

pca

postclassicalarchaeologies

volume 1/2011

SAP Società Archeologica s.r.l.

Mantova 2011



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DESIGN

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PUBLISHER

SAP Società Archeologica s.r.l.
Viale Risorgimento 14 - 46100 Mantova
www.archeologica.it

PRINTED BY

La Serenissima, Contrà Santa Corona 5, Vicenza

Authorised by Mantua court no. 4/2011 of April 8, 2011

CONTENTS		PAGES
EDITORIAL		5
RESEARCH		
C. Giostra	Goths and Lombards in Italy: the potential of archaeology with respect to ethnocultural identification	7
S. Hakenbeck	Roman or barbarian? Shifting identities in early medieval cemeteries in Bavaria	37
V. La Salvia	Tradizioni tecniche, strutture economiche e identità etniche e sociali fra <i>Barbaricum</i> e Mediterraneo nel periodo delle Grandi Migrazioni	67
V. Fronza	Edilizia in materiali deperibili nell'alto medioevo italiano: metodologie e casi di studio per un'agenda della ricerca	95
C. Negrelli	Potenzialità e limiti delle ricerche sugli indicatori ceramici nelle regioni altoadriatiche e padane tra tardo antico e alto medioevo	139
F. Cantini	Dall'economia complessa al complesso di economie (Tuscia V-X secolo)	159
F. Salvadori	Zooarcheologia e controllo delle risorse economiche locali nel medioevo	195
A. Colecchia, L. Casagrande, F. Cavulli, L. Mura, M. Nebbia	Paesaggi medievali del Trentino (progetto APSAT)	245
V. Caracuta	Ambiente naturale e strategie agroalimentari in Puglia settentrionale tra tardo antico e alto medioevo: l'esempio di Faragola (FG)	275
A.M. Grasso	Analisi archeobotaniche a Supersano (LE): una comunità autosufficiente?	297
L. Spera	Le forme della cristianizzazione nel quadro degli assetti topografico-funzionali di Roma tra V e IX secolo	309
E. Destefanis	Archeologia dei monasteri altomedievali tra acquisizioni raggiunte e nuove prospettive di ricerca	349
C. Ebanista	Le chiese tardoantiche e altomedievali della Campania: vecchi scavi, nuovi orientamenti	383

RETROSPECT

G.P. Brogiolo	Alle origini dell'archeologia medievale in Italia	419
S. Gelichi	Fortunate coincidenze?	424
G. Vannini	Elio Conti e l'archeologia medievale	431
G.P. Brogiolo	Formazione di un archeologo medievista tra Veneto e Lombardia	441
H. Blake	Professionalizzazione e frammentazione: ricordando l'archeologia medievale nel lungo decennio 1969-1981	452
R. Hodges	Introducing medieval archaeology to Molise, 1977-1980	481
D. Andrews	Remembering medieval archaeology in Italy in the 1970s	493
B. Ward-Perkins	A personal (and very patchy) account of medieval archaeology in the early 1970s in northern Italy	496

PROJECT

J. Baker, S. Brookes, A. Reynolds	- Landscapes of Governance. Assembly sites in England 5 th -11 th centuries	499
------------------------------------------	---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	-----

REVIEWS

503

Carlo Citter, Antonia Arnoldus-Huyzendveld, *Uso del suolo e sfruttamento delle risorse nella pianura grossetana nel medioevo. Verso una storia del parcellario e del paesaggio agrario* - by **G. P. Brogiolo**

Miguel Angel Tabales Rodriguez, *El Alcázar de Sevilla. Reflexiones sobre su origen y transformación durante la Edad Media. Memoria de investigación arqueológica 2000-2005* - by **J. M^º Martín Civantos**

Andrew Reynolds, *Anglo-Saxon deviant burial Customs* - by **P. Marcato**

Giuliano Volpe, Maria Turchiano (eds), *Faragola 1. Un insediamento rurale nella Valle del Carapelle. Ricerche e studi* - by **M. Valenti**

Armelle Alduc-Le Bagousse, *Inhumations de prestige ou prestige de l'inhumation? Expression du pouvoir dans l'au-delà (IV^e-XV^e siècle)* - by **A. Canci**

Juan Antonio Quirós Castillo (ed), *The Archaeology of early medieval villages in Europe* - by **A. Chavarria Arnau**

Roman or barbarian? Shifting identities in early medieval cemeteries in Bavaria

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This paper offers a contribution to the study of ethnicity in early medieval archaeology. Situated within the 'ethnic paradigm', previous studies of early medieval ethnicity have largely focused on decontextualised grave goods that were considered ethnic markers. Here the active nature of material culture in expressing and maintaining identities is examined. This approach goes beyond traditional archaeological assumptions about ethnicity and their critiques by placing identity at the centre of the investigation.

Keywords: ethnicity, material culture, burial practice, gender, *Altenerding*

Questo articolo si inserisce nel dibattito sull'etnicità nell'alto medioevo. Seguendo il "modello etnico" gli studi tradizionali si sono focalizzati su beni di corredo decontestualizzati considerati come markers etnici. Il presente contributo vuole andare oltre i tradizionali assunti archeologici riguardanti l'etnicità ponendo l'identità al centro dell'indagine e prendendo in esame la cultura materiale come sua espressione.

Parole chiave: etnicità, cultura materiale, pratiche funerarie, gender, *Altenerding*

In early medieval Bavaria, funerary practice developed in the late fifth century as a hybrid of late Roman and barbarian¹ practices. In the sixth century, when the early medieval polities became consolidated, burial practice moved away from its Roman origins to become more overtly barbarian. At a local level, this was a time of striking distinctions between cemeteries, specifically in terms of the ways in which women were buried. Cemeteries

¹ It is difficult to find an acceptable terminology for the ethnic groups of the early medieval period, since many terms have complicated histories and often carry much ideological baggage. Thus 'Germanic' and 'tribe' are no longer acceptable. The term 'barbarian' is adopted deliberately. It was used by the classical ethnographers to describe peoples that were not Roman. While a rigid ethnic and cultural dichotomy has been shown to be problematic, 'barbarian' can nevertheless be a meaningful term in the context of identities.

on the Munich gravel plain almost exclusively adopted one of two types of female funerary costume. The choice of costume transcended differences in brooch types, which had previously been assumed to have primary ethnic significance. During the sixth century, local identities were therefore considered at least as powerful as super-regional tribal identities. There was also a significant difference in the way identity was expressed in the graves of men and women, with the male burials being determined by a sense of belonging to a 'tribal' army, while in female burials both differences between cemeteries and links to a real or imagined homeland were important.

1. Going in circles: ethnicity and *Tracht*

Since its inception in the nineteenth century, early medieval archaeology and in particular the evidence relating to barbarians, has been dominated by the 'ethnic paradigm', as it has been termed by Sebastian Brather (2000). Within this paradigm, ethnic groups are considered to be primordial, that is, to be enduring, mutually exclusive entities that can be identified objectively by the combination of language, genetic relatedness and culture that makes up 'who they are' (Shennan 1989, pp. 14-16; Jones 1997, pp. 65-72). Thus, ethnic groups are seen as 'closed' entities that can be studied in isolation. Archaeologically, this translates into the belief that ethnic groups can be distinguished from each other by their material culture and customs.

A conceptual link between ethnicity and appearance was provided by the concept of *Tracht*, meaning traditional peasants' costume. In the eighteenth century, dress had been determined by profession, class or social standing. By the mid-nineteenth century this had largely been replaced by 'bourgeois' or urban dress with new materials, colours and cuts. However, in the imagination of the urban bourgeoisie *Tracht* came to be considered as locally or regionally specific costume, which had survived unchanged over generations (Hartinger 1989, pp. 353-361). As such, it was considered to represent an authentic and primordial expression of the culture of the people. *Tracht* came to be seen as an expression of a pre-existing national consciousness. The idea that *Tracht* represented pre-modern ethnicity lent itself very well to archaeological attempts to identify the ethnicity of individuals in the past through the artefacts with which they were buried. Indeed, from the 1930s onwards *Tracht* became the dominant conceptual tool for identifying early medieval ethnic groups, and it has remained so ever since (Fehr 2001, pp. 371-375). Its accessories, mainly brooches and weapons, were interpreted as having had enduring and exclusively ethnic meanings. It was assumed that in early medieval society these ethnic meanings of objects could and would have been read by all in the same way. The

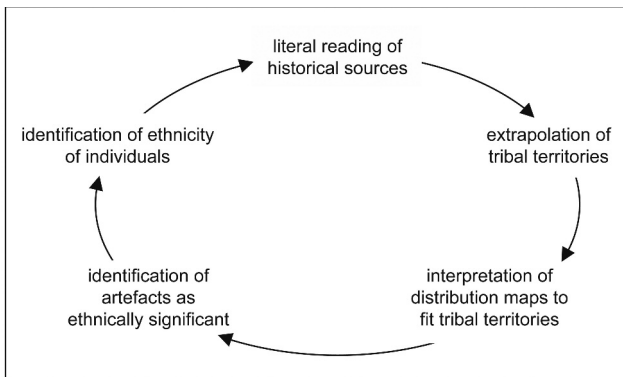


Fig. 1. The circular argument on which many traditional approaches to ethnicity were built.

ethnic paradigm therefore worked with simplistic interpretations of material culture; both people and objects were considered classifiable by their external attributes, and the only difficulty lay in getting the classification right.

Furthermore, studies of ethnicity in the early medieval period have relied heavily on a literal reading of historical sources, creating a self-referencing circular argument (fig. 1). The sources are thought to provide a framework of facts and dates into which archaeological evidence can be fitted. Fragments of information gained from historical sources are taken out of context and used to identify the movements and settlement areas of the barbarian peoples. Distribution maps of specific artefact types then apparently identified these areas on the ground. The next step is to identify the ethnicity of individuals by making a connection between these artefacts and the identity of those that were buried with them. Once the tribal areas became populated with people, these people then turned fully-clothed into the actors mentioned in the historical sources.

2. Moving forward: ethnicity as identity

Research into ethnicity in anthropology (Gluckman 1958; Barth 1969; Bentley 1987) and history (Wenskus 1961; Geary 1983; Wolfram 1994) replaced primordial notions of ethnicity with the concept of ethnicity as a group identity that is socially and historically contingent. This was taken up in archaeology, where the ethnic paradigm underlying culture-historical approaches has been criticised since the 1960s. Well-founded critiques have deconstructed the concept of cultures and 'primordialist' notions of ethnicity (e.g. Shennan 1989; Jones 1997) and the flaws inherent in early medieval approaches to ethnicity have also been widely recognised and criti-

cised². Recent archaeological studies of ethnicity have followed on from the approach proposed by Siân Jones (1997). She also understood ethnicity as an identity and used Bourdieu's (1977; 1990) theory of practice and concept of *habitus* to explain how it is perpetuated in day-to-day life.

Three fundamental characteristics can be drawn out from these studies and applied to the question of ethnicity in the early medieval period. First, ethnicity is nested, that is, it operates on different levels, from the individual and local to the supra-regional. For example, on one level the burial practice in the whole of north-west Europe in the sixth century was very similar: men were buried with a similar range of weapons, women with broadly similar types of brooches and jewellery. On another level we can identify clear differences in dress styles: in Anglo-Saxon England brooches were worn on the shoulders to fasten a *peplos* dress, while in southern Germany they were worn centrally on the body, possibly on a sash. Second, ethnicity has a complex relationship with other social identities, such as gender, age or social status. Historical studies have shown that identities of status, religion, profession, gender and others did not exist in isolation but determined each other (Geary 1983; Amory 1994). Falko Daim applied these ideas to material culture: in the same way that a person can have different identities, objects too can have different meanings, based on their typological characteristics. So the fabric, firing technique, shape or decoration of a pot could each have had different meanings, depending on the context in which these characteristics became relevant (Daim 1998, p. 79). Because of its interrelatedness with other forms of social identification, ethnicity cannot be studied as an entirely distinct area of society. The boundaries between social identities are fluid. Finally, which level of ethnic identity and which aspect of social identity were relevant at any given time depended on specific social situations, on the persons involved, the public or private nature of an activity and its timing. A funeral represented such a situation, and burial practice is therefore a useful medium for studying the socially contingent aspects of identities.

The relationship between material culture and identity is complex. Material culture is meaningful in the expression and maintenance of group identities, but a straightforward connection between material culture and ethnicity does not exist. Nevertheless, material culture very powerfully conveys ethnic meanings. Outside contemporary or ethnographic contexts, where the meanings of material culture can be explained by living informants, the context has to provide the explanation (Hodder 1987). Recent studies of agency in anthropology and archaeology have highlighted the centrality of the material world in the creation and negotiation of social relations (e.g. Gell 1998; articles in Dobres, Robb 2000). Repeated use of material culture in the same way, in the same situation, by the same group of people

² BRATHER 2004; EFFROS 2004; HÄRKE 2007; VON RUMMEL 2007.

creates a sense of common identity [Gosden 2005]. In the confrontation with differing practice (in the sense of Bourdieu 1977; 1990), difference is made aware; and once a possible ethnic meaning of material culture has become explicit it can be actively employed to maintain cohesion among groups and to exclude others.

In the following, this approach will be applied to the case study of early medieval Bavaria. By examining different aspects of burial practice – stylistic variation of artefacts, dress styles, cemetery organization and differences between cemeteries – we can draw out some of the multiple meanings of material culture and thereby gain an insight into the multiple facets of identity that were expressed through it.

3. Early medieval cemeteries in Bavaria

An exploration of the development of and changes to ethnic identity is particularly relevant in the specific situation of early medieval Bavaria. The Bavarians were first mentioned in historical sources in the mid-sixth century, when the Bavarian polity was already established. In contrast to other historically-attested early medieval peoples, such as Alamans, Goths or Langobards, no contemporary origin myth was associated with them and they only appeared in the written histories of others, such as in Jordanes' *Getica* (Mommsen 1882) or the writings of *Venantius Fortunatus* (Leo 1881). There is thus a gap of a hundred years, which is historically undocumented, between the end of Roman rule in the provinces of *Raetia Secunda* and *Noricum* and the earliest references to an established Bavarian polity.

This article largely focuses on the cemetery of Altenerding, contrasting it with developments in other cemeteries in the region around Munich (fig. 2). Altenerding was exceptional in that it did not expand chronologically and was not laid out in rows, but was instead organised into different areas (Bierbrauer 1985; Hakenbeck 2007). Together these cemeteries spanned the whole period during which row-grave cemeteries were in use. The cemeteries were dated with typo-seriation based on correspondence analysis (Hakenbeck 2011). They fall into two broad categories: Altenerding (Sage 1984; Losert, Pleterski 2003) and Aubing (Dannheimer 1998) were both very large cemeteries, with around 1450 (originally probably 2200 to 2300 (Losert 2003, p. 38) and around 900 graves, respectively. They were in use from the late fifth to the first half of the seventh century. Giesing, Plienig and Steinhöring on the other hand were much smaller, with around 250 graves each³. They originated later, in around the mid-sixth century, and remained in use until the mid-seventh century.

³ BOTT 1936; ARNOLD 1992; FURTMAYR 1995; CODREANU-WINDAUER 1997.

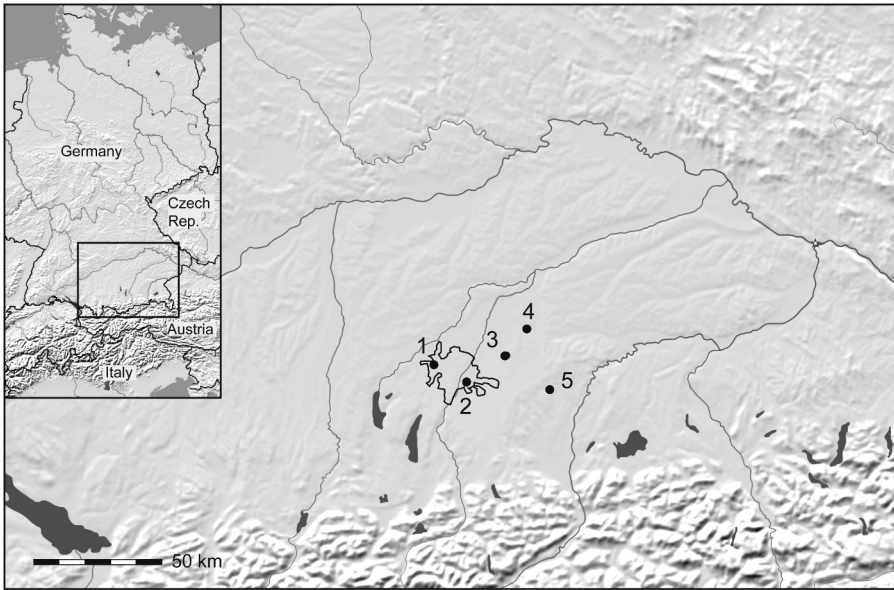


Fig. 2. Cemeteries in the area around Munich (city boundary outlined): [1] Aubing, [2] Giesing, [3] Pliening, [4] Altennerding, [5] Steinhöring.

4. The legacy of the Roman Empire

By the fifth century, the northern frontiers of the empire had ceased to be clear lines of demarcation, separating Romans and barbarians. Though the Rhine and Danube *limites* were nominally still in existence and fortified, the frontier zone had in fact turned into an area that united rather than separated populations (Whittaker 1994; Elton 1996). Since the third century, the Roman army had increasingly included barbarians and, just as the physical boundaries between Romans and barbarians dissolved, their identities too became interdependent. The emergence of row-grave cemeteries and the associated weapon-burial practice in fifth-century Gaul, for example, has been interpreted as evidence of changes in the representation of a high-status or warrior identity following the collapse of centralised power⁴.

Barbarian female dress and funerary practices also appear to have developed as a result of interaction with the Romans. Max Martin (1995, pp. 659, 664) suggested that, since a *peplos* with brooches worn on the shoulders went out of use in central Europe at around AD 400, the emerging bow brooches must have been inspired by the onion-headed brooches of Roman military dress. He also proposed that the *cingulum*, a military belt,

⁴ HALSALL 1992; BÖHME 1996a; THEUWS, ALKEMADE 2000.

was taken up as part of female dress. Contrary to Martin, Böhme (1998, pp. 443-445) proposed a gradual evolution of bow brooches in his study of female dress on both sides of the Rhine in the late fourth and fifth centuries. He suggested that the female relations of barbarian soldiers in northern Gaul abandoned their traditional *peplos* in the second half of the fourth century. They replaced it with the Roman tunic and cloak that were fastened with brooches according to Germanic tradition, the tunic with a pair of small brooches at the throat and the cloak with a pair of bow brooches. More recently, Philipp von Rummel (2007, p. 400) has questioned the widespread interpretation of *peplos* dresses worn with brooches as Germanic dress styles, suggesting instead that most components of 'barbarian' dress also occurred within the empire and did not necessarily signify ethnic difference so much as social distinction. He proposed that apparently barbarian dress was really the dress of the emerging military elites who may have drawn on fashions common in the frontier zones.

Individual dress accessories also seem to have been developed within a context of mixed traditions. Having plotted all known occurrences of bird brooches, Ute Haimerl (1998, pp. 101-103) found that they clustered densely in northern France and Belgium, in the Rhine valley and south-west Germany, but that there were few occurrences outside of these areas. She concluded that bird brooches, just as other types of small brooches, like horse- and rider-brooches, originated in late Roman contexts but were enthusiastically taken up and popularised by the barbarians. The brooches were therefore created in a context of interaction between Romans and barbarians.

5. Altenerding: founders' graves

The cemetery of Altenerding came into use in the first half of the fifth century (fig. 3). The earliest graves were located in an area that was destroyed by the road running from north to south across the cemetery. Within this central cluster (area A) an arrangement of five graves stands out. The graves of four children surrounded that of an adult man. The bodies in graves 512 and 516 were buried with very similar brooch arrangements. The younger girl (grave 512) was buried with a brooch of the Gondorf type that combined stylistic elements of 'Thuringian' and 'Ostrogothic' brooches and has parallels as far apart as northern Germany and northern Italy. The older girl (grave 516) was buried with what appears to be an attempted copy of the same type. In both cases, the brooches were worn individually, head-up on the pelvis or lower body. Both graves also contained bead necklaces. The older child in grave 516 was also buried with a simple

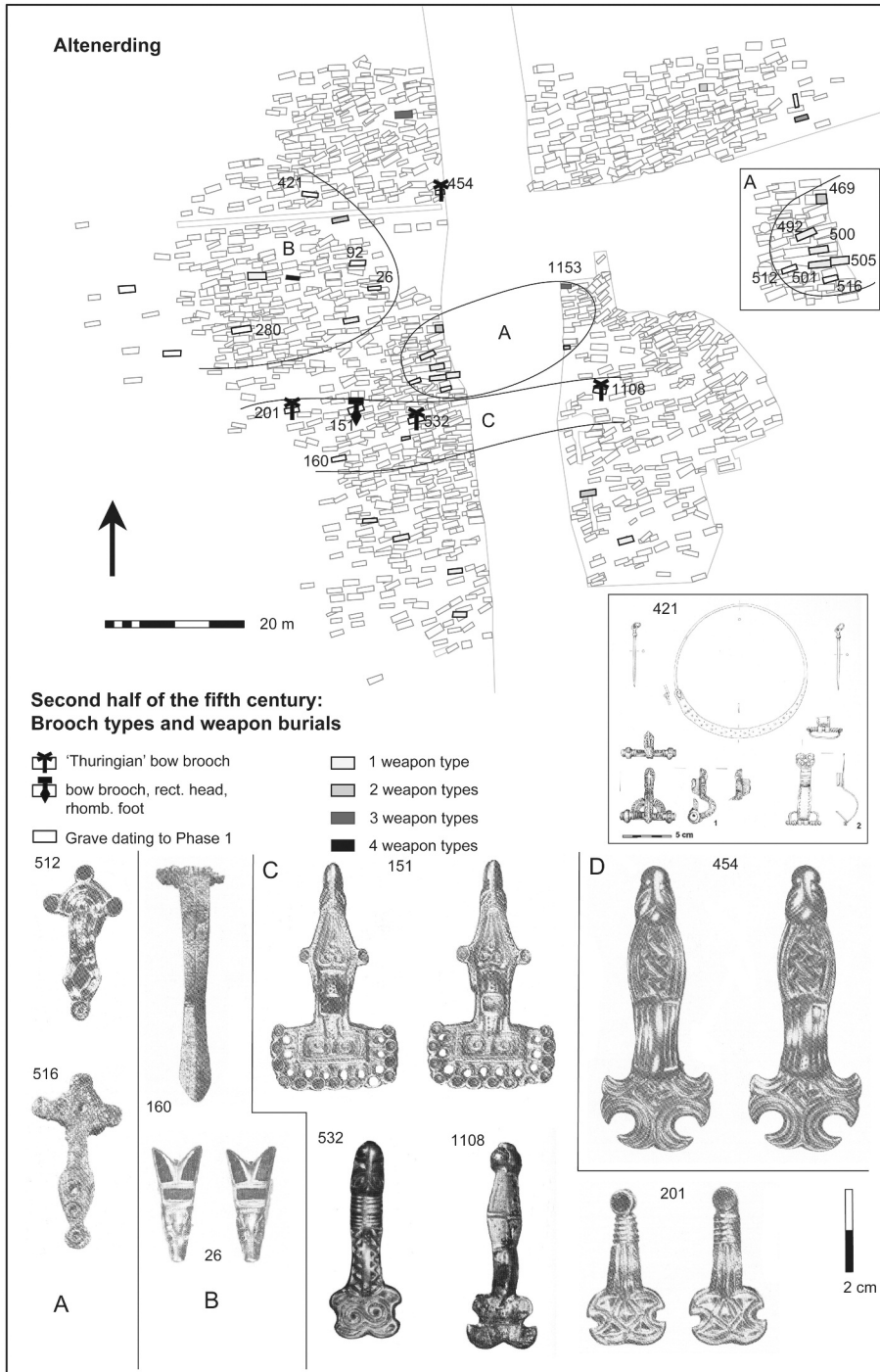


Fig. 3. The spatial organization of Altenerding during the second half of the fifth century [Artefacts reproduced with kind permission, © W. Sage].

girdle group made of two bronze rings, a spindle whorl and a whorl-shaped glass pendant. Grave 505 contained the body of an older child, buried with a seax-like knife and a bag. To the north was grave 500 of an infant, buried with a knife and a belt buckle. The grave of the adult man in the centre (grave 501) was furnished with a late antique spatha with a narrow and light blade and a bag. Since the female children were buried in almost identical ways, it is very likely that they were related, possibly siblings, and the whole group may have represented a family. On the other side of the modern road, a grave of an adult man (grave 1153) contained a spatha blade, similar to but longer than the one in grave 501, and a slim seax. Their location on the crest of the ridge that ran from the north-west to the south-east across the site suggests that these central graves represent the initial use of the cemetery, the 'founders' graves'.

Two other unusual graves also date from this early phase. Grave 26 contained two cicada brooches that were positioned on the shoulders and four glass beads. The cicada brooches were probably modelled on east-European predecessors. Cicada imagery also occurred on 'Thuringian' brooches, but this brooch type had more direct parallels in Barbing-Irlmauth and Bittenbrunn and in modern-day Thuringia (Weimar-Nordfriedhof) (Losert 2003, pp. 179-181). Grave 421 contained the body of a woman of mature age whose style of costume and grave goods were radically different from that of the rest of the cemetery and are highly unusual in southern Germany (Sage *et alii* 1973, p. 260). She was buried wearing a neckring that has parallels in Gotland and Öland (Werner 1970, pp. 78-80), two dress pins of the Nörmland type that was densely distributed around Helgö and the western coast of Finland around Österbotten (Waller 1972, p. 62) an unequal pair of 'Scandinavian' cross-bow brooches, one of them of Ozingell type and the other of Ostsee type⁵. Neither are very common but their distribution seems to lie in central Germany and the east Baltic region. The brooches were positioned on the shoulders; the woman therefore appears to have worn a *peplos*.

In both graves the brooches were worn on the shoulders not on the chest or pelvis. This means that the brooches were probably used to pin a *peplos* dress and not on a sash or a wrap-around dress that has been suggested for brooches positioned more centrally on the body (Clauß 1987, p. 516; Martin 1995, p. 654). These two *peplos*-burials therefore have great significance. If their wearers wore them in life as they did in death they may have moved to Altenerding from central Germany or further north. Grave 421 in particular leaves little room for doubt since all grave goods and the way they were used seem to have originated in Scandinavia.

⁵ WERNER 1970, pp. 78-80; SCHULZE-DÖRRLAMM 1986, pp. 619-620.

During this early phase, funerary practice appears to have been in transition. Some grave goods, such as spathas from graves 501 and 1153, originated within the late Roman military tradition, while many of the brooches were probably derived from cross-bow brooches but have a distribution pattern that is densest in central Germany and, in the case of the brooches from grave 421, Scandinavia. There were numerous influences, both barbarian and Roman, but a unified burial practice had yet to emerge.

6. Altenerding: the emergence of burial areas

In the first half of the sixth century, the four-brooch costume, consisting of a pair of bow brooches and a pair of small brooches, became formalised across northern France and Belgium, Thuringia, southern Germany and northern Italy. Though the individual elements of the four-brooch costume had been derived from late Roman and Germanic items, the costume as a whole now represented something quite new. After a phase of transition, female funerary costume most clearly expressed barbarian (as opposed to Roman) identity.

Altenerding now developed into clearly different burial areas (fig. 4). The central area with the earliest graves fell out of use, and the cemetery was now dominated by areas to the south and west of it. Area B was defined by graves containing a variety of radiate-headed bow brooches with five knobs and a straight foot. These brooches were associated with a variety of unusual small brooches, in the shape of horses (grave 117), a dragon (grave 31), or of four radiating birds (grave 319), as well as the far more common bird brooches. Area C was defined by 'Ostrogothic' brooches (semicircular head and rhombic foot) and brooches with a rectangular head and rhombic foot. Graves with 'Thuringian' brooches were located in the eastern half of this area; they usually also contained S-brooches. Area D was a second area of graves containing radiate-headed bow brooches, twice with animal-head-shaped foot. Here many graves also contained only small brooches, predominantly bird brooches. Of the four graves with bow brooches there was only one (grave 607) with an additional pair of small brooches; they too were bird brooches. While the brooch types that were deposited in the graves here fell into the same general category as those in area B, the graves in area D were furnished more plainly, with half the graves containing only a pair of small brooches. The bird brooches in this area were also very much mass-produced, rather than individually manufactured, compared to the unique small brooches in area B. Area E can be identified by 'Thuringian' brooches and area F was defined by a cluster of four graves, two of which contained bow brooches with five knobs and straight foot. The

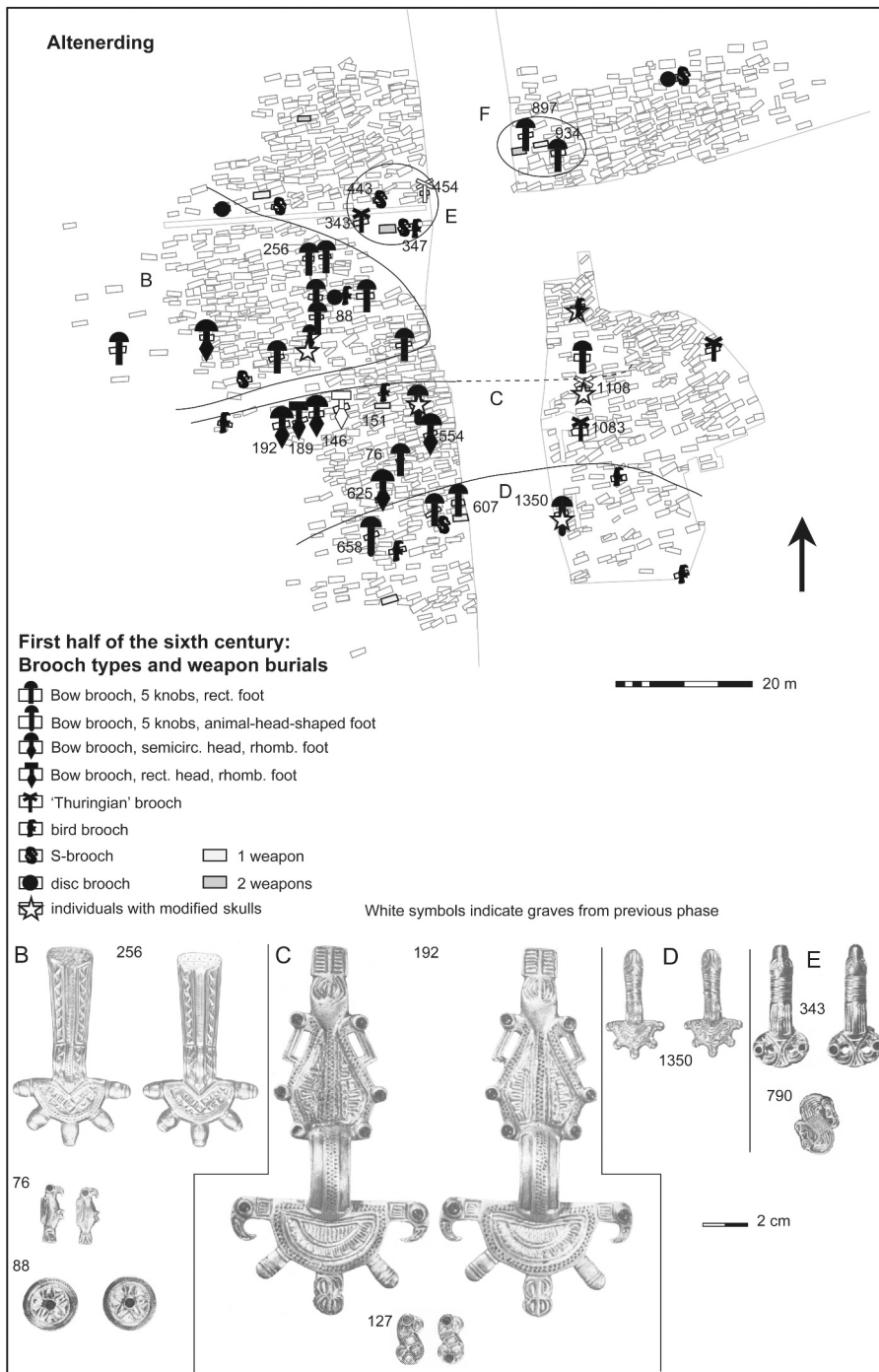


Fig. 4. The spatial organization of Altenerding during the first half of the sixth century (Artefacts reproduced with kind permission, © W. Sage).

cemetery was now very clearly divided into different areas that were distinguished by a preference for certain brooch types, but also to a lesser extent by the wealth of the funerary assemblage.

Each burial area was used by groups consisting of around 28 to 44 members, if we assume that the population size remained stable⁶. This would be representative of a hamlet inhabited by two or three extended families, if we consider that a household may have included several generations, in-laws, servants and slaves. Similar numbers have been proposed for Anglo-Saxon England (Arnold 1997, p. 195; Härke 1997). The areas thus probably represented the burial plots of different families or kin-groups. Both by using specific brooches and belt sets in the funeral and by claiming specific locations of the cemetery as theirs, these families maintained and perpetuated their identities and cohesion.

7. Female mobility and identity

Five female skeletons (graves 125, 513, 1108, 1135 and 1350) dating from the later fifth and first half of the sixth centuries, had artificially modified skulls (fig. 5). Cranial modification was a practice common in eastern or south-eastern Europe but was unusual in southern Germany. It has been associated with the practices of incoming nomadic-pastoralists such as the Huns (Werner 1956; Kiszely 1978). The skulls had a very high and elongated forehead and shortened base, which was probably achieved by tight binding during childhood when the bone was still soft. It is likely therefore that these individuals too were not born locally but moved to the Altenerding area from eastern Europe (Hakenbeck 2009). This is supported by a recent study of carbon and nitrogen stable isotopes of some skeletons from Altenerding and the cemetery of Straubing-Bajuwarenstrasse (Hakenbeck *et alii* 2010). The results suggest that some of the individuals with modified skulls had access to a slightly different diet, compared to the rest of the population, possibly as a result of having migrated.

In contrast to the woman in grave 421, the funerary dress of the women with skull modification was no different from that of other female burials in Altenerding. One individual was buried with a pair of 'Frankish/Alamannic' bow brooches, one with two bird brooches and one with a 'Thuringian' brooch, and their positions on the bodies conformed to the brooch arrange-

⁶ Andy Boddington calculated population size as life expectancy at birth x number of total burials / number of years cemetery was in use. In Altenerding the median life expectancy at birth is 36.7 (HELMUTH 1996, p. 14). The burial areas contained between 113 and 242 graves, and they were in use for c. 150 to 230 years. Therefore the size of the groups using each of the burial areas lies between 27 (area G) and 44 (area F), with an average of 37. These numbers assume a static population for the duration of the cemetery's use, so can really only give a very general indication of the size of each group.

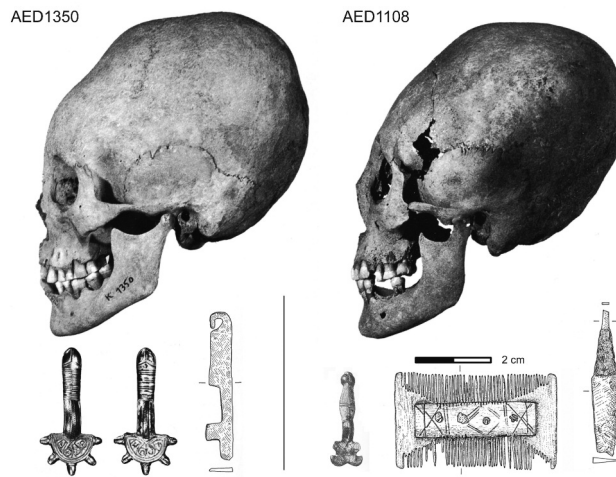


Fig. 5. Artificially modified skulls from graves 1108 and 1350 in Altenerding [reproduced with kind permission, © H. Helmuth].

ment typical for Altenerding. These women were buried in the middle of the cemetery, two just within area A and one each in areas B, C and D. Both the manner of their burial and the positions of their graves indicate that the different life-histories suggested by their modified skulls and possibly foreign childhood was subsumed into the local group identity by the time of their death. Regardless of whether these women may have had a foreign identity during their lifetime, in death they were treated as local women with no evidence of their possible migration other than that which was inscribed on their bodies during childhood.

8. Transitions

During the second half of the sixth century, female funerary dress gradually changed from the four-brooch costume to the one-brooch costume (fig. 6). Bow brooches were therefore less common and only found in three graves; all other brooches in use were small brooches. In the male assemblage the most common and conspicuous dress accessories were tripartite belt sets. These are as significant for the identification of areas within the cemetery as brooches had been in the previous phase. Throughout this phase, the division of the cemetery into different areas was upheld. However, some areas went out of use, while others expanded.

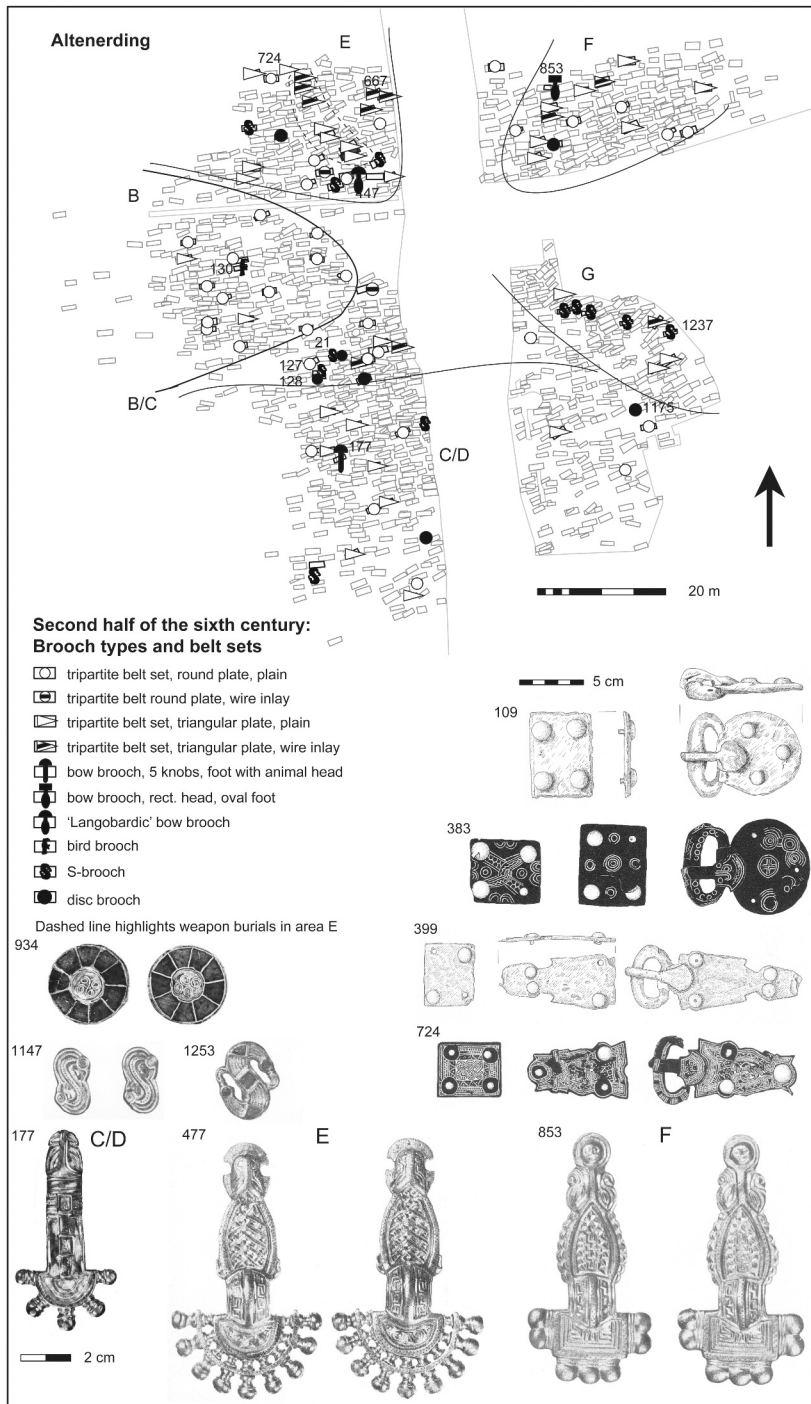


Fig. 6. The spatial organization of Altenerding during the second half of the sixth century [artefacts reproduced with kind permission, © W. Sage].

Area B was defined by graves with tripartite belt sets with round plates, and one weapon type, most commonly arrows, but also a *spatha* or *seax*. One female grave contained a pair of bird brooches. In the previous phase bird brooches had frequently been associated with 'Frankish/ Alamannic' brooches, so in the absence of bow brooches the preference for bird brooches in this area continued.

Between the cores of areas B and C was a cluster of male and female graves, located in what had previously been area A. The female graves in this area contained S-brooches and garnet-inlaid disc brooches. Sometimes these were used in combination. In the grave 21 an S-brooch and a disc brooch were worn together while in a double grave (127/128) one body was buried with a pair of S-brooches and another with a pair of disc brooches. Four of the belt sets in the cluster had round plates while the other two had triangular plates. This cluster of graves formed a distinct group; not only were they more richly furnished than other graves but, more significantly, grave goods that were typical of areas B and C were deposited together, if not generally in the same grave then still in very close proximity.

During this phase, areas C and D became indistinguishable from each other. In the previous phases these areas had been used for rather more poorly furnished graves and this continued. One grave (177) contained a bow brooch with five knobs and an animal-headed foot, two contained S-brooches and one a pair of simple garnet-inlaid disc brooches. The bow brooch with animal-headed foot extended the earlier practice of placing these brooches in areas C or D. Tripartite belt sets with triangular plates predominated, but just over a third of belt sets had round plates. Areas C and D thus expressed characteristics of both areas and the graves were now less rigidly divided. There were only two weapon-burials in this area; both contained only arrows.

In one grave (447) in area E a pair of 'Langobardic' bow brooches of exceptional quality was deposited in combination with a pair of bird brooches and other items. Other brooch types used in this area were S-brooches, with one of these (in grave 451) being very elaborately decorated with style I. The belt sets predominately had triangular plates, many of them with wire inlay decoration. However, there was also a group of three graves buried around a fourth that contained belt sets with round plates. Overall, this area gave the impression of great wealth. This was reinforced by the large number of weapon-burials with three or four weapon types. They were arranged in two parallel but staggered rows. Adult or older men were buried here, all of them with *spathas*, as well as spears and shields and sometimes arrows and *seaxes*. These grave goods represented the greatest wealth in this cemetery at that time.

In Area F grave 853 contained an unusual pair of bow brooches, with only one parallel in a brooch pair from Trivières in northern France. The basic shape was typical for south-west Germany, but its decoration combined 'Langobardic', northern European and 'Slavic' elements (Losert 2003, p. 109). A pair of simple disc brooches with garnet-inlay was deposited in grave 945. This pair was very similar to those from graves 1175 and 813 in areas G and C/D respectively. Belt sets with triangular plates dominated here as they did in area E and here too were two instances of belt sets with wire-inlay decoration. The weapon-burials however were less elaborate than those in area E. There were fewer of them and they only contained one weapon type: seaxes, arrows or in one case a spatha.

In this phase a new area began to be used (area G). The earliest grave, dating from the previous phase, was 1237 with a pair of 'Thuringian' bow brooches and an S-brooch. In the absence of bow brooches during this phase area G was dominated by S-brooches. A group of four graves was placed close together, each containing a pair of S-brooches and in the case of 1147 and 1253 almost identical ones. Fewer belt sets were in use in area G compared to other areas. The belt sets in the four graves that contained them all had triangular plates, in one case with inlay decoration. Also in contrast to other areas, there were more weapon-burials than graves with belt sets. They contained one or two weapon types, usually a seax and then either a spatha, spear or arrows. During the second half of the sixth century each of the areas was therefore characterised by its own specific assemblage, defined by the degree to which boundaries and internal coherence were maintained and also by its wealth.

9. Brooches: foreign and local identities

In Altenerding there was a strong tendency for bow brooches to be placed head-down vertically above each other on the pelvis (fig. 7.1). This includes pairs and single bow brooches. In two cases, the bow brooches were positioned above each other, one head-down, the other head-up; in two cases (one pair, one single brooch) the brooches were positioned head-up; and in a further two cases they were oriented across the body, but still positioned vertically above each other. The small brooches conformed to the same pattern (fig. 7.2). In eight cases, small brooches were positioned vertically above each other on the chest or the throat. Where small brooches were paired with bow brooches this arrangement was more pronounced; it was maintained in about half of these cases. Where only one small brooch was combined with bow brooches, it was usually positioned centrally below the neck. In graves that only contained small brooches the arrangement

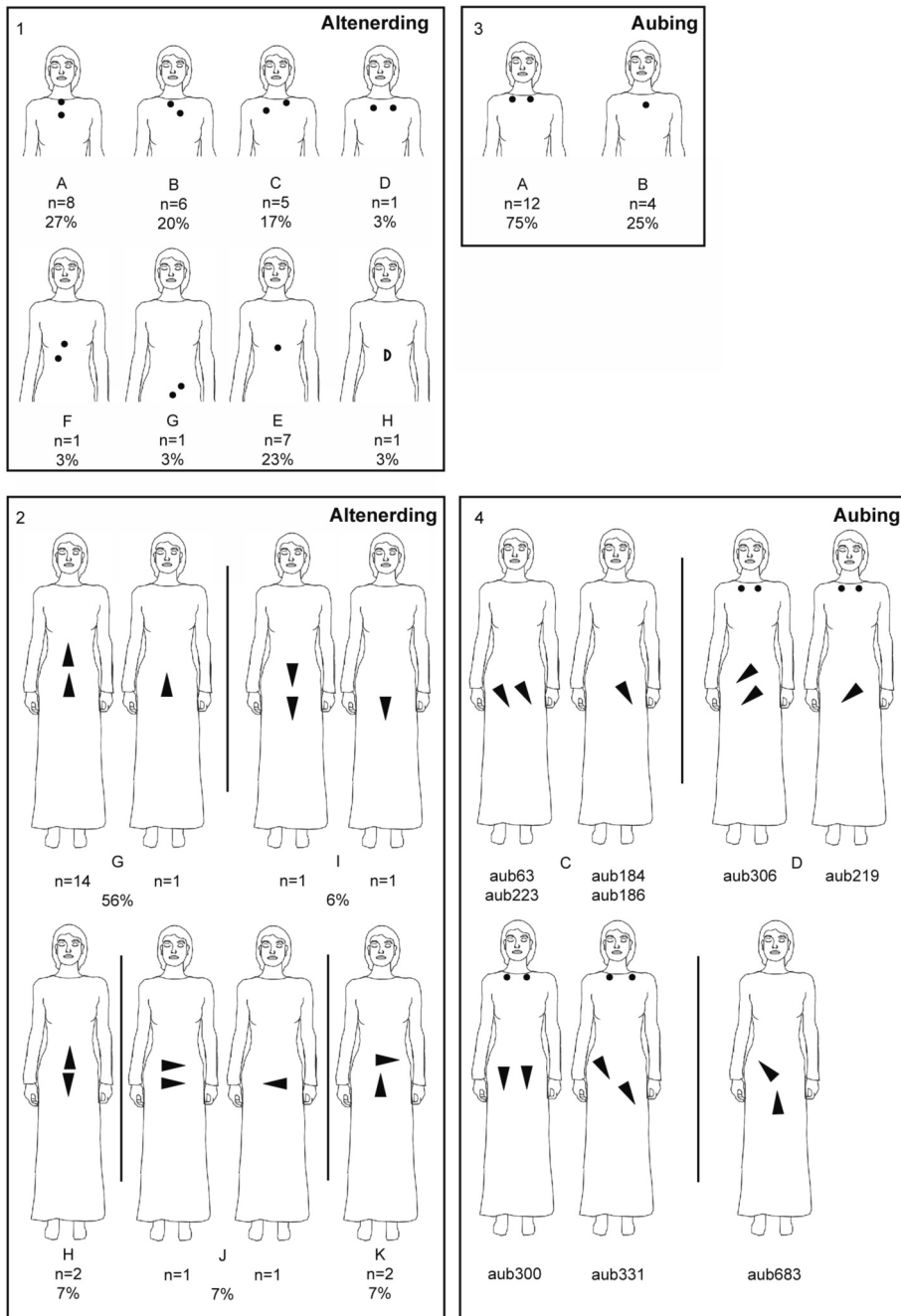


Fig. 7. The positions of brooches in Altenerding and Aubing during the first half of the sixth century.

was less clear. Here most of the small brooches were placed off centre and at an angle. One grave (88) contained two pairs of small brooches. They were positioned vertically above each other on chest and pelvis with the lower pair being used in the manner of a pair of bow brooches.

When we compare burial dress in Altenerding with the evidence from the cemetery of Aubing⁷, a very different picture emerges. In eight of nine graves with bow brooches in Aubing these were positioned head-up, next to each other on the pelvis or lower abdomen (fig. 7.4). There were some variations in the directions in which the brooches pointed (mostly towards the left leg), but the brooch arrangement in general was fairly uniform. It was also clearly different from the arrangement common in Altenerding. Only one grave (683) stood out, with a brooch arrangement more like that of Altenerding. With small brooches this homogeneity is even more striking (fig. 7.3). All pairs of small brooches were positioned horizontally next to each other on the top of the chest. The remaining quarter was made up of single small brooches that were positioned centrally at the top of the chest. The brooch arrangement of Aubing was therefore extremely regular.

Crucially, at either cemetery the ways in which the brooches were positioned on the body was not determined by the types of brooches that were used. Different brooch types were all positioned in the same way, according to the norms that governed burial in the cemeteries at that time. This is particularly significant in the case of 'Ostrogothic' brooches. According to Volker Bierbrauer (1971, pp. 134-139), brooches found in the Ostrogothic areas of the Crimea, the Balkans and in Visigothic Spain in the early sixth century were usually worn as a pair and positioned head-down on the shoulders. Often the heads were turned slightly inwards. This position implies that the brooches were used to fasten a *peplos* dress, which at that time had gone out of fashion in all but these Gothic areas. These brooches were frequently associated with earrings with polyhedral attachments, a large belt buckle and a pair of arm rings. In contrast, the five individuals in Altenerding and the one in Aubing with 'Ostrogothic' brooches were not buried in this way. The individuals were also not associated with any of the other grave goods that have been considered typically Ostrogothic, such as a belt buckle with decorated rectangular plate.

Different brooch types were therefore not worn as part of different

⁷ The northern half of the cemetery of Aubing was excavated in 1938 and the remainder from 1960 to 1964. The grave plans from the earlier excavations were only schematic; Hermann Dannheimer (1998, p. 84), the director of the excavations of the 1960s, assumed that they were drawn after the end of the excavation, based on plans that were sketched on site. He doubted whether the positions of the grave goods were sufficiently accurately represented. However, while the grave plans are schematic, they are not repetitive or formulaic and they do show variation. In fact, the brooches are rarely drawn in exactly the same place. So while we can assume that the draughtsperson may have drawn the artefacts in the general place of where she or he thought they ought to be the drawings nevertheless do not look fabricated. Nevertheless a question mark remains over the veracity of the earlier drawings.

styles of costume, and brooch types on their own cannot be considered ethnic markers when placed in the context of costume as a whole. However, this does not mean that brooches did not carry any ethnic meaning at all. They were the most striking objects found in female graves. Their designs were varied and full of complex symbolism, depicting birds with huge beaks, animals with large nostrils and beady eyes and distorted human faces that, like a visual riddle, required some knowledge to understand. This symbolism may have been associated with the brooches' real or assumed geographical origins. The existence of brooches in a grave could have suggested that their wearer was associated with areas beyond the local, with foreign lands or mythical territories. Brooches were therefore carriers of a common identity that arose out of long-distance connections between populations.

In a local context, the variation between the two cemeteries may have taken on greater importance than the differences indicated by different brooch types. There were two distinct notions of appropriate burial at work here. In Altenerding this was less standardised and all-encompassing, whereas in Aubing the vast majority of graves with brooches conformed to a norm specific to that cemetery. If we accept that brooches had a functional purpose then the different positions of the brooches on the body imply different ways of dressing the dead. These differences represented powerful expressions of local identities.

10. The weapon spectrum: supra-regional variation

In contrast to the female assemblage, the male funerary assemblage has traditionally not been interpreted in terms of ethnicity but in terms of status and social stratification (e.g. Steuer 1968; Christlein 1973). Research thus enforced stereotypical gender roles: women were associated with horizontal networks between people and populations, whereas men were part of a hierarchical vertically structured world in which they were engaged in warfare, raiding and travel. This has resulted in potentially ethnic meanings of the male assemblage being almost completely ignored.

In a large-scale synthetic analysis, Frank Siegmund (1998; 2000) addressed this issue by aiming to determine early medieval ethnic groups in northern France and Germany on the basis of statistical differences in the use of grave goods across the whole area. He focused on the relative proportions of weapon, brooch and belt set types and was able to identify three bounded 'cultural models': West (along the Rhine valley and northern France), South (southern Germany) and East (split into modern Thuringia and the Elbe valley). He assigned these models to historically attested peoples: Franks, Alamans (putatively including the Bavarians), Thuringians and

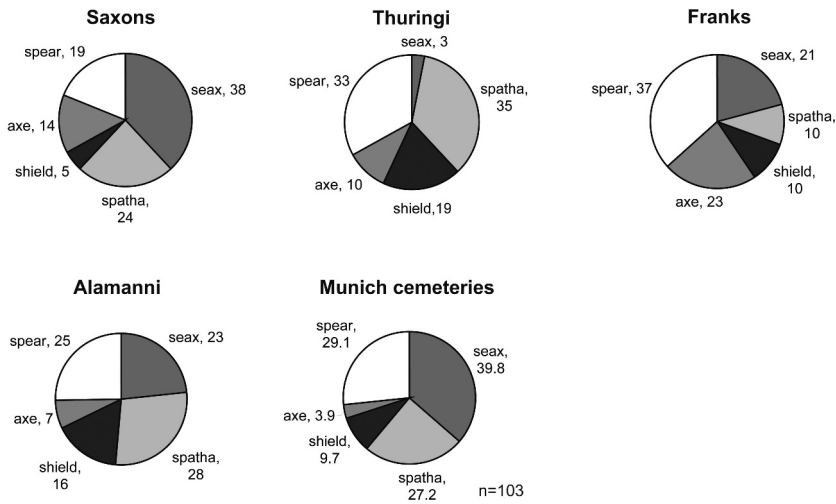


Fig. 8. The weapon spectrum in the sixth century. Saxons, Thuringians, Franks and Alamanni, according to SIEGMUND (1998, p. 184, redrawn). The cemeteries in the Munich gravel plain for comparison. Here seaxes by far outweighed other weapon types. *n* is the total number of weapons (seax, spatha, shield, spear, axe) and all numbers are percentages of *n*.

Saxons. Siegmund moved away from identifying the ethnicity of individuals based on individual artefacts. However, assigning tribal names to different patterns in the weapon spectrum is also problematic, in particular as he did not consider unnamed patterns that he could not associate with a specific tribe to be of equal ethnic significance.

If we compare the weapon spectrum of the cemeteries on the Munich gravel plain with that of other areas we find that differences were maintained on a regional rather than a local level (fig. 8). Moving geographically from northern France to Bavaria, the use of seaxes in the funeral increased and axes became less important. This regional variation remained relatively stable from the fifth to the seventh century (Siegmund 2000). Differences and similarities in the funerary practice were therefore maintained on a larger scale than was the case with the female burial practice.

11. Altenerding: the end of the burial areas

From later sixth century onwards the differences between the burial areas within the cemetery lessened and finally disappeared (fig. 9). Disc brooches were the only brooch types now in use. The four graves that contained them were spread across the southern and western part of the

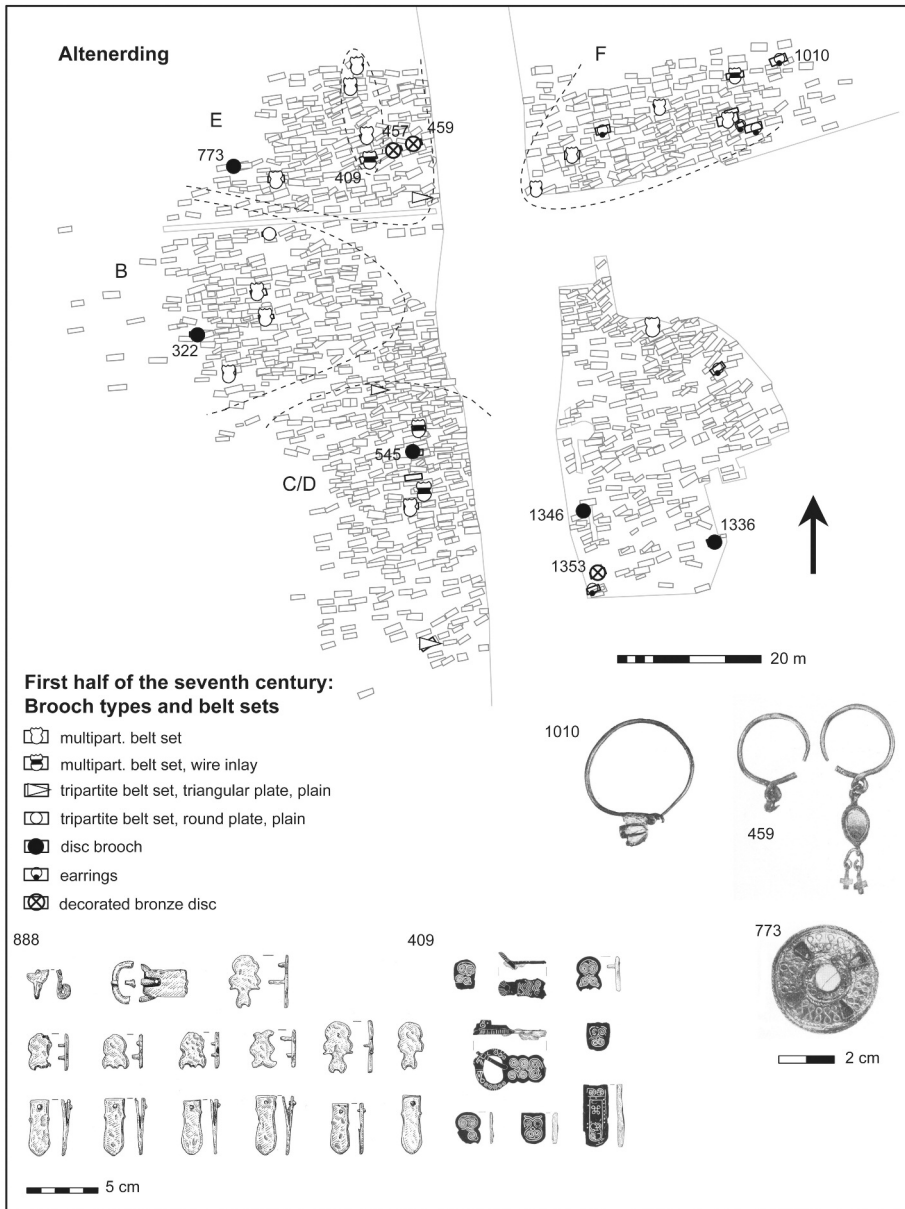


Fig. 9. The spatial organization of Altenerding during the second half of the sixth century [Artefacts reproduced with kind permission, © W. Sage].

cemetery. Other significant grave goods were openwork bronze discs that were part of girdle group assemblages, and earrings. While the openwork bronze discs were found across the whole cemetery, the bodies wearing earrings were predominantly buried in the north-east, in what had previously been area F. In a small number of graves tripartite belt sets were still used exclusively, and in a few other cases they were combined with multipartite belt sets, perhaps to be used as separate spatha and seax belts. However, the majority of belt sets in the late sixth and seventh centuries were of the multipartite kind and these were used across the whole cemetery without typological differentiation.

Some idea of the established areas was maintained; however the areas were now primarily defined by their wealth. Thus weapon-burials with three or four weapon types clustered in the north of the cemetery, in areas E and F. The graves with earrings and girdle groups that were located in the same areas also contained a greater variety and number of grave goods compared to the rather simply furnished graves with brooches.

12. Return to Empire

By the early seventh century, the transition to the one-brooch costume was complete. Brooches were now worn individually on the chest and used to fasten a cloak. This practice was typical for the Mediterranean regions and probably derived from Byzantine fashions (Koch 1998). The transition took place earlier in the Frankish areas where, according to Alexander Koch (1998), bow brooches had mostly gone out of fashion by AD 580, and slightly later in the Rhineland and southern Germany. A greater focus on Byzantine fashions was also evident in other elements of the funerary costume. Earrings, collars embroidered with beads and patterned silks can be seen on the mosaics of Ravenna and numerous other Byzantine images, and they also influenced funerary fashion in central Europe. Hajo Vierck (1981, p. 93) has shown how imperial fashions, particularly beaded collars and pectoral crosses, were imitated by Frankish and Ostrogothic royalty. In a less ostentatious version, such as bead necklaces with amethyst pendants and pendant earrings, these were also taken up in regular, though most probably still high-status, burial practice. Mechthild Schulze (1976, p. 150) interpreted the increasing number of glass beads in the sixth century and specifically the appearance of amethyst pendants in the late sixth century as having been influenced by Byzantine fashions. Strings of beads were increasingly worn around the upper arms or wrists and large beads found in the pelvic area were possibly attached to belts. The position of

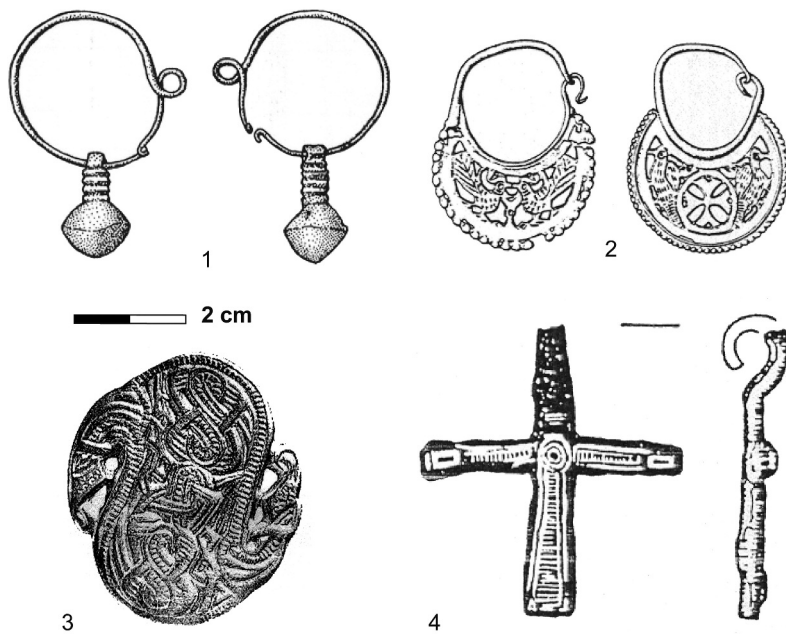


Fig. 10. Grave goods dating from the seventh century: [1] earrings with spherical pendants [Plienig, grave 109], [2] earrings with Christian symbolism [Steinhöring, grave 11], [3] S-brooch with style II decoration [Aubing, grave 7], [4] a cruciform girdle group attachment [Giesing, grave 224].

some of these beads implies that they were stitched onto the clothes, possibly in imitation of imperial fashions represented for example in the mosaics of San Vitale in Ravenna. This increased use of beads was most common in the Frankish regions and also spread to Alamannia; however, it was limited to graves of relatively high status.

Some of the earring types that were worn in the cemeteries were manufactured according to Byzantine ideals. Even though earrings were in use in the second half of the fifth and first half of the sixth centuries in Bavaria and Alamannia, they were by no means common. In the second half of the sixth century they disappeared and only reappeared from around AD 600. Uta von Freeden (1979) suggested that the early earrings were an Ostrogothic fashion. With the collapse of the Ostrogothic kingdom in Italy, Ostrogothic influence in Bavaria lessened and earrings went out of use. Subsequently, in the early seventh century earrings came back into fashion in southern Germany, possibly because of closer connections with Langobardic Italy. According to von Freeden the continued use of earrings in Francia was due to closer Frankish connections with the Byzantine Mediterranean regions. Earrings with spherical pendants (fig. 10.1) were found in

grave 109 in Pliening and possibly in grave 164 in Giesing, perhaps in combination with a beaded collar. Basket earrings, particularly of the fluted type (e.g. in grave 1010), were the most common type of earrings across all five cemeteries (fig. 9). Gerhard Fingerlin (1974) studied the distribution of Byzantine basket earrings and their local copies. He concluded that a small number of Byzantine imports limited to royal graves, for example that of Arnegundis in St Denis, or those of very high status, provided the impetus for the development of distinct imitation styles that were distributed much more widely and were worn in less elevated levels of society.

From the fifth to the seventh century, contacts between the eastern empire and the West – in the form of diplomacy, treaties, marriage alliances and of trade and gift-giving – had been maintained to varying degrees (Harris 2003). Within these long-established contacts, the Byzantine campaign to reconquer Italy had particular significance for the barbarian kingdoms of north-western Europe. The Franks had hoped to profit from the wars between the Byzantines and the Ostrogoths in the mid-sixth century by extending their own influence over northern Italy. Even though the Byzantines in fact only reconquered Ravenna and Rome and a narrow corridor in between, the Franks benefited significantly from being on their side and from the subsequent peace with the Langobards and they maintained close links with Byzantium throughout the seventh century (Jarnut 1996; Sansterre 1996). This led to far-reaching transformations in Frankish society. While kings had long legitimised their position by projecting an enduring *romantitas* (Kiielerich 1996), the wider population now also adopted, emulated and reinterpreted Byzantine fashions, perhaps from a desire to become part of a class of nobility in the manner of the imperial court. Simultaneously, the elaboration of the weapon-burial practice also points to an increasingly ranked and stratified society.

13. Universal symbols and local developments

Burial practice in the first half of the seventh century indicates fundamental social transformations. For the first time differences between cemeteries were no longer expressed through costume. Burial practice was now modelled on Byzantine fashions and emphasised the universal rather than the local. Thus earrings were very common in all cemeteries and amethyst beads were worn occasionally. In this phase we also find objects such as the S-brooches from Aubing (fig. 10.3) and garter strap ends decorated with style II. From the seventh century onwards, style II became ubiquitous across wide stretches of Europe, from Scandinavia to Langobardic Italy. Lotte Hedeager (1998; 2000) has interpreted this as evidence

for a unifying barbarian identity that was generated by a common understanding of the symbolism and myths expressed through style II. At the same time, another complex of universal symbols was provided by Christianity. For the first time we find crosses, such as on the earrings in grave 459 in Altenerding or on the girdle group pendants in grave 224 in Giesing and 224 in Steinhöring (fig. 10.4). Both types of symbolism drew on abstract ideas and ideologically appear a step removed from the earlier use of amulets such as crystal spheres, shells or even keys, whose power may have come from their direct properties rather than their use as symbols. That such a distinction was not very clear-cut is exemplified by grave 459 in Altenerding, which contained earrings with cruciform pendants and a girdle group with an attached cowrie shell and a bronze disc decorated with a radial pattern.

This universalism also became evident in the cemetery layout where distinct family identities that had been based on distant 'tribal' affiliations were no longer maintained. This took place at the same time as differences in the burial practices of different cemeteries ceased to be important. Many grave goods were now produced locally, rather than having distributions across large areas of Europe. Multipartite belt sets for example were typical for the Bavarian areas, and were also used in the eastern Alamannic regions and in Langobardic Italy, but not in the Frankish regions or central Germany. They were influenced by Avaric and Mediterranean styles but were quickly developed into a recognisable belt set type in their own right (Siegmond 2000, p. 231). Long-distance connections were thus supplanted by more local networks of metalwork production. From the family outwards local identities were now appear to have merged into a much more all-encompassing and more abstract identity that may have drawn on a sense of Bavaria as a discrete social and political entity.

The emergence of the Bavarian dukes as political agents in the mid-sixth century, the stability brought about by the peace treaty between the Franks and the Langobards in 591 (Jarnut 1996) and the close affiliation of the Frankish kings with the Byzantine emperors in the seventh century (Sansterre 1996), may have generated an idea of the Bavarian areas as belonging to a Bavarian polity with its own nobility and army and a relatively clearly defined territory. During the seventh century increasing social differentiation lead to the separation of high-status graves from cemeteries where the rest of the population was buried. High-status individuals were now buried in or near churches, possibly maintained by their own families, or under mounds (Stein 1967; Böhme 1996b). This has been interpreted as evidence of fundamental change from a society with limited status differentiation to a hierarchically ordered society, dominated by a land-holding nobility (e.g. Böhme 1996b; Steuer 2004).

14. Conclusion

In the period from the fifth to the later seventh century burial practice in the cemeteries on the Munich gravel plain developed in the context of wider social changes that took place during that time. Burial practice had to negotiate the tension between the attraction of *romanitas* and all that was associated with it — the Roman past in the west, present interaction with the Byzantine emperors in the east, both of which provided a source of legitimisation for worldly and religious powers — and the reality of living in a society that had ceased to be Roman and was instead determined by various barbarian political factions. In the fifth century the barbarian burial rite developed out of Roman and earlier barbarian predecessors. In the sixth century the concept of a barbarian burial practice reached its high-point with the emergence of the four-brooch costume for women and burial with weapons for men. It represented a powerful expression of barbarian identity. In the later sixth century both apparently Roman and Byzantine elements of the burial practice became common in the funerals among all strata of society. This change was connected to a resurgence of Christian practices in Bavaria and to an increasing stabilisation of the Bavarian polity under Frankish rule.

In Bavaria the changes in the burial practice of the fifth century have long been explained with the migration of the Bavarians into a land that had been part of the Roman empire but had subsequently been abandoned. The apparent cultural, ethnic or racial dichotomy between Romans and barbarians has served as an explanatory model for the sweeping cultural changes that are evident across the whole of central and north-western Europe during that time. In the past three decades the theoretical pendulum has swung the other way and the ‘dichotomy model’ has been replaced with the idea of a gradual transformation of the Roman world and the peaceful accommodation of barbarians and the notion of a duality of Romans and barbarians has been questioned.

However, we can see from the changes in burial practice that the ideas of what it meant to be Roman or to be barbarian were alive and relevant at the time and that people struggled to situate themselves and their dead in this framework of alternative identities. The development of bow brooches, which were central to the four-brooch costume, was influenced by earlier Roman army brooches. When their function changed, their meaning changed too, and they became a symbol of barbarian identity. Similarly, there were parallels between the development of style II as a universal barbarian decorative scheme at the end of the sixth and the early seventh century and the increasing decorative use of Christian symbolism, which was

also universally readable. Indeed, on gold foil crosses in Alamannia and Langobardic Italy both converged. Notions of *romanitas* or of being barbarian were not dichotomous in an exclusive sense but rather dependent on each other.

Ethnicity is an elusive category, since there is no straightforward or direct relationship between material culture and ethnicity. Objects can have many meanings; these meanings can change or be of different relevance in different social situations. Like the material culture through which it was expressed, ethnicity in the cemeteries on the gravel plain had situational relevance. This means that differences or similarities in funerary practice would have been noticed and become relevant only in relation to the participants' own identities and place in the social structure. Burial practice could convey various meanings at the same time. General similarities in dress and use of brooches were an expression of a supra-regional identity, while local differences in the way brooches were pinned created a sense of opposition to funerary customs in other cemeteries and thereby a sense of local identity. Both may have been equally relevant. The ethnic and group identities expressed in the cemeteries on the gravel plain were nested, ranging from supra-regional cultural affiliations to the identities of individuals. The notion of situational ethnicity implies that identities were relevant in specific social contexts. The concept of nested identities adds to this by being more inclusive: different levels of identities could exist side by side. Such a complex of contrasting and inclusive identities was not maintained without tensions. Ethnic identity did not exist in a social void. The material culture used for expressing ethnic identity also conveyed meanings about gender, kinship and other social networks and the boundaries between these different identities were fluid and cannot easily be separated.

Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to Professor Matthew Johnson and Dr Alison Gascoigne for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper. Any errors and inconsistencies of course remain my own.

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