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Saint-Louis-Eisenthür -Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines, France de l'Est- **Sans doute la plus belle mine d'argent de la Renaissance.**

Abridged English version

Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines (Alsace, France), Saint-Louis-Eisenthür, opened to the Public since 1988 :

The mine "Saint-Louis-Eisenthür" is located in the Pb-Cu-Ag district of Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines (Alsace, France). Old maps of the sixth century called it "mine Saint-Louis". It was re-opened in 1970, October 10th, through the clearing off of a 8 meter high ventilation shaft, which was fully filled with stones and ground. Several hundred meters of levels and numerous staple shafts or open stops were discovered and measured up in a few weeks time. At the same time, a map of 1560 was discovered in the Archives Départementales du Haut-Rhin, which can exactly be superposed with the drawing of the archaeologists. On the old map appear four different mines which meet together, "Eisenthür" (our "mine Saint-Louis"), "Die Aich" (the Oak), "Sanct-Michael" and "Unser Frau". That way, the different parts of that huge underground system were identified.

In 1983, an important archaeological investigation occurred (fouille archéologique programmée), concerning the whole ore lode which contains the system Saint-Louis-Eisenthür. Mining excavations, whose discovery is due to the use of speleological techniques, were carefully studied and measured over a height of 310 m and an length of 1050 m. Detailed results of this research were published in "Documents d'Archéologie Française" N° 16 (1988).

The following years, more and more people were initiated inside the main levels of "Eisenthür" and "Die Aich", this was then called "school-mine". 1988, just for the field-trip of the "International Conference on the Mining Techniques in Europe up to the 18th century" (Strasbourg), the entrance of "Die Aich" was re-opened, allowing an underground circuit.

From 1987 to 2005, the mine received 122783 visitors, which were led by the guides of the ASEPAM (Speleological Association for Study and Preservation of Old Mines). Nearly every year, since 1987, there has been a camp for young voluntary people ("Work camp"), whose aim is partly to rebuilt parts of the wooden old installations, after doing on these sites small archaeological investigations (f. i. clearing a shaft off its debris); it consists also in landscaping parts of the surface remains, such as pits or open cut workings. Scientific processes took place too, f. i. a study of the air movements and the ventilation of the mine, conditioned by a wooden air duct, with experiment on one side and physical modelling on the other. So, the mine appears as a natural laboratory for old mining techniques. The Association got several national first prizes rewarding its acts.

Compared with hundreds of touristic mines in Europe, "Saint-Louis-Eisenthür" appears to be perhaps the only one which presents such a strong relationship between archives and the field studies, for the 16th century. It has produced some of the best mineralogical pieces of Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines (f. i. native silver). It can be considered as a very complete school of the techniques of the Renaissance (driving levels, stopping, ventilation, haulage, timberwork...). The visitor walks through 600 m addits which were dug by hand, with hammer and iron tool. More, the mine every year is the theatre of scientific investigation. That's all the reasons why it can be regarded as maybe the finest renaissance silver mine in Europe.