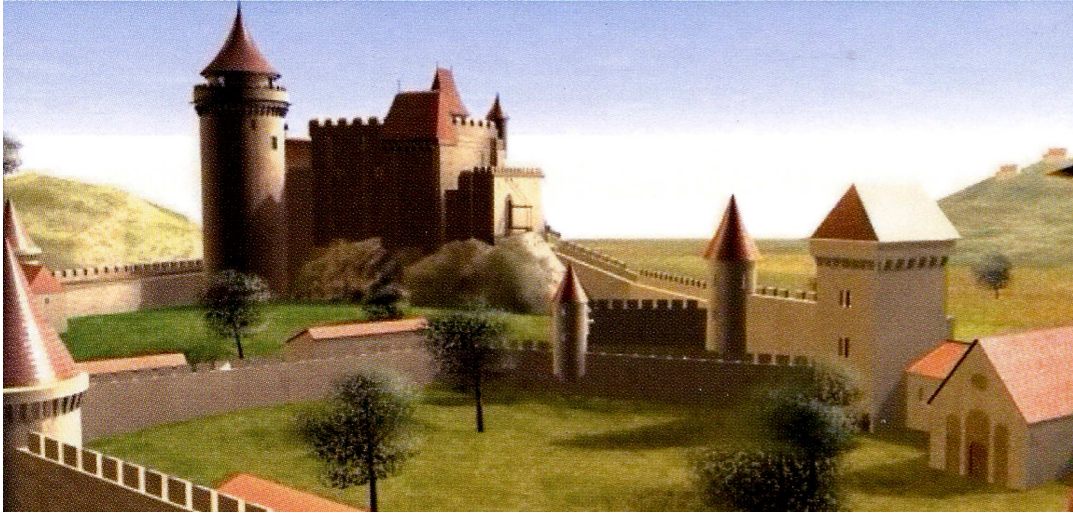


A castle in the city



A comprehensive review: the important stages in the castle's life, from the Neolithic period to the present day.

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Sources : Isabelle Chave, archivist-paleographer : Documented Reports

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Excavations reports: François Fichet de Clairefontaine, François Delahaye,

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Surveys Department of the D.R.A.C Basse-Normandie : « *Images du Patrimoine. Falaise* »

General history, characters: see bibliography.

THE ORIGINS OF THE SITE

The site of Falaise, which lies on a schistose bedrock, has been inhabited since the Mesolithic Age (circa 7000 BC). But it is only during the Neolithic Age (circa 5000 BC) that the area becomes densely populated. People start clearing and cultivating grounds around small groups of villages. During the Iron Age (circa 600-650 BC), farms are being built and fortified places are constructed on high ground.

Around the city, there are numerous vestiges from the Gallo-Roman period (from 30 BC to 400 AD). More specifically, at the north-east of the town, there are remains of the **Villa Vatou**, and those of a Gallo-Roman sanctuary underneath the church of Guibray – which is now a district of Falaise, but was an autonomous village for a long time.

The excavations undertaken in 2000 revealed human traces dating back to the Early Roman Empire (1st and 2nd century AD), where the reception building now stands.

Starting from the 5th century, as in the whole of Western Europe, the end of the Roman Empire signals the start of new forms of habitat, more diffuse, mainly comprised of farms, small individual groups, and especially *necropoleis* from the Merovingian period.

There are few archaeological traces from the Merovingian period in Falaise, other than the vestiges of a sepulture that replaces the Gallo-Roman sanctuary in Guibray.

In 651, the Carolingian succeed to the Merovingian : the new rulers of Neustria rely on the Church's hierarchy as well as on the existing authority of counts. The counts manage vast territories modeled on the Roman « *pagi* ».

There is then a lengthy period of peace, where trade thrives all over Europe, and many abbeys and town castles are built.

The first Viking raids take place at the end of the 8th century. These raids proliferate and cause the construction of many fortified strongholds, along rivers, at crossroads, and often on well defended natural sites

The spur on which the castles lies comprises many excellent defensive features : it is located above the cliffs of two rivers – the Ante and the Marescot – which constitute a sort of natural moat. This spur is steep.

Many famous historians, among them Michel de Bouärd, believe that a fortified place stood there, on this spur, as soon as the Carolingian period.

A parish, called Sainte-Trinité, was created around 840, proof that a large population lived around the rocky spur.

The new parish was protected by castle walls, which probably was then a wooden stockade.

10th and 11th Century :

THE CASTLE UNDER THE RULE OF THE FIRST DUKES OF NORMANDY

At the beginning of the 10th century, Rollo the Viking became a Christian, and acquired from Charles III, king of France, a large territory north from the Seine. Very quickly, the Viking territory stretches to the frontiers of the Cotentin and the Avranchin. At the center of this territory, Falaise emerges as one of the first cities in Normandy.

911 marks the birth of Normandy:

In this new political landscape, both the town and the castle of Falaise will noticeably change and expand.

Documents and archaeological searches confirmed the existence of a fortress built, at least partially, in stone, as soon as the 11th century.

During the excavations carried out in 2000, underneath the northern wall, a large oven was uncovered. It was used between the 11th and 12th centuries for domestic purposes. The remains of a stone building were unearthed as well, leaning on the terrace wall, and pre-existing the Anglo-Norman keep.

Guillaume of Jumièges, William The Conqueror's biographer, tells us that Robert the Magnificent, William's father, sought refuge inside the castle of Falaise during a conflict with Richard III, his own brother. He has to use a battering ram as well as mining to chase out Robert and his men. This tells how strong the building material was!

In 11th century Normandy, stone castles are still an exception: they display how wealthy their occupants were, as well as how important militarily and strategically their position was.

At this particular period, 3000 or 4000 people live in Falaise. It is a prosperous town.

The ducal fortress protects a vast area around the town of Falaise, where the most famous of Norman dukes, William the Conqueror, was born in 1027.

Many enchanting stories surround William's birth, as well as a famous legend*. The actual facts hold in a few words : Robert the Magnificent, the sixth duke of Normandy, seduces a young country girl, Arlette.

From their relationship, a girl will be born, Adelaide, as well as a boy, William.

In 1035, Robert dies on his way back from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Prior to his departure, he had taken care of his succession by gathering his barons at Fecamp, in order to produce his heir before them: the matter is complicated by the fact that he did not marry Arlette.

His son is 7. The tutor his father chose is assassinated, and the struggle for Robert's succession is a fierce one. As soon as he is 15, William takes part in battles and seizes back the castle of Falaise, previously occupied by a felon vassal. He is then knighted.

We do not know where he spends his first fifteen years : in Falaise, probably, and perhaps at his mother's home, who had married the count of Conteville in the meantime. For a longtime, William has to fight the pretenders to the duchy, the « Richardides ». He regularly visits his castle in Falaise, which he keeps up.

13th Century : WILLIAM'S SUCCESSORS

After the Conquest of England in 1066, William distributes vast quantities of land, defended by fortresses, to his main barons. From the south to the north of England, dozens of castles are built or strengthened. The most famous among them is the **White Tower** in London. As for **Rochester, Norwich, Colchester and Castle Rising**, built later, these English fortresses are given large square keeps. They are special by the fact that they are residential as well as defensive.

William's last son, **Henry I Beauclerc**, is born in England in 1068. He succeeds quite late in time to his two brothers: **William Rufus** for the crown of England in 1100 and the elder, **Robert Curthose**, for the Norman duchy, in 1106. At this time, he is 38. He is rich and powerful.

Naturally, Henry Beauclerc thinks of refurbishing the family's castle. For this, he is inspired by the English fortresses: a great square *keep* is erected around 1123.

Easy to build, and relatively cheap – at least for a high-ranking lord, this kind of keep appeared in the north-west of France around the 10th century and was commonly used in the end of the 11th century. These keeps feature several levels:

- The ground level, where the walls are windowless or pierced with narrow slits for ventilation, whilst preventing any intrusions. It is used for storage: weapons, food and treasures are kept there.
- The first floor is used as a noble residence - there are sometimes several floors like this one, but Falaise only has one. The private apartments of the kings are there, as well his retinue, inside the *camera*. There is a reception room, called the *aula*, and a chapel, the *capella*.
- The last floor is used to accommodate the soldiers defending the place. It usually is, as it probably was in Falaise, a covered gallery at the level of the roofs.

The keep of Falaise is 26.5 meters wide and 26.5 meters high. The natural steep of the rock helps render it inaccessible. Thus, the noble floor can sport large bay-windows without fearing for its defences.

Its walls are very thick – 4 meters on average – and are strengthened by **buttresses** and protected by a **forebuilding**. These features help complete the **passive defensive system in use in this particular period**.

Henry reinforces the castle walls and erects a chapel dedicated to Saint Nicolas inside the courtyard. It is used as a main parish church.

Henry contributes a lot to the town and orders the construction of many buildings and among them a hospital, and a new Holy Trinity church. He founds the Abbey of St John and entrusts those institutions to monks, who officiate inside the new castle church.

When Henry I dies, there are renewed conflicts inside the Anglo-Norman kingdom that will last 20 years: Henry's daughter, Mathilda "the Empress" is the heir of the duchy of Normandy. But it is her second husband, Geoffrey Plantagenet, who is the actual duke. Stephen of Blois, who is a nephew by marriage of Henry Beauclerc, is the closest male heir. He becomes king of England.

Eventually, it is **Henry II Plantagenet**, Mathilda's son, who inherits the double title of duke and king. He marries **Eleanor of Aquitaine**, the heiress of a vast territory. Both spouses possess, in France: Normandy, Anjou, Aquitaine, Limousin and Brittany (through the marriage of their underage son), and England, for Great Britain. They keep Wales and Scotland under tight control.

The year is 1154. Never before had the Anglo-Norman kingdom - also called Plantagenet Empire - been so strong. This will whet the appetite of the king of France, whose own royal estate is much smaller...

At the end of the 12th century, the castle of Falaise is extended with the « Lower Keep ». This keep protects the western front of the fortress and is arranged as a residence. It is an elegant and comfortable building, complete with a chimney and beautiful openings. The access is arranged through a flight of stairs inside the western wall of the Great Keep, which leans on the new construction.

Henry II and Eleanor, as were all great lords, were « nomadic nobles », who often travelled from one estate to the other. We know for sure that they spent the Christmas Eve of 1158 at the castle of Falaise. Those stays are of course a great occasion to celebrate. The sovereigns can in the same time settle their regular business as well as important local feuds.

At the same period, the king of France, **Philip-Augustus**, and the Anglo-Norman dukes clash a number of times. As soon as Henry II dies, a war breaks out between **Richard Lionheart**, son of Henry II, and **Philip-Augustus**.

Richard, too, is both king and duke. He is rich and feisty. He strengthens the castles built by Henry I, and among them the castle of Falaise. He is killed in 1199. His brother **John Lackland** succeeds him.

John contributes a lot to the town of Falaise, where he strengthens the defensive walls.

Moreover, he grants large commercial opportunities to its inhabitants, as well as "communal rights". It is possible for them to elect, under certain conditions, their own mayor.

At this period, there are two churches in Falaise - Saint Gervais and Sainte Trinité - as well as two hundred wooden houses and fifteen stone houses. There are several convents, a hospice and a general hospital (that replaces the old one). The town is surrounded by strong castle walls.

In 1204, John Lackland is vanquished by Philip-Augustus and loses his title of duke of Normandy.

13TH CENTURY: NORMANDY BECOMES FRENCH

The third keep of the castle was built in 1207. It was erected by the new ruler of Normandy: the king of France, Philip-Augustus. He strengthens the numerous Norman fortresses around, and builds new round towers designed for defence. They were built very quickly and were replicated around. There are several floors inside, as well as narrow openings - archer loops – which overlook the area.

This round keep, in Falaise, is 35m high (115 ft) and its diameter is of 14m (48 ft) at the bottom. It offers the main features that are commonly found on other master-towers built by Philip-Augustus' architects:

- A circular layout that avoids any **blind angle**.
- A slope-shaped base that strengthens the tower's foundations so that sapping would very long and difficult, or even impossible.
- The thickness of the walls and the attention brought to their **bond** allow them to resist to siege weapons.

Its stone vaults are strengthened by rectangular ribs that reinforce the wooden floors. This way, the tower is stiffer and resists more efficiently against fires. There is an inner well that provides fresh water.

To protect the keeps, Philip-Augustus adds a fortified gate-house that replaces the old tower-gate defending the inner bailey. The castle walls are flanked with new towers, and the old ones are restructured. It is possible that some of the rearrangements were decided - but not finished - by Philip-Augustus' predecessors, Richard Lionheart and John Lackland, who had spent a lot of money on the castle.

The viscount's quarter is arranged along the northern castle wall. It is a noble dwelling, built in stone, with three window-benches inside the wall. There are two adjoining rooms inside.

Philip-Augustus needs local support : he is conciliatory with the inhabitants of Falaise. Their previous privileges are reconfirmed, and they can exercise loans at enormous interest rates. A number of buildings destroyed during the siege are rebuilt.

After the wars of the 12th century, there is a long period of peace in France. **Henry III**, king of England, signs the "Treaty of Paris" in 1259 with **Louis IX** (Saint Louis). He renounces, together with his vassals, the Norman territories. It is a productive period for commerce, art and architecture.

END OF THE MIDDLE AGES, HUNDRED YEARS WAR :

The 14th century, on the other hand, is devastating. The Capetian kings impose heavy taxes on the French. Famines and the plague take their toll. The Hundred Years War starts in 1337.

Before the English occupation (1414), it is not sure that Falaise was severely damaged by the war : the remaining accounts tell of an age of great wealth.

At this periode, the ponds along the southern front of the castle walls are arranged as fishponds; there are troughs for the cattle and horses, as well as mills for sheets and wheat. At the heart of the enclosure, there is a deep well that provides the community with fresh water. It is a considerable construction, sheltered by a building with timber-framed walls. It is at the centre of an residential area, located on the southern front of the enclosure : there are barns, sheds, forges and several homes.

Thus, there are frequent mentions of the “Captain’s dwelling”, complete with a stable and a hayloft. It is built in stone, and is heated. The floor is paved and the bedroom sports two windows, proof that its occupant was of great importance.

The “*Logis de Barou*” and the bailiff’s house are located inside the same area of the enclosure.

These building are now gone : we can imagine what they were like by studying the archives from that period. But their precise location will be pinpointed only after a vast campaign of excavations. Furthermore, the records of the works use several names for a single building. It is then very difficult to provide a reliable and accurate description.

The viscount’s dwelling is expanded : there is now a private appartement for the viscount, a living quarter, a kitchen, a storage room for food and several areas devoted to administrative functions : a hearing room, a writing case and a counter.

Some of the windows have glass. For the others, there are wooden leaves and oilcloth.

The outhouses, built toward the east, are clearly described. There are cowsheds (or stables?), a hayloft, and a basement, with strongly built vaulted cellars. The abode is supplemented with a garden and is linked to the church of Saint Nicolas through a paved path.

From the abode, there is a direct connection to the *Tour de l’Echiquier*, from where it is easy to defend and watch over the fortified gate-house.

The English occupation re-launches an important campaign of restorations and military arrangements inside the enclosure. More rooms are built for the administrator of both the town and the viscounty.

Fifteen flanking towers protect the castle walls, and some of them have very precise functions (watch tower, dwelling, steeple...). The openings are rearranged so as to fit with new techniques of warfare, which now include the use of the cannon.

In the same time, the main living centres of the enclosure operate a progressive shift : while the lower-bailey is more densely populated, the Anglo-Norman keeps are slowly deserted and forgotten.

During the 15th century, the English army is stationed there. They are rearranged: cannon holes are built inside the windows of the lower keep, large bay-windows are opened inside the upper rooms of the Philip-Augustus tower, and chimneys are built in.

As a whole, it is acceptable to say that the English occupation was perceived as quite fair. After the siege of 1417, **Henry V**, king of England, restores the castle with the assets of the defeated governor, *Olivier de Mauny*.

As a whole, it is acceptable to say that the English occupation was perceived as quite fair. After the siege of 1414, **Henry V**, king of England, restores the castle with the assets of the defeated governor, *Olivier de Mauny*. Taxes are raised among the city-dwellers of Falaise, as well as at Bayeux and Evreux, in order to rebuild the town. Henry V restores the famous “communal rights” for the inhabitants of Falaise, which had been authorized by John Lackland, confirmed by Philip-Augustus, but revoked by **Charles VI**.

In 1500, Falaise’s income is estimated to reach half of Caen’s.

MODERN DAYS :

The 16th century is marked by fierce religious wars and a decline in religious institutions. Between 1562 and 1589, the city is successively held by the royal armies – Catholics – then by the Protestants, led by **Gabriel de Montgomery**. The coronation of **Henry IV, Protestant king of France**, will cause serious clashes in Normandy. In this region, the influence of the conservative Catholic *Ligueurs* is great. The town of Falaise is particularly hostile to the new king and undergoes a harsh siege led by the monarch himself.

In January 1590, the royal armies bring down the western front of the castle's enclosure using no less than "400 cannon strikes". The armies enter the castle. The defences – old walls and swamps – are no longer efficient since the invention of the modern artillery.

A few days later, the governor of Falaise surrenders. The castle no longer has a military purpose, and in the same time, the office of governor is purely symbolic. The title will be dropped eventually in 1777.

In 1593, there are only 60 soldiers left at the castle. Its decline continues and accelerates. The buildings are falling apart. In 1613, the governor's lieutenant complains about the bad state of the castle's « houses » and barracks. Some emergency works are decided.

17TH AND 18TH CENTURIES :

These years are ones of a renewed prosperity for the religious institutions, as well as for the city's finances, which depend on the textile industry. Other activities are quite lucrative as well : fairs – particularly in Guibray – horses and trade in general, generated particularly by the regular stops of the royal soldiers passing through Falaise.

Beautiful mansions are built, as well as the present town hall, dating from 1777.

The gates of the town's enclosure, which symbolise a bygone age, are leveled. New roads are created, as well as new urban areas.

Before the French Revolution, Falaise had 15000 inhabitants

The castle is inhabited by soldiers until 1777. The "Viscount's dwelling", which had become the "Governor's dwelling" during the Hundred Years War, is inhabited on a permanent basis by the dynasty of the Aubigny, the Morells. They hold both offices of governor and viscount.

During the 18th century, many works are undertaken. Both towers of the fortified gate-house, as well as the curtain-walls of the Inner Bailey, dating back from the 13th century, still appear on a plan in 1749. But in 1788, they are gone.

The ditches are progressively filled up. A building is erected where the crossing bridge once was, before the fortified gate-house.

Then, all of the ditches are rearranged as orchards. As well, the nave of the castle's chapel was in a bad state : it is demolished in 1772.

The roofs of the keeps cave in and disappear. The floors are exposed, endangering the settings and the waterproofness of the walls. They are in such a bad state that it is decided to demolish them. But the cost of such a destruction would have been so high that it is not carried out.

In 1790, it is decided to use the castle for administrative offices, and for a *gendarmerie*, among them. Neo-Romanesque arches are built in the hall of the dwelling (where the entrance of the present reception building stands).

There are plans to use the derelict keeps as a prison : the general outlines of 1792, drawn by an engineer from the Department of Civil Engineering, tell us what was decided:
“*The Talbot Tower is to be transformed into prison cells ; the yards before the Tower are to be used to take the prisoners out to walk ; location where it is suggested to build a place for the jailer, with a room for the jury and a few rooms for the sick. Top of a tower where a garrison of guards could be stationed.*”

The Viscount’s dwelling is to be turned into offices. The chapel was chosen to be for assemblies, and the outhouses and the stables for the *gendarmerie*.

Falaise’s elected officials didn’t agree with the project. Rather, they wanted a high-school to be built there. Their wish is granted, and the works start in 1803. The classrooms and the boarding house are built on the foundations of the viscount’s dwelling, which is almost completely demolished for the project. From its residential area, only the stone-benched windows of the 18th century are still visible today. The *Tour de l’Echiquier* is preserved but separated from the main building. Large openings are made to the west. The arches and the hall are kept up. However, the buildings on their right hand side are completely demolished. New rectangular openings are created inside the castle wall, the fourth wall of the building. From the original rooms, only a small vaulted cellars remains.

The high school’s rearrangements as well as the whole expansion plans symbolize the end of an era for the keeps: after the plans for the prison were scrapped, what can these old stones be good for?

In order to save them, Prosper Mérimée, the first minister for the *Beaux-Arts*, lists the castle as a historical building in 1840.

There will be several decades of hard and chaotic works.

Ruprich-Robert is the architect appointed by Viollet-Le-Duc, and oversees the works from 1860 to... 1912! During this period of political hardships, where the main players are continuously replaced, Ruprich will have to exercise an extraordinary amount of energy in order to achieve just a small part of his plan.

His works are more about saving than restoring. The crests of the square keeps’ supporting walls are paved. He creates a clever system that drains the rain water to the lower floors, which he had previously been cleared up. The eastern front of the great keep, which had tumbled down, is repaired. However, this intervention was carried out in a hurry, using rather mediocre building material.

Only the chapel is treated with a proper restoration.

He does not try to recreate roofs and floors but sets galleries along that wall, that enable the visitors to circulate, but make the building quite difficult to understand.

His works save the supporting walls, but in the same time, all traces of the interior settings are erased (coatings, wooden floors, roofs).

Until the end of the last war, the buildings won't undergo any major transformations. During the Allied bombings of 1944, the high-school, which was sheltering the occupying forces, is almost completely destroyed.

In 1950, the architect appointed for the reconstruction employs an amateur – but fully competent – archaeologist, the Doctor Doranlo. He uncovers the remains of the 12th century forebuilding that once protected the great keep.

It is only in 1985 that a vast restoration project for the keeps and the walls will come up.

THE CASTLE TODAY

The restoration of the three keeps starts in 1986. The Chief-Architect for Historical Buildings Bruno Decaris is appointed to the task

The requirements are complex: there are repairs and restorations to carry out where those can be done. The building has to be “legible”, notably by recreating the missing structures. It has to be fully accessible, because the main objective of its owner, the town of Falaise, is to make it a tourists venue.

This task will take ten years. For some places, like the Philip-Augustus Tower, a method of identical restoration was used. This tower had been damaged, but had kept a number of remains from its noble past. It is quite easy to reinterpret it.

The keeps had suffered a lot, and a number of questions will remain forever unanswered.

What kind of building material was used ? What was the original height of the building ?

How were built the roofs ? Without this firsthand knowledge, the architect chooses to interpret the place and recall the missing parts without creating fakes. There are new original materials used, such as metal sheets and cloth. The new designs thus created are firmly contemporary.

The result is daring, elegant, debatable, and it saved the castle from further decay. Bruno Decaris' “architectural feat” will be remembered.

Since 1997, the castle is open again to visits and there were many consecutive archaeological excavation campaigns. The study of documents helped as a lot in our knowledge of the castle for the last five centuries, but many unknowns remain, especially for the years 1000 to 1400.

The Inner Bailey, which is a narrow passage that links the Lower Bailey to the keeps, was restored according to the spirit of the place. Bruno Decaris' successor, Daniel Lefevre, was able to use well-informed archaeological data in order to recreate the original circulations.

The less well-known areas were marked in a special way, using stainless steel cages containing dry masonry.

The reception building, open since June of 2003, was built where the viscounts dwelling once was. Here, the difference between the ancient and the modern was made obvious : the northern walls with their stone benches, the vaulted cellar, the neo-Romanesque arches were restored to look like the original, and new elements were brought in, such as glass and stainless steel.

In a very near future, a new campaign of restorations will focus on the castle walls.

The extraordinary history of the castle and its famous inhabitants is not over. The site's promotion, as well as its cultural and tourist development are the "conquests" of today's owners, being the depositories of a precious heritage.