

Medieval and Later Settlement around Chassenon (Charente), France: Fieldwork in 2011

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This report outlines the first season of fieldwork on medieval and later settlement in the environs of *Cassinomagus*, one of the largest and best preserved Roman bath complexes in France. The remains of the site are located in the commune of Chassenon (Charente). The aim of our research is to examine the impact of post-Roman *Cassinomagus* on the development of the surrounding medieval and modern countryside, with particular emphasis on settlement origins and evolution. Our project forms one small unit of a large *projet collectif de recherche* (PCR) involving over 10 teams, and coordinated by Gabriel Rocque (Conseil Général de la Charente). More information about the project and reports from the PCR can be found at <http://www.cassinomagus.fr/>. Copies of a more detailed report on our 2011 work with a catalogue of the finds has also been deposited in the archive of the Conseil Général's *Cassinomagus* research centre at the site in Chassenon (Turner and Webster 2011).

Between the 1st century AD and the 4th *Cassinomagus* grew from an Imperial *mansio* into a small town, at the heart of which lay a large rural sanctuary. The latter comprised twin *thermae*, an enigmatic octagonal temple and pit group, and theatre. The site was first explored by archaeologists in the 19th century, and a considerable amount of excavation has been undertaken since the 1960s. The bath suite, the temple environs, and the mechanics of the water supply to and around the complex are the main subjects of the present PCR. To date, however, little attention has been paid to post-Roman *Cassinomagus*, and to the part the complex might have played in shaping medieval settlement in the immediate environs. *Cassinomagus* had ceased to function as a baths complex before the early 5th century, but its presence continued to be felt in a variety of ways. First, recent work has revealed that a large post-Roman structure, re-occupying the north-eastern *gymnasium* of the baths complex, was still in use as late as the 6th century AD (Hourcade and Mourin 2008). Second, as first noted by Bourgeois, Andrault-Schmidt and Berland (2006), the ruins were clearly a source of building materials for Chassenon's early medieval church. Churches with pre-Romanesque fabric are rare in the region, but here the west elevation appears to have survived 11th-century and later rebuilding. The associated cemetery has Merovingian origins (Bourgeois 2007). Finally, recent excavations of cisterns (*puits de l'eau*) below the modern village of Chassenon suggest that methods of water containment dating back to the Roman period were still being employed here in the early medieval period (Rocque *et al.* 2010).

Much research on the medieval countryside of France has been focussed on northern regions (especially the Paris basin) and the south (Languedoc), with an emphasis on the nature of feudalism, processes of nucleation and *incastellamento*, and the role of castles (Cursente 2007). Nevertheless, researchers are increasingly interested in the development of the landscape in other regions. The largely dispersed settlement patterns of some western regions may not have developed along the same lines, and merit study on their own terms (Antoine 2005).

Our project aims to address a significant gap in our knowledge concerning the medieval landscape of Chassenon and its region. Our methodology has three components. First, preliminary reconnaissance, allied with documentary and cartographic research has enabled us to isolate villages and hamlets of potential early medieval date. Second, test pit excavation is being undertaken in these locales, using the methodology pioneered by Richard Hodges (1991) and popularised more recently at Shapwick (Gerrard and Aston 2007) and through Cambridge University's Higher Education Field Academy (HEFA) scheme (Lewis 2006, 2009). This method is apparently previously untested in currently occupied settlements in France. Finally, detailed building recording is also being undertaken in order to demonstrate the scale of local reuse of building stone taken from the baths complex. These techniques have allowed us to begin the important task of understanding the broad impact of *Cassinomagus* on post-Roman building construction, as well as casting light onto the origins and development of medieval and later settlement types in the region.

In the summer of 2011 four settlements in the environs of modern-day Chassenon were selected for detailed study. These were Villegoueix, Longeas, Brethenoux and Champonger (Fig. 1). We make a brief report on our work at each of these below. Before undertaking fieldwork in these villages, however, we spent some time at the Roman baths complex making a detailed record of the range of building stone and tile employed there. *Cassinomagus* is located within the Rochechouart impact crater, formed when a meteor struck the earth here in the Triassic period. The baths were principally constructed from the distinctive polygenic breccia (known locally as impactite) which resulted from this collision event. Breccia is formed from a mixture of crushed and shocked rocks cemented in a crystalline matrix. Autochthonous basement rock, which varies across the impact crater zone, is intensely fragmented into the matrix. As might be expected (and as was demonstrated by a rapid analysis of local quarries and outcrops) the baths at Chassenon were built using

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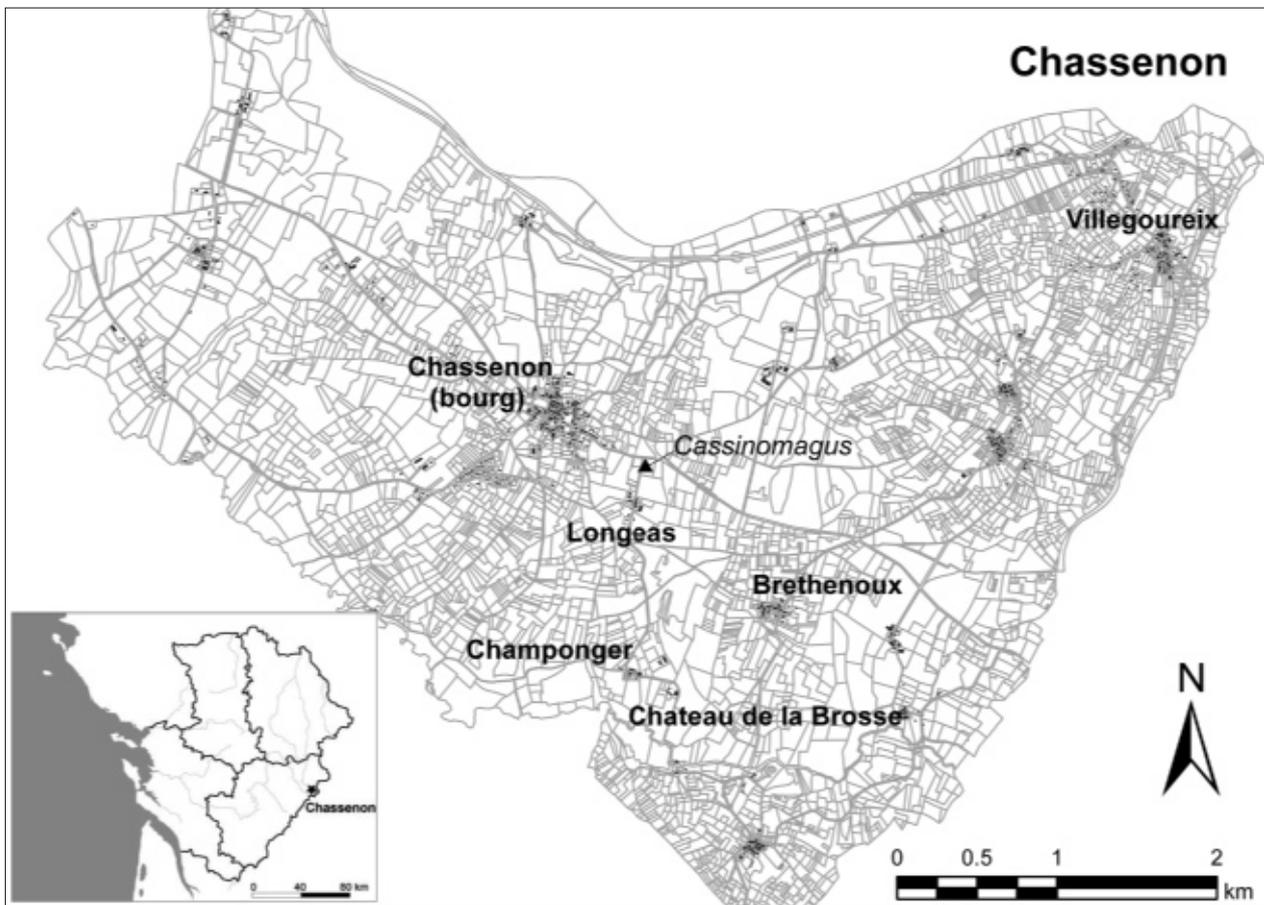


Figure 1 Location of key sites mentioned in the text.

impactite from the immediate vicinity, and referred to here as Chassenon impactite.

Villegoueix

Villegoueix is a nucleated village located in the north-eastern corner of the commune of Chassenon, close to the border with Rochechouart. The place-name has been identified as having a Frankish origin (Boin 2003). We have not yet identified any medieval documentary references to the village, but in combination with the place-name, the complex irregular plan of the settlement hints strongly at medieval origins. The ‘Napoleonic’ cadastre of 1833 reveals that today’s plan form was well-established by that date. Although there has been some consolidation of plots, the basic layout of the village in the early 19th century was very similar to that of today.

Test pit excavation

We excavated four test pits in two separate gardens in the heart of the village (Fig. 2). Very little Roman pottery, brick or tile was recovered from these pits. A total of 19 sherds of late medieval pottery were found in test pits 001, 002 and 003. Test pit 004 produced only one sherd of medieval pottery but 26 of post-medieval material. Test pit 002 revealed stratified archaeological deposits including a small pit, a post-hole, and a rock-cut feature identified as a foundation trench for a wooden building. Test pit 004 revealed the presence of another

rock-cut linear feature in the natural bedrock, although all deposits here had been recently disturbed.

The results from Villegoueix show clear archaeological evidence for occupation of the site during the late medieval period. The test pits we excavated suggest that this occupation was focused towards the centre of the existing settlement, but more work will be required to confirm this conclusion and define how the village developed over time.

Historic building recording

In addition to test pit excavation, we made a rapid inspection of the historic building standing on cadastral plot 856 (Fig. 3). The principal aim here was to determine whether Roman material from the complex at *Cassinomagus* might have been incorporated into the standing historic buildings. On the ‘Napoleonic’ cadastre, this building was divided into five separate units. This history of divided ownership remains clear in the surviving fabric. Despite numerous alterations a considerable amount of pre-modern wall fabric appears to survive in the building. The earliest element of the building is likely to be the north-eastern quoin, with the chamfered northern jamb of the doorway in the east-facing elevation. Elements of this doorway, perhaps of 17th century date, have been re-set in the southern jamb of the door during an episode of renovation, probably dating to the 18th century.

Despite the considerable age of parts of the building, and the definite traces of medieval occupation on



Figure 2 Villegoureix: location of test-pits and pottery by date.

the site identified through test pitting, few traces of possible Roman masonry were recognised. Several of the elevations are rendered, but where stone is visible the majority of the fabric is composed of local schists and impactite from the Rochechouart (rather than Chassenon) area. *Cassinomagus* was constructed almost entirely from Chassenon impactite, so the baths cannot have been the source of the majority of the building stone used at Villegoureix. A few possible blocks of Chassenon impactite have, however, been used in the SE and NW quoins of the building, and these may derive from *Cassinomagus*.

We also inspected the interior of a house immediately to the north of our excavation site on cadastral plot 869. This contained a fine spiral staircase, part of a fireplace and other architectural features made of impactite. They appeared to be of late medieval date, c. 15th-16th centuries. These features may have been brought to Villegoureix from elsewhere, but it seems more likely that they have been preserved *in situ* after being incorporated into the present building (a house of largely post-medieval date) from an earlier structure.

Longeas

Longeas is a small hamlet located immediately to the south of the baths at Chassenon. On the early 19th-century cadastral plan, it is depicted as a small settlement of just two buildings. These probably form parts of the building now used as the archaeological site store,

archive and research centre for the PCR. Various new buildings were added to the hamlet in the 19th and 20th centuries including three dwelling houses and several barns. There appears to be significant use of Roman materials in these buildings.

Three test pits (Long 001, 002, 003) were excavated. As might be expected, given the proximity of *Cassinomagus*, the great majority of finds here were Roman in date. Around 37 sherds of Roman pottery and around 530 fragments of likely Roman brick and tile came from our three small excavations. Nevertheless, one sherd of medieval green-glazed pottery was also identified here along with a few others of uncertain date.

Building recording

We examined a large agricultural building which may have originated as that shown on the 1833 plan, but if so it has been substantially altered. The building includes several phases, and our recording focused on the northern half (adjacent to our test pits). Here, the main building had been enlarged to the east with the addition of a 19th-century outshot (employing reused Roman tile) placed along the top of the east wall to provide a level course to lay the wall plate. The quoins and doorways of the barn contain numerous large blocks. These are mostly of Chassenon impactite, and appear likely to have been re-used from the bath complex. Some include features such as lifting holes (e.g. a large pinkish granite slab re-used in the jamb of a doorway). Interestingly, some features show they have been re-used more than once.

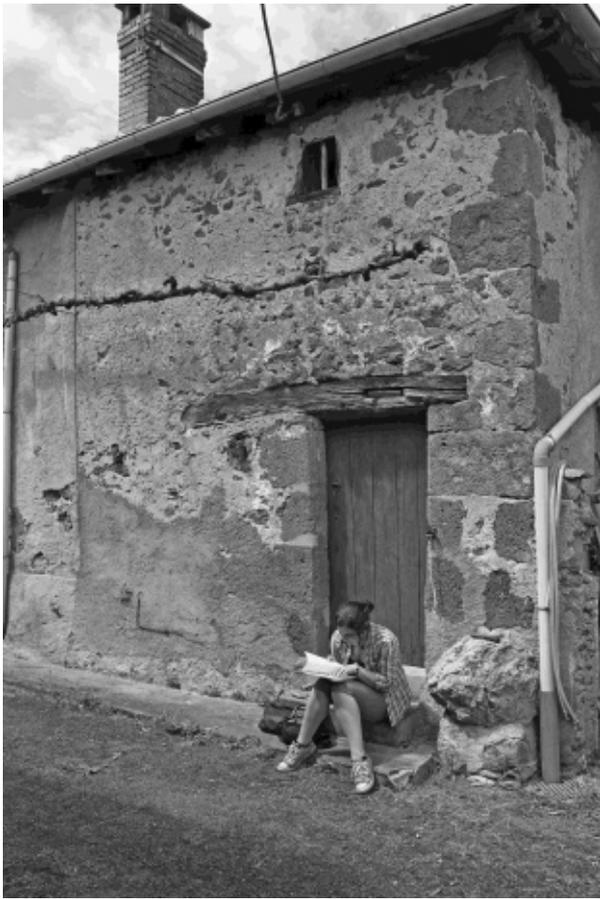


Figure 3 Villegoueix: North-eastern quoin of the historic building on plot 856, looking south west. The earliest identifiable feature is the lower portion of the quoin and the northern jamb of the adjacent doorway. The top of the doorway has been truncated and the southern jamb re-set.

The dimensions of some of the large impactite blocks are similar to those in the north court of the bath complex, suggesting they may have originated as drain covers.

Brethenoux

The village of Brethenoux is located to the south west of Chassenon. A single test pit was excavated here, 25.5 m south-east of the modern house in cadastral plot 199. The test pit was located in an area of fields outside the historic core of the village. This location is reflected by the nature of the finds recovered, which comprised very small, heavily abraded sherds of pottery, brick and tile, and a prehistoric flint core.

Champonger

Champonger is a small, regular two-row hamlet located on an east-west road 300 m to the west of the Chateau de la Brosse and 1.2 km due south of the bath complex at *Cassinomagus* (Fig. 4). The modern road from Chassenon that enters the hamlet from the north was built in the mid-20th century; before that date, travellers entered the hamlet from the west along the road that led to a t-junction with the *chemin de Chabanais* c. 275 m

west of the settlement. In the early 19th century, there were no buildings in the village on the plots to the south of the road, though the plots themselves are depicted on the cadastral map. The only structures on this southern side were a well-house and its washing pool, which are both clearly shown on the early cadastre (see below). It seems likely that the only other building that may not have been substantially altered since this time is the large house and barn at the eastern edge of the hamlet.

Test pit excavation

Five test pits were excavated (Fig. 4). Two were located close to the road, and therefore towards the front of historic building plots, on the southern side of the road. Three were located at the back of plots, to the north and south of the road. In all cases deeper deposits of soil were encountered towards the back of the plots. This might be expected since it is here that garden soils and rubbish probably accumulated in the past.

A significant amount of medieval pottery was recovered, indicating occupation across the site during the Middle Ages. Roman pottery was also common, with a particular concentration to the north of the road in test pit 004.

Building recording

We undertook rapid inspections of the historic buildings standing on cadastral plots 404 and 405. We called this complex of connected structures Building 1. It comprises two main elements: firstly a barn (on plot 404) and secondly, a row of cottages and barns on plots 404 and 405 (originally four separate dwellings, but now two)

The barn, which is not shown on the 1833 survey, is built in roughly coursed rubble comprising various local rocks including schist, and Chassenon and Rochechouart impactite. The SW and SE quoins are constructed from dressed Chassenon impactite. Some of the large slabs, e.g. the lower stones of the jambs of the blocked window in the south elevation could be re-cut ancient slabs from *Cassinomagus*. The elevations include occasional tiles, varying from pale pinkish orange to darker red fabrics; some are probably Roman. Immediately to the west of the barn in plot 404 are the ruined remains of another building which is also not shown on the 1833 plan.

The row building of four cottages and two barns originally included accommodation on the first floor with haylofts above, although the living area of the three eastern houses has been extended upwards in the 20th century and two of them have been combined to create one larger house. The walls are built largely of Chassenon impactite. Architectural details include two Chassenon impactite sinks, and one in a pinkish granite, very similar to one of the granites occurring at the *Cassinomagus* bath complex. A large Chassenon impactite gatepost marks the garden entrance to the principal modern dwelling.

Tile occurs sporadically in the walls. Two tiled features are of particular note: one a niche high up in the east-facing elevation of the barn, and the other an oven in one of the cottages, though it seems unlikely that either is composed of ancient brick/tile.

In addition, we inspected the west-facing elevations of the buildings on plot 413 (from plot 414), which we collectively called Building 2. The three buildings here,

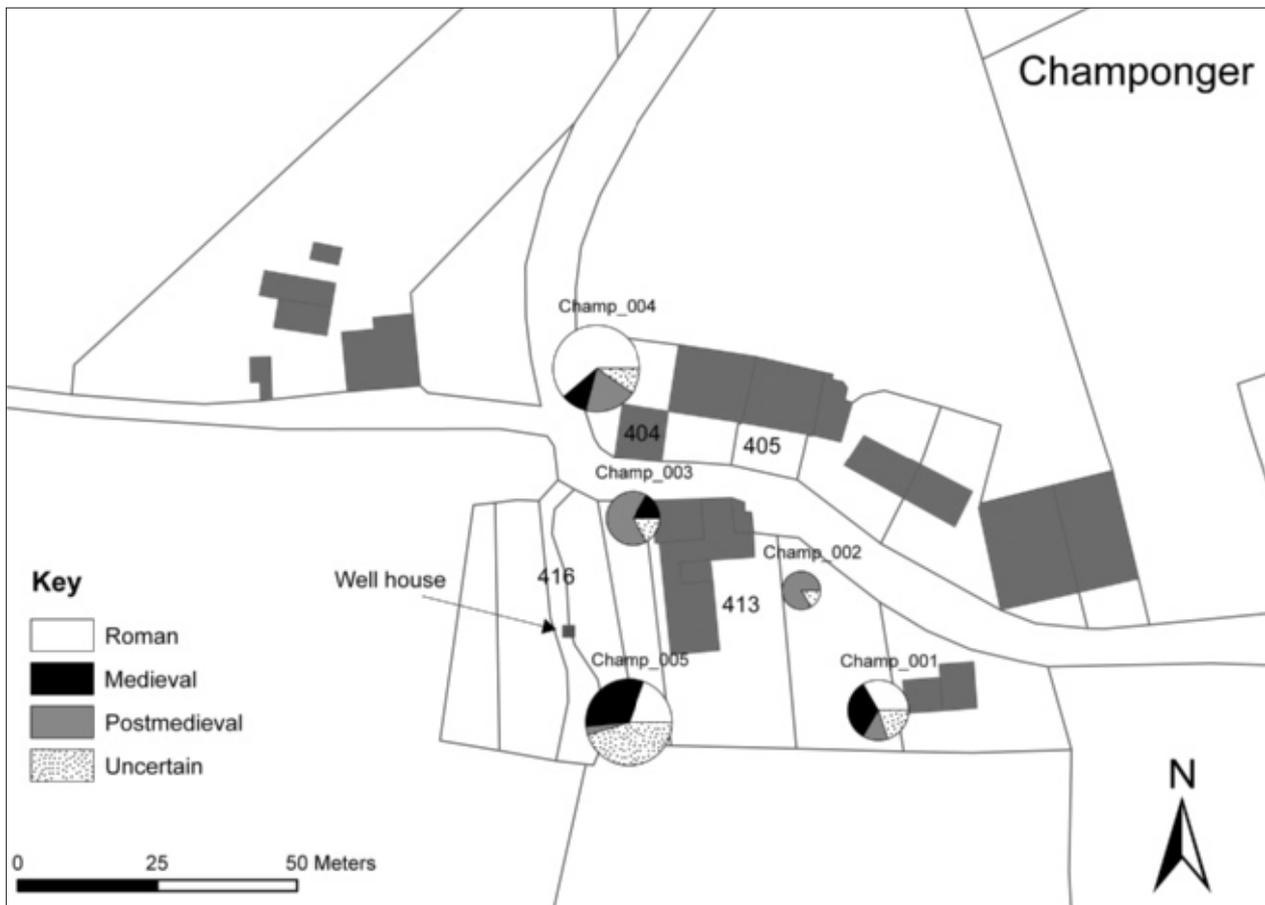


Figure 4 Champonger: location of test pits, with pottery recovered by date.

all constructed since 1833, have stone walls of roughly coursed Chassenon impactite rubble, bonded with clay. Modern repairs have been carried out using cement-based mortars.

Perhaps the oldest building we inspected at Champonger, and certainly the one containing the greatest quantity of re-used Roman material, was the small well-house on cadastral plot 416 (Fig. 5). Local resident M. Boijoux told us that the well was still in use up to *circa* 30 years ago, and it is clearly depicted on the 1833 cadastral plan. The complex comprises the well-house building itself, a settling tank, a stone-lined channel and a large washing pool. The small well-house comprises an open-fronted structure set into the bank. The building has recently been re-roofed with a concrete capping, but otherwise the structure appears to be largely historic. The main fabric is found in the two side walls which are built of many small blocks of Chassenon impactite. For example, the south-facing elevation is built of 12 regular rows of Chassenon impactite blocks. These appear to be largely the same size and stone type as the small blocks used in the Roman bath complex. The south-west quoin is made from 19 rows of brick/tile ranging in thickness from 3–4.5 cm (except the top course, which is in small Chassenon impactite blocks; and the bottom two courses, in large Chassenon impactite blocks). The interior of the well-house is constructed of irregular Chassenon impactite rubble. The lower parts of the interior walls are bonded with a lime-based mortar; a large, flattish Chassenon impactite block supports the

back wall of the well chamber above the well pool itself, which extends below and behind this stone.

The well-house has been rebuilt several times, but it is conceivable that the first structure here dates to the Roman period. The upper part of the well is stone-lined, and the four-sided, dressed stone basin bears some resemblance to examples found at water source sites in Roman Burgundy, which were sometimes surmounted by a small stone *cupola*. The Fontaine de St-Martin, in the grounds of the 12th century Chapel de St Martin at Beurey-Baugay (Pouilly-en-Auxois) is an example here. The possibility that the well house at Champonger was built in the Roman period, from the same stone as that employed at the bath complex, is an intriguing one. Cassinomagus was more than simply a bath house: it was a large, rural sanctuary within which water played a significant ritual role. Roman *Cassinomagus* may thus have impacted on its environs in ways which extended beyond the purely structural into the realm of ritual and belief. Whether this influence persisted into the post-Roman period is another matter entirely, but this is a possibility that bears detailed consideration in future. It is not, perhaps, coincidental that the medieval church in the village of Chassenon, just a few hundred metres from *Cassinomagus*, is dedicated to St John the Baptist.

Conclusion

The fieldwork undertaken in 2011 demonstrated that test pit excavation can be used successfully in the study area



Figure 5 Champonger: south-facing elevation of the well-house.

to identify ceramic scatters and indeed archaeological features (as in Villegoueix test pits 002 and 004). Evidence of occupation in the Roman, medieval and post-medieval periods was recovered from Champonger, Longeas and Villegoueix. Although no medieval ceramics came from the single test pit at Brethenoux, this is probably because this was sited well outside the historic core of the settlement. Within settlements it would seem that areas with deeper soil, often towards the back of occupation plots, tend to preserve a greater variety and quantity of ceramic evidence. This is probably because they have been least disturbed in the relatively recent past.

The historic settlements of Villegoueix and Champonger yielded most evidence for medieval occupation. This has included parts of standing buildings, archaeological features, and scatters of medieval ceramics. Re-used Roman building materials were identified in historic buildings at Champonger and Longeas, but not certainly at Villegoueix where Rochechouart impactite was much more common in the buildings than Chassenon impactite. At Longeas, post-medieval and modern farm buildings contain both large slabs of Chassenon impactite and Roman tile. At least some of the large slabs appear to have been recycled from the adjacent bath complex, perhaps particularly from the drain coverings. At Champonger occasional Roman tile and some large Chassenon impactite slabs may also be re-used. The clearest re-use of ancient materials here is in the well-house, which may also be the oldest building recorded in the hamlet. It is built mainly of small, dressed blocks of Chassenon impactite from the Roman complex at *Cassinomagus*.

Distance appears to have been a significant factor in sourcing building material throughout the post-Roman

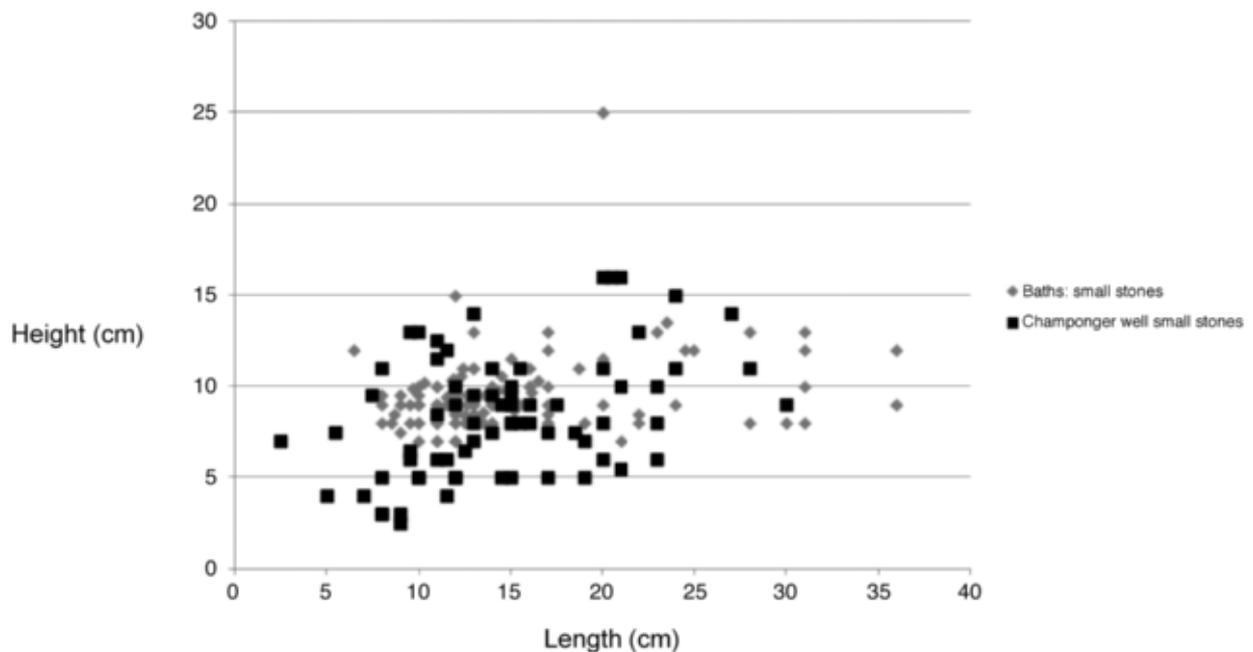


Figure 6 Graph comparing dimensions (cm) of small impactite blocks from *Cassinomagus* baths (diamonds) with small impactite blocks in the well-house at Champonger (squares). The graph suggests the well-house is built from Roman stones, presumably recycled.

period. Of the four villages examined, Villegoueix is the furthest from *Cassinomagus*, and the impactite used here came mainly from Rochechouart impactite quarries. The age of the building in question may also be a factor, since older structures seem more likely to contain re-used Roman material.

We hope to continue our research with more test-pits in order to refine our understanding of the development of medieval settlement in the commune. We will also extend our fieldwork to encompass another type of settlement by surveying and test-pitting around the small rural manor house at Chateau de la Brosse.

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