

A 'DAY OF ARCHAEOLOGY' AT VIARMES (FRANCE) – MY HOMETOWN

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When I was called to undertake the archaeological evaluation of the place de la Mairie (municipal square) in Viarmes, I was at first astounded – for the past 20 years this small city north of Paris has been my hometown! The idea of taking it as a focus of archaeological research had never crossed my mind, even though I have been a practicing archaeologist for the past three decades. I had begun with local archaeological associations, then moved on to AFAN (the National association for archaeological excavations) and thence to its successor **INRAP** (the French national institute for preventive archaeological research) where I have been working since its creation in 2002. Over these years I have undertaken archaeological research in the towns of Villiers-le-Sec, Villiers-le-Bel and Louvres: I have studied many medieval sites in the region, and I have even made the incredible discovery, in Baillet, of the Soviet statues used during the 1937 Universal exposition!



On the field in my hometown Viarmes © JL Bellurget, Inrap

But let us come back to Viarmes. It all began with an archaeological trial-trench, in January 2012. The mayor's office is barely 4 metres away: out of his window he sees appearing a floor, paved with coloured tiles from the 13th century. My colleague and old friend Nicolas begins to expose a bicolour yellow and green floor. But the trench continues into a deeper ditch whose bottom cannot be reached. At a width of 12 metres, we hit a broad masonry wall: what we have here is a moat and a tower, that is, a fortified castle!

At the same time, Pierre, the retired maths teacher who is the living memory of the town, tells me of the ancient finding of a curious silver object in a sewer trench, not far from where we were working. This turns out to be the small matrix of a seal, representing a knight's head with his helmet and coat of arms. There is also a small inscription, which together with my colleague Marc we decipher thus: "Charlot de la Courneuve". This really looks like a prank: since 2009, our INRAP archaeological centre is located in the town of La Courneuve! What a coincidence!

:cʰ aʀlɔt: dɛ la : kɔʀt : nœuue:
:charlot: dela :court:neue:



Bonne Année 2012

matrice de sceau de Charlot de la Courneuve, XVe s.
Viarnes, place P. Salvi

"Charlot de la Courneuve"

Hidden under the esplanade of the Mayor's offices, the medieval castle had effectively been 'forgotten'. Some of its arches had been exposed during building works in the 1980s, but they were interpreted as a guardroom from the 16th century. Now, following our trial evaluation, a full-fledged archaeological excavation campaign has been prescribed by the regional authorities. Beginning in June 2013, this campaign is to last 50 days. My team includes Nicolas, who did the evaluation, Eddy, with whom I excavated in Marne-la-Vallée and in Serris, Marc, who shares my office in La Courneuve and participates in the programmed excavation at the Château d'Orville, and finally Hervé, whom I met in Orville in 1989. We are helped along the excavation by trainees.



View of the archaeological site © Inrap

Excavation begins by a clearing with a mechanical engine, with the help of the technical assistant Saïd and the engine driver Harry. This clearing enables a better exposure of the site, and makes the vestiges appear very visibly. A cement slab overlying an ancient latrine in the eastern courtyard is removed. We can thus perceive the span of the outer wall preserved over several meters high, leading to the lord's residence. The base of two windows, now truncated by a nearby street, suggests the location of the hall. Quite obviously, a fire has raged, and a thick burned layer can be found in the nearby ditch: this part of the castle was destroyed at the end of the middle ages. Then, the angular tower already perceived during the evaluation appears now, with a glacis which lends it the look of a pyramid.



Tower of the fortified castle © Inrap

A second building contained a paved room, decorated by yellow and green squares, together with ornate tiles. The abundance of complex cuttings and ornate tiles on their edges and lower part, all indicate a sophisticated pavement. The floor above this complex was accessible through a staircase: the twenty metres long room found there was rich in decorations: Eagle, Deer, Sagittarius, Leopard, and the paschal Lamb are all represented. We also found there a shield ornate with gilded scallops (appearing, to Olivia at least, like Pac-man figures): these are the coat of arms of Pierre de Chambly, lord of Viarmes. The edifice was probably built at the end of the 13th century by “our” Pierre VI of Chambly.



Pavement © Inrap

Excavations at the second room, with its lowered plaster floor, show evidence of a violent fire, earlier than that which destroyed the castle. We have now to examine the chronicles for any evidence of this drama. Could these have been incursions into the region by Charles le Mauvais (Charles the nasty – the bad guy in Hollywood movies) together with his English mercenaries? Or possibly events related to the infamous peasant uprising (Grande Jacquerie) of 1358?

Some answers may well be found in the ground, in the form of potsherds or coins which will provide us with dating, or other clues.

Fortunately, we still have three weeks to explore this site!

François Gentili, archaeologist at [INRAP](#)