

The 2012 phenomenon in South-West France



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Abstract:

The 2012 phenomenon is discussed, especially its development in *The Two Rennes and Bugarach Area* in South-West France. First the ideas and beliefs of the “alternative seekers” and the growth of an expectation of spiritual renewal on 21st December 2012 are presented; together with the transformation of this expectation into the prediction of a total disaster and especially the treatment of this prediction as an “entertaining” subject in the mainstream. Later the cluster of myths and beliefs that has grown since the 1950s around Rennes-le-Château and inspired the *Da Vinci Code* (2003) is discussed, together with the growth of personal development workshops linked to the sacralized Pic of Bugarach nearby, that have brought an exceptional concentration of alternative seekers in this area. Finally, the article presents the situation’s evolution in the last days of 2012 in Bugarach, marked by the mobilization of the authorities, a massive presence of the media and the almost total absence of the expected “visionaries”. Prospective remarks will be presented to conclude.

Keywords:

2012 phenomenon, alternative beliefs, alternative seekers, apocalyptic expectations, contemporary mythologies, France, Mayas, Native Americans

INTRODUCTION

This article aims to explore the complex genealogy of the expectation amongst alternative seekers of great forthcoming changes linked to the end of a Maya calendar era — and the transformation of this expectation into the prediction of a catastrophic end of the world in 2012.

The author has chosen the expression “alternative seekers”, instead of “alternative spiritualists” used by other commentators, to avoid confusion with the more restricted spiritualist movement linked to the Fox sisters’ experiments in spirit communication in March 1848, a movement “which derived its essential impulses from Swedenborg and Mesmer” (Hanegraaff 1998 [1996]: 435). The term “seekers” enhances the importance attached to the individual’s quest amongst different alternative spiritualities rather than to a body of beliefs. The term was used in Soviet Russia during the 1970s by a movement associated with urban mythology (Panchenko 2004: 114). In the cultic milieu, participants often designate themselves as “researchers” a more prestigious term but close to “seekers” (Heelas 1996).

A strong collective emotion was caused early December 2010 by the statements of the mayor of Bugarach. Jean-Pierre Delord was worried that an unmanageable crowd would swamp his village (pop 189) in 2 years’ time as it was said on the Internet that the Pic of Bugarach (1 230 m., 4 035 feet) — along with a few other sacred mountains — was to be sheltered from the forthcoming Apocalypse on December 21, 2012.



In August-September 2011, January and April 2012, fieldwork was conducted by the author in the region (Campion-Vincent 2011 & 2014). The analysis of this bricolage of New Age expectations around 2012 and of the complex mythology developed since the 1950s around Rennes-le-Château extended a former study of the concern surrounding the Y2K scare (Campion-Vincent 2000). The Rennes-le-Château mythology delimits France's main mystery area that could playfully be called *The Bugarach Triangle* but more exactly *The Two Rennes* (Rennes-le-Château and Rennes-les-Bains) and *Bugarach Area*.

The area presents an important concentration of diverse alternative seekers in a rather small physical area located in an industrialized country. Three maps are presented to locate the place, very close to Catalonia in Spain.



FIG. 1. Map of France (Aude is District 11)

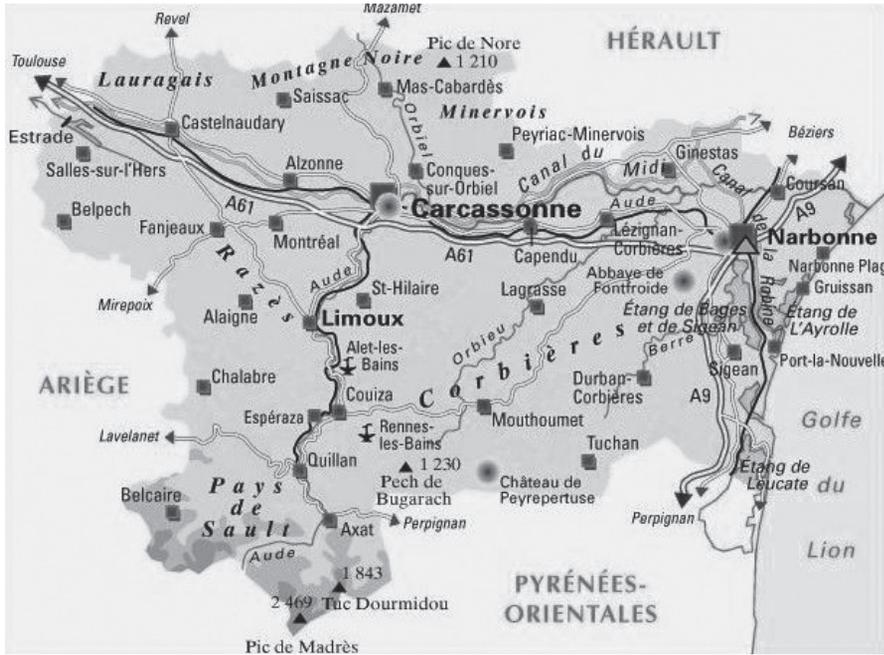


FIG. 2. Map of the district Aude. Shows Rennes-les-Bains and Bugarach. Rennes le Château is above Espérazza, situated 50 kms south-west of Carcassonne



FIG. 3. From Rennes-le-Château (2) to Bugarach (4). The town of Rennes-les-Bains -above (3) “closes” the triangle



CONTEMPORARY MYTHOLOGIES

The real subject of this research are contemporary mythologies, that is meaningful clusters of legends which “assume ongoing penetration of this world by supernatural forces... global scenarios accepted on faith by the members of subcultures who use them to link and give ultimate meaning to puzzling events” (Ellis 2000: 5). The plural is important: it’s not one scenario but several emergent narratives that we will meet and the path is continuous from legends — combinations of beliefs — to mythologies — combination of legends that can lead to actions as “legends are maps for behavior” (Ellis 2000: 204).

The alternative seekers that are established in the *Two Rennes and Bugarach Area* are considered by the original population as belonging to the New Age circles. These circles adopt mythologies in which heterogeneous elements organize into one interpretative system. Some widespread elements can be enumerated:

1. *brotherhoods and ancient civilizations* (existing or dreamt about, and the Knights Templar; Cathars, Egyptians and Mayas are on the same level as the inhabitants of Atlantis, Mu or Lemuria) possessed cosmic knowledge still topical and their past monuments (Cathar castles, Egyptian or Mayan pyramids) *are endowed with power today.*
2. *extraterrestrial creatures have created and civilized the human species through genetic engineering.*
3. *a new era — maybe the end of days — will surge soon.*
4. *our capacities of communication with the cosmos can be enhanced through spiritual exercises.*
5. *many nonstandard occurrences — alien abductions, cattle mutilations, crop circles — are signs of another reality to be decoded, but government and scientists are united in a conspiracy to cover the truth and suppress this knowledge.*

These mythological elements are not unanimously endorsed by the alternative seekers, but each person or subgroup accepts some elements and rejects others. Beyond these variants lies the unifying certainty that personal experience is *the* key that opens the doors to other dimensions (Meder 2007).

The reinterpretation of Native American cultures as models of respect of nature and source of authentic spirituality is a contemporary mythology that surged in the 1960s with the hippie movement and plays an important role in the New Age trends, especially in the *Two Rennes and Bugarach Area* (Campion-Vincent 2017).

Expectations of a regenerating end of days are not limited to the minority New Age trends but have influenced the mainstream. Since the 1960s the prevision of forthcoming disasters has generalized when the fundamentalist apocalyptic Christians were reinforced in their denunciation of the modern world by ecologists. The perspectives were different, but fundamentalists and ecologists both shared a collective need of expression of spirituality and predicted disaster if the human species did not change radically. The problems — by no means fictitious — met today are thus transformed into a global threat announcing an apocalypse unless *the* radical solu-

tion is found. This is a long-term trend: in the 1960s it was the demographic explosion, nuclear destruction or the depletion of natural resources asserted by the Club of Rome, today global warming, economic and financial crisis, nanotechnologies. An apocalyptic and redeeming rhetoric is part of our common stock of cultural knowledge (Stoczkowski 2012). A well-established consequence of this generalized loss of trust is the growing importance of conspiracy theories that have invaded all sections of society and are now almost a normal explanation, even in case of natural disasters.



1. ALTERNATIVE SPIRITUAL BELIEFS

GREAT CHANGES DUE DECEMBER 21, 2012?

Belief that a radical change was to take place on December 21, 2012, developed from an alternative spiritual trend considering the “First Peoples” as depositories of a sacred knowledge lost by the West, doomed because of its materialism. This trend’s speculations focused on Maya culture. December 21, 2012 was said to correspond in the Maya calendar of the Classic era to the end of a Great Cycle, the Long Count utilized from 200 BCE until 900 ACE and including 1 872 000 days, some 5 126 solar years. The announcement of major changes on December 21, 2012 has incited millions of discussions and the references grew in numbers as the fateful date neared. If on June 3, 2009 archeoastronomer Anthony Aveni got 2 060 000 hits when he Googled “Maya Creation 2012” (Aveni 2009: 29), this author got 16 100 000 hits on May 4, 2012 and 26 400 000 hits on November 12, 2012.¹

First the *genealogy* of the idea of a great change due Dec 21, 2012, then a *description* of its main traits and of its evolution towards *disaster prediction* will be presented. NASA scientific reactions to these predictions will conclude this section.

THE GENEALOGY

John Hoopes (2011) has shown that several of the 19th century Mayanists harbored strange theories: Basseur de Bourbourg (1814–1874) “an influential scholar (...) discoverer of the *Popol Vuh* (...) by the end of his career had become convinced that the Maya had come from the lost continent of Atlantis” (Hoopes 2011: 186–7) or Le Plongeon (1825–1908), “the first excavator of Chichen Itza and discoverer of the Chac Mool, traced the roots of Freemasonry through ancient Egypt and Atlantis to the Yucatan some 11 500 years ago” (Hoopes 2011: 187). Discarded by scientists, these theories enjoyed a life of their own in occult, esoteric, and counterculture circles. Predictions of a major change in 2012 appeared in the 1970s in American counter-culture. Frank Waters (1975) announced (for December 2011) a flow of cosmic forces and a psychic revolution ushering entry into *the sixth age of consciousness*, his book’s subtitle. The McKennas (1975) predicted that 2012 would be the end of a 43,000 years-cycle and that the key to the universe laid in the divining Chinese system I Ching of 64 hexa-

¹ Googling the same expression on April 5, 2018 gave 6 references, that quoted Aveni.



grams — that was also close to the DNA code. These authors' influence grew and they were republished in the 1990s. The period was one of exponential growth of the syncretism that characterizes our era.

José Argüelles (1939–2011), artist and spiritual leader, user of psychotropic substances and astrologist, had already (Argüelles 1975) mentioned 2012 as an important year for the Mayas due to bring spiritual transformation. Later his most influential book (Argüelles 1987) designated the date of August 16–17, 1987 as The Harmonic Convergence — an astrological expression designating a planetary alignment of the sun, the moon and six planets — that was the first step in the Great Change due on December 21, 2012 with the return of the Mayas from cosmos. So that this Convergence might be benefic, Argüelles successfully organized the important mobilization of 144 000 persons for a collective meditation at dawn that he deemed indispensable. This success established his status as leader. However, his creation developed independently and his death on March 23, 2011 was almost unnoticed. His website *Law of Time* (the movement's title) later led by Stephanie South, aka Red Queen² announced a huge program of collective meditation of 144 million people to ease the passage to 2013 and the radiant noosphere predicted.

THE DESCRIPTION

Millenarist hope, always very lively amongst the alternative seekers of the New Age, has been revitalized by the reference to 2012 as date of the great change that progressively spread amongst these trends. But this reference has been adapted *à la carte* to the leaders' different messages (Mayer 2012). The speculations concerning galactic alignment and equinoctial precession will be mentioned hereafter.

For John Major Jenkins (1998, 2002, 2009) the ancient Mayas' calendar priests had chosen the starting date of the Great Cycle so that its end would coincide with the galactic alignment of the winter solstice sun with the galactic center, “the center of rotation of the Milky Way Galaxy” (Aveni 2009: 180). In fact, the crossing point of the solstice sun and the galactic center cannot be distinguished precisely without modern telescopes the Maya did not possess (Aveni 2009: 106). The galactic center, the sun and earth have been aligned on Dec. 21, 2012, but this alignment does takes place... on each winter solstice.³

Jenkins asserted that the galactic alignment concluded, not only the Great Cycle of 5126 years, but also of the 26,000-year period of the precession of the equinoxes, roughly equivalent to five Great Cycles: $5 \times 5125 = 25\,625$ (Aveni 2009: 92).

Historian of science Giorgio de Santillana and his colleague Hertha von Dechend had fueled 2012 mythology, via the importance they gave to the precession of the equinoxes in *Hamlet's Mill* (1969). Their book was by and large rejected as pseudoscience but nevertheless influential.

2 See www.lawoftime.org/pdfs/Galactic-Handbook-and-Synchronized-Meditations.pdf Last accessed Feb 19, 2017.

3 See Neil deGrasse Tyson — *World to End In 2012...or Not*: www.youtube.com/watch?v=QJjQMwEjCII Last accessed Feb 19, 2017.



One of the longest astronomical cycles, precession has inspired many theories that try to create links between mankind and the cosmos, asserting that *the* key to the evolution of cultures is to be found in the movements of celestial bodies. How these theories overstretch facts is demonstrated in detail by archeoastronomer Aveni (2009: 92–106).

The 2012 phenomenon is the most important doomsday movement since Y2K when a surprising attention was paid to apocalyptic assertions that came mostly from groups of the literalist Christian fringe, living in the expectation of an imminent end of days, the Rapture and the Second Coming (Campion-Vincent 2000). With the 2012 phenomenon, the referent is not tied to Christianity⁴ but to Native American spiritualities, valued as holders of a lost wisdom.

THE DISASTER PREDICTION

Without excluding the possibility of disasters on the path to a new world, New Age Prophets envisioned 2012 as an evolutionary and positive event, announcing radiant tomorrows. Very rapidly, however, other darker predictions clustered around this date, said to herald doomsday, the end of *the* world rather than the end of *a* world. The 2012 phenomenon then surged. This evolution has been voluntarily fabricated by the mass media with mostly mercantile aims. It is indeed difficult to explain the expectations, held by very small New Age trends, of mostly interior transformation to non-believers, far more numerous. In contrast, announces of disaster are sure to meet a wide audience. Cable TV, such as *History Channel* or *Discovery Channel*, started, already in 2006, to create on a large scale pseudo-documentaries, “mockumentaries” being a more exact designation, with enticing titles and scary pictures. To attain their aims the inventive producers approached New Age prophets, tempting them with the possibility of disseminating their theories and promising an even-handed dialogue between the Domsday and the Renewal approaches. However, on arrival, the product was 90% Domsday. The vein was lucrative and numerous money-making mockumentaries produced and sold abroad.

These products are artificial constructs aiming to entertain through the shudders they plan to cause. These mockumentaries present analogous outlines. They are organized into short sequels, discussing haphazardly several end of days’ prophecies, predictions of celestial and terrestrial disasters, and presentations of those who stock guns and fit out well-stocked bunkers to survive. In each sequence, spectacular and scary pictures, often accelerated, are commented with sepulchral voices by authorities endowed with dubious titles. One is in ambiguity, rumor, the pseudo-documentary does not say “this is going to happen” but “it is said that this is going to happen and I put you in the know”. The sequences often end, especially in their French adaptations, by skeptical or careful statements. However, these dismissive parts hardly take more than 10 % of the mockumentary’s length. These doomsday predictions are therefore treated not as news from the real world but as entertainment. One does

4 The Jehovah’s Witnesses, who live in the expectation of the end of days, have spoken against the 2012 predictions.



not discuss the veracity of these predictions to which one does not subscribe. In fact, one does not say that there *will* be a disaster but that *some assert* that disaster is near. One utters a statement but simultaneously marks one's distance from that statement. This is the characteristic situation of rumors, and it is not improper to consider the 2012 phenomenon as *an apocalyptic rumor*. The ludic dimension is paramount and the rumor entertaining.

Short excerpts of the mockumentaries have been posted in many copies on the exchange video sites such as *YouTube* and have largely disseminated the catastrophic message. Amongst the fictions presenting the idea of an end-of-the-world on December 21, 2012, it is *2012*, authored by the specialist on disaster movies Roland Emmerich and released in November 2009, which is the best known.

The fact that such dire predictions are considered “fun” indicates that a subdued worry persists towards these announcements which, however, are not considered true. Playing with these dire predictions seems endowed with a conjuring power: talking lightly about them will ensure they do not come true. Doesn't this stubborn prediction of catastrophe play a propitiatory role? Reflecting long ago on the daily display of evil and violence in the media that endlessly offer death and pain as TV entertainment, philosopher Michel Serres asserted that this fascinated collective contemplation of evil rediscovered the logic that led the Carthaginians to sacrifice their children to Baal to ensure the harmonious flow of the universe: “If an observer from another universe listens or watches for the first time what we call News, he would certainly think that our global culture, devastated by wars and terror, is based on human sacrifice” (Serres 1987: 33).

In 2009, the release of the disaster movie *2012* brought a reaction of many scientific institutions who multiplied explanations and dismissals of the dire predictions.

One of the main scientific institutions having fought against the disaster assertions is the NASA and especially David Morrison, an astronomer specialized in exobiology and concerned by scientific literacy who runs the NASA program “Ask an Astrobiologist”. Morrison became concerned because of the growth of alarmed questions he received about Dec 21, 2012 and went public with a successful *YouTube* video of four minutes “The Real Truth about 2012” (Nov 2009)⁵ multiplying interventions and videos later. The nightmare of NASA astronomers has been the imaginary rogue planet Nibiru (born from the visions of one of the creators of the Ancient Astronauts theory, Zecharia Sitchin 1920–2010) that was said to collide with the earth on Dec 21, 2012 when it would return, as every 3 600 years. Submerged by hostile questions asking them why they hide its existence and confronted to the activity of convinced net surfers — who create and circulate “proofs” (hoaxed images) or interpret the discovery of Nano planet Eris as a confirmation of Nibiru's existence — these astronomers and scientists have endlessly had to refute but without being believed. Morrison, the most concerned of NASA scientists, wondered in 2008 at the anger his answers raised with “people who seem to want the world to end in 2012, who are upset to be told that this catastrophe will not happen” (Morrison 2008). On April 21, 2010, in a long

⁵ On *YouTube*, the query “David Morrison NASA” gives 5,430 answers, many copies of the same videos exist. Search conducted Feb 25, 2017.

(90') and fascinating lecture to a sympathetic scientific audience Morrison coined the term *Cosmophobia* for this unreasoned fear of the cosmos. He then compared sadly the trusting adhesion to a cosmic disaster based on dubious proofs to the stubborn disbelief into the *real* possible disaster caused by global warming and still doubted by 50% of American citizens in 2010.⁶



2. FRANCE'S TWO RENNES AND BUGARACH AREA

FROM TREASURE TO SECRET

Several alternative seekers trends surround the sacralized Pic of Bugarach. But Bugarach is also part of a region that has become the center of mythologies developed from a "simple" treasure story that appeared in the 1950s in nearby Rennes-le-Château.

Rennes-le-Château is a small perched village of Languedoc where, in the late 19th century, the parish priest Bérenger Saunière (1852–1917, in charge from 1885 until 1909) became suddenly very rich and rebuilt the parish church, later passing on to the construction of other expensive and extravagant buildings which he left to his servant-mistress Marie Dénarnaud (1868–1953). On his death, he had been "suspended" by the church authorities on the accusation of trafficking in masses, that is to solicit and accept more masses than he could celebrate. The traffic in masses, supported by Saunière's systematic letters of solicitation to religious convents, and some classified ads in the Catholic press, has been established by Bucholtzer (2008), who also stressed the importance of monetary gifts the priest had received from reactionary key figures, of Saunière's own orientation. So the real sources of his extraordinary revenues did not come from the discovery of a treasure, still unspent and waiting to be rediscovered.

Started as a simple treasure story in the 1950s by Marie Dénarnaud's adopted heir who had opened a restaurant on the premises of Saunière's buildings and developed the tale to draw tourists, the mystery of Rennes-le-Château has grown since the 1960s on, turning towards speculations as to the nature of that treasure, mobilizing very different approaches: from alchemy to ufology, from the study of sacred geometry to millenarianism, from visionary archaeology to biblical interpretation.

Rennes-le-Château's saga has become an all-encompassing universe in which everything can find its place. The participants and creators of the quest are engaged in the infinite game of an infinitely complicating narration whose links can be extended endlessly without limits. The legends surrounding Rennes-le-Château have greatly evolved, always in surprising ways. In 1956, the treasure of the village was attributed to Queen Blanche of Castile (early 13th century). Later, a whole collection of books, the most famous from Gérard de Sède (de Sède 2001 [1967]) and "documents" inspired and fabricated by esoterist Pierre Plantard referred to the mythical secret association of

⁶ The lecture was delivered during the Silicon Valley Astronomy Lectures and added on YouTube in Feb 2013 by this body. It is still visible at www.youtube.com/watch?v=zC3ESO7kkdI Last accessed Feb 26, 2017.



the Priory of Sion. The treasure then was no longer physical but identified with a secret that will evolve and enlarge with the successive players in the game.

In the 1980s, the best-seller *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* (Baigent, Leigh and Lincoln 1982) introduced the new exciting heretical element of the union of Mary Magdalene and Jesus, whose descendants would have found refuge in the village and beget the Merovingian bloodline. Settled near Rennes-le-Château, the rich visionary Elizabeth Van Buren (1986) projected a celestial map on the area where she detected a subterranean temple, refuge from the forthcoming Apocalypse (de Sède 2006 [1988]). In the 1990s, the orientation is towards sacred geometry theories that encompass the whole area: Rennes-le-Château is at the heart of a monstrous symbolic grid connecting towers, standing stones, caves and outstanding relief (Lincoln 1991, 1997). It is also asserted that UFOs land in the area. Many books that extend the adventurous hypotheses of *The Holy Blood* are published, but with a limited readership. In 2003, the hugely successful novel *The Da Vinci Code* (Brown 2003) appears. It has direct roots in *The Holy Blood* and Dan Brown thus becomes the discoverer of a *real* treasure in Rennes-le-Château (the name of the place is not mentioned but a character is called Saunière).

A succession, regular but much smaller, of skeptical books (Descadeillas 1974, Bedu 1990, 2005, Putnam and Wood 2005 [2003], Bucholtzer 2008, Rossoni 2010) marks the Rennes-le-Château saga, but these books do not affect the collective dreamers. Any critical contribution is immediately rejected because every demystifying statement closes at least one of the possible extensions of the game, thus threatening its very purpose which is to continue indefinitely.

This collective mythology is lived with exaltation by its participants. Common sense objections are worthless: the group intends to go on playing. The game must be pursued at the expense of historical truth and ignore any contrary evidence. Explicitly playful elements are countless: historical enigmas rely on paintings to be interpreted as elaborate enigmas; long inscriptions and coded messages are read as if they were crossword puzzle; maps are covered with dots to be connected to form figures; anagrams and puns mark the entrance towards layers of deeper meaning.

The Rennes-le-Château saga ends up in an “agglutinating” mythology integrating the most disparate components. Van Buren’s book, for example, refers to the classic Agartha popularized by Theosophy and largely picks up several occultist trends including alchemy; moreover, its author had developed a landing strip near Rennes-le-Château to welcome the forthcoming extraterrestrials. The limits of the village have been exceeded long ago and the quest reaches all the *Two Rennes and Bugarach Area* (Amiel 2008, Tomatis 2011).⁷

The Cathar past and heritage of the region — after the rediscoveries of the 19th century there has been since the 1960s exaltation of spiritual knowledge and supposed architectural secrets without forgetting assertions of fabulous treasures — is also integrated to the quest.

How do these luxuriant and heterogeneous beliefs organize themselves at the level of passionate individuals? A local researcher, Jean-Michel Pous (still active in

7 Inspiration has been drawn from these two remarkable texts.



2017), gave two lectures to a sympathizing audience — at ufologists’ regular dinners in Paris in 2005 and 2006.⁸ The telegraphic style resulting from notes taken by hand during an oral discourse offers a somewhat compressed image of the mythology. Centering his first lecture on “the relationship between the case of Rennes-le-Château’s treasure and the UFO phenomenon” Jean-Michel Pous presented himself as “rather passionate about the field of mysterious civilizations” asserting that he belonged to a group titled *Roots and Researches of the Aude district* which included a section conducting researches about extraterrestrials. Then off he went: “If there was not Rennes-le-Château R. L. C. there wouldn’t be the Cathars, the Templars, Jesus and Mary-Magdalen and UFOs in Languedoc-Roussillon [the region including Aude district]. To sum up there is a treasure story, disreputable people, a war during the 20th century opposing the Merovingian and Bourbon dynasties and a religious secret (Jesus and Mary-Magdalen). Clovis’s ancestral line, union between Franks and extraterrestrials, Merovingian bloodline, blood of Christ... From the treasure a huge mix-up arises. On the 9th century, Charlemagne had planned to retake the object with his army in R. L. C. but a UFO shows up in Aix-la-Chapelle and in the East. Charlemagne is scared and cancels his project. The UFO beneath R. L. C. is there since the time of Atlantis, 10,000 years ago.”

Invited to specify his theories, Pous adds: “The Hebrew have been contacted by entities. They won battles and objects amongst which the Ark of Covenant, in fact a type of cell-phone. On the other hand, Jesus and Mary-Magdalen descent was not Merovingian but Visigoth. We have received the deposition of a hunter who discovered a grotto with three space ships each containing the body of a hibernating reptilian. You may smile.”

A year later, in a second lecture, he specifies new points and opens somewhat breathtaking perspectives: “Ten thousand years ago, the Atlantes store their archives in secret rooms. One of these is in the Pyrenees, near Rennes-le-Château. We have discovered that some places were aligned in the region. The gold of Rennes-le-Château permits the erection of the Versailles castle. Within the vicinity of R. L. C. there are very ancient keys that might allow humanity to get out of the ditch. The “dark side” doesn’t want them to come out. Our enemy does everything to deny their existence. There are in the field two forces that possess subterranean bases and flying objects. For me the Ark of Covenant was here well before the Templars. They [the Templars] were sent to find the intact body of Jesus and bring it into a cavern of Bugarach where it is in lethargy. This body is the proof and means to stop the negative financial and economic planetary dynamic.”

THE SETTLING OF ALTERNATIVE SEEKERS

Several alternative seekers have settled in the *Two Rennes and Bugarach Area*, in the villages but mostly in the more discreet disseminated hilly hamlets. Village authori-

⁸ www.les-repas-ufologiques.com/index.htm. Pous’ quotations are drawn from the reviews published on this website in 2011. The website can no longer be reached. However, Jean-Michel Pous is still present on the Rennes-le-Château scene.



ties have often shown themselves very welcoming, though conflicts appear. Agricultural and industrial decline make these new contributions desirable and the alternative seekers have relayed the migrations of the 1970s that had revitalized agriculture and cattle breeding.⁹ In the town, yesterday industrial, of Espéraza, located in the valley, the Sunday morning market is a steady rallying point where the alternative seekers come down from the hilly hamlets to trade and socialize.

The alternative seekers are not organized into movements and the most disparate trends are met amongst them. The variety of the products of the Debowska productions, which play an important role of dissemination, is a good index of this diversity. Since their settling in 2006 in Rennes-les-Bains, Malgorzata Debowska and Konstanty Udala, concerned alternative seekers of Polish origin, have produced some 400 videos and regularly organize screenings and discussions in their adoptive little town but also in Toulouse or Paris. Everything is to be found there: local mysteries (over twenty videos concern Bugarach and the two Rennes), Cathars, shamanism, NDEs, parallel medicine, etc.; even traditional pilgrimages such as Catholic Lourdes are reinterpreted. Native Americans, mostly from Mexico and Canada, are invited by Debowska productions to come on Bugarach territory to stress the spiritual mysteries of the place and offer neoshamanist workshops.

MYSTICAL TOURISM: WORKSHOPS AROUND THE PIC OF BUGARACH

The Pic of Bugarach is the highest point of the region. During the upheaval caused by the French Revolution, astronomer Pierre-François Méchain (1744–1804) used the Pic of Bugarach as reference point to establish the new measurement unit, the meter that aimed at universality.

Since some ten years, mystical tourism has developed around this sacralized mountain, including in an initiatory path over other locations such as “The Love Fountain” and “The Devil’s Chair”, on the territory of Rennes-les Bains. These workshops and courses are often organized by alternative seekers, new country dwellers settled in the neighboring hamlets and sharing the vision of the magical nature of the place. A whole array of adhesion to these alternative beliefs can be noted: if some dedicate themselves to them and organize their existence around these choices, others make do with workshops one or two weeks per year. The courses and workshops have been studied by Thomas Gottin (2012 [2011]) who designates them as “mystic-esoteric therapies”. Using an anthropological approach, Gottin has written an analytical book, aiming to understand the individual and collective dimensions of the quest of the workshops’ participants, but also of the organizers’ activities. In these groups the needs of collective validation around an exemplary model on the one hand, of individual religious self-building on the other hand, are complementary. The beliefs spread during the workshops are syncretic and eclectic, mixing shamanism, tantrism, yoga, Qi Gong but also neo-pagan rituals or reinterpretations of Catharism. Extraterrestrial mythologies (begetters of the human species living under the Pic or in other close sacred places) are a major component. The workshops’ participants,

⁹ The mayor of Bugarach settled in the village as farmer in the early 1970s.



often in situations of crisis, are in quest of meaning, develop from multiple contributions their own personal religious universes centered on love, harmony, peace. They access them thanks to the rituals suggested by the organizers and the collective experiences lived. These workshops draw an 80% feminine and middle-aged clientele. Their prices, about 500€¹⁰ per week, partially explain this. These prices are not outrageous but delimitate a public. Some audience diversification is noted for the lectures and rituals around sacred objects, of shorter duration and thus cheaper. Natural environment (here the Pic of Bugarach) is considered sacred and plays simultaneously an individuating function, through individual appropriation, and a socializing one, through the sharing of experience between the participants. Gottin's study dates from before 2010. The articles of Vincent Basset (2012, 2013a, 2013b) enhance the importance of the Native American neoshamanist trend, reinforced by recent settlers from Mexico.

Since some thirty years, many legends surround the Pic of Bugarach. It is tied to the Rennes-le-Château saga (and said to shelter the Grail or a sacred tomb). But mostly the Pic is said to harbor remnants of ancient civilizations — terrestrial or galactic — and to be closely watched by extraterrestrials, often sighted. Jean de Rignies, who settled in the 1970s, started the trend.

Jean d'Argoun has picked up the trail. Author of several books (1997, 1998, 2001, 2003, 2005, 2006) and videos¹¹ he has organized pilgrimages/workshops in the region for the last fifteen years. Argoun says he is a "contactee"; he therefore relays the revelations of successive Superior Beings: Issahâ, Isshâ, Metaxa, Arka who tell him about great forthcoming changes and show him the huge vessel hidden under the Pic and awaiting awakening and exit. Numerous other authors have developed neighboring themes: while the prolific Jean Blum covers a whole range of mystery subjects in books and videos, Genny Rivière centers on the Pic of Bugarach which she discovered in 1999. She moved into the region in 2003, organizes workshops there and has created a school of Qi Gong in 2012. Her book details her experiences (Rivière 2007) and terminates by a 100 pages' presentation of her ideology — heavily influenced by ideas drawn from 19th century Theosophy — where a central role is devoted to the Pic which is a powerful vortex, a Being modeled on the Human Being — endowed with chakras in its image. One of the most representative coaches is Hervé Sempéré, who lives in the region since 2005. For Sempéré: "our antediluvian origins can be directly accessed"¹² through the changes brought about by immersion in mountain caves that abound in the region.

¹⁰ \$ 531 in February 2017.

¹¹ Nine videos are on sale on www.debowska.fr: *Dia Rigden et Jean d'Argoun*; *Ganagobie et Theopolis*; *Jean d'Argoun*; *L'Enigme de Vaux-le-Vicomte*; *La Loge Secrète de Champs-sur-Marne*; *Nous venons du Futur*; *Paris Secret*; *Rennes-le-Château*; *Versailles secret*. Last accessed March 1, 2017.

¹² Quotation from interview conducted Aug. 31, 2011.



3. BUGARACH: STORY OF A NON-HAPPENING

MAYAN "DOOMSDAY" IN BUGARACH

This article began with the declarations in November 2010 of the mayor of Bugarach to the town council. His assertions that Bugarach (the Pic) would be one of the few places on earth spared by "the end of the world predicted by the Mayan calendar" announced an influx of believers for December 21, 2012. Picked up by the local correspondent of a regional daily in a sensationalist article marked by the discovery of the many legends surrounding the Pic¹³ this unchecked information was developed by the world media and made the celebrity of the place. Jean-Pierre Delord, the mayor, has never clearly explained who or what caused his anxiety as to this possible invasion. In the Catalan movie that was shot in November-December 2012 on the premises *Bugarach. La fin du monde / Bugarach. The End of the World* (Sunyer, Durall, Cameron 2014) Delord jokes with the local correspondent who coined the first paper, journalist Bruno Coince, and says: "We never thought our joke would go that far". Besides, the subject was an ideal diversion in a situation marked by hostile reactions to the project, actively supported by Delord, of building 22 wind turbines, some on the Pic's slopes.¹⁴

This author has personally never encountered a *direct* affirmation before November 2010 that Bugarach might be a refuge from an apocalypse. One is here *clearly in the realm of rumor*, a saying always assigned to a third party.

APOCALYPTIC SECTS?

A reaction often met towards heterodox thinkers trying to decipher the secrets of the universe outside established institutions, is hostile rejection, often mixed with contemptuous amusement. Terms such as "crazy", "cuckoo", "sick" are easily employed to designate them, even amongst intellectuals. In France TV shows aimed at large audiences oscillate between hysterical laughter and moral panic. Thus, some renegades come to the interviews "masked for fear of retaliations" (Dericquebourg 2003). An objective approach meets many obstacles in such a climate.

Is France engaged in an all-out war against alternative spiritualities that militant secularism designates as sects and misrepresents? Such is the thesis presented by Susan Palmer in a fascinating and very critical book (Palmer 2011). While this thesis is too extreme in this author's view, it is true that, following the scared reactions to the presentation by the media of conflicts linked to Scientology and the collective suicides and murders of the Solar Temple's members in Switzerland (1994), France (1994, 1995) and Quebec (1994, 1997), the fight against sects has been institutionalized in France. Public bodies such as "Mission de lutte contre les sectes / Mission of fight

¹³ Bruno Coince "Bugarach, seul rescapé de la fin du monde !" *L'Indépendant* 30. 11. 2010.

¹⁴ An association "Pic en Colère" (Pic in Anger) was created. The project concerned several villages at first (Bugarach, Cubières, Fourtou). An agreement was signed in May 2009 for Bugarach. Annulled in July 2012 (*La Dépêche* 7. 7. 2012) In December 2012, the report of the inspector on a new project was also negative (*La Dépêche* 12. 4. 2012).



against sects”, later MIVILUDES (**M**ission **I**nterministérielle de **V**igilance et de **L**utte contre les **D**erives **S**ectaires / Intergovernmental mission of watch and fight against sectarian abuse) are largely staffed by anti-cult associations which receive important funds from the State. MIVILUDES, still active in 2015, officially fights sectarian abuse but in fact all alternative spiritualities in a militant vision of secularism, heavily influenced by the secular Mason lodge of the Grand Orient influential in political circles of France. Leaders of alternative religious or spiritual movements are systematically presented as crooks motivated by greed and a pervert taste for abusive exercise of power over their adepts. This approach meets in France by and large a sympathetic reception. Alternative seekers have protested this rejection, but in vain. All their pleas for violation of civil liberties have been rejected by the courts with strong approval of public opinion.

Questioned about the declarations of the mayor of Bugarach, MIVILUDES announced a forthcoming report on the dangers caused by apocalyptic groups. This report was published in June 2011 (MIVILUDES 2011) with a remarkable advertising launch. It contained an important section on apocalyptic groups.¹⁵ The report was presented as “elaborated from the elements furnished by the departmental services of general information” (MIVILUDES 2011: 5) meaning that its redactors are mostly from the police and remain anonymous. Although the alternative seekers of *The Two Rennes and Bugarach Area* are not organized into permanent groups, they were targeted by MIVILUDES which expressed great fears as to the excesses — and especially collective suicides — the “disappointed of the apocalypse” might perpetrate. The part concerning Bugarach was very inconsistent but stressed the need for a careful monitoring. Georges Fenech, former magistrate and president of MIVILUDES, will still mine the vein after his election as UMP (in 2016 LR), Representative for the Rhône district in June 2012 and his departure. He will launch a book on the theme (Fenech 2012) and pay several visits to Bugarach. The mobilization of the authorities in December 2012 has largely been due to his personal investment.

Since Fenech’s departure MIVILUDES, now directed by Serge Blisko, seems to have turned more towards health practices, aiming to eliminate practitioners spreading alternative theories, mostly holistic. It also organized in October 2013 a conference centered on “Conspiracy Theories and the Internet” (MIVILUDES 2015). Its last document published (MIVILUDES 2016) describes the body’s functions and actions. Their designation of the dangerous groups in France ignores the Islamist and Jihadist violent-prone tendencies and stays focused on “the evolution of New Age trends (especially channeling, a communication process with a being from another dimension), neoshamanism and satanism” (MIVILUDES 2016: 80).

BUGARACH, DECEMBER 2012

The last days of December 2012 have been marked by an important mobilization of the authorities, a massive presence of the media and a quasi-total absence of these “visionaries” that were to be watched or checked.

¹⁵ 11–126 that is 115 pages out of 290, almost half of the Report.



The mobilization of about one hundred *gendarmes*, of planes and helicopters to watch the Pic; from Dec 19th until 23rd the interdiction to climb the Pic or penetrate the caves; the delivery of permits for the inhabitants (550) and the journalists (303, 84 countries represented); the interdiction of hunting, of concerts, rave parties and mass *apéritifs* parties: the State has spared no expense and one can feel a little skeptical when the prefect asserts that the cost of all this is “extremely minimal and impossible to quantify since the means are there and the civil servants paid anyway”.¹⁶ It is tempting to compare this active interference with the overcautious wait and see policy of the authorities in November 2012 towards the opponents to the project of a new airport of Notre Dame des Landes (in the West, near Nantes, district of Loire Atlantique) who could settle illegally for a long time on disputed territories, as they still occupy the place in 2017. Objects of derision and endowed with a very low social level, the alternative seekers are weak adversaries, towards whom victory is ensured, unlike the anarchist contestants of the airport project, whose claim of environmental protection is considered valid.

The ridicule of the massive presence of journalists reduced to filming each other has been noticed by all and perhaps does not need further comments. As for the almost total absence of the “visionaries”, it was sometimes explained as a happy consequence of the dissuasive measures taken by the authorities: “The representative of the State estimated, during a press conference, that the presence of about 100 *gendarmes* who watched access to the village has been dissuasive. Thus, this village (supposed to be spared from the so-called end-of-the-world of December 21) will not be assaulted by curious on-lookers. ‘Had I not decided it, reproaches could have been made’ said he” (*Le Figaro* 20. 12. 2012).

Alternative seekers, trapped by their own vanity, had been easy bait ridiculed by some media¹⁷ and they kept to themselves afterwards. These believers — in a generation not in a disaster — had been there for a long time and had already established a sub-culture in the area. They needed no warning but, realizing they were not audible, remained discreet and silent. The only alternative “seeker” who talked to the media was “Oriana” alias Sylvain Durif, then from the neighboring town of Arques but living in Bugarach in 2017, who harbored several identities, as he explains on his Facebook page: “alias The Green Man, the cosmic magician; alias Merlin the Wizard; alias Oriana, the Cosmic Emperor; alias Al Khidr, Moses’ teacher; alias Melchizedek, Jesus’ teacher; alias the Cosmic Christ, the beloved Son of God. Interests himself to: family, spirituality, music, song, dance, second sight, vegetarian food, tantra, genealogy, revolutionary inventions, quantum science, sustainable development of Humanity, esoterism, spirituality, paranormal, ufology, miraculous cures, regeneration, immortality, synchronicity, levitation, soul’s travels and the great universal enigmas (Great Monarch, Cyclic Cross of Hendaye, Agar-

¹⁶ *L’Indépendant*, 21. 12. 2012.

¹⁷ Especially in *La folie Bugarach* aired December 19, authored by *Action discrète*, the parodic group of the Channel *Canal +*, specialist of hidden cameras. Hervé Sempéré reacted to his parodic presentation in the program www.au-taquet.net/action-discrete-la-folie-bugarach

tha...). Activities: reading, writing, dance, flute, cycling, swimming, tai chi chuan and forest walks.”¹⁸

Durif/Oriana will incarnate the caricature expected and be the media’s providence. In 2017 he is still active, especially through *YouTube* — many parodies are also to be found. The videos recognized by Durif are about 161¹⁹ while videos indicated when his name is typed amount to 32,800.²⁰

The rumor of the Pic of Bugarach as refuge has not met adhesion and the dissuasive measures of the authorities were only useful to dismiss onlookers. The events of December 2012 in Bugarach have enhanced the primacy of fantasies and fictions over reality.

Militant secularists inspire the French authorities when alternative seekers worry them but are the two groups so different? The militant secularists pursue dangerous enemies largely built up by their own approach and gaze and live themselves as soldiers of Reason while the alternative seekers, whose universe is peopled of imagined friends (Lurie 1967), entities or spirits of nature, live themselves as pioneers exploring superior dimensions. Both parties have adopted imagined identities and live by them.

TO CONCLUDE

With the 2012 phenomenon, the heralding of a new era has not reached beyond the New Age circles. What has spread is pure catastrophism, the idea of a full, sudden, general stop of all life on earth. One did not subscribe to this idea, but it seemed worthwhile to debate it. One sees here at work the deep pessimism that marks the societies in crisis in which we live. Led by consumerism and an economic globalization driven by liberal capitalism, given over to the excesses of financial greed are not these societies racing full speed ahead without aim or control? Submitted to accelerated changes, are not Western societies rootless, forgetful of their traditions but also unable to project themselves into the future? The ecological issues enhance the damages to nature, to an almost divine *Gaia*, and the consciousness of a climate change bearer of future disasters has especially entailed today an important demoralization

18 www.facebook.com/SylvainDurifOrianaLeChristCosmiqueLeGrandMonarque/info?tab=page_info. Last accessed February 19, 2017, small differences appear for the first paragraph: “alias the Green Man, the Cosmic Magician, alias Merlin the Wizard, alias Oriana, Cosmic Emperor, alias Al Khidr, who taught Moses, alias Melchizedek, who taught Jesus, alias the Cosmic Christ, the beloved son of God. A paragraph has been added: “Distinguishing marks: descends from the Merovingian bloodline through Clovis, Hugues Capet and Saint Louis by the family de Villeneuve Esclapon. Incarnates the energy of the Great Monarch alias the Green Man alias Merlin the Wizard and Cosmic Christ Maitreya. Hitchhikes since 2005 in France and Québec. Permanent resident in Québec where he lived for 18 months” (2008-09).

19 www.youtube.com/user/Elvita71258 Last accessed February 26, 2017.

20 www.youtube.com/results?search_query=%22Sylvain+durif%22 Last accessed February 26, 2017.



for those that adhere to these hypotheses. Public policies seem guided by the forthcoming catastrophe; it is no longer a matter of progress but of “salvation”, of “preservation”. Thus, apocalypse is enlisted to help rational policies (Føessel 2012).

HOPE LIES ELSEWHERE

As skepticism and paranoia progress, Western societies no longer expect a solution from their own religions or society, but direct their hopes elsewhere. This attitude of rejection of one’s own culture coincides with the widening universe of these last seventy years: that led to an era of globalization. Beyond the materialism, rationalism, empiricism and scientism that characterize Western culture, many admit that seeking spirituality from other cultures supposed to be more harmonious, will lead to a new start. It is necessary to move away from priests and to get closer to shamans. Native Americans are praised for the simplicity of their lives, their respect of nature and their wisdom. The interest in Other societies has paved the way to Neo-Indians who revive ancestral customs but situate them in a global perspective influenced by New Age ideas (Galinié and Molinié 2013 [2006]) and operate also in Europe. A global mystical tourism, today strongly established, has developed since the 1970s, mixing recreation and self-discovery; its participants resource themselves through shamanic initiation or connection with the fabulous energies of pyramids and sacred sites. The meaningful dates of solstices and equinoxes draw crowds.²¹

In the esoteric tradition, lost civilizations have inspired Gnostics who endowed them with superior knowledge and wisdom. Gnostic ideas are present today at all levels of society and many Gnostic traits are very present amongst New Age authors and in the mythological elaborations of the Rennes-le-Château saga: the quest for a better world; the certainty that only chosen adepts can attain hidden knowledge (deemed superior to faith) and thus escape from the present universe; the belief that it’s ignorance, not sin, that hinders achievement; the idea that *all* religions and wisdoms contain paths to revelation, etc... It can be said that Gnostic ideas — loosely inspiring lives in a fuzzy version rather than as objects of carefully analyzes by specialists — are a unifying factor for those who seek hope elsewhere, as much as the glorified image of the “First Peoples”.

The 2012 phenomenon deserves analysis as it shows “what can happen when scholarly speculation on topics relevant to archaeology, astronomy, and archaeoastronomy has ideological and commercial value beyond the realm of academia” (Hoopes 2011: 184).

While science has cast doubts on many metaphysical and supernatural claims, scientific understanding of the mechanisms of cognition is still too inadequate to decipher the causes of adhesion to revelations. Contemporary mythologies attract those with anti-authoritarian agendas and can develop quite easily since those endowed with scientific authority, the archaeologists in the case of the Maya, are indiff-

²¹ On the Spring Equinox, since the mid 1970s, one of the most popular destinations is Chichen Itza (Mexico) where, in the afternoon, participants can see the shadow of the descending serpent appear on the north-west corner of the Maya pyramid of Kukulcan (the feathered serpent god who the Aztecs call Quetzalcoatl).

erent to the mythologies regarding lost archaic knowledge or ancient wisdom, just as astronomers do not care about astrology. In France, institutionalized hostility to alternative beliefs largely explains the success met by the Mayor of Bugarach's "joke", and especially the authorities' costly involvement in the control of the accesses to Bugarach in December 2012.

BEYOND 2012

December 21, 2012 has been over for long. Will it be known one day how many had bought bunkers and taken refuge in these? The alternative seekers seem still convinced of the spiritual change, spreading out the expiry dates, asserting the expected changes have partly taken place or finding reasons for their imperfect fulfillment. 2012 has shown that aspirations of alternative seekers trends to collective change are still strong. The pessimism firmly installed in Western Societies drives many either to "the truth below" via the denunciation of all-encompassing conspiracies, or to the Millenarist expectation of "the truth beyond" reality, a one-thousand-years era of perfection following a great upheaval. The desire for a forthcoming radical change thus remains important in society at large and sooner or later an end of days' scenario will surface again, carried by the deep-seated distrust towards the established powers. The seduction of being "in the know" — conscious of a future that others ignore or to belong to the few elects able to solve unfathomable mysteries — reinforce the doomsday hypothesis' seduction. However, it is still too early to predict when a new cluster of mythologies will crystallize around a new date.

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