

Press release
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The discovery of a Gallo-Roman monumental sanctuary and its statuary at Pont-Saint-Maxence



An exceptional Gallo-Roman sanctuary is currently being revealed at Pont-Saint-Maxence (Oise). This Inrap excavation has been authorised by the government (Drac Picardie) and is taking place prior to the construction of a shopping centre. The history of Late Antique period Pont-Saint-Maxence is little known, and the discovery of an enormous sanctuary from the mid 2nd century A.D. therefore came as a surprise, particularly as the remarkable statuary discovered on the site has no equal in Roman Gaul.

The sanctuary

This sanctuary, contained in an enclosure of 70 x 105 m, possessed two small pavilions at the rear of which only the foundations have been preserved. In the centre, the *cella*, a substantial masonry platform, was accessible by steps in the front façade. This was the heart of the sanctuary, containing the statue of a divinity. Here, archaeologists have discovered many pieces of balustrades with paired "S" shaped decorative elements, together with fragments of marble veneer.

A monumental façade with sculpted ornaments

Entrance to the sanctuary took place through a monumental façade nearly 10 m high and 70 m long, which was exceptionally large for sites of this type in Roman Gaul. The façade was pierced by an arcade with between 13 and 17 openings, topped by an entablature and an attic frieze that evokes the architectural style of triumphal arches. The frieze bore a dedication in bronze letters.

A few decades after its erection, the façade collapsed, practically in one piece – perhaps as a result of a fault in the foundations linked to the type and slope of the soil beneath – producing a chaotic mass of thousands of blocks and fragments that archaeologists are now studying in order to gradually reconstruct the original appearance of the monument. The decoration, sometimes enhanced by the use of colour, consisted of a profusion of sculpted elements: meanders, foliage, animals, kantharoi, figures emerging from acanthus bases etc.

Venus, Apollo, Jupiter; exceptional statuary

Within the entablature, the most unusual sequence is the frieze ornamented with divinities from the Graeco-Roman pantheon: a crouching Venus is associated with the extremely expressive head of an old woman. This sculpture recalls an episode related by Homer (*Odyssey VIII*): after her adventure with Mars, the spouse of Vulcan retires to the woods. An old woman told the gods, who were seeking Venus, where to find her. To punish her, Venus turned her into a rock.

At the summit of the façade, one of the most remarkable elements is a decorative feature consisting of three monumental heads (three times life size) with complex hairstyles and whose eyes were originally inset with coloured stones. Among these is a head of Jupiter Ammon with ram's horns. Other gods and goddesses, still unidentified, alternate with seated griffons with spread wings.

Numerous fragments represent divine attributes (Juno's peacock, Diana's quiver and bow...) or faces of the gods (Vulcan or Ulysses, Hades, a figure with a Phrygian cap etc.): all have dramatic expressions evoking the *pathos* unique to Hellenistic statuary. The workshop that produced these sculptures was of extremely high technical standard. The style is very similar to that of the Temple of Champlieu (Oise), but perhaps of even better quality.

Archaeologists are uncertain of the origins of this deliberately imposing temple, which was located close to the Antique period Senlis-Beauvais road. A sanctuary, constructed on the Gallic remains (ditches, post holes) and sealed by a level containing a large number of very small coins from the 4th century AD.

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 national research institute realizes approximately 1,500 archaeological diagnostic operations and 250 excavations in partnership with private and public developers 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. Inrap researchers also participate in international research and education programs, as well as expertise missions.

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