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Sensational Discovery in Simmering

Possible Key to Vienna's Roman Origins

First presentation for media representatives

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Early skeletal finds from the Roman Empire are extremely rare. This is because the Romans practiced cremation in Europe until the 3rd century AD. This makes the discovery of a Roman mass grave from the end of the 1st century AD all the more dramatic.. The unceremonial burial points to a catastrophic event in a military context. It could be evidence from the immediate history of the founding of Vienna.

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1. The Excavation

In the course of the renovation of the sports field (Ostbahn-XI-Platz) in Simmering, Hasenleitengasse 49 by MA51 Sport Wien, the construction company discovered a large accumulation of human remains at the end of October 2024.

After contacting the Federal Monuments Office, an initial scientific investigation was carried out under the direction of Stadtarchäologie Wien in collaboration with the archaeological excavation company Novetus. Novetus provided two experts in archaeology and anthropology. The excavation work had already displaced numerous bones within the excavation pit. An extension of the excavation area made it possible to record the extent of the distribution of the human remains. The excavation work was carried out until December 17, 2024.

2. The Mass Grave

At least 129 coherent individuals were documented during the excavations. Due to the large number of dislocated bones, which were torn from their original position by the excavation work, the total number of individuals is estimated at over 150.

- **Extent**: approx. 5 x 4.5 m, depth: 0.3 to 0.5 m
- **Grave shape**: Presumably originally oval. It remains unclear whether the pit was deliberately created or a natural depression was used.
- **Burial type**: The individuals were buried without any recognizable order or orientation. Many lay on their stomachs or sides, some adapted to the shape of the pit. The limbs were intertwined with those of other individuals. This indicates a hasty covering of the dead with earth, i.e. not an orderly burial.

3. Anthropological Examinations

The skeletons are cleaned at Novetus and then examined. Among other things, body height, age at death, sex, pathological changes and possible causes of death are recorded.

So far, just over a third of the skeletons have been analyzed. The results so far:

- **Body height**: mostly over 1.7 m tall
- **Sex**: All individuals examined so far were male.
- **Age at death**: mostly 20-30 years
- **State of health**: Few indications of infectious diseases, generally very good dental health
- **Injuries**: Perimortem injuries were noted on every individual examined, particularly to the skull, torso and pelvis.
- **Causes of death**: Injuries from blunt and sharp weapons, including spears, daggers, swords and iron bolts from ranged weapons. The variety of injuries indicates a battle and not an execution site.

These initial anthropological investigations suggest a catastrophic end to a military operation.

As the remains are purely male, it can be ruled out that the site of discovery was not connected with a military hospital or similar or that an epidemic was the cause of death. The injuries to the bones are clearly the result of combat.

The dating of the bones by means of C14 analysis revealed the period approx. 80 to 230 A.D. The grave goods found in the grave made it possible to specify the period more precisely.

4. Archaeological Investigations

The small number of objects found beyond the skeletons indicates that the dead were robbed of their weapons and equipment. However, the few finds that were recovered are remarkable and allow a chronological and cultural-historical classification:

- **Dagger**. The iron dagger is the key find for dating the mass grave. Its fragments look inconspicuous when found due to rusting and corrosion. However, an X-ray image of the dagger scabbard immediately reveals characteristic Roman decorations. These are inlays made of silver wire, which allow the dagger to be dated to between the middle of the 1st and the beginning of the 2nd century AD.
- **Scale armor.** Several scales of scale armor/*lorica squamata* were found, made of non-ferrous metal alloy and connected to each other by wire. In contrast to the rail armor that was also used, scale armor was more complex to manufacture and allowed its wearers greater maneuverability. Scale armor became established around 100 AD under the influence of cavalry soldiers from the eastern half of the Roman Empire. However, the specimens found are strikingly different from most of those known from the research literature. Instead of the usual round perforations, they have square recesses on the upper side for fastening to the carrier material. What may appear to be a small detail is, due to its rarity in our area, a production feature that must be investigated.
- **Cheek piece of a helmet**. A cheek piece is a sheet of metal that was attached to the helmet to protect the cheeks. The recess for the ear allows it to be assigned to a Roman helmet type that became established from the middle of the 1st century AD.
- **Lance points**. Two iron spearheads were found, one of which was stuck in a hip bone.
- **Shoe nails**. Numerous hobnails were found in the foot area of one individual. They came from so-called caligae, Roman military shoes. These were made of leather and studded with nails on the underside. This type of footwear identifies the individual with great certainty as a Roman soldier.

The discovery of a mass grave with around 150 Roman soldiers who died in battle is unique in Central Europe.

5. Hypothesis: The mass grave could be directly linked to the founding of Vienna

The question of the dating of the mass grave can be clarified by the objects found. The decoration of the dagger sheath is particularly significant. Daggers of this type were in use from the middle of the 1st to the beginning of the 2nd century AD.

The question of the cause of the mass grave can be explained by knowledge of the burial rites in the Roman Empire: In the Roman Empire, there were elaborate burial rituals and set rules; precise rules also had to be followed for the time after death. As cremation burials were common in the European parts of the Roman Empire around 100 AD, bodily burials were an absolute exception. Finds of Roman skeletons from this period are therefore extremely rare.

The creation of a mass grave without cremation of the dead suggests a large number of casualties in combination with a lack of time and resources. The battle wounds, on the other hand, rule out the possibility of executions, such as a punishment for military cowardice. Instead, everything points to the catastrophic end of a military operation.

Historical sources report that there were repeated battles with Germanic tribes on the Danube border of the Roman Empire under Emperor Domitian (81-96 AD) at the end of the 1st century (Danube Wars 86 to 96 AD). These were extremely costly for the Romans - there are reports of the destruction of an entire legion. A few years later, under Emperor Trajan (98-117), the massive fortification line, the Danube Limes, was extended.

The mass grave in Simmering is the first physical evidence of fighting from this period and indicates the location of a battle in the area of present-day Vienna. The defeat attested here could therefore have been the immediate reason for the expansion of the formerly small military base into the legionary camp of Vindobona - less than seven kilometers from the site of the find. Hasenleitengasse may therefore mark the beginning of Vienna's urban history.

6. Outlook

The Vienna team is still at the very beginning of its research. Further investigations into the human remains and the objects found will be carried out as part of an international, interdisciplinary research project. DNA and isotope analyses in particular will provide exciting results on the origin and living conditions of the soldiers buried in Hasenleitengasse.

Furthermore, experts from Austria and abroad will delve into the following topics:

- Geophysical investigations of the subsoil in the wider vicinity of the excavation site
- Pollen analyses to investigate the vegetation in Roman times
- River morphological investigations to reconstruct the course of the Danube around 100
- Political and military-historical classification of the grave find
- Research into the objects recovered from the grave
- Religious-historical research on this form of special burial
- Legal-historical prerequisites for burials in the event of war