The Development of Southern French and Catalan Society, 718-1050

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Conclusion

[401] The society which had emerged in Southern France and Catalonia by 1050 differed in many ways from that found in these same regions in 718 on the eve of Moslem and Carolingian intervention in the affairs of the Midi. Yet in one respect it was similar. In 718 the social pattern which existed south of the Loire and north of the Pyrenees was generally similar in every region, except in tribal Gascony and in Catalonia, which had been overrun by the Moors. Life in the Limousin or the Valley of the Rhone was remarkably similar, judging from our scanty sources, to that found in Septimania, the Toulousain, or Provence near the mouths of the Rhone. By 1050 this was even truer. Regional differences existed in the mid-eleventh century as they had existed even in 950. Gascony, which had never known Roman or Visigothic law or where it had disappeared leaving no trace, kept certain unusual legal procedures. Visigothic law gave a different cast to the legal system which was used in Catalonia. The aprisio continued in 1050 important in the Spanish March long after it had disappeared north of the Pyrenees. Gascony and Western Aquitaine kept a prevailing villa system intact to a greater degree than the rest of the Midi, but lagged in clearing their vacant land for cultivation.

Nevertheless one should not overestimate such regional differences. By 1050, and even earlier, we can clearly view this whole region as an area enjoying a civilization generally similar in character in every portion of it, and different from that found in Northern France. All of the Midi and Catalonia by the eleventh century had the same kind of social classes, the same kind of Church, the same kind of military system, the same method of landholding, the same weak feudalism, the same lack of government, the same type of voluntary courts or assemblies which kept the peace. We can say, by this time, that we are dealing with what, for want of a better term, we might call a special civilization. All this explains why a Raymond of Saint-Gilles could rally the nobles of these regions to follow him as Provençals on the First Ciusade; why troubadour lyrics could spread so rapidly from the Limousin to Gascony, Catalonia, Languedoc, and the Valley of the Rhone; and how a count of Barcelona could effectively operate in Languedoc, and his successors, as kings of Aragón, could become counts of Provence. By 1050 a new and unusual society had emerged in lands which lay south of Poitou and Burgundy.

How did this society of 1050 differ from the earlier one of 718? In the first place, by the mid-eleventh century the society of these regions was a much more vital one. Two new classes had appeared, the milites and the bourgeois. One was the product and result of the new castles which had arisen in the course of the tenth century; the other had emerged as a result of the revival of trade and commerce and the new growth of towns. In the countryside a new, freer, and more independent peasantry was to be found on the aprisiones and medium plantum which were created out of vacant and uncultivated land, as the villa system disappeared and the older serfdom with it. Only near castles was a new and different serfdom appearing. The Church, vigorous and growing, was busy checking the abuses of the new militarism and beginning to demand a more spiritual life, free of secular control. In Aquitaine and Catalonia new principalities, making use of money in a new way, were appearing. The society of the Midi and Catalonia, then, in 1050 was richer, more militarized, and more productive in its agricultural
and commercial life than it had been in 718. At the same time it had a more vigorous Church and in certain areas the beginnings of more effective regional government. It was a society ready to play an important role in the medieval civilization of Western Europe.

How did all this come about? What caused the emergence of this vital and unusual civilization in Southern France and Catalonia? First of all we need to assess the role of the Carolingians in this process -- a role frequently overestimated or even misunderstood. Perhaps their most important contribution was the conquest of Septimania and the Spanish March and their partial pacification of Gascony. As a result of this, both Septimania and Catalonia became integrated with the rest of the Midi, an integration that survived the decay of Carolingian authority, while enough ties were established between the Gascons and their Southern French neighbors so that in the tenth century Gascony too could become a part of Southern French civilization in a real sense, despite its backward, primitive society.

On the other hand, little of the political system which the Carolingians imposed upon the Midi and Spanish March survived the end of the ninth century, except perhaps in Catalonia. Though the names of the officials [403] which they introduced -- counts, viscounts, and vicars -- survived, their functions did not. Nor did the territorial boundaries which they established always survive either in later counties, viscounties, or vicaria. The feudalism which they introduced either disappeared into the allodial and family system which prevailed, or was modified into a system of precaria and benefices closer to that found in these regions in pre-Carolingian times. Their military organization disappeared also, except perhaps in Catalonia, until a new and different one, based upon castles and milities, appeared in the late tenth century. Except in Catalonia, so did their judicial system, which became a system of informal regional assemblies and courts keeping order by invoking public opinion to obtain agreements on a voluntary basis. By the tenth century little of the Carolingian political system had survived which could form the basis of later government, either feudal or nonfeudal.

Where the Carolingians made the most important contribution to the Midi and Spanish March, as a matter of fact, was in what they did for the Church. The revival which they encouraged in the Church of Aquitaine, Septimania, and the Spanish March never completely stopped, though they were less successful in this respect in Gascony and Provence. From this revival stemmed a renewed Church and monastic growth which spread from the Massif Central and Languedoc and Catalonia, until by the end of the tenth century a vigorous Church was one of the realities in every part of these lands which lay south of Poitou and Burgundy. Similarly the aprisio system, which they sponsored in Septimania and Catalonia, and the medium plantum, which seems to have begun during their rule, were important as means of clearing new land for cultivation, and from the tenth century on, changed the face of Southern France and the Spanish March and helped free the peasantry from its ancient bondage to serfdom and the villa system.

Though we must agree that a debt is due the Carolingians on the part of Southern France and Catalonia, we still must emphasize that the particular type of society which emerged by 1050 was more the result of certain indigenous instincts than it was of Carolingian influence. What were these instincts or traditions? The first was the insistence upon land being allodial. From the time of Louis the Pious the society of Southern France and Catalonia fought for allodial rights. As a result Carolingian benefices and aprisiones disappeared by 900, and every later attempt to create a true principality failed also, as those to whom land was given on feudal terms transformed it into allods. If Charles the Bald failed in this respect, so did Louis of Provence, William the Pious of Auvergne, Count Ebles [404] Manzur of Poitou, Count Raymond Pons of Toulouse, Marquis William I of Provence, and many others.

The second important instinct or tradition of these regions was its emphasis on family control of property, political power, and the Church. This, like the emphasis on the allod, doomed Carolingian feudalism and government, and helped make all later attempts to create principalities impossible. This
family system also helps to explain why women became powerful in the Midi and Catalonia at an early period and remained so, and why the Church in this region was so different from that found elsewhere. At a time when all other political institutions had disappeared, it was the family system which survived as the basis of public order and control of private property.

The third instinct was one which insisted on viewing feudal ties less as a matter of personal loyalty in the Carolingian or Northern French sense than as individual agreements over property as such. Even before Charlemagne this seems to have been the case in regard to early *precaria* and benefices given out by private individuals and the Church. It remained so later. As a result the feudalism that we find by the eleventh century in our regions concentrates on the fief and conditions under which it is held, generally demanding at least a *cens* in payment for it, instead of upon the loyalty of fidelitas which should exist between lord and vassal of which the fief was a payment or tangible token. Such a feudalism at best could be only a fragile affair of little value in the establishment of an effective governmental system.

Finally to make this system work the society of Southern France and Catalonia added, in the tenth century, its own contribution of a unique sort: the informal court or assembly which represented independent families, churchmen, *miltites*, and other magnates, and which met on a local or regional basis to keep peace, settle disputes, and handle other matters of importance. Until counts of Barcelona and dukes of Aquitaine began to use money and power in a new way, this was the closest thing to government which we find in Southern France. Out of it were to come those representative assemblies and local town councils which were to be so important for the future in these regions.

The society of the Midi, then, was different from that of Northern France by 1050, because its original elements, the contributions that the Carolingians made to it, and the basic instincts were different from those north of the Loire. And it was to remain different until the armed might of Northern French monarchs and nobles forcibly integrated it into a new France which was being built in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.