

## Abstract

New investigations on monumental enclosures of the Michelsberg/Baalberge period (c. 4200–3500 calBC) in Northern Germany show a close correlation between their location and medieval long distance roads, which are highly dependent on ground features and thus probably very constant in time. In some cases not only the position but also the architecture of enclosures seems to have been constructed deliberately in respect of ancient tracks leading by. Together with additional data from recent excavations the long discussed function of large enclosures can now be reassigned to the realms of representation, communication and mortuary ritual.

## Introduction

For over one century Neolithic causewayed enclosures have been under intense study by European researchers. Nearly every interpretation, every possible function has been discussed, rejected and – revitalized. The history of research can be divided into three main phases. The beginnings before WW I are characterized by the spirit of militarism, in which – of course – it was no question, that enclosures were remains of fortifications. An article from 1910 by Hans Lehner is named *Der Festungsbau der jüngeren Steinzeit* (fortress construction in the Neolithic period). Between the World Wars and after WW II archaeologists looked for new fields of interpretation. Most probably as a reaction to the decades of war and violence, a social and religious role of the enclosures was assumed by researchers from Great Britain and Germany. Features once interpreted as traces of military action – for example human skeletal remains and arrowheads in the ditch systems – were now put into the context of ritual. Nowadays, at least in German research, we can observe a shift back from the realms of ritual to a more profane interpretation, in which enclosures are considered as multifunctional facilities, with a primary function as fortified settlements, sometimes with ritual activities on the fringe.

It's astonishing, that the discussion through the years was based on a quite shaky foundation, for only a small number of enclosures have been examined in a sufficient way. While studying at the University of Göttingen in the late Seventies, I was still taught that enclosures can be looked at as quite exceptional phenomena, but perspective changes dramatically: A recent study by Niels Andersen (Andersen 1997) lists nearly 800 objects all over Europe – and in addition the actual number can be estimated at least three times higher, due to a vast amount of yet unpublished sites, which have been discovered by intensive aerial reconnaissance over the last years.

One of the main obstacles for an appropriate interpretation is the diversity of the objects. Constructed by several Neolithic cultures over a time span of three millennia and scattered over different regions of Europe, enclosures show remarkable differences in architecture and layout. Their size ranges from a few thousand square meters to 80 or 90 hectares – big enough to encircle a medieval town. The ditch systems consist of one up to

## Monumentality and Communication

### Neolithic Enclosures and Long Distance Tracks in West Central Europe\*

by Dirk Raetz-Fabian

[www.jungsteinSITE.de](http://www.jungsteinSITE.de)  
5. Januar 2002

\* Paper delivered at the Symposium *Perspective 2000: Cultural Continuity and Social Change*. The 64th Annual Meeting of the Society for American Archaeology, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA, April 9, 2000. First published on *The Comparative Archaeology Web* ([www.comp-archaeology.org](http://www.comp-archaeology.org)) in Dec. 2000. The paper is re-published on the *jungsteinSITE* with kind permission of the CAW editor Max O. Baldia.

five parallel ditches and, in most cases, additional palisade constructions. Clear evidence of corresponding settlements in the encircled areas seems to be delimited to the smaller types. Thus, it is highly questionable, that enclosures represent a consistent group of objects with a standardized set of functions or meanings.

## Recent Research

Two recent research projects in Germany now offer the opportunity to study a special group of enclosures, the so-called monumental type, which can be defined by a combination of the area covered (more than 10 hectares) and the overall length of the ditch system (more than 1 500 meters). Both parameters are available in most cases, even if no excavation has been carried out (cf. Raetz-Fabian 1999 a). The first project referred to, is the excavation of an enclosure and nearby gallery grave, I conducted at Calden near Kassel between 1988 and 1994, the second a survey of several similar objects, just started during the last years south of Brunswick in Lower Saxony under the direction of Michael Geschwinde (*Bezirksarchäologie Braunschweig*), where a considerable concentration of the monumental enclosure type can be observed (Geschwinde/Raetz-Fabian 1998).

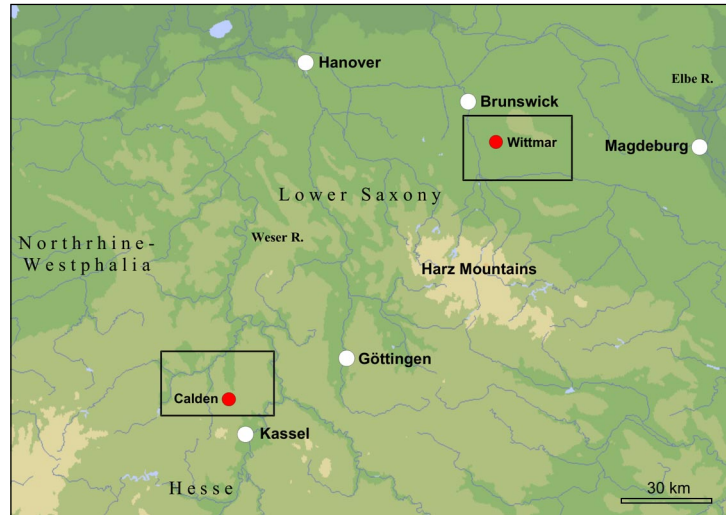


Fig. 1: Location of the Calden and Brunswick research projects (Northern Germany).

The Calden enclosure consists of a double-ditch system, which covers an area of 14 hectare (Fig. 3; Raetz-Fabian 1999 a; b; 2000). Two parallel palisade trenches, accompanying the inner ditch, can be reconstructed as a wall, made of timber and earth. Access was possible at seven points or causeways, each of which was controlled by a wooden building of a similar ground plan, which would allow only one person at a time pass through into the inner range (reconstruction cf. Fig. 5). The architecture of these gateways is unique in Neolithic Europe. Though the overall impression seems to be characteristic of a fortification, there are several features and observations that belong to a context of ritual and mortuary practice. The ditch system has been refilled deliberately very shortly after construction; scattered human remains in the excavated sections can – in relation to the overall length of the ditch-system – be estimated to be over 300 individuals. Similar observations were made at the recently excavated Oberntudorf site about 30 miles to the north-west. The ground plan of the Calden enclosure is not as warped as it seems on first sight: The front faces towards south-west, forming a so-called façade, and the gateways show a symmetrical arrangement (Fig. 6). The main access with a different architecture can be located in the north. The whole construction is radiocarbon dated around 3700/3600 calBC.

In the Brunswick area c. 8 to 12 objects of similar dimensions have been detected up to now in a region of only 200 square

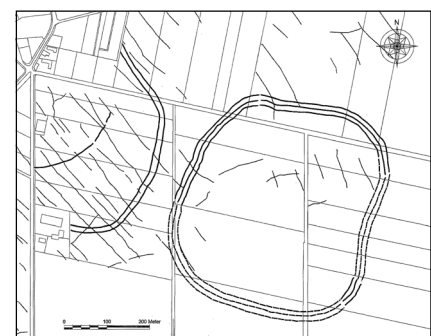


Fig. 2: Monumental twin enclosure at Niedersiecke (Kr. Wolfenbüttel, Lower Saxony; after Geschwinde/Raetz-Fabian 1998).

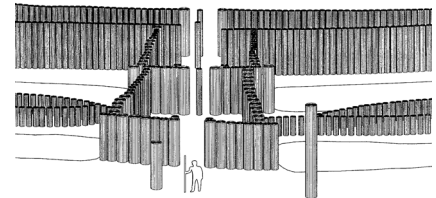
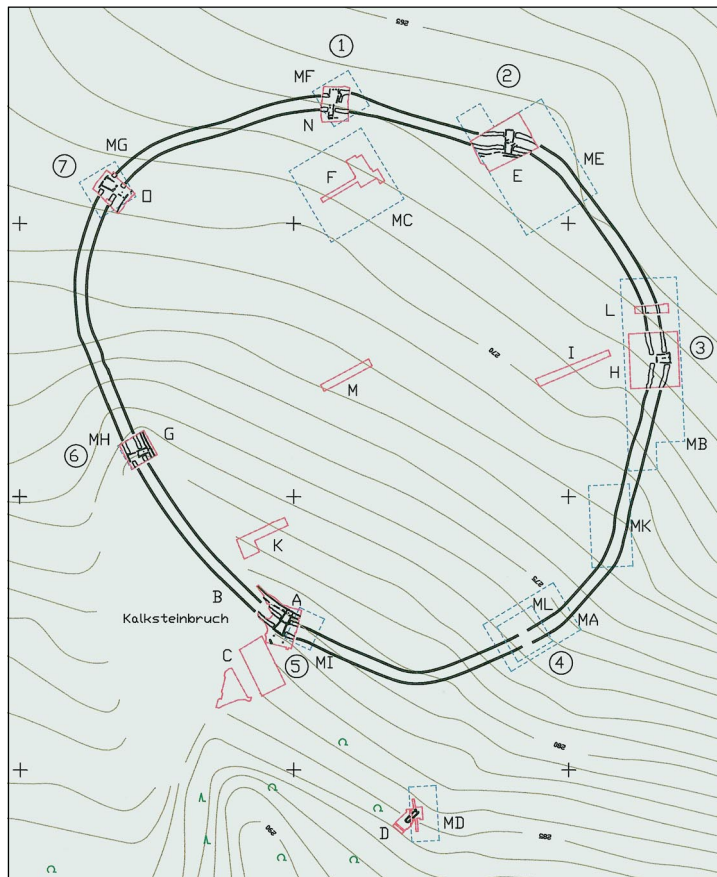


Fig. 3 (left): Plan of the Calden enclosure. Distance from cross to cross: 200 m. 1–7 causeways/gateways.

Fig. 4–5 (above): Reconstruction of a wooden gateway and the same feature in an aerial photograph (gateway 5 in the south-east of the enclosure; Photo by Otto Braasch). © Photo: Staatliche Museen Kassel

miles – in most cases from the air (Geschwinde/Raetz-Fabian 1998). Only a few of them have been examined by excavation. One of the most surprising features is a twin enclosure, with each object covering about 15 hectares (Fig. 2). On the basis of these observations we can now take a renewed look at monumental enclosures and discuss some main aspects:

### Time of Construction

Mapping the time of construction in west Central Europe, it becomes evident, that the erection of monumental enclosures is limited to two very short and nearby chronological horizons (Raetz-Fabian 1999, 94 Fig. 6): the first at the beginning of the Michelsberg Culture (start of phase I/II) around 4 200 cal BC and the second, geographically more restricted to the north, starting c. 3 700 cal BC (Michelsberg phase IV?/V, Baalberge). A significant concentration, including Calden, is delimited to northern Hesse and eastern Westphalia and connected to the very last stage of the Michelsberg development. Only one or two centuries later these regions will see the emergence of the Wartberg Culture with the erection of numerous megalithic graves from the start on (Raetz-Fabian 2000; 2001). At Calden the enclosure is intensively re-used for several ritual activities; a megalithic gallery grave is constructed only 100 m south of the enclosure (Fig. 3, object D).

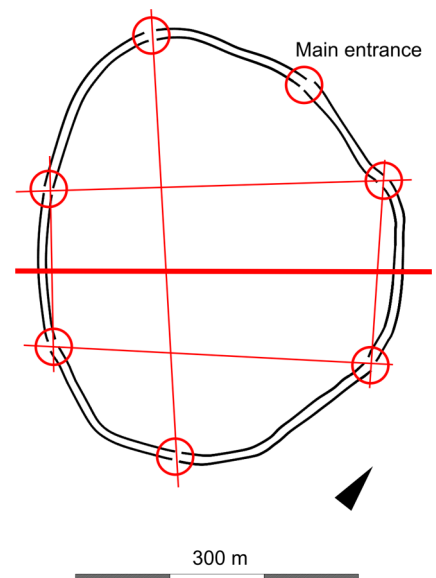


Fig. 6: Calden. Symmetrical arrangement of the gateways.

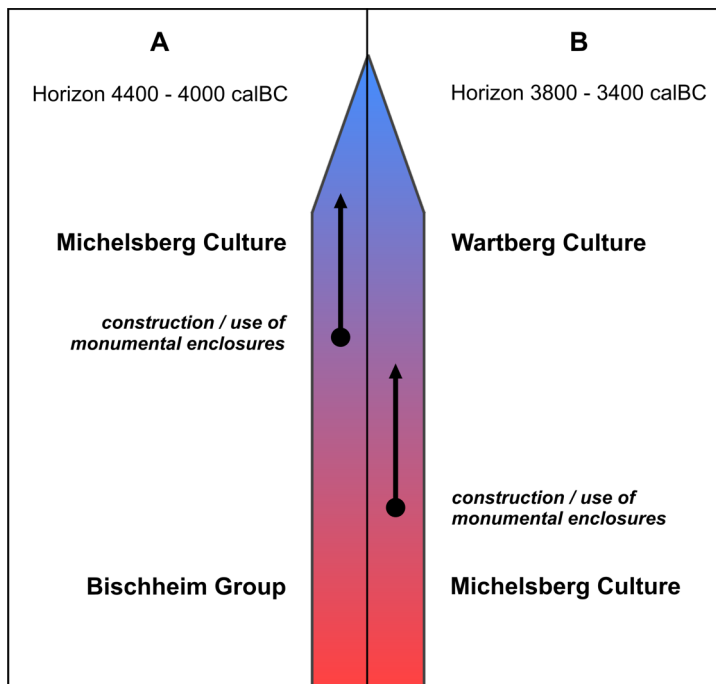


Fig. 7: Model of the cultural transition from late Rössen groups to Michelsberg (A), from late Michelsberg to Wartberg (B) and the role of monumental enclosure construction.

Putting this chronological framework to a more abstract model, it seems to be most likely, that the two horizons of construction mark the beginning of cultural formation processes, with the first horizon leading to developed Michelsberg (Fig. 6A ) and the later one to the emergence of the Wartberg Culture (Fig. 6B). In this transitional stage Calden and related enclosures appear quite early – at a point, where in the pottery-based typology a change is not yet to be seen.

### The Role of Representation and Communication

The façade-design of the Calden enclosure is a feature which can be found as well in Germany and England (Raetz-Fabian 2000, 89 ff.), but in general it seems to be not very common. It can be argued, that this very special layout was intended to impress a traveler approaching from the appropriate direction. There might have been a sort of convention in constructing this feature: this is underlined by striking similarities between Calden and the recently discovered Wittmar enclosure near Brunswick (Fig. 8). Both objects belong to different cultures but most probably to the same chronological horizon.

The aspect of representation only makes sense, when the main direction of an approach is defined at the time of construction. This is well illustrated by a palisade construction of the Funnel Beaker Culture near Anloo in the Netherlands (Jager 1985). Here an ancient track is indicated for several miles by a string of archaeological objects and even soil marks. The façade of the palisade turns out to be aligned along the ancient track. Similar connections between tracks and façade seems to be most likely also at Calden and Wittmar, where medieval roads pass by in close vicinity.

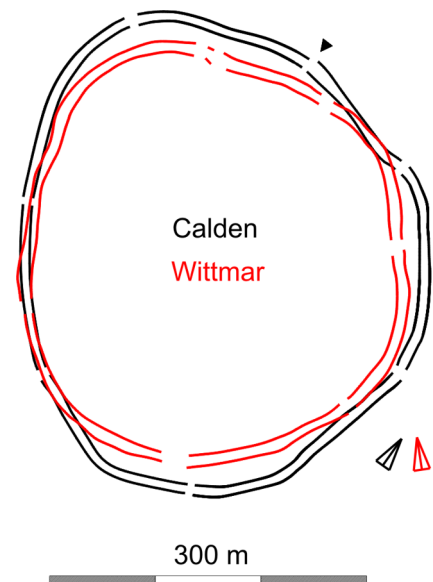


Fig. 8: Superimposed layouts of the Calden (black) and Wittmar (red) enclosures. Both plans have been rotated to comparison and do not point to the North.

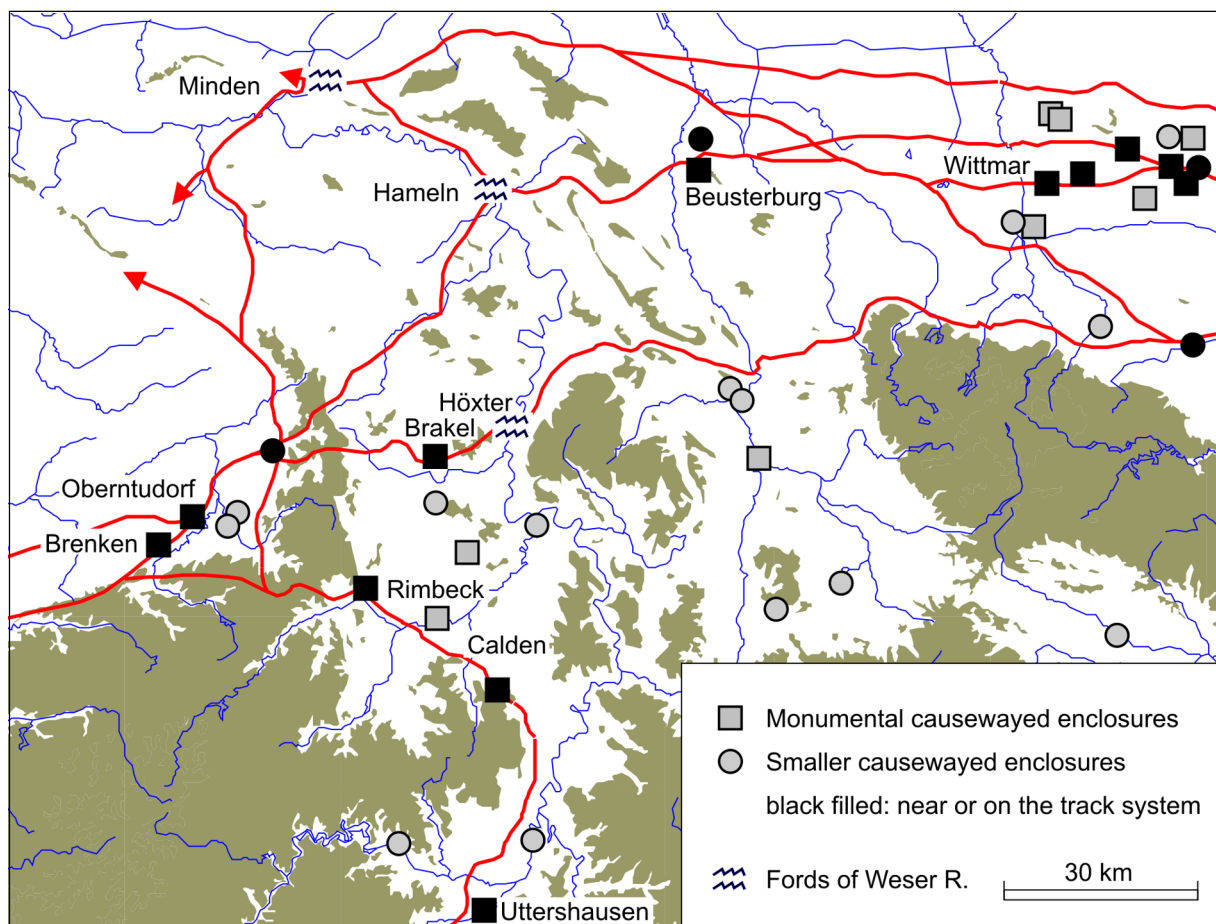
Fig. 9 shows enclosures of the younger Neolithic and their relation to early medieval main roads like the „Hellweg“ system, connecting Rhine and Elbe river. Though of course not every monumental enclosure is located on this Carolingian east-west road system, it becomes evident, that the main historical communication lines in many cases reflect much older routes, especially if they are dependent on ground features as fords or passes, ridges and swamps.

In conclusion we may sum up the observations made on the monumental enclosure type in west Central Europe:

- ◆ Construction of monumental enclosures is restricted to two short and nearby chronological horizons; they mark initial phases of cultural formation processes.
- ◆ The catchment area of each object can be considered not too widespread, as the density in the Brunswick region shows.
- ◆ The high number of human skeletal remains at Calden and Oberntudorf must be considered as an evidence for an important role in mortuary and burial practices.
- ◆ Most objects – some of them with a special façade layout – have been constructed near long distance communication lines, tracks or waterways.

In conclusion we can assume, that monumental enclosures once formed focal points for a cultural consolidation, ancestral legitimating and representation. Deliberately placed near

Fig. 9: Map of Younger Neolithic enclosures (c. 4200–2800 calBC) and Medieval road systems in Westphalia, Lower Saxony and northern Hesse.





established lines of communication, they may have served as an interface for ritualized contact to the „outer sphere“ (cf. Thomas 1991, 35f.).

## References

Andersen, Niels H.:

The Sarup Enclosures. The Funnel Beaker Culture of the Sarup site including two causewayed camps compared to the contemporary settlements in the area and other European enclosures. Sarup vol. 1. Jutland Archaeological Society Publications 33.1. Moesgård 1997.

Geschwinde, Michael/Raetzl-Fabian, Dirk:

Monumental-Architektur aus Holz und Erde. Archäologische Erdwerksforschung in Südniedersachsen. Archäologie in Niedersachsen 1998, 34–37.

Jager, Sake W.:

A prehistoric route and ancient cart-tracks in the gemeente of Anloo (province of Drenthe). Palaeohistoria 27, 1985, 185–245.

Raetzl-Fabian, Dirk:

Der umhegte Raum – Funktionale Aspekte jungneolithischer Monumental-Erdwerke. Jahresschrift für mitteldeutsche Vorgeschichte 81, 1999 (a), 81–117.

Raetzl-Fabian, Dirk:

Calden. Erdwerk und Galeriegräber des 4. Jt. v. Chr.  
In: www.jungsteinsite.de – Artikel vom 14. November 1999 (b).

Raetzl-Fabian, Dirk:

Calden. Erdwerk und Bestattungsplätze des Jungneolithikums. Architektur – Ritual – Chronologie. Universitätsforschungen zur prähistorischen Archäologie 70. Bonn 2000.

Raetzl-Fabian, Dirk:

Absolute Chronology and Cultural Development of the Neolithic Wartberg Culture in Germany. In: www.jungsteinsite.de – Artikel vom 5. Januar 2002.

Thomas, Julian:

Rethinking the Neolithic. Cambridge 1991.