

# Archaeological Study Tour to Poitou - Charente



Église Ste-Radegonde, Talmont-sur-Gironde

**16 to 24 May 2008**

# Archaeology in Europe

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## Archaeological Study Tour to Poitou - Charente 16 to 24 May 2008

### Itinerary

Friday, 16 May	Depart London Embankment - crossing via Channel Tunnel - drive to Orléans - overnight Orléans
Saturday, 17 May	Depart Orléans 8:30 –Tours - Saintes Amphitheatre
Sunday, 18 May	All day in Saintes
Monday, 19 May	Depart Saintes 8:30 – all day in Poitiers
Tuesday, 20 May	Depart Saintes 8:30 - Talmont-sur-Gironde – site Gallo-romain- du Fâ – Pons - Aubeterre-sur-Dronne
Wednesday, 21 May	Depart Saintes 8:30 – Tumulus de Bougon – Niort (lunch) – Abbaye de Maillezais
Thursday, 22 May	Depart Saintes 8:30 Aulnay - St Jean d'Angely (lunch) - Melle
Friday, 23 May	Depart Saintes 8:30 – Brouage – Châtelleraut (lunch) - Orléans (overnight in Orléans)
Saturday, 24 May	Depart Orléans 8:30 – drive to Calais - crossing via Channel Tunnel - arrive London Embankment

## Orléans

**Orléans is the site of the famous siege of 1428 – 29** when the English forces cut off the town and all but succeeded in capturing it. However, in April 1429 Joan of Arc persuaded the future Charles VII to rescue Orléans. Joan's forces entered the town on 29 April, although it was not until the 8 May that the French won the final victory.

**The Cathedral of Ste-Croix** was started in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, but construction continued into 16<sup>th</sup> century. The cathedral was partly destroyed by the Protestants in 1568. Henri IV started the rebuilding of the cathedral in a composite Gothic style and work continued into the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The cathedral is built on a grand scale with the three large doorways of the west front and double aisles in the interior. The old town lies to the south and south west of the cathedral.



An interesting aspect of industrial archaeology comes from the sugar trade which was important here in earlier times. Many of the old ceramic sugar moulds found a new lease of life as chimneypots – eventually giving rise to a skeuomorphic design which became quite common in the town.

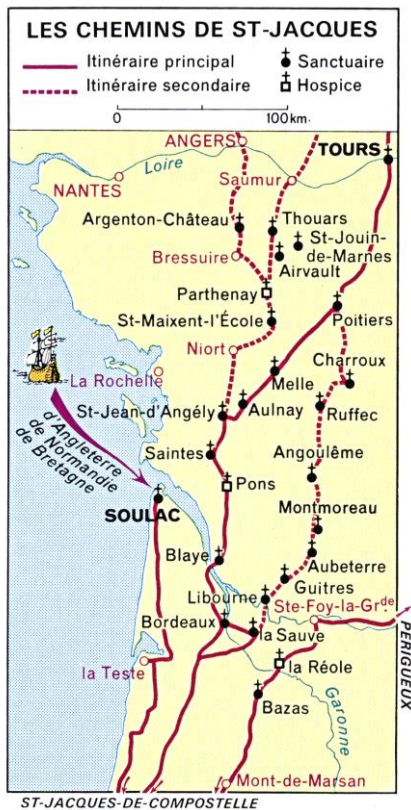
## Tours

**Tours was founded during the Roman period** as the settlement of *Turons*. It developed into a prosperous city and acquired the name *Caesarodunum*. The town reached its greatest prosperity in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, but by the 4<sup>th</sup> century it had shrunk to a walled administrative enclave around the present cathedral area. In 375 the town's name reverted to *Turones* and it became the centre of government for the third Lyonnaise – a province comprising Touraine, Maine, Anjou and Armorica.

The early medieval expansion of Tours was based, not on this administrative area, but the area around the church of Saint Martin, which was situated within one of the extra-mural Roman cemeteries on the road outside the town. In 471 a great basilica measuring 50m x 20m had been built over the tomb of Saint Martin. For some time the city consisted of two separate elements: the cathedral and administrative area, and a monastic centre around which developed an increasingly important market function.

**Saint Martin** was the greatest bishop of Gaul, but he began as legionary in the Roman Army. At the gates of Amiens the young soldier was approached by a beggar shivering in the wind. He cut his cloak in two and gave half to the beggar. That

night, in a dream, he saw Christ wearing half of his cloak. He was baptised and founded a monastery at Ligugé in Poitou; this was the first monastery to be built in Gaul.



**Clovis** is said to have visited the tomb of Saint Martin in 496 or 498, and to have vowed to be baptised if he defeated the Alamanni. He returned in 507 during the war against the Visigoths and commanded his army not to plunder Tours out of respect for the saint. In 563 Gregory, a young deacon who suffered from poor health, visited the tomb of Saint Martin. After his miraculous cure, he settled in Tours, eventually becoming bishop in 573.

**Gregory of Tours**, as he became known, wrote *The History of the Franks* as well as many other works. Between 573 and Gregory's death in 594 the town developed and a great abbey grew up around Saint Martin's Basilica.

At the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century the fame of Tours as an artistic and intellectual centre greatly increased under the leadership of **Alcuin**, an Anglo-Saxon monk.

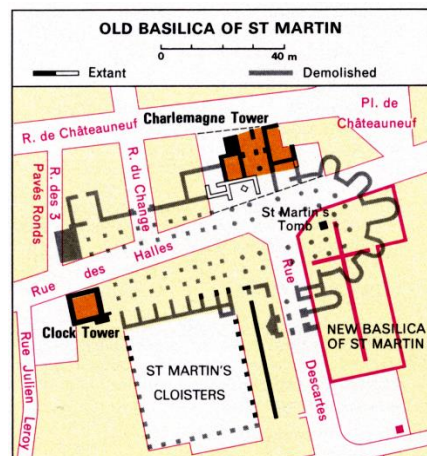
The abbey also continued to develop as a place of pilgrimage and it became one of the most important shrines on the **Via Turonensis** the great pilgrim route

that ran from Paris to Santiago de Compostela. Several of the churches that we will visit on this study tour were important pilgrimage churches on this route, as can be seen from the map on the left.

In 997 a great fire destroyed the Abbey of Saint Martin and the *suburbium* outside it. The damaged 5<sup>th</sup> century basilica was replaced by a great Pilgrimage type church constructed in 1014. This was burnt down in 1230 and rebuilt on an even larger scale.

This church was badly damaged by the Huguenots in 1562 and fell into further disrepair during the Revolution, when its vaulting collapsed. In 1802 the nave was demolished to make way for the *rue des Halles*.

Excavations in 1860 revealed the plan of the church and located fragments of Saint Martin's Shrine. A remaining tower – Charlemagne Tower partially collapsed in 1928, but has been carefully restored. A new basilica in the neo-Byzantine style was built between 1886 and 1924 and this church has the shrine of St Martin in its crypt.



## Saintes

**Mediolanum Santonum** (the central town of the Santons – the tribe that inhabited the area) was founded c. 20 BC during the expansion of the Roman road system serving Burdigala (Bordeaux). The town is estimated to have had about 15,000 inhabitants.

The most important survival from the Roman period is the **amphitheatre**, which is on the left bank of the River Charente near the summit of the hill on which the town was built.

It was constructed c. 40 – 50 AD and the seating is built into the sides of the valley using the earth for support as in the amphitheatres at Senlis, Lyon, Beziers.

One descends the different levels by stairs parting directly from an exterior esplanade at the top level. The eastern portion was built as a hollow, vaulted structure from the valley floor making the amphitheatre a “mixed structure” as in the older amphitheatres of Frejus and Pompeii.



The structure is an ellipse 126 m by 102 m, nearly as large as the one at Nîmes (136 m by 100 m) and the capacity of the amphitheatre is estimated at 12,000 to 18,000 people, close to the entire population of the city.

The **Arc de Germanicus** originally stood at the entrance to a bridge until 1843, when the bridge was demolished to make way for the modern crossing and the triumphal arch was re-erected on the riverbank.



**In the medieval period**, Saintes was the capital of the province of Saintonge – an area famous for its widely-exported pottery. Production started in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, but the best-known vessels in this ware are tall jugs with polychrome glazed decoration dating to the 14<sup>th</sup> century. In particular, the “birds and shields” motif was a hallmark of this pottery.

The medieval town was surrounded by a defensive wall built on the foundations of the Roman wall, and was dominated by a castle built at the highest point. Saintes was an important stage on the **Via Turonensis** and the pilgrimage church of St-Eutrope was an important point of call for those on their way to Santiago de Compostela.

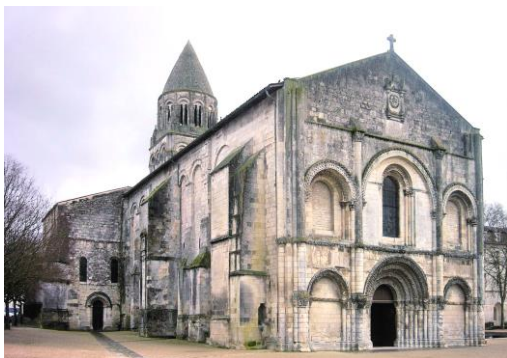
## The Cathédrale St-Pierre

The present church is a rebuild which started in 1450, although the crossing and southern transept retain part of the 12<sup>th</sup> century church which preceded it. Construction of the present building started in the Flamboyant style, but work was still not complete when the building was sacked by Protestants in 1568, during the French Wars of Religion. The damage was so severe that the nave had to be rebuilt, although lack of resources meant that a complete rebuild has never been possible. The heavy appearance of the tower, for example, results from the lack of the spire intended to finish it, the present dome constituting a more economical substitute.



## Abbaye aux Dames

The Abbaye aux Dames was founded in 1047 by Agnès de Bourgogne and her second husband, Geoffroy Martel, count of Anjou.



The church is in the Saintongeais Romanesque style with the three western doorways echoed by the three windows above

The church was damaged by fire in 1608 and 1648 and in 1798, the convent was turned into a troop barracks, and in 1808 Napoleon gave the Abbaye aux Dames to the town as an army barracks for 1200 soldiers. The buildings were poorly treated, and the abbey itself was transformed into a stable and dormitory. In 1840

the abbey was finally classified as a national historic monument.

## St-Eutrope

The Cluniac church of St-Eutrope is the one church in Saintes that is mentioned in the 12<sup>th</sup> century *"Pilgrim's Guide to Santiago de Compostela"*.

The original church was founded at the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, rebuilt by monks from Cluny and consecrated (although at the time still incomplete) by Pope Urban II in 1096. It was again rebuilt in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. In 1803 the nave and façade were partly destroyed - the south aisle and transept still survive.



The impressive crypt has an apse surrounded by an ambulatory with three radiating chapels. The choir of the crypt houses the sarcophagus of St-Eutrope, which was rediscovered in 1843.

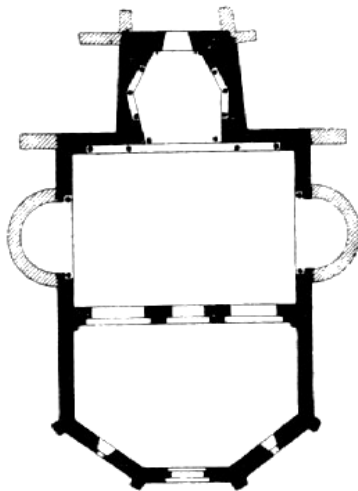
## Poitiers

**The Baptistère Saint-Jean** is believed to be the oldest Christian building in France. In the earliest years of Christianity in Poitiers, the sacrament of baptism was administered in the River Clain, which runs about 100 meters from the baptistery. Then, around 360, a baptistery was constructed by the first bishop (St. Hilary) in what would soon become the ecclesiastical centre of the city.



Over the centuries many changes were made to the original structure. A round apse and transept with square arms were added in the 6th or 7th century. The arms of the transept were later transformed into two small semi-circular apses.

A baptismal tank was added in the 6<sup>th</sup> century but in the 8<sup>th</sup> century this was filled in. The walls were decorated with frescoes in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, remains of which can still be seen. One shows the Emperor Constantine on horseback.



The baptistery was abandoned in 1791 during the revolution, then confiscated from the Church and sold to a private citizen who used it as a warehouse. It was saved from demolition by a public subscription, which allowed it to be repurchased in 1834.

The baptistery was excavated and restored in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Excavations uncovered the baptismal tank and led to more precise dating of the building, which in turn ruled out the theory that the baptistery first served as a pagan temple.

**The church of St-Hilaire-le-Grand** was built in the 11th century over a Roman graveyard and dedicated to St. Hilary, the first bishop of Poitiers. Hilary was born into a pagan family at Poitiers and converted to Christianity after reading the Scriptures. He was appointed bishop of his city in 350 AD, after which he took up the defense of orthodox Christianity against Arianism.

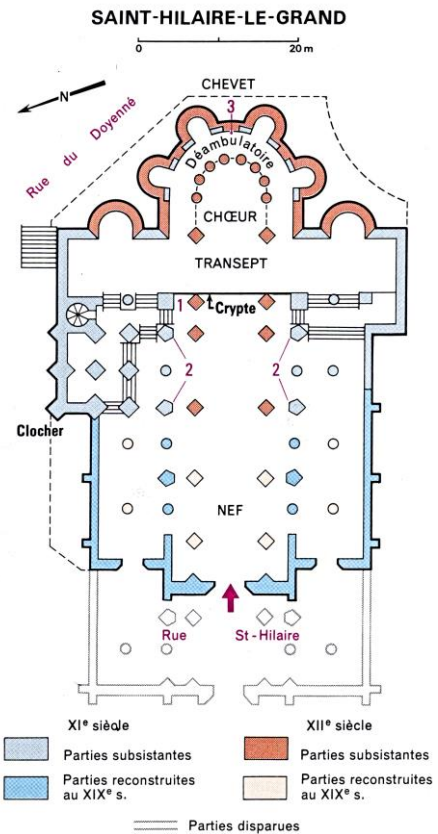
Hilary was eventually exiled by the Arian emperor Constantius, but he continued his writing on theology (in which he encouraged a moderate approach to the Semi-Arians) and travelled to Constantinople to do further battle against heresy.

Hilary returned to Poitiers in 361, resumed his role as bishop, and was visited by his former disciple St. Martin of Tours. After a trip to Italy on further Arian-related business, Hilary returned again to Poitiers, where he remained until his death in 368 AD (feast day: January 14).

The presence of the tomb of St. Hilary attracted many pilgrims on their way to Santiago de Compostela. The fate of Hilary's relics is not known for certain (the church of Puy still claims to have them), but one account says they were taken from the church of St-Hilaire and destroyed by Protestants in 1572.

The original wooden roof of the church was destroyed by fire c. 1100 and was replaced with eight heavy domes. The extra weight required the addition of numerous auxiliary columns, hence the rather unusual appearance of the interior.

The facade and domed aisles of were severely damaged when the tower fell in 1590. The church was restored in the 19th century, during which part of the nave was trimmed off.



**The early history of Notre-Dame-la-Grande** is something of a mystery, but the first recorded mention of it dates from 924 AD. Most of the present church dates from the late 11th century under Eleanor of Aquitaine; the splendid Romanesque façade was added in the mid-12<sup>th</sup> century.

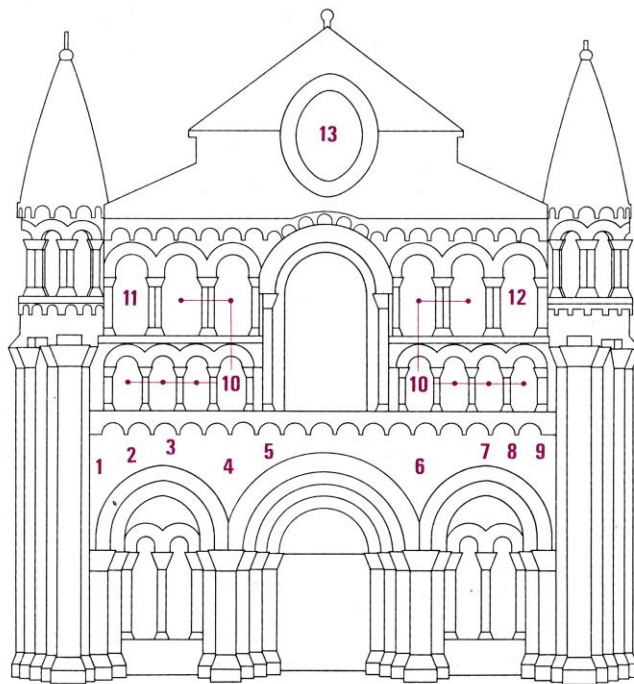


In subsequent centuries the church was expanded to the west, with new chapels added around the choir and north of the nave. The church is not particularly large, so the name probably indicates there were smaller or less impressive churches dedicated to Our Lady in medieval Poitiers.

Every Easter Monday in the Middle Ages, a statue of the Virgin Mary known as the Virgin of the Keys was carried in procession around the ramparts of the town. This venerated statue still survives today, kept in the choir of the church.

The church was thoroughly cleaned and restored in 1996; its stone is now a gleaming white. Interestingly, most of the dirt and

damage to the façade was caused less by pollution and pigeon droppings than by the salt from the nearby market, which seeped into the ground and up the façade.



### The West Front of Notre-Dame-le-Grande

- 1 Adam and Eve
- 2 King Nebucanezer
- 3 Moses, Jeremiah, Isaiah and Daniel
- 4 The Annunciation
- 5 The Tree of Jesse
- 6 The Visitation
- 7 The Nativity
- 8 The Bathing of the Infant Jesus
- 9 Meditation of St Joseph
- 10 The Apostles
- 11 St Hilaire
- 12 St Martin
- 13 Christ in Majesty

**The Cathedral of St-Pierre** stands over the ruins of a Roman basilica. Construction began in 1162 under the direction of Henry II (Plantagenet ) of England and Eleanor of Aquitaine. It was completed much later in a Gothic style.

The west front features a central rose window and three sculpture-filled portals. It is flanked by two stout, mismatched towers.

The interior has a light and airy feel and a long vista down the 89m (292 ft.) long nave. The windows contain some admirable 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century stained glass. The east window dates from the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century and is said to have been donated by Henry and Eleanor themselves. It features scenes of the Ascension of Christ and the crucifixions of Christ and Peter.

**The church of Sainte Radegonde** has ancient origins and was originally named Ste-Marie-Hors-les-Murs (St. Mary outside the Walls), but it was renamed for the city's patron saint when she was buried here in 587 AD.

Sainte Radegonde was the daughter of the king of Thuringia. In about 531, she was captured by the Merovingian King Chlotar I (son of Clovis) during an expedition against the Thuringians. She later founded the nunnery of the Holy Cross at Poitiers. It was said that Radegunda performed numerous miracles and that Christ appeared to her a year before her death on August 13, 587.

The early church in which Radegunda was buried in Poitiers was destroyed in 877. The present building dates mostly from the 11<sup>th</sup> century (crypt, choir and west tower), with the Gothic nave and west doorway dating from the 13<sup>th</sup> through 15<sup>th</sup> centuries.

## Talmont-sur-Gironde

**Construction on the church of Sainte Radegonde** in Talmont-sur-Gironde began in 1094. The church was an important stage on the route to Santiago de Compostela as the River Gironde could be crossed here by ferry, thereby saving a considerable detour.

The enclosed and fortified village was founded around the church in 1284, according to the plans of the ancient bastides, on the orders of Edward I of England. During the Hundred Years War which divided England and France, Talmont became a strategic stake. In 1652, the village was destroyed by the Spanish.

## Site Gallo-romain- du Fâ

**The archaeological excavations at Fâ** have revealed the remains of a 1 to 3 century AD Roman town and port. The site has been suggested to be the recorded site of Novioregum, although this is not certain. Aerial photography shows that the site extends considerably beyond the current area of excavations, and the project is on going.



At the moment, part of the excavated town is visible and a small museum shows the results of the project.

## Pons



**The 12<sup>th</sup> century donjon** of the chateau and part of the town walls remain, but the most important part of the medieval town lies outside of the walled area.

In the extra-mural lower town the Hospice des pèlerins, or pilgrims' Hospice, was founded in 1160 by Geoffroy III, the Count of Anjou as a hospice for pilgrims on the route to Santiago de Compostela.

The array of 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century buildings is unique and the site was given World Heritage status in 1998.

## Aubeterre-sur-Dronne

The interesting little town of Aubeterre-sur-Dronne is set on a hillside above the river. The main point of interest is the amazing Église Monolithe – a 12<sup>th</sup> century church that was carved out of the soft rock of the cliff face.

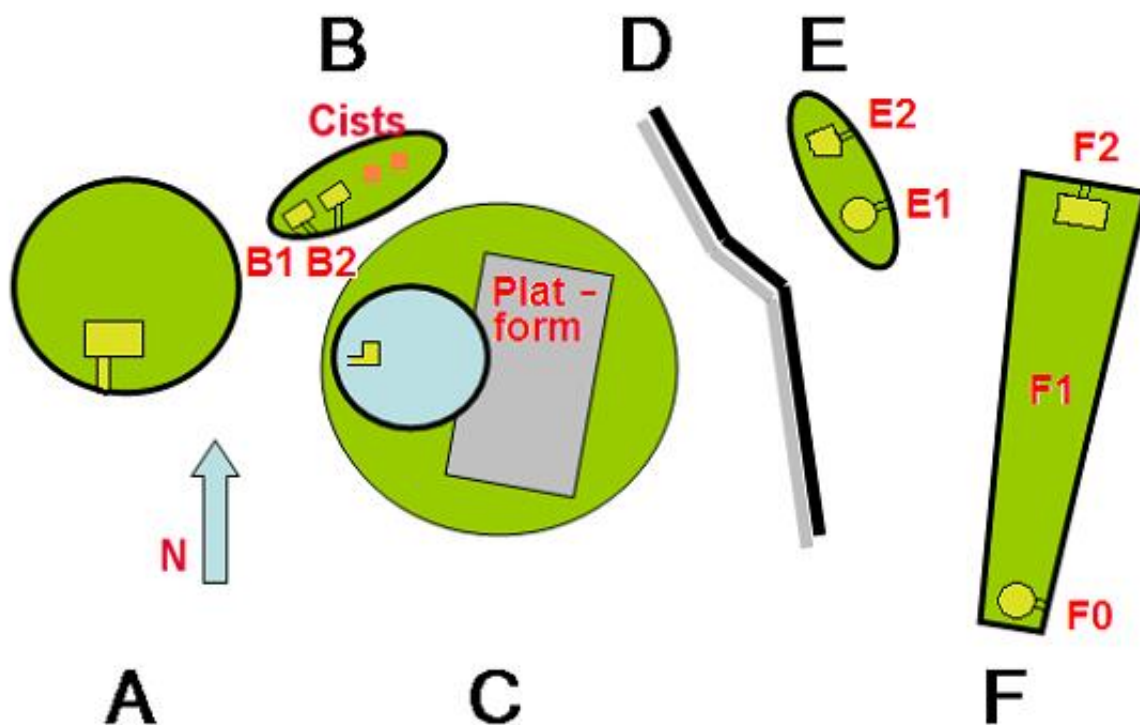
The church is not the earliest Christian activity here – there are a number of 6<sup>th</sup> century rock-cut tombs as well.



## Tumulus de Bougon

The Tumulus de Bougon is a group of five Neolithic monuments. Their discovery in 1840 raised great scientific interest. To protect the monuments, the site was acquired by the department of Deux-Sèvres in 1873. Excavations resumed in the late 1960s. The oldest structures of this prehistoric monument date to 4,800 BC.

In 1993 the Bougon Museum was opened. The exhibition is focused on prehistory in general and the Neolithic in particular. It includes the excavated material from the site, but also replicas of a room in the Neolithic settlement of Catalhoyuk (Turkey) and of the passage tomb art from Gavrinis (Brittany).



**Tumulus A** is a stepped mound, erected in the early 4th millennium BC, has a diameter of 42 m and a maximum height of 5 m. Its large rectangular chamber (7.8 x 5 m, 2.25 m high) lies south of its centre.

**Tumulus B** is a long mound, 36 m long and 8 m wide. It has four chambers. Two of them are very small cists, with no access passage. The mound's west part has two larger rectangular chambers, each accessible via a passage from the south.

**Tumulus C** This circular earthen mound with a diameter of 57 m and a height of 5 m is a complex structure. It reached its final shape through several phases. The mound covers two earlier monuments: a rectangular platform and a smaller circular mound.

**Structure D** is a 35m long and 2 m tall drystone wall which subdivides the Bougon complex in two zones, separating Tumuli E and F from the rest of the site. Several finds, including a piece of wood, proved the Neolithic date of this feature, unparalleled among the megalithic monuments of France.

**Tumulus E** This doubly stepped mound, 22m long and 10 m wide, has two chambers accessible by near-central passages from the east. Originally, the chambers were contained in separate circular mounds.

**Tumulus F** This trapezoidal long mound, 72 m long and 12 to 16 m wide, is the largest monument of the Bougon complex. Its west end abutted a pit that has been filled in later history. The pit was the source of the material of which the mound (originally 3 m high) was built. The mound contains two chambers (F0 and F2), one at each end. Between them are seven different chamberless structures (F1).

## Niort



Following Henry II's marriage to Eleanor of Aquitaine in 1152, the English Crown controlled most of western France. Henry needed a secure base from which to maintain links with England.

He chose Niort, which lay on the banks of the Sèvre, and was strategically placed as a site which Henry could fortify and maintain a garrison and supplies of personnel and weapons.

All that remains today of the **Chateau de Niort** is what is usually referred to as the Donjon de Niort – two square towers linked by a 15<sup>th</sup> century building. The building is now a museum.

## Abbaye de Maillezais

The Benedictine Abbaye de Maillezais was founded c. 989 by Gauzbert, Abbot of St-Julien de Tours, at the request of William IV, Duke of Aquitaine, and his wife Emma.

In 1317 Pope John XXII created the Bishopric of Maillezais. The writer and humanist, Rabelais, was a Franciscan at Fontenay-le-Comte and a monk in the monastery of Maillezais and was honoured with the friendship of Geoffroy d'Estissac (1518-43), Bishop of Maillezais.



In 1631 Urban VIII, with a view to a more active struggle against Protestantism, transferred the residence of the Bishop of Maillezais to Fontenay-le-Comte; in 1648 the see itself was suppressed by Pope Innocent X and its territory annexed to the Aunis district and the Isle of Ré, both of which had been detached from the Diocese of Saintes in order to form that of La Rochelle.

## Aulnay

Melle, Aulnay and St Jean d'Angely are stages on the *Via Turonensis* between Poitiers and Saintes. Owing to the importance of the route, the churches in these places are of the highest quality with doorways and capitals containing some of the best sculpture in the area.

**The beautiful church of St-Pierre in Aulnay** is a World Heritage site. The central portal on the West façade was once surmounted by the equestrian statue of Constantine. It has been described as “a magnificent illustration of the *sermon saintongeais*”. It depicts the labours of the twelve months, the parable of the wise and foolish Virgins, the battle between Vice and Virtue and Angels Adoring the Lamb.



The South portal is the jewel of the church. It is chiefly remarkable for its four ornate archivolts representing the Roman Bestiary, Elders of the Apocalypse, Apostles and Prophets and 6 interweaving mythological creatures.

The chevet has many attractive sculpted modillions while the apse window pillars have a carved motif symbolising the ‘Scala Salutis’ - the Ladder of Salvation.

## St-Jean-d'Angely



**The Royal Abbey of St-Jean-d'Angely** was founded in the 9<sup>th</sup> century to house a relic of St John the Baptist. Because of repeated destruction, the abbey was rebuilt in the 14<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. It survives today as a ruin.

Since 1989, this Royal Abbey has been the home of the European Cultural Centre Santiago de Compostella.

## Melle

Melle boasts three medieval churches: St-Hilaire; St-Pierre and St-Savinien. The most important of these was St-Hilaire, which was a dependency of the Abbey of St-Jean-d'Angely. The church dates from c. 1090 with subsequent work of c. 1150 and contains a wealth of sculpture, including the celebrated “Cavalier de Melle” over the north door.

Melle was also important for its medieval royal silver mines – the “Mines d'argent des Rois francs” which were of great importance during the Carolingian period.



## Brouage

Brouage was founded in 1555 by Jacques de Pons on the Bay of Biscay facing the Atlantic Ocean. Its economy was based on salt and access to the sea.

The town was fortified between 1630 and 1640 by Cardinal Richelieu as a Catholic bastion in order to fight against the neighbouring Protestant town of La Rochelle.



In 1685 Vauban was ordered to review the fortifications in order to put them onto an adequate war footing, together with the task of fighting the endless silting.

Gradually the harbour silted up in the last part of the 17th century, leaving the town stranded and useless as a port. It fell into ruin.

## Châtelleraut



The town of Châtelleraut was an important stronghold on the northern marsh of Poitou, established by the Count of Poitiers to secure his borders in the early 10th century. The count's local representative, the Vicomte de Châtelleraut was established as a hereditary appointment by the time of Airaud who was probably a kinsman of the counts of Auvergne and dukes of Aquitaine; his heirs were *vicomtes* (viscounts) until the mid-11th century.

The Église St-Jacques is a priory church of 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries with a 19<sup>th</sup> century façade. It houses an important 17<sup>th</sup> century wooden polychrome statue of St-Jacques.