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The hierarchy of Alamannic settlements in the former
Limes region of South-Western Germany to AD 500

THE HIERARCHY OF ALAMANNIC SETTLEMENTS IN THE FORMER LIMES REGION OF SOUTH-WESTERN GERMANY TO AD 500

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There has been, for some years, a research group (*Forschungsverbund*) of several departments at the University of Freiburg im Breisgau, working on the topic 'archaeology and the history of the first millennium in south-western Germany'. The goal is the inter-disciplinary research of changes in the history of south-western Germany (Nuber et al. 1990) (Fig. 1), particularly alterations of settlement pattern, of economical and social structures, and of the population ethnicity, Celtic, Roman, and finally Alamannic and Frankish (Fig. 2). One such decisive change was the retreat of the Roman administration behind the Rhine and Danube and the settlement of Germanic peoples, called the Alamanni, in the abandoned areas from AD 310 onwards.

The questions asked are how and when did the settlement patterns change and what was the nature of settlement hierarchy. Here, first, is a quick sketch of five stages of changes in the settlement pattern – mirrored by settlements, fortifications, and cemeteries – in the area east of the upper Rhine around the area of Freiburg where our archaeological field research concentrates.

Stage zero: Germanic settlers occupy the area of the middle upper Rhine region during the early first century AD, before the establishment of the Roman province.

Stage one: The period as part of the province Germania Superior until AD 260. The Romanised area east of the Rhine is known as the *Agri decumates* (Nuber 1984).

Stage two: The period from the withdrawal of the *limes* to behind the Rhine (AD 260) to the period of the early appearance of archaeological finds of Germanic settlers (increasingly common from the first half of the fourth century), covering about sixty to eighty years or three generations.

Stage three: The period for which there is much archaeological evidence of Alamanni immigrants to the final withdrawal of the Roman military from the Rhine (by AD 406), covering about fifty to sixty years (two

Figure 1. Location map: research area in south-western Germany.

generations), and later to the start of Frankish hegemony over the Alamanni after their defeat in AD 496 and 507 (a total of about 150 years or five generations).

Stage four: From the new settlement pattern of the sixth to eighth century AD in Alamannia, now a part of the Frankish empire under the Merovingian dynasty, to the structural changes at the beginning of Carolingian rule (in sum an epoch of 250 years or about eight to ten generations).

The main periods covered by this essay are the first three stages, lasting about 250 years (eight to ten generations).

STAGE ZERO

Roman occupation not only assimilated aboriginal Celtic populations but also Germanic tribal groups. In other words, the Germanic people pressing against the *limes* after AD 200 were not the first to settle in south-western Germany. Neither were they, perhaps, the only Germanic parts of the population of the area at a later date. After plans of further conquest had been given up and the border-line was consolidated in the reign of Tiberius (AD 16), Germanic groups were settled by the

Figure 2. South-western Germany in late Roman times (Junghans 1986:157 map 4).

Roman military administration in the area along the eastern side of the Rhine and in the area of the Neckar River, mainly in close vicinity to fortresses in order to populate these relatively empty areas (Lenz-Bernhard 1990). As settlers with a strong martial tradition, these Germanic groups were used to protect the Rhine border. This need was lost when the *limes* was moved forward from the Rhine in AD 74, and the Germanic groups must have been quickly assimilated, as the Celts were before them.

Traces of these so-called 'Neckarsueben' continue, for example in Roman inscriptions, until the third century. Germanic Neckar-Suebians may have fought against other Germanic peoples, against the advancing Alamanni. They can be recognised in archaeological terms by their typical burial customs and grave goods, which suggest an origin in the area of the 'Elbgermanen', partly even within an area of the Przeworsk culture.

Almost no settlements have been excavated and the settlement pattern must be reconstructed from the cemeteries. Settlements seem to have had a sort of village character (the settlement Ladenburg 'Ziegelscheuer' extends about 200 metres in length overall). There is no social hierarchy evident, although richly furnished warrior burials have been excavated in some cemeteries.

Figure 3. Germanic incursions against the Roman limes along the Rhine and Danube from the third to the early fifth century (after Schmidt 1983:343 fig. 69).

STAGE ONE

The pattern of Roman settlement behind the fortress-studded *limes* is marked by the regular distribution of rural estates, called *villae rusticae*, of which well over 1000 examples are known in south-western Germany. There are also some small and a few large towns, administrative centres, street stations, trading settlements, and a few concentrations of buildings called *vici*. But the *villae rusticae* dominate, in most cases separated by only a few kilometres and distributed over the whole region.

STAGE TWO

The steady advances of Germanic warrior bands into the south-west since 213 eventually led to the withdrawal of the *limes* back to the Rhine by 260 (Fig. 3). Here, new fortresses, *burgi*, and watch-towers were built to protect the border. Until now it has been a common thesis that the whole Roman and Romanised population left the Agri decumates, the areas on both sides of the Black Forest. But a recent analysis of the coins found in settlements on the right side of the Rhine, published in 1989 by K. Stribny, has proved that a Roman population continued to live in these areas from

Figure 4. Germanic hilltop settlements (Höhensiedlungen) in south-western Germany in the fourth and fifth centuries AD. 1. Extensive excavations in the last years; 2. finds (numerous or scattered) that imply permanent settlement and craft manufacturing; 3. few finds, but typical of hilltop settlements; 4. single finds; 5. late Roman limes with castellae.

260 to the middle of the fourth century. The figures show the survival of a coinage-based economy, with strong connections with the Roman territory left of the Rhine, in those eastern areas of Germania superior well suited for settlement and trade (Stribrny 1989). Coins were mainly used by the Romanised part of the population, less so by the invading Germanic groups, whose traces in the settlement pattern of the third and early fourth century are still missing. Coins struck after 260 and well into the fourth century have been found in apparently abandoned fortresses, in their dependent settlements, and in other kinds of settlements, particularly the villas (Nuber 1990).

Figure 5. 'Zähringer Burgberg' near Freiburg im Breisgau with workshop areas (vertical hatching).

The problem is that archaeological evidence of Germanic peoples for two or three generations is missing, though written sources repeatedly speak of large bands of warriors. One possible explanation may be that the Germanic tribes practised unobtrusive cremation burials, another may be that the archaeological material has been improperly dated. Not all signs of early Germanic peoples, however, are absent: there are graves of women with crossbow brooches belonging to the third century and burials of males with 'Bügelknopffibeln', the oldest forms of which belong to the first half of the fourth century. These brooches even allow us to recognise the regions from which the immigrating Germanic tribes came (Fig. 6). But in the end it must be assumed that no small part of the former Romanised population continued to live on in this region.

STAGE THREE

From the first half of the fourth century up to about AD 500, two generations of Alamanni are well known both from archaeological and historical sources (Christlein 1978; Fingerlin 1993). It is the period recorded by Ammianus Marcellinus, who accompanied the army of the general and later emperor Julian the Apostate (361–3) as an officer and an author (Ammianus Marcellinus 1968). Commanding the Gallic forces from 355, Julian defeated an alliance of several Alamannic kings and their army reputedly of 35,000 warriors in the Battle of Argentorate/Strasbourg in 357. The names and the hierarchy of those kings were documented: Chnodomar and Serapion (Germ. Agenarich) led, followed by five kings (*reges*). In addition there were ten minor kings (*regales*) and many nobles (*optimates*) (Amm. 16.12.26). On average each Alamannic leader could have commanded up to 5000 warriors. Postulating a numeric relationship of 1:4 between warriors and other people in each tribe, this would indicate populations of about 15–20,000. Where and how did they live?

This is also the time chronicled by the *Notitia dignitatum*, the late Roman book of state affairs (*Staatshandbuch*). It contains information about the military organisation of the empire from the end of the fourth and beginning fifth century. The Brisigavi, inhabitants of the Breisgau, the Lentienses, and inhabitants of other districts (*pagis*) are mentioned as belonging to recruiting areas of the late Roman army (Fig. 2). During the reigns of the emperors Valentinian I (364–375) and his successor Valentinian II (375–392) the fortresses of the Rhine were extended. Their garrisons consisted mainly if not entirely of Germanic warriors, mostly Alamanni. The garrisons of the fortresses of the Breisacher Burgberg and of Sponeck im Breisgau may have consisted of Brisigavi (Swoboda 1986) (Fig. 7). This is evidenced by the finds, mainly so-called hand-made Alamannic pottery found in fortresses and at workshops that produced 'Germanic' combs, in the *burgi* and elsewhere, and by the cemeteries belonging to the fortresses, which contain burials of women and children. One example is the cemetery of Jechtingen immediately in front of the fortress Sponeck, a typical cemetery belonging to a late Roman fortress. The grave goods, brooches or military belts, identify the Germanic burials. What happened to the fortresses after the Roman army withdrew until 410 cannot be answered. Germanic leaders may have occupied them and taken them over.

Such leaders (*reges* and *regales*) had so-called hilltop settlements (*Höhensiedlungen*) built upon the outer hills of the Black Forest opposite the late Roman *limes*; they could be seen from far away (Steuer 1990a) (Fig. 4). The oldest finds – such as from the Runder Berg near Urach (Bernhard et al. 1991) or from the Zähringer Burgberg near Freiburg (Steuer 1990b) – belong to the first half of the fourth century. The finds indicate an ordinary population of women and warriors; they provide evidence for a high living standard and also a preference for a Roman lifestyle, reflected by the late Roman pottery and tableware, Roman terra sigillata, glasses, mixing bowls (*mortaria*), and so on. These civilised goods are found less often in other Alamannic settlements. We have excavated one of these hill-top settlements, the Zähringer Burgberg near Freiburg, over many years. This *Höhensiedlung* is marked by the extensive

Figure 6. Distribution of 'Bügelknoffibeln' with conical knob.

reshaping of the whole hilltop, which thereby created a high terrace on which houses and workshops were built (Fig. 5). This type of settlement seems to have contained several large buildings for a warrior elite, where not only parts of weapons, belt fittings, and fragments of jewellery are to be found but also a concentration of workshops; we might therefore infer a monopoly of workshops for the treatment of non-ferrous metals.

These hill-top sites represent the top of the settlement hierarchy and were probably the residences of minor kings. These high-ranking settlements of the elite are marked by a strong Roman influence. Surely the warriors living in some of them might have been members of Roman army units, although more often these settlements would have been bases for warrior bands that threatened the empire.

Germanic groups also used *Höhensiedlungen* in the hinterland, far from the *limes*, as for instance the well-known Runder Berg near Urach in Württemberg or the fortification in the Mainschleife near Urphar in Franken (Fig. 4). Their origin in the Germanic hinterland is demonstrated by, among other things, the brooch types (*Bügelknopffibeln*) (Fig. 6). Again the strong Roman influence is evident. These high-ranking settlements might have been the homesteads of the different ranking Alamannic kings and sub-kings, or they might have been advanced late 'Roman' military bases with garrisons of *foederati*, defending against incursions from the eastern Germanic world. The garrisons of the *Höhensiedlungen* of the middle Main region might have been Burgundian *foederati*.

The next ranking settlements are fortified farmsteads in the lowlands. Until now the only one of this type to have been excavated is Sontheim im Stubental in Württemberg (Planck 1990). Within an area 65 by 65 metres, timber post buildings were built and surrounded by a palisade, one side of which was built with a double row of posts and at its mid-point was a gate tower.

For the time being how the overall settlement pattern looked must remain uncertain. Only systematic surveys will give us an image of the density of settlement. But it seems as if the former Roman settlement of villas over the whole breadth of environments was continued in a similar way and that the Germanic population even occupied the former Roman estates. In short, the Roman settlement pattern continued. The evidence for this comes from burials; from Germanic burials within the area of a Roman complex of buildings, for example at Lauffen am Neckar (Schach-Döriges 1981), and from the fact that only small cemeteries with not more than twenty burials have been found, and they are known in large numbers in the Breisgau (Fingerlin 1993) (Fig. 7). The grave goods include valuable brooches and weapons, including swords. The small settlements are not always found in or beside a Roman building complex, often they are a small distance away, but still within the area of the former estates. Near the *limes* at the Rhine the concentration in front of the fortresses is remarkable. Until now the settlements themselves have in most cases only been indicated by small scatterings of sherds at places with traces of Neolithic and La Tène settlement, making archaeological research of Alamannic farmsteads even more difficult. The settlement of Mengen im Breisgau, which is somewhat better explored, occupies a much smaller area than the later Merovingian settlement

Figure 7. Alamannic settlements and cemeteries, fourth and fifth centuries, in the Breisgau:
 1. late-Roman castellae; 2. Alamannic hilltop settlements; 3. cemeteries; 4. settlements.

at the same place, which repeatedly shifts its centre. Pits, pit-houses (*Grubenhäuser*), post-holes, and so forth have all been uncovered. And while crafts like pottery making and the smelting of iron out of mined iron ore are archaeologically represented in the rural settlements, the production of arms and the working of non-ferrous metal is found only on the *Höhensiedlungen*.

In settlements of the same period along the lower Rhine the craft working of non-ferrous metal, the casting of chip-carved belt buckles, and the working of glass is generally attested. It remains to be shown – Gennep being an example of central importance (Heidinga and Offenbergl 1992) – if craft production occurred at all settle-

Figure 8. *The hierarchy of settlements in Alamannic from 260 to 500 AD.*

ments or if among the seemingly comparable settlements there were some outstanding ones that belonged to the top of the social hierarchy.

In the same period, the production of weapons in economic centres continued in a late Roman tradition. An example is the distribution of swords of the fifth century between northern Gaul and Pannonia (Kiss 1981; Böhner 1987:414; Fingerlin 1990:132).

The settlement hierarchy at this stage (Fig. 8) saw late Roman fortresses and Germanic *Höhensiedlungen* at the top. The next ranking Alamannic settlements were the fortified farmsteads in the lowland followed by a large number of scattered farmhouses. In general the Germanic incomers maintained the Roman settlement pattern.

STAGE FOUR

From 500 onwards the settlement pattern and settlement hierarchy changed considerably. Not only the Roman fortresses but also the *Höhensiedlungen* were now deserted. The latest finds end around or shortly after 500. At the Runder Berg there is even recognisable evidence for a military defeat and the destruction of the settlement. The general theory for the end of the settlement of the *Höhensiedlung* type is the annexation of Alamannia by the Frankish empire. The Merovingian rulers would not allow independent Alamannic elites to live in fortified and prestigious settle-

Figure 9. Merovingian-period cemeteries 'Reihengräberfelder' in the Breisgau (Hoepfer 1994).

ments. But we should note that there is also no continuity in the cemeteries.

New cemeteries now develop: the so-called *Reihengräberfelder*, row-grave cemeteries (Hoepfer 1994) (Fig. 9). They are to be found in places that differ from the old Roman settlement areas, on less fertile slopes and small hills. They are situated not more than some hundred metres from the new settlements, which may now be properly called villages. These settlements consisted of ten or more farmsteads which might move after some decades to be built anew, but still keeping within the old boundaries of the village land ('*Gemarkung*'). Each village seems to have existed at one place only for a single generation of about 30 years. At the same time the settlements shifted within their local area, new cemeteries were often added to the old ones situated nearer to the new settlement place (Steuer 1988). Remaining within the same local settlement boundaries, a single continuous village might actually have been sited in several different locations in the course of this long period and have had several cemeteries. The complex system of shifting sites has been proven by several extensive excavations in northern Germany and in Denmark too.

Craft workshops for the working of non-ferrous metal are now to be found within the villages, as evidenced by fragments of moulds, models, and semi-finished products. But not much is known about the organisation of craft working. Were there wandering artisans who were hired to work seasonally if needed or were there local craftspeople? There is also nothing known about the production of weapons. Large numbers of high-quality swords and scramasaxes are conserved as grave goods, but they were not produced in the villages, but rather in the central workshops of the king or of monasteries. At least the Carolingian sources hint at this. Distribution of weapons may have taken place at the annual gathering of the army in spring.

There is no longer any evidence of a hierarchy between settlements with the exception of the royal palaces (*Pfalz*, *palatium*) which have not yet been explored archaeologically. The social elite seem not to have been distinguished by their residences. Even their burials, which can be recognised by their valuable grave goods and other aspects of their treatment, can be found in the common cemeteries often at its fringes, and later on near churches at the cemetery or near the settlement. One exceptional example was recently excavated near Lauchheim, Ostalbkreis, Württemberg, with a courtyard (60 by 60 metres) and richly equipped aristocratic graves immediately outside the surrounding fence (Stork 1993a; 1993b).

The end of the Roman world and its settlement pattern consisting of scattered single farmsteads may be dated to about 500, a time when the expansion of the Merovingian empire during the reign of Clovis marked the beginning of a new socio-political and cultural world. Strong kingship at the top led to a less hierarchical settlement pattern. In the early Alamannic period tribal society was constructed of many small groups, each with their own leaders (Fig. 8), kings who wished to have their own centres to demonstrate their authority, to have, for example, their own *Höhensiedlung*. The Merovingian kings ended these independent interests. Thus, the Roman settlement pattern did not change with the arrival of Alamannic immigrants in the third century, but rather about AD 500.

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ABSTRACTS

The hierarchy of Alamannic settlements in the former *limes* region of south-western Germany to AD 500.

The author summarises recent research undertaken at Freiburg University on settlement in south-western Germany during the Roman and Merovingian periods. Following the Germanic conquest of the Agri decumates and the retreat of the Roman *limes* to the Rhine and Danube (AD 260), hillfort settlements appeared. They were the pinnacle of Alamannic settlement hierarchy, forming the counterpoint to the late Roman *castellae* along the Rhein, which were also garrisoned by Alamanni warriors. New research, however, suggests an otherwise strong continuity of the Roman settlement pattern (particularly the pattern established by *villae rusticae*), and a major shift only occurred around AD 500 when the hilltop settlements disappeared and village-like settlements replaced scattered farmsteads.

Die Hierarchie der alamannischen Siedlungen in ehemaligen Limesgebiet in Südwestdeutschland bis 500.

Systematische Geländebegehungen im letzten Jahrzehnt erlauben die Rekonstruktion des alamannischen Siedlungsgefüges nach der Rückverlegung des Limes an Rhein und Donau und der Besetzung der Agri decumates durch germanische Kriegergruppen. Vier Stufen charakterisieren den Besiedlungsgang im Breisgau von der Landnahme bis zur Eingliederung Alamanniens ins Fränkische Reich. Während von den ersten Generationen der eingewanderten Germanen kaum archäologische Spuren bekannt sind (Stufe 2), ist für das 4./5. Jh. (Stufe 3) die alamannische Gesellschaft sowohl aus der schriftlichen Überlieferung als auch durch archäologische Quellen gut bezeugt. Die germanische Elite residiert in Höhsiedlungen als Spitze der Besiedlung aus verstreut liegenden Gehöften, deren Verteilung sich an das römische Besiedlungsmuster der *villae rusticae* anlehnt. Die germanischen Höhsiedlungen am Schwarzwaldrand bilden den Gegenpol zu den spätrömischen Kastellen am Rhein (Breisacher Münsterberg, Sponeck am Kaiserstuhl), deren Besatzung weitgehend ebenfalls aus alamannischen Kriegern besteht. Erst nach 500 ändert sich das Besiedlungsbild, die Höhsiedlungen werden aufgegeben, statt der kleinen Gehöftsiedlungen entstehen Dörfer, deren Verteilung im Breisgau über die Verbreitung der Reihengräberfelder angezeigt wird.

La hiérarchie des habitats Alamans dans la région de l'ancien *limes* du sud-ouest de l'Allemagne jusqu'à 500 ap. J.C.

L'auteur résume des recherches récentes entreprises à l'université de Fribourg sur des habitats en Allemagne de l'ouest durant les périodes romaine et mérovingienne. Suivant la conquête germaine des Agri decumates et la retraite du *limes* romain du Rhin et du Danube (260 ap. J.C.), les habitats de hauteur fortifiés font apparition. Ils sont au sommet de la hiérarchie des habitats Alamans. Cependant, des recherches récentes suggèrent une continuité autrement forte du schéma de l'habitat romain; un changement majeur ne se produit qu'aux alentours de 500 lorsque les habitats de hauteur disparaissent et les habitats de 'type village' remplacent les fermes dispersées.