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Mobility in Thuringia or mobile Thuringians: A strontium isotope study from early medieval Central Germany

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Abstract

Residential changes of people during the Migration Period are crucial for archaeological research. Within an extensive study of the migration of the Langobards, strontium isotope analysis was carried out on tooth enamel taken from 48 burials from the Thuringian cemeteries of Rathewitz and Obermöllern (Burgenlandkreis, Sachsen-Anhalt, Germany), which date to the late 5th–mid 6th century. Modern vegetation and water

samples provided detailed information about the isotopic composition of the biologically available strontium of geological units in the area. Although the rich furnishing of the burials provides evidence for contacts with many different regions, only one individual (7.1%) in Rathewitz and three (12.5%) in Obermöllern are isotopically nonlocal to the sites. These individuals were buried among the locals and their graves were similarly equipped. In contrast, many nonlocal grave goods were found with isotopically local individuals, often in combination with local items or pieces indicating several different source areas. This suggests the existence of strong interregional ties among the members of the local elites. The cemeteries cannot overall be associated with newly arriving groups; rather, they resulted from a change of funeral customs of the indigenous population from cremation to inhumations or small-scale changes of the burial places. They reflect individual residential changes rather than large-scale movements of groups.

Keywords

Migration Period, Central Germany, Strontium isotopes, mobility, migration

Introduction: the interdisciplinary Langobard project

The migration of the Langobards in the 5/6th century has been studied very intensively by historians and archaeologists. Written sources and grave goods from cemeteries provided the foundation for the development of a detailed picture of Langobardic movements from the lower Elbe region to Moravia, Pannonia, and finally to Italy (Pohl, 2005). An interdisciplinary project, “Isotope analysis and mapping to investigate the origin of nonlocal groups during the early Middle Ages – New approaches to Langobard research” (German title: “Analyse und Kartierung von Isotopen zur Herkunftsbestimmung ortsfremder Personenverbände während des Frühmittelalters – Neue Wege der Langobardenforschung”), designed to test the existing hypotheses, is currently supported by the German Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF).

The three-component project allows researchers to take a new, more detailed and comparative look both at the material culture and its regional ties and at the skeletal remains of the people themselves, with the help of multi-isotope analyses. Strontium and oxygen isotope ratios provide information about human mobility (Ericson, 1985; Schwarcz and Knyf, 1991; Tütken et al., 2008), while carbon and nitrogen isotopes are an archive of dietary information (Ambrose, 1993). Within this project, nine cemeteries in four countries have been chosen as case studies (Fig. 1). Samples have been taken from a total