

Firewood selection in Roman cremation rituals in Northern Gaul: ritual, functional or opportunistic?

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Summary: Charcoal assemblages from 101 Roman cremation graves from 12 different sites from northern Belgium have been identified. These have been compared with charcoal assemblages from refuse deposits, reflecting the domestic use of firewood. As no apparent differences could be found, it is concluded that firewood selection for Roman cremation rituals was based on functional and opportunistic reasons rather than ritual.

Key words: firewood, charcoal, Roman, cremation, Belgium

INTRODUCTION

Cremation was the most common funeral practice in northern Roman Gaul during the first three centuries AD (Bechert, 1980). Although Roman age cremation graves are frequently found during archaeological excavations, charcoal from these graves has been studied only very occasionally.

This presentation gives the results of a systematic study of wood use in the Roman cremation ritual in Northern Gaul. Next to the identification of woody taxa that have been used for the construction of funeral pyres, it is assessed whether there are any differences in wood use for the cremation ritual and domestic use. Therefore the charcoal assemblages from the cremation graves are compared with those from refuse pits from the same or nearby Roman sites to detect possible differences in wood selection strategies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 101 Roman age cremation graves have been analyzed, originating from 12 different sites from northern Belgium. The analyzed graves were located in graveyards associated with small, rural settlements or large cemeteries associated with urban Roman settlements. Next to these cremation graves, the charcoal assemblages from 7 refuse pits from the same or nearby Roman sites have been analyzed for comparison with the assemblages from the cremation graves.

The charcoal assemblages of most graves are clearly dominated (>50%) by one single taxon, which is in most of the graves *Quercus* sp. In 23% of the graves, only *Quercus* sp. charcoal has been found. In some of the other graves *Alnus* sp. or *Fagus sylvatica* is the dominant taxon. All other taxa appear in small quantities only.

Except for *Abies alba*, all identified taxa from the cremation graves belong to the natural vegetation of northern Belgium and can have grown in the proximity

of the sites. However, the charcoal assemblages of the individual cremation graves are not a good reflection of the composition of the vegetation surrounding the site as most graves contain very few taxa, and therefore are clearly biased by human selection. On the other hand, there are no indications that certain tree taxa have been avoided because of a taboo on their use for cremation rituals as, except for some rare trees, all available taxa have been found in one or more cremation graves.

Abies alba which does not belong to the natural vegetation of Belgium, has been found in several graves from northern Belgium. *Abies alba* charcoal has also been found in several Roman cremation graves from sites in Germany like Frimmersdorf (Rheinland) (Tegtmeier, 1997), Zülpich (Rheinland) (Becker *et al.*, 1999), Wölversheim (Hessen) (Kreuz, 2000), while these sites are also situated outside the natural range of this tree.

The charcoal assemblages of most of the individual cremation graves are much stronger dominated by one single taxon, respectively *Quercus* sp., *Alnus* sp. or *Fagus sylvatica* than is the case for the refuse deposits. When the total charcoal assemblage of several graveyards is pooled and compared with those from the refuse deposits, however, these differences become less pronounced (Fig. 1).

The complete cremation of a human body demands a large volume of good quality wood fuel in a single event of time (Herrmann, 1990). The charcoal residue from the refuse deposits on the other hand results from the repeated collection of fuelwood for uses which do not necessarily require large amounts of large diameter wood. Also the burning characteristics of the collected taxa might not be as important for domestic use, like heating or cooking, as for cremations. The differences observed between the two types of deposits are therefore believed to be the consequence of functional and opportunistic reasons rather than ritual or symbolic motivations.

CONCLUSIONS

Charcoal fragments from 101 Roman cremation graves from northern Belgium have been analyzed. Although most of the graves are clearly dominated by one single taxon, mostly *Quercus* sp., this does not seem to be the consequence of wood selection for symbolic reasons or ritual as the cremation graves do not differ significantly from the charcoal assemblages from contemporary domestic refuse deposits.

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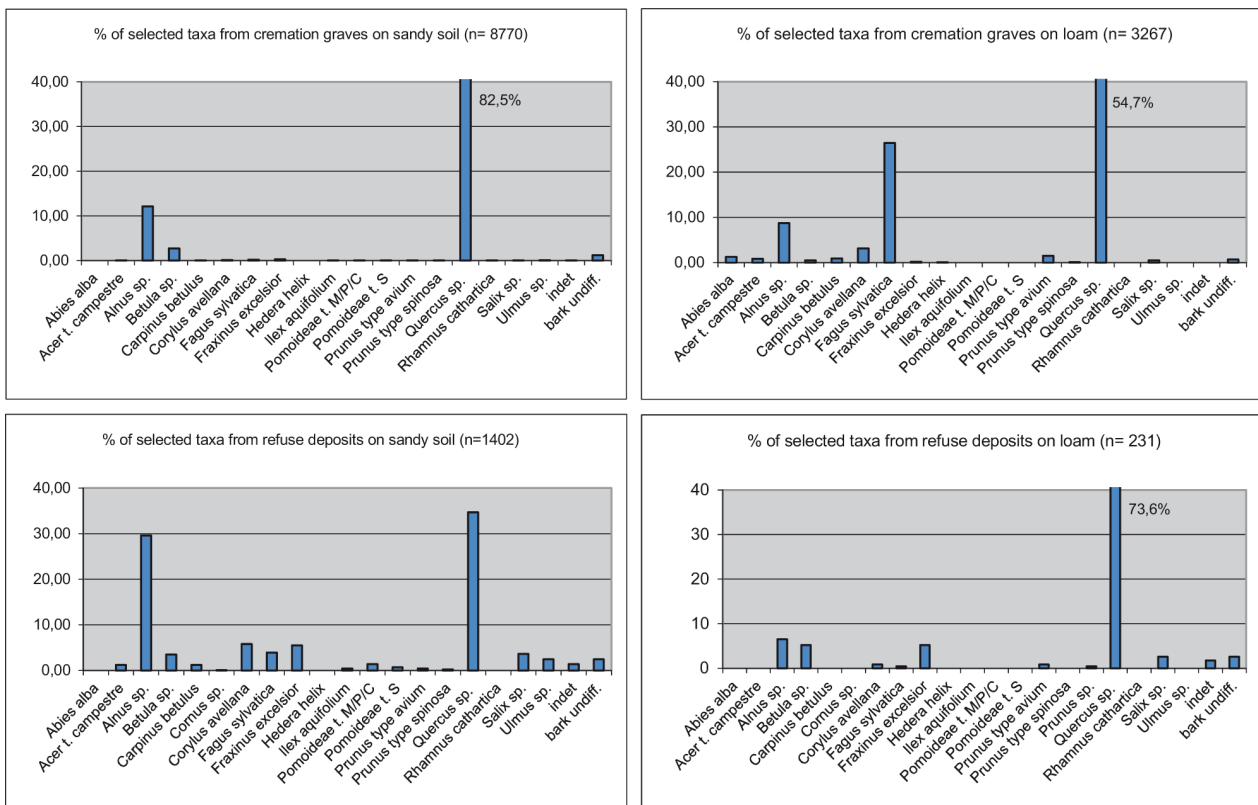


FIGURE 1. Percentages of selected taxa from Roman cremation graves and refuse deposits from sites on sandy and loamy soil types.