World Heritage application of the City of Carcassonne and its mountain sentinel castles

Restructured in the second half of the 13th century based on a compound of Gallo-Roman origin in Carcassonne, and on sites previously occupied by feudal constructions, the City of Carcassonne and its mountain sentinel castles demonstrate the affirmation of royal military defence architecture intended to control a newly conquered territory following the Albigensian Crusade, as well as the French-Aragon border zone. These castles, veritable “vertiginous citadels” built on steep-sided peaks, along with Carcassonne – seat of the bailiwick and centre of military, political and administrative power – are a unique testimony to what was a coordinated and homogeneous territorial defence system in the 13th century and the early 14th century. All of these fortresses copy the architectural model that began under the reign of Philip II, adjusting it to mountain locations intersected with gorges and faults: a geometric plan with round and hollow flanking towers, an entrance châtelet, stirrup-shaped or spade-shaped arrow slits, battlements and hoardings, in a quest for architectural synergy. This architectural model then spread throughout Europe and as far as the Middle East with, for example, the Crac des Chevaliers in Syria. But the City of Carcassonne and its mountain sentinel castles formed a wholly original and pioneering serial defensive military system in medieval western Europe.

The eight properties proposed for the series

City of Carcassonne

Consisting of a Count’s Castle, 52 towers, two inner and outer curtain walls separated by baileys, in the 13th century the City of Carcassonne was the centre of the defence system implemented by the King of France on his newly conquered lands. Under the reigns of Philip III the Bold and Philip IV the Fair, the City’s fortifications were modernised and a good part of the inner wall was renewed to benefit from technical progress in the field of military architecture. From then on, the City of Carcassonne was an extraordinary fort. Its restoration, entrusted to Viollet-le-Duc (1814-1879) in 1853, continued until 1910.
Lastours

The four castles of Lastours (Cabaret, Tour Régine, Surdespine and Quertinheux) range between 260 and 285 m in altitude on the first foothills of the Black Mountain. Occupied since protohistory, the site gained in importance in the early 12th century and then became an important centre for Catharism. The four castles visible today were built in the middle of the 13th century when the King of France restructured the fortresses of Languedoc and put garrisons there. Despite a few later modifications, the fortified complex results from the same architectural choice and construction campaigns chronologically close to those of the City of Carcassonne.

Termes

With a breath-taking view of Hautes-Corbières, Termes crowns the summit of a rocky escarpment at altitude 470 m. Mentioned in the 11th century, the fortified castrum was taken by Simon de Montfort in 1210. The castle, which had a royal garrison in 1255, was then profoundly redesigned (walls, uncut stone towers and smooth towers). The construction of Termes therefore undoubtedly continued until the third quarter of the 13th century.

Aguilar

Consisting of two concentric walls, Aguilar dominates the Tuchan Plain. In 1262, Louis IX integrated the castle, an ideal lookout post to watch over the Corbière Massifs, in the system of royal fortresses responsible for defending the new border resulting from the Treaty of Corbeil in 1258. Although the interior seems to identify with the original castle and could date back to the 12th century, with later additions, the outer wall is probably the work of the master builders of the King of France in the last third of the 13th century to early 14th century (truncated stacks made from uncut stones, arrow slits in the style of Philip II, etc.).

Quéribus

Like an eagle’s nest, Quéribus stands at 728 m, at the summit of a rocky spur. Close to the Aragon border, it watches over the plains as far as the Mediterranean. After the Treaty of Meaux-Paris (1229), followed by the failure of the Tencavel revolt in 1240, the castrum welcomed the Cathars and exiled lords (faidits). The castle was returned to the King of France after his conquest in 1255 and underwent major transformations which strengthened its military role: installation of the keep, construction of the stairway tower, etc.
Peyrepertuse unfolds over 300 m, along a limestone ridge culminating at 796 m at Roc Sant Jordi. The first real feudal castle that housed a Cathar community dates from the early 12th century. With the Treaty of Corbeil (1258), the castle became a royal fortress. Dominating several valleys, it is one of the essential links in the defence network against Aragon. Most of the constructions can be dated to the middle of the 13th century (stair carved in the rocks, low wall, Sant Jordi keep, works in the old keep and works in Saint Mary’s church).

Puilaurens

West of Fenouillèdes, perched at 697 m on the summit of a limestone ridge, Puilaurens overlooks the Boulzane Valley and the passes that form a route in the Agly Plain. Initially housing a community of “perfects”, Puilaurens castle was strengthened from 1255 by order of Louis IX. The building probably dates to the last third of the 13th century, which seems to be confirmed by the use of uncut and mixed stone used in all royal fortresses in Languedoc. Unlike many other sites, Puilaurens does not appear to have any elements prior to the Capetian conquest.

Montségur

Situated in Ariège, Montségur castle culminates at 1207 m on a particularly steep pog on the northern side. It has an exceptional view of the plain. The existence of a Cathar community on the pog of Montségur is attested from the beginning of the Albigensian Crusade. The castle, “the seat and the head” of the Cathar church after the end of the royal crusade, in 1229, held a 10-month siege, until March 1244. Guy II de Lévis then took possession and paid homage to the king. The archaeology testifies to a reconstruction between the second half of the 13th century and the start of the 14th. The castle is therefore the visible symbol of the return of orthodox authority on the pog of Montségur.

Justification of Outstanding Universal Value

Since late Antiquity, fortifications were constructed on the hill where Carcassonne is situated today, as well as on certain sites proposed in the series. In the time of the Counts of Toulouse and Barcelona (10th – 13th centuries), the sites of the elements in the series were occupied by perched towns and by feudal fortresses. Many of these housed heretic communities (Albigensian or Cathar). During and after the Albigensian Crusade, these places were used as refuges and hubs of resistance to invasion. Restructured in the second half of the 13th century, the City of Carcassonne and the bailiwick castles were one of the first serial constructions inspired by the fortification model endorsed by Philip II. They testify to the implementation of an architectural standard, intended for the defence and affirmation of royal power on a newly conquered territory after the Albigensian Crusade.
The seat of a royal bailiwick, the City of Carcassonne became a centre of civil and military power. Around it, the castles of Aguilar, Lastours, Montségur, Peyrepertuse, Puilaurens, Quéribus and Termes fortified and controlled the territory of southern Languedoc against the kingdom of Aragon. This homogenous defence complex was particularly striking. It was also intended to assert the authority of the Capetian kings over the newly conquered populations, a part of which was partly heretic and likely to rebel.

The series of defensive sites was erected in just a few decades, circa 1300, on the mountain peaks of the Pyrenean foothills and the Black Mountain. Their topographical situation put strong constraints on their construction, which restricted architectural prowess. These fortresses demonstrate a vast capacity to adapt the fortification model of the time to a challenging topography. They also show different technical advances through the rapid implementation of parallel sites, the use of partial prefabrication and important progress in siege warfare. Today, they are remarkable visual landmarks on the top of their rocky ridges, which they audaciously prolong skywards, in extraordinary landscapes.

Carcassonne and all of the sites forming the series are emblematic of the planning of border defence system. This type of planning is characteristic of the beginnings of the centralised state in France. Affirmation of royal power and the takeover by the Roman church marked the history of the 13th century in Languedoc. Tangible religious heritage from this time has already been recognised: Episcopal City of Albi inscribed on the World Heritage List in 2010 under criteria (iv) and (v), and castles: City of Carcassonne inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1997 under criteria (ii) and (iv) and this proposal to inscribe the City of Carcassonne and its mountain sentinel castles, as well as intangible heritage of the Cathar history.

In the 19th century, the romantic fervour for ruins and the medieval past encouraged the “rediscovery” of the City of Carcassonne and some of its castles proposed in this series of cultural property. Afterwards, the restoration of the City of Carcassonne by Viollet-le-Duc illustrated the vision of medieval architecture at this time and established a national policy for the conservation and enhancement of historical monuments in France.

In the second half of the 20th century, a television programme and the many publications that ensued made the history of Catharism popular by making it an element of the Languedoc identity and sometimes giving rise to a mythical reconstruction of this past.

While the City of Carcassonne has been the subject of a restoration, the mountain sentinel castles have seen less interventionist restoration policies aiming at maintaining the state of ruin. Their exceptional landscape situation is in the interest of the general public.

**Envisaged UNESCO criteria**

*Criterion (ii): to exhibit an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town-planning or landscape design.*

Carcassonne and the castles of southern Languedoc demonstrated, in the 13th century, the spread of a royal fortress model from the north of France to the Mediterranean basin, and its adaptation to the steep mountain ridges. Their construction contributed to the expansion and affirmation of French royal power following one of the few crusades led against a Christian population. These castles also testify to the efficiency of royal administration, the expression of a new centralised power that would lastingly mark the development of the major European states, then in gestation. Lastly, Carcassonne and its 13th-century mountain sentinel castles testify to successive theories and practices of heritage restoration, but also their reappropriation (or reinterpretation) through the periods. The sites in the series thus each document a type of intervention.

*Criterion (iv): to be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history.*

The fortified City of Carcassonne and the mountain sentinel castles that accompany it result from the affirmation of a territorial defensive conception and royal military architecture in the second half of the 13th century and the start of the following century. They are eminent examples of a remarkable adaptation of military engineering, initiated at the start of the century by Philip II, to the constraints of the topography, reflected in the architectural forms and the tactical techniques as well as in the building processes. The theatres of often well-documented sieges, Carcassonne and many of these castles are considered to be laboratories of siege warfare in the medieval era. The upper town of Carcassonne is an excellent example of a fortified medieval town whose enormous defence system reused some of the ramparts from the end of Antiquity.

The City of Carcassonne and its mountain sentinel castles testify to many historical events that took place in southern Languedoc, in which the expansion and then the repression of the Cathar faith are of particular importance. The City of Carcassonne is of exceptional importance because it combines the military and political value given to this place in the 13th century with the restoration work undertaken by Viollet-le-Duc in the second half of the 19th century.
The morphology of the natural environments in which these castles are situated strongly influenced the building techniques and the defence systems and the architectural forms adopted. The visual quality of these mountain castles, conserved in remarkable natural settings, today plays a role in the perception and appreciation of this complex.

**Statements of integrity and/or authenticity**

The elements making up the series form an original and pioneering serial military defence system in medieval western Europe. They are all the result of the same military and architectural programme and were built in the same period. The integrity of this global and unified defence system is expressed by the City of Carcassonne and by the selection of the seven mountain sentinel castles. The integrity of the military elements in Carcassonne was already recognised in 1997 by the World Heritage List. The seven castles are sufficiently well preserved to each be fully representative of a royal castle built in the mountains in the 13th century or early 14th century, and sufficient in number to show the adaptation of Capetian military engineering to the mountain ridges. The integrity of the landscape is also considered excellent.

The individual authenticity has been judged good or acceptable for each of the elements in the series. For the City of Carcassonne, scientific research has progressed since the 1997 inscription, particularly in the identification of the truly authentic parts and the 19th-century reconstructions / restorations. The mountain sentinel castles, which have generally been only minimally restored, provide important testimonies to 13th-century military engineering. This is the ideal counterpart to the work of Viollet-le-Duc, providing a state of reference in the initial definition of the authenticity of the City of Carcassonne.

The seven castles, perched on rocky ridges with limited human use (woods, coppices, pasturage), and their immediate environments, form an evolving living landscape of undeniable visual interest.

**Comparison with other similar properties**

The complex formed by the City of Carcassonne, with its double-fortified walls, its gates and the Count’s castle, and the series of mountain sentinel castles form an exemplary territorial system of defence and military control from the second half of the 13th century, in Europe and in the Mediterranean world. The complex is exceptional due to its completeness compared to the vestiges of other defence systems conserved from the same period, or chronologically close. It is also exceptional in its stylistic homogeneity due to a royal programme applied methodically and effectively. The complex has been little altered by history and it is well conserved as a whole in terms of a territorial fortified system, in excellent quality urban environments or mountain landscapes. The restoration, on scientific bases, promoted by Viollet-le-Duc in the second half of the 19th century, has exceptionally reinforced the integrity of the double wall of the City of Carcassonne and the Count’s castle.

The proposed complex offers an eminent and remarkably homogeneous example of a 13th-century territorial defence system.

**Criterion (iv) seems fully justified by the comparison with other similar properties.**

The entirety of the proposed property illustrates the implementation of the concepts of Capetian fortification, which made their appearance at the start of the 13th century within the framework of the French monarchy. It fulfilled its ambition to create a great European state, particularly towards the Mediterranean world. It showed the adaptation of a fortification model created in the plain to mountain ridge sites. It illustrates a particularly successful method of centralised military and administrative management of the territory. The proposed property provides a very complete testimony of the diffusion of an architectural model in the second half of the 13th century which took place on the scale of western Europe, Mediterranean Europe and the Middle East.

The complex provides a very complete and well preserved example of a major exchange of influences in the 13th century between western Europe and the Mediterranean world, through the diffusion and application of the principles of Capetian fortification, on the one hand with the fortification of a central town and on the other by the standardised construction of castles located on steep ridges.

**Criterion (ii) seems fully justified by the comparison with similar properties.**
Scientific community of the application

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