



La Jurade de Saint-Emilion

Saint-Emilion: A History and Description

Today Saint-Emilion is known the world over as a beautiful miniature mediaeval city, surrounded by lovely landscape and beautiful châteaux, the first wine growing area to be a UNESCO World Heritage site, and producer of some of the world's greatest wine. As always today owes much to the past. The story of the Jurisdiction and the roots of its Jurade lie deep in both French and English history - as is shown by its Arms, Great Seal and banners, which bear both the Lilies of France and the Lions of England.

The history of Saint-Emilion can be traced back to early signs of human settlement in the Upper Palaeolithic period (35,000-10,000 BC). The region was certainly heavily populated during the Celtic-Gaulish period, as is shown by the remains of a defended hill fort on the plateau overlooking modern Saint-Emilion. The Roman occupation began when Augustus created the province of Aquitania in 27 BC. With the prosperity of Burdigala (Bordeaux), Valerius Probus used his legions to fell the Cumbris forest in AD 275 BC and created the first vineyards by grafting new varieties of grape onto the *Vitis biturica* that grew naturally in the region. Trenches excavated in the stone by the Romans for growing vines still exist at Château Beau-Séjour Bécot.

The first Christian monasteries appeared at the beginning of the 7th century. Legend has it that in the mid 8th century a Breton monk, Emilian, sought asylum here from the Benedictine community and led a hermit's life in a cave. Reports of miracles attracted many companions, who lived according to the rule of St Benedict. It was they who began to build the great monolithic church, which was three hundred years in the building, or rather excavation, in the limestone of the City, its belfry and steeple still dominating the City. The region was on the pilgrims' route to Santiago de Compostela and many monasteries and churches were built, their buildings still gracing the City.

Its position on that route undoubtedly contributed to the increasingly great prosperity which Saint-Émilion experienced from the 11th century onwards. That prosperity was considerably further increased when the region, together with the rest of Aquitaine, formed part of the dowry of Eleanor of Aquitaine on her marriage, in 1152, to the then Prince Henry, who came to the throne as Henry II in 1154 and became part of the extensive Anglo-Angevin empire stretching from the North of England through Normandy, Anjou and Aquitaine down to the Kingdoms of Aragon and Navarre on what is now the Spanish border. That opened up trade by river to the open sea, delivering new markets for Saint-Émilion's wines.

It was not long before the Jurade entered upon the scene allowing powerful local figures to mould and control the City's destiny and fortunes. The written evidence of the existence of the Jurade and its powers dates from 1199, when their son, King John, by the Charter of Falaise, confirmed an earlier, now lost, grant of full liberties and privileges. That first grant was almost certainly made either by King Richard, Coeur de Lion, or by his mother, Queen Eleanor as Duchess in 1193 or 1194 whilst raising the ransom to end King Richard's imprisonment when he was held hostage by Leopold of Austria as he returned from the Third Crusade. By those grants Saint-Émilion became effectively a free City under the Crown, with the Jurade having control of its legal and economic affairs.

Whatever the true date of its foundation, it is clear that for the six hundred years after the Charter of Falaise, the City was ruled by the Jurade, composed of the Jurats, or magistrates, and one hundred *pairs* or peers. The Jurats not only governed but judged, exercising judicial power in what is still properly called the Jurisdiction of Saint-Émilion. (Not long before, in England and Wales, Richard III and John's father, Henry II, had set up the Assize system of the King's Judges going out on Circuit to do justice. Those who have seen the robes of an English High Court Judge trying criminal cases will note the common link between them and the robe of the Jurats, back to the robes of Angevin magistrates.) In return for the privileges granted, the Crown required that regular, and very large, consignments, of wine be tasted, judged, its good quality assured, and then be consigned to England in casks.

The Jurats knew full well the importance of wine-growing, then as now, to the local economy and made ensuring its success an important part of their rôle. They took firm control of the production and sale of wine, closely monitoring its quality. Each barrel was tasted to ensure that only that wine worthy of it bore the

name of Saint-Émilion. Authenticity was guaranteed by the Great Seal of the Jurisdiction branded on each approved barrel: any barrels containing any unworthy wines were smashed and burned in what was probably among the first exercises in consumer protection. They did not only control the final product but to get to that point the Jurats also regulated vineyard practices, for example, forbidding picking before the official opening of harvest; preventing the release of dogs into the vineyard before and during picking, no doubt for reasons of hygiene, and punishing misconduct and fraud.

Their success is well demonstrated by the fact that during the 12th and 13th centuries the wines had a reputation as high as they now enjoy. They were known as as *vins honorifiques* (in English as "Royal wines") because they were presented as gifts to kings and important people, showing their quality, prestige and reputation. In 1298 Edward I signed a decree enlarging the limits of the Jurisdiction, delineating an area which has hardly changed so that, now as then, it still produces the wine which proudly bears the name of Saint-Émilion.

Vast quantities of wine were exported, much of it to the English Court and nobility. The wine fleet went out from England in the autumn and again early spring with 800 or more vessels leaving both Bordeaux and Libourne (founded and named by Guy de Leyburn, a Yorkshireman, who knew a good thing when he saw one). In 1306/7, the equivalent of 120 million modern bottles, some 100,000 tonneaux, passed through Bordeaux for export, much of it to England. So important was the trade that it gave the word still used to measure a ship's size – tonnage from *tonneaux* – and led to the foundation of one of the City of London's great Livery Companies – the Company and Mystery of Vintners. The fleet exported armour, cheese, cloth and dried fish, but, even then being unable to sell much cheese to the French, often went out in ballast, taking stone which still paves the streets of Saint-Emilion.

In 1453, to the great economic loss of the winegrowers of the region, who were deprived of much of their English trade on privileged terms, the City came under lasting French rule, and the region suffered badly economically. Petitioning their new King led after three years to Charles VII of France confirming all the Jurade's privileges earlier granted by English Sovereigns to help it re-establish itself after the ravages of war. Saint-Émilion suffered again during the Wars of Religion in the later 16th century and lost its leading position to Libourne but the late 17th and 18th centuries saw the quality of the wines from the region again becoming recognized as exceptional. They were beloved of Louis XIV and celebrated in prose, poetry and song. The demands of Flemish consumers in the

early part of the century led to an increase in viticulture, since the quality of the Saint-Émilion wines enabled them to be transported by sea without the wine turning into vinegar – they still travel very well.

However, profound social changes came with the Revolution which destroyed the old order. The Jurade was abolished in 1792, some Jurats being guillotined. Many of the ancient buildings were demolished or fell into ruins as did the quality, reputation and trade of Saint-Émilion's wine. It was not until 1853 that Saint-Émilion started to recover, thanks to its vineyards and the coming of the railway line between Paris and Bordeaux.

In 1867 wines of Saint-Émilion were awarded the Gold Medal of the Universal Exhibition, and this was followed by the highest award, the Grand Prix Collectif, at the 1889 Universal Exhibition.

The Jurade was re-born in 1948, its old identity and determination to protect and enhance the reputation of the Jurisdiction's wines being grafted onto modern human root-stock, although many of the families who provided Jurats in times past still do so today.

The first classification of the Saint-Émilion wines by the Institut National des Appellations d'Origine (AOC) was in 1954, when four Appellations were defined. These were reduced to two - Saint-Émilion and Saint-Émilion Grand Cru - in 1984. By comparison with other vineyard regions of the Bordelais, Saint-Émilion has been noteworthy for its innovations. It established the first wine syndicate in 1884 and the first cooperative cellars in the Gironde in 1932. Many of the technical innovations of modern wine-making have been begun or developed by the growers of the Jurisdiction.

Now the Saint-Émilion vineyards produce over 230,00 hectolitres of wine (all red) annually, representing 10% of the AOC wines of the Gironde. The 7,846 hectares, some 19,400 acres, of the Jurisdiction still cover the same eight communes as they did in 1289. It is bounded on the north by the Barbanne, a tributary of the Isle, on the south by the Dordogne, on the west by the town of Libourne, and on the east by the Appellation of Castillon-la-Bataille, with vineyards now occupying more than two-thirds of the total area. The long history of the Jurisdiction has produced its own characteristic monuments and architecture. Their range, historical integrity and the beauty of their setting, inspired UNESCO to make the Jurisdiction a World Heritage Site, the first wine-growing area to be so recognised.

Medieval and Renaissance castles, built on militarily important sites, take their place alongside the vineyard chateaux, many of them magnificent in their own right, others smaller and less obviously imposing but all contributing to a rich and beautiful landscape.

In the City of Saint-Emilion itself, the Jurats still worship at the beautiful Église Collégiale and the massive keep of the Château du Roi still stands. From its top the Jurats, wearing the historic scarlet and white of their mediaeval magistrate predecessors, still proclaim the Jugement du Vin Nouveau in Spring and the Ban des Vendanges to authorise harvesting in September, calling upon the spirits of Jurats long dead to bear witness to their continuing work.