

The Comminges County from the 10th to the 15th century

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Abstract: From the 10th to the 15th centuries, the counts of Comminges developed their important domain and resisted the ambitions of their powerful neighbors. Alliances, treaties, marriages, wars, everything has been good to preserve their goods. These counts played happily with their personalities, their strengths, their weaknesses, their malice. They supported the economic and social development. The population gradually migrated from the mountains to the plain, first with the help of the Church and the creation of the "sauvetés". Then the liberality of the counts allowed the construction of numerous "bastides" in the 13th century. The county families provided the majority of the Commingeois bishops and reinforced the importance of the Secular Church. By their permanent support to the Regular Church, they favored the establishment of large monastic and templar domains, the development of as much farming land. The progressive close up with the raimondine city of Toulouse, placed the County under his protection after the crusade by the Albigensians in 1218. The war against the English, the devastations of the Black prince in 1355 opened the last page of this story, accompanied by calamities that left in 1453 a bloodless Comminges in the hands of the King of France.

1 Presentation

Medieval Comminges occupied the southern part of the present Haute-Garonne department and some nearby territories in the departments of Ariège, Hautes Pyrénées and Gers. Throughout the Middle Age, it kept essentially the same envelope despite some fluctuations over the centuries. [1]

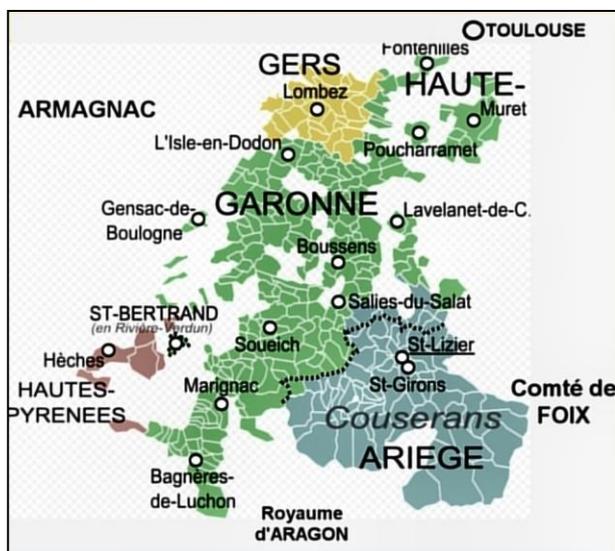


Fig.1 - Comminges county after the 15th century

Comminges extended in the southern part of the current department of Haute-Garonne, and also spread

over the departments of Ariège, Gers and Hautes-Pyrénées. Saint-Gaudens and the Nebouzan were out of the county, possessions of the count of Foix. In the 8th century the Saracens, based in the North of Spain, crossed the Pyrenees to be defeated in Poitiers in 732. Before this date they had not invaded the South of France but carried out devastating raids, looted villages, massacred populations.



After the defeat of the invader, the inhabitants of these North Pyrenean regions, mainly residing in these mountains, were protected against possible new risks. They thus protected the valleys of Luchon and Garonne by building a network of watchtowers, a total of twenty, like the towers of Oo, Casteblancat, Castelvielh... and protection fortresses (St B at, Fronsac, Marignac, Montespan, Aspet, etc.)

Fig.2 - The Saint-Beat castle

Little is known about the history of Comminges from the 7th to the 10th century. The few existing texts are too thin to deal with it seriously.



Fig.3 – The tower of Oo

Nevertheless, it is known that the influence of the Vascons, a people from the North-West of present-day Spain, who arrived towards the end of the sixth century in the Pyrenean valleys, was decisive in the evolution of the population, the harshness of the characters and the vigour of the language.

2 The origins of the county

Arnaud Ist, 957-979, is the first known count of Comminges. He reigns on an enclosed territory of valleys and mountains. Mixed farming (wheat, oats, beans, peas, vines, etc.) benefits from quality land. In pastures, intensive breeding of small animals (goats, sheep, ewes, etc.) is preferred. The forest supplies firewood and construction, transported by flotation on waterways. Roman quarries are used for construction.

The small seigneuries that make up the original county are passed on by inheritance to the elder. This regime marginalizes populations, cadets of families and people of medium and small conditions, who are in the vital obligation to undertake a progressive migration towards the plain. We deforest, we cultivate heath lands, fallow lands and vacant bushes. Soils are poor, crop rotation is used, yields are low.

Thus the county grew on the plains. Roger Ist, son of Arnaud, built the castle of Cazères. Great seigneuries settled in Aspet and Benque. Roger II connected the Lézat Abbey to Cluny in 1073. At the end of the eleventh century, the ancient land of the Convenes (Saint-Bertrand) stretches towards Piedmont and the plains from Luchon, Saint B at, Aspet... up to the Garonne in Cazères and the high valley.

The poor, miserable people gather in "sauvet s", small villages created between 1050 and 1150 with the support

of the Secular Church. Thus came the humble villages that dot the plains. At the same time appear the first fortified villages,



grouped around a strong castle and protected by the lord. This is the case for L'Isle-en-Dodon. In the picture below can clearly be seen the circular boulevard that surrounds the old town, built on the site of the old fortifications. The town hall of the 19th century is located on the site of the former castle fort. A first fortification surrounded the castle and the church, practically on the limits of the present large square

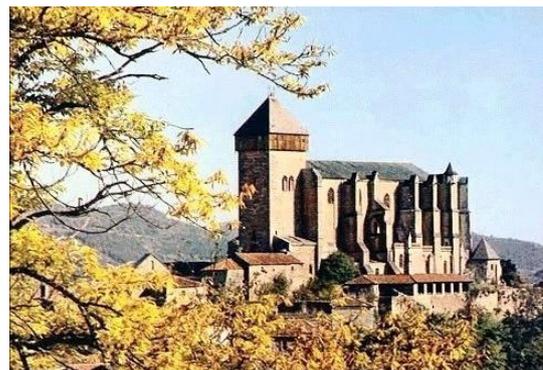
Fig. 4 – L'Isle-en-Dodon aerial view

3 The Secular Church

The Secular Church favoured the establishment of villages where the poor found refuge and protection. Bertrand de L'Isle, a tireless evangelizer, travelled through mountains and valleys to convert populations that had been distant from religion. Appointed bishop in 1083, he abandoned Saint-Just of Valcabr ere, a basilica from the 11th and 12th centuries, and started to build the cathedral of Saint-Bertrand and its cloister.

Saint-Bertrand instilled a new spiritual activity and monastic life in a relatively poorly endowed church, living mainly on heritage properties. The bishopric was fragmented down the centuries: Saint-Lizier, Rieux, Toulouse, Lombez. The commingeois bishops of Saint-Bertrand, great lords, always from large families of the county, will keep close relations with the counts who contributed to the cohesion of the country.

Fig.5 – Cathedral of Saint-Bertrand



4 The counts of Comminges

4.1 The conquest of the territory

The counts with the name of Bernard succeeded one another without interruption from Bernard Ist in 1105 to Bernard VIII in 1341.



Fig.6 - Comminges county around 1150

Bernard Ist, 1105-1145, a belligerent, skilful negotiator and opportunist, tirelessly aggregated the land and prepared the county's future map during the 40 years of his reign. In 1118 he supported his neighbour, the king of Aragon, in his reconquest of Zaragoza. His marriage in 1120 with Dias of Samatan brought him the seigneuries of Samatan and Muret, the future capital of Comminges. His alliance with the count of Toulouse, Alphonse Jourdain, enabled him to annex the Couserans in 1130 after having sacked Saint-Lizier and massacred the population. In 1144 he added the Val d'Aran to the county, taking advantage of the victory of the Castilians over the Aragonese.

Bernard III, said Dodon, through negotiation and his religious learnings managed between 1153 and 1176 to keep a fairly consistent domain, although the division of Montsaunès between his three sons caused the county to lose the territories of Couserans and Savès. He had previously lost the Val d'Aran to the belligerent Alfonso II of Aragon.

4.2 The grand counts

The 13th century marked the peak of the county. Bernard IV, 1176-1225, courageous, strategist and skilled negotiator turns to Toulouse while retaining a prudent neutrality in the struggle between Raimond V, Count of Toulouse, and Alphonsus II, King of Aragon. The death of the two belligerents will bring together Raimond VI, Peter II, king of Aragon and Bernard IV.

Bernard IV lost the county of Bigorre when his wife, Countess Béatrix de Bigorre, was divorced. Pierre II, his ally, gave him the Val d'Aran in exchange for his support in obtaining the seignury of Montpellier.

The Albigensian crusade, proclaimed by Pope Innocent III in 1208, against heretics, who denounce a rich and corrupt church that cares little for the interests of the people, will strengthen alliances. Simon de Montfort crushed the coalitions at Muret in 1213. Pierre II was killed in action. Raimond VI and Bernard IV found their salvation only in flight. Comminges was submitted until the grouping of allies, supported by the count de Foix, in 1217. Toulouse was reconquered in 1218. The city under siege for nine months was liberated on the day of Simon de Montfort's accidental death.

Comminges was still looted by the Crusaders until its total reconquest in 1222. The Crusade left deep scars. The country is impoverished, devastated by war and epidemics.

Bernard IV nevertheless leaves an intact, enlarged territory of the Val d'Aran.

Bernard V, 1225-1241, faithful supporter of his father, succeeded him. He initially deviated from the count of Toulouse, Raimond VII, who was excommunicated and opposed King Louis VIII. In 1227 he made allegiance to the king, Louis IX, returned to the count of Toulouse and placed his forces at the disposal of the Church. Bernard V remained until the end of his life in 1241 a close friend of the count of Toulouse. Combative, good negotiator, he kept his county intact.

Bernard VI, 1241-1295, will remain the faithful ally of the count of Toulouse all his life. In 1244, the tribute to Toulouse definitively brought the county into the fiefs of the house of Toulouse. This homage will link the county to the kingdom of France since, at the death of Raimond VII in 1249, Bernard VI swore an oath of fidelity to the Queen of France, who had taken possession of the Toulouse states, in the name of his son. He then took the oath to Philippe III Le Hardi in 1271 and definitively placed himself under the protection of royalty, heir to the Toulouse movement.

At his death in Muret in 1295, after 54 years of reign, Bernard VI yielded his power to his son with the approval of the king, Philippe le Bel. He was able to protect his county despite the ambitions of Gaston VII de Foix-Béarn, which nevertheless led to a compromise and to the definitive attachment of Nébouzan and Saint-Gaudens to the county of Foix.

4.3 The successors

Bernard VII, count of 1295-1312, already old at his advent, preferred procedure and negotiations to the use of weapons. In 1301, however, he was forced to take up arms against the count of Foix, Gaston Ist, who attacked his possessions, bullied the populations, and burnt villages. Supported by Pope Clement V and the king, Philip le Bel, Bernard VII concluded the peace of 1309.

Bernard VII left a large number of descendants for the county's political protection. One of his daughters was to marry the count of Foix, one of his sons, Jean-Raimond

was to become the first archbishop of Toulouse and became cardinal.

Bernard VIII, 1312-1336, will benefit from the inheritance of three marriages. Puelle, daughter of Géraud II de Béarn, brings him closer to the Armagnacs before dying. Marguerite in 1308, daughter of Raymond VI, count of Turenne, brought him rich estates in Limousin. After his second widowhood in 1312, Mathe, daughter of Bernard de L'Isle Jourdain and Marguerite de Foix, reconciled him with the house of Foix.

Entangled by the depravity and exactions of his brother Gui, who claimed the lands of Jean de Montfort and his father-in-law, lord of Lombers, he went to war in Albi's region for 20 years.

In 1332, King Philip VI of Valois granted him letters of forgiveness for the crimes committed thanks for his fidelity to the crown.

4.4 The agony of the county

The reign of Pierre-Raymond II, 1341-1375, son of Pierre-Raymond Ist, at the beginning of the Hundred Years' War, was a long succession of conflicts that would ruin the country. While Gaston Fébus sided with the English in 1352 when the king attributed the lieutenancy of Languedoc to his rival Jean Ist d'Armagnac, Pierre-Raymond II had the favour of the king, Philippe VI de Valois, then remained faithful to his successor, John II the Good.

In 1355 The Black Prince, son of Edward III, king of England who holds Bordeaux and the Guyenne, plunders the country, bypasses Toulouse and arrives in Béziers. He continued his looting during his retreat from November until Bordeaux. In 1356 his new and terrible ride ended with his victory of Poitiers over King John II.

In 1359 Gaston Fébus entered the war and made prisoners Jean Ist d'Armagnac, Pierre-Raymond II de Comminges and 900 knights in 1362 at Launac. The ransom is 13,000 florins.

In 1369 the war against the English started again. Pierre-Raymond and Jean d'Armagnac fought for 5 years in Gascony, Agenais and Albigeois.

Wars, looting, armed gangs cause misery, famine in 1373, epidemics, plague. Many villages are abandoned, people take refuge in the mountains.

At the end of the reign, the count devoted himself to donations and pious foundations. The ruined Comminges, however, remained a stake for its powerful neighbours Foix and Armagnac

Marguerite, daughter of Pierre-Raymond II, is kidnapped by John II, count of Armagnac, in his castle of Muret in May 1378 at the age of twelve. The count married her the same day to her son. A year after the death of this first husband, she remarried in 1392 with Jean de Fézengué, Comte de Pardiac, who died in 1402.

In 1399 Marguerite separated from her husband to fight the Pardiacs after the assassination of her allies, the two Lanta brothers, under the walls of the castle of L'Isle-en-Dodon. She approached the count of Armagnac, Bernard VII, who imprisoned her husband.

She was to govern alone from 1402 to 1419, still marked by her abduction and her first marriage when she was just a young teenager. For lack of experience, capricious and spirited, she won't be able to govern reasonably her county and defy the Armagnacs despite her proximity in 1412 with Jean Ist Comte de Foix.

In 1419 she married Mathieu de Foix, twenty years younger, brother of Jean Ist. Mathieu had her locked up a few months later in the castle of Saint-Marcet where she would remain for more than twenty years [2]. Liberated by the King of France in 1443 at the age of seventy-five, she died shortly there after at Poitiers.



Fig.7 - The castle of Saint-Marcet (being restored)

After joining the King of France in 1423, the county of Foix participated in the victory at Orléans in 1428 with the help of several Commingeois lords. The Comminges was invaded by Jean IV d'Armagnac from 1439 to 1445, covered with hordes of looters, until the victory of the royal army. Impoverished, devastated the county is now in the hands of Charles VII.

Sixty years later, in 1502, a judgment of the parliament of Toulouse made effective the attachment of Comminges to the crown of France.

5 The County Administration

5.1 The main characters

The county properties (Châtellenies) are administered by lords, parents or vassals of the count. They ensure the protection of populations in exchange for their fidelity. From the 10th to the 12th century the land was owned by the counts and did not depend on any seigneurie. The peasants were free to use it.

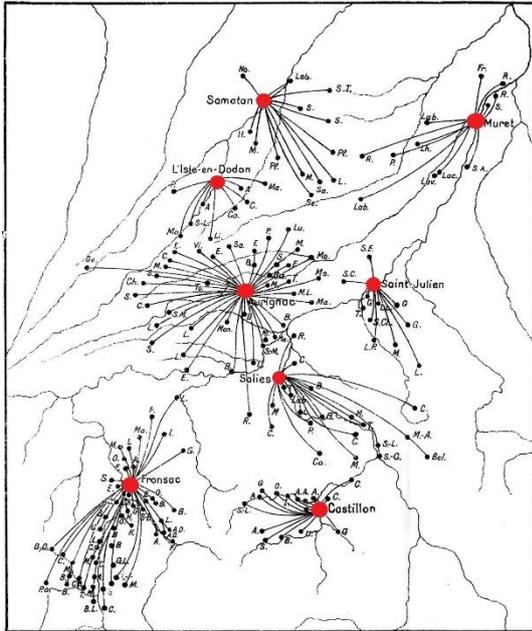


Fig.8 – The county properties in the 14th century

large markets and the creation of "bastides" from the thirteenth century. In the 14th century, the bastides with the best human and economic location became large towns: Saint Lys, Carbonne, Le Fousseret, Boulogne, Rieumes and especially Montrejeau. The others lived and remained modest villages.



Fig.9 – The "bastide" of Valentine

The Vassals, in paying public homage to the suzerain, constitute the countal movement. They administer their fiefdoms, but must help and assist the count who protects them. The lords of Saint B at and Aspet are among the most important.

The "Clientele" has relations of proximity, exchange, circulation... for many independent lords. The lords collect taxes on crops, market fees, tolls...etc. The greatest barons enjoy a small administration and some officers.

Commingeoise feudalism reached its peak in the 12th century before entering the service of the count and then of the king [3,4],

5.2 The commons

From early thirteenth century onwards, rather liberal charters regulated relations between municipalities and suzerains: in Rieux, Muret, Saint-Gaudens [5], then about fifty municipalities between 1250 and 1350 [6].

Charters allow fairs and markets, toll exemptions. They record the in use of banalities, windmills, bread ovens, press... They Include Civil and Criminal Law Clauses. Residents enjoy freedom of persons, residence, displacement. It provides for county protection.

Consulates, two to six consuls according to the size of the cities, surrounded by prud'hommes, administer the cities. The consuls, appointed for a year, are chosen ("elected") from among notables. The bayle, representative of the count, sits with the consuls.

They control the economic life. They are also responsible for defence and security. They are responsible for real estate. They are supported by small local officials.

The count reserves the powers of justice and let cities govern themselves in a fairly liberal manner. This management is a wealth of the country. The free movement of people and goods facilitated the opening of

A bastide is usually created according to a pre-established checkerboard street plan with central square, hall and covered. It has a fundamental economic and commercial role.

The largest cities are carefully distributed to cover the territory. The rational and methodical organization of the geographical distribution of these bastides, while making its wealth, allows the count to know his domain well, to manage it effectively although it leaves to the vassals and to the municipalities broad marks of liberality.

6 The Regular Church

The Regular Church, the most endowed, actively supported by all the counts, has acquired immense fortunes. Its powerful abbots, cadets of seigneurial houses, held an essential place in the political and economic life of the county until the 15th century. In the thirteenth century it had very large abbeys and priories. It developed agricultural and pastoral activities on immense properties.

The main abbey, the best endowed, Bonnefont, shelters the graves of 4 counts. His abbots favoured the creation of bastides in the upper Save country.

Women's Monasteries flourished in the 12th and 13th centuries: the Cistercians of Fabas, those of the Fontevrault order at St Laurent.



Fig.10 – Remains of the prior of Saint-Laurent

The Templars of Montsaunès in their fortress, guardian of the Pyrenean road, together with Bonnefont

The Order, faithful to the crusaders, is not affected by the albigeny crisis. In 1307, Philippe le Bel suppressed the Order, executed and burned his masters, including the great master Jacques de Molay in 1314. The commandery then passed into the hands of the Hospitallers of Jerusalem.

During their reign, by their generosity, by their gifts, by their faith, the counts attracted the good graces of the

constitute the most important ecclesiastical domination of the county.



Fig.11 – The church of Montsaunès
(last vestige of the templar castle)

Church. It contributed to the territorial and economic expansion of the county.

The counts of Toulouse, in delicacy with the papal authority at the time of the war of Albigeois, approached the commingeois lords to try to soften the anger of the pope

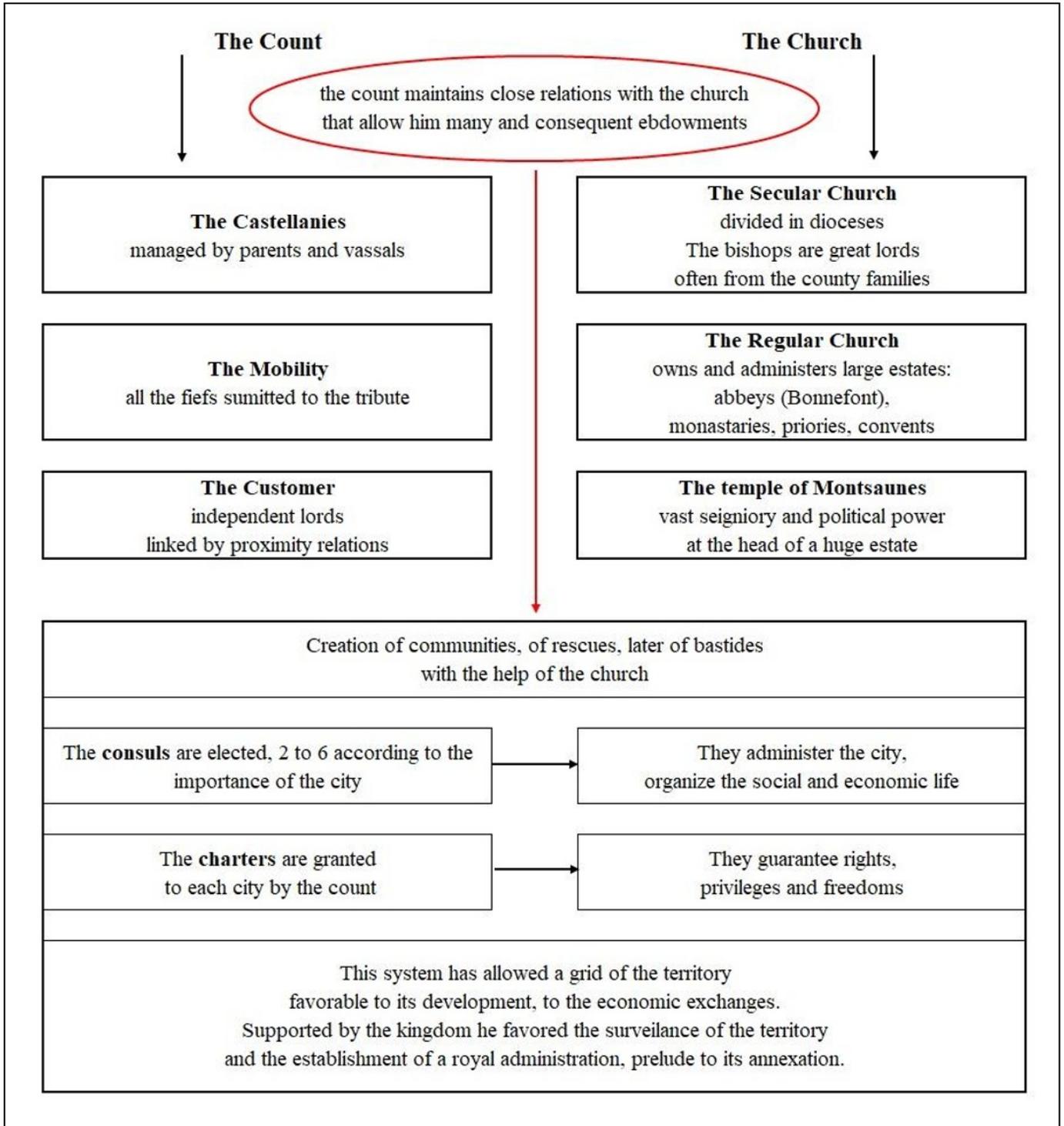


Fig.12 – The organisation of the county in the 13th century

7 Epilogue

The county of Comminges was surrounded by great neighbours, the count of Toulouse, the count of Foix-Béarn, the count of Armagnac, the king of Aragon. These powerful lords have always had the objective of seizing this territory.

These characters sought alliances, married their daughters, fought, invaded the county, sometimes looted and burnt towns and villages. The counts have resisted for five centuries with the same recipes. Married, divorced, remarried with the big neighboring families, they knew how to compose, find alliances, overthrow them, fight to preserve their domain. From 1244, paying homage to the Count of Toulouse, close to the King of France, and in 1271, taking an oath to the King, Philippe III Le Hardi, they received the support of the Crown. From the end of the thirteenth century, the royal administration gradually infiltrated Comminges. The establishment of the bastides, the pivot of trade and economic development, enabled the count, but also the king, to supervise the territory. The Royal Administration, Royal Justice and the Royal Army have insidiously and gradually invested it.

The counts, however, retained real authority in their domain, all the more so because they relied on the powerful and faithful Church as an ally: the secular Church from which the bishops came from their families, the regular Church strongly supported and endowed by their care.

8. Bibliography

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Thanks to their sense of administration, their generosity and the promulgation of charters in more than fifty municipalities, thanks to the support of the Church, they have enlarged and developed their domain.. By leaving it to the cities to govern themselves with their consuls by instituting a regime of freedoms for the population, by authorizing the free movement of goods and persons, and by building good relations with their vassals and local lords, they received unwavering support.

The wars of religion, the beginning of the Hundred Years' War, the fatal passage of the Black Prince, the ambitions of Gaston Fébus de Foix and Jean Ie d'Armagnac have hindered the smooth functioning of the county. In the fourteenth century these events considerably weakened it. Misery, epidemics, the plague devastated the population.

The arrival in power of Marguerite, who had been kidnapped, married under pressure at twelve years of age, and ill-prepared for her duties, tolled the knell of the county.

This story has a morals. counts have never yielded. They have resisted for five hundred years to neighbours eager for conquest and power. The great lords intrigued, fought to get this County, and they never had possession of it. In 1502 Comminges County was officially attached to France by Toulouse Parliament.

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