

“The Miracle at Magra,” from *The Secret History of Venice*



In the long history of Venice, no time was more turbulent than the end of the 11th Century. Enemies surrounded her on all sides, and her citizens oft feared that the end had come. Many great Doges lead the city during this time, and cannily steered the ship of state through these storms. Yet in the greatest of these storms, the city succeeded not because of craft and wise planing, but in spite of them. The story of the Battle of Magra is well-worth telling, and shows the limits of human virtue in the face of Fortuna's wheel.

The problems began some two centuries previously, with the Viking invasion of Britain. After King Aella executed the Norse raider Ragnar Lodbrok, the raider's sons organized an enormous host—the so-called “Great Heathen Army”—to invade England in revenge. The petty rivalries of the English kept them from mounting an effective defense, and one by one they fell to the Norse. The final conquest of the isles took generations, and was not without resistance—Morfarch of Cornwall is rightly famed for leading a fierce struggle against warlord Einarr the Thunderbolt. However, the Christian kingdoms were ultimately unable to quench the invaders' bloodlust, and once the kingdoms of Northumbria, Wessex, and Mercia were crushed, the die was cast for the British Isles. Constant raids and warfare sapped the strength of Ireland and Scotland, and the Raven triumphed over the Cross.

Even as the Norse pillaged their way across England, the Slavs pushed into Germany. Under the leadership of Szczeny the Hammer, Slavic forces dealt a series of defeats to King Hartmann von Tirol. Though a skilled administrator, King Hartmann was a poor general, and unable to raise and organize sufficient levies to stand against Szczeny's Slavic hordes. Successive defeats pushed German borders steadily West, until Jürgen Oeningen, the last King of Germany, was forced to flee to Italy in Anno Domini 1047.

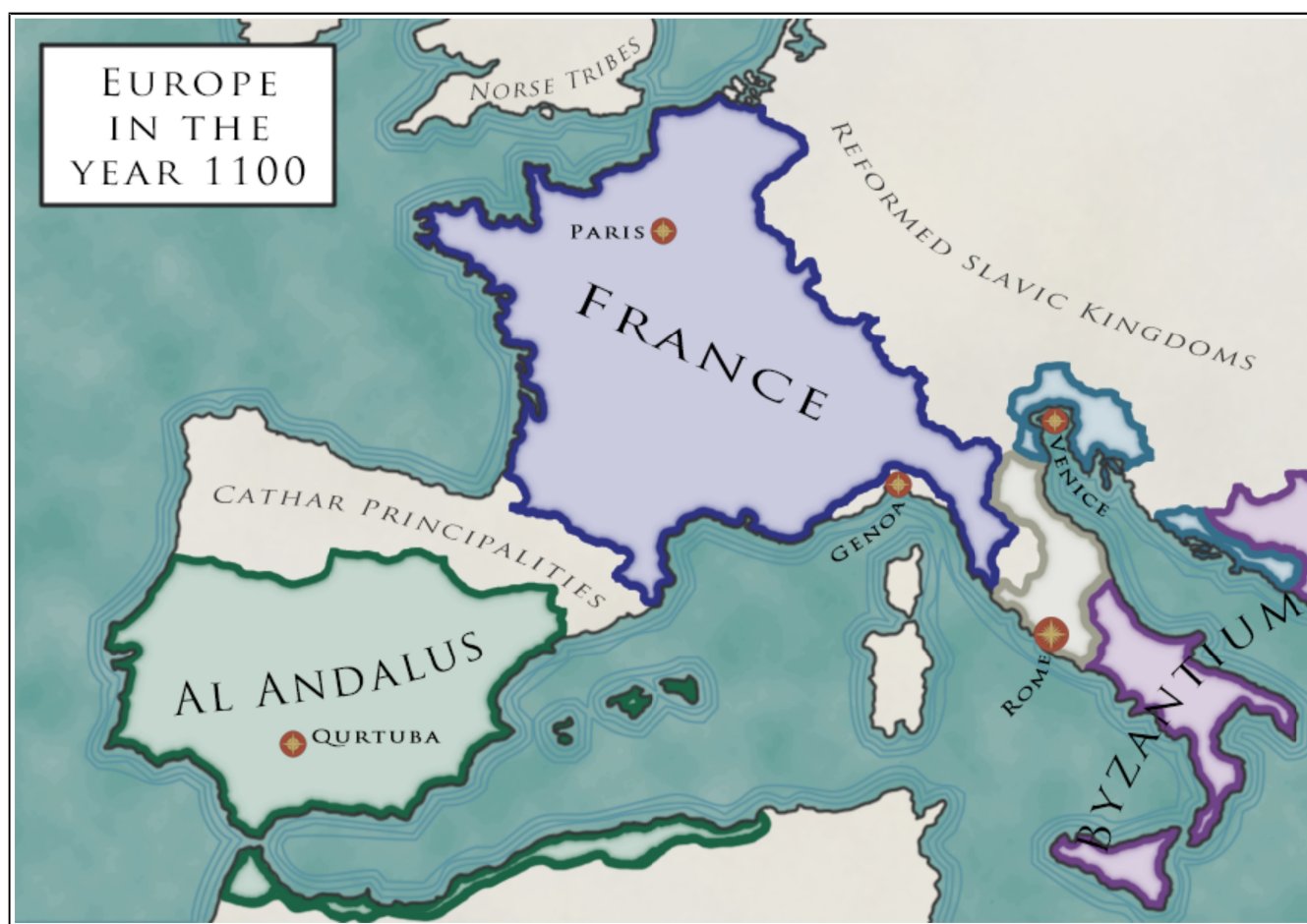
Each of these defeats would have been a great setback alone, but together, they shook the Catholic faith to the core. The English county of Kent and the German county of Köln were important centers of pilgrimage and home to prominent bishops; their loss to pagan hands caused lords and peasants alike to feel abandoned by the Almighty. In these uncertain times heresy flourished as the people began to doubt the correct path. Heresiarchs preaching deviant versions of Christianity found ready audiences throughout Europe in both villages and castles. In Spain, where the nobility remained true to the faith, Cathar preachers stirred the peasantry to rebellion and forcibly converted thousands to their teachings. Similar uprisings in France were crushed by the King, but Fraticelli calls for church reform found ready converts among the French counts and dukes. Temporal power won out over heavenly salvation, and King Raimbaut the Weak converted in Anno Domini 1072 AD to preserve his crown. The Italian princes were the last true Catholics.



Initially, Venice had paid little attention to these catastrophes. The ascendant Ottoboni family was worried about the resurgent Byzantines, who had reconquered Bosnia and sought to expand their influence to the Danube. As Byzantium had never formally renounced its claims to Venice, Ottoboni Doge Castore the Spider rightly feared that the Serene Republic was next, and successfully plotted the murders of multiple emperors. The resulting succession crises rent the empire in civil warfare, simultaneously eliminating it as a threat to Venice and allowing the Venetians to seize coastal cities throughout the Adriatic.

However, by Anno Domini 1060, the effects of pagan success were felt in Venice. As in France, the great houses of Venice turned to heretical teachings for solace in those dark times. After Castore's death in Anno Domini 1061, the Lollard Livio Dandolo was even elected Doge. Livio's reign proved to be brief—he died only a year later when a balcony collapsed under him. However, newly-elected Doge Ignio Ottoboni clearly could not ignore the continued spread of heresy.

These problems became all the more acute due to French expansion in Italy. Fraticelli zealots viewed Catholics as legitimate targets for conquest, and the French nobility eagerly seized upon this excuse to expand their power. King Raimbaut's successor, Baudoin the Brave, was a true believer, and repeatedly declared his intention to conquer Rome and depose the Pope. Slavic raids kept him from being able to devote his full attention to the South, but if Baudoin were able to neutralize the threat to his East, none doubted that he would march against the Pope.



To counter these threats, Doge Ignio set multiple plans in motion. He dispatched his cousin, the Bishop Umberto Ottoboni, to counter the heretics' arguments in Venice and bring the Venetians back to the fold. Umberto's generosity and piety made him a shining example of Christian virtue, and his exceptional knowledge of the gospels and theology helped him defeat heretical arguments. Thanks to his efforts, Ignio was able to stave off the possibility of heretical revolts overthrowing Venice and turn his attention abroad.

France posed a much more difficult problem. By far the largest and most powerful realm in western Europe, Venice had no chance of defeating it in a head on war. But Ignio was a devious man to whom plots came naturally, and he hit upon a long term way to turn France into an ally. Not all of the French ruling house had converted to Raimbaut's heresy; his brother Ancel de Bures had remained Catholic. Ancel had died some years previously, but his son, Étienne de Bures, had inherited Ancel's claim on the throne and was living in exile in the Alps. Étienne abhorred France's current king, and gladly accepted Ignio's invitation to come to Venice. There, Ignio married him to his daughter Bianca Ottoboni, being sure to specify that all children of the union would be from House Ottoboni, not House de Bures. The union bore fruit, and Ignio was pleased to meet his new granddaughter Sophia and his grandson Pietro. Now he sought the right opportunity to intervene in France.

The moment came in Anno Domini 1092, when Baudoin died of old age. The French lords could not agree who should succeed him, and the realm was splintered in civil war. Ignio opened the Ottoboni vaults to hire thousands of mercenaries, and led the Venetians into the fray by presenting Étienne as the rightful heir to the French throne. Their levies depleted by fratricidal conflict, neither of the French claimants was able to put up significant resistance, and Étienne was crowned in Paris in Anno Domini 1095. Ignio died two years later, believing to the last that he had ensured the triumph of Catholicism in Europe.

And for a while, it appeared he had. Étienne was a zealous Catholic, and persecuted heretics within his realm, steadily winning back land for the Catholic faith. But he was also an old man, and died only three years after Ignio. Pietro Ottoboni ascended to the throne of France, and rapidly proved he was a different man than his father. Not only did he lack his father's faith, he feared a revolt by the major Fraticelli lords, who had been angered by Étienne's intransigence. His position increasingly untenable, Pietro cut this Gordian knot by following Rimbaut's example. On 18 September 1097, in front of an audience of the leading French nobility, Pietro converted to the Fraticelli faith. In an instant, he undid all of his grandfather's plans and plots.



When the news of Pietro's conversion reached him, it is said that Venice's Doge Orlando Ottoboni tore his hair in despair and cursed the day he was born. Once his wailing subsided, he began to subtle discussions with French nobles about usurping Pietro and replacing him with his sister Sophia. But the French nobility was overwhelmingly Fraticelli, and happy to have a new king who shared their heresy. Orlando then resorted to hope, and prayed that Pietro would not betray his heritage by initiating new conquests in Italy. But hope is the salve of fools, and the ambitious Pietro saw an opportunity to secure his position by conquering the minor counts of North Italy. Soon, he was the undisputed master of Lombardy.

From this formidable position, he declared war on the Papal States, with the express intent of seizing all of Latium, deposing the Pope, and taking the best land of Italy as his personal demesne. Orlando cursed his predecessor and resigned himself to the Papacy's destruction. In his despair, it is said that he even considered adopting the Fraticelli faith himself to survive.

But the wheel of fate turns quickly, a person may be king one moment and dust the next. So it was for Pietro. Despite being hopelessly outmatched, Pope Benedict VIII lead his army of 8,000 men against the French forces, which numbered some 20,000. The two armies met along the river Magra, where Pietro sought to force a crossing.

In the ensuing battle, it is said that heavenly light enveloped the Papal armies, and that ghostly trumpets inspired them to heroic actions while dismaying the French. A Papal soldier named Giulio reportedly fought single-handedly against over a hundred French knights to prevent them from crossing a strategic bridge before collapsing from his wounds. But despite these heroics, the Papacy was steadily forced back from the river and the French were able to cross unimpeded. Pietro then sought to end the Papacy then and there, and led the cream of French chivalry in a charge against Benedict's guard. But the Papal troops refused to yield, and in the ensuing melee, Pietro was killed.

Without the drive of their king, the unity of the French army quickly disintegrated. The great dukes of the realm could not agree on a plan of action, and led their levies back to their lands. As Pietro had no progeny of his own, Sophia was now the rightful ruler of France. A good Catholic, she had no wish to go against God's regent on earth, and slowly led the French lord back to subservience to Rome.



So it was that the best laid plans of the Venetians were foiled, but their goals were obtained nonetheless. Sophia was as good as her name, and governed the French wisely and justly over the next four decades. Many saw Pietro's death as proof that God favored Catholicism, and the French abandoned their false prophets in droves. France would once again be a bastion of the Catholic faith.

In Venice, the Ottoboni family was relieved; their faith rewarded and justified. However, their relief was tempered by the knowledge that Byzantium had recovered from its civil wars and was once again looking outwards. But Doge Orlando and his family took comfort in the knowledge that they had successfully navigated fortune's treacherous waters before, and sought to meet this new challenge with steady hands and hearts.