

Historic Centre of Avignon: Papal Palace, Episcopal Ensemble and Avignon Bridge

Avignon (/aviŋɔ̃/ in French) (Provençal Occitan: Avinhon in classical norm or Avignoun in Mistralian norm) is a commune in southern France with an estimated mid-2004 population of 89,300 in the city itself and a population of 290,466 in the metropolitan area at the 1999 census.

The city is probably best known for its Palais des Papes (Palace of the Popes), where the Popes lived for much of the 14th century.

The site of Avignon was settled very early on; the rocky outcrop (le Rocher les Doms) at the north end of the town, overlooking the Rhône, may have been the site of a Celtic oppidum or hill fort. Avignon, written as Avennio or Avenio in the ancient texts and inscriptions, takes its name from the Avennius clan. Founded by the Gallic tribe of the Cavares or Cavari, it became the centre of an important Phocaean colony from Massilia (present Marseilles). Under the Romans, Avenio was one of the most flourishing cities of Gallia Narbonensis, the first Transalpine province of the Roman Empire, but very little from this period remains (a few fragments of the forum near Rue Molière).

During the inroads of the barbarians, it was badly damaged in the 5th century and belonged in turn to the Goths, the kingdoms of Burgundy and of Arles, the Ostrogoths and the Frankish-Merovingian kings of Austrasia. In 736 it fell into the hands of the Saracens and was destroyed in 737 by the Franks under Charles Martel for having sided with the Arabs against him. Boso having been proclaimed Burgundian King of Provence, or of Arelat (after its capital Arles), by the Synod of Mantaille, at the death of Louis the Stammerer (879), Avignon ceased to belong to the Frankish kings. In 1033, when Conrad II fell heir to the Kingdom of Arelat, Avignon passed to the empire. The German rulers being at a distance, Avignon took advantage of their absence to set up as a republic with a consular form of government, between 1135 and 1146. In addition to the Emperor, the Counts of Forcalquier, of Toulouse and of Provence exercised a purely nominal sway over the city; on two occasions, in 1125 and in 1251, the latter two divided their rights in regard to it, while the Count of Forcalquier resigned any right he possessed to the local Bishops and Consuls in 1135. At the end of the 12th century, its commune declared itself an independent republic, but independence was crushed in 1226 during the crusade against the Albigenses (the dualist Cathar heresy centered in neighboring Albi) after the citizens refused to open the gates of Avignon to King Louis VIII of France and the papal Legate, but capitulated after a three months' siege (10 June - 13 September, 1226) and were forced as punishment to pull down the ramparts and fill up the moat of their city. On 7 May 1251 Avignon was made a common possession of counts Charles of Anjou and Alphonse de Poitiers, brothers of French King Louis VIII the Lion. On 25 August 1271, at the death of Alphonse de Poitiers, Avignon and the surrounding countship Comtat-Venaissin (which was governed by rectors since 1274) were united with the French crown.

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