



château du

Haut-Kœnigsbourg

Bien plus qu'un monument

Teacher's guide

Having witnessed nearly 900 years of history, this Alsatian fortress, restored at the beginning of the 20th century, now offers us a modern-day window onto the Middle Ages.

Passing through the castle's main entrance is to travel back in time to the medieval world. Everything is here - from towers and bastions to wall walks, portcullises and machicolations (the so-called 'murder holes'...)

This guide will help you to prepare and get the most out of your visit to Haut-Kœnigsbourg.

Information and reservations,
Monday to Friday.



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The history of the castle Haut-Kœnigsbourg

The House of Hohenstaufen, builders of the first castle

The castle Haut-Kœnigsbourg originally dates from the 12th century. A manuscript tells us that Frederick II, the Hohenstaufen Duke of Swabia, owned a castle sited upon a mountain known as Staufenberg. At this time, the Hohenstaufen family was attempting to build up a power base for themselves in Alsace in order to gain control of the Holy Roman Empire. Bearing this goal in mind, the site of Haut-Kœnigsbourg is an excellent place to build a fortress: the rocky spur that crowns the mountain is a perfect natural defensive feature and the height of the Staufenberg (757 meters), gave the castle's occupants a clear view of the two major commercial arteries that passed by the foot of the mountain – the salt and silver route (running East-West between Alsace and the Duchy of Lorraine), and the cereals and wine route (running North-South).

The Hapsburg period

After the Hohenstaufen dynasty came to an end, a second Imperial dynasty added the castle Haut-Kœnigsbourg to its list of properties: The Hapsburgs. The castle retained its strategic importance and acted as the Western boundary of the Holy Roman Empire, which was the object of the territorial ambitions of both the Dukes of Lorraine and the Kings of France.

Although strategically important, the castle placed a heavy strain on the Hapsburgs' finances. They were unable to pay for the upkeep of the fortress, which had been enlarged several times, much less meets the wages of the garrison. They decided to grant the castle to various aristocratic families, who therefore had the use of the castle in exchange for help towards meeting the costs of the castle's maintenance. This created a confused situation which robber knights used to their advantage. These knights lived by attacking the merchants who passed beneath the castle, looking for protection there.

Following repeated attacks on their citizens, several towns banded together to destroy this threat to their economies and trade routes. Following a siege in 1462, the castle was occupied and destroyed.

As a result, the Hapsburgs recovered a ruined fortress that they could not afford to rebuild. In 1479, they once again decided to award the castle as a fiefdom to one of their most loyal military commanders, Oswald of Tierstein. Following this, the castle was rebuilt, enlarged and modernized so as to be capable of withstanding the firearms that were becoming ever-more effective.

However, the Tiersteins were faced with the same problems as previous castle tenants in relation to the maintenance of the castle. They were only able to pay for a small castle garrison.

Despite its outdated defenses, the castle Haut-Kœnigsbourg became a key strategic position once again in the 17th century, as it controlled one of the main routes into Alsace. The conquest of the region was a key objective during the Thirty Years' War, which pitted the Roman Catholic German Principalities, supported by the Duke of Lorraine, against the Protestant Principalities, supported by the Kings of France and Sweden. For the villagers living on the plains below, the castle was a place where they could shelter, safe from pillaging soldiers from either side.

In 1633, the Swedes decided to destroy the fortress. The castle withstood a siege that lasted over a month, but modern artillery finally got the better of medieval walls. A fire that broke out several days after it had fallen to the Swedes completed the castle's destruction.

The rediscovery of the castle ruins

After 1633, the castle Haut-Kœnigsbourg fell gradually into ruin. It wasn't until the advent of the Romantic Movement at the beginning of the 18th century that interest in the mysterious ruins of Haut-Kœnigsbourg was rekindled.

Attracted by the dark forests and ivy-covered ruins, the first hikers also came to admire the views over the Vosges and the Alsatian plain. The ruins were given listed building status in 1862. It wasn't long before various proposals for the restoration or rebuilding of the ruins were brought before the town of Sélestat, which had bought the site in 1865. For want of funds, the town made do with stabilizing the site. None of the other proposals went ahead.

The castle's reconstruction

Alsace was annexed by the German Empire in 1871. Haut-Kœnigsbourg was a potent symbol for the House of Hohenzollern, marking the Western border of the Holy Roman Empire, to which they claimed to be the successors. In 1889, the town of Sélestat gave the site to Wilhelm II. He decided to restore the ruins, both to house a museum of the Middle Ages and to act as a symbol of Alsace's German identity. Bodo Ehardt was entrusted with the restoration project and decided to rebuild the castle to look as it would have done during the time of the Tierstein family in the 15th century. The walls, which had remained standing right up to the level of the machicolations, and the partially preserved vaults, were a solid basis on which to begin the work of reconstruction. After finishing the process of clearing and cleaning up the ruins (which uncovered a wealth of archaeological finds), restoration work ran from 1899 to 1908, using the most advanced technology available at the time. The castle's interiors and interior design were entrusted to Leo Schnug and a not-for-profit organization, the HohKönigsburgverein, which took charge of furnishing the castle and collecting the various items and objects that would bring it to life. Bodo Ehardt's proposals to 'recreate' a 15th century château were very controversial at the time. Nevertheless, the end result is plausible enough in terms of historical accuracy, even if certain aspects of the castle, such as the covered wall walks and the original height of the keep, could only be guessed at.

The 1918 Treaty of Versailles transferred ownership of the castle to France. As of January 1st, 2007, the castle belongs to the Conseil Général du Bas-Rhin.

Placing the castle Haut-Koenigsbourg in its historical context

	The castle	The wider German context	Major historical events
12th to 15th century	<p>1147: First mention of the castle. It belongs to the Hohenstaufen family</p> <p>1462 : castle Haut-Koenigsbourg besieged and destroyed by a coalition of towns in response to the attacks of robber knights. The castle now belongs to the Hapsburgs</p> <p>1479: The Tierstein family is awarded the fiefdom of the castle. They rebuild and modernize it.</p>	<p>Hohenstaufen dynasty (Holy Roman empire)</p> <p>Hapsburg dynasty (Holy Roman Empire)</p>	<p>The Crusades (1095- 1270)</p> <p>13th century: Great cathedrals constructed</p> <p>1337 – 1452: Hundred Years' War</p> <p>1453: Invention of printing</p> <p>1492: Discovery of America</p>
16th to 17th century	<p>1633: The castle is besieged and taken by the Swedes, before being destroyed in a fire</p>	<p>1525: The German Peasants' War</p>	<p>1517: Beginning of the Protestant Reformation</p> <p>1618-1648: The Thirty Years' War</p>

18th to 21th century

End of the 18th, beginning of 19th century

1862: The ruins of Haut-Koenigsbourg are given listed building status

1901-1908: The castle Haut-Koenigsbourg is restored by Bodo Ebhardt for Kaiser Wilhelm II. The castle belongs to the Hohenzollern family

1919: Haut-Koenigsbourg becomes state-owned, managed by the Caisse Nationale des Monuments Historiques et des Sites

2007: Haut-Koenigsbourg passes into the ownership of the Conseil Général du Bas-Rhin

The Romantic Era:
Rediscovery of medieval-era ruins and increased interest in Middle Ages in general

Hohenzollern dynasty (Holy Roman Empire)

1871-1914: Following the Franco-Prussian war, Wilhelm I founds the German Empire. Alsace is annexed by Germany

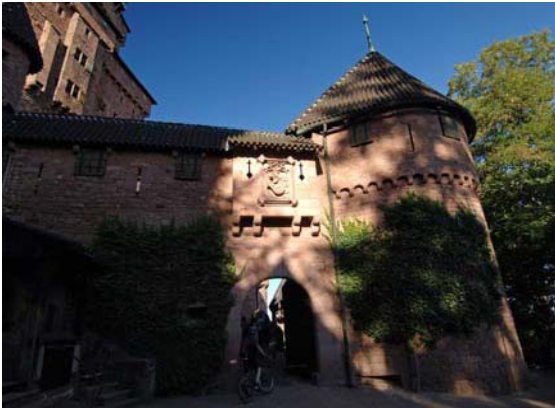
1914-1918 :
First World War

1939-1945 :
Second World War

A step-by-step guide to the castle Haut-Kœnigsbourg

The start of the tour

Opposite the ticket office



© Jean-Luc Stadler

- To begin with, you can remind your students that the site that they are about to visit was restored at the beginning of the 20th century and was designed to be both a museum of the chivalry in Alsace and a political symbol..

- The views over the valley below will enable you to explain why the site was chosen (for defensive purposes and the vantage point it provided).

- The canting arms of the Tierstein family above the entrance way provide an opportunity to refer to both the medieval history of the castle and the art of heraldry

Once through the first entrance way



- Immediately on your right you can see the outer wall, its covered wall walk and the open-backed tower. You can discuss the defensive role of the castle at this point

- A scene from the famous French film, 'La Grande Illusion' by Jean Renoir (1937) was filmed here.

Once through the first entrance way



© Jean-Luc Stadler

-Immediately on your left is the Lord's residence. This will enable you to discuss the castle as a place to live and how people sought to make it more comfortable (bay windows, latrines, windows). Traces of the original Romanesque period castle can still be seen here (bricked-up gemel (twin) windows).

-on the main entrance, directly in front of you as you pass through the first entrance way, you'll see both defensive elements (doors, portcullis, bartizan) and ceremonial and decorative additions (coats of arms of Charles V and Wilhelm II).

The Lower Courtyard



-Here you can talk about the economic role played by the castle, using the restaurant/inn*, the forge and the mill (which was not originally part of the castle), as illustrations. These buildings, together with the small water reservoir, enable the castle to be self-sufficient. In this respect, the mill and the reservoir should not have been sited here during the castle's restoration – it would have been more appropriate for them to be in the upper castle area to which people would fall back in the event of an attack.

-Choices made during the restoration project give students the opportunity to exercise their critical faculties

*Currently undergoing renovation work and therefore not visible to the public

Access steps



© Eric Lorenzini

-these steps are the only access way to the Lord's residence. They have a defensive role (irregularly-spaced steps, loopholes and the opportunity to expose the enemy to crossfire)

The lion gate



© Eric Lorenzini

-This entrance way is especially well-protected, since it represents the last line of defence before the Lord's residence. It consists of two doors separated by the first drawbridge and a ditch. Machicoulis, arrow loops and a bartizan are sited directly above the ditch.

The well



-Here you can underline the importance of water in the event of a siege, demonstrated by this 62 metre-deep well's strongly-defended location in a tower sited right in the heart of the castle.

The cellar



-The cellar's size is determined by the width of the rocky spur upon which the castle is built.

-In the Middle Ages, reserves of food were stored here.

- Now it houses an exhibition about the restoration of the castle, as well as a scale model of the castle ruins as they would have looked in the 17th century

© Marc Dossmann

The inner courtyard



© Jean-Luc Stadler

-This courtyard served several purposes relating to the castle's residential role. Located here is a cistern for water storage and filtration, the kitchens, and two stairways leading to the floors occupied by the nobleman and his family, accessed by means of wooden balconies.

-During the restoration project, a desire to emphasize the aesthetic role of this courtyard led to the creation of a mural featuring the nine worthies.

The keep



© Jean-Luc Stadler

-The square keep that overlooks the courtyard was above all used as an observation post and as a final place of refuge, rather than as a place to live.

-The keep is also a symbol of the power of the Lord who owns the castle.

-Today, the keep is taller than it was at the end of the 15th century. Wilhelm II wished to demonstrate his power through this symbol.

The medieval kitchens



-These two rooms will give you a good idea of what a medieval kitchen in Alsace was like, with its two huge fireplaces, stone sink and vat.

The Kaiser's Room



© Jean-Luc Stadler

The original lay-out of this room was not adhered to during its restoration, as can be seen from the corbels that originally supported another floor which was not rebuilt because this room was destined to be a stateroom.

-Leo Schnug was responsible for decorating this room. His wall paintings are symbolic of Wilhelm II's desire to claim a place for himself in the history of the castle. Images of the castle under siege in 1462 are depicted alongside the imperial eagle and the coats of arms of the ten free Imperial cities of Alsace.

The Lord's residence



©Jean-Luc Stadler

-The Lord's residence will enable you to examine the question of the quest for creature comforts:
Heat, thanks to the wainscoting, the fireplaces and the stoves (recreated with the help of ceramic tiles discovered during digging work).
Light, thanks to the bay window and the window seats that enabled people to make the most of natural light.
Hygiene, thanks to the latrines located in the bedrooms.

-You will also be able to talk about medieval furnishings and furniture (storage chests, beds) and how they developed during the Renaissance period (wardrobes).

The armoury



© Jean-Luc Stadler

-Wilhelm II chose to convert the medieval banquet hall into a museum of medieval weapons. Here we can study the different types of arms in use at the end of the Middle Ages: Pole arms, projectile weapons, swords, firearms and suits of armour.

-This offers another opportunity to get students to exercise their critical faculties, by getting them to pick which weapons were actually used for fighting and which were used for purely ceremonial purposes

The upper garden



-To enter and leave the upper garden, you must cross over drawbridges. These were designed to divide the castle into different sections in order to separate the keep from the rest of the castle for defence purposes.

-This clear area of ground serves an aesthetic, but also a defensive purpose: Traces of Romanesque-era buildings have been found here, but in the 15th century, this area's main purpose was to prevent an attacker's artillery from being able to hit the Lord's residence.

The main bastion



© Eric Lorenzini

-Built in the 15th century, the main bastion played a role in both passive defence (with 9 metre thick walls at the bottom of the south tower) and active defence (artillery platform at the top of the towers). Numerous copies of the culverins, bombards and cannons that were typical of the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries can be found here.

-The 360° view from the main bastion is a reminder of the castle's main function – to watch over and control the surrounding valleys.

The North ward



© Violaine Chaussonet

-As you come down from the main bastion, you will go through two rooms containing more information about the restoration project and the methods and techniques behind it.

-Once into the North ward, you rejoin the outer wall and its covered wall walk. From the North ward, make sure you show your students the imperial eagle on the keep. It may be interesting to encourage them to think about the symbolism of the eagle's presence in this particular place.

Exploding some common myths

Dungeons and torture

There are no dungeons in the castle Haut-Kœnigsbourg. In reality, people in the Middle Ages generally preferred to ransom off prisoners fairly quickly, rather than keeping them imprisoned indefinitely. Dank, dark dungeons for keeping prisoners were therefore the exception to the rule!

Likewise, torture was not systematically practised in the Middle Ages, except in the event of people accused of witchcraft or treason. More common was trial by ordeal (being subjected to a physical test that was supposed to prove the innocence or otherwise of the accused) or relying on divine judgement. It was only during the Renaissance, with the advent of the Inquisition and the rise of absolutism, that torture was codified and became more widespread.

Boiling oil and siege engines

Countless books and films have popularized the idea of huge quantities of boiling oil being poured over attacking forces. In reality, oil was far too scarce and expensive to be wasted in this way – all the more so in the event of a castle siege! The same applied to water, which was an absolute necessity in a fortress. Attackers were more likely to be held back by having hot sand, stones or various types of excrement thrown at them.

Mountain fortresses, including Haut-Kœnigsbourg, would not have been attacked by siege engines such as mangonels, trebuchets or wooden siege towers as the terrain made their deployment too difficult.

The weight of armour

We all have a picture in our head of a knight in full armour, on the ground and unable to get up, like a tortoise on its back. This is only accurate in relation to jousting at the very end of the Middle Ages, when special suits of armour were used, sometimes even being fixed to the rider's saddle. During actual combat situations, the weight of armour being worn would not exceed 15kg (for chain mail armour at the beginning of the Middle Ages) or 30kg (for a suit of plate armour at the end of the Middle Ages). Trained soldiers retained their mobility and speed, even when wearing armour. The equipment carried by a modern-day soldier in the field is just as heavy!

The role of women

The legal status of women in medieval times, notwithstanding big regional variations, offered women, on the whole, considerable freedoms. Any curtailment of these freedoms came later, during the Reformation. Therefore, women were able to take part in politics at the very highest level (Eleanor of Aquitaine, Blanche of Castile, Anne of Brittany), and they took part in all aspects of medieval life, including warfare.

Attacking a castle

An attack on a castle was a very different matter to how it is often portrayed in Hollywood blockbusters, being first and foremost a job for the 'sappers'. A full-scale assault was only used as a last resort, as it was very costly in terms of lives and equipment. Preferred methods were to employ some kind of subterfuge, intimidation, methodical bombardments, undermining fortifications or letting hunger take its toll. Generally-speaking, if a breach were made in the wall, the defenders would surrender. The castle Haut-Kœnigsbourg was taken twice, in 1462, by subterfuge and in 1633, following a methodical bombardment.

Castles teeming with life?

For doubtless sound pedagogical reasons, children's books have led us to expect castles that teem with life, from the dungeons to the top of the keep. However, except when they were being used to shelter local people, castles were home to very small numbers of people. In 1530, there were only 21 people living in the Château du Haut-Kœnigsbourg, of whom only 8 were soldiers!

A dark and cruel period of history!

The perception of the Middle Ages as an uncivilized, almost barbaric time, a period of general stagnation that produced no scientific or technological advances, was created by those living during the Renaissance period, and even more so by the philosophers of the Enlightenment. 19th century historians further entrenched this inaccurate portrayal by presenting the period as a 'Middle' age, an interlude between two golden ages, Classical Antiquity and the Renaissance. Although certain advances were slow to spread, they did occur – from the adoption of the number zero, the development of windmills, the first clocks and the plough, to gothic architecture, horizontal looms, the cheque and water power. The Middle Ages brought us innumerable benefits in all fields.

Personal cleanliness and hygiene

Parallel to the idea of the Middle Ages as a 'dark' period of history runs the equally inaccurate portrayal of this time as dirty and unhygienic. In fact, the stricter moral standards encouraged by the Reformation in the 16th century led to a decline in standards of Europeans' personal hygiene. Public baths and steam rooms were commonplace in towns in the Middle Ages and water was not considered to be a danger to public health. 'Washing' without using water and the use of powders and perfumes to mask smells were much later developments.

Gargantuan banquets

A whole collection of inaccurate representations of banquets dating from the Middle Ages – often designed to demonstrate an ideal state of plenty and to boost the reputation of the person commissioning the painting – has accustomed us to depictions of enormous banquets with tables groaning under the sheer weight of food. We have to be careful not to make two mistakes. Firstly, we would be wrong to think that the day-to-day medieval diet consisted of complex dishes, when in reality, it was composed of simple meals (bread, soup, broth, little meat and even less game). Secondly, medieval banquets were not like our buffet meals. Guests only ate what was set before them and good table manners forbade any 'wolfing down' of one's food.

The castle Haut-Kœnigsbourg: a fanciful restoration?

The restoration of the castle at the start of the 20th century was the setting for a violent debate, played out against a backdrop of extreme nationalism, which pitted Bodo Ebhardt against those who opposed the idea of restoring the château and/or those who questioned the restoration's historical accuracy. Depicted by the artist Hansi with his usual talent, criticism centred on the keep (should it be square, like a 'German' keep or round, like a 'French' keep), the methods employed during the initial digging work and certain other details (the mill, the height of the keep, the 'new' look of the site after restoration work was completed...). In fact, unlike other restoration projects carried out at the same time, at Haut-Kœnigsbourg the project was conducted in a scientific manner, with care taken to preserve as much of the existing structures as possible and to add to them in as historically accurate a way as possible. Apart from a few mistakes, which were mostly due to Wilhelm II's interfering, (the windmill, the Kaiser's Room), the site offers today's visitors a realistic taste of life at the end of the Middle Ages.

Glossary

Bartizan: small rectangular or triangular structure sited directly above a door to provide defensive downward fire for this door.

Bastion: first appeared at the end of the 15th century. A low polygonal fortification sited in front of the main wall designed to house the castle's artillery and repel that of the enemy. At the Château du Haut-Kœnigsbourg, there is the star bastion and the main bastion (actually two artillery towers).

Bay window: Window built upon corbels jutting out from a building façade, thus offering maximum exposure to daylight.

Bestiary: collection of stories and fables about animals or, used in a wider sense, all animals represented in a given site or building.

Bossage: uncut stone left projecting from the surface of a wall for reasons that are still debated: defensive, aesthetic or financial.

Canting arms: emblems chosen in order to represent the name of a family, town or guild by way of a verbal and visual pun (for example, the arms of the Tierstein family bear an animal upon a rock, in German, 'Tier' means animal and 'Stein', rock).

Coats of arms/shields: collection of emblems and colours used to identify and differentiate lords, towns and guilds.

Corbel: Piece of stone or wood projecting from a wall, designed to bear a load such as a beam or a wooden floor.

Crenel shutter: A pivoting shutter, used to protect a loophole or an embrasure (crenel)

Curtain wall: Wall joining two towers

Embrasure: Rectangular opening in the parapet of a wall.

Fief: property/land or position of power awarded by a lord to his vassal in exchange for their allegiance and other services.

Firearms: culverins, bombards, cannons, arquebuses.

Gemel window: double window, typical feature of Romanesque architecture

Guerite or bartizan turret: small defensive turret projecting from the corner of a wall so as to cover a blind spot.

Heating: The Château du Haut-Kœnigsbourg was heated by 2 methods: kachelhoffe (ceramic stoves) in living areas and fireplaces in the bedrooms.

Heraldry: The study of coats of arms and blazons.

Infeudate/enfeoff: Act of awarding a fiefdom.

Keep: the castle's main tower. In Alsace, unlike in the rest of France, the keep was not used as living quarters. It protected the lord's residence, provided a final place of refuge, acted as a watch tower and symbolized the power of the nobleman.

Lewis hole: A hole made in a stone that will help insert the stone into the right place during construction work. A lewis is a lever-type device used to lift stones.

Loophole: Opening, usually narrow and sited high up in a wall that allows soldiers to shoot projectiles whilst being protected by the wall.

Lord: A nobleman who possesses a demesne.

Machicolation: Structure projecting from the top of walls enabling projectiles to be shot vertically downwards.

Mason's mark: Symbol carved on a stone by the stonemason who dressed the stone. During the restoration project, Bodo Ebhardt took up this tradition, giving it a new meaning. Each symbol now represented a year, making it possible to see which parts of the castle were restored and when.

Medieval: Relating to the Middle Ages. This period traditionally runs from AD 476 (the sack of Rome) to AD 1492, (the discovery of America). A visit to the Château du Haut-Kœnigsbourg will take you back to the very end of the Middle Ages, to 1479. Wilhelm II decided to restore the castle to how it would have looked after its first rebuilding by the Tiersteins. In this respect, the Château du Haut-Kœnigsbourg is already modern, as it is adapted to the use of firearms.

Merlon: The solid part of the parapet of a wall between two embrasures.

Miniature: painted letter or coloured drawing decorating an illuminated manuscript.

Open-backed tower: Tower with a back open to the inner courtyard. This prevents the enemy from taking cover there even if they manage to seize the tower.

Portcullis: A moveable gate or grille made of iron-reinforced wood, designed to close and protect an entrance way.

Putlog hole: A hole in a wall that supports scaffolding during construction work.

Suzerain or Lord Paramount: A nobleman who possesses a demesne, part of which is given to a vassal.

Vassal: Person bound directly to a lord, their Lord Paramount, who granted them a fief.

Vat: Large barrel

Ward: area between two walls or between a wall and a ditch.

Water: it was vital for a castle to have its own supply of water. At the Château du Haut-Kœnigsbourg, this supply came from two sources: a 62 metre deep well and water storage cisterns that stocked and filtered rainwater and run-off water.

Weapons: Defensive weapons, pole arms, projectile weapons etc

Window seat: Small seat built into a wall, next to a window so as to make use of any available natural light.

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