

The Monts de Châlus and the Middle Ages: the heritage of the Monts de Châlus

Medieval history, in particular the presence of Richard the Lionheart, has left its mark on the identity and heritage of the Monts de Châlus. Feudalism brought with it the building of numerous castles by landholding lords both great and small. Several of these castles are still visible and their rich history only reinforces their attraction, although very few, in fact, are contemporary with Richard the Lionheart.

The most remarkable are the castle of Montbrun, in the commune of Dournazac, and the two castles facing each other in Châlus. Although not contemporary with Richard, there is also the castle at Les Cars which, at the end of the Middle Ages and during the Renaissance, belonged to one of the most prestigious noble families of the region, the Pérusses of Les Cars. Even if their residence was largely destroyed during the revolution, some interesting remains are still visible and worth a visit.

There are also the ruins of an imposing stronghold at Courbefy in the Commune of Bussière-Galant. A possession of the powerful Géraud de Maulmont and destroyed in the 17th century, there are still some extensive remains that bear witness to its past power. Nearby, there are three “Bonnes Fontaines” (Holy Springs) among the most well known in Limousin. History, religion and myth meet at this exceptional site as they do throughout the historic area of the Monts de Châlus.

The important historic sites of the Monts de Châlus:

The castles of Châlus-Maulmont and Châlus-Chabrol:

Châlus-Chabrol is one of the principal castles of the territory of the Monts de Châlus, and certainly the most symbolic. It is situated on the left bank of the Tardoire and the town of Châlus developed around it. It stands on a rocky outcrop that overlooks three very ancient trade routes.

The first castle was constructed in the 11th century by the Chabrols, a family of local lords. The castle became the centre of a castellany (the lordship of a castle and its territory) within the Viscounty of Limoges. The original castle building enclosed the houses of about ten minor knights. At this time, the castles in Limousin were often fortified collections of houses belonging to various families of knight and lords. These castles were often run as co-lordships.

The castle of Châlus-Chabrol experienced a number of sieges, including that of 1199, which brought Richard the Lionheart to Limousin to fight against the viscounts of Limoges. His army laid siege to the castle and it was while inspecting the siege works that the king was hit by a crossbow bolt, probably fired by a Limousin knight called Pierre Basile. The king died of his wound.

In this period, the castle would have been very different from today, when there remain very few traces of the castle of the 11th and 12th centuries. Among these can be seen the remains of the church of Notre Dame, annexed to the Parish of Pageas since the 11th century. A number of towers and other buildings would also have existed, but they have now disappeared. The arrow that killed Richard the Lionheart was fired from one of these buildings.

The present remains, including the tall round tower, date back to the 13th century when the castle had been rebuilt according to the latest innovations in design. The round tower in the centre can be

dated to the beginning of the 13th century, that is, just after Richard's death. Later, in 1265, the castle experienced another siege, led by Bozon de Bourdeilles against Adémar de Maulmont who held it in the name of the viscount of Limoges. Adémar was killed during the taking of the castle. After receiving compensation for the murder of his brother and the rights to the lordship of Châlus, Géraud de Maulmont became proprietor of the castle.

This powerful figure, close to the viscounts of Limoges and the kings of France, was also the founder of Châluçet-haut, situated in the Commune of Solignac where one can still admire the size of the castle that he built. At Châlus, he set about numerous building projects, including the construction of a second castle, Châlus-Maulmont, where he received Marie de Comborn, also known as Marie de Limoges. She had recently become Viscountess of Limoges, partly thanks to the support of Géraud de Maulmont who was one of her principal allies. He also undertook a reconstruction of Châlus-Chabrol, in particular the main living accommodation in the south-west corner. Part of it is still visible.

Géraud de Maulmont also had a second castle built on the other bank of the Tardoire. Châlus-Maulmont originally consisted of a large rectangular building flanked by two round towers diagonally opposite each other. The large building in the centre must have been originally the living accommodation for the Lords of Maulmont. In fact, it was probably more of a garrison than a home, the lords of Châlus preferring Châlus-Chabrol. There was also a chapel and the whole was encircled by a curtain wall, of which one can see traces in the modern houses nearby.

In 1307, the Maulmont family inheritance was challenged. The King of France, Philip the Fair, altered the inheritance of the Maulmont heirs and gave the two castles to his advisor Henry de Sully. At the end of the 14th century, the two places fell under the control of the La Trémoille family, and then the Albret family, also viscounts of Limoges, who lived there part of the time in the 15th century. In the 16th century they became the property of the Bourbon-Bussets. It was they, followed by the Bourbon-Châlus, a cadet branch of the family, who were the lords of Châlus until the Revolution. They improved the castle of Châlus-Chabrol by constructing a new building for living accommodation more in keeping with its time, after the old medieval castle had been partly destroyed during the Wars of Religion.

During the Revolution, the two castles again suffered much damage. In the 19th century, Châlus-Maulmont served as a prison. During the 20th century the castle of Châlus-Maulmont fell into disrepair. The roof of the main building collapsed in the 1920s, and the top of the last tower in 1994. In the 1980s Châlus-Maulmont again became the property of the Maulmont family who are trying to restore it.

The castle of Châlus-Chabrol is open to visitors in the summer.

The castle of Montbrun:

The castle of Montbrun is one of the most well-known in the Monts de Châlus and Limousin for the remarkable state of preservation of the exterior. Indeed, situated in the Commune of Dournazac overlooking a lake - what remains of the old moats - it corresponds to the traditional image that one has of a medieval castle. With the exception of the square tower in the centre, it only dates, however, from the 15th century, the end of the Middle Ages. The site is nevertheless a lot older and has been through numerous changes in the course of its existence.

The oldest trace of fortifications is the motte that stands beside the present day castle. Its construction is linked to the family of the "Brun" who seem to have been related to the Chabrols of Châlus. The motte was probably surmounted by a wooden tower. Since it was built in the bottom of

a valley, the marshes around it acted as a natural moat. These early castles, called “motte and bailey” castles, appeared during the 10th century and were the residences and symbols of power of the lesser feudal lords. The one at Montbrun probably dates to the 11th century.

It was in the 12th century that the first castle in stone was constructed at Montbrun. It was built by Aymeric Brun, lord of this area, who also founded the priory of Altavaux in 1180. Of this castle there remains nothing but the large rectangular tower, called “le Grand Jacques” (“Big Jim”). It was probably not the only one of this type and was perhaps not even the principal tower of the original castle. When Richard the Lionheart was besieging Châlus-Chabrol, one of the defenders was called Pierre Brun, perhaps related to the family from Montbrun. He was present when Richard was mortally wounded.

With the death of Aymeric Brun at the beginning of the 13th century, the Bruns divided into several branches who controlled the castellany in co-lordship. They maintained a number of knights attached to their households who probably established their residences inside the walls of the castle of Montbrun. The ruins of one of the knights’ residences are still visible to the north of the present castle. A much larger curtain wall surrounded the buildings, which included a chapel, the ruins of which remain behind the present castle. In the 13th and 14th centuries, there was a small settlement beside Montbrun but few traces of it remain.

After being linked to the Pompadours, the Brun family was called “de Montbrun” and its members gained influence, particularly by means of important posts in the church. Thus, at the end of the 15th century the castle was rebuilt in its present form by Pierre de Montbrun, Bishop of Limoges. The members of his family lived there during the following centuries. Eventually, the castle passed to other descendants until the Revolution, during which it was destroyed.

The present day castle was built at the end of the Middle Ages. The gradual introduction of firearms, bombards and canons, had completely changed the techniques of siege and defence. Castles, which had previously consisted of broad enclosures, drew in on themselves, adopting the form of a large main building strengthened with towers, as at Montbrun.

High walls replaced the curtain walls and their wall-walks. Towers, round and squat, were built to reinforce the angles. The residential aspect of the castle also became more important than its defensive aspect. This is why one can see numerous windows inserted in the walls in the 16th century.

The mottes of Mazaubrun:

The mottes of Mazaubrun can be found near to Châlus on either side of the road in the direction of Bussière-Galant. They are a group of six motte and bailey castles, built probably in the 10th and 11th centuries. The site was established close to an intersection between several ancient roads. The name is perhaps a reference to the Brun family who might have had a residence there before moving to Montbrun.

These mottes were artificial mounds of earth which were designed to serve as a base for a castle, or at least quite an imposing tower. These were built in wood, which explains why it is only the mottes that remain. They were the forerunners of the stone castles that later characterise the Middle Ages. These mottes surmounted by towers were probably surrounded by a wooden palisade that enclosed the residences of the lords of the place and their entourages.

The wooden towers rarely served as houses, except in the very largest versions. The tower served as a lookout, and in particular as a symbol of the power of the lord over his domain. The motte and bailey castles were built by lesser feudal lords who had insufficient resources to build houses in stone. The great lords had themselves begun to build castles in stone from the beginning of the 11th

century (like the castle of Fulk Nerra at Loches).

Most of the time, a motte and bailey castle contained only one motte, sometimes two. But at Mazaubrun, at least six mottes are visible, which is exceptional. This is probably explained by the existence of a co-lordship in this place, consisting of several lords. Each family would have had its own motte to symbolise its status as co-lord.

Little is known of the history of the mottes of Mazaubrun, other than that they were very quickly eclipsed by the castle of Châlus-Chabrol. In the 13th century records speak of them only as a “refuge”, perhaps for the people of Châlus in the event of an invasion.

The castle of Les Cars:

The ruins of the castle of Les Cars are not linked directly to the history of Richard the Lionheart or his era. However, it is among the richest and most interesting heritage sites of the Monts de Châlus. The castle of Les Cars was in fact the residence of the Pérusses of Les Cars, a very important aristocratic family whose members occupied very high positions from the 14th century onwards. Their castle matched their wealth and reputation: a jewel of Renaissance architecture in Limousin.

A small castle or a fortified house certainly already occupied the place from the 12th century. Eventually, in the 14th century, the castle passed from the Barrys of Aixe to the Pérusses, a family of knights originally from Ségur-le-Château in Correze. They had already acquired wealth and renown and they strengthened their position further in the centuries that followed. At the end of the 15th century and beginning of the 16th, Geoffrey Pérusse, close friend of the kings of France, including François I, and the Kings of Navarre, built a sumptuous aristocratic residence at Les Cars, which had become the location of the family’s principal residence.

This castle was built with residence rather than defence in mind. It is an expression of the beginning of the Renaissance in Limousin. Archaeological excavations in the 1990s and in the 2000s have revealed some very rich household goods. Precious tableware, objects of glass and metal as well as numerous sculptures and bas reliefs have been found. They are on show in an exhibition on site which can be seen when visiting the castle.

Before its destruction, the castle was in the form of a square with sides of more than 30 metres, consisting of a tall main tower, the principal living accommodation, and angle towers, all of which have disappeared. These buildings were arranged around an inner courtyard that was richly decorated. The main tower, the south-east corner of which is still partly standing, consisted of large rooms lit by tall bays. This was probably the heart of the castle.

François Pérusse of Les Cars, grandson of Geoffrey, reinforced the defences of the castle during the Wars of Religion. The artillery tower, still in existence in the south-west angle, and the digging of the ditch are the most visible elements of this restoration of the castle’s defences. The appearance of firearms in the 15th and more particularly the 16th centuries had made necessary the provision of particular defensive openings in the walls. One can thus see the presence of numerous gun ports, circular openings allowing the use of firearms, in the parts of the castle which still stand. The elliptical tower in the south-west corner was added to reinforce the defences of the entrance to the castle. The gatehouse, situated beside the modern Town Hall, consisted of two slender towers flanking a drawbridge which crossed the main ditch.

A second surrounding wall with a broad walkway for artillery was built with a double function: to keep possible enemy artillery at a distance from the principal building and to allow easier movement of the defenders’ artillery. Five small towers were arranged along its circuit, having both a defensive and decorative role. Two of them still exist in the north-east and south-west corners. On the western side of the castle was the lower courtyard, beyond the artillery wall. It contained a number of outbuildings, including the stables, which still exist as a large 16th century building lit by decorative dormer windows. The ground floor has a vaulted ceiling and large frescos illustrating horses and other equestrian themes.

The castle was once surrounded by large gardens. To the south, the former gardens were in the French 16th century style. Other terraced gardens were added in the 18th century to the west side of the castle. They were bordered by the canal that is still visible below the castle. In the town of Les Cars, the church, medieval in origin but largely restored, contains a reliquary cross of the 13th century. On the keystones of the vault of the nave can be seen the arms of the Pérusse family. Some houses belonging to the manorial officers still exist on the main street.

At the time of the Revolution, the Pérusses emigrated to England in protest. The castle was pillaged and eventually sold to quarrymen who demolished it in order to re-sell the material, sparing only the artillery tower in the south-west angle and part of the main tower. Today, the castle is the property of the commune, which is trying, with the help of an archaeological society, to display the remains effectively.

To this end, guided visits are offered, which reveal the rich history of this castle by means of two exhibition rooms and a tour, with commentary, of the castle remains and the stables.

Chènevière and Puybonnieux, Templar domains:

It was at the time of the First Crusade that the military religious orders appeared. The most famous of them were the Templars and the Hospitallers, who fought alongside Richard the Lionheart during the Third Crusade. In the beginning they were orders of warriors who were both knights and monks at the same time. Their role was to defend the Holy Land and Christian pilgrims who were on their way to Jerusalem.

In time, these orders acquired great influence as well as enormous wealth, possessing numerous domains, not only in the Holy Land but also in Europe. They ruled these possessions like feudal lords by means of “commanderies” (estates under the control of a commander), which constituted their principal source of revenue.

In the Commune of Pageas, the villages of Chènevière and Puybonnieux were commanderies, belonging first to the Templars and then the Hospitallers. Little trace remains of these commanderies. However, the village of Chenevière has a small church typical of those founded by the military orders of the time: plain and austere. The village has some ancient houses, several having moulded windows which may have come from the former commandery, or perhaps from the castle at Les Cars.

At Puybonnieux, the Templar commandery was replaced by a huge estate whose buildings probably date back to the 18th and 19th centuries. Some walls still define what was perhaps the old domain attached to the commandery. These lands belonged to the Order of the Temple until its dissolution at the beginning of the 14th century. They then passed to the Hospitallers, who became the Order of Malta. It kept its domains until the Revolution, during which, like all the benefices of the clergy, they were nationalised. Some place names still recall the presence of these military religious orders in the territory of the Monts de Châlus, like the Moulin du Temple near the village of La Jourdanie, in the Commune of Pageas.

The site of Courbefy:

The site of Courbefy in the Commune of Bussière-Galant is one of the most interesting in the territory of the Monts de Châlus. It mixes history, myth and religion, which is what gives it its unique character.

The site was perhaps occupied in the pre-Roman period but it is the Middle Ages that have left

traces of a sizeable stronghold. Little is known about its history. It belonged to Géraud de Maulmont, who perhaps rebuilt it. He was a powerful landholder and cleric in Limousin, also the lord of Châlus and proprietor of the castle of Châluçet-haut.

In the 13th and 14th centuries, the castle at Courbefy was the property of the Maulmont family, then of the king of France, Philip the Fair. During the Hundred Years War it was besieged and taken on several occasions, both by the English and by armies in the service of the king of France. Following this, it was handed down through the family and was eventually destroyed in the programme of fortress demolition ordered by Richelieu. The demolition was made the responsibility of the citizens of Limoges and the surrounding area because the ancient fortress had become a hideout for brigands and had a terrible reputation.

In spite of this, one can still make out numerous traces of what had been a powerful castle. An early curtain wall surrounded the central section which must have been a large principal building. Parts of the walls, some of them collapsed, are still visible. In particular, one can see the remains of the latrines in the north-west corner. The site gives a unique vantage point over the surrounding region, both the Monts de Châlus to the north and Perigord to the south.

At Courbefy, one can also visit the small chapel originally built in the 13th century, probably contemporary with the castle and extensively altered in the 17th century. One can still come here for private prayer when on pilgrimage to the springs. These three springs, known as “Bonnes Fontaines” (holy springs), are singular places of worship found in great numbers in Limousin and beyond. Those of Courbefy were particularly renowned and busy. They can still be seen today, protected by walls of dressed stone. One of them even has a cross covered with ex-votos, votive offerings and other marks of devotion.

These springs, and the worship of them, are extremely ancient. In Antiquity, particularly in Celtic and Gallo-Roman religion, certain natural sites were venerated, particularly those associated with water or the subterranean world. With the coming of Christianity, the saints replaced the ancient divinities but the worship and devotion accorded to the springs continued. They remained important in the Middle Ages, overshadowed by the great fortress above them.