

The History of the Château de Clérans

by Nancy Dawson

In a region celebrated for its many castles, one of the oldest and rarest is the Château de Clérans, a castle with an intriguing history. It was built in the 11th century in the traditional Aquitaine configuration, at the top of a hill with a small village clustered below. A section of the guardhouse wall dates to the 9th century and is evidence of earlier structures. Its location at the juncture of a medieval crossroad contributed to its strategic importance and its fate. When Raymond, Count of Turenne, returned from the First Crusade in 1100, he burned the castle and the town to the ground, and then repented for his deed, spending Lent in a monastery.

The castle and the guardhouse were rebuilt not long after, with the addition of a large Romanesque tower. Clérans's power and prestige grew: its seigneurs were warlord captains who controlled vast properties and dozens of parishes between the Dordogne and Louyre rivers. They plundered and ravaged the rich valleys of the Périgord. A restored mural on a castle wall, a mere fragment of the ancient great hall, attests to castle's prosperity.

It was a time of political intrigue, conflict, and war during which a famous medieval troubadour, Bertran de Born, wrote about Clérans and likely entertained in the great hall. A "sower of schism" (as he was immortalized by Dante in the "Inferno"), de Born used the seigneur of Clérans to manipulate England's role in the Aquitaine, fueling conflict between the sons of King Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine – Richard the Lionheart and Henry the Young King. He championed Henry against Richard, the then-Duke of Aquitaine, drawing Clérans into a league rebelling against Richard. After Henry's unexpected death from a cold, a victorious Richard likely stormed the castle to take his revenge on Clérans. This was the beginning of an uneasy relationship with the British.

In 1260, the square tower was rebuilt, doubling its size to the current height of 30 meters, a massive project at the time. But, it was a strategic error that sealed the castle's destiny. Square towers were becoming obsolete because the round tower had come into use, its circular walls more effective in deflecting new weapons, the catapult and gunfire. This alone brought on the castle's decline and fall. Records show that in 1287, there were thirteen co-seigneurs of Clérans who were vassals of the Duke of Guyenne, who was also the King of England.

The Hundred Years' War brought more chaos and the castle alternated between French and British rule. At one point it was the seat of a garrison that changed sides according to who was paying them. A British king, Henry III, gave Clérans to the new bastide of Lalinde. Later it came under the seigneurs of Limeuil, vassals of the Count of Turenne, coming full circle in three centuries. In 1453, following a three-month siege, Clérans was French again. New seigneurs built housing in the castle park occupied by Calvinists and Clérans became a Protestant community. This likely was a result of the infamous conversion of the nobles, intended to spur the growth of the Reformation. After playing a decisive role in the medieval history of the Périgord, the castle was placed on the sidelines. It was owned by the barons of Biron for the next century passing to the Augéard family until the Revolution when they were forced to immigrate, after which the castle was used as a quarry until 1938.

The Château de Clérans was one of many castle complexes that were mainstays of the feudal systems of high middle ages, of which, sadly there are few examples left. Today, it remains central to the village life due to the commitment of the current owner. It has been popular destination on Heritage Days in the Périgord with more than 10,000 visitors over the past ten years, a popularity sustained by the continued renovation and restoration, and its status as a major national monument.