

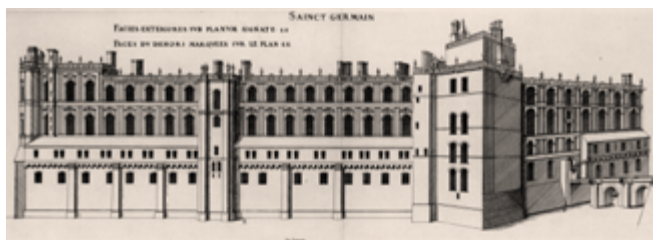
MUSÉE D'ARCHÉOLOGIE NATIONALE



Domaine national du château
de Saint-Germain-en-Laye

History
of the castle





↳ ① This engraving showing the northern façade of the castle is one of the oldest known records of the royal residence. Jacques Androuet du Cerceau, *Saint Germain, extract from the First Volume of the Most Excellent Buildings of France, 1576*. Etching. Museum of National Archaeology, archives centre.

The Château of Saint-Germain-en-Laye — home to the Museum of National Archaeology nowadays — is a place steeped in history. Until the reign of **Louis XIV** it was one of the favourite residences of the kings of France due to its forest for hunting and the renowned healthy air of Saint-Germain.

Louis VI le Gros (reigned 1108–1137) was probably the first king to build a royal residence on the “Laye plateau” in about 1120. Throughout the Middle Ages, the royal residence constantly evolved, expanded and maintained.

The “castle keep” (the large square tower on the left side as you enter the museum) was probably built by **Philippe Auguste** (r. 1180–1223), perhaps to house his apartments. The tower was later modified by King **Charles V** (r. 1364–1380).

Between 1234 and 1238, **Louis IX** (r. 1226–1270), known as Saint Louis, built the beautiful chapel in Gothic style, separated from the residential buildings. He also added a series of buildings to enlarge the castle. It is likely that an outer wall and a moat protected the complex.

The Hundred Years’ War between the kingdoms of England and France left its mark on the castle history. In 1346, the soldiers of the Black Prince, son of the King of England, set fire to the village and the castle. Both were burnt down and only the chapel was spared.

From 1348 on, repairs were undertaken by King **Philippe VI** (1328–1350), but **Charles V** did carry out most of the work to protect the royal residence. He had a moat dug around the castle and raised fortified ramparts with

a walkway above machicolations, turrets and sentry boxes. The king often came to the castle of Saint-Germain where he had one of his famous libraries in the castle keep.

François I^{er} (reigned 1515–1547), who married **Claude de France** in the palace chapel, had the medieval castle knocked down from 1539, but kept the ramparts built by **Charles V**. He had the new residential buildings of the new Renaissance castle lean on them. ❶ The medieval curtain walls can still be seen from outside the castle in the lower part of the building. **François I^{er}** preserved the keep, included the royal chapel in the new series of buildings and left a big courtyard in the centre of the royal residence. After his death in 1547, his son **Henri II** (r. 1547–1559) commissioned **Philibert Delorme** to complete the work and design the royal children's apartments on the second floor. The castle in all likelihood had nearly 80 apartments to host as many guests as possible and to make it easier to move around the buildings. A ballroom and several chapels completed the edifice. A tennis court to play "jeu de paume" was set up in the moat and a small zoo with wild animals was created at the edge of the plateau, towards Le Pecq. One of the biggest projects was a royal retreat, soon to be known as "Château-Neuf" (New Castle), in contrast to the "Château-Vieux" (Old Castle), which was also at the edge of the plateau and had an attractive view towards the river Seine. **Henri IV** (r. 1589–1610) was also very fond of Saint-Germain. He transformed and completed the second royal residence, adding a splendid garden and musical "grottoes". On this site, where **Louis XIV** was born (r. 1643–1715) and **Louis XIII** (r. 1610–1643) died, only the chapel pavilions and the "grottoes" remain nowadays. (You can see a model of the royal castles in the room after the museum shop).

Louis XIV stayed for long periods at the Château-Vieux and wanted to enlarge the royal residence further. In about 1680, he entrusted the project to **Jules Hardouin-Mansart**. This architect added five pavilions to the residential buildings built under **François I^{er}**, at one of the angles with the effect of over-charging the architecture. ❷ The king commissioned **André Le Nôtre** to design the gardens and the long terrace.

On 20 April 1682, the Court left for the palace of Versailles, and returned to Saint-Germain only for hunting parties. After his exile, King **James II of England** (r. 1685–1688) was welcomed with his family and court to the Old Château by his cousin **Louis XIV**. The Jacobites and their descendants stayed at the castle until the French Revolution.

During the Revolution, the castle was used as a prison, and later became a riding school under **Napoleon I^{er}** (r. 1804-1814 and 1815), barracks and finally a military prison during the reign of **Louis-Philippe** (1830–1848) and **Napoleon III**, between 1836 and 1855. ③ ④

Napoleon III (r. 1852–1870), by an imperial decree dated 8 March 1862, founded the “Gallo-Roman Museum”, which is today the Museum of National Archaeology. At that time the castle had fallen out of disrepair. It was listed as a historical monument on 8 April 1863. Major restoration work began in 1862 under the leadership of **Eugène Millet**, a pupil of **Eugène Viollet-le-Duc**. ⑤ The architect was also in charge of the museum displays in the exhibition rooms. This gigantic project was only completed in 1910 by the architect **Honoré Daumet**. The first seven rooms in the museum were opened by the Emperor on 12 May 1867. In 1961, **André Malraux**, the minister of culture, launched a complete reorganisation of the museum’s tour route and the galleries.

Today, most of the rooms in the castle are used to exhibit archaeological collections, illustrating past ways of life of people through their artefacts. The museum collections are among the world’s richest, ranging from prehistoric times to the early Middle Ages. The different settings created by the French kings on the site have sadly disappeared due to successive occupations.



↳ ② The castle was expanded by Jules Hardouin-Mansart at the request of Louis XIV. Jacques Rigaud, *View of the old château of St Germain en Laye*, about 1720–1730. Museum of National Archaeology, archives centre.



↳ ③ View of the courtyard when the château was a military prison. Printed in the newspaper *L'Illustration*, n°48, 27 January 1844.



↳ ④ The castle after the military prison was closed in 1855 and just before restoration work was begun by Eugène Millet in 1862. Napoleon III decided to open the Gallo-Roman Museum on the site, today the National Archaeological Museum. Benoist & Cicéri, *Château of St Germain-en-Laye*, 1861. Lithograph. Museum of National Archaeology, archives centre.



↳ ⑤ The Imperial Museum entrance, today the National Archaeology Museum, when it was opened in 1867, while the castle was still being restored. Charles Marville, photo print, 1867. Museum of National Archaeology, archives centre.

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