Mont Saint-Michel

Mont-Saint-Michel[3] (French pronunciation: [lə mɔ̃ sɛ̃ miʃɛl]; Norman: Mont Saint Miché; English: Saint Michael's Mount) is a tidal island and mainland commune in Normandy, France.

The island[4] lies approximately one kilometre (one-half nautical mile) off France's north-western coast, at the mouth of the Couesnon River near Avranches and is 7 hectares (17 acres) in area. The mainland part of the commune is 393 hectares (971 acres) in area so that the total surface of the commune is 400 hectares (990 acres).[5][6] As of 2019, the island had a population of 29.[7]

The commune's position—on an island just a few hundred metres (yards) from land—made it accessible at low tide to the many pilgrims to its abbey, and defensible as the incoming tide stranded, drove off, or drowned would-be assailants. The island remained unconquered during the Hundred Years' War. A small garrison fended off a full attack by the English in 1433.[8] Louis XI recognised the benefits of its natural defence and turned it into a prison. The abbey was used regularly as a prison during the Ancien Régime.

FORMATION, GEOGRAPHY

Geography

Now a rocky tidal island, the mount occupied dry land in prehistoric times. As sea levels rose, erosion reshaped the coastal landscape, and several outcrops of granite emerged in the bay, having resisted the wear and tear of the ocean better than the surrounding rocks. These

included Lillemer, Mont Dol, Tombelaine (the island just to the north), and Mont Tombe, later called Mont-Saint-Michel.

Mont-Saint-Michel consists of leucogranite which solidified from an underground intrusion of molten magma about 525 million years ago, during the Cambrian period, as one of the younger parts of the Mancellian granitic batholith.[12] Early studies of Mont-Saint-Michel by French geologists sometimes describe the leucogranite of the Mont as "granulite", but this granitic meaning of granulite is now obsolete.[13]

The mount has a circumference of about 960 m (3,150 ft) and its highest point is 92 m (302 ft) above sea level.[14]

Tidal island

The connection between Mont-Saint-Michel and the mainland has changed over the centuries. Previously connected by a tidal causeway uncovered only at low tide, this was converted into a raised causeway in 1879, preventing the tide from scouring the silt around the mount. The coastal flats have been polderised to create pastureland, decreasing the distance between the shore and the island, and the Couesnon river has been canalised, reducing the dispersion of the flow of water. These factors have all encouraged silting-up of the bay.

In June 2006, the French prime minister and regional authorities announced a €200 million project (Projet Mont-Saint-Michel)[15] to build a hydraulic dam using the waters of the Couesnon and the tides to help remove the accumulated silt, and to make Mont-Saint-Michel an island again. The construction of the dam began in 2009. The project included the removal of the causeway and its visitor car park. Since April 2012, the new car park on the mainland has been located 2.5 kilometres (1+1⁄2 mi) from the island. Visitors can walk or use shuttles to cross the causeway.

In July 2014, the new bridge, by architect Dietmar Feichtinger, was opened to the public. The light bridge allows waters to flow freely around the island and improves the efficiency of the now-operational dam. The bridge, which cost €209 million, was opened by President François Hollande.[16]

FROM THE 8TH CENTURY ONWARD

History

Before the construction of the first monastic establishment in the 8th century, the island was called Mont Tombe (Latin: tumba). According to a legend, the archangel Michael appeared in 708 to Aubert of Avranches, the bishop of Avranches, and instructed him to build a church on the rocky islet.[18]

Unable to defend his kingdom against the assaults of the Vikings, the king of the Franks agreed to grant the Cotentin peninsula and the Avranchin, including Mont-Saint-Michel traditionally linked to the city of Avranches, to the Bretons in the Treaty of Compiègne. This marked the beginning of a brief period of Breton possession of the Mont. In fact, these lands and Mont-Saint-Michel were never really included in the duchy of Brittany. Around 989–990 these traditional bishoprics, dependent of the archbishopric of Rouen and that had been left vacant during the time of the Viking raids, regained their bishops.[19]

The mount gained strategic significance again in 933 when William I Longsword annexed the Cotentin Peninsula from the weakened Duchy of Brittany. This made the mount definitively part of Normandy, and is depicted in the Bayeux Tapestry, which commemorates the Norman Conquest. Harold Godwinson is pictured on the tapestry rescuing two Norman knights from the quicksand in the tidal flats during the Breton–Norman war. Norman ducal patronage financed the spectacular Norman architecture of the abbey in subsequent centuries.[citation needed]

TIDES OF MONT SAINT-MICHEL

Tides

The tides vary greatly, at roughly 14 metres (46 ft) between highest and lowest water marks. Popularly nicknamed "St. Michael in peril of the sea" by medieval pilgrims making their way across the flats, the mount can still pose dangers for visitors who avoid the causeway and attempt the hazardous walk across the sands from the neighbouring coast.

Polderisation and occasional flooding have created salt marsh meadows that were found to be ideally suited to grazing sheep. The well-flavoured meat that results from the diet of the sheep in the pré salé (salt meadow) makes agneau de pré-salé (salt meadow or salt marsh lamb) a local specialty that may be found on the menus of restaurants that depend on income from the many visitors to the mount.