

Some remarks on society and settlement dynamics in the early medieval Alpine foothills of north-western Noricum

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Summary

The transition from Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages in the Alpine foothills of north-western *Noricum ripense* was long seen through the lens of the *Vita Sancti Severini*'s tale of the Roman provincial population's evacuation to Italy in the late 5th century. It has been suggested that this event caused the depopulation of the entire province, followed by a wave of resettlement from the west only in the late 6th century. Another wave of migration, this time from the (south-)east, is supposed to have occurred from the mid-8th century onwards. Allegedly, these migrations manifest in ethnically distinct cemeteries dating to the Merovingian period on the one hand, and to the early Carolingian period on the other hand. Although current research no longer concurs with the notion of a settlement hiatus following Roman rule, local early medieval

archaeology largely remains constrained by the traditional interpretations. This paper presents some thoughts on the emergence and development of early medieval settlement and society in north-western *Noricum* from the Merovingian to the early Carolingian period, and attempts to go beyond positivistic ethnic labelling. A particular focus is on the early medieval cemetery topography, on the similarities and differences between the burial communities of the late 6th/7th centuries and the 8th/9th centuries, and the perspectives these diachronic observations could open up on future approaches to disruptions and continuities in the formation of settlement and society as well as political developments in the study area.

Keywords: *Noricum ripense*, Early Middle Ages, cemeteries, settlement, continuity, Merovingian period, Carolingian period

1. Introduction

After the Diocletian reforms of the 3rd century CE, the Alpine foothills that extend to the northern outer slopes of the Alps between the Rivers Inn and Salzach in the west, the Danube in the north and the River Enns in the east, formed the north-western area of the Roman province of *Noricum ripense*. Today, this geographical area is made up of the state of Upper Austria south of the Danube and the northern Flachgau district of the state of Salzburg.

The archaeological view of the transition from Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages in this region has to date been determined by the 6th-century *Vita Sancti Severini*. According to this account, the entire provincial Roman population was ordered to leave *Noricum ripense* for Italy in 488 CE following repeated invasions of Germanic hordes and the subsequent destruction of the Rugian Kingdom by Odoacer.¹ This alleged exodus had long been seen as an abrupt hiatus between the end of Roman rule in

the 5th century and the presumed resettlement of the area between the Rivers Inn, Danube and Traun in the late 6th century by groups migrating from the west. The resettlement was said to have occurred as part of the formation and expansion of the Bavarian Duchy and was traditionally interpreted as a migration of groups of "Bavarian" ethnicity. In contrast, the eastern half of the study region was thought to have become a focal point for "Slavic" settlers in search of a new homeland in the 8th century following political turmoil in the Avar Khaganate and in Carantania.² However, neither the resettlement of the area in the 6th and 7th centuries, which is traditionally dubbed the "Bavarian colonisation", nor the onset of the "Slavic" occupation over the course of the 8th century is backed up by written evidence. Early medieval written sources concerning north-western *Noricum* date only from around the mid-8th century onwards. They depict political and ecclesiastical developments related to the Bavarian Duchy, such as the founding of the monasteries Mondsee (748 CE) and Kremsmünster (777 CE) by Bavarian Dukes, and also men-

¹ *Vita Sancti Severini*, chap. 39/4, 44/5. See HALSALL 2007, 285; WOLFRAM 2017, 46–48.

² Cf. various papers in HOLTER 1980; TOVORNIK 1998.

Überlegungen zu Siedlungs- und Gesellschaftsdynamiken im frühmittelalterlichen Alpenvorland des nordwestlichen Ufernorikums

Die Sicht auf den Übergang von Spätantike zu Frühmittelalter im Alpenvorland des nordwestlichen Ufernorikums war lange determiniert durch die in der „*Vita Sancti Severini*“ kolportierte Evakuierung der gesamten Provinzialbevölkerung nach Italien im ausgehenden 5. Jahrhundert. Lange ging man davon aus, dass dieses Ereignis zu einer kompletten Entvölkerung der Provinz geführt habe, die erst im ausgehenden 6. Jahrhundert durch eine Neubesiedlung des Gebiets von Westen her endete. Ab der Mitte des 8. Jahrhunderts soll es zu einer weiteren Migrationswelle – diesmal von (Süd-)Osten her – gekommen sein. Diese Bevölkerungsbewegungen meinte man in ethnisch gedeuteten Gräberfeldern der Merowingerzeit einerseits und frühen Karolingerzeit andererseits ablesen zu können. Obwohl heute davon ausgegangen wird, dass es in der Region zu keinem kompletten Bevölkerungsbruch am Ende der römischen Herrschaft kam, bleibt die lokale frühmittelalterliche Archäologie großteils in den traditionellen Inter-

pretationen verhaftet. In diesem Beitrag werden einige Überlegungen zur Entstehung und Entwicklung der frühmittelalterlichen Siedlungs- und Gesellschaftsstrukturen in Nordwest-Noricum von der Merowinger- bis in die frühe Karolingerzeit vorgestellt, die über positivistische ethnische Interpretationen hinausgehen. Ein besonderes Augenmerk gilt dabei der frühmittelalterlichen Gräberfeldtopographie, den Gemeinsamkeiten und Unterschieden zwischen den Bestattungsgemeinschaften des späten 6./7. und des 8./9. Jahrhunderts, und den Perspektiven, die ein diachroner Ansatz für die künftige Annäherung an Brüche, Kontinuitäten und Wandel in der Siedlungs- und Bevölkerungsgenese, aber auch an die politische Entwicklung der Region ermöglichen können.

Schlagworte: *Noricum ripense*, Frühmittelalter, Bestattung, Siedlung, Kontinuität, Merowingerzeit, Karolingerzeit

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