

CHRISTOPH JAHN

Centre for Baltic and Scandinavian Archaeology (ZBSA), Schleswig  
 christoph.jahn@zbsa.eu  
 ORCID 0000-0002-0472-030X

## WHEN BALTS MET VIKINGS AT THE CURONIAN LAGOON. STRATEGIES OF SOCIAL REPRESENTATION AT THE VIKING-AGE CEMETERY AT LINKUHNEN

### ABSTRACT

The cemetery at Linkuhnen by River Memel had a long history of usage by local Baltic tribes, starting in the early Roman Period and continuing to the Viking Age, with the highest number of burials in the 10<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. When Linkuhnen was excavated in the 1930s by German archaeologists, it was considered a Viking cemetery, since some of the grave goods (especially weaponry) seemed to bear signs of Scandinavian influences. However, the Scandinavian influence was overstated and the interaction between local Balts and Vikings was never thoroughly explained by the excavators. New research on the old excavation archives indicates that Linkuhnen was not a Viking burial ground but that incoming influences

from Scandinavia brought a shift to the internal strategies of representation by local Baltic elites. The burial rite changed from simple single cremation graves to lavishly equipped collective cremation graves for members of powerful families or military units. Another remarkable feature is the large number and ‘international’ character of weaponry in the burials, some of the highest quality (Ulfberht), while the jewellery represents local types only. Unlike other Scandinavian-influenced sites on the southern Baltic coast, the Scandinavian presence in the River Memel area only led to minor interactions between Balts and Vikings, though it had a significant impact on the local Baltic elites’ internal representation of status.

**Keywords:** Viking Age, East Prussia, cemetery, Scandinavians, Balts, Scalvians, Ulfberht swords

### Introduction

The cemetery at Linkuhnen (Rzhevskoye, Linkūnai) by River Memel (Neman, Nemunas) in former East Prussia (Kreis Niederung), now Kaliningrad Oblast, was excavated between 1928 and 1939 by German archaeologists from the Prussia-Museum in Königsberg (now Kaliningrad), mainly by Carl Engel. The excavation results were never thoroughly published before World War II. However, Linkuhnen was considered an important Viking Age site based on two articles by Carl Engel, which mainly discussed results from the excavation campaign in 1929.<sup>1</sup> It needs to be emphasized that most of the graves in Linkuhnen were excavated in later campaigns,<sup>2</sup> the results of which were only perfunctorily pub-

lished in local newspaper articles and remained unknown to archaeological research. Despite the sparse data, the cemetery at Linkuhnen has been repeatedly discussed as a Scandinavian site or even as a port of trade or an *emporium* in recent archaeological literature.<sup>3</sup> Linkuhnen can indeed be considered in the context of other Scandinavian-influenced sites on the southern Baltic coast, like Haithabu, Groß Strömkendorf, Rostock-Dierkow, Ralswiek, Menzlin, Wolin, Świelubie, Ciepłe, Bodzia, Truso, Wiskiauten and Grobiņa.<sup>4</sup> Each of these sites has had a very different history of research, which was heavily affected by the historic events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The interpretation of Scandinavian-influenced objects at the southern coast of the Baltic Sea had preoccupied archaeological research both before and after World

<sup>1</sup> Engel 1931; 1932.

<sup>2</sup> Gossler, Jahn 2019, 69, tab. 3.

<sup>3</sup> E.g. Wróblewski 2006, 108–110; Bogucki 2006, 94–95; 2012, 85, fig. 1; Żulkus, Bertašius 2009, 198.

<sup>4</sup> Maixner 2010; Steuer 1984; Kleingärtner 2014; Biermann 2020; Stanisławski 2013; Duczko 2014; 2020; Wadył 2019; Buko 2014; Jagodziński 2015; von zur Mühlen 1975; Ibsen 2009; Petrenko, Urtāns 1995; Bogucki 2006.

War II: Do Scandinavian-influenced grave goods indicate that the buried individuals were Scandinavians, and if so, what was the interaction between those Scandinavians and the local communities?<sup>5</sup>

The archaeological record of the listed sites on the southern Baltic coast shows a common Scandinavian influence on the local burial rites and grave goods as well as settlement features. However, it remains difficult to compare the sites with one another, as the Scandinavians were faced with different cultural and ethnic groups between Haithabu and Grobiņa. Some places are very well studied in their entirety (e.g. Haithabu, Grobiņa), while others have either well-studied cemeteries or well-studied settlements, but the relationship between them remains somewhat unclear (e.g. Wolin, Bodzia, Truso, Wiskiauten).

The ‘international’ character of imports as well as hacked silver scrap, scales and weights are indicators of a network of proto-urban settlements and ports of trade (*Seehandelsplätze*) or *emporia* around the Baltic Sea, which connected Scandinavians, Slavs and Balts in a ‘Baltic economic zone’.<sup>6</sup> When we look at the two most prominent Viking Age sites of former East Prussia: Linkuhnen and Wiskiauten, it becomes obvious that both places are unique in their own way. Wiskiauten is a burial mound necropolis with many typical Scandinavian grave goods and burial rites. Grave goods like scales and weights as well as Arab dirhams indicate long-distance trade, even if a corresponding Scandinavian trading place has not yet been found near Wiskiauten. The cemetery at Wiskiauten is – like most of the other Scandinavian-influenced cemeteries on the southern Baltic coast – a multi-ethnic site comprising Scandinavian and local population.<sup>7</sup>

In Linkuhnen there are so far only very faint traces of settlement, which cannot be compared in any way with places like Haithabu, Wolin or Grobiņa. No scales or weights were found at the cemetery, the only coins from Linkuhnen date to the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD (graves 323/1933 and 342/1933).

While in Grobiņa it is quite possible to distinguish Scandinavian (Rudzukalni 1, Priediens 2) and local cemeteries (Atkalni 2, Priediens and Kapsēde), we must revisit Carl Engel’s question from the 1930s: Who are the individuals buried in Linkuhnen? To answer this question, we need to take a closer look not only at the origin of the grave goods alone, but also at the specific burial rites in which the objects were laid down.

After the lost World War I and the Treaty of Versailles of 1919, the German province of East Prussia was sep-

arated from the rest of Germany. The Memel Region (Memelland, Klaipėdos kraštas) specifically was lost to Lithuania in 1923. In this heated political atmosphere, Germany reaffirmed its territorial claims against Poland in the west and Lithuania in the northeast, and in doing so also used archaeological findings for political propaganda. In the German argumentation, the Scandinavian-influenced finds of Linkuhnen showed the permanent presence of Vikings in East Prussia and ‘proved’ that only Germanic tribes had been settled in East Prussia at all times.<sup>8</sup> In this context, it is no wonder that Carl Engel overemphasized the Scandinavian influences in Linkuhnen for political reasons.<sup>9</sup> What is crucial, however, is that this overstatement from the 1930s was uncritically adopted for a long time due to a lack of published archaeological sources from Linkuhnen.

In consideration of that, the history of research at Linkuhnen was extensively reconstructed and reevaluated by the Museum of Pre- and Early History in Berlin during a research project in 2011–2014 related to the Berlin-housed mediaeval finds of the former Prussia Collection.<sup>10</sup> This new perspective on the pre-war German research in Linkuhnen was by and large an excavation of an excavation, involving a recombination of the preserved archaeological objects and different archival sources from institutions throughout Germany, Poland, Russia, Lithuania, Latvia and Sweden. The main goal was to reconstruct and reconnect the available information about the archaeological context, burial rites and grave goods of the cemetery and to review Carl Engel’s interpretations of Linkuhnen from the 1930s. The results of this research were published in 2019.<sup>11</sup>

### Excavations at Linkuhnen, 1928–1939 – the cemetery’s stratigraphy

Linkuhnen is located about 10 km west of Tilsit (today’s Sovetsk, Kaliningrad Oblast, Russia), about 4.5 km southwest of the present course of River Memel, which separates the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad from Lithuania (Fig. 1). The original excavations were executed in 1928, 1929, 1930, 1931, 1933, 1935, 1937, 1938 and 1939 by Herbert Jankuhn, Carl Engel and Fritz Jaensch. Almost 500 graves with at least 526 burials were found in a rather small area of 50 × 50 m (Fig. 2). The cemetery was in use for 1,000 years, and its occupancy can be divided into 7 phases (Fig. 3), starting at the end of the

<sup>5</sup> Von zur Mühlen 1975; Bogacki *et al.* 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Bogucki 2012, 85, fig. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Ibsen 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Steuer 2004, 426–427; Gossler, Jahn 2019, 43.

<sup>9</sup> Gossler, Jahn 2019, 45–65

<sup>10</sup> Gossler 2013; 2014; Gossler, Jahn 2013; 2014; 2015; Jahn 2016; Jahn *et al.* 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Gossler, Jahn 2019.



Fig. 1. Location of the Linkuhnen cemetery in former East Prussia (Gossler, Jahn 2019, 4, fig. 4).

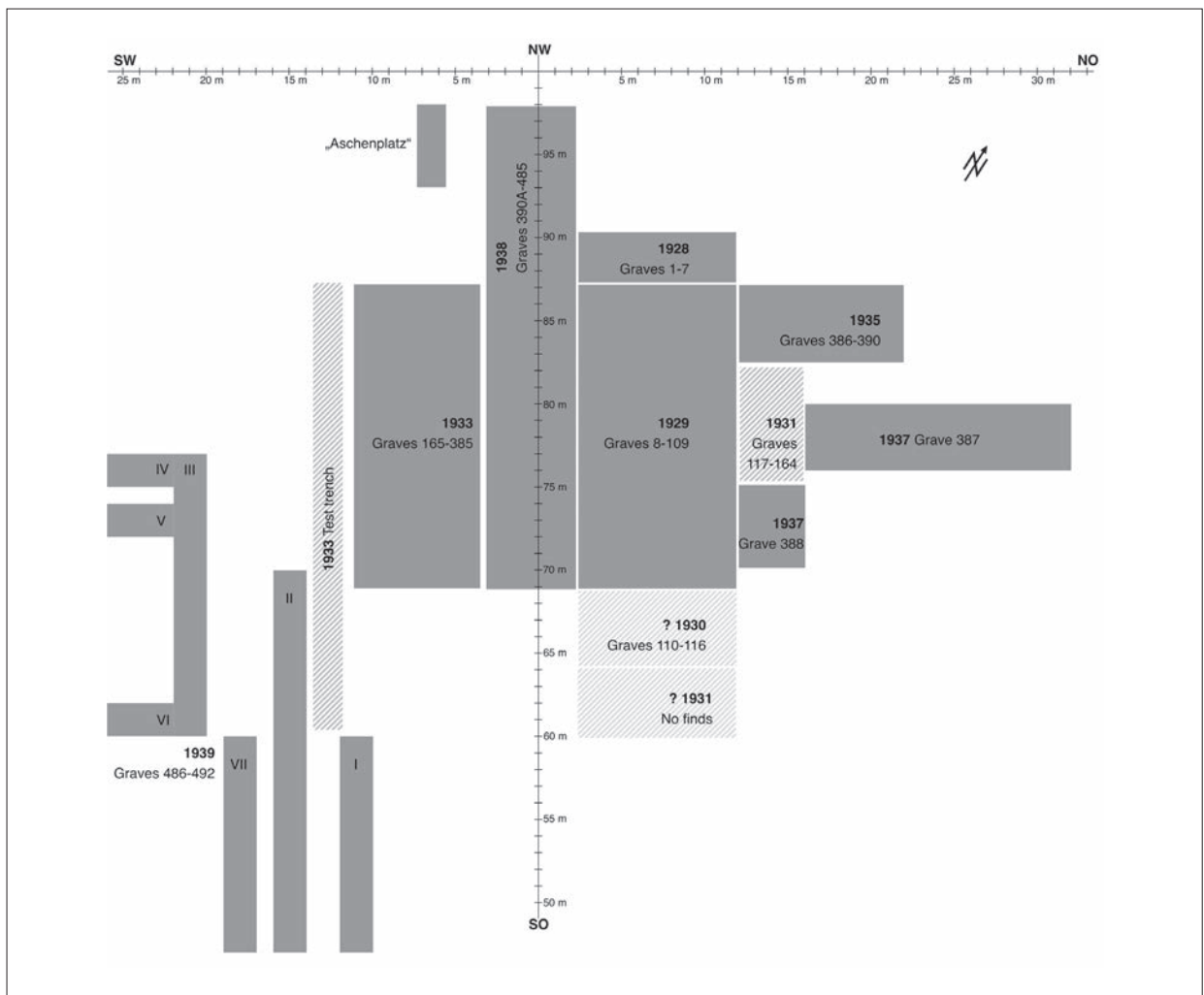


Fig. 2. Plan of the excavation area in the Linkuhnen cemetery, 1928–1939 (Gossler, Jahn 2019, 8, fig.9).

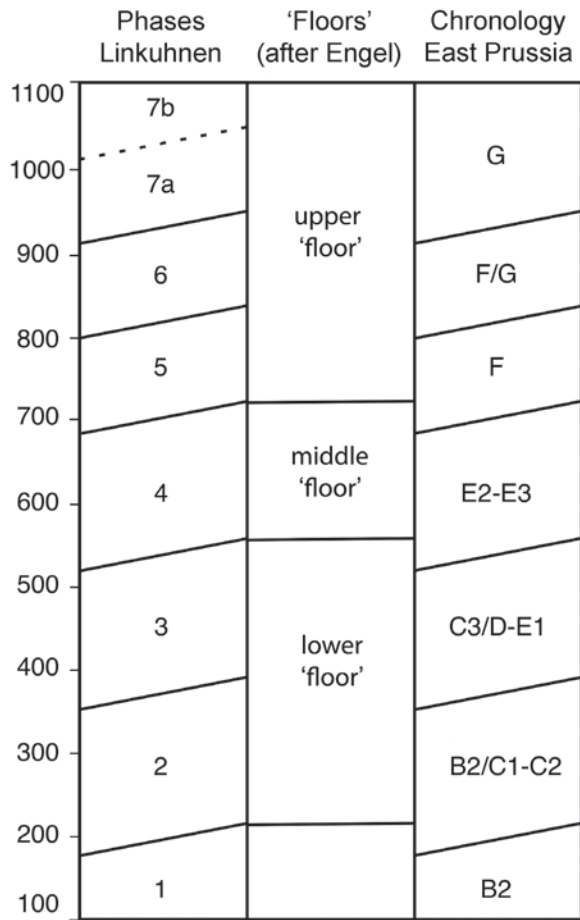


Fig. 3. Chronology of the Linkuhnen cemetery: lower, middle and upper 'floors' (*Stockwerke*) and phases 1–7 (chronology of East Prussia according to Engel 1931, 314; Gossler, Jahn 2019, 226, fig. 97).

Early Roman Period (B2) with a few cremation graves.<sup>12</sup> The main feature of the Linkuhnen cemetery is its stratigraphy and multi-level structure, which Carl Engel divided into so-called lower, middle and upper 'floors' (*Stockwerke*) (Figs 3 and 4).

The lowest layer at a depth of about 1.20–0.90 m was formed by the inhumation graves of the early Migration Period (phases 2–3), where tree coffins had survived in places. All the bodies were in the stretched supine position. In the male graves the buried often held weapons in their hands: spearheads lay in the right arm bent to the shoulder, the left hand was found on the handle of a sword or a dagger at the left hip or on the chest (Fig. 5). In the women's graves finger spirals, arm and neck rings, big hairpins and fibulae worn in pairs on the chest were mostly found (Fig. 6).<sup>13</sup>

The two upper layers were characterized by cremation burials, with the graves of the middle 'floor' at a depth of about 0.90–0.60 m containing the older cremation graves of the younger Migration Period and the transitional phase between the end of the Migration Period and the beginning of the Viking Age (phase 4). These older cremation burials often overlapped with the upper edge of the inhumation burials and contained heaps of coarse cremated remains with relatively few grave goods. Mortuary cremains and grave goods were often wrapped in cloth and interred in small wooden boxes from which wooden fragments had survived. The grave goods in the men's graves usually included an iron sword and two deformed spearheads, in the women's graves finger spirals and arm rings were found, more rarely neck rings and fibulae.<sup>14</sup>

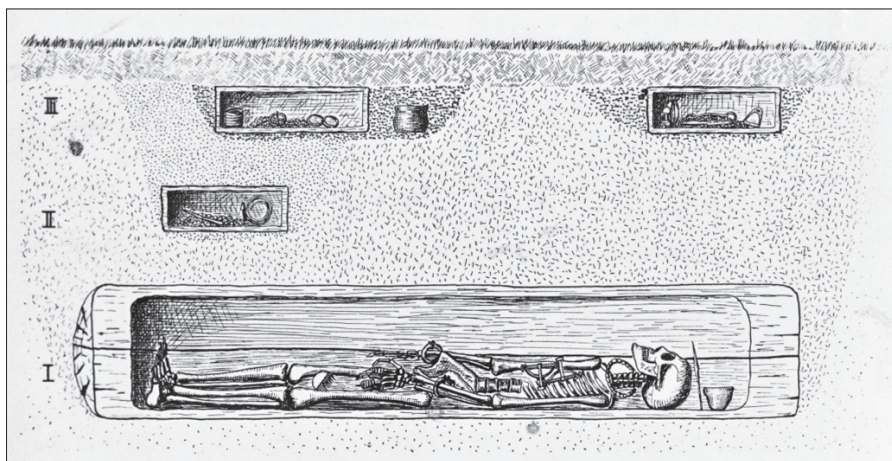


Fig. 4. Schematic representation of the stratigraphic sequence in Linkuhnen: I – lower level inhumation graves of early Migration Period; II – middle level cremation graves of late Migration Period; III – upper level cremation graves of the Viking Age (Gossler, Jahn 2019, 40, fig. 43, after Engel 1931, 315, fig. 1).

<sup>12</sup> Jahn 2016, 155.

<sup>13</sup> Gossler, Jahn 2015, 75–77; 2019, 229–238.

<sup>14</sup> Gossler, Jahn 2015, 78; 2019, 239–242.

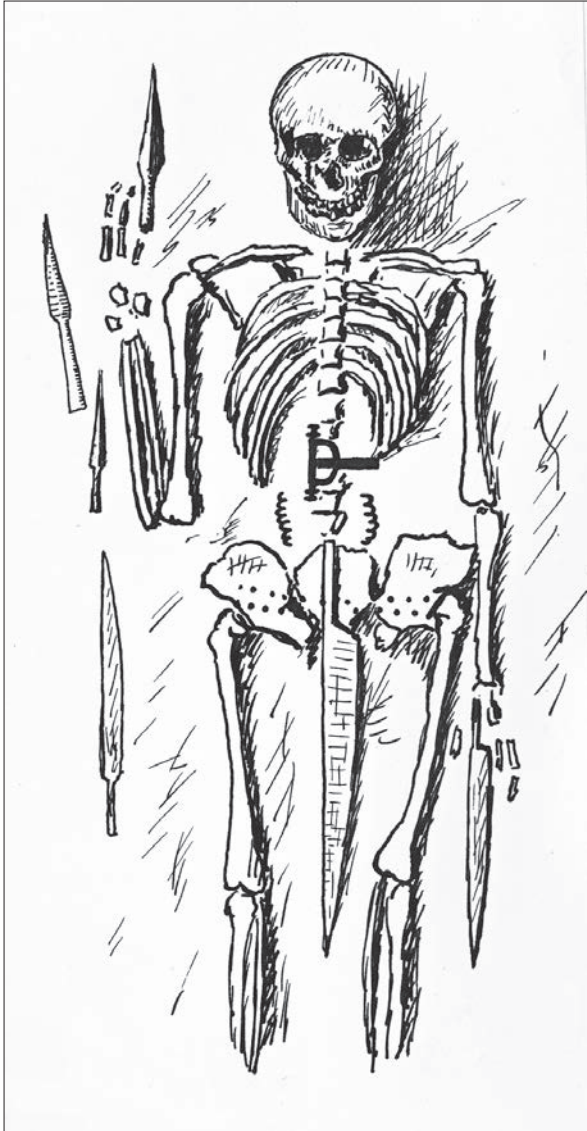


Fig. 5. Linkuhen, male inhumation grave 104/1929 (Migration Period, 5<sup>th</sup> century) (Gossler, Jahn 2019, pl. 65, 3).

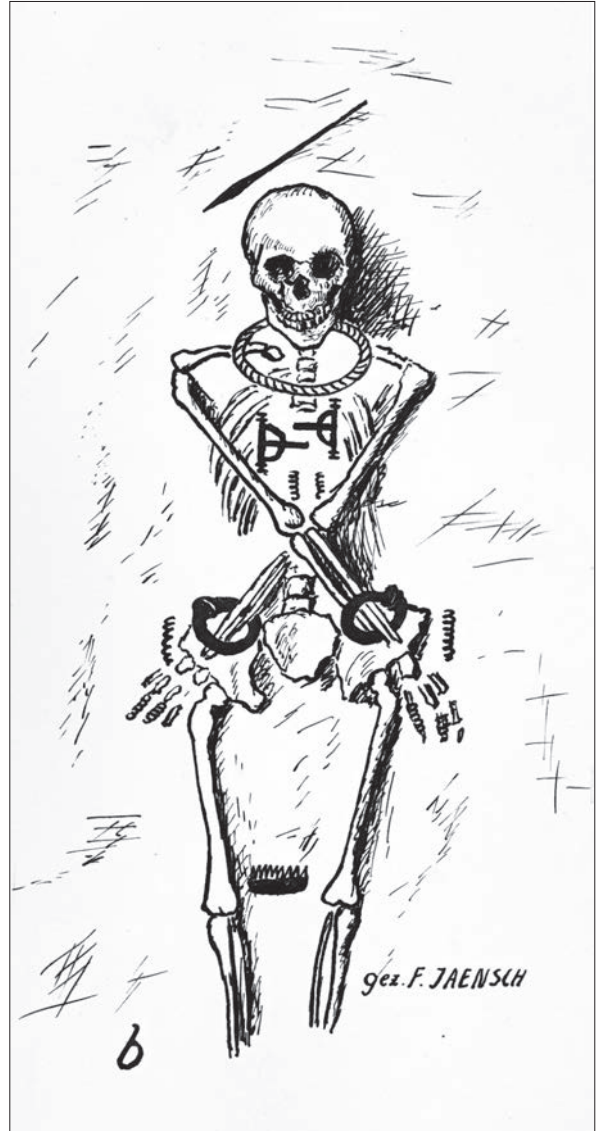


Fig. 6. Linkuhen, female inhumation grave 52B/1929 (Migration Period, 5<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup> century) (Gossler, Jahn 2019, pl. 40, 1).

With the upper ‘floor’ of the younger cremation graves at a depth of 0.60–0.30 m (phases 5–7), the number of grave goods increased drastically, while the actual burial custom hardly changed: mainly the dimensions of the wooden boxes in which cremated remains and grave goods were placed and the size of the cremation piles increased significantly. In some of men’s graves up to six swords and over 12 spearheads were found, adorned with rich bronze ornaments. The jewellery in the women’s graves was even richer and featured finger spirals, arm rings, fibulae, breast chain pendants, neck spirals, nee-

dles and belt buckles (Fig. 7). In addition, there were spinning and weaving implements, which appeared in women’s as well as men’s graves. The men’s burials also included riding accessories, such as stirrups, bridles and spurs (Fig. 8). Horse burials, which are common on the nearby Sambia Peninsula, are rather rare in Linkuhen.<sup>15</sup>

### Weaponry of the Viking Age

The Viking Age graves on the upper ‘floor’ represent the largest portion of burials in Linkuhen which

<sup>15</sup> Gossler, Jahn 2015, 78–81; 2019, 242–272.