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Hilltop settlement dynamics in Provence between the 5th-9th centuries: results and research prospects

André Constant, Jean-Antoine Ségura, Marie Valenciano

► To cite this version:

André Constant, Jean-Antoine Ségura, Marie Valenciano. Hilltop settlement dynamics in Provence between the 5th-9th centuries: results and research prospects. Vicelja, Marina. Swords, Crowns, Censers and Books. Francia Media, Cradles of European Culture, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Rijeka, pp.374-403, 2015, 978-953-7975-32-6. hal-02273080

HAL Id: hal-02273080

<https://normandie-univ.hal.science/hal-02273080v1>

Submitted on 29 Aug 2019

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Swords, Crowns, Censers and Books



Swords, Crowns, Censers and Books

Francia Media - Cradles of European Culture



Cover

Front

Representation of a king, fragment of a stone panel, Baptistery of Split Cathedral (photo: N. Belošević)

Representation of a warrior, fragment of the transenna from the Church of St Mary at Crkvina in Biskupija, MHAS (photo: Z. Alajbeg)

Back

Detail from the fol. 214v, Egmont Gospel Book, KB 76 F1 (© the Hague, Koninklijke Bibliotheek)



Silver censer from Cetina near Vrlika, MHAS (photo: Z. Alajbeg)

Swords, Crowns, Censers and Books

Francia Media - Cradles of European Culture

Edited by

Marina Vicelja-Matijašić

Center for Iconographic Studies

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences – University of Rijeka

Rijeka, 2015



Publisher

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Rijeka

For the publisher

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Graphic design and text preparation

Sanja Jovanović (University of Rijeka)

K&K, Zagreb

Sizis d.o.o., Zagreb

Print

Denona, d.o.o. Zagreb

©2015 Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Rijeka, Croatia

ISBN 978-953-7975-32-6

University of Rijeka Library Cataloging Number (CIP): 130816029

UDK: 902/904(4)''04/14''(082) * 7(4)''04/14''(091)(082)

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Acknowledgments

We would like to thank individuals and institutions who contributed to the realisation of this publication:

Vera Ameels, Koen De Grootte, Hans Denis, Nancy Lemay, Jan Moens - Flanders Heritage Agency, Belgium

Maurice Cornelis, Marie-Claire Van der Donckt - Provinciaal Archeologisch Museum (PAN), Ename, Belgium

Patrick De Jaegher, Belgium

Louise Fredericq, Ename Expertisecentrum voor Erfgoedontsluiting, Belgium

Daniel Pletinkcx, Visual Dimension bvba, Belgium

Eva Roels, Tourist Office Oudenaarde, Belgium

Zoran Alajbeg, Museum of Croatian Archaeological Monuments, Split, Croatia

Petra Predoević Zadković, Department of History of Art, University of Rijeka, Croatia

Jacqueline Balen, Igor Krajcar - Archaeological Museum, Zagreb, Croatia

Institute of Archaeology of the CAS, Prague, v.v.i., Prague castle, Czech Republic

Jan Gloc and Martin Frouz, Czech Republic (for sharing copyrights)

Iva Herichová, Czech Republic (for sharing the results of her geological survey of the Prague Castle promontory)

Aix Marseille Université, CNRS, LA3M UMR 7298, Aix-en Provence, France

Université de Caen Basse-Normandie, CNRS, CRAHAM UMR 6273, Caen, France

Heiko Schlombach, Solstice scop Sarl, France (translator)

Nicola-Jane Stevenson, Translation Ninja, France (translator)

Holger Grewe and Katharina Ferch, Forschungsstelle Kaiserpfalz Ingelheim, Germany

Arjan den Braven, Joep Hendriks, Rob Mols, Hettie Peterse, Katja Zee, Municipality of Nijmegen (Gemeente Nijmegen), Netherlands

Centre for Global Heritage and Development, Leiden University, Netherlands

Research Institute CLUE+, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Netherlands

Roman Catholic Parish Office, Ladice, Slovakia

Tomas Mařík, Slovakia (translator)

Timotej Knific, Narodni muzej Slovenije, Ljubljana, Slovenia

Tomaž Lauko, Narodni muzej Slovenije, Ljubljana, Slovenia (photographer)

Jože Hanc, Ljubljana (photographer)

Meta Osredkar, Ljubljana (translator)

Foreword

Swords, Crowns, Censers and Books is the product of the five year project *Francia Media – Cradles of European Culture* which has brought together scholars, researchers and experts in various fields of humanities in reference to the specific period of early medieval European past. On the foundation of the Carolingian world, which provided the bedrock for the subsequent development of medieval European culture, Francia Media prospered as a political realm that connected the North Sea and Mediterranean, cultivating its diversities and struggling and manoeuvring through a complex political narrative. Its power was operated through royal and aristocratic courts, the military and church who contributed and assured the appearance and specific formation of centres of culture, learning and artistic patronage. The deliberate channelling of resources towards education in the service of the Christian faith was a fundamental element in the formation of Europe and European cultural identity. Fragments of this powerful and fertile social and cultural realm are scattered throughout Europe and act as reminders of its great formative age.

In the publication authors present ten archaeological sites in nine European countries: the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Croatia, Italy and France. The conceptual framework presumed the representation of heritage from the perspective of a crossroads of different backgrounds, traditions, established practices and experience within the heritage route that the sites formed. The articles discuss various issues and problems such as the relationship between centre and province, the question of borders, elites and social classes, written and other historical sources, reconstructing the past, conservation, protection and interpretation of heritage etc. The sites possess distinct importance both for national histories and the overall chronology of the early Middle Ages. The texts also highlight the importance of learning about Europe's cultural past in contemporary society as a means for supporting the processes of identity creation, transcultural dialogue and regenerating and re-establishing values and integrity. Each partner has demonstrated both good practice and problems within the wider approach to the particular archaeological site or specific set of subjects.

The work on the project mobilised not only the partners' institutions but other individuals and associations in promoting the importance of the heritage of the early Middle Ages and thus generating the idea of a strong platform that will continue building bridges between the past and present.

Marina Vicelja-Matijašić

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***Hilltop Settlement Dynamics in Provence
between the 5th-9th Centuries
Results and Research Prospects***

**André Constant
Jean-Antoine Segura
Marie Valenciano**

Introduction

Long-time divided academically into historical periods (Antiquity-Middle Ages), the history behind the development of settlements is now being approached through the ages. The work carried out by specialists of the ancient period dedicated to the fate of the aristocratic estate (*villa*), questioned the medieval specialists early on about the Roman settlement system and its evolution towards the creation of the “village”.¹ Since then, the increase in the number of archaeological prospections and excavations has indicated a major transition in the landscape during the 5th-9th centuries, with a significant gap in the quantity of research between the lowlands and hill slopes due to the increase in preventive archaeology. Complex concomitant dynamics change the crucial substrate of the settlement that was created during the early Roman Empire especially with the development of Christianisation.² One of the major aspects of this transition is the development of hilltop sites between the 5th-6th centuries in the Mediterranean Midi, the understanding of which has benefited from a number of substantial scientific advances over the last few years.³ Brought to light by Paul Albert Février’s studies in Provence⁴ from the 1970s onwards, it is today considered a major factor in the history of settlements in the western Mediterranean regions.

This current assessment, which is the result of a university lecture that led to the undertaking of two theses,⁵ has been succinctly presented in 2014 and 2015 during some exhibitions showcasing the European CEC *Francia Media* project.⁶ We will not, however, discuss hilltop settlements from the 10th-11th centuries that were linked to the emergence of the castle, as this is one part of the debate in Provence that is already clearly understood, which has given way to a number of publications.⁷ The following text will only discuss the rich corpus of Provençal hilltop sites from between the 5th and 9th centuries, not forgetting the possibility of a future publication including the wave of later hilltop settlements linked to the *incastellamento* (10th-12th centuries). The pace and factors affecting the process of hilltop settlement will be of particular interest in this article and new lines of thought triggered by the inevitable gaps in the documentation will be presented.

The current state of documentation

The historiographical investigation brings the number of hilltop sites recorded in the Provence Alpes/Côte d’Azur region (PACA) from Late Antiquity/early Middle Ages to 80 (fig. 1). The current status of this inventory, due to the haphazard of prospections and the rarity of excavations, primarily conducted in the plains in the framework of preventive archaeology, does not give a realistic overview if you also take into account the remains hidden by today’s villages, as well as the vast mountainous regions in the Provençal countryside that have yet to be explored. Nevertheless, it unveils a by far greater and up to now unsuspected amplitude of hilltop settlement dynamics in Provence during

Late Antiquity.⁸ They seem to be more widespread than in Languedoc and much more so than in Catalonia.⁹ It must be acknowledged, however, that the quality of the information recorded on the different sites is very disparate; the data being relatively old, imprecise, edited or not published at all (archaeological excavation reports). Most of the hilltop sites are only known through archaeological prospections (45 sites) and the remaining 35 have been the subject of more or less extensive excavations (fig. 2). Added to this patchy documentation is the often uncertain dating referring us merely to general historical periods (“Late Antiquity” and “early Middle Ages”), which makes it impossible to accurately establish when many sites were founded and abandoned. However, knowledge of ceramics has greatly advanced over the last few years, which means that some records may improve in terms of chronological accuracy once the material finds are studied again. Given the numerous problems with the documentation, this study will therefore focus on the 35 sites that have been excavated and provide the richest information.

From the 4th to the 6th centuries: the dawn and rise of hilltop settlements

Information gathered so far suggests that hilltop settlements in Provence came into being over the course of the 4th century and the first half of the 5th century (fig. 3). The evidence, however, are tenuous.¹⁰ At most they reveal that a few Provençal upland areas were already being frequented before the actual foundation of settlements. The process of development becomes more intense over the course of the second half of the 5th century during which all of the known settlements were created. For the most part they are built on top of the remains of earlier protohistoric habitats and sometimes partially retain their layout. Aside the epiphenomenon of a premature abandonment of some sites during the 5th century, this process reaches its zenith over the course of the first half of the 6th century. In Provence, as elsewhere, it indicates a progressive and major transformation that prefigures the genesis of the “medieval” landscape.

A network of sites?

The status and hierarchy of hilltop sites within *territoria* from the 5th-7th centuries is difficult to evaluate with only the field surveys. Despite rare contemporary juridical sources suggesting the existence of such a hierarchy, it remains elusive.¹¹ The hilltop sites dated to between the 5th and 7th centuries and built every 10 km or so overlooking smaller river basins, constitute a seemingly dense pattern in Provence (fig. 1). The more or less important distance to the capitals seems to induce densifications to varying degrees as well as the rank of certain sites in the settlement pattern. In contrast to the Provençal hinterlands, the fringes of the coastline have been more thoroughly explored (areas around the Etang de Berre, Toulon, the Massif des Maures and the Alpes Maritimes). The map showing the distribution of sites reveals a network of hilltop settlements inside a radius of around 10 km surrounding the city administrative centres -

chef-lieux (Toulon, Fréjus). Closer to the Ludurian region where the capitals are situated nearer to one another (Cimiez, Nice, Vence), this network sprawls increasingly over the landscape. By contrast, the important sites of Saint-Blaise and Constantine on the edge of the Etang de Berre are situated further away from the administrative centres of Arles and Marseilles, at around 30 km. These virtually urban settlements were sizeable (5.5 ha and 7 ha) and may have been secondary administrative centres at the boundaries of the territories belonging to those cities. Based on these initial observations, it seems that a high density of city administrative centres resulted in a dense network of smaller sites. Frédéric Trément has modelled for the first time a network of sites on a “territory” scale gravitating during the 5th-6th centuries around the agglomeration of Saint-Blaise (Saint-Mitre-les-Remparts/13). Using the size of the sites and their sometimes presumed structures as criteria, he has come up with a network of settlements organised into three successive groups: the main agglomeration of Saint-Blaise (5.5 ha), followed by a set of 3 hilltop sites described as being “intermediate” (1.5 ha), and finally a set of three smaller settlements situated in lowland areas (100-2500 m²).¹²

Even if we strongly suspect the existence of a network organised around the capitals and the most important “rural” sites (secondary administrative centres), the data we have available may nevertheless prove to be misleading, which is why an excessive transposition of these models will be avoided. The great variation in the size of sites is not surprising, and ranges from 7 ha to 100 m². It is very tempting to assume that there was some kind of site hierarchy in the countryside. However, merely taking into account this particular variable (surface area) may be misleading and risky. When the organisation of the blocks is revealed by excavations, important imbalances appear in the density of the buildings (widely spaced or tightly packed neighbourhoods). Whilst in Saint-Blaise (5.5 ha) (Martigues/13), the settlement partly adopts the protohistoric layout and takes on the appearance of a “village” (fig. 4), the one in Sainte-Candie (7 ha) seems to have a much more open layout and also has zones on the outskirts of the settlement set immediately into the hill slope (Haute Roques site).¹³ Our lacking knowledge of the exact site sizes (in most cases found through prospection), their overall layout, their infrastructures and their functions as well as the distribution of the elite properties that can extend beyond the city territories during this period, means that the modelisation of the “networks” of power amounts to a documentary impasse. Only a thematical and prudent approach makes it possible to come up with some explanations of the architecture and an understanding of the Provençal pace during the 5th-6th centuries.

Factors of hilltop settlement dynamics during the 5th and the 6th centuries

Migration and new dominions: what role does the strategic aspect play?

It is already well known that the dynamic phase of hilltop settlements during the 5th and 6th centuries falls into the context of “barbaric” migrations and the establishment

of new dominions. The Provençal area, which was governed by the Goths from 476 onwards, falls under the control of the Burgundians and then the Franks in 536. The for a long time in this context brought forward insecurity of the population is no longer considered as a reason for the colonisation of hilltops (“refuge settlements”). In an article published in 1978, Paul-Albert Février was the first to nuance the importance of these events in relation to the onset of hilltop settlements. He privileged the economic and social approach of the reconquest of the hill slopes¹⁴ when medieval specialists were carrying out a great deal of research in line with Pierre Toubert’s studies on the *incastellamento* of the 9th-11th centuries.¹⁵ Since then, the progress that has been made on the understanding of hilltop sites from the 5th-7th centuries in the Mediterranean Midi has considerably clarified the security factor. Pottery specialists have not observed any disruption to the great trade of the Mediterranean up until at least the 7th century: it continued to supply all of the Mediterranean Provinces with wares imported from the Near East or North Africa.¹⁶ As in other regions, even the most isolated Provençal hilltop settlements prove the prosperity of the long-distance trade.¹⁷ All the sites have revealed imported objects in varying proportions that need to be quantified further between the sites along the coast - close to the harbours - brimming with wares from distant lands and those in the Provençal hinterlands that have not been subject to as much study or as many excavations. The regular presence of imported pottery suggests that the network of hilltop settlements was involved in a dynamic trade during the 5th-6th centuries and open to economic flows that transcended until at least the 7th century Provence that had fallen under Gothic and then Frankish domination.

If the idea of “refuge settlements” contradicts the continuity of these economic flows, then we may have been overly focused these last few years on the social and administrative reasons behind the development of hilltop sites - this being at the expense of considering the defensive aspect (control over the area and network). Facing the Frankish conquest, the strengthening of the Ostrogoths power from 511 onwards with the restoration of the Gallic administrative centre in Arles between 511 and 534 and the appointment of senior officials with military responsibilities (dukes and counts), raises questions about how the network of sites that were occupied from the 5th century on fits into the defensive geostrategy of *Provincia*.¹⁸ According to Cassiodorus, the Durance valley, at that time the border of the Burgundian kingdom, is dotted with *Castella* (small forts) since 508.¹⁹ From an archaeological point of view, the military function of hilltop sites (strongholds), which could back a reinforced military control during the 6th century revealed by texts, is far from being proven. Even if the high value of metal may have justified the recovery of objects, the excavations carried out on 5th to 8th century hilltop sites have so far not revealed the presence of weapons, although they have been found in the later “roques castrales” (motte-and-bailey castles).²⁰ The enclosure walls, which were discovered during archaeological prospections on a number of sites occupied between

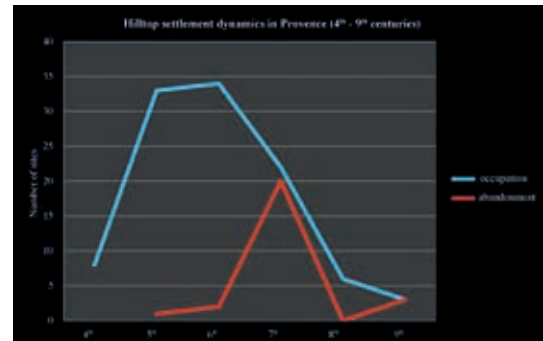


1. Map showing the distribution of known hilltop sites from 5th-9th c. in Provence

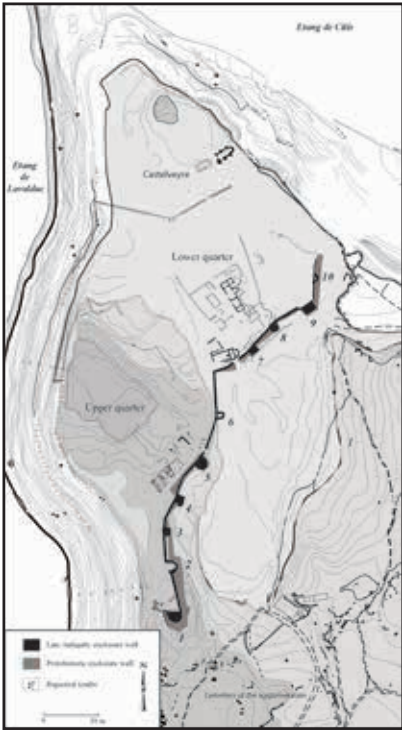
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		More or less precise chronology resulting from excavations of the hilltop sites						
Dpt.	Site	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th	9th	
06	Camp-du-Bois							
06	Colline du château							
06	San Peyre							
06	Le Château							
83	Le Pègu							
83	Bayonne							
13	Saint-Blaise					9	9	
13	Le Baou Rouge					9	9	
83	Perquarrolles/Mèdes							
06	La Tourraque							
06	Mont Bastide							
06	Castellar							
06	Saint-Martin							
06	L'Eouvière							
83	Peyro Barosan							
83	Saint-Estève							
83	Essarriènes							
83	Mont Garou							
83	San Lucien							
83	Le Grand Courrent							
83	Ragnose							
83	San Peire							
13	Les Baux							
13	Saint-Saens							
84	Courrens							
84	Le Clairier							
84	Oppède							
13	Tour de Nedon							
13	Constantine							
13	Sainte-Propice							
13	N.-D. du Château							
13	Orgon/Beauregard							
83	Salernes							
13	Col Sainte-Anne							
83	Sainte-Candide							

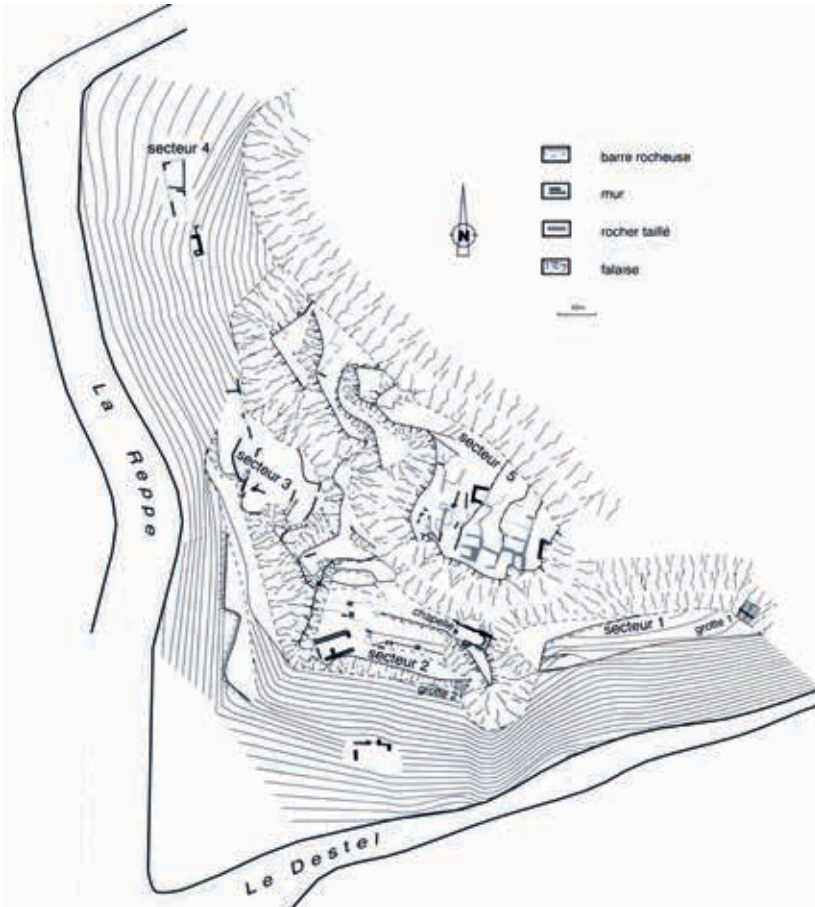
2. Chronology of 35 hilltop sites substantiated using data from more or less limited excavations



3. Graph summarizing rate of hilltop development using current data available



- 5. View of enclosure wall at Saint-Blaise, partly set back from the protohistoric defensive wall (photo: M. Valenciano)
- 4. Plan of remains of Saint-Blaise agglomeration from 5th-7th c. (CAD M. Valenciano)



6. Plan of the site of Saint-Estève

the 5th and 7th centuries, remain poorly dated. However, they belong without doubt to the protohistoric occupation, but in which proportions is impossible to evaluate. Some very rare results indicate that there were phases of restoration or reconstruction. The Constantine enclosure, built during the Iron Age, was restored and rebuilt with a carriage door during the 5th-6th centuries.²¹ The enclosure of Saint-Blaise (figs. 4, 5) was nearly completely rebuilt and set back from the Hellenistic rampart during the first half of the 6th century under Ostrogothic or Frankish dominion.²² Does this enclosure of virtually urban size reveal a strengthening of the defences around the Provençal coastline or rather the prestige associated with a hilltop commune situated on the territorial boundaries of the powerful cities of Arles and Marseilles? There is unfortunately no straightforward answer. The contemporary site designations, possibly implying a status and a particular rank within the territorial hierarchies (such as *castrum*, *castellum*, *vicus*, *villa*, and *locus*),²³ are unknown to us. As far as Saint-Blaise is concerned, later source from the 9th century refer to the site as a *vicus*.²⁴ This aspect of hilltop sites is a vast field of research. We must wait for proper research programmes on the enclosure walls in order to establish the chronology of these structures that may have led to the reorganisation of sites already occupied in the 5th century.

Christianisation: what was the role of the city administrative centres?

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The dynamic phase of hilltop development during the 5th-6th centuries takes place at the same time as the spread of Christianity and the renewal of the administrative centres of the cities, which has been subject to a large amount of scientific literature in Provence. The 5th and 6th centuries constitute the Golden Age of the Provençal Church.²⁵ The appearance of the first bishoprics (episcopal groups) and the Christianisation of the elite, the dawn of the “rural parishes” and the first cemeteries (presbyterian groups), date the important phase where the Church lays its foundations within an urban setting (4th-5th centuries) and later within the countryside (5th-6th centuries) to between the 4th and 6th centuries. The coastal cities, of which Arles and Marseilles are at the forefront, were major centres for Christianisation in the Late Roman Empire. The presence of the Church, occupying a prime position in historiography, has been extensively studied in lowland contexts but is less or only very locally understood in Provençal hilltop contexts.

The current state of understanding has found that only three hilltop sites among the 80 recorded have revealed church remains from the 5th-6th centuries: namely Constantine and Saint-Blaise near Etang de Berre (Bouches-du-Rhône), and Saint-Estève (Var) (fig. 6). They represent the paltry evidence of the Church’s probably much stronger presence in the network of hilltop sites, as well as being rare examples that enable a few topographical and chronological observations. The ecclesiastical building, erected at the high point of these three agglomerations, physically governs the site and the surrounding area. This topographical disposition in the settlement cannot simply be a coincidence. It visually pro-

motes the ecclesiastical function of the inhabited hilltop as seen from the surroundings and most probably implies the assertion of a city administrative centre in the area. Without knowing all the churches associated with the hilltop sites, as Yann Codou highlights, one cannot forget the fact that some buildings erected at the foot of the hills may well have been, along with the hilltop establishment, one single settlement hub structured into two distinct topographical entities with just a small distance separating them.²⁶

Although toponymy was disreputed as a tool for reconstructing landscapes as well as the ancient settlements,²⁷ it nevertheless provides an interesting line of enquiry in the absence of excavations: 29 hilltop sites, from the 5th-6th centuries, among the 80 mapped are actually named by hagiotoponyms. Many come from martyrial cults attested from the Late Antiquity period and the early medieval period in the West or the Byzantine world.²⁸ The churches still present on these sites may well include older structures linked to occupations between the 5th-7th centuries, suggested by prospections.

The rate at which the churches appeared on hilltop sites is also unclear and although built in a prominent position, one refrains from hastily lending them the rank of protagonist or suggesting that it is a polarising element of the settlement. The two churches of Saint-Blaise appear after the reoccupation phase of the protohistoric *oppidum* during the 4th and 5th centuries: one is founded at the end of the 5th century or at the beginning of the 6th century, the other one, which may have had a baptistery, was built over the course of the 6th century (figs. 4, 7).²⁹ These kinds of observations give nuance to the role that the Church and the episcopal city's administrative centre played in the initial control of the development process of hilltop sites. The first reoccupation movement on the plateau of Saint-Blaise during the 4th and 5th centuries seems to have been "spontaneous". Or was it at least fostered by earlier and as yet unidentified driving forces behind the foundation of churches?

The development of the monastic movement in Provence drove without doubt also very quickly the occupation of hilltops. From the 5th century onwards, certain areas were chosen for their island position, maximising the isolation and favouring contemplation. Thus, the rocky mound of Montmajour, which forms an isolated island in the middle of marshlands near Arles, was occupied from the 5th to the 6th centuries, probably by hermits who lived in the natural caves.³⁰ At the Cap des Mèdes on the island of Porquerolles, a group of five cells from the 5th century would have constituted an ephemeral Monastic settlement that John Cassian made reference to between the years 420 and 450 (fig. 8).³¹ Particularly if considered it in terms of mentalities, the occupation of a hilltop may have symbolised the advent of the Augustinian ideal. According to the Saint-Génies "Inscribed Stone" (Alpes de Haute Provence), which dates to the beginning of the 5th century and is known by specialists,³² Claudius Posthumus Dardanus, Praetorian prefect of the Gauls in Arles, who was also close to Saint Augustine, founds on his lands a fortified perimeter open to occupation at *Theopolis* ("City of God").³³ Aside from the ideological impact of a

foundation deed, the promoting role of the great aristocracy and the part played by aristocratic property in the renewal of the forms of occupation, is one of the major questions.

What is the relationship between hilltop sites, villa and the climate?

Due to the scarcity of written sources, the role the elite played in the development of hilltop settlements during the 5th-6th centuries can be approached by taking into account data on the evolving dynamics of the aristocratic estate (*villa*), which on the plains, was a widespread settlement system from the early Roman Empire. It would not be appropriate here to detail the results that have already been published for Provence.³⁴ They suggest that the *villae* pattern was maintained during the 5th-6th centuries, although there were major distortions regarding the density of *villae* still occupied between the coast and the middle Rhône valley, where the abandonment of sites was much more pronounced.³⁵ The general trend is a decline or change in the nature of the occupations situated in the lowlands. As in the Languedoc region, the few excavations carried out on Provençal *villae* bring to light the loss of their elite residential function during the 6th century at the latest: abandonment or at best keeping a “peasant” settlement dedicated to agricultural and sometimes artisanal activities. Whilst the foundation of a church in the countryside may result in the transfer of a settlement from the Antique site to the ecclesiastic centre,³⁶ dynamics are more focused on highland areas during the 5th-6th centuries. There, more prestigious and expensive materials are used in construction, which is in contrast to what is found on the plains where earth and perishable materials begin to be predominant in the construction of homes.³⁷

The idea of a transfer of the domanial function from the lowland *villae* towards the promontories, was suggested by Gabrielle Démians d’Archimbaud through the excavation of the hilltop site of Piégu.³⁸ The appearance of an elite home in Saint-Blaise during the last decades of the 6th century, with either an apsidal structure or flanked tower (fig. 9), could echo the development of neighbouring *villae* into more rustic homes.³⁹ The map drawn up by the Centre Archéologique du Var showing the settlements from the 5th-6th centuries, also implies the new dynamics engaging between lowland and hilltop settlements (fig. 10): the “hilltop villages” from the 5th-6th centuries were thriving among a cluster of lowland *villae*. Despite there being a number of gaps in the precise chronology of the sites, and the persistent presence of partial and more “rustic” occupations in the heart of the *villae* pattern, it is legitimate to ask whether the climatic context during the 5th-6th centuries was also behind the renewal of the landscape through the reoccupation of hilltop sites that had for the most part been abandoned since the Iron Age.

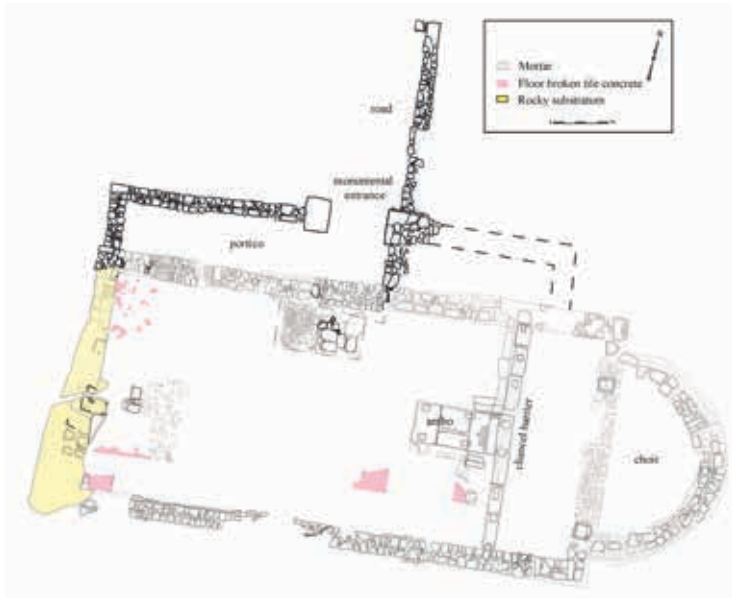
The role that the climate played in the evolution of the agrosystems and medieval society over a long period, has for a long time been considered as essential.⁴⁰ The Medieval Warm Period during the 8th-12th centuries goes hand in hand with the extension of the *ager* and settlement revival during the High Middle Ages. Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie’s publication⁴¹ arouses strong interest in the Little Ice Age (13th-17th centuries),⁴²

which is in any case better explained by texts. Written sources hinting at the climate towards the end of Antiquity and the beginning of the Middle Ages are extremely rare,⁴³ and have therefore not kindled the same kind of transdisciplinary enthusiasm. Grégoire de Tours recounts the only mentions of climactic phenomena from the 6th century in order to stress the eschatological event of the apocalypse (Book 5:23; 5:25).

The role and the frequency of violent climactic episodes remain difficult to grasp from deficient texts. However, recent advances in the knowledge of the climate provided by geoarchaeologists, allow to take into account, as has been done for later centuries, the part of the climate in the evolution of the settlement dynamics in Provence and more broadly the Midi Mediterranean during the 5th-7th centuries. Large-scale studies carried out in the lower and middle Rhône valley give a solid overview of a hydrological crisis that occurred at the end of the 5th century and during the 6th century, and indicates most likely a decrease in temperature.⁴⁴ This new climactic episode is revealed by the changes visible in the geomorphological and geoarchaeological fields. After a stable climatic and pedogenic phase (4th century to the middle of the 5th century), a hydrological disturbance placed strain on the settlements at the bottom of the hillsides and the surroundings (truncation of layers, overlaying of the soils, destructions). The instability of the streams thus “strongly reduces the settling possibilities near fluvial channels”.⁴⁵ In the lagoonal area of Berre, the sedimentary deposits at the bottom of the river basins and the increase in the flow of the rivers also reveal an erosional process on the surrounding slopes at that time.⁴⁶

Excavations in Provence have disclosed local signs of hydrological stress affecting the settlements. The rise of the aquifer level explains the backfill used to raise the floor of the Saint-Pierre de Vence *villa* in Eyguières during the 5th-6th centuries.⁴⁷ In Camargue, contrary to the previous centuries, settlements are restricted to the alluvial mounds.⁴⁸ In Arles, the reorganisation of the suburban funerary zones of late Antiquity also poses questions regarding Rhône floodings: the necropolises established over the course of the 4th-5th centuries in Trinquetaille and on the outskirts of the Roman arena were abandoned; only the Alyscamps remain at the eastern entrance of the agglomeration.⁴⁹ The existence of elite tombs may explain the polarization of the sepulchres in this suburban sector, but the Alyscamps are also further set back from the immediate Rhône riverbank.

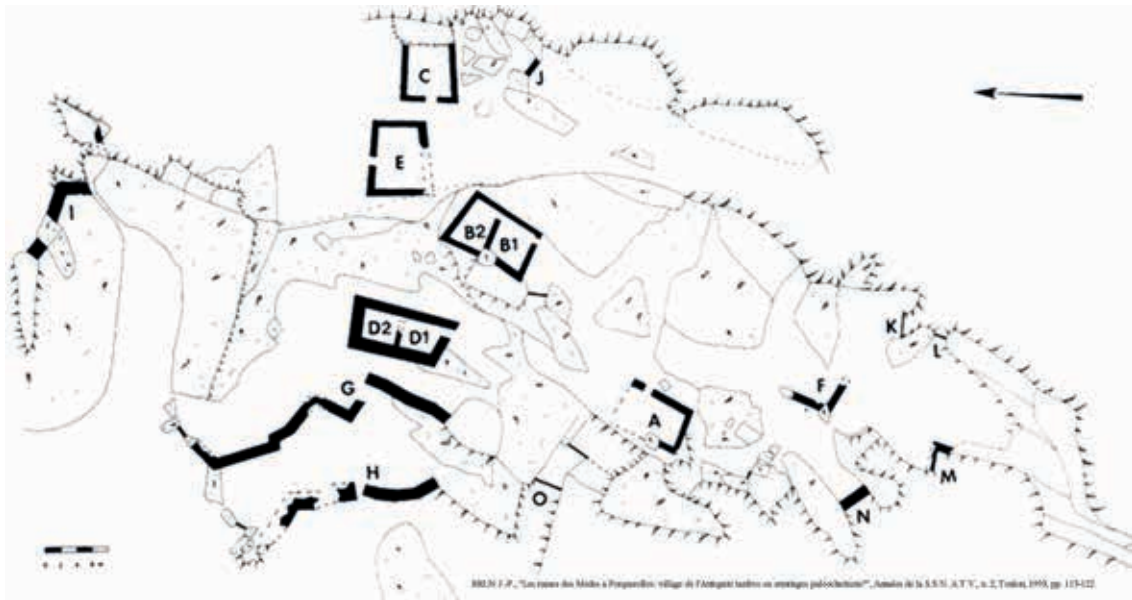
The impact of the climactic crisis on the economy of the *villa* system is still not entirely understood, and one will thus avoid any over-interpretation and stick to hypotheses. In a cause and effect relationship, it may have led to the decline of certain arable lands and the conquest of new spaces. Is the movement of settlements towards nearby hilltops one of the consequences of these climatic variations on the economy and the new dynamics of the *villae*? The establishment of research teams bringing together settlement and paleo-environmental specialists on excavations is what is needed in order to develop analysis.



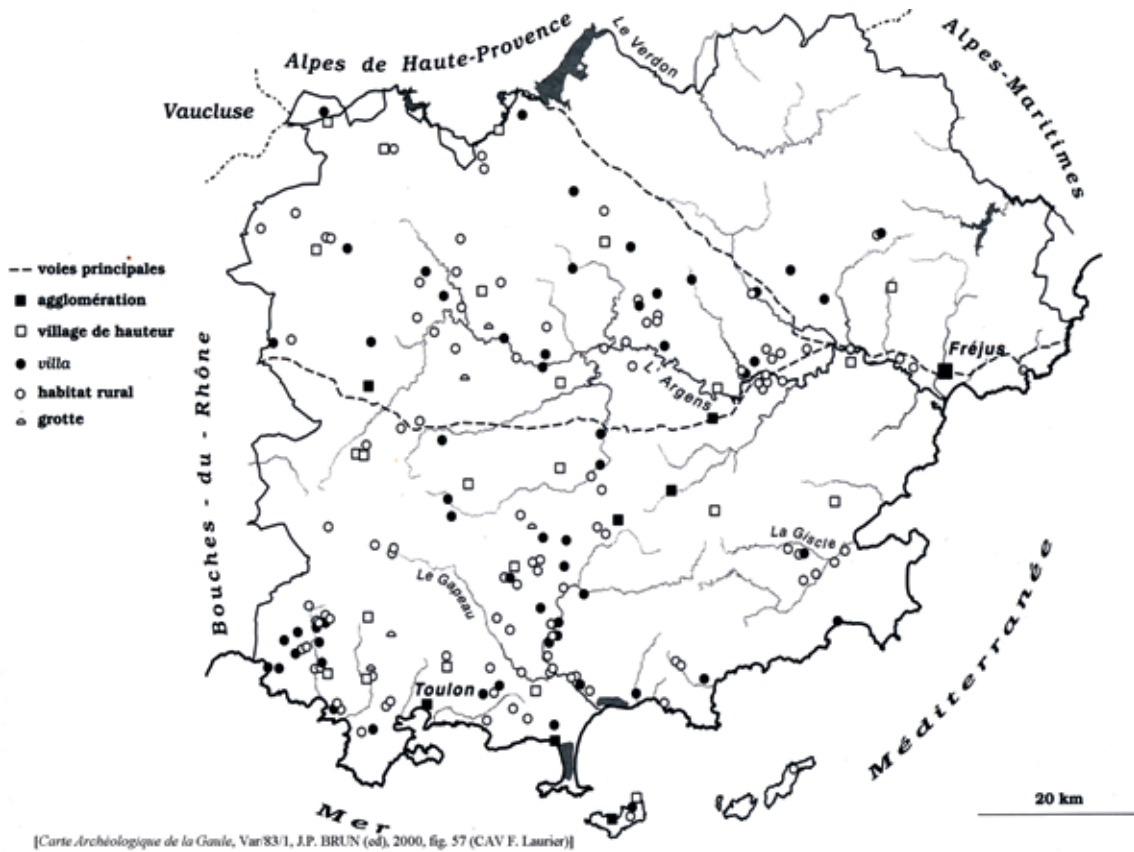
7. Saint-Blaise, church from lower quarter of agglomeration dating to 5th-6th c. (CAD M.Valenciano)



9. Saint-Blaise, plan of *domus* dated to last third of 6th c. (CAD M. Valenciano)



8. Plan of the site at Cap des Mèdes on the island of Porquerolles



10. Map of distribution of lowland and hilltop sites from 5th-6th c. in Var department

***From the second half of the 6th to the 8th century:
between decrease, decline and revival of settlements***

Based on the current knowledge, and unless it is the result of a mistake in the typo-chronological identification of certain material indicators that have gone unnoticed or have been mis-identified, hilltop occupation seems, in Provence at least, to have been affected by some sort of interruption or constriction over the course of the second half of the 6th century and even more so during the 7th century (fig. 3). The abandonment (or decrease?) of a large number of sites (20 out of the 35 excavated) raises questions about a possible crisis. Many settlements - prospering during the 5th-6th centuries - decline, or at least archaeology has some difficulty in proving their maintenance, however infinitesimal. A major site such as Saint-Blaise situated near the Berre lagoon, is partially abandoned over the course of the first half of the 7th century. A later and smaller occupation in the "upper quarter" of this agglomeration during the 7th-9th centuries is well possible, but remains little investigated.⁵⁰

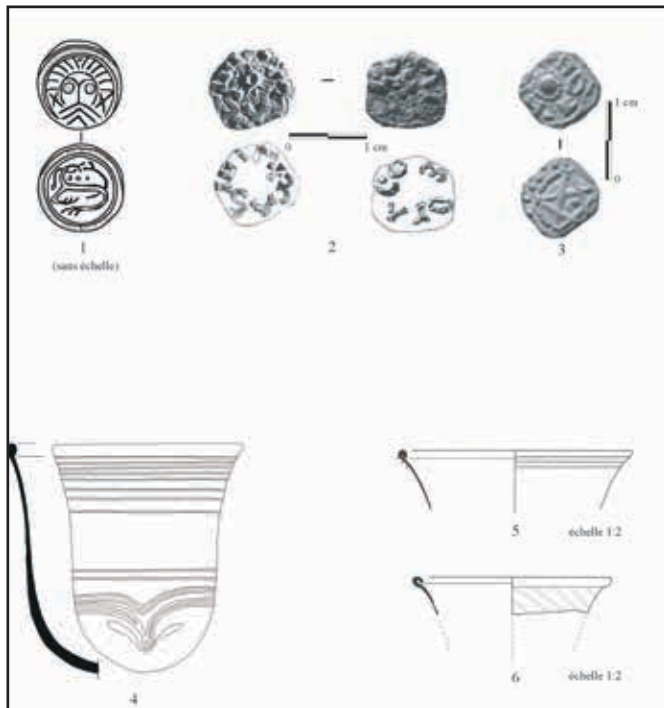
What impact did the waves of the plague of Justinian have?

The downturn of the Provençal settlement dynamics, more obvious in the 7th century (fig. 3), is not due to a problem recognising the chronological markers of the sites. Indeed, the typology of this material (ceramics of the 7th century) is relatively well understood. The idea that lowland settlements are now more dynamic and able to counterbalance the relative decay of the hilltop settlements is also to be dismissed. Since long, historians advance the disastrous demographic consequences of the waves of the "Plague of Justinian" (black death) coupled with the small pox epidemic striking during the same period.⁵¹ The Black Death occurs from the year 541 onwards in Egypt, and takes on a "world-wide" scale between the first half of the 6th century and during the 7th century. The Midi Mediterranean and Provence are hit several times: from 541-543 the ports, then in 570, 580-582, 588-591, 599-600, until at least 654 (territory of Arles).⁵² The tremendous demographic loss in the regions most exposed to the disease would explain a transfer of the economic dynamics from southern Europe towards the less affected northern parts of the continent.⁵³ To date, the Provençal cemeteries of the early Middle Ages have revealed no signs of "mass graves" indicating the hurried nature of inhumations in a context of epidemiological crisis. There is still a lot to be learnt from DNA analysis of skeletons and their teeth. They have recently revealed the presence of the Black Death bacillus (*yersinia pestis*) as the cause of several deaths in a Bavarian cemetery from the 6th century.⁵⁴ Although the extent of the catastrophe in terms of the settlements cannot be evaluated with certainty, from what we know so far, the few pieces of evidence for continued occupation of hilltop sites hint at reoccupations instead.

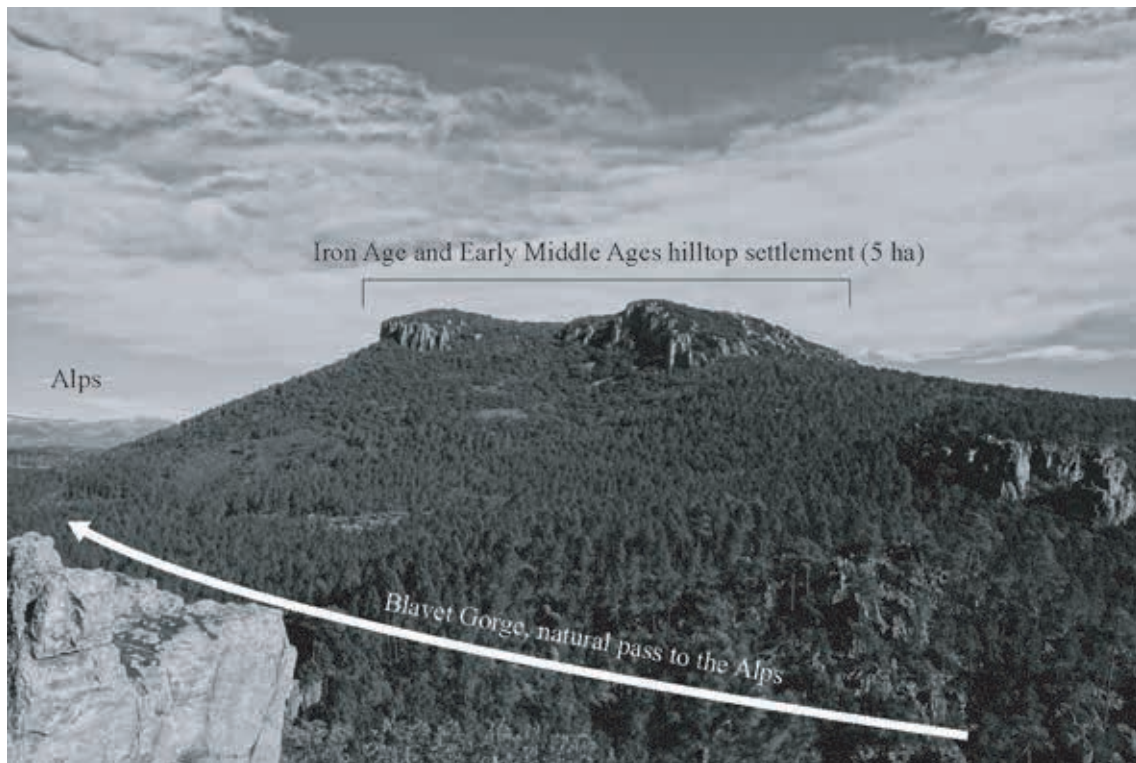
Continued occupation or revival during the 7th to the 9th centuries?

Like in other regions, the period between the 8th-9th centuries is difficult to approach, as the chronological rhythms of the settlements during this period are still uncertain. Our current perception of the early Provençal Middle Ages (decrease during the 7th-9th centuries) is therefore probably distorted - but to what extent? - by the lack of data. The sequence of occupation from the 8th-9th centuries, which is more elusive since associated with buildings often constructed using mud and perishable materials,⁵⁵ may have been missed on certain excavations both on lowland and hilltop sites. This is also due to a lack of better radiocarbon dated archaeological contexts. The over different storage facilities scattered data as well as the number of unpublished excavation reports also greatly contribute to the under-representation of the 7th and 9th centuries in the regional historiography. The recent historiographical study and the current investigation of archaeological finds nevertheless reveal a group of seven hilltop sites that present signs of occupation or reoccupation between the end of the 7th century and during the 9th century. This information has been kept quiet in a number of publications and was in part only known by local archaeologists or finds specialists.⁵⁶ While these early medieval occupations currently seem to be under-represented among the 80 hilltop sites mapped, we can be confident that the pursuit of investigations and new excavations will greatly improve our knowledge.

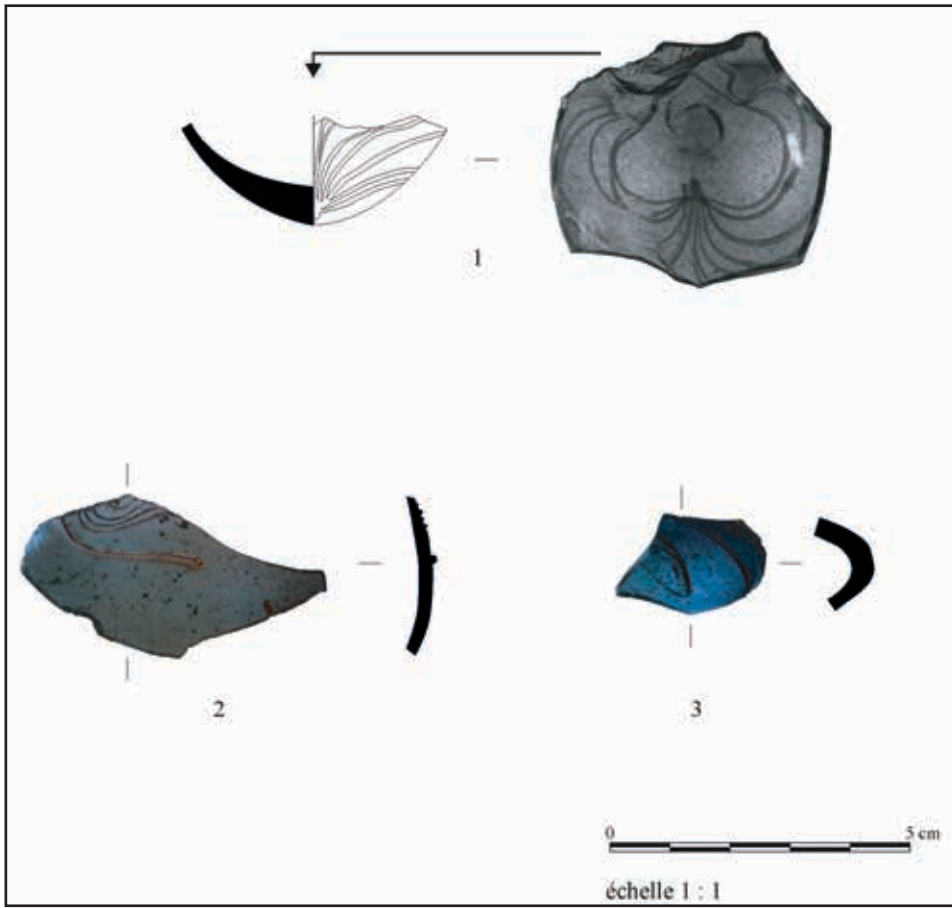
Alongside what we have gained from the understanding of the pottery in this sequence, in particular in western Provence around the Rhône,⁵⁷ coins and glass objects make it possible, when found, to envisage an occupation during the 8th-9th centuries. Evidence providing hilltop sites are mostly found in the Var (83) department and to a lesser extent in the Bouches-du-Rhône (13) (fig. 1). Given the rarity of these markers as well as the patchy nature of the observations recorded in excavation reports, it is impossible to evaluate the number of sites that were still active between the 8th and the 9th centuries as well as the nature and size of the associated occupations. The early excavations carried out on the hilltop site Saint-Estève (Évenos/83) mention the discovery of an Anglo-Saxon *sceatta* (fig. 11, no. 1)⁵⁸ similar to the ones discovered in the United Kingdom dating to the first half of the 8th century (Lundenwic in London and Hamwic in Southampton).⁵⁹ A Mar-seilles denarius IACOMO from the 8th century was found in 1971 near the Notre-Dame-de-Beauregard church (Orgon/13).⁶⁰ One of the excavation reports from Col Sainte-Anne (Simiane-Collongue/13), relates the discovery of a “glass decorated with white lattice and floral patterns”, which could be a blue-toned glass campaniform beaker (fig. 11 no. 4).⁶¹ This piece of evidence, associated with fragments of blue glass, would suggest an occupation between the second half of the 7th century and at least the 8th century.⁶² Two other excavated hilltop sites have also unveiled similar objects: Notre-Dame-de-Consolation (Jouques/13; fig. 11 no. 5, which date from the 8th-9th centuries) and Sainte-Candide (Roquebrune-sur-Argens/83; fig. 11 no. 6) in the lower Argens valley.⁶³



11. Chronological markers of 8th-9th c. discovered on hilltop sites: 1: *Sceatta* discovered at Saint-Estève in Evenos (CAD J.-A. Segura); 2-3: obol from Marseilles IACOMO and denarius from Touraine, discovered at Sainte-Candie (F. BERTONCELLO and Y. CODOU, 2005, fig. 7); 4: glass decorated with white lattice and floral patterns, from Sainte-Anne (CAD J.-A. Segura; from A. MÜLLER, 1986, fig. 1); 5-6: glass campaniform beaker (“*palm cup*”) from Notre Dame de Consolation and Sainte-Candie respectively (D. FOY and M. PICON, 2005, figs. 17, 20, p. 107).



12. View of Bayonne site (photo: J-A. Segura)



13. Glass, 7th-9th c. from the hilltop site of Bayonne, Var (CAD J-A. Segura)



14. Metal clothing accessories of the 7th-9th c. discovered in the hilltop site of Bayonne, Var (CAD J-A. Segura)

The occupation sequences from the early Middle Ages of settlements founded during the important phase of hilltop development during the 5th-6th centuries may have been misinterpreted. For example, the chronology that was suggested after the excavations of the Bayonne site in the Var (fig. 12), has long concealed the reality of an occupation during the 4th-9th centuries in terms of the historiography of the site. Between 1974 and 1985, an amateur archaeologist, G. Désirat, used unconventional excavation methods at a time when medieval archaeology was becoming institutionalised. In an article published in 1985, and given the considerably lower level of understanding of the finds at this point in time, he dated the remains to the end of the Iron Age and the end of the “Roman Period” (1st century BC to the 5th century AD).⁶⁴ The recent re-examination of the finds actually lends a chronology of between the Iron Age and the 4th-9th centuries. The glass finds, mostly bluish in colour, also indicate that this hilltop area was occupied from the 7th century at least. The finds include the bottom of a bluish lamp with white lattice decoration that can be dated from the 6th-7th centuries (fig. 13, no. 1), as well as a fragment of a bluish glass belly with white lattice decoration (fig. 13, no. 2), which evokes a 7th century bottle that was discovered at Cividale del Friuli (northern Italy).⁶⁵ Finally, a fragment of bluish coloured glass with red veins (fig. 13, no. 3) is also similar in terms of the decoration process, to the plate-glass debris discovered in a funerary context radiocarbon dated to around 875-950 at Saint-Côme-et-Saint-Damien (La Cadière-d’Azur/83).⁶⁶ Among the corpus of metal clothing accessories, there was also the discovery of at least one double-hooked clasp (fig. 14, no. 1). Other examples come from the site Saint-Estève in Évenos.⁶⁷ In southern France, these objects indicate contexts from the second half of the 7th century to the 8th century and maybe also the 9th century.⁶⁸ Another larger metal object (iron) without any obvious holes in the middle may be a firesteel (fig. 14, no. 2).

The Sainte-Candide hilltop site, which has a visual connection with the Bayonne site, has been the location of excavation for several seasons between 1996 and 2004 (fig. 15).⁶⁹ These preliminary research has showcased the *ex-novo* creation of the site over the course of the 5th-6th centuries followed by a “reoccupation” characterised by the clearing of ruins, which was then dated to the 8th century by a few tracer elements: a rim of a *palm cup* discovered on the surface (fig. 11, no. 6), an obol from Marseilles IACOMO coined at the beginning of the 8th century, possibly after 720 (fig. 11, no. 2), as well as a denarius from Touraine displaying a “pentagram with a pearled globe”, issued towards the middle of the 8th century (fig. 11, no. 3). In 2015, a recent excavation allowed to partially delimit this reoccupation in space and situate it more precisely in time. It comprises of three successive phases dated to between the 7th century and the 8th century. Using the scientific data that has improved our understanding of the sequence of occupation in Provence between 7th-9th centuries, we will now briefly discuss the results.

During a first phase of reoccupation (7th-8th centuries), the layers of collapsed material were pushed up against the truncated 5th and 6th century walls in order to con-

struct a building (fig. 16, no. 1-2B and no. 1-2C). Along the walls, the scree forms a fairly well delimited bank into which posts were wedged (fig. 16, no. 3-4). These structures hint at a mixed architecture made up of stone plinths surmounted by a wooden superstructure supported by load-bearing posts. This type of construction has been attested in Provence on sites from the year thousand⁷⁰ and in Liguria in the 7th century at the hilltop site San Antonino di Perti.⁷¹ Other evidence (an *olla* made of kaolinitic clay and decorated with a band around the rim - productions from the Rhône region) evokes a later date comprising of between the 8th and the 10th centuries.⁷² This first phase is sealed by a layer virtually devoid of any material (fig. 17).

A later phase presents an occupation layer overlying the reworked collapsed material inside the building (fig. 18). The deposit contained glass finds (mainly bluish in colour) and pottery indicating a chronology of between the second half of the 7th century to the 8th century.⁷³

The third and final phase seals the structures and the earlier layers but a large post-hole associated with a later wooden building remains visible (fig. 16, no. 4). This building was recognised partly during the excavation and discovery of around thirty more shallow and generally smaller post-holes indicating most likely the existence of a “light-weight” construction (fig. 19, no. 1 and no. 2). A number of pits surrounded by around 50 iron scoria were dug. They seem to signal the nearby presence of a metal workshop, the extent and layout of which could be established with further excavations. Once again, the presence of coarseware with convex bases and the noticeable predominance of blue glass, suggest a time span of at least the end of the 7th century to the 8th century. The two coins described above that were discovered between 2000 and 2004, and in particular the *denarius* from Touraine, determine a *terminus post-quem* of around the middle of the 8th century.

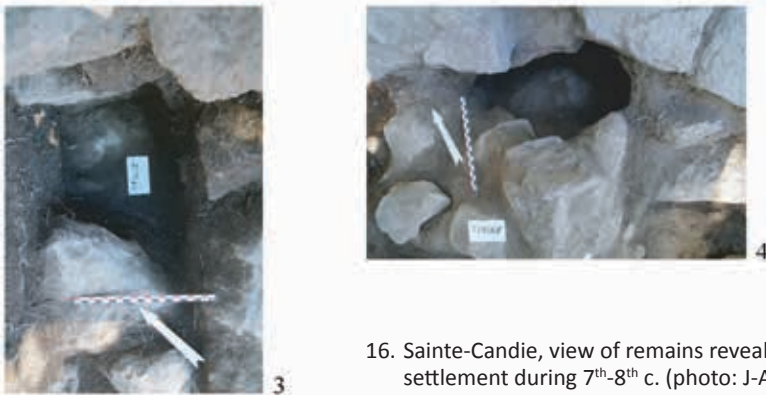
These recent results obtained from an encouraging excavation suggest that a Sainte-Candie quarter was indeed occupied around the 8th century, and probably extends significantly beyond the limits of the one area that has been excavated.

Prospects: for a systematic analysis of hilltop sites

Given the inevitable documentary pitfalls associated with the dated and rare instance of often incomplete archaeological excavations in highland areas, this particular assessment of Provençal hilltop settlements from the 5th-9th centuries is only the beginning of a synthesis. Nevertheless, it does investigate for the first time across a wider chronological horizon (4th-9th centuries) the shifting pace and cyclical factors that may have determined the development of hilltop settlements during the first centuries of the Middle Ages. It is indeed a huge challenge to endeavour to improve our understanding of this settlement phase preceding the *incastellamento*, better documented in terms of excavations and texts. Hopefully, future excavations will refine our understanding of



15. View of Sainte-Candie site (photo: J-A. Segura)



16. Sainte-Candie, view of remains revealing the reorganisation of settlement during 7th-8th c. (photo: J-A. Segura)



17. Sainte-Candie, view of layer devoid of any material (photo: J-A. Segura)



18. Sainte-Candie, view of remains of a floor surface from 7th-8th c. (photo: J-A. Segura)



19. View of remains of new building constructed with perishable materials from around 8th century (photo: J-A. Segura)

the chronology of the sites (decrease of the 7th century settlements followed by occasional reoccupations?). With a view to the analysis of concomitant factors, the study of infrastructures (churches, enclosure walls, elite dwellings) is desirable given our lack of knowledge of certain aspects suspected to have played a role in the development of hilltop sites (such as the part of the Church during the 5th-6th centuries, the rate of construction on the settlements, the strengthening of defences during the 6th century, and the move of the elite from the *villa* to highland areas). The barriers between the study of hilltop sites and lowland sites in Provence must also be broken down, as preventive archaeology has concentrated much more on the latter. We still need to clarify if the sites that were still active during the 8th-9th centuries may have partly instigated the spreading of castles in the countryside between the 10th-11th centuries in a climatic context that favoured the expansion of *ager* and the opening up of pioneering frontiers. In order to produce a historical discourse, it is hoped that there will soon be a systematic analysis of hilltop sites that goes beyond the scope of a thematic approach and instead, using pluridisciplinary teams, as has been done for the study of the *incastellamento* of the 10th-14th centuries.

- 1 *Les Campagnes de la Gaule à la fin de l'Antiquité*, P. Ouzoulias, C. Pellecier, C. Raynaud, P. Van Ossel and P. Garmy (eds.), Antibes, APDCA, 2001; See also P. VAN OSSEL, "De la "villa" au village: les prémices d'une mutation", 2006, <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00090599/document> (accessed 03 June 2015).
- 2 *Aux origines de la paroisse rurale en Gaule méridionale (IV^e-IX^e siècles)*, C. Delaplace (ed.), Paris, Errance, 2005. For Provence in this book: Y. CODOU, "Le paysage religieux et les paroisses rurales dans l'espace provençal", pp. 82-97.
- 3 For knowledge gained over the last decade on settlement dynamics in southern France: L. SCHNEIDER, "De la fouille des villages abandonnés à l'archéologie des territoires locaux. L'étude des systèmes d'habitat du haut Moyen Âge en France méridionale (V^e-X^e siècle): nouveaux matériaux, nouvelles interrogations", in: *Trente ans d'archéologie médiévale en France. Un bilan pour un avenir*, J. Chapelot (ed.), Société d'Archéologie Médiévale, 2010, pp. 133-161.
- 4 P.-A. FEVRIER, "Problème de l'habitat du Midi méditerranéen à la fin de l'Antiquité et dans le haut Moyen Âge", *Jahrbuch des Römisch-Germanischen Zentralmuseums Mainz*, 25, 1978, pp. 208-249.
- 5 Boosted since the year 2000 by the LA3M Axe 1 project (UMR7298 AMU-CNRS) directed by Laurent Schneider, the research dedicated to hilltop settlements between the 5th - 9th centuries, which is taught in our university, has incited a number of students in Provence to carry out their own research and in particular two doctoral theses: M. VALENCIANO, *Saint-Blaise / Ugium de l'agglomération tardo-antique au castrum médiéval. Relectures et regards nouveaux*, doctoral thesis, Aix-Marseille Université, november 2015; J.-A. SEGURA, *De la plaine aux sommets, habitats et dynamiques paysagères en basse Provence durant les V^e-X^e s.: l'exemple du massif des Maures*, Université de Caen Basse-Normandie (doctoral thesis in progress).
- 6 Dynamics of the Provençal landscape outlined in the catalogues of the exhibitions in Ename (Belgium, May 2014) and Montmajour (France, September 2015): A. CONSTANT, "Aan de poorten van *Francia Media*, bij de Middellandse Zee. Het Provençaalse landschap, tussen de efernis van de klassieke oudheid en de vernieuwing van het jaar 1000", in: *De Erfenis van Karel de Grote, 814-2014*, D. Callebaut, H. Van Cuyck (eds), Gent, Provinciebestuur Oost-Vlaanderen, 2014, pp.

- 233-254; *Le paysage provençal: entre héritage antique et renouveau de l'An Mil*, A. CONSTANT (ed.), Aix-en-Provence, Aix-Marseille Université/LA3M (UMR7298, AMU/CNRS), octobre 2015.
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