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Contributors



Mark Stratton

Mark is an award-winning full-time travel writer and photographer based in Devon. Over the past decade he has written for most UK national newspapers and travel magazines, including *Wanderlust* and *National Geographic Traveller*, specialising in destinations off the beaten track.

He travels to France two or three times a year.

What did you most enjoy about tracing the *Route Napoléon*?

I particularly enjoyed researching the legends that persist, despite the passing of a couple of hundred years. It was a real privilege to be one of the first in many years to follow the actual track that Napoléon's flight took, around Digne-les-Bains. For sheer beauty, the drive up from Gap into Champsaur was unforgettable.



Kate Crockett

Kate Crockett is currently Special Projects Editor for *House & Garden*. Writing predominantly about travel and lifestyle, Kate has contributed to the London *Evening Standard* and *The Sunday Times Travel* magazine, among many others. She travels to France as often as she can, her last visit

being particularly memorable as she arrived on the Orient Express.

What did you most enjoy about getting to know Besançon?

I knew very little about the Jura before arriving in Besançon, so it was great to discover this less-visited region. The city itself is marvellous. It is small enough to explore on foot, which turns out to be the best way to discover all the narrow alleyways, hidden staircases and courtyards.



Todd Mauer

Todd Mauer writes about the Loire Valley for magazines and newspapers in Britain, the US, France and Australia. A native of Alaska, he has lived in the Loire Valley for ten years but is still unable to shake off his New Yorker's wide-eyed wonder at the European history that surrounds him.

What did you most enjoy about setting out on the trail of the 10th-century Count of Anjou, Fulk Nerra?

Researching and writing the story was like re-visiting my boyhood dreams through the eyes of an adult. My inner child was struck by Fulk's bravery in battle, whereas the adult in me was fascinated by his enduring historical and architectural legacy. Being able to shine a bit of light on a medieval legend was the icing on the cake.

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FRANCE (ISSN 0958-8213) (USPS 013-661) is published bi-monthly by Archant Community Media Ltd Ltd., Archant House, Oriel Road, Cheltenham, Glos. GL50 1BB, UK.

Distributed in the US by Evergreen Marketing, 116 Ram Cat Alley, Suite 201, Seneca, SC 29678-3263. Periodicals postage paid at Seneca, SC and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to FRANCE, PO Box 433070, Palm Coast, FL 32143-3070. Canadian GST Number 87211 8922 RT0001

US-BASED ADVERTISING

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FRANCE Magazine is published by Archant Community Media Ltd, Archant House, Oriel Road, Cheltenham, Glos GL50 1BB, England. Head office: Archant Community Media Ltd Prospect House, Rouen Road, Norwich NR1 1RE.

Tel: +44 (0)1603 628311. www.archantlife.co.uk

Company Registration no. 19300. Commission Paritaire no. 76379.

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The Incredible Fulk



The Loire Valley is celebrated for its Renaissance châteaux but the man behind its castles from an earlier era remains largely unknown. **Todd Mauzer** goes in search of the Black Falcon



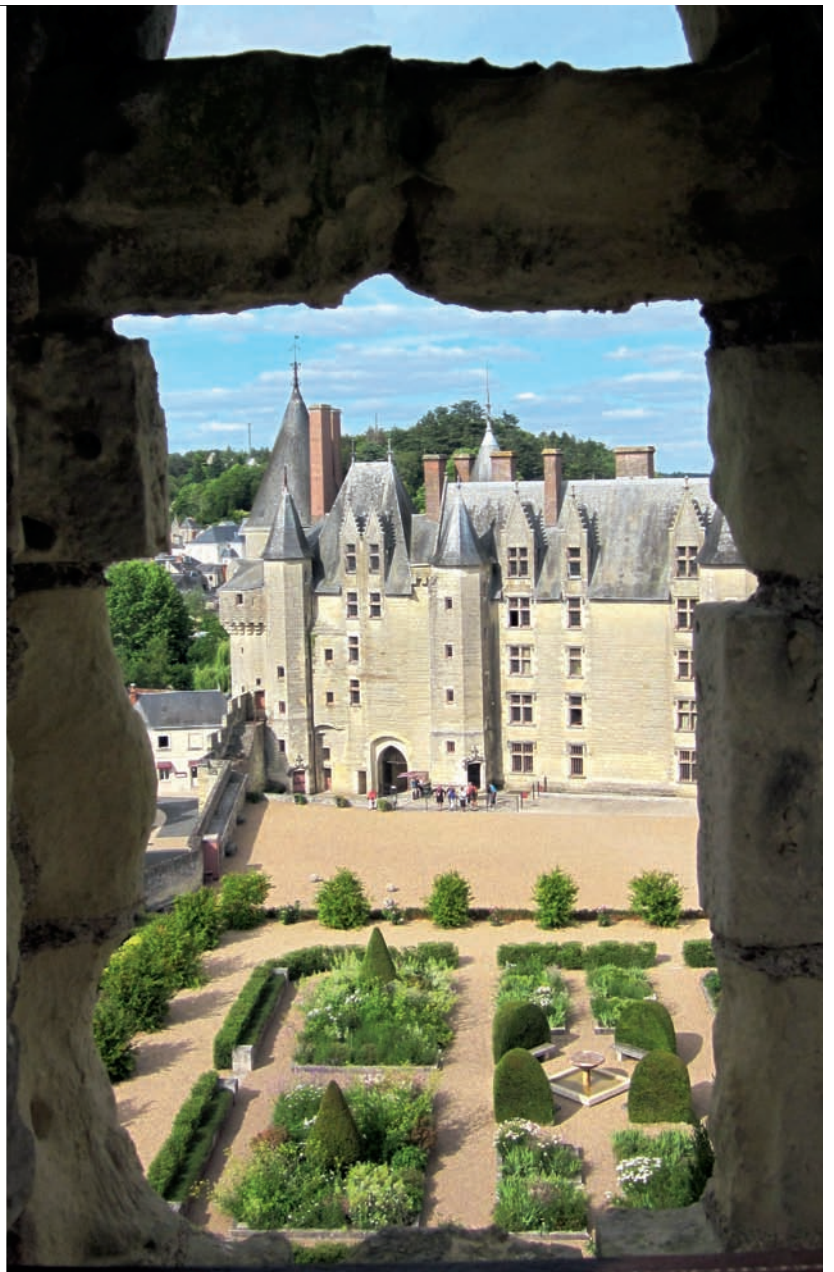
At first glance, the 30-metre-high castle keep of Montbazouin south of Tours appears to be just another of many medieval fortresses dotted throughout the French countryside; but appearances can be deceptive. Built late in the 10th century, the square fortification is believed to be the oldest castle still intact in France. Encircled by encroaching woods, the 12th-century outer defensive walls seem to be under assault, not from armoured knights but from an army of lilac and coppiced hazel. The smell of herbs emanates from the medieval garden at the foot of the keep (or *donjon*) and you can just about hear the murmur of the River Indre as it threads through the fields surrounding the village.

If Montbazouin today seems a vision of serenity, its very existence – not to mention the trebuchets and other siege weapons arrayed below the keep – is proof that there is more to the Loire Valley than the refinement of the Renaissance. Hit by lightning in the

18th century (which has left a scar slithering up its side), the keep has survived several sieges, municipal orders for its destruction and prolonged periods of neglect. It has even been used since the 19th century as the pedestal for a ten-ton statue of the Virgin Mary. Considering what it has been through, however, the keep wears its thousand-plus years remarkably well.

The original fortress was built by Fulk III Nerra, Count of Anjou (c970-1040), known as the Black Falcon or Fulk the Black, a fascinating character who has largely been forgotten, but whose historical footprints are scattered all over the Loire Valley and beyond. More than any other historical figure, it is Fulk (or Foulques) who makes a visit to Montbazouin worthwhile and provides a lot of the colour, much of it crimson from the huge quantities of blood spilled as he forged the beginnings of what is now described as the Angevin Empire, which at its height in the 12th century would stretch from the Pyrénées to the Scottish border.

PHOTOGRAPHS: TODD MAUZER; PAUL COOPER/REX FEATURES; ILLUSTRATION & MAP COURTESY OF HARRY ATTERTON



In 2003, the privately owned fortress opened its doors to the public for the first time after years of restoration work carried out by its then owners Harry Atterton and his wife Jacqueline. Mr. Atterton, originally from Yorkshire, is an eloquent if unlikely advocate for Fulk and seems to appreciate the irony of being an Englishman educating the French about a legend from their own history.

“Fulk is a forgotten giant of French history and, I would argue, English history as well,” he said. “He’s in the genealogies of every royal house in Europe, including the House of Windsor. He can even be considered one of the fathers of England because we can make a link between the geo-political unit he created in Anjou and the development of the English nation. Yet I was amazed to discover that someone so important remains so little known outside the region.”

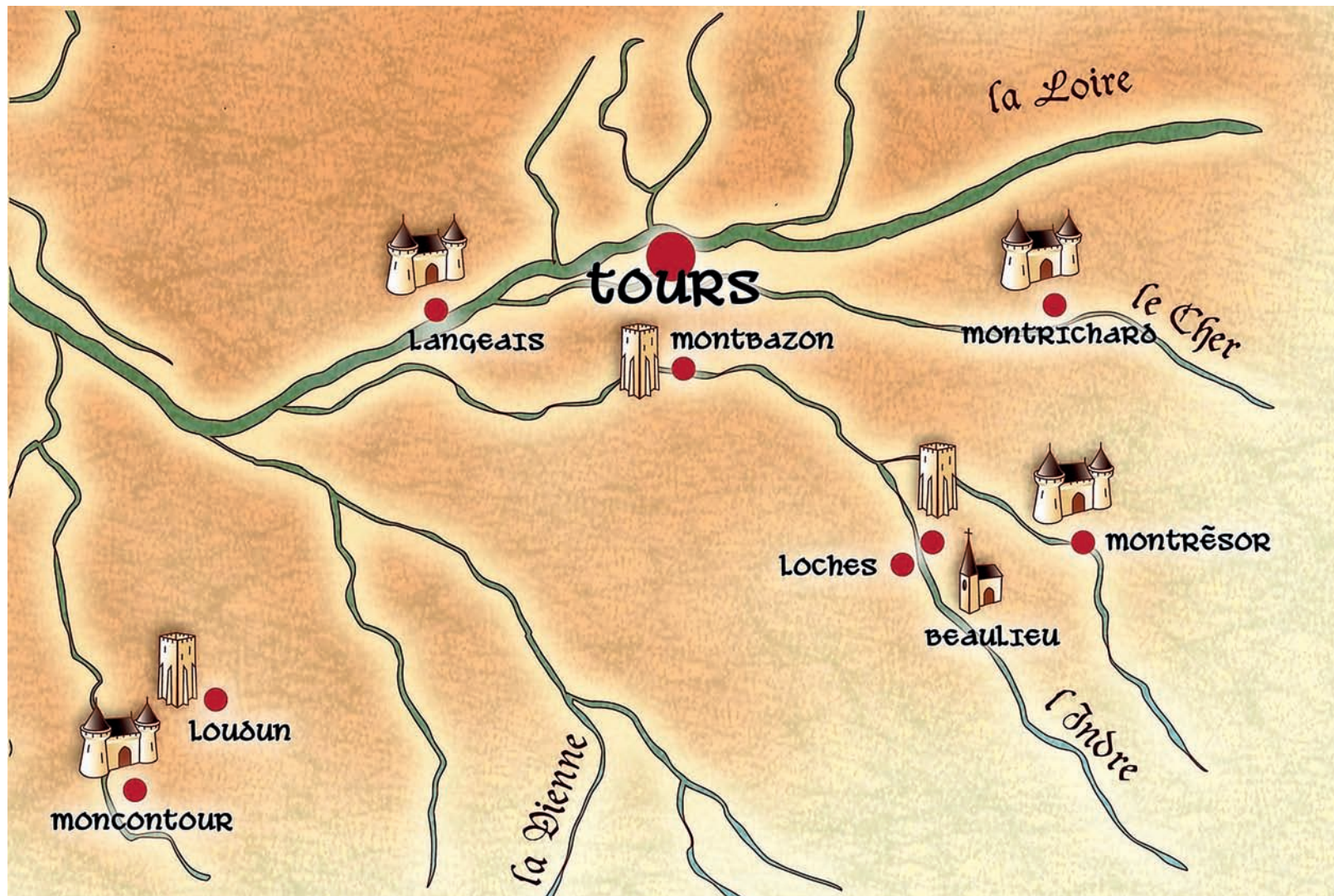
Mr. Atterton, who sold Montbazouin in 2009, makes a compelling argument that Fulk has as much of a right to a seat at the European medieval table as Charlemagne, William the Conqueror, Henry II of England and Richard the Lionheart, all of whom shared Fulk’s blood. Indeed, blood – particularly the shedding of it – was a recurring theme in his life. He may

even have been responsible for murdering William the Conqueror’s father, thereby setting into motion the events which led to the Norman invasion of England in 1066. William became the Duke of Normandy in 1035 while still a child when his father Robert died of poisoning while returning from a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Travelling with William’s father at the time of his death, and suspected by some historians of ordering it, was his regional rival Fulk.

When Fulk wasn’t assassinating or defeating his rivals in pitched battles, or voyaging to Jerusalem on one of his pilgrimages to the Holy Land to seek atonement for his catalogue of sins, he was commissioning more than 50 fortifications and religious buildings throughout the Loire Valley. A surprising number have survived more or less intact, but Montbazouin is one of the best-preserved and most dynamic, offering guided tours, subterranean passages to explore, crossbow practice, and medieval fairs and banquets in the summer.

If Montbazouin can justly claim to be the oldest intact castle in France, the ruins of another Fulk fortification in the nearby town of Langeais may actually predate it by a couple of years. In fact, visitors get two castles for

ABOVE LEFT:
The 30-metre-high castle keep at Montbazouin
ABOVE: The 15th-century château at Langeais seen from Fulk’s fortification
FAR LEFT: An artist’s illustration of Fulk, based on a description from a contemporary chronicle



TOP: A map of Fulk's major fortifications in the Loire Valley
ABOVE: Fulk's seal
FACING PAGE, FROM TOP: The remains of the 10th-century fortifications at Langeais; The keep at Montrichard; The abbey at Beaulieu-lès-Loches; The keep at Loches; The château at Montrésor on the site of Fulk's fortress

the price of one. The principal draw is its 15th-century fairy-tale château, with its air of a half-slumbering, gentle giantess that it would be unwise to provoke. But behind this late-medieval facade, Langeais has a much older story to tell.

Defying time and gravity, and often overlooked by tourists, an imposing tufa limestone wall towers over a sculpted formal garden in the castle grounds. The wall is the only remaining vestige of the fortification provocatively built by Fulk in the early 990s on territory ostensibly belonging to his principal rival, the Count of Blois. The count's response to Fulk's provocation was swift and decisive, and Fulk soon found himself besieged and effectively trapped in Langeais. Deliverance only came when the King of the Franks Hugues (Hugh) Capet arrived with his army, forcing the Count of Blois to withdraw on condition that Fulk dismantled his new stone fortress. The solitary wall at Langeais stands testament to a rare and humiliating setback for Fulk, but it was only a temporary brake on his territorial ambitions. Medieval-style wooden scaffolding has been erected behind the wall, allowing visitors to go up and admire both Fulk's handiwork and the later château.

Fulk's power base was in Angers, further west along

the Loire Valley, which earned his subjects and holdings the term *Angevin*. However, his enduring ambition was to wrest control of the Touraine area from the Counts of Blois, whose territories at that time stretched to Champagne. In fact, most of Fulk's castles which can be visited today played a part in that grand design. The best-preserved and most important are at Montbazon, Langeais, Loches, Moncontour, Montrésor, Loudun and Montrichard. These make a fascinating medieval alternative to the region's well-travelled Renaissance châteaux circuit. So does the abbey at Beaulieu-lès-

Loches, founded by Fulk and where he lies buried.

The picturesque town of Loches is an excellent base for visiting Fulk-related sites in the Loire Valley. Pass through the arched Porte Picois, one of four medieval

gates which protected the lower town, and then follow the cobbled Rue du Château up the hill, where you are confronted by the soaring four-metre-thick walls of the wonderfully preserved medieval citadel; its entrance is guarded by the 13th-century Porte Royale, complete with drawbridge, machicolations and arrow slits. Once inside the citadel, amble up to the Église Saint-Ours, founded by Fulk's father, Geoffrey 'Greymantle', with its distinctive twin stone pyramids capping the

His enduring ambition was to wrest control from the Counts of Blois, whose territories stretched to Champagne

nave. Finally, beyond the *manoirs* and quaint gardens of Rue Thomas Pactius and at the end of a tree-lined row of cottages, lies the keep, the site where, according to some sources, Fulk was born.

At that time in the 10th century there was only a motte-and-bailey fortification typical of the era, the earthwork (*motte*) foundation of which remains to this day. The formidable stone keeps such as at Loches and Montbazoin that Fulk would build played a major role in expanding and consolidating his holdings, but also helped to revolutionise military architecture. "Fulk's keeps may be considered as grandfathers of the British castle," said Mr. Atterton, and anyone familiar with William the Conqueror's White Tower in London or Rochester Castle will recognise the lineage.

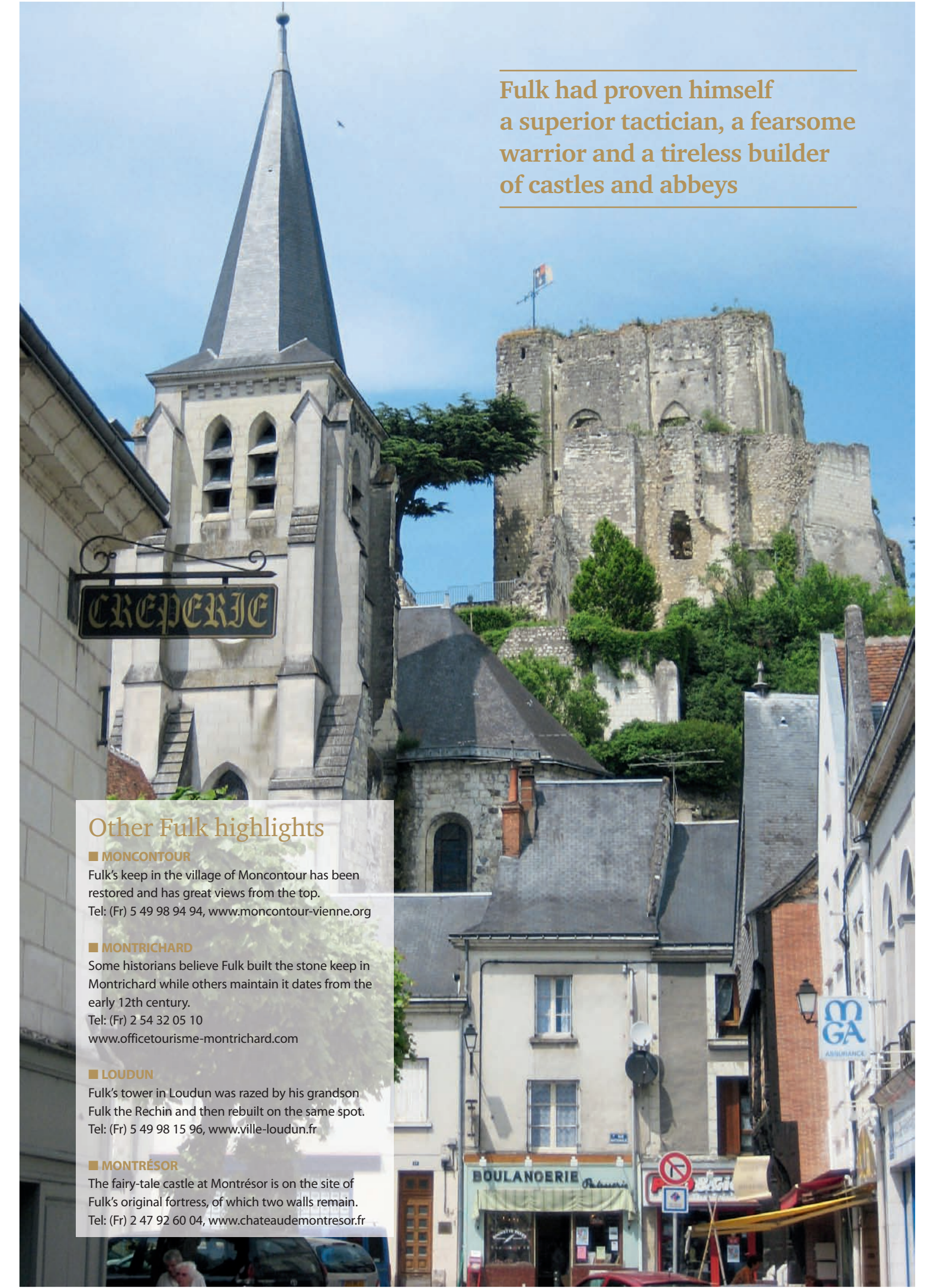
The keep at Loches remains an impressive sight; the structure is a vertigo-inducing 36 metres high, making it one of the tallest in Europe. Visitors can climb to the top for a panoramic view of the Indrois Valley, and visit Fulk's chapel and the moss-covered altar where he sought divine forgiveness for his sins. Fulk's most infamous act was the burning of his first wife, Elizabeth of Vendôme. Historians agree that she died in a fire, but the exact circumstances of her death remain unclear. One version contends she was caught in a compromising position with a goatherd and that Fulk had her burnt at the stake in her wedding dress, although he was 'chivalrous' enough to impale her with his sword before the flames were lit. Others suggest she was accused of witchcraft and condemned to death by a religious council.

Atoning for his sins

Despite his acts of cruelty, Fulk was terrified of eternal damnation and the ultimate act of penitence was to go on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. This was a perilous trip risking disease, enslavement, murder, piracy and shipwreck. Remarkably, Fulk made not one but four pilgrimages to Jerusalem. These took a total of seven years – a testament not only to his fortitude, but also to the quantity and gravity of his sins. Fulk was particularly haunted by the spilling of Christian blood. In addition to many skirmishes, he fought two major pitched battles: at Conquereuil near Nantes in 992 and at Pontlevoy near Montrichard in 1016 against his enemy, Odo II, Count of Blois. In both battles he was unhorsed and nearly died before emerging victorious, but thousands were killed. The carnage at Conquereuil – where he defeated and probably killed his brother-in-law, Count Conan of Rennes – was the inspiration for his first pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

When Fulk returned he claimed that his habitual ferocity had been "replaced by a certain sweetness," and he vowed to build an abbey on the best site in his lands. The result was Beaulieu-lès-Loches, in the township of Loches, where he lies buried. Although not much is left of Fulk's building, an imposing wall with Romanesque arches which formed part of the nave suggests its considerable scale. The adjoining church was built mainly by the Plantagenets who incorporated parts of Fulk's construction into their own smaller one. ▶





Fulk had proven himself
a superior tactician, a fearsome
warrior and a tireless builder
of castles and abbeys

Other Fulk highlights

■ MONCONTOUR

Fulk's keep in the village of Moncontour has been restored and has great views from the top.

Tel: (Fr) 5 49 98 94 94, www.moncontour-vienne.org

■ MONTRICHARD

Some historians believe Fulk built the stone keep in Montrichard while others maintain it dates from the early 12th century.

Tel: (Fr) 2 54 32 05 10

www.officetourisme-montrichard.com

■ LOUDUN

Fulk's tower in Loudun was razed by his grandson Fulk the Rechin and then rebuilt on the same spot.

Tel: (Fr) 5 49 98 15 96, www.ville-loudun.fr

■ MONTRÉSOR

The fairy-tale castle at Montrésor is on the site of Fulk's original fortress, of which two walls remain.

Tel: (Fr) 2 47 92 60 04, www.chateaudemontresor.fr



Outside on the north transept is a faded battle frieze representing Fulk's victory at Conquereuil, complete with carvings of sword-wielding knights on horseback. Although his original tomb inside the abbey church was destroyed during the French Revolution, Fulk's sarcophagus was unearthed as part of an archaeological dig in 2007, and can now be viewed through a glass panel in the floor of the south transept. Behind the choir a stained-glass window depicts one of the most famous episodes from Fulk's life when, during his second pilgrimage to Jerusalem, he is said to have bitten off a piece of Jesus's tomb at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. In medieval times, the possession of relics was essential for large churches to attract paying pilgrims and add to their prestige, so Fulk donated this and other relics to his new abbey at Beaulieu.

The villagers had many reasons to be thankful to Fulk, despite his obvious flaws. Although self-interest was certainly his main motivation for founding his abbey – he wanted the monks to pray for him in order to save his soul from eternal damnation – he granted generous tax exemptions and the right to hold a market, which spurred the village's development. But he went

further, and not only with the people of Beaulieu. Exceptionally for his time, he believed his indentured serfs should be free after a certain number of years of service, and supported education not only for the nobility and clergy but for ordinary people as well.

When Fulk died of illness in Metz in 1040 while returning from his fourth pilgrimage, he was considered second in influence only to the king. In his 53 years as Count of Anjou, he had laid the foundations for the Angevin Empire and proven himself a superior tactician, fearsome warrior and tireless builder of castles and abbeys. Although he was a French historical figure, the principal beneficiaries of Fulk's empire-building prowess would be the Plantagenet kings and queens of England. Indeed, back in ancient Montbazou, in the shadow of the oldest intact castle in France, the outer defensive walls encircling the keep were built by King Henry II of England – just one reminder of Fulk's enduring legacy as a forgotten giant of French and English history. 📖

FURTHER READING: *Fulk Nerra: the Neo-Roman Consul, 987-1040*, by Bernard Bachrach, published by University of California Press.

FACING PAGE:
The castle keep
towering over
the village of
Montrichard
ABOVE: Fulk's
sarcophagus at
Beaulieu-lès-
Loches and the
stained-glass
window depicting
him biting off
a piece of
Jesus's tomb

FRANCOFILE

On Fulk's trail in the Loire Valley

HOW TO GET THERE

Loches is the best base for visiting Fulk's sites.

By road: Loches is about six hours' drive from the northern Channel ports.

By rail: Trains run regularly from Tours.

By air: Ryanair operates daily flights from Stansted to Tours. www.ryanair.com

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www.forteresse-du-fauconnoir.com

Château de Loches

www.chateau-loches.fr

Beaulieu-lès-Loches

The abbey church is open daily, entry free.

Château et Parc de Langeais

www.chateau-de-langeais.com



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