

THE TEMPLAR COMMANDERY OF SAINT CHRISTOPHE: AN HISTORICAL SKETCH

Location

The Templar Commandery of St-Christophe is located at a crossroads where a north-south route going from the hinterlands of Provence to the ports of Hyères, Fréjus, Toulon, and Marseille meets an east-west road used by pilgrims, crusaders, and merchants travelling westwards to Santiago de Compostela or eastwards to the Holy Land.

It lies very close to the *Via Julia Augusta*, part of the *Via Aurelia*, the ancient Roman road connecting Italy and Gaul. Indeed, there are the remains of a Roman villa in the adjoining field, which would have once stood on the countryside of the Roman *castrum* located upon the Castellas hill, near Solliès-Toucas. The ford on the river Caramy, which forms part of the property's boundary, dates back to the Roman era as well, and in the lower part of the apse, there are some remnants of a Roman rubble stone wall.

Eleventh-Century Origins

The earliest mention of the building is found in charter 281 of the Cartulary of the Abbey of St-Victor in Marseille, which records a donation made around 1025 by Gualdrada and Geoffrey of Rians, a rich Provençal family, to the Abbey of St-Jean in Esparron, a dependency of St-Victor.

There is, however, archæological evidence of an earlier place of worship under the current apse, including coins and potsherds dating from the 2nd to the 4th centuries, and it is possible this used to be the site of a baptistry.

During the restoration works in the chapel in 1992, it was found that the earlier chapel, built in the very beginning of the 11th century, has been preserved almost in its entirety. It is a hall chapel, i.e. a chapel with nave and aisles of about the same height, with a barrel vault over the first bay and a wooden roof over the rest of the building. Three of the four walls (except the north-east) date from the 11th century and include the following doors:

1. The main door (2 by ½ metres) is to the north and is surrounded by tuff, like the four corners of the chapel. This door was meant for the use of secular clergy and the laity.
2. The south-east door allows the chapel choir to communicate with a small adjacent side building. This door opens under a lateral discharging arch and has an arch borne by two narrower supports, bespeaking Eastern influence. This door was reserved to the monks; there is a similar example in the Priory of St-Symphorien in Buoux (Vaucluse).
3. Three openings splayed from within (in bays 2, 3, and 4). This sort of opening was abandoned toward the end of the 11th century.

This 11th-century ensemble is quite exceptional and places it amongst the older mediæval buildings in the south of France.

Today, this building represents a prototype of the Provençal Romanesque, and hence the entire building has been listed in the inventory of historical monuments since 1984 and is awaiting definitive classification.

Twelfth-Century Works

The highway sign proclaims *Ferme des Templiers XII siècle*, and indeed the burgeoning Order of Knights Templar acquired this building and the surrounding land as part of an exchange with the Abbey of St-Victor of Marseille in the second half of the 12th century.

The Templar contributions include:

1. The insertion of three diaphragm arches dividing the chapel into bays according to the standards of the golden ratio.
2. Two new double-embrasure openings in the apse oriented according to the feasts of the two Saints John, the north one for St John the Baptist on 21 June (close to the summer solstice) and the south one for St John the Evangelist on 27 December (close to the winter solstice).
3. An extension of the existing vault into the second bay and, for this purpose, the insertion of a discharging arch on the sides to support said vault. This is the arch over the south wall, passing in front of the 11th-century opening.
4. Above the diaphragm arch that separates bays 4 and 5, which is lower than the rest, the insertion of a wall holding up the upper part of these two bays.

During an Intermediate Period

Sometime before the end of the 13th century, bays 2 and 3 were closed, as well as the lower part of bays 4 and 5.

There were a number of graffiti on the east side, including a boat in the shape of a carrack representing the crossing to the Holy Land at the time of the Crusades.

From the End of the 13th and the Beginning of the 14th Centuries

1. The insertion of an intermediate level sustained by three diaphragm arches on bays 3 and 4 (as evidenced on the east side by the arch separating bays 4 and 5, inscribed with a cross pattée.)
2. In the southern side aisle, the insertion of diaphragm arches (4 of them, creating 5 spaces as in the chapel) on a preëxisting building, two openings of which survive on the eastern defensive wall.
3. The creation of supplementary openings allowing access to the different spaces and levels thus formed:
 - a. Northern side of the chapel: access door in bay 2
 - b. Southern side of the chapel: access doors in bays 2 and 3
4. Extension of the chapel to the west by a small building with two diaphragm arches and a door under a semicircular arch on the western façade.
5. An enclosure wall with a large gateway under a semicircular arch and a surbased arch closing off the group of buildings to the southwest and demarcating a second enclosure.

Function and Use of the Chapel and its Dependencies

The 11th-century chapel is an oriented building built for worship during an era of great fervour. From its foundation it was intended to assist pilgrims on the great pilgrimage routes (Compostela and the Holy Land).

This is evidenced by its dedication to *Sancti Christofori* in the 1025 deed—St Christopher was one of the patron saints of pilgrims—and its placement on a crossroads outside of the vicinity of any urban area.

Nevertheless, the presence of an important necropolis seems to show that the location was attractive in itself, and the chapel is likely the continuation of a more ancient place of worship, dating back to the 2nd and 4th centuries.

Acquisition by the Knights Templar

The Order of Knights Templar was in its origins dedicated to protecting pilgrims and securing their transit to the Holy Land. Hence, during the time of its efflorescence, the Order sought to acquire this strategically-located chapel placed on a crossroads. The monks of St-Victor were well-disposed to the Knights and made way for their takeover of St-Christophe in Brignoles.

Construction at the End of the 13th Century

As the Order of Knights Templar flourished, St-Christophe was enlarged to facilitate the agricultural exploitation of the surrounding land.

Besides their outstanding geographical position, which made it a preferred stopping point for pilgrims under the secure ægis of the Templars, the fertility of these lands, watered by the river Caramy, made them favourable to agriculture. Wheat, cereals, vines were grown here, and cattle and sheep were bred; the products were destined for exportation to the east.

The general visitation to St-Christophe performed by the Order of Malta in 1338—kept in the departmental archives of Bouches-du-Rhône and transcribed and studied by J. A. Durbec, a historian of the Knights Templar, in the *Provence-Historique* journal—reveals the importance of these resources and the details of the products, personnel, and revenues.

From the same century, we possess the arrest warrant for the Templar Commander of Brignoles, Br Pierre Borgondio, who was taken prisoner on 24 January 1308 in the Château de Montfort. An inventory of goods is attached to the warrant stating that Borgondio had left the Order's possessions in the care of Guillaume de Néoules, chaplain of the Commandery of St-Christophe.

Pierre Borgondio (or Borgondion) belonged to the family of the seigneurs of Trets, who were also viscounts of Marseille and seigneurs of Roquefeuille.

The general arrest of the Templars the Kingdom of France took place on 13 October 1307, but the County of Provence was not yet part of the kingdom at the time, and Br Borgondio's arrest occurred four months thereafter. He was imprisoned in the Château de Meyrargues, whence he escaped a few years later. He ended his life as a hermit in a grotto in Verdon and popular memory for along time retained the image of him as a recluse who died in the odour of sanctity. A chapel, Notre-Dame de l'Assomption, was later erected inside his grotto.

The Great Provençal Families Present in St-Christophe

1326: Jacques Maconi

1338: Savaric de Ste-Maxime

1347: Étienne Oriassi

1348: Bertrand de Vayesco

1394: Reforciat de Castellane, who was Preceptor of the Preceptory of St-Christophe of Brignoles of the Order of Knights Hospitaller of St John of Jerusalem. His coat of arms, surmounted in chief with the Cross of the Order and with the Order mantling, can be seen above the north-east door (bay 2).

1411: Jean de Mayronis

1426: Pierre de Demandolx

1480: Jean de Laincel

1548-1599: François de Puget, who later became Grand Prior of St-Gilles. He participated in the defence of Malta against Suleiman.

1580: Pierre de Maireville

1643: Jean Flotte de la Bastie-Montsaléon

1638: Commandeur de Beausset

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After the suppression of the Order of Knights Templar, the commandery was taken by the Order of Knights Hospitaller, later known as the Order of Malta. Under Hospitaller rule, it became a flourishing agricultural estate, but the debts contracted by the Hospitaller upon its purchase, like all the other Templar properties, proved to be too heavy a burden for the Order, which never recovered the cost.

Hélion de Villeneuve, of noble Provençal stock, was Grand Master of the Hospitallers at the time of the suppression of the Templars, and effectively managed to recover most Templar properties, but the King of France sold them at two or three times their value.

The records of the Order's visitations allow one to see the slow diminishment of the property and its revenues. At the time of the Order's abolition in France, it could not even afford simple repairs. The Hospitallers, thus, were not as effective owners as were the Templars.

In 1793, the Order of Malta was dissolved in France by the revolutionary government. The estate was sold as a *bien national* and the crosses were effaced. The deed of the sale is kept in the departmental archives.