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Ancient Greek Marseille's first buildings discovered

Going back to the origins of France's oldest town

A few metres from the Vieux-Port, excavations carried out in the quarter known as the Panier have brought to light the earliest constructions from the period of the Greek colony.

Prior to the renovation of the College of the Vieux Port, for the *Conseil Général* of the Bouches du Rhône, the Institut National des Recherches Archéologiques Préventives (INRAP), carried out excavations curated by the Regional Archaeology Service of the *Direction régionale des Affaires culturelles Provence-Alpes-Côte-d'Azur*. Within stratified deposits three metres deep, archaeologists quickly found occupation levels datable to the Archaic Greek town (600-480 BC). Around 550 BC, the quarter was modified around a large public edifice, perhaps the podium of a temple. The finds discovered in these levels are remarkable.

Going back to the origins of the Greek presence

The area concerned is at the foot of the Saint-Laurent hill, within the initial limits of the Greek town, a few metres from what was the north bank of the antique port. Right from the beginning of the Greek occupation, the steep slope of the land towards the *Vieux Port* probably made necessary the creation of terraces.

During the first centuries of the Greek occupation (6th-5th century BC), the buildings comprised adobe walls (made of bricks of unfired earth), built on limestone foundation beds, organised according to an apparently orthogonal plan.

A temple podium ?

Around 550 BC a monumental edifice was built on the site. From the beginning it had a podium. Rectangular in plan, it was divided into two spaces surrounded by imposing 1.20 metre thick walls. Even though its function is not yet understood, it is certain that it was part of a public building, perhaps religious (temple podium) or military .

It was rapidly completed by different constructions. The unusual plan of these narrow spaces as well as certain architectural indications (large sculpted blocks, blue wall paintings), make it unlikely that they were dwellings. The immediate proximity of the large rectangular building leads one to suppose that this ensemble was part of the same monumental complex covering a square area of about 120m².

Certain similarities with other sanctuaries of the Greek world are to be noted, as much concerning the organisation of space, construction materials and techniques used, as the date of construction - for example the emporium of Gravisca in Etruria. We may well be in the presence of a 'private' sanctuary, reserved for the *emporoi*, these shipowners and merchants who brought offerings and celebrated the cult of their protecting divinities (Aphrodite, Herakles, the Dioscuri . . .)

Objects found

Pottery dominates the finds, there are both local and imported productions. The latter are of Greek origin: Attic, Corinthian, Ionian; others from Rhodes and Etruria. Among the Attic and Corinthian potteries can be found the famous "Black-figure" and "Red-figure" wares characteristic of this period, with very varied decoration.

This tableware is associated with many amphorae mostly from Etruria, but also from Corfu, Athens, Islands of the Aegean Sea and from the Phoenician and Punic worlds.

The context of the discovery

Recently, the ships and the quays of the Places Jules-Verne and Villeneuve-Bargemon were discovered. Other constructions of the Archaic Greek period (6th-5th centuries BC) have been discovered in Marseille (the habitat in front of the Church of Saint Laurent, the Îlot des Pistoles...). But no site is as well preserved and over such a large area

The high quality of the buildings and finds, and the excellent state of conservation of the structures make this an important reference site for the history of France's oldest town, and more widely for the archaeology of the Mediterranean Basin.

Inrap

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most of the archaeological evaluations and excavations in France. Within the framework of national and regional planning policy, it acts on behalf of private and public property developers (local and regional authorities, Motorway companies, French railroad system . . .). More than 2,500 excavation sites are undertaken every year, in metropolitan France and in the D.O.M. (French overseas departments).

Preventive Archaeology Operator: INRAP.

Site Director: Philippe Mellinaud (INRAP)

Curation: Regional Archaeology Service of the *Direction régionale des Affaires culturelles Provence-Alpes-Côte-d'Azur*.

Excavations were carried out with the collaboration of Lucien-François Gantès (Atelier du patrimoine, ville de Marseille)

Developer: Conseil Général of the Bouches-du-Rhône department.

Contractor: 13 développement.

To contact us:

INRAP

Service de la Communication externe

7, rue de Madrid, 75008 Paris

Tel.: 01 40 08 80 00/ Fax.: 01 43 87 18 63

E-mail: communication@inrap.fr

Direction interrégionale Méditerranée

Chargée du Développement culturel et de la Communication

Catherine Dureuil-Bourachau: 06 87 01 62 86

www.inrap.fr