

Press release
24 October 2013

An exceptional archaeological site at Obernai: more than 6000 years of occupation



In advance of the construction of an industrial business park by the associated communes of Pays de Sainte Odile, Inrap has just finished a large excavation at Obernai, under the curation of the State (DRAC Alsace). Across more than 7.5 hectares, Neolithic, Gallic, Gallo-Roman and Merovingian societies succeeded each other through time. The excavation of this site sheds new light on the cultural evolution and population movements over nearly 6 millennia, as well as on the territorial organisation of Alsace.

Around 6900 years ago: a Neolithic necropolis

In the south-eastern part of the excavated area, the archaeologists uncovered a funerary sector containing around twenty graves. The oldest of them date from 4900 to 4750 BC. Another sector yielded around fifteen additional Neolithic graves. Most of the deceased were adorned with pendants and bracelets composed of small limestone or mother-of-pearl beads. One of them was wearing two stone ring-disks. Flint tools and pottery are abundant. Based on the decorated pottery, this occupation can be attributed to the end of the Grossgartach culture, the first large entity of the Middle Neolithic, at around 4750 BC. During this period, vast “Danubian” necropoli were replaced by small sepulchral entities. This transitional period is poorly known in Alsace and the Obernai necropolis now provides a solid reference.

2160 years ago: a Gallic farm

To the north of the site, the remains of a Gallic farm were found. It is composed of a 8000 m² enclosure with an unusual plan; it has two doors built into its corners, one of which is covered with a monumental porch. Inside the enclosure, there are building remains, storage pits and many artefacts from the Final La Tène period (150 to 130 BC). These artefacts (fibulae, glass ornaments, pottery, amphorae, coins, etc.) show the importance of this farm and the wealth of its owner.

The Gallic occupation also extends outside of the large enclosure, beyond its trenches: to the south, the archaeologists uncovered a small contemporary enclosure whose purpose is still unknown, and around fifty meters to the east there is a group of habitat structures (excavated buildings, storage pits).

The discovery of human skull fragments, weapons and a few burials of children and animals, across the entire site, suggests a religious context, and perhaps even the presence of a sanctuary. One pit in particular yielded *umbo* shields with marks made by strikes.

These data and the location of this establishment at the border between *Mediomatrici* and *Rauraque* populations make this site one of the most important for this period in Alsace.

Around 1650 years ago: peoples from the East

Archaeologists and physical anthropologists have studied a Merovingian necropolis composed of eighteen graves orientated west-east, following the ritual of the period. Objects were found in four tombs, including three silver earrings. The richest of the deceased was wearing two small gold pins that were holding a piece of clothing or a veil on her chest. Two pendants, called ‘*châtelaines*’, were attached

to her belt, and various objects were attached to them: a silver mirror, like those used by Alans-Sarmatian populations (Caucasus); several large beads of coloured glass and amber; and a toiletry kit (tweezers and earscoop). This woman also had a triangular brush made from deer antler and decorated with geometric motifs, and horse heads at its extremities

In addition to the grave goods, the eastern origin of the individuals is shown by the presence of a deformed skull. During the Merovingian period, this practice was first associated with the Huns, the famous ethnic group of central Asia. The intentional deformation required the use of wooden planks or ties that bound the head from a very young age. This practice distinguished the elites and affirmed their social status. Similar graves, which are usually isolated, have been discovered in Northern Gaul, Germany and eastern Europe. They are accompanied by abundant grave goods. They thus appear to be the graves of high dignitaries and their families, of eastern origin, incorporated into the Roman army during the "great migrations". The Obernai necropolis is one of the few large groups of discovered in France. It is the first evidence of the presence of an eastern community over a long period of time in Alsace at the end of the Roman Empire.

The construction of an inter-commune Business Park

The industrial vocation of Obernai started developing in the 1960's thanks to the political efforts of the city to accumulate the financial resources necessary to accommodate businesses. Sixty per cent of the jobs in Obernai exist in its three activity zones. All of these zones are currently occupied and the associated communes are constructing a new industrial business park. The construction will begin as soon as the excavations are completed. A 6 hectare plot is already under a preliminary sales agreement and discussions are underway with the other parties wishing to join the 560 businesses who invest, develop and create employment opportunities in Obernai.

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 research institute realizes most of the archaeological diagnostic operations and excavations in partnership with private and public developers, equaling nearly 2500 sites per year in metropolitan France and its overseas territories. . Its missions also include the scientific exploitation of the results and the diffusion of archaeological knowledge to the public.

Development **Associated communes of Pays de Sainte Odile**
Curation **Regional Archaeology Service (Drac Alsace)**
Archaeological research **Inrap**
Site director **Clément Feliu, Inrap**

Contacts

Mahaut Tyrrell
Media communication
Inrap, media partnerships and relations
01 40 08 80 17 – mahaut.tyrrell@inrap.fr

Stéphanie Hollocou
Cultural development and communication
Inrap, interregional office Grand Est sud
06 72 56 28 51 – stephanie.hollocou@inrap.fr

Audrey Schimberle
Director
Associated communes of Pays de Sainte Odile
03 88 95 68 42 – audrey.schimberle@ccpsa.com