

SO SIMILAR BUT YET SO DIFFERENT - THE RING DITCHES OF GOSECK AND PÖMMELTE

¹JACQUELINE WÖTZEL

Jacqueline Wötzel: jbaldamus@hotmail.com

Corresponding Author: JACQUELINE WÖTZEL

ABSTRACT

The archaeological finds from Goseck and Pömmelte in Saxony-Anhalt, Germany are discussed with regard to the possible use and significance of the ring ditches, summarising all aspects is provided.

KEYWORDS: Ring Ditches, Goseck, Pömmelte, Archaeological Finds

1. INTRODUCTION

The ring ditches of Goseck and Pömmelte are located 130km apart in Saxony-Anhalt, Germany. Their structure, construction and the materials used are strikingly similar, so it is not surprising that they are considered to be of similar importance. However, the two sites are separated by around 2500 years of history and, above all, the way they were used, as evidenced by the associated finds. The older site in Goseck has been dated to an age of around 7000 years[1] and is associated with the time when larger communities began to settle down. The Pömmelte site has been dated to around 2335-2050 BC. The settlement of a larger community has been proven[2].

2. INTERPRETATIONS OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL FINDS GOSECK

Goseck is an enclosure with a diameter of 75m and has a surrounding moat around the two palisade rings.[1] The ditch surrounding the enclosure certainly served to protect the structure of the enclosure and was intended to keep surface or near-surface water away from the enclosure in order to protect the palisades from soaking, tilting or slipping.



Figure 1: Overview of the Goseck plant [1]



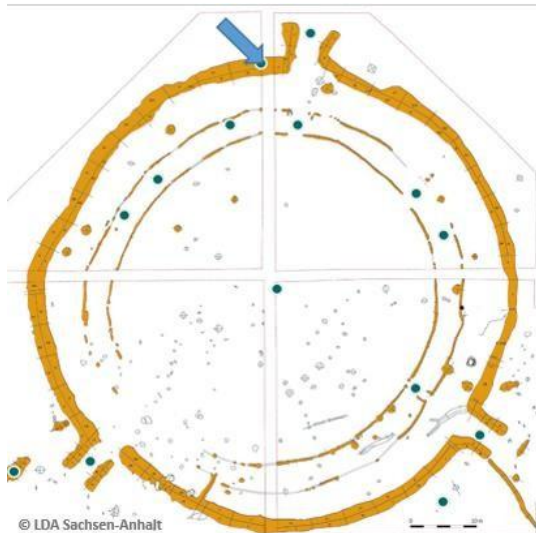
Figure 2: Slab in the centre of the Goseck plant

The area was colonised during the linear pottery period (5500-4800 BC) and links the builders of the site to the stroke-ornamented ware period (4900-4700 BC). [3]



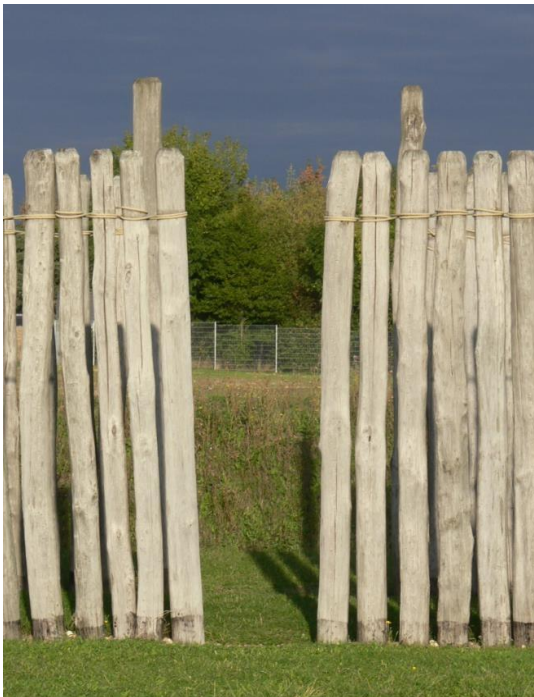
Figure 3: with linear pottery and figure 4 with stroke-ornamented ware [3]

In Goseck, the openings in the palisade ring can be associated with special dates in the year. Only the alignment to the north does not correspond to the astronomical possibilities, i.e. the alignment to the North Star. However, according to the mapping, the circular ditch located next to the north gate lies quite exactly to the north, see Figures 5 and 6. This circular ditch was a circular depression in the ground, the diameter of which decreased towards the bottom and which was ‘kept clean’ in this form for a long time.[1] It is conceivable that the direction north, in which the sun never appears, had negative significance. This circular trench in the north may represent a symbolic entrance to the dark world, i.e. into the earth. It was perhaps used to free oneself from immaterial things, i.e. negative thoughts, worries and fears. Before entering the palisade ring, it was a conceivable place to ‘cleanse’ oneself of negative thoughts, impressions and experiences.



Figures: 5 and 6 [1]

The striking gate in the north is now used as the entrance. All other openings are precisely aligned with astronomical events. On the east and west sides, two openings in the palisades mark the sunrises and sunsets at the summer and winter solstices, and the day of the spring festival (1 May) can also be read.[1]



Sunrise, 1st of May



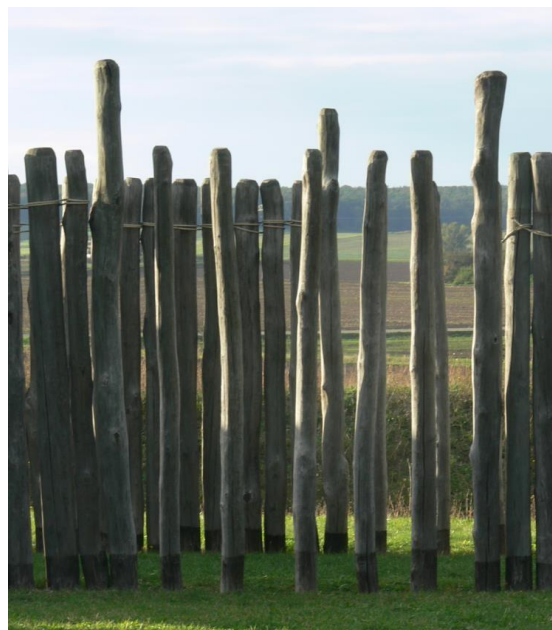
Sunset, 1st of May

Figures: 7 and 8

It can be assumed that these dates could be read from special astronomical constellations. It is striking that a pillar is exactly in the centre of the gate at sunset on the first of May, see pictures 7 and 8.



Sunrise, Midsummer



Sunset, Midsummer

Figures: 9 and 10

The special design of the corresponding sunrise and sunset gates, with gate cheeks, lattice-shaped passage or simple passage, are still clear. Their construction was preceded by astronomical knowledge and observations and they must be closely related to constellations.

The finds inside and outside the site show that it was mainly used peacefully and positively, with highlights on special days of the year. The site of the ring ditch complex is criss-crossed by two veins of water that merge into a vortex right in the centre of the complex. They come from the west and east and join at the very centre to form a water vein that flows off to the north. The people who chose this place were highly sensitive to these energetic features, as were and are many other people who live close to nature. They consciously chose and protected the place as a 'source of energy'. The site was probably revered and protected as a special place long before the complex was built. Its largely peaceful use indicates a co-operative community that had settled down and used the site for communal rituals.

Strengthening their community by promoting a sense of 'we' is a proven strategy. Dancing, singing or experiencing together created a positive and effective community bond.[4] The structural and symbolic features of the site are therefore special, but above all the choice of location is special. The site was probably intended above all to support and strengthen the entire community. The positive connection with each other and the feeling of being uplifted in the community represent a permanent motivating drive for all members. In a co-operative community, everyone can be effective according to their possibilities and abilities.

Artefacts of cattle skulls, fireplaces and some human remains were mainly found in the area of the north gate and the midwinter gates, see Figure 11.[1] This suggests that these gates were seen in connection with access to a 'dark world', which is associated with darkness, cold and therefore negative.

The insertion of cattle skulls at the north gate and the winter solstice gates can be seen as sacrificial elements to ward off natural threats to the group. This may also explain the discovery of a few individuals in these areas. It is conceivable that they were rejected by the community and therefore killed. In the case of one individual, it is assumed that he was buried before the complex was built. Sacrifices of cattle, which are documented in the direction of the 'dark gates' by cattle skulls, probably represented a factual and symbolic request for help. It is conceivable that these were made by the community or by family groups who wished for a positive turnaround in bad situations, such as the averting of illness and strokes of fate, i.e. wanted to ask for improvements.

The gates of the midwinter are relatively wide and, like the north gate, are designed with eye-catching gate cheeks, see Figures 12 and 13. They can serve to guide away 'negative things'. The design of the gate cheeks and the adjoining paths symbolically support the guiding away. The surrounding moat is interrupted at all three gates, making it easy to exit through them. Viewed from above, these three passages are designed like bottle necks that protrude outwards.

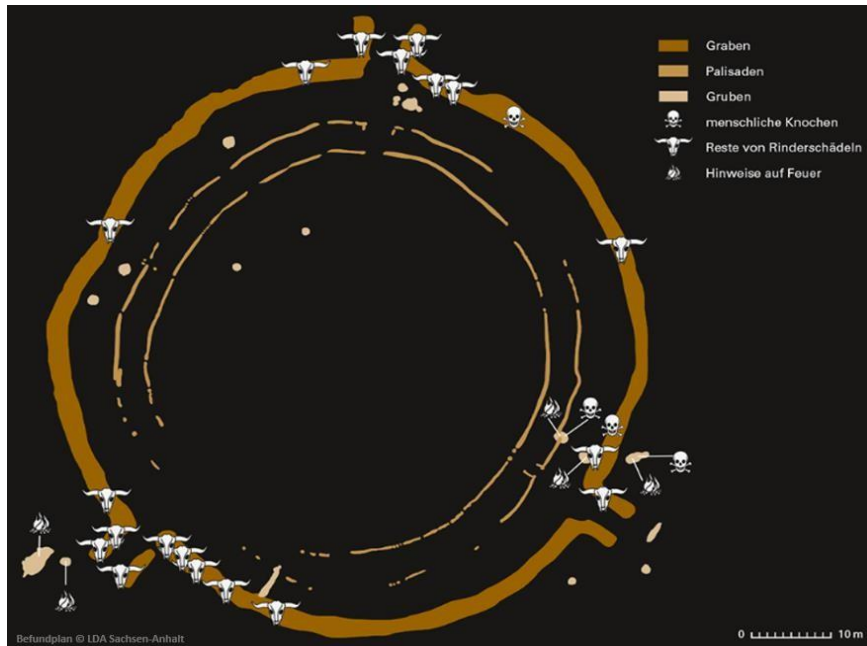


Figure: 11 [1]

This design of the gates may therefore also serve to ‘repel and guide away negativity’. Negativity is likely to include all events that can be associated with winter and the north, such as darkness, cold, lack of food, hunger and illness.

A long-used fireplace was found at the gate of the sunset at the midwinter[1] and it is conceivable that it was ritually used during the ‘dark’ period to preserve the light.



Sunrise, Midwinter



Sunset, Midwinter

Figures: 12 and 13

3. PÖMMELTE

The finds in Pömmelte are quite different. The ring ditch complex is a comparatively monumental structure that was built during the transition to the Early Bronze Age. It has a total diameter of 115 metres and consists of an inner chamber with a largely closed palisade and two loose inner rings of posts. The palisade openings are aligned with 24 February and 18 October - dates whose agricultural or calendrical relevance is insignificant. The inner area is enclosed by a circular ditch in front of the palisade with a total of 29 shaft pits created during the entire period of use. [5] These pits, which document the gruesome killings of women and children, have a recurring structure. The ‘type of burial’, the ‘grave goods’, the ‘form’ and even the ‘place’ where they were created appear to be a cruel judgement on people from the community.



Figure 14: Overview of ring ditch Pömmelte [7]

The period in which the ring ditch complex in Pömmelte was built coincided with a growth in the community - more people were living in a village-like atmosphere and their care and the organisation of their lives required increasing organisation. It is easy to imagine that physically and mentally strong people took on a leading role in this process. The step from a growing sense of power or awareness of power to a dominant lust for power is not large. For a growing community, a stronger authoritarian hierarchy is just as necessary as for a family. The degree of authority is generally associated with a feeling of security, both internally and externally - high authority is thus equated with high responsibility and protection of the community. However, the decisive factor is whether this authority, which in communities is often represented by a group of people, acts in a co-operative or power-oriented manner. Power-orientated hierarchies want to dominate and strive for a large sphere of influence. The desire for dominance always and inevitably leads to abuse of power, which is intended to secure and strengthen one's own position.

The ring ditch complex in Pömmelte was apparently used more as a place of judgement. As a framing, central meeting place, the site offered the opportunity to orientate the community towards certain goals and tasks. For power-obsessed ‘leaders’, however, it is fundamentally necessary to demand the unconditional subordination of the community and to wipe out supposed ‘opponents’ of this community. In this case, opponents are people who consciously or unconsciously weaken those in power through their actions. It can be assumed that these were group members who disrupted the prevailing power structure of the community, for example because they were able to contribute their own special skills, were knowledge carriers for certain tasks or simply underestimated the leading group's obsession with power. In any case, they jeopardised the position of power simply by ‘questioning’ it. Through their own strengths, their special knowledge, skills or talents, they represented a ‘natural’ and therefore high authority within the group.

Although the killings followed recurring rituals, the manner of killing and the rituals of ‘burying’ rather show that these people were to disappear from the community - forever. What reason would there be to maltreat a mother and her child, then beat them to death, throw them into a ‘hole’ together with rubbish, i.e. broken pieces and various individual animal bones? They were ‘dumped’ in the entrance area of the ring ditch as a humiliating symbol of admonition. Finding 1099 is a typical example: a woman aged around 30-40 with her upper body bent over in a prone position and a child aged 5-7 on top of her were found in the pit. Both had perimortem trauma to the skull and thorax. It is therefore unclear whether the women and children who were thrown into the ‘hole’ were really already dead when they were thrown into the pit together with the rubbish. Bones of sheep and cattle were found between the bodies. The dead were covered with an almost completely preserved bell jar with the opening facing downwards. This was probably to prevent their souls, or similar spirits, from ascending. A kind



of seal was placed on top with cattle jawbones and millstones. This may have served to prevent the souls or spirits from ‘climbing out’ at all costs. The bell jar kept them ‘down’ and the jawbones and grinding stones were able to grind and crush whatever wanted to ‘rise up’. It is conceivable that the subsequent piling up was another family member,

i.e. the man, whose decapitated body was possibly burnt in the pit, thus finally wiping out the family. (His) Skull was placed on top of these ashes as a degrading symbol and with an eternal view of the ‘self-inflicted’ punishment.

The recurring formalised sequence follows a pattern or ritual. A total of 29 pits were found in the circular trench, around 1.50m to 2.00m deep. They were created over a period of 150 to 280 years. In the lower area, mainly women and children were found, together with animal bones, pottery shards and grinding stones, which were thrown over the bodies in the pit like rubbish. [5],[6],[7] This cruel practice was obviously intended to prevent the affected families from ever influencing the community again. It cannot be ruled out that the victims were people with knowledge, who were able to acquire a strong position in the community through their knowledge and expertise, i.e. who represented a high level of authority. People who thought and acted in their own way, i.e. ‘stubbornly’, contributed ideas and thus challenged the power structure, could be the ones who ultimately ended up in the ‘holes’. Threats such as ‘Otherwise you’ll end up in the hole!’ or ‘We’ll put you in the hole!’ have even survived in everyday language. These are phrases that threaten exclusion from the community, albeit in our imagination more in the form of confinement in a small room.

There would certainly have been alternatives to this extermination of families, but it is conceivable that, for example, sending the families away could not simply be realised due to their strong position. Another way was sought and found. However, this was the sum of cruel acts of maltreatment, killing and banishment and was apparently intended to ensure ‘eradication’ from the community even in death. The described killing rites of families can be seen as the cruel climax of brutal demonstrations of power.

The circle of posts inside consists of individual posts arranged in an almost circular shape. Their significance as a ‘pillory’ cannot be ruled out. In this way, ‘lighter’ punishments of individual members of the community were possible.

Of the 20 shallow graves in the centre of the complex, the partial burials of young men were found in 13 graves, mostly without grave goods. There is evidence that only certain parts of the skeletal apparatus were buried. [5],[6],[7] These young men may have been sons, for example, or may have held important positions, e.g. as defenders, and acted as a support for those in power. They probably had a special position in the community. It is conceivable that they ultimately wanted to use their special position to end the prevailing power structure, in particular its abuse of power, and thus became a threat to the leadership. The way they were found suggests that they died ‘dishonourably’. Unlike the victims in the pits, the young men were buried in graves inside the complex. Their former high position could explain the special place of their burial. Contrary to the usual burial rites, their direction of burial was towards the circular ditch, i.e. towards the centre of the rulers, and in some graves it was possible to prove that only parts of the skeletons had been buried. Seven graves were kept open, [5],[6],[7] so the plan was to ‘bury’ seven more people.

Those in power, who ultimately benefited from the community in every respect and, like everyone else, were dependent on it, knew how to protect themselves and their position of power. All the cruel killings that served solely to maintain their power and the stories about them were certainly passed down from generation to generation and were anchored in the collective memory. It is easy to imagine that a growing resistance to those in power developed from the diverse and cruel rituals that were directed against members of the community - after all, it could affect anyone. Ultimately, the Pömmelte complex was completely destroyed. The complete dismantling of the entire complex took place between 2135 and 1985 B.C., as calibrated 14C dates show. [8] Around 250 years later, the Pömmelte ring ditch complex was completely removed from the community's living area. All the posts were torn out of the ground and burnt in a large fire. [9] The pits and ditches were filled in and the entire site disappeared. [10]

It can be assumed that the serious events associated with the Pömmelte ring ditch complex lived on in the collective memory and also had an effect. The complete removal of the enclosure structure may be linked to a new change in the community structure. In this case, it is an indication of the end of the destructive abuse of power.

The community, which was dependent on good cooperative collaboration, jointly produced the goods for the preservation and improvement of the way of life and also felt jointly responsible for the security and strengthening of the community. It drew its strength from its good co-operation with different groups of people and their knowledge. Developments and improvements are mainly triggered by individuals who, through their talents or their points of view, can, in the best case, develop good solutions to the tasks at hand. Combining and utilising all existing knowledge and skills for the tasks at hand makes the community both humane and strong. Tasks facing every community require a cooperative behaviour of the group members that works through human tolerance. Constructive ideas and solutions from individuals can thus be developed and ultimately utilised for the benefit of all. Dealing with difficult crises, external enemies or new developments has always presented the community with major challenges.

It is possible that Pömmelte symbolises two turning points: firstly, the transition to a community that was dominated by a power-obsessed, dominant group. The brutal behaviour with which they protected their own power, the many proven



gruesome killings that are closely linked to the circular ditch, probably triggered another turning point. The aim was to create a more co-operative group. Structures in which everyone could contribute to the community with as much authority and autonomy as possible allowed for co-operative, peaceful and constructive coexistence.

The neighbouring ring ditch complex of Schönebeck (2,150 to 1,800 BC), located approx. 1.4 km away, consisted, like the complex in Pömmelte, of several concentric rings of posts, palisades and ditches and was somewhat smaller at 80 metres in diameter. It was built at a time when the Pömmelte complex was still in use. However, the Schönebeck ring ditch complex was still in existence around two centuries after the complex in Pömmelte had already been destroyed. What is remarkable about Schönebeck is precisely what was missing: there were no pits, graves and, above all, no victims - neither animals nor humans. [10]

4. CONCLUSIONS

Although the ring ditches in Saxony-Anhalt have many things in common, the archaeological finds point to very different uses. That they were in any case an important centre in the communities is undisputed. They also had an outstanding significance as a special architectural site. The finds at the sites are very well documented and give a far-reaching impression of the utilisation and possible significance of these sites. Ultimately, they are also a reflection of the societies that used them. The knowledge and skills utilised and ultimately documented in these buildings are impressive.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many Thanks for the detailed and very structured documentation of archaeological finds.

REFERENCES

- [1] <https://www.sonnenobservatorium-goseck.info/> von Kulturbetriebe Burgenlandkreis GmbH) with <https://www.emuseum-himmelswege.de/dig-deeper/fundort-goseck/befunde> and <https://www.emuseum-himmelswege.de/dig-deeper/fundort-goseck/funde>
- [2] https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kreisgrabenanlage_von_Pömmelte#Zeitstellung
- [3] <https://www.emuseum-himmelswege.de/dig-deeper/fundort-goseck/funde> - Figure 3; Kindergrab Befund 48 und Figure 4: Grube, Bef.97
- [4] Jochen Metzger: Wir Wir-Wesen, Psychologie Heute 06/24, S.40-45
- [5] <https://www.emuseum-himmelswege.de/dig-deeper/fundort-poemmelte/befunde-funde>
- [6] Markus Brauer; So grausam starben Menschen als Ritualopfer“; Stuttgarter Zeitung, 11.04.2024 - <https://www.stuttgarter-zeitung.de/inhalt.ritualmorde-in-der-jungsteinzeit-so-grausam-starben-menschen-als-ritualopfer>
- [7] <https://himmelswege.salzlandkreis.de/> and <https://www.himmelswege.de/orte/ringheiligtum-poemmelte> and <https://www.bing.com/search?q=kreisgrabenanlagen+pömmelte&FORM=R5FD1> and <https://www.archaeologie-online.de/nachrichten/neue-erkenntnisse-zur-sakrallandschaft-zwischen-den-ringheiligtuemern-poemmelte-und-schoenebeck-4751/>
- [8] André Spatzier: Nach Bandkeramik und Lengyel – Kreisgrabenanlagen in Sachsen-Anhalt und Mitteleuropa vom Jungneolithikum bis zur frühen Eisenzeit. In: François Bertemes, Harald Meller (Hrsg.): Neolithische Kreisgrabenanlagen in Europa. Internationale Arbeitstagung in Goseck (Sachsen-Anhalt) 7.–9. Mai 2004 (= Tagungen des Landesmuseums für Vorgeschichte Halle. Band 8). Landesamt für Denkmalpflege und Archäologie Sachsen- Anhalt – Landesmuseum für Vorgeschichte, Halle (Saale) 2012, ISBN 978-3-939414-33-9, S. 363–388
- [9] <https://www.himmelswege.de/orte/ringheiligtum-poemmelte/der-kultplatz>
- [10] https://www.landesmuseum-vorgeschichte.de/fileadmin/landesmuseum/alle/pdf/pdf_himmelswege/poemmelte_entdecker_karte.pdf