

## Empty graves in LBK cemeteries – indications of special burial practises

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**ABSTRACT** – *After a short overview of LBK burial rites, I propose a definition of empty graves, distinguishing them from cenotaphs. Until now, empty graves have been found only in twelve LBK graveyards, comprising an average of 10.2% within these cemeteries, which seem to cluster in some regions and to be absent in others, which might be due in part to bad soil conditions for preserving skeletons. The proportion of empty graves within the graveyards varies considerably and is highest in Lower Austria/Moravia and Bavaria. Some 53% of the empty graves yielded no finds, 45% some ceramic remains and 10% stone tools only, or in addition (Fig. 3). There are never remains of ornaments, indicating that when the corpses were disinterred they were still securely wrapped in winding sheets. The open questions remain as to what kind of ritual treatment these bodies underwent next, and where the human remains were finally reburied.*

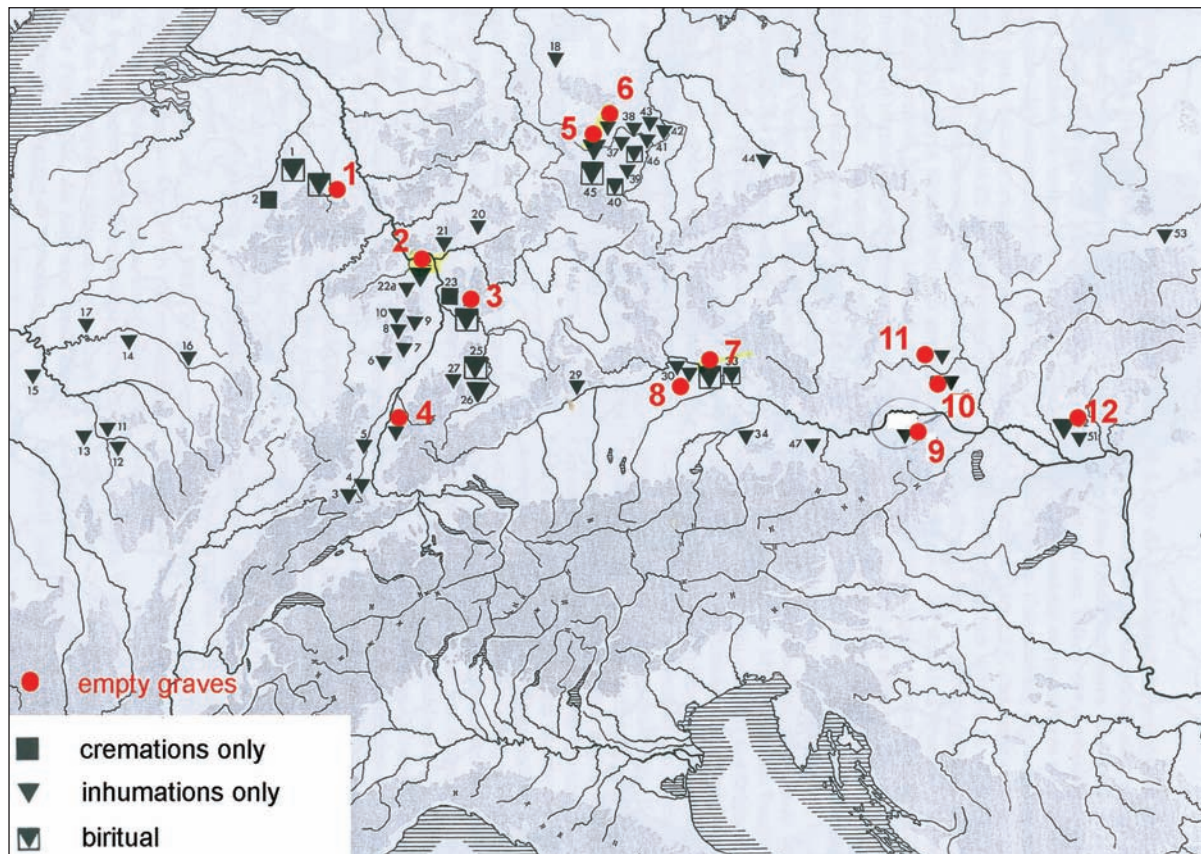
**IZVLEČEK** – *Po kratkem pregledu LTK pokopnih praks predlagam definicijo praznih grobov, tako da jih ločimo od kenotafov. Prazni grobovi so bili do sedaj najdeni le na dvanajstih LTK grobiščih. V povprečju predstavljajo 10,2% grobov v grobiščih. Opazne so njihove zgoščitve v nekaterih regijah in odsotnost v drugih, kar je lahko posledica slabe ohranjenosti kosti v agresivnih okoljih sedimentov. Delež praznih grobov v grobiščih močno variira in je najvišji v Spodnji Avstriji, na Moravskem in Bavarskem. V 53% praznih grobov ni najdb, v 45% se pojavljajo keramične najdbe, v 10% pa tudi ali samo kamena orodja (Sl. 3). Nikoli ni ostankov okrasja, kar je indic, da so bila trupla ob izkopu še vedno zavita v mrtvaški prt. Ostaja vprašanje, v kakšne rituale so bila ta trupla vključena in kje so bili njihovi ostanki pokopani za tem.*

**KEY WORDS** – *Neolithic; LBK; burial practices; cenotaphs and/or cleaned graves*

The culture of the 'Linearbandkeramik' (LBK) or Linear Pottery Culture is synonymous with the early Neolithic in central Europe. In its later stage, it extended from western Hungary to the Paris basin. Burial practises show great diversity. To a small extent people were buried inside settlements, close to houses, in the long pits of houses, or in other settlement pits, but quite seldom in unusual positions, or with only parts of the bodies being interred (Veit 1996; Zápotocká 1998). There are some sites with regular inhumations in the ditches surrounding settlements, such as at Menneville in France (Farruggia et al. 1996) or Vaihingen in Germany (Krause 1998; 2002), but also ditches filled with corpses thrown in and showing clear signs of violent death (Asparn/Au-

stria – Windl 2009). Similar traces of massacre are known only from two more sites, where the victims were found in settlement pits (Talheim/Germany – Wahl-König 1987; Wiederstedt/Germany – Meyer-Kürbis-Alt 2004).

The greatest number of all burials by far is to be found in cemeteries of the most varying size, from small grave groups of 5–10 graves up to very big graveyards with more than 200 graves (Schwetzingen – Gerling 2009; Wandersleben – unpublished; Jeunesse 1997; Nieszery 1995). Only in these cemeteries are some burials cremations (Lenneis 2007), but at all sites many more inhumations have been preserved. The 'normal' position of the dead is flexed,



**Fig. 1. LBK cemeteries in Central Europe (Nieszery 1995.Abb. 7 – with the addition of sites with empty graves): 1. Niedermerz (Dohrn-Ihmig 1983), 2. Flomborn (Richter 1969), 3. Schwetzingen (Gerling 2009; in press), 4. Königschaffhausen (Kraft 1936), 5. Bruchstedt (Kahlke 2004), 6. Sondershausen (Kahlke 2004), 7. Aiterhofen (Nieszery 1995), 8. Sengkofen (Nieszery 1995), 9. Ratzersdorf (Blesl 1999), 10. Kleinhadersdorf (Neugebauer-Maresch 1992; Neugebauer-Maresch, Lenneis in prep.), 11. Vedrovice, Za Dvorem – Zabrdovice (Skutil 1941; Podborský et al. 2002), 12. Nitra (Pavúk 1972).**

more often on the left than the right side. Positions such as stretched lying on the back or others are quite seldom. In at least twelve (or perhaps more) of all LBK cemeteries (Fig. 1) there are also ‘empty graves’, pits in the form of graves, but with no skeletons, or only few remains of them. Some of these pits contain various types of find.

Different terms are used to deal with this phenomenon – purely descriptive ones such as ‘grabähnliche Gruben’ (pits like graves), ‘leere Gräber’, ‘Leergräber’ (empty graves); ‘Gräber ohne Bestattete’ (graves without funeral); or interpretations such as ‘tombes symboliques’ (symbolic graves) or ‘kenotaphe’ (cenotaphs). This last term is used rather often, and I think without sufficient care.

Kenotaph (cenotaph) is a Greek word meaning empty grave, but it was used in antiquity only for the grave of an absent person to whom funeral honours were dedicated. Therefore, I propose to distinguish the two as follows: a ‘cenotaph’ is a burial pit in which

no skeleton or even remains are buried, but grave goods are clearly deposited in an intentional position to symbolize the grave of an absent person. An ‘empty grave’ is a burial pit in which no skeleton or only a few remains of human bones are found. Grave goods or other finds are (discovered) in disturbed, *i.e.* not in the original position. The scattered human remains, grave goods and other remains mark the exhumation of the deceased.

LBK grave pits without skeletons are all ‘empty graves’ as described above, but with varying ‘lost’ grave goods. Empty graves have not been found in all LBK graveyards, which might be partly due to the quality of the excavations, but also in some regions to soil conditions disturbing the bones (especially in parts of the northern Rhineland). The record in Table 1 and Figures 1 and 2 might be only the minimum values. There are several doubtful or unclear situations, which might raise the number in the future. To give some examples.

**Vedrovice, Široká u lesa/  
Moravia**

There are 108 graves, with eleven burials which were disturbed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but about four to five ‘damaged’ burials with a considerable depth (around 50–60cm) and some more damaged or disturbed shallow graves (Podborský *et al.* 2002. 126–128). Only the grave pits disturbed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were cleared of skeletons; the others contain more or less damaged skeletons. It is not possible to classify them as ‘empty graves’ in the given definition on the basis of the published information.

**Vedrovice, Za dvorem/Moravia**

The much smaller graveyard at Vedrovice contains only seventeen burials; eight were excavated by Černý in 1910/1911. In his report, Skutil published about six graves with inhumation and grave goods and about two empty pits in the form of graves. Both authors published these graves as belonging to Zábrdovice near Vedrovice; Podborský combines them with the graves investigated later at the site at Vedrovice, Za dvorem (Skutil 1941.22; Podborský *et al.* 2002.336–337).

**Stuttgart-Mühlhausen, Viesenhäuser Hof**

Unfortunately, this very large graveyard with 177 LBK burials has not been published. The overview plan of the graveyard shows at least fourteen graves which cannot be orientated. This fact might indicate a disturbance or clearance of the inhumation, but there is no explanation in the brief commentary on these graves (Price *et al.* 2003.26–28, Abb. 3).

**Bassin Parisien/Paris basin**

Figure 1 shows seven sites in this most western region of the LBK. Nieszery put them on this map of LBK graveyards, although there are only graves inside the settlements, at some sites in small groups at the edge of the settled area. Most recently, two empty graves were reported from this region, but unfortu-

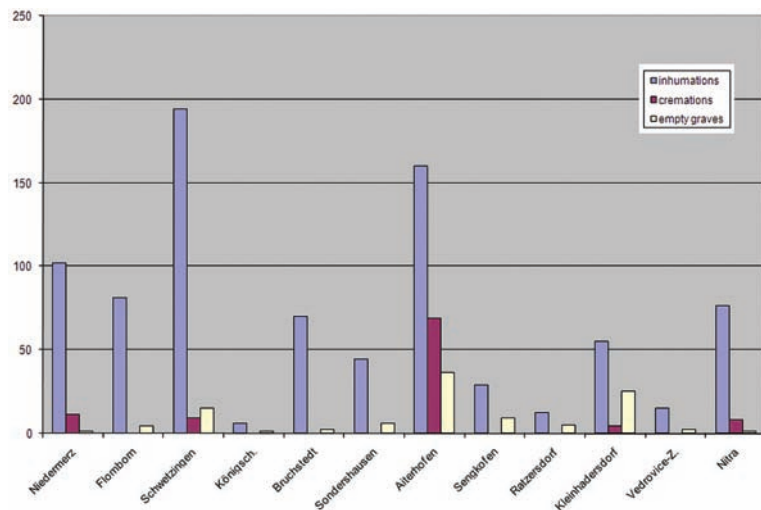
	total amount	inhumations	%	cremations	%	empty graves	%
Niedermerz	114	102	89.5	11	9.6	1	0.9
Flomborn	85	81	95.3	0	0	4	4.7
Schwetzingen	218	194	89	9	4.1	15	6.9
Königsch.	7	6	–	0		1	
Bruchstedt	72	70	97.2	0	0	2	0.8
Sondershausen	50	44	88	0	0	6	12
Aiterhofen	265	160	60.4	69	26	36	13.6
Sengkofen	38	29	76.3	0	0	9	23.7
Ratzersdorf	17	12	70.6	0	0	5	29.4
Kleinhadersdorf	84	55	65.5	4	4.8	25	29.7
Vedrovice-Z.	17	15	88.2	0	0	2	11.8
Nitra	85	76	89.4	8	9.4	1	1.2
	<b>1052</b>	<b>844</b>	<b>80.2</b>	<b>101</b>	<b>9.6</b>	<b>107</b>	<b>10.2</b>

**Tab. 1. The different grave types in the twelve LBK cemeteries with empty graves.**

nately without naming the site (Thevenet 2009. 111).

There are twelve LBK cemeteries at which empty graves have been found for certain (Tab. 1; Figs. 1 and 2). In total, more than 2500 LBK graves have been found (Jeunesse 1997.25), with twelve graveyards accounting for less than half of them, accommodating 1052 graves. The mean values for the latter are: 80.2% inhumations, 9.6% cremations, and 10.2% empty graves, but the numbers of these grave types varies considerably at different sites.

The Austrian sites at Kleinhadersdorf and Ratzersdorf show the highest percentages of empty graves: 29.4–29.7%, followed by the Bavarian sites Sengkofen (23.7%) and Aiterhofen (13.6%), the Thuringian site at Sondershausen (12%) and the Moravian site



**Fig. 2. Structure of the twelve LBK cemeteries with empty graves.**

at Vedrovce, Za dvorem (11.8%). In the remaining cemeteries, empty graves are below 10%<sup>1</sup> of the total. One has the impression that the phenomenon of empty graves might have been of greater importance in these regions than in others.

Although this type of grave did not contain a skeleton, some contained other finds (Fig. 3). As mentioned before, they were found in the back-fill or in a sort of disturbed position. Until now, the best documented situations are of Sondershausen (*Kahlke 2004.42–47, T. 14–19*); Schwetzingen (*Gerling in press.*)<sup>2</sup> and Kleinhadersdorf (*Neugebauer-Maresch, Lenneis in prep.*) will follow soon. On average, nearly 45% of the empty graves contained some ceramic remains, at most only a few sherds, and very seldom whole pots (for example: Nitra, grave 10; Flomborn, grave 18). In only about 10% of these pits were stone tools found, some together with the pottery. The stone tools are adzes, millstones and hammer-stones, most seldom flint. Some 53% of these empty graves contained nothing; they were empty in the normal sense of the world.

It is very important to point out that not even the smallest remains or ornaments have been found in these empty grave pits. This fact indicates that the disinterred corpses must still have been securely wrapped in winding sheets, and also that the time between burial and disinterment was not very long. The winding sheet was probably of organic material (leather, tissue), which rots rather quickly in central European soils. Therefore, it remains an open question as to what kind of ritual treatment these corpses underwent. And where were these corpses, or their remains, finally deposited?

Until autumn 2009 (see *Boulestin et al. 2009*), there seemed to be a possible answer to where the bodies extracted from graves could have been reburied. The scattered human remains found together with rich, and also scattered, finds in ditch like pits around the site at Herxheim in the Palatinate province of Germany were interpreted as the remains of hundreds of humans, buried there in a secondary burial rite (*Zeeb-Lanz et al. 2007*). As there are a few other

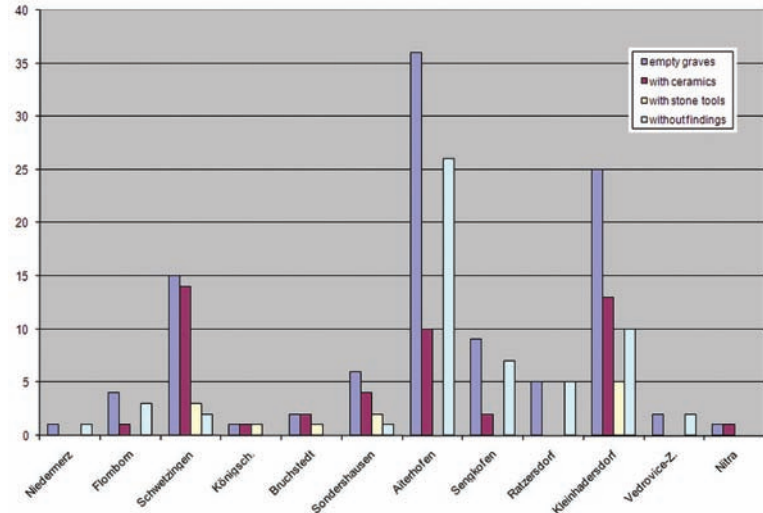


Fig. 3. Contents of empty graves.

sites, although badly excavated and not well documented, but yielding similar remains (for example: Taborac near Draßburg, Austria – *Mossler 1949*), one could suggest that similar practices occurred in other parts of LBK territory. Further investigation at Herxheim have shown that the human remains probably come from mass cannibal rites (*Boulestin et al. 2009*), and are not secondary burials. Will we ever know what people did with, perhaps, a tenth of their dead?

<sup>1</sup> As the real number of graves at Königschaffhausen is unknown, I did not calculate the ratios here.

<sup>2</sup> I am very grateful to Claudia Gerling for sending me this part of her manuscript; although I do not agree with her that only some are empty graves.

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