An unusual discovery of human remains from the medieval church of Grevenmacher (Luxembourg)

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With 2 figures and 3 tables

Abstract: The occurrence of burned human remains on a Christian burial ground is very rare in medieval Europe. Therefore, the discovery of a complex consisting of commingled burned and unburned human bones within the church of Grevenmacher (Luxembourg) is of special interest for anthropological as well as archaeological research. In the current paper we present methods for a comprehensive analysis for such an exceptional case connected with the question if this bone accumulation represents a form of funerary custom or if other factors lead to its composition. Thereof, two possible scenarios for the occurrence of this unusual composition were created and discussed.

Keywords: burned human bones; commingled human remains; bone accumulation; Medieval times; Luxembourg

Introduction

Besides the inhumation, the cremation of human remains, as part of funerary customs is widespread in European prehistory until modern times. In some periods, both kinds of funerary practices existed simultaneously and are proven on the same graveyard. This is the case in the Neolithic and the Iron Age, as well as the Roman Imperial Era (Trautmann I. 2007; Wahl 1988a). However, in some time periods this circumstance has an exceptional character, in particular during Christian medieval times. In 786, Charlemagne enacted the so-called edict of Paderborn, which prohibited the burning of human corpses by penalty of death and obliged the burial of the intact human body (Capitulatio de partibus Saxoniae 7). An exception was the use of the combustion as a punishment in death penalty or in exceptional cases for fears of disease (Schild 2002; Ohler 2003). Because the cremation of human remains has a very exceptional character especially in high and late medieval times, the human skeletal material found in the town of Grevenmacher (Luxembourg) is of special interest for anthropological as well as historical research.

The actual town of Grevenmacher is located about 24 km northeast of the city of Luxembourg directly at the German border (Fig. 1). In the years 2003 till 2005 several excavation campaigns were carried out by the CNRA, Luxembourg. In the area of the so-called “Baxerasgarten” the archaeologists unearthed building structures from the Roman period, as well as the early and high medieval times. From special interest were the foundations of a church and a related cemetery extended to the east of the building.

A special feature of the site of Grevenmacher is that it includes two different complexes containing human skeletal remains. On one hand, the inhumation graves on the cemetery as well as within the church. Some of them date back to the 8th century whereas most of the graves date from the 13th to the beginning of the 15th century and therefore represent the last phase of occupation framed by the construction date of the church and its abandonment. On the other hand, a complex of human remains was found in a separated area within the church building (Fig. 2). In the north-eastern part of the building, some foundation remains delimit a separate area of 2.30 × 2.90 m. Within this plane a layer of commingled human skeletal material was recovered, 30–40 cm thick, mixed with isolated animal bones, sediments, stones and mortar residues. A coin found within these remains dates the whole complex between 1346 and 1389 (Bis-Worch 2005; Bis-Worch 2010). What is special in this case is that a great part of the bones were burned. The bones from the undermost layer were mostly unburned and affected by heat just in the contact zone with burned bones in the upper layers. These bones show various discolorations and therefore the influence of different temperatures during the combustion process.