

Press Release
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Discovery of a vast Gallo-Roman religious complex at Neuville-sur-Sarthe



A team of archaeologists from Inrap has recently brought to light a vast religious complex dating from the Gallo-Roman epoch, more precisely from the three first centuries AD. This excavation has been carried out, since June 2010, curated by the State (DRAC, Regional Archaeological Service, Pays-de-la-Loire), in the context of the development of the ZAC (urban development zone) of the Château, at Neuville-sur-Sarthe. Covering an area of almost two hectares, this antique sanctuary consists of several temples (*fana*) of different forms – quadrangular, polygonal, circular – and of different dimensions linked by roads of circulation (paths and galleries).

A vast religious complex

The religious complex of Neuville-sur-Sarthe is divided into three zones.

To the west a vast rectangular enclosure (60 x 40 m) surrounds a *fanum*, Gallo-Roman temple, in the tradition of Celtic temples, later monumentalised. The construction of this type of edifice, generally on a square plan, is characterised by a central room dedicated to the divinities the *cella*, surrounded by a peripheral gallery where the faithful walked in procession.

This main *fanum* is a vast temple of 15 x 15 m. The few fragments of architecture discovered lead one to think that it was of Corinthian style with painted walls. It is completed by five small buildings or « side chapels » on a square or octagonal plan. A large enclosure, or *temenos*, made of masonry walls, delimits this sacred space.

Abundant archaeological remains, dating from the first century AD have been found there.

The south zone is incomplete and presents a large *fanum* of circular plan, 12 metres in diameter. At its side is an auxiliary temple, smaller and on a square plan.

One of the distinctive features of this *fanum*, apart from its circular plan, is to have an entrance facing north, contrary to most temples whose entrances face east.

Numerous pole holes nearby allow one to envisage the presence of a pergola about fifty metres long exalting the entrance to the temple. The archaeological goods, of a later date than the precedent (2nd and 3rd centuries AD), are also less abundant.

In the north zone, a vast building on a E plan (8 x 8 m.) is situated in the exact continuation of the entrance to the main *fanum* of the west zone. Apart from a function of welcome and of guidance of pilgrims, it was also probably used as accommodation for the guardians or a sales point for objects to be later offered to the gods.

Rich and varied goods

The numerous offerings discovered testify the importance of this sanctuary, a regional centre of pilgrimage a few kilometres from the antique town of Le Mans. Rich archaeological remains for the first century AD have been brought to light:

many coins and fragments of Roman pottery, fibulae, knives, keys, as well as several offerings made of iron, including a remarkable military dagger. A gold ring incrustated with an intaglio (green semi-precious stone) is one of the exceptional objects discovered on the site. If no dedication to a god in particular has been revealed, the presence of ophthalmic “ex-votos” allows one to envisage the cult of a healer-god.

The richness of the findings, the complexity of the plans of the structures (in particular the vast round *fanum* of which only three or four comparable examples have been excavated in France) give the Inrap archaeologists unexplored perspectives of research concerning the domains of archaeology, history of art and of religions. This site will certainly mark the regional archaeology of the Pays-de-la-Loire for many years.

Inrap

With more than 2,000 collaborators and researchers, Inrap is the largest French archaeological organization of research 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. nearly 2,500 sites a year in Mainland France and in the Overseas Departments.

Developer : **Communauté de Communes des Rives de Sarthe**
Scientific control : **Service régional de l'archéologie (Drac Pays-de-la-Loire)**
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