

Introductory geographical data and chapter one of the book *Soufflenheim, Une cité à la recherche de son histoire* by Lucien Sittler, honorary archivist of the city of Colmar, Marc Elchinger, and Fritz Geissert, published by Valblor, Strasbourg, 296 pages, 1987.

## GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

The Rhineland plain has formed itself from the tertiary era with the collapse of the hercynian massive mountains. The moles of the Vosges and of the Black Forest were re-erected in consequence of the flexure of the Alps, and a ditch was filled up with the materials carried by the Rhine River and his effluent's. During millions of years, old alluvial deposits dating back to the tertiary era (Pliocene) and quarternary, more and more recently formed the subsoil of the plain : pebbles, gravels, sands of different nature in layers of different thickness, clay underground in the forest of Haguenau which is used by the potters of Soufflenheim.

In Northern Alsace, from Strasbourg to Lauterbourg, we find from the West and the North-West, towards East : the Low Vosges (350 to 500 m) of height, in front a region of hills, then a slightly undulated plain constituting a terrace of about 140 m height, and finally a flat and uniform plain, the low terrace or Ried (120 m height) extending to the Rhine River.

The terrace bears the forest of Haguenau, one of the largest of France (13,700 hectares nowadays, but larger formerly, covering around 20,000 hectares), whose eastern edge is rather marked and rises ten to fifteen meters height above the Ried. It consists mainly of poor sands, brought by the rivers carrying the sandstone of the Low Vosges, and one part of the subsoil contains in depth of 5-10 m. powerful layers of watertight clay, used for many centuries by the ceramists (1).

The Ried is formed from recent alluvial deposits, of various nature, most of them of a rich value, and relatively moist. However, the proximity of the river makes it a region of fields and meadows.

The edge of the terrace has been appreciated by man who could use the resource of both regions. Very early, men established themselves there and formed villages which are still there in the present time. Among them, Soufflenheim. This locality is sited on the Eberbach river, which is joined by the smaller waters of the Brumbach which go down to the rhenan depression. Further north, the Sauer river constitutes on a dozen of kilometers long, the northern limit of the forest of Haguenau. South, the Moder river, crossing Haguenau, continues its way to the Rhine.

On the site of Soufflenheim, man, sheltered from overflows of the plain, has worked from remote ages, cultivating the ground, breeding cattle, using the forest. There too he knew how to use the clay subsoil, and the craft of pottery has been practiced there for centuries.

Whereas Strasbourg, the main town of Alsace, is over 30 km distance south of the place, Soufflenheim is only 14 km away from the city of Haguenau, on the west, and a dozen of kilometers from the Rhine on the east side. Close to the forest of Haguenau, the large village, central place of 4500 residents, is surrounded in a large circle by the villages of Schirrrhein-Schirrhoffen, Sessenheim, Auenheim, Rountzenheim and Fort-Louis, Leutenheim et Roppenheim, and is separated on the north by the forest of Haguenau from Hatten and Betschdorf.



Map of the course of the Rhine and the surroundings of Fort Louis, Lauterbourg, and Haguenau, 1748, Robert de Vaugondy

## HISTORY OF SOUFFLENHEIM

## FROM PREHISTORY TO THE MIDDLE AGES

### Chapter One

In the Neolithic period or age of polished stone (from 5000 to 2000 before Jesus Christ), people settled into the region and specifically on the outskirts of the forest, built their huts in small groups, practiced a primitive form of agriculture, looking for fertile land and using the forest for their needs in wood to build houses and heat them.

Progressively, the primitive population still in small number improve their life, mainly in the Age of Bronze (2000 to 1800 before Jesus Christ). They know how to use metals: copper at first, then a mixture (alloy of copper, tin and zinc) the bronze, harder and more resistant than copper. Weapons and tools are no longer produced on the same place, but come from other regions, and spread all over the territory. At this moment, agriculture is still practiced in the lower region towards the Rhine River, but the forest is also used, mainly for raising pigs. Also places devoted to sepultures are established, where the dead are buried under elevations of ground, hillocks (in latine tumuli), numerous in the surroundings of Soufflenheim. According to the beliefs of the time, the dead receive tools, ornaments and pottery.

The archeologist and renown historian Xavier Nessel, mayor in Haguenau in the last century, dug these tumuli and made a number of discoveries : bones, axes and other utensils, potteries of different size and forms (gathered in the Museum of Haguenau). The eminent Strasbourg archeologist, F.A. Schaeffer, has studied these objects.

In his high-level scientific work (2), he demonstrated that tumuli grouped in twenty, thirty and up to hundred units are found in the forest, preferably close to the edge. Primitive men had thus settled there. It is especially true for Soufflenheim on the edge of a terrace, on the junction of the Brumbach and the Eberbach, where they dominate the depression of the Rhine River. The parcel of land named Kurzgeländ contains 98 tumuli ; the one named Weissensee-Oberfeld has 63. They constitute real necropolis, to which can be added the site of the Donauberg (name derived from the Germanic divinity Donar).

In these tumuli were found, under many other funeral offerings, many pieces of pottery made out of the nearby layers of clay found close to the village, and still exploited today. The primitive populations had already recognized their quality and made vases, jugs, bowls and dishes, cups and plates. What is striking for us, wrote Monsieur Schaeffer, is the perfection of these pieces of pottery, and their variety, in spite of very limited technical means so far. They are well ornamented using a decoration carved with a knife and show a large skill and a developed artistic sense. They prove a certain degree of civilization, and bear witness of a time of relative prosperity and peace.

As the weapons and bronze objects found prove, these potteries date back to the Age of Bronze, second millennium before Jesus Christ. So that we can say that pottery in Soufflenheim is the oldest and most authentic handicraft in Alsace.

The populations who lived at this time in Alsace are not well known. Professor J.J. Hatt, archivist of Museum of Archeology in Strasbourg, calls them the Protocelts (3). They came from the Swabian plateau around 1600 or 1500 before Jesus Christ. They formed important colonies in the forest of Haguenau, devoted less to agriculture than to breeding cattle and their civilization was of an original type. As a result of Monsieur Schaeffer, it also notes the existence of an outstanding ceramics, deeply carved, offering elegant and noble forms.



Vases with prints from the Middle Bronze Age found in the burials of the Haguenau Forest (Haguenau Museum)

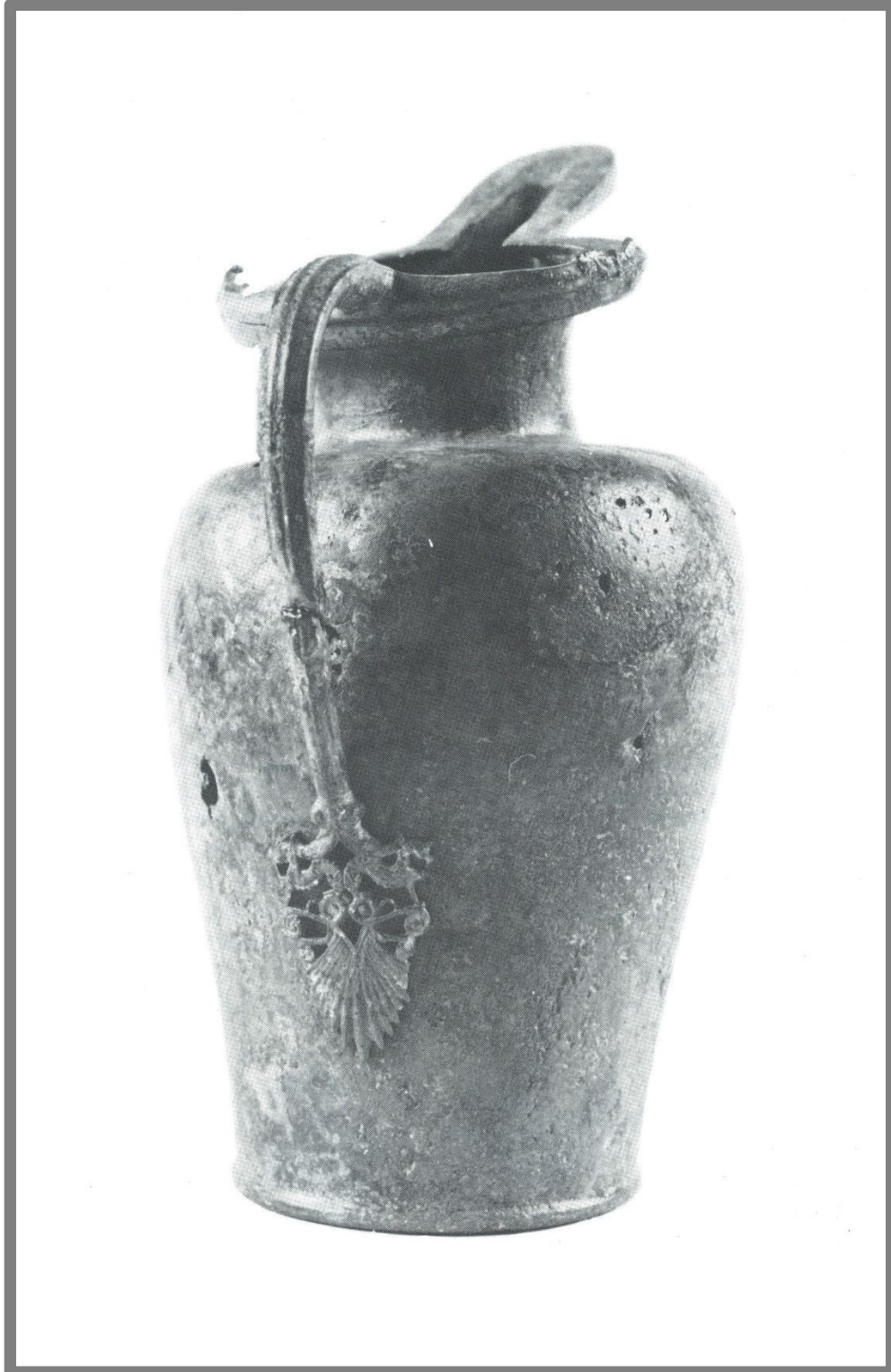
The populations who lived at this time in Alsace are not well known. Professor J.J. Hatt, archivist of Museum of Archeology in Strasbourg, calls them the Proto Celts (3). They came from the Swabian plateau around 1600 or 1500 before Jesus Christ. They formed important colonies in the forest of Haguenau, devoted less to agriculture than to breeding cattle and their civilization was of an original type. As a result of Monsieur Schaeffer, it also notes the existence of an outstanding ceramics, deeply carved, offering elegant and noble forms.

Towards the end of the Bronze Age unknown ethnic transformations took place, migrations of tribes come from Wurtemberg and Bavaria, also from the Celtic race. Around 800 before Jesus Christ, these populations brought with them tools and weapons made from iron. Whereas the former populations were mainly occupied with breeding, these newcomers practice more farming. They too lived preferably in the outskirts of forests, on the terrace. Their tombs contain objects out of iron, buckles and armbands, necklaces, plates of belts, also potteries, not as beautiful and carved as those of the Bronze Age.

They are witnesses of the expanding of colonization of the region and also of the potter's handcraft. The spot of Soufflenheim stayed to be a privileged place of colonization, later too. This is due to the presence of layers of clay, constantly in use. To be noticed further, found in tombs of Soufflenheim, a jug with a large handle and long beak, called oenochoe (from Greece) and a buckle, both dating back to the Age of Iron in the Vth century before Jesus Christ.

In Roman times (from the last century before Jesus-Christ), the region was occupied by Celts, to which joined the Triboques, a Germanic tribe whose main residence was in Brocomagus (Brumath). At this time (first century after Jesus Christ), the pottery of the region was less appreciated. Beautiful products were imported from Italy and workshops of terra sigillata created in Alsace itself (Heiligenberg) : but the population certainly also continued to use vases and jugs out of cooked earth, brickmaking and tileries developed close to Schirrhoffen. A Gallo-Roman station was found in the Eisenbaechel where potteries with metal surfaces (IIIrd to IVth centuries). A Roman road linking Brumath to the Roman station of Seltz passed through Soufflenheim.





Haguenau Historical Museum. Oenochoe type with volutes and animal patterns,  
of the Iron Age (Old Tiene I) 475-400 BC Soufflenheim

The Roman epoch ended at the dawn of the Vth century with the violent invasions of Germanic tribes. The Alemanni and the Franks crossed the Rhine rivers several times, and after a long period of insecurity and troubles that made the Gallo-Roman population disappear, they started to establish themselves in the area. The Alemanni occupied the larger part of Alsace up to the forest of Haguenau. The Franks on their side, pushed from North to South and came also in the region of Soufflenheim. Until today, the local language attests of differences between the Alemannic and Frankish speeches.

From the VIth century and until the IXth century, from the east to the northeast of the forest of Haguenau and towards the Rhine, several villages were created, on rather favorable places, already often earlier occupied by prehistoric or Gallo-Roman populations. Sepultures containing men with weapons, swords and axes, women with ornaments, necklaces and armbands were found, also remains of potteries in cooked earth, simply orned cups for instance, in the place named "Kurzgeländ" near the southern side out of Soufflenheim (4).



Haguenau Historical Museum. Burial of the Middle Bronze Age (1550-1200 BC) Haguenau Forest, Donauberg Canton, Tumulus 13, Burial 1

#### Notes:

- (1) J.A. KOERNER, (de Soufflenheim), (doctorate de l'université d'Erlangen). Beitrag zur Kenntnis det Elsässer Thone, Strasbourg, 1900.
- (2) F.A. SCHAEFFER, *Les tertres funéraires préhistoriques dans la forêt de Haguenau*. Tome 1, *Les Tumuli de l'Age de Bronze*, Haguenau, 1926 : et Tomme 11, *Les Tumulti de l'Age de Fer*, Haguenau, 1930.
- (3) *Histoire de l'Alsace*, Tome 1, editions mars at Mercure, Wettolsheim, 1978,
- (4) Voir pour cette période P. Elchinger, Soufflenheim, *La cité des Potiers*, 1977, 11-26 : et 1978. 55-64.