

# Chapelle des Templiers de Cressac (16)

## HISTORY

- 1150 – 1160: construction of the chapel
- 1789: destruction of part of the frescoes by the revolutionaries
- 19<sup>th</sup> C: conversion to farm
- 1922: restoration of the chapel walls by architect Besnard and Inspector General Louzïer
- 1950 to 1966: restoration of the frescoes by Melle Mezdrïkoff, then by M.F. Sorbets de Christen

## ARCHITECTURE

### Exterior:

The external aspect is very sober. The very thick walls are supported in the corners by slightly protruding buttresses. We enter from the west through an arched door whose two curves are supported by small columns the capitals of which are decorated with roughly hewn flat leaves. The south wall carries the imprint of a 'hand of penitence' which required the aforementioned hand to be rubbed on the stone a certain number of times. This 'purification' was recommended to the pilgrims.

### Interior:

The nave and the choir form a single unit. The interior space is covered by a broken barrel vault, which sits on two arches joined to pinion walls. The east wall is richly furnished with a triplet decorated with abundant 'rinceaux' (decorative arabesques and vegetal forms) in which are incorporated two lion's heads and unusually topped by an oeil de boeuf window in quadrilobe form. The west wall has only one window above the entrance door. To the left of the oeil de boeuf you will see a chrisim; undoubtedly a consecration cross. The sculptured decoration is sober and consists of a lightly worked cord, situated at the top of the windows and around the oeil de boeuf. Finally, on the side walls and on the arches a cornice marks the boundary between the partition and the vault.

## THE LEGEND OF SAINT GEORGE AND THE DRAGON

George was serving in the roman army. By chance he was travelling one day on the outskirts of a town in the province of Libya. Nearby lay a vast pool inhabited by a monster to which the townsfolk regularly sent their sheep. If they were late the beast would approach the town walls and pollute the air with its' poisonous breath. When there were no sheep, young boys or young girls were offered to it. One day, the lot fell to the daughter of the king. Despite the kings' supplications, the people demanded that she be delivered to the monster. And so the young girl, watched by all the towns' populace, left the town and headed towards the pool. George who was passing by on horseback demanded the cause of her trouble. At that moment the beast emerged from the pool and began to head towards them. The young girl pleaded with the knight to flee. But he made the sign of the cross, ran the beast through with his sword and toppled him. Next he said to the king's daughter to throw his belt around the wounded monster's neck, and it followed her like a dog. Then having made the townspeople promise to be baptised, George finished off the beast.

### The frescoes on the north wall:

It is these friezes which have created the reputation of Cressac. They date from the years 1170 – 1180 and at that time covered all the walls of the chapel but progressive degradation over the centuries means that today only fragments remain. They tell the tale of the battle of the Crusaders in the Holy Land, and more precisely the joint victory achieved in 1163 by the knights Templar and the french army commanded by Geoffroy Martel, brother of William Taillefer, count of Angoulême, and Hugo VIII of Lusignan, known as Hugo the Brown, count of the Marche, against the Saracens led by Nour Ed Din on the plain of la Bocquée, at the foot of Krak du Chevaliers.

The lower frieze, a little later, represents the Saracen camp and the exchange of prisoners.

## The Frescoes on the East and West walls:

### *East Wall*

We can see on the left, Saint Michael weighing a soul, and on the right, a bishop in a mitre carrying a cross and performing a blessing. Perhaps, the artist has represented Adémar, bishop of Angoulême, who, the first to do so, took the cross and enlisted with an expedition against the Saracens who were seriously threatening the Christian kingdom of Spain. Skilfully led by the Duke of Aquitaine, the crusaders succeeded in driving them away. Further on, a cruciform circle is most probably a cross of consecration.

### *West Wall*

On the left a knight on foot, equipped as a crusader, saves a woman from a flying dragon. Opposite, a woman wearing a crown is watching. This scene retraces the legend of George and the Dragon.

On the right a bearded and crowned knight mounts a saddled horse. The horse threatens the head of a small figure with his hoof. Opposite the knight, a crowned woman appears to welcome the victor. Rather than alluding directly to a king of France, the images may be interpreted as representing the classical figures of Constantine and the Church, a grouping which appeared frequently in the sculptured façades of western France, and which, here in association with Saint George, exalts the triumph of the Church. This theory is the most regularly proposed but is not unanimously supported. Other theories suggest that they could in fact represent Louis VII and his wife Eleanor of Aquitaine, thus paying homage to Louis VII as being the first French king to participate in the crusades when he headed the second crusade of 1147 accompanied by the young Eleanor.

In the window casement: on the right hand side, there appears a small boat and two boatmen; probably an evocation of the sea crossing made by the crusaders.

## THE ORDER OF THE KNIGHTS TEMPLAR

The Knights Templar, a monastic-military order, put into practice the apparently contradictory twin vocations of the monk and the soldier. They formed part of those military orders which came into being in close rapport with the armed conflict against the Muslims.

The military orders were the best defenders of the Latin kingdom of Jerusalem. Their function was twofold. On the one hand, they assured the security of the Holy Land, building a number of fortresses. On the other hand, these 'soldiers of Christ' undertook the role of protecting and looking after the numerous pilgrims who came to the Holy Land from throughout Europe.

### *History of the Knights Templar*

9 French knights, gathered around noblemen Hugues de Payens and Geoffroy de Saint Omer decided in Jerusalem to protect the roads leading to the Holy Land and to assure the protection of the pilgrims travelling there. Thus, at the end of the year 1119 they founded the order of 'The Poor Soldiers of Christ', later known as the order of the Templars. From the beginning, several brothers came to swell the ranks of the young militia. In 1127, Hugues de Payens went to the west to obtain from the Holy See the confirmation of his order, which was to become effective in March 1139. The result was a considerable growth in the number and property of the brothers. The Templars acquired immense wealth and synarchic power, which created bitter enemies and was to be the origin of their downfall. The Templars had become the bankers to popes and kings.

The fall of the eastern Latin empire in 1291 precipitated events. Judging them to be too bothersome and being in need of money, Philippe le Bel decided to have them eliminated, entry into the order having been refused him.

On Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> of October 1307 at dawn, all the Templars of France were arrested and thrown into prison. For his part Pope Clement V, circumvented by Philippe le Bel, had read out at the opening of the 2<sup>nd</sup> session of the council of Vienne, on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of April 1312, the papal bull 'Vox clamantis' which supported the suppression by provision of an order whilst awaiting the definitive judgement of the next council; this council was never to meet.