Romainmôtier : 1500 years of history

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Priory church of Romainmôtier

Romainmôtier, a village of 460 souls, lies some 20 km north of Lake Geneva in the foothills of the Jura mountains, close to the French border. Little does one expect to find one of the oldest churches of Switzerland there. Romainmôtier comes with a big history, tied up intricately with the churches and politics of France.

The first priory at Romainmôtier was built by Romanus of Condat around 450 AD and is thought to be the oldest priory in Switzerland. Born in around 390 AD in France, Romanus moved to live as a hermit in the remote area of Condat across the border from Romainmôtier. Soon joined by his brother Lupicinus, they built up a following of disciples and founded several monasteries, including Romainmôtier Priory (Romanum monasterium). Romanus directed these monasteries until his death in around 463 AD. Later, the brothers were to be known as the fathers of the Jura.

The early priory fell into disrepair but was rebuilt around 640 AD under St. Columban rule, creating a thriving monastic community at the time. In the 9th century, the priory fell into the hands of the kings and dukes of Burgundy, who eventually gifted it to the Abbey of Cluny in France. Under the Abbey and its Benedictine rule, the Romainmôtier Priory was to experience another golden age. Abbot Odilo of Cluny built the priory church we know today around the year 1000, setting the scene for many other structural additions over the years.

The Abbey of Cluny continued to rule the priory over the centuries, but under increasing threat from aristocratic families of the region who desired to expand their estates at the expense of t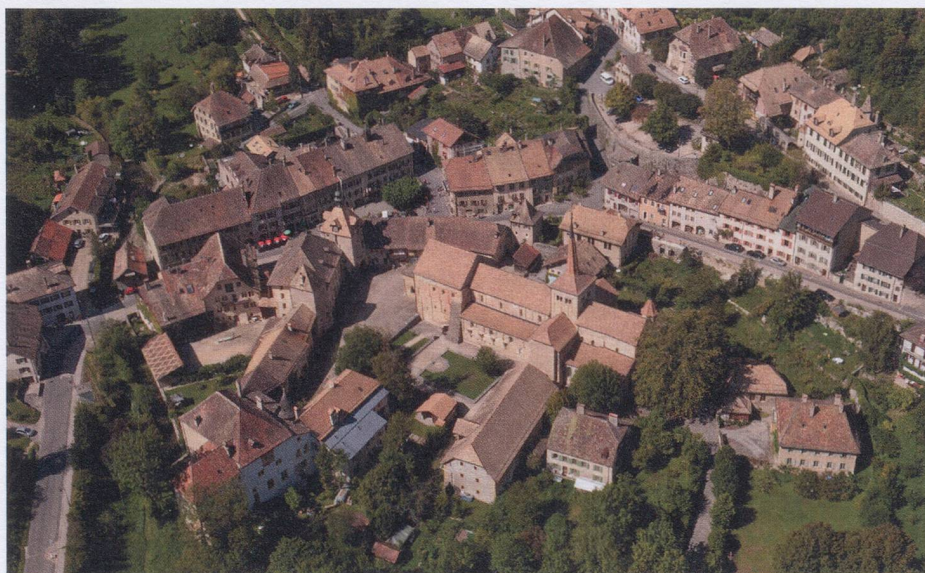he priory. In spite of this, the priory survived and flourished again in the late 1400s and early 1500s. In the mid-1500s, it passed into the secular hands of the Savoy dynasty. Thus, when the Reformation arrived in 1536, the priory was already in decline. The canton of Bern took immediate measures by demolishing priory buildings and the beautiful cloistered courtyards, leaving only the priory church and the prior's house. Painted frescoes in the church were whitewashed and statues removed. The prior's house was converted into a castle for the Bernese Vogt (Bayliff) and the remaining buildings were rented or sold. The delapidated prior's house was finally re-discovered in the 1960s as the medieval jewel it was by a young journalist called Katherina von Arx, who subsequently restored it as her life's work. The remaining structures at Romainmôtier are considered as some of the most important examples of Cluniac Romanesque architecture in Switzerland.

During medieval times, the priory held significant property, including the territory around Romainmôtier known as La Poté, comprising twelve villages and surrounding lands. The priory also owned extensive and dispersed land holdings throughout France and Switzerland, usually gifted as legacies, and set up a number of small priories to manage these. Until the 11th century, the inhabitants of the Poté were serfs, but from 1266 they were awarded more personal liberties and the ability to trade, as long as they remained faithful to the prior. There was a family of laypeople around the prior including artisans, administrators as well as the citizenry of Romainmôtier, who were not required to carry out compulsory service to the priory, but to pay a heriot or death duty. Today, life in Romainmôtier may be at its quietest in 1500 years. The village attracts many people with an interest in medieval Romanesque architecture and in doing a bit of historical time travel. During summer time, weddings and musical events take place on most days against the lovely backdrop of the old priory church and surrounding courtyards. Visitors sip tea in tea rooms set up in the medieval Prior's House, or rifle through the local book and artisan shops. Reason enough to venture out and see for yourself, should the opportunity arise! Susie Wood

Sources: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romainm%C3%B4tier_

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