

Names of French regions as reflection of
historical, cultural and political features of the
country
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The names of regions in France have a very different history of origin. Some names are more than 2000 years old, others appeared quite recently.

The presentation shows evolution of names of French regions and their administrative predecessors. It describes that names of many French regions have a long history and show cultural, geographical and political features of the country.

Before our era Gaul, ancient name of France, was populated by many tribes. But Southern part of Gaul was Roman province. The word “province” meant a territory outside Italy. A geographical region between Alps and Rhone retained this name which was transformed to Provence which we know today. When Gaul was conquered by Romans it was divided into provinces and municipes. Municipes was organized and named by Gallic tribes, provinces – by Gallic tribes and Roman names. Aquitaine, one of the Roman names has survived to our days.

After the fall of the Roman Empire territory of France was plunged into feudal fragmentation and divided into many counties and duchies. Some of them were named by former municipes and Gallic tribes (Auvergne) or Roman provinces (Aquitaine), but others reflected areas of settlement of

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Germanic (Burgundy), Celtic (Brittany) or Normand (Normandy) peoples. The name Lorraine comes from the name Lothair, which had two emperors who successively ruled this region. During high middle ages Champagne has appeared as country of fields from Latin.

In the 11-16 centuries French kings centralized the country and annexed feudal lands to their territory. Then they turned into provinces remaining their names and cultural identity.

By 1789 France included about 34-35 provinces which had not certain boundaries. Some provinces were part of others. Each of them had their own feudal traditions, laws and tax systems, which was an obstacle to the effective management of the country. The French Revolution radically affected the political development of France. It created a new administrative division into 83 equal departments which were named after the mountains, rivers and natural areas. This sweeping reform simplified the administration of the territory and the collection of taxes, as well as increased the centralization of the country. The provinces have survived only in the form of historical and cultural regions.

Projects for the unification of departments into economic regions have appeared since the beginning of the 20th century. In the 1950s French authorities created 22 administrative and economic regions based on historical, cultural and economic community. Many regions were formed on the basis of the existing historical and cultural areas of the country. 9 regions were created on the territory of one former province, 6 – two provinces, 5 – three or more provinces. Most regions received the names of the old provinces (Burgundy, Auvergne, Alsace etc.) and stood out from each other by their historical and cultural identity. But many regions had geographical names because they united several historical and cultural areas. One region was named by its geographical position (Center), 2 regions – by major rivers and mountains (Pays de la Loire,

Rhone-Alpes) and names of 2 regions consolidated these features (Nord-Pas-de-Calais, Midi-Pyrenees). Names of 5 regions combined geographical and historical toponyms (Poitou-Charentes, Champagne-Ardenne etc.).

Regions were consolidated in 2015-2016. It was formed 13 regions instead of the previous 22. One of the results of the reform was the blurring of historical and cultural differences between them. After the reform, only 4 regions (Brittany, Normandy, Ile-de-France and Corsica) coincide with historical and cultural areas. Some other regions lost their identity and became simply administrative units of the first rank. This is evidenced by the proposed small-speaking names of new regions. For example, regions Alsace, Champagne-Ardenne and Lorraine were united into Grand Est (Great East). The regions Nord-Pas-de-Calais and Picardy were merged into Hauts-de-France, which literally translates to "peaks of France". This flat Northern region was named because it is at the top of the map of the country, which is geographically incorrect. These names were adopted by regional governments to attract investment but they do not have a cultural component. These regions may still find their identity as the combined region of Languedoc-Roussillon and Midi-Pyrenees, which became Occitania. Alsace was restored as a territorial collectivity in Grand Est in 2021.

There is a different origin of names of French regions today. Some of them have a long history and cultural background, others appeared recently and do not have own identity.

