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Session XX-2. Shell mounds, shell middens and coastal resources

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Abstract (oral presentation)

Riņņukalns revived – new interdisciplinary research on a Neolithic freshwater shell midden in northern Latvia

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Abstract

Riņņukalns, in northern Latvia, is unique in the context of Baltic Sea region prehistory. Discovered and first investigated by Count C. G. Sievers in the 1870s, it is the only well-stratified Stone Age shell midden in the East Baltic and one of the rare sites consisting of freshwater mussel species. The artefacts recovered in the first excavations include ceramics, bone tools and some art objects. Human burials were also found stratified within and under the shell midden. Consequently Sievers considered these human remains the first Stone Age graves found in the Eastern Baltic. However, this interpretation was heavily critiqued, and the age of the presumed Stone Age graves remained in dispute.

After a break of almost 70 years, new research on this important site started as a close cooperation between the Institute of Latvian History, Latvia, and the Centre for Baltic and Scandinavian Archaeology, Germany. In 2011, a geophysical survey allowed us to lay out small trenches; a short excavation proved the survival of intact midden deposits, despite extensive excavations during the 19th and early-mid 20th century. The new midden exposure provided new samples for malacozoological, archaeozoological, isotopic and ¹⁴C analyses. It was dated to the late 4th millennium cal BC, and the potential existence of large freshwater reservoir effects in human bones was demonstrated on a human maxilla fragment found in the deposits. In addition, the human remains from the 19th-century excavations were rediscovered in the Rudolf Virchow Anthropological Collection of the Berlin Society of Anthropology, Ethnology and Prehistory, Berlin, Germany. New osteological, stable isotope and radiocarbon investigations on these remains resolved the old research dispute. They showed that two of the burials excavated by Sievers are indeed from the

Neolithic. Nevertheless, stable isotope analyses show that these people were still fishermen, hunters and gatherers and not farmers.

Since 2017 we are able to continue research on this important shell midden site in the frame of a new interdisciplinary research project funded for 3 years by the German Research Foundation (DFG). The first excavation campaign in summer 2017 provided important new insights into the preservation status of the shell midden and into older human occupations of the site. Of particular importance, however, is the discovery of another Stone Age burial from the Neolithic shell midden phase.

The paper will provide a summary of the most important results of the investigations since 2011 and an overview of the new research project, including the first excavation campaign in 2017.