

The Forest of Scissy, did it exist?

Legends relating the existence of forests and settlements engulfed after the Roman Conquest are recounted in numerous places along the NW coast of Europe. That of the Forest of Scissy, which would have surrounded Mont. St Michel in Gallo-Roman times and been destroyed by an exceptional tide in 709AD, gave rise to very lively controversy during the 19C. It is still told to tourists who visit the Mount and the information (explanation) notice of the Avranches News Sheet (1970) mentions it as a geological truth.

The scientific arguments supporting the legend are on the one hand, the existence of a certain number of records, the Manuscript of Chanoine de St. Aubert dating from the 9C, a map rediscovered at Mount St. Michel in 1714 on which Alderney, Jersey and Chausey were joined to the coast, and on the other hand, the discovery of fossil tree trunks (Les Coïrons) in Dol marshland, and some say, in the bay, and supposed traces of Roman roads across the actual intertidal zone. Supporters and critics of the existence of the Scissy Forest have analysed these arguments many times without convincing success. What can be said after numerous drillings done in recent years in the floor of the Bay (of St. Michel)? The cores drilled in the intertidal area by France Electricity for the study of the project for establishing a tidal power station between Cancale, Chausey and Granville have never encountered peaty sediments, only marine, shelly sands. In contrast, near Dol, there exist in the "white marsh", two peaty lenses interstratified with littoral sediments and containing, in particular, the deep lens of tree trunks (Les Coïrons). These peats, which could be the most convincing argument, have provided dates grouped around 5,600 yrs BP or of 3,600 yrs BP (Before Present, 1950), and the last offshore bar dates from the beginning of the historical period (1,320 +/- 60 yrs BP), being between 572-692 of our era.

What happened between 3,400 yrs BP and the present? The existence of a negative oscillation of the sea level (regression) between the end of the Bronze Age (3000 yrs BP) and the Gallo-Roman period is actually acknowledged in Armorica. The maximum of the regression occurred in the Iron Age (2,500 yrs BP; ie 600BC); it was in the order of 5 metres below the present level. But towards 270AD, the sea level was near to the present. This rapid rise, nearly a metre per century, could be appreciated (**a pu être sensible?**) on the human scale and it is not excluded that the settlements situated in the low lying areas, would have been (**aient pû être?**) inundated. The eastern part of the Bay of St. Michel has undergone, between 600BC – 270AD, an important advance of the sea (transgression). The memory of this rise (advance) was passed on orally; each generation amplifying the importance of the destruction, always placing it fairly incorrectly in time (**tout en les situant assez mal dans le temps?**). The popular legends are not just pure imagination. However, it is necessary to recognise that, without doubt, there has never been a forest around Mont St. Michel but only occasionally flooded, grassy marshland and salt marshes during periods of low sea level.

Lardeux, H. 1996. Guide Géologique de Bretagne. 3rd Ed. p.33.
Translated by Dr. R. Nichols, Sept. 2004.