

Animals in funerary space: Ethnic, social and functional aspects in Roman Switzerland

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ABSTRACT

Animal bones from funeral contexts of two sites in Roman Switzerland, the legionary camp Vindonissa and the capital city Aventicum, are compared. Burning of meat offerings existed in both sites, but the burial of complete or partial animals is only documented in Aventicum. Apparently the method of deposition was dependent on the social and ethnic affiliation of the deceased, as well as the function of the settlement to which the graves belonged.

KEY WORDS

Animal bones,
Roman,
burial,
deposit,
offering.

RÉSUMÉ

Les animaux dans l'espace funéraire : aspects sociaux et fonctionnels en Suisse romaine.

Cette contribution est consacrée à l'étude de restes osseux d'animaux issus de contextes funéraires des sites du camp de légionnaires de Vindonissa et de la cité d'Avenches (Aventicum) en Suisse. La crémation d'offrandes de pièces de viande est attestée dans les deux sites alors que celle de carcasses animales, complètes ou partielles, n'est attestée que sur le site d'Avenches. Les pratiques de dépôt semblent largement influencées par le rang social et l'origine ethnique du défunt ainsi que par la fonction du site sur lequel sont installées les sépultures.

MOTS CLÉS

Ossements animaux,
période romaine,
sépultures,
dépôts,
offrandes.

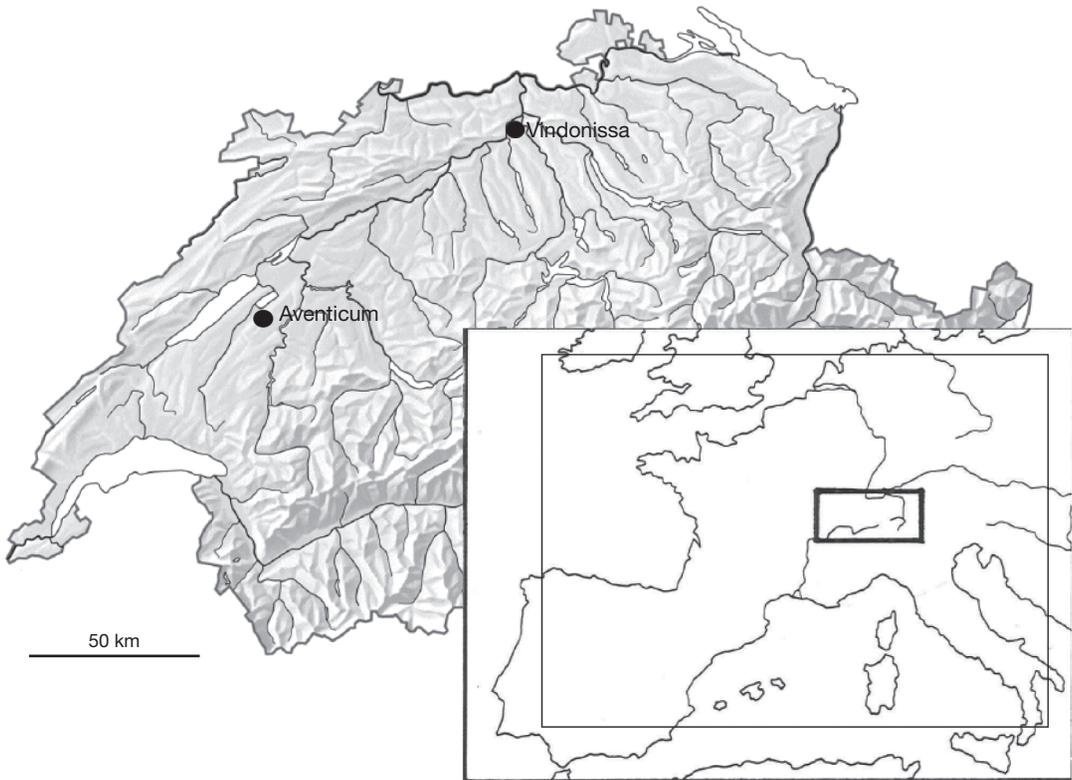


FIG. 1. — Aventicum (Avenches VD) and Vindonissa (Windisch AG) in Roman Switzerland.

INTRODUCTION

When Emperor Augustus died in 14AD his corpse was buried in the typical manner of the Upper Class at the time. He was burnt on a pyre in a location outside of the city, called ‘Campus Martius’, ‘the Field of Mars’. The cremated bones would have been collected and brought to the nearby mausoleum. In 410, the Goths despoiled the mausoleum and scattered the ashes, thus the evidence from these remains was lost and it impossible to determine whether animals, or parts of animals, were also buried with the corpse. This was an Italian custom, as shown by the bone analysis of other cremation graves, for instance Pompeii (Van Andringa & Lepetz 2008).

Late Iron Age Celts north of the Alps usually interred their dead in inhumation graves, though cremation burials are known in the late Iron Age

due to Roman influence (e.g. by the Helvetii in: Ruffieux *et al.* 2006). Cremation was practically the only mode of burial during the first phase of Roman occupation in the first and second century AD. The archaeological evidence for such burials consists of heavily burnt gifts and both human and animal bones. They could have either remained at the cremation site (graves of busta type) or possibly been collected and buried in pits, urns or wooden boxes (ustrina type graves) (Flutsch, Niffeler & Rossi 2002: 339-345). While all human bones are cremated and highly fragmented, only some of the animal bones are in a similar condition. A smaller proportion of the animal bones though are highly fragmented, but unburnt (e.g. in Vindonissa-Südfriedhof, Veszeli 2000). What was the idea behind the use of these animal remains? Latin authors write about animal sacrifice, mainly pig, during funeral ceremonies

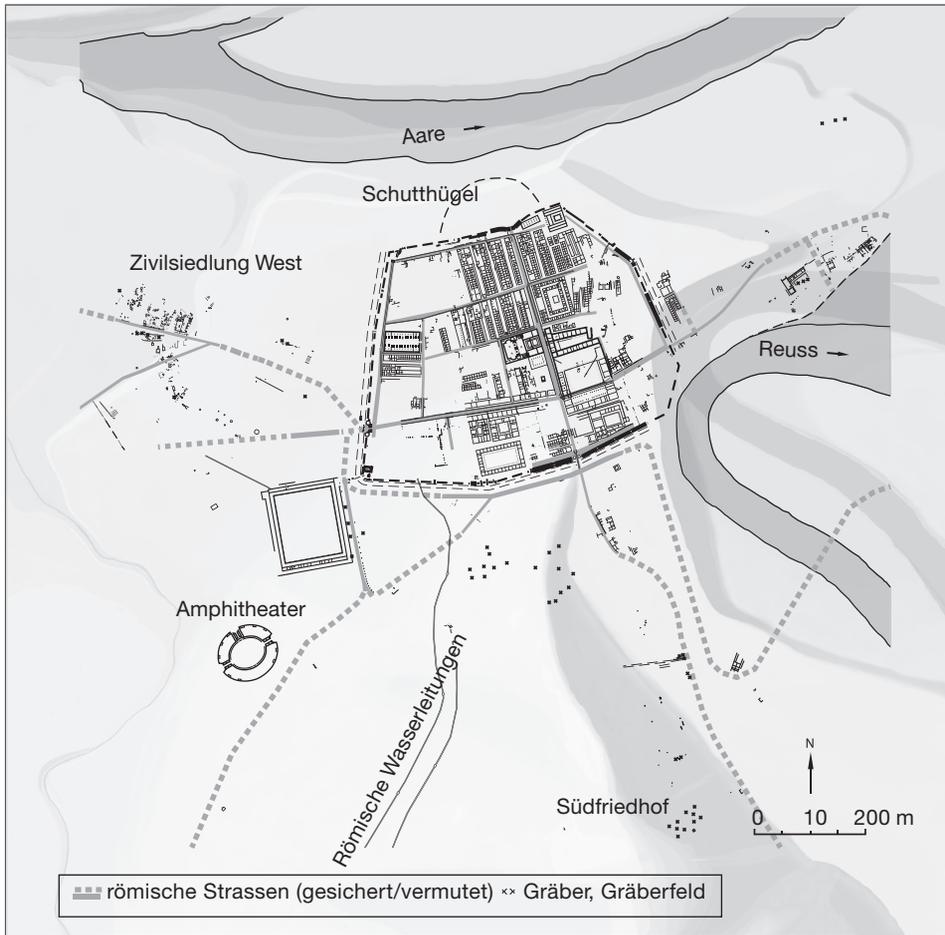


Fig. 2. — Vindonissa and the surrounding area (R. Bellettati, Kantonsarchäologie Brugg)

before burning the corpse on the pyre. The bowels were dedicated to Ceres, part of the meat was laid on the pyre and the rest was eaten by the funeral community at the funeral place. This ritual was called *silicernium* (Harich-Schwarzbauer 2011). Accordingly, the burnt animal bones in Roman cremation graves could be offerings to the dead, whereas the unburnt bones may be funeral feast remains. These rituals bear a resemblance to the animal sacrifices made in Greek and Roman temples (e.g. Forstenpointner 1998; Forstenpointner 2003). However, the dead seem to benefit more from the offerings in this ritual than the gods.

Another type of animal sacrifice in connection with funerals in the northern Roman provinces consists of the deposition of unburnt animal carcasses or parts of carcasses. This seems to be an ancient local tradition (Deschler-Erb, in press). Due to the lack of written sources it is difficult to interpret these rituals.

Burials and related structures have been found and analysed at many sites in Roman Switzerland (Flutsch, Niffeler & Rossi 2002: 332-355). This contribution presents and compares animal offerings in a funerary context from two different sites.

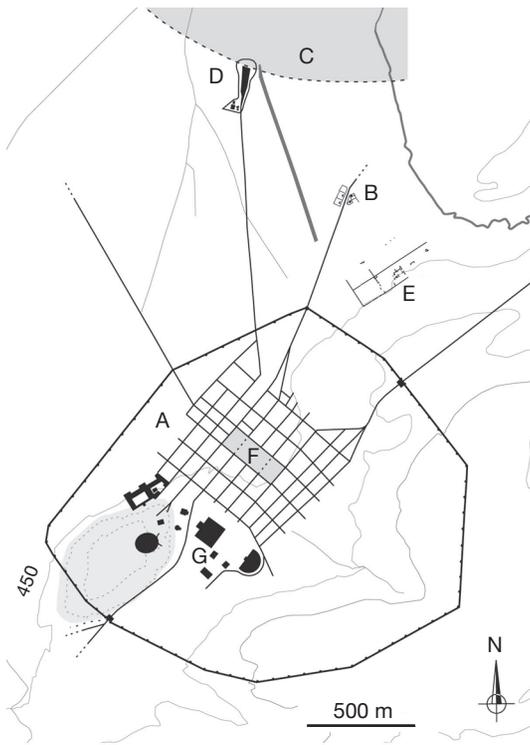


FIG. 3. — Aventicum: **A**, Roman city; **B**, En Chaplix; **C**, Lake of Morat; **D**, Roman Harbour; **E**, Villa suburbana; **F**, Forum; **G**, "quartier religieux occidental" (after D. Castella, *Avec le Temps Sàrl, St. Legier*)

TWO SITES – TWO HISTORIES

The first site is Vindonissa (modern Windisch, canton Aargau) in northern Switzerland close to the river Rhine, Fig. 1). Vindonissa is the only legionary camp that has been found within modern Swiss territory. It was established in 16/17 AD. The Legio XIII Gemina was stationed at Vindonissa until 44 or 45. With the arrival of the 21st legion Rapax the camp was rebuilt with stone fortifications. After the 21st legion had looted the countryside in 69, it was replaced by the 11th legion Claudia which remained stationed there until 101. More than 6 000 men, from throughout the Roman Empire, lived in the camp and hundreds, if not thousands more people in the surrounding civilian settlements (Hartmann 1986).

As in Rome, the dead were cremated and buried outside the settlement in different cemeteries on the arterial roads. Detailed archaeozoological data are available from the Südfriedhof area (Veszeli 2000) (Fig. 2).

The history of Aventicum – today Avenches, in the Vaud canton, the second site to be presented here, in western Switzerland (Fig. 1) and only 120km away from Vindonissa (Hochuli-Gysel 2001), is completely different (Fig. 3). Aventicum was the capital of the Celtic Helvetii tribe. The earliest evidence of human activity consists of Iron Age burials, probably chieftains' graves in the later "quartier religieux occidental". From the late first century BC onwards, temples were built close to these burials. Initially the temples were probably used for some kind of ancestor worshipping. These temples were used and rebuilt until late Roman times (Castella 2008) and incorporated within the city as it grew. All Roman era burials have been found outside the city walls and many of them have been found in the area called En Chaplix (Fig. 4). This necropolis not only housed the middle and lower class dead, but also two mausoleums of important inhabitants. Across the road, two Gallo-Roman style temples were found. Under the northern temple a burial of a woman from the Augustan period has been found. Here again, there is thus a close relationship between a burial and a sanctuary.

This suggests that there were important historical, functional and social differences between the sites of Vindonissa-Südfriedhof (Hintermann 2000; Veszeli 2000) and Aventicum-En Chaplix (Castella 1999; Olive 1999). Thus, from an archaeozoological view point the focus should be on the influence that these differences had on animal offerings in a funerary context.

MEAT OFFERINGS IN CREMATION GRAVES

Only more or less contemporaneous burials were used in the analysis. These are from Vindonissa, dated between 70 and 120 AD, and Aventicum, from the late first century to the first third of the second century AD. Differences can be seen in the number of burials containing animal bones as well as in the frequency of different animal species.

In Aventicum-En Chaplix 78% of the 27 analysed burials contained remains of meat offerings (Olive 1999: 137) and in Vindonissa-Südfriedhof only 55% of the 122 burials (Veszeli 2000: 169). In both



FIG. 4. — Aventicum-En Chaplix: 1 Northern temple, 2 Southern temple, 10 Northern Mausoleum, 12 Southern Mausoleum, 17 cemetery (after D. Castella, Avec le Temps Sàrl, St. Legier)

cemeteries, pig (*Sus domesticus*) is by far the most important species, followed by chicken (*Gallus gallus*), while cattle (*Bos taurus*) are of little importance (Fig. 5). Pig and especially chicken were part of the upper class Roman cuisine. This was not only the case from written and visual sources in Italy, but also in Gaul and the German provinces, where the information is based on archaeozoological results (Lepetz 1996: 114-132; Peters 1998: 248-249). So it can be proposed that mostly high quality meat was given to the dead.

The frequency of these animal species differs slightly in both sites: While the proportion of pig bones is

higher in Aventicum (91%) than in the Vindonissa (84%) graves, chicken is more often found in Vindonissa (10.3% compared to 4.5%) (Fig. 5). Sheep/goat (*Ovis aries/Capra hircus*) bones were not recovered in the Aventicum graves, but in Vindonissa they constitute at least 5%. It is known from other analyses that the consumption of these species in the region north of the Alps was influenced by Mediterranean customs (Deschler-Erb, 1991). So it could be assumed, that on average, Roman traditions had a greater influence on the choice of meat offerings in the graves at Vindonissa than those of Aventicum. This can presumably be explained by the presence of military

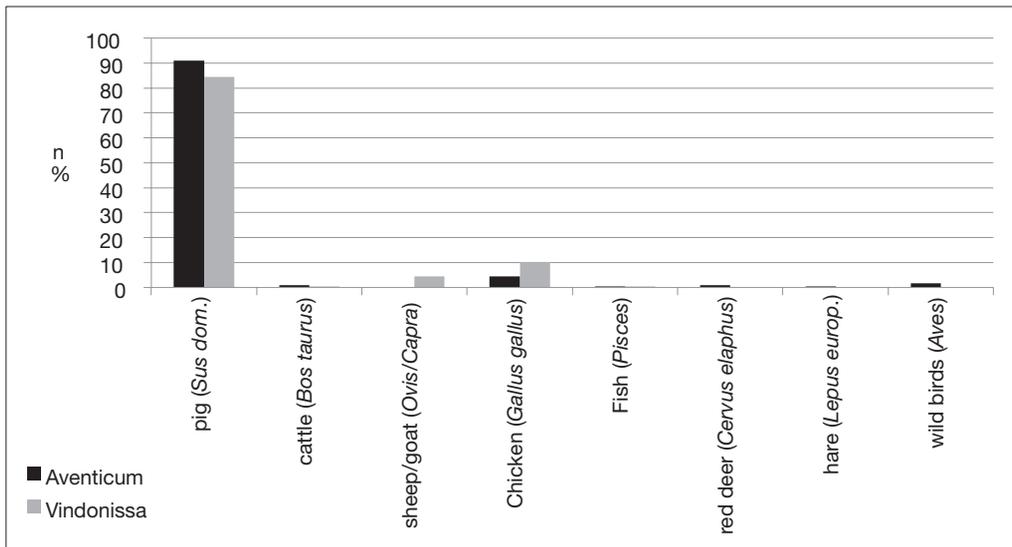


Fig. 5. — Frequency of different animal species in burials of Vindonissa-Südfriedhof (total 611n) and Avenches-En Chaplix (total 489n).

persons and their families from highly 'Romanised' regions coming together and being relatively wealthy.

Due to the very bad condition of the burnt animal bones at both sites it is often hard to identify which parts of the animals were placed on the pyre. In Avenches (Olive 1999:138) and in Vindonissa (Veszeli 2000: 174-177) graves exists where all body parts of pigs are represented. Therefore at both sites it could be assumed that sometimes complete animals were put on the pyre (=holocaust).

SPECIAL ANIMAL DEPOSITS

Meat offerings, as stated above, are found at both sites. However, there are other animal deposits which, with the current analysis are only represented in Aventicum. For example, the deposition of a complete six to twelve-month-old sheep with a jar in the ditch surrounding the cemetery. In another part of the ditch a cattle left hind leg was found (Fig. 6) (Castella 1999: 28; Olive 1999: 145).

Behind the southern mausoleum of Avenches-En Chaplix, containing burials of an important inhabitant of Aventicum and a descendent of the Celtic upper class, a complete horse (*Equus caballus*) skeleton has been found (Fig. 7) (Castella & Caspar & Eschbach 1993). Celtic warriors were

excellent riders, and this was one reason why Caesar integrated mainly Celts into his cavalry troops (Junkelmann 1991: 55-56). There existed a close relationship between Celtic warriors and their horses. The fact that in 40AD a horse was buried close to the mausoleum shows that perhaps this relationship, still existed in the 'Romanised' Celts living in a civilian settlement, if only in a symbolic manner.

Around the northern Gallo-roman temple of Avenches-En Chaplix, which was built on a grave, different animal deposits have been found: A complete horse skull, articulating pig vertebrae and ribs and a cattle offering which had undergone multiple procedures before internment. The head was cut off and placed back in the original position, the left foreleg was removed and finally a dog (*Canis familiaris*) was laid on top of the animal (Fig. 8) (Morel & Castella 2001, 69, fig. 95). All these deposits seem to have been placed there in honour of the woman buried under the temple.

Also inside the city walls special animal deposits were found at temples which can be considered to be funerary contexts because of their relationship with ancient Celtic burials. In the early first century AD, remains of feasts have been found, mostly pig, but also sheep, cattle and chicken, in ditches close

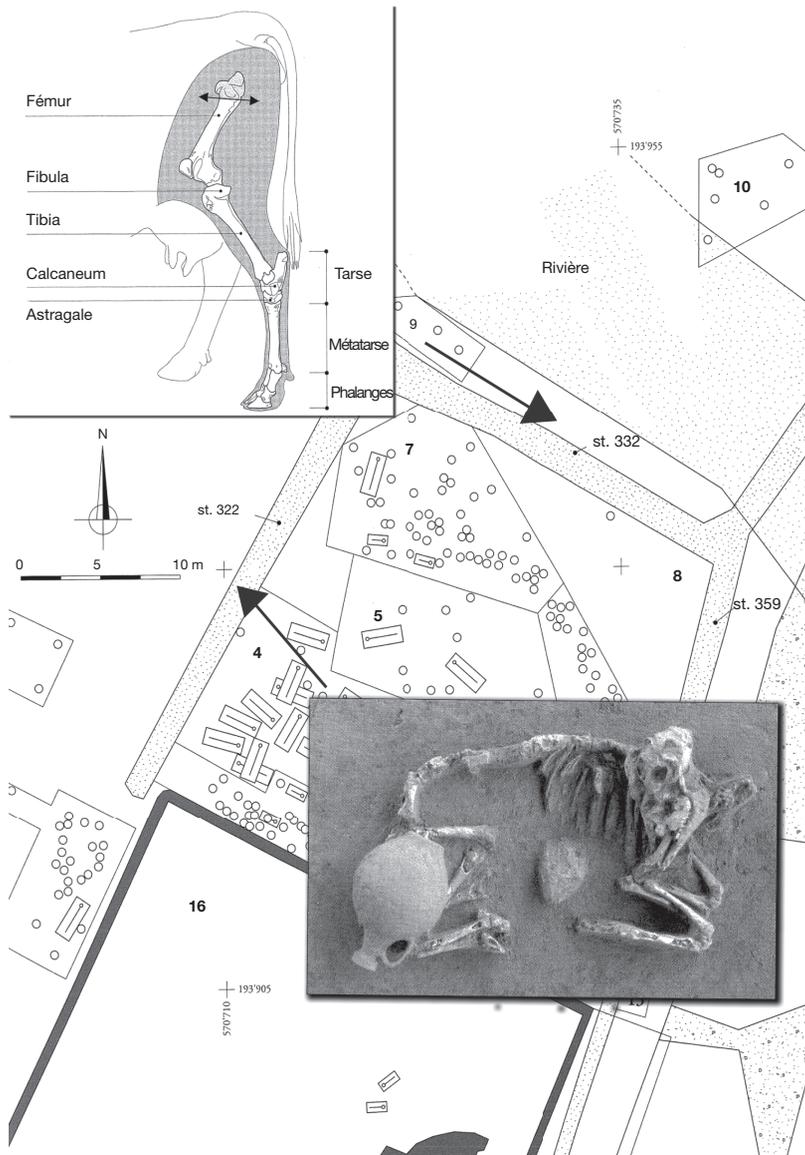


FIG. 6. — Special animal deposits in Avenches-En Chaplix (after Castella 1999 & Olive 1999)

to the later Grange de Dîmes temple (Lachiche & Deschler-Erb 2007: 125-130). The most striking find is an almost complete black vulture skeleton (*Aegypius monachus*) (Deschler-Erb 2008; Deschler-Erb 2009). Vulture bones are very rarely found in Roman Switzerland and it is hard to believe that this is an accidental incursion in the ditch. This can be

perhaps linked to the Celtic tribe of Hiberni (Spain) and the conception described by the Latin author Silius Italicus for: “*To these men death in battle is glorious; and they consider it a crime to burn the body of such a warrior; for they believe that the soul goes up to the gods in heaven, if the body is devoured on the field by the hungry vulture.*” (Punica III, 340-345).

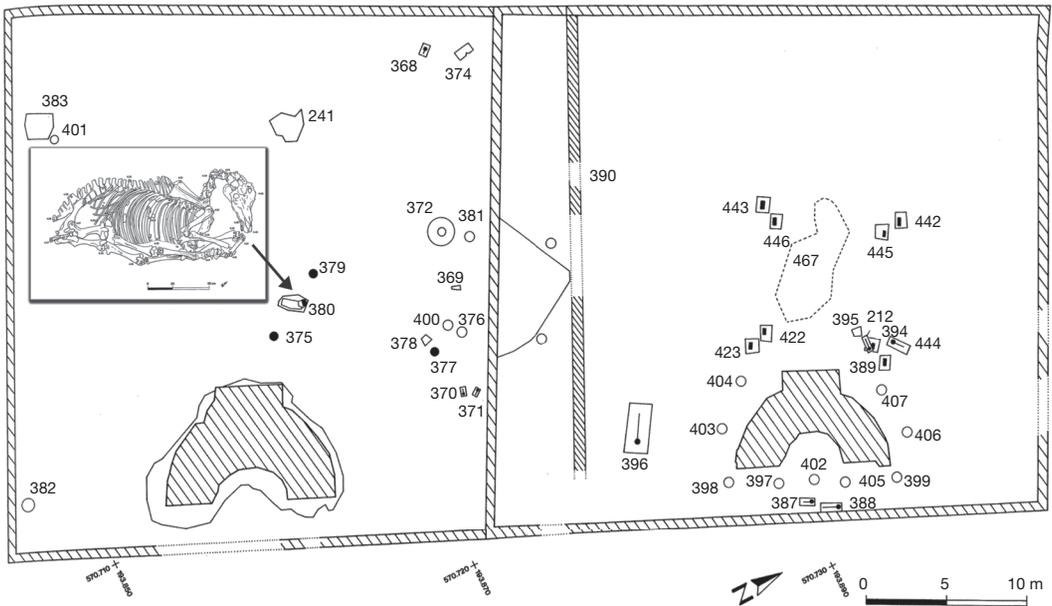


FIG. 7. — Avenches-En Chaplix: The two mausoleums with the horse skeleton found in pit st. 380 (after Castella & Caspar & Eschbach1993 : fig. 1).



FIG. 8. — Avenicum-En Chaplix: Cattle with dog skeleton (after Morel & Castella 2001: 69, fig.95).

It could be that this belief was still prominent in the Romanised Celts at Avenicum and the vulture was brought to the temple Grange de Dîmes as a symbol of its existence in Roman times.

CONCLUSIONS

In Vindonissa, only Roman graves were found and these were exclusively located outside the settlement. In Avenicum, Celtic graves were found inside the

city wall with later temple superstructures, but all Roman period burials were outside the walls. Cremation graves with meat offerings occur in Vindonissa-Südfriedhof as well as in Aventicum-En Chaplix, but the frequency of animal species shows a higher degree of Romanisation in Vindonissa due to the military influence. On the other hand, the deposition of complete or parts of animals in connection with a death cult and ancestor worshipping only occurs in Aventicum due to an important indigenous influence. It can thus be concluded that the two contemporary and adjacent sites had completely different burial and animal offering rituals due to their different ethnic, social and functional backgrounds. These results show once again that faunal analysis can support, complete and diversify cultural-historical research.

English: R. Frosdick and B. Jennings

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