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# Early medieval villages and estate centres in France (c. 300-1100)

ELISABETH ZADORA-RIO<sup>1</sup>

## SUMMARY

This paper considers the dynamics of rural settlement in France during the early Middle Ages, from c.300 to c.1100. Although it is hardly possible to incorporate the mass of available settlement archaeology into a single interpretative framework, some major trends can nevertheless be identified. In the southern part of France, the Roman villa system remained resilient down to c.700, and in the 5th and 6th century one can also observe a move towards nucleation with the foundation of complex stone-built hill-top settlements. In the North, those Roman villas which remained occupied underwent drastic changes, and many small timber villages were built during the 6th and 7th century. A major shift in the later part of the 7th century was marked by a significant growth in village size, a move towards formal planning, with some areas being devoted to corn processing and storage, and the appearance of boundary features, high-status residences and churches. The appearance of outsized seigneurial buildings, storage and baking devices in the 10th century provides archaeological evidence for the development of an increasingly ranked and polarised society.

KEY-WORDS: village, estate centre, storage, church, burials

Hundreds of early medieval settlements have been excavated in France in the past twenty years through contract archaeology, often over very large surfaces.

In an influential book published in 1980, *Le village et la maison au Moyen Age*, Jean Chapelot and Robert Fossier argued that «villages» only appeared in the West around the year 1000, and were associated with settlement nucleation, the presence of a church, a parish territory, formal collective practices and institutions, often a castle. In accordance with this historiographical tradition, early medieval settlements in France were long denied the label of «village». In comparison with the more monumental worlds of the villa on the

one hand and of the castle on the other, early medieval settlements were deemed to be short-lived, and to lack both coherence and identity. As I aim to show in this paper, these views have been disproved by a growing set of archaeological evidence: they now no longer have many supporters, and most archaeologists have lost their reluctance to speak of early medieval villages. Even if ideas have moved on, this standpoint has nonetheless hindered the interpretation of early medieval settlements, which were defined for a long time simply as being «non-Roman» and «non-village», that is as a mere transitional process in-between two proper settlement systems.

## ROMAN AND EARLY MEDIEVAL SETTLEMENT SYSTEMS

In contrast to the early middle ages, the Roman settlement hierarchy, dominated at the regional level by the *civitas* capitals, is fairly well-known, both through textual sources and archaeological evidence. Even if the interpretation of individual sites is often controversial (LEVEAU 2002), settlement types such as Roman *vici* and *villae* are usually recognizable through archaeological evidence, and there is no doubt about their relative position in the settlement system.

The Roman settlement hierarchy was undoubtedly maintained by the early medieval Church, with cathedrals located in *civitates*, public baptismal churches in *vici*, and private oratories in *villae*, but it is clear that the inherited *civitas* capitals no longer occupied a truly central place in administrative and economic networks, and that their role in the supply of goods to rural estates and settlements had been superseded by other types of exchange networks (GALINIE 2000, 2007). They were the seats of bishops and of the representatives of the king, but they were no longer an essential part of a hierarchical administrative framework aimed at tax-collecting.

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They also had to contend with rival centres for the exercise of secular power, in the form of scattered royal and aristocratic palaces located in *villae*.

Documentary sources are not very helpful when it comes to trying to reconstruct the early medieval settlement system. Throughout the early middle ages, down to the 12th century, the same Latin words remained in use in the documentary evidence, but their meaning and their relative hierarchy were changing.

In the late 6th century, for instance in the writings of Gregory of Tours, the words *vicus* and *villa* represented distinct entities. The word *villa* had several meanings: Martin Heinzelmann has shown that it could refer either to a «village» or a «rural residence» or «rural property» (HEINZELMANN 1993). The *vicus* was clearly situated above the *villa* in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, but on the other hand *villae* could encompass royal palaces and aristocratic residences not found in the *vici*.

In Carolingian times, the bulk of the documentary evidence is made up of royal diplomas. The term *vicus* is hardly ever used to describe a specific settlement, whereas *villae* are omnipresent. Many places named as *vici* by Gregory in the 6th century are called *villae* in the Carolingian diplomas (ZADORA-RIO 2008: 84-88). This change must not be interpreted as a «ruralization» of the 6th century *vici*. Although there is nothing in the documentary evidence from this period which could allow us to identify nucleated settlements, this does not necessarily mean that there were none. *Villa* is used as a blanket term to describe all kinds of settlements, whether villages, isolated farms or estates belonging to the aristocracy. Recent historical research has argued that the *villa* in Carolingian times was essentially a fiscal unit, without material identity. The task of bringing together textual and archaeological sources is clearly of primary importance, but it is seldom possible to identify an early medieval «*vicus*» or «*villa*» on the basis of archaeological evidence. The labels derived from documents are not adequate for the reconstruction of the early medieval settlement system.

Chris Wickham has argued convincingly that the most important feature of the post-Roman transformation was the transition from landowning patterns in a rural landscape focused on villas to geographical territorialization, with territories named after and focused on villages,

and a common identity shared by everyone living in that territory no matter what their tenurial status (WICKHAM 2005: 470). This nonetheless raises the question of the material correlates which would allow us to identify this transition in the archaeological record. Neither the size of the settlement nor its pattern of dispersal or nucleation can necessarily be considered as secure indicators: in some cases, individual estate centres could have a greater concentration of people than villages. Besides, whether settlements are concentrated or dispersed, the sense of being part of a single village does not entirely depend on living close together, and can be present even when its inhabitants are living in scattered farms (KLAPSTE, NISSEN JAUBERT 2008). The best marker is certainly the existence of individual houseplots, providing evidence for autonomous agricultural units, but their identification is not always straightforward. Another indicator is evidence for strong community organisation, demonstrated in the archaeological record by a regular layout, specialized areas for storage and ovens, indicating adherence to a generally agreed or imposed design, large associated graveyards and the existence of public space - but the morphology of a public square and that of a private courtyard can look very much the same.

Let us turn to settlement hierarchy: from an archaeological standpoint, this may be taken to fall under three different but interrelated aspects, which can find expression in the archaeological evidence with varying degrees of visibility:

- the exercise of lordship, which archaeologically correlates with the existence of a privileged focal building.
- economic status, expressed in the material culture by the occurrence of luxuries and imported commodities, the diversification of craftsmanship and the pattern of food consumption
- finally, the position of the settlement in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, for which churches and burials can provide evidence.

#### THE LATE ANTIQUE SETTLEMENT PATTERN (c.300-c.500)

In contrast to earlier assumptions, recent research in France has emphasized the resilience of the settlement pattern of the early Roman

Empire through the 4th and 5th centuries. In spite of the shrinkage of the number of settlements and the variations of the survival rate of earlier Roman sites from one region to another, there is no sign of a dramatic regression in land-use, even in the northern part of Gaul (VAN OSSEL, OUZOULIAS 2001). The continuity of villas, although in much smaller numbers than before, has been well established. Some of them expanded in the course of the 4th and 5th c., with an outward display of opulence through architectural monumentalization and the laying out of fine mosaic floors. Numerous examples are known in Aquitaine and in Languedoc, such as Loupian (Hérault) in the 5th century, or Plassac near Bordeaux and Séviac in Montréal near Eauze (BALMELLE 2001; BALMELLE, VAN OSSEL 2001; PELLECUER, POMAREDES 2001) but late mosaic floors are also to be found in Central Gaul, for instance at Migennes (Yonne), or Mienne (Marboué, Eure-et-Loire) near Chartres at the end of the 5th century, or in the Loire Valley at Fondettes and Saint-Rémy-la-Varenne, between Angers and Tours, in the 6th century (VAN OSSEL 1997) (Fig. 1). Building activity is also apparent in smaller-scale villas which in the 4th century still display a spatial organization comparable to that of the preceding century, as in Limetz-Villez (Yvelines) or Saint-Germain-les-Corbeil (Essonne) (VAN OSSEL, OUZOULIAS 1989; PETIT, PARTHUISOT 1995). Apart from those settlements which maintained, at least for some time, their organization and general aspect, many others underwent such drastic change that they lost their original design. The coarse repair of older buildings with spolia went in parallel with the erection of new structures, now mostly in wood. In the South of Gaul, the tradition of stone-building and roof-tiles was maintained, but its quality declined, and the use of mortar became rare. Excavations have provided evidence for agricultural production, large storage devices and artisanal activities on such sites, but heating systems and bath installations were abandoned. The end of the villa as a settlement type marked the end of one of the major elements of Roman elite identity and display, but the growing importance of construction in perishable materials is not necessarily an indication of a drastic pauperization of the countryside. In connection with the growing militarization of late antique society, the value of the *otium* imagery and

senatorial lifestyle became less relevant, and landlords seem to have placed their priorities for investment increasingly on installations used for agricultural production (VAN OSSEL, OUZOULIAS 2000; WICKHAM 2005: 174-175). On the other hand, the limits imposed on archaeological interpretation by wooden architecture should not be underestimated. Post-holes and vanished sill-beams are a dramatically mute type of evidence, and it would be quite impossible to reconstruct the sophisticated superstructures of some of the wooden buildings which still survive in eastern and northern Europe on the basis of ground-plans alone.

Recent research in France has emphasized the importance of post-built architecture during the Roman period, which had hitherto been overlooked because archaeologists used to focus their attention exclusively on the main residential buildings. Most of the building techniques observable in late antique and early medieval settlements, such as sill-beams and wooden frames on stone-footings, single-aisled or two-aisled earthenfast post-buildings, were rooted in earlier Roman building traditions (VAN OSSEL 1997). Sunken-floor buildings (SFBs), which had occurred only occasionally during the Iron Age, reappeared in Gaul during the second half of the 3rd century, at virtually the same time as in *Germania libera* (VAN OSSEL, OUZOULIAS 2000). As in later early medieval settlements, they were built with 2, 4 or 6 posts.

Until recently, the three-aisled long-houses (20 to 30 m long, 6 to 8 m large), associated with smaller buildings, post-built granaries and SFBs, which are known in *Germania libera* and which appear in the second half of the 4th century in the North of Gaul (that is, modern Belgium and the Netherlands), were completely unknown in France, but one conspicuous example of this type of settlement has recently been discovered in Saint-Ouen-du-Breuil, between Rouen and Dieppe in Normandy (GONZALEZ, OUZOULIAS, VAN OSSEL 2001). It extends over a surface of 9 to 10 ha, overlying a small Iron Age farm associated with a ditch system from the second half of the 2nd century BC. The excavations identified about 40 timber buildings representing at least four agricultural units. The main buildings were three-aisled longhouses (38 meters long, 8 meters wide) with slightly convex walls, transverse partitions and central hearths. They were associated with smaller buildings (15 to 20 meters long), SFBs,

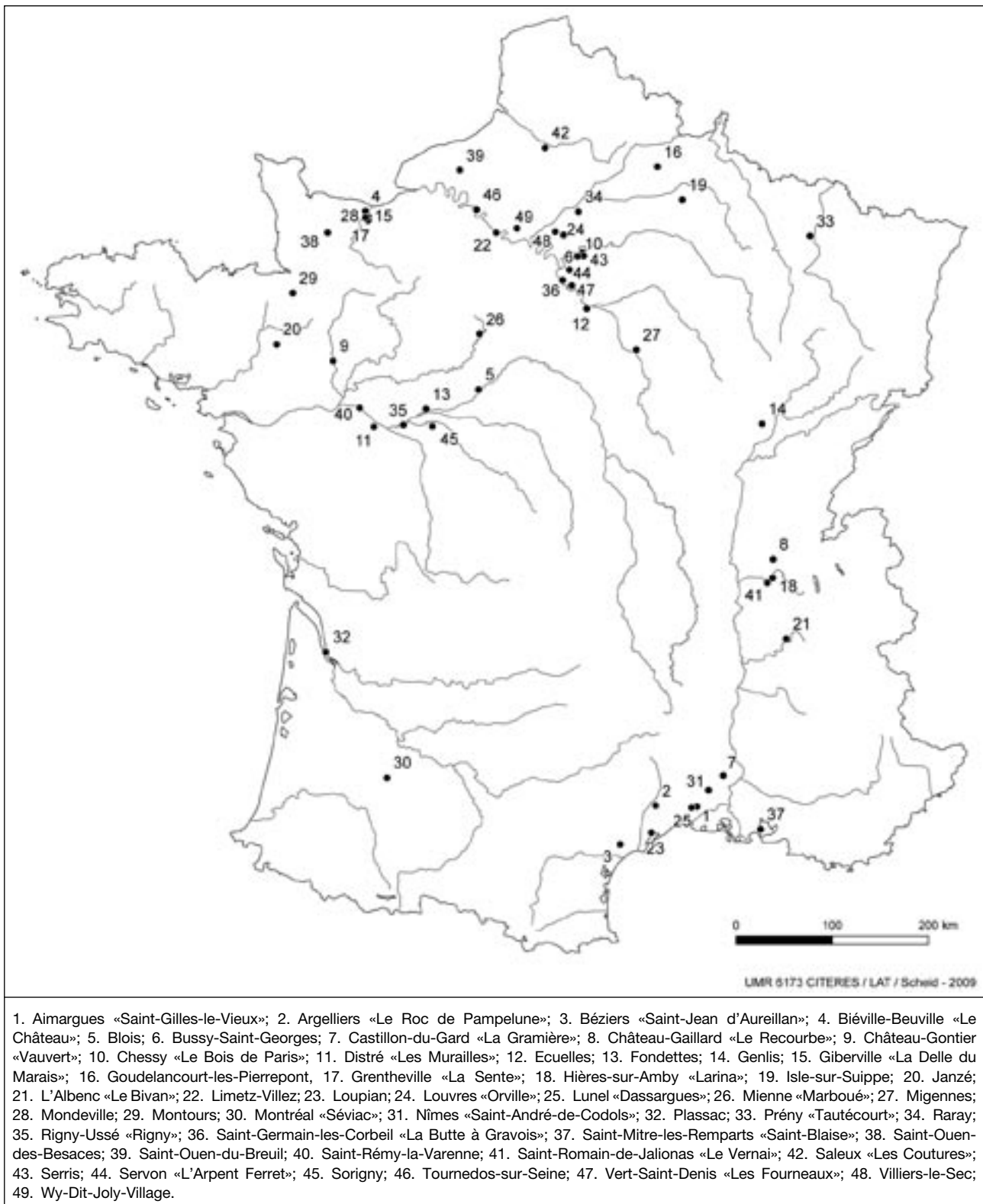


Fig. 1. Sites mentioned in the text.

post-built granaries and domestic ovens. Cremation burials were scattered in the settlement. The boundary ditches of the Iron Age field-system were filled in during the 2nd and 3rd centuries, but they must have remained visible, since they determined the orientation of the 4th-century buildings. One third of the pottery was hand-made, even though hand-made pottery is very rare in this part of France. Above 25% of the finds also involved long-distance imported fine ware (terra nigra, Argonne ware, black-burnished ware...). Metalwork included knives and cross-bow brooches - but no weapons. A jug from the Rhineland, dating from the first half of the 4th century, was recovered from the in-filling of a pit. It contained a rich hoard (16 golden solidi, 23 silver medals, one golden ring, 3 silver spoons), dating from 345-350 and possibly corresponding to a votive deposit.

The settlement, which lasted for two of three generations (60-70 years), from the middle of the 4th century to the first quarter of the 5th century, was involved in cereal cultivation and breeding. The closest parallels are with contemporary Germanic settlements in the Rhineland, at Peelo, Wijster or Flogeln. It has convincingly been interpreted as a settlement of German auxiliaries in the Roman army.

Except for the settlement in Saint-Ouen-du-Breuil, which is unique in France at the time of writing<sup>1</sup>, the direct influence of Germanic migrants or invaders is difficult to assess (BALMELLE, VAN OSSEL 2001; RAYNAUD 2004). Late antique and early medieval building techniques and layouts were rooted in vernacular traditions.

#### THE REASSESSMENT OF HILL-TOP VILLAGES IN THE SOUTH OF FRANCE (c.450-c.700)

The early medieval occupation of hill-top locations, which often re-use abandoned Iron Age forts, is known all over France, and these sites have been interpreted for a long time as places of refuge for populations fleeing insecurity. Recent excavations in the southern part of France have entailed a complete reassessment of these settlements.

The site of Roc-de-Pampelune, recently excavated on a large scale by Laurent Schneider, is situated on a hill-top in a woodland not far from Montpellier, in Languedoc (SCHNEIDER 2003, 2007). The settlement was newly founded in the second half of the 5th century, and abandoned in the middle of the 6th century (Fig. 2). A stone-built rempart enclosed a triangular precinct covering 2,25 ha. In the middle of this enclosure was a large square, which may have corresponded to a public space connecting two separate building clusters. In the upper part, there were a church and baptistry at the very end of the hill-top, and a few stone-and-mortar buildings with tiled roofs isolated from the open square by a terrace wall. In the lower part, a greater number of buildings was found, some of which had an upper storey. The buildings were organized fairly regularly around inner courtyards, but the absence of streets is striking. The internal hierarchical organization of the settlement is not easily determined, either by the architectural evidence or by material culture evidence. Excavation has produced agricultural tools, but also evidence for a diversified craftsmanship: loom-weights for textile production, traces of iron and bronze smelting, and glass production. In spite of its apparent remoteness, the settlement was integrated in far-reaching exchange networks: lamps and amphorae from North Africa were found in large numbers (40% of the amphorae are North African imports).

Obviously the relocation to a hill-top did not mean a loss of access to commodities and luxuries. The building of the village and church within a short time-span represented an important input of labour and investment. The settlement brought together a wealthy community engaged both in agricultural production and diversified craftsmanship, connected with long-distance exchange networks, and yet it lasted for perhaps less than a century. The Roc-de-Pampelune can be compared with other sites showing the dynamic of settlement in the 5th and 6th centuries: the hill-fort site of Saint-Blaise, in Saint-Mitre-les-Remparts, occupied during Roman times, was rebuilt at the end of the 5th century, with a fortified precinct covering 5ha, including several churches. The small-scale excavations conducted by Gabrielle Démians d'Archimbaud have provided evidence for a wealth of Mediterranean imports (DEMIANS d'ARCHIMBAUD 1994). Surveys by Frédéric Trément in the surrounding area have

<sup>1</sup> A new example has just been reported not far from Paris, in Essarts-le-Roi (Yvelines) (SAMZUN, BARAT, 2008).

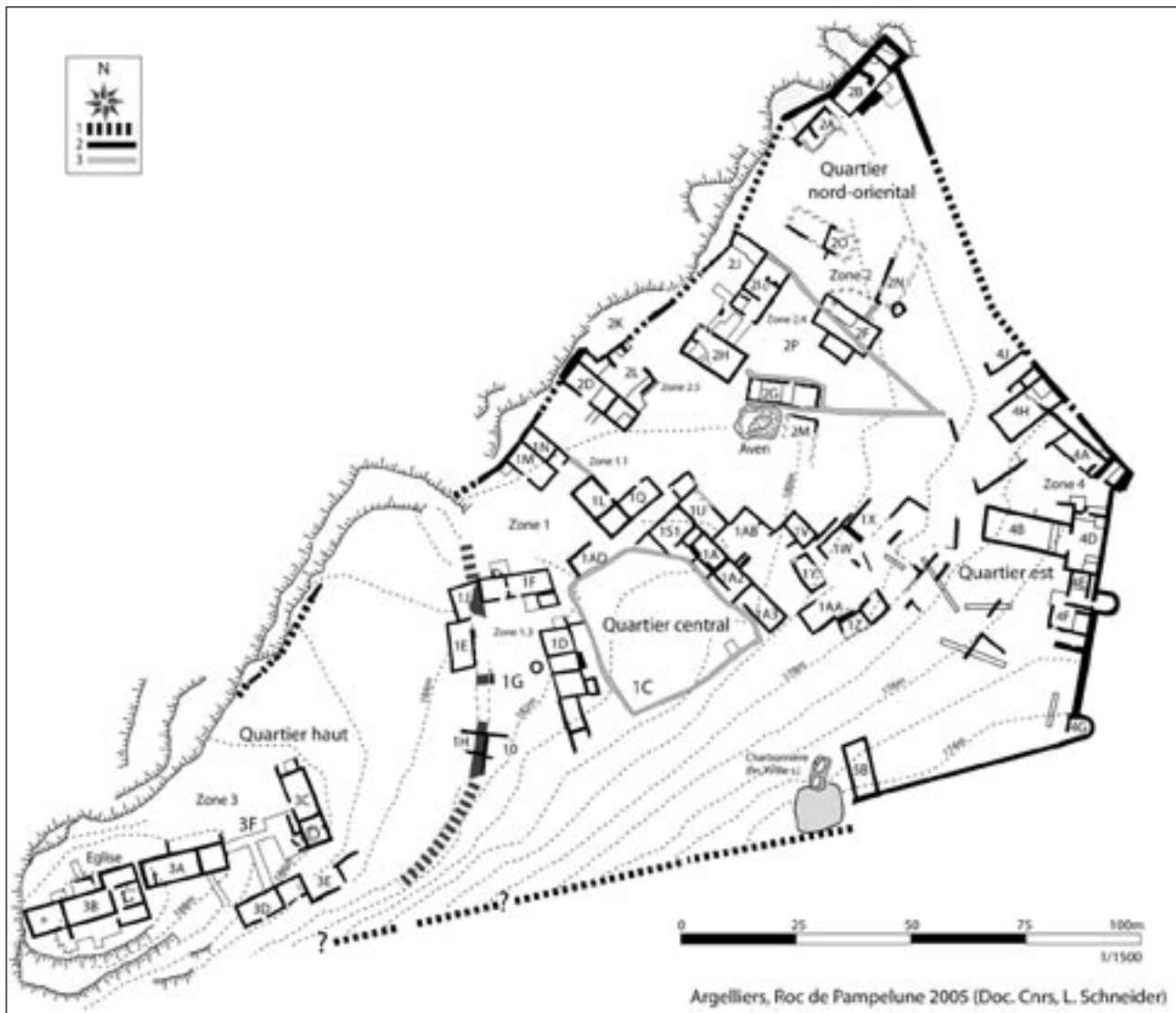


Fig. 2. The hill-top settlement in Le Roc de Pampelune (Argelliers, Hérault) (c.450-c.550) (after SCHNEIDER 2007).

shown the density of contemporary occupation in the plain (TREMONT 1999). Contrary to what was long assumed, hill-top occupation in the 5th and 6th centuries did not entail the abandonment of lowlands, which provide a large set of evidence of occupation. Several other early medieval hill-top sites comparable to the Roc-de-Pampelune have been recorded in the South of France, further away from the Mediterranean coast. In Larina (Hières-sur-Amby), East of Lyon, a settlement including fifteen buildings in adobe with stone-footings was built on a hill-top above the Rhone valley in the second half of the 5th century. One outstanding building was 22 meters long and 14 m wide (more than 300 m<sup>2</sup>) and possessed an outbuilding with a gallery. The associated finds

were extremely rich and included several hundreds of coins, bronze jewellery and engraved glass vessels. This first settlement lasted for less than a century and was already abandoned in the second half of the 6th century, when three large stone buildings were erected. The largest one had a complex layout and a colonnade. This second settlement lasted from the middle of the 6th century to the middle of the 8th century. The finds stressed the high status of the inhabitants: a spur decorated with silver, a ring with a seal, ear-rings, and styli, which provide evidence for literacy. Two successive cemeteries belonged to these settlements. The second one was associated with a small church encompassing an outstanding grave, with an outfit including a Byzantine golden ring

and garments decorated with golden threads (PORTE 2001; SCHNEIDER 2007).

These results have entailed a reassessment of hill-top villages: while they were long connected with refuge in times of insecurity, they have proved to be high-status complex settlements, engaged in diversified craftsmanship and integrated in long-distance exchange networks. For the time being it is not possible to tell how far this early trend towards nucleation on hill-tops may have extended towards the northern part of France. Some places like Chinon and Loches near the Loire, which are mentioned in the 6th century both as *vici* and *castra* by Gregory of Tours, might reveal similar developments, but the archaeological evidence is lacking so far.

#### THE RE-SHAPING OF ROMAN VILLAS AND THE BUILDING OF NEW AGRICULTURAL ESTATE CENTRES (c.500-c.700)

During the 6th and 7th century, the influence of the Roman settlement pattern was still very strong in the South of France. In Languedoc, according to survey evidence and excavations, nearly one half of known Roman *villae* were still occupied in the 6th century, and about one quarter survived into the 7th century (PELLECUER, POMAREDE 2001; SCHNEIDER 2007: 40). In Castillon-du-Gard, in the villa of «La Gramière», new stone buildings, some with a tiled roof, were erected in the late 6th and 7th centuries (BUFFAT 2005). At the site of L'Albenc «Le Bivan» (Isère), near Grenoble, a villa which had been abandoned in the 4th century was entirely rebuilt in the 6th century. The new stone building had a complex layout, was much larger than its Roman predecessor, and remained in use until the 8th century (DE KLIJN 2001). In Saint-Romain-de-Jalionas «Le Vernai» (Isère), near Lyon, a large-scale excavation revealed a long sequence of occupation of nearly one thousand years from the Iron Age to the early middle ages (ROYET et al. 2006). The villa, which was rebuilt on a monumental scale during the late empire, was abandoned at the end of the 5th century. A large masonry building (nearly 350 m<sup>2</sup>) with a complex ground-plan was erected in the late 6th or early 7th century, reminiscent of a contemporary building in the hill-fort of Larina, a few kilometers away. Although some walls from the late imperial villa were re-used, the ground-plan was completely

reorganized. The southern façade displayed two rectangular outbuildings at each corner, with a gallery in-between, clearly reproducing a well-known model of Roman villa.

A more modest example of these new agricultural estates is the early medieval farm which has been excavated in Dassargues (Lunel, Hérault). The first occupation, at the end of the 5th century, is represented by two large SFBs associated with storage-pits. It was enlarged in the early 6th century with the erection of a large dry-stone building (20 m x 5 m) and a boundary wall delineating the farmyard (GARNIER et al. 1995).

These large stone buildings from the 6th and 7th centuries, with a complex lay-out, also extended further north, at least as far as the Loire valley. In Rigny (Indre-et-Loire), near Tours, a small scale excavation (1100 m<sup>2</sup>) revealed a large masonry building which was erected in the late 7th century. The ground floor was divided by partition walls forming a grid supporting a wooden floor, and was probably used for storage (Fig. 3). It had an outbuilding, probably a gallery, on the south side. The quality of the mortared masonry shows a high level of skill, attesting the survival of Roman building techniques in the late 7th century in Central France. Rigny was the centre of an

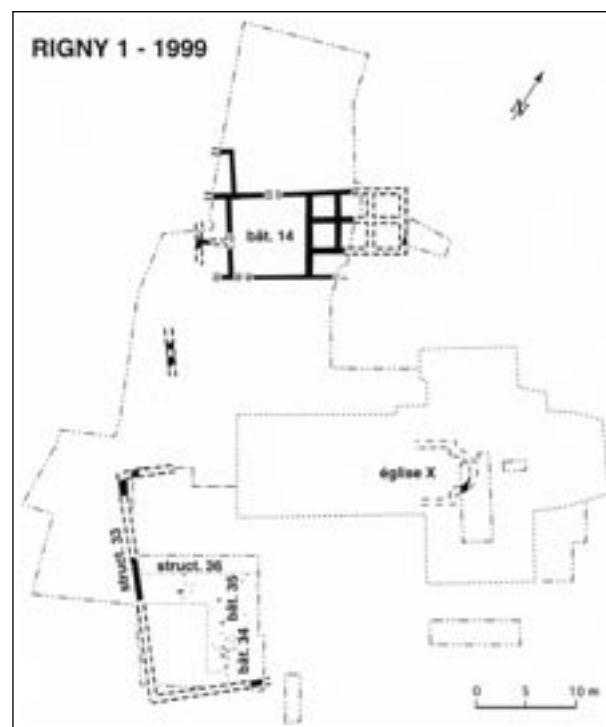


Fig. 3. The estate centre of Rigny (Rigny-Ussé, Indre-et-Loire) in the late 7th century (after ZADORA-RIO, GALINIE 2001).



agricultural estate belonging to the monastery of Saint-Martin of Tours. The surviving account documents from the end of the 7th century mention seven families of tenants belonging to the *colonia* of Rigny who were contributing barley, rye, oat and wheat to supply the needs of the monastery in Tours. A small stone church, the remains of which have been recovered under the still standing 12th-century parish church, was built shortly after the storage building.

The building layout underwent quick transformations within a few decades: the storage building was considerably enlarged with a new ground-level residential aisle and a second stone building was erected, but both show the demise of the use of mortar and a drastic decline in building skills. Shortly afterwards the buildings were abandoned and they were already in decay by the middle of the 8th century, when graves progressively began to occupy the ruins and spaces in-between. This transformation may have been connected with a reorganization of the supply network of the monastery (ZADORA-RIO, GALINIE 2001: 226).

Such large stone buildings with a complex ground-plan, which were the centres of elite agricultural estates in the 6th and 7th century, are as yet undocumented in the northern part of France.

Many villa sites in the North also display a remarkable continuity of occupation, as in Bussy-Saint-Georges «Les Dix-huit Arpents» (BUCHEZ 1995), Servon «L'Arpent Ferret» (GENTILI, HOURLIER 1995), Vert-Saint-Denis «Les Fourneaux» (PEYTREMANN 2003, 2:197-200) or Limetz-Villez (VAN OSSEL, OUZOULIAS 1989) near Paris, but the new buildings erected in the 6th and 7th centuries were post-built structures and SFBs.

#### NEW POST-BUILT VILLAGES IN THE NORTH OF FRANCE (c.500-c.700)

In contrast to previous centuries, many new settlements, unrelated to Roman predecessors, were founded during the 6th and the 7th centuries in the northern part of France. They were usually small, with only a few individual farmstead units, and they usually lacked any clearly defined edges, internal boundaries or other signs of delineation, such as enclosed groups of buildings. There are,

however, some exceptions. In Western France, a 6th-7th century ditched boundary enclosed the settlement of Château-Gontier «Vauvert» (Mayenne) (VALAIS 2007). In Chessy «Le Bois de Paris» (Seine-et-Marne), the boundary ditch of a Roman farm abandoned in the 3rd century was re-used in the 6th-century settlement and the enclosure was completed by a fence (BONIN 2000).

The houses were usually small single- or two-aisled buildings without a byre, made of timber, wattle-and-daub or adobe with earthfast, or more rarely stone-sill foundations, and associated with ancillary structures, such as SFBs, storage-pits, granaries, wells and ovens. Graveyards were located at some distance away from the settlements, but very often a few isolated burials are to be found within the villages.

In Goudelancourt-les-Pierrepont, in Picardy, a polyfocal settlement made up of three separate nuclei from the 6th-7th century with a contemporary furnished graveyard has been extensively excavated over a surface of several hectares. The cemetery, which was in use from the beginning of the 6th century to the beginning of the 8th century, contained 458 graves. The earliest graves date from the first half of the 6th century. A second group of burials from the second half of the 6th century stands out due to its different orientation, probably intended to preserve the identity of a second community. The first burial-ground also developed further during this period. The graveyard contained very richly furnished graves with weapons, jewellery, oriental golden fibulae, a pixyde. Several stelas and the lid of a sarcophagus with carvings were also discovered in the graveyard (NICE 2008).

Only one farmstead unit from the excavated settlement has been fully published (NICE 1994). It incorporated five surface buildings, the main one (6m x 8,50m) with a wooden frame on stone-footings and a hearth against the gable-end, with 14 SFBs, some of which were used for housing, and a well. The evidence for craftsmanship included weaving and smithing (NICE 1994). In the settlement area, there was a substantial amount of pottery, and 20% of it was fine ware (Argonne and Merovingian biconic wares). Metalwork was scarce, especially in comparison with the conspicuous outfit of the burials. Within the settlement, only a few dress accessories, bronze pins and other pieces of metal-work were found,

but the presence of small quantities of luxury commodities such as fragments of glass vessels, and pieces of carved bone-work are unusual in peasant households and may suggest a higher status for its inhabitants - but the main information about social ranking is provided by the graveyard.

In Prény «Tautécourt» and «Frichamp» (Meurthe et Moselle) in Lorraine, two settlements separated by a distance of 900 m, with a graveyard in-between, have recently been excavated (FRAUCIEL 2009).

The settlement in Tautécourt, which was excavated over a surface of 1.8 ha, was occupied from the end of the 5th to the late 9th or early 10th century, but its layout underwent important changes. Many finds were recovered during the excavation: about 12,000 sherds, 10,000 animal bones, 300 pieces of metal-work, and evidence of craftsmanship. The early occupation, in the 6th and part of the 7th century, corresponds to 15 single-aisled post-built buildings, laid out in a row with a similar orientation. The largest were 10 to

12 m long. Most of them included a main room of about 40 m<sup>2</sup>, with only one larger exception (73 m<sup>2</sup>). This modular ground-plan, which was also found on the second site, in Frichamp, was sometimes enlarged with additional rooms at the gable-end or on the side-wall: some buildings were L-shaped. The six largest buildings all included a central hearth, and they were certainly dwelling-houses. The pottery included hand-made pottery, coarse-ware from the Eifel (Mayen), and fine-ware from Argonne (10%). The evidence for craftsmanship included deer antler carving, smithy, leather-work and weaving.

During the late 6th or early 7th century, the village shifted southwards and its layout became more clustered (Fig. 4). It included several household units, but the lack of internal boundaries made a reconstruction of the plots impossible.

In Prény «Frichamp», where the excavation was more limited, about 20 buildings were found. Their layout, orientation and building techniques were similar to those in Tautécourt.

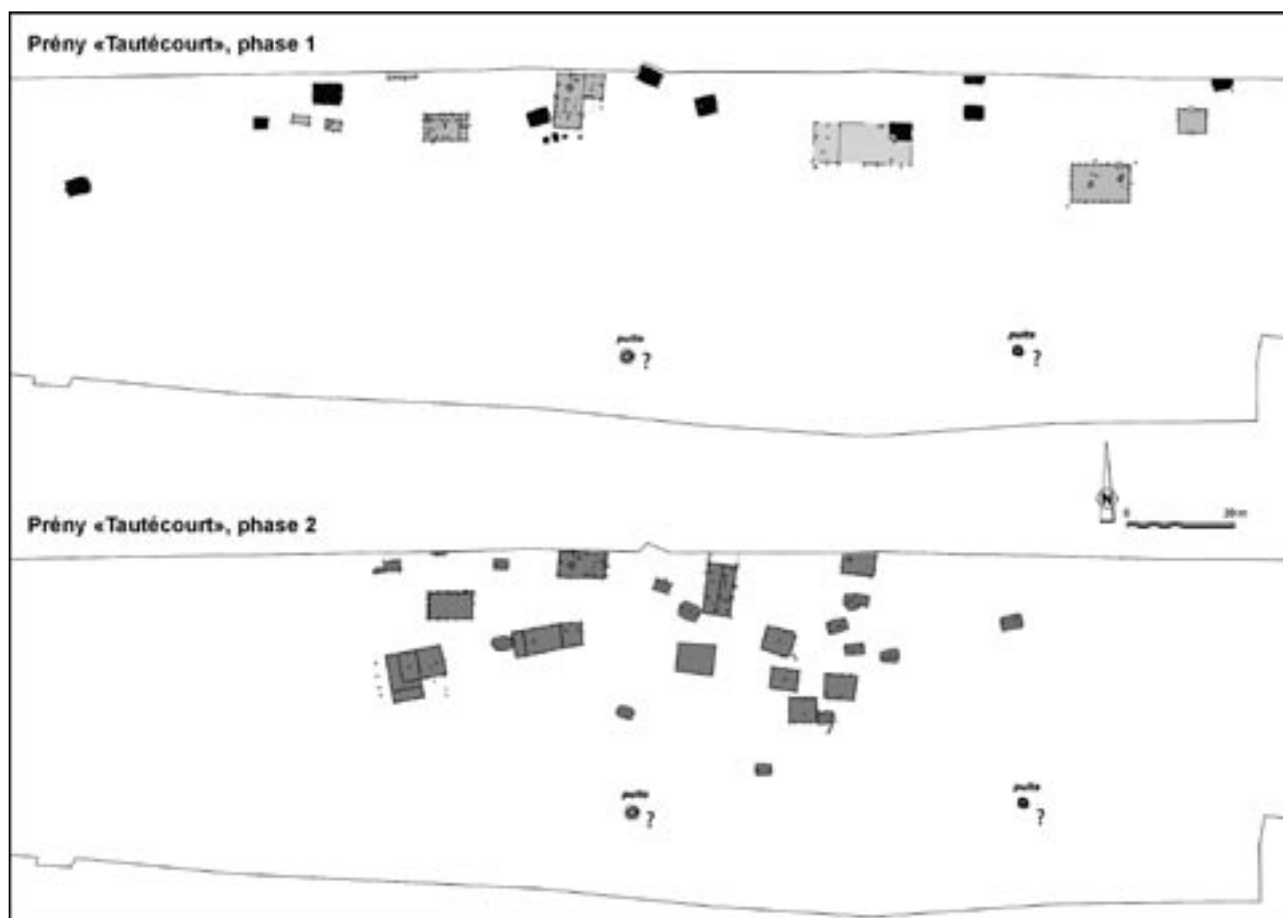


Fig. 4. The transformation of the village layout in Prény «Tautécourt» (Meurthe-et-Moselle) during the 6th and early 7th century (after FRAUCIEL 2009).

The graveyard included at least 200 burials from the end of the 5th to at least the 8th century, with 177 furnished graves. The layout of the burial-ground displayed internal ranking: two graves were surrounded by a circular enclosure, others had large mortuary chambers of 4,50m x 2 m. Some men's graves contained a sword and angon, while women were buried with their jewellery (gold and silver fibulae, silver and bronze bracelets, amber necklaces). Even children were sometimes buried in furnished graves, with miniature weapons, which might be considered evidence for hereditary ranking and stable elites.

Genlis, in Burgundy, is one of the largest 7th century villages recorded so far in France (CATTEDDU 1992). The site was excavated over a surface of 3ha; 18 post-built buildings and 29 SFBs were found. They were occupied for a short time-span, from the end of the 6th century to the end of the 7th century. The main ground-level buildings were 8 to 15 m long. Their surface was between 60 and 90 m<sup>2</sup>, with only some buildings being more than 100 m<sup>2</sup>. Each main building was surrounded by several ancillary buildings, SFBs, granaries and storage pits, and was separated from the next by a distance ranging from 30 to 80 m. There were some boundary ditches delineating the households, but they were inherited from an earlier Roman field-system.

The quantity of pottery recovered was modest, but included a proportion of fine ware. The metalwork was scarce (a few agricultural tools, bronze pins and dress accessories), but the discovery of slags suggests some smithing activity. The village graveyard was not found during the excavations, but four scattered burials were discovered within the settlement. One of them, buried in a disused storage pit, was perhaps an outcast, but the others were buried in standard graves, with some dress-accessories.

#### THE TREND TOWARDS NUCLEATION AND FORMAL PLANNING IN THE NORTH OF FRANCE (c.650/700 - c.900)

From the second half of the 7th century, settlements tend to become larger and more clustered. In Goudelancourt, two of the three settlement nuclei were abandoned in the 7th century, and only one lasted as late as the 10th or 11th centuries (NICE 1998). Although the

results of the excavations have not been fully published yet, we may assume that it probably developed at the expense of the two abandoned nuclei. In Bussy-Saint-Georges «Les Dix-huit-Arpents», from the 8th century onwards, the settlement outgrew the limits of the Roman villa within which it was confined in the 6th-7th century, and expanded in a row along a road (BUCHEZ 1995).

There were also changes in building techniques and ground-plans. Buildings became larger, but they seldom exceed 15-16 m in length. The large three-aisled 9th century timber buildings from Château-Gaillard «Le Recourbe», which were 23 to 27 m long and 10 to 11 m wide, stand out as an exception (VICHERD 2001). From the late 7th century onwards, stone footings were more widely used, and SFBs became rare except in the East and North. This revival of stone-building has been observed on various sites in Normandy, for instance in Mondeville (LORREN 1989), in Giberville (SAINT-JORES, HINCKER 2001), and in Grentheville (HANUSSE 1999, 2005). In this last settlement, which was constituted of four agricultural units in the 6th century, the SFBs were filled-in in the late 7th century and replaced by buildings on stone-footings, but the general layout of the village remained unchanged.

From the late 7th century onwards, the layouts of a number of villages display a more formal pattern, including ditch-systems delineating house-plots and fields, with some areas devoted to specific activities such as craftsmanship or corn processing and storage (granaries, storage pits, drying kilns for cereals...). Some settlements were delineated by narrow curvilinear ditches, as in Saint-Ouen-des-Besaces (Calvados) in Normandy between the 8th and 10th century, or a rectangular boundary fence determining the orientation of the buildings as in the case of Sorigny (Indre-et-Loire) in the 9th century (CARPENTIER 1999; CATTEDDU 2009: 28). Where they are preserved, the remains of fences and ditches around the individual household units play an essential part in conveying a sense of regularity in the layout. In Janzé, in Brittany, the household plots dating from the 8th or 9th centuries were delineated by small ditches enclosing a surface of about 1000 m<sup>2</sup> (Fig. 5). In Raray (Oise), in Picardy, north of Paris, the farmstead plots from the 7th-8th centuries had a surface of about 1,700 m<sup>2</sup>. They encompassed one or two ground-floor buildings, one to three

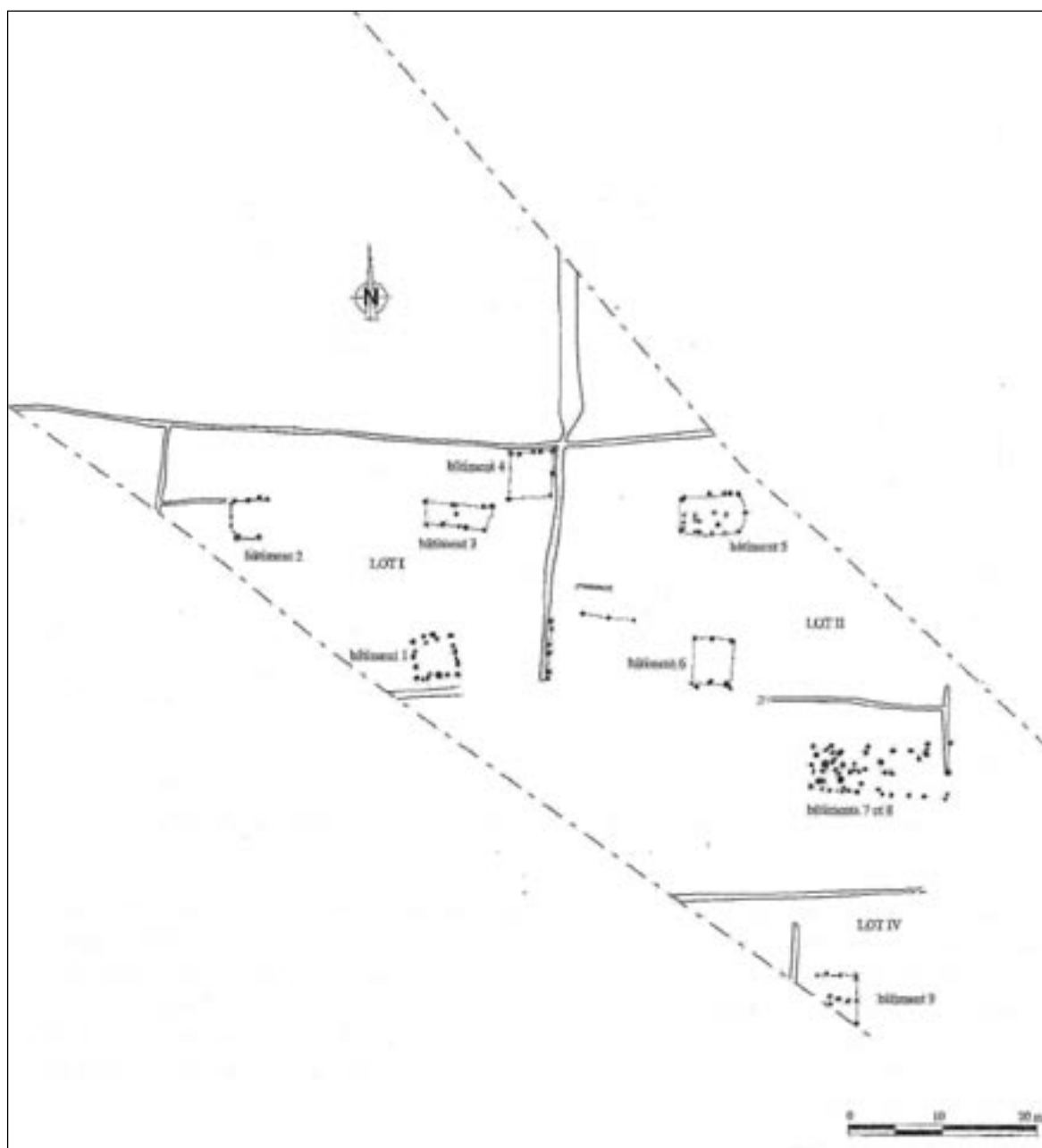
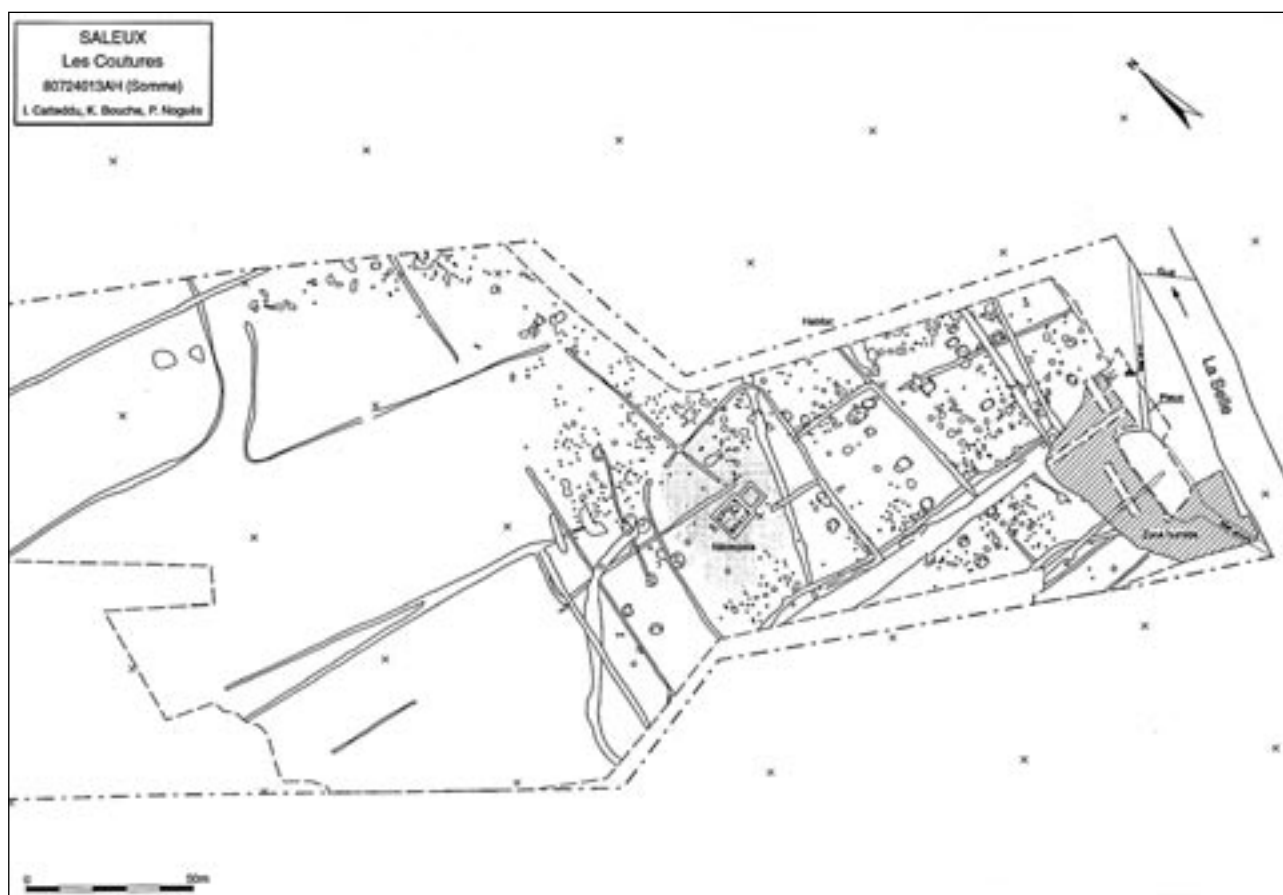


Fig. 5. Boundary ditches delineating houseplots in Janzé (Ille-et-Villaine), 8th-10th centuries (after PEYTREMANN 2006).

SFBs, and a few pits. Some plots contained exclusively storage-pits and ovens, without any buildings. In Isle-sur-Suipe (Marne), three small plots delineated by ditches included several SFBs, a two-aisled timber building and a storage area. In Mondeville, in Normandy, a complex boundary ditch-system, perpendicular to the village street, enclosed an area of 1350 m<sup>2</sup> containing two large buildings with stone-footings and slightly sunken floors (PEYTREMANN 2006). In eastern Brittany, the excavation of a surface of 4ha at Montours uncovered two settlements, Louvaquint and

Teilleul, dated between the 8th and the 10th centuries, which were facing each other on either side of a stream at a distance of 500 m. The boundary ditches were laid out at different dates, but they all fitted in a fairly regular field-system including both settlements and indicating an overall planning (CATTEDDU 2001).

In Saleux «Les Coutures» (Somme), the farm units were defined by boundary ditches, maintaining the orientation determined by an older Roman orthogonal field-system (Fig. 6). The large-scale excavations, carried out over a surface



**Fig. 6.** The village of Saleux «Les Coutures», 7th-11th centuries (after CATTEDDU 2003).

of 4 ha, indicate that the settlement first developed along the bank of the river Selle, a navigable tributary of the Somme, during the course of the 7th century. Each farm unit contained remains of earthen-fast buildings as well as SFBs and storage or refuse-pits. The settlement incorporated at least twelve post-built buildings (30 to 45 m<sup>2</sup>), about 40 SFBs, and at least 50 storage pits (CATTEDDU 2003).

In Prény «Tautécourt», during the late 7th or early 8th century, the settlement layout was reorganized around a courtyard or a square, surrounded on the east side by adobe and wooden buildings with stone-footings, and on the opposite side by two-aisled earthen-fast post-buildings (FRAUCIEL 2009). One building 10.5 m long and 8 m wide with large foundation trenches filled with stones and massive post-holes probably had an upper storey. The lack of any kind of defensive ditch makes it unlikely that this tower-like building was a fortification. It might have been used as a granary. Similar tower-granaries are known from late Roman villas in the North of Gaul (VAN

OSSEL 1992: 154-155). The SFBs were gathered on the outskirts of the main built area. An area devoted to corn processing with drying kilns was also identified. During this last period of occupation, craftsmanship seems to have been limited to weaving, and sheep-breeding seemed to gain a new importance. Six burials scattered in two groups were found in the settlement. They were unfurnished, but one of them had a stone-lined grave, similar to those which were discovered in the graveyard.

A courtyard plan is also apparent in the 7th-8th century village of Villiers-le-Sec (Val d'Oise), near Paris, where the excavation covered an area of 9 ha. It was organised around a vast courtyard or square surrounded by large buildings and fences. An area encompassing SFBs was devoted to craftsmanship (mainly weaving). A great number of storage pits and ovens were scattered on the outskirts of the settlement, the limits of which were marked on the north side by a ditch-system encompassing the graveyard. During the second half of the 8th and in the 9th century, the

square was settled with several large earthen-fast buildings associated with storage pits and large SFBs. The main building in the centre of the square was L-shaped. During the same period, smaller household units developed in a row settlement along a crossroad. This layout remained unchanged until the village shifted in the 11th century to its present location, a few hundred meters to the North-East (GENTILI, VALAIS 2007).

In Tournedos-sur-Seine, in Normandy, a row-village developed from the middle of the 7th century over a surface of 3 ha. The households were delineated by fences perpendicular to a road. 72 SFBs were discovered, but no ground-level buildings. The existence of wide empty spaces within the household plots could indicate that the ground-level buildings were constructed on sill-beams. A small area encompassing 15 post-built granaries was discovered close to the church and churchyard at the north end of the settlement. Another large specialized activity area was located at the south end of the village, and covered 3 ha. It contained many ovens or kilns for the processing of corn. This clear spatial pattern provides evidence for collective organization and reveals an overall design in the layout (CARRE, GUILLON 1995; CARRE et al. 2007).

#### PRIVILEGED SETTLEMENTS IN THE NORTH OF FRANCE (c.600-c.900)

A few privileged settlements from the 7th and 8th centuries have been discovered in the North of France, but in comparison with the elite estate centres excavated south of the Loire, their ground-plan is much simpler, and their stone-footings were built without any mortar. Their high status is inferred from their pattern of consumption and supply rather than from structural evidence.

In Biéville-Beuville (Calvados), a small settlement consisting of a few 6th-century SFBs was completely reorganized in the early 7th century. Six large buildings with stone-footings were built around two courtyards, which were delineated on the north side by a trench-built boundary fence (Fig. 7). A post-built granary and three rectangular pits, interpreted as underground storage cellars, were found in the western courtyard. The buildings were about 13/14 m long and 6/7 m wide, and three of them were divided in two rooms. The largest one (14.80 m x 6.8 m) had

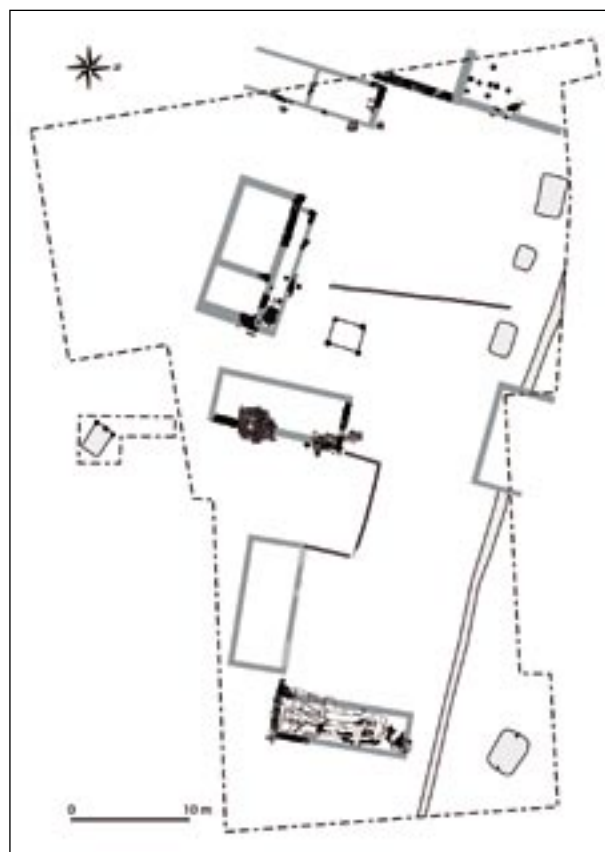


Fig. 7. The estate centre of Biéville-Beuville «Le Château» (Calvados) in the 7th century (V. HINCKER, Conseil Général du Calvados).

an outbuilding, perhaps a gallery. One of the buildings delineating the eastern courtyard encompassed a large stone-built corn-drying or smoking kiln. The buildings and the fence all had the same orientation, and the layout shows overall planning. Finds included a large quantity of glass vessels, keys, locks, bronze ear-rings and fibulae, a silver ardillon, pieces of horse harness, a spur. Their quality indicates a high-status for the inhabitants, and the site probably represented an aristocratic estate centre, which shifted or was abandoned in the late 7th or early 8th century (HINCKER 2007). Because of the small scale of the excavation, it is not known whether it stood alone or was part of a village.

Another elite building was discovered at Serris, in Ile-de-France, where a large scale rescue excavation covering a surface of 17 ha has revealed an early medieval polyfocal settlement occupied from the late 7th century. Two large buildings, with stone-footings and a ditched enclosure covering a surface of about 2 ha, were found. The main building, which was divided into two rooms,

was more than 30 m long and had an interior surface of about 280 m<sup>2</sup>. It had a glass window in the south gable, and probably a gallery on the west side. The finds included numerous bronze dress accessories, and rare commodities such as a Byzantine coin-weight, and sceattas. The archaeozoological evidence suggested a dominance of pigs, which is a trait observed in high-status nuclei as opposed to peasant households, and revealed the occurrence of rare luxuries such as oysters, sturgeons, and prestige birds (peacock). The privileged status of the building is therefore corroborated by architectural evidence (mainly through the occurrence of window-glass), the wealth of the outfit, and the pattern of food consumption.

An ecclesiastical complex lays further north, at a distance of about 300 m from the high-status nucleus, with a few peasant farmsteads scattered in-between. In spite of the distance, the two nuclei show close connections. The graveyard contained more than 1,000 graves, with some richly furnished burials, and two churches with stone footings and stained-glass windows, providing architectural evidence similar to that from the high-status settlement.

During the 9th century, the high-status settlement disappeared, probably due to an extension of the wet zone, while the farmsteads remained in use; the churchyard developed further, but did not outgrow the enclosure boundary (GENTILI, MAHE 1999; GENTILI, VALAIS 2007).

A somewhat later privileged settlement was discovered in Distré «Les Murailles» in the Loire valley near Saumur in Western France. The excavation covered 1ha on the border of a swamp. The site offered excellent preservation conditions due to the deposit of hill-wash. Ten stone buildings dating from the 9th and 10th centuries were found. They were all about 8-9 m long and 4-5 m wide. The hearths were placed against the gable-end, and one 9th-century building had a stone chimney.

The excavation provided evidence for diversified craftsmanship: weaving, leather-work, glass-working, and the carving of quern-stones. The discovery of many glass vessels, as well as several spurs, arrow-heads, spear-heads and a piece of armour provide evidence for the high status of the inhabitants. The provisional analysis of the faunal remains stressed the occurrence of a small quantity of wild game bones and the relative importance of

the consumption of pigs in comparison to other rural settlements where cattle and sheep are usually dominant.

Many agricultural tools were found. Agricultural production included wheat, oat, barley, millet and pulses. Evidence for wine-growing was provided by the discovery of billhooks and grape-pips. About 150 storage-pits were discovered, indicating a large storage capacity. In addition to the storage pits, three buildings had underground cellars (GENTILI, VALAIS 2007).

The existence of a *villa Distriacus* is mentioned in 990, and the church, which is still standing in the present village of Distré, is mentioned in 1004. The excavated site is located 300 m from the church, that is, the same distance as that between the 7th-8th century high-status nucleus and the ecclesiastical complex in Serris. It is quite possible that the *villa* in Distré included a polyfocal settlement of the same type as Serris. But contrary to Serris, the 9th-10th century buildings were all about the same small size (about 50 m<sup>2</sup>), and there was no larger focal building.

## CHURCHES AND CHURCHYARDS

The transition from unassociated burial-grounds to churchyard was a long process, involving a deep change in the attitudes of the living towards the dead. While no burials were made within Roman settlements, except for newborn children, scattered burials are a common feature in early medieval settlements. In the 6th-7th century, they are still rare, and when they are found, there are just a few. From the late 7th and 8th centuries onwards, they occur in most villages, and they often appear in larger groups of up to 20 or 30 individuals.

Churches became more common in early medieval villages from the 7th-8th centuries onwards. In some cases, they were added to a pre-existing graveyard. In other cases, it was the building of the church which brought about the gathering of graves in the churchyard.

In Tournedos, a wooden church was built during the 8th century in the burial-ground located at the north end of the 7th-8th century row-settlement (CARRE 1996). It was rebuilt in stone during the 9th century and the churchyard remained in use until the 14th century, long after the settlement had shifted. Over 1,600 graves from

the 7th to the 14th c. have been excavated. It was only in its last stage that the churchyard was enclosed by a curvilinear fence.

In Saleux les Coutures (Fig. 6) a cemetery was established in the 7th century on the outskirts of the initial settlement core, to the south-west, and developed around a single stone sarcophagus (the only one in the whole graveyard), enclosed within a wooden mortuary structure, which was interpreted as the founder's grave. During the 8th or 9th century, a church in the form of a large earthen-fast wooden construction was built over the mortuary edifice of the founder's grave. The church then formed the focus for further burials. The overall settlement expanded to the north, south and west of the church, making the church the focal point of the settlement. The church was rebuilt on chalk-sill foundations at the end of the 10th century, and it continued to act as the focus of the settlement into the 11th century. The churchyard, within a boundary ditch, remained in use until the 11th century and contained nearly 1,200 graves (probably about 1,500 individual burials). There were also a few scattered graves in the settlement (CATTEDDU 2003).

In Serris, during the 7th and 8th centuries, the churchyard co-existed with two small burial-grounds including about 60 people, and several isolated burials in various places in the settlement. During the final phase of the settlement, between the 9th and early 11th century, only the churchyard was in use, and the small clusters of graves were abandoned (GENTILI, MAHE 1999).

In Rigny, there was no churchyard around the first church contemporary with the use of the stone buildings mentioned above. In the late 7th and early 8th century, the inhabitants of the *colonia Riniaco* were buried elsewhere, probably in a cemetery situated further afield. It was only from the middle of the 8th century onwards, when the stone buildings were already in decay, that the graves progressively began to occupy the ruins and spaces in-between. With the exception of one female burial which was associated with a purse containing four coins of Louis the Pious and a loom weight, the early medieval graves were unfurnished, and the dating was obtained mainly through radiocarbon analysis. The density of the graves was low, and they were scattered among the ruins. It is interesting to note that at this stage the church does not seem to have attracted graves in any particular way. The burials, isolated or in small

groups, were dispersed on a patch of land encumbered with ruins, close to the settlement, the permanence of which, after the 8th century, is attested through the presence of rubbish, hearth remains and domestic structures in the burial area. The positioning of the graves cannot therefore be explained by any symbolic value attached to the older buildings, nor by any polarising role played by the church. Instead, it shows the progressive coming together of the living and the dead which marks a break with pagan Antiquity, when the graves were kept at a distance from the settlements. It was only in the course of the 10th century, when the church was enlarged, that the funerary area was recentred around it: the parts of the graveyard which were furthest away were abandoned, and the graves were progressively drawn closer around the church. This transformation, which put in place a closer relationship between the graves and the church, marks the transition from a loose funerary area to the churchyard, and it may well have corresponded to an important stage in the conceptualisation of the parish community. The polarization of the burial-ground around the church is thought to be the physical expression of a new sense of church community; it provides evidence for the making of the parish churchyard, as opposed to the loose pattern of early medieval burials spreading all over ruined buildings. The process of re-shaping of the burial-ground for which the excavation in Rigny provides evidence was probably widespread, and may account for the transition from a burial ground consisting of scattered graves to a parish churchyard (ZADORA-RIO, GALINIE 2001, ZADORA-RIO 2003).

#### THE DEVELOPMENT OF LORDSHIP (c.900 - c.1100): THE OUTSIZING OF SEIGNORIAL BUILDINGS, STORAGE CAPACITY AND OVENS

In Ile-de-France, around Paris, several very large 10th-century seigneurial buildings have been discovered. In the village of Serris, during the 10th century, a new high-status nucleus was created close to the churchyard, within a ditch enclosing a great timber building 37 m long and 7m wide with ancillary buildings. Further south, a ring moat of 40 m diameter surrounded a square building resting on four large posts, a kind of timber tower of 5,5m x 7 m. A large size L-shaped building was



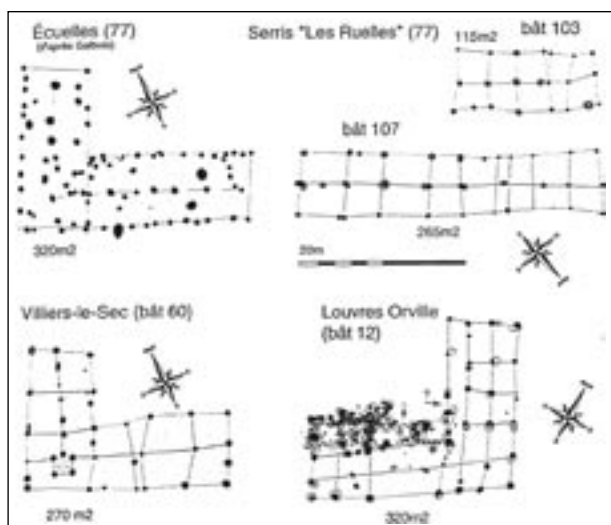


Fig. 8. Large 10th century high-status residences in Ile-de-France (after GENTILI 2001).

also erected in the 10th-11th century in the village of Villiers le Sec. Other examples of very large 10th-century seigneurial buildings in the same region include Louvres «Orville» and Ecuilles (Fig. 8) (GENTILI, VALAIS 2007).

The occurrence of these larger buildings, sometimes surrounded by a ditch which had a symbolic as much as a military value, indicates an important change in the spatial organization of early medieval settlements, reflecting a shift in the social structure of aristocratic groups, and revealing an increased control of ruling families.

The change in the numbers and size of baking ovens which has been stressed in Ile-de-France also constitutes a valuable indicator. While in the 6th-7th century, baking ovens were small and scattered in the individual household units, in the 8th and 9th centuries they were fewer, larger and often lying in clusters. Between the 10th and 12th centuries, only a single oven can be found for each settlement; these ovens were very large, reaching a diameter of 3m in the case of the settlement of Wy-Dit-Joli-Village (Val-d'Oise). A clear example of this evolution is provided by the settlement of Villiers-le-Sec, near Paris. In the 7th and early 8th centuries, there were 88 small ovens scattered around the settlement. During the late 8th and 9th centuries, 53 ovens, often lying in clusters, were in use. In the 10th century, only one very large oven (2m in diameter) was in use within the settlement (BRULEY-CHABOT 2007). This evolution could indicate the development of collective practices in the village community, but is most likely to reflect

an increase in seigneurial control and taxation for baking («four banal»), which is well attested through documentary evidence from the first half of the 11th century onwards.

The increase in storage capacity is also a feature of 10th-11th c. settlements. It points to the stocking of larger agricultural surpluses, either by the village community or by lords collecting renders from tenants. Although it is impossible to calculate the overall storage capacity of a settlement, because agricultural products could be kept not only in storage-pits but also in above-ground granaries, in sunken-floor buildings or in various kinds of containers within dwelling-houses, the capacity of which is impossible to assess, very large storage-pits, or important concentrations of middle-sized storage-pits, are clearly connected with high-status nuclei. While in most early medieval settlements the number of storage-pits is limited and their capacity is usually less than 1 m<sup>3</sup>, the 40 storage-pits from the 8th-10th centuries found during the excavation of the castle of the counts of Blois had a capacity varying between 3 m<sup>3</sup> and 10 m<sup>3</sup> (AUBOURG, JOSSET 2000). In the high-status settlement of Distré, 150 storage-pits from the 9th and 10th centuries were found, and their capacity varied from 1 m<sup>3</sup> to 3 m<sup>3</sup>.

Very large concentrations of several hundreds of storage-pits have been found recently in different places in the South of France: 450 storage pits dating from the 10th to the 12th century in Saint-Gilles-le-Vieux (Aimargues, Gard) (MAUFRAS, MERCIER 2006); about 500 in Saint-Jean d'Aureillan (Béziers, Hérault); more than 330 in Dassargues (Lunel, Hérault) in the 10th-11th centuries; 400 to 500 storage-pits dating from the 9th to the 12th century in the courtyard of an abandoned Roman villa in Saint-André-de-Codols in Nîmes. The settlement context of these storage areas is not clear yet, but they probably represent either collective storage by the village community or seigneurial stocking of tax renders, or, as suggested by Laurent Schneider, the collecting of tithes by the church (BOIS, SCHNEIDER 2006: 440-445).

## CONCLUSION

Recent excavations have tended to blur to some extent the strong contrast which was thought to exist between northern and southern France.

Contrary to previous assumptions, there is a growing set of evidence for the use of timber and the existence of SFBs in the South, and for building in stone in early medieval settlements in the North.

Important differences nevertheless remain according to the present state of knowledge. The trend towards nucleation, as demonstrated by the hill-top village foundations, started early in the South, by the end of the 5th century. In the North, new settlements were numerous in the 6th and early 7th centuries, but they were very small. A significant growth in village size is observed only from the second half of the 7th century. By contrast, large 8th and 9th century villages comparable to those which have been excavated in the North are yet unknown in the southern part of France, where very few settlements from this period have been recorded. The question of where to place the boundary between «northern» and «southern» France is a matter of debate, and it varies according to different indicators. If one takes on the one hand the recorded early medieval hill-top settlements, and on the other hand the extension of large timber-built villages<sup>2</sup>, we might situate it somewhere on the latitude of Lyon. The limit would lie further north, at the level of the Loire valley, if we considered instead the survival of late Roman villae into the 6th century and the extension of the large stone buildings with complex layout erected in the 6th and 7th centuries. Obviously, there is a good deal of overlapping, and the opposition between South and North is itself an oversimplification, considering the importance of microregional variations.

In comparison with the standardized architecture of the coastal regions along the North Sea (Scandinavia, Germany, the Netherlands) and even with the more diverse evidence from Anglo-Saxon England (HAMEROW 2002, KLAPSTE, NISSEN JAUBERT 2008), early medieval villages in France display a considerable regional and even micro-regional variety in layout, building ground-plans and materials. What this diversity means in terms of social and economic history is still far from fully understood, and represents a key issue for future research.

<sup>2</sup> One of the most southward example which is known as yet is the large 9th century post-built village of Château-Gailard «Le Recourbe» (Ain), where 20 timber buildings, were recovered (VICHERD 2001).

There are definite regional patterns relating to the distribution, function and chronology of the SFBs. By the 6-7th century, they seem to be in use in most parts of France, but their number in relation to the ground-level buildings varied to a large extent. In Alsace and in Lorraine, in the East, or in Ile-de-France around Paris, in Picardie in the North, or in Normandy in the West, there were usually several SFBs in each household unit, and some of them included hearths or ovens, showing their use as dwellings (CHATELET 1999; FAURE-BOUCHARLAT 2001; PEYTREMANN 2003). In some settlements like Mondeville, or Grentheville, in Normandy, SFBs seemed to be the only building-type in use during the 6th and 7th century (HANUSSE 2005). In other regions, such as Brittany, Touraine, and Anjou in the West, or in southern France, they were rare, and they were used only as ancillary buildings, for craftsmanship, storage, or for animal shelter. There are also regional differences regarding their chronology: in some regions, such as parts of Normandy, the Rhône valley and the Mediterranean, they seem to fall out of use in the 8th century, although there are a few late examples (FAURE-BOUCHARLAT, BROCHIER 2006: 272), while in Ile-de-France, the North and the East, they are still common in the 11th or even 12th century.

Before the middle of the 7th century, there is very little structural evidence for internal ranking within the villages, and no building that would seem to have been built on a grander scale than the others. Yet where the related cemeteries were excavated, the evidence makes it quite clear that social differentiation existed, and that some people were buried with a great deal more burial wealth than others. Status during life may have been displayed through media other than domestic architecture, such as a lifestyle including hunting, feasting and gift-giving.

The occurrence of focal outsized elite buildings is a late development in early medieval villages, dating mainly from the 10th century. The fact that they have been found mainly in Ile-de-France may result from the haphazard nature of archaeological investigations, but it could reflect a regional trend, connected with the preeminence of the landed aristocracy known in this region from documentary evidence.

The pattern of consumption and supply shows great variety from one village to another. The scarcity of finds on some sites can be accounted

for by the pattern of deposition and preservation of the archaeological record: on many sites, either because they have been severely eroded, or because the top-soil has been removed in a drastic way during rescue excavation, only the bottom of sunken features and post-holes survive. Our ability to examine the economy and the character of a settlement is reliant upon the existence and the survival of refuse-pits and dumping areas. However, even in villages where only a small amount of finds were recorded, finds included a proportion of fine ware, metalwork, and other commodities obtained through exchange networks.

The assessment of settlement durability depends to a large extent on the scale of the excavation: apparent abandonment of certain settlements may be a reflection of limited area excavations which miss small-scale, localised shifts of the communities. Small-scale excavations can suggest a short span of occupation where a larger scope would reveal continuity with only a short-distance relocation of the settlement (CHATELET 2006; NISSEN JAUBERT forthcoming). The shifts in village location seem often to result from competition between different nuclei within a complex of polyfocal settlement.

The improvement of dating accuracy, due to advances in pottery chronology and in the precision of carbon-dating, has allowed the identification of transformations within limited time-frames and revealed a pattern of settlement foundation, shift or expansion much more dynamic than was previously expected - and this dynamic of change should not be misinterpreted as «deserted» or «failed» settlements. The shifts in village location or the fast transformation of the layout and character of a settlement on the same spot reveal the importance of building investments. Contrary to a long accepted idea, stone buildings do not necessarily warrant durability, as shown by the example of Le Roc-de-Pampelune, where the fortified village and church lasted less than a century from the end of the 5th to the middle of the 6th centuries. The same is true of the architectonic sequence in Rigny, where the large stone buildings were used for no more than a few decades at the end of the 7th century, before the area was converted into a churchyard.

Archaeological evidence highlights the complexity of the process of parochialization.

Scattered graves within settlements are found in small numbers in the 6th-7th century, and in larger groups between the 8th and 10th or 11th centuries. They reveal a change in burial custom, which can be seen as a result of the closer relationship between the living and the dead characteristic of Christianity.

Churches became more common in early medieval villages from the 7th and 8th centuries onwards, but they did not necessarily have a focal position from the start. They were often built on preexisting graveyards located on the outskirts of settlement, as in Tournedos or Saleux. The example of Rigny shows that the transition from a burial-ground consisting of scattered graves to a parish churchyard was a long process, which was only completed in the 11th century.

A key issue for the understanding of the early medieval settlement system will be our ability to develop research in existing villages. Many of them originated in the early middle ages, but the archaeological evidence is currently to a large extent being destroyed without being properly recorded, because the redevelopment of village centres usually affects limited areas, too small to be of interest for rescue archaeology contractors.

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