



McDONALD INSTITUTE CONVERSATIONS

Delicate urbanism in context: Settlement nucleation in pre-Roman Germany

The DAAD Cambridge Symposium

Edited by Simon Stoddart



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with contributions from

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Chapter 5

The rural contribution to urbanism: late La Tène *Viereckschanzen* in southwest Germany

Günther Wieland (Esslingen)

The function and cultural context of the so called *Viereckschanzen* has been investigated by archaeologists for more than 150 years. These characteristic quadrangular fortifications are known from Bohemia to southern Germany, and northwards to the Upper Rhine and eastern France. Only a very few *Viereckschanzen* have appeared in northern Switzerland and north of the River Main. Within Baden-Württemberg, the focus of this article, there are over 200 known structures of this particular type. The number of known examples is constantly growing as a consequence of aerial archaeology and Airborne LiDaR (Bittel et al. 1990).

The *Viereckschanzen* are contemporary both to the proto-urban *oppida* and to other rural settlements of the Middle and Late La Tène period in the second and first century BC (Wieland 1996, 37–54; Wieland 1999a; Büchsenschutz & von Nicolai 2012). The most characteristic feature is, of course, the square to rectangular shape (Figs. 5.1 and 5.2), often accompanied by at least one rectangular corner. The dimensions of the sides of the structure range between 80 and 120 m, where only a few *Viereckschanzen* have dimensions that exceed 150 m. Running parallel to the exterior of the rampart, there is a V-shaped ditch which surrounds the whole structure. In front of the gate, there is no interruption to the ditch, which highlights an obvious difference to Roman fortifications.

The rampart is only built with earth, without any kind of internal reinforcements in wood or stone, but some traces of a fence or palisade have been found on top of the rampart. The ditch has pronounced angular corners (not rounded as they are at Roman forts, which is an important feature for the identification of *Viereckschanzen* by aerial archaeology (Wieland 2006). The regularly documented increased height of the rampart corners is not intentional, but simply the effect of accumulating earth from two converging ditches. We know that the gateway never opened to

the north – perhaps for ritual reasons (Fig. 5.2). Inside the *Viereckschanzen*, we have a number of standardized buildings, often of very similar shape (which could imply a similar function) and similar arrangements of buildings. One building can be identified as the main building, and this usually lies opposite the gateway near the back rampart (Berghausen 2014).

Research on *Viereckschanzen* began early in the first half of the nineteenth century. Most scholars thought of them as Roman forts because of their regular shape. For the first time, in 1899, after an excavation in *Gerichtstetten* in northern Baden-Württemberg, K. Schumacher put *Viereckschanzen* in their right temporal and cultural context (Figs. 5.3 and 5.4). Remarkably, Schumacher had already considered various alternative functions such as a fortified grain storage facility, but also considered religious uses (Schumacher 1899).

The ritual function has become increasingly prominent since the 1930s. The research and excavations by K. Schwarz in *Holzhausen* near Munich in Bavaria in the 1950s and 1960s particularly led to the interpretation of *Viereckschanzen* as sanctuaries. Approximately 30 m deep shafts within the *Holzhausen* structure were crucial for this interpretation, since they have been understood as sacrificial pits (Schwarz & Wieland 2005). As a consequence, the uniform appearance of the *Viereckschanzen* and other structures were all interpreted as indicative of a special form of *Celtic* sanctuary (Reichenberger 1995). Indeed some other characteristics could very well be explained from a religious perspective (for example the vicinity to older grave mounds), but there are also other possibilities of interpretation.

It is important to acknowledge that currently there is no complete excavation of the interior of a *Viereckschanze*. Later investigations showed that, even in *Holzhausen*, there were also remains of a main building deduced from the presence of large post-holes.



Figure 5.1. Aerial view of the well-preserved Viereckschanze of Westerheim (Alb-Donau-Kreis, Baden-Württemberg). (Archiv Landesamt für Denkmalpflege, Photo: O. Braasch).

So, in this case, the reconstruction of the structure as an enclosed sanctuary, with no buildings inside, was based on insufficient data. The most common current reconstruction of *Viereckschanzen* as fortified farms is based on extensive and complete excavations, for example at *Ehningen*, *Bopfingen-Flochberg*, *Riedlingen*, *Nordheim* and *Beuren* (Krause & Wieland 1993; Neth 2000; Bollacher 2009; Ambs 2011) during the 1980s and 1990s. It has been shown, that several buildings are regularly placed in the interior: a large main building is typically placed opposite the entrance, and further adjoining buildings are located beside or in the corners (Fig. 5.7). Excavations at *Fellbach-Schmidlen* during the 1980s have proved that the mysterious sacrificial shafts are actually wells. Wooden ladder rungs have been discovered in the shaft of *Fellbach-Schmidlen*. The shaft was accessible, and the identical construction is well known from Roman wells. The wooden posts found during earlier excavations in the shafts (e.g. *Holzhausen* and *Tomerdingen*) have been suggested to be ritual posts, but could be interpreted as parts of the wooden construction for lifting water buckets out of the well (in German these are called *Stangenziehbrennen*, Wieland 1999a, 44–53). For these

reasons, scholars have returned to the interpretation of the structures as fortified farms and as a kind of functional precursor to the Roman *villae rusticae*, as already intimated in 1899 by K. Schumacher and in the 1920s by K. Bittel (Schumacher 1899; Bittel 1934, 99–105; Wieland 2001).

On the basis of these extensive excavations, our picture of the *Viereckschanzen* has completely changed. It is now clear that these structures are typical features of the rural settlement patterns of the Late La Tène period in southern Germany and they represent, in their appearance, an old and established form of settlement: a rectilinear enclosed farmstead (the so called *Rechteckhof* or *Herrenhof*), already well known since the Late Bronze Age and especially from the Hallstatt period in southern Germany. Of course, these early types of enclosed farmstead are different in some details from the *Viereckschanzen*, but may have been quite similar in function.

Other forms of rural settlement also existed: we know traces of open rural settlements without fortification and very small farmsteads (Wieland 2001). Rural settlement of the period has turned out to be much more complex than originally thought. These

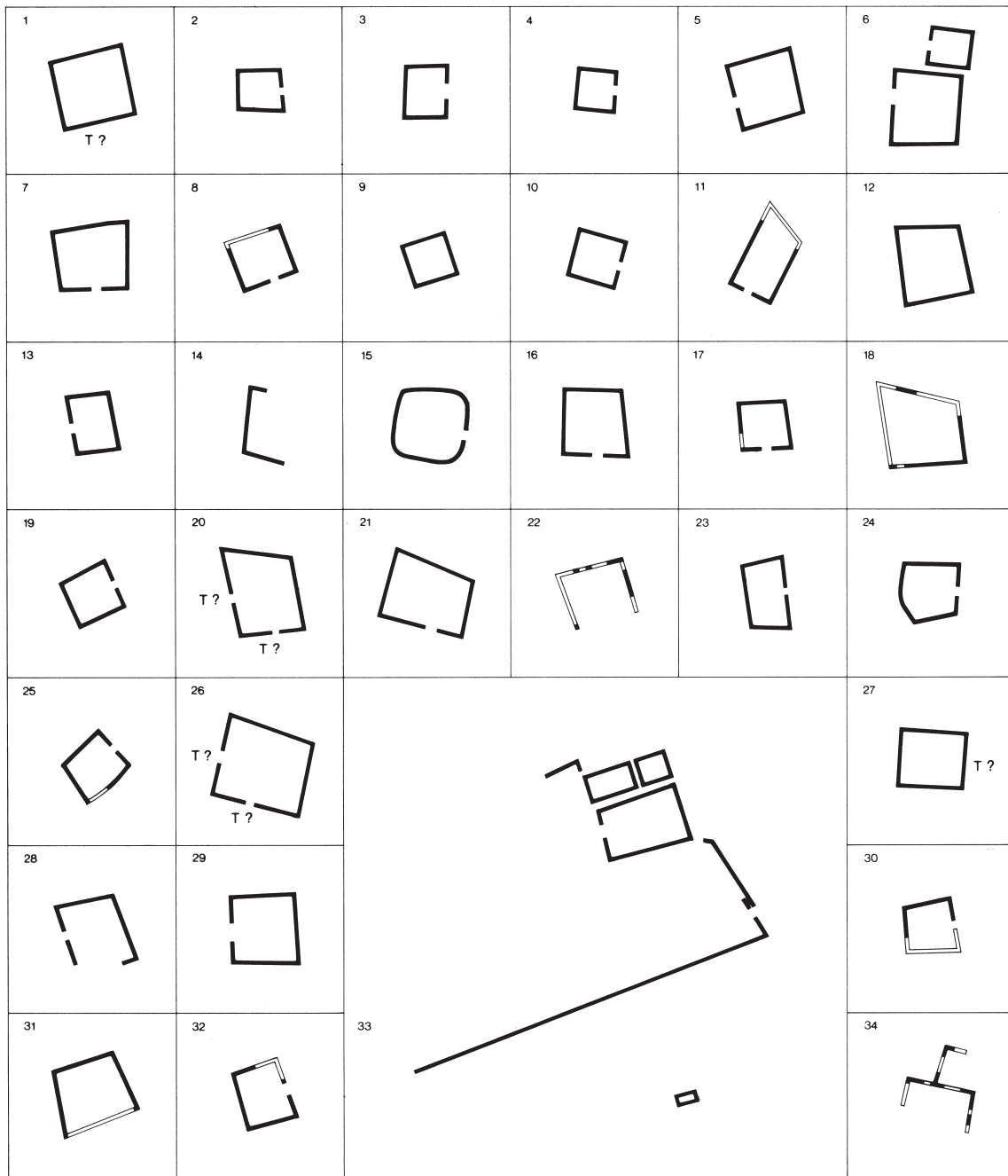


Figure 5.2. Ground plans and orientation of Viereckschanzen (examples from Baden-Württemberg). North is above. (From: Bittel et al. 1990, 26 Fig. 10a).

settlement structures are only to be found in very large-scale excavations, for example in the case of large excavations along new highway and railroad routes (Thoma 2011; Thoma 2012a, Thoma 2012b). It is noticeable, however, that such settlements are now increasingly found in close proximity to Roman settlements and farms, leading to the question of

settlement continuity between Roman and earlier features (Rieckhoff 2002; Peters 2004; Zanier 2004; Wieland 2004; Wieland 2011; Rieckhoff 2012; Keller 2015, 278–88). This does not necessarily indicate settlement continuity without hiatus, but it is clear that the rural settlement patterns and the farming practices in Late La Tène and Roman times in southern Germany

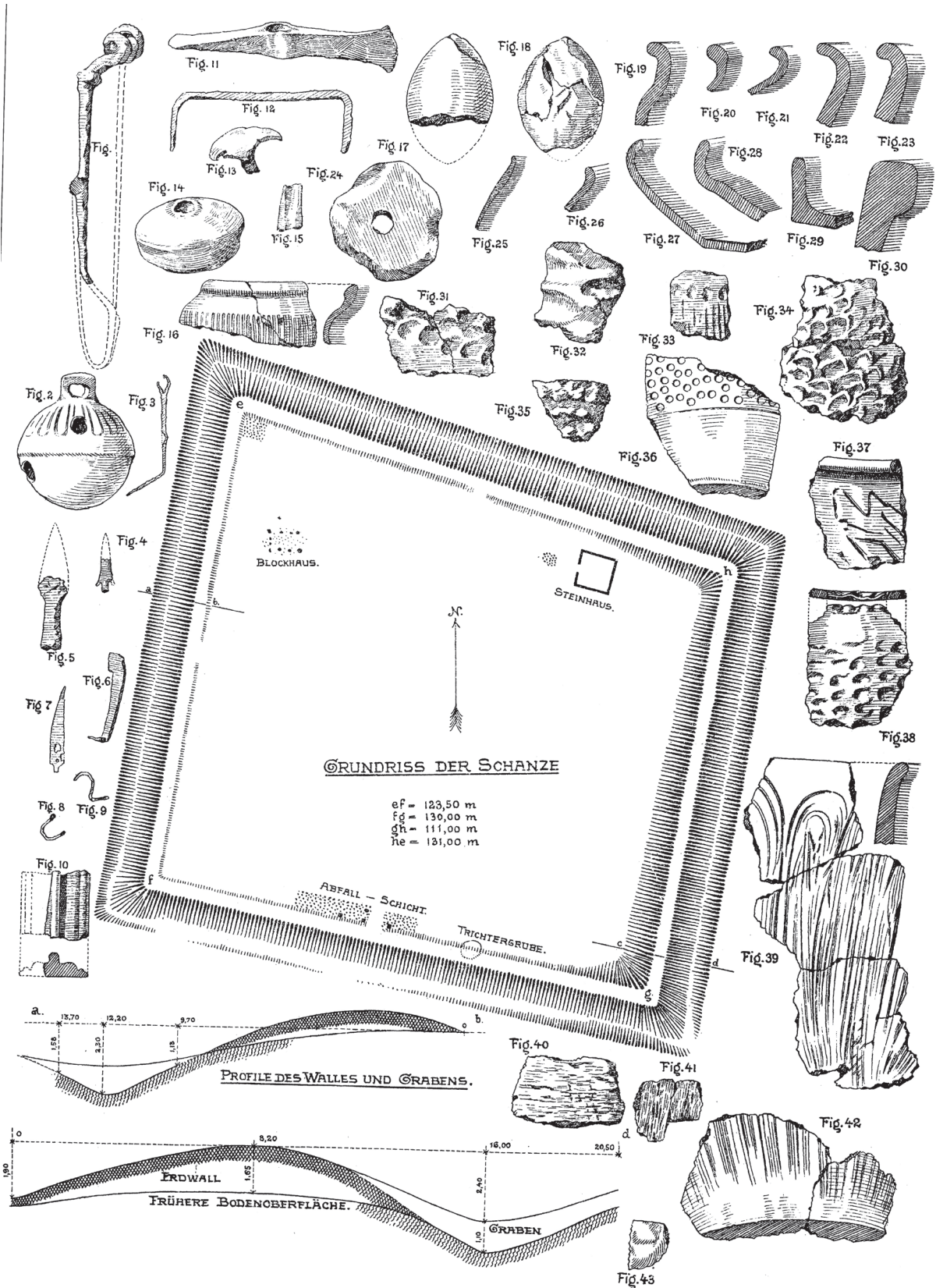


Figure 5.3. Plan and drawing of the finds from the excavation of K. Schumacher at the Viereckschanze of Gerichtstetten (Hardheim, Neckar-Odenwald-Kreis, Baden-Württemberg). (From: Schumacher 1899, plate 1).



Figure 5.4. Example of a very well-preserved rampart (height of about 2.5 m) belonging to a Viereckschanze at Gerichtstetten (Hardheim, Neckar-Odenwald-Kreis, Baden-Württemberg). (Photo: G. Wieland).

were quite similar: *Viereckschanzen* and Roman *villae rusticae* belong to the same type of farmstead. We can now assume that the *Viereckschanzen* are the most typical form of the late Iron Age rural settlement in southern Germany.

The previously favoured interpretation of *Viereckschanzen* as sanctuaries could not be verified in later excavations. However, there is undoubtedly a need and a place for ritual and related practices inside settlements, but this does not justify a narrow restriction of function. Instead of the former discussion ‘only ritual’ – or ‘just settlement’ we should consider a range of functions, that includes different dimensions, ritual and secular (Venclova 1998; Wieland 2006b). The *Viereckschanzen* are **multifunctional** and we can name three main functional components (Fig. 5.5): **Enclosure** (fortification and representation), **central place** for the surrounding area (storage place (e.g. for seed grain and commercial goods), market place,

a place for ritual and religion, for court hearings, for meetings) and **settlement**, (organization and management of agriculture, water supply by wells, residences of the social élites).

Within the enclosures, we can also see a temporal development, namely a transition from fence to rampart, which means, that in some *Viereckschanzen* we have found a stratigraphic relationship between simple fences, comprising the first enclosures, and ramparts, ditches and solid built gateways which replaced them. This transition could imply **fortification** in reaction to uncertain political and social conditions and/or external threats, and/or new forms of **representation** that demonstrated the power of the local social élites.

One interpretation is that the fortification had a similar function to the large ramparts of the *oppida*, but that this was realised on a smaller scale. The fortification character may also have been intended but not fully implemented. It is possible that the fortification

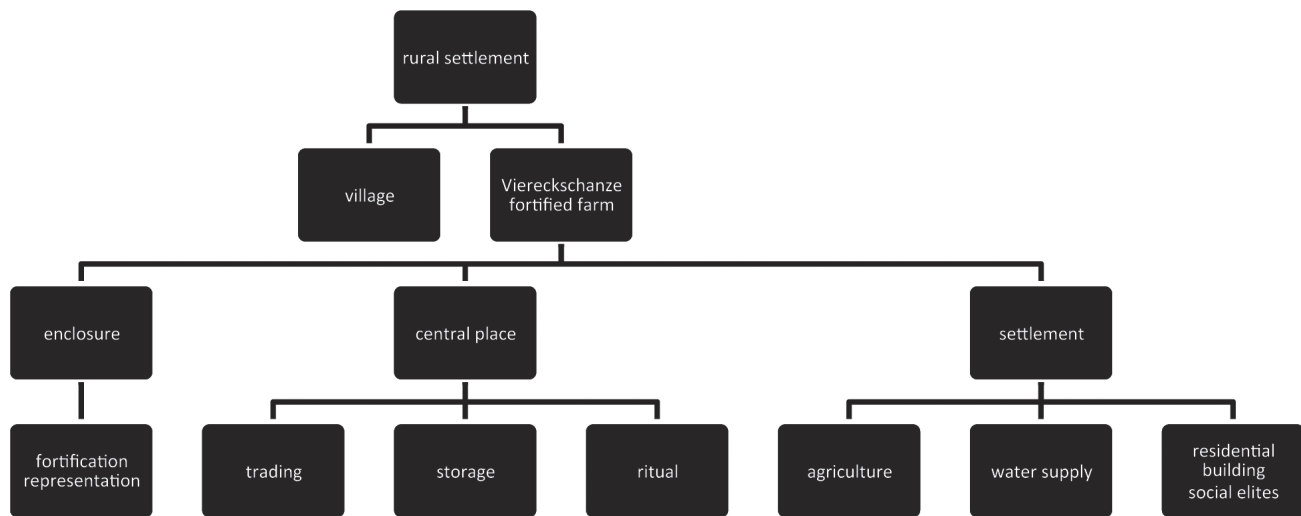


Figure 5.5. Range of functional aspects of the Viereckschanzen.

character was intentional, but that a *Viereckschanze* was not built according to simple principles of fortification. The compromise between these two functions – fortification and representation – could have produced an intermediate outcome. Another detail is that some *Viereckschanzen* have large extension ramparts (*Annexschanzen*) which suggest either a kind of settlement extension (although we only have very few traces of buildings inside) or simply a livestock enclosure. The dimensions of these ramparts can be very impressive for a rural settlement. The example of *Königheim-Brehmen* shows (Fig. 5.6) a large extension rampart with a length of 600 m. At present, there is more evidence, that these large extensions have enclosed areas for agriculture – livestock enclosures, pastureland or arable land – than they contained dwelling houses.

The function of a *Viereckschanze* as a **central place** links the structure to its environs, particularly pointing out a relationship to smaller settlements. In this connection, we should mention, that, inside most *Viereckschanzen*, the buildings are arranged in such a way that a free space was created in the middle (Fig. 5.7) (Wieland 1999c; Berghausen 2014) – this could have been a type of storage place and/or market place for commercial goods and also a place for ritual and religion, for court hearings and meetings. This leads us to consider the possible functions of buildings within these structures. The quadrangular four-post-buildings in the *Viereckschanzen*, for example, are well known as storage buildings for grain from a lot of prehistoric settlements, but they are also quite similar to sanctuary buildings, for example within the *Martberg oppidum*. So we must assume that the same building form may

have had different functions. We find also examples of small huts for crafts, barns and also simple dwelling houses.

The building, which is placed opposite the entrance, is always distinguished in its layout from the other buildings, both in terms of its size and its apparently standard location within the enclosure. So we have good reasons to identify this as the main building of the *Viereckschanze* and most probably the residence of the élite. Firstly, some of the objects found there, for example the fragments of imported wine amphorae, were typical luxury goods of the local élite. Other evidence of agricultural tools, animal bones and household appliances show that the occupants were in charge of agricultural production, and the wells demonstrate the importance of a permanent water supply. The prominence of these finds is connected with the major advances in agricultural intensification and organization during the Late La Tène period.

One of the most important functions of a central place was probably as a **place for ritual and religion** – with the proviso that in prehistory ritual and religion were embedded more thoroughly in everyday life than today. Religious practices would have been present in any kind of settlement. The three famous wooden sculptures found in the well of the *Viereckschanze Fellbach-Schmiden* belong to this religious context, even if their precise context is not clearly known. All three sculptures have the same arrangement and it is highly probable that this wooden artwork had a religious function. The assemblage had been destroyed and thrown together with burned wooden architectural elements into the well – an indication of the complete destruction of the buildings by a fire. The shaft of

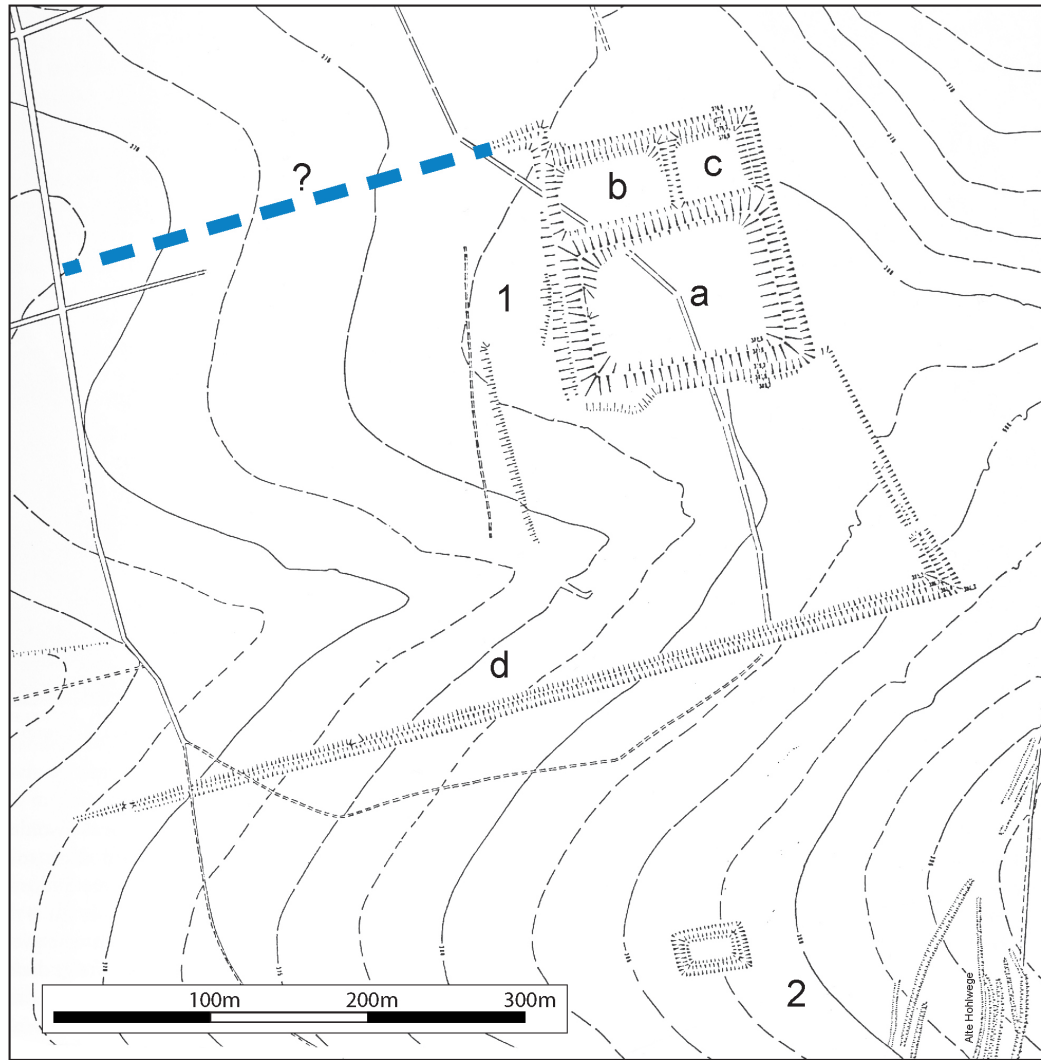


Figure 5.6. Plan of the Viereckschanze of Königheim-Brehmen (Main-Tauber-Kreis, Baden-Württemberg). *a*: Central Viereckschanze, *b* & *c*: small extensions, *d*: part of large extension rampart (from: Bittel et al. 1990, 213 Fig. 122 with additions. Graphic: LAD, Y. Stahl).

the well was later back-filled (Planck 1982; Wieland 1999a). Objects like the *Schmiden* wooden sculptures show us, that ritual and religion must have been part of a *Viereckschanze*'s function, but they are no proof of the interpretation of the whole site as a sanctuary (Wieland 2006b).

Since the 1930s, the proximity of *Viereckschanzen* to earlier burial mounds has often been pointed out as an argument for their interpretation as sanctuaries (Bittel 1978). A funerary function was inferred, because of the almost complete absence of Late Iron Age burials in southwestern Germany. However, recent excavations, for example in the site at the Early Iron Age princely burial mound *Hohmichele* near the *Heuneburg*, did not indicate any such a function – the finds, mostly coarse

handmade pottery, show the same range of types as in other *Viereckschanzen* (Hansen et al. 2015).

Another interpretation has far more plausibility, following the thesis of Holger Wendling (Wendling 2016): The placing of a fortified farmstead near older burial mounds may have had the intention of legitimization of land ownership, closely connected with ancestral veneration. Broadly similar situations occur with Roman *villae rusticae* where Roman burials are often found in the older indigenous burial mounds.

One extraordinary burial contradicts the pattern of absence of Late Iron Age burials in southwestern Germany and provides a direct connection to the function of the *Viereckschanzen* as the residences of Late Iron Age élites. In 1865, a rich burial was discovered near



Figure 5.7. Plan of the excavated Viereckschanze of Ehningen (Kr. Böblingen, Baden-Württemberg). The buildings are arranged in a triangular shape. The building opposite the gateway could be considered as main building (from: Wieland 1999, with additions. Graphic: LAD, Y. Stahl).

Sinsheim-Dühren in the north of Baden-Wuerttemberg. The objects (metal mirrors, glass bracelets, glass and amber beads, bronze and silver fibulae, and bronze vessels) belonged to a female burial of the Middle or beginning of the Late La Tène period (Lt C2/D1), contemporary with the period of the *Viereckschanzen*. The *Dühren* burial remains a highly unusual phenomenon in southwestern Germany, both in terms of its richness and in the origin of the extraordinary objects. Undoubtedly it was the burial of a member of the Late Iron Age élites. Later research of Karl Schumacher in 1889 localized the exact position of the grave and

uncovered parts of a ditch, filled with soil and traces of charcoal. It had much bigger dimensions than the well-known contemporary enclosures from the Rhineland, so, as Schumacher already assumed, the ditch could easily have belonged to the enclosure of a *Viereckschanze*.

Further geophysical and archaeological research in 2006 by the Landesamt für Denkmalpflege Baden-Württemberg and the Institute for Geography of the University of Heidelberg led to the evidence of a typical V-shaped ditch of a *Viereckschanze* in its entire extent. The rich woman's burial was originally placed within

the enclosure, most probably covered by the rampart (Spohn 2009; Wieland 2009). The grave may have been placed inside an older (palisade enclosed) site or intentionally under the rampart during its construction. Of course, this could have led to its understanding as a kind of ancestral cult or worship and direct connection between burial and settlement.

An additional interesting issue is that of the potential interdependence of *oppida* and *Viereckschanzen*. There is so far no evidence of the spatial coexistence of the *Viereckschanzen* and *Oppida*. There is also no conspicuous spatial concentration of *Viereckschanzen* in the immediate vicinity of the large *Oppida* in south-western Germany, rather the opposite can be observed (Stegmaier, this volume 46–8): we have such spatial concentrations at a greater distance from the *Oppida*, especially in regions with best conditions for agriculture (e.g. at the Upper Danube Valley near the *Heuneburg* or in the Middle Neckar Valley Region). We do not know very much about the organization and forms of agriculture inside and outside the *oppida* and if there has been a significant difference to the agriculture of rural settlements. This is connected to the question of the foundation or the development of an *oppidum*. Perhaps the *oppidum* initially was a kind of spatial concentration of rural settlement, attracting specialized crafts and trade? Of course we also have

to consider other factors, for example the significance for ritual and religion (as proposed by Manuel Fernández-Götz 2014d). Undoubtedly there are quite significant differences in the composition of the materials found in *oppida* and rural settlement. For example, the percentage of hand-made pottery is much higher in *Viereckschanzen* than in the *oppida*, since the wheel-turned fine pottery was made by specialized craftsmen in the large settlements. Another factor is that almost no coins have been found in the *Viereckschanzen*, raising the question of whether a monetary economy was limited to the *oppida*. On other hand, we have some finds of luxury goods in *Viereckschanzen*, from which we can infer the presence of élites. Finally we should consider that these fortified farms may have had a central function on a local level. From this perspective, a group of neighbouring *Viereckschanzen* – as a kind of ‘administrative association’ – could have had similar central functions to an *oppidum*.

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