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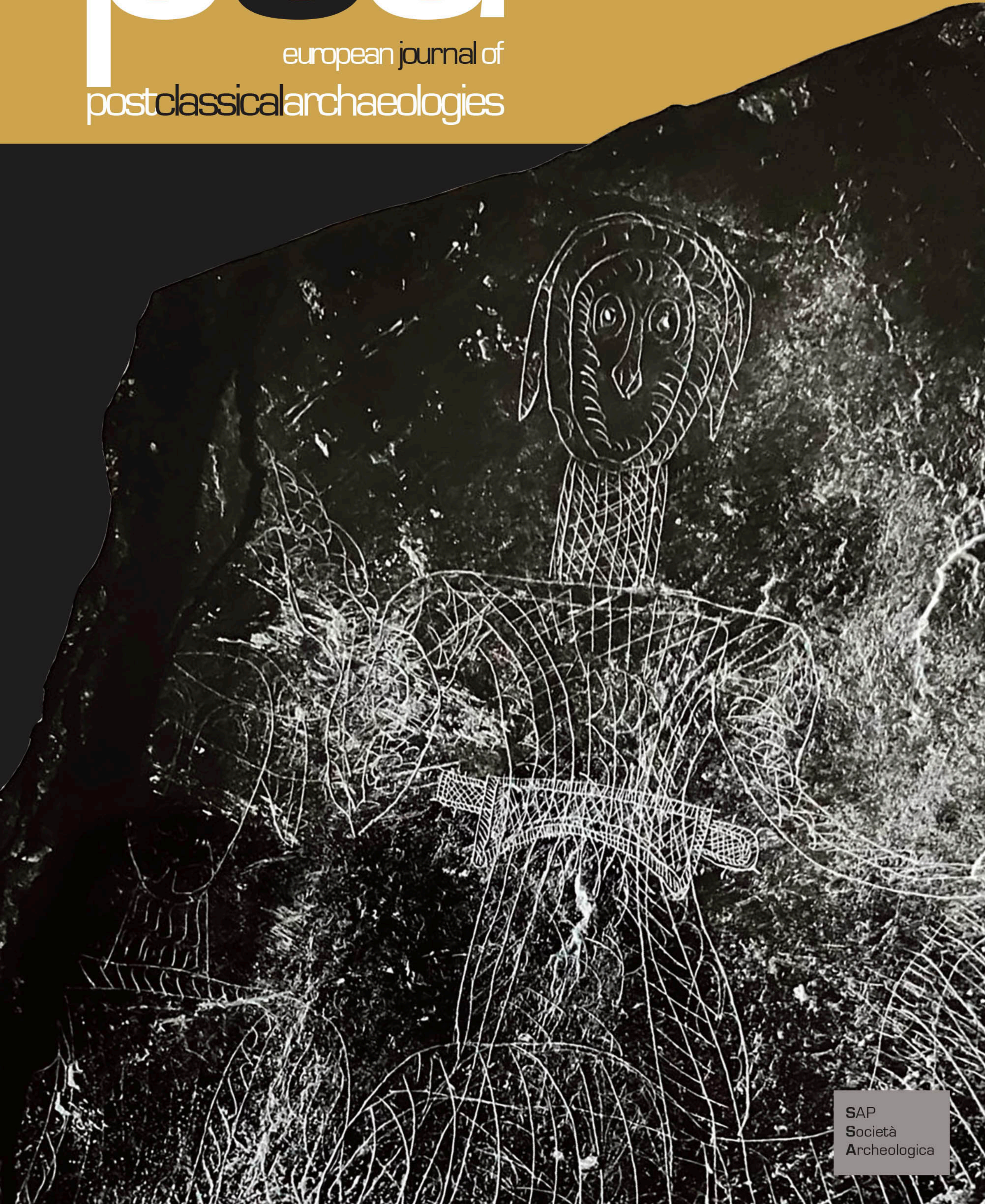

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Raphaël Durand*

Between contrasts and analogies: defining social status based on archaeological and anthropological data within the Avaricum necropolises from the 3rd to the 5th century (Bourges, France)

1. Introduction

During Late Antiquity, the city of Bourges-Avaricum and its surrounding territory hosted funerary sites of varying scale, ranging from isolated burials to large communal cemeteries (fig. 1). The urban necropolis identified between the present-day Place Malus and Place des Marronniers represents the largest burial area investigated to date. Excavated in several campaigns between the 1980s and 2019, it has yielded more than 450 graves dated from the 3rd to the early 6th century AD (Durand 2005; Durand, Fondrillon, Marot 2018). Its rural counterpart, the necropolis of Lazenay, is associated with a vast agricultural complex continuously occupied since the Gallic period. The Late Antique burial ground, comprising 326 graves (Troadec 1993), reflects the evolution of funerary practices up to the 4th century. A few kilometres away, the smaller satellite site of Grand Mazières, also occupied during Late Antiquity, displays comparable funerary characteristics (Durand, Maçon 2013).

Taken together, the almost 800 burials excavated in Bourges and its environs offer a valuable framework for assessing the evolution, uniformity, or diversity of funerary practices, as well as their potential association with particular categories of individuals. While the biological definition of such "types" of individuals can be approached objectively, any social attribution remains far more complex, if not speculative, given the significant contrasts observed, which mirror the social complexity of the communities they represent. Identifying privileged or disadvantaged groups is a delicate endeavour, often grounded in preconceived assumptions that conflate contrasts, exaggerate nuances, and separate supposed opposites using archaeological and biological arguments of variable reliability.

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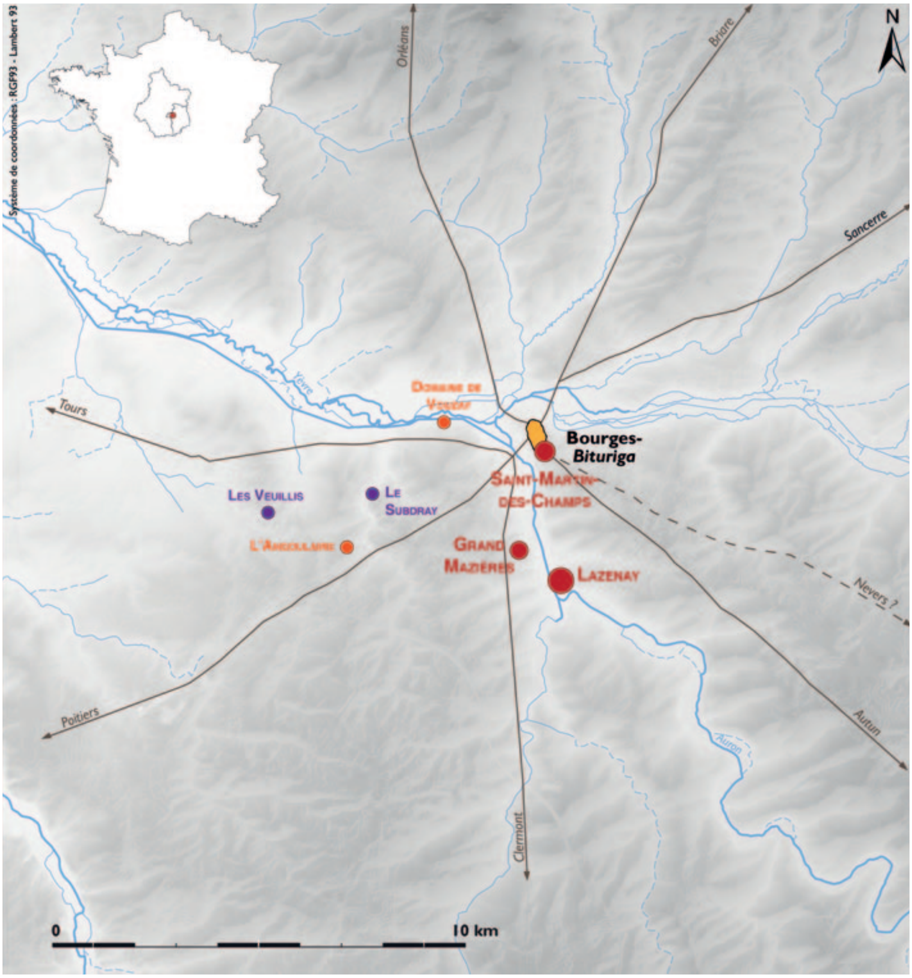

Fig. 1. Location of the burial sites of Bourges during Late Antiquity (CAD Raphaël Durand © Service d'Archéologie préventive Bourges Plus).

Research undertaken in Roman Gaul has shown that during Late Antiquity many of these parameters prove inadequate – especially when considered in isolation (Bel 2002, p. 188; Ferdière 2004; Blaizot 2009; Blaizot 2018). Interpreting the symbolic representations of the grave, primarily expressed through its architecture and associated artefacts, rapidly narrows the analysis to only one part of the funerary process. The material or financial value of these elements reflects, above all, the economic means of those responsible for the burial rather than of the deceased. Funerary buildings, containers, jewellery, ornaments, and other grave goods primarily express adherence to ritual norms. However, their quantity and quality may, to some extent, indicate the deceased's relationship to the living and the way in which their death was perceived.

Moreover, privileged classes constituted only a minority within the population. If the study of burials may capture social hierarchy through its wealthier representatives, distinguishing middle or intermediate groups – those positioned between the affluent and the poor – is equally challenging. In a Late Antique funerary landscape characterised by a high degree of standardisation, it was uncommon to exclude particular categories of individuals from the rites and practices deemed necessary for the welfare of all.

While such questions remain central to many current studies and cannot be resolved solely through the examples from Bourges, this substantial funerary corpus nevertheless provides a valuable ground for reflection that integrates topographical, archaeological, and biological parameters.

2. Funerary spaces, the topography of death, and the location of the dead

Two closely related notions must be considered here: the management of space and the management within space. Naturally, the diversity of funerary contexts – and their possible association with urban or rural entities – can introduce interpretative bias. In Bourges, the necropolises excavated so far belong to two distinct settings, each potentially influencing the social profile of the individuals represented. The urban necropolis of Saint-Martin-des-Champs/Monin, for instance, may have accommodated a composite population, sometimes transient, whereas the rural sites of Lazenay and Grand Mazières appear more closely linked to a resident, working community. This assumption finds an echo in the organisation of the funerary spaces themselves. While social status may have influenced the location or visibility of graves, the archaeological record tends to highlight only the extremes – particularly the richest and most monumental burials.

Within the Saint-Martin-des-Champs necropolis, the presence of funerary buildings directly affected the spatial arrangement of the graves (fig. 2). Such constructions required financial investment and advance planning, reflecting both the economic means and the social position of their commissioners and occupants. The absence of overlapping or disturbed earlier graves suggests that these structures were established in unused zones within the funerary area or on land destined to become part of it. The issue of ownership arises, as both cadastral and economic considerations imply a significant administrative and financial commitment – one that remains difficult to quantify. Moreover, these edifices were commissioned during the lifetime of their intended occupants, at a time when they were still fully engaged in civic life (Monteil, Van Andringa 2019, p. 2). Beyond financial capacity, such constructions clearly reflect the social position-

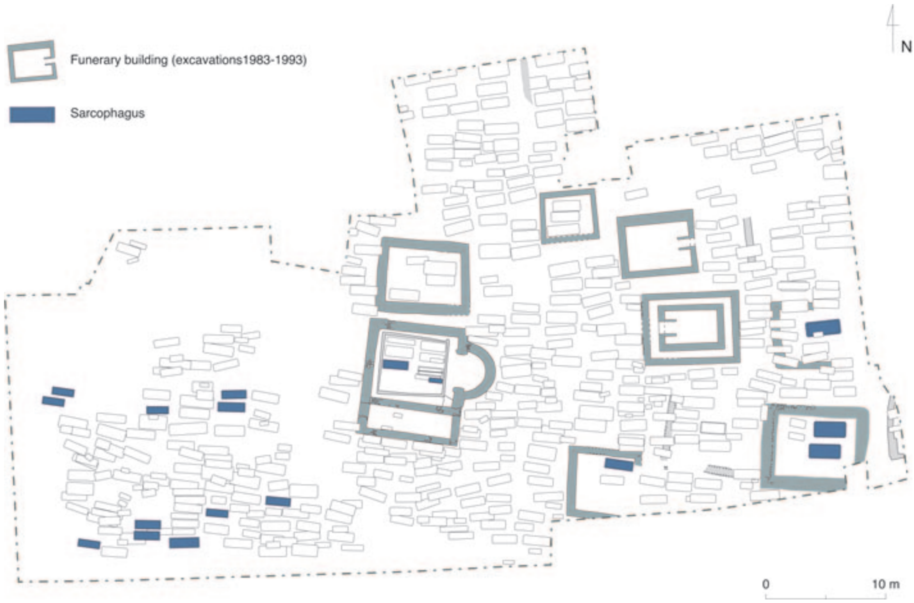

Fig. 2. General plan of the late antique necropolis of Saint-Martin-des-Champs (CAD Raphaël Durand © Service d'Archéologie préventive Bourges Plus).

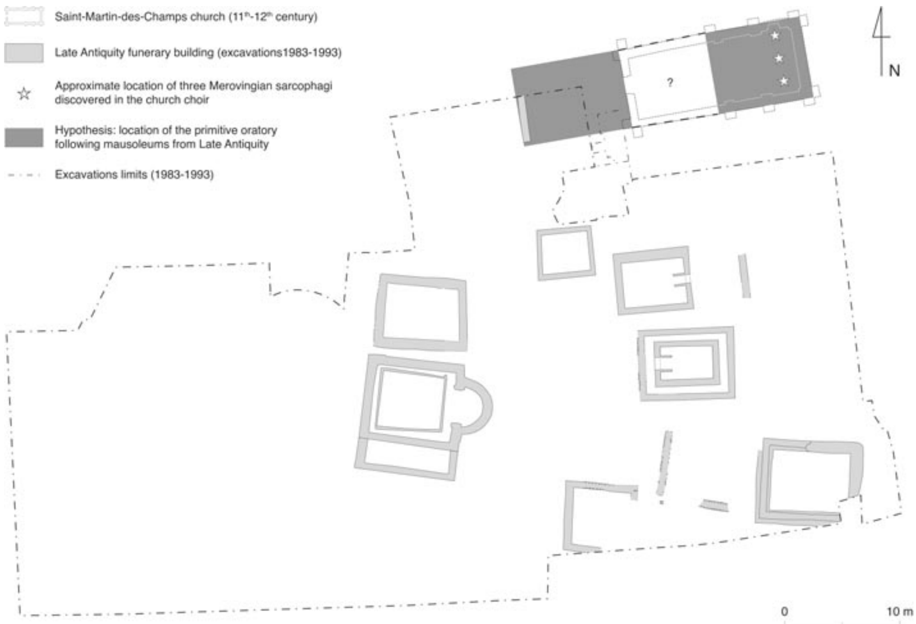

Fig. 3. Necropolis of Saint-Martin-des-Champs: antique funerary buildings and supposed location of the 7th century oratory (from Maçon 2010, p. 91, fig. 4-6).

ing of their owners, one of whom was likely responsible for founding, in the 7th century, an oratory around which a new burial area developed, succeeding the ancient necropolis (Maçon 2010, p. 91) (fig. 3). In some cases, these buildings were found empty of burials – not due to poor preservation or excavation error, but rather because they served a purely commemorative purpose (Monteil, Van Andringa 2019, p. 3).

What, then, of the graves surrounding or adjoining these buildings? It seems improbable that they belonged solely to non-privileged individuals. The numerous stone sarcophagi discovered in these contexts indicate the presence of people belonging to intermediate social classes – wealthy enough to invest in a costly funerary container but unable to afford a full architectural monument. Although this interpretation remains tentative, it is supported by the occurrence of sarcophagi within the funerary buildings themselves, suggesting a conceptual link between these two categories of structures. Topographically, outside the buildings, sarcophagi tend to cluster in the western sector of the Saint-Martin-des-Champs necropolis. While the current limitations of dating hinder firm conclusions, the organisation of this area, the varying density of burials, and its relative distance from the buildings all hint at a distinct spatial structuring, perhaps centred on graves belonging to individuals of particular status.

In rural settings, the expansion, layout, and management of funerary spaces appear unrestrained by real-estate constraints. The development of the Lazenay (fig. 4) and Grand Mazières (fig. 5) necropolises followed practical needs, with no apparent rules structuring the funerary landscape other than the avoidance of disturbing pre-existing burials. Within these two sites, no grave stands out through external features or markers. At Lazenay – regularly explored since the 1990s – no cenotaph or commemorative monument has yet been identified. The layout of the burial ground likewise shows no deliberate isolation or grouping of graves, nor any concentration around a specific tomb. If socially notable individuals were buried in these cemeteries, they remain archaeologically invisible *ex humo*.

Conversely, recent rescue excavations at the Domaine de Vouzay and L'Angoulaire (fig. 1) have revealed a burial protocol apparently reserved for a small number of individuals. These were rural burials located outside any known cemetery. They share consistent features: isolated placement, usually at the edge of a land boundary, and interment within a tegulae coffin (fig. 6). The specific topography of these graves and the uniformity of their containers suggest a practice designed to distinguish the deceased – perhaps not to exclude them from the community, but rather to highlight their presence through some form of surface marker or identification. The use of a tegulae casing recalling a sarcophagus, albeit of humbler material and re-used components, does not imply social degradation. On the contrary, it testifies to the care invested in preparing the grave, even with modest means.

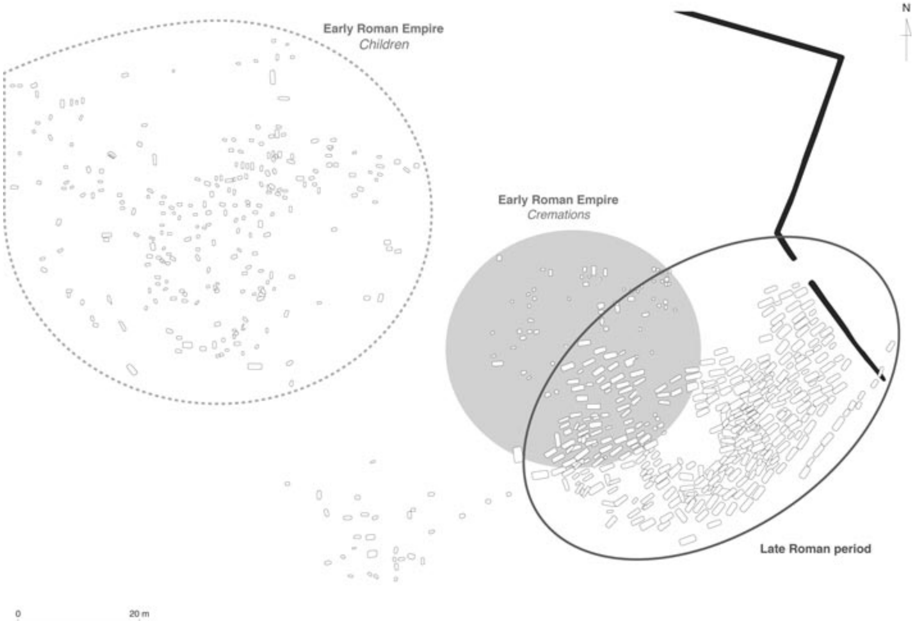

Fig. 4. General plan of the late antique Lazenay and its distinct funerary areas (CAD Raphaël Durand © Service d'Archéologie préventive Bourges Plus).

Fig. 5. General plan of the late antique Grand Mazières (CAD Raphaël Durand © Service d'Archéologie préventive Bourges Plus).

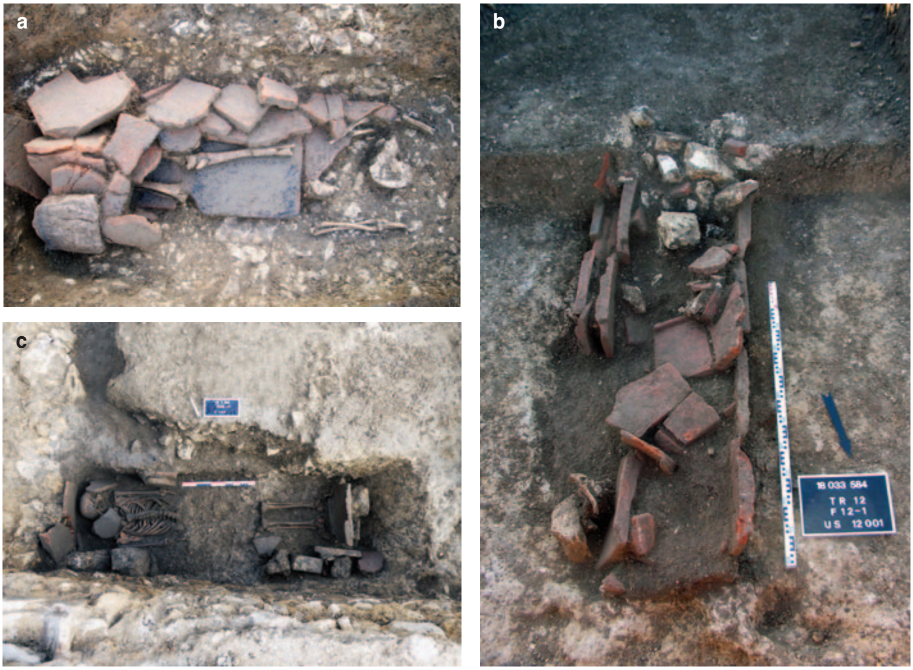

Fig. 6. Funeral tile formwork: a – L'Angoulaire; b – Domaine de Vouzay; c – Monin (© Service d'Archéologie préventive Bourges Plus).

Two additional cases from Les Veuillis and Le Subdray (fig. 1) illustrate in different ways how burial location may reflect social positioning, especially non-membership in the community responsible for the interment. Without being marginal to society, both individuals may have died away from their group, resulting in specific funerary treatments defined primarily by the placement of their graves. At Les Veuillis, the deceased was buried within an Iron Age tumulus cemetery but outside the nearby Roman burial area (Marot 2021). Although poorly preserved, the grave showed no evidence of an architectural feature (fig. 7). Only the skeleton remained, accompanied solely by a pair of footwear, identified from hobnails near the left thigh. This practice – frequently observed at Bourges and across Roman Gaul – matches the radiocarbon dating of the skeleton, between the second quarter of the 4th and the first quarter of the 5th century AD (334-422). At Le Subdray, the individual was buried along a road, isolated from any known necropolis (Dieudonné-Glad, Maçon, Rouquet 2013). The grave, dated to between the late 3rd and the third quarter of the 4th century (290-360 AD), contained abundant yet heterogeneous artefacts. Whether these belonged to the deceased – perhaps indicating a professional identity – remains uncertain (fig. 7). Although carefully deposited, the poor condition and secondary use of these objects suggest recycling, implying a lower social rank than that of a craftsman.

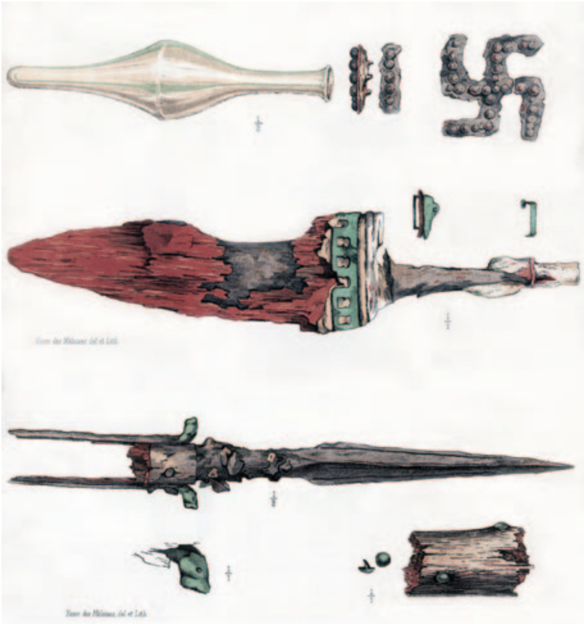

Fig. 7. Funerary deposit from the tomb of the Patrice discovered in 1891 (from Buhot de Kersers *et al.* 1891, pl. I-II).

In and around Bourges, while the number of known sites may seem limited, absences can be equally informative. Clear indicators distinguishing rich from poor within funerary contexts are rare and mostly confined to architectural evidence. Isolated burials appear to represent spatial distancing by those performing the burial, rather than a marker of social rank. At most, one may surmise that individuals of higher status would have received a different, perhaps more prestigious, treatment – possibly in another location.

3. The grave as a medium of social status: realities and limitations

The question of funerary stelae – potential indicators of the deceased's social standing through the presence of *tria nomina* or the mention of professions – may be dismissed at the outset. In Bourges, regardless of the cemetery, such evidence is absent: stelae were either missing altogether or discovered reused within the foundations of later funerary buildings.

Two main components may therefore be analysed: the funerary apparatus and the grave goods. Like funerary buildings, the choice of burial container reflects the financial resources mobilised for the burial. The increasing standardisation of funerary practices from the second half of the 3rd century onwards cautions against interpreting the use of simple wooden coffins as indicators of low social rank. However, the use of containers made of alternative materials appears to hold greater significance, and these are found exclusively in urban contexts. Coffins constructed from tegulae may represent an adaptation to locally available resources, substituting for stone or lead, whose procurement and transport might have been more costly or logistically difficult.

At Saint-Martin-des-Champs, the social implications of sarcophagi seem clear. Each consisted of a rectangular basin and a gabled lid. Most were installed within funerary buildings (fig. 2). In the hypogeum of the main structure, these sarcophagi accompanied masonry tombs built of limestone blocks and mortar – differences in construction that nonetheless indicate conformity with, or emulation of, the *more Romano*. One sarcophagus, specifically designed for a child, contained the remains of four young individuals, suggesting the familial character of both the container and the building. The diversity of containers used corresponds to chronological variation – the masonry coffins being earlier – and to the long period of use of the structure, from the 3rd to the 5th century (Durand, Pic 2000; Durand 2005).

Other sarcophagi found outside buildings point to individuals wealthy enough to afford high-quality stone coffins but unable to fund architectural monuments. In the Monin site (fig. 6), westward of Saint-Martin-des-Champs, the presence of a tegulae coffin recalls rural practices, representing an intermediate solution between the simple wooden coffin and the stone sarcophagus – a slightly more elaborate arrangement for a lesser expense.

Another type of container accompanies these sarcophagi: lead coffins. Most were found in urban contexts, generally during early excavations, and only three within Saint-Martin-des-Champs. Two had been crushed under the weight of the sediment, probably because they lacked internal reinforcement – simple coffins placed at the bottom of the pit and covered directly with soil. The third displayed a more complex funerary design involving a double container. The use of nested coffins is a characteristically Roman practice (Bel *et al.* 2009, pp. 32-36). In this instance, the lead coffin was placed within a wooden casing, and the deceased appears to have been laid upon a bier inside. Protected from the general collapse of the pit fill by the wooden casing, grave F8-28 yielded artefacts suggesting a distinguished funerary – and perhaps social – status (Durand, Charlier 2021). First, this grave is among the few in the necropolis to include grave goods; second, its assemblage closely recalls that of a 19th-century discovery within the same area, known as the *Tomb of the Patricius* (Buhot de Kersers, Marguerye, La Guère 1891; Bailly 1984). That tomb, containing a stone sarcophagus with a lead coffin, produced a rich assemblage including an iron lance with central rib and long recurved hooks, inscribed *PATRI/CIUS Z/REG/IVS* (fig. 7), an iron dagger, a pair of nailed shoes, a glass flask (Isings 105), and a ceramic vessel. The inscription, recently reinterpreted as *REG/IVS PATRI/CIVS Z(EZES)* –

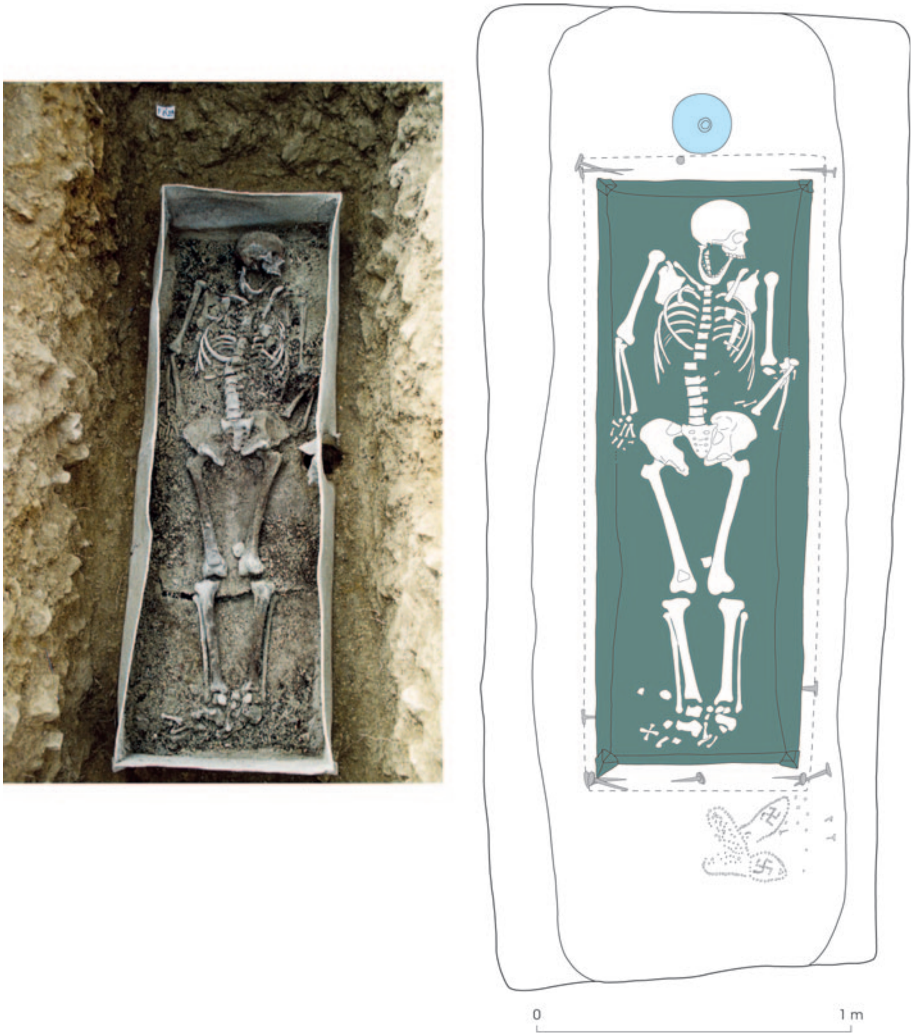

Fig. 8. Necropolis of Saint-Martin-des-Champs: photograph and measured drawing of the burial F 8-28 (CAD Raphaël Durand © Service d’Archéologie préventive Bourges Plus).

“Long life to the Patricius of the King!” – suggests that the weapon belonged to the *signifer* of a patricius, a high-ranking Gothic officer or one serving under Gothic command, though culturally Roman (Boudartchouk 2020).

Although grave F8-28 contained no weaponry, its assemblage was largely comparable to that of the *Tomb of the Patricius* (fig. 8). It included a bronze object, possibly an inkwell, currently under study, which may hint at the deceased’s literacy and, by extension, membership in an educated social stratum.

In this case, grave goods complement the information conveyed by the burial containers, though they are not always equally meaningful. Despite overlapping chronological phases, the Saint-Martin-des-Champs and Lazenay necropolises exhibit markedly contrasting patterns (Durand 2005, pp. 341-349). In the urban necropolis, grave goods are rare or exceptional, whereas in the rural necropolis of Lazenay they are almost systematic (fig. 9). Most deposits consist of a single ceramic vessel, though some graves contain up to four (Fourré 2003; Durand 2005, p. 348). Other materials, such as glass and copper alloy, occur in smaller quantities. Among the latter, personal ornaments – rings, bracelets, and necklaces – form the main category. One necklace is particularly noteworthy for its pendant, made of a polygonal-section emerald (Durand 2005, p. 352).

Here, objects used during the funerary ceremony, derived from household assemblages, primarily express ritual conformity. In contrast, items of personal adornment may help delineate a social hierarchy within what appears to be a largely labouring population. Yet such distinctions are not reflected spatially: there is no topographical differentiation, and individuals interred with the most valuable artefacts are dispersed throughout the cemetery.

At Lazenay, numerous graves contained shoes, identified by hobnails, in 81 cases (25%). At Saint-Martin-des-Champs, only five graves (1.3%) included footwear, whereas at Grand Mazières, four of the ten graves did (40%) (Durand 2005; Lechevalier, Durand, forthcoming). Were these the marks of those who walked or worked standing? Such an interpretation seems doubtful, especially as shoes also appear in the most privileged burials of Saint-Martin-des-Champs. In the modest cemetery of Grand Mazières, ceramic markers identical in type and organisation to those of Lazenay are present (Durand, Maçon 2013, pp. 188-189). In grave F31-10, the deceased was placed in a wooden coffin enclosed within a wooden casing (fig. 10), accompanied by a ceramic vessel, a glass vessel, and two pairs of shoes. Although less prestigious than the urban assemblages, the use of a double container recalls the more elaborate *Roman-style* arrangements seen in the urban necropolis, such as grave F8-28.

The variety of grave goods – both in type and quantity – raises the question of their social representativeness. Does a greater number or higher quality of artefacts necessarily indicate wealth or social rank? Some scholars have argued that the richness of a burial is expressed through the number of objects or their material value (Gleser 2000, p. 295; Struck 2000, p. 85; Polfer 2004, p. 43). Yet this approach yields mixed results for Biturigan necropolises, not due to poor artefact knowledge but to uncertainty over their relative economic value and the confusion between rarity and worth. The frequency of an object in funerary contexts must be compared with its frequency among the living. Furthermore, artefacts placed in graves are not necessarily representative of all items used during the funerary ritual.

Fig. 9. Necropolis of Lazenay: examples of ceramic container deposits (© Service d'Archéologie préventive Bourges Plus).

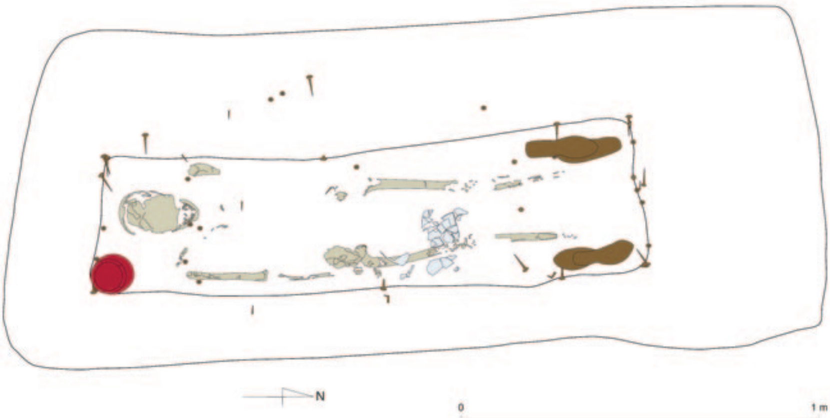

Fig. 10. Necropolis of Grand Mazières: photograph and measured drawing of the burial F 31-10 (CAD Raphaël Durand © Service d'Archéologie préventive Bourges Plus).

Conversely, the absence of grave goods does not necessarily imply poverty or lack of means, nor does it preclude the existence of elaborate, perishable ritual components. Comparing the late phases of Lazenay and Saint-Martin-des-Champs, which are broadly contemporary, reveals striking contrasts: at Lazenay, nearly every grave contains artefacts, whereas in Saint-Martin-des-Champs only about 10% do (Durand 2005, pp. 366-368). It would be erroneous to infer that the rural population was wealthier. Within Lazenay itself, children's graves share the same features as those of adults, even though children are often presumed to occupy lower social positions (Durand 2023, pp. 191-194).

Finally, one must remember that these artefacts were visible only during the funerary ceremonies. Some vessels may have been used again in later rites – such as the *Parentalia* festivals honouring the ancestors – but ultimately, the grave goods shared the same destiny as the deceased: to pass into invisibility.

4. To be injured, ill, in pain – yet to survive: the real privilege?

The preceding discussion of the burials from Avaricum and its surrounding area illustrates the difficulty of inferring social status solely from graves and their organisation. The distinctive burials represent only a tiny fraction of the excavated population and cannot, on their own, define the corpus of the elite or the affluent classes of the *civitas*.

At this point, biological anthropology and forensic archaeology can significantly enrich the interpretation. From palaeodemographic and biological perspectives, the populations of Bourges do not differ markedly from those of Roman Gaul in general. Infant mortality was high, affecting both urban and rural communities. Burials of young children are numerous and distributed throughout the necropolises, including within buildings associated with privileged groups. The causes of infant death were multiple, with varied aetiologies and levels of virulence seemingly independent of living conditions. Whatever the social class, surviving the first five years of life was a major challenge.

At the level of individuals, palaeopathological examination reveals that the population as a whole was frequently exposed to significant metabolic stress and nutritional deficiencies. The usual skeletal indicators of physiological stress observed in ancient populations – *cribra orbitalia*, *porotic hyperostosis*, and dental

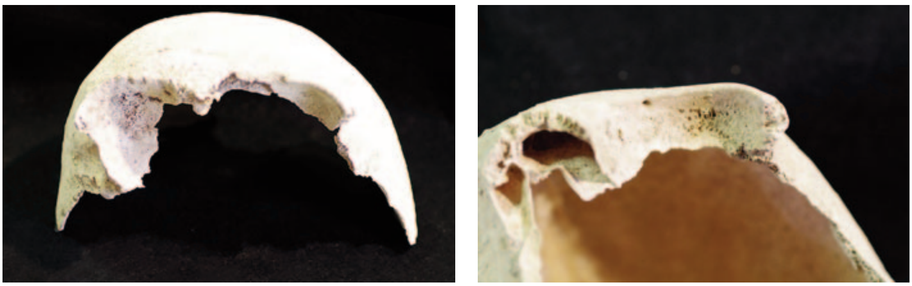

Fig. 11. Necropolis of Saint-Martin-des-Champs: two typical examples of *cribra orbitalia* (©Raphaël Durand, Service d'Archéologie préventive Bourges Plus).

Fig. 12. Examples of serious fractures of the lower limbs in the necropolises of Saint-Martin-des-Champs and Lazenay: a - major fracture of the left femur shaft; b - major fracture of the proximal quarter of the left femur; c - left tibia/fibula double fracture; d - major distal quarter fracture of left tibia; e - fracture of the proximal third of the left fibula (©Raphaël Durand, Service d'Archéologie préventive Bourges Plus).

enamel hypoplasia – occur at various developmental stages and intensities, reflecting repeated episodes of food shortage, malnutrition, or even famine (fig. 11).

Where palaeopathology proves most informative is in the assessment of traumatic, inflammatory, and degenerative lesions. The overall number of fractures observed is low: 14 at Saint-Martin-des-Champs and 9 at Lazenay, representing only 3-4% of the total population in each case. All these fractures occurred in adults and affected both upper and lower limbs without clear predominance. However, a specific pattern emerges for the lower limbs (fig. 12): in both sites, four individuals – exclusively men aged between 30 and 59 years – show double tibia/fibula fractures. The causes of such injuries are multiple: twisting the leg while the foot was fixed, falling from height, or the impact of a heavy object. Determining the precise cause of each fracture is difficult, especially as similar lesions appear in both urban and rural contexts. Nonetheless, they may plausibly relate to regular contact with horses or large animals, whether in riding or herding activities.

In the upper limbs, fractures are primarily located on the clavicle and, to a lesser extent, on the forearm and elbow joint (fig. 13). Most result from falls in which the victim attempted to break the impact with the arm extended – injuries not diagnostic of any specific activity but common in everyday life.

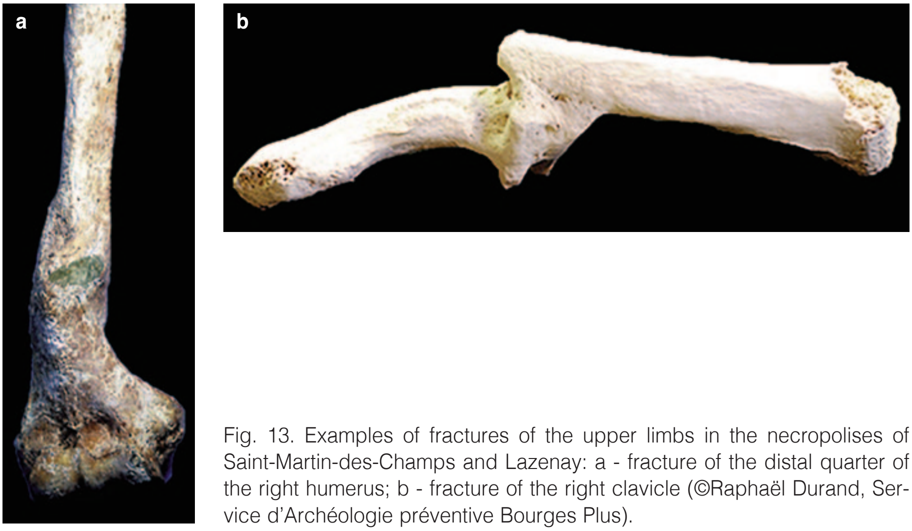

Fig. 13. Examples of fractures of the upper limbs in the necropolises of Saint-Martin-des-Champs and Lazenay: a - fracture of the distal quarter of the right humerus; b - fracture of the right clavicle (©Raphaël Durand, Service d'Archéologie préventive Bourges Plus).

It is crucial to note that these lesions were identified because bone healing had been completed. The average recovery time for a double lower-limb fracture ranges from 90 to 120 days – three to four months – during which the individual would have required assistance with basic functions essential to survival, hygiene, and recovery. In several cases, the presence of malunions or imperfect callus formation paradoxically testifies to therapeutic care, prioritising the patient's survival over the risks associated with surgical reduction.

Inflammatory and degenerative diseases are more complex to interpret because of their multifactorial origins. They may result from musculoskeletal strain, intense or repetitive physical activity, or co-occurring systemic conditions. Such lesions affect a small proportion of the populations at both Saint-Martin-des-Champs and Lazenay (Durand 2005). They occur mainly in the spine but are also found in the lower limbs (knees, heels), often reflecting specific activities – repeated walking, forced leg movement, or prolonged crouching or kneeling. The most severe cases correspond to maximal pathological development, frequently associated with advanced age; these individuals were probably partially immobilised, perhaps dependent on others for care (fig. 14).

If conditions such as osteoarthritis, arthritis, or ankylosing disorders are seen as indicators of physical activity, one might expect a higher frequency at the rural site of Lazenay, yet this is not the case. Mortality was higher among this labouring population, reducing the lifespan available for degenerative disease to develop. In contrast, in the urban environment, longer life expectancy allowed more time for such lesions to appear – ironically, making them markers of longevity.

Fig. 14. Examples of spinal ankylosis in the necropolises of Saint-Martin-des-Champs and Lazenay: a - thoracic vertebrae; b - lumbar vertebrae (©Raphaël Durand, Service d'Archéologie préventive Bourges Plus).

This osteological paradox – where skeletal lesions attest not to mortality but to survival – emerges clearly from the data. These injuries and pathologies reveal individuals who experienced severe or disabling conditions over time, yet lived long enough to recover. For instance, the individual buried in grave F8-28 at Saint-Martin-des-Champs, whose costly and complex funerary assemblage corresponds to that of the local elite, had suffered a serious fracture of the left elbow (Durand, Charlier 2021). Disability, deformity, and chronic pain were likely part of his daily existence, and the severity of his lesion attests to some form of medical intervention, however limited, alongside access to pharmacological care.

Access to remedies raises important reflections. Certain lesions undoubtedly posed a life-threatening risk. In cases of fracture, the evidence of bone healing indicates not only survival but often a return to activity. During recovery, patients required analgesic and antiseptic support, as well as prosthetic or stabilising devices. Similarly, untreated dental abscesses could be fatal, necessitating drainage and sanitation of the affected area. Chronic rheumatic pain, even if not wholly disabling, called for the use of pain relievers or anti-inflammatory agents.

All these treatments imply the presence of a healer or practitioner capable of guiding post-traumatic care and managing convalescence – whatever the social context.

Although direct proof of medication use is elusive, ongoing analyses in several Bourges necropolises seek to identify correlations between osteological pathologies and residues of therapeutic preparations. Preliminary results are promising: chemical analyses of vessels placed in graves appear to match the pathological profiles of the deceased (Linger-Riquier *et al.* 2023).

The duration of convalescence provides insight into a community's ability to care for its members and temporarily forgo their contributions. Access to medical treatment, broadly defined, raises the question of who could claim such privilege. In the immediate aftermath of injury, survival likely depended on the availability of first aid. But for chronic or degenerative conditions, the financial capacity and social standing of the patient probably acted as decisive filters.

While it is difficult to assess the competence of ancient healers, literary, iconographic, and epigraphic sources consistently depict a medical landscape – both urban and rural Gaulish – staffed by numerous practitioners (Gourevitch 1982, pp. 206-207; Pietri 1989, pp. 343-344; Dasen 2010; Nutton 2013). Within this framework, longevity despite declining health may itself be regarded as a form of privilege – a biological reflection of social status, and a testament to the care and value accorded to certain individuals within their communities.

5. Conclusion

The dead represent a distinct social group, not necessarily organized around the same statuses or roles as the living. The world of the dead is therefore not a straightforward mirror of the living community, and direct, obvious links between funerary practices, beliefs, and social structures are often absent.

Attempting to determine the deceased's social status solely from grave goods is inherently problematic, as their presence typically reflects ritual considerations related to the condition of the deceased rather than their social rank. As with the living, funerary contexts do not offer a binary view of society dividing the privileged from the non-privileged. Society was stratified, but identifying the less wealthy or less socially prominent strata is challenging, as necropolises tend to standardize burial practices, with only minor exceptions. Individual display appears to reflect not social rank but the role or position of the deceased within the group responsible for their interment.

The evidence recovered from tombs represents only the "tip of the iceberg". Funerary display and protocols, including stelae and other monuments, were the primary venues for expressing the deceased's social distinction. While tomb architecture and grave goods were constrained by available resources, it is debatable whether items destined for burial can be considered genuine indicators of wealth.

In Bourges during Antiquity, defining social status from burial contexts remains particularly challenging. Urban and rural differences may reflect the earlier adoption of new fashions in the city, a locus of power display and of the diffusion of *more romano*, while rural areas maintained traditional practices for longer. Contrary to expectations, rural tombs often contain richer grave assemblages, particularly in terms of the frequency of grave goods. Interestingly, the most elaborate burials are sometimes those of children, including infants who had not yet fully entered the social sphere.

The study of funerary archaeology and its social dimensions cannot be confined to the tomb alone. While tombs are not ideal instruments for defining the social, cultural, or religious identity of past populations, they provide crucial insights into the relationships between the living and the dead, and into the evolution of these interactions, simple in principle but complex in expression. Beyond microcosmic comparisons of analogies and contrasts, it is essential to broaden both the visual and analytical scope, viewing the management of the dead as a continuous process and an integral aspect of late antique Gallo-Roman society, constantly evolving and adapting.

Abstract
In Roman Gaul, the social status induces very distinct modes and qualities of life so that stratigraphy, typology and osteology could constitute effective reading tools if they were not limited by homogeneity of funerary rites and global health status. If occasionally some burials clearly demonstrate a wish for ostentation and distinction, these are rare cases and therefore easily identifiable. In contrast, non-privileged individuals are more difficult to distinguish. Absence or overabundance of grave goods sometimes results more from a strict application of tradition, of rite, escaping any social consideration and respecting the rule of the community.
Keywords: archeo-thanatology, funeral practices, roman Gaul, social identity, biological anthropology.

Nella Gallia romana, lo status sociale determina modi e qualità di vita molto distinti, tanto che la stratigrafia, la tipologia tombale e l'osteologia potrebbero costituire strumenti di lettura efficaci, se non fossero limitati dall'omogeneità dei riti funerari e dallo stato di salute generale. Anche se occasionalmente alcune sepolture dimostrano un chiaro desiderio di ostentazione e distinzione, si tratta di casi rari e quindi facilmente identificabili. Al contrario, gli individui non privilegiati sono più difficili da distinguere. L'assenza o l'eccesso di corredi funerari deriva talvolta più da una rigorosa applicazione della tradizione, del rito, che sfugge a qualsiasi considerazione sociale e rispetta le regole della comunità.
***Parole chiave**: archeotanatologia, pratiche funerarie, Gallia romana, identità sociale, antropologia fisica.*

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