

Provins as an example of a “live museum”

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Abstract. The article concerns the history, revalorisation and accessibility of the cultural heritage in the historic town of Provins, located to the south-west of Paris. The town was founded in the early medieval period, and in the 12th and 13th century it was one of the most prominent fair towns in Champagne. Many valuable monuments of that period have survived until the present time, such as the urban layout, the defensive walls, the Cesar tower supposedly relating to the legendary origins of the town dating back to the Roman period, churches and relics of residential buildings. In 2001, the above mentioned buildings were appreciated and distinguished by the UNESCO Committee which inscribed Provins in the World Heritage List. This distinction is not merely a matter of pride for the local authorities, but also an obligation to properly maintain the historic heritage, to revalorise it constantly and to educate the community regarding the protection of the town heritage. It must be stated that the authorities perfectly fulfil their responsibilities, which is worth presenting in this article to set an example of proper cultural heritage management for other historic towns.

1 Introduction

The town of Provins is located to the south-west of Paris. Nowadays this medieval centre has a population of 11 thousand and lies in the region Île-de-France, in the Seine and Marne department.

This article is aimed at presenting that unique medieval town, primarily in the conservation context as a sanctuary of historic buildings and its spatial layout, and also in the popularising context as a “live museum”.

Provins was founded in the early medieval period. It was then an important market town in Champagne. From that period relics of e.g. the own ramparts with 22 towers, medieval housing, churches and the urban layout have survived until the present time. In the year 2001, the mentioned elements of the cultural landscape were appreciated and distinguished by the UNESCO Committee which inscribed Provins in the World Heritage List [1]. This distinction is not merely a matter of pride for the local authorities, but also an obligation to properly maintain the historic heritage, to revalorise it constantly and to educate the community regarding the protection of the town heritage. Provins perfectly fulfils those responsibilities by creating the “live museum” within the historic building complex from the medieval period.

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2 History of the town in its heyday

Provins was established during the Middle Ages. The first information about this town comes from the beginning of the 9th century, from the document issued by Charlemagne. Its location at the crossing of important trade routes, as well as the policy of the Counts of Champagne wishing to increase the significance of their province in France at the time, affected the rapid development of the town primarily as a trade centre. Numerous monuments which have survived from that period enable tourists to feel the ambience of medieval fairs attended by flocks of merchants from all over Europe. Those merchants contributed to the growing wealth affluence and fame of the town where one could buy almost all desirable commodities (wine, fruits, vegetables, grain, fish and meat), even such as Chinese silk, exotic spices or woollen fabrics from Flanders and Florence. Besides all the above mentioned features of the town, which made it particularly attractive for merchants, there was also the possibility to cash letters of credit and to obtain protection for one's merchandise during the journey, which was granted to merchants by the Counts of Champagne. It is also worth mentioning, that the origins of the trading fairs in Provins are associated with celebrations accompanying religious events and holidays. Only with time did those events acquire a typically commercial, and thus a more lay dimension. To conclude this outline of the fairs in Provins, it has to be emphasised, that towards the end of the 12th century Provins together with three other major towns of the county (Troyes, Lagny, Saint-Denis) made up one huge all-year-round trading fair. In the course of a year, merchants travelled from one town to another, conducting their trade in each of the towns on specific dates. One of the greatest advantages of the fairs in Champagne was the admirable infrastructure created on the initiative of the Counts of the province, men of business and inhabitants of the above mentioned towns. The infrastructure comprised e.g. market halls, taverns, inns, stables, warehouses and money-changers' offices. Their relics have also been preserved till the present day.

Provins, as was depicted in an old print from the 17th century, consisted of two parts: the upper and lower towns. The upper town, located on the hill, was the town of rulers. Here stood the castle of the Counts of Champagne, the Saint-Quiriace collegiate church, houses of knights, clergymen and lay officials and stretched the small, rectangular market square. The lower town was situated at the foot of the upper town. Here trade was conducted, and here lived merchants, craftsmen and other residents of Provins. The district formed around the Saint Ayoul abbey near which, already in the 11th century, fairs were held to commemorate its patron saint [2–4].



Fig. 1. Caption of the Figure Provins on a historic sketch from the 1st half of the 17th century, [in:] *Plans et vues de villes de Champagne et Brie* (1634-1644), <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b531441082/f4.item>, access: 11.03.2018.

The paramount importance of Provins and other towns in Champagne in trade declined in the 14th century, when Paris became the centre of commercial exchange in this part of France. Such a state of affairs had a huge impact on the present-day cultural heritage of the town. As a result of stagnation and impoverishment of Provins, in the following centuries people used the largely medieval buildings, thus avoiding constructing new houses. A similar situation occurred in the case of public utility buildings; therefore we can still admire unique examples of original, medieval architecture today [5].

3 Provins in the UNESCO World's Cultural Heritage List

The cultural value of Provins is reflected in the fact that it was inscribed in the UNESCO World Heritage List, which took place in the year 2001. It also should be added, that the condition of inscribing a monument in the World Heritage List is acknowledging its unique universal value according to at least one of the criteria presented by the UNESCO. According to criterion I, the proposed object or complex should represent a masterpiece of human creative genius. Criterion II states that it ought 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. According to criterion III the inscribed object or complex should bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared. Criterion IV means that it ought 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 final – V criterion requires the monument to be an outstanding example of traditional human settlement, land-use or sea-use which is representative of a culture (or cultures), or human interaction with the environment especially when it has become vulnerable under the impact of irreversible changes. The UNESCO Committee prepared one more criterion, defined as supplementary, which should be applied in conjunction with the other criteria. It states that the proposed monument should be directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas or beliefs, with artistic or literary works of outstanding universal significance.

Provins was inscribed on the List because it fulfilled II and IV criteria. In the justification of the entry it was stated that Provins (within criterion II) was one of a few towns in Champagne which, at the beginning of the 2nd millennium, became a venue for annual celebrations and fairs associated with them. The fairs linked Europe of the times with the cultures of the Mediterranean. As far as fulfilling the requirements of criterion IV was concerned, it was indicated that Provins has largely preserved the architecture and urban layout characteristic for fair towns of the medieval period [6].

The distinction granted to the town by inscribing it in the UNESCO World Heritage List has its consequences. The local authorities of Provins have to guarantee appropriate protection, revalorisation, as well as effective management of the entire historic complex. For this purpose the existing regulations have been amended, which allowed for precise identification of mechanisms ensuring proper protection of the whole complex.

4 Cultural heritage of the town

The historic heritage of Provins, inscribed in the UNESCO World Heritage List consists of several elements. Those are primarily: the urban layout, relics of defensive ramparts, churches and residential buildings.

Undoubtedly, an extremely valuable element of the cultural landscape of the town is the urban layout which was formed during the medieval period and has survived until the present. A part of the town (the upper town) was located on a hill. Such a location, outside the defensive perimeter, strengthened the defensive character of the town.

The lower town, on the other hand, was surrounded with a line of defensive ramparts. The urban layout of Provins has an organic character; one can notice here free development of the town determined by a current economic situation and its requirements. It certainly cannot be called a defined orthogonal layout. Provins is a typical French town from the early medieval period.



Fig. 2. Fragment of an archive map of Provins showing the town inside the medieval ramparts. Map [in:] <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b53024909n>, access: 14.03.2018.

Another important cultural element of the town is the ramparts. The defensive perimeter of Provins was 5 km long and was among the longest in France at the time. It was constructed in stages. The ramparts around the upper town were built between 1226 and 1236. They were founded by the Count of Champagne, Thibault IV. The construction of the whole perimeter which would also enclose the area of the lower town was to be realized during the 14th century. Unfortunately, the plan did not succeed, as the building work continued until the 15th century. During the construction of the defensive perimeter around the town some spare parcels of land were measured out for future building development, therefore the area inside the ramparts was fairly vast. However, as a result of a sudden economic collapse in Provins that land was never built upon. In the past it was used by local manufacturers producing woollen fabrics for which the town was famous in the 13th century.

Besides the curtain walls, the defensive perimeter of the town also consisted of gates and numerous towers with varying forms, twenty two of which have survived until today. From the defensive perimeter the 1200 m long section surrounding the upper town has been preserved until today; the remaining part was demolished in the course of numerous regulations and modernisations of the town, which took place in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. It is worth emphasising that, although the major part of the ramparts in Provins has been dismantled, their original outline is clearly visible even today [7].

Nowadays the relics of the medieval defensive walls in Provins are one of the most valuable elements of the cultural heritage of the town. They are in good technological condition and constitute a unique attraction for crowds of tourists sightseeing the town.



Fig. 3. View of the preserved medieval town gate in Provins from the north, 2017.
Photo: D. Kuśnierz-Krupa.



Fig. 4. View of the preserved medieval town gate in Provins from the south, 2017.
Photo: D. Kuśnierz-Krupa.



Fig. 5. View of the preserved, medieval town gate in Provins from the south, 2017.
Photo: D. Kuśnierz-Krupa.

One of the two landmarks dominating over the upper town is the so called Cesar tower (Tour César) erected in the 12th century and connected to the defensive perimeter. The name dates back to the hypothetical origins of the town from the Roman period, which has not been confirmed so far. The 44-metre tall tower was built from stone on the site where previously an older construction of that type must have stood. It served mainly as a jail and an archive. It was also meant to symbolically emphasise the power and authority of the counts of Champagne [8].



Fig. 6. View of the preserved, medieval Cesar's tower from the west, 2017. Photo: D. Kuśnierz-Krupa.



Fig. 7. View of the preserved, medieval Cesar's tower from the north, 2017. Photo: D. Kuśnierz-Krupa.

Important elements of the cultural landscape of Provins are medieval churches. The most important of them is the Saint-Quiriace collegiate, which together with the above described Cesar tower, dominates the silhouette of Provins. It is a massive, stone building the construction of which commenced in the 12th century on the initiative of the Count of Champagne, Henri le Liberal. The construction of the church was an immense enterprise, and therefore was realised in stages. The first to be completed was the chancel, around the year 1166. The building work was continued in the following centuries and was finally

completed in the 17th century. The reason was the increasing poverty of the town which, since the 14th century, gradually lost its political and commercial significance. In spite of problems with completing the construction, that Romanesque-Gothic church has become the symbol of the town and its medieval prosperity [9].



Fig. 8. View of the Saint-Quiriac collegiate church from the north, 2017. Photo: D. Kuśnierz-Krupa.



Fig. 9. View of the Saint-Quiriac collegiate church from the west, 2017. Photo: D. Kuśnierz-Krupa.

Besides the above-mentioned historic objects, the cultural landscape of Provins also encompasses the 12th-, 13th- and 14th-century medieval houses of knights, merchants and clergymen, which have survived till today. They are located in both the ‘upper’ and the ‘lower’ town. Those buildings, erected during the prosperous period connected with famous trading fairs and with the large-scale wool production, make up a live open-air museum of old construction technologies. It ought to be emphasised that later ages, i.e. the 15th, 16th and the next centuries, witnessed the multi-level stagnation in Provins, owing to which town residents did not erect new house but instead adapted and possibly made additions to houses inherited from their ancestors. Thanks to that nowadays one can find the preserved examples of medieval residential buildings in Provins. Interestingly, the houses are constantly used by their owners.

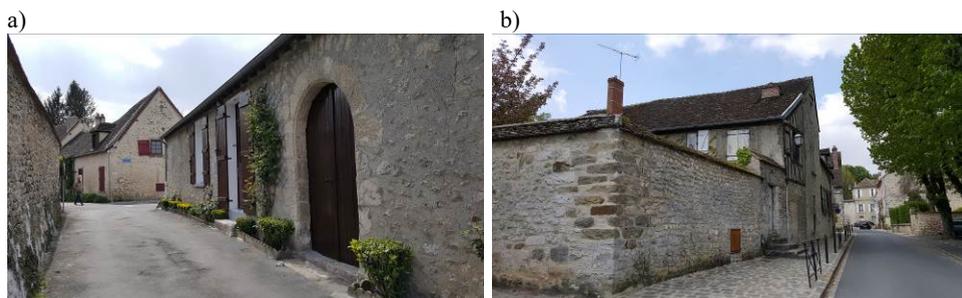


Fig. 10 a, b. View of the preserved, medieval buildings in the “upper town” in Provins, 2017.
Photo: D. Kuśnierz-Krupa.



Fig. 11 a, b. View of the oldest preserved house in Provins, called Maison Romane, 2017.
Photo: D. Kuśnierz-Krupa.

5 Provins as a “live museum”

Besides the suitable protection and revalorisation of the cultural heritage, which is a direct result of the town being inscribed in the UNESCO World Heritage List, one can notice proper popularization of Provins achieved by means of a suitable tourist offer. Thanks to tourism, local authorities acquire financial means for current maintenance of that immense cultural heritage comprising 58 buildings entered in the monument register or the supplementary list.

No matter if the visitor is an expert on the medieval architecture and town planning, or merely an amateur in this field, he will be able to find an interesting fragment of an extensive tourist offer in Provins.

Architectonic objects, especially in the upper town, have been revalorised. Strolling along the streets of Provins, the visitor can feel the ambience of a medieval fair town. The relatively wide streets, rather uncommon in a medieval town, reveal their historic commercial purpose. Similarly, stores and rooms located in vaulted cellars accessible by wide staircases, bring to mind the annual fairs in Provins.

Local authorities emphasise the need to popularise the knowledge of the town’s history. It can be broadened by visiting e.g. the local museum which was “hidden” in the oldest preserved building in the town - Maison Romane. The most significant historic monuments are clearly marked and provided with brief information about the object. You can go sightseeing the town on your own or follow a selected tourist route. Additionally, various exhibitions and shows (war machines, falconry or jousting tournaments) are organised in the open air, which not only teach history but also draw crowds of tourists. Besides those, it is also worth mentioning the varied foods offered in the town, souvenir shops, tourist information points and infrastructure (transport, parking lots).

Finally, it ought to be stated that although Provins is a kind of an open-air museum of medieval urban planning and architecture, it is also regularly inhabited and used, even in the oldest and most valuable part that is the upper town. The majority of historic buildings has remained in the hands of private owners whose efforts at protecting and revalorising the objects are supported by the local authorities e.g. in the form of subsidies.

In conclusion, it should be emphasised that inscribing this slightly forgotten town into the UNESCO World Heritage List offered it an opportunity for development and rebirth. Provins has certainly made good use of that opportunity by taking proper care of monuments, modernising them, and suitably advertising the town as a relic of a historic, medieval fair town, both with regard to the urban layout and historic buildings.



Fig. 12 a, b, c, d, e, f. Revalorised buildings in the upper town, 2017. Photo: D. Kuśnierz-Krupa.



Fig. 13. Market square in Provins, with Cesar tower in the background, 2017. Photo: D. Kuśnierz-Krupa.



Fig. 14. Tourist information point located outside the town ramparts, 2017. Photo: D. Kuśnierz-Krupa.

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