palm tree and the crocodile as the town's coat of arms. Since then the inhabitants have been extremely proud of their crest. Redesigned in 1986, it can be found all over the town, even in the bronze studs set in the paving of the old town.



Amphitheatre

In terms of intelligence and intuition, this inhabitant of Le Cailar clearly has much in common with his bulls! His knowledge of the Camargue bull is second to none, having been picked up the hard way over the last fifty years. His vast experience has led to Jean Lafonte's role, since 1983, as the organizer of the *"courses a la cocarde"* in the Nîmes Amphitheatre, these taking place on the Sundays preceding the *'ferias'* (the Spanish style festivals combining corridas, bull running, concerts and other events). Although the Camargue bulls are not killed in the arena, they nevertheless play a starring role during these spectacular occasions, to the extent that the bulls' names are often blazoned across the posters. With 320 bulls, of which around fifty are *"cocardiens"*, Jean Lafonte is totally dedicated to their wellbeing and success, and sees himself rather as the bulls' impresario, *"It's just like being a pop or opera star's manager"*. It is pretty clear that in the Camargue, the real stars have four hooves and sharp horns ...

Contact the Nîmes tourist office for further information:

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Charles Allston Collins, *Berengaria's Alarm for the safety of her husband, Richard Coeur de Lion, awakened by the sight of his girdle for sale at Rome (The Pedlar)*. 1850. Oil on canvas, 39 7/8 x 42 in. Manchester City Art Galleries

HAVE YOU HEARD OF BERENGARIA, PRINCESS OF NAVARRE, WHO LEFT HER NATIVE LAND IN 1191 NEVER TO RETURN?

Julianna Lees

IN THE STEPS OF ENGLAND'S "UNKNOWN" QUEEN

THOUGH BERENGARIA WAS QUEEN OF ENGLAND, SHE NEVER SET FOOT IN HER REALM AND IS MENTIONED IN ENGLISH HISTORY BOOKS - IF AT ALL - MERELY AS A FOOTNOTE TO HER FAMOUS HUSBAND RICHARD I "THE LIONHEART" OF ENGLAND. (COEUR DE LION FOR THE FRENCH).

She was marginalised, in fact, almost out of existence. Had Berengaria produced an heir to the throne the course of English history would have changed forever. "Bad" King John would never have succeeded to the throne and a different blood line would have coursed through the Plantagenet dynasty. Whose fault it was, that no baby was born during 10 years of marriage - or whether the marriage was ever consummated - will never be known. There are certain facts that may be taken into consideration but they hardly amount to clues. Richard was not sterile as he fathered a son from a liaison with a prostitute

during his youth. He may, or may not have been homosexual : Hugh of Avalon, Bishop of Lincoln is known to have chided him for his vicious practices following which there was some kind of reconciliation with Berengaria, but the precise nature of his "vices" is left to our imagination. Richard had been betrothed to Alice, daughter of King Louis VII of France (his mother's former husband) when he was a young child. This made the young couple closely connected by marriage, but what Richard may have found more off-putting was the idea that she was his father's mistress. Whatever the reason, Alice was practically "on the shelf" when Richard finally broke off the engagement and married Berengaria instead - under pressure from his mother - when he was 34, almost middle-aged by the standards of the twelfth century.

So what are the facts about Berengaria? She is known as Berengère in France and Berenguela in Spanish, one of five children born in or around 1165 to Sancho VI "The Wise",



Berengaria holding her book



King of Navarre and Beatrice ("Sancha") of Castille. One of her younger sisters - Blanche of Navarre - married Eleanor of Aquitaine's grandson, the Count of Champagne, and their son later became the King of Navarre. Marriage between the ruling families of Navarre and Castille was an established practice; Berengaria's aunt Constance of Castille succeeded Eleanor as wife to Louis VII of France and their daughters - Marguerite and Alice - were betrothed respectively to Henry, Richard's eldest brother and Richard himself. So don't think of Berengaria as an alien from an outlandish country : we are dealing with an intimate circle of related families united by ties of blood, marriage and political alliances.

There is a possibility that Richard and Berengaria had met when he was on a visit to her brother for a tournament in Pamplona in the 1170s. Was King Sancho known as "The Wise" because he stayed home to reign over a secure and prosperous kingdom instead of gadding off to take part in ruinous and catastrophic crusades like his future son-in-law? What we do know is that his court was a haven for artists, musicians and troubadours so that Berengaria, like Richard and his mother would have received an excellent education and shared many points of reference with them. They would have known many of the same stories and poems, enjoyed the same jokes, and communicated in Occitan, though - no doubt - Berengaria was also able to understand Spanish or even Basque. In any case, she was the kind of bride of whom Eleanor would have approved, and the match is generally believed to have been her initiative.

With Richard away on the Crusades, his huge Anglo-French kingdom remained largely unprotected and Eleanor was anxious to seal an alliance with her powerful neighbours. Her heartland of Aquitaine where she now resided shared a border with Navarre. Indeed, Sancho was more friend than neighbour, so now Eleanor rode to Pamplona to quickly arrange the marriage and secure Sancho's protection. At twenty-five or thereabouts, and still unmarried, Berengaria seemed just right for her 34-year-old son, Eleanor thought. She lost no time in escorting her across the Pyrénées and through France, hoping to reach Richard before he sailed to the Holy Lands.

Berengaria was described as "elegant and prudent," by Ambroise, a Norman minstrel - one of only two chroniclers who ever saw her. Later writers who never saw her called her "ravishingly beautiful" and "fairest in the land", but we can take this as conventional exaggeration. Probably Berengaria was very relieved to be claimed at long last as bride to so important and famous a personage as the King of England. She must - surely - have been thrilled to be setting off on Richard's adventurous expeditions and in such brilliant company: it was the holiday of her lifetime!

Eleanor and Berengaria crossed the Alps, continued through Italy, and sailed from Brindisi to the Crusaders' camp at Messina, where they arrived on March 30, 1191. Philip Augustus of France, Richard's fellow Crusader, had just left Messina for the Holy Land. Eleanor wished the wedding to take place immediately, so that she could return to her many duties, but Richard played for time. Lent was beginning, and Richard objected that festivities would be unseemly. So Eleanor left Berengaria in the care of Richard's sister Joanna, the recently widowed queen of Sicily, who had just joined the party.



Le Mans, pony rides in the 'rue de la reine Bérengère'



The ancient palace of the Counts of Anjou and Maine, now the Town Hall

A few days later Richard gave the order to sail. More than 200 ships set out toward the eastern Mediterranean, but a mighty storm cut Berengaria and Joanna's ship off from the others. Eventually they arrived off the coast of Cyprus and took shelter in the harbour at Limassol. Here they waited, uncertain of the whereabouts of Richard and the rest of the fleet. To make matters worse, the self-styled emperor of Cyprus, Isaac Comnenus was seen as dangerous. He sent boats out and tried to lure them ashore with promises of fine food and Cypriot wine - probably hoping to hold them for ransom. What a relief it must have been, when Richard's ships appeared just as they were preparing to flee.

Furious, the king attacked the Cypriots and drove them into the hills. He might have pursued them and completed the conquest of the island, but was persuaded that now the wedding could be delayed no longer, "if only out of regard for the bride's reputation," says the chronicler Richard of Devizes. Besides, there was now a large number of Crusaders who had recently arrived from Syria to add lustre to the ceremony. So Richard postponed his pursuit of Isaac long enough to celebrate his marriage. This took place at the Chapel of St George at Limassol on May 12, 1191. After the service, two bishops and one archbishop crowned Richard King of Cyprus and Berengaria Queen of England and Cyprus.

Richard's gorgeous clothing is described by the chroniclers in great detail, but not Berengaria's. Her effigy at Le Mans may give a clue to her appearance at that time, because it shows her with her hair long and loose - as befitting a bride but not a wife or widow. Her veil is caught with a jewelled crown, and her flowing tunic held by a girdle sparkling with gemstones. The face of this effigy is not that of a beauty, but of a "prudent and elegant" woman.

After the feasting and the conquest of Cyprus the entire party set sail for Acre in Palestine where Richard joined Philip Augustus of France and Leopold of Austria for the successful assault. Berengaria and Joanna moved into the royal palace for most of the following year. It is recorded that they spent their time on embroidery but on at least one occasion they joined Richard on a march to Jaffa. However, Richard's indifference toward Berengaria was noted, and there is no evidence that they spent any time together as man and wife. The chroniclers



Detail of lion and dog from Berengaria's effigy



Berengaria's gatehouse at Epau

wrote that he was far too busy with his battles to spend time with the queen.

During the following year, the Crusaders marched around Palestine, fighting the Saracens under their leader Saladin, but never getting close to Jerusalem. Philip Augustus lost heart and returned to France. Eventually Richard signed a truce with Saladin in the autumn of 1192 (he tried in vain to persuade Joanna to seal it by marrying the brother of Saladin, his former enemy,) and the Third Crusade came to an ignominious conclusion.

Richard sent his wife and his sister home to France on September 29, 1192. It was three years before Berengaria saw him again. His adventures during this period are well known - hers are more obscure. The two women were to be travelling companions for a long time : " They held each other dear, and lived as doves in a cage." Eventually they reached Rome and stayed with the Pope for a while, were escorted to Marseilles, and then travelled with Alfonso II of Aragon through Provence. For the final stretch of the journey to Poitiers they were led by Raymond of St. Gilles, Count of Toulouse - who became Joanna's second husband.

Back in France after all her travels and adventures, Berengaria probably spent several years living quietly at the Angevin castle of Chinon. Meanwhile, Christendom was riveted by the fate of the king of England, imprisoned in Austria. After his enormous ransom had been raised, Richard was finally recrowned at Winchester Cathedral on April 16, 1194. Eleanor occupied the place of honour but Berengaria was not invited. Richard soon returned to France to reassert his authority, which had been challenged by Philip Augustus, but he still did not visit Berengaria. In fact, he devoted himself instead to debauchery to such an extent that he was reprimanded by the Church. Both St Hugh and a holy hermit warned him that his end was near unless he mended his ways and returned to his queen. Nevertheless, it was over a year and not until a severe illness nearly carried him off, that Richard finally joined Berengaria for Christmas in Poitiers in 1195. However, Richard's effort was short-lived. He was soon off again to carry on warring against Philip Augustus and supervising the building of an enormous and impregnable fortress - the Château Gaillard in Normandy - which he nicknamed "his daughter".

Soon Richard gave up any pretence of conducting a real marriage. Though as a king he was well aware of the importance of an heir apparent, in 1196, he finally rejected Berengaria and acknowledged his brother John as his heir. To make matters worse, he tried to reclaim two of the castles in Berengaria's dowry from her brother, Sancho VII who had succeeded his father as king of Navarre. Berengaria, humiliated, retired to an obscure castle near Angers from where she heard the news of Richard's death on April 6, 1199, aged forty-two. Before he died, he repented of his sins and took the Holy Sacrament - for the first time since his previous fit of penitence three years earlier. Eleanor was at Richard's deathbed and at his funeral at Fontevrault Abbey, but Berengaria, though within a day's journey, was invited to neither.

Did Berengaria mourn her husband? Possibly. Adam of Eynsham records that Berengaria was "stricken with grief" at the death of her husband but this seems unlikely in view of the facts. Perhaps he was being conventional again, or perhaps poor Berengaria nurtured a one-sided passion for the Lionheart throughout her unhappy marriage? She was certainly loyal to his memory for the rest of her life, and conscious of her position as the widow of a king. But life was still not easy for the unlucky queen. For the next twenty years she battled to get her share of Richard's estate and her own dowry - land assigned to her by her marriage settlement. King John of England made promises but constantly stalled and ignored her. Pope Innocent III and later, Honorius III supported her, but it was not until 1220, after threats and excommunications that Berengaria finally received a pension from Henry III, who had succeeded to the English throne.

Until Eleanor of Aquitaine died in 1204, aged eighty-two, Berengaria stayed with her sister Blanche in Champagne. After the death of her mother-in-law, Philip Augustus tried to seize her lands. Berengaria, - the new dowager queen - claimed them as rightfully hers, and he gave her the city of Le Mans in exchange for some of her other properties.

So Berengaria lived in Le Mans for the next quarter of a century, arguing with the bishop and his archbishop over taxation and the jurisdiction of civil versus ecclesiastical courts and devoting herself to good causes. Not the least among these was the founding of a Cistercian abbey south-east of Le Mans, at Epau. The great establishment over which she watched was almost complete when Berengaria died on December 23, 1230. She is still revered in the city as the "Dame of Le Mans," where a museum has been named after her. Her beautifully-carved effigy was moved from the abbey to the Cathedral of St. Julien in Le Mans in the last century but restored to Notre Dame de l'Epau after the recent extensive reconstructions. The abbey had fallen into a terrible state of disrepair after the revolution, the once gracious church being reduced to a barn. Since the 1960s, however, Notre Dame has witnessed a phoenix-like revival, and is now among the best-preserved Cistercian abbeys in France. You can visit it every day and admire Berengaria's "gisant" forever lying in state only a short distance geographically but a world away from the much-visited effigies of her neglectful husband and his family, in the royal chapel of Fontevraud.

Photographs by Robin Lees



Le Mans, Gallo-Roman walls



Berengaria, crowned head

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