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Painted Gallo-Roman Figurines in Vendeuil-Caply

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- 1 The preservation of the pigments may have been the result of an exposure to an intense fire that occurred in this Gallo-Roman city at the end of 2nd century C.E. This causal relationship is revealed by the stratigraphic location of the figurines, which were concentrated under a dark, burnt layer that dates to 170–180 C.E.¹ This fire is an important event for the history of Vendeuil-Caply because the population began to abandon the city after two centuries of intense development. Even though the exact nature of this event is still to be determined, nevertheless it is clear that it marked the end of the city, which was progressively depopulated until the 5th century C.E.²
- 2 Evidence suggests that this figurine production may be local to Vendeuil-Caply. First, the aesthetic of Vendeuil-Caply's figurines is not seen elsewhere. Even if most of the types discovered in 2013 are characteristic of Gallo-Roman figurines in general, such as the nursing mother, Venus Anadyomene, female busts (Fig. 1), birds, and quadrupeds among other iconographic types, the artistic style appears to be particular to Vendeuil-Caply. Second, the corpus presents new iconographic types that comprise a standing or walking male figure set on a pedestal and wearing a tunic with a scale pattern, pants, and boots; on occasion two figures occupy the same pedestal. An inscription "MARC" on one of these pedestals may be the insignia of a coroplast named MARCELLUS.

Fig. 1. Heads from female busts, polychrome terracotta, second century C.E.

Vendeuil-Caply Collection Delahoche: Musée archéologique de l'Oise.

- 3 However, the main novelty of Vendeuil-Caply's figurines is obviously their color. In 1993, Micheline Jeanlin asked if all Gallo-Roman figurines could have been painted.³ Twenty years later, we still do not have enough data to answer the question fully, but with the 2013 discovery at Vendeuil-Caply, we know that at least the figurines from this production center were decorated with colored pigments.
- 4 An increased understanding of these so-called white terracottas will result from the analysis by the Centre de Recherches et de Restauration des Musées de France (C2RMF) of pigments found on a selection of 14 figurines from Vendeuil-Caply, with the goal of determining the nature of the chemical composition of the pigments and the painting technique (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2. Small edifice with Venus Anadyomene, polychrome terracotta, second century C.E.

Vendeuil-Caply, Collection Delahoche: Musée archéologique de l'Oise.

- 5 The C2RMF also will analyze the clay of these figurines in relation to the fabric of a group of large clay balls that were found together with the figurines. Unfortunately, no molds were discovered in 2013, but the size of the balls seems to correspond to the amount of clay needed to cast a typical figurine. The results of this analysis will be compared to the results of another study conducted in 2009 on a painted, Gallo-Roman

edifice-figurine 12 cm high that was found in a cremation tomb at the Caserne Gouraud at Soissons in 2006 (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3. Small edifice, polychrome terracotta, second century

C.E. SOISSONS, SERVICE RÉGIONAL DE L'ARCHÉOLOGIE PICARDIE.

- 6 This study was carried out by the Centre d'étude des peintures murales romaines (CEPMR) based in Soissons. A raman spectroscopic examination of a green pigment from the sides of the edifice-figurine revealed that it comprised glauconite and celadonite mixed together. Surprisingly, there was a much higher concentration of celadonite, a considerably more expensive mineral that had to be imported from Italy or Cyprus. This information suggests that the painted edifice-figurine was rather precious. Another interesting result of this analysis was the absence of calcium carbonate, a fact that indicates that the pigments were not painted directly on the clay, but rather were applied with a binder that must have been organic and that disappeared over time.⁴ After the analysis of the figurines from Vendeuil-Caply is completed, it will be possible to extend the fabric analysis to the Soissons' figurine.
- 7 The current work of the C2RMF is very promising because it is exploring the as yet unknown field of the pigment decoration of Gallo-Roman terracottas. It is expected that the figurines from Vendeuil-Caply will yield information that will considerably increase our understanding of this aspect of Gallo-Roman craft production, if the fire of C.E. did not alter the pigments that decorated these figurines in any appreciable way. The quantity of figurines from Vendeuil-Caply and their pigments offer scientists an excellent opportunity to investigate this kind of decoration on a meaningful scale.

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NOTES

1. Audoly 2015.
 2. Piton 1993.
 3. Jeanlin 1993.
 4. Amadei, Cristini, Groetembril 2009.
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ABSTRACTS

In 2013, an archaeological team exploring the site of Vendeuil-Caply in northern France brought to light a new corpus of Gallo-Roman terracotta figurines. The particular importance of this corpus lies in the preservation of pigments that decorated the surface of these figurines. From the 19th century onwards, the generic term that has been used to refer to this kind of Gallo-Roman production has been "white-clay," most often associated with the Allier region of central France. This term arose from the stark, white color of the fabric. Consequently, archaeologists were quite surprised to find not only color on the figurines, but also repetitive patterns, such as feathers, or details of clothing.

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