

## THE CEMETERY OF SCHMÖLLN IN THE UCKERMARK DISTRICT

In 2014, a multi-phase burial site was discovered in the valley of the river Randow near Schmölln, whose topographical location has several exceptional features. This location is the reason for its late and unexpected discovery and raises the question why this cemetery was built there. A second aspect of this site is the exceptional and unique monumentality of the burials, which also requires explanation. The third remarkable feature of the cemetery is the fact that it had been used repeatedly as a burial ground by at least three different cultures for several thousand years. The aim of this article is to present the site of the graveyard and to identify the connections between these three aspects and how they might be explained.

The archaeological excavations near the village of Schmölln along the A11 motorway in Brandenburg revealed large stone settings which hinted at a cemetery dating back to the Early Pre-Roman Iron Age (ca. 500 BC, Fig. 1). These structures had not been discovered earlier because they had been entirely covered by colluvial sediments, which saved the graves from destruction by modern agriculture.

This discovery was rather surprising because the site is situated in a river valley which is surrounded by high and steep slopes while Prehistoric graveyards tend to be sited on plateaus rather than in valley lowlands. There are two topographical particularities which can explain why this unusual site was chosen for the cemetery. First, it is situated in the headwaters area of the Randow river, which branches off here northwards to the Baltic Sea and southwards to the Oder River. Secondly, this is the narrowest point of the valley, where a natural east-west crossing is formed (Fig. 2).

The excavation site, which covers an area of approximately 0.7 ha, was thoroughly examined in the years 2014 and 2015 (Bartels, 2016, 62-66). Most of the burials were urn graves from the Early Pre-Roman Iron Age (ca. 500 BC), which were covered by carefully laid stone pavings with diameters ranging from about one to eight meters. The stones on the edge and in the centre were often bigger than the other stones of the paving. As all the graves were immersed in the colluvial sediments, no differences of colours or soil were visible to mark the limit of the graves other than the stones. Usually round stone pavings covered a single urn, and only in a few cases there were two or more urns. Some of the urns were surrounded by stone packings and sometimes covered by a flat stone or a ceramic bowl.

At least three pavings had radial patterns on them. The clearest pattern of these “rays” or “spokes” was found in the largest stone paving of the cemetery, which had a diameter of eight meters and consisted of about 2400 stones (Fig. 3). At the south-eastern edge of this paving there was a large block of granite stone (a cup-marked stone) with at least five flat round depressions on its surface. Originally, it served probably as an upright standing stone (stele) to decorate the grave. Such large steles were also found in a stone circle of 7 m in diameter, which contained two covered urn burials. The largest ring of stone had a diameter of 10 m. It held five steles and a central stone paving sized approximately 5x3 m, which covered 11 urns. Another urn was buried east of the paving.

The excavation site contained a total of 14 complete round stone pavings. 14 more pavings were either incompletely preserved or only partially examined, because they were sited on the edge of the excavated area (Fig 4).

As of the status of the examination, there are 45 objects which are interpreted as burials of 47 individuals dating from the Pre-Roman Iron Age (Bartels and Storch, 2018, 42). The interpretation of five more objects is not yet conclusive. A total of 35 urns were found below the round stone pavings and recovered completely. Only two urns had been buried without a stone paving. In at least 5 other cases, the paving covered ceramic sherds with burnt bones, rather than complete urns. Because of the difficult soil conditions, there was no evidence whether this was due to a grave robbery or whether the vessels had been shattered intentionally in a funeral ceremony. Three burials contained only burnt bones, which means that they had been either buried in a vessel of organic material or laid in a pit without a vessel.

The most extraordinary discoveries, quite unique to Brandenburg, were six large linear stone settings. They were partially uncovered in the initial pre-examination and later confirmed by geophysical examinations. The largest of these pavings was straight, 105 meters long and 2.1 meters wide, and extended from north-west to south-east. The geophysical examinations indicate that this paving stretches south-east beyond the excavation site. Its extension to the north-west is not visible as it is overlain by the motorway. Like in the other Iron-Age stone pavings, the edge of this structure is made of carefully laid stones. Although from a distance it looks like a paved path, the inner stones are not laid their flat side up, but completely irregularly, so in fact they cannot be used as a path for pedestrians or carriages (Fig. 5). No indications of sand, wood or other materials were preserved on the stones. No burials or other objects were found under the paving which consisted of only one layer of stones. A single urn was found in an interrupted section in the south-eastern part of the paving. This structure possibly served as a demarcation between different parts of the cemetery as it did not overlap with any other paving. Its dating has not be-

en established yet. Another pavement of this kind extended from north to south, north of the main excavation area.

Four more alignments had a curved, ship-like shape. The largest of them was about 63 meters long and 3.5 meters wide (Fig. 6). It was situated a few meters north of the straight paving and parallel to the rest of another curved alignment. Two more ship-like shaped alignments were found directly side by side in the eastern part of the excavation site.

To our surprise, we discovered that the stone pavings in the north-eastern part of the excavation area (the last to be examined) did not cover Iron-Age urns, but inhumation burials from the Middle Neolithic Funnel Beaker Culture (Trichterbecherkultur). All those graves were covered by head-sized stones, but their tomb constructions varied widely (Fig. 7). One group of five tombs lay in the northern middle of the excavation site. Its south-eastern end was formed by a Megalithic tomb. A pit next to it contained numerous human bones.

The Megalithic tomb (dolmen) showed signs of various disturbances. The covering stone block and the northern wall had been removed or relocated, and the two side blocks were tilted outwards (Fig. 8). There was an irregular paving inside the burial chamber. It covered a secondary burial from the Late Neolithic Age. The grave contained an axe and a beaker from the Uckermark group of the Single Grave Culture. The buried man held a bone point in his right hand. The crouched inhumation, which was found on the right-hand side, was surrounded by single scattered bones. They belonged, together with the bones in the pit outside the Megalithic tomb, to at least 14 different individuals. Radiocarbon dates of the bones confirm that the crouched inhumation (2289-2041 BC) is a secondary burial. It is about one thousand years younger than the bones outside the burial chamber (3340-3022 BC).<sup>1</sup>

The bones in the pit outside the burial chamber are supposed to have been reburied from the Megalithic tomb or from other graves of that period. It remains uncertain whether this reburial took place together with the secondary burial in the Megalithic chamber in the Late Neolithic period, or whether it had already been carried out by the people of the Funnel Beaker Culture themselves in the Middle Neolithic period.

Two more tombs, each of them with multiple burials, were discovered in the east and in the south-east of the excavation site. One tomb contained a crouched inhumation with a stone axe, a flintstone top and the rest of a vessel. Various scattered bones lay beneath that inhumation. The other grave was a stone chamber made of tables of red sandstone with a disintegrated vessel. Two bone deposits were found inside the chamber as well as outside it, under the surround-

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<sup>1</sup> All radiocarbon data of the cemetery were provided by the Poznan Radiocarbon Laboratory, 23.11.2015 (unpublished).

ding paving. A stone-framed grave and a single deposited vessel from the Middle Neolithic Funnel Beaker Culture, neither of which contained any bones, were also found under a large ship-shaped paving in the western part of the excavation area. All the Neolithic burials of the cemetery contained remains of a total of at least 43 individuals.

Another special feature of the cemetery was the presence of lime spots on top of numerous stones, which in some cases formed patterns of white lines on the stone settings. On the largest round stone paving, they formed two stripes, each of about 0.6 meters in width, on the west side and on the east side, running from north-west to south-east. The lime also continued upon the sediment between the stones. When the paving was removed a sharp edge of the lime was visible between the upper and the lower sides of the stones. Another 0.6-meter-wide strip extended onto the neighbouring paving from north to south. The straight linear alignment was also covered in a 0.5- to 0.6-meter-wide lime pattern. Single spots of lime were found on at least two other stone pavings. Whether the lime had been painted upon the stones or whether it had been deposited through geological processes is still being investigated.<sup>2</sup>

The dating of the large linear stone pavings is still largely unknown. The largest ship-shaped paving covered a stone-framed grave of the Funnel Beaker Culture, which indicates that the paving was constructed in the Middle Neolithic Age. But the same paving also covered a C14-dated fireplace from the Bronze Age and contained an urn from the Pre-Roman Iron Age. In addition, none of the other linear pavings contained a Neolithic burial or other Neolithic objects. It is also unclear how many burials of the Funnel Beaker Culture were still visible on the surface in the Iron Age. Only few stone pavements are overlaid on each other. This indicates a respect for the older, probably still recognisable tombs.

In the northern half of the excavation area, the stone structures are significantly worse preserved than the ones in the southern half (Figs. 4 and 7). One reason for that may be the proximity of the present road through the Randow Valley. South of the road, an older pavement was found at the edge of the excavation area, in which stones from the prehistoric structures could have been installed. Further findings concerning the dating of the burials, the stone structures and the colluvial sediments can only be provided by scientific examinations, such as radiocarbon tests and geological analyses. The overall extent of the cemetery also remains still unexplored. Geomagnetic prospecting has revealed that the burial ground stretches, at least, to the south and south-west beyond the excavation area.

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<sup>2</sup> According to an unpublished report by the Berlin-based geologist Dr Th. Schatz, the lime spots are of natural origin.

Overall, the burials at the cemetery of Schmölln span about 3000 years and at least three different archaeological cultures (Fig. 9). The oldest tombs, which include the Megalithic tomb and the individual bones buried therein and next to it are associated with the Funnel Beaker Culture of around 3300 BC. The secondary burial inside the Megalithic tomb was performed in the Late Neolithic Age. The third period of burials at the cemetery is the pre-Roman Iron Age with urn graves from around 500 BC.

This long use as a burial place clearly shows that the place must have had a special significance for people over all periods of time. It is obvious to assume that this has to do with the location in the Randow Valley. On the one hand, the cemetery is located at the intersection of two important traffic routes. A crossing of the Randow valley in east-west direction is only possible at the few places where side valleys break through the steep slopes of the Randow lowland. This is especially true for this place, as it lies at the narrowest and flattest point of the Randow valley. Since this place is also at the origin of the river, it is also of great importance as a waterway in a north-south direction. It can be assumed that due to the low water level at this point, the cargo had to be reloaded for the onward journey to the north or south. However, it is unclear to what extent the river was navigable at this point at the time when the cemetery was used. What is certain, however, is that the water level fluctuated considerably over time and, at least in the Middle Neolithic, was significantly lower than today, since the easternmost Neolithic graves lie below today's groundwater level.

On the other hand, the location of this place at the source of the Randow river also implies a special ritual meaning. It is not only a place of transition from one side to the other in a practical sense. As the source of a river, it also embodies an origin in the ritual sense. This is all the more true since the Randow is one of the few rivers that flows from its source not only in one but in two opposite directions. Whether this duality actually had a metaphysical significance in the selection of the site for the cemetery cannot, however, be judged from today's point of view.

Undoubtedly, however, the particular ritual significance of the site is reflected in the monumentality, number and concentration of the stone structures. It took an enormous amount of work to collect many thousands of stones, transport them to the place of burial and carefully install them. This special care is particularly evident in the placement of the radial stones in the largest circular pavement. Interestingly, this pattern is hardly recognizable from a pedestrian's perspective, but only from an elevated position. During the excavation, the motorway embankment offered such an elevated position (Fig. 1).

Before the construction of the motorway, the edge of the Randow Valley in the immediate vicinity west of the cemetery formed a pronounced terrain edge, which offered an excellent overview of the graves and in particular of the long linear stone pavements. Unfortunately, this edge was levelled during the construction of the motorway and integrated into the motorway route, so that archaeological research is no longer possible there (Fig. 2). However, it is reasonable to assume that there was a prehistoric vantage point there. The concentration of the stone pavings in a relatively small area can be explained by the fact that only this area was higher than the rest of the valley due to the colluvial sediments from the side valley which provided a firm base. In fact, the alignments of the linear pavings are not oriented to astronomical directions, but to the extent of the sediments from the Schmölln side valley.

Just as interesting as the fact that the cemetery was used for burials for three thousand years is the observation that very long periods of time lie between the individual occupation phases in which no burial took place there. This raises the question of how the tradition of the site as a burial place could be preserved over this long period of time by at least three different scriptless cultures. The simplest explanation is that the older graves were still recognizable on the surface when the younger burials were laid out. In the case of the reburial in the Middle Neolithic dolmen, this fact is obvious. The fact that most of the older and younger stone structures do not overlap may also indicate that the older Neolithic tombs were still visible in the Iron Age and were respected by the Iron Age population. On the other hand, numerous stone pavings in the north of the excavation area and the linear pavings in the south have gaps. This could in turn indicate that the older structures were partially demolished to serve as building material for the younger pavings. However, the missing stones may have been removed later for agricultural use or for medieval to modern road construction.

If or to which extent the continuity of the site as a cemetery was also based on an oral tradition that survived a period of three millennia despite all cultural differences remains unclear. At what point in time the cemetery was completely covered by the sediments will be one of the questions of future research.

#### References:

- Bartels, Rainer. 2016. "Stein für Stein. Ausgrabungen auf dem Gräberfeld von Schmölln, Lkr. Uckermark." In *Ausgrabungen in Berlin und Brandenburg 2014* (pp. 62-46). Darmstadt: Theiss in Kommission
- Bartels, Rainer, and Susanne Storch. 2018. "Belegung über drei Jahrtausende. Bestattungen auf dem Gräberfeld von Schmölln, Lkr. Uckermark." In *Ausgrabungen in Berlin und Brandenburg 2016* (pp. 41-43). Darmstadt: Theiss in Kommission

**FIGURES:**



Fig. 1: Stone structures in the southern part of the excavation site in Schmölln. Source: R. Bartels, BLDAM

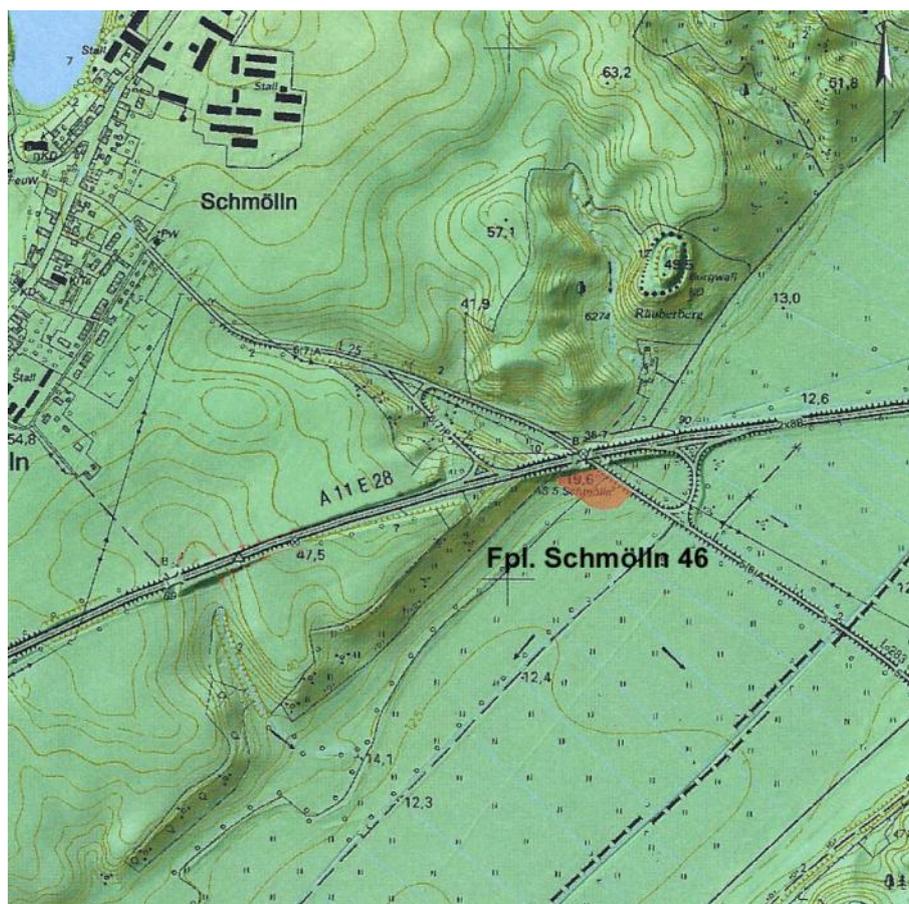


Fig. 2: The excavation site (Schmöln 46) in the Radow River Valley. Source: BLDAM



Fig. 3: The largest round paving with a diameter of 8 meters had radial patterns, a cup-marked stone at its edge and two strips of white lime on its surface. Source: R. Bartels, BLDAM

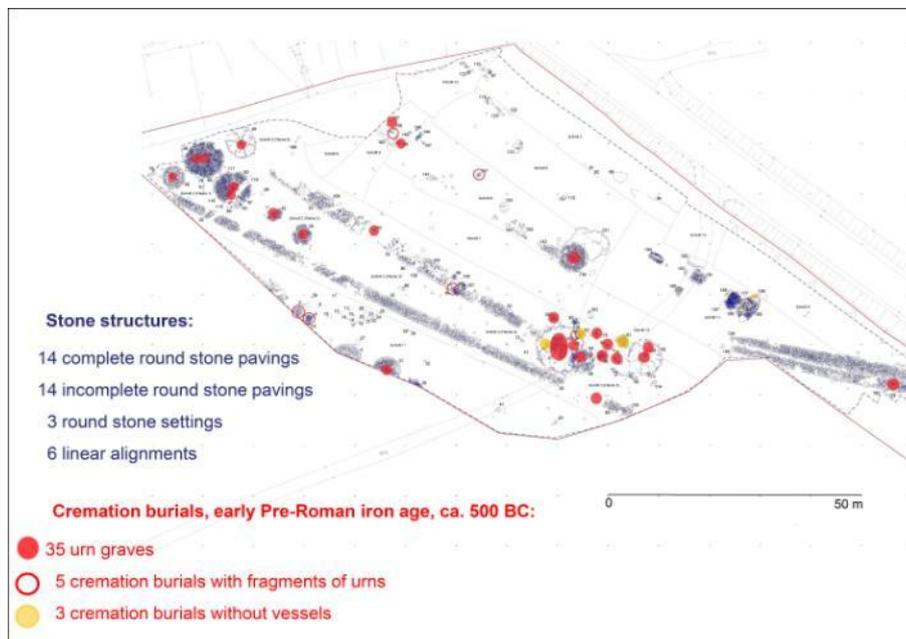


Fig. 4: Stone pavings and cremation burials. Source: D. Newiadomsky, J. Jones, R. Bartels, BLDAM



Fig. 5: The straight linear paving unearthened during the excavation. Source: R. Bartels, BLDAM



Fig. 6: The largest curved, ship-like shaped paving was about 63 meters long and 3.5 meters wide. Source: R. Faron-Bartels, BLDAM

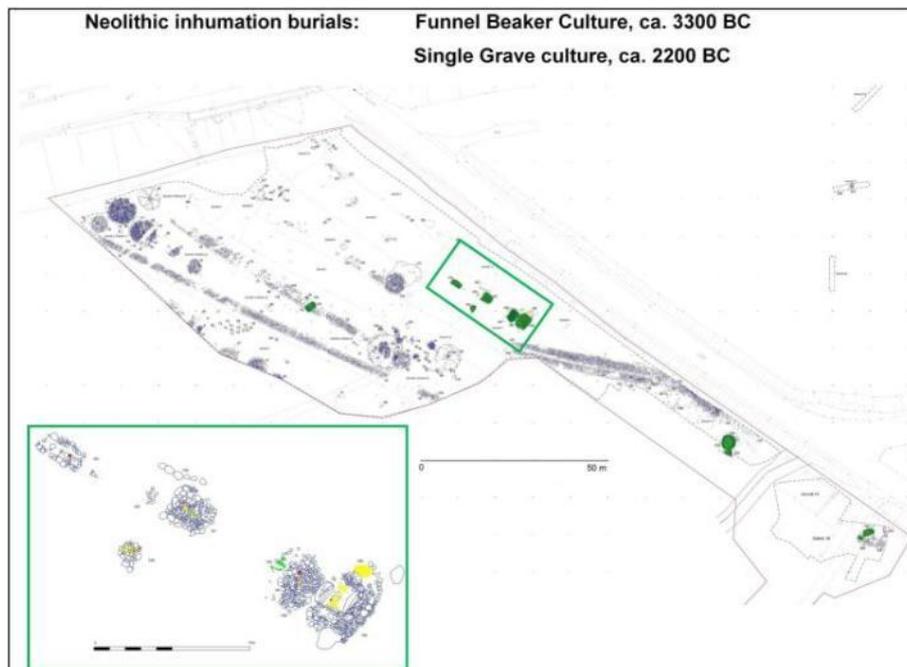


Fig. 7 Neolithic inhumation burials. Source: D. Newiadomsky, J. Jones, R. Bartels, BLDAM



Fig. 8: A Megalithic tomb with a secondary burial inside and a pit filled with human bones outside. Source: R. Bartels, BLDAM



Fig. 9: The burials at the cemetery of Schmölln spanned about 3000 years and at least three different archaeological cultures. Source: Brandenburgviewer/GeoBasis-DE/LGB 2016/ BLDAM