A Celtic Hilltop Settlement on Oberleiserberg in Lower Austria

Oberleis near Ernstbrunn (Oberleiserberg – ‘Oberleis Hill’) is one of the most important archaeological sites in eastern Austria. It is located on a vast elevation (457 m above sea level) which is part of the Leiserberge chain in the very centre of Weinviertel in Lower Austria (Figs. 1:1–2). The summit of the elevation is an oval plateau with a surface area of about 6.5 ha (about 360 x 250 m), which is bordered to the west, north and east by steep slopes. On the south side, slightly below the plateau, is an additional flat “terrace” (called “Vorburg”) with a surface area of about 1.5 ha. It is therefore a typical upland site with a very favourable position both topographically and in terms of communications. Over many years of archaeological research, rich traces of settlements starting from the late Neolithic period to modern times have been found. An important part of the archaeological material coming from Oberleiserberg is a group of finds dated to the Late Iron Age and connected with La Tène culture settlements. These are materials that come from methodical archaeological research as well as being gathered from the surface of the site. Some of them are in private collections. For the most part, these are as yet unpublished finds.

The site under discussion has been known in the literature since the second half of the 19th century (MUCH 1872, 125–130; HOERNES 1889, 69–70). The first systematic archaeological research was carried out in 1925–1931 and 1933 by Herbert Mitscha-Märheim and Ernst Nischer-Falkenhof (MITSCHA-MÄRHEIM, NISCHER-FALKENHOF 1929; NISCHER-FALKENHOF, MITSCHA-MÄRHEIM 1931; 1935; MITSCHA-MÄRHEIM 1937; 1956). Subsequent research began in 1976 under the direction of Herwig Friesinger from the Institute of Pre- and Protohistory of the University of Vienna and after breaks in 1991–95 as well as 2002 and 2006 the research continues. At present, the research project is being headed by Alois Stuppner from the Institute of Pre- and Protohistory in Vienna.

As yet, the archaeological material found during the research has not been fully analysed. The history of research at Oberleiserberg to 1981 and the literature dealing with it have been summarised and discussed by Kurt Genser (1986, 685–701). Short reports on the digging in 1977–1989 have been published by Herwig Friesinger (1978) and Anton Kern (1982; 1986; 1988; 1989; 1990). The material dated from the Neolithic period to the La Tène Period found during past research as well as stray and surface finds were described in an unpublished doctoral thesis by Anton Kern (1987). The same author also presents a brief discussion on the state of research on finds from the La Tène Period from the research in 1976–1990 (KERN 1996). Matters connected with finds of Celtic coins from Oberleiserberg have been discussed several times in numismatic literature (GÖBL 1973; 1983; 1987; 1992; 1994; DEMBSKI 1999). La Tène culture glass jewellery as well as selected finds made from antlers and southern imports were the object of short papers by Maciej Karwowski (1999; 2004; 2005; 2007a). The same author has also recently presented a short discussion on the main issues connected with La Tène culture settlements on this site (KARWOWSKI 2007b). Materials from research in 1996–2001, 2003–2005 and 2007 as well as the vast quantity of stray and surface finds are currently being analysed and prepared for publication. The La Tène culture settlement in question has been referred to many times in the literature (also as “oppidum”) within general papers (e.g. FILIP 1956, Fig. 17; COLLIS 1975, 78; 1984, 8; 193, Fig. 1–10; URBAN 1992, 120; 1994, 35; 1998, 53; 2000, 352). Materials dated to the late antiquity were the object of short papers by Herwig
The oldest traces of La Tène culture settlement in north-eastern Austria appear in the Early La Tène Period, probably as a result of eastward migrations of Celtic tribes. It is worth remarking that this earliest presence of sites of La Tène culture is concentrated in areas to the south of the Danube, mainly in the Treisen river valley. Offering very favourable conditions for settlement, the Weinviertel area, in the centre of which is the Oberleiserberg settlement, remained somewhat outside the interest of the Celtic newcomers at that time. It was only at the beginning of the Middle La Tène Period that clear transformations took place north of the Danube – similar to those in many areas of La Tène culture – finally leading to the total disappearance of archaeologically accessible cemeteries. It is possible to observe at the same time a distinct increase in the intensity and density of settlement network. As a result of these changes, a well-developed middle, and then late period La Tène culture grew up. At that time the Celtic settlement centre in Roseldorf – “Sandberg” – in the western part of Waldviertel was also undergoing a period of prosperity.

In the north-eastern area of Austria La Tène culture forms a relatively cohesive cultural group in the middle and at the beginning of the Late La Tène Period (Fig. 1:2). It mainly encompasses a fertile land situated to the eastern part of Waldviertel – mainly the Kamp river valley and the region of the towns of Horn and Eggenburg – and the whole of Weinviertel, together with the particularly intensively settled Marchfeld, and to the south of the Danube the lower part of the Treisen river valley as well as the Wiener Becken and the northern part of Burgenland. In the western and south-western direction lie areas empty of settlement separating the areas under discussion from the group of La Tène culture settlements in Upper Austria (the vicinity of Linz) and in Styria. In the eastern and south-eastern direction the La Tène culture from north-eastern Austria borders directly on zones of that culture settlement from south-western Slovakia and western Hungary.

La Tène culture settlements in north-eastern Austria are most probably connected with the presence here of Celtic Boii (Fig. 2:1). These tribes and their migrations are mentioned in a number of ancient written sources, so their presence on the central Danube seems to be fairly well historically documented (see e.g. Urban 1998, 53–55). Less clear is the question of the end of the La Tène culture in this area, as well as the historical events connected with it. The written sources refer to Boian-Dacian wars, that happened probably c. 40 B.C. or slightly earlier, after which there remained – according to Pliny – Deserta Boiorum. On the basis of archaeological sources, it seems that the breakdown in Celtic settlements in north-eastern Austria occurred at the same time as the disappearance of these settlements in Moravia, i.e. in the LT D phase. It is not, however, possible to exclude the local survival of certain elements of the La Tène culture, though undoubtedly in a distinctly altered form.

There is also some uncertainty as to the extent of the influence which Regnum Noricum – a union of Celtic tribes under the rule of Noric kings, encompassing the area of modern-day Carinthia – had from the mid-2nd century BC on the territory to the north of the central Danube (Fig. 2:1). This political formation, whose direct influence undoubtedly reached the line of the Danube, is considered to have been the last manifestation of Celtic power on the continent. The far-reaching southward contacts of the Lower Austrian Boii should therefore have been in direct relations with the Noric kingdom. However, traces of such contacts in the archaeological material are as yet surprisingly negligible (Karwowski 2007A). This is true both of imports from Noricum itself and those which could have come through the intermediary of Noricum.

Oberleiserberg is one of the very few hilltop settlements of the La Tène culture in the region of the central Danube with preserved traces of intensive settlement, covering a significant part of the site. Additionally, very few of settlements of this type yielded such an
impressive collection of stray and surface finds. In this regard, the only comparable sites in Lower Austria, though considerably richer (a fact undoubtedly influenced by chronological differences) are two open lowland settlements: Roseldorf, less than 40 km from Oberleis, and Etzersdorf, located to the south of the Danube. Material from these settlements have not yet been fully published (V. Holzer and E. Wallner pers. comm; see also KARWOWSKI 2004, 46–49; HOLZER 2007). In the majority of the excavated hilltop settlements in this region, only traces of settlement or merely single dwellings have been found. In a number of cases, however, the existence of fortifications on these sites has been found (URBAN 1995; 1999; see also KARWOWSKI 2006A). From this we can assume that hilltop settlements did not have an important economic role, and that they could not have been intensively settled. The traces discovered on these sites indicate rather that their function was as a refuge or for administrative purposes. The comparative paucity of archaeological material from this site would, however, seem to exclude the latter.

Researches carried out on Oberleiserberg indicate that the character of this settlement is quite different. At present, over 24 archaeologically researched dwellings (Fig. 2:2) – mostly pit dwellings, but also post-construction houses, a considerable quantity of small constructions of undefined function (mainly various types of small pits) and a substantial collection of stray and surface finds – can be linked with La Tène culture settlements. Moreover, electromagnetic surveying carried out in 1997–1998 by a team led by Peter Melichar and Wolfgang Neubauer from Archeo Prospections in Vienna (NEUBAUER 2001, 83–89) on the entire unforested area of the site revealed that excavations had hitherto been carried out mainly outside the area with the best preserved La Tène culture settlements. In the southern part of the magnetogram (Fig. 3), numerous rectangular objects interpreted as pit dwellings are visible which can, with a great degree of probability, be linked with the La Tène culture. These assumptions are further confirmed by the surface material. Excavations carried out since 1976 in the central and western part of the plateau were mainly aimed at researching the remains of constructions from the Migration Period and encompassed the part of the territory most intensively used at that time. The relatively small number of preserved La Tène culture constructions in this area seems to have been caused by later settlement. Excavations resumed in 2007 and those planned for 2008 concentrate on researching the remains of constructions linked with La Tène culture settlements as well. The present state of research on this culture in eastern Austria would seem to suggest that the site at Oberleiserberg is the only hilltop settlement in that region capable of providing data for the reconstruction of the structure of buildings area. On the basis of the documentation left from the research by Herbert Mitscha-Märheim and Ernst Nischer-Falkenhof from the 1920s, it can be concluded that the northern part of the site must have been intensively settled in the La Tène Period also. This area is now densely forested and practically inaccessible archaeologically speaking.

The majority of the unearthed dwellings are pit dwellings. A typical La Tène culture pit dwelling from Oberleiserberg is a rectangular construction, 5 m by 3 m on average, hollowed about 50 cm into rock (Fig. 4). The roof construction must have been supported on two posts placed in the middle of the shorter sides. In a few cases, the rows of holes from the additional posts along the shorter or longer wall have been preserved. In some of the pit dwellings, the hearth has also been preserved. The state of preservation of the entire site usually allows only the part of the construction hollowed into the rock to be documented. Because of this, the post-construction dwellings, sometimes multi-phase, which are only slightly hollowed into rock, are considerably worse preserved and harder to interpret. This is connected with the multicultural character of the site, the very intensive settlement during the Migration Period, modern agricultural activity and, in places, quite extensive erosion. Over the area of the whole site, the cultural layers underwent, in places, very strong displacement.

The question still remains open whether one could link the massive ramparts surrounding the whole plateau (which remain up today) with La Tène culture settlements (Fig. 5:1). These fortifications were certainly made during the Urnfield culture times, though their reuse both in the Late Iron Age and in later periods cannot be excluded. The current state of research indicates that the most probable is the existence of fortifications on Oberleiserberg in the La Tène Period in the form of a simple palisade. Very favourable conditions for settlement within
the plateau also suggest that the hilltop settlement here could have had an open, undefended character. There are grounds for thinking that in the central part of the site there was a spring; on the northern and western slopes of the hill there are springs that still exist today. From the southern side and partly from the western side, the plateau is in places relatively easily accessible and there are now modern access roads here. One cannot deny that the conditions for cultivation on Oberleiserberg are not optimal (mostly rendzina soil), but that does not change the fact that today the whole unforested part of the site is intensively cultivated. Practically such favourable conditions for a normal settlement are not provided by any of the other surrounding hilltop settlements.

In addition, the quality and quantity of the finds from Oberleiserberg differentiate this site from the remaining Lower Austrian hilltop settlements. From here, some individual finds indicating far-reaching, indirect and direct contacts are also known. First of all, we should mention a coin minted in Numidia in the second half of the 2nd century B.C. and finds of fragments of Campana ceramics, or black sigillata from Italy (Fig. 5:3b–c). The fragments of bronze vessels, including, for example, some massive cast bucket feet and other items, like mirrors, are at least in part imported (Fig. 6). These artefacts most probably came into the area to the north of the central Danube through the intermediary of Regnum Noricum. As mentioned above, this type of finds in the northern part of Lower Austria is very uncommon. Amongst the numismatic material there are also Noric and Pannonic imports, as well as western Celtic ones. Some metal ornaments and tools should also be connected with these areas. Some of the finds also indicate contacts with areas occupied by Tauriscii and Scordiscii. The very important question as to the character of the links of the Oberleiserberg settlement with areas inhabited by Dacians remains as yet unresolved. Amongst the materials found, there is a lack of finds that would directly indicate the existence of such contacts. An exception is a typical hand-made Dacian bowl found during pre-war excavations (Fig. 5:3a).

The Oberleiserberg settlement has also provided the most numerous finds of Celtic coins among Lower Austrian hilltop settlements – at present, about 145 known examples, mainly minted by the Boii, but also fairly many of the aforementioned imports (J. Militký pers. comm.). More numerous collections of Celtic coins in north-eastern Austria come only from the open settlements in Roseldorf and Etzersdorf. The possible existence of a local minting, postulated by Robert Göbl (1987; 1992, 16), with which the author links silver coins of the so-called Oberleiserberg type (Fig. 5:2), seems here of great relevance. These are three types of didrachma, being imitations of Pannonic, Noric and perhaps also Boian coins. It should be emphasised here that so far no direct evidence has been found on this site that coins were locally minted, in the form of minting disc moulds or minting dies. In Lower Austria, minting activity – dating back, in fact, to much earlier – has been confirmed in the Roseldorf settlement (DEMBSKI 2002; HOLZER 2007, 406). The Oberleiserberg coin collection is currently being analysed and prepared for publication by Jiří Militký from Prague.

Further metal objects, especially fibulae, are well represented at Oberleiserberg. Over 300 such finds have so far been registered. The vast majority are fibulae made of iron – about 250 items (Fig. 7), while much less numerous are bronze fibulae – 50 items (Fig. 8) and ones made of silver – 2 items. Amongst the iron pieces, a relatively numerous series – about 70 items – stands out of late La Tène fibulae, which are imitations of bronze Schüsselfibeln (crescent fibulae). Such a concentration of these finds may indicate that they were made locally. Also from Oberleiserberg is a series of almost 30 fibulae, the unequivocal typological classification of which is not easy. They are bronze, cast in the form, fibulae with a “pseudo-middle La Tène” construction with a bow decorated with bosses. The Oberleiserberg collection represents the most numerous concentration of these objects, which may also suggest their local provenance. The remaining fibulae represent a range of types of middle La Tène construction (numerous wire, often badly preserved iron specimens; Mötschwill type) and late La Tène one (Schüsselfibeln, including a silver specimen; Neuheim type and its variants; var. J after R. Beltz (1911); type 65 after O. Almgren (1923) and their iron imitations; Almgren 18 and a few iron Geschweiftefibeln – curved fibulae).

Amongst the remaining finds made of metal, some parts of clothing draw particular attention (belt hooks of various kinds, including some decorated with palmettes; belt fittings and
loops; rings, including the *Knottenringe* type; ornamental buttons and decorations; bracelets; belt chains), various small specialty tools (tweezers, toiletry implements, mirror handles and faces, fine scales, small instruments, including surgical ones, hooks), craft and farming implements (iron knives, files, socketed axes, socketed hoes, pot hooks, drill bits, spanners, chains), horse-riding accessories (ornamental accessories; spurs – also with decorative bosses) and parts of carts as well as the previously mentioned fragments of bronze vessels (Figs. 6 and 9:2).

A fairly numerous series of metal objects with zoomorphic or mythical depictions also comes from Oberleiserberg (Fig. 9:1). These can be whole animals (for example, fibulae in the shape of a horse), decorative elements and fittings with stylised masks, buckles and clasps finished off with animal heads or indefinable creatures (including a unique fastening, perhaps taken from a cuirass). A small bronze human figure, probably connected with a cult, which was found in 1998, owes particular attention (Fig. 5:4).

The next very numerous group of La Tène culture finds from Oberleiserberg is glass jewellery, mainly bracelets and ringbeads: at present, 83 items (KARWOWSKI 1999; 2004). This category of artefacts occurs commonly in settlements in practically the whole area of the La Tène culture, though usually in the form of a few finds from an individual site. The concentration of several dozen items has only been discovered so far at relatively few sites. It is worth remarking that the most numerous finds are mainly connected with lowland settlements of an open character, and in the case of north-eastern Austria, the largest collections of Celtic glass jewellery come – exactly as in the case of the aforementioned coins – besides Oberleiserberg, from two lowland open settlements: Roseldorf and Etzersdorf (KARWOWSKI 2004, 46–49; 2006B, 133–136).

The most numerous category of finds from the Oberleiserberg settlement is obviously a group of objects made of clay. These are mainly fragments of ceramic vessels (fine wares – about 40–50%; coarse wares – about 30–40%; graphite wares – about 20%). Amongst the vessels there are practically all forms that are characteristic of La Tène culture, mainly numerous bowls, pots and flagons. In the overwhelming majority of cases, these vessels were made using a potter’s wheel. One should mention in this group also typical spindle whorls and numerous whorls made from potsherds of broken ceramic vessels.

In the light of preliminary analyses of the archaeological material, we can say that the beginnings of La Tène culture settlements on Oberleiserberg should be linked with the beginning of the Middle La Tène Period, or at least with its older phase (LT C₁). This would mean that it was settled earlier than many other hilltop settlements in the region of the central Danube. An explanation of this puzzle will probably only be possible after a detailed analysis of the very numerous ceramic pieces found in closed complexes. A key role in considering the chronology of the site, apart from fibulae and precisely dated glass ornaments, is certainly played by Boian coins. The majority of them should be dated to the first half of the first century B.C., which generally speaking coincides with the dating of the majority of the remaining finds. This allows us to state that the La Tène culture settlement on Oberleiserberg was at the height of its development in the older phase of the Late La Tène Period (LT D₁). The question of the end of the culture’s settlement on Oberleiserberg remains relatively unclear. Amongst the archaeological material is a series of finds which are also known from complexes dated to the younger phase of the Late La Tène Period. The majority of this material can, however, be set within the older phase of this period. Isolated stray finds coming unequivocally from the second half of the first century B.C. do not seem to be a sufficient confirmation of the continuation of the settlement in this period. In the light of these finds, it is not possible to exclude the survival of certain elements or – what is more probable – sporadic settlements, perhaps of a different character. This situation allows us to say that the end of the settlement in question coincides with the end of La Tène culture settlements in Morávia, which happened in about the middle of the first century B.C. At the present stage of research, it is difficult to decide unequivocally whether the end of Celtic settlements on Oberleiserberg had a direct link with the fighting
between the Boii and the Dacians. There are at present no premises whatsoever to assume that it could have followed a violent course.

The character of La Tène culture materials from Oberleiserberg allows the theory to be accepted that this settlement fulfilled a central role, albeit probably of local significance. The main reason for this could be not so much the hilltop character of this settlement as rather its very favourable location at a short distance from both the Danube and the trade routes running from the Danube further to the north along the rivers Kamp and March, for it is along these routes that Caput Adriae must have been connected to the Baltic Sea coast. The significance of Oberleiserberg must have increased in the Late La Tène Period, in other words after its heyday, or even after the decline of the settlement complex in Roseldorf. Perhaps then the hilltop location of the Oberleiserberg settlement took on greater significance and that is why it could take over the central role. Also during this period, there probably existed the local minting.

Abbreviations:

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Fig. 1.
1. Oberleiserberg. View from the west;
2. The La Tène culture in north-eastern Austria
1. photo by IUFG Wien; 2. after KARWOWSKI 2007B
Fig. 2.
1. Regnum Noricum and neighbouring tribes in the East Alpine region;
2. Oberleiserberg. La Tène culture pit dwellings within the excavated area

1. after Urban 2000; 2. after Karwowski 2007b
Fig. 3. Oberleiserberg. Archaeological interpretation of electromagnetic survey after NEUBAUER 2001
Fig. 4. Oberleiserberg. Typical La Tène culture pit dwellings.
Top – No 318/2004, bottom – No 416/1999
photo and drawing by IUFG Wien
Fig. 5.
1–4: Oberleiserberg: View on the ramparts from the south; 2. Coins of the Oberleiserberg type; 3. Imported ceramics: top – hand-made Dacian bowl, bottom – fragments of Campana; 4. Small human figure made of bronze
1. photo by IUFG Wien; 2. photo by J. Militký; 3. photo and drawings by M. Karwowski and IUFG Wien; 4. photo and drawings by IUFG Wien
Fig. 6. Oberleiserberg. Small finds made of bronze
drawings by E. Smagur
Fig. 7. Oberleiserberg. Fibulae made of iron
drawings by K. Szewczyk
Fig. 8. Oberleiserberg. Fibulae made of bronze
drawings by E. Smagar
Fig. 9.
1–2. Oberleiserberg. 1. Small metal objects with zoomorphic or mythical depictions; 2. Small finds made of iron
1. drawings by E. Smagur; 2. drawings by E. Szewczyk