

Press release
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Discovery of a sanctuary dedicated to Mithra at Angers



The excavation of the site of the former Clinique Saint-Louis at Angers, curated by the State (Regional Archaeological Service, Pays d-de-la-Loire), is being carried out by a team of Inrap archaeologists. This site covers an area of 9,000 square metres. At present, the vestiges of a sanctuary dedicated to the worship of Mithra, a god of Indo-Iranian origin is being brought to light.

Mithraism was probably introduced into the Empire by Roman soldiers and eastern merchants and spread at the end of the 1st century AD. This cult of mysteries, reserved to men, attracted first of all the élites, then spread to all layers of society. Competing with Christianity it was strongly combated and finally banned by Emperor Theodosius in 392 AD.

An antique quarter

Researchers suppose that this part of Angers was occupied from the beginning of our era, during the reign of Augustus. The urban axes, the *cardo* (north-south and the *decumanus* (east-west) of an islet of dwellings, are visible on the site with ditches and sidewalks. This quarter has recently been dated at a very early date for Angers: circa 10 BC. At the end of the first century, one or two dwellings (*domus*) were built in this islet. These rich decorated residences had colonnades and a system of floor heating (hypocaust). Large numbers of buildings in the quarter were destroyed by fire.

Le *mithræum*

At least as early as the 3rd century AD, a rectangular excavated building was installed to the northwest of the site. Its architecture is that of a *mithræum*, an edifice dedicated to the cult of Mithra. These temples appear as small vaulted shrines in which banquets and sacrifices in honour of Mithra took place. Their painted vault is generally decorated with a starred sky. At Angers, drums of columns, or perhaps bases of altars, emerge. Sanctuaries dedicated to the god always include a low relief showing the divinity with his Phrygian bonnet. Sent by the supreme god he cuts the throat of a bull, symbol of evil, whose blood gives birth to new life. The excavation of the antique remains of the rue René Brémond today reveals elements of these painted statues: fragments of a low-relief of the god Mithra with notably elements of *dadophoroi* (torch bearers) and of the *miles* (lance bearer), associated with rich 4th century AD goods.

The goods of the *mithræum*

Many coins (about 200) and pottery fragments, as well as intact oil lamps, fragments of a rare terracotta chandelier with Nubian figures, a bronze cruciform fibula characteristic of 4th century functionaries, animal remains dominated by cockerel bones (a favoured dish of cultic banquets), an exceptional zoomorphic vase with handles largely conserved, are scattered inside and around the temple. On a sigillated ceramic beaker made in the workshops of Lezoux (Puy-de-Dôme) there is a dedication, engraved before firing, offered by a certain Genialis in the first half of the 3rd century AD : « DEO [INVIC]TO MYTRH[AE].../...JVS

GENIALIS CIVIS MA [...]VS EXVOTO D[.../...]RIBVS OMNIS LOCO
OMNIS (...) » : « To the unvanquished Mithra, ,]us Genialis , citizen of ... has
offered an ex-voto (this vase) ».

A fragment of worked freestone, decorated with palmettes, has a cartouche with a four-line inscription in Greek that has been in part deciphered. It indicates a dedication by a certain Theophilos of eastern origin for the benefit of Retitutos, a name of Gallic consonance.

The richness of the findings, the conservation of the vestiges, the importance of epigraphy, the absence until now of a discovery of any *mithraea* in the west of France, offer to the Inrap archaeologists perspectives of original research concerning the fields of archaeology, of art history and of religions. This discovery opens new perspectives for the history of Angers and early Christianisation in the fourth century. After Bordeaux, Strasbourg, Biesheim, Septeuil, Tirlmont (Belgium), Martigny (Switzerland), Rome and Ostia, Angers henceforth takes its place in the limited inventory of the *mithraea* known in Western Europe.

Inrap

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