

# Louis d'Amboise and the Invisible Tomb

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## 1. Who?

Louis d'Amboise was bishop of Albi from 1474 to 1503 (fig 1). He came from a wealthy noble family, was a generous patron of the arts, and was a close confidant of three French kings: Louis XI, Charles VIII, and Louis XII. He commissioned ambitious, costly works for his cathedral, including a new choir and jubé (fig. 4), and the largest painted depiction in Europe—then and now—of the Last Judgment (fig. 5).

## What?

Bishop Louis lies, in accordance with his own testamentary request, beneath a plain, flat slab laid in the floor of the cathedral, marked with only a simple epitaph (fig. 2).

## Where?

The axial chapel of Albi cathedral (fig. 3).

## Why?

Why would a patron who dedicated his episcopacy to embellishing his cathedral church in such spectacular fashion opt for a deliberately underwhelming, almost invisible memorial? This is the question I asked in my doctoral thesis about the bishop's art patronage, and which I expand further in an essay for the forthcoming Shaun Tyas publication, *Tomb Monuments in Medieval Europe*, edited by Christian Steer and Paul Cockerham.

Scholars have in the past concluded that the bishop's humble tomb reflected his piety alone. My research, which draws upon new visual and documentary evidence, nuances this hypothesis to suggest that there was more to the bishop's burial chapel than a simple, flat tomb slab. In addition, I believe it is important to consider the soft-power role that 'ostentatious humility' played in the late-medieval mindset, particularly relevant in the commemorative monuments of royalty and ecclesiastical elites.

## 3. Sources

### i. The Testament, 1485

The nineteenth-century scholar who first published Louis d'Amboise's testament in Latin, interpreted the bishop's wishes for an ascetic final resting place (see right) as proof of the bishop's piety. This has determined all discourse on the prelate's life and legacy ever since.

### ii. Inspection of archbishop Goux de la Berchère, 17th century

We know from an inspection of the cathedral by archbishop Goux de la Berchère in 1698 and 1699, that Louis d'Amboise was buried in the axial chapel of Sainte-Marie-Majeure, a location which fulfils multiple spiritual criteria for being close to God in death. The tomb was placed at the foot of the altar in the cathedral's principal chapel, dedicated to the Virgin, so his physical body beneath the tomb slab benefited from being close to this altar *and* to the high altar. De la Berchère also describes elements in the chapel that are now lost:

- A painted and gilded retable with a donor portrait of Louis d'Amboise
- A lavish wall tomb for two hermits, commissioned by Louis d'Amboise

*"On the wall on the side of the epistle (liturgical south) of this chapel is a large sepulchre, on which are represented the body of a man and a woman. We think it is the brother and sister who were secluded in the hermitage of Combeffa, and, who being deceased in holy sanctity, the seigneur d'Amboise who had made this sepulchre for them, placed these two recluses there."*

These elements would have made the funerary chapel visually much grander than with d'Amboise's tomb alone. The commissioning of a large sepulchre for holy recluses represents a stunning display of ostentatious piety, when considered alongside the virtually invisible tomb he specified for himself.

## 4. Conclusions

The testament that Louis d'Amboise wrote in 1485, the 17th-century archbishop's description, and the considered location of the bishop's tomb, all reveal that there was more to the bishop's burial chapel than a simple tomb slab. I believe that his tomb was excessively plain because the art programmes he had commissioned for his cathedral were all the legacy he needed to leave. His tomb's format and location fulfilled its intended theological purpose in the pursuit of salvation. He made a show of not caring about the monument housing his mortal remains, but lavished attention and money on making provision for the care of his soul. In this physical and spiritual context, for the bishop to lie beneath a humble flat tomb stone represents an effective display of constructed piety.



Fig 1. Portrait of Louis d'Amboise, book of statutes and ordinances of the Order of St. Michael, Ms. 93, f.5v., dated 14 October 1494, Médiathèque Pierre Amalric, Albi.

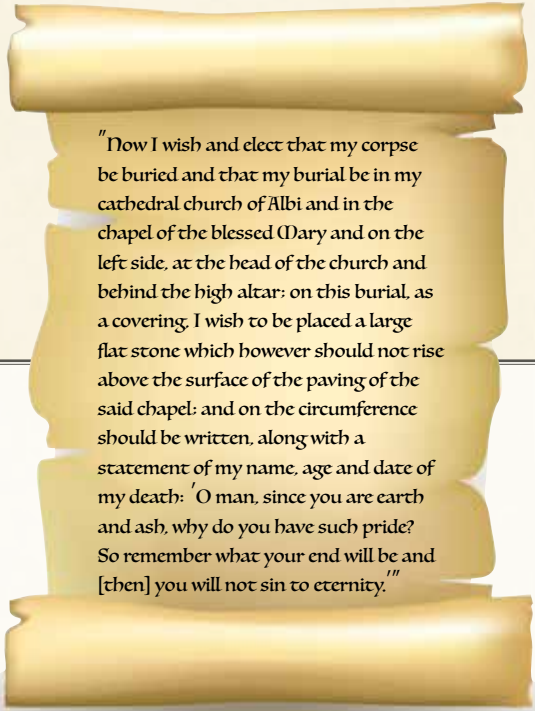


Fig 2. Floor slab tomb of Louis d'Amboise, chapel of Sainte-Marie-Majeure, Albi cathedral.



Fig 3. Location of Louis d'Amboise's tomb marked in pink, chapel of Sainte-Marie-Majeure, easternmost apsidal chapel, with 18th-century decorative scheme, Albi cathedral.

## 2. Patronage

To appreciate the dichotomy between the bishop's episcopal patronage and his funerary monument, the modern viewer need only look inside his cathedral, although some of his most lavish and expensive commissions no longer survive:

- Mural painting of the Last Judgment (extant)
- Completion of the bell tower, which included a chapel (extant)
- Choir and jubé, with extensive statuary programme (extant)
- Organ, with statuary (lost)
- Bronze liturgical objects for the new choir (melted down in the Revolution)
- White marble altar (lost)

And to ensure that God and his flock would associate these works with his patronage alone, he had his coat of arms applied to every available surface. Even after the iconoclasm of the Wars of Religion and the French Revolution, more than 350 of Louis d'Amboise's coats of arms remain in the cathedral. Clearly this bishop wanted to be remembered.



Fig 4. Jubé and choir, Albi cathedral, c. 1474 - c. 1485, Albi cathedral

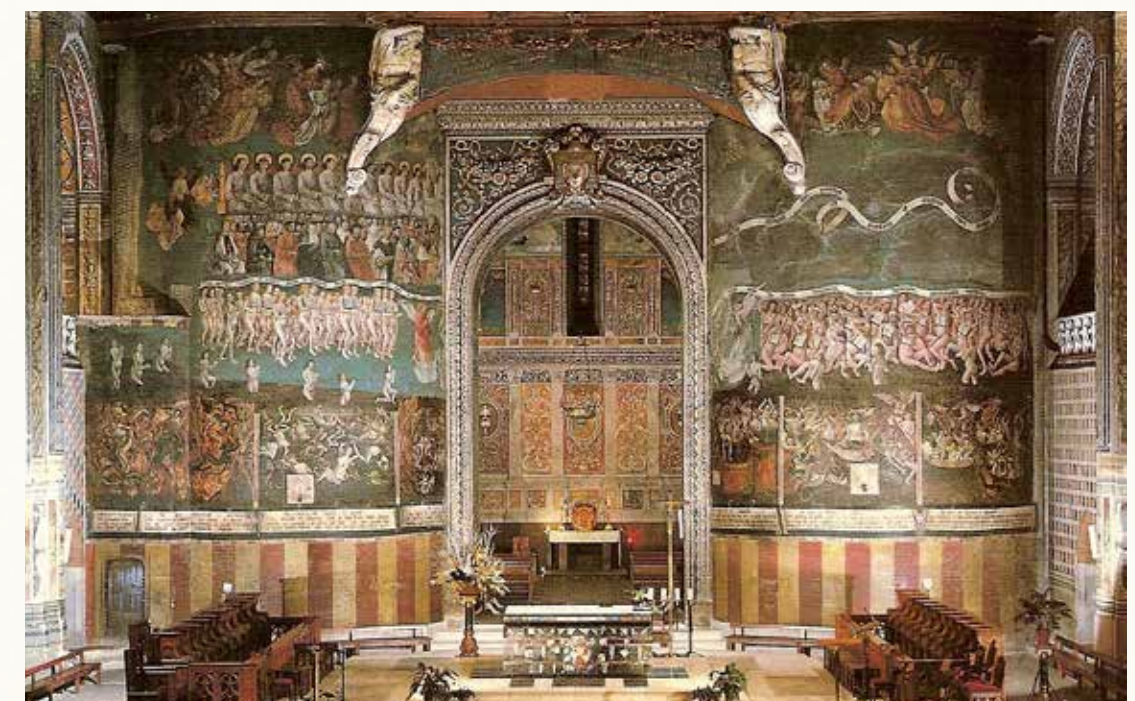


Fig 5. The Last Judgment, west wall, c. 1495, Albi cathedral



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