

**Y**our invitation to talk to you, Ladies and Gentlemen, gave me the opportunity to have another look at the family book that was given to me by my friend, the much missed Amiod de Dardel, when it was published in 1999. This new approach increased even more my respect for the authors of this work. Thus our subject is not to bring now revelations on the genealogy of your family.

Today, I will bring your attention to two specific aspects of your history: the origin and meaning of the name Dardel; the economic and social significance of Jehan Dardel's move from Villiers to Saint-Blaise in 1513.

## **The origin and meaning of the name**

Among the rare mentions of the name Dardel in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, we find Janin Dardel, son of Amiod Cuhe. Those of you skiing experts may now find a genetic relationship with the champion Didier Cuhe<sup>1</sup>. The change of name is not unusual in the Middle Ages, and to be specific, it does not give explanations about the meaning of the name.

More intriguing is the dialectal, thus original form “Dardey” or “Derdai” that is occasionally found. For instance, an account of the Valangin seigniory<sup>2</sup> mentions your common ancestor in 1505 as “Jehan Dardey, son of Huguenin Dardey”.

I owe Hervé Chevalley, chief editor of the *Glossaire des patois de la Suisse romande*, the confirmation of the form “Derdai”, a word pronounced with a closed é. This was the current pronunciation of other names in our region ending today with –el, such as Boré [Borel], Gabré [Gaberel] or Sogué [Soguel]<sup>3</sup>. Your name was still pronounced as “Derdai” by the patois-speaking people in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as appears in this phrase mentioned in Georges Quinche's *Glossaire du patois de Valangin*, a glossary of which only one copy exists, made in 1866. You can read under “Derdai”: “Dardel, nom propre de famille, suivi de cette phrase “D’ivouet, sont-u les Derdai ? El y èd a a Saulet et pis dgires a Saint-Biâse”. [Dis voir ils sont d’où les Dardel ? Il y en a à Saules et puis aussi à Saint-Blaise]”<sup>4</sup>

Whilst the form “Derdei” is found in the Val-de-Ruz, the form “Derdi” is found in Saint-Blaise, which corresponds precisely to the local evolution of the suffix –ellu.

Beyond the form, M. Chevalley tried to understand the meaning of the name, but there is no “dardel” appellative in our region, and Albert Dauzat's *Dictionnaire des noms de famille* brings nothing convincing in this respect. Even the very scholarly *Französisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* (tome XVa, p. 56) brings no other clue than those we can imagine from the word “dard”: a projectile, an insect's sting, a snake's tongue, an architectural ornament, a kind of fruit branch, or the synonym of a fish species, the “vandoise”<sup>5</sup>.

Even after consulting an excellent specialist, the road is still open for interpretation and even more for imagination.

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<sup>1</sup> Didier Cuhe, a Swiss ski champion of Neuchâtel.

<sup>2</sup> Seigniory (*seigneurie* in French) is land owned by a lord.

<sup>3</sup> *Le patois neuchâtelois*, p. 317 note 1.

<sup>4</sup> “Tell me, where do they come from, the Dardels? There are some in Saules and some others in Saint-Blaise”.

<sup>5</sup> The dace, a sweet water fish.

## From Villiers to Saint-Blaise

It is not known why Jehan Dardel left the seigniorship of Valangin to settle in Neuchâtel county in Saint-Blaise. We don't know either whether he married a girl of this village, at an unknown date, before or after his arrival. What is certain is that Jehan Dardel had a legal status that did not attach him to the seigniorship of Valangin, but allowed him to choose where he wanted to live: the few Dardels mentioned in the Middle Ages are described as “free men” or *habergeants*<sup>6</sup>, a quality given to many men of the seigniorship of Valangin, and even to all who undertook the colonisation of the mountains from this part of the Jura.

Whatever the reasons of his move, Jehan Dardel, while keeping his trade, would experience a great change.

The mill of Villiers is at the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century one of the many existing installations along the Seyon brook, and probably one of the smallest, for it brings to the lord of Valangin only half as much as what he gets from the mill in Bayerel. On the other hand, the mills of Saint-Blaise are the only ones in the *châtellenie*<sup>7</sup> of Thielle, which includes the territories of the villages of La Coudre, Hauterive, Saint-Blaise, Marin, Thielle, Wavre, and Cornaux, as well as a few hamlets, such as Voëns.

You will also remember that at that time, even if the cereal yield was very low, a great part of today's vineyards was fields.

As for the mills, from the financial point of view before Jehan Dardel's arrival, they were leased for a period of three years in an auction in the name of the count of Neuchâtel, but this was changed in 1513. The county had been occupied by the four cantons sharing the bourgeoisie of Neuchâtel: Berne, Solothurn, Fribourg and Lucerne; this occupation was soon extended to the other eight cantons of the Swiss confederation and would last until 1529.

The governor in charge in 1513 innovated the administrative practices and changed the three-year leasing for an “accensement”, which is a concession not limited in time. Thus on June 8<sup>th</sup> the Bernese governor Louis de Diesbach conceded the mills to Jehan Dardel against an annual fee of 14 *muids*<sup>8</sup> of wheat, 2 pounds of wax and 7 pounds of weak currency.

For a better understanding of these values, one should know that 14 *muids* of wheat are roughly equal to 4500 kg, and that the 7 pounds in weak currency represent the conversion in money of the fee of three pigs that was due previously. The fee expressed in wheat, wax and pigs corresponds to the main activities around a mill at a time when the economy was little based on money. To estimate these dues more precisely, the 14 *muids* of wheat correspond to about one fifth of the revenue in wheat of the *châtellenie* and almost three times the fee of the mill in Villiers, which was also charged with two pounds of wax and two pigs.

From a legal point of view, the Saint-Blaise mills belonged to the *domain* of the *châtellenie* of Thielle, which was the part reserved for the lord, the *dominus*. This *domain* was marked materially and symbolically by the right to have the grain required by the castle milled free of charge, and by the obligation — still valid at the

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<sup>6</sup> Habergeant or franc-habergeant: free man (Switzerland).

<sup>7</sup> Châtellenie: the land owned by the lord of the castle (château).

<sup>8</sup> The muid is an obsolete unit of volume, which varies greatly from region to region.

beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century for the great-grandsons of Jehan Dardel — to supply each year a “loaf of bread of one *émine* of wheat”, a large bread indeed as the *émine* was equal to 15 litres.

A part of the *domain* was sometimes land, but always the ovens, mills and all installations along the brook, which means all that was bound to a “right of ban”, the *bannum*, an exclusive right of the lord to constrain and punish.

Jehan Dardel was thus enjoying this right, as he had the monopoly of milling, and all the inhabitants of the *châtellenie* were obliged to have their grain milled in his mills. These rights of ban were abolished in 1830 by an order of the King of Prussia, prince of Neuchâtel.

The owner of the mills is thus the count of Neuchâtel, but in practice the miller possesses them, and in addition to the mentioned fees, he is required to maintain the mills and the installations; the count contributes to this maintenance but does not pay for it, as he allows the miller to take wood from one of his forests, free of charge but on demand only.

Even if Dr Olivier Clottu says so, it seems exaggerated to me that the mills of Saint-Blaise were falling into ruins at the time of their concession to Jehan Dardel. Nothing proves that they were out of order, but it is true that the three-year leasing would not motivate the millers to maintain the buildings and installations.

It also seems that from his arrival Jehan Dardel devoted his greatest attention to the resources of the brook: the same document of 8<sup>th</sup> June 1513 granting him the concession of the mills also involves the beater against a fee in money and in tow.

To defend his interests, he sued ten years later before the governor a man called Petitjaquet who had just re-built on the brook a fabric beater<sup>9</sup> and a hemp mill<sup>10</sup>. This man was probably a descendant of another Jean Petitjaquet who was a miller in Saint-Blaise from 1456 to 1468.

Jehan purchases a sawmill in 1522, and after various concessions obtained from the confederate bailiffs he ends up possessing all the installations along the brook, from its source to its mouth. Not only does he have the use of the energy of the stream — the only energy of the time outside that produced by muscle — he also has the exclusivity of fishing.

This being said, the recognition of Jehan Dardel’s possessions in 1533 (he is about 63) hardly contains any land. The efforts of this man were obviously devoted to the acquisition and restoration of installations, to obtaining rights and to yield a profit. A proof of this is the purchase of a forest above the village of Cornaux that took the name of “Bois Meunier” (The miller’s wood) through which he was less dependant of the count’s power to get timber.

On the other hand, his successors in the mills of Saint-Blaise purchased a great deal of real estate, mainly land and vineyards.

In the context of his period, Jehan Dardel appears like an entrepreneur who in very few years obtained from the local authorities the rights to operate in various fields:

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<sup>9</sup> French: *foule* (Swiss word) an installation to make cloth and fabric soft and supple.

<sup>10</sup> French: *rebatte* (Swiss word) an installation to process hemp (*chanvre* in French).

mainly milling, but also activities using the energy of water for processing cloth and cutting wood.

His success is also reflected in the act of 15<sup>th</sup> May 1522 through which the bailiff Nicolas Halter grants him the *bourgeoisie*<sup>11</sup> of Neuchâtel.

In the very rural, socially structured, and not much permeable society of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Jehan Dardel really appears as an entrepreneur.

There was a time when history was expected to teach lessons. While the first part of this speech demonstrated the variety of the research, the second could be seen as praise for work and personal endeavour.

***Rémy Scheurer, August 2013***

*Translation and notes: François de Dardel  
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<sup>11</sup> The *bourgeoisie* is a Swiss public right through which the *bourgeois* becomes an official member of the community.