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Stadt – Land – Burg

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herausgegeben von
Claudia Theune, Gabriele Scharrer-Liška,
Elfriede Hannelore Huber und Thomas Kührtreiber



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The Avar Period Settlement and the Ceramic Finds from the Cemetery in Zillingtal, Burgenland, Eastern Austria

Hajnalka Herold
Exeter

Introduction

Two settlements and a number of cemeteries have been excavated in Austria from the Avar period.¹ Both a settlement and a cemetery were uncovered in Zillingtal, a unique case in the archaeology of the Avar period in Austria so far. The present article offers a short overview of the research results on this settlement and on the ceramic finds from the cemetery. The comprehensive publication of the research results on these topics, including an in-depth analysis of the settlements and the ceramic finds of the Avar Khaganate not covered in this article, is available as a monograph.²

It can be assumed that the Avar Khaganate consisted of multiple ethnic groups, similarly to all other states of steppe nomads. The differentiation and identification of these groups based on the archaeological record is, however, a complex issue. A further unclear point is the relationship of the Avars to other ethnic groups that had already been present in the Carpathian Basin prior to the arrival of the Avars in this region, such as e. g. remains of the Romanized population of the former province Pannonia or different Germanic groups. Thus it is increasingly common to describe archaeological sites belonging to the Avar Khaganate as Avar period sites (as opposed to ‘Avar sites’). This expression refers to the chronological period and to the political unit these sites belonged to, but not to the ethnic identity of (or to the modern-day assignment of an ethnic identity to) their population. The expression ‘Avar period sites’ is used in this sense in the present article.

The excavations at Zillingtal

586 graves of the Avar period cemetery at Zillingtal (district Eisenstadt, figs. 1 and 2) were excavated under the coordination of F. Daim between 1985 and 1994.³ These graves are part of a cemetery from which 211 graves had been excavated in 1927 and 1930 and subsequently published.⁴ Comprising 797 graves in total, the cemetery of Zillingtal is the largest cemetery of the Avar period in Austria. It was used from the second phase of the early Avar period (EA II) until the third phase of the late Avar period (LA III),⁵ which



Fig. 1. The location of the site of Zillingtal (Map by author).

roughly corresponds to the time span from 630/650 until 800/820 AD.

The metal finds from women’s graves at Zillingtal were included in the analysis of 7th and 8th-century women’s graves in Eastern Austria by A. Distelberger.⁶ The anthropological and zoological material was investigated by S. Grefen-Peters.⁷ A comprehensive analysis of the cemetery is in preparation. Approximately 80 % of the graves contained pottery, usually one vessel; in rare cases two vessels per grave were found. The 469 ceramic vessels of the modern excavations (from 1985 until 1994) were included in the analysis presented here.

The Avar period settlement of Zillingtal was discovered by field walking during the excavation of the cemetery. In addition to pottery, the field walking yielded various objects made of non ferrous metals, including a buckle, strap ends, an earring, and also spindle whorls (fig. 3).⁸ The settlement is situated 1 km southeast of the cemetery, as the crow flies (fig. 2). The settlement and the cemetery are intervisible, this supports the assumption that the two sites belong together. Prior to the excavation, aerial photos of the site were made and magnetic prospection was carried out at the settlement. A field

¹ Settlements: Zillingtal (Herold 2010), Brunn am Gebirge (Herold 2002a; Stadler/Herold 2003). For the cemeteries see Daim 1987.

² Monograph: Herold 2010. Summaries of the results from Zillingtal have been published in German (Herold 2001; Herold 2002b; Herold 2011a; Herold 2011b; Herold 2012); a summary in English has not been available so far.

³ For preliminary reports about the excavation and selected finds see Daim 1990; Daim 1996; Daim 1998.

⁴ Caspart 1935.

⁵ Chronological phases of the Avar period used after Daim 1987.

⁶ Distelberger 2004.

⁷ I would like to thank Dr. S. Grefen-Peters for access to her research results.

⁸ These finds were displayed at the Burgenland State Exhibition in 1996 and are also depicted and described in the exhibition catalogue, see Daim/Distelberger 1996, 376.

survey was undertaken and test trenches were opened in 1993. Systematic excavations began in 1994 and were continued in 1995 and 1997; the site supervisor of these excavations was A. Distelberger.⁹ A preliminary report has been published about the excavations of 1994 and 1995.¹⁰

The excavations at the settlement site uncovered features of the Roman and of the Avar period, including ruins of a building of a Roman villa disturbed by post-Roman settlement activity and Avar period iron smelting furnaces. The Avar period settlement features outside of the villa building comprise 14 pits and postholes of a building. The analysis presented here investigated the Avar period settlement features and the Avar period layers of the Roman villa.

The Avar period settlement of Zillingtal

The most frequent type of Avar period settlement features excavated in Zillingtal are pits; the 14 pits uncovered here display two major forms: deep cylindrical pits with a diameter of 1.2 to 1.5 m, and larger, shallow pits. Furthermore, postholes of a 4.5 × 5.5 m construction were excavated; it is likely that they belonged to a building, but a reconstruction as a pen for animals is also possible. Sunken-featured buildings, which are usual in many other settlements of the Avar period, were not found in Zillingtal. In this part of Europe, sunken-featured buildings of the early Middle Ages are usually considered to have served as dwellings. The reason for their absence in Zillingtal might be that the residential part of the settlement was not situated in the excavated area, but northwest of it, as also indicated by the results of the magnetic prospection. However, the possibility that some settlements of the Avar period comprised only ground-level buildings cannot be excluded.

As mentioned above, the remains of a building of a Roman villa excavated in Zillingtal were disturbed by post-Roman settlement activity. Most of this settlement activity can be dated to the Avar period, based on the stratigraphic position of the settlement features and on the finds from their fill. The following post-Roman 'disturbances' were found in the area of the villa building (see also fig. 4): a small ditch in the south-western part, rows of postholes in the western and south-western part, and ditches left after the removal of stone walls in the western and central part. The small ditch and some postholes punched through the mortar floor of the Roman period. Other postholes were dug into the fill of the ditches left after the removal of the Roman period stone walls, or into the fill of the Roman period heating channel. The question of what the ruins of the Roman villa building in Zillingtal might have looked like in the Avar period cannot be answered with

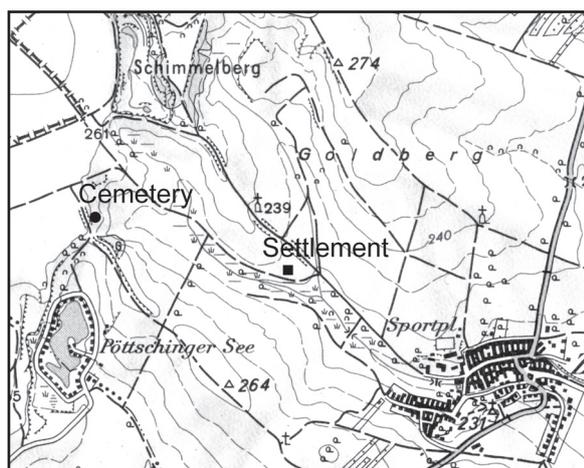


Fig. 2. The relative location of the cemetery and settlement of Zillingtal (Burgenland/Austria), detail of the Map of Austria scale 1:50 000, Sheet 77, Eisenstadt (Map by author).

certainty. The Avar period pottery fragments found in the fill of the ditches left after the removal of the Roman stone walls make it probable that the now missing stone walls, or at least their lower parts, were still in place in the Avar period, at least at its beginning. However, it cannot be reconstructed how high these stone walls still were and if they were visible above ground. In any case, no structures were excavated that would show an Avar period use of possibly still standing Roman walls of the villa.

The settlement features excavated in Zillingtal between 1994 and 1997 can be divided into four settlement phases, based on the pottery in their fill; the pit excavated in 1993 dates later than all other pits, also based on the ceramic finds from its fill, and thus represents a fifth settlement phase. The post-Roman settlement features in the villa building contained too few and too small fragments of pottery for a more precise dating within the Avar period. The ceramic finds from the iron smelting area also allow only a general Avar period date. The five phases of the settlement cover the time span from the second phase of the middle Avar period (MA II) until the third phase of the late Avar period (LA III). The use of the cemetery of Zillingtal started in the early Avar period (EA) or in the first phase of the middle Avar period (MA I) and lasted until the third phase of the late Avar period (LA III). The first phase of the pottery from the cemetery, which only comprises vessels made without the use of a turntable or a wheel (so-called hand-modelled vessels), is not present in the excavated part of the settlement. This means that the settlement existed at least from the second phase of the middle Avar period (MA II) until the end of the cemetery's use. When the settlement emerged and if this was the only settlement, whose inhabitants were

⁹I would like to thank Dr. A. Distelberger for his numerous comments on the excavation of the Zillingtal settlement.

¹⁰Daim/Distelberger 1996.

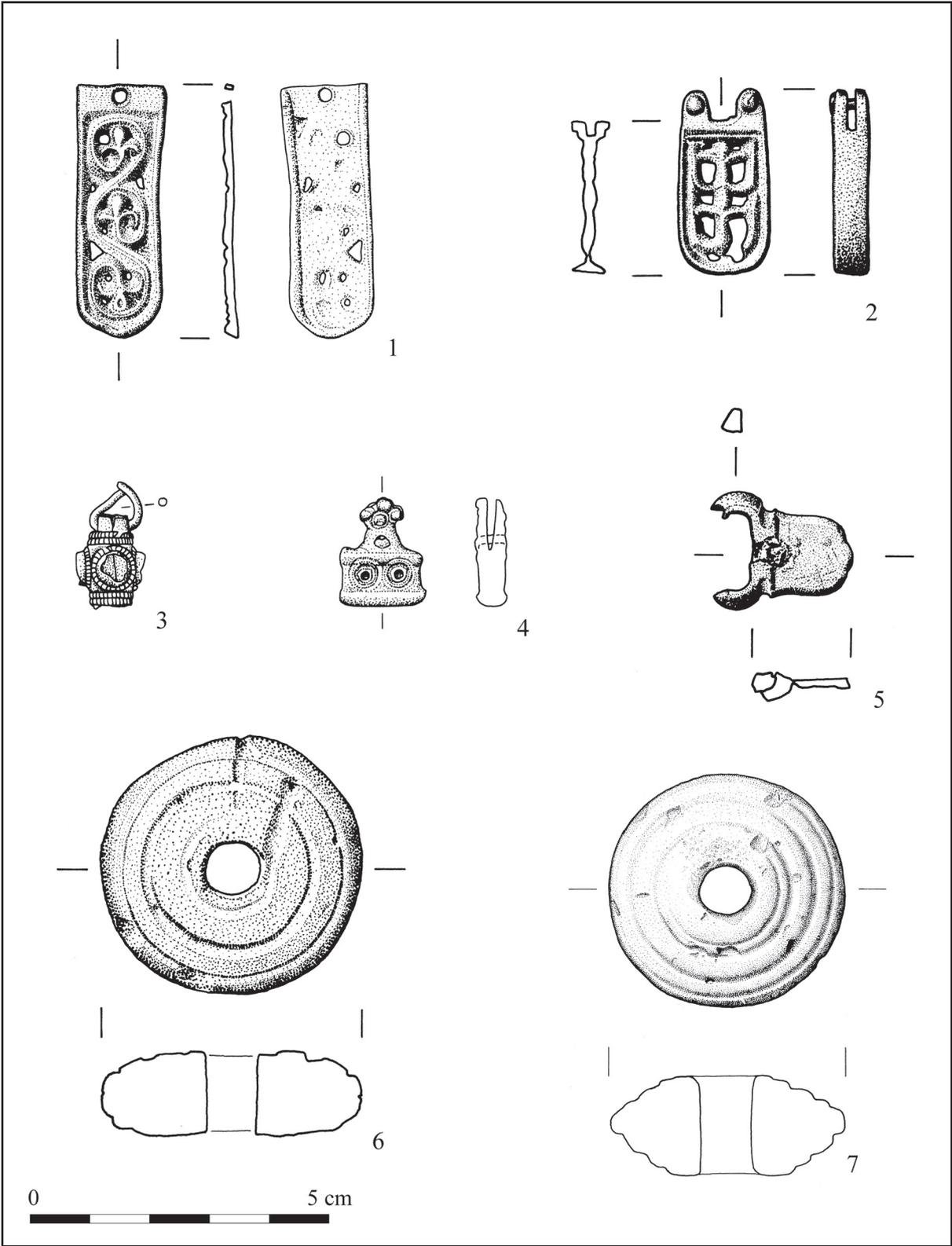


Fig. 3. Finds from the area of the Avar period settlement of Zillingtal collected by field walking prior to the excavation; finds formerly in the Collection Schmidt (Graphics: F. Siegmeth, Bad Vöslau, Austria).



Fig. 4. The main building of the Roman villa of Zillingtal, photo from the north, for information on the location of the post-Roman 'disturbances' see the main text (Photo: A. Distelberger, Vienna, Austria).

buried in the cemetery, cannot be decided with absolute certainty.

Concerning subsistence practices, it can be established that the natural environment in Zillingtal is currently very suitable both for animal husbandry and plant cultivation. This is very likely to have been similar during the Avar period. The use of former Roman fields and of Roman roads for access to these is possible. Among craft production activities, iron smelting and forging are documented in Zillingtal. Tools made of bone/antler are also likely to have been made locally, as shown by production/processing marks on animal bones from the settlement. The ceramic vessels from the settlement and the cemetery were also locally produced, within the households (hand-modelled ceramics) and in local workshops (pottery produced on a slow wheel/turntable), as is known from archaeological pottery analysis.

The heterogeneous distribution pattern of the chronological groups of pottery in the fill of the settlement features suggests that the deposition of refuse in the settlement happened rather randomly and that no rearrangements or levelling activities took place that would have affected the entire area of the settlement at once. It can be assumed that old buildings were demolished and new ones built in a similarly random

manner, based on the changing needs of the inhabitants. The square shaped cross-section of the posts of the post-built structures indicates that people skilled in carpentry were also available at the settlement.

Based on the analysis of the animal bones,¹¹ it can be concluded that the Avar period settlement of Zillingtal was basically agrarian in character; the demand for meat, milk and wool was covered by production within the community. The distribution pattern of the different animal species (cattle, pigs, sheep/goats) in the refuse of the settlement stayed nearly constant during the entire existence of the settlement. In contrast, changes can be seen in the course of the Avar period in the distribution pattern of species of the animal bones deposited in the graves of the cemetery (e. g. bones of pigs can primarily be found in the early phases of the cemetery). This indicates that changes in the ritual use of animals or parts of animals, to which their deposition in graves most probably belongs, were not necessarily connected to changes in the day-to-day practice of animal husbandry.

Bones of neonate and foetal humans were also found among the animal bones in the settlement refuse. This age group is not present in the cemetery of Zillingtal,

¹¹ See also the contribution of S. Grefen-Peters in the monograph on Zillingtal (Grefen-Peters 2010).

only children aged six months or older were buried there. These observations suggest that members of the youngest group did not receive a funeral, but were deposited or 'discarded' within the settlement. Bones of two adult men in the refuse of the settlement show that this could also be the fate of people dying at a later age.

Investigation of the ceramic finds from the cemetery of Zillingtal

Based on the archaeological and archaeometric analysis of the ceramic vessels from the Zillingtal cemetery, it is possible to conclude that the two basic groups of pottery, vessels made on a slow potter's wheel (also called turntable) and the so-called hand-modelled vessels (produced without a slow wheel), were both used at this site in most chronological phases of the Avar period. Only the first phase of the cemetery (early Avar period until middle Avar period I) yielded exclusively hand-modelled vessels. The pottery turned on a slow wheel can be divided into three chronological groups (LG 1 to LG 3). These groups are not strictly separate, but represent stages of continuous change in material composition and style. The hand-modelled ceramics in Zillingtal can be divided into four chronological groups (HG 1 to HG 4) that, similarly to the groups of the slow-wheel-turned pottery, represent stages of continuous change. However, the hand-modelled pottery shows a higher degree of variability (in shape, colour etc.) than the vessels turned on a slow wheel.

469 pottery vessels were found in the 586 graves excavated in Zillingtal between 1985 and 1994. Of these 349, i. e. about three quarters, are hand-modelled and 108, about one quarter, were made on a slow wheel.¹² During the analysis of the pottery from the cemetery the following question emerged: Which criteria decided whether the members of the Avar period community chose to put a hand-modelled or a slow-wheel-turned vessel in a particular grave? This question was then investigated in relation to the age and gender of the deceased. In order to detect possible changes in these deposition practices through time, the chronological group of the vessels concerned was also taken into account.

Ceramic vessels were found in Zillingtal in 150 women's graves (91 % of all women's graves) and in 131 men's graves (81 % of all men's graves).¹³ This means, a higher proportion of women's graves contained pottery than of men's graves. When comparing the proportions of slow-wheel-turned and hand-modelled vessels in the graves, it can be concluded that men received a slow-wheel-turned vessel much more often than women. Of the men's graves that contained vessels, 32 % had a

slow-wheel-turned vessel (42 of 131 graves), while this proportion is considerably lower, 19 %, in women's graves (28 of 150 graves). In all chronological phases of the Avar period, slow-wheel-turned vessels occur more often in men's graves than in women's graves in Zillingtal. The proportion of slow-wheel-turned vessels in children's graves lies between the values of the two adult gender groups; this is most probably due to the presence of both sexes among the children. In the case of the hand-modelled vessels, the proportion relative to the gender of the adults is the opposite; women received a hand-modelled vessel more often than men, in all chronological phases of the cemetery. The proportions of hand-modelled vessels in children's graves are variable.

When examining the mean volume of the vessels deposited in the graves according to the gender of the deceased and the chronological group of the vessels, it can be shown that men usually received larger vessels than women, both in the case of slow-wheel-turned and hand-modelled vessels. Children were usually given smaller vessels. If one compares the mean volume of vessels in the two main groups of pottery (slow-wheel-turned and hand-modelled ceramics) a difference can be shown between those receiving a hand-modelled and those receiving a slow-wheel-turned vessel. The mean volume of the slow-wheel-turned vessels in the various age groups, of both men and women, ranges between 0.4 and 0.8 litres. In the case of the hand-modelled vessels this value is considerably lower, between 0.2 and 0.6 litres for men and between 0.3 and 0.5 litres for women.

The possible interpretations of the above observations are manifold; here only the numbers are recorded.¹⁴ This is the first time that such analysis was conducted for an Avar period cemetery. It would be fruitful to pursue such investigations at further Avar period cemeteries and to undertake a comparative analysis for different regions within the Avar Khaganate and beyond.

Settlements and cemeteries of the Avar Period in Eastern Austria

The Avar period settlement of Zillingtal lies on the southern slope of a hill, near to a stream. This is a convenient and generally preferred position for settlements in the Carpathian Basin. The proximity of water has always been advantageous for settlements (animals, pottery production, iron smelting, etc.), whereas cemeteries had to be protected from water, so the latter usually occupied a position lying higher in the landscape. Therefore the position of the cemetery was to a certain extent determined by the position of the settlement. The Avar period inhabitants at Zillingtal seem to have preferred having intervisibility between the settlement and the cemetery, the cemetery was thus laid out on the northern, north-eastern slope opposite the settlement (fig. 2).

¹² Plus seven non-identifiable vessels and five vessels that are hand-modelled, but imitate slow-wheel-turned pottery.

¹³ Individuals of late juvenile age or older are considered here.

¹⁴ For further data and graphs see Herold 2010.

A similar relative position of an Avar period settlement and cemetery can be assumed in Bad-Sauerbrunn, near Zillingtal. Here some Avar period graves were excavated and others disturbed within today's village cemetery.¹⁵ This partially known Avar period cemetery was laid out on a north-eastern slope. Some hundred metres east of the cemetery an archaeological site from the Roman period can be found, where small finds from the Avar period have also been collected.¹⁶ It is believed that this is the site of the Avar period settlement belonging to the cemetery.¹⁷ This arrangement of an Avar period settlement on a southern, south-western slope and of a cemetery belonging to it on the northern, north-eastern slope lying opposite to it might prove to be a more general pattern in the wider region. However, the settlements belonging to the well-known Avar period cemeteries of Eastern Austria have yet to be identified.¹⁸ Remains of an Avar period settlement were excavated in Brunn am Gebirge, but no cemetery belonging to it has been found.¹⁹

When considering the density and the layout of the Avar period settlement network in the region of Zillingtal, it is useful to consult the map of known sites and new stray finds published by S. Schmidt.²⁰ This map shows, in addition to the already known five sites, six further Avar period sites that were identified with the help of stray finds. If one assumes that most stray finds represent a cemetery or a settlement, 6.5 km appear to be the mean distance between two Avar period sites in the vicinity of Zillingtal.

The Avar period settlement of Zillingtal was laid out on the site of a Roman villa. All Avar period stray finds from Burgenland that were mentioned in 1987 by F. Daim²¹ and published later by H. Winter²² and S. Schmidt²³ originate from Roman sites. Remains of Avar period settlements at Roman sites have also become known from Western Hungary.²⁴ Thus it seems, as already discussed by F. Daim²⁵ and H. Winter,²⁶ that the Avar period population of former Roman territories preferred Roman sites in establishing their own settlements. This can well be one of the reasons for the very low number of known settlement sites from the Avar period both in Eastern Austria and in Western Hungary; finds from the Avar Period might have easily remained

unnoticed within Roman settlement assemblages, especially in the case of older excavations.²⁷

It is interesting to consider how the population of the Avar period related to the Roman ruins. One question is what these ruins might have looked like in the Avar period, e. g. concerning the visibility or height of Roman walls.²⁸ In Zillingtal, it appears certain that the Avar period population did not reside in still (partially) standing Roman buildings, as the Avar period settlement features within the Roman villa building (rows of posts, small ditch) have a different orientation than the Roman walls. It is difficult to say what made the Avar period population of Zillingtal settle down in the vicinity of the villa. It would be tempting to assume a continuous occupation of the villa from the Roman to the Avar period. H. Winter points out that some Avar period sites in Burgenland have also yielded finds from the Lombard period (6th century AD).²⁹ However, no finds of the 6th century have become known from Zillingtal so far. The reoccupation of former sites as a means of legitimising power, as set forth by R. Bradley,³⁰ is a possible explanation here.

However, there are also Avar period settlements known from Eastern Austria without recognisable connections to Roman sites. Although Roman pottery fragments were found in the fill of the Avar period settlement features at Brunn am Gebirge, neither settlement features of the Roman period were uncovered at the site, nor there is a Roman site known in the vicinity.³¹ Future excavations can show if Zillingtal and Brunn am Gebirge represent two distinct models for Avar period settlements, one with and one without connections to former Roman sites.

Summary

A settlement and a cemetery from the Avar period (7th to 8th century AD) were excavated near Zillingtal in Burgenland (Eastern Austria) between 1985 and 1997. In addition to Avar period settlement features, a building of a Roman villa disturbed by post-Roman settlement activity was excavated at the settlement site. Most of the settlement activity disturbing the villa building can be dated to the Avar period. The cemetery of Zillingtal comprised 797 graves and is thus the largest cemetery from the Avar period in Austria. The study briefly presented here analysed the Avar period settlement and the ceramic finds of the cemetery, concentrating on three main topics: (1) the relationship

¹⁵ Daim 1987, 189; Kimmel 1997.

¹⁶ Kimmel 1997, 222.

¹⁷ The position of the two sites are shown in Kimmel 1997, Abb. 1. The settlement of Zillingtal was discovered in a very similar manner, based on collected small finds; see Daim/Distelberger 1996, 372.

¹⁸ Daim 1987, 166, footnote 16.

¹⁹ Herold 2002a; Stadler/Herold 2003.

²⁰ Schmidt 1997, 248.

²¹ Daim 1987, 175.

²² Winter 1997.

²³ Schmidt 1997.

²⁴ For detailed data see Herold 2010.

²⁵ Daim 1987, 175.

²⁶ Winter 1997, 75.

²⁷ A large number of Avar period settlements has been identified and partly also excavated in Eastern Hungary that was never part of the Roman Empire, see e. g. MRT 6 and MRT 8.

²⁸ B. M. Szóke (1992, 129) assumes that at the site of Nagykanizsa Inkey kápolna the Roman walls were still standing when the early medieval settlement emerged in the 7th century.

²⁹ Winter 1997, 75 f.

³⁰ Bradley 2002.

³¹ Herold 2002a; Stadler/Herold 2003.

of settlements from the Roman and the Avar period, (2) pottery production and use in the Avar period and (3) the deposition of grave goods in the Zillingtal cemetery in relation to the age and gender of the deceased. This article offers a very short overview of those results that are directly connected to the site of Zillingtal.

Zusammenfassung

Zwischen 1985 und 1997 wurden in Zillingtal (Burgenland, Ostösterreich) eine Siedlung und ein Gräberfeld der Awarenzeit (7.-8. Jh. n. Chr.) freigelegt. In der Siedlung konnte, neben awarenzeitlichen Siedlungsobjekten, ein Gebäude einer römischen *villa rustica* mit nachantiken

Störungen erfasst werden. Der Großteil der nachantiken Störungen lässt sich in die Awarenzeit datieren. Das Gräberfeld von Zillingtal stellt mit 797 Gräbern die bislang größte awarenzeitliche Nekropole in Österreich dar. In der hier kurz präsentierten Studie wurden die awarenzeitliche Siedlung und die Keramikfunde des Gräberfeldes untersucht, mit folgenden drei Schwerpunkten: (1) die Beziehung awarenzeitlicher und römerzeitlicher Siedlungen, (2) Keramikproduktion und Keramikgebrauch in der Awarenzeit und (3) Beigabensitten im Gräberfeld von Zillingtal in Zusammenhang mit dem Alter und Geschlecht der Bestatteten. Der vorliegende Artikel bietet eine kurze Zusammenfassung jener Ergebnisse, welche die Fundstelle Zillingtal direkt betreffen.

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