

Nîmes au fil des siècles - La maquette vidéo

NÎMES

Texte en anglais



Sequence 1 – Between Plain & Hills

The landscapes around Nîmes stretch out between plateaus and plains, forming a typically Mediterranean backdrop. Arid scrubland, known as the *garrigue*, covers the low hills; seven hills which, legend has it, made Nîmes the equal of Rome!

In the heart of this panorama is the original spring that gave birth to the city of Nîmes. From its highest point, the city overlooks a vast landscape, then gently slopes down to the agricultural plain of the Vistre Valley.

The city grew, shrank, then grew again, stretching out into the countryside. Its face has changed much down the centuries, but its layout conserves over 2,000 years of history!

Sequence 2 – Early Occupations

The origin of Nîmes dates back to the 6th century BCE, when the Volcae Arecomici, a Celtic people, settled around a spring. Their settlement gradually stretched out across the hillsides and into the plain. Two centuries later, an oppidum was built, with a fortified wall and a lookout tower.

Rome conquered southern Gaul, and the *Via Domitia*, the road from Rome to Spain, accelerated urban development. A century later, Nîmes became a colony under the Law of Rome and was doted with all the attributes of a Roman city.

A sanctuary dedicated to the Roman gods was erected around the spring.

A long ring of ramparts, punctuated with gates and towers, including the Tour Magne, was built to protect the city.

The hillsides remained virgin land; while in the plain, more and more dwellings sprang up along a regular gridline.

An aqueduct brought water from Uzès to the *castellum*, the colony's repartition basin.

The city centre was furnished with sumptuous monuments, such as the Maison Carrée – the forum temple – and the amphitheatre.

The 2nd century AD was the Golden Age of Nîmes.

Sequence 3 – Medieval decline

The first signs of decline appeared in the 3rd century. Whole sections of the city were abandoned and became wasteland or fields. Most of the ancient monuments were demolished; others were re-used. Dwellings were concentrated around the Maison Carrée, the amphitheatre or the cathedral. These three districts slowly joined together.

It wasn't until the 12th century that Nîmes awoke from its long slumber. A new cathedral and a first set of new walls were built. Monasteries and convents appeared outside the walls.

In the 14th century, wars, plagues and famines struck the city, wiping out one-third of the population. A second set of monumental ramparts was built to strengthen the city's defences. In his cavalier account of Nîmes, the historian Jean Poldo d'Albenas describes a city *"hemmed in by its ramparts, surrounded by the remains of its ancient walls! In the middle, only the cathedral and old town hall stand out."*

The spring water ran in the open air, encouraging leather-tanning and textiles activities.

Sequence 4 – The Rebirth

Two centuries later, the Wars of Religion, between Catholics and Protestants, halted urban development. Numerous religious buildings were vandalised or demolished.

But Nîmes encountered prosperity again in the 17th century with the rise of the textile and silk industries. The city became a bustling hub. Inside the walls, all kinds of activities took place: spinning, weaving, dyeing and trading. Outside the walls, were the tanneries and slaughter-houses. In 200 years, the population grew from 13,000 to 50,000 inhabitants. Soon, there was a lack of room within the walls.

In search of space, the city stretched out into its suburbs.

To the north, part of the rampart was demolished to make way for a citadel and to incorporate the suburbs. To the east, army barracks were built.

Inside the walls, construction resumed. The city created new rules in urbanism, with widened streets and aligned façades. The burgher class – a product of the booming economy – had luxurious town houses built for them.

The flourishing textile industry required even more water, so work was begun around the famous spring to supply the workshops. The work unearthed the remains of the Roman sanctuary, which you can now see in the Jardins de la Fontaine.

On the eve of the French Revolution, Nîmes was the largest manufacturing city in the Bas-Languedoc.

Sequence 5 – The 19th Century

In the late 18th century, a town-planning programme transformed the city. The Medieval walls were gradually demolished; the ditches were replaced by wide boulevards; and beautiful new churches sprang up all along them. Little by little, the sectors inside and outside of the walls blended together, and the former suburbs became new city districts.

In 1839, the arrival of the railway pushed the city limits even further.

Between the historical centre and the train station, the Avenue Feuchères marked the link between the past and the modern day and reflected the wealth of Nîmes. On either side of the avenue, buildings with opulent façades drew the eyes of visitors.

Nîmes strengthened its prestige and its military vocation with the construction of new army bases.

It was a time of circulation: of goods, of people... and of the air! Hygiene regulations imposed the recovering of the stream, which had become insanitary. Its stagnant water, conducive to the spreading of epidemics, polluted the air and gave off a sickening stench. New streets were laid to air the old city centre.

The Roman monuments – part of the city's rich heritage – were given back their former pomp. It's this face of Nîmes, inherited from the 19th century, which we still see today.

Sequence 6 – The Modern Era

In the early 20th century, the railway workers' district stretched the city beyond the train station. In 1932, Nîmes had 89,000 inhabitants. 30 years later, the population passed the figure of 100,000. New housing was urgently needed for this growing population. With the city centre already full, construction was started in the surrounding countryside.

To the east, the first housing estates were built. To the west, the Priority Urbanisation Zones of Pissevin and Valdegour sprang up, combining housing, businesses and facilities. The apartment neighbourhoods were deserted by the middle-classes. Wanting to live in individual houses, they moved to the surrounding villages and the hillsides of the *garrigue*.

In the late 1960s, the construction of the motorway and ring-road stretched the city limits even further. The area between the two became filled with allotments, urban facilities, industrial estates and shopping centres. As a crossroads for both rail and road, Nîmes became a gateway to the beaches and changed its image. The historical centre was embellished, and the monuments restored. Nîmes rediscovered its building spirit and called on renowned architects and designers. Contemporary buildings and art works now echo the vestiges of Ancient Rome.

Today, with a population of over 150,000 inhabitants, the city must renew itself again. It's opening up so it can breathe once more. Promenades and parks invite you to take a stroll or take a seat to pass the time. Mediterranean Nîmes now offers us a spectacle in which history can be glimpsed through transparency.

Renseignements

Direction des affaires culturelles
Service valorisation et diffusion des patrimoines
Hôtel de Ville
30033 NIMES Cedex 9
Tél. 04 66 76 74 49
www.nimes.fr

Office de Tourisme de Nîmes

6 Bd des Arènes
30000 NIMES
Tél: 04 66 58 38 00
<https://www.nimes-tourisme.com/>

Horaires:

Du 01/04 au 31/10

Du lundi au samedi : 9 h à 19 h
Dimanche et Fériés : 10 h à 18 h

Du 01/11 au 31/03

Du lundi au samedi : 9 h à 18 h
Dimanche et Fériés : 10 h à 17 h

