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An underground refuge attesting to the Middle Ages in Tourrain?



Between July and September 2012, several archeological excavations were conducted in Sublaines (Indre-et-Loire) by the Institut National de Recherches Archéologiques Préventives (Inrap), under the curation of the State (Drac Centre). In advance of the creation of an artisan center in the federated districts of Bléré-Val-de-Cher, the archaeologists are excavating Neolithic, Antique and Medieval remains. Among the Medieval remains, a well preserved underground refuge chamber was recently discovered. This find is rare in the context of preventive archaeological excavations.

The refuge of a local elite?

The discovery of a ceramic cooking pot in the infill of the underground chamber allows it to be dated to the end of the 11th century. At this time, the Counts of Anjou and Blois were quarrelling over the possession of the Touraine region, where there was a large network of military installations.

We enter the Sublaines refuge by a staircase dug into the ground. The refuge composed of a network of several hallways and rooms extending along more than fifteen linear meters. It is narrow and low (0.50 m wide on average, and 1.15 to 1.55 m high) and appears to have served as a refuge based on several elements, such as right-angled “elbows” that would have hidden the occupants and slowed down the assailant. The entrance was closed off by a door at the bottom of the staircase, and another protected the access to the three hallways. The chamber could also have been used to store and protect food from looters.

Inside the refuge there are rather elaborate modifications including twenty niches to hold old lamps, benches carved into the limestone, a small well fed by the groundwater table, boards to level the ground surface. All of these elements suggest that this refuge could accommodate five or six persons for a prolonged period. A small family unit – probably belonging to the local elite – could thus take refuge there.

The entrance to the underground refuge was hidden under the floor of a small building on stilts.

Laboratory analyses

A series of laboratory analyses will be realised in the near future, which will contribute to our knowledge and understanding of this Medieval site. A pottery specialist will study the sherds and vases recovered from the infill of the underground chamber, a dendrochronologist will determine the date at which the trees used were cut down, and a xylologist will identify their species. Radiometric dates will also be obtained. The traces left by the tools and techniques used to cut the stone will provide information on how the refuge was dug out. All of these data will be used to verify the hypotheses proposed by the archaeologists and help to clarify the age of this exceptional site.

Inrap

With nearly 2000 collaborators and researchers, Inrap is the largest archaeological research structure in France and one of the most important in Europe. Each year, this public research institution realizes approximately 1500 diagnostic archaeological operations and 250 excavations in partnership with private and public developers in mainland France and its overseas territories. Its missions also include the scientific exploitation of the results and the diffusion of archaeological knowledge to the public.

Developer **Communauté de communes de Bléré-Val-de-Cher**
Curation **Regional Archaeology Service (DRAC Centre)**
Archaeological research **Inrap**
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