

Corsavy down the Ages

The Corsavy area was probably first inhabited in the late neolithic era (judging by the dolmen on a hill above the village), and the iron ore of Canigou has been worked since Roman times.

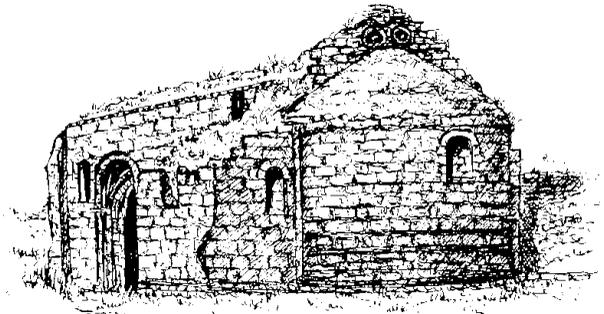
The area has seen waves of invasions: Romans, Carthaginians, Visigoths, Arabs, Franks, and more recently the Germans during World War 2.

The name of the village has varied over the years: Cort Savino, Curtis Savino, Curtesavino, Cursavino, Cursavi, Corssavi, Cortsevi, Corsevi, Cortsavi all being seen in different documents. After the 1659 Treaty of the Pyrénées the name was usually Cortsavi, and since 1800 Corsavy has been common.

The first mention in documents is in AD 993 when Berenger, Bishop of Elne, consecrated the church of Sant Marti (Saint Martin), just outside the present village on the road to Arles [*'...ecclesia Sancti Martini in villa Rivo Ferrario...'*].

At the same time the church was endowed with a consecrated space of 30 paces round it 'for the living and the dead' [*'...donamus...in circuitu ecclesiae sancti Martini cimiterium triginta passuum...tam vivis quam etiam mortuis...'*].

This cluster of people and goods round a church and cemetery was the way that many villages of the region began, though in the case of Corsavy the village later moved to the protection of the castle.



Sant Marti before its restoration

11th Century

In AD 1001 Berenger the Bishop of Elne handed over supervision of the church to Sintillus, the abbot of Arles-sur-Tech.

In 1007 the Count of Besalú, Bernard Taillefer, made a gift to the abbey in Arles-sur-Tech which included the fief of '**Cort Savino**'.

At that time Corsavy was largely made up of enclosures or shelters serving to house the many herds using the rich pastures of the area. These shelters, which belonged to Bernard Taillefer, were held in fief to begin with by a man called Savinus (Sabinus), from which came the name Cort Savino.

'Cortal' is a word for a cow-byre or a sheep-pen (the nearest English word is 'corral') and is still used in place names (as for example in the Cortal de l'Aloy, the area including the crêperie just outside the village, where the Trabucayres were captured, see Appendix 3).

In 1020 the same Count, Bernard Taillefer, made a legacy to his daughter Constancia of the fief of Cort Savino, held at this time by a man called Oriol.

In 1090 there was an exchange between Guitard the abbot of Arles, and Ramon Matfred, Lord of Corsavy and Montferrer. The abbot demanded that the seigneur stopped requiring excessive payments from people living near the church, and that he give up land that he had taken. The document refers to there now being 43 store-places to be taxed in the area round the church.

The hostile tone between the church and the castle continued for at least another century.

12th Century

In 1106, there is mention of a Ramon Brachiati of Curti Savino (probably the son of Ramon Matfred and his wife Bellisende), who signed as a witness to a donation by the Count of Besalú to the church of Saint Paul at Narbonne. This Ramon Brachiati (1078–1118) was also called Ramon Bracads (bracads was a nickname in the old language for someone who wore culottes or trousers). Ramon was the father of an important local war-lord, Raymond of Serralongue.

In 1119 Bernard Ramon of Curto Savini signed as a witness for an act of donation to the abbey at Arles by Guillem Raimundi of Palatiodan (now called Palalda).

Catalans of this period seem to have had an amazingly modern sense of democracy. A Catalan oath of allegiance from the 12th century reads:

*We - - - who are as good as you,
swear to you, who are no better than we,
to accept you as our king and sovereign lord,
provided you observe all our liberties and laws;
but if not, not.*

In 1157 (on the 3 of ides of October 1157), Bernard of Cortsavino, his brother Guillem, and their mother Blanca assisted in the consecration of the church of St Etienne (St Stephen) in Arles.

By contrast, probably due to the continuing bad feeling, none of them was present for the re-consecration of the church of Sant Marti of Corsavy which took place in the same year (1157). The service was taken by the Bishop of Elne and Joan the curé of Corsavy.

To emphasise the continuing hostility between church and castle, during this consecration ceremony Artal II, Bishop of Elne, declared that the new chapel of St Jacques, built by the seigneur next to the Castle of Corsavy [*...ecclesiola quae novita constructa est juxta castrum Curti Savini...*] would be forever subject to the parish church of Sant Marti.

From this record it seems clear that the Chateau (or Castell) was well-completed by 1157, but when it was begun is not known.

Two years later, in 1159, Lord Bernard and his family did attend the re-consecration of the church of Saint Peter of Riuferrer just outside Arles. This church had been founded in 820 and later supported by Siniofred, abbot of Arles and brother of the famous Wilfred le Poilu (Wilfred the Hairy), the man in the legend of the origin of the 'blood & gold' design of the Catalan flag.

In the later years of the twelfth century, the lord of Cortsavi was Raymond (probably the grandson of Ramon Bracads). He died in 1194 and left no sons but 3 daughters : the famous **Ermessinde** (or Ermessanda), Giraula and Marie. Giraula married Pons de Vallgarnera; Marie married Bertrand d'Ille.

In 1197, Ermessinde married Ramon de Termes (Raymond III des Termes, 1170–1214) one of the most powerful lords of the Narbonne area and a leading Cathar. Shortly afterwards, in 1197, Ramon and Ermessinde contested a will made by Bernard of Corsavy, Ermessinde's uncle, in which he had left some properties to the abbey in Arles. After an intervention by the Bishop of Elne, Ermessinde and Ramon agreed to give three of the five contested farms to the abbey.

13th Century

In 1207 Ramon and Ermessinde agreed in a document that the abbot of Arles had the right to nominate the priest for the church of Sant Marti of Corsavy, and that the priest had the right to live where he wished without necessarily being attached to the castle of Corsavy. This indicates the continuing tension between castle and church, and perhaps implies that the village was by this time equally grouped round the two sites.

It was probably during this period or a little later that the signal towers of the region were built, including the ones in Corsavy and at Batère.

Ramon was widely celebrated for the defence he made of his castle against the army of Simon de Montfort the elder, Earl of Leicester, in 1210.

De Montfort was known for his extreme cruelty and had been employed by Pope Innocent III and King Philip Augustus of France to fight the Albigensian Crusade to wipe out the Cathars, whose simple views were seen as heretical by the Church.

Ramon's castle was under siege for 120 days (1 August - 22 November 1210), and most of the Cathar defenders of the castle died, in hand-to-hand fighting.

Ramon had escaped but was captured when he returned to his castle during the night of 22 November. He died in about 1214, after spending 3 years in a dungeon in Carcassonne.

Raymond and Ermessinde had 4 children (Raimonde, Olivier, Bernard, Blanche). Their eldest son was the famous Olivier de Termes (1207–1274). Olivier distinguished himself in all the expeditions of his time, including a crusade (the seventh), and became one of the most celebrated knights of the 13th century, a member of the court of the King of Aragon, and with links to the Knights Templars, who in this area were based at Mas Deu near Perpignan. Olivier died on 12 August 1274 in the Holy Land.

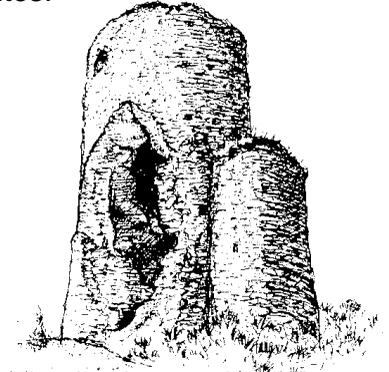
After Raymond's death, Ermessinde, now the richest lady in Vallespir, married again (in 1215?), to her cousin Bernard Hugues (Bernard-Hug) of Serrallonga (? - 1254), with whom she had 3 sons and 2 daughters. (In total she had at least 9 children who grew to adulthood.)

The 3 sons were called Guillem-Hug, Ramon and Arnald. Guillem (? - 1270) succeeded his father, Ramon became Bishop of Majorca, and Arnald became Bishop of Elne in 1241. The daughters were called Ramunda (who married Ramon de Canet, one of the principal barons of Rousillon) and Saurina.

In January 1237 Bernard-Hug renounced his rights in some of his land (at Passa) in favour of the Knights Templars.

The last known mention of Lady Ermessinde of Cortsavi is on the 21 of Calendes of July in 1248 when, (with her husband Bernard-Hug, and with the agreement of Lord Olivier de Termes, Guillem-Hug and Ramon their son) she made a concession of 'pasquiers' in the mountains of Cortsavi in favour of Richard, abbot of Vallbona abbey. These rich pastures were on the Pla de Rodes to the west of Corsavy (behind the domed mountain called La Souque). This agreement also allowed for the free passage of the abbey's herds over all of Ermessinde's territory.

On the death of Ermessinde (1255) the inheritance of Cortsavi (and of La Bastide) passed to Raymond of Serrallonga, second son of Bernard Hugues.



The signal tower above Corsavy before its restoration

14th Century

Some time later, around 1312, Bernard of So became lord of Cortsavi and of La Bastide.

On 13th October 1335, Bernard of So ceded the barony of Cortsavi, including the castle and village to James III of Majorca.

In 1340 James of Majorca assigned to *'the chapel of our castle of Corsavino'* all the tithes of the barony of Corsavy.

In 1346, a proclamation by Pedro IV of Aragon said that *'the chatelain who resides in the Castle of Corsavy, with a wife and family, received 1600 sols of Barcelona as an annual salary for himself, 2 sergeants and a dog'*.

In 1391 the parish of Cortsavi, taxed at 15 *livres*, was conferred to Nicholas Rossignol. At the end of the 14th Century King John I of Aragon named Pierre de Rocafort the lord of the manor of Cortsavi, of which the seigneurie belonged to Queen Yolanda of Aragon.

15th Century

On 2nd February 1428 there was a catastrophic earthquake which damaged the whole region of Catalunya, with hundreds of deaths. Both the churches in Corsavy (the original Sant Marti and the newer Saint Jacques at the castle) were damaged.

Queen Yolanda the younger (who had been the power behind Joan of Arc) gave support for re-building the church of St Jacques near the chateau, but the older church of Sant Marti was ignored, perhaps indicating that by then the village was entirely on its present site.

King John II of Aragon seized the castle around 1474 and a Lord Rocafort was the last to occupy the castle.

A report dated 30th March 1509 says the castle of Cortsavi was by then completely ruined. Its stones have been used to build the houses clustered round the castle rock.

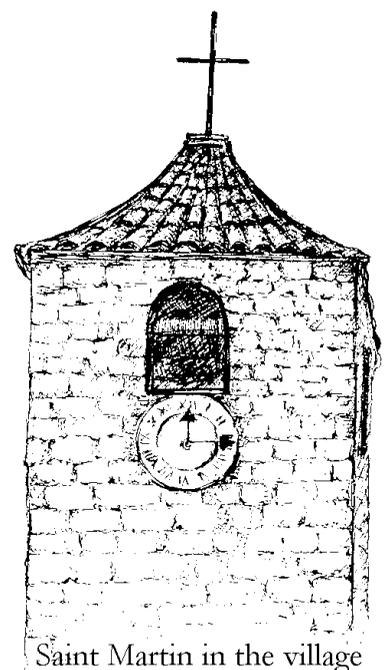
Little remains of the castle now (see more details about the castle and access to it in Appendix 1).

The church in the village (now dedicated to Saint Martin) dates from 1621, with its doorway showing the date 1775.

It is not clear whether it is on the same site as the original St Jacques.

Most of the village was built during the 16th and 17th centuries.

Some of the houses in the village have dates carved on the lintel (1730, 1739, 1740, 1787, 1793 the year of the Revolution) but they are probably older.



19th Century

In April 1818 Henriette-Ann, Lady Fortescue (née Hoare, of the London banking family) made a courageous visit (courageous for its time, just after the Napoleonic Wars). She journeyed through the Pyrénées-Orientales, sketching as she went.

Her sketch of Corsavy made on 9th April 1818 (viewed from near the Chapel of Sant Marti) shows Corsavy looking very much as it does today. On the other hand her sketch of Leca, the hamlet on the road to Batere, is hard to recognise. At the time, Corsavy was said to be renowned for the 'education and affability' of its inhabitants.

It was about this time that the huge trees in the village parc were planted. The trees (sequoia, himalayan cedars, etc) are now about 200 years old

In May 1845 the famous incident of 'Les Trabucayres' took place at the Cortal de l'Aloy (now the crêperie), see Appendix 3.

In 1848 a Dutch painter, Charles-Louis Hora-Siccama travelled from Amélie (Banys d'Arles as it was known then) up to Mas Vilalta, high above Corsavy, and several of his paintings survive. His journey has been used as the basis of an imaginary diary which can be seen at www.corsavy.co.uk

In 1872 François Arago (bourgeois Republican, famed scientist, discoverer of the principle behind the traditional car speedometer) visited Corsavy for a few hours (as he did to so many villages and towns in France), and had a 'fontaine' (water tap) named after him (the fontaine itself is dated 1756). This is 50m east and below the village square, down the steps, next to one of the 3 wash-houses.

Another of the wash-houses, still in use today (2006), is behind the Mairie, next to the Salle des Fêtes.

The third lavoir is half a kilometre along the road to Montferrer, isolated because it was for the use of people with tuberculosis.

20th Century

Black's Tourist Guide of 1909 describes the journey from Amélie up to Corsavy as '*costing 15 francs, with a pourboire of 2 francs, needing 2 and a half hours to go up and 1 and a half hours for the return. The village is famous for its truffles; there are grand views on the way.*'

In those days the main road into the village square (place de la republique) did not pass between Chez Françoise and Chez Deit as it does today. Instead it passed up the narrow alley called El Raco, just wide enough for a coach, at the side of Chez Deit (the big house on the square) which was the coaching inn.

Like every other village in France (and Britain) Corsavy was affected by the 'Guerre de 14', with 27 names on the War Memorial.

The village was not affected physically during World War II, not even by the terrible floods of 16-19 October 1940 when up to 1500mm (60 inches) of rain fell during 4 days, sometimes 150mm (6 inches) in an hour. The river Tech rose by 16 metres (50 feet) in some places and amid widespread drownings and damage, the chocolate factory in Arles floated away. It being wartime, re-construction took some time (the railway lines were never replaced).

During the war three more villagers died as soldiers and at least one husband died while being deported. In Arles, a member of the resistance (Louis Moli) was shot by the Germans, and villages like Valmanya were put to the torch.

Over the years the population of Corsavy has changed dramatically:

1370	37	families/homes
1515	20	families/homes
1732	71	families/homes
1806	702	inhabitants
1846	1007	
1851	906	
1901	689	
1937	373	
1954	327	
1968	327	
1975	310	
1990	220	
2000	250	

The high population density coincided with the periods when the iron forges of Vallespir were in full use. Iron has been mined in Vallespir for two thousand years, since about 100 BC.

Most of the iron for the forges came from the mines at Batère, above Corsavy. Although the miners (and some families) lived most of the time up at Batère, most of their wives and families lodged in Corsavy, as did many of the army of muleteers that transported material to and from the mines.

The population of the commune was composed largely of miners, muleteers, some coalmen, together with the farmers in the outlying farms raising animals. Corsavi and Prats de Mollo always possessed the richest summer pastures in Vallespir.

The first large fall in population (shown by the census of 1901) was due to the fall in the local iron trade towards the end of the 19th Century.

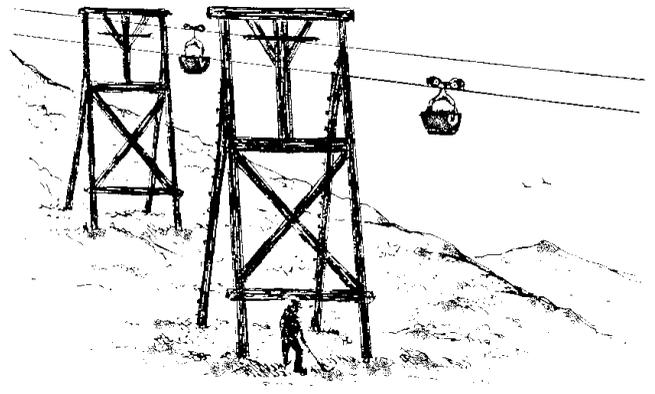
For many years the mines had been successful because of the nearby forests (the forges needed 17 tons of wood to make 1 ton of iron) and because of the streams which supplied motive power.

However as time passed, the richest veins were used up, the forests became sparser, and the torrents provided power for only half the year . . . while from the mid-nineteenth century the railways and steam power made iron from other areas more viable.

Even the building (in 1900) of the 8km aerial ropeway to transport the ore down to Arles only slowed down the inevitable decline.

The ropeway could transfer up to 50 tons of ore per hour, from the mine at an altitude of 1255 metres down to the station in Arles, at an altitude of 270 metres.

The second fall in population, mid-century, echoes the fall in farming, which has been a casualty throughout Upper Vallespir.



The aerial ropeway from Batere to Arles

Even in the 1930s the village supported 3 boulangeries; 4 grocers (Boix, Delclos, Payrou, Vaills); 2 hotels (Bouix, Vaills); with up to 4 cafés (Boix, Barboteu, Delclos, Vaills).

The two most popular cafés were the bases for the Whites (les blancs were the royalists of the right) and the Reds (les rouges were the communists and republicans), with occasional fights between them.

On one occasion there was a fight between the man living in Al Coucout (off rue Barri d'Avall) with his neighbour who was of a different political persuasion and had a dog, called Condom. During the fight an ear got bitten off. Afterwards the fighter searching for his ear was devastated to find only the dog licking its lips !

In the 1930s the butcher on the main street would slaughter the sheep on the street and the blood would run down the gutter while the children watched (in earlier times the blood would have been drunk).

Electricity arrived in the village in the 1930s.

Sometimes there were film shows in the open-air on the old boules pitch between Chez Françoise (called Can Ton in those days) and Can Serrat, with a white bedsheet hung up as a screen.

There were two schools, one in the village (in the same building as the Mairie) and one up at Batère (which closed in about 1950).

Streets like the rue Barri d'Avall (which was originally called l'Enrecoutade or l'Enracloutade) were not paved until the 1960s, when the water-pipes and drains were first laid and a sewage plant built down in the ravine.

As in all mountain villages, modern techniques have drastically reduced employment. Even by 1980 there were very few miners living at Batère, and many of the farms were deserted.

The construction of 'Les Chantevents', a home for deprived or abandoned children, brought some local employment.

The mines closed entirely in December 1987 and the last part of the long aerial ropeway from Batère to Arles, with its huge steel buckets, was demolished in 1995, although the terminal can still (2006) be seen in Arles.

The post office finally closed in 2005 and the secretariat of the Mairie moved to the ground floor.

Perhaps the population of Corsavy has now stabilised with the maintenance of holiday homes for those of us lucky enough to live here.

Keith Johnson
Mas Les Chantalies,
Cortal de l'Aloy, Corsavy
October 2006

Drawings by Ann Johnson

Appendix 1 : The Castle

The chateau (or 'castell') of Corsavy has been in ruins since at least 1509, and has since disappeared, acting as a quarry for building the houses now clustered round the castle rock.

In style it was probably like Montferrer Castle, the remains of which can still be visited (on the crest of the ridge visible from the lower parts of Corsavy).

The rock in Corsavy was a natural site for building a castle, with steep faces on all sides except for two ways of entry:

- On the south face there is a steep (private) path from rue Barri d'Avall. Near the summit the overhang to this path has the remains of a wall which might possibly have been part of a guardhouse.
- On the north face, on the main street, behind the houses that have been built against the castle rock, there is a large entry arch. This arch is about 5 metres high and 5 metres wide, easily big enough for a man on horseback or a coach to enter into the cavern behind it. This natural cavern is a large uneven space, about 10 metres by 15 metres in area and about 7 metres high. At the right-hand (west) side of the cavern a stone stairway (slightly damaged) still rises up inside the rock to the summit of the castle. Presumably it arrived into the interior of the castle buildings.

On the lower south face there are two rocky entrances, of unknown depth, sealed with stones. These days many of the houses clustered round the rock have access to the top by way of their attics.

At the upper (west) end of rue Barri D'Avall, near the Place de l'Aire, there are the remains of an arch that may have been the location of the village gates to be closed at curfew. There is no sign of an arch at the other end of the street.

There was once another castle in Corsavy. A letter from the Maire of Corsavy, dated 20 April 1820 says: *'At a quarter of an hour distant to the South-East of Cortsavi can be found the remains of another chateau. It appears to be older than the castle in the village. It has been called for a long time 'Lo Castell Vell'. These days someone has built a farmhouse there, known as Can Gaillart.'*

The letter goes on: *'There is still an old tower on the left bank of the Riu Ferrer, at the point where the territory of Cortsavi touches that of Leca. It is called the Tour d'En Glas.'*

Appendix 2 : The Tower

The signal tower (Tour de Calaris) stands at the top of the village street, a short distance to the north-west of the castle rock, at an altitude of 800 metres (2600 feet). It has been partially restored recently.

It is called a 'tour á signaux' (signal tower) or a 'tour á guet' (look-out tower). There is a path up to it from the road near the old Auberge de Calaris.

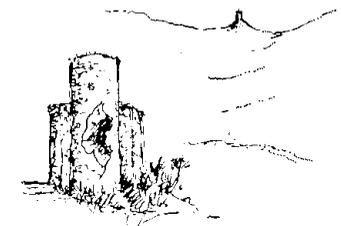
It is part of a chain of signal towers, but its position also allowed it to support a defence of the castle if necessary.

Most towers in the area were built towards the end of the 13th century on the orders of James II of Majorca. For example, the Tour de Madeloc above Collioure was built in 1286, and it is thought that most of the signal towers, including the ones at Corsavy and Batère, were built at about the same time.

The towers are said by some people to be for giving warning against another Arab invasion, although the Moors had been beaten many centuries earlier in 732 at the Battle of Poitiers by Charles Martel, and they had long since retreated far south into southern Spain.

The main tower is 2.5 metres in diameter inside the thick walls, with 2 levels each covered originally by a vault. The stairway has gone. A smaller tower has been added, rather oddly, to two-thirds of the northern perimeter, up to the height of the first floor.

There are traces of a chimney intended to emit smoke (from damp straw, for daytime signals) or flames (from dry straw, at night). Modern experiments have shown that these signals are very difficult to discern at a distance.



Towers at Corsavy and Batere

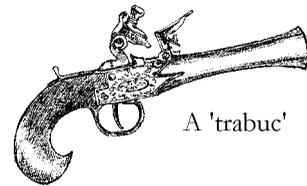
The tower in Corsavy is part of an extensive chain of signal towers.

7 km to the north the tower at Batère is clearly visible, connected in turn to a series of signal towers on the Rousillon plain.

The tower at Corsavy is just high enough on the slope to see the towers of Cabrenç (near Serreelongue) over the crest of the Montferrer ridge to the south-west, with other towers near Le Tech and above Prats de Mollo.

To the south-east there was a tower at Montdony (Montdoyn), above Amelie. Further towards the sea, there are towers at St Christophe, Laroque des Albères, Massane, and then high above Collioure, the Tour de Madeloc.

Appendix 3 : The Trabucayres



During 1830–1845 Catalunya suffered a period of terrorism from bandits. It got worse in 1840 when Don Carlos the pretender to the Spanish throne was defeated, and many of his ‘Carliste’ supporters became renegade brigands.

One such band was called the ‘Trabucayres’ (named after the ‘trabucs’ or blunderbusses that they used). These 13 men lived in France (at Las Illas, between Céret and the border town of Le Perthus) and made most of their raids in Spain. Their leader was Jean Simon, called ‘Trocabens’ or ‘good-shot’.

At about 10 pm on the night of 27 February 1845 these 13 highwaymen ambushed the Perpignan-Barcelona stagecoach in a wood just south of Gerona.

After abusing the passengers they took 3 people as hostages: Don Ballber of Gerona, Senor Roger a bank-manager from Figueres, and Jean Massot a schoolboy aged 16 who was travelling with his terrified mother.

They set off on foot for France. On the second day of marching Don Ballber, who was 70 years old and too slow, was left for dead in the snow. He was first allowed to dictate his will to Roger.

The following day there was a brief battle with their pursuers, during which two soldiers were killed.

Three weeks later, on 25 March, the bandits and their 2 prisoners were holed up in a house near Terradell when the police attacked. In the skirmish Roger tried to escape but was hit by a bullet in the neck and died.

The bandits escaped again, and while five of them set off for the village of Coustouges on the frontier, the other eight holed up in the grotto of Bassagoda, with their schoolboy prisoner.

Jean Massot spent the last month of his life (1st April–1st May) in this cave, being ordered to write tearful letters to his mother, asking for 800 ounces of gold for his ransom. (More details at www.corsavy.co.uk)

When the ransom was not raised the Trabucayres decided to kill the young prisoner.

On 1st May the boy was given a drink of ‘eau de vie’ and allowed to say his prayers.

Then, while two men held him down, the bandit called Xicolate stabbed the boy in the neck and then later in the chest ...it took a quarter of an hour for the boy to die.

The boy’s ears were then cut off and taken as trophies.

The band then set off for Corsavy, with the intention of hiding in the mas (farm) on the upper part of the area called Cortal de l’Aloy (in the building where the creperie and museum are today).

The Cortal de l’Aloy was sometimes called Cortal de l’Eloi (Saint Eloi is the patron saint of ironworkers, the word ‘Eloi’ being Aramaic for ‘My God’, the word Christ spoke on the cross, ‘My God, why have you forsaken me?’).

The bandits arrived in Corsavy at about 3 am on 3rd May. They hid their weapons and acted so innocently that the farmer (Laurent Claret) had no suspicions and killed a sheep to feed them.

On the third day, 5 May 1845, after a tip-off the police with a company of infantry surrounded the mas (moving over the very ground where I am writing this outline). During a brief skirmish one bandit was shot, and later died after receiving the last rites from Abbé Lacaze, the curé of Corsavy. The others were all captured, at last, and taken off to prison.

The following morning a local shepherd went up into the hay-loft of the Cortal de l'Aloy and made the macabre discovery of Jean Massot's two ears wrapped in a bloody parcel.

The trial took place in Perpignan the following year and lasted ten days. It was so popular that it was moved from the usual small court to the large chapel of the former convent of Saint-Dominique.

When shown the remains of Jean Massot's ears, some of the accused joked that they were mushrooms.

Four of the men (Jean 'Tocabens' Simon, Jerome Icazes, Joseph Balme, and Joseph 'Xicolate' Matheu) were sentenced to death by guillotine. Most of the others were given hard labour for life.

The public executions took place on 26 June 1846, two in Perpignan (in the morning) and two in Ceret (in the afternoon), with a large crowd.

In those days it was a local tradition to take the children to view the executions and, at the moment when the head fell into the basket, to slap the child's face hard, 'so that they wouldn't forget it' !



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