

Aristocratic Celtic grave goods discovered by Inrap now being restored by *Conservare* (Compiègne)

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Of the 300 excavations conducted yearly by Inrap, approximately 30% concern the Iron Age, a period which is currently the subject of intense research activity. While we cannot reduce the study of Celtic society to its elites, mortuary rites and aristocratic burials still offer the most spectacular discoveries. Inrap recently excavated several individuals buried with their ceremonial or combat chariots. The metal objects contained in these graves reveal the technical mastery and artistic inspiration of the Celtic artisans.

A large number of these objects are now undergoing restoration at the *Conservare* Institut (formerly IRRAP) in Compiègne.

Orval

The unique grave of Orval (Manche) was discovered during the summer of 2006. It is the westernmost “chariot grave” from the end of the Early La Tène period known in Europe and also the only one from Celtic Gaul containing horses.

All that is left of the two-wheeled chariot deposited in the grave is related to the wheels, the connections between the axle and the body, and, exceptionally; rein-rings.

The bronze head of two chariot pins is decorated in bas-relief with one face viewed straight on and profiles on either side. These pieces belong to the “plastic” style dated to the end of the Early La Tène period (around 350-350 BC).

The two identical harnesses are exceptional in that they are decorated with a large amount of coral, an exotic material originating in the Mediterranean. One was found in connection with a horse head (with only the teeth preserved in the acidic soil), while the other was deposited in a leather sack more than one metre from a second horse head.

All that remains of the deceased human are his weapon and a few personal objects, including an unusually long iron spear head (nearly 70 cm), a sword in its sheath and a very beautiful gold ring.

Livry-Louvercy

Nearly 200 Celtic chariot graves have been discovered in Champagne since the 19th century. That of Livry-Louvercy, excavated in September 2006, contained the body of a 15 to 16 year old adolescent, thus proving that social status was already acquired at this young age.

Dated to the 5th century BC, this grave was constructed for a two-wheeled chariot and contains a bronze bracelet and brooch, harness elements (2 bits, 2 bronze phalera with a coral cabochon), a ceramic drinking service (pots and goblets) and an offering of a gigot of mutton.

The grave pit was opened during the Celtic period, not to be pillaged, but to collect the highly refined wheel coverings, which were considered to be of great value at the time.



Vasseny

There were forty graves in the Vasseny cemetery (Aisne), which dates from 450-350 BC. Most of the dead belonged to the elite class. The objects that accompanied them into the after-life are specific to their sex and rank in Gallic society.

The men are equipped with their weapons: daggers, swords, shields, lances and javelins. These objects are sometimes accompanied by tools and toilet utensils (tweezers, razors, etc.). The women wore torcs, brooches, bracelets, bronze earrings, and beads of amber or two-toned glass. The bronze torcs (wide rigid necklaces) were often decorated with coils and, in one case, coral.

Two men and one woman were buried in three chariot graves, which shows that they had the highest hierarchical rank of their community. As at Livry, the wheel coverings were removed during the Gallic period.

One of the women wore a small bronze pendant decorated with the image of a person whose legs form a lyre. Human representations are rare during this period, and this evocation of a lyre is the earliest known from the Celtic world.

Raillencourt-Sainte-Olle

Within a 925 m² funerary enclosure, seven incineration graves dated to the 2nd and 1st centuries BC were found at Raillencourt-Sainte-Olle (Nord). Four of these graves were organized around one central grave. They are exceptional because of the great diversity of the objects found. A lot of pottery as well as bronze pots and cauldrons were found, along with andirons with zoomorphic heads and wooden buckets encircled with bronze and finely decorated. These latter were used for libations during religious ceremonies. The presence of a bronze pot imported from Italy is of great interest. Each of these burials was surrounded by a colonnade that must have allowed them to be covered. Around this ensemble, the three other smaller graves contained abundant and well preserved ceramic objects.

The Celtic Aristocracy of the La Tene period

Archaeologists have little information concerning the hierarchy of the Celt elites. An aristocratic burial can nonetheless be defined by the presence of complex funerary architecture (tumulus, chamber), the presence of prestige symbols, notably a chariot or weapons, or objects imported from the Mediterranean world.

Conservare

In 2006, Conservare succeeded the *Institut de Restauration et de Recherches Archéologiques et Paléométallurgiques* (IRRAP). With 27 years of experience, Conservare, a member of the national restoration network since 1989, is overseen by both the Musées de France and the sub-direction of Archaeology SDARCHETIS. It is supported by the Conseil Générale of the Oise Department and the town of Compiègne. Since its creation, the Institute has broadened its activities to include the treatment of art objects and technical and ethnographic metal objects. In 1991, it was the first Institute to undertake preventive conservation missions. In 2005, a laboratory for the treatment of ceramic and glass objects was inaugurated. The team is currently 15 strong, including 8 restorers and one researcher.

Conservare treats nearly 2,000 objects per year, half originating from museums in France and half from preventive archaeology. Some notable examples are projects realized for the department of the Arts of Islam of the Louvre Museum, the Musée de la Marine, and numerous local museums, including those of Amiens, Beauvais, Charleville-Mézières, Châteaudun, Compiègne, Moulin, Soissons, Reims, Senlis, Rouen and others.

In the context of preventive archaeology, Conservare has conserved objects from numerous sites along the TGV high speed train line to the East, and treated and conserved objects from Gallic graves.

Inrap

With 1,800 collaborators and researchers, Inrap is the largest archaeological research structure in France and one of the most important in Europe. This national public research institution undertakes the majority of archaeological evaluations and excavations in partnership with private and public developers, a total of nearly 2,500 sites per year in mainland France and its overseas territories.

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