

Bergerac, first Neolithic village in the South-West of France

A team from the National Institute for Preventive Archaeological Research (Inrap) is at present excavating the remains of a Neolithic village in the Vaures quarter of Bergerac. While the Bergerac region is well-known for high quality flints widely exploited during Prehistory, Neolithic dwellings in the area, on the contrary, are little known. The excavation is curated by the Regional Archaeology Service (DRAC Aquitaine).

Bergerac, made of earth and wood

The discovery of more than twenty dwellings over an area of an hectare and a half has just filled this gap. They all date from the Late Neolithic period, circa 3500-3000 BC. These houses have a rectangular floor plan with convex extremities, and are from 15 to 25 metres long by 4-5 metres wide, resting on sill-beams whose imprints are still visible. Their pitched roofs were probably made of organic materials. There are enough dwellings to have formed a village. Not all the structures are of the same period: new houses cut across more ancient buildings, yet others have a different alignment.

On the ground, numerous dark areas indicate traces of uprooted trees witnesses of later clearings. The finds discovered by the archaeologists consist of axe preforms and polished axes, scrapers, awls, knives, sharp arrow heads made of Bergerac flint. Also found were some pottery fragments, millstones, polishing stones and bone tools.

At present, a long kiln, containing heated stones, whose plan and organisation are unique in French Late Prehistory, is being excavated.

What do we know of the Neolithic dwellings of the South-west of France?

Large enclosures surrounded by ditches have been found in the Charente basin area, the Marais Poitevin, the North of Dordogne (Peu-Richard at Thénac, Champ Durand at Nieul-sur-l'Autize, Fontbelle at Ségonzac, the Bois du Fau at Festalemps). In Dordogne, a few small caves were also used by farmers (Cave of Campniac near Périgueux).

The discovery of the Bergerac Neolithic village results from an improvement in excavation techniques, large-scale excavation and the broader research exploration of valleys by preventive archaeology.

An excavation of national research significance

Between 3800 and 2000 BC, during most of the Neolithic period, the presence of such villages is exceptional in the whole of France. From this period only the lakeside settlements of the Alps and Jura, or the dry-stone villages of Languedoc have been found. The Bergerac excavation now makes it possible to study, over a wide area, the organization of a Neolithic village, its way of life and the inhabitants' technical know-how. It also casts light on the production and diffusion of polished flint axes which were exported from the Bergerac area over the whole of the South West corner of France, and well beyond.

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 evaluations and excavations in France, in partnership with private and public developers: i.e. about 2,500 sites a year in mainland France and in the overseas departments.

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Photo captions:

Late Neolithic archaeological finds in Bergerac
Plan of a Neolithic house in Bergerac marked by posts
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Long Neolithic house at Bergerac
Neolithic kiln at Bergerac
Convex extremity of a Neolithic house in Bergerac