

The history of the real heart of France



The location of the centre of France, the department of Cher, was the subject of a long debate between geographers and politicians. Where though would the heart of the hexagon be situated if we regarded France as a human body? Open a map and look towards the east of the capital in the direction of this heart. What do you see there beyond the limestone ridges that border the Paris Basin? This wide plain, called 'champagne' in French would eventually become the name of a region.

If you look more closely at the relief you'll see that the area is cut by rivers. They flow mainly towards the west: the Aisne and the Oise, then the Marne, the Aube, and the Yonne, all meet in one of them, the Seine. It has been used since prehistory for the transport of men and goods towards the Atlantic. The Romans founded Lutèce on the banks of the Seine. It became eventually Paris. Central and northern France was the region of the langue d'oïl, (The language of yes), and dialects from around France's



capital were the origin of Modern French.

It is easy to see if you look closely that an almost continuous link is ensured, towards the north – northeast, with the basins of the Meuse and the Moselle, towards the south and southeast, with those of the Loire and of the Saone and the Rhone, by easily passable thresholds. A large part of France is served by these passages and major waterways. They open it to the sea routes of the North Sea, the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. It is thus in Champagne that the heart of France is located, since starting from this plain, the blood of human activity can circulate by coming and going in almost all directions up to the frontiers of the hexagon and be renewed by contact with the civilizations of other nations.

The Treasure of Vix illustrates that, in the Celtic world, precious goods were already transported over very large distances. The Roman roads that run across the plain of Champagne were built to ensure a direct connection between the Empire's centre and its distant provinces They were vital for the administration, the army and for traders. Reims and Troyes were then very important crossroads towns.

The plain's vocation, in times of peace, was to provide an easy passage by land or water. It also had its own economic life that attracted merchants with their raw materials and finished goods.

The ease of communication was however a great problem in times of war. The simplest rumour of a distant incursion became quickly menacing and the populations retreated behind the fragile walls of their towns and villages. Craftsmen and merchants were forced to wait for peace to return. Roads and waterways that weren't maintained become impassable and even useless causing the economy to stagnate with disastrous consequences. The possession of valuable goods could be dangerous and it was considered wiser to hide them. If the threat became urgent the local authorities were confronted with a very difficult question. How could they control the enemy's line of march when this wide plain was invaded by hordes searching space? Should they let them pass with the risks that posed or try to stop them with the possibility of heavy losses on the banks of one of the area's many rivers?

How many times until the German surrender in 1945 did the enemy bear down on different places in the vast region of Champagne? If we go back in time there was the Battle of the Marne, Napoleon's French Campaign of 1814, the battle around the windmill at Valmy that saved the Revolution, the siege of Saint-Dizier by Charles-Quint, and Attila's threat to Troyes after the Battle of the Catalaunian Fields? Where there were no natural barriers the armies waited to confront the enemy behind makeshift walls. A lot of blood was spilled on the plain of Champagne and millions of men sacrificed their lives. The Nation's identity was forged here in this frontier zone. There are many military cemeteries with neatly aligned gravestones as well as monuments and war memorials that rightly keep alive the memory of these young lives that were ended brutally here. Flowers sometimes bloom in these gardens of death that don't belong to the local flora:

the seeds were brought from Hungary or Virginia in the pockets of those whose dying eyes stared up to the plain's immense sky. Life is always victorious over death!

Such is the geographical and historical framework of this area that does not have natural borders. Many, many times an enemy believed he held the whole of France after having struck it in the heart in the plain of Champagne. This caused several regimes to falter but each time history has obstinately given a victory to our nation. A nation all the more avid for centralized authority and a collective effort rather than a disobedient and revolutionary spirit that easily creates ill feeling between its citizens.

Was it chance that led to Reims being chosen as the place for the coronation of many generations of French kings? Monarchs who had made a love shared between the king and his subjects the cement of their kingdom. During the First World War, the Germans knew very well why they were desperate to crush the cathedral-symbol under their bombs.

If a conflict in Champagne stagnated the economy and caused misery because of deprivation in the surrounding area peace revived it. It thrived and to thrive it attracted, it welcomed, it enriched and grew rich. Before the recent installation of agribusiness, freedom of movement for men and goods on the roads and waterways was, in times of peace, the principal cause of each revival of the region's economy.

In addition the different terroirs of the Champagne region each maintain a particular rapport specific and different with water. The rivers which ensure the links between them, cut through different types of soils: sometimes argillaceous and impermeable or more often limestone and porous. If circulation is easy on this large hydraulic network, the landscape, the habitat, agricultural production in their diversity are concentrated or dispersed according to the abundance and proximity of water.

Before giving a broad outline of this region's history it should be noted that in connection with the important question of water, in the last third of the twentieth century, a triple heart bypass was practised on the principal rivers which feed the Paris area and which cross this area: the Marne, the Aube and the Seine. This major intervention on the watercourses was carried out at a quite precise point in Champagne, where the ground is composed of impermeable clays. Reservoir lakes were thus created, between Saint-Dizier and Troyes, to prevent the danger of flooding in Paris. This rather poor terroir where water flows and is also retained in multiple ponds, underwent a kind of counter-revolution. Its ungrateful nature was outraged and great quantities of water, imprisoned for a time accumulate there now behind artificial dams. So that this particular function, related to the rhythm of the seasons and the rain gauge, does not cause too much harm, the level of the water is maintained, as far as possible, during summer. Continental populations can thus enjoy a quasi-maritime landscape and activities. The local clay now rubs shoulders with fine, imported sand, nautical activities with stock breeding, the pleasures of sunbathing, forest walks etc....

These are in the middle of old forests with names charged in history: Trois-Fontaines, Soulaines, Clairvaux, the Orient and Temple. We will return to them shortly. They are the relics of a very old forest, the Forest of Der (Oak in Celtic)...

Nature is ever present in this corner of Champagne despite the relatively artificial character of the water reserves described above.

The Celts were probably the first to exploit these forests. They worked in wood and metal, wove cloth and raised fish and pigs.

A little before the year 1000, with evangelisation and an increase in population, village communities started to develop. The great monastic orders found the conditions ideal here: in the area which interests us, around the Lac Fôret d'Orient: Beaulieu, Basse Fontaine, both near Brienne, Montiéramey and Larrivour. There are other prestigious names such as Montier-la-Celle, Montier-en-Der, Clairvaux, and Molesmes not too far away.

Monks and peasants domesticated the old forest by cutting and clearing it. The Counts of Champagne and Brienne were the most important noble families in the area. They administered their feudal rights, protected goods and men, constituted rich personal hunting grounds and gained much money from exploiting the forests. When we think of an old forest we think of oak trees. This strong wood was particularly sought after for construction in an area where there is not a lot of stone. We now have a fine legacy of historic half-timbered houses-there are at least a 1,000 in Troyes.

Our local lords decided for a large number of reasons to endow the monastic orders and the Templars. They also decided that over the long term they'd extract as much as they could from the riches of this terroir whose fundamental features have hardly changed since. The present administration, responsible for the economy, tourism and cultural activities in this area, in particular in the Fôret d'Orient Regional Natural Park, are, to a certain extent, in charge of almost fossil territories. This part of Champagne was saved from industrialisation and agricultural upheavals and deserves to be studied.

We have already shown that Champagne is geographically and historically the heart of France. We can now add that the Fôret d'Orient Regional Natural Park that is in the heart of this heart should by its location be considered a very

special place for our national heritage.

Let us return, within this precise framework, for our historical survey by limiting our attention to precisely fifty communes in the Park. We are interested in the statues and stained glass of their historic churches. We will introduce you to just a few examples. These restored works are the object of a particular presentation.

Whilst several archaeological sites date back to prehistory, one finds many worked stones here; it is the local geography that preserves the most traces of early human occupation in this area. The forests, rivers, and villages have kept names that hold the secrets of the tribes and the men who created them. It's certain that for a long time and especially since the time of the Gauls, that this wooded area was used, like so many others in Northern Europe, as a place of refuge but also more importantly a place of work: building, grazing, the iron and glass industries... New discoveries are still to be made.

The Roman colonization of Gaul saw the start of a first period of prosperity. It dated from the end of the C1st AD to the first third of the C3rd AD.

The Romans had a less profound influence on the modest people of the Tricasses than they did on their richer cousins the Rèmes. Southern Champagne and more particularly the Park, has few traces of monuments. Almost all of the Roman constructions in Troyes and its surrounding area were swept away during the barbarian invasions. There's nothing here like the Porte de Mars or the sarcophagus of Jovin in Reims, or the monumental gate and fine collection of artefacts in the museum in Langres. Villas were however located at Pel-en-Der and Saint-Leger-sous-Brienne and the traces of four Roman roads delimit, to a certain extent, the Park today: two important roads connected Lyon and Reims, the first via Autun, Troyes and Arcis-on-Aube (N 77), the second via Langres and Bar-sur-Aube (Segessera) and then followed the river to Brienne-la-Vielle (N 396); and two minor roads: in the north of the Park that connected Troyes and Joinville on the Marne (N 60), the other in the south joined Troyes to Bar-on-Aube (N 19). The area certainly benefited from this increase in trading opportunities throughout the great empire, to which it offered necessary products, in particular cereals for the troops stationed on the northern and eastern frontiers. The most important horde of coins from the Western Roman Empire was found in Troyes: 186,200 poorly made local coins dating from the second half of the C3rd with a total weight of 102 kg.

The Taranis Monument in Brienne-la-Vielle can teach us much. This modest village in the Park stands in the shadow of its larger neighbour, Brienne-le-Château. When work was recently undertaken on the church here, a votive column was found. The specialists have identified the five gods depicted on the monument. There's Jupiter/Taranis: King of the Gods, Lug the old prehistoric god who symbolizes wisdom, Hercules, symbolizing military force, and two gods from the East who were very in fashion then: Cybelle the protector of military camps and Seraphis, an Egyptian god, doctor and bargeman. The Romans choose this strategic site, where the Roman road from Langres to Reims leaves the river Aube, to build a camp and a port. Whilst the Aube upstream was deep enough to be used by supply boats downstream it was too shallow and only suitable for floating wood. The latter function continued until the construction of the railway network in the C19th. It seems clear that Roman soldiers with different nationalities built this monument to worship local, Roman and other foreign gods. The Romans were good at blending and uniting religions. They guarded the local specificities in so many places and for so many professions. The site of the port was good and the gods well chosen.

The Taranis column opens the intellect and the imagination onto a buried past. It also serves as a witness to the way in which the colonisers were able to combine waterways and roads to create an efficient regional network that suited their needs.

Barbarian invasions and the slow evangelisation of France between the C3rd and the C10th erased the visible traces of the first period of prosperity and created new conditions. They marked our area deeply even though there are now few traces. Warrior tombs have been excavated and we have close to the Park early Christian places of worship such as Saint-Parres-aux-Tertres and Isles-Aumont. Many villages were also built at this time.

The rural society that emerged was aware of the dangers surrounding it. It was organized around well-regulated centres of production. Drive through the countryside in Champagne now and you'll see that a church dominates many villages. The origins of the system of parishes' dates back to the period we're describing. Let us look at this in more detail from a local perspective.

Northern Europe was unbalanced by the fall of the Roman Empire. During this dark age our region came to the fore. Frankish and Germanic tribes, the ancestors of the French, settled in France. Clovis (466-511) and later Charlemagne (742-814) tried to create a coherent territorial whole from these two groups. Imagine that by a hazard of division Soissons, Laon, Reims or Troyes had become a capital like Metz or Aachen. After the deaths of these two kings the uniting forces broke apart as quickly as the too fragile political structures. Two blocs emerged in the east and the west that disputed for the central part from Flanders to Provence. They were particularly interested in Lorraine, Burgundy and Champagne.

During the centuries that interest us danger was often present. There were invasions by the Huns and later the Vikings that made trade difficult and obliged people to organize to protect themselves. A powerful man with his army of loyal followers guaranteed security thanks to a fortified site that offered a refuge. Feudalism that existed in France for at least a thousand years was based precisely on this need for security, and reciprocity. Here, for example, the inhabitants of Brienne-la-Vielle, moved from the site of the port to shelter under the former oppidum of Brienne-le-Château .A late C18th chateau now stands here.

Amongst the noble families who ruled our territory we are mainly interested in the Counts of Champagne and the Counts of Brienne. There were ties between them as well as with the ruling dynasty; the Capetians They gave France several queens and the royal family several countesses of Champagne. They took part in the Crusades. Henry of Champagne was king of Jerusalem at the end of the C12th and Jean of Brienne became Emperor of Constantinople at the beginning of the C13th. The most important of these Palatine Counts were: Theobald the Large, (1125-1152), Henri 1(the Liberal), who died after returning from the Crusades in 1181, husband of Mary of Champagne, the daughter of Eleanor of Aquitaine, Theobald IV, the Songwriter (1201-1253). Their lands lay between Provins and Bar-sur-Aube, and were bordered to the north by the possessions of the Bishops of Châlons and Reims, to the south by those of the Dukes of Burgundy and to the west those of the kings of France, and to the east by those of the Holy Roman Emperors. The counts understood that this plain crisscrossed by roads with towns at strategic sites was intended for trade. They established in the C11th the famous Fairs of Champagne which were held in Bar and Lagny as well as Provins and Troyes. The fairs offered to all the merchants of Europe the chance to sell their products throughout the year. The counts ensured the protection of merchants and guaranteed currencies and contracts. This policy made the region thrive. Whilst Provins has guarded traces of the counts and the fairs there are no significant remains in or around Troyes. We can only dream that the oldest trees in the Forêt d'Orient saw the court of the Counts of Champagne gallop past in pursuit of game or that beneath these leafy boughs in around 1170 the poet Chrétien of Troyes recited to Mary of Champagne some of his verses from Yvain , The Knight with the lion.

These princes also gave to the Church and this has left more traces. The C9th marked the start of the spreading of Christianity throughout Western Europe. Gradually structures were installed to guide the faithful. The secular clergy who lived in the world were responsible for parish churches and the regular clergy who were cloistered followed their rule in monasteries. The bishops were in charge of dioceses that had been created following Roman territorial boundaries.

The population had started to grow by the C8/9th and at the beginning of the year 1000 AD Europe was on the brink of a revival. Raoul Glaber, the Benedictine chronicler described France as covered "with a white blanket of churches". With a trained eye we can still find traces of Romanesque architecture preserved in our religious buildings. In the Park you can see traces, in Brienne-la-Vielle, Bossancourt, Mesnil-Saint-Père, Montiéramey, Montreuil-sur-Barse and in the surroundings Isles-Aumont, Rouilly-Saint-Loup, and Moussey. Troyes has only one beautiful capital from St Etienne the church of the Counts of Champagne. There's also the eleven Romanesque arcades from the southern side of the cloisters of the abbey of the order of Prémontrés (Norbertines) in Basse-Fontaine, close to Brienne. Gauthier II, Count of Brienne founded this abbey dedicated to Our Lady in 1143.

The impressive late C12th wooden statue of the [Virgin-Mother in Rouilly-Sacey](#) , is the only surviving witness to religious sculpture at the time of the counts. Her soft features show already the most remarkable characteristic of the works that were made later in the area.

When you compare it with the large C13th statue of the [Virgin-Mother in Bossancourt](#), there's a noticeable evolution in the expression of feminine charm! The village's church has conserved elements from the C11th and C12th .

The last Countess of Champagne, Jeanne, married Philippe of France in 1284. He became king a year later. Champagne kept its own administration until 1314. It was at this date that our area became definitively a royal possession.

The statue of the [Virgin mother in Dosches](#), dates to this time. She is graceful but the Parisian style, very neat and a little aristocratic , is very noticeable.

The large stone statue of the [Virgin Mary in Rouilly-Sacey](#), is a little later in date. One can see different European influences particularly from the south of France. It should not be forgotten that the Counts of Champagne were also kings of Navarre from 1234 and that the region's culture was already very cosmopolitan.

The union with the kingdom of France did not destroy the religious and social structures that had been established over the previous centuries. There were changes in the ranks of the nobility .Several old families had disappeared during the Crusades .It was from the reign of Phillip Augustus that the Capetians increased their power and during their rise they grabbed the titles of noble families. Here, the county of Brienne and Piney passed to the House of Enghien then to the Luxembourgs who kept it for a long time (See the [painting in Piney's church](#)) . The riches gained from the Fairs of Champagne caused the merchants and bourgeoisie of Troyes to become interested in the financial possibilities of land

ownership. They pursued this strategy over the following centuries and some succeeded in becoming members of nobility.

It was however the Church which most reinforced its position. The important chapters in Troyes -Saint-Loup, Saint-Etienne, Saint-Pierre and Paul, the abbeys -Larivour, Montieramey and close to Troyes the abbey of Montier-la-Celle as well as the Templiers in Troyes had received over the centuries many donations. It was from these generous acts to obtain forgiveness that these institutions created important domains which included labourers, lands and woods, incomes and feudal rights... Church members were often recruited from the bourgeoisies of Troyes and we can imagine the complicity that existed in the management of these goods.

The maintenance and the decoration of the churches preserve the trace of these strategies that were to be strengthened.

This society, in complete transformation, was to suffer from 1320 at least a century and a half of disorder and war. The Black Death killed at least a third of the inhabitants of Europe. The One Hundred Years War was very cruel in Champagne. One can add to these two physical wounds the moral crisis generated by the Great Schism which led to the papacy being divided between Rome and Avignon. The economy at the end of this period was in ruins.

The revival that started in the 1460's, was as vigorous as the desires were strong: the need for men and money sharpened ambitions. The bourgeoisie in Troyes decided with a modest then serious determination to re-conquer the European markets. The decoration of the churches in a witness of this-there was little rebuilding but a lot of restoration. The statues and stained glass reflect the taste of a former age: reserved and serious, such as the [Pieta in the Oratory in Marmoret \(Brévonnes\)](#), the [statues of Saint-James \(?\) in Blaincourt](#), [Saint Syre in Unienville](#), [Saint Robert \(?\) in Radonvilliers](#), the [statues of Saint John and the Virgin in Lassicourt](#), [Saint Eloi in Villeneuve-au-Chêne](#), [Saint George in Laubresse](#), and the [tomb stone in Ville-aux-Bois](#).

The stained glass is remarkable for its colours and the force of the design, for example the fragment of the [Creation of the World in Dienville](#) or in the [beautiful series of windows in Montangon](#).

Prosperity returned under the good king Louis XII, the "father of the people", who restored the Fairs of Champagne. Work now started on rebuilding. The statues started to have smiles and the poses were more natural: [Saint Eloi in Bouranton](#), [Saint George in Epagne](#), the very sober expression of the Bound Christ in Montreuil-sur-Barse which dates to 1520, and the impressive [Saint Quirinus in Pel-en-Der](#)

In the 1520's, a new generation who'd been raised in peaceful times started to take control in domains as different as the economy and the arts. It was virtuosity that was most important for these men. They seemed to challenge each other in their way of rendering the essence of youth? Witness to this are the many statues of Virgin Mothers from this period, all very young and elegant, even quite provocative: note particularly the most skilful in [Chauffour-les-Bailly](#), and [Mesnil-Saint-Père](#): the most elegant, is the [Education of the Virgin in Montieramey](#), where female stylishness bursts out in a multitude of details: the pompons, laces, embroideries, belts.... The possession of a book was then seen as very fashionable and this explains why this model was so often recopied! There's also the [statue of Saint Martin in Villehardouin](#).

Rich donors could offer for the high altar a superb altar piece, like the one in [Géraudot](#) that dates to 1540. The forms of classical architecture triumph but the theme is treated in the style of Flemish realism. It's the classical lines that are striking in [the baptismal font in La Loge-au-Chévres](#)(1559). The beautiful chair in Juvanzé is a more modest but still very accomplished piece .

The search for detail started to tire these craftsmen around the middle of the C16th What could be more affected than the young [Virgin Mother in Rouilly-Sacey](#) or the [Saint Gengoul in Sacey](#)? The economy had started to slow down, the ideas of the Reformers had reached France and religious wars were brewing. It's against this background that the search for expression concentrated on clothes and the human form was styled according to the influence of the Renaissance that came from Italian artists working on Fontainebleau. Italian artists and artists from Troyes worked there side by side: see, for example, the [Pieta in Rothière](#), the [Praying Virgin in Magny-Fouchard](#), [Saint Peter in Rosson](#), the unforgettable [Virgin in Précý-Notre-Dame](#), and finally, the delicate [Baptism of Christ on the baptismal font in Brantigny](#).

Stained glass lost its colour and became painting on glass, see for example the [series of windows in Brienne-le-Château](#).

The end of the C16th was a sad time for Champagne. During a generation the divisions between Catholics and Protestants had caused a considerable slow down in trade.

A neat work that we cannot now appreciate for its proper value, brings us an echo of those difficult times: it is the [tomb of Louise de Coligny, in Thennelières](#) (1589). The important nobility made a point of marking the place of their burial in

a church on land that they owned. Sometimes they offered more prestigious testimonies of their generosity ,for example, the painting of Charles-Henry of Clermont-Tonnerre, Duke of Piney-Luxembourg in the church of Piney.

Their servants could imitate them. The artist Joachim Duviert "officer of the king, painter of Mgr of Luxembourg and his servant" offered, in about 1620, to the church in Vendeuivre a series of paintings representing the Mysteries of the Rosary.

The economic revival of the first half of the C16th came to be considered like the period of the Fairs of Champagne as a happy time. Henri IV succeeded with the Edict of Nantes (1598)in putting an end to the civil war. It did not though allow a resumption in trade, in particular with Italy and Germany. The kingdom of France turned in on itself. The ambitious satisfied themselves by serving the monarchy in a games of interests... or dupes that finished, as we know, by the defeat of absolutism.

The Catholic Counter-Reformation gave new life to the peoples faith. If the area has many works of art of a high quality, it is often because lords, priests, or religious establishments that had the means to meet their generosity offered them. Works for repentance were more modest. Troyes was an important artistic centre. The donors here also frequented the capital and by their networks they knew the best artists. After the Revolution modest country craftsmen continued to ensure the decoration of the churches. This popular art is often difficult to date, see for example, St John the Baptist in Précý-St-Martin and Saint Christopher in St Christophe Dodinicourt. All of the churches have such works.

The French Revolution brought destruction and the dispersal of works of art from religious buildings such as the abbeys of Larrivour, Basse-Fontaine or Montieramey.

The rural economy in the C19th had a certain vitality and there was money to pay for restoration and new decoration. The ' Sainterie' in Vendeuivre flooded the area with terra cotta religous statues. It was often a priest that decided to make changes in his church ,for example, in Lusigny. It was partly rebuilt with taste and it was given a decoration in a very uniform style particularly its stained glass (c.1860-1880).

We cannot ignore works from the C20th ,for example, the medallion by the Italian sculptor Medaro Rosso (1858-1928), in the church in Trannes .It depicts a mother and her child. Champagne had , once again, welcomed a foreign artist!

These fifty communes are like a large museum. One has to make an effort to discover these forgotten masterpieces in the places for which they were created. We have tried to make them available. It is not pure conservation. It is an attempt to put life back into our heritage . If the park succeeds in sharing this discovery with the tourists of our time it will be rewarded.

Brochure extract "Quelles merveilles autour des lacs"/old website nature-aube.org