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Achaeological site of St Peter's Cathedral, Geneva
Europa Nostra Prize

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The archaeological site of St Peter's Cathedral (Geneva) among the winners of the "European Union Prize for Cultural Heritage - Europa Nostra"

Geneva, 16 May 2008 – **The archaeological site of St Peter's Cathedral is to receive a medal in the "Conservation" category of the prestigious "European Union Prize for Cultural Heritage" awarded by the European Federation Europa Nostra. Recognized for the quality of the excavations it has conducted over more than 30 years, the archaeological site is also congratulated for the important museographic improvements achieved during its new extension, open to the public since 2006.**

One Single Swiss Award Winner

The organizations recognized by the "European Union Prize for Cultural Heritage" meet the highest quality standards in the area of the conservation of heritage, architecture, urban and rural planning.

This year, not less than **6 prizes and 21 medals** were awarded to institutions in 15 European countries. The archaeological site of St Peter's Cathedral was the only Swiss institution to receive a distinction in 2008.

Official Ceremony in Great Britain

An official ceremony to present the awards to the winners will take place on **12 June 2008**, at Durham Cathedral in **Great Britain**.

Guillaume Fatio, president of the Foundation of the Keys of St Peter, and Jean Terrier, cantonal archaeologist, will receive the medal in the name of all the professionals who took part in the renovation of the archaeological site of St Peter's Cathedral.

The European Union Prize for Cultural Heritage - Europa Nostra

This award was launched jointly in 2002 by the European Commission and Europa Nostra. The European Federation of cultural heritage and Europa Nostra work to preserve and display cultural heritage. It fulfils the role of representative among international bodies, in particular the European Union, Council of Europe and UNESCO. Europa Nostra's mission is to reward exceptional initiatives on behalf of Europe's cultural heritage; the restoration of monuments or sites, urban or rural restructuring, including the maintenance of prestigious art collections or scientific research projects.

The Archaeological Site of St Peter's Cathedral, a European asset

In 2006, after 30 years of excavation, the archaeological site of St Peter's Cathedral inaugurated the new extension of its research facilities and an innovative, decidedly modern museography. This huge learning area is once again available to the public and enables visitors to familiarize themselves with Geneva's history, while situating it in the wider context of the origins of our civilization. Audiovisual means, films with synthetic images and the site's museography relies on all the recent advances in technology to give back to the public the spirit of the original site. The archaeological site of St Peter's Cathedral undeniably constitutes a world benchmark in matters of archaeology. Open to the public since 1986, it is one of the largest areas in Europe devoted to religious remains of the Middle Ages. Underneath St Peter's Cathedral lie the remains of the churches that preceded it, the oldest of which goes back to the IVth century. In the basement of St Peter's, there are also some pre-Christian remains of the occupation of this sector of the town built on the hill: wells, a wheat processing area, a cultural building, and an allobroge tomb. Numerous remains of old Geneva have survived, despite the continuous occupation of the site for over 2000 years.

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The new exhibition space: an ambitious undertaking

By Guillaume Fatio, chairman of the Clefs de St-Pierre Foundation

Between the beginning of the excavations under the Cathedral in 1976 and the inauguration of the second and final extension of the archaeological site of Saint-Pierre Cathedral, thirty years have passed. Thirty years: in other words, a whole generation, during which our world has changed profoundly.

On the level of archaeological and historical knowledge, the exploration of the area below and around the cathedral, under the direction of Charles Bonnet, as well as the many digs carried out elsewhere in the canton of Geneva, have contributed hundreds of new pages on the history of Geneva and the lives of its inhabitants from earliest antiquity. And the new discoveries are far from over: even though the excavation of the cathedral is now finished, researchers still have much to learn from the mass of data they collected over the years.

Secondly, the culture, expectations and understanding of the public have also changed. While previous generations enjoyed a solid education in the classics and relied on the written word for new information, access to knowledge has now been democratised, sometimes to the detriment of the kind of historical, cultural and religious knowledge that used to be taken for granted. At the same time, the audiovisual media have come to play a growing role in informing the public, in particular the younger generation.

These changes have not dimmed public interest in history and museums, on the contrary. As a result, the places where knowledge is communicated have been forced to modernise in order to meet the expectations of a new kind of visitor, who is often more demanding and less patient than his or her predecessors.

Based on this realisation, the directors of the Clefs de Saint-Pierre Foundation decided to take advantage of the conversion of the portion of the archaeological site not yet open to the public to rethink the presentation of the entire site, with the aim of making it more attractive and accessible to contemporary visitors. It is up to them to tell us whether the objective has been met.

As the archaeological site turns a new page and begins a new period, the Clefs de Saint-Pierre Foundation would like to thank all those who since 1976 have contributed to the achievements inaugurated in 2006: the archaeologists, architects, museum designers and other essential contractors, some of whom have been working on the project for the last 30 years; the companies and specialists whose careful work ensured the high quality of the site's fittings; the cantonal, communal and federal authorities who underwrote the restoration of the cathedral and the creation of the underground museum, as well as the generous private donators who allowed the new exhibition concept to see the light of day; and finally, the many individuals who contributed their time, knowledge and resources to bringing the wonders of the archaeological site of Saint-Pierre Cathedral to a new generation of visitors.

Guillaume Fatio

Chairman of the Clefs de St-Pierre Foundation

Information on www.site-archeologique.ch

An Archaeology for Geneva

By Jean Terrier, Cantonal Archaeologist and Curator of the archaeological site

The exceptional vestiges displayed in the archaeological site of Saint-Pierre Cathedral illustrate the birth of our city from its origins in the Celtic period.

However, it was only in the late 4th century, after the promulgation of Christianity as the state religion of the Roman Empire, that the city acquired an impressive string of monuments. During this period, no less than three cathedrals were built, each of which had a distinct function; the centrepiece of this architectural composition was the baptistery, the building where catechumens underwent conversion. The power of the bishop was manifested by the construction of a palace with several reception rooms as well as a private chapel. All these buildings were constantly modified, transformed and rebuilt to satisfy changing liturgical practices or to mark the accession of a new bishop. By the turn of the first millenia, work had commenced on a single cathedral that would replace the earlier churches. This structure was in turn supplanted by the current cathedral, begun in the second half of the 12th century.

This long and complex evolution is best understood by visiting the archaeological site under the cathedral, where a resolutely modern exhibition space, equipped with well thought-out didactic displays at key points along the path of the visit, has been carved out within the vestiges themselves. This unique museum not only showcases the archaeology of Geneva for both a local and international audience, but also serves as a valuable frame of reference for the elaboration of archaeological research policies in the canton of Geneva.

Based on our experiences in the city centre, several village churches have also been explored prior to scheduled restorations. The remains discovered in these rural sanctuaries illustrate the emergence of villages centred around their places of worship, the origins of which sometimes date back to prehistoric times. These excavations invariably arouse intense public interest. During recent open days, for instance, the excavations of the church of Compesières drew around 3500 visitors eager to discover the history of their region. This was a one-time opportunity, however, as it was not possible to create a permanent display of the finds, and the excavations were eventually reburied.

Conversely, in the space under the cathedral, all our archaeological discoveries are on view. We would like to express our deepest gratitude to the many people whose support was essential to the completion of this project, and without whom this archaeological site would simply not exist. We especially thank the employees of the Cantonal Archaeological Department and the specialised workers who patiently dug and sifted in search of even the faintest clues that might enrich our knowledge of the past.

Jean Terrier

Cantonal Archaeologist and Curator of the archaeological site
Information on www.site-archeologique.ch

An ambitious project born of a successful partnership

By Mark Muller, State Councillor of the Canton of Geneva in charge of the Department of Construction and Information Technology

I am delighted to inaugurate the final extension of the archaeological site of Saint-Pierre Cathedral. This museum is ambitious both by its size and by the richness of its message; its aim is to invite visitors to discover the history of Geneva while also connecting it to the wider context of the origins of western civilisation.

We owe the privilege of being able to visit this site to the many people who actively contributed to its genesis. I would like to express my gratitude to them, and especially to the members of the Clefs de Saint-Pierre Foundation, who mobilised a large section of the Geneva population to bring this project to fruition. The completion of this important cultural asset is the result of a remarkably successful partnership between the state – namely the canton of Geneva, the Federal authorities, and the city of Geneva – and the private sector, a partnership that allowed us to collect the funds necessary for this ambitious project.

The outline of Saint-Pierre Cathedral, with its spire and two towers, is a potent image of Geneva that resonated far beyond our borders. If one takes a closer look at the cathedral's architecture, one immediately notices that it experienced several important transformations throughout its history. One level down, standing amongst the remarkable archaeological vestiges under the cathedral, one is amazed to discover that Saint-Pierre Cathedral was preceded by many earlier buildings, which formed the core of the historical city centre perched on the hill.

The dynamism of the men and women who laid the stones of our city over the last two thousand years may come as a surprise to some. The cathedral seems to have been standing here since the dawn of time, but in fact it is merely the final avatar of the many buildings that preceded it. This multiplicity of structures constantly modified the appearance of the historical city centre, yet their functions remained relatively constant. For a politician in charge of a department of construction such as myself, who is responsible for shaping Geneva's future image, the knowledge drawn from these archaeological discoveries provides a valuable frame of reference.

The archaeological site of Saint-Pierre Cathedral illustrates why archaeological research in Geneva has gained an international reputation for excellence; it also demonstrates the dynamism of the discipline within our administration. The opening of this cultural asset to the public shows how archaeology can be incorporated into the life of the city. Not only does this site allow us to explore our roots and visit our past, it also provides us with valuable insights into how we can approach the future.

Finally, I would like to enthusiastically reiterate my thanks to everyone who contributed to this unique project. I hope visitors will come in great numbers to discover the origins and the history of our city in the now considerably larger Espace Saint-Pierre.

Mark Muller

State Councillor of the Canton of Geneva
in charge of the Department of Construction and Information Technology

Staging an archaeological site

By Michel Etter and Johanne Blanchet Dufour, museum designers

The role of the museum designer

What is role of a museum designer hired to design a project like the archaeological site of Saint-Pierre Cathedral?

The “staging” of a space involves a number of challenges and hazards, and requires true passion, a quality the museum designer shares with the archaeologist. Our role begins with the definition, in collaboration with the archaeologist, of a strategy for “knowledge communication” based on practices and approaches that are specific to both disciplines.

Documenting, analysing, inventorying

Our first step as designers was to outline a scenario defining the themes and methods we might use in order to capture the attention of visitors and help them better understand the importance and value of the vestiges on display. Our objective was to breath new life into the remains, no matter how fragmentary, naked and silent, to enable them to tell a story – the story of the men and women who shaped and built them, many centuries ago.

In addition, to enhance the value and promote the interpretation of an archaeological site that is as exceptional as it is complex, we had to create conditions that would be acceptable to visitors: these included: a comfortable, warm atmosphere, a message that flowed well, methods of communication that would be accessible to a majority of visitors and suitable signage.

Imagining for an audience

In order to interpret a site while respecting the spirit of the place, Museum designers can draw on a wide range of tools: they suggest a type of presentation, create auditory and visual atmospheres, and design lighting, didactic displays, showcases and audiovisual presentations.

In the case of the archaeological site of Saint-Pierre Cathedral, certain constraints appeared very early on. In order to meet our objectives – to astonish and seduce visitors, to encourage them to see, understand, and dream – we decided to facilitate the transfer of scientific knowledge by soliciting input from the people who worked on the site. So we asked archaeologists, historians, architects, engineers as well as specialists from a number of disciplines to share their understanding of the site with us.

In May 2005, a thematic mock-up and the installation of the first elements of the new museum design allowed us to test the relevance of the scenario we had come up with. This marked the start of a long series of works, thanks to which the Clefs de Saint-Pierre Foundation and the Cantonal Archaeological Department is now able to welcome the public in a much larger space comprising an entire new section of excavations. This was an opportunity to rethink and modernise other areas of the archaeological site.

Conceiving, building, staging

In the next step, we updated the information provided to visitors to reflect new discoveries made by archaeologists in recent years. Then we defined around twenty attractive themes to be addressed in the redesigned visit. Summarising 30 years of archaeological research (1976–2006) was a difficult, almost impossible exercise. But

encouraging visitors of all ages to reflect on the history of our predecessors and to question our own way of living was a realistic objective.

The buildings which once stood on this site, and the activities which took place there, are evoked in wall panels, artist's renderings and backlit tablets.

Perspectives, large and medium-sized models, as well as aerial photographs allow visitors to situate themselves throughout the path of the visit.

Recent technological advances offered us attractive new options: 3-D simulations and films were used to explain the conclusions of archaeologists' research in a way that is easily understood by a audience of non-specialists.

In order to educate the public about new dimensions of the archaeologist's mission in terms of communication, research and methodology, we opted for documentaries made specifically for the site, which are projected on flat screens and interactive kiosks.

The fact that Geneva is a cosmopolitan city and that many of the visitors to the archaeological site are tourists from abroad justified translating the new audio tour in six languages.

Finally, the lighting design helped create an intimate atmosphere suitable for the religious and sacred nature of the site.

One of our main concerns was to uphold the reputation of a museum which had been in operation for twenty years, so that it would remain a model of excellence for similar projects elsewhere in the world. We hope this new museum design will contribute to a better reading and understanding of the site and allow everyone to appreciate this unique and rich heritage.

The new design could not have been realised without the many synergies between the museum and design teams. Several specialists contributed their know-how to the project, and we thank them sincerely for their help.

Michel Etter and Johanne Blanchet Dufour

Museum designers

THEMATIS SA

www.thematis.ch

www.museum.ch

The expansion of the excavations and recent archaeological discoveries

By Charles Bonnet, former Cantonal archaeologist

What visitors discover when they enter the archaeological site of Saint-Pierre Cathedral is an extraordinary space containing the remains of some of Geneva's oldest monuments. This required the systematic excavation of a large area within and around the cathedral, under the surrounding streets and squares. The government and the public understood the interest of this approach, in which excavations were carried out in parallel with the restoration of medieval buildings.

The earliest remains we have uncovered, dating from the second or first century BC, consist of a square, a temple, an aristocratic house and a potter's workshop. Above this, at the highest point of the hill, was a citadel surrounded by a palisade and moats; this area probably contained another religious building and was used as a refuge when needed. The port that developed at the end of the lake, as well as the bridge over the Rhone, provide further evidence of the development of the town as both a place of passage and a place of exchange.

The path of the visit through the underground site stops by an ancient tomb dating from around 100 BC. We believe it contains the remains of an influential personage, probably an Allobrogian chieftain. This individual was still remembered around 60 or 80 years later, when an earth and wood mausoleum was built over his grave. In rituals carried out during this period, an oval hole was dug in the beaten earth floor in order to reach the head. Next to it, partially burned branches attest to a funeral cult. This cult continued in the following decades with the construction of a large building in which one painted room marked the location of the tomb. A tile and brick pedestal probably served to support an altar or a statue. A fenced terrace built of sand and gravel may have served to preserve the memory of the heroicised former chief.

The temple at the centre of this area could not be entirely excavated because it is located under the baptistery. Nevertheless, we are certain there was such a building, made of wood and mud, from the earliest time of human occupation on this part of the hill. It underwent the same transformations as the buildings associated with the tomb we think belonged to an Allobrogian chief, and it was not until the first century AD that it was rebuilt in stone. A capital and a column found deep under the Maison Mallet (where the International Museum of the Reformation is now located) may be connected to this early Roman temple. From its origins, this religious structure defined an urban centre where the placement of all new buildings was determined by the position of the sanctuary.

During the "Roman Peace" that followed the conquest of Gaul by Julius Cesar, *Genava* became a renowned *vicus*. It is often assumed that the following "dark centuries" put an end to the wealth of the region. In fact, when visiting the archaeological site, one quickly realises that Christianisation allowed the city to flourish. Its religious buildings were grandiose, as were the reception halls and their various annexes.

In recent weeks, we have discovered an exceptional oratory, which helps explain how the governing elite passed from paganism to the new religion. On the north side of the site are significant remains of a residence built on a natural terrace overlooking the port. We know that the owner of the vast residence was a Christian because the first cathedral of Geneva built around 375–380 took over part of his house.

The tomb of this man, or a member of his family who died long before work began on the cathedral, was set up in the choir of the oratory. This building comprised a nave with a barrier destined to mark off an area for ecclesiastics. A second, large tomb was added against the chevet. This valuable oratory was retained during the building of the first

cathedral, whose floor covered the remains of earlier buildings. We believe that these vestiges, dating from around 350 BC, are some of the oldest witnesses to the Christianisation of Northern Europe.

Charles Bonnet

Member of the Institute

Former Cantonal Archaeologist

Scientific counsellor for the extension of the excavations

The archaeological site in numbers

• Start of excavations	1976
• Most recent excavation campaign	1996-2006
• Discovery of the Allobrogian tomb	2000
• Surface of the most recent excavation	1'060 m ²
• Total surface of the site	3'300 m ²
• Volume	approx. 13'000 m ³
• Length of the visit	approx. 400 m
• Duration of the visit	45 min to 1h15
• Audiovisuals	2 documentary films 2 simulation of films in 3-D Audio tour
• Didactic displays	6 models, 12 wall panels and 18 backlit tablets
• New audio tour	6 languages (French, German, English, Italian, Spanish, Japanese) and 18 information points
• Number of visitors per year (Statistics 2007)	20'000 visitors
• Espace Saint-Pierre	3 sites in one : Saint-Pierre Cathedral and towers Archaeological Site of Saint-Pierre Cathedral International Museum of the Reformation
• Cost of the new museum design and fittings	3.4 million Swiss francs

GENERAL INFORMATION

Opening hours: Tuesday to Sunday	from 10 am to 5pm
• Adults	CHF 8.-
• Children (7-16), pensioners, invalids, unemployed, students and apprentices (16-25)	CHF 4.-
• Groups of 15 or more	CHF 4.-
• Guided tours available on reservation	

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