

ETHNIC IDENTITIES AS CONSTRUCTIONS OF ARCHAEOLOGY (?): THE CASE OF THE THURINGI

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The ethnic interpretation of archaeological remains

It is only quite recently that archaeologists specialising in the Early Middle Ages have begun to reconsider the question of the ethnic determination and interpretation of archaeological remains, and to discuss the issues in a new way.

The main issue is to identify *which* archaeological complexes from this period, such as artefacts (primarily grave goods), customs and habits, or remains of buildings, can be assigned to any one of the peoples or *gentes* testified to at that time in written sources. In the present context, the question is whether there are any archaeological items, be they elements of material culture, funeral customs, or whatever, that can be linked to the *gens* of the Thuringi, which is first mentioned in written sources around the year 400 but was eliminated by the Frankish kingdom in the 530s.

Together with the Franks, the Alamanni, the Suebi and the Langobards, the Thuringi were a *West Germanic* people (*gens*). These are consistently distinct from the *East Germanic* peoples (Goths, Gepids, Vandals, Sciri, Rugii and more) in archaeologically visible features, such as costume and the form and function of brooches, and across a range of customs, including their burial practices. That distinction, however, is not our subject here.

The key question – that of whether archaeology can ever assign an ethnic character to archaeological finds – will be discussed here neither theoretically nor in terms of sociology or ethnology but rather on the basis of the archaeological evidence. In the case of the Thuringi, an archaeological assessment is complicated by the fact that we have no precise evidence for the geographical extent and boundaries of the Thuringian realm that was destroyed in the 530s – not only as a political entity but indeed in its interior social structure.

From the nineteenth century, ethnic identifications of archaeological finds from the Early Middle Ages have been made according to what is called the ‘geographical principle’. That means that finds of a country or region are assigned to whatever people is mentioned by contemporary (or retrospective) written sources as the inhabitants of the territory in question: for example the Alamanni in southern Germany, the Franks in northern France, and so on.

This method continues, in principle, to be the only practical one, especially for regions *outside* the border of the former Roman Empire. Up to the middle of the twentieth century, archaeological research into the Early Middle Ages hardly ever paid



Fig. 1. A) Costume of an upper-class Suebian woman, third quarter of the fifth century (Basel-Kleinhüningen 126) (Furger *et al.* 1996: fig. 200). B) Costume of an upper-class Alamannic woman, c. 500 (Altenerding 617) (Martin 1997: fig. 390).

attention to the differences in the course of development inside and outside of the Empire respectively. In the Early Middle Ages, descendants of the Roman population (*Romani*) continued to dwell in lands west of the Rhine and south of the Danube that had been parts of the *Imperium Romanum*, and constituted the great majority of the population, in contrast to the immigrant Germanic folk. In many cases, therefore, it is necessary first to ascertain which objects and customs within the frontiers of the Roman Empire are Germanic, and which Roman.

The bow brooches of West Germanic women: sense and meaning

The most prominent and most valuable possession of West Germanic women was a pair of what are known as **bow brooches**: a purely Germanic costume feature. In this paper the term 'costume' is consistently used in the sense of 'garment' (German 'Kleidung') rather than 'traditional costume' (German 'Tracht').

West Germanic bow brooches never had a practical function (Martin 1994). They were fixed on the belt (*cingulum*) girding the tunic, at either end (Fig. 1 A + B). Most are made of gilt silver; only a few types, and mainly late, are of copper alloy. From the middle of the fifth to the second half of the sixth century these brooches were thus a privileged possession of upper-class Germanic women and, as a regular and unalterable element of the costume, constituted an important status symbol – and more besides.

When mounted on the belt of upper-class women, these brooches were closely associated with another important element of the costume. At all times, people have associated a wide range of abstract qualities with the belt. Characteristically, the most important amulet worn by upper-class Germanic women was normally fixed on a ribbon to one of the bow brooches – and consequently to the belt at the same time (Fig. 1 A+B). During the Early Middle Ages the three components of belt, bow brooches and amulet formed a real ensemble for West Germanic women: they were not only valuable in themselves, but also a status symbol and an efficient element of protection. At the same time the bow brooches were normally the heaviest and therefore the most valuable (metallic) element of the costume.

Archaeologists subdivide bow brooches into types and variants. However, these types and variants are, as a rule, not unique or independent forms but represent stages of development of a basic form which was itself primarily determined by *the contour of the brooch* and did not change except in minor details. The basic form reveals another meaning of our threefold belt-ensemble: the ethnic 'label', i.e. the ethnic origin of the wearer, at least as far as the Alamanni, the Thuringi and the Langobards are concerned. Further research will have to attach more importance to the basic form of the brooches (repeatedly referred to in this paper) and to the 'genealogical tree' and affiliations of all bow brooches – as well as to exceptions.

In many West Germanic costumes (Alamannic, Frankish, Thuringian, Langobardic), the pair of bow brooches is frequently accompanied by a pair of **small brooches**. As fasteners of a cape (Fig. 1 A+B), these had a different function, and they will not be discussed here.

Langobardic examples

The complete range of bow brooches from Varpalota, a cemetery in Pannonia, north of Lake Balaton, dating to the middle of the sixth century (Werner 1962; here Fig. 2), shows the basic form of Langobardic bow brooches in the second and third quarters of the sixth century very clearly: a semi-circular head-plate with six to nine knobs, and oval foot-plate ending in an animal-head. There is only one incongruent specimen within this collection of typically Langobardic bow brooches at Varpalota: a Thuringian type (Fig. 2, top right), which not only stands apart from this otherwise uniform group but was also found in the bag of a woman (grave 13). The other brooches were fixed to the ends of the belts, at the same level as the thighs (Fig. 3).

The Langobardic origin of the Varpalota bow brooches is proved both by older examples (and prototypes) found in the earlier areas of Langobard settlement north

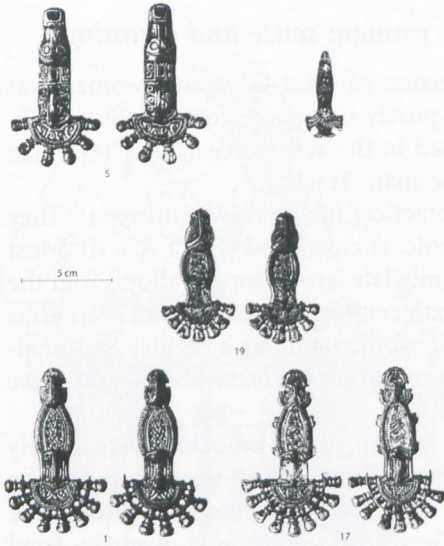


Fig. 2. The complete series of bow brooches in the Langobardic cemetery of Varpalota (Hungary), c. 540-568 (associated small brooches not shown) (Werner 1962, cf. text). The numbers in the figure correspond with the burial numbers.

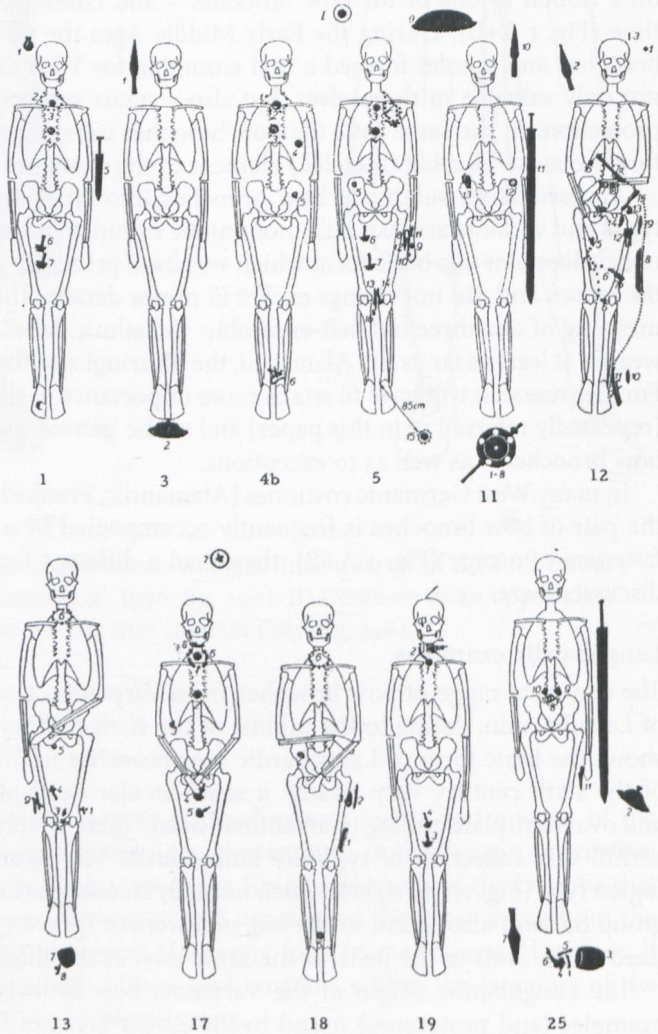


Fig. 3. The mode of wearing of bow brooches at Varpalota (Werner 1962: pl. 71).

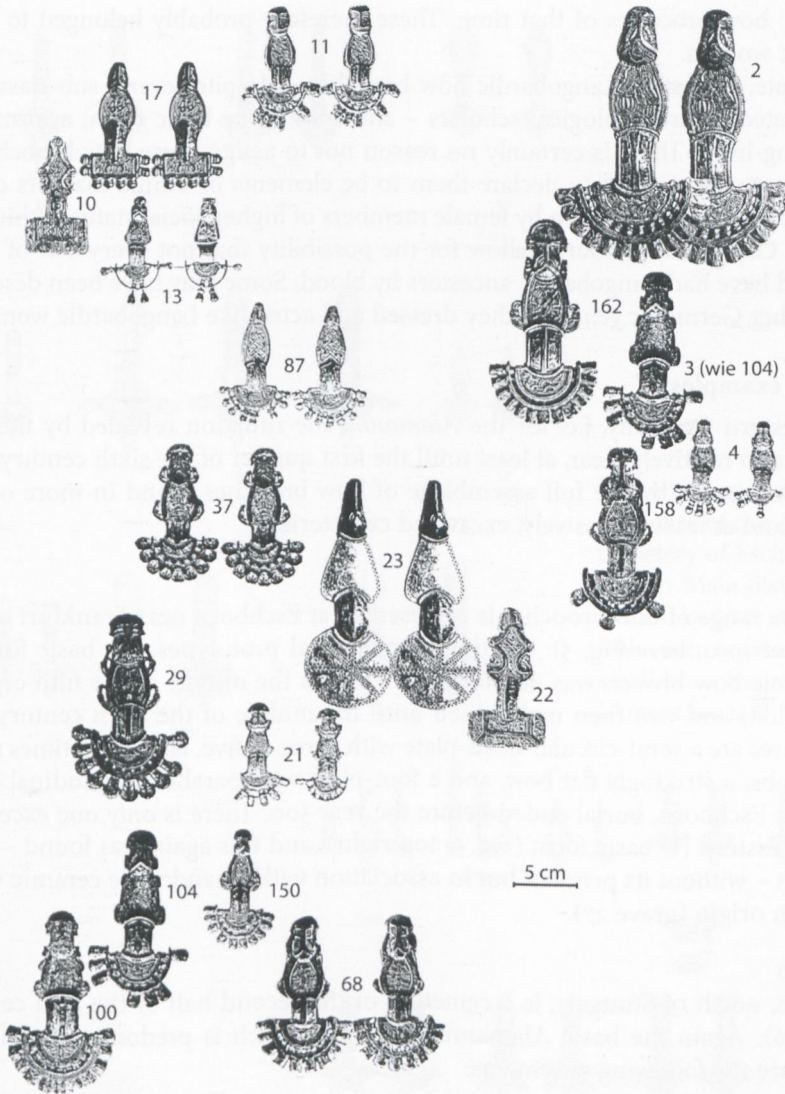


Fig. 4. Synopsis of all bow brooches in the Langobardic cemetery of Nocera Umbra, Italy, c. 568–600 (associated small brooches not shown) (Werner 1950, cf. text). The arrangement in the figure corresponds with the distribution of the brooches in the burial ground.

of the Danube River, and by direct parallels and immediate descendants amongst the brooches from Italy, which was conquered by the Langobards in the year 568 (Werner 1962; Bierbrauer 1993). The typological and chronological development of these Langobardic bow brooches has been reconstructed on the basis of archaeological evidence and research. However it is only the written sources that deliver their ethnic identification: the name, and thus what one might call the ethnic 'label'.

A large number of remarkably uniform Langobardic bow brooches is known from the famous cemetery near Nocera Umbra in central Italy (Werner 1950; Rupp 1996; here Fig. 4); only two smaller items, and one pair of brooches with a rectangular head-plate (Fig. 4, bottom and top left) do not correspond to the basic form of the

Langobardic bow brooches of that time. These therefore probably belonged to non-Langobardic women.

At this date, almost all Langobardic bow brooches – despite several sub-classifications elaborated by archaeological scholars – show the same basic form; a form that was very long-lived. There is certainly no reason not to assign these bow brooches to Langobardic women and so to declare them to be elements or ethnic markers of the Langobardic *gens* that were worn by female members of higher social status within that community. One must, of course, allow for the possibility that not every one of these women need have had Langobardic ancestors by blood. Some may have been descendants of another Germanic *gens*, but they dressed and acted like Langobardic women.

Alamannic examples

In south-western Germany, i.e. for the *Alamanni*, the situation revealed by the bow brooches is also relatively clear, at least until the first quarter of the sixth century. This can be demonstrated by the full assemblage of bow brooches found in more or less completely, and at least extensively, excavated cemeteries:

Eschborn

The complete range of bow brooches is represented at Eschborn near Frankfurt on the Main (Ament 1992; here Fig. 5). Starting from several prototypes, the basic form of the Alamannic bow brooch was developed as early as the middle of the fifth century (Fig. 5, top left) and was then maintained until the middle of the sixth century. The typical features are a semi-circular head-plate with three or five, later sometimes seven or more knobs, a strikingly flat bow, and a foot-plate with parallel longitudinal edges (Fig. 1 B). At Eschborn, burial ended before the year 500. There is only one exception showing an eastern (?) basic form (Fig. 5, top right), and this again was found – typically enough – without its pendant but in association with a handmade ceramic vessel of Bohemian origin (grave 27).

Hemmingen

Hemmingen, north of Stuttgart, is a cemetery of the second half of the fifth century (Müller 1976). Again the basic Alamannic form of brooch is predominant (Fig. 6); exceptions are the following specimens:

- a) proto-Merovingian brooches, made of iron and without a head-plate, worn by three women in the same manner as bow brooches (Fig. 6, top left);
- b) four bow brooches showing eastern basic forms and perhaps representing women from central Germany, Bohemia or Pannonia (Fig. 6, bottom).

At Hemmingen, these graves with ‘foreign’ bow brooches constitute a very heterogeneous, non-Alamannic minority alongside nearly a dozen Alamannic women.

Weingarten

The same uniformity as in the series of Alamannic bow brooches from Hemmingen (Fig. 6) appears in the large cemetery of Weingarten north of Lake Constance (Roth & Theune 1995; here Fig. 9): here there is a total of ten women with bow brooches representing the basic Alamannic form; but now, in contrast to the prototypes and the early specimens at Eschborn, all of these are of developed forms. Only four graves with bow brooches of other basic forms occurred. One of these is contemporary with the Alamannic brooch graves, but the other three burials are later (Fig. 10).

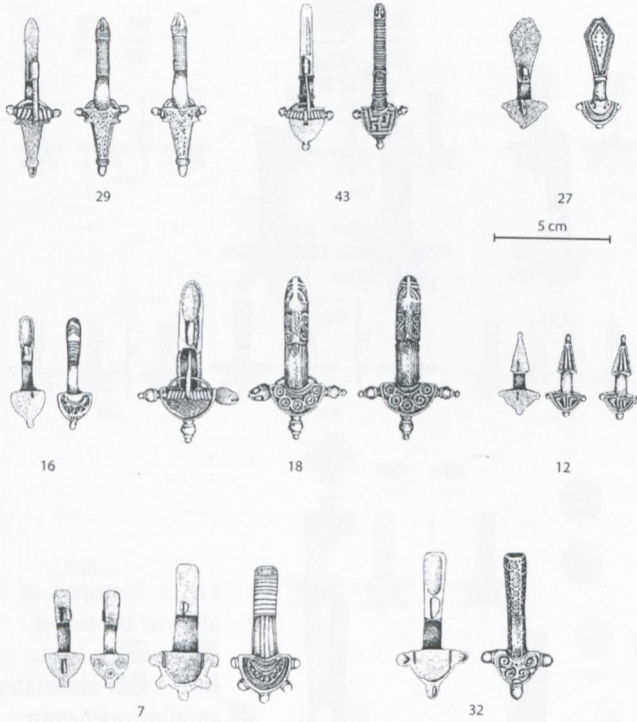


Fig. 5. Synopsis of all bow brooches of the Alamannic cemetery of Eschborn (Rhein-Main district), c. third quarter of the fifth century (associated small brooches not shown) (Ament 1992, cf. text).

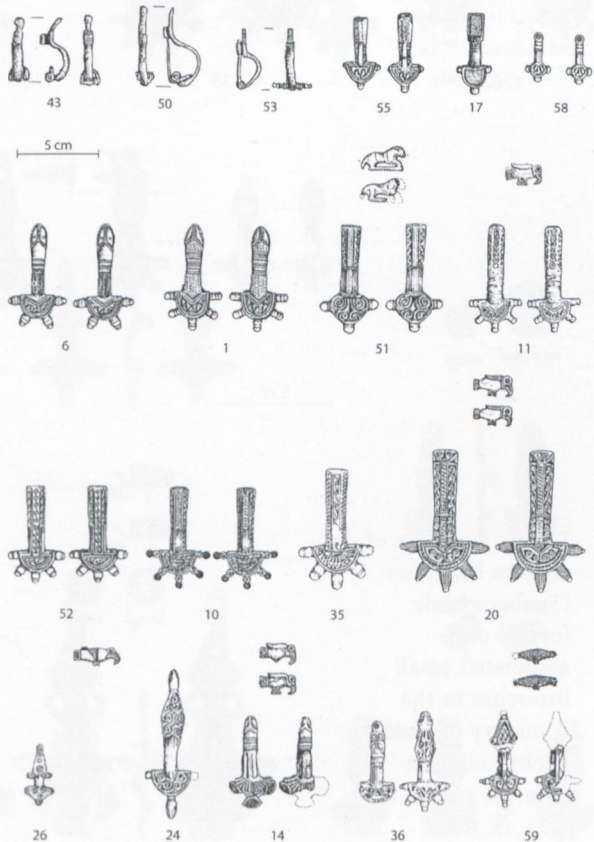


Fig. 6. Synopsis of all bow brooches and associated small brooches in the cemetery of Hemmingen (north of Stuttgart), c. second half of the fifth century (Müller 1976, cf. text).

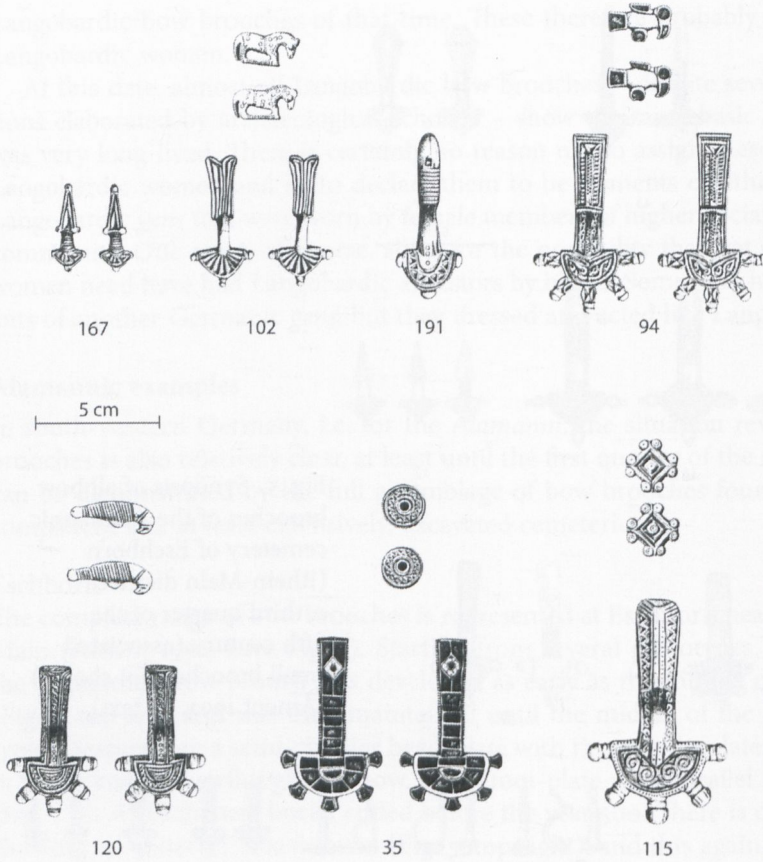


Fig. 7. Synopsis of all bow brooches (Alamannic basic form) and associated small brooches in the cemetery of Basel-Kleinhüningen (Martin 2002a: fig. 2, cf. text).

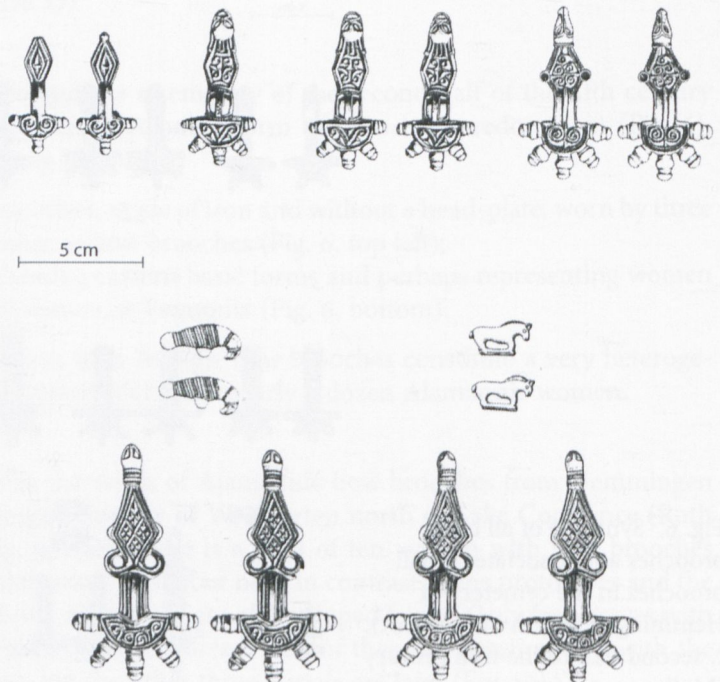


Fig. 8. Synopsis of all bow brooches (Suebian basic form?) and associated small brooches in the cemetery of Basel-Kleinhüningen (Martin 2002a: fig. 3, cf. text).

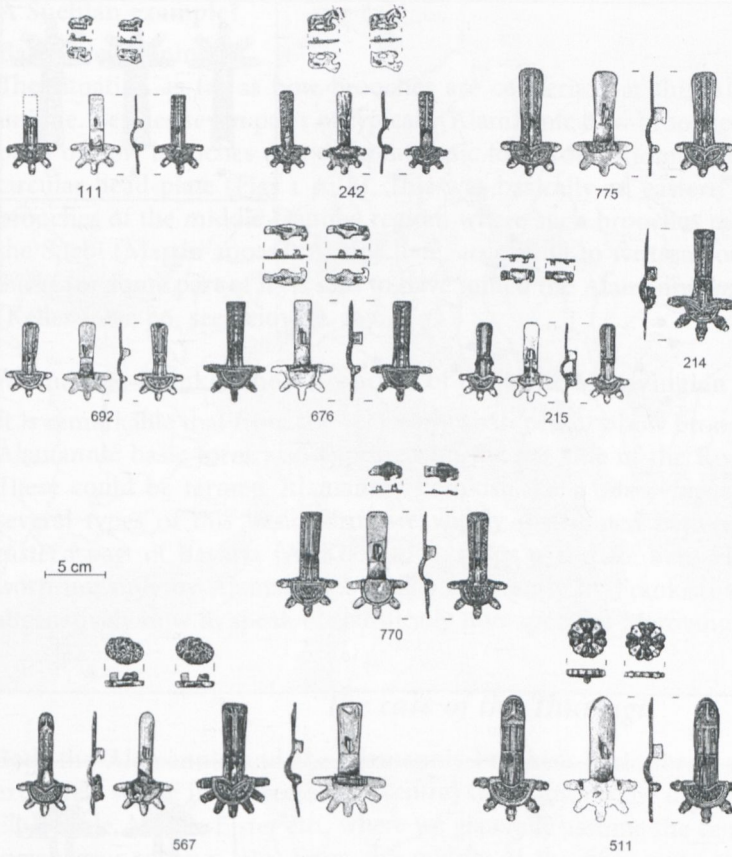


Fig. 9. Synopsis of all bow brooches (Alamannic basic form) and associated small brooches in the cemetery of Weingarten (north of the Lake Constance), c. 480-530.

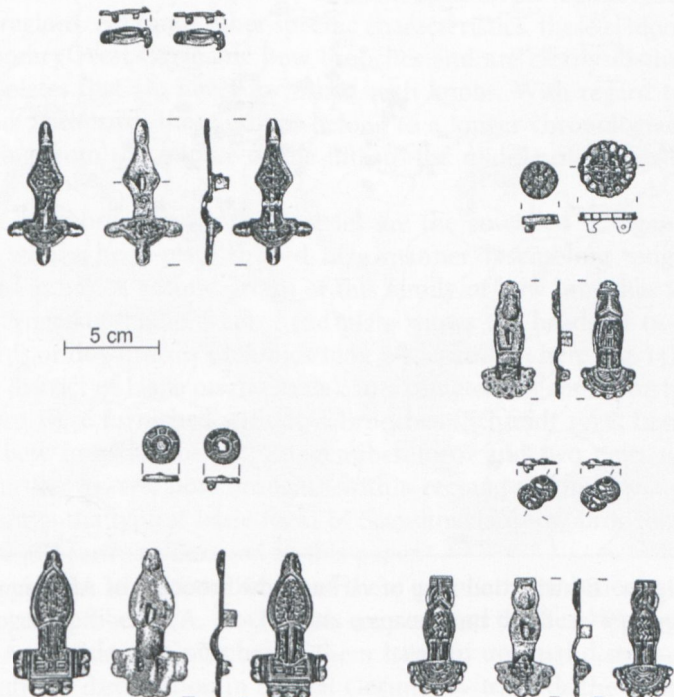


Fig. 10. Synopsis of all bow brooches (non-Alamannic basic forms) and associated small brooches in the cemetery of Weingarten (north of Lake Constance), c. middle of the sixth century (Roth & Theune 1995, cf. text).

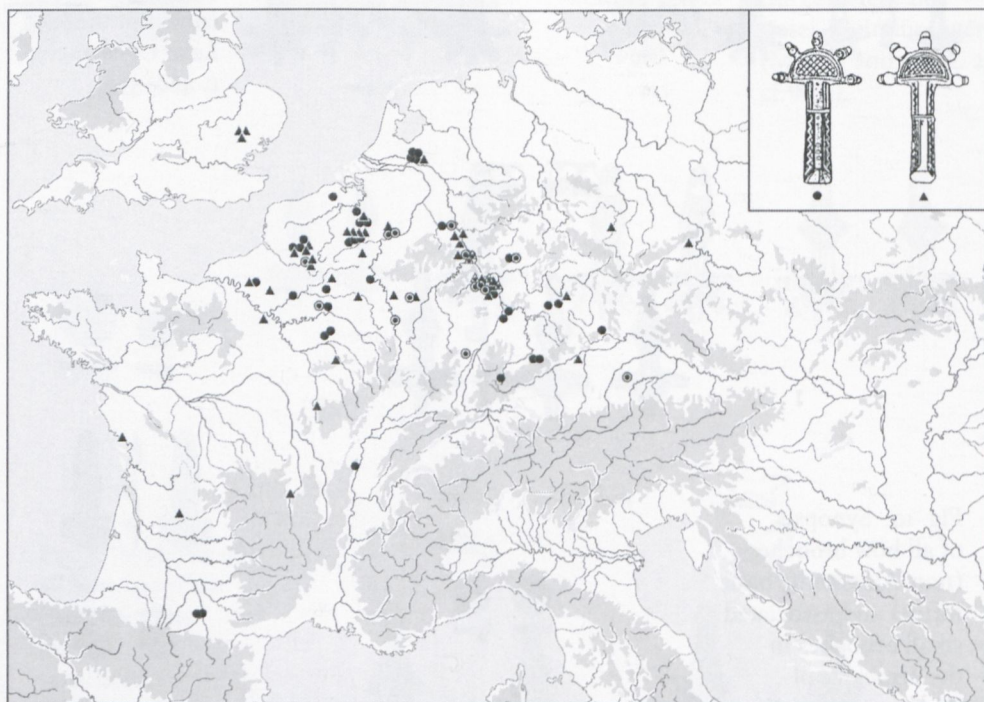
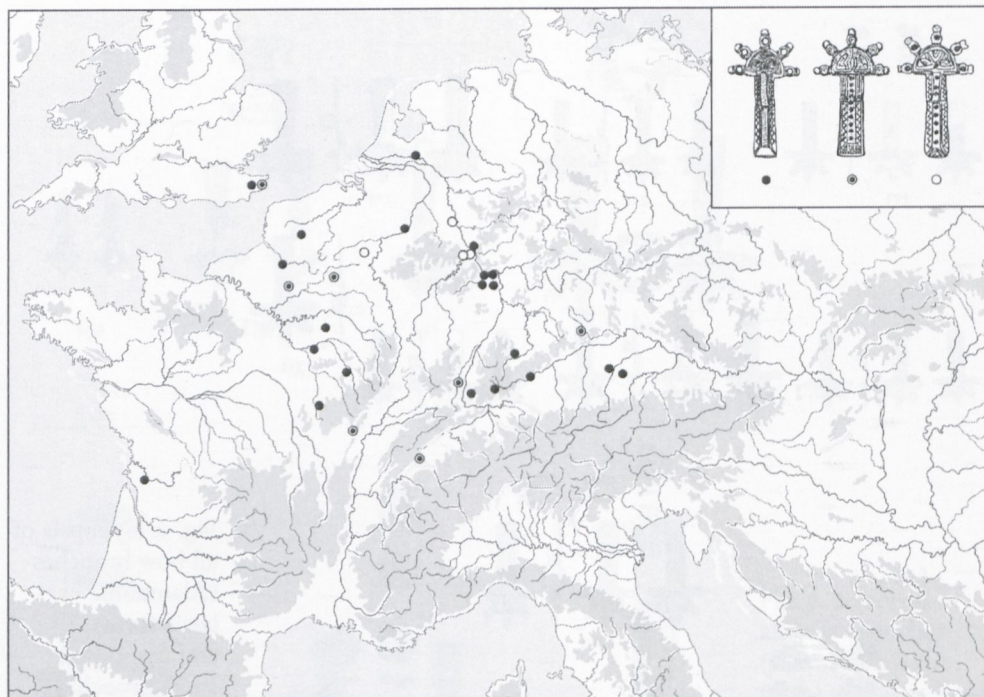


Fig. 11. Distribution map of various bow brooches of Alamannic basic form, c. early sixth century (A. Koch 1998: maps 9 and 10).

A Suebian example?

Basel-Kleinhüningen

The situation as far as bow brooches are concerned at this Alamannic cemetery is unique. Besides seven pairs of typically Alamannic bow brooches (Fig. 7) there are six pairs of bow brooches of a different basic form, of a rhombic foot-plate and a semi-circular head-plate (Figs 1 A; 8). This was basically an eastern form, related to bow brooches of the middle Danube region, where such brooches may have been used by the Suebi (Martin 2002a). At this date, according to written sources, the *gens* of the Suebi (or some part of it) is said to have joined the Alamanni: '*mixti Alamannis Suevi*' (Keller 1989: 96; see below, p. 267').

Alamannic-Frankish bow brooches of the basic Merovingian form?

It is remarkable that from the very early sixth century bow brooches of the developed Alamannic basic form also appeared on the left side of the River Rhine, in *Francia*. These could be termed 'Alamannic-Frankish', i.e. a *Merovingian basic form*. In fact, several types of this basic form are widely distributed between the Seine and the eastern part of Bavaria (A. Koch 1998: maps 9 and 10; here Fig. 11), and thus were worn not only by Alamannic but also apparently by Frankish women. Or ought we alternatively now to speak of (ethnically non-specific) Merovingian women?

The case of the Thuringi

Both the Alamannic and the Alamannic-Frankish basic forms mentioned above are extremely scarce in the regions of central Germany, on the upper reaches of the Rivers Elbe, Saale, Mulde, Elster etc., where we generally assume the central area of the Thuringian *gens* to have lain. From the middle of the fifth century onwards, we mainly encounter two groups of bow brooches of completely different basic forms (Kühn 1981) in the cemeteries of these regions. Amongst other specific characteristics, these seldom reach the size of contemporary West Germanic bow brooches and are clearly distinguished by peculiar head-plates that are never furnished with knobs. With regard to the obvious development of the forms, these groups belong to a longer chronological period, apparently stretching from the middle of the fifth to the middle of the sixth centuries.

The most characteristic bow brooches in these series are the so-called 'Zangenfibeln', i.e. bow brooches with a head-plate shaped in a manner resembling tongs (Schmidt 1961: pl. 38; here Fig. 12). A second group of this family of bow brooches is of equal importance: the 'Vogelkopffibeln'. Their head-plate shows the heads of two birds looking either upwards or downwards (Schmidt 1961: pls 36 and 37; here Fig. 13).

In Obermöllern (in the district of Halle on the Saale), in a cemetery of about thirty graves, a total of six women were furnished with bow brooches (Schmidt 1976; here Fig. 14). There were two bow brooches of the 'Zangenfibel' form and two pairs of 'Vogelkopffibeln'. In two further graves, bow brooches with a rectangular head-plate and a 'baroque' footplate show the typical basic form of Scandinavian bow brooches (Fig. 14, bottom) which are not further discussed in this paper.

In the context of our topic, the wide distribution of these peculiar bow brooches, the 'Zangenfibeln' and 'Vogelkopffibeln' (A. Koch 1998: map 26 and 25; here Fig. 15) merits especial attention. A considerable number of them have an unusual distribution – far beyond their centre of distribution in central Germany – towards the west,



Fig. 12. Collection of bow brooches with tongue-shaped head-plate, second half of the fifth and beginning of the sixth century (Schmidt 1961: pl. 38). Layout and labelling after Schmidt.



Fig. 13. Collection of bow brooches with a head-plate decorated with two bird-heads, second half of the fifth and beginning of the sixth century (Schmidt 1961: pl. 37). Layout and labelling after Schmidt.

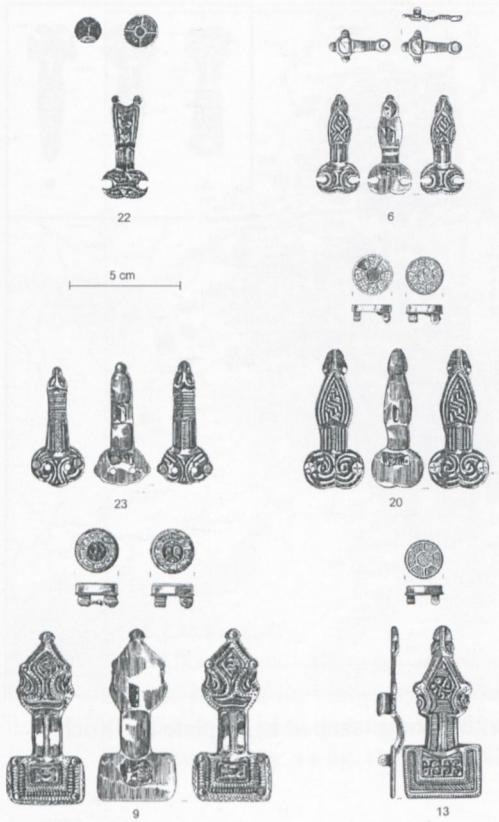


Fig. 14. Synopsis of all bow brooches and associated small brooches in the cemetery of Obermöllern (Central Germany) (Schmidt 1976: 101–9 and pl. 85ff.).

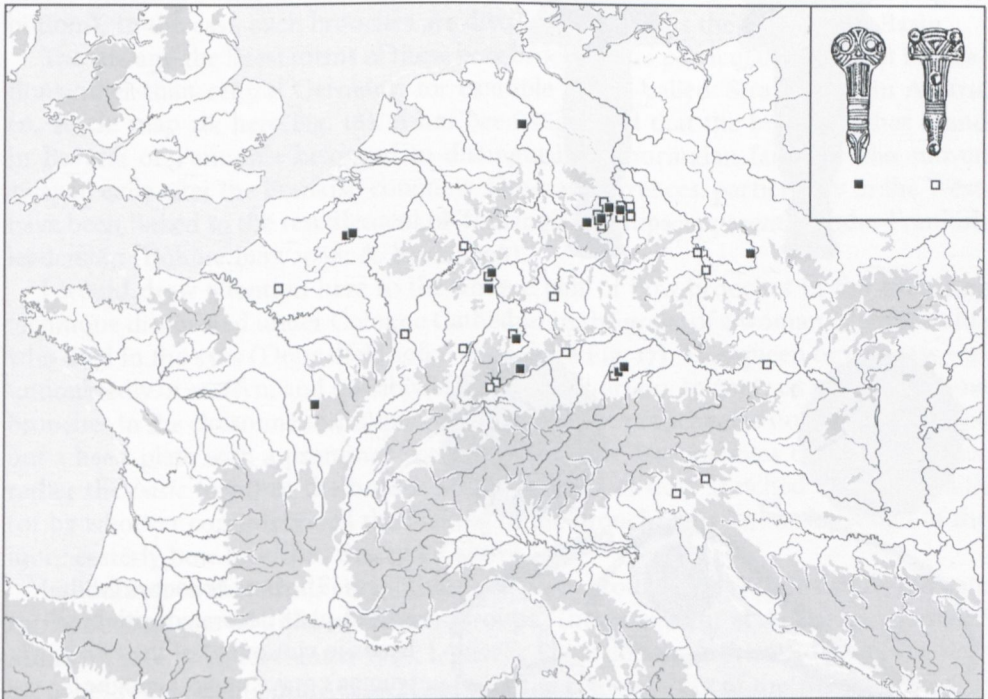


Fig. 15. Distribution of bow brooches with a head-plate decorated with two bird-heads (A. Koch 1998: map 25).



Fig. 16. Distribution map of bow brooches with a tongs-shaped head-plate (A. Koch 1998: map 26).

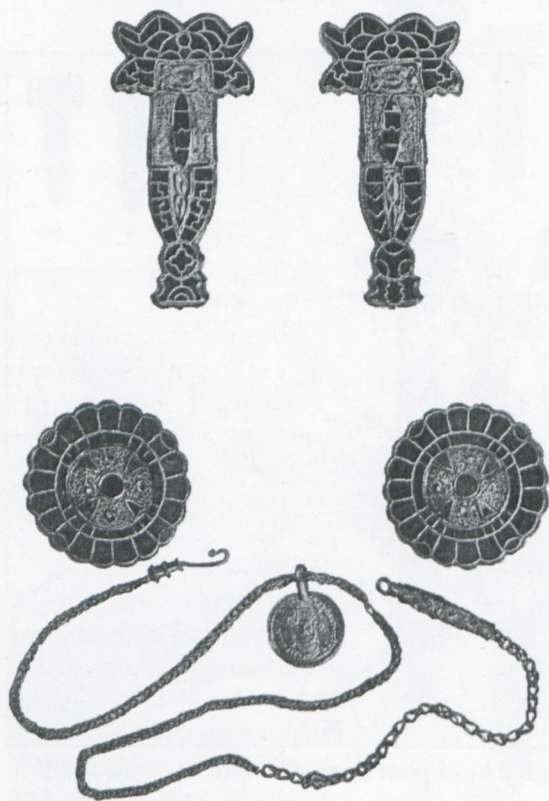


Fig. 17. The bow brooches (with a head-plate decorated with bird-heads in cloisonné) of the rich woman's grave under Cologne Cathedral, c. 530 (Doppelfeld 1960: pl. 15). Scale ca. 1:2.

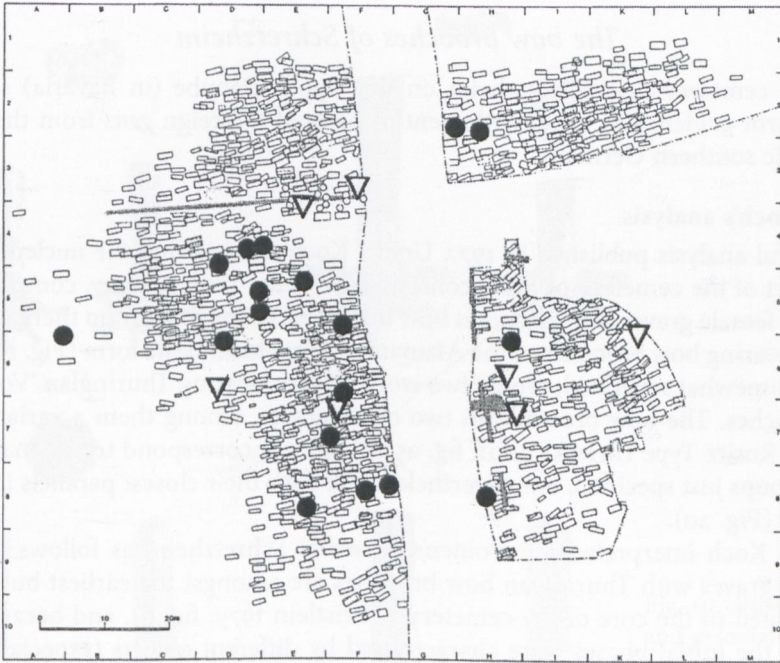


Fig. 18. Map of the cemetery of Altenerding, showing bow brooches of Alamannic basic form (dot) and of eastern basic forms (triangle) (Bierbrauer 1985: 24 fig. 12 modified).

across the River Rhine and up to the Seine, and to the south as far as Bavaria (Fig. 15, bottom). In the east, such brooches are distributed as far as the Carpathian Basin.

The late and the latest forms of these bow brooches are particularly frequent in locations other than central Germany: for example the so-called 'Strass Type' in Austria (A. Koch: map 26; here Fig. 16). It has been suggested that the bow brooches found in Bavaria or Pannonia belonged to distinguished Thuringian families who moved away in exile after the Frankish conquest. Other occurrences, particularly in the West, have been linked to the resettlement of Thuringian groups, apparently under Frankish leadership (Böhme 1987, 1988; A. Koch 1998).

I would draw attention here to the unique pair of bow brooches in the cloisonné technique discovered under Cologne Cathedral in the grave of a woman of royal status who died in the 530s (Doppelfeld 1960: pl. 15; here Fig. 17). This queen or princess was undoubtedly of eastern, and possibly of Thuringian, origin. In contrast to all other bow brooches in the cloisonné technique (Quast 1993), her brooches do not have any knobs but a head-plate with a prominent contour line. This demonstrates that the form (or rather the *basic form*) of the brooch was created or at least sketched by a goldsmith (or by whoever commissioned the making of the brooch) who knew the design of the more easterly bow brooches described above.

In addition to these migrations that took place around the 530s, the finds indicate earlier movements of different eastern groups. This is evident at Altenerding, east of Munich (Sage 1984; Bierbrauer 1985; Losert & Pleterski 2003): the majority of the bow brooches found in the more central parts of the cemetery are of the Alamannic basic form, but there are also – in a rather scattered pattern around this zone – some early bow brooches of an eastern basic form (Fig. 18).

The bow brooches of Schretzheim

The large cemetery near Schretzheim on the Upper Danube (in Bavaria) seems to provide firm evidence of the resettlement of parts of a foreign *gens* from the east in Alamannic southern Germany.

Ursula Koch's analysis

In a careful analysis published in 1977, Ursula Koch showed that the nucleus, i.e. the oldest part of the cemetery of the second quarter of the sixth century, comprised two groups of female graves, with different bow brooches. In the first group there were four women wearing bow brooches of the Alamannic(-Frankish) basic form (Fig. 19). In the second, somewhat separated, group, two women were wearing Thuringian 'Vogelkopf' bow brooches. The bow brooches in two other graves, among them a variant of the so-called Rositz Type (Brieske 2001: fig. 25.26), do not correspond to the main Thuringian groups just specified, but nevertheless still have their closest parallels in central Germany (Fig. 20).

Ursula Koch interpreted the women's graves at Schretzheim as follows (Fig. 21). Since the graves with Thuringian bow brooches are amongst the earliest burials, and were situated in the core of the cemetery (Christlein 1979: fig. 6), and because other graves of the initial phases were characterised by different objects (especially hand-made pottery) and peculiar burial practices (for example the deposition of eggs) that are rarely encountered in southern Germany but are common in central Germany, the cemetery at Schretzheim would appear to have been founded by Thuringian families. These might have resettled near Schretzheim after the destruction of the Thuringian realm, perhaps under Frankish leadership. The existence of some groups of western, native or of Frankish origin is proved by the other bow brooches mentioned above (Fig. 19) and also represented by a well-equipped horseman's grave (grave 391), and more.

Criticism – 25 years after

The case of Schretzheim, however, requires detailed discussion. In the past years, substantial criticisms have been levelled against ethnic identifications of this kind. In the following, I shall restrict myself to a critique of Ursula Koch's analysis of the first phase at Schretzheim. An extensive critical review was published by Gerard Jentgens in 2001. Starting from a new, and seemingly better but nevertheless incorrect, chronology, Jentgens proposed dating the beginning of the cemetery (and the settlement) not to around the year 530, but earlier, around or even before the beginning of the sixth century. If Jentgens were right, one could not connect the oldest graves with the events linked to the Frankish expansion and conquest of the Thuringian realm. The case that Koch's datings are still correct cannot be explicated in detail here (but see Koch 2001: 35–6; Koch 2004; Martin 2002b: 305).

However, it was another consequence of this (erroneous) earlier dating that was much more important for Jentgens. Dating the first phase of the cemetery about three decades earlier, he could claim that the cemetery and in particular the associated settlement were already established in the late fifth century. He thus connected the first phase of Schretzheim chronologically with the so-called retainer or *comitatus* system ('Gefolgschaftswesen'): a form of feudal social order consisting of leader and followers with mutual obligations. According to a model proposed by Heiko Steuer, this social order was current among Germanic societies during the Late Roman and the Migra-

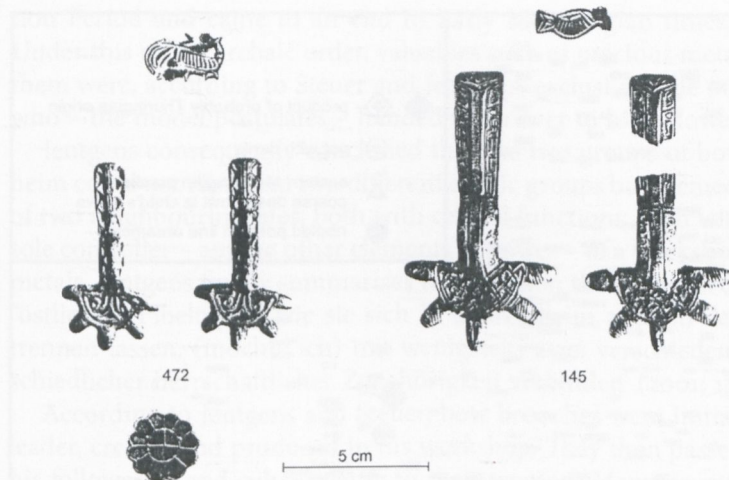


Fig. 19. Bow brooches and associated small brooches found in four graves of the western group at Schretzheim, phase 1, c. 530–550 (Koch 1977: 187).

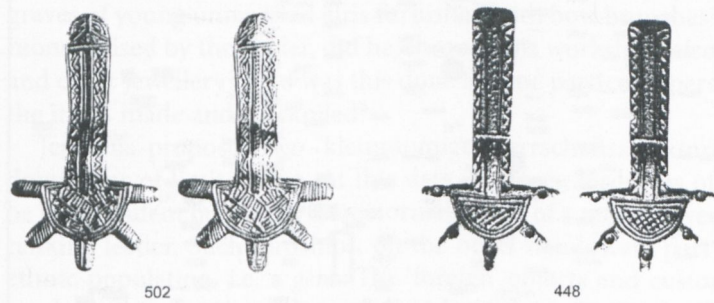
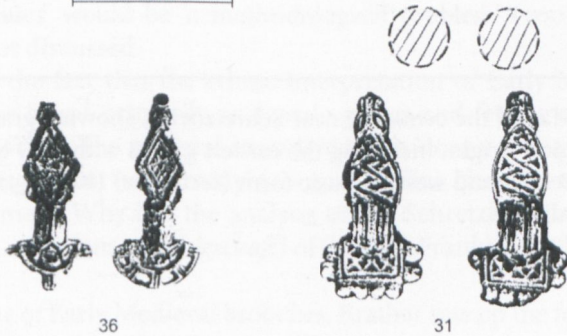


Fig. 20. Bow brooches (and associated small brooches) found in five graves of the eastern group at Schretzheim, phase 1, c. 530–560 (Koch 1977: 187).



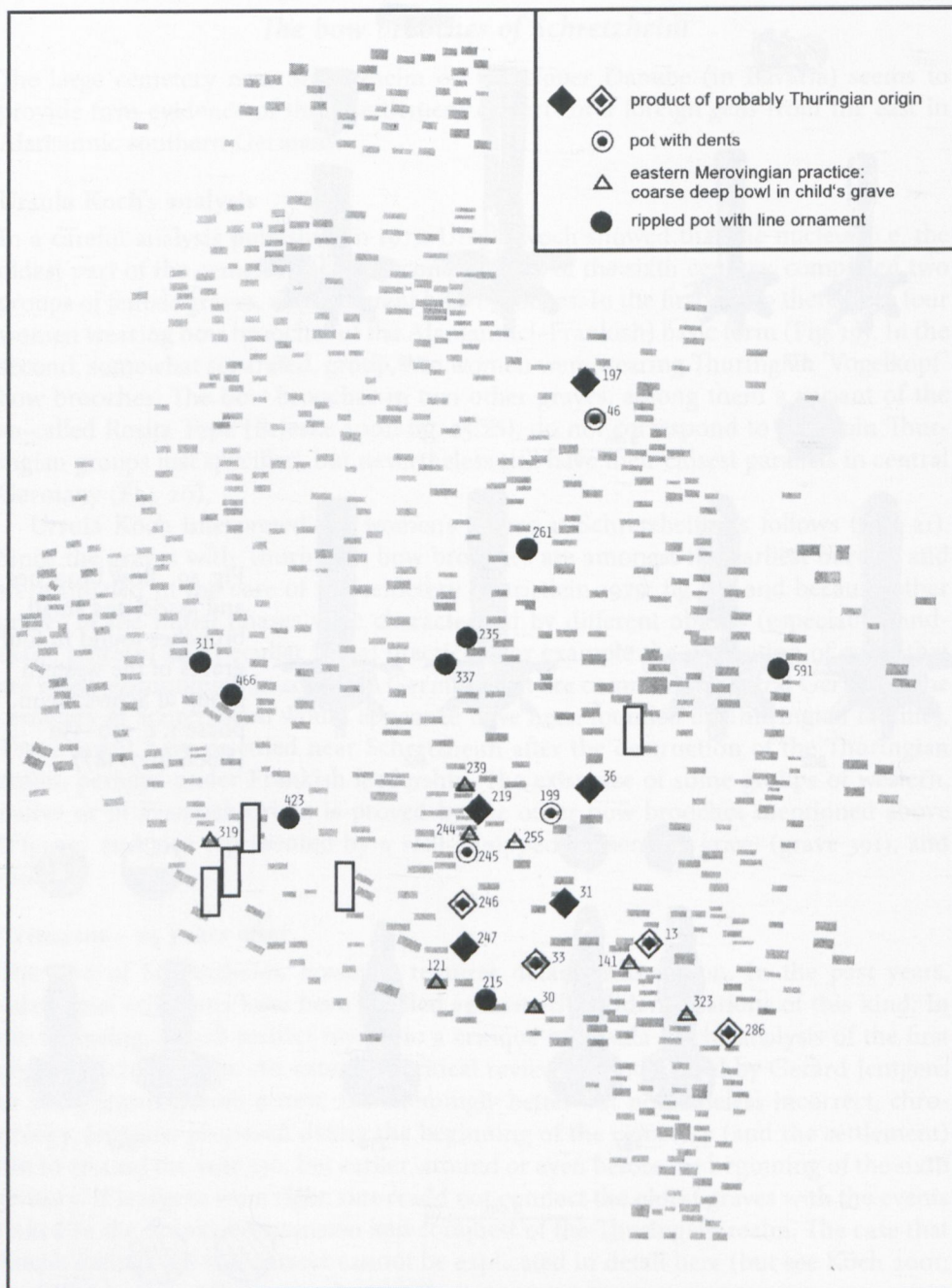


Fig. 21. Map of the cemetery near Schretzheim, showing graves with objects of 'Eastern Merovingian' origin, including the earliest graves with bow brooches of eastern basic form (lozenge) and western basic form (rectangle) (Koch 1977: pl. 268 and Brather 2002: fig. 7, modified).

tion Period and came to an end in Early Merovingian times, around the year 500. Under this rather archaic order, valuables such as precious metals and objects made of them were, according to Steuer and Jentgens, exclusively the possessions of the leader who – the model postulates – handed them over to his followers.

Jentgens consequently concluded that the two groups of bow brooches at Schretzheim could not represent two different ethnic groups but seemed to prove the existence of two neighbouring sites, both with central functions, each with its own leader as the sole controller – among other elements of power – of a workshop for working precious metals. Jentgens finally summarises the situation thus: ‘Die Gruppen “westlicher” und “östlicher” Fibeltypen, wie sie sich in Schretzheim auch in der räumlichen Struktur trennen lassen, (möchte ich) mit wenigstens zwei verschiedenen Werkstätten unterschiedlicher herrschaftlicher Zugehörigkeit verbinden’ (2001: 185).

According to Jentgens and Steuer, bow brooches were initially the property of the leader, created and produced in his workshop. They then passed directly from him to his followers – and subsequently to their women. Many questions arise. What about graves of young unmarried girls furnished with bow brooches? If precious metals were monopolised by the leader, did he, through his workshop, also produce ear-rings, pins and other jewellery? And was this done for one particular person in each case, or were the items made and stockpiled?

Jentgens proposes two ‘kleinräumige Herrschaftsstrukturen’ (ibid.: 189): i.e. two dominions of limited size. At this date, however, lordships of such a kind would not be independent but rather were normally part of a more powerful realm with a higher-ranking leader. Such lordships, on the other hand, were part of (and constituted) an ethnic population, i.e. a *gens*. The ‘foreign’ objects and customs at Schretzheim have surely nothing to do with a small independent dominion under the leadership of a native chief with ‘wide ranging relationships’ but rather prove the presence of several Thuringian families in the midst of Alamannic(-Frankish) communities.

Jentgens’s hypothesis is unconvincing. The idea of two different but equal and independent societies or populations burying their deceased together in the same cemetery is quite implausible. In his summary, Jentgens himself calls his hypothesis an attempt (2001: 191).

Around the same time, the ethnic interpretation of bow brooches and further ‘foreign’ objects at Schretzheim was also discussed and rejected by Sebastian Brather (2002: 164–7). He pointed out that ‘nearly every Early Medieval cemetery includes one or more graves with “foreign” pieces of jewellery’, and that there was ‘considerable mobility’ in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages. Nevertheless, he asked whether the ‘foreign’ objects or ‘imports’ must be evidence of ‘foreign’ individuals or rather ‘show only wide-ranging relationships (exchange)’ (ibid.: 164). ‘To differentiate between these two possibilities’ would be ‘a methodological problem’ (2001: 164 *et seq.*), which, however, is not discussed.

He is strongly critical of the fact that the ethnic interpretation of Early Medieval grave finds and cemeteries is based primarily on female graves and female costume, especially that involving brooches. The material considered thus ‘does not describe the movement of armed warriors, at least not directly’ (2002: 164). One question raised by this critique is indeed legitimate. Why has the analysis of the Schretzheim cemetery not revealed ‘the Thuringian attendants (*Gefolgschaft*) of the new Frankish lords’ (ibid.: 164)?

With reference to the value of Early Medieval brooches, Brather sets up the following hypothesis: ‘The gold and silver brooches ... were primarily of social significance

within the society; their regional differentiation was not so essential that it could be used for (regional or ethnic) demarcation' (2002: 169). The first part of this hypothesis is certainly right, because almost all pairs of bow brooches consist of precious metals. On the other hand, the second part is a largely unproven claim. In considering 'regional differentiation', as Brather calls it, he focuses only on the various types and variants of the bow brooches, and not on their basic form.

Against this hypothesis, Brather himself is correct to remark that 'Antique and Early Medieval sources mention a number of "material ethnic markers": armament, costume and jewellery, and hair...' (ibid.: 169); two pages later we read:

In order to demonstrate ethnic relationship ... groups select particular distinguishing cultural features. Selection is essential, because ethnic groups share most cultural, social, and economic characteristics with their neighbours. The choice of characteristics is arbitrary – anything can become a symbol of ethnic relevance.... Only features which make sense, which plausibly are able to distinguish groups, can be used. Particular elements of costume, language cultivation, aims and strategies of education, manners, ways of communication ... are purposefully raised and intensified as 'principal' ethnic differences. So on the one hand, nearly any part of material culture *could* have demonstrated 'ethnic identity'. And on the other hand, it is possible that no *material* sign was important... (Brather 2002: 171–2).

These remarks, especially those concerning the 'raising' of selected elements of the costume, recall the bow brooches and their persistent basic forms.

The weapon graves of Schretzheim

Early Medieval archaeology has hitherto given a great deal of attention to brooches of the female costume, but far less to the grave goods and burial rituals associated with men. The cemetery of Schretzheim also is still incompletely explored. We lack discussions of male burials, and not only at Schretzheim. This equipment, especially the deposition of weapons, is just as important as the two groups of bow brooches, but it has not been considered in detail. Brather's question (2002: 164) about the absence of 'the Thuringian attendants (*Gefolgschaft*)' is entirely valid.

Frank Siegmund's analysis

In his book *Alemannen und Franken* (2000), Frank Siegmund examined an impressive quantity of Early Medieval weapon graves from more than 200 cemeteries between the River Seine and eastern Bavaria dating from the middle of the fifth to the end of the seventh century. He divided the weapon graves into three chronological phases (A: c. 450–510; B: c. 510–580; C: c. 580–700) and examined the different categories of weapon (sword, seax, spearhead, shield etc.) in relation to their variable frequency in both time **and** space. In the same way, he analysed another major category of artefacts: the handmade and wheel-thrown pottery together with the glass vessels.

On the basis of many tables, graphs and distribution maps, Siegmund concluded that during the Early Middle Ages there had existed four large regions with different burial customs, corresponding to four 'Kulturmodelle'. He summarised the situation thus: 'The distribution of these cultural groups does not differ too much from our knowledge about the distribution of Early Medieval ethnic groups, derived from written sources, and allows us to combine these purely archaeologically defined

Kulturmodell ▶	West		Süd		Ost		Liebenau	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Gräber	1429		1396		105		144	
Tongefäße	1117	78,2	529	37,9	109	103,8	333	231,3
handgeformt	16	1,4	304	57,5	46	42,4	296	88,9
Thür. Ker.	1	0,1	5	0,9	25	22,9	1	0,3
Glasgefäße	297	20,8	68	4,9	1	1,0	15	10,4
Waffen	744		879		63		23	
Spathen	70	9,4	240	27,3	22	34,9	5	21,7
Saxe	141	19,0	214	24,3	2	3,2	8	34,8
Lanzen	284	38,2	225	25,6	21	33,3	5	21,7
Schlitztüllen	247	87,0	63	28,0	14	66,7	1	20,0
Äxte /Beile	179	24,1	55	6,3	6	9,5	3	13,0
Schilde	70	9,4	145	16,5	12	19,0	2	8,7

Zeitschnitt B. Nachweis der den Kulturmodellen zugrunde liegenden Daten. Links beobachtete Häufigkeiten, rechts kursiv die davon abgeleiteten Prozentwerte.

Fig. 22. The percentages of vessels of pottery and glass (top) and of various weapons (below) in Siegmund's *Kulturmodelle* South and East in phase B (Siegmund 2000: fig. 145).

“culture-groups” with Early Medieval ethnic groups’ (Siegmund 1998: 186 *et seq.*) – groups corresponding to the Franci in the west, the Alamanni in the south, the Saxons in the north and the Thuringi in the east (Siegmund 2000: fig. 148). He concluded that the ‘frühmittelalterlichen Ethnien sich als archäologisch fassbar erweisen’ (ibid. 2): that is that the ethnic groups, or better the *gentes*, of the Early Middle Ages are archaeologically recognisable. In Siegmund’s view they are also identifiable by means of the deposition and the types of weapons and pottery.

In phases A and C however, Siegmund could only distinguish groups of the ‘West’ (Franci) and ‘South’ (Alamanni). But in phase B – corresponding roughly to the first two phases of burial at Schretzheim – he could identify a group of the ‘East’ showing ‘Spezifika des thüringischen Raumes’ (2000: 271. 312; here Fig. 22). The weapon graves of his eastern group come in fact from only two cemeteries in central Germany: one situated near Obermöllern and the other at Stössen (ibid.: 266, 415, list 15).

In this work, Siegmund considered only the frequency of weapon burials and of weapon deposits. Although he established the different quantities of all kinds of weaponry, he disregarded the assemblages and also their numerical proportions, in particular with regard to the two forms of sword: the two-edged *spatha* and the one-edged seax.

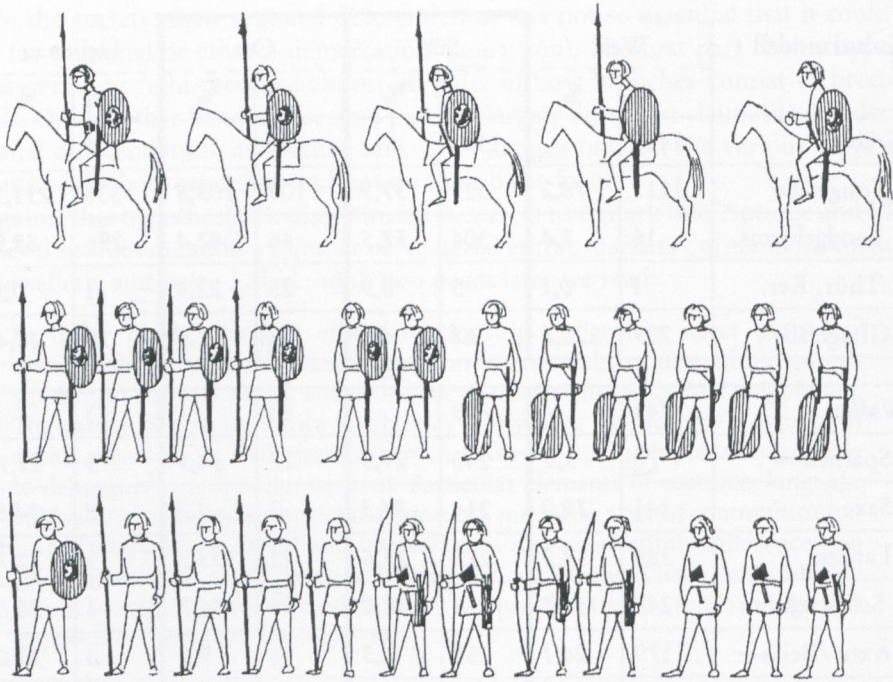


Fig. 23. Armed men in the cemetery at Weimar-Nordfriedhof (Behm-Blancke 1970: fig. 1).

A new attempt

If we examine both the proportions and the combinations of *spatha* and *seax* – in graves, of course – over a wider geographical range, we can recognise two large and distinct regions (Martin 2000; 2005). These correspond to two cultural ‘circles’, defined in part by Joachim Werner fifty years ago (Werner 1962). Werner classified populations and settlements from central Germany, Bohemia and Moravia as far as Pannonia as an ‘eastern Merovingian circle’. These are regions in which the presence of the Thuringian and the Langobardic *gentes* is testified to by written sources. Reciprocally, Werner’s ‘western Merovingian circle’ comprised mainly the territories of the Franci and Alamanni.

In graves of the ‘western circle’, the *spatha* is at no time nearly as frequent as the *seax*. However, the owner of a *spatha*, in the west, often had both types of sword at his disposal: *spatha* and *seax* together. Consequently, the remaining *seaxes*, as the overwhelming majority of sword-finds, were the only sword in the graves.

In the ‘eastern circle’, the presence of weapons, especially of the sword, clearly differs from that in the west. Above all, the *spatha* played a much more important role in the east, in contrast to the extremely rare *seax*. The *spatha* is present as a single sword in many graves: not only in rich burials but also in modestly equipped ones (Behm-Blancke 1970: fig. 1; here Fig. 23). Consequently, only a few *seaxes* occur within the ‘eastern circle’, and the *seax* was extremely rare if ever occurring at all as a single sword. Sometimes, however, the *seax* does appear in well-equipped graves as a supplementary sword, associated with a *spatha*.

This is the place to explain why the terms ‘weapon deposit’ or ‘sword deposit’ (Waffen-, Schwertbeigabe) are avoided here and ‘presence of weapon’ is preferred

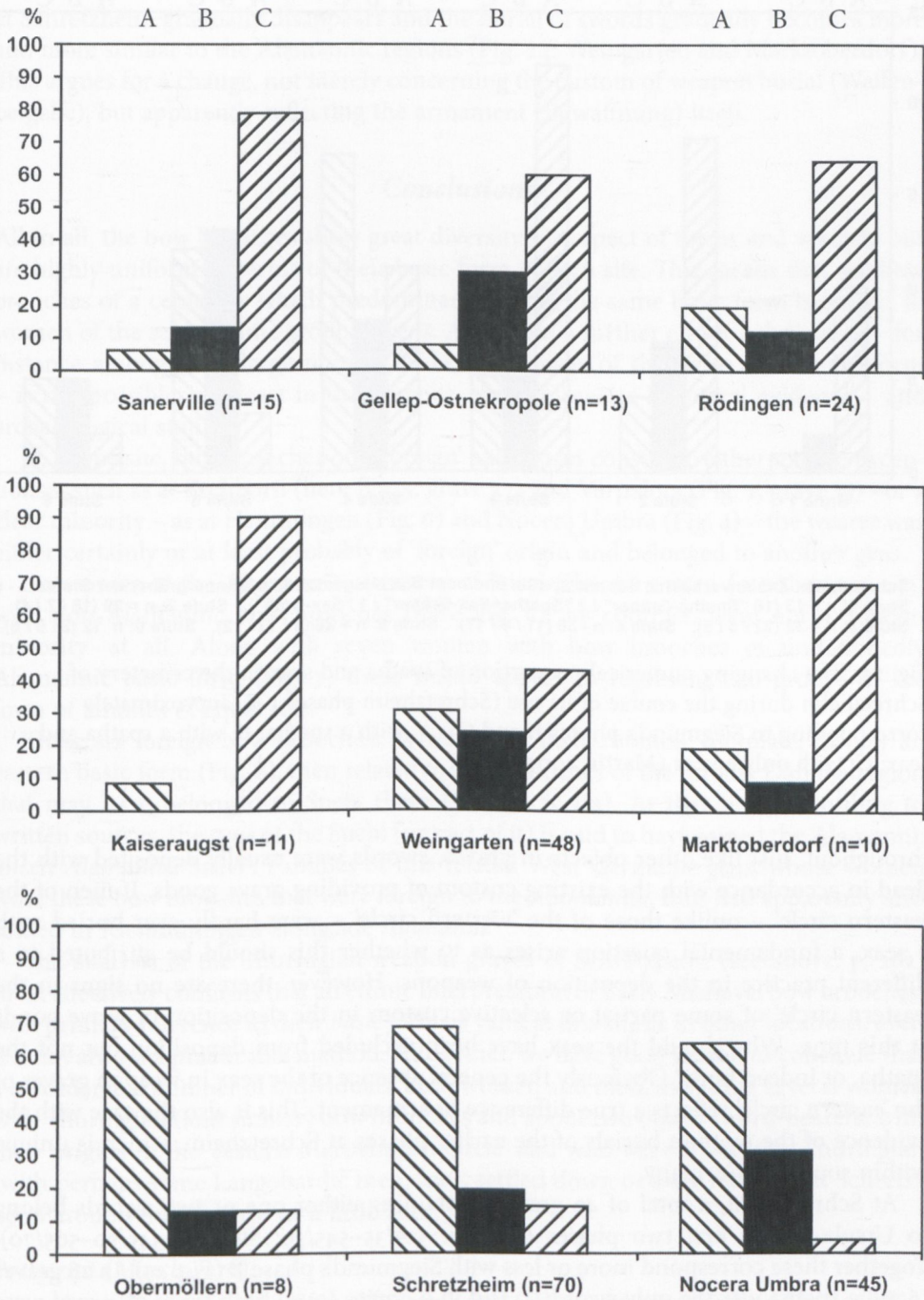
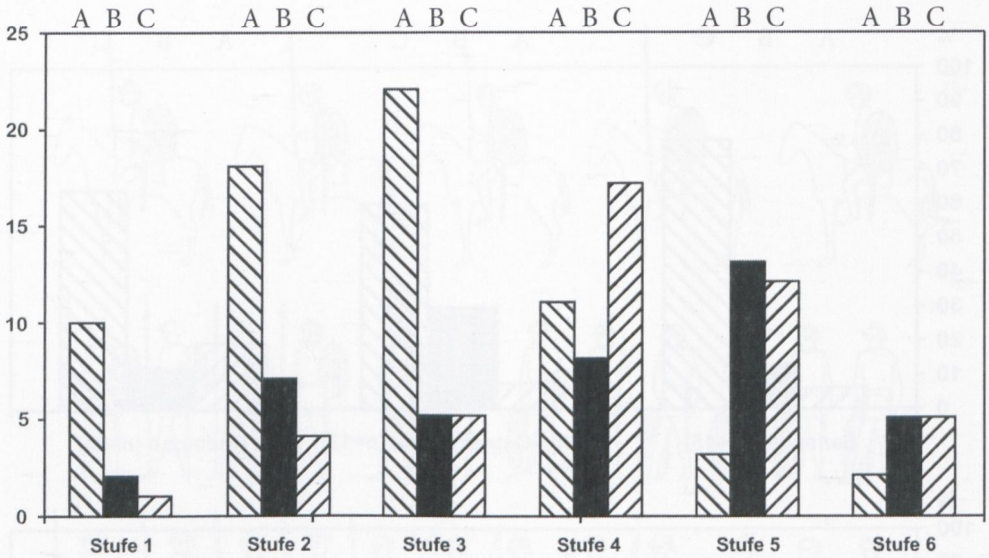


Fig. 24. Percentages of weapon-burials containing one or two swords. A: with a spatha (without accompanying seax); B: with a spatha **and** a seax; C: with only a seax. In cemeteries of the 'Western Merovingian circle' (top and centre) and 'Eastern Merovingian circle' represented by Obermöllern, Schretzheim and the Langobardic cemetery of Nocera Umbra (below) (Martin 2005: fig. 5).



Schretzheim: Zahlenverhältnis der mit Spatha und/oder Sax ausgestatteten Männergräber der Stufen 1 - 6
 Stufe 1: n = 13 (10 "Spatha-Gräber" / 2 "Spatha+Sax-Gräber" / 1 "Sax-Grab"). Stufe 2: n = 29 (18 / 7 / 4).
 Stufe 3: n = 32 (22 / 5 / 5). Stufe 4: n / 36 (11 / 8 / 17). Stufe 5: n = 28 (3 / 13 / 12). Stufe 6: n 12 (2 / 5 / 5).

Fig. 25. The changing numerical proportion of spatha and seax in the cemetery of Schretzheim during the course of its use (Schretzheim phases 1-6, approximately corresponding to Siegmund's phases B and C). A: with a spatha; B: with a spatha and seax; C: with only a seax (Martin 2005: fig. 3).

throughout. Just like other objects in graves, swords were usually deposited with the dead in accordance with the existing custom of providing grave goods. If men of the 'eastern circle' - unlike those of the 'western circle' - were hardly ever buried with a seax, a fundamental question arises as to whether this should be attributed to a different practice in the deposition of weapons. However, there are no signs in the 'eastern circle' of some partial or selective custom in the deposition of grave goods at this time. Why should the seax have been excluded from deposition but not the spatha, or indeed both? Obviously the general absence of the seax in weapon graves of the 'eastern circle' reflects a true difference in armament. This is also the case with the evidence of the weapon burials of the earlier phases at Schretzheim, which is unique within southern Germany.

At Schretzheim, a total of 42 graves containing either one or two swords belong to Ursula Koch's first two phases (Stufe 1: 525/35-545/50; Stufe 2: 545/50-565/70). Together these correspond more or less with Siegmund's phase B (Fig. 25). In 28 graves (67%) a spatha was the only sword(!), and in 9 graves (21%) both types of sword were present. In the remaining 5 graves (12%) a seax alone was found. The character of this 'weapon presence' is clear. During approximately the first five decades of burial here, the cemetery is completely out of line with the usual profile of weapon-burial of the 'Alamannic culture group' (Siegmund's 'South'), but corresponds exactly with the profile of contemporary Thuringian cemeteries in central Germany and other areas within the 'eastern Merovingian circle'; including even Nocera Umbra in Italy (Fig. 24). At the end of the sixth century, however, the curious predominance of the spatha

at Schretzheim gradually disappears and the burial of swords gradually becomes more and more similar to the Alamannic regions (Fig. 24: Weingarten and Marktoberdorf). This argues for a change, not merely concerning the custom of weapon burial (*Waffenbeigabe*), but apparently reflecting the armament (*Bewaffnung*) itself.

Conclusions

All in all, the bow brooches show great diversity in respect of forms and variants but are highly uniform in terms of their basic form at each site. This means that the bow brooches of a cemetery which predominantly show the same basic form belonged to women of the same ethnic group or *gens*. At present a further ethnic subdivision – for instance amongst the large number of bow brooches of the basic Alamannic form – is not possible; not least in the absence of more precise historical evidence – and archaeological studies.

If, at one site, bow brooches of a ‘foreign’ basic form constitute either unique exceptions – such as at Eschborn (here Fig. 5, grave 27) and Varpalota (Fig. 2, grave 13) – or a clear minority – as at Hemmingen (Fig. 6) and Nocera Umbra (Fig. 4) – the wearer was either certainly or at least probably of ‘foreign’ origin and belonged to another *gens*.

Six women at the Alamannic cemetery of Basel-Kleinhüningen (see above, p. 253) with non-Alamannic bow brooches (here Fig. 8), by contrast, were not a ‘foreign minority’ at all. Along with seven women with bow brooches of undoubtedly Alamannic basic form (Fig. 7) these would appear to represent two groups in the form of families of equal size.

These six foreign bow brooches, by reason of their rhombic footplate, display an eastern basic form (Fig. 8), then related to bow brooches of the middle Danube region that may have belonged to Suebi there (Martin 2002a). At that time, according to written sources, the *gens* of the Suebi (or part of it) is said to have joined the Alamanni: ‘*mixti Alamannis Suevi*’. Families of this related West Germanic *gens*, whose women wore these bow brooches that were foreign to the *Alamannia*, thus had apparently also settled in Kleinhüningen alongside *Alamanni*.

The analysis of the Thuringian weapon graves of Schretzheim (see above, p. 262) most effectively confirms that an ethnic interpretation of Early Medieval bow brooches, with primary reference to their *basic form*, is valid at this site as in other locations, even if it not always a practicable method. Altogether, we have good reason to conclude that a considerable number of individuals, both women and men, including several women with Thuringian (and similar) bow brooches and about two dozen sword-bearers, with their origins in the ‘eastern Merovingian circle’ and who were apparently Thuringian (with perhaps some Langobardic men, too), settled down or were resettled at Schretzheim around the year 530 or a little later.

Postscript (March 2010):

Apart from ‘The weapon graves of Schretzheim’ (p. 262 above), which was added later, and some minor changes and additions, the text of this contribution is identical with the paper presented at the conference in September 2004; literature published later could not be included here.

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