

JUST RECYCLED? A NEW LIGHT ON ROMAN IMPORTS IN CENTRAL GERMANY ACCORDING TO THE 'CENTRAL LITTLE FARMSTEAD' OF FRIENSTEDT, THURINGIA*

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Abstract

Between 2000 and 2003, near Frienstedt, Kr. Erfurt, in central Germany, a settlement, graves, and what is presumably a cult site from the Roman Iron Age, were partly excavated. The habitation of the settlement started at the end of the first century AD, and ended around 400 AD. From the middle of the third century, ten inhumation graves were set out, surrounding a Bronze Age graveyard in a loose circle with a radius of about 120 metres. Two of these are little chambers of a 'princely couple'. In the centre of the site are several shafts with a presumed ritual function. About 1,500 bronze fragments show a distinct connection with the Roman Empire in the third century, possibly in part due to Germanic soldiers recruited by the Roman army.

Key words: Roman Iron Age, Germany, Frienstedt, Roman import, Haßleben-Leuna group, settlement, cult site, inhumation graves.

Introduction

At least since the publication of Hans-Jürgen Eggers' principal work *Der Römische Import im freien Germanien* (Roman Imports in Free Germania) in 1951 (Eggers 1951), it has been well known that developments in central Germany in the third century AD differed from those in neighbouring regions, especially in the large number of Roman imports, mostly bronze vessels and tools. Even earlier, the inhumation graves of the Haßleben-Leuna group, discovered mainly in the first half of the 20th century, stood out in comparison with the typical cremation burials of the period, and shed more light on the lives and customs of Germanic elites. In 1970, Wolfgang Schlüter suggested a social hierarchy based on an analysis of grave goods (Schlüter 1970). The only grave of his highest rank found in recent times is the male burial at Gommern in the northeast part of the group's territory (Becker 2010). The discovery of this grave, and its block lifting and excavation under laboratory conditions, was a real sensation, and gave a new impetus to reflections on the special role of central Germany. Matthias Becker, Jan Bemann and Berthold Schmidt then suggested

new interpretations for this well-known phenomenon (Becker 2006, Bemann 2000; 2003; Schmidt, Bemann 2008). It could be demonstrated that poorly furnished inhumation graves started early in the third century, and that there were relatively rich cremation graves too, while the rich inhumation burials may have begun as early as the 240s, and continued for the rest of the third century.

Almost all of these reflections were based on grave finds. A completely new picture emerges with the many new settlement finds of Roman imports recovered by the increased use of metal detectors over the last two decades.

The archaeological site at Frienstedt and its dating

The Alacher Feld archaeological site between Frienstedt and Gottstedt (in the suburbs of the city of Erfurt), one of two places with similar masses of metal findings where excavations were carried out,¹ was discovered in the early 1980s by amateur archaeologists working with the Museum of Prehistory and Early History in Weimar, which de facto managed archaeological activity in the three administrative districts of the former

* The archaeological excavations at Frienstedt were carried out by the Thuringian State Office for the Cultural Heritage and Archaeology in Weimar (TLDA), under the excavation leader P.-M. Sukalla. The evaluation and analysis were financed by the Fritz-Thyssen-Stiftung, and were a cooperation project between the TLDA and the Centre for Baltic and Scandinavian Archaeology in Schleswig, Germany.

¹ Very few large-scale excavations have been carried out so far. Frienstedt was the first settlement of this character, another was excavated in 2007 and 2008 near Bretleben, 45 kilometres northeast of Frienstedt, which has similar structures, like shafts and small storage buildings, as Frienstedt. Unpublished research, mentioned with the kind permission of Dr Diethard Walter, Weimar.



Fig. 1. The excavations in spring 2001: in the foreground is a double grave from the Early Bronze Age, part of a little burial ground to which the Roman Iron Age graves refer (photograph by Peter-Michael Sukalla, TLDA).

GDR that now make up the Federal State of Thuringia. The construction of the A71 Highway, planned in the 1990s as part of the Traffic Project German Unity, was going to destroy the site, so excavations started in the autumn of 2000, and continued in several phases until 2003 (Fig. 1) (the last general view publication, not up to date in some points: Schmidt 2008). Approximately 25,000 square metres were excavated, and the surrounding area was surveyed with geophysical methods and metal detectors. The geomagnetic survey and a detailed mapping of about 1,500 metal finds both indicate the same extent of the settlement area, so it can be said that about a third of the settlement has been excavated.

The end of the settlement can be easily determined: 13 out of 164 brooches and brooch fragments are of the Niemberg type (which more than doubles the number known in Thuringia so far), and are therefore indicators that the settlement was still inhabited at the end of the fourth century AD (Fig. 2). There are Niemberg A and B brooches, but none of Niemberg C type: Niemberg A and B brooches clearly represent a chronological order, even if their typological differentiation is not precise, while Niemberg B and C brooches are typologically very different, although their chronological relevance is not well established (Fig. 2) (Bemmann 2001). In the Liebersee cemetery in Saxony (Bemmann 2002), in the heart of the area where Niemberg brooches of

all three types are concentrated, C brooches are under-represented in comparison with the surrounding region. This might be an indication that Niemberg C starts a few years, or even decades, later than B, even if both types were in use together for a time. The fact that Niemberg C is not represented in the Friestedt material, while there are eight B brooches, suggests that settlement at Friestedt ended early in phase D₁ of the Migration Period, perhaps shortly before 400 AD.

There are 53 brooches with a trapezoid foot, called Elbe brooches, and 29 brooches with a fixed catch plate, which might indicate that settlement activity was mainly in phases C₂ and C₃, that is, from the middle of the third to the middle of the fourth century (Fig. 3). But the ceramic spectrum also has types from the first century, in a quantity that cannot be ignored. The low number of brooches from this period is comparable to the number of objects lost in normal settlement conditions. It can thus be concluded that settlement at Friestedt started as early as the first century AD, and existed for at least 300 years, and maybe even as many as 400 years. Moreover, at some point in the third century, significant changes must have occurred that transformed ordinary agricultural and minor trading structures into a craft centre where large quantities of metal were collected from the surrounding region and recycled to make new objects that, with a certain degree

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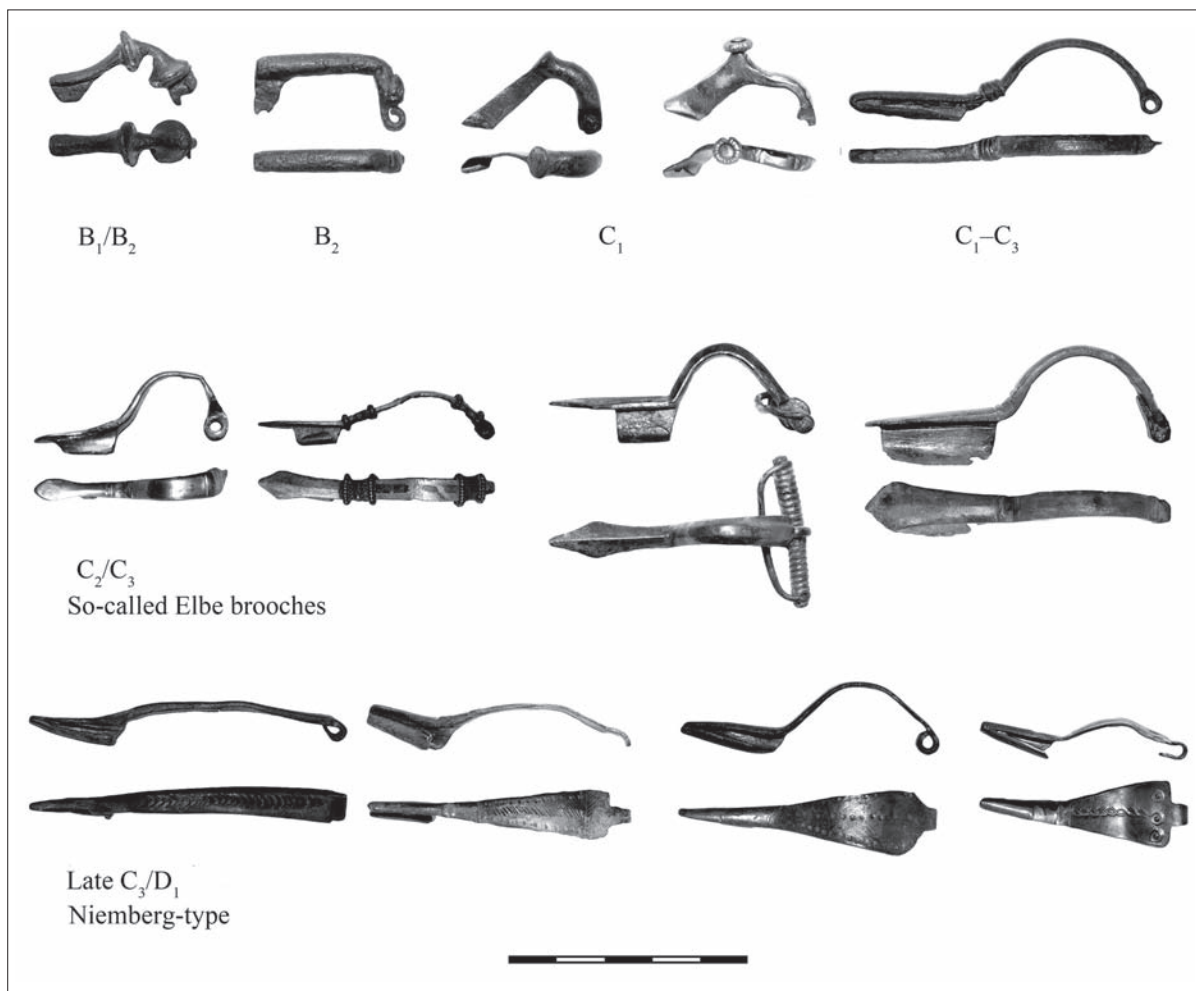


Fig. 2. Examples of the main fibula types from the different Roman Iron Age phases, as represented in the Frienstedt material (photographs by the author).

of probability, were even traded. The topographical situation is ideal for an economic and trading centre: the Via Regia, the main road in the Middle Ages from the Rhineland to the east through the fertile Thuringian basin between the Harz and Thuringian Mountains, passes just a few kilometres to the south, and may have been in use long before the historical period. The same can be assumed for the route via the main pass over the Thuringian Mountains to the north, which might have used a similar route to the new Highway A71, which cuts through the settlement site.

Uncovered structures: small buildings, graves and a presumed cult site

The excavation revealed traces of at least 18 storage buildings, seven pit houses, and eight small huts with a maximum size of 30 square metres (Fig. 4). There is a marked absence of large houses with dwelling and stable sections. However, we know very little about Roman Iron Age houses in central Germany, and there

are indications that building structures in the region are different to what we expect based on excavations in the more northern and eastern parts of the *barbaricum*. So at the unpublished Bretleben site, similar structures as in Frienstedt were uncovered.² The buildings at Frienstedt do not overlap. If we did not know that the settlement had lasted so long, we might interpret them as a planned ring-shaped village around some kind of village green without buildings in the centre. But the place was used by at least ten generations, and even if we take into account the fact that two thirds of the settlement area are still unexcavated, this would mean that an average of just two huts, two pit houses and six storage buildings might have existed simultaneously. This means that the excavated structures do not reflect more than a single small farmstead, which was rebuilt every few decades, moving each time a little further round a specific virtual centre, consisting of a small Bronze Age graveyard (Fig. 5) and a remarkable place completely free of building structures.

² See footnote 2.

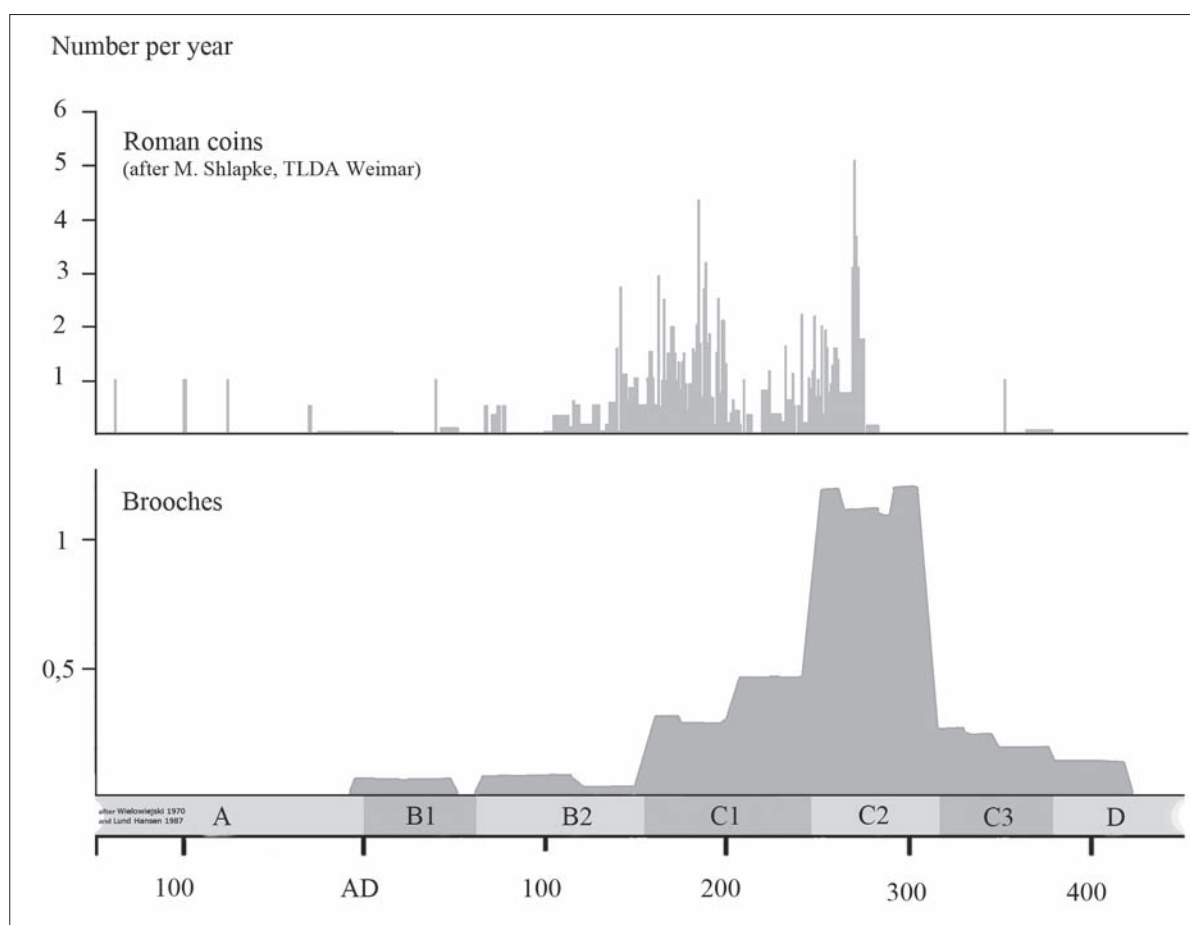


Fig. 3. The chronology of coins and brooches in its actual state of research (graphic compiled by the author).

On this central space near older burials by thousands of years, about 25 shafts had been dug, resembling small but deep wells with diameters of less than one metre (Plate II.1). Most reach the present water table, but none show any sign of reinforcement. On the other hand, there are about 20 typical wells beneath the houses and storage buildings: these have much larger diameters, and, in some cases, are reinforced with wooden fittings. These wells contained typical waste from a rural settlement: ceramic shards, cattle bones, and so on. Cattle skulls, however, were found only in the narrow shafts described above, and, in every one of these shafts, there were up to five times as many cattle bones as in the house wells (Plate II.2). At this point, the possibility of a religious significance has to be considered, including some kind of sacrificial shafts (Colpe 1970).

Within the settlement, 34 inhumation graves were uncovered. Ten are extended burials that are safely dated to the Late Roman Iron Age (Haßleben-Leuna group). Most of these are loosely spread in a ring-shaped area with a radius of about 120 metres around a little graveyard belonging to Early Bronze Age Únětice culture (Fig. 5). Perhaps the Bronze Age graves were inter-

preted as the graves of ancestors, and therefore used as the basis for some tradition of political legitimisation or even identity. According to this hypothesis, a 'holy place' became a religious centre, at least for the immediate area, where rituals and offerings were performed. As we know from similar Medieval sites, such religious gatherings might be used for trading purposes, and to cultivate the image of the local elite, whereby some people used their status to obtain a privileged grave and memorial *ad sanctos* at a frequently visited site.³ Some of the Roman Iron Age graves seem to be oriented radially towards Bronze Age burials, facing this geographical centre, and therefore reinforcing the suggested hypothesis, even though the most fundamental proof cannot be verified, namely that the Bronze Age graves were still visible monuments in this later period.

The unique combination of political, economic and religious aspects in one place fits the well-known and often-used concept of 'central places' (Hedeager 2001; Schuster 2003), even if in this case we have to talk just about something like a 'central little farmstead', and we do not know if this was the court where the buried elite used to live at all.

³ Cf. Schiller 1999.

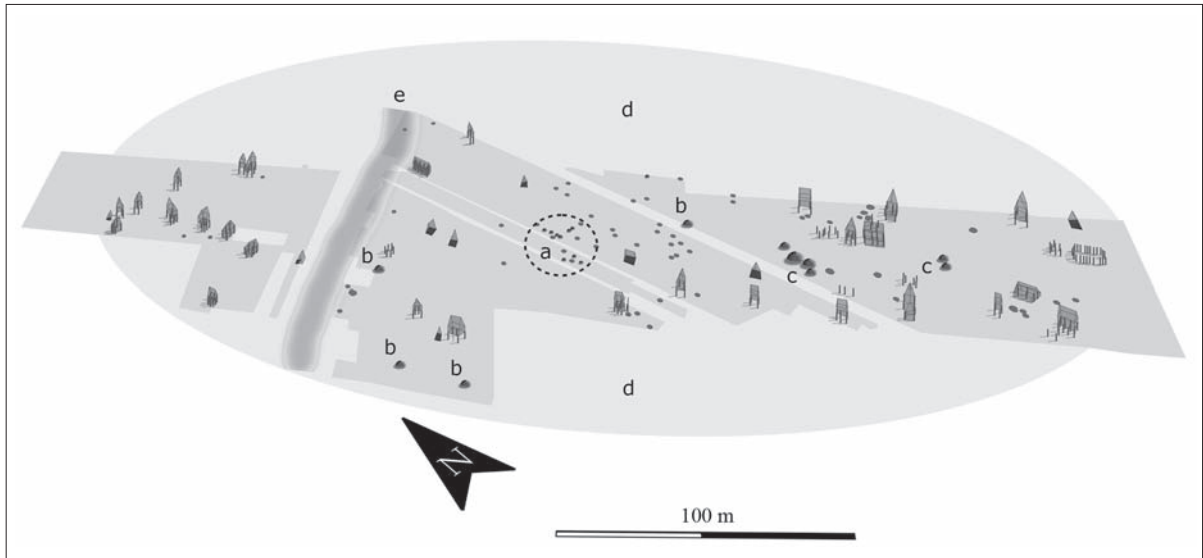


Fig. 4. A reconstruction sketch of the excavated structures, with the possible cult site in the centre (shafts marked as small dots) and Bronze Age (a); Roman Iron Age (b: single graves, c: groups) burials shown symbolically by grave hills. As the ceramics showed, only a few of the buildings existed at the same time. The settlement area as a hole is marked by an oval (d), divided by the small river Nesse (e) (graphic compiled by the author).



Fig. 5. Two Bronze Age burials, possibly a sort of ideational centre for the religious site existing 2,000 years later at the same place, the graveyard and elite settlement, and therefore maybe used for some kind of reassurance in changing times (photograph by Peter-Michael Sukalla, TLDA).

The main graves of a high-status couple

There are few grave goods in the Roman Iron Age burials, the inhumation graves seem poor compared with other sites of the Haßleben-Leuna group. Two of them have an outer space around the grave pit, thus forming a small chamber (for more detail about these two graves, see Schmidt, forthcoming). The smaller of these is a woman's grave, with a bead necklace, a fragment of a bone comb, and a ceramic beaker. The other burial is in the form of a large square pit, with one side consisting of three steps leading down to the bottom of the chamber, where the actual grave was dug (Plate II.4). A wooden structure was not clearly visible, so it was impossible to determine whether some kind of wooden sarcophagus had been lowered into the pit, or whether the deceased had been placed on the ground and covered by planks that rested on the surrounding 'bench'. The young man wore a silver fibula with blue glass shields on his right shoulder, and a gold spiralling ring on the little finger of his left hand. According to the ranking models discussed by Schlüter, and more recently by Bemann, these items indicate a rather high social rank, equal to the eight male graves of Bemann's Group 2b (Bemann 2000). His Group 2a consists of six graves, while there is only one Group 1 male grave, found at Gommern. The form of the chamber with at least three steps clearly follows the same pattern as the grave of the 'princess' at Haßleben, 15 kilometres away, thus confirming the high status of the man at Frienstedt. At the same time, his grave goods are very poor compared with other graves in Group 2: a bone comb, five silver arrowheads, a roughly formed ceramic folded beaker, and a pork bone as the remains of food for the afterlife. A Philippus II aureus had been placed in his mouth as an *obolus* (Plate II.5). There was no Roman vessel, and no spurs or other objects, as are usually found in inhumation graves of this kind. The Roman coin had been minted between the years 244 and 246: it showed signs of punching, and, on the reverse, small traces of having been worn as a medalion. The obverse is very clearly defined, and in almost mint condition. This may indicate that the grave can be dated to shortly after the middle of the third century, prior to the period of what is called the Gallic Empire, with which Walter Schulz and Joachim Werner connected the Haßleben-Leuna group for historical reasons (Schulz, Zahn 1933; Werner 1973). The dating of the Haßleben-Leuna group is still a subject under discussion, but it is obvious that it lasted for at least two generations, possibly even starting in the second quarter of the third century AD, and that the inhumation graves first appear early in the third century (see also Becker 2010, pp.343-350).

Roman objects through the ages

One more special feature of the excavations at Frienstedt is the large quantity of about 1,500 metal objects, mostly Roman bronze fragments, recovered by the use of metal detectors and mapped in their exact find position (Figs. 6; 7). The 191 Roman coins, of which 173 can be identified, possibly indicate the periods when Roman imports arrived in central Germany, and the intensity of the flow. If we ignore the few older coins, the imports first arrived in the second half of the second century, and the flow intensified towards the end of the century (Fig. 3). Surely this has to be connected with the Marcomannic Wars, and with the plundering in the Roman provinces at this time.⁴ Later, it may have been connected with a better knowledge of each other, as well as with economic and political interests on both sides: the barbarian side sought to acquire the products of the higher culture, while the Romans' priority was maintaining peace. The intensity of contacts declined in the first half of the third century, but increased again around the middle of the century, with a distinct peak under the Gallic emperors, that is, Postumus (260–269) and his successors (until 274). For the time of Tetricus (271–274), there is an average of more than five coins per year. However, the influx collapsed abruptly when the legal emperors reconquered the western provinces in 274. This remarkably abrupt end leads us to assume that Roman imports in the last decades before 274 were due to the political situation at the time, and this end should not be connected with the reorganisation of the Roman army by Diocletian ten years later, otherwise we would at least have a few more coins from that decade. These considerations suggest that Roman imports in central Germany during these years, the second half of the third century, should not be interpreted mostly as a result of plundering and Germanic incursions into the Roman Empire, because these would almost certainly have been terminated by Diocletian's reorganisation rather than earlier. In the first decades of the third century, and after the Marcomannic Wars, there may have been a combination of different ways to acquire Roman products, such as trading, individual contacts and travel, political and diplomatic structures, and, of course, military conflicts. The special status of central Germany, at least in the second half of the third century, is well known. In the areas between Thuringia and the Limes, there are almost no Roman imports: even in Mainfranken, the most prolific area in the region in this respect, the number is very low, compared with the central German area (Steidl 2008). The clearly defined area with imports and their very abrupt end suggest political reasons for this phenomenon, which brings us back to the hypothesis suggested by Schulz and Wer-

⁴ Cf. Wolters 2003.



Fig. 6. Most of the bronze finds are sheet fragments of Roman vessels (photograph TLDA).



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Fig. 7. Examples of Roman imports at Friestedt: Roman brooches, strap knobs and fittings, parts of weapon scabbards and a relief figure of Jupiter Dolichenus (photograph TLDA).

ner, who combined the *ingentia Germanorum auxilia* mentioned in *Historia Augusta* (the chapter 'Tyranni Triginta' 6, 2, ed. e.g. Hohl 1927) with the Roman finds in central Germany (Schulz, Zahn 1933; Werner 1973).

Non-material import?

There are several indications that certain aspects of Roman religion and magic were also adopted in the central German *barbaricum*. Although many details of its investigation and interpretation seem problematic, there is one special sanctuary at the famous offering place at Oberdorla, which Behm-Blancke, the excavator of Thuringian archaeology, dates to the third century, and which was one of only two of the many sanctuaries on this site that had obviously been destroyed deliberately (Behm-Blancke 2002, pp.63ff, 210ff). While the others contained simple idols shaped by following the natural structure of the wood, such as forked branches, this particular sanctuary contained a small carved statue that has its nearest parallels in Gallo-Roman contexts. This figure had been broken into pieces, as had the whole 'temple'. Behm-Blancke's interpretation is that a single, probably powerful, person had tried to establish a Gallo-Roman cult at this holy site, but after losing the protection of this person, the 'foreign' goddess was condemned and destroyed. This import was presumably considered foreign and unwelcome.

At Frienstedt, there are some fragments of statues and statuettes, including a high-relief bronze figure depicting Jupiter Dolichenus, whose worship, like other eastern cults, is known to have been particularly popular in military circles. This fragment was surely brought to Frienstedt to be melted down and recycled like most of the other Roman finds (Sukalla 2005). But there is another figure, made of clay and therefore obviously not raw material (Plate II.3). This clay figure is roughly formed: it has no arms, and the front of its stump-like legs is deformed, as though the figure had been stood on its feet while still damp. Several punched holes perforate its body, particularly the head, heart and genitals. Close parallels have been found in Roman contexts, in particular two military forts, in Bavaria and at Mainz (Spindler 1982, Witteyer 2003). What indeed looks like a voodoo doll can be considered in the light of Greek texts from Late Antiquity.⁵ They show that dolls of this kind were not intended to harm or kill a specific person (as might be supposed from well-known clichés), but rather to force the person to love the maker of the doll.

⁵ This interesting puppet and its probable interpretation have to be mentioned here, but since an extensive publication is being prepared, no more details shall be given at the present time.

Was this magic of Late Antiquity also imported, for use by a rejected Germanic lover?

Abbreviation

TLDA – Thuringian State Office for the Cultural Heritage and Archaeology

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TIK PERDIRBINIAI? ROMĖNIŠKASIS IMPORTAS VIDURIO VOKIETIJOJE NAUJU ASPEKTU, REMIANTIS „MAŽA CENTRINE SODYBA“ FRIENSTEDTE (TIURINGIJA)

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Santrauka

Romėniškojo geležies amžiaus archeologijos paminklas „Alacher Feld“, esantis tarp Friestedto ir Gottstedto (Erfurto priemiesčių), yra viena iš keleto vietų Vidurio Vokietijoje, kur per pastaruosius dešimtmečius daugybė žalvarinių radinių, daugiausia romėniškojo importo, buvo rasta metalo ieškikliu. Tačiau Friestedtas – tai tik vienas iš dviejų paminklų, kur buvo vykdomi archeologiniai tyrinėjimai (1–7 pav.: II iliustr.). Remiantis keramika, Friestedto gyvenvietės pradžia sietina su I a. po Kr., o pagal išlikusius metalinius radinius ji gyvavo maždaug iki 400 metų. Kažkuriame III a. tarpsnyje turėjo įvykti svarbūs pokyčiai, pakeitę įprastą žemdirbių gyvenvietę su nedidelės apimties prekyba į amatų centrą, kuriame didžiuliai romėniškos ar net germaniškos produkcijos metalo kiekiai (metalo laužas) buvo surinkti iš aplinkinių regionų, siekiant juos perdirbti į naujus gaminius.

Ilgą gyvavimo laikotarpio įrodymai, lyginant su ne-gausiomis statinių struktūromis, reiškia, kad vidutiniškai tik du antžeminiai pastatai, dvi žeminės ir trys sandėliavimui skirti pastatai buvo naudojami vienu metu. Taigi ši gyvenvietė galėjo būti ne didesnė kaip pavienė mažą sodybą, kuri buvo perstatinėjama kas keli dešimtmečiai, kiekvieną kartą persistumiant šiek tiek arčiau mažo bronzos amžiaus kapinyno ir ypatingos atviros erdvės tyrinėtų struktūrų viduryje aplinkos.

Ši centrinė erdvė yra visiškai be statinių struktūrų, bet čia esama apie 25 šachtų, panašių į mažus gilius šulinius, kurių skersmuo mažesnis nei 1 metras. Nė vienoje iš šachtų nerasta tvirtinimo požymių, priešingai nei 20-yje tipišku šulinių po namais, turėjusių net didesnį skersmenį. Galvijų kaukolių buvo rasta tik siaurosiose šachtose, ir kiekvienoje jų buvo iki penkių kartų daugiau galvijų kaulų nei namų šuliniuose. Šiuo atveju reikėtų svarstyti prielaidą, kad šachtose buvo atliekami aukojimai, kitaip tariant, jos buvo aukojimo duobės. Gali būti, kad bronzos amžiaus kapai, kažkokiū būdu pažymėti ar vis dar aiškiai įžiūrimi, buvo laikomi protėvių kapais ir dėl tam tikros tradicijos, religinių apeigų, politinės legitimacijos ir netgi identiteto pagrindu.

II

PARADE
OF SHIELDS
AT THE
CROSSROADS
OF GERMANIC
CULTURES

Dešimt III amžiaus griautinių kapų buvo laisvai ratu pasklidę aplink 240 m skersmens plotą, kuriame būta bronzos amžiaus kapų. Tačiau III a. kapai įsiterpė tarp bronzos amžiaus kapų. Du iš jų interpretuojami kaip „kunigaikščių poros“ palaidojimai. Jaunas vyras ant dešiniojo peties gulėjo sidabrinė segė su mėlyno stiklo skydeliais, auksinis įvijinis žiedas ant kairiosios rankos ir romėniškas *aureus* burnoje. Kapo duobės kamera, mažesniu lygiu primenanti Hasslebeno „princesės“ kapą, buvusį už 15 km, patvirtina aukštą mirusiojo statusą.

Vienas iš ypatingų kasinėjimų Frieenstedte bruožų yra didžiulis kiekis (apie 1500) metalo radinių, daugiausia buvusių romėniškų bronzinių dirbinių fragmentų. Remiantis 173 identifikuotomis monetomis, ryšių su Romos imperija intensyvumas staigiai išaugo apie III a. vidurį, pasiekdamas viršūnę valdant Galijos imperatoriams, tačiau staigiai ir nutrūko, kai teisėtieji imperatoriai atgavo vakarines provincijas 274 metais. Tai leidžia manyti, kad kelių dešimtmečių iki to laiko romėnų importas turėtų būti interpretuojamas ne kaip plėšimo pasekmė, nes tai greičiausiai būtų nutraukta 10 metų vėliau dėl Diokletiano pertvarkymų. Šie duomenys grąžina mus prie hipotezės, pasiūlytos Schulzo ir Wernerio, kuria „*ingentia Germanorum auxilia*“, paminėta veikale „*Historia Augusta III*“, susiejama su romėniškaisiais radiniais Vidurio Vokietijoje. Vienas ypatingas (spėjamas) importas yra molio figūrėlė, grubiai lipdyta ir perforuota kaip Voodoo [vudu] lėlė, kuri graikiškų vėlyvosios antikos tekstų gali būti interpretuojama kaip vėlyvosios antikos meilės magijos ženklas – dar vienas mentalinis žingsnis link greičiausiai patrauklios svetimšalių kultūros Vidurio Vokietijoje.

Vertė Rasa Banytė-Rowell