

Press release
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Inrap uncovers the Tower of Denis at the foot of the ramparts of Mont-Saint-Michel

A team of archaeologists from the Institut National de Recherches Archéologiques Préventives has just finished an excavation at the foot of the ramparts of Mont-Saint-Michel. This operation uncovered the remains of a fortification tower, the Tower of Denis, which was built sometime around 1479 and destroyed in 1732. Curated and financed by the Regional Direction of Cultural Affairs of Basse-Normandie, this intervention is part of a project to reconstruct the maritime aspect of Mont-Saint-Michel and to realize a general restoration of the fortifications.

The Tower of Denis

In 1997, the archaeological test-pits realized by Inrap, as part of an advance study before the excavation and restoration of the ramparts, resulted in the uncovering of the remains of the Tower of Denis. Since these remains are now located at around 1.5 meters below the current shore level, the archaeologists had to remove nearly 300 m³ of sand and sediments using a mechanical shovel and create a thick bank to protect the excavation from high tides. This work revealed the foundations of the tower and part of the pavement stones of the lower room of this edifice. A foundation wall constructed later between the Tower of Denis and the neighboring the Tower of Liberty, was also identified. It served to protect the base of the ramparts against the violent tide currents.

A tower in ruins as early as 1690

The construction of a “curtain” (a small wall linking two towers) between the Tower of the Arcade and the Tower of Liberty is attested from 1441. The Tower of Denis was constructed against this curtain around 1479. It is also located near a postern (small door integrated into the wall) which was part of the first line of defense that operated during the 14th century. On a relief-map of the fortifications of Mont-Saint-Michel, dated to 1690 and conserved at the Invalides, the Tower of Denis appears to be partially ruined by the action of marine currents. Due to its poor state and its location on a section of the rampart that was already well protected by the Arcade and Liberty Towers, the engineer Pierre de Caux, in charge of the restoration of the fortifications, considered the possibility of its elimination. The Tower of Denis was then demolished in 1732 and the continuity of the rampart was thus restored.

In the near future, the remains of the Tower of Denis will be likely be at least partially restored by François Jeanneau, the head architect of the Historic Monuments department.

In 2005, an Inrap team recovered a large quantity of schist molds used to cast pilgrimage symbols (Scallop shells, the effigy of Saint-Michel, etc.) in the location

of a production workshop dated to the 14-15th centuries, near the entrance to the Abbey. Due to their variety and quality, these pieces now serve as reference objects in Medieval archaeology.

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, under the direction of the Ministry of Culture and Communication and the Ministry of Higher Education, undertakes the majority of archaeological evaluations and excavations in partnership with the developers, equalling a total of more than 2000 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.

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