

Where did Sidonius Apollinaris live?

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Introduction

The Auvergne area of central France (Fig. 17.1) is arguably one of the best historically documented areas of western Europe in the Late Antique to Early Medieval periods. The major author of the fifth century, Sidonius Apollinaris, was bishop of Clermont-Ferrand, and passed many summers on the estate of his father-in-law, the Roman Emperor Avitus, and his writings include descriptions of life at the villa. At a slightly later date Gregory of Tours gives us further information about the area, including his famous description of the rich cornfields of the Grande Limagne. Though there is a history of topographical studies in the area (e.g. Desforges *et al.* 1970; Fournier 1962) archaeology was slow to develop, and it is only in the last twenty years that it has started to cast significant light on the period (Fizellier-Sauget 1999).

There had long been speculation on where Sidonius Apollinaris actually lived. The villa was adjacent to one of the lakes in the Massif Central, formed either in the craters of the volcanoes or in valleys blocked by lava flows. It is one of the latter, Lac Aydat or Lac d'Aydat, that is accepted by most scholars as the site of the villa. The modern name of the village, with some linguistic licence, can be derived from the name given by Sidonius Apollinaris, *Avitacum*, the estate of Avitus; names ending in *-ac* or *-at* are common in central France, and are generally assumed to derive from Roman to Early Medieval estate names, thus suggesting strong continuity of land tenure between the two periods. The clinching feature is Sidonius Apollinaris' description of the lake (*Letters* 2.2), where he describes a rock which was used as a turning point in boat races, a feature which is still to be found on the opposite side of the lake from the modern village.

The most detailed discussion of where exactly the villa lay is that by C. E. Stevens (1933). Since he wrote there have been few additional finds in the area, and none relevant to the location of the villa (Provost and Mennessier-Jouannet 1994, 22–23), but, as I am suggesting in this article, information from recent excavations elsewhere in the Auvergne may give us more clues.

La Chapelle de Pessat (Riom, Puy-de-Dôme)

During the construction of the A71 motorway from Paris to Montpellier and Beziers in 1984, the section north and east of Clermont-Ferrand was intensively field-walked revealing a couple of Neolithic, Iron Age and Roman sites at Pontcharaud and at Pâtural which were subject to major excavations (Loison *et al.* 1991; Deberge *et al.* 2007). The third major excavation in 1984 was that of Pessat where surface finds included pottery from various periods and many human bones, and aerial photography revealed a circular ditched enclosure. An emergency excavation under the direction of Bernadette Fizellier-Sauget and Jean-Michel Sauget was launched. As I had no major excavation that year, I agreed to send a team of students and Earthwatch volunteers under Duncan Hale to assist.

The site was quickly identified as La Chapelle de Pessat, a small priory dedicated to St. Martin which had been abandoned in the seventeenth/eighteenth century in favour of the less marshy new village at Pessat-Pollérande, the modern Pessat-Villeneuve. In all about 1,000 burials were excavated of an estimated 3,000, as well as the complete sequence of the priory buildings. The site lies on the northern fringe of the Grande Limagne, the large plain to the east of Clermont-Ferrand whose *terres noires* have been accumulating under marshy conditions since the Neolithic, and which, once drained, form one of the richest agricultural areas of France. Unfortunately for the archaeologist these soils do not lend themselves to stratigraphical excavation, so normally sites have to be dug in spits, and in the case of Pessat, there was also huge disturbance caused by the burials. This means that it has proved impossible to date the buildings other than in the most general terms using the evidence of the superposition and cutting of walls and burials, and comparing construction techniques and mortars. The burials are dated on the basis of their intercutting, the typology of tomb construction and a minimal number of grave goods (grave goods are confined to about ten burials). Because of the limited funding available at the time, it has proved possible only to do an anthropological study of the earliest burials and there are no C¹⁴ dates or other analyses available.

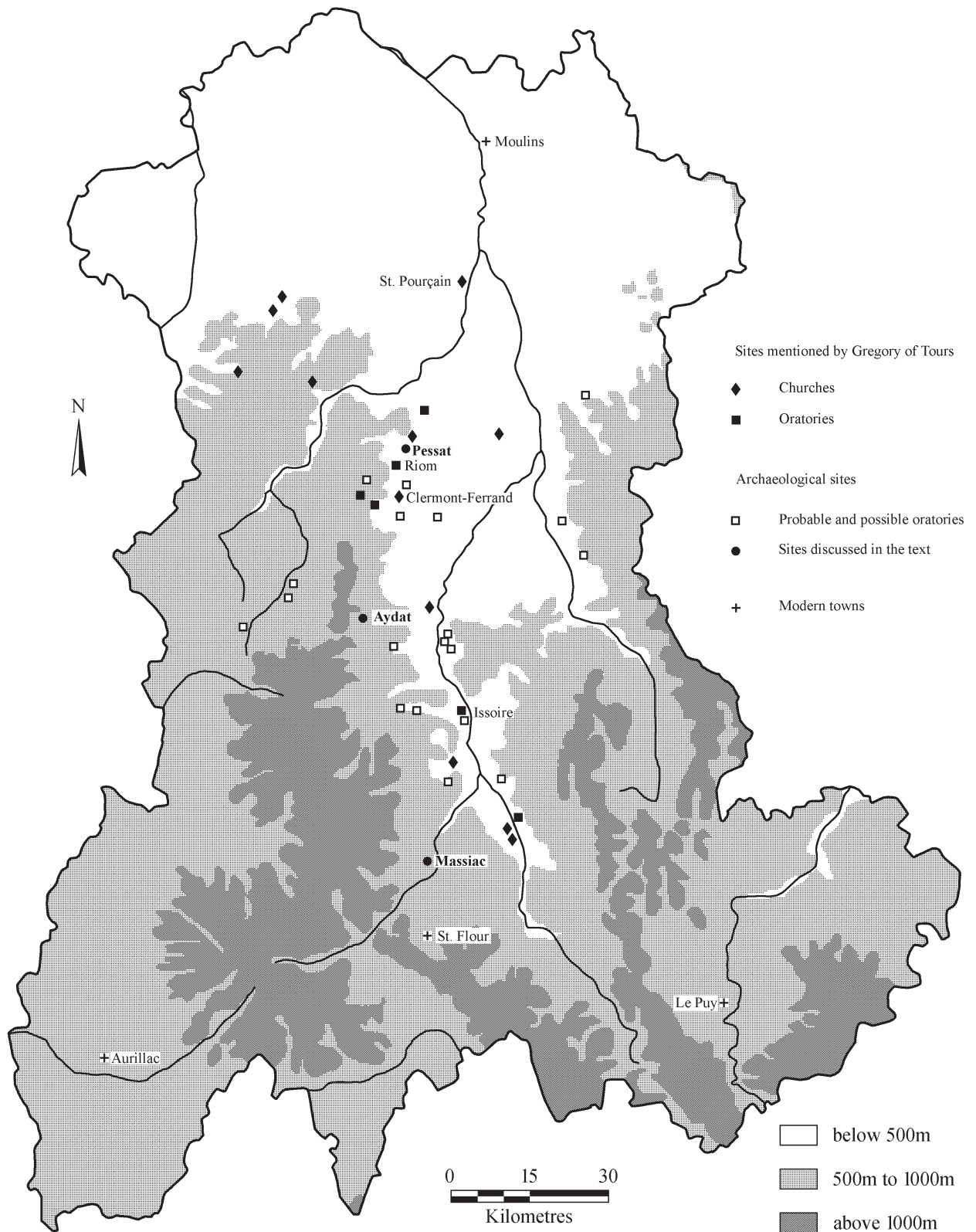


Figure 17.1. Location map of sites mentioned in the text.

Apart from one Late Bronze Age pit and some Late La Tène ditches and pits, the occupation starts in the Roman period with the construction of a Roman villa (Fig. 17.2). No floor levels survived intact, so there is no good dating evidence for either its construction or its abandonment. The largest room originally had an *opus signinum* floor, but none of it remained *in situ*. Fragments were found in some of the earliest graves that had cut through it, and on the basis of the good condition of these fragments, Fizellier-Sauget has suggested that in this room at least the roof had remained intact up to the time when it was turned into a mortuary chapel. She also argues that at least one other wall running north-south was still standing when the surrounding cemetery was established as four burials were aligned along it (burials 478, 598, 601 and 602).

Through preferential demolition and reconstruction of some of the walls, the Roman building was turned into a small church in the Merovingian period and an apse added to the east end (Fig. 17.3). Round the northern, western and southern sides further walls were added forming an ambulatory and porticus. The original, presumably dining, room, of the villa with its *opus signinum* floor became the chancel, and into this several burials were inserted, one in a stone sarcophagus made of local trachyandesite, a soft volcanic stone, a coffin type which is relatively common in the Massif Central. The other burials were generally in wooden coffins with the graves lined with stone or lumps of *opus signinum*. The top of the sarcophagus would have protruded above the floor surface, marked in places by a scatter of charcoal. The alignment of the burials was a mixture of south-north and east-west. One of the burials cut through the wall of the villa which would have divided the chancel from the nave, showing it had already been demolished. Similar groups of burials were found in small clusters around the church, especially in proximity to the apse, including others in stone sarcophagi, and presumably denoting family groups; 48 burials have been assigned to this phase. The only dating evidence for them was

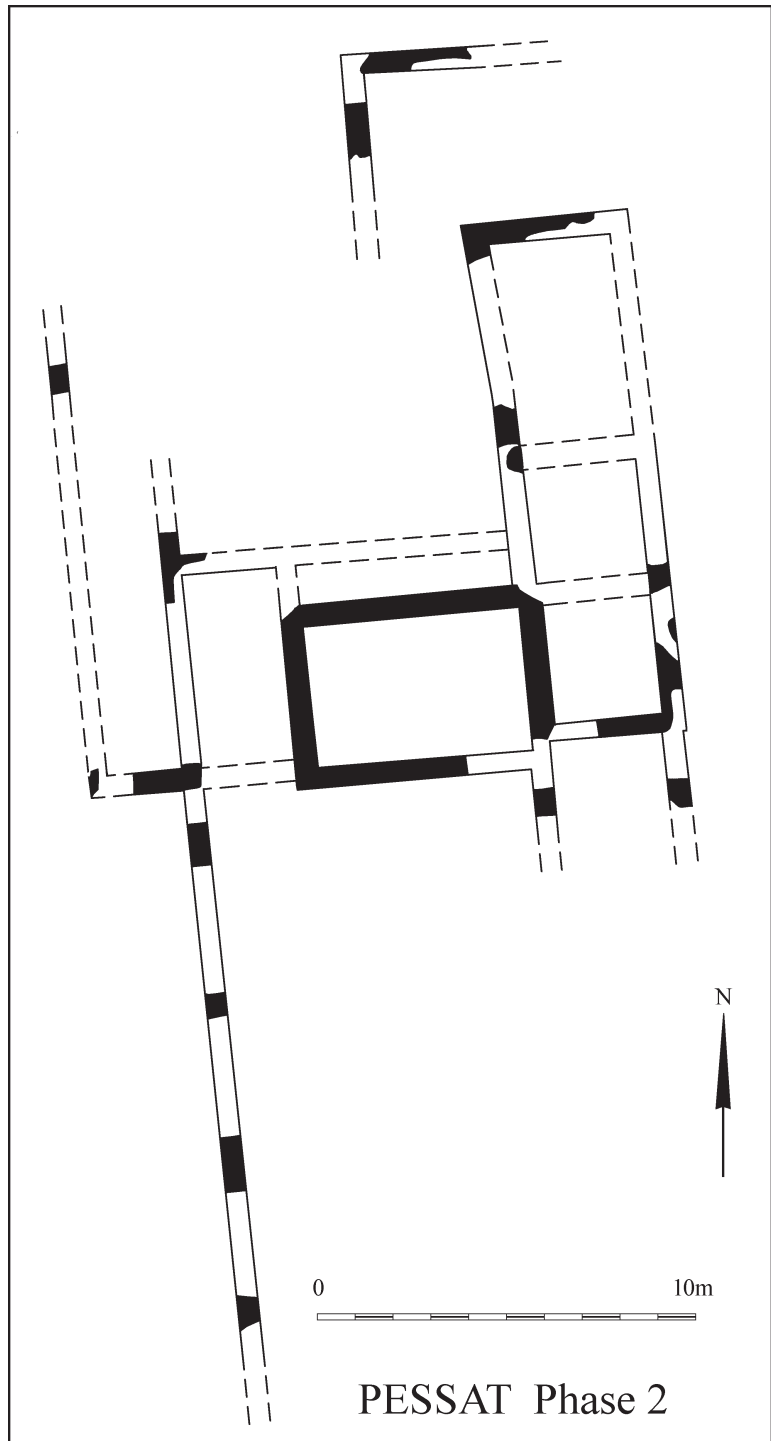


Figure 17.2. Plan of Phase 2 at La-Chapelle-de-Pessat, Riom.
(After Sauget and Fizellier-Sauget 1999, Figure 3).

a double-hooked bronze tag of Merovingian type from one of the burials, and so suggests a sixth to eighth-century date. At a later date, also not closely dated but also probably in the Merovingian period, the western entrance was reconstructed with a wall with unmortared

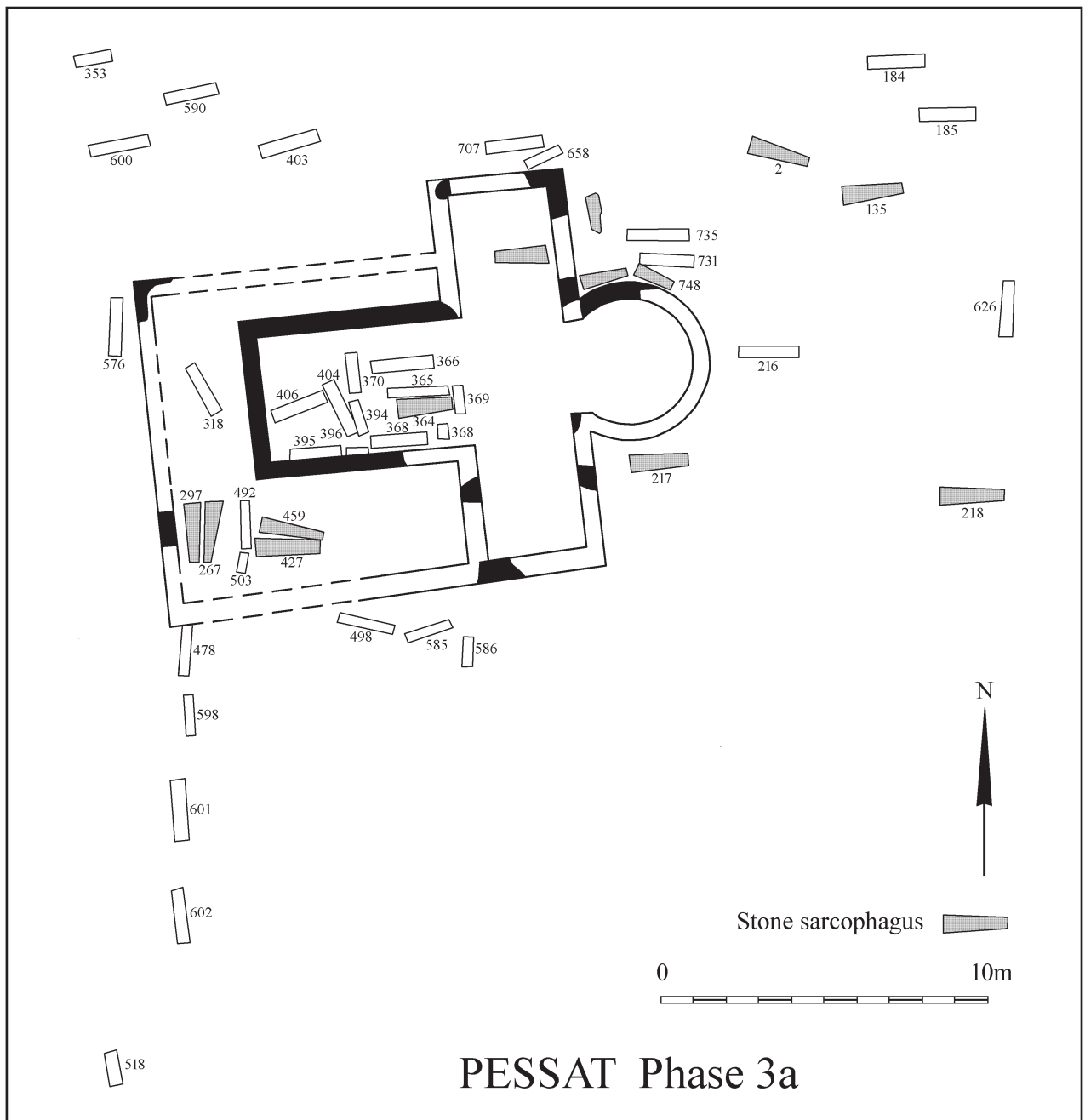


Figure 17.3. Plan of Phase 3A at La-Chapelle-de-Pessat, Riom. (After Sauget and Fizellier-Sauget 1999, Figure 4).

stone footings forming an enclosed area which included a burial in a wooden coffin (Fig. 17.4). However, there is no domestic occupation around the site, and Fizellier-Sauget argues that it falls into the category of 'private oratories', to which Gregory of Tours makes allusion, and she suggests a number of other sites in the Auvergne which would fit with this description, several of them on sites of Roman villas or which have produced Roman finds (Fig. 17.1).

The first documents mentioning the church at Pessat date to the 1190s when its dedication to St Martin is also stated. By 1296 it was under the control of the prior of St Amable at Riom and its status was a small priory. The building was reconstructed at about this time (Fig. 17.5), still using the traditional roofing of *tegulae* and *imbrices*. At a later date a dwelling was attached to the northern side; it incorporates Volvic stone, the quarry for which was not opened until the thirteenth

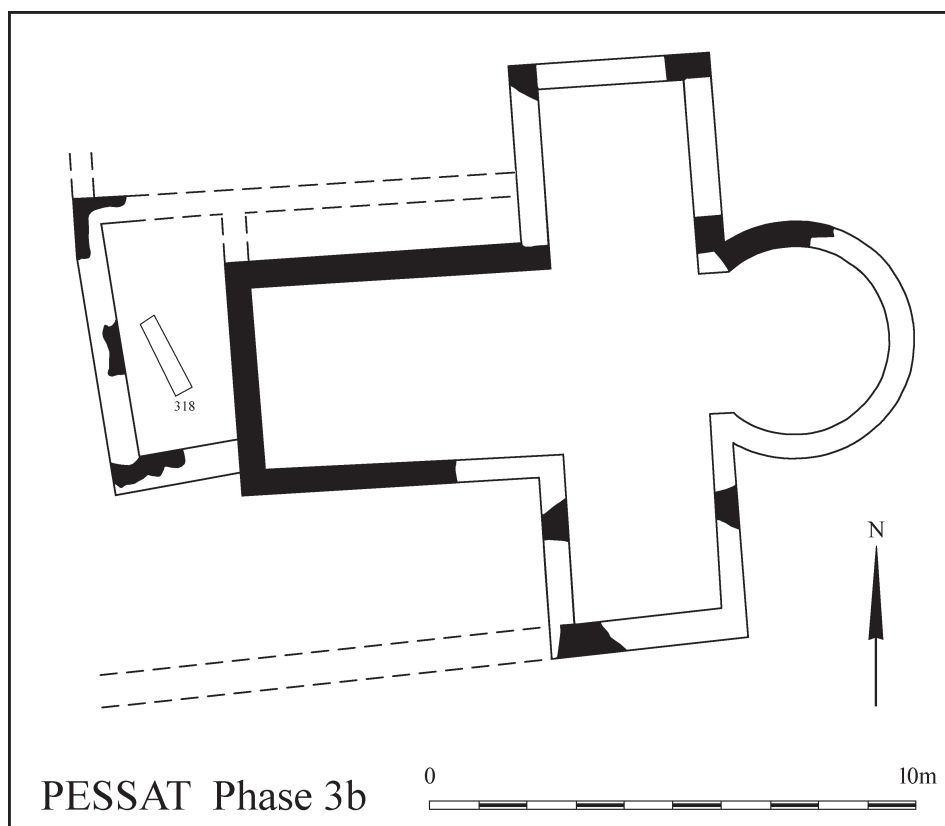


Figure 17.4. Plan of Phase 3B at La-Chapelle-de-Pessat, Riom. (After Sauget and Fizellier-Sauget 1999, Figure 5).

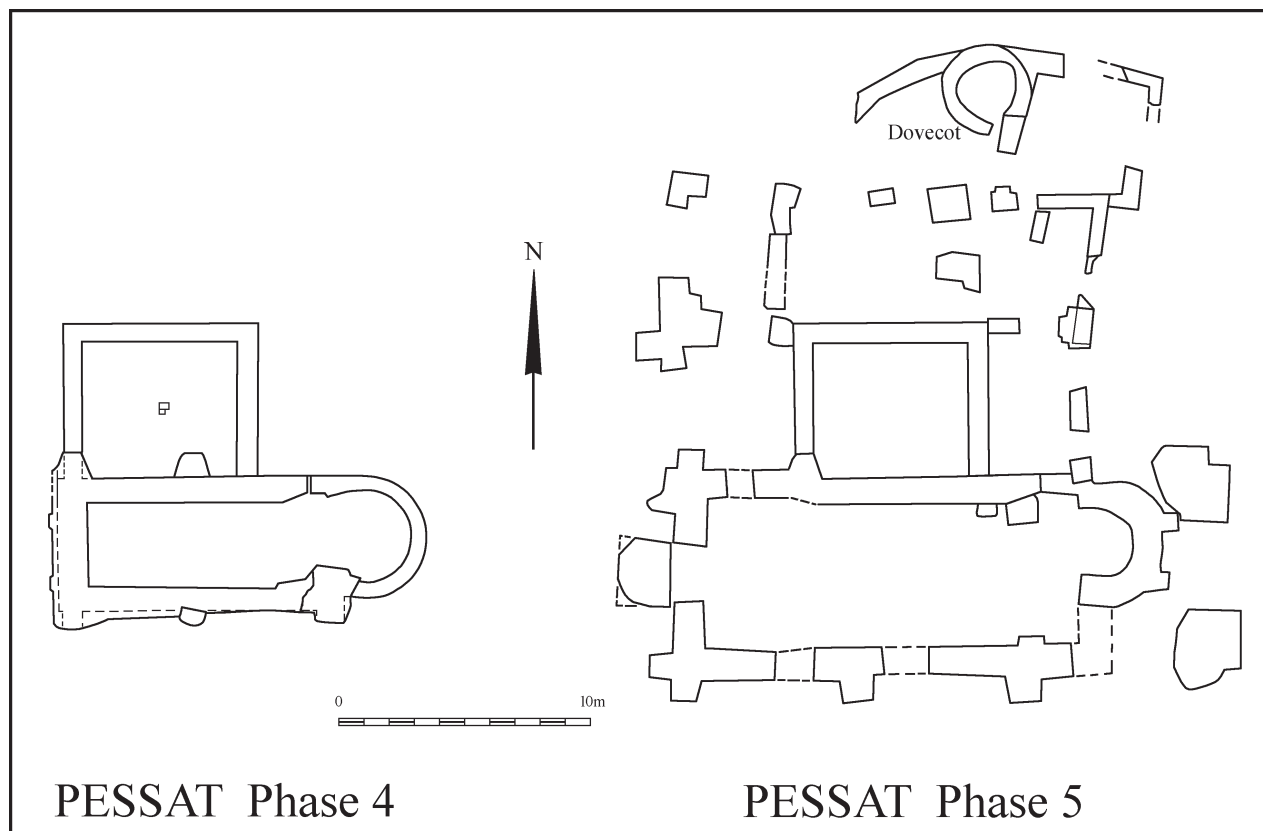
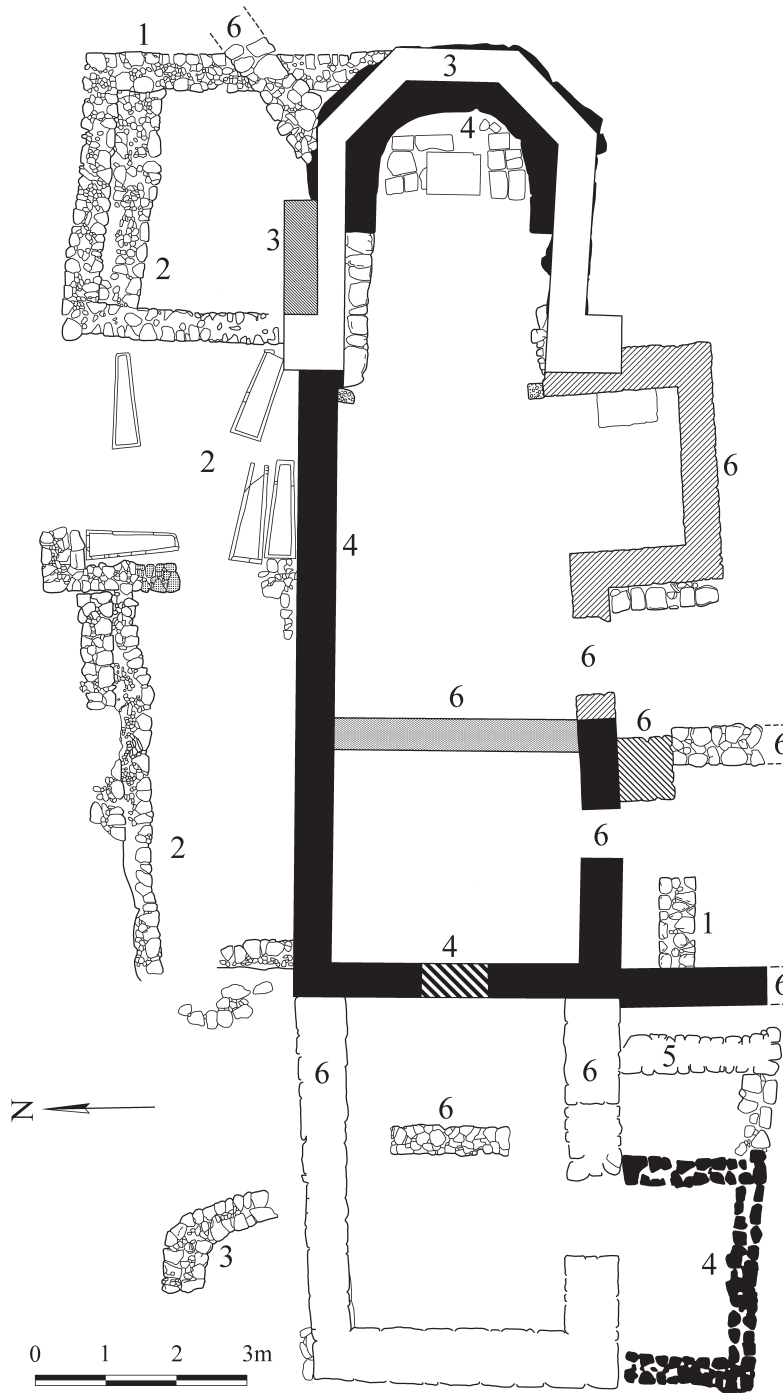


Figure 17.5. Plan of Phases 4 and 5 at La-Chapelle-de-Pessat, Riom. (After Sauget and Fizellier-Sauget 1999, Figure 6).



SAINT-VICTOR-DE-MASSIAC

Figure 17.6. Plan of the church of Saint-Victor-de-Massiac.
(After Tixier and Liabeuf 1984, Figure 6).

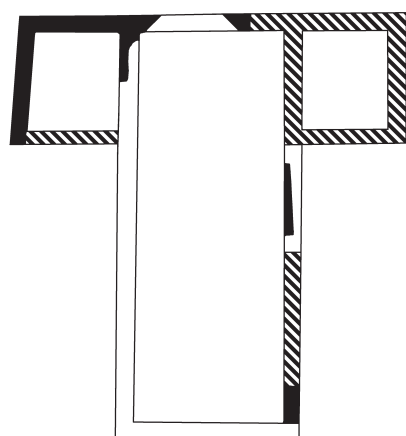
century, a date supported by the associated pottery, and there are a subterranean structure and drainage ditches as well as signs of agricultural activity on the site, suggesting a resident priest. Finally the church was increased in size, probably in the fifteenth century

when a circular ditch was also dug enclosing the site. The building also had a bell as a bell-casting pit was discovered. Later the dwelling became an open courtyard around which were a number of domestic buildings, including a pigeon loft, a well and a possible forge. Burial intensified to the south and east of the church, with a density of burials of about seven per square metre. But from the sixteenth century the site was in decline, and by the seventeenth century a new chapel at Pessat-Pollérande was in use; there is documentary evidence in the eighteenth century that the old church was being robbed to repair the new church. The site of the old church was progressively forgotten, indeed the land was transferred to Riom in a redrawing of the parish boundaries in the late eighteenth century.

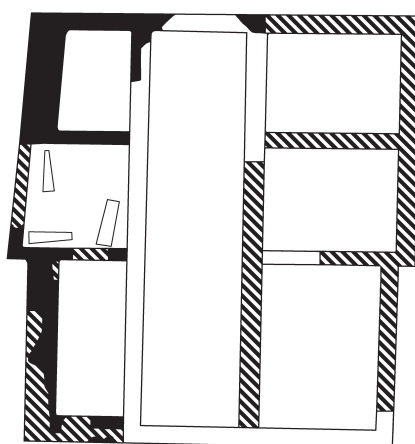
St Victor-de-Massiac (Massiac, Cantal)

The second church in the Auvergne which has been completely excavated, by Luc Tixier and René Liabeuf between 1972 and 1982, is that of St Victor which stood on a spur overlooking the modern town of Massiac (Tixier and Liabeuf 1984; Provost and Vallat 1996, 124–5; Collis 2000). With the opposing hill-top of La Madeleine which also boasts a church, it controls the entrance to the gorge of the Alagnon which flows past Blesle to Cournon where it joins the valley and the Petits Limagnes of the river Allier. There is Neolithic occupation on the spur and the outer cross-bank probably dates to this period, but there is also Hallstatt occupation at the end of the spur. In the late Roman period a smaller area was cut off by a large bank fronted by a double ditch, and it was within this enclosure, close to its entrance, that the church was built (Fig. 17.6), and, in early medieval times, a small village.

The first phase of the church (Fig. 17.7a) seems to have been primarily funerary and was of high status; the masonry built building was in part faced with green marble and polished red lava, and had a tiled roof. It consisted of a nave with two rooms to the north which



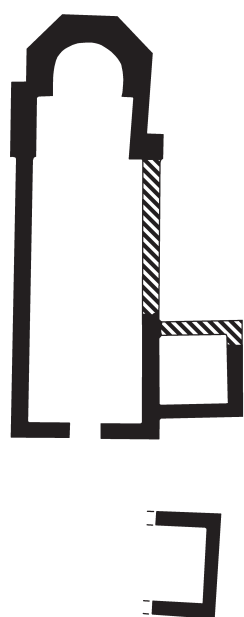
a: Late Roman



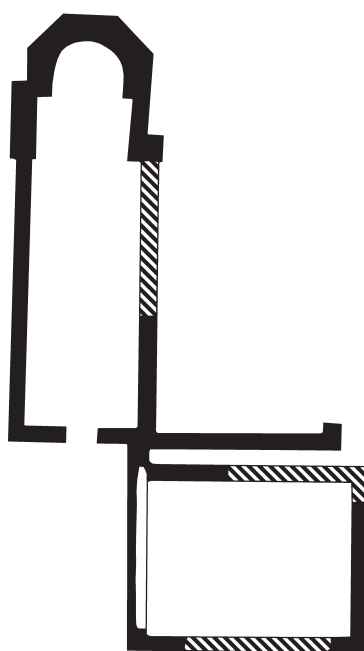
b: Early Medieval



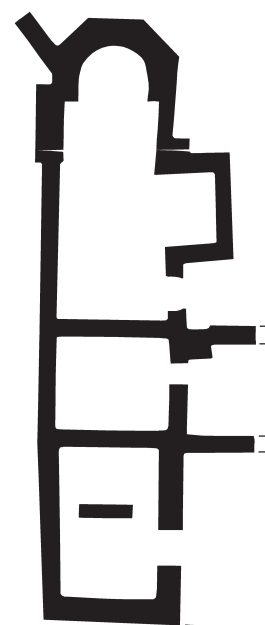
c: 11th century



d: Late 13th-14th



e: Early 15th



f: Late 15th - 16th

■ Excavated

== Concealed

▨ Conjectured

SAINT-VICTOR-DE-MASSIAC

Figure 17.7. Phasing of the church of Saint-Victor-de-Massiac. (After Tixier and Liabeuf 1984, Figure 7).

the excavators suggest was mirrored by similar rooms on the southern side, but this area had been totally destroyed by more recent constructions and graves. Around the building were inhumations in graves lined with Roman *tegulae*, but these had been systematically robbed, apparently at the time of the Frankish takeover of the region. This phase is dated by the presence of 'paléochrétienne' stamped pottery. The church was also probably completely demolished as a burial from the next phase cuts through its foundations.

Sometime later, probably very soon after the desecration, the building, now certainly a church, was reconstructed, but the associated material culture was Frankish, for instance black pottery with roller-stamp decoration. The new building (Fig. 17.7b) was constructed in wood with planks inserted into stone-packed trenches. It too consisted of a nave with rooms to north and south, two of which had been used for burial. That to the north contained inhumations in stone sarcophagi, the one to the south simple inhumations. This phase lasts for several hundred years, until the late Carolingian period in the late tenth century, with the latest coins belonging to Charles the Bald (843–877) and Guillaume III (918–926). In AD 933 there is a charter in which the landowner, Giraldus and his wife Seginildis donated the property to the church at Brioude, after which the building fell into disrepair, and the manor of Ouche at the foot of the hill became the centre of activity, though St Victor continued in use as a cemetery. It was probably in the twelfth century that the old church was buried under a layer of soil, and a small polygonal chapel constructed on the site of the previous apse (Fig. 17.7c), while at the western end there was circular stone building which seems to be domestic. In a papal bull of 1185 a priory is mentioned at St Victor belonging to the Benedictine abbey at Blesle.

In 1289 the properties of Blesle were reorganised, and at St Victor this seems to relate to a clearing of the land for more intensive agriculture and the construction of field enclosures, while parts of the original church were used for dumping stone from field clearance. This agricultural expansion saw the establishment of a small village on the site and the reconstruction of what had now become the parish church (Fig. 17.7d, 17.7e). This building survived the various vicissitudes of the later medieval village (plague, possible destruction during the 100 Years War, and final desertion in the late sixteenth century due to worsening climatic and environmental conditions). In the late fifteenth century the church was rebuilt with a small lateral chapel and altar (Fig. 17.7f), apparently as a burial chapel for the lords of the manor. The priest's dwelling was finally abandoned in the seventeenth century, and by 1758 the right of baptism and burial

had passed to the nearby village of Bussac. In 1855 the church was finally demolished to provide material for the enlargement of the church at Bussac.

The wider context in the Auvergne

The two churches described here are the best documented examples in the Auvergne of continuity of Christian buildings from the Late Roman to the early modern period, despite often fundamental changes in their functions and ownership. In both cases their accessibility is due to their final abandonment in the eighteenth century, but it seems likely that similar continuity would be demonstrable under modern churches if such were possible, and it may be a characteristic of quite a number of churches in central France, though the specific nature of the original foundation may have varied. In the case of Brioude it was the sanctity of the foundation as the burial place of the martyr St. Victor which hallowed the ground, a site already mentioned by early Christian authors. In her discussion of likely early oratories, Fizellier-Sauget notes that several of the sites have produced evidence of earlier Roman occupation, and the construction of chapels and baptisteries in Roman villas is well documented in Gaul and Britain. As villas were usually the administrative centres of estates, where those estates continued to function in the early medieval period, their role as religious and especially burial centres is likely to have continued, and one wonders how many parish churches in the Auvergne have this origin. The *-acum* names are one indicator of continuity. The stone sarcophagi noted at both Pessat and St. Victor are common evidence of Merovingian burials, and are regularly preserved by the church and village authorities as well as being recorded by village antiquaries; the Auvergne also has a number of more elaborate Late Antique decorated sarcophagi.

The circular enclosure which surrounds the site at Pessat is also a common feature in the topographical layout of villages in the Grande Limagne, marking the historical core of the village, though usually only visible as property boundaries or streets. In many cases, though not all, the church lies in the centre of these enclosures, as in the case of Lussat or St. Beauzire, but it may also include a high status lay building as at Lussat. But in other cases the space is occupied by normal houses forming a circle around an open space, as at Aulnat, which may have been used as a market or for other communal activities. In some cases this central area is raised above the surrounding land, suggesting a defensive role in some cases. Thus the sequence found at Pessat may be fairly typical. The use of archaeology to explore village origins is still relatively undeveloped in central France, but these examples suggest its great potential.



Figure 17.8. View overlooking the village and church of Aydat and their relationship to the lake.

Aydat

Sidonius Apollinaris is perhaps the iconic author for the western empire in the fifth and sixth centuries. As the civil administrative structure started crumbling the church increasingly took over some of its roles. Sidonius, for instance, as bishop of Clermont, took a leading role in organising the defence against the Visigothic attack, and himself went to Rome to negotiate with the senate, and also to Toulouse where the Visigothic royal family with which he had many personal ties was based. Of all the villa sites in the Auvergne, *Avitacum* is one of the most likely to have had an administrative and religious role. Standing outside the apse at the east end of the twelfth-century church, despite some silting up of the lake over the past 1,500 years, it is easy to imagine the view Sidonius may have had from his villa (Fig. 17.8). On all the evidence, I would be very surprised if excavation in and around the church were not to reveal the original villa.

Dedication

This article was originally intended to be included in the *Festschrift* for Martin Biddle, but could not be finished in time to meet the deadline. Belatedly I offer the paper (completed in 2015) to him, and in memory of the two Scandinavian girls who shared a room on the Winchester excavation in 1964, Birthe Kjølbye-Biddle and Sissel Sørdring Collis.

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