

# ISLANDNESS, INUNDATION AND RESURRECTION

A mythology of Sea/Land relationships in Mont Saint-Michel Bay

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**ABSTRACT:** Mont Saint-Michel Bay is located in a coastal area with a high tidal range that has resulted in a varied and complex history of inundation and of its opposite, “de-islanding”. This article explores the mythologisation of the location and its history and identifies recent efforts to ensure that its islandness is re-established and re-affirmed as a local and national asset.

**KEYWORDS:** Mont Saint-Michael Bay, Scissy Forest, submergence, islandness

## Introduction

The concept of submergence is a stimulating topic for Island Studies, referring both to historical, physical dimensions and mythology. In the Introduction to the previous issue of *Shima* (v10 n2 – ‘Submergence: a special issue on Atlantis and related Mythologies’), Dawson and Hayward contended that “mainstream archeology has little to offer in explaining the continuing appeal of mythical submerged islands and manifestations of it in popular culture (and/or the various forms of crypto-/pseudo history that operate on its fringes” (2016: 7). The case of the Mont Saint-Michel Bay, located at the border of Normandy and Brittany in France, is an illuminating example of this. A place of entanglement between land and sea, it has been the subject of numerous cultural representations over time, engaging both mythologies and science. In this article we are going to focus on the myth of Scissy Forest and related issues concerning Mont Saint-Michel island, emphasising the successive and opposite narratives concerning sea/land interactions and their impact in producing the landscape, both culturally and materially.

Mont Saint-Michel Bay is located at the south-eastern corner of the Norman-Breton Gulf, a pronounced indentation of the north-western coast of France (Figure 1). This landscape is very complex, being the result of a combination of various factors. In physical-material terms, the landscape of this area has changed during different periods due to the opposing processes of sedimentation and erosion. At the end of the last Ice Age, the rise of sea levels led to processes of submergence, shaping islands and islets of various sizes from high areas of otherwise inundated land. The present day island of Guernsey was isolated around 7000 B.C (Patton, 1995), followed by the other Channel Islands; Jersey, the largest one, being the

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last to be detached from the continental mainland, around 4000 B.C. (Cunliffe, 1995). Closer to the continent, islets, rocks and reefs follow each other until they reach the three small rocky islands dominating the bottom corner of the Gulf: Mont Saint-Michel (originally named Mont Tombe), Tombelaine and Mont-Dol (Figure 1). At the opposite of the time scale, a twice-a-day tidal movement that is amongst the highest in the world brings sedimentary deposits that have gradually filled the bay. As a result, the bay is also known for both the speed of its tidal flows and the quicksands. The erratic course of the three rivers flowing into the bay, the Couesnon, Sée and Sélune, also contribute to shape an ever-changing landscape of water and sand.

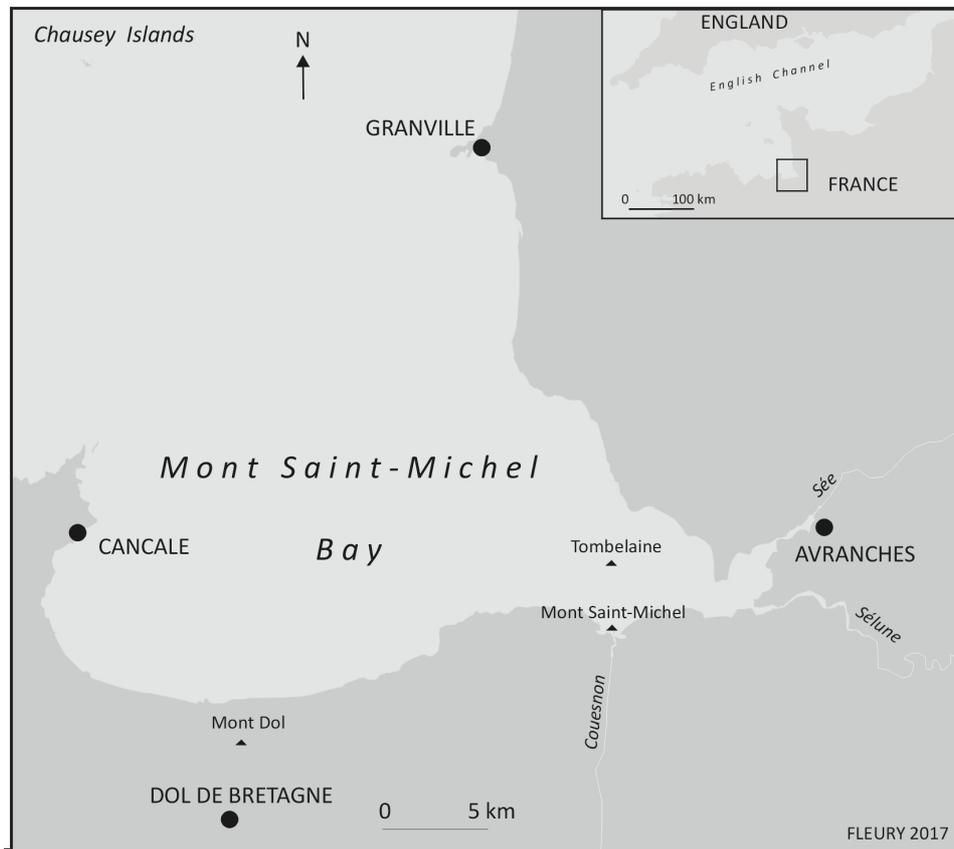


Figure 1 - Mont Saint-Michel Bay

Culture is another important factor in producing the landscape and religious narratives have been prominent over the last 1200 years. The north-west of today's France was on the fringe of the territory of the Frankish Empire formed by an aggregation of Western German tribes between the 5th and 9th centuries (see Geary, 1988) and this relatively remote area became slowly evangelised by Christian missionaries from Ireland and Cornwall. Some elevated locations that were traditionally pagan places of worship were appropriated by the Catholic Church at this time, effectively resignifying their symbolic function in the landscape. This was the case with the particular object of our discussion, Mont Tombe, where a basic abbey was erected at the beginning of the 8th Century.

## The Myth of Scissy Forest: Genesis and Embellishment

Religious interpretations of place and history have provided the framework for other narratives that have been developed since, entangling mythology, history and science. A number of authors - monks, scholars, scientists - have been inspired by Mont Saint-Michel Bay from medieval period to present times. The earliest description of the place dates back to the turn of the 10th Century. Hervadus, one of the Benedictine monks working in the Scriptorium, a place within the abbey dedicated to both production and copying of manuscripts, asserted that an oratory was built on the rocky island under the orders of Aubert, the bishop of Avranches (Visset, 1997). The same document refers to a wild and impenetrable forest surrounding the island before the 8th Century. The purpose of this account appears to have been to give this elected place a new image and association, in line with Biblical texts. Its emergence from the sands - which might be understood as the realm of the forces of evil - enabled the author to consider the mount as a type of Noah's Arch (Simonnet, 1999).<sup>1</sup>

But it was not until the early 15<sup>th</sup> Century that an anonymous monk made the first reference to a sudden destruction of the forest around the mount by tidal inundation. The date identified for the event was 709, at the time when messengers were sent by Aubert to Mount Gargan in Italy to bring some of St. Michel's relics to the Mont Tombe. It is explained in the text that when they arrived at the mount, the sea had flooded over the forest turning the area into a shore: (paragraph 2, verso of folio 47 of the manuscript 212)

*The sea had crushed and reached the forest and brought it back to into a shore. The mentioned messengers who had left the place covered with wood saw it as a shore and believed they had entered into a new world. (Paragraph 2, verso of folio 47 of the manuscript 212 - author's translation).*

This emerging legend is generally interpreted as a myth of regeneration that served to erase the traces of the pagan period in order to legitimise the Catholic faith in the troubled times of the end of the Middle Ages. As Salitot pointed (1995) out, the forest is a figure where symbolisms and politics are hidden. The forest is a common figure in medieval times, inspired by Biblical narratives referring to the state of wilderness (Le Goff, 1985). At the turn of the 15th Century, Western Europe faced many severe issues including the threat of Ottoman invasion, the Black Plague epidemic and the Great Schism within the Catholic Church. As the French historian Jean Delumeau wrote:

*The emergence of modernity in Europe was marked by an incredible fear of the devil and the sea, a place of fear, of dead and madness, where Satan, demons and monsters lived. (1978: 232 - authors' translation)*

The following centuries saw the emergence and the strengthening of the myth of a local cataclysm that led to the submergence of the forest. From the Middle Age to the middle of the 19th Century, this story got supplemented and embellished to meet people's inclination

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<sup>1</sup> The reference to St. Michel in Hervadus's account allows the association of the submergence of local lowlands with the fight between the Archangel and the Dragon described in the 12th chapter of Biblical Apocalypse of St. John, whereby the defeated dragon emits a river from its mouth.

for the marvelous (Pigeon, 1891). Many authors took the former assertions without any criticism and, in some cases, added new, unverified elements.

In 1604-1606, the Priest Feuardent referred to the astonishment of the messengers to Mount Gargan returning from Italy in 709. In 1659, Don Quatremaire, who was the first to explicitly mention a natural cataclysm, referred to a forest that was six leagues in length and one in width (approximately 29 kilometres by 3). In 1734, another priest, Laurent Rouault, produced a description that extended the forest up to the Chausey archipelago, which is more than thirty kilometers off Mont Saint-Michel (Figure 2), multiplying the previously specified forest area by a factor of one hundred. He also stated that the inundation occurred in March (which is plausible given annual tidal variations and their possible combinations with storms around the equinox). Rouault was also the first to give the name “Scissy” to the forest, a new toponym derived from the uncertain Latin etymology of Chausey islands. A cartographic interpretation was later provided by the priest Lefranc, who drew its outlines in 1792 (Figure 2).<sup>2</sup> The Catholic Church endorsed all these elements thanks to Gilles Déric, vicar of the Bishop of Dol de Bretagne, who included the so-called event of 709, as well the appellation “Scissy Forest,” in the breviaries of the dioceses of Dol de Bretagne and Saint-Malo. The map has been since reproduced in many books and guides even in the present times. In these contexts, the map is presented as evidence of the extent of the former forest rather than the imaginative representation it actually is.

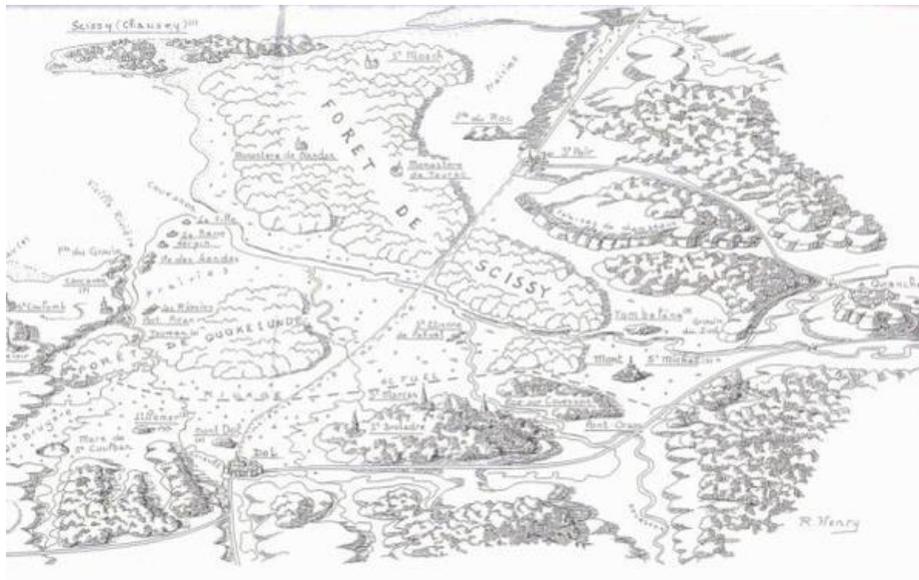


Figure 2 - An example of imaginative representation of the Scissy Forest (Source: <http://archeorange.e-monsite.com>)

The embellishment of the myth culminated with Abbé Manet, a priest from Pontorson, a parish located nine kilometers south of Mont Saint-Michel. In 1829, he published a book in

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<sup>2</sup> Due to the poor quality of the Lefranc map we have not reproduced it here and instead show one of the many versions provided by subsequent authors (source: <http://archeorange.e-monsite.com> - accessed 14th March 2017).

which he added numerous fictional details on the cataclysm, emphasising the violence of the *fatale marée* ("fatal tide"). It was not only clerics who contributed to the maintenance of the myth but also some (self-proclaimed) historians, mainly local personalities. Even well-known naturalists such as Milne Edwards and J.V Audouin mentioned the Scissy Forest and its submergence during historical times (Visset, 1997). But an increasing number of voices rose during the second part of the 19th Century to challenge the dominant theory of cataclysm.

#### The shift in the narrative: from religion to secularisation

Manet's 1829 book on the mount marked both the peak and the beginning of the decline of the religious mythology of the inundation of the bay around Mount Saint-Michel. A significant shift took place in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century when the rise of a secular and rational perspective put into question the religious interpretation and function of the bay-scape and the myth of Scissy Forest was increasingly challenged. Nature was no longer considered as a divine essence but as a material to be controlled, dominated, and reshaped in the name of progress and economy. The bay, thus, became a space to be reclaimed as any other. Private companies and public bodies invested in developing modern and efficient agricultural operations around the bay and the heritagisation of Mont Saint-Michel can be interpreted in this context of secularisation. During the French Revolution, the monks were expelled from the abbey, which became a prison until 1863. It was not until 1966 that a community of monks returned to the island. Thus it was no longer the area's religious interpretation that provided its meaning but its heritage value for the French nation.

It is however a priest, the Abbé Pigeon, who in 1865 returned to original manuscripts and found out that there was no reference to a submergence in 709. According to his interpretation, the text referred to the forest clearance immediately around or even on the mount itself. The fossilised pieces of wood, leaves and fruits the people collect around the bay, well conserved due to their long stay in pits or in the sand, only prove the existence of some forest areas on the fringe. The different geological and archeological surveys carried out from the end of the 19th Century until the 1970s led to the conclusion that the submergence occurred in a much earlier period. It is now identified that it was around about 6000 BC that a part of the area was submerged and both the settling of the area and the submergence of the so-called Scissy Forest may therefore have occurred during the Bronze Age (Morzadec-Kerfoun and Délibrias, 1975).

#### Reclaiming the Bay

The large scale reclamation around the Bay carried out since the 19th Century is another cultural shift. It is not new, however. From the 11th Century onwards there were many attempts to control the coastline. The reclamation works have had two principal objectives, firstly stopping the ever-changing channels in the lower course of the area's rivers by reducing water flow and then containing the sea by constructing dykes. One of the most spectacular constructions is the embankment in the West (Figure 3) that was constructed after public authorities gave concessions to a local investor in 1769 (Verger, 2001). But it was not until the middle of the 19th Century that technical improvements and major investments from the private sector led to a long-term stabilisation. In 1856, the Mosselman company, named after one the most prominent French businessman of the Second Empire,

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carried out the canalisation of the Couesnon and achieved the containment of the sea in the West side.

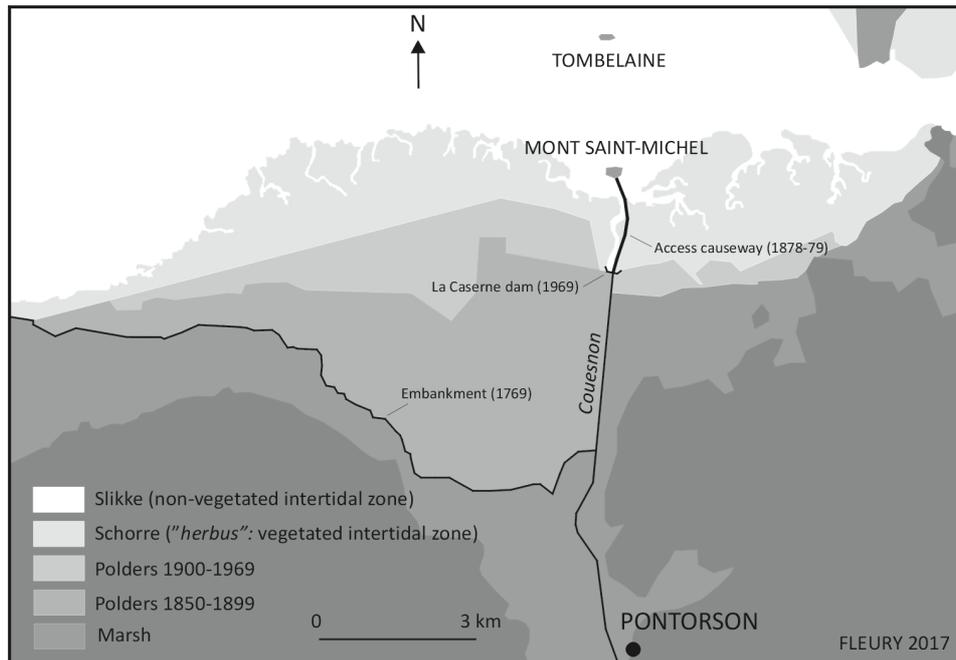


Figure 3 - Stages of the reclamation process in the Bay

For more than a century, the works – later operated by La Compagnie des Polders de l'Ouest – had the objective of keeping the sea out. This was the cause of further dykes built east of the mount as well as the causeway built in 1878/1879 to facilitate access to the islet. In 1969, the construction of a dam on the lower Couesnon River to prevent flooding was the last step of this logic (Rapillard, 2005). In the context of an expanding market economy, the works implemented aimed to reclaim areas of seafloor and convert them to highly productive agricultural land. It was successful in this respect since several tens of square kilometers of good agricultural land have been created. But not only have these works led to the retreat of the sea in the area, they also accelerated the process of sedimentation, filling the bottom of the bay. The local landscape thereby ceased to be a place of religious narratives but rather the result of the capitalist rationality.

### Making Mont Saint-Michel and its bay a national landmark

At the end of the 19th Century, heritage became another vision that attempted to erase the former religious narrative. Its invention, which dates from the French revolution, has been part of the process of nation building. As citizens took possession of the symbols from the *Ancien Régime*, like churches and castles, they became landmarks of a more general French history, deserving protection. Prominent French intellectuals like Victor Hugo and Prosper Mérimée contributed to the popularisation of the idea of heritage (*patrimoine*) in France. Hugo, along with many other writers, including Guy de Maupassant (who later wrote a tale,

*The Legend of Mont-Saint-Michel* in 1882) and Gustave Flaubert visited the mount. They were fascinated by the place and contributed to its recognition as a major national landmark. The Mont Saint-Michel Abbey – often named *La Merveille de l'Occident* (The Wonder of the West) – is one of the most emblematic buildings protected by the first state heritage list of 1862. Since then, this *lieu de mémoire* (place of memory) (Nora, 1986) of France has been protected by different measures. In 1874, the abbey became owned and administrated by the State Service des Monuments Historiques (Historical Monuments Board).<sup>3</sup> The mount was initially known as a pilgrimage place, a function that still exists today. When tourists started to come, facilities were built to make the access to the islet easier. Complementing the 1878 causeway, a railway linking to the town of Pontorson was inaugurated in 1901. Following this, the number of tourists rose dramatically. In 1910, about 80,000 tourists visited Mont Saint-Michel but by 1930 the number was 150,000 (Conseil régional de Basse-Normandie, 1998).

The loss of insularity that resulted from the construction of the causeway was however contested. Victor Hugo, who had visited Mont Saint-Michel in 1836, wrote in 1884: "Mont Saint-Michel is for France what the pyramids are to Egypt. The mount has to be kept as an island. We have to at any price protect this work of nature and art" (1926: 240 – authors' translation). The shift in the 19th Century paved the way for a new phenomenon that clashed with attempts to gain agricultural land from the sea. This coincided with and typified shifting cultural perceptions of the sea that changed along with urbanisation and the rise of leisure and tourism. According to Alain Corbin (1986), *Le désir de rive* ("The desire for seashore") changed the perception of the seascape and paved the way for a new symbolic aspect for it. The sea was no longer perceived as a space of fear and danger but rather as a space of rest, meditation and pleasure, first for the bourgeoisie and gradually for the masses. Such perceptions have given momentum to the idea of fighting the loss of insularity, the mount being more and more surrounded by sandbanks that eventually evolved to *herbus* (salt meadows). The combination of a holy dimension, the making of a national landmark and the scenic landscape – together with the attraction of the sea – explains the enthusiasm for Mont-Saint-Michel today.

Mont Saint-Michel reflects remarkably the extension of the scope of heritage from stone to landscape. In 1979, the Abbey and the Bay of Mont Saint-Michel were listed as one of the first UNESCO World Heritage sites, a designation that stresses the symbiosis between the monument and the natural setting (UNESCO, 2014: online). This area covers 6650 ha. The buffer zone, added in 2007, covers both the tidal and the land areas integrating 57,510 ha. The area protected refers to a visual dimension in that it is – more or less – the space where the mount is visible from different points of view around the bay. The landscape policy in this area is to minimise buildings and infrastructure that could disturb the scenic view to the mount, now a major tourist attraction.

As a national landmark, Mont Saint-Michel has been a tourist attraction since the end of the 19th Century. The number of tourists coming from all over the world has grown rapidly to around 2.5 million p.a. in the 2010s (making it the third most visited national site in France) and numbers have proved difficult to manage, particularly with regard to cars and buses parking next to the mount on the *herbus*. It has now become an iconic symbol of France worldwide, the subject of an endless number of postcards, books, posters, media reports and websites. However, the iconic representations are very similar. The photographs often show the mount surrounded by the sea – a scene that has become

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<sup>3</sup> Now the Centre des Monuments Nationaux.

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increasingly rare, since sedimentation processes in the bay been accelerated by reclamations and the different constructions made on the seashore.  
Bring the sea back! Toward the Re-insularisation of the Mont

In the 1970s, it became clear that Mont Saint-Michel was in danger losing its character as an island. It was in danger of meeting the same fate as Mont Dol in the Breton part of the bay, a hill surrounded by fields, no longer located on the seashore (Figure 1). Land reclamation policy was effectively undermining the iconic representation of the mount, the tourist industry that served this and religious perceptions of the mount as a place of historic pilgrimage.

There have been many surveys conducted about the sedimentation of the bay since the 1970s. On the east side of the bay, the Roche Torin causeway, constructed to service reclamation projects and flood prevention, was removed in 1983 in order to facilitate water circulation around the bay. As a result, Mont-Saint-Michel – and its islandness – became a national cause. In the 1990s the state implemented a board (*la Mission du Mont*) and mobilised a panel of well-known architects to rethink access to the mount. The idea was to bring back the water so that the mount is surrounded by the sea during high tides and to reorganise access accordingly. In 1995, during the presidency of Jacques Chirac, a programme of work often qualified as "titanic struggle" against the sedimentation was implemented. The objective was to restore the maritime character of the mount. A special dam was built in the Couesnon River in order to flush the water and direct the sediments around the island (somewhat like a toilet cistern). The work – costing around 185 million Euros – was funded by the French State, the European Community and regional and local councils from Normandy and Brittany. The causeway was removed and replaced by a light bridge (*pont-passerelle*) and the parking lots were moved a few kilometres further away (in a move that was criticised by many local interest groups). Today, Mont Saint-Michel is no longer accessible by private cars and buses, with a shuttle system coupled with a fee-paying car park in operation.



Figure 4 - The "re-insulated" Mont Saint-Michel, 2016)  
(source: [www.projetmontsaintmichel](http://www.projetmontsaintmichel) - accessed 14th March 2017)

In 2015, after 20 years of work, the 'new' site was ready (Figure 4). On the 21st of March, during a 'super tide' event caused by an unusual alignment of the sun, moon and Earth, Mont Saint-Michel was once again encircled by the sea. This event got a huge media coverage. As one headline proclaimed "The mount is an Island again!" (unattributed 2015a:

online). The pictures of the "reinsulated" mount have been extensively broadcast and disseminated in France and abroad. The mount seemed to have recovered its magic appeal again.

## Conclusion

This article has highlight how culture interacts with elements in different ways. Christian dogma has interpreted physical elements of landscape according to its mythology to create a sense of place. The characteristics of this space on the fringes of the north-western French coast provided a conducive setting for narratives. The religious narrative then gave way to a secular mythology – first driven by agriculture, now by tourism – emphasising the sea and the mount's islandness. Many metaphors referring to a fight are commonly used to describe the area, reflecting the re-shaping of the material space by constructing, reclaiming, destroying and restoring. Mount Saint-Michel and its adjacent bay could thereby be considered as a palimpsest, each narrative trying to erase the former one but nevertheless conveying traces of previous ones. As one example, at the beginning of the 21st Century the myth of the sudden inundation of Scissy Forest is still present in local culture despite scientific evidence to the contrary. As the head of the Interpretive Centre in Vains informed the authors, many people and even trainee guides still reiterate the legend. The fact that some fossilized pieces of wood are still found on the beaches, usually after storms, may contribute to reactivating the story (Rivoual, 2014: online). A number of websites also refer to Scissy Forest while esoteric interpretations of Mont Saint-Michel still exist. Like the entanglement of sea and land, the immaterial and the material, fiction and the real are combined in the cultural narratives. Underneath the surface, attraction for the area's magic seems to be still in place.

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