

# THE RESEARCH PROJECT „EARLY MONUMENTALITY AND SOCIAL DIFFERENTIATION“ –

Recent results from excavations in the Albersdorf region

by Hauke Dibbern, Kiel

## Abstract

In this contribution results from excavations at three archaeological sites in and around Albersdorf will be presented, which were conducted in the framework of the DFG-Priority Programme “Early Monumentality and Social Differentiation – On the origin and development of Neolithic large-scale buildings and the emergence of early complex societies in Northern Central Europe” within the last five years. The investigations shed, in part, new light on the ritual world of Neolithic societies, the developmental history of the monuments and changes in human interactions with them from the Early Neolithic until “Dagger times”.

Contrary to the general theme of these conference proceedings this article does not deal with stone tools and their processing. Alternatively, an overview of the archaeological investigations in and around the conference venue of Albersdorf – a small region with a rich assemblage of Neolithic monuments (KELM 2006) – will be put forth. In particular, the following paper concentrates on excavations at Albersdorf-Dieksknöll, a well-known Early Neolithic causewayed enclosure, at the famous megalithic tomb “Brutkamp” and at a long barrow in the forest area “Bredenhoop” south of Albersdorf. The investigations were implemented in the framework of the Priority Programme “Early Monumentality and Social Differentiation”, a major project with 22 participating institutions and research areas throughout Northern and Central Germany, funded by the German Research Association (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft / DFG, Bonn). As suggested in the title of the project, its focus is centered on monumental structures that were constructed during the times of first sedentary societies – on our latitudes strongly associated with the Funnel Beaker culture (4.200–2.800 B. C.) – and the investigations concentrate, in particular, on deciphering societal processes that led to their construction. Included in the term “monuments” are, in addition to megalithic tombs, the so-called enclosures. Among them are diverse structures that are characterized by areas bordered by ditches and/or palisades. Such structures are found scattered throughout Europe. The most well-known, extensively examined and publicized ditch system in the distribution area of the Funnel Beaker culture is still represented by Sarup on Fyn (ANDERSEN 1997). Nevertheless, even more than 40 years after its discovery the function of such sites is still a controversial issue.

Questions on the origins, the periods of use and the intentions associated with monumental tombs and ditch systems in Schleswig-Holstein are being investigated by the project “Monumental ditch systems, non-megalithic and megalithic tombs of the Early and Middle Neolithic in Schleswig-Holstein” within the Priority Programme. Both investigation areas – Albersdorf near the west coast and Büdelsdorf near the city of Rendsburg – offer the best points of departure for this endeavor, since in each case an enclosure as well as a larger number of tombs is found in the immediate vicinity of each other.

The ditch system Albersdorf-Dieksknöll, originating from Funnel Beaker times and discovered by V. Arnold in 1992, is located southwest of Albersdorf at the end of an elongated promontory and is surrounded by lowlands on three sides. The complex, measuring ca. 2,5 hectare in size, is surrounded by several aligned ditch segments. Located on the inner side of the ditch structure, the alignment is accompanied by a palisade ditch. Neither ditches nor palisades were constructed in areas of the site that are protected by steep slopes. The course of the ditch exhibits at least 10 interruptions. In two of these interruptions, elongated installations were located perpendicular to the adjacent ditch sections. Such structures have not been found at any other causewayed enclosure of the Funnel Beaker culture. Until the discovery of the site Albersdorf-Dieksknöll, the enclosure at Büdelsdorf near Rendsburg was the only secured complex of this type in Schleswig-Holstein (HAGE 2014). In the meanwhile, a similar structure has been uncovered near Rastorf in the District of Plön (STEFFENS 2009). With high probability, a Neolithic causewayed enclosure was also located near Itzehoe.

Directly after its discovery a number of excavations were conducted at Albersdorf-Dieksknöll. Accordingly, the complex was pinpointed to a time period with already known enclosures that belong to an early phase of the Funnel Beaker culture (the so-called “Fuchsberg stage”) (ARNOLD 1992; 1993; 1994; 1997). However, many questions concerning the site remained unanswered, for example, the function of the structure, its operating life span and its importance on regional and supra-regional levels. In 2010, these aspects were to be clarified in renewed investigations that were conducted on the Stone Age complex in the framework of the DFG-Priority Programme. In the process, an expanse of ca. 550 m<sup>2</sup> has been excavated. Together with the excavations from the 1990s, approximately 1000 m<sup>2</sup> of the enclosed site and thus 4% of its entire expanse has been archaeologically accessed.

The causewayed enclosure at Dieksknöll can, in some respects, be described as a unique site of its kind. As verified by a series of <sup>14</sup>C dates, it was repeatedly visited over a time span of ca. 1.200 years (DIBBERN 2012). Its period of usage commenced in the Early Neolithic at about 3.700 BC and ended not until about 2.500 B. C., already in connection with the Single Grave culture. However, one cannot speak of temporary or even permanent settlement activities. Verifiable activities at the complex occurred primarily in the area of the ditch alignment surrounding the area. Both of the ditch segments that were investigated during excavations in 2010 display a number of layers that each represent singular events in the history of the enclosure. Characteristic are alternating horizons that can be

ascribed to repeated digging and refilling at the ditches as well as to fire incidents that partially occurred directly within the ditch segments (Fig. 1). The clearly demarcated and man-made fill layers must be interpreted as the traces of singular interventions. Although the single events took place at long intervals, new cuttings never missed the old ditch segments. Interventions were usually associated with the deliberate deposition of parts of broken ceramic vessels and stone artefacts on the floors of the ditches. Comparable behavior patterns are already known from other causewayed enclosures, but are difficult to interpret from a current perspective. The meaning of it is not pragmatic, but rather seems to be up to the collaborative implementation of clearly defined rituals.

A special feature is represented by the installations in two of the ditch interruptions, of which one could be examined during the 2010 excavation. As already indicated by the geophysical anomalies, we are dealing here with a deep pit, transversely aligned to the ditch. Comparable to the ditches, several fillings and recuttings could be observed within this feature. It can be assumed, however, that the pit originally served as a fundament for two massive posts that either served as highly visible markings or supported a construction. However, it is obvious that a change of use occurred in a later phase, analogous to the adjacent ditches. Similar findings are to be assumed for a non-excavated structure in another ditch interruption. A further pit that corresponds in size and shape to that investigated in 2010 suggests that comparable post constructions were also positioned in the interior of the complex (DIBBERN in print).

Although other enclosures in the distribution area of the Funnel Beaker culture exhibit developments from being used as ritual places to profane settlement



Fig. 1: The profile of an investigated ditch segment. Separate fillings and burnt layers are identifiable.

sites, the functional purpose of Albersdorf-Dieksknöll appears to have remained stable. Changes in the course of action, existing in repeated ditch recuttings, the deposition of artefacts and subsequent re-fillings, cannot be registered for the entire usage phase. The labour effort for such construction work that needed to be conducted during each event is hardly likely to have been borne by a single local group. Therefore, it is to be assumed that persons from a broader catchment area met to take part in the respective ritual events. Thus the Albersdorf enclosure obviously must have been played a significant role in communication processes between various Neolithic regional groups on the west coast of Schleswig-Holstein. Impulses for the construction of and practices associated with the ditch system most likely came from Central Europe. Cultural influences from the so-called Michelsberg culture can be traced, for example, through the excavated ceramics and the installations in the ditch interruptions that are otherwise not found in Northern Europe. Additionally, a surviving imprint of tetraploid naked wheat – originally a grain native to southern Central Europe – found on a clay disc fragment clearly points in this direction (KIRLEIS u. FISCHER 2014).

In addition to the causewayed enclosure, the ritual sphere of the Albersdorf region during the times of first cultivation was characterized by a large number of grave monuments. A striking number of these is concentrated in “Bredenhoop”, a ca. 19 ha large, wooded terrain south of Albersdorf that, similar to Dieksknöll, is separated from the area on several sides (Fig. 2). With three exceptions, we are dealing with mighty long mounds up to 60 m in length. The distance between the group of burial mounds and the causewayed enclosure at Dieksknöll to the west is approximately only one km.

The long barrow Albersdorf LA 56, investigated in 2011, is ca. 45 m long, on average 7 m wide and is preserved to a height of 2 m. Only a small portion of the original complete kerb of tightly placed boulders is preserved. Most of the stones of the mound's facing, as with all burial monuments on this terrain, fell victim to the procurement of construction material in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Also the center of the long barrow is disturbed by a deep illicit excavation hole. The destruction of the tombs at Bredenhoop is associated with road construction on the street to Hanerau-Hademarschen and the construction of the Gieselau Bridge around 1860. Traces of the stone wrecking emerged clearly in all excavation areas in the form of pits darkly coloured by charcoal particles. Thus, it was possible to determine the positions of the formerly existing facing stones. Also in the modern era, however already before the mentioned destructions, the pilferage of the central stone chamber occurred. That is implied by a disturbance leading from a southeast direction into the mound, in which a large amount of burnt flint was recovered.

Features from the time of origin of the burial site could be documented from the largely undisturbed cross profile at the southwest end of the long mound. Here, at least three different phases of embankment could be observed (DIBBERN 2013). The base of the mound was created with densely packed sods, upon which a sandy deposit was immediately placed. This construction phase occurred at the latest during the first half of the 37<sup>th</sup> century B. C. within the same time span as the causewayed enclosure. In the heavily damaged center of the long barrow, a

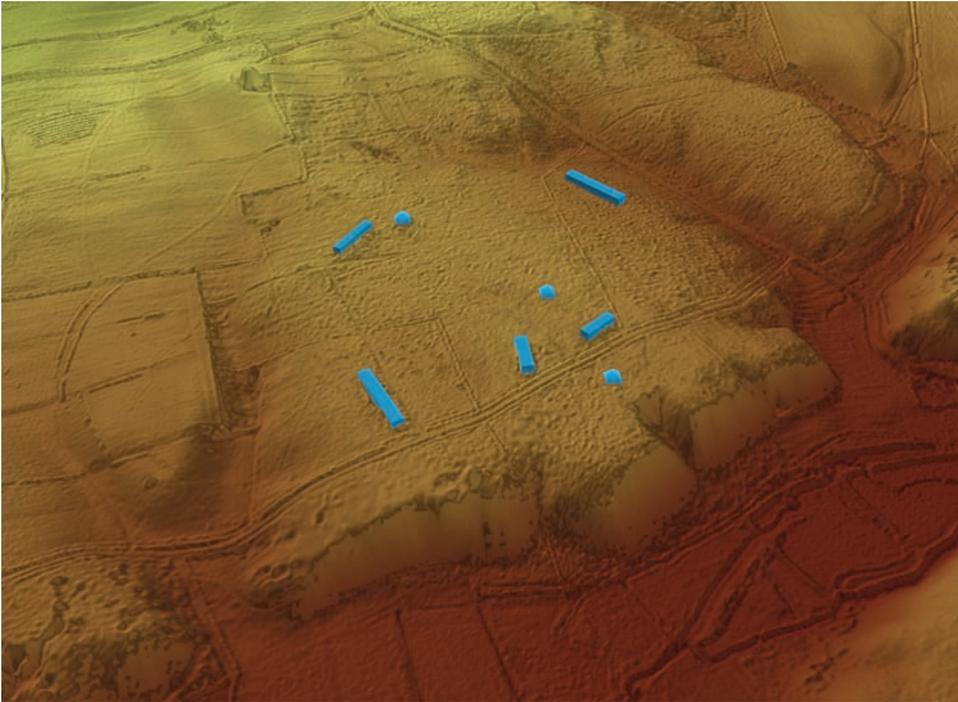


Fig. 2: Superelevated terrain model of the Bredenhoop area south of Albersdorf on the basis of LIDAR data (© LVermsH) with the position of grave monuments of the Funnel Beaker Culture.

number of foundation pits show that a megalithic chamber construction was located here, probably in the form of a polygonal dolmen. Inside the tomb chamber, pebble floor paving and burnt flint were observed. The hole from the pilferage excavation ranged deeper than the bottom of the chamber. Fortunately, it missed the major part of the feature. Archaeobotanical samples from the stone foundation pits of the tomb chamber date to 3.650 B. C. and are thus slightly younger than the lowest mound fillings. The tomb installation was therefore firstly conceived as a so-called non-megalithic burial mound or a “kammerloses Langbett”, comparable to the long barrows in the “Sachsenwald” northeast of Hamburg (SPROCKHOFF 1954). Tombs of this type spread out from Poland across Denmark to England and are generally associated with flat graves, even though no traces of such burials were recovered at Bredenhoop due to the very limited excavation area. The modification of the long barrow LA 56 to a megalithic tomb occurred several decades after its creation. The third mound embankment is probably to be associated with the construction of the chamber. The construction of Brutkamp (cf. below) and probably other megalithic tombs occurred approximately during the same time period as the transformation of the long barrow LA 56. Obviously, we observe a general time sequence from non-megalithic to megalithic tomb monuments. Hardly any finds from the first megalithic use phase could be recovered from the grave chamber. They were partly removed in the course of modern disturbances and also already in the context of chamber clearings during



Fig. 3: One of the Late Neolithic flint daggers that was excavated at the long barrow Albersdorf LA56 in the area of the grave chamber (Photo: A. Heitmann).

the Neolithic and deposited southeast of the chamber area. The recovered fragments here are dated to the early Middle Neolithic (MN I–II). Finds of flint daggers as well as a v-shaped, perforated amber knob from the area of the grave chamber verify secondary use of the grave site during the Late Neolithic (Fig. 3).

The re-use of megalithic tombs in this period is a regularly occurring phenomenon. It also became

clear at “Brutkamp”, where a sondage excavation was conducted in 2009, that the grave monuments of Funnel Beaker times once more played an important role in ritual contexts for the resident population during the Late Neolithic (DIBBERN 2014). Brutkamp is considered one of the most well-known megalithic tombs of Northern Germany, not least due to its massive capstone weighing ca. 18 t that covers the polygonal chamber of 5 orthostats. The tomb is located in the center of a round mound that is bordered by a ring of erratic boulders. The entrance to the chamber lies in southwest direction that was formerly composed of two supporting stone pairs. Since it often comes to a fan-shaped accumulation of finds in front of the entrance during successive phases of use of a megalithic tomb, this area was therefore chosen for an excavation trench at Brutkamp. Here, good preconditions also existed to record the stratigraphy of the mound in detail. With the help of the archaeological investigation, important conclusions concerning the construction of Brutkamp could be drawn and several phases of use were differentiated. In the profiles of the excavation area, two super-imposed sandy embankments were observed that were separated by a stone layer. The foundation pits of the still existing stones in the lowest mound fill show that the construction of the monument did not begin with the erection of the chamber and the stone fringe. Instead, the boulders were embedded in the already existing first earthen deposits. This first construction phase probably occurred at the end of the 37<sup>th</sup> century B. C. The flat stone packing and the second mound fill are considerably younger. Both were simultaneously installed at ca. 2.200 B. C., again during the Late Neolithic, and considerably changed the appearance of the monumental tomb. The excavation at Brutkamp also yielded flint daggers characteristic of this time horizon. Virtually buried by the stone packing, a large flat stone, which was accompanied on one side by small cup marks, emerged just in front of the access (Fig. 4). In this context, it is highly probable that it was the original capstone of the entrance, which was relocated in connection with Late Neolithic activities.

Of the 700 highly fragmented ceramic sherds from the excavation area, 26 vessels of the late Early Neolithic and the beginning Middle Neolithic were reconstructed. Regarding the ceramic finds, two discernible concentrations were observed that indicate different depositional processes. On the one hand, the

pieces of several vessels were located close together directly in front of the chamber access. Accordingly, it appears that the vessels positioned in this area were “sacrificed”. On the other hand, the fragments of further vessels exhibit, in contrast, a widely scattered distribution over the entire excavation area. Here, we are apparently dealing with ceramics that were cleared out of the chamber, thus grave goods in a strict sense. This distribution coincides with that of the burnt flint fragments that are surely to be interpreted as flooring material of the chamber. According to the layer assignment of the corresponding fragments, the temporal context of the clearing events could be determined. Hence, one or possibly several chamber clearings that barely stirred the chamber floor already occurred during Funnel Beaker times. The rigor with which the chamber was cleared was far greater in the Late Neolithic phase, as verified by the large quantities of burnt flint in the clearing horizon. Although the chamber itself was not archeologically investigated, these activities signalize a renewed use of the chamber as a burial site. It is among others known from the grave LA 3 at Flintbek (MISCHKA 2011) that burial monuments in Funnel Beaker times regularly exhibit very long and variable histories of construction, modification and usage. In the process, they seem to have lost importance during the period of the Single Grave culture and served no longer as collective but probably as single graves in the Late Neolithic. Nevertheless, they were present over the millennia. The enduring presence of the ditch system at Dieksknöll must have also existed in the consciousness of the resident population, even if it already lost importance some centuries before the Late Neolithic “rediscovery” of the megalithic tombs of the Funnel Beaker culture.

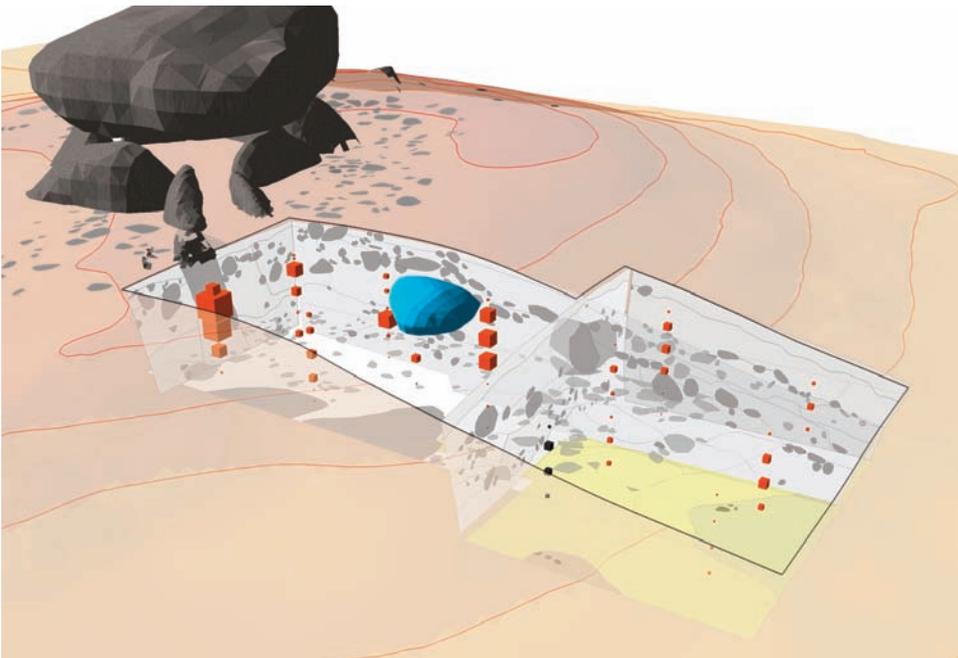


Fig. 4: A view of the excavation trench at “Brutkamp” with 3-dimensional mapping of the cup-marked stone and the recovered ceramics.

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