

## THE TRADITION OF THE MARIES IN PROVENCE<sup>1</sup>

(*continuation*)

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THE frequency of the name Martha in Provence from the eighth century onwards, as well as its rarity elsewhere in the West, is an indirect but significant indication of the cult of the saint who first bore it in those parts. Moreover, two charters of 964 and 967, now in the archives of the Bouches-du-Rhône, mention a *terra* of St Martha near Tarascon.

It is also alleged that there exist no other traditions concerning these saintly personages (Lazarus and his sisters, Martha and Mary Magdalen, Mary Salome, and Mary the mother of James), and no other church has ever claimed them. This has been contradicted by the original opponent of the tradition, the seventeenth-century scholar Launoy, and more recently by Mgr Duchesne. The latter brought forward a number of texts to show that Mary Magdalen, regarded as distinct from Mary of Bethany, had her tomb in Ephesus in the sixth century, and that Lazarus, whom certain traditions also connect with Ephesus, had a tomb in Larnaca, then called Citium, in Cyprus, in the ninth century, and that in 899 his body and that of Mary Magdalen were transferred to Constantinople by Leo VI.

It would take too long to reproduce Duchesne's assertions and the refutations or attenuations of them by the traditionalists. Duchesne's point of view is expounded in the first volume of *Fastes épiscopaux de l'ancienne Gaule* and the *Légende de Sainte Madeleine*; a traditionalist reply will be found on pp. 107-121 of Canon J. Escudier's *Évangélisation primitive de la Provence*. The impression of an outsider who has listened to both parties is that, though indeed the East can boast no coherent body of traditions concerning Mary Magdalen and Lazarus comparable to those of the West, and though the mention of these saints and of their abodes and places of burial is shadowy and ill-substantiated, yet the fact that they existed in the late ninth century suffices to disprove

<sup>1</sup> The first part of Professor Girdlestone's article appeared in the September issue of *BLACKFRIARS*.

the contention that Provence is the only area of Christendom to claim their presence. It seems that nothing definite one way or the other can be deduced from the existence of the oriental traditions whose force has been over-stated by Duchesne and, I think, rightly minimised by Escudier.

The most impressive elements in the discussion are the three *inventiones*: of Martha at Tarascon in 1187, of Mary Magdalen at Saint-Maximin in 1279, and of the two Marias at Les Saintes in 1448. With the existence of the crypt at Saint-Maximin and its sarcophagi, they constitute the strongest claims to a sympathetic hearing that the traditionalists can put forward.

It may be asked: Why the need for these 'discoveries' if the traditions had never been lost? The answer is that, during the troublous centuries of the Saracen invasions and the Norsemen's raids, everything precious was buried to save it from falling into the hands of the foes or being destroyed. Between 719, when they took Narbonne, and 975, when their last stronghold at La Garde Freinet was destroyed, the Saracens were either in occupation of the Provençal cities or constantly threatening them. Driven back once by Charles the Hammer, they returned again and again, pillaging and burning. St Victor's and St Sauveur's abbeys in Marseilles were ruined by them; Avignon and Arles were taken more than once; the Tour de Roland which still stands on the Roman theatre in the latter town perpetuates the name of an archbishop who built it as a defence and who died a prisoner of the invaders. Towards the middle of the ninth century Norsemen settled for a while in the Camargue and made it their centre of operations. Is it surprising, incidentally, if documents earlier than the eleventh century are practically non-existent and if it is impossible to prove the existence, earlier than this date, of any 'traditions'?

The usual hiding place for relics at such times was a crypt, which could be filled with earth and concealed under the floor of the building above it. In the fifth century, St Hilary's remains were thus buried at Poitiers to save them from the Goths and Vandals, and, in the seventh, those of St Privatus at Clermont and St Symphorian at Autun were preserved in like manner. In the one diocese of Fréjus, at least four saints' remains were saved in this way: those of Ausilius, Maxima, Torpetius and Leontius, the last three of which still remain to be discovered. There is, then,

nothing unusual in the burial of the relics of Martha, Mary Magdalen, Salome, and Mary the mother of James.

Of the earliest discovery we have no detailed account. All we know is that excavations on the supposed site of Martha's tomb revealed an ancient crypt, containing a sarcophagus of the fifth century, still in existence, which contained the bones of the saint and an inscription, now lost, saying: '*Hic Martha jacet*'. The brevity of the formula is said to be the sign of an early date.

The discovery of 1279 is much more circumstantial. In addition to the official statement we possess a number of contemporary references. One of these is by a Franciscan, Fra Salimbene, the first man to leave a detailed account of a pilgrimage to the Sainte-Baume which he visited in 1248. The fullest accounts are those of Bernard Gui (1261-1331) and Philippe de Cabassole. Neither was an eye-witness, but Bernard Gui visited Saint-Maximin not long after the exhumation and spoke with some who had seen it, whilst Philippe de Cabassole derived his information from King Robert of Naples, count of Provence, whose father, Charles the Lame, had ordered the researches that led to the finding. Bernard Gui has left two accounts of the events, couched in almost identical terms, one in his *Flores Chronicarum*, the other in the *Speculum Sanctorale*. That of Philippe de Cabassole occurs in his *Libellus historialis Mariae beatissimae Magdalenae* (1355).

From these accounts as well as from the official reports we learn that the initiator of the undertaking was Charles, prince of Salerno, the future Charles II of Naples and Provence. He was the eldest son of Charles of Anjou, brother of St Louis, the first king of the Two Sicilies and count of Provence of the Capetian line. The prince of Salerno was to succeed his father in 1285. He was, says Bernard Gui, extremely desirous of finding the body of the Magdalen. He did not rush into the quest, however, but made diligent inquiries in the written documents and questioned old men. He then caused excavations to be made in the 'oratory where Maximinus . . . had buried the blessed one, as witness ancient and authentic deeds'. The digging began early in December, 1279, and the prince himself took part in it, helping to remove the earth which filled the crypt. Philippe de Cabassole describes him: 'seizing a pick-axe . . . digging with his own hands, soaked with sweat'. By the ninth of the month the clearing had gone far enough for four sarcophagi to be seen ranged on either side of the

chamber. One of them was of white marble or alabaster<sup>2</sup> and bore carved on its cover the scene in the house of Simon the Pharisee, as mentioned in the pseudo-Rabanus' life and the shorter and supposedly older life, and also by Gislebert Crispin, abbot of Westminster in the eleventh century.<sup>3</sup> This, which was recognised as the saint's tomb, was empty. Another sarcophagus, however, of a coarser marble, gave forth a sweet scent and therein was found the body of the saint. The tomb was not investigated but was at once sealed up with the prince's seals, as Charles was anxious to have it examined in the presence of serious witnesses. Meanwhile, he summoned the archbishops of Aix and Arles and a number of other distinguished clerics, and on December 18th the sarcophagus was opened afresh and scrutinised more closely. This time there was found in it an ancient piece of wood or cork which broke in two as it was being passed from hand to hand and which contained a scrip (*cartellus, chirographum, cedula* are the words used in the different accounts) of great age, bearing an inscription which will be discussed shortly. The tomb was again sealed up. An official statement was drawn up recording these facts and embodying the text of the inscription. Meanwhile, preparations were made for a permanent shrine which was ready by the end of April. On May 5th took place the translation of the relics. A third time, the tomb was opened and now everything in it was removed, even to the dust which had accumulated in it and which was distributed as relics to the various bishops present. In the course of this further investigation a ball of wax was found which had passed unnoticed up to then. It contained a small wooden tablet on which were inscribed the words, similar in their concision to those found at Tarascon: '*Hic requiescit corpus beatae Mariae Magdalenae*'. The tablet, says Bernard Gui, was so old that it was scarcely legible. Another official statement<sup>4</sup> was made out; it recorded this further discovery and the displaying and translation of the relics, which were then taken to the upper church where they continued to be venerated till the Revolution. What survives of them is now once more preserved in the crypt, above the alabaster tomb in which they were discovered.

2 The material is really a very fine grained marble which has the appearance of alabaster.

3 Faillon, I, 434 (a).

4 Faillon, II, 801-802, nos. 80-82.

A canonical inquiry had been held and a decision was delivered by Cardinal de Longis, who had conducted it, declaring that the body found in the tomb was that of Mary Magdalen.

Philippe de Cabassole, whose information comes from Robert, Charles' son, adds a detail which is of great interest. Charles of Salerno sought and obtained permission from the Pope to substitute Dominicans for the Cassianites, depending on St Victor's abbey in Marseilles, who had been in possession of the sanctuary for centuries. The new occupants were installed in 1295 and on this occasion the count of Provence and king of Naples, as he then was, paid a visit to Boniface VIII, taking with him an account of the discovery, the two inscriptions and the saint's skull whence, as stated by two official documents of 1282 and 1283, the lower jaw bone was missing.<sup>5</sup> The Pope said that among the relics in the Lateran Basilica was one which purported to be a jawbone of the Magdalen. He sent for it and it was found that it fitted perfectly and without effort into the sockets in the skull. Boniface gave Charles the relic, but the king, instead of keeping the two parts together, separated them again and gave the maxillary to the convent of Our Lady of Nazareth at Aix. The convent was destroyed after the Revolution and the relic is now at St Maximin.

We must turn to the document preserved in the piece of wood or cork. It is now lost, but was still extant in the seventeenth century when Father Antoine Pagi, who examined it, found parts of it quite illegible and to be made out only with the help of a copy. It read as follows in the official statement drawn up in 1280 :

*Anno Nativitatis Domini Dominica septingentesimo decimo, V<sup>to</sup> mensis decembris nocte secretissime, regnante Clodoveo piissimo, Francorum rege, tempore infestationis gentis Saracenorum, translatum fuit corpus hoc carissimae et venerandae beatae Mariae Magdalenae, de sepulchro suo alabastri in hoc marmoreo, timore dictae gentis perfidae, et quia secretius est his, amoto corpore Cedonii.*<sup>6</sup>

Bernard Gui's and all subsequent transcriptions read 'Odoino' for 'Clodoveo' and that used by Pagi reads 716 for 710.

It is obvious that both name and date were hard to make out. Of the two dates, 716 makes better sense, since in 710 Tarik had not yet crossed into Spain, whereas in 716 the conquest of the

<sup>5</sup> Faillon, II, 803-806, nos. 85 & 86.

<sup>6</sup> Faillon, II, 802.

Peninsula was complete and the Saracens were on the point of invading Gaul which they actually entered in 719. But all early transcribers read DCCX and it seems that DCCXVI is a misreading due to faulty joining of the dates of year and day of month.

The reading 'Odoino' is certainly more satisfactory than 'Clodoveo'. There were three kings of the name of Clodoveus or Clovis; the last died in 695. The Merovingian king in 710 was Chilperic II, but his writ did not run in southern Gaul, and Odoinus fits in perfectly with Odo, or Eudes, the Merovingian *dux* of Aquitaine (688-735), who, though never officially king, reigned as independent sovereign over that part of Gaul which he governed. Aquitanian charters are dated with the year of his reign and his rule was recognised in 717 by Chilperic II. *Rex*, moreover, was a title given to all members of the royal house, whether or no they were reigning monarchs.

The document has vanished and with it the simple '*Hic requiescit . . .*' whose brevity is alleged to be a sign of antiquity; no final decision can therefore ever be reached. To an outsider, whom passion moves neither to support nor to contradict the traditions so dear to Provençal Catholics, it seems that, if this document was a forgery as Mgr Duchesne, among others, claims it to have been, it was a very bad one. The purpose of the forgery must have been to prove that, at a certain date, in a certain reign, Mary Magdalen's body was hidden. The most elementary precaution would have been to make date and name legible. Yet it is clear that neither had that quality. The choice of Odo, or Odoinus, *dux Aquitaniae*, rather than of Chilperic II, whose name figures in the king lists, is particularly surprising. It was obviously not recognised by Charles and his court of inquiry, since the official statement of the *inventio* transcribes Clodoveo, which is an attempt to read the known into the unknown. The existence of duke Eudes was clearly not known in Provence in 1279; hence the substitution of Clovis for his name. It is true that, soon after the discovery, the correct reading was established, but that no one identified the mysterious Eudes for a long time is seen by the suggestions to read the date differently which were made in the seventeenth century, in order to bring it into line with the dates of the reign of the king Eudes, first king of the third dynasty, who ruled from 888 to 898. Not till the eighteenth century did a scholar, Catel, author of the *Mémoires de l'histoire du Languedoc*,

spot that the Odoinus of the inscription was the *dux* of Aquitaine. After him, Dom Vic and Dom Vaissette, authors of the *Histoire du Languedoc*, showed that Eudes had ruled in Provence and had been recognised as sovereign of Aquitaine by Chilperic II. A forger in 1279 could therefore not have thought of Odoinus, whose existence was forgotten. He would have chosen a name known to everyone.

Why should a forger have slipped two inscriptions into the sarcophagus? Those who examined them were all struck by their *vetustas*. Bernard Gui, who was far from uncritical, 'scrupulous to the point of indicating the material condition of documents, . . . balancing contradictory evidence, discussing dates and distinguishing the merely probable from what is proven',<sup>7</sup> Bernard Gui, who had handled the document, was taken in by this appearance of age, like all the others. Was the imitation of *vetustas* such a fine art in the thirteenth century?

But even if the documents were forgeries of the Cassianites who occupied Saint-Maximin in 1279—the Dominicans were not put into possession till 1295—the whole set-up of crypt and sarcophagi cannot have been. 'Quand on cherche, on trouve', remarked Mgr Duchesne, adding: 'A document is at hand to underwrite what is found'. But when, a few years later, Charles, then count of Provence, undertook a similar quest at Les Saintes Maries, he found nothing,<sup>8</sup> and when one of his successors, René, resumed it in 1448, no parchment was ever produced to guarantee the identity of the bones unearthed. And yet the great abbey of Montmajour had owned the church of Les Saintes since 1084 and should have been as interested in staging an *inventio* as the monks of Saint-Maximin.

The crypt and its four tombs are still extant. The masonry is Roman but it is impossible to date it. Mgr Duchesne claimed it was a family burial vault. The traditionalists have countered this with two arguments. None of the sarcophagi bears any inscription on the *tessera* as it would most probably do if it had been a private tomb. It seems incredible that in the burial *hypogeum* of a wealthy family not a word should recall the deceased. Moreover, two of the tombs have *fenestrellae*. The *fenestrella*, the little opening

<sup>7</sup> Leopold Delisle: *Notice sur les manuscrits de Bernard Gui*, quoted by Escudier, 79.

<sup>8</sup> Escudier, 84.



through which sacred relics could be seen or objects could be inserted to touch them, is the certain mark of a saint's tomb. If this impressive quartet of fine Arlesian sarcophagi has been set up here to contain the bones of saints, who are these saints? The traditionalists reply: The Magdalen, Maximinus, Sidonius and Marcella.

Even if a dishonest monkish hand slipped into one of the graves a parchment feigning age and illegibility, how can one explain their presence in a place where, well before 1279, Mary Magdalen and Maximinus were stated to lie buried? They cannot, like the parchments, have been invented for the purpose. They are unquestionably of the fourth or fifth centuries and two of them are saints' tombs. No one doubts that they were already there when 'discovered' in 1279 and that, though their existence before that date was believed on the strength of a tradition, they had not been seen by anyone for many generations. It must not be overlooked that a forger may have invented the documents; he cannot possibly have forged sarcophagi and crypt. Indeed, no one pretends either that the crypt was built for the purpose or that the sarcophagi were 'slipped' into it, as the parchment and tablet may have been 'slipped' into them.

If the crypt and its contents had all been invented to serve the legend, or if the legend had been invented to explain the crypt, the matter would be clear. But both crypt and legend ante-date 1279. The legend is recorded some two hundred years earlier, at a time when the crypt was hidden. Yet the earliest accounts suppose the existence of the crypt and its tombs, which no one in the eleventh century had seen. It is impossible not to admit that there existed a long-standing tradition in Provence that, at the place called Saint-Maximin, under a sanctuary in the keeping of the monks of St Victor, Magdalen and Maximinus lay buried.

The discovery of 1448 is even less open to the accusation of fraud, but it is less impressive in that it revealed neither sarcophagi nor parchment. After Charles II's failure here, no one made any attempt to find the remains of the Maries till July 1448, when René of Anjou, count of Provence and titular king of Naples and Jerusalem, wrote to Pope Nicholas V to ask his help in undertaking a search. The Pope answered favourably in a bull of August 3rd and deputed two Apostolic commissaries, the bishops of Marseilles and Aix. The latter ordered a knight, one



Jean Arlatan, to conduct the excavations, and fourteen workmen, having been sworn in, cut the first sod in his presence.

If the search here was a fraud, it was an exceedingly clever one, for it bears all the signs of genuineness. It began in the most obvious place, on the site of the high altar of the original church enclosed within the building of the twelfth century. Nothing was found here. The diggers then followed a most devious line which shows clearly that they had no preconceptions and were just searching at random under the chancel of the twelfth-century church. After some weeks two skeletons with hands crossed over the chest were found, one on each side of the high altar of this church, not in sarcophagi but surrounded by thin slabs of stone. Four skulls were also unearthed before and after the skeletons were discovered.

The official account, still extant, is very circumstantial and I am giving a mere outline of it. I believe that this discovery was quite honest. What its value is I do not know. Whether the position of the two skeletons justifies the contention that they were the remains of saints I cannot say. But here again, though less impressively than at Saint-Maximin, there is a measure of agreement between what the traditions claimed for the place and what was found there.

The traditionalists point out also that no *inventio* of Lazarus has even been staged. The canons of Autun, in the late eleventh or early twelfth century, claimed to possess his bones which they had received from Marseilles and which still rest in the cathedral church. But the crypt of St Victor's abbey has never been the scene of a discovery like those of 1187, 1279 and 1448. Yet if it was as easy, as Mgr Duchesne sincerely said, to find when one sought, with parchments to corroborate, it is surprising that the monks of St Victor did not also organise their *inventio*.

I have said little about the Sainte-Baume. Of all the spots where the memory of the Bethany saints is venerated today, the Sainte-Baume is certainly the most sacred. It is one of those places 'where the spirit breathes' and, under the direction of the Dominicans who have an *hôtellerie* and a retreat house there, it is a centre of deep devotion. It is a place where many graces are received, ordinary and extraordinary, and where a few well authenticated cures have taken place. The homage offered there to the saint to whom many sins were forgiven because she loved much is true and fervent. Yet of all these holy places it is, I think, the least

likely to be authentic and its legend is the least credible. Indeed, it is precisely the legend mentioned in the ninth-century English martyrology and denounced so vehemently by the pseudo-Rabanus as an apocryphal borrowing from that of Mary of Egypt, which has been located there. I have pointed out, after Faillon, that there are certain differences between the legend and that of the Egyptian penitent, notably in the existence of the cave, which has been indeed the chief element in the Sainte-Baume tradition. The legend is placed at the Sainte-Baume since the late eleventh or early twelfth century at least, but the place was called then *Sancta Maria de Balma*, a name which suggests that it was a shrine of our Lady. Still, it is not usual for our Lady to relinquish her shrines; she more often inherits those of others, so the Mary of the cave may be she of Magdala after all.

The case for that part of the tradition that concerns Lazarus is weakest. The earliest mention of him in connection with Provence is in the bull of Benedict IX, which says merely that his body, *passio*, lies in St Victor's. The pseudo-Rabanus's life, upon which the traditionalists base so much, refers to him as bishop of Cyprus. It has sometimes been thought that his cult grew up in Provence through confusion with a Lazarus, the earliest recorded bishop of Aix, who died in Marscilles and was buried in St Victor's crypt in the first half of the fifth century.

I think it hard to deny that a cult of Mary Magdalen, Martha and Maximinus and perhaps of the two Maries, and a belief in their former presence in Provence and in the possession of their bodies, existed in that part of Gaul before the time when the Saracen invasions compelled the churches to hide their relics. The discovery of 1279, whether or not the parchment be bogus, does, I think, carry us back beyond the time when the crypt was filled in—that is, before the Saracen onslaught. But I do not believe it possible to go back any further. The traditionalists proclaim loudly that a tradition is valuable from the mere fact of its existence. But it is first necessary to be assured of that existence. If the tradition could be proved to have existed in the fifth, the fourth, the third century, their position would be much stronger. As it is, I believe that the great likelihood of at least one section of it existing in 700 is assured. But does that take us very far? That people in 700 believed in the mission of Martha, Magdalen and Maximinus, is not of much more value than that people in 1700

believed it. There are still over six centuries to travel back, during which there is nothing.

A suggestion which has been made to explain the claims of St Victor's abbey to have possessed not only Lazarus but also its patron, the soldier-martyr and his companions, is that their bodies were brought from the East when the era of persecutions was over and relics began, so to speak, to circulate freely. It is tempting to believe that the bodies of Martha and Magdalen came to Gaul in the same way. Whether these bodies were really those of the saints whose names they bore it would, of course, be rash to decide.

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## OBITER

### SOME RECENT GERMAN BOOKS

Many books have been written upon the love of God, but few with such wide scope as Fr Ohm, O.S.B., allows himself in the 544 pages of his *Die Liebe zu Gott in den nichtchristlichen Religionen* (Erich Weivel-Verlag, DM. 19.50). Its first fifty pages are concerned with the theological question of the natural desire for God in non-Christian religions; the second, and major, part deals with the evidence for the love of God in India, China, Islam, etc., fields in which the author has been working and studying all his life. The last hundred pages are devoted to the missiological problems raised by the preceding sections. If the encyclopaedic nature of the book makes it heavy in parts, this is compensated for by the author's balanced judgments, free from extremism.

Yet another German scholar, Erich Peterson, has recently presented us with the fruits of his life-long devotion to theology, in *Theologische Traktate* (Kosel-Verlag zu München, DM. 15.50), a collection of his essays and booklets of the last thirty years. Brilliant, that overworked word, is the only one to describe the thrusts of insight and effortless quotation by which Peterson exposes error as, for instance, in his annihilation of 'Crisis-Theology', or his respectful disarming of Adolf Harnack ('*Correspondence with Adolf Harnack*'). Again, the relevance of theology to politics is brought out in '*Monotheism as a political problem*', which, though discussing the early Church and Empire, helps us to interpret aright twentieth-century polytheism. A great deal is being written in Germany at the moment about the theology of politics along the lines suggested by Peterson. Philip Dessauer (in '*The politics of Anti-Christ: Wort und Wahrheit*', June) has shown that the rôle of the