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The Lamb Triumphant

and the Municipal Seals of Western Languedoc

in the Early Thirteenth Century

It would be hard to find a more common or more spiritually compelling symbol of medieval Christianity than the Lamb of God Triumphant (1). Consequently, anyone claiming to identify a use of the device in medieval art which he believes is fundamentally different from others that have been described or discussed before walks on very thin ice indeed. And yet it is a fact that certain secular or lay artifacts, notably municipal seals, rarely bore the emblem. The exceptions to this statement therefore constitute a proper field for inquiry.

That the device was rare on municipal (and other lay) seals, as opposed to ecclesiastical seals and similar artifacts can hardly be doubted: the major published collections of these objets give virtually no secular examples before the fourteenth century (2). A possible explanation for this absence would be that lay authorities, whose symbols were intended to express a feeling of institutional suzerainty, found the Lamb of God motif inappropriate for this sentiment. That is, although the Lamb of God Triumphant

(1) Preliminary research into the motif was aided considerably by the facilities of the Index of Christian Art (ICA), Princeton University.

expressed a high (the highest) degree of suzerainty, it did so by symbolizing Triumph after or through humiliation. Thus, ecclesiastical potentates imitating in theory if not in fact the vita Christi made use of the image indiscriminately (3); secular powers preferred not to.

When the Lamb of God Triumphant has been observed on lay artifacts of this sort or, more particularly, on municipal seals, which are the subject matter of the present essay, they have been regarded as fortuitous borrowings from ecclesiastical usages with little or no "deep" meaning intended by lay elites (4). Certainly the borrowing was suggested by something — the need to imitate a powerful monastery whose emblems bore the device; an extravagant sense of one's own importance; a spurious or overdone etymology. Any one of these reasons or a selection of them, for example, might explain why Genoa, Ghent, the German town of Marienfeld, the northern French towns of Montdidier and Rouen, employed the iconography of the Lamb Triumphant on their municipal seals (5). But they were, in fact, exceptions; the associa-

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(5) Dainville, p. 261 (Genoa, example 1259); G. DEMAY, Inventaire des sceaux de Flandres, 2 vols., Paris, 1873, I, 434 no. 3954 (Ghent, counterface, example 1276); ICA 23M338355, 1 (Marienfeld, example 1292); V. DE BEAUVILLE, Histoire de la ville de Montdidier, I, Paris, 1857, 110 (Montdidier, example 1260); DOUET D'ARCO, II, no. 5777 (Montdidier, example 1303). The commune of Rouen used a Lamb Triumphant intermittently on its seals; at other times it employed a lamb with a lion (or leopard), recalling the Old Testament passages (e.g., Is 11.5-9, 65.25; and Hos 2.18) on the eventual harmony of the beasts including the lion and the lamb. To consult various examples, certainly as early as 1266, see A. CHASSANT and P.-J. DELBARRE, Dictionnaire de sigillographie pratique, Paris, 1860, pl. XV; DOUET D'ARCO, II, nos. 5719-22; and G. DEMAY, Inventaire des sceaux de la Normandie, Paris, 1881, no. 1648. For an allegorical interpretation of the Rouennais lamb see the fascinating discussion by the fifteenth century observer, Rouen Pinel, in B. GUENÉE and P. LEHOUX, Les Entrées royales françaises de 1328 à 1515, Paris, 1968, pp. 245, 248-51, 262. In a different work, G. DEMAY, Inventaire des sceaux de l'Artois et de la Picardie, Paris, 1877, p. xxi, no. 314) dates the seal of a bourgeois of Rouen with the Lamb Triumphant as early as 1228; and he dates a personal seal of Thomas of Lampernesse with the device (p. xxii, no. 315) in the year 1226.
tions of the Lamb with the Passion made the device, on its own merits, less appealing to secular authorities than one might have first supposed.

This explanation, it seems to me, is insufficient for understanding the efflorescence of the Triumphant Lamb on a group of municipal seals from western Languedoc of the early thirteenth century. The easy identification of them as a specific subgroup affiliated both by chronology and geography makes it somewhat improbable that they are adventitious borrowings from church forms (6). Among the municipal seals bearing the device that I have been able to identify are those of Béziers, Carcassonne, Narbonne (bourg and cité), Rieux, and Toulouse. The earliest example comes from Toulouse and hangs from a document of the year 1214. The progression for other towns follows rapidly: the earliest Narbonne Lamb Triumphant dates from 1218; the earliest Béziers piece, 1226. Carcassonne and Rieux were employing the device on their seals by 1303 and 1308 respectively (7).

Prudence raises her ugly head and dictates that the use of the emblem by the city fathers of Carcassonne (1303) and Rieux (1308) should be regarded, at least until further evidence comes to light, as an imitation of the other Languedocian towns that were already employing the Lamb (8). But seals are notoriously easy

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(6) The number of towns employing seals varied considerably from region to region in France. For the communes of the northwest (Normandy and Picardy), seals were part of the juridical apparatus and so were fairly common; cf. C. PETIT-DUTAILLIS, Les Communes françaises, Paris, 1940, pp. 141-43. In the center, as, for example, in the county of Poitou, they were rare (only three towns used them, Poitiers, Niort, and Saint-Maixent); F. EYGUN, Sigillographie du Poitou, Poitiers, 1938, p. 151. In Languedoc, seventy municipalities used seals in the Middle Ages; J. ROMAN, Manuel de sigillographie française, Paris, 1912, p. 327.

(7) DOUËT D'ARCQ, II, nos. 5614, 5616 (Béziers); no. 5623 (Carcassonne); nos. 5652-54, 5650-51, 5655 (Narbonne — bourg and cité); no. 5671 (Rieux); and nos. 5680-83 (Toulouse). Douët d'Arcq's index is unreliable and his dates old style. See also Trésor de numismatique et de glyptique, XIII: Secours des communes, communautés, évêques, barons et abbés, Paris, 1858, p. 37 no. 6 and pl. 22 no. 6; and D.-F. GASTELIER DE LA TOUR, Armorial des états de Languedoc, Paris, 1767, p. 157, 165, 175, 219.

(8) It may be that Carcassonne changed the design of its seal for the purpose of adhering to the propaganda blasts of Philip IV in 1303. On these so-called adhesions, see C.-V. LANGLOIS, St. Louis; Philippe Le Hardi; Philippe Le Bel; les derniers Capétiens directs, III, part 2 of E. LAVISSE, ed., Histoire
things to steal, and unscrupulous enthusiasts have made sphragistics the undeveloped tool of historical research. Not much more will come to light. Therefore, if it can be shown that there was a good reason for the efflorescence of the Lamb Triumphant on the municipal seals of western Languedoc in the early thirteenth century, it may not be too rash to speculate that other municipal examples of the device, though dating much later, ultimately go back to the early 1200's (9).

All of the early examples cited above hang from documents touching the Albigensian Crusades. Indeed, the towns using the device were among the most active centers of the Cathar heresy (10). The Toulouse impression of 1214 hangs from a document concerning the papal legate's manoeuvres against the heresy. A wax impression (of about the same time), also of the municipality of Toulouse, hangs from a letter to the king of Aragon, a political supporter of the heretics; and it, too, touches the policies of the southerners in the Albigensian wars. The Narbonne impressions of 1218 and the Béziers impression of 1226 are appended to their capitulations in the Albigensian crusades (11).

Taken in isolation, logic would seem to reject the view, put forward in the preceding paragraph, that the documents from which the seals hang give a hint of the reason for the employment of the Triumphant Lamb on them. Seals, after all, rarely change; issues do. But the Albigensian heresy dominated politics in Languedoc

de France, Paris, 1900, pp. 160-61. A similar situation may have occurred in the case of the northern town of Creil which appended its (completely new?) seal to its adhesion of July 1303; in June 1861 the document from which this hung was reported to be lost and with it all trace of the medieval seals of Creil. Mathon, Histoire de la ville et du château de Creil, Paris, 1861, p. 6 n. 2. On the peculiarity of the adhesion seals generally, see the Procès-verbaux de la Société historique de Compiègne, XVII, 1909, p. 54.

(9) At least one other western Languedoc town was employing the device in the early modern period, Cuxac (d'Aude), and it may be that its usage goes back to the medieval period (cf. Gastelier de la Tour, p. 157, 165, 175, 219).


in the late twelfth century and the first five decades of the thirteenth, and the war of conquest pitting Northern Frenchmen against southerners, which that heresy provoked, was bound in time to affect many and varied levels of cultural and social activity. That, eventually, it should have affected the designs of municipal seals does not seem improbable (12).

Assuming that the original use of the motif was tied to the Albigensian crusades, the fundamental problem is why the Lamb Triumphant was regarded as an appropriate iconography for the situation of the towns of Languedoc in the early thirteenth century. An answer to this is suggested by the scriptural legend that usually accompanied the depiction of the Triumphant Lamb. Although sometimes the alpha (Α) and omega (Ω) of Apocalypse serve to reemphasize the aspectus triumphans of the emblem itself, more often one encounters an inscription drawing on John 1.29: «Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world» (13). This legend makes explicit, what until now I have taken for granted and should, in any case, be obvious, that the Lamb Triumphant normally carried with it an allusion to the Passion.

Those who resisted northern domination had apparently failed. They — and this means the political elites of the towns (14) — chose to point up the failure and to emphasize its docetic character in the image of the Triumphant Lamb. The Lamb of God had also failed: He had, in the words of the Creed, suffered, been crucified, and died. Yet this illusion was set aside by His Resurrection and would be confirmed decisively in the Second Coming, symbolized in the rich language of the Book of Revelation in the militant Lamb. What could have been more appropriate to meridional patriots?

(12) É. Sabatier, Histoire de la ville et des évêques de Béziers (Béziers, 1854), pp. 461-62, argued, in a similar vein, that the employment of the fleur-de-lys on the emblems of Béziers dates from the time that the « rois [de France] eurent assuré leur domination sur les pays de la vicomté de Béziers ».

(13) Above n. 7. The Α-Ω may be seen in examples 5650 and 5653.

(14) Here I must insist that the people responsible for using and accepting this device on the seals, the city fathers, were not rabid and ascetic Cathars themselves who might have found all such symbolism inappropriate to their quasi-iconoclastic views; cf. Strayer, Albigensian Crusades, p. 29.
This pattern was not unique to the municipal elites of Languedoc. It was common to movements in which an "evident" failure had to be covered up, masked or, otherwise, spiritualized. Consider the uprising of the Shepherds (the Pastoureaux) in Northern France in 1251 (15). Although they ultimately tried to carry out a mini-social revolution, their original intent had been to rescue the failing armies of Louis IX from the Moslems and to save the Eastern Crusade which had begun in 1248. The symbols associated with these Shepherds (and perhaps the cause for the epithet Shepherds to remain with them long after their ranks had been swollen with the urban proletariat) were the Virgin and the Lamb. The Virgin is supposed to have told the Master of Hungary, the leader of the movement, to go to the aid of Louis IX (16). And it is reported that the Master carried a banner embroidered with the innocent lamb bearing a pennant with the victorious sign of the cross, that is, the image of the Lamb Triumphant (17). This symbol represented not only the conviction of the Shepherds that they were carrying on the work of Christ, but that even though their hero, Louis IX, might seem to be failing to achieve the rightful end of Christian warfare in the East, their and his affiliation with the image of the militant Lamb was self-assurance of ultimate victory and glory.

Normally what is common to heretical or revolutionary movements of peasants and urban proletarians is not typical of staid and sober municipalities. But like the Shepherds, the town fathers of the pro-Catharite or, more properly, anti-northern towns of Languedoc in the early thirteenth century turned to these fundamental Christian symbols under stress. The Shepherds had been

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(15) R. Röhrich, "Die Pastorellen (1251)", Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte, VI, 1884, 292. There are more recent studies of this movement; they add little or nothing to Röhrich's work.

(16) Ibid., pp. 201-92.

(17) Ibid., S. de Sède, La Sainte-Chapelle et la politique de la fin des temps, Paris, 1972, pp. 163-69; Matthew Paris, Chronica majora, ed. H. Luard, 7 vols., London, 1872-83, V, 248: Agnus in signum humilitatis et innocentiae, vexillum cum cruce in signum victoriae. A passage recording the activities of the Pastoureaux in a fourteenth century manuscript chronicle is accompanied by a miniature depicting a group of them. The artist used purely decorative designs, however, for the banners and shields in their possession. MS Brussels: Bibl. Royale, 5, Chroniques de France, fol. 314 ro./ICA 32B91LR1102, 314A.
stirred to action by the stories of Louis IX’s plight and the massacre of pious Christians in the East (18); the town fathers of Languedoc were motivated by the failure of their compatriots in a « patriotic » war (19). But neither group, as far as I can see, meant to symbolize despair by means of the Triumphant Lamb. Such a view would be absurd. Yet they signalled the illusion of defeat — this was the nature of the emblem — only to affirm their faith in ultimate victory. The Lamb of God Triumphant on the municipal seals of Languedoc in the early thirteenth century was nothing less than a revolutionary challenge to the domination of (impious) northerners; and the reality of this challenge would be underscored time and time again by the rebellions against royal domination of the south which distinguished the first five decades of the thirteenth century and still has faint echoes in contemporary graffiti: Vive Occitanie Libre (20)!


(20) On the rebellions, the biography of Louis IX by H. Wallon, Saint Louis et son temps, 2 vols., Paris, 1875, is comprehensive. See also Strayer, Albigenian Crusades. I observed the graffiti on walls near the Université de Montpellier in 1971 and 1975.