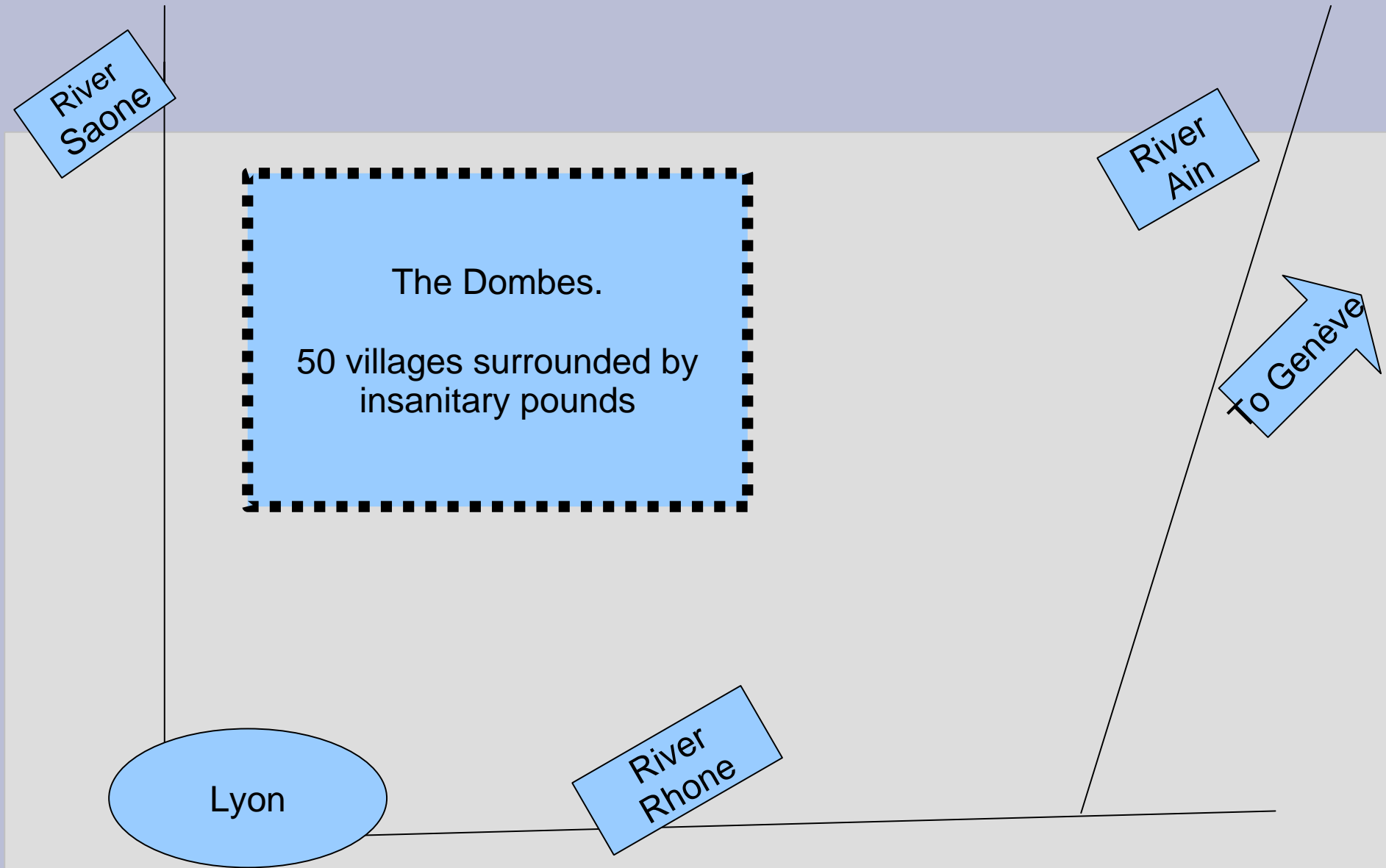


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**The widow, the widower and the orphan.  
Broken marriages and family networks in a  
situation of high mortality.**

Guy Brunet  
LARHRA UMR 5190  
Université Lyon 2 - CNRS

# The province of Dombes



## Demographic sources

- Saint Trivier sur Moignans is a small city  
(about 1400 habitants en 1820)
- Database built from parish registers and Etat civil:  
1720-1870
- About 8700 baptisms/births, 2300 marriages, 9800  
sépultures/deaths
  - Nominative linkage of informations (family  
reconstitution)

## Judicial sources

- Archives of « Justice de Paix » of the *canton* de Saint Trivier sur Moignans (12 villages)
- Délibérations of the family councils in charge of the protection of the orphans

# **1 – A high mortality and short lasting marriages 18<sup>th</sup> and et 19<sup>th</sup> centuries**

## A high mortality

Between 1720 and 1870, the number of deaths is higher than the number of births during 11 decades among 15

Improvement during the 19<sup>th</sup> century

Average annual deficit = 13,1 before 1790  
= 1,7 after 1790

# Short lasting marriages

	1750-1789	1790-1829
Proportion length <5 years	31,0 %	26,9 %
Median duration	10,1 years	11,5 years
Average duration	11,4 years	14,5 years
Mode	4 years	0 year
Secondary mode	1 year	1 year

## Sex of the surviving spouse

Man	52,6%
Woman	47,4%



# Infant and child mortality

	1770-1789	1800-1819
Q0	310	290
4Q1	330	250
5Q5	140	140
S 10	397	458

2 – So many orphans

# To survive means to be an orphan

In such a context, especially during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the most frequent situations for children are:

- either to die very young
- or to run a high risk becoming an orphan

To grow up with both biological parents is rare

# Proportion of children without father according to age

	Marriages 1750-1789	Marriages 1800-1829
5 <sup>th</sup> anniv.	33,3 %	13,3 %
10 <sup>th</sup> anniv.	50,3 %	30,3 %
15 <sup>th</sup> anniv.	63,8 %	42,5 %
20 <sup>th</sup> anniv.	75,5 %	56,8 %
25 <sup>th</sup> anniv.	85,5 %	68,0 %

# Proportion of children without mother according to age

	Marriages 1750-1789	Marriages 1800-1829
5 <sup>th</sup> anniv.	22,3 %	11,5 %
10 <sup>th</sup> anniv.	35,1 %	24,7 %
15 <sup>th</sup> anniv.	46,7 %	36,5 %
20 <sup>th</sup> anniv.	57,6 %	47,6 %
25 <sup>th</sup> anniv.	68,5 %	58,0 %

# Proportion of children without father and mother according to age

	Marriages 1750-1789	Marriages 1800-1829
5 <sup>th</sup> anniv.	7,4 %	3,3 %
10 <sup>th</sup> anniv.	16,5 %	9,6 %
15 <sup>th</sup> anniv.	34,5 %	19,6 %
20 <sup>th</sup> anniv.	42,2 %	33,0 %
25 <sup>th</sup> anniv.	57,2 %	44,8 %

## A check: proportion of orphans among single men and women getting married

Among single men and women getting married for the first time at age 20-24 (1800 - 1829):

55% have lost their father

49% have lost their mother

33% have lost their both parents

(N.B. Only 1 spouse out of 3 was born at St Trivier)

### 3 – Justice and families taking care of orphans (1810-1819)



## The *Code Civil* and the family councils

The *Code Civil* (1804) stipulates that, after father's or mother's death, a family council must be gathered within some weeks

63% are gathered within two weeks

88% within one month

## Differences according to the sex of the deceased parent

The family council sometimes is belatedly gathered after mother's death, and, probably, some fathers do not gather family councils

Among the deliberations to designate the surrogate-guardian, 74% come after father's death, only 26% after mother's death

## Size of the sibships concerned by family councils

Only children under 21 are enumerated (older brothers or sisters can be alive)

1 orphan: 36,9%

2 orphans: 28,5%

3 orphans: 16,6%

4 orphans and more: 18,0%

Average number of orphans: 2,2

# Legal composition of the family council

- 3 members belonging to the father's side
- 3 members belonging to the mother's side
- + the *juge de paix* (local judge): theoretically, he can give the casting vote
- + possibly orphan's brothers who have reached the age of legal majority, and husbands of orphan's sisters who have reached legal majority

# Actual composition of the family councils

Due to adult mortality and mobility, sometimes it is difficult to gather six parents

- 6 parents or close relatives: 65 %
- 5 parents or close relatives: 19 %
- 4 parents or close relatives: 9 %
- less than 4 parents or close relatives: 7 %

12% of the members are not related to the orphans

# Who is the legal guardian ?

- Legally, the surviving parent is the gardian
- Some mothers were dismissed (hasty remarriage without agreement from the family council)
- When both parents are dead, the guardian is always  
a man

- Demanding responsibility, entrusted to experienced men (some adult brothers resign from this heavy care)
- When both parents are dead, most of the times the guardian is an uncle of the orphans, more rarely a cousin or a brother in law
- Grand-parents rarely appear in family councils (most of them are dead)

## Who is the surrogate guardian ?

- A surrogate guardian is elected by the family council to help and to control the decisions of the guardian, even when the orphan's father is the guardian
- The surrogate guardian is always chosen in the other familial lineage



## Conclusion 1/2

- In 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries Dombes, families are facing a permanent crisis
- Family life is deeply altered by the high level of infant and adult mortality
- All the families are concerned with orphanhood (mother or father was an orphan, mother or father dies leaving orphans, sisters or brothers dies leaving orphans ...)

## Conclusion 2/2

- Only a small proportion of children grow up surrounded by biological parents
- Numerous children live with their mother or their father only, or with a stepfather or a stepmother, sometimes with children born from other marriages
- After 1804, orphans are protected by the law (*Code Civil*) and surrounded by family councils and guardians