

CERCLES

Situated in the easternmost point of the canton of Verteillac, the *commune* covers 1507 hectares. Up to 1789, its history has been inseparable from that of the communes of Bourg des Maisons, Chapdeuil, La Chapelle Montabourlet and especially La Tour Blanche, the civic centre of a small enclave of Angoumois, or members of the city of Angouleme, in Périgord.

I The origins, from prehistory up to the 6th Century

The region has been occupied since pre-history. The refuges of the Valley of Fongrenon and the engravings and sculptures of animals, 15,000 years old, discovered in 1983 near to the Chateau of Jovelle (commune of La Tour Blanche) bear witness to this.

This area is at the centre of the crossroads of two great Roman roads. One linking Périgueux to Saintes has left traces at the nearby "Cross of Peyrat" (Cercles) The other, a post route, used to join Bordeaux to Limoges and beyond, to Lyon, the capital of Gaul. The present roads more or less follow the original and cross at La Tour Blanche (Périgueux/Villebois-Lavalette and Verteillac/Nontron). There is further evidence of Gallo-Roman occupation: an inscription to the Maumassons on a stone re-used as a keystone in a stone barn. * There seems, too, to have been a Gallo-Roman villa on the site of the village, where sheep were raised.

The region has been completely Christian since the Vth Century. Since the VIth Century a religious foundation dedicated to the pastoral calling (a mother church) seems to have existed at Cercles.

II The Middle Ages

The ruins of the Tenth Century tower of La Tour Blanche, (one of the oldest in France), built to replace a wooden fort, are witness to the turbulent times of this epoch. The Lordship of Tour Blanche, including the demesne of the Vilars family around Cercles and La Chapelle Montabourlet, depended initially on Angouleme for its material and Périgueux for its spiritual guidance. It was re-integrated into Périgord under Jean II "The Good". Later detached from the latter on the temporal level until 1789, it became an enclave of the Angouleme region in Périgord, still with Cercles and Montabourlet.

From the 10th Century, this important religious nucleus was dependent on a family whose main property was situated at Vilars, 15 kms to the south-west of Angouleme. In Périgord, their domain (Cercles) was given over to sheep farming. In the evening, in order to protect them from wolves, the sheep were kept in traditional Gallo-Roman circular enclosures, *circulae* from the Latin *circulus*, circle, which gives its name to the domain and then to the parish which grew up there.

On a spiritual level, on the other hand, the church at Cercles has been a dependency from the beginning of the bishopric of Périgueux, whereas the parishes of Verteillac, which were created further to the west, are outside the authority of the bishop of Périgueux.

The first writings which mention Cercles go back to the end of the 11th Century. The first mention of a Prior of Cercles dates from 1115. Prior Pierre de Cercles is cited as witness to an agreement made that year between the Abbot and a secular lord, Itier de Chavenat. The Prior of Cercles figures, in fact, among the members of the Chapter of the Abbey of Saint-Cybard. In 1168/69 *“Whilst Louis was king of the Franks and Henry, king of the English, was Duke of the Aquitaines and of the Normans, Jean, Bishop of Périgueux, grants to Girard, Abbot of St. Cybard, the rights of Cercles over Bourg des Maisons. After taking account of the devotion and of the charity that you and your brothers have shown towards us and towards the Church of Périgueux, and in recognising your requests and those of Pierre, Prior of Cercles and of your brothers, and with the consent of our Archdeacon Itier, we give and concede the church of Sainte-Marie des Maisons to you and to the church of Saint-Cybard (of Cercles) in such a manner that the church of Les Maisons shall belong in perpetuity to the jurisdiction and to the property of Cercles (Circulum).”*

In this era (11th and 12th Centuries) the area around Verteillac had many Romanesque Churches with cupolas, or domes. Certain of them are fortified, bearing witness to the insecurity which reigned in this frontier region. Cercles also possessed at this time a stone church, probably fortified. Some elements of this have been re-used, notably in the lower part of the present nave. You will find, in particular, two sculpted stones which have been used as support stones in the north cupola, one on its west facade (a naked figure raising its arms), the other on its north-west buttress (a bishop by the side of a figure kneeling beneath a snake.)

III The Templars (12th –14th Centuries)

At the end of the 12th Century, Cercles came under the sphere of influence of the Order of the Temple, which financed the enlargement of the church, then the most important religious building in the region. The earlier construction was raised higher to provide the two vaults of the nave. The transept and the present choir were created as well as a monastic building, no longer in existence, which lengthened the south transept. (This building was still shown on the cadastral map of 1825).

On the Romanesque walls of the earlier edifice which have retained their semi-circular arrow slits or loopholes, the two opposing spans forming the present nave were erected in the 13th Century. They are vaulted in ribs which rest on bundles of small columns. The transept is vaulted in the same way and shows even greater distortions as there are no right angles to the walls. Two chapels were made in the thickness of the East walls, in the middle of the North and South transepts.

Where the North wall of the nave and the West wall of the transept meet, a square buttress has been hollowed out and a spiral staircase built, to enable one to get to the roof space and

on to the bell tower. The traces of a walled-up passage on the South wall, giving access to the monastic building, have disappeared following the work on this wall in 2003.

The sculptures on a group of about thirty capitals dating from the early Thirteenth Century, are attributed by M. de Verneilh to sculptors from the Angouleme region:

"These capitals are beautifully sculpted, in a stone with a very fine grain, and in an astonishing style : masks, foliage, flowers, rose-shapes, moon faces, entwined beasts, facing each other or back-to-back, geometric ornaments; one of them is sculpted with six smiling masks (North-East corner of the North transept), another is a superb masterpiece of a refined elegance (South-East corner of the South transept). Others are sculpted with elaborate leaves which recall the sculpture of Notre-Dame de Paris or of Reims ... Like the capitals inside the church, those on the porch do not seem to be local, and are treated with great virtuosity (tracery, monsters, animals in combat. . .)" (from the Inventory of churches of Dordogne).

1V The Priory of the Temple*

The Templars also built or improved other buildings at Cercles serving military or hospital functions. A group of buildings in an irregular T-shape, with an East-West orientation, was constructed on the site of the present village both for defence and for the reception of guests.

The large block, orientated North-South, had a tower in the middle and to the East, lay along the communal road no. 1. The smaller block, orientated East-West, and divided in two by the same road, lay along the communal road 2, at its South side. There was a tower at each end. These towers were much damaged during the Wars of Religion. The South part of the larger block, burnt down in 1911, is now replaced by gardens and a new house (parcel no.42). In the central part, (parcel no.43), now restored, the "*rose tower*" is still identifiable. Its North side (parcel no.45) lies along the crossroads to the South. On the East side of the small block, now restored, (parcel no.22), the "East" tower can also be identified. On the other hand, if there are still traces of the West part of the small block behind the present *Mairie*, (parcel no. 8, rear passage and well), and above all, inside the adjoining sheepcote (parcel no.9, façade including a fine blind arcade), the "West" tower has completely disappeared.

V The Priory of Cercles (14th-17th Centuries)

In 1312, the Priory of Cercles returned to the orbit of St Cybard. It remained prosperous for a long time, as shown by the successive enlargements of the priory Church, before declining during "The Age of Reason" and disappearing during the Revolution.

In the 14th Century, a door was cut in the West wall of the South transept, probably to give access to a cloister which has since disappeared. The latter must have leant against the exterior South wall of the nave (there are visible traces and traces can also be seen on the cadastral map of 1825) and against the West wall of the South transept. The monastic

building also disappeared after 1825. From the 15th to the 17th Century, large buttresses, straight and diagonal were added to the church to counterbalance the stresses. Despite their size (one of them measures 3 metres by 4 at its base), they were insufficient to stop the damage to the masonry.

In the 16th Century, the vaulting of the church was altered by a small chapel opened in the North wall of the first span of the nave. It was vaulted with ribs resting on colonettes with polygonal bases. The capitals, sculpted with leaves, seem to be a re-use from the 13th Century. The priory was to suffer badly during the Wars of Religion. The Angouleme region became Protestant while Cercles, like Périgord, (apart from Bergerac) remained Catholic. In 1570, an incursion of people from the Angouleme region into their enclave in Périgord resulted in the partial destruction of the defensive towers of the castle at La Tour Blanche and those of the priory of Cercles.

In the 17th Century, the vaulting of the church was changed again (a document of 1688 shows that the nave was “half-vaulted”). A new square bell tower, squat and heavy was placed on the transept. Pierced by two round-arched windows on each side, there was no bell as it stayed in the belltower-wall above the West front. However, the adjoining cemetery to the East was raised and surrounded by a wall, pierced to the West by an elegant portal (listed). Finally, the possibility of providing accommodation inherited from the Templars led to the choice of Cercles for the installation of a postal relay. (see the map of postal routes of 1676). This role saved the village when, in the 18th Century, Cercles, in common with many other villages, fell into decline. The Revolution struck the final blow: the church became a barn, having its floor raised by 80 centimetres to allow carts through : the bases of the columns are no longer visible.

V1 "Secular" Cercles (19th-20th Centuries)

This was a prosperous time. In the 19th Century, on the signing of the concordat, the church was returned to the Faith. During the Restoration, the commune absorbed that of La Chapelle Montabourlet, suppressed by royal decree on 28 December, 1825, (but re-established by the Third Republic, in September, 1828). Cercles remained a postal relay until replaced by the railway, with a station at Cercles.

The last quarter of the 19th Century was undeniably one of a return to religion. In 1880, the mayor, Jean Debets, ordered a new bell from the firm of Chambon, the foundry at Montargis. The traditional enmity between village priest and village schoolmaster seems not to have been a problem at Cercles as the latter became godfather to the bell, little Clémence (810 kilos!) In 1882 the large presbytery which you can see today, was built by the commune South of the church, on level ground freed by the demolition of the ruined monastic building and the remains of the cloister. The municipal council also bought a building in front of the West front so as to demolish it, give light to the entrance and improve the present threshold. A part-time worker was engaged to maintain the surrounds. To celebrate this joyous period, two large mission crosses were erected. The first, of wrought iron on a stone base, to the

North-West of the church, the second, entirely of stone, at the crossroads of Peyrat, 1.5 kms North of the village.

VII Decadence (middle of the 20th Century)

At the beginning of the 20th Century, the male population was reduced by the Great War to such an extent that by the end of hostilities almost all the buildings belonged to a single family. The rural exodus continued until 1980, by which time Cercles was almost depopulated. The church, no longer consecrated, was in danger of collapse due to the weight of the tower, and lacking the support of the monastic building.

VIII A 21st Century renaissance?

Since 1980, the direction of the population flow has been reversed. Most of the houses at Cercles were restored and re-occupied by the end of the 20th Century. The school was saved, a playgroup created, and more and more, the commune works with that of Tour Blanche while belonging to the association of communes of the Verteillac region. At the dawn of the 21st Century, the works to safeguard the church had been completed. Those undertaken during 2002-2003 have corrected most of the faults in the masonry and completely restored the South transept, which was the most damaged.

NB – the above notes are translated from a resumé of the work of General Bresse, Director of the Musée des Invalides, who lives in Cercles. *The references to the Templars have not been verified and I think they are based on the writings of a “fantaisist” of the 19th century. Jean-Pierre Bétoin suggests that they should be omitted. Can we do this, without unbalancing the structure? Professor Nelson doesn't mention Templars – is any further evidence needed that their presence in Cercles is just a fantasy?