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The seated dead: Evidence of funerary complexity from the early Late Bronze Age, 14th–12th centuries BCE in France

Stéphane Rottier

Bordeaux University, UMR 5199 – PACEA, Bât B8, Allée Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, frey St Hilaire, 33615, Pessac Cedex, France

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ABSTRACT

In the early Late Bronze Age of the Seine-Yonne and Seine-Aube confluences in northern France, novel funerary practices include the repeated use of a seated position (i.e. with the vertebral column in a vertical position) of the deceased within a container, most often a rigid one, placed in a pit whose diameter rarely exceeds 1 m. The use of these graves does not appear to be limited solely to the deposition of the deceased, as re-opening and post-inhumation activities have also been identified. Many of these graves contain animal bones, sometimes in large quantities, above or next to the human remains. Furthermore, anthropogenic interventions, including bone removal during or after decomposition of the corpse, can be demonstrated. These practices are particularly well illustrated among the 136 buried individuals in the "Frécul" necropolis in the Barbuise and La Saulsotte areas (Aube). Thirty-six individual graves were also re-used for successive inhumations at Barbey "Les Cent Arpents" (Seine-et-Marne). We propose hypotheses about the way these funerary structures were used, following a sort of bone-collecting process, and reflect upon the funerary programme of which they were a part.

1. Introduction

In France, the Middle and Late Bronze Age extend from the seventeenth to the ninth centuries BCE. During these centuries societies were undergoing a process of increasing social complexity (e.g. Kristiansen and Larsson, 2005; Harding and Fokkens, 2013). By the end of the third millennium BCE the foundations of territorial organisation and structuring networks for the exchange of techniques, ideas and people were in place, and institutionalized trade networks developed between neighboring human groups. Since settlements for this period are still poorly known, funerary deposits are the main source of information on these protohistoric societies. In the southeast Paris Basin, many burial sites of the early Late Bronze Age, from the fourteenth to twelfth centuries BCE, have been excavated over the last forty years (e.g. Mordant, 1988; Mordant and Depierre, 2005; Rottier et al., 2012). A recent inventory lists nearly 370 individuals buried in little more than twenty sites (Cervel, 2015). This inventory comprises only inhumation burials (Fig. 1) but not cremations, which represent at least one third for that period in the same area.

These discoveries certainly make this region one of the best documented, with many burial sites and buried individuals, for the period in Western Europe in terms of uncremated human osteological material. The evidence for burial practices reflects a variety of responses to death. The position of the body during the burial, sitting or lying, is a perfect illustration of this diversity. Moreover, removal of bones occurs within some of the graves. Finally, the architecture of the graves and grave goods found near the bones that may testify to the social status of the deceased and their relationship with contemporaries. All these show a growing diversity of inhumation burial types before cremation became the primary treatment for deceased individuals, almost exclusively from the tenth century BCE. Within this growing diversity, narrow pits containing human skeletal remains have attracted attention over the past fifteen years, both with respect to excavation and interpretation of them (Rottier, 2003; Rottier et al., 2012). The arrangement of bones with respect to each other and the structural elements of the grave aid to identify a previously unknown type of funerary treatment. These findings have also more recently been extended to old excavations, permitting new interpretations of them.

In this contribution the analytical method used to reconstruct the original position of the corpse upon deposition will be presented first. Then what we believe to be the specific funeral treatments of the deceased will be described and compared with those employed in other contemporary burials. This concerns only adult size individuals since immature individuals are rarely recovered at these sites. Finally, these observations and analyses lead to a re-interpretation of many sites that have not previously taken potential post-mortem changes within the grave and its contents into account.

2. Analytical methods

The site of Barbuise - La Saulsotte in the Aube region and the site of Barbey located in the Seine-Yonne confluence in northeastern France (Fig. 1) provide examples of detailed analysis of both grave contents

E-mail address: stephane.rottier@u-bordeaux.fr.

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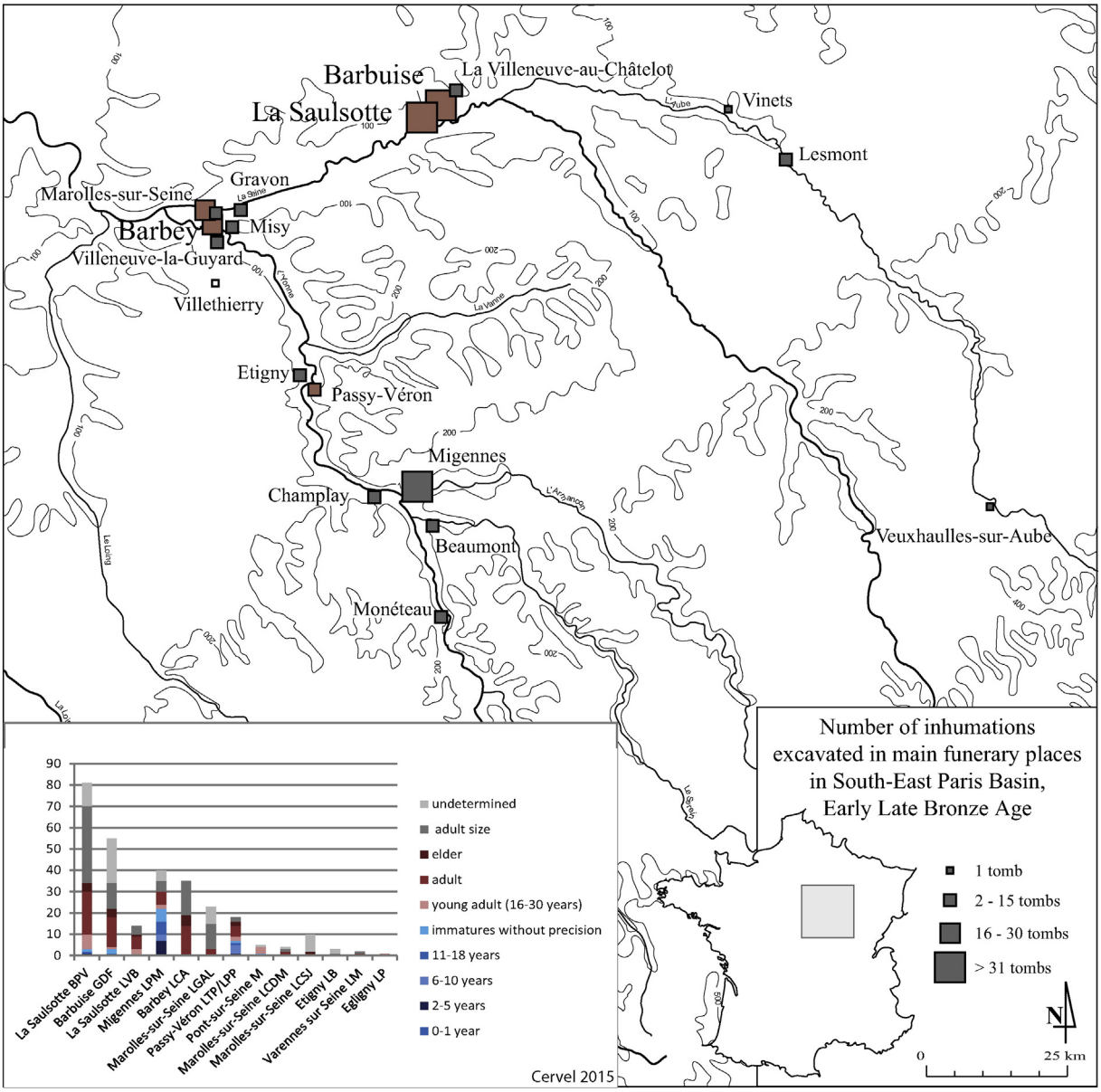

Fig. 1. Map of main funerary sites from the early Late Bronze Age in the Southeast Paris Basin. The places mentioned in this study are in colour. Table of age at death data by site, after Cervel, 2015. (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

and skeletal remains. After application of an archaeoanthropological approach to account for both types of evidence, it is possible to reconstruct the position of the body at the time of its interment. The taphonomy of the grave, as described by Duday over the last forty years (e.g. Duday, 1978, 1987, 1995, 2005, 2006, 2009), is applied and customised to reveal previously unnoticed aspects of early Late Bronze Age funerary treatments (Rottier, 2003, 2012a).

The most basic principle employed in this study is the "principle of imbalance." This principle is based on the action of gravity which will move any object down until it finds a position of equilibrium. The observation and description of the relative position of each element can be characterized by three main occurrences:

1) Displacement of elements is observed. This means that the space required for displacement is present. If displacement extends beyond the initial volume of the corpse, this indicates that decomposition occurred in an open space, such as a container.
2) Displacement of elements has occurred but the observed position is one of imbalance. In this case, decomposition occurred in an open space but with some type constraint exerted by the structure of the grave or its inclusions.
3) If no displacement is observed, there are two possibilities: 3a) the original position of the corpse is in equilibrium, for example in an extended supine burial with all elements on the bottom of the grave or on some sort of durable material, or 3b) the original position of the corpse was maintained by soil.

In the case of 2, above, it is possible to characterize the type of constraint that influenced the position of the corpse when it was deposited, such as wall effects, support lent by some structural component of the grave, empty spaces, or the presence of supporting soil.

If gravity cannot account for all observed displacements, then this is evidence that some external factor intervened. It is the repetition of these observations relating to an external factor - its systematization - that can be used to identify an anthropic action more than other external factors (natural ones). The goal is to try to reconstruct the original position of the corpse and configuration of the deposit through use of

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