

CANNIBALISM IN THE
LINEAR POTTERY CULTURE:
THE HUMAN REMAINS
FROM HERXHEIM

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Cover image: orthoimage of deposit F and skull cup from the same deposit

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Foreword

Research on the site of Herxheim began nearly 20 years ago: in 1996 indeed the first excavations were launched under the direction of Annemarie Häußler. On the eve of this twentieth anniversary and seven years after the second and final excavation campaign which ended in 2008, arose the question of the publication of the results of this long-lasting research period. The particular issue was the choice of the support that would allow to both provide a maximum data and make the synthesis. Even if some intermediate results had already been published in a few papers, they were of limited length and contained only few raw data.

It was initially intended to gather all the specialized studies and publish them in a single monograph along with a global interpretation of the site and of its functioning. A site like Herxheim though cannot be managed like any other site, owing on the one hand to its extremely complex nature and the quantity of bone remains and artefacts to analyse, and on the other hand to the number of specialists participating in this project, which makes it difficult for the different works to progress at the same pace: according to the time and money allowed to each specialist, some research works are obviously progressing quicker than others. Some are just beginning whereas others have been completed since a long time. This is the case for the work on the human remains, presented here, the writing of which was completed in December 2013. It thus seemed right to us not to wait any longer to hand our study over to the scientific community, rather than having to wait for a monograph of undetermined release date. We therefore took the decision to publish Herxheim's anthropological study on its own, relying on the fact that its importance for the archaeology of death, the discussion of prehistoric cannibalism and the understanding of the end of the Linear Pottery Culture period justify that its publication be no longer indefinitely postponed. Dividing the works has a disadvantage though, in a sense that it prevents a global vision of all the data. In order to make up for it, our

conclusion will present the results already available for the other subjects, and suggest an interpretation, at least temporary, of the events which unfolded in Herxheim at the end of the VIth millennium BC and of the context in which they took place.

This study presents only the results concerning the human remains recovered during the research excavation from 2005 to 2008 and those from a small additional section of the inner ditch excavated in 2010. The amount of human remains from the 1996-1999 excavation was so huge that it was impossible to take them into account in this work and it will probably take several years to complete their detailed analysis. Moreover, very few field data are available for this first campaign; hence the interpretations we could make are much more limited. Nevertheless, a partial examination of these remains shows that, but for a few exceptions, the patterns for the treatment of the bodies are strictly identical with those of the other sector. It could hardly have been otherwise. We can thus assume that the results given here can be totally extrapolated to the whole site, or at least to its excavated portion.

This research work greatly benefited from the support of all the members of the Herxheim research team involved in the recovery, the restoration and the study of the archaeological and anthropological record, and from the field work of all the volunteer and professional diggers. Our thanks go to all of them. It was sponsored by the municipality of Herxheim (excavations) and the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft*. Additional support was granted to Bruno Boulestin by the *Agence Nationale de la Recherche* (French State Research Agency) through the project *Guerre et violence dans les premières sociétés d'Europe : approche intégrée* (War and violence in the first European societies: an integrated approach). We are also grateful to Emmanuelle Boulestin for the many hours she spent revising and correcting the first translation of the original French manuscript.

Introduction: recalling Herxheim's general context

The site of Herxheim is situated in the south of the German Federal State of Rhineland-Palatinate (Figure 1), on a small spur above a loess plateau containing many prehistoric sites and at the confluence of two small rivers. It was discovered in the 1980s by surface prospection. The *GDKE Rheinland-Pfalz, Direktion Landesarchäologie-Speyer* (Rhineland-Palatinate State Office for the Preservation of Historical Monuments) then carried out two excavation campaigns (1996-1999 and 2005-2008). The first, directed by Annemarie Häußer, was a rescue excavation required by the construction of an industrial and commercial estate. The second was conceived as a planned excavation intended to complement the earlier data and provide further details. It was conducted within the framework of a research project financed by the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* (German Research Foundation): *Siedlung und Grubenanlage des linearbandkeramischen Fundplatzes Herxheim* (Settlement and pit deposits of the Linear Pottery Culture site at Herxheim). Established in 2004, this project involved a multidisciplinary, international team directed by Andrea Zeeb-Lanz, which grouped together specialists in physical anthropology, archaeozoology, ceramics, bone and stone tools,

archaeobotany and palynology, isotopic and collagen analyses and palaeogenetics. Finally, a small additional section of the inner ditch was excavated in 2010, on the occasion of the production of a documentary film by the National Geographic Channel.

The structures excavated indicate a village inhabited between 5300 and 4950 BC (from the Flomborn phase to the last phase of the Linear Pottery Culture). The main structure is a trapezoidal enclosure of 5ha measuring some 250 x 230 metres (Figure 2). It seems at first sight to be composed of two parallel trapezoidal ditches, but in fact these ditches never existed: they are merely the product of the overlapping of a large number of oblong pits of varying length, form and depth (the deepest extended up to four meters beneath the Neolithic ground level), which were dug over several centuries according to a pre-determined layout. New pits would intersect others which were already partially filled, so that the internal area was never completely surrounded by continuous ditches. For this reason we can speak of 'pseudo-ditches' for this type of enclosure, also referred to as Rosheim type on the basis of the excavations at the eponymous Linear Pottery Culture

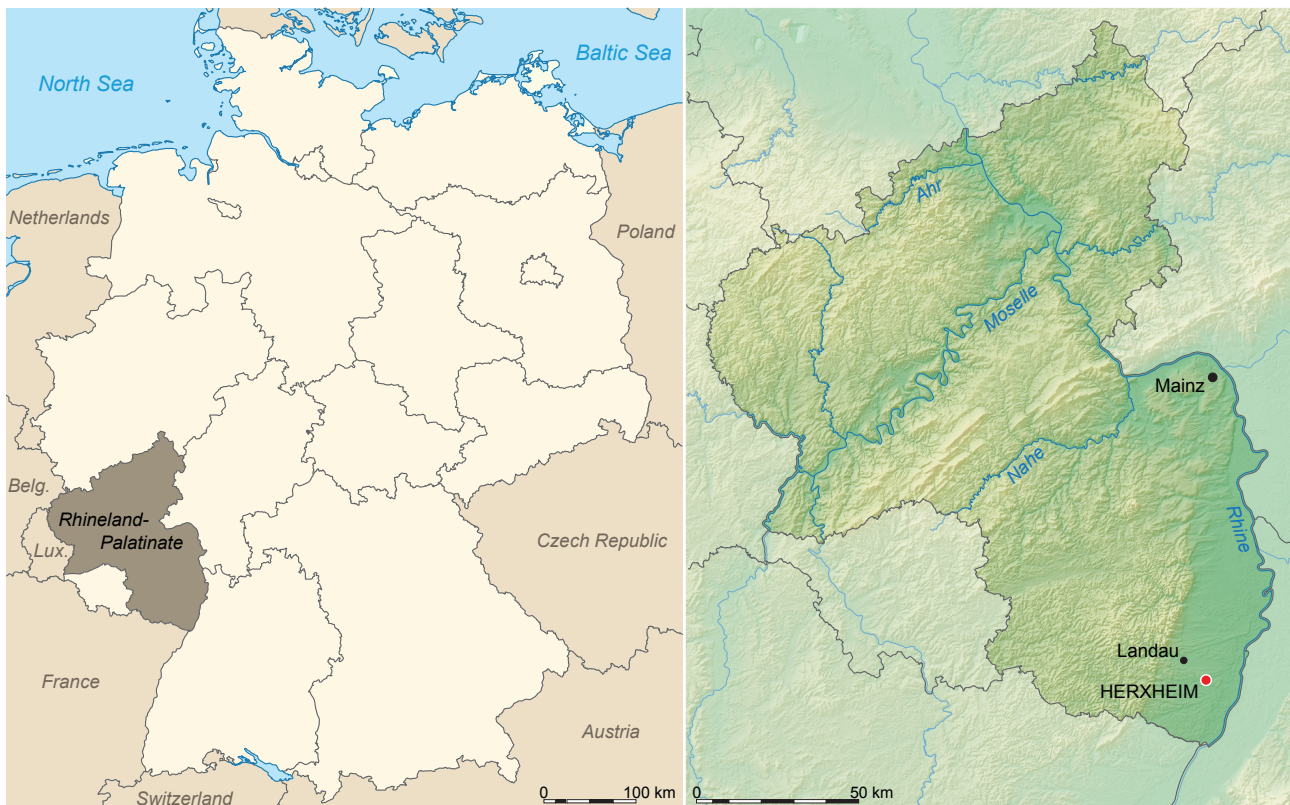


FIGURE 1. GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION OF THE HERXHEIM SITE.

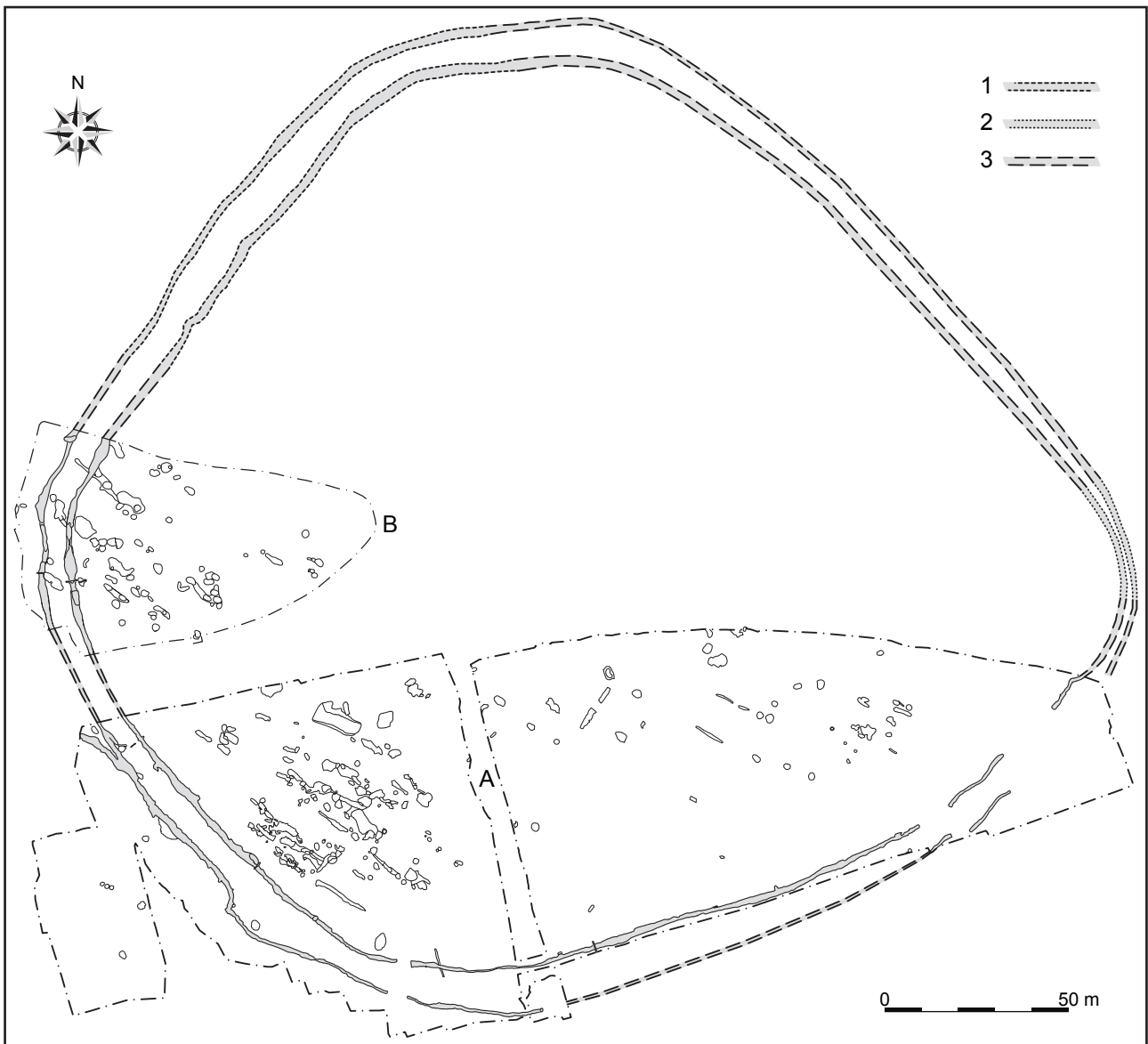


FIGURE 2. GENERAL PLAN OF THE EXCAVATION.

1. DITCH SYSTEM AS SEEN BY GEOPHYSICAL PROSPECTION; 2. DITCH SYSTEM AS REVEALED THROUGH TEST TRENCHES; 3. RECONSTRUCTION OF THE DITCH SYSTEM; A. EXCAVATION AREA 1996-1999; B. EXCAVATION AREA 2005-2008; ORIGINAL CAD BY F. HAACK.

enclosure in France (Jeunesse and Lefranc 1999).¹ The two chains of pits forming the enclosure certainly never served as a protection, but rather as a symbolic boundary for a settlement area which was probably also used for ceremonies. The interior of the enclosure, which has been widely destroyed by erosion, has for its part yielded only a small number of settlement pits and a few graves (Figure 2).

The function of the enclosure seems to have changed during the Final Linear Pottery period. Some already existing pits and others specially excavated for the event received spectacular deposits composed mainly of human remains, but also of fauna, ceramics, stone and bone tools in various proportions, as well as rare decorative artefacts. Around 80 such deposits have been discovered. The results from the detailed analysis of the human remains found in the pits excavated between 2005 and 2010 are presented in the following pages.

¹ The application of the Rosheim pattern to Herxheim's ditches was recently questioned by Fabian Haack. Since we know nothing of the arguments on which he has relied, and since all our observations are strengthening this pattern, we stick to this interpretation.