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Press release
21 April 2016

The underground dwellings of Naours, a popular tourist site during the First World War



Since 2014, Gille Prilaux (Inrap) has coordinated archaeological research in the underground dwellings of Naours (Somme). This aim of this work, initiated by the Bocage-Hallue community district, was initially to date this vast underground system. The discovery of an surprising concentration of graffiti and inscriptions made by soldiers during the First World War reoriented the investigation to a formerly unknown activity at this site: touristic visits to the underground dwellings during the First World War.

An underground refuge starting in the 15th century

In Picardy and Artois, modified underground sites are often composed of a complex network of several branches. The Naours site is centered around an epicenter (ancient quarries) from which around a dozen small “islands” branch off. Today, archaeological research supports the hypothesis of a large occupation at the beginning of the 17th century during the Thirty Years’ War, attested by inscriptions, coins, pottery and musket bullets.

The site of Naours was rediscovered at the end of the 19th century by Father Danicourt who, after 18 years of excavation and extensive modifications, made this incredible piece of work accessible in 1888.

Since its opening to tourists in the 1930’s, it has been said that the site served as a hospital during the First World War. Archaeological research now contradicts this story and affirms that it was in fact a tourist attraction during this tumultuous period.

Graffiti and lead pencils

Most of the chambers and corridors of this underground site contain numerous signatures made by soldiers during the First World War. The inventory currently in progress is expected to reach 2,800 names. These signatures are often accompanied by a nationality, a military unit, a date, and sometimes even an address. While the names of French, British, American, Canadian and Indian soldiers have been identified, nearly half of the graffiti was realized by Australian soldiers, starting in 1916. The soldiers most often used a lead pencil to make these short inscriptions.

January 1, 1917, Blake

Though the research and identification of these thousands of names has just begun, a few individuals with sometimes extraordinary stories have already been revealed. Lieutenant Leslie Russel Blake, for example, wrote his name and unit on the wall on January 1, 1917. This famous Australian geologist and cartographer was an explorer in the Antarctic. He was internationally recognized by the scientific community for his work on Macquarie Island. This war hero, injured several times and well known his participation in the combats of the Battle of the Somme, died on October 3, 1918.

January 2, 1917, Allan Allsop

Archival research reveals that the site of Naours was a very popular local curiosity to the soldiers stationed in the sector. One of the signatures was made by William Joseph Allan Allsop on January 2, 1917, who on this date he wrote in his journal: *...in the afternoon, a group of 10 of us went to the famous “caves” near Naours, where the refugees often hid during invasions. The caves contain around 300 rooms – one of which is 1000 meters long. An entire unit, with its men, horses, canons and transports could fit in here...*

Inrap

With more than 2,000 collaborators and researchers, Inrap is the largest archaeological research institute 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 study and diffusion of the results and the transmission of archaeological knowledge to the public.

The Underground Dwellings of Naours in Bocage-Hallue

The community district of Bocage-Hallue, located just to the north of Amiens, is composed of 26 towns and nearly 14,000 inhabitants. A highpoint of this region, the underground dwellings of Naours have been managed by the inter-community since December 1, 2013. This major tourist site in Picardy welcomes 40,000 visitors per year, with one out of two originating from a country other than France. An important economic and publicity resource, the goal is to articulate the high demand of visitors to discover the site, and the necessity to maintain the conditions necessary for the preservation and scientific research of this major heritage site.

The Drac Picardy

The Regional Archaeology Service authorized this test excavation in advance of a multi-year operation whose aims are to better understand these types of remains and to accompany public outreach activities, such as school visits.

Site management **Bocage-Hallue community district**
Curation **Regional Archaeology Service (Drac Picardie)**
Archaeological research **Inrap**
Site director **Gilles Prilaux, Inrap**

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