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A Roman shipwreck in the Antique port of Antibes



A team of Inrap archaeologists is currently excavating part of the Antique port of Antibes (Alpes-Maritimes). This research, curated by the State (Drac Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur), is being conducted in advance of the construction of an underground parking lot by QPark. The archaeologists will work for seven months at the site of "Pré aux Pêcheurs".

The Antique *Antipolis*...

Antibes is the Antique *Antipolis*, a Greek trading post founded by the Phocaeans of *Massalia*. The date of its establishment is still uncertain, but it followed an indigenous habitat located in the high areas of the current city. Along the Provençal shoreline, *Antipolis* occupied an advantageous location on the maritime routes linking Marseille to the Italian coast. Like the Saint-Roch cove, it had a natural port that was protected from the dominant winds. The prosperity of the Greek and then Roman city was largely based on the dynamic activity of its maritime commerce, as well as on the transformation of sea products, fish salting and the fabrication of *garum* (a fish based sauce).

... and its port

The archaeologists are currently exploring, over 5000 m², the bottom of an Antique port basin, which was progressively covered with sand. This obvious waste dump has yielded many objects – waste thrown from mooring boats or bits of cargo lost during transshipments – and provides information on the daily activities of the sailors and the maritime commerce. The layers of archaeological objects have been accumulating since the 3rd century BC until the 6th century AD. Several tens of thousands of objects of all kinds that were sunken underwater in the Saint-Roch cove have already been recovered, including merchandise originating from periphery of the Mediterranean basin. They alone illustrate the dynamic nature of the Antique port and commerce in this part of the Mediterranean.

The sediments excavated were located under the sea level and were not dried until the construction of the parking lot. These specific anaerobic conditions contributed to the preservation of organic materials and thus allowed the recovery of objects that are not preserved in excavations on land, including amphora corks, leather shoe soles and wood objects.

The shipwreck

In the last area explored by the Inrap archaeologists, the wreck of a Roman vessel was discovered. The boat, preserved over more than 15 m in length, is lying on its side in a shallow area (less than 1.6 m under the Antique sea level). In the context of a partnership with the Centre Camille Jullian, Inrap and a CNRS naval archaeology specialist are collaborating in the analysis and interpretation of this discovery.

The remains consist of a keel and several boards that covered the hull, held together by thousands of pegs inserted into sheave slots cut into the thickness of the boards. Around forty transverse ribs are present, some of which were attached to the keel with metallic pins.

Elements of the ceiling were also identified. The keelson, which served to house the foot of the mast, was not preserved. This vessel was a medium-sized commercial

sailboat (20/22 m long, 6/7 m wide, height of the hold approximately 3 m). Conifer was the main wood used in its construction. The wood knots of the hull were reinforced by plaques of lead held in place by small nails. These plaques compensated for the faults of a medium quality wood, which was used for the construction of this vessel because it was easily available and accessible. The tool traces are clearly visible (saw and adze), as is the pitch that was used to protect the hull. These architectural features support the date indicated by the stratigraphy and pottery elements recovered in the levels accumulated after the boat was abandoned – the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD – and allow the vessel to be attributed to the Imperial Roman ships of the western Mediterranean.

The cause of its sinking is still unknown. Did it crash against the shore during a storm? Was it abandoned to rot in a corner of the port? Was it purposefully sunk to serve as a base for a wharf? These two latter hypotheses could explain the absence of cargo. The continuing investigations will surely reveal the answer.

Inrap

With nearly 2000 collaborators and researchers, Inrap is the largest archaeological research structure in France and one of the most important in Europe. This public research institution undertakes the majority of archaeological evaluations and excavations in partnership with private and public developers, equalling a total of more than 2500 sites per year in mainland France and its overseas territories. Its missions also include the scientific exploitation of the results and the diffusion of archaeological knowledge to the public.

Developer **QPark Serimo**

Curation **Service régional de l'archéologie (Drac Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur)**

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