Landscapes of Ancestors

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 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 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 mound 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 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.

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 mound was built up with more earth.

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The wine and drinking equipment from the Mediterranean came in handy in elite strategies of political one-upmanship. Second, almost all of the objects in the grave were imports from the Mediterranean. Three early Iron Age hillfort settlements and burial mounds have been explored for decades, though not always systematically.

The drinking equipment from the Mediterranean was preserved when the central burial was also looted, the Röntgen Biel, whose rich gold neck ring is also an import of the highest-quality craftsmanship. 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 5.3 hectares (roughly 8 acres), it is one of the smaller Fürstenburgen, but two characteristics are especially significant. One distinctive feature is the whitewashed wall of sun-dried mudbrick, a Mediterranean construction technique that is 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 in number, of which there were once several hundred of these burial monuments, but looting and other destructive activities, like plowing and the removal of mound soil to local fields, have taken their toll. There are some two main groups of mounds, the Giessentitz 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 Magdalenenberg, 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 Giessentitz-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 mudwall 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 burial 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. The Tumulus 17 contained several burials with weapons, including

The wine and drinking equipment from the Mediterranean came in handy in elite strategies of political one-upmanship. Second, almost all of the objects in the grave were imports. One in particular, the spectacular five-and-a-half-foot-tall sheet bronze drinking vessel known as a krater was 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 craftsmanship. A four-wheeled wagon, with the wheels removed and propped against one wall of the chamber, was also placed in the grave.

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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 bivertical 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 variability in treatment sometimes both treatments in the same grave (as in the case of the bivertical 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 variability in treatment sometimes both treatments in the same grave (as in the case of the bivertical 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 two of these probable female burials contained bronze neck rings, items not found in any of the Tumulus 17 graves. One of these neck rings 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 ceramic vessels. 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 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 Sabine and Hubert Hagmann, Harald and Jim Johnson, Prof. Hartmann Reim of the Ludwig-Maximilian University, Berlin, and the National Geographic Society and is also supported by the State Monuments Office in Tübingen. Funds from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Graduate School partially supported the first field season. Special thanks are due to excavation director Matthew L. Murray, the excavation teams of all three field seasons, especially Seth Schneider, Deann Muller, Lancer Lundquist, and Jim Johnson, Prof. Hartmann Reim of the LDA Tübingen, Hans-Joachim Teufel, Sabine and Hubert Hagmann, Harald and Hilke Williges, and Dr. Jürgen Selbher. The author also thanks Thomas H. Hanfky for his patience, forbearance, and computer skills extraordinary, including his work on the project Web site.

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In English


In German

