

# The Comtat Venaissin and the Vaucluse

The Comtat Venaissin is a region that is part of the Vaucluse department. But what are the boundaries of the Comtat Venaissin? Which towns or cities are in the Comtat Venaissin?

Geographically, the Comtat Venaissin is a plain in the west of the Vaucluse department, in the corner framed by the rivers Rhône and Durance. It is an irrigated agricultural region, with mainly fruit crops (tomatoes, apples, grapes and melons). The Comtat (county), which comprised lands anciently part of France, was ceded to the papacy, first in 1229 and then definitively by Philip III the Bold to Pope Gregory X in 1274. It remained under pontifical authority until it was reunited with France in 1791 along with the territory of Avignon (Comtat d'Avignon); this annexation was not accepted by the Holy See until 1797.

A distinction must be made between the limits – or boundaries – in history and those of today.

## Historical borders

The Venaissin was not known as such until the territories came under the control of Pope Gregory X; they had pertained to the Counts of Toulouse until the Albigensian crusade in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century. Pope Gregory used the expression 'comitatus Venesinus or Venayssini', which 'félibres' (poets) and then 20<sup>th</sup>-century historians transformed into Comtat Venaissin, giving the term Comtat an identity value that it did not have when the lands were structured as a county.

Sources show that Venaissin, which probably derives from Venasque, a medieval episcopal city, was in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries an ill-defined region, quite extensive to the north since Montélimar was reputed to be in Venaissin. The Treaty of Paris of 1229 (at the end of the Albigensian crusade), imposed by the King of France and the Papal Legate on the Count of Toulouse, Raymond VII, only referred to a 'land in the Empire, beyond the Rhone' that was to be ceded to the Church in perpetuity. But five years later, the Count received the title of Marquis of Provence from Emperor Frederick II, making his claims on lands stretching between the rivers Durance and Isère politically coherent. The deaths of the count and the emperor, in 1249 and 1250 respectively, enabled the resurgence of a 'Venaissin land', which the popes, after taking

unambiguous possession of it in 1274, structured as a county, if only to impose administrative frameworks previously developed in central Italy.

[<http://ressourcescomptables.huma-num.fr/node/9>]

A book, *L'annexion à la France de l'État pontifical du Comtat Venaissin et d'Avignon (14/09/1791) et La création du département de Vaucluse (25/06/1793)*, (L'Affaire\_d'Avignon.pdf), published by the Association des Amis de Saint-Hilaire, describes in 206 pages the history of the Comtat and Vaucluse and the creation of the department of Vaucluse during the Revolution. These are important events in the history of the Comtat Venaissin. The book also illustrates the boundaries of the Comtat before the Revolution and after the creation of the department of Vaucluse.

The map below shows the Comtat, that is the papal or church lands (the Papal States) before the Revolution. According to this map, Avignon is not part of the Comtat.

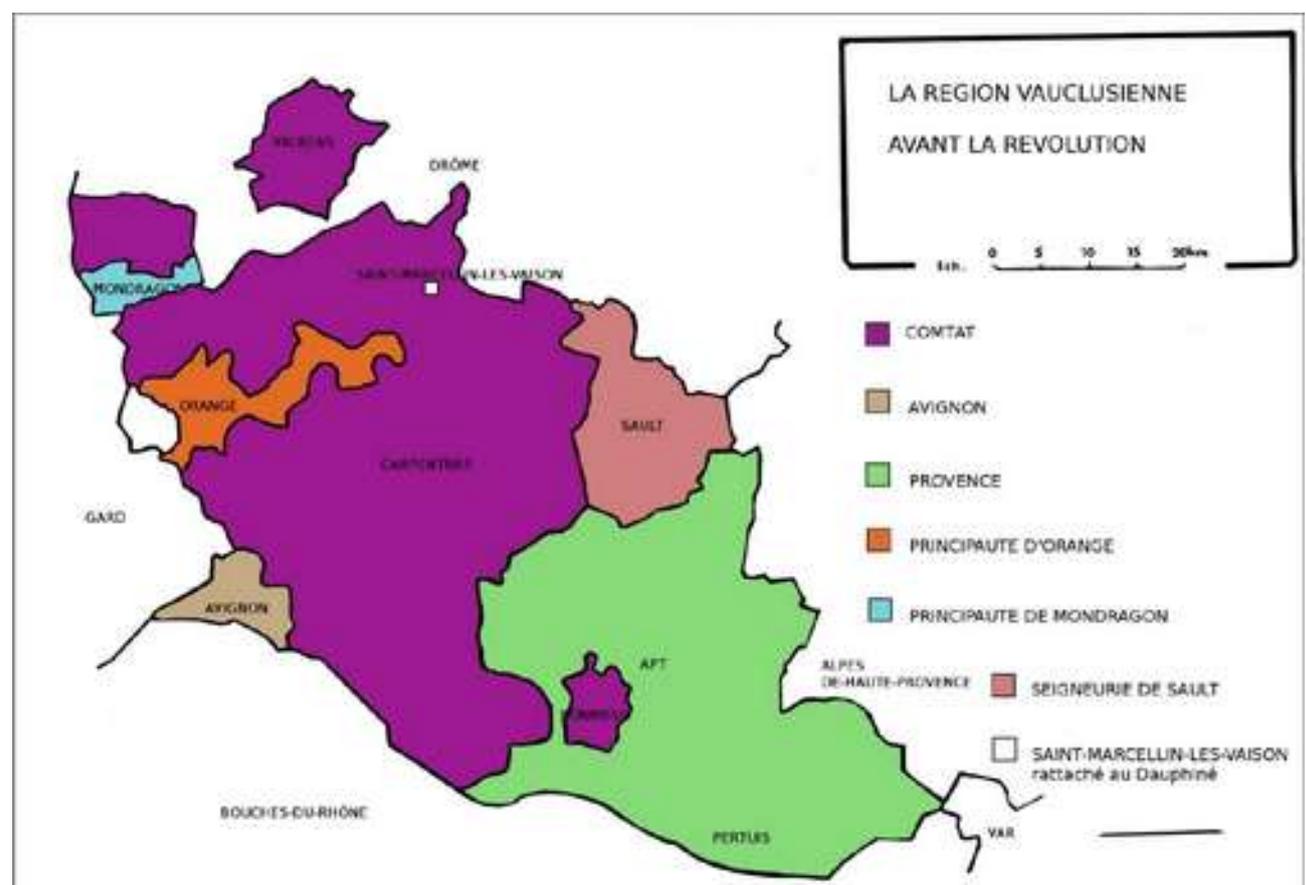


Illustration 1: The Vaucluse region before the Revolution

In 1309, Clement V (1264–1314, 195th pope) was elected pope and settled in Avignon. On 6 and 9 June 1348, Clement VI (1291–1352, 198th pope) bought the city with all its

dependencies (the Comtat Venaissin) from his suzerain, Queen Jeanne I of Naples, Countess of Provence.

With Benedict XIII (1329–1423, deemed an 'antipope') the history of the popes of Avignon came to an end, but the Comtat Venaissin and Avignon continued to be administered by their legates.

The imprecision of the boundaries of the Comtat Venaissin, enclosed between the Dauphiné and Provence, was the source of disputes between the subjects of the pope and the king of France. In 1623, Pope Gregory XV (1554–1623, 234th pope) and Louis XIII (1601–1643) decided to establish the limits of the area by appointing experts. This was followed by the signing of a treaty that partly regulated the boundaries of the two states.

From this time onwards, when there was a dispute between the pope and the king, the latter used the threat of seizure of the Papal States as a means of pressure, and the king did not confine himself to a simple threat on three occasions.

In 1662, following the Affair of the Papal Corsican Guards in Rome under the pontificate of Alexander VII (1599–1667, 237th pope), Louis XIV (1638–1715) had the Italian garrison expelled from the city of Avignon and suspended the authority of the vice-legate, then, after a long procedure, the Parliament of Provence proclaimed, in a default judgment against the pope of 16 July 1663, that: the city of Avignon and the Comtat Venaissin be declared to be of the former domain and dependencies of the county of Provence, and that they could not have been alienated nor separated from it; by means of this judgment, they be reunited to the crown; and, consequently, it be ordered that the King will be restored to dominion over the said city and comtat. However, in execution of Article XIV of the Treaty of Pisa (1664), Pope Alexander regained his domains after his nephew, Cardinal Flavio Chigi, publicly presented the apologies of the Holy See to Louis XIV in a room in his palace at Fontainebleau. Official possession in Avignon did not take place until 6 August 1688.

The second occupation took place soon thereafter, in October 1688, under the pontificate of Innocent XI (1611–1689, 240th pope), following on from the 'affaire de la régale' (extension of royal rights), and the suppression of the franchises enjoyed by ambassadors in Rome. The Papal States were placed under the authority of the Count of Grignan, Louis XIV's Lieutenant General in Provence; but they were returned after a

year (October 1689), following the cessation of the conflict on the death of Pope Innocent XI (12 August 1689).

The Treaty of Utrecht in 1713 confirmed the definitive integration of the Principality of Orange into the Kingdom of France. Pontifical authority on the territories of the papacy's own states had become limited. Thus, on 22 January 1726, cutting short a centuries-old dispute, the Council of State of Louis XV (1710–1774) ruled that the Pope had no sovereignty over the Rhône, and that the entire river bed, its islands and even land on the left (east) bank that was submerged in times of flood all belonged to the king.

Similarly, the vice-legate was no longer appointed without the prior approval of the king, who could also have deserters from his armies seized in the Comtat Venaissin, send his recruiters there, and take timber for his navy; the 'ferme générale' (tax collectors) had offices in Avignon and in the Comtat Venaissin.

Finally, in 1768, Louis XV's government once again took control of the Papal States. This third occupation followed the publication on 30 January 1768 of a writ by Pope Clement XIII (1693–1769, 248th pope), arising from his disputes with representatives of the infant duke of Parma, Don Ferdinand de Bourbon, a grandson of Louis XV. The cause at issue was the protection given to Jesuits expelled from France, for whom the papal enclave served as a refuge.

The decision of the Parliament of Provence of 16 July 1663, not having been specifically revoked, was put into effect as still in force. Followed by a few troops, the Count of Rochecouart, governor of Avignon and the Comtat (1768 to 1774), presented himself on behalf of the king on 11 June 1768 before Archbishop Manzi, the interim vice-legate, and said: 'Sir, the king orders me to give Avignon back into his hands, and you are requested to withdraw.' This time, the annexation seemed definitive as legislation and administrative organisation were substantially modified, but when Pope Clement XIV (1705–1774, 249th pope) pronounced the dissolution of the Jesuits his States were returned to him in April 1774.

To restore the pontifical regime in Avignon, the Pope sent not a vice-legate, but a more important prelate, Angelo Maria Durini, who was made president of the legation of Avignon (1774), a title he only left to receive the cardinal's purple and return to Rome (1776). Durini had no difficulty in understanding that the Holy See's dominance of the

banks of the Rhône had become anachronistic, and that the relevant institutions needed numerous reforms.

An elite part of the local population, lawyers, merchants and industrialists, also wanted changes that it seemed only annexation to France would make possible. It was hoped these would put an end to the economic asphyxiation from which the Papal States suffered within their too narrow borders.

In France too, consideration was beginning to be given to regular annexation in return for fair compensation, indemnity or territorial exchange. For his part, Pope Pius VI (1717–1799, 250th pope) saw, it is said, cession of this kind as a means of relieving strained finances. The deal appeared to have been concluded when the archives of the 14<sup>th</sup>-century papacy, which had remained in Avignon, were sent to Rome in 1783, but negotiations failed at the last moment.

On the eve of the Revolution, the Papal States had a population of about 150,000, of which 25,000 were in the State of Avignon, that is the urban agglomeration and its suburbs (including Le Pontet and Morières-lès-Avignon), and 125,000 in the Comtat Venaissin.

Only Jews, numbering about 2,000, still formed a separate ethnic group. [ For the history of Jewish people in the region, where they had long enjoyed tolerance not available in France, see <https://journals.openedition.org/tsafon/3728>] They were confined to 'ghettoes' in Avignon, Carpentras, Cavaillon and Isle (sur la Sorgue), and were subject to special statutes, but also to communal charges and various special fees.

On 26 February 1790, with Louis XVI (1754–1793) still reigning, the National Constituent Assembly voted to divide France into 83 departments, with Provence divided into three departments (Basses Alpes, Var, Bouches du Rhône), and determined their respective boundaries.

At the time of the creation of the departments, the 'viguerie' of Apt formed a district attached to the Bouches-du-Rhône; the county of Sault was included in the district of Forcalquier in the department of the Basses-Alpes; the principality of Orange was initially a dependency of the Drôme, then, on the request of the population, was attached to the Bouches-du-Rhône, along with Mondragon. As for the States of Avignon and the Comtat Venaissin, still not annexed, they were divided by the electoral

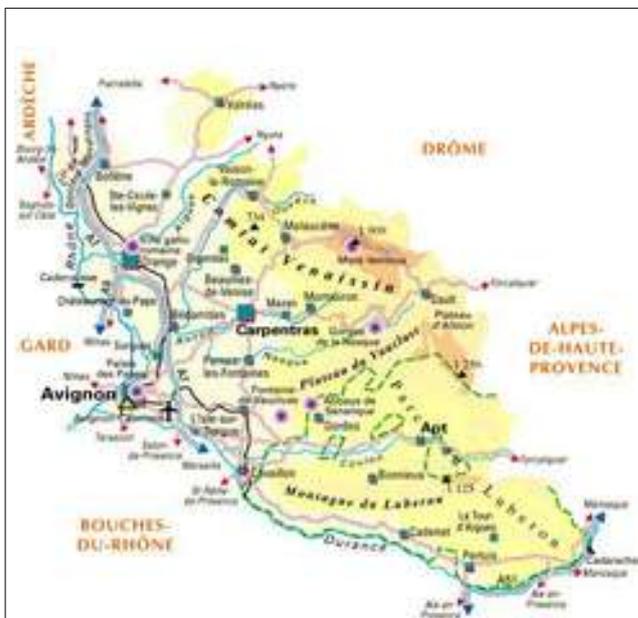
Assembly of Vaucluse into four districts: Avignon, Carpentras, Cavaillon and Vaison, with Avignon as the chief town of the department (29-30 March 1791).

The revolutionary period was tumultuous, even bloody in the region of Comtat and the town of Avignon; the massacres of Glacière, Bedoin and Orange sowed terror in spectacles of the bloodiest political excesses. There is no need here for details.

On 12 September 1791, the National Constituent Assembly voted for the annexation of Avignon and the reunion of the Comtat Venaissin with the kingdom of France, following a referendum submitted to the inhabitants of the said Comtat. Two days later the city-state of Avignon and the Comtat Venaissin, pontifical states, were annexed to France.

On 12 August 1792 the boundaries of the department of Bouches-du-Rhône, too vast, were modified with the creation of the department of Vaucluse. It was constituted from the districts of Avignon, and Carpentras, to which were joined those of Apt and Orange that had belonged to Bouches-du-Rhône, as well as the canton of Sault that had belonged to Basses-Alpes.

With the creation of the department of Vaucluse, the Comtat Venaissin as a state of the church lost its autonomy and became a region of Vaucluse whose limits were no longer defined.



*Illustration 2: The Vaucluse today*



*Illustration 3: The cantons of the Vaucluse Department*

## **The Comtat Venaissin today**

As can be seen on the map of the Vaucluse, the department extends over the historical regions of Provence and Comtat Venaissin. The latter includes the south-eastern edge of the Alpes de Provence, but also part of the Rhône valley to the west.

On 26 April 1966 the District of Comtat Venaissin was created, presided over by Maurice Charretier, mayor of Carpentras, comprising eight communes and 29,672 inhabitants. This district was transformed in 2002 into the 'Community of Communes Ventoux –

Comtat Venaissin', called 'La CoVe'. The Ventoux – Comtat Venaissin Agglomeration Community comprises 25 communes for 60,597 inhabitants of the Vaucluse.

The Ventoux–Comtat Venaissin agglomeration community has 70,258 inhabitants and covers an area of 52,743 hectares, between the Dentelles de Montmirail, Mont Ventoux and Monts de Vaucluse. In the immediate vicinity of the Rhône axis, its 25 communes spread over four cantons, all of which are committed to a unitary development dynamic.

According to the CoVe website, the area comprises the following communes:

1. Aubignan
2. Le Barroux
3. Le Beaucet
4. Beaumes-de-Venise
5. Beaumont-du-Ventoux
6. Bédoin
7. Caromb
8. Carpentras
9. Crillon-le-Brave
10. Flassan
11. Gigondas
12. Lafaie
13. Loriol-du-Comtat
14. Malaucène
15. Mazan
16. Modène
17. La-Roque-Alric

18. La-Roque-sur-Pernes
19. Saint-Didier
20. Saint-Hippolyte-Le-Graveyron
21. Saint-Pierre-de-Vassols
22. Sarrians
23. Suzette
24. Vacqueyras
25. Venasque

## Conclusions

Comtat Venaissin is mainly a historical name and corresponds to the Papal State of the 14th century, not including the city of Avignon. With the Revolution, this state disappeared and the Comtat Venaissin became a name for a geographical region around Carpentras without its limits being precisely defined. At the beginning of the 21st century, in 2002, the 'Communauté de Communes Ventoux – Comtat Venaissin, called 'La CoVe', was created and thus, the Comtat Venaissin became again a well-defined administrative and geographical entity, under another name.

## References and Links

Information on the Vaucluse and maps <https://www.actualitix.com/carte-vaucluse.html>

The\_Avignon\_Affair.pdf, History of comtat and vaucluse, creation of the department of Vaucluse during the Revolution (206 pages)

<http://vexil PROV.free.fr/cartes/carte%2084.html>

Map of the Vaucluse showing the inter-communities (today) and its signs.

[http://vexil PROV.free.fr/ventoux\\_comtat\\_venaissin/venaissin.html](http://vexil PROV.free.fr/ventoux_comtat_venaissin/venaissin.html)

short history of all the communes of the comtat

<http://www.lacove.fr/accueil.html>

website of the "Communauté de Communes Ventoux - Comtat Venaissin