



# Life and death at the “The Land of Three Lakes”: Revisiting the non-adults from Roman Aventicum, Switzerland (1st–3rd century CE)



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## ABSTRACT

The study of Roman childhood has been the focus of research primarily using documentary and archaeological evidence, while relatively few non-adult skeletal assemblages have been analyzed. This paper presents the study of 93 non-adult individuals from four cemeteries in the Roman (1st–3rd c. CE) *civitas* capital of Aventicum (Avenches), Switzerland. The results of the analysis offer a new bioarchaeological perspective on mortality and disease patterns during childhood in Roman Switzerland, adding to the discussion regarding living conditions in the urban centers at the periphery of the Roman Empire. This study also highlights the importance of studying perinates in archaeological populations, since the current research inform us about the experiences of mothers and their offspring in Aventicum. The mortality and disease patterns of the perinates, representing 71% of the total non-adult sample (66/93), suggest that pregnancy and the time around birth were extremely challenging at Aventicum. It is argued that environmental constraints, e.g. the risk of infectious diseases such as malaria and natural phenomena such as recurring floods resulting in resources scarcity, could have considerably affected the mother-fetus pair in this urban settlement.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. The bioarchaeology of Roman childhood

Age is an important measure of variation in physiological responses to stress, with perinates and infants being at greater risk of morbidity and mortality due to their immature immune system (Goodman and Armelagos, 1989; Lewis, 2018a, 5–7). The interpretation of these patterns is still one of the main challenges for bioarchaeologists studying past populations. Taphonomic issues, excavation techniques, and differential burial practices are among the primary factors usually attested as affecting the recovery of non-adult remains, but it is currently well understood that this assumption does not represent reality (Inglis and Halcrow, 2018). Although research on non-adult remains has gained significant ground in bioarchaeology, perinates rarely form part of these studies and the apparent difficulties of differentiating normal from pathological changes in such tiny remains has led some researchers to discard fetuses, perinates and infants from their analyses (Ribot and Roberts, 1996; Tocheri et al., 2005; Wheeler, 2012; Rohnbogner and Lewis, 2017). Recent publications, though, offer some promising new insights into theoretical approaches, perinatal mortality and paleopathology (Snoddy et al., 2017; Halcrow et al., 2018; Inglis

and Halcrow, 2018; Lewis, 2018a, 2018b).

In Roman society, upon the birth of a child, clearly defined rites of passages existed for its familial acceptance and social debut, denoting the liminal status of fetuses and infants in the Roman society and culture (Laes, 2014; Dasen, 2015). Roman fetuses, perinates or even infants were often buried in non-typical locations, such as abandoned buildings, domestic spaces, workshops, silos, foundations, (e.g. Coulon, 2004, p. 151–153; Bails-Talbi and Blanchard, 2006; Bails-Talbi and Dasen, 2008; Moore, 2009; Alapont Martin and Bouneau, 2010; Carroll, 2011; Brkojewitsh et al., 2014; Millet and Gowland, 2015), although archaeological evidence has also revealed cases where they were buried within the community cemetery (e.g. Pearce, 2001; Blaizot et al., 2003; Coulon, 2004, p. 147–150; Bails-Talbi and Blanchard, 2006; Carroll, 2011), in a specifically reserved zone within the community cemetery (e.g., Blaizot et al., 2003; Bails-Talbi and Blanchard, 2006) or in cemeteries exclusively used for non-adults (e.g. Blaizot et al., 2003). Further, mortuary treatment of perinates, provides valuable information about their social identity, with child burials accompanied by numerous offerings often interpreted as suggesting inherited social status (Castella, 1999). Cremation, predominant in the Roman world during the first and second centuries CE, limit the available biological material, although examples of the co-existence of inhumations and

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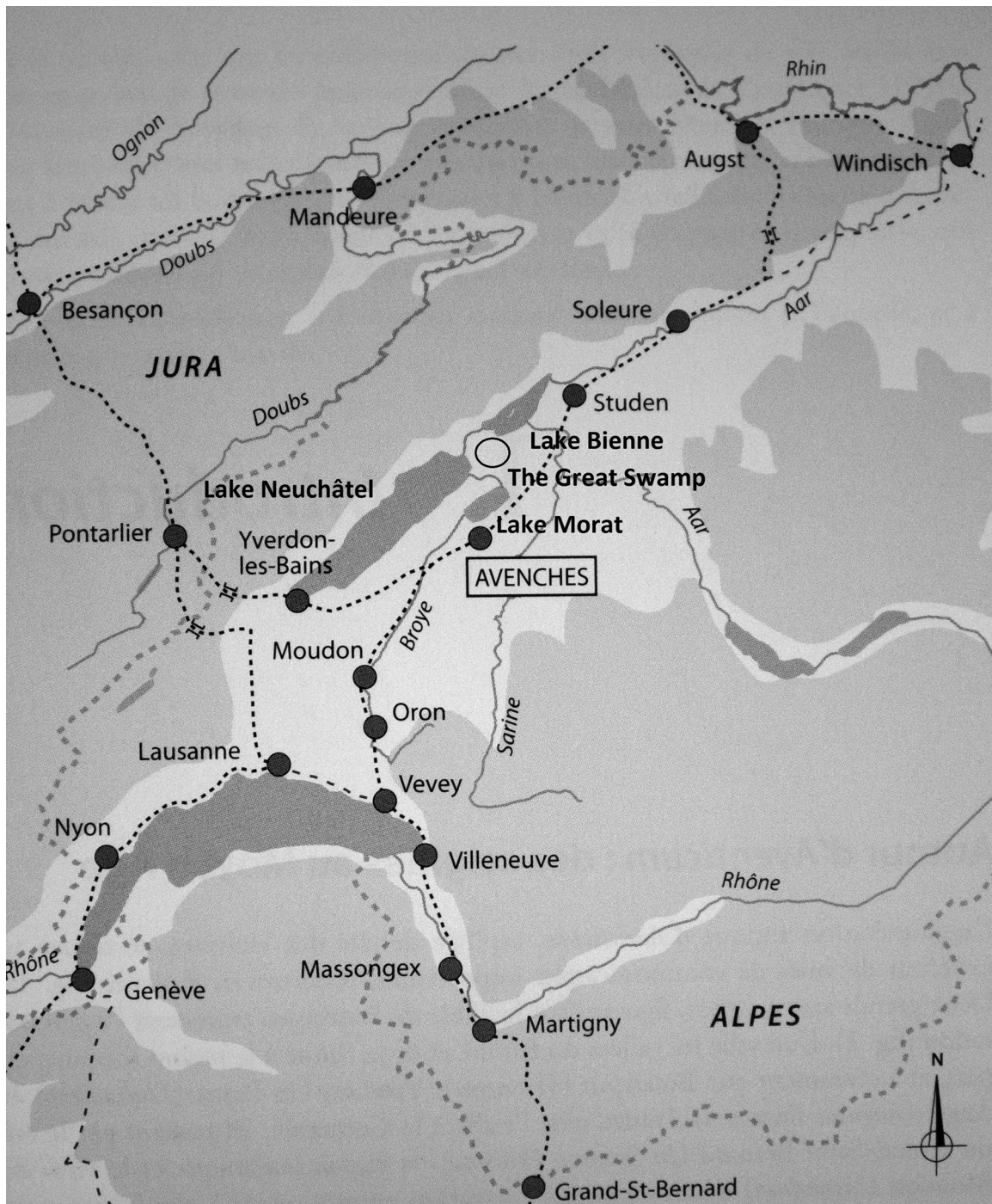


Fig. 1. Map showing the location of Aventicum (Avenches).

cremations in the same cemetery have been encountered. Pliny the Elder (*Nat. Hist.* VII, 15; [Bostock and Riley, trans. 1855](#)), argued that cremations should not be performed on individuals “*who die before they have cut their teeth*”, that is, not before the seventh month “*when the front teeth are produced... and, nearly always, those in the upper jaw the first*”. That such a notion was not shared by all Roman populations, is evidenced by the presence of cremated perinates (e.g. at the necropolis of Saint-Lambert, Fréjus in France, ([Gébara and Béraud, 1993](#), 332)). To this extent, differential funerary treatment of perinates in Roman society significantly affects the recovery of their skeletal remains and consequently our ability for understanding bioarchaeological questions on demography, adaptation to biocultural changes, maternal health and disease, as well as social organization of past populations.

Research on Roman childhood is based primarily on the extensive investigation of documentary evidence and archaeological material (e.g. [Harlow and Laurence, 2010](#); [Laes, 2011](#); [Evans Grubbs et al., 2013](#); [Laes and Vuolanto, 2017](#)). However, documentary evidence is not site-specific and its applicability throughout the vast Roman Empire is largely unknown since spatial and temporal differences in child care within the diverse communities are likely to have existed. Although studies broadly outlining the cultural context of Roman childhood are important, research on their biological remains has been rather limited for much of the Roman Empire and non-adult health, especially of fetuses and perinates, is still little understood. The majority of research into child health and mortality during this period comes from England ([Gowland and Redfern, 2010](#); [Lewis, 2010, 2011, 2012](#); [Redfern and](#)

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