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Map showing the localities associated with the House of Mont-Saint-Jean. Scale: 1 cm represents 4 kms.

THE CASTLE OF MONT-SAINT-JEAN

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From the movements of the medieval dukedom of Burgundy, so scarce and so often inaccessible are the records that even the most earnest of published archives can offer only loose and broken fragments trembling in the blanks. To assign a niche in time to a knight of the lesser nobility when we have but one rung in the chronological ladder: *confirmed his father's gift in 1107*, we hang in suspense, not knowing whether to go up or down. Where it is a serious question of charting a medieval genealogy, relationships cannot always be defined. One chronicle might remark that Gauthier is probably father of Oudot; another leaves one with the impression that he was the uncle. If all we have for Gauthier is living in 1216, he could just as well have been Oudot's brother, cousin, even grandsire.... Oudot married Agnes, but was she a Frolois or a Vergy? And if the latter, then when did her husband, Guillaume de Bar, leave her a widow? Or was she of quite another generation? The ladies, in fact, perpetuate a name from mother to daughter, from aunt to niece, and contemporary cousins in separate family branches can escalate confusion to madness. These imaginary examples typify the problems that loom over the researcher like outraged ghosts.

In this misty atmosphere, local historians or those with some predetermined aim can glorify a family beyond recognition, while even the most conscientious can stumble into imprecision and omission.

Fortunately, two historians give comparable accounts of the barons of Mont-Saint-Jean: the Abbot Claude Courtépée* (1721-1781), who credits the Abbot-historian Jean le Beuf (1687-1760) for much of his information, but he himself traveled even to remotest hamlets to copy whatever documents were still extant: private letters, land transfers, donations to religious establishments.... And Émile Bobin,* architect, who transcribed key passages from the *Annals* of Flodoard (894-966) and used material from the private records of families whose forebears were in some way connected with Mont-Saint-Jean. Ernest Petit, who gives a genealogy of Mont-Saint-Jean and Charny in his *Histoire des Ducs de Bourgogne* (1888) found nothing to add.

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* COURTÉPÉE and BEGUILLET: *Description du Duché de Bourgogne*, vol. IV.
BOBIN: *Monographie Descriptive, Historique et Archéologique du Château de Mont-Saint-Jean-en-Auxois*.

While some details were gleaned from various other interesting sources, the substance of this present essay comes from Courtépée and Bobin.

The Lords

Flodoard was the first to mention Mont-Saint-Jean. He relates that while Raoul (Rodolphe), duke of Burgundy and king of France, was on an expedition in 924, he came upon the castle of Mont-Saint-Jean: *inde reversi circa quoddam venimus quod dicitur Mons Sancti Iohannes....* The place had been usurped by Regnard. The king laid siege and forced Regnard to abandon the castle, upon which Raoul took possession.

It is believed that the House of Mont-Saint-Jean descended from Manasses I de Vergy, the hero who rid Burgundy of the Norman ravagers just as they reached the gates of Dijon late in the IXth century.

But before the year 1000 no record specifically names the family. In that dawn of a new millennium, the lords (or Hugues) of Mont-Saint-Jean gave a grange and pastureland to the Xth century priory of Bar-le-Régulier, in their parish of Missery. Three centuries later, in 1340, Charlotte de Charny, daughter of Geoffroy de Charny, brought to her husband, Bertrand de Chazans, the fief of Missery with its good wheat, its slopes blooming with vines. Courtépée remarks with some disgust that the road is bad and there is only one tavern.

A systematic listing of the barons of Mont-Saint-Jean begins with Rainard, for whom the only date given is 1076. His son, Hugues I, signed the Charter of Foundation of the abbey of Citeaux in 1098. For generations, the lords continued to benefit this famous abbey and some of them were buried there.

Gui* was lord of Mont-Saint-Jean after his father. In 1117, Gui took Salmaise from the Frolois and carried on long wars with that family. Salmaise remained the property of the lords of Mont-Saint-Jean, who constructed there a strong castle with a chapel dedicated to St. Mark. Gui's wife, the daughter of Gui de Saulx, was benefactress of the abbey of Sainte-Seine. There were several children.

Hugues II, lord of Mont-Saint-Jean, Charny and Thoisy, succeeded his father. His brother Jean inherited Salmaise, but at Jean's death this fief reverted to Hugues II. Before 1152, Hugues married Elisabeth de Vergy, daughter of Hervé de Vergy. Seven children resulted from this union, five of whom were sons. In 1180, Hugues and his firstborn, Etienne, notified the bishop of Autun that they had ceded to the monks of Reigny all that they possessed in the juridical territory of Locheres and Chatel-Censoir. Both Bobin and Courtépée record that "this baron was so wise and so powerful

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* Courtépée fails to mention Gui de Mont-Saint-Jean.

that Pope Eugene II (in 1149) and Anastasio IV (in 1153) entrusted the rights and goods of the abbey of Vézelay to him rather than to the Count of Nevers." Curiously, Courtépée repeats this notice word for word in reference to Gui de Thil.

Etienne I, seneschal of Burgundy, succeeded his father in 1196 and died in 1198, without heirs. He had married Gilles de Noyers; about the same period, Sybille de Noyers married Ponce de Mont-Saint-Jean, founder of the Charny lineage.

The death of Etienne brought to power his brother Guillaume I (1198-1223). By his marriage with Bure d'Ancy, he acquired Ancy-le-Franc and a part of the vast holdings of the Vergy. In 1202, he ceded his fief of Fixin to the church of Langres. Like all those of the House of Mont-Saint-Jean, he was benefactor of St. Andôche in Saulieu, of the abbey of Sainte-Seine and many other monasteries; and in 1216 he founded the priory of Notre-Dame at Val Croissant, which his descendants continued to support for two hundred years.

The third son of Huges II was Ponce de Mont-Saint-Jean, who will claim our interest another time.

Guillaume II was baron after his father. In 1224 he defended the monks of the abbey of Sainte-Seine against the lord of Sombernon. In 1239, the duke of Burgundy, Hugues IV, engaged to give his daughter as wife to Guillaume's son.

Marguerite of Burgundy, then, married Guillaume III "a little later". It is said that Guillaume III participated in the crusade of 1248 and that it was he who brought back from the Holy Land a piece of the arm of St. John the Baptist and the bodies of St. Julian, martyr of Alexandria; St. Macaire, the Egyptian hermit; and St. Pelagie, the Egyptian penitent converted by St. Macaire. When Guillaume III died, circa 1256, leaving no children, the barony passed to his brother Etienne II.

Etienne II married Mahaut de Frolois and died in 1300. For forty-odd years, it would seem that all his lands prospered in peace, for the only notices we have for this lord is the sale of a castle to King Saint Louis in 1259, and the enfranchisement of the inhabitants of Salmaise.

But when his son became seigneur of all the lands and tenants, the clash of steel rent the air. Etienne III was constantly at war with his neighbors. He had repeated disputes with the bishop of Autun, and arrogantly refused homage to the duke, Hugues V of Burgundy, his blood relative. The duke finally laid siege to the castle, forcing Etienne's submission; but he pardoned the presumptuous malcontent on condition of liege homage and the cession of Charny, Arconcey and Chatellenot, which was effected in 1325. In 1331, Etienne was obliged to cede Salmaise and Marcilly in payment of a loan he had borrowed from the duke before his rebellion but was unable to honor. Two years later, after three stormy decades, Etienne died. He had married Mahaut de Boulogne.
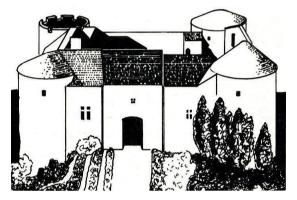
His son, Hugues III, died (Bobin says "about 1370"; Courtépée says 1358) leaving no male heirs. "He was the last descendant of this powerful family that bore gueules, three gold escutcheons." His daughter, Jeanne de Mont-Saint-Jean, married Pierre de Thil and "The immense wealth of this family thus passed to the House of Thil."

It will be remembered that the device of Geoffroy de Charny was gueules, three silver escutcheons. In the armies of Philip VI and John II, the device with silver not infrequently met the device with gold. It does not appear, however, that any marriages were contracted between Charny and Mont-Saint-Jean.

The Castle

"One of the most ancient examples of military feudal architecture in Burgundy." In these words the architect Émile Bobin rated the castle-fortress erected by the barons of Mont-Saint-Jean during the XIIth and XIIIth centuries. The castle rises at the point of an abrupt hill (491 m. altitude). At the foot of the escarpment, a moat was cut out of the rock and palisades bristled on the counterscarp. Today, a pleasant promenade lined with trees traces the filled-in ditch. No enemy could approach unseen, for from atop the towers one can survey an immense panorama over the valley of the Serein, dotted with the castles of Missery, Thoisy, Thil — as far as Saulieu, where the barons had a town house. Beneath the sky's infinitude, the land spreads out with fields and lakes and forests, then rises on the mountains of Morvan. That the site was propitious for habitation is attested by still-standing megaliths. The Eduens, their capital at Autun, populated the area; and here Caesar established a *castellum*, a vantage point along the Roman road from Alesia to Autun.

West front of the castle from a very old photograph. Drawing by James Campbell

Whatever might have been the stronghold that Regnard invaded and then surrendered to Raoul, the baronial structure, being modified each epoch to meet the ever more devastating instruments of warfare, was able to resist numerous sieges. Ten huge towers spaced 60 feet apart measured the strong stone outer curtain enclosing the acre of Mont-Saint-Jean-le-Chateau; five could still be counted when Courtépée visited the site. A tower rounded at each of the four angles of the keep; in the fourth, deep underground, the gloomy dungeon. A long tight corridor cut in stone threaded to the dungeon chapel so a prisoner, confined in his cell, would not be deprived of the comfort of hearing Mass. A drawbridge and

portcullis gave entrance to the Court of the Guard; and in a vast hall hung with tapestries, the lord dispensed justice.

The chapel in the inner bailey, dedicated to St. John the Baptist, was served by eight priests. Although the crypt dates from the XIIth or possibly the XIth century, it is unclear if the relics of Saints Julian, Macaire and Pelagie were deposited there before 1453, the year in which the present little church was dedicated and the relics transferred from the barons' private chapel. The Michelin Guide for Burgundy says it was Raoul de Mont-Saint-Jean who brought the relics back from a crusade. The sources available to me name no Raoul, but one there must have been, as Michelin research is eminently reliable.

Walls with seven gates protected Saint-Jean-le-Bourg. Outside the town were five villages: Mairey, La Comme, Doran, Fleurey and Ormancy. Nearby was a hospice for pilgrims making their way to San Juan Compostella. A leprosarium was built in the XIIth century; a stone cross stood on the road to warn travelers.

Until 1348, three fairs a year attracted villagers from far and near. On the feast of St. Pelagie — the Tuesday before Corpus Christi, which in those days fell on the Thursday after the Octave of Pentecost — on that day, prizes were awarded to the young men who won a footrace and a jumping contest. Three young ladies were adjudged the loveliest in a beauty contest, first prize being a mirror. "The five prizes," Courtépée comments, "were established by the barons in the centuries of ignorance."

Today finds this stout castle splendidly restored and comfortably modernized by a Parisian family who spend their holidays in this delicious corner of old Burgundy.

Court of the Guard.