

Press release
May 7, 2011

The French vision of archaeology: a survey by Ipsos

For the 2011 Archaeology Days, Inrap commissioned the Ipsos Institute to conduct a survey on the perception of the field by the general public¹. For this survey, conducted in 2010, a sample of 1000 persons aged 15 and above and representative of the French population was consulted “face to face, in their homes.” Its results provide insights into the general public’s perception of archaeology and complete the data of surveys made in 1997 and 2008 on the cultural practices of French citizens². As a follow up to a first inquiry made by Ipsos in December 2005³, it also provides a basis for evaluating the evolution of the public’s perception of the field following the recent development of preventive archaeology.

43 % of French citizens interested by the history of “Prehistory until the present”

The proportion of French people interested in archaeology itself is 19%, a level roughly equivalent to that of astronomy (18%) and philosophy (21%). Meanwhile, 38% of those questioned are interested in the history of “Prehistory until the present”, and the combination of those interested in “history” and “archaeology” attains 43%, which is five points higher than in 2005 (question 1).

An increasing familiarity

Among the “interested” public, 38% of the participants appear to be “neophytes” (they were 41% in 2005), while 54% can be considered as “relative connoisseurs” (49% in 2005), and 6% could be classed as “experts”, with a good knowledge of certain aspects, fields or periods (question 2). We thus observe an increase in the number of persons considering themselves to be “connoisseurs”, indicating a greater familiarity with the field.

Frequent visits to French archaeological sites

Fifteen percent of those questioned say they have visited at least one archaeological site over the past 12 months and 70% at least once in their life (question 7). The number of visits to sites is thus comparable that that of museums (77%)⁴. Only 9% have visited a site outside of France during the past 12 months, which can be explained by the fact that not all French people travel to other countries. This shows that, contrary to common assumptions, the public’s interest in archaeology concerns sites in France as much as sites elsewhere in the world.

¹ François de Sars and Guillaume Cambe, *Image de l’archéologie auprès du grand public*, Ipsos-Inrap, mars 2011. The entire report can be consulted at www.inrap.fr

² Olivier Donnat, *Les pratiques culturelles des Français à l’ère numérique – Enquête 2008*, La Découverte, 2009.

³ *Archéologie – Rapport d’étude du volet quantitatif*, Ipsos-Inrap, janvier 2006.

⁴ *Les pratiques culturelles des Français à l’ère numérique – Enquête 2008*, p. 185.

A useful research activity

Among those surveyed, 24% consider archaeological research to be “very useful” and 62% “rather useful”, together equaling 8 out of 10 people. This number is very high considering the skepticism often voiced concerning discoveries in France and the ongoing debates on the utility of the field (question 9).

A productive research activity

Along the same lines, 24% of those questioned consider that “in France, archaeology still makes many discoveries” and 59% believe that it “still makes a few discoveries” (question 10), demonstrating yet another positive impression of this research activity.

Preventive archaeology: an acknowledged activity

Among the “interested”⁵ (question 3⁶) 54% consider the most important activity to be “the excavation of sites threatened by construction (motorways, parking lots, railroads, buildings, etc.)”, more than “the excavation of known historic and prehistoric sites” (30%) or “the excavation of accidentally discovered remains” (12%).

A familiarity with archaeology “close to home”

Eighteen percent of those “interested” acknowledge being aware of an excavation near their home (question 8). This very high number can be explained by the diversity of archaeological sites excavated in cities and rural zones (concerning nearly 300 districts per year) and the effort made since 2005 to present this work to the public.

A strong desire for information

Nevertheless, only 21% of those “interested” believe that they receive sufficient information concerning the excavations conducted near their homes (question 4), but this number is rapidly increasing since only 13% considered themselves to be sufficiently informed in December 2005. Nonetheless, 77% feel that they are still insufficiently informed.

A popular field

These data support those experienced in the field where the public displays a strong interest in archaeology. Excavation “open house” days draw numerous visitors, many of whom are not particularly “scholarly”, but are interested in the remains revealed near their homes. These discoveries are often perceived as being part of “their past” and contribute to their attachment to their region and its history. In addition, the dispersed nature of archaeological sites contributes to the awareness of many residents, increasing each year, who do not necessarily have the opportunity to visit cultural sites. The diffusion of archeology is thus plays an key role in maintaining a cultural democracy.

The favorable evolution of a certain number of indicators demonstrates the particular interest of presenting remains *in situ*, as they are being discovered,

⁵ Or 421 persons among the 1000 surveyed.

⁶ “There are three major types of archaeological activities in France today. In your opinion, which is the most important relative to the number of persons working on them?”

especially since they are ultimately destined to disappear from the excavated site, or even to be destroyed by the excavation itself.

At the same time, the very high percentage of those surveyed who consider themselves to be insufficiently informed reminds us that efforts to share this information with the public must be continued. It also shows that archaeological remains most often constitute a puzzle that cannot be solved by the uninitiated⁷ and that significant efforts must thus be made to explain them, as they are in other sciences.

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 national public research institution undertakes the majority of archaeological evaluations and excavations in partnership with private and public developers, a total of more than 2000 sites per year in mainland France and its overseas territories. Its missions also include the scientific exploitation of excavation results and the transmission of archaeological knowledge to the general public.

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⁷ Paul Salmona, « Le rébus dans le labyrinthe », in *Archéopages* hors série, février 2008.