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Dossiers du programme européen “Rural Landscape in north-eastern Roman Gaul”

dirigé par Michel Reddé, directeur d'études à l'École pratique des Hautes Études (EPHE)

Workshop 3

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ROMANISATION AND RURAL REORGANIZATION ON THE SÉNART PLATEAU (PARIS AREA, SEINE-ET-MARNE) FROM THE CONQUEST TO LATE ANTIQUITY

Gilles Desrayaud*

Contexts

About 20 miles to the South-East of Paris (fig. 1), the New Town of Sénart, created in 1983, is made up of 10 administrative districts, straddling the French counties of “Essonnes” and “Seine-et-Marne”¹ (fig. 2; Lambert 2009). Formerly dedicated to agriculture (Robert 2008), more than a third of this 30 000 acre territory is today “artificialized” (road network, commercial and residential areas). Since the 1990's, those construction works have led to prior extensive archaeological surveys and excavations under the auspices of the State (*Service Régional de l'Archéologie*). Around 5000 acres have been explored by trial trenching and an important number of sites excavated, mainly by government-induced organizations² (*Afan* then *Inrap*; Chaoui-Derieux 2008; fig. 2 & 3). Large scale pedestrian and aerial prospections have also been conducted, mainly by a voluntary association³ and the National Forests Office (Benailly, Lejeune 2011; Gerame 2006). A comprehensive study of “fossil” landscape features by photo-interpretation was also carried out in the 1990's (fig. 8; Robert 1995, 1996). Matched with the analysis of cartographical data, it suggests the existence of ancient land division networks covering hundreds of acres (Robert, in: Boulenger *et al.* 2007).

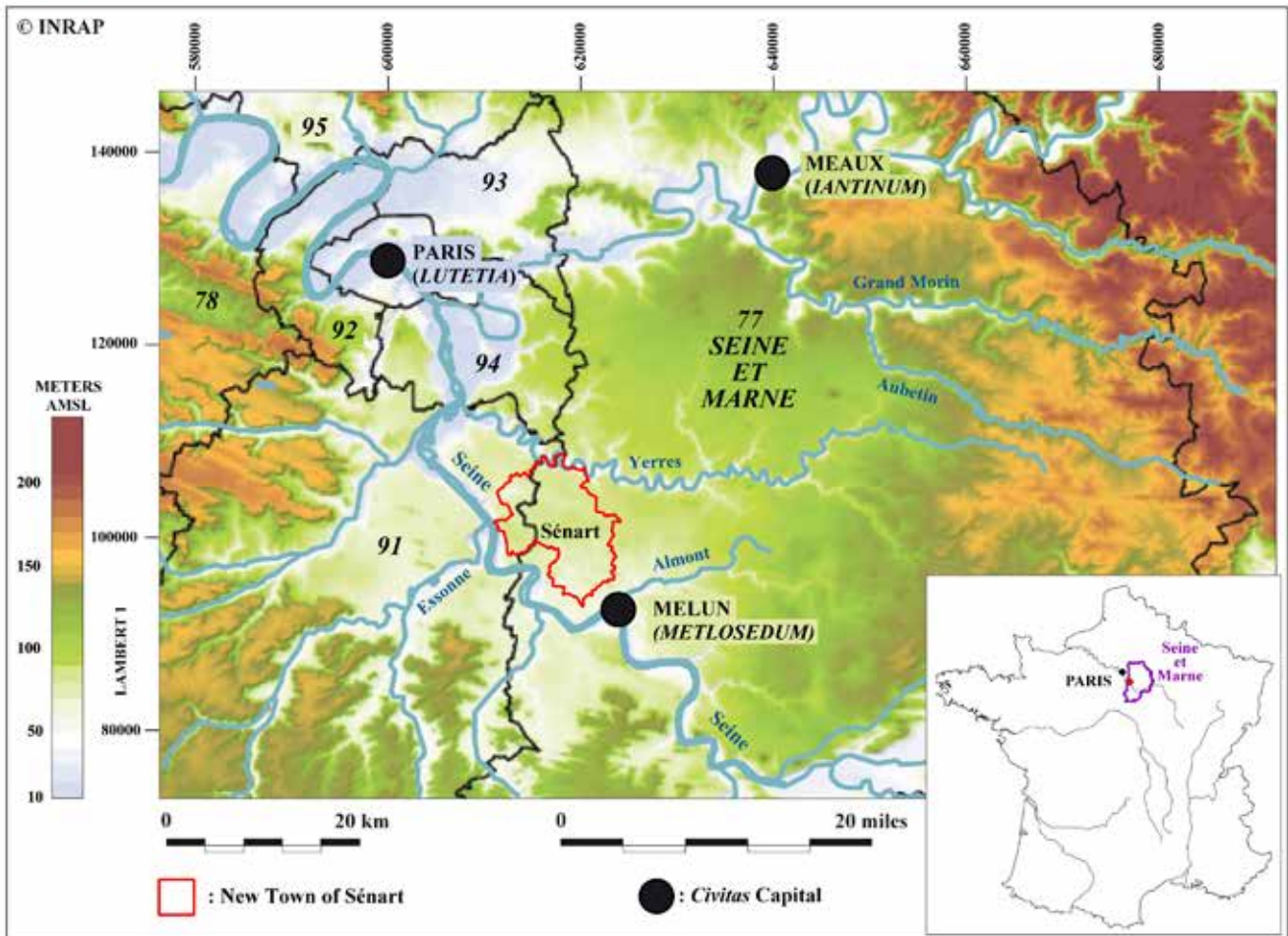
In Antiquity, this area is on the border between the territories of the *Parisii* and the *Senones*, in the northern vicinity of the town of *METLOSEDUM* (present day Melun; fig. 01; Debatty 2004). During the Early Empire, those two *civitates* belong to the Celtic or *Lyonnaise* Gaul. In the Late Empire, they become part of the First *Lugdunensis*, with *LUGDUNUM* as metropolis; and from the end of the IVth c. A.D. onwards, the Fourth *Lyonnaise*, or *Senonia*, with *AGEDINCUM* (Sens) as Capital City.

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1 www.epa-senart.fr; www.senart.com/san.

2 <http://www.inrap.fr/archeologie-preventive/> ... /p-2147-Senart-archeologie-de-la-ville-nouvelle.htm

3 Groupement d'Étude et de Recherches Archéologiques de Melun-Sénart et de l'Essonne

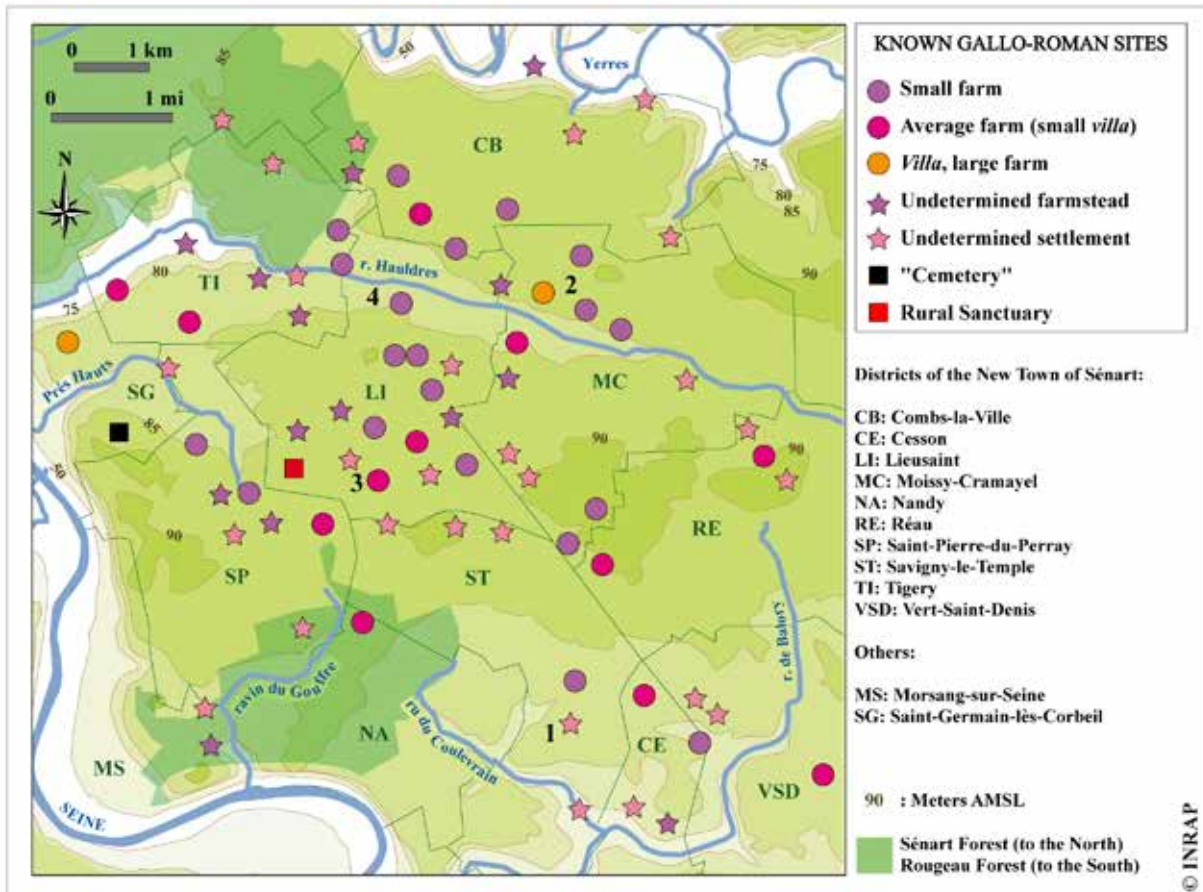


+ Fig. 1. Localisation and geographic context of the New Town of Sénart (© Inrap, Centre Archéologique de Pantin, Service topographique).

Slightly on the margin of the confluence of the rivers Seine and Essonne, one of the major passage points of the Paris Basin, the Sénart Plateau is located between the valleys of the Seine and the Yverres, at a medium height of 86 meters above sea level (fig. 1 & 2). Several streams have formed shallow channels and the plateau was once dotted with natural ("sinkholes") or man-made ponds (fig. 3). On most of the area, the fertile clayey-silt or Loess mantle doesn't exceed one meter in depth. In general, it lies on top of a thin layer of Periglacial hardened alluvial pebbles ("Cailloutis de Sénart") covering Tertiary millstone clays (fig. 6, section A; Legriel 2008a). Colluvial slope formations are also present and stream banks usually display a higher concentration of gravels.

Although its first cultivators can be traced back to the Early Neolithic (Vth millennium B.C.; Durand 2008), signs of consequent deforestation on the Sénart Plateau have not been found before the Late Bronze Age (XIIIth-XIIth c. B.C.; Boulen 2008). Apart from a forest renewal at the beginnings of the Second Iron Age (IVth-IIIrd c. B.C.), an increase in land-clearing and the multiplication of settlements indicate the constant development of agro-pastoral activities, culminating during the first centuries of the Roman Period.

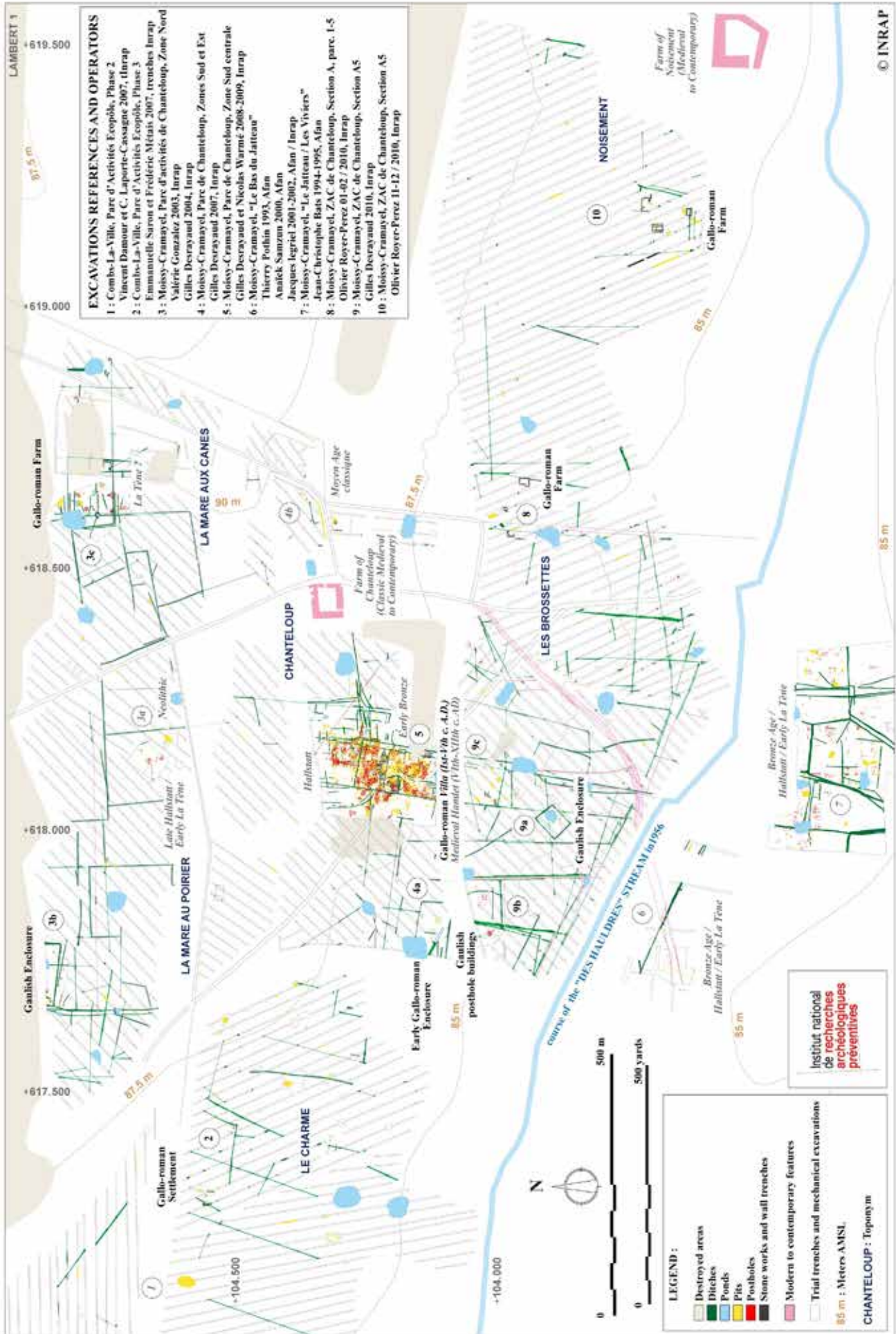
Throughout the Gaulish Period (La Tène C2 / D2; ca. 200-50 B.C.), a new agrarian system had emerged with the creation of numerous rural units (fig. 3 No. 3b, 9a & 9b; Boulenger 2008a). Most of those settlements can be identified as farms. They are usually composed of a main simple or double quadrangular enclosure surrounding posthole buildings, with secondary ditches delineating annex spaces. Such layouts are known from all over the Paris Basin and beyond (Buchsenschutz, Méniel 1994; Pion 1996). As for the Sénart region, one "textbook" example was excavated at the "Mont-Blanc" Business Park in the district of Savigny-le-Temple (fig. 2 No 1; fig. 4; Bruant 2008). Posthole building plans based on the diagonals of a lozenge or square are typical of this period, and can be found until the start of the Early Empire (fig. 4; fig. 5: Bldg 01; fig. 6; Pion 1996; Desrayaud 2010, p. 112-117 & 446).



+ Fig. 2. Distribution map of known Gallo-Roman sites on the Sénart Plateau (from Boulenger *et al.* 2007; © Inrap, L. Boulenger, G. Desrayaud, J. Legriel).

Archaeological areas cited in text:

1. Gaulish farmstead, "Mont-Blanc" Business Park, Savigny-le-Temple;
2. Archaeological area of the "Chanteloup" Business Park, Moissy-Cramayel;
3. Gallo-Roman farm, "La Mare-aux-Trois-Pucelles / La Normandie", "Carré-Sénart" Business Park, Liesaint;
4. Site of the "La Pyramide" Residential Park, Plot C1, "Le Bras de Fer", Liesaint.



+ Fig. 3. Preventive excavations at the "Chanteloup" Business Park in Moissy-Cramayel (© Inrap).

In the area of the Business Park of Chanteloup, in the district of Moissy-Cramayel, about 500 acres were tested by trial trenching between 1993 and 2010. Several Antiquity settlements were detected and partially excavated.

To the North-West, 3 ditches and 2 posthole buildings could materialise the Southern part of a Gaulish to early Gallo-Roman enclosure (No. 3b; Gonzales 2003; Desrayaud 2005).

To the South, a 2000 m² quadrangular enclosure, of about 45 by 55 meters, was partially uncovered (No. 9a). The ceramics collected indicate a probable filling during the first part of the Late La Tène Period (*circa* 150-100 B.C.; Desrayaud 2011). About 200 meters to the North-West, two posthole buildings can be attributed to the Late La Tène or the beginning of the Roman Period (No. 9b). Nearby, several pits and postholes could be related, suggesting the presence of other constructions.

50 meters or so to the North, several ditches and pits contained artefacts spanning the Late La Tène and the Early Empire (No. 4a). This area, of about 2.5 acres, seems to be delimited by an enclosure. Two Gallo-Roman stone drains were discovered and two large pits yielded potshards and a weaving weight from the 2nd half of the 1st or the 2nd c. A.D. (Desrayaud 2007).

In the centre of the park, the *villa* of "Chanteloup / Les Brossettes" is delineated by an enclosure of about 275 meters long for 93 meters wide (No. 5 and 9c ; fig. 9). With a surface of nearly 6.5 acres, a residential edifice of 620 m² and at least 5 annex buildings, it is one of the few examples of relatively large Gallo-Roman farmsteads on the Parisian plateaux. At the end of the 3rd c. A.D., it was the seat of a monetary workshop that minted emergency coinage in the form of "radiate copies". Founded during the end of the 1st or the 1st half of the 2nd c. A.D., the *villa* later evolved into a medieval hamlet (abandoned during the 2nd half of the 12th century).

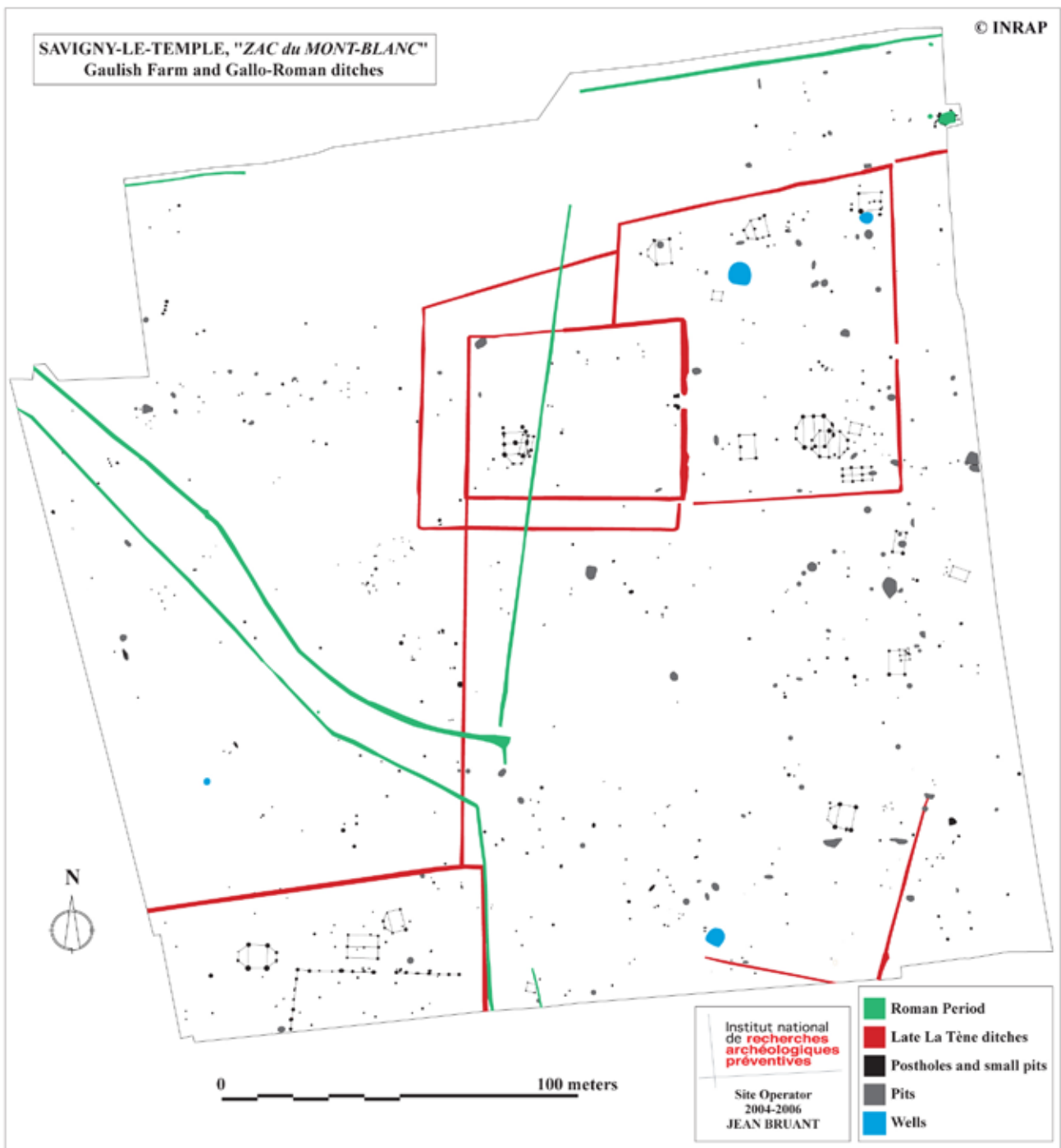
500 meters to the North, a Gallo-Roman farm was partially uncovered at the "La Mare aux Canes" location (No. 3c), dated between the middle of the 1st c. B.C. and the end of the 3rd c. A.D. The surface of its enclosure (3 acres) along with the low density and complexity of its features indicate a rather small agricultural unit.

Within a one kilometre radius of the "Chanteloup" *villa*, three other small or medium sized Gallo-Roman settlements were detected to the North-West (No. 2) and South-East (No. 8 & 10). Their exact chronologies and layouts remain unknown. The collected artefacts suggest spans of occupations centred on the first part of the Empire (1st-3rd c. A.D.).

A large number of "criss-crossing" ditches antedating the Modern Period cover the areas between settlements. It seems that in most of cases they can also be attributed to the Early Empire Period (Desrayaud 2008b; Desrayaud 2011).

The Roman Period

The Early-Empire (c. 25 B.C.-250 A.D.) sees a marked increase in the number of settlements and the creation of ditch networks, at least partly orthonormed, on an unprecedented scale (fig. 2 & 3; Desrayaud 2008b; Legriel 2008b). Small and medium sized agricultural units, with 2.5 to 5 acre enclosures, cover the whole of the plateau (fig. 2 & 5). Those farms and occupation areas, spaced about a kilometre or less apart, together with data pointing towards an open field and highly anthropized countryside, hold testimony to an extensive exploitation of agricultural resources (Boulen 2008). Without comparison to the larger estates of Northern and Eastern Gaul, the development of rural settlements on the Sénart Plateau is nonetheless characterized by a sustained increase in the size of agro-pastoral units, the long-term stabilization of their location and a “monumentalization” of their facilities (fig. 5; Desrayaud et al. 2008).



+ Fig. 4. Gaulish Farm, “Mont-Blanc” Business Park in Savigny-le-Temple District (© Inrap, Jean Bruant).

The La Tène settlements antedating the Conquest are abandoned, or more seldom deeply reorganized. In addition to relative multiplication, a widespread shift in the distribution of habitational sites can be observed at the beginnings of the Empire (fig. 3, 4 & 5; Boulenger, Robert 2008 p. 45; Bruant 2008).

Despite the rebellion of the *Senones* and *Parisii* against the Roman invaders (Poux, Robin 2000, p. 213-217), no archaeological evidence suggests the large scale destruction of Celtic farmsteads around the middle of the 1st c. B.C. The bases of the new Gallo-Roman rural fabric are apparently laid during the end of the 1st c. B.C. and the first half of the 1st c. A.D. Nonetheless, the layouts of newly founded Augustan settlements are largely inherited from the Gaulish Period (fig. 5: enclosure 1 and Bldg 01; Collart 1996; Desrayaud 2008a).

Between the middle of the 3rd and the beginning of the 4th c. A.D., the vast majority of sites are deserted and the ditch networks are left unattended or backfilled. For this period, the retraction of human occupation as seen on the Sénart Plateau seems to be a regional phenomenon. Areas to the North, notably the territory of the Meldi, continue to show a certain degree of "dynamism" well into the 4th century (Ouzoulias, Van Ossel 2001).

In the Paris Basin, as for the whole of Northern Gaul, a general phase of abandonment takes place during the 5th c. A.D., coinciding with a global crisis affecting most of the Western Empire. Despite a few rare examples of continuity (fig. 3 No. 5), "the end of Antiquity and the beginnings of the Early Middle Ages see an important decrease in the number of habitational sites and the development of new forms of settlements" (Ouzoulias, Van Ossel 2001, p. 171-172).

Early Empire drainage and land dividing ditches

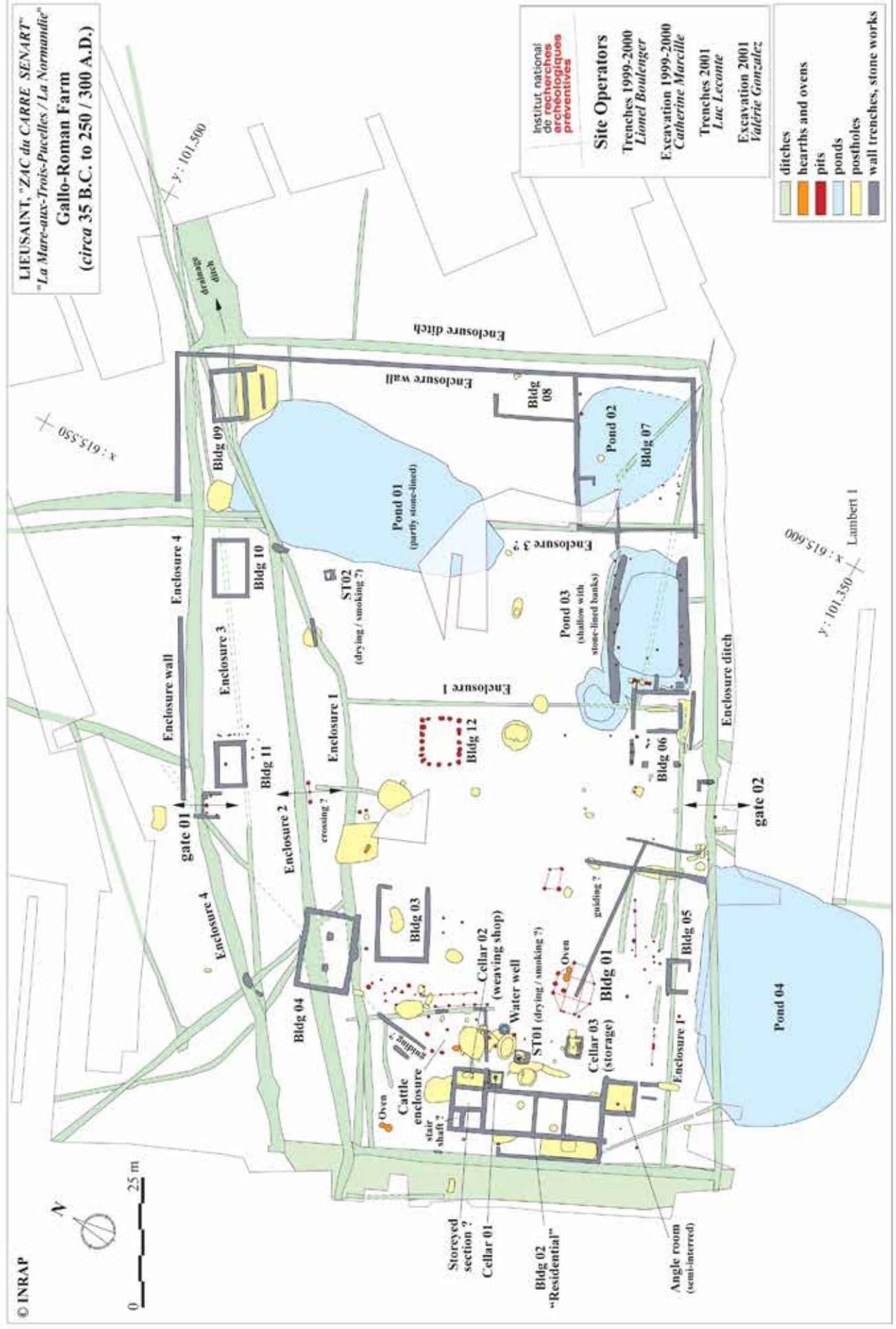
Preventive archaeology excavations on the Sénart Plateau have revealed Early Empire ditched networks covering hundreds of acres (fig. 3). The man-power required for the digging and maintenance of such extensive works can only be justified by the necessity to control surface runoff and / or the will to create "strong" boundary limits (land division or containment and protective enclosures), that could have otherwise been materialised by surface markings (Desrayaud 2008b).

Though they vary in size, some of them being several hundred meters long, most of those Gallo-Roman ditches are rectilinear and seem to have endured for long periods of time. Unlike the ubiquitous ponds, they did not constitute permanent reservoirs and only carried water when the surrounding soils were saturated or during heavy precipitations. In general, the axes of a given network followed the natural dip of the terrain.

On the clayey silt plateaux of the Paris Basin, soil drainage greatly improves crop output. Frequent wet seasonal periods probably compelled Gallo-Roman farmers, as well as their contemporary counterparts, to develop effective drainage systems in order to lessen, among other factors, anoxia⁴ effects that are very damageable to cultivated plants (notably cereals; Baize, Jabiol 1995; Defgnee, Munaut 1996).

The deepest ditches show successive phases of natural sedimentation, backfills and re-cuts (fig. 6). A certain time after initial digging, some ditches were at least partly "cleaned out" and then refilled with surrounding sediments (from the embankments?) before re-cutting (fig. 6 phases H & G). Presumably, those actions were meant as upkeep practices without any significant change in the course of the ditch. The use of compacted natural sediments allows for the re-cutting of more stable and impermeable walls. This improves water flow while limiting saturation and loss of stability of the upper banks and facilitates frequent passage along the edges, notably in case of a bordering pathway. By avoiding the widening of the sides, this technique also enables to maintain the initial width of the ditched limit and to fulfill spatial division requirements.

4 Crop anoxia: total depletion in the level of available oxygen by roots, caused by water saturation or flooding.



+ Fig. 5. Gallo-Roman Farm, “*La Mare-aux-Trois-Pucelles / La Normandie*”, Lieusaint
(© Inrap, G. Desrayaud, V. Gonzales, C. Marcille).

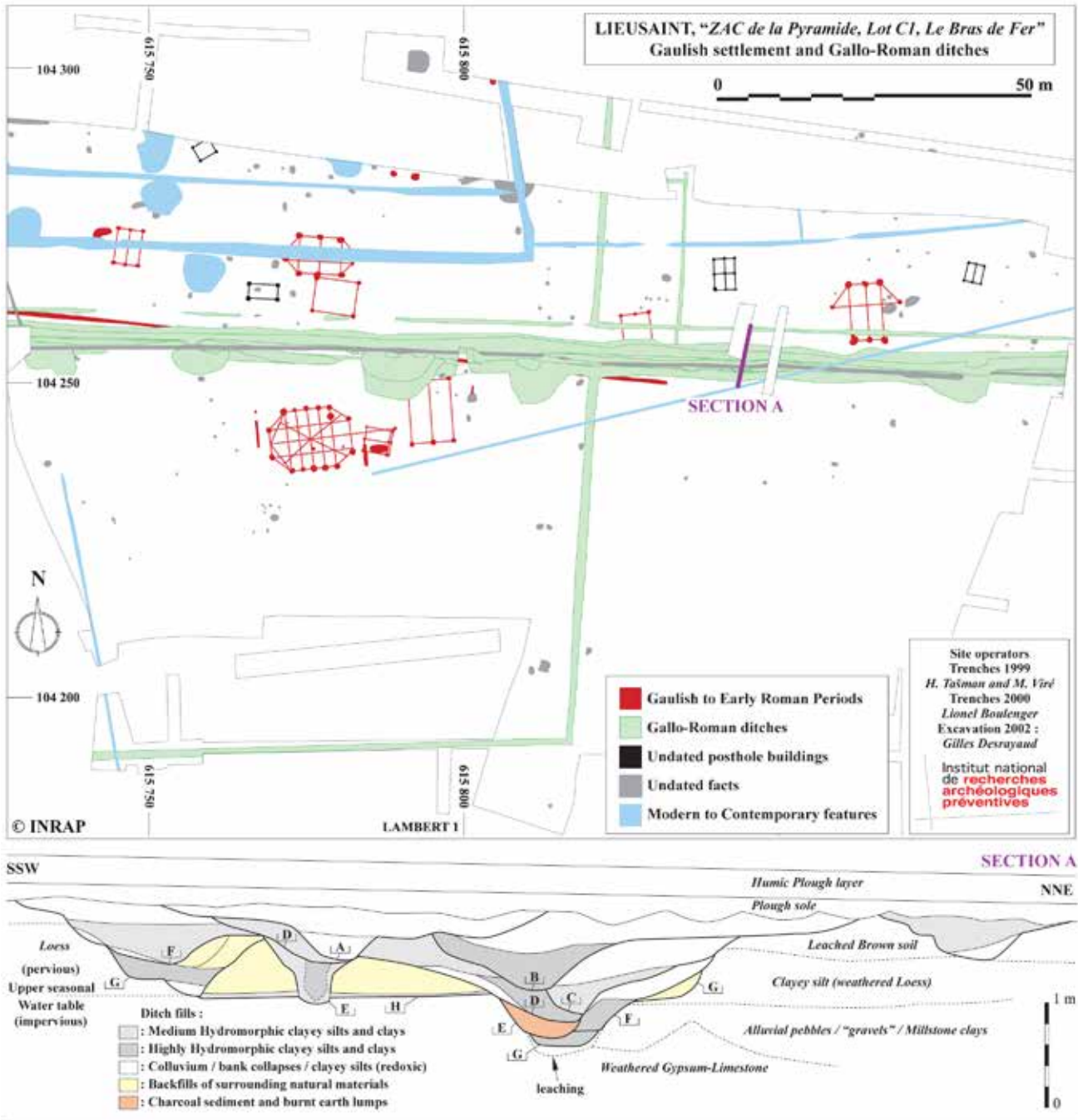
At the “*La Mare-aux-Trois-Pucelles / La Normandie*” locations in the district of Lieusaint, a Gallo-Roman farm was nearly entirely uncovered and excavated between 1999 and 2001 (Marcille 2001; † Valérie Gonzales). With a total surface approaching 4 acres, its morphology is typical of small to medium sized agricultural settlements on the Parisian plateaux and Northern Gaul during the Early Empire (Ferdrière 1988).

A sub-rectangular SW/NE ditched enclosure surrounds a central courtyard lined with buildings on stone foundations, including a main residential edifice on the smaller SW side. Four main enclosure phases have been identified, the last one being partly walled, the three latter representing an increase in size to the East and North (enclosures 1 to 4). Inversely, the Western and Southern limits don't seem to have undergone any major modification.

According to ceramics dating, the first enclosure phase spans the last third of the 1st c. B.C. to the middle of the 1st c. A.D. (E. Leclerc, in Marcille 2001). The presence of a “diamond” shaped posthole building, of Gaulish tradition (Bldg 01), strengthens the hypothesis of an early Gallo-Roman foundation. The wooden frame at the bottom of the stone water well was dated from 40 B.C. by dendrochronology.

Between the middle of the 2nd and the end of the 3rd c. A.D., the farm reaches its maximum development, with an enclosure of 100 by 150 meters and half a dozen buildings distributed on the Northern and Southern flanks. It then displays a “classical” bipartite layout, composed of a main habitational and activity area in the Western half (“*Pars Urbana*”), together with a secondary Eastern sector (“*Pars Rustica*”) containing most of the annex constructions (Bldg 06 to 11). This partition is materialized by a central posthole building (Bldg 12) and a transversal pathway between two gates on both sides of the enclosure (gates 01 and 02). The dating artefacts collected from the latest principal features (cellars, ditches, ponds) indicate an overall abandonment of the site before the beginning of the 4th c. A.D.

During the Early Empire, this farm is part of relatively dense fabric of agricultural units interconnected by networks of drainage ditches. It is located in the SE part of a seemingly distinct land division grid of about 1 250 acres, including at least four Gallo-Roman farms and a rural sanctuary of Gaulish origins (fig. 8 ; Robert 1996; Boulenger, Robert 2008).

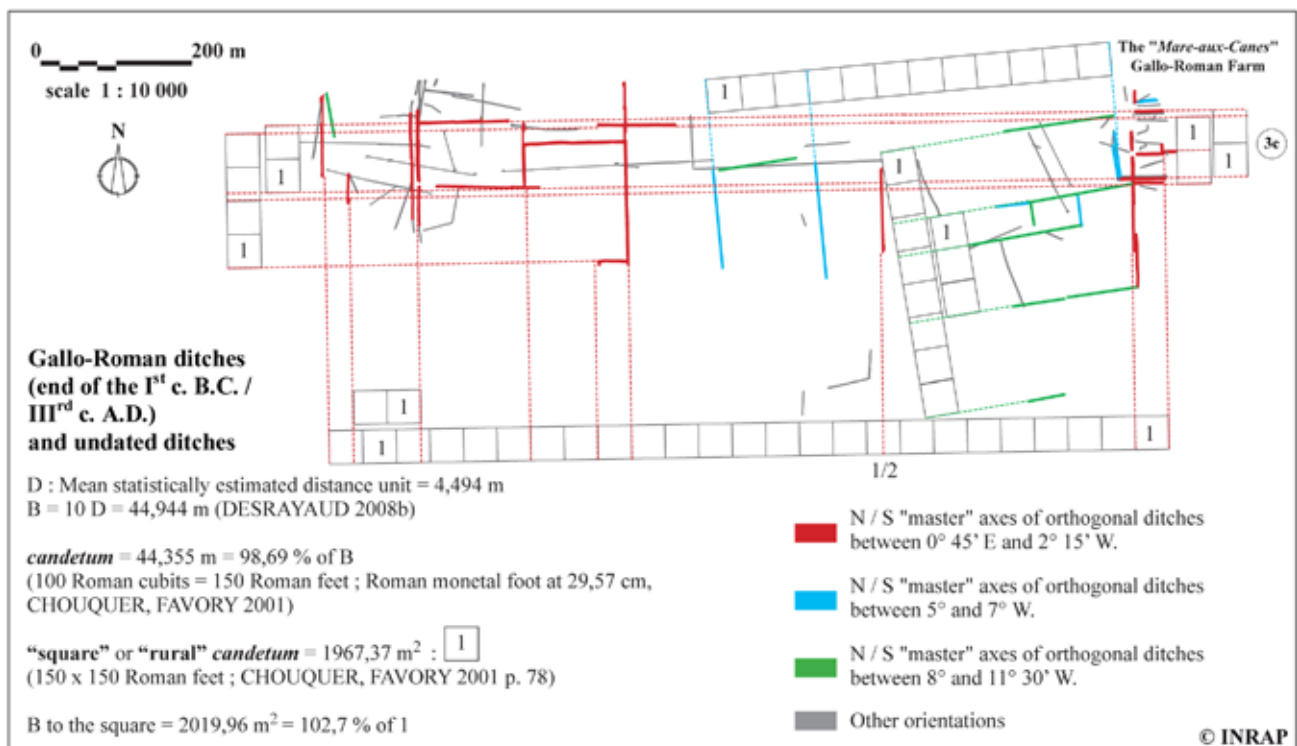


+ Fig. 6. Map of Late Iron Age and Gallo-Roman remains of the Plot C1 of the "La Pyramide" Residential Park, "Le Bras de Fer" location, Lieusaint District. Cross-section of the main Gallo-Roman ditched drainage system (© Inrap, G. Desrayaud; Desrayaud 2004).

In the Northern half of the "Chanteloup" Business Park, in Moissy-Cramayel, Gallo-Roman orthogonal drainage ditched networks were observed on a 75 acre area (fig. 3 No. 3). The permanence of orientations into the Modern and Contemporary periods, along with statistical evidence as to the employment of fixed measure and surface units (*candetum*⁵? Fig. 7) strongly suggest the creation of land surveying "grids", from the start of the Empire (Desrayaud 2008b).

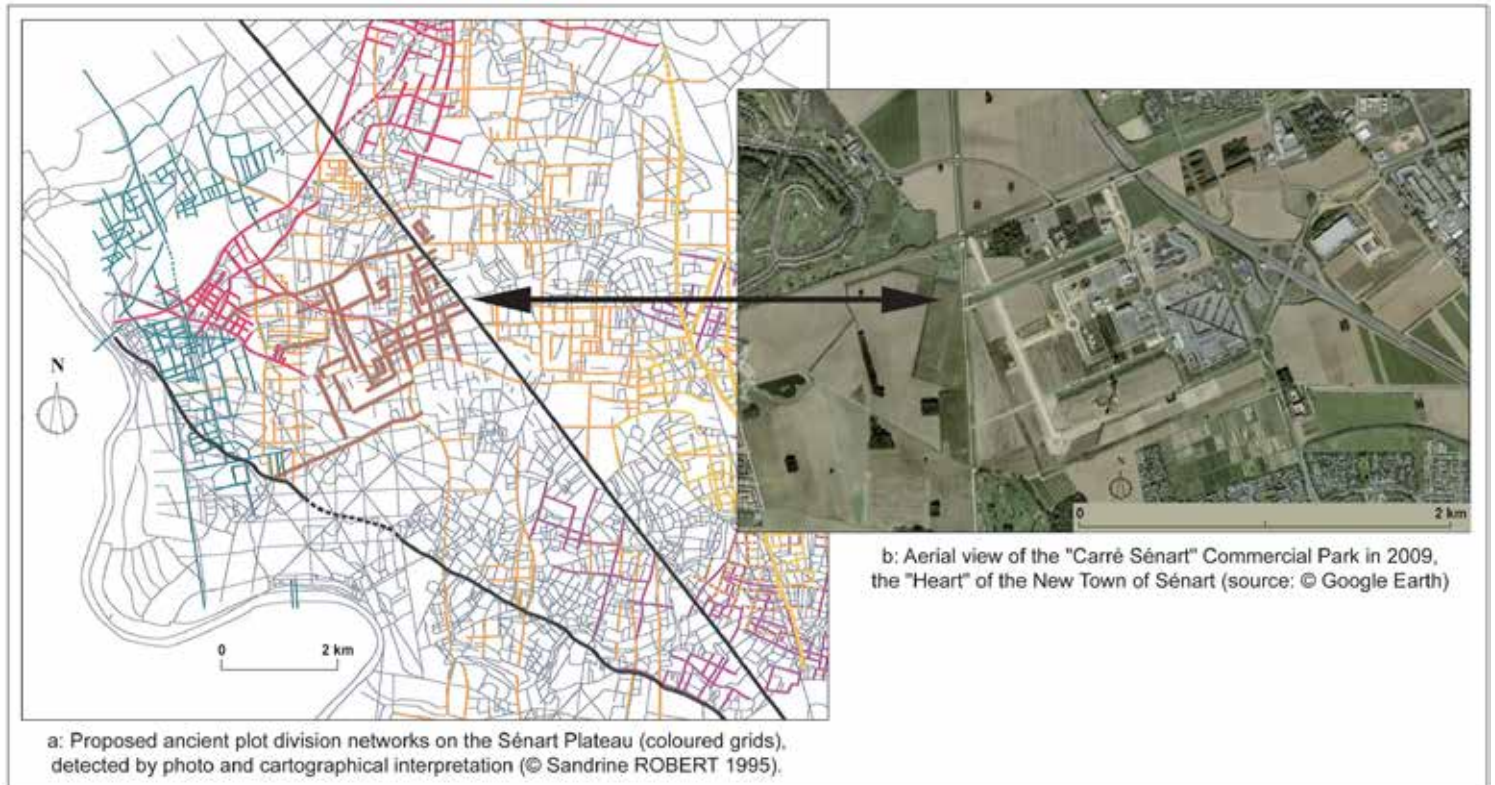
Clues toward plot division could be linked to agricultural labour control and planning. Indeed, basic surface units, such as the *actus* or the *candetum*, match the extent of land that can be tilled with an ard in one day (Chouquer, Favory 2001). In addition, the existence of rectangular plots greatly facilitates Land appraisal.

Those drainage and land dividing networks probably evolved and coexisted on different scales according to their "collective" or "private" status.



+ Fig. 7. Moissy-Cramayel District, Northern part of the "Chanteloup" Business Park. Hypothesis of Gallo-Roman ditched land division based on the "rural" *candetum* unit (© Inrap, G. Desrayaud; Desrayaud 2008b).

5 Unit of Gaulish origins: Chouquer, Favory 2001, p. 78.



+ Fig. 8. Square "heart" of the New Town of Sénart coinciding with an ancient plot division network, which can be traced back to the Roman Period.

Conclusion

Romanisation of the Sénart Plateau is accompanied by a densification of land exploitation. Its most striking aspects are the creation of drainage orthogonal networks on a large scale and the multiplication of agricultural settlements. As for most of the rural territories of Celtic Gaul, the period of the Early Empire is characterized by the development and a profound restructuring of ditched systems (Courbot 2000, p. 470-473).

The laying out of land dividing "grids", based on surface units, could be in part linked to measures implemented by the Gallo-Roman elites (the administration and landlords) in order to integrate the conquered territories into the juridical and economic orbit of the Empire. It could as well derive from acculturation of the indigenous populations and / or the rise of new techniques, nonetheless partly inspired by Gaulish traditions. Arguably, it probably rested on the will to improve and "rationalize" land exploitation and appraisal, both in quality and quantity.

In any event, the beginnings of the Empire saw a relatively fast (in the span of two generations) and radical shift in the repartition of agricultural settlements, that could be the result of new land dividing and redistributing. The Early Empire social and economic hierarchy was essentially based on agrarian possession and production (Alföldy 1988, p. 94-99). Just as the vast majority of *oppida* were deserted in favour of newly founded Roman towns nearby, the abandonment of Gaulish farms and the creation of new settlements could be the result of a will to reshape and better control the economic and social structures of the countryside.

During the Late Empire, the disuse of the drainage networks and of a majority of sites indicates the disappearance of the agricultural system characterizing the first centuries of Roman colonisation. Nonetheless, the permanence of many Gallo-Roman land boundaries, or of their orientations, through the Middle Ages implies a will and the means to maintain them (milestones, cadastres... Chouquer, Favory 2001, p. 264-276; Desrayaud 2008b). Even today, the heritage of Gallo-Roman land division is everywhere to be seen in the agrarian landscapes of rural France.

Despite extensive reparcelling and a sprawling road system, the 1980's planners and architects chose to make the square "heart" of the New Town of Sénart coincide with an ancient plot division network, which can be traced back to the Roman Period (fig. 8; Robert 1995, 1996; Boulenger, Robert 2008; Lambert 2009)...



+ Fig. 9. Aerial view of the preventive excavation of the "Chanteloup" Villa and Medieval Hamlet in the District of Moissy-Cramayel, March 2009 (fig. 03 No. 5 ; © Inrap).

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