

The Archaeology of early medieval (6th-12th century) rural settlements in France

La arqueología de los asentamientos rurales altomedievales (siglos VI-XII) en Francia

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Abstract

This paper considers the story of the French archaeological research on early medieval rural settlements in the past four decades. The primary issues of this research have been presented and illustrated by examples from throughout France.

Key-words: historiography, rural architecture, making of the village, environment, elite property, excavation in existing villages.

Resumen

El presente artículo aborda cuatro décadas de investigación arqueológica de los asentamientos rurales altomedievales en Francia, con una presentación de los principales problemas encontrados y ejemplos recogidos de todo el país.

Palabras clave: historiografía; arquitectura rural; la formación de las aldeas; el medio; las propiedades de la élite; excavación en las aldeas existentes.

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1. HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE RESEARCH

Initial findings and early research

The first discoveries of early medieval rural settlement remains in France date back to the late nineteenth century. They mainly revealed Sunken-Feature Buildings (SFB) (Vauvillé 1894; Robert 1905; Forrer 1937). It was not until 1949 that the subject of Merovingian settlements was clearly discussed in Volume I of *La civilisation mérovingienne* written by the renowned scientist Edouard Salin (Salin 1949). In this work, archaeological examples are few and E. Salin primarily relies on written sources and on German examples when referring to dwellings. Some discoveries were mentioned in the 1950s and the 1960s in Alsace, Bourgogne, and Champagne-Ardennes as well as in southern France, particularly at Lombren (Fig. 1) where a hilltop settlement has been excavated (Chamarsson 1962).

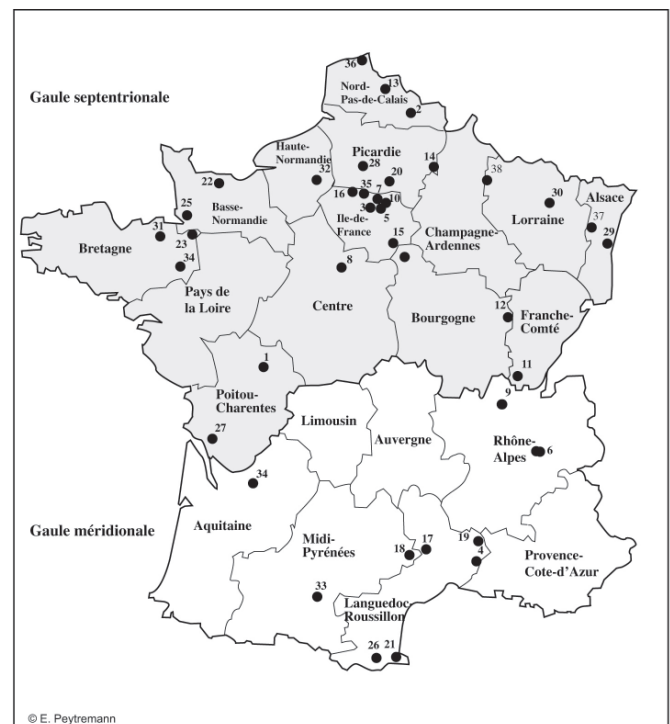


Fig. 1. Location of sites mentioned in the article. In the background, the French administrative regions

1: Pouthumé (Vienne), 2: Brebières (Pas-de-Calais), 3: Bussy-Saint-Georges (Seine-et-Marne), 4: Castillon-du-Gard (Gard), 5: Serris (Seine-et-Marne), 6: Charavines (Isère), 7: Saint-Pathus (Seine-et-Marne), 8: Ingré (Loiret), 9: Château-Gaillard (Ain), 10: Coupvray (Seine-et-Marne), 11: Écrille (Jura), 12: Genlis (Côte-d'Or), 13: Izel-les-Esquerchin (Pas-de-Calais), 14: Juvincourt-et-Damary (Aisne), 15: La Grande-Paroisse (Seine-et-Marne), 16: Villiers-le-Sec (Val-d'Oise), 17: La Malène (Lozère), 18: Lapanousse-de-Cernon (Aveyron), 19: Lombren, Vénéjean (Gard), 20: Longueuil-Sainte-Marie (Oise), 21: Lunel-Viel (Hérault), 22: Mondeville (Calvados), 23: Montours (Ille-et-Vilaine), 24: Passy (Yonne), 25: Plomb (Manche), 26: Roc de Pampelune, Argelliers (Hérault), 27: Saint-Georges-des-Coteaux (Charente-Maritime), 28: Saleux (Somme), 29: Sermersheim (Bas-Rhin), 30: Sillegny (Moselle), 31: Tinteniac (Ille-et-Vilaine), 32: Tournedos-sur-Seine (Eure), 33: Vieille-Toulouse (Haute-Garonne), 34: Châteaugiron (Ille-et-Vilaine)

The actual beginning of the archaeology of early medieval rural settlement can be dated to the 1970s, a time when French medieval archaeology underwent a significant boom, marked by the first publication of the journal *Archéologie médiévale*. Although primarily focused on the Middle Ages and deserted villages, research also included settlements of the early middle ages, as demonstrated by the publishing of the monograph on the Brebières site in northern France (Demolon 1972). This book, entirely devoted to settlement features of the sixth and seventh centuries, served as the primary reference for the next fifteen years. Then, in the late 1970s, excavations of early medieval rural settlements sprang up all over France, usually covering small areas, and mostly led by academics or volunteers. The publication of an important article by Paul-Albert Février on «The problems of settlement in Mediterranean France in late antiquity and the Early Middle Ages» (Février 1978) belongs to this movement.

First syntheses and the development of excavations

The early 1980s were marked by the publication of *Le village et la maison au Moyen Âge* (Chapelot, Fossier 1980), written by two researchers working, one from archaeological evidence, and the other from written sources. Without adding to Jean Chapelot's assessment of the archaeological aspect, the lack of archaeological data from France and the recourse to Germanic and Dutch examples are striking. Subsequent publications (Peytremann 2003: 363-427) proceeded to enrich the documentary corpus. Scheduled excavations conducted by academics, volunteers, and occasionally archaeology officials were undertaken in northern France, Normandie, Picardie, Alsace, northern Bourgogne and southern France. These excavations shed new light both on the nature of a settlement's characteristic features and on the topography and the formation thereof. The first results of excavations led by Claude Lorren at Mondeville (Calvados) in 1978 are quite enlightening in this respect. Among others, particular features of the site at Mondeville include an uninterrupted occupation for over ten centuries and the location of a graveyard and a church within the settlement itself (Lorren 1982, 1983).

It should be noted that, during the studies initiated for the millennium of the accession of the Capetians (1988), Gabrielle Démians d'Archimbaud presented an initial synthesis on early medieval rural settlements in France (Démians d'Archimbaud 1987). Although the data provided by the excavations appears to be slightly more abundant, the difficulties of dating the period of occupa-

tion of such settlements and of identifying their structures remain. The publication in 1989 of an article on the scheduled site excavation at Tournedos-sur-Seine (Haute-Normandie) is also worth mentioning. This site's settlement features are unusual in that they include a graveyard adjacent to the settlement and a church, which apparently remained in use even after the occupation of the settlement had ended (Carré 1989).

Developing the excavations of early medieval rural settlement sites and changes in scale and perception

Early medieval rural settlement excavation has mainly developed in the northern part of France from the 1990s onward. The increase in the number of excavations is due to the unprecedented growth of preventive archaeology, a natural result of land development (high-speed train lines, motorways, and the new city of Marne-la-Vallée).

While preventive archaeological excavations had been done previously, particularly in connection with the extension of quarries and sand-pits (Juvincourt-et-Damary, La Grande-Paroisse (Petit 2009), Passy, Tournedos-sur-Seine)¹, their generalization owing to large-scale civil engineering has become an important innovation in the growth of rural settlement archaeology. In fact, thanks to engineering, rural settlement archaeology has become possible over larger areas. While the surfaces explored before 1989 would rarely amount to 1 000 sq. m., several sites excavated from 1989 onward exceed one hectare (Bussy-Saint-Georges (Seine-et-Marne), Tinteniac (Ille-et-Vilaine), Coupvray (Seine-et-Marne), Longueuil-Sainte-Marie (Oise), Izel-les-Esquerchin (Nord), and Serris (Seine-et-Marne)). Besides the possibility of excavating large-scale sites, significant methodological progress was made in the detection of settlement sites. The gradual increase in mechanical soundings in staggered rows over more than 5% (Blouet, Seilly, Thion 1994: 21-24) of the total area undergoing development has indeed greatly improved the detection of early medieval settlement sites that were hitherto difficult to detect by field-walking. During approximately the same period (1980 - 1990), a significant change also appeared in southern France (Schneider 2007: 13). However, its causes are different, connected with a research program lead by CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique) researchers and academics rather than with preventive archaeology, less frequent in southern France. This research focuses on the

¹ For bibliographical references relating to the sites mentioned in this paragraph, please refer to the catalogue in Peytremann 2003, volume 2

transitional period between late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages and is mainly based on scheduled excavations covering small areas (Favory, Fiches 1994). In this case, more attention is given to different modes of occupation, in particular through a multidisciplinary program involving geographers (Durand-Dastès *et alii* 1998).

Such changes in scale and perception help to modify the understanding of a settlement's topography, chronology and environment. On a number of these sites, a series of analyses (palynology, carpology, etc.) has been undertaken to help to place the settlement in its environment and enable understanding of its exploitation. Assessment of the chronology of occupation has also remarkably improved. Settlement maps by period or by phase are only beginning to appear, but excavation teams are paying more attention to the analysis of ceramic artifacts. Alongside ceramological analyses, carbon dating is used more often, though with differences among regions.

The 1990s were characterized by the prevalence of preventive archeology, used in most of the development projects for housing estates, business parks, sports grounds, and road and railway construction. The lack of balance among regions began to diminish, thanks chiefly to new motorway construction in western France. Moreover, a better-organized management of settlement excavations and of resulting data was also established.

Fewer and better-targeted excavations

During the first decade of the twenty-first century, the number of new sites discovered per year in northern France diminished despite significant modifications of the French archaeological landscape. For example, the Institut National de Recherches Archéologiques Préventives (INRAP) was created in 2002 to replace the Association Française d'Archéologie Nationale (AFAN). As a result, the number of archaeological departments in local communities grew significantly (in départements and cities), as did that of private archaeological companies, authorized by law on August 1, 2003. The quality of excavation reports has clearly improved. Local teams are gradually being set up, some of which are tabulating excavation data, sometimes quite abundant, to make it available to the scientific community. Thus, Collective Research Projects, set up for three years and focused on early medieval rural settlements, started in 1998 in the Pays de la Loire (Valais 2012), in 2002 in Ile-de-France (Gentili, Lefèvre, Mahé 2003; Gentili, Lefèvre 2009), and in 2007 in the Centre region. Two methodological trends came to the fore during the first decade of this century. On the one hand, starting

in 2001, the excavated areas have been growing in an unprecedented manner. Thus the largest excavation in France to date encompasses an area of 20 ha., the site of Châteaugiron² in Bretagne, currently under study. Exploring sites over areas exceeding 5 ha has become quite common, while excavating sites under 1 ha. is now rare. On the other hand, the number of small excavation sites in existing villages has slightly increased, particularly in northern France, Ile-de-France, and Alsace.

In southern France, preventive archaeology continues to develop, though with some regional differences due to differing land-development programs. The publication in 2001, 2005, and 2006 of three syntheses reflects the dynamism of rural settlement archaeology in the south-eastern quarter of France (Faure-Boucharlat 2001; Schneider 2005; Maufras 2006). Although fewer, discoveries made in the south-western regions do include important sites such as the one at Lapanousse de Cernon in Aveyron (Boudartchouck 2000), or those at Vieille-Toulouse in Tarn-et-Garonne³. Excavations scheduled in Lunel-Viel and Larina resulted in publications (Raynaud 2007; Porte 2011), while the search conducted on the site of Le-Roc-de-Pampelune continues (Schneider 2010).

The early twenty-first century has been marked by a slight decrease in the number of interventions on rural settlement sites. New problems and questions (see below) have appeared along with concern for proper analysis and publication of data, and a desire to clarify some of the issues. Many publications, comprehensive ones (Faure-Boucharlat 2001; Peytremann 2003, 2010; Schneider 2005, 2007; Zadora-Rio: 2009) as well as monographic ones (Catteddu 2001; Guillaume, Peytremann 2008; Perugot 2008; Revue Archéologique de Picardie 2011), attest to this effervescent research.

2. ISSUES

As has been seen above, the research on rural settlements in the Early Middle Ages spans four decades during which the issues at stake have increased in number and varied with the passing years and the prevailing currents of thought. Five issues have been selected here in order to demonstrate the dynamism of this research.

2.1. Rural architecture: a marginal subject in France a rather discreet research in France

Rural architecture attracted the interest of researchers mainly during the first two decades (Decaen 1973; Chape-

² Isabelle Catteddu is conducting the study of this site

³ Information given by Rémy Carme and Yann Henri, whom we thank.



Fig. 2. Distribution of Sunken-Feature Buildings in France

lot, Fossier 1980; Peséz 1998). The studies were generally viewed in an evolutionary manner, from timber to stone and brick (Chapelot, Fossier 1980: 281-284). Indeed, in the 1980s, the knowledge of the settlement pattern gradually improved. Post-built buildings, buildings with stone-footings, storage-pits, wells, and ovens join the well-known sunken-feature buildings (SFB). In addition, the hypothesis of specialized areas within the settlement is put forward. The researchers began to study construction techniques and to suggest some typologies. Thus, sunken-feature buildings are generally classified, depending on the number of their inner posts, according to research led by the German archaeologist Claus Ahrens, who attributed a structural function to the posts (Ahrens 1966: 208). Sunken-feature buildings built with 2, 4, and 6 posts are the types occurring most frequently. The surface area of these small buildings varies between 4 and 14 sq.m. for a preserved depth ranging from 0.20 to 0.80 m. The materials used for their construction are timber (walls,

posts, wattle, and shingle), daub (walls), thatch or reeds (roof), and stone (wall facing, bases) (Peytremann 2003: 275-276). The possible Germanic origin of these structures was debated for a time (Farnoux 1995). Today, this hypothesis has been abandoned, since such structures have been discovered throughout Europe. Their function has also been a matter of debate, the main question being whether they could have been used as dwellings (Chapelot 1980; Lorren 1981). Since the 1990s there has been no real research on these structures⁴, which are attested on almost the whole French territory, with a stronger presence in the northern half, except for Bretagne and Pays de la Loire where they remain rare (Fig. 2). As for their function, researchers agree on considering the sunken-feature buildings multi-use structures: weaving cellar, workshop, shed, shelter for small animals, possible dwelling, etc.). Sunken-feature buildings have recently aroused new inter-

⁴ Except some master's theses (Deschamps 2009, etc.).

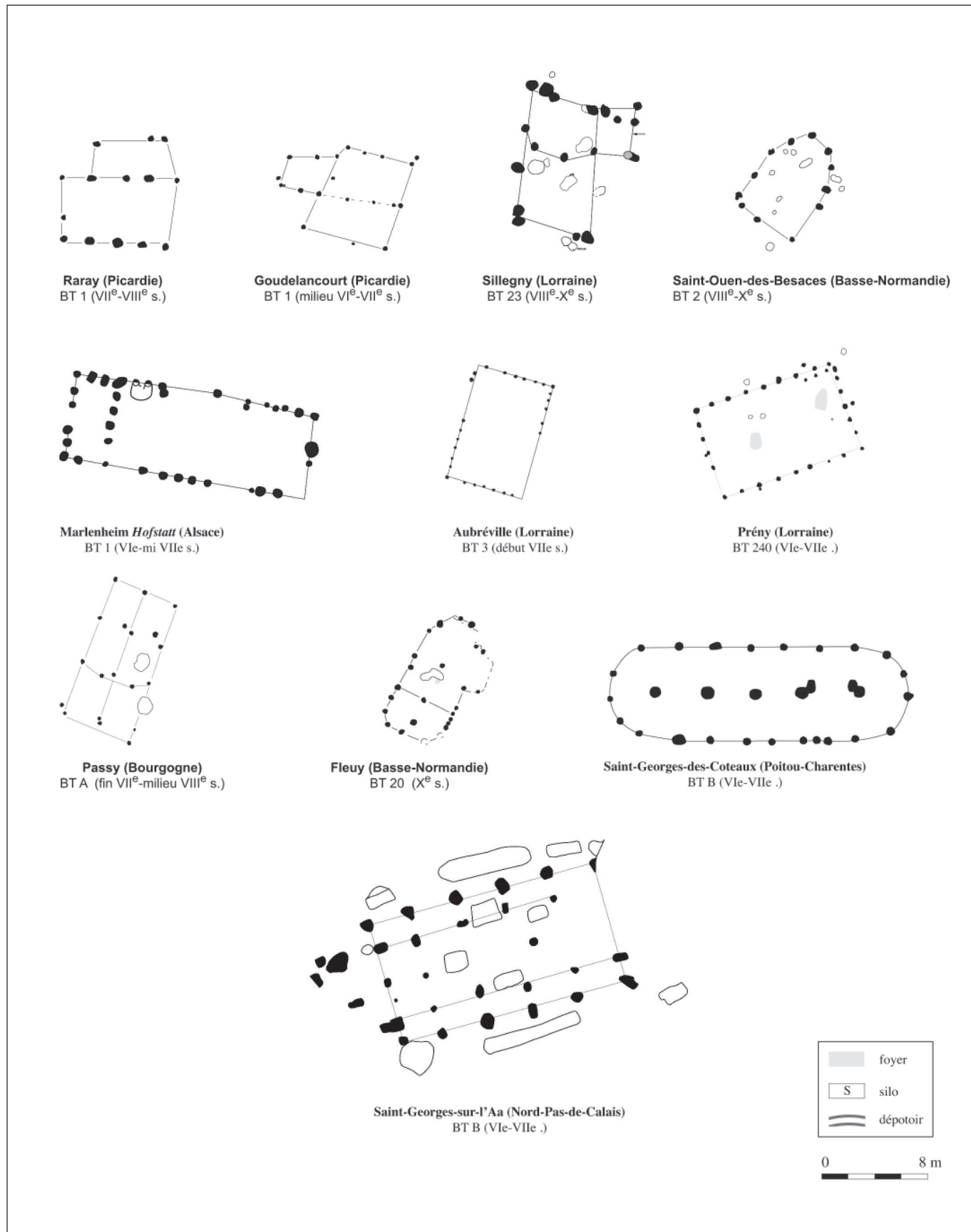


Fig. 3. Post-built buildings

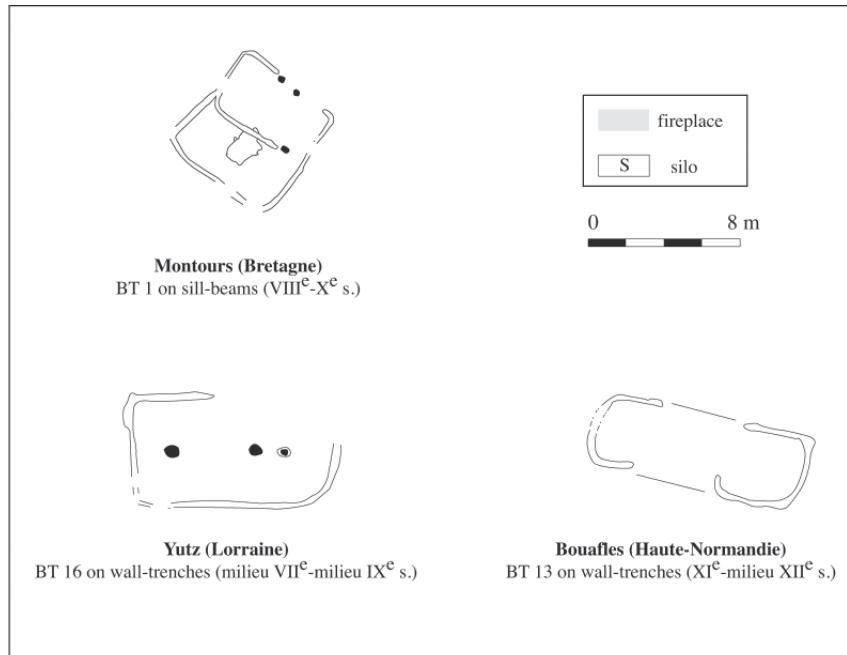


Fig. 4. Other timber-buildings

est as to construction technique, an aspect which had not hitherto been formally studied (Épau, Gentili 2009). The researchers generally contented themselves with graphic reproductions or life-size reconstructions using current building techniques.

Most post-built buildings have a rectangular floor plan (Fig. 3). Some buildings, discovered in Lorraine, Normandie, Ile-de-France⁵, and Poitou-Charentes⁶, reveal a plan with one or two semi-circular apses (Fig. 3) (Peytreman forthcoming a). Post-built buildings have also benefited from a typology, based mainly on the number of aisles. The presence of an axial line of posts has usually been interpreted as providing evidence for the use of a ridge-beam, thereby following the work of proto-historians, themselves strongly influenced by the work of the German archaeologists Adelhart Zippelius and Bendix Trier. Several researchers (Buchenschutz 2005; Epau 2009) postulate that this widespread hypothesis would have been difficult to implement (difficulty in lifting the ridge-beam) and expensive in raw materials. Indeed, ethno-archaeological comparisons would argue in favour of a roof-structure built with a truss system. Thus, the presence of the axial line of posts remains to be accounted for. Frédéric Epau has hypothesized a support for a wooden floor⁷. However, for sin-

gle-aisled structures with posts facing each other, the roof-structure is generally reconstituted with rafters, forming a truss. The use of a cruck-framework is considered at least once, on the site of Plomb in Normandie (Fig. 5) (Carpentier 2007).

The walls are made not only out of wattle-and-daub, but also out of planks, adobe, or swish. The two-sided or cut-corner roofing is usually covered with vegetable material. However a tiled roof has been discovered on the Ingré site (Loiret)⁸ (Jeset 2009). The presence of a glass window has been occasionally attested. The indoor layout of the buildings varies: partition walls from the 7th century onward, porches, and sometimes one storey. Fireplaces sometimes complete these layouts. The ground-floor surface area (ranging from 15 to 200 sq.m.) chiefly determines possible functions of these buildings: agricultural outbuildings (granaries, sheds, etc.) and ancillary ones (bath, cookery, etc. as mentioned by written sources) for the smaller ones, dwellings and barns for the bigger ones. While the post-built buildings are largely dominant in northern France, they are not absent from southern France, where they were found in Rhône-Alpes, Languedoc-Roussillon,

⁷ Frédéric Epau has very kindly given all these pieces of information, some of them unpublished hitherto. They are the result of a seminar devoted to experimental archaeology, which was organized by Edith Peytreman at University Paris I.

⁸ Information given by Sébastien Jeset in the course of a seminar on rural craftsmanship in the Early Middle Ages, which was organized by Edith Peytreman at University Paris I.

⁵ The site of Saint-Pathus (Seine-et-Marne) (Hurard 2010: 21).

⁶ The site of Saint-Georges des Coteaux (Charente-Maritime) (Gerber *et alii* 2010: 86-87).

Auvergne, and Aquitaine (Peytreman forthcoming a). Without going into detail, at least two other methods of constructing timber-buildings are attested: buildings on sill-beams, and buildings on wall-trenches (Fig. 4), generally oval-shaped (Peytreman forthcoming a).

Surprisingly, stone buildings or timber-and-stone buildings did not attract the same attention from researchers, and no typology was attempted. According to the

available corpus, it is possible to outline a few features of rural stone architecture. Floor plans, mostly rectangular, are sometimes L or U-shaped. As for the post-built buildings, layouts with one or two apses are known mainly in Bretagne and Normandie. Three types of building techniques (Fig. 5) have been identified:

- the building was constructed on stone foundations bound with clay or mortar;

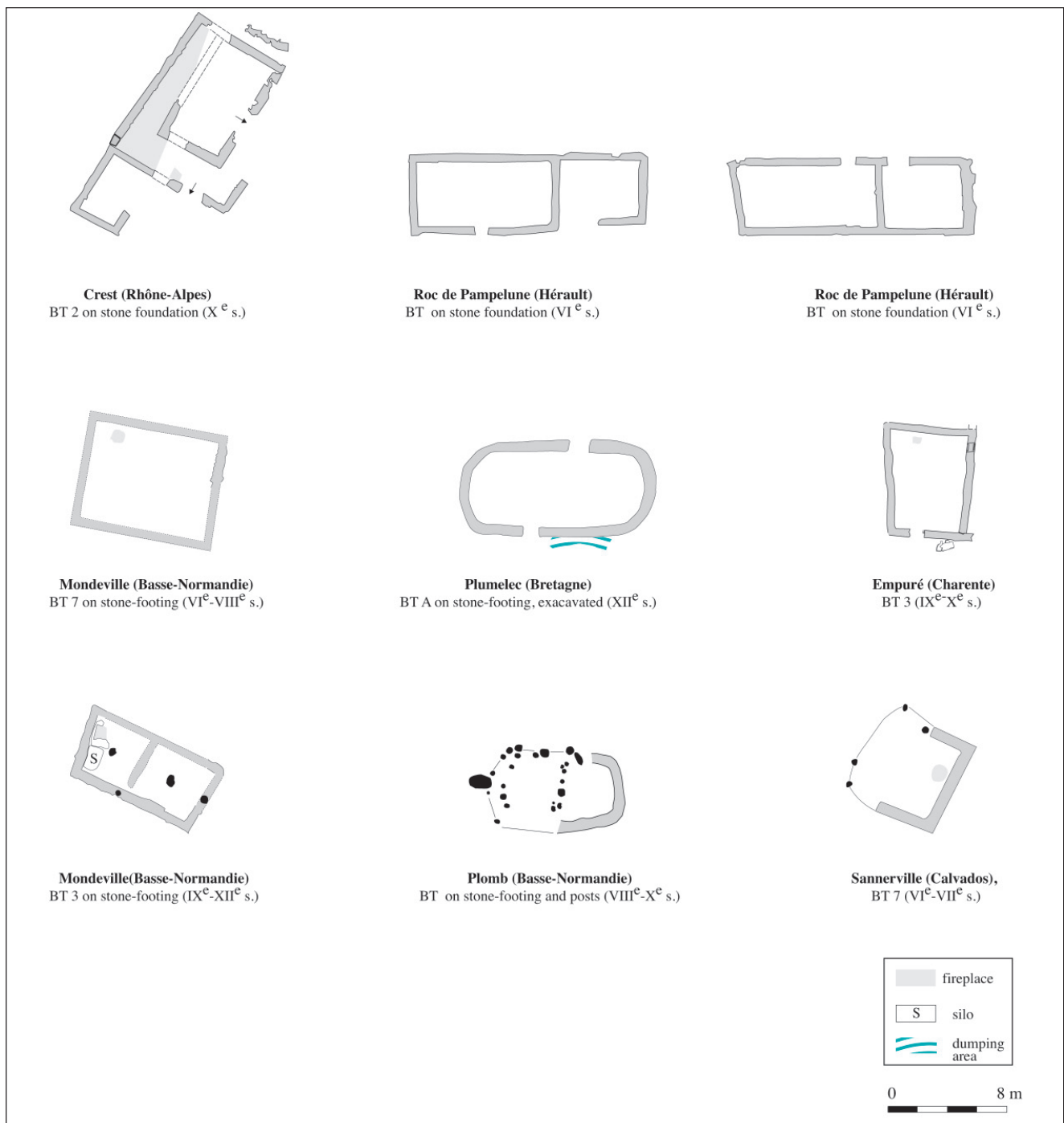


Fig. 5. Stone buildings or timber-and-stone buildings

- the building was constructed on stone-footings bound with clay or mortar;
- the building was constructed on stone-footings and posts.

In the first case, the walls are usually made out of dry-stone, or stones bound with clay or mortar, though swish or adobe walls may also be found. In the second case, the walls are mostly made out of wattle-and-daub, swish or adobe, rarely from stone. In the last case, the posts are set on an axial line or in the stone-footings, or they are part of the structure.

Roofs are covered with non-durable materials, or stone or tiles. As to the interior, partition walls, lobbies, and galleries are mainly observed, as well as fireplaces occasionally. The floors are mostly hard-packed earth. In Languedoc, a typical structural unit can be distinguished for the 5th to 7th centuries. It is rectangular, measures about 95 sq.m., and is divided into two rooms, representing 1/3 and 2/3 of the total surface area. This division 1/3 and 2/3 has also been observed in more recent post-built buildings, on the sites of Villiers-le-Sec (Val-d'Oise) or Sillégné in Lorraine (Fig. 3).

The various construction techniques used in early medieval rural architecture have all been known since proto-history — post-built buildings, buildings on sill-beam, and dry-stone buildings — and since Antiquity — masonry buildings. Only the types of building and the inner layout vary attesting to the changes in social and agricultural practices. Thus it seems useless to draw up a chronology of evolving construction modes as it was done in the 1980's. Construction techniques are to be apprehended not as indicators of technical progress but as evidence of practices, which are local ones to a certain extent and meet the needs in a given socio-economic background (Peytreemann forthcoming a). The fact that most elite residences built in the 10th and 11th centuries throughout France were post-built buildings appears to be a convincing example (Pinheuil (Gironde), Charavines (Isère), Louvres (Val-d'Oise)). In fact the distinctive elements are to be found in the more or less complex implementation, the construction system, and the inner partitions. However in a selective but not exclusive way, some types of building have been implemented during limited extents of time. As is particularly the case with the post-built buildings with posts set close one to another which were built in the 6th and 7th centuries in eastern France (Fig. 3)⁹. Moreover recent work tends to

prove the existence of regional types of building, from the 10th century (?) onward as in Saint-Georges sur l'Aa: the three-aisled building limited by a ditch-system is characteristic of the Flanders coast-line in the 10th and 11th centuries (Herbin 2012).

Aside from the publication of the proceedings of a round table discussion devoted to buildings (*Les Cahiers lorrains* 2005, N°4) and two articles, one of which more specifically focused on western France (Peytreemann 2005 ; Peytreemann forthcoming a), early medieval rural architecture has not inspired any tangible, well-argued publications in approximately fifteen years. Moreover ethno-archaeology and experiments have so far only rarely been used. Current work by Frédéric Epaud will, we hope, provide new elements for further reflection on rural architecture. In France, the early medieval rural architecture displays a considerable variety within France and expertise, which attests to the presence of a skilled carpenter.

2.2. The birth of the village around the year 1000 (millennium): a typically French controversy

The question of the birth of the village holds an important place in France, insofar as this is one rare subject on which both historians and archaeologists have carried out research (not necessarily together!). In the book *Le village et la maison au Moyen Âge*, the settlement is indeed considered an entity apart from the village, which corresponds to a certain number of criteria, such as the presence of a manor, a church, a lordship... Robert Fossier dates the birth of the village in the late 11th century, since at this time «the settlement looks like a completed village» (Chapelot, Fossier 1980: 139), that is with a manor and a church. Such theories have imposed a hierarchy, the settlement being considered short-lived and incomplete compared to the village. Building materials were submitted to this hierarchy as well. Earth and timber became, and still are in the eyes of some researchers, materials synonymous with fragility and instability. This apprehension of the settlement has been a strong argument for researchers who supported the idea of a revolution in the year 1000, and of a –before and an –after. It is important to remember that this perception of the rural settlement in the 5th to 12th centuries influenced all of the historians in the 1980s and even well beyond, whether they worked from written sources or from archaeological evidence (Zadora-Rio: 1995). In 1987 Patrick Périn suggested a reflection on the settlement and its perception. He refutes the theory on the birth of the village developed by Robert Fossier and supports the assumption that villages appeared in Merov-

⁹ Particularly buildings at Marlenheim (Châtelet 2009), Aubréville (Vermerard, Wiethold 2008), Prény (Frauciel 2008) and cf. 3. Some examples, Genlis

ingian times. In particular he proposes that excavated settlements are ones which were abandoned because for some reason or another they did not work out well, unlike those which are the predecessors of our present villages or towns (Périn 1987). Evidence from excavations has gradually demonstrated the caricatural aspect of opinions developed by supporters of the birth of the village in 1000. The results of the field-work on the Mondeville site, at Tournedos-sur-Seine or Saleux (Somme) (Cf 3. Some examples, Saleux) have indeed revealed the existence of a nucleus settlement near a graveyard, prior to the construction of a church. Furthermore work directed by Edith Peytremann has demonstrated that the definition of the village as proposed by Robert Fossier is only valid from the 12th century onward. Applying this definition earlier than the 12th century would deny the constant spatial, social, and cultural dynamics, which sustain the countryside and modify the semantic contents of the term «village» (Peytremann 2003: 101). It should be added that, since the turn of the century, this debate has lost its relevance and no longer interests more than a few researchers, and then only marginally (Morsel 2008: 4; 9).

The question of the making of the early medieval village has been stimulated, thanks particularly to the development, from 2001 onward, of excavations in existing villages (Peytremann 2010; Chapelot 2010). This revival has led to a first meeting, that is a roundtable, which took place in 2005 (Mahé-Hourlier and Poignant, forthcoming). The first results of the discussion contradict the model, put forward in the 1980s, which highlighted the instability of the settlement until the 10th century. Indeed most of the examples presented demonstrated how ancient (antiquity for the oldest ones) and long-lived current villages are. These results strengthen the assumption of polynuclear land-occupation from late antiquity to the mid-seventh century, followed by progressive settlement nucleation at the expense of other settlement areas (Peytremann 2003: 335 and 355). Furthermore, it appears that a significant number of sites excavated in villages are located close to a current place of worship, the dating of which has not always been verifiable. This observation reopens the question of the role of the church and the parish community, not in the making of the village, but in the process of settlement nucleation.

Despite obvious benefits of developing excavations in existing villages¹⁰, research faces many problems, mostly of

a logistical and financial nature (Carré *et alii* 2009: 51-59), which restrict the growth of the corpus and research in these very long-lived settlements.

2.3. From the settlement in its environment to the environment of the settlement

The issues related to the paleo-environment have only very gradually appeared in settlement research,¹¹ and one could say they have grown along with the development of preventive archaeology. Archeological interest initially focused on the resources of the settlements, and therefore on the agricultural and breeding produces. First, animal bones were studied. In their evaluation (Yvinec, Clavel 2010), two archaeozoologists emphasize the youth of this discipline, which explains the lack of regional synthesis. However the region all around Paris, which benefits the most from studies, reveals the advantage of such work, as it provides information on food consumption habits and indicators as to the economy and the management of the farmsteads (primacy of breeding or cultivation, use of animal traction, etc.) according to land-use (meadows, cultivated fields, woodland, etc.). Since the turn of the century, the corpus has clearly increased, which in turn has led to an increase in the number of questions to be addressed. These often extend beyond the framework of environmental study, being increasingly social in nature.

Since the 1990s, the palynological, carpological, sedimentological, macological, anthracological, and geomorphological studies have been treated more systematically. However, such paleo-environmental studies depend on the geographical distribution of research laboratories and on the training of the persons responsible for field-work. Studies are conducted, but a pluridisciplinary dialogue does not always take place.

In the late 1990s, there has been a change in the relative hierarchy of environmental archaeology development. Research is no longer focused on the settlement itself, which becomes a mere component, of a landscape to be studied through the ages, through test-pits as well as through settlement excavation. The impact of man on his surroundings and his relationship with his environment has become a predominant part of archaeological issues. The Montours site in Bretagne set an example in this regard. In this published research the paleo-analyses have pride of place, palynology in particular and carpology to a lesser extent. Their contribution assists in the understand-

¹⁰ The present corpus refers mainly to the Ile-de-France, Nord-Pas-de-Calais, and Alsace regions.

¹¹ The publication of the site of Charavines (Isère) (Colardelle, Verdel 1993) may be mentioned as an exception.

ing of a rural land where inhabited areas are just one element. The archaeogeographical work initiated by Gérard Chouquer (Chouquer 2008; Robert 2011) belongs to the same trend. Settlements are anthropogenic constructions as well as land parcels and road-networks, established in a semi-natural space subjected to environmental, climatological and anthropogenic dynamics.

More recently, thanks to the discovery, mainly—though not exclusively—in southern France, of many storage areas outside villages or far from farmsteads, the questions of cereal cultivation practices and storage methods have arisen, not with regard to the settlement and its resources, but about the land around the settlement, and the fields in particular (Faure-Boucharlat 2001; Maufras 2006; Carme et Henry forthcoming). Fields and farmland, in relation to settlements of course, are also the main subject of the research initiated by the University of Tours, relying in particular on field walking and on spatial and statistical analysis (Poirier 2010: a and b). These changes in perception and in scale have been associated with the word «off-site» (Poirier 2010a)¹², a rather questionable term from the semantic point of view.

2.4. The presence of an elite within settlements: a new development

Since the turn of the century, archaeologists have become interested in an issue popular in the 1970s when it was completely separate from rural settlement archaeology: elite buildings. This new interest, stripped of a number of paradigms, has produced three seminal articles (Nissen-Jaubert 2003, 2010; Bourgeois 2006). This research has benefitted in recent years from the discovery of residences considered to be elite, of a type hitherto unidentified for the 10th to 12th centuries: residences possessing neither fortification nor motte (Gentili, Valais 2007; Hincker 2007; Jesset 2009; Cornec, Farago-Skezeres 2010). One merit of this renewed interest in the elite has been the extension of the time span studied to the 6th to 9th centuries in order to better understand the process of the establishment of the rural elite, a process which led to the erection of the castles in the Middle Ages (12th to 16th centuries). Nevertheless, many questions remain, particularly those related to the identification of an elite presence within settlements (Peytreman forthcoming b). Yet, several indicators have been validated, particularly in the architectural field. During the Merovingian period (6th to

8th centuries), according to the small corpus available, an elite residence consists of a usually «remarkable» dwelling house often associated with agricultural outbuildings arranged around a courtyard which is most often enclosed (cf 3. Some examples, Pouthumé). The dwelling-house, on a surface area equal to or greater than 100 sq.m., consists of several rooms, some with a fireplace. It might be provided with an upper storey and/or a portico. It is generally built on a stone foundation and may have glass windows. The door and window frames are significant features. From the 9th century onward the architecture then evolved. The building's surface area generally increased, from 130 to over 300 sq.m., and timber became the dominant construction material. Some complex floor plans indicate 3 or more aisles. The buildings are mostly rectangular; some however have an apse at the gable-end or a perpendicular wing. Some houses, again, have glass windows. As before, these houses are associated with agricultural outbuildings arranged around a larger courtyard most often enclosed by a fence or a non-defensive ditch.

The other indicators of an elite presence have not yet been sufficiently studied, in particular from a quantitative and qualitative point of view, to be validated here. These include the presence of weaponry, specific fauna, horse equipment and imported artifacts, or the existence of a religious building, a large storage area, and the house's location within the settlement, the region, etc.

Research on elite residences has been conducted in southern France as well, when the research surrounding hill-top settlements was resumed (Schneider 2004; 2007). Hill-top settlements have long been considered temporary shelters, but recent excavations contradict this assumption and provide evidence for fortified sites protecting dense and tightly packed dwelling places, and sometimes a church and an elite building like the one discovered on the La Malène site (Lozère) (cf 3. Some examples, La Malène). This building, 48 by 7.50 m., was built during the 7th century. Besides its exceptional size it has an upper storey with a colonnade and floors made out of broken tile concrete (Schneider 2011). These fortified hill-top villages, occupied in the Merovingian times and sometimes later, display great variety and are not typical of Mediterranean France, since several of them have been found in Rhône-Alpes (Larina; Porte 2011), Auvergne, Bourgogne or Franche-Comté (Ecrille; Gandel, Billoin, Humbert 2008). There are many questions left to be clarified, notably that of their military, economic, and administrative functions.

The revival of research on elite has made it possible to

¹² The term « off-built areas » seems indeed preferable, so that the definition of an archaeological site would not be called into question, nor the potential ensuing studies.

analyze the presence of elite otherwise than through the prism of feudalism. A continuous presence of rural elite is attested to in the rural areas, although differently depending on the region, the importance of the legacy from Antiquity, and the time line. One can observe a gradual epistemological shift (among archaeologists at least!), which considers feudalism a mere stage in an ancient elite process, rather than an innovative phenomenon whose origins supposedly lie in the Frankish takeover.

2.5. For a new apprehension of inhabited rural areas

As seen in the historiography, the early medieval rural settlement has been a great success from the late 1980s onward, mainly through preventive archaeology excavations. Various issues, some of which are developed above, have gradually come to light revealing the wealth of the data collected. Nevertheless, in the past few years, uneasiness

has arisen on the subject of early medieval rural settlement research, because of the «repetitive» nature of reports and analyses. The principal criticism is the lack of connection with analyses by historians. Though the debate between historians and archaeologists on the use of archaeological data is far from over, it should be acknowledged that archaeological research on «rural settlements» requires comprehensive renewal, and yet must not become a «victim» of fashion trends, most notably on the subjects of the elite and the appearance of lordships. Some ideas to consider have been proposed in order to escape the archaeological abstraction produced by the misuse of the phrase «early medieval rural settlement» (Peytremann forthcoming c). The first idea suggests deepening topographical study of the settlements by broadening its focus from a mere cluster of farms to developed areas, which might include farmsteads and/or dwelling houses, an elite residence, a specialized area for agricultural activities or crafts (cf 3. Some ex-



Fig. 6. Maps of sites of La Malène and Pouthumé. A. The residence of Pouthumé (Vienne) in the 7-9th century (Cornec, Farago-Szekeres 2010:98). B. The *castellum* of La Malène (Lozère) in the 6-7th century (Schneider 2011: 27)

amples, Sermersheim), a religious area, a burial area (clusters of graves, graveyards), a public area (square), communications lines, gardens, etc. Taking all of these entities into consideration is a first step, which will enable comparisons among settlements. The second idea for consideration raises questions about vocabulary. Indeed, for simplicity's sake, the presence of a sunken-feature building, storage pits, granaries, stone-buildings or timber-ones, is routinely referred to as «rural settlement», whereas those various features belong to a farmstead, or a craft area or an elite farmhouse. The final idea suggests a multidisciplinary approach, which would associate archaeologists, historians, and archaeogeographers and would lead to a better understanding of the various rural networks (political, economic, and religious) and of the settlements' role therein.

This new approach is truly necessary in order to learn more about early medieval rural settlements, which are far from being as unvaried as current studies suggest.

3. SOME EXAMPLES

In order to illustrate the diversity of French rural settlements and of the related issues, a choice has been made to present only a few sites from throughout France occupied from at least the 6th to the 8th centuries.

The excavation in 2003 of the site at Pouthumé (Vienne) over an area of approximately 0.7 ha. reflects the revival of the issue of elite residences in the 7th century (Fig. 6). This site is located near a Roman route. It was occupied throughout the Early Middle Ages (Cornec-Farago-Szekeres 2010). The residence consists of four stone-and-masonry buildings, constructed around a courtyard measuring approximately 470 sq.m., open to the south. The total area measures 1 500 sq.m., surrounded by a partly excavated enclosure. To the east, two rectangular buildings are contiguous, used for agricultural and household purposes, one containing a meat-smoking kiln. Between the two buildings, which delimit the courtyard to the north, a stone-and-mortar oven, somewhat sunken, is to be found. On the west side the fourth structure, an outstanding building 18 m. square is divided into several rooms arranged around a central space. An upper floor may be considered. A funerary area and a small storage area are located 30 m. to the east. The funerary area is characterized by sarcophagus burials around a sunken *memoria*-like building. The storage area includes circular and quadrangular silos, of which at least one is protected by a post-built building. This isolated residence, which is still similar to the Roman *villa* in many respects, reveals the presence of a rural elite mostly likely Christianized.

Further south, the site of La Malène (Lozère) illustrates both the issue of hill-top settlements (Fig. 6) and the issue of an elite residence within a settlement (Schneider, Clément 2012). High on a rock overlooking the gorges of the Tarn, the *castellum* of La Malène is surrounded by a masonry wall, with at least one rectangular tower in the north-west corner. The scheduled excavation, which was undertaken four years ago, has led to the discovery, within the enclosure, of a building fitted with *thermae*, a cistern, a large building believed to be a cellar, a rectangular building with an apse, interpreted as a church, and one imposing building. This latter is divided into four rooms. It is about 45 m. long, its width ranging from 12.5 m., for the ceremonial room arranged perpendicularly, to 6 m. Lastly, a prestigious building containing wall paintings has been discovered below the tower. Here again the prominence of the antique legacy is visible. Items found in a dumping area—a gold coin of Sigebert III, valuable metalwork pieces, and East African *amphorae*—indicate the presence of high-ranking inhabitants. Moreover, the function of this settlement, occupied from the late 5th century to the late 7th century, is not clear: a royal establishment on the border between the Frankish and Visigoth kingdoms? A military garrison? An economic checkpoint on an important travel route? The example of La Malène reflects the emergence of new settlements, to be placed in complex power networks.

In the plain, the site of Castillon-du-Gard (Gard) reveals another type of settlement, occupied from the 3rd to the 10th century (Fig. 7). This is a *villa*, which from the 6th century to the mid-8th century, was surrounded by domestic and agricultural buildings (silos), and workshops (smithies). This long period of occupation is interpreted as an indicator of property stability and a sign of the presence of a Gallo-Roman elite, or as a sign of its integration into the royal or ecclesiastical patrimony (Schneider 2010: 135-136).

Further north, in Bourgogne, the Genlis site, excavated over an area of 3.2 ha., has revealed part of a village dated from the end of the 6th century to the end of the 7th century (Catteddu 1992). Settled on an alluvial terrace, close to an antique road, the excavated area includes at least 6 farmsteads placed side by side. Each consists of one or more post-built buildings associated with several sunken-feature buildings, storage-pits, granaries, and silos (Fig. 7). Three graves have been found on the eastern edge of the settlement. The Genlis site illustrates perfectly a new type of nucleated settlement, made up of timber-and-earth farm buildings, created in the late 6th century or the early 7th century (Peytreman 2003: 321-322) in sur-

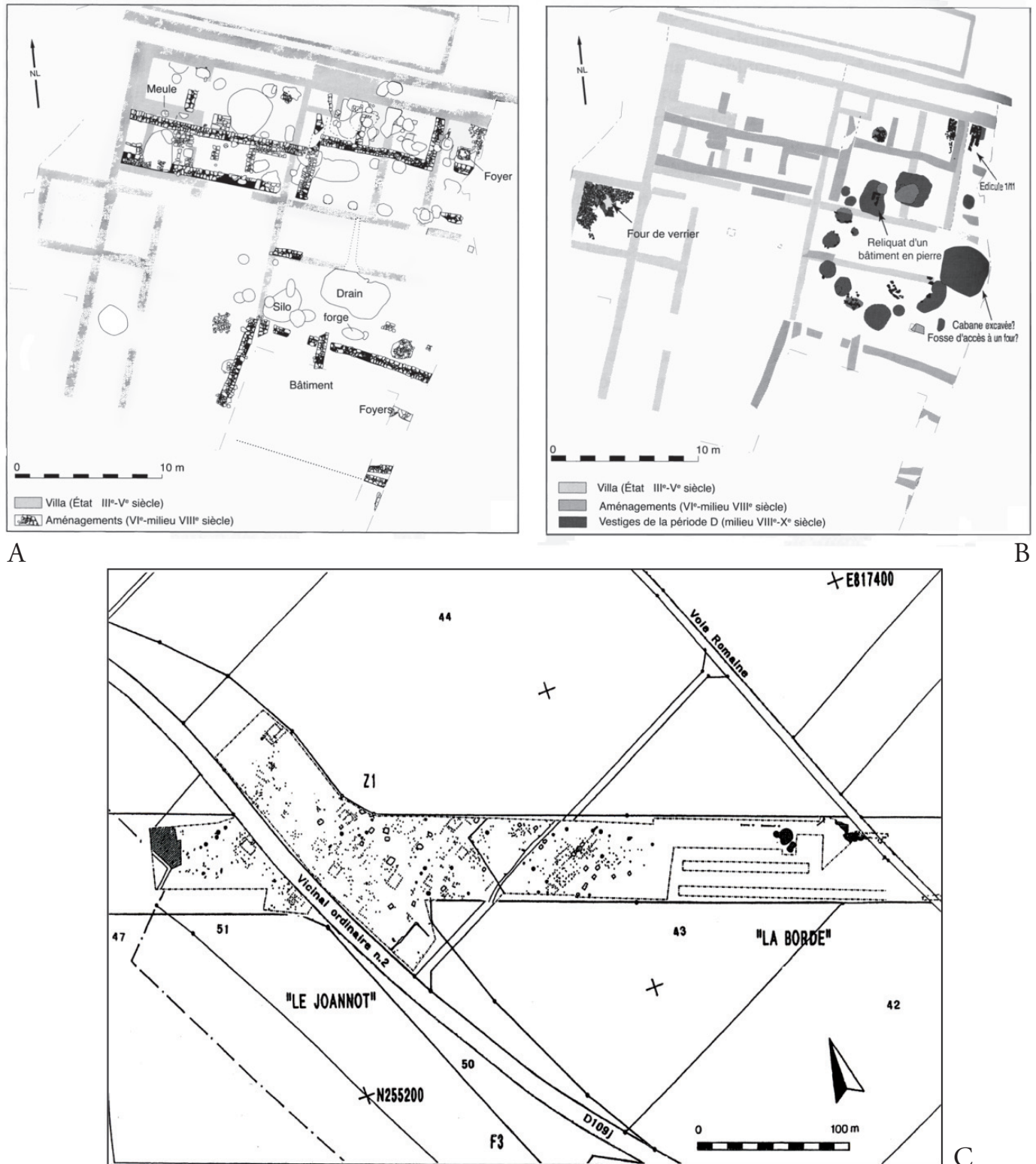


Fig. 7. Maps of sites of Castellon-du-Gard and Genlis. A and B. The villa of Castellon-du-Gard (Gard) (Schneider 2010: 136). C. The village of Genlis (Côte-d'Or) (Catteddu 1992: 41)

roundings occupied at least since the Gallic period. It should be noted that the excavated buildings belong to a type of post-built buildings with posts set close one to another, found in Switzerland and in a large part of

eastern France. They are typical of the 6th and 7th centuries (Peytremann, forthcoming).

The Alsatian site of Semersheim, excavated over 1.7 ha., corresponds to an area of agricultural and craft activi-



Fig. 8. Sites of Sermersheim and Saleux. A. The specialized area of Sermersheim (Bas-Rhin) from mid-6th to the early 12th (Peytreman C). B. The village of Saleux (Somme) from 7th to 11th (Catteddu 2004: 28)

ties, probably located on the outskirts of the village (Tegel, Peytreman 2011). Occupied from the mid-6th century until the early 12th century, this site is unique because there are very few post-built buildings but many sunken-feature buildings, silos, and about fifty wells (Fig. 8). The study of faunal remains indicates a frequency of ox and Equidae, whereas carpology studies testify to cultivation of wheat, flax, fruit trees (including peach) as well as grapes. A significant weaving industry has been revealed by the numerous loom weights found from vertical weaving looms. A smithy was in use in the 8th century and perhaps also a tannery. Another peculiarity of this specific activity area is the existence of two burial grounds respectively containing forty-two and twenty-eight graves. This excavation has revived the issue of village topography and demonstrates that a village does not only consist of farmhouses, but may also include a stable area for agricultural and craft activities.

The existence of such areas raises the further question of their status: were they private or communal?

The last selected example is located in Picardie. The Saleux site (Catteddu 1997) is significant, not only as to the questions surrounding the village's making and the location of the church, but also that of man's relationship to his environment. Excavated over a surface of 3 ha., this village developed in the course of the 7th century together with a graveyard (Fig. 8). Both were abandoned in the 11th century. The site is located at the bottom of the valley, close to the river in order to exploit that resource. The riverbanks were reinforced to limit the risk of flooding, a ford was made, and a millrace was built, probably to run a mill. Post-built buildings, sunken-feature buildings, and pits are distributed among a parcel network whose origin dates back to Antiquity. In the 7th century, the graveyard was located at the far end of the village. On its highest

point, a wooden structure sheltered the only sarcophagus tomb. In the 8th or 9th century, a church, a rectangular timber-building with a rectangular choir replaced this structure. The gradual extension of buildings has changed the initial topography of the village. The church and the graveyard, no longer on the outskirts, are at the centre of the village.

These few examples illustrate the diversity in forms of settlements from the 5th to the 8th centuries. The conclusion is identical, and even more marked, for settlements during the following period (9th to 12th centuries), which, by design, have not been presented in this article.

CONCLUSION

Research on early medieval rural settlements has made significant progress in France during the last four decades. Since the 1990s, this progress has accelerated, particularly in connection with the development not only of preventive archaeology but also of environmental science and numerical technologies (SIG, etc.). The considerable number of excavated sites, about one thousand, still reveals disparities between northern and southern France. The issues have been revived thanks to the wealth of data collected and to fashion trends and current societal problems, clearly visible in issues related to the environment or to the elite. With our present knowledge, it is possible to ask different questions about rural settlements and to refer to villages, farmsteads, craft area, storage areas, etc. These semantic explanations allow not only to avoid the abstraction in the term «early medieval rural settlement», but also to come somewhat closer to the ideas expressed by written sources. Research would indeed probably gain efficiency and undergo revival if the gap between archaeologists and historians were not so large. This is a methodological challenge to be met and a change in attitude of mind to be carried out.

A weakness in the research on rural settlements in France is the often underlined small number of publications on important sites such as Serris, Saleux, Mondeville, Château-Gaillard, etc. This weakness should be nuanced. It depends partially upon research management and financing, a common problem in Europe! The development of research on rural settlements in all of Europe, as demonstrated by this book or the recent publication *The archaeology of early medieval villages in Europe* (Quiros Castillo 2009), is a means of energizing research in France. In fact, taking but one example, a short while ago the sunken-feature building was still considered typical in north-western Europe. Now, since research on settlements

has been developed in Italy and in Spain, it is possible to declare that this is not the case and that this structure is also found in Mediterranean Europe.

Let us hope that the regular comparison of the results of research on a European scale may revive the issues of early medieval rural settlements but also the classical view of the early medieval rural world, with the help of written sources which are extremely disparate from country to country and from century to century.

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