

Press release
6 October 2020

At Pontarlier, an ephemeral village attests to the strategies of the Frankish conquests



An Inrap archaeological team is currently excavating a large Early Medieval Settlement in Pontarlier (Doubs). Prescribed by the State (Drac Bourgogne-Franche-Comté), this excavation of the “Gravilliers” site is conducted before the development of the Grand Pontarlier economic activity park. In 2011, its archaeological evaluation across 21.5 hectares revealed a Merovingian settlement and its necropolis, as well as a Mesolithic occupation that now constitutes the earliest known human presence in Pontarlier. The size (eight hectares) and location of the excavation offers the archaeologists a complete view of the Merovingian settlement. Large buildings whose architecture was previously little known in France and a wooden church with a basilica plan constitute a significant contribution to the knowledge of the Early Middle Ages. Above all, the site of Pontarlier attests of the geopolitical context underlying the Frankish conquest of the Kingdom of the Burgundians.

An unusual village and its remarkable basilica church

The village was founded during the Merovingian period, and its occupation spanned less than 200 years during the 6th and 7th centuries. The core of the site covers approximately 1 hectare. Two surprising aspects of its plan are its orthonormal organization and the spatial concentration of its main buildings.

It contains ten or so large rectangular buildings (200 - 300 m²), which are supported by powerful load-bearing posts, nearly 1 m in diameter. Inside, all of these constructions display a clear separation of space, reflecting very different uses: one half is partitioned and supported by naves (probably the habitation space). The other is much more open and was probably the animal stalling area. Previously, this type of plan was known only in the Swiss-German region and Bavaria.

Away from the habitation buildings, is a remarkable church. It is a wooden edifice about 20 m long and 14 m wide, with a basilica-type plan. There is no known equivalent of its plan in the surrounding French or Swiss regions. Contemporary to the site, this church is currently one of the oldest in the Jura Mountains. It was likely a place of worship built by the owners of the village. Four tombs, one located in the edifice itself and the others nearby, could have belonged to the founding family.

Around 70 graves scattered within the village were also excavated.

An economy based on animal breeding

A few dozen meters from the village, near a permanent spring captured by a hollowed tree trunk, a cattle-slaughtering area was identified. It stretches across several hundred square meters. ¹⁴C dates show that this activity was concomitant with the Merovingian occupation of the 7th century. The ox dominates among the thousands of bones discovered, while horse is also well-represented. The enormous quantity of bones reflects sustained butchery activities and shows that breeding was the main economic activity at this site.



A Frankish strategy to consolidate the conquests

The site was occupied for a few generations, less than 150-200 years. The organization of the settlement reflects its rapid creation. The village was built a short distance from the town of Pontarlier, at the time a strategic point in the Jura crossing, on the large road linking Italy and northern Gaul. While the status of the inhabitants is difficult to discern, their tombs, found in the village, include sword carrying individuals and mounted soldiers. The rich jewelry in some women's graves is similar to that of the *La Grande Oye* necropolis in Doubs, whose impressive artifacts are displayed in the Pontarlier Museum. The site of Gravilliers thus appears to correspond to a governing center rather than a simple peasant village.

With its unusual house plans for the region and its rapid establishment, this village evokes a population transplantation – a common practice at the time – to consolidate new conquests. Moreover, the emergence of this settlement is contemporary with the conquest of the Kingdom of the Burgundians by the Franks in 534. Like the *Grande Oye* necropolis, which was created *ex-nihilo* during the 6th century and abandoned toward the end of the 7th century, the “Gravilliers” settlement probably attests to the geopolitical context of the time, including the control by the Frankish Empire of the major road linking Italy to north-west Europe.

The abandonment of the village seems to have been quick but orderly. There is no evidence of violent destruction. Possible reasons for this abandonment are a regrouping of the population in the town of Pontarlier, geopolitical developments or a change in the economic model of subsistence.

Inrap

The French National Institute for Preventive Archaeological Research is a public institute under the tutelage of the Ministries of Culture and Research. It identifies and studies archaeological heritage sites in advance of development projects, each year conducting some 1,800 diagnostic operations and more than 200 excavations on behalf of private and public developers in metropolitan France and its overseas territories. Its work also includes the scientific analysis and interpretation of excavation data, as well as the transmission of archaeological knowledge. Its 2,200 agents, distributed among eight regional and interregional directorates, 42 research centers and the headquarters in Paris, constitute the largest archaeological research operator in Europe.

Developer **Zae des Gravilliers, communauté de communes du grand Pontarlier**
Curator **Service regional de l'archéologie (Drac Bourgogne-Franche-Comté)**
Archaeological research **Inrap**
Site director **Michiel Gazenbeek, Inrap**

Contacts

Mahaut Tyrrell
Media communication
Inrap, media relations and partnerships
01 40 08 80 24 – mahaut.tyrrell@inrap.fr

Stéphanie Hollocou
Cultural development and communication
Inrap, regional directorate Bourgogne-Franche-Comté
06 72 56 28 51 – stephanie.hollocou@inrap.fr