

From Abbatial Domain to Feudal Estate

Little is known about the history of Chaumont in the High Middle Ages. It could well have been the property of the Kings of Burgundy (888-1032) since the area of Chaumont (*Villa Calvomonte*) is recorded as early as 1039. Later, as shown in an Act of 1178, when under the Abbey Saint-Maurice of Agaune (Canton of the Valais, Switzerland), Chaumont already had a fortified castle.

(Arms of Counts of Geneva - Ruins of the Chateau of Chaumont prior to restauration).

In the XIIIth Century, the Abbot of Saint-Maurice bestowed the Rule of Justice for Chaumont upon the Vidomne family whose surname originates from *vicedominus*, being in the Middle Ages the term for a seigneurial agent or Chatelain. On the other hand, the Abbot entrusted the actual protection of the area and the custody of the fortress to the Count of Geneva.

The Counts ensured their dominance over Chaumont through the feudal tribute of the Vidomne family and others of lineage by raising the area to a Chatelainerie, or Seigneurie, in the middle of the XIIIth Century. This territory, covering the present-day parishes of Chaumont, Clarafond, Dingy, Epagny, Frangy and Marlioz, was administered by a Seigneur, Chatelain a revocable civil servant, whose powers covered command over, coercion and general law abeyance of the local population.

For the Counts of Geneva, the Chatelain raised taxes, levied customs and tolls. He ensured the validity of contracts as well as of weights and measures, and administered minor cases. Crimes punishable by death remained, however, the responsibility the County Judge. Furthermore, the Chatelain enrolled men in military service for the Chateau and who also oversaw security in the fields and on the pathways. The latter duties were to prove crucial during the Delphino-Savoyard conflicts (1268-1355) - or 100 years' skirmishes - which opposed the Counts of Savoy and the Dauphins of Vienne and their allies. *(Chateau of Chaumont during and after the restauration).*

From medieval Chateau to the romantic ruin

The Chateau of Chaumont represents numerous architectural characteristics of the typical Alpine fortified sites of the XII-XIII Centuries. Emplacement adapted to the terrain, quadrangular Great Tower or Donjon itself surrounded by its own powerful, strengthened isolating wall. The fortress was further with a secondary wall to serve as a refuge for the population and, perhaps, enclosing some of the houses of nobler families. The whole overlooked by the Great Tower and another, had a *corps de logis* with reception rooms, kitchen, cellar together with another containing a large reception room, public kitchens, an oven, and a water reservoir.

The sale of the County of Geneva to the Count of Savoy in 1401 dealt a fatal blow to the fortress. No longer benefitting from modernisation or upkeep it lost any military importance it had enjoyed and the Savoy Chatelains little by little neglected even the minimum maintenance of the buildings, only the Great Tower retaining their interest since it served as the local prison. In the middle of the 16th century, the Chatelains even began dismantling the Chateau using the materials to repair Chaumont's covered Market and the Borbannaz Mill, near the Fornant River.

Thus weakened, Chaumont no longer presented any threat to potential invaders, thereby losing all strategic importance. Hence when the troops of the Protestant City of Geneva invaded the Chaumont area in October-November 1590, they choose rather to concentrate their assault against the neighbouring stronghold of Thiollaz.

In the summer of 1616 the Chateau of Chaumont basked in its last hour of glory on the occasion of the war between the Duke of Savoy and the King of France for the control of the Rhone Valley. The Duke of Savoy only maintaining a garrison of thirteen men at the Chateau ordered the demolition of the walls rather than leave his enemy any option for entrenchment.

To-day, the Chateau, much of which was used as a quarry, now welcomes visitors for a romantic stroll through its ruins amid a glorious, eternally grandiose panorama.

View of the triple fortified wall

View of the outer rampart ruins

Manuscript sources

The Chatelain "servant" appointed by the Counts of Geneva and later by their successors, the Counts, later Dukes, of Savoy submitted an annual report on revenues and expenditures which were controlled by the Chamber of Accounts, often in the presence of the prince. Although Chaumont's accounts are only to hand from 1352 they continue on an ongoing basis through to 1528. There are also other specific separate accounts and inventories, all in the form of rolls of parchment and/or paper notebooks tabled in the Departmental Archives of Haute-Savoie and Savoie.

This considerable documentation, about 9,500 pages in all, records the social and economic life of the Chatelainery of Chaumont over almost 200 years. It details the maintenance work carried out on the Chateau: replacement of roofs, floors, renovation of walls, construction of watchtowers, etc. Such information associated with archaeological finds permits an understanding of the layout of the fortress and its associated buildings and construction.

Restauration and consolidation of existing remains

The main works consisted of renewing the facings, consolidating the mortar with hydraulic lime, at the same time as internal strengthening of various outer walls by a masonry lock and protection of the tops of the walls from the weather by lead sheeting.

The laying of the lead sheeting protection

The recent restauration which took place between 2003 and 2006 amounted to EUR170,000. 72% was publicly funded by the General Council of the Haute-Savoie, the Rhône-Alpes Regional Council, the State and 28% by private financing (Gas of France, Crédit Agricole Bank, Mairie of Chaumont (owner of the site), and by local subscription).

Credits

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