

Pre-ample : These extracts from : Le cartulaire de Saint-Cybard were brought to my attention by Claude Ribeyrol, President of the Patrimoine de St Méard, of which I am a vice-president. Both are referred to and translated by Professor Nelson in the article below. The cartulaire can be seen on line here :

<http://www.guyenne.fr/ArchivesPerigord/Cartulaires/Perigord dans cartulaires.htm>

**Chartes antérieures à l'abbatit de Ramnoul II (1171-1218)
Par Paul Lefrancq
1931**

Ce cartulaire a été rédigé dans la deuxième moitié du XIIe siècle, probablement sous l'abbatit de Géraud (1159-1171) et complété durant l'abbatit suivant de Ramnoul II. Il comporte des copies d'actes beaucoup plus anciens : depuis 852, confirmation par Charles le Chauve de donations faites en 769 par Charlemagne, jusqu'à 1218, fin de l'abbatit de Ramnoul II.

Le cartulaire présenté est le document coté AAA au trésor de Saint-Cybard et maintenant conservé aux archives départementales de la Charente (cote H.I.I). Une copie cotée CCC existe dans le fond de Saint-Cybard.

Il existe des copies de quelques actes, avec quelques variantes de ce manuscrit sur parchemin, à la Bibliothèque Nationale : manuscrit du fond latin, N° 12778, fol. 56 ; Collection de Périgord, vol. 34, fol. 361 ; collection Duchesne, vol. 75, fol. 86.

Charte N° 47

1168-9

Confirmation par Jean, évêque de Périgueux, en faveur de l'abbaye de Saint-Cybard, de la possession de l'église de Notre-Dame de Bourg-des-Maisons.

Original parchemin, attaches de sceau sur double queue aux archives départementales de la Charente, H1 244, n°1

Johannes Dei gratia Petragoricensis episcopus dilecto in Christo filio suo Geraldi abbati, scilicet ecclesie Sancti Eparchii in perpetuum. Equitatis suadet ratio, debitum caritatis nos invitat ut ea peticio de facili benignum sortiatur effectum que justicie et honestati inniti non dubitatur, ea propter, o Karissime, in Domino fili Geralde, abbas Sancti Eparchii, multa prerogativa dilectionis annectimus favorem etiam religionis ecclesie **Sancti Eparchii** et devotionem et caritatem quam erga nos et ecclesiam Petragoricensem hucusque te et fratres tuos habuisse cognovimus considerantes te et ecclesiam tibi commissam de beneficiis nostris ampliari disposuimus. Inde est quod nos tuis et Petri prioris de Circulo fratrumque vestrorum piis petitionibus adquiescentes ecclesiam **Sancte Marie de Maisos** cum omnibus pertinentiis suis, consilio et assensu dilecti in Domino fratris nostri Iterii archidiaconi, salvo in omnibus episcopali jure, tibi et ecclesie **Sancti Eparchii** donamus et eam libere et quiete perpetuo possidendam concedimus, ita tamen quod predicta ecclesia de **Maisos** cum omni integritate sui juris ad jus et proprietatem prioris et prioratus de **Circulo** semper respiciat. Ut autem hec donatio nostra auctoritatem et quietem habeat, presentem paginam sigillo nostra munimus et corroboramus. Huic siquidem donationi nostre interfuerunt et testes sunt Arnaldus magister scholarum, Petrus Morandi, Helias Calla prior de Rocenac. Hoc vero factum est anno ab incarnatione Domini M° C° LX° VIII°. Alexandro III° papa. Ludovico rege Francorum, Henrico rege Anglorum, duce Aquitanorum et Normannorum.

Charte N° 101

1098-1128

Donation par Bernard de Vilars, à l'abbaye de Saint-Cybard, d'une partie de la terre d'Obevie, injustement détenue par lui, en compensation de dommages par lui cusés à Saint-Cybard, et à de deux sous six deniers de cens annuel sur l'église de Cercles.

[I]n nomine Domini. Notificamus cunctis fidelibus quod Bernardus de Vilars pro salute et remedio anime sue et parentum suorum reliquid, dat, et concedit Deo et **Sancto Eparchio** illam partem quam habebat in terra de Albavia ; hanc partem injuste invaserat et possederat et pro hoc peccato et pro aliis malis que Sancto Eparchio fecerat. Hoc totum absque ulla retractatione et inquietudine liberum reddit et donat. Donat etiam in eodem dono Sancto-Eparchio pro spe salutis et incolumitatis sue duos solidos et sex denarios quos habebat de censu per singulos annos in ecclesia de **Circulo**. Hoc autem totum factum est apud Rocenacum per manum Helie de Villaboen, in manu Hugonis abbatis sub testibus istis : Arnaldo monacho de Fredafonte, Josfredo de Marton, Aimerico Grimoardo, Giraldo Josmari, ipso Helia de Villaboen. S. +. Bernardi de Vilars. S. +. Willelmi de Vilars. S. +. Bernardi filii Bernardi Senis. S. +. Giraldi de Albavia. S. +. Petri de Vilars filii Bernardi. S. +. Ademari de Vilars.

THE CHURCH of CERCLES

(**précis of the leaflet written by Professor Nelson in 1993**)

No visitor to the church of Cercles can help being struck by its size and quality. Why is the church here, on this scale, and so imposing? The following notes on the earliest evidence for Cercles' existence are intended to help explain why this church is where it is, and as it is.

The historical context

Angouleme was a regional stronghold in pre-Roman and Roman times. It remained an important place in the early Middle Ages, as the seat of a bishopric and of a county. Just outside its walls was the abbey of St Cybard (St Eparchius), founded in the Merovingian period, probably in the sixth century. In the mid-eighth century the Carolingian dynasty supplanted the Merovingians and the vast region of Aquitaine, after a brief, unsuccessful bid for autonomy, became part of the Carolingian Empire. After 781, Charlemagne created an Aquitanian sub-kingdom for one of his sons, and Angouleme became a key centre of this regime. Thereafter, the Carolingian kings of Aquitaine took an interest in the appointment of counts and bishops in Angouleme, and favoured the cult of St Cybard. The abbey also benefited from the pious donations of the Aquitanian aristocracy, yet, at the same time, it often suffered from the greed of those very families: this was a typical love-hate relationship between a local church and the neighbouring elite. Kings maintained some sort of balance between ecclesiastical and lay interests.

The church of Cercles in the Middle Ages

The date of Cercles's foundation is obscure. It appears at about 1100 as a dependence of St Cybard, Angouleme. Bernard of Vilars (a place some 15 km. South-west of Angouleme) gave back to Abbot Hugh of St Cybard some lands at Obevie which had been 'wrongfully invaded'. In the documentary record of this hand-over, Bernard added by way of compensation: "two sous and six pence which he had been holding as the annual render of the church at Cercles." (*Cartulaire de Saint Cybard*, no. 101) .

[A sou (solidus) was worth 12 pence (*denarii*). In c. 1100, a peasant might owe his lord 5 pence in annual dues; a noble bought a horse in the nearby Limousin for 50s.]

It is unclear whether or not Cercles belonged to St Cybard before this. If it did not, then perhaps it had been founded as a private, family church by Bernard or by one of his relatives, perhaps on land newly taken into exploitation for sheep-rearing. The Latin word *circulae* means sheep-folds (literally, 'circles', circular enclosures). There is another possibility,

however, namely, that in the eleventh century, the church of Cercles was already old, and had functioned as the local church, serving the pastoral needs of its lay parishioners, long before St Cybard acquired an interest in it. What is certain is that around the year 1100, the community of St Cybard was the corporate owner of this church in the northern Périgord, rather far away, and in a different diocese from St Cybard itself. This was the sort of situation which tended to give rise to problems and to legal disputes.

Thus, in the twelfth century, St Cybard established its proprietary rights over the church at Cercles. First as the architectural evidence proves, by constructing a large and imposing church with an extensive view from its bell-tower over the surrounding countryside: an area that Cercles was intended to dominate not only figuratively, but literally - for Cercles appears, already in this early period, as the mother-church of a little family of dependencies. This is clear from a second document, this time dated exactly, to 1142. Bishop Geoffrey of Périgueux, at the request of Abbot William of St Cybard, confirms the abbey's rights over certain churches, lands, tithes, and possessions in the diocese of Périgueux.

The document's date is relevant. In 1138, Louis VII had staged a splendid royal progress in Aquitaine following his marriage with Eleanor, heiress of the duchy. Impressive ceremonies were held at Bordeaux. This was the first time for more than a century that a king of France had appeared south of the Loire. Louis meant to make himself an effective ruler here. When, in 1141, he intervened to protect the rights of the bishop of Angoulême against the local count, this was the first royal intervention in the Angoumois since the tenth century. The bonds of a governmental hierarchy were renewed in the Church as well. In 1143, the archbishop of Bordeaux confirmed the document just cited, which, the previous year, his suffragan the bishop of Périgueux had granted in favour of the abbey of St Cybard.

After 1152, Aquitaine underwent some rapid changes. Louis divorced Eleanor, who had born him only daughters: two months later, she married the young count of Anjou, Henry. He thus became duke of Aquitaine. Soon afterwards, in 1154, Henry, claiming in right of his mother, became king of England too. The Angoumois and the Périgord now became part of the Angevin Empire until the thirteenth century, under Richard the Lionheart (1189-99), then John (1199-1216), the sons of Eleanor and Henry. (Later, though John lost much of Aquitaine, his descendants held onto Gascony until the fifteenth century and the close of the Hundred Years War.)

In the next document to mention Cercles, which was drawn up in 1168/9, the dating clause reads: ... while Louis was king of the Franks and Henry, king of the English, was duke of the Aquitanians and the Normans.

This document survives as an original charter in the departmental archive at Angoulême, complete with its seal. It was issued by Bishop John of Périgueux at the request of Abbot Gerald of St Cybard, Angoulême. Here, for the first time, the church of Cercles is presented as a priory of St Cybard. Thus the bishop addresses the abbot and community of St Cybard in definitive terms:

In consideration of the devotion and love which you and your brethren have shown towards us and towards the church of Périgueux, and in acknowledgement of your request and the request of Prior Peter of Cercles, and the request of your brethren, and with the consent of our archdeacon Itier, we grant and concede the church of St Mary of (Bourg-des-)Maisons to you and to the church of St Cybard ... in such a way that the church of Bourg-des-Maisons shall belong forever to the jurisdiction and ownership of the prior and priory of Cercles. (Charente 11, 1244, no. 1)

We know that Prior Peter had held this office since 1151 at least: in that year, he witnessed, at Angouleme 'in the chapterhouse', an agreement between the abbot of St Cybard and a lay lord, Itier of Chavenat.

Cercles, St Cybard, and St Denis

A final document, dateable to between 1159 and 1171 (that is, during the abbacy of Gerald) gives more details on the links between Cercles and, on the one hand, the abbey of St Cybard, and, on the other, the subordinate churches. This document bears *the title*: 'Charter on the subject of the monks' furs'. It is an agreement between the community of St Cybard (there had evidently been disputes over the division of resources between the abbot and the monks - again, a common enough situation), in the following terms:

I Gerald, abbot of St Cybard, ... acknowledging the just requests of the brethren, and with their counsel and consent have established that one of the monks, chosen for this purpose by the abbot and chapter, should receive the pennies given for the purchase of their furs, that is, the pennies due as an annual payment, at Christmas each year, from the subordinate churches whose names are written below. And that chosen monk must distribute that money to the brethren every three years, at the Feast of the Purification of the Virgin, according to the custom of this church. Here are the subordinate churches who owe these pennies... There follows a list of nine churches. The first-named is: Cercles - 15 sous - followed by the 'daughter-churches' of La Tour Blanche and the rest (and also by four other churches with no special relationship to Cercles). The document ends by explaining that the Feast of St Denis must be celebrated in a special way, with a procession... (*Cartulaire de Saint Cybard*, no. 247).

Here we see Cercles, still with its little group of churches, all of them dependencies of St Cybard. The reality of that dependence was expressed each year in the form of a cash-payment. The monks of St Cybard needed this in order to equip themselves with furs (doubtless a commodity in abundant supply from the forests of the Périgord, still quite wild in those far-off days), so that they could process in a particularly magnificent and sumptuous way - when? on the Feast of St Denis, patron-saint par excellence of the kings of the Franks. It looks as if, already, in the heyday of the Angevin Empire, the community of St Cybard at Angouleme, and perhaps too its priory of Cercles along with its subordinate churches,

foresaw that destiny would bind them, in the long run, to the Capetian kings and to the kingdom of France.

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