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The house urns of the “Sammlung Ur- und Frühgeschichte” at the University of Leipzig

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Zusammenfassung: In dem Beitrag werden die in der Sammlung Ur- und Frühgeschichte der Universität Leipzig aufbewahrten Hausurnen vorgestellt. Es handelt sich um eine Kopie und ein Original.

Schlagworte: Eisenzeit, Hausurne, Mitteldeutschland, Spätbronzezeit

Abstract: This contribution analyzes and discusses formal and chronological characteristics of the house urns in the Collection of prehistoric artefacts of the University of Leipzig.

Key words: Central Germany, house urn, Iron Age, Late Bronze Age

Introduction

The North European house urns are a very peculiar class of burial urns of the Nordic Late Bronze Age.

They are distributed on a large area that comprehends part of southern Scandinavian, north and eastern Germany and north Poland (Fig. 1).

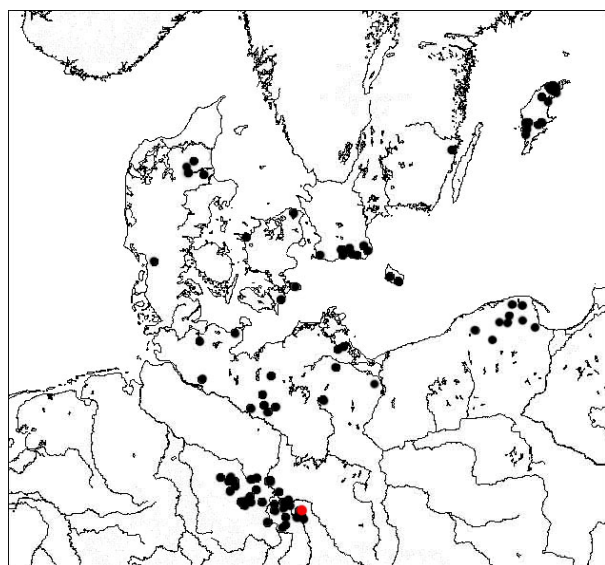


Fig. 1: Distribution map of the North European House urns. In red is the location of the house urn from Burgkennitz.

Despite the many studies on the class, some core issues regarding this practice's background and use are still an open matter of debate. In particular large and interesting discussions are concerned with the interpretation of those objects' shape and with the question of their cultural and geographical origin.

The term “*Hausurnen*” appears for the first time in the archaeological literature during the 19th century (Lisch 1849) and it has today a not negligible historical value. However, it portrays a rather limited picture of the class and it implicitly carries on an interpretation of those objects which does not properly enlighten their large and interesting variety of forms. Whether some of the urns effectively evoke a human construction, some others are instead not more than

biconic vases with roof-like features and a door opening or just with a door opening often in the middle/upper part of the object's body.

The frequent occurrence of those not house-shaped items is one of the core issues of a very interesting discussion upon the possibility that the all class did not have contemporary houses as models, but other types of buildings instead¹.

Partly connected to the question of the shape, it is the debate on the origin of the class. At about the same time, a similar burial ritual is practiced in the central western regions of the Italian peninsula. The Italian so called “hut urns” are proved to be local real houses' reproductions (Bartoloni et al. 1987: 135-143) and are so intensively and systematically used that several scholars proposed the occurrence of the north European phenomenon as the result of an influence from this Villanovan tradition².

The house urns from Burgkennitz

In 1826 the local landowner (*Rittergutsbesitzer, Herrn von Bodenhausen*) brought to the *Sächsische Verein* the so called house urns from Burgkennitz (Kr. Bitterfeld, Sachsen-Anhalt)³.

Burgkennitz's urn (Fig. 2) is the first known house urn discovered in the North of Europe.

It was directly incorporated into the collection of the *Deutschen Gesellschaft in Leipzig* and in February 1939, together with the other objects of the prehistoric section of the collection, it was donated to the chair of pre- and proto-history of the University of Leipzig. The 4th of December of 1943 the Institute of archae-

¹ A large ongoing debate was opened by Oelmann (1929). He brought to the attention of the academic world a consistent amount of ethnographic and historical parallels to demonstrate that the house urns are most probably granaries' miniature reproductions.

² For a comprehensive analysis of the Italian hut urns (“*urne a capanna*” in Italian) see Bartoloni et al. 1987. In the latter volume and in Stjernqvist 1961, the authors provide a history of the studies concerned with both the southern and the northern European tradition and their eventual relations.

³ Information from the archive of the Collection of prehistoric artefacts of the University of Leipzig.

ology was destroyed by bombs, few objects survived the event and among them the house urn, which is now again exposed in the pre- and proto-historical Collection of the University.



Fig. 2: The house urn from Burgkernitz.

The urn is a slightly biconic vase with a rounded upper part consistent with the rest of the body. In the higher half of the vase there is a large door opening, which was closed by a door nowadays lost. The opening's outline suggests that the door had a simply rectangular shape, cut to overlap the necessary space around the aperture.

Two socket handles on both sides of the opening prove that the door was kept in place by a stick, which is nowadays also lost and might have been of perishable material or eventually bronze⁴.

According to the previous literature (Behn 1924, 8, Pl. 1a) on one of the two handles it was hanged a thin bronze ring today lost. Its function if not purely decorative, it is not to be understood.

An interesting peculiarity of the urn is a hidden detail which is not visible by simply looking at the object; under the bottom of the vase there is an incised cross (Fig. 3), which is one of the only two known "signs" on house urns⁵.

⁴ A few preserved door-closing pins are in bronze. See for example the urn from Gandow (Behn 1924, Pl. 4b). As in a few other cases as well, Gandow's door plate has a little socket handle in the middle.

⁵ Strömberg (1982, 132) reports that a cross is incised on the shoulder of Ingelstorp's urn (cf. Fig. 6). Unfortunately the sign is not visible in the available picture and the urn is today lost.



Fig. 3: The incised "cross sign" under the bottom of the house urn from Burgkernitz.

The underside surface of the urns is normally rather rough and not meant to be seen. A couple of urns from Denmark, for example, have been used despite their bottom was damaged by cracks occurred most probably during the cooking process⁶.

Not any other item all over the north of Europe displays any similar sign of distinction as Burgkernitz's specific case and it seems reasonable to account for such exceptionality on the base of practical rather than symbolic or ritual purposes.

The urn was found with a ring, a razor and three not restorable vases (Behn 1924, 8). Unfortunately all the other components of the context are lost. In his review of a book about Antiquities in Thuringia⁷, Reinecke (1910, 12) mentions that the urn is dated by A. Götze to the early Hallstatt period (frühhallstattische Zeitstellung), but he doesn't mention on the base of which elements and no images of the grave goods are otherwise available.

The "door urns"

As mentioned the house urns are a class of burial containers for cremated rests characterized in the first place by an incredible variety of forms. Although general similarities allow direct comparisons between

⁶ Fissures occurred on the bottom of the urns from Gullev and Smidstrup have been visibly repaired with resin (i.e.: Broholm 1949, 145-147). Such treatment suggests that the bottom of the urns was most probably not visible.

⁷ According to the review information, the book (which I have not been able to find) is: A. Götze/P. Höfer/P. Zschieche, Die vor- und frühgeschichtlichen Altertümer Thüringens (Würzburg 1909).

them, every single object remains a unique piece and any attempt to classify them requires very flexible patterns of criteria.

The largest distinction within the house urns is to be done between those items with a house shaped form and those which are vases manufactured with some architectural features (“door urns”).

The urn from Burgkernitz pertains to this second category and in particular to that group which could be defined as closed biconic or oval vases with a door opening generally in the middle/upper part of the body and not any other feature representing eventual architectural elements.

The main difference between the “door urns” is to be found in the shape of their upper part, which can be round as in the case of Burgkernitz or completely flat or particularly composed with various applications on the top of the object. The shape of the upper part plays an important role in the final appearance of the various items, probably bearing implicit references to the urn’s real models or symbolic meanings.

The door urn from Burgkernitz is one of those items that Behn (1924, 8) defined *Erdkuppelhütte* and it is defined in this contribution “with a rounded upper part”.

The two items from Zwitschöna and Robbedale and possibly the urn from Ingelstorp as well are the closest exemplars to Leipzig’s cinerarium.



Fig. 4: The house urn from Zwitschöna.

The urn from Zwitschöna (Saalkreis, Sachsen-Anhalt) (Fig. 4) is probably the most similar to Burgkernitz, close as well in geographical terms, since they both come from the German region of Sachsen Anhalt along the Mulde River. It was found in 1885 and it is now part of the collection of the Landesmuseum in Halle. No information is available on its context of provenience (Behn 1924, 9; Krüger 1913). It is just known that during the same rescuing operation six other urns/vases (Krüger 1913, Pl. XXX,1-7) were

found and dated to the VI Montelius period. However, due to the lack of documentation, it is not possible to state any clear relation between those objects.

The upper part of Zwitschöna’s urn is not preserved, but it certainly looked similar to Burgkernitz’s exemplar, as in the partial reconstruction nowadays accessible in Halle’s Museum (see fig. 4). The door opening was rectangular and had most probably two handles⁸ holding the door-closing stick, which was probably rescued together with the urn in the form of a bronze fragment nowadays lost⁹.

The other urn from Robbedale (Fig. 5) was found on the Baltic island of Bornholm, in 1833. No detailed information is available on its context (Bornholm 1949, 146). This Danish urn has the overall shape and the door’s closing system very similar to the two already presented items, although it retains a peculiar difference as well. The door of Robbedale’s urn was not only fastened with a stick, but sealed as well with the help of resin.



Fig. 5: The house urn from Robbedale. Around the door opening there are well visible rests of the resin used to seal the door to the urn.

The custom to seal the door of the house urns is known in a few cases from the Jutland peninsula, the island of Gotland and the Swedish region of Scania¹⁰. Eventually the same practice was applied to close the door of the urn from Braak, in Schleswig-Holstein

⁸ The handles are completely missing, but the particularly abraded surfaces on both sides of the opening represent a consistent evidence to infer their existence. They most probably were socket as the ones on the urn from Burgkernitz.

⁹ A fragment of a bent bronze pin was found together with the urn (Krüger 1913, Fig. 1) and has been interpreted as its possible door closing stick (Krüger 1913, 328).

¹⁰ See for example the urn from the grave 71 at Simris cemetery here in Fig. 8.

(Behn 1924, Pl. 3d), which presents light traces of resin around the door opening and on the door plate. With the exception of this case, no other items outside Scandinavia, from Germany or Poland, appear to have been ever sealed with the use of resin.

Among those door urns with a rounded upper part, it might be included the urn from Ingelstorp. As visible in the picture (*Fig. 6*) the urn's upper part is missing, but it could have been round. In addition, after Burgkernitz this is the only other house urn bearing an incised cross/sign (see footnote 5). It was rescued during regular excavations in a large burial ground from south-eastern Scania, in Sweden¹¹.

Ingelstorp's item is the first of the mentioned contexts whose cremated bones have been rescued and analysed. The urn contained the rest of an adult man (Persson 1982, 241-2).



Fig. 6: The urn from Ingelstorp (after Strömberg 1982, Fig. 92 a-b).

A number of other urns are very similar to this "Burgkernitz group". They display few substantial differences, but attest as well the existence of particular conceptual paradigms of reference all through the house urns' distribution area.



Fig. 7: The two house urns from Kecklewitz (after König 1926, Pl. VII).

From the German region of Sachsen-Anhalt come the two exemplars of Kecklewitz's cemetery (*Fig. 7*). The

¹¹ The urn was found in 1977 (Strömberg 1982) and should be part of the collection of the historical Museum of the University of Lund in Sweden. Unfortunately it is currently lost.

most consistent difference between them and the just defined group is to be found in the presence of a protruding frame which surrounds the door-opening and replaces the function of the lateral handles by having two opposite holes holding the fastening stick. In addition the doors plates of both urns from Kecklewitz were completely preserved and had a straight horizontal carving in the middle functioning as a sort of bed for the pin.

According to the preliminary analysis of the osteological material each urn contained the bones of an adult: eventually a man and a woman (König 1926, 262-3)

Unfortunately Kecklewitz's material was destroyed during the Second World War together with the complete destruction of the Schloßmuseum of Zerbst where it was preserved. Any further analysis is not possible anymore.



Fig. 8: The house urn from the grave 71 at Simris cemetery, in Scania, Sweden.

Formally rather close to Burgkernitz, although each in a different way, are some Scandinavian urns. The local door urns "with a rounded upper part" come from Nylars on the island of Bornholm (Broholm 1949, Pl. 44), from the grave 71 at the cemetery of Simris, in Scania (Stjernqvist 1961, Pl. XXIII, 3) and from the grave 14 at Piledal's grave field, also in Scania (Olausson 1986, Fig. 8, 2). They contained respectively the rests of three young individuals (Vretemark 2004, 2; Gejvall 1961, 169; Szalay 1986, 149). It is worth to briefly focus on the item from the grave 71 at Simris's cemetery (*Fig. 8*). The urn has a large round top and an oval door opening closed by a door which fits perfectly into the protruding frame and that was once fastened with a resin's seal, like the previ-

ously analysed urn from Robbedale (in Fig. 5). The house urns' grave goods, when rescued, are often not remarkable neither in number nor in quality. In this particular burial there was a bronze bent pin (Stjernqvist 1961, Pl. XXIII, 5) which can be dated to the V period. This grave represents though one of the chronologically better defined contexts of the group.

Two last exemplars with a round cap-like top remain to be introduced. They are both nowadays lost and have been described as similar to each other (Behn 1924, 10) that we actually infer their aspect from the survived documentation about only one of them: the urn from Unseburg, Kr. Aschersleben-Staßfurt, in Sachsen-Anhalt (Fig. 9).

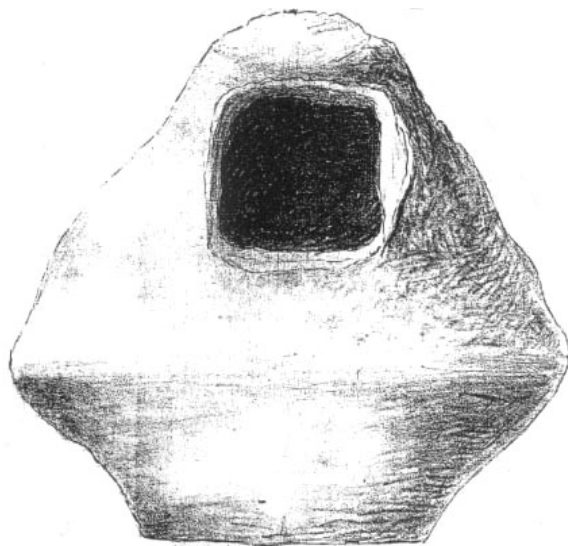


Fig. 9: The urn from Unseburg in a drawing from the Landesamt für Archäologie Sachsen-Anhalt Fundstellenarchiv (Unseburg, Kr. Aschersleben-Staßfurt, M/2/40/1).

They had a pronounced biconic form and the door opening surrounded by a protruding frame with holes for the sticks to pass through and hold the door closed. Their mention in this work is particularly relevant in chronological terms. The item from Seddin (Kr. Westpriegnitz, in Brandenburg)¹² was buried not only with the richest bronze grave goods known among the house urns, but also well dated to the V period (Behn 1924, Pl. 2b), by a beautifully decorated pair of tweezers a razor and an “antenna” sword.

To sum up, Burgkernitz is not an exceptional case. Many house urns are preserved, but very little was often documented or is today materially available about their contexts of provenience.

¹²The urn has never been graphically reproduced. It was found in 1888 in fragmentary conditions and never rescued. At the moment of the discovery it appeared very similar to the urn from Unseburg (see Fig. 9), but the interpretation cannot be proved. The presence of two straight bronze pins among the documented grave goods confirms the hypothesis that Seddin was a house urn. They look like possible door closing pins (Behn 1924, Pl. 2b on the left side of the picture).

Due to the limitedness of the resources, considering together shape-related items opens the possibility to outline general hypotheses about the all class or its particular components. In other words it furnishes elements for the cultural and chronological contextualization of the house urns. Due to their characteristic variety of forms and to the exceptionality of several single manifestations any comparative analysis of the house urns requires specifically open patterns of criteria.

Burgkernitz's urn and its closest parallels (the urns from Robbedale and Zwitschöna) cannot be correctly dated on the base of the available documentation. The urns from the grave 71 at Simris cemetery and from Seddin have been buried with datable grave goods. They all share given formal and structural characteristics (the shape of the upper part and the presence of a door opening, but not any other architecture-related feature) suggesting a slightly contemporary use. For the all group it is though proposed a feasible chronological determination to the central phase of the Nordic late Bronze Age (Montelius period V).

A consistent number of house urns' contexts can be dated to the same Nordic V period (i.e.: Sabatini 2004, 425, Fig. 1) and the practice was evidently well established during that period (Stjernqvist 1961, 53-55). However, a firm chronology for the all of the North European house urns is still missing and there are significant indications as well for a later (VI period) use of some of those burials (cf. Müller 1999, 86-87). For instance an irregularly shaped oval door urn with a slightly rounded upper part came out during the excavation of the cemetery of Menz-Waldsiedlung (Kr. Magdeburg, Sachsen-Anhalt). It is an exceptional item with a complex incised decoration all over the body (Lies 1967, Fig. 12), but it could be formally compared with the other urns with a rounded upper part as Burgkernitz as well. It contained the rests of a man and grave goods dating to the Hallstatt C period (Lies 1967, 279). It is therefore possible that Burgkernitz and related items were in use partly until the end of the Nordic late Bronze Age as well.

The osteological analysis conducted on the mentioned urns' contexts illustrates that these Burgkernitz-like urns were used at the same time for the burial of young and adult individuals. There are not sufficient data to discuss sex and gender of the people deposited in those specific urns, but the situation most likely mirrors what has been already noted in a wider survey on the subject. It has been demonstrated that the Scandinavian house urns have been generally used to contain individuals of both sexes and any age (Sabatini, 2004).

The variety, which characterizes the formal aspect of those cineraria, occurs as a sort of constant and very interesting feature in various aspects of the house urns' tradition.

Conclusive considerations

The idea to propose a gallery of what we could define the door urns “with a rounded upper part” arose from

the objective to talk about the first discovered north European house urn: the cinerarium from Burgkernitz, nowadays exposed in the Pre- and Proto-historical Collection of the University of Leipzig. Documentation and contextual data about the urn are today rather limited. They went lost partly during the II World War and partly already at the time of its discovery nearly two centuries ago.

The present work has collected and compared all those items showing a relation to Burgkernitz's urn on the base of their exterior aspect. The applied strategy has been not only oriented towards a plain search for formal similarities between the objects, but towards understanding those sets of cultural and ritual expressions which are behind the formal likenesses and at the very origin of those specific objects' use and manufacture.

The Burgkernitz-like urns are just one possible expression of the north-European house urns, which could be ultimately defined as a class of *unica*, tied together in reason of stronger conceptual rather than formal or structural ties.

The house urns represent an extremely interesting case. They are a complex, but single class¹³, geographically spread on a well defined area of the European continent during the particular period of the Nordic late Bronze Age. They are formally characterized by being manufactured with more, but at least one architectural feature (normally a well shaped door opening closed by a door plate) which possibly reproduce or symbolize a contemporary human construction.

This short contribution is not the appropriate place to open up a debate on the North European house urns' symbolism neither to discuss the partly related question of their origin. Though a correct interpretation of their repeatedly mentioned multifaceted variety it is to be connected to the mutual understanding of those issues¹⁴.

The existence of a conceptually similar tradition in the central western regions of the Italian peninsula (see Bartoloni 1998; Bartoloni et al. 1987) imposes considering possible connections between the two practices and widens the question of the North European house urns' origin. However, the hut urns' well defined presence in a far away cultural environment contrib-

utes to indeed the characterization of the house urns' specific cultural and geographical borders well beyond the variety of their single local manifestation.

In this respect, the analysis of this practice and its multiple expressions becomes a very interesting and particular arena to discuss intercultural exchanges and relations within proto-historic Europe.

The urn from Werderhausen

In the pre- and proto-historic collection of the University of Leipzig there is as well a copy (Fig. 10) of the house urn from Werderhausen (Kr. Köthen, Sachsen-Anhalt). The urn was found in one of the stone cist graves of the local grave field excavated in 1930 (König 1932/33, 107); until the beginning of the II World War it has been preserved in the Museum of Gröbzig (von Brunn 1939, 136), but it seems nowadays lost¹⁵.



Fig. 10: The cast of the house urn from Werderhausen preserved in the Pre- and Proto-historical Collection of the University of Leipzig.

If we confront the preserved copy (Fig. 10) with the picture of the original (König 1932/33, Pl. 8, 10), the copy at Leipzig's Museum seems absolutely accurate. Werderhausen's urn was a rather simple "house-shaped" urn with an oval base and a detachable roof. It had an oval door opening surrounded by a protruding frame and closed with an oval plate fastened by pins. The urn was found together with a bronze so called *Schwänenhals* pin. On the base of this pin, the context is normally dated to the VI period.

¹³ Very different items (i.e.: simple "door urns" and accurately manufactured "house-shaped" cineraria) coexisted in the same burial grounds. Consistency and variety within the class are therefore evident on contextual bases as well. In this respect the most interesting case is probably represented by the cemetery of Wulfen. The site returned several house urns completely different from each other (see the items published by von Brunn 1939, Pl. V a, VI a-b, VII b-c, VIII d).

¹⁴ As mentioned in the introduction in particular origin and symbolism of the house urns have been largely debated. For a comprehensive review of the house urns' studies see Bartoloni et al. 1987 and Stjernqvist 1961, 45-57. Recent works discussed all or part of the issues about the class (i.e.: Bartoloni 1998; Bradley 2002 and 2005; Griesa 1999; von Hase 1992; Müller 1999, 2002; Sabatini, 2004).

¹⁵ During my research I haven't been able to find information about this Museum or about any displacement of the material eventually moved from there.

In his analysis of the find, König (1932/33, 107) links the urn from Werderhausen with two other urns in particular: the German cinerarium from Klus and the Swedish urn from Prästhemmet. König bases its comparison on the presence of a detachable roof, which is otherwise not any common element among the house urns.

Klus's item (Behn 1924, Pl. 6c) is nowadays also lost and known through a copy preserved in the Niedersächsische Museum of Hannover. It had probably a detachable roof, but the overall shape was indeed rather diverse from that of Werderhausen's urn.

As far as it regards the Swedish urn from Prästhemmet (Hansson 1927, Pl. 37), the difference is more pronounced than in the previous case. Werderhausen and Prästhemmet's *cineraria* are structurally unlike. The roof of Prästhemmet's house urn was in origin most probably consistent with the rest of the body.

In conclusion Werderhausen house urn stays as a peculiar piece, which just enlarges the observed range of the variety of the class. There is not a single urn eventually discovered in more recent years directly comparable with it.

Indeed, not only “house-shaped” urns do not normally have a detachable roof, but Werderhausen's upper part does not look like a roof, rather as an upside-down large bowl without any particular roof features or decorations.

In reason of such considerations it is proposed to see this piece as a sort of mixture between the house urns (evident in the main body of the item) and the most common urns consisting in vases closed by a bowl (represented by its peculiar roof).

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