

# THE TEMPLAR COMMANDERY OF VILLERS-LE-TEMPLE

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Grand **P**riory of **S**erbia

**Abstract** — Few Walloon villages can boast of ever being borrowed from the Templars. Villers-le-Temple, located between Hoi and Liège, is one of them. Situated on the Roman road between Tongeren and Aarlen, this rustic village probably owes its origin and name to a Roman villa that would have stood there. [1] Unfortunately, there are no more sources available from this period, the first mention of Villers as a village is listed on a sales certificate from 1124, in which Albertus de Villers and his brother Theodooricus would have sold a plot of land to the Abbey of Flône. Shortly after his return from the Holy Land, Gérard de Villers (commander of the Houses of the Temple in Brabant and Hesbaye), knight of the Temple Order, exchanged on November 16, 1260, 3 plots of land, which were located in Geer, with the Abbey of Flône. [2] Together with a sum of 300 Liège Franks, it would confirm the exchange of property whereby the abbey would consecrate its estates of Villers and Clémodeau, including the right of patronage to the parish church of St Peter, to the Temple Order. [3]

**Keywords** — Include at least 5 keywords or phrases

## X. ORIGIN AND SITUATION

On the grounds in Villers-en-Condroz, the Temple Order would, on the initiative of Gerard de Villers, begin the construction of a commandery that would become the center of the Order of the Templars in Haspengouw. The commandery would consist of a reinforced house with 4 towers, a chapel, farm buildings and stables, surrounded by a wall that forms a fence of the almost 28 bunders of land. From this foundation, the village of Villers-en-Condroz would be given its current name: Villers-le-Temple.

Of the actual commandery founded by Gérard de Villers, there is unfortunately not much left to be found. Only the fence walls, a few agricultural buildings, a tower (there were originally four, 1 is still authentic, a 2<sup>nd</sup>e rebuilt in modern stone, of a 3<sup>rd</sup>e is only the foundation to be seen and of the 4<sup>th</sup>e is still missing every trace.), as well as some underground structures.

The Temple House, also known as Villers-le-Temple Castle, has been destroyed and replaced by buildings currently occupied by private individuals.

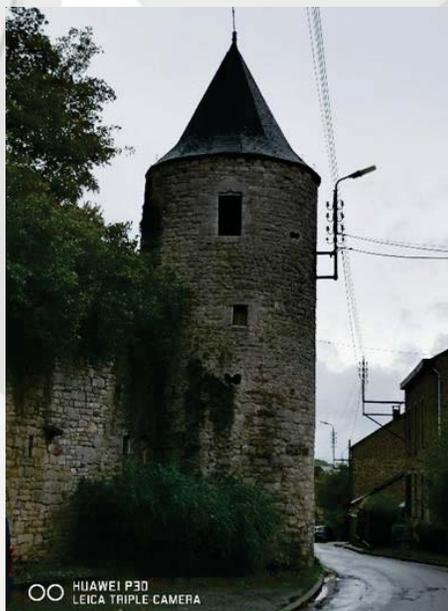


Fig. 2. The remaining tower.

The remaining tower can be seen about a hundred meters from the village church. Nearby, on the perimeter wall, a plate is affixed, quite recently, which has been struck with the cross of the temple.



Fig. 2. Perimeter wall plate.

## XI. DESCRIPTION OF THE COMMANDERY

On the High Court there was Villers Castle, consisted of a large building flanked by four large towers, two of stone and two of brick, all covered with slate, and within a small square courtyard, where there are three towers in cul-de-sacs, built since by several Commanders. (The original fortified castle probably occupied the same site as the one that was rebuilt between the 16th and 17th centuries).

In the enclosure, near the body of the residence, is a chapel, under the invocation of John the Baptist. Still depicted on a canvas painting and well painted in oil, above the tabernacle, that chapel is built of beautiful stones and bricks, and well covered with slates, with its bell tower top covered with the same, two medium-sized bells. It is said that the archives of the commandery were rested in a turret of this castle. In the high courtyard there was the dungeon which was shaped like a large rectangular tower.



*Fig. 3.* Agricultural outbuildings.

In the Lower Court In the backyard there were agricultural outbuildings with farm buildings and the farmer's house. These buildings are still present.



*Fig. 4.* Entrance to the lower court.

The entire commandery was surrounded by walls enclosing a fence of 28 bunders. [4]



*Fig. 5.* Underground entrance 1.

Although one can experience the splendor of the Templar Order above ground, the real beauty of Villers-le-Temple is found in its underground structures. Two separate stairs lead to an area that appeals to the imagination. When you go down the stairs, you don't have the faintest idea of the size that was most likely part of the cellar of the castle of Villers-Le-Ville.



*Fig. 6.* Underground cave.



Fig. 7. Underground cave 2.

As with many other temple buildings, Villers-le-Ville also had its own water supply, a well that was and still exists under the castle, within its vaults.



Fig. 8. sealed wall, to a nearby room...?

According to the state created in 1313, the house of Villers owned 94 bunders of arable land, which could give 6 seeders of spelled each annually; about 30 bunders of undeveloped land; 36 meadow bunders not far from the house and 8 others made them in Oxhe (Oxhe's Fond, Val d'Oxhe, near Huy - Note of Charles Saint-André) about 250 three-piece wooden bunders, each bringing back about 20 tournament bottoms every ten years, but on which two rangers must be kept continuously; 28

bunders of land in Nandrin, of which 10 muds [5] of oats were returned every year. In addition, the house had two mills that brought in 30 muds of rye per year, more or less.



Fig. 9. Underground water supply.

## XII. VILLERS-LE-TEMPLE COMMAND

Since the foundation of the commandery until the lifting of the Order at papal Bul "ad providum Dei", from 2 May 1312, the command of the Commandery of Villers-le-Temple would be carried by 4 preceptors of the Temple.

The first command would be conducted by Gérard de Villers, Master of the Temple, until his death on February 28, 1273.

After Gérard's death, the importance of the commandery as the capital of the bailiwick of Hesbaye would not disappear, better yet it was further developed into the headquarters of the Order [6] in Liège.

### Commanders of the Temple of Villers-le-Ville: 1260- 1273: Gérard de Villers [7]

Unfortunately, no sources exist about when Gerard decided to join the Order. As son of the Lord of Villers Bastien, he was a nobleman. However, it is suspected that he opted for the temple order after the death of his wife Margaretha around 1245. [8]

On his return in 1257 he donated all his possessions to the temple [9] and shortly afterwards became commander of Brabant and would follow in his older brothers Walter [10] footsteps as the Commander of Hesbaye. [11] Founded the commandery of Villers-le-Temple in 1260 and would also found other commanderies such as those of Haneffe and Bierset. He seemed to be an influential man within the Temple Order, as is evident from his presence at the General Chapter of March 1262. [12] He died on February 28, 1274.

His tombstone, which was in the Chapel of the Commandery, was sealed in the church of Villers-le-Temple. This record is one of the few period performances of a knight in the Order of the Temple. Granite templar crosses adorn the southern wall of the church.

The blue stone tomb, which once took place in the Chapel of the Commandery, in the floor in front of the altar, now stands

in the church of Villers. He is depicted in natural size, under a trilobed arch in the shape of an awning, and dressed in the robe of his Order. His bearded head is covered with an iron helmet called a "cervelière". With his right hand he leans on his sword, and from the left he holds a rosary on his belt. On his cloak, opposite the heart, is applied the red cross, insignia of the Templars, whose presence here has the effect of chasing the demon represented by a serpent.



Fig. 10. Burial stone of Gerard de Villers.

Around the stone reads the following inscription:

"Chi: gist:freres:gerars: ki: ceste: maison funda: aarts: por: s  
arme: si: trepassa: nl: lan: del: incarnatie: nostre: signor: Jhesus:  
Christus: mil: cc: en LXXIII: en LXXIII: en LXXIII: de: de:  
derien: ior: uit:

HERE RESTS BROTHER GERARD DE VILLERS, WHO  
FOUNDED THIS HOUSE. PRAY FOR HIS SOUL. HE DIED  
ON THE LAST DAY OF FEBRUARY OF THE YEAR OF  
THE INCARNATION OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST  
MCCLXXIII.

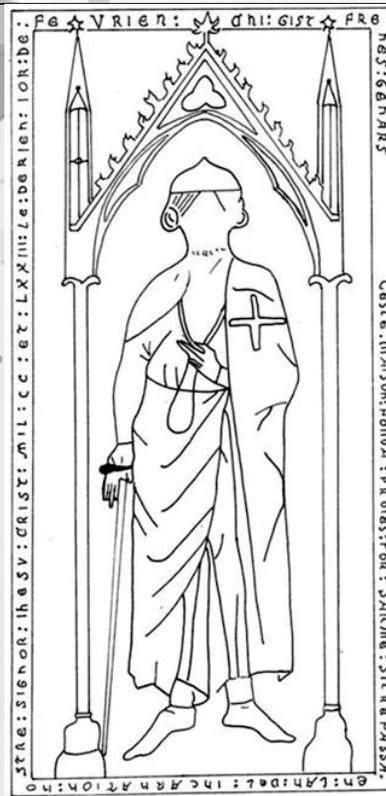


Fig. 11. Burial stone Gerard de Villers.



Fig. 12. Burial stone of Renier de Villers.

1274 - 1291: Renier de Villers [13]

Seems also a templar of merit for the Order. Mentioned in documents of 1275 and 1289 [14] mentioned as master of the house of Hesbaye. In 1292 he was mentioned as the commander of a house of the order in Germany. [15]

1291 – until about 1300: Godefroid [16]

Around 1300 - 1307: Guillaume [17]

1711: Acting Hardouin Bruslart

1712 - 1717: Alexandre Chambon d'Arbouville

1717 - 1737: Henri Perrot de Saint-Dié

1737 - 1756: Bernard d'Avesnes de Bocage

1756 - 1787: Jacques Laure le Tonnelier de Breteuil

1787 - 1792: Eustace of Vauclin or Vauquelin

### XIII. THE COMMANDERY AFTER THE DISSOLUTION OF THE ORDER

On May 2, 1312, through the papal bul "ad providum Dei", (by Pope Clement V), the Order of the Temple was abolished and the knights templar's property was transferred to the Order of St. John of Jerusalem (which would change its name to 1530 as the Order of Malta).

From 1313, the house of Villers-le-Tempel would be listed as commandery of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem within the ballroom of Avalterre. At that time the mills Larmoulin and Neumoulin were already in command.

#### Commanders of the Order of St-John of Jerusalem

1312 - 1317: William

1322: Arnaud van Wezemael

Around 1380: Peter, known as "the Templar of Huy"

1363: Gilles de Huy

1386, 1393, 1402 and 1404: Amiel de Parfondieu

1406: Jean de Parfondieu

1428 - 1435: Alexandre de Brunshorn or Brisemonde

1435 - 1440: Jacques de Parfondieu

1453 - 1456: Jean Suetmen de Diest

1504 - 1509: Guillaume de Ruydt

1509 - 1520: Jean de Hestrus

1520 - 1522: Christophe de Quatrelivres

1522 - 1524: Cornil of Homburg

1524 - 1545: Antoine de Veres

#### Commanders of the Order of Malta

1545 - 1555: Jacques d'Aspremont de Nanteuil

1555: François de Lorraine

1559: Christophe de Grenay

1566 –1573: Michel de Seure

1573 - 1586: Nicolas de Pontarlier

1586 - 1587: Francis de Byron

1587 - 1610: Claude Natalis de Conrandin

1610 - 1614: Charles de Gaillarbois

1614 - 1628: Charles Picart de Sévigny

1628 - 1645: Charles de La Fontaine

1645 - 1654: Thierry de Beaufort

1654 - 1659: Nicolas de Paris-Boissy

1659 - 1666: Antoine Lefort de Bonnefosse

1666 - 1684: François Signoret de la Borde

1684 - 1692: Balthazard de Crevant d'Humières

1692 - 1698: F. de Chambly Monthnault

1698 - 1708: Hardouin Bruslart

1708 - 1711: Alexandre Chambon d'Arbouville

In the 15th century, Chantraine in Brabant was the capital of the bailiwick of Avaltera of the Grand Priory of the Netherlands for the Order of St-John, a very important commandery in the Order of St. John. In 1466, the bailiwick was, for reasons of interest, divided into two: Chantraine and Villers-le-Temple, this division was ineffective until 1503. [18]

The commanders control all the houses of the Order in the Diocese of Cork, they are French and are elected by the Grand Priory of France. Most of them would not live in Villers-le-Temple and therefore did appoint an administrator.

A summary from 1695 description of the commandery states that: "... the chapel is still in the high courtyard joining the house, which is perched on rock, without a well or even a drop of water for the convenience of the so-called. house that one is going to look for in a fountain nearby ...»

Until the end of the Ancient Régime, all the commanders came from large families of the French nobility; they do not reside in Villers, but delegate their power to subordinates.

The most famous of them is Jacques Laure le Tonnelier de Breteuil (1723-1785) is general of the galleys of the Order of Malta, baili, is commander of the commanderies of Villers-le-Temple from 1756 to 1785, Vaillampont, Pièton ..., ambassador of the Order to the Holy See and then to Paris.

The Belgian and Liège territories were annexed by the French Republic in October 1795. On 17 June 1796, the existing Orders were abolished and their assets were sold as national goods from 1797 onwards to save the Republic's coffers.

The Commandery of Villers-le-Temple and its outbuildings became FR on April 16, 1798 for 1941000. Sold in various individual plots.

Currently, the entire estate is still divided into several private properties.



Fig. 13. Sketch of the Commandery of Villers-le-Ville.

#### REFERENCES

- [43] Villers is a derivative of the Latin word "villare", what villa means.  
[44] De Chestret de Haneffe, L'ordre du Temple dans l'ancien diocèse de Liège ou de la Belgique orientale, pp. 313-314.

- [45] Roman Causeway no. 2, 4540 Flône-Amay, Belgium - Note of Karel Saint-André.
- [46] A bunder (Latin: bonnarium; French: bonnier) or bonder is an old unit of land area, which was often slightly larger than one hectare (ha).
- [47] A mud (also mudde) is an old measure of volume. The word comes from the Latin modius.
- [48] This is demonstrated by the name of Gérard's successor Renier de Villers or saïd de Villers, who in public deeds sometimes calls himself master of the houses of the Temple in Hesbaye (1275), sometimes commander of the order house in The German country (1292).
- [49] J-L Alias; Acta Templarorium, pp. 433-434, 2002.
- [50] M. Nuytens; Krijgers voor God, pp. 170-171, 2007.
- [51] Y. Van Buyten – W. Vanderzeypen, 2005, De Tempeliers, huurlingen van de Paus.
- [52] M. Nuytens; Krijgers voor God, pp. 179, 2007.
- [53] M. Nuytens; Krijgers voor God, pp. 162-163 mention a deed of 9 August 1257 in which Gerard de Villers was recognized by the bishop of Liège as commander of the Knights Templar in Hesbaye, 2007.
- [54] M. Nuytens; Krijgers voor God, pp. 171, 2007.
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- [60] BULLETIN DE L'INSTITUT ARCHÉOLOGIQUE LIÉGEOIS - TOME LXXV, pp. 46, 1962.