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Shifting Burial Rites – Shifting Identities?

Late Antique Burial Practices on the Rhine Frontier

Introduction

Within the framework of this volume, a paper dealing with the regions along the northwestern frontier of the Roman Empire appears to be slightly exotic (Fig. 1).

At first glance, the provinces along the left bank of the Rhine were not a cultural hotspot of the Late Antique world. They neither included important Christian centres, nor were they home to numerous distinguished writers and yielded only few workshops producing outstanding works of art. Only *Treveris*/Trier as Imperial residence may provide an exception here.[1] The northwestern frontier of the Empire (in further 'the Rhine frontier') roughly ran along the left bank of the Rhine River from Lake Constance in the south to the Rhine estuary in the north. While the Lower Rhine functioned as frontier already from the 1st c. AD onwards, the Middle and Upper Rhine became a border (again) in the later 3rd c. AD. In Late Antiquity the Rhine frontier was garrisoned by *limitanei* units based in numerous *castra* and cities along the river and to some extend also in its hinterlands. While earlier scholarship believed that, the end of the Rhine frontier came already at the beginning of the 5th c. AD (in 401 or 406/7), current research could document that most fortifications were in use until the second half of the 5th c. AD, when roman provincial administration collapsed in the wake of military revolts against the western roman emperors in Italy.

Compared to the other (mostly Mediterranean) regions studied in the volume, the Rhine frontier appears as distinct place, separated not only by geography but also by different research traditions. While most excavators and researchers dealing with Late Antique remains in the Mediterranean come from a 'classical' background, the author of this paper is a pre- and protohistorian archaeologist. The study of Late Antique burials in the northwestern provinces of the Roman Empire stand in the focus of both Provincial Roman and Early Medieval archaeology. Both are separate disciplines in Germany and both have different views about Late Antiquity concerning chronology: Provincial Roman archaeologists will usually argue that this period started in the later 3rd c. AD and ended with the collapse of Roman Imperial administration in Gaul around the middle of the 5th c. AD.[2] The following centuries are generally considered to belong to the Early Medieval era that ex-

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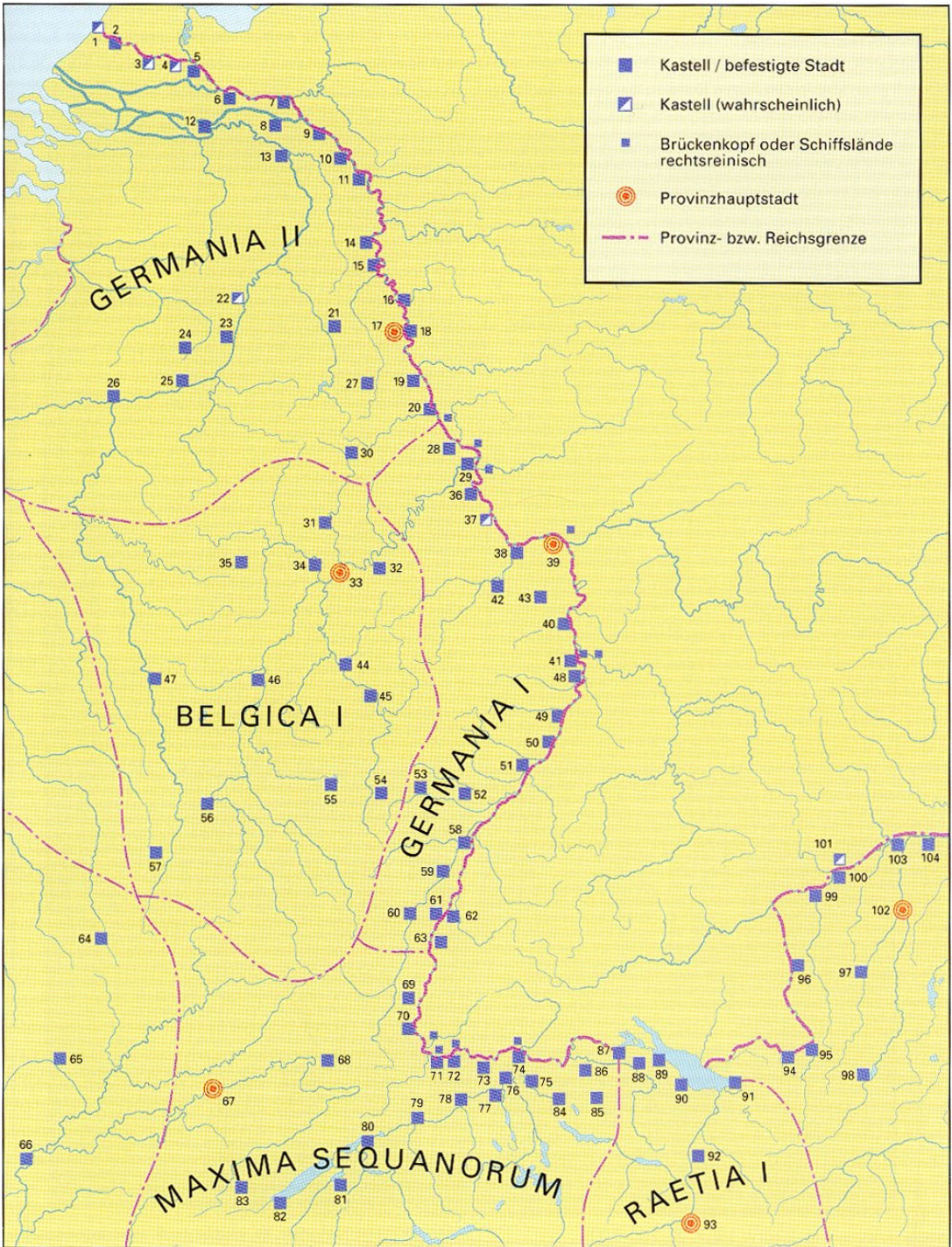1 See the contribution MERTEN in this volume.
2 BECHERT 2007, 132.

Fig. 1: The Late Antique Rhine frontier with sites discussed in this contribution.

tended to the Carolingian era or even beyond, although a precise differentiation between Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages has increasingly become a difficult task for both archaeologists and historians.[3] The same applies to the historical disciplines, in which the field is divided between Ancient and Medieval History. Especially in archaeology, the approaches towards the study of burials in Provincial Roman and Early Medieval archaeology are quite different. This complicates any attempt at an overview of burial rites along the Rhine frontier between the 4th and 7th c. AD. An additional problem is the fact that most research on burials never dealt with burial rites, but instead focused on two main questions of ethnic and/or religious identity of the dead. Thus, this paper will firstly examine the different research traditions and secondly try to outline a possible approach for future studies of burial rites in this frontier region. Despite the fact that the author beliefs in a 'Long Late Antiquity' spanning from the 4th to the 7th c. AD in the northwestern provinces, this paper focuses on the period that is traditionally labelled 'Late Roman' (the 4th and 5th c. AD).

The Study of Burials through the Lens of Provincial Roman Archaeology

As the name already implies Provincial Roman archaeology focuses on the five centuries of Roman rule in *Gallia* and *Germania* from the conquest under Julius Caesar to the breakdown of the provincial administration around the middle of the 5th c. AD.[4] As a separate discipline in Germany, it evolved to a lesser degree from Classical archaeology and more from Pre- and Protohistoric archaeology, dealing mostly with material remains of the Roman epoch and not so much with its art history. It applies many technical methods that were developed for prehistoric archaeology but also still heavily relies on written historical and epigraphic sources when it comes to analysis and interpretation of archaeological evidence. Provincial Roman archaeology is a relatively young discipline; the few existing professorships in the field were mostly installed within the last fifty years. Nevertheless, large-scale excavations of Roman sites have a tradition in Germany that goes back for more than two centuries. In this field of research, the Roman military has always been in the focus of attention. Along the Rhine, numerous military sites were excavated, among them five legionary fortresses and hundreds of auxiliary and smaller forts. The military aspect was also dominant in the study of Roman burials: In the 1st c. AD, Roman soldiers, mainly from Italy, brought their burial customs to the frontiers, where the local population partially adapted them.[5]

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3 Goetz 2003, 280–284; Marcone 2008; Meier 2017.
4 Fischer 2001, 10–13.
5 Nierhaus 1969; Böhme-Schönberger 2001; Bechert 2007, 90–95.

For the 1st c. AD, burial practices are mainly discussed within the broader field of Romanization, but already at this stage, ethnic identities play a role in the interpretation of grave furniture – especially fibulae from burials. According to studies on burials of the 1st c. AD, society on the Rhine frontier was ethnically heterogenic, comprising 'local' populations of 'Celtic' and 'Germanic' origins and immigrants from Italy as well as from various other northwestern provinces.[6] The presumed high mobility of at least some parts of society is mainly explained through the frequent exchange of the troops garrisoning the frontier. Identifying burials of Italian immigrants entering the frontier zone after the initial conquest is in many ways problematic: tombstones and inscriptions from funerary monuments clearly document their presence especially in towns and legionary fortresses, but this evidence is usually unrelated to any archaeologically examined burials since most of the stone material comes from secondary contexts. There is no grave furnishing that can be directly compared to contemporary burials from Italy and sources that highlight 'Roman' burial practices are usually restricted to only a few Roman authors writing about obsequies for individual members of the highest social classes in the times of the Late Republic and the Early Principate. Obviously, most aspects of Roman burial customs were not subject to religious regulations or state law. Thus, the individual handling of the dead was left to families and other social groups that took care of the funerals.[7] This means that all expenditures for type and size of funeral monuments and grave goods were limited predominantly by economic means and less related to social status or ethnic and/or religious identities. This important conclusion should be kept in mind also when discussing Late Antique burials.

Concerning the period between the late 1st and the end of the 3rd c. AD, thousands of burials from the Rhine frontier and its hinterland have been subject to archaeological studies. Among them are different types of burial grounds related to towns, smaller settlements and rural *villae*. Only a few of these sites are entirely excavated: in *Mogontiacum*/Mainz, a necropolis stretching along the main road leading from the legionary fortress and its neighbouring *canabae* (serving as provincial capital but gaining municipal rights only in the late 3rd c. AD) to the north was exposed.[8] It resembled typical urban burial grounds from the Mediterranean with assemblages of large grave monuments as well as numerous simple, unmarked burials. Similar lavish necropoleis are also known from smaller *vici* such as Heidelberg.[9] Other examples such as the modest grave field of the rural *vicus* of *Belginum*/Wederath with its smaller tumuli show a continuous development of burials from the late Iron Age to the 4th c. AD.[10] Many rural *villae* had separate burial

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6   KAKOSCHKE 2002.
7   VOLP 2002, 69–94.
8   WITTEYER/FASOLD 1995; BOPPERT/ERTEL 2020.
9   HENSEN 2009.
10   HAFFNER 1989.

grounds, often with large grave monuments such as tumuli or pillar tombs; the majority of these lavish monuments from the second and first half of the 3rd c. AD were already demolished towards the end of the 3rd c. AD, their building material being reused in the foundations of newly erected fortifications.[11] The destruction of older grave monuments at this time marks a profound change in the ways the provincial Roman society was dealing with its ancestors: theoretically, disturbing the rest in death was a capital crime, yet levelling commemorative monuments that were partially erected on private land and financed by private money was a widespread phenomenon since the beginning of Late Antiquity. Quarrying these older monuments was not a random act of destruction but part of commercial operations carried out by craftsmen. The stone material was mainly reused for buildings commissioned by the state or local communities. This may point towards the possibility that these activities were not only legally sanctioned but also socially accepted: either the families that erected the funerary monuments no longer cared for them or they deemed them no longer a necessity for their funerary practices.

The 3rd c. AD saw another profound change in burial practices when the number of cremation burials declined and inhumation became the dominant form of burial at the beginning of the 4th c. AD. In the northwestern provinces, most graves from the 1st and 2nd c. AD were cremation burials with very few exceptions mostly found in urban contexts. Throughout the 3rd c. AD, the Roman elites changed their favoured practice to inhumation and within a few generations, the whole society seems to have followed their example.[12] This sudden change was attributed to the spread of Christianity within the Roman Empire based on the assumption that cremation was a burial form incompatible with both Christian beliefs and religious practices of the ascending oriental cults in the 3rd c. AD.[13] A direct relation between both phenomena has, however, not been proven until today.[14] For the Rhine frontier, this hypothesis can easily be dismissed since the transition from cremation to inhumantion burials predates the spread of Christianity in these areas by several generations.[15]

We should add, finally, a brief discussion on the so-called 'grave goods'. In burials from the 1st to 3rd c. AD, certain objects usually accompany the remains of the dead. Burials without any objects are known from Roman necropoleis (usually they are not dated), but the overall majority contained grave goods ranging from a few items to large assemblages of objects. Provincial Roman archaeology has studied this material mainly in terms of chronology and wealth of the deceased. The question why certain objects (or combinations of objects) were deposited in the graves has hardly been touched. Also, the definition of 'grave goods' remains imprecise: all

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11 Henrich 2010; Henrich 2016.
12 Morris 1992, 31–33.
13 Audin 1960, 529.
14 Volp 2002, 187.
15 Prien 2012, 65.

objects in a grave are counted in despite the conventional approach to include only things that were neither part of clothing or personal jewellery nor small items from the personal belongings of the deceased. Apart from that, most grave goods were vessels of different use and type.[16] Very common were pots, sometimes containing meat or fruit. Food could also be placed on plates and dishes. Drinking vessels appear quite often, sometimes in combination with jars or jugs that presumably contained wine or other beverages. Richly furnished graves included glass vessels instead of or additionally to ceramics. Small lamps and little flasks with perfumy oil are usually interpreted as helpful items that would serve the dead in the afterworld. Rarely, larger objects like tools were included in burials. Some items may represent the profession of the deceased, but contrary to this observation, weapons are seldom found in any burials. This is usually explained by the assumption that Roman soldiers were equipped with arms from state-run *fabricae* and that these had to be returned on retirement. But as the weapon graves from Late Antiquity demonstrate, privately owned arms must have been circulating.

In Late Antiquity, the northwestern frontiers of the Empire saw some major changes. In contrast to the roughly two hundred years in which especially the Upper Rhine Valley was protected by the outer-lying Upper Germanic-Rhaetian Limes, the entire course of the Rhine between Lake Constance and the North Sea became a frontier again, albeit a frontier that was initially hardly visible in the second half of the 3rd c. AD. In contrast to the situation commonly shown by historic maps, the Upper Rhine did not become a military fortified border after the fall of the *limes* in the middle of the 3rd c. AD. Fortifications were not built before the beginning of the 4th c. AD and most of them where not *castra*, but fortified cities and smaller settlements. Sources such as the *Notitia Dignitatum* clearly tell us about the presence of military troops within settlements, but archaeologically we cannot detect them. The once so clear line between civilian and military space became blurred and even invisible. The same problem applies to burials where identifying graves of soldiers from the 1st to 3rd c. AD is fairly simple because of the numerous tomb stones naming or depicting members of the armed forces, but in later times, such examples nearly vanish. Therefore, another major issue in archaeological research on Late Antique burials on the frontier zone is the differentiation between civilians and soldiers.

In summary, grave goods and burial practices in the northwestern provinces point toward strong local traditions in funerary practices that go back to the Iron Age. This is the cultural package all studies of Late Roman burials have to build on. Up until now, there are no comprehensive studies on Late Antique burials on the Rhine frontier. Only single grave fields and smaller areas have been studied so far – in contrast to neighbouring regions where anterior studies tried at least to examine

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16   BECHERT 2007, 91.

chronological aspects.[17] Given the numbers of excavated Late Roman burials on the Rhine frontier – until present thousands of graves – this paper can only focus on some small but hopefully representative examples.

The Archaeological Evidence: A Case Study from the Upper Rhine

From the Upper Rhine region, a wide range of grave constructions from Late Antiquity is known: the simplest ones are inhumations without any wooden or stone covers. The bodies of the deceased were probably wrapped in shrouds, but these – like most forms of textiles – seldom survived.[18] The body was deposited in a grave

Fig. 2: Speyer, south-eastern grave field, tomb 1127.

pit together with grave goods that were placed either beside the head or behind the feet of the dead. Especially on the Lower Rhine, often a separate niche was added to the grave pit that received the grave goods.[19] In some cases, traces of wooden coffins were recorded, but their use is archaeologically often hard to trace. The next more elaborate examples of graves are those with installations. The grave pit contained a construction made out of slabs or large tiles; usually reused building material (Fig. 2).

17 A good example for the province of *Raetia Secunda* provides KELLER 1971.
18 The only well-documented examples come from the necropolis of St. Maximin in Trier (REIFAHRT 2013); cfr. also the contribution MERTEN in this volume.
19 LINSCHEID 2018, 109. The first niches occur already during the 2nd and 3rd c. AD (Fischer 2001, 197).

Very common were brick plate graves where the tiles formed a triangular roof over the body of the deceased. These grave constructions can be found in large numbers in every part of the Late Roman Empire and even beyond and have a long tradition. The most expensive container for the dead were stone sarcophagi, especially in areas without stone deposits like the Lower Rhine region. Here, some of the sarcophagi were made from imported limestone that could be shipped via the rivers Moselle and Rhine from quarries in Lorraine, but the majority came from the tuff layers of the Volcanic Eifel. On the Upper Rhine, local bunter was predominately used. Most sarcophagi were only roughly worked; examples with relief sculpture are rare und were usually found around Trier and Köln and only few in rural areas. Stone sarcophagi seem to have been reused often in both Late Roman and Early Medieval times. Their appearance is not limited to urban necropoleis; they can also be found especially in burial grounds of large *villae*. Despite the huge quantity of archaeological data that comes from the underground grave structures, little is known about grave markers above ground.[20] Tombstones with inscriptions continued to be erected in the 4th to 7th c. AD, but in much lower quantities compared to the previous centuries. Apart from Trier where over 1 300 – mostly Christian – grave inscriptions are known, most towns contribute no more than a dozen.[21] Again, with the exception of Trier, no tombstone or grave slab was found *in situ*. In some cases traces of wear point towards a horizontal positioning over a burial or an upright position at a front end position.[22] Other grave markers like wooden posts or enclosures have hitherto not been observed. Still, an above ground marker must have existed in many cases, since graves in the larger necropoleis seldomly overlap. Late Antique mausolea are only know from *Colonia/*Cologne and Trier. Most notable is the huge domed building with conchs, an attached peristyle court and golden mosaics that was built on the northwestern grave field outside Cologne on the site of the later church of St. Gereon. Originally thought to have been a Late Antique sanctuary housing the relics of the martyrs of the Theban Legion, later studies have shown that the building from the last quarter of the 4th c. AD was a monumental mausoleum that can be compared to Imperial sepulchres in Rome.[23] Unfortunately, neither archaeological nor historical sources provide evidence about who commissioned this extraordinary monument. In Trier, a few chamber tombs are known, some of them with painted walls and vaults.[24]

With one exception discussed below, all information about burial practices comes from the graves themselves, especially from the grave goods. Thus, the following few examples of burials from the 4th to the 6th c. AD will be presented,

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20   Cfr. the contribution Osnabrügge in this volume.
21   Ristow 2007, 270–274; cfr. the contributions Merten and Osnabrügge in this volume.
22   Cfr. the contribution Osnabrügge in this volume.
23   Verstegen 2006.
24   Faust 1998; Siedow 2020. On Late Antique barrel-vaulted tombs cfr. the contributions Ardeleanu, Ott and Valeva in this volume.

beginning with the Upper Rhine region: numerous Late Antique burial sites are known from the urban centres of *Nemetae*/Speyer and *Borbetomagus*/Worms as well as from the various rural regions of the Palatinate. In the countryside, *villae* still in use in the 4th and 5th c. AD had at least one burial place which could be of varying size. The larger and smaller *vici* also contained necropoleis that were used – similar to those in the cities – often from the beginning of the 1st c. AD and continued until the end of Antiquity, sometimes even beyond. From the surroundings of Late Roman hilltop settlements also grave fields are known, where the occupation usually began at the same time as in the settlement. The extensive material findings from the several thousand known graves of Late Antiquity from the Palatinate provides comprehensive insights into burial practices of that time. It is striking that in the Palatinate, as in almost all border regions on the Rhine and Danube, there are many particularly richly furnished graves.

As an example for the rural area, three Late Antique burial sites are briefly presented here: The first example comes from Wachenheim (northwest of Speyer), where a large *villa* and its associated burial grounds were partially excavated. The *villa* itself was founded at the beginning of the 1st c. AD and remained in use without any destructions but with several rebuilding phases until Late Roman times.[25] Only in the 5th c. AD, the main building was destroyed by a fire but the *villa* was further used until the end of the 5th c. AD, which is quite exceptional on the Rhine frontier, where most *villae* seem to have been abandoned in the middle of the century at the latest. Only a few decades later, an Early Medieval settlement together with a row grave cemetery was founded nearby. The burial ground lay about 300 m south of the *villa* and was only partially excavated. It was in use from the 1st c. AD onwards and up to the end of the 3rd c. AD, only cremation burials existed. Inhumation graves appeared from around AD 300 onwards. The Late Antique burials are comparatively wealthy, with many stone sarcophagi. Grave goods deposited on or beside the sarcophagi and wooden coffins usually contain sets of pots and bowls or plates and jugs. Precious glass vessels also appear (usually individually) in a number of graves. The personal belongings of the dead sometimes include an iron knife, rarely hairpins and bronze necklaces or bracelets and in one case a three-layer bone comb. Exceptional are the 'military belt fittings' and a richly decorated glass goblet in tomb 63, which belongs to the first half of the 5th c. AD (Fig. 3).

Additionally, the grave yielded a set of ceramics (three bowls and a jug) and a small knife. These grave goods were found outside a bunter sarcophagus with a presumably male deceased (the bone material was nearly decomposed). The current interpretation of the grave goods emphasizes only on its ethnical character: due to the 'military belt fittings' and the glass goblet with its 'Frankish' form, the deceased is supposed to have been an individual of 'Germanic' origin.[26] While the

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25 BERNHARD 2012.
26 BERNHARD 2005, 143.

Fig. 3: Wachenheim, tomb 63.

ethnic nature of these two objects is debatable, the approach doesn't take into account the fact that the set of ceramics appears to be very 'Roman'. These sets can be found in most of the graves in the Wachenheim burial ground, as the example of tomb 21 shows (Fig. 4).

Here, the other objects from the grave (a necklace with glass beads, a spindle whorl and two bone needles) point toward a female burial but nothing indicates her ethnical origins. The Late Antique 'military belt fittings' in tomb 63 are interpreted as indicating a 'Germanic' warrior, since the man appears to have been former soldier and only soldiers of 'Germanic' origin would have been accompanied by such military insignia in their graves. Yet the belt-buckle and belt-fittings that are usually thought to have been manufactured in Roman state *fabricae* as equipment for the Late Roman army do not identify the individual in tomb 63 as a soldier, since the precise use and dispersion of these objects is entirely unknown (they were also worn by other individuals than military officials). In this special case, they are treated as substitute for a weapon that would usually belong to a 5th c. AD-'warrior grave'. The glass goblet certainly shows a form which belongs to the later 5th c. AD, albeit not a 'Frankish' one. Indeed, the combination of a ceramic jar and a drinking vessel made from glass is very typical for Late Antiquity and does not express an ethnical identity – none of the grave goods presented here does. A similar interpretation of tomb 18 is even less convincing: here the assumed 'Germanic' character of the deceased rests entirely on the presence of a glass bowl type Helle, dating to the last third of the 5th. c. AD.[27] This vessel type was first recorded in Helle (Lower Sax-

27 On the use of glass within Late Antique burial practices cfr. the contributions ARDEL-
    EANU, BIANCHI and OTT in this volume.

Fig. 4: Wachenheim, tomb 21.

ony), which is outside the former Roman Empire, hence coming from a 'Germanic' origin. But most of the later found examples come from the Rhine frontier. All other grave goods (a plate and two bowls) were manufactured within the Empire. They were deposited all together in a niche beside the sarcophagus – again a very common practice along the Rhine. All Late Roman burials at Wachenheim show great similarities in terms of grave construction and grave goods and present a striking example for long-lived traditions that go far into the second half of the 5th c. AD. Yet they are commonly seen as evidence for a population shift that is thought to have taken place in many parts of the hinterland of the Rhine frontier during the 4th and 5th c. AD.[28] The reason for this lies both in the excessive focus on ethnic interpretation and in the over-interpretation of scanty historical sources. According to them, the Palatinate was hit by at least four Barbaric invasions (AD 275/276, 351–355, 406/407 and 451) that devastated the entire frontier zone and killed most of its inhabitants.[29] A continued settlement in *villae* and *vici* therefore required a new population that came from lands beyond the frontier. Beside the fact that the historical sources provide little evidence for this narrative, archaeological traces for widespread destructions are lacking in most cases.[30] In the case of Wachenheim, the *villa* shows traces of a fire that damaged most buildings in the first half of the 5th c. AD, but the site was not abandoned before the turn of the century. In the last occupation phase, the main building was no longer in use as a living space. In its vicinity, two pit houses (Grubenhäuser) were erected that contained sherds of

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28 BERNHARD 2020, 74.
29 WITSCHEL 2020.
30 PRIEN 2013.

handmade pottery and pieces of a torque (Ösenhalsring). These objects were also classified as 'Germanic', despite the fact that both the ceramics and the torque are well-known finds in the Rhine frontier region.[31] The old burial ground in the south was also no longer in use. Instead, a small grave field with 13 inhumation burials developed close to a farm building. All but one were without any grave goods or small objects, only tomb 11 contained a steep glass beaker, a knife and two pots, which date to the late 5th c. AD. While the objects from the pit houses may signal a changing material culture of the inhabitants of the *villa*, the burials contradict this evidence: unfurnished burials are abundant in the late 5th c. AD and the grave goods from tomb 11 still show the presence of older traditions. To put it in a nutshell, the study of burials from the Wachenheim *villa* shows a remarkable continuity of burial customs over more than 400 years despite alleged population shifts and religious changes.

In Gönnheim, only a few kilometres away from Wachenheim, a cemetery with 132 inhumation and cremation graves was excavated that belongs to a hitherto unlocated *villa*. The oldest burials date back to the first half of the 3rd c. AD and were all located in the east of the excavated area, to which the inhumation graves from the time after AD 300 adjoined to the west. Even further to the west were burials of the 4th and 5th c. AD suggesting that the neighbouring *villa* was in use well into the second third of the 5th c. AD.[32] The Gönnheim necropolis provides a high number of excellent examples for Late Antique burial customs on the Upper Rhine Area. Approximately a tenth of the deceased were buried in stone sarcophagi. A high percentage of the tombs contained glass and fine ceramics such as terra sigillata from the Argonne and terra nigra. Among the glass vessels were also very expensive products such as drinking horns and jugs and in two cases, the dead were buried with 'military belt fittings'. Surprisingly, there is a small number of cremations among the burials from the late 4th and 5th c. AD. Tomb 8 (Fig. 5) was furnished with a sarcophagus which contained two bowls, a small jar, a glass beaker, a lamp and a bronze bracelet and it belongs to the early 5th c. AD.

Tomb 30 (Fig. 6) dates roughly from the same time. Here, both beaker and jar are glass vessels, accompanied by a terra sigillata bowl and a plate together with a torques (Ösenhalsring), which again led to the conclusion by the excavator that the deceased must have been of 'Germanic' origin.[33]

But these torques made from bronze wire are quite abundant in burials from the Palatinate. The grave goods from tomb 41 (Fig. 7) belong to a cremation burial from the late 4th c. AD and illustrate that they do not differ much from what is found together with inhumation burials: once again, a drinking vessel, a jug and a small knife that was deposited together with the cremated bones in an amphora.

31 Bernhard 2005, 141.
32 Bernhard 2003.
33 Bernhard 2003, 150.

Fig. 5: Gönnheim, tomb 8.

Fig. 6: Gönnheim, tomb 30.

Although not the entire necropolis in Gönnheim was excavated, traces of a double ditch were found on two sides that presumably enclosed the burial ground. Unfortunately, no structures above ground could be recorded.

The third example for rural cemeteries comes from a different kind of sites: hilltop settlements are very common und distinctive Late Antique features within the settlement landscape not only in the frontier regions but also in most areas of the Roman Empire and beyond. In the Palatine, the site 'Großer Berg' near Kindsbach (district of Kaiserslautern) provides an example where both the settlement and the associated necropolis where nearly completely excavated.[34] The almost 100 graves at the foot of the mountain are particularly striking because they are all crema-

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34 Bernhard 1987; Bernhard 2001.

tions, a rare phenomenon in the 4th c. AD. However, the unburnt grave goods from these burials hardly differ from those of the two previous examples. Also at this site, ceramic vessels are dominant (rather a larger pot than an urn, supplemented by small jugs or bowls) and occasionally, a glass vessel or tools in the form of knives can be found. While the 'military belt fittings' are missing, at least two of the graves yielded torques (Ösenhalsringe). These objects are associated with the presence of a 'Germanic' population in the settlement, since the oldest known objects of this type come from areas beyond the Rhine frontier.

In the present case, the cremation burial rite was also interpreted as 'Germanic' and thus the 'immigrants' buried here are said to have come from areas outside the Empire. Again, this ethnic interpretation of individual grave goods or of a whole burial is difficult in several respects: it presupposes that the relatives were concerned at the time of burial about consciously emphasizing the 'otherness' of the deceased. However, if this was indeed the case, it must have been a hard task to achieve, since apart from a few objects and the cremation rite the entire grave furnishing is identical to other contemporary burials from rural and urban contexts. The often-cited torques may have been a kind of status symbol, but not for a 'Germanic immigrant' – their widespread distribution in the border provinces of the Roman Empire rather suggests that they played a role within the 'border society' in Late Antiquity.

Fig. 7: Gönnheim, tomb 41.

Fig. 8: Speyer, south-eastern grave field, tomb 9/2010.

In addition to the rural necropoleis, urban burial places of Late Antiquity in the Palatinate have also been studied in recent times: hundreds of graves have been recorded in both Worms and Speyer.[35] Overall, it can be said that the graves in urban environments are often even more elaborately furnished than their counterparts in the countryside. Thus, precious glass vessels appear in much higher numbers and stone sarcophagi are also found much more frequently. Speyer also offers a good overview of the spatial development of the burial grounds around the city: at the beginning of Late Antiquity, a large cemetery existed in the west of the city.[36] It was partially used up to the 5th c. AD. In the 4th c. AD, various new burial sites developed in the north and at different locations in the west and south, including small groups of graves along the main road that led to the west. Finally, in the second half of the 4th c. AD, a large new cemetery evolved southeast of the now fortified town, which is the subject of recent excavations.[37] So far, this burial place is exceptional since nearly all of its hundreds of inhumations received no grave goods at all. Yet this place was certainly not the final resting place of a population in poverty as can be demonstrated by the numerous bunter sarcophagi that come from this site.

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35 For Worms see Grünewald 2006. The burials from Speyer remain largely unpublished until present.

36 Prien 2018, 90.

37 Nashan 2018.

The only furnished grave is tomb 9/2010 (Fig. 8), where a man in his thirties was buried in the middle of the 5th c. AD.

He was buried in a simple pit, but received some grave goods, among them three dices and a handmade pot. On his body, he wore a 'military belt' with its fitting, sandals, a bronze fibula and a small knife. In this case, both the type of pot and the fibula are objects that probably came from outside of the Roman sphere and the absence of any further ceramic or glass vessels stands in stark contrast to other furnished graves in the Palatinate. These dissimilarities may not suffice to declare the deceased a military officer of 'Germanic' origins, but it highlights the fact that this man was buried according to different burial customs. While this grave stands out among others in the southeastern grave field, a late 4th c. AD burial from the western cemetery shows some similarities: tomb 17 yielded another adult man in a wooden coffin with two belt buckles (one probably showing a bust of an emperor), a crossbow brooch, five bronze coins, a finger ring, a knife and a glass vessel (Fig. 9).

Again, the personal items of the deceased may hint at a high status as state official, which was displayed through these objects. Tomb 110 is from the same cemetery, the burial of an adult woman in a stone sarcophagus. She was buried in the second half of the 4th c. AD together with a terra nigra beaker, two glass flasks, a small *balsamarium* and a necklace of glass beads. This combination of grave goods is quite abundant in urban necropoleis, where numerous glass vessels were uncovered. A striking example for this is provided by the burials that were already excavated in the 19th c. in the western cemetery of Speyer: in 1867, two undated stone

Fig. 9: Speyer, western grave field, tomb 17.

Fig. 10: Speyer, two richly furnished sarcophagi from the western grave field.

sarcophagi were discovered that together yielded sixteen glass vessels, among them six jugs with a volume of three litres each (Fig. 10).

Each tomb was equipped with at least two drinking bowls, two jars and two or more of the afore-mentioned jugs. The archaeological significance of these burials is even higher since one of the glass jars is still filled with conserved wine – it is indeed the oldest wine that survived from Antiquity in Europe. It allows speculating that the contents of most glass vessels in Roman burials were similar and thus quite expensive. Drinking vessels remained an important part of grave furnishings in Merovingian times, where the presence of glass is also usually interpreted as a sign of wealth and high status of the deceased.[38] The Late Roman burial grounds of Speyer ceased to be used – unlike many other urban necropoleis along the Rhine – throughout the 5th c. AD. Only from the southeastern cemetery, Merovingian burials are known.

Grave Goods and Burial Rites

As mentioned above, Late Antique burials from the Rhine frontier have until now only been studied in terms of chronology, social hierarchies, ethnic and to some degree religious identities. Unfortunately, there is no recent discussion about actual

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38 Koch 1998.

burial rites, which usually encompasses much more than just the way in which the deceased was buried. Some of the steps in the process of a burial that are conveyed by written sources are hard or even impossible to detect in the archaeological material. Lamentation of the dead, public mourning and laying-out usually took place in the houses of the living and required no special architecturally designed place. The deposition of the deceased in a tomb is usually the only archaeological evidence present, but from this, we can only sparsely tell which rites were conducted at the funeral or in the course of the remembrance of the dead. There is only one exception: funerary meals that were held at certain times in the year at or near to the grave. These meals held a long tradition in Roman funerary customs and were no distinctive 'pagan' feature, but also celebrated by Christians in Late Antiquity.[39] One reason for the continuity of this important ritual might have been its exclusive connection to funerary rites, while there was no direct link to church religions. The Bible itself offers no regulation to Christians regarding the handling of funerals, so feasting and libation at the grave was probably more a cultural trait than a religious one. From the catacombs in Rome, architectural features like benches and tables for meals or even cooking facilities are known.[40] From Late Antiquity, similar installations on closed burial spaces are known from various parts of the Roman Empire, sometimes – as in North Africa or Spain – even holding inscriptions that explain their functions.[41] Unfortunately, such features are unknown at the Rhine frontier at large. The only three exceptions here are marked by so-called *cellae memoriae* from *Tricensimae*/Xanten on the Lower Rhine, *Bonna*/Bonn and *Gelduba*/Krefeld-Gellep. Beneath the present collegiate church of St. Victor in Xanten, pre-war excavations uncovered a Late Roman and Early Medieval burial place. Two graves were overbuilt by with *cellae* (small rectangular stone buildings) in the second half of the 4th c. AD. One of them (*cella* A) was furnished with a stone slabthat served as *mensa* (table).[42] The most prominent example was discovered beneath the collegiate church of St. Cassius et Florentius in Bonn, where a rectangular *cella* with circular benches and a masoned *mensa* that had terra sigillata bowls inserted in its surface was found. The structure was erected in the second half of the 4th c. AD and dismantled only a generation later. The excavator interpreted the *cella memoriae* as distinct early Christian feature, but this view is no longer valid.[43] According to older interpretations, the *cella* was the nucleus of an evolving pilgrim site where the relics of two martyrs from the Theban Legion were worshipped and where already in the early 5th c. AD a church was erected. However, recent evaluations of the old ex-

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39 VOLP 2002, 216; cfr. the contributions ARBEITER, ARDELEANU, MERTEN, OTT and VALEVA in this volume.

40 SCHNEIDER 1927; FÉVRIER 1978.

41 Cfr. several discussed examples in the contributions ARBEITER and ARDELEANU in this volume.

42 For the excavations, see OTTEN 2003.

43 RISTOW 2007, 156.

cavations indicated that this building that housed a number of Early Medieval burials belongs to the 6th c. AD.[44] Another possible *cella memoriae* comes from *Gelduba*/Krefeld-Gellep.[45] Apart from these few examples of architecture designed for commemorative funerary meals, no other archaeological aboveground structures that can be related to funerary rites are known. Still, the finds from the graves presented above strongly suggest that these traditions were widespread along the Late Roman Rhine frontier. In almost every case, the grave goods encompass a drinking vessel and another container for liquids. Very common were also plates and cups that were used in the course of a meal. The presence of liquids such as wine is usually not attested and most of the food that was deposited in the graves left little recordable archaeological traces, but the ceramics usually point toward a desire to equip the deceased with drink and meal. Unlike in Old Egypt, written sources that tell about Roman funerary customs and in general about the afterlife imply that this aliment was not a necessity for the dead in the afterworld.[46] Instead, the grave goods were deposited in order to enable the dead to take part in the funerary meals. The abundance of distinctive sets of vessels in burials show that funerary meals were a very common custom in the northwestern provinces of the Late Roman Empire.

Christian and Pagan Burials

For a long time, it was assumed that the absence of grave goods in Late Roman graves especially from the 5th c. AD was a sign for Christian burials. This view was already called into question when burials with grave goods such as glass and ceramics vessels or ever jewellery that display Christian symbols and motives were encountered. Today there is a consensus that grave goods can tell us little about the religious identity of the deceased. As demonstrated above, it helps us to understand whether rites such as funerary meals were practiced in some communities or not, but this again gives no evidence for religious affiliations. The situation is further complicated by the fact that Pagans and Christians usually used no separate places for burials. Well into the 6th c. AD, both groups buried their dead together. Along the Rhine frontier and in its hinterland, no exclusively Christian burial places such as spots near to *momoriae* for early martyrs existed neither. Only in Trier, two prestigious burial places near the resting places of the first bishops may have existed. Another reason for the absence of a Christian *coemeterium* in other towns is a lack of Early Christian martyrs along the Rhine. No martyr from the 2nd to the 4th c. AD is attested by contemporary sources in the region. The cult of the martyrs from the so-called Theban Legion that originally was connected to *Octodurum*/Martigny in

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44   KELLER/MÜSSEMEIER 2001, 290–292.
45   REICHMANN 2009.
46   VOLP 2002, 198.

modern Switzerland is an 'innovation' from Merovingian times, when the serious shortage of martyrs in the east of the Frankish Empire had to be compensated with the creation of new members of the Legion that met their faith further north in places like Bonn, Cologne and Xanten.[47]

Conclusion

In summary, many aspects of Late Antique burial rites on the Rhine frontier are still open for study. Further research in this area requires a wider scope of methods and approaches. Until present archaeological material from graves has predominantly been studied in terms of chronology and ethnic, religious and social identities. While distinctions between 'native Romans' and 'barbarian immigrants' have been called into question, little effort has been made to focus on archaeological traces of actual burial rites and their development through the times. This brief overview can only highlight few phenomena like the numerous presence of drinking vessels in Late Antique burials and a very small number of *cellae memoriae* along the Lower Rhine that probably served as places for commemorative meals for the deceased. A research focused on burial rites will require overstepping current boundaries and the abandonment of some much-loved theories.

The first step in this direction is to abandon 'traditional' questions about ethnic and religious affiliations since it turned out that this approach in research is a dead end. Instead, comparative studies that also include regions far away from the Rhine may provide new and surprising insights on the uniformity of Late Antique funerary landscapes. For the northwestern provinces, it also requires overstepping the boundaries between Provincial Roman and Merovingian archaeology, since burial rites obviously did not change together with the collapse of the Roman political order but rather evolved homogeneously into Early Medieval times. This step was not taken in this paper since it requires much further studies, but the present volume may be a valuable tool for such an undertaking.

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47   PRIEN 2012, 29.

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