

## Female warriors and ‘cross-dressing’ in early medieval Bavaria? Some critical comments

Kriegerinnen und „Cross-dressing“ im frühmittelalterlichen Bayern?  
Einige kritische Bemerkungen

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*The graves of the Merovingian period in Central Europe show typical grave inventories which allow us to determine the sex (and not only the gender) of the buried persons with high accuracy. In the year 2000 a skeleton of the Alamannic cemetery of Niederstotzingen (Germany), which was equipped with weapons as a male component of the grave goods, was identified as female by DNA-analysis. This surprising result gave us a reason to investigate some skeletons of the Bavarian region, which seemed to be female by the morphology of the bones but also had weapons. We found no further ‘female warriors’, and recent investigations of the skeleton from Niederstotzingen carried out by other scholars have shown that it also belongs to a man. So we have no archaeological traces of women in the Early Middle Ages who filled the role as a warrior in life. This is also the case in view of the written sources. Surprisingly, in our Bavarian sample we found two persons with a male genotyp and beads from a necklace. These finds have to be interpreted with caution and we cannot be sure to find a proof of ‘cross-dressing’ in the Merovingian period.*

Merovingian period – Bavaria – gender archaeology – burial rites – physical anthropology

**Bojovnice a „crossdressing“ v raně středověkém Bavorsku? Několik kritických poznámek.** Výbava hrobů merovejského období ve střední Evropě se vyznačuje charakteristickou kombinací předmětů, umožňující s vysokou pravděpodobností určit biologické pohlaví zesnulého. Zbraněmi vybavený jedinec z alemanského pohřebiště v Niederstotzingen byl v roce 2000 pomocí DNA analýzy určen jako žena. Tento překvapivý výsledek zadal podnět k prozkoumání několika hrobů z bavorské sídelní oblasti, které sice obsahovaly zbraně, kde ale morfologie koster naznačovala ženské pohlaví. Další bojovnice ovšem nalezeny nebyly a nové rozborů niederstotzingenského hrobu mezitím prokázaly, že i tam se jednalo o muže. Z raného středověku tedy ve zkoumané oblasti neznáme nálezy, u nichž by existovalo podezření, že se jedná o pohřby bojovnic, a ani v písemných pramenech pro tento jev nenalzáme oporu. Naopak jsme ale právě v Bavorsku identifikovali dvě kostry s mužskou DNA, které měly na krku korálkové náhrdelníky. Takové nálezy nutno posuzovat obezřetně, v žádném případě ale nejde o archeologický doklad „crossdressingu“ v merovejském období.

raný středověk – Bavorsko – gender – pohřební rítus – antropologie

### 1. Grave goods and gender

The graves of the Merovingian period from central Europe and beyond offer a broad data base for studying many aspects of early medieval society. The burials of the so-called ‘Reihengräberfelder’ (Ament 2003; Fehr 2010, 725–729), which occur in the Frankish reign and among others in the neighbouring regions of the Alamanni and the Bavarians, show to a certain degree standardised grave goods. In the 6<sup>th</sup> century the custom of depositing grave goods in the burial pit reached a climax. For a long time archaeologists have tried to decipher the underlying rules which constitute the burial equipment. Influenced by research in

English-speaking countries, in Germany the issues of age and gender were first considered in studies on the Alamann settlement areas (*Brather 2005; Sasse 2001*, 113–120). With regard to Old Bavaria, research was carried out on cemeteries in the Munich gravel plain and three burial grounds in Lower Bavaria (Straubing, Peigen, Künzing-Bruck: *Gärtner 2012; 2013; Gutsmiendl-Schümann 2010; 2011*). We noticed some differences between the subregions, especially in view of the endowment of the graves of old women. Whereas in the Alamann region the women aged over 60 had only a poor complex of offerings or were buried without any grave goods, in Lower Bavaria the female graves of this age group in some cases had richer grave goods. There we found gold and silver objects and a larger number of brooches – however only in a few graves. But in general the number of graves containing old persons is not large and statistical investigations should be considered with caution (*Gärtner 2013*, 272–275).

A huge number of analyses have shown impressively that the furnishing of graves in the Merovingian period was based on clearly visible norms. Women were buried with jewellery and the provision of weapons is typical for male graves. Only few pieces of jewellery are regularly found in male graves such as bow fibulae with equal arms, which were used at least in part as a fibula for a mantle, or bangles (*Thörle 2001*, 244, 249; *Wührer 2000*, 110). Furthermore there are only very limited examples of brooches in male graves (*Graenert 2007*, 119, 127, fig. 85; *Bayard 1986*, 162, fig. 129). Some tools or implements such as shears and tweezers are more typical for male graves but are also recorded from female burials. In the cemeteries of Lower Bavaria, fire stone and steel occur primarily in a male context, but we find them in rare cases in female graves, too. This is also true of the awl. Both types of implement are generally considered as male grave goods, although they will occasionally appear beside female skeletons (*Brather 2005*, 161; *Gärtner 2013*, 254–256; *Gutsmiendl-Schümann 2011*, 44, fig. 1; 62, fig. 12; *Reiß 1994*, 142). On the other hand spindle whorls are more common in female graves and tools for flax-breaking are confined to the female sphere (*Gärtner 2013*, tab. 5b).

## 2. Weapons

In the case of weapons the situation has seemed clear for a long time. Weapons were assumed to be associated with male skeletons, and if the analysis of physical anthropology concluded that the skeleton was female, this was assumed to be a mistake made by natural sciences. The same applies when a supposed male skeleton is associated with jewellery (*Effros 2000*, 635; *Härke 2011*, 103; *Halsall 1995*, 82–83). Only in rare cases a possible example of cross-gender or ambiguous sex has been discussed (*Halsall 2010*, 342–43; *Knol et al. 1995/1996*, 394–397). When the cemetery of Niederstotzingen in Baden-Württemberg was discovered, which can be classified as a burial ground for the upper class, the graves containing weapons were considered to be the burials of the social and military leaders and their followers – obviously all men. In grave no. 3 three persons were found, each with an extensive weapon arsenal (*Paulsen 1967*, 182–185). Skeleton 3C was considered to be male, although after morphological analysis of the bones this can only be deemed to be likely, not assured. In the year 2000 a DNA analysis was carried out which seemed to indicate that in reality the skeleton was that of a woman (*Zeller 2000*). Since then some archaeologists

have argued that we must take into account that in some cases women were trained to use weapons and female warriors existed in early medieval society (*Brather 2009*, 261; *Schneider 2008*, 9). Apparently under the impression of this fresh perspective, ‘women with weapons’ were also identified in the Bavarian area. *Gutsmiedl-Schümann (2010, 86)* presented findings from the Aschheim-Wasserturm cemetery, where grave 9 incorporated a spearhead, three arrowheads and some tools. The skeleton was determined merely as ‘more likely female’; however, the author assumed it was that of a woman. Likewise, other scholars suggest that women may have been buried with weapons in early medieval Europe (*Hakenbeck et al. 2012*, 261, tab. 2; *Steuer 2012*, 25; *Wahl et al. 2014*, 388).

The determination of skeleton 3C from Niederstotzingen by means of DNA as female was a very surprising result, not only from the archaeological point of view, but also with regard to the written sources, which never mentioned a female warrior in early medieval Europe. It is naturally conceivable that in a situation of distress women defended themselves with arms, e.g. in the case of a siege or rape. This is described by some medieval historians (*Halsall 2005*, 34). But we would expect that women who participated regularly in battle would be reflected in historical writing – albeit only perhaps by a clergyman complaining about this violation of the supposed divine order.

The *Lex Baiuvariorum*, written in the Merovingian period, speaks about women ‘fighting like men’<sup>1</sup>: ‘If one of these women is raped, she is atoned twice, because women received double atonement when they are not able to defend themselves with weapons. But if they are daring and bent on fighting like a man, their atonement will not be doubled.’ This text passage illustrates that a woman who fights ‘like a man’, and this means most likely fighting with weapons, was not an unknown phenomenon. The supporters of the ‘female-warrior thesis’ have used this passage to underpin their concept. But what does the text really say? We are not told anything about women being trained in fighting with arms. In my view, the first sentence refers to women who took up arms in order to defend themselves in case of rape or maltreatment. It seems very unlikely that the author of the *lex* had a female warrior in mind. At least it is obvious that the passage cannot be considered as proof that female warriors, trained in using weapons, existed in Central Europe in the Early Middle Ages. This is even more significant in the case of a passage sometimes cited from the *Edictus Rothari* (643 AD), a legislative text of the Lombards. It tells us that one did not have to pay the usual atonement if a woman interfered in a quarrel between men and got hurt or was killed. It is not mentioned that the woman took up arms (cf. *Steuer 2012*, 25).

Also in other sources we find no mention of women using weapons as men did. The texts quoted were written by antique writers and do not verify the existence of armed women (cf. *Schneider 2008*, 13–14; *Wahl et al. 2014*, 343). The value of these historical writings with respect to the Early Middle Ages is dubious indeed. In some medieval sources violence by women is explicitly condemned, such as in the case of the *Lex* of the Lombards (*Balzaretti 1998*, 186). In their legal texts fighting women never occur, and in a singular example where women attacked a village on behalf of their husbands, so that the men avoid the death penalty, the women were shaven, publicly whipped and passed through

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<sup>1</sup> ‘De feminis vero eorum, si aliquid de istis actis continerit, omnia dupliciter conponuntur, dum femina, cum arma defendere nequiverit, duplicem compositionem accipiat. Si autem pugnare voluerit per audatiam cordis sui sicut vir, non erit duplex compositio eius’ (*Beyerle 1926*, 80).

the villages as punishment for their indecent behaviour – the men had to pay a fine for the female wrongdoings.

How is the situation with regard to the archaeological record in Bavaria? Encouraged by the results of the DNA analysis of grave 3C from Niederstotzingen, the author decided to examine some female burials in which the results of the archaeologists and the physical anthropologists did not fit together (*Fig. 1*). These investigations were supported by the *Archäologische Staatssammlung München* and the *Staatssammlung für Anthropologie und Paläoanatomie München*, where the DNA analyses were carried out in order to determine the sex of the buried individuals.<sup>2</sup> Apart from DNA analysis the morphological characteristics of the skeletons were reexamined. This traditional method is, however, of variable precision as on account of the variable state of preservation and the available skeletal parts. The pelvic bones promise a probability of 95% in view of sex determination, while the features of the skull provide an accuracy of 85–90%. In the case of the strength and size of the bones the probability is about 80–90% (cf. Immler in *Gärtner et al. 2014*, 227). It is obvious that under these circumstances any individual diagnosis is affected by uncertainty. Unusual and isolated findings should therefore be treated with caution if they are based solely on the morphological method. The new investigations underline this critical view.

In the cemetery of Straubing-Bajuwarenstraße two graves in particular catch the eye: in grave 490 we find a skeleton which is determined by the physical anthropologists with certainty as female (*Fig. 2*). The person reached an age of between 20 and 40 years. A double-edged sword (*spatha*), a sword with a single-edged blade (*seax*) and a spearhead were found in the burial pit. The latter provides an argument for dating the grave in the timespan around 600 AD. On the left lower arm two prehistoric fibulae came to light; these were probably once stored in a small bag made of organic material (*Geisler 1998*, 179). Such 'antiques' occur again and again in graves from the Merovingian period. Brooches from older times were found in graves of both sexes and can therefore not be used for sex determination (*Mehling 1998*, 41). Thus we would expect a male burial from the archaeological point of view. A similar situation is found in grave 388. The physical anthropologists declared the skeleton as 'probable' female, aged about 40–50 years, but the grave inventory includes beyond a bag with some tools a battle axe (*Franziska; Geisler 1998*, 129). Again, we would rather assume this to be a man who was buried in the middle third or second half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century.

The above mentioned grave 9 from Aschheim-Bajuwarenring, dating around 600 AD, was also included in our recent studies. Furthermore, 13 other graves were examined. In Weiding grave pit 121 contained a 'female' skeleton, a single-edged sword and a knife. Grave 160 showed a similar sword with a typical long blade, belonging to the time around 700 AD, two knives and a long silver strap-end, combined with the remains of a supposed female skeleton (*Schabel 1992*, 93, 99). Grave 62 from Plienig was disturbed on a large scale. Only the rivet of a scabbard and a single part of a multipartite belt were found. The

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<sup>2</sup> My particular thanks go to Brigitte Haas-Gebhard (*Archäologische Staatssammlung, München*), Michaela Harbeck, Franziska Immler and Andreas Rott (*Anthropologische Staatssammlung, München*) and especially to the *Freunde der bayerischen Vor- und Frühgeschichte* and the *Archäologischen Staatssammlung München*, who financed the DNA-analyses. For the results of our study cf. also *Gärtner et al. 2014*.

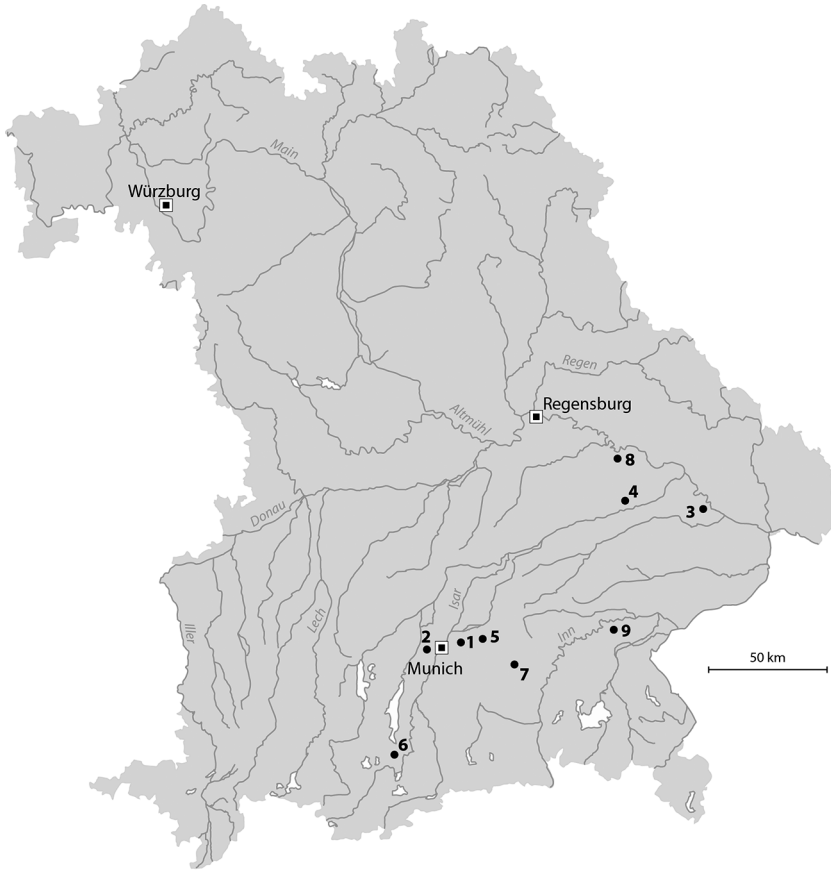


Fig. 1. Location map of the Bavarian archaeological sites with the analysed skeletons. 1 Aschheim, 2 Aubing, 3 Künzing-Bruck, 4 Peigen, 5 Pliening, 6 Sindelsdorf, 7 Steinhöring, 8 Straubing, 9 Weiding (drawing Ulrike Lustfeld, Halle/Saale).

Abb. 1. Lage der bayerischen Fundplätze mit den untersuchten Skeletten. 1 Aschheim, 2 Aubing, 3 Künzing-Bruck, 4 Peigen, 5 Pliening, 6 Sindelsdorf, 7 Steinhöring, 8 Straubing, 9 Weiding (Zeichnung Ulrike Lustfeld, Halle/Saale).

bones were regarded as probably female (*Codreanu-Windauer 1997, 160*). Two arrowheads were recovered in grave 232 from Peigen. The skeleton belongs to a woman by the morphology of the bones, but at first the male sex of the deceased was postulated. This seems obvious because single arrowheads are not unknown in a female context, but two or more were only observed in male graves (*von Freeden – Lehmann 2005, 192*). Two female graves from Steinhöring, which in each case include a single arrowhead in the pelvic region in one case and between the thighs in the other (*Arnold 1992, 225–226, 253*), confirm this rule according to our new DNA data. The arrowhead does not have to be considered as a weapon which was used by the woman in hunting or fighting. The frequent occurrence of single arrowheads in graves of subadults, including children up to two years old, suggests that such grave goods must be interpreted as symbolic. Impressive examples can be seen in the areas

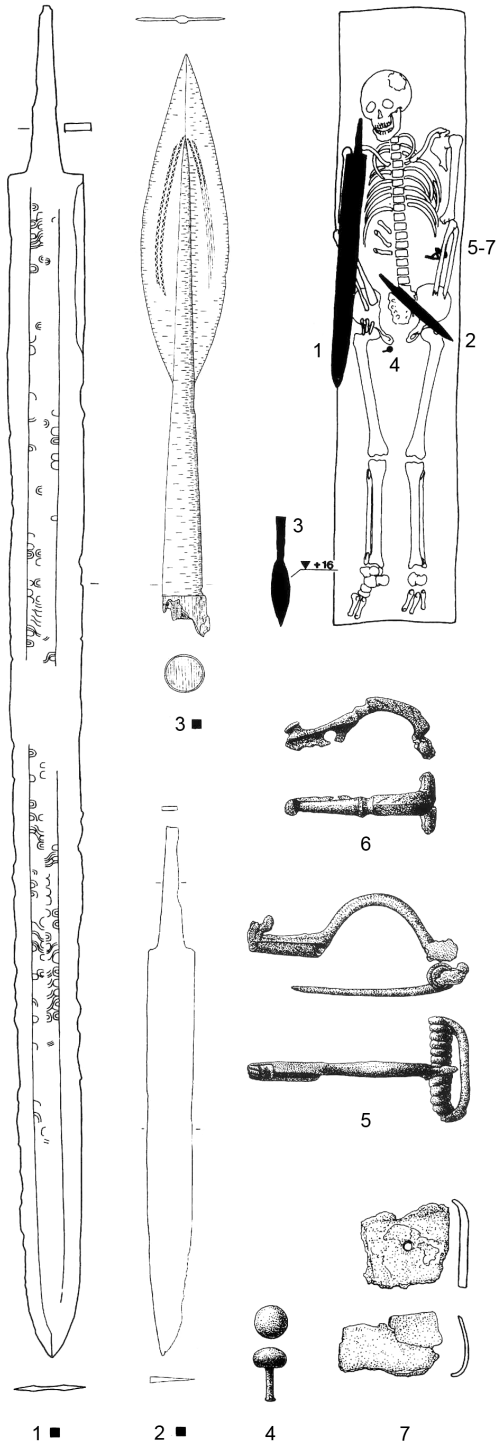


Fig. 2. Straubing-Bajuwarenstraße, grave 490 (Geisler 1998), without scale.

Abb. 2. Straubing-Bajuwarenstraße, Grab 490 (Geisler 1998), ohne Maßstab.

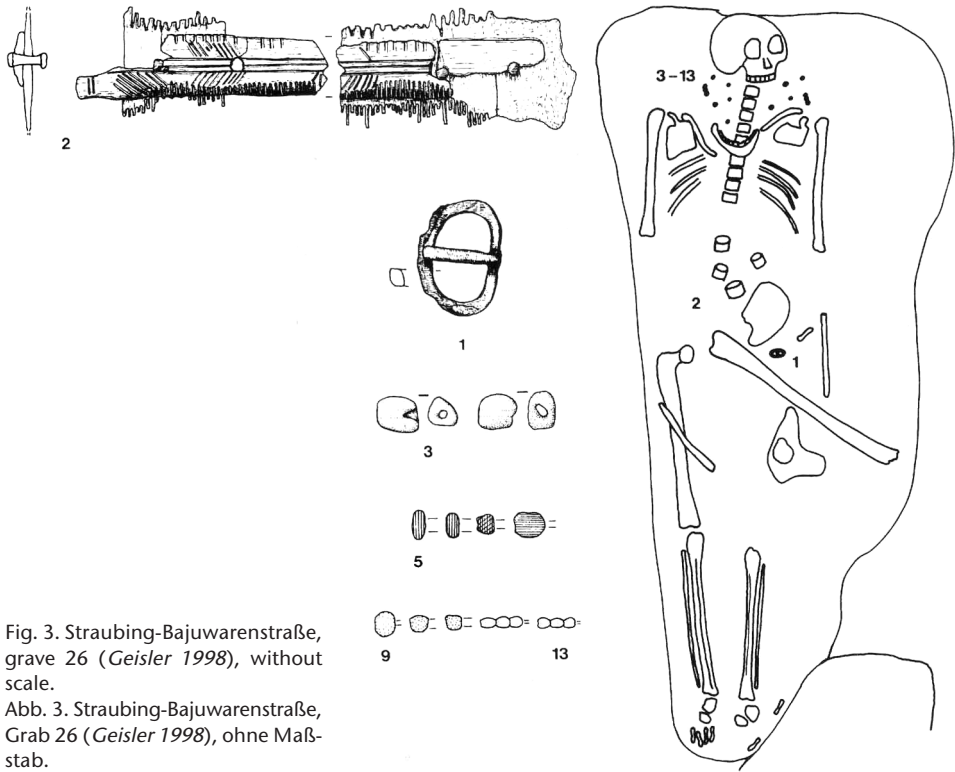


Fig. 3. Straubing-Bajuwarenstraße, grave 26 (Geisler 1998), without scale.

Abb. 3. Straubing-Bajuwarenstraße, Grab 26 (Geisler 1998), ohne Maßstab.

of the Saxons and Anglo-Saxons (Hills – Lucy 2013, 311; Weber 2000, 50). In graves of male juveniles the single arrowhead has been taken as a sign of the limited weapon ability of the young people (Groove 2001, 230; Walter 2008, 66), also a hypothesis.

Our investigations were expanded to grave inventories that show a female appearance and were associated with a male skeleton according to the traditional methods of sex determination. These are fewer in number. Two graves are to be mentioned from Straubing, which date in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Grave 26 shows beads of glass and amber beneath the skull, a comb in the pelvic region and an iron belt buckle (Fig. 3). The beads belong to a necklace or were fixed on clothing (Geisler 1998, 6–7). Grave 717 contained significantly more burial objects. Here we find four brooches, two bow brooches and two small brooches, the so-called ‘Vierfibelkleidung’ (‘clothing with four brooches’), which is found only in richer graves obviously belonging to the upper social class. Moreover, a further brooch, a small one, which was probably kept in a little bag placed beside the knees, 31 beads, a comb, a girdle hanger and a Roman coin were found. The determination of the bones as male was not as reliable as in the case of grave 26 (Geisler 1998, 262–63). Also worthy of interest is grave 249 from Künzing-Bruck, a disturbed unit with 13 beads, a bronze pin and parts of a girdle hanger dating in the years around 600 (Hannibal-Deraniyagala 2007, 198). In Aubing, grave 490, male bones were accompanied by several beads and a brooch. Finally, grave 232 from Sindelsdorf should be noted, with beads in the area of the neck. A comb and

Grave	morphology (older studies)	morphology (Immler)	DNA (Immler)	grave goods
Straubing 388	probably female	male	no result	weapons
Straubing 490	female	probably male	no result	weapons
Aschheim 9	probably female	probably male	male	weapons
Pliening 62	female	probably male	male	weapons
Weiding 121	female	probably male	no result	weapons
Weiding 160	female	probably male	male	weapons
Straubing 26	male	male	male	jewellery
Aubing 490	male	female	female	jewellery
Künzing-Br. 249	male	probably male	female	jewellery
Straubing 717	male	probably female	no result	jewellery
Sindelsdorf 232	–	male	male	jewellery

Tab. 1. Sex determination of the skeletons from selected Bavarian graves.

Tab. 1. Geschlechtsbestimmung der Skelette ausgewählter bayerischer Gräber.

a needle-like tool were observed next to the skull and may have been deposited in a little bag. An iron belt buckle completes the inventory.

The recent investigations of the bones carried out by Immler (Munich) show remarkable results (*Tab. 1; Gärtner et al. 2014, 231*). With regard to the metric features of the bones (pelvis, inner ear), only three graves still show a conflict between archaeology and physical anthropology. This is astonishing and due to the fact that in recent time the standards of morphological analysis were extensively modified. Among these skeletons we do not find any women with weapons, but only men who were buried with female objects. The DNA analyses largely confirm these results. A few samples have not yielded any results because suitable DNA was not available<sup>3</sup> and only for nine skeletons the conclusions can be considered as safe. In the case of grave 249 from Künzing-Bruck the DNA implies a woman’s skeleton, although the bones suggest ‘probably’ a man’s. However in graves 26 from Straubing and 292 from Sindelsdorf we find men with a female-like garment.

### 3. Conclusions

In summary, we have to conclude that there are no indications for the existence of female warriors in early medieval society in southern Germany according to written and archaeological sources. Our results fit well with the re-examination of the bones from grave 3C of Niederstotzingen. A second morphological investigation and a new DNA analysis demonstrate that in fact this body was that of a man, too, who died at the age of 20–30. The previous analysis carried out in 2000 was incorrect, most likely because the Y-chromosome was mistakenly not detected during an amelogenin test (‘Allelic drop-out’: *Wahl et al. 2014, 356, 365, 378–380; Wolf 2013, 55*). The three persons in grave 3 were not closely related, in contrast with Zeller’s initial assumption (*Wahl et al. 2014, 382*).

<sup>3</sup> Steinhöring 172, Straubing 295, 388, 490, 717, Weiding 121.



But we must return to the last mentioned graves at Straubing and Sindelsdorf. It is the presence of beads that first led to the assumption that women were buried there. Beads made of glass, amber, bone or metal have practically never been found in male burials. There are only a few exceptions. Grave 608 from Schleithem-Hebsack (CH) belongs to these rare, unusual cases (*Burzler et al. 2002*, tab. 72). But here it is very probable that the beads were stored in a belt pouch together with a knife, three tools of indeterminable function and a Roman coin. The person was buried with a single-edged sword and can be dated in the first third of the 7<sup>th</sup> century. The examination of the morphology of the bones has confirmed the postulated male sex of the dead. It seems clear that the beads have nothing to do with the clothing. In Hellmitzheim (Middle Franconia) a male skeleton with a sword, two ceramic vessels, a glass beaker and some beads beside the elbow were found in grave 29. Unfortunately, it was a relatively early excavation and the circumstances of the find are not altogether trustworthy (*Dannheimer 1962*, 208). In the case of the two Bavarian graves with well documented find circumstances, the situation is different. The beads were situated around the neck, a typical place for beads in female burials. This is undeniable in spite of the fact that grave 26 from Straubing was disturbed. We do not know whether they belonged to a necklace or an embroidered shawl, but it seems certain that they were a component of dress. But it is important to stress that a textile decorated with pearls did not have to be worn around the neck in life. As Haas-Gebhard pointed out it is possible that a shawl with pearls could be put around the neck of the dead body by a close relative, perhaps his wife or a daughter who had worn it before (cf. *Gärtner et al. 2014*, 234). This cannot be excluded. Is it on the other hand conceivable that in the Merovingian period a man not only dressed at least partly like a woman but was also buried in a female habit? A man dressed like a woman appears in the books of Gregory of Tours. The king's daughter Chrodechilde led a monastery in Poitiers. In 589/590 the nuns rebelled against their abbess and tabled several charges. Among other things Chrodechilde is said to have housed a man who dressed in female clothes; thus she could have sex with him whenever she wanted. The man testified in court that he dressed in this way because he could never act like a man.<sup>4</sup> We do not know exactly what this means; perhaps he was impotent or could not fight or do heavy work like his male contemporaries (*Halsall 2010*, 324). This is one of the few remaining written records that record a case of cross-dressing in early medieval Europe. Systematic research could perhaps detect further cases.

Finally we have to keep in mind that in the vast majority of cases DNA gives us reliable information about the sex of a certain person. However, it has been well documented that in our present society gender allocation for a certain number of people is ambiguous. The sex chromosome does not fit the anatomy of the genitals ('disorders of sexual development'; *Ainsworth 2015; Brown – Brown 2011*, 161). A person who looked like a woman could genetically be a man. The number of cases is very low, but leads to uncertainty in the interpretation of our archaeological record when only isolated cases exist. In summary this means that Sindelsdorf 232 and Straubing 26 are not proven examples of cross-dressing. A larger number of verified cases is still required, confirmed by modern DNA analyses. Only then can we have archaeological proof of cross-dressing in early medieval society.

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<sup>4</sup> *Buchner 1970*, 364: 'Qui cum in veste ... muliebri coram omnibus adstetisset, dixit, se nihil opus posse virile agere ideoque sibi hoc indumentum mutasse.'

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## Kriegerinnen und „Cross-dressing“ im frühmittelalterlichen Bayern? Einige kritische Bemerkungen

Die Bestattungen der Merowingerzeit in Zentraleuropa und darüber hinaus zeigen in weiten Teilen standardisierte Ausstattungsmuster. Offenbar finden wir klar erkennbare Regeln vor. Frauen wurden mit Schmuck bestattet und die Ausstattung mit Waffen ist typisch für Männergräber. Unter dem Einfluss der englischsprachigen Forschung wurden Untersuchungen zu den Faktoren Alter und Geschlecht im Bestattungsritual zuerst für alamannische Gräberfelder durchgeführt. Mittlerweile liegen aber auch Arbeiten zum bajuwarischen Siedlungsgebiet vor, und zwar zur Münchener Schotterebene und zu Niederbayern. Im Jahr 2000 wurde eine Bestattung von alamannischen Gräberfeld von Niederstotzingen in Baden-Württemberg, die mit Waffen ausgestattet war, über die DNA als weiblich bestimmt. Seitdem haben einige Archäologen behauptet, dass mit der Existenz von für den Kampf ausgebildeten Frauen und Kriegerinnen im frühen Mittelalter zu rechnen sei. Offenbar unter dem Eindruck dieser neuen Ergebnisse wurden auch in Bayern „Frauen in Waffen“ gefunden, deren biologisches Geschlecht über die Morphologie der Knochen bestimmt worden war. Daher fassten wir den Entschluss, bei einigen dieser Skelette die DNA zu untersuchen. In der Zusammenfassung ergibt sich, dass es keine Kriegerinnen gegeben hat und dass die klassische anthropologische Geschlechtsbestimmung, welche die Morphologie der Skelette zu Rate zieht, für den Einzelfall nur eingeschränkt belastbare Ergebnisse liefert. Auch die Schriftquellen halten keine sicheren Hinweise für bewaffnete Frauen bereit. In zwei Fällen fanden wir über die DNA als männlich bestimmte Skelette, die Glas- und Bernsteinperlen im Schädelbereich zeigten, die zu einer Perlenkette oder einem bestickten Tuch gehören müssen. Die Männer müssen diese Perlen nicht zu Lebzeiten getragen haben. Vielmehr ist auch gut denkbar, dass sie ihnen nur mit in das Grab gelegt wurden, vielleicht von einer Verwandten, die sie zuvor selbst getragen hatte. Somit haben wir keine archäologischen Belege für Kriegerinnen oder für ein „Cross-dressing“ im frühmittelalterlichen Bayern.