

The Chateau of St. Jean at Nogent-Le Rotrou



The Chateau of Saint Jean dominates the town of Nogent-le-Rotrou, and is a witness to the glorious past of the town. The Chateau overlooks five valleys, representing the roads between Chartres and Le Mans, and also access to Châteaudun and Bellême. It is thus a crossroads between L'Ile de France, Normandy and Maine. In such a position, it is a strategically placed fortress overlooking the valley of the river Huisne.

The importance of such a site had already been known for some time, as it is supposed to have been the emplacement upon which a Viking fortress had once been built, but later destroyed. In an effort to stop Viking raids on the area north of the rich plains of France, had signed a peace treaty with Rollo, King of the Vikings ¹. In return for peace with the Vikings, Rollo would convert to Christianity, and would receive control over a large area of Northern France, soon to become known as Normandy. Unfortunately, the descendants of Rollo were as much war-mongers as their predecessors, and continually sallied over their border to pillage the plains of l'Ile de France.

In the middle of the tenth Century, in order to prevent the "Norman" invasions south of their border, Thibault, a vassal of the French King Lothaire, and Count of Blois and Chartres, probably under orders from his King, set about installing fortifications close to a small developing town of Nogent-le-Châtel. An army commander of Count Thibault, a faithful and trusted minor lord, whose name was Rotrou was given command of these fortifications.

¹ The Treaty of Saint-Clair-Sur-Epte, in the year 911. Now that the Vikings held an authorized foothold in France, the future French kings would live to regret this treaty.

1 - Initial fortifications at the Second Half of the Xth Century

And so will emerge in about 980 ², in this small town of Nogent-le-Châtel, the future House of Rotrou, which will dominate the historical and political scene of the area for nearly 200 years. Rotrou builds the beginnings of a fortification, certainly of the form "Motte and Bailey", in wood, apparently upon the site of the previous Viking ruins. The tower and palisade were thus built late in the Xth Century, but the tower and dungeon will be rebuilt in stone some years later, by Geoffrey, grandson of Rotrou. This imposing edifice will later be known as the Chateau of Saint Jean, the home and seat of the Rotrou family, future Counts of Perche. Although the importance of the county of the Perche has mostly been forgotten ³, as it has no existence in modern times, it was once the theatre of bloodthirsty battles between rivals, Normans in the North and existing powerful Houses to the South, as the Rotrou family established themselves in their new territories, and established their place in French History.

If we follow the history of the Château of St. Jean, built and maintained by the Rotrou family, we can begin to understand the emergence and the power of the Rotrou family, before their eclipse during the early years of the XIII th Century.

The centre of the "Rotrou" domain will become the town of Nogent-le-Rotrou, and their residence, the Château of St. Jean ⁴.

2 - Consolidating the fortifications at the beginning of XIth Century

Rotrou's successor, Geoffroy III builds around the year 1020, the château "keep" in stone, that we can still admire today. These works show the privilege of important people who can mobilise important financial means to reunite and pay supervisors, carpenters, stone cutters and masons. From this time also, date the small arched bay windows which one can see on the top floor. The keep is established as an advanced defensive position. The battlement walls, indented with protected archer positions, are rounded to eliminate blind spots, and to ensure a more efficient defence. The ditch, which could never hold water because of the height of the chateau, is widened, making this system of defence very efficient, because attacking forces must clearly expose themselves. It is no longer possible to use wooden towers during the attacks, because of the width of the ditch. The keep walls are 3 metres 50 in thickness at their base, 5 metres, if we consider the buttresses. There are three "floors" to the keep, and at each level, the walls lose 50 cm, to allow for the installation of the wooden floors. On the ground floor, and the first floor there is a bearing wall dividing the floors into two rooms of unequal size. No chimneys or windows are provided. However, a well, 47 metres deep, is dug in the access tower. The builders also added a cellar underneath the keep. The ground floor thus served as a store, and because of water and provisions stored

² Apparently, a certain number of years will pass after the debacle of 963 (when Belleme was lost to the Normans), before the possibility of protecting those territories south of the border of Normandy.

³ Forgotten, except for several dynamic associations - Association Des Amis Du Perche, the Federation Des Amis Du Perche, Les Amis du Perche de l'Orne, and several others.

⁴ History does not seem to record the date at which the name St. Jean was attributed to the château, but it was probably much later.

there, permitted the defenders to support a long siege. The upper floors served as living quarters for the Lord and his family. The walls of the keep show signs of numerous modifications. On the North side of the first floor, a door was provided, but today has been walled up. There are traces of chimneys and their smoke stacks. The second and third floors have a chimney and three windows. Primitive latrines exist on the second floor. The third floor shows signs of the level of comfort which existed, even in a medieval fortress of this time. A bathroom apparently existed on this floor, with a draining system through the wall of the keep to the outside. At the summit of this imposing edifice, the roof was flat, probably of wood, and covering an area of 350 square metres, which could be covered with drenched animal skins as a protection against flaming arrows. A sentinal position one metre wide caps the whole edifice, allowing surveillance of the surrounding area from a height of more than 90 metres.

Thus is the architecture of the château modified to suit recent war developments, such as as catapulted stone balls, so that the edifice will not collapse, as it would do with rectangular and square fortresses. It is protected on the west side by natural defenses, and on the east side, a ditch of about 20 meters wide and 7 to 8 metres deep is deployed in a semi-circle which meets at the place where the plateau has a sixty metre overhang above the valley of Huisne. A rectangular building, which no longer exists today is built, butting against the keep. The entrance to the château, protected by its two towers, has, in between, a drawbridge which has long since disappeared. However, we can still see grooves in the stone walls showing the position of the two portcullis which existed at this time.

Until more modern artillery is invented, as long as food rations are plentiful and as long as the defenders are vigilant, this fortress is indeed impregnable.

In 1028, the abbey of Saint-Denis is founded by Geoffroy II, a redoubtable warrior, as a sign of repentance ⁵. The foundation charter, drafted in 1031, locates the abbey "between the River Huisne and the stronghold of Nogent". This is the first time that the existence of the château appears in a charter. In 1079, the lords of Nogent take the title of Counts of the Perche. In 1100, Rotrou III [*2nd Count of Perche 1083-1144*]) learns of the death of his father, Geoffroy III, First Count of the Perche, while he was taking part in the siege of Jerusalem (1099), during the first crusade.

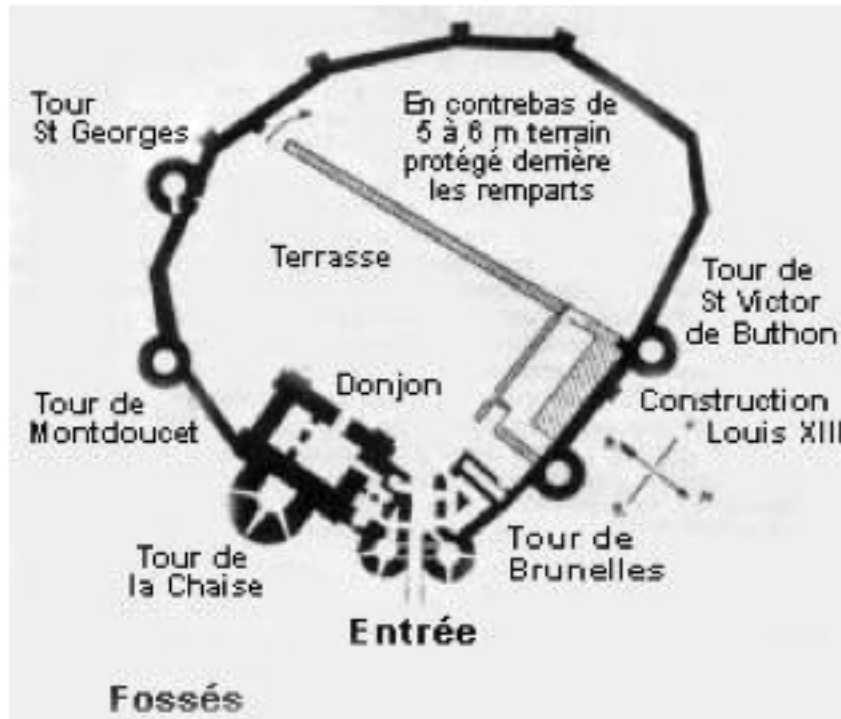
3 - The End of the XIth to the XIIth Century

Between the cavalcades and combats, the lords of Nogent live in their château and invest in certain elements of comfort there: creation of twinned windows with their attenuated arches and tympanum with diamond shaped openings ⁶. Between 1100 and 1144, Rotrou III, known as "The Great", leaves his homeland of the Perche to go to war with the Arabs, in Spain and the Holy Land. During his brief returns to his native soil, he actively sides with the Duke of Normandy, King of England, a fierce rival of the King of France, supported by Robert "The Devil", lord of Bellême. In 1113, Rotrou is awarded Bellême by Henry 1st (Beauclerc), in reward for his services, with the notable exception

⁵ We have no clear idea of the reason for this "repentance".

⁶ See Addendum for explanations and examples of such architecture.

of the chateau at Bellême, that Henry keeps for himself. At his death, Rotrou III leaves a powerful, sovereign and independent county ⁷. In the middle of the XIIth century, buttresses are added to reinforce the four corners of the keep, as well as the southern and western faces. Towards the end of the XIIth century, a circular perimeter is added, flanked by seven cylindrical towers, to reinforce the defence of the edifice. Two of the towers flank the main entry. The other five towers are named after the local lords who are to ensure their defence in times of attack.



Between 1144 and 1191, Rotrou IV takes an active part in the conflict which still opposes France and England. In 1191, he is killed under the very walls of Saint Jean d'Acre in Palestine.

4 - The End of the XIIth and the beginning of the XIVth Century

Military architecture changes radically, influenced by [*tactics learned in*] the Middle East, and a body of military engineers is created by Philippe Auguste [*King of France (1180-1223)*]. In 1204, Philippe-Auguste conquers Normandy and confiscates it from John Lackland [*King of England (1199-1216)*]. The county of the Perche loses thus its position of "frontier zone". In 1217, Thomas, 5th Count of Perche, is killed at the battle of Lincoln on May 20, 1217. The Crown Prince Louis VIII, son of Philippe-Auguste, "felt the greatest suffering" [*when hearing the news*]. In 1226, the Perche is united with the crown of France ⁸. During the XIIIth and XIVth centuries, no significant modifications are made to the château.

⁷ However, unable to subjugate the Perche-Gouet, his domains will never exceed more than half of the County of the Perche.

⁸ This is no less than a confiscation, due to the lack of a male heir (Law of Reversion). Subsequent French Kings will successfully use this law to laboriously and painfully expand the French Crown to national unity.

5 - The Hundred Year War

The Hundred Year War will reposition the Perche in the centre of Franco-English rivalry and will again give the château of Nogent a defensive role which it has not played any more for several centuries. The Perche, claimed, as well as Normandy, by the kings of England, has to undergo the murderous attacks of the English on several occasions. In 1359, the English seize Nogent as well as the château and on October 24, 1360 by the Treaty of Brétigny, Edward III, King of England [1312-1377], restores the seats of Nogent and Beaumont. In 1424 after the Battle of Verneuil, the Perche passes to the English. In 1427, the château of Nogent is again taken by the French. In 1428, the château, although valiantly defended by the Gascon captain La Pallière, cannot resist the attack conducted by the Count of Salisbury. The attack is carried out especially to the north-eastern corner. A section of the wall yields up to the top of the keep [*this will be called "The English Breach"*], the interior is set ablaze, then abandoned. The Saint-Etienne vault, built in the enclosure of the château in 1122 under Rotrou III, is also destroyed. The 35 metre high dungeon was burned down by Thomas of Salisbury in 1428. In 1447, the English are definitively driven out of the Perche.

6 - The End of the XVth to The Beginning of the XVIth Century

It is to the "Young Ladies of Armagnac", known as "*Les Dames de Nogent*", that we can attribute the current aspect of the château⁹, rebuilding of the living quarters above the "Barrel Vault"¹⁰ passage, which now becomes the ground floor, restoring the two entry towers, and increasing their height, heightening of the turns of the entry crowned with decorative machicolations¹¹. The "Steps of Saint Jean" connecting the château to the Pâty quarter go back to this time¹².

7 - The XVIth Century

The seigneurie of Nogent-le-Rotrou passes to the family of Bourbon-Condé, who stayed there frequently. The château is the theatre of an ostentatious life. In 1558, is celebrated the new draft of the customs of the Grand-Perche¹³, and in 1566, is celebrated the birth of Charles of Bourbon, future Count de Soissons. The poets of the Pleïade interpret "The Judgement of Paris".

⁹ The "Demoiselles d'Armagnac", Marguerite and Charlotte d'Armagnac, inherit the chateau in 1503. I am unable to determine anything concerning these new owners, apart from their name.

¹⁰ Not too sure about this translation from the French "passage vouté en berceau" ! I need the help of a medieval architect

¹¹ An opening in the floor of a battlement, for dropping stones on attackers. Later used for decorative effects, and becoming a characteristic of non-military buildings - see Addendum.

¹² These 155 steps, created to facilitate communication between the Chateau and the town below, were built under the auspices of the "Demoiselles d'Armagnac".

¹³ The Rotrou family were never able to accede to a major part of the Perche (Perche-Gouet), which was too powerful to overcome. We have to wait until the XVIth century before the customs of the whole of the County of the Perche are finally drafted. These customs live on today in the pride of this ancient county which today, no longer officially exists.

1568 - These festivals are later followed by bloody sequels during the "Wars of Religion". It is at this period, probably, that the tower of "La Chaise" is razed, to be transformed into a gun position.

8 - The XVIIth to the XVIIIth Century

1624 - The Duke of Sully, Maximilien de Béthune, becomes the new owner of the château. The imposing project which had been considered by the minister of Henri IV - to reverse the old keep of the Counts of Perche to rebuild a traditional residence of style - were not fortunately ever realized. The charming villa in the Louis XIII style is the only vestige of this period. The alley of elms that Sully planted on the external circumference of the enclosure is cut down two centuries later.

1641 - Death of Sully. His sepulture is set in the Hotel Dieu of Nogent and is next to the Notre Dame church.

1779 - The descendants of Sully sell the baronry of Nogent to the Count of Orsay who was the last lord of Nogent.

1789-1801 - During the Revolution, the château is transformed into a prison. The Collegiate of St Jean, built in 1094 per Geoffroy IV outside the enclosure of the château, is demolished in 1798.

9 - The XIXth and the XXth Centuries

During these two centuries, the château passes through several hands. The 9th of June 1836, Victor Hugo writes to his wife "We saw and visited Nogent-le-Rotrou, the château which someone wanted to sell to me, six or seven years ago. Nanteuil is drawing a souvenir sketch of it while I write to you. The outside of the château is still very beautiful and superbly dominates an immense horizon of undulating plains. The interior is in a state of total dilapidation".

In 1843, Oeillet Des Murs ¹⁴ acquires the château and undertakes much restoration work. The "English Breach" ¹⁵ is hidden by a wall containing several windows and decorative machicolations are installed. Several windows are also added to the ground floor. The windows of the home and the towers are enlarged, the floors and ceilings are repaired. Exhausted and partly ruined by so much effort, Oeillet des Murs sells the fortress to Dr. Jousset de Bellesme. In 1885, Historian of the Perche and impassioned archaeologist, this person continues the work undertaken by his predecessor. Several interventions are carried out on the keep, the most visible and discussed being the re-establishment of the notching of the walls of the keep in 1905.

In 1950, damaged by the conflicts of the Second War, the château is bought by the town

¹⁴ Former lawyer of the Supreme Court of Appeal, Curator of the Library of Nogent-le-Rotrou, Des Murs is the author of a remarkable book - "Histoire des Comtes de Perche de la Famille des Rotrous (History of the Counts of Perche and the Rotrou Family)", a precious reference concerning the Lords of the Château St. Jean - 1856.

¹⁵ See Section 6 - The Hundred Year war.

of Nogent-le-Rotrou. Very significant restoration work is then undertaken in order to refit the living quarters of the château as a museum of ethnography ¹⁶ and local history and showrooms.

Since 2001, the restoration and the development of the keep and tower of the Chair are ongoing.

THE CHATEAU AS IT IS TODAY



¹⁶ Ethnography - A research strategy often used in Social Sciences.







ADDENDUM

This section is deemed necessary to explain some of the technical terms of architecture used in the main document, especially for the section :

4 - The End of the XIth to the XIIth Century

Original documents are, of course, in French. This translation was made, with much difficulty, using the Google translation site and my many dictionaries. I hope it is successful, for I am not an architect !

BAIES GEMINEES (TWINNED WINDOWS)



TYMPAN (TYMPANUM)

A tympanum (plural, tympana) is the semi-circular or triangular decorative wall surface over an entrance bounded by a lintel and arch.



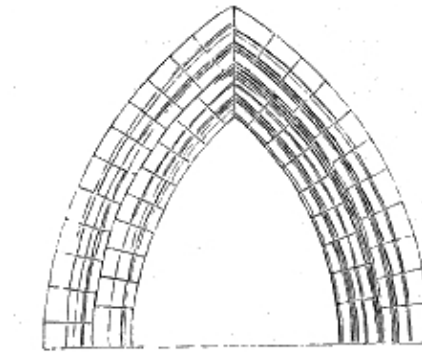
OCULUS

An oculus (latin: eye) is an opening of a wall or roof, designed to allow the passage of daylight. Usually circular, it may also take other shapes, such as a diamond.



LANCETTE

An arch



MACHICOLATIONS

Holes in battlement floors allowing defenders to drop stones on attackers. They can clearly be seen in the following photo. They later become decorative.

