

Pottery Function, Dining and Funerary Assemblages. A comparative study from northern Gaul

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1. Pottery in Tombs

Containers found in funerary structures are invaluable for understanding the practices performed during funerals. A detailed study of the fabric and function of these containers provides us with useful insights into the purpose of such rituals, playing an essential role in separating the living from the dead. At the same time, the nature of the original structure (pyre, tomb, etc.) tells us when exactly the vessels were used during the funeral proceedings. We will focus in this article on pottery, attested both in pre-Roman Gaul and Roman Italy and consequently found frequently in tombs from Roman Gaul, in which the meaning of object selections can differ according to the chronological and cultural context. Firstly we will summarise the meaning of funerary practices in Gaul during the late Iron Age, Roman Italy and Roman Gaul. We will then address the characterisation (category and function) of pottery in Roman Gaul before discussing its presence in three distinct cultural contexts: Ostrevant (Atrebates), Hainaut (Neruii) and Hesbaye (Tungri).

1.1 Death in pre-Roman Gaul

Our knowledge about the conception of death by the Celts relies on very few literary testimonies. These sources evoke an after-life taught by the druids (Pomponius Mela, III, 2; Caesar, *Bellum Gallicum*, VI, 14, 5). According to an eschatological doctrine spread from the third century BCE, the immortal soul can migrate to another body or join the gods' kingdom if the deceased is a soldier (Silius Italicus, *Punica*, III, 340-43; Lucan, *Pharsalia*, I, 452-62) (Brunaux 1998). This belief is linked to the lack of care taken of the dead body as related by the literary sources (such as abandonment of the body on battlefields and destruction of the body by cremation) and by archaeological contexts (for example, presence of bones isolated in domestic and religious contexts, and small numbers of graves scattered through settlements). These elements lead us to believe that access to graves was not a right provided for all.

Literary testimonies also describe Gallic funeral procedures and mention in particular cremation practice and the splendour of the pyre offerings (Pomponius

Mela, III, 2; Caesar, *Bellum Gallicum*, VI, 19, 4). The archaeological evidence shows another reality. Indeed, Iron Age graves in northern Gaul contained, in some cases, lots of material (chariot burials from north-east Gaul), but no pyre with the quantities of material described by Caesar or Pomponius has ever been found (e.g. Desenne *et al.* 2010; Villes and Bataille-Melkon 2000). Moreover, the Celtic society mindset about death changed during the La Tène period: inhumations with plenty of offerings (weapons, jewellery, vessels) were predominant during the early phase, then cremation practice appeared along with an impoverished general aspect of the grave in the late La Tène. A few graves were richly furnished at the end of this period, in particular in *Belgica*, for example in Lamadelaine (Metzler- Zens *et al.* 1999), Clémency (Metzler *et al.* 1991), Cambrai (Assémat-Reigner *et al.* 2012), and Raillencourt- Saint-Olle (Bouche *et al.* 2007). Iron Age graves, whether rich or not, all have in common the presence of pottery assemblages, selected by the living in a funeral context.

1.2 Death according to the Romans

Roman conceptions of death are far better documented by the literary sources, although not always very explicitly. These testimonies by and large relate concrete facts about the management of death, whether in legal terms about the location of funerary spaces and the separation between the living and the dead (*Lex Duodecim Tabularum*, reported by Cicero in *De Legibus*, 2, 22; *lex Ursonensis*), or in practical terms about funerary practices, rites and procedures. These latter highlight the presence of pottery in funerary structures.

The Roman religious frame did not include a belief in an after-life for the body of the deceased, but only of his soul (*anima*), in contrast to the Celtic context (Scheid 2005, 162). Funerals focused on the private rite and were directed by the father (or son) of the family; they were thus adapted to each individual mourning the death of a relative, as shown by the variety of practices identified in the excavated cemeteries. A series of rites was invariably performed to settle the deceased in his new status and to allow him to join the *di Manes* (spirits of the dead) rather than risk seeing him come back to trouble the living, to honour him and to start the reintegration process of the bereaved family temporarily defiled by death (Scheid 1984, 118; 2005, 190). 'Inversion rites' (which overturn normal everyday behaviour) were included in the range of funeral rites: oil lamps were burnt in broad daylight, the deceased was perfumed and well dressed whereas his family had to leave all these kinds of artifices, tableware used during the funeral meal was broken, etc. These rites were to protect the living from the defilement of death by creating a frontier between the living and the dead (Scheid 1984, 120). Funerals in Rome lasted nine days (Poux 2009a; 2009b). After a series of rites performed in the house of the dead, the funeral procession led the dead to the pyre place. There, a sacrifice (a sow) was offered to Ceres, followed by a banquet shared by the living, the dead and the gods; remains of food, tableware and animal bones, burnt or not, excavated in pyres and the environment of the grave reflect the sharing of the meal (Scheid 1984, 130-31; 2002, 138; 2005, 168-74, 184-88; Lepetz and Van Andringa 2004). Graves from Pompeii illustrate these practices perfectly (pyres and residual ashes put inside the graves contained burnt sherds of ceramics, fish and caprine

bones, burnt or not, and some burnt seeds and fruits: niche 25a and ashes graves 26, 31, 32, etc.; see Van Andringa *et al.* 2013, 172, 192-93, 229-35, 763-808, etc.). After cremation, the bones of the dead are collected and washed in wine, then placed in a ceramic container (Varro, *De lingua Latina*, V, 23). By burying the bones, the place became sacred (Cicero, *De legibus*, 22, XXII, 55). In contrast to Celtic graves, material placed inside Roman graves is scarce, limited to money and little flagons. The mourning ended on the ninth day of funeral, when the purified family came back to the world of the living. This ultimate step was marked by two sacrifices, one addressed to the *di Manes* to welcome the dead's soul among them and a second offered to the domestic divinities, the *Lares* and the *Penates*, to integrate the family. A new banquet closed all, this time excluding the dead (Scheid 2005, 176-77). The *di Manes* of the dead were worshipped during the *Parentalia* and *Feralia* through the offering of food, drinks, flowers, etc.

1.3 Death in Northern Gaul

Funeral practices in northern Gaul provide evidence both of a Roman and Celtic (pre-Roman) syncretism and of some local identity practices. Of course such practices change as time goes by and the archaeologist can try to characterise them through fine-grained excavation and more thorough anthropological and archaeozoological analysis.

Based on three micro-regions, what we address in this article is the link between funerary practices and food. Even without taking perishable food offerings into consideration, we can distinguish the different functions of pottery – whether it is used for the banquet, for the living or the dead.

2. Vessels

2.1 Food

The food *chaîne opératoire* can be retraced from the moment food is introduced into the house until its consumption (Florent and Deru 2012). First of all, there is a temporary storage phase, which can vary in length from short, for the daily well water for example, to a longer period for seasonal supply. Cooking is the most common preparation stage and also the best evidence of cookery's growing complexity. According to Levi- Strauss' culinary tetrahedron (Figure 1) and Apicius' *De re coquinaria*, cooking methods can be simple or combine grilling, roasting, boiling or simmering. At the same time, some ingredients can be crumbled or powdered before being added to the food. Beverages, which may have been heated or mixed, are served during meals and are consumed using individual vessels. Food can be eaten directly from the pan, shared on plates or individual dishes.

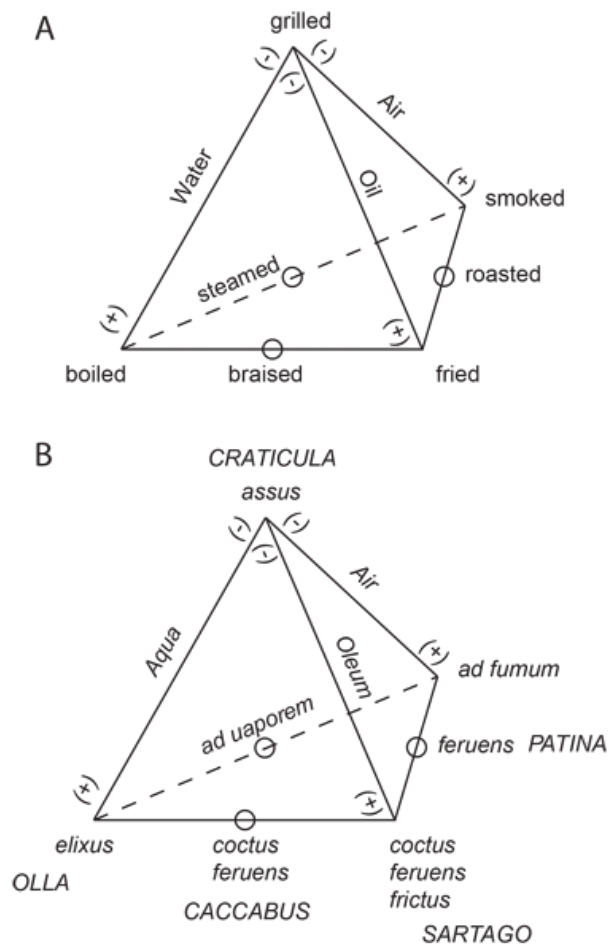


Figure 1: Culinary tetrahedron. A. Ethnographic pattern; B. Pattern from literature (Florent and Deru 2012)

2.2 Pots

Various vessels are usually required for the different stages of food processing; thus, in archaeology, these vessels can be investigated in order to consider the complexity of eating and drinking. We could even describe the food processing as primitive when no vessel is used during the course of preparation.

First of all, the vessels collected in archaeological contexts can be assigned to a certain general function. We must then consider that most vessels are produced for a specific purpose though their original purpose can sometimes be altered, which should be discussed in reference to specific archaeological assemblages.

The criteria for determining the function of vessels are both technical and morphological. In the first stage of classification, we try to link pottery classes to their function i.e. eating, cooking, serving, etc. Fineware, with smooth, decorated, sometimes slipped, surfaces was used as tableware, for service and consumption of food and drink (Table 1). Coarse ware, with a fabric made to resist high temperatures, was used to cook food. Jugs made in pale common ware (CC) were used to serve drinks while *mortaria* were used to grind raw ingredients. Vessels belonging to this class are thus allocated to storage. We can also find *dolia* and amphorae in this group.

Abbreviation	French	English
AM	Amphore	Amphorae
AE	Bronze	Bronze
CC	Céramique commune claire	White ware
DR	Céramique dorée	Mica-dusted ware
EN	Céramique engobée	Colour-coated ware
ER	Céramique à enduit rouge	Red-slip ware
FRA	Céramique fine régionale claire (cuite en mode A)	Red fine ware
FRB	Céramique fine régionale sombre (cuite en mode B)	Grey fine ware
MD	Céramique modelée ou non tournée	Handmade pottery
MO	Mortier	Mortarium
MT	Céramique métallescente	Rhenish ware, Black-slipped ware
PTN	Proto terra nigra	Pre <i>terra nigra</i>
RUA	Céramique rugueuse claire (cuite en mode A)	Red coarse ware
RUB	Céramique rugueuse sombre (cuite en mode B)	Grey coarse ware
TN	Terra nigra	<i>Terra nigra</i>
TR	Terra rubra	<i>Terra rubra</i>
TS	Terre sigillée	Samian or <i>terra sigillata</i>
VR	Verrerie	Glass

Table 1: Abbreviations used for pottery classes (and other materials) with French and English definitions. Note that in France and Belgium, pottery 'fabric' is identified by two different criteria: the category, which is defined by production technique, typology, function, period, and the characteristics of the paste (i.e. colour, breaks and inclusions). (E.g. TS-SG = South Gaulish terra sigillata, TS-CG = Central Gaulish terra sigillata, EN-SG = South Gaulish colour-coated ware, EN-LY = colour-coated Lyon ware, etc.)

We can define function groups a bit more precisely using forms and usewear analysis. For tableware, we quantify plates, cups, and bowls for individual food consumption, beakers and cups for drinking and flagons and bottles for serving drinks. Cooking pottery includes vessels used for boiling food, cooking pots for simmering, and bake-ware for oven cooking, reheating or even to eat from. Coarse-ware jugs employed to heat water could also be used for serving. *Mortaria* form a specific category although some of them, with or without grit, can be found in fineware (e.g. *terra sigillata*, *terra nigra*). These *mortaria* could be used to grind seasoning as part of a table service. It is useful to assess the Latin names of these dishes and their links to the functions established by the ethnographical and literary models.

Besides Apicius, numerous literary references were compiled by Hilgers (Hilgers 1969). Names or function can sometimes be inscribed on the vessels themselves: content and weight, vessel or owner's name. The firing lists of the Graufesenque include *terra sigillata* forms (Bémont 2004; see also Dannell [this volume](#)).

On the table, we find plates (*catillus, catinulus, patina*, 'assiette' in French) and cups (*acetabulum, paropsis*, 'coupe à sauce'), and people drink from cups or beakers (*olla*, 'gobelet'). A drink service includes flagons (*lagoena, cruche*) or Celtic bottles (*bouteille*), whose Latin name remains unknown. In the same way, flagons used to boil water ('kettles' in English (see Cool 2006, 37) or 'bouilloire' in French) are hard to qualify in Latin.

Cooking vessels include cooking jars (*olla*, 'pot à cuire'), casserole (*caccabus*, 'marmite'), cooking dishes (*patina, testa*, 'plat à cuire'), frying pan (*sartago*, 'poêle'), as well as their lids (*operculum*, 'couvercle'). *Mortaria* have two equivalent names: *mortarium* or *peluis* ('mortier'). Storage vessels are called *urceus* or *olla* (storage jar, 'pot à provision' or 'à miel') or *amphorae*.

3. Regional Cemeteries

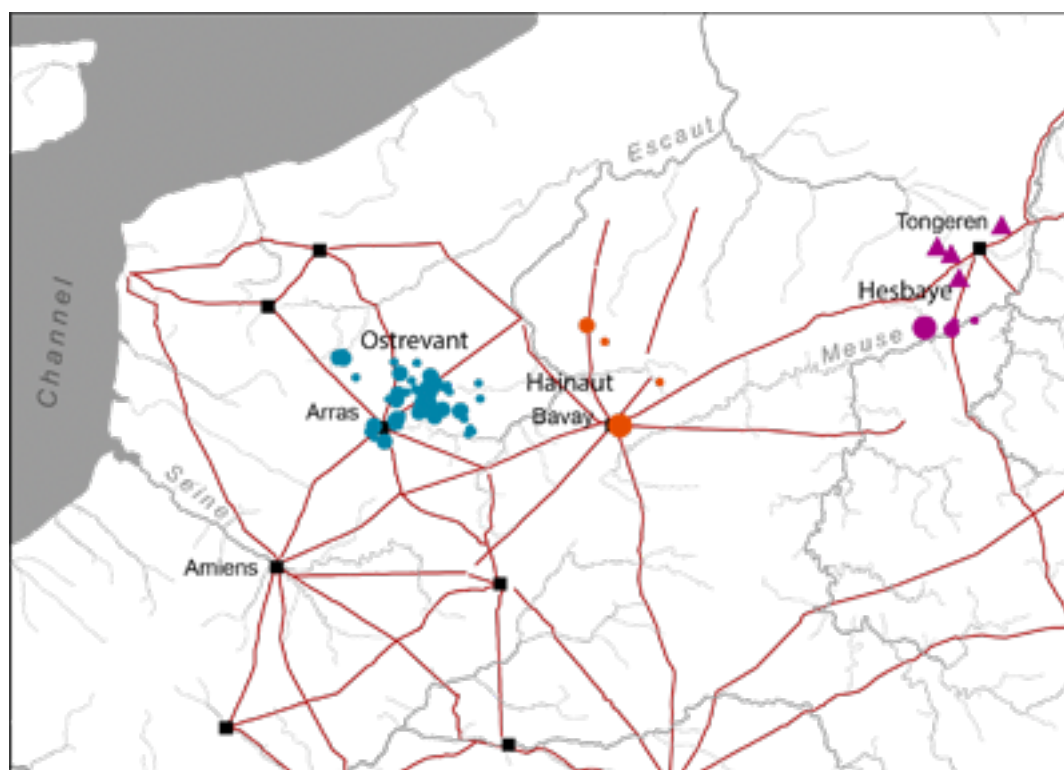


Figure 2: Map showing distribution of graves (circles) and barrows (triangles). Ostrevant (Atrebates) (blue), Hainaut (Neruii) (red), Hesbaye (Tungri) (purple)

Ostrevant corresponds to the eastern part of the *civitas atrebatum* (*Belgica*). About a hundred cemeteries have been inventoried, consisting of 626 tombs (Table 2, Figure 2). They have been recently studied in a PhD thesis, which offers a synthesis of funeral practices and their evolution between the Iron Age and the first three centuries of the Roman Empire (Dananai 2015). The chronology of all graves was revised using a method of seriation by matrix permutation that can fix funeral

characteristics and their changes chronologically. Eight phases have been distinguished, dated between the end of the first century BCE and the beginning of the third century CE. The cemeteries typically consist of a small number of tombs: slightly more than half of them comprise 2 to 9 tombs only. The deceased was burnt on a pyre, which is rarely discovered by excavations. The bones were then selected and placed inside a wooden box or a ceramic container that was put inside the grave. Until the beginning of the second century CE, the deceased was accompanied by numerous objects. This funeral equipment was composed of objects that matched the personality of the deceased, his appearance and his activities (dress, jewellery, toilet instruments, tools, etc.), and also by ceramic vessels and meats, corresponding to the needs of the ceremony (animal sacrifice, sharing of food, etc.). The nature of the equipment and the funerary structures offer a homogeneous ensemble: cemeteries are associated with domestic and rural contexts, for which no hierarchy has been detected. Privileged tombs (*hypogea*) found in Ostrevant are scarce and the small number excavated have unfortunately been pillaged.

Hainaut is part of the Neruii territory (*Belgica*). Two cemeteries are more important: one located in Blicquy, excavated by Ghent University in the 1960s, and the other situated near the town of Bavay, which has been published by Loidant and Deru (2009). Recently, *hypogea* with goods have been discovered but are not yet published.

Hesbaye is a region north of the River Meuse, which was part of the Tungrian *civitas* (*Germania*). The cemeteries selected were excavated by archaeological volunteers. In this area, we have some privileged burials covered by a barrow and four representative ones have been chosen (Hodeige, Rosmeer, Gutschoven and Helshoven).

For the two first groups, the chronology was established by permutation matrix: Ostrevant burials belong to 8 phases starting from the end of the first century BCE until the end of the second century CE. Hainaut burials cover 6 phases and go from the beginning of the first century CE until the beginning of the third century CE. The 'Hesbaye group' burials globally date from the second and third centuries CE.

4. Quantitative Analysis

For all these funerary assemblages, we have carried out a quantitative study of pottery functions. Firstly, it is necessary to make clear from the start that there are very few glass and metal goods. Secondly, the status and function of the container that protects the dead bones needs to be defined, in order to know if it should be included in the study. To answer that question, the everyday function of the urn was compared to the function of the other pots placed in the grave. Thus, during the first century, a typologically identical container to the urn is sometimes found in the grave but without any human remains. The pot used as an urn loses its primary function to become a cinerary pot and should not be counted in the functional assemblage, the twin container taking on its function. At the end of the first century, this applies to only half of the graves, and in the second century the deposit of a second identical container appears in less than 30 per cent of the

graves, whereas the use of an urn increases. Thus, for the late phases, the urn becomes unique and stereotyped (a big cooking pot, very frequent in the domestic context and perfectly adapted to its new function: containing and protecting the bones of the deceased). This specific use in all cases seems to underline the particularity of the urn status, and the reasons why it should not be taken into account for the ceramic study.

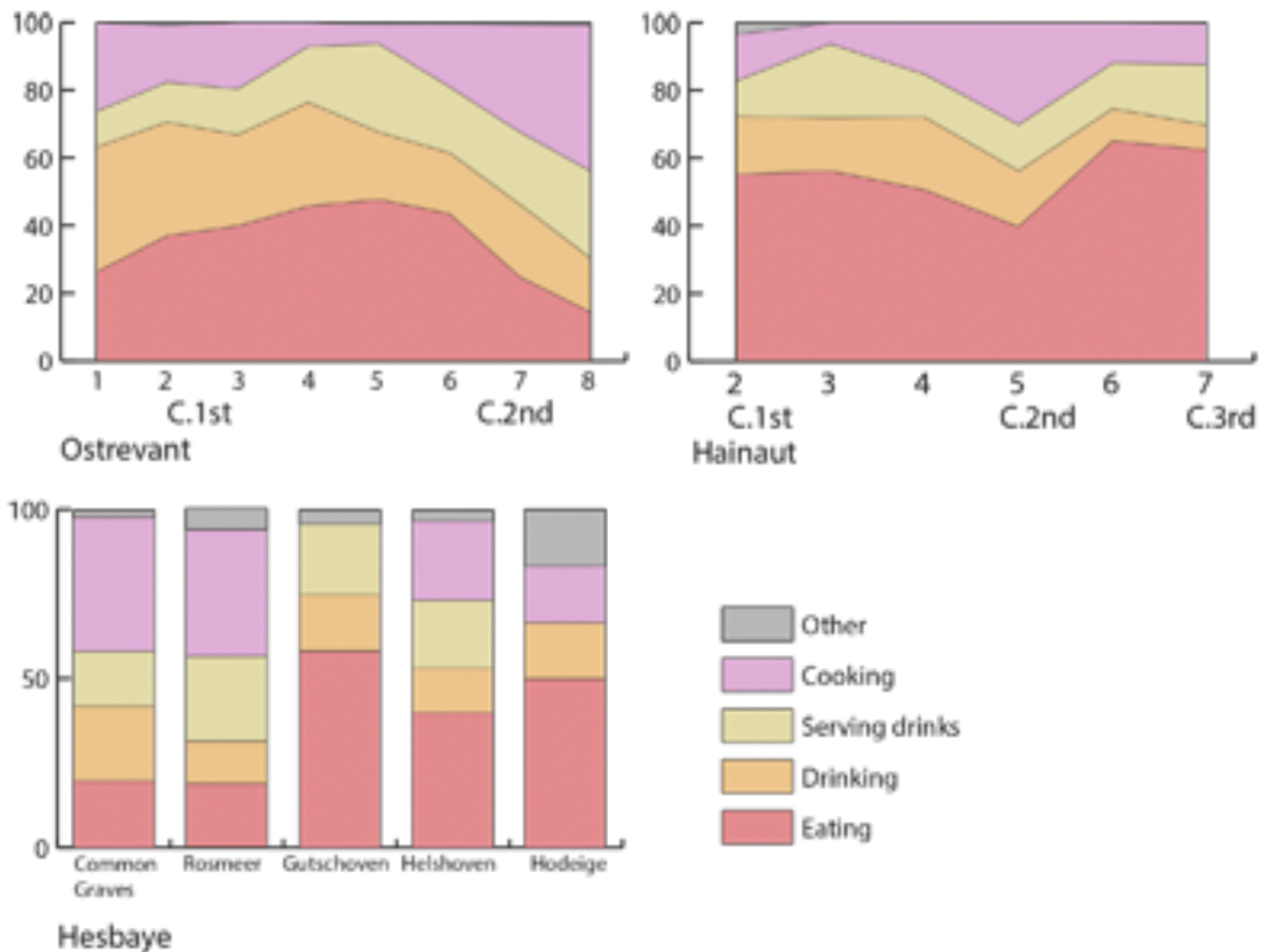


Figure 3: Graphs demonstrating the main functions of vessels in graves of the three regions, Ostrevant, Hainaut and Hesbaye

First of all, the specific functions of pottery types have been gathered into global functions, such as eating, drinking, serving drinks and cooking (Figure 3). In Ostrevant, an increase in tableware dedicated to eating and drinking is striking during the first century CE, followed by a decrease in favour/to the benefit of cooking ware. In the eastern assembly (Hesbaye) in the second and third century CE, the cooking ware is equally important in the common graves. In contrast, tableware is predominant in the more privileged tombs. Rosmeer's grave may be qualified as privileged by its structure and number of offerings, although the pottery is quite similar to finds in common graves. In Hainaut, cooking ware is

under-represented and, in contrast to the two other regions, tableware rises during the second century.

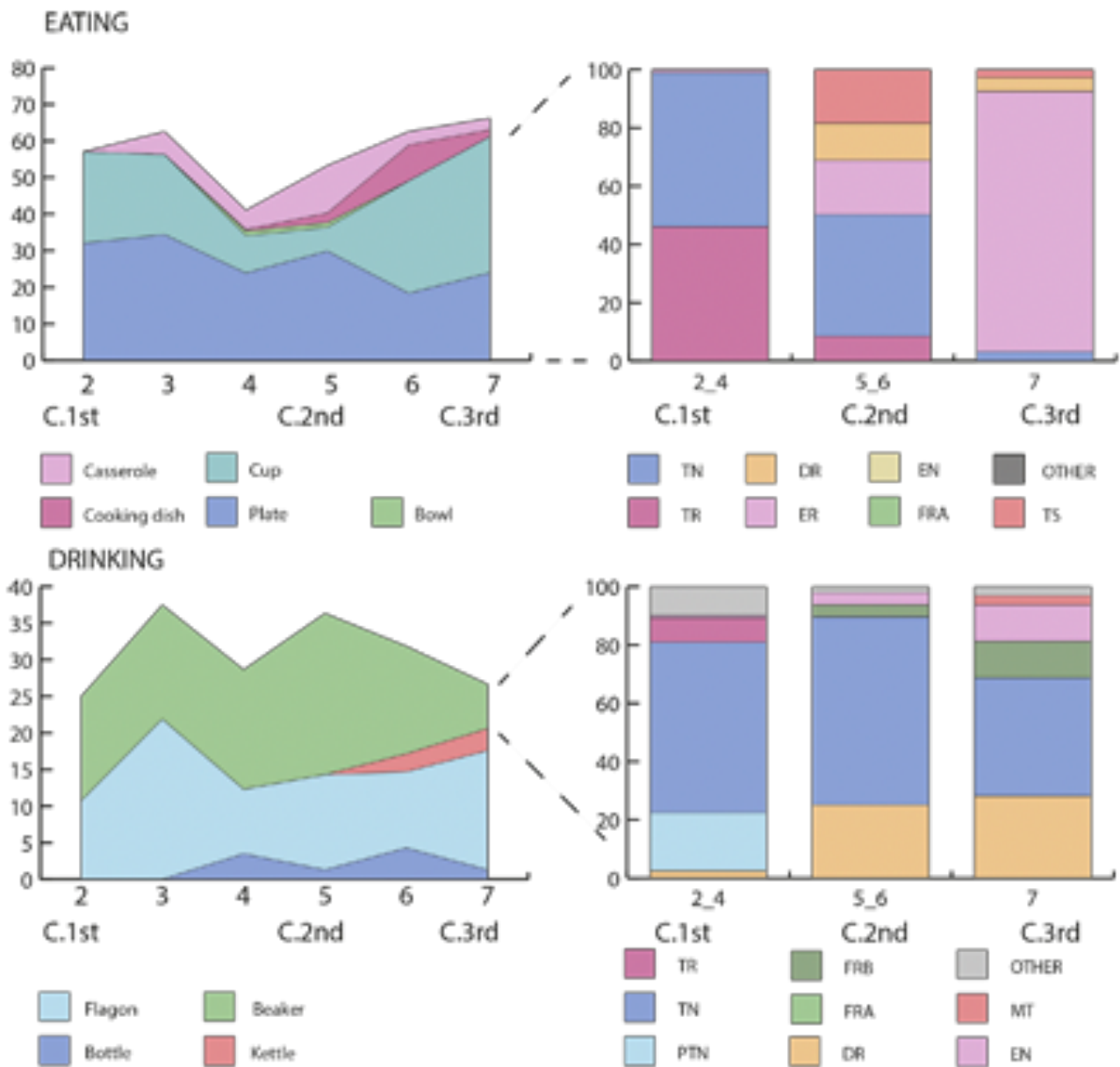


Figure 4: Specific function of vessels in graves of Hainaut (Neruii)

Going further with the Neruii (at Hainaut) vessels' functions, the proportion of plates and cups is particularly important in the first century, decreasing slowly at the end of the first century, but increasing again during the second century (Figure 4, top right). In the first century, plates and cups are essentially represented by Gallo-Belgic ware, while in the second century they are made of a low-quality pottery, a red-slipped soapy fabric (Figure 4, top left). This fabric could have been produced exclusively for graves. The percentage of drinking vessels is important but decreases during the second century (Figure 4, bottom left). Although fabrics usually correspond to a certain function, for instance coarse ware used for cooking ware, some cases are not so clear cut, such as small pots in coarse ware (RUB) used as beakers (see Figure 5). The large majority of the drinking vessels are in

terra nigra and, from the end of the first century, in mica-dusted ware. Drinks are served mainly using flagons whereas bottles are scarce. Kettles progressively appear during the second century.

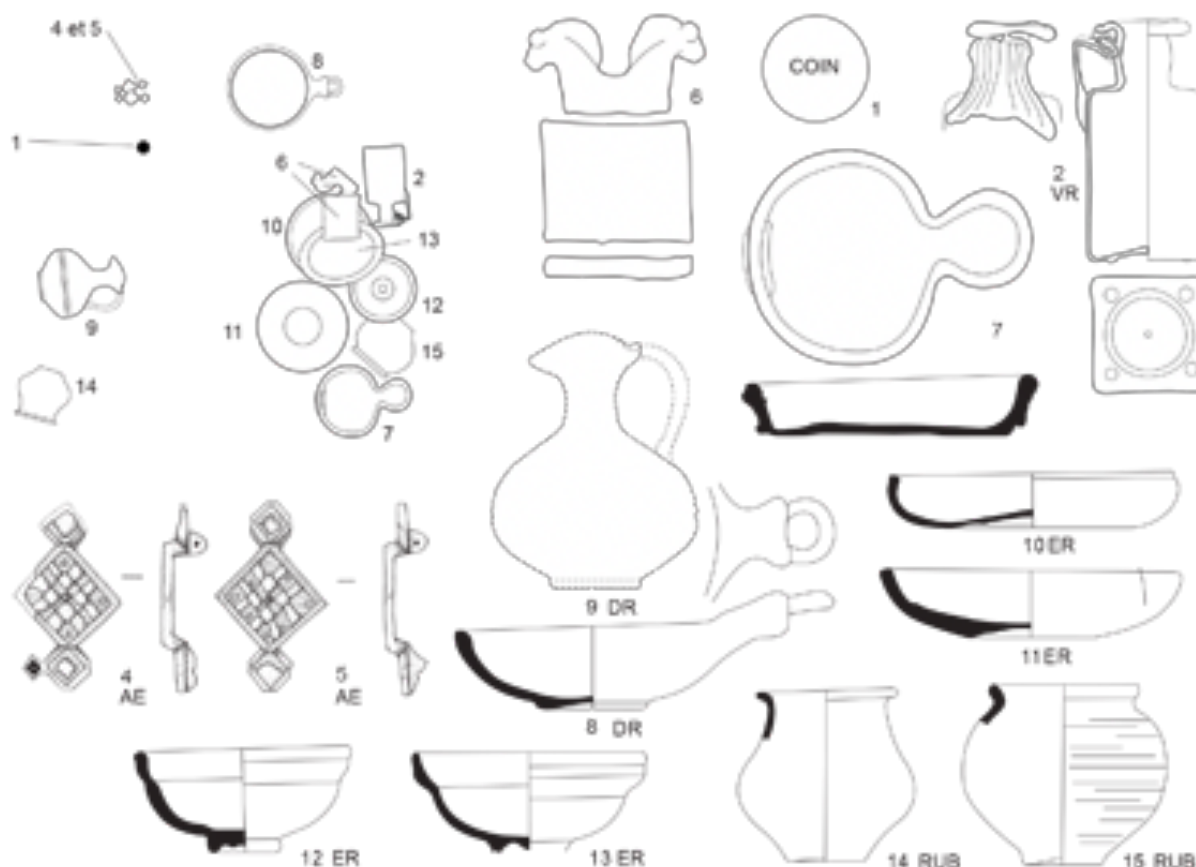


Figure 5: Vessel assemblage in Grave 7/53, Bavay (Loridant and Deru 2009)

In the privileged burials of the eastern region and later period, the proportion of cups and plates is significant (Figure 6, top left). In Rosmeer and in the common graves (Figure 6, top left), the proportion is much lower and we can suggest that dishes and casseroles are used to cook and to eat food. In the *tumuli*-type graves (i.e. barrows), tableware is mainly represented by *terra sigillata* (Figure 6, top right). In the common graves, the primacy of *terra sigillata* gives way to a regional smoky ware. Proportions of drinking ware are quite stable in the various contexts (Figure 6, bottom left). Beakers are represented by colour-coated ware from Cologne and local ware (Figure 6, bottom right). In the same period, the drinking service consists only of flagons and a few kettles.

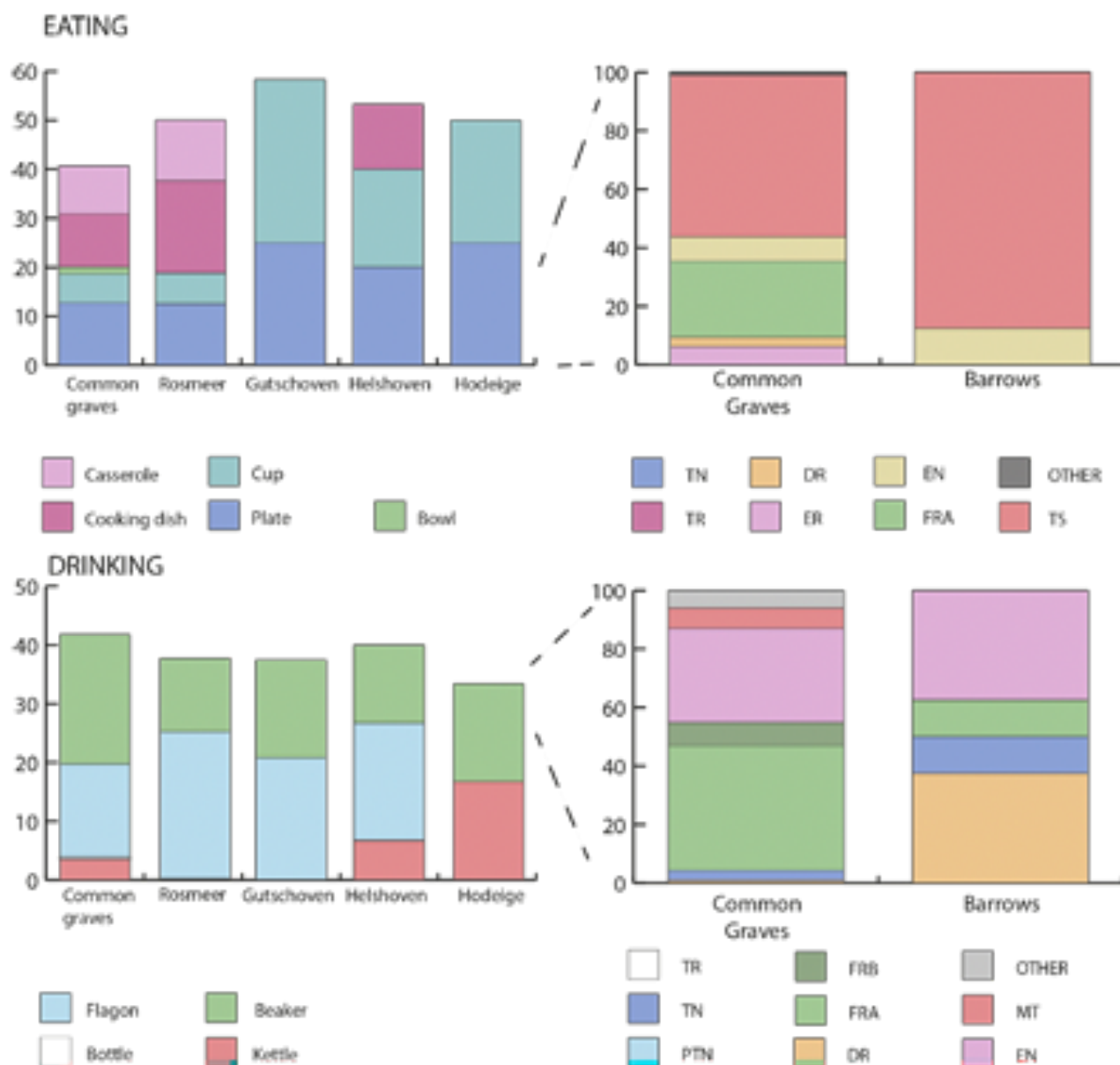


Figure 6: Specific function of vessels in graves of Hesbaye (Tungri) (see Table 1 for classes)

In contrast, in Ostrevant, Celtic bottles are numerous during the first two centuries CE even if the proportion of flagons increases (Figure 7, bottom left). The proportion of beakers, mainly in Gallo-Belgic ware, decreases. At the end of the first century BCE, food consumption is from large Celtic bowls (Figure 7, top left). Then, plates and cups, made of Gallo-Belgic ware, increase during the first century CE then decrease during the second with a shift to samian ware (Figure 7, top right).

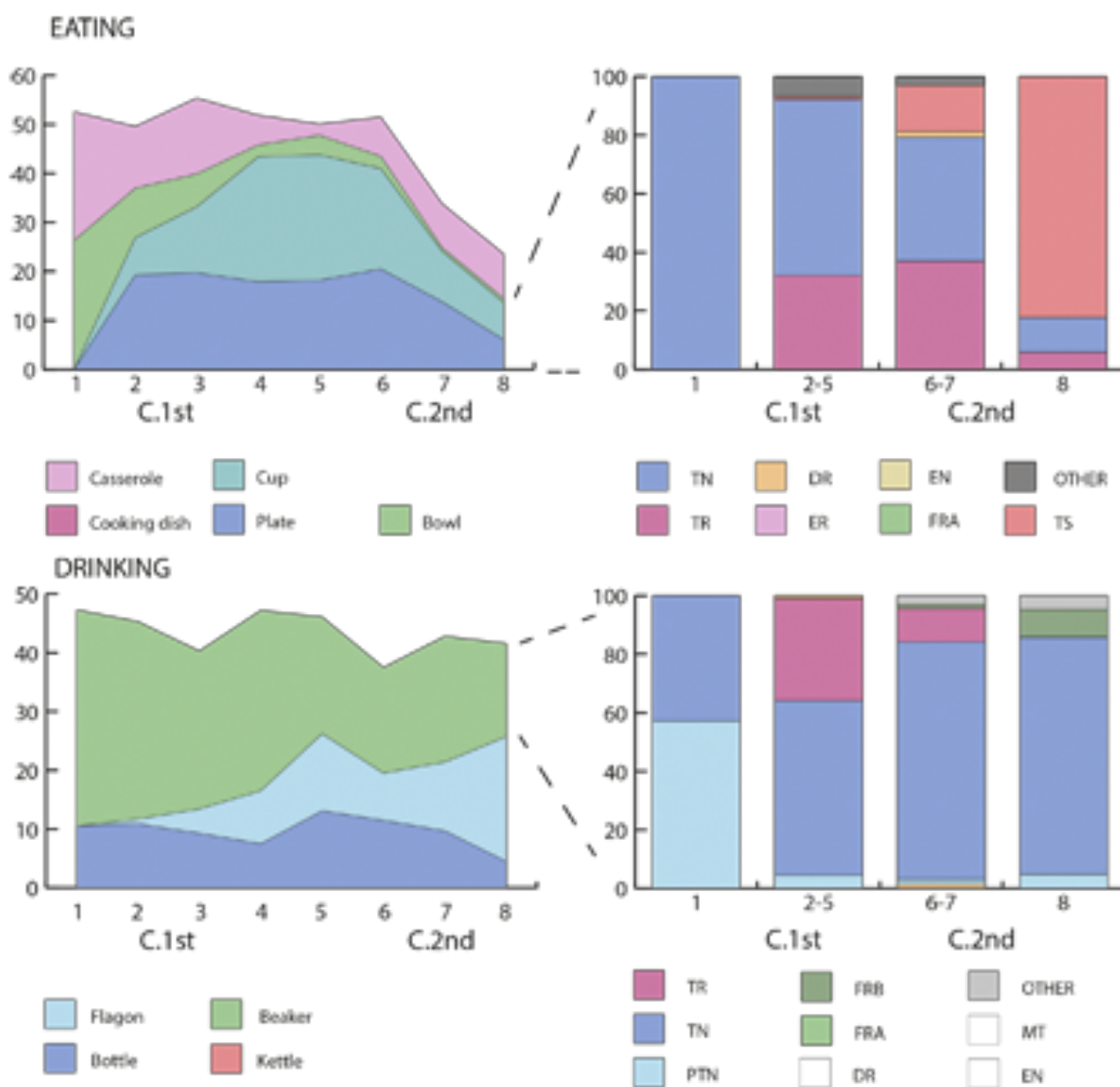


Figure 7: Specific function of vessels in graves of Ostrevant (Atrebatés)

By comparing the three regions using the same criteria, the Ostrevant and Hainaut regions, though geographically close, are clearly distinguished from one another (Figure 8). Indeed, in Ostrevant, tableware decreases in the second century CE while it increases among the Neruii. The Neruii have possibly created an identity in their funerary practice, displaying the banquet service and adding the *patera*/flagon duet (Figure 5, Figure 8, Figure 9) and hearth symbols: andiron or 'chenet' in French (Figure 5 and Figure 6), tripod, etc. Cooking ware is scarce in these two regions compared to simple tombs in the eastern region. Dishes and casseroles can play a role in food consumption.

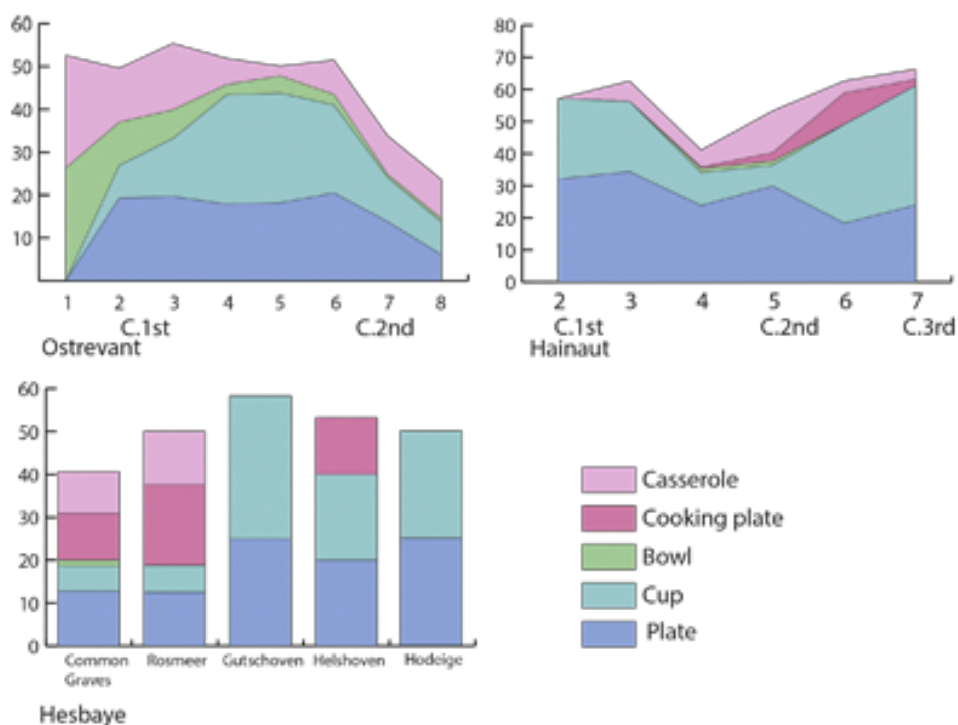


Figure 8: Specific functions related to eating for vessels in the three regions

For drinks services, bottles are much more important in Ostrevant than in Hainaut and simply do not exist in the eastern part (Figure 9). The presence of kettles indicates a complexity of food because it comes later in the Neruii territory and is more specific to Tungrian privileged burials. In Ostrevant, bottles and bowls on the one hand, and the absence of kettles on the other hand, are evidence for simpler and local food. Also regional fabrics rather than imported ones were used.

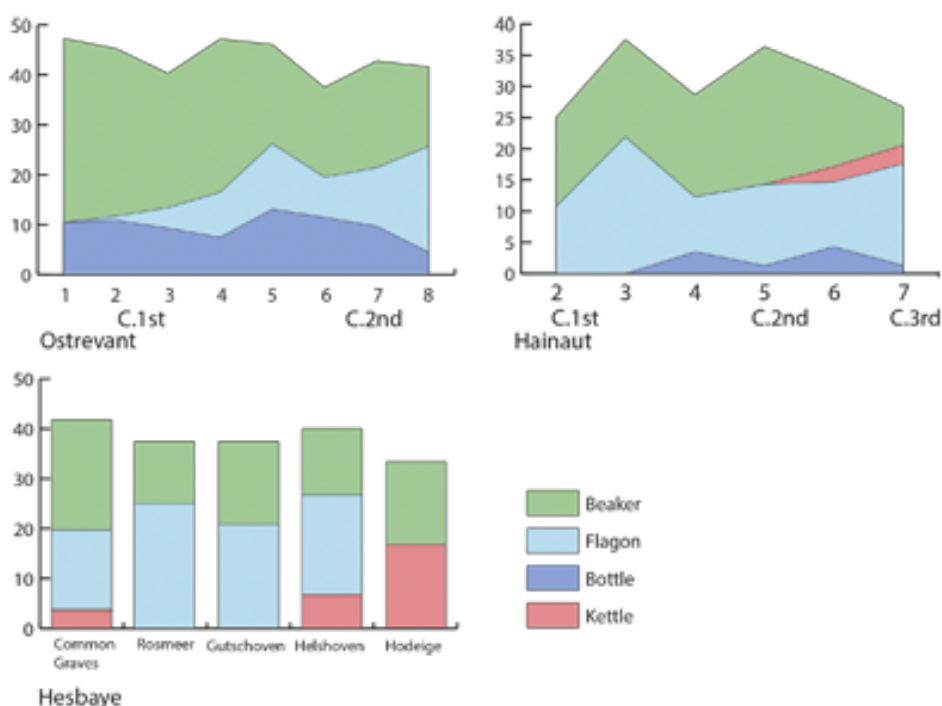


Figure 9: Specific functions related to drinking for vessels in the three regions

Until now, cooking ware has not really been discussed because it is a minority (Figure 10). Cooking pots indicate simpler cooking methods, probably boiling. Their number increases considerably during the second century CE in Ostrevant and is less represented in Neruii and Tungrian common graves. They are totally absent from the privileged tombs of the Tungrian *civitas*. In contrast, casseroles and cooking dishes indicate a more complex food and can be found in higher numbers with the Neruii and Tungrian burials.

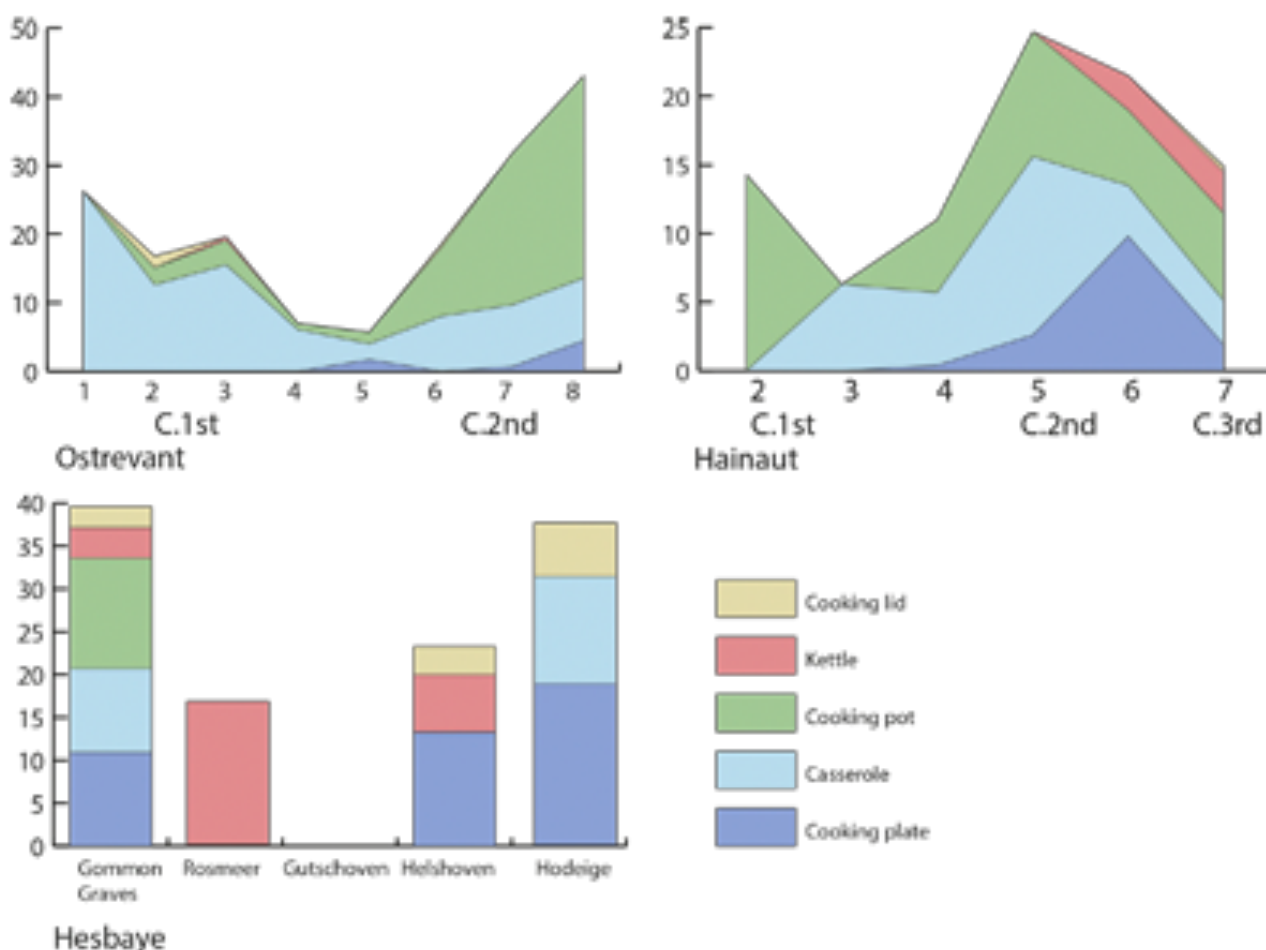


Figure 10: Specific functions related to cooking for vessels in the three regions

Funerary assemblages can also be compared to other settlements, highlighting the specificity of each context (Figure 11). In Ostrevant, between the middle of the first century and the end of the second century, cooking ware is much more important on rural settlements than in burials. In contrast, this difference is less marked in the territory of the *Tungri*. The importance of flagons and bottles (serving drinks) in burials is another difference between rural and funerary settlements.

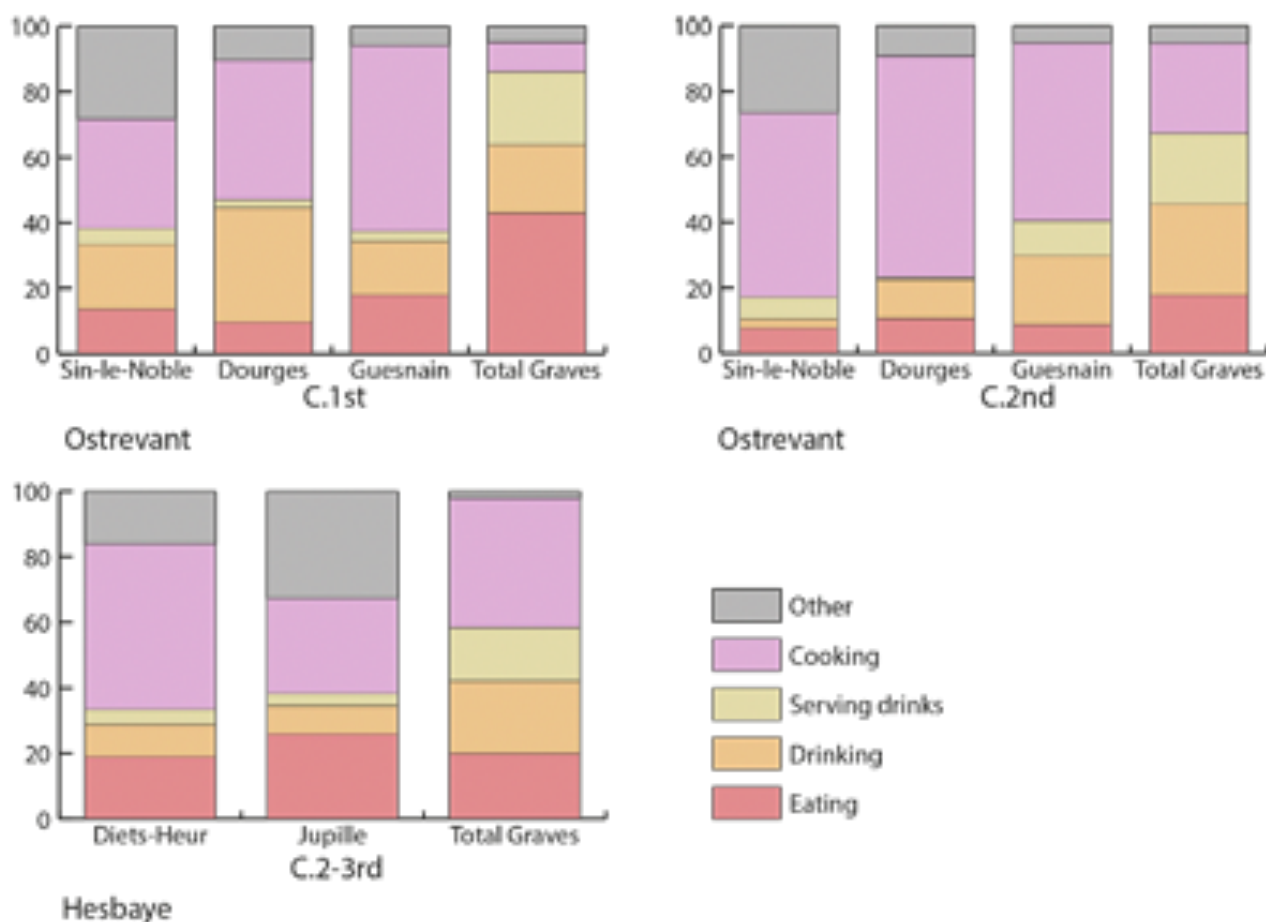


Figure 11: Main functions of vessels in settlements in Ostrevant (Sin-le-Noble, Dourges, Guesnain) and Hesbaye (Diets-Heur, Jupille) and graves in the two regions

5. Spatial Analysis

Determining function goes beyond these reflections. Indeed, by observing the distribution of functions inside the grave and the pattern in each tomb, a chronology of the deposits can be determined, allowing reconstruction of the development of funerals (Figure 12). Thus, after placing the dead inside the grave in Ostrevant, dishes used to eat from were placed first, close to the dead, which is also confirmed by the presence of animal bones. The drinking vessels were then organised around those deposits. Most of the time, a big jug was placed in the corner of the tomb, as an ultimate offering. This is not especially observed by the Neruii (at Bavay), where dishes are not organised separately in function groups but are scattered everywhere in the grave, and occupy the maximum space possible. In contrast to the Ostrevant case, the presence of a drinking pot or a jug next to the deceased is more frequent, as well as the *patera*-flagon duet. In Hesbaye (for example in Wanzoul), the material offers a concentric organisation: bones and ashes are placed in the grave, with the disposition of ceramics all around them, without any specific relationship between the vessels.

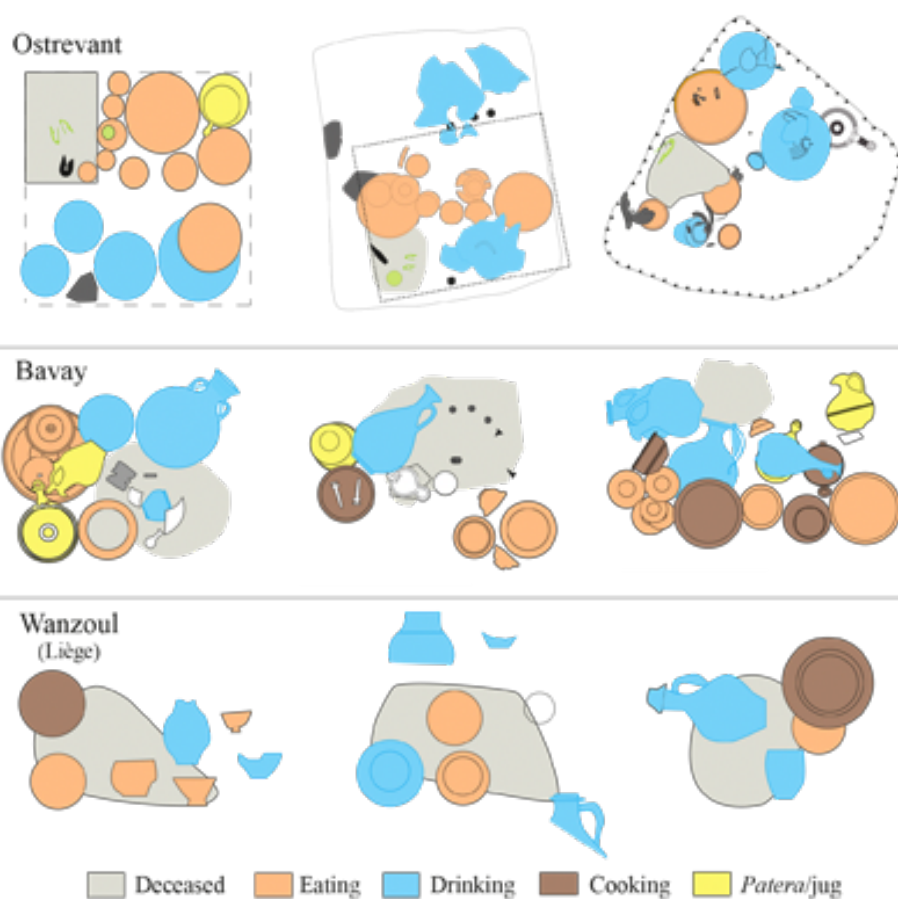


Figure 12: Organisation of vessels in the grave, in Ostrevant, Bavay and Wanzoul

6. Conclusion

The practice of grave offerings changed throughout the Roman period. We can date the change of functional assemblages in Hainaut and in Ostrevant, to the end of the first century CE. In Ostrevant, where pottery shows simple ways of consumption, the number of plates and cups, which had steadily increased until then, starts to decrease. In Hainaut and Hesbaye, on the contrary, the number of plates and cups, as well as jugs (bottles in Ostrevant) remains important. In Hainaut, even if the use of plates and cups keeps rising during the second century CE, they are manufactured in low-quality fabric, whereas in Ostrevant, though in small quantity, and in Hesbaye, especially in barrows, tableware is provided in *terra sigillata*. At the same time, in Hesbaye's common graves, coarse ware normally intended for use in cooking could also be used to eat from.

In Ostrevant and Hesbaye, the comparison of pottery assemblages in funerary and domestic contexts shows that tableware is generally over-represented in graves. The contrast would certainly be sharper in Hainaut should the data be available. Tableware found in graves could either reflect the belief in an afterlife or be from the funerary meal, but categories and types belong to Roman culture consumer goods. In a funerary context, tableware can take a symbolic significance that ultimately will allow the different communities or social groups to express their own identity.

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