

A scientific mind

On the basis of an objective examination of historical sources, Renan drew up a scientific history of early Christianity. Emperor Napoleon III appointed him to lead an archaeological mission to Phoenicia*, which took him as far as Galilee and Judea. On his return he wrote his *Life of Jesus*. It was a phenomenal success despite the Church having threatened to excommunicate* anyone who read it.

The tolerant founder of French secularity

Renan's honesty, intellectual tolerance and rationalism led him to declare that "religion is not The Truth, it is an instrument for Humanity's ideal life". As early as 1871 he was arguing for the separation of Church and State, the basic tenet of French secularity. In 1882 he gave a lecture at the Sorbonne entitled "What is a Nation?", making him one of the founding fathers of secularity shortly before the law of 26 March 1882, which introduced a secular school curriculum, was passed. "Two things are certain – that Catholicism will not perish, and that Catholicism cannot remain as it is," Renan asserted. As early as 1870, he viewed "Europe as a confederation of States united by the common idea of civilisation." The Nation is like "a spiritual principle, a common desire to do great things together," and he was already pleading in favour of Franco-German friendship.

* Explanations overleaf

Glossary

Athena: the Greek goddess personifying intelligence, and protectress of the arts, sciences, and techniques.

Closed bed: a type of boxed bed resembling a wardrobe, traditional in Brittany.

Excommunication: to definitively exclude a Christian from the Catholic church.

Philology: a historical discipline based on the study of the written documents left behind by civilisations of the past.

Phoenicia: a region on the Mediterranean coast in what is now western Syria.

Visitor information

Average length of visit: 1 hour.
Guided tours in French.

Book and giftshop

The guide for this monument is available in the "Itinéraires" collection.

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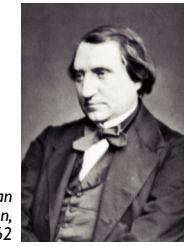
CENTRE DES MONUMENTS NATIONAUX



Ernest Renan's birthplace

Memories of a pioneer of French secularity

A brilliant career



Portrait of Renan by Adam-Salomon, 1862

Ernest Renan, born in 1823, was the son of a merchant Navy captain who was lost at sea in 1828. His mother managed to retain their house despite the substantial debts left by her husband. Ernest was a promising pupil and

in 1838 he left Brittany to attend the Collège de Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet in Paris, before entering a seminary. He soon abandoned his religious vocation and devoted himself to studying literature. A Professor at the Collège de France in 1862, he was dismissed after the publication of his *Life of Jesus*, which contested Christ's divinity. Whilst not anticlerical, he was a secular thinker who defined himself as a "philosopher-historian" specialising in religion. He was elected to the Académie Française in 1878, and appointed *grand officer* of the French Légion d'Honneur. He died in 1892.

A place forever associated with Renan

The house, bought by Ernest Renan's grandparents in 1780, remained in the family until 1947, when it was donated to the State. It was immediately restored, and opened by the French President, Edouard Herriot, on 20 July 1947. Since then it has served as a reminder of the importance of this 19th-century writer, and of the continuing relevance of his ideas on secularity today.

The front of the house

The house was built in 1623 for a shipowner, and its façade was restored in 1992, for the centenary of Renan's death.

Ground floor

1 The counter in the entrance hall comes from a bakery, a reminder that the house was rented to a baker until 1903. The portrait of Renan is the work of Léon Bonnat (1892), and the bust by René de Saint-Marceaux (1888).

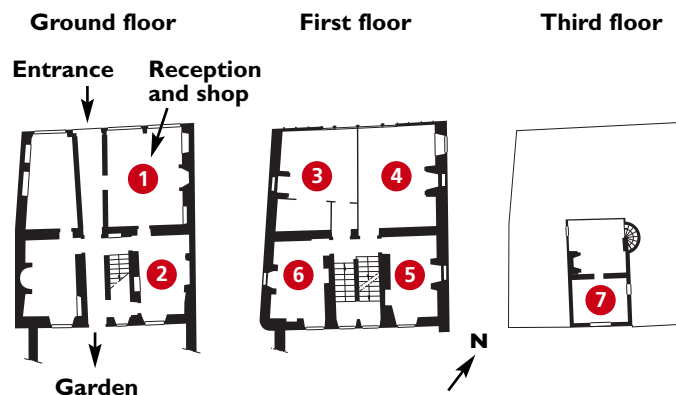
2 In the projection room a film recounts Renan's life.

It was here that he was born on 28 February 1823, in a closed bed* by the fireplace.

The financial hardship affecting his family at the time led Renan's mother to tell him: "when you came into the world, we were so sad that I held you in my arms and cried bitterly".

First floor

3 **The family room:** Renan attended a seminary, first at Issy-les-Moulineaux from 1841 to 1843, and then at Saint-Sulpice until 1845, when he abandoned his religious vocation. In 1856, he married Cornélie, daughter of the painter Henry Scheffer. The young woman's portrait was painted by his uncle, Ary, also an artist. The couple's two children – Ary, born in 1858, and Noémi, born in 1862 – are shown along with Renan's beloved older sister Henriette. A closed bed* and clothes chest are typical of Breton furniture of the past. The other furniture, including a salt bench and armchair with upholstered armrests, comes from Renan's property in Rosmapamon.



4 **A reconstruction of his study at the Collège de France:** Renan obtained his doctorate in 1852, and was appointed Professor at the Collège de France in 1862.

He was dismissed in 1864 after the publication of his polemical *Life of Jesus* in 1863, before being reappointed, this time definitively, in 1870.

The desk blotter and inkwell were a gift from his son-in-law Jean Psichari in 1882. His Académie uniform and sword are also on display. The furniture belonged to his family. His manuscripts were donated to the Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

5 **The 1903 affair:** the French Republic decided to erect a statue of Renan, representing him sitting next to Athena*. The work was commissioned from the sculptor Jean Boucher, with an inscription on the pedestal reading: "Man creates the beauty of what he loves and the holiness of what he believes". The inauguration of the monument on 13 September 1903, on the Place du Martray next to Tréguier Cathedral, gave rise to turbulent demonstrations between clericals and anticlericals. Renan, local man, theoretician of patriotism, and spokesman for secular France, continued to provoke controversy twenty years after his death.

6 **The exhibition room** evokes Renan's family. His sister Henriette died on 24 September 1861, at Amsheet, in Lebanon, while accompanying him on his archaeological mission to Phoenicia*. Renan's daughter Noémi married Jean Psichari, an eminent linguist, in 1882. The round pedestal table in marquetry, on which he finished writing his *Life of Jesus*, comes from his Paris apartment on Rue Vaneau.

Third floor

7 **Ernest Renan's bedroom** is an emotive reminder of his childhood, with an ivory rattle belonging to "Ernestic", his school reports, a lock of plaited hair, and the small square table and straight-backed chair that he used as a child.

He spent his holidays in this room until 1845. "Oh mother, my little bedroom, my books, my sweet and gentle studies, my walks with my mother – farewell forever". Originally this room served as a lookout for the shipowner who could watch the comings and goings of ships in the port and the movements of the tide.

Rear façade and garden

The private garden, in which grew a fig tree and three poplars when Renan was young, offers fine views of the rear of the house. The staircase leading to the lookout and Ernest Renan's former bedroom is housed in a rectangular tower against the rear of the building.