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SPECIAL ISSUE

SPRING

2018

In many countries children hunt for Easter eggs on the morning of Easter Sunday - doing Dominican history is sometimes a bit like that - you are fairly certain there is something out there, but there can be a good bit of long grass in the way. Here is an Eastertide offering to our readers that has been the fruit of such a search. Sr Barbara op

William Claret and the Other Prouille (1)

Anyone who has read the *Libellus* of Jordan of Saxony⁽²⁾ or just about any other life of St Dominic will have heard of the Cistercian monk William Claret. But usually little more is said of him than that Bishop Diego, on departure for Spain in 1207, made him responsible for the material administration of the new community of women at Prouille. Given the great difficulty in establishing certainties of any kind surrounding the early years of the foundation of Prouille and Dominic's years in the Languedoc, it could be interesting to shift the angle of perspective slightly, in the hope of throwing a little more light on the subject by focusing on this minor actor in the drama, and also by not omitting the spiritual dimension of religious history, while trying at the same time to respect the demands of scholarship.

Over the course of the centuries, William Claret has been accused by some of having tried to make Cistercians of the future Dominican nuns. In the event, Prouille did not become Cistercian, but in many respects it would seem to have been a near miss, and in any case, influences there certainly were and possibly more than meet the eye at first sight. Indeed after his move to the Languedoc (now France, but not at that time), Dominic lived more or less surrounded by Cistercians: Abbot Arnaud Amaury of Cîteaux and the other papal legates, the monks of Fontfroide, and his greatest supporter, Foulque, who had been a monk at Le Thoronet before being made Bishop of Toulouse. The home base of William Claret was the large Cistercian Abbey of Boulbonne, just a day's walk distant from Fanjeaux. The first monks arrived in 1129. In the following century it was certainly visited by Dominic and was a place of refuge for Simon de Montfort on the eve of the battle of Muret in 1213.



All that remains of the great Cistercian Abbey of Boulbonne

So who was William Claret and what is known about him? He was of a local family established in Pamiers; he had an uncle, also called William, who had entered as a monk at Boulbonne before him.

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On certain documents of the abbey he is described as an *operarius* and he seems to have dealt with building works and land tenure: an ideal candidate to be a helpmate for Dominic.⁽³⁾

We know that the Claret family had land holdings in the area, notably vineyards, some of which were subsequently a source of disputed ownership between Boulbonne and Prouille. Possibly in the early stages William had made over a piece of family property as a dowry for his sister Raymonde who was one of the first nuns at Prouille. Perhaps this was not done through the appropriate channels in those early, doubtless rather chaotic days.

There has been speculation in some quarters that William Claret was a runaway from Boulbonne because of an alleged sympathy for the heresy that, according to some historians, had taken hold among the monks.⁽⁴⁾ In this case it would seem unlikely that he should seek refuge just down the road with a very fragile new foundation that could offer no ecclesiastical security at that stage. Is it not more likely that Bishop Diego, whose sympathies with the Cistercians had gone as far as receiving their habit at Cîteaux and knowing that he had to return to Spain, would ask the abbot of the nearest monastery to Prouille to lend a capable subject until the foundation be on a surer footing.

Although the abbey of Boulbonne has disappeared leaving very little trace, scrutiny of the Google satellite photographs of the area where it formerly stood in all its gothic splendour reveal something quite unexpected. Hoping at best for a heap of stones in the corner of a field, what a surprise it was to see on the aerial photograph the name “Prouille” about one kilometre down the road from the site of the abbey. What could this signify?

Various hypotheses presented themselves: perhaps at some point in the past, the owner of this property, out of a fondness for Dominican nuns, had simply called his house “Prouille”. Or perhaps, given that the monastery of Prouille had for a long time had at its disposal granges or storage barns on the Cistercian model, might this have been one of them? Subsequent research in the excellent studies of this aspect of the early history of Prouille revealed no trace of such a grange at this location.⁽⁵⁾



This is the Google aerial view of Mazères and district that set the ball rolling for this investigation.

The next step was to investigate records of land tenure in the surviving local archives. The library and museum staff at Mazères entered into the spirit of the thing and produced the original *compoix* of 1619. The *compoix* is a document specific to the Languedoc and is basically a land register, listing all the proprietors and their holdings in the district at that time. Local directories revealed that the domain of Prouille near Mazères in the Ariège department was currently owned by an army doctor, presumably retired. But the next step was to

consult the famous Carte Cassini, the first complete cartographical survey of France, made in the 18th century. And there was “Prouille”, as on the Google map, just along the road from Boulbonne, so close that it must have been part of the monastic estate. So far so good, but not far enough.

The date 1619 is particularly significant, as the abbey that St Dominic had known at Boulbonne met a sorry end in 1567 when it was attacked and burned down by Calvinist troops during the wars of religion.(6) When peace was restored in the early 17th century, the monastic lands were carved up amongst local supporters of the Protestant cause. (In fact Mazères was to remain predominantly Protestant for centuries to come, and in the 19th century Fr Lacordaire founded a convent and apostolic school there in order to counter the Protestant influence.) It would seem unlikely that a new Protestant owner of a piece of land confiscated from monks would actually choose to give it a name associated with Dominican nuns. He would most likely retain the existing name, quite possibly in ignorance of its significance. And the name retained was Prouille. In 1619 the domain was divided between two local Protestant worthies: Jacques de Chandon and Jean de Serris. It changed hands again twice in the eighteenth century, but always keeping the same name.(7)

Field work on location was the obvious next step: actually to venture on to the Prouille domain. As it turned out his was done *ad hoc* without ringing or writing beforehand to make an appointment. And so my Dominican sister companion and I were in fact trespassing, and could have met a sorry end attacked by vicious guard dogs or chased off by an angry farmer. Having arrived at the end of a long driveway, there was no sign of life. The solid stone building was a long three storied construction, almost certainly owing nothing to the 13th century. In that it would be no different from the medieval houses at Fanjeaux and other villages, where most of them have been repeatedly rebuilt on the same site over the centuries. Closer scrutiny revealed heaps of stones at the far end of what is now the garden of the property, but professional archaeological skills would be necessary to make any assessment of their provenance.

To return to the improvised visit, knocking at the door produced no effect, but eventually an elderly lady appeared at one of the upstairs windows. She looked relieved to see that the intruders were nothing more threatening than a couple of nuns in full habit. Very apologetically I explained that this intrusion was linked to a theory that nuns might have lived here briefly in the 13th century. Without hesitation the owner replied: “Oh, that wouldn’t surprise me in the least; this is an amazing place.” She came downstairs and invited us into the kitchen of the large and elegantly refurbished farmhouse. She willingly recounted the history of her involvement with the Prouille domain.

She and her husband had purchased “Prouille” eleven years previously, shortly after he had been diagnosed with a serious and irreversible neurological disorder. As a medical man himself, he knew what awaited him and was in a state of revolt. However as they settled into their new home Dr B. became more and more serene and accepting of his fate. His faith was as if miraculously restored and, after years of being lapsed, he sought out a local priest and returned to the regular frequentation of the sacraments. He died about ten years after the move to Prouille, having lived out his last years in peace. The property was now on the market, being too large for an elderly widow to manage on her own. There had been no potential purchasers in over a year. Madame asked for prayers, which we promised. A couple of months later, she rang us at Fanjeaux to say that she had already moved house to be near her daughter as her property had been sold very quickly after our visit and the conversations about the possible presence of nuns. She thanked us for the prayers, which had been less assiduous than she might have imagined, but the power of prayer is not for us to assess.

Clearly there is nothing scientific about this story, but as a nun writing up the history of nuns, it was difficult to remain indifferent. It did not however dispense from the next stage of more serious scientific enquiry into possible links between the pre-Dominican nuns of Prouille and this domain so close to William Claret’s abbey of Boulbonne. The historian, Pierre Duffaut, now unfortunately deceased, wrote in his authoritative work *Histoire de Mazères, ville maîtresse et capitale des comtes de Foix*: “The Dominican nuns of the Monastery of Prouille founded in 1206 by St Dominic enjoyed rights over this property in the 13th century and the name has been retained.” He does not elaborate as

to what these rights might have been.(8)

What they were, how the sisters exercised them and the role of William Claret in all of this were the outstanding questions. The early years of the monastery of Prouille were far from easy. When writing the history of a religious institution that has subsequently become great and glorious it is tempting to gloss over an earlier period that might have been much more modest. In certain accounts of Prouille for example we read that Dominic enclosed the nuns in November 1206. This would seem virtually impossible, as Bishop Diego and his assistant Dominic arrived in the Lauragais area only in early summer of that same year. Their mission was itinerant preaching and records reveal a good number of towns and villages where their presence was attested. It is amazing enough that a small community of women called to religious life could be assembled before the end of the year and accommodation found for them. And in any case, Bishop Diego was the one in charge at this early stage – his name as founder of Prouille would be removed from the records of the Order of Preachers later in the 13th century. It is unthinkable that there could exist a regular monastery with enclosure walls and doors by November. This foundation date is challenged by Dom Vaissette, the Benedictine author of the *Histoire Générale du Languedoc* who proposes 1207 at the earliest and possibly 1208.(9) On the site there would have been a rather dilapidated chapel and several ordinary and very modest houses. In the deed transferring the benefit of the church of St Martin at Limoux to the sisters “recently gathered together by Dominic canon of Osma,” they are described as “*habitantibus nunc et in perpetuum in castro Fano Iovis et in ecclesia Beatae Mariae de Pruliano.*”(10) Dom Vaissette translates *in castro* as “in the château,” which can be taken to mean that they were at least living inside the ramparts of Fanjeaux. He adds that it was not until 1211 that Dominic was able to gather them all together at Prouille.(11) As will be seen, this statement adds grist to the mill of our argument.

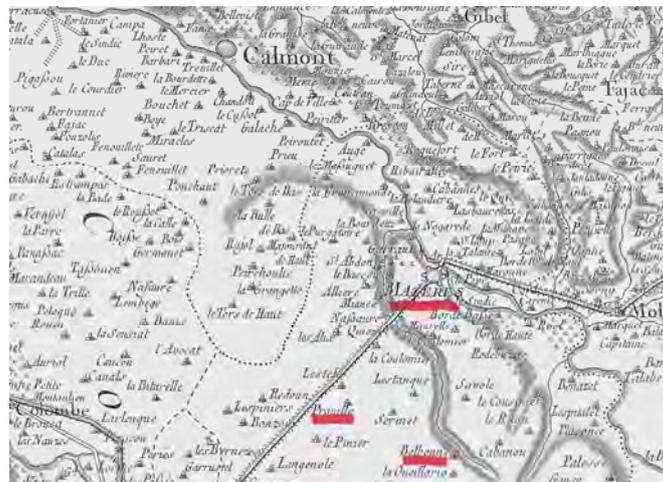
By the spring of 1207, with an unplanned community to support, not surprisingly funds were running short and Bishop Diego returned to Spain hoping to raise money in his diocese. It was at this point that he made William Claret co-responsible with Dominic, the one for temporal the other for spiritual matters. At this point they may all have had at the back of their minds that the embryonic community at Prouille might one day become Cistercian. But in fact Bishop Diego would never return to the Languedoc; he fell ill and died in Spain at the end of 1207. Simon Tugwell argues very convincingly that Dominic must have returned to Spain during the period 1208-1211, despite the lack of absolute written proof (in any case such proofs are very thin on the ground for the 13th century).(12) It would seem unthinkable for Dominic as a regular canon to carry on alone with a new venture without returning to home base at Osma to consult his new superiors

So William Claret, a Cistercian and himself under obedience to his abbot, found himself alone and responsible for a group of women who belonged to no religious Order, and without proper monastic buildings of their own. To make matters worse, the political situation in Languedoc was deteriorating rapidly. No sooner was Dominic gone than the crusade against the heretics was proclaimed, following the assassination of the papal legate Pierre de Castelnau in 1208. In 1209 the fighting came as close as Bram. Now the site at Prouille was entirely unfortified. Fanjeaux did have ramparts, but we learn from various contemporary sources, notably the Chronicle of the Albigensian crusade by the Cistercian monk Peter of Les Vaux de Cernay that once they heard about the siege and sack of Béziers, all the inhabitants of Fanjeaux, where the local Seigneurs had embraced the heresy, fled. Fanjeaux was vulnerable as it is situated at an important crossroads. At the approach of the crusaders, the inhabitants set fire to the village as they left.(13) The neighbouring villages of Montréal, Alzonne and Saissac had also been deserted by their inhabitants. The local population headed for safer territory, notably that of the Comté de Foix. Thus King Peter of Aragon having met no resistance, was able in due course to install his troops at Fanjeaux.

William Claret would surely not have left the sisters at Prouille or Fanjeaux undefended with conflicting armies roaming around the district, especially as his own sister Raymonde Claret was amongst their number! Like the other inhabitants of Fanjeaux, would he not have sought some place of safety, some temporary refuge where they could be protected and at peace until the end of the conflict? Or at least until Dominic returned to take over (and William had no guarantee at all that he would). Where else should he seek refuge for them than under the protection of his own abbey, and Boulbonne was situated just over the border in the Comté de Foix.

Clearly the sisters could not be received into an abbey for men, but quite possibly, in an emergency, in some other building on the monastic domain. As they had as yet not enjoyed a permanent monastic home, even a barn or other agricultural building would have been a welcome refuge in time of war. Regulations governing the enclosure of nuns have always provided for exit from the monastery in case of danger to life or limb.

William Claret did have to take seriously the possibility that Dominic might never return. Communication between Osma and Prouille would have been virtually non-existent, especially in a time of civil unrest. In that case an easy alternative would present itself. At the very same time that Diego and Dominic were setting up Prouille, the monks of Boulbonne were actively involved in the foundation of an abbey for Cistercian nuns at Valnègre. The first abbess Jordana received an important gift of land from the local lord William de Lissac in 1209. Valnègre is just over ten kilometres from the mysterious domain of Prouille – very convenient and potentially an attractive plan B for William.



The 18th century Cassini map, showing “Prouille” and “Bolbonne” near the town of Mazères (Ariège)

During this period, in the absence of any “Dominican” rule for women, it was the most natural thing in the world for the new sisters to follow the Cistercian observances, even though Cistercian constitutions for nuns did not exist as such at this date. The capitular statutes for nuns did not appear until later in the 13th century as the Cistercian monks were torn between a desire to cast off the *cura monialium* and the need to provide solid legislation for the communities of nuns already in existence.

Dominic’s signature on land transactions disappears between 1208 and 1210 and is replaced by that of William. His presence in the Languedoc is once more attested in 1211;(14) With his return, the time had come to build a proper regular monastery on the site at Prouille. William Claret stayed on however in the service of Dominic and the nuns. Indeed one could say that during the first fifteen years of Prouille’s existence, William Claret was a much more stable presence than Dominic himself, for indeed the latter would often be absent in Toulouse, Paris, Spain or Rome.

During this period William Claret was much occupied with the lengthy legal disputes over the income from the church of St Martin at Limoux.(15) This had been one of the earliest donations made over to the sisters of Prouille, but it was hotly contested by the Benedictines of St Hilaire. This was probably part of Dominic’s reason for leaving him at Prouille, because he had been involved with this question from the very beginning.

Jean de Réchac in his list of the priors of Prouille says of William Claret that he rendered services and governed the monastery from time to time but without any formal attachment, implying a semi-official arrangement which would not have been the case if he were a Dominican.(16) In fact opinions vary as to whether he ever became a Dominican in the formal sense. In 1217 he is referred to as being attached to the *Predicatio* at Saint Romain in Toulouse. This was the name applied to all of those gathered around Dominic as the Order of Preachers became established. With

the acquisition of this first church and priory, Dominic could well have found William the *operarius* useful at this stage.⁽¹⁷⁾ He soon reappears at Prouille however. It is noteworthy that Dominic never moved him out of his home diocese; Boulbonne was in the diocese of Toulouse at the time, the diocese of Pamiers not being created until 1295. Thus Dominic never associated him with the wider universal mission of the Order.

Brother Noel is often mentioned in association with Prouille, indeed after the dispersal of the friars in 1217 he is referred to as prior. William Claret was also to remain at Prouille after the dispersal, which underlines that his mission was localised specifically in this place; if he had made profession in the hands of Dominic, he would have been the more likely candidate as prior, given his years of seniority at Prouille. However, William was to become at least *de facto* in charge once more, as the unfortunate Brother Noel was drowned in the local river Blau in 1218. One must note however that the “prior of Prouille” was never responsible for the nuns. They had their own prioress from the first; he was rather the prior of the group of companions and later friars who constituted a separate male community on the site at Prouille. As specified in the rule of Saint Sixtus, six friars were to be attached to the women’s communities to assist them for liturgical celebrations and in the general running of the estate.⁽¹⁸⁾

It would seem unlikely that William Claret was a priest; traditionally in Cistercian houses only a minority of the monks would be ordained. His function as *operarius* would tend to favour this interpretation. He is referred to as *frater* in those abbey documents dating from before his secondment to Prouille. This could be another reason for moving the nuns closer to Boulbonne during the absence of Dominic, otherwise the community would have been completely cut off from the sacramental life of the Church, possibly for years on end.

By the time of Dominic’s death in 1221 the situation at Prouille was much more stable and even flourishing, with many new recruits, many donations of land notably from Simon de Montfort and his companions. Proper monastic buildings had been constructed, and Dominic himself quite probably wrote a rule for the sisters. William Claret could be forgiven for having believed that the uncertain status of the sisters of Prouille during the crusade years was simply preparing the way for future consolidation as a Cistercian abbey. Fr Vicaire concurs that at the beginning of the foundation Diego and Dominic could have been thinking in terms of subsequent incorporation into the Order of Cîteaux.



The House at Prouille as it is today

But now things were very different: peace was restored, a new religious Order had acquired official status and some of its male members were living at Prouille in a community independent of that of the nuns. William Claret’s role was over. According to Bernard Gui, who wrote a history of Prouille in the 1340’s, he decided to return to Boulbonne at this point, “highjacking” the nuns for the Cistercian Order, almost certainly for Valnègre. Writing at the end of the 13th century, the Dominican Bernard Gui adds the comment that this did not come about because God did not wish it.⁽¹⁹⁾ Jean de Réchac writing three centuries later says that William Claret tried to impose the Cistercian habit, rather than the new one as revealed to Blessed Reginald of Orleans. If there was ever any documentary proof for this incident, it has long since disappeared.

Besides the death of Dominic, another decisive point at this stage was almost certainly statute n°12 of the Cistercian General Chapter of 1223. It stipulated that “the monks or lay brothers who pass to the Or-

der of Preachers or of Friars Minor will be considered as fugitives". At the time such a status had grave consequences in civil law also.

William Claret's final appearance in the Dominican story is his testimony in the Toulouse canonization process for Dominic in 1233. He is described as "sacristan". He and several other monks were interviewed "at home" in the abbey of Boulbonne to which he had returned. Together with Abbot Pons, he was asked whether he concurred with a list of statements concerning Dominic's practise of charity. He said that he did and added that Dominic had embraced poverty all the time he had been in his company, also that whenever he received fresh tunics for the brethren he distributed them immediately.(20) All of this shows once more how much there is that we do not know about the early history of the Order, and how difficult it is to find out anything at all with the degree of certainty that rigorous scholarship requires. As Simon Tugwell wrote at the end of his masterly study of the foundation of Prouille: "We are completely in the dark."(21) All one can do is strike a match and hope for a glimmer in the obscurity.

NOTES

1. In this article the spelling "Prouille" has been used consistently to avoid confusion. This is the spelling that was generally in use until the 1980's, when the Occitan form of the name "Prouilhe" was reintroduced. This has not been in use since the 17th century. The estate in the Ariège department which is the subject of this article has retained the spelling "Prouille".
2. Jordan of SAXONY, *Libellus*, section 29.
3. See Jean DUVERNOY, « Boulbonne et le Lauragais au XIIIe siècle » in *Le Lauragais, histoire et archéologie, Fé dération historique du Languedoc méditerranéen et du Roussillon*, Montpellier 1983, p.108-110.
4. Jeanne BAYLE, « L'abbaye de Boulbonne et la croisade des Albigeois » in *Pyrénées ariégeoises*, 1983, pp.82-91
5. For example, Monique BOURDIN-DERRUAU, « Un exemple d'agriculture monastique en Lauragais, les domaines de Prouille », in *op.cit. Le Lauragais, histoire et archéologie*, pp.115-125.
6. See Roger ARMENGAUD, *Boulbonne, Le Saint-Denis des Comtes de Foix*, Mairie de Mazères, 1993, 328 p. quatrième partie, Chapitre 1, pp.217-223.
7. See « Mutations de la propriété rurale » Annexe X in Pierre DUFFAUT, *Histoire de Mazères, ville maîtresse et capitale des comtes de Foix*, Mairie de Mazères, 1988, 802 p., p.731.
8. Pierre DUFFAUT, *op.cit.*, p.742.
9. Dom VAISSETTE, *Histoire générale du Languedoc*, 15 volumes, 1730-1745, vol. 5, p.683.
10. Vladimir KOUDELKA, *Monumenta diplomatica S.Dominici*, MOPH, vol. XXV, Rome, 1966, 213p., pp.13-14.
11. Dom VAISSETTE, *op.cit.*.
12. Simon TUGWELL, *Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum*, vol. LXXIII, 2003, "Where was Dominic from 1208 to mid-1211?", pp.104-109
13. See Peter of LES VAUX DE CERNAY, *The History of the Albigensian Crusade*, trans. W.A. and M.D. Sibly, The Boydell Press, 1998, 338 p., (110), p.61.
14. Vladimir KOUDELKA, *op.cit.*, pp.24-25.
15. *Ibidem*, p.102.
16. Jean de RECHAC in his list of priors of Prouille says of William Claret, whom he does not label as "Père", in contrast to "Père Noël" : "It is true that he did a certain amount of business for the house, and governed it from time to time, but because he was commissioned to do so, and not that he held the office", in "Histoire du très-illustre, très-saint et auguste monastère de N. Dame de Prouilles", in *Vie du glorieux Père Saint Dominique*, Paris 1647, p.230.
17. Vladimir KOUDELKA, *op. cit.*, p.82
18. *Institutes of the Sisters of San Sisto*, trans. M.M. JACOBS op, Summit, NJ, 2004, 61p., p.30.
19. See Bernardus GUIDONIS, *De fundatione et prioribus conventum provinciarum tolosanae et provinciae ordinis praedicatorum*, ed. P.A. AMARGIER op, MOPH vol. XXIV, Rome, 1961, 314p., p.24.
20. Depositions at Toulouse, section 4.
21. Simon TUGWELL, *Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum*, vol. LXXIV, 2004, p.66.



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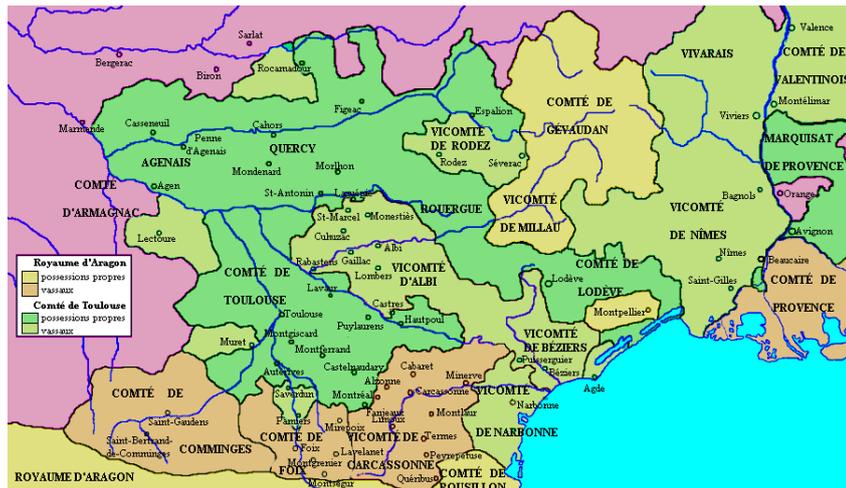
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The Counties of Languedoc in St Dominic's day



VISITORS TO FANJEAUX

As this issue goes to press, we are getting ready to welcome Sr Mary Catharine op of the Dominican monastery at Summit NJ. Sister has kindly volunteered to give of her time to advance the work on the S.H.O.P. library catalogue.

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