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The Gallo-Roman textile collection from Les Martres- de-Veyre in France

Introduction

A new project, called “ArchéoMartres”, sponsored by the Maison des Sciences de l’Homme de Clermont-Ferrand and the Direction Générale des Affaires Culturelles (DRAC) Rhône-Alpes-Auvergne, aims to re-study the Gallo-Roman collections from Les Martres-de-Veyre stored in the Musée Bargoin in Clermont-Ferrand.

The site of Les Martres-de-Veyre, 15 km south of Augustonemetum (ancient Clermont-Ferrand), the capital of the Arverni, is known for its ancient pottery manufacturing centre (Terrisse 1968), its water mill (Romeuf & Romeuf 2000) and its graveyard. The burials date from the 1st to the 2nd centuries AD. They were excavated in the course of excavation seasons in 1851, 1893 and 1922-23 (Audollent 1922, 1923) and constitute several examples of clothed burials, especially female ones, in an exceptional state of preservation. In these burials, not only clothes but also all the organic material were well preserved: wooden coffins and *pyxides*, baskets, fruit and other vegetal offerings, hair, etc. Textiles represent a high percentage of the discoveries. Among them, a tunic associated with a so-called ‘belt’ (fig. 1a), a pair of stockings and a pair of leather shoes constitute a world-renowned assemblage. This has been manipulated and exhibited without damage in the museum from the time of discovery to the renovation of the museum: under a heavy glass bell in the 1950s (fig. 1b), hung between 1968 and 1985 (fig. 1c), on a mannequin for a special exhibition (fig. 1d) and exhibited flat from 1985. The preservation is supple, making this discovery unprecedented in France. Paradoxically, its extraordinary condition contributed to the find being perceived as trivial and hence little-studied. More recently, the tunic has not been on permanent display and instead was mostly kept away

from direct light. This exceptional find is a small part of a wider collection which has not been extensively published but which includes more than 80 fragments of textiles (clothes, covers, socks, bands, etc.) in different techniques. These are currently being recorded (Breniquet et al. 2017).

The “ArchéoMartres” project is an interdisciplinary project which links together several main institutions: the Musée Bargoin, the University Clermont-Auvergne, the Maison des Sciences de l’Homme de Clermont-Ferrand and the Institut National de Recherches en Archéologie Préventive (Inrap). However, different specialists from other research centres may also collaborate. One of the main objectives of the project is to re-study the textile collection. We plan to enlarge the perspective to other aspects than the textiles such as the funerary practices (both inhumation and cremation burials), the other materials such as pottery or glass and, applying up-to-date methods, we aim to carry out a spatial analysis of the entire settlement and its environs. This is supported by the complete ongoing inventory being conducted by the museum and by the recent discovery of unpublished archaeological archives of the first excavations in the cemetery which provide new information.

First scholars

The first excavations at the site were conducted by several notable local scholars (G. L’Héritier, E. Kuhn and A. Audollent) and reported by many others (H. Dourif, G. Desbouis, P. P. Mathieu, F. Vazeilles, E. Vimont). Most of them were fellows of the Académie des Sciences, Belles-Lettres et Arts of Clermont-Ferrand or of other local academies. Two, J.-B. Bouillet and E. Vimont were directors of the museum; the others



Fig. 1. a The 1893 tunic and its 'belt'; b as exhibited in the 1950s on a hanger; c as exhibited between 1968 and 1985; d on a mannequin for a special exhibition, no date (a Image: F. Giffard, Musée Bargoin, b-d © Musée Bargoin).

were physicians, teachers and one was the mayor of a small town near Clermont-Ferrand. As the occupation of Les Martres-de-Veyre covers a large part of history from the Palaeolithic to the modern period, their interest depended on the period or artefact, especially coins and pottery. However, they hardly published

these remarkable finds, which found their way only into local journals of limited audience. Among them, Audollent deserves a special mention as he provided the most complete published report. Audollent arrived as associate professor of classics in Clermont-Ferrand in 1893. He was previously a

member of the Ecole Française de Rome and developed a huge interest for the Roman world. He wrote a masterly thesis on *Carthage romaine*. His academic position in Clermont-Ferrand drove him quickly towards the local museum and allowed him to run excavations in the Temple of Mercury at the top of the Puy de Dôme and in Les Martres-de-Veyre. As a field archaeologist, epigrapher and historian (Dupont-Ferrier 1943), Audollent entertained a scientific network with other eminent scholars such as the famous prehistorian J. Déchelette, who advised him to take care of the textile discoveries from Les Martres-de-Veyre. He did so when he wrote the only detailed publication of the excavations of the Gallo-Roman cemetery (Audollent 1923) after collecting part of the available information and sending samples of textiles for study to Ch. Pagès (Pagès 1923). At present, their reports remain the only published sources of information on the textile collection. Audollent collected and organised the information, giving an inventory as consistently as possible for the entire collection (textile and material) and assigned to each tomb a letter: A, B for the 1851 discoveries, C to F for the later ones. As another publication was planned by other scholars, however, he did not give a full account of the discoveries. Details and photographs were missing and some descriptions remain unclear as he did not take part in the excavations. Audollent is also the only scholar who published the discoveries abroad, in the journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, *Man* (Audollent 1921). Most scholars still refer to Audollent's publications when discussing the finds (e. g. Roche-Bernard & Ferdière 1993, 11-14).

History of the excavations

The history of these excavations is difficult to write as the first discoveries were fortuitous and incompletely recorded. In 1851, workers from the Vazeilhes tile factory were digging to collect clay in an area called Le Lot (Le Lod or Le Laud are other possible orthographies of the place), between the railway and the river Allier. We believe that the old name "Les Chaumes d'Allios" used for a more specific place, actually refers to the area of the Gallo-Roman cemetery (Lauranson 2012, 89).

The first grave for which details are lacking was found and quickly "excavated" in June 1851. A second tomb (named D by Audollent), found in September, brought to light in a wooden coffin the remains of a young woman, lying on her belly, whose face was still apparent. She was apparently dressed in several layers of clothes, badly recorded in the field. She had worn a pair of leather sandals with cork soles. Her head lay



Fig. 2. Grave I during the excavations, 1922-23 (© Musée Bargoin).

on a checked fabric and her body was partially covered by another felt blanket woven in twill. A basket with nuts and apples was also in the grave. Since the 19th century, the exceptional preservation of the organic materials has been explained by the presence of hydrothermal springs which deliver carbon dioxide to the soil, inhibiting normal bacterial degradation (Audollent 1923, 54). The discovery of such preservation was so astonishing that people doubted that the burial was old and refuted the Gallo-Roman date. Several coins dating to the reigns of Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian and Antoninus Pius (Audollent 1923, 12-13), as well as Samian pottery, finally confirmed that the grave should be assigned to the first centuries of the Christian era. Bouillet succeeded in collecting several pieces of textile which were exhibited in the museum and published (1861, 105-106). After several decades, in 1893, other graves were discovered. They yielded more inhumation burials, with or without coffins, with the dead lying in various positions.

These burials also contained pottery, coins, glass flasks and vegetal offerings to the present state of knowledge (Blaizot et al. 2009a, 170; Blaizot et al. 2009b). The female Grave D is the masterpiece of the collection with its complete tunic, 'belt' and socks. Other tombs were female (D and E), Grave F was that of a little girl buried with a distaff, spindles, a hair comb, a basket and other vegetal offerings. All were coffin burials furnished with textiles and organic offerings except Grave C (a man without a coffin). No drawings or photographs were done in the field. As far as



we know from the excavation archives, other graves were found more or less in the same time frame, but except for oral and (sometimes uncertain) testimonies of the local inhabitants, we have no clear evidence of what was found. Finally, in 1922-23, Audollent started new excavations in the cemetery and brought to light cremation and inhumation burials in coffins; unfortunately, these were less spectacular than the first ones. This time, several pictures were taken in the field, providing some insight into the general environs of the excavations and the first and only photograph of a tomb (named I) (fig. 2). These last discoveries were published in a short paper but were never included in the general publication of the graveyard (Audollent 1922). The wooden coffin was exposed in the museum and finally dated by dendrochronology to 170 AD in 2014 (Blondel 2014).

First studies of textiles

Audollent was aware of the necessity to study the textile collection. The nearby city of Lyon, renowned for its textile industry, was regarded as the best place to find a specialist. But in the 1920s, textile archaeology was an uncommon branch of archaeology in France. Audollent solicited the help of Pagès who was professor at the Ecole de Commerce and sent him a selection of 13 samples from at least eight different textiles. Unfortunately, Pagès died soon after doing this work and Audollent chose to publish it as it was (Pagès 1923). The samples were cut with scissors and were supposed to be as representative as possible, but unfortunately they were not. Audollent chose probably what he recognised as “valuable” textiles from their apparent qualities, but they are beyond the statistical number of fabrics encountered in the graves because he made a selection of 13 pieces which are only woollen pieces. Currently, we can estimate the textiles fragments to number at least 80. Pagès’ first account, however, is a good starting point as he provided most of the technical parameters: direction of twist, warp, weft, and structural variation, borders, fringes, hem, wear, damaged traces, etc. Some other observations were directly inspired by textile industry practices: yarn count, structure, estimated weight. More observations allowed him to make some hypotheses on the technical processes used in that time period, and help us to recognise the pieces that were originally dyed. Finally, he suggested uses for the fully-preserved fabrics (clothes, blanket, etc.).

After Pagès’ pioneering work we hear nothing about the collection until the 1980s. Several scholars involved in textile archaeology received the authorisation from the museum to study parts of the collection. The first

was H. Granger-Taylor who studied mostly the famous tunic and related pieces from Grave D in order to link her results with her work on Roman textiles. The last was F. Médard who made an inventory of most fragments. During the autumn of 1996 and the spring of 1997, S. Desrosiers had the opportunity to do a complete technical study of a large part of the collection. In a short paper that offered an overview of Gallo-Roman textiles from France (Desrosiers & Lorquin 1998), she alerted scholars to the immense size of the collection. Unfortunately, these studies remain unpublished. In 2015, Desrosiers graciously returned her complete archives to the museum, opening the way to carry out the “ArchéoMartres” project. After her preliminary study, the municipality of Clermont-Ferrand undertook the conservation of the collection, under the supervision of Girault-Kurzemann at Orange, France. It was thus possible to perform some dye identification analysis (Nowik et al. 2005).

The textile collection

It is not possible here to give a complete overview of the textile collection for the inventory. A full re-evaluation of all fragments is part of ongoing analyses¹. We can, however, offer a more accurate survey. Using current techniques, this may help us to distinguish complete clothes and materials with a clear destination from pieces and fragments with an unclear use, as well as techniques. A set of shoes, at least three different pairs and a pair of soles complete the collection.

Tunics

The most famous item is without doubt the tunic from Grave D mentioned above. This tunic has large proportions (1.25 x 1.70 m with sleeves) and was reduced in length by a fold at the waistline, sewn with large stitches in a white thread. A pattern of the tunic was drawn by P.-F. Fournier in 1956: a large rectangular piece folded in two sewn on one side and on the shoulders, and two smaller rectangles added to it for the sleeves (Fournier 1956, 203). The shape still has to be confirmed as, strangely, it appears to show drooping shoulders.

Another tunic comes from the cemetery. It is complete but it was probably extracted in fragments through a narrow hole made by the pickaxe of the excavators in the coffin (Mathieu 1856, 362). Unfortunately, its exact provenience has not been ascertained as Audollent’s excavation report is inconsistent. Audollent suggested it came from Grave A, but crushed glass has been found in the folds of the fabric and none is recorded from that grave. Crushed glass is present in Grave E

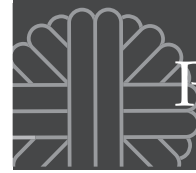


Fig. 3. The most complete band from Grave I (3 x 60 cm) with detail (Image: M. Veschambre, Musée Bargoin).

(Audollent 1923, 18). So both possibilities exist and all the information gathered from Audollent's publication and the unpublished archive material therefore require cross-checking. The second tunic has been reconstructed by Desrosiers from the many fragments. Its pattern seems different from the first one: cross-shaped, folded and sewn under the arms and on the sides. This tunic shows also *clavus* decoration in red on the shoulders.

Bands

The tunic from Grave D was found with a long and narrow band woven in warp-faced tabby (4.30 x 0.12 m), decorated in several places with plaited designs. The common-sense interpretation was that this band was a belt, probably based on the depiction by Vimont and reported by Audollent (1923, 45). But Granger-Taylor convincingly suggests that it is a *strophion*, i. e. a long and narrow band that was wrapped around the chest (fig. 3a). It has to be compared with the bands found at Masada, especially no. 92-113/3 (Granger-Taylor, pers. comm. and forthcoming). A black Samian pot from Les Martres-de-Veyre kept in the Musée Bargoin (inv. no. 5126) depicts how such a band was worn. We hope to find other fragments associated with the other tunic.

Other bands come from Grave I. They are different in both shape (being narrower: 3 x 60 cm for the longest fragment) and use. They are wrapping bands in tabby technique for the ankles and the knees (fig. 3b), visible *in situ* on the only photograph available for the whole cemetery (fig. 2).

Stockings

The young girl from Grave D wore fringed stockings made from several sewn parts, probably initially held up using garters at the knees. One of the stockings was embroidered with three letters: PRI. Another pair of inner boots are supposed to have been part of the funeral arrangement of the grave, but their provenance is far from certain. However, their shape and material recall those from Iron-Age Riesenferner/Vedretta di Ries worn with leggings (Bazzanella et al. 2005, fig. 9 and 10, 156-157; Grömer 2016, fig. 215, 388) (fig. 4a and 4b). Both pairs, stockings and boots, are tailored and woven in twill.

Other clothes or fabrics

The woman in Grave E was discovered with a fringed shawl on the shoulders (fig. 5a) which was repaired in antiquity: a carefully-sewn tear is visible (fig. 5b).

Other fragments with *gamma* figures in tapestry technique are recorded in the catalogue of the museum and came possibly from Grave A, according to Audollent (1923, 47-48). Some textiles are difficult to identify: the checked fabric from Grave A² (fig. 5c), the "felted" one from the same tomb and the white "blanket" from Grave F (fig. 5d). They may have been real blankets or rectangular mantles in twill or tabby technique for wrapping the body during winter time, held using *fibulae*.

Grave F yielded several fragments identified by Audollent as folded shrouds in vegetal fibres used as mattresses. Grave E provided many fragments of vegetal fibres which may have belonged to underwear. These need to be subjected to new analysis.



Fig. 4. a Stockings from Grave D; b Woollen boots, possibly from Grave D (© M. Veschambre, Musée Bagoïn).

Open fabrics (gauze or more probably sprang) are also listed from Grave I.

Shoes

As part of the Roman costume, shoes should be mentioned. At least three different types are recorded in Les Martres-de-Veyre: leather shoes with nailed soles from Grave A (and possibly I), leather slippers with cork soles from Grave A, wooden clogs with inside soles of sheep skin and leather straps (unfortunately lost) from Grave E. All the leather items have been studied by M. Leguilloux and will be published in a wider study (Leguilloux & Médard forthcoming).

Raw materials

The clothes and fabrics from Les Martres-de-Veyre are mostly wool, the quality of which has to be explored further. However, as stated above, vegetal fibre fragments have been recorded. Further investigations are planned to identify the quality of the wools and the nature of the other fibres. Flax or hemp are of course possible, and cotton too, as it has been attested for the same period in central France in Vareilles, Creuse, (Dussot et al. 2001-2002) and in Damblain, Vosges (Schluck et al. 2012). Cotton was a rare and imported fibre in antiquity and was not locally cultivated. It probably came from the Mediterranean (Egypt?). Despite a description by local inhabitants in the 19th century (Mathieu 1856, 362), no trace of silk or gold threads have been found (yet?) in the collection kept in the museum. These fibres exist, nevertheless, in other contemporary contexts (Bédard et al. 1999, 7). We plan to complete the first deeper analysis of the fibres in order to have a better overview of the raw materials and to study, as far as possible, the qualities of the wool and its preparation. Preliminary examination suggests that the wool from the main tunic was combed as the fibres seem very regular and parallel, and quite different from the wool of the *strophion* which appears soft (possibly carded).

Techniques

Except for the open-work fragments, all the textiles from Les Martres-de-Veyre are real fabrics, mostly Z-twisted. Different weaves are attested according to different uses: tabby, warp-faced tabby, extended tabby, 2/2 twill, tapestry³ (Fig. 6a), with a high variation of threads per cm and thread diameters. All of them are rather high-standard products, but with the exception of the stockings and boots, tailoring is minimal.

According to the dye analysis (High-Performance Liquid Chromatography with Photodiode Array



Fig. 5. a-b: Shawl from Grave E, length 1.2 m, detail of the shawl showing a repaired tear; c Fragment of a checked fabric from Grave A; d Fragment of a blanket or a coat from Grave A (Image: M. Veschambre, Musée Bargoin).

Detection, HPLC-PDA) done by W. Nowik at the Laboratoire de Recherche des Monuments Historiques at Champs-sur-Marne, the dye sources are vegetal: *Rubiaceae* family for red, luteolin (from weld, dyer's brown or sawwort) for yellow, ellagitannins for brown and indigo for blue (Nowik et al. 2005). However, part of the textile collection is not dyed and has the natural colours of the fibres. Some samples may have been dyed but are now impossible to identify due to alteration of the dyestuffs. Some blue spots are visible on the neckline of main tunic. Audollent interpreted them as a possible design printed on the fabric (1923, 45),

but this is perhaps questionable, as holes and remains of an altered material are present in and around the coloured staining (fig. 6b). We suggest they are the remains of metallic objects, possibly coins or fibulae, undetected or unrecorded during the excavations (see also Nowik et al. 2005, 845).

As for every old collection, a lot of issues remain unsolved. Hopefully, answers will emerge with new investigations. Leaving the technical observation of the textiles aside, we have to consider several main questions: Les Martres-de-Veyre was a small town during the Gallo-Roman period. The settlement has



Fig. 6. a: Fragment of a *gamma* figure in tapestry technique, length c. 20 cm; b Detail of the collar of the tunic from Grave D with stains, length c. 20 cm (Images: M. Veschambre, Musée Bargoin).

not been well documented by archaeological studies. The relations between the inhabited area, the pottery workshop and the graveyard are still poorly understood. Many signatures on the Samian ware pots attest to the presence of more than 140 master potters at the site (Terrisse 1963; Provost & Mennessier-Jouannet 1994, 181). Were the people buried here potters? Were they related? DNA analysis of hairs and bones may give an answer despite the fact that the samples are old and have been manipulated without regard for standard archaeological precautions in the past. The domestic areas are not documented; the houses and workshops used at the time are still unknown.

Where did the raw materials come from? We plan to compare the local wool on the distaff from the little girl's coffin to the other wools from the clothes. For the moment, it is impossible to say if the garments were made or bought in the town or in another main city (Augustonemetum or Lugdunum for instance). Was textile production a rural craft or an urban industry (Wild 1999, 30)? Probably, our answer will have to be nuanced. If part of the textile collection was home-made, the typological connections for tunics drive us to Bourges (Ferdrière 1984, fig. 42 and 55), ancient Avaricum (200 km to the north) and far away to the Near East to Didymoi (Cardon et al. 2011), Qasr Ibrim (Adams & Crowfoot 2001), Masada (Granger-Taylor forthcoming) and Qumran (Shamir 2006). This is probably the result of an unrepresentative survival of textiles.

Some garments have the appearance of being constructed to a good standard. Are we looking at household production or (perhaps, more probably) a workshop-based one? Most of the fabrics are not new and show traces of wear (felting, holes), but we have no information about the date of production. They seem to be everyday garments but may have been arranged specifically for the funeral. Several studies suggest that burials may not give a perfect impression of the contemporary costume used at the time. For instance, the main tunic is not in itself a gendered garment, but it comes from a female burial. It was found in association with stockings with the three letters on them: PRI. It has been suggested that this embroidered mark could be related to the *tria nomina* (van Driel-Murray 1999, 11). It is hard to believe, however, that our potters were so high-ranking, as the rest of the funerary assemblage seems modest. Other readings cause us to speculate that 'PRI' constitutes either the maker's name or more probably the owner's (i. e. PRI(MA)) (Wild 2012, 246). Both explanations suggest that the clothes were second-hand products, bought or given for specific (unknown) circumstances.

Some parts of the slothing such as the shoes (or other small items like belts) could have been introduced in the coffin as part of the funerary practice (as attested elsewhere by Graenert & Schönenberger 2007, 56). The leather shoes from Grave D are thought to have been worn by the young girl. However, their size (comparable to our size 34) made it impossible with the stockings and the woollen boots. Observations made on other graves (Grave I for instance, or those excavated in Lyon recently) show shoes or soles close to the body, but not on feet (Blaizot et al. 2009a, 120). Audollent may not have been aware of this possibility, and without drawings showing the objects *in situ*, may have described what he understood from his own perspective at the time. Despite the remarkable value of his initial report, it is reasonable to consider some modifications to the findings and interpretation of his original publication based on our forthcoming new studies.

Once again, textile archaeology interweaves together many fields of research in an interdisciplinary way. We hope that the ongoing studies will yield a new understanding and shed new light on this exceptional site and its collections.

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Notes

1. For this reason, we choose not to include inventory numbers here.
2. The fragment belongs to the same fabric illustrated in Breniquet et al. 2017, fig. 26c.
3. The fragment shown here belongs to the same fabric as the one illustrated in Breniquet et al. 2017, fig. 26a.

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