

SOUFFLENHEIM DEVELOPMENT OF THE RD-1063 BYPASS

Alsace, Bas-Rhin, France

Soufflenheim Genealogy Research and History
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In 2008 archeologists excavating the route of the future D1063 bypass road in Soufflenheim identified a large river system in the Soufflenheim region below the terrace and protohistoric necropolises. Excerpts from the *Development of the RD-1063 Bypass of Soufflenheim Diagnostic Report* by Thierry Logel.



Soufflenheim, location of the archaeological site as seen on the 1775 map of Cassini.
The lower arm of the Moder is still occupied by the Rhine.

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL PROJECT

“The objective of the diagnosis was to determine the archaeological and geomorphological potential of the land of the road development project, in an archaeologically rich area which still remains archaeologically unexplored, and to define, if possible, the nature of the occupations and their main chronological developments.

The archaeological diagnosis was carried out by a series of 217 east-west oriented boreholes, 15 m long on average and 2.50 m wide. The surface opened by trenches was estimated at 6,550 m², i.e. 8.5% of the available site area. The trenches were dug using a tracked mechanical excavator, fitted with a 2.50 m wide cleaning bucket. The siting of the borehole trenches was defined in advance. The soundings were stopped when the substrate was reached, that is, about 1 m below surface level. Six holes of 4 m maximum depth were carried out to evaluate the paleochannels. Finally, a series of 2 m deep cores was carried out in an alluvial context”. (Logel, 2008, pp. 33-34)

“The diagnosis is influenced by two very distinct topographical spaces. In the western part, the site is established on the Würm terrace of the Haguenau forest up to the slope of the terrace. East of the embankment, the road project is continuing in the alluvial zone [deposit of sand, mud, etc., formed by flowing water], more than 10 m below the terrace overlooking this space.

The terrace part is characterized by a relatively flat ground made up exclusively of sands, disturbed by several contemporary clay pits. The alluvial sector presents a more complex geological context. Several large channels have been uncovered, separated by bars or small alluvial terraces. The land therefore turned out to be extremely wet, unsuitable for constant occupation.

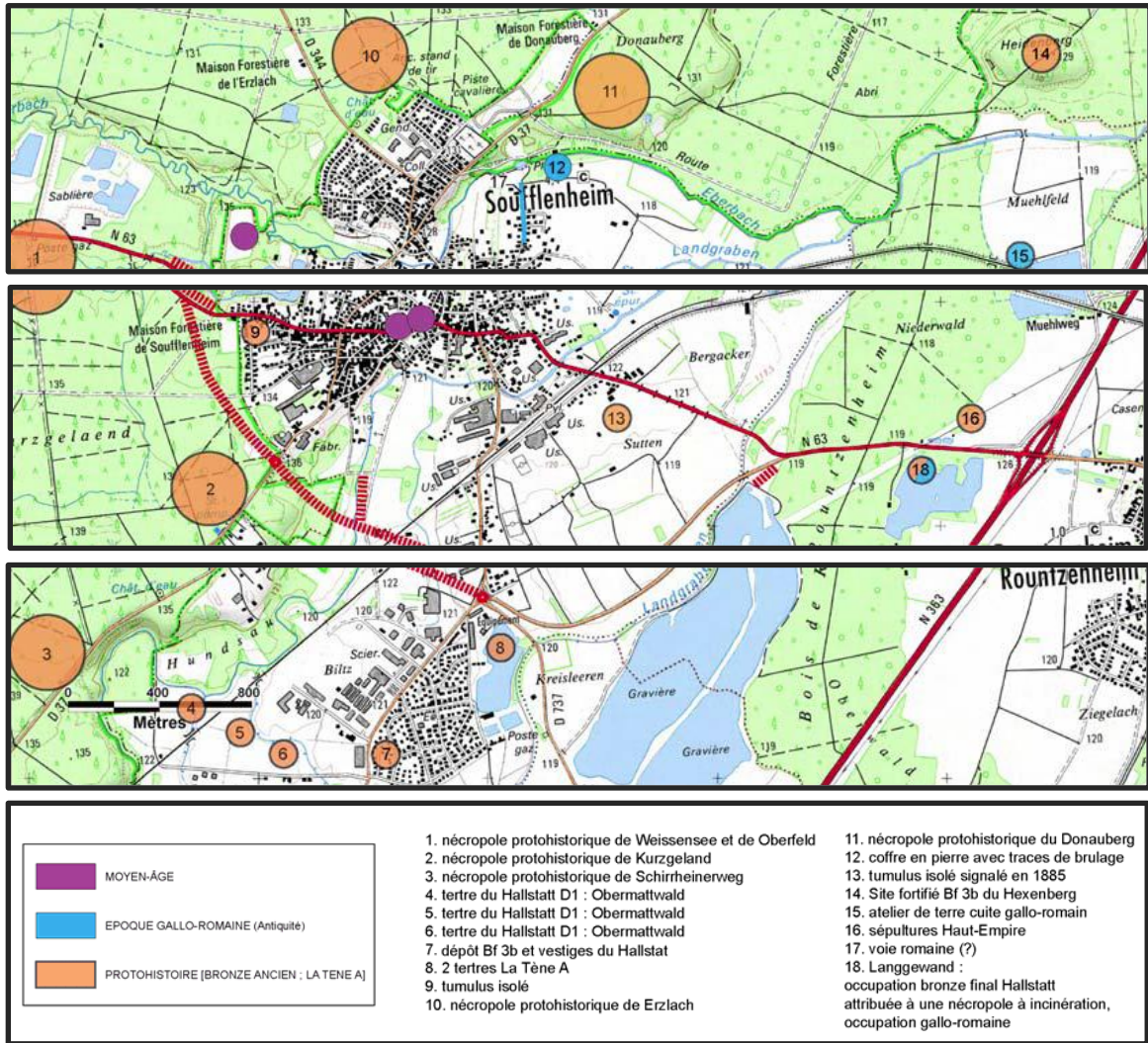
Only one archaeological structure, a hearth with heated pebbles, probably from the Late Bronze Age, could be observed on the site on the terrace in the forest area. Finally, a series of contemporary trenches was observed. These are probably the remains of military trenches from World War II and the heavy fighting around Haguenau and Hatten in the winter of 1944-45, during operation "Nordwind", during the Ardennes offensive and the abandonment to the Germans of the municipalities of North Alsace. These observations were confirmed by the mayor of the town and several residents. The three bridges of the town were blown up during the withdrawal of French and American troops from the area.

The alluvial part has yielded no archaeological remains in the classic sense of the term. However, the many paleochannels [remnants of an inactive river or stream channel] unearthed confirm the presence of an important river system in the Soufflenheim region below the terrace and the important protohistoric necropolises. The presence of rivers seems to be at least one of the reasons for the topographical location of these necropolises.” (Logel, 2008, p. 4)

“The archaeological diagnosis was conducted on the site of forest plots, agricultural land, meadows and gardens. The land involved in the project is in the western outskirts, and south and east of Soufflenheim. The town of Soufflenheim is located on the Alsace plain on the edge of the terrace of Haguenau. The latter marks the western boundary of the floodplains of the Rhine. The choice of this location allowed the village to be safe from the floods of the Rhine plain.

The Rhine alluvial plain is a vast wet and marshy area 8 km wide between the base of the Haguenau terrace and the Rhine. This space is topographically little differentiated which allows a wide wandering of the river. Faced with the magnitude and frequency of the floods, canalization work on the river began in 1840. They had the effect of modifying the base level of the bed of the Rhine, leading to its deepening.

This led to a drop in the water table throughout the region and the drying up of certain "rieds" and "wetlands" which were still active during historical times. We can therefore establish that in the area of operation, the landscapes have evolved considerably since the Bronze Age." (Vigreux, 2008, pp. 11-12)



Location of the site (red tracks) and archaeological environment on an extract from IGN 3914 OT

EARLY HISTORY

“Soufflenheim is located on the eastern edge of the Haguenau Forest, at the site of the slope of the Würm terrace and at the outlet of the Eberbach, which flows from west to east. Other small streams, almost

stagnant or partially dried up, run from south to north. The site is located in a rich archaeological context, largely dominated by Protohistory. No Neolithic remains are reported on the bank of the town.

The Würm Terrace

Several tumular necropolises are located in the forest of Haguenau in parallel with the slope of the Würm terrace. These are, in the area concerned, the necropolises of Schirrheimerweg, Kurzgeland, Donauberg, or further west Weissensee, to name only the groups closest to the operation. No archaeological intervention is, however, attested to the site itself

The construction of mounds in the forest has been in effect since the Early Bronze Age. An isolated corded ceramic, found in tumuli in Donauberg, attests to an even older visitation (Late Neolithic). Most of the occupation, however, took place during the Middle Bronze Age and the beginning of the Late Bronze Age. For the middle period of the Late Bronze Age, only two cremations were incidentally found at the Donauberg. Shards from this phase were found in a gravel pit on the road from Rountzenheim to Soufflenheim. R. Forrer attributes them to a funeral context. Finally, from the start of Hallstatt we witness a revival in the use of mounds. We thus note the reuse of Middle Bronze tumuli but also in the construction of new mounds.

Further north is the hill of Hexenberg site, dated Late Bronze Age 3b, installed on an outlier mound of the Würm terrace, isolated in the alluvial plain. In clay near the Vasenmühle, a stone arrangement was discovered in 1913 whose stones showed traces of ash and fire. This structure has been attributed to the ancient period despite the absence of archaeological material. In the absence of movables and a more precise description, one can however suggest an older chronology. The dimensions of this structure (length 2 m and width 1.10 m) in fact recall those of the heated pebble hearths attributed to the Late Bronze Age in Alsace.

Floodplain

For the lower terrace, this sector presents a complex river activity that is poorly characterized to date. Already mentioned above, shards of this phase were, on the other hand, found in a gravel pit on the road from Rountzenheim to Soufflenheim. R. Forrer attributes them to a funeral context. Mounds appear to be erected later in the alluvial plain. From Hallstatt D1 a few tumuli are erected on the edge of the terrace (Obermattwald). Four mounds had already been listed at the place Obermattwald by X. Nessel and mapped by F.A. Schaeffer in 1926. In 1987, François Sigrist spotted several other small tumuli in the same area, as well as 3 larger mounds 500 m further to the west. Other mounds, poorly characterized and poorly located, are located to the south of the town at a place called Surrloch, Riedmatt and Suttin. A set of 12 mounds called Sieben Hügel are indicated at a place called Geisswaell). No dating has been proposed for most of these mounds. Only an isolated tumulus, probably located at a place called Surrloch, seems to present a continuity of use from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age.

The most important tumuli are attributed to ancient La Tène and are located inside the alluvial plain or even near the minor bed of the Rhine in the 18th century. This is the case with the two mounds of the east Soufflenheim gravel pit located at the crossroads of the D138 and D737 roads or the princely tumulus of Sessenheim. Italic onochoes [wine jugs] are part of the funerary movables unearthed in these mounds. These late mounds are probably linked to the few remarkable tumuli erected on the Baden side

on the river bank in Hügelsheim, Söllingen and Iffezheim, including a chariot mound attributed to Hallstatt D3.

Finally, a metal deposit composed of an ax with fins and ring, two bracelets of the Hombourg type characteristic of a production of the Lorraine-Sarre-Palatinat plateau, and two leg rings was found at 0.40 m during a survey in the Roedern district. During the same operation, some structures attributed to Hallstatt were brought to light (pits and ditches or drains).

In addition to the data collected by the archaeological map of the Regional Archaeological Service and the Archaeological Map of Gaul (Bas-Rhin), the inventory of archaeological discoveries benefits from the numerous observations of F. Sigrist for the whole of this sector. At a place called Biltz, between the industrial zone and the railway line, in the 1990s, F. Sigrist collected on the surface archaeological material attributed to La Tène C.

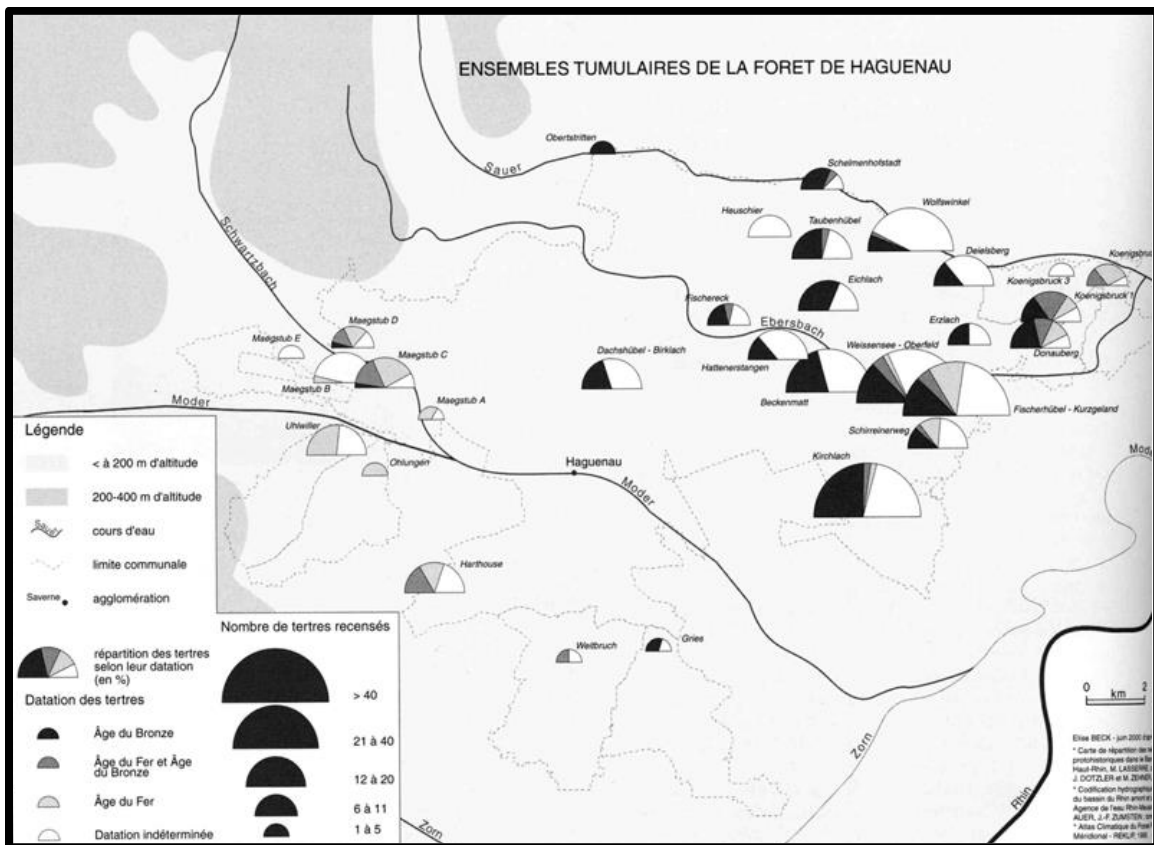


Figure 8: Distribution by chronological phases of burial mounds in the forest of Haguenau (Bas-Rhin CAG 2001)

Roman Period

The Roman discoveries, made in the town, remain modest to this day. A Roman road is signposted on the edge of the Würm terrace. It is located parallel to the departmental road from Soufflenheim to Schirrhofen. Local road 28, located in the alluvial zone to the north of the town at the foot of the Donauberg, could correspond to another section of road. An isolated fibula was found in an old quarry

located “near the Roman road” (Flotté and Fuchs 2001). In a clay near the Vasenmühle, a stone arrangement was discovered in 1913, whose stones showed traces of ash and fire. This structure has been attributed to ancient times despite the lack of archaeological material. N. Meyer attributes it to a funeral pyre. In the absence of movables, however, one can suggest an older chronology. The dimensions of this box (length 2 m and width 1.10 m) are reminiscent of those of heated pebble hearths attributed to the Final Bronze Age in Alsace. At a place called Eisenbaechel is located an extensive Roman settlement detected during pedestrian prospecting. Movables attributed to the 2nd century and the beginning of the 3rd century AD. A necropolis with cremation dating from the 2nd century is also noted at the site of the gravel pit, route de Rountzenheim. A few burials are known on the Hexenberg hill.

Middle Ages

Church Square, a recent embankment contained ceramic movables dating from the 8th century. Light-colored ceramic movables attributed to the 8th century has been unearthed at No. 37 rue Principale. According to the finder, it comes from a funeral context. Several other sites attributed to habitats were located in the commune and on its ban during pedestrian surveys (Werbholtz, Oben am Brunnen, Geisswaell, Roemischer Hundshof).

Contemporary Period

The very hard fighting of the winter of 1944-1945 delivered by the American army to the German troops during Operation Nordwind are undoubtedly at the origin of the few remains of trenches and shells observed in the forest and of various anecdotes entrusted to us by the inhabitants of Soufflenheim. The three bridges in the town were blown up by American or French troops during their withdrawal to make crossing rivers more complex. The exact course of the fighting in Soufflenheim is not known to us. This is, however, a secondary front area.

Operation Nordwind was one of the Wehrmacht's last military offensives during World War II. It took place from January 1st to the 25th, 1945 in northern Alsace and Lorraine. The offensive was stopped at the end of January by Allied troops made up of American troops supported by French units. The most violent fighting took place in the vicinity of Hatten and Rittershofen. Hatten was almost completely destroyed during the tank battles (among the most important on the Western Front) which took place between January 8th and 20th, 1945.

The main aim of the Nordwind offensive was to relieve the German troops engaged in the Battle of the Bulge since December 15, 1944, by mobilizing Allied forces in north-eastern France and, at the same time, destroying the 7th Army American. The initial plan called for the German 19th Army to attack Strasbourg by crossing the Rhine, while the 1st Army launched its offensive from northern Alsace.

The offensive began on January 1st, on New Year's Eve 1945, without any artillery preparation to avoid the effect of surprise. The American troops, surprised at first, quickly put up a bitter resistance which blocked the German advance. The secondary offensive was launched south of Strasbourg against the French positions. On January 4th, the Americans withdrew and established a front line on the Moder, which crossed the city center of Haguenuau.

On Monday January 8th, the Germans brought considerable forces to Alsace by crossing the Rhine in fifteen places, in particular between Freistet and Gambenheim or between Söllingen and Fort-Louis. The

XXXIX Panzerkorps launched its attack on Hatten, an obligatory passage on the road to Strasbourg: it was the start of the terrible battle of Hatten-Rittershofen which was to last 12 days.

On January 15th, the 17 German divisions succeeded in reconquering other villages as well as the forest of Haguenau. They arrived at the Haguenau gate on January 16. After the withdrawal of the Americans from Hatten and Rittershofen, the front stabilized on the Moder during the night of 20th-21st. Of the 365 houses in the village of Hatten, 350 were destroyed. 2,500 soldiers and 83 inhabitants of the village were killed during the battle.

On January 24th, the Germans attempted to surround Haguenau. Heavy hand-to-hand combat took place in Schweighouse.

On January 25th, the Germans launched a final attack, supported by tanks and succeeded in crossing the Moder halfway between Kaltenhouse and Haguenau. The war took hold in the middle of Haguenau, on both sides of the Moder Canal. That evening, as American reinforcements began to arrive from the Ardennes, the Germans abandoned Operation Nordwind, including the bridgehead on the Moder.

An episode (8) of the television series *Band of Brothers* directed by Steven Spielberg in 2001, tells the life of a parachutist unit of the 101st US Airborne during the Second World War, is devoted to the combat in "Bloody Haguenau". The loss of life of the American army during these engagements in northern Alsace and in the Vosges will be among the most important of the war in Europe." (Logel, 2008, pp. 23-33)

RESULTS

Forest

The forest area is characterized by the presence of a sandy substrate, disturbed by a few modern and contemporary clay pits. Despite the presence of several sets of burial mounds, the operation uncovered only a few structures. The heated pebble pit is the only structure that could be attributed to Protohistory. The pit is oval, 2.50 m long and 1.60 m wide and 0.20 m deep. Though no movables could be found in the structure, the heated pebble hearths are characteristic of Protohistory in our region and the movables associated with these structures has been exclusively attributed to the Late Bronze Age in Alsace.

These stoves come in a wide variety of shapes and sizes. Their uses are therefore probably also multiple. They are particularly common in the southern half of the region. Important groups have been unearthed in Bas-Rhin, but it is in Haut-Rhin that the largest number of these structures are concentrated. This could be attributed to a lower activity of archeology in this area, which also coincides with the modesty of the protohistoric remains of habitat unearthed in this area. The foci unearthed are, for the most part, isolated structures, of medium to small dimensions, found during excavations at Reichstett-Mundolsheim, in Littenheim and from Soufflenheim, the most northerly of the heated pebble hearths unearthed to date.

A stone structure showing traces of fire passages is also reported in the past in the town but its chronological attribution remains debated. As for the site at the hill of Hexenberg, excavations on its plateau have brought to light a series of small hearths (0.80 m in diameter) which have been interpreted as culinary hearths of family units.



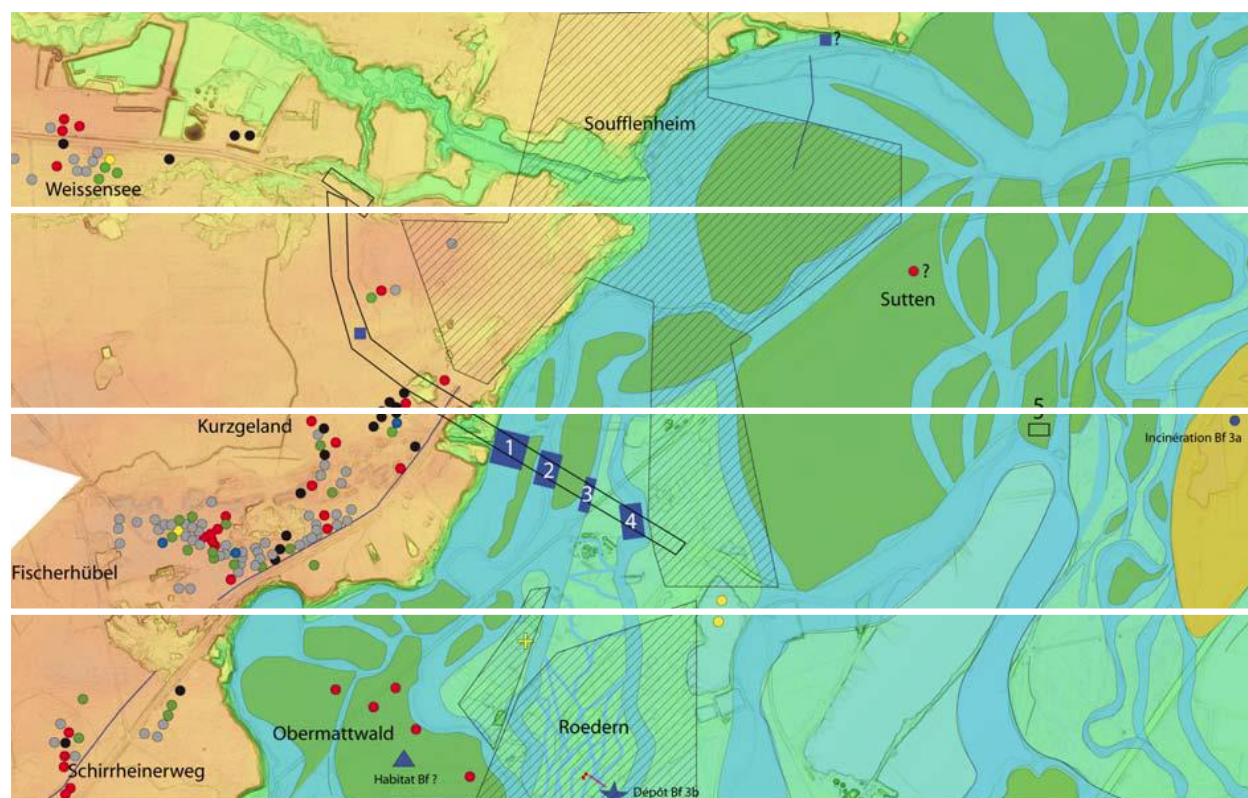
Heated pebble pit during excavation.

A series of very narrow trenches or ditches, 0.60 m wide and 0.80 m deep, attributed to the contemporary period by a series of glass bottles (beers) are probably the remains of trenches of the Second World War. This interpretation was suggested to us by the inhabitants of the village. These structures are located in the culminating part of the forest near a deep clay loam, undoubtedly already present during this conflict, which may have served as a fulcrum or anti-tank ditch. It is a system of branching trenches connecting several lines of defense. No military furnishings were observed.

Alluvial Zone

The diagnosis consisted of work on the bypass to the south of the town, from the Haguenau forest and the terrace (near the Kurzgeland necropolis) to the alluvial plain east of Soufflenheim, including 3 isolated trenches at the eastern end of the diagnostic area. From below the terrace, more than 10 m high, important paleochenals have been unearthed. All of these combined cover almost the entire surface of the archaeological operation in the alluvial plain, more than 500 m in width.

The drilling trenches were oriented from west to east, perpendicular to the flow of the paleochannels, therefore made it possible to carry out a general section of the alluvial plain in this sector. Our first observations allow us to confirm the presence of a very important watercourse, most likely the Rhine, immediately below the Würm terrace. This watercourse is made up of innumerable channels which have been observed thanks to the laser-scanning technique (or Lidar, airborne laser survey). Four of these channels were located during the operation.” (Logel, 2008, pp. 34-36, 38-42)



Graphic reproduction of the alluvial context of the Soufflenheim sector and chronology of land use in Protohistory, according to Schaeffer 1926 and 1930, CAG Bas-Rhin 2002, Piningre and Jedy 2001, Zehner 1998, DRAC Alsace Archaeological Map, results of the diagnosis and modified airborne laser survey (General Council of Bas-Rhin, River Service, made available at PAIR, image processing F. Basoge); Doc./DAO Logel 2008.

Numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 indicate the various paleochannels identified during the operation. (Circle: funeral. Triangle: habitat. Square: hearth with heated pebbles. Green: Middle Bronze Age. Blue: Late Bronze Age. Black: Bronze Age and Hallstatt Period. Red, Hallstatt Period. Yellow: La Tène Period. The hatching pattern shows the built-up areas. Logel 2008

CONCLUSION

“The forest area crossed in the western part of the diagnostic operation is located in the immediate vicinity of the Kurzgeland tumor necropolis. However, no new mounds have been unearthed in this sector, and no other type of burial has been observed, unlike the two cremations in urns dated Late

Bronze IIIa found incidentally during the construction of a forest road in the Donauberg (Piningre and Sainty 1989). With the exception of a heated pebble fireplace, no other protohistoric structure was located during the boring operation. Thus, contrary to the local archaeological tradition which associates the presence of burial mounds with the proximity of the habitat, this forest established on a sandy soil, not very conducive to a traditional agricultural activity, could turn out to be empty of any permanent human occupation in protohistoric times. We can therefore envisage an essentially funeral destination for this forest area, with temporary frequentation or even passage areas. The absence of archaeological material in the heated pebble hearth, which is common for this type of structure, may also suggest a remoteness from residential areas.

The situation at the edge of the terrace could not be observed during the operation due to the activity of the quarries and recent clay pits which almost completely disturbed the substrate in the area of the operation. In the past, this area had proven to be quite rich in archaeological material, exclusively ceramic, but the erosion of this sandy soil on the edge of the slope has also largely disrupted the conservation of the remains. The presence of a Roman road reported by written sources at the edge of the terrace could not be noted, probably for these same reasons.

The part of the operation located in an alluvial zone presents a wide paleochenal, attributed to the Holocene period according to our observations.

No significant archaeological remains have been unearthed on the surveyed ground, but the interest of the site lies in its strong environmental potential and its significant contribution to the study of the evolution of the Rhine and its impact on the occupation of the soil in the north of Lower Alsace during the pre/protohistoric and possibly historical phases.” (Logel, 2008, pp. 43-44)

References

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