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What defines a Collective Grave?

Aurore Schmitt, Sylviane Dederix

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Gathered in Death

Archaeological and Ethnological Perspectives on

Collective Burial and Social Organisation

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Archaeological and Ethnological Perspectives on Collective

Burial and Social Organisation

Edited by Aurore Schmitt, Sylviane Déderix & Isabelle Crevecoeur

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10. What Defines a Collective Grave?

Archaeological and Ethnological Perspectives on Collective Burial Practices

Aurore Schmitt¹
Sylviane Déderix²

Introduction

Collective tombs include a broad diversity of archaeological contexts spanning prehistoric to modern times (see Déderix *et alii*, this volume). Given the chronological, geographic, cultural and socio-political diversity of these archaeological contexts, the social motivations that led to the adoption of collective burial practices through time and space are likewise expected to be varied. Shedding light on the ideology underlying this particular form of burial is a major challenge for archaeologists who are left to interpret the material remains of past human activities.

Recently, Mortuary Archaeology³ has witnessed a series of developments, and new issues have been raised. As detailed publications of funerary contexts increased in number, archaeologists came to realise that burial treatments in past human societies were much more varied and complex than previously envisioned. Terminology must therefore be accurate and unequivocal to translate the heterogeneity of the mortuary record and enable the classification and interpretation of burial data. The demonstration that the material remains encountered by archaeologists result from intentional human actions lies at the core of mortuary studies, with the consequence that the discipline rests upon the meaning ascribed to the terms used to describe and interpret bone deposits. However, a cross-lingual standardised nomenclature is still lacking, leading to inconsistent accounts employing diverse, poorly defined and inadequate terms (Knüsel 2014). The absence of consensus on vocabulary is a major cause of misunderstanding and over-interpretation. The urgent need to revise and reassess nomenclature was the focus of the ‘Terminology in Funerary Archaeology’ session at the 21st annual meeting of the European Association of Archaeologists (2015, Glasgow). In particular, participants at this session stressed the need to adopt different terms to, first, describe and, only then, interpret bone deposits. Description and interpretation must indeed remain clearly distinct stages in the archaeological process.

Since the 1980s, Mortuary Archaeology has benefited from the development of a series of new approaches focusing on human remains. Bioarchaeology is one of them – for a history, see Knüsel 2010. As “a contextual approach combining the biological identity of the deceased with their cultural and archaeological context” (Knüsel 2010: 62), Bioarchaeology aims at understanding the cultural, social and political meanings of burials. Funerary taphonomy is another approach that recently grew in importance within the field of Osteoarchaeology, especially in Anglo-Saxon scholarship (Knüsel & Robb 2016). Taking into account the role of the depositional environment in the preservation of burials, it relies on taphonomic evidence to infer funerary practices based on data collected during excavation and in subsequent laboratory analyses. In parallel, France has witnessed the development of ‘field anthropology’ (Duday 1981) and Archaeothanatology (Boulestin & Duday 2006). The purpose of Archaeothanatology is “to reconstruct the attitudes of ancient populations towards death by focusing on the study of the human skeleton and analysing the acts linked to the management and treatment of the corpse” (Duday 2009: 6). Nowadays, French scholars sometimes use the term as a synonym for ‘Archaeology of death’ (Zemour 2016).

Unlike Mortuary Archaeology, which focuses on the funerary treatment of the dead, Archaeothanatology

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³ ‘Mortuary Archaeology’ is used here to refer to archaeological studies of human remains, whatever their theoretical or atheoretical background.

also investigates extra-funerary and post-funerary treatments of human remains. Similarly, Archaeothanatology expands beyond the scope of funerary taphonomy in that it combines biological knowledge about how the human body decomposes, with detailed observations of the archaeological context of skeletal remains. This approach has transformed how anthropological and archaeological remains of past burial practices are excavated and studied. According to archaeothanatologists, the way the dead are deposited has an effect on corpse decomposition and preservation. The position of the bones at the time of discovery does not replicate the placement of the corpse at the time of burial; however, the original deposit can be reconstructed using a combination of meticulous field observations, deep understanding of taphonomic factors and detailed knowledge of human anatomy. Archaeothanatological studies, which necessarily begin in the field, provide information on the original conditions of the deposit, the treatment of the body, and its decomposition process. The approach has grown in importance over the last two decades and its influence now expands beyond the boundaries of French-speaking countries, but the lack of systematic translation of French terminology remains a source of confusion – see, however, Knüsel 2014.

This chapter builds upon such recent developments, debates and issues. It discusses the traditional definition of ‘collective burial’, making a case against its common usage in Archaeology and arguing in favour of an alternative. In doing so, this chapter relies on ethnographic, ethnoarchaeological and historical data in an attempt to address not only the modalities of use of collective tombs but also the social implications of burying the dead in the same feature over several generations.

1. Limits and problems of the archaeological definition

As discussed in the introduction to the volume, collective burials are defined in both English and French-speaking literature based on their modalities of use (*fonctionnement* according to the French archaeothanatological terminology) rather than mere formal characteristics. As such, most definitions of ‘collective burial’ revolve around three notions:

- number – *i.e.* for a tomb to be characterised as ‘collective’, it must contain the remains of more than one deceased;
- temporality – *i.e.* the deceased must have been deposited in the tomb successively and over a certain period of time; and
- space – *i.e.* the human remains must be contained in a single structure, which must therefore be re-ope- nable to allow new bodies to be brought in.

However, a quick review of the origin and use of the term ‘collective burial’ in French and English demonstrates that its seemingly straightforward definition is in fact a source of much confusion.

In French Archaeothanatology, ‘collective burial’ (*sépulture collective*) is employed to designate “structures in which several corpses have been deposited successively, as deaths occurred. This system, which requires particular measures enabling repeated access to the structures, is mostly characteristic of the Final Neolithic of Western Europe” (Leclerc & Tarrête 1988: 1002, our translation⁴). The term ‘collective burial’ was coined to distinguish successive funerary deposits from simultaneous depositions of several deceased – the latter being referred to as ‘multiple burials’ (*sépultures multiples* in French) (Leclerc 2003). The adjectives ‘multiple’ and ‘collective’ thus differentiate bone assemblages based on the chronology of their deposition. Originally, the definition of collective burial relied exclusively on the modalities of use of the tombs, irrespective of architectural concerns. In this way, it recognised the need to study megalithism and funerary practices separately (Leclerc 1999), since indeed not all Final Neolithic collective tombs are megalithic in nature⁵. However, new discoveries were gradually made which revealed that, although they are particularly common during this period, collective burial deposits are not specific to the Final Neolithic. Examples are known from other prehistoric

⁴ Original quotation in French: “Le terme de *sépulture collective* est plutôt réservé aux structures dans lesquelles plusieurs corps ont été déposés successivement, au fur et à mesure des décès. Ce système, qui impose des dispositifs particuliers permettant un accès répété, est surtout caractéristique du Néolithique final d’Europe occidentale” (Leclerc & Tarrête 1988: 1002).

⁵ The term ‘megalithism’ is used here in accordance with the definition by Leclerc (1999). This definition was, however, recently reassessed (Boulestin 2016b).

and protohistoric periods and, to a much lesser extent, from historical times. Arguing that ideological changes underlined the diffusion of collective tombs during the Final Neolithic period (Chambon 2003), French scholars introduced additional conditions to match the mortuary record of this period, and hence remain faithful to the goal of the original definition. Some have, in this way, claimed that only built structures can rightly be characterised as collective tombs – natural caves without architectural features thus falling beyond the scope of the definition (Chambon 2003). Similarly, the loss of individual integrity is often considered a necessary condition for the identification of collective burials (Leclerc 2003). However, this raises the question of how to characterise, for example, natural caves containing the remains of several deceased whose deposition was staggered over time, whether or not individual integrity was preserved. In fact, the meaning of the term ‘collective burial’ has been debated and questioned almost ever since it was coined (Zammit 1986; 2015; Chambon 2003; Leclerc 2003; Boulestin 2016a), but the definition based on its modalities of use remains globally accepted. According to some, ‘*sépultures collectives*’ and ‘*sépultures multiples*’ have become such an integral part of the French archaeological jargon that their substitution would cause unnecessary confusion (Chambon 2003).

In his book *Burial Terminology: A Guide for Researchers*, Sprague (2005) reviews the historical development of various funerary terms, focusing mainly on the English-speaking Western scientific world and making a plea for standardisation. After synthesising the variety of English terms employed to describe burials of more than one deceased, Sprague (2005: 29, 73-79) proposes that there exist five categories of burial deposits: fragmentary, single, double, multiple, and mass. In contrast to French archaeoanthropologists, he relies on such criteria as the state of preservation and articulation of skeletal remains to differentiate these five categories. Sprague argues against the use of the terms ‘group’, ‘communal’ and ‘collective’, instead suggesting a distinction between two types of multiple deposits: *contemporary* multiple deposits on the one hand, and *consecutive* multiple deposits on the other hand.

Whether the term ‘collective burial’ or ‘consecutive multiple deposit’ is favoured, the definition emphasises the successive character of depositions staggered over time (e.g. Bray & Trump 1970: 63; Joukowsky 1980: 184; Darvill 2009: 102). Recently, several researchers have warned that funerary terminology in the English language is more interpretative than descriptive (Knüsel 2014; Knüsel & Robb 2016), proposing instead a specific nomenclature to first describe human bone deposits, before moving to the next, interpretative stage. As stressed by Knüsel (2014: 45), “the term multiple burial relates only to features with more than a single individual in the most general sense with collective, reduction of the corpse and mass burials differentiated on their extent of disarticulation”. Literally, the term ‘multiple burial’ means only that the deposit contains remains of more than one deceased, without any implications about the temporality and the reasons for their deposition. As also proposed by Sprague (2005), Knüsel and Robb (2016) differentiate multiple depositions and mass graves. Such a distinction is, however, inappropriate according to French archaeoanthropologists, who argue that the identification of a mass grave cannot be made at the descriptive stage but only later, when attempting to reconstruct the initial deposit. Indeed, the term ‘multiple deposition’ is a purely descriptive one, whereas recognising a mass grave – which is a particular type of multiple deposition – involves interpreting the material record based on the number of deceased, the state and position of the corpses, and, most importantly, the archaeological context of the deposit.

The standardisation of mortuary terminology between two academic traditions is hardly a simple task, as it involves not only translating concepts but also fusing distinct theoretical frameworks. The difficulty is increased by the fact that the term ‘collective’ appears to be confusing in both English and French. Far from being a neutral descriptive term, ‘collective’ carries social implications. Common dictionaries define it in relation to the notion of group and sharing – e.g. “shared by all members of a group” according to the *Oxford Dictionary*, or “collective actions, situations or feelings shared by every member of a group of people” according to the *Collins Dictionary*. As a consequence, the very meaning of ‘collective burial’ implies that the dead gathered in a tomb belong to a specific group of people. As stressed by Boulestin (2016a), the term ‘collective burial’ is problematic because it is used both to describe archaeological facts and to interpret function. In the same way, we argue in this chapter that the term ‘collective’ should be abandoned in favour of descriptive terms in the first stages of the study of archaeological contexts, to be brought into the discussion only at the stage of interpretation.

2. Terminology and the three stages of the archaeothanatological process

The ultimate goal of mortuary studies is to understand the actions and, if possible, the ways of thinking of past people, which involves relating the archaeological record to past cultural, social and ideological realities (Boulestin & Duday 2006). In order to obtain reliable results, however, researchers must avoid cutting corners and mixing the description of observable facts with the reconstruction of past practices – *i.e.* the sequence of gestures that can be reconstructed based on archaeological data (Chambon 2016) – and the interpretation of these practices. The archaeothanatological approach relies on an epistemological process of three stages (Boulestin & Duday 2006; **Fig. 10.1**) that must be undertaken in order.

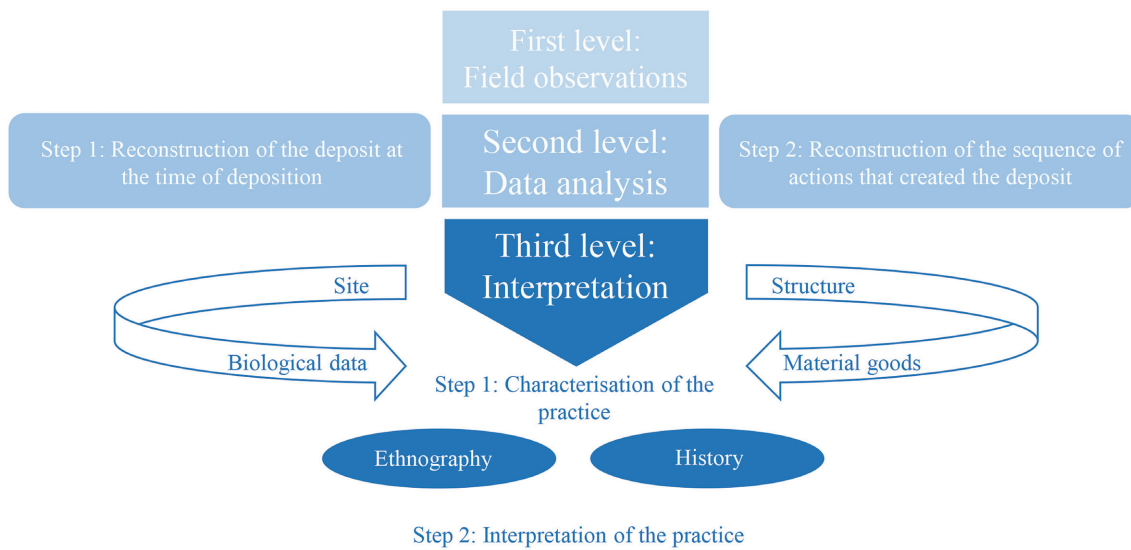


FIG. 10.1 THE THREE LEVELS OF THE ARCHAEO THANATOLOGICAL APPROACH (A. SCHMITT)

The first level of the archaeothanatological approach corresponds to field observations. The number, type and position of the bones present in the deposit are recorded, as is their degree of anatomical articulation. The vocabulary used to describe bone deposits is borrowed from anatomy. The second level consists in the analysis of the data recorded in the field. The aim is to reconstruct the original deposit – that is, its arrangement at the time of deposition – and the actions that led to its formation. The term ‘practice’ is used to refer to actions the intentionality of which can be demonstrated. These practices are interpreted in the third and final level of the archaeothanatological approach. It is at this third level only that the deposit can be characterised as funerary or non-funerary in nature. Biological data, the material goods deposited with the bodies, the characteristics of the burial structure and the specificities of the site are all considered and crossanalysed in order to, firstly, reconstruct the practices, and secondly, interpret their meanings. Terms such as ‘rite’, ‘double funeral’, ‘secondary burial’, ‘ossuary’ and ‘sacrifice’ have specific connotations. They belong with the third level of the archaeothanatological approach and should therefore not be used at the first and second levels. ‘Practice’ does not equate to ‘rite’, and if secondary deposits may indeed be the result of secondary burials, other scenarios (*e.g.* reduction) neither can nor should be excluded by default. In fact, the term ‘burial’ should be avoided altogether in favour of the more neutral term ‘deposit’ before the third – *i.e.* interpretative – level, which specifically aims at connecting gestures with the thought that motivated them.

At the second level of the archaeothanatological approach, a feature containing a single individual can be identified as either a primary or a secondary deposit. According to the archaeothanatological definition, a primary deposit contains the remains of a corpse (or part of a corpse) deposited when all skeletal elements were still anatomically articulated, in contrast to secondary deposits, which consist of human remains deposited

after the partial or complete disarticulation of the corpse (e.g. Boulestin & Duda 2006: 166). In this way, at the level of analysis (level 2), Archaeoethanatology defines primary and secondary deposits based on the state of the corpse when it was placed in the structure where it remained until its discovery by archaeologists. The archaeoethanatomical definitions differ from those proposed recently by Knüsel and Robb (2016: 657), who identify primary and secondary deposits depending on whether the skeletal elements are anatomically articulated or disarticulated. Using the state of articulation of the bones as a criterium to identify primary and secondary deposits is, however, problematic. Indeed, if articulated bones often suggest a primary deposit, not all primary deposits produce fully articulated bodies. Conversely, disarticulation does not necessarily imply a secondary deposit. Many taphonomic processes can indeed account for loss of anatomical articulation.

Reassessing terminology seems particularly necessary for deposits containing more than one deceased (Fig. 10.2). In French Archaeoethanatology, such deposits are characterised as ‘plural’ (*pluriel*), a term that was originally coined for cases where it could not be ascertained whether the depositions took place simultaneously (*sépulture multiple*) or successively (*sépulture collective*). It is suggested here to avoid (in both French and English) the terms ‘multiple’ and ‘collective’⁶ at the level of analysis (level 2), as they are loaded with meaning and implication. We propose instead to employ *pluriel* in French and ‘multiple’ in English to describe deposits containing several deceased, and to further distinguish between multiple simultaneous deposits (*dépôts pluriels simultanés*) and multiple successive deposits (*dépôts pluriels successifs*). Both types of multiple deposits can consist of primary deposits, secondary deposits, or a combination of primary and secondary deposits (‘mixed deposits’).

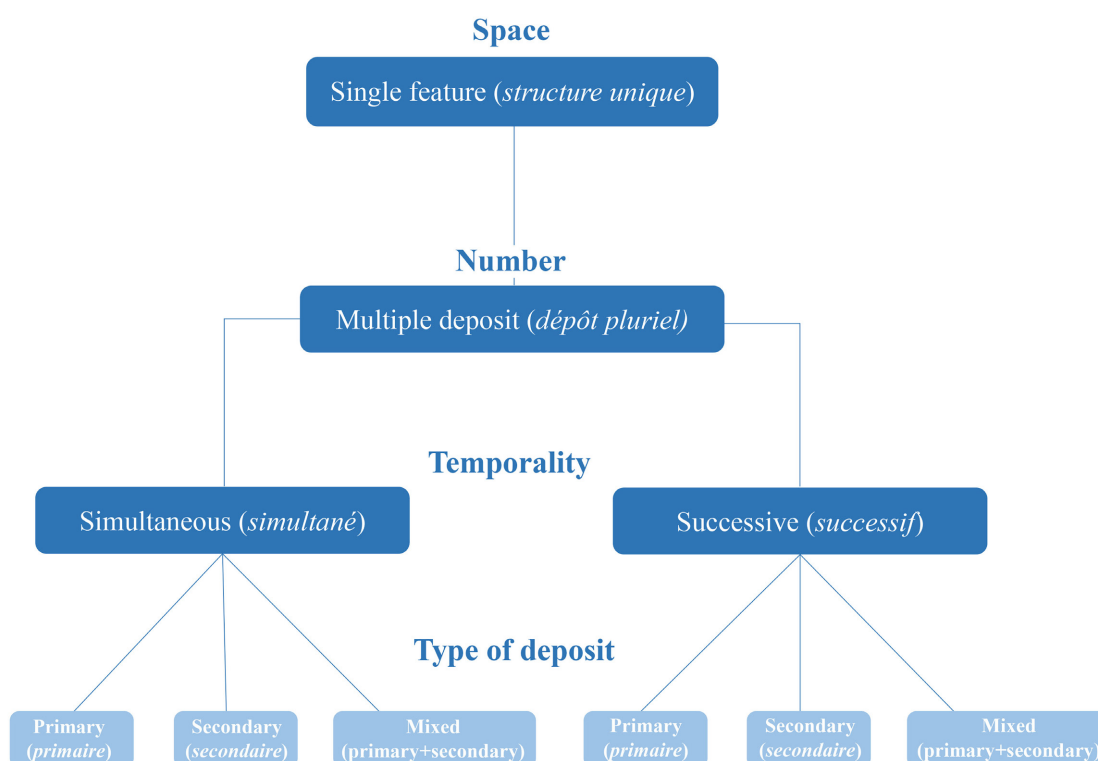


FIG. 10.2 CLASSIFICATION OF BONE ASSEMBLAGES ACCORDING TO NUMBER AND TEMPORALITY (A. SCHMITT)

⁶ The opposition between *collectif* and *multiple* is, in fact, semantically problematic. *Multiple* literally means ‘more than one’. By extension, the term ‘multiple deposit’ designates a deposit that includes several individuals, as does the term ‘collective deposit’, without any temporal correlates.

3. What defines a collective burial?

The term ‘collective burial’ was coined for archaeological purposes. It is not commonly employed by historians and ethnographers, who have direct information about the nature of the relationships between the deceased buried together, enabling them to employ more specific terms than the generic ‘collective tomb’ (e.g. ‘ancestral tomb’, ‘family tomb’). Where archaeological research is concerned, it is argued here that due to its social implications, the term ‘collective’ should not be used to describe (level 1) or analyse (level 2) bone deposits, but only to interpret them (level 3). In other words, the term ‘collective burial’ should be brought into the discussion only after the practice has been reconstructed, when attempting to place the mortuary sequence back into its social and cultural reality.

3.1. The funerary or non-funerary character of multiple deposits

The interpretive process (level 3 of the archaeothanatological approach) must start by determining whether or not the practices reconstructed at the level of analysis (level 2) are funerary in nature or not. Indeed, not every intentional action involving the manipulation of human remains forms part of the funerary cycle (Weiss-Krejci 2011; this volume). It is therefore necessary for archaeologists to discriminate funerary practices from non-funerary treatments of human bones (**Fig. 10.3**).

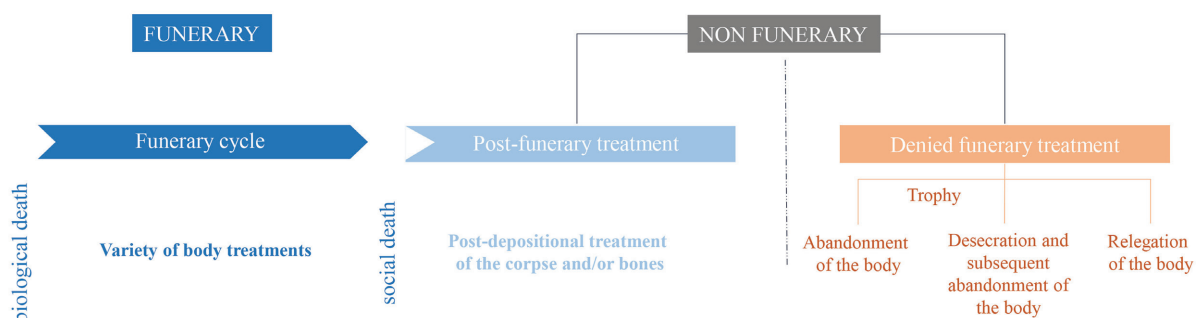


FIG. 10.3 FUNERARY AND NON-FUNERARY GESTURES (A. SCHMITT)

At the death of an individual, two scenarios are possible: either the deceased is deemed worthy of a funeral – in which case the corpse may be deposited in a grave, although burial is not systematic – or he/she is not. In the first case, the funerary treatment of the corpse and the underlying religious and social ideologies may take a wide variety of forms (Frazer 1934; Guiart 1979; Ucko 1969). The reasons for the variability of funerary practices across human societies still awaits explanation (Guille-Escuret 2012). In fact, different forms of funerary treatment usually coexist even within a given society, depending for instance on the status of the deceased or the circumstances of death (Goody 1959; Ucko 1969). Death is not only a biological reality that leaves material remains (*i.e.* a corpse) but also a cultural and social phenomenon (Radcliffe Brown 1922; Thomas 1985). From a cultural and social perspective, death is not a sudden event that occurs at ‘time *t*’; instead, death is a process. As theorised by Hertz (1907) more than a century ago, death triggers an ambivalent attitude on the part of the living, for whom the deceased do not die when drawing their last breath. There is a period of transition during which the deceased are considered as neither dead nor alive. This period of transition defines the funerary cycle, in the course of which the deceased die socially, the corpses disintegrate, those left behind mourn their loss, and society undergoes reorganisation (Hertz 1907; Van Gennep 1909). The end of the funerary cycle marks the end of the mourning period as well as the departure of the ‘soul’ to the ‘world of the dead’, without any possibility to return.

It is only at this point that the deceased is finally removed from the society of the living. In other words, it is only when the funerary cycle has been completed that the deceased dies socially, at least as a human being. Afterwards, the living may continue to interact with the dead who, however, then take the form of non-human entities such as ancestors (Weiss-Krejci 2011: 71). If funerary rites are not properly performed, the deceased may turn into malignant spirits and haunt the living (Thomas 1975; Metcalf & Huntington 1991). Funerary rites within a given society represent a lengthy process which is the result of, on the one hand, cultural beliefs about the afterlife and, on the other hand, social and religious behaviours linking the living and the dead (Bartel 1982; Thomas 1985).

Occasionally, however, individuals may be denied proper funeral because of their social position (*e.g.* slaves, young children, victims of human sacrifices⁷), the circumstances of their death (*e.g.* persons who committed suicide, women who died in childbirth), or misconduct and wrongdoing during their lifetime (*e.g.* convicts, criminals, transgressors) (Weiss-Krejci 2013: 284-287). In such cases, the treatment of the deceased, non-funerary in nature, may be limited to abandoning the corpse or throwing it away. Another type of non-funerary treatment of human remains corresponds to body parts kept as trophies (Zegwaard 2012). More common, however, are actions performed after the funerary cycle has been completed (Duday *et alii* 1990; Weiss-Krejci 2011). Skeletal remains may indeed continue to be manipulated after the 'soul' is believed to have reached the 'world of the dead'. Post-funerary treatments include a wide range of ritual (*e.g.* ancestor cult, commemoration, collection of relics) or non-ritual activities (*e.g.* looting) (Goody 1962; Azam 2002). The bones may also be retrieved from overcrowded funerary spaces to be redeposited in ossuaries, with or without ceremonies, to make room for new burials. Such a practice, which is conducted for practical reasons, concerns the management of skeletal remains and is post-funerary (rather than funerary) in character. This non-exhaustive list offers a glimpse of the kind of circumstances that produce bone deposits without being related to the funerary treatment of the deceased.

3.2. The archaeological identification of collective burials in the ethnographic record

Once the funerary character of a multiple deposit has been demonstrated, the next question is whether or not this deposit can be defined as collective. It is useful, in this context, to review what archaeologists describe as 'collective tombs' in the ethnographic record, when ethnologists themselves do not employ such a term. The megalithic tombs and hypogea of Madagascar and Indonesia are often referred to by specialists of the French Neolithic, owing to similarities in architecture and modalities of use. Indeed, the gathering in a single built space of multiple deceased whose remains were deposited successively and over a certain period of time fits the definition of 'collective burial' as it was formulated in relation to the French Neolithic dataset. Ethnographic references were first used to address architectural questions relevant to the study of Neolithic collective and non-collective megalithic tombs, *e.g.* dolmens (for a review, see Jeunesse 2016). The identity of the deceased gathered in such tombs, and selection criteria, had rarely been discussed (see, however, Joussaume & Raharijoana 1985) until the last few years (*e.g.* Théry 2012; Couderc, this volume; Jeunesse & Denaire, this volume). The recent emphasis on the social implications of collective burials suggests that these are characterised not only by their modalities of use but also by their function. We argue that central to the function of collective tombs is the fact that they contain remains of individuals who did not *die* at the same time. In this way, we distance ourselves from the traditional archaeological definition of collective burial, which places the emphasis on the successive character of the depositions rather than the successive character of the deaths of the individuals placed in the tomb.

As noted above, the term '*sépulture collective*' was coined to distinguish tombs in which several deceased were deposited successively from those in which the corpses were buried simultaneously. The issue of the temporality of the depositions obviously relates to that of the deaths: if two individuals can be demonstrated to have been buried successively in the grave, they can be assumed to have died at different moments. But the successive character of the depositions is a theoretical model intended to infer the successive character of the deaths. It is thus the successive character of the deaths that should be the focus of the definition and the interpretation of collective burials. Indeed, the motivations for burying together individuals whose deaths occurred close together in time differ radically from the ideology that underlines the gathering of whole generations of deceased in the

⁷ Victims of sacrifices may be subject to non-funerary rituals such as foundation deposits.

same tomb, regardless of the temporality of the depositions. In the former case, bodies are buried together in the context of small- or large-scale mortality crises (e.g. epidemics, wars, mass executions), or because the death of one individual leads to the killing of others (e.g. ‘accompanying dead’) (Boulestin 2008). In the latter case, that of collective burials, the deceased are gathered in the same tomb for reasons not pertaining to the cause of their death.⁸

Two scenarios are possible as regards the temporality and the type of depositions in collective tombs (Fig. 10.2):

- The human remains were brought in *successively*, either in the form of primary, secondary, or mixed deposits.
- The human remains were placed in the tomb *simultaneously*. In this case, the deposits may be either secondary or mixed in character.

The importance of placing the emphasis on the successive character of the deaths rather than on that of the depositions is demonstrated below with the case of the Wendat ceremony of the Feast of the Dead.

3.2.1. Wendat ‘ossuaries’ as collective tombs

The Feast of the Dead is documented in the archaeological record and in 17th century accounts describing mortuary practices among Native populations in the Great Lakes region of North America, especially the Iroquoian-speaking Wendat⁹. The Wendat lived in village communities that formed the largest unit of their socio-political organisation (Birch 2012: 649). Clans and lineages were other important units in Wendat society, which was for the most part organised along rules of matrilineal descent and matrilocal residence – see, however, Birch 2008 for nuances. Due to the practice of clan exogamy, lineages were involved in a dense network of relationships that cut across the boundaries of village communities, facilitating integration at the regional scale (Williamson & Pfeiffer 2003: 10; Birch 2016: 33). Fur trade with Europeans transformed Wendat economy, which in turn induced changes in social organisation. Among the Europeans who travelled to the New World during the 17th century were Jesuit missionaries, some of whom produced extensive descriptions of mortuary ceremonies (e.g. Thwaites 1896-1901 (vol. 10): 279-299; Wrong 1939: 211-212; Kidd 1953: 372-375). Brébeuf’s account of the ceremony he witnessed in 1636 (Thwaites 1896-1901) is of particular interest for it describes the secondary deposition of human remains in the pit of Ossossané, which was excavated in 1949 (Kidd 1953). This ceremony was somewhat unusual in that it took place during the smallpox epidemics that had dramatic consequences for Wendat populations and led to the abandonment of entire villages (Warrick 2008). Yet, even though it marked a disruptive period for Wendat communities, the ceremony at Ossossané was conducted according to traditional precepts. Excavation reports from the site and Brébeuf’s account provide us with an exceptional opportunity to correlate, on the one hand, the ethnographic description of a sequence of gestures with its material signature, and on the other hand, the archaeological record with the funerary and social ideology underlying the burial practice that produced it.

The funerary customs of the Wendat have been described at length in multiple instances (e.g. Tooker 1964; Trigger 1969; 1990; Ubelaker 1974; Sioui 1999; Seaman 2011). The Wendat honoured their dead with double funerals. Initially, the bodies were temporarily stored in the village cemetery, either on raised platforms or in individual pits dug in the ground. Every 10 to 12 years according to historic accounts, they were exhumed and reburied together in a large communal pit called ‘ossuary’ by local archaeologists – it must be stressed that this usage of the term ‘ossuary’ differs from the archaeothanatological definition, which designates secondary deposits of bones moved after the completion of the funerary cycle, for reasons linked to the management of the burial space. The reburial of the bodies took place during the ceremony of the Feast of the Dead, which lasted several days and involved ritual feasting, exchange of gifts, games and dancing. The ceremony was performed for all the deceased that had accumulated in the cemetery since the previous Feast of the Dead, meaning that bodies in different stages of decomposition were placed together in the pit, ranging from fully fleshed corpses to dry bones. The Feast of the Dead ended the burial programme, which represented the progress of the soul towards the afterlife (Robb 2007: 291). According to Wendat beliefs, the souls of those buried in the cemetery remained near

⁸ A collective tomb may contain an episode of multiple simultaneous deposition if two or more individuals entitled to burial in the tomb accidentally died at the same time.

⁹ Wendat are often referred to as ‘Huron’ in the literature. However, this name is avoided here as it was coined by the Europeans and is considered offensive by the Wendat (e.g. Warrick 2008: 8).

the corpses until the Feast of the Dead. After the body was exhumed and reburied in a collective pit, one of the two souls of the deceased stayed with the body, waiting to be reborn as a child, while the second soul travelled to the land of the dead (Trigger 1969: 103; Birch & Williamson 2015: 145). Each Wendat Nation or major village was believed to have its counterpart in the afterlife. The journey to the land of the dead was a perilous one that little children and old people lacked strength to undertake. Their bodies were therefore left in the village cemetery, where they formed a separate community awaiting reincarnation (Sioui 1999: 145). Those who died violently (*e.g.* at war, by drowning, by suicide) were not exhumed either, since they were thought to have no communication with other deceased in the afterlife (Tooker 1964: 132; Trigger 1969: 104; Sioui 1999: 145). The fact that only those granted access to the land of the dead received secondary burial treatment emphasises the fact that the Feast of the Dead was strongly linked to the fate of the souls.

The Feast of the Dead was thus central to eschatological beliefs, but the ceremony was also of great social importance to the Wendat. Burying the dead in a collective pit reinforced social relationships and strengthened the cohesion of the burying group: by depositing the bones of their deceased together, the living expressed their desire to be united in peace and harmony (Tooker 1964: 139-140). Funerary recruitment evolved in a remarkable manner over time, in parallel with transformations in settlement pattern and social organisation (Trigger 1969: 102; Williamson & Pfeiffer 2003: 89-131; Birch & Williamson 2015). The oldest known Wendat collective pit dates to the 13th century (Williamson & Pfeiffer 2003). Starting from the beginning of the 14th century, villages were generally occupied for no longer than 10 to 30 years, before being relocated elsewhere. At the time of abandonment, those who had died during the occupation of the village were exhumed and reburied together in a pit. Gradually, as scales of interaction widened, multiple villages came to join forces, organising common Feasts of the Dead and burying their deceased in the same pits. In this way, secondary burial practices offered an opportunity to initiate and perpetuate friendships and alliances beyond the village community, among Wendat tribes, and eventually, between Wendat tribes and their non-Wendat trading partners (Hickerson 1960; Trigger 1969: 102, 108-109). Between *ca.* 1300 and 1600 AD, the ceremony thus participated in the creation of real and idealised communities at an increasingly large scale. The joint Feast of the Dead contributed to extending the bonds of symbolic kinship to the greatest possible number, alliances being symbolised by the mixing of the bones, and reinforced through the conspicuous exchange of prestige goods among the living (Sioui 1999: 146).

According to the traditional archaeological definition, Wendat pits cannot be described as collective burials because the deceased were gathered in their final resting place simultaneously rather than successively. Yet, we argue that they *are* collective burials because 1) the secondary deposition of the bodies was necessary for the completion of the funerary cycle, and 2) the individuals buried together died successively, within a time interval of several years. Furthermore, the recruitment of the dead was guided by kinship and alliances, so that the burial pits of the Wendat played significant social and political roles not unlike the often-quoted collective tombs of contemporary Madagascar and Indonesia.

3.2.2. Collective burial among the Tlingit, the Dogon, the Bara and the Merina

Other collective tombs documented ethnographically and frequently referred to by archaeologists include those of the Tlingit, the Dogon, the Bara, and the Merina (*e.g.* Keswani 2004: 17-18). The 19th century Tlingit of Southeast Alaska constituted a matrilineal ranked society whose economy relied on fishing and semi-sedentary hunting and gathering (Kan 1986; 1989; 2016; Emmons 1991). The Tlingit population was divided into two matrilineal exogamous moieties, in turn subdivided into clans and lineages, which were also exogamous and matrilineal (Kan 1986: 195; 2016: 23-26). Each clan possessed territory as well as myths of origin, crests, songs, *etc.* which symbolised its collective identity. The matrilineages of a single clan were dispersed across several villages where they each occupied a house and owned land in addition to other forms of tangible and intangible property. Clans and lineages were ranked, with the head of lineages and their close matrikin forming the aristocracy, but there were no formal grades (Kan 2016: 25). As a consequence, status and rank were under constant reassessment, especially in the course of elite mortuary rituals, which represented the main occasion for matrilineages to demonstrate prestige. Tlingit burial practices consisted in double funerals. During the primary burial ceremony, the corpse was cremated and the remaining bones and ashes were temporarily stored in a box deposited in a grave house belonging to the lineage of the deceased. The grave houses of a same clan were clustered in a cemetery located behind the houses

of that clan, in such a way that “the ‘village of the dead’ mirrored that of the living” (Kan 1986: 195-196). During the secondary burial ceremony, which was held a year or more later, the remains of the deceased were transferred to a new container – either a new box or a refurbished grave house. A potlatch was then held to memorialise the dead and remunerate the affinal paternal kin (*i.e.* the members of the opposite moiety) that had performed mortuary services (on the potlatch, see *e.g.* Mauss 1923-1924; Barnett 1938; Kan 2016). The ceremony marked the redistribution of the non-corporeal entities and prerogatives of the deceased among matrilineal descendants, the final separation between the living and the dead, and the permanent installation of the spirit of the deceased in the village of the dead (Kan 1986: 195, 197; 2016: 42-43). The potlatch was thus necessary to complete the mortuary cycle, but while aristocrats were honoured by their own potlatch, lower ranking deceased were memorialised in the ceremonies held for their higher ranking matrikin (Kan 1986: 197; 1989: 408; 2016: 42). Clearly, the potlatch played a central role in society, representing a major social and political arena where status was negotiated through lavish feasting, exchanges of conspicuous gifts, and singing and dancing activities. In this way, the secondary burial ceremony of the Tlingit combined funerary, religious, emotional, economic, social and political dimensions.

The Dogon are subsistence farmers of the central plateau region of Mali. Dogon society is divided into patrilineal descent groups, each of them constituting a village (Paulme 1940; Lane 1994; 2006). Due to lineage segmentation, villages are frequently divided into several wards that host major patrilineages, which are in turn subdivided into a number of minor or minimal patrilineages (*‘ginna’*) (Lane 2006: table 1). The *ginna* is the most fundamental social unit in daily life. It also holds rights on agricultural land and functions as an independent unit of production, consumption and reproduction (Lane 2006: 41). Marriage is polygynous, exogamous and virilocal, so that married women settle in their husband’s village. Nuclear and polygynous families occupy individual compounds that belong to the *ginna* (Lane 2006: 42). Burial ceremonies among the Dogon consist of two parts, the first of which takes place soon after death and involves the deposition of the corpse. Adult deceased are placed in rock cavities used for collective burials, except for spiritual leaders (*‘Hogon’*) who receive individual burial. Women rarely rest in their husband’s cemetery; instead, their corpse is generally repatriated to their natal village to receive burial treatment (Lane 1994: 191). The second part of the funerary ceremony (*‘dama’*) takes place after an undetermined period. It is more elaborate than the initial burial ceremony, but the degree of complexity depends upon the age, status and sex of the deceased. The *dama* ends the mourning period and enables the soul of the deceased to reach the land of the dead. The results of an interdisciplinary project focusing on the abandoned village of Tyi provide significant insights into social grouping in collective tombs (Huysecom *et alii* 2010: 124-126; Mayor *et alii* 2014: 38). According to local informants from Tyi, adults were buried in caves and hypogea linked to the wards. Each ward was associated with several burial places because, on the one hand, men and women were deposited in distinct tombs, and on the other hand, it was not allowed to bring a new body into a tomb less than a year after the last burial. The gathering of adults in collective tombs was thus defined based on descent and residence (wards), sex, but also timing of the deaths. In addition, a separate cave near Tyi was reserved for lepers, both male and female, whereas young children were buried in individual graves clustered in open-air cemeteries and *Hogon* were deposited in richly decorated individual tombs.

The Bara are sedentary cattle pastoralists and rice cultivators of the southern plains of Madagascar (Metcalf & Huntington 1991: 113-130; Parker Pearson & Regnier, this volume). Ranked patrilineal descent groups are important units in Bara society, and patrilineal descent indeed determines place of burial (Keswani 2004: 17). Married women are, as a rule, returned to their father’s tomb (Metcalf & Huntington 1991: 121). The funerary cycle comprises three ceremonies (Metcalf & Huntington 1991: 116-122). A few days after death, the body is deposited in an individual coffin in the cave that serves as the family tomb or in another temporary burial place. After the first harvest following death, a large feast is held in honour of the deceased. This feast represents the largest and most expensive of the three funerary ceremonies, but it is surpassed in ritual importance by the reburial ceremony, which takes place once the flesh has decomposed. On this occasion, the bones are retrieved from the primary burial place, cleaned, and deposited in their final resting place in the patrilineal cave tomb. The cave contains several large decorated coffins, deposition in which is regulated by sex, age and descent: “The male caskets embody a lineal order of grandfather, son, and grandson; the female caskets are like collection boxes for the skeletal residue of this agnatic system” (Metcalf & Huntington 1991: 121). The secondary burial ceremony is an absolute obligation towards the death and, for the living, it marks the return to normality.

The Merina are an ethnic group established in the central region of Madagascar (Bloch 1971; Jousaume &

Raharijaona 1985; see also Parker Pearson & Regnier, this volume). The Merina bilateral kinship system results in a complex web that does not divide society into exclusive units. However, while society is not strictly divided based on kinship links, it is structured by mortuary rites (Bloch 1971; Metcalf & Huntington 1991: 83). In the absence of definite rules prescribing burial place, an individual is entitled to choose the collective tomb in which his/her remains will be deposited. This choice has major consequences since it defines the corporate group to which the individual belongs in life. The funeral takes place soon after death and involves the community among which the deceased lived (Bloch 1971: 139-145), so that the primary burial place may be some distance away from the collective tomb chosen by the deceased when alive. The corpse is usually buried temporarily in a pit dug in the ground, less often in a collective tomb. At least two years later, the ceremony known as *famadihana* is conducted, in which participate the dispersed family members who come from different villages (Bloch 1971: 145-171). On this occasion, the remains of the deceased are collected, transported to the collective tomb, rewrapped in expensive silk shrouds, danced around, and eventually deposited in the ancestral tomb. As argued by Bloch, *famadihana* is not necessary to the completion of the funerary cycle if (and only if) primary burial took place in the collective tomb (Bloch 1971: 146-147, 162). Indeed, the ceremony does not affect the fate of the soul but aims at reforming the corporate group in death. According to the Merina, those who live together should be buried together. This seems paradoxical considering that most of the deceased sharing a tomb probably never lived together, but in fact, the collective tomb presents an ideal of family unity that is strived for in life but never achieved (Bloch 1971: 161-171). *Famadihana* and collective tombs thus help the Merina to mediate between the real and ideal organisation of their society.

3.2.3. Collective burials in ethnography: synthesis

The examples briefly mentioned above (Wendat, Tlingit, Dogon, Bara and Merina) as well as those discussed at length in the ethnographic and ethnoarchaeological chapters in this volume (southern Betsileo (Madagascar), see Parker Pearson & Regnier; Uut Danum (Indonesia), see Couderc; Toraja and Sumba (Indonesia), see Jeunesse & Denaire) provide food for thought as to what defines a collective burial. An initial observation is that there is no strict association between collective tombs and specific burial rites: in some cases, the body is placed in the collective tomb soon after death (*e.g.* among the Dogon), but in others, the deceased are reunited with their forebears only during secondary funerals (*e.g.* among the Uut Danum and the Wendat). Among the Bara, the corpse may be deposited in the patrilineal tomb immediately after death, but it is nevertheless kept apart, in an individual coffin, until the secondary funeral is carried out (Metcalf & Huntington 1991: 120-121).

A recurrent feature, at least among the ethnographic examples discussed in this volume, is that collective tombs are intended from the start to contain the remains of multiple deceased, who are gathered according to pre-established rules of recruitment (*'recrutement funéraire'* in French). In other words, a tomb is defined as a collective burial place from the time of its foundation, which is also when the criteria granting burial rights are established. This does not mean that these criteria are immutable, but at any given time, a set of rules exists that regulates which deceased (past, present and future) have a right to burial in the collective tomb, and which do not. It is not uncommon for old skeletal remains to be transferred into a new tomb. Among the southern Betsileo, when a branch of descendants splits from the family, the bones of some forebears (*e.g.* parents, grandparents) are taken out of ancient burial structures and redeposited in the newly built tomb of the seceding branch. The transfer of old deceased gives genealogical depth to the new tomb and consecrates it as a proper ancestral burial place (Parker Pearson & Regnier, this volume). Among the Merina and the Toraja, old skeletal remains can also be displaced at the time of the construction of a new tomb, out of fear that an empty burial structure would be 'hungry', causing a series of untimely deaths within the community (Bloch 1971: 161; Jeunesse & Denaire, this volume). In all instances, the deceased selected for redeposition in a new tomb are not randomly picked but specifically chosen because they fit – albeit *a posteriori* – the recruitment criteria.

At the same time, however, ethnographic data also suggest that, while burial in collective tombs is always regulated by specific sets of rules, these rules are generally flexible and adaptable to the circumstances. Among the Merina and the Toraja, recruitment criteria result in multiple possible burial places from which to choose between (Bloch 1971; Jeunesse & Denaire, this volume). In other cases, recruitment criteria are more constraining, but the regular funerary programme can be somewhat amended. 'Breaches of the rules' are, for instance, described by

Jeunesse and Denaire (this volume) for the case of Sumba. Among the aristocracy of Sumba, the rule is to build one dolmen per lineage and per generation. However, owing to the costs of constructing such a megalithic tomb, most lineages use the same dolmen for three to five generations. Furthermore, chiefs are often deposited in the family dolmen with a delay of a few months or even years, to allow time for the lineage to gather the resources necessary to hold a large-scale funerary celebration worthy of the rank of the deceased. In such cases, the corpse is temporarily stored in the house or buried in an earth pit instead of being deposited in the dolmen immediately after death. Another example of a ‘breach of the rule’ on Sumba corresponds to ‘temporary guests’ in collective tombs – that is, relatives who do not fit the recruitment pattern but are nevertheless authorised to rest in a collective tomb until their own is ready. Bloch (1971: 161-162) describes similar, although rare, cases of ‘temporary guests’ among the Merina of Madagascar: individuals who lived and died away from their chosen burial place are occasionally buried momentarily in another collective tomb, closer to their place of residence, awaiting for their body to be exhumed, transported and reburied in their own collective tomb during *famadihana*.

Another major observation is that collective forms of burial treatment do not generally concern all deceased. On Sumba and among the Toraja, for instance, collective tombs are the hallmark of nobility, while commoners and slaves are deposited in single graves (Jeunesse & Denaire, this volume). In this way, the dolmens of noble families on Sumba are often flanked by individual pit graves containing the remains of dependents. Mode of burial thus clearly distinguishes elite groups from the rest of society. On the other hand, some selected deceased can be further set apart by being buried in conspicuously decorated individual tombs. This is the case of Merina kings (see Parker Pearson & Regnier, this volume) and Dogon *Hogon* (e.g. Mayor *et alii* 2014: 38), for instance. In the same vein, some Tlingit aristocrats had their cremated remains deposited in the back of mortuary poles rather than in collective grave houses (Kan 1986: 196; 2015: 40-42). In such cases, individual treatment participates in emphasising the exceptional status of the deceased, further ennobling them. Other deceased, however, may see their right to burial in a collective tomb be withdrawn due to their age, the circumstances of their death, or their actions during life. Infants and young children, who are not considered as fully-fledged members of the community, often receive a distinct form of funerary treatment (e.g. among the Dogon, the Uut Danum, the southern Betsileo and the Wendat), as do individuals who died a bad death (e.g. among the Wendat and the Uut Danum) (Sioui 1999: 145; Mayor *et alii* 2014: 38; Couderc, this volume; Parker Pearson & Regnier, this volume). Among the Wendat, old people were also excluded from reburial in the collective pit due to the belief that, like young children, they were too weak to undertake the dangerous journey to the world of the dead. The differential funerary treatment of children, elders and people who died violently relates to the fate of their ‘soul’, which is believed not to join the rest of the community in the afterlife (Trigger 1969: 164; Sioui 1999: 145). Finally, some deceased can also be excluded from the collective tomb as post-mortem punishment for misconduct during their life. By being denied burial in the collective tomb (or burial treatment altogether), these individuals are ostracised from their community even in death.

All breaches of the rules and exceptions set aside, the main question remains: which social units are buried collectively? That is, what is the recruitment pattern of collective tombs? At least in all the examples discussed here, recruitment relates to systems of kinship and descent, sometimes in combination with residence. For instance, dolmens on Sumba are used by aristocratic patrilineages, in theory during one generation but in practice for three to five generations, resulting in burial assemblages of *ca.* 20 corpses (Jeunesse & Denaire, this volume). Among the Uut Danum, bone repositories belong to multifamily houses (‘longhouses’) that are usually founded by groups of close relatives and can host up to *ca.* 200 residents (Couderc 2012: 165; this volume). The construction of a collective bone repository is a significant step in the life of a longhouse, marking its emergence as an independent unit. All descendants of the original founder(s) of a bone repository are entitled to have their remains deposited in it, even those who settled in another longhouse. Kinship, residence and burial practices are also linked among the Dogon, as village wards and collective tombs are occupied by patrilineages (Lane 1994; 2006). However, while spouses among the Uut Danum and on Sumba may be buried in the tomb of the house in which they married (Couderc 2012: 169; Jeunesse & Denaire, this volume), this is not the case in Dogon country, where wives are usually returned to their birth village to be deposited in their own patrilineal tomb (Lane 1994: 191).

While the tombs of the Uut Danum, the Dogon and on Sumba reflect – to some extent – the social organisation of the living, the relationship between kin groups and tomb groups is not always straightforward. In this way, bilateral descent systems have important consequences in terms of recruitment in collective tombs, as they provide the deceased with a choice of burial places. This is, for instance, the case among the southern Betsileo, the Toraja, and

the Merina. The hypogea of the Toraja are associated with enduring lineages (Jeunesse & Denaire, this volume). According to the rule, all direct descendants of the founder of a hypogeum have a right to burial in it. The question of where to bury a corpse is a serious matter since it links the descendants of the deceased to the house owning the tomb, and with this link come rights and privileges (*e.g.* access to cultivable land) but also duties (*e.g.* participation in ritual expenses). In southern Betsileo, where burial is allowed in the tomb of both the paternal and the maternal descent lines, the final resting place of the dead can be a source of conflict and dispute between groups (Parker Pearson & Regnier, this volume). And among the Merina, the choice of burial place determines the social unit to which an individual belongs in life, with the consequence that collective tombs ultimately structure the society of the living (Bloch 1971). The case of the Merina is of particular interest for it illustrates that the social order displayed through funerary practices may be ideal and imagined, and as such, burying groups do not necessarily correspond to the most significant social units in daily life. The Wendat represent an extreme example in this sense since collective pits, which originally contained the deceased of a single village, eventually came to receive the remains of deceased as remote as non-Wendat trading partners (Williamson & Pfeiffer 2003: 89-131; Birch & Williamson 2015). By burying their relatives and friends in the same pit, the Wendat built symbolic kinship links among biologically unrelated groups, hence creating a fictive family.

Whether recruitment is based on real or imagined kinship, collective tombs always play a major role in producing and reproducing society. The integration of the dead, whose bones are reunited with those of relatives and forebears, is a strong symbol that contributes to the integration of the living. In this way, the unity of the burying group is constituted and reconstituted in the tomb. Furthermore, the social implications of collective burial practices are often associated with economic or political concerns. This is evident among the southern Betsileo, where collective tombs materialise descent groups as a strategy to control agricultural land (Parker Pearson & Regnier, this volume), as well as among the Wendat, where secondary burial in collective pits participates in consolidating trade relationships. The significance of collective burial is made all the more obvious in cases where the deceased possesses rights to burial in several tombs and ownership of the corpse is subject to argument and negotiation between burying groups (*e.g.* among the southern Betsileo and the Toraja).

In summary, the ethnographic examples discussed above suggest that the function of collective tombs is to gather the remains of multiple deceased whose death occur successively over long periods of time and who are selected based on pre-established (although often flexible) rules of recruitment that usually revolve around real or symbolic kinship ties. Collective tombs have significant social, economic and political implications for the living society, which is produced and reproduced through funerary practices.

3.2.4. The case of French modern vaults

Modern vaults are closer in space and time to European archaeologists' own cultural frame of reference than the ethnographic and ethnoarchaeological examples discussed above. The deposition of multiple deceased in burial vaults is documented in the archaeological record as well as in written sources that provide insights into the religious and social ideologies of this particular funerary practice. The term 'burial vault' designates subterranean funerary chambers. In France, two types of modern burial vaults can be distinguished: common vaults on the one hand, and family vaults on the other. Common vaults contain the remains of deceased deposited together owing to the timing of their death rather than for social reasons (Bertrand 2000; 2006). In 16th-18th century France, for instance, Christians were allowed to be interred inside churches. The deceased were in some cases buried under the floor of the church, but in others, they were gathered in vaults built for this purpose and periodically emptied to make room for new bodies. Common vaults thus received successive individual burials that were made in the same funerary structure for logistic reasons rather than according to pre-established rules of recruitment, with the consequence that they did not fulfil the same social function as the collective tombs of Madagascar and Indonesia, for example.

Family vaults, on the other hand, belonged to the category of family tombs, which Bertrand (2000; 2006) divides into three sub-categories: 1) burial places under funerary chapels – in such cases, the chapel could be either an independent place of worship or a lateral chapel in a church, and the founders and their descendants possessed rights of burial under the chapel that they actually owned; 2) concessions in the basement of churches, reserved for the burial of a given deceased and his/her descendants, either or not in a vault; and 3) family plots in cemeteries,

for the burials of members of the same family.

In medieval and post-medieval Europe, politics relied on the continuity and stability of bloodlines (Weiss-Krejci 2004: 375). Family tombs were used by noble houses but also by the peasantry (Bertrand 2006). In both instances, burial practices actively participated in demonstrating the endurance of the family and legitimising its territorial claims. Burying family members in a given territory was indeed a strong symbol grounding the house to the land. The social, political and/or economic significance of family tombs in modern Europe was also linked to the relationship between the living and their dead relatives (Bertrand 2006). According to the doctrine of Purgatory, the deceased had to expiate their sins before being permitted to enter into Heaven. Through prayers, the living could contribute to the salvation of the souls, who, once in Heaven, could in turn intercede for their relatives. Ascendants and descendants thus relied on each other, and family tombs explicitly materialised this intergenerational interdependence.

Family vaults shared several characteristics with the collective tombs described by ethnographers. They were used for funerary purposes by specific social groups (rather than the whole society) that claimed and secured rights and privileges on genealogical grounds. The dead were gathered in the same tomb based on kinship ties, which played a significant role in social and political organisation. Recruitment criteria were defined at the time of the first burial, but the deceased sometimes had a choice of burial places, which could cause disputes among the living. Burying the dead in the same vault was a decision of strategic importance that strengthened alliances and demonstrated territorial rights, so much so that deceased were sometimes exhumed and reburied in a vault years after their death, to reinforce the familial character of the tomb (Blanchard *et alii* 2014). At the same time, however, burial vaults represented only one possible form of familial graves (Bertrand 2000; 2006). What truly mattered was for the human remains of family members to be gathered at the same location, be it the same vault or individual graves juxtaposed in a cemetery plot or in a church. In this way, the funerary practices of modern Europe differ from the ethnographic case studies discussed in this volume, for which the gathering of the dead in a single space is necessary.

4. Back to the archaeological record

Recognising collective burial practices based solely on the material evidence can be challenging for archaeologists. As already stressed, it is only at the level of interpretation – that is, at the third level of the archaeoanthatological approach – that a deposit can be defined as a collective burial (**Fig. 10.1**). This involves demonstrating, firstly, the funerary nature of the deposit and, secondly, its collective character.

Archaeological context is crucial to determine the not always obvious funerary nature of human bone deposits. In English, the term ‘burial’ is used for “a grave containing a corpse, for the buried corpse itself, the act of burying a corpse, and the act of burying something else” (Knüsel & Robb 2016: 657). In Mortuary Archaeology, ‘burial’ has come to refer to any deposition of human remains whether or not these were actually buried – *i.e.* placed underground. But however broad its usage, the term should be employed only in relation to practices whose funerary nature has been determined. In French scholarship, the meaning of ‘burial’ (*‘sépulture’*) continues to be debated owing to the fact that using the term involves interpreting rather than merely describing anthropological and archaeological remains (Leclerc 1990). According to Boulestin (2012: 31-37), the definition of ‘burial’ revolves around the characteristics and the function of funerals: these are ceremonies associated with the management and especially the deposition of a corpse, their role being to honour the deceased through the treatment of their remains. Therefore, a burial is a context that contains the bones of one or several deceased deposited during a ceremony honouring at least one of these deceased through the treatment of his/her bodily remains (Boulestin 2012: 37). Key to the definition is that burials are intended as the final resting place of the remains of the dead, which excludes temporary deposits made in the course of double funerals.

The identification and understanding of funerary contexts and burials can be achieved only by means of an integrated study of all aspects of the deposit – that is, the human bones, but also the location of the grave, its architecture, and the material goods associated with the human bones.

Once a deposit containing human bones has been securely identified as a burial, whether or not it can be described as ‘collective’ depends on conditions pertaining to space, number, temporality, but also, we argue, on the social function fulfilled by the burial. The first condition for the identification of a collective burial is spatial: the deceased

must have been gathered intentionally in the same empty space (Boulestin 2016a), be it a natural cavity or a man-made tomb. The second condition concerns the number of individuals. The very term ‘collective’ implies that the tomb contains the remains of more than one deceased – for lack of a better threshold, we thus have to consider that a minimum of two deceased is required. A reliable count of the total number of individuals is necessary to estimate the size of the group contributing bodies to the tomb. However, it is notoriously difficult to calculate the minimum number of individuals (MNI) in commingled assemblages, especially in cases of highly fragmented bones (*e.g.* Adams & Byrd 2014; Osterholtz *et alii* 2014; Robb 2016). The MNI thus often provides only a rough (under)estimate of the size of the buried group. Furthermore, the meaning of the MNI can be interpreted only in relation to the duration of use of the tomb – *i.e.* in relation to temporality. Indeed, a tomb containing 50 bodies reflects very different recruitment (and hence, social) patterns depending on whether it remained in use during a century or a millennium.

The third condition, that of temporality, touches upon several aspects: the temporality of the tomb, the temporality of the deposits, and the temporality of the deaths. The study of collective burial practices would benefit from an increased use of radiocarbon dating methods to complement stratigraphic evidence, estimate the duration of use of the tombs, and hence obtain a more realistic idea of the size of the social units buried collectively. Regarding the temporality of deaths and depositions, it was argued earlier that collective tombs contain the remains of individuals who died successively, no matter the timing of burial. Indeed, although successive deaths often result in successive depositions, collective burials can also take the form of simultaneous secondary or mixed deposits (**Fig. 10.2**), as is, for instance, the case of Wendat collective pits. Ethnographic accounts demonstrate that human remains in collective tombs can be subject to varied and complex manipulations, sometimes long after the completion of the funerary cycle. In this way, it is not uncommon for old deceased to be taken out of a collective tomb, only to be redeposited in another one. Such transfers can have different motivations – *e.g.* the deceased may have been buried temporarily while awaiting the construction of their own tomb, old bones may be brought into a newly built tomb to give it genealogical death, or conflict over dead bodies may lead to their exhumation and reburial in another tomb (*e.g.* Bloch 1971; Jeunesse & Denaire, this volume; Parker Pearson & Regnier, this volume). A transferred deceased enters the collective tomb in the form of dry bones, in contrast to those who receive primary burial in the same tomb and are thus brought in as fully articulated bodies. If several deceased are transferred at the same time, they form a multiple simultaneous deposit in the collective tomb.

Ultimately, body treatment thus provides no reliable clue to help identify collective burial practices in the archaeological record. Collective tombs can indeed contain successive primary deposits, secondary deposits (simultaneous or successive, funerary or post-funerary), as well as mixed deposits (simultaneous or successive, funerary or post-funerary). Only simultaneous primary deposits can *de facto* be ruled out (**Fig. 10.2**). Ossuaries, on the other hand, correspond to simultaneous or successive secondary deposits of a post-funerary nature. They contain bones cleared out of one or several tombs after the end of the funerary cycle to make room for new depositions, and as such, they represent logistic gestures and post-depositional disturbances (**Fig. 10.3**) – which does not imply a lack of respect or ritualisation. It is a major challenge for archaeoethnologists studying commingled bone deposits to discriminate between collective tombs (*i.e.* funerary contexts) and ossuaries (*i.e.* non-funerary contexts), since the two can have similar material signatures.

The fourth condition of collective tombs, *i.e.* the existence of strong social ties between the deceased buried together, is probably the hardest to tackle. It involves demonstrating that the dead were gathered in the same tomb owing to their social identity, status and relationships, rather than for circumstantial reasons as was, for instance, the case in the common vaults of modern France. Kinship is central to recruitment patterns in all the ethnographic examples discussed in this chapter and the rest of the volume. However, kinship is a social construct that may or not reflect biological relations. Both social and biological kinship ties must thus be considered when interpreting commingled bone deposits in collective tombs. Bioarchaeology provides tools to reconstruct biological kinship (Meyer *et alii* 2012). The absence of biological affinities between individuals buried in the same collective tomb opens the possibility that the recruitment relied on social relations. aDNA analyses enable the identification of biological kinship, whereas strontium isotope analyses can shed light on residential mobility. However, to produce reliable results, both types of analyses must be embedded in a broader integrated and contextual approach. This is especially true when dealing with commingled bone assemblages, as these can be the product of a broad range of taphonomic processes as well as funerary and non-funerary gestures. Bioarchaeological analyses should thus

always start with an extensive biological study to assign bones to specific individuals based on spatial proximity and biological characteristics (e.g. stature, maturation), so as to build an osteological profile on which the rest of the anthropological study will rely. Sex and age-at-death – determined by means of osteological analyses – as well as biological affinities – based on aDNA results and genetically determined nonmetric traits (Ricaud *et alii* 2010) – are the most relevant clues regarding the identity of and the relations between individuals buried in the same tomb.

Summary and conclusion

It has been argued in this chapter that the traditional definition of ‘collective burial’ is a source of confusion in that it excludes deposits that are nevertheless considered as collective tombs by archaeologists (e.g. Wendat collective pits). The ethnographic case studies discussed in the volume suggest that the definition should be amended to take into account not only the modalities of use of the tombs (*i.e.* space, number and temporality) but also the function of collective burial practices. Furthermore, to be in accordance with the epistemological process of Archaeothanatology, the term ‘collective burial’ should be employed only to interpret bone deposits, and not to describe and analyse them. As such, collective tombs are intended to gather in the same empty space the remains of several deceased (from two to n) who did not die at the same time and are entitled to burial in the tomb owing to pre-established rules of recruitment that often revolve around kinship ties. Besides demonstrating the funerary character of multiple bone deposits, a major challenge for archaeologists and archaeothanatologists is to identify the recruitment criteria of collective burials. The nature of the relationships linking individuals deposited in the same tomb is indeed central to understanding the social, economic and political implications of collective burial practices.

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