THE BELL BEAKER CREMATIONS AT GENLIS (BOURGOGNE, FRANCE)

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Abstract: The two cremation burials of Genlis, the Nicolot are outstanding representations of the Bell Beaker period for the East of France and Burgundy region. Very few cremation graves are attested in Western Europe and the Genlis burials can certainly attest to cultural links with Central Europe where this type of funerary practice is better documented.

Key words: France, Burgundy, Bell beakers, graves, cremation, copper dagger, ceramics.

1. Introduction

The site at Genlis, in Burgundy, lies to the southeast of the Dijon urban area in a large alluvial plain fed by the waters of the Tille and the Ouche, tributaries of the Saône (*Fig. 1*). The excavation of the cemetery at Le Nicolot, Genlis, took place in 2013, and involved a surface area of about two hectares (*Fig. 2*). This cemetery had been occupied from the end of the First to the beginning of the Second Iron Age. Following their excavation, two graves can be dated to the Bell Beaker period (labelled UF 24 and M8). These graves were located at the north and the south of the cemetery, at roughly three hundred metres from each other (*Fig. 2*). Grave UF 24 was a small adapted pit whereas Grave M8 was part of a complex monument, made of postholes and ditches.

2. The box cremation, UF 24

UF 24 was found following mechanical stripping of an undated enclosure (UF 26). A copper dagger blade along with ceramic sherds appeared on the surface. The structure consists of a square pit, measuring 55 cm on each side, levelled by ploughing and re-cut on the eastern side by the enclosure ditch (*Fig. 3*). As a result, the structure was not complete. It seems that only the bottom of the pit survived, to a depth of 6 cm. The edges of the north-western quarter were only visible thanks to the tenacity of a dark stain. The cutting in that area of the structure had completely disappeared. The bottom of the pit was very uneven, and formed by small hollows.

2.1 The fill of the pit

A longitudinal cut was made from east to west, crossing the pit and the ditch in order to better understand the filling of the structure (*Fig. 4*). The stratigraphy indicates several fillings. All of the bone material was found in trapped in two layers. The upper filling is composed of a brown sandy-clay homogenous and friable silt, mixed with gravel and pebbles (layer 1), where the dagger blade and a flint tool (fire-lighter) were found. The lower layer, less sandy and with less gravel, contained an archer's wristguard (layer 2). The fill of the western part of the pit was composed of a yellow-brown sandy-clay homogenous and friable silt, mixed with gravel and pebbles (layer 3).

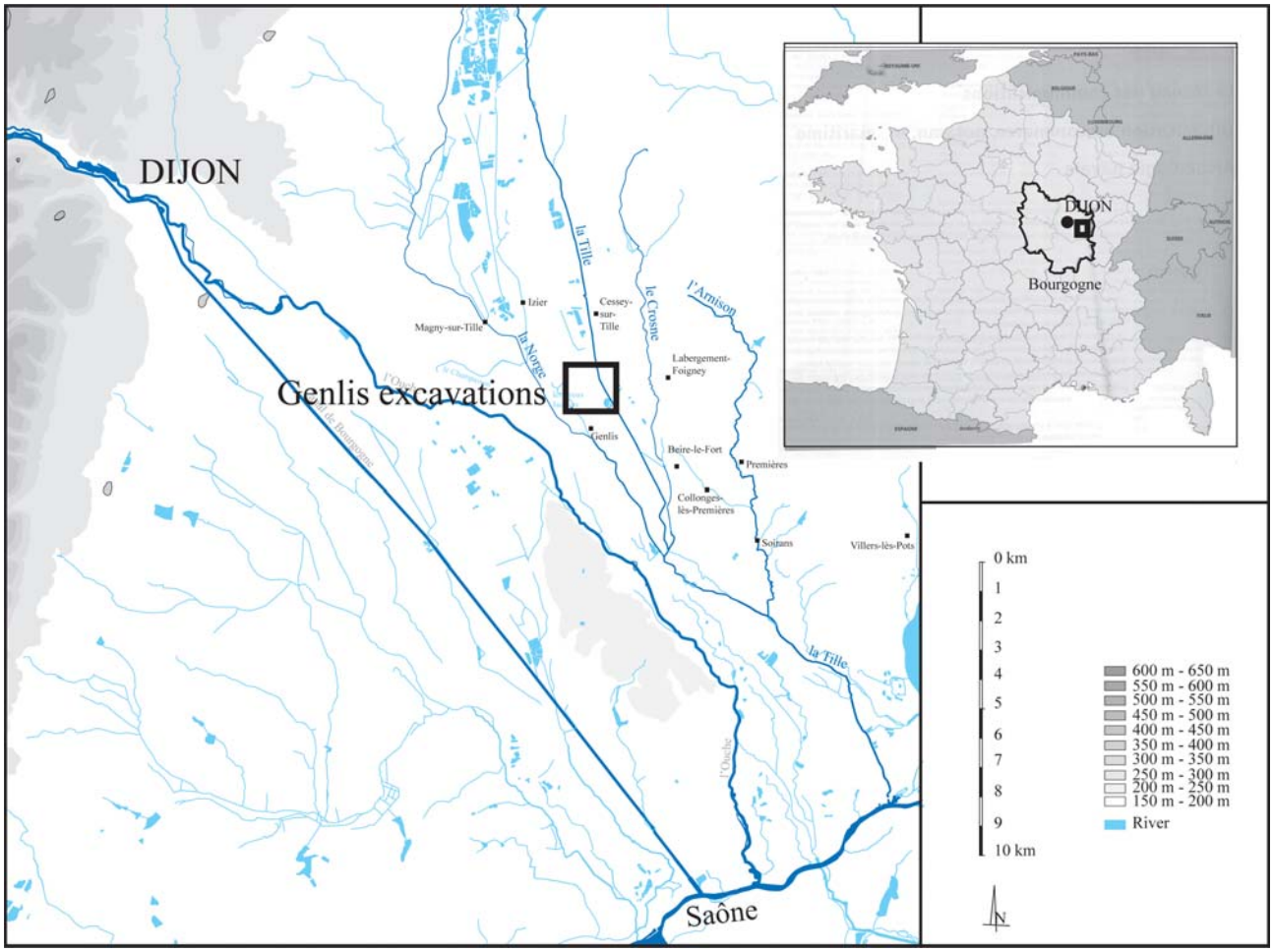


Fig. 1. *The geographical location of the cemetery at Genlis, le Nicolot (map by R. Labeaune, Inrap).*

2.2 The human bone

All of the bone deposit was found together in the eastern part of the pit and away from the ditch. The cremated human bone fragments were associated with unburnt animal bones. The cremation encloses the osseous remains of an individual of adult height, of undetermined sex, weighing in all 240,2 g. All of the anatomical regions are represented, yet with a strong preference for skull fragments and in contrast to a smaller proportion from the limbs, which suggests selection recovery from the funeral pyre (*Fig. 5*). Most of the garments are white-coloured, indicating a cremation temperature higher than 650 °C for at least 1,5 hours (*Hummel et al. 1988*, 179). The bone fragmentation varies from weak to high, but the majority of the pieces measure from two to four centimeters in length.

2.3 The funerary offerings and furniture

All of the funerary objects were found in the eastern half of the pit, brought together at 14 cm from the ditch and at 25 cm from the western edge of the pit. A copper dagger blade with a flint fire-lighter and some sherds of pottery were found above the cremated bones, at the level of surface stripping (*Fig. 4*). An archer's shale wristguard was found under the human and animal bones, lying on the bottom of the pit.

The pottery fragments came from a single decorated beaker, of which only the rim and the neck could be restored. The incised and combed decoration forms a horizontal band of hatched triangles (*Fig. 6*). This is a classic decoration belonging to the final Bell Beaker phase in Burgundy and can be classified with the Burgundy-Jura production group (*Salanova – Ducreux, 2005*). The shale archer's wristguard is a simple style, with a double central perforation. Objects of this type are not numerous in the region: a fragment of a wristguard with four perforations was found in a domestic deposit at the site of Genlis, La Mousseniére (*Fig. 6*). Archers' wristguards are relatively rare in Burgundy and the one found in cremation UF 24 is the first of its type. The small copper dagger is also exceptional for the region, and it is the first metallic object

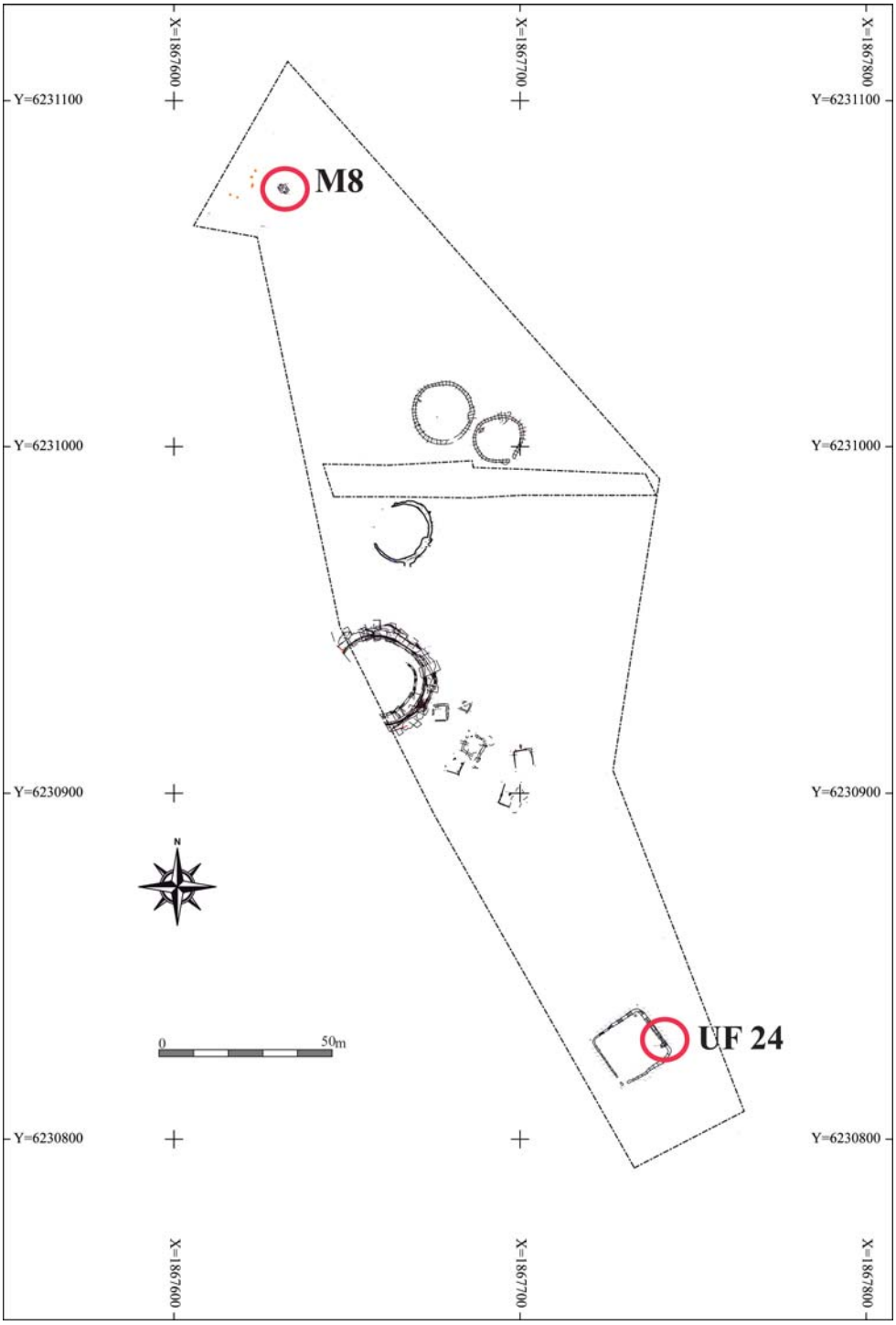


Fig. 2. *Plan of the early Iron Age cemetery at Genlis, Le Nicolot, and the position of the two Bell Beaker cremations.*

to have been found in a grave (of this period). Some (similar) daggers have been found in Burgundy, all unstratified (*Fig. 6*). Lastly, the flint fire-lighter is also the first of its type to have been found in a funerary context in the region. Flint is present, however, in the funerary assemblage of the Longvic tomb at Les Quétinières, but only in the form of a small flake found near the hands of the deceased. The fauna deposit is composed of the fox and pig remains. The fox bones belong to a single anatomical group although it was not possible to determine whether the initial deposit was a complete or partial individual. The pig bones are those of the foot of an animal a few weeks' old. It is possible that some burnt animal bones may have been mixed with the burnt human remains.

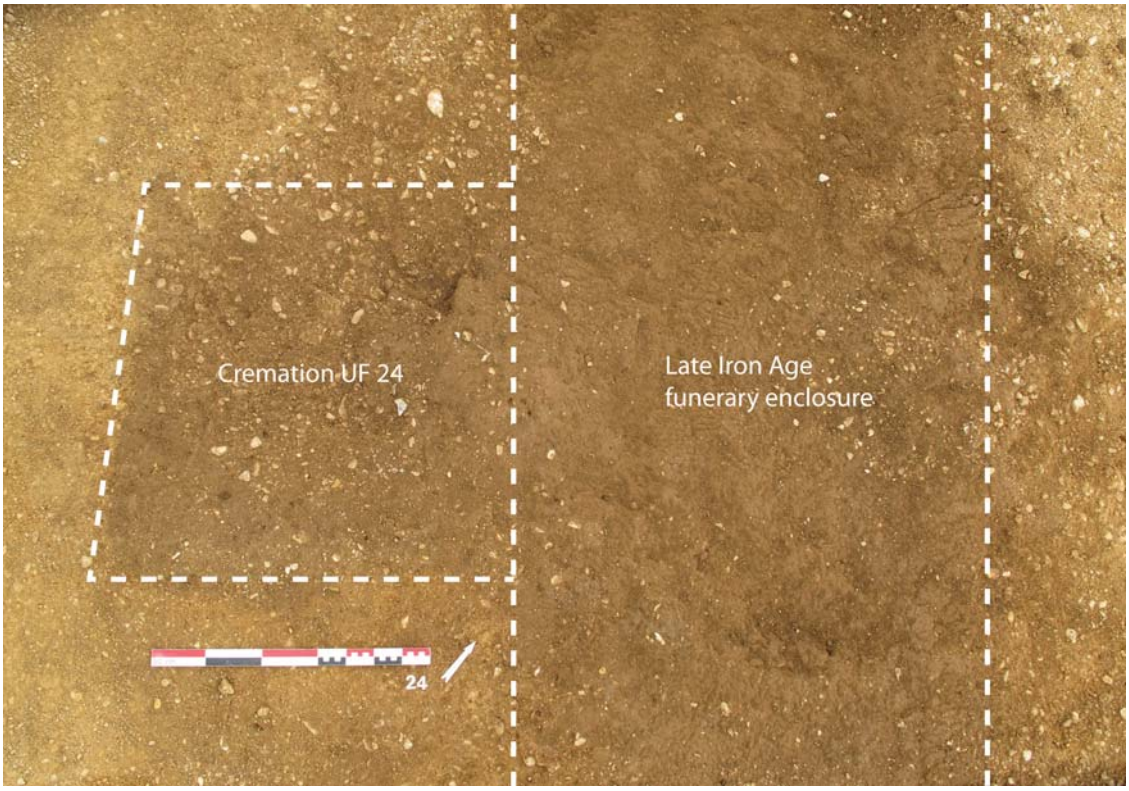


Fig. 3. *View of UF 24, cut by the La Tène ditch UF 26 (photograph by L. Christin)*

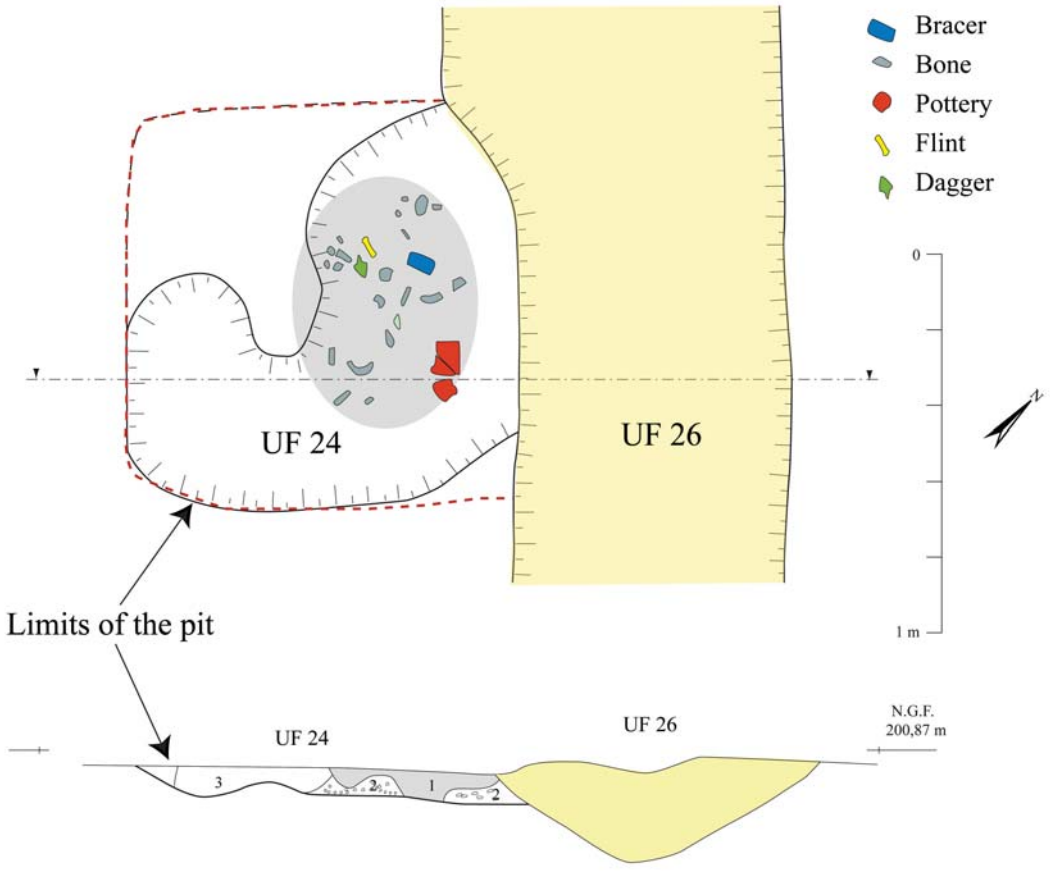


Fig. 4. *Plan and section of UF 24 and UF 26 (illustration by L. Christin and Y. Amrane)*

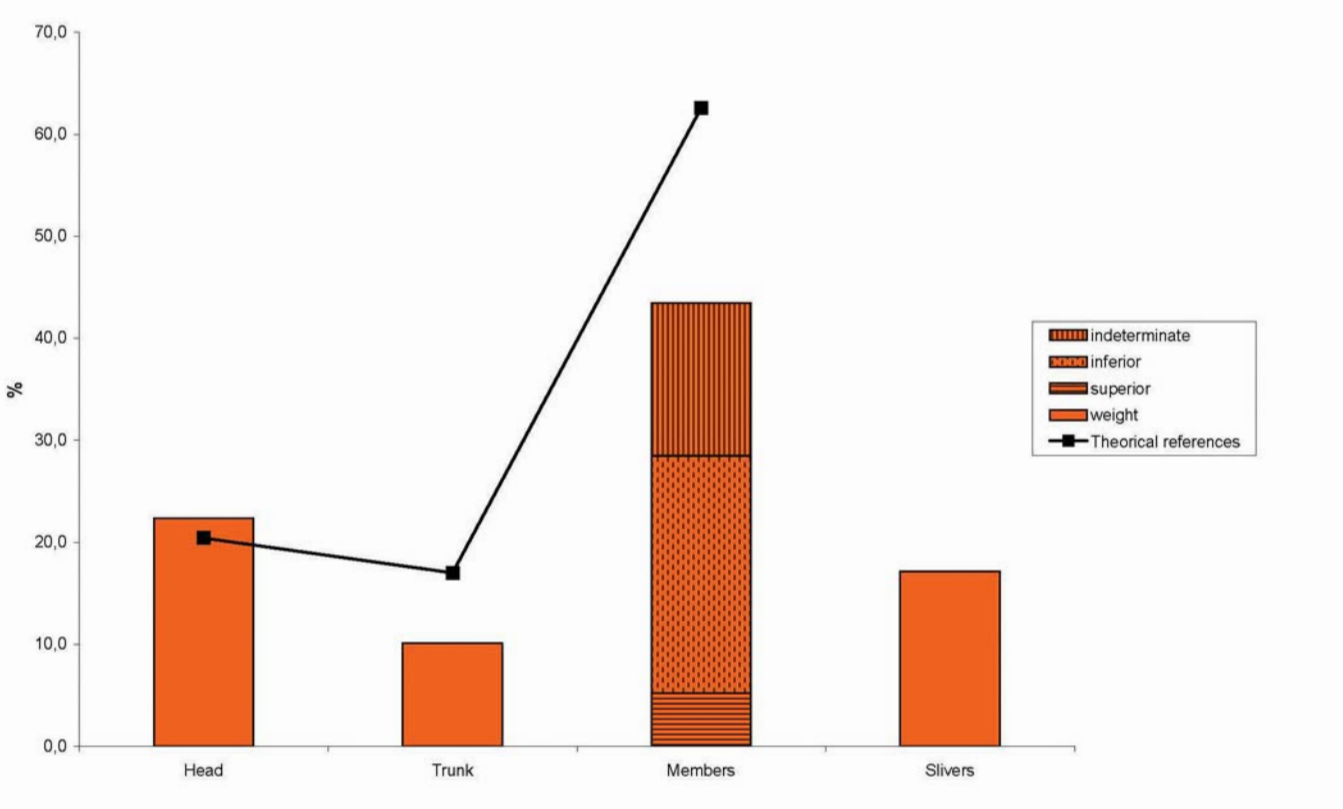


Fig. 5. *Calculated values of the various anatomical regions represented in UF 24 compared to the reference weight established by Krogman (1978); (diagram by L. Christin).*

2.4 Interpretation of the structure

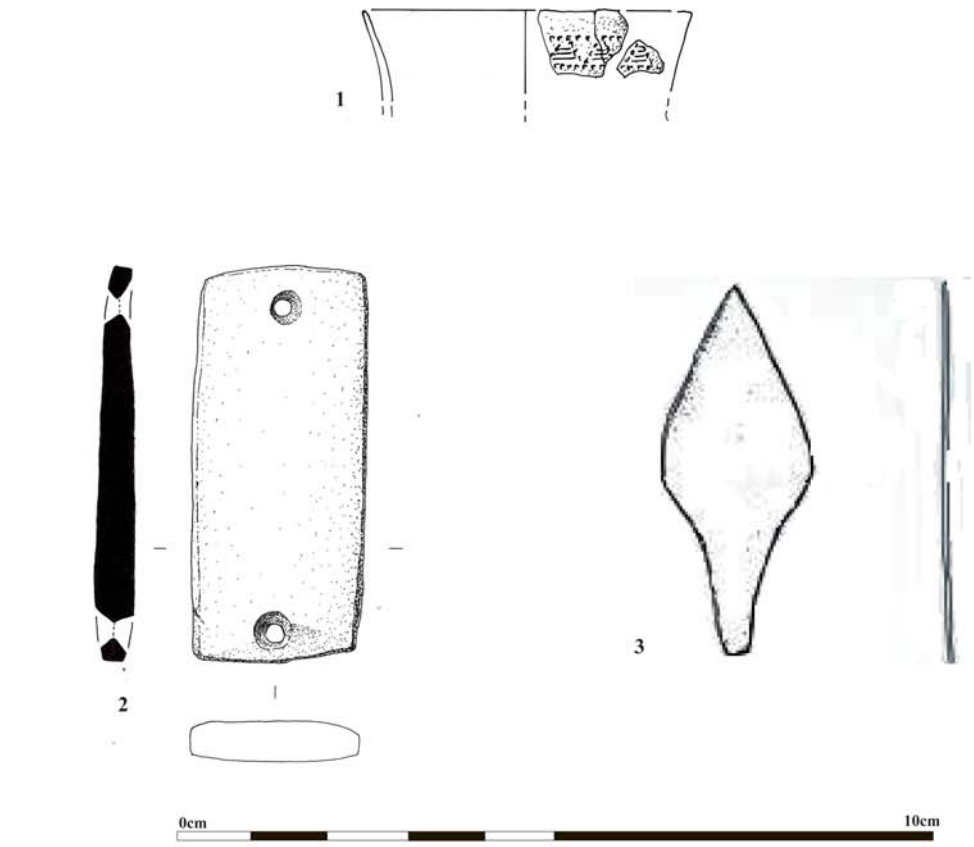
The observation of the various stratigraphic fills and the arrangement of the objects lead to the supposition that there may have been several containers present. The concentration of the bones suggests that there had been a flexible container in perishable material that held the cremated human bone remains. Furthermore, the difference between the fills, the alignment effects seen mainly on the surface and the stratigraphic arrangement above the ceramic sherds, the dagger blade and the fire-lighter, all suggest a possible solid container, such as a box in perishable material. The box would have enclosed the small bag of human bone, placed above the archer's wristguard and with the other objects placed upon it. A space would thus have existed between the box and the wets wall of the pit, leaving room for the deposition of perishable offerings (*Fig. 7*). This interpretation must remain hypothetical, in view of the tenuousness of the evidence and the heavy levelling of the structure.

3. The monument with cremation, M8

Monument M8 was found to have a complex shape (*Fig. 8*). It was made up of a combination of posts and pits of an undetermined function spread more or less symmetrically following an east-west axis, creating a generally rectangular edifice. The structure was preserved to a height of 25 cm, and had probably been much eroded. Two oblong pits indicate the two longer sides (UF 27 and UF 28). These are framed on the western side by six cuttings (UF 15, 16, 17, 18, 29 and 32) and on the eastern side by five cuttings (UF 19, 20, 21, 22 and 23), all more or less circular but of variable depth, between 10 and 25 cm (*Fig. 9*). The oblong pits are of asymmetrical shape along their longitudinal axis and measure roughly 100 cm in length with a maximum of 50 cm in width.

3.1 The fills

The filling of the whole of the monument was not homogeneous and variations could be observed even within the different construction units (*Figs. 8, 9*). Generally, the sediment is a compact reddish-brown silty clay. It includes micro-



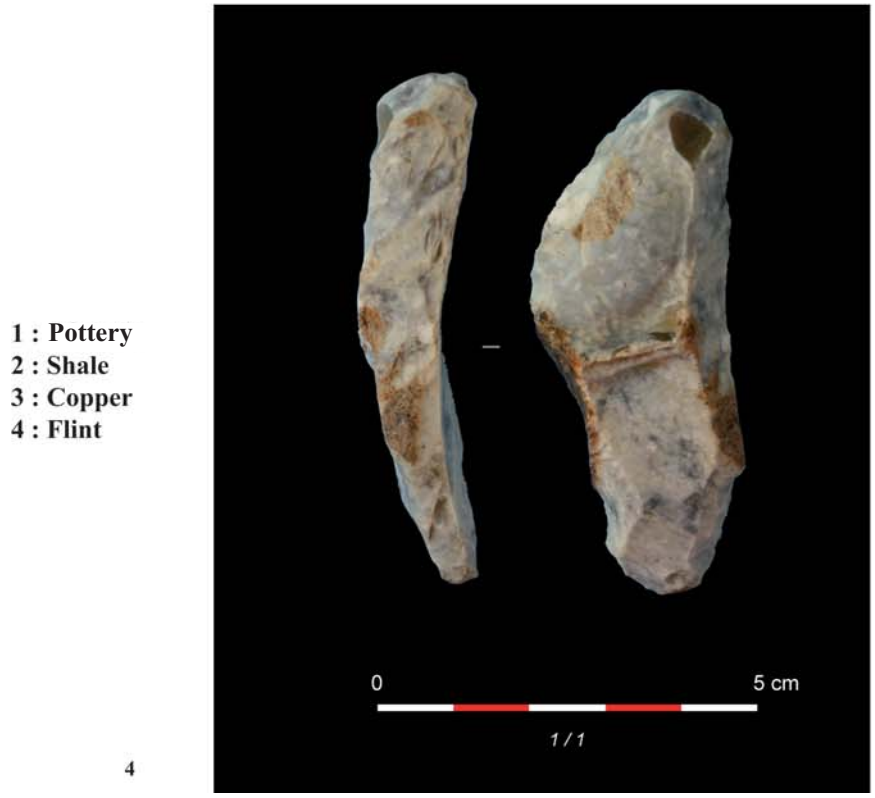


Fig. 6. *The funeral offerings with the cremation grave UF 24 (illustrations by: F. Ducreux and F. Gauchet, Inrap).*

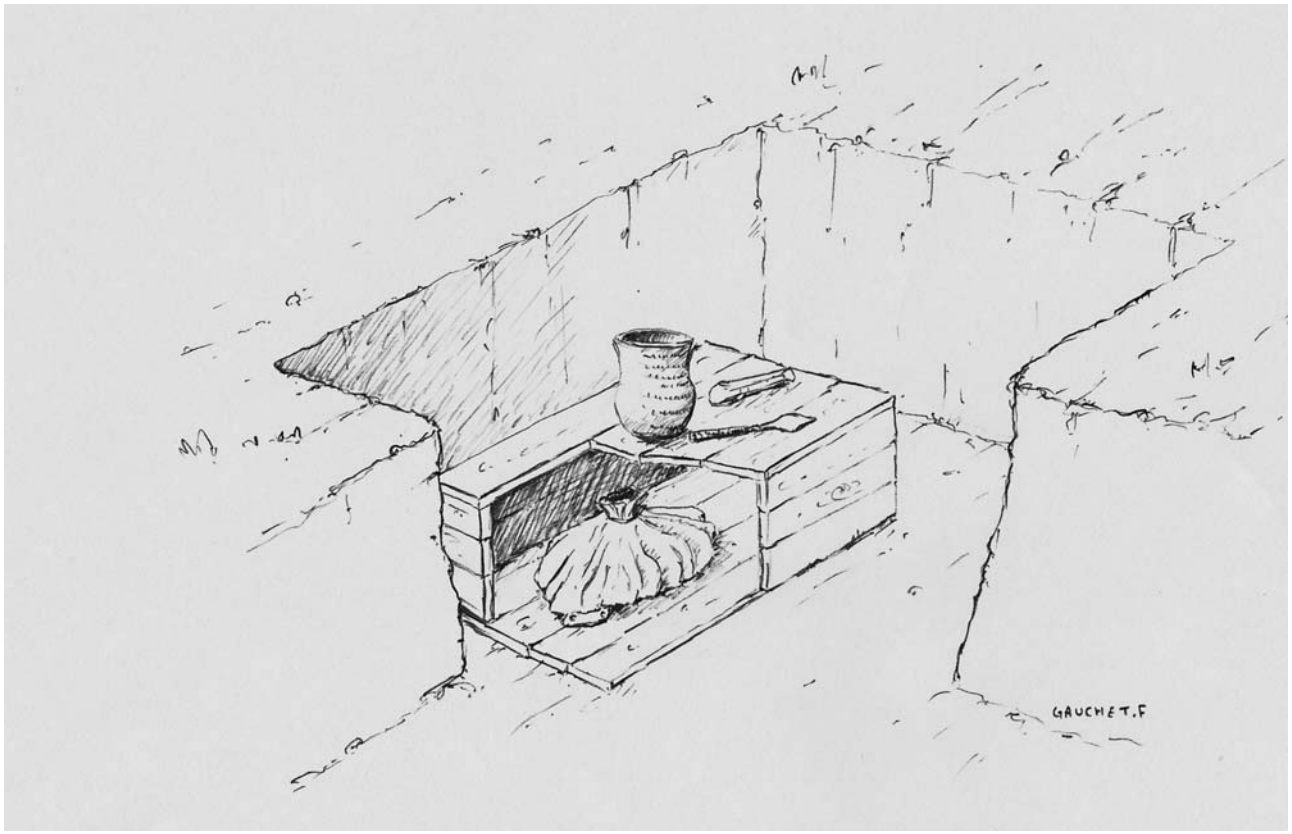


Fig. 7. *Hypothetical reconstruction of UF 24 with the various objects in and on the box (illustration by F. Gauchet).*

fragments of bone (burnt or unburnt), charcoal and terra cotta, whose density increases towards the centre of the structure. At the same time, the fills in the middle are of much darker colour, and with a much higher density of charcoal, terracotta, reddish burnt earth, bone and pottery. Some areas can also be seen in plan: the highest density of burnt bone and pottery was found in the north-eastern corner, while the fauna was found mostly in the south-eastern corner. The areas of reddish burnt earth were mainly in the south-western corner. This large variety of fills seems to indicate that the post-holes and pits were filled with what had been in the middle of the structure, during the gradual destruction of the monument.

3.2 The burnt human bone

Some of the burnt bones were stolen during a theft from the site and have been reconstituted from memory. As a result, the corpus is incomplete, as are the analysis results, and these should thus be taken with caution. The entire bone deposit weighs 26.3 g. This small quantity is not enough for a wholly reliable interpretation. Nevertheless, we can observe that all the anatomical regions are represented and in this sense are fairly homogenous (*Fig. 10*). All the bone remains are white coloured, indicating a cremation temperature higher than 650 °C for at least 1,5 hours (*Hummel et al. 1988*, 179). The fragmentation of the bones can be described as high, since the majority are less than 2 cm in length. No osteological duplication has been recognised. The robustness and general aspect of the bone fragments is fairly homogenous and does not suggest any incompatibility. Thus the grave seems to have been that of a single individual, who was a tall adolescent or an adult of undetermined sex. No indications of the state of health or other physical variations have been identified.

3.3 The offerings

At least two vessels were deposited on the pyre, one of which was obviously burnt. The other vessel shows no clear traces of burning, but is also very incomplete. It is possible that it was only burnt at the base, which was not recovered in the excavation. The two vessels are beakers with an S-shaped profile, a long neck and a short body, and fit well with the typology of Bell Beakers in Burgundy (*Fig. 11*). By contrast, the corded decoration used on both vessels, in the form of horizontal lines, is much more rare in the region. This type of decoration is often associated with the early period of Bell Beakers, poorly represented in Burgundy, where combed and incised decorations are more prevalent.

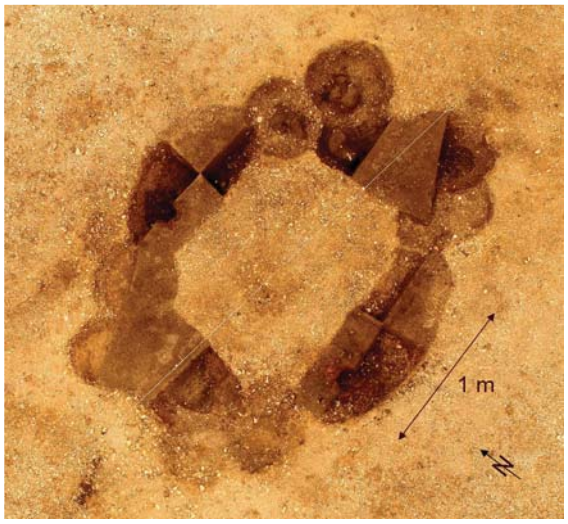
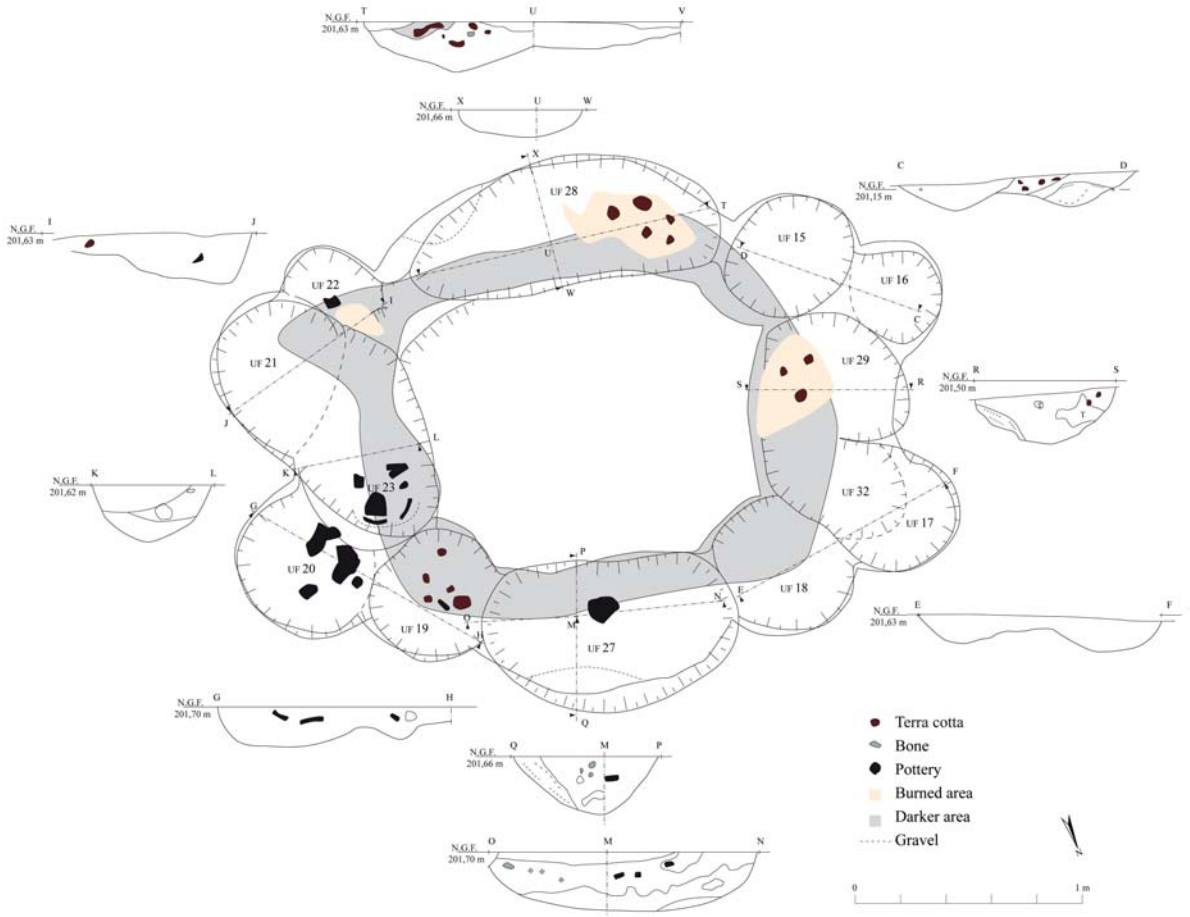


Fig. 8. *General view of M8 during excavation (photograph by Captair).*

Fig. 9. *Plan and section of M8 (illustrations by C. Fossurier, D. Sordoillet & Y. Amrane).*



Among the human bones were also some unburnt fauna bones. These were cattle remains and those of another mammal of medium size (pig or sheep).

There was also some reddish burnt earth that had been moved, probably taken from the funeral pyre.

3.4 Interpretation of the structure

Because the monument had been levelled and was preserved to a maximum depth of 25 cm, it has been difficult to interpret owing to the small quantity of evidence. Moreover, no real point of departure could be established. Most of

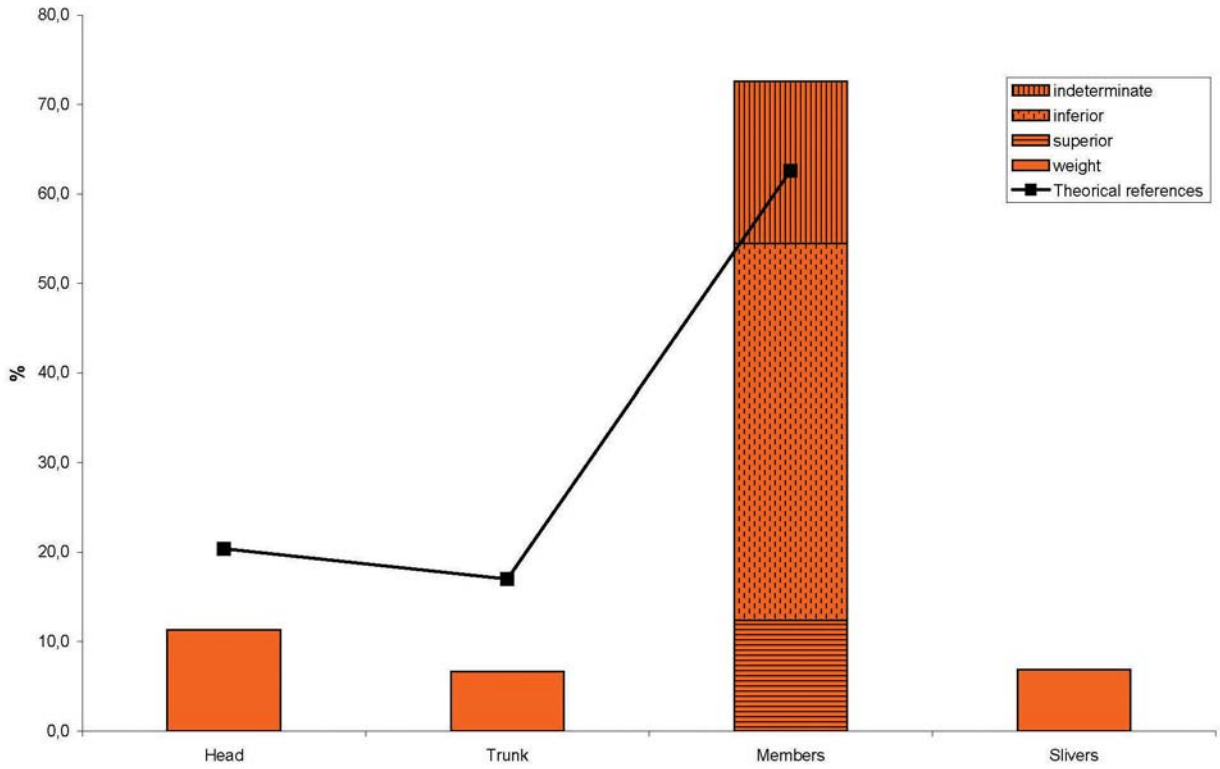


Fig. 10. *Calculated values of the various anatomical regions represented in M8 compared to the reference weight established by Krogman (1978); (diagram by L. Christin).*

the material had probably been located in the middle of the structure and were subsequently found in the lateral cuttings made during the destruction of the edifice. This progressive disappearance led to the material being found trapped in various cuttings. The ochre-red burnt earth of the pyre was perhaps spread on the ground before the main deposit had been properly installed. With regard to the other objects, the deposit consisted of fauna bones (a bovine and another animal of medium height), and two vessels, one of which was burnt and had probably been placed on the funeral pyre. It is difficult to say whether or not the human bones had been in one of the vessels, but this must be a strong possibility, since most of the bone fragments and ceramic sherds were located in the same place (*Fig. 12*). The architecture of the edifice itself is more difficult to interpret. Indeed, almost all known examples of funerary structures show a structure with four posts (see below). For this monument, the presence of several postholes on the shorter western and eastern sides indicates one of two explanations: either the building underwent some repairs, or there was a succession of posts. In either case, the probable presence of posts suggests that there was a roof over the structure. The presence of side walls also seems to be indicated by the two fills that could be seen in the lengthwise pits. The material used for the construction of the side walls remains difficult to determine. It could have been wattle, with a supple wood such as willow, or another type of construction using perishable materials (*Figs. 12, 13*). Willow seems a strong possibility since it has also been found in other graves, notably in England (*Harrison 1986*).

4. Synthesis and significance in France and Europe

4.1 The cremation practice

In France, the phenomenon of Bell Beaker cremations seems to be relatively rare. For the moment, only two other examples have been recognised. The first was found not far from Genlis, at Quetigny, at the site of Ferme du Bois de Pierre 2. This was an isolated cremation found on a site occupied during the Bell Beaker period and the early Bronze Age, not far from an undated (either Bell Beaker period or BZa1) inhumation grave (*Labaune, 2012 excavation, publication*

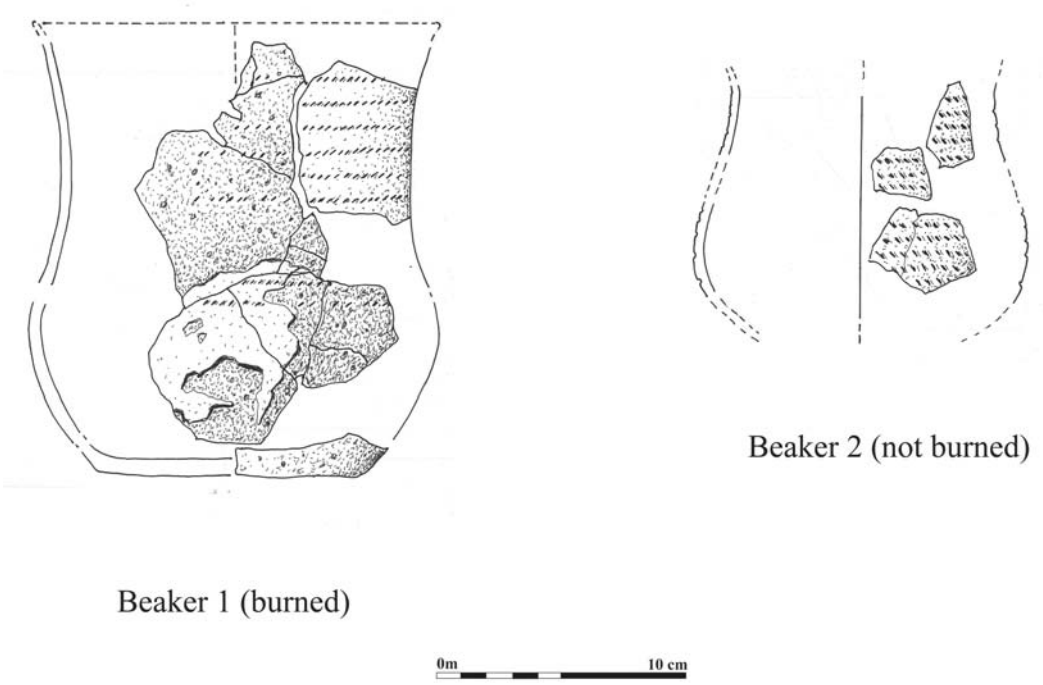


Fig. 11. *Ceramic accessory vessels with corded decoration. Monument M8 (illustration by F. Ducreux, Inrap).*

forthcoming). This was very different from the structures at Genlis: it consisted of burnt bone remains (almost entirely skull fragments with one fragment a fibula) found in a pit with some charcoal but with no other associated material (*Figs. 14–16*). This has thus almost no point of comparison with UF 24 and M8.

A second cremation seems to have more in common with M8, even though it was found in Lorraine (*Lefebvre et al. 2011*). This was composed of a set of burnt bones placed in a container of perishable material which was then placed at the centre of a monument built with four postholes. A notable difference, however, was that this cremation was associated with two individual inhumations, which was not the case at Genlis, unless the latter bones were not preserved. The fact that there was unburnt fauna bone in M8 is not consistent with that possibility. The presence of a perishable container within a larger one is suggestive of what may have been observed in UF 24 although the sizes are different. In Lorraine, the weight of the bones was fairly small but they were represented in a normal manner and the cremation temperatures were similar to those at Genlis; the remains included, however, no cinders or charcoal (*Lefebvre et al. 2011*, 107, 109). The ceramic remains were also burnt (*Lefebvre et al. 2011*, 109). Thus, in France some variety of situations can be discerned. At Genlis, in one case the burnt bones were probably deposited within a perishable container, and in the other within a ceramic vessel, this latter usage also being present in Germany (*Hille 2001*, 613).
Further Bell Beaker cremations have been recorded in other countries, including the Netherlands, the British Isles and other countries of northwestern Europe (*Vander Linden 2006*). In central Europe, cemeteries often include both inhumations and cremations, such as those in Austria and Hungary (*Vander Linden 2006*).

4.2 Bell Beaker funerary monuments

With regard to the edifice M8, points of comparison can be found with data associated with inhumations. Generally, the latter are found under small mounds; they are sometimes in a box or are surrounded by circles of posts and associated with willow (*Harrison 1986*, 20, 26–7). In France, two definite cases are known of box inhumations have been found, surrounded by circular ditches that could have served for the installation of a palisade (*Billiard 2011*; *Tcheremissinoff et al. 2011*). At Ciry-Salsogne (Aisne), some sides of a very complex structure were probably composed of walls in per-

ishable materials held in place by reinforcements set at different heights according to the sides (*Hachem et al. 2011*, 26). The system was strengthened by a wooden shuttering, but only at the corners. It is likely that the structure was covered. It is also possible that posts had been installed at the corners (*Hachem et al. 2011*, 26): a similar practice has been identified in Lorraine, and at Gurgy, in Yonne (*Lefebvre et al. 2011*; *Meunier et al. 2011*). Furthermore, at Gurgy Meunier and his co-authors consider that the grave had a roof that was higher than ground level, but they remain cautious about this interpretation since the grave had been very eroded (*Meunier et al. 2011*, 69). At Altwies, in Luxemburg, symmetrical stone blocks found on both sides of one of the graves seem to have been placed in order to support a rigid covering in perishable material (*Le Brun-Ricalens et al. 2011*, 122). At Mol, in Belgium, a mound was found to cover a pit with post holes at its four corners; within, three Bell Beakers and a flint knife were found, albeit without human remains – the excavators suggest there may have been a cremation (*Vander Linden 2006*, 39). Further away, in Moravia, a mortuary chamber built in wood on stone bedrock has been found (*Harrison 1986*, 44). Pits with several surrounding post holes have also been found in Bohemia and at Hostivice, in the Czech Republic, their arrangement is evocative of our monument M8; at Hostivice, the central pit no longer contained any bones but instead four archer's wristbands marked the position of the skeletons (*pers. comm. J. Turek*).

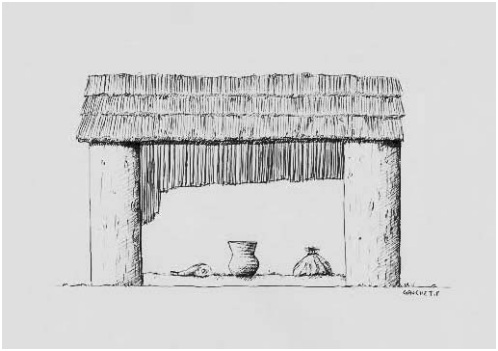


Fig. 12. *Hypothetical reconstruction of M8, seen from the inside, with its various objects (illustration by F. Gauchet).*

4.3 Funerary practices associated with graves

Evidence of fire or heating can also be observed in various funerary structures. At Eterpigny-Barleux (Somme), a possible Bell Beaker grave was found to have charred timber shuttering (unpublished pers. comm., D. Lamotte). At Ciry-Salsogne, the deceased rested on a layer of black silt containing charcoal, which is evidently similar to the pyre earth deposited at the base of the structure M8 at Genlis (*Hachem et al. 2011*, 25). At Altwies, the individuals, undoubtedly buried in a shuttered box, were laid onto a layer of reddish burnt earth containing charcoal spread from the centre of the pit: the fire seems to have been lit in the pits, and then these were at least partially cleaned (*Le Brun-Ricalens et al. 2011*). At this site, the bones showed no evidence of having been burnt but the evidence of burnt earth is clearly similar to the burnt earth found in M8. At Rudston (East Riding, Yorkshire, England), stone cists containing incinerated bones were placed in a well in which a fire was lit, giving a red colour to the earth. Thereafter followed a filling of chalk covered by a layer of charcoal; and finally three inhumations were deposited onto the surface of charcoal (*Harrison 1986*, 77–79). At Hostivice in the Czech Republic, the bottoms of cremation pits were found to contain a layer of turned-over red loess 3-5 cm thick (*Turek 2008*, 273). Deposits were frequently associated with these graves, but it remains difficult to determine at what point in the funeral rite they were used, since the ceramics were usually at least partially burnt (*Turek 2008,* 273). At Brandýsek, in Bohemia, a young woman had probably been buried with a dog, and some graves containing several individuals have been identified (*Harrison 1986*, 44, 49). Also at Hostivice, two partly-burnt bovine heads on the top of a cremation grave (ibid. 273). Only a few metal objects are found in this type of grave (in about 5% of cases) but the association of an archer's wristband and flint points can sometimes be found in the Netherlands, in Moravia and in Hungary (*Harrison 1986*, 24, 44, 56). The highest cremation temperatures are similar to those at Genlis (*Turek 2008*, 275).

5. The site at Genlis, le Nicolot, in its chronological, cultural and regional setting

The graves at Genlis, le Nicolot, offer new and original data with regard to its chronological, cultural and regional setting. Each cremation has provide ^{14}C dating that fill out the up-to-now poorly documented chronological picture (*Fig. 17*). The two graves present fairly similar dates, situated between -2300 (for M8, 3890 ± 35 BP) and -2150 (for UF 24, 3805 ± 30 BP). Given the difficulties of ^{14}C dating of Bell Beaker sites, these dates must be tentative. Nevertheless, we can observe that M8 is the earlier grave, which seems to be confirmed by the objects. Indeed, the two vessels with combed decoration from M8 represent a style that is in principle earlier than that of the vessel with hatched triangles found in structure UF 24, while the other objects found in UF 24 do not offer any further chronological precision.

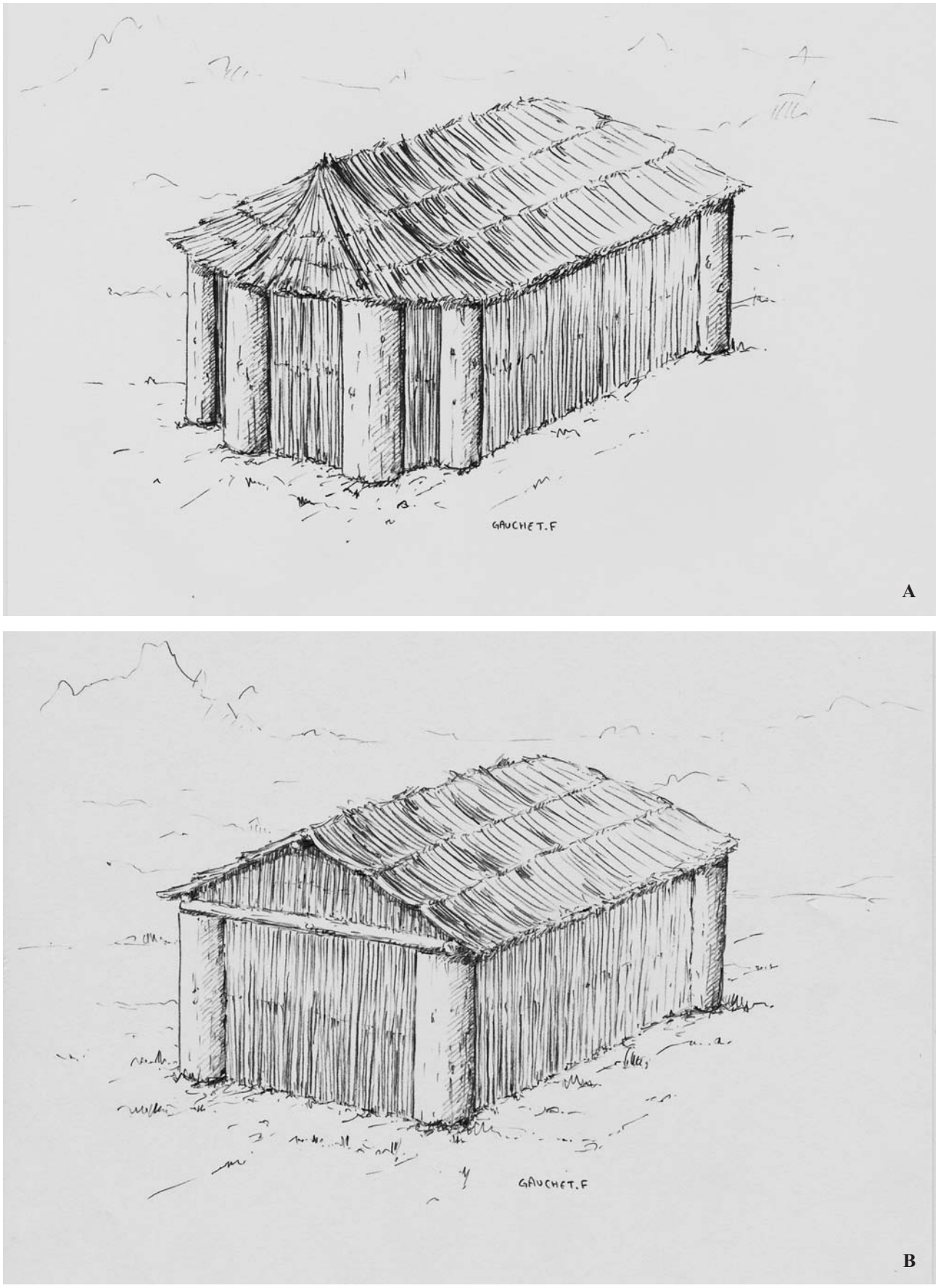


Fig. 13. *Reconstructions of the funerary monument M8, with two possible solutions:*
A The monument in just one phase, including all the posts
B The monument built on four load-bearing posts, having undergone some alterations.

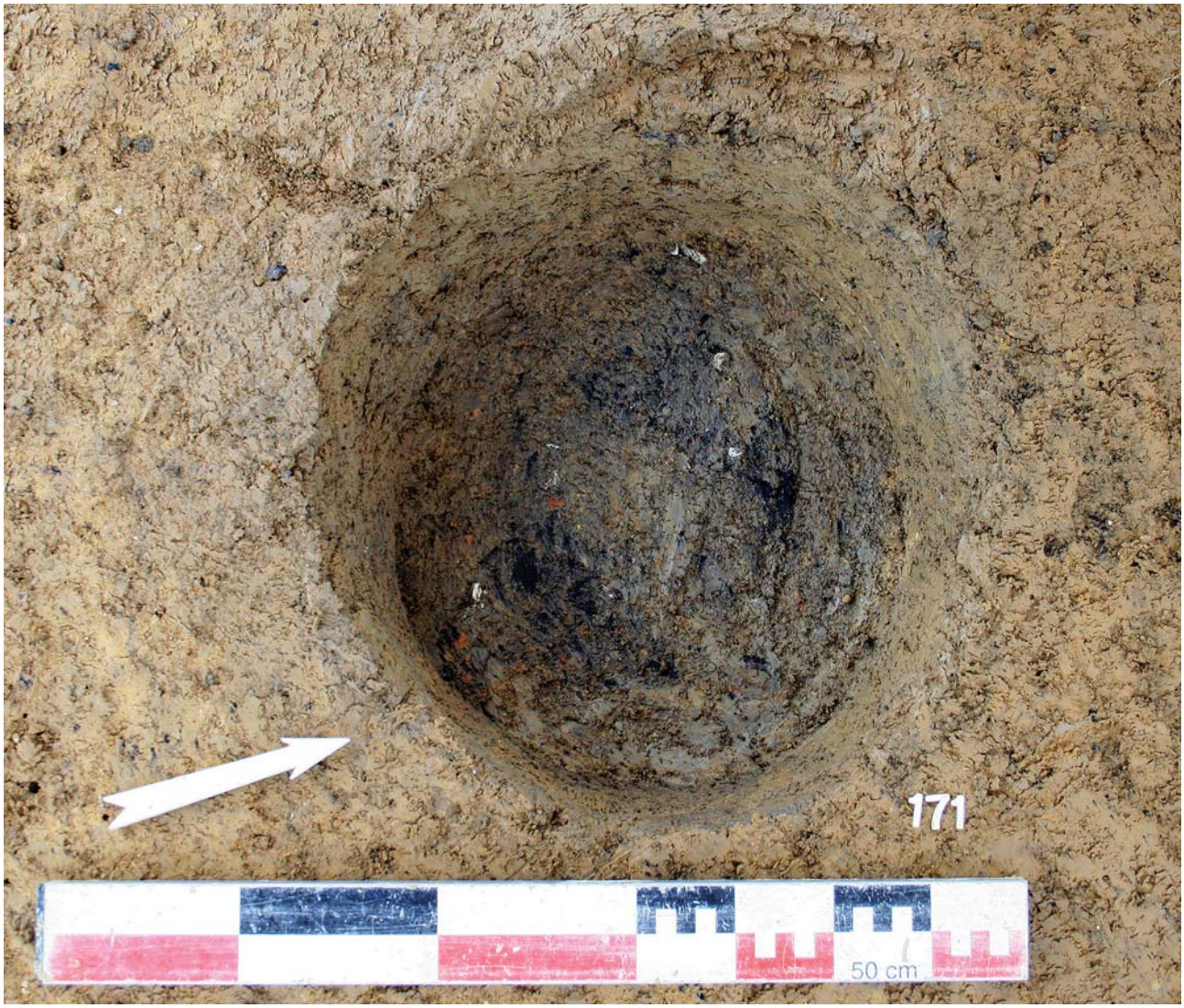


Fig. 14. *View of UF 171 (photograph by E. Bouquet).*

The early period of Bell Beaker culture, indicated by corded decorations and hatched horizontal bands, is not represented in Burgundy and yet monument M8, with its two beakers with corded decoration seems to belong to this period. By contrast, the beaker with combed incised decoration of the grave UF 24 conforms with the chronological and cultural styles of the Burgundy-Jura group, typical of the second Bell Beaker phase, when regional productions are predominant (*Salanova – Ducreux 2005*). In terms of objects, this period is characterized by the arrival in the region of so-called accessory pottery, very much present in the settlements at Saint-Marcel, La Noue (ibid.), at Lux, La Perrouze (*Ducreux 2013*), and, in the region of Dijon, at Quetigny, les Allées-Cavalières (*Salanova – Ducreux 2005*). For this period there are few precise dates: a structure in a small settlement at Labergement-Foigney near Genlis has provided two dates close to that of UF 24 (ST 12, 3750 ± 30 BP; ST 12c4, 3805 ± 35 BP). This period is represented in the Dijon region by several sites that are notable for having well-type structures (Labergement-Foigney, Les Vernes, and Genlis, La Moussenière, unpblished excavations by F. Ducreux). The cremations of UF 24 and M8 seem, however, to be earlier than the last Bell Beaker phase, during which become more like those of the early Bronze Age (Les Roseaux-type carinated cups with handles and jars with moulded decorations). This last phase of Bell Beaker culture is characterized in the region by the persistence of combed decorations, in the form of chevrons and triangles, inspired by the barbed-type styles that were widely present from the Mediterranean to the middle Rhone Valley (at the sites of Magny-Cours, Le Pré-de-la-Fontaine – *Ducreux et al. 2013*, and Genlis, La Moussenière – unpublished excavation, F. Ducreux, 2013).

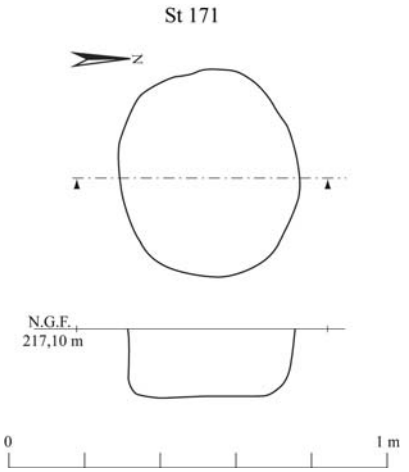


Fig. 15. Plan and section of UF 171 (illustrations by E. Bouquet and Y. Amrane).

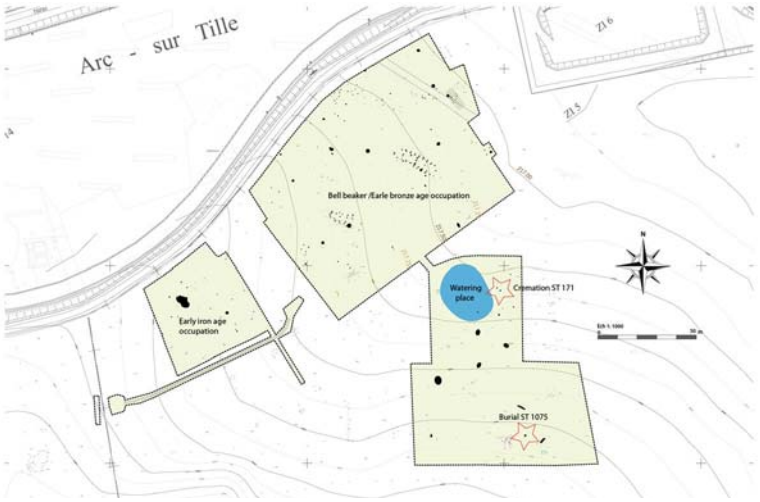


Fig. 16. Plan of the site at Quetigny, Ferme du Bois de Pierre 2.

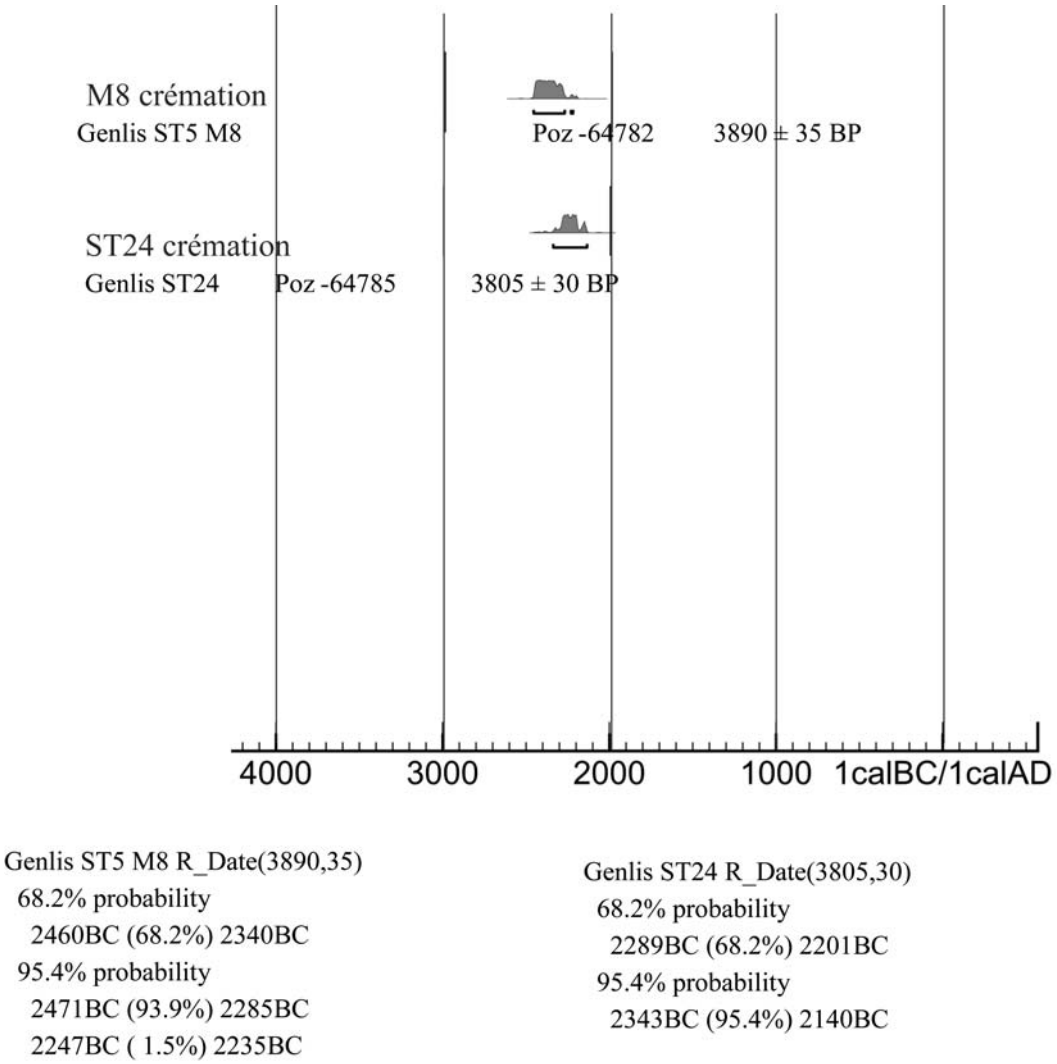


Fig. 17. ^{14}C dates obtained for the graves UF 24 and M8 at the site of Genlis, le Nicolot,(Poznan laboratory).

6. Conclusions

If the graves found at Genlis seem to be unique in the Bell Beaker culture, they nonetheless offer some aspects in common with graves found elsewhere in France and, more widely, in Europe. The main originality lies in the fact that these are cremations. Yet while this practice is quite rare in the east of France, and wholly absent in the west, it is relatively common the local area. Indeed, of the five Bell Beaker graves so far recorded in the Dijon region, three are cremations. All are scattered individual graves but nearby settlement areas. They are more or less structured, with almost always some objects. Ultimately, it seems to be not so much the ritual, whether inhumation or cremation, which seems to define these graves, but the architectural structure and the accompanying objects. In this sense, it is the cremated remains found at Quetigny that seem to be exceptional, both in the type of deposition and in the selection of bones from the pyre. The above-cited three cremations in five graves is the highest level to be found in our bibliography, and this well above the proportions found in central Europe. Several explanations can be given for this: to begin with, the group under consideration is very small, especially when compared with regions more to the east where cremations are found within large cemeteries in which the two practices are mixed. In those regions, the choice of cremation or inhumation does not seem to be socially determined (*Turek 2008*, 275). Furthermore, the conditions of discovery are very strongly linked to the biases of rescue archaeology: in 2012, the number of Bell Beaker inhumations known in the region was just two, while the number of known cremations was zero. In 2014, the proportion of the practices is completely reversed! Finally, since the cremation graves are generally small and isolated, they can be more difficult to recognise during evaluations and large-scale field stripping. The data recovered from future projects will thus usefully complement the current information and lead to a better understanding of Bell Beaker funerary practices in the Dijon region.

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Résumé
Les deux sépultures à crémation campaniformes de Genlis, le Nicolot constituent des témoignages exceptionnels de la période campaniforme pour l'Est de la France et la région de Bourgogne. Jusqu'à présent, très peu se sépultures à crémation sont attestées dans l'Ouest de l'Europe et le tombes de Genlis peuvent certainement témoigner de liens culturels avec l'Europe centrale où ce type de pratique funéraire est mieux documentée.
Les sépultures de Genlis, le Nicolot se caractérisent également par une architecture funéraire remarquable de type «cabane funéraire» pour l'une d'entre elles et coffre enterré pour l'autre. La dotation en mobilier des tombes s'avère complète: vases à décor à la cordelette, brassard d'archer, petit poignard en cuivre et outil en silex.

[1] We would like to thank warmly J. Turek for this information.

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