The Ambialet Peninsula

A City of Stone and Water

Petites Cités de Caractère

Heritage Trail

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History of the Peninsula

The history of Ambialet dates back to the first millennium BC, when Celts and later Romans settled here, drawn by the mineral resources and the peninsula's strategic position.

In the Middle Ages, the village was fortified with seven strongholds! At that time, it was the seat of the Viscounty of the Trencavel, rivals to the Counts of Toulouse. During the Albigensian Crusade, Simon de Montfort seized Ambialet, marking a period of conflict and transformation for the region. Four centuries later, the Wars of Religion once again left a deep mark on the area.

At the end of the 19th century, the Tarn valley attracted industrialists, particularly for its hydroelectric potential. Between 1917 and 1923, the Saut du Tarn metallurgical plant built the Ambialet hydroelectric power station to power its electric furnaces and the iron mines of Le Fraysse.

A Remarkable Heritage

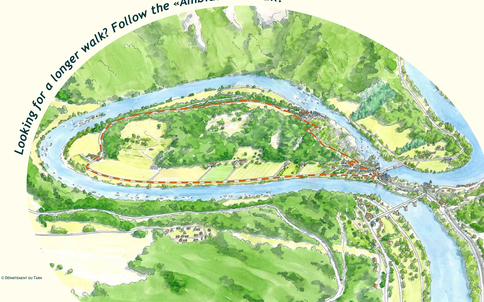
The heritage of the Ambialet peninsula is, first and foremost, natural: the Tarn river forms a 3.5 km loop before doubling back on itself, creating one of the narrowest isthmuses in Europe!

The built heritage bears witness to a rich and varied history: three churches, a priory, a Way of the Cross, several strongholds, a hydroelectric power station and its dam, and breathtaking viewpoints... Without a doubt, Ambialet will surprise you!

The Village Today

Today, Ambialet is a picturesque Petite Cité de Caractère® (Small Town of Character), offering visitors a wide variety of activities. The village invites you to stroll through its streets, while outdoor enthusiasts can explore hiking trails or take to the Tarn river for paddleboarding and canoeing.

The village also hosts cultural events, such as art exhibitions from June to September in Saint-Gilles Church, not to mention the Son et Lumière (sound and light show) in the summer!



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The Almière gate and the floods

The Almière gate marks one of the most critical crossing points of the peninsula. Its name is derived from the Saut de l'Almière (or l'Hormière), an ancient hydraulic system carved directly into the rock to channel water and power a mill.

This passage also served as a fortification during periods of high water. It allowed authorities to restrict access to the most vulnerable areas of the lower village, highlighting the deep connection between the village's layout and the site's unique geology.

The floods of the Tarn (from the Celtic *Taran*, meaning *torrent*) are known locally as Tarnades, and they have profoundly shaped the history of Ambialet. The exceptional configuration of the river's meander concentrates the water during heavy rainfall, occasionally exposing the isthmus and the lower districts to flooding.

Several flood markers stand as a testament to these spectacular events. Today, the Almière Gate can be closed in the event of an alert, but the risk remains very real, as evidenced by recent floods.

If the gate is open, feel free to walk through for a stroll along the reservoir to admire the village from the opposite bank!

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Saint-Gilles church

Despite its entrance being tucked away at the bend of a narrow lane, Saint-Gilles Church holds a unique place in the landscape of Ambialet. Perched against the rock that bears its name, it overlooks the Tarn and the lower town, marking the gateway to the peninsula. Built in the 11th century in a sober and robust Romanesque style, it served as the village parish church for centuries.

The medieval builders knew how to take advantage of a particularly constrained site: the church is built of local schist and adapts closely to the rock, which is thus integrated into the walls. Its bell tower is perched on a platform overhanging the building, established on the ruins of an older fort.

The strategic situation of the church made it both a place of worship and a major landmark in the landscape. It was destroyed and set on fire several times, during the Albigensian Crusade, then during the Wars of Religion. Restored at the end of the 20th century and deconsecrated, it now hosts exhibitions and events from June to September, offering a new use for this place steeped in history.

Link to the exhibition program

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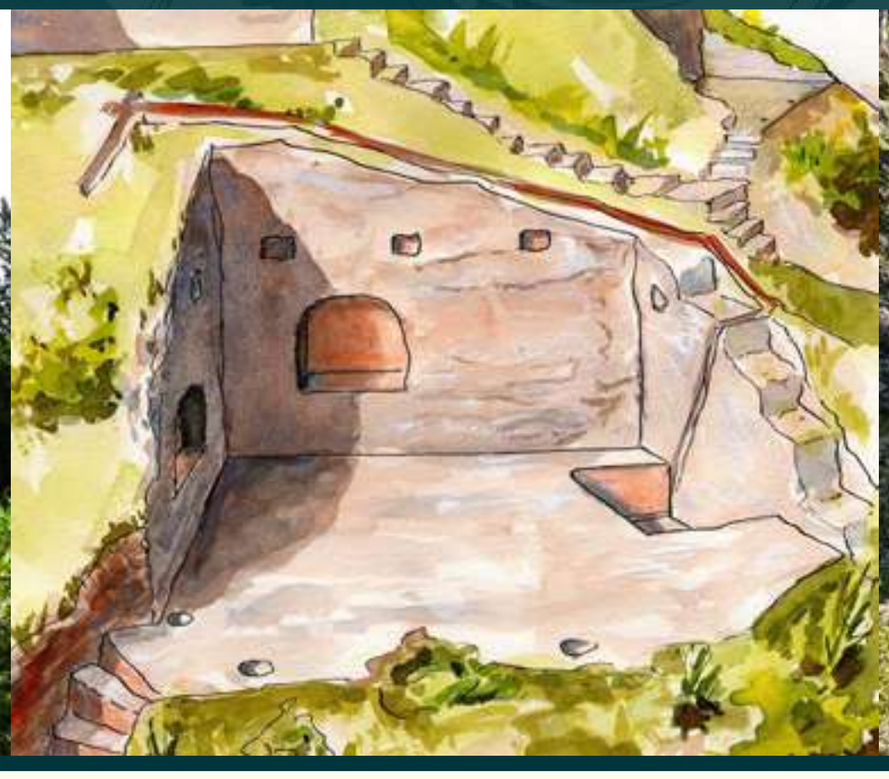
Roc Saint-Jean and the rock-cut dwellings

During your walk, you may notice strange geometric shapes carved into the rock… These are the traces of the *cases-encoches*, semi-troglodytic dwellings!



Iron and copper mines were exploited as early as the Gallic era and throughout the Middle Ages, creating the wealth of Ambialet. To benefit from the protection of the rock during the insecurity of the Early Middle Ages, miners used the strength of their arms and quarrying picks to carve excavations into the stone several meters wide and deep. Around these dwellings, they cut thin channels to direct and collect rainwater. The stones pulled from the rock were then used to build the rest of the habitation.

There are nearly 80 of these rock-cut dwellings in Ambialet!

These excavations, very common in the region, were sometimes repurposed: as storage areas, hideouts for *routiers* (mercenary bandits) during the Hundred Years' War… and even as supports for the Ambialet Stations of the Cross!

Today, you still walk upon the steps carved into the rock that once provided access to the different levels of these dwellings.

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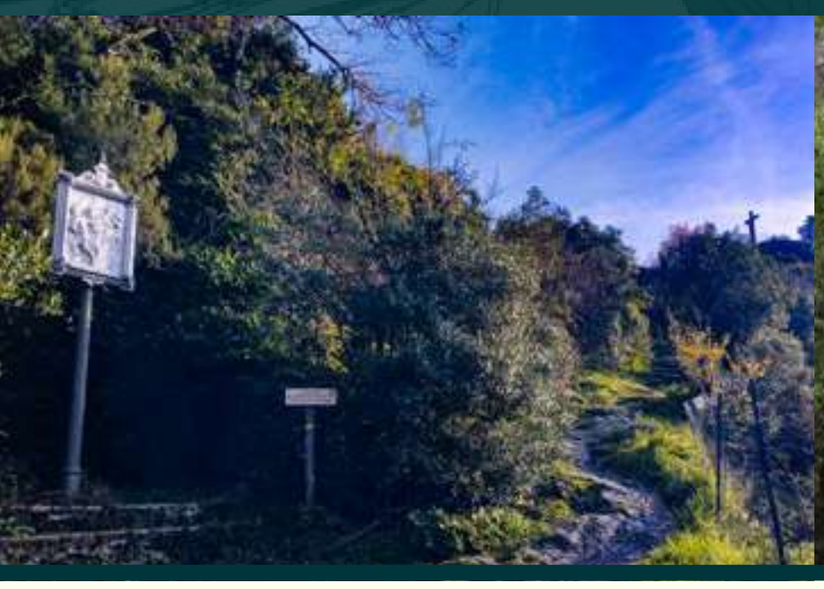
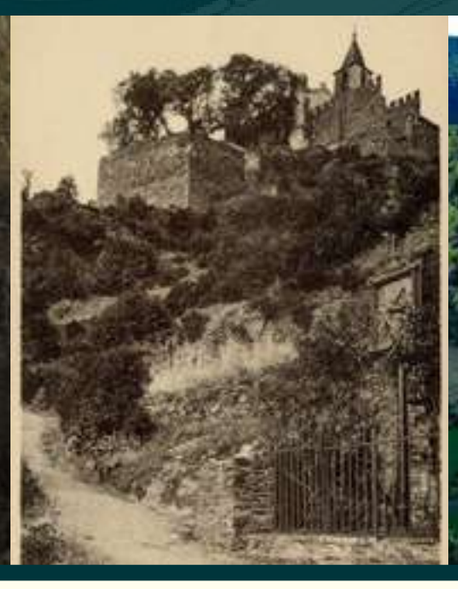
The stations of the Cross

The Stations of the Cross, or *Via Crucis*, originated in Jerusalem during the Good Friday liturgy. For a long time, they were a common rite practiced by all Christians, whether Catholic or Orthodox.





The Franciscans, present in Jerusalem as early as 1220 according to the will of Saint Francis of Assisi, transposed the seven ritual stations into their churches in the Holy Land, and then progressively throughout Italy. In 1731, Pope Clement XII permitted the erection of the Stations of the Cross in any place of worship, provided they were created by a Franciscan. In the 19th century, the Stations of the Cross spread throughout France.

This specific path was created and inaugurated by the Franciscans on Friday, August 21, 1874. That day, 50 priests participated and 10 parishes were present, carrying their banners. The 14 stations are spread along the steep path leading to the «Arbre de l'Oder» (the Oder Tree). A fifteenth station, which has since disappeared, was once located there.

Abbé Bartimée described it as follows in October 1874: «The Oder Tree is enclosed by a gate in a small oratory dedicated to Our Lady of Pity. A magnificent bronze marks the spot. Our Lord is laid out dead upon the knees of the Blessed Virgin. The angel of sorrow, prostrate at his feet, takes his hand with love and mingles his tears with those of the Mother of Sorrows. (...) This is the fifteenth station.»

In the Chapel of Notre-Dame de l'Oder, the current Stations of the Cross were sculpted by Pierre Dutheil de Bellegarde in September 2010, at the request of Father Jacques Albert, who was the Franciscan guardian at the time.

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The Oder tree

This broad-leaved Phillyrea (Phillyrea latifolia) is locally named *Oder*, an appellation derived from the Occitan Laudre or Lauder.

According to a more than plausible legend, this tree was brought back from the Holy Land by a knight returning from the Crusades in the 12th century. Planted near the priory of Notre-Dame de la Volte -meaning «the Loop» formed by the river- the tree eventually gave its name to the chapel, which over the centuries became Notre-Dame de l'Oder.

This Phillyrea, usually modest in size, has exceptionally developed into a remarkable tree, believed to be nearly 800 years old.

In 2013, a storm damaged part of its foliage, of which only 25% remains today. A botanical curiosity and a living symbol of heritage, the Oder tree embodies the deep connection in Ambialet between nature, beliefs, and local history. A specific conservation plan has been put in place to ensure its preservation. The felled section was used to craft the altar and the ambo (lectern) in the chapel's oratory.

We thank you for taking great care of this tree, which is nearly 800 years old. Please do not harm it; do not cut its branches or the new shoots at its base, as it nourishes itself through its leaves!

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The formation of the Ambialet peninsula

The Ambialet peninsula is a natural masterpiece created by the patient force of the Tarn. Over millennia, the water has carved out a vast meander 3.5 kilometers long, almost closing in on itself to form a spectacular loop around a thin strip of land. At its narrowest point, called the isthmus, the two banks of the Tarn come within twelve meters of each other, a record for thinness!

This unique formation is the result of a dual natural phenomenon: erosion and sedimentation. The river's rapid current progressively wears away the outer banks of the loop, while sediments carried by the water accumulate on the inner banks, where the current is calmer. Little by little, this slow and steady action sculpted the peninsula that can be admired today.

Its dominant position surrounded by water, combined with a subsoil rich in metals, made Ambialet a strategic site that has been occupied since Prehistory. During the Gallo-Roman period and the Middle Ages, numerous galleries were dug to follow veins of iron, copper, zinc, and lead ore.

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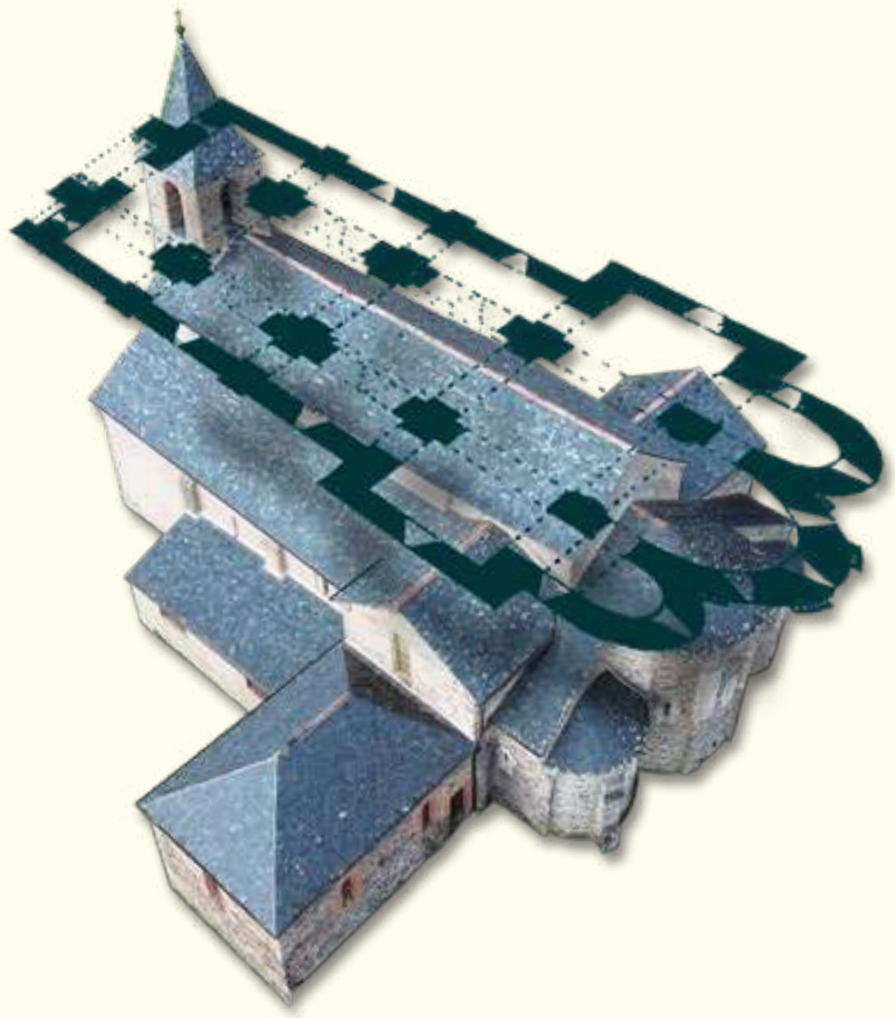
The exterior of the Notre-Dame de l'Oder chapel

Formerly named Notre-Dame de la Volte, the church perched at an altitude of 295 m was then attached to a small monastery. In 1057, the Viscount of Albi donated it to Benedictine monks under the authority of the Saint-Victor Abbey in Marseille. They expanded the complex and occupied the monastery for five centuries.

Built of local schist, the church features a sober and harmonious Romanesque architecture, with a Latin cross plan composed of three naves leading toward the choir and its apses. The portal is particularly remarkable, with elements finely sculpted with various motifs: a bird, a pine cone, an archer, scrolls, and palmettes…



After the Viscountcy of Ambialet was annexed to the Kingdom of France, the monastery gradually diminished in importance and was finally abandoned by the Benedictine monks during the French Revolution. The priory's assets then passed to the commune of Ambialet, and the chapel continued to deteriorate until the bell tower collapsed in 1845!

The priory and its chapel were reborn with their purchase by Father Charles-Henry Clausade and the installation of the Third Order Regular of St. Francis, which he revived in 1864 in Ambialet. The Franciscan brothers restored and expanded all the buildings during the 19th century and the 1960s. The church was classified as a Historical Monument in 1886.

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The Interior of the Notre-Dame de l'Oder Chapel

The interior of the chapel is now characterized by great sobriety: the barrel-vaulted central nave is supported by massive pillars 1.60 m wide, without ornamentation. The uniqueness of the side aisles lies in their half-barrel vaults, which act as buttresses to stabilize the main nave. The stone of the walls was stripped bare in 1965, revealing an edifice of great simplicity, almost Cistercian in style.

The church houses a polychrome wooden statue of the Virgin known as Notre-Dame de l'Oder, dating from the 17th century, to whom the chapel is dedicated. This sculpture was damaged during the Revolution and then hidden for many years. In the 19th century, the Franciscans restored it, and the Sisters of the Carmel of Toulouse repainted it. A new restoration in the 1980s reattached certain pieces, some of which were strangely adjusted—notably the right arm of the Christ Child, which should be blessing the faithful. It was dusted and restored once again in 2022.

The priory also possesses a magnificent 12th century censer made of copper, as well as a 15th century reliquary of Saint Francis of Assisi, both classified as Historical Monuments. The censer represents a superposition of buildings housing chimeras and other winged dragons, the whole being finely chiseled. These remarkable objects are kept today in a location ensuring their protection and preservation.

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The Priory

The Priory of Ambialet was built in the 11th century by the Benedictine monks of Saint-Victor de Marseille, on the foundations of a modest, older monastery. They developed and occupied the site until the Revolution, which reached as far as the Ambialadès region.

Having fallen into ruin during the Revolution, only a few elements of the Benedictine priory have survived to the present day, notably the base of the 14th-century tower and the Romanesque vaulted chapter house, which later became a refectory.

In the 19th century, the priory underwent a true reconstruction under the impetus of Abbé de Clausade, in order to establish the novitiate of the Third Order Regular of St. Francis, which he had just revived. Driven by the Franciscans, a second campaign of expansion works in the 20th century allowed for the arrival of many students, but the establishment closed its doors in the 1960s.

From 1866 to the 1990s, the Franciscan priory welcomed thousands of young people on retreats. It was then managed by the Brothers of Saint John from 1993 to the early 2000s, and subsequently by an American Franciscan university until 2023. Far from being a monument frozen in the past, the priory continues to live and write its history every day.

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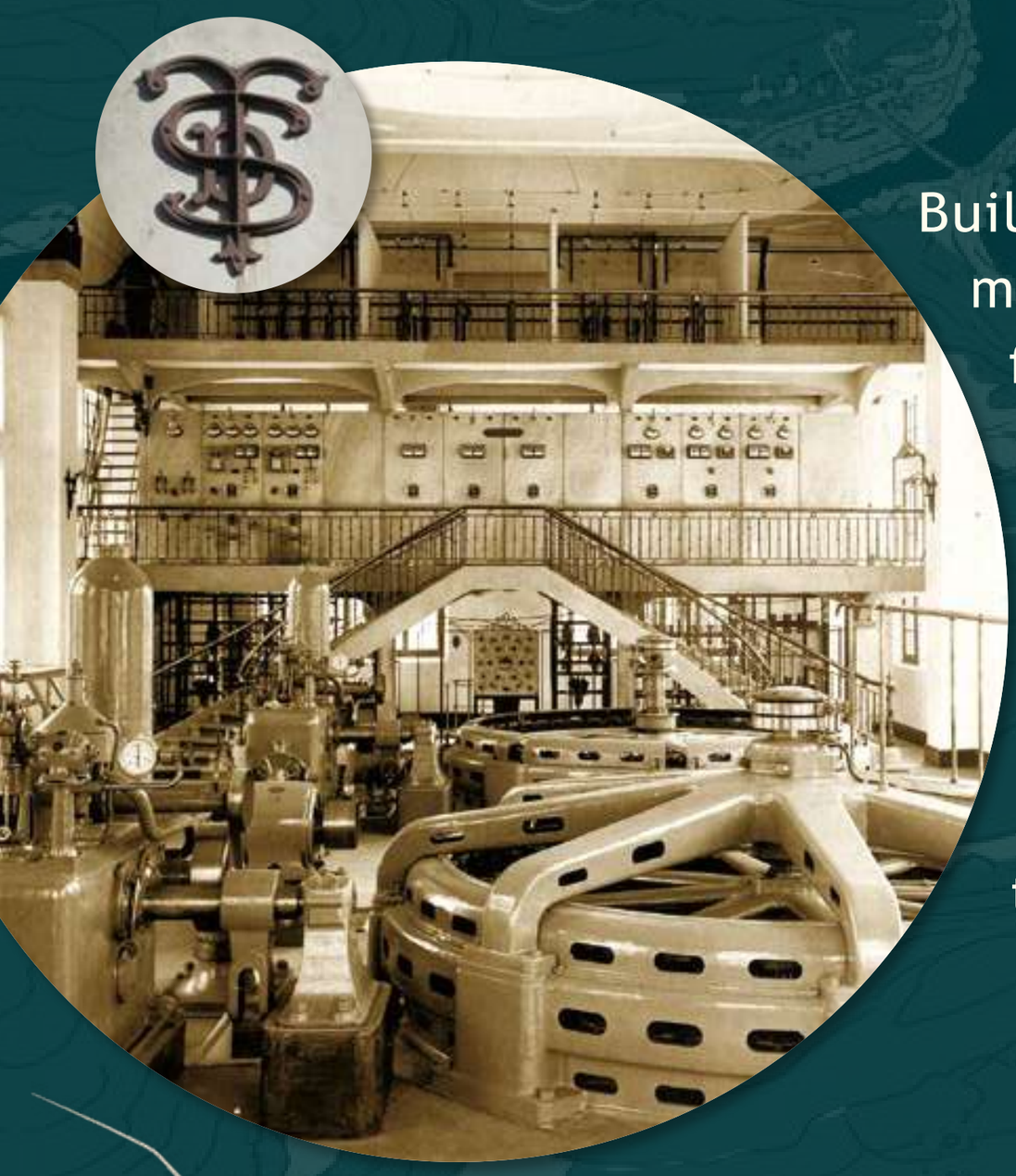
The Hydroelectric power station

The natural configuration of the Ambialet isthmus encouraged the significant use of hydraulic power from a very early stage. As early as 1291, the monks of the Oder Priory bored a hole through the rock to power a mill.

At the beginning of the 19th century, the Decazes family mill, after major modernization work, was used for several activities: producing flour for bread and livestock, wool spinning, a sawmill, an oil mill, and a sharpening workshop.
The mill eventually gave way to the imposing hydroelectric power station visible today. Its architecture symbolizes prosperity and industrial power, drawing inspiration from Renaissance chateaus as well as the Bavarian style, which was in vogue after the 1900 Universal Exhibition.



Built between 1917 and 1923 by the Saut du Tarn metallurgical plant in Saint-Juéry to power its electric furnaces and the iron mines of Le Fraysse, it was later modernized in 1961 by the Forges et Ateliers du Creusot, increasing its capacity (to over 2 MW).

Until 1990, production was monitored from the Saut du Tarn Plant No. 1, which has now become the Saut du Tarn Museum. Since 1970, EDF has taken over and ensures its control and operation.

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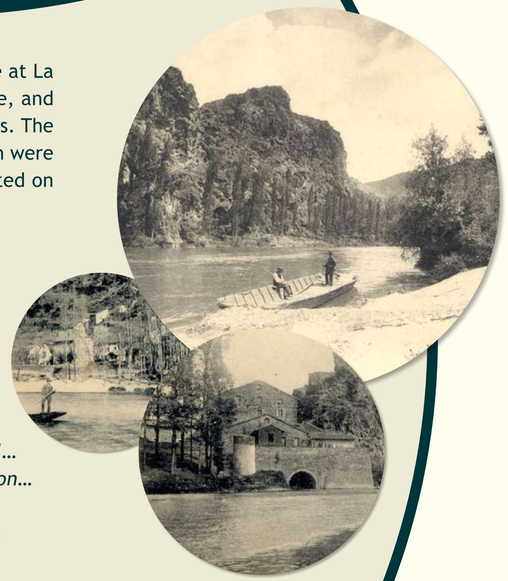
The Bridge over the Tarn

In our daily travels, we cross bridges and other engineering structures naturally, as if they were simply part of the landscape. Today, it is difficult to imagine the human and technical adventure such a structure represented at the dawn of the 20th century, and the upheaval it brought to the daily lives of the inhabitants!

Before the Bridge

To cross the river, two ferries were available: one at La Moulinquié, connecting Ambialet and Saint-Cirgue, and the other at Candou, between Ambialet and Courris. The ferries were attached to a cable, the ends of which were fixed to large stone pillars called cabrelles, located on either side of the river.



The ferryman… he was mostly looking to line his pockets. To cross, people would call out to him: «Mathiou, bèni mé quèré!» (Mathieu, come get me!)
But Mathieu didn't always come on the first call… he wasn't too keen on crossing for just one person… it cost us two sous… but I'm talking about 1898…

Gustave DAURES, born in 1887, *Mémoire du Saut du Tarn N°9*

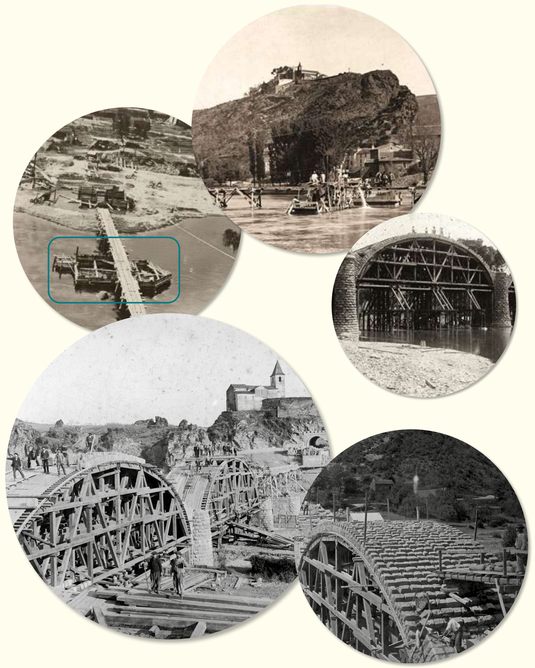
The Construction of the Bridge

In 1897, the General Councilor Gustave de Lapanouse secured the vote for the construction of the Ambialet Bridge. Aimé Espérou, an engineer from the Ponts et Chaussées (Bridges and Roads Department), was tasked with supervising its construction in 1900. The structure was ambitious: composed of five large arches, it would measure 187 meters long and over 20 meters high!

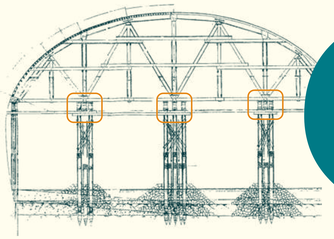
Building a structure with its *feet in the water* is no easy feat. First, it was necessary to install wooden cofferdams in the Tarn at the locations of the future pillars. A boat equipped with a pump could then dry out the area before masonry work began.

Once the bridge piers were built, the installation of the stone arches required a massive volume of wood to build a temporary framework. Even on a stone structure, the role of the carpenter remains essential!

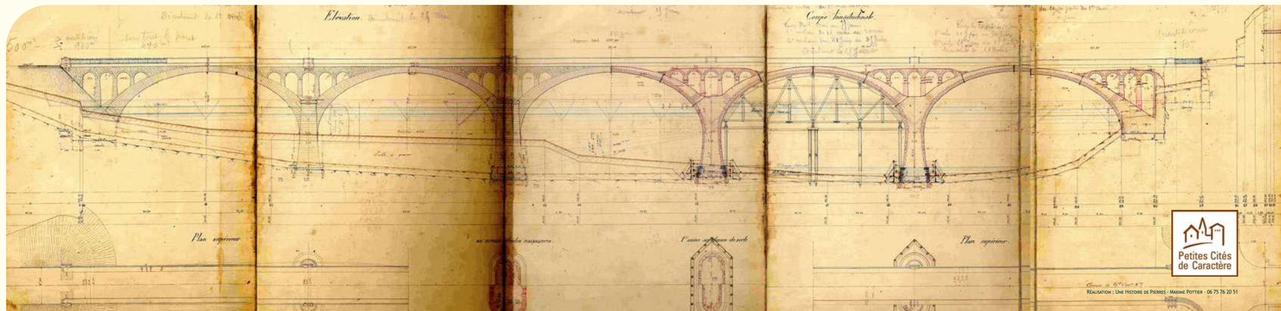
The stone was quarried 80 kilometers from the site, transported on carts, and then moved using an aerial cable. The blocks were carved on-site; the hardness of the stone actually caused delays and cost overruns. Fearing the bridge would not be finished by autumn and might be swept away by floods, Aimé Espérou personally advanced a large sum of money to pay the stonecutters and quarrymen of Saint-Antonin.



The striking of the formwork (de-centering) was a particularly delicate stage: once the stone arch was finished, it had to be put under load to verify its stability. To remove the support, the wooden structures were placed on *sandboxes* that were gradually emptied until the centering was separated from the vault. Silence was required throughout the valley during this stage, so that any cracking sound related to a construction defect could be heard!



This titanic project was completed in 1902. The bridge ended the village's isolation and remains the main access point to Ambialet today.



Notre-Dame de la Capelle church

Formerly the chapel of a castle that has since disappeared, its existence is documented as early as the 13th century. The current building features a 15th century choir, whose keystone displays the coat of arms of the Castelpers family, lords of Ambialet from 1388 to 1762.

Following the Wars of Religion and the ruin of Saint-Gilles Church, it became the seat of a small priory under the name Notre-Dame de La Capelle. The former presbytery is built against the rock and connects to the church via an internal staircase.
In the 19th century, a genuine quarrel concerning the church persisted for two decades between the inhabitants of the upper town (Notre-Dame de La Capelle) and those of the lower town (Saint-Gilles Church). Ultimately, this chapel became the parish church in 1853, at which time it was enlarged and equipped with a bell tower.

To the left of the church, a 14th century cross is the final witness to the former cemetery that once bordered the apse. On one side, the naive form of Christ on the Cross stands out, and on the other, the Crowned Virgin, holding a scepter topped with a fleur-de-lis in one hand and the Child in the other.

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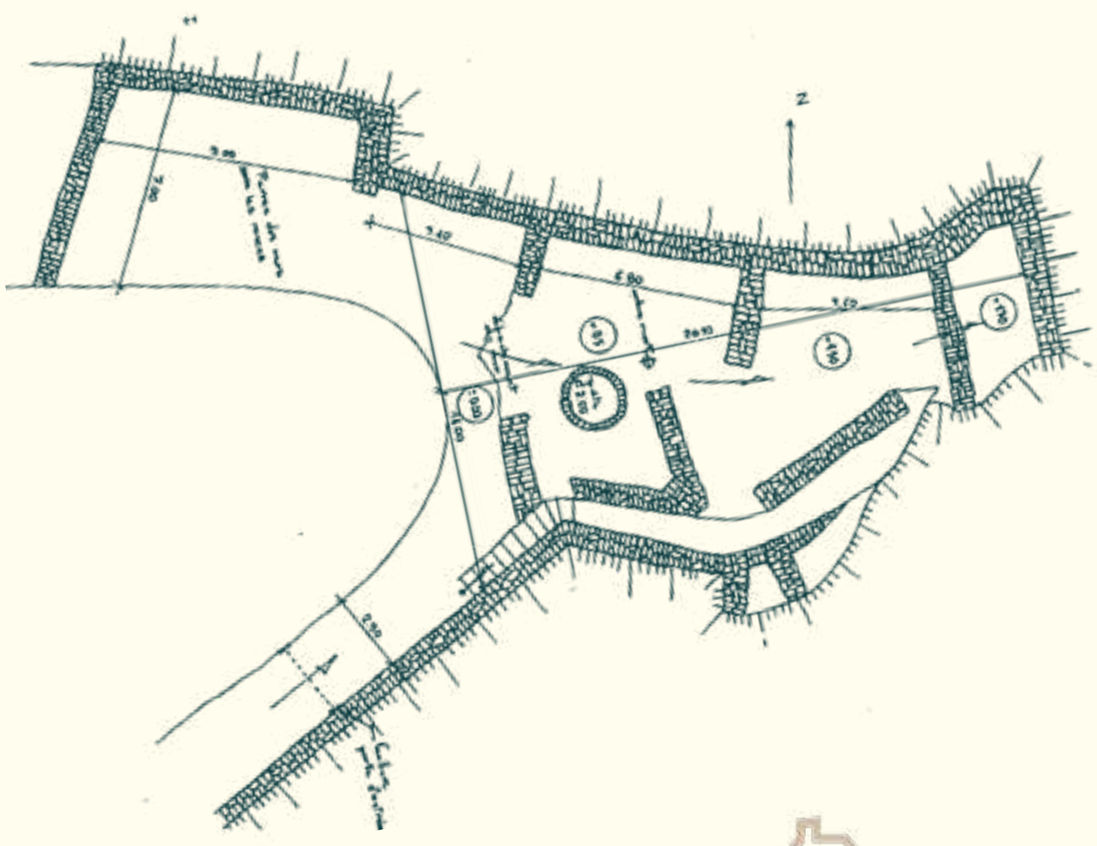
The Castelas Ruins

Facing you, a strategic rocky spur overlooks the entire Ambialet peninsula; it was likely equipped with a stronghold as early as the 10th century. The remains of the castelas still visible today are more recent, dating from between the 13th and 17th centuries.

The site consists of a keep on the upper section -perhaps once equipped with an alarm bell- and a fortified house comprising several vast living quarters, stables, and a well.
Initially a possession of the Trencavel family, the Castelas passed under the authority of Simon de Montfort during the Albigensian Crusade. The latter spent the winter of 1210 in this very secure stronghold, where he met Raymond VI, Count of Toulouse.

The Castelas maintained a military use during the Hundred Years' War, and later during the wars of religion, before being progressively dismantled. Today, the path leading to it is steep, but it offers an extraordinary view of the entire peninsula!



Trencavel comes from the Occitan *Trinca vel* and means *He who slices well*, whether in war or at the table!

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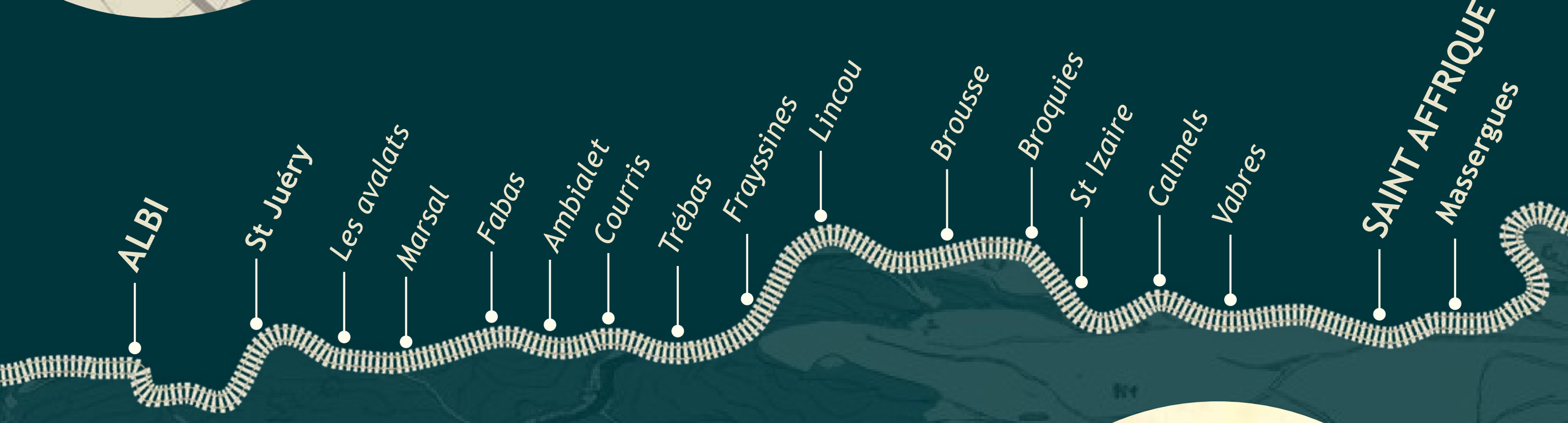
The Railway tunnel

Located slightly below, you can see the entrance to a disused tunnel 680 meters long, a vestige of an ambitious railway development project.



At the end of the 19th century, a study was conducted to link Toulouse to Nîmes via the Tarn valley, Saint-Affrique, the Larzac plateau, and Le Vigan. Despite a rugged profile, this route would have saved significant mileage for slow steam locomotives compared to the detour via Narbonne and the Mediterranean coast.

Work progressed slowly in the Tarn valley, and only a 10 km section entered service in 1904, between Albi and the Saint-Juéry steelworks. Numerous engineering structures were built, but the First World War brought the work to a halt. The project never truly recovered due to other priorities and the development of road transport, leading to its final decommissioning in 1941.

Today, the unfortunate history of an unfinished line has become a superb tourist road, which follows the railway layout almost exactly.

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The Hamlet of la Condomine

The term *condomine* or *condamine* originates from Old Occitan and refers to lands belonging to the lord (in this case, the Lord of Ambialet) that were exempt from taxes or charges. The hamlet is mentioned in 1073 in a donation by the Trencavel family, so its origins are even more distant. It is easy to imagine the appeal of such a site where the Tarn valley widens, particularly on the left bank: the flat alluvial lands are especially well-suited for crops and meadows.

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As the village could not rely on the natural protection of a rocky height, it features a clustered habitat centered around the church and its cemetery, enclosed by a gate. The narrow, loophole-shaped openings of the bell tower suggest that it may have played a role in the community's defense.

Saint-Pierre de la Condomine Church features one of the oldest Romanesque bell towers in the region (11th century) and a Gothic choir with trilobed windows. The nave and the entrance of the church are more recent, likely dating from a period of reconstruction following the fire that damaged the church during the Wars of religion.

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The Hamlet of Bonneval

Nestled at the bottom of the Cézens valley, the architecture of the Notre-Dame de Bonneval church is striking! Built at the end of the 19th century after the collapse of the previous church in 1867, it features a neoclassical style rare in a rural context. Topped with a dome-shaped bell tower, its facade is adorned with a pediment reminiscent of an ancient temple, featuring beautiful engaged Corinthian columns.

The interior of the church houses a remarkable pulpit by the sculptor Pierre-Paul Laclau of Paulinet, who is also known for the decoration of the Lacalm church. The church once housed a statue of Saint Carissima, now kept at the Archbishopric of Albi: an 18th century gilded wood carving, listed as a Historical Monument since 1992.

Perched on a rock, the ruins of Bonneval Castle are still visible in the forest. The complex features large, bright 18th century rooms built upon older elements (lower halls and towers). Destroyed by fire during the Second World War, the building is private and dangerous; it is not open to visitors.

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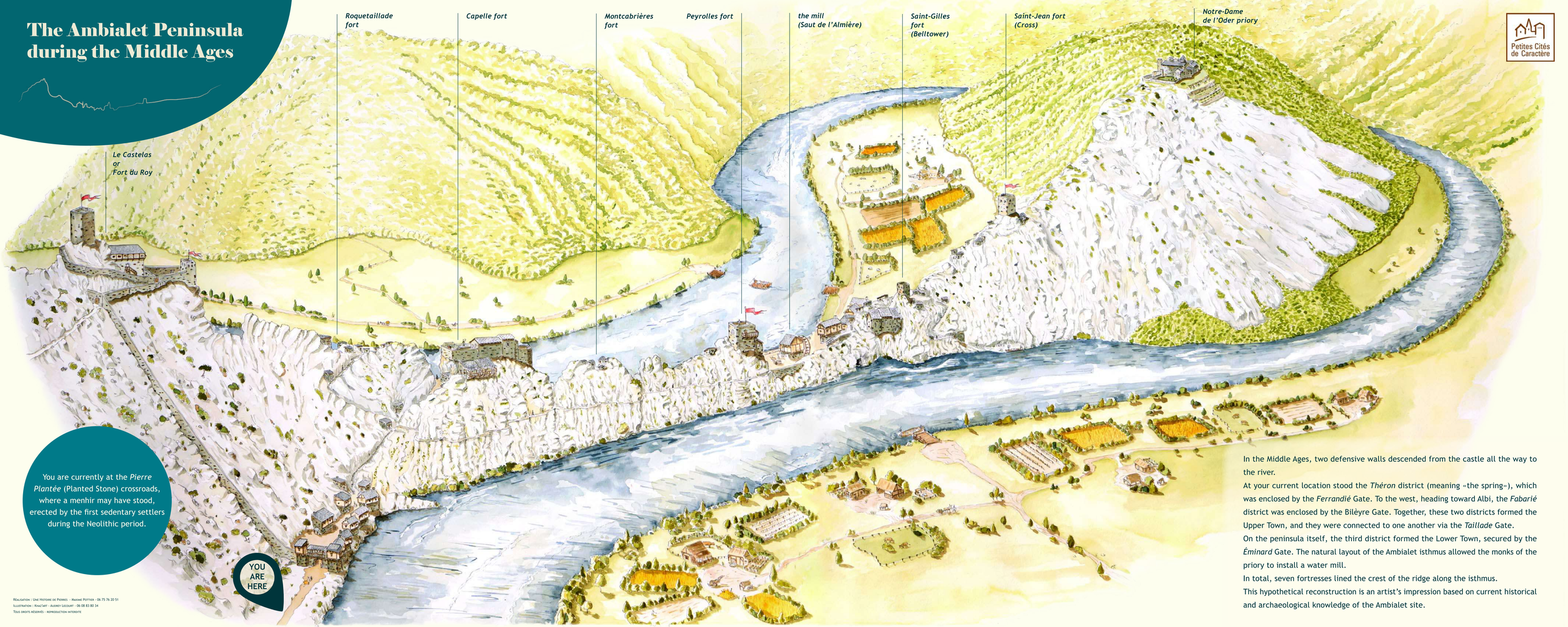
The Ambialet Peninsula during the Middle Ages



You are currently at the *Pierre Plantée* (Planted Stone) crossroads, where a menhir may have stood, erected by the first sedentary settlers during the Neolithic period.

In the Middle Ages, two defensive walls descended from the castle all the way to the river.

At your current location stood the *Théron* district (meaning «the spring»), which was enclosed by the *Ferrandié* Gate. To the west, heading toward Albi, the *Fabarié* district was enclosed by the Bilèyre Gate. Together, these two districts formed the Upper Town, and they were connected to one another via the *Taillade* Gate.

On the peninsula itself, the third district formed the Lower Town, secured by the *Éminard* Gate. The natural layout of the Ambialet isthmus allowed the monks of the priory to install a water mill.

In total, seven fortresses lined the crest of the ridge along the isthmus.

This hypothetical reconstruction is an artist's impression based on current historical and archaeological knowledge of the Ambialet site.

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