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Research Article

Interpreting funerary variability in the Alsace Plain between 5300 and 4400 BC

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Abstract

The funerary practices of the archaeological cultures that settled in the Alsace Plain (eastern France) during the Early Neolithic and the beginning of the regional Middle Neolithic have long been perceived as relatively homogeneous. This view has been challenged since the 1990s, following the identification of regional variability that led to the definition of three funerary 'facies'. The substantial increase in the number of inhumation burials now calls for a reassessment of this model, integrating newly available data from Alsace, together with evidence from well-preserved sites in neighbouring regions. The results reveal a greater degree of variation than previously recognised and allow the identification of several funerary 'sub-facies' within the broader facies already defined. This variability, expressed through body orientation and position, grave-pit layout, and artefacts associated with the deceased, cannot be correlated with biological sex or age at death. Its repeated occurrence within specific areas suggests the existence of social dynamics operating at a distinct scale from that of archaeological cultures, defined through ceramic styles. These patterns, shared by segments of the population, may reflect the persistence of social units rooted in particular territories that expressed forms of belonging through different funerary gestures, while simultaneously sharing a wider Danubian identity. By showing that regional funerary variability frequently transcends chrono-cultural divisions based on ceramic styles and, in some cases, corresponds with differences observed in other domains (e.g. domestic architecture, subsistence strategies), this study contributes to questioning once more the perception of archaeological cultures as coherent social entities.

Keywords: Early Neolithic; Middle Neolithic; funerary practices; Alsace Plain; graves

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Introduction

The Linearbandkeramik culture (LBK), which emerged in the Danube Basin around 5500 BC and was responsible for the spread of a sedentary lifestyle in central and western Europe, gave rise to various entities that developed during the first part of the Middle Neolithic. In western Europe, this applies, among other things, to the Hinkelstein–Grossgartach–Rössen sequence.

The funerary practices of each of these four related cultures have long been described as relatively homogeneous (e.g. Lichardus-Itten 1980; Pavúk 1972), suggesting that they formed a broadly unified cultural sphere. The LBK has been associated with oval pit-graves, usually gathered in cemeteries, containing a single individual deposited flexed on their left side, with their head oriented eastward (see contributions in Bickle & Whittle 2013; Hofmann 2015, 109; Jeunesse 1997a; Waldvogel 2025a). As for the Hinkelstein, the Grossgartach, and the Rössen cultures, which share several characteristics, the deceased is placed in a pit-grave, usually laid on their back with their lower limbs in extension and their head westward (Childe 1929; Lichardus *et al.* 1985; Lichardus-Itten 1980). However, the increasing amount of funerary data accumulated over recent decades has begun to challenge this apparent homogeneity of practices (e.g. Bickle & Whittle 2013; Hofmann & Bickle 2011; Modderman 1988; Pechtl & Hofmann 2013; Waldvogel 2021; 2022; 2024; 2025a). Research devoted to the western LBK, for instance, has revealed significant variability in body orientation and position, as well as in the types of artefacts deposited with the dead (Arbogast 1983; Jeunesse 1995a; 1997a; Waldvogel 2025a). Such observations raise broader questions regarding the extent to which funerary practices can be strictly associated with an archaeological culture defined through ceramic styles.

The Alsace Plain, located in eastern France, offers a particularly suitable context in which to address this issue. Bordered by the Vosges Mountains to the west and by the River Rhine to the east, it was occupied by LBK communities between 5300 BC and 4950 BC, corresponding to phases II to V of Walter

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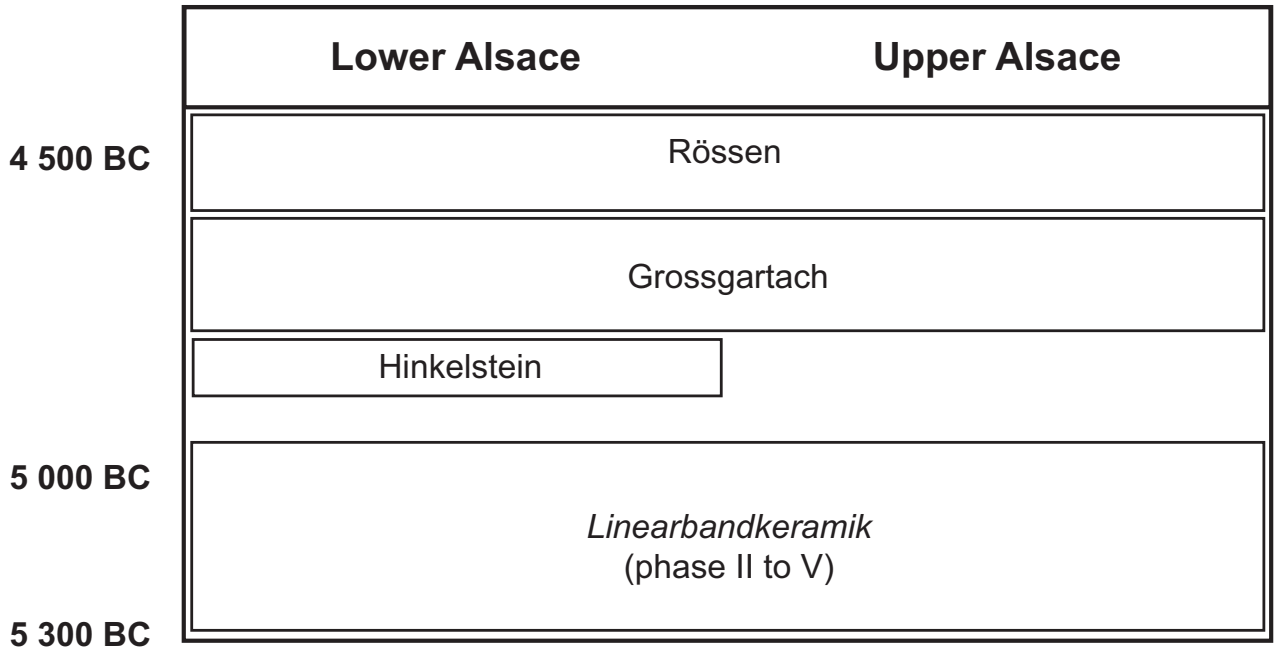


Figure 1. Chronology of the Early Neolithic and the first part of the Middle Neolithic in the Alsace Plain (Illustration: L. Waldvogel).

Meier-Arendt's (1966) chronological subdivision[1]. These first Neolithic communities were subsequently followed by a succession of related cultures during the first half of the regional Middle Neolithic, around 4800 to 4460 BC (Figure 1) (Denaire 2009; Denaire *et al.* 2017; Jeunesse *et al.* 2004). The Hinkelstein (HST), originating in the Worms region, is thought to have reached Lower Alsace in 4910–4725 BC, that is to say between 40 and 175 years (68% probability) after the end of the LBK in the area (Denaire *et al.* 2017, 1136). However, several discoveries suggest that the beginning of the Hinkelstein around Worms was contemporaneous with the end of the LBK in Alsace (Denaire *et al.* 2017, 1136–7; Jeunesse 1999; 2006, 13; Jeunesse & Strien 2009; Spatz 2001). In the latter zone, the Hinkelstein was followed by the Grossgartach[2] (GG) and the Rössen (RO). Since the 1990s, three funerary 'facies' defined by recurring combinations of funerary gestures have been identified in the Alsace Plain and adjacent zones, suggesting a more complex social reality than that implied by the chrono-cultural divisions established for these four cultures on the basis of ceramic styles (Jeunesse 1995a; 1997a; 1997b).

The substantial increase in the funerary corpus now makes it possible to reassess this model from a broader geographical perspective, incorporating evidence from neighbouring areas associated with the same archaeological cultures. Building on previous studies (Jeunesse 1995a; 1997a; 1997b), this paper refines the analytical framework through the distinction between funerary 'facies' and 'sub-facies', allowing funerary variability to be examined at multiple spatial scales and its possible social significance to be explored. More specifically, it sets out to consider whether recurring regional patterns of body treatment, grave layout, and associated artefacts may hint at the existence of distinct social segments rooted in particular territories, which may have materialised forms of belonging through specific funerary gestures, while simultaneously participating in a broader Danubian sphere.

Methodology

Identifying funerary human remains

The first step in this research was to create a list of sites that yielded human remains dated to the Early Neolithic (LBK) and the first half of the Middle Neolithic (HST, GG, RO) in the Alsace Plain. This survey was based on available publications up to 2021 (articles, assessment or excavation reports, monographs). Each find was re-examined to confirm its cultural attribution. A review of the literature confirmed that not all the deceased were deposited with artefacts. Thus, to minimise the risk of error, undated human remains located outside any funerary context (e.g. settlements or undetermined contexts) were excluded from the outset. Out of the 61 sites collected, this process led to the exclusion of seven (Waldvogel 2025a). Additionally, individuals found in bicultural cemeteries (i.e. sites used by two succeeding cultures: HST/GG or GG/RO) and lacking artefacts that could confirm their cultural attribution were also excluded. Finally, the small number of cremation deposits (six for the LBK, three for GG) led to their exclusion from the study, which instead focuses on the variability of inhumation burials.

The second step was to assess the funerary nature of the human deposits retained, based on the archaeological definitions of the concept of 'grave' (*sépulture*; Boulestin & Courtaud 2022; Boulestin & Duday 2005; Lerclerc & Tarrête 1988). This type of structure is defined as a final deposition site, where one or more deceased were placed with the

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intention of carrying out a funerary act, which reflects a 'positive intentionality' toward the deceased (Gallay 1987, 28) and presupposes the holding of funerals. In our discipline, identifying a grave relies on the convergence of several 'positive' criteria (Boulestin 2010, 23–4; Boulestin & Courtaud 2022, 60–2), such as the funerary context, the presence of artefacts intentionally associated with the deceased, the careful positioning of the body, or the repetition of the same practices within a given corpus.

This approach made it possible to classify human remains located in settlements or undetermined contexts as funerary when their characteristics aligned with practices observed in contemporary cemeteries. On the other hand, human deposits showing notable differences from the practices observed in cemeteries, classified as 'other types of human remains', were excluded from the analysis because of the uncertainty surrounding their interpretation, as they may have resulted from funerary, non-funerary, or post-funerary behaviours (Waldvogel 2025a; 2025b).

Funerary practices and geographic variability

To better understand the sources of funerary variability, and explore how recurring traits concentrated in given geographic areas may be interpreted, this study draws on insights from social anthropology. The latter has shown that funerary rites result from a group's effort to address the disruption caused by the loss of one of its members. They therefore support the deceased, both physically and symbolically, in their transition to a new state (Baudry 2005; Hertz 1905/1906; Lemonnier 2008; Thomas 1975; 1985; Van Gennep 1909) through a complex set of codified actions imbued with symbolic meaning, whose proper execution guarantees the effectiveness of the ritual. In this way, funerary rites form a system that contributes to the reproduction of shared prescriptive norms (Hertz 1905/1906; Thomas 1975; Yannic 2010) and the maintenance of social bonds (Baudry 2005; 2010; Durkheim 1960 [1912]), so that 'death is [...] not merely the end of an individual existence, but a collective dimension' (Baudry 2001, 29–30). This also implies that funerary norms within a group are rarely homogeneous, as different categories of individuals may be subject to distinct norms. This phenomenon has been widely documented in ethnographic studies, which show that such variability may depend on factors such as the deceased's social status, age at death, gender, or the circumstances of death (e.g. Hertz 1905/1906). Individuals who die a bad death (*malemort*) may be deprived of funerals (e.g. Anstett & Schmitt 2023; Frazer 1934; Héritier 1996, 109; Hertz 1905/1906; Schmitt *et al.* 2025; Thomas 1975; van Wing 1938, 38), although in some cases they can be reintegrated into the community through ceremonies of reparation that transform them into a *bon mort* (e.g. Geirnaert-Martin 1992).

In prehistoric archaeology, however, studying the funerary sphere is particularly challenging. First, only behaviours that leave material traces can be observed, thereby providing access only to part of the population and its social dynamics (Bocquentin *et al.* 2010; Lemonnier 2008). Second, the data reflect descriptive rather than prescriptive norms (Boulestin 2016). In other words, the observation of regularities in the archaeological record (descriptive norms) does not necessarily reflect the rules imposed on the group (prescriptive norms), and equating the two involves a methodological leap, as some behaviours may result, for instance, from non-normative habits (Boulestin 2016). Within this framework, archaeological analysis can only rely on the identification of observable regularities in the treatment of the dead (i.e. funerary practices), which do not provide access to the belief system underlying them (i.e. rites; Boulestin & Duday 2005). Our understanding of the funerary sphere is therefore largely based on indirect material traces (i.e. body position and orientation, grave layout, objects deposited with the dead; Boulestin & Duday 2005). In this context, the repeated occurrence of similar patterns of variability within a given geographical area, without any correlation with biological data such as age or sex, may suggest the existence of social units rooted in particular territories (e.g. clans, lineages) and expressing their distinctiveness through several aspects of life, including funerary practices.

Among the material traces that can be analysed, the objects found in graves are particularly complex to assess. Their study first requires determining whether they relate to the dead (i.e. personal objects; objects reflecting a specific collective identity, such as gender, age, or position within the social hierarchy), formed part of the funerary rites, or resulted from commemorative practices (Bailly & Plisson 2008). Given the difficulties inherent in making such distinctions for prehistoric contexts, small objects recovered from the grave fill (e.g. scattered pottery sherds) were excluded from my analyses, since they may represent either intrusions or the material outcome of ritual activities (e.g. communal meals followed by the deliberate breaking of ceramic vessels). Consequently, the analyses focused primarily on artefacts recovered in direct association with the deceased[3]. These artefacts, whether complete or fragmented, may be linked either to the deceased themselves or to defined funerary rites. Although, as emphasised by the functionalist approach, the study of material culture in prehistoric societies allows us to understand only its structure (i.e. its form) and broad categories of functioning (i.e. its mode of action; Sigaut 1991), the presence of these items alongside the dead nonetheless suggests that they held meaning for the living. Thus, the identification of recurrent patterns adopted by a part of the population within a geographically restricted area should lead us to consider the hypothesis of social segments rooted in a given territory and expressing their identity through distinct funerary gestures, for instance by selecting specific artefacts considered meaningful to them. Such a configuration was, for example, observed during ethnoarchaeological fieldwork among 'traditional' societies in western Sumba[4] (Indonesia). Although this region shares a

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common material culture, social structure, and religion, our informants reported that certain ethnic groups (i.e. territorial groups; Taylor 2011, 242–4) used specific rituals (e.g. breaking vessels on the grave during funerals), whereas others did not.

Building on these ethnological insights, and to address the question of regional variability, I refined the analytical construct of funerary facies (previously called 'traditions'; Jeunesse 1995a; 1997a; 1997b) and introduced the complementary concept sub-facies. These concepts are designed to identify recurring and distinctive funerary gestures adopted by parts of the population within a circumscribed region, without any correlation with the age at death or biological sex of the deceased. Both concepts are applied independently of chrono-cultural divisions to identify behavioural regularities operating at a different scale from the distribution of ceramic styles (generally used to define archaeological 'cultures'). In this perspective, facies and sub-facies may be interpreted as potential indicators of distinct social segments, whose shared gestures materialise specific forms of social belonging. Their identification relies on the recognition of recurring particular traits within defined areas, namely body orientation and position, types of goods, and pit layout.

Results

The analysis of the corpus from the Alsace Plain for the different archaeological cultures (Tables 1 & 2) has led to the identification of:

- Linearbandkeramik: 297 inhumations (Minimum Number of Individuals/MNI: 305) from 30 sites;
- Hinkelstein: two inhumations (MNI: 2) from two sites;
- Grossgartach: 228 inhumations (MNI: 236) from nine sites;
- Rössen: 22 inhumations (MNI: 26) from five sites

The Linearbandkeramik (c. 5300–4950 BC)

The study of LBK inhumations (Figure 2) shows marked differences between Lower and Upper Alsace in several parameters. This phenomenon is clearly visible from phase IV onwards, a period for which the funerary record is relatively balanced between Lower and Upper Alsace. Within each region, a coherent set of gestures can be observed across all types of contexts (i.e. cemeteries, settlements, undetermined contexts) and does not appear to be related to the age at death and biological sex of the deceased, except for certain types of objects associated with the dead.

The orientation of the bodies shows distinct trends. In Lower Alsace, 31% of the individuals for whom this parameter is known have their heads to the west ('antipodic'), contrary to the LBK practice of placing the head to the east. In contrast, in Upper Alsace, 92% of the individuals with known orientation are buried with their heads to the east, in line with the practice identified in the Danube Basin (Figure 3).

The data also highlight a broader range of body positions for the deceased in Lower Alsace during phases IV/V (Waldvogel 2025a) and confirm the frequency in this region of a position previously unknown in the Alsace Plain and beyond: lying on the back with the lower limbs extended (Jeunesse 1995a; 1997a). The particularity of Lower Alsace is also already visible in the 'traditional' LBK position (flexed on the side), with an average recorded knee flexion from 18° to 170°. A closer examination reveals two distinct trends: marked flexion (100–170°), and more moderate flexion (18–70°). In contrast, in Upper Alsace, average flexion never drops below 90° (Figure 4). This phenomenon cannot be attributed to the presence of a wooden container affecting body position, since most cases for which the decomposition environment has been assessed indicate that the pit was filled shortly after deposition of the body directly in the ground. Likewise, the hypothesis of a direct relationship between a supine position and the use of a wooden container (Thevenet 2012; 2013) cannot be generalised, as several individuals displaying this position have decomposed in a filled environment.

Current data also indicate that, although the grave pits are generally oval, certain structural features are documented only in Upper Alsace. At the Mulhouse-Est cemetery (phase III), burial 5/2014 shows an arrangement referred to as a '*banquette*' system, which is 'an elevation of the pit above the bottom, where the skeleton lies' (Allard *et al.* 1997, 34; translation by the author). Located to the east of the space containing the deceased's bones, it stands 30 cm high, with a maximum length of 1.95 m and a width of 0.50 m. This burial is further distinguished by a post-decompositional intervention, as a large portion of the skeletal remains was removed after the flesh had decayed, while the remaining bones were crushed (Jeunesse *et al.* 2015). Additional arrangements were reported for burial 1 at the same site by Roger and Joël Schweitzer (1977), who noted the presence of 'postholes', later reclassified as 'stakeholes' due to their small size (Jeunesse *et al.* 2015). The authors also reported 'circular discolorations' in burials 2, 11, 14, 15, 17, and 20 (Schweitzer & Schweitzer 1977), but their interpretation as stakeholes should be considered with caution.

Although grave goods encompass a wide range of object types, analysing them together with biological parameters (where known) shows that in Upper and Lower Alsace some appear to be linked to the biological sex of the deceased. This is the case for fire-lighting kits (men: 27%; women: 3%), adze blades (men: 40%; women: 1%), flint blades (men: 35%; women: 2%), and flint arrowheads (men: 35%; women: 0%), which are preferentially deposited with men. However, biological sex is not the only factor, as among the 66 individuals identified as male, only 45% were associated with an adze blade, 18% with a flint arrowhead, 14% with a fire-lighting kit, and 14% with a flint blade.

While some types of items are preferentially associated with biological sex, during phases IV/V others display regional patterning that cannot be readily explained by biological data. Thus, in Lower Alsace, colourants mainly occur as raw or partly worked nodules, and in contrast to Upper Alsace food deposits, polishing stones/sharpening

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Table 1. Inhumation burials in the Alsace Plain attributed to the Linearbandkeramik culture

	Site	Context	Phase	Number of inhumations	MNI
Lower Alsace	Bischoffsheim 'Le Village' and 'AFUA du stade' (Jeunesse & Sainty 1991; Lefranc *et al.* 2004)	Domestic	IV	1	**1**
	Entzheim 'Sud-est de la gare' (Forrer 1912; Weigt 1909)	Cemetery	IV	11	**11**
	Entzheim 'Les Terres de la Chapelle – ZAC' (Lefranc 2012; Lefranc *et al.* 2017)	Domestic	IV	2	**2**
			IV/V	4	**4**
	Entzheim 'In der Klamm' (Landolt & Croutsch 2008; Landolt *et al.* 2013)	Domestic	Undetermined	4	**4**
			IV	1	**2**
			IV/V	1	**1**
	Ingenheim 'Bannenberg' (Lefranc *et al.* 2014)	Cemetery	IV	22	**23**
	Ittenheim 'Complexe sportif et zone de loisir' (Cartier *et al.* 2007; Lefranc *et al.* 2007)	Domestic	III-V	1	**1**
	Kolbsheim 'Lotissement Vogeseblick' (Denaire 2013)	Domestic	Undetermined	1	**1**
			III/IV	1	**1**
	Mundolsheim 'Pelzstücke' (Thévenin 1974; 1984)	Undetermined	Undetermined	1	**1**
	Oberschaeffolsheim 'Zwischen Oberschaeffolsheim und Ittenheim' (Forrer 1916)	Undetermined	Undetermined	1	**1**
	Osthoffen-Breuschwickersheim (Forrer 1916; Schneider 1983)	Undetermined	Undetermined	1	**1**
	Osthouse 'Kleinfeld' (Perrin 2013; Vauthier 2012)	Domestic	IV	1	**1**
	Quatzenheim 'Auf dem Spitzenpfad' (Jeunesse 2005; Schneider 1983; Stieber 1947; Wernert 1948)	Cemetery	IV	17	**17**
	Rosheim 'ZA Rosenmeer – Extension Baruch' (Baudoux 1996; Jeunesse & Mauvilly 1996; Zehner *et al.* 2002)	Undetermined	Undetermined	1	**1**
	Schwindratzheim 'Terrasses de la Zorn' (Denaire 2016)	Domestic	III/IV	1	**1**
			IV/V	1	**1**
	Souffelweyersheim 'Tuilerie Reiss und Bund' (Forrer & Jänger 1918; Heintz 1981; Schneider 1983; Ulrich 1939; 1946; 1953)	Cemetery	IV	34	**34**
	Stutzheim 'Auf dem Hengstberg' and 'Über dem Stutzenweg' (Forrer 1903; Schneider 1983; Stieber 1952)	Undetermined	Undetermined	1	**1**
	Vendenheim 'Le Haut du Coteau' (Jeunesse 2002a; Jeunesse *et al.* 2025)	Cemetery	IV/V	94	**99**
Upper Alsace	Brunstatt 'Lang Dudely Acker' (Thévenin 1978; Wolf 1979)	Undetermined	III	1	**1**
	Colmar 'Route de Rouffach' (Bonnet *et al.* 1988; Jeunesse 1993a)	Domestic	II	1	**1**
			III	2	**2**
	Ensisheim 'Les Octrois' (Jeunesse 1993b; 1995c; Jeunesse & Boës 1996; Lambach 1993; Mathieu & Mathieu 1993; Mauvilly 1993)	Cemetery	IV/V	44	**44**
	Ensisheim 'Ratfeld' (Jeunesse & Sainty 1992)	Domestic	Undetermined	1	**1**
	Geispitzen 'Stuecke' (Wolf *et al.* 2000)	Grave group	III/IV	4	**4**
	Habsheim 'Landserer Weg' (Thévenin 1978; Wolf 1979)	Domestic?	II	1	**1**
	Merxheim 'Breit' (Bonnet & Jehl 1960; Schneider 1983)	Undetermined	Undetermined	1	**1**
	Morschwiller-le-Bas 'Ungeheuer Hoelzle' (Schneikert 2012; Vergnaud 2016)	Grave group	IV	5	**5**
	Mulhouse-Est (Jeunesse *et al.* 2015; Mechadi 2020; Schweitzer & Schweitzer 1977)	Cemetery	III	24	**25**
	Rouffach 'Tuilerie' (Adam 1937; Jeunesse 1983)	Undetermined	IV/V	1	**1**

(*Continued*)

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Table 1. (*Continued*)

Site	Context	Phase	Number of inhumations	MNI
Wettolsheim 'Koenigsbreite' (Sainty *et al.* 1988)	Undetermined	IV	1	**1**
Wettolsheim 'Ricoh' (Jeunesse 1988; Jeunesse & Mauvilly 1996)	Domestic	IV/V	1	**1**
Wittenheim 'Le Moulin' (Guillotin 2011; Vergnaud & Maurer 2014)	Cemetery	IV/V	8	**8**

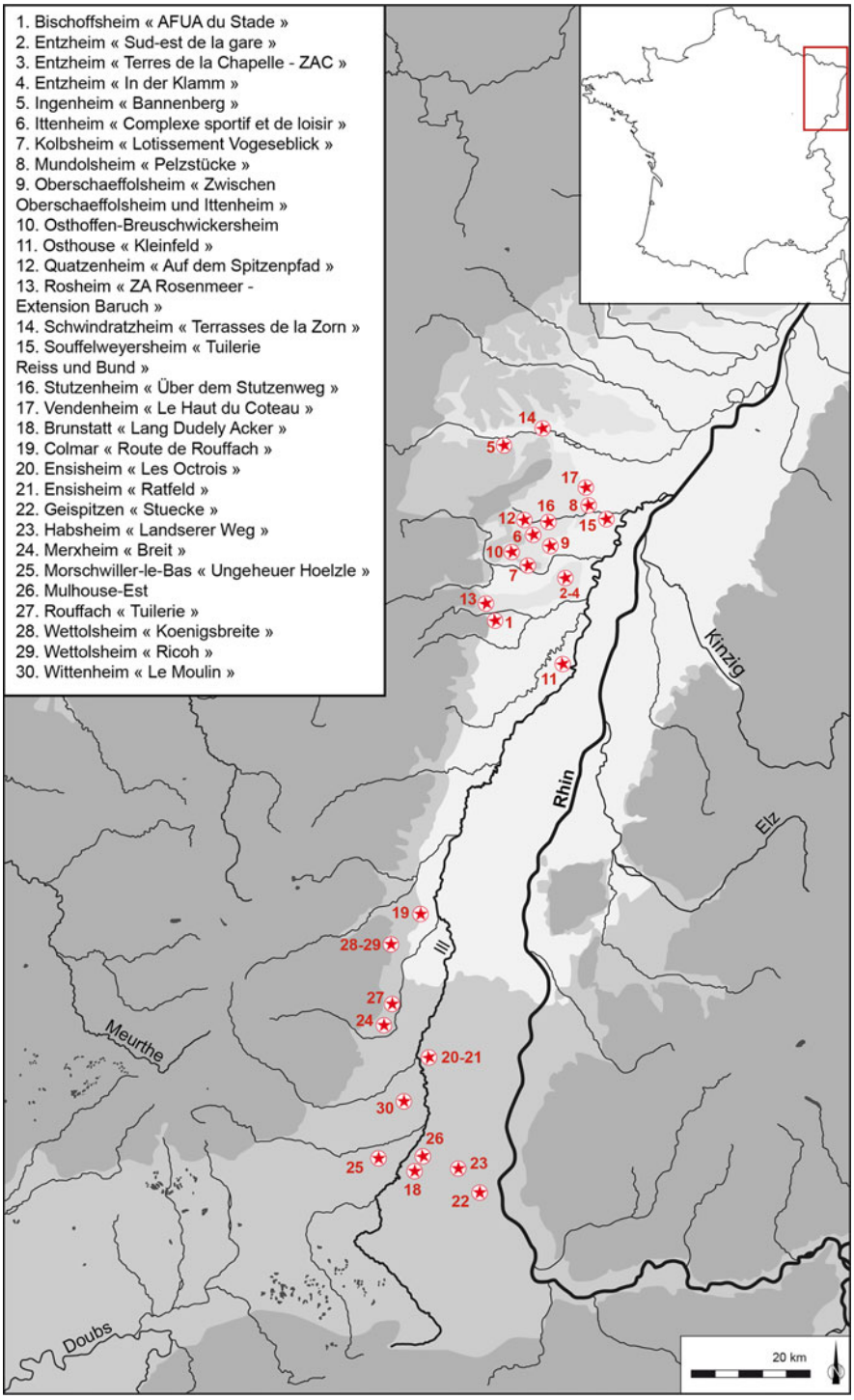


Figure 2. Location of the inhumation burials used in this study and attributed to the Linearbandkeramik culture (Illustration: L. Waldvogel; base map: A. Denaire).

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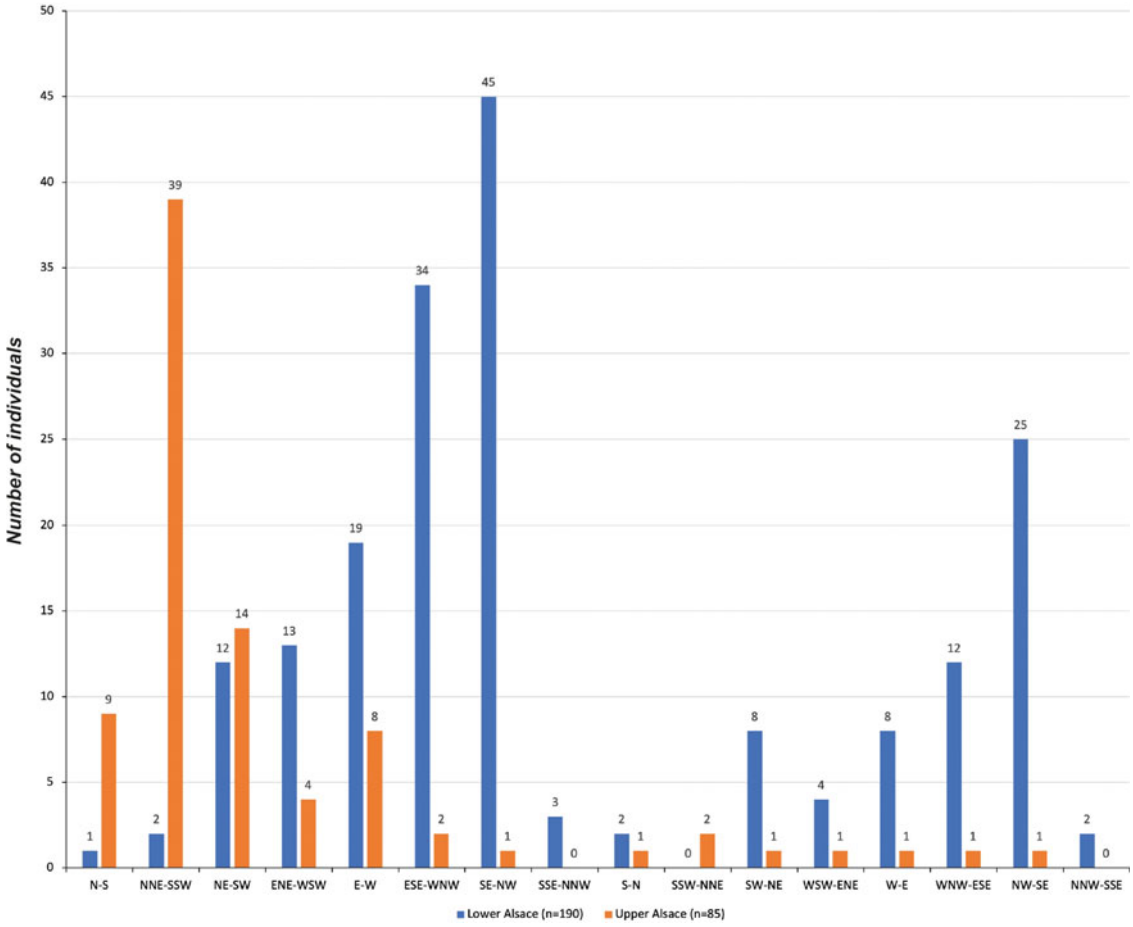


Figure 3. Orientation of the deceased in the Linearbandkeramik culture in Lower and Upper Alsace. The first cardinal direction denotes the position of the head (Illustration: L. Waldvogel).

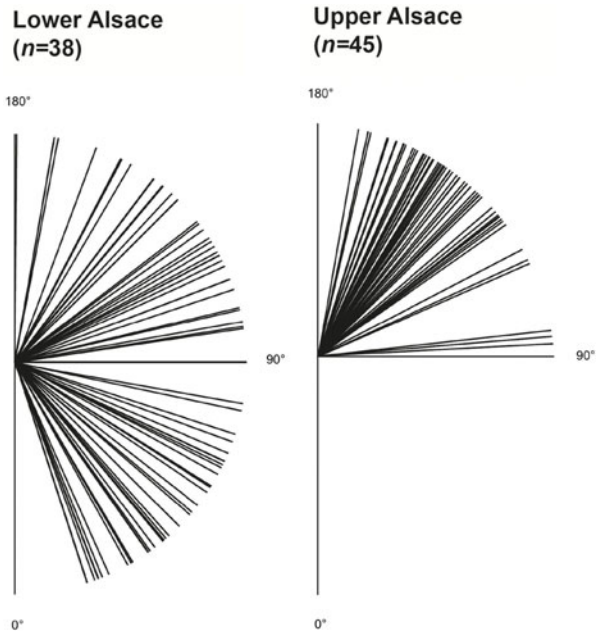


Figure 4. Average knee flexion of individuals buried in a lateral flexed position (Illustration: L. Waldvogel).

tools, bone arrowheads, grinding tools, and awls are attested (Figure 5). Ornaments are rare and their types are also limited: the 12 identified items, composed of a total of 145 elements, shows that 11 were necklaces and one a bracelet. Except for a few contemporary marine shells (*Nucella lapillus*), the raw materials derive from two species of small terrestrial and river shells (*Ena detrita* and *Margaritifera margaritifera,* or *Unio*), as well as deer teeth or antlers.

In Upper Alsace, colourants are found almost exclusively in powdered form. Ornaments are well attested and display a considerable diversity of types: three bone rings, one bracelet, eight necklaces, two antler toggles (*Geweihknebel*), three perforated shells (one *Spondylus*, one marine fossil shell, one terrestrial shell), and two V-*Spondylus* (i.e. shells with a V-formed incision, generally interpreted as belt buckles). These ornaments also stand out for their large number of components, with 19 objects comprising a total of 600 elements. Most are made from contemporary Atlantic and/or Mediterranean marine shells, while recent discoveries confirm a change in the morphology of small *Spondylus* shell beads (Jeunesse 1995a): beads from phase III have varied shapes (triangular, oblong, discoidal, trapezoidal); during phases IV/V only the discoidal shape persisted, with new

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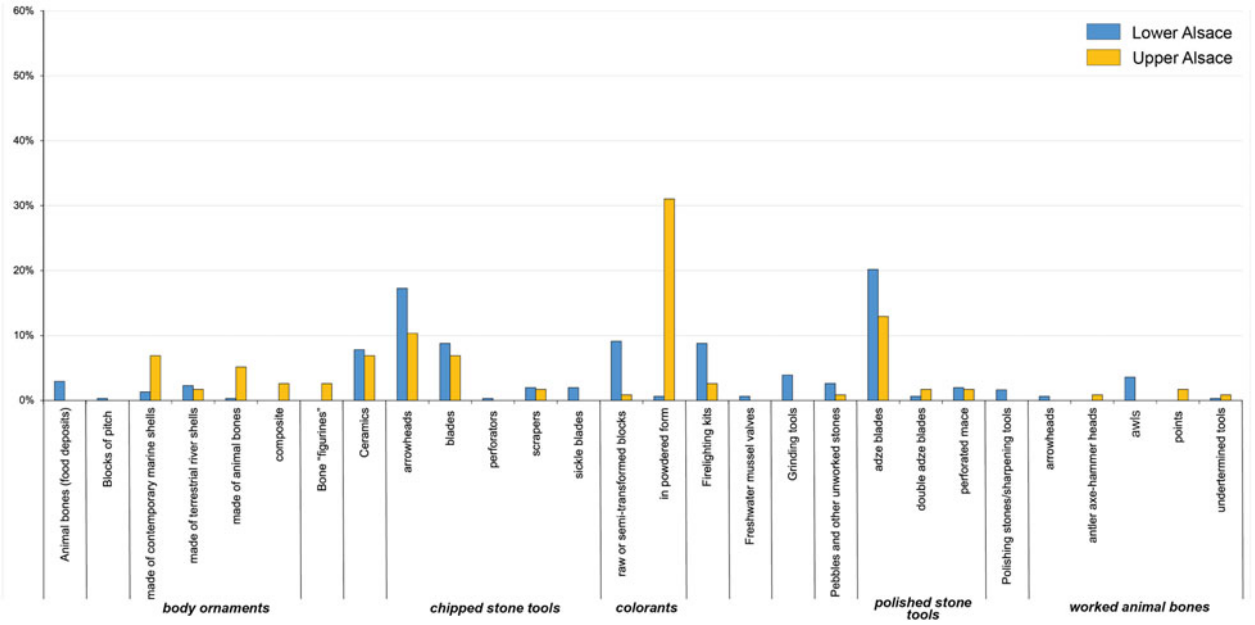


Figure 5. Frequency of object types found in inhumation burials in Lower Alsace and Upper Alsace during phases IV/V (illustration: L. Waldvogel).



Figure 6. Burial 6 from Morschwiller-le-Bas 'Ungeheuer Hoelzle' contained an individual wearing two bone rings (photograph: ANTEA-Archéologie).

beads made from *Trivia monacha*, *Nucella lapillus*, *Dentalium vulgare*, and *Columbella rustica* suggesting close links with Mesolithic populations (Jeunesse 1997a; 2002a, 151; Rigaud 2011). Furthermore, Upper Alsace has yielded the only known examples of bone rings in Alsace (Figure 6). The study of the raw material used for ornaments in the Alsace Plain indicates that, whereas those made from animal bone and terrestrial/river shells are also attested in settlements, those made from marine shells – especially *Spondylus* – are found almost exclusively in inhumation burials. This pattern suggests that they held a particular significance within the funerary sphere in Upper Alsace.

The Hinkelstein (c. 4800–4730 BC)

The known Hinkelstein graves in Alsace are limited to two individual inhumations from bicultural cemeteries (HST and GG) located at Erstein 'Krebsrott' and Entzheim 'In der Klamm' (Lower Alsace) (Figure 7; Table 2). Although this small corpus precludes any meaningful assessment of variability, their characteristics are briefly described here. The individual from tomb II at Erstein 'Krebsrott', poorly preserved, was oriented WNW–ESE. The deceased was associated with fragments of a decorated cup with a globular body (near the feet) and fragments of two boar tusks located either in the neck area (Forrer 1911, 196) or on one of the individual's arms (Schneider 1983). The likely adult female from Entzheim 'In der Klamm' (burial 7056) lay on her back with extended limbs and head to the SE, in a pit that fits her body (1.90 × 0.60 m) (Figure 8). The decorated cup and the bowl located to the left of the skull were elevated above the skeleton (Landolt *et al.* 2013, 362). This observation led to the proposal that these ceramics were either placed on a board used to close the grave or on a *banquette*. The incompleteness and spatial distribution of the ceramics found at the level of the deceased may be the result of intentional breakage. These include two incomplete cups, whose sherds were scattered around the left forearm, and sherds of a pot found along the right lower limb. The deceased also had a complete and a fragmented sandstone grinding tool placed near the right

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Table 2. Inhumation burials in the Alsace Plain attributed to the Hinkelstein, the Grossgartach, and the Rössen cultures

	Site	Context	Cultural attribution	Number of inhumations	MNI
Lower Alsace	Entzheim 'In der Klamm' (Landolt & Croutsch 2008; Landolt *et al.* 2013)	Cemetery	HST	1	**1**
			GG	47	**51**
	Entzheim 'Le Terres de la Chapelle – ZAC' and 'Lotissement' (Lefranc 2012; Lefranc & Chenal 2008; Schneikert 2006)	Grave group	RO	6	**10**
	Erstein 'Krebsrott' (Forrer 1911; Schneider 1983)	Cemetery	HST	1	**1**
			GG	11	**11**
	Lingolsheim 'Ancienne sablière Fischer et Schott' (Forrer 1911; 1938)	Cemetery	GG	32	**32**
	Obernai 'Neuen Brunnen' (Féliu 2017; Schneikert 2012)	Cemetery	GG	9	**9**
			RO	4	**4**
	Oberschaeffolsheim 'Lotissement RD 45' (Perrin 2019)	Domestic	GG	1	**1**
	Rosheim 'ZA Rosenmeer – Baruch' (Bakaj *et al.* 1998; Boës 1999; Denaire 2009; Jeunesse & Mauvilly 1996)	Cemetery	GG	88	**91**
			RO	7	**7**
Upper Alsace	Éguisheim 'Bühl' (Gutmann 1902)	Grave group	GG	4	**4**
	Guémar 'Rotenberger Weg' (Denaire *et al.* 2012)	Cemetery	GG	35	**36**
			RO	4	**4**
	Réguisheim 'Grossfeld/Oberfeld' (Jeunesse 1996; Roth-Zehner 2004)	Undetermined	GG	1	**1**
	Sierentz 'ZAC Hoell' (Denaire & Jeunesse 2008; Roth-Zehner 2007)	Undetermined	RO	1	**1**

foot, and wore a fired clay armring with two grooves on the left arm. This last type of object is concentrated in the southern Upper Rhine Plain, where it appeared during the LBK. However, it is mainly found in settlements (Jeunesse 1993c; 1995b). The specimen from the Hinkelstein grave at Entzheim 'In der Klamm' thus represents the oldest and only example of such an ornament in a funerary context in the Alsace Plain.

The Grossgartach (c. 4730–4600 BC)

The Grossgartach inhumations from the Alsace Plain (Figure 7) show a certain degree of variability. However, given the current state of evidence, the lack of well-preserved cemeteries in Upper Alsace prevents us from assessing whether a regional trend exists.

The analysis of body orientations, known for 75% of the 236 individuals, indicates a tendency to deposit the deceased with their head to the west (94%), although some alternative orientations exist (Figure 9). Regarding body positions, the most common is supine with both the upper and lower limbs extended (61%), which co-exists with nine other less represented configurations (Waldvogel 2025a).

This period has yielded the first traces of wooden structures for the Neolithic in the region. While their existence in some inhumation burials had long been hypothesised based on a combination of indirect evidence (e.g. linear delimitations, decomposition in an empty space, flat pit bases; Boës 1999; 2004; Féliu 2017; Landolt *et al.* 2013), it has been confirmed by recent discoveries at Bernolsheim-Mommenheim 'Plateforme départementale d'activités de la région de Brumath', where residual traces of wood were identified in four burials from cemetery 1 (burials 3004, 3202, 3210, 3238; Leprovost 2023) (Figure 10). However, it remains challenging to identify the exact nature of these wood traces and to ascertain whether they corresponded to simple planks, a movable container, or a wooden casing directly constructed within the grave (Waldvogel *et al.* in press). Their use should also not be generalised or linked to the supine position, as several supine individuals from Rosheim appear to have decomposed in a filled space (Boës 1999; 2004).

Grave goods include a wide range of object types, of which two seem to be preferentially deposited with men: flint arrowheads (men: 47%; women: 0%) and adze blades (men: 23%; women: 4.5%). Nevertheless, biological sex appears to be only one of the factors influencing the deposition of these types of items, as 47% of male individuals are not associated with them. Contrary to the LBK, the limited corpus currently available for Upper Alsace prevents us from identifying any clear pattern in the deposition of specific artefact types across the Alsace Plain. While variability appears to operate primarily at the site scale, several common tendencies can nevertheless be identified. Certain items attested in LBK graves, such as double adze blades and specific marine shell ornaments (e.g. V-*Spondylus*, perforated *Spondylus* shells) disappear during the Grossgartach, and new types emerge, including stone armrings ('*anneaux-disques*'), armrings made from boar tusks, and axe blades. The range of materials used to produce adornments is diverse and relies mainly on locally available resources. These include various rocks (Jurassic

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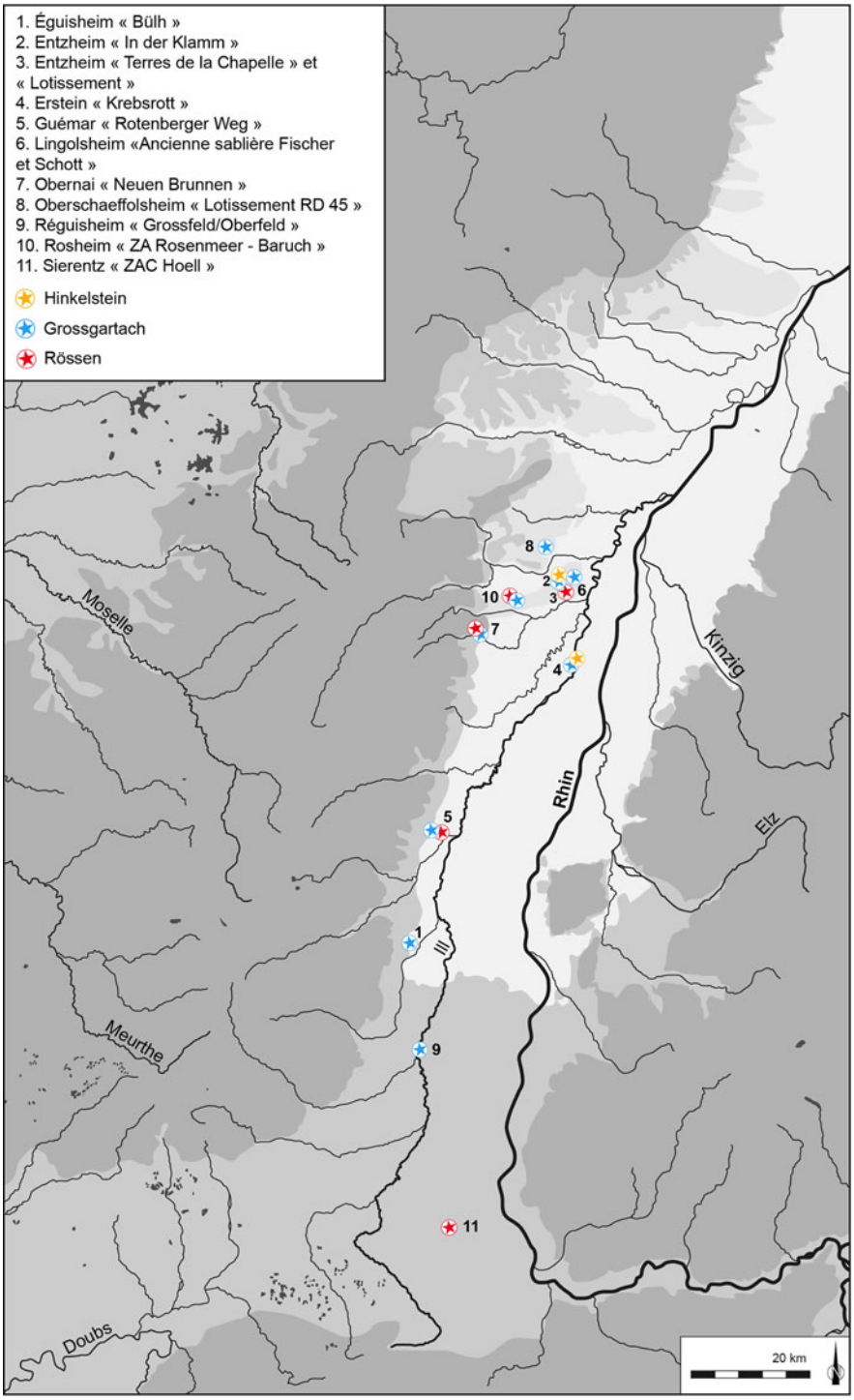


Figure 7. Location of the inhumation burials used in this study and attributed to the Hinkelstein, the Grossgartach, and the Rössen cultures (Illustration: L. Waldvogel; base map: A. Denaire).

oolitic limestone, lignite, jet, probably schist and serpentinite), which dominate the assemblages, as well as animal bones (deer teeth, boar tusks, bird bones, fox canines), Atlantic marine shells (*Nucella lapillus, Dentalium vulgare*), continental molluscs (freshwater mussels of the *Unio* type), fossil shells (*Natica, Tympanotonos*), and, more rarely, fired clay. Only a few items indicate long-distance exchange: this is the case for *Nucella lapillus* and *Dentalium vulgare* (Atlantic coasts; Jeunesse 1997a, 72), fossil *Natica* and *Tympanotonos* (Paris Basin; Bonnardin 2009, 48), and probably schist (St-Amarin?) and serpentinite from the Alps (Jeunesse 1995b, 6). The same types of ornaments are also attested in contemporary settlements. However, stone armrings constitute a notable exception, as they are always fragmented (Jeunesse 1995b, 11), so that the only complete specimens known come from graves.

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Figure 8. Burial 7056 from Entzheim 'In der Klamm', where the position of artefacts suggests the presence of a *banquette* (photograph: Archéologie Alsace).

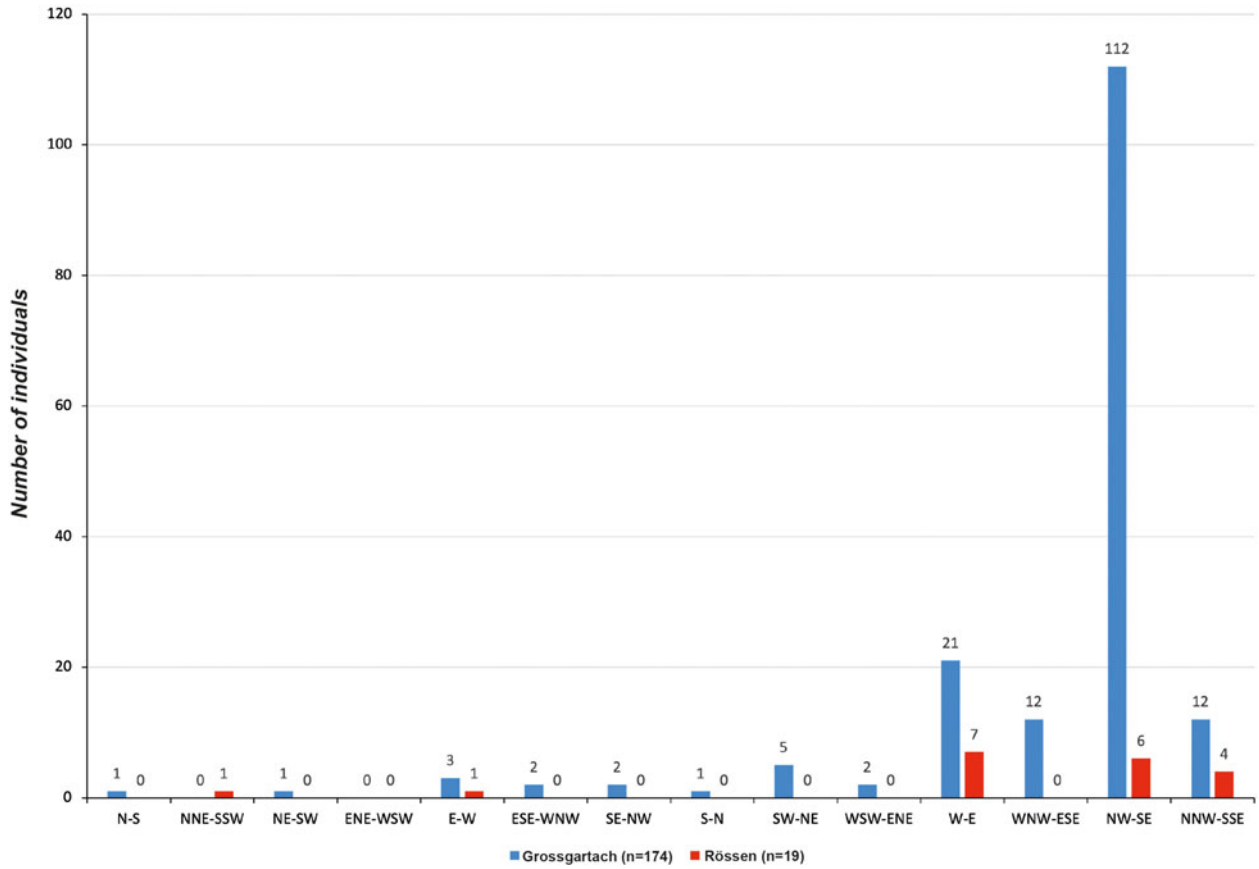


Figure 9. Orientation of the deceased attributed to the Grossgartach and the Rössen cultures (Illustration: L. Waldvogel).

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Figure 10. Burial 3238 from Bernolsheim-Mommenheim 'Plateforme départementale d'activités de la région de Brumath', where traces of wood were identified (photograph: Archéologie Alsace).

The Rössen (c. 4600–4400 BC)

Rössen inhumations are concentrated in Lower Alsace and their limited number (22 burials) (Figure 7) does not allow for the identification of regional trends in the object types deposited with the dead. The data show that, in this region, the preference for the deposition of the head to the west continues (17 of 19 individuals) (Figure 9), whereas body positions indicate limited variability, with a preference for a supine placement with both upper and lower limbs extended (seven of nine individuals with available information; Waldvogel 2025a). The use of wooden containers for certain individuals has also recently been highlighted with the discovery of burial 371 at Hochfelden 'Route départementale n°421' (Oberlin in press; Waldvogel *et al*. in press) (Figure 11).

Compared with the preceding periods, grave goods are characterised by a more limited spectrum. This is particularly visible in the reduced diversity of ceramic forms, as well as in the limited range of chipped stone tools (arrowheads, blades) and bone tools (awls). Ornaments also show a reduction in the range of materials employed, which remain largely local: limestone (47%), *Dentalium* shells (28.5%), mother of pearl (24%), schist (0.5%), and *Nucella lapillus* (0.25%). Given the limited number of inhumations, no clear pattern in the deposition of specific object types related to biological data or regional distribution can currently be

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Figure 11. Burial 371 from Hochfelden 'Route départementale n°421', where traces of wood were found (photograph: Archéologie Alsace).

identified. The observed variability therefore appears to operate primarily at the site scale. Moreover, as during the Grossgartach, body ornaments are also attested in Rössen settlements. However, stone armrings are consistently found in a fragmented state (Jeunesse 1995b, 11).

Discussion

The study of funerary practices documented in the Alsace Plain during the Early Neolithic (LBK) and the beginning of the Middle Neolithic (HST, GG, RO) reveals a significant diversity in the treatment of the dead. As previously mentioned, such variability observed at the site level may be linked to the fact that individuals within a group could be subject to distinct prescriptive norms due to their belonging to one or several particular social categories (e.g. gender, age at death, social status; e.g. Hertz 1905/1906). However, the recurrence of specific gestures adopted by part of the population at the local or regional scale, without any apparent correlation with variables accessible through archaeological analysis (e.g. age at death, biological sex), raises additional questions. The available evidence suggests that other factors may also have contributed to this variability. When compared with data from well-preserved cemeteries and settlement graves in other areas occupied by Linearbandkeramik, Hinkelstein, Grossgartach, and Rössen populations (Figure 12), it appears that the observed geographical variability does not constitute an isolated phenomenon. Besides, some of its main patterns often transcend the chrono-cultural divisions defined on the basis of ceramic styles, even though these populations shared a broadly similar material culture. The combined analysis of key parameters (i.e. pit layout, body orientation and position, objects associated with the dead) not only supports the identification of four funerary facies, as previously recognised (Jeunesse 2006; Jeunesse *et al.* 2004), but also suggests the presence of several sub-facies. The existence of these two categories, which should be understood as statistical tendencies emerging from the available corpus rather than homogeneous entities, likely held social significance, to which I now turn.

A regionalisation of funerary practices in the Danubian world

The study of the different kinds of material evidence mobilised to characterise funerary practices, together with the comparison between objects recovered from inhumations and those found in settlements, show that most artefact types identified in graves are also attested in domestic contexts. However, certain ornament types and raw materials constitute an exception, as they are found almost exclusively in burials, suggesting that they might have been selected deliberately for funerary purposes. In addition, several aspects of funerary practices display recurrent regional patterns that cannot be explained by the biological

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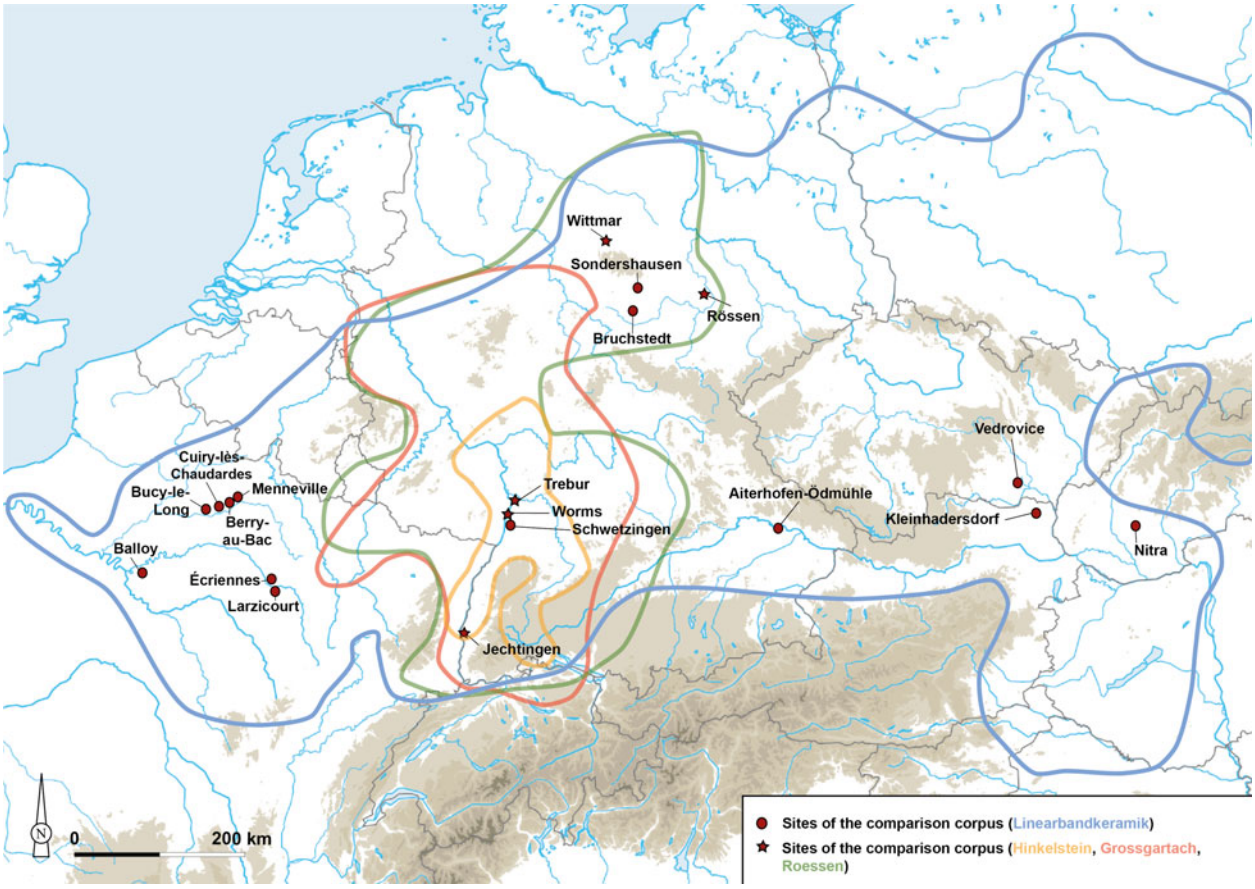


Figure 12. Location of the cemeteries included in the comparative corpus, with outline of the distribution of the various cultural groupings. Linearbandkeramik: Aiterhofen-Ödmühle (Nieszery 1995); Balloy 'Les Réaudins' (Mordant 1997); Bucy-le-Long 'La Fosselle' (Hachem *et al.* 1998); Berry-au-Bac 'Le Vieux Tordoir' (Allard *et al.* 1997); Bruchstedt (Kahlke 2004); Cuiry-lès-Chaudardes 'Les Fontinettes' (Ilett & Constantin, 1993); Écriennes 'La Folie' (Bonnabel *et al.* 2003); Kleinhadersdorf (Neugebauer-Maresch & Lenneis 2015); Larzicourt 'Champ Buchotte' (Chertier 1980); Menneville 'Derrière le village' (Thevenet 2010); Nitra (Pavùk 1972); Schwetzingen (Gerling 2012); Sondershausen (Kahlke 2004); Vedrovice (Podborský 2002). Hinkelstein: Trebur (Spatz 1999); Worms-Rheingewann and Worms-Rheindürckheim (Meier-Arendt 1975). Grossgartach: Trebur (Spatz 1999); Jechtingen (Dornheim 2011). Rössen: Rössen (Rötting 1983) (Illustration: L. Waldvogel; base map: A. Denaire).

characteristics of the deceased accessible through osteological analysis.

Within the western part of the LBK, this variability can be described through the identification of two funerary facies[5]. The first (Facies I) encompasses Upper Alsace and the Paris Basin. In these regions, the deceased are predominantly oriented with their heads between the NE and the SE, and are placed in lateral flexed positions, either on the left or on the right side. Variants of the supine position with flexed lower limbs are also documented. The angle of flexion of the legs is generally high, usually exceeding 90°, which closely corresponds to practices observed in the Danube Basin. Grave goods frequently include ornaments composed of beads made from animal bones or teeth, sometimes combined with other elements such as recent marine shells. Powdered colourants are also attested, although their distribution around the body differs from the pattern observed in the Danube region (Waldvogel 2025a).

Despite this shared set of gestures, the available data highlight regional distinctions within this facies (Figure 13). In Upper Alsace and the Vosges region (sub-facies Ia), the *banquette* within pits is largely absent, and grave goods in phases III–V often include objects such as fire-lighting kits, axe-hammer blades made from deer antler, and polished stone tools. Ceramic vessels are frequently deposited in graves during phase III, but become rarer in phases IV and V. In contrast, the Paris Basin (sub-facies Ib) is characterised by the absence of cemeteries – the deceased are deposited in graves located in settlements (Bickle & Whittle 2013, 373; Bocquentin *et al.* 2010; Pechtl & Hofmann 2013, 124) – and the frequency of *banquettes*, which are often associated with '*niches*' (Bonnabel *et al.* 2003; Thevenet 2010). Ceramic vessels remain frequent in graves during phases IV and V, while *Spondylus* beads display notable morphological diversity (e.g. Thevenet 2010, pl. 17, 42, 56, 92), contrary to Upper Alsace at this time. Moreover, several categories of objects present in sub-facies Ia (e.g. fire-lighting kits, antler axe-hammer blades, and polished stone tools) are now rare in inhumations (Jeunesse 2006, 8; Plateaux 1993, 101; Thevenet 2010). These features, specific to the Paris Basin, persist in the region during the following Villeneuve-Saint-Germain period (Waldvogel 2021; 2022; 2025a; Waldvogel & Jeunesse 2022).

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Facies II is attested in Lower Alsace and in the Neckar region. According to previous studies, it may also be present in the north-western LBK, although there are problems of poor preservation at its main cemeteries (Jeunesse 1995a; 1997b). In this facies, colourants are deposited as raw or semi-worked nodules and show no preferential association with the sex or age of the deceased, while ornaments mainly consist of recent terrestrial and river shells (*Ena detrita* and *Margaritifera* in Lower Alsace; *Zebrina detrita*, *Pseudunio auricularius, Unio pictorum*, and *Anodonta cygnea* at Schwetzingen in south-west Germany) or fossil shells (*Glycymeris* at Schwetzingen; Gerling 2012). Another particularity is the frequency of antipodic orientations, with a significant proportion of individuals buried with their heads oriented between the SSW and the WNW (31% at Schwetzingen, 31.5% in Lower Alsace), in clear contrast with the pattern observed in Upper Alsace (7%). Despite these shared features, several elements point to a specific dynamic in Lower Alsace and support dividing Facies II into at least two subgroups separating Lower Alsace (sub-facies IIa) from the Neckar region (sub-facies IIb) (Figure 13). Sub-facies IIa (Lower Alsace) stands out in that flexed individuals show a wide range of average angle of flexion of the lower limbs, from 0° to 170°. Food deposits are also attested, a practice which remains rare in eastern LBK areas but is also documented in the Hinkelstein culture (Spatz 1999), which developed in the Palatinate contemporaneously with the end of the LBK in Alsace (Jeunesse 2006, 13; Jeunesse & Strien 2009). The appearance, during phase IV, of individuals buried in a supine position with extended lower limbs echoes a similar practice observed in neighbouring Hinkelstein groups. In contrast, sub-facies IIb (Neckar region, south-west Germany) displays a more 'conservative' configuration. Flexed positions remain dominant, with angles of knee flexion similar to those observed in the Danube Basin, which never drop below 90°. The supine position with extended limbs is uncommon (1% in Schwetzingen), whereas grave goods are characterised by the presence of bone pins in a few graves and by the rarity of polished stone tools.

The study of funerary practices associated with the Hinkelstein, the Grossgartach, and the western part of the Rössen (first part of the Middle Neolithic) has confirmed the existence of common features that define Facies III (Jeunesse 1997b, 545). The latter presents several patterns indicating a persistence of traits from sub-facies Ia. In Facies III, the supine position with extended lower limbs is generally adopted, *Spondylus* ornaments are rare – and completely disappear during the Grossgartach (Jeunesse 2002b, 52) –, colourants are deposited as nodules, and grinding tools are frequent. At the same time, new tendencies appear, such as the increasing use of stone and animal bones for ornaments, and the deposition of axe blades with the dead.

Within this facies, however, several geographic variants that transcend chrono-cultural subdivisions can be distinguished (Figure 14). Sub-facies IIIa is currently documented in the Hinkelstein cemeteries of the Worms region in Germany (Trebur, Worms-Rheingewann, Worms-Rheindürkheim; Meier-Arendt 1975; Spatz 1999) – the number of Hinkelstein inhumations in Alsace is currently too small to extend observations there. It is characterised by the predominance of an easterly burial orientation – therefore continuing LBK practice – and the presence in graves of imitations of deer teeth made from terrestrial or river shells, bracelets made of deer antler, and beads mainly made of locally available recent or fossil shells. Arrow shaft straighteners and food deposits are frequent, while arrowheads are rare. During the Grossgartach, the same region (Trebur; Spatz 1999) displays slightly different patterns that suggest the existence of a sub-facies IIIb. There are now roughly equal numbers of people buried with their head to the west or east, whereas other elements change: shell imitations of deer teeth are replaced by real ones, and *Spondylus* ornaments and arrowheads disappear from inhumations. Sub-facies IIIc is represented at least in the Alsace Plain, where it encompasses both the Grossgartach and the Rössen. Inhumations of this area differ from the Grossgartach ones at Trebur due to the high frequency of arrowheads, the presence of limestone imitations of deer teeth, and, more broadly, the frequent use of limestone for ornaments.

Finally, several contemporary cultures located further east display specific funerary gestures defined as Facies IV (Jeunesse 2006; Jeunesse *et al.* 2004). In contrast with Facies III, these groups maintain the lateral flexed position common since the LBK. This is documented in the *Stichbandkeramik*, the eastern part of the Rössen culture area, parts of the Lengyel, the Samborzec, the Jordanów, and the Gatersleben cultures (Jeunesse 2006, 13–19; Jeunesse *et al.* 2004, 18; Pavlů & Zápotocká 2013; Zápotocká 1998), spanning an area from modern-day eastern Germany to Poland. Although their detailed examination lies beyond the scope of this study, the data indicate significant internal variability, also suggesting the existence of several sub-facies (Waldvogel 2025a).

Funerary facies as an indicator of social units rooted in specific territories?

The patterns outlined above highlight the recurrence of specific funerary gestures within circumscribed areas. Although observed among only part of the population, these practices show no correlation with biological sex or age at death. They are furthermore associated with geographical variability in the types of ornaments or raw materials used for their manufacture. This phenomenon suggests the existence of regional dynamics shaping funerary practices within the broader Danubian sphere. One possibility is that this reflects the agency of one or several social units (e.g. clans, lineages) associated with particular territories, which expressed their distinctiveness through several specific funerary gestures. Despite a shared material culture and a common set of practices across the Danubian world, some local segments appear to have used the funerary sphere to materialise special forms of belonging. While this can only be suggested for the Hinkelstein, the Grossgartach, and the western part of the Rössen, it appears particularly convincing in the case of the Linearbandkeramik populations of the Alsace Plain, which constitute the core dataset of this study.

In this region, the distinction between Upper and Lower Alsace in the funerary sphere corresponds to differences

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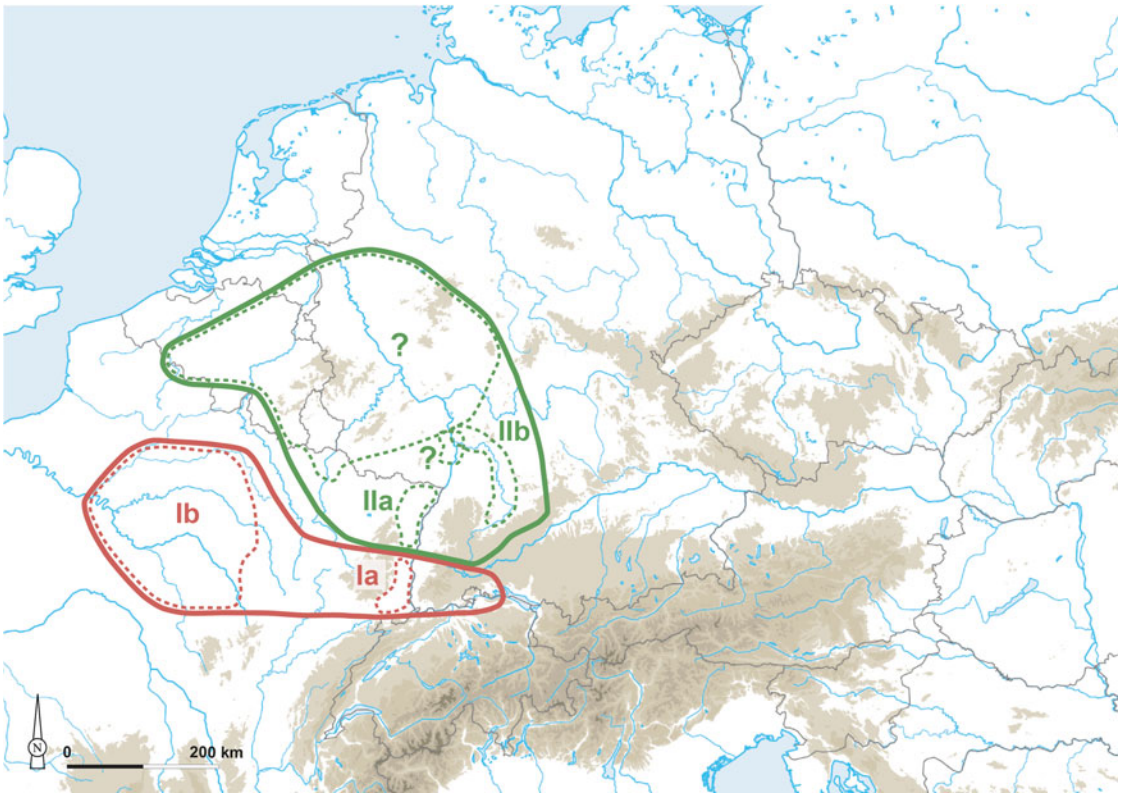


Figure 13. Location of sub-facies Ia (Linearbandkeramik)/Ib (Linearbandkeramik, Villeneuve-Saint-Germain) and sub-facies IIa (Linearbandkeramik)/IIb (Linearbandkeramik) (Illustration: L. Waldvogel; base map: A. Denaire).

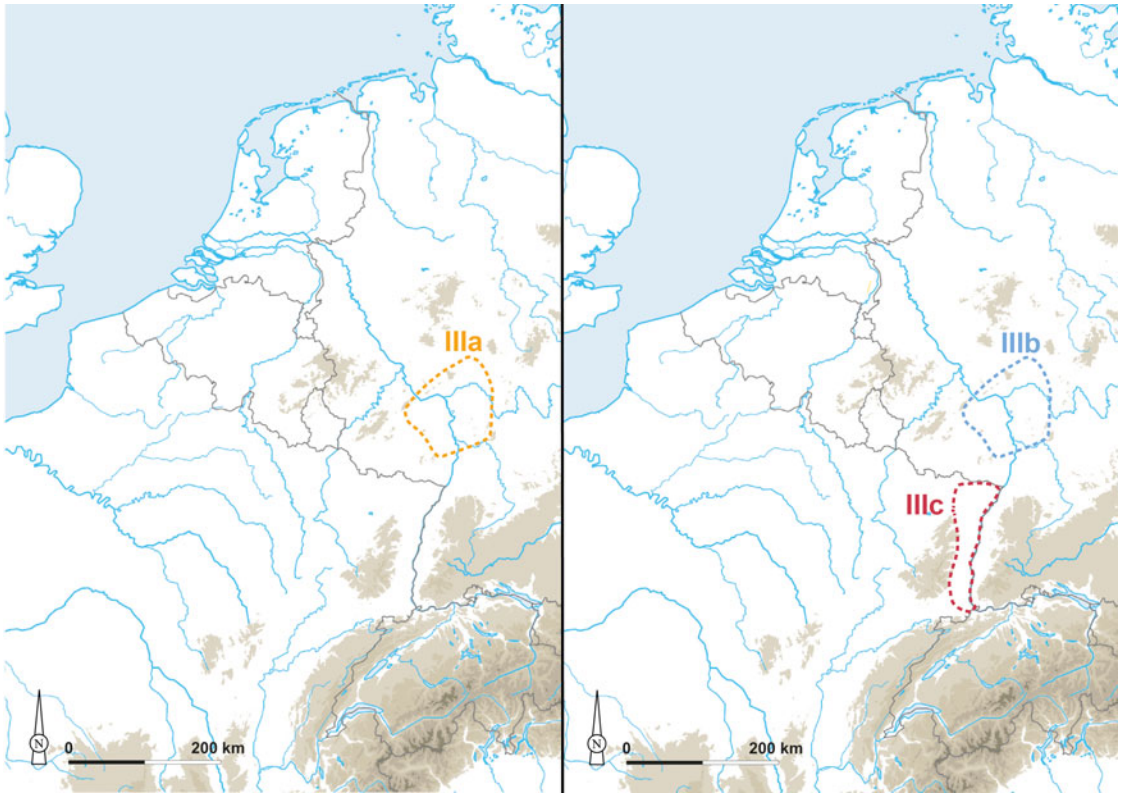


Figure 14. Location of sub-facies IIIa (Hinkelstein of the Worms region), IIIb (Grossgartach of the Worms region), and IIIc (Grossgartach and Rössen of the Alsace Plain) (Illustration: L. Waldvogel; base map: A. Denaire).

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documented in several other spheres of social life. This is notably visible in house plans and orientations: Upper Alsace is characterised by trapezoidal houses oriented on a W–E axis, whereas Lower Alsace displays the typical rectangular LBK house plan oriented NW–SE (Jeunesse 1995a, 10; Lefranc 2007, 30). Differences are also apparent in subsistence practices. Archaeozoological studies have shown that during phases II–III, pig was the principal species consumed in Lower Alsace (tradition A), whereas goats and sheep predominated in Upper Alsace (tradition B), mirroring patterns documented in the Danube region. During phase IV, however, both areas converged towards tradition A (Arbogast & Jeunesse 1996, 398–9; 2013, 277). Finally, Upper and Lower Alsace are also distinguished by ceramic styles (Jeunesse 1995a; Lefranc 2007). Taken together, these convergent lines of evidence suggest that the funerary distinction observed here forms part of a broader regional pattern. They support the hypothesis of two territorially structured zones in which differences were expressed through variations across several domains. In this context, the regional variability observed in the Alsace Plain during the LBK – mirroring the same Upper/Lower Alsace division – may indicate the presence of multiple social units embedded in these territories, some of which articulated their differentiation from others through the funerary sphere.

The reproduction of these practices over several generations likely contributed to the persistence of these particular funerary gestures, which may explain why some of them transcend the cultural entities defined through ceramic styles. This phenomenon is particularly apparent in the Paris Basin, where a substantial proportion of the practices established during the final phases of the LBK persisted into the Villeneuve-Saint-Germain (sub-facies Ib). Similarly, several practices that became widespread in Lower Alsace at the end of the LBK (sub-facies IIa) were maintained and became widespread during the Hinkelstein, Grossgartach, and western parts of Rössen. This continuity contributed to the emergence of Facies III, which itself displays a degree of regional differentiation (sub-facies IIIa, b, c). In this context, it is noteworthy that, despite clear differentiation in ceramic styles between the Grossgartach and the Rössen, DNA analyses have revealed biological continuity among individuals attributed to these two cultures buried in the Obernai cemetery (Lower Alsace; Féliu 2017). This suggests that changes in ceramic styles do not necessarily reflect the arrival of genetically distinct populations, but may instead indicate transformations occurring within local groups.

While these patterns may partly result from internal developments, some evidence also points to processes of interaction and borrowing between neighbouring communities. This hypothesis may be considered, for example, in the case of the supine position with extended lower limbs, a practice that is rarely documented across the LBK as a whole but occurs frequently in Lower Alsace (sub-facies IIa). This position is, however, well attested within the Hinkelstein culture of the Worms region, as illustrated by the cemeteries of Worms and Trebur (Meier-Arendt 1975; Spatz 1999). The possibility of contacts between these two cultures is further supported by the concentration of Hinkelstein evidence in Lower Alsace following the hiatus marking the end of the LBK in the region, as well as by the probable introduction, during phase IV of the LBK, of the pivoting technique in ceramic decoration (Lefranc 2013, 505). As already noted by Meier-Arendt (1975, 77), a key question remains whether these practices were adopted by LBK communities in Lower Alsace from Hinkelstein groups, or whether the transfer occurred in the opposite direction.

In this context, the identification of geographical variability (facies, sub-facies) that is independent of biological sex and age at death within a single archaeological culture – that is to say a construction defined by ceramic styles (Bocquentin *et al.* 2010; Roberts & Vander Linden 2011) – once again challenges the notion of coherent and homogeneous entities corresponding to a single social group or society (Hodder 1978a; 1978b; Renfrew 1977; Roberts & Vander Linden 2011). Rather, the sharing of a common material culture does not preclude the existence of groups that distinguish themselves through subtle variations in different aspects of social life. This phenomenon has frequently been documented by ethnological studies. For example, Pascale Bonnemère (1992) has shown that, although the twelve groups forming the Anga of New Guinea share a common material culture and similar social structures, each nevertheless developed distinctive traits. Thus, the Baruya and the Ankave can be distinguished, among other things, by their domestic architecture (Bonnemère 1992, 22–3). Likewise, the island of Sumba (Indonesia) shares a common material culture, but harbours two distinct social structures in its eastern and western regions, primarily identified through variations in domestic and funerary architecture (Jeunesse 2019; Wunderlich 2019). In western Sumba, where segmented societies are found, variability in funerary rituals is also linked to the presence of several clans belonging to a particular ethnic group[6]. These examples suggest that, in prehistoric archaeology, the identification of social units rooted in specific areas is best achieved through the correlation of evidence from multiple domains, including funerary practices, subsistence strategies, and domestic architecture.

Conclusion

Our analysis has demonstrated that funerary practices in the Alsace Plain during the Early Neolithic (Linearbandkeramik) and the first part of the Middle Neolithic (Hinkelstein, Grossgartach, Rössen) often display a high degree of structured variability. By integrating the available corpus with comparative evidence from adjacent regions, this study has identified coherent patterns of geographic variability. The latter, conceptualised as facies and sub-facies, highlight the recurrence of funerary gestures within circumscribed areas. Although their exact social significance remains difficult to determine, their geographical distribution may reflect the existence of distinct social units rooted in particular territories (e.g. clans or lineages), which expressed aspects of their identity through parameters such as body orientation and position, pit layout, and selected artefacts.

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This observation underlines once more the importance of approaching the usually pottery-based Neolithic cultures not as homogeneous social units, but as composed of complex and heterogeneous groups. Future research combining funerary, domestic, and subsistence data at a wider regional scale will be necessary to better understand the mechanisms underlying the persistence and transformation of this variability.

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Notes

1 Meier-Arendt (1966) proposed a chronological scheme of five phases: earliest (I), early (II), middle (III), late (IV), and final (V).

2 I follow the chronology proposed by Anthony Denaire (2009), who considered the Planig-Friedberg as the final phase of the Grossgartach culture.

3 It should be noted that no elements attributable to a closure system for either a flexible (e.g. shroud) or a rigid container (e.g. coffin) have been identified in cases involving decomposition of the body in an empty space or delayed grave infilling.

4 This fieldwork has been carried out with a E29 research visa (ethical clearance n°241/KE.01/SK/04/2026) and is part of the ongoing SNSF project 'Specialized craftspeople on the move: a holistic approach to Bell Beaker societies in the Alps and in Europe'. Our preliminary results highlight the variability of megalithic architecture, much of which appears to be linked to ethnic identity.

5 Recent discoveries from the cemetery of Ensisheim 'Réguisheimer Feld – TR3' (Upper Alsace), attributed to phase II (Roth-Zehner *et al.* 2022), suggest that the emergence of Facies I and II did not occur before phase III.

6 These observations are part of ongoing ethnoarchaeological research (see note 4).

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RÉSUMÉ

Interpréter la variabilité funéraire dans la plaine d'Alsace entre 5300 et 4400 av. n. è.

Les pratiques funéraires des cultures archéologiques présentes dans la plaine d'Alsace (Est de la France) au Néolithique ancien et au début du Néolithique moyen régional ont longtemps été perçues comme relativement homogènes. Cette perception a cependant été remise en question à partir de 1990 à la suite de l'identification d'une variabilité régionale ayant conduit à la définition de trois « faciès » funéraires. L'accroissement significatif du nombre d'inhumations appelle aujourd'hui à une réévaluation de ce modèle, en intégrant les données récentes d'Alsace ainsi celles des sites bien conservés des régions voisines. Les résultats mettent en exergue un degré de variabilité plus important qu'initialement envisagé, et permettent l'identification de plusieurs « sous-faciès » au sein de chacun des « faciès » déjà définis. Cette variabilité, exprimée à travers l'orientation et la position du corps, ainsi que l'architecture de la fosse et les objets associés au défunt, n'est pas corrélée avec le sexe biologique et l'âge au décès. Son occurrence répétée au sein de zones circonscrites suggère l'existence de dynamiques sociales opérant à un niveau distinct de celui des cultures archéologiques, traditionnellement établies sur la base des styles céramiques. Ces schémas, qui sont partagés par certains segments de la population, pourraient refléter l'existence d'unités sociales ancrées dans des territoires particuliers, exprimant des formes d'appartenance à travers des gestes funéraires distinctifs, tout en partageant simultanément une identité danubienne plus large. En montrant que la variabilité régionale perçue dans la sphère funéraire s'affranchit des découpages chrono-culturels établis sur la base des styles céramiques et que, dans certains cas, elle correspond à des différences observées dans d'autres domaines (*e.g.* architecture domestique, stratégies de subsistance, styles céramiques), cet article contribue à questionner une nouvelle fois la perception des « cultures » archéologiques comme des entités sociales cohérentes.

Mots-clés: Néolithique ancien; Néolithque moyen; pratiques funéraires; plaine d'Alsace; sépultures

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Die Interpretation geographischer Variabilität von Bestattungen im Elsass zwischen 5300 und 4400 BC

Die Bestattungspraktiken der archäologischen Kulturen, die das Elsass (Ostfrankreich) im frühen Neolithikum und zu Beginn des Mittelneolithikums besiedelten, wurden lange Zeit als recht homogen wahrgenommen. Diese Sichtweise wurde ab den 1990ern in Frage gestellt, da eine geographische Variabilität festgestellt wurde, die zur Definition dreier funeraler „Facies" führte. Der erhebliche Zuwachs an bekannten Körperbestattungen erfordert nun eine Neubewertung dieses Modells unter Berücksichtigung nunmehr verfügbarer Daten aus dem Elsass sowie von Informationen aus gut erhaltenen Fundorten in benachbarten Regionen. Die Ergebnisse lassen einen größeren Grad an geographischer Variabilität erkennen als bisher bekannt und ermöglichen die Feststellung mehrerer funeraler „Sub-Facies" innerhalb der breiteren, bisher definierten „Facies". Diese Variabilität, die durch die Ausrichtung und Positionierung der Körper, die Gestalt der Grabgrube und durch die Grabbeigaben sichtbar wird, kann nicht mit dem biologischen Geschlecht oder Alter der Verstorbenen korreliert werden. Das wiederholte Auftreten innerhalb bestimmter Regionen legt die Existenz sozialer Dynamiken nahe, die auf einer anderen Ebene als jener der archäologischen, durch Keramikstile definierten Kulturen wirken. Diese Muster, die von bestimmten Bevölkerungsgruppen geteilt wurden, könnten das Fortbestehen sozialer, in bestimmten Territorien verwurzelter Einheiten anzeigen, die Formen der Zusammengehörigkeit durch unterschiedliche Bestattungspraktiken zum Ausdruck brachten, während sie zugleich eine übergreifende danubische Identität teilten. Die geografische Variabilität der Bestattungskulturen geht also häufig über chronokulturelle Einteilungen hinaus, die auf Keramikstilen basieren, und stimmt in einigen Fällen mit Unterschieden überein, die in anderen Bereichen beobachtet wurden (z. B. Wohnarchitektur, Subsistenzstrategien). Damit trägt diese Studie dazu bei, die Wahrnehmung archäologischer „Kulturen" als zusammenhängende soziale Einheiten erneut in Frage zu stellen.

Schlagwörter: Frühneolithikum; Mittelneolithikum; Bestattungspraktiken; Elsass; Gräber

RESUMEN

Interpretando la variabilidad geográfica de las prácticas funerarias en la llanura de Alsacia entre el 5300 y el 4400 BC

Las prácticas funerarias de las culturas arqueológicas asentadas en la llanura de Alsacia (este de Francia) durante el Neolítico inicial y el inicio del Neolítico medio han sido generalmente percibidas como relativamente homogéneas. Esta visión se vio modificada en la década de 1990 mostrando la identificación de una cierta variabilidad geográfica que condujo a la definición de tres 'facies' funerarias. El incremento

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sustancial en el número de enterramientos por inhumación induce ahora a plantear una revisión de este modelo, integrando los nuevos datos disponibles en Alsacia junto con la evidencia de los sitios bien preservados de las regiones vecinas. El resultado revela un mayor grado de variabilidad geográfica de lo que previamente se había reconocido y permite la identificación de algunas 'sub-facies' funerarias dentro de las amplias 'facies' previamente definidas. Esta variabilidad, reflejada tanto en la orientación como en la posición del cuerpo, la configuración de las fosas funerarias y los artefactos asociados a los individuos, no se puede correlacionar con el sexo biológico o la edad de la muerte. Su recurrencia en áreas específicas sugiere la existencia de dinámicas sociales que operan a distintas escalas en cada una de las culturas arqueológicas definidas a partir de los estilos cerámicos. Estos patrones, compartidos por algunos sectores de la población, podrían reflejar la persistencia de unidades sociales vinculadas a determinados territorios que manifiestan formas de pertenencia a través de distintos gestos funerarios, mientras que simultáneamente comparten una identidad danubiana mayor. Al demostrar que la variabilidad geográfica de las prácticas funerarias transciende con frecuencia las divisiones cronoculturales establecidas a partir de los estilos cerámicos y, en algunos casos, se corresponde con diferencias observadas en otros aspectos (por ejemplo, arquitectura doméstica, estrategias de subsistencia), esta investigación contribuye a cuestionar una vez más la percepción de las "culturas" arqueológicas como entidades sociales coherentes.

Palabras clave: Neolítico inicial; Neolítico medio; prácticas funerarias; llanura de Alsacia; enterramientos

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