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Heuneburg

FIRST CITY NORTH OF THE ALPS

Were there cities in Central Europe before the Romans? Yes, say **Manuel Fernández-Götz** and **Dirk Krause**. And Heuneburg was the first. Long-believed to be little more than a hillfort, it is, they claim, the oldest urban settlement north of the Alps – and one of the most important sites in European prehistory.

BELOW 3D reconstruction of Heuneburg at the height of its prosperity in the first half of the 6th century BC.





ABOVE The Hohmichele, one of the largest burial mounds in Central Europe.



ABOVE RIGHT Reconstruction of a section of the mudbrick wall seen from the Danube valley.

Traditionally, archaeologists considered the Late Iron Age oppida – large fortified sites of the 2nd and 1st centuries BC – to be the first cities north of the Alps. Today, large-scale research projects in Germany and France are challenging this long-established view. We now know that the first urban and proto-urban centres developed here between the end of the 7th century BC and the 5th century BC, in an area stretching from Závist in Bohemia to Mont Lassois and Bourges in central France.

The best-known and most intensively investigated site is Heuneburg, near Herbertingen in southern Germany. At about the middle of the 5th century BC, the Greek historian Herodotus of Halicarnassus wrote in his famous work *Histories* (II, 33): ‘The Istros [Danube] river arises among the Celts and the *polis* of Pyrene, cutting Europe across the middle.’ It has been suggested that Pyrene, the *polis* mentioned here, is Heuneburg, and that this is the first time that a city in Central Europe is mentioned by name.

While this reference cannot be proved, we can show that the site, located 50 miles (80km) downstream from the source of the Danube, is exceptional. Excavations

at Heuneburg are proving that this was the site of one of the most important centres of power in the early Iron Age, a substantial settlement that flourished politically and economically, and which had extensive connections with areas as far away as Etruria and the Greek colonies.

Revisiting Heuneburg

Research into the prehistoric landscape around Heuneburg began in the 19th century, when a number of burial mounds with rich grave goods were discovered at Gießübel-Talhau. They included gold neck and arm rings, the remains of wagons, and bronze vessels. In the first half of the 20th century, further archaeological work concentrated on the tumuli, and in 1937/1938 extensive excavations were

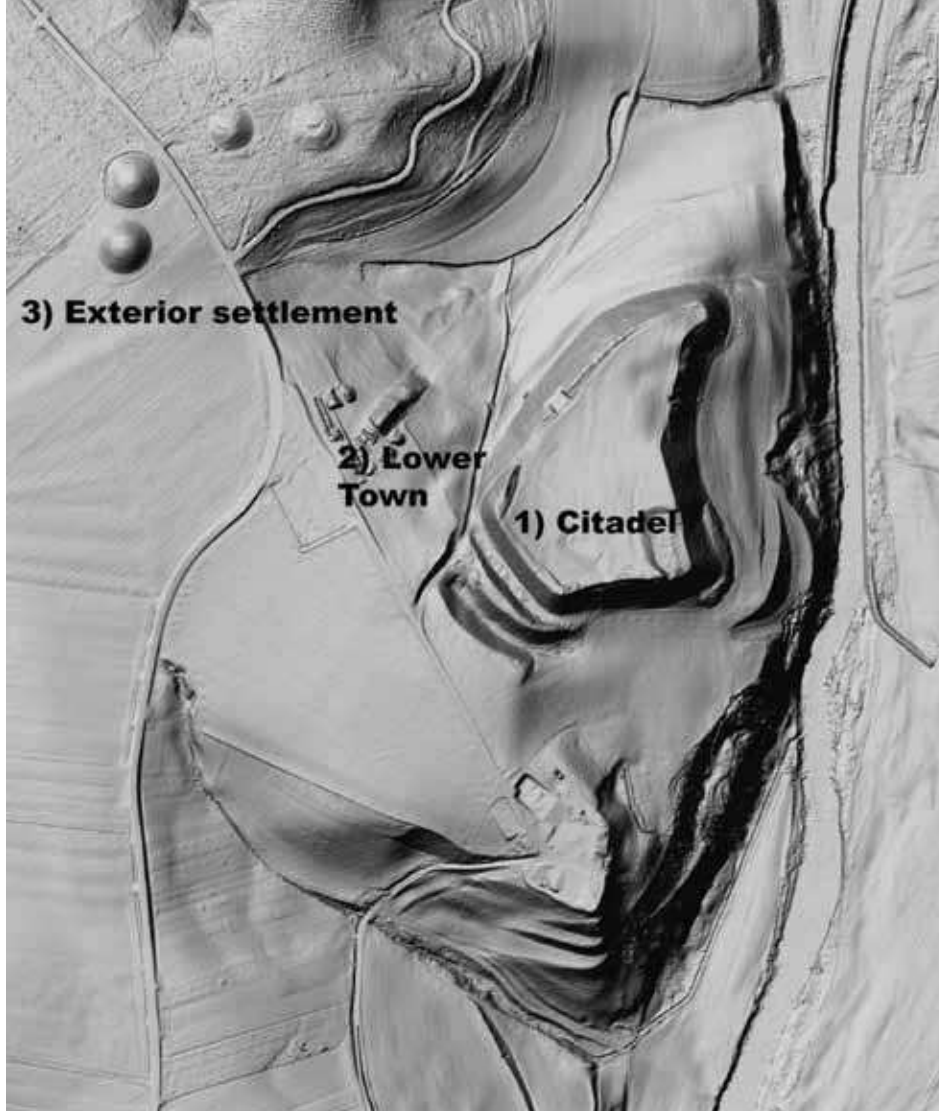
conducted on the Hohmichele mound; at 43ft (13m) in height and with a diameter of 263ft (80m), it is one of the largest tumuli in Central Europe.

The first systematic excavations on the 3ha of the Heuneburg plateau, overlooking the Danube, began in 1950. It was soon clear that the results would surpass all expectations. The discovery of a mudbrick wall based on Mediterranean prototypes and probably erected in about 600 BC was spectacular, attracting international attention. The excavations were continued until 1979, above all by Wolfgang Kimmig and Egon Gersbach, and produced further, substantial results. The archaeological material is unusually rich, and allows the reconstruction of 14 building phases of the Late Hallstatt period, together with 10 phases for the fortifications, thus providing a remarkable insight into the development of the settlement on the hilltop plateau, which, in the early Iron Age, was a genuine acropolis. The stratigraphy is extensive, and archaeologists often refer to the settlement as a tell.

For a long time it was thought that the settlement at Heuneburg was mainly confined to this central hilltop. Although as early as the 1950s it was clear that there was also an exterior settlement beneath the tumuli of the Gießübel-Talhau necropolis, this appeared to be no larger than a few hectares. However, new work in the last 20 years has radically changed ▶

BELOW Fragment of Greek pottery from Heuneburg.





LEFT High-resolution LIDAR scan, with the citadel, lower town, and exterior settlement marked.

BELOW Timbers from the ditch at Heuneburg during excavation.

this picture. The focus is no longer just on the central hilltop, but has been extended to the further surroundings in search of traces of settlement there. The combination of field walking, large-scale excavations, geomagnetic prospection, and high-resolution airborne LIDAR scans has extended our understanding enormously: old theories have been disproved, new ones proposed. The central hilltop was only the tip of the iceberg. The entire settlement at Heuneburg was, in fact, divided into three areas: the citadel (hilltop plateau), the lower town, and the exterior settlement.

The first discovery that changed the picture completely was the realisation that the defences of the lower town were not Medieval, as earlier scholars had for a long time thought. They were, in fact, constructed in the Late Hallstatt period. Evidence for this came partly from stratigraphical observations in the area of what is now a car park of the open-air museum; but above all from the discovery of large quantities of wood in one of the ditches that were dated – through dendrochronological analysis – to the

first quarter of the 6th century BC. The timbers were part of a bridge that was built around 590 BC, and remained in use for at least ten years. Evidence suggests it was modified or repaired on several occasions.

A further sensation came with the excavation in 2005-2008 of a monumental stone gate of the Hallstatt period. It was built in the 6th century BC, and, just like the wall on the plateau, it comprised

mudbricks on a stone foundation. The gatehouse was extremely impressive: it was more than 52ft 6ins (16m) deep and some 33ft (10m) wide, while internal transverse walls reduced the opening to about 8ft (2.5m). This was a deliberate demonstration of power by the local elite: the gatehouse, integrated as it was into the 16ft-high (5m) rampart, set behind a V-shaped ditch some 46ft (14m) wide by up to 20ft (6m) deep and crossed by a wooden bridge, was clearly designed to make as monumental an impression as was possible.

In addition to all this, work in the area of the lower town has revealed that it was densely settled. Indeed, even unsuitable, steeply sloping areas were carefully terraced so that they could be used to build houses, suggesting that the population here was heavily concentrated, and that there was a shortage of space in the area. As a result, a whole series of artificial terraces were constructed which provided level surfaces for the construction of houses and workshops.

The discoveries relating to the exterior settlement are also of fundamental importance for our understanding of Heuneburg. The results of the new excavations and surveys by Siegfried Kurz indicate that at least during the first half of the 6th century BC, a huge area of some





ABOVE 3D reconstruction of the monumental stone gate, in the background the towers of the mudbrick wall. LEFT The monumental stone gate that formed the entrance to the lower town of Heuneburg.

100ha and at least 5,000 inhabitants.

Both Heuneburg and other contemporary sites like Bourges or Mont Lassois should no longer be described as 'princely seats'. These are the first urban or proto-urban centres of temperate Europe, ruled by kings and aristocrats whose power and social position is reflected in rich burials such as those at Hohmichele, Bettelbühl, Hochdorf, Sainte-Colombe, or Vix.

Thus we can conclude that Heuneburg constituted the central place of an important early Iron Age polity, comparable in power and influence to Etruscan city-states of the Archaic Period such as Tarquinia, Veii, or Orvieto. And, given its early date, Heuneburg can therefore be described as the 'first city north of the Alps'.

Of course, a city is not only defined by the size of its population or the area it covers, but also by other factors, such as the exercise of functions typical of a central place for the surrounding area. However, the extent of the settlement, the presence of imposing monumental structures – the mudbrick wall, stone gate, large building with several rooms nearly 1,000ft² (300m²) in size beneath Gießübel-Talhau Mound 4, for example – as well as indications of significant differences in social status and specialised production, justifies categorising Heuneburg as a 'town', at least for the period of the

mudbrick wall, c.600/590 to 540/530 BC.

It is important to realise that the extent and the significance of the Late Hallstatt Heuneburg continued to change throughout its less than 200-year occupation. Indeed, the various building phases, fires, and constant restructuring are testimony to an eventful existence with dynamic social changes.

Extensive surveys have revealed that for the 7th to 6th centuries BC there was a scattering of farms and hamlet-like agricultural settlements in the region around Heuneburg. ▶

BELOW Map showing how the exterior settlement was divided into smaller quarters, each one including several farmsteads.



100ha to the west, north, and south-west of the hilltop plateau was taken up by closely spaced farmsteads, enclosed by rectangular palisades. This huge exterior settlement was divided into smaller quarters by an extensive system of banks and ditches. These, in turn, then enclosed various properties of between 1ha and 1.5ha that were surrounded by massively built timber fences.

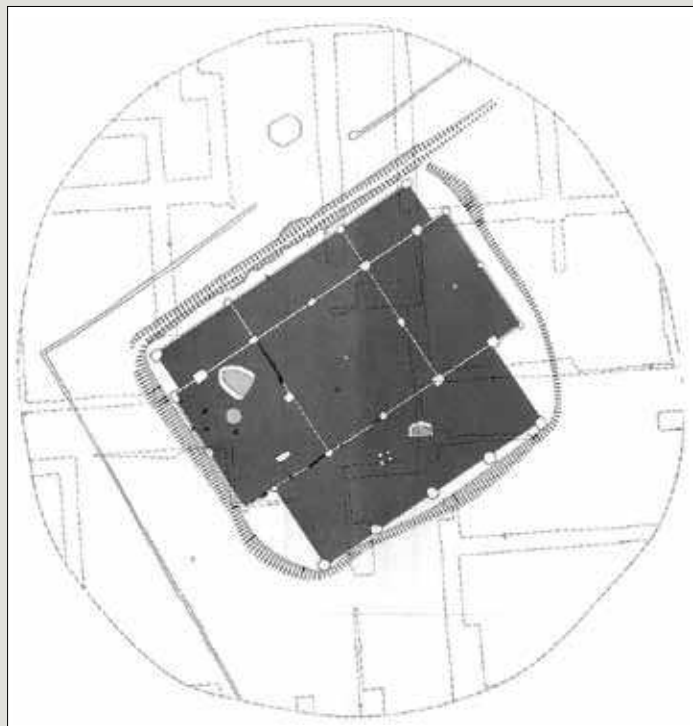
Areas of the exterior settlement that were suitable for occupation would have provided sufficient space for about 50 such units, being inhabited by most of the various groups who gradually merged to form a single community. The division of this exterior settlement into separate quarters may also be evidence for the existence of different kinship groups, each inhabiting one of these quarters.

Heuneburg in a new light

Rather than a small hillfort of just a few hectares, as once believed, we can now see that in the first half of the 6th century BC Heuneburg was an enormous settlement of



ABOVE Reconstructed buildings from the mudbrick wall phase at the Heuneburg open-air museum.
 RIGHT Plan of a large building that was later covered over by Mound 4 of the Gießübel-Talhau necropolis.



of the 6th century BC with relatively uniform, small buildings set in rows, some of which served as workshops. During the mudbrick-wall period, an enormous structure with several rooms was erected outside the citadel on the later site of Mound 4 of the Gießübel-Talhau necropolis. This building, covering 1,050ft² (320m²), shows structural

LEFT 3D reconstruction of Wagon Burial 6 from the Hohmichele mound.

BELOW 3D reconstruction of the newly discovered burial from the Bettelbühl necropolis.

As the farming settlements prospered, so the population grew and local elites developed. The circle of the most important families and settlement groups was surely responsible for triggering the construction of Heuneburg in the second half of the 7th century BC. The heads of different households and lineage groups must have joined together in a process that led to the construction of the exterior settlement at Heuneburg.

After a first phase of settlement and fortification based on a traditional pattern, a mudbrick wall was built around the 3ha hilltop plateau sometime around or soon after 600 BC. This wall was clearly inspired by Mediterranean prototypes and was unique north of the Alps. It consisted of mudbricks set on a stone base, with rectangular towers incorporated into the defences along the north and west faces (see illustration on p.31).

In contrast to the exterior settlement, the actual citadel at Heuneburg was densely built up during the first half

similarities with the Etruscan palaces of Murlo and Acquarossa.

Landscape of ancestors

From the beginning, the settlement at Heuneburg was surrounded by numerous burial mounds which served as last resting places for members of the social elite and their relatives. The monuments that comprised this extensive 'landscape of ancestors' functioned as a mnemonic system that was central to issues of kinship, territoriality, and social memory. Death, identity, and social memory would have been fundamentally linked, as they



RIGHT Some of the finds from the newly discovered rich burial in the Bettelbühl necropolis.

are in most ancient cultures. In this context, the placing of grave mounds in the landscape could imply a strategy of tying the dead of particular households or lineages to specific parcels of land. Moreover, it would have played a key role in the construction and maintenance of social memory and power relationships both within and between groups.

It is interesting to note that the burials of the early phase were situated at some distance from the settlement. Many of the large mounds and princely burials are arranged in larger cemeteries that include not only rich, but also normal or simply furnished graves. An example of a rich chamber burial from the period is Wagon Burial 6, from the Hohmichele mound. It dates to about the first quarter of the 6th century BC. Unfortunately, most of the central graves in the mounds were robbed in ancient times, so probably most of the richest burials are lost.

It is for precisely this reason that the latest results from the Bettelbühl necropolis, 1.5 miles (2.5km) south-east of Heuneburg in the Danube valley, are of such enormous scientific interest. In 2005, the secondary burial of a two- to four-year-old girl was found in Mound 4. It was furnished with two gold-plated *fibulae* and two gold pendants, and is one of only a handful of rich child burials of the Hallstatt culture. Such a wealthy burial of a young child suggests that at this time the concept of inherited status was being established at Heuneburg.

But the main highlight is the central burial in the same Mound 4 of the



Bettelbühl necropolis, which was recovered at the end of December 2010 as a 80-ton block: it is a shaft grave with a 14ft 9ins (4.5m) x 11ft 9ins (3.6m) timber chamber. The floorboards and some of the side planks were excellently preserved, thanks to the extreme humidity of the soil.

Although excavation in the laboratory has not yet been completed, it is already clear that this is the unrobbed burial of a woman. The gold jewellery and the *fibulae* are very similar to the gold objects in the child's grave, so we must assume that there were strong social connections between the

“THIS EARLY 6TH CENTURY BC GRAVE IS ONE OF THE OLDEST KNOWN RICH IRON AGE BURIALS OF A WOMAN.”

two rich burials. So far, about 30 gold objects (including an earring, *fibulae*, pendants), and more than 100 pieces of amber have been recovered. Dendrochronological analysis places the grave in the early 6th century BC, meaning that it is one of the oldest known rich burials of a woman from the early Iron Age.

The great fire

A dramatic break in the history of the settlement at Heuneburg came after the mid-6th century BC following a devastating fire. The cause of this catastrophe is difficult to ascertain: whether external attack or internal conflict; or problems with supply and exploitation of resources; or simply the emigration of part of the population.

Whatever the reason, we know from excavations in recent years that within the enormous external settlement most of the material dates to the period of the mudbrick wall, while material from the end of the 6th and the beginning of the 5th centuries BC is restricted to just a few isolated areas. Heuneburg was fundamentally restructured soon after the middle of the 6th century BC: the external settlement was abandoned and the Gießübel-Talhau cemetery, which dates from 540/530 BC, was placed over it.

The large Gießübel-Talhau necropolis mounds make up an isolated cemetery for the social elite, and were not incorporated into a larger necropolis – emphasising the ▶

BELOW LEFT Burial mounds at Gießübel-Talhau. BELOW Reconstruction of a monumental building from the phase after the mudbrick wall in the Heuneburg open-air museum.



special status of the ruling elite at Heuneburg.

At about the same time as the exterior settlement was abandoned and the Gießübel-Talhau necropolis was initiated, there is a fundamental change in the architecture of the citadel's fortifications: the mudbrick wall is replaced in c.540/530 BC by a traditional earth and timber rampart. The fact that the mudbrick wall was never rebuilt after the fire suggests that there was an iconoclastic reaction to the exotic building technique.

The buildings in the citadel also underwent a complete reorganisation at this time. Instead of the rows of relatively uniform houses from the mudbrick phase, buildings of varying size and function now appear, including prestigious 1,312ft² (400m²) structures, which may be *regia*, aristocratic residences, or assembly halls.

The lower town, meanwhile, saw an intensification of settlement: densely built terraced areas, occupied in the last quarter of the 6th century BC and the early part of the 5th century BC, have produced large quantities of finds that suggest this area was occupied by artisans and others involved in service activities.

It appears, then, that during the mudbrick phase, buildings within the citadel were mostly uniform and set closely together, while outside it structures were more scattered and varied. In the following period, this was reversed, with less dense and more varied construction within the citadel, while outside in the lower town structures were more crowded and the architecture was probably more uniform. Interestingly, most of the Mediterranean imports, including several Greek vases, belong to the period after the end of the mudbrick wall.

New times?

Unfortunately, although we know that occupation of the citadel and the lower town did not continue beyond the mid-5th century BC, we still do not know why Heuneburg was so abruptly abandoned. However, if we consider the development of central places between Burgundy and Württemberg at this time, we can at least identify a



ABOVE A 16ft-deep (5m) shaft for cult activities at the Alte Burg site, near Langenenslingen.

“THE MUDBRICK WALL WAS NEVER REBUILT, SUGGESTING AN ICONOCLASTIC REACTION TO THE EXOTIC BUILDING TECHNIQUE.”

pattern. Heuneburg appears to have been abandoned at about the same time as similar centres such as Mont Lassois in Burgundy. At the same time, in a zone further to the north, central places like Bad Dürkheim and Glauberg became more important, and a new elite burial zone emerged between Champagne and Hunsrück-Eifel.

The reasons behind these structural displacements and shifts in power from the south to the north remain uncertain. But that we must still expect surprises is shown by finds made during a watching brief at construction work below Heuneburg in 2009-2010. During work to environs of the Danube, a new river bed 131ft (40m) wide was excavated over a

distance of 1.2 miles (2km). In the thick layers of gravel, a number of prehistoric finds were made that had been deposited there secondarily, including two Early La Tène bronze *fibulae* found directly below Heuneburg. Since the settlement at Heuneburg more or less ceased at the end of the Hallstatt period, but the two *fibulae* belong to the La Tène period that followed – and so are later – they seem to indicate

previously unrecognised activity within the direct vicinity of Heuneburg.

One possibility is that the two *fibulae* are related to practices of ritual deposition in or near the Danube. Whether they are or not, the new finds are confirmation of the enormous potential for further research and discoveries in and around Heuneburg. With regard to this, it should be noted that Alte Burg hillfort near Langenenslingen – just 5.6 miles (9km) from Heuneburg – was apparently a sacred place for people at this time, and there is evidence here for cult activities well into the La Tène period. ▣

BELOW An early La Tène mask *fibula* from the Danube valley.



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