

History of Gruyères

Antiquity

The first vestiges that can be found in Gruyères date from the time of La tène (around 325 to 250 BC) and those are actually about fifteen graves that reveal true archeological treasures in bronze. They have been discovered when the foundations of the Duvillard orphanage were dug in Epagny (1913 – 1915). In the eighties, the foundations of a Roman villa were also discovered in the same area.

From the 5th century, the region had been invaded by many peoples, such as the Germans, the Gallo-Romans, the Burgundians and other Germanic people. Charlemagne did his best to maintain some kind of order, but his son, Louis the Pious, did not manage to keep that. In 879, Charlemagne's Empire dissolved, thus creating many kingdoms, like the one of Burgundy (our region was part of it).

From the Crusades to the Fall

The origin of the name « Gruyères »

According to the legend, the name "Gruyère" is said to come from « Gruérius », vandal captain who would have settled in our region in 436 (Gruérius I and II are even mentioned and the King of Burgundy would have pledged the land of Gruyère to him in 510).

According to the historian Hisely, the word "Gruyère" would come from « Grand-gruyer », a word in Roman which means « forest ranger ». This one was the « supersilvator », the judge officer of the waters and forests who reprimanded the offences made. The « Grand-gruyer » was administrating a « gruerie », which was a region like the one La Gruyère is nowadays. This is then easier to understand why this region has this name, even if we have to remember that another etymology would be possible: Gruyère would come from the crane (« grue » in French), the bird that appears on the flag of the city, emblem that was chosen by the first Count.



Today, the city of « Gruyères » is spelled with an –s, this is mainly to distinct the city from the region and the famous cheese « le gruyère ».

The Counts

The History of Gruyères reasserts itself in the 11th century, with the first Count known, William I (~1080 – 1115). A beautiful page of our history has been written thanks to his devotion to protect the faith: the exodus of the Gruyerians for the Crusade. All of Europe stood up at that time to take back Jerusalem and the Holy Sepulchre from the hands of the Turks. Hugues and Turin armed 100 Gruyerians among the shepherds to bring them to this conquest. According to a legend, some young shepherdesses tried to prevent their departure. Once the doors were reopened, the squire said "En avant la Grue! S'agit d'aller! Reviennent qui pourra! ". What is sure is that the Gruyerians took part of the first crusade (1096 – 1099), according to an Italian poet who depicted the Crusaders.

The leprosy

Those who survived and came back brought along with them a terrible disease, the leprosy. Many people caught that disease and since there was no cure, they got isolated into some leper hospitals. There was one in Gruyères on the hill of Montilly, the Verneys leper hospital.

As soon as the first symptoms appeared, people who were infected had to say so and then be judged so that they would be isolated for the rest of their life. They could only ask for charity during one of the four main celebrations of the year and they were subjected to strict rules when they were allowed to leave.

List of the counts:

William I : ~1080 – 1115

Raymond 1er : 1115 – 1136

William II: 1136 – ~1157

Rodolphe I 1157 – 1196

Pierre I: 1196 – 1209 and Rodolphe II: 1196 – 1226

Rodolphe III: 1226 – 1270

Pierre II: 1270 – 1304

Pierre III: 1304 – 1342

Jean de Montsalvens : 1342 – 1365

Rodolphe IV : 1365 – 1403

Antoine : 1403 – 1433

François I : 1433 – 1475

Louis : 1475 – 1492

François II : 1492 – 1499

François III : 1499 – 1500

Jean I: 1500 – 1514

Jean II: 1514 – 1539

Michel: 1539 – 1554



The Abbey of Rougemont

It is thanks to William I that the Abbey of Rougemont was built on the large territories he had given to the Benedictines (beyond the Tine, near Château-d'Oex).

It had been undertaken by monks coming from Cluny, around 1080 and its architecture reflects their influences through its shape of a Latin cross and through its high nave that leans on the side-aisles.

But the Bernese influence of the Reformation altered its aspect and made it go to a Reformed cult. The roof had been replaced by a unique roof with a steep slope. Its pointed bell tower also comes from this influence. The priory, destroyed in 1555, was replaced by the bailiffs' castle and a restoration at the beginning of the century gave it its current aspect. Among the four bells of the bell

tower, three are dating from the 15th century, and the last one was cast for the 900th anniversary of the city, in 1980.

The Castle

The current castle is from 1270-1282 and it reproduces a construction system largely used at the time called « carré savoyard » (square of Savoie). The end of the 15th century marked the beginning of a glorious era. In 1476, Louis (Count of Gruyères, 1475-1492) took part of the Burgundy War along with the confederates. After this, modernization works began: the esplanade with its chapel, the spiral staircase of the inner courtyard and the transformation of the building. Therefore the castle lost its aspect of a fortified castle to become more of a seigniorial residence.

Saint-Théodule Church

Rodolphe III asked for permission to build a church in his city in 1254 so that people wouldn't have to go to Bulle. This church is dedicated to Saint-Théodule, just as the chapel of the ruins of Ogoz (it appears that the Counts' family comes from the Ogoz family). It has a large tower as it was first used as an observatory.

In 1560, during the liquidation, the priest of the city, Pierre of Gruyères, bought an altarpiece that represents the Christ and his 12 apostles. The remains can be admired at the Chapel of Pringy: those are two elements representing twice three apostles.



When the bell tower got struck by lightning in 1679, the inside of the tower as well as the beams burnt down, while the church did not get damaged. The documents related to the reconstruction of the bell tower, by the priest Ruffieux, still appear in the archives of Fribourg. It seems that he tried to imitate the French constructions, because the chancel is not in the axis of the nave. This chancel is actually a former chapel of a Gothic style. The thickness of the walls shows that the construction is quite old.

The Saint-Theodule church was once again in flames in 1856, the day of the Corpus Christi ("Fête-Dieu"), all because of a mortar fire that fell on the roof made of "tavillon" (wooden roof). The cantonal architect Mr. Antoine Nein did the reconstruction and was inspired by the tower and the chancel. The reconstruction was over in 1860 when it was consecrated once again. It is now made of three naves, a main one and two side-aisles, that used to be chapels attached to the building from 1800. The stained glass windows were made by Yoki and it is quite interesting to know that the vault of the counts and bailiffs is located under the altar.

The Taxes

In 1304, the city of Gruyères collected its first taxes that were until then only for the Count. The goods that entered the city were taxed, especially the wine, wheat and cloths. That decision had been taken by Pierre III. He is the one who extended the county by new purchases in the Gessenay (Saanen).

The Chalamala

Gérard Chalamala is the most famous jester of Gruyères. He was hired by the Counts to entertain the celebrations organized in the castle and he would appear during suppers, shaking a bauble (a kind of stick with a puppet on top of it) and his hat with small bells. He had a comical expression and wordplays that would make the whole court laugh (most of the time, jesters had a peculiar physical appearance), even though he sometimes said things that made a lot of sense. As he followed his master with the armaillis, he also went with him during the “coraules” (dance, round dance).

When he died in 1349, he divided his estate and left a part of it. The priest of Gruyères, the Valsainte and the Monastery of La Part-Dieu all received a cow and he also gave CHF 5'000 to the church of Gruyères.

He is still remembered thanks to his house (from 1531) that is still located in the middle of the city and also with a piece of land in Epagny that shares his name.

The confrontation with Bern

The battle of Laupen occurred in 1339. It opposed Bern, that was looking to extend its land, and Lords from the French-speaking part of Switzerland, who joined forces to prevent this expansion. The Bernese had been preparing for this battle for a very long time, hence their victory and the death of many Gruyèrian people (among the Bernese, there was even the priest of Bern, who carried the Blessed Sacrament).

In 1349, a new conflict emerged between the Crane and the Bear (symbols of Gruyères and Bern) in the region of the Pays d'En-Haut, in the reign of Pierre IV. The Gruyèrians won but the Bernese didn't wait too long to get revenge. One day, one of the vassals of the Count, Othon of Everdes, attacked the wife of the magistrate of Fribourg. As to teach the Gruyèrians a lesson, Bern and Fribourg got together and set fire to the castles of Vuippens and of Everdes. When they arrived in La tour-de-Trême, they captured 50 soldiers and decided to keep going to Gruyères via the Sauthaux's forest. According to the legend, two heroes (Clarembos and Ulrich, called “Bras-de-fer” (arm wrestling)) stopped them from going through the Pré des Chênes up until the troops of the Count arrived and finally managed to push them. This is why Fribourg and Bern set fire to La Tour-de-Trême and took the prisoners.

A celebration for the two heroes, who both appear on the fresco of the Belluard, took place a few days later in the castle. This is at that time that Chalamala predicted that “Sooner or later, the Bear of Bern is going to eat the Crane in the cauldron of Fribourg”. This prediction turned out to be true two centuries later, when the Counts were forced to yield their place to the bailiffs.

Arguments between the Counts and the Princes-Bishops of Lausanne (~1400)

During the Middle-Ages, the Bishops of Lausanne were the masters of a part of the “Pays de Vaud”, hence the name “Princes-Bishops”. As they were spiritual leaders of our country, several quarrels occurred between the Counts and the Princes. The Counts always had to surrender, for fear of excommunication.

Because of those quarrels, Bulle, Riaz and Albeuve were separated from the county of Gruyères and allocated to the Princes. Gruyères then had to close its markets and fairs so that people from the

county would have no choice but to go Bulle to buy things and then bring more money to the city of the Princes-Bishops. Later on, the markets were open again.

The Golden Century

This is during the 15th century that the County reached its apogee, as much as regarding its territory as its strength. At the time, it included the Sarine Valley, from its source in Hauteville, which was divided into five banners: Gruyères, Montsalvens, Corbières, Château-d'Oex and the Vanel, each one under the order of a feudal lord that led a small army. Around 1400, the most important monarchs were looking to close some alliances with the country, considered as a military strength.

During this time, also known as the Golden Age, there were less and less wars, which gave the Counts more time to meet other Lords to go hunting. At the castle, they attended tournaments between high ranking knights and then shared a banquet usually entertained by some troubadours and poets. That was a time of luxury which, of course, did not last.

The last century of the reign of the Counts was a happy time. People loved their Counts who mixed with them, in happiness as in sadness, hence the nickname of “Rois-Pasteurs” (King-Ministers). For instance, they went to the mountain to visit the armaillis and told them about what happened in the plain. Once they came down, the Count joined people and laughed with them. Here is an anecdote: Rodolphe would have joined a coraule (dance, round dance) leaving from Enney one Sunday to arrive in Château-d'Oex on Tuesday along with 700 people!

The first Communal Council took place in the reign of François I, who was a Count much appreciated by his subjects for the freedom he gave them. Afterwards, Louis seized power and formed an alliance with the Swiss to fight against Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy. Therefore he was one of the leaders of the battle of Murten in 1476, which enabled him to bring back wonderful pieces such as the embroidered capes, taken from the Duke. He is also the one who had the chapel of Saint-Jean repaired and this is in his reign that the special indulgence was granted by the Pope to those who visited it during some celebrations.

The Hospital

Around 1440, the city of Gruyères decided to have a hospital built, because until then, there was no place to treat the sick. Many donations were made so that the hospital could be built. A chapel dedicated to St-Maurice was then attached to the hospital. In 1763, works were done and this is at this time that a Latin inscription was engraved on the front door of the current Foyer Saint-Germain and can still be seen today:

« IL FOURNIT DES SECOURS À L'AVEUGLE, AU BLESSÉ
ET ACCORDE L'AUMONE À CELUI QUI LA DEMANDE »

(« HE PROVIDED ASSISTANCE TO THE BLIND, TO THE WOUNDED AND GRANTED CHARITY TO THE ONE WHO ASKED FOR IT”).

From the end of the Counts until today

The Fall

From 1500, the reputation of the County of Gruyères, as well as the one of other seigneuries, declined. Jean II had to fight against the Berneses who wanted to impose Protestantism there (hence the numerous holy progressions that were against this idea, going up until the church of Saint-Théodule).

Then came Michel, the last legitimate Count. He spent a lot of money and kept on throwing parties at the castle even though money was being tight. While looking for financing, he borrowed money from Bern and Fribourg, pawning lands. He eventually offered his services to the King of France, providing him with 2'000 men that the Count had to arm at his own expenses. The King wouldn't pay Michel for those men, considered as coward and not efficient. Then, from 1555, the county came under the authority of "Leurs Excellences de Fribourg" and the bailiffs settled in the castle (there was a total of 13). Then, in 1814, the bailiffs were replaced by some prefects and in 1848, the Prefecture of Gruyères was suppressed to be attached to the one of Bulle. The castle had belonged to the canton of Fribourg since 1938, after it had been bought from the Balland family. The canton installed a museum there, made of an amazing collection of varied objects. It is now managed by the Foundation of the Castle of Gruyères.

The hermits of the Châtelet

When going up towards the Dent de Broc via the Châtelet, you can see a block of rock with a wall partly demolished: those are the ruins of the Hermitage of Ste-Anne. This place was picked by a hermit in 1607 for its quietness, and until 1736, many hermits followed him. The sanctuary had been built so that hermits could have a place to live and also celebrate Mass, with the help of the City of Gruyères, generous with those men who apparently brought good grace to the region. In 1736, the last hermit died. The sanctuary was devastated and then demolished, but the altar and the bell were moved in the current chapel Sainte-Anne in Epagny.

The Plague

One evening in April, 1611, the remains of a bourgeois from the city were brought back from Fribourg after a mysterious death. This is how the plague entered the city, causing the death of 140 people. Those were buried on the side of the hill in the place "Le Berceau" where a chapel was established in honor of the Blessed Virgin, of Saint Roch and of Saint Sebastian as to eradicate the plague.

The Sisters

In 1637, the Sisters of Saint Jeanne of Chantal came and set up a small convent in Gruyères that was near Chavonne. Today, the vestiges constitute the shed of the Hôtel de Ville. During their short visit, they took care of the education of young girls, this is why the inhabitants were sad to see them leave.

Water and Fountains in Gruyères

Up until 1755, there was no fountain in Gruyères. People went to the Laviau to do the laundry. To do the cleaning, water was taken from the well: there were three in Gruyères, one at the castle, one in front of the Foyer Saint-Germain and one near the Calvaire. There were also cisterns to collect rainwater for the animals and fire... But in 1755, Gruyères decided to have a pipe built to bring the water from the Cheneux. After many attempts to find the good material, oak was chosen and thanks to this, water came to the city on the 27th September. Everyone was thrilled! Twenty-four years later, the wooden pipes were replaced by cast iron, and people were as thrilled as they were the first time.

The Industry

The different factories at the time all had something in common: water. In fact, most of the factories needed water to turn the wheel that activated the machines. Along the stream of Saussivue, there were two grain mills (the millstones of one of them can still be seen from the cantonal road). There were also a bone mill there (bones reduced to feed hens and pigs) and a lime factory, in Creux, near Pringy.

Most families weaved straw, especially children when they came back from school (a lot of time working for little money, between 20 and 30 cents!).

Emigration

This is interesting to note that twice, quite a lot of Gruyerians left the country to go to America. The first expedition left in 1819 to Brazil according to the orders of Sébastien Gachet of Gruyères. A lot died during the journey but those who did arrive founded the city of Nova – Fribourgo. In 1854, 72 people also tried the adventure and today some of the descendants made a name for themselves in those far away regions.

To conclude

In 1969, the Commune of Gruyères (Gruyères, Epagny, Pringy, Moléson) twinned with the French city of Renaison, that was looking for a city with the same culture, language and religion.

This proves Gruyères had already a good reputation, and its popularity isn't going to stop now. Gruyères still is one of the most famous places of Switzerland in the world, and this, thanks to the support of the medias (during the Tour de France for instance) and of course thanks to its idyllic setting.

Sources :

<http://www.gruyeres.ch/fr/portrait/histoire/>

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