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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Contents

Contributors vi
Figures vii
Tables viii

Chapter 1 Introduction 1
Simon Stoddart (Cambridge)

Part 1 **Regional differences** 7

Chapter 2 Early Iron Age *Fürstensitze* – some thoughts on a not-so-uniform phenomenon 9
Axel G. Posluschny (Glauberg)
Chapter 3 Urbanism of the oppida: a case study from Bavaria 27
Caroline von Nicolai (Munich)
Chapter 4 Ritual, society and settlement structure: driving forces of urbanization during the second and first century BC in southwest Germany 41
Gerd Stegmaier (Tübingen)

Part 2 **The rural dimension** 49

Chapter 5 The rural contribution to urbanism: late La Téne Viereckschanzen in southwest Germany 51
Günther Wieland (Esslingen)

Part 3 **The funerary dimension** 61

Chapter 6 Burial mounds and settlements: the funerary contribution to urbanism 63
Ines Balzer (Rome)

Part 4 **Comparative approaches** 85

Chapter 7 Quantifying Iron Age urbanism (density and distance) 87
Oliver Nakoinz (Kiel)
Chapter 8 Not built in a day – the quality of Iron Age urbanism by comparison with Athens and Rome 97
Katja Winger (Berlin)

Part 5 **Discussion** 103

Chapter 9 Discussing Iron Age urbanism in Central Europe: some thoughts 105
Manuel Fernández-Götz (Edinburgh)
Chapter 10 Urbanization in Iron Age Germany and beyond 111
Colin Haselgrove (Leicester)
Chapter 11 Urbanism: a view from the south 115
Anthony Snodgrass (Cambridge)
Chapter 12 On the origins and context of urbanism in prehistoric Europe 117
Peter Wells (Minnesota)

Bibliography 120
Index 134

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Figures

1.1	*Principal region of study.*	2
2.1	*Map of Princely Sites mentioned in the text.*	10
2.2	*Area of the magnetometer survey on the Glauberg.*	11
2.3	*The bronze Celtic style Schnabelkanne from the Princely burial 1 from the Glauberg.*	12
2.4	*The bronze Celtic style Röhrenkanne from grave 2 from the Glauberg.*	13
2.5	*Bronze double mask fibula from grave 3 from the Glauberg.*	13
2.6	*Life-size sandstone statue from a ditch at burial mound 1 from the Glauberg.*	14
2.7	*Model of a settlement hierarchy for the Early Iron age and alternative hierarchical model*	15
2.8	*20-km viewsheds from the Heuneburg and Bussen mountain.*	17
2.9	*Viewsheds of the Hallstatt settlements and Early La Tène settlements in the area around the Glauberg.*	18
2.10	*Slope based least cost path model of possible routes connecting sites with line-decorated pottery, also found on the Glauberg.*	19
2.11	*Location of the Princely grave on the Glauberg.*	20
2.12	*Sizes of the catchment areas that are reachable on foot within a one hour from a settlement.*	22
2.13	*Core settlement areas of the Marienberg environs in the Urnfield and the Hallstatt periods.y.*	23
2.14	*Core settlement areas of the Glauberg environs in the Urnfield and the Hallstatt periods.*	23
2.15	*Early Celtic style Fürstensitze and their relation to the borders of larger regions and major rivers.*	24
2.16	*Share of settlement sites per 100 years for the Late Bronze Age the Early Iron Age Hallstatt and the Early La Tène period.*	25
3.1	*Oppida and open agglomerations in the modern federal state of Bavaria.*	28
3.2	*Manching.*	29
3.3	*Kelheim.*	30
3.4	*Fentbachschanze.*	31
3.5	*Schwanberg.*	32
3.6	*Berching-Pollanten.*	34
3.7	*Passau.*	35
3.8	*Straubing.*	36
4.1	*Diagram of factors which favoured and led to a process of centralization and the foundation of oppida.*	42
4.2	*Map of southwest Germany with the two regions of investigation: Heidengraben and Heunebur.*	43
4.3	*Map of the Late La Tène oppidum Heidengraben.*	44
4.4	*Plan of the Burrenhof cemetery with Early Iron Age burial mounds and the complex Late Iron Age system of ditches.*	45
4.5	*Diagram of individual interests that influenced the process of centralization and dispersal during the Late La Tène period.*	47
5.1	*Aerial view of the well preserved Viereckschanze of Westerheim.*	52
5.2	*Ground plans and orientation of Viereckschanzen from Baden-Württemberg.*	53
5.3	*Plan and drawing of the finds from the excavation of K. Schumacher at the Viereckschanze of Gerichtstetten.*	54
5.4	*Example of a very well preserved rampart at Gerichtstetten.*	55
5.5	*Range of functional features of the Viereckschanzen.*	56
5.6	*Plan of the Viereckschanze of Königheim-Brehmen.*	57
5.7	*Plan of the excavated Viereckschanze of Ehningen.*	58
6.1	*Magdalenenberg.*	65
6.2	*Kappel am Rhein.*	65
6.3	*Burial mounds of Ha D1 to Ha D3 in the region of the Heuneburg and the Hohmichele and other burial mounds.*	66
6.4	*The Außensiedlung near the Heuneburg.*	67
6.5	*Clans drawn in from peripheral settlements to the Heuneburg and Außensiedlung and the settlement structures of the Heuneburg.*	68
6.6	*The Münsterberg of Breisach.*	69
6.7	*The occupation of the Münsterberg in Breisach.*	70
6.8	*The Heuneburg and the rebuilt Gießübel-Talhau-Nekropole.*	71
6.9	*The Hohenasperg.*	72

6.10 *The Hohenasperg near Stuttgart: Princely tombs.* 73
6.11 *Settlements of the Iron Age in the region of the Hohenasperg.* 74
6.12 *The Ipf near Bopfingen: digital terrain model with the fortification-system.* 75
6.13 *The two hillforts Ipf and Goldberg.* 75
6.14 *Niedererlbach.* 76
6.15 *Glauburg-Glauberg.* 78
6.16 *Glauburg-Glauberg: Tumulus 1 and environs.* 79
6.17 *Glauburg-Glauberg. Tombs 1 and 2 of Tumulus 1 and the sandstone statue.* 80
6.18 *Korntal-Münchingen Lingwiesen excavation.* 81
6.19 *Glauburg-Glauberg: aerial photo of the rebuilt Tumulus 1 and the ditch-system.* 82
7.1 *Global temperature, colluvial layers in southwest Germany, the Heuneburg population and the number of sites in the Heuneburg area mapped onto the same graph.* 92
7.2 *Factors influencing the behaviour of the two types of actors in the two agent based models.* 93
7.3 *Populations of some settlements and interpretation according to one simulation run of abm 2.* 93
7.4 *An alternative narrative of the Heuneburg development.* 94
8.1 *Ground plan of the acropolis of Athens and idealized 'drone' image of the acropolis of the Heuneburg.* 98
8.2 *Ground plans of Rome with the area surrounded by the Servian Wall marked in yellow and the oppidum of Manching with the main excavations.* 100
8.3 *Diversity of building structures in the northern part of the 'Südumgehung' at Manching.* 101
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.* 107
9.2 *Two examples of Iron Age low-density urbanism. A) Heuneburg; B) Bourges.* 108
9.3 *Idealized model of the Heuneburg agglomeration.* 109
9.4 *Idealized reconstruction of the centre of the oppidum of Corent.* 110

Tables

2.1 *Functions of Central Places and their appearance at Early Iron Age Fürstensitze.* 16
3.1 *Comparison of urban attributes of the sites.* 33
7.1 *The effect of some kinds of complexity reduction on two community size thresholds.* 91
9.1 *Archaeological urban attributes, with an application to the Heuneburg and Manching.* 106

Chapter 11

Urbanism: a view from the south

Anthony Snodgrass (Cambridge)

Once, long ago, I believed in a clear definition of 'urban' and 'urbanization'. It was a typical Classicist's definition, inspired by the regular town-plans of the 'marble, well-governed cities' of the Mediterranean lands. But everything changed once it became clear that no such model could still command wide acceptance, even in Mediterranean archaeology.

The force of this change came home to me when I was asked, by the *American Journal of Archaeology*, to review a new book: the proceedings of a 1994 Copenhagen seminar entitled *Urbanisation in the Mediterranean in the 9th to 6th centuries* BC (Damgaard Andersen et al. (eds.) 1997; Snodgrass 1999). The (mainly young) contributors were clearly concerned with Mediterranean countries, but anyone expecting them to share such a traditional understanding of urbanism as I had accepted would have been much mistaken: one after another, they turned out to have completely renounced it. Urbanism, they broadly agreed, was anyway more a state of mind than an empirically based combination of material features: it arose within societies who had progressively embraced the idea of living together in larger than kinship-based groupings, and it developed to a point where the urban mentality affected everything within its orbit, notably including ritual. And since its product, the city, formed only a part of the human landscape as a whole, such external attributes as territories, viewsheds, roads and burials were also legitimate aspects of the study of urbanism.

But within Europe, 'the city' was long seen as a term and a concept at home only in the Mediterranean lands – the natural focus of the Copenhagen seminar; whereas for the purposes of this conference, 'town' proves a much more appropriate term (the German *Stadt* of course bridges both categories), as 'city' is hardly a suitable label for such types of settlement as the *Fürstensitz* or the *oppidum*. Yet these too, it will by now be agreed, were products of (not necessarily fully developed) urbanization. Here, fresh enlightenment has come from a somewhat older movement: the progressive recognition of the nature of settlement in the northern European Iron Age. Early understanding of this goes back more than fifty years, to Sjoberg's *Preindustrial City*; but as examples of early formative texts, I think of the papers by John Collis and Barry Cunliffe (Collis 1976; Cunliffe 1976) in the conference volume entitled *Oppida: the beginnings of urbanisation in barbarian Europe*.

There one can already read definitions of 'urbanism' that fully embrace the *oppida* of northern Europe in general. If at that time the discussion leaned rather heavily on the example of Manching, this conference has greatly broadened the data-base for the region of southern Germany – yet without necessarily accepting the full denomination of 'urbanism' for it (see Caroline von Nicolai's paper at this conference). One can in fact already find a hint of problematic status for this region in John Collis's 1976 paper, when he wrote: 'In Central Europe, this first move towards town life came to nothing', but then immediately made an exception for Germany south of the Danube.

He was perhaps thinking of a factor that I too find significant: the subsequent impact of the Romans. Accepting, as I think we should, the independent development of the barbarian *oppidum*, recognized in regions such as Bohemia that lay beyond most perceptible Mediterranean influences (where indeed it 'came to nothing'), we can for the moment turn away from these definitional problems of urbanism – destined, it seems, to be an unending preoccupation of archaeologists the world over – to some historical realities. Specifically, what of those other regions where Roman rule and Roman town life were quite soon to penetrate, such as southern Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg (or indeed southern Britain)?

Another, by now familiar, argument is relevant here: that the spread of pre-Roman urbanization did not merely prepare the path for the fully fledged version that the Romans brought, but decisively influenced its success or failure. Specifically, regions where Iron Age urbanism was fully embraced (Gaul, followed by Germany west of the Rhine) presently witnessed the healthy growth of Roman towns and cities; while in a second, intermediate zone, which was also to fall under Roman rule, but where urban development had been more sporadic and hesitant (southern Germany, much of England and Wales), Roman urban growth was similarly to be less sustainable, perhaps in some cases even stunted; and in regions which were to be tangential to Roman rule, but where there had been little or no pre-Roman urbanism at all (the rest of Germany, or much of Scotland), the Romans were not in a position to do more than provide distant archetypes for the establishment of lasting urban centres.

The theory has the merit of fitting the historical realities, and its application to southern Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg is interesting. For although Roman towns were to be established not far from the sites discussed in this conference – *Cambodunum* (Kempten) or *Augusta Vindelicorum* (Augsburg) – they could never rival the scale of such cities as Roman Trier or Mainz. Secondly, the Roman *limes*, once it came to be established, cut right through the middle of the distribution of both the (now abandoned) *Fürstensitze* and the (probably moribund) Iron Age *oppida*, disregarding any existing territorial boundaries. These two observations between them go far, first to place southern Germany firmly within the second, intermediate zone, where urban development had remained limited in its scope and depth; and almost as important, to reinforce the belief that such pre-Roman urbanization as took place in this zone did indeed grow up – as argued here by Manuel Fernández-Götz – independently of Mediterranean models.