THE FIRST CHRISTIANS AT CEMENELUM

By the end of the 3rd century CE, Cemenelum had lost its title of capital of the province of Alpes Maritimae to Eburodunum (Embrun). The town saw a revival in the 5th century CE, with the construction of a cathedral and baptistry within the West Baths. The cathedral’s east-facing choir occupied the frigidarium, while the nave covered the tepidarium and caldaria. Two sacristies appear to have been built on either side of the choir. Built on the site of the praefurnium (furnace), the baptistry was a room containing a ciborium (canopy) on eight pillars, over a hexagonal baptismal font. In the early days of Christianity, baptism was by immersion.

CEMENELUM AFTER THE 5TH CENTURY

There are records of urban life in Cemenelum up to the end of the 7th century CE. In the 6th century CE, it lost its bishopric to Nikaia (Nice). This period marks the beginning of the town’s gradual decline and abandonment. The development of the land for vinegrowing brought changes to the site, in particular with the establishment of a farm in the frigidarium of the North Baths. This building, the last visible remains along with the amphitheatre, was known in local popular culture as the “Temple of Apollo”.

THE AMPHITHEATRE

1st century CE

A structure of modest size, Cemenelum’s amphitheatre was one of the smallest in Gaul: 68 m long and 57 m wide. It was built in two successive campaigns between 70 and 80 CE. Located on the outskirts of the town, it could accommodate more than 4,000 spectators, from the town and surrounding area, who came to watch the gladiatorial contests.

The Cimiez site

The ancient Roman town of Cemenelum was built at the foot of the oppidum (fortified settlement) of the Vedianitii – the present-day hill of Bellanda. Founded in the 1st century BCE, following Emperor Augustus’s campaigns to pacify the Alps, Cemenelum became the capital of the province of Alpes Maritimae. Its strategic position on the Via Julia Augusta and at the starting point of the routes to the Alps enabled it to control the valleys. A military stronghold, for over a century at least three cohorts (infantry corps) were stationed in the town. It owed its growth to an imperial policy implemented by the governors of the province.
The town of Cemenelum covered an area of at least 20 hectares. Our two-hectare archaeological site corresponds principally to the site of the thermal baths. It comprises three distinct areas, named according to their geographical location: the North, East and West Baths. An area of accommodation to the south does not form a direct part of the bath complex.

The baths differ in size and external structure, but their layout is identical. Each consists of a series of four linked rooms, laid out north to south. You could circulate between the frigidarium (cold room), tepidarium ( tepid room), laconicum ( dry hot room at the back of the tepidarium) and two caldaria ( hot rooms).

The town was supplied with water by two aqueducts, the “Falicon” (5 km long) and the “Mouraille” (7 km long). There was also a network of drains for carrying away sewage.

A listed historic site since 1958, this archaeological site has been the focus of many archaeological digs since the 19th century.

THE NORTH BATHS  
Late 1st - early 2nd century CE

The North Baths are the largest. They were formerly richly decorated with mosaics, marble facing and painted plasterwork.

In the Roman world, people frequented the baths on a daily basis. These public establishments were designed for hygiene and pleasure, but the Romans could also play sport or simply socialise there.

Bathers undressed in the apodyterium ( changing room) and took part in different sporting activities in the palestra (gymnasium). Then they would freshen up in the natatio (open-air pool) before beginning their bathing session. The three baths at Cemenelum present the same “reverse course” layout, in which the alignment of the rooms requires bathers to retrace their steps. The baths were also equipped with latrines (toilets), laid out along a bench, with a gutter to carry away the waste water.

THE EAST BATHS  
Late 1st - early 2nd century CE

All that remains of the East Baths is their foundations and the system for heating the rooms and pools, known as a hypocaust, of which there is a fine example. This heating system consisted of a series of stacks of baked clay tiles supporting the floors, so that hot air from a central log fireplace (praefurnium) could circulate in the space beneath. Tubuli (shafts of baked clay) embedded in the walls carried away the smoke.

In the southern section is a lime kiln and a semi-circular room whose purpose has not yet been clearly established.

THE SOUTHERN QUARTER

In the southern section of the site is a magnificent decumanus (east-west-oriented paved street). A domus ( house) and two shops have also been identified.

Roman towns were organised around two axes: the decumanus maximus (east-west) and the cardo maximus (north-south). These two main streets met at the forum, the economic, political and religious centre of the town. Around these two axes, the urban space was divided into insulae (blocks), separated by secondary streets to form districts.

THE WEST BATHS  
Late 3rd century CE

Of more modest dimensions, the West Baths were built in the 3rd century CE. By that time, mixed bathing was no longer acceptable, having been forbidden by Emperor Hadrian (117-138 CE), who had decreed separate bathing times.

The West Baths were transformed into a cathedral complex in the 5th century CE.