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Horses in the war at Bar-sur-Aube

At Bar-sur-Aube (Aube), in 2013, an Inrap team realized an archaeological excavation in advance of the construction of a new road and a housing development, under the curation of the State (Drac Champagne). Bar-sur-Aube is the Antique *Segessera*, a secondary Gallo-Roman agglomeration of the city of Les Lingons. The aim of the archaeologists was to verify the presence of the road of Agrippa, the eastern branch of the Ocean road represented on the “Tabula Peutingeriana” (a map of the roads and cities of the Roman Empire dated to the 4th century AD). On this occasion, astonishing trenches filled with horse remains were discovered.

Trenches and horses

The excavation first uncovered 45 meters of a long, zig-zag shaped trench that extended beyond the excavation limits. Inside this narrow space more than forty horse carcasses were found. Twelve of them were carefully excavated along 12 meters. These very corpulent draft horses were piled on top of each other and dragged to the edge of the trench before being carefully lowered into this improvised pit. The head of each animal was placed on the chest of the preceding one and the limbs stretched toward to the center of the excavation. The regularity of this position indicates that great attention, or even respect, was paid to these horses. They were all buried within a short period of time. Some still had their horseshoes on, while others were killed on the ground by a blow behind the ears. The only artifacts found in the trenches are horseshoes and harness buckle.

Napoleon wars or global conflicts?

What tragic event could be associated with this tomb?

From a historic perspective, the archaeologists immediately think of the battlefields of the Napoleon wars. The battle of Bar-sur-Aube took place on 27 February 1814 and confronted the French forces and the “*armée de Bohème*” (an Austrian, Russian and Bavarian coalition), on a field located in Ailleville, only 1 kilometer west of the excavation. Most of the forces present were composed of artillery batteries on horseback and the Kellermann cavalry division lost more than 400 men in a single assault against the Russian defenses. However, this hypothesis is not supported by the zig-zag shape of the trenches, which does not correspond to a movement war of the early 19th century.

A second hypothesis is based on the presence at Bar-sur-Aube of the headquarters of the future Marshall Joffre in 1914. The city could thus have been secured by fortification lines, possibly including these military trenches installed a few hundred meters ahead of one of the main doors to the city (the Notre-Dame door). Wounded horses arriving from the front, located a few dozen kilometers to the north, would thus have been cared for in a veterinary hospital specifically devoted to these unfortunate war companions (Blue Cross).

Meanwhile, a detailed study of written documents, a study of the bones and the burial conditions of the carcasses favors a third hypothesis, which is that these are the civil defense trenches installed during the Second World War. The presence of a site for horse requisition by the occupation troops and a German veterinary hospital (Pferdelazareth) at Bar-sur-Aube in 1940-41 have also been demonstrated. The trauma suffered by the horses did not correspond to consequences of a bombing, or to those of an intentional extermination, but probably to those of a



fire. No inhabitant present during this period has any memory of this incident, but, in the last days of the German occupation the civil population of Bar-sur-Aube had to deal with many other upheavals.

The Agrippa road

The excavation showed that the road was built on a solid slab foundation constructed during the Augustinian period, shortly after the Conquest. Though the width of the driving section was no more than a few meters, the right of way of this strategic communication route reached thirty meters, comprising a large land hold on which no obstacle or installation could inhibit the circulation of carriages or riders. The use of this road during the Middle Ages is confirmed by the presence of numerous horseshoes that were removed and discarded in deep ruts. During this period, heavy circulation and poor maintenance of the road led to the deterioration and levelling of the Antique foundation. A study of the horseshoes and pot sherds found in the ruts dug out by the last carriage wheels confirms that the road was used over a long period.

The excavation of the site of Les Varennes thus dispelled an archaeological controversy concerning the Ocean road in the Aube region and adds a new page to the modern history of Bar-sur-Aube. It also shows the difficulty of interpreting some remains and the events underlying them through archaeology alone. At the site of les Varennes at Bar-sur-Aube, horseshoes lost on the Medieval road, along with those still attached to horses that died while defending France, once again illustrate the specific relationship that has linked humans and horses since their domestication.

Inrap

With nearly 2000 collaborators and researchers, Inrap is the largest archaeological research structure in France and one of the most important in Europe. Each year, this national research institute realizes approximately 1,500 archaeological diagnostic operations and 250 excavations in partnership with private and public developers in metropolitan France and its overseas territories. Its missions also include the scientific exploitation of the results and the diffusion of archaeological knowledge to the public.

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