



The Mühlen Eichsen Graveyard site in late September 2017.

The cemetery of Mühlen Eichsen and the Jastorf Culture of Northern Germany

A brief summary

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The Pre-Roman Iron Age in Northern Germany

The continental central European Iron Age is characterized by many cultural phenomena. While southern Germany is dominated by Hallstatt and Latène culture, northern Germany, resp. northeastern Germany is inhabited by people of the so-called Jastorf Culture (ca. 650 BC – 0 AD). Named after a little village near Uelzen, Lower Saxony, this Iron Age culture has its core area in Schleswig-Holstein, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, the northern parts of Brandenburg and Saxony-Anhalt and the eastern parts of Lower Saxony¹. There is a chronological shift between the southern Iron Age cultures and the Jastorf Culture: while in the southern regions the Iron Age starts ca. 800 BC, in northern Germany the beginning is fixed ca. at 650-600 BC.

The Jastorf Culture itself can be divided into different sub-cultures, which, simply spoken, are distinguished by different distributions of artefact forms. There is kind of a discussion about the methodological problems of differentiation and how boundaries are drawn². I orientate myself to the works of J. Brandt and H. Seyer. The following sub groups, which are the main distribution area of typical Jastorf material, have been distinguished by Seyer, disregarding chronological subtleties: The South Jutland Group, The Lower Elbe-Group³, The Warnow-Oder Estuary Group⁴, The Lake Group⁵ and The Middle Elbe-Havel-Group⁶ (see Illustration 1 for an overview). While H. Seyer separates sub groups by different distributions of artefact forms (so-called "Formenkreise") only, J. Brandt in addition sums up the main sub groups to a core Jastorf area, while the edging ones belong to a periphery, where Jastorf material is only an influence, but not the main material (Illustration 2)⁷. Beyond the core region Jastorf material can be found in neighbouring regions such as western Poland, southern Brandenburg and Saxony-Anhalt and southern to central and north western parts of lower Saxony⁸. In the centuries BC a spreading of Jastorf elements along the Elbe and connected river systems southwards can be observed⁹.

The research of Jastorf Culture started in the late 19th and early 20th century. Early research history is connected to G. Schwantes. He published a monograph regarding early urn fields in the surrounding area of Uelzen and Lüneburg in eastern Lower Saxony. In his monograph he coined the term Jastorf Culture and worked out his first relative-chronological system of it. Similar approaches have been carried out by others in different regions, but the mainframe was set by G. Schwantes and till the mid-twentieth century many orientated on his work.

¹ Esp. Brandt 2001.

² Latest: Nikulka 2014, 50-55.

³ Schleswig-Holstein, eastern Lower Saxony, Western Mecklenburg, Parts of northern Saxony-Anhalt

⁴ Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania and parts of northern Brandenburg

⁵ parts of southern Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania and northern Brandenburg, in an area with great glacial lakes such as the Müritz.

⁶ Central to western Brandenburg, eastern parts of northern to central Saxony-Anhalt

⁷ Brandt 2001, 25f.; Seyer 1982, 92 Abb. 41.

⁸ Brandt 2001, 26.

⁹ For example, typical Jastorf shaped pots have been found in an Iron Age graveyard of Kunitz, City of Jena, Thuringia. This cemetery also provides typical Latène material such as pots and vessels made on a potter's wheel, but also typical Latène belt chains and typical Latène fibulae. This is an interesting impression of how in contrary of Latène objects spreading northwards earlier Jastorf materials are spreading southwards into regions occupied by Latène culture and related groups. Recommended literature: Geschow/Ipach/Kupetz et al. 2014, 51-61; Köhler et al. 2014, 76-77; Schüler 2019, 91-93 and especially Schneider 2014, 103-106 regarding the graveyard of Kunitz. Also see Keiling 2005, 185-203 and Sievers 2014, 367-376 for a brief overview reg. contacts between (early) Jastorf Culture to southern Latène culture and Brandt 2001 for a detailed study regarding the connection between Jastorf and Latène.

From the 1950s the work got more regionalized. Although Germany was divided into two separate states, the research on Pre-Roman Iron Age was carried out more or less intensive in both eastern and western Germany. In the Federal Republic of Germany, it has been K.-H. Willroth and especially H. Hingst, who pushed the research of Jastorf Culture. It was him, who published many monographs on Jastorf cemeteries in Schleswig-Holstein and created a new chronological frame system for this region. In the German Democratic Republic, it mainly has been H. Keiling who also published cemeteries and worked out a new chronological frame system for the regions of nowadays Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania. Many others, such as R.-H. Behrends in the Federal Republic of Germany or H.-J. Gommel in the German Democratic Republic examined smaller regions or single cemeteries¹⁰. After the fall of the Iron Curtain, the number of publications of single cemeteries or whole regions as monography decreased. Publishing activities were limited to articles and contributions in conference reports, with some exceptions¹¹. Especially as a result of big linear building projects in the 1990s and 2000s the excavation activity intensified, but publications are limited to short reports in collected volumes mostly¹².

The chronology of Jastorf Culture has been a central research subject from the beginning, when G. Schwantes in the early 20th century first defined the characteristics of “Jastorf Civilisation”. While his chronological system was made up by three stages¹³, nowadays the most systems consist of two main stages with sub stages. Protagonists of chronological research for the main areas have been H. Hingst (mainly Lower Elbe-Group) and H. Keiling (Warnow-Oder Estuary-Group as well as Lake Group and eastern parts of the Lower Elbe-Group) despite others (see Illustration 3 for an overview of regional Jastorf chronologies). Generally spoken, the two main stages (which are often named after the researcher who developed it)¹⁴ separate the older and the younger Pre-Roman Iron Age in Northern Germany. The cut is often made by the first appearance of objects which originate in the Latène culture, but there still is a discussion about that. But in general the relative chronological frame is fixed.

The connecting element of the Jastorf Culture (or better cultures?) is the cremation burial¹⁵. Graveyards can consist of only a few graves, but also reach the dimensions of up to thousands of graves, as we know it from cemeteries like Schwissel¹⁶ (~ 2500 graves, County Bad Segeberg, Schleswig-Holstein) or Mühlen Eichsen (~ 4500-5000 graves, County Northwest-Mecklenburg, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania). Mostly the graveyards contain between 100 and 500 graves. The construction elements of graves take many shapes (see Illustrations 9a-g for a glimpse). The span extends from simple graves without any stone installations over

¹⁰ There could be quoted many more single studies

¹¹ I'd like to mention two exceptions: the graveyard of Badow is one. The material was published by G. Bemann as a monography in 1999, the analysis as an article by H.-J. Nüsse in 2007. Another recently published graveyard is Muchow (Keiling 2017), worked out by H. Keiling, who is still into Jastorf research.

¹² For a detailed research history and a summary of the state of research in the different Jastorf areas, I highly recommend Brandt 2001, 26ff. and Brandt/Rauchfuß 2014.

¹³ He divided it using three different cemeteries: the urn field of Jastorf, the urn field of Rippdorf and the urn field of Seedorf, which are thus eponymic for his three chronological stages. Sometimes even nowadays researches refer to his system, but more for a quick determination in the field or in a view of research history.

¹⁴ For example, the chronology of H. Hingst divides into the Stages Hingst Ia – Id and Hingst IIa – IIId, the system of Keiling divides into Keiling Ia-Ic and IIa – IIc.

¹⁵ Which is kind of interesting, as in the Urnfield Period of the Late Bronze age it is central to southern Germany it is similar, but in northern Germany the Late Bronze Age people buried their dead in burial mounds, but also as cremation.

¹⁶ Behrends 1968; in fact, Schwissel and Mühlen Eichsen have a lot in common, f. e. the high number of burials, grave constructions, finds etc.

graves, were the urn stands on a stone or got a capestone (or both). In turn, others are completely surrounded by a stone construction. In addition to that, especially in the Lower Elbe-Group, but also in the Warnow-Oder Estuary Group, the graves can have horizontal stone construction laying above the urns. For example, in Mühlen Eichsen and Schwissel several graves got round or rectangular stone settings without or with paving above the actual burial¹⁷.

The cremated remains are mostly filled into an urn and buried, but there are also some examples, where you find a compact pack of cremation remains without any container (these ones are most likely originally buried in an organic container, which rotted in the course of time). The grave goods, which generally spoken are not very "rich", often consist of small ceramic vessels like cups and beakers, many shapes of bronze and iron needles, belt hooks and belt rings, fibulae (local forms and later on Latène forms as well as adaptations of Latène forms), different types of earrings and pearls, rarely pendants, shaving knives, armrings and bracelets, urn resin and objects such as spindle whorls and rattles, besides others. In many cases the grave goods have been on the pyre with the dead body and thus were often partly destroyed by fire (see illustration 4-5 to get an impression of belt hooks, needles and fibulae).

Some special grave goods are found very rarely. First there is the so-called Holstein Belt, which consists of plates made of bronze, which are connected by massive bronze rings (see illustration 6). As the name suggests, their main distribution area is located in Holstein, the southern part of Schleswig-Holstein. The second object is the so-called Altmärkischer Kettenplattenschmuck (Altmark chain and plate jewellery). Ideally it consists of two metal plates made out of bronze, which on the upper end are connected to the clothing by Altmark fibulae (see illustration 7a)¹⁸. The lower ends of the plates are connected by bronze chains. Both objects are said to represent a higher social rank of their owners. The same could be said for the rarely occurring armrings and especially Crown Bracelets (see illustration 7b). But after all, it has to be recorded, that the graves of the Jastorf Culture do not show a social hierarchy, even if some contain rare objects. Also the combination of grave goods and sepulchral constructions doesn't provide a proper hint regarding social hierarchy.

The biggest desideratum exists regarding settlement archaeology of Jastorf Culture. While in Denmark there have been a few studies on settlement structures, the German archaeology lacks of comparable studies. One reason could be that the research of the last 7 decades was focused on the examination of typology and chronology and thus concentrated on cemeteries (except a study on a Late Bronze- and Iron Age settlement from Zedau, Altmark¹⁹, Saxony-Anhalt and some minor investigations as a result of large linear building projects such as gas pipelines and autobahns in the 1990s and early 2000s²⁰. To sum it up, the state of research is unsatisfactory.

¹⁷ There are also two examples of a number of burials laying underneath an elongated stone pavement, one is from Timmberge (Schleswig-Holstein) and the other is from Schmölln (Brandenburg). These structures are unique in the grave construction canon of the Jastorf groups so far, see Hücke 1954, 55-62 and Bartels 2015, 62-66 for further information

¹⁸ Altmark fibulae and Altmark chain and plate jewellery is named after an area of northern Saxony Anhalt, in which both has been first found and defined. Actually the main distribution area includes the Altmark, but the objects are also spread in the neighbouring regions and can also be found in the more distant core areas of Jastorf Culture.

¹⁹ Horst 1985.

²⁰ f. e. Engel 2014, 157-160; Weiß 2014, 161-164 and others.

The cemetery of Mühlen Eichsen – A summary of the biggest graveyard of Jastorf Culture²¹

The cemetery of Mühlen Eichsen is the most important urn field of Jastorf Cultures core area. Its chronological span extends from 600 BC to 100 AD. Its located in the federal state Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, roundabout 20km north western of the capital city Schwerin in the county North Western Mecklenburg. With ca. 5000 buried individuals it's the largest Jastorf Culture cemetery so far. Discovered at the beginning of the 20th century, it has been continuously examined since 1992 by the State Office for Culture and Heritage Conservation of Mecklenburg Western Pomerania as well as the Department of Archaeology of Prehistory to the Early Middle Ages of the Friedrich-Schiller-University of Jena. Till now, the focus of research has been on burial rites, construction of graves, the social differences between the buried individuals within the cemetery complex, demography, questions of typology and chronology, paleo environment and on the beginning, continuity and the ending of site occupation in the early Roman Period.

Like many archaeological sites, Mühlen Eichsen was discovered randomly. It was in the early 20th century, when the road between Mühlen Eichsen and Schwerin was to be paved with stones. When the road workers unearthed the first urns, they didn't notice they have discovered something special. That is why they destroyed many burials and used the stones of the graves cobbling as construction material and smashed the urns hoping to find a hidden treasure. This inappropriate handling destroyed minimum 200 graves and went on until R. Beltz, an early prehistorian in Schwerin and thus responsible for area of the Grand Duchy of Mecklenburg-Schwerin, heard about the discovery. He carried out first excavations in 1907 and noticed quickly that it was a Pre-Roman Iron Age cemetery. But he didn't carry on with excavating the whole site, so its enormous extend wasn't discovered in the early days. Archaeological investigations in Mühlen Eichsen stopped until 1993, when the site was rediscovered during construction works of a gas pipeline. Systematic surveying of the graveyard and some small sample excavations not only indicated a dense occupation of the area, but also showed an urgent need for large scale excavations due to massive destruction of graves by intensive agricultural usage of the graveyards expanse. During excavations, that lasted from 1994 till 2003, 6200 evident structures including 4650 burials were uncovered and documented (see Illustration 8 for an overview). Excavations ended for the time being, but parts of the graveyard are still to be unearthed²². Since then the process of archaeological evaluation of structures and finds is in progress and will take many more years to be finished. In the last years it concentrated on the south group, which has been examined by many students as a B.A. or M.A. thesis (or better, the German pendant: Jahresarbeit and Magisterarbeit) and has been topic of many articles in the last 15-20 years²³.

The usage of the Mühlen Eichsen site starts in the Late Bronze Age. Round areas, in which no cremation burial has been found, indicate an early coverage of the site with burial mounds. The cremation burials seem to cluster at the bottom of the hills. It seems likely to expect the earliest Iron Age burials in this area, though due to erosion it is unclear if there have been only the recognized hills or even some more but now destroyed hills. The youngest burials

²¹ This summary is based on a description of the research project. The original text can be found on the homepage of the Seminar für Ur- und Frühgeschichtliche Archäologie (http://www.ufg.uni-jena.de/Projekte/Aktuelle+Projekte/Vorgeschichte/M%C3%BChlen_Eichsen/Das+Gr%C3%A4berfeld.html). The latest publication of results regarding the cemetery can be found in the article Ettel 2014, 169-204. There you can find a more detailed overview as well as further literature regarding the site if necessary.

²² Especially in the northern and north western parts of the site.

²³ Ettel 2014 is the actual one, but there are a few more to come soon.

date in to the first century AD and thus to the early Roman Period. As described above and typical for Jastorf Culture, all graves in Mühlen Eichsen are cremation burials. Despite that all mentioned forms of cremations (with and without urn) and all shapes of grave constructions (from no stone construction to stone packing overlaid by stone paving) can be observed (Illustrations 9a-9g are all examples from Mühlen Eichsen). Not in every case, but quite often, there is more than one burial underneath a stone setting/stone paving²⁴.

The density of coverage with burials partly varies substantially with parts of the graveyard being more or less empty while others are almost overcrowded²⁵. This led to the conclusion that there are 5 burial ground groups (see Illustration X): the eastern group, the southern group, the western group, the north western group and the northern group. The groups differ regarding the number of graves. For example, the northern group contains nearly 2000 burials while the north western group only contains approx. 460 burials. Also the groups seem to differ regarding their preservation²⁶. The different groups are thought to represent a single burial community each, thus every group is said to be its own "small graveyard". This leads to the interpretation that the whole graveyard has to be seen as a central burial place for the surrounding settlement chambers.

Regarding the finds, the full spectrum of typical Jastorf objects as mentioned above has been recorded. Mentionable are very special grave goods like the found Holstein Belts, the Altmark Chain and Plate jewellery, so-called Crown Bracelets²⁷ and the Pomeranian Fibulae, which indicate inner cultural contacts between the Mühlen Eichsen people and northwestern, southern and eastern regions edging regions of Jastorf core area (see Illustration 10 for an impression of their distribution).

The Mühlen Eichsen site offers a very high potential for modern archaeological science approaches. Till today it is totally unclear, how wide the catchment area of the graveyard was and how far the people went to bury their dead there. It would give us also the opportunity to check if the defined burial groups really represent different settlements or even settlement chambers. And it is still unclear whether the mentioned special grave goods got to the burial communities by trade or if the individuals buried with them did move from their origin to the Mühlen Eichsen area, died and were buried there with the goods they brought from their ancestral home²⁸. To answer these questions would not only give us a direct impression of the mobility of Iron Age people in northern Germany. It would also shed some light on the graveyards magnitude in the Iron Age settlement structure²⁹ of North Western Mecklenburg. A comparable approach for a Jastorf graveyard is – as far as I know – absent³⁰.

²⁴ Which immediately brings up questions about the relations between the individuals buried underneath the same pavement.

²⁵ Yet it seems as if only in single cases a younger grave has destroyed an older one, which led to the conclusion that the graves have been marked on the surface (for example it seems likely the stone pavings and capstones of the burials have been visible on the surface originally).

²⁶ It is still to be examined how big the influence of preservation is regarding the definition of burial site groups, but more or less it seems as if the theory of different areas of occupancy is valid.

²⁷ The main distribution area of these bracelets is Middle Jutland.

²⁸ This question cannot only be asked regarding the mentioned special grave goods from the Jastorf core area, but also the Latène objects.

²⁹ One aspects should be mentioned regarding this: first there are – as mentioned in the text above – a few more big graveyards with much more than 1000 burials. This leads to the question how far the genesis of these sites is comparable to one another.

³⁰ Another interesting field is archaeogenetics, which is actually also examined in cooperation with the MPI-SHH.

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Illustrations

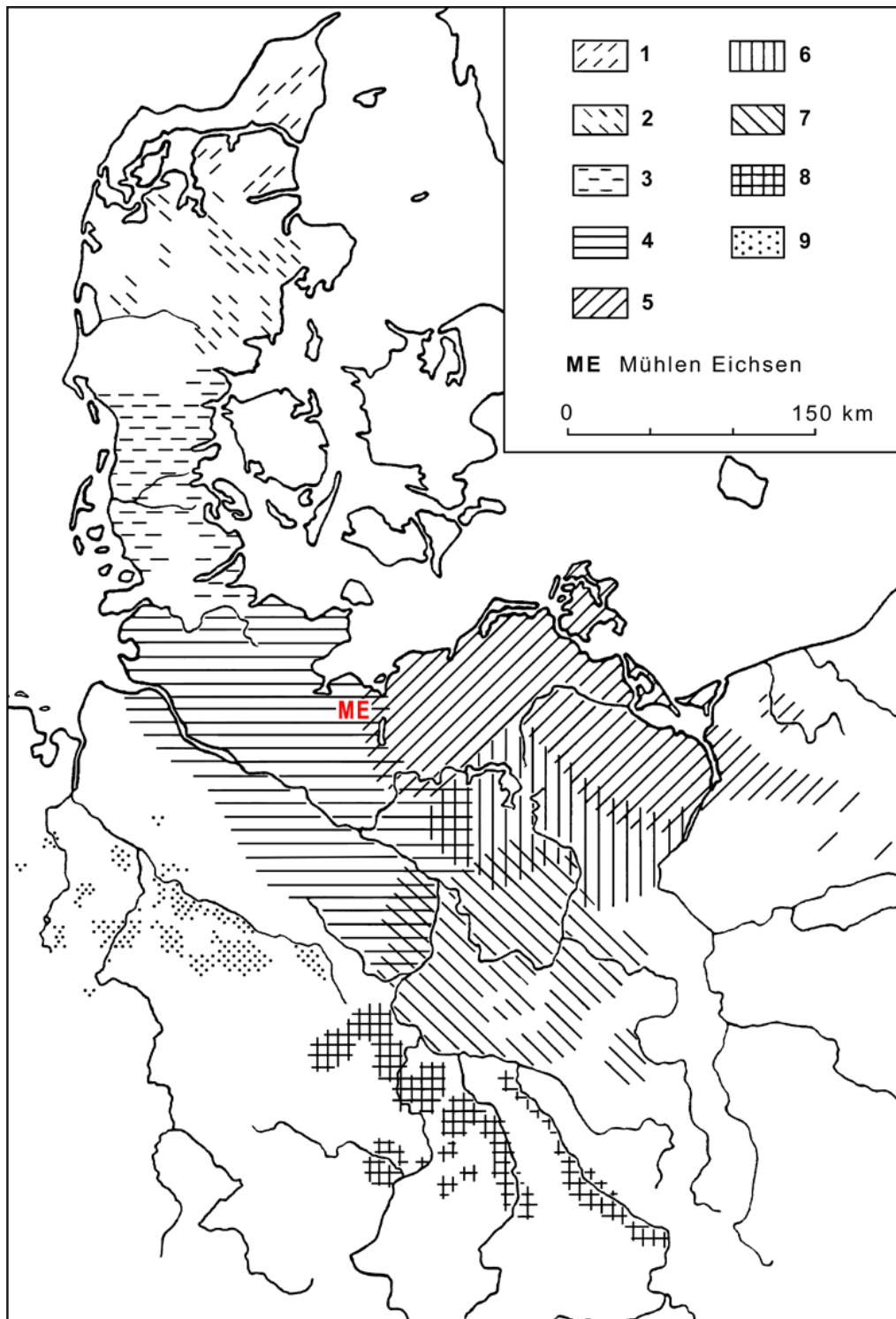


Illustration 1: The different sub groups of Jastorf Culture (bold ones are the core area of Jastorf Culture; normal ones are periphery): 1 – Northern Jutland Group; 2 – Middle Jutland Group; **3 – South Jutland Group**; **4 – Lower Elbe Group**; **5 – Warnow-Oder Estuary Group**; 6 – Lake Group; 7 – Middle Elbe-Havel Group; 8 – Elbe Saale Group; 9 – Nienburg Group (Ettel 2014, Abb. 5 after Seyer 1982, Abb. 41).

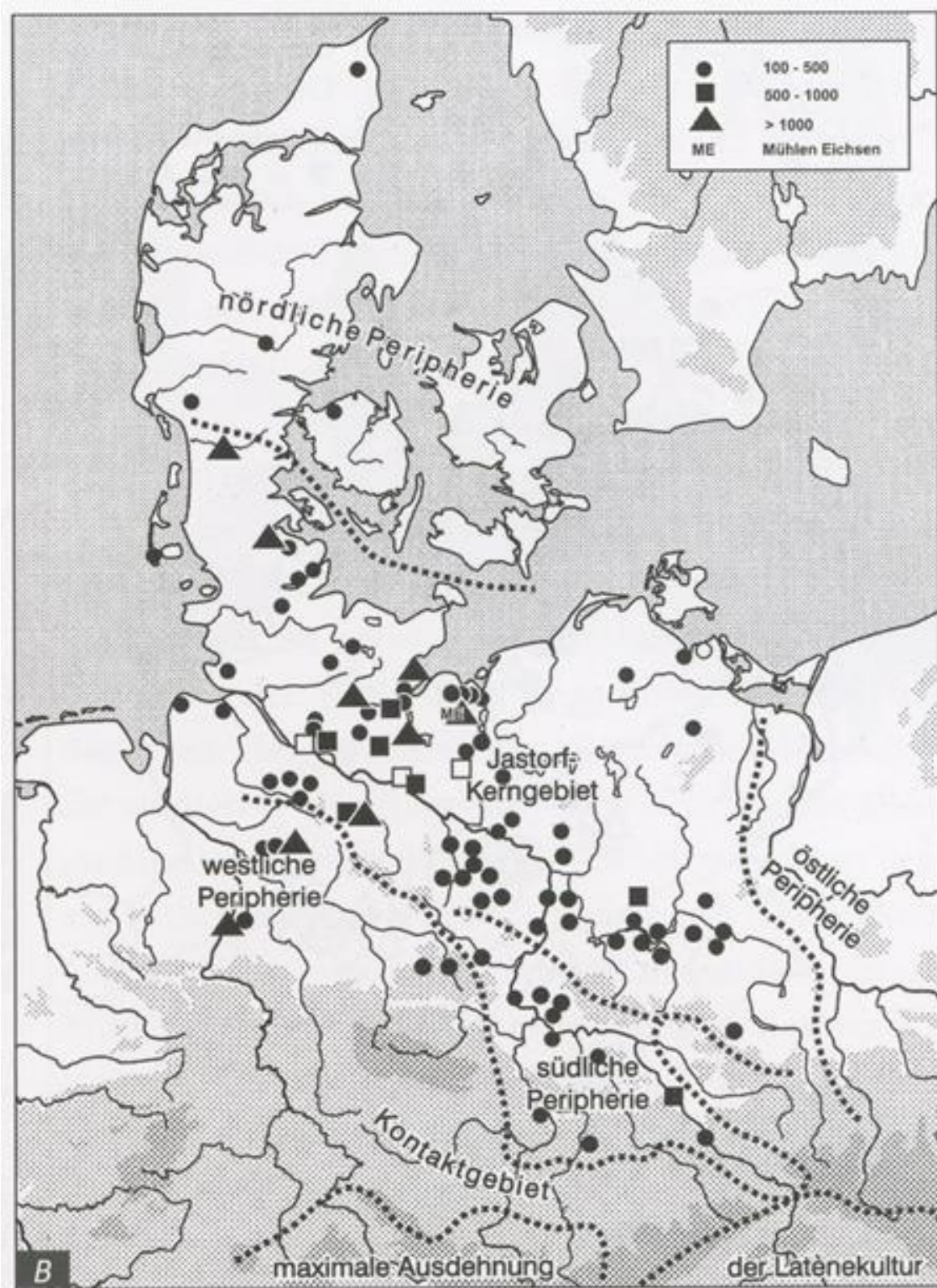


Illustration 2: J. Brandts division of Jastorf Culture into a core area and periphery. Also plotted on this map are graveyards from 100 graves (Ettel 2014, Abb. 5 after Brandt 2001, IV- V).

	Sachsen-Anhalt Müller 1985	Brandenburg Seyer 1982	Altmark Gomolka 1972	Nordost-Niedersachsen Schwantes 1909/11	Harcck 1973a	Holstein Hingst 1959	Willroth 1992	West-Mecklenburg Kelling 1969	Vor-Pommern Reinecke 1988	Becker 1961	Jütland Martens 1996	Hachmann 1960
480	Ha D					la		la	la			
	Phase 1	la	la	Jastorf a	la	lb	1	lb	la	(a)		
390	Phase 2				lb	lc	2			I	IA	
330	Phase 3	lb	lb	Jastorf b	lc	ld	3	lc	lb	(b)	IB	
	LT B2			Jastorf c	ld		4					
250	LT B2/C1			(1)	Ila		5		Ila	II	IIA	
180	LT C1	Ila	Ila	Ripdorf		Ila	6	Ila				
	LT C2			(2)		Ilb	7	Ilb				Früh-Phase
120	LT C2	Ilb1	Ilb	(1)	Ilb	Ilc	8		Ilb1			Mittel-Phase
	LT D1	Ilb2		(2)	Ild	Ild	9	Ilc				früh
60	LT D1/2			(3)								spät
	LT D2			See-dorf (3)				Ild	Ilb2		IIB	Spät-Phase

Illustration 3: Overview about synchronized regional Jastorf chronologies compared to the chronology of the Latène Culture (after Brandt 2001, Abb. 3)



Illustration 4: Typical forms of Jastorf Belt Hooks (from front to back: Einfacher Gürtelhaken, Zungengürtelhaken, Haftarmgürtelhaken, Plattengürtelhaken) (Wilroth 2002, Abb. 338b)



Illustration 5: Typical forms of Jastorf Needles and Fibulae (Wilroth 2002, Abb. 342/343).

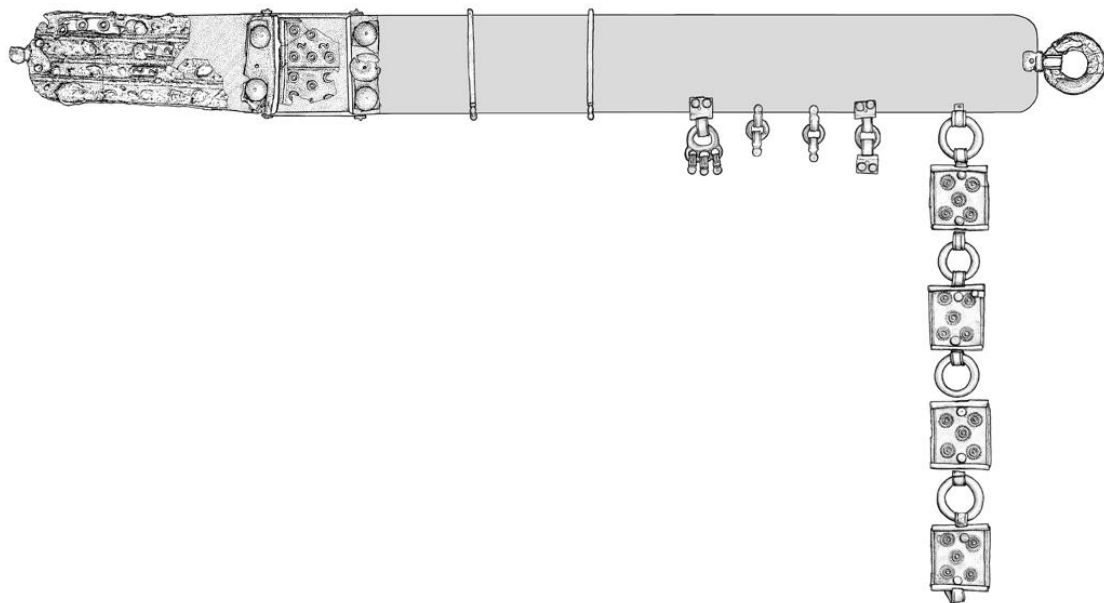


Illustration 6: An example of a Holstein Belt.



Illustration 7a: An example of an Altmark Chain and Plate Jewellery and how it might have been worn.

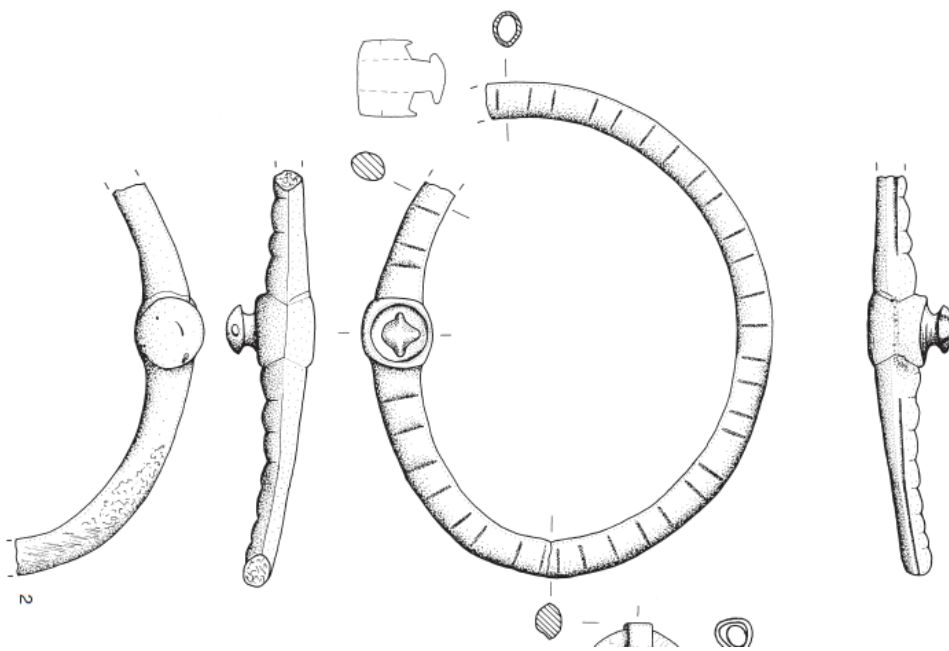


Illustration 7b: Example of a Crown Bracelett.

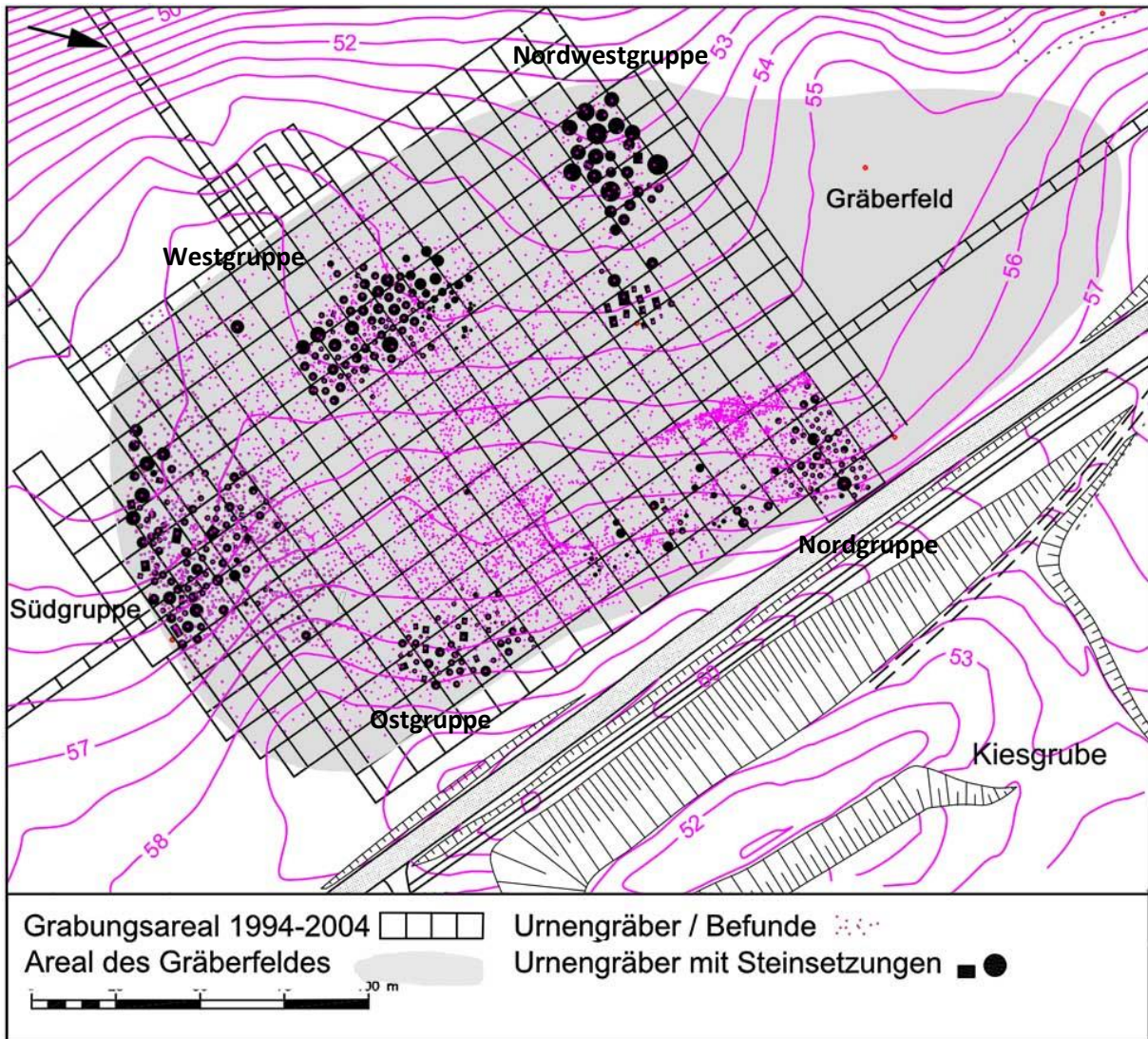


Illustration 8: Plan of the Mühlen Eichsen Graveyard with its 5 occupation groups. The gray overlay shows the expected maximal area of the graveyard. The small boxes show the excavated areas.



Illustration 9a: Typical burial without any stone construction



MUEHLEN EICHSEN
FOTO NR. 1397 FPL 1
BEFUND 926
06.08.97

Illustration 9b: Typical urn grave with capstone.



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FOTO NR. 1316 FPL 1
BEFUND 766
14.07.97

Illustration 9c: Typical urn grave with the urn standing on a stone and covered by a capstone.



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NWM FPL.1
QUAD. 190N / 500E
FOTO NR. 453
BEFUND.322 19.4.96

Illustration 9d: A stone packing which sheathed the whole grave.



Illustration 9e: A circular stone pavement covering/overlaying the grave(s).



Illustration 9f: The circular stone constructions also appear without paving.
The stone in the middle is a capestone of an urn.

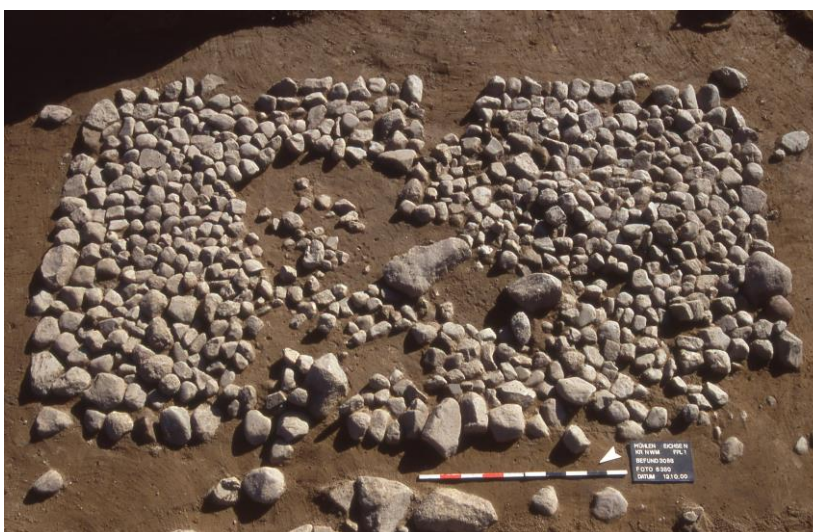


Illustration 9g: The rectangular stone paving is also common,
yet not found as often as circular ones. It also appears without pavement.

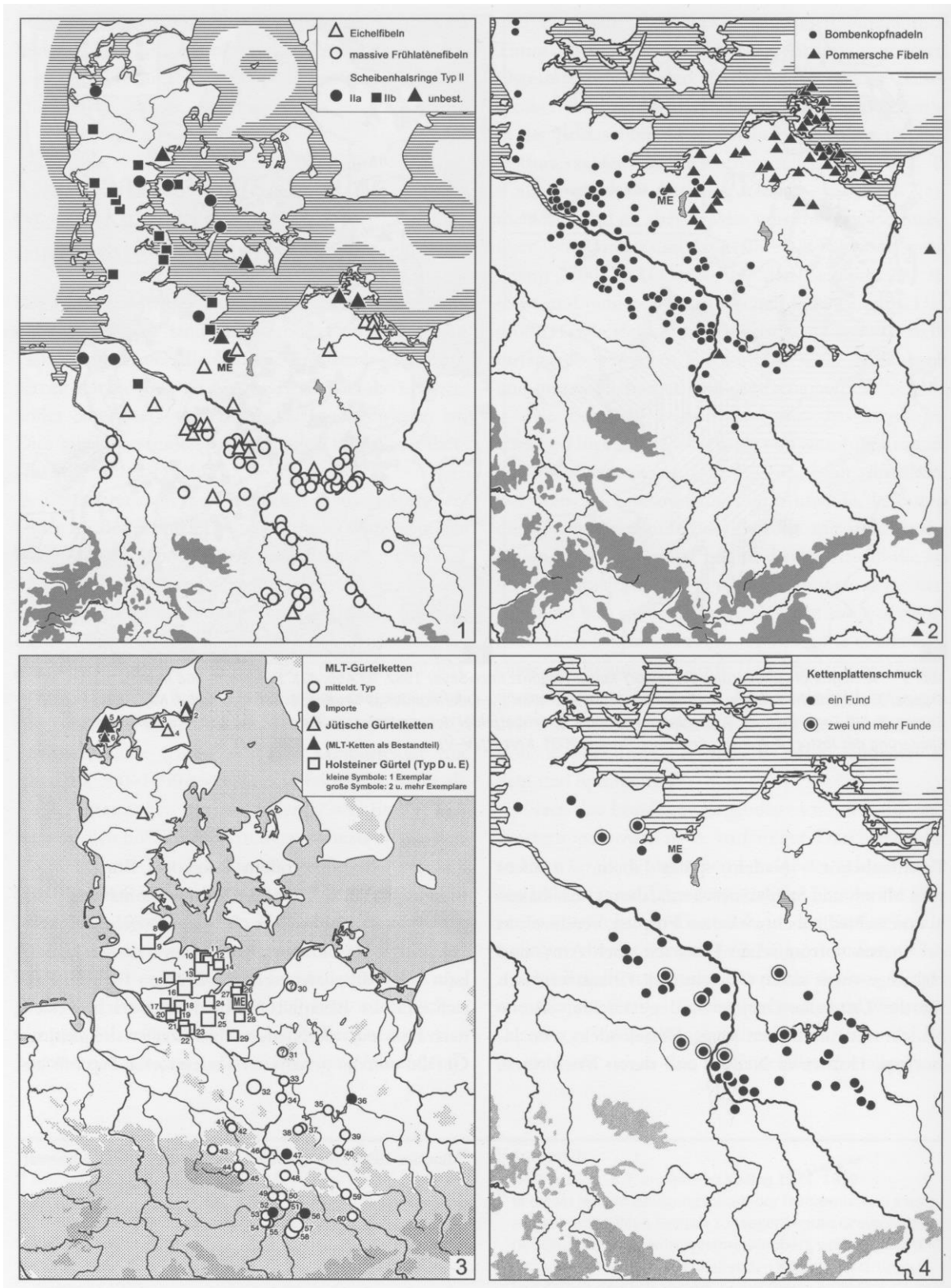


Illustration 10: Main distribution of “foreign” artefacts found in Mühlen Eichsen. Map one shows the distribution of crown bracelets (black symbols), map two of Pomeranian fibulae (black triangles), map three of Holstein Belts (white squares) and map four of Altmark Chain and Plate Jewellery. It is clearly visible that Mühlen Eichsen is always on the edges of the main distribution areas of these artefacts.