THE LBK ENCLOSURE AT HERXHEIM:
THEATRE OF WAR OR RITUAL CENTRE?
REFERENCES FROM OSTEARCHAEOLOGICAL
INVESTIGATIONS

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Abstract

Numerous highly fragmented bones and some partial skeletons characterise the human skeletal remains at the Early Neolithic Linear Pottery Culture (LBK) enclosure of Herxheim, near Landau, Rhineland-Palatinate. The predominant portion of the archaeological and osteological finds had been deposited within apparent ditches, and these finds and the possible circumstances of their deposition led to the preliminary assumption that they were the result of a warlike conflict. First doubts were raised by the very large total number of at least 450 individuals. Moreover, the evidence that those skull injuries caused by strong blows had all completely healed, that intentional manipulation of the skulls, cut-marks and fragmentation of the postcranial skeleton were consistent among the finds, and that the human remains were laid down in depots, all suggest a recurring ritual act rather than a single warlike incident. Therefore, the hypothesis of a wartime event at Herxheim should be dismissed.

Introduction: Linear Pottery Enclosures, Violence and Herxheim

The Early Neolithic Linear Pottery Culture (LBK) of South Central Europe (Gronenborn 1999; Whittle 1996: 157–78) is generally characterised by ceramic bowls with incised linear band decoration; typical longhouse settlements; small-scale farming with cattle, pigs, sheep/goats, dogs, wheat, barley, lentils and flax as domesticates; and additional hunting and gathering. Around 5700 B.C., the first phase began to spread from Hungary to the middle Rhine valley, with settlements established mainly on fertile soils like loess. In the middle or Flomborn phase (ca. 5300–5000 B.C.), the LBK complex extended along the Rhine to the north and south, into areas in the Netherlands as well as southern Poland. In the late phase (5000–4900 B.C.), LBK settlements can be found from the Paris Basin in the west to central Poland and Moldavia in the east. The archaeological record of the later and latest phases of LBK shows signs of greater regionalism (Stehli 1989; Gronenborn 1997; Whittle 1996: 177–8; Zimmermann 1995) as well as evidence of cultural and/or subsistence crises (Gronenborn 1999: 187–90; Orschiedt 2001; Spatz 1998).
Fortifications?

Enclosures with V-shaped ditches are common from the LBK Flomborn phase onward (Andersen 1997: 172–8). Some of them were built with one or several parallel trenches around groups of longhouses. Whether the intended function of the LBK earthworks was mainly fortification, a manifest sign of social identity or rather a circumscription of ritual space is still under debate. Whittle (1996: 174–6) argues against a general defensive purpose, favouring the interpretation of formalised space “to reinforce . . . a sense of purely local identity and independence . . .” (ibid.: 176). In the final LBK period, however, an increase in physical conflicts can be observed, a fact that is sometimes combined with the fortification argument to draw a picture of a period of crises.

Collective Violence

Towards the end of the LBK, aggression was not restricted to hostilities between individuals but extended to systematic violence between groups. Sites like the mass grave at Talheim in SW Germany, containing thirty-four individuals, of whom eighteen were beaten to death from behind and three were severely injured by arrows (Wahl-König 1987; Whittle 1996: 170–71), or the earthwork at Asparn-Schletz in Austria that resembles the remains of a battlefield (Teschler-Nicola et al. 1996, 1997; Windl 1996), illustrate the results of such collective conflicts: extensive violence or even the physical destruction of a whole population. Even though the presence of late Mesolithic populations is well established during LBK times in regions with less fertile soils adjacent to LBK areas (Kind 1997; Louwe Kooijmanns 1993), it is not very likely that conflicts with these hunter-gatherer populations escalated towards the end of the LBK or became archaeologically manifest (c.p. Gronenborn 1999: 185–7; Whittle 1996: 176). Forensic evidence of blow marks from stone adzes (Wahl-König 1987) suggests that these conflicts most likely occurred among individuals, or populations or both within the Early Neolithic groups.

Herxheim

During construction in spring 1996 at an industrial area in Herxheim near Landau, Rhineland-Palatinate, an early Neolithic enclosure from the LBK period was discovered. From 1996 to 1999, a rescue excavation conducted by the State Office for Archaeological Monuments at Speyer investigated the SW third of the structure (Fig. 1). The northern and eastern parts were not examined because they were not then endangered, while the southern section had probably been destroyed earlier during construction of a storehouse: local people reported finds at that time of bones and human skulls. Only in summer