

CHAPTER 3

Funerary Practices and the Construction of Religious and Social Identities in the South-East of Gaul from the 4th to the 10th Century

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Abstract

How might funerary archaeology contribute to the discussion about religious identities in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages? In answer to this question, I describe the different ways in which religious and social practices are expressed and evolve in a given context. In Roman Gaul, the large-scale switch to inhumation in the second half of the 3rd century may be linked to a change in perception of the idealised image of the deceased, and is not accompanied by any change in burial practices or in the organisation and dynamics of funerary areas. A century later, traditional funerary practices are widely represented in the archaeological series, but funerary areas are emerging whose organisation and dynamics differ from those of the early Roman empire. In larger cities, some are developing around a funeral basilica erected on

How to cite this book chapter:

Blaizot, Frédérique. 'Funerary Practices and the Construction of Religious and Social Identities in the South-East of Gaul from the 4th to the 10th Century'. In *Being Pagan, Being Christian in Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages*, edited by Katja Ritari, Jan R. Stenger and William Van Andringa, 29–55. AHEAD: Advanced Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences. Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.33134/AHEAD-4-3>.

the mausoleum of a saint, and their graves clearly show changes from past practices. These new funerary expressions, which become exclusive in the second half of the 5th century, can be linked with the rise and the structuring of Christianity, along with social changes. During the Early Middle Ages, before the completion of the parish system in the 11th century, societies successively build their Christian identity. Using their burial customs and the organisation of their deceased, these societies display their socio-cultural norms, both inherited from and partly reshaped throughout their history. Our archaeological data show that in the funerary sphere, sense of religious identity is not expressed in the same way at the end of the 4th, 6th, 8th and 10th centuries, and that the real break between Antiquity and the Middle Ages relates mainly to the silencing of individual and familial memory in favour of the construction of a collective Christian memory.

Keywords: funerary archaeology, funerary transitions, burial customs, living and deceased relationships, Late Antiquity, Early Middle Ages

Discerning Pagan and Christian Funerary Practices

Studying the question of paganism in Late Antiquity through archaeology means looking for continuity of customs elaborated in the frame of the Roman religion at a time when Christianity had become the official religion of the empire. From a historical point of view, it is the same method as for Christianisation: pagans must be the starting point, as they are the ones converted to Christianity (Inglebert 2015).

This approach consists, admittedly, of calling 'paganism' that which belongs to the official Roman religion before the 4th century. This is highly debatable from a historical point of view. If the term 'paganism' contrasts with 'Christianism', it embraces a wide diversity of beliefs and cults alongside the traditional ones. The same is true of Christianity, which gives birth to various religious theories and churches (Chuvin [1990] 2009; Gauthier 1997). Moreover, as the archaeological data on Roman sanctuaries show, Christianity is enshrined in a landscape of pagan worship practices which evolved during the 3rd century, and which were deeply altered in the 4th century (Kasprzyk et al. 2014). The major problem afflicting funerary archaeology is that one cannot begin to debate questions without referring to these two distorted

categories. This difficulty makes it necessary to explore the enigma by considering how funerary diversity and variability are expressed, and to reflect on what they really mean in terms of religious beliefs and practices. Hence, we must unwind the fine thread that links practices elaborated over ten centuries to develop the following series of questions: is there a Christian identity for funeral practices? When does it begin? And how it is expressed?

From the Roman conquest onwards, in the central-south-east quarter of Gaul, there is a 'smoothing' of funeral practices (Blaizot and Bonnet 2010). We enter a system of social cohesion marked by a ritualism organised around divine governing rules, where rites aim to provide a framework to ensure certainty, continuity and consistency. In the funeral context, this system is expressed through the observance of religious practices which reflect the pact with the gods, sealed by a tripartite shared meal. Cremation, initially present in Gaul alongside inhumation in most areas, becomes the dominant practice, probably because it allows the exhibition of the dead and the shared meal, emphasising the Romanised elites: the quantity of vessels demonstrates the extent of relationships of the deceased's family and their status (Blaizot 2009, 335–37).

In Late Antiquity, a noticeable change is the adoption of inhumation as an exclusive rite. This change occurs more gradually and earlier in urban contexts than in rural areas, where it happens more quickly and a little later (Blaizot 2009, 19–25, 2019). Its relation to Christianity is not proven: the switch to inhumation happened in the second half of the 3rd century, before the emperor Constantine made Christianity the official religion. Contrary to common beliefs among archaeologists, no text makes a link between inhumation and resurrection of the flesh (Rebillard 2003). The matter of cremation or inhumation had been discussed since the end of the 2nd century. Various factors may explain this change: an attitude that began in Rome in the 2nd century, the decline of the magnificence of funeral ceremony from the second half of the 2nd century observed in towns (reduction of the pyre size, reduction in the number of vessels and in the amount of food; Blaizot 2009), and a new attention accorded to the corpse in the 3rd century (Rebillard 2003, 101).

Admittedly, the 4th century graves do not differ from previous ones in terms of their location. In the countryside, some burial areas are used from the early Roman times well into the Carolingian period.

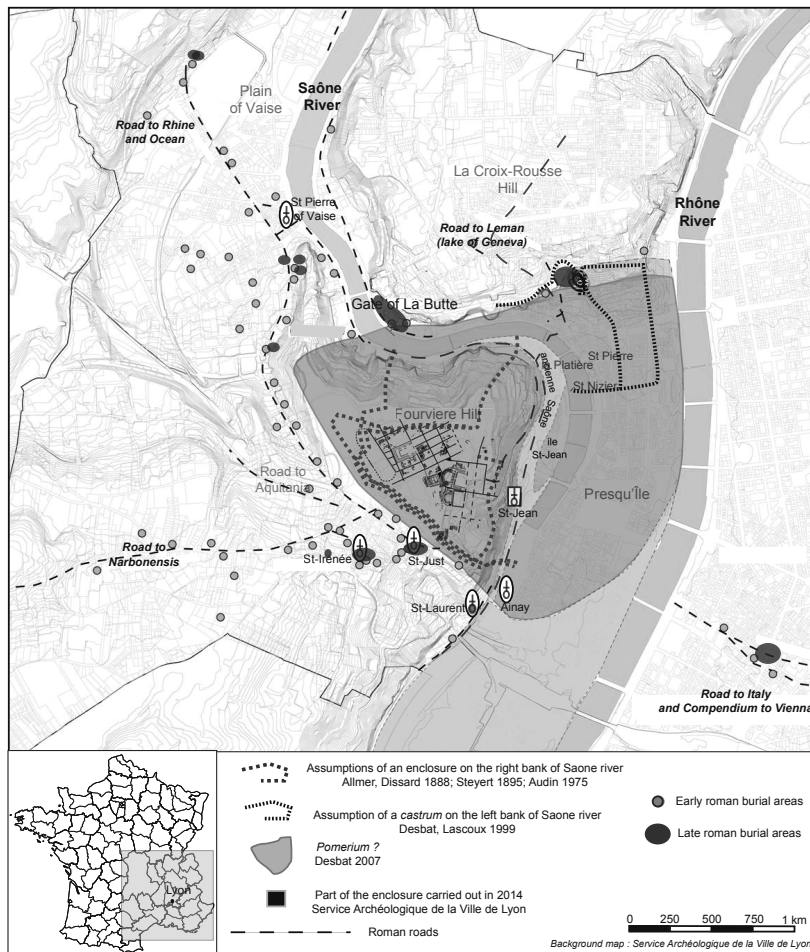


Figure 3.1: Map of Lyon from the Roman conquest until the 5th century CE. Background map: Service Archéologique de la Ville de Lyon. Image: F. Blaizot and Inrap.

In towns, late Roman burials take place in the areas occupied by early Roman graves, in the *suburbium* (Figure 3.1). In general terms, grave locations mostly follow the same pattern as before: small and short-lived groups installed on abandoned areas of settlements. The same is true in rural areas: graves are established in the landholdings or on previously abandoned areas of villas.

Nevertheless, in this century, we see a Christianisation of the peri-urban area. Funeral basilicas are placed in the *suburbium*; in Lyon, St Irenaeus and St Just, built in the last third of the 4th century, are surrounded by graves of the previous centuries, and St Just was erected upon two mausoleums built on ruined Roman bath houses. The emer-

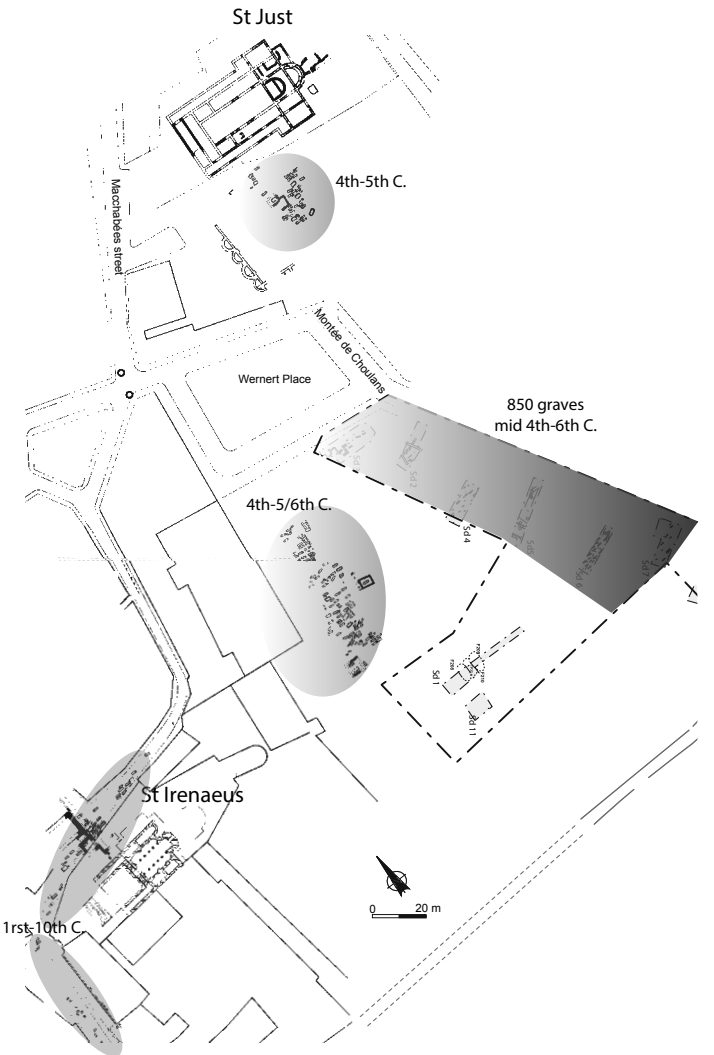


Figure 3.2: Archaeological research in the area of the Basilica St Just and St Irenaeus. Background map: Inrap.

gence of high-density burial areas constitutes a significant new fact in the suburban space. The phenomenon can be observed in Lyon in St Irenaeus and St Just, which have been the subject of several archaeological excavations since the end of the seventies ([Figure 3.2](#)). The latest excavation revealed around 800 graves dated from the second half of the 4th century until the end of the 6th century AD; these represent three quarters of the inhumations known in Lyon for the 5th and 6th centuries – before this, the funerary areas are mobile spaces with saltatory dynamics. In rural contexts, large funerary areas are rare during the 4th and 5th centuries; for those which continue through to the Carolingian period, the proportion of late antique graves remain low, with about only 30 graves per site (Blaizot 2019).

A similar pattern can be observed in the organisation and architecture of the graves. The ways of depositing the remains of the deceased are alike: as previously for cremated bones, the body is not in contact with soil but placed in a container (tiles, stones, wooden boarded coffers, coffers, or mixed, nailed wooden coffins, tree-trunk biers, lead coffins, earthenware jars for children ...) or in a pit sealed by a saddle-shaped or a flat lid. The pit is generally constructed (walls and/or lid), and memorial monuments could be erected. The posture of the dead becomes standardised: the deceased lays on their back with the lower limbs extended and the forearms straight and close to the body, contrary to the early Roman empire, where the dead person is often lying on their stomach, or even on their side as in the late Iron Age (Blaizot 2009, 39).

Separation and Commemoration

With the practice of cremation, during the Roman period, the ‘separation’ stage is illustrated by the pyre from which the deceased shares the meal with the living and the gods. The tableware used by the living cannot be taken back to the home for new uses, as it is considered to be stained by death; for this reason, the services are deliberately broken and thrown on the pyre. Burial seems to be composed of two actions: pyre debris deposit is placed directly within a pit, which could be linked to the *humatio* rite, while the mechanisms of commemoration related to the ossuary seem to identify the latter as the grave (Blaizot 2009, 316–21). Vessels deposited in the grave are interpreted as future commemoration meals (Scheid 2005, 188). These forthcom-

ing commemoration meals are not shared with the living, which can explain why the early Roman graves do not contain the broken vessels that we identify as being those of the living. This explains also why the containers placed in the graves are often mutilated: possibly to avoid confusion between living and dead, and more specifically a reminder that such vessels are those of the dead, this practice would allow everyone to be kept in their own place.

The staging of the body and the funeral banquet are comparable in the two periods: the table is set, even if late Roman burial is far from the lavish feasting which formerly served the elites, illustrated by the quantity of items/artefacts collected in the cremation layers ([Figure 3.3](#)). The finds related to the funeral meal have similar characteristics during both periods. Vessels used by the living are broken, while those intended for the dead are left intact and most often rendered unusable, mutilated, for the living. The presence of vessels used by the living alongside those intended for the deceased and placed together within the same grave seems to reflect the meal shared by the dead, the living and the gods. Previously both, in the case of a cremation, these objects, contaminated by death, would have been abandoned on the pyre. We have seen that mutilated vessels placed with the ossuary in the early Roman times seem to refer to the commemoration or 'non-shared' meal. Hence, I wonder if the unbroken but often mutilated vessels in the late antique graves may relate to both ceremonies. This seems to coincide with the combination of the two stages of the rites (separation and commemoration) within a single structure, where previously separate features (one for each action, namely pyre for separation, then pyre debris deposit for *humatio* and ossuary for grave) were required in the context of cremation (Blaizot 2009). This may be illustrated, for example, where the portion of the dead is divided into two parts, one placed within the container (coffin or similar) and the other placed outside. In any case, the presence of meat, and the vessels of the living and of the dead, demonstrates that the sacrifice and the shared meal continue to be held into the first half of the 5th century, as illustrated by imported ceramics (finely dateable) in the southern part of Rhône-Alpes. In the second half of this century, tableware and animal bones have entirely disappeared from the graves.

The architecture of the graves located near funeral basilicas is the same as that of those in other burial areas. All the deceased are buried in a container generally placed into a pit closed by a lid. Stone or

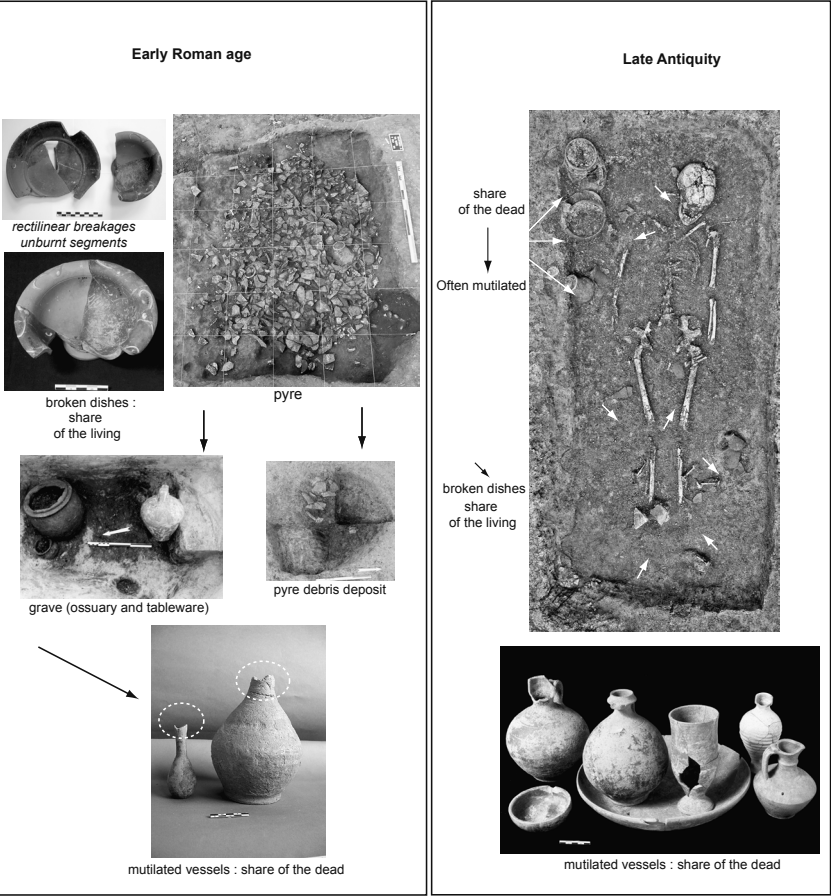


Figure 3.3: Layout and architecture of funerary structures and gestures in the early Roman empire and Late Antiquity. Drawings: F. Blaizot. Photography: Inrap.

lead sarcophagi show that the grave remains a place where the status of the deceased and their family is displayed, as in other funerary contexts. Stone or lead containers are generally placed close to the building, while wooden architectures are set at a certain distance from the monument, illustrating that the social ranking of the space surrounding religious buildings, well known in the Middle Ages, begins early. In contrast to the other funerary areas, graves situated on the periphery of these basilicas do not contain any attribute of funerary meals. This is

the case in Lyon, and in Nîmes (early 5th century), in Villeneuve-lès-Maguelonne (6th–7th centuries) and in Marseille (early 5th and 6th centuries), where the only objects left with the dead are glass vials or large ceramic balm jars (Barrauol, Raynaud and Garnotel 1998; Moliner 2011, 138–39). This increase in perfume containers observed from the end of the 3rd century in Lyon (Marty and Capelli 2016) could be linked to the new preoccupations with the body transcribed in the texts.

However, the excavations carried out in Lyon have revealed broken vessels situated on sarcophagi lids or at either end above the pits (Raynaud 1998, 106, 169, 205, 221). Remains of fireplaces, and pits that contain animal bones and ceramic shards contemporary with the graves, are also found in Lyon, at St Just and in the later basilica of St Laurent-de-Choulans, built at the end of the 5th century. These practices are observed until the end of the 6th century at St-Laurent-de-Choulans. Between the 6th and 8th centuries, in the basilica of Seyssel, at Albigny-Condion (Haute-Savoie), fragments of pots and jars come from a part of the building that, because of the absence of graves, is considered to have had a cultural use (Bizot and Serralongue 1988, 40–41). Unfortunately, data concerning these elements are poor; ceramic shards collected in the archaeological layers or in the back-fills of burials are often neglected. More precisely, they are studied only chronologically and not from a taphonomic or functional point of view (vases with liquid foods, solid, perfume, new or uses, representativity ...). They are therefore mentioned only as dating arguments, rarely described in any detail and only globally inventoried.

These remains could testify to funeral meals taken by the living, testimonies of which we have through other sources, in the Orient (Rebillard 2015). Hence, if funerary meals took place in Christian contexts, the deceased portion is missing. If these meals were taken on the day of the funeral, the absence of unbroken vessels and meat deposits in the grave which are the dead's part would mean that the latter has been excluded from the banquet, as was Ceres. These remains are the only indications of meals recorded in Christian contexts in the middle Rhone valley. It is, however, difficult to determine which meal is referred to: the funeral or the commemoration. Because none of these fragments are found within the grave, are the meals commemoration ones? These observations (systematic lack of vessels and animal bones in the pit; presence of these elements in the state of fragments in the

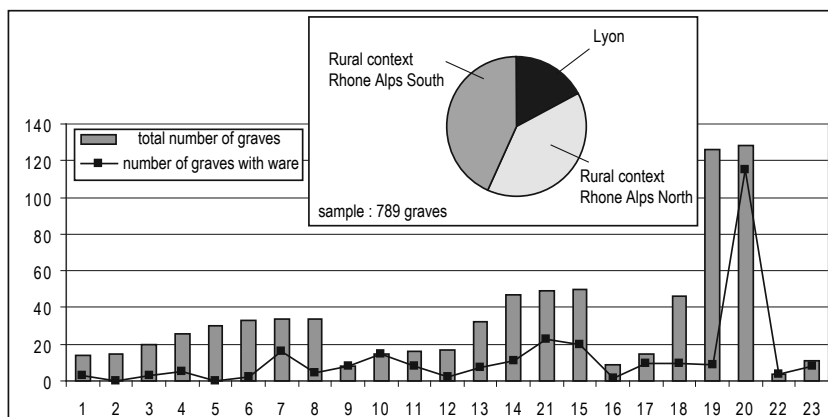


Figure 3.4: Representativity of graves with vessels: mid-3rd century to 5th century. X-axis: each number corresponds to a site; y: number of graves; straight line: number of graves with ware. Source: F. Blaizot and Inrap.

archaeological layers of the funerary area) are the only signs of change in proven Christian contexts. They can, however, be considered significant because they concern a wide range of graves at one time, and because these graves are located within the funeral basilica's boundaries. Therefore, the absence of the dead's part would show the abandonment of the sacrifice offered to the underworld gods.

Indeed, if we exclude the contexts of basilicas, all funerary areas, including rural and urban sites, provide a great diversity of layout of graves. Some sites which are contemporary and close to one another show completely different realities. Some graves contain only mutilated tableware without any broken pieces, or vice versa, others contain only one vessel, some contain more than five, while others are empty as in genuine Christian contexts. However, in contrast to what is seen on the pyres of the previous centuries, systematically provided with tableware and food, only 7% to 50% of the later graves per site contain such goods ([Figure 3.4](#)). On the other hand, similar proportions are observed for the furnishings set beside the ossuary in the early Roman graves; this observation focuses again on the question of what stage of the rite is represented when vessels are placed beside the corpse during the Late Empire.

Change in Rural and Urban Contexts

Nonetheless, a significant difference is recorded between rural contexts and the *suburbium* of Lyon, with a lower proportion of goods in the latter. The question of the apparent change which begins in the urban contexts is delicate. Are we faced with a change once again initiated in towns? And what is exactly changing?

The examination of facts over time shows that the number of graves with meal attributes increases in rural contexts but declines in urban contexts ([Figure 3.5a](#)).

The hypothesis of a decrease in the number of vessels over time has been tested: no significant result comes out at the level of the whole corpus ([Figure 3.5b](#)). However, the deposit of a single vessel is common, if not present in the majority of cases, in urban contexts from the 3rd century onwards, where the number of vessels never exceeds three.

In rural contexts, where the number of vessels may be higher, an increase in the number of graves with a single vessel appears only during the 4th century ([Figure 3.5c](#)).

The changes of pace shown when separating urban and rural contexts remind us of those illustrated in the previous century with the changeover from cremation to inhumation. Do these results show a resistance to change in rural areas? Or do they reflect a problem with our sample composition? The frequent lack of imported tableware in the late antique graves of the northern part of the region, including Lyon, means that it is difficult to follow the precise chronological evolution of deposits in a significant number of settlements, even if, as here, we have worked only with what can be considered well-dated contexts.

Several elements need to be taken into consideration:

1. The inaccuracy of our dating methods must be considered. The imported vessels are scarce or absent in the later graves of our geographic area. Therefore, the precise chronological evolution of deposits cannot be observed in a sufficiently representative number of sites.
2. We should also consider perishable containers which could alter our statistics. Such containers are frequently suggested by the presence of constricted chicken carcasses.
3. In the early Roman graves, vessel deposit is not systematic since it concerns only 6 to 60 per cent of the graves at each site. It is not

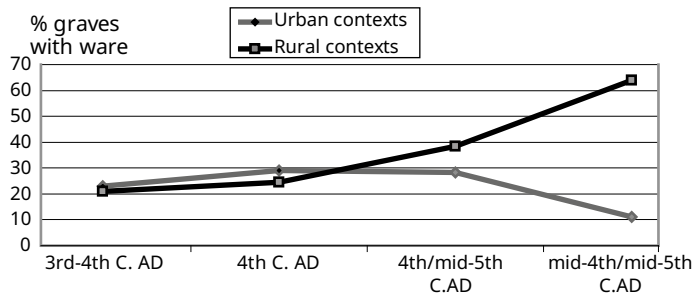


Figure 3.5a: Variation in the number of graves with vessels from the 3rd to the 5th centuries, according to their context: urban or rural. Source: F. Blaizot and Inrap.

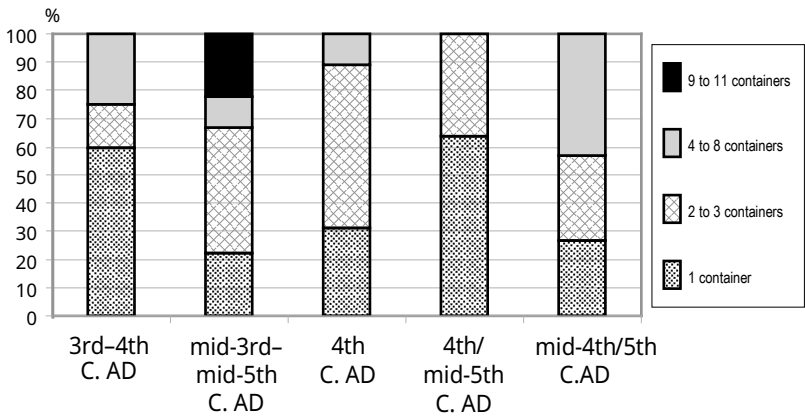


Figure 3.5b: Evolution of the number of vessels in graves from the 3rd century to the mid-5th century. Source: F. Blaizot and Inrap.

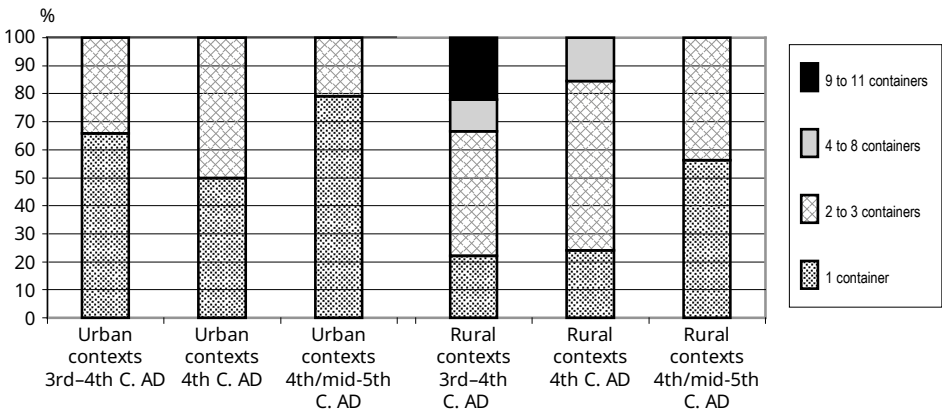


Figure 3.5c: Evolution of the number of vessels in the graves from the 3rd century to the mid-5th century, according to their context: urban or rural. Source: F. Blaizot and Inrap.

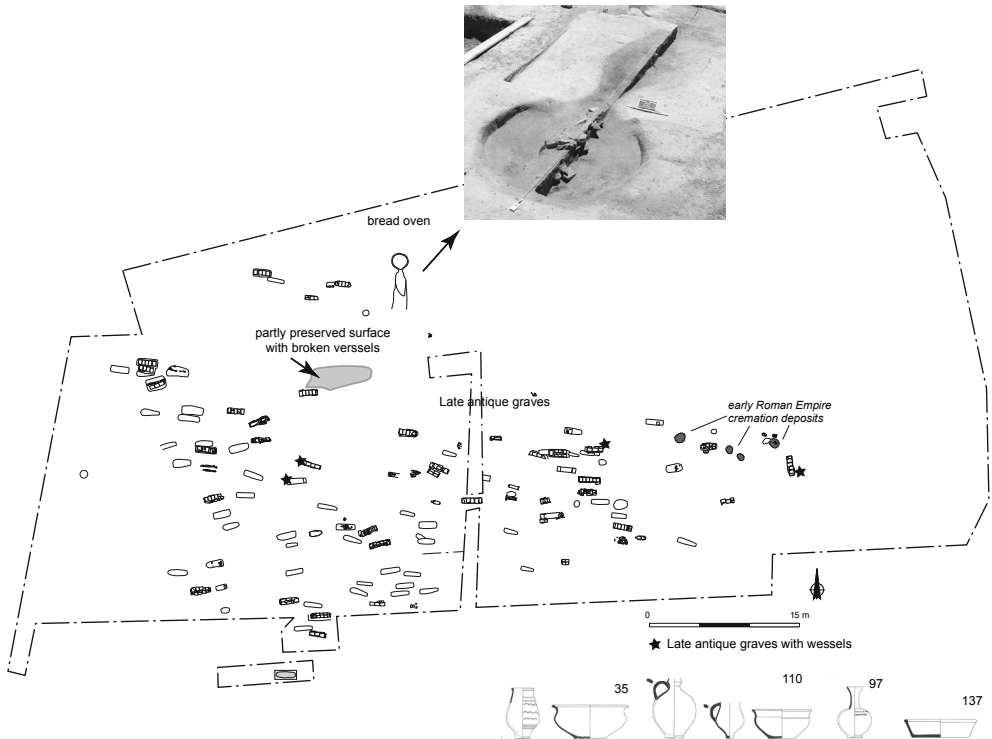


Figure 3.6: Map of the excavated part of the site of La Labre, at Châteauneuf-du-Rhône (Drôme): bread oven, partly preserved surface with broken vessels, late antique graves with vessels. CGI: P. Rigaud, F. Blaizot and Inrap.

credible to consider that the lack of goods in the early Roman graves mean that no funeral rites were performed. We should instead consider that the products of the funerary rituals, (dishes, food ...) were not systematically placed within graves. This finding constitutes a major obstacle; the lack of goods in the later graves does not necessarily signify the abandoning of Roman beliefs and rites.

To understand these evolutions, the archaeological data must be handled carefully. The highlighted differences between rural and urban behaviours need to be more deeply explored through hypothesis, and the radical differences between contemporary neighbouring sites must be considered. Do these changes illustrate conversions to Christianity?

Or do they represent the continuation of increasing lack of interest in display during funerals that began at the previous centuries?

Overall, archaeological data are often ambiguous and contradictory. For example, on the settlement of La Labre at Châteauneuf-sur-Isère (Drôme), a bread oven and broken vessels found on a partly preserved surface may have been used only for the four burials which contain vessels (Blaizot, Ronco and Bonnet 2023; [Figure 3.6](#)). Or does this small number of graves with vessels mean only that the attributes of a traditional banquet have not been placed within the other graves? Another possibility would be that this bread oven could have been built and used only for commemoration meals from which the deceased was excluded.

Christian Burials in Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages

To conclude about Late Antiquity, the absence of vessels and food in a grave which is not located in the close surroundings of basilicas is not necessarily synonymous with the abandonment of Roman beliefs and practices. On the other hand, a grave with some traditional attributes does not necessarily mean a pagan grave. The example of libation conducts in churches, especially in Africa but also in Gaul, as in the Lérins Monastery (Codou 2014, 307, figure 14), bears witness to this ambiguity. The same applies to any food deposit, as illustrated by the example of a chicken in the monastery of Luxeuil in the 6th century (Bully et al. 2014, 330). However, these pipes were not necessarily used for pouring beverages into the grave, as indicated by the physical-chemical analysis of the one excavated in the basilica 'Rue Malaval' in Marseille, which revealed the presence of fatty substances – maybe perfumed oils (Moliner 2011).

The analysis of early texts shows that there is no Christian burial cult during Late Antiquity (Rebillard 2003). The Church does not govern burial practices, which remain a family matter. Archaeology itself suggests that if the Christian grave is not characterised by the adoption of new practices, it could be illustrated by the abandonment of what, in the Roman grave, refers to the traditional religion, namely the tripartite shared meal during funerals. This shared meal, which involved Ceres, would have rapidly changed among the Christian circles in the towns, but to affirm that the banquet attributes of the Roman funerals or of the

commemoration feasts found in a grave mean that this is a pagan's grave would mean overlooking the weight of culture and of socio-familial practices. Practices may survive independently of one's discourse. It is appropriate to keep in mind the practice of celebrating the Eucharist in the presence of the corpse and sharing it with the deceased, a practice that an African canon condemned at the end of the 4th century; one can wonder about its relationship with the funerary meal of Roman tradition (an attempt at substitution? Rebillard 2003, 155). Whether a sign of paganism, an affirmation of cultural identity or purely a formal survival among Christians introducing and reinterpreting traditional practices, the presence of dishes and food is, after all, no simpler to interpret than their absence (Christians? Or pagans performing their funeral rites without depositing their attributes in the grave?).

In Gaul, the archaeological data at this stage of the research may indicate that commemorative rites are becoming increasingly important, to the detriment of separation rites. The antique iconography and texts make no mention of a possible meal taken on the day of a funeral, and the banquet scenes depicted on the early Christian sarcophagi or in the paintings never picture the dead (Jastrzebowska 1979), meaning that they unquestionably represent commemoration meals. Yet Christians and pagans have the same way of honouring their dead, by means of commemorative meals (Caseau 2015). At the end of the 4th century, commemoration banquets are condemned not because Christians take part in them but because they are offered to the dead as sacrifices. We may thus suppose a persistence of the traditional practices among Christians for some time, either unconsciously or simply at a formal level to illustrate a commemoration meal that was, as always, shared only among the living, in memory of the deceased. This meal may have been served near the grave, or more broadly within the funerary area, but it is different from that of the early Roman times because the family no longer feed the Manes of the dead beforehand. The absence of dishes or food deposits in the graves implanted near basilicas shows that the dead person is excluded from the banquet at all stages of the rite. It is particularly interesting to note that the African archaeological data show that the exclusion of the dead is marked by a change in the commemoration rites. This change is reflected by the abandoning of the cupula tomb, namely the sacrifice to the dead's Manes, in favour of a mensa which is intended for the sharing of a meal among the living (Rebillard 2015, and [Chapter 2](#) in this book).

During the following centuries, burial areas are used over longer periods of time than before. There is a growing stabilisation in the location of burial areas, even when no sanctuary is built. In other words, burial areas, once made up of rather scattered and juxtaposed little family groups or corporations along roads or on the landholdings of a villa, become community areas, open to a wider range and greater number of people. Most of them, in rural and urban contexts, are in areas previously used for burial from the second half of the 3rd and in the 4th century. The restructuring of economy and settlements during the Merovingian period is probably involved in these changes. The rules according to which these funerary areas are structured remain largely unknown, for the 5th and 6th centuries. In some funerary areas graves are organised around the funeral monument of a particular individual, while others show a hierarchy between individuals transcribed by the location of their graves, regardless of the existence of a sanctuary (Bizot and Serralongue 1988; for the northernmost regions of Gaul, see Demolon 2006; Pilet 1994). In the south-eastern part of Gaul, the scarcity of grave goods in contrast with the northern and eastern parts does not allow us to take these questions further: the burial assemblages appear as a juxtaposition of silent graves.

Over time, the dead are more and more frequently grouped around a sanctuary, a funerary church and later a church for worship. Just as in the 4th century, these buildings may have been founded above a mausoleum within an earlier funerary area, or not. But burial areas of various sizes without churches continue to be used or are created. If many burial areas have been abandoned by the 9th century, the move of the dead towards the sacred is not completed before the 10th century. At this time the parish system is achieved, and only burial areas with a church are maintained.

Scattered and isolated graves in fields or at the boundaries of landholdings coexisting alongside a grouped burial area around a church have contributed to the debate about paganism. These graves, which we come across until the early 11th century, do not generally show marked differences, from a burial customs viewpoint, from those located close to a church or in a community burial area. This 'double system', which appears during the 7th century, seems to exist in the context of large, landed estates and should be read in relation to the status of the concerned establishments and people. Some of them, mainly dated from the 7th and 8th centuries, concern only a small number of

people, often with high-status attributes, who remain on a line of continuity from the Roman period, where the landowner and his family are buried on their own land (Blaizot 2017). Other burial areas contain individuals selected on the basis of gender and age ([Figure 3.7](#)). In these cases, the presence of groups of men, groups of women, or a large number of children and adolescents (5–14 years old) inconsistent with natural demography evokes data on slavery and skilled workers listed in the Carolingian establishments' census (Blaizot 2017). Some of them could be the graves of pagans, but there is nothing that can differentiate them from those located within collective burial areas, except maybe some unconventional positions that are encountered only in these contexts for these periods (prone position, lying on one side, sometimes interred in disused domestic structures such as grain storage pits or wells). Are these deviant cases sufficient to interpret these graves as those of non-Christians?

The analysis of burial modalities shows how the funeral sphere has contributed to the construction of a Christian identity and its incorporation within a social and politic system:

Until the 6th century, burials are no different from those of previous centuries ([Figure 3.8](#)), except for the decline of nailed coffins. The dead are still buried within containers deposited in pits that are not filled with earth. Tree-trunk caskets, wooden or tile coffers, or a combination of these materials are placed in pits whose sides are constructed or which are closed by a lid ('chamber tombs'). Except for the eastern regions of Gaul (characterised by Germanic cultures), graves contain no dishes or food. At this period, the grave is conceptualised as the last place where the individual appears and where their memory will be honoured, as in previous centuries. Emphasis is given to the identity of the deceased and their individual memory. The body, adorned with jewellery and clothing accessories (when possessed), is probably exposed (for viewing) in its container, placed in a built chamber. Wooden constructions or enclosures have been identified on some sites, as in the 4th century. As we saw previously, sites with good levels of preservation show material evidence of funeral meals until at least the mid-6th century. In the East, the placing of dishes and food in early Merovingian graves should not be interpreted as a continuation of the traditional Roman sacrificial meal but could be related to the rise and maintenance of aristocratic power (Halsall 1998). It is one form of reciprocal gift-giving, and a social display illustrated using still-func-

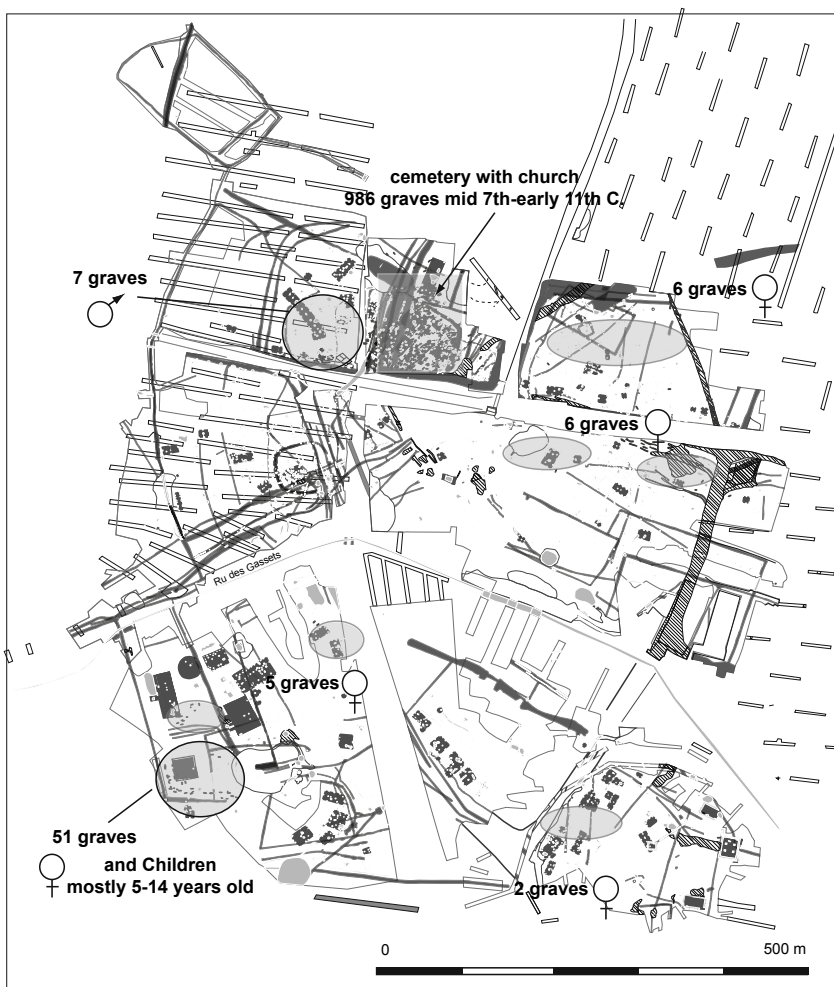


Figure 3.7: Map of the burials scattered at the boundaries of the land-holding of Les Ruelles à Serris (Seine-et-Marne): sex and age distribution. CGI: F. Blaizot, F. Gentili and Inrap.

tioning identity attributes parallel to the introduction of new elements such as ostentatious jewellery (Halsall 1998, 335–36).

- In the second half of the 6th and in the 7th century, the focus is on the social relationships of the deceased by means of a new prac-

tice ([Figure 3.9](#)). Successive deposits are made in the same grave pit, and the relation with the previous corpse is illustrated by the scene-making of the bones: the skull is placed on the lid of the last coffin, and long bones are gathered at one end of the container to be seen. It should be noted that this practice involves only adults and never concerns more than two or three people. Elite status is indicated by this practice and by the presence of some objects of quality (jewellery and clothing accessories). Despite successive deposits, the individuality of each person is respected; the dislocated bones of each individual are never mixed with those of another body. Each one is laid in their own container, onto which the next one is placed; bones can also be put between the new container and one of the pit's sides. In the case of an accidental discovery of bones while creating a new grave, they are grouped and reinterred in roughly the same place. In the north-east, funeral display is less ostentatious (less jewellery, less tableware, which tends to disappear), and at the end of the 7th century these practices are abandoned (Halsall 1998).

- During the 7th and 8th centuries, alongside individual tombs, one encounters graves that function in a similar way to later vaults ([Figure 3.10](#)). The localisation of these reutilised graves, generally grouped in a part of the burial area, seems to be a new and unique status indicator, for small groups of people. Personal markers and belongings are absent; the idea of individuality disappears in favour of collectivity. For each successive interment, the bones of the previous occupants are gathered and sorted regardless of the individual. This is usual too in the case of the partial destruction of a previous grave while digging a new one: the removed part of the earlier skeleton is reintegrated in the new pit, and the undisturbed bones are left. The bones of a large number of individuals (up to ten or more) may be thus relocated within the grave; as the number of individuals increases, a new sorting takes place among the bones in order to make room by retaining a *pars pro toto* of the dead. The rest of bones – the smaller ones – are discarded in the fill of the pit, or even onto the ground of the burial area.
- From the 9th century, we identify new graves where the corpse is placed directly on the bottom of the grave pit, covered by a lid, and containers are often bottomless ([Figure 3.11](#)). The exhibition of a body in the tomb seems to lose its importance, in favour,

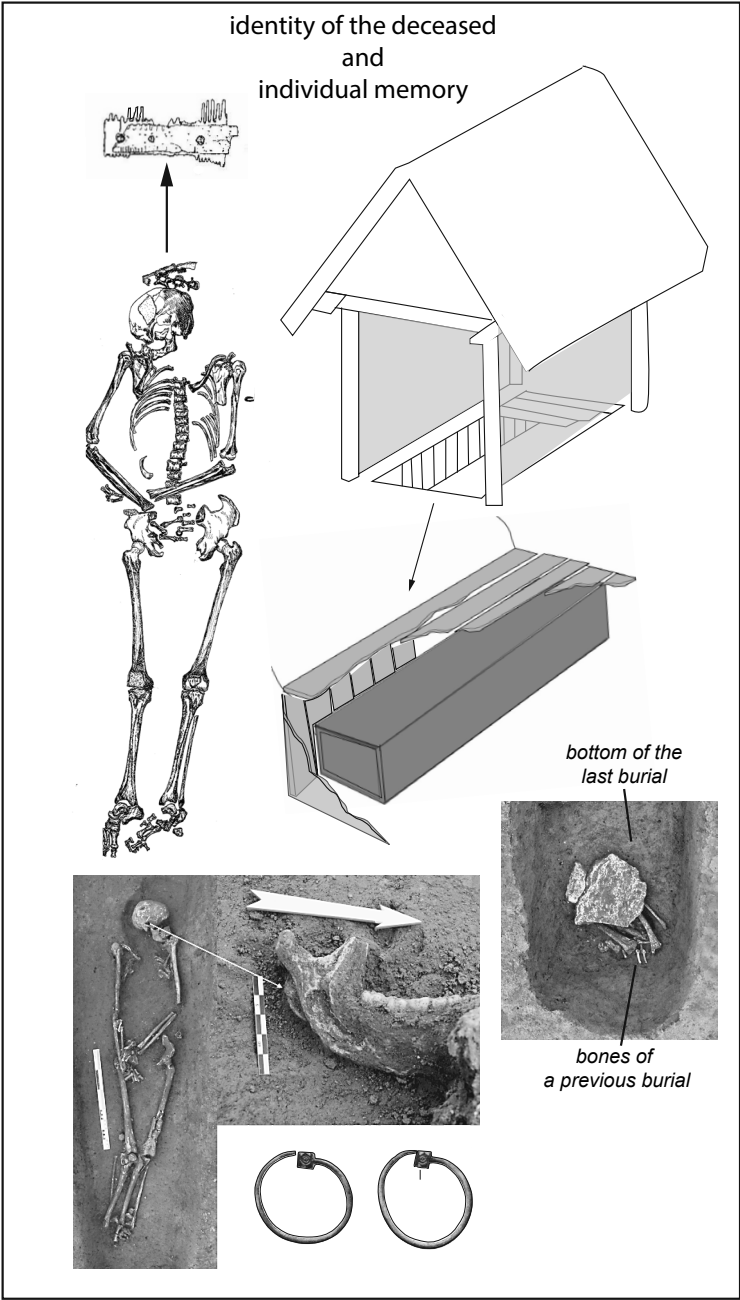


Figure 3.8: Layout and architecture of funerary structures and funerary gestures in the mid-5th and the 6th centuries. Drawings: F. Blaizot. Photography: Inrap.

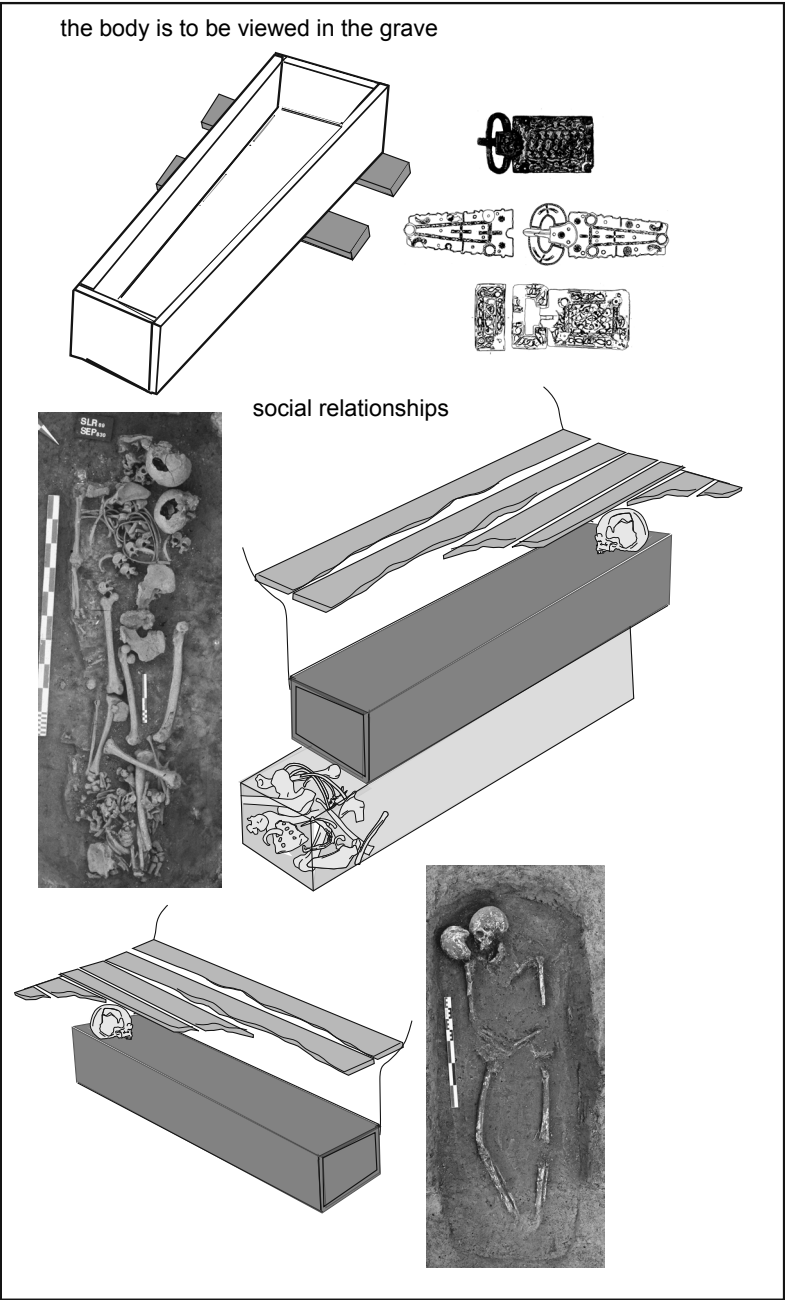


Figure 3.9: Layout and architecture of funerary structures and funerary gestures in the mid-6th century and the 7th century. Drawings: F. Blaizot. Photography: Inrap.

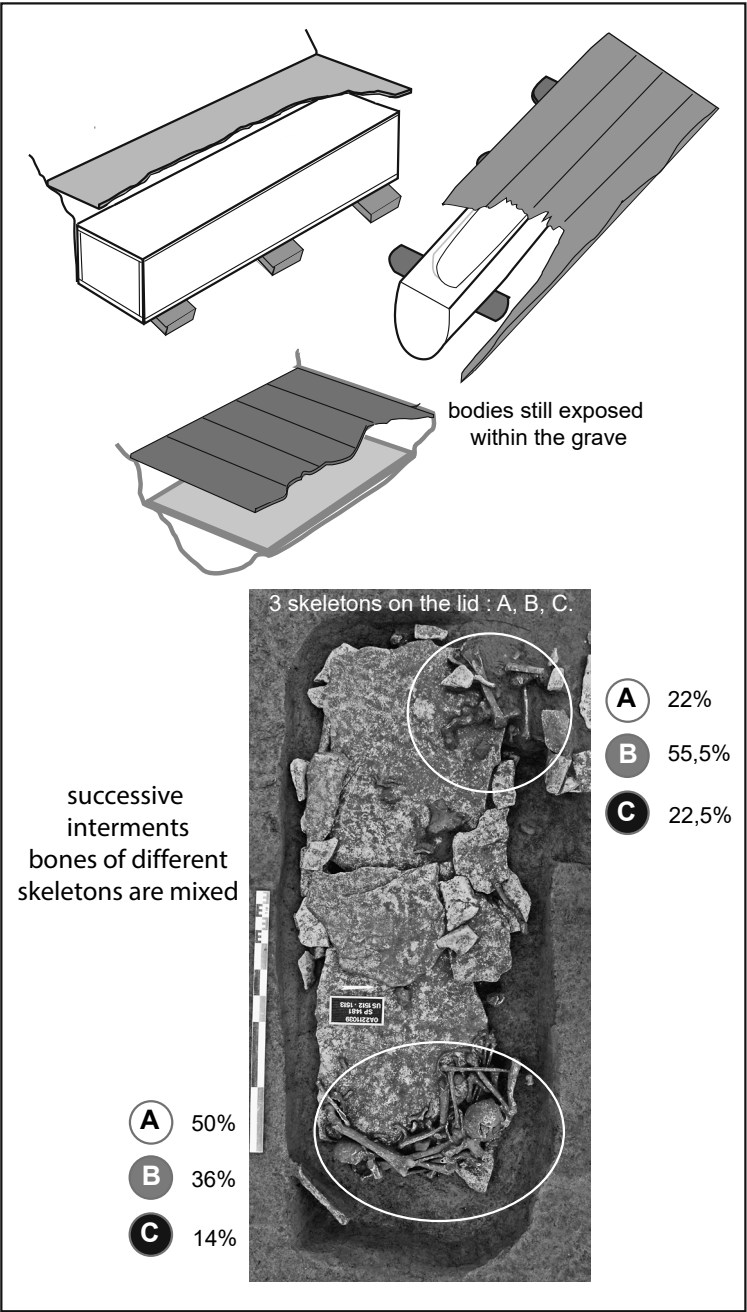


Figure 3.10: Layout and architecture of funerary structures and funerary gestures in the 8th century. Drawings: F. Blaizot. Photography: Inrap.

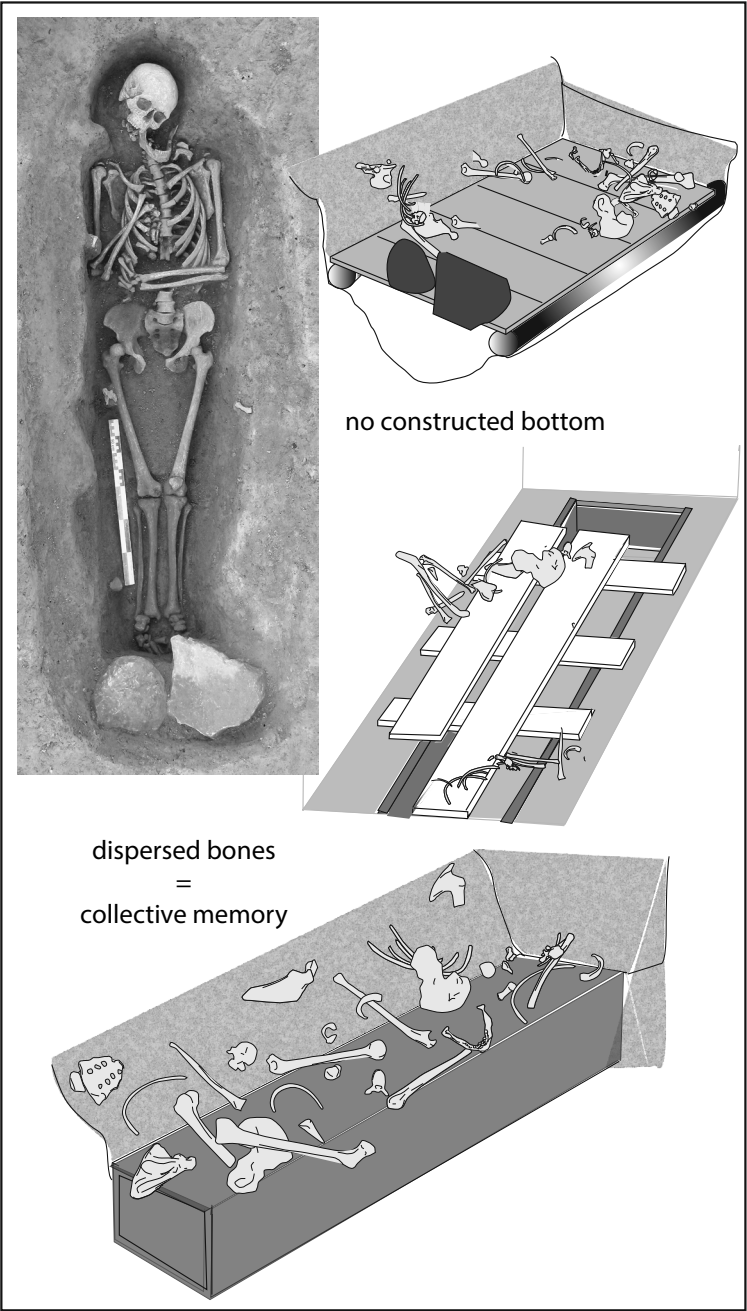


Figure 3.11: Layout and architecture of funerary structures and funerary gestures from the 9th to the beginning of the 11th century. Drawings: F. Blaizot. Photography: Inrap.

perhaps, of the accompanying act of procession to the grave, as attested in Carolingian texts (Treffort 1996). The multiple reutilisation of graves disappears. The bones of previous burials are collected and deposited in collective ossuaries or discarded on the ground of the cemetery. While iconographic evidence confirms their existence, the archaeological evidence from this period shows uniquely dispersed bones randomly relocated in later burial fills. The model 'simple grave-cut' and 'dispersed bones' will prevail during the following centuries.

Conclusions

In the 4th century, the graves of Christians are identified only by the context in which they are located (basilicas). However, as a church, as a building, is not necessary to the burial of early Christians, we may suppose that other areas could have hosted Christian burials. Burials excavated close to the basilica of Lyon show that, both physically and organisationally, the Christian grave is not defined by new traits but characterised only by the abandonment of those related to the traditional religion in the Roman grave, namely the sacrifice followed by a meal shared between the dead, the living and the gods on the day of the funeral. While Christians and pagans honour their dead in the same way, through commemoration meals, the funeral meal of the former expresses new social practices relating to *partage* (sharing and gifts) among people of the same faith. Frequently called to order by bishops, Christians develop an identity whose expressions are not defined, because they are only constructed, at first, in opposition to the heathen. Because of the polysemy of the objects (vessels, libation conducts), archaeological data need to be interpreted with caution. Changes are made up of continuities and discontinuities that affect the nature, the function and the expression of practices, as was previously the case at the time of the Roman conquest of Gaul (Blaizot and Bonnet 2010), and as research on the passage from the worship of the gods to the cult of the saint has highlighted (Inglebert 2015). In archaeology, it is sometimes difficult to know if we are facing different practices or different expressions of similar practices. We must be careful of confusions: a dangerous shift may occur from cultural to religious identity, while both of these aspects function well together. During the 3rd and the 4th centuries, grave objects could convey cultural identity, or they

could mean only that funeral honours were given to the dead, without any link between the items and the actual way of honouring them.

The question of non-Christian graves during the Early Middle Ages seems to be a dead end. Data inform us instead on how religious and social practices are expressed and evolve over time and show that the transition of the dead towards the sacred sphere is slow. Over the centuries, the grave is a place where several identities coexist and adapt to one another. Earthly claims do not prevent the construction of a Christian identity. Up until the 8th century, most funeral assemblages appear to be simply a juxtaposition of individuals; collectivity seems to be expressed only on a family level (kinship, relatives, ancestors). Burial is still the privileged place of funerary expression, a means of multiple communications, but Christian identity is not defined by the material traits assigned to the burial, apart from inscriptions, accessories or ornaments where the decoration testifies the relationship to Christian religion. A real change appears during the 9th century. The grouping together of individuals around a religious building accelerates. This is the beginning of the Christian cemetery. It is no longer individuals that are buried side by side but Christians that are brought together. Tombs are less and less long-lasting; remembrance fades towards prayers; more exactly, the exercise of remembrance no longer needs graves, which become ephemeral during the 10th century. If the grave during early Roman times, is the result of strict religious observances, the analysis of burial practices of the Early Middle Ages seems to show that the rites accompany the constitution of the grave, but it remains difficult to know exactly when, between the 9th century and the 11th century, this change occurred.

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