Middle Neolithic burials in Mediterranean France: honouring or rejecting the dead?

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Riassunto / Abstract

Compared with neighbouring European areas, Middle Neolithic funerary practices in Southern France are characterised by a high proportion of individuals buried in domestic structures of settlements. The purpose of this paper is to characterise these human remains while discussing, among other things, the nature of the burials (conveying a positive or negative attitude towards the deceased) and the presence of the deceased in the space occupied by the living.

Parole chiave / Keywords

Middle Neolithic, graves, non-funerary practices, settlement, South of France

Neolitico Medio, tombe, pratiche non funerarie, insediamento, Francia meridionale

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1. Introduction

Very few sites in the South of France can bring information about the Early Middle Neolithic period (4800–4400 BC). However, from 4400 BC onwards, the situation is unambiguously different, particularly owing to the discoveries made during archaeological survey programs and extensive excavations.

The geographical area studied in this paper roughly spreads over the south-eastern quarter of France. This geographical unit corresponds to the area where the Southern Chasséen, an archaeological culture which used to be considered the main Middle Neolithic culture in the South-East of France, is spreading. Today, following the growing number of ceramic assemblages found during recent excavations, this cultural homogeneity is questioned and often debated. Studying the relationship between funerary practices and cultural groups defined by archaeological data has therefore become a tricky task. However, since the notion of archaeological culture is not strictly synonymous with culture in a broader sense, this limit does not impact our study. Moreover, groups sharing the same culture might have had different funerary practices, and vice versa.

The Middle Neolithic period in the South of France is tied to the idea of a local expansion of agricultural economy and the new needs generated in terms of spatial organisation and exchange networks. Subsistence economy is clearly pushed a stage further, though it is considered more of a threshold than a break with the Early Neolithic period. The territory is more densely occupied, following a complex exploitation system that relies on ceremonial and fortified sites. The sites vary greatly in terms of size, function and location compared to the Early Neolithic: large settlements (large enclosed plain sites, with or without pits), small villages or hamlets (in plains or on hilltops), simple farms, and temporary shelters. The range of silos discovered in settlements attests to the intensive management of cereal stocks. The development of trade is one of the Middle Neolithic’s most striking phenomena. Quarrying raw materials and crafting items intended for trade (for instance flint blades, eclogite and jadeite axe-heads, and obsidian artefacts) are specialised tasks. The quantities that were manufactured, going far beyond material needs, induced an increase in trade and in the distance this trade covered.

During the 5th millennium, the entire Mediterranean area was marked by a competitive environment that led to social stratification in relation to the expansion of villages, demographic growth and the control of communication networks. These parameters likely contributed to the emergence of decision-makers.

The number of French Mediterranean Middle Neolithic structures and sites where human remains were found is rather small for a 1200-year period. Mortuary practices within a site and between settlements are characterised by a diversity of gestures. Very few discoveries were made in caves or rock shelters. Burials in stone cists are slightly better documented. They are specific to the Roussillon area and usually isolated or grouped far from settlements, yet most of them were discovered following older excavations. However, no extensive research in the areas surrounding these cists has ever been carried out. These graves have a lot in common with the ones of contemporary cultures on the other side of the Pyrenees.

Most human remains were found in open-air sites, in pits of various shape. The variability in the treatment of the human bodies inside dwelling settlements (different types of pits, different types of objects associated with the deceased, age-at-death and sex of the deceased) is interpreted as a funerary mirror of social hierarchy (ranking), differentiating ordinary people from those of high social status. Still, differences may be more complicated than they appear. If most human deposits are most likely related to funerary rituals and considered to be burials, is it the case for all the inhumations in circular pits found in dwelling settlements (domestic

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1 Gernigon 2014.
2 Sellato 2002.
3 Beeching et al. 1991.
4 Demoule, 2007; Guthertz 2008.
5 Guilaine 2003.
6 Demoule 2014.
7 Guilaine 2003.
8 Vaquer 1998.
10 Vaquer 1998.
context)? Primary or secondary human deposits (either cadavers or bones) in domestic settlements have been discovered only for 20% of excavated open air settlements, so individuals per site are too few to be representative of the entire deceased community. Some authors recently proposed that, in some cases, burial deprivation should be an alternative to current funerary interpretation. The funerary nature of these deposits should at least be considered. The presence of the deceased in the living space leads to the following questions: who is buried in this place and why? What kind of settlements (the vicinity of homes, storing areas, etc.) are concerned with these inhumations? The aim of the present paper is to discuss these two points.

2. Field anthropology and terminological issues

‘Field anthropology’ has developed over the past three decades in France and has completely changed the approach French archaeologists have for mortuary analysis. The term ‘field anthropology’, although commonly used, is perhaps one of the least appropriate terms to describe this discipline. While the study of funerary contexts certainly begins with observations in the field, it also incorporates a broader range of disciplines, such as biological anthropology, ethnology and sociology. The use of the term archaeothanatology was recently suggested to include the tools and knowledge taken from all these disciplines. This methodological approach enables archaeologists and osteologists to propose a valid interpretation of the decaying processes of the body by closely analysing skeletal remains. However, as thanatology studies the biological and social components of death, the term ‘archaeothanatology’ is also used, by some French scholars, as a synonym of ‘archaeology of death’.

Details on the origin of field anthropology can be found in the publication about the Mournouards collective grave from the South of France. Since the late 1970s, H. Duday formalised the discipline by adding biological information about how the human body decomposes through detailed field observations of archaeological context. Field anthropology studies the interaction between the decomposition processes of the body and the grave environment around it to explain the final spatial configuration of the skeletal remains as they are found during excavation. In addition, post-depositional processes, such as flooding, erosion, and faunal and floral disturbances must be taken into consideration. As such, field anthropology enables, among other things, the reconstruction of the original position of the body, the deduction of the state of the corpse when it was buried, of the presence of possible arrangements made of perishable material (for instance timber linings or coffins), and of manipulations of the bones after decomposition, etc. This approach is completed by laboratory analyses of the bone assemblages.

Anthropologists are involved in field anthropology from excavation to the final study of the remains. Interpretation depends on the quality of field data, and requires accurate and precise mapping and recording of the data during field work. Although this methodology revolutionised the approach towards mortuary contexts in French archaeology, up until 2000, its influence beyond French-speaking spheres was limited by a lack of publications in Anglo-Saxon journals. Since then however, field anthropology has been described in several papers written in English by French scholars.

However, recent articles have shed a light on the uniqueness of French funerary vocabulary and the difficulty of translating many of its terms into English. To avoid confusion, it is important to be clear about the meaning of several of these terms.

In English, the terms ‘funerary’ and ‘mortuary’ are largely used interchangeably as both terms refer...
to the treatment of human remains. In archaeothanatology however, ‘funerary practices’ are only a part of ‘mortuary practices’, which refer to any kind of post-mortem treatment and manipulation of human remains. ‘Funerary gestures’ refer to actions that are ‘reverential’ by nature.

Additionally, the generic term ‘burial’ is used to refer to the human remains deposited (buried) in the ground but also to a stage in the funerary process. However, human remains found in the ground may or may not be the result of a funeral. In this paper, ‘burial’ refers to a generic human remains ‘deposit’.

A primary deposit is the deposit of a corpse or part of a corpse when skeletal elements are still articulated, in complete anatomical connection. A secondary deposit is the deposit of remains when skeletal elements are partially or completely disarticulated. The latter implies subsequent displacement of human remains from their primary location. This distinction is purely descriptive and not interpretative. Deposits may or may not be ‘funerary’. Primary or secondary deposits do not correspond to primary or secondary graves.

When a burial contains the remains of several individuals, it is necessary to understand whether they were deposited simultaneously (multiple contemporary deposits) or successively (multiple consecutive deposits).

3. Data description

The archaeological sample is composed of 20 sites for which data has been published and is consequently accessible. All sites combined represent at least 134 human deposits and 166 individuals from 117 structures (tab. 1, fig. 1).

Several characteristics have been used to define mortuary practices: the treatment of the cadaver, the type of pits and the relationship between burials and settlements. All the studies considered follow the principles of field anthropology. The following characteristics were recorded: the original position of the body; its location within the pit (vertically and horizontally); the number of individuals present, both in individual or multiple primary and secondary depos-

![Figure 1](image-url)  
Location of the sites included in the text; the sites are listed in table 1
Table 1
Sites and structures include in this study, type of structures, content, number of deposits, number of individuals, chronological attribution. For detailed references on each site, refer to Schmitt (2015)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Number of the site</th>
<th>Number of structures</th>
<th>Type of burial</th>
<th>Primary/secondary deposit</th>
<th>Single/Multiple deposit</th>
<th>Number of deposits</th>
<th>Number of individuals</th>
<th>Radiocarbon dates</th>
<th>Chronological attribution by archaeological culture</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Barreau de la Dèvèze</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>type A</td>
<td>primary</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>ERL-15185: 5524 ± 42 BP</td>
<td>4400-3500 BC</td>
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<td>Cadeneau d’Alès</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>type A or B</td>
<td>primary</td>
<td>single and multiple</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4400-3500 BC</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encombres</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>type B</td>
<td>primary</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4400-3500 BC</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacques Cœur II</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>type A or B</td>
<td>primary</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4400-3500 BC</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>17</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>type A and B</td>
<td>primary and secondary</td>
<td>single and multiple</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>3900-3600 BC</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>19</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>type B</td>
<td>primary and secondary</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>ETH-16883: 4810 ± 65 BP</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lagaste</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>type B</td>
<td>primary</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>LY-3590: 5060 ± 30 BP</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Le Perreiras</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>type B</td>
<td>primary</td>
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<td>multiple</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>3900-3600 BC</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Poz-45044: 4880 ± 35 BP</td>
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<td>type B</td>
<td>primary and secondary</td>
<td>single and multiple</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3900-3600 BC</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Station de Lattes</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>type A</td>
<td>primary</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4400-3500 BC</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saint-Michel du Touch</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>type A</td>
<td>primary and secondary</td>
<td>single and multiple</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>MC2089:5440+/1-130 BP</td>
<td>4400-3500 BC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Villeneuve-Tolosane/Cugnaux</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>type A and B</td>
<td>primary and secondary</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Ly 2326 : 5340±45 BP</td>
<td>4400-3500 BC</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
its; whether deposits are simultaneous or successive; and the presence or absence of grave goods.

Sex and age-at-death were recorded for all individuals based on Bruzek and colleagues’ recommendations. Traces of inter-personal violence were investigated on the remains from the sites that yielded the largest number of individuals: Le Crès, Saint-Antoine 2, Villeneuve-Tolosane/Cugnaux, Les Clavelles and Les Martins.

For the pits themselves, records included whether the grave was immediately filled with sediment (an in-ground burial) or if the remains were placed in an empty space, such as the one created by containers or other architectural grave elements.

4. Data analysis: from body treatment to spatial organisation

4.1 Body treatment

Two types of burial positions were noticed: a conventional one, in which the lower and upper limbs of the individual are flexed to the left or to the right side (fig. 2a) and an unconventional one. A small number of individuals were found with their lower limbs flexed on the thorax (fig. 2b), which suggests the use of bonds or of a soft container (a hide or leather bag). The bone awls or perforators that were systematically discovered in this kind of configuration indicate that a container was used, with the awls used as fasteners.

In several cases, an unconventional position results from the body being placed through a narrow opening of the pit without being followed by any other manipulation (fig. 2c). The other positions relate to bodies being thrown into the pit from above (fig. 2d) or placed against the pit walls, in prone or supine extension (fig. 2e). Of course, many other positions may result from throwing or slipping the body through a narrow opening. These two examples are only illustrations.

Overall, primary deposits contained fully articulated remains for which there was no evidence of handling after decomposition.

Two secondary burials were discovered on the site of Saint-Michel-du-Touch, along with abundant grave goods. The layout and composition of the assemblages showed that the bones had previously been disarticulated and fragmented before the isolated bones were reconstructed. The interment of
defleshed skeletonised remains is also attested by unpublished secondary cremation burials.\textsuperscript{24}

Secondary deposits of isolated bones were discovered in eleven structures. Because of the lack of detailed data, the nature of these assemblages cannot be discussed, except for the structures at Le Crès and Saint-Antoine 2.\textsuperscript{25} A femoral head from structure 3 and a cranial fragment from structure 23 at Le Crès were lying at the bottom of the pit. This pit also yielded the complete remains of two dogs. A child’s cranium from structure 8 at Le Crès, bearing no defleshing marks or cutmarks, was associated with the remains of a woman lying in a conventional position.\textsuperscript{26} Since it belongs to a child, it is rather unlikely that the cranium may be that of an ancestor, or a trophy.\textsuperscript{27} Yet, these two individuals were undoubtedly intentionally put together in the same structure. This also shows that the child’s cranium was transferred from another location, maybe for a belated burial. Structure SP 2343 at Saint-Antoine 2 illustrates specific treatment for at least 4 individuals who were probably partly dismembered and cremated.\textsuperscript{28} No charred remains or burnt soil was observed. An arrowhead embedded in one of the lumbar vertebrae of an older adolescent is the only proof of inter-personal violence in the entire sample. It seems legitimate to consider this deposit as the abandonment of skeletonised remains rather than a burial.

The sample described here consists in 97 adults, 10 adolescents, 37 children and 5 perinates. Biological data could not be determined for 17 individuals. The number of adults for whom sex could not be reliably determined (because of missing or badly preserved hip bones) is very high (n=30), hence the prevalence of one sex over the other (30 women and 27 men) cannot be discussed. Regarding primary burials, 54 adults/adolescents and 6 sub-adult individuals were in a conventional position, and 23 adults and 13 sub-adults were in a non-conventional position. For 49 individuals, age-at-death and/or burial position could not be determined.

4.2. Different types of pits

Two types of underground structures containing human remains were identified. The first type (type A, n=38) is used exclusively for a mortuary purpose. Several variations can be observed: according to archeoanthropological evidence (no bones were found outside the space originally occupied by the corpse, labile joints were persistent, etc.), a pit with dimensions adjusted to the size of the deceased, who was placed with the lower limbs flexed to one side, was backfilled just after the deposit was done, and niche burials were enclosed with vertical slabs.\textsuperscript{29}

At Saint-Michel du Touch, the monument is a unique case: it is a very large, quadrangular buried structure, lined with wood and covered by a tumulus. The second type of pit (type B, n=79) is considered as a domestic structure, since its initial function prior to the deposition of bodies or human bones was different (for instance, they could be silos for storing grain). These pits have a circular shape and their diameter varies from one to two metres. They are between 15 cm and 2 m deep, narrower than they originally were due to the erosion that affected some of the sites. Their primary use is confirmed by the presence of a sedimentary filling, and/or of typical waste deposit assemblages (of variable height) at the bottom of the pit, underneath the human deposits (52 cases). If these elements are absent, the shape of the pit (plane and volumetric) is considered domestic if it shows analogies with the pits dug for domestic purposes discovered on the same site, as it is the case at Le Crès or Saint-Antoine 2, for instance.

The site of Villeneuve Tolosane-Cugnaux produced burials associated with segments of ditches (in the filling or at the bottom). This means these ditches were also reused after they had fulfilled their initial function.

4.3. Relationship between burials and domestic occupation

Burial structures that have produced human bones are always located in lowland domestic contexts: in storage areas, beneath stone hearths, and within set-
tlements. The nature of these occupations is rarely defined. They could have been dwellings dedicated to specialised activities or ceremonial sites. Erosion of these sites probably eliminated the archaeological signatures that would have allowed the identification of constructions.\textsuperscript{30} The sites have various areas and are composed of circular pits of various shapes, some of which contained artefacts. The ones that do not present faunal or floral remains and/or circular stone surfaces have a diameter of about 1 metre. They were constructed by deliberately gathering blocks and pebbles. The chronological relationship between domestic pits and the pits containing human bones is not always easy to understand.

In 35 cases of the sample, the presence of waste material above burial level for some individuals indicates that the area was not abandoned by its inhabitants and was likely to have been a residential area, since the artefacts do not reflect any specialised activity. In the other cases, it is difficult to confirm the strict contemporaneity between the ‘domestic’ occupation and the pits that received either corpses or skeletonised bones, since neither ceramic chronotypological determination nor carbon dating provided a more precise chronological interval for these structures.

At Le Crès, groups of graves were observed within the domestic area. At Gournier and Saint-Antoine 2, these groups were located outside these areas but were close to the settlement. In the other cases, burials found in domestic pits were not grouped but scattered among the other pits.

5. Discussion and comparison

A burial is the deposit of human remains but also relates to the notion of ‘rite of passage’.\textsuperscript{31} It is associated with beliefs concerning the fear of death and the dead and the necessity, among other things, to help the deceased travel and remain in the land of the dead during the after-life. Because the transformation of the dead body is a direct consequence of different actions, the remains of the deceased are relevant for archaeothanatological studies.\textsuperscript{32}

As a French archaeothanatologist, I consider that beliefs related to mortuary practices are definitely lost to archaeologists.\textsuperscript{33} However, I assume that differences in individual body treatment and location observed in the archaeological and biological records are meaningful and that interpretations should be attempted, bearing in mind that differences between burials do not necessarily mark different social rankings.\textsuperscript{34} as it was proposed in New Archaeology in the past.\textsuperscript{35} As such, although it does not solve the problem of the meaning of the mortuary record, the use of ethnographic information helps present possible scenarios explaining body treatment.

5.1. Single graves

We have already mentioned the necessity of distinguishing funerary from non-funerary connections with the deceased. Some of the characteristics we described led to interpreting a reverential attitude towards deceased individuals found in a conventional position, flexed on their left or right side, and either buried in structures exclusively devoted to mortuary use or in domestic pits. This configuration concerns 56 adolescents and adults of both sexes and six children. The bones were not handled after decomposition. The objects associated with the deceased are scarce: graves yielded vessels, grinding tools associated with women, arrowheads associated with men, other flint objects found with both genders and tools made of faunal material. There were very few ornaments. These graves are integrated in the domestic space and are limited to a very small part of the community, from which the children are mostly excluded. At Le Crès, individuals found in domestic pits exhibiting these characteristics have a south-to-north orientation, like the people buried in regular graves.

The grave goods may give us some clue about the role played by the deceased during their life.

\textsuperscript{30} Gutherz 2008.
\textsuperscript{31} Van Gennep 1981.
\textsuperscript{32} Knüsel, Robb 2016.
\textsuperscript{33} Duday 2009.
\textsuperscript{34} Pearson 2003.
\textsuperscript{35} Binford, Binford 1968.
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In four domestic pits, single individuals in a conventional position (n=5), accompanied or not by grave goods, were associated with one or several others in a non-conventional position (n=15). The burials took place simultaneously, and sometimes the pit contained two different episodes of simultaneous deposits. In figure 3, the central individual was a woman whose position was visible only to someone standing at the edge of the pit. The other two individuals (a man and a woman) were lying under the overhang of the pit wall. There was no layer of sediment between the bodies. Although they decomposed in a void (the skeleton lay flat and bones were found outside the space originally occupied by the body), not a single body was disturbed by the others. Since the access to the pit, a silo, is very narrow, burying a new corpse should have disturbed the one(s) already in place. The absence of disturbance indicates that these interments took place simultaneously.

This pattern was observed in Gournier and Saint-Paul-Trois-Châteaux and dates from the first half of the fourth millennium B.C. These sites, which cover a large area, are not regarded as mere settlements: some areas are considered cultual and/or...
or ceremonial centers. People buried in the same space either reflect a particular social phenomenon, during which one death leads to the death of the others, or reflect particular events that led to similar manners or circumstances of death for the individuals. The first case is characterized as ‘accompanying dead’, while the second relates to small or large-scale mortality crises (epidemics, famine, collective accidents, conflict). How can we identify the first case in archaeological contexts? The principle, introduced by A. Testart, requires finding asymmetry between the dead that could reflect an existing hierarchy between them. This asymmetry can be observed at three levels: the position of the body, the spatial organisation of the bodies within the pit, and the presence or absence of grave goods. When the number of accompanying dead is high, this asymmetry is easy to identify. It is far less identifiable however when there are only a few individuals. In the case mentioned here, the individual found was in a conventional position at the centre of the pit and associated with grave goods. These three elements can be opposed to the position of the other individuals, their peripheral location and the absence of associated grave goods. Killing, as a part of the ‘accompanying dead’ practice, is very well documented in ethnological publications. The death of one individual motivated the killing of one or several others, in which case they are considered as ‘accompanying dead’. The grave is therefore intended for the individual deposited in a conventional position, with the others forming the accompanying group. This is in fact a single burial event and these ‘accompanying’ burials should therefore be considered as grave goods. A. Testart insists this type of killings meant to accompany the deceased should not be considered as sacrificial, because there is no offering involved. As the practice is conducted with the intention of affecting the supra-human world of the dead, should therefore be considered as such. The crucial point here is the fact that some individuals are killed to accompany the deceased, and this action can be discussed in terms of social organisation. Accompanying deaths are a consequence of the personal bonds of loyalty established between leaders and their followers in early complex societies. They can be found in graves of various types of people (kings, high-ranked dignitaries, chiefs of lineages) in societies defined by an economical system based on the accumulation of goods and the acquisition of social capital. According to ethnological studies, acquiring wealth enables some high-status people to assume a leading position in society. Their power may be based on their renown, their reputation, and sometimes their clients and slaves. This system is perfectly plausible for Neolithic societies, without having to imply the existence of royal or stately centralised power. It may be that low-level chieftains were followed in death by some of their slaves.

Therefore, in this society, there would have been individuals whose social status resulted in their killing when a high-ranked individual died. However, it is difficult to know if they were slaves, prisoners of war, etc. Also, because one of the central individuals was a woman, the hypothesis of the accompanying individuals being wives does not make sense.

5.3. A positive attitude towards the dead?

Some human deposits found in domestic pits display different traits: among the individuals in unconventional positions (n=29), some were placed in the grave through a narrow opening, while others were apparently thrown into the pit. However, there was no evidence of further interventions in both cases. Other individuals were intentionally placed in a supine or prone extended position. Burials were single or multiple, in which case they were either contemporary or successive. No objects were clearly associated with the dead in this group. Some individuals from the sample included here were placed in circular pits, whose function at the time of and/or after the deposit of the body appears to have been for waste disposal.

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40 Boulestin 2008
41 Testart 2004.
42 Boulestin 2008.
44 Testart 2004.
45 Shwartz 2012.
46 Testart 2005.
Multiple contemporary deposits have been observed in three structures at Le Crès (with two or three individuals) that contain six children out of seven individuals in total. No evidence of the manner of death was found on the skeletal remains. The configuration described for burials with accompanying dead has not been observed in these structures (fig. 4). As discussed in the previous section, individuals buried together were most likely related by a common manner of death such as an epidemic, famine, or conflict. The first two factors could explain why children were deposited simultaneously.

In both single or multiple burials, some individuals appear to have been refused full funerary rites. This could either reflect standard funerary rites or the abandonment of corpses. The difference between these two possibilities is important because the part played by the funerary ritual regarding the

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47 Boulestin 2008.

**Figure 4**
Multiple contemporary deposit (Le Crès, ES 7, picture: G. Loison)
deceased individual or the impact it may have had on the living is very important. Yet, it is difficult to favour one hypothesis over the other. The fact that some individuals were associated with waste disposal areas makes the second hypothesis more convincing, but this is not demonstrated for all cases.

Whatever the case, did some individuals undergo different treatments than the others? Single burials in unconventional positions were supposed to be reserved for people of low social value. This interpretation is plausible, but debates about the motivations implicated in Neolithic mortuary practices also support other interpretations. In many societies, the most repelling corpse usually results from a ‘bad death’. A ‘bad death’ is one of the commonest reasons for the omission of basic funerary rituals. The attitudes towards these individuals vary in different societies. Generally, these attitudes depend on the location, the age of the deceased and, most of all, on the circumstances surrounding death. It can be suicide, murder, a particular disease, accidents, or fatal complications during childbirth for example. A ‘bad death’ has a very important impact on the rituals of the funerary process. Ethnological observations show that, in these cases, a simplified version of funerary rituals is dominant; however, an individual can also be deprived of a grave, meaning that the corpse will often be disposed of near waste areas, or abandoned outside the settlement, without undergoing any funerary proceedings.

After a killing, the corpse can also be placed in a pit. Killing an individual may be done as a legal sanction, or for a sacrificial purpose, or because he was an enemy. The problem with killings (by strangulation, suffocation, or poisoning) is that they often leave no skeletal evidence on human bones. Hence, they must be identified through indirect data and by considering the organisation of the human deposit as a whole. On the site of Saint-Antoine 2, a structure yielded four individuals bearing violence-related injuries (arrowheads were embedded in the bones of one of them), and evidence of dismemberment and charring. This case does not fall into the category of deposits in domestic pits, since the shape of the pit unfortunately cannot be reconstructed, but it shows evidence of killings nevertheless. Moreover, many examples of killings and violence have been established for the European Neolithic period, so according to a review of ethnological papers, most ritualised killings of human beings, be they accompanying deaths or not, take place during funerals. Human sacrifice is documented in archaeological and ethnological contexts as well and this hypothesis remains a possibility even if there is no direct evidence of it here.

Ascertained successive deposits (the first buried individual being largely or even completely decomposed before the second one was deposited) were few and spaced out. They were observed in three structures that contained two or three burials separated by sediment (fig. 5). This kind of deposit was interpreted as possible members of the same lineage buried together. At the present time though, no biological data can corroborate this hypothesis. In this kind of pit, there was one individual (adult or child) in a conventional position, or in a supine position with the lower limbs flexed on the thorax who could either be the first or the last person placed there. The position of the others is unconventional, as if they were thrown into the pit or deposited through a narrow opening. The combination of the position of the remains, the location of the grave, and the presence or absence of grave goods described for the accompanying dead have also been observed, but this time it concerned all deposits found in the pit, and not the simultaneous deposits of several individuals. We can, however, reject the notion of postponed accompanying dead. It would be illogical that the death (i.e. killing) of an accompanying person take place long before or after the death of the one responsible for it. Pits contain-

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48 Van Gennep 1981.
49 Vaquer 1998.
50 Thomas 1975.
52 Faron 1963; Van der Geest 2004; Schröter 1998.
53 Adler 1982.
54 Shwartz 2012.
55 Michel, Sendra 2014.
57 Shwartz 2012.
Middle Neolithic burials in Mediterranean France: honouring or rejecting the dead?

A. Schmitt

5.4. Mortuary practices in Southern France and neighboring geographical areas

During the second half of the 5th millennium and the beginning of the 4th millennium, in the West and Centre of France, burials in domestic/circular pits are unknown. Most deceased individuals were buried in megalithic or at least monumental tombs or in coffins or regular pits grouped in cemeteries.

The phenomenon of burials in domestic/circular pit started in the south of France, around 4700 BC, and developed between circa 4400 BC and 3500 BC. The frequency of this type of burial is higher in comparison to regular graves like pit burials made exclusively for mortuary purposes, or cist burials like the ones found on the West side of the Rhône river. These slab tombs are related to the cultures from the North of Spain. In this area, until the end of the 5th millennium, many graves were discovered and reflect an extremely standardised funerary system.

Many scenarios are presented to explain the deposits and treatments in domestic pits but the different ways of dealing with the deceased observed in our corpus suggest that not only social status but other factors such as deviant behavior during the individuals’ lifetime or circumstances of death were involved.

Figure 5
Multiple consecutive deposit (Le Crès, ES 5, picture: G. Loison). Burial D in the center, burial B on the left, burial C on the top.

60 Chambon 2016.
63 Gibaja et al. 2012.
These tombs in pits or cists are found both in isolation or grouped to form necropoleis located near or far from settlements. However, only a few circular pit burials are also documented\(^{64}\) and present the configurations described in section 5.2.

A few burials in domestic pits were reported in Italy,\(^{65}\) but regular graves are more frequent. Individuals were generally placed in regular pits (more or less architecturally arranged), sometimes grouped in cemeteries, close to or inside the dwellings\(^{66}\) and sometimes even in a village’s enclosing ditch.\(^{67}\) Isolated cases suggesting the throwing of bodies in a well or a ditch are also mentioned. However, most Italian Neolithic burials, especially the ones containing disarticulated remains, are not published in enough detail to enable taphonomic reconstruction\(^{68}\) so the characterisation of diversity in body treatment is restricted.

In Greece, during the 4\(^{\text{th}}\) and 5\(^{\text{th}}\) millennia, single burials in settlements were the most common. The deceased were inhumed in a contracted position in a simple pit with an extremely small number of grave goods. In a few cases, such as those found in Thessaloniki and Makrigialos, the deceased were disposed of in primary burials in refuse pits without any particular care.\(^{69}\) No separate cemeteries or monumental structures are known outside the village\(^{70}\) and multiple burials are rare. Scattered bones within the settlement ditches and domestic pits are also mentioned and have recently been raised to attention.\(^{71}\) In these three areas, burials in circular pits are anecdotal.

To date, the origin of burials in domestic pits remains unknown.\(^{72}\) They seem to develop follow the Rhône valley and a few centuries later, they are very frequent in the East of France\(^{73}\) and quite exclusive. They are well documented, also, in Central and Eastern Europe after the end of the 5\(^{\text{th}}\) millennium but in these two areas, regular graves represent the commonest funerary treatment.\(^{74}\)

Some aspects of the mortuary practices in the South of France have affinities with Mediterranean areas, especially through the presence of primary burials in the space occupied by the living.

The close relationship between the deceased and settlements, a characteristic of the first sedentary groups,\(^{75}\) seems to be a common feature of the earliest Neolithic populations. Graves in domestic contexts are indeed very well documented for the early Neolithic period in the Near-East as well as in southern Europe, particularly in Greece. The graves are found within houses\(^{76}\) or buildings that did not necessarily have a residential function.\(^{77}\) They could also be placed between the buildings, in abandoned areas, or in areas that were being reorganised.\(^{78}\) In most cases, the dead are not spatially separated from the living. Their proximity after death may contribute to preserving and strengthening the identities of their relationship with the buildings and the people in them, be they families or community members. In Greece and Macedonia, however, there is only one occurrence of the deposit of a small group of deceased individuals inside or next to dwellings.\(^{79}\) It was suggested that they could have been deviant cases, i.e. deviations from regular burials reserved to individuals ineligible for or unworthy of standard rituals.

In the South of France, it is rare to find Early Neolithic burials in domestic settlements. Only two sites yielded a single burial in a pit probably meant for domestic occupation.\(^{80}\) The proportion of deceased individuals linked to domestic contexts increased during the Middle Neolithic, but unlike those found in the Near-East, only part of the population was interred within or next to domestic parts of houses. However, what is observed on settlement sites may not reflect the most common funerary treatments. In the South of France, even if a portion of the burials discovered in open-
air settlements are related to funerary treatments, we have a rather incomplete grasping of the ideologies governing funerary practices in these communities. Only 20% of open-air occupations produced human bones and the number of deposits is limited.\textsuperscript{81} Even when archaeological excavations extended to include a greater part of the site, the number of burials did not appear to correspond with the actual number of deceased individuals who once occupied the space. Indeed, most of the deceased were not buried in the settlements; hence, the treatment they underwent left no archaeological traces (they have either not been found yet, or the bodies were not interred). Discussions on this aspect of mortuary treatments, which are not specific to the current study, have recently been initiated\textsuperscript{82} and should be kept in mind. In this study, single burials predominantly containing adults flexed on the right or left sides with few grave goods were the most frequent, but they may be unusual cases, or so-called ‘deviant burials’. Indeed, the individuals separated from more common treatments may include people of elevated status, not only transgressors.\textsuperscript{83}

In our corpus, the reverential attitude towards male or female individuals, as well as several architectural features suggest that the deceased may have had a privileged status. This is the case for the double secondary burials of Saint-Michel-du-Touch or some niche burials at Le Crès. These graves required more human resources and technical effort for their elaboration than simple pits did (for instance transporting slab stones for several kilometres).

The most important difficulty in these contexts is to establish the chronological relationship between burials and domestic occupations, whether burials were linked to the foundation of the dwellings or not, and whether the bodies were deposited during the period of occupation of the house or after it had been abandoned. This has obvious importance for understanding the role played by the deceased. If strict contemporaneity of most burials with the domestic space cannot be proved, at least it can be discussed for 35% of the burials found in domestic pits. The filling covering the individuals looked very much like waste and this suggests that the space was used simultaneously for mortuary and domestic purposes. In these cases, the data suggests that they could be simplified funerals, or abandoned corpses. Using the pit as a waste disposal before and after having deposited a body suggests that the second hypothesis may be more likely. However, is the retention of human remains within the living space logical? As previously mentioned, most individuals were not interred within the domestic space, then it is not common for individuals to be placed there. Burying the corpse of an individual in a space belonging to the world of the living, or that will at least be considered as such one day, gives the corpse a function. If an individual was killed, depositing him/her in a specific location gives the place symbolic significance: it may mark its foundation,\textsuperscript{84} or be an act of offering to the deities or supernatural entities, for instance related to agriculture and water.\textsuperscript{85} However, this is indeed punctual treatment applied to a small number of individuals and subjects who do not necessarily belong to the community living in the settlement. Burial pits in settlements are used for a minority of people that probably had a special status. Some were honoured, some were not. In our context, however, treatments other than the act of burying may have taken place within dwellings as well. In these cases, corpses were not interred but that does not imply a lack of reverential attitudes towards the dead or categorise them as non-funerary processes.\textsuperscript{86} They simply do not leave any evidence and therefore elude archaeological analyses.

6. Conclusion

The goal of the present paper was to examine the nature of the deposits found in domestic/circular pits in archaeological sites of the South of France. We proposed an alternative to their current funerary interpretation for at least some of the cases. Addition-
ally, the close relationship between the deceased and the domestic and/or residential areas led us to discuss this particular aspect.

The presence of several deceased individuals in a space devoted to the living is known since the Early Neolithic in the Near East and many parts of Europe. Such cases may be primary or secondary burials of complete bodies or isolated bones. Since the second half of the 5th millennium, the burial of complete bodies in settlements is more frequent in eastern and southern France compared to other areas. In both regions, regular graves are very scarce and cemeteries separated from residential areas are quite unusual. Moreover, many of these burials are in domestic pits and some of the configurations observed may not be related to funerary treatments.

The interpretation of these cases is not univocal but at least we showed that in the East of France, social status is not the only parameter that can explain the diversity of body treatment. Some individuals may have been killed or denied a funeral.

Burials in circular/domestic pits seemed to develop from the second half of the 5th millennium following the Rhône valley to Central and Eastern Europe rather than heading to the Mediterranean region. The place of the South-East of France in the genesis of this tradition remains unclear. Contemporaneous cases are also mentioned in the East of France87 and one case from Bohemia is documented.88 The radiocarbon program on the sepulcros de fosa, which started several years and is still going, should also provide some information on this subject.89

87 Lefranc et al. 2010.
88 Pavel 2010.
89 Oms et al. 2016.
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