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Reviewed Article:

Roseldorf Rekonstruiert

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This review concerns the article "Roseldorf rekonstruiert – Ein keltischen Heiligtums entsteht in Asparn an der Zaya" published in EuroREA 6/2009.
Above a photo of the idol of Cernunnos placed inside the temple... But does he recognise his surroundings?

During the on-going archaeological excavations of the Celtic settlement at Roseldorf, four or five sanctuaries have been discovered of which the first one (Objekt 1, Sandberg) was

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discovered in 2002 and excavated during the following four years. This find constitutes the basis for a reconstruction at the Museum für Urgeschichte at Asparn an der Zaya in Niederösterreich, Austria. The background of the reconstruction, the questions asked beforehand and the work process is described in the above-mentioned article by Dr Ernst Lauermann. I have read this article with my critical glasses on and indeed, as Dr Lauermann writes, the construction of this sanctuary is (my translation) "a special challenge, a provocation which is meant to initiate discussions" (Lauermann 2009: 20).

Let me first give praise to the total impression of the now standing Celtic sanctuary. It is a beautiful building which no doubt enriches the open air Museum für Urgeschichte, and surely gives visitors some sort of impression of Celtic religious life at the time. But is it a reconstruction? I would say no! As Dr Lauermann points out in his article, Objekt 1, Sandberg is the archaeological find that is the foundation for this work (Lauermann 2009: 20). But the now erected sanctuary differs a great deal from the actual archaeological results. At the excavation, a square ditch (25x25 m) was found and on the inside, there was a pit, empty of finds, and therefore interpreted as a sacrificial pit. Additionally, a post hole was discovered, where possibly a pillory with displayed sacrificed weapons was placed. This assumption was strengthened by all the finds of weaponry, for example sword sheets penetrated by nails (Lauermann 2009: 26).

But when the construction work began, inspiration was collected from a series of earlier excavated French sanctuaries (Gournay-sur-Aronde, Ribemont-sur-Ancre, Corent, Bennecourt, Fesques and Montmartin) which resulted in the construction of a palisade surrounding the sacred 'islet', a monumental entrance with three decorated heavy poles and a roof over the sacrificial pit, supported by eight stout poles. Additionally, an entrance was added in the form of a small wooden bridge, not to the east as the geo-magnetic evidence showed, but to the south, which better suited the visitors (Lauermann 2009: 21, 24).

Why were so many features collected from Celtic sanctuaries in France? This is not explained in the article. Since there was no trace of a palisade, entrance or a roof, perhaps none of these should have been built? It would have been different if there had been diffuse traces, but still traces. In that case, of course you could look for comparisons. But now, all these features are simply additions and have, in my view, nothing to do with a reconstruction, but instead constitute a mix of different elements from other places. In my view, there is a lack of trust in the archaeological material when you do such a thing. One might suspect, that the work group had a preconceived view of what a Celtic sanctuary should look like, and "filled in

the gaps" of the archaeological record. This is a little sad, because instead it would enrich the view of how local religious life was practiced and what local sanctuaries looked like in what is today Austria, if the reconstruction had been true to the actual archaeology of the site. In fact, such a reconstruction could feed the discussion on the field of Celtic cult and religion, because new questions would have had to be asked to the material and something might have been learned. I wonder what was actually learned in this process?

Lauermann writes that a palisade creates a closed room where sacred activities could be carried out, activities that were not meant for the public eye (Lauermann 2009: 22). That is true, in general, but the excavated Objekt 1 may have had a slightly different function since it did not look like other sanctuaries. This could be due to for example regional differences in religious practise or a special function within a sacred area with many sanctuaries.
And such an area has indeed been discovered through the ongoing excavations! In the latest report of 2009, one can read that four or five sanctuaries have been found of which one (Objekt 30) shows traces of a palisade (but no sacrificial pit) (Holzer 2009: 3)!

When we come to ornaments, decoration, paint etc I think the work team has done a good job. If you have finds of such things, you should of course stick to them, but that is an uncommon situation. In case of no traces, I think you should always look around regionally first, scanning the occurrence of ornaments of the actual time, but secondly, I think you should also look transregionally for evidence, just as the reconstruction team did! But when it comes to one thing I am still a little confused: Lauermann writes about human skulls decorating other Celtic temples, but that idea was rejected early in the planning and instead human heads were chiselled out of wood (Lauermann 2009: 23). This also looks very good, but if there are evidence of human skulls decorating Celtic temples, why not use artificial, anatomically correct human skulls for decoration? It would be interesting to know why such an idea was rejected.

I also wonder about the sacrificial pit. Bloody sacrifices were carried out at sacrificial pits, and that would be a pedagogically unwise thing to illustrate, so instead a roof was built above the pit (Lauermann 2009: 23). What does the roof have to do with how you illustrate a sacrificial pit? I don’t see the logic here. When it comes to the pit, of course blood could not be poured into it, but perhaps this could be illustrated in other creative ways. I think it is extremely important to show what we really think different places looked like during pre-history, even if it might, at least on the planning stage, seem too unattractive (Josefson & Olofsson 2006: 76). Otherwise, reconstruction work should perhaps not be carried out at all.

The idol of Cernunnos was placed inside the temple, based on the find of a worked, and at the base, drilled antler that probably had been mounted on something made of wood. I think that this is a very good interpretation of the find and, I must say, the idol looks very good

indeed, sitting on his podium close to the sacrificial pit. But does he recognise his surroundings?

Link(s)

Holzer, Veronika. 2009. Dokumentation Grabung 2009. Available as pdf.

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