

Stone grave building at the cemetery of Les Tombes at Estagel (Pyrénées- Orientales, France): some economic and symbolic aspects

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Funerary archaeology is an important source to approach social, economic and everyday life's aspects of any community. Accordingly, cemeteries of the early medieval period have been often considered from this perspective. But even in the most thoroughly researched cases, some aspects of the so called funerary architecture, which in the Mediterranean area consists frequently of stone structures defining and protecting the burials, are clearly misrepresented: the economic, social and symbolic meanings of stonework graves are by far less well known.

The ongoing researches on the Visigothic-period cemetery at Estagel (Pyrénées-Orientales, France) are a good occasion to explore these issues. The site has numerous points of interest: a long chronology of use (at least 5th-7th century AD), a well defined spatial organisation combining funerary and non funerary spaces and the attested presence of different social strata. From the point of view of funerary structures, the most striking feature is its almost unparalleled homogeneity: over the 95% of the graves correspond to "stone coffins" made of six stone slabs, including a monolithic cover lying just above the cemetery's trampling surface. This type of funerary structure is well documented in the western Mediterranean and beyond, but it hardly appears to be as hegemonic as it does at Estagel.

On the basis of the example of Estagel, I will explore two main aspects of grave building in early medieval Mediterranean: its economic importance (who could afford this type of stone coffins?) and its symbolic meaning (who did actually want to bury their dead in such graves and why?). To do so I will endeavour an integrated archaeological and petrographic approach enabling to identify the sources of the raw stone, the available transportation infrastructures and the correspondence patterns between stone-built graves, gender and age and types of grave goods.