

Diskussionen

The grave's a not-so-private place: Elite multiple burials in Early Iron Age West-Central Europe

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Revisiting Multiple Burials

The German term *Mehrfachbestattung* is defined as the simultaneous deposition of at least two individuals within the same mortuary feature (coffin, burial pit, urn, chamber etc.). A distinction can be made between this burial practice in continental Iron Age Europe and the communal burials that characterised earlier time periods, notably the megalithic tombs of Neolithic societies. An emphasis on group rather than individual identity is the hallmark of communal disposal in the earlier time period, whereas the Iron Age multiple burials are traditionally interpreted as communicating the aggrandisement of at least one of the individuals within the burial context, usually referred to as the primary interment (KRAUSSE 2006; KURZ 1997; KURZ / SCHIEK 2002; OLIVIER 2000). Some Iron Age burials containing more than one individual are also what is known as bi-ritual, meaning that both cremation and inhumation rites are represented in the mortuary context (OLIVIER 2000; REBAY-SALISBURY 2012); in some cases this might have been motivated by the desire to preserve the remains of one of the individuals (cremation) for a later multiple burial once the second individual (inhumation) deceased.

In his 1984 survey of multiple burials in prehistoric Europe, Claus Oeftiger noted that burials containing more than one individual are more commonly found in richly outfitted chamber graves (OEFTIGER 1984). The sample of multiple burials has expanded significantly in the years since Oeftiger's study and it may be time to revisit this mortuary category in light of new evidence from Early Iron Age contexts in southwest Germany that suggests that the connection between elite status and multiple burials is in need of critical deconstruction. Rather than presenting a general re-interpretation of the phenomenon, the aim of this brief discussion is to draw attention to some of the shortcomings of traditional interpretations while highlighting the multiplicity of possible scenarios (OLIVIER 2000, 224).

The complex factors involved in determining which death was the one that preceded and / or precipitated that of the other individuals in a multiple burial was identified by OEFTIGER (1984) as one of the main challenges of interpreting this burial category – simultaneous death due to disease, accident or violence can rarely be ruled out and the ethnographic record clearly indicates that age and gender are not reliable indicators of primacy. Children and women, for example, are not necessarily secondary depositions in ethnographic accounts of mortuary rituals involving multiple individuals, and the social structure and belief systems of a society play a significant part in determining which member of a particular social or economic unit was interred in the primary category and whether other members were, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, disposed of subsequently (WEISS-KREJCI 2011, 79–80).

Not being able to determine the simultaneity of disposal when more than one individual is present in a burial is a major problem, since chamber graves in the West Hallstatt area of Early Iron Age Europe are made of perishable material, often leaving only post holes or ditches to indicate their locations (KURZ 1997). This in turn means that it is not always possible to say definitively that they were not opened more than once in order for later interments to take place. There is in

fact some evidence to suggest that a form of ritually motivated post-depositional disturbance of central burials was practiced in some areas (BAITINGER 1992; DRIEHAUS 1978; KÜMMEL 2009), which complicates the assumption that all the individuals in a multiple burial were necessarily deposited at the same time. Moreover, the integrity of the burial context as well as the determination of gender and age makes this a difficult burial category to analyse statistically, especially for contexts excavated before systematic techniques were introduced and where in some cases the skeletal remains were poorly preserved or have been lost.

Multiple burials in Early Iron Age Southwest Germany: From Magdalenenberg to the Heuneburg

Andrea Bräuning has recently noted that in some regions of the West Hallstatt area, including southwest Germany, multiple burials occur mainly in the large burial mounds surrounding the Heuneburg and the Hohenasperg as well as the Magdalenenberg in the Black Forest (BRÄUNING 2009, 139). However, this apparent pattern may be the result of a bias favouring research-driven systematic investigation of larger mounds rather than an actual qualitative distinction between high status burial monuments and those belonging to the secondary status tier. Thus at least two cemeteries in the Taubertal (Impfingen and Werbach, both Main-Tauber-Kreis) also contain multiple burials that do not fall into the megamound paramount elite category (BAITINGER 1999, 120–121), and the same can be observed at the necropolis of Schirndorf in Bavaria (HUGHES 1995).

Even in large tumuli, the central chamber grave is not necessarily the only one containing more than one individual. This latter point is illustrated by the Magdalenenberg, a megamound on the eastern edge of the Black Forest that contained numerous multiple burials including several bi-ritual interments (*fig. 1*) (SPINDLER 1971; 1973; 1999). Most of these graves involved individuals with relatively modest assemblages. Combinations included adult male / adult female (Grave 100), adult male / subadult (Graves 106, 114 and 93), adult female / subadult (Grave 56); adult male / unknown adult (Grave 113), two adults / subadult (Grave 75) (BRÄUNING 2009, 140; OLIVIER 2000, *fig. 4*). Particularly interesting was the placement of a young adult female (Grave 79) just above and directly aligned with the coffin-like chamber of a significantly older and more elaborately outfitted female (Grave 78); neither of these graves qualifies as a paramount elite and their simultaneity appears to be confirmed by the archaeological evidence (SPINDLER 1973, 47–55) (*fig. 2*).

Similarly, in the Heuneburg micro-region recent excavations have indicated that multiple burials may not in fact be confined to the uppermost echelons of society (for an overview on the burial evidence in the environment of the Heuneburg see ARNOLD 2010; KRAUSSE ET AL. 2016, 113–138; KURZ / SCHIEK 2002). These burials are described briefly below, followed by an attempt at a re-assessment of this mortuary category in light of new evidence.

Gießübel-Talhau Tumulus 1 Central Chamber

One of four 50 m diameter mounds close to the Heuneburg hillfort, the central chamber of Gießübel-Talhau Tumulus 1 was reported as containing three inhumations, one female (30 years of age), one male (over 50 years of age), one female (unspecified age at death). Excavated by Eduard Paulus the Younger in 1877, this burial context was clearly disturbed by at least one looting episode and the original number of individuals cannot be definitively determined. Kurz and Schiek suggest that there may only have been two individuals in this chamber (KURZ / SCHIEK 2002, 96),

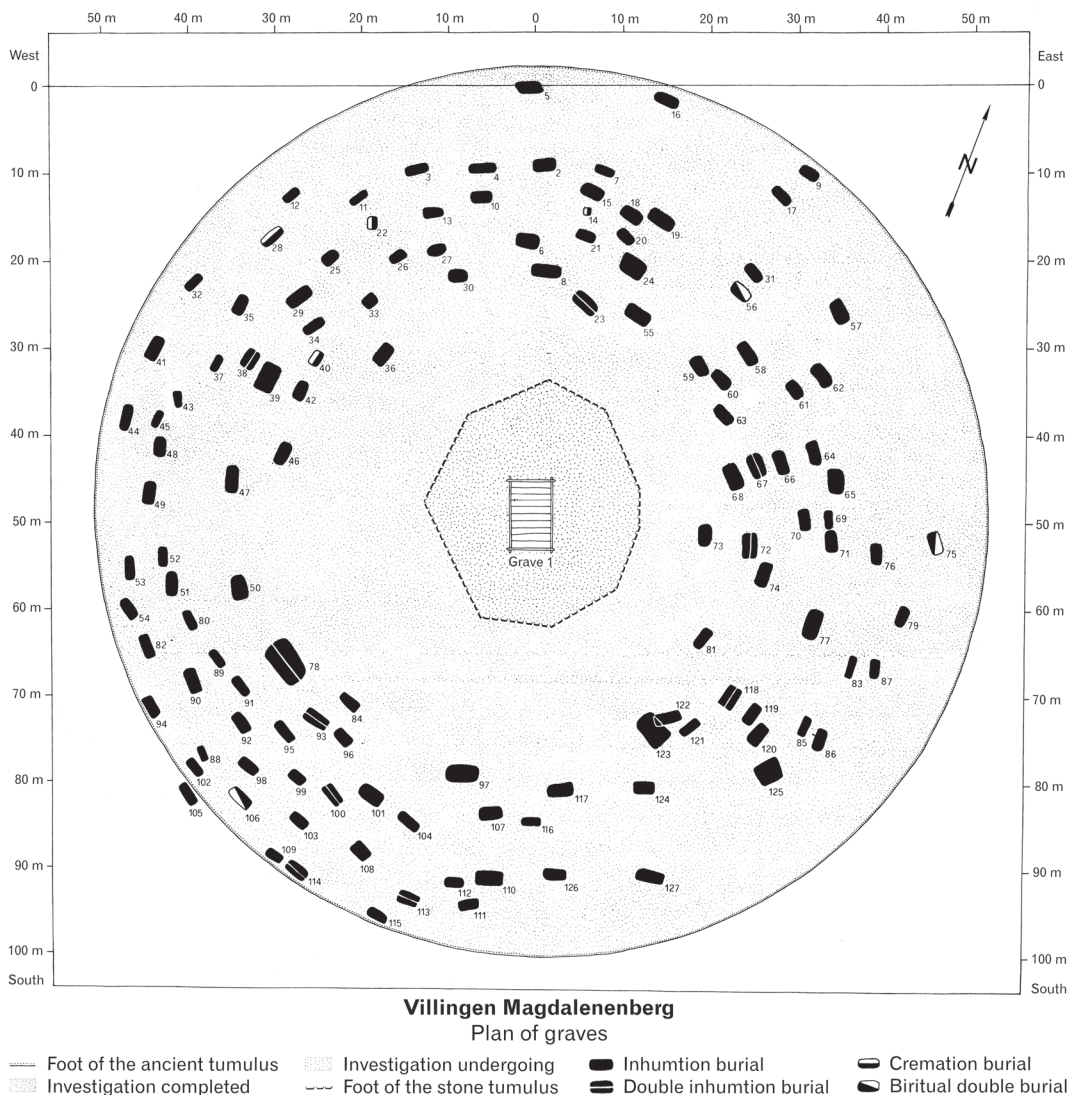


Fig. 1. Magdalenenberg (Villingen-Schwenningen, Baden-Württemberg). Plan of the burials in the Early Iron Age megamound indicating positions of multiple burials.

and a recent re-analysis of the remaining skeletal elements by Joachim Wahl confirmed the presence of two bodies, one a robust older male and one a possible adult female (WAHL 2002, 162). This burial illustrates another problem with the multiple burial category – can proximity of grave goods to the body be relied on as an indicator of association? A group of three iron spear heads, now lost, and a bronze leaf-shaped spear head decorated with La Tène-like compass designs were found to the left of the 30-year-old female body in this burial, while the male individual apparently was associated with a dagger (now lost), a ceramic vessel (also lost) and a bronze object of indeterminate function. The third body (if present) appears to have been buried with numerous amber beads and other ornaments as well as textiles decorated with at least 100 gold and silver staples of different sizes that had once been attached to the fabric in a pattern of some sort (fig. 3) (KURZ / SCHIEK 2002, 96).

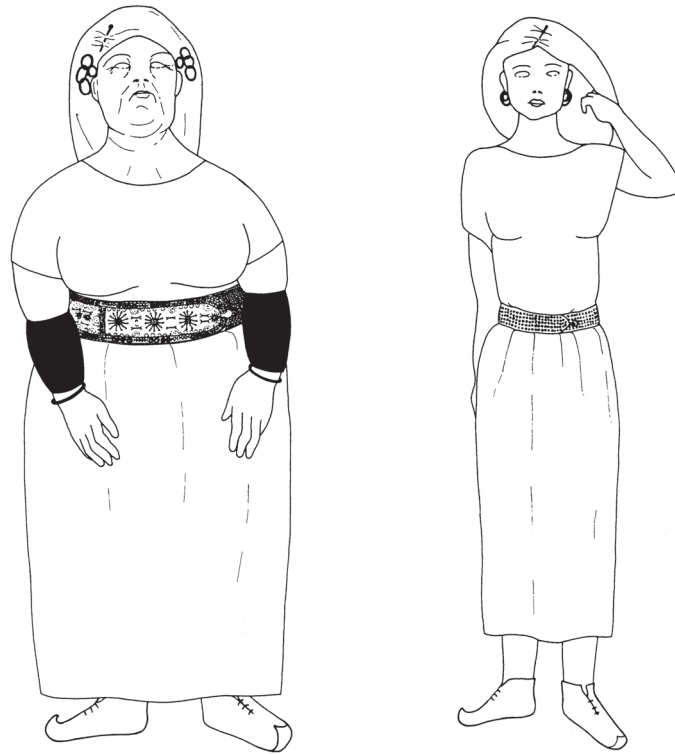


Fig. 2. Magdalenenberg. Graves 78 and 79. Reconstruction of female burials, which were apparently interred simultaneously.

Gießübel-Talhau Tumulus 2 Central Chamber

This mound was also unsystematically explored by Paulus in 1877, and according to his report the two inhumations, sex and age unspecified, uncovered in the central chamber were very poorly preserved, and none of the grave goods he describes have survived. Based on the limited information available, the chamber, which had been looted, contained fragments of what Paulus described as iron weapons as well as the remains of several small bronze objects (KURZ / SCHIEK 2002, 110), so presumably at least one of the individuals was male.

Hohmichele Central Chamber

Two individuals were supposedly originally interred in the looted central chamber of the Hohmichele, the largest of the mounds in the Speckhau group about 3.5 km west of the Heuneburg hillfort (*fig. 4*). Although the mound had been unsystematically investigated in the 19th century, most of what we know about it is the result of excavations conducted by Gustav Riek between March 1937 and October 1938 (RIEK 1962, 7–9; see also KRAUSSE ET AL. 2016, 21–22). The central chamber was looted initially in prehistory based on the robber's trench observed by Riek tunneling into the side of the mound and entering the chamber at the level of the ancient surface (RIEK 1962, 42–43). The looters had apparently removed personal ornament at a time not long after deposition of the bodies, based on the discovery of 736 large and small green glass beads and fragments of string in the chamber as well as outside it, in the latter case distributed in a linear

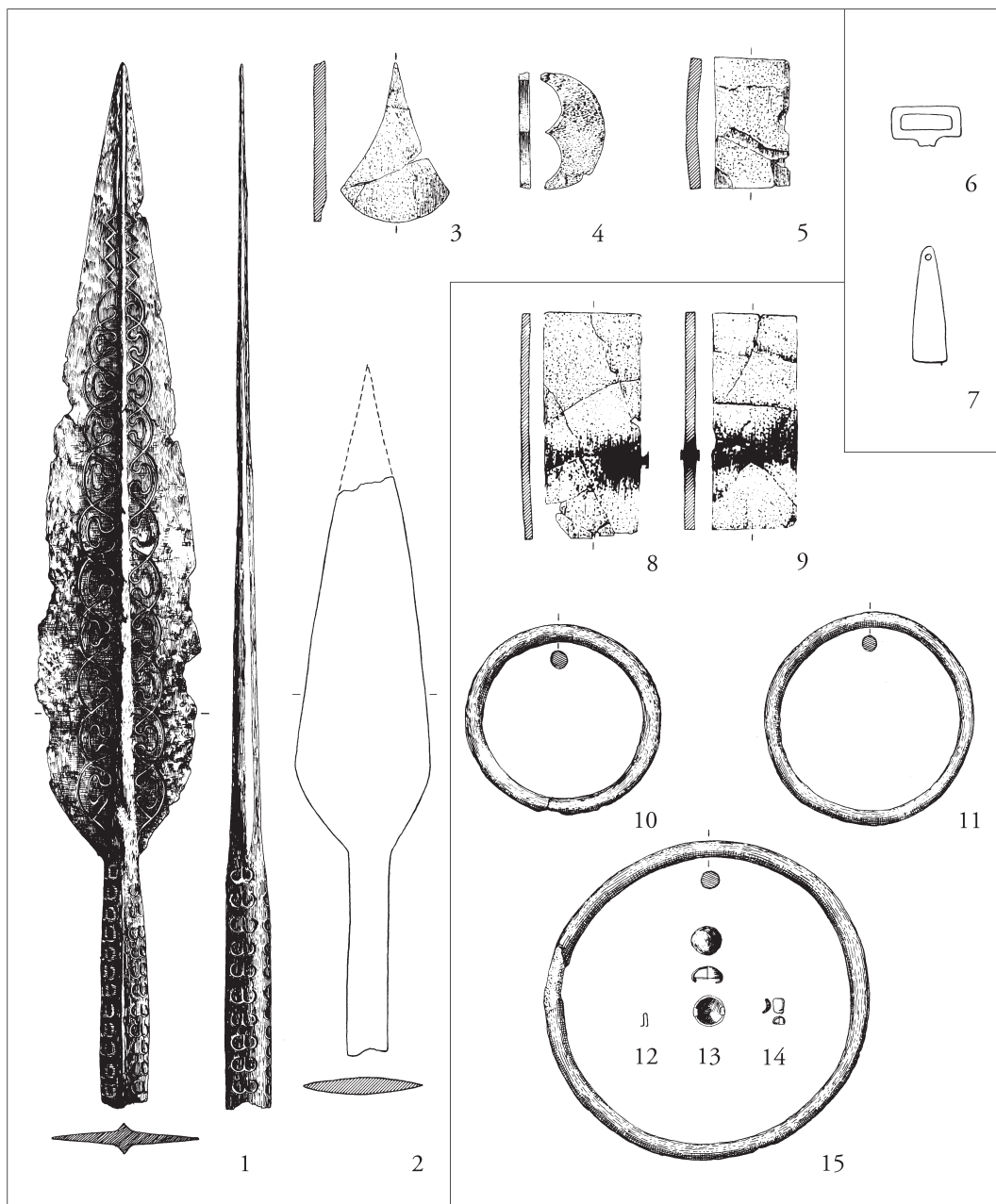


Fig. 3. Heuneburg (Herbertingen, Lkr. Sigmaringen, Baden-Württemberg). Grave goods from the central chamber of Gießübel-Talhau tumulus 1. 2 Iron; 3–5.8.9 amber; 12–14 gold; all others bronze. Scale 1 : 2.

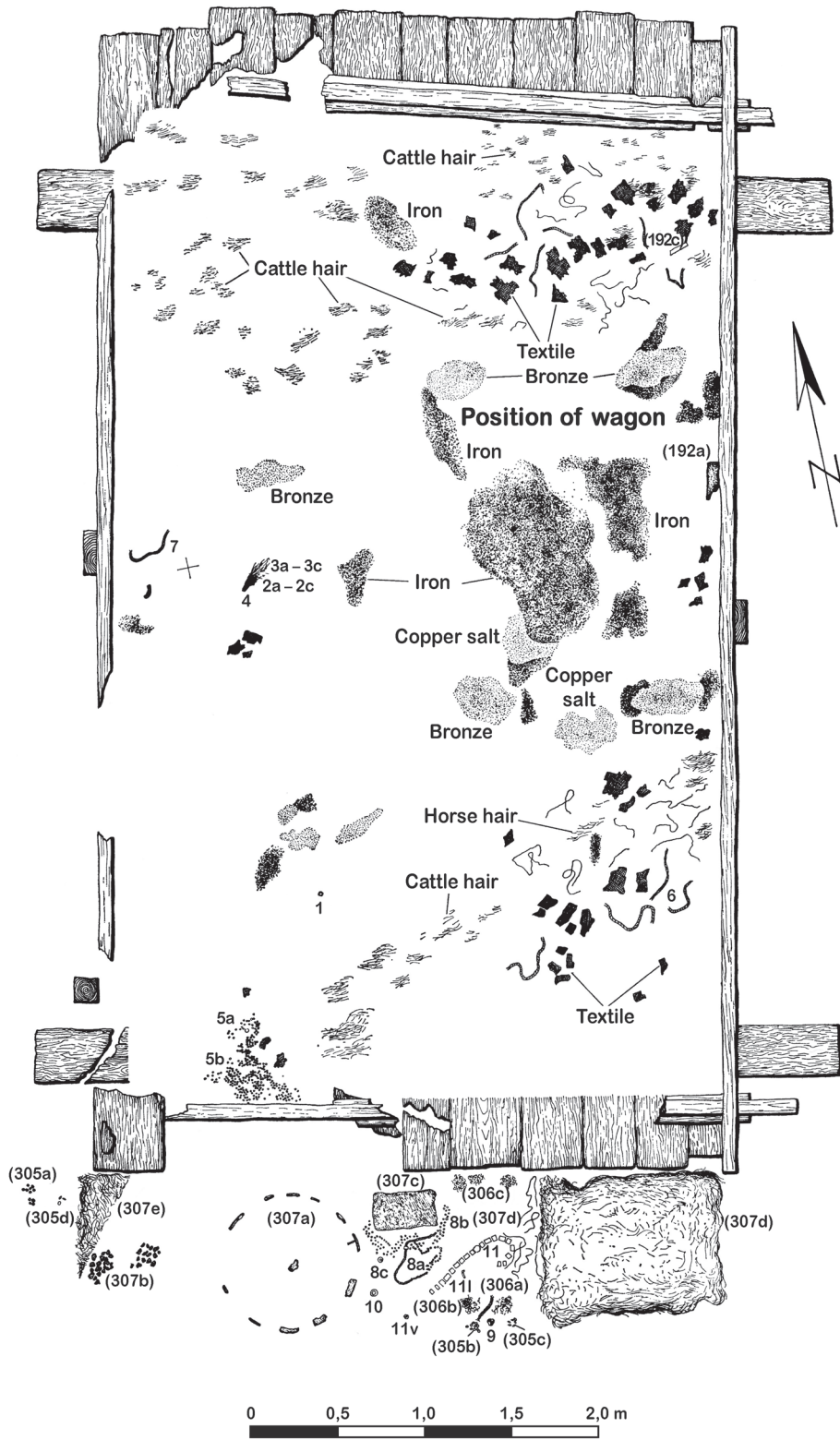


Fig. 4. Heuneburg. The looted central chamber of the Hohmichele tumulus with grave goods.

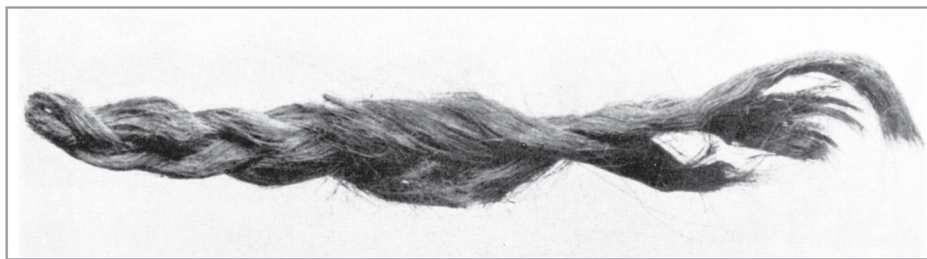


Fig. 5. Heuneburg. Braid of human hair from Hohmichele central chamber.

pattern while the looters were crawling out of the tunnel. The presence of such a large number of glass beads strongly suggests that at least one of the individuals interred in the central chamber was female, based on mortuary patterns from this region (ARNOLD 2016).

The extremely acidic soil conditions resulted in differential preservation of organic material such that bone was virtually gone while animal and human hair and metal fragments in contact with organic material, including wood, leather and textiles, were preserved well enough so that the species of animal could be identified in some cases. The grave had originally contained a presumably four-wheeled wagon that had been placed on one or more cow hides against the eastern chamber wall, based on the large quantities of iron, animal hair and skin fragments recovered. A tablet-woven belt decorated with gold foil threads and a tassel was found in a fragmentary state in the south-eastern corner of the chamber. Another belt made of bronze plaquettes and a central bronze boss that had presumably originally been attached to some sort of organic backing was found in front of the chamber wall near the looter's trench, suggesting the presence of another person, but whether male or female is unclear. The terminal portion of a braid of human hair that was tapered at one end and cut at the other was found in the same location near a miniature ceramic vessel (*fig. 5*) (RIEK 1962, 53–54). Kuz'mina cites a mortuary ritual by Iranian-speaking peoples involving the placement of a cut plait of hair by a widow, a practice found until recently among Kurds and in Ossetia (KUZ'MINA 2007, 194; see also KALOEV 1971). This appears to be an example of a substitution – hair for the whole person, a possibility Riek had already noted in his 1962 publication (RIEK 1962, 130) – but whether the braid belonged to one of the individuals interred in the chamber or one of the mourners cannot be determined.

Hohmichele Grave 6

This secondary burial in a chamber contained two inhumations, one likely male, one likely female. Riek interprets this burial context as a probable example of what he terms *Witwenfolge* (widow sacrifice; RIEK 1962, 119), but notes that the male individual could also have been the servant or an armed retainer of the high status female individual whose body was initially depicted in reconstructions as lying beneath the box of the four-wheeled wagon also found in this burial. The most recent illustration of this grave context shows the female lying on the wagon box with the male individual in a visually subordinate position, a reflection more of changing attitudes toward gender configurations in prehistoric research than of actual new data (*fig. 6*). Riek does make the distinction between social ties based on marriage and those based on other types of social contracts, including economic ties to a particular household or the bonds between two individuals serving in the same para-military unit; he sees the latter as a likely explanation for multiple burials containing two adult males, for example (*ibid.* 120).

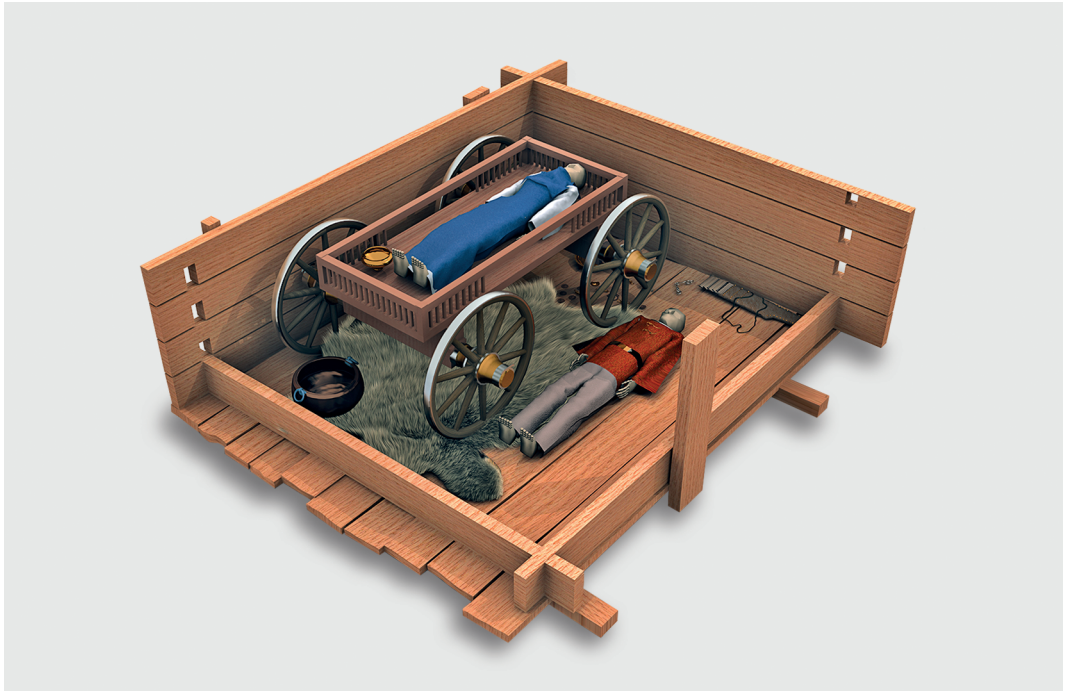


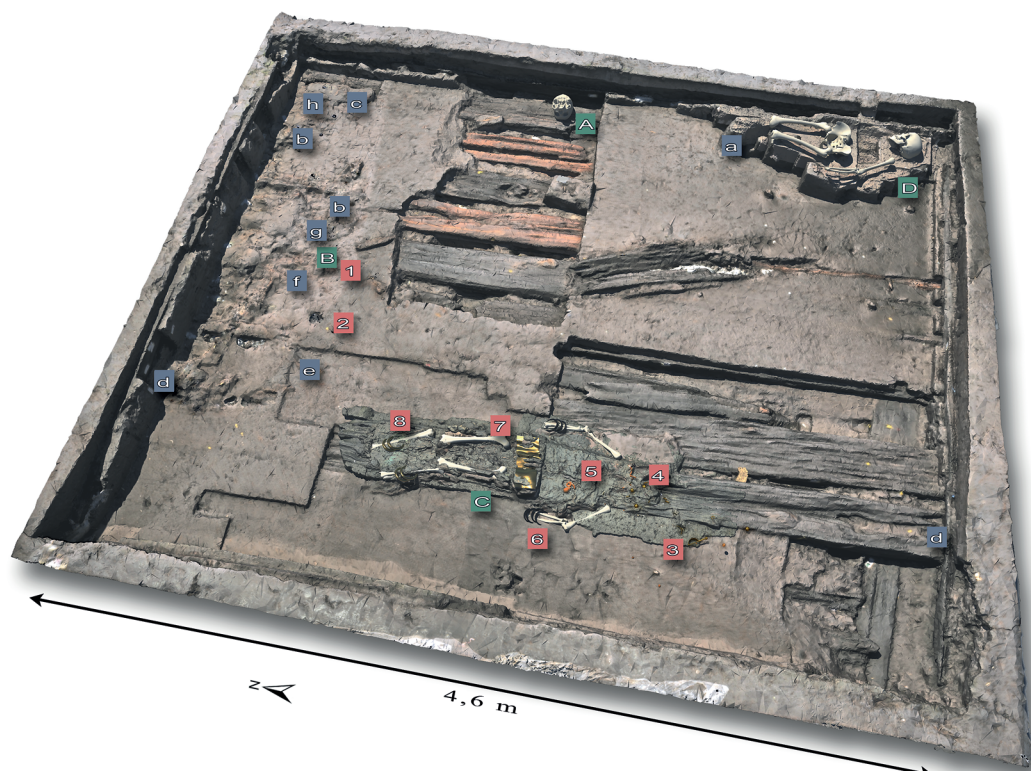
Fig. 6. Heuneburg. Idealised reconstruction of the wooden burial chamber of Hohmichele Grave 6.

Bettelbühl Central Chamber

A different type of explanation is required in the case of the two inhumations, both adult females, recently discovered in the central chamber of Bettelbühl Tumulus 4 (KRAUSSE / EBINGER-RIST 2016; KRAUSSE ET AL. 2017). The first problem is how to interpret the apparent evidence of disturbed grave goods and body parts, which resulted in the displacement of the cranial elements belonging to the female individual presumed to be the primary inhumation based on the large quantities of gold and amber ornament still in close proximity to the body to the other side of the large burial chamber. The second is represented by the fact that the less richly ornamented female appears to have been interred on a platform of earth above the chamber floor; it is unclear at this stage whether this accumulated naturally or indicates that this interment was placed there at a later date than the other (*fig. 7*). The excavators have assumed an economic relationship existed between the two women based on the disparity between their personal ornament ensembles and have designated one as a “princess” and the other as her “maid” – but it might be worth attempting to subject both bodies to aDNA analysis to test this assumption and other explanations should be considered as well. In several respects, this multiple burial context seems analogous to the double female burial in Magdalenenberg Grave 78, discussed previously.

Speckhau Tumulus 17 Central Chamber

The central chamber of Speckhau Tumulus 17 illustrates how recent advances in technologies such as proteomic analysis of ceramic vessel contents can confound our assumptions about mortuary practices in prehistoric contexts (ARNOLD / MURRAY 2016; in press). The 5 x 5 m central enclosure

**human remains**

- A** calvarium individual 1
- B** mandible individual 1
- C** postcranial skeleton individual 1
- D** skeleton individual 2

personal ornaments individual 1

- 1** pinhead (gold)
- 2** earring (temple-ring)
- 3** fibulae (gold)
- 4** spheres (gold)
- 5** beads and fibulae (amber)
- 6** bracelets (jet)
- 7** belt plate (copper alloy)
- 8** anklets (copper alloy)

other grave goods

- a** pony-cap
- b** wild boar tusks
- c** sheets (copper alloy)
- d** pinheads? (amber)
- e** swine as food
- f** knife
- g** ritual elements
- h** textile and fur

Fig. 7. Heuneburg. Bettelbühl Tumulus 4. Plan of the burial chamber showing the position of the skeletal remains and grave goods. The skull of the presumed primary burial and the second female individual were found against the eastern wall of the chamber.

contained a cremation, likely male, and a likely female inhumation (*fig. 8*). Here we have what appears to be an example of a bi-ritual burial with the fragments of iron weapons and wagon remains probably belonging to the disturbed central cremation, while the female inhumation was placed at a slight angle just inside the enclosure ditch with symmetrically distributed ring jewellery and head and belt ornament consistent with other female graves from this mound group. However, the position of the female grave seemed odd from the start – why place the body in such a haphazard way so close to the edge of one of the largest central chambers of any of the Heuneburg mounds? Laurent Olivier's overview of multiple burials in the West Hallstatt area, while not comprehensive, indicates that the combination of central cremation and secondary inhumation is unique to date (OLIVIER 2000, 219–220), further highlighting the unusual nature of this burial complex.

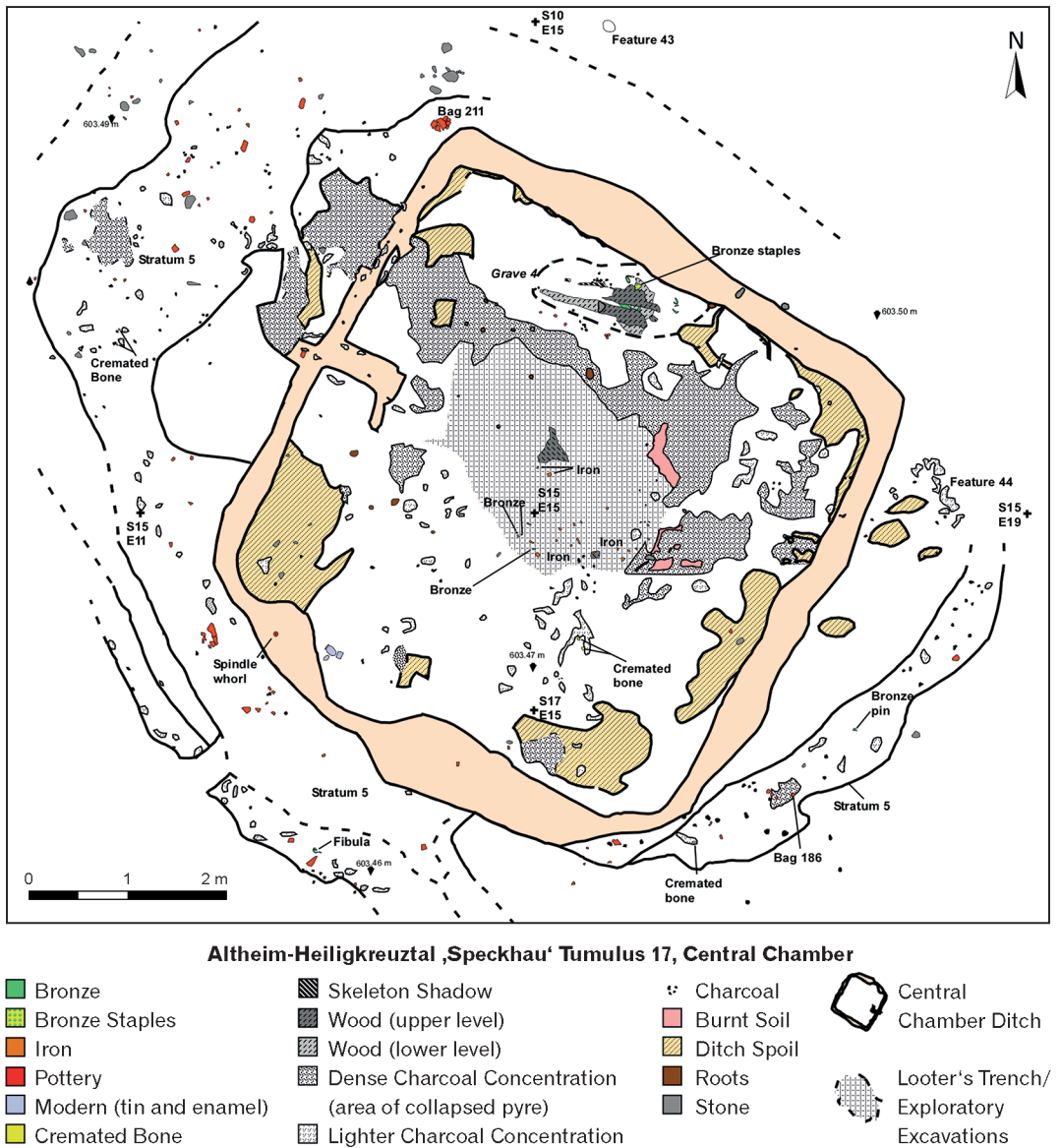


Fig. 8. Altheim-Heiligkreuztal (Kr. Biberach, Baden-Württemberg). Speckhau Tumulus 17, central chamber.

The remains of sheet bronze and iron fragments suggest the presence of a four-wheeled wagon and personal ornament in the central enclosure that were destroyed by multiple looting episodes but there would still have been room for the female inhumation to be placed in closer proximity to the cremated remains of the (presumably) male individual. Analysis of the cremated bone recovered from the severely disturbed central cremation (the animal burrows and looter's trenches can be seen clearly in the plan view) suggested that the cremated remains are those of both a male and a female (WAHL in press), which would further problematise the oddly positioned female inhumation. At this point, the presence of weapons corroborates the identification of a male individual while no material culture remains confirm the presence of a female cremation.

The results of a recent proteomic analysis of ceramic sherds from vessels belonging to the central burial may provide a clue to the unusual features of this central burial complex – several vessels yielded evidence of human blood and tissue that retained the distinctive protein signature of a hemorrhagic fever virus that would have resulted in a painful death accompanied by profuse bleeding from all orifices. Cremation and looting may have reduced the individual for whom this mound was built to a few fragments of bone but the proteomic analysis results provide us with a potential cause of death in the absence of a body, if the blood and tissue in the ceramic vessels are from the central cremation. The hasty interment of the female inhumation could be explained by the highly infectious nature of diseases in this class, which includes the Ebola virus. Anyone handling the body, for example in preparation for a funeral, and in particular if that preparation involved exsanguination, would have contracted the disease, which has an incubation period of about two weeks (WIKTOROWICZ ET AL. 2017). It is certainly plausible to suggest that the woman buried in the central chamber may have had to be disposed of quickly as much to protect the living as to allow her to accompany the central individual in death. We may also see here a glimpse of funerary practices involving the period preceding the actual disposal of the body – ethnographically the washing and preparing of corpses for burial is most often the responsibility of women (HAME 2008). The question is whether this particular woman had any familial relationship to the deceased or whether she was simply placed in the central chamber because she died in the same way as the primary individual. The avoidance of this mound as a burial place after the construction of the tumulus over the chamber – suggested by the fact that only two more burials were placed much higher up at least 100 years after the central interments (ARNOLD / MURRAY 2016) – may also be explained by the spectacular and presumably gruesome ends of the individuals in the central enclosure. It is unusual for a mound of this size to contain so few graves.

Speckhau Tumulus 18

A more typical pattern is represented by the next mound in the Speckhau group, Tumulus 18, in which 18 interments were recorded (ARNOLD / MURRAY 2016; in press). In this mound the central interment consisted of the remains of a funeral pyre that appears to have been allowed to burn down *in situ*; the charcoal carpet that remained included extremely small, highly calcined bone fragments from a male individual of mature years (*fig. 9*). Fragments that may be the remains of a subadult were recovered from the same context while additional cremated bone was recovered from the highly disturbed area just outside the pyre zone that has been identified as belonging to a mature female individual (WAHL in press). However, due to the many looters trenches and clear evidence of re-deposition it is not possible to state definitively that the central cremation grave contained more than one person. It is possible that a relationship existed between the likely female and likely male individuals buried in inhumation Graves 4 and 5, based on their close proximity (*fig. 10*), but technically this does not qualify as a multiple burial because there is no evidence of simultaneous disposal or the presence of a burial chamber large enough to hold both bodies.

Conclusions

The examples provided in this paper illustrate the fact that the defining characteristic archaeologists use to differentiate multiple burials from other forms, namely the presence of more than one body in a single mortuary context, is both the primary as well as the least important distinguishing feature of this category of disposal. The fact that bi-ritual burials containing both cremated and inhumed remains are relatively common in some regions of southwest Germany in the Early Iron Age (for example at the Magdalenenberg) but are not found at all in others indicates that the range

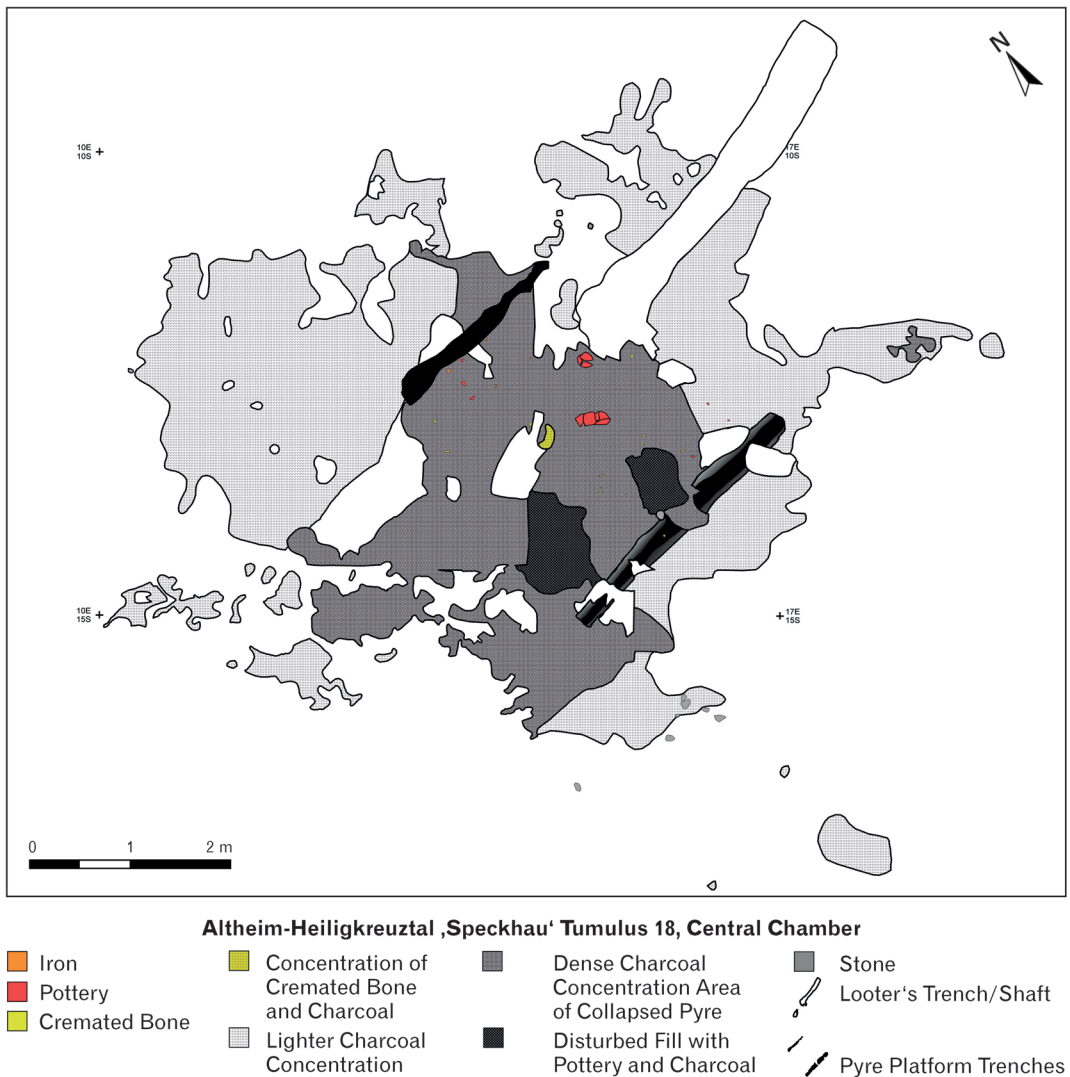


Fig. 9. Altheim-Heiligkreuztal. Speckhau Tumulus 18, central area with pyre remains and foundation trench.

of possible relationships between individuals found in the same burial context is even larger than originally proposed by OEFITIGER (1984). This conclusion is further supported by the uneven distribution of gender / age combinations through time and space – adult female + adult female; adult male + adult male; adult female + adult male + adult female; adult female + subadult; adult male + subadult; adult female + adult male + subadult; subadult + subadult (cf. also MÜLLER-SCHESSEL 2013, 143–145).

While most Iron Age multiple burials contain two adults, often a female and a male, other combinations, such as female / female, male / male and male / child or female / child, are also known (*fig. 11*). These configurations have traditionally been interpreted as representing familial relationships or a prehistoric form of widow-sacrifice (as represented by historic accounts such as Ibn Fadlan's Viking funeral, see MONTGOMERY [2000]), but new evidence indicates that this category of burial cannot be reduced to a simple or single causal interpretation. Possibly reflecting regional

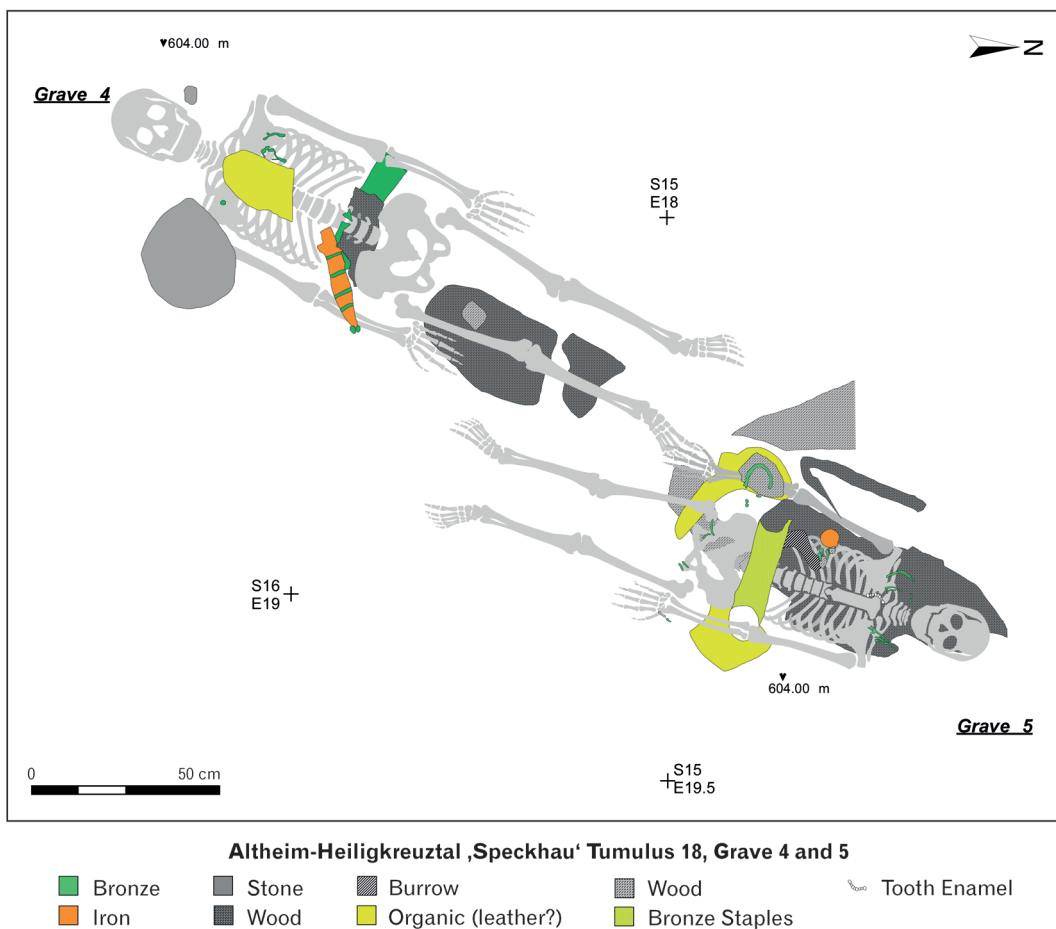


Fig. 10. Altheim-Heiligkreuztal. Speckhau Tumulus 18, Graves 4 and 5.

mortuary practices, in southwest Germany the combination of adult male, adult female and sub-adult is the least common type of multiple burial (KURZ 1997; ZÜRN 1970), suggesting that familial relationships may not be the primary determining factor in this particular cultural context. Burials containing more than one subadult are also rare. On the other hand, micro-regional traditions as well as seasonality and kinship associations represent additional possible explanations for the high degree of variability seen in this disposal category, which makes pan-regional analyses such as those conducted by OEFTIGER (1984) and OLIVIER (2000) problematic.

Moreover, the two women buried in the central chamber of Bettelbühl Tumulus 4 and the double female burial of Magdalenenberg Grave 78 clearly demonstrate that the interpretation of multiple burials as a form of *sati*, or widow sacrifice, in which the primary burial is a male and the secondary one a female, can be rejected as a general rule for Early Iron Age southwest Germany (see also BRÄUNING 2009, 140). However, we should not discard the possibility that a form of *sati* or *sahagamana* – “going after”, a more neutral and useful Sanskrit term (BRICK 2010, 203) – might apply to some specific examples from the Hallstatt period. Archaeologically and historically the practice of *sahagamana* is attested mainly in the Indian subcontinent and in areas influenced by Hinduism (e. g. Vietnam, Java, Sumatra, Bali, Cambodia, Myanmar and Sri Lanka), but it also

Site/Grave	Adult	Adult	Adult	Adult	Adult/Sub.	Adult/Sub.	Adult/Adult/Sub.	Sub./Sub.
	♀♀	♂♂	♀♂	♀♂♀	♀?	♂?	♀♂?	??
Magdalenberg			X		X	X	X	
Gießübel-Talhau T 1				X				
Gießübel-Talhau T 2			X?					
Hohmichele CC			X					
Hohmichele Grave 6			X					
Bettelbühl T 4	X							
Speckhau T 17			X					
Speckhau T 18			X?				X?	

Fig. 11. Multiple inhumation burial combinations in the Early Iron Age: Magdalenberg and tumuli in the Heuneburg area.

occurs in a range of Old World contexts west of Asia (FISCH 1998). This includes the Andronovo culture complex of the Asiatic steppe in which approximately 2 % of the burials under tumuli were paired male-female interments and which overlaps in its latter manifestations with the Early Iron Age in western Europe (KUZ'MINA 2007, 194). Herodotus also mentions a version of *sahagamana* in his description of the customs of the Crestonian Thracians (Book 5.5) involving the choosing of a favoured wife for sacrifice, and he documents this practice among the Scythians (Book 4.71–72) as well, where we have complementary archaeological evidence that can be convincingly interpreted in this way (SPINDLER 1982). Perhaps significantly, the spread of *sahagamana* in the Indian subcontinent appears to have been due largely to emulation of elites, the warrior castes in particular, and its association with concepts of valour, purity and honour (YANG 2008, 21–23). OLIVIER also appears to view the multiple burial phenomenon as part of a trend toward distinguishing an emerging male warrior elite (2000, 226).

To sum up, even at the micro-regional level (in this case represented by the Heuneburg burial record with a western extension to the Magdalenberg) there is simply too much variability for any one causal relationship to be the defining one: familial (affinal, consanguineal, fosterage) – possibly represented by several bi-ritual secondary graves in the Magdalenberg as well as the possible dual cremation in the Tumulus 18 central burial; economic (household, personal retainer) – as suggested for the Bettelbühl Tumulus 4 central interment; martial-political (*comitatus*); or accidental (infection during funeral rites) – possibly represented by the central cremation / inhumation of the Speckhau Tumulus 17 central burial complex. We still have too little information at present about the range of possible links between individuals in multiple burials to hazard more than a guess about why particular individuals may have been buried together. However, the presented overview clearly suggests that multiple burials were not a requirement of central interments but were the result of variables other than social status. Significantly, of the five large mounds in close proximity to the Heuneburg, at least three (Gießübel-Talhau Tumulus 3, unsystematically explored in the 19th century [KURZ / SCHIEK 2002, 115], Gießübel-Talhau Tumulus 4, excavated in the 1950s [ibid. 118], and the Lehenbühl, unsystematically explored in the 19th century [ibid. 92]) do not seem to have had more than one individual in their central chambers, while the two Speckhau mounds both do. Does this indicate that the practice of multiple central burials was lim-

ited to the earlier mounds in the Heuneburg vicinity (late HaC / D1) or might it mean that mounds not in the immediate proximity of the hillfort were subject to different mortuary regulations? A systematic analysis of the full range of burial mound types (sizes, groupings) in an already intensively studied micro-region like the Heuneburg will be required to formulate more nuanced explanations for this complex mortuary category.

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