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# Hillforts in Connection with Pyres Sites in Inner Alpine Areas (Tirol, Südtirol/Provincia di Bolzano, Trentino)

Peter C. Ramsl\*

## Introduction

Ritual pyres are a common phenomenon in inner alpine area in Bronze and Iron Age periods. Mankind has always felt the need to influence and appease these invisible guides of the gods and goddesses of his fate by acting in a targeted manner. In doing so, they always tried to exert direct influence on them in many different ways.

Individual religiously motivated actions had been known to Archaeologists for some time and could be identified in different ways based on special finds and particular topographical locations with varying degrees of clarity (Oberrauch 2019, p. 446-447; Tecchiati 2018, p. 206-210). In contrast, the prehistoric research defined cult sites in the Central European region only at a relatively late stage. Relevant places could not be addressed and correctly interpreted. In addition, a rationalistic character in the subject suppressed a religious-historical approach, so that as a result pyre sites were still the subject of controversial discussions. Pyres sites as religious and, as it were, political centres were a reflection of society (Steiner 2010, p. 2). In this short paper, I want to expound and introduce the sites of hillforts and pyres in the inner alpine area of Tirol, Südtirol/Sud-Tirolo and Trentino by means of some examples. These phenomena, which start (at least) in Bronze Age and have a strong phase in Iron Age, are described with Laugen-Melaun and Fritzens-Sanzeno cultures (or groups). Marks of the fortifications are the topographical location in the main valleys and foreign influence in the material finds.

## The landscapes (Tirol, Südtirol, Trentino) – some short history and chronology

Our geographical research area is defined by the Austrian province of Tyrol and the Italian autonomous province of Bozen/

\* This short paper is dedicated to our colleague Gianna Reginelli, who has sadly passed away. I fondly remember the meetings at the AFEAF conferences and at the excursion of the University of Innsbruck at the Laténium in 2016. May we always remember her kind and warm-hearted nature.



Fig. 1. Area of historical Tyrol with mentioned archaeological sites (Author after EUREGIO).

Bolzano (which include german-, italian- and ladinspeaking populations) as well as the province of Trentino (fig. 1).

The inner-alpine chronology from Copper to Iron Age can be seen as follows: Copper Age lasts from ca. 3500 to 2200 BC (Età de Rame – Pedrotti 2000), the inner alpine Bronze Age last from ca. 2200 to 1650 (Età del Bronzo antique e Medio – Perini 2000), followed by the late Bronze Age from ca. 1250 to 950 BC (Età del Bronzo Recente e Finale – Marzatico 2000, De Marinis 2014), the Early Iron Age from 950-ca. 500 BC (La prima Età del Ferro – Marzatico 2001) and finally the Late Iron Age from 500-15 BC (Reti/Fritzens-Sanzeno culture – Marzatico 2014, Roncador 2017).

## Definition “Brandopferplatz – Pyres”

Burnt offering sites are understood to be pre-Roman and Roman period sanctuaries in the Alpine region and in the northern Alpine foothills, where burnt or fire sacrifices were offered. These are usually multi-unit complexes with an altar, a place of deposition and a festival site. Burnt offerings are considered the lowest common denominator, without being limited to the Alpine and northern or as such to characterise a ritual or a deity

in more detail. If the ritual can now also be recorded as early as the Copper Age (3300-2200 BC; Piglone Kogel south of Bozen – Oberrauch 2004, Oberrauch 2020), it was first documented during the Bronze Age (ca. 2200-950 BC). A number of Bronze Age pyre sites have been found in the high mountains. As in the valleys, there is often a connection to springs and lakes. During the Early Iron Age (ca. 500-15 BC), under the Mediterranean influence (Oberrauch 2020), new offerings appeared at the pyre sites. Worth mentioning are various jewellery and costume elements, especially brooches, but also weapons and tools. It is remarkable that at this period, most of the custom of depot, individual and high altitude finds in the Rhaetian-Alpine region has come to an end (Gleirscher *et al.* 2002, p. 177-182). Bowls and jugs often bear pseudo-inscriptions (Gleirscher 2012, 228-229).

## State of research

For the study of the Alpine pyre sites, there are now sites that have been fully explored through modern excavations: For the Bronze Age and Urnfield Period, the Hahnehütter Bödele/ Schluderns should be mentioned, for the later Iron Age St. Walburg/ Ulten. Schwarzsee/Vilanders and Grubensee/Maneid are two sites for burnt offerings in the high mountains. Finally, there are other sites like the Schlern and other sites mentioned and used in this article. This provides a good starting point against which to measure the findings of older excavations as well as sites that have only been partially explored or found in readings, or which can be used to confirm, supplement or correct the picture drawn so far with a new basis.

A clear definition makes it easier to address the findings and is also a prerequisite for the comprehension of the argumentation and working methods. Ideas about the density of pyre sites have been subject to considerable change in recent years; while older research believed in larger catchment areas, the image that each settlement had its own pyre site was gradually consolidated (Krämer 1966; Steiner 2010).

## Examples

I want to start with the western part of Südtirol, the so-called *Vinschgau* (between the border to Switzerland and the city Meran). The site of **Ganglegg** (Steiner 2007) was occupied during the Copper Age (3300–2200 BC), the middle and late Bronze age (14th–11th c. BC), after an interruption in the Iron Age (4th c. to the roman occupation) and finally a reactivation of the settlement in the 3rd to 4th cent. AD. Inside the fortifications, a lot of terraces and houses have been found; the fortification itself was built by stone and wooden bars. The pyre site of **Hahnehütterbödele** was placed next to it, but separated by a small and deep valley. The topographical locations confirm the importance as a controlling point of the Vinschgau valley and a transition passage across the Alps.

Another site – quite near the mentioned site above - in this area is this of **Tartscher Bichl**, placed at an isolated rock at the



Fig. 2. Plan of the site of Ganglegg (after Steiner 2007, Fig. 6).

valley ground. It runs from the Late Hallstatt age to the Middle La Tène period and has a lot of complex stone house constructions. Also here, we can mention a pyre site at the highest point of the site (Steiner 2010, p. 472, Abb 221.2).

In (next to) the *Eisack Valley*, which stretches from the border with Austria (Brenner/Brennero) in the north to the confluence of the Eisack and Etsch rivers at Bozen I want to mention the site of the **Rungger Egg** (which is connected with the impressive massiv of the *Schlern*). The pyre site of Rungger Egg consists of a massive stone construction („pyramide“) and the excavated “scattered cremation place“ (“Brandschüttungsplatz“). Next to it, divided by a anticline, we can see the fortified area of the **Gschliern**. The entire area is terraced and there are also house foundations made of dry stone walls and millstones made of porphyry. The site dates into the Iron Age Period (Gleirscher *et al.* 2002).

Next area is this of the *Nonstal/Val di Non*, which connects Südtirol with the province of Trentino. Here the famous site of **Sanzeno** is placed, which gave also name to the late Iron Age group of “Fritzens-Sanzeno“. The terrace of Sanzeno rises in a strategic position at an altitude of 656 m on the left bank of the

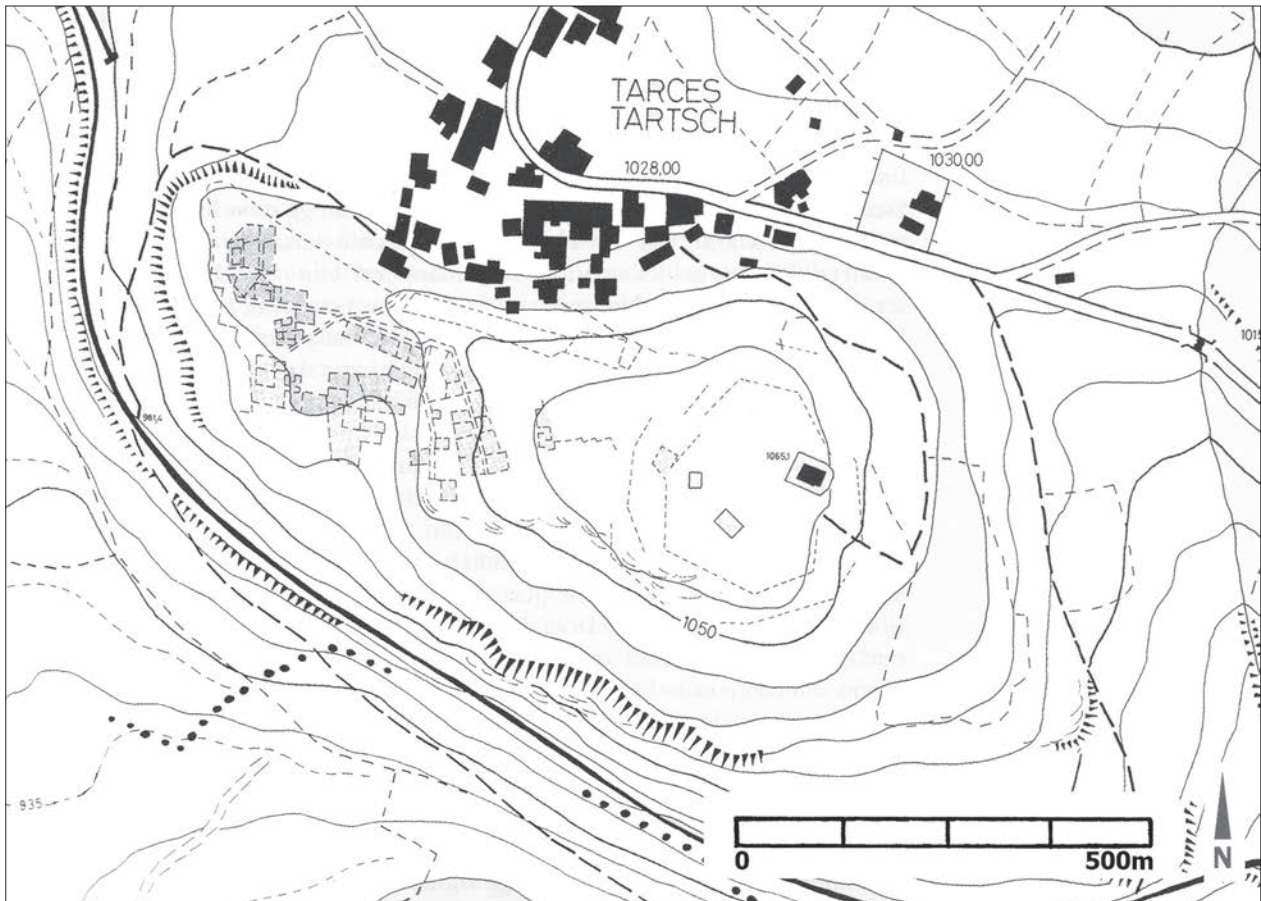


Fig. 3. Plan of the site of Tartscher Bichl (after Steiner 2007, Fig. 227).

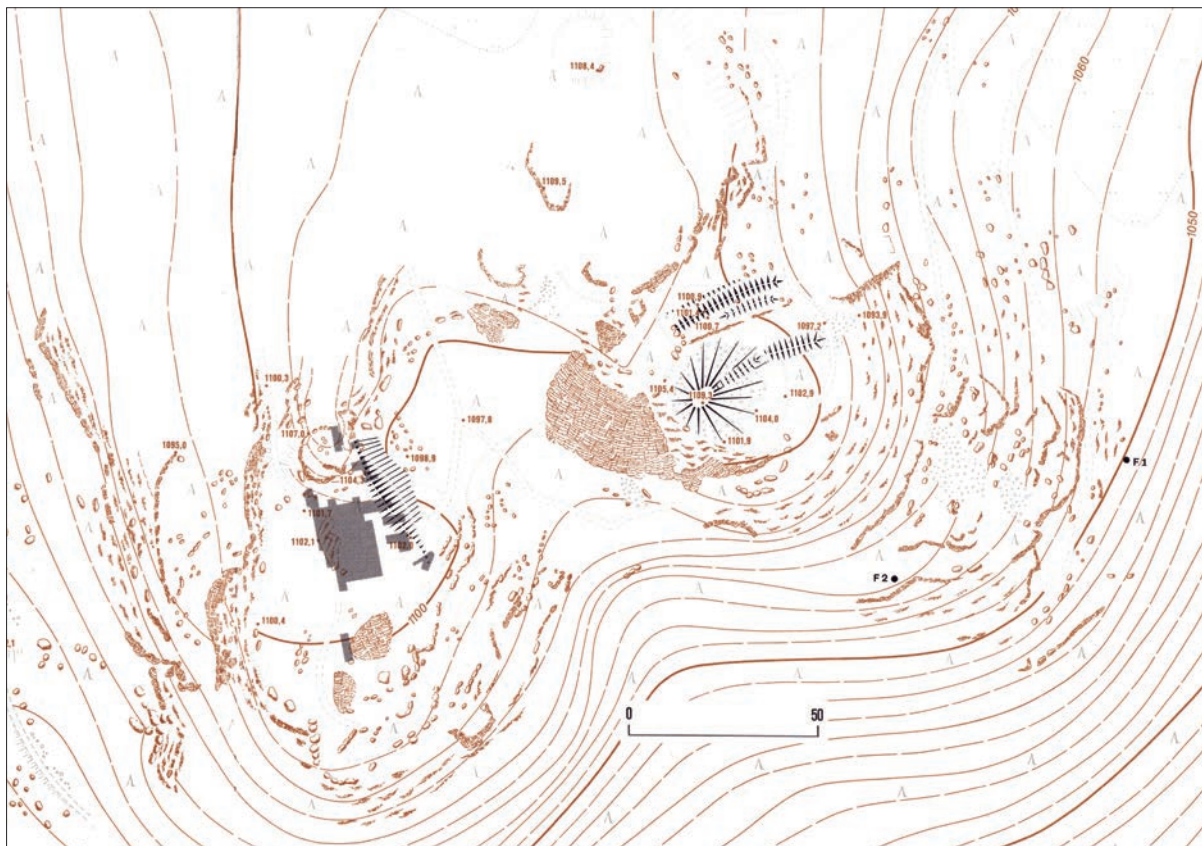


Fig. 4. Plan of the site of Rungger Egg (after Gleirscher *et al.* 2002, Beilage 1).

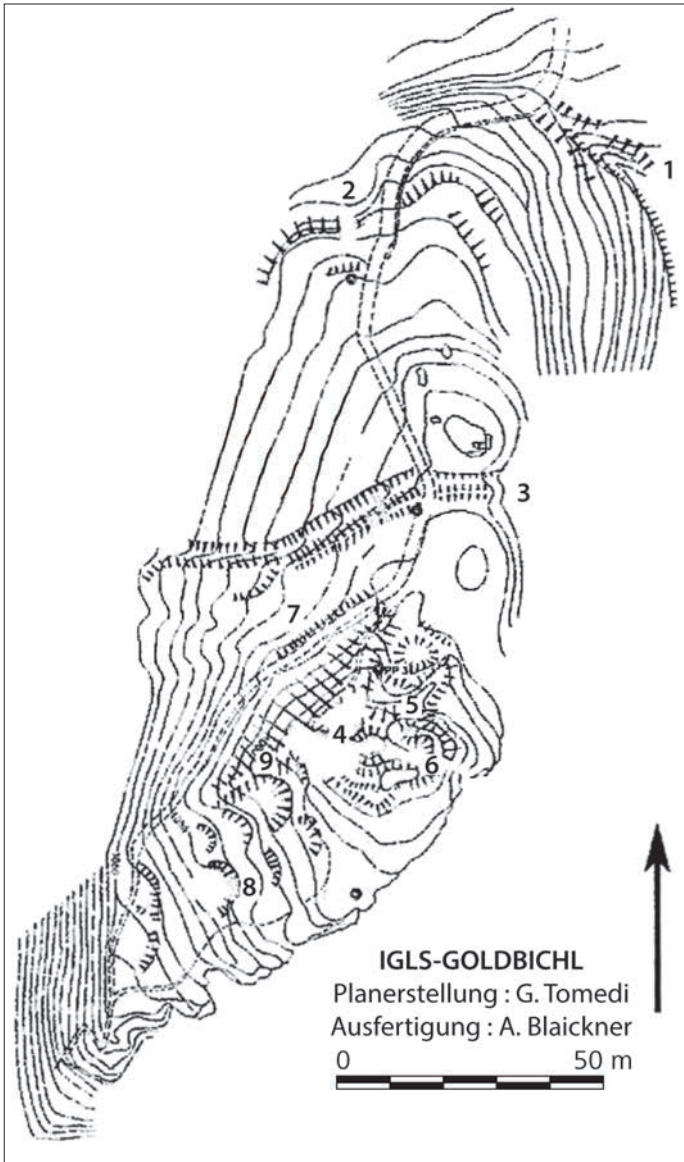


Fig. 5. Plan of the site Goldbichl (after Tomedi, Nicolussi 2007, Fig. 19).

Noce river in the Nonsberg. Protected by steep slopes framed by two rivers, the plateau extends for about 2 km in length and 1 km in width. At the main terrace, a lot of so-called “Casa Reti” made of stone had been found. Mighty layers of ash combined with a lot of votive offerings may postulate also a pyre site at this place (Glaischer *et al.* 2002, p. 251; Marzatico 2012)

Last mentioned area is Nordtirol (part of the province Tyrol in Austria). Here, a prominent site is this of Goldbichl which is placed in the commune of Igl. This site, which was excavated from 1995 to 2003, can be described as a fortified site with a pyre and dates from the Early Bronze Age to the Late Iron Age Period. The whole area is surrounded by a wall, including a lower plateau, an extra fortified upper plateau with the hilltop and the pyre site (Tomedi *et al.* 2007).

Next to earlier finds, larger excavations were carried out at the Bergisel because of the construction of the new ski jump hill in 2002 (Tomedi, Putzer 2007). The site consists of a pyre site at a small hilltop (with a “house of treasure”), a wall with a ditch and several terraces with remain of houses. The pyre site dates to the La Tène period, the wall itself is still undated, but should date to the same period due to its location and architectural features.

### Conclusion

Pyre sites in the inner alpine area can be placed on the one hand at the valley ground and on the other hand high in the mountains. The mentioned phenomenon begins in the Copper Age and lasts (often with interruptions in individual places) until the Roman period. Several of them are connected with settlements, often with hillforts. Sometimes, the settlement areas and the pyres itself are separated e. g. by a small, but deep valley (see Ganglegg). It is common sense, next to big, interregional

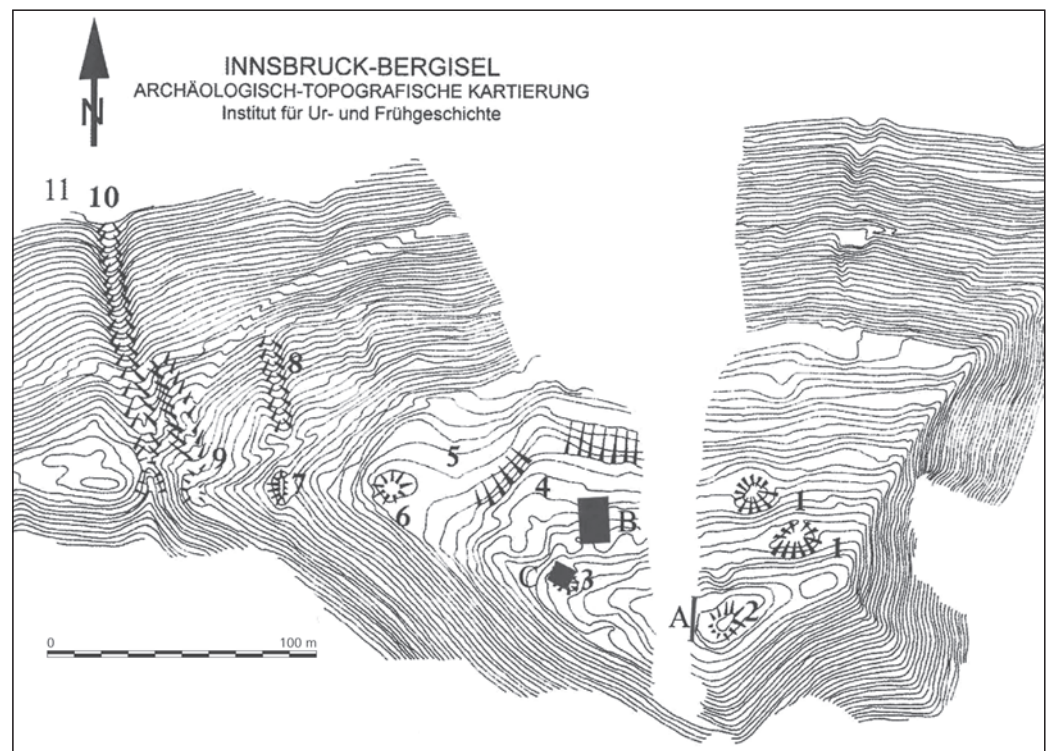


Fig. 6. Plan of the site Bergisel (after Tomedi, Putzer 2007, Fig. 3).

sanctuaries like in St. Walburg, nearly every settlement had its “own, local” pyre site – but this is already in discussion (Steiner 2010, p. 477; Gleirscher 2012, 229).

## Acknowledges

At this point, I want to say thank you to Gerhard Tomedi (Innsbruck), Hubert Steiner (Tisens/Bozen) as well as Hanns Oberrauch (Tramin) for the information and their personal view of research.

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### **Abstract**

A common phenomenon in inner alpine area in Bronze and Iron Age periods (sometimes to the late Roman period) are ritual pyres. Pyres are placed on high mountains like the Schlern and in the valleys, so individually located and in connection with settlements. In this paper, the connection between pyres and (fortified) settlements in Tyrol, Südtirol/Provincia di Bolzano and Trentino are examined.

### **Résumé**

Les bûchers rituels sont un phénomène courant dans les régions alpines intérieures à l'âge du bronze et du fer (parfois jusqu'à la fin de la période romaine). Les bûchers sont placés sur les hautes montagnes comme le Schlern et dans les vallées, donc localisés individuellement et en relation avec les établissements. Dans cet article, le lien entre les bûchers et les établissements (fortifiés) du Tyrol, du Südtirol/Provincia di Bolzano et du Trentin est examiné.