

Press Release

Nr. 044/2024

Oct 18th, 2024

Spectacular discovery of a Early Celtic burial chamber near Riedlingen

During archaeological excavations on the plains of the Danube near Riedlingen, a burial chamber from the Early Celtic period was discovered. It was located in the centre of a large burial mound, 65 m in diameter and, to this day, almost 2 m high. It probably once reached a height of more than 6 m. Based on these dimensions, it belongs to the small and exclusive group of so-called princely burial mounds. Between 620 and 450 BC, the Celts of southwest Germany constructed such mounds for particularly high-ranking individuals.

“The newly discovered burial chamber represents an extraordinary testimony of our rich monument landscape. 2,600 years after its construction, the [burial chamber] is still fully preserved,” Ms Andrea Lindlohr MdL, Staatssekretärin at the Baden-Württemberg Ministry for Regional Development and Housing at today’s press conference held at the excavation site. “The archaeological heritage of Baden-Württemberg is impressive and opens insights into long-gone periods and societies.”

Professor Dr Dirk Krausse, State Office for Cultural Heritage Baden-Württemberg (Landesamt für Denkmalpflege im Regierungspräsidium Stuttgart – LAD), the long-standing Director of Research at the Heuneburg and State Archaeologist of Baden-Württemberg, added: “The Riedlingen grave is a stroke of luck for archaeology: the scientific significance of this fully preserved Celtic chamber grave, investigated using modern methods, extends far beyond the boundaries of Baden-Württemberg and southern Germany.”

The excavations will continue over the next few weeks and are expected to be completed by the end of this year. Excavation and analysis are carried out using the latest excavation, documentation and conservation techniques and in close collaboration between archaeology, conservation and natural sciences. Dr Roberto Tarpini (LAD), who is in charge of the excavations on site, emphasised: “The investigations and analyses to be carried out after the excavations are completed promise further important insights, in particular regarding the question for whom this monumental burial mound was constructed.”

The president of the LAD, Professor Dr Claus Wolf, concluded: “All timber from the burial chamber will be carefully recovered for conservation and restoration in the workshops of the State Office for Cultural Heritage Baden-Württemberg over the next few years, with the aim of presenting the fully reconstructed chamber to a wider audience in a museum setting.”

Background information about the discovery

Location close to the Heuneburg and Mount Bussen

The burial mound is located just about 7 km northeast of the Heuneburg, which is considered to be the oldest urban-like settlement north of the Alps and one of the most important archaeological excavation sites in Central Europe. Located at about the same distance is the Bussen, known as the 'sacred mountain of Upper Swabia' and another important archaeological site of the Bronze and Iron Ages (Fig. 1). The Heuneburg and its surroundings are currently the subject of a long-term research project funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) and the Baden-Württemberg Ministry for Regional Development and Housing, and carried out by the LAD. Last year, archaeological excavations, which are still ongoing, were launched to clarify the chronology and structure of the burial mound, and to assess the condition of the archaeological features of the grave, severely threatened by intensive agriculture.

Large burial chamber made of oak wood

A big surprise awaited the excavation team led by Professor Dr Dirk Krausse in the centre of the burial mound: completely unexpectedly, the archaeologists discovered the substantial oak timbers of a large, completely preserved burial chamber just 70 cm below the modern ground surface (Figs 4-5, 7). This find is unique and of outstanding scientific importance, since under regular conditions, buried wood only survives for a few years or decades. Although timber was the most important building material during the Early Celtic period, finds of this kind are amongst the rarest in archaeology. A fully preserved Celtic burial chamber has only been discovered once before in Germany, during an excavation near Villingen in the Black Forest in 1890. At the time, however, the remains were insufficiently documented and only later partially preserved. All the more significant are these recent discoveries in Riedlingen of a chamber tomb, completely preserved with its ceiling, walls and floor. This level of preservation can be attributed to the special hydrological conditions at the site and the conservation resulting from the exclusion of oxygen due to the influence of groundwater and stratum water.

Description of the burial chamber

The chamber, aligned roughly north-south, is approximately 3.40 m wide and 4.05 m long. Its floor consists of thick, north-south arranged planks that are in excellent condition (Fig. 5). Each wall of the burial chamber consisted of three edge-set planks, which distinctly overlapped at the corners and thus interlocked. A crossbeam inserted roughly in the centre at the top of the longer

walls originally supported the weight of the heavy ceiling in the central area; subsequently, under the weight of the burial mound, the ceiling collapsed into the interior of chamber. The chamber walls measured approximately 1 m in height. In the outer corner areas, four wooden posts were driven through rectangular recesses in the upper ceiling beams and into the soil raised around the burial chamber, probably serving as a construction support. The ceiling was constructed extremely strong (Fig. 4). It consists of two layers of very thick oak planks, with the upper layer laid crosswise and the lower layer laid at right angles to it lengthwise. In some places, especially on the eastern side, where they lay flat on the filled-in soil, the timbers of the upper ceiling layer significantly exceeded the width of the burial chamber and reached lengths of almost 5 m. At the very top, two more split planks were arranged in the longitudinal direction on the upper ceiling layer, resembling a roof ridgeline.

A contemporary of the Celtic princess of Bettelbühl?

Of outstanding scientific importance are the unique conditions in which wood has been preserved inside the grave, which allow dendrochronology (treering dating) to determine the exact year of burial, despite belonging to a period with no written sources. The dendrochronological analyses of the chamber timbers recovered so far have not yet been completed. However, a club-like wooden artefact (Fig. 9) left behind by the Celtic builders after constructing the chamber has already been dated. The object, which may have been a half-finished wooden spade, was made from an oak felled in 585 BC. These and other observations suggest that the princely tomb of Riedlingen was built in 585 BC. Thus, it is only two years older than the grave of the Celtic princess of Bettelbühl (583 BC), which was recovered a few years ago at the foot of the Heuneburg, and, likewise, coincides with the prime of the Heuneburg with its unique mud-brick architecture.

The work of past looters

The Early Celtic builders probably intended the ceiling's very heavy construction in several layers also to prevent the looting of the burial chamber by grave robbers. This is supported by the observation that almost all princely graves beneath large burial mounds dating from this period had been looted in antiquity. Unfortunately, the recently discovered grave at Riedlingen is no exception: two tunnels dug by looters, both of which led to the southeast corner of the burial chamber (Fig. 8) have been documented during the archaeological excavations. The looters broke through the chamber ceiling and entered the chamber through an entry hole measuring only about 40 x 45 cm (Fig. 6). The looting – which must have taken place at a time when it was still possible to move unhindered within the burial chamber – was very thorough and systematic, as no grave goods made of metal or other valuable materials have been found on those areas of the chamber floor that have been uncovered so far. However, the excavation of the chamber floor has not yet been completed, and objects overlooked by the grave robbers may still come to light. Numerous decorative bronze nails found in one of the looters' tunnels confirm the obvious assumption that the burial chamber originally contained rich grave goods. These decorative nails,

as well as several characteristic iron nails, presumably originated from a four-wheeled wagon, as they are known from other Early Celtic elite graves, such as the princely grave of Hochdorf, which is about 50 years younger. Further archaeological investigations will determine whether a man or a woman was buried in the Riedlingen grave. So far, several well-preserved human skeletal remains have been recovered. According to an initial anthropological autopsy, they are likely from a male individual, probably 15 to 20 years of age and between 160 and 168 cm tall.

Additional burials

In addition, the excavations revealed the partially preserved skeleton of a 25-35-year-old man just below the ground surface, close to the edge of the burial mound (Fig. 3). The burial included two bronze brooches and a small rock crystal, which may have been worn around the neck as an amulet. The grave goods and the elevated position within the burial mound suggest that, around 500 BC, this burial had been dug into the pre-existing burial mound as a secondary interment. Just a few metres from this grave, a small pit, also covered by the burial mound, contained two pottery vessels with cremated human remains, thus serving as urns (Fig. 2). These represent two older cremations from around 600 BC, which had been placed in the ground during or shortly before the construction of the large burial mound.

Information for editorial teams:

For further questions, interviews, etc., please contact:

Professor Dr Dirk Krausse, State Archaeologist and Director of Research, State Office for Cultural Heritage Baden-Württemberg; phone: 0711 90445501, email: dirk.krausse@rps.bwl.de

Dr Roberto Tarpini, Research Associate, State Office for Cultural Heritage Baden-Württemberg; phone: 0174 3240479, email: roberto.tarpini@rps.bwl.de

Images

Images are available for download at the following link: www.mlw.baden-wuerttemberg.de/mediathek