



**SARL ALBAN  
TORRE ET CONSORS**



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## **Discovery of an Early Christian Baptistery in Ajaccio**

The remains of the Early Christian baptistery of Ajaccio's first cathedral have just been revealed by a team from the Institut national de recherches archéologiques préventives (Inrap). Curated by the Regional Archaeological Service, the archaeologists have been working since March 2005 on a plot of land earmarked by its owner, M. Joseph-Marie Torre, rue François-del-Pellegrino, for the construction of a car park and a building.

### **The beginnings of Christian Corsica**

Since as early as 1738, the archaeological importance of the quarter has been evident and discoveries resulting from agricultural and building work have led historians to situate the antique agglomeration of Ajaccio in this sector. The bishop's see, mentioned for the first time in a letter from Pope Gregory the Great dated A.D.601, was also situated here. The cathedral was dedicated to SS John and Eufraise, whose relics could have been brought to Corsica by African bishops during the persecution by the Vandal Kings in the 5<sup>th</sup> century.

### **The Early Christian baptistery**

Part of the cathedral complex whose exact location has not yet been determined, the baptistery consists of an apse (4.60 x 3.50m), framed by several buildings, in the centre of which is a large cruciform baptismal font (2.68 x 1.39m, depth 1.34m), whose model should be looked for in North Africa. Twice, during the Early Middle Ages, this basin was subjected to transformations to reduce its volume and adapt it to changes in the baptism rite. This font

can be linked with a smaller cylindrical basin (80cm diameter) perhaps intended for the washing of the catechumens' feet before the baptism itself.

The excavation of an important rubbish pit, associated with this complex, has led to the collection of almost 5,000 potsherds. The diversity of their provenance shows that the site was, in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries, and perhaps still in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, fully integrated into the Mediterranean commercial network.

### **The medieval cemetery**

The baptistery fell into disuse and a cemetery was installed on its ruins. Eighty graves have been located and excavated. The types of grave are very varied: the dead were buried in amphoras, under tiles, in stone chests, in the rock and directly in the earth. They can be linked with examples from Sardinia, Italy and the South of France (6<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> centuries) that have been found. To this list should be added the white marble sarcophagus decorated with an image of the deceased framed by the Four Seasons accompanied by the “Good Shepherd” and by Dionysos, discovered on this same site in 1938.

Several ceramic tiles used for the construction of tombs were incised before firing (knots, door crowned with a half sun, cross) and above all inscriptions whose meaning has yet to be determined. The skeletons are in a good state of conservation. First observations show that the majority of those buried here were young (between approximately sixteen and forty years of age) and that there was a fairly equal proportion of men and women.

### **What preventive archaeology brings to our knowledge of the Early Christian period.**

The Ajaccio site completes our knowledge of other Corsican baptismal complexes of the same period, such as those of Mariana, Sagone, Bravone and Rescamone. In four years, preventive archaeology has completely renewed research, on the pivotal period between the end of Antiquity and the beginning of the Middle Ages. Inrap archaeologists have excavated four Early Christian basilicas whose dates vary between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries in Arles and Marseille (Bouches-du-Rhône), Rezé (Loire-Atlantique), and Roanne (Loire).

### **Inrap**

With more than 1,800 collaborators and researchers Inrap is the largest French archaeological organization and one of the foremost in Europe. A public research establishment, it carries out most of the archaeological evaluation 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 excavations are undertaken every year in mainland France and in the D.O.M. (French overseas departments).

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