

Saint-Marcet – a forgotten castle

Jean-Louis Brousse¹

¹Elected from Gascony, city of L'Isle-en-Dodon 31230 France

Abstract: The castle of St Marcet was in the 13th and 14th centuries the largest stronghold in the county of Comminges, from Spain to Muret. Its powerful neighbours, Toulouse, English Bigorre, Armagnac and Astarac, Foix and Aragon, aimed to claim this land for themselves. A delicate partition of the castle between the counts and the bishops of Comminges weakened the building. This succinct evocation makes one aware of the complexity of the historical context and the disorder that results from it: the diversity, the opportunity of matrimonial and political alliances, the wars between neighbours. The richness of its history, illustrated by the 20 years of captivity of the famous and powerful Countess Marguerite de Comminges, gave this place all its interest and even saved it. The owner, Jean-Marc Fontan, has been working for nearly 20 years to rehabilitate this vast estate on a site that is difficult to access and complicated.

1. Introduction: Site occupation

Among the 13,000 fortified castles listed in France, that of Saint-Marcet has the particularity of being southern [1], which explains its long activity, to have a double life, county castle and episcopal castle, and finally to be inhabited and maintained by its owner keen on history and passionate. This makes the fortified castle of Saint-Marcet quite exceptional. The rock of Saint-Marcet has probably been occupied since the Neolithic as evidenced by the exceptional proliferation of pucks and artifacts [Fig. 1]. Then the tribes succeeded one another until the Middle Ages (Aquitaine, Romans, Volscians) retaining their gods, their customs, living in harmony, giving birth to the people called the Convenes.

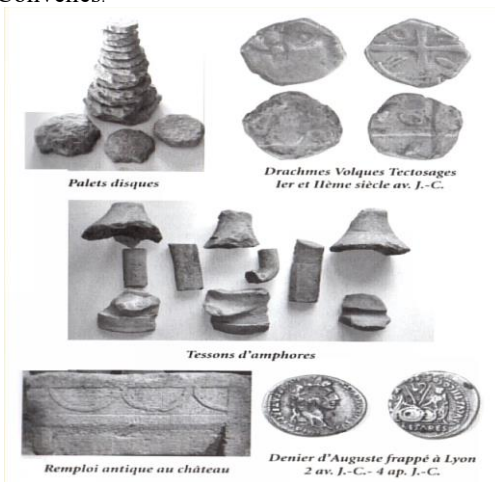


Fig. 1 Archaeological gleanings

1.1 Historical references data

1026 Roger the 1st establishes the existence of a fortified castle.

1114 Raimond Guilhem de Benque, his nephew, donated his share of the castle. Now in the heart of the castle everything is double: two dungeons, two separate courtyards, and especially two gates barely 35 meters apart.

1213 The Cathar conflict spared Saint-Marcet while Jory, lieutenant of Simon de Montfort, and the son of the latter, occupied Saint-Gaudens and its surroundings. The episcopal status of half of the fortress gave him this immunity thanks to the bishop of Comminges.

1226 At the accession of Louis IX, Saint Louis, Bernard V makes an act of submission to the king and the papal legate. In a little more than two centuries the Comminges will gradually slip under the influence of the king of France.

1231 An attack by the count of Foix and Béarn results in the attachment of part of Nébouzan (Saint-Gaudens) to the county of Foix.

1250 Bernard VI recovers under pressure the eastern part of the site. Saint Louis' brother, Alphonse de Poitiers, Count of Toulouse, forced him to return it to the bishopric of Comminges.

These data are taken from references 2 and 3.

1.2 Geographical data



Fig. 2 Comminges in the 13 th century

Finally, the castle was in 1250 the last rampart of the county.

1.3. The 1255 war

Countess Petronilla of Bigorre, daughter of Bernard V, contested the inheritance of Bernard VI, illegitimate son of the same Bernard V. He reigned for 55 years from 1241 to 1295. Under his aegis the coalition neighbors, brought together by numerous matrimonial alliances, are fomenting an unprecedented attack. Most of Nébouzan is taken around Saint-Gaudens.

In 1263 the coalitionists are at the gates of Saint-Marcet, before retreating in front of a work difficult to take, but especially politically untouchable. But the imminence of a new attack would surprise neither the Count of Toulouse nor the Count of Comminges, especially since the English, belligerent, occupy Aquitaine as far as Lourdes.

The castle of Saint-Marcet, on the front line, facing the Nébouzanis, is therefore of paramount importance. The stronghold was enlarged, reinforced with the financial and armed help of Count Toulouse. To attack the castle of the Count of Comminges is above all to attack the forces of the King of France's brother.

From then on, the Comminges really returned to the influence of the king of France. Saint-Marcet, key position on the steps of the kingdom, strategic and symbolic position, 4 leagues from the Anglo-Bigourdan border, is at its peak.

This predominance will last for a century. Saint-Marcet, head of châtellenie, will decline little by little in favor of Aurignac at the end of the fourteenth century, better served by the roads of the time.

1.4 Marguerite de Comminges - a tragic and romantic life

1378 Kidnapped at the age of 12 by Jean II d'Armagnac at the castle of the counts in Muret, after the death of her father Pierre Raimond II, she is married the same day to the son, John III. This hasty marriage was to satisfy the aims of John II on the Comminges and thus supplant the Count of Foix. John III was killed in 1391 in Lombardy. Gaston Fébus, Count of Foix, died the same year.

1392 Despite the Armagnac their rival and relative, the Count of Pardiac, obtained a dispensation from Pope Clement VII for his son, Jean de Fézensaguet, to marry Marguerite after his widowhood.

1398 Marguerite approaches the Count of Armagnac, Bernard VII, who opens hostilities against the Pardiacs, the father and the two sons. Defeated, all three perished in captivity in 1401.

1401 Marguerite reigned 17 years alone on the Comminges. She is a lonely woman with a difficult character who lacked arguments and experience in the face of ambitious lords. In 1412 she was kidnapped from the castle of L'Isle-en-Dodon by the Armagnac. The king had her released a year later.

1419 Marguerite marries Mathieu de Foix, brother of John I, Count of Foix. Mathieu, determined to reign alone over the county, quickly separates from his turbulent wife. He placed her under forced house arrest at the Château de Saint-Marcet. The house of Foix now reigns over the

Comminges especially since Pierre, brother of John I and Mathieu, was appointed bishop of Saint-Bertrand.

1423 John and Matthew move away from the Anglo-Burgundians to get closer to the king of France. The latter had consolidated his positions in the South at a high price. Jean received the county of Bigorre, Mathieu the lands of Albigenians and the government of Dauphiné as well as large sums. John, now loyal to the king of France, died in 1453.

1443 Marguerite died in Poitiers, freed by the King of France, Charles VII, 6 months earlier after 3 years of negotiations and wanderings. The county no longer has an heir, Marguerite's 2 daughters had died a few years earlier.

2. Present status

2.1. Attachment to the kingdom of France. The ruin of the building

1453 The Parliament of Toulouse decrees the attachment of the county to the Kingdom of France.

1461-1473 King Louis XI installs two counts, Jean de Lescun and Odet d'Aydi. The castle was guarded by a modest garrison under the authority of a castellan captain. Little by little it no longer serves as a refuge for bands of looters... nor a stronghold. It was guarded by a modest garrison under the authority of a castellan captain. It will be like this until the middle of the 17th century.

1621 The county part of the castle was dismantled by order of Louis XIII who asserted his supremacy. The dungeon was razed halfway up and the count's entrance was knocked down. The enclosures are open and the West Watchtower decapitated. The episcopal part is preserved and even extended to the county part where a bastion is transformed into a chapel.

At the end of the XVII^e century the office of captain castellan is certainly only honorary. The garrison disappeared, giving way to the extraction of building stones. At the end of the XVIII^e century there is not much left to demolish.

2. 2 The building rebirth

In the twentieth century Saint-Marcet is very ruined. But the essential witnesses remain: the first enclosure with a watchtower, its huge farmyard, its ditches, its second enclosure surrounding the high court, its open door tower, its dungeon, its triangular tower, its chapel, its bread oven and the rain sewers of the high court.



Fig 3 Jean-Marc Fontan

Marcellin of Toulouse, a poor, infirm, feeble-minded man, took refuge in Saint-Marcet after the war around 1950. Coming from a peasant house in Saint-Marcet, he was the poorest, the most disadvantaged. Reduced to the state of begging, he lives on the ground floor of the dungeon, in the cold and humidity.

The takeover of the building in 2005 by its new owner, Jean-Marc Fontan [Fig. 3], saved it. After 18 years of reflection, imagination, arduous work, sweat, he will, practically alone, patiently, painfully, professionally, largely rebuild the buildings, the surrounding walls, the door, the watchtowers and give life to this space.

Saint-Marcet is one of the few fortified castles still inhabited.

The pictures below [Fig. 4] characterize the renovation work carried out since 2005.

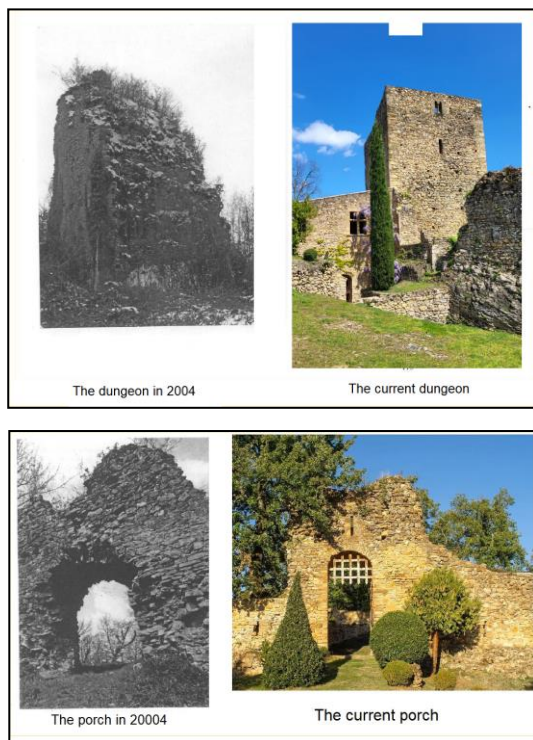


Fig.4 Renovations

3 The vicissitudes of the history of the site

The partition of the castle between the count and the bishop created architectural complications. Everything is double: 2 courtyards, 2 towers, 2 dwellings, 2 entrances and a wall in between. When we attack Saint-Marcet who are we attacking and who is defending whom?

This partition weakens the defence of the castle especially since it also shares the power of the direction of this defence.

The complexity and diversity of matrimonial alliances for political reasons, the wars they generate lead to the detachment of several territories from the Comminges tutelage.

Marguerite's three marriages consecrate these difficulties marked by the disorder of confrontations, wars, ransoms,

More recently the anarchic extraction of building stone led to the ruin of the castle,

The disorder of a looted, abandoned site hinders and slows down the implementation of the site's safeguarding work,

The desire to save heritage has clashed with local habits, the traditions of a disappeared political world

Finally, the organization of a life at the castle is difficult in a site that is not very accessible where everything is complicated.

4 The rebirth of the building

These difficulties, their complexity, this disorder probably contributed to the richness of the place and finally saved the castle.

The counts, aided by Toulouse, used their military power to resist the territorial ambitions of their powerful neighbours.

They also knew how to manage political and matrimonial alliances, provoke reversals of alliances for the same purpose.

The bishops also contributed to this safeguard. The very Catholic crusade against the Cathars, the fight against the Count of Toulouse and against the Count of Comminges could only stop in front of a castle held by the bishops.

During the dismantling of the site in 1621 by Louis XIII, its domination over the nobility was displayed while respecting the Church without touching the episcopal part of the castle.

The refuge: both Marguerite, surrounded by her court, and Marcellin in his profound destitution found peace in this isolated place in a complex and difficult world from which they had both been rejected and suffered deeply.

Finally, the owner, Jean-Marc Fontan, may have found his refuge here too, away from this turbulent world. He is deeply attached to this castle and its site, to the calm of this land of Comminges. The difficulties, the obstacles of the restoration of the building are, in his opinion, largely compensated by the awareness of having brought life and beauty back to this place after 4 centuries of sleep.



Fig. 5 The castle of Saint Marcet today

5. References

1. J.M. Fontan, St-Marcet "Un château oublié" (2022)
2. C Higounet, "le Comté de Comminges" (1949)
3. B. Magre, "L'Isle-en-Dodon – Châtellenie du Comminges"
4. Publications of the Comminges studies society "Revue du Comminges"