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[The Latest Lies about Rennes-le-Château](#)

[Rennes-le-Château Origins. Part 2.](#)

[Rennes-le-Château Origins. Part 3.](#)

Translation: Transcript of Noël Corbu's Tape-Recording

Preserved in the Archives départementales de l'Aude, Carcassonne – a transcript of the Tape-Recording that Noël Corbu made for the guests to his restaurant in Rennes-le-Château. The transcript dates from about 1962.

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THE HISTORY OF RENNES-LE-CHÂTEAU is lost in the mists of time. One thing we can say for certain is that the plain upon which the village stands has always been inhabited. Some historians have claimed that RENNES-le-CHÂTEAU itself was founded by the Visigoths in about the 5th century CE. This is flatly contradicted by the quantity of much more ancient remains to be found in shallow ground, whether these be prehistoric, palaeolithic or neolithic, Iberian, Gaulish, Roman or Gallo-Roman. The abundance and diversity of these remains show beyond all conceivable doubt that RENNES-le-CHÂTEAU was a major township well before the Visigoths arrived.

Other historians think that RENNES-le-CHÂTEAU was the capital of the *Sotiates*, a very powerful Gaulish tribe which long

kept Caesar at bay. Caesar, in his *War Commentaries*, describes the fall of their capital. In doing so he describes the surrounding countryside in terms which correspond precisely to the panorama to be seen from RENNES-le-CHÂTEAU: the Pic de Bugarach to the south-east, the Pic de Cardour to the east, the area of Becq and the plain of Les Fanges to the south, the Aude and its meanders to the west, and then its valley heading towards Alet and Carcassonne. Everything one would expect to find in Caesar's description is there, and it is reasonable to suppose that RENNES-le-CHÂTEAU, before it became a powerful Visigothic capital, was a Gaulish one, then a great Gallo-Roman stronghold, and – before this period – a major prehistoric habitation-site as well.

But why should RENNES-le-CHÂTEAU have been so important during this period? There are three main reasons:

1°) - its geographical position, dominating and indeed commanding all the surrounding valleys: that of the Salle running from RENNES-les-BAINS and NARBONNE, that of the Aude towards CARCASSONNE and ST. JEAN, the valley abutting PUIVERT and CHALABRE, and the valley of RENNES-le-CHÂTEAU itself (which enabled travellers to reach SPAIN before the road passing through the gorges of La Pierre Lisse was cut). The road from RENNES-le-CHÂTEAU to SPAIN was certainly a Roman one, because we can still find there some perfectly-paved sections, and at the property known as '*LA RODE*' a bronze wheel and a shaft from a Roman chariot were found, which are now in the museum in TOULOUSE;

2°) - the large number of springs on this peak, which provided abundant water and which have never dried up;

3°) - the very temperate climate, which in winter is warmer than

the valley and free of mist and fog, and much milder than the valley in the summer.

These three advantages made RENNES-le-CHÂTEAU a very special place – a sort of oasis in the river-basin which it overlooked.

From the 5th century CE onwards RENNES-le-CHÂTEAU was known as RHAEDE [sic], and was a major stronghold. As the Visigothic capital of the Razès, it had a population of more than 30,000. The population of the butchers' quarter alone was 18,000. So important was the town that the bishops charged by CHARLEMAGNE with evangelizing SEPTIMANIA – the Visigoths having embraced, long before Catharism, the Christian heresy known as Arianism – mentioned in their report to the Emperor only two towns as being of any importance, and these were RHAEDE and NARBONNE. The surface-area of the citadel of RHAEDE was at least three times the size of the present village, and contained 7 *ricetti* [small fortified areas in a citadel for protecting residents from attack].

To the south the town extended as far as another peak, where another fortress had been built called the *CASTELLA*. Another ring of fortresses defended RHAEDE: this comprised the castles of COUSTAUSSA, BLANCHEFORT, d'ARC, BEZUT, CADORRONE and COUIZA.

RENNES-RHAEDE began to decline during the Albigensian struggles. Having been partially destroyed, it was then rebuilt on the orders of SAINT-LOUIS. PHILIP THE BOLD continued his father's initiative, and we can say that, during the 13th century, even if the town no longer enjoyed its previous importance, then the citadel itself was still standing and just as formidable.

However, the confusion surrounding the sale of the territory of RHAEDE to the King of CASTILE meant that the Spaniards sought to recover their purchase by invading SEPTIMANIA and destroying RHAEDE for the first time. It was rebuilt, though only in part, but suffered a second destruction in 1370. That was the end, for never again would RHAEDE rise from the ashes. Little by little the inhabitants would descend towards the valleys. RHAEDE became RENNES-le-CHÂTEAU, a little village where formerly there stood a magnificent town of 30,000 inhabitants.

RENNES-le-CHÂTEAU would certainly have fallen into the memory-hole had it not been for the fact that a priest originally from MONTAZELS near COUIZA arrived as *curé* on 1 June 1885. For seven years Abbé Béranger SAUNIERES [sic!] led the life of a poor rural priest. In the account-books found among his papers we can read, for example, under the entry for 1 February 1892: “I owe Léontine the sum of 0 francs 40 centimes”, or “I owe Alphonsine 1 franc 65 centimes”, and his savings (which he referred to as his “secret fund”) amounted at this time to 80 francs 65 centimes.

In this same month of February 1892, since the main altar of the village-church of the time was falling apart, he successfully applied to the MUNICIPAL COUNCIL for a grant to restore it. In one of the pillars of the altar the workmen charged with taking it apart found wooden cylinders containing parchments. The Abbé was immediately alerted and subsequently snatched the cylinders from the workmen – something had obviously attracted his attention, because he ordered work to stop immediately. The following day, it is said, he left for PARIS, but we have no confirmation of that fact.

On his return he ordered work in the church to be resumed,

but this time he did not confine himself to the main altar, but attended to the whole church, and then the cemetery where he often worked alone. He even demolished the tomb of Comtesse d'HAUTPOUL-BLANCEFORT and himself erased the inscriptions on the tombstone. The village council was not at all happy with this and banned him from working in the cemetery, but the damage was already done because this tomb should have had some sort of indication of whose tomb it was. He also had walls built around the garden in front of the church, and used a splendid Visigothic-style pillar from the altar (which he damaged by having the words "Mission 1891" carved upon it) to support the statue of N.D. de LOURDES in another small garden. He had the presbytery entirely restored and then, in 1897, ordered the building of the house, the *Tour*, the circular path and the winter-garden – all at a cost of one million francs in the money of the day, which would be something like 250 million francs today. He furnished the house and the tower with fastidious taste. He lived the high life. L'Abbé SAUNIERES entertained whomever came to see him, and every day seemed to be a feast-day. The rum that he ordered from Jamaica and Martinique amounted to 70 litres a month, not to mention all sorts of liqueurs and fine wines. He spoon-fed his ducks with biscuits to improve their taste. He was a true sybarite.

One year he entertained Monseigneur BILLARD who, according to the locals, went away a very happy man. BILLARD had been astonished by his priest's lifestyle but chose to say nothing. His successor, Mgr de BEAUSEJOUR, reacted very differently: he immediately asked to see the Abbé SAUNIERES accounts and summoned him to CARCASSONNE to explain himself. The Abbé however was reluctant to say anything and said he was too ill to travel to CARCASSONNE. To support this claim he even submitted medical certificates from Dr. Rocher of

COUIZA. These were obviously false, as we have a letter from Dr. ROCHER saying, in essence: “My dear friend, I'm sending you the certificate which you asked me for. If it's not enough, tell me what you need and I'll be happy to oblige.” Although L'Abbé SAUNIERES wasn't well enough to go to CARCASSONNE, he was well enough to travel abroad – to SPAIN, SWITZERLAND and BELGIUM. These trips were conducted in total secrecy. To put people off the scent he left with his housekeeper and confidante, Marie DESARNEAU [sic], some ready-made letters saying things like, “Dear Sir/Madam/Miss, Thank you for your letter. I'm sorry I can't reply at greater length but I'm summoned to the bedside of a sick colleague, Yours...”, signed SAUNIERES. Marie DESARNEAU would open his mail and, if a letter required a reply, would put one of these short missives into an envelope and pop it in the post to make it look as if the Abbé had never left RENNES.

At the Bishop's palace however things were becoming serious. In 1911 Mgr de BEAUSEJOUR, exasperated at not having obtained any explanations from his priest, accused him of mass-trafficking and suspended him. The Abbé was found guilty *in absentia*. The allegations of mass-trafficking did not stand up, as the masses only cost 0 francs 50 centimes, and Mgr de BEAUSEJOUR was unable to explain how these could have covered the exorbitant expenses of Abbé SAUNIERES. That was however the only item of evidence that he had that would enable him to corner the Abbé.

Abbé SAUNIERES refused to accept the decision of the diocesan court, and immediately appealed to ROME, hiring as his attorney an ecclesiastical lawyer, Canon HUGET, who went to Rome at the Abbé's expense. The proceedings lasted two years and ended in the dismissal of the charge as unproven. Once ROME

had been informed about the Abbé's extravagant lifestyle however it in its turn asked him for an explanation, which he refused to provide. It was for insubordination therefore that he was again suspended, and this for the last time, on 11 April 1915. It was however made clear to Abbé SAUNIERES that if he made honorable amends then the sentence might possibly be mitigated.

The Abbé however was outraged, and refused to listen to anything further, whether from the Diocese or from the Vatican. To counter his Bishop's plans he took a 99-year-lease on the presbytery. In the little chapel which he had ordered to be built he said Mass despite the ban, and a large part of the population of RENNES-le-CHÂTEAU came to hear him, while the regular priest appointed by the Bishop, but whom the villagers did not want, was forced to live at COUIZA some 4 kilometres away and say Mass to almost empty pews.

During his legal proceedings the Abbé did not undertake any further building-works. When it was all over and done with however Abbé SAUNIERES resumed his building plans, which included building the road from COUIZA to RENNES-le-CHÂTEAU at his own expense (because he was thinking of buying a car), installing running-water for all the villagers, building a chapel in the cemetery, building a rampart all around RENNES, building a tower 50 metres in height so that he could see who was entering the village (with a spiral staircase inside and a library that followed the route of the staircase), raising the existing tower by a further storey, and laying down the winter-garden. The cost of these various works amounted to some EIGHT MILLION IN GOLD FRANCS (more than two billion of our francs). On 5 January 1917, with war raging, he accepted the estimates for all these works and put them in hand.

On 22 January however, just 17 days later, he caught a chill on the terrace and suffered a heart attack which, exacerbated by cirrhosis of the liver, was enough to finish him off.

He died later that day. He was left sitting in an armchair in the living-room, his face uncovered, and the rest of him covered by a throw fringed with red pompoms. Those who came to pay him their last respects each cut off one of the pompoms in veneration. He was buried in the tomb which he had been in the process of constructing for himself in the village cemetery.

SAUNIERES family then set about claiming his inheritance, but to their horror they found that Abbé SAUNIERES had bought and ordered everything in the name of his housekeeper, Marie DESARNEAU, and it was she who remained his sole heir, which meant that his heirs presumptive went away with a flea in their ear.

Marie DESARNEAU, who had been quite a lively personality at the time of the Abbé's death, began to lead quite an austere lifestyle. She withdrew to the presbytery, living completely alone and hardly ever going out. She made just one further trip to COUIZA. As the years went by she stubbornly refused to sell any of her belongings, but with the advent of old age she was no longer able to keep an eye on them or look after them properly, and that's when the pillaging began. Rare books, stamps, works of art – all were stolen. Finally, in 1947, she decided to sell everything that remained to the CORBUS, who turned the Abbé's former house into the *Hotel 'La Tour'*.

As for the origin of the treasure which the Abbé most certainly found (a large part of which must still exist), the archives of CARCASSONNE provide an explanation: Blanche de

CASTILLE, mother of SAINT-LOUIS, and regent of the Kingdom of FRANCE during her son's crusades, thought that PARIS was too insecure to house the royal treasure, for the barons and the common people were in rebellion against the crown. This was the famous Revolt of the *Pastoureaux*. She therefore arranged for the treasure to be transported from PARIS to RENNES (which was part of her domains), put down the revolt and then died shortly afterwards. When SAINT-LOUIS returned from the crusade he almost immediately departed again and died in TUNIS. His son, PHILIP the BOLD, must have known where the treasure was hidden, since he was always very interested in RHAEDE, and had a number of defence-works built there. We also find a number of spur-towers there, which are a feature of the period. After him however there's a gap, and PHILIP the FAIR was obliged to produce counterfeit money, as the FRENCH treasury's cupboards were bare. We must therefore suppose that he did not know where the treasure was hidden.

The treasure was found twice. In 1645 a shepherd called IGNACE PARIS, while guarding his flock, fell into a hole and brought back to his hut a beret full of gold coins. He told people that he had seen a room full of gold coins and went crazy fighting to defend the coins that he had found. The castellan and his guards searched for the place where the shepherd had fallen but without success. Later of course we have the Abbé SAUNIERES and his parchments.

Looking at the archives we find a list of what the treasure would have consisted of, i.e. 18½ million gold coins, weighing about 180 tons, plus many gems and jewellery and religious objects. Its intrinsic value, according to this list, would be more than 50 billion francs. If we look at its historic value, however, then assuming that a gold piece at that period was worth 472,000

francs, we arrive at a value of 4,000 billion.

In this humble village therefore, with its magnificent views and prestigious past, there lies one of the most fabulous treasures that has ever existed.