

# Landscapes of Ancestors

By Bettina Arnold

## Early Iron Age Hillforts and Their Mound Cemeteries



THE CELTIC-SPEAKING EARLY IRON AGE PEOPLES WHO LIVED IN SOUTHWEST Germany, eastern France, and Switzerland north of the Alps did not have their own system of writing. For clues about their ways of life and their cultural traditions between about 700 and 400 B.C., we have the remains of their hillfort settlements and burial mounds. The costumes, ornaments, technology, farming practices, architecture, and other material remains of these early Celtic speakers are both familiar and strange. They are among the first European peoples documented to have worn pants, and they were producing high-quality plaid and striped fabric by at least 700 B.C. Yet they had no buttons, but fastened their clothing with fibulae, decorative safety pins made of bronze, iron, and more rarely gold and silver. Their houses were made of timber with shingled or thatched roofs and would have seemed cramped but familiar to us today, with iron farming implements and weapons hanging on the walls and pottery vessels arranged on shelves and on the tables where families sat for meals.

as neck rings, belt plates, daggers, and so forth. It is possible they were intended to represent a lineage, with the founder buried in the central grave. Other features also suggest a form of ancestor worship. The mounds are often arranged as though roads ran through or past some cemeteries, so that visitors literally had to pass through a landscape of a people's ancestors before they came to the settlement of the living.

### THE WORLD OF THE DEAD

At the beginning of the Early Iron Age this population cremated a certain percentage of their dead — that is, the bodies were burned on funeral pyres at very high temperatures. This was followed by a period when both cremation and inhumation — where the body is buried without being burned — were practiced. Occasionally, both forms of burial ritual can be found in the same grave. During the late Hallstatt period (600–400 B.C.) inhumation was the dominant funerary rite. By that time the earthen mounds erected over the cremated or inhumed remains had become very large, with the biggest around 100 meters in diameter and more than 10 meters high. Mounds began with a burial chamber in the very bottom and center, followed by secondary burials placed higher up in the mound fill as time passed and the tumulus was built up with more earth.

It is believed that the individuals buried in a mound were related to those previously buried in the central grave. In some cases carved stelae, or stone markers, placed on the mound summit depicted items found in the central burials, such

### POWER, POLITICS, AND PARTYING

Status, role, and gender differences were important in early Celtic societies, which seem to have become more stratified over time, based on the range of grave goods found in burials and the relative invisibility of low-status individuals in the archaeological record. The torc, or neck ring, typically made of bronze in the early Hallstatt period, was by 600 B.C. occasionally made of gold



A bronze fibula, or clothing fastener, from a grave in Tumulus 18, part of an Early Iron Age burial mound cemetery in southwest Germany

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BOTTOM: Map showing locations of sites mentioned in the text. BELOW RIGHT: Bronze cauldron from a grave in Tumulus 17, a few meters east of Tumulus 17. LEFT: The Magdalenenberg near Villingen in southwest Germany, the largest known burial mound in western Europe. Lance Lundquist, a University of New Mexico Ph.D. candidate, stands in the foreground.



MAP: THOMAS H. HRUBY; PHOTOGRAPHS: BETTINA ARNOLD

or iron. Gold is one of the markers of the high status burials, known in German as *Fürstengräber* (“princely graves”), that appear in burial mounds close to certain hillforts, referred to as *Fürstensitze*, or princely seats. These were usually on or near river systems, and were often heavily fortified.

The late Hallstatt period is also the time of the first evidence of Celtic contact with the Mediterranean world. Around 600 B.C., a group of Phocaean Greeks established a colony on the coast in southern France at what they called Massalia (modern day Marseille). Among the luxury goods they offered for exchange with people to the north and east along the Rhône and Saône River corridors were amphorae filled with wine — this was before grapes had been introduced to France or Germany — and the pottery and metal containers used to mix, serve, and drink

the wine. Contact with the Etruscans, a culture that developed in northern Italy around the same time, has also been documented.

The Celtic-speaking peoples of west central Europe made only two alcoholic beverages of their own: beer (nasty-tasting stuff by today's standards, made without hops but fairly intoxicating) and mead (made with honey, the only sweetener available, and as a result very costly). They used these beverages in the political game of competitive feasting, where chiefs and other aspiring leaders would throw big feasts in an attempt to outdo their rivals. A combination of imported and local equipment was used by Celtic elites to mix, dispense, and drink the beer, mead, and wine that constituted the main feature of these feasts. Metal vessels were especially valuable; most were made of bronze, though gold serving vessels were occasionally used.





TOP LEFT: The Kleinaspergle burial mound. TOP RIGHT: Reconstruction of the costume and some of the grave goods in the burial chamber of the Vix "princess" (seated). She is wearing the imported gold torc found in the grave. The bronze *krater* is a component of the Greek *symposion*, or drinking party. Her anklets are one of the characteristic markers of female costume in the Early Iron Age, as are the symmetrically distributed bracelets on each wrist. BOTTOM LEFT: The Hohenasperg hillfort near Stuttgart, an early Iron Age *Fürstensitz*.

The wine and drinking equipment from the Mediterranean came in handy in elite strategies of political one-upmanship for a number of reasons: (1) wine could be stored, while beer and mead had to be drunk soon after they were ready to be consumed; (2) wine had a higher alcohol content than the local beer or mead; (3) wine tasted better than the local beverages; and (4) the wine came from a distant place with mystical associations that ambitious and enterprising members of the upper social stratum appear to have exploited to their advantage.

#### LANDSCAPES OF THE LIVING AND THE DEAD

Early Iron Age hillfort settlements and burial mounds have been explored for decades, though not always systematically. Several sites have produced evidence in burials or in the settlements themselves for imports from the Mediterranean. Three of these hillforts and their burial landscapes have enabled



archaeologists to fill in some of the gaps in what we know about the Early Iron Age peoples of west central Europe.

The Hohenasperg, a hillfort near the southwest German city of Stuttgart, is surrounded by burial mounds and has produced evidence of imported Greek pottery. Unfortunately, a fortress was built on the summit of the hillfort that serves today as a minimum-security prison. This construction activity destroyed virtually all traces of the Early Iron Age occupation, which is documented by a few sherds and other finds. One of the burial mounds associated with the Early Iron Age occupation of the site is the Kleinaspergle. Its central burial chamber was looted in antiquity, like most of the large mounds associated with this hillfort include the Grafenbühl, whose rich central burial was also looted, the Römerhügel, and possibly the spectacular Hochdorf grave, discovered in the late 1970s and dated to about 550 B.C. This central burial is one of only two unlooted *Fürstengräber* known. But because it is 11 kilometers away from the Hohenasperg and because an associated settlement, including finds of imported Mediterranean pottery, was found during the construction of a museum at the site, some archaeologists, such as the excavator Jörg Biel, now question whether in fact it should be considered one of the Hohenasperg *Fürstengräber*.

Until recently, excavations at the hillfort of Mont Lassois in Burgundy, France, also have focused on its burial monuments rather than on the hillfort itself. The spectacular burial of the so-called Princess of Vix, a high-status woman in her late 30s, was excavated there in 1953 by French archaeologist René Joffroy. This unlooted central burial, dated to around 450 B.C., is important for several reasons. First, the Early Iron Age inhabitants of Mont Lassois chose to bury a woman with objects of social as well as political and ritual power during a time when women in the Greek world could not own property and had no legal rights in a world controlled by men. Second, almost all of the objects in the

ILLUSTRATION: DEBORAH SCHOENHOLZ; PHOTOGRAPHS: BETTINA ARNOLD

grave were imports. One in particular, the spectacular five-and-a-half-foot-tall sheet bronze drinking vessel known as a *krater* — the largest vessel of its kind ever found — was manufactured in a Greek colonial workshop, possibly in Italy. The Vix princess's gold neck ring is also an import of the highest-quality workmanship. A four-wheeled wagon, with the wheels removed and propped against one wall of the chamber, was also placed in the grave.

Apart from the physical characteristics of the skeleton, which mark it as female, the kind, number, and distribution of personal ornaments also are characteristic of female costume during this period. She was buried wearing bronze anklets, a costume element that is not found in male graves, and she wears bracelets on both wrists, whereas men typically wore a single bracelet. The absence of any weapons, especially the dagger commonly found in male elite burials, is another clue that this is a female burial. Even the placement of the wagon wheels against one wall of the chamber is a feature found mainly in female graves; men's wagons were placed in the chamber with the wheels still attached. As I suggested in "The Deposed Princess of Vix" (see For Further Reading on page 13), the woman in this grave appears to have been accorded a position in society that was reserved for a very small number of people during this time. Ongoing excavations by French and German archaeologists at the hillfort itself and in its vicinity continue to investigate the important role of this settlement and its inhabitants in the region.

#### AN IRON AGE STRONGHOLD ON THE DANUBE

The Heuneburg on the upper Danube River in the modern German state of Baden-Württemberg is one of the most extensively excavated and intensively studied Early Iron Age hillfort settlements in Europe. At 3.3 hectares (roughly 8 acres), it is one of the smaller *Fürstensitze*, but two characteristics are especially significant. One distinctive feature is the whitewashed wall of sun-dried mudbrick, a Mediterranean construction technique that is to date unique in this climate zone, where rainfall is regular and copious. Another is the imported ceramics found during more than a quarter century of excavations on the plateau and its associated outer settlement. The burial monuments at the site also represent an important source of information about the way of life of the people who inhabited this promontory above the Danube River and controlled its hinterland.

The site is surrounded by burial mounds, roughly 130 of which survive today. Presumably, there were once several hundred of these burial monuments, but looting and other destruc-



Aerial view of the Heuneburg hillfort with the Danube River to the left

tive activities, like plowing and the removal of mound soil to local fields in boggy areas, have taken their toll. There are two main groups of mounds, the Giessübel-Talhau mounds immediately next to the hillfort and the Hohmichele group, 2.5 kilometers to the west. The mounds closest to the hillfort were first explored in the late 19th century and yielded many burials containing gold ornaments and metal drinking vessels, among other grave goods. In the 1930s, the Hohmichele burial mound, second in size

only to the Magdalenberg, was partially excavated, but World War II interrupted the investigations, and subsequently the mound was restored to its original height of 13.5 meters. Tumulus 4 in the mound group near the hillfort was partly excavated in the 1950s and '60s, and the remains of Tumulus 2 and Tumulus 1 in the same mound group were explored in the 1970s and '80s.

#### THE LANDSCAPE OF ANCESTORS PROJECT

These investigations raised numerous questions. One involved the relationship between the mounds in the so-called Giessübel-Talhau group and those surrounding the Hohmichele. Until recently, it was thought that the Hohmichele mound group had been abandoned around 540 B.C., about the same time that a fire destroyed the mudbrick wall settlement on the hillfort and its outer settlement. All the burials found in the excavated portion of the Hohmichele dated between 600 and 540 B.C., and the central burial chamber was thought to have contained the founder of the Heuneburg hillfort.

Testing this assumption was one of the goals of the Landscape of Ancestors project, initiated in 1997. This collaborative, long-term project associated with the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and the State Monuments Office in Tübingen is concerned with understanding the life history of the Heuneburg site and its mortuary monuments. Excavations conducted between 1999 and 2002 in two mounds in the Hohmichele mound group, Tumulus 17 and Tumulus 18, indicate that in fact this mound group continued to be used until at least 450 B.C., and possibly into the early La Tène period.

#### OF WARRIORS AND WOMEN

Situated only a few meters apart, the two mounds were roughly similar in size, each around 20 meters in diameter. Tumulus 17 was preserved to a height of almost 3 meters while Tumulus 18 had been used to amend local agricultural land and was only 1.6 meters high. In spite of these superficial similarities, the mounds are different in a number of interesting ways. Tumulus 17 contained several burials with weapons, including the

LANDESKMALAMT BADEN-WÜRTTEMBERG, AUSSENSTELLE TÜBINGEN





LEFT: View of the Heuneburg hillfort from the Danube Plain. The reconstructed section of the whitewashed mud brick wall, part of the Heuneburg Open Air Museum, can be seen in the southeast corner of the promontory. RIGHT: Hohmichele burial mound



partially looted central burial chamber, which yielded the fragments of at least two iron spears and fragments of an iron knife or sword. In addition, two warrior burials, Grave 1 and Grave 3, were uncovered higher in the mound. Grave 1 contained a bronze cauldron, two iron-tipped spears, an iron belt hook, an iron short sword with an unusual curved handle made of horn, and a leather helmet with an iron helmet plume clamp. Grave 3 held an iron dagger, three bronze fibulae, a bronze upper arm ring, two iron spear points, and a small ceramic drinking cup. The only female burial was found in the disturbed central chamber, and although it contained a leather belt decorated with bronze staples and a bronze belt plate, it was otherwise not especially well outfitted. The central burial chamber was 5 by 5 meters, one of the largest known for this time period, and both of the later warrior burials were oriented like the central chamber, with the heads to the south and the sides of the chamber (Grave 1) and coffin (Grave 3) oriented to the cardinal directions. The radiocarbon dates and the grave goods indicate a use life of about 150 years for the mound, from about 600–450 B.C.

Tumulus 18 also seems to have been in use for about 150 years, but whereas only five burials were recovered from Tumulus 17, this mound contained at least 18 burials. On the basis of grave goods, more than half of these burials appear to have been female. Two of these probable female burials contained bronze neck rings, items not found in any of the Tumulus 17 graves. One of these neck ring graves appears to have been a child's, based on the size of the burial chamber and of the bronze bracelets also found in the grave. Most of the women's graves contained bronze decorated belts, all but one contained symmetrically distributed bronze bracelets (the exception contained the only bronze anklets found in either mound and no bracelets at all), and several contained ceramic vessels.

The burials were oriented in concentric circles around the central burial area, which contained a cremation burial apparently not placed in a chamber but consisting of a funeral pyre

burned on the spot, with the charcoal pyre remains subsequently distributed in a kind of carpet over a large area of the ancient surface. At least seven elaborately decorated ceramic vessels were placed close together in the center of the burial area.

#### AN ENIGMA WRAPPED IN A CONUNDRUM

After only three seasons of excavation in the Hohmichele mound group, the first fieldwork done here since the 1930s, the sample of systematically excavated burials available for study in the Heuneburg region has more than doubled. One of the main lessons appears to be that we must be careful in constructing scenarios based on burial practices during the Early Iron Age.

The extreme range of grave goods suggests that we cannot assume that mounds necessarily contain only the bodies of wealthy individuals. The variable treatment of the dead is also noteworthy. The fact that some were cremated (one burial in Tumulus 17, at least two in Tumulus 18) and some inhumed, sometimes both treatments in the same grave (as in the case of the biritual multiple central burial in Tumulus 17) is important because it suggests that the choice of treatment may have marked something other than a chronological shift in belief systems. The possibility that individuals buried in these mounds may have been from outside the region (both Graves 1 and 3 in Tumulus 17 contain grave goods that are not local but that are also not imports from the Mediterranean), the long use-life of the mounds, in spite of their relatively small size, and the variable orientation of burials in mounds even in the same mound group are significant discoveries. Clearly this was a society in flux. The burial record reflects some of the intense competition between social groups during the Early Iron Age.

The need for additional excavation and survey is clear. Even sites and regions as intensively studied as the Heuneburg are far from being completely understood, and given the speed with which the archaeological record is vanishing, the situation is urgent. Collaborative research

LEFT: BETTINA ARNOLD; RIGHT: MATTHEW L. MURRAY



involving excavation, survey, and analysis of skeletal and cultural material, like the Landscape of Ancestors project and the fieldwork being conducted at Mont Lassois and the Heuneburg by French and German archaeologists, can help answer some of these questions. However, the Early Iron Age Celts of west central Europe will always remain remote and strange to us no matter how familiar their material culture may appear. That is part of the appeal of studying this enigmatic but culturally rich people and the landscapes of ancestors" they have left us as a mark of their passing.

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FAR RIGHT PHOTOGRAPHS: BETTINA ARNOLD; CENTER: MATTHEW L. MURRAY; FAR LEFT: HARALD WILLIGES

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FAR LEFT: Pottery fragment from a vessel placed in the central burial of Tumulus 18. The elaborate stamped, incised graphite and red slip decoration marks this as a vessel produced for burial. LEFT: Tumulus 17 Grave 1, probably a male individual. RIGHT: Tumulus 18 Grave 13, probably a female child. Closeup of bronze neck ring and more than 160 glass and jet beads.



#### FOR FURTHER READING

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