



Avignon

City of Popes

Broad Historical Timeline

Avignon has been settled since Neolithic times, entering broader European history with the Roman conquest in 120 BC. The city embraced Christianity in 439 AD and appointed its first bishop, but from 500 to 734 AD it suffered repeated attacks by Burgundians, Franks, and Saracens that nearly destroyed it. Stability eventually followed, and in 1129 Avignon became a self-governing commune. After a three-month siege in 1226, King Louis VII took control of the city. By 1290, it was under the rule of Charles II of Naples, though it remained part of the Kingdom of Arles. In 1309, Pope Clement V established his residence in Avignon during the Council of Vienne, making the city the seat of the papacy from 1309 to 1377.





The City of Popes

Clement V, who became pope in 1305, moved the papacy's seat to Avignon in 1309 due to the factionalized political situation in Rome. In 1348, the papacy purchased the city of Avignon. Although the Avignon papacy was overwhelmingly French in character (all seven popes during this period were French, as were 111 of the 113 ordained cardinals), it was not under French control.

During this time, the Sacred College of Cardinals began to play a role in governing the Church. A vast reorganization and centralization of administrative offices and other agencies took place; reform measures for the clergy were initiated; expanded missionary enterprises, reaching as far as China, were encouraged; university education was promoted; and the popes made numerous attempts to resolve royal rivalries and establish peace. Nevertheless, hostility – especially in England and Germany – toward the papacy's residence in Avignon damaged its prestige.

The Second Pope and the Great Western Schism

After Pope Gregory XI reestablished the papal capital in Rome in 1377, cardinals of the Sacred College selected a second pope to occupy the now-vacant Avignon seat. This decision marked the beginning of the Great Western Schism. A succession of such “antipopes” followed, and the schism was not resolved until 1417.

During this period, there were two – and at times three – rival popes, each with their own Sacred College of Cardinals and administrative offices. The double election had disastrous effects on the Church. Supporters of the rival popes were divided largely along national lines, and the competing papacies intensified the political antagonisms of the era.

The spectacle of rival popes denouncing one another caused deep confusion among the faithful and led to a severe loss of prestige for the papacy. The schism finally ended at the Council of Constance in 1417, when all competing claimants were deposed or persuaded to resign, paving the way for the election of a single universally recognized pope, Martin V.



The Palace of the Popes

Listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the Palace of the Popes is one of the ten most visited monuments in France, welcoming around 650,000 visitors each year. A powerful symbol of the influence of Western Christianity in the 14th century, this 15,000 m² architectural masterpiece is both the largest medieval fortress and the largest Gothic palace in Europe.

Behind its austere façade lies a richly decorated interior featuring works by Simone Martini and Matteo Giovanetti. Dominating the city, its ramparts, and the remains of a 12th-century bridge over the Rhône, the palace forms the centerpiece of an exceptional historic ensemble. At its feet stand the Petit Palais and the Romanesque Cathedral of Notre-Dame-des-Doms, together forming a remarkable group of monuments that attest to Avignon's leading role in Christian Europe in the 14th century.

The Palace of the Popes is considered one of the most magnificent Gothic edifices of the 14th century. To the north lies the Palais Vieux (Old Palace), built during the reign of Benedict XII; to the south stands the Palais Neuf (New Palace), erected by his successor, Clement VI, and home to the papal chapel.



Le Palais Vieux (Old Palace) and the Palais Neuf (New Palace)

The Palais Vieux was built by the architect Pierre Poisson of Mirepoix at the request of Pope Benedict XII. The austere pope had the original episcopal palace demolished and replaced with a much larger, cloister-centred complex that was heavily fortified against attack. Its four wings are flanked by tall towers.

The most characteristic features of the Palais Vieux are the vast Consistory Hall, which leads to the Chapel of St John decorated by Matteo Giovannetti, and, above it, the Tinel (Feast Hall), also painted by the same artist. To the north of this wing rise two towers, including the Trouillas Tower (52 m), one of the tallest medieval towers. The palace also contains the private papal apartments. The day room of Clement VI, known as the Stag Room, is adorned with important frescoes depicting rustic scenes.

Under Popes Clement VI, Innocent VI, and Urban V, the complex was enlarged to create what is now called the Palais Neuf. Clement VI commissioned the architect Jean de Louvres to construct a new tower and adjoining buildings, including a 52-metre (171 ft) long Grand Chapel to serve as the setting for papal worship. Under Innocent VI, two additional towers and a bridge were added. Urban V completed the main courtyard, known as the Court of Honor, by enclosing it with further buildings. The interiors were richly decorated with frescoes, tapestries, paintings, sculptures, and carved wooden ceilings.







The Bridge of Avignon (The Saint Benezet's Bridge)

Now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the Saint-Bénézet Bridge draws over 300,000 visitors every year. Only four of its arches survive, along with the Philippe-le-Bel tower on the Villeneuve-lès-Avignon side and, of course, the famous song known around the world.

Started in 1177, the bridge once formed a key link on one of the most important medieval pilgrimage routes between Italy and Spain. Originally 920 meters long, it had 22 arches and was 4 meters wide.

Celebrated in its time as an engineering marvel, the bridge was completed in just eight years, by 1185. In 1226, during the brutal siege of Avignon by Louis VIII, three-quarters of the structure were destroyed. A few years later, despite official bans, the people of Avignon rebuilt it themselves.

From that first bridge, only the original chapel survives, now called the lower chapel because the roadway of the later bridge was raised. The newer Saint Nicolas Chapel, built above it, is therefore known as the upper chapel.

From the 17th century onward, the city could no longer afford the upkeep of the bridge. In 1603, severe flooding of the Rhône caused one arch to collapse, followed by three more in 1605. Repair work began only in 1628 and was then halted by a plague epidemic. The bridge finally became usable again in 1633 – only for two further arches to be swept away by the Rhône just two months later.

Sources

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