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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Contributors

Ines Balzer
Deutsches Archäologisches Institut Rom, Via Valadier 37, 00193 Rome, Italy.

Manuel Fernández-Götz
Lecturer in Archaeology, School of History, Classics and Archaeology, University of Edinburgh, William Robertson Wing, Old Medical School, Teviot Place, Edinburgh, EH8 9AG, UK.

Colin Haselgrove
School of Archaeology and Ancient History, University of Leicester, University Road, Leicester, LE1 7RH, UK.

Oliver Nakoinz
Johanna-Mestorf Akademie / Institut für Ur- und Frühgeschichte, Christian-Albrechts-Universität, Leibnizstraße 3, D - 24118 Kiel, Germany.

Axel G. Posluschny
Keltenwelt am Glauberg, Am Glauberg 1, 63695 Glauburg, Germany.

Gerd Stegmaier
Institut für Ur- und Frühgeschichte und Archäologie des Mittelalters, Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen, Schloss Hohentübingen, D-72070 Tübingen, Germany.

Anthony Snodgrass
Faculty of Classics, Sidgwick Avenue, Cambridge, CB3 9DA, UK.

Simon Stoddart
Magdalene College, Cambridge, CB3 0EU, UK.

Peter Wells
Department of Anthropology, University of Minnesota, 395 HHH Ctr, 301 19th Ave S, Minneapolis, MN 55455, USA.

Günther Wieland
Landesamt für Denkmalpflege im Regierungspräsidium Stuttgart, Archäologische Denkmalpflege Ref. 84.1, Fachgebiet Prospektion, Dokumentation und Archäobiowissenschaften, Berliner Str. 12, 73728 Esslingen, Germany.

Katja Winger
Institut für Prähistorische Archäologie, Freie Universität Berlin, Fabeckstr. 23-25, 14195 Berlin, Germany.

Caroline von Nicolai
Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, Institut für Vor- und Frühgeschichtliche Archäologie und Provinzialrömische Archäologie, Geschwister-Scholl-Platz 1, 80539 München, Germany.

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Chapter 12

On the origins and context of urbanism in prehistoric Europe

Peter Wells (Minnesota)

The workshop from which these papers derive, organized by Simon Stoddart, presented a highly informative and richly stimulating overview of current research on urbanism in Germany. I wish here to expand briefly on four themes that emerge from the papers. These are ritual, design, communication, and interregional integration.

But first, I would like to make an observation on the importance of the archaeological study of the Iron Age in Germany. Germany has a very strong and active tradition of archaeological research and publication and thus offers an unusually rich database for the study of questions related to urbanism in prehistoric Europe. Furthermore, with its central location in Europe, the archaeology of Germany connects with the archaeology of other countries to the north, south, east, and west. Thus the patterns that can be recognized in the archaeological record of Germany can be linked with those in other regions of the continent.

Ritual

Several of the papers emphasize ritual as an important factor in the emergence of centres and urbanism in the Iron Age landscape. *Manching* in Germany and *Corent* in France have been repeatedly cited as exemplary of the link between ritual and urbanism (Fernández-Götz 2012, 2014d). As Caroline von Nicolai emphasizes in the case of *Manching*, and Gerd Stegmaier for both *Manching* and *Heidengraben*, much specific evidence can link ritual activity to the formation of urban centres.

I would like to emphasize the much broader concept of 'ritual' that is gaining ground in theoretical approaches to later prehistoric Europe, particularly among British archaeologists (e.g. Bradley 2003). In our post-Enlightenment minds, we tend to conceptualize ritual as something distinct from everyday life (Brück 1999), with special places and material culture associated with the performance of rituals, most often of a religious nature. But most human behaviour is 'ritualized' (Berggren and Stutz 2010, 185). The way we prepare meals, the way we interact with our colleagues, the way we dispose of rubbish – all of these behaviors are ritualized in the sense that people perform them repeatedly in more or less the same way, and in ways that are both specific to the cultural milieu in which they live and to some degree ideosyncratic to the individual. Stephen Wilson's *The Magical Universe: Everyday Ritual and Magic in Pre-Modern Europe* (2000) and Roberta Gilchrist's *Medieval Life: Archaeology and the Life Course* (2012) show the importance of this kind of everyday ritual in medieval times, when we have access to both textual and material evidence to examine ritual performances and their purposes. Ritual practice was thus an essential part of all people's lives in the past as it is in the present. This aspect of ritual is important to bear in mind when we contemplate the role of ritual in the development of larger places, such as the *Heuneburg* and the *oppida*.

What may be different with regard to ritual performance associated with the development of the large and complex settlements such as Manching and Heidengraben was the 'institutionalization' of ritual – the creation of special spaces for ritual, such as the 'temple' at *Manching* and the features at *Corent* in France (Poux 2006). I would suggest that this development is related more to the scale of the larger communities than to a fundamental change in ritual practice. No doubt individuals continued to practice their everyday rituals at the same time that spaces and structures for communal and more formal ritual practices were developed in the larger and more complex settlements.

A question worth investigating is, can we understand the ritual practices apparent at the *oppida* in

terms of a gradual increase in scale and complexity of ritual practice, or was there a fundamental 'jump' from smaller-scale ritual practice to that apparent at the *oppida*.

Design

As I have argued (Wells 2008, 2012, 2016), fundamental changes in design and representation happened at the same time as the increasing complexity and scale of settlement in Iron Age Europe. The fundamental design principal in the latter part of the Early Iron Age (Hallstatt D) was geometric. The pottery at the *Heuneburg* and at the *Burrenhof* (cited by Stegmaier), the fibulae at the *Heuneburg*, and the patterns on the dagger at *Hochdorf*, to mention a few examples, are all based on geometric elements. In the Early La Tène period, geometric structures gave way to floral patterns and stylized representations of animals and humans.

At the time of the formation of the *oppida*, another fundamental change took place in design. In most regions, pottery became plainer (but there were exceptions [Guichard 1987]), and most of it was wheel-made, mass produced, and unpainted. The principal decoration was vertical linear patterning. Similarly, fibulae became much plainer than they had been, and forms were designed to be mass produced (Drescher 1955). Representations of animals became much more naturalistic than they had been in the earlier phases of La Tène (Sievers 2017).

The striking plainness of material culture in the final phase of La Tène (La Tène D), relative to that of the earlier periods of the Iron Age, is closely related to the greatly increased scale of settlement with communities made up of larger populations, and to the expansion of economic activity, particularly evident in the scale of production of iron tools and in the growth of trade, both regional and inter-regional (Wells 2012, 214–21).

Are we to understand this new plainness in material culture simply as a *reflection* of the social and economic changes associated with urbanism, or was it in some way *instrumental* in those changes? We need to consider not only why potters and metalsmiths changed the nature of the objects they manufactured, but also how people *responded to* the material culture that they saw and used (discussion in Wells 2008). We need to think about the role that material culture, and specifically the design of material culture, played as agent (Gosden 2005, Robb 2010) in the formation of new mindsets that may have given rise to, or at least paved the way for, urban settlements of the *oppida* (Wells 2012, 196–9, 209–21).

Communication

Urban societies require more complex systems of communication than do rural societies. In Gordon Childe's (1950) original formulation of definitions of civilization and urbanism, writing was one of the essential elements. In the Near East, in the Shang Bronze Age of China, in Classical Greece, and in Mesoamerica, the formation and growth of cities was accompanied by the development and use of writing. Evidence seems to indicate that the societies of temperate Europe did not become 'literate' until after the Roman conquests, when the Mediterranean society introduced writing into its provinces.

Yet many traces of writing have been identified in Iron Age Europe, such as the Korisios sword from *Port* in Switzerland (Wyss 1956) and sherds bearing Greek or Latin letters at *Manching* (Krämer 1982). Caesar (I, 29) (Edwards 1917) mentions Helvetians with documents written in Greek. But there is no evidence for general use of writing at the *oppida*, though we might expect it, with all of the evidence for mercantile interaction with the Roman world. No evidence of writing has been forthcoming at the *Heuneburg*.

How can this be? If the *Heuneburg* had a population of 5000 people, how were interactions, and especially records of production and trade, managed? At the *oppida*, how were the complex systems of supply, production, distribution, and export coordinated without writing, which was so essential to urban centres in other societies? There must have been systems of transmitting messages over distances, and of keeping records, economic and historical. Of what did these systems consist? Can we identify means of transmitting and recording information at the Iron Age urban centres (see Zeidler 2003)?

Scholars studying complex societies in Mesoamerica and South America have argued for much broader definitions of 'writing' than the way we understand writing in the ancient societies of Asia and the Mediterranean region (Boone and Mignolo 1994). Perhaps applying some of their ideas to the archaeology of the Iron Age societies of Europe would lead us to recognizing manifestations of systems of communication that we currently overlook. Identifying such systems would open a vast new area for research into urbanism in the Iron Age.

Interregional interaction

Finally, I would argue that to fully understand urbanism in Iron Age Germany and Europe as a whole, we need to take a much broader perspective and look at connections and interactions not just with the societies of other parts

of temperate Europe and of the Mediterranean world, but with Eurasia as a whole, as a recent volume has suggested (Fernández-Götz and Krausse 2016). In *The Axial Age and Its Consequences* (Bellah and Joas 2012), authors argue that during the final millennium BC, especially during its second half, fundamental changes in economy, social organization, and worldview (including what we would call religion) occurred over much of Eurasia (see also Wells 2012, 200–1). We would gain a different and expanded perspective on the emergence of the Early Iron Age centres such as the *Heuneburg*, and of the *oppida* during the final centuries BC, if we investigated these developments within the broader context of the changes taking place in Eurasia as a whole.