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*The archaeology of post-depositional
interactions with the dead*

edited by

Edeltraud Aspöck, Alison Klevnäs
and Nils Müller-Scheeßel

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6. Disturbance of early medieval graves in south-western Gaul: taphonomy, burial reopening and the reuse of graves

Yves Gleize

In early medieval cemeteries, graves sometimes contain the co-mingled bones of several individuals. For many years, these disturbed deposits have created questions for historians and archaeologists. Studies of early medieval grave disturbances were often based only on textual sources or imprecise analyses of bones deposits. Many hypotheses were proposed to explain these usages. Were they funerary practices or unrelated to the burial process? With the development of the field methods known as archaeoethanatology (Duday 2009), it is now possible to analyse the organisation of disturbed bones in graves more precisely. This methodology requires the full documentation of the position of bones in the grave and thus the deposition patterns. With this data recorded it becomes possible to ascertain if a body (primary deposit) or only dry bones (secondary deposit) were initially placed in a grave, or to determine the original presence or absence of funerary containers and architecture (*e.g.* tree trunk coffins, wood covers). Generally, it is important to distinguish taphonomical processes, such as the decay of human remains or coffins, from anthropogenic facts. And, for those determined to be actual cases in which graves were opened, it is necessary to distinguish whether they resulted from funerary practices or later interventions.

In early medieval contexts, one of the main causes of disturbance of existing graves is their reuse. Interpretations of reuse practices are often limited to identifying burial practices contrary to the law and possible familial graves. Insights provided by textual sources are very few, and studies of the bones and their patterns of deposit have been for the most part too hasty. An archaeoethanotological analysis of a number of early medieval graves, located between the Loire and the Garonne in south-western Gaul, focuses on the heterogeneous nature and complexity of these practices: they vary according to a series of parameters, including chronology, the architecture of the grave and the location of the burial within the cemetery (Gleize 2006). Their study is fundamental to understanding the dynamic organisation of funerary spaces and provides insight into the evolution of burial practices and the perception of the dead in the early Middle Ages.

Introduction and methods

During the early Middle Ages in Western Europe (5th to 10th centuries AD), the antique pattern of situating funerary spaces along roads and in the suburbs was gradually transformed. Grave groupings around “founder” burials and edifices such as urban churches and private oratories increased

(Young 1977; Ariès 1981; James 1989; Dierkens and Perin 1997; Halsall 2010). Progressively, over the course of centuries, cemeteries were integrated into towns and villages. In the south of Gaul, this phenomenon was accompanied in the 6th century by an increase in the use of sarcophagi, and a decrease of the deposition of objects in graves. Archaeologists and historians have also noted the presence of the remains of several skeletons in what appear otherwise to be primary individual early medieval graves. Many hypotheses have been offered to explain this phenomenon. However, the premise of discussions has often been that these may have represented shared familial graves, with additional bodies added to initial burials, and that such practices were contrary to the law. However, the complexity of bone deposits in the graves requires more detailed exploration: this is a complex phenomenon that shows significant variability and cannot all be explained in the same way. Studies of the skeletal remains, which have not received significant attention, have traditionally been limited to a counting of the bones (sometimes only the skulls) without consideration of their positions in the graves. The reopening and destruction of graves often left the deposits looking like nothing more than a heap of bones at the time of excavation, making more detailed descriptions seem both impossible and valueless. However, the methodology of archaeoanthatology (Duday 2009), which involves documentation of the position of bones and their deposit patterns, has allowed studies to progress significantly in the last thirty years. With these methods, for example, it is possible to ascertain if a body (primary deposit) or only dry bones (secondary deposit) were initially placed in a grave. Archaeologists can also avoid the common error of decontextualising these practices, since it is necessary to interpret these disturbances of bones using archaeological data such as the type of funerary space used, the location of the grave and its dating.

In France, recent research on the early Middle Ages (Crubézy and Raynaud 1988; Blaizot 1997; Farago-Szekeres 1997; Gleize 2006; Noterman 2016b) has demonstrated the importance of studying the bones found in a secondary position in individual graves. Such analyses, which are still too uncommon, must precede any interpretations of these practices and any comparisons with textual sources. A number of questions allow us to understand the timing of the deposition of bodies and bones and how they evolved over time:

- How many individuals were present in the grave?
- Were they deposited as complete cadavers or as bones?
- Were the deposits simultaneous or did they take place over time?
- Were the bones disturbed as new bodies were deposited in the grave?
- Who were the buried individuals (*e.g.* age at death, sex)?
- How do we make sense of these disturbances in documenting the history of particular cemetery spaces?

In describing the manipulation of bones, archaeoanthatological methods should be used before comparing the resulting data to archaeoanthropological data. The groupings of bones inside the grave must be analysed to understand the origin and the causes of the disturbances. It is necessary to understand if the manipulations of bones inside the grave took place during deposition of a body or after. Previous buried skeletons could be disturbed during the reuse of a grave for a new body. However, the reuse of a grave is not always a simple disturbance but it relates to the uses of graves during longer time spans and their memorial dimension. To understand these practices, it is necessary first to distinguish them from other types of disturbances.

In this essay, an analysis of graves in the south-west of Gaul, I will first present non-anthropological disturbances and touch upon the issue of so-called grave robbery, and then will move to an analysis of the reuse of graves. These practices must be discussed in relation to other archaeological and anthropological data from graves (such as grave furniture, the location of the grave in the necropolis, biological identity (*i.e.* age at death, sex, stress markers), and so on) to move beyond simple descriptions and offer some possible explanations for these practices.

Disturbances unrelated to the reuse of graves: N- and C-transformations

The arrangement of human remains discovered during an excavation is the consequence of a series of taphonomical processes between the time of the burial and the archaeological excavation centuries later (Efremov 1940; Duday 2009). Even if the nature of these archaeological site formation processes (Schiffer 1983) is sometimes indefinite, anthropologists must be aware of their existence. At a general level, these processes can be divided into two types of phenomena: naturally-occurring transformations (N-transformations) and anthropogenic transformations (C-transformations), the latter being either deliberate or accidental (Schiffer 1983). The identification of bone displacements with regard to the general position of the body and the reconstruction of the burial environment around the body in the grave (including empty spaces caused by decomposition of the body, coffin, shroud, and so on) (Duday 2009; Blaizot 2014) are crucial for differentiating between C- and N-transformations.

Animal activities, taphonomy, flooding: N-transformations in practice

In some cases, modifications of the positions of bones may be due to the activities of scavenging animals, which can be identified by the evidence of subterranean dens or gnaw marks left on bones. However, in early medieval graves one of the most common causes of such modifications is the deterioration or disappearance of the funerary container. For example, during the decay of the cadaver in the grave, the decay of coffins made of perishable materials or the collapse of the walls of a grave can cause numerous bones movements, some of them large, due to the force of gravity (Duday 2009; Blaizot 2014). To highlight such modifications, the analysis of deposits has to take into account the features of the grave that are no longer existent. So, in several cases of sarcophagi studied here (Gleize 2006: Usseau, Jau-Dignac-et-Loirac, Richelieu), such movements were explained by the collapse of a wooden floor or stretcher that created an empty space under the skeleton (Gleize 2012) (Fig. 6.1).

Other disturbances may be due to other natural processes. In certain graves, small-sized bones (such as phalanxes or the hyoid bone) or low density bones (ribs and vertebrae) may be found dozens of centimetres from their initial position without the other bones of the same individual having moved substantially. These phenomena are observed particularly in sites known to have experienced raised water levels (Clarensac (Fig. 6.2)) or those located close to estuaries (Jau-Dignac-et-Loirac). In such cases, the displacement of bones is likely to be due to flooding (*e.g.* Voorhies 1969; Boaz and Beherensmeyer 1976).

These displacements are even clearer if they concern the last individual buried in a collective burial. For example, in a sarcophagus in the necropolis at Fief Dampierre of Usseau (Fig. 6.3), the hyoid bone of the last buried individual, which should have been in front of the cervical vertebrae, was found in front of the left tibio-femoral joint. The same individual had bones of the feet displaced to both sides of his skull. The recurrence of displacements related to bones of similar types characterised by a small size or a low density suggests the presence of a concentrated flow of water

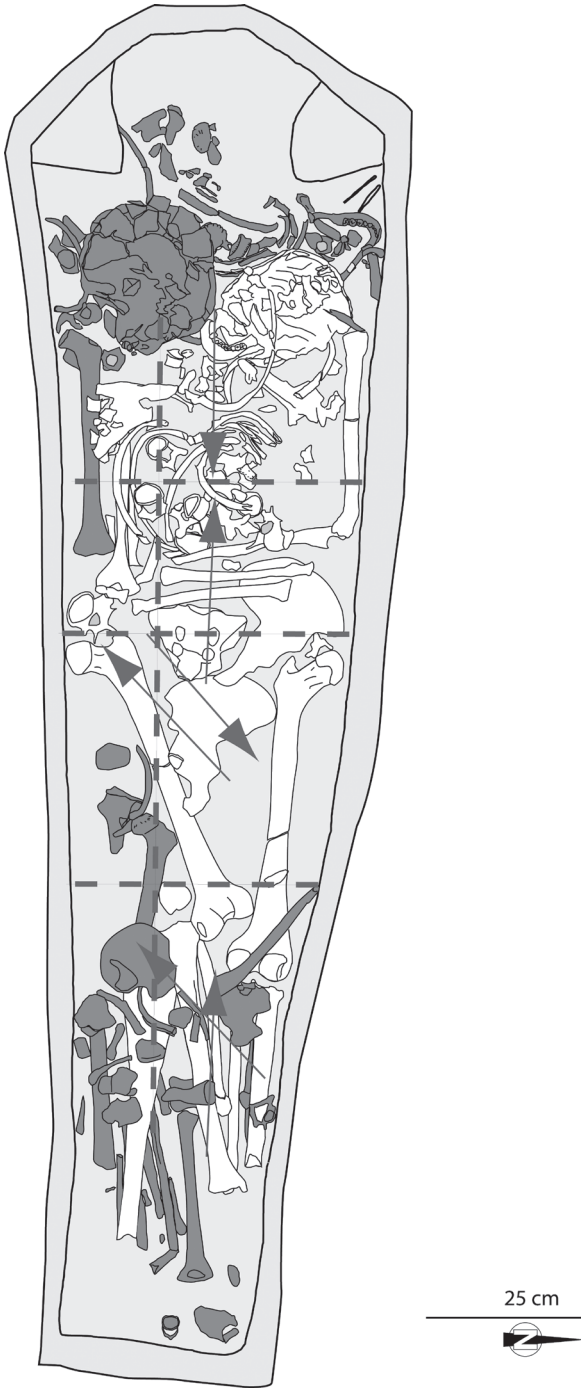


Fig. 6.1: Sarcophagus of the necropolis of Usseau (Deux-Sèvres, France) presenting bone displacements (arrows) due to fractures (dashed lines) in a floor under the last deposited individual (white bones).

(such as a stream) during a past flooding of the grave. Similar phenomena have already been documented (Duday 2009) and must not be interpreted as anthropological manipulations. Conversely, however, it is important to note that not all displacements can be explained by the infiltration of water (Gardrat 1860–1867).

In an experimental study (Gleize and Peressinotto unpublished), we tested the influence of the water on bone displacement in the grave of an adult skeleton in an anatomical position. If the water had simply risen in the grave, such movements would have been impossible. However, the formation of micro-flows helps to explain the movements of small osseous remains. Uneven water penetration in several locations of the grave could have led to the creation of one or more micro-currents. The movement of more substantial remains is much rarer and depends not only on strong currents but also the arrangement of bones. In the case of an unsealed sarcophagus, the water flowed more easily through gaps between the tank and the cover than through the bottom. Movements of bone caused by water can also be identified by the displacement and grouping of bones of the same density such as those of the hands and feet.

Human disturbances of graves: C-transformations

Once N-transformations have been ruled out, the anthropogenic manipulation of bones (C-transformations) should be closely studied to differentiate human activities before and during deposition from disturbances caused by subsequent reopenings, whether accidental, for example during building work, or intentional, for the removal of objects or body parts. In the literature the latter practice has become known as “grave robbery”, but recent studies have shown that this term is misleading, as it was not predominantly carried out for materialistic reasons in this period (Salin



Fig. 6.2: Burial T15 in the medieval cemetery of Clarensac (Gard, France) (Courtesy of O. Boyer and Service régional archéologie d'Occitanie).

access to entire *in situ* skeletons. Reopenings not associated with funerary practices in this type of grave may be identified when all the skeletons in the same grave appear to have undergone identical disturbances. For example, in a sarcophagus of the necropolis Fief Dampierre (Usseau), a large number of bones of all the individuals were pushed in the same direction (Fig. 6.4). During such movements, the medium-sized (*e.g.* vertebrae) or small bones might remain in the same position at the bottom of the grave because they were the least likely to be disrupted by such actions.

1962, 262–267; Roth 1977; Thiedmann and Schliefring 1992; Effros 2002; Kümmel 2009; Van Haperen 2010; Aspöck 2011; Dierkens 2011; Klevnäs 2013; Chenal and Barrand Emam 2014; Noterman 2016a; 2016b; see Zintl, this volume). Bone disturbances due to so-called grave robbery can take many forms, depending for example on whether there was still an empty space from a funerary container around the body when it was reopened (*e.g.* Aspöck 2011; Noterman 2016b; Aspöck *et al.*, this volume). However, in general, these disturbances are often easy to distinguish from the reuse of graves. Many early medieval burials were typically disturbed for removal of objects before the funerary containers were completely filled with sediment, that is to say, the activity took place within a generation or so after burial, which typically led to little bone damage, and often left bone spread across the base of the former funerary container (*e.g.* Aspöck 2011; Zintl 2012; Klevnäs 2013; Noterman 2016b). Often the disturbance is limited to a certain area of the grave, while skeletal remains are still *in situ* in other areas. In graves where all perishable structures had collapsed and which were fully filled with sediment when they were reopened, this leads to the dislocation of bones within the area of the reopening pit only. Another characteristic of such graves is the fragmentation of bones as, for example, in the grave S35 of the necropolis of Font-Pinette. However, in the case of non-perishable grave structures, such as stone sarcophagi, containing several skeletons, empty space is likely to be preserved for a much longer time and the opening of the preserved cover provides



Fig. 6.3: Displacement of the hyoid bone (black arrow) and the left cuboids (white arrow). Grave 34 in the necropolis Fief Dampierre of Usseau (Deux-Sèvres, France).

Early medieval texts testify to the problem of “grave robbery”. Although there is not much evidence for the interdiction of the manipulation of corpses and their dislocation before the 4th century (Thomas 1999; Rebillard 2009), there were popular fears concerning the “violation of graves” which were condemned in the 1st century AD (Thomas 1999). The survival of this antique protection of the grave may be seen in the majority of the barbarian laws: Ripuarian (at the beginning of 7th century), Visigothic (at the end of 7th century), Salic (6th century) and Burgundian (6th century) laws all punished the violation of graves (*corpus exspoliaverit* or *sepulchrorum violatricem/violatorem*). Visigothic legislation specified that following the violation of a grave, it was necessary to put back in order “the body of the deceased and all which surrounds him” as was the case in Roman law (Thomas 1999, 87). For example, a letter of Gregory the Great (*Letters*, IV, 30) testifies to the importance of protecting a grave because people died miraculously when the grave of a certain Laurent was opened in error. In addition, the ban on the violation of graves and the condemnation of perpetrators were formulated in numerous councils (Février 1987) and sacramentaries (Henron 1992).

Finally, epitaphs testify to attempts to protect graves against violation (Le Blant 1892; Effros 1997). At Antigny (Vienne), a sarcophagus is engraved with the inscription “Theobald’s stone should not be lifted” (*Teodovaldo labede non revolvatur*) (Le Blant 1892). Such an epitaph may be compared to an inscription discovered in Saint-Denis; the stone specified that “that no one should hurt the grave” (*nulle lesit sepultus*) (Wyss 2004). The need for protection may also have led to the sealing of certain sarcophagi as observed in the necropolis of Chasseneuil-sur-Bonnieure (Gleize 2006; Poignant 2010).



Fig. 6.4: Anthropogenic disturbances following deposits (displacements schematised with arrows) at Usseau. Sarcophagi 83 (Y. Gleize) and 68 (C. Scuillel).

These elements of protection for graves are important even if they do not offer evidence of the actual pillage of tombs. The archaeological cases of pillage but also the repetition of laws and epitaphs attest the frequency of the reopening of graves during the early Middle Ages. If “grave robbery” is an illicit activity, then it is necessary to specify the practices and the possibilities for reusing a grave legally during the early Middle Ages.

Disturbance and reuse of graves

A diversity of disturbances: case study of the province of Bordeaux

Many disturbances of early medieval burials are related to the reuse of graves in the area under study. In a funerary context, a grave could be reused *in situ* (primary reuse) or in a place different from its original use (secondary reuse), for example when a coffin is moved to another context, such as the example of Charlemagne’s burial in a reused Roman sarcophagus. The reuse implies the desire to retain the function of an element by integrating it into the same or a new context. Several legal and hagiographical texts of the early Middle Ages attest to the reuse of graves, with additional burials added, while graves containing skeletons of several individuals are commonly found from the Merovingian period across Western Europe, from Spain to Germany. To explain the process, scholars such as Édouard Salin (1952, 212–216) referred to early medieval texts that might explain such phenomena: their interpretation oscillated between the practice of multi-generational family graves and seeing these as “deviant” practices (*e.g.* Lex Salica, XVII).

To understand these practices and account for their variability, it is important to describe and compare grave disturbances in specific archaeological contexts. The phenomenon of reuse was thus studied in a target area to limit the impact of regional factors: in this case, the ecclesiastical province of Bordeaux (Gleize 2006). Originally a Roman province, *Aquitania secunda*, this region is historically well-defined. Located in the north of today’s Nouvelle Aquitaine, Bordeaux contains a large number of excavated early medieval necropolises. Early explorations of Merovingian burials in this region frequently revealed graves containing several skeletons, such as in Civaux (Routh 1738). Some epitaphs linked the names of two individuals on the same steles or tomb covers: *Aeternalis* and *Servilla* at Civaux, *Ismaimalla* and *Siggifledis* at Doué-la-Fontaine, and *Daveldes* and *Dumnolentus* and *Lopocena* and *Dedimia* at Rom (Uberti 2015). However, the stones do not offer evidence as to whether these individuals were buried at the same time.

Among the early medieval cemeteries that have been excavated to a higher standard in the recent past, several different forms of sites (including large rural necropolises and groups of scattered graves) were selected and analysed. In total, a corpus of 11 funerary sites representing 786 graves was established (Fig. 6.5). The overall proportion of reused graves was 22.5%, with the rates varying a great deal between sites (Table 6.1). Using detailed documentation of the skeletal remains in the excavation data (such as position of the body, and grouping of the displaced bones) and biological data (age, stature, robustness of the skeleton), a minimum number of individuals (MNI) for each grave was calculated and the representation by type of bones was reached. With the identification of individual skeletons and the analysis of the position of their bones, the deposit patterns could be analysed to estimate their relative chronology.

The graves containing the remains of several individuals revealed a diversity of funerary practices. Simultaneous deposits (contemporaneous burials of two or multiple individuals), for instance, were rare and often not easily demonstrable. For example, at the necropolises of Chadenac and

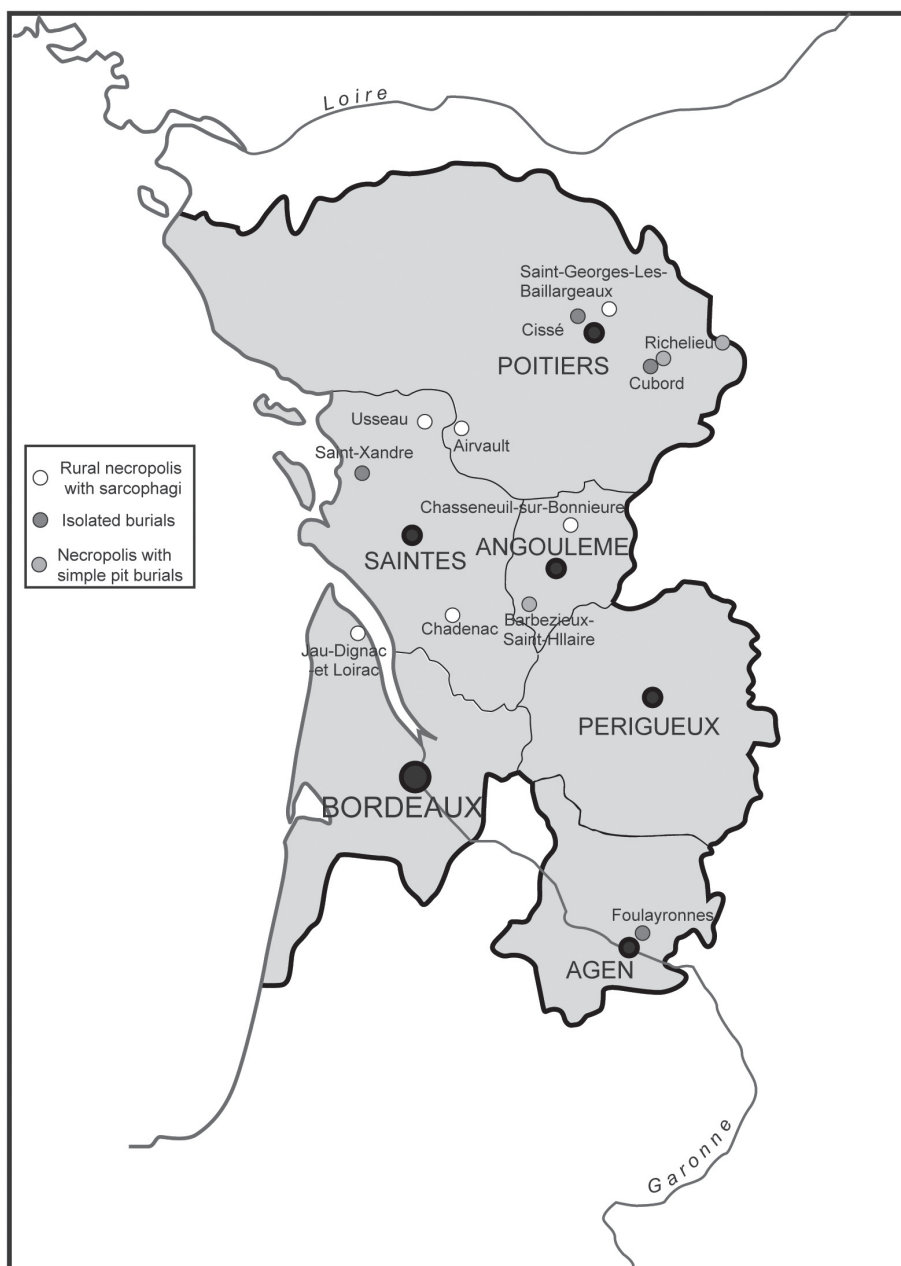


Fig. 6.5: Location of the different funerary sites under analysis.

Jau-Dignac-et-Loirac (Gleize 2006; 2015), the observation of the position of bones suggested the burials were consecutive, with graves usually reused after the remains of the first occupant had decomposed.

It was possible to distinguish two kinds of primary reuses, namely whether the grave was reused to bury an entire cadaver or a collection of bones. The first type of reuse consisted of a

Table 6.1: Percentages of reused burials in different funerary sites of the ecclesiastical province of Bordeaux.

Site	Total of excavated burials	Total of analyzed burials	Total of reused burials	% of reused burials	% of reused sarcophagi	Average number of individuals in sarcophagus	Type of majority reuse
La Mamot	181	66	9	13.6	50	2	Superposition
Jau-Dignac-et-Loirac	28	28	11	39	73	2	Superposition
La-Maison-Neuve	2	2	2	100	100	4	?
Chadenac	472	313	78	25	51	2	Reduction
Chasseneuil-sur-Bonnieure	117	116	51	44	44	2	Reduction
Richelieu	35	34	3	8.8	100	3	Reduction
Airvault	28	16	2	12.5	12.5	1	Reduction
Cissé	6	6	2	33	100	3	Reduction/ Superposition
Foulayronnes	26	26	8	30	87.5	3 (4)	Reduction/ Superposition
Cubord-le-Claireau	172	146	10	7	100	2–3	Superposition
La-Font-Pinette	33	33	1	3	100	5	

secondary deposit of bones – bone exhumed elsewhere and then reburied. The reuse of graves for the deposit of additional bones was rare and often limited to one long bone or skull. For example, on the site of Mamot, the anthropological comparison showed that the bones in secondary position in a sarcophagus came from a partly destroyed grave close to the sarcophagus. Transfers of bones in a zone of the necropolis of Terrier-de-la-Chapelle at Chadenac (SP30, 31, 32, 33) may, perhaps, be correlated with the deposition of a new sarcophagus (SP32) on the location of an older grave (Gleize 2006).

In the majority of cases, however, the graves were reused for the burial of intact bodies. The bones of the last occupant(s) could be moved to the edge of the grave and/or reduced to a part of the grave (Fig. 6.1). In the second case, the position of bones differed from anatomical logic and their grouping (known as *reduction*, Boulestin and Duday 2006, 153) attested that they were totally removed then partially reintroduced to the grave and deposited in front of and under the new body, rather than, for example, simply being moved aside.

Another practice observed was superposition (Fig. 6.6), in which the existing skeleton(s) were covered by the simple superposition of a new corpse. In such a case, the bones of the previous occupant of the grave were moved little, with often only the most voluminous bones (skulls, hip bones and long bones) disturbed.

Deposition of the skulls of previous occupants on both sides of the head of the newly buried body has frequently been observed in (Gleize 2006, 449) and outside the region under study (e.g. Salin 1952). It is presumably related to the importance of the head for contemporary community members. This usage also suggests that the bones of the previous occupants were visible during funerals. The presentation of a body in a grave was surely important. In some cases, the new body was laid on a wooden board or floor placed on top of the bones of the previous skeletons (Usseau, Jau-Dignac-et-Loirac and Richelieu) (Fig. 6.1) (Gleize 2010). In addition, at Usseau, the previous skeleton was covered during the reuse by a layer of gravel (Fig. 6.3).

In general there is no evidence that graves were reused more than twice, but there are instances in which individual graves had been reused as many as five times. When the number of individuals was more than three, it is often difficult to identify the practices for each burial and the nature of these deposits (bodies or bones). In a few examples (Chadenac, Foulayronnes and Font-Pinette), a portion of the removed bones were deposited in a pit near the reused sarcophagus (Fig. 6.7) (Gleize 2015). These graves often contained more than four individuals and the archaeoethanatomical analysis attests that the majority of small bones were buried in the lateral pit and that the long bones were reburied in the graves. Finally, sometimes a variety of manipulations, such as reduction and superposition or reuse for body and bone, were observed in the same grave that had been reused several times. For example, in a sarcophagus at Cubord-le-Claireau, two individuals had been buried on top of each other (superposition) and then a femur was deposited on the last skeleton.

A common practice but neither widespread, nor forbidden

The practice of grave reuse, although frequent, was never used in the majority of graves in any of the studied sites: reuse varied from a single interment to about half of the graves at a site (Table 6.1). All the identified types of reuse occur across all sites. Although the proportions of reused tombs varied significantly, the size of the cemetery does not seem to have had any measurable influence on the proportion. For example, both large sites such as Chadenac and small isolated groups such as Foulayronnes contained a substantial proportion of reused graves.

With respect to the frequency of these practices, we have to wonder about the opposition to these practices in contemporary legislation. In early medieval legal texts, there is no indication of concerns regarding the deposition of bones in an already occupied grave. Texts about the reuse of tombs



Fig. 6.6: Sarcophagus 169 (Jau-Dignac et Loirac). Some bones of the first buried individual (in red) were displaced when a new body (in yellow) was superimposed. Then the third individual (in green) was superimposed after the right femur of the second interred was placed on his left.

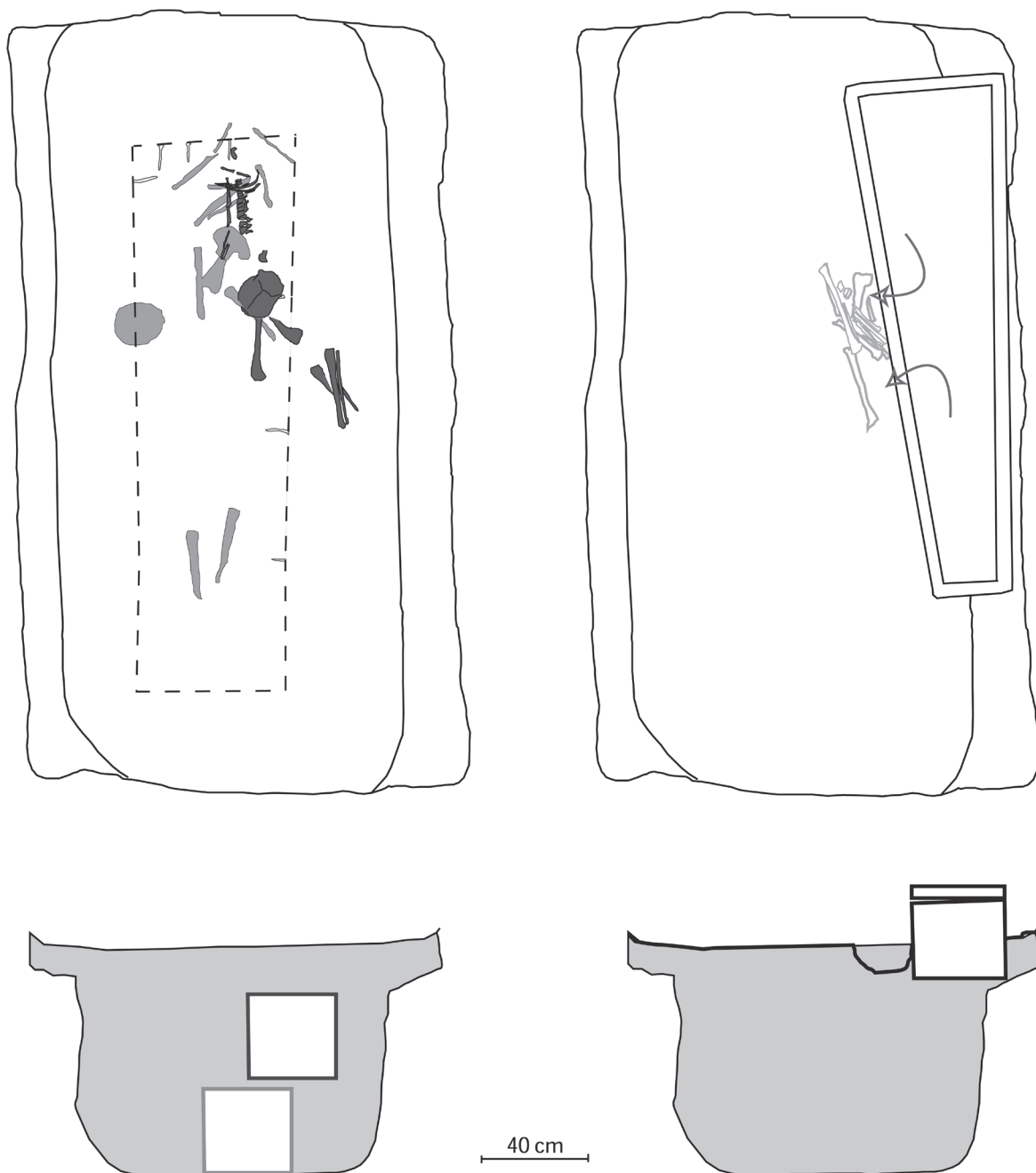


Fig. 6.7: Burial 4 (La-Font-Pinette at Barbezieux-Saint-Hilaire). To the left, the first burials were in the pit and to the right of the installation of the sarcophagus with a pit for reduction. Below, cut schematising the various events in the pit.

are relatively rare. There are several hagiographical texts, in particular those written by Gregory of Tours and Gregory the Great, that testify to the reuse of graves in which the former occupant had been reduced to bones. This was the case, for instance, during the burial of the bishop Reticus (*Liber in gloria confessorum*, LXXIV) or an unnamed monk (*Dialogues*, II, 33, 2). The Synod of Auxerre (561–605) and Salic law (middle of 6th century) both stipulated that it was forbidden to lay a corpse atop another. At roughly the same time, the Council of Macon in AD 585 (*Concilia Galliae, Concilium Matisconense*, XVII) forbade the reuse of a grave should the corpse within it not yet be decomposed. These bans seem to have been connected to cases in which families sought to deposit a body on top of another body or lay a grave on top of a grave.

However, in the majority of studied burials, the cadavers of first occupants seem to have been decayed. This consciousness of the degree of decomposition in cases of reuse raises the question of the perception of the body of the deceased at the start of the Middle Ages and of its implication in customs involving manipulation of graves and of the bones interred within them. These practices must be put in dialogue with the reorganisation of funerary space in the early Middle Ages, as well as with the multiplication of the translation of relics. With new notions of bodies during this period, were some conjunctions of these phenomena related to the practice of reusing graves?

Chronological data in the region under study shows that reuse of graves in the form of the reduction of skeletal remains formed the majority of cases during the 6th century but decreased during the 7th century, in favour of reuse by superposition of additional bodies (Gleize 2007). These results are compatible with observations made in southern France (Crubézy and Raynaud 1987). Texts from the 6th century mention only a ban on superimposing bodies, making no mention of those bodies buried over earlier burials that had been reduced to bones. The decrease of disturbances in the form of reduction may testify to a change in the perception of bones and bodies during the 7th century (Gleize 2007). In view of the textual sources and the frequency of the practices observed in contemporary necropolises, it is difficult to recognise an effective legal ban against the reuse of graves and any manipulations of bones in existing graves (Treffort 2004).

Causes of the reuse of graves

The variability in the types of reuse is most probably due to different beliefs and concepts around bones and cadavers. Therefore, it is also necessary to analyse the possible motivations and reasons for burying an additional body in an occupied grave.

Nature and visibility of the grave

The type of grave was a very important factor in determining its reuse (James 1979, 163). The preservation of an empty space and a cover in a grave facilitated its reuse. Thus the majority of reused graves in the corpus were stone sarcophagi (Table 6.1). At the sites in which there were few sarcophagi (1–4), they are all reused. Of the roughly twenty stone cists in our corpus, approximately 50% were reused. The frequent preservation of the original cover of the grave offers evidence of a certain amount of care taken during the reopening of the tomb. The site of Maison-Neuve at Cubord is particularly exceptional: a sarcophagus containing the remains of five individuals is closed by its original lid. Meanwhile at Chasseneuil-sur-Bonnieure, several lids of reused sarcophagi reveal repairs.



Fig. 6.8: Plan of the necropolis of Cubord le Claireau with different types of funerary deposits.

The possibility of reusing a grave required the burial to be accessible and visible, or at least for there to be knowledge of its location. In several cases, the cover of sarcophagi seem to have appeared at ground level allowing fairly easy identification of their location and facilitating reopening. In other cases, steles were used to identify graves, such as at Foulayronnes, where two marked cists were reused.

Within individual funeral spaces, reused graves were not necessarily evenly distributed. There might be variations according to the accessibility and the position of the graves in the funerary space. In the necropolis of Cubord-le-Claireau, for instance, the proximity of a path in the funerary space seemed to favour reuse as did the ground-level burial of a sarcophagus in a cemetery otherwise characterised by graves dug into the ground (Fig. 6.8). The rate of reuse also increased with the density of graves, such as at Chadenac and at Usseau. Near buildings, the proportion of reused graves varied. At Jau-Dignac-et-Loirac, for instance, reuse was more common outside than inside the edifice, which has been identified as a private church. However, these spatial differences should not be only considered in a pragmatic way. They may well correspond to decisions to use

the space differently, in particular as a reflection of the identity of different subjects and groups, or the desirability of burial in particular areas of the cemetery.

Reuse of graves and identity

Even if early medieval texts proposed a normative vision inspired by antique traditions, they nonetheless put emphasis on the protection of the grave and attested to the possibility of reusing graves by an authorised group. In Salic law, violation of graves was condemned by a much stronger penalty (100–200 *solidi*) than the unauthorised reuse of a grave (62 *solidi*). The emphasis was more heavily focused on the protection of the grave against violation as “property” than the actual reuse of the grave. The reuse of graves and thereby some disturbances could be related to the identity of the deceased and the memory construction of his or her respective social group.

Early medieval texts indicated that the holders of rights to tombs could have family links with the previous occupants (in the case of a couple or a sibling pair). Gregory of Tours specified that the bishop Reticus was buried with his wife (*Liber in gloria confessorum*, LXXIV) and two lovers were also buried together (*Historiarum libri decem*, I, 42, *Liber in gloria confessorum*, LXXIII). Saint Benedict of Nursia asked that his sister be buried in his grave so that he could later join her (*Dialogues*, II, 33, 2). These texts certainly show the religious perspective of the authors of these texts as they relate to their families. However, links of patronage could also exist. For example, Gregory the Great cited the case of a priest buried with a monk (*Dialogues*, II, 33, 2).

In few examples, individuals sharing certain discrete traits, such as anatomical anomalies with a possible genetic origin, thus indicating biological closeness were buried in the same grave (Gleize 2006). In the case of a sarcophagus at Chadenac, for instance, which was reused in a short period of time, several skeletons buried within it had a posterior bridge of atlas vertebrae. This characteristic is a strong familial trait (Saunders and Popovich 1978; Selby *et al.* 1955). Similarly, evidence for or the absence of stress manifested in the linear hypoplasies of tooth enamel (Goodman and Rose 1990; Boldsen 2007; Nakayama 2015) could suggest that the individuals buried together had earlier lived in the same socioeconomic environment and therefore may belong to the same families or the same social group (Gleize 2006). A palaeogenetic study by Marie France Deguilloux *et al.* (2014) on skeletons from the necropolis of Jau-Dignac-et-Loirac identified individuals sharing the same maternal lineage in two sarcophagi. These results indicate that in certain cases individuals interred in the same grave were biologically linked.

In some cases, age at death seems to have been the reason for individuals being buried together. For example, groupings of individuals older than 50 years were observed at a variety of sites (Usseau, Chasseneuil-sur-Bonnieure). In few cases, certain small sarcophagi (less than 150 cm in length) contained several immature subjects such as at Usseau (graves 58 and 59). More often, however, adult graves were reused for children. At Chadenac, for instance, there were chronological differences in practices of reuse. The children buried at the beginning of the usage of the necropolis (early 6th century) were buried in coffins or tile burials, whereas at the end of the period (7th to 8th centuries), all children’s burials reused adults’ sarcophagi, usually in superposition to the adult remains (Chasseneuil and Chadenac). Because of the small size of immature individuals, it is possible that the bones of the previous occupants were disturbed little or not at all during the deposit of these additional occupants.

There are indications that the stature of the deceased may sometimes have had an impact on the type of grave reuse. At Cissé, the bodies buried directly next to the only sarcophagus at the site were of a larger stature than the length of the sarcophagus. At Fléac, a stone cist for an adult was installed next to a small-sized sarcophagus containing an immature individual (Bolle 2001). However, this does not apply to all sites. At Font-Pinette at Usseau, for instance, the head of the second dead body had to be bent to allow deposition into a sarcophagus that was too short (Fig. 6.3).

Reuse, spaces and memory

Biological identities thus do not explain entirely the reuse of graves. Even if social identities are often difficult to capture in archaeology, a comparison of osteological and archaeological data might provide some insight. It is thus important to consider the integration of the reuse of a grave in the funerary space and the environment around the grave.

In the necropolis of Font-Pinette, there was only one case of reuse. It was the only stone sarcophagus present at the site, which was reused four times. Before the installation of the sarcophagus, the pit was used for a wood-nailed coffin and was then reused for a second burial. So on the same funerary location, seven bodies were buried successively (Fig. 6.7). This phenomenon is exceptional for the site because no other grave on the site was reused. This case demonstrates the presence of a desirable funerary location. Perhaps the identity of the first interred individual might explain the importance of this location. This man was distinguished by his significant stature in comparison with the general early medieval population and it is possible to propose that he may have had a prestigious social rank and that his identity played an important role for the local community (Gleize 2015). This raises questions as to the preservation of the memory of this particular individual over time and the resulting desire to reuse his funerary location, which became a reality with the installation of the only sarcophagus used on the site.

It is also clear that other interments might be installed near reused graves. Groups of burials close to reused graves were observed in several sites such as Cissé, Cubord Claireau and Mamot (Gleize 2006; 2015). In this case, the attraction of the grave (often a sarcophagus) presumably resulted in both its reuse and the burial of individuals near the grave (“spatial polarisation”). Nonetheless, it is not possible to explain why certain bodies were buried in reused graves and others were buried beside them. Was it due to the size of the cadaver, the absence of authorisation, or the presence of an un-decomposed body in the grave? However, these observations provide evidence for certain desirable positions in the funerary space and the attraction of the sarcophagus as the structuring element in a funerary space. The reuse or proximity of unique graves testifies to their use as spatial or social markers, or perhaps both.

In large necropolises with multiple sarcophagi, such observations are more difficult to make due to the density of graves. But at the site of Chadenac (Fig. 6.9), reuse was more frequent in the eastern portion of the site where sarcophagi were most numerous. In this zone, one may also see the apparently attractive effect of certain graves. At some sites, the distinct use of the funerary space seems to reveal the presence of different social groups. For example, in different necropolises (Jau-Dignac-et-Loirac, Airvault, Chadenac, Usseau and Fief-Dampierre), private edifices and churches attracted only a particular type of burial. Also the reuse of such particular burial locations was limited, unlike the rest of the funerary space (Fig. 6.9).

These practices testify to the possibility of burial that was closer to particular individuals and to the desire to embed certain of the dead in a specific funerary context. They offer evidence for the importance of the memory and the forgetting of the dead. But the construction of funerary memory during the early Middle Ages does not always require the knowledge of the precise location of a grave or the precise identity of a dead (*e.g.* Sidonius Apollinaris, *Letters*, III, 13, 1; Gregory of Tours, *Liber in gloria confessorum*, LX and XXXVI). Therefore the construction of memory depended in part on the status of the individuals, the choices of following generations and the evolution of funerary spaces.

Conclusion

In south-western France, archaeological excavations commonly attest to the disturbance of early medieval graves. The analysis of these disturbances requires us to distinguish between anthropogenic and natural processes and to determine if graves were reused to accommodate subsequent bodies. Using archaeological and anthropological data, the present study was carried out on several early medieval cemeteries in south-western France and analysed the variability of the manipulation of bones. The majority of disturbances observed were due to the reuse of graves. The manipulation of bones during the reuse of graves was varied and depended on different factors – it cannot be explained by only one reason. However, archaeological and anthropological data allows us to understand this complex phenomenon on the basis of individual sites.

The data suggest that reuse was not a random practice. The possibility of opening a grave does not testify necessarily to detailed planning, but, in contrast to older interpretations, it could be shown that reuse of graves was authorised for certain groups and certain individuals. Osteological analyses offer evidence that individuals in the same grave seemed to share social links. The accessibility of a grave had an impact on whether it would be reopened for the burial of a new body; a certain pragmatism must have influenced the decision to reuse a grave rather than to install a burial close to another grave.

In the absence of planning of the use of the cemeteries and of the establishment of an authority overseeing the use of cemetery spaces, the choice of the group was surely paramount. However, the reuse of a grave might also be the result of the lack of space, desire for the integration of a particular burial in the funerary space, and of distinctiveness of the space. The ambivalence of these situations might be explained by changes over time and space in the same necropolis. These choices also reflected complex patterns of dynamic organisation that renders investigation of the primary causes very difficult. Overall the reuse of graves in a funerary space can be analysed only if the general use of the burial space is considered.

The reuse of graves must be integrated into the archaeology of death and our views of human remains. The evolution of these practices seems to provide evidence for changes in mentalities, perhaps with a decrease in the manipulation of human remains during the 7th century. These manipulations inform us about the changes that formed part of the dynamic organisation of necropolises and the evolution of funerary spaces. Studies of bone manipulation and the reuse of graves should be used to compare different configurations of and evolution within funerary spaces. The study of the reuse of graves shows how a critical analysis of osteological data adds greatly to discussions of the use of funerary spaces and of the care of the dead during the early Middle Ages, a period for which textual sources are rare.



Fig. 6.9: Plan of the necropolis of La Chapelle at Chadenac with the repartition of the reused burials.

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