

Town and region of art and history
Coëvrons-Mayenne

Architecture is fixed music.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832)

discover the **story** of
**Sainte-
Suzanne**

Sainte-Suzanne, medieval town

Until recently it was commonly thought that the origins of the human occupation at Sainte-Suzanne dated from the 11th century. Yet, archaeological excavations led in 2006, assured that the privilege situation, 60 m above the Erve river, favoured an implantation from the 6th century B. C.

An ancient occupation

The site of Sainte-Suzanne is known for its medieval vestiges, but a recent excavation, led at the foot of the lodge, allows nowadays to reconsider its origin. Indeed, the remnants of a settlement (fireplace, ceramics) vouch for an occupation from the 6th century B. C. (Iron Age). This rocky outcrop site was chosen for it was naturally defended on two of its three sides. Obviously, it also possesses from this period a symbolic and prestigious aspect. Several clues permit to suggest that the whole promontory was encircled by a vitrified rampart. This type of fortification is obtained thanks to a great heat (until 1400°) which solders the blocks between them and gives them an aspect close to cooled lava.

The medieval keep: a Carolingian origin

Between 2001 and 2003, the keep ① was restored and archaeological observations were made on the masonry to learn about their transformations. During a survey in the ground of the monument, some foundations belonging to a preceding building were discovered. It is probably a wooden tower, edified in the 10th century.

William the Conqueror's failure

The stone keep was certainly built at the beginning of the 11th century. At the end of the century the Beaumont family owned the lordship which, apart from the keep, was composed of a budding town and a rural territory, progressively gained on the Charnie forest, thanks to the clearings. At the end of the century Sainte-Suzanne was involved in the conflicts opposing the Normandy and the Maine. William the Conqueror, duke of Normandy and king of England, wanted to expand his power southward and wished to take the province. Diplomatic approaches failed and war erupted. The fortresses fell one after one under the Normand grasp.

A medieval fortress

Henri IVth old. Musée national du château de Pau (© R.M.N.).



Aerial view of the fortress of Sainte-Suzanne.



Then, in 1083, the Conqueror besieged Sainte-Suzanne, defended by Hubert de Beaumont. Face to the failures of his first assaults, he commanded the construction of an earthen camp to settle his army. The remnants of this camp are still visible, close to the road leading to Assé-le-Bérenger. After 3 years, the Normans didn't manage to take the town. Getting tired, they entered into negotiations. Hubert de Beaumont accepted to negotiate and peace came back. According to Orderic Vital, a contemporary chronicler, Sainte-Suzanne victoriously resisted "because of the rocks and the thickness of the vines all around it".

The Hundred Year's War

As the french king's authority strengthened on the princes and on his vassals, the seigniorial conflicts found an appeasement. Yet, this authority wavered anew, throwing the kingdom of France into the Hundred Years' War, against England. In 1425, Sainte-Suzanne unable to resist against the English artillery was taken and occupied during 14 years. Jean de Bueil finally recaptured it in 1439, thanks to John Ferramen's, an English soldier, treason. A century later, the Religion wars bathed France in blood. From 1589 the members of the League and Henri IVth's supporters fought over the town. During this two



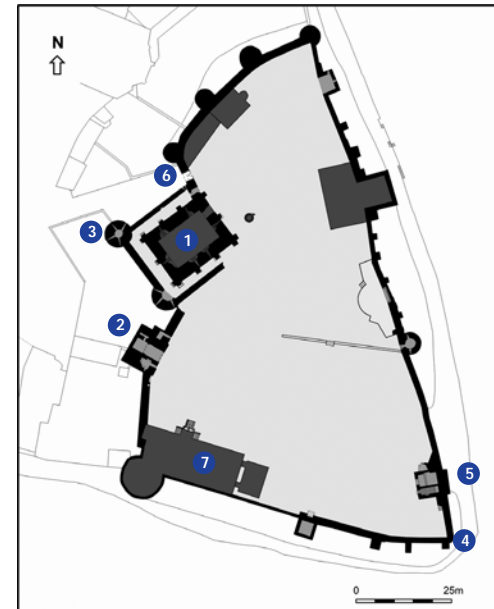
Marguerite de Valois. François Clouet's preparatory drawing. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Cabinet des Estampes.

conflicts, the enclosure of the fortress was equipped with machicolations and square towers pierced of piece guns.

From the lord to the king

In the 16th century, the town belonged to Henri IVth, who had inherited it from his grandmother: Françoise d'Alençon. He sold it to his first wife: the Queen Margot who resold it in 1604 to Guillaume Fouquet de la Varenne. This man was close to the king Henri. This one rewarded him of his faith in allowing him to become marquis of La Flèche. Fouquet de la Varenne also created the first post office services in the kingdom.

- 1 Keep
- 2 Draw-bridge
- 3 Farinière tower
- 4 Southern corner of the outcrop
- 5 Iron door
- 6 Current entrance
- 7 Lodge



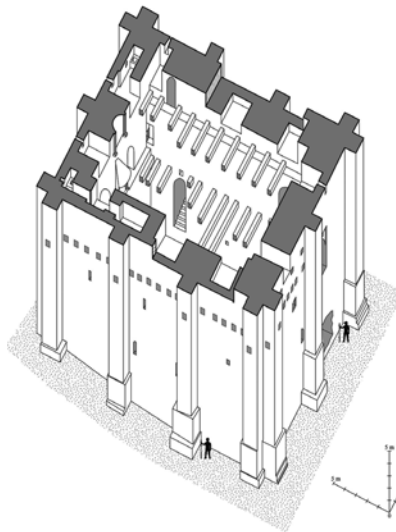
Keep and drawbridge

The fortress of Sainte-Suzanne keeps inside its ramparts some vestiges of the former entrance and of the keep, residence of the lords.

The medieval vestiges

The medieval entrance ②

In the Middle Ages, the entrance was close to the current lodge. At the origin (12th century?) it was a crossing surrounded by two warden rooms, whose two round arches still remain. Probably at the beginning of the 14th century, the entrance was considerably modified by the construction of a large crossing topped by a red sandstone pointed arch. The drawbridge may not precede the 15th -16th century, period where two buttresses were added. They both shelter the lifting of the bridge and enforce the defence. The system has three active defence elements: folding doors*, portcullis*, bridge. This ostentuous work is also meant to show the power of the lord of Sainte-Suzanne. Become useless after the 17th century, the former entrance was turned into a dwelling with a bread oven.



The keep

This quadrangular tower has three levels dedicated to different uses. It's impossible to know its original height and the shape of its roof because the summit disappeared. The ground floor was not a living space but a storage place. The narrow openings served for light and air but not for shooting. A movable stair, surely in wood, gave access to the keep by the first floor. The door, visible on the northern wall, was raised by security: when the castle was attacked it was only needed to remove the wooden staircase to be sheltered from the assailants. The first floor was considered as the noble space; used for reception. There, the lord surrendered justice and received his vassals. The room is lighted by six recessed bays* and several comfort elements are still visible: 2 latrines, 2 sinks which could be used for bathing or for cooking and some wardrobes, kind of vaulted corridors dug in the thickness of the walls. The room of the second floor is the highest and widest of the building. Lightened by 9 recessed bays it might have a private use and be reserved to the lord and his family. From the second floor, a trap door, hidden on the northern wall, led to a secret room dissimulated in the thickness of the masonry. This one, accessible with difficulty, protected against fire, has 2 windows and a cupboard. That was surely "the room of the treasure" meant to shut up precious objects (written documents as well as

jewellery). The 2 chimneys visible on the western wall (unblocked during the restoration) seem to have been condemned as the keep was built. It is possible that the edifice changed of destination and was reduced to a unique military function.

Inner of the keep, south-west wall. The arches at the centre of the 1st and the 2nd floor are the remnants of the filled in again chimneys.



The ramparts

From the Middle Ages to the 18th century, the castle of Sainte-Suzanne had a military function, visible in its fortifications.

The defensive elements

The Farinière tower (ci-contre) ³

The stone ramparts were maybe built in the 13th century. They include the keep and defend its base. The Farinière tower, located at the south-east corner is one of the eldest of the castle (mid-13th century). The enclosure is bordered by a dry moat which lengthens to the dwelling. At the origin, this moat was full of thorns and nettles; the barbed wires of the period.

Southern corner of the outcrop ⁴

A stair gives access to the top of the rampart where a beautiful panorama can be enjoyed. The view spreads on two of the sides of the castle and on the Erve valley. On the other side of the river, is located the Tertre Ganne and further, the edge of the Charnie forest. Still more on the right, the Erve river crosses the river Village.

Room of the treasure in the keep.



The iron door ⁵

The rampart is interrupted, on its east side, by a second entrance, called “postern”. In the 12th century it was a basic crossing, perpetuated by the current door. At the end of the 13th century, the defending system was strengthened by adding an overhanging wall, where 2 murder-blocks* were fitted out. The building which encroaches on the yard, and its high parts are the most recent equipments, whose construction spreads out from the 15th to the 20th century.



The drawbridge, former entrance of the fortress. It was filled in again in the 17th century, during the building of the lodge



The entrance porch ⁶

The current entrance was probably pierced at the beginning of the 17th century, during the building of the lodge. But it is integrated in the medieval part of the fortress. To the right, the keep, preceded by the rampart. To the left, a medieval tower (13th-14th century) crowned with machicolations during the Hundred Years' War.

At the bottom and middle, current entrance of the fortress. The door was pierced in the 17th century in medieval walls. The machicolations are still visible on the left tower.

The iron door, secondary entrance of the castle.



The lodge

In 1608, Guillaume Fouquet de la Varenne, new lord of Sainte-Suzanne commanded the construction of a new castle.

An architectural transition between Renaissance and Classicism 7

The work may have lasted 5 years, as the year “1613” found on the lintel of a window, during the restoration, indicates it. Yet, the northern part is the only one to be finished. The main façade is characteristic from the Henri IVth's period. The heirloom of the Renaissance is visible in the mullion windows, the pediments topping the dormer windows and the superimposition of the orders (Doric below, ionic on the first floor, Corinthian on the second). The Classicism can be found in the sobriety of the adornment and the clearness of the disposition (vertical spans interrupted by horizontal string courses). This severity is yet softened by the pavilion used as a perron, topped by a rounded roof. A double stair gives access to the inner staircase. The large tower must have a medieval origin. A study of the edifice revealed that its base dates from the 15th or 16th century, whereas its high part was rebuilt in the 17th century.

A new living space



Le lodge of the castle of Sainte-Suzanne restored.

A clear organisation

According to a description from 1655, the inner staircase divides the lodge into two spaces: the reception rooms to the left, the private rooms to the right. The rooms kept their chimneys whose bossage adornment remembers the one of the façade, and whose chimney funnel is surrounded by pilasters. The great room on the second floor is covered by a beautiful framework of medieval manner.



Guillaume Fouquet de la Varenne, lodge of Sainte-Suzanne's builder.

The Centre of Interpretation of Architecture and Patrimony (CIAP)

After 3 years of restoration the lodge has opened its doors again in 2009. It now shelters the Centre of Interpretation of Architecture and Patrimony.

An exhibition place

Presenting the mayennais heritage

The Towns and Regions of art and history convention requires from any signatory town or region to open a centre in order to introduce the story and the heritage of the territory, in a delay of 5 years after its creation. The Region of art and history Coëvrons-Mayenne was born on October 2005. The partners collectivities of the Region Coëvrons-Mayenne quickly designated the lodge to shelter that structure. Yet, they choose to show the whole mayennais heritage instead of narrowing to the limits of the Region. Moreover, this exhibition integrates all kinds of patrimony: archaeological, historical, architectural, and also natural and memorial.

Evolution of the Mayenne department from Prehistory to nowadays.



The ground floor: Sainte-Suzanne and the natural heritage

Behind the greeting space, opens a room devoted to the story of Sainte-Suzanne. At the centre a multimedia post offers a journey in the fortress, the medieval town and the surrounding territory. The part devoted to the natural heritage was fitted out on the other side of the staircase. The environment, geological and hydrographic thematic are broached thanks to tables settled at the centre of the room. Some illustrations of animals decorate the largest wall and a film illustrates the world of horse-races in introducing the Vaiges stud farm. A curiosity cabinet is on the following room. Based on the curiosity cabinets, fashionable during the 18th century, it keeps some seeds of different plants and some skeletons of unusual animals such as the pygmy shrew, smallest mammal of the department.

The patrimony of the Mayenne department from the Middle Ages to the 21st century.



The first floor: the historical heritage

On the first floor, an animated map, coordinated with an audio commentary shows the evolution of the territory. The two following rooms develop the information delivered in the first room. The first evokes the mayennais heritage from Prehistory to the early Middle Ages. The other pursues this presentation from the Middle Ages to the 21st century and models of three remarkable monuments of the department are settled in. The fourth room speaks about the country heritage, the customs and the way of life in Mayenne between the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century.

The second floor: a lecture and temporary exhibition space

The last floor is dedicated to temporary exhibitions based on the patrimony. Between 2009 and 2010, an exhibition based on the work of the *Inventaire* service on the canton of Sainte-Suzanne was presented. This floor also comprises a room devoted to lectures (below).



The medieval town

Built in the extension of the castle and surrounded by ramparts, the medieval town directly depended from the lord. It gathered a population of craftsmen and clerks and was a market town, source of benefits for the lord.

The fortifications

The medieval town was completely surrounded by high walls built during the Middle Ages and improved in the 16th century, at the time of the Religion wars. The enclosure was not as large as the current town for extensions were realised in the 19th century. The rampart crossed the *Rue de la cité* and the *Butte Verte* park. The ornamental tiling indicates the place of the vanished walls and towers. The circulation inside the town was also different. The fence had two entrances: the *Porte du Guichet* ① to the north, and the former *Porte murée* ② to the southwest, destroyed in 1786. The most imposing tower ③ is on the west side of the fortification for this one does not benefit from the natural protection that the slope dug by the Erve river offers. Built in the 15th or the 16th century it is endowed with openings fitted to the shot of fire arms. The path called *Promenade de la Poterne* which nowadays allows to border the town while looking at the river, did not exist during the Middle Ages for it would have represented a danger; in case of siege, assailants might have used it to approach the town and dig some tunnels under the walls.

The medieval dwelling

Several houses built in the Middle Ages and refurbished during the following centuries, remain. The most remarkable are the *Butte Verte* manor ④ and the manor close to the fortress. ⑤ Both of them were built between the end of the 15th and the beginning of the 16th century, as their polygonal tower aimed to receive a staircase, testifies it. Coutelle de la Housaye, president of the court running the salt loft inhabited it in the 18th century. Other dwellings, widely refit at following eras still have some medieval elements; thus, a house in the *Rue du Grenier à Sel* keeps the relic of a three-light window.

An administrative town

At the end of the 16th century, Sainte-Suzanne became an intermediary of the royal administration, for the justice and the *gabelle*. To carry out the missions entrusted to it, Sainte-Suzanne had three establishments: the auditory of justice located in the vanished markets, the house of the prosecutor ⑥ and the salt loft ⑦. In the *rue de l'Auditoire*, a house dated from the beginning of the 16th century sheltered the prosecutor, representative of the royal law. A *Montrée* realized in 1772, as the Maine was given in possession to the Earl of Provence, Louis XVth's grandson, indicates the existence of a jail.





The three locks of the salt loft.

The salt loft, now turned into a dwelling, kept its former door equipped with three different locks. Three notables, each of them owning one key, were needed to open the building. Every inhabitant of Sainte-Suzanne as those of the 26 surrounding parishes, had to look for their salt provision there and paid the gabelle in passing. This tax was deeply unequal according to provinces; the Britain for example was tax-free whereas the Maine was loudly taxed. The three locks proves the importance that the Rule attached to the respect of this tax. It also explained the flourishing clandestine trade where smugglers were specialized. The *gabelle* was so unpopular that the salt loft was plundered at the beginning of the Revolution.



Detail of the porch of the church.

A church with a Renaissance porch ⁸

The church of Sainte-Suzanne, consecrated in 1553, was rebuilt in 1824 for the most part. Nevertheless it kept its porch, noticeable by its Renaissance architecture. The door was surrounded by two columns crowned with composite capitals, bearing an entablature.

Former house of the prosecutor in the *rue de l'Auditoire*.



The *Butte Verte* manor. It was built at the end of the Middle Ages but the windows of the first floor were modified in the 18th century. The manor shelters nowadays the Tourism Office.

The transformations of the 19th century

A townhall ⁹ and a new street

A townhall was built in 1883-1884 in the heart of the medieval town, instead of the markets which sheltered the fairs. Expressing the rationalism of its time, it presents a tripartite façade with a forepart topped by a pediment. The *Rue de la Cité* ¹⁰ was pierced in 1824 to facilitate the access to the town: a part of the enclosure was destroyed at that occasion. The bordering houses are recognizable by their alignment in relation to the tracing of the way. At this period the town extended beyond the rampart and developed itself around four main axes: the road leading to Le Mans, the Montsûrs road, The Evron road and the Torcé-Vivier-en-Charnie road.

The townhall, built between 1883-1884 by Eugène Hawke.



The surroundings of Sainte-Suzanne

In the neighbourhood of Sainte-Suzanne several monuments are directly linked to the story of the city.

The river village

Located below the medieval town, alongside the Erve river, the river village brought together activities that required water as a driving force or as raw material. 20 mills for flour, tanning, fulling and paper all worked within a distance of 2 km. The oldest houses date from the 15th century. From this period, the manufacturing of paper pulp from old flax or hemp fabric was a speciality of Sainte-Suzanne. The force of the water activated mallets which pounded the fabrics which had been first rotten in tanks. In the 18th century, a part of this production was used to print playing cards, as a wood engraving, kept at the Auditoire museum testifies to it. The gohard mill is a remnant of this industry.

A busy suburb

Former Gohard mill in the river Village. This mill used to make paper pulp from old flax or hemp fabric. It was converted then in a flour mill and later in a dwelling.



Wood engraving plaque used in the 18th century to print playcards. It is displayed in the Auditoire museum .

A William the Conqueror's memory

The Beugy camp

From 1083 to 1087, William the Conqueror besieged Sainte-Suzanne. When he realized that the town could not be captured but by a long siege, he settled his army in a camp and went back into England. This camp located at 1 km of Sainte-Suzanne, on the Assé-le-Bérenger road, is remarkably preserved. 220m long and 100m large, it consists of two walls in a horseshoe, built at the edge of a valley and separated by a moat. The earth banks bordered by moat, were probably crowned with palisades and wooden towers. The Beugy camp is open for unaccompanied visits.

One of the two enclosure of the Beugy camp. The grassy crossing at the centre gives access to the second enclosure.



The oldest Monument of the Mayenne

The dolmen of Erves

Dolmen are tombs dating from the Neolithic period; they consist of a narrow corridor and a burial chamber where the dead were laid. The dolmen of Erves was built between 4700 and 4000 B.C., and belongs to the first corridor dolmen, such as one of the Mané-Kerioned near Carnac (Morbihan). It is the oldest monument built in Mayenne. The architecture of the dolmen of Erves relates it to the type of dolmens built near Angers, characterized by a large chamber and a narrow corridor. Excavations made in 1983 had unearthed the traces of an accumulation of stones around the large stone blocks. The dolmen were indeed covered by a mound of stones: the cairn. Thus, the chamber formed a sort of dark crypt. But the cairn stones dispersed over time, leaving only the large stones of the megalithic frame, much more difficult to move. The dolmen of Erves is an open access site, on the Assé-le-Bérenger road.

The Erves dolmen.



* **Porticullis** : wooden or iron gate, armed below with strong spikes. It slid in the side walls of a main door of a stronghold and protected it.

Folding doors : movable panel of a door.

Recess windows : wide opening dug in the thickness of a wall allowing people to access to shooting rooms, windows, latrines and wardrobes .

Murder-hole : opening made in a crossing or above a door in order to launch projectiles on assailants.



Let's tell you the story of **Coëvrons-Mayenne**, a region of art and history ...
... in the company of a guide-lecturer authorised by the ministry of culture.

The guide will welcome you. He knows all about Coëvrons-Mayenne and will give you the vital elements required to understand the scale of a landscape, the story of the region in its different areas. The guide is there for your benefit, feel free to ask any questions you may have.

The heritage mediation service

runs the region of art and history Coëvrons-Mayenne. It organises events throughout the year for individuals and groups (adults and school children) .

If you are with a group

Coëvrons-Mayenne offers visits throughout the year subject to reservation.

Coëvrons-Mayenne is part of the **national network** of towns and regions of art and history

The architecture and heritage division of the ministry of culture and communication attributes the name of “towns and regions of art and history” to local communities which promote their heritage. It guarantees the skills of guide-lecturers and promoters of heritage and the quality of their activities. From ancient remains to 21st century architecture, the towns and regions present their heritage in all its diversity. A network of 137 towns and regions is currently in existence throughout France.

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Nearby sites,

Laval, Le Mans, Angers, Vitré, Fougères, Nantes, Guérande, Fontenay-le-Comte and Saumur have been granted the name “town of art and history”; the Perche Sarthois et the Vallée du Loir have been granted the name “region of art and history”.

