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Book reviews

Das Frühmittelalterliche Hügelgräberfeld von Bernhardsthal (Early Medieval Burial Mound Cemetery Bernhardsthal)

Jiří Macháček and Peter Milo with chapters written by Wolfgang Breibert, Petr Dresler, Stefan Eichert, Anna Pankowská and Friedel Stratjel

Archäologische Forschungen In Niederösterreich, Franz Pieler and Armin Laussegger, eds.), Neue Folge Band 7 (2019), Krems. 144 pp. ISBN 978-3-903150-58-4.



The book “Das Frühmittelalterliche Hügelgräberfeld von Bernhardsthal” (The Early Medieval burial mound cemetery of Bernhardsthal) has been written in German by Jiří Macháček and Peter Milo with colleagues (Wolfgang Breibert, Petr Dresler, Stefan Eichert, Anna Pankowská and Friedel Stratjel). It presents a timely and very well executed publication presenting a relatively rare type of archaeological site in this part of Europe: An Early Medieval burial mound cemetery. The book was published within the Archäologische Forschungen in the Niederösterreich series edited by Franz Pieler and Armin Laussegger.

The book is divided into twelve chapters. In addition to the standard scientific apparatus (Introduction, Summary in

English, References) the core of the book presents the discovery, excavation, pottery analysis, ¹⁴C dating, anthropological analysis, interpretation of the site, and presents the discovery in its wider context.

It is a particular pleasure to read the chapter describing the discovery of the site in which remote sensing and geophysical prospection played the main role. Freely available airborne LiDAR data enabled the initial discovery of the burial mounds. Due to the dense vegetation on the one hand and the relative obscurity of the mounds on the other, the site had not been previously discovered despite the intensive archaeological activities in the area. The initial interpretation of the airborne LiDAR-derived data was followed up by geophysical research that provided evidence for two types of burial mounds of different construction. This information was decisive when the subsequent excavation had to be planned. In addition, numerous structures were identified, proof of intensive settlement activities, and imply the presence of archaeological findings from different time periods. Important indications for an Early Medieval dating have been gained: the spatial connection with the Moravian Pohansko site, as well as a similarity with some already known Slavic burial mounds. Based on the location of the burial mounds, its tendency towards a grouping in roughly an East-West direction was also indicative – as it is a common feature of early medieval burial mounds.

The main part of the book is devoted to the excavation of two burial mounds that took place in 2013 and 2014. The book is therefore a demonstration of good practice: the prompt publishing of excavation results. Chapter three clearly presents the methodology of the excavation and gives a description of the findings that is easy to follow thanks to high-quality plan and section drawings and interpretations.

One of the most important parts of the book is chapter four: devoted as it is to the pottery analysis. Four phases have been detected. First, burial mound No. 15 was built with the primary burial on the

top of the burial mound in the first and second thirds of the 7th century. Mound No. 14 was built later, when the cremation with its ceramic items were deposited at its base, probably in the second half of the 7th century, or at the beginning of the 8th century. In the course of the 8th century, the urn with the cremation was buried in the north-eastern area of burial mound 15. There were also some fragments at the site dated to the 9th century, which bear witness to the last activity in the area of the burial mounds that are no longer in use.

The next chapter thoroughly presents the results of ¹⁴C dating, a part that is too often amiss in archaeological publications.

Meaningful anthropological analysis of burnt bones is always a difficult task. In chapter six it is executed masterfully: applying state-of-the-art methods. The examined material was a representative example of the diversity of burial customs in the Slavic period. The cremation probably occurred at a low temperature, or only for a very short time, and was not homogeneous. The bone fragments buried represent only a small selection of what must have remained at the stake. One urn – analysed with the micro excavation method – enabled the reconstruction of the manner of bone burial: the lower extremities had been deposited first and then the skull on top.

Chapter seven brings the interpretation of the burial site. Based on the precise analysis of the wooden construction, combined with the thorough analysis of previously known examples and anthropological analogies, a highly likely and persuasive interpretation of the “house of the dead” burial construction is presented. But perhaps even more impressive is the interpretation of the Early Medieval community of Bernhardsthal as reflected in the structure and development of the burial ground.

Chapter eight presents the burial site in its wider settlement context and the last chapter presents comments on the Early Medieval burial mound cemeteries in Lower Austria in the context of the new discovery. Both are masterfully written in a manner

that is far too concise to be summed up in a few sentences. It must be read in full by anyone interested in either Early Medieval archaeology or the archaeology of death.

In conclusion, I can only repeat the above statement. The book is a demonstration

of the good practice of prompt publishing of research results. The remote sensing analysis is a pleasurable read and the geophysical research is an important addition to the overall understanding of the site. The exact analysis of the finds

and findings is used as the basis for a convincing interpretation of a previously-poorly-understood phenomenon.

Benjamin Štular