

Navigating Navigo

Top Terraces

L'Eau Below

Ballon Air de Paris

Livres Rares de Jean de Bonnot

Jewelry Jewels

Euro June 12: .648

Euro May 14: .646

Rain Days: 12

High Temp: 76°F/24°C

Low Temp: 58°F/14°C

Nat'l Holidays: July 14, Aug 15

PARIS

n o t e s

JULY / AUGUST 2008

VOLUME 17 ISSUE 6

DIGGING DEEP

By Mary McAuliffe

With a little digging, you can uncover the earliest layers of Paris history

If you were suddenly transported back to the Paris of 1890 and decided to take a walk, you might soon find yourself on the edge of a large construction site bordering Notre Dame. There, among the workmen and the debris, you would very likely encounter a small man with a sharp face, top hat and goatee. Under his supervision, the workmen have stopped their excavation to extract a large block of stone. The gentleman you are watching, a man by the name of Théodore Vacquer, has been waiting for this moment. Because this block of stone is special—a fragment of sculpture dating back almost 2,000 years, when Paris was part of the Roman Empire.

Roman Empire? Yes, indeed. Here on the banks of the Seine, a Celtic tribe called the Parisii once lived in peaceful obscurity, until an ambitious Roman by the name of Julius Caesar led his legions into Gaul. After soundly defeating scores of Celtic tribes, including the Parisii (in 52 BC), Caesar and his victorious Romans added Gaul to their holdings and methodically took over. In time, the Parisii fishing village—which the Romans named Lutetia—acquired a temple and administrative buildings on what we now call the Ile de la Cité, as well as centrally heated houses on the Left Bank hill now known as Montagne Ste-Geneviève, high above the marshy shores of the Seine.

During the next several centuries, the Romans built a forum between what now are the Luxembourg Gardens and the Panthéon, as well as a large amphitheater—a portion of which is still visible along Rue Monge at Rue de Navarre (5th). Being Romans, they also built several public baths, one of which can still be seen, dramatically adjoining the Hôtel de Cluny (5th). To supplement their water supply, they constructed a lengthy aqueduct leading in from the south and paralleling what now is Rue St-Jacques. And, as elsewhere throughout the empire, the Romans provided Lutetia with a grid of well-built roads, including a major north-south thoroughfare that now is Rue St-Martin on the Right Bank and Rue St-Jacques

on the Left. Two bridges (at the present sites of the Petit-Pont and Pont Notre-Dame) linked both sides of this thoroughfare, facilitating commerce throughout Lutetia and beyond—south to Orléans and north to the sea.

All was well for the first three centuries, and Lutetia—a strategic crossroads in the Roman imperial system—grew to respectable



size, with a population of between 8,000 and 10,000. During these years, the conquered Celts mingled with their Roman conquerors. Many even became Roman citizens. The result was a culture that we now call “Gallo-Roman,” a term that acknowledges Roman influence on Gaul’s conquered people, including those of Lutetia, who became Romanized without entirely losing their Celtic ways.

This peaceful blending of cultures, which took place under the auspices of the Pax Romana, began to encounter heavy weather during the last part of the third century AD, as barbarians stepped up their probes of soft spots along the Empire’s periphery. Although situated some distance from the frontier, Lutetia was nevertheless vulnerable. In response to growing insecurity throughout the region, Lutetia’s residents erected a wall around the Ile de la Cité as well as around their forum, and the city (now bolstered by a military camp) developed into a garrison. In the middle of the fourth century, the Roman general

Julian (soon to become emperor) chose the city as his headquarters—as did one of his imperial successors.

The empire continued its meltdown, and by the late fifth century its western portion had collapsed. But Lutetia, now governed by the Germanic Franks and known as Paris (after the Celtic Parisii), continued in a modest way to prosper. That is, until the ninth century, when the Vikings arrived, leaving devastation in their wake. For many years thereafter, Paris remained a ghost town, shrunken to scarcely more than the Ile de la Cité.

Paris began its near-miraculous recovery in the 11th century, and its climb to glory came soon after. By this time, its Gallo-Roman history was long forgotten. Yes, there still were a few visual reminders of the past—remnants of the forum, the baths, the amphitheater and the Cité’s walls. But these meant little or nothing to medieval Parisians, who conjured up unlikely tales to explain the ruins’ presence. The forum, for example, was believed to have been the family home of Ganelon,

legendary betrayer of Charlemagne’s noble henchman, Roland. Moreover, when it came to practical matters, the people of medieval Paris could not be bothered with preservation. Many of the stones of the ruined amphitheater (the Arènes) disappeared into Paris’ 12th-century wall—much as, during precarious Gallo-Roman times, stones from this same source had bolstered Lutetia’s third-century fortifications.

Time and neglect buried the rest, and when in 1711 workers digging a vault beneath Notre Dame’s choir discovered five large carved blocks of stone dedicated to the Roman god Jupiter and dating from the reign of emperor Tiberius, it created a sensation. Those eagerly deciphering the roughly carved Latin inscription learned that these stones, which originally were mounted on top of one another, had been erected early in the first century AD by the Nautes, a group of boatmen who controlled river traffic on the Seine. This Pilier des Nautes (shown), or Boatmen’s Pillar, which today is (continued on page 7)

regarded as the oldest surviving sculpture from Gallo-Roman Lutetia, has long been a special prize of the Musée National du Moyen Age, Thermes et Hôtel de Cluny (6 Place Paul-Painlevé, 5th). After a recent four-year absence for restoration, this pillar currently resides with other antiquities in the frigidarium of the Roman baths, or thermes, which are one of the museum's highlights.

Antiquities continued to turn up at construction sites, such as the Luxembourg Gardens and the Panthéon, but the antiquarians who collected and even catalogued these rarities did not really know what to make of them. Nor did royalty, even when Louis XVIII came to the rescue of Cluny's ruined Roman baths by clearing out the tradesmen who had set up shop inside and removing encroaching structures, such as a garden on the roof. Soon after, King Louis-Philippe had the idea of integrating these baths with a museum meant to hold the Pilier des Nautes—a forerunner of today's Musée National du Moyen Age. Yet despite these monarchs' good intent, the spirit that moved them seems to have been heavily laced with romanticism and civic pride. Not surprisingly, the story of Paris' origins remained muddled.

And then, around the middle of the 19th century, an architect named Théodore Vacquer began to visit the numerous construction sites that were emerging under the direction of Napoleon III's prefect of the Seine, Baron Georges Haussmann. Baron Haussmann had in mind a city of the future, of broad boulevards and flattened cityscapes as well as a monumental new sewer system. To achieve this, Haussmann tore out the narrow winding streets of medieval Paris, leveled the city's innumerable hills and rises, and dug deep into the accumulated dirt and rubbish of the centuries. Vacquer was there to record and save what the workmen uncovered, and since so much of Haussmann's projects took place in the center of Paris, directly above ancient Lutetia, the antiquities that the workmen uncovered were frequently Gallo-Roman. As a result, the outlines of Gallo-Roman Paris began to emerge—for the first time in 1,500 years.

Vacquer, who began his career as foreman of city works, became an inspector for the city's Service Historique before spending the last 18 years of his life (1880-98) as an assistant curator at the Museum of the City (now known as the Musée Carnavalet). Over the course of half a century, he made an enormous contribution to the rediscovery of Paris' Gallo-Roman past. So did others, especially the Commission du Vieux Paris, founded in 1897. Thanks to finds uncovered during extensive Métro excavation at the turn of the 20th century, Paris discovered even more of its ancient heritage, including sections of the Gallo-Roman wall that once fortified the Cité, as well as pieces of the forum that emerged on Rue Soufflot between Rue St-Jacques and

Boulevard St-Michel (5th).

During these years, public outcry managed to preserve a portion of the Gallo-Roman amphitheater (the Arènes), although unfortunately this outcry occurred too late to save the rest, which had already been demolished to make way for Rue Monge and a bus depot. But perhaps by way of compensation, two additional baths were discovered (the one beneath the Collège de France on Rue des Ecoles, and the other on Rue Gay-Lussac, 5th), as well as a theater (on the site of the Lycée St-Louis, Rue Racine, 6th). Remnants of the Gallo-Roman aqueduct were also found along present-day Rue St-Jacques (5th), where it entered Lutetia from the south.

In addition to these large architectural



discoveries, there were countless smaller finds—fragments of sarcophagi and pieces of sculpture, broken bits of friezes and other architectural decorations. Many of these had come from Gallo-Roman trash-heaps, used to reinforce Lutetia's fortifications during perilous times.

More of Paris' Gallo-Roman history turned up in the second half of the 20th century, during a spate of excavations for underground parking garages. Most important of these was the striking discovery beneath the Parvis de Notre Dame: multiple layers of houses, streets and fortifications—an accumulation of Parisian life going back to Gallo-Roman times (now preserved in the Crypte Archéologique de Notre-Dame). In addition, archaeologists continued to track down Gallo-Roman burial sites, locating a new find along the Rue Pierre-Nicole (5th). Here they discovered a wealth of funerary items that had been buried with their owners, including revealing mementos of everyday life. Movingly, when archaeologists removed the lid of one small sarcophagus, they found the body of an infant, whose face—accidentally covered by what must have been wet cement beneath the lid—had created a kind of death mask, leaving for us a portrait of one of Lutetia's youngest residents.

After these digs were completed, most were covered over, their contents removed to a variety of warehouses. The best pieces went to the Musée Carnavalet, but after 1921 they were removed from public view and sent into storage. Not until 1991 did the museum—prodded by a younger generation of archaeologists—bring its

Gallo-Roman collection back into public view. Now displayed in the museum's Orangerie, it includes an astonishing variety of survivors from Paris' Gallo-Roman age: glass bottles and vases, jewelry and hair pins, an inkwell and a lovely statuette of Mercury, who was a popular deity among the Romanized Gauls. An especially winning ring-shaped vessel bears the Latin words, "Hostess, fill my flask with beer!" In addition, a variety of intriguing items were gleaned from those quiet cemeteries located outside the ancient city limits. Nearby are scale models of Lutetia's forum and amphitheater—both of them impressive structures for what was, in fact, a small town.

My favorite Carnavalet treasure is a pair of shoes with studded soles, buried with their owner. Accompanying the shoes are a utilitarian-looking plate and ceramic bottle—items from the fellow's daily life. These provide a nice homey touch, but it is the presence of the well-worn shoes that I find especially moving. Given the footwear, the man probably was a soldier, and the humble elements of his life have miraculously survived for almost two millennia.

Finds like this are still going on throughout the heart of what used to be Lutetia. In the early 1990s, the Commission du Vieux Paris discovered a small group of first-century habitations in Place André-Honnorat, in the Luxembourg Gardens (6th). Recently, work on the remains of some of the earliest dwellings in Lutetia, located in the courtyard of the Institut Curie (26 Rue d'Ulm, 5th) has been completed. For a video of this exciting discovery, click on www.inrap.fr/archeologie-preventive/Decouvrir/Audiovisuels/Reportages_videos/p-1178-Aux_origines_de_la_Lutece_romaine.htm.

Like others throughout Paris, this dig has been covered over, and a new building now hides it forever. So where do you go to find the remains of Gallo-Roman Paris? First, head to the stunning Crypte Archéologique de Notre-Dame, located on the Ile de la Cité beneath the Parvis de Notre-Dame (open Tues-Sun, 10am-6pm). Then wander over to Place Paul-Painlevé on the Left Bank, where you will find the glorious ruins of the thermes, or baths, of Cluny as well as the Pilier des Nautes (Musée National du Moyen Age, Thermes et Hôtel de Cluny, open Wed-Mon, 9:15am-5:45pm). A short jaunt away are the remains of the Arènes, or arena, de Lutece—now a public park, located on Rue de Navarre at Rue Monge, 5th.

To complete your tour, save a morning or an afternoon for the ever-surprising Musée Carnavalet, the museum of the history of Paris. Located at 23 Rue de Sévigné, 3rd (and open Tues-Sun, 10am-6pm), the Carnavalet has since Théodore Vacquer's time served as the primary repository for the remains of ancient Gallo-Roman Paris. Pay a visit to my Roman soldier, and let his worn shoes reach out to you across the ages. Vacquer would understand—and would be quietly pleased.