

## EXPLORATORY EXCAVATION AT BRAYE-EN-LAONNOIS, RENGE NOYER, 1991: PRELIMINARY REPORT

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### Introduction

This report is concerned with excavation at Braye-en-Laonnois, Département Aisne, north-east France, in August and September 1991 by a team from the Institute of Archaeology, University College London, and the University of Durham. The work was carried out as part of a wider programme of research into rural settlement and landscape in the Aisne Valley in the 1st millennia BC and AD (Haselgrove 1989; Haselgrove et al. 1990a, 1991), and was prompted by the need to test assumptions based on field survey data. It was funded by grants from the University of London, the Society of Antiquaries of London, and the Royal Archaeological Institute.

### Site location and character (Figs. 1-2)

The site (*lieu dit* Renge Noyer, site code BRN) is c. 1 km south of the modern village of Braye-en-Laonnois, north of the river Aisne. It lies at the mouth of a small valley, on a south-east facing slope which falls in a series of sloping terraces to a stream. To the north, the land rises more steeply to the Chemin des Dames plateaux, the watershed between the rivers Aisne and Ailette. Renge Noyer is under intensive arable cultivation. The subsoil here is a sandy clay.

Braye-en-Laonnois lies within one of the transects (C1) fieldwalked as part of the wider survey programme. The existence of a cemetery, probably early medieval, adjacent to the area investigated in 1991 has been known for some years. Linewalking in 1989, however, showed that it lay within a surface concentration of Iron Age, Gallo-Roman and early medieval material which covers at least 6 ha, and which also includes evidence of a substantial Gallo-Roman building (C1/34, 35). A second concentration of early medieval material, covering at least 3 ha, is known c. 1 km west and north of BRN at Les Marias (C1/40, 41). Other similar sites are known in Transect C1 at Soupir, 2.5 km south of Braye-en-Laonnois, where two extensive scatters have been identified on the valley slopes east of the modern village.

### Excavation aims and procedure

The investigation of an early medieval site identified during the survey programme was intended to test and refine the interpretation of fieldwalking data, complementing similar exercises on concentrations of Iron Age and Gallo-Roman material (Haselgrove et al. 1989b). Early medieval sites are notoriously under-represented in the settlement archaeology of France, and so taking the opportunity to demonstrate that they can be detected by field survey was given a high priority.

The potential of three sites known from linewalking was assessed by gridded surface collection, priority being given to those located away from the gravel terraces of the river Aisne to help offset the bias of modern rescue excavation, and on the basis of these results BRN was selected for more

intensive work. The primary objectives were (1) to confirm the dating and interpretation of the site; and (2) to examine the relationship between surface

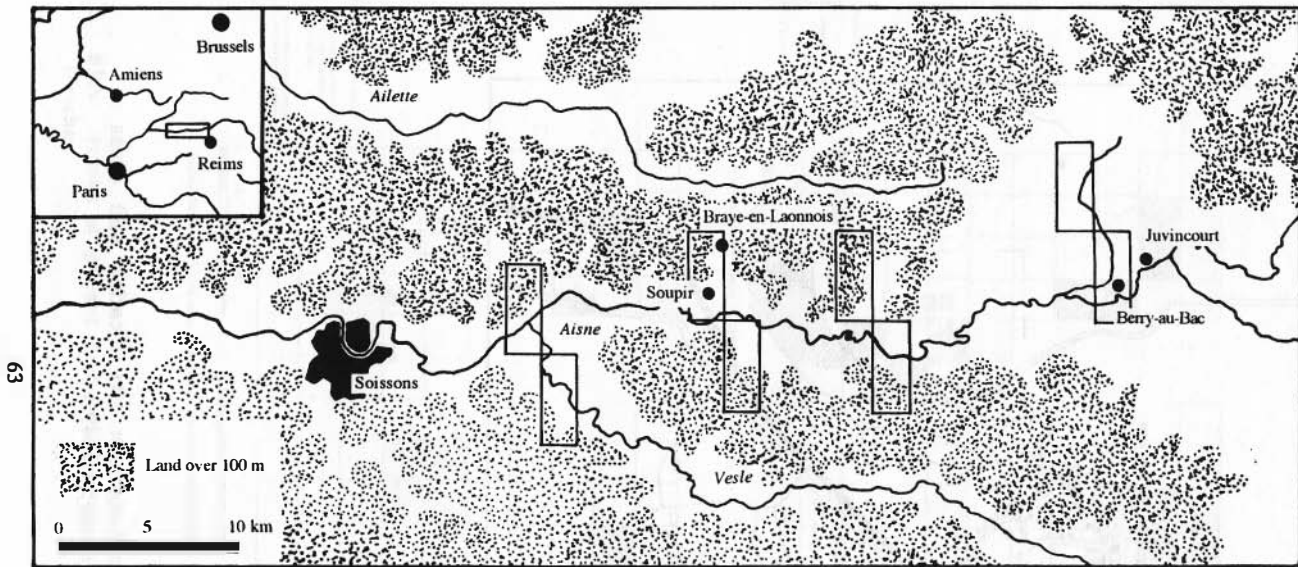
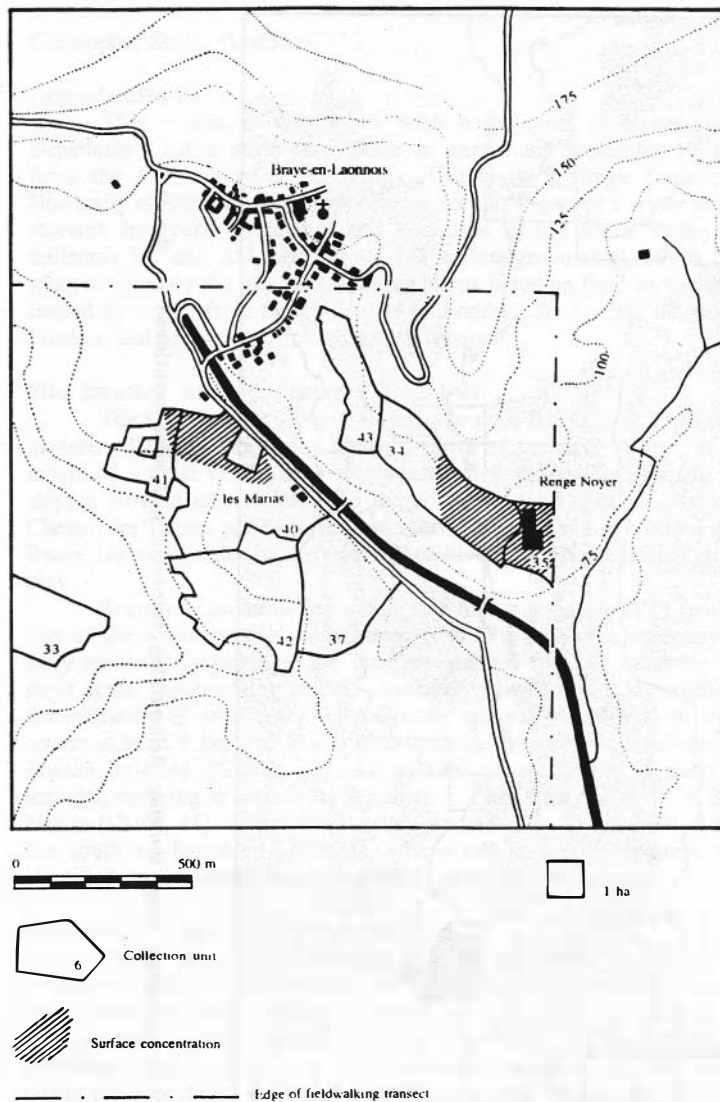
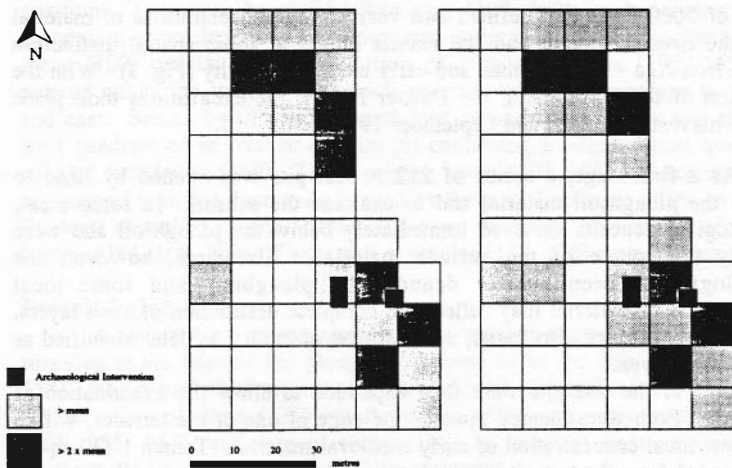


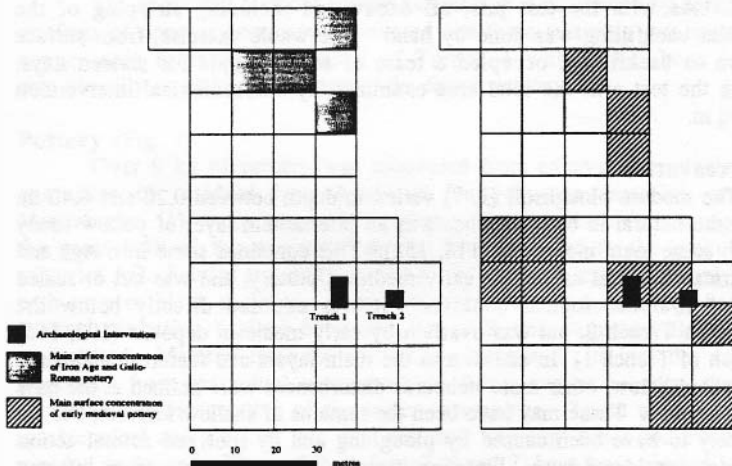
Fig. 1. Location map, showing fieldwalking transects and sites mentioned in the text



**Fig. 2. Braye-en-Laonnois: site location and areas fieldwalked in 1989.**



Surface densities of sherds by number (left) and weight (right).



Surface distribution of Iron Age - Gallo-Roman and early medieval pottery.

**Fig. 3. BRN: results of gridded surface collection and location of trenches.**

finds, material in the ploughsoil and subsoil archaeology. Only the limited excavation necessary to achieve these aims was envisaged, interventions being located according to the results of surface collection.

No fieldwork could be carried out in C1/34 because of the standing crop, and so attention was focussed on C1/35. Here, gridded surface collection over an area of 5000 sq m had defined two very strong concentrations of material within the overall spread, and the results hinted at some spatial distinction between Iron-Age - Gallo-Roman and early medieval activity (Fig. 3). With the permission of the landowners, the Dufour family, the excavations took place after the harvest in August and September 1991.

As a first stage, a series of 2x2 m test pits was opened by hand to quantify the ploughsoil material and to examine the subsoil. In some areas, archaeological deposits survived immediately below the ploughsoil and were evidently the source of the surface material. Elsewhere, however, the archaeology had been heavily denuded by ploughing, and some local concentrations of material may reflect the complete destruction of such layers. Negative features were also found, and a spread of burnt clay later identified as the base of an oven.

Two of the test pits were then expanded to allow the examination of larger areas. Both were located towards the edge of one of the terraces, within the densest local concentration of early medieval material. Trench 1 (30 sq m) was expanded from the test pit in which the oven base had been found. Trench 2 (16 sq m), 9 m east (downslope) of Trench 1, was located at the junction of the two grid squares with the highest overall surface densities of early medieval material. As with the test pits, all excavation including stripping of the topsoil and backfilling was done by hand. The whole exercise, from surface collection to backfilling, occupied a team of seven people for sixteen days. Including the test pits, the total area examined by archaeological intervention was 62 sq m.

### **The Excavation**

The modern ploughsoil (1, 7) varied in depth between 0.20 and 0.40 m. Capping the natural in both trenches was an intermittent layer of yellow sandy clay with some loam inclusions (118, 152). This contained some Iron Age and Gallo-Roman material as well as early medieval pottery, and was cut or sealed by all other archaeological contexts. It was exposed directly below the ploughsoil in Trench 2, but was overlain by early medieval deposits (102, 165) over much of Trench 1. In addition to the main layers and features catalogued and discussed below, other more nebulous disturbances were defined at the base of the ploughsoil. These may have been the remains of shallow features, but are more likely to have been caused by ploughing and by root and animal action and are not considered here. Flotation samples were also taken from selected contexts.

#### **Trench 1 (Figs. 4 and 5)**

An area 7 x 4 m was opened initially; subsequently, a small extension was excavated at the south-west corner of the trench to investigate oven base 162. The archaeology had been disturbed by the First World War as well as by

more recent deep ploughing. Because of the damage done by shell craters the south-west quadrant was not excavated below the base of the ploughsoil, but the rest of the trench was fully excavated to natural.

Most features and deposits excavated can be dated to the early medieval period by the pottery they contained or on the basis of their stratigraphic position. Two oven bases of baked clay (100, 162), each constructed on a foundation of potsherds, were encountered at the base of the ploughsoil. One of these (100) overlay an accumulation of domestic debris (102, 165) which petered out to the west of the trench and was thickest downslope to the south and east. Sealed by this in the north-east corner of the trench was the south-west quadrant of an oval or circular pit containing a largely intact oven with a cobbled foundation (166). The overlying layers (102, 165) had accumulated in, or slumped into, the depression caused by the partial collapse of the oven dome. Contexts disturbed by shell crater 161 were probably the remains of a similar feature (164, 168, 169). Two small postholes (117, 176) were also excavated.

### Trench 2 (Fig. 6)

A square 4 x 4 m was opened. Two spreads of limestone rubble and tile revealed at the base of the ploughsoil proved to be the fills of two pits (128, 158), which probably represent post-medieval disposal of ancient building rubble. One of these (128) cut three pits containing early medieval pottery (151, 155, 157), and one of these (155) in turn cut another small pit or posthole (181). Pit 158 was not fully excavated.

### Finds

The excavated material culture assemblage is dominated by ceramics. No artefacts of bone or horn were recovered and there was only one metal find, a copper coin from the ploughsoil of Trench 1 which has been identified provisionally as an irregular copy of the fourth century AD.

### Pottery (Fig. 7)

Over 9 kg of pottery was recovered from excavated contexts. Small quantities of residual Iron Age and Gallo-Roman material, and some Merovingian (1), were recovered, but provisional examination suggests that the great bulk of the excavated pottery can be dated to the eight to tenth centuries AD. Fabrics are sandy and hard-fired, and are most commonly reduced with grey or black surfaces. Decorated sherds are in a minority, but 'lattice pattern' rouletting, incised horizontal lines (2) and burnished stripes (7) are represented. Material from the oven foundations and pits includes substantial fragments from individual vessels whose forms appear broadly, though not exclusively, representative of the wider assemblage. These are wheel-thrown sub-biconical and globular jars with rounded 'sagging' bases and everted rims, rounded or flanged. Three of these jars (3, 6 and 7) have been pierced below the rim for suspension. Carbon encrustation on sherds from similar vessels suggests that they are cooking pots.

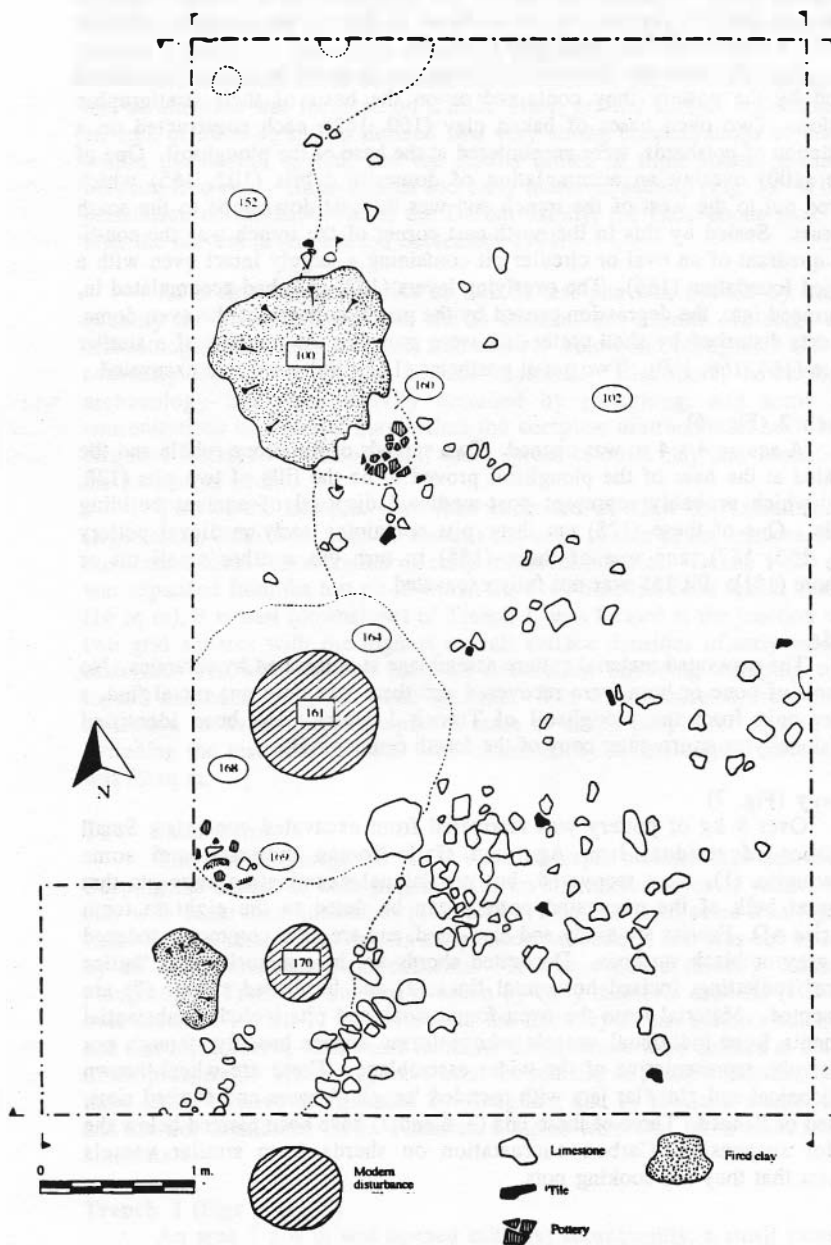


Fig. 4. Trench 1: stratigraphy exposed at the base of the ploughsoil

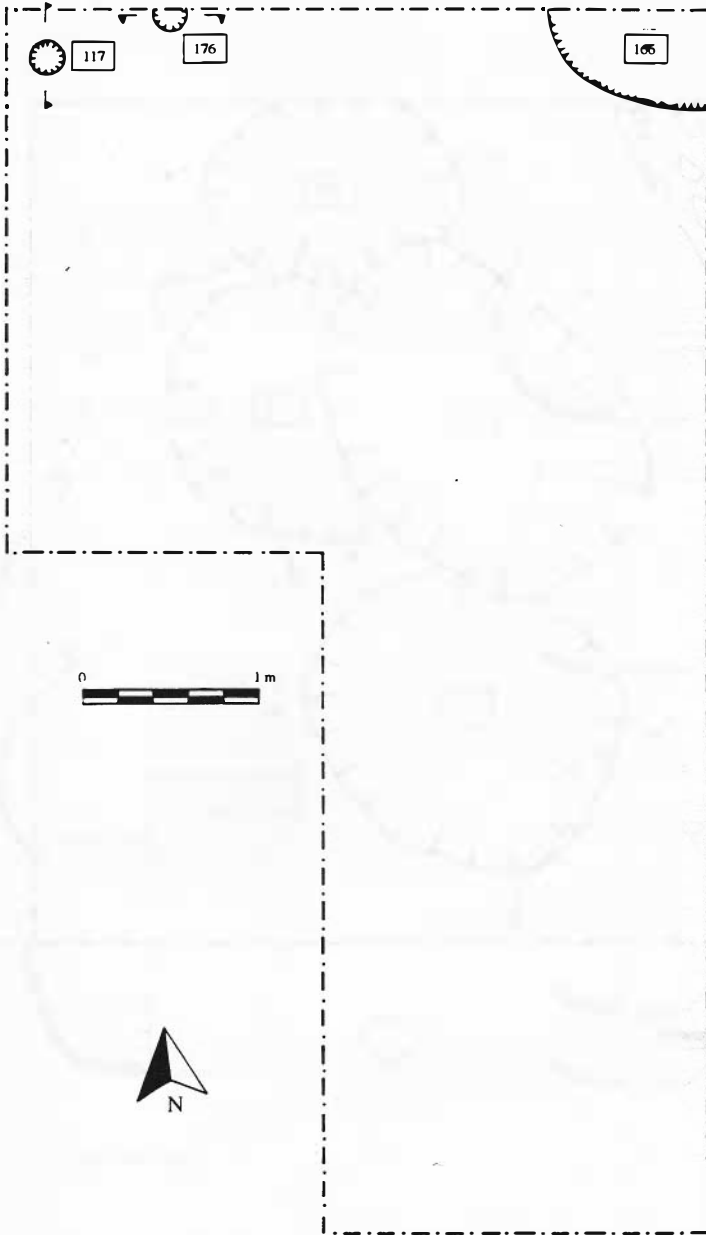


Fig. 5. Trench 1: excavated features cutting the natural



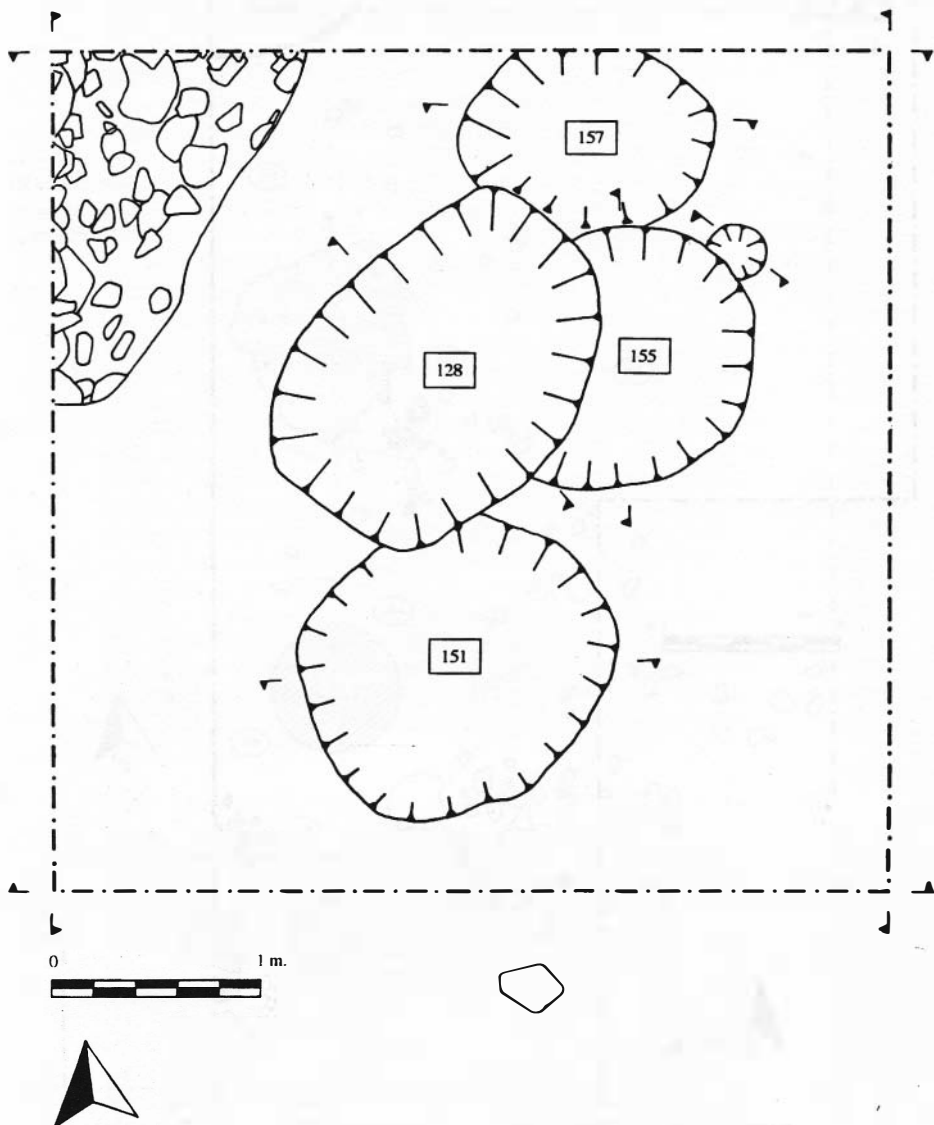


Fig. 6. Trench 2: excavated features

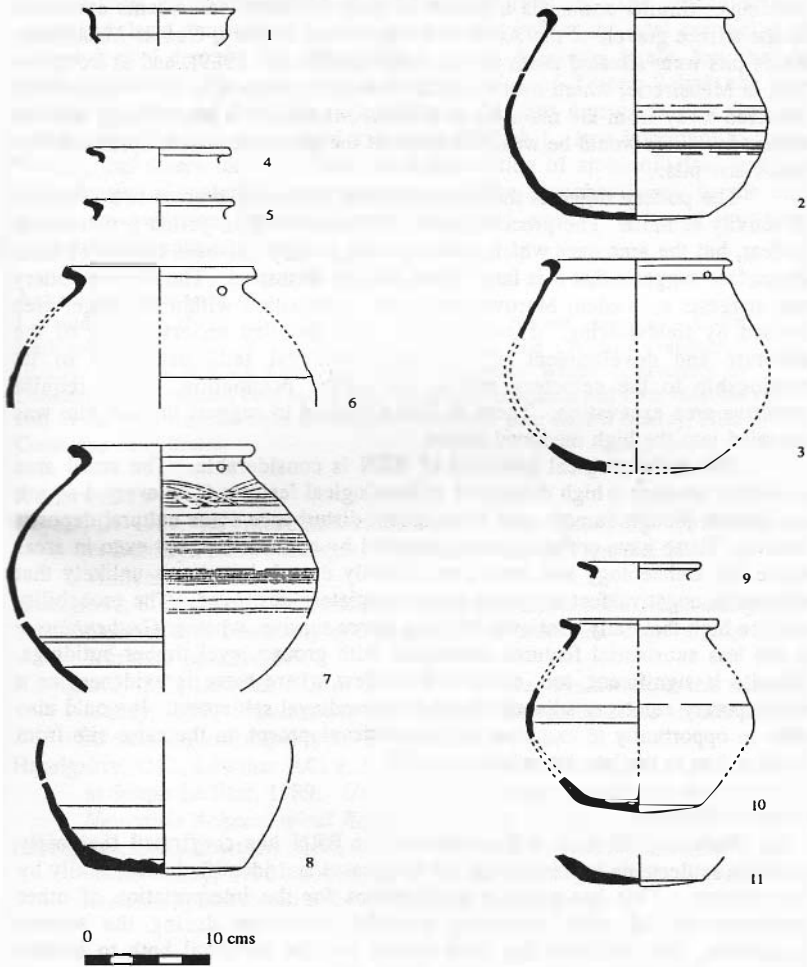


Fig. 7. Excavated pottery

## Discussion

No features earlier than the eighth century were identified. The small amount of earlier material almost certainly derives from Iron Age, Gallo-Roman and Merovingian-period activity in the immediate vicinity.

Although no buildings were identified in the excavation the results clearly show that this is part of a settlement site, most probably a yard with external ovens and an area of rubbish pits away from houses and ancilliary buildings. Similar zoning is a feature of early medieval settlements excavated on the terrace gravels of the Aisne at Juvincourt-et-Damary, Gué de Mauchamp, where pits were situated north of the buildings (Bayard 1989), and at Berry-au-Bac, la Maladrerie, where ovens similar to those excavated at BRN were found clustered away from the main focus of *Grubenhäuser*. It seems likely that the nearest buildings would be west and north of the areas excavated, upslope of the ovens and pits.

The pottery suggests that the excavated features represent two centuries of activity at most. The precise nature of the Carolingian-period settlement is unclear, but the area over which contemporary pottery has been recovered from the surface suggests that it is larger than a single farmstead. The surface pottery also suggests antecedent Merovingian-period occupation within the larger area defined by fieldwalking. However, any more detailed understanding of the structure and development of the early medieval settlement, and of its relationship to the cemetery and to the earlier occupation, would require extensive area excavation. There is little evidence to suggest that the site was occupied into the high medieval period.

The archaeological potential of BRN is considerable. The small area excavated revealed a high density of archaeological features (1 to every 4 sq m), and despite plough-damage and other recent disturbance some cultural deposits survive. These have probably been protected by colluviation, but even in areas where the archaeology has been more heavily denuded it seems unlikely that substantial negative features have been completely destroyed. The probability must be high that early medieval building traces survive, whether *Grubenhäuser* or the less substantial features associated with ground-level timber buildings. The site is significant, too, as one of the few where there is evidence for a contemporary cemetery adjacent to an early medieval settlement. It would also offer an opportunity to examine settlement development on the same site from the Iron Age to the late 1st millennium AD.

## Conclusions

Surface collection and excavation at BRN has confirmed that early medieval settlements in this region can be located and identified successfully by fieldwalking. This has positive implications for the interpretation of other concentrations of early medieval material identified during the survey programme, and confirms that field survey has the potential both to further illuminate the regional picture away from the terrace gravels, where rescue excavation is concentrated and where aerial survey is most effective, and to help redress the wider over-dependence on cemetery archaeology for the period. Although the relationship between them is unclear, the presence of two early medieval settlements within 1 km of the modern village of Braye-en-Laonnois emphasizes that post-Roman patterns of settlement have not been static, and

that processes of settlement shift and abandonment must be taken into account when explaining the development of the pre-feudal and feudal landscape.

The exercise has also helped to define some limits of inference from surface collection data. The assumption of a positive correlation between the density of surface material and the subsoil archaeology was broadly justified by the results, but it is clear that such relationships need not be straightforward, and that differential densities of surface material within a site provide only a limited basis for more detailed or specific interpretation. The probability that some high local densities of surface material may reflect the total destruction of archaeological deposits has already been noted. It is very likely, too, that the surface concentration which dictated the location of Trench 2 had not been wholly ploughed-up from the excavated pits, but was derived in part from the ovens and cultural layer exposed upslope in Trench 1. It is important to stress, though, that where there has been local destruction of archaeological levels, a high density of material on the surface or in the ploughsoil may be the only surviving evidence for activity which would not be detected by more conventional excavation.

#### Acknowledgements

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