

EXHIBITION BOOKLET

STONE Heroes Steles and Celtic warriors' statues from Les Tourières' sanctuary

This exhibition was created through the collaboration between two units of the County Council of Aveyron, the archaeology department and the museums department. The departmental archaeology centre in Montrozier exhibits the astonishing sites of Les Tourières through the Aveyron archaeologists point of view. From the excavation to the exhibits in the museum, the exhibition unveils the scenes behind a complex yet exciting field with the objective of an understanding, preservation and transmission of knowledge.

Section I - An exceptional site in the Aveyron and beyond...



The Aveyron archaeology department has been performing excavations in Les Tourières site since 2008. It is considered extremely interesting. For one of the first times in Europe's history, it reveals the evolution and the functioning of a sanctuary dedicated to heroes from the early Iron Age (8th-4th Century B.C.). In those times, during the Celtic era, the local inhabitants were settling in particular places, perhaps holy ones to celebrate their heroes. The steles and statues that have been already found in the South of France were reused as later fortifications for cities. Regarding Les Tourières, after they were permanently abandoned during the 4th century without any habitation emerging from it since. Steles' original function inside of a sanctuary can be studied thanks to their preservation. Close to this place other steles share common points style-wise, meaning an original group had emerged. In Les Tourières, there is a depiction of evolution ranging from figurative warriors with anthropomorphic steles to symbolized ones with polished steles. Finally, in this area where statuary seemed to be absent, a new landmark in history was set between "statues-menhirs" (3500-2200 B.C.) and Gaul busts on pedestals (2nd and 1st centuries B.C.). Simple coincidence or proof of continuity, those warriors' belt design is reminiscent of the one present on statues-menhirs.

The Tourières' sanctuary during the excavation with, in the background, the natural amphitheatre of Saint-Paul-des-Fonts (picture taken by SDA12)



Informations : 05.65.70.75.00

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Global mapping of Les Touriès site and two other deposits in Southern-Aveyron, where were found steles dating from the First Iron Age. 1 : Tarn valley (Millau) ; 2 : Le Puech (Versols-et-Lapeyre); 3 : Les Touriès (Saint-Jean-et-Saint-Paul)



Section II – From discovering to the excavation

An unexpected discovery

Below the high plain of the Larzac, Les Touriès site is nestling on a rocky promontory in the middle of the natural amphitheatre of Saint-Paul-des-Fonts. It was on the edge of this small peak that André Verlaquet, the owner of the field, had discovered four steles while doing agricultural work. These were stored in the family's farm for over ten years. Eventually by word of mouth an attentive ear would hear about the steles' existence rumour. An archaeologist from Aveyron called Philippe Gruat quickly understood the value of such a discovery and started to prospect, then proceeded to the evaluation of the site. The unexpected results enabled him to launch some extensive searches.



The first steles discovered by the Verlaquet family, here stored in Vialaret farmyard (picture taken by J.-P. Serres in March 2006)

Espace archéologique
départemental

The archaeologist on the field

Being an archaeologist is very demanding and requires rigour, precision and polyvalence. Excavating can turn out destructive, as any information that isn't kept can be lost. As a result, the archaeologist follows a precise methodology and piles up numerous means of recording the collected data during the whole excavation work on the field.



*Manual scouring,
also known as « precise » excavation*



*Stele 31 as discovered during searches
(picture taken by the SDA12)*

From the excavation to the brushing step, several steps are necessary to the proper progress of the searches. Photographs, notes, sketches are the ground's memory and enable the analysis of stratigraphic layers.

Archaeologists rely on the geographical referencing of the remains. The repartition plans coming off of it are vital for the interpretation and the functioning of the site.

Concerning the vestiges, those latter are listed down, classified and labelled with great care. Most of them are cleaned with water while restorers take care of the most exceptional pieces. At the end of the excavation they're studied then stored in reserves.

Reporting the vestiges location with electronic tachometer



Section III – The hidden side of archaeology

The experts

Modern analysis techniques help the archaeologist to learn more about the vestiges found, to better understand the surrounding environment as well as the place's role. During the excavation and once it's done, various specialists take part and contribute to the meaning of the site.

Mineral : A geologist examines the sandstone of the steles. Therefore he will be able to determinate its extracting location and study sculptural techniques. A geomorphologist joins in to analyse the relief of the site.

Flora : specific analyses such as palynology (pollen study), carpology (seeds science), anthracology (carbon studying) and also ground study (soil) enable the reconstitution of the local flora during the occupation of the area.

Bones : Archeozoology, the studying of animal remains, enables the identification of the most consumed animals while anthropology serves as mean of identifying the human remains found in les Tourières.

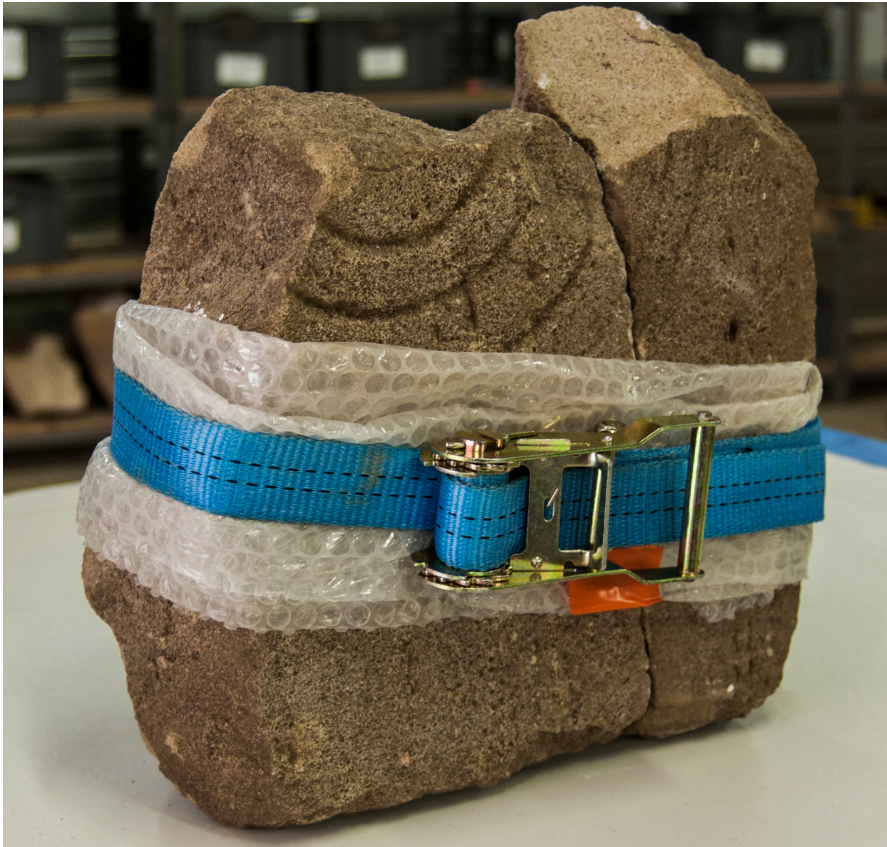
Signs of human activities : further studies performed on shards and samples found in hearths unveil the nature of the food that was consumed, burnt or given as offering.

Restoring

The archaeologist must take care of the material preservation for explanatory purposes towards the visitors. They can seek help from a restorer who will elaborate a specific treatment process, as done on Les Tourières' steles. Once extracted, the steles suffered from the proliferation of moss and lichens causing sandstone decay. Therefore, they were accurately cleaned and this led to the discovery of paint traces on eight out of them all.



Cleaning faces with a cotton swab (picture taken by the Atelier du Rouge-Gorge)



*Stele 14 during gluing process
(picture taken by the Atelier du
Rouge-Gorge)*

Some pieces are glued or filled in order to strengthen some steles for exhibition. A well logging was performed on the largest ones to install them on a definitive, yet reversible pedestal to limit their manipulation while keeping their original appearance.

*Sampling of ochre pigments (picture
taken by the Atelier du Rouge-Gorge)*



Ground's archives

All of the data compiled during the field searches part are treated and analysed after the excavation. This months-long work is written down in a search report as it is a legal obligation the supervisor and his team must follow. This report will be reference work for further campaigns and for national or international archaeologists. The results obtained after excavating also raise a huge amount of questions. The findings added to the report may be subject to change as soon as new discoveries and new analyses occur. Archaeology is a constantly changing science.



The manual excavation of the southern-western edge of the podium (monument B) and its surroundings with the current clearance of the steles' cladding in the foreground (picture taken by the SDA12)

Section IV – A heroes' sanctuary in a nutshell

History of the sanctuary

Around the 8th or 7th Century B.C., a sanctuary dedicated to heroes was raised on Les Tourières promontory. It seems the choice of building a sanctuary in this stunning landscape in a valley like an amphitheatre in Saint-Paul-des-Fonts isn't purely coincidental and may even be symbolic. The alignments of steles were done in the area so they could be seen from a distance. During the 5th Century B.C., the creation of a 50-meter long stone-made podium contained a large amount of steles that were reused as cladding spots. This podium that was probably built in the memory of a deceased hero enabled the preservation of whole steles. A big butte is monumentalized by it, perhaps a tumulus, on which two steles' bases are still set up. Through those four centuries of occupation, the sanctuary was modified and extended a lot. Those modifications prove the successive generations of local warrior elites.



Exhibition of a stela set in the departmental archaeology centre

Detail on stela 31, featuring old traces of mutilation (iconoclasm) performed on the representation of the cardiophylax and the breastplate (picture taken by the SDA12)

The fight of the leaders

The rich archaeological context in the surrounding area may indicate a diversity of territories and communities back in the site's era. A lot of the stelae depict warriors carrying their equipment in a more or less stylized manner. A sheet metal disk known as a cardiophylax often ornate the supple breastplate on the thorax, more rarely on the back, and is supposed to protect the heart area. This equipment is rather unusual in tombs contemporary to the site and isn't represented that much on statues and stelae, is mostly an elite symbol. Those heroine characters sculpted in the stone and honoured during banquets were offered small objects such as ornaments, spindle whorls, ceramics and other items, as well as food.

It can be sure that the different constructions of the sanctuary and the transport of the sandstone for many kilometres are the action of a community, probably ruled by powerful family clans. Next to the practically full 22 stelae that were found, more than 47,000 pieces were discovering, meaning around 8 tons of sandstone, the equivalent of 40 or 50 stelae, statues or pillars. The other stelae were systematically broken with the obvious will to erase the predecessor's picture, a way to kill him in a symbolic manner. This ritual resulting from a violent competition between members of indigenous aristocracy was truly a means of validation for the dynasty, successors and status of the new leader.



Fragments of the representation of sandstone-made carriage wheel (picture taken by the SDA 12)



The excavation goes on...

At the current time of searches, a 20-meter long impressive butte has yet to be excavated. Some human bones belonging to four individuals, a child, a teenager and two adults, as well as two sandstone reproductions of four-wheeled carriage suggest a funerary context. These discoveries remind of the tumulus containing princes tombs from closer-Eastern European countries where were buried the high-ranked dignitaries on ceremonial chariots. The pursuit of excavations may help to solve the last mysteries surrounding this exceptional site.

Some steles from Les Tourières excavation site (picture taken by the SDA 12, infography by D.Espitalier)



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