The significance of Early Neolithic settlement burials: a case study from Central Germany

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ABSTRACT - Early Neolithic Settlement burials in Central Europe have long been treated as an irregularity and thus sparked discussions about perceptions of social deviancy. In recent years, the highly increased number of documented settlement burials suggests that they constituted an integral part of a more complex system of burial practices, which precludes a dichotomous division into ‘regular’ and ‘irregular’ burials. Based on the characteristics of a series of interments in the Central German settlement Niederröblingen, this study aims to determine the probabilities of individual agency within a framework of collective rules in the early Neolithic Linearbandkeramik culture.

KEY WORDS – Linear pottery culture; burial customs; settlement burials; settlement archaeology; Neolithic; irregularity

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Pomen zgodnjeneolitskih grobov v naselbinah: študija primera iz Srednje Nemčije

IZVLEČEK – Zgodnjeneolitski pokopi v naselbinah v srednji Evropi so bili dolgo obravnavani kot anomaške in so zato sprožili razprave o percepcijah družbene deviantnosti. Povečano število dokumentiranih pokopov v naselbinah v zadnjih letih kaže, da predstavljajo sestavni del kompleksnega sistema pogrebnih običajev, ki preprečuje dihotomno delitev na ‘prave’ in ‘neprave’ pokope. S pomočjo niza značilnih pokopov v osrednjemški naselbini Niederröblingen želimo v študiji določiti verjetnost individualnega delovanja v okviru pravil skupnosti kulture Linearno trakaste keramike v zgodnjem neolitiku.

KLJUČNE BESEDJE – kultura Linearno trakaste keramike; pokopne prakse; pokopi v naselbinah; naselbina arheologija; neolitik; nepravilnosti

Aim of this study

Hardly any aspect of human existence seems to transcend both the private and the collective spheres of a society as much as the death of one of its members. From the perspective of most modern cultures, few acts are more personal than dealing with grief and loss, and yet a multitude of social requirements and taboos determines the adequate actions connected to burial practices. This is by no means a recent development, but can instead be traced back through the customs of many archaeological cultures. Burials within settlements as a phenomenon of early sedentary cultures are especially intriguing from a modern point of view, due to the seemingly fluent transition of the domains of the living and the dead, which are usually kept distinctly separate in modern societies.

This study aims to determine the probabilities of individual agency within a framework of collective rules.
regulating the burial customs in the early Neolithic Linearbandkeramik culture in Central Europe. Taking the characteristics of a series of interments deposited within the settlement of Niederröblingen in Central Germany as a starting point, a broader examination of the differences between this type of burial and the graves in contemporary cemeteries is conducted. A central aim of the paper is to ascertain why certain individuals were interred apart from cemeteries in general, and specifically why they were deposited within the settlements, a domain one would assume to be reserved for everyday life. By analysing rites, grave goods and anthropological data, the question is examined as to whether certain subsets of people were treated differently as a rule or if the choice concerning the location of burial was based on uniquely individual decisions. In this context, the oft-applied dichotomous division into ‘regular’ and ‘irregular’ burials is assessed anew.

The Linearbandkeramik culture (LBK)

As the first Neolithic culture in many parts of Europe, the Linearbandkeramik (translating to Linear pottery culture) has been extensively studied since the late 19th century. Approximately dating from 5600 to 4900 BC (Coudart 2015:309; Jakucs et al. 2016:323), it has been named for the eponymous decorations on its characteristic pottery vessels. The culture occupies a key position within the research into early Neolithic life-ways in Europe, as it saw a dramatic change in many areas of daily life, including the transition from a mobile to a sedentary lifestyle, as well as a shift within the strategies of subsistence from a foraging to an agricultural society. At the height of its distribution, settlements containing the characteristic longhouses could be found from the Paris Basin in the west to Western Ukraine in the east, and from the Northern German Plain in the north to the Carpathian Basin in the south (Bickle 2013:151; Coudart 2015:310f; Stäuble 2010:25). While occasionally showing signs of regional variation, the majority of architectural features as well as objects of daily use display a surprising uniformity over the vast area of distribution, allowing for the designation as a single archaeological culture.

The Niederröblingen site

The Niederröblingen site is located within the eponymous incorporated community belonging to the city of Allstedt in the district of Mansfeld-Südharz...
in the southern part of the German federal state of Sachsen-Anhalt (Fig. 1). The surrounding natural area is formed by the Goldene Aue\(^1\) valley, which, thanks to its outstanding natural conditions, offered an ideal location for an extensive Linearbandkeramik settlement and also saw frequent use by subsequent cultures. The site apparently experienced the most intensive settlement activity in the regional phases LBK II to LBK IV, which approximately date from 5300 to 4850 BC (Schwarz 2021.54). In between the houses and other settlement structures, a total of 29 contemporaneous inhumations could be identified (Fig. 2; Tab. 1) (Stolle 2021.7).

The exceptionally high number of settlement burials allows for systematic comparisons concerning the burial rites of that time. In the vast majority of contemporaneous sites, interments were only documented in small numbers, if at all. Furthermore, the level of preservation of the majority of features was extremely favourable. In most settlements, it was impossible to ascertain the temporal relation between houses and human remains, due to the absence of clear stratigraphical relations. Although, due to the high density of local features, most of the skeletons in Niederröblingen were inevitably situated spatially close to the houses, the site lacked clear evidence of temporal relations between buildings and interments\(^2\). However, the proven continuous and long-term usage of the settlement helps to clarify the concurrency of houses and burials. The earliest features at the site could be radiocarbon-dated to around 5300 BC, relating to the regional Phase LBK II, while a complex stratigraphic sequence in the southern section of the excavated area implies continuous settlement activity ending concurrently with the final phase of the Stichbandkeramik culture (Eng. Stroke-ornamented ware culture), which regionally followed the Linearbandkeramik. Afterwards, usage of the site seems to have been discontinued until the late Neolithic (Lubos et al. 2011.51–52).

The majority of the investigated burials, none of which was dated earlier than 5300 BC, were found in the southern section of the site as well, implying the simultaneity of houses and burials in this area. Even in the other parts of the site, the buildings can be dated to the whole array of locally represented phases of the culture, as is evidenced by radiocarbon dating as well as characteristic architectural features and a con-

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1 This roughly translates to ‘golden meadow’, referring to the favourable natural conditions of the environs.
2 Two burials (NRB 2 and 3) that seemed to be located within the floor plan of a house are most likely the product of unintentional subsequent overlays.
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Burial location and grave construction

Niederröblingen

Approximately one third of the documented inhumations were deposited in refuse pits, while the remaining features might very well have been deliberately constructed as grave pits, since they were devoid of waste and their dimensions roughly corresponded to those of the skeletons. While no indications of wooden or lithic constructions within the graves could be documented, a young child’s burial (NRB 20) was surrounded by a narrow circular ditch with an outside diameter of almost three metres and an opening in the northwestern section (Fig. 3). While the exact function of this structure could not be determined, its uniqueness sets the grave construction apart from the remainder of local burials.

Settlement burials in Niederröblingen in the context of contemporaneous burial rites

Hereinafter, the attributes of the burials documented in Niederröblingen will be discussed and subsequently contextualized within the framework of contemporaneous burial rites, both in other settlements and on graveyards. Apart from general observations of differences relating to the burial location, the two cemeteries of Sondershausen and Bruchstedt, which are located about 30km and 45km southwest of Niederröblingen, respectively, were used for a more case-specific comparison, due to their relative proximity to Niederröblingen.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Burial</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Orientation</th>
<th>Dir. of View</th>
<th>Burial Goods</th>
<th>H⁸C-Date (2σ)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NRB 1</td>
<td>infants II</td>
<td>grave pit?</td>
<td>crouched, left side</td>
<td>NE-SW</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>CRJ, R, SGJ</td>
<td>calBC 5207–4940</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRB 2</td>
<td>adult or older</td>
<td>refuse pit</td>
<td>stretched, prone</td>
<td>E-W</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>FT, P, R</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRB 3</td>
<td>juvenil or older</td>
<td>refuse pit</td>
<td>stretched, prone</td>
<td>SW-NE</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRB 4</td>
<td>adult or older</td>
<td>grave pit?</td>
<td>stretched, prone</td>
<td>NW-SE</td>
<td>NE</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>calBC 5284–5046</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRB 5</td>
<td>juvenil</td>
<td>grave pit?</td>
<td>crouched, left side</td>
<td>E-W</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>calBC 5225–5000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRB 6</td>
<td>juvenil</td>
<td>grave pit?</td>
<td>stretched, prone</td>
<td>NE-SW</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>calBC 5319–5080</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRB 7</td>
<td>infants (2?)</td>
<td>grave pit?</td>
<td>SE-NW</td>
<td>ABJ, P</td>
<td>calBC 5218–5020</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRB 8</td>
<td>infants</td>
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<td>crouched, left side</td>
<td>NW-SE</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>P (2x)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRB 9</td>
<td>adult</td>
<td>refuse pit</td>
<td>crouched, left side</td>
<td>NE-SW</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>calBC 4934–4745</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRB 10</td>
<td>infants II</td>
<td>refuse pit</td>
<td>crouched, supine</td>
<td>NE-SW</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>calBC 5207–4858</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRB 11</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>crouched, right side</td>
<td>NW-SE</td>
<td>SW</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>calBC 4934–4745</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRB 12</td>
<td>adult or matur female</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>crouched, left side</td>
<td>NE-SW</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>S, R</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRB 13a</td>
<td>adult or older female</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>crouched, right side</td>
<td>NW-NE</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>calBC 5211–4987</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRB 13b</td>
<td>infants I</td>
<td>refuse pit</td>
<td>crouched, left side?</td>
<td>SE-NW?</td>
<td>SW?</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>calBC 5219–4997</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRB 14</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>crouched, left side</td>
<td>S-N</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>S, R</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRB 15</td>
<td>adult or matur female</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>crouched, left side</td>
<td>NE-SW</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>CRJ, SGJ (2x)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRB 16a</td>
<td>adult</td>
<td>refuse pit</td>
<td>stretched, prone</td>
<td>E-W</td>
<td>downwards</td>
<td>calBC 5211–4987</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRB 16b</td>
<td>infants I</td>
<td>refuse pit</td>
<td>stretched, prone</td>
<td>E-W</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>calBC 5219–4997</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRB 16c</td>
<td>infants I</td>
<td>refuse pit</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>calBC 5219–4997</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRB 17</td>
<td>infants</td>
<td>grave pit?</td>
<td>crouched, right side</td>
<td>SE-NW</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>calBC 5217–5007</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRB 18</td>
<td>juvenil</td>
<td>grave pit?</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>AB, P</td>
<td>calBC 5215–5018</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRB 19</td>
<td>juvenil female</td>
<td>grave pit?</td>
<td>crouched, supine</td>
<td>NE-SW</td>
<td>AB, HT, P, S, SGJ</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRB 20</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>crouched, right side</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>AB, HT, ET, SGJ</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRB 21</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>crouched, left side</td>
<td>NW-SE</td>
<td>NE</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>calBC 5291–5053</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRB 22</td>
<td>infants II</td>
<td>grave pit?</td>
<td>crouched, left side</td>
<td>NW-SE</td>
<td>NE</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>calBC 5291–5053</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRB 23</td>
<td>infants I</td>
<td>grave pit?</td>
<td>crouched, left side</td>
<td>NW-SE</td>
<td>NE</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>calBC 5291–5053</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRB 24</td>
<td>adult female</td>
<td>grave pit?</td>
<td>crouched, prone</td>
<td>W-E</td>
<td>downwards</td>
<td>QS</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRB 25</td>
<td>adult</td>
<td>grave pit?</td>
<td>crouched, left side</td>
<td>NW-SE</td>
<td>NE?</td>
<td>AB</td>
<td>calBC 5298–5062</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRB 26</td>
<td>adult or older</td>
<td>refuse pit</td>
<td>crouched, left side</td>
<td>NE-SW</td>
<td>SW</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>calBC 4999–4841</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tab. 1. Overview of settlement burials from Niederröblingen (abbreviations for grave goods: AB animal bone; ABJ animal bone jewellery; ATJ animal tooth jewellery; CRJ Columbella rustica jewellery; FT flint tool; HT horn tool; P pottery vessels; QS quernstone; R red ochre fragment; S shell; SGJ Spondylus Gaederopus jewellery).
low proportion of interments in settlement pits is concerned. As a rule, grave pits within settlements seem to have been constructed more shallowly than those in the cemeteries, a fact which could be observed in the Lower Bavarian site of Stephansposching, where both settlement burials and an extensive contemporaneous cemetery were documented (Pechtl, Hofmann 2013.12). Usually, there are no clear indications of additional receptacles serving as sarcophagi within the pits, neither on the cemeteries nor within the settlements (Siemoneit 1997.146; Veit 1996.94). The burial NRB 20 documented in Niederröblingen seems to be an exception in this respect, which is all the more unusual as the appearance of the circular ditch seems to suggest the former existence of a mound atop the grave, which is almost unheard of in the context of the early Central European Neolithic. A comparison can be drawn to the Ukrainian site of Nezvis’ko, where a richly furnished inhumation within a settlement showed traces of a grave architecture that was significantly more complex than usually is the case in Linearbandkeramik burials (Dębiec 2016). The Nezvis’ko grave is interpreted as the burial of a person with a high social status (Dębiec 2016.243).

In total, about a tenth of all Linearbandkeramik settlement burials were discovered in the longitudinal pits accompanying the houses, which can be found in the majority of contemporaneous sites (Trautmann 2006.63). These characteristic features were likely dug to obtain clay for the construction of the exterior walls of the houses and subsequently used as refuse pits. In Niederröblingen the situation was quite different and only dislocated human remains could be documented within these structures. Furthermore, the circumstances in these cases seem to suggest a mere disposal rather than a proper secondary burial. Interments with a recognizable spatial relationship to contemporaneous buildings are exceedingly rare (Trautmann 2006.63). In particular, individuals that have been found within houses seemed to either be victims of accidents, (e.g., in case of a fire during which the surrounding structure was destroyed) or more often than not the result of subsequent superpositions of features.

**Anthropological data**

**Niederröblingen**
The anthropological data from Niederröblingen did not allow for a single certain determination of the sex of any of the skeletons. Instead, a clear assessment of the age group was possible in most cases, and 25 of the individuals could roughly be classified as adults, adolescents, or children (Fig. 4).³ It is notable that non-adults (i.e. *infans* and *juvenis*) were featured in relatively high numbers, as their relation to adults was almost 2:1 (Stolle 2021.8).

**Comparison**
The age of the skeletons in Niederröblingen largely reflects the conditions within other Linearbandkeramik settlements, as both children and adolescents were usually represented in significantly higher numbers when compared to adults (Hedges et al. 2013.373; Pechtl, Hofmann 2013.129; Peter-Röcher 1997.62; Scott 1999.98; Siemoneit 1997.105). Conversely, on contemporaneous burial grounds chil-

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Children only made up around 20 to 30% of interments, with younger children up to the age of seven generally occurring significantly more rarely than older ones (Bickle, Fibiger 2014.216; Orschiedt 1998.69; Siemoneit 1997.17). The varying age distributions are evident in the Central German cemeteries of Sondershausen and Bruchstedt (Kahlke 2004.49, 105) (Fig. 5). Differing opinions exist as to whether the children’s burials from settlements compensate for the shortage in cemeteries to the extent that the actual mortality rates are reflected (Pechtl, Hofmann 2013.133; Peter-Röcher 1997.65), but there is a consensus that newborns and children under the age of one were generally strongly underrepresented (Pechtl, Hofmann 2013.131; Kahlke 2004.106; Peter-Röcher 1997.63). This observation could be confirmed in Niederröblingen, where no infants were documented at all. It would be conceivable, for example, that a completely different treatment took place for members of this age group, the traces of which are simply no longer tangible by archaeological means (Wilhelm-Schramm 2009.134).

Information on the sex of the skeletons tends to be scarcer as a rule. However, current data indicate that there was a roughly balanced relationship between the burials of men and women in both settlements and graveyards (Hedges et al. 2013.373).

**Form of burial, skeletal position and orientation**

**Niederröblingen**

With 24 of the 29 individuals, more than 80% were deposited as single inhumations, while two cases of multiple inhumations of adults and children within a single pit were documented. NRB 16 contained one adult and two small children, all of indeterminate sex, while NRB 13 contained one adult skeleton, likely female, and one small child. Nearly all the skeletons in Niederröblingen were deposited as primary burials, as can be determined by the fact that their bones were mostly still positioned within their anatomical context. However, the presence of isolated and dislocated human skeletal remains in at least ten contemporaneous refuse pits could possibly indicate the parallel existence of multi-stage burial rituals (Stolle 2021.8–9). In at least two cases the skeletons were found in almost their entirety, if completely dislocated, which could very well be the result of secondary burial processes. The determination of the other isolated remains is less straightforward. Due to their placement in refuse pits and the lack of any objects that could positively be identified as grave goods, these could very well be the result of an incidental disposal of bone remains, for example in the case of an accidental destruction of earlier graves during a subsequent construction process.

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4 This new data contradicts earlier studies suggesting a predominance of female skeletons within the settlements (cf. Peter-Röcher 1997.62; Scott 1999.98; Siemoneit 1997.109).
Among the 21 interments for which the arrangement of the body could be determined, crouched skeletons on their left side slightly dominated the picture, directly followed by those crouched on the right side and skeletons in a stretched prone position (Fig. 6). Two individuals were buried in a crouched supine position with their legs to the left. A single skeleton was interred in an unusual crouched prone position. Altogether, the variations were rather pronounced, with no clear preference for a single skeletal position (Stolle 2021.9).

Among the 24 individuals for which an orientation could be determined, the majority were placed with their head pointing northeast, directly followed by northwest and east (Fig. 7). West, southwest and southeast were represented with two burials each, while only one skeleton was oriented towards S-N. Similar to the skeletal positions, there seemed to be no single preferred orientation of the dead in Niederröblingen. Instead, 13 (54.2%) skeletons were found with heads roughly pointed to the east (with deviations to the northeast and southeast), and 11 (46.8%) were roughly oriented toward the west. Burials of children showed a higher variation compared to those of adults with respect to the orientation, while the crouched position on the left was more predominant among children than adults, whose posture varied more locally (Stolle 2021.9).

**Comparison**

As in Niederröblingen, the majority of contemporaneous settlement burials consisted of individual interments. Nevertheless, multiple burials tended to occur more frequently within the settlements than in cemeteries (Hofmann, Bickle 2011.188). It is noticeable that most of these cases involved either the mutual burial of children and adults or, to a lesser extent, joint interments of children (Bickle, Fibiger 2014.216; Siemoneit 1997.96). The former was also the case for both graves containing multiple individuals in Niederröblingen. In general, an actually simultaneous interment is nearly impossible to determine, and thus subsequent burials cannot be ruled out. The fact that both complete and dislocated skeletons occurred in some multiple burials (Pechtl, Hofmann 2013.126), such as in NRB 16 in Niederröblingen, seems at least to indicate multiple-phase burials. One possible scenario would be the subsequent reburial of an individual after the death of one of their relatives.

The complete absence of cremation burials in Niederröblingen is hardly surprising, as, to date, no con-
firmed traces of comparable burial rites are known from any *Linearbandkeramik* settlements (Pechtl, Hofmann 2013.129; Trautmann 2006.64). Among the inhumations, the left-sided crouched position prevailed both in settlements and cemeteries (Meyer et al. 2013.111; Wilhelm-Schramm 2009.127). Nevertheless, settlement burials tended to feature a higher number of deviating postures (Pechtl, Hofmann 2013.133; Veit 1996.183), which at least in some cases may be due to the fact that the position of the bodies was determined by the size and shape of pre-existing pits. On the whole, the right-sided crouched position was more common within settlements than on burial grounds, as were skeletons in a stretched or crouched supine position as well as prone burials (Hedges et al. 2013.374). On the cemetery of Sondershausen more than half of the dead were deposited in a left-sided crouched position, while in Bruchstedt almost three quarters of the inhumations were found in this posture amounted, attesting to the stronger representation of this position in burial grounds (Kahlke 2004. 52, 108; Peschel 1992.236) (Fig. 6). Conversely, the fact that only about two-fifths of the skeletons in Niederröblingen were arranged in a left-sided crouched posture corresponds to the generally only slight predominance of this posture within the settlements.

Contrary to subsequent Neolithic cultures in Europe, like the Bell beaker or Corded ware culture, no regular sexual dimorphism in either the position or alignment of the dead is known from the *Linearbandkeramik*. The rather inconsistent alignment of the skeletons in Niederröblingen is also reflected in the overall data of *Linearbandkeramik* settlement burials. The variance within the settlements was again significantly higher than it was in contemporaneous cemeteries (Pechtl, Hofmann 2013.124), where a general orientation to the east was usually predominant. In Sondershausen and Bruchstedt, the vast majority of skeletons were aligned with the head pointing northeast (Fig. 8) (Kahlke 2004.52, 108). By contrast, within the settlements preferences seemed to vary regionally or even locally, while the preponderance of a certain direction was usually much less distinct (Hedges et al. 2013.374).

**Grave goods**

**Niederröblingen**

A total of 14 of the 29 (48.3%) documented burials in Niederröblingen contained grave goods (Fig. 9). Four burials were clearly void of artefacts, while the remaining 11 skeletons were deposited in refuse pits, for which reason the objects found with the dead could not be positively identified as grave goods. Pottery vessels were most commonly found within the graves, having been found with 57% (n=8) of burials containing grave goods. Two graves were equipped with a cup (NRB 2, NRB 3) and a round-bottomed jar (a so-called *Kumpf*) (NRB 8, NRB 17), respectively, whereas NRB 8 also contained a bottle with eyelets, and thus was the only local burial containing two different vessels. All of the above were decorated in the characteristic *Linearbandkeramik* style. Second in number were animal bones - most likely the remains of pieces of meat – as well as ornaments made from *Spondylus gaederopus* shells, which were found in four graves (29%). NRB 1 contained an extensive ensemble of *Columbella rustica* shells, NRB 7 three polished tubular bones of a larger waterfowl, and NRB 20 five pieces of jewellery fashioned from pierced dog teeth. In most cases, the grave goods were placed close to the head, slightly less often in the pelvic area. Distinct differences in the furnishing of child and adult burials could not be determined (Stolle 2021.9–11).

Among the children and adolescents, exactly half of the interments (n=8) were supplied with clearly identifiable grave goods, while among the adults the percentage of furnished
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As a rule, it is exceedingly difficult to assess the importance of certain grave goods, especially since their symbolic value could either be connected to immaterial local traditions, to personal or ancestral significance, or otherwise be distinguished from the more clearly identifiable material value. Still, in some cases singular grave goods of a clear supra-regional importance could be recorded in Niederröblingen. One of these would be the assemblage of beads made from the shells of *Columbella rustica*, which only occurs in the Mediterranean Sea and Atlantic Ocean, therefore serving as evidence for the existence of established long-distance trade networks. Comparable objects made from this type of snail-shell are known from *Linearbandkeramik* sites in France, Switzerland and Southwestern Germany. Still, the burial from Niederröblingen is so far the only known case of such artefacts from Central Germany (Clasen, Müller 2011.214). The canine teeth serving as grave goods for the small child burial from NRB 20 are as of today almost unparalleled. A similar group of objects could be documented in the contemporaneous Slovakian cemetery at Nitra, where an adult male was equipped with the remains of a chain featuring pendants made from human and canine or vulpine teeth (Pavúk 1972.11). As a rule, jewellery made from animal teeth only regularly appears in the Central European Middle Neolithic (Fehlmann 2008.186). Even from an intra-site perspective, the child burial in NRB 20 shows signs of a higher-than-usual expenditure, as far as grave goods and construction are concerned, which opens up the question of the potential social importance of the individual within its group.
Within settlements, about half of both male and female burials were usually equipped with objects (Hedges et al. 2013,374). Considering the frequency of grave goods within Linearbandkeramik child burials in general, which tallies at about 69% in cemeteries and 51% within settlements (Bickle, Fibiger 2014,216, Tab. 2), it is evident that the numbers correspond almost exactly to the general frequency across all age groups, meaning that children were allotted grave goods about as often as adults. The major exception would be infant burials, whose graves less frequently, yet still in about half of the cases, contained objects. That notwithstanding, it seems somewhat unusual that all graves containing locally exclusive burial goods belong to children (NRB 1, NRB 7, NRB 20). Still, examples of child burials equipped with rare grave goods are not unheard of, and comparable cases are known from other contemporaneous sites (Siemonet 1997,145). One of these was recorded in the French site of Rixheim, Dep. Haut-Rhin, where a child of about 10 years of age was equipped with a necklace consisting of marble beads, otherwise rarely found in Linearbandkeramik graves (Storch 1984,48).

### On the concept of regularity among Linearbandkeramik burials

The decidedly vague concept of ‘irregular burials’ (Germ. Sonderbestattungen), which for a long time was used to gauge the social implications of certain interments perceived to be unusual, has been rightly criticized in more recent studies (cf. Hofmann 2009,220; Pechtl, Hofmann 2013,123 et pass.; Müller-Scheffel 2011,6; Wilhelm-Schrann 2009, 128). Despite the fact that there are plenty of documented Linearbandkeramik graves, the extent of information about the contemporaneous interment practices is still somewhat too sparse to allow a determination of clear cultural rules and by extension a dichotomous classification into ‘regular’ and ‘irregular’ burials. Recent findings suggest that such a categorization is certainly not practicable with regard to burials within settlements, as opposed to those in cemeteries. The initially strong quantitative imbalance between these two categories has successively shifted to a more even distribution over the years. At the same time, there are areas from which hardly any cemeteries are known, while most information on funerary rites stems from settlement burials, as is the case in Poland (Czekaj-Zastawny 2021).

In general, reconstructions of the Linearbandkeramik population size suggest that only a small percentage of the contemporaneous populace might be represented in all extant burials (Peter-Röcher 1997,60; Veit 2008,46). According to the most recent calculations, it is presumed that only about two fifths, possibly even only around one fifth of the totality of Linearbandkeramik people can be archaeologically accounted for through burials (Pechtl, Hofmann 2013,132). Conceivably, cremations were carried out far more frequently than the findings seem to suggest, as they are inherently harder to determine. Natural and man-made erosion could have furthermore lowered their number, due to the fact that pits for cremation burials were usually dug significantly shallower than those for inhumations (Trautmann 2006,39).

A designation as an ‘irregular’ burial would suggest the complete absence of certifiable rules and regularities, which was hardly the case, neither within the examined settlements nor within the culture in general. For instance, in Niederröblingen even individuals deposited in a prone position, which occasionally is interpreted as an indication of irreverence towards the buried individual, were sometimes equipped with grave goods, as can be seen in the local graves NRB 3 and NRB 24. As a matter of fact, in almost all interments in Niederröblingen at least some characteristic elements of the Linearbandkeramik burial customs were observed. Instead of a clear-cut antithesis to cemetery graves, the local burials seem instead to form part of a nuanced ritual structure, corresponding to the concept of “diversity in uniformity” first suggested by Pieter J. Modderman, which can be frequently observed in various areas of Linearbandkeramik life and alludes to the possibility of regional or individual variation within a nonetheless mostly uniform cultural framework (Modderman 1988,63).

The majority of interments, which used to be treated as special cases, set apart from the established standard burial, would therefore more likely represent “extreme points within a continuum” (Müller-Scheffel 2013, 7) of burial customs. Thus, interments within settlements presumably also formed an integral, if somewhat differential, component of contemporaneous grave rituals. The widely documented supra-regional similarities of settlement burials nonetheless suggest a common motivation behind the choice of location, the nature of which shall be discussed in the following section.

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5 Germ. “Extremata in einem Kontinuum”.
To systematically approach these issues, one has to ponder what exactly was to be achieved by a proper burial and who was the main beneficiary of abiding by certain social rules. Was the process mainly supposed to ease the deceased’s transition into the after-life? Was it primarily a device for the living to remember their loved ones by, or was it meant to reinforce the cultural values of the remaining group? As often is the case, the answer might lie somewhere in between, although different aspects seem to have been stressed with different parts of the treatment.

Despite the overlying similarities alluded to above, it is impossible to determine a single, appropriate set of burial customs for the Linearbandkeramik, as with every internment, various factors like age, sex, social gender, an individual’s position within the community and their manner of death might have influenced the precise burial practices. Recent isotope analyses even shown that a person’s area of origin might have affected their treatment in death (Hofmann 2016.239; Hedges et al. 2013.367–369). Therefore, a single cause for an internment within the settlement cannot be determined, as the respective cultural context within the group potentially always influenced the decision. Even within a single community, different reasons and motivations are likely to have affected the burial customs (Veit 2016.37). Still, the unlikelihood of a dichotomous scenario of regularity and an antithetical irregularity does not mean that one cannot and should not try to understand what affected the burial location, as certain patterns can often still be observed, the examination of which permits us to at least infer some of these motivations.

**Interpretation of Linearbandkeramik settlement burials. What do the structural differences tell us about the settlement burials?**

While it can be assumed that grief and emotion have always formed a universal part of basic human behaviour (Tarlow 2012), it is very likely that coping mechanisms have taken on varying forms in different sociocultural contexts, for example when being regulated by collective requirements of the respective group (Veit 2013.12) or influenced by learned emotional responses dependent on the cultural context, as is believed by scholars following a constructivist approach (Tarlow 2012.170–172). Considering the fact that the Linearbandkeramik was geographically and chronologically extremely widespread, it is therefore likely that a number of temporal, regional and even local peculiarities developed in the burial rites as in many other aspects of the culture (Modderman 1988.63). Consequently, over the years some authors have voiced justified criticism of the assumed premise of a uniform burial custom for the entire culture (cf. Hofmann, Bickle 2011.185). Surprisingly, however, even with settlement burials certain cultural norms and burial practices were often adhered to, as has been outlined above.

Considering the existence of designated cemeteries, which certainly represented a product of community efforts, these same recurring elements contradict the assumption of complete individualism in the choice of the burial place and indicate a community-coordinated selection of individuals interred within the settlements. The fact that the heterogeneity in appearance is nevertheless more pronounced in comparison to the cemetery burials indicates that the reaction of a living community to the death of one of its members still was by no means rigidly standardized, but instead apparently determined by a combination of numerous factors based on which the decision about the most appropriate form of burial practice was made (Pechtl, Hofmann 2013.133; Veit 1996.211; 2013.19). The occasional assumption that this diversity in characteristics precludes the status of the individual within the group as an influence on the burial customs (cf. Hofmann 2009.222–223) cannot be agreed with, at least not completely. Slight, yet recurring, differences in the material evidence suggest that burials in cemeteries tended to be carried out with greater care when compared to those in settlements. The comparison of Niederröblingen with contemporaneous cemetery burials revealed that individual characteristics of the treatment of the deceased, in particular the posture and orientation, showed a generally greater variance within the settlements. The same is true for other contemporaneous sites (Kahlke 1962.110; Peschel 1992.236). This might be due to the fact that in many cases pre-existing settlement pits were reused for the burial, and the dead were placed according to the shape and alignment of these.

A lower average frequency and amount of grave goods, which could often be observed in settlement burials, was also reflected in Niederröblingen. The most regularly documented objects were meat and pottery vessels, the procurement of which would have required comparatively little effort. Conversely, graves equipped with jewellery were only be recorded in a few cases. Furthermore, in sites in which the occupation layer was preserved, a generally lower depth of designated burial pits could be observed.
compared to those in cemeteries (Pechtl, Hofmann 2013.128). Double and triple burials, the increased occurrence of which was usually also characteristic of inhumations within settlements, could be documented in at least two cases in Niederröblingen. Along with the occasional deposit of complete skeletons and isolated human bones in supposedly pre-existent settlement pits, it seems that for many of the burials in Niederröblingen and other Linearbandkeramik settlements less effort was expended than for the majority of contemporaneous burials in cemeteries.

However, as at least some of the burial customs represented on the cemeteries were often observed within the settlements, there is no evidence of a deliberate disparagement of the dead. Instead, the generally lower expenditure seems to be the result of a somewhat heightened indifference towards at least some individuals buried inside the settlements, corresponding to a ‘ritual economy’ that is often observed in this context (Kraus 2006.15; Veit 1996.205; 2008.49). Conversely, access to the cemeteries seems to have been concomitant with a higher degree of consistency in the burial customs. The social and emotional esteem for the deceased would therefore be directly reflected in the expense invested in the burial (Bickle et al. 2011.1254; Meyer et al. 2011.115).

**Who was buried in the settlements?**

Given the above, one has to wonder which individuals were treated in a manner different from the majority of the deceased. This in turn raises the question as to whether LBK burials were primarily orchestrated to facilitate the deceased’s passage to the afterlife, or if they were of primary importance to the remaining group members, by either mediating their emotions (Williams 2007.109–111; Nyberg 2010.30–31) or reinforcing their cultural identity by following a set of predefined and well-established rules, basically serving as a ritual of cultural memory following the concept of Aleida and Jan Assmann (Assmann 1988.12–16).

It is highly likely that the burial served multiple functions, and even if it was not consciously organized with the group identity in mind, the latter would have been automatically reinforced by following existing patterns of propriety in the treatment of the dead, serving as an example of institutionalized communication (Assmann 1988.12). Nevertheless, within a given collective framework of cultural rules, the possibility to carry out the specifics of the burial situationally might also have existed, which would account for the existing variation of burial rites outlined above. In these cases breaking, ignoring or subverting existing rules might have been acceptable, as the deceased were not considered part of the group. Thus, the ritual economy observed in many settlement burials might directly reflect esteem for the individual, while still upholding collective traditions.

In the course of comparative ethnographic studies, a differential burial of individuals who had either already assumed a socially marginalized position during their lives or had died in a way perceived as unnatural could often be observed (Veit 2013.19). In a segmentary society, the position within the group would probably have been defined by the part an individual played for the continued existence and further development of the community, for example by providing a specialized technical skill-set or holding a position of ritual or religious importance (Meyer-Orlac 1997.3). A more deterministic connection between social status and factors like age, gender, geographic origin and physical or mental health is also conceivable (Häusler 1996.61; Meyer-Orlac 1997.3; Orschiedt 1998.35; Veit 1996.202), especially since these factors could very well have influenced the ability of the individual to economically support the group. In this context, the comparatively low age of most individuals from Niederröblingen and other Linearbandkeramik settlements could be ascribed to the fact that children were unable to make a significant contribution to the continued existence of the community (Orschiedt 1998.37; Scott 1999.98).

At the same time, it is also very likely that children, especially young ones, were simply not considered full members of the group (Brather 2014.19; Veit 1996.204), as they had not reached a certain level of mental or physical development or had not yet completed any necessary rites of passage. Both scenarios would explain the increased numbers of younger children recorded in Niederröblingen and other contemporaneous settlements, without contradicting the occasional occurrence of (mostly older) children in cemeteries. The age distribution clearly suggests that the likelihood of interment in a cemetery increased with age (Hedges 2013.374). Unusual causes or circumstances of death may also have precluded a burial with the majority of the group (Schwiedetzky 1965.231), and furthermore could have led to an anomalous treatment of the individuals, like prone burials or extreme crouched positions suggesting an initial binding of the body, which were observed
to a heightened degree within settlements. These could have served as apotropaic measures meant to prevent the return of the dead (Aspöck 2008.21; Tsaliki 2008.3, Tab. 1.2). The possibility that children who suffered a perinatal death (Scott 1999.98; Veit 2013.12), or individuals who died from infectious diseases (Schwidetzky 1965.231) might have been regarded as victims of ‘unnatural’ deaths would also explain the virtual absence of younger children in cemeteries.

Consequently, the location and appearance of Line­arbandkeramik burials, including the settlement burials of the Niederröblingen site, appear to be the result of a case-specific decision based on communal notions of appropriateness, the personal relationship of the bereaved to the deceased, and simple practical exigencies. Since the majority of settlement burials seem to have been carried out with an altogether smaller effort, it stands to reason that most of the individuals were likely considered with a higher degree of indifference than the ones buried in cemeteries. Individual cases of a more careful treatment at the investigated sites are almost exclusively limited to children, whose perceived deviance from the social norm would not have been a result of their actions but could rather be ascribed to the fact that they were not yet considered to be a full part of the group. A careful and loving treatment by surviving family members would be appropriate in these cases. Additionally, the likelihood of a surviving family member supervising the burial process would be higher for children than for adults. Outside the closer circle of relatives, a higher level of indifference towards an individual could be expected. Adults, on the other hand, might have been considered responsible for their position within or outside the community, and thus treated in a way that might have directly reflected their esteem in life, which was likely a low one. Social deviancy could have been dealt with in various ways, but burial location might have been one of these.

Thus, the majority of burials seem to reflect the existence of individual decisions within a pre-set framework of cultural appropriateness. Accordingly, the bereaved seem to have been given a certain amount of freedom in carrying out each individual burial, while the decision about the location of interment was likely a collective one, dependent on the prevailing cultural norms. Occasional deviations from this rule, as evidenced by burials of small children within the cemeteries, could be cases in which  

**Conclusion and summary**

Earlier in the paper, the question was raised as to whether the dead or the living were the likely main beneficiaries of a ‘proper’ burial. The observations outlined above seem to indicate that different aspects of the burial rites could be interpreted as the results of different concerns in that regard.

If we believe the possibility to be buried in a cemetery to have been socially regulated by the group, as the demographic evidence suggests, the location of interment would have mattered to the living to preserve a sense of propriety and a certain consistency in the symbolic composition of the group. An individual’s affiliation with the community during his or her lifetime might have been represented in death through a shared interment with the other group members. Conversely, the exact burial place of individuals who had not yet passed certain rites of passage or were not considered part of the collective for different reasons would not have mattered, as long as they were buried in a place separate from the actual members of the group. This might explain the rather small percentage of children in the contemporary graveyards, a part of which is represented through inhumations inside the settlements. Nature burials, as practised in several more recent traditional societies, would also be a distinct possibility. As traces of these would be almost impossible to determine, they could account for the fact that especially infants and young children are still underrepresented, even if the numbers of burials in settlements and in cemeteries are added up. If the access to graveyards was thus socially regulated by the group, it stands to reason that the burial process of the dead allowed into the cemeteries served to reinforce the identity of the living members by following certain guidelines of propriety.

While the dead in cemeteries thus had to be treated in certain collectively acceptable ways, it seems that for settlement burials a higher degree of variation was admissible. The heterogeneity in skeletal positions and orientations could to some degree be explained by the utilization of pre-existing pits, to which the bodies had to be adjusted, while some cases seem to suggest the implementation of certain apotropaic measures. While it is not possible to determine a clear-

**and affective factors trumped normative ritual**, as has been observed in burial rituals in late Bronze-Age Transylvania (Tarlow 2012.173).
cut normative *Linearbandkeramik* burial template, the overall treatment of the dead indicates generally higher esteem for individuals buried in cemeteries, as opposed to those deposited within settlements.

Coming back to the question of regularity posed above, settlement burials as a possible way to deal with non-members of the group could constitute a regular interment of young, uninstructed children as well as an irregular burial of adults standing at the periphery of society, both fulfilling the same structural function in preserving the integrit of the community. Accordingly, death could have been dealt with appropriately from a societal viewpoint via the location of interment, while the bereaved would still have been entitled to deal with the specific circumstances of burial as they saw fit. This might account for the higher variation in the customs, as well as the expense invested in the burial of some individuals, especially children. Elaborately constructed graves and those that were copiously supplied with rare grave goods, like NRB 1, NRB 7 and NRB 20 from Niederröblingen, could have resulted from a strong expression of personal affection. Conversely, an explicit ritual economy could hint at a higher degree of indifference toward the buried individual, both from an individual emotional standpoint and from one of propriety as dictated by group rules. The latter could already have been regulated by choosing the burial location, which would have adequately signified the dead as beyond the sphere of the group, and therefore not necessarily subject to their burial rites.

The interments from Niederröblingen are representative of this in that, despite certain regularities in the treatment of the dead, which collectively differentiated them from cemetery burials, their increased variability reflects the omnipresent complexity of the contemporaneous ritual structure according to the oft-observed “diversity in uniformity” in *Linearbandkeramik* traditions. This might be the result of an intersection of public and private space during the burial process, where communal notions of proper practices met with personal expressions of grief. It goes without saying that this is just one of many possible scenarios explaining the phenomenon of *Linearbandkeramik* culture settlement burials, and future findings might help us understand the phenomenon better. Undoubtedly, this aspect of early Neolithic life still offers great potential for further analyses of agency and the possibility of individual decisions within the framework of cultural norms.

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**References**


