

Press release
13 November 2020

Aristocratic Aedui tombs and Antique necropolis in Autun



A team of Inrap archaeologists has excavated a site in Autun—Antique *Augustodunum*, the capital of the Aedui people—as prescribed by the State (Drac Bourgogne-Franche-Comté) and in collaboration with the Autun City Archaeology Service. Conducted in advance of a private construction project, this research concerns a large necropolis in the Saint-Pierre-l’Estrier quarter. This work contributes both to our knowledge of the history of Autun and our understanding of Late Antique mortuary practices in Roman Gaul.

A large Late Antique necropolis

During the 3rd and 4th centuries, the three main necropolises in Autun were in decline simultaneously as a new mortuary site was emerging at around 250. This necropolis seems to have become the main one in the city during Late Antiquity. While the reasons for this transfer are still unclear, this necropolis presents a new significant feature: high social diversity.

This necropolis emerged during the dawn of the Christianization of the Roman world but preceded the installation of nearby churches, such as that of Saint-Pierre-l’Estrier, during the 5th-6th centuries. Though the exhumed remains do not directly confirm the religious affiliation of the deceased, the necropolis must have included inhumations of the first Christian community in Autun. A few mortuary inscriptions, including the famous stela of Pektorios, confirm this. Discovered in the 19th century near the site, this 4th century inscription is one of the earliest records of Christianity in Gaul.

Sandstone sarcophagi and lead coffins

The excavation provided the Inrap team with an opportunity to study the evolution of mortuary practices over approximately two centuries. The more than 230 graves uncovered display a high degree of diversity in their inhumation practices. The archaeologists identified mausoleums and a wooden building, a gable tomb and a tile structure recalling some Early Empire mortuary practices, and even more remarkable, five sandstone sarcophagi and fifteen lead coffins. While these generally lack decoration or inscription, they are sometimes inscribed with “X” signs that are difficult to interpret. Numerous examples of lead coffins were already discovered in Autun, which has the largest number in northern Gaul.

One of the sandstone sarcophagi contained a lead coffin, which was studied in detail. An enclosed space was created on the site, and a strict sanitary protocol was followed. Dressed in masks and full protective suits to avoid all forms of contamination, an anthropologist, a paleo-epidemiologist, a carpologist, an archaeologist, a restorer, two photogrammetry and fabric specialists opened the coffin and excavated the inhumation.

All their work was filmed and recorded. A microscope installed nearby enabled the rapid identification of gold thread belonging to precious fabric. Though the coffin was not fully sealed, the research team was able to study its well-preserved human skeleton.

An aristocracy close to Rome

Some of the tombs contained rare objects.

The largest sarcophagus contained an exceptional assemblage of objects for Roman Gaul: a set of amber pins, a finely embossed gold ring, and another gold ring adorned with a garnet. Other tombs yielded jet pins and rings, and gold earrings. The study of some inhumations revealed the presence of fabrics woven with golden thread and, probably, Tyrian purple, a pigment extracted from a Mediterranean shellfish.

The most exceptional object is a cage cup or *vas diatretum*, of which only around ten complete specimens are currently known. The epitome of Roman glass art, this object in reticulated glass has an inscription above its decorative motifs: “*Vivas feliciter*” (Live in bliss). It was reserved for eminent persons, probably close to the imperial power. Complete, though fragmented, it will be carefully restored. All these elements demonstrate the presence of members of the high aristocracy of *Augustodunum* in this necropolis. The new archaeological discoveries corroborate the Antique sources. The Aedui elites, close to the emperor Constantine the Great (306-337) are thus mentioned in the *Panegyrici Latini* or the *Laudes domini*, considered the first Christian poem of Roman Gaul.

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.

The Autun City Archaeology Service

Created in 1989, this service has four main missions: 1) *Oversee urban development projects*: it supervises construction work and is certified to conduct preventive archaeology diagnostic operations in advance of urban development projects. It conducts excavations in the region surrounding the Autun commune. Its partners in this activity are the Urbanism directorate of the Grand Autunois Morvan Community of Communes, the Autun Technical Services Directorate, the State services (DRAC and Inrap). 2) *Preserve the archives exhumed from the ground* based on the records produced via excavations or objects uncovered, consultable by students and researchers. These data are currently being entered into database that will constitute a management tool that will enable, in advance of urban development projects, a more thorough consideration of the questions relating to the presence of archaeological remains. 3) *Organize archaeological research*: it proposes university research topics and participates in CNRS, university, and Inrap research projects. It coordinates the research conducted in the Antique quarter of the Genetoye, at the foot of the temple known as Janus. 4) *Transmit the results of these discoveries to the public* via visitor days at archaeological sites, and presentations. It participates in the exhibitions of the Musée Rolin and in the education of Heritage Education guides.

Developer **Private**
Curator **Regional Archaeology Service (Drac Bourgogne - France-Comté)**
Archaeological research **Inrap**
Site director **Carole Fossurier, Inrap**

Contacts

Mahaut Tyrrell
Media communications
Inrap, cultural development and communication
+33 6 07 40 59 77 – mahaut.tyrrell@inrap.fr

Stéphanie Hollocou
Cultural development and communication
Inrap, Interregional directorate Bourgogne-Franche-Comté
+33 6 72 56 28 51 – stephanie.hollocou@inrap.fr