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From Roman legionnaires to cathedral builders: the excavation of the Place du Château in Strasbourg



In the heart of the historic center of Strasbourg, classified as a World Heritage Site, a team of Inrap archaeologists are currently excavating the Place du Château at the foot of the cathedral. This work is curated by the State (Drac Alsace).

This excavation, realized as part of the restoration of the site by the City and the Urban Community of Strasbourg, presents a unique opportunity to explore the Antique origins of the city, to discover the Roman camp of the *Legio VIII Augusta*, and to uncover remains associated with the construction of the cathedral.

The camp of the *Legio VIII Augusta*

Les origines de Strasbourg coïncident avec les installations de l'armée romaine. La *Legio VIII Augusta* fut établie dans la ville antique d'Argentorate au 9^e siècle AD. Ses 6000 hommes ont construit un camp permanent couvrant près de 20 hectares, qui deviendra plus tard le cœur de la ville épiscopale au Moyen Âge, aujourd'hui le centre de la ville. Dans le cadre de plusieurs opérations précédentes, les archéologues Inrap ont déjà exploré ce camp, notamment la rue Brûlée en 2008 où une partie des casernes des légionnaires a été découverte. Aujourd'hui, l'excavation de la Place du Château concerne une autre partie du camp, la *praetentura*, qui contient, entre autres, les maisons de six tribuns et d'autres casernes des légionnaires et de leurs centurions.

Malgré la petite surface excavée, l'exploration d'une seule tranchée, 1,10 m de large et 3 m de profondeur, a permis de découvrir plusieurs murs. L'un des murs de cloisonnement, qui s'est effondré tout d'un coup, présente une haute qualité de peinture murale sur les deux faces. Une peinture représente des colonnes et un panneau encadrant une femme debout. L'autre est constituée d'une belle guirlande rouge avec un nœud vert. Cette peinture en plâtre illustre le statut de l'occupant de ce bâtiment, qui doit être un tribun, ou au moins un centurion. Les deux peintures ont été soigneusement retirées et sont actuellement nettoyées et restaurées.

Discovery of the remains of the cathedral construction site

The earliest cathedral, whose location is unknown, appears in texts dated to 728. In 982, Strasbourg became an urban Episcopal Seigneurie whose administration was tied only to the Diocese. In 1015, the Bishop Werner de Habsbourg undertook the construction of a new Ottonian style cathedral, which burned down in 1176. From 1180 to 1439, the current cathedral was built, first in a Roman style, and then in a Gothic style starting in 1255.

With its 3 meters of stratigraphy, the excavation of the place du Château reveals the history of the constructors of the cathedral.

Just to the south of the cathedral, the archaeologists have uncovered the levels on which the builders circulated. These levels are composed of flakes of sandstone spread out the stone cutters in front of their workshops (the loggias). Packed down by continual trampling, these stone fragments were accumulated from the 7th to the 15th centuries to a thickness of 1 to 1.5 meters. These stone fragments provide

information on the stone cutting techniques used as they still display the traces of the tools employed, including picks, kevels and polkas. Other trades are also represented: the presence of slag indicates smithing activities, layers of mortar the work of mixers, and lead and glass fragments the work of master stained glass makers. The function of an oven with a single heating chamber, dated to the 12th century, remains to be determined.

The “Maison Schoettel”

A building from the 18th century was partially uncovered in front of the Œuvre Notre-Dame. It was constructed on medieval foundations. According to the archives, it was built in 1724 in the location of a group of houses that included the stables of the Œuvre. The paving that is now visible, along with the study of the plan-relief of 1727, a watercolor and a map from 1854, reveal that some of these stables continued to function while the floors above were rented to individuals. This building was named after one of its renters “Maison Schoettel” in the 19th century, before it was demolished in 1855 to enlarge the “Place du Palais”

The opening of the last excavation sector, in front of the Fustel de Coulanges high school, and continuing research, have both provided additional information on the two millennia buried under the current Place du Château at the foot of the Strasbourg cathedral.

The renovation of the Place du Château

The Place du Château is an emblematic site in Strasbourg and its history. Located against the southern side of the cathedral, it is surrounded by fine buildings constructed over several centuries. In our current car-dependent, it was transformed into a parking lot. In 2010, the Place was returned to pedestrians and a first project was developed. Its objective is to create a pleasurable space, to reveal the monuments surrounding the Place – with the first priority being the cathedral – to create views of the ensemble, and to draw visitors to the five museums on the Place.

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.

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