

Ages of children and burial rites

Evolution of child graves organization in French medieval cemeteries

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Abstract: Age can be seen in a biological and social dimension, because it is the determinant of numerous social behaviors which vary with time and place. In this context, children are a specific group: they are characterized by fast growth associated with the division of childhood into stages related to biological and cognitive development, sociocultural practices as social representations. However, the use of demographic age groups in the anthropological analysis (0-1, 1-4, 5-9, 10-14, 15-19 years) limits the observations, because this division is artificial and is not representative of childhood in all ancient societies. Using hagiographic and normative sources, which highlight specific ages like 7, 12 and 14-15 years, I propose to apply a new method of distribution of children in “social” age groups, adapted for the Middle Ages (0-2, 3-7, 8-12, 13-17 years).

This new approach shows the essential role of the age in burial rites and organization of child graves in medieval cemeteries, from 6th to the 12th centuries AD. Indeed, the progressive establishment of parish cemetery during this time, characterized by the presence of a church, reflects a profound change in the social system of death management. Churches polarize the dead's ground and children less than seven years-old are grouped against the church's walls, in a general movement which affects numerous churches in Gaul from the 9th and 10th centuries AD.

Keywords: children, age, cemetery, palaeodemography, Middle Ages.

Introduction

In France, the medieval cemetery, or churchyard, is essentially characterized by the presence of a church gathering the graves, unlike other contemporary burial grounds, as Merovingian cemeteries (LAUWERS, 2005; ZADORA-RIO, 2003). However, the development and the organization of the churchyard are still unknown because of the scarcity of complete excavations. Indeed, almost all cemeteries analyzed were partially excavated, usually just around the walls of the church, which does not give us a complete vision of the dead space. In this context, some groups of children are found against the walls of the church, in areas considered privileged.

In the framework of doctoral researches, the analysis of children burials in sixteen French cemeteries, seven Merovingian and nine churchyards, highlight a specific process of children's graves grouping in some part of the churchyard from the 9th century (PEREZ, 2013). The burial practices seem to evolve with the children's age, emphasizing some stages during childhood. Indeed, newborns, infants and children until 7 years old seem to have a specific place in the medieval cemetery.

Material and methods

This study focuses on six churchyards partially excavated, used between the 6th and the 15th century (Tab. 1) and five Merovingian cemeteries from the 6th to the 8th century (Tab. 2), where excavations have concerned more than 80% of the space (Fig. 1). The age estimation of children was performed by dental mineralisation (UBELAKER, 1984), length of long bones for foetus and perinatals¹ (FAZEKAS, KOSA, 1978) and observation of the ossification points (BROTHWELL, 1972). Children are considered here from birth to 17 years of age.

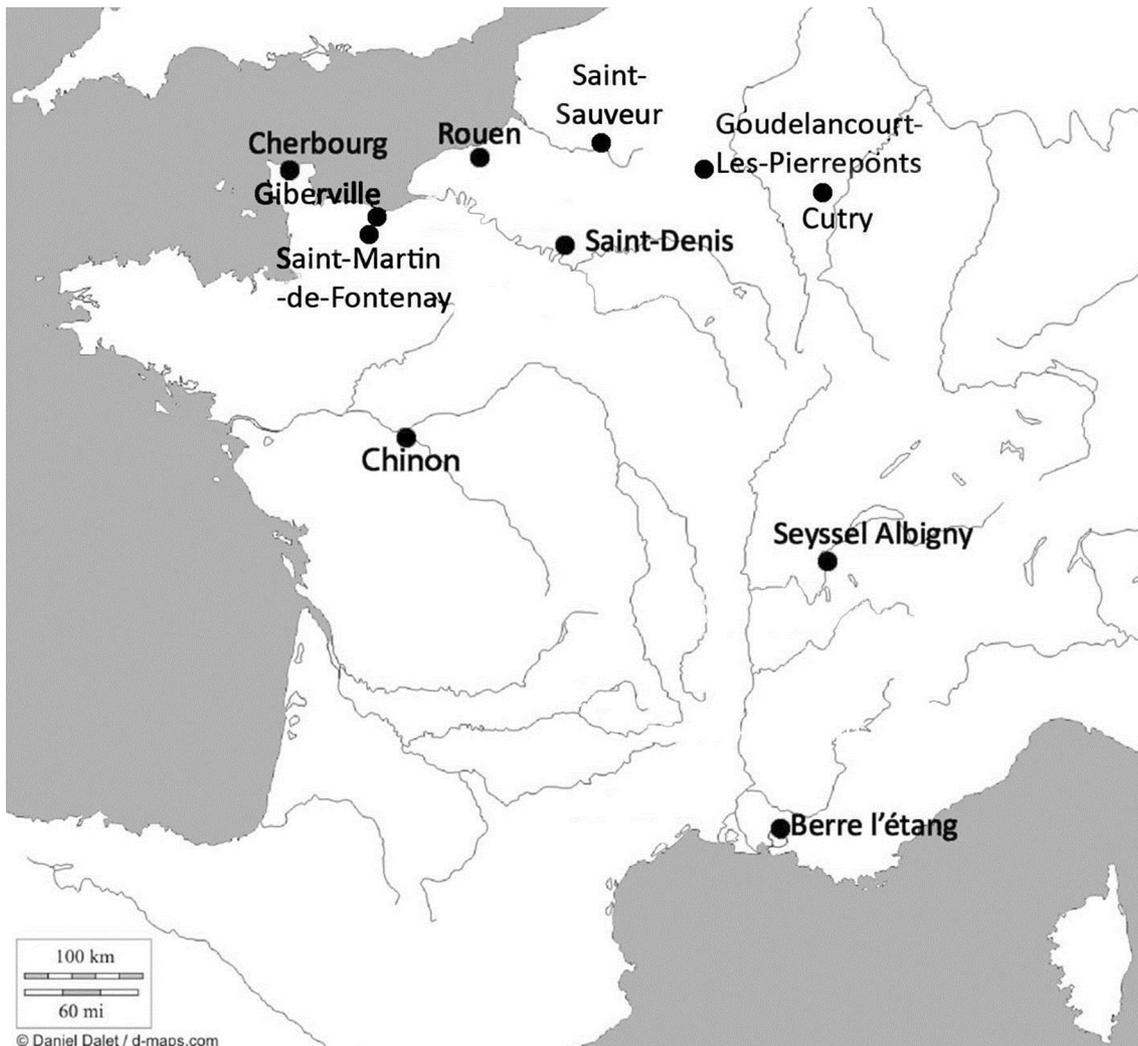


Fig. 1 – Situation of the sites studied

¹ In archaeology, perinatals are children from birth to 2 months.

Churchyards	Centuries	N total	N children
Saint-Denis	6 th -10 th	464	90
Notre-Dame de Rouen	11 th -12 th	630	249
Seyssel-Albigny	6 th -11 th	119	50
Notre-Dame de Cherbourg	7 th -10 th	195	82
Saint-Estève-le-Pont	6 th -11 th	270	131
Saint-Mexme de Chinon	4 th -15 th	411	247

Tab. 1 – Number of children in the churchyards

Merovingian cemeteries	Centuries	N total	N children
Giberville "Le Matray"	6 th -	375	43
7 th Goudelancourt-lès-Pierrepont	6 th -	429	69
8 th Cutry	6 th -7 th	284	48
Saint-Sauveur	6 th -8 th	436	105
Saint-Martin-de-Fontenay	6 th -7 th	44	186

Tab. 2 – Number of children in the Merovingian cemeteries

Age as biocultural data

In France, the usual use of demographic age groups² to represent child mortality limits the observations. They are especially adapted to contemporary demography, where age is an accurate data, measuring time between two distinct demographic events, such as between birth and marriage. Conversely, age used by anthropologists is a probable data, estimated from a biological indicator and subject to variability. Then, these age groups are artificial and not representative of children lifecycle in all ancient societies. Indeed, medieval written sources reflect the changing attitude of adults towards children by gender and age (LETT, 1997; ORME, 2003). At the end of the Middle Ages, childhood is divided into stages according to a tradition of theorizing lifecycle which came from Antiquity (ALEXANDRE-BIDON, 2003). The ages of 7, 12 and 14 years are frequently cited in the texts and mark important and symbolic stages during childhood. Therefore, as age is a *biological* and *social* data, the age distribution should be representative of the society studied. In this context, I propose to apply a new method of distribution of children in social age groups adapted for the Middle Ages (Perez, 2013: S. 34; SÉGUY, BUCHET, 2013: S. 21–23):

- 0-1 year: it measures the infant mortality, the highest in preindustrial populations.
- 1-2 years: it highlights the risk of infancy (illness, accident, weaning).
- 3-7 years: 7 years, « age of reason », is regularly underlined as a significant stage of childhood in medieval society. Children under 7 years are known to be irresponsible, fragile and dependent on adults (LETT, 1997: S. 101; ORME, 2003).

² 0-1, 1-4, 5-9, 10-14, 15-19 years.

- 8-12 years: from 8 years, the child comes in a new stage of his life, closer to puberty and adulthood.
- 13-17 years: according to law codes (6th-8th centuries), the majority was between 12 and 15 years. They share the same rights, risks and responsibilities than adults.

When the age estimated is associated with an important margin of error the subadult could be between two age groups, so there are two possibilities:

- To an *individual age*, for example to link a subadult with his grave-goods, we use a probability calculator to choose an age group: *a child of 3 years +/- 12 months* (UBELAKER, 1984) = 0,841(1) in 3-7 years, he has a high probability (84%) of being aged from 3 to 7 years.
- To a *collective age*, to present a distribution of age at death in age groups and calculate mortality rate, all the probabilities of the sample are added by age groups to give a probable age distribution: *a child of 3 years +/- 12 months* = 0,841 in 3-7 years and 0,159 in 1-2 years. Then, we have to take into account the unequal duration of the first age groups (0-1/1-2 years) in the age distribution (SÉGUY, BUCHET, 2013).

This example shows many differences between the probabilistic distribution by age and a distribution in demographic age group for the same sample, here Notre-Dame of Rouen in the 11th-12th centuries (Fig. 2). With the probabilistic age distribution, some stages during childhood can be highlight, linked to the importance of specific ages during the Middle Ages. Here, we note the importance of the infants, up to 12 months, which compose 30% of the subadult population. However, in this paper I discuss children organisation using individual age.

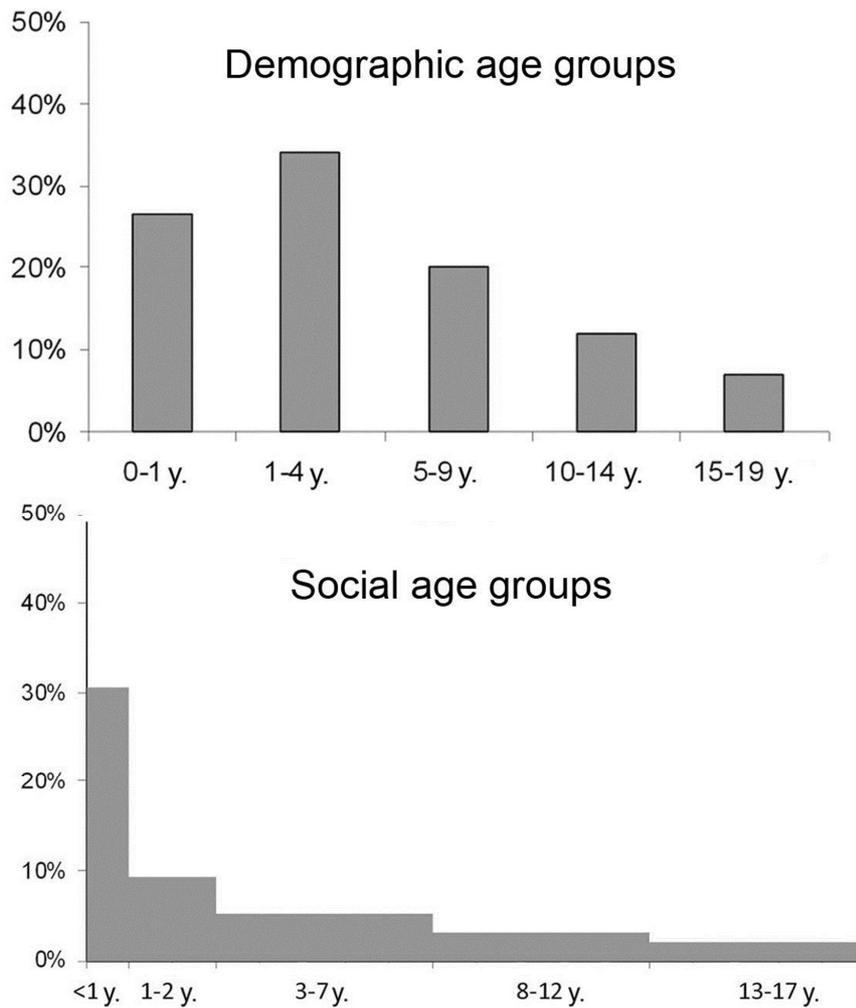


Fig. 2 – Comparison between two methods of age distribution of children in the sample of Notre-Dame of Rouen (N = 184): in demographic age groups and in social age groups.

Results and discussion

Increasing of the children

There are 19 to 60% of children in the churchyards (Fig. 3) against 11% to 29% in Merovingian cemeteries (Fig. 4). Two tendencies in the organization of children’s burials are noticed, according to presence or absence of a church. In the last case, newborns and infants burials are underrepresented owing to multiple factors, like poor bone conservation or burial out of the cemetery (BUCKBERRY, 2000; LEWIS, 2007). On the contrary, the presence of a church impact the graves’ organization, and children up to 2 years old are more numerous (GILCHRIST, 2012).

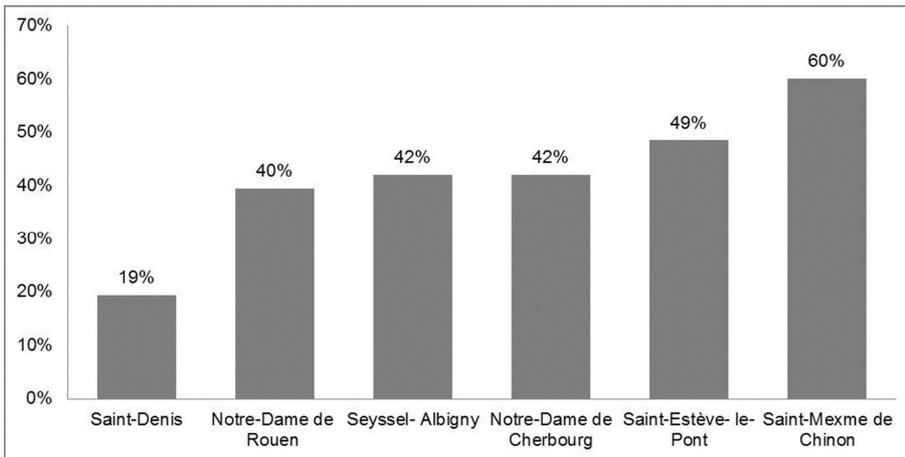


Fig. 3 –% Children in the churchyards.

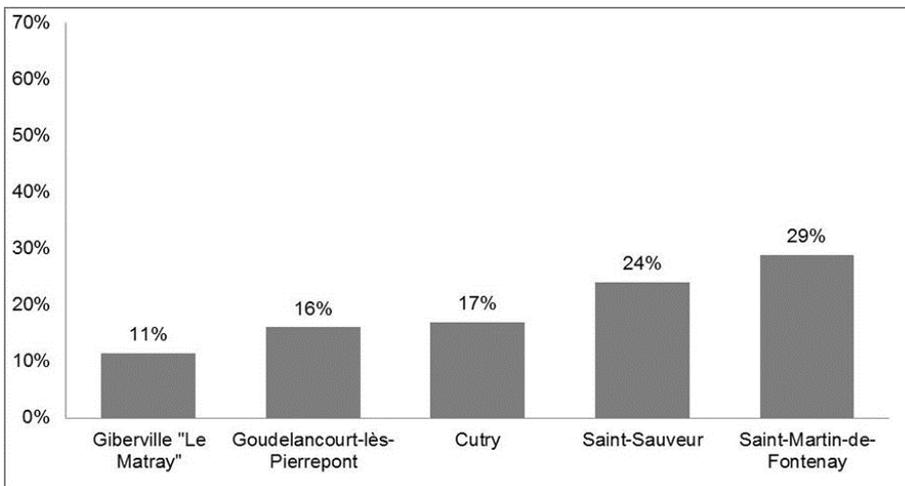


Fig. 4 – % Children in the Merovingian cemeteries

Children's graves organisation

Nevertheless, these frequencies just reflect a global tendency on account of the long period of use of the cemeteries. Indeed, the analysis of the churchyard reveals a significant variation of the children frequency, from 13% to 53% up to the twelfth century (Fig. 5). From the 6th to the 8th century, few children have been found in or around the churches, like Saint-Denis, Notre-Dame of Cherbourg (13-17%) or Saint-Mexme of Chinon until 12th century (29%). People buried in and around these churches could be considered privileged: they are mostly adult males, buried in sarcophagi of stone or plaster occasionally with grave-goods. They constitute probably secular or ecclesiastical elite.

From the 9th century the children increased³, especially the 0-1 and 0-7 years old, accompanied by a

³ All the differences cited are statistically significant at 5% of error (see Perez 2013).

change of funerary practices or architectural modifications of some churches (Fig. 6). Indeed, some clusters of children less than 7 years old are found in specific areas: in the choir, against the walls or under the parvis of the churches.

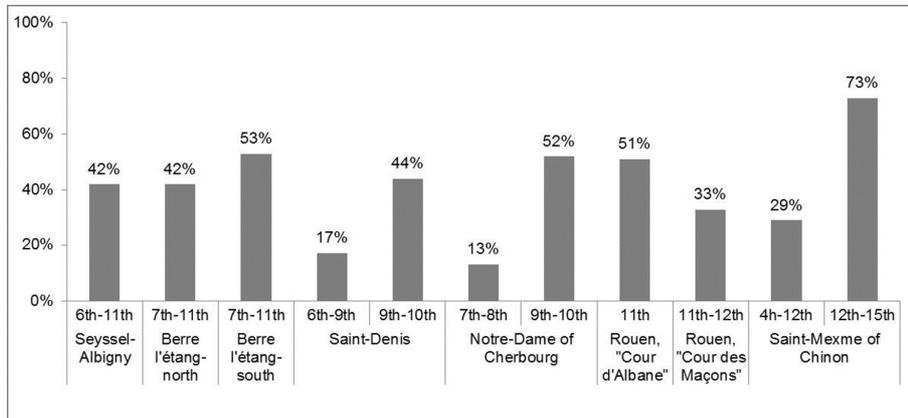


Fig. 5 – Children frequencies (on the population) by period in the churchyards

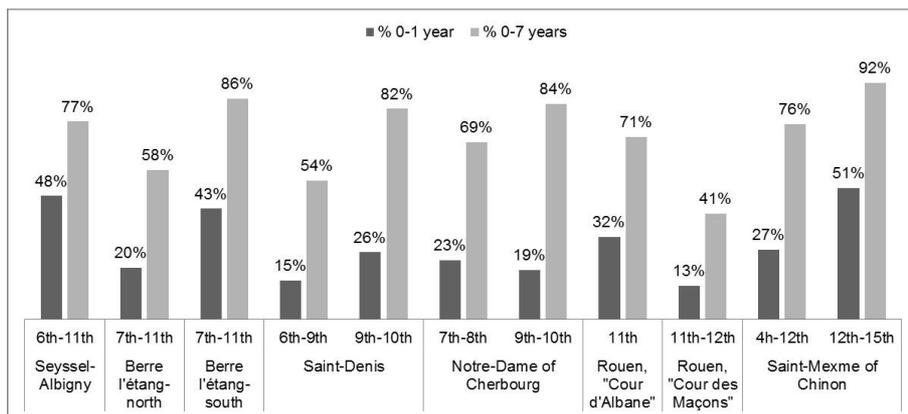


Fig. 6 – Frequencies of children less than 1 year and 7 years (on the children), by periods

In Saint-Denis, increasing of children succeeds to the extensions of a little church, Saint-Barthélemy, dating from the late 9th century by the ceramic, and it corresponds to the use of wooden coffins instead of sarcophagi (GALLIEN, 1992). During 9th and 10th centuries, children are 80% around Saint-Barthélemy and the ones under 7 years are 82% in the large cemetery. At Berre l'Etang during the 8th-9th centuries children until 7 years are more common in the southern area around the Saint-Estève church (Fig. 7). Their graves are in stone or tiles coffins and replace the sarcophagi of the 6th-7th centuries (THOMANN, 2004). In Saint-Mexme of Chinon, children increased after the reconstruction of the north wall of the church in the 12th century, where a special area is implemented for children (Fig. 8) (LORANS u. a., 2006). In Seyssel-Albigny the southern part of the choir is used only by children from 2 months to 2 years (BIZOT, SERRALONGUE, 1988). Then, only perinatals and children under 1 year are buried on 3 meters at the south of the apse; adults are buried further (Fig. 9).

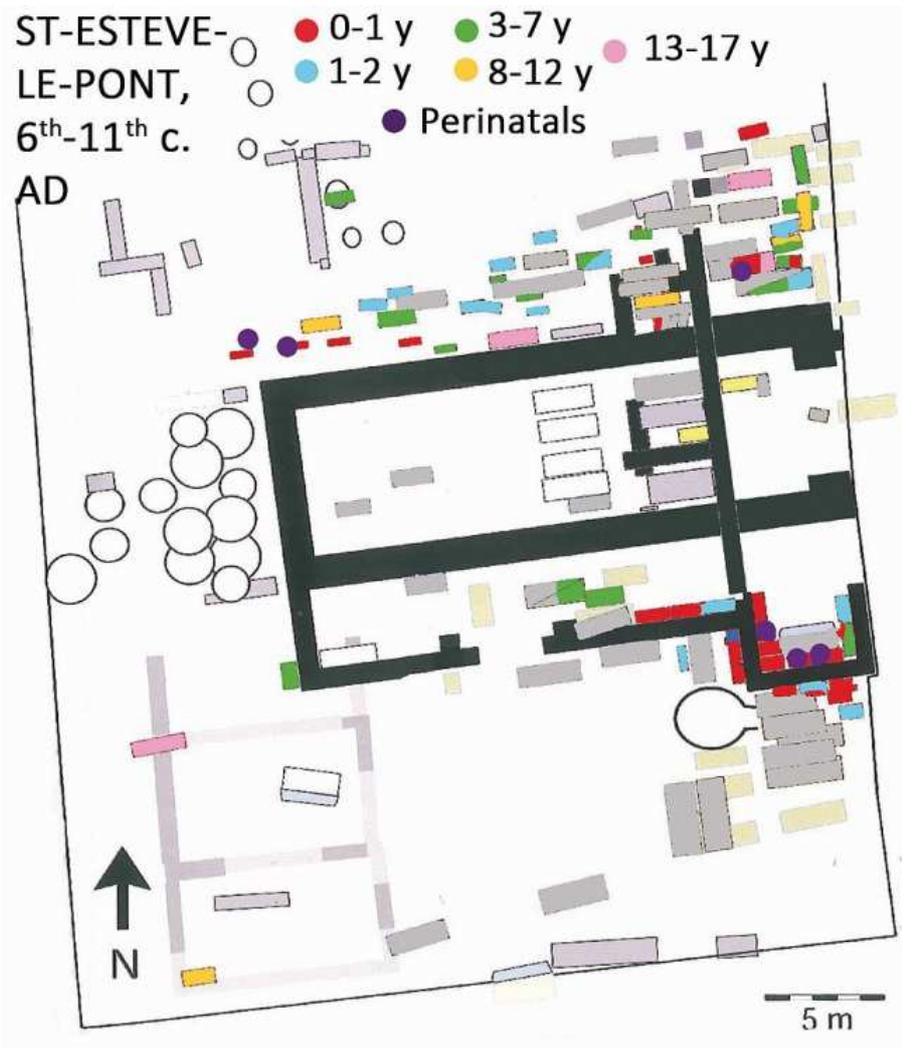


Fig. 7 – Children’s organization by age in Berre l’étang (south) , around the Saint-Estève church (from THOMANN 2004, modified by PEREZ 2013)

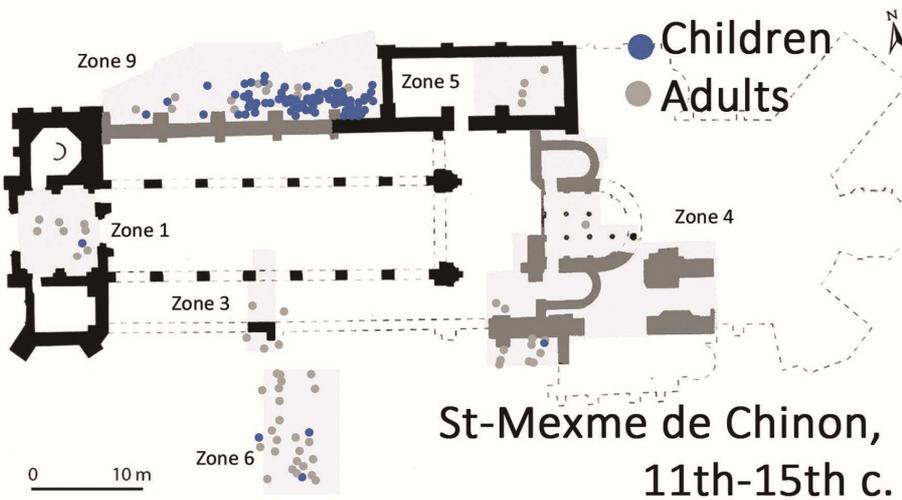


Fig. 8 – Children organization in Saint-Mexme of Chinon, from the 11th to the 15th century (from LORANS et al. 2006, modified by PEREZ 2013)

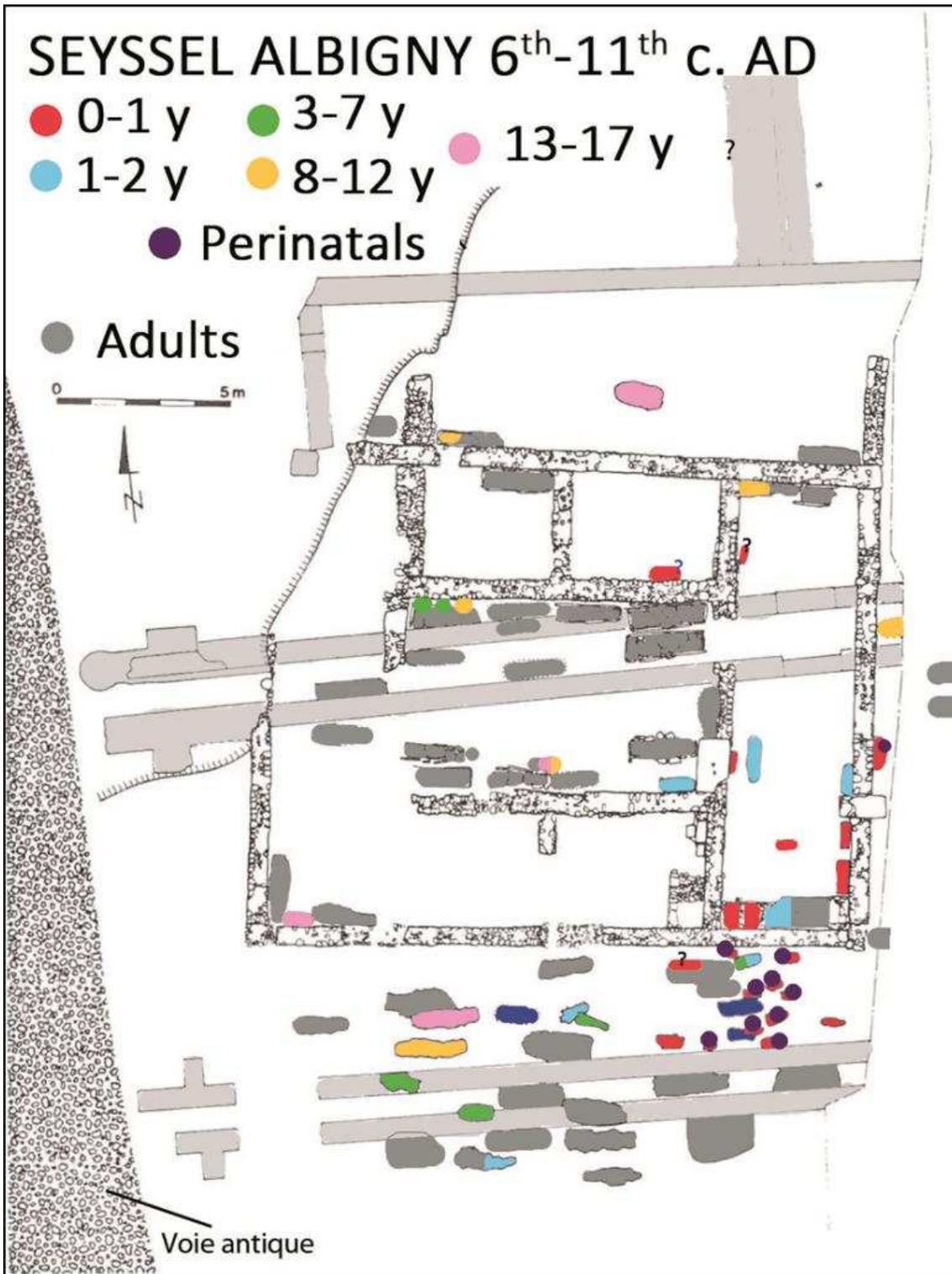


Fig. 9 – Children's organisation by age in Seysssel Albigny (from BIZOT & SERRALONGUE 1988, modified by PEREZ 2013)

Thus, in the series studied only children until 7 years old are grouped in specific areas of the cemetery. In the case of incomplete excavations, the high frequencies of children under 1 and 7 years in these sites do not reflect the mortality, but are linked to the discover of specific burial areas. Then, the cemetery seems to be organized according to the church, which polarizes the graves of children closer to the walls. These clusters by age demonstrate a segmentation of the cemetery. So, other factors can play in the funeral

organization, such as gender, social status or function, many criteria which constitute social identity of the individuals.

Rites of passage and social integration

Baptism as social integration

The use of social age groups shows a rupture in the funerary treatment of children around the age of 7 years. This grouping process following a restoration of the church, increases from the Carolingian Period and characterize more recent churches too (Notre-Dame of Rouen 11th, Saint-Mexme of Chinon from the 12th). Then, the burial of young children against the walls of the church is sometimes called "under the eaves" or *sub stillicidio* and linked to a belief in baptism by the waters flowing from the roof (ARIÈS, 1962; ORME, 2003:

S. 120). This expression is found in some hagiographical texts about adults, princes and bishops (TREFFORT, 1997: S. 106). The specialization of this area for unbaptized children seems appear much later, in the folklore of the 18-19th centuries and therefore not applicable to the medieval reality⁴.

Gave in the first years of life, the baptism is the most important ritual of social integration in the Middle Ages. Many clerical discourses focused on children who died unbaptized from Early Middle Ages, and increased from the 12th-13th centuries. The unbaptized child is called *pagan* (*paganus*) and he hasn't right to the Salvation. In this context, it would be tempting to conclude at the exclusion of unbaptized children of the cemetery and to consider that only children baptized gathered closer to the church, in specific sectors. However, nothing is said in the Early Middle Ages about the burial of unbaptized child and if he is excluded of the cemetery from this period. Then, archaeological observations show that fetus and perinatal burials increased around the churches from the 11th-12th centuries, like in Saint-Mexme of Chinon or in Notre-Dame of Rouen. These observations nuance the idea of a systematic exclusion of unbaptized children of the consecrated cemetery: if doubt exists as to perinatal, less than 2 months, fetuses are stillborn and therefore were not baptized.

Then, in the Early Middle Ages the funerary practices of unbaptized child are unknown. There is not explicitly mentions that burial in the cemetery was denied. Even damned, he could be buried there, but without the funerals and liturgical rites. Moreover, before the development of the consecration rite of the cemetery, the idea of exclusion of non-Christians does not have specific meaning. It is only with the slow progress of this consecration rite from the 12th-13th centuries that the first mentions of exclusion of unbaptized children appeared (LAUWERS, 2005). So, the repetition of the prohibition to bury the unbaptized child in the consecrated space suggests that the priest may authorize the burial, for friendship, fear or deference (LETT 1997, p.211 note 6). It implies that unbaptized children could be buried in the cemetery during Middle Ages.

⁴ Some respite sanctuaries have a space called *sub stillicidio* (Gélis, 1989).

Seven years: a sociocultural stage in medieval childhood

The age of 7 years seems to be a special stage in the funerary process. Even if this analysis was conducted using age estimations based on biological evolution and not civil ages, the rupture between 3-7 years and 8-12 years is clear enough to be highlighted. Seven years is frequently mentioned in medieval normative and hagiographic texts. In the medieval canon law of the 12th and 15th centuries, seven years is the minimum age to engagement or entry in the secular clergy. The commitment was confirmed at puberty between 12 and 14 years, according to the child's sex (METZ, 1985). However, most of canonists of the 12th and 15th centuries resume the Roman law to divide childhood: from birth to 7 years and then to the majority, set at 14 years for boys and 12 for girls. These stages at the ages of 7, 12 and 14 years refers directly to the Roman concept of division of life (METZ, 1985: S. 19).

Conclusion

The use of a new method of children distribution in social age groups highlights different stages in their funerary treatment. The age of 7 years, more than 1 or 5 years, appears to be a break, resulting in the gathering of these children in specific areas around the church. The cemetery seems to be characterized by a strong segmentation according to biological and social factors, such as age, gender or social status. Therefore, social identity participates in the graves' organization in the cemetery, involving a hierarchy of space with the church at the center.

The early medieval cemetery reflects the image of a stratified society. First accessible to all, it is then restricted only to Christians from the 12th to the 15th centuries. In this context, the question of the representativeness of the skeleton sample from incomplete excavations is asked. Indeed, age and sex variations in the populations studied do not necessarily refer to changes in the living population, and therefore cannot be interpreted in terms of mortality or migration. They reflect only the graves' organization in some areas of the cemetery. Finally, by their specific place in the cemetery, children participate fully in the movement of polarization of the dead around the churches in the first centuries of the Middle Ages.

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