

Slavery, 6000 years ago¹

by

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Summary

In the absence of written sources, reconstructing the social organisation of the first farming communities on the old continent poses a difficult but fundamental problem. We show here how a precise analysis of certain funerary practices can help us to achieve this reconstruction. Between 4500 and 3500 BC, a particular form of burial is encountered from southern France to Slovakia, involving the deposition of several bodies in circular pits. It is argued here that such practices correspond to the funeral of one of the dead and that the others were killed in order to accompany this person. Ethno-history teaches us that the custom of followers or dependents following their master into the grave was widespread. For the Neolithic, the deduction is that these people were slaves.

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One of the major problems in prehistoric archaeology is the making of inferences about the social structure of ancient societies for which there are no written sources. Archaeologists have long wondered about the archaeological criteria for identifying slavery. The authors of this article think that slavery can be identified with a fair degree of probability in certain favourable contexts such as multiple burials (where several bodies were deposited at the same time), as in certain European Neolithic cultures.

In Western Europe, the Neolithic way of life (farming, pottery and sedentary village life) was introduced during the 6th millennium BC. Around 4500 BC, the Chasséen culture emerged between the Seine basin and the Mediterranean coast. It would seem that this period was marked by profound changes of both an economic and social nature. A more efficient subsistence system made it possible to colonise regions that had until

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then remained on the periphery since the first wave of neolithisation, and this led to a spectacular increase in the number of inhabitants. At the same time, a new form of social organisation emerged marked by, amongst other things, a greater degree of social differentiation. This trend towards a greater degree of hierarchy led to the development of new funerary practices. In the southern half of the area concerned, these new practices are represented by stone cists covered by a burial mound and destined for the elite. Elsewhere, they take the form of multiple burials in pits, these are more unusual but also better known and far more widespread: it is these that we shall be looking at in this article.

The multiple burials are a small subset within a larger set of burials which have the following characteristics in common - 1. They occur within settlement sites 2. The pits chosen for burials are cylindrical, and some of these pits may be disused food storage features (silos). Most of the burials in pits contain only one individual. The burials with which we are concerned here contain several skeletons which appear to have been deposited in the pit at the same time. This simultaneity has been well established in all the cases under discussion, through painstaking excavation and observation of important phenomena such as the absence of any significant separation between skeletons, and maintained labile articulations (whereas a second body deposited several weeks later would have come into contact with the first and would inevitably have disturbed it in the absence of a coffin). With a few notable exceptions, specialists have long refused to consider such deposits of human remains as having a funerary function. The recurring presence of bodies apparently deposited haphazardly in the pits tended to confirm this hypothesis. These deposits were sometimes considered to represent the practice of discarding individuals who were deemed unworthy of the standard treatment, or sometimes, simply, as a final and not particularly significant step, in a series of steps which cannot now be reconstructed, given the absence of evidence, other than the remains themselves.

Ideas on this subject only started to change slightly in the 1980's in the Rhone valley thanks to work by Alain Beeching. The two Chasséen sites of Saint-Paul-Trois-Châteaux 'Les Moulins' and of Montélimar 'Le Gournier' (Drôme, France) yielded complexes of circular pits certain of which contained human remains, with multiple burials on both sites. For the 'Les Moulins' site, we will consider pit no. 69, a circular feature containing three articulated female skeletons, as well as a child represented by just one bone (fig. 1). The bodies were deposited at the same time and we can clearly observe the presence of a central individual, this being the only one where most of the skeleton is visible from the top edge edge of the pit. A vase is placed next to the head of this individual. The other two individuals seem pressed up against the side of the pit and are in haphazard positions, (fig. 1), the two bodies partially overlapping. Only the contracted position of the central individual corresponds to what is found in conventional funerary features of the few existing Chasséen cemeteries. The other two individuals were clearly not placed with the same care as the central individual. The two expressions of asymmetry: central v peripheral positioning of the skeletons, and presence v absence of grave goods, plus the contracted position of the central figure, reinforces the impression of asymmetry, which Alain Beeching³ highlights in his description of a "body in a central position" accompanied by "discarded bodies".

³ Beeching 2003; Crubezy 1991; Beeching and Crubezy 1998.



Fig. 1 Saint-Paul-Trois-Châteaux Les Moulins, pit no. 69 (photograph Beeching/Cordier).

The Le Gournier site at Montélimar yielded nineteen single burials, as well as two multiple burials in circular pits. One of the burials, which had unfortunately been disturbed by the digging of a trench, nevertheless showed an individual in a central position. In another, a male adult in a contracted position, clearly deposited first, was accompanied by the bodies of three children. Generally speaking, multiple Chasséen graves in the Rhône Valley held between three and nine individuals. In the cases described, the main difference is between the treatment of the central individual and the others, with a greater or lesser degree of asymmetry depending on the context.

Comparable human remains had long been identified in a certain number of central European late Neolithic cultures. However, for the reasons described above in relation to the Chasséen culture, they had not attracted any great interest. A conference held in Sens under the direction of Luc Baray and Bruno Boulestin⁴, where evidence from half a dozen countries was compared, led to the conclusion that in reality, we were dealing with just one category of remains. Far from being limited to the south of France, burials in circular pits occur over a large crescent shaped area connecting Languedoc to Slovakia and there are in fact two major reasons for thinking that this way of treating the dead was standard practice throughout the region. First of all, its chronological homogeneity, since all of the remains date from between 4500 and 3500 BC. Also, the fact that all the regions concerned seem to have been affected, more or less directly, by a movement spreading from west to east. This movement started in the southern Paris basin with the Michelsberg culture, which emerged through a process of cultural integration between the expanding Chasséen culture and the local substratum, before occupying most of the Rhine basin. Unlike the Chasséen culture, which had a variety of funerary practices, graves in circular pits were practically all there was. The spread towards the east and then the south inevitably influenced other culture groups, such as the Münchshöfen culture in Bavaria and Munzingen in southern Alsace. This area has yielded a large number of multiple burials in circular pits. The largest, attributed to the Michelsberg culture, contained the remains of at least eighteen individuals.

With the settlement recently excavated under the direction of Muriel Zehner at Didenheim (France, Haut-Rhin), the Munzingen culture has provided us with a particularly interesting site in relation to the question under consideration. Three circular pits dating from the second quarter of the 4th millenium produced sets of human

⁴ Baray and Boulestin, *in press*.

skeletons which, according to the models identified in the Chasséen sites of the Rhône valley, consisted of a central individual in contracted position and a varying number of individuals apparently deposited haphazardly. The most spectacular burial (fig. 2) contained the remains of four individuals. Three of them were piled one on top of the other, with an adult in a contracted position (no. 2) resting upon an adult apparently deposited haphazardly (no. 3), and below the skeleton of a child (no. 1). Beside this pile were the disarticulated remains of a second child (no. 4) whose body was already decomposed at the time of burial. Close to the southern edge of the pit, in front of the face of individual no. 2, was a small beaker made of deer antler and a large fragment of a ceramic vessel. The visible contrast in the positions and in the way the grave goods are arranged provides similar evidence to the Rhone valley burials.

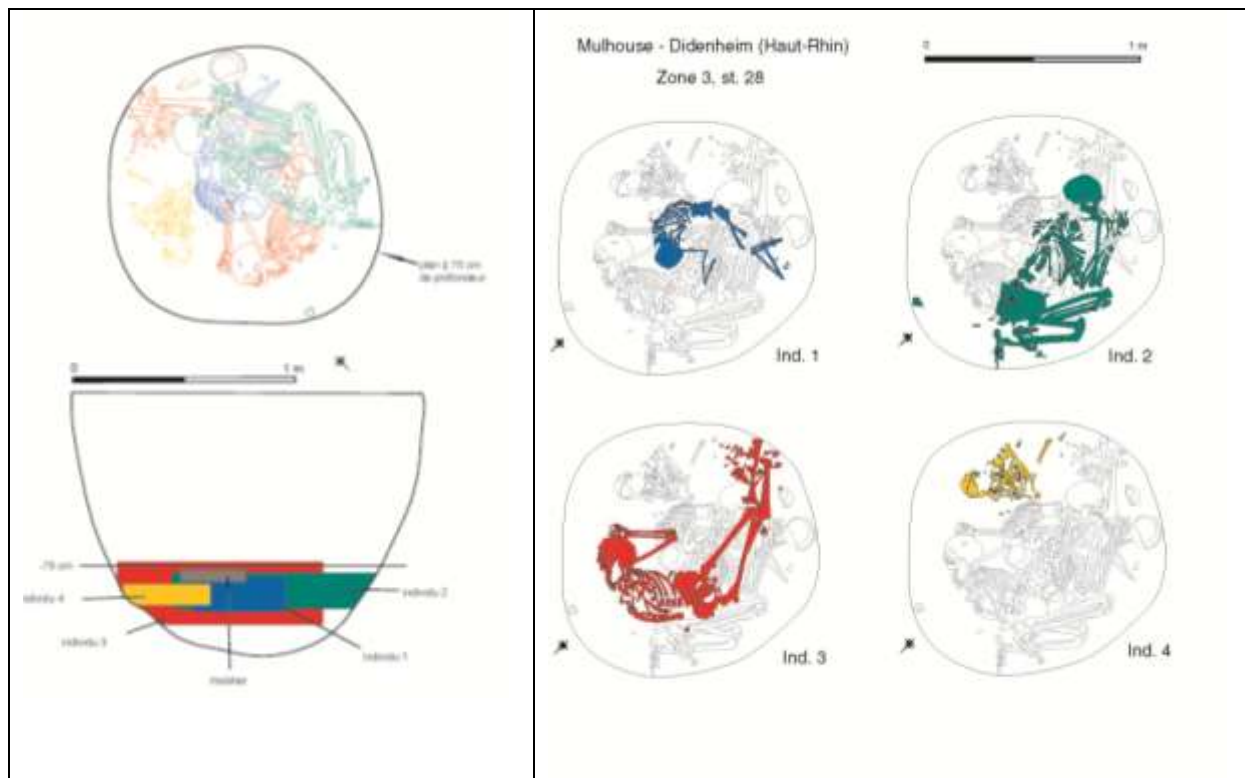


Fig. 2. Mulhouse, Didenheim, structure 28. Plan of human remains, cross-section and sequential analysis of the way in which the bodies were deposited in the tombs (from *Antéa archéologie*).

All these cases correspond to the same model and can be summarised thus-

1. The remains are in *circular pits*,
2. Several bodies were buried *simultaneously*,
3. There is always *one body that stands out* from the others because it is the only one that is contracted and lying on its side (lateral decubitus), whereas all the others are in haphazard positions; the idea that one body stands out can be considered to be reinforced by its central position in the middle of the pit, and by its proximity to the grave goods.

What can be inferred from these remains in circular pits? First of all, the recurrence of the phenomena reveals a consistent and widespread practice from the western Mediterranean to eastern Central Europe, thus invalidating anecdotal evidence and demonstrating that we are dealing with funerary rites that were standard throughout the geographic area under discussion. The presence of several bodies in the pits, and the fact that it has been shown that they were buried at the same time or within a relatively short

lapse of time following death⁵, indicates either that the people died at the same time or within a short lapse of time. In a recent article⁶, Bruno Boulestin showed that three or more multiple deaths could not be a coincidence, or be unrelated to one another: they are inevitably linked. He also showed that this link could only be one of two types: either the deaths had the same cause, or, one of the dead brought about the death of the others. The first case corresponds to a crisis involving multiple deaths, possibly due to armed conflict, famine, epidemics, or even some kind of collective accident or natural catastrophe. In the second case, the death of one important person brought about the execution of certain of their dependents, in order to accompany the personage in death and into the grave. This was the custom of “accompanying the dead”, that Alain Testart showed to have once been widely practised by past populations on every continent⁷. The archaeological distinction between these two possibilities is based mainly on the asymmetry of the bodies, an asymmetry that takes three forms: the spatial organisation within the grave, body position and grave goods. In cases where there is asymmetry, this indicates a hierarchical relationship between the deceased reflecting the relationships between these same individuals when alive, and can therefore be interpreted as accompaniment in death. *A contrario*, there is no reason why there should be any symmetry in the case of people buried following a simple crisis involving several deaths. In the case we are considering here, the fact that one body stands out in relation to all the others, a fact that we have highlighted, proves beyond doubt the existence of the practice of accompanying the dead.

This explanatory hypothesis is therefore the only one that takes into account all the data related to Chasséen, Michelsberg, Münchshöfen and Munzingen cultures. Single bodies in pits can be interpreted as simple, ordinary burials. Multiple burials in pits indicate an ordinary funeral rite just for the individual in contracted position, whilst the others were killed in order to accompany the first. It can be noted that in all these cultures, the artefacts in the tomb are particularly meagre: at most a little pottery, but no tools or weapons, and nothing that could be interpreted as a sign of wealth. It is as if the only kind of wealth that can be taken into the after life were these men and women accompanying the person into the grave.

After a systematic review of ethnographic and historiographic data, relating to the practice of accompanying the dead, Alain Testart⁸ concluded that the companions in death were always dependents. They were:

- wives who accompanied their deceased husbands, as in the *sati* tradition in India,
- or royal servants accompanying their king, as was the custom in China during Upper Antiquity (Shang and Zhou dynasties) and probably in the “royal” tombs of Ur in Mesopotamia,
- or subjects of a theocratic kingdom such as that of the Natchez, an Amerindian people of Louisiana where it was the custom to commit suicide on the death of a sun-god assimilated to a god,
- or they were companions of war who had taken a vow not to outlive their chief should he be killed in combat, according to a custom of the ancient Germans as described by Tacitus,

⁵ The preservation of the most labile connections indicates that the bodies were buried within a few days to a few weeks at most after death. Also, that they were deposited more or less at the same time, for the reasons explained above.

⁶ Boulestin 2008.

⁷ Testart 2004.

⁸ Testart 201 *sq.*

- or slaves, killed in order to follow their master, for which there is well documented evidence relating to Amerindians on the Northwest Coast of North America or sub-Saharan Africa, even outside the great African kingdoms.

As far as the Chasséen, Michelsberg, Münchshöfen and Munzingen cultures are concerned, the custom of *sati* has to be excluded because the main person for whom it is thought the others were killed has been shown in at least one case to be a woman, (the Les Moulins site). The graves we have been discussing in no way resemble royal tombs, since they are not luxurious and there are too many of them. The hypothesis of war companions seems unlikely because of the presence of children, and also because of the general absence of signs of violence, weapons, or warlike behaviour. The only possible hypothesis is therefore one of slavery, for which we believe there are visible traces in these burials of the European Neolithic, dating from 4500 to 3500 BC, which is roughly 6000 years ago.

This conclusion may come as a surprise to those who would associate slavery only with the slave trade of sub-Saharan Africa or with slavery in ancient Rome and Greece. Over the last thirty years or so, a large body of work in cultural anthropology has highlighted the importance of slavery in smaller societies, with neither king and nor State, in North America and sub-Saharan Africa⁹. Simple village or family chiefs had a few slaves who were mostly former war captives, with no rights whatsoever and who worked for a master. As these slaves had no rights, they could be killed and a master could insist they be killed to follow him into the grave. This custom was observed by numerous eye witnesses in different regions of the world. This was most particularly the case of several tribes in the Ivory Coast where, as late as 1895, one or more slaves were killed and their corpses served as a base on which the body of the master was then placed¹⁰. The whole group of bodies was then buried in a deep grave somewhat similar to those of the European Neolithic cultures discussed here.

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⁹ Miers and Kopytoff 1977; Patterson 1982; Donald 1997; Testart 2001.

¹⁰ Memel-Fote (1988: 587-600).

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