



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## Northern customs and the shaping of Homeric burial rites?

Kelder, J.M.; Felbacher, R.; Fischer, J.

### Citation

Kelder, J. M. (2024). Northern customs and the shaping of Homeric burial rites? In R. Felbacher & J. Fischer (Eds.), *Studien zur Geschichtsforschung des Altertums* (pp. 147-165). Hamburg: Verlag Dr. Kovač. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3729671>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Creative Commons CC BY 4.0 license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3729671>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

# Northern Customs and the shaping of Homeric burial rites?

*Jorrit M. Kelder (Dutch Institute for the Near East, Leiden)*

## Introduction

Various studies have highlighted the extent to which Homer, and indeed much of Greek culture in general, owed a cultural debt to the Near East. Indeed, many features on Greek vases in the so-called “Orientalising Period” (the late 8<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> century BC) are clearly borrowed from Levantine (Phoenician) art, whereas the emergence of stone sculpture, as well as advanced metalwork, is thought to have been triggered by Greek contacts with Egypt. Through Greece, many of these innovations spread across the Mediterranean, and into Europe. Comparatively little attention has, however, been paid to northern influence on the Greek world. Indeed, numerous similarities have been observed between the Homeric epics and Near Eastern stories, and these are generally ascribed to Greek “borrowing” of older Near Eastern storylines and elements. At the same time, however, any similarity between Homer and later European epics (such as the *Beowulf*) is usually dismissed as either coincidental or extremely indirect, given the huge timeframe that separated the creation of the respective epics (although the Homeric epics were known and copied well into the Middle Ages and thus could have easily influenced early Medieval bards). Yet it seems unlikely that songs similar to the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were unknown in Bronze Age and Early Iron Age Europe; in fact, glimpses of later (recorded) Celtic and Germanic legends very much suggest a lively oral tradition, in which heroic exploits were recited and embellished. If true, such songs may well have influenced, and have been influenced by, contemporary Greek traditions. The archaeological record may provide us with some arguments for such a scenario. By highlighting a number of remarkable features in northern European tumuli, focusing in particular on the so-called “Royal Tomb” at Seddin (Brandenburg), this paper argues that a number of features of the burial of Patroclus and Hector from Homer’s *Iliad*, were

likely borrowed from contemporary funerary practices in Central and Northern European communities.

### **Contacts between the North and the South**

The giant tumuli that dotted the landscape of Iron Age Europe have often been considered as part of an orientalisising tradition, owing some (though not all of their features) to contacts with the Mediterranean world.<sup>1</sup> There is much to support such a view, such as the apparent gap between local Bronze Age traditions and the new form of elite burial, and, importantly, by the almost simultaneous introduction of drinking sets in Northern and Central Europe that are normally associated with the *symposion* in elite graves throughout the Mediterranean, Anatolia and the regions around the Black Sea. Indeed, trade routes to and from the Adriatic Sea, and Etruria in particular, may arguably have served as the conduit for the underlying ideas behind such practices, if not necessarily for the prestigious objects themselves. The intensity of these contacts may account for the sometimes seemingly contemporaneous emergence of customs on either side of the Alps. Bronze *situlae*, *amphorae* and similar vessels, for example, were widely (and in some places quite suddenly) used as urns in elite burials from the 9<sup>th</sup> century BC onwards.<sup>2</sup> Of these, the so-called “Gevelinghausen-Veio-Seddin” type stands out. Though only few of such amphorae have been found, their distribution appears to have been quite extraordinary: they have been found from Central Italy to Jutland, and from the Saar to eastern Hungary.<sup>3</sup> It is not farfetched to suppose that the diffusion of cultural elements may well have extended beyond portable objects. Metzner-Nebelsick,<sup>4</sup> for example, noted that the meander-like motive on the walls of the burial chamber of the so-called “Royal Tomb” at Seddin (Brandenburg, Germany; where one of the aforementioned amphorae was found) is otherwise unknown in the Nordic cultural zone, and is likely to have come from the south; with which the Adriatic region was presum-

---

<sup>1</sup> Hansen 2017, 225.

<sup>2</sup> Desplanques 2022.

<sup>3</sup> May 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Metzner-Nebelsick 1997, 98.

ably meant, and more in particular the Po-valley and Etruria. Indeed, the same paper proposed personal, first-hand knowledge of “Helden” like the one at Seddin of those distant regions to the south.

When I first read that paper, in preparation for a lecture at a conference in Brandenburg in 2018 (which forms the basis for this paper), I was somewhat sceptical about the concept of direct connections between, say, elites in northern Germany and communities in southern Europe, e.g., Etruria and the Aegean. Indeed, whilst the absence of evidence cannot realistically be taken as evidence for absence, the scarcity of any indication for direct contact between the Aegean world and Central (or Northern) Europe (as has already been noted long ago by Snodgrass<sup>5</sup>) rather suggests that Greek elements, including references to Homeric traditions, were probably transferred indirectly, via the Etruscan world and along the eastern Adriatic coast. Yet at the same time, there is a growing body of evidence – in part triggered by recent breakthroughs in the study of ancient DNA – that indicates far greater mobility throughout Bronze and Iron Age Europe (and indeed, beyond that) than previously thought. These new insights, as well as re-evaluations of older evidence, have led some scholars to suggest that at least some societies in Central and Northern Europe were likely far more complex, stratified, outward looking and connected than hitherto thought.<sup>6</sup> That raw materials and occasionally finished objects from the north made their way south was always known (think of amber from the Baltic, which was found in Italy, Greece, and even the Near East), and in recent years, specialist studies<sup>7</sup> have highlighted how particular know-how, such as specific metalworking skills may have similarly spread from the (not so) “Barbarian” north to the “civilised” south. All of this, of course, does not mean that we need to entirely overhaul the narrative of “ex oriente lux” in the orientalisising period – there is no question that many ideas of that time, and their material reflection in iconography, hailed from the Near East, and entered Europe via the Aegean and the Adriatic / Italy. Yet it seems reasonable to suppose that this was not a one-way stream, and that

---

<sup>5</sup> Snodgrass 1965.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Meller – Michel 2018; who argue for direct personal contact between elites from Únětice communities and the Near East.

<sup>7</sup> Such as Molloy 2012, for overviews, Kristiansen – Suchowska-Ducke 2015, 367, and Kelder 2022.

novelties also came from the north, and were adopted by communities in the south.

Indeed, such a notion was already explored in a workshop on “Der Grabhügel von Seddin im norddeutschen und skandinavischen Kontext”; the proceedings of which were subsequently published by Svend Hansen and Franz Schopper in 2018. From reading those papers, it becomes quite clear that there was a notable northern influence on burial practices at Seddin and the regions around it. The complex sets of rituals and behaviour, fossilised in the tumulus at Seddin, was emphatically not just a matter of piecemeal “southern” influence in the “barbarian north”: it was a mix of local customs and responses to northern *and* southern concepts of how one ought to bury the illustrious dead. In view of all that, it is reasonable to wonder whether we may not push this line of thought a little further, and whether we may not suggest that even the most “Greek” heroic burials – the burials of Patroclus and Hector in Homer’s *Iliad* – may have been partly inspired not just by (older) Near Eastern traditions (as is widely accepted)<sup>8</sup> but also by contemporary northern practices.

The aforementioned emergence of giant tumuli, and a number of associated burial rites, may be an example of such multi-directional interaction. I already noted how the use of *situlae* in elite burials likely originated in the Mediterranean, more specifically in Etruria: there often seems to be a tacit understanding that the building of mounds may have spread from that general direction, too. Yet the construction of tumuli in Etruria seems to have started only in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC; well over a century after the giant tumulus at Seddin, in Brandenburg, had been constructed. Seddin, in fact, seems to have been not only one of the largest, but also one of the earliest monumental tumuli in Late Bronze and Iron Age Europe. More strikingly, perhaps, the tumulus at Seddin also predates the very tumuli that are often thought to have served as models to other burial mounds in the orientalisising world, most notably those at Sardis (such as the tomb of Alyattes, which dates to ca. 560 BC) and the royal tumuli at Gordion, of which the so-called ‘Midas Mount’, dated to ca. 740 BC, stands out. The question rises as to how this tallies with an ‘orientalisising’ narrative, and where the funerary rituals as fossilised at Seddin might have come from – or converse-

---

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Rutherford 2020; *ibid.* 2007, 223.

ly, whether some of the ‘orientalising’ traditions in the Mediterranean may not have been inspired by practices from the north, such as at Seddin.

### **A hero’s burial: The archaeological record of Homer’s world**

Let us first establish the basic facts of the “Royal” tomb at Seddin. With a diameter just over 61 meters<sup>9</sup>, it was constructed just before ca. 800 BC – a date that is reasonably secure thanks to 14C dating.<sup>10</sup> The tumulus consists largely of earth; however, its outer rim was once surrounded by a (low) stone wall (a “Steinring”), whereas its surface may have originally been covered with a layer of smaller (and occasionally larger) stones and pebbles.<sup>11</sup> Nine meters off its centre, a stone-built burial chamber of about 2.3 meters in maximum diameter, with nine slightly inward-sloping orthostats supporting a roof of large boulders. Within the chamber was the burial itself. The cremated remains of the occupant – thought to be a male of ca. 30 to 40 years old – were preserved (originally wrapped in what likely was a marten pelt – the animal’s claws were preserved) in a bronze amphora. The vessel’s dotted decoration is thought to have served as a calendar:<sup>12</sup> it was closed with a bronze “phalere”. The urn, in turn, was found in a larger pottery vessel (a “situla”), which was covered by a terracotta slab with four nails to keep it shut. Amongst the 40 or so grave gifts, was a bronze sword, a bronze axe, a chissel, a razor, a so-called “ring-handed knife”, two razors, and – rare for this early period – two iron pins. The sword and axes naturally point towards the deceased’s status as a warrior. But even objects that we may not readily associate with martial prowess, such as razors, may well have served to stress the deceased’s status as warrior. This point is stressed by Harding<sup>13</sup> who refers to a number of passages in Homer that speak of the careful treatment of the body in preparation for warlike activities. In two smaller terracotta vessels, the remains of two women – one of which was allegedly a child –

---

<sup>9</sup> May 2018, 17.

<sup>10</sup> May 2018, 31, fig. 38.

<sup>11</sup> May 2018, 20-21.

<sup>12</sup> The position of the tomb itself and its relation to various other features may similarly point to calendrical considerations. Cf. May 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Harding 2008, 149.

were found, suggesting human sacrifice – possibly of retainers or immediate family “voluntarily” following their leader in death.<sup>14</sup>

The whole ensemble at Seddin is remarkable, not only for the scale of the tomb and the objects (and human remains) it included, but also because of its sheer age. In fact, only a handful of similarly elaborate and monumental tombs are known from the Bronze Age. In the Netherlands, the “chieftain’s grave” at Oss is perhaps the most famous – yet this grave is at least a century younger than the tomb at Seddin. At Oss, moreover, there is no evidence for retainer burials, though other elements, such as the presence of (costly) weapons (at Oss, in what seems to have been a local tradition, the sword was ritually “killed”) and horse-bits (referring both the deceased’s status as a warrior and a reflection of his wealth – horses are a status symbol throughout history). In fact, the only more or less contemporary and similar burial that I know of was erected at Lusehøj, in Denmark. Here, a large barrow of some 36 meters in diameter was constructed around 800 BC (the date is relatively secure thanks to 14C dates<sup>15</sup>), covering a stone cist. Within this cist, archaeologists found a remarkable collection of objects, all of which had originally been bundled together in a piece of woollen cloth and had been covered by an ox-hide. Most striking was an unusual bronze vessel, which had originally probably been used in drinking ceremonies and must have been imported (if the shape and decoration are anything to go by) from somewhere in the southeastern Alps. It was in this vessel that the cremated remains of a man (?), as well as a number of grave gifts were deposited. As at Seddin, the remains were treated with considerable care: before being placed in the bowl, the ashes and objects (which included a gold arm ring, two razors – one of which made of gold, two large pieces of amber, and two golden and two bronze “toggle buttons”) were wrapped in finely-woven cloth, apparently made of nettle fibres. In an interesting twist of research, a recent study<sup>16</sup> has now suggested that this cloth was perhaps made in the Carinthia/Styria region of Austria; possibly from the same area whence the urn itself had come from. The large bronze vessel was subsequently closed with a lid, which was secured with a

---

<sup>14</sup> May et al. 2005, 6 on Seddin; see Hansen 2018, 69, with reference to Testart 2004 for the suggestion of “servitude volontaire”.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Thrane 2018, 92.

<sup>16</sup> Bergfjord et al. 2012.

thick layer of resin (or birch pitch). Impressions suggest that the pieces of amber, which were found next to the urn, had originally been embedded in its surface. A cord further secured the lid to the urn. Additional gifts that were found alongside the urn included a bronze socketed axe, three small bronze cups and a bronze beaker.

It is clear that the tombs at Seddin and Lusehøj were not only roughly contemporary, but that their builders shared a very similar set of ideas of how important members of their society ought to be buried. Shared key features include the practice of cremation, the careful treatment of the ashes (wrapped in imported cloth or animal pelt), the deposition of the ashes in splendid metal containers (either imported or reflecting shapes from areas further south), grave gifts which include objects, such as weapons and razors, that may be associated with warriors (although such associations are tricky at best). The tombs of Lusehøj and Seddin stand out because of their rich contents and (in the case of Seddin) size, yet they were not entirely without comparanda: at and near both sites, various other (mostly smaller) burial mounds. This, in many ways, is remarkable, for in most of Europe, the previously wide-spread practice of erecting barrows had died out by ca. 1200 BC. Indeed, only in the regions north of the Greek world, in Epirus and Albania, is there clear evidence for the erection of earthen mounds over burials in the centuries after that.<sup>17</sup> Yet even there, the practice is notably different from a truly “Homeric” burial – cremation, for example, is only sporadically attested and cremation seems to have been the norm. Burials generally also appear to have contained relatively few grave gifts: metal vessels, such as the precious urn for Patroclus’ ashes or the bronze amphora found at Seddin, are virtually absent. The size of the burial mounds, moreover, is generally very modest – although there are exceptions (most notably the 13<sup>th</sup> century BC Kamenica tumulus in Albania). Even in the north of Europe, in areas such as southern Scandinavia and northern Germany where inurned cremation burials in tumuli were known in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century BC, the practice seems to have become very rare in subsequent centuries. Though it has sometimes been suggested that magnificent 14<sup>th</sup> century burials such as those at Skallerup (Trudshøj) in Denmark, or Peckatel in Schwerin (Germany), may have been precursors of the later, 8<sup>th</sup> century tumuli in the region, there is a notable gap of

---

<sup>17</sup> For an overview, see now Kourkoulakos 2022.

several centuries.<sup>18</sup> The stunning burial at Håga, near Uppsala in Sweden, may be considered as evidence for continuation of the practice, seeing that this huge mound is thought to have been created around 1000 BC. Yet, though this large tumulus does indeed feature numerous examples of the “Homeric burial” – the quantity of gold and other metal objects, such as a sword and razor, the creation of a (wooden) burial chamber, and of course the erection of the mound itself – the cremated remains were not deposited in a metal urn (but instead in a wooden coffin).<sup>19</sup> Indeed, it has been proposed that Håga represented a change to new ways of dealing with the dead in (southern) Scandinavia, with cremation becoming more common whilst the older concept of retaining the whole body was preserved (by depositing the cremated remains in a coffin, rather than an urn, with grave gifts deposited alongside the remains as if the body were still there).<sup>20</sup> Whilst the practice of burying the dead under tumuli thus did not have entirely died out in the most northern parts of Europe, it certainly was not very common anywhere else around the turn of the millennium. Moreover, the “complete package” of what is considered a Homeric burial, seems to have been exceedingly rare. Seddin and Lusehøj, in sum, really were remarkable constructions in 9<sup>th</sup> and early 8<sup>th</sup> century BC Europe.

Hansen (2018) already pointed out that there are clear parallels between various “chiefly burials” in northern Europe and the burials of Patroclus and Hector in Homer’s *Iliad*, as well as that of Achilles as recounted in the *Odyssey*. One notable common feature is the deposition of the bones in a precious metal urn (though in Homer the urns are of gold, whilst at Seddin and Lusehøj, the vessels are of bronze). Both Patroclus’ and Hector’s bones are wrapped in precious garments: fine linen and a purple robe, respectively. The situation at Seddin is less clear, though, as I noted above. It has been proposed that the presence of marten bones may indicate that the mortal remains were wrapped together in a pelt. The urn, moreover, is not simply placed in the ground, but carefully de-

---

<sup>18</sup> For Trudshøj, see Price 2015, 245-247.

<sup>19</sup> Recent studies indicate that earlier suggestions that unburnt human remains in the tumulus fill may indicate human sacrifice (and possible ritual cannibalism) can now be dismissed: these remains turn out to be centuries older and may instead indicate that the mound was erected in or nearby previous graves – the contents of which may consciously been mixed into the new barrow (Ullén – Drenzel 2022, 166).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Ullén – Drenzel 2022, 162.

posited in a built tomb. At Seddin the overall architecture and remains of wall-painting indicates that considerable effort was invested in this aspect of the tomb. Indeed, it has been proposed that its orthostats may point to the cardinal points, or align to the winter and summer solstice.<sup>21</sup> Such cosmic considerations are not explicitly mentioned in the Iliad, but Homer's reference to large, close-set stones to cover "the hollow grave" of Hector point to at least a cist-like burial (as in Lusehøj), if not a burial chamber. Whilst aspects such as the pouring of wine, as described by Homer, are difficult to pinpoint in the archaeological record, the presence of various bronze cups as well as the urn (a bronze amphora) itself, suggest that alcoholic beverages are likely to have been involved in the funerary rites and may point to broadly shared ideas and customs between the communities such as at Seddin and Lusehøj and (roughly contemporary) societies in the world of Homer. The deposition of weapons and other grave goods, moreover, further served to stress the elevated status of the deceased: although this custom is not explicitly mentioned in Homer (indeed, both Hector and Patroclus were stripped of their armour when they fell), it is found in elite burials throughout Europe – from the Aegean and Italy to the north, at Seddin, Lusehøj, and Oss (the Netherlands).

All of the similarities between the chiefly burials at Seddin and Lusehøj and those described in the Iliad and Odyssey could, of course, be down to sheer chance. But it is worth noting that these tombs appear to have been the *only* tombs in Europe (and indeed anywhere else) that conformed *entirely* to the Homeric ideal of burying a "heros" *that are roughly contemporary* (and this needs to be stressed) with Homer (or at least the Homeric epics as we have come to know them). In the Mediterranean – the area where the concept of the Homeric burial is assumed to have come from – there are no contemporary burials that combine all the essential elements of Hector's, Patroclus' of Achilles' burial: a built grave (chamber or cist), the burning of the body and the collection of the bones in precious cloth, a metal urn, the presence of grave gifts that mark the deceased's status as a warrior, retainer burials, and the erection of a barrow – preferably marked by packed stones. Within Homer's own presumed lifetime, then, northern Europe seems to have been the only place where his words were put into practice.

---

<sup>21</sup> May 2018, 24.

## The tomb and its community

This is a remarkable observation, and one that should make us pause. For how could communities in Central and Northern Europe somehow be influenced by novelties from the Mediterranean (as part as an “orientalising” trend) when those very same novelties had not yet materialised in the area where they were supposed to come from? During Homer’s presumed own period, the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC, cremation was by no means the “standard way” to bury the dead and usually practiced alongside inhumation. Indeed, burial practices seem to have varied significantly, not just per region, but also within regions and indeed within specific sites.<sup>22</sup> In this, the Greek Early Iron Age (ca. 1100 BC–700 BC) is quite distinct from the Greek Late Bronze Age (ca. 1700–1100 BC), when inhumation was the norm throughout Greece (although tomb morphology varied wildly, and included cist graves, *pithos* burials, chamber tombs, and, for the elite, tholos tombs – but notably no tumuli!). Cremation only seems to have appeared towards the very end of the Mycenaean palaces, in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century BC, though the practice is attested throughout Greece in the subsequent post-palatial period. But even then, with the notable exception of a peculiar 12<sup>th</sup> century BC tumulus with 13 single, inurned, cremations at Khania near Mycenae<sup>23</sup>, cremation was always practiced alongside inhumation. All of this stands in stark contrast with the situation in Homer, where cremation is clearly the norm.

There is one exception to all this. In his survey of Late Bronze and Early Iron Age tumuli, Professor Hansen already highlighted the famous ‘Heroon’ at Lefkandi, on Euboea. This tomb has been widely cited as one of the first archaeologically attested ‘Homeric’ burials, and as evidence for the re-emergence states in Greece. There are a number of clear parallels with Seddin; most notably the creation of a large tumulus, the ostentatious reference to the dwelling of the living within the tomb (although the truly monumental size of the *megaron* that

---

<sup>22</sup> Georganas 2002 offers an exhaustive study of communal tumuli at 8<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> century BC Halos in Thessaly, and various other burial traditions in the wider region; cf. Dickinson 2006, 183 ff. for a more general overview of Greek Iron Age burial traditions.

<sup>23</sup> Variousy identified as a tumulus or a cremation platform, this particular site, which has been dated to the 12<sup>th</sup> century BC, was discovered in 1984 (AR 1984-5: 21; French 2002: 140) but has received only limited scholarly attention. On the Greek mainland, I know of no clear parallels, and indeed, this site may perhaps only be compared with a number of tumuli at Vergina and other sites far to the north, in Macedonia.

was covered by the tumulus has caused some to wonder whether it may have been erected specifically for the funerary rituals),<sup>24</sup> the burial of weapons (a sword and a lance) and a razor, and the multiple simultaneous burials (2 at Lefkandi, namely the cremation burial of a man and the – significantly wealthier – inhumation burial of a woman<sup>25</sup>; and the three at Seddin). Yet at the same time, the burial at Lefkandi dates to the 10<sup>th</sup> century BC – and thus predate Homer himself by some 2 centuries. Moreover, it seems to have been a unique construction, and although this may be due to archaeological bias, no similar graves have yet been found in Greece; neither before nor after Lefkandi.

Addressing the tomb's unique status, Kölv<sup>26</sup> recently stated that “the authority of the Lefkandi ruler appears as both exceptional and ephemeral: nothing similar has been found elsewhere in Greece, and the building, destroyed almost immediately after construction, remained without successor”. And whilst the cemetery around the tomb shows a whole group of burials dating between the mid-tenth and mid-ninth centuries BC, suggesting a deliberate and continuing association with the Heroon, the differences between these burials (ranging from the extremely rich to the extremely poor in terms of grave-goods) is such that they seem “more like [those of] a clan than a dynasty of successive chiefs”.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, the director of the excavations at Lefkandi, Professor Lemos has argued that this very burial, including the construction and subsequent destruction of the large *megaron* “should be seen as marking a social-political change at Lefkandi, namely the change from the rule of a powerful basileus to that of a dynamic elite group”.<sup>28</sup>

This is an interesting insight, and it may provide us with an idea about the status of those interred at Seddin and Lusehøj, and their respective communities. There is little doubt that the warrior who was buried at Lefkandi must have held significant, effectively king-like, powers over the surrounding communities by

---

<sup>24</sup> E.g. Lemos 2002; Dickinson 2006, 107, 190.

<sup>25</sup> I note here that the presence of the woman in the Toumba grave does not necessarily indicate human sacrifice at the time of the man's cremation, although the presence of an iron knife with ivory handle near her shoulder might suggest such a practice. The urn with cremated remains, however, may also have been kept, much like Patroclus' urn in the Iliad, by the deceased's wife; to be deposited at the time of her death.

<sup>26</sup> Kölv 2016, 7.

<sup>27</sup> Dickinson 2006, 249.

<sup>28</sup> Lemos 2006, 521.

the time of his death. Indeed, it has been proposed that he should be viewed as a *basileus*; the title that Homer attributes to most of the Achaean heroes. But even at Lefkandi, there is no clear evidence for continuity of this power after the ruler's death; there are no indications to suggest that his status and power were inherited and passed on to his successors.

Similar observations may be made at Seddin. The tumulus at Seddin, though it appears to have been built at a place that was already of some importance (perhaps it served as a cult place, depending on how one interprets the row of pits with burnt remains to its northeast<sup>29</sup>), seems to have been a solitary burial. There were other important, and in some cases possibly equally powerful, people at late 9<sup>th</sup> to early 8<sup>th</sup> century BC Seddin, as a concentration of tumuli – including a few that are comparable in size to the 'Königsgrab' – in the "Wickboldische Tannen", some 500 meters or so to the north of the prehistoric settlement indicates, but the 'Königsgrab' was built away from (although perhaps in sight of<sup>30</sup>) those grounds. It is impossible to know why this was done, but kinship may well have been a factor. If so, the 'Königsgrab' at Seddin might represent the emergence of a new important 'noble' family in the area, whose leader must, in view of the sheer monumentality and unique qualities of his tomb, have attained a leading position over the local community and may have claimed additional legitimacy through the association of his tomb with an older local cult place. The similarities between the interment at Lefkandi and that at Seddin are such that it seems reasonable to attribute a *basileus*-like status to the occupant of the Seddinner 'Königsgrab'. But whether or not this new leader could reasonably be called a 'prince' or 'king', implying a hereditary system of rule, is a moot point. And even if he held such significant power during his lifetime, the absence, as far as I know, of any later burials in or around this particular burial mound at Seddin seems to suggest that his preeminent status went with him in

---

<sup>29</sup> May – Hauptmann 2012, 115.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. the website of the Landkreis Prignitz: "Genau dort wurde das 'Königsgrab' errichtet, womit die Sichtbeziehung zumindest theoretisch hergestellt war. Auch wenn derzeit noch wenig über bronzezeitliche Raumordnung im Seddiner Gebiet bekannt ist, stellt das 'Königsgrab' als einzelner Grabhügel wahrscheinlich ein monumentales Bindeglied in einer Kette von Hügelgräberfeldern dar. Die bewusste Wahl des Standortes des 'Königsgrabes' an einer hervorragenden Position im Raum kann als ein zusätzliches Merkmal von Monumentalisierung begriffen werden." (accessed 1 June 2017: [http://www.landkreis-prignitz.de/de/zugast-im-landkreis/tourismus/zao/zao\\_seddin.php](http://www.landkreis-prignitz.de/de/zugast-im-landkreis/tourismus/zao/zao_seddin.php))

the grave and was not hereditary. The overall impression, it seems, is one of a small number of important noble families, all with their own burial grounds, whose leaders may have gained, through their personal charisma and achievements, acceptance as *primus inter pares* over the Seddinner region. If we are indeed dealing with such a negotiated form of social organisation, somewhere between kingship and oligarchy, then the socio-political organisation at Seddin would not have been all that different from places like 10<sup>th</sup> century BC Lefkandi.

Whatever religious or political importance the lord of Seddin may have had, it is clear that above everything else, the tomb's shape and size, as well as its inventory, served to highlight the interred as a mighty warrior – a 'heros' – in a way that would have been immediately recognisable to contemporary elites throughout Europe and the Mediterranean. Whatever rights and status he may have derived from possible religious capacities (as has been suggested on the basis of, e.g., the burial of particular types of axes), I would argue that it must have been primarily his qualities as a warrior that propelled the deceased at Seddin to the fore of his society. The wider region around Seddin clearly was not an economic or political backwater and, in view of the recent and remarkable discovery of the 'Massacre at the Bridge' (the site of a great battle that was fought ca. 1250 BC and which probably involved thousands of warriors on the banks of the Tollense river) some 150 km to the north, must have been of supra-regional importance, and worth fighting for, since at least the Late Bronze Age. Whilst the Tollense massacre may have been exceptional in terms of scale and predates the burial at Seddin by some 450 years, the impressive fortifications of settlements such as Biskupin (Poland), the Römerschanze near Potsdam and, closer to home, the Schwedenschanze, indicate that, around 800 BC, the region around Seddin was not necessarily particularly tranquil. The sword that was deposited in the Königsgrab (and which is apparently unique in terms of style and shape), as well as the *phalere* and the lance doubtlessly shows how power at Seddin (and indeed, virtually everywhere in Late Bronze and Early Iron Age Europe) was won and maintained.

## Conclusions

I hope to have highlighted how the typical “Homeric burial”, which is often (explicitly or tacitly) perceived as Mediterranean concept that gradually spread across Europe as part of an orientalisng cultural horizon, appears to have been rather out of place in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC Mediterranean world. Whilst the single and extraordinary Heroon at Lefkandi may point to an otherwise archaeologically invisible tradition of burying the most important members of Dark Age Greek society in the manner of Achilles, Patroclus, and Hector, the practice is archaeologically better attested in northern Europe during the late 9<sup>th</sup> and early 8<sup>th</sup> century BC. This happens to be precisely the period during which “Homer” acquired the shape in which it is known to us. Given the presence of objects in tombs such as Seddin and Lusehøj that were either imported or influenced by regions close to, or in, the Mediterranean, there can be no doubt that some ideas from the south may have travelled north as well. Yet at the same time, the export of objects such as amber (and likely other perishable materials, such as pelts) from the north to the south, must alert us to the possibility that ideas may just as well have travelled south. Indeed, given the fact that, precisely at the time when Homer is thought to have reached its more or less definitive state – that is, the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC, burials in the Homeric way were only truly known in northern Europe, we may perhaps suggest that this way of burying the heroic death may have originated in that general area; and not in the Greek world itself. Indeed, it is notable that even in later times, the Homeric burial is conspicuously absent in the archaeological record of the Greek states themselves, whereas the concept did appear in other, culturally very related states. Notable examples are, of course, the later tombs of Macedonian kings, but one could also point to the 7<sup>th</sup>–5<sup>th</sup> century royal tombs in Cyprus (where Homeric terms such as ‘wanax’ were used to further enhance the status of the ruling families). The reasons for this are difficult to gauge, and may well relate to socio-political developments: perhaps, the rise of autocratic forms of government in these regions may have resulted in a greater emphasis on the construction of royal tombs, whereas this was not the case in most Greek poleis (in Athens, especially, regulations were already put in place under Solon to limit the effort and expenditure on funerary display).

There can be no doubt that Homer was, first and foremost, a Greek creation. Yet at the same time, we know that a number of elements in the Iliad and Odyssey, and presumably many other stories of the “epic cycle” (some that are now lost), were inspired by older, Near Eastern epics. It stands to reason that other areas that are known to have been in close contact with the Greek world may have similarly influenced the shaping of Greek culture (and vice versa, of course). Tracing the origins of the various constituent parts of Homer is notoriously tricky, and one should be weary of simply viewing similarities in practices at various places as necessarily related or (if a clear chronological difference can be established) descended from one another. In the case of “Homeric burials”, much depends on chronology: when Homer is supposed to have been active (or, if one does not consider the bard a historical character, when the epics reached the shape in which they are more or less known to us now), and to what extent one is willing to gloss over gaps in the record and assume continuation or cessation of a given practice. To complicate matters further, even with modern (<sup>14</sup>C) dating techniques, it often remains difficult to establish which site may have preceded the other – archaeological contemporaneity (usually measured in centuries at best) is not the same as actual contemporaneity. Nevertheless, and with the caveat that future finds or revisions may well change the picture, it now seems likely that the typical “Homeric burial” first materialised in regions far to the north of the Greek world – in northern Germany and southern Scandinavia. As a consequence, it seems to me that this region should at the very least be considered as a possible source of inspiration for the burials of Patroclus, Hector and Achilles.

### **Addendum**

The proofs of this paper reached me at about the same time as exciting news from Seddin (1 November 2023). Close to the ‘royal tomb’, the remains of a large hall were found, measuring some 10 by 31 meters. It would have been one of the largest buildings in Europe north of the Alps, and appears to have been built in the 10<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> century; making it a likely residence for the occupant of the nearby tomb. Remarkably, two of the walls of the buildings appear to have

been fitted with a stone foundation of sorts (the density of which appears to have been somewhat uneven); something that is unique for the region. One of the archaeologists involved, Dr. Immo Heske, has proposed that this remarkable feature is most easily explained as the result of contacts with the south -the Mediterranean. Such a notion, as well as the sheer scale of the building only boost the impression that the Prignitz was, during the 9<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE, an important region, with far-flung contacts, and that its inhabitants may well have been inspired by, and inspired, Mediterranean practices.<sup>31</sup>

## Bibliography

- Bergfjord et al. 2012 = C. Bergfjord et al.: Nettle as a distinct Bronze Age textile plant. In: *Scientific Reports* 2 / 664 (2012) (DOI: 10.1038/srep00664).
- Cunliffe 2008 = B. Cunliffe: *Europe between the Oceans*. New Haven 2008.
- Desplanques 2022 = E. Desplanques: Protohistoric metal-urn cremation burials (1400–100 BC): a pan-European phenomenon. In *Antiquity* 96 (389) (2022) 1162-1178.
- Dickinson 2006 = O. Dickinson: *The Aegean from Bronze Age to Iron Age*. Oxon – New York 2006.
- Fontijn – van der Vaart-Verschoof 2016 = D. Fontijn – S. van der Vaart-Verschoof: “Local elites globalized in death: a practice approach to early Iron Age Hallstatt C/D chieftains’ burials in Northwest Europe”. In T. Hodos (ed.): *The Routledge handbook of globalization and archaeology*. London – New York 2016, 522-536.
- French 2002 = E. French: *Mycenae: Agamemnon’s Capital*. Stroud 2002.
- Georganas 2002 = I. Georganas: Constructing Identities in Early Iron Age Thesaly: The Case of Halos Tumuli. In *OJA* 21:3 (2002) 289-298.

---

<sup>31</sup> The latest excavation results have, to my knowledge, not yet been published, but some of the finds were shared with the media; e.g. <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/regional/brandenburg/rbb-grosse-halle-aus-der-bronzezeit-in-koenigsgrab-bei-seddin-entdeckt-100.html>

- Hansen 2017 = S. Hansen: Giant Tumuli of the Iron Age: Tradition – Monumentality – Knowledge Transfer. In: M. Fernández-Götz – D. Krausse (eds.): *Eurasia at the Dawn of History: Urbanization and Social Change*. Cambridge – New York 2017, 225-239.
- Hansen 2018 = S. Hansen: Seddin: ein “Homerisches Begräbnis”. In: S. Hansen – F. Schopper (eds.): *Der Grabhügel von Seddin im norddeutschen und südsandinavischen Kontext*. Brandenburg 2018, 65-84.
- Harding 2008 = A. Harding: Razors and Male Identity in the Bronze Age. In: Frank Verse et al. (eds.): *Durch die Zeiten... Festschrift für Albrecht Jockenhövel zum 65. Geburtstag*. Rhaden, Westfalen 2008, 191-196.
- Kelder 2022 = J. Kelder: From Thutmose III to Homer to Blackadder: Egypt, the Aegean, and the “Barbarian Periphery” of the Late Bronze Age World System. In: J. Spier – S. Cole (eds.): *Egypt and the Classical World: Cross-Cultural Encounters in Antiquity*. Los Angeles 2022, 4-14
- Kölv 2016 = M. Kölv: Basileus, tyrannos and polis. The Dynamics of Monarchy in Early Greece. *Klio* 98:1 (2016), 1-89.
- Kourkoulakos 2022 = A. Kourkoulakos: Burying the Heros: identifying the archaeological Background of the Homeric Burial. In: *PZ* (2022) 1-12 (DOI: 10.1515/pz-2022-2015).
- Kristiansen – Suchowska-Ducke 2015 = K. Kristiansen – P. Suchowska-Ducke: Connected Histories: the Dynamics of Bronze Age Interaction and Trade 1500–1100 BC. In: *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 81 (2015) 361-392.
- Lemos 2002 = I. Lemos: *The Protogeometric Aegean: The Archaeology of the Late Eleventh and Tenth Centuries B.C.* Oxford 2002.
- Lemos 2006 = I. Lemos: Athens and Lefkandi: A Tale of Two Cities. In: S. Deger-Jalkotzy – I. Lemos (eds.): *From the Mycenaean Palaces to the Age of Homer*. Edinburgh 2006, 505-530.
- May 2018 = J. May: Neue Forschungen am “Königsgrab” von Seddin. In: S. Hansen – F. Schopper (eds.): *Der Grabhügel von Seddin im norddeutschen und südsandinavischen Kontext*. Brandenburg 2018, 9-35.
- May 2008 = J. May: Die gefangene Zeit: Vergleichende Untersuchungen zu den Kalenderamphoren von Seddin, Herzberg, Rørbæk, Unia und Gevelinghausen. In: *Acta praehistorica et archaeologica* 40 (2008) 127–55.

- May – Hauptmann 2012 = J. May – Th. Hauptmann: Das “Königsgrab” von Seddin und sein engeres Umfeld im Spiegel neuerer Feldforschungen. In: *Bodenaltertümer Westfalens* 51. Mainz 2012, 105–135.
- May – Hauptmann – Metzner-Nebelsick 2005 = J. May – Th. Hauptmann – C. Metzner-Nebelsick: Seddin. In H. Beck – D. Guenich – H. Steuer (eds.): *Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde* (2nd, updated and expanded edition), vol. 28. Berlin – New York 2005, 1-14.
- Meller – Michel 2018 = H. Meller – K. Michel: *Die Himmelsscheibe von Nebra. Der Schlüssel zu einer untergegangenen Kultur im Herzen Europas*. Berlin 2018.
- Metzner-Nebelsick 1997 = C. Metzner-Nebelsick: Vom Hort zum Heros – Betrachtungen über das Nachlassen der Hortungstätigkeit am Beginn der Eisenzeit und die besondere Bedeutung des Königsgrabes von Seddin. In: A. Hänsel – B. Hänsel (eds.): *Gaben an die Götter. Schätze der Bronzezeit Europas*. Museum für Vor- und Frühgeschichte Berlin – Bestandskataloge, Band 4. Berlin 1997, 93-99.
- Molloy 2012 = B. Molloy: *The Origins of Plate Armour in the Aegean and Europe*. In: *Talanta* XLIV (2012) 273-294.
- Price 2015 = T. D. Price: *Ancient Scandinavia. An Archaeological History from the first Humans to Vikings*. Oxford 2015.
- Rutherford 2020 = I. Rutherford: *Hittite Texts and Greek Religion. Contact, Interaction, and Comparison*. Oxford 2020.
- Rutherford 2007 = I. Rutherford: *Achilles and the Sallis Wastais Ritual: Performing Death in Greece and Anatolia*. In: N. Laneri (ed.): *Performing Death: Social Analyses of Funerary Traditions in the Ancient Near East and Mediterranean*. Chicago 2007, 229-242.
- Snodgrass 1965 = A. M. Snodgrass: *Barbarian Europe and Early Iron Age Greece*. *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 31 (1965) 229-240.
- Testart 2004 = A. Testart: *La Servitude volontaire. Les morts d’accompagnement*. Paris 2004.
- Thrane 2018 = H. Thrane: *Lusehøj und Voldofte, Southwest Funen in its chronological setting – The best parallel for Seddin?* In: S. Hansen – F. Schopper (eds.): *Der Grabhügel von Seddin in norddeutschen und südsandinavischen Kontext*. Berlin 2018, 91-104.

Ullén – Drenzel 2022 = I. Ullén – L. Drenzel: Håga revisited: New Analysis from the Bronze-Age Håga Megabarrow (Uppsala Län) in Sweden. *Archäologisches Korrespondenzblatt* 52/2 (2022) 157-180.