

# Massacre deposit sites and their relationship to warfare in Central European Neolithic (5200 - 2500 BC) A state of affairs

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**Abstract:** Thirteen cases of individuals grouped together in buried structures following violent deaths are known to exist in Central European Neolithic sites. They are dated between the end of the 6th millennium and the middle of the third millennium. Within this group, two main categories can be distinguished: 1) “massacre deposits” consisting of individuals laid out in no particular order, and 2) genuine burials, where individuals were carefully interred according to the funeral practices prevailing in their community. The first is specific to the Danubian Neolithic, which includes the Linear Pottery culture (Lbk) and the cultures of the fifth millennium that derived from it. The second is represented by two sites from the third millennium belonging respectively to the Globular Amphora culture and the Corded Ware culture. A direct link with a warlike event seems plausible for the Late Neolithic graves. Although this interpretation is repeatedly postulated in the works devoted to them, it is more difficult to support for the “massacre deposits” of the Danubian Neolithic. The ambiguity of the data certainly does not allow us to definitively rule out a direct link with war in certain cases. However, the hypothesis of sacrificial ceremonies and deposits dedicated to supernatural powers seems to us to be the most plausible interpretation. In this hypothesis, war is not the direct cause of death, but it may intervene as a provider of victims for sacrifices unrelated to the martial context.

**Keywords :** Neolithic, “massacre”, war, Talheim, Asparn, Herxheim, Achenheim, violence.

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## INTRODUCTION

The subject of mass killings in the European Neolithic period only recently emerged in the specialized literature, with the discovery in 1983 of the Talheim site (Wahl and König, 1987), which will be described below. The finds then multiplied, giving rise to an abundant production, details of which can be found in the presentation of the corpus. Central Europe, to which this article will be devoted, is one of the best endowed regions. The cases listed there range from the early Neolithic (Linear Pottery culture) to the final Neolithic (Corded Ware culture). We use the concept of “massacre deposits” to refer to deposits containing several individuals buried simultaneously, a significant number of whom show signs of potentially fatal *perimortem* injuries. The terms *mass grave* and *Massengrab* (massacre grave) used in the English and

German articles respectively seem to us to be inappropriate, except, as we shall see, in one of the 13 sites studied (Koszyce), where the individuals buried simultaneously were treated in accordance with the funeral rites of the culture to which they belonged. Here we are dealing with what is commonly referred to as a “multiple grave” and falls under the category of “disaster burials”, in the variant concerning individuals killed in armed conflict.

Simultaneous deposit implies that the bodies of the deceased were placed in the burial structure at the same time (Boulestin, 2008 and 2018), but not necessarily that they died at the same time. Massacre deposits are commonly linked to warlike activities (warriors killed in battle, victims of a raid on a village, of a collective execution as part of a “victory celebration” type event). We will examine this hypothesis while considering whether it may be overly restrictive and, consequently, whether the existence of a direct link with war, almost systemat-

ically posited in the case studies summarized below, is truly valid in all instances. After a brief presentation of our analytical framework, we will describe the thirteen relevant cases, before reflecting on their interpretation. A brief detour via three sites without human remains but with evidence of battle will then allow us, finally, to complete the dossier of alleged evidence of warfare (fig. 1).

## 1. THE ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

To define a good analysis strategy, we believe it is important to distinguish three stages: capture, execution and burial. The first two are combined for individuals killed in the heat of battle, but we will see that this is not the most common scenario. The capture, or collection, of future victims can take place in a single episode or over several episodes. The notion of a single episode is implied in the scenarios which favor war as the event providing the massacre deposit. On the other hand, the idea of a collection occurring in several stages opens up the possibility of a dissociation between the time of capture and that of execution, and of scenarios other than those involving warlike conflicts in the general sense of the term. The capture, during raids, of prisoners destined to be reduced to slavery before being, later, collectively executed in the

context of a sacrificial ceremony, is distinguished from war by the fact that the violence that presides over the capture is not intended to subdue the enemy, but to constitute “reserves” of sacrificial individuals. It is thus similar to the practice of headhunting, which consists of fuelling rituals with human body parts collected for this purpose. Both activities can also be linked, with war providing an opportunity to capture slaves and take heads, but it should not be forgotten that this is a random mixture of actions with different motivations.

Studying the types of injury is therefore fundamental. The presence of war pathologies, and therefore of defensive wounds, although it does not exclude other scenarios, is an essential condition for linking the individuals concerned to a warlike confrontation. The evidence of potentially lethal blows inflicted on previously immobilized individuals, on the other hand, points to massacres perpetrated after the victims had been captured and gathered, which introduces the idea of a time lag between capture and execution. The latter does not necessarily take place immediately after the battle and may have no functional connection with the conflict that generated it. The execution of captured combatants for sacrifice is not the same as that of prisoners killed on the evening of the battle to take revenge or humiliate and terrorize the enemy. The link between war and the “massacre” is therefore indirect.

The massacre deposit implies that the deceased or future victims were first gathered together and that, in

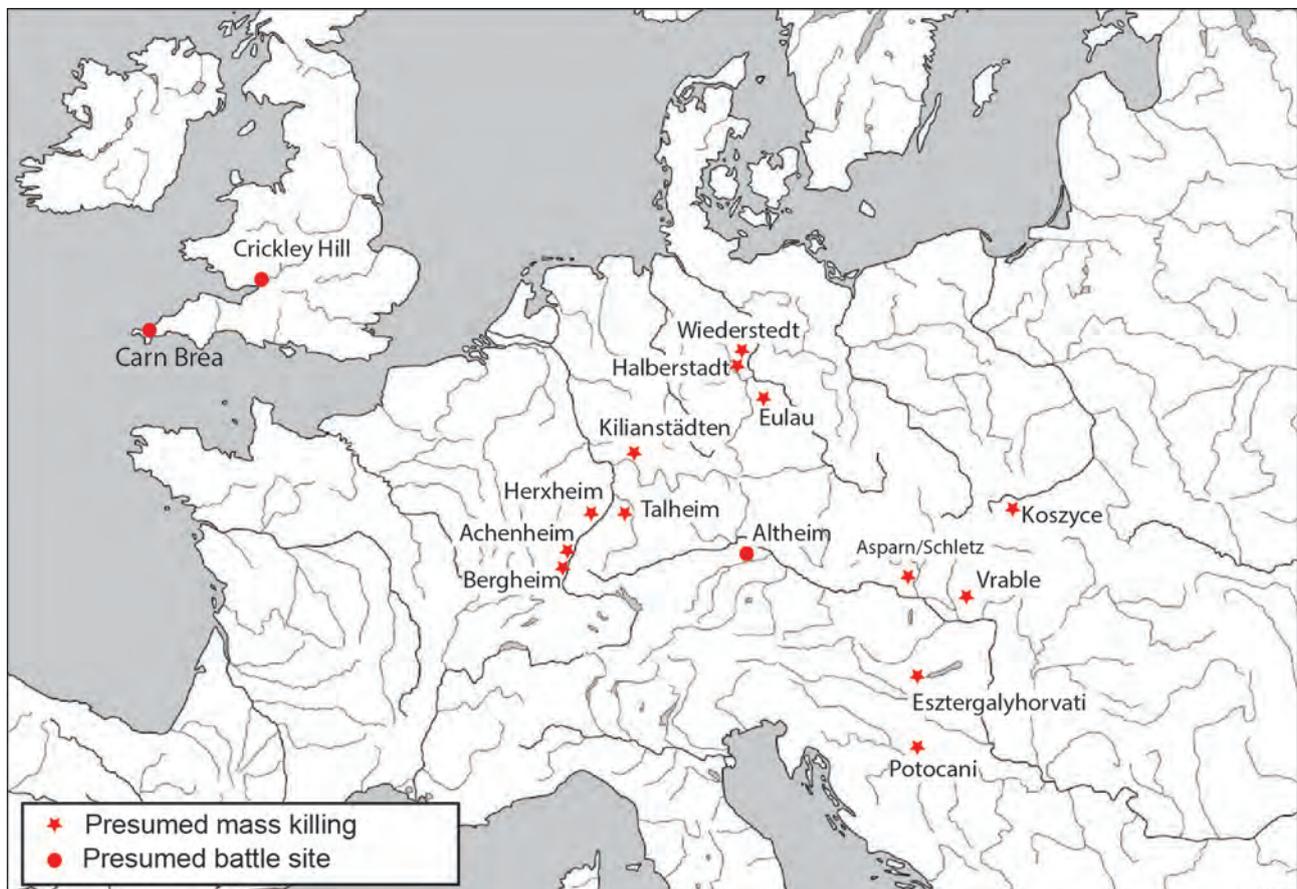


Fig. 1 – Distribution of sites mentioned. CAD C. Jeunesse.

the latter case, the individuals assembled were executed simultaneously. The fact of depositing them in the same grave is generally understood to be motivated by their belonging to the same community: that of enemies killed after the battle, that of prisoners sacrificed in a festive context or that of victims of an assault buried by their peers. The methods of palaeobiology (genomic and/or isotopic analyses) will help to distinguish the first two cases from the third. The presence of women and children and, a fortiori, the existence of family ties between the victims will tip the balance more towards a scenario where the inhumed and the inhumers belong to the same community, a hypothesis possibly reinforced by evidence of treatment in accordance with local funeral practices. The existence of evidence of over-violence (torture, mutilation, on the living or the dead) leads to envisaging “foreign” victims, which does not necessarily imply assimilating them to prisoners of war executed because they were enemies. In this case, we must remain open to the possibility of actions like the “sacrifice of scapegoats”, for which a distinction must be made in the analysis between the circumstances of capture and the motivations for execution. Violence is not only directed against foreigners. It can also be internal to the community, both in a sacrificial context and in the case of judicial executions. Finally, it should not be forgotten that the existence of isotopic indicators of an external origin does not necessarily mean that the victims are “foreigners”. Individuals from different biotopes may well belong to the same ethnic group or the same political entity, and similarly, individuals with the same isotopic signals may well come from two different communities sharing the same biotope. It is therefore necessary to avoid conflating the biological outsider/foreigner—who can now be identified through new paleobiological methods—with the social outsider/foreigner, who remains undetectable to the prehistorian.

The distinction between one-time capture and captures spread over several episodes is another blind spot in research. Archaeological and anthropological methods can, on the other hand, help to distinguish between a simultaneous deposit and a deposit of individuals deposited successively in the same place. We will see later that taking this distinction into account is by no means irrelevant.

## 2. PRESENTATION OF THE SITES

Considering the wide range of scenarios represented, we thought it would be useful to summarize the main characteristics of each of the deposits in separate notes. These are arranged in chronological blocks and, within each block, in alphabetical order. The corpus consists of thirteen deposits, the majority of which (six cases) come from German sites, with the others divided between eastern France, Austria, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and Croatia. Taking the dating into account leads to the identification of three periods: the end of the sixth millennium

(seven sites), the fifth millennium (four sites) and the first half of the third millennium (two sites).

### End of the sixth millennium – the Linear Pottery (LBK) culture deposits

Asparn-Schletz (Lower Austria): Linear Pottery (LBK) settlement surrounded by a double ditch. The ditches have yielded the remains of around a hundred individuals, 67 of which have been systematically analyzed and interpreted as the remains of an alleged assault dating from the recent LBK (around 5100-5000 BC). The skeletons were partially dislocated (in particular due to the removal of the extremities) and bore traces of animal bites, indicating a delayed burial. All 33 skulls found showed fractures, while only two cases of trauma to the postcranial skeleton were observed. Both sexes and all age groups are represented, with, however, an apparent deficit in young women. This observation could, however, be biased by questionable methods, because it is based essentially on the examination of the skulls to determine sex and age at death. The excavator imagines a site abandoned immediately after the attack, the corpses being left on the spot. Based on the condition of the skulls, it is likely that the wounded or prisoners were executed. Capture and execution took place in the same place and were carried out in quick succession. The hypothesis of an abandoned battlefield seems plausible, although the scarcity of osteological evidence of frontal combat calls this conclusion into question (Windl, 1998 and 2002; Teschler-Nicola et al., 2006; Teschler-Nicola, 2012; Meyer et al., 2018; Pieler and Teschler-Nicola, 2023).

Halberstadt (Saxony-Anhalt): A sub-circular pit from the Linear Pottery culture (around 5100 BC) dug near a settlement has yielded the remains of nine adults (seven securely identified as male, one probable male, one probable female) of non-local origin (isotopes) clearly executed, once immobilized, by blows mainly to the back of the skull, and arranged in no particular order in the structure. Traces of animal bites suggest that the pit may have remained open for some time before being definitively sealed. Pathological lesions are rare apart from the blows to the skulls. The proposed interpretation is that they are the victims of a failed raid who were buried by the attacked community, and therefore links the deposit to the consequences of a single violent attack on a village (Meyer et al., 2018a and 2018b.)

Herxheim (Germany, Palatinate): Linear Pottery Culture (LBK) settlement surrounded by a double ditch. The highly fragmented remains of nearly 500 individuals come from the two ditches and internal pits. Several separate deposits contained up to fifteen individuals (fig. 2). The corresponding events date from the end of the occupation of the site, around 5100-5000 BC. The presence of groups of carved skulls (skullcaps) and remarkable objects such as ceramics show that the deposits are the result of a stereotypical ritual. For B. Boulestin and A.-S. Coupey (2015), whose interpretation is by far the



Fig. 2 – Herxheim, view of deposit 9. Photo Christian Jeunesse.

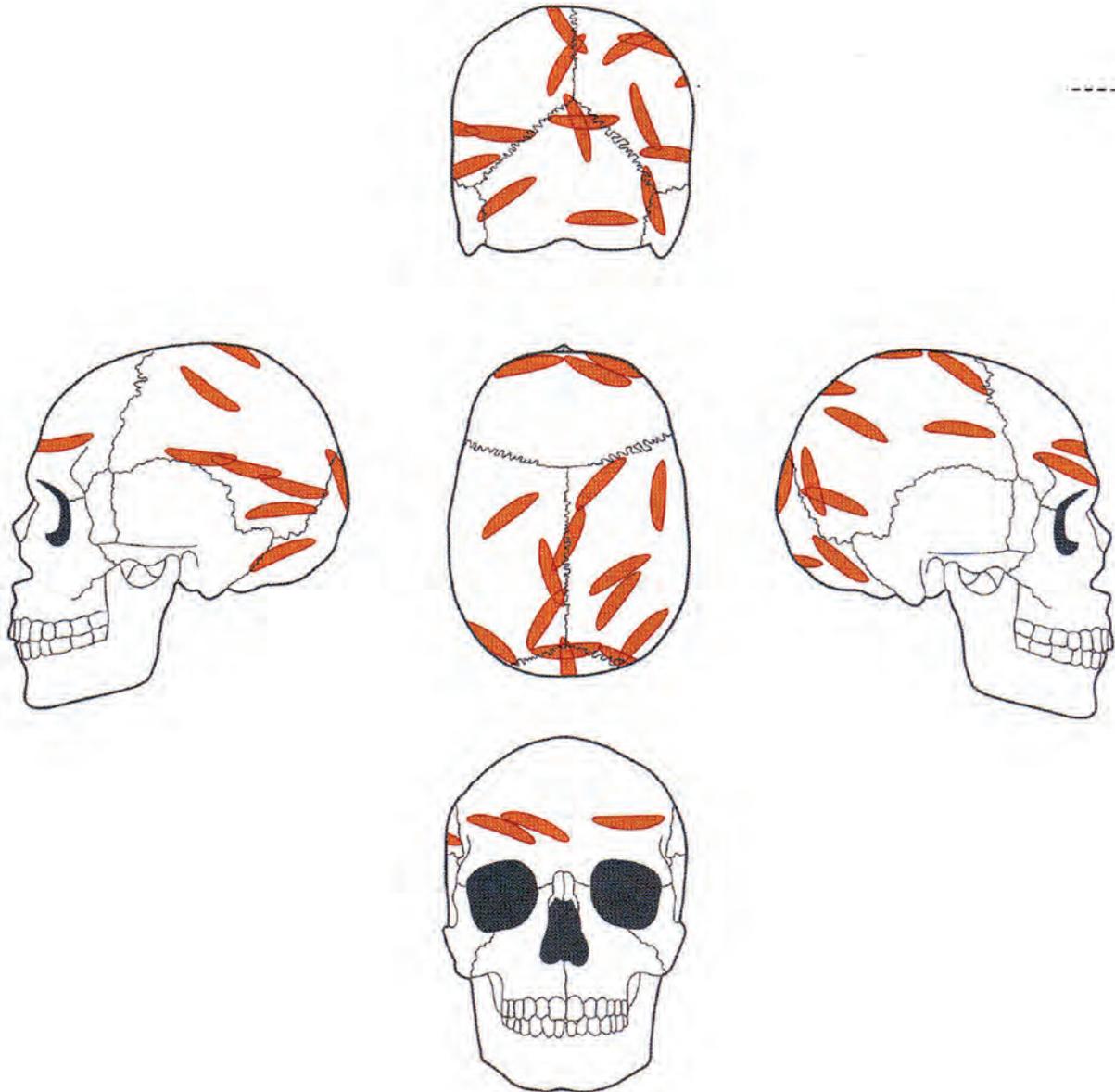
most convincing, the condition of the bones points to cannibalistic practices. Isotopic analyses show that the majority of the victims have non-local indicators. However, the evidence of violent capture is insignificant. The interpretation favors a scenario in which foreigners were captured to feed sacrificial practices. The multiplicity of deposits suggests the existence of a series of ceremonies that took place over a period of time. Several episodes of capture were therefore followed by several episodes of execution, treatment and burial of the remains. (Zeeb-Lanz et al., 2007; Boulestin and Coupey, 2015; Zeeb-Lanz, 2019; Peter-Röscher, 2023).

Schöneck-Kilianstedten (Germany, Hesse): the poorly preserved remains of at least twenty-six individuals arranged in no apparent order come from a section of ditch from the recent LBK period (around 5100 BC). The group includes thirteen adults (nine males and two females, sexed on the basis of skull morphology) and thirteen immature individuals (10 of whom were under the age of 10). Numerous cranial injuries (including arrow impacts and blows from adzes) probably resulting from face-to-face combat. The other *perimortem* blows detected are mainly localized on the tibias and fibulas, attesting, according to the authors of the study, to torture of immobilized living persons or targeted violence against the corpse. The interpretation favors the aftermath of a warlike event. (Meyer et al., 2015 and 2018b, p. 27)

Talheim (Germany, Baden-Württemberg): excavated in 1983-84, this site is the first proven massacre deposit

for the LBK. The disordered remains of thirty-four individuals (sixteen juveniles and eighteen adults, including nine men and seven women) were found in a sub-rectangular pit dating from the recent stage of the LBK (around 5100 BC). Compared to a standard demographic composition, young adult women are missing. 59% of the skeletons showed signs of *perimortem* injuries, including numerous skull fractures caused by blows from a club or adze and arrow impacts. The majority of the injuries are located at the back or on the right side of the skull (fig. 3). The evidence of defensive pathologies is insignificant. Probable family relationships have been detected (odontological and genomic analysis). The proposed interpretation is that of the massacre of an entire community during a raid. The lack of young women could be the result of abductions. Most of the individuals appear to have been killed once immobilized. However, a quick search and basic taphonomic observations cast some doubt on this scenario. The few available photos are more reminiscent of a mass grave from the Late Neolithic period than a pile of primary deposits. However, the attribution to the LBK is not disputable. The existing data does not provide unambiguous proof that the 34 bodies were deposited simultaneously, which weakens the hypothesis of a single burial episode following a war raid. (Wahl and König, 1987; Price et al., 2006; Wahl and Trautmann, 2012; Strien et al., 2014).

Vráble (Slovakia): A group of thirty-eight individuals deposited in no particular order in a ditch within the



**Fig. 3** – Talheim, accumulated impacts of adze blows on skulls. Based on Strien et al. 2014.

enclosure of a large Linear Pottery settlement (circa 5100 BC) was discovered and excavated in 2022. The information available at the moment is limited to a few generalities. The skull and mandible are missing for thirty-seven of the individuals identified. The presence, in some cases, of the first cervical vertebra suggests that the head was carefully removed rather than violently decapitated. The initial indications suggest that the bodies were deposited simultaneously, during a single burial episode, but a more complex scenario cannot be ruled out (Furholt et al., 2020, Müller-Scheeßel et al., 2023<sup>1</sup>).

Wiederstedt (Saxony-Anhalt, Germany): a pit located in a LBK settlement has yielded the remains of ten individuals, including six children, two adolescents (12-16 years old), one adult male and one adult female. The bodies were lying in a disordered position and without furniture. The predominance of the immature and the absence of pathology—in particular of cranial fractures—make this

site a special case within the LBK. The cause of death could not be determined: epidemic, famine, poisoning or execution without impact on the skeleton are the possibilities suggested by the authors of the study. (Meyer et al., 2004).

### **Fifth millennium – post-linear Danubian cultures**

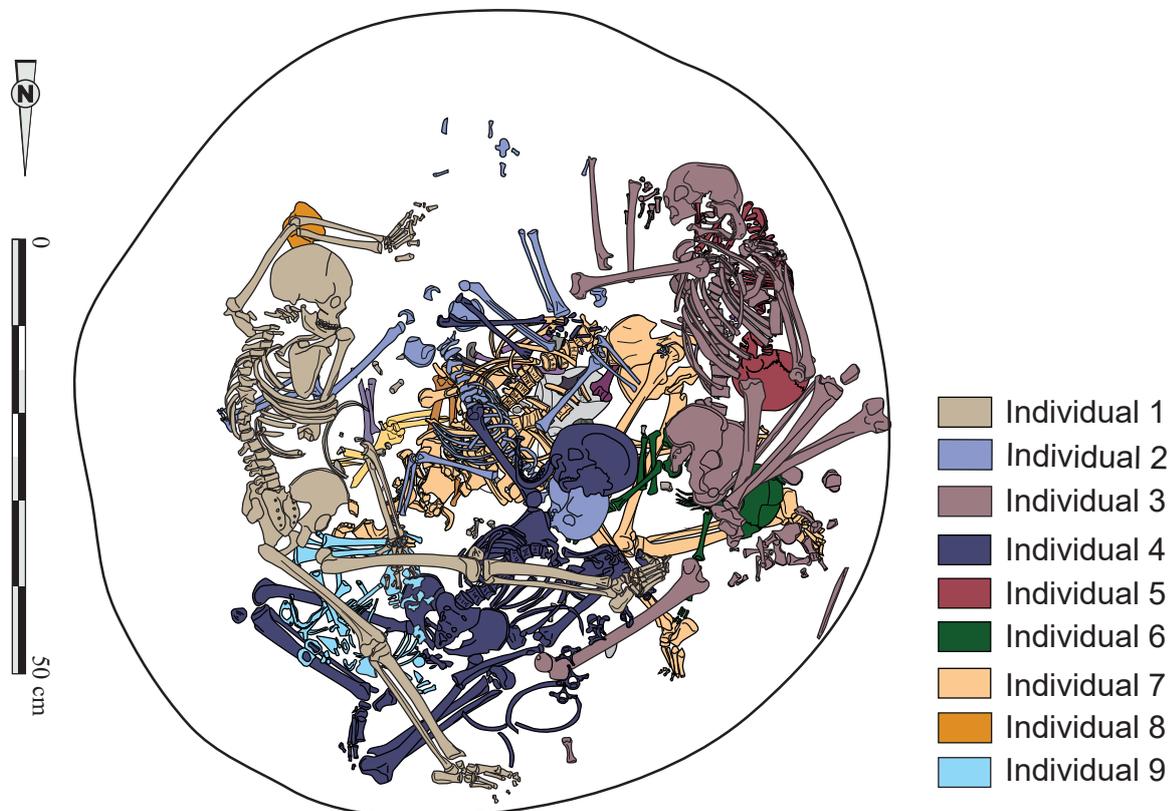
Achenheim (Alsace, France): The remains of five adult males and one adolescent, accompanied by four supernumerary upper limbs, have been found in a circular pit in a settlement of the Bruebach-Oberbergen group (circa 4300 BC) surrounded by an enclosure. The six sub-complete individuals were lying in a disordered position and presented a multitude of perimortem fractures, including systematic fracturing of the skulls and tibias. The skulls had been methodically destroyed, with

particular attention paid to the destruction of the faces. Isotopic analyses show the exogenous origin of the victims. The authors of the study refer to torture, mutilation and/or desecration of the corpses and favor the hypothesis that the bodies of prisoners were deposited in a recycled storage pit following a “victory celebration” and, consequently, that there is a direct link with warfare. This preconception is based on the fact that all the individuals are men and that the site is surrounded by a defensive structure, but also on the prominent place of North American Indians in ethnological comparisons. It is actually impossible to demonstrate the link with a single warlike event and, a fortiori, to assess the time that elapsed between capture and execution. The hypothesis of a group of captives taken prisoner during several separate events and then sacrificed and buried simultaneously cannot therefore be ruled out. (Lefranc et al., 2021).

Bergheim (France, Alsace): from a circular pit attributed to the BORS group or to the early stage of the Michelsberg culture (between 4300 and 4000 BC) come the remains of fifteen individuals represented by seven complete skeletons, a fragment of the skull of a young child and seven left upper limbs amputated at the arm level, the latter grouped together at the bottom of the pit, at forming the base of the deposit (fig. 4). The complete bodies are in various positions and are those of one woman, two men and four children. The arms come

from six adults and one adolescent (12-16 years old) and show, in addition to the impacts related to amputation, numerous traces of blows. One of the adult males has potentially fatal cranial injuries and his left arm has been amputated; it has not been possible to establish whether this arm belongs to the group of arms deposited in the pit, but it is possible. The bodies and arms were deposited simultaneously or within a very short period of time. The pit was clearly left open for some time. The interpretation favors a direct link with warfare. The treatment and burial of the remains would have occurred immediately after a military confrontation, and the arms are interpreted as trophies. The women and children are seen as executed prisoners of war (Chenal et al., 2015).

Esztergályhorváti (western Hungary): the remains of eight individuals come from a quadrangular pit disturbed by recent construction work, studied as part of a rescue excavation in 1994 and attributed to the early stage of Lengyel culture (between 4940 and 4720 BC). The human remains were found under a layer of burnt sediment between two and twenty centimeters thick. The deposit consists solely of men over the age of 16. According to the sketch published by Barna (2015, fig. 3), the bones were scattered over a depth of about one meter. The bones are poorly preserved. The only skull in fairly good condition shows signs of potentially fatal injuries; probable injuries have been observed on a second skull (Makkay, 2000; Zoffmann, 2007; Barna, 2015).



**Fig. 4** – Bergheim, general layout of the deposit. Based on Chenal et al. 2015.  
CAD H. Barrand Emam and Fanny Chenal; copyright: Antea archéologie.

Potočani (Croatia): the remains of forty-one individuals deposited haphazardly come from a circular pit attributed to the Lasinja culture (around 4200-4100 BC). The deposit consists of twenty men, eighteen women and three children. Of the thirty-eight individuals analyzed, eleven are related. Some of the skulls show perimortem trauma located mainly at the back of the skull (fig. 5). The authors refer to a “large-scale indiscriminate killing” including executions of individuals killed after being immobilized (Janković et al., 2017; McLure et al., 2020; Novak et al., 2021; Hansen, 2022).

### Third millennium – Corded Ware and Globular Amphorae culture

Eulau (Germany, Saxony-Anhalt): four grouped tombs of the Corded Ware culture dated between 2675 and 2495 BC respectively contained four, four, three and two individuals. The group comprised two men, three women and eight children, making a total of 13 individuals, five of whom showed signs of injury. The study showed that each of the graves had at least one perimortem injury (axe blows, arrowhead impact) and/or combat pathologies (injuries affecting the forearms or hands). Several cases of family relationships were detected. One of the graves

contained the skeletons of a couple and their two children. The interpretation favors the hypothesis that they were victims of a raid and were buried simultaneously by members of their community, in accordance with local funeral rites and family divisions. The circumstances are reminiscent of those described for Talheim, with the difference that the Eulau dead were not mixed together in a mass grave (Meyer et al., 2009; Haak et al., 2008 and 2023).

Koszyce (southern Poland): from a rectangular pit of the Globular Amphora culture excavated in 2011 come the skeletons of fifteen individuals buried simultaneously and distributed between two rows of seven and eight individuals showing opposite directions (fig. 6). Eight dates place the event between 2875 and 2670 BC. The group consists of four men, five women, two adolescents and four children. The paleogenomic study (Schroeder et al., 2019) makes it possible to reconstruct an extended family, with, in particular, mothers buried with their children and brothers and sisters laid to rest side by side. The fact that the deceased were carefully aligned and accompanied by funerary offerings (ceramics, axes, tools and pendants made of bone, objects made of amber and tusks) allows us to interpret the structure as a multiple grave. Perimortem cranial wounds, clearly caused by flint axes for 12 of the deceased, were observed on 14 of the 15 individuals.

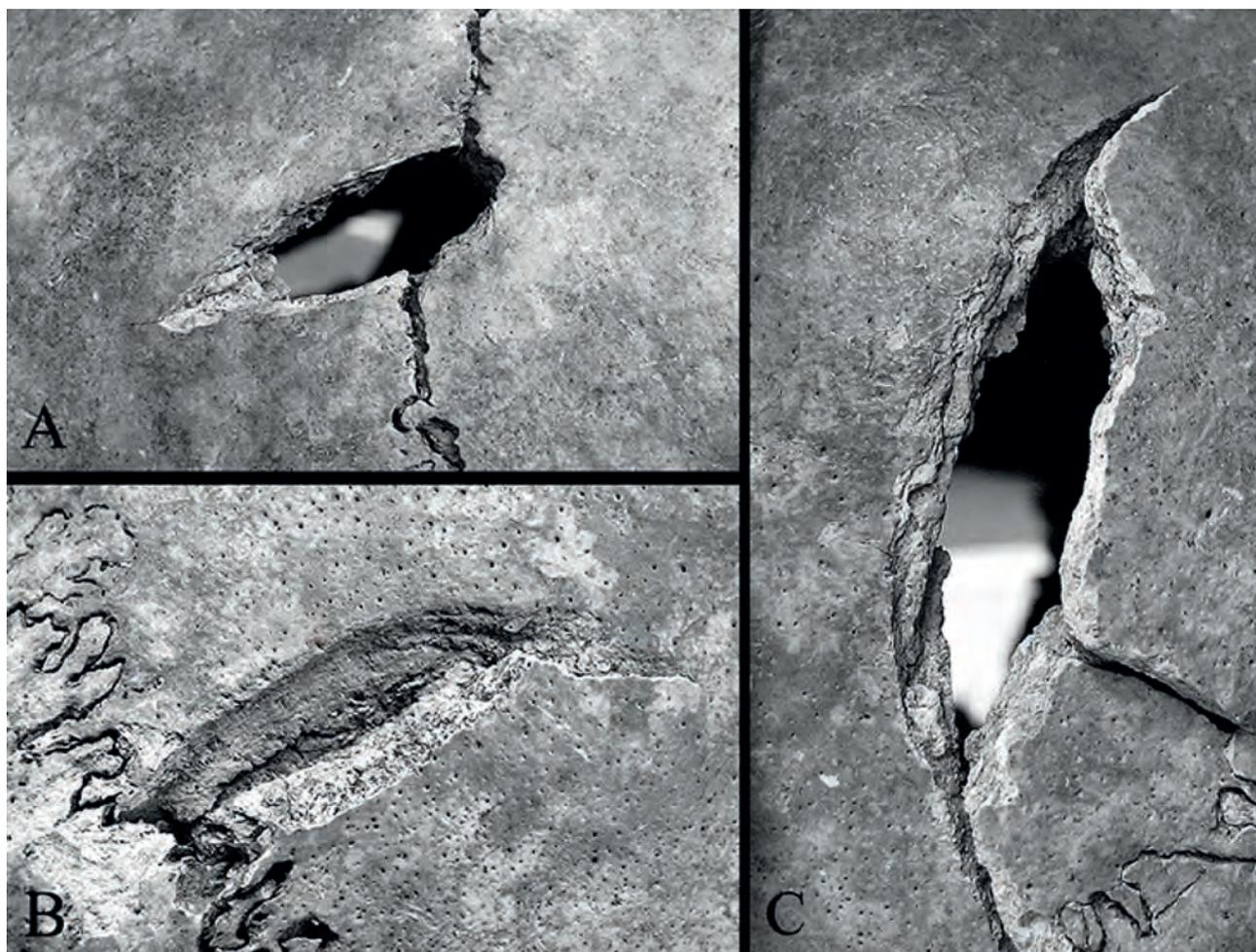


Fig. 5 – Potočani, examples of skull impacts. Based on Janković et al. 2017.



Fig. 6 – Koszyce, general view of the multiple grave. Based on Konopka et al. 2014.

The rest of the skeleton did not show any signs of combat. Two interpretative scenarios have been put forward: victims of a fight (in a raid-type scenario) who were executed after being immobilized, on the one hand, and sacrifices carried out in a ritual context, on the other. The arrangement of the bodies shows that those responsible for the deposit knew the family ties between the victims (Konopka et al., 2016; Szmyt, 2017; Schroeder et al., 2019; Hansen, 2022).

### 3. INTERPRETATION

#### Summary

From the outset, three of the configurations encountered can be set aside: Asparn, the only probable case of dead bodies found abandoned on the battlefield, and which, in the absence of the intentional grouping of the deceased in a dedicated hollow structure, does not fall under the category of deposition; Herxheim, the only example showing several episodes of deposition on the same site and the only practically proven case of a recruitment involving several episodes of capture, execution and burial; and finally, Eulau and Koszyce, where we are dealing with real genuine burial deposits (Koszyce is therefore, due to the large number of individuals, the only site for which the notion of mass grave—*tombe multiple*, *Massengrab*— is appropriate).

The existence of executions after immobilization (and not in the heat of battle) is represented in eight out of

thirteen sites and probable in four additional sites. Concerning the composition of the deposits, only two groups are limited to adult males, the most frequent case (nine occurrences) being that of groups made up of adults of both sexes and children. In the second case, the distribution by sex and age group is not necessarily in line with that of a 'normal' living population. The predominance of the immature places the Wiederstedt site in a class of its own. Family relationships have been detected for four sites, including the two cases of burials respecting local funeral practices (Eulau and Koszyce) as well as the massacre deposits of Talheim and Potočani. Evidence of torture and/or perimortem mutilation has been found at the sites of Achenheim, Bergheim, Schöneck-Kilianstedten and Vráble. They concern the entire group at Achenheim and Vráble, and only part of it at the other two sites. The Vráble and Achenheim sites are distinguished by features unknown in the rest of the corpus, the former by the systematic practice of removing heads, the latter by the extent of over-violence, for which the term "relentless" is not an exaggeration. At the other end of the spectrum, the Wiederstedt deposit is unique owing to the complete absence of injuries having left traces on the bones, which opens up the possibility of it being a disaster burial with no connection to violent deaths.

#### Origin of the deposits

The proposed interpretations show a clear preference for narratives in which the deposit is directly related to a warlike episode (a battle or raid on a village or ham-

let). The victims are seen either as combatants or as mere victims of raids, and the deaths are presented as being directly related to the warlike event, whether they concern the victims of the fighting or prisoners executed after the battle. This view is underpinned by the notion of “over-violence”, employed by several authors, who suggest the existence of a distinction between the lethal act intended simply to incapacitate an enemy in the heat of battle, and acts of torture or mutilation carried out on individuals who are already immobilized.

The majority of cases involving the killing of defenceless individuals by blows to the back of the skull show that the deposit is, more often than not, something other than the result of the simple collection of the victims of a conflict; This scenario is only truly plausible in the two proven cases of burials arranged in all likelihood by inhumers belonging to the same group as the deceased (Eulau and Koszyce). Living individuals, possibly from several capture episodes (as in Herxheim), were gathered and executed after immobilization before being buried collectively in a pit dug for this purpose or in an existing hollow structure. The scarcity of battle marks is a good argument in favor of this pattern. Its pre-eminence should lead us to seriously consider hypotheses involving narratives in which the execution is not directly related to warfare, whose role in the operational chain may have been limited to constituting one of the circumstances that allowed for the capture of individuals destined to be executed in non-war contexts. The issue of the chronological, spatial and functional link between the battle (whatever its form) and the execution of the victims lies at the heart of the debate. War may have been one of the sources for the creation of panels of victims intended for sacrificial practices that are not a direct consequence of it. The opposition between the “victory celebration” type hypotheses and those that favor the idea of delayed executions with no direct relation to a battle or raid is not unrelated to the ethnological frames of reference mobilized: North American Indians, known for their propensity to torture prisoners, on the one hand, and Mesoamericans (such as the Mexica) or South Americans (such as the Tupinamba), who favored capturing prisoners to be sacrificed, on the other.

Regarding the relationship between those who deposited the bodies and those who were deposited, a consensus has emerged around the idea that the former are the inhabitants of the place where the structure or structures housing the bodies is located. They would then have buried their own dead, which is the most frequent case, or victims from the camp of the attackers (as in the scenario of the failed raid put forward about the Halberstadt deposit). In the first case, a distinction can be made between the actual burials, with the dead spread over several graves in Eulau or grouped together in a single pit as in Koszyce, and the groups of bodies piled up unceremoniously and without any identifiable funeral rites. The latter account for the majority of our corpus and suggest mere pits intended to accommodate individuals who died an “unfortunate” death and were not entitled to the usual

funeral rites. The existence of family ties is one of the pillars of the “raid” model on a village or hamlet. However, this interpretation is not compulsory. It is also conceivable that the people left behind correspond to a group of related individuals rounded up to serve as sacrificial victims. This scenario does indeed involve a raid in its unfolding; however, the dead are not direct victims of the attack, but prey intended to be captured alive and to be slaughtered later, in circumstances with no direct connection to the raid.

### **Cultural and historical context of the massacre deposit: the pre-eminent role of the Danubian Neolithic**

As we saw above, the sites in our corpus can be divided into three chronological blocks. Two of them belong to the same cultural complex, namely the Danubian Neolithic. This group accounts for the vast majority of the sites, including all those from the sixth and fifth millennia, namely seven Linear Pottery sites and four sites belonging to later cultures also part of the Danubian cultural tradition (fig. 7). Considering the fact that the two remaining sites, Koszyce and Eulau, correspond to funerary structures, we can conclude that all the Central European massacre deposits belong to the same cultural complex, thus reflecting a historically and culturally situated practice. This does not, of course, mean that massacres were absent from the repertoire of the other two major complexes of the North European Neolithic (Michelsberg-Funnel Beaker culture on the one hand, Corded Ware-Bell Beaker on the other), but that the Danubians were the only ones to take care to bury the victims affected by these forms of violence. The same can be said of the practices of *perimortem* torture and mutilation, which we only know of in the Danubian context because this complex is the only one to have created, through the burial of bodies in pits, the conditions favorable to their fossilization. The eleven recorded cases are not evenly distributed within the Danubian Neolithic, where there is a secondary concentration of three sites dated to the last third of the fifth millennium and a main concentration of seven sites attributable to the recent and/or final stages of Linear Pottery (around 5100–5000 BC). The latter deserves some additional comments.

### **The “crisis” of the late LBK**

The seven Linear Pottery sites are, with varying degrees of certainty, attributed to the recent and/or final stages of this culture. This has led some authors to conclude that they were part of a single phenomenon known as the “crisis at the end of the LBK”. This would have affected the central area of the LBK, spanning from the Rhine in the west to Slovakia in the east, if we are to believe the current state of documentation. A climatic, demographic and economic crisis is said to have destabilized the LBK communities, triggered the violent conflicts evidenced by our deposits and contributed to the

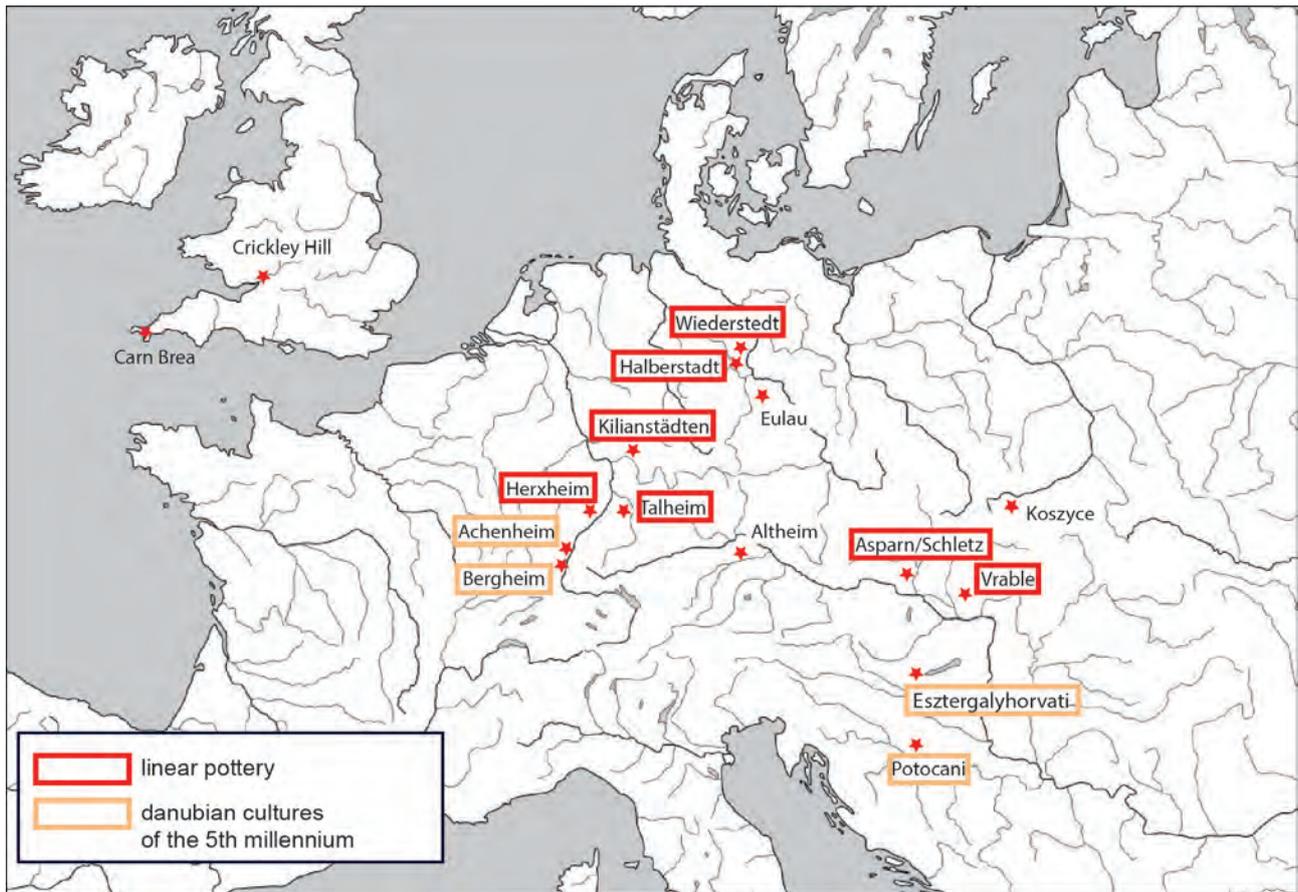


Fig. 7 – Distribution of sites classified by period. CAD C. Jeunesse.

disappearance of the LBK as a culture (critical analysis and complete bibliography in Link, 2014, more recent comments in Meyer et al., 2018b, Pieler and Teschler-Nicola, 2023). The abandonment of the Asparn-Schletz and Herxheim sites immediately after the “massacres” is an argument often put forward to support this thesis. The scenarios establishing a direct link between the deposits and warfare attribute the latter to the manifestation of rivalries over increasingly scarce resources. The alternative view, which favors the idea of sacrifices of individuals who may have been captured in a warlike context but executed in a setting not directly related to any battles, is also compatible with the scenario of food scarcity, while opening the door to other narratives that emphasize social, religious and psychological factors. Whatever its causes, a profound identity crisis is thought to have triggered a wave of mass sacrifices intended to appease the supernatural powers believed to be responsible for the threats to the cosmic order. A phenomenon of mimetic contagion is thought to have led to the rapid spread of this crisis throughout Central Europe, with each region inventing its own form of violence, as evidenced by the variability of the cases recorded. The fact that care was taken to bury the victims, which was exceptional in the context of the European Neolithic, is also consistent with this view: the sacrificed individuals would be, in the same way as the axes and adzes of the first major phenomenon of deposits that began at the end of the LBK (Jeunesse,

2024), votive deposits transmitted to the powers of the afterlife via the underground world.

## Discussion

Two scenarios emerge from our observations: that of votive deposits of individuals executed outside a war context (pattern 1) and that of regular tombs of individuals who died a violent death (pattern 2). Mass execution directly related to a war event (pattern 3) is more difficult to conceive.

On the whole, except for the somewhat ambiguous cases of Asparn and Schöneck-Kilianstedten, it is difficult to discern warriors and war in this corpus: combat pathologies (defensive wounds) are absent everywhere except at Eulau, the most recent site (diagram 2). The most common case, as we have seen, is that of cranial injuries resulting from blows to individuals who were in all probability previously immobilized. The most likely scenario for the Danubian Neolithic is the one that has been identified for the Herxheim case: 1, capture (one or more episodes); 2, gathering of victims at the burial site; 3, execution in a ceremonial context for which it is difficult, if not impossible, to establish a direct link with war (Diagram 1). The Asparn-Schletz site is not a massacre deposit, unless one considers the entire ditch system to be the container. The fact that individuals without battle marks, executed once immobilized and intentionally buried (even if it was after

having been exposed for some time) does not make it possible to rule out this hypothesis without discussion. The existence of family ties in Talheim and Potočani is not enough to reject the votive deposit scenario: assuming that the configuration observed in Talheim is indeed the result of a simultaneous deposition of bodies in anatomical connection that were executed at the same time, which the available data does not prove, nothing prevents the composition of the ensembles found on these two sites from resulting from the capture of members of the same family; the hypothesis of a raid on a village or hamlet also makes this scenario highly probable. The absence of injuries that would have left impacts on the skeleton at Wiederstedt is also compatible with pattern 1. What we are dealing with here could possibly be a killing technique (drowning, suffocation, etc.) that would simply broaden the already quite wide spectrum of forms of violence attested to for the end of the sixth millennium.

The other well-documented pattern is that of the regular burials of individuals who died a violent death (pattern 2). It is only attested for the Eulau and Koszyce sites, which share their late dating (third millennium) and their non-belonging to the Danube cultural complex. The fact that we are dealing here with victims of attacks buried by members of their own community in accordance with local funeral practices (and therefore that we are dealing with genuine graves) seems indisputable in this case, which, as we pointed out above, falls outside the scope of the “massacre deposits” issue. The hypothesis of the execution of prisoners immediately after the battle and in direct connection with warfare (the “victory celebration” theory – pattern 3) has not been proven anywhere. However, it cannot be completely ruled out, particularly in the cases of Achenheim and Bergheim, with their potential “trophy arms”, the presence of which is more consistent with a martial narrative than with a sacrificial act. In the case of the Danubian cultural complex (which includes sites from the sixth and fifth millennia and all the genuine “massacre deposits”), the most salient common denominator is the burying of bodies in pits or other types of excavated structures. The fact that this practice is found in only one of the major Neolithic cultural complexes in Central and Western Europe shows that there is nothing “natural” about it and raises the possibility of a link with the practice of votive deposits of adzes and axes made of polished stone, the oldest example of which dates from the Danubian Neolithic. It may be added that the two Danubian deposition phenomena (corpses and polished tools or weapons) began more or less simultaneously, in the recent-final stage of the LBK (Jeunesse, 2024).

#### 4. NEOLITHIC “BATTLES” IN THE FOURTH MILLENNIUM

The preceding paragraphs have repeatedly referred to attacks on villages or hamlets. This prompted us to broaden our investigation to a small series of sites that

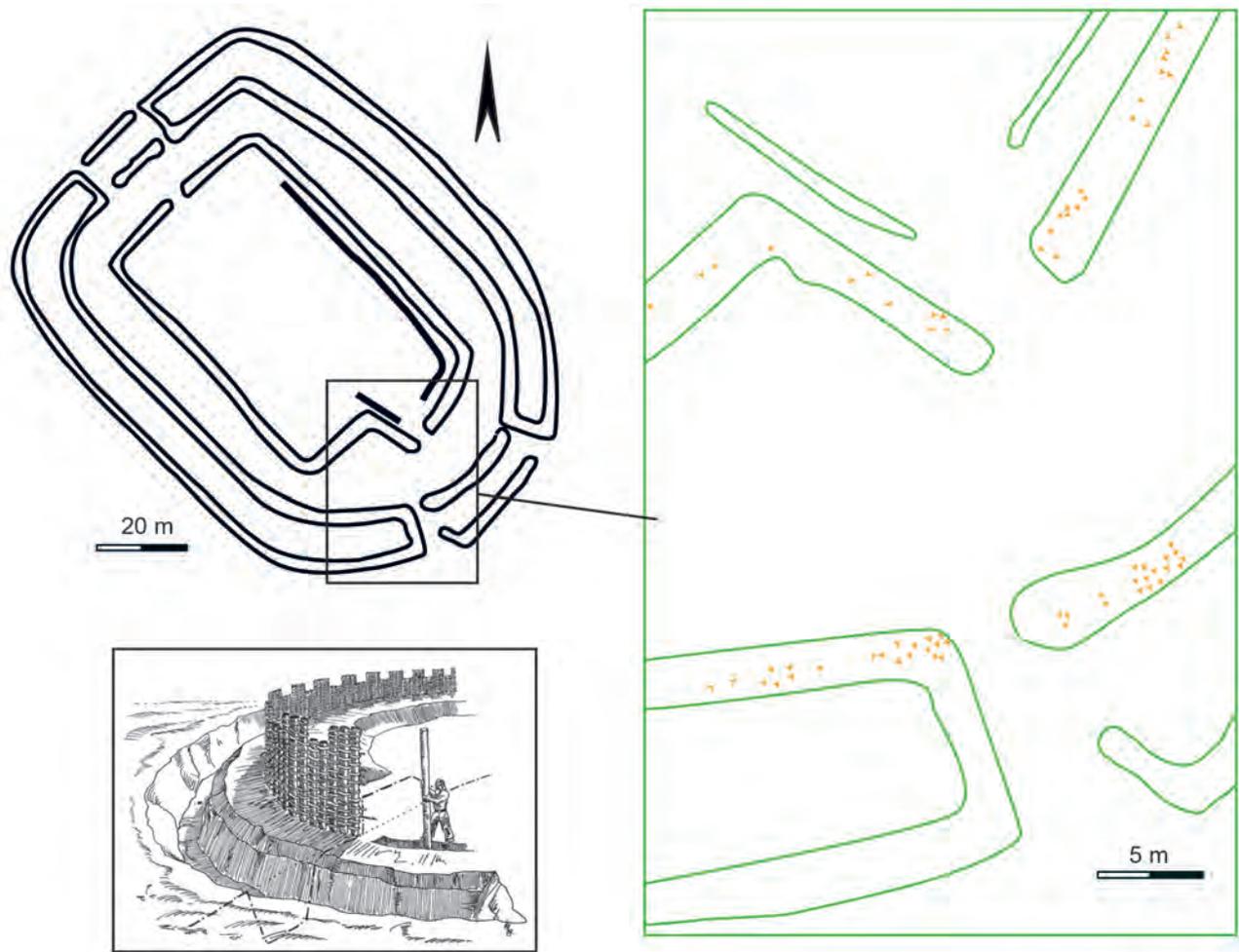
have yielded remains which can be interpretable (and interpreted) as the result of warlike episodes such as attacks or sieges. The three sites in question are dated to the middle of the fourth millennium, corresponding to a time interval that we did not encounter in our study of massacre deposits. These are the sites of Altheim, Crickley Hill and Carn Brea.

Altheim (Bavaria) is the site of the eponymous site of the Altheim culture, dated between 3800 and 3400 BC (Saile, 2014 and 2017; Reinecke, 1915; Saile *et al.*, 2017). It is a small site, probably a settlement, protected by three concentric ditches. The abundance of arrowheads (around 180, 60 of which were found on either side of an interruption (fig. 8) and the presence of traces of fire in the inner ditch and *perimortem* trauma on the numerous human bones discovered at the bottom of the ditches are the arguments that led, from the time of the excavation in 1914, to favor the hypothesis of an attack. While the concentration of a large number of arrows constitutes a strong argument, the association, in the ditches, of human bones (including groups of skulls and anatomical segments of connected bones) and complete or incomplete vases directs attention to a configuration identified in several burial sites of the Michelsberg culture (4100–3600 BC) and for which a warlike origin has been suggested, but without exhausting the range of possibilities (Jeunesse, 2012).

The English sites of Crickley Hill (Gloucestershire) and Carn Brea (Cornwall), dated respectively to around 3500 and between 3700 and 3400 BC. (Dixon, 1979 and Whittle *et al.*, 2011 for the former; Mercer, 1981 and 1999 for the latter) have each yielded a significant accumulation of arrow heads made of siliceous rock, with notable concentrations around the interruptions of the ditches. At Carn Brea, evidence of the burning of a wooden structure that may have belonged to the fortification system supplements the more than 700 arrowheads found at the site.

## CONCLUSIONS

In various cultures of the Danubian Neolithic, the recurrent practice of the simultaneous burial of groups of individuals who died a violent death opens a window onto a practice clearly specific to this cultural complex. The absence of massacre deposits in other cultural complexes of course does not allow us to conclude that they were less prone to violence. Chronological analysis at most allows us to identify, within the Danubian Neolithic, a particular concentration of cases at the end of the sixth millennium, a probable indication of a crisis situation. Analysis of the eleven recorded cases of massacre deposits according to a grid distinguishing the respective times of capture, execution and burial leads to a relativization of the hypothesis, widely shared by the authors of the works devoted to these ensembles, of a direct link between the postulated “massacres” and warlike events. One of the central questions, as we have seen, is whether the burial has a meaning in itself or whether it is simply a way of getting rid of the



**Fig. 8** – Altheim enclosure (Bavaria), general plan of the site, reconstruction of the rampart and location of the reinforcements.  
CAD C. Jeunesse, based on Saile 2017.

bodies, a hypothesis implicit in the majority of studies, but in my opinion strongly tainted with ethnocentrism. Even if more studies are needed to make this claim without caution, I am convinced that traditional societies, presumed to be animist, do not innocently bury objects or beings. As the Danubian practice of depositing adze and axe blades shows, the underground is not just a simple rubbish dump place, but rather a privileged vector of communication with the supernatural. The virtual absence of battle pathologies in the eleven massacre sites listed, combined with recurring evidence of the killing of previously immobilized individuals, leads us to favor the hypothesis that these sites contain the remains of human sacrifices to the gods or spirits. Even if, as in the headhunting of traditional societies in Southeast Asia, war may have provided victims, there is no evidence of a direct link between war and the massacre deposits. While ethnographic comparisons fuel the discussion on certain aspects, none offer a complete analogy with the entire operational chain of the practice of massacre deposits. The practice of burial, often neglected because it is seen as “natural”, but which we consider to be central, is not attested anywhere. The Danubian Neolithic massacre deposit is therefore neither a grave (*mass grave*) nor, in all likelihood, an assemblage

of direct victims (on the battlefield or at in the context a “victory celebration”) of a warlike conflict. By contrast, the two cases of graves of “massacred” individuals from the final Neolithic period illustrate much more convincing cases of structures directly linked to warlike events.

#### NOTE

- 1 See also the notice University of Kiel: <https://www.uni-kiel.de/en/details/news/003-headless-skeletons>.

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## DISCUSSION

**Inconnue.** Thank you for your presentation. I had a brief question regarding the parallel you draw with the First Nations of North America. I want to know which community you are referring to when you talk about Amerindians who practiced torture, since there are many communities and not all of which had the same customs.

**Christian Jeunesse:** I admit that I don't know the details, but these are things you often read about. P. Lefranc, the author of the Achenheim study, for example, has discussed this. I refer you to his work, but this idea of individuals being tortured is a common theme in the ethnography of North American Indians. Does Christophe [Darmangeat] know more about the ethnic groups that are directly concerned with this aspect?

**Christophe Darmangeat:** Regarding systematic torture, first, you made the distinction well: the term “pris-

oners of war” is used when, after waging a war, one ends up with prisoners. And then there is what is called, in my opinion incorrectly, the “war of capture”, which, in fact, is not actually a war. These are operations conducted with the sole objective of bringing back prisoners, which is not the same thing. This was practiced all along the eastern coast of North America, roughly from Florida to the Iroquois. Afterwards, the fate of the prisoners varied. Were they eaten or not? What kind of device was used to torture them? There is an article by an author whose name I have forgotten, who carries out thorough comparison and identifies the main types. But in any case, for centuries along the eastern part of North America, there was this custom of going out to capture people for the purpose of sacrificing or torturing them.