The People of Ancient Nice

From Homo Erectus to the Late Roman Period — 400,000 Years of Human Presence

> "The site of Nice has been inhabited since prehistoric times: archaeological evidence from nearby Terra Amata suggests human presence some 400,000 years ago." — Musée Terra Amata, Nice [1)]

The city we live in is among the oldest continuously inhabited places in the whole of Europe. Long before it was Nikaia, before it was Cemenelum, before it was the capital of the County of Nice or the winter destination of Queen Victoria, the hills and shoreline of what is now Nice were home to a succession of peoples whose lives, technologies, and cultures extended over a span so vast that modern history — even ancient Greek and Roman history — forms only the most recent chapter.

This entry traces the human story of our city from its earliest evidence of occupation to the end of the Roman period, introducing each of the four principal peoples who shaped the ancient territory: the prehistoric hunter-gatherers of Terra Amata, the Celto-Ligurian Vediantii and their neighbours, the Greek colonists of Nikaia, and the Romans of Cemenelum. It is a story that can still be read in the ground beneath our feet — and in the museums, ruins, and hillside paths that are within walking distance of our door.



This entry forms part of our wiki's history section and should be read alongside The Architecture of Nice, which covers the visual legacy of the Baroque, Belle Époque, and later periods, and Music and Composers, which documents the more recent cultural life of the city. The sites described here are accessible on Route 4 (Cimiez) and by a short detour from the Sentier du Littoral trailhead.

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A Chronological Overview

Period	People	Key Sites	What Survives
c. 400,000 BC	Homo erectus / Homo heidelbergensis (Terra Amata)	Terra Amata beach camp, Mont Boron	Musée de Préhistoire de Terra Amata; tools, hearth traces, one footprint
c. 200,000 BC	Hunter-gatherers, Lazaret Cave	Grotte du Lazaret, above Coco Beach	Cave site; bone and tool deposits
c. 80,000 BC	Neanderthals	Surrounding grottos of the Nice hills	Cave remains in the Alpes-Maritimes
c. 30,000 BC	Homo sapiens sapiens	Surrounding region	Weapons and tools found in the Nice area
c. 1,000 BC	Ligurians — various tribes	Oppidum on Cimiez Hill; settlement at mouth of Paillon	No standing structures; place names; oppidum traces
c. 350 BC	Greek Massaliotes — founders of Nikaia	Colline du Château; coastal trading colony	Ceramic fragments on Colline du Château; olive and vine cultivation introduced
154 BC	Romans intervene on behalf of Massalia	Coastal region	Historical record (Polybius, Strabo)
14 BC	Romans — founding of Cemenelum	Cimiez Hill	Arena, three thermal bath complexes, streets, residential quarter
1st–3rd c. AD	Gallo-Roman population of Cemenelum	Full city of c. 20 hectares, Cimiez	Ruins at Cimiez; Musée d'Archéologie de Nice-Cimiez
5th c. AD	Paleo-Christian community	Western baths converted to church and baptistery	Ruins of episcopal group in western thermal baths
Late 6th c.	Lombard invasions; city abandoned	—	City ends; Cemenelum site slowly reclaimed

The First People: Terra Amata and Prehistoric Nice

The most ancient human presence in the Nice area is documented at Terra Amata — a site whose name means “Beloved Land” in Italian — on the slopes of Mont Boron, overlooking what was then a beach at the mouth of the Paillon River. The site, originally on a prehistoric beach, contained tools of the Lower Palaeolithic period, dated to about 400,000 BC, as well as traces of some of the earliest domestication of fire in Europe. [2])

The Terra Amata People

The people who camped at Terra Amata were, in all probability, members of either Homo erectus or the closely related Homo heidelbergensis — the species that preceded both Neanderthals and modern humans, and the first to leave Africa for Europe and Asia between 1.3 and 1.8 million years ago. [3] They were approximately 5 feet tall, with low, receding foreheads, thick brow ridges, and a cranial capacity significantly below that of modern humans. They are the most distant ancestors of all of us

who live in this city today.

What they left behind at Terra Amata is remarkable:

- **Oval huts**: Archaeologist Henry de Lumley identified post holes, hearth traces, and limestone blocks arranged to suggest temporary oval-shaped structures 7–15 metres long and 1–6 metres wide — among the earliest evidence of man-made human habitations in Europe. De Lumley believed the inhabitants built the huts of animal skins supported by poles, with a hole in the centre for the smoke to escape. Twenty to forty people could gather in such a shelter. [4)]
- **Controlled fire**: The hearths at Terra Amata — with ashes showing that the inhabitants had domesticated fire — are among the earliest evidence of fire use known in Europe, alongside Menez Dregan in Finistère and Beeches Pit in Suffolk, England.
- **Tools**: Almost 10,000 stone artefacts of the Acheulean tradition were recovered, including choppers, hand-axes, and a distinctive type of stone pick since named the “Pic de Terra Amata.” The tools were made primarily from local limestone cobbles.
- **A footprint**: A single preserved footprint in ancient sediment is the only direct physical evidence of the people themselves — the most intimate possible connection to a human being who stood on this shore 400,000 years ago.
- **Seasonal occupation**: Pollen preserved in sediment layers shows that Terra Amata was occupied in late spring and early summer, suggesting the camp was used repeatedly as part of a seasonal migration following game.



At the time of the Terra Amata occupation, 400,000 years ago, the sea level was approximately 26 metres higher than today. The beach where the huts stood is now well above sea level — built over by the apartment block whose basement houses the Terra Amata museum. The entire coastal plain of Nice would then have been largely under water. The hills and cliffs of Mont Boron, Castle Hill, and Cimiez were the defining landscape features, as they still are today.

The discovery of Terra Amata was made not by planned excavation but by construction work. In 1966, during the building of an apartment terrace near the port of Nice, workers uncovered traces of the prehistoric site. Archaeologist Henry de Lumley was given permission to excavate from January to July 1966, working seven days a week and ultimately 24 hours a day to complete the work before construction resumed. The apartment block was built on top; its basement became the museum. [5)]

Later Prehistoric Peoples

The Terra Amata people were not the last prehistoric inhabitants of the Nice area. A sequence of later prehistoric occupations is documented:

- **c. 200,000 BC**: The Grotte du Lazaret, located on the hillside above Coco Beach — the start of our Sentier du Littoral walk — was inhabited by hunter-gatherers. Around 200,000 years BC, the Lazaret Cave was inhabited by hunters, and the site has yielded bone and tool deposits from this period. [6)]
- **c. 80,000 BC**: Neanderthal people occupied the surrounding grottos of the Nice hills. They were more advanced than their predecessors — capable of burial of the dead, symbolic thought, and complex tool manufacture.
- **c. 30,000 BC**: Homo sapiens sapiens — anatomically modern humans — arrived in the region.

Weapons dating from around 30,000 BC have been found proving that modern humans lived in this area.

The Ligurians: The First Settled Inhabitants

Around 1,000 BC, the Ligurians were the first to settle here permanently, constructing their settlement at the mouth of the Paillon River and on the hill overlooking the valley. [7] These are the first people we can give a name to — the Ligurians — and their presence is the starting point of what becomes the documented history of our city.

The Ligures (Latin singular: Ligus) were an ancient people who occupied a wide territory across what is now north-western Italy, the French Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur region, Corsica, and parts of the Iberian Peninsula. They were a Celto-Ligurian people — that is, a population showing strong Celtic influences on their language and culture — and are described by classical authors including Thucydides, Strabo, and Pliny the Elder. [8]

Their material culture was characterised by hilltop fortified settlements called oppida (singular: oppidum), which controlled the trading routes between the coast and the interior. Ligurian sepulchres of the Italian Riviera and Provence exhibit both Etruscan and Celtic influences — evidence of the cultural crossroads position they occupied between the great civilisations of the ancient Mediterranean and the Celtic north.

The Vediantii: Our Closest Ligurian Ancestors

Of all the Ligurian tribes, the one most directly connected to our city is the **Vediantii** — a Celto-Ligurian tribe dwelling on the Mediterranean coast near present-day Nice during the Iron Age and the Roman period. The Vediantii dwelled on the Mediterranean coast, between the river Var and Mont Agel, around the Massaliote colony of Nikaia (modern Nice). Their territory was located east of the Deciates and Nerusii, west of the Intimilii, and south of the Vesubiani. [9]

Their name is itself of linguistic interest. The ethnonym Vediantii is probably Celtic, and has been interpreted in three different ways by scholars: as “pertaining to the praying ones” (from the Celtic root *wed-* “to pray”), as the “Leaders” (from **wedʰ-yā* “guidance, leadership”), or as the “Sages” (from **weid-yā* “knowledge, doctrine”). In any of these interpretations, the name suggests a people with some claim to religious, political, or intellectual authority within the Ligurian world.

Their chief settlement was the oppidum on Cimiez Hill — the hilltop that commands the coastal plain of Nice and controls the routes inland toward the Alps. This oppidum, known by the Romans as Cemenelum (a name that appears to be of Ligurian origin), stood at exactly the location of the Roman ruins we can visit today. The Vediantii maintained their oppidum in the area after the arrival of the Greeks, living in a complex relationship of cooperation and occasional conflict with the Massaliote colony on Colline du Château below.

A striking fact about the Vediantii is their political pragmatism. Contrary to other tribes of the region, the Vediantii were probably allied or tributary to Massalia and the Roman Republic by the 2nd century BC. When the Oxybii and Deciates attacked the Massaliote colonies of Nikaia and Antipolis in 154 BC,

the Vediantii were not among the attackers — and their territory was not subsequently reduced by Rome as punishment. This political flexibility explains how their chief town Cemenelum survived and ultimately became the capital of the Roman province of Alpes Maritimae. [10)]



An altar dedicated to the Gallic deity Centondis, inscribed by a Roman citizen named Decimius Vessucius Celer, was found in Nice and is displayed in the Musée d'Archéologie at Cimiez. It is one of the rare physical documents connecting the religious practices of the pre-Roman Ligurian world to the Roman administrative world that succeeded it — a man with a Roman name making an offering to a pre-Roman god. We can see it on any visit to Cimiez.

The Deciates and Other Neighbouring Tribes

The Vediantii's western neighbours were the **Deciates** — a more aggressive Ligurian tribe who occupied the territory west of the Var, in the area of modern Antibes and its hinterland. In 154 BC, in what is the first precise historical event documented in the Nice area, the Deciates and their allies the Oxybii attacked both Nikaia (Nice) and Antipolis (Antibes). Upon a request from Massalia, and after a Roman legate named Flaminius had been injured by the Oxybii, the Roman Senate sent the consul Quintus Opimius to pacify the region. The Romans defeated the Deciates and Oxybii and handed over a great part of their territory to Massalia. [11)]

This Roman intervention — ostensibly on behalf of Greek colonists and the alliance with Massalia — was the first step in Rome's direct military presence on the Côte d'Azur. The door, once opened, would never fully close.

The Greeks: Nikaia and the Massaliote Colony

Nice was probably founded around 350 BC by colonists from the Greek city of Phocaea in western Anatolia. It was given the name of Níkaia (Νίκαια) in honour of a victory over the neighbouring Ligurians — Nike being the Greek goddess of victory. [12)] The founding colony came not directly from Phocaea but from Massalia (modern Marseille), itself a Phocaean colony founded around 600 BC. Nikaia was thus a daughter-colony: Massalia's child, established to extend and protect its trading network eastward along the coast.

The Phocaeans: Who They Were

The Phocaeans were Ionian Greeks from the ancient city of Phocaea on the western coast of Anatolia (modern Foça in Turkey). They were exceptional seafarers — the Greeks of the western Mediterranean who, from the 7th century BC onward, established colonies at Massalia, Antipolis (Antibes), Nikaia (Nice), Emporiae (Spain), and along much of the Ligurian coast. The mother city of Phocaea was ultimately destroyed by the Persians in 545 BC, which reinforced the self-sufficiency and determination of the western colonies. [13)]

What Nikaia Was

At this time, Nice was a small stronghold, with a few hundred inhabitants, mainly merchants, under the authority of magistrates nominated by Marseille. [14] This is important context: Nikaia was not an independent city-state of the classical Greek type, but a subordinate commercial colony administered from Massalia. Its population was primarily mercantile — traders, dock workers, craftsmen — whose purpose was to make the harbour function.

The probable location of Nikaia is the Colline du Château (Castle Hill) and the adjacent area now occupied by Vieux Nice, where the Paillon River once met the sea. Several proposed locations have been put forward by archaeologists, but so far only ceramic fragments — possibly dating to the Greeks of Marseille of the 6th or 5th century BC — have been recovered from the Colline du Château. No substantial structural remains of the Greek settlement have been found. [15]

The Greeks' most lasting contributions to the landscape were not buildings but plantings. It was these ancient settlers who introduced olive trees and grape vines to the region — a legacy that persisted through all subsequent civilisations and that we can still observe in the ancient olive grove at Cimiez, surrounding the Roman ruins. [16]

The Colony's Role

Nikaia soon became one of the busiest trading ports on the Ligurian coast, serving as a key link in the commercial network between Massalia to the west and the Ligurian and Italian coast to the east. The goods that passed through included iron, spices, wheat, wine, and slaves — the standard commodities of ancient Mediterranean trade. In exchange, Nikaia received agricultural produce from the Ligurian hinterland and raw materials from the Alpine valleys.

The city occupied a natural defensive position: the Colline du Château provided protection from land attack, the harbour gave access to the sea, and the Paillon River offered a navigable entry point toward the interior. The relationship between the Greek colonists and the Vediantii tribe on the hill above appears to have been, for the most part, one of cooperation rather than conflict — the two communities had complementary economic roles, with the Greeks controlling maritime trade and the Vediantii controlling the mountain routes.



The question of what happened to Nikaia's Greek population when the Romans arrived is historically complex. The archaeological record shows continuity of settlement at Colline du Château into and beyond the Roman period. It is likely that the Greek-origin population was gradually absorbed into the broader Roman provincial community, with Nikaia continuing as a civilian town while the military and administrative functions moved to the new Roman city of Cemenelum on the hill above. The two cities — Greek Nikaia and Roman Cemenelum — coexisted as rivals for several centuries before Cemenelum was finally abandoned during the Lombard invasions of the late 6th century.

The Romans: Cemenelum, Capital of the Alpes Maritimae

Founding and Growth

The ancient Roman city of Cemenelum was built at the foot of the oppidum (fortified settlement) of the Vediantii — today's Bellanda Hill. Founded at the very end of the 1st century BC, after the pacification campaigns of the Alps led by Emperor Augustus, Cemenelum became the capital of the province of the Alpes Maritimae. [17)] Its strategic position on the passage of the Via Julia Augusta — the great coastal road linking Italy to Gaul — and at the start of the roads to the Alps allowed it to control the mountain valleys.

The name Cemenelum is itself considered to be of Ligurian origin — the Roman city adopted the indigenous name for the hilltop, rather than imposing a Latin one. It is a small but significant detail: Rome was building on Ligurian foundations, in the most literal sense.

In its early form, Cemenelum was primarily a military station — the permanent garrison of at least three cohorts (infantry corps) whose role was to police the Alpine passes and maintain the Roman peace in the newly pacified region. Its growth from military outpost to functioning city was the result of deliberate imperial policy, shaped by successive governors of the province.



The Tropaeum Alpium — the Trophy of the Alps — erected at La Turbie in 6 BC to celebrate Augustus's pacification of the Alpine peoples, lists 45 defeated tribes on its inscription. The Vediantii are notably absent from this list, consistent with their history of alliance with Rome rather than resistance. We can visit La Turbie easily from Nice — it is the dramatic monument visible on the ridge above Monaco from our window on a clear day.

Daily Life in Cemenelum

At its height in the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD, the city boasted a population of several thousand and all the hallmarks of Roman urbanism — grand public buildings, paved streets, aqueducts, and a forum at its centre. [18)] The city extended over at least 20 hectares, though our surviving archaeological site covers only 2.5 hectares — primarily the thermal baths district.

The structures that survive and can be visited today are:

The Thermal Baths (Three Complexes)

The most impressive surviving feature of Cemenelum is its extraordinary series of three separate bath complexes — Northern, Eastern, and Western — built and rebuilt between the 1st and 3rd centuries AD. The baths were central to Roman social life, offering areas for hot, warm, and cold plunges (caldarium, tepidarium, frigidarium), as well as gymnasiums (palaestra) and meeting rooms. The Northern baths have a frigidarium (cold room) that retains an elevation of more than 10 metres — the largest surviving Roman structure in Nice. [19)]

The scale of the bath complexes tells us something important about the kind of city Cemenelum was: the investment in public bathing infrastructure suggests a prosperous, civilian city in which social gathering, personal hygiene, and the rituals of Roman daily life were well established. The baths were not just for washing; they were the social hubs of the city, where business was conducted, political gossip exchanged, and the hierarchies of Roman provincial society put on display.

The Amphitheatre

Built in the 2nd century AD, this elliptical arena could accommodate up to 5,000 spectators. [20)] Here, gladiatorial combats, chariot races, and other public spectacles entertained the Roman populace. The Cemenelum amphitheatre was constructed in two phases: an initial Augustan-era structure with wooden seating and capacity for approximately 500–600 spectators, expanded during the Severan dynasty to its final stone form seating 5,000. [21)]

Unlike some amphitheatres, the Cemenelum arena has no subterranean rooms (hypogeum) — suggesting that the elaborate animal hunts (venationes) common in the great arenas of Rome were not a feature of provincial entertainment here. The games at Cemenelum were likely gladiatorial combat and public spectacle of a more modest kind, suited to a provincial capital rather than an imperial showpiece. The arena seats 2,000 today for the Nice Jazz Festival each July.

The Residential Quarter and Streets

Beyond the baths and arena, the archaeological park preserves traces of Cemenelum's residential streets, shops, and private houses. During the Roman occupation, residential streets, shops and an amphitheatre characterised the day-to-day life of Romans here. The street grid follows the classic Roman pattern of decumanus (east-west) and cardo (north-south) axes, and the remains of individual houses — with their floor plans, thresholds, and occasional mosaic floors — give a more intimate sense of how people actually lived.

The Paleo-Christian Community

The story of Cemenelum does not end with the Roman Empire. In the 5th century, after Christianisation, the Roman baths were no longer used for bathing, and a paleo-Christian church and baptistery were built within the western bath complex. A bishopric existed briefly in Cimiez in the 5th century, of which the ruins of the episcopal group remain in the western Roman baths. [22)] This conversion — the most intimate possible image of one civilisation growing inside the bones of another — is one of the most evocative details in the entire archaeological record of Nice.

Decline and Transformation

With the development of the Roman conquest towards the north, Cemenelum gradually lost its status as provincial capital to the benefit of the Gallo-Roman city of Embrun, further into the Alps. Despite the barbarian invasions of the 4th and 5th centuries, the site continued to be inhabited — the thermal baths were replaced by dwellings, and reoccupations are documented lasting into the 7th and even

8th centuries. [23)]

It was finally the Lombard invasions of the late 6th century that effectively ended Cemenelum as a functioning city. By the 9th century, Benedictine monks had established an abbey on the hill, incorporating Roman stones into their church — the same process of material reuse that can be observed in medieval buildings throughout the Mediterranean world. Later, in the 16th century, Franciscan friars took over the monastery, which still stands adjacent to the ruins today.

The Greek town of Nikaia on the lower hill, meanwhile, had continued through all these upheavals and persisted into the medieval period, its population gradually shifting from the Colline du Château to the valley floor — the area that became Vieux Nice. The continuity from ancient Nikaia to medieval Nice to the Baroque city we live beside today is unbroken.

Where to Encounter Ancient Nice Today

All of the peoples described in this entry have left physical traces that we can visit, most within a 30-minute journey from our door.

Site	What you see	People	Address	Admission
Musée de Préhistoire de Terra Amata	Reconstructed huts, original tools, preserved footprint, hearth traces, immersive prehistoric scenography	Homo erectus / Homo heidelbergensis — 400,000 BC	25 Boulevard Carnot (at foot of Mont Boron)	Free (City of Nice museum)
Grotte du Lazaret	Prehistoric cave above Coco Beach; visible from the Sentier du Littoral path	Hunter-gatherers — c. 200,000 BC	Near Boulevard Franck Pilatte (above Coco Beach)	Access limited; enquire at Terra Amata museum
Colline du Château	Castle Hill; site of Greek Nikaia; ceramic fragments c. 5th–6th century BC	Greek Massaliotes — c. 350 BC	Top of Castle Hill; free lift from Quai des États-Unis	Free
Musée d'Archéologie de Nice-Cimiez	Extensive artefacts from Cemenelum: mosaics, sculptures, pottery, jewellery, coins, altar to Gallic deity Centondis	Vediantii Ligurians; Roman citizens of Cemenelum	160 Avenue des Arènes, Cimiez	Free (City of Nice museum)
Roman Baths (Cemenelum)	Three bath complexes; frigidarium retaining 10-metre height; heating systems; street plan	Romans — 1st–3rd century AD	Adjacent to Musée d'Archéologie, Cimiez	Free
Roman Amphitheatre (Cemenelum)	Arena seating 5,000; stone tiered benches; elliptical plan; no hypogeum	Romans — 2nd–3rd century AD	Jardin des Arènes, Cimiez	Free
Trophée d'Auguste, La Turbie	Monument listing 45 defeated Alpine tribes; the Vediantii conspicuously absent	Romans — Augustus, 6 BC	La Turbie village, above Monaco; Bus 116 from Nice	Paid



We strongly recommend combining the Terra Amata museum with a walk up to Castle Hill on the same morning — the two sites, separated by perhaps 20 minutes on foot, bracket the entire sweep of Nice's human prehistory and early history between them: the prehistoric beach camp below and the Greek-then-medieval hilltop above. Begin at Terra Amata when it opens (10h00) and be on Castle Hill by noon. The combined visit is one of the most historically concentrated half-days available to us in any city in France.

Quick Reference

The Four Ancient Peoples of Nice — in order of arrival:

- **Homo erectus / Homo heidelbergensis** — c. 400,000 BC — Terra Amata beach camp; hunter-gatherers, fire users, hut builders
- **The Ligurians (Vediantii tribe)** — from c. 1,000 BC — settled peoples; hilltop oppida; Celto-Ligurian culture; controlled Alpine trade routes; politically allied with Greece and Rome
- **The Greeks (Massaliote Phocaeans)** — c. 350 BC — founded Nikaia on Colline du Château; merchants and traders; introduced olive and vine cultivation; administered from Massalia (Marseille)
- **The Romans** — 14 BC (Cemenelum founded) — built the provincial capital; left the ruins at Cimiez; arena, three bath complexes, streets; paleo-Christian community from 5th century

Three key museums:

- Terra Amata: 25 Boulevard Carnot (free; 10h–18h Wed–Mon)
- Musée d'Archéologie de Nice-Cimiez: 160 Avenue des Arènes (free; 10h–18h Wed–Mon)
- Colline du Château: free; lift from Quai des États-Unis

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Last reviewed: March 2026. The archaeological record of Nice is continuously expanding through ongoing excavations, principally managed by the Musée d'Archéologie de Nice-Cimiez and the Direction régionale des affaires culturelles (DRAC) PACA. New findings may revise details presented here, particularly regarding the precise location and extent of the Greek settlement of Nikaia.

This entry is part of the Nice history section of our wiki. See also The Architecture of Nice for the built

heritage of the city, Walking in Nice — Route 4 (Cimiez) for the walking route to the Roman ruins, and The Sentier du Littoral for the walk past the Lazaret Cave. The Trophée d'Auguste at La Turbie is referenced in Other Cultural References.

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