

Summary

On the "Kleinbüel", on a flat hill on the outskirts of the village of Rodersdorf (canton Solothurn, Switzerland), during the Early Middle Ages, a community buried their dead. In the year 2000, in the context of a planned development, the cemetery was rediscovered and subsequently excavated in two campaigns. In addition to the 57 graves belonging to the Early Medieval cemetery, not only were the remains of a pit-house from the same period discovered, but also a temple, smithy and watermill dating to the Roman period.

Rodersdorf lies in the upper Leimen valley, to the south-west of Basel, at the foot of the Blauen, a mountain range belonging to the Jura. Since prehistoric times, it has been part of an important transport route. The name ending "-dorf" points to a foundation in the Early Medieval period, the first written reference dates to the 12th century.

The cemetery lay within the area of a Roman sanctuary. The graves were aligned to the sanctuary's walls, which must have been visible when the cemetery was established. Some of the graves even intentionally disturb the wall foundations. In some cases rectangular openings in the wall foundations can be observed, created by the wooden grave constructions. In the north and the west, the limits of the cemetery were reached. There is a possibility that the cemetery could continue on the other side of the Kleinbühlstrasse, although excavations have not yet taken place here. To the south, further graves were destroyed by a large modern disturbance. Here, the skeletons of 80 individuals were retrieved from several intersecting pit structures.

The graves of the cemetery are laid out in six rows, a seventh row cuts through some graves. The graves are orientated from west to east, the head of the deceased lies in the west, the feet in the east. The first burials were placed within the confines of the sanctuary and the cemetery developed subsequently in an outwards direction to the east. A pit house was discovered to the north west a few metres from the graves. Based on comparisons, it dates to around 600 AD, and was probably in use at the same time as the cemetery.

In most cases, the deceased were buried in a wooden construction, timbered on site and backfilled with stones. The precise alignment of the stones allows for a reconstruction of the measurements of the timber constructions. In some cases, the metal fittings and nails belonging to these wooden constructions were retrieved. Four burials are probably simple earth graves: the missing stones as well as the presence of

a burial shroud (as observed by the anthropologist) are the relevant indications. One of the deceased was buried in a dry stonewall grave chamber. A further grave shows traces of a composite construction, consisting of monolithic upright slabs for the head and feet regions and layered stones for the side walls. Two stone slab chamber graves are the exception; they were created towards the end of the cemetery's period of use.

Four of the graves were used for two individuals: in three of these cases a secondary burial was observed and in one case a double burial took place. Three double graves were excavated; the burials were separated by a row of stones in the middle. The arms of the deceased were either slightly angled or lay outstretched next to the body. The only exception from the usual gesture are the arms of a woman lying at an angle with both hands clasped.

Despite being forbidden in Early Medieval times, grave robbery was apparently tolerated by society and also carried out on the Kleinbüel cemetery. As the remaining scabbard fittings show, the seax is missing from two male graves. The belt was probably stolen from a female grave.

The deceased were buried in the clothes they wore while alive. Only the imperishable components were preserved, i. e. mainly metal objects. Of the clothing itself, only the corroded remains close to the metal were preserved.

In the case of the women, the belt was their most important grave good. There were two types of belt fashion: Either the belts were opulent and were worn visibly or they were worn inconspicuously and were hidden beneath the billows of the tunic. In all graves, the belts were found in the waist region, meaning that the women wore them as they did during their lifetime. Only in one grave was the belt wrapped in a piece of cloth and laid in its original position on the body. Amongst the belts, two bronze examples, decorated in the animal style stand out as well as one with silver and one with brass inlays. The bronze belt fittings were probably produced in the region of Kaiseraugst (canton Aargau). Further comparative pieces can be found in the vicinity. The belt with silver inlays may have tried to imitate Frankish models. The belt with brass inlays shows Christian symbols and is identical to a belt from the Bassecourt Cemetery (canton Jura). The belts of the other women are simple buckles of iron or bronze. At the cemetery's beginning they are narrow, becoming a lot wider, only to turn narrow again at the end of the cemetery. A chatelaine is attested in two cases. Two women

wore leg bindings closed with buckles. Two women possessed a cloak with brooches. One is a garnet disk brooch, which once belonged to a pair. The other is a brooch, made from pressblech of the burgundo-romanic type. Further grave goods were deposited in the shape of jewellery: earrings in three cases, finger rings in two, necklaces with glass- and amber pearls in four cases. The comparisons of the pearls of the four necklaces allow the respective female graves to be dated.

The burial equipment of the male graves is stereotypical. The deceased were given a seax in its scabbard along with the belt. Only at the beginning of the cemetery was the belt girdled together with the seax. Just as with the female graves, the belt buckles are the most important burial goods in the male graves. In the 6th century, they are simple buckles, to which, in the last quarter of the century, a plate is added. To begin with, the plates are round before becoming bell-shaped. Later on, a counter-plate and a back-plate are added to the belt. Two belt fittings with silver inlays come from graves, a further one is a stray find. Two men were buried with a bronze belt fitting, one of which may come from the south of France. Belt pouches can only be proven indirectly via the remains of their contents. In most cases, the grave goods were laid to the right of the deceased, as the position of the pouch contents, the belt plates and the seax with its metal scabbard fittings proves. In one case they were on the left hand side of the body. One male suffered from a groin hernia, which was treated with hernia bandage, the latter buried with him after his death.

The cemetery was dated using external comparisons. In the case of the female and male graves, a phase system was developed, which could be connected with the help of the belt buckle types. The cemetery was thus in use from the last quarter of the 6th century to the later 7th century AD.

The burials consist of male and female individuals, the most of which are between 40 and 60 years old. Infants and babies were probably buried in a different site. The individuals were very healthy; the most common illness was arthritis, more rarely deficiency syndromes could be determined on the skeletons.

The Rodersdorf community buried their dead according to the Romanic way: A reduced burial custom was practiced. Only half of the deceased received grave goods. Especially in the case of the female graves, the ties between western and eastern traditions is striking. Some of the deceased reveal themselves to be Christians through depictions of the

cross or through other Christian symbolism. The grave goods of the males and females of Rodersdorf show connections to the Burgundian, Frankish and Alamannic regions. The pressblech disc brooches, the belt buckles of type B and the belt buckles of the Bülach type can be traced to the Burgundia. Frankish influences are to be found in the strong presence of the seax amongst the grave goods as in the belt buckles imitating type A. The main distribution area of the plate-less iron buckles of the female graves and the wire earrings can be traced to the Alamannic territories. The unique, local character of the Rodersdorf community is shown by the hybridity of the western and eastern dress elements and in the high-quality cast-bronze objects, which were probably produced in the vicinity.

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