

Probable Frankish burials of the sixth century AD at Saint-Dizier (Haute-Marne, Champagne-Ardenne, France)

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Abstract

In 2002, excavations carried out by Inrap at Saint-Dizier revealed three exceptionally rich graves – a woman, two men and a horse – dating from around 525 – 550 AD. These graves present features that differ from the usual funerary practices known in the region: Morken-type chambers, horse burials, swords with rings, etc. These elements link the Saint-Dizier tombs with the 6th century ‘Frankish chieftain’ graves, interpreted as evidence for Frankish expansion. The questions of whether the people buried at Saint-Dizier were Franks is not strictly addressed in terms of ethnicity but rather in terms of social and political identities. The splendour and ritual of these graves indicate that the dead had a particular material culture and were eager to demonstrate that they belonged to an elite that followed a strict set of rules regarding death and burial.

Keywords

Privileged burials, ceremonial swords with pommel rings, Morken-type burial chamber, horse burial

Introduction

The excavation in 2002 of an early medieval settlement at the La Tuilerie district of Saint-Dizier brought about the unexpected

discovery of four burials, of two male and one female human, and a horse (Fig. 1). The exceptionally rich grave goods suggest that the deposit can be dated to the second quarter or the middle of the 6th century AD². The La Tuilerie district is located to the south of the town, in an area that has provided abundant archaeological data. The area is particularly well known as a result of a series of evaluations and excavations that began in 1993, in advance of the construction of the southern Saint-Dizier bypass and the development of the adjacent commercial area of Chêne Saint-Amand. In the latter area alone, more than 10 hectares have been the subject of evaluations, with almost 6 hectares consequently excavated³. These archaeological investigations have shown that the entire sector was continuously occupied from the late Iron Age until the 12th century AD.

1 The presentation of the site and the finds

The graves were situated about 30 cm. apart. This may suggest inhumations that were either simultaneous or else very close in time, two possibilities that are confirmed by the homogeneity of the grave goods. In the latter case, the juxtaposition of the graves can be taken to imply knowledge of the previous burials, still visible in the earth. In either case, this grouping demonstrates a clear desire to bring together these individuals in death, and apart from chronological considerations, probably indicates an important family or social group.

The individuals buried at this Saint-Dizier site are a male aged around 30⁴ (Burial 11)⁵, an adolescent female aged 17 to 19 (Burial 12)⁶, and a male aged around 50 (Burial 13)⁷. Biological analysis⁸ has revealed that all three were in a much better

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² End of Phase MA1 and Phase MA2 of Legoux,

Périn, Vallet 2006.

³ Beague-Tahon 199; Durost 2004; Truc 2009.

⁴ Diagnosis of sex determined with five morphoscopic characteristics after Bruzek 1991.

⁵ All the visible cranial sutures are open: Masset 1982.

⁶ Moorrees *et al.* 1963; Ferembach, Schwidetzky

& Stloukal 1979; Birkner 1980.

⁷ Synostosis coefficient of the exocranial sutures: 1.2, stage 6, giving an age-range of 38 to 64, with a potential error of plus or minus 13 years, after Masset 1982.

⁸ Carried out by Cécile Paresys, Inrap; see also her report in Truc 2009, vol. 1.

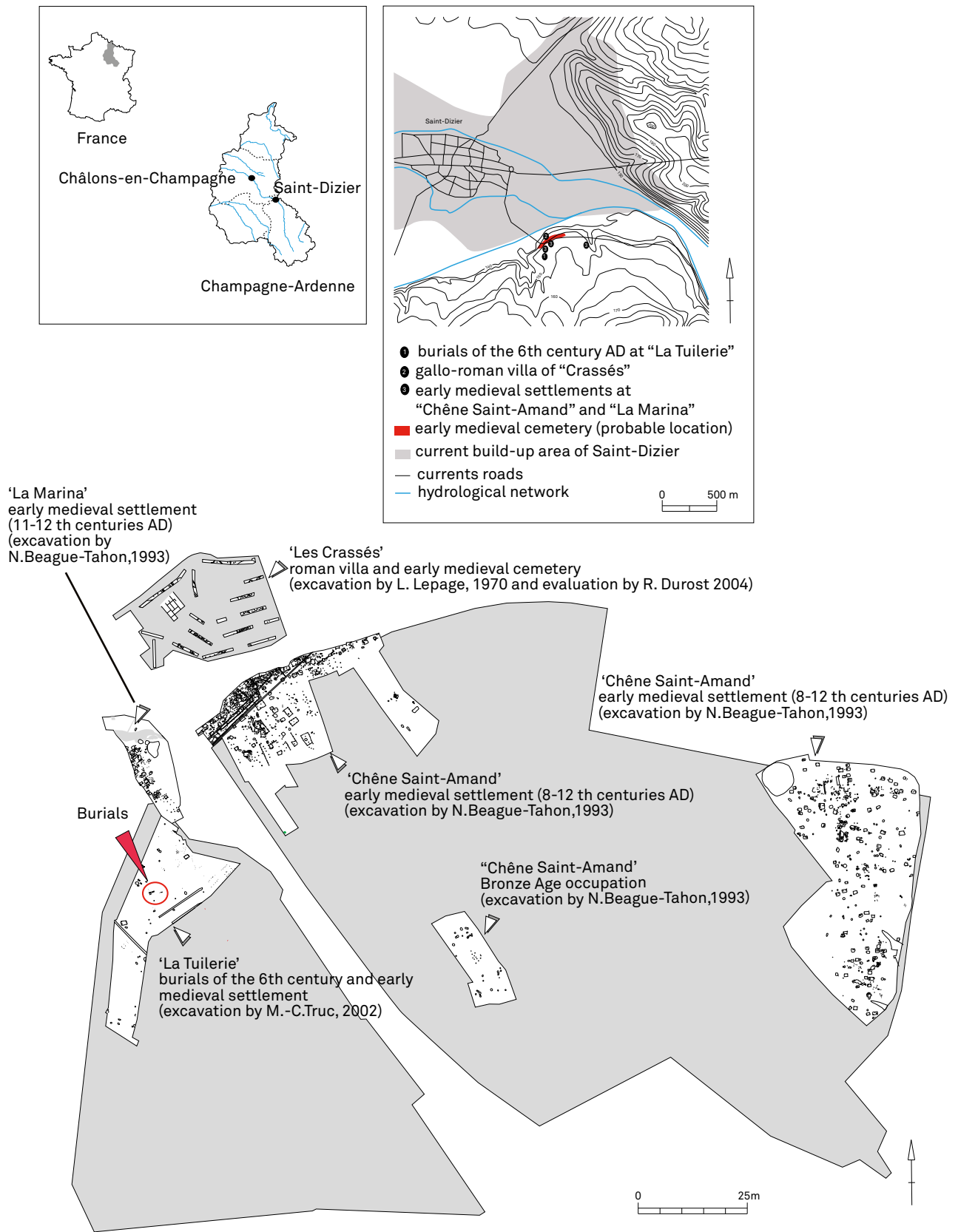


FIG. 1 Location of the excavations. Map by Inrap.

state of health than that of previously studied contemporary populations, and indicates life in rather favourable conditions for the period.

1.1 The female grave (Burial 12) (fig. 2-3)

The young woman was in a supine position in a pit, accompanied by a abundant jewellery, clothing accessories and tableware.

◦ The grave goods

At the level of the neck, two circular silver brooches, decorated with garnet cloisonné, had been used to close the collar⁹. Two asymmetric handled (radiate-headed) brooches in gilt silver had been placed on the abdomen of the deceased, having served to close the tunic¹⁰. These must also have held a belt, in perishable material – not preserved, but suggested by the presence of a knife and a large antler bead found between the knees.

Around the neck there was a necklace of thirty or so beads in amber and glass. On the chest were found about seventy beads in various shapes and materials¹¹. In the absence of evidence found in the excavation, the interpretation of their function is difficult, but we suppose that they must have been sewn into the border of the clothing, or else on a cloth or in a bag placed on the body. At her right hand there was a brilliant gold ring, set with garnets and decorated with gold filigree. On her left wrist there was a silver bracelet, with open, everted ends¹².

Finally the grave inventory was completed by a goblet¹³ and a bottle in glass¹⁴, a basin in copper alloy with bead-decorated rim, and a ceramic bowl. The number of funerary vessels, as well as their quality, is wholly exceptional for the Champagne-Ardenne region.

◦ Burial method

The young woman was buried in a rectangular grave measuring 2.25 by 0.8 m. Heavy levelling of the area makes it impossible to determine the original depth.

The presence of nails and taphonomic indicators suggest that there was a rectangular coffin originally measuring 2.20 by 0.52 m. The deceased was laid inside adorned with her jewellery and clothing accessories. The presence of clothing is attested by the disposition of the jewellery and the brooches in their functional positions, as well as by some textile fragments found in contact with metallic objects.

The toppled position of the two glass vessels seems to suggest that they had been placed on the coffin at the time of the burial. The original positions of the basin and the ceramic bowl are less clear; when compared with the evidence from Burial 11, it is tempting to suggest that these vessels were also placed on the coffin.

1.2 The male graves (Burials 11 and 13) (fig. 4)

The two male graves show great similarity in the type and positioning of the grave goods, as well as in their architecture.

◦ The grave goods

The men were buried with a complete array of weapons (axes, shields¹⁵, arrowheads, seaxes, lances and angons), indicating both their status as warriors and their high social rank. In fact, even though in Merovingian graves it is relatively common to find an axe, a seax, and parts of shields, the addition of a sword, a lance or an angon is always characteristic of a member of the elite. Helmets and cuirasses may appear in graves of still higher status¹⁶.

The two swords at Saint-Dizier are unquestionably spectacular. They are preserved in their alder scabbards with a silver scabbard-head at the bottom. The scabbard of the sword in Burial 11 is decorated with two cylindrical beads in gold and ivory. Each sword has a pyramid-shaped pommel in gilt silver. The pommel of the younger male (Burial 11) bears a runic inscription whose transcription reads *alu*, which can be translated as ‘progress’ or ‘power’¹⁷. These pommels were lengthened by two rings. Only those of the sword in Burial 11 have been preserved, but their

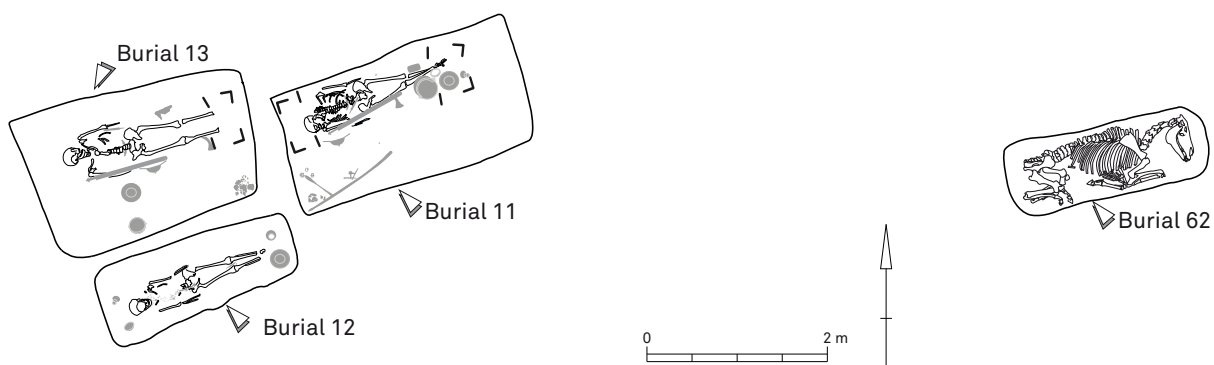


FIG. 2 Plan of the funerary deposit. Plan by C. Paresys and M.-C. Truc (Inrap).

⁹ Veilitz, 2003, 104, fig. 44, Group A6.

¹⁰ Koch 1998, 111-113, Group I3341.

¹¹ Ovoid beads in amber, large glass or rock crystal beads, tubular beads in blue glass, blue-green micro-pearls, cylindrical beads in clear or gilded glass, and pierced Roman silver coins linked by a

copper-alloy wire.

¹² Wührer 2000, 16, 123 & fig. 6, Type 2.1; Martin 1976, 84.

¹³ Feyeux 2003, Type 1.31a.

¹⁴ Feyeux 2003, Type 20.0. Glass analysis by Hubert Cabart; see his report in Truc 2009, vol. 1.

¹⁵ The shield bosses are Hübener 1989, 88, Abb. 2, Type II.

¹⁶ Périn 1972, 54-55.

¹⁷ Fischer *et al.* 2008, 105-107.

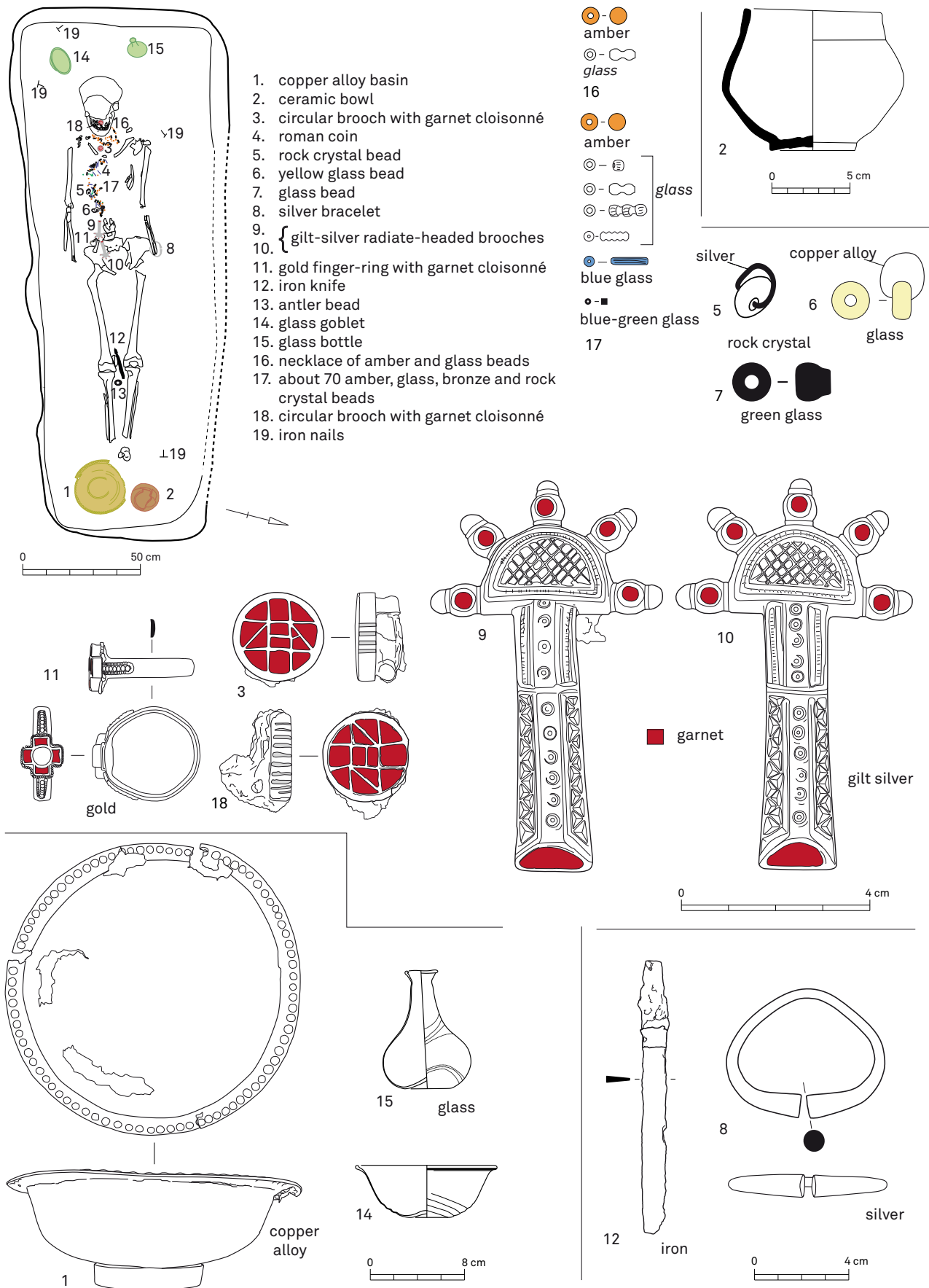


FIG. 3 Burial 12: plan and finds. Plan by C. Paresys; glass and beads drawn by C. Cabart; metalwork drawn by S. Culot; ceramics drawn by A. Ahü-Delor (Inrap).

presence on the sword in Burial 13 is indicated by an indentation made at the end of the pommel.

The axes, with their smooth profiles and ash handles – ash having been classically used for shafts and handles of thrown weapons¹⁸ – seem to be related to the francisca type of throwing axe¹⁹.

The seaxes were found in their alder scabbards, sheathed in leather and with a silver scabbard-head at the bottom. A long, fine knife with gold handle had been slipped into a pocket behind the scabbard of Burial 13. This type of knife, mainly found between the Seine and the Rhine, was in principle the privilege of wealthy burials, female as well as male²⁰.

In Burial 11 there were also a lance²¹ and an angon²², both originally with shafts made of ash, of which some traces remained. The angon was a characteristic Frankish weapon, used both for throwing and for hand-to-hand combat. A high status item, it is fairly rare in graves and is only found in the most prestigious burials²³. Among the accessories found were belt buckles and the clasps of purses. The former are in rock crystal and silver; the latter are of Arlon type²⁴, with the ends in the forms of horses heads, decorated with garnet cloisonné. The rectangular central frame of the Burial 11 clasp is inlaid with lapis lazuli, previously unknown on this type of object²⁵.

The younger male also wore a gold finger-ring on his left hand. Against his left leg there was a double-sided composite bone comb in its case, upon which there remained traces of a red colour. This comb is richly decorated with engraved lines and pierced circular eyelets forming a series of openwork quatrefoils. Combs of this type are rare in the early medieval period and in 1995, Michel Petitjean had recorded only fourteen, of which some, comparable to those found at Saint-Dizier, came from Lombard Italy from the beginning of the 6th century²⁶.

Additionally, three buckles were found in the south-west angle of the funerary chamber of Burial 11, in silver-Damascened iron, in copper alloy, and in silver, located. Their proximity with a horse's bit in silver-Damascened iron²⁷ suggests that they were part of a harness with the leather parts not preserved.

Each grave enclosed a substantial number of elements of tableware that is considerably superior to that found in other graves excavated in the region. Burial 11 yielded a goblet²⁸ and a bottle²⁹ in glass, a copper alloy basin with bead-decorated rim similar to the one found with the young woman, and finally a Westland cauldron in copper alloy³⁰, which enclosed two bowls, one in maple wood and one in glass³¹. Burial 13 also contained three glass vessels (two goblets³² and a bell-shaped beaker with terminal button³³), a copper alloy basin and a bucket. This last object is notable for its rich decoration: the upper part consists of a frame in copper alloy, decorated with

circular eyelets and nineteen triangular applied stamped decorations in the form of stylised human masks. The rings connecting the handle, with an openwork profile, were similarly decorated with circular eyelets, and the handle, also richly ornamented, is linked by means of a pin with the head of an animal. Finally three iron hoops held the pine staves in place. Until now just fifty or so examples of this type are known in western Europe, most of them found in rich graves found between the Rhine and the Meuse³⁴.

⊙ Burial method

The men were buried in rectangular funerary chambers measuring 2.70 by 1.50 m., and at least 0.80 m. deep. These were sealed by a wooden lid, observed in the excavation by a particular colouration in the soil. Dark fibrous traces, detected against the wall of Burial 11 also provide evidence of a wooden box. Almost one square metre of the oak floor of the Burial 13 chamber was very well preserved.

The deceased lay dressed, each with their clothing accessories, their sword and their seax in a rectangular oak coffin, closed by iron brackets, which was set against the north wall of the chamber. The other weapons were found outside the coffin: shields and axes were set vertically against the south wall. The angon and the lance of Burial 11 were placed on the lid of the funerary chamber, the points towards the west.

The tableware was also outside the coffins: in Burial 11, the cauldron, the basin and the bottle were set on the coffin, above the feet. The glass goblet had been placed upside-down in the south-west corner of the chamber, probably at a height above the floor. In Burial 13, the basin and the bucket were set on the floor, the former overturned. In the latter there were silver aglets and shoe buckles. Lastly, the glass vessels were found broken in the south-east corner of the chamber.

Elsewhere in Burial 11, dark traces of wood were clearly visible at the foot of the coffin, marking a quadrilateral with an interior surface of 0.15 m². This was doubtless the remains of a chest that had contained offerings. Similar arrangements were observed in Grave 4 at Klepsau (Germany)³⁵ and in Grave 319 at Lavoye (France)³⁶.

1.3 The horse burial (fig. 5)

A horse burial was found at about 5.50 m. to the east of the human graves. The animal, a male of 8 to 10 years old, was buried on its side, at an inverse orientation to that of the humans. It must have been a horse for riding, as attested by the wear of the lower premolar teeth that is characteristic of the use of a bit³⁷. The immediate proximity of the burial to the human graves, along with the presence of a horse's bit in Burial 11, suggests that the horse may have belonged to this man.

¹⁸ Identification by Willy Tegel: see his report in Truc 2009, vol. 3.

¹⁹ Böhner 1958, tome 1, 22, & tome 2, pl. 31, Type A; and Legoux, Périn, Vallet 2004, 23, Type 2.

²⁰ Werner 1968, 653, fig. 1.

²¹ Böhner 1958, Vol. 1, 148, Type A.4 and Legoux, Périn, Vallet 2004, 25, Type 33.

²² Von Schnurbein 1987, Type C.

²³ Von Schnurbein 1987, 419.

²⁴ Windler 1994, 94 and following pages.

²⁵ Analysis by Thomas Calligaro: see Calligaro 2005.

²⁶ Petitjean 1995, 165.

²⁷ Oexle 1992, tome 1, 34 (and following pages)

Type I horse's bit with branches, and tome 2, fig. 2.

²⁸ Feyeux 2003, Type T.81.0.

²⁹ Feyeux 2003, Type 20.0.

³⁰ Pirling 1974, tome 1, 115, and probably Hauken

2005, 25-26, Type 2D.

³¹ Feyeux 2003, Type 81.1a.

³² Feyeux 2003, Type 81.1 acp.

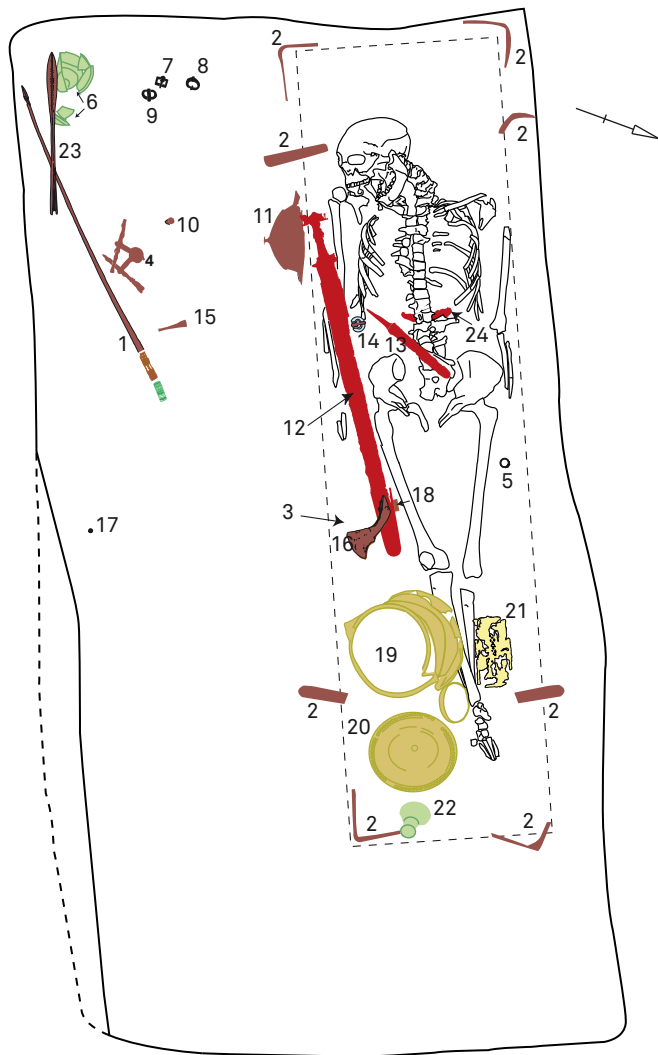
³³ Feyeux 2003, Type 56.1d.

³⁴ Pirling 1974, tome 1, 111-112.

³⁵ Koch 1990, 22-24 et fig. 4-5.

³⁶ Joffroy 1974, 100.

³⁷ Archeozoological analysis by J.-H. Yvinec; see his report in Truc 2009, 134.



1. iron and copper alloy angon
2. iron bracket
3. oak coffin fragment
4. horse's bit in silver-Damascened iron
5. gold finger-ring
6. glass goblet
7. copper alloy buckle
8. iron buckle
9. buckle in silver-Damascened iron
10. copper alloy rivet of the shield boss
11. iron shield boss
12. sword in alder scabbard with silver, ivory and gold decoration
13. scramasaxe in alder scabbard
14. rock crystal and silver buckle
15. iron nail
16. iron axe
17. copper alloy ring
18. iron arrows
19. copper alloy cauldron
20. copper alloy basin
21. bone comb
22. glass bottle
23. iron spear
24. clasp of purse (silver, garnet cloisonné, lapis lazuli)

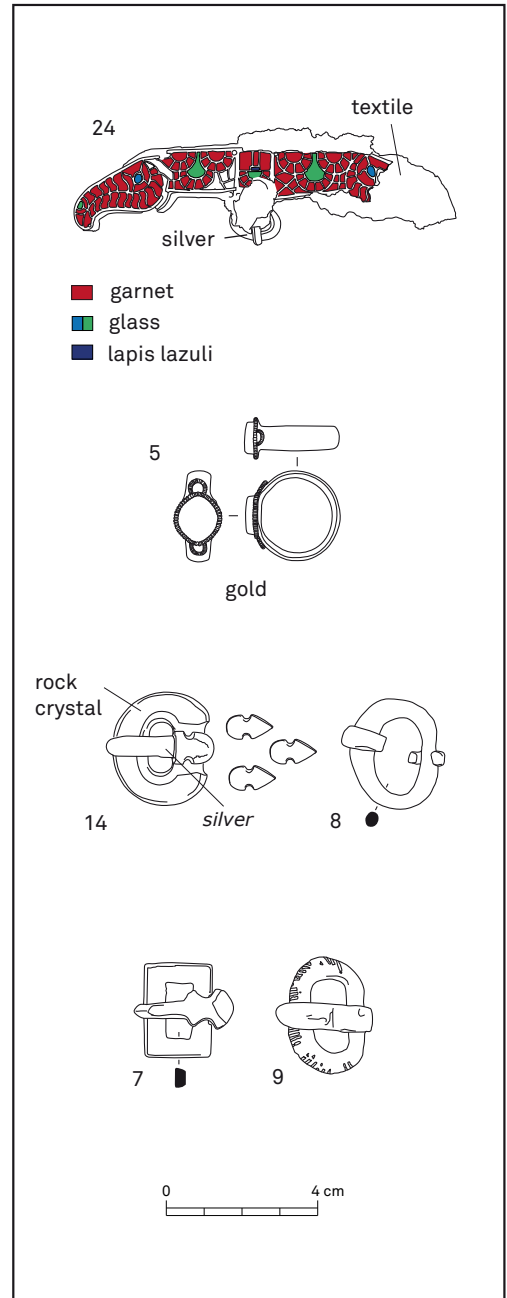
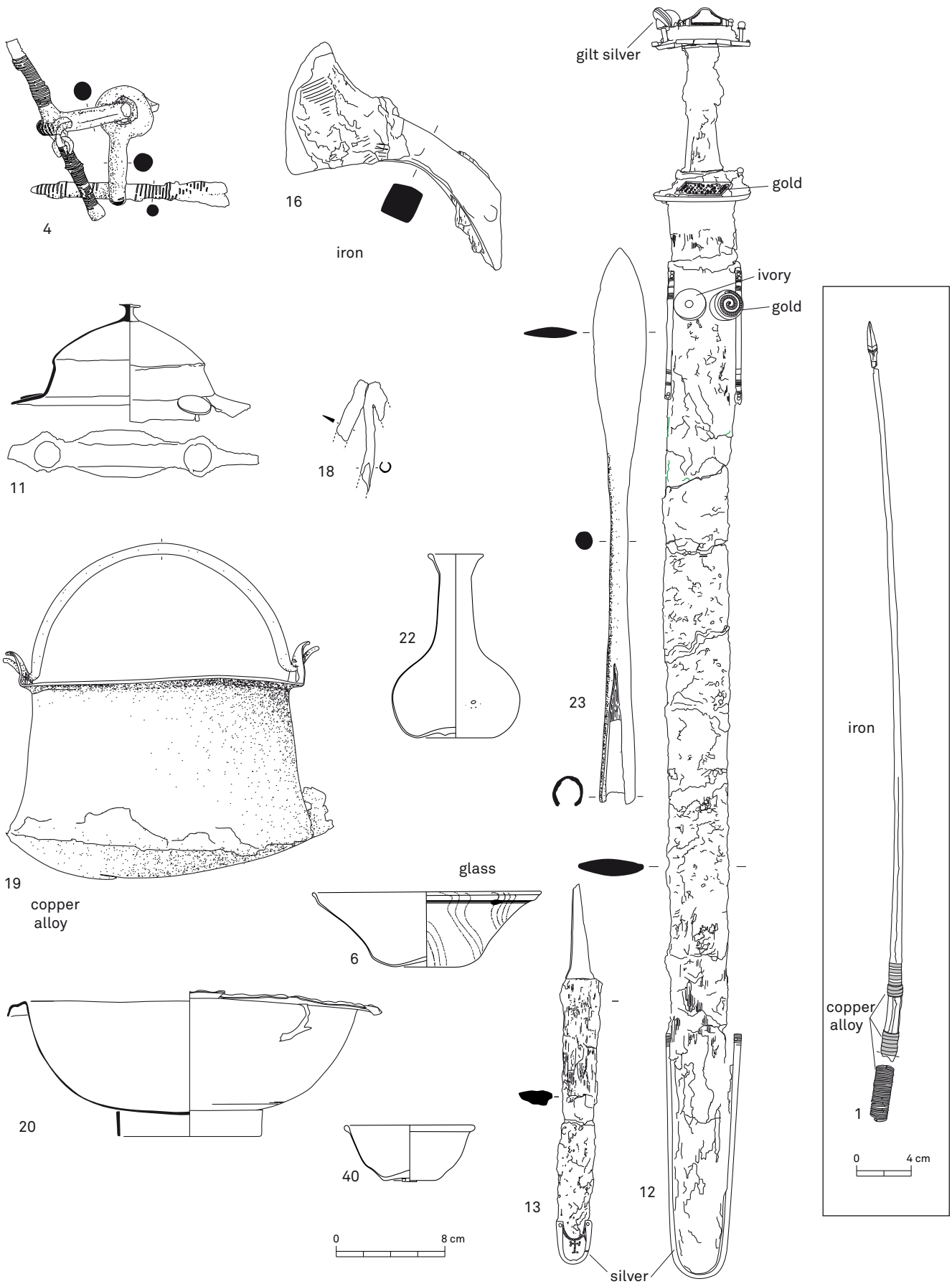
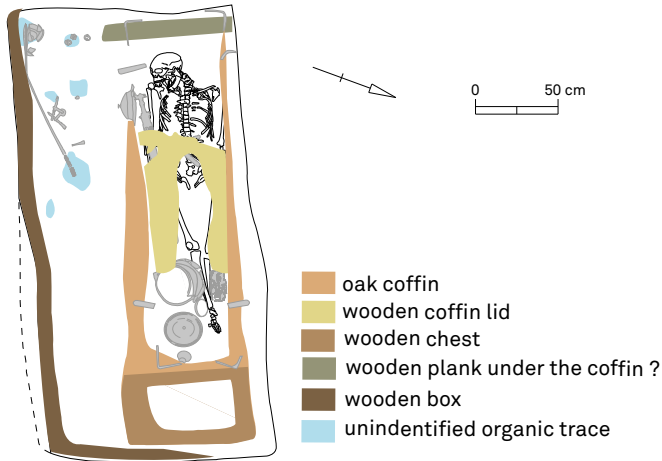


FIG. 4 Burial 11: plan and finds. Plan by C. Paresys; glass and beads drawn by C. Cabart; metalwork drawn by S. Culot (Inrap).



Burial 11



Burial 13



Burial 11



M.-C. Truc / Inrap

Laurent Juhell/Inrap, SRA Champagne-Ardenne



M.-C. Truc / Inrap



V. Peltier / Inrap

FIG. 5 Male burial chambers and the horse burial. Plan by C. Paresys; photos by M.-C. Truc (IINRAP).

2 Provisional interpretation of the funerary deposit

These three inhumations represent funerary rites that are different from those normally observed in this region, and they are rather closer to practices common to regions to the north and east, with Germanic and particularly Frankish influence.

2.1 Allochtoon funerary rites

◦ The funerary chambers

The reconstruction of these graves shows that the two males at Saint-Dizier were inhumed in a Morken-type burial chamber, after the eponymous site in the Rhineland (Germany)³⁸. This type consists of a rectangular excavation of 1.10 to 3 m. wide by 2.20 to 3 m. long, framed with horizontal planks and sometimes including a floor. The interior space is divided into two areas: in the northern half there is the funerary bed or coffin, with the deceased laid to rest inside, along with clothing, weapons and jewellery. The southern part of the chamber is used for offerings, other weapons and various objects³⁹. The origins of this type of chamber go back to Late Antiquity, and during the 6th century AD they are attested in the Frankish regions. Since they usually feature abundant funerary deposits, they are a demonstration of the high social status of the deceased. In the 7th century there is a process of democratization, and they are no longer a privilege of the elite⁴⁰.

In Champagne-Ardenne the only two other sites – Charleville-Mézières (Ardennes) and Gye-sur-Seine (Aube) – with funeral chambers are, like Saint-Dizier, atypical sites that are quite different from other cemeteries in the region. At Charleville-Mézières in particular, the chamber graves are male burials dated to the first half of the 6th century. Their furniture and organisation are in every way comparable with the graves at Saint-Dizier, indicating that they are part of the same archaeological phenomenon. The Charleville graves have been interpreted as graves for “Frankish chiefs”⁴¹. The site at Gye-sur-Seine is also deeply atypical for the region: the number of burial chambers, their dimensions and the types of grave goods evoke the cemeteries beyond the Rhine⁴².

◦ The horse burial

The burial of horses, particularly complete horses, is also a rare practice in our region. The few known examples, such as those at Vouciennes and Conflans (Marne)⁴³, were found in early excavations, where unfortunately the archaeological context was not well recorded. Therefore discussion of the chronology or the funeral rituals is difficult. For the moment, based on the distribution maps established by Müller-Wille, Saint-Dizier remains one of the southernmost sites where this practice has been recorded⁴⁴.

Horse burial is in fact a Germanic custom⁴⁵ that developed mainly between the 5th and 7th centuries AD on the east side of the Rhine. Less frequently practiced on the west side, this ritual

is found essentially between the Somme and the Escaut, in other words at the heart of the first Frankish kingdoms⁴⁶. Thus in France, horse burials are more associated with the north of the country. These burials are interpreted as giving (the horse) a function as a psychopomp, but also as a participant in the funerary splendour, along with the chambers and the ceremonial objects, and thus underlining of the high social status of the deceased⁴⁷.

◦ The grave goods

The objects deposited in the graves seem to represent a remarkable cultural homogeneity. This situation is particularly notable in view of the distribution maps of handled brooches⁴⁸, bracelets⁴⁹, angons⁵⁰, gold-handled knives⁵¹ and buckets⁵². It is clear that these objects have distribution areas that are limited to the north-east by the Rhine and to the south-west by the Seine. The young woman is also dressed in a manner considered to be characteristic of wealthy Franks⁵³, with the heavy open silver bracelet and especially with the group of four brooches (two small ones decorated with garnet cloisonné at the neck, and two handled brooches at the abdomen), along with a knife and an antler bead hanging from a belt⁵⁴.

While it is always debatable to try to prove the geographic origin of a population on the basis of distribution maps of finds, in this case the correlation of the maps to several sets of data (funeral rituals, the types of grave goods and their specific arrangement with the furniture in the chamber) can serve to suggest that the Saint-Dizier burials are clearly different from other local contemporary inhumations and are instead closer to discoveries made in Frankish regions.

2.2 An elite, an indication of Frankish expansion?

A final element is the presence of a double ring attached to the pommel of the sword in Burial 11. In northern Europe, a number of rich male graves – often accompanied by equally well-furnished female graves – have included this kind of sword with the pommel lengthened with a double ring, either moveable or not (fig. 6). These graves, dated to the 6th century AD⁵⁵, all comprise similar associations of objects (weapons, tableware, clothing accessories) arranged in a manner that seems almost standardized.

The function of these rings (prophylactic, symbolic, ethnic, political etc.⁵⁶) has already been much discussed. Among the theories most often cited is that of Vera Evison⁵⁷, for whom these rings symbolise the links of one man to another: a chief or other important individual would give a ring to one of his warriors as a way of expressing thanks for a service rendered, or to acknowledge a particular responsibility, or as a symbol of mutual loyalty. Some swords have an indentation suggesting that there had been such a ring which had subsequently been removed: this is the case with the sword of Saint-Dizier Burial 13.

38 Böhner 1959.

39 Stein 1993, 6.

40 Stein 1993, 21.

41 Périn 1972.

42 Scapula 1951, 142-151.

43 Salin, 1959.

44 Müller-Wille, 1970.

45 Salin, 1959, p. 24.

46 Koch 1996, 725; Dierkens, Le Bec, Perin 2008, 281.

47 Dierkens, Le Bec, Perin 2008, 281.

48 Koch 1998, maps 10, 31 and 32.

49 Wührer 2000, 17.

50 Werner 1968, 103 et fig. 5.

51 Werner 1968, fig. 1.

52 Martin 1976, 117: carte 30.

53 Périn 1997.

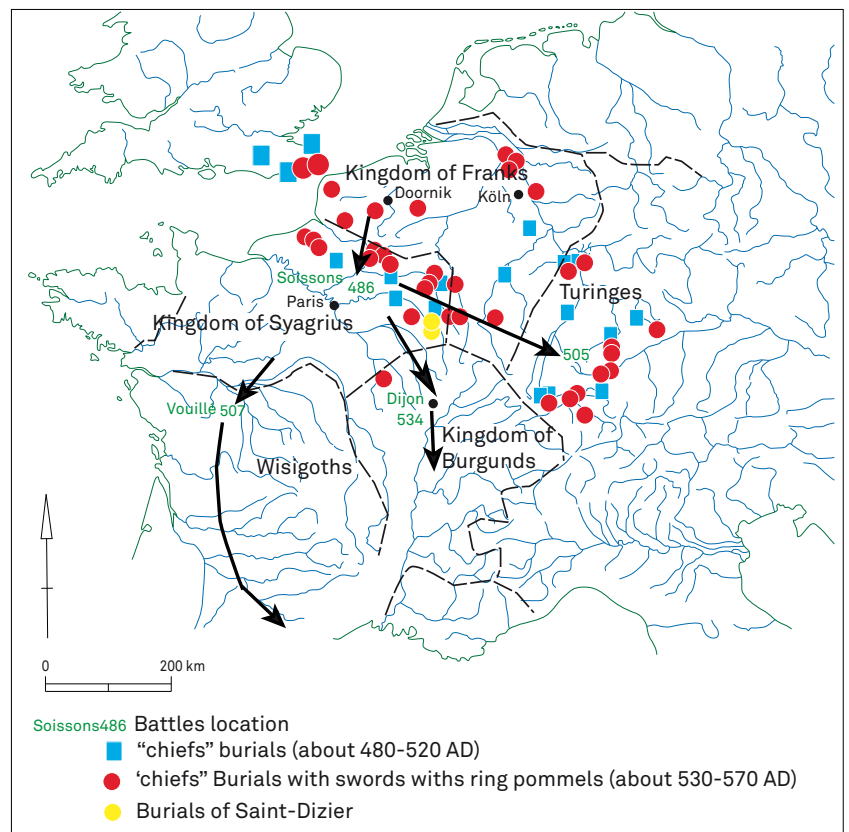
54 Claus 1987, 512.

55 Menghin 1983.

56 Among others: Böhner 1949, 170 and Steuer 1987, 203-205. See also Fischer *et al.* 2008, 23-26, who summarizes the various theories on the subject.

57 Evison 1967, 63; Périn 1972, 58.

FIG. 6 Distribution map of ceremonial swords with pommel rings. Map and commentary by G. Achard-Corompt and M.-C. Truc (Inrap), after Menghin 1983, 57, Tafel 24.



The presence of complete arrays of weapons, of rings on the swords as well as the distribution⁵⁸ of these graves at the margins of the Frankish kingdoms, has led Patrick Périn to interpret them as archaeological evidence of the securing of power over Gaul by Clovis and his descendants⁵⁹.

Should we therefore conclude that the individuals buried at Saint-Dizier were Franks? This is not necessarily so much an ethnic question as one of social and political identity. The splendour and the ritual of these inhumations reflect a specific material culture, which departs from what is habitually found in cemeteries in the surrounding region. This reveals a clear wish to demonstrate the belonging of these individuals to an elite or to a high social – and doubtless warrior – class that maintains a very precise style of inhumation. And this is a style that is found in the territories that fit closely with the edges of the first Frankish kingdoms from the end of the 5th to the 6th century AD.

3 Interactions with the local environment?

3.1 A Roman-period estate

Some 200 m. north of the graves lie the remains of the Gallo-Roman villa of Crassés, known since the 19th century. Limited excavations carried out in the 1960's showed that the *pars urbana* was occupied from the end of the 1st century until at least

the 5th century AD⁶⁰. In 2004 Inrap⁶¹ undertook an evaluation (trial trenches) covering the whole of the site, bringing a better understanding of the buildings, which seems to have been developed towards the east⁶². If the excavations, as yet incomplete, seem to show that the Gallo-Roman form of the *pars urbana* was abandoned during the 5th century, this does not necessarily mean that the site itself was abandoned. Indeed numerous of ceramic sherds dated from the end of the 5th century to the beginning of the 6th, and found residually throughout the sites at *Chêne Saint-Amand*, *La Tuilerie* and *La Marina*⁶³, provide evidence of just detectable human presence.

The three people who were buried in the 6th century therefore did not choose an entirely deserted or virgin landscape. Even if at the time of their arrival we do not know the state of the villa buildings, it can be suggested that their presence in this location was not accidental, but came from a desire to control an agricultural estate.

3.2 An early medieval cemetery

This cemetery was established on the ruins of the villa, and has not yet been excavated. For the moment it is known only from early discoveries and from the 2004 evaluation, which nevertheless made clear its extent and chronology. The proposed provisional dating, based on the types of finds and the use of

⁵⁸ Menghin 1983, 57.

⁵⁹ Périn 1997, 70-83.

⁶⁰ Lepage 1970, 7-8; Durost 2004, 9-10.

⁶¹ Institut national de recherches archéologiques préventives (France).

⁶² Durost 2004, 29.

⁶³ Truc 2009, volume 1, 181.

Bourguignon-Champenois-type sarcophagi, spans the 7th and 8th centuries AD. This cemetery seems thus later than the ‘chiefs’ graves⁶⁴. The latter were separate from the cemetery, but at a sufficiently close distance to suggest that there could have been a link between these two funerary installations. In fact numerous researchers have already suggested that the wealthy graves of the early 6th century were often the progenitors of cemeteries and that they frequently occupied a significant position at the core of the latter⁶⁵: either they were installed at the heart of a funerary deposit toward which subsequent burials were attracted, or, by contrast, they were somewhat outlying, as at Lavoye (Meuse, France)⁶⁶.

3.3 An early medieval settlement

The cemetery – whose dates of creation and abandonment remain to be firmly established – no doubt served for the burial of all or some of the inhabitants of a settlement that developed on the site from the 8th century. Indeed, in the terrain adjacent to *La Tuilerie*, excavations carried out in 1993⁶⁷ led to the discovery of a large and densely-populated late medieval settlement. In its early stages this implantation grew alongside the *pars urbana*, and respected the land-use of the villa. Then, from the 10th to 11th century, the settlement seems to break free of this Gallo-Roman spatial constraint and acquires a new character as a metal-working site, with forges and bloomeries⁶⁸.

This settlement was abandoned during the 12th century, which is perhaps a phenomenon that is either linked to the development of the town of Saint-Dizier, then surrounding itself with fortifications and concentrating the population, or to the creation in 1227 of the Cistercian Abbey of Saint Pantaléon, which seems to have controlled part of the area⁶⁹.

Were those who were buried in the privileged graves of *La Tuilerie* the founders of this settlement? It is impossible to confirm this view with the presently available archaeological data. However the presence of iron ore, abundant in the Saint-Dizier area and even in places visible on the surface, may have been an attraction. Iron ore has been worked at the site since at least the Carolingian period, as is attested by early metallurgical workshops⁷⁰. But there is nothing to say that it was not extracted and worked in earlier times. The establishment of a warrior elite in this place could be the result of a desire to exploit this primary resource.

Conclusion

This article does not pretend to answer all the questions that arise from the discovery of these four exceptional graves. It seems that the individuals buried at Saint-Dizier belonged to a social elite, with their membership expressed in an ostentatious manner in the funeral rituals. It seems equally likely that the graves bear archaeological witness to Frankish expansion. The question of their ethnic origin remains unresolved: were they Gallo-Romans who became Frankish in culture, or Franks who had come from the north?

Their presence in this location seems to be connected to the existence of a large Gallo-Roman agricultural estate, but again,

we know little of the landscape at the time of their arrival, just as we know little of the role they may have played in the development of the settlement and the later cemetery.

Yet some answers may be forthcoming in the near future, notably concerning the dating and manner of the abandonment of the villa, as well as the precise chronology of the cemetery. This is because the town of Saint-Dizier, anxious to preserve this extraordinary archaeological heritage, recently purchased the plot of the *Crassés* villa, and excavations should begin there in the summer of 2011.

Collaborators

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Résumé

En 2002, des fouilles menées par l’Inrap à Saint-Dizier ont permis la découverte de trois tombes d’une richesse exceptionnelle – une femme, deux hommes et un cheval - datées des environs de 525-550.

Habillée et parée de nombreux bijoux, la jeune femme (sép. 12) reposait à l’intérieur d’un cercueil sur lequel avait été déposé de la vaisselle en verre, alliage cuivreux et terre cuite.

Chaque homme (sép. 11 et 13) a été inhumé dans une chambre excavée coffrée de chêne. Ils reposaient dans leur cercueil avec accessoires vestimentaires épée d’apparat au pommeau prolongé par un double anneau. Les armes plus volumineuses (hache, bouclier, lance et angon) ainsi les objets de vaisselle avaient été placés sur le cercueil et dans le reste de la chambre funéraire.

Enfin, à quelques mètres du groupe humain, un cheval avait soigneusement été inhumé dans une fosse. Il n’était accompagné d’aucun mobilier, mais des éléments de harnachement retrouvés dans la sépulture 11, laissent suggérer que le cheval appartenait au défunt.

Ces tombes présentent des caractéristiques qui tranchent sur les rites funéraires habituellement observé de la région : chambres de type Morken, inhumation de cheval, épées à anneaux, etc. Par ailleurs la plupart des objets découverts à Saint-Dizier ont une aire de diffusion en principe centrée sur des régions plus

64 Durost 2004.

65 Dierkens 1984, 48; Simon 2002, 97.

66 Joffroy 1974, 94 et planche I.

67 Excavations of the *Chêne Saint-Amand* and of *La Marina*: Beague-Tahon & Bourdin 1993.

68 Leroy & Merluzzo 1998.

69 Bur 2005, 525-538.

70 Leroy & Merluzzo, 1998.

septentrionales qui correspondent aux territoires sous contrôle franc au VI^e siècle.

Ces éléments incitent rattacher les tombes de Saint-Dizier au faciès archéologique des tombes dites « de chefs francs » du début du VI^e siècle. Ce faciès est caractérisé par une cinquantaine de riches tombes à armes masculines - généralement associées à des inhumations féminines bien dotées elles aussi - et qui présentent entre elles de fortes similitudes dans les rites funéraires et l'agencement des dépôts. La dispersion géographique de ces tombes reflète l'expansion franque, aussi les archéologues s'accordent-ils à penser que cette élite inhumée dans ces tombes d'apparat a du jouer un rôle dans la prise du pouvoir sur la Gaule par Clovis et ses descendants.

Doit-on en conclure que les inhumés de Saint-Dizier sont des Francs ? La question ne se pose pas forcément en terme ethnique mais plutôt en termes d'identité sociale et politique. Le faste et le rituel de ces inhumations reflètent une culture matérielle particulière, qui déroge à ce qui est rencontré habituellement dans les nécropoles environnantes. S'y révèle une volonté manifeste de mettre en valeur l'appartenance de ces défunts à une élite ou caste sociale, qui suit une mode bien précise dans la mort. Mode qui se retrouve dans une partie du nord de l'Europe sur des territoires qui correspondent à peu de choses près aux marges de premiers royaumes francs de la fin du Ve et du VI^e siècles.

La présence de cette élite à Saint-Dizier, qui à l'époque ne revêt aucune importance particulière, peut être lié à l'attrait d'un domaine antique, la villa des *Crassés*. Aux siècles suivants se développent sur place une nécropole et un habitat. Nous ignorons si la présence de ces aristocrates a joué un rôle dans le mode d'occupation du secteur, mais des fouilles qui devraient reprendre en 2011, fourniront peut-être quelques éléments de réponse.

Summary

In 2002, excavations carried out by Inrap at Saint-Dizier led to the discovery of four graves of exceptional wealth, containing a young woman, two men and a horse, dated to c. 525-550 AD.

Dressed and adorned with numerous jewels, the young female (Burial 12) was laid in a coffin upon which were placed vessels in glass, copper alloy bowl and ceramic.

Each male (Burials 11 and 13) had been buried in an excavated funerary chamber, built within an oak frame. They were laid in their coffins along with their personal clothing, including a ceremonial sword with two rings added to the pommel. The larger weapons (throwing axes, shields, lances and angons) as well as

various utensils were placed either on the coffins or in the other parts of the funerary chamber. Finally, few metres away from this group of human burials, a horse had been deliberately buried in a pit. The horse burial contained no objects, but parts of a harness found in Burial 11 suggest that the horse may have belonged to the deceased.

These graves exhibit characteristics – Morken-type chambers, swords with pommel rings, and the horse burial – which are significantly different from the funeral rites usually observed in the region. Indeed, most of the objects found at Saint-Dizier have distributions that are mainly centred in regions further to the north that were under Frankish control during the 6th century AD. All of these aspects indicate that the graves at Saint-Dizier can be linked to the archaeological phenomenon of the so-called 'Chiefs' graves of the beginning of the 6th century. This phenomenon is represented by about fifty wealthy male burials – usually associated with equally wealthy female burials – which are characterized by a high level of similarity both in the funeral rituals and in the arrangement of the deposits. The geographical locations of these burials illustrate the extent of Frankish expansion, leading some archaeologists to suggest that the elite who were buried in such splendour must have played a role in the conquest of Gaul by Clovis and his descendants.

Were the buried people in Saint-Dizier Franks? This is not necessarily so much an ethnic question as one of social and political identity. The opulence and the ritual involved in these burials reflect a specific material culture that is a departure from what is usual in the surrounding cemeteries of the region. This shows a clear intention to demonstrate the membership of the deceased of an elite or high social rank, following a very precise style of inhumation. This style is particularly found in the territories that fit closely with the edges of the first Frankish kingdoms from the end of the 5th to the 6th century AD.

The presence of the elite individuals at Saint-Dizier, which at the time had no particular importance, may be linked to the attraction of a Gallo-Roman estate, the villa of *Crassés*. In the succeeding centuries this area would be developed into a settlement with a cemetery. It is not known at present whether or not these aristocrats played a role in the occupation of the area, but further excavations which began in 2011 may provide some new answers to these questions.

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