McDONALD INSTITUTE CONVERSATIONS

Delicate urbanism in context:
Settlement nucleation in pre-Roman Germany

The DAAD Cambridge Symposium

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with contributions from
Ines Balzer, Manuel Fernández-Götz, Colin Haselgrove, Oliver Nakoinz, Axel G. Posluschny, Gerd Stegmaier, Anthony Snodgrass, Peter Wells, Günther Wieland, Katja Winger and Caroline von Nicolai

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Chapter 9

Discussing Iron Age urbanism in Central Europe: some thoughts

Manuel Fernández-Götz (Edinburgh)

The Cambridge workshop 'Urbanism in First Millennium BC (Iron Age) Germany' provided an excellent opportunity for discussing recent developments in Iron Age archaeology in Central Europe. The last two decades have witnessed a spectacular increase in quantitative and qualitative data related to early centralization and urbanization processes in Iron Age Germany, from the large-scale project on the *Fürstensitze* (cf. Krausse 2008; Krausse and Beilharz 2010; Krausse et al. 2016) to the publication of new excavation monographs about key *oppida* such as *Manching* (Winger 2015) and *Martberg* (Nickel 2013). The papers presented at the workshop combined a presentation of new fieldwork results with some wider reflections on aspects such as the role of ritual and the interdependence between central places and their rural hinterland. Rather than addressing individual contributions, in this brief discussion piece I will concentrate on some general remarks from a comparative perspective. I have structured my comments in four main points: 1) The complexity of Iron Age agglomerations and the applicability of the term 'urban'; 2) The need of cross-cultural comparisons that go beyond the models of cities in the Classical world; 3) The contribution of the concept of 'low-density urbanism'; and 4) the role of open spaces.

The urban question

Thanks to the research carried out in the last few decades, it has become increasingly evident that the terms *Fürstensitze* and *oppida* cover a heterogeneous reality (Fernández-Götz et al. 2014b; Fichtl 2005; Krausse & Beilharz 2010; Sievers and Schönfelder 2012; see also Posluschny this volume). Neither of them represent a uniform group of settlements, but rather they were centres of power that could often vary enormously in terms of when they were established, their inner area, their architecture and the manner in which they functioned as central places. Thus, rather than making general statements about the urban or non-urban character of Iron Age agglomerations, we should base our assessments on contextual analyses that take into account the specific characteristics of each site. In this sense, I do not share the reluctance of some German scholars in applying terms such as 'urban', 'city' or 'town' to Iron Age temperate Europe; and it is interesting to note that different research traditions can play a role in the use of nomenclatures, since British, US, French or Spanish archaeologists are usually less hesitant in speaking about Iron Age 'cities'.

Geography, and in particular the academic distinction between the study areas of 'classical' and 'prehistoric' archaeology, can sometimes heavily influence interpretations. When visiting the *Heuneburg* a few years ago (cf. Smith 2014), my American colleague Michael E. Smith said that the discussion on the urban nature of the settlement reminded him of the debate around the North American mega-site of *Cahokia* (Pauketat 2009). If *Cahokia* were located in Mesoamerica, no scholar would hesitate in classifying it as an urban site, but, because it is in the middle of the Midwest, there has been an ongoing discussion on the matter. Similarly, if the *Heuneburg* or *Manching* were located in Central Italy, scholars would have little doubt in professing their urban character. From my perspective, some of the sites encompassed under the broad terms *Fürstensitze* and *oppida* were clearly not urban (e.g. *Zarten*/*Tarodunum* or *Finsterlohr*, which have yielded virtually no sign of any internal occupation). However, at the same time, we do have good arguments to classify other settlements like the *Heuneburg*, *Bourges*, *Manching*, *Corent*, *Titelberg* and *Bibracte* as cities or towns on the basis of criteria such as evidence of a preconceived plan, housing a population of several thousand inhabitants and bringing together different categories of population and activities (cf. Smith 2016

Table 9.1. *Archaeological urban attributes, with an application to the Heuneburg and Manching (after Smith 2016).*

Attribute	Type of variable	*Heuneburg*	*Manching*
Settlement size:			
population	M	5000	5000–10,000
area (ha.)	M	100	380
density	M	50	13–26
Social impact (urban functions):			
royal palace	P/A	-	-
royal or high aristocratic burials	P/A	x	-
large (high-order) temples	P/A	-	x
civic architecture	S	1	1
craft production	S	2	3
market or shops	S	?	?
Built environment			
fortifications	P/A	x	x
gates	P/A	x	x
connective infrastructure	P/A	x	x
intermediate-order temples	P/A	-	x
residences, lower elite	P/A	x	x
formal public space	P/A	-	x
planning of epicentre	P/A	x	x
Social and economic features:			
burials, lower elite	P/A	x	x
social diversity (non-class)	P/A	x	x
neighbourhoods	P/A	x	x
agriculture within settlement	P/A	x	x
imports	S	1	2

for an approach based on archaeological urban attributes) (Table 9.1). Moreover, as indicated by Caroline von Nicolai (this volume), some open agglomerations are closer to a contextual definition of urbanism than many fortified sites, so that we need to acknowledge their importance in Iron Age settlement patterns and society (see also Fichtl 2013; Salač 2014). Finally, we need to pay more attention to the interactions and interdependence between agglomerations and their rural environment (Fig. 9.1), as Günther Wieland and Gerd Stegmaier have rightly pointed out (this volume). In fact, it can be argued that one of the best ways to expand our understanding of Iron Age central places is to study the landscape around them.

Why we need to expand our comparisons

My second point concerns the need for placing Iron Age urbanism within the broader field of comparative urban studies. Despite the considerable attention that hillforts and *oppida* have attracted since the nineteenth century, Iron Age centralization processes have rarely been considered from an anthropological perspective (with some exceptions such as John Collis' 1984 seminal book on the *oppida*, which introduced concepts such as 'solar central place' and 'dendritic system'). Most approaches have focused on comparisons with the Classical world (particularly with Greek and Roman cities), interpreting the appearance of major settlements in Temperate Europe as a 'barbarian' attempt to emulate Mediterranean urbanization. The widespread distinction between prehistoric and classical studies and therefore between 'civilized' south vs. 'barbarian' north carries important implications for the way Iron Age urbanization processes have been traditionally examined and understood. This includes the use of 'checklist approaches' in which the urban character of a site is determined by its similarities with the supposed 'standard' model of classical cities, or the maintenance of diffusionist views in which cultural change among 'passive' Central European societies is dependent on the stimuli coming from 'active' southern

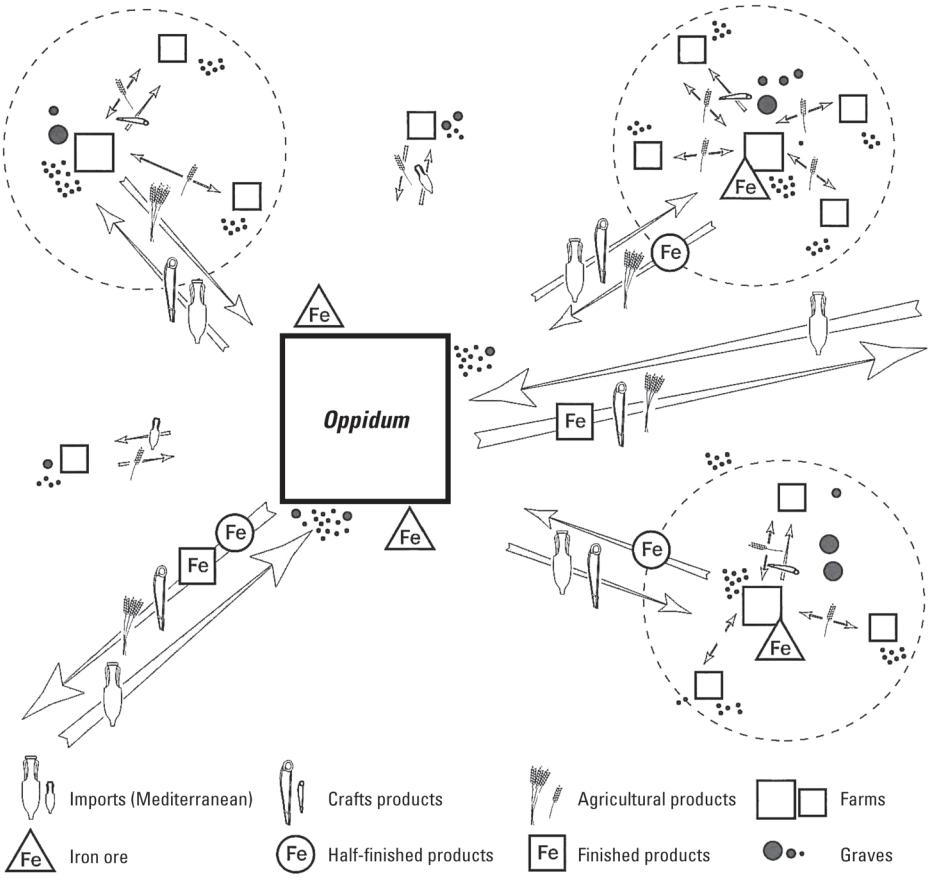

Figure 9.1. *Theoretical diagram of relations between the oppidum and its surrounding rural territory, based on the data of the Titelberg area during La Tène D (after Fichtl 2005, based on Metzler 1995).*

civilizations (see for example Kimmig 1983). As John Collis has rightly expressed it: 'One of the problems with the "diffusionist" model that has been applied to temperate Europe is that the characteristics of urban settlements have been largely defined in terms of the cities of the classical world; it is thus necessary to determine to what extent the European sites conform to this classical ideal. If, however, we expand our horizons in time and space, looking at urbanization on a worldwide scale […], we see a much greater variety in the urban phenomenon, of which the classical Greek and Roman sites are just one type (or more – there is also variety in the characteristics of classical towns); the urban sites in temperate Europe, as in medieval Europe, are based on different principles and characteristics' (Collis 2016: 265–6).

Rather than seeing urbanization north of the Alps as dependent on the Mediterranean, it is better to envisage two distinct zones evolving in parallel and in close contact with one another (Collis 2014). Having said this, I still consider it useful to establish comparisons and analogies with nucleation processes in the ancient Mediterranean, and Katja Winger (this volume) offers an enlightening example of how such an approach might work. But in order to achieve a better understating of Iron Age urbanization, it is useful to adopt a broader approach based on the comparative analysis of complex societies (cf. Smith 2012) and the multiple pathways to aggregation and urbanization (see for example Birch 2013; Marcus and Sabloff 2008; Storey 2006; Yoffee 2015). In this way, we can go beyond colonial dualisms and reductionist perspectives that obscure the rich diversity of urban forms in pre-industrial societies. Concepts such as Roland Fletcher's notion of 'low-density' urbanism (Fletcher 2009, 2012), Michael E. Smith's study of neighbourhoods as universal features of urban life (Smith 2010), or Monica L. Smith's discussion on the role of 'empty' spaces in urban sites (Smith 2008) can provide particularly fruitful insights for future research, helping to place Iron Age urbanism in Temperate Europe within a wider comparative framework.

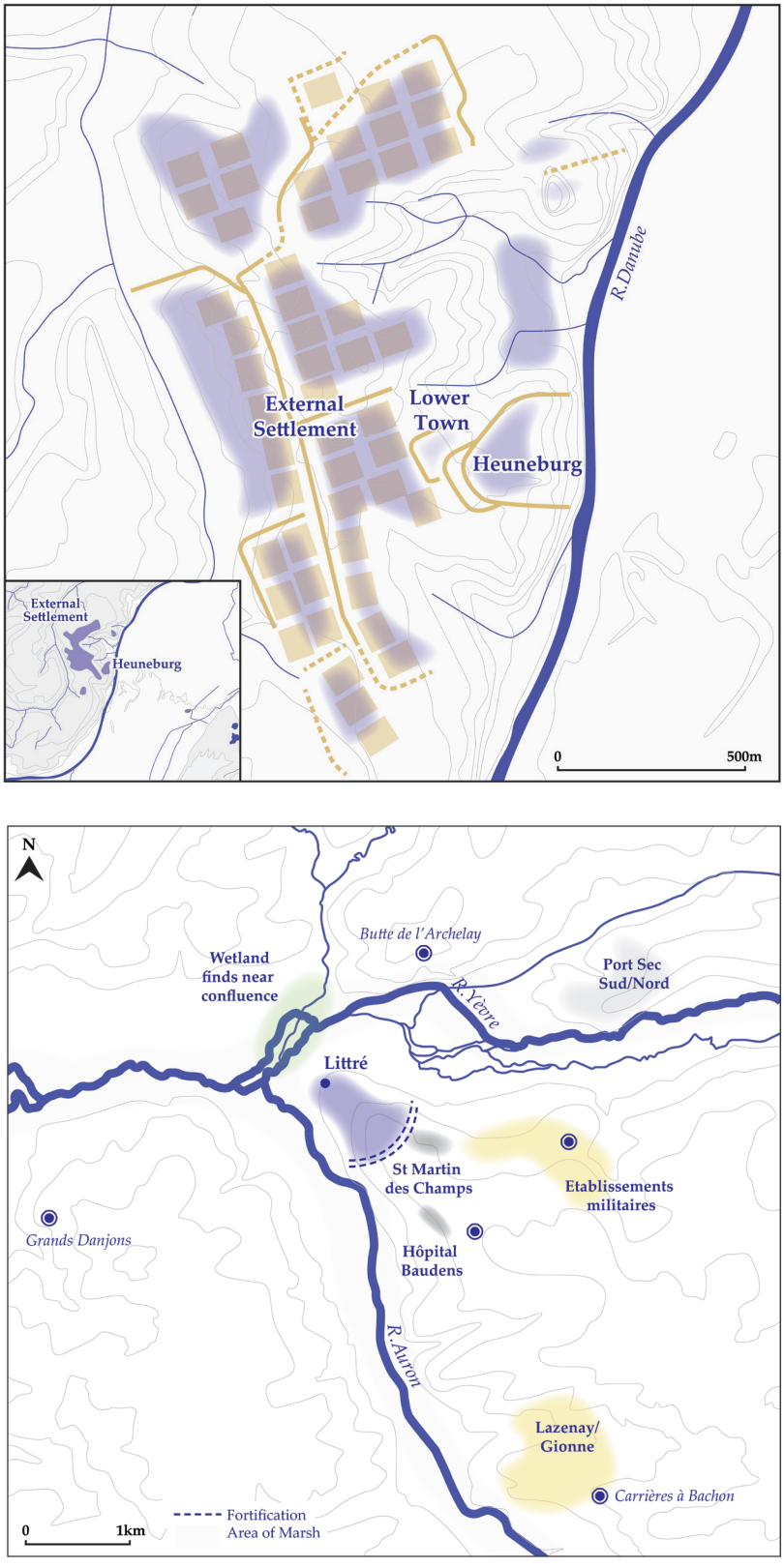

Figure 9.2. *Two examples of Iron Age low-density urbanism. (Top) Heuneburg, first half of the sixth century* BC*; (above) Bourges, fifth century* BC *(after Fernández-Götz and Ralston 2017).*

Figure 9.3. *Idealized model of the Heuneburg agglomeration, with the densely occupied hilltop plateau in the background, the lower town, and a low-density occupation in the outer settlement with farmstead-like compounds (after Krausse et al. 2016).*

The contribution of low-density urbanism

In this paper, I would like to highlight the work of the Sydney Professor Roland Fletcher and in particular his concept of low-density urbanism (Fletcher 2007, 2009, 2012). In contrast to concentrated, densely occupied settlements that would fit within Gordon Childe's classic model of urbanism (Childe 1950; for example Early Bronze Age *Ur* or *Uruk*, and Classical *Rome*), throughout history many urban sites all around the world have been characterized by their large areas and manifold functions but also by low-density occupation of often fewer than 50 people per hectare. Although cases such as *Angkor*, *Cahokia*, *Great Zimbabwe* and *Co Loa* are among the most famous examples, a significant number of Late Prehistoric European sites can also be added to the list, including the fourth millennium BC Trypillia mega-sites from Ukraine (Chapman and Gaydarska 2016).

As indicated by Fletcher himself, the Late Iron Age *oppida* also fit well into the notion of low-density urbanism, and the same can be said about the outer settlement of the *Heuneburg* or the nature of the Late Hallstatt and Early La Tène agglomeration at Bourges (Fig. 9.2). All these sites cover large areas but generally present a low population density per hectare. If we accept the estimations of 5000–10,000 inhabitants that have been proposed for both *Manching* and *Bibracte*, these major Late La Tène sites would have had a population density of 13–26 inhabitants per hectare in the case of *Manching* (380 hectares) and 37–74 for the second fortification phase of *Bibracte* (135 hectares). For its part, the 5000 inhabitants proposed for the 100 hectares agglomeration of the *Heuneburg* in the early sixth century BC would result in a population density of 50 inhabitants per hectare. M. G. Smith's term 'rurban' (Smith 1972) encapsulates the idea of the domination of many Iron Age agglomerations by unbuilt space, often more similar to farm landscapes than our traditional notions of urban quarters. However, we need to be aware of the complexity of existing situations: in the case of the *Heuneburg*, we observe an interesting combination between a synchronous very high-density occupation in the area of the hilltop plateau and a low-density pattern in the outer settlement (Fig. 9.3). At the same time, neither the Trypillia mega-sites nor

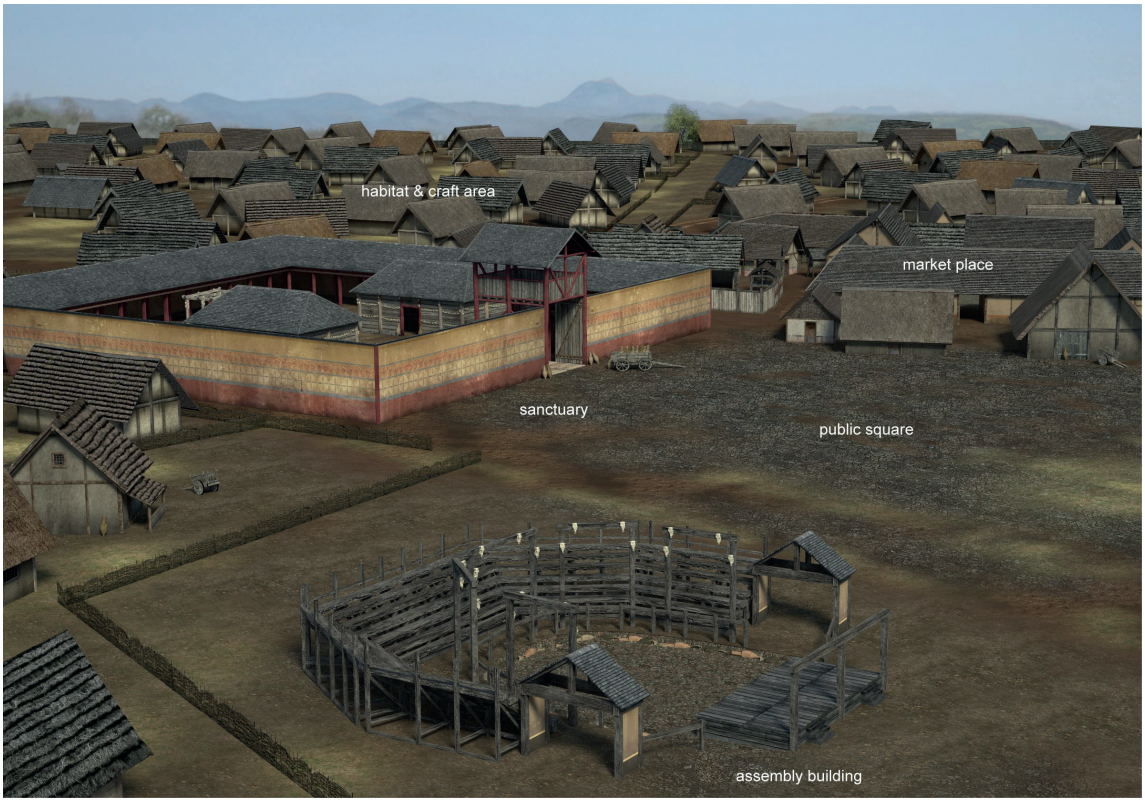

Figure 9.4. *Idealized reconstruction of the centre of the oppidum of Corent with main public structures, including the central sanctuary, the public square and a building interpreted as the presumed meeting place of the Arvernian senate (after Poux 2014).*

most Temperate European Iron Age agglomerations follow Fletcher's model of an urban trajectory in which initially high-density cities morph into increasingly large but also increasingly low-density settlements.

Unfinished projects or communal spaces?

A final and closely related topic concerns the role of open spaces. As mentioned above, many *oppida* enclose large areas but present a low population density per hectare. Even those sites with a significant internal occupation present large free areas inside the fortified space. The layout of the walls was often determined by the local topography, but, in addition, the 'empty spaces' (Smith 2008) could serve a variety of economic and social purposes, from areas for agriculture and cattle breeding to spaces for political assemblies and religious celebrations (Fig. 9.4), and places for refuge of the rural population in case of danger. The recurrent existence of large open areas within the *oppida* suggests that these unoccupied spaces were in fact one of their principal elements, playing a fundamental role in the negotiation of control over people and resources. Rather than interpreting the existence of open spaces and low-density occupation as an indication for 'unfinished' projects, we should recognise that in many cases they constitute a defining characteristic of major settlements. To name only one extra-European example, even in the Mesoamerican megalopolis of *Teotihuacan* there were extensive open areas for agriculture (Cowgill 2015). In summary, urban open spaces are widely found in both ancient and modern cities (Smith 2008; Stanley et al. 2012; Woolley 2003), so that their presence in the *oppida* does not contradict the urban character of at least some of these sites.