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## FUNCTIONS OF THE LARGE FELDBERG TYPE STRONGHOLDS FROM THE 8<sup>TH</sup>/9<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY IN MECKLENBURG AND POMERANIA

### ABSTRACT

Biermann F. 2011. Functions of the Large Feldberg Type Strongholds from the 8<sup>th</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> Century in Mecklenburg and Pomerania. *Sprawozdania Archeologiczne* 63, 149–173.

The article deals with the early medieval Strongholds in Mecklenburg and Pomerania called Feldberg type: Large fortifications with ramparts constructed mainly from wood and earth, often built on hills, dated by finds and dendrochronological dates to the second half of 8<sup>th</sup> and the 9<sup>th</sup> century. On the basis of old and new research their fortification and building constructions, their development, their chronology, their political and social function and traditions are discussed. The Feldberg strongholds were tribal elite residences, instruments and symbols of power, but also constantly settled places, important elements of the settlement landscape and refuge places in dangerous times.

Keywords: Early Middle Ages — North-Western Slavs — Strongholds — political-social organisation

Received: 7.02.2011; Revised: 25.07.2011; Accepted: 15.08.2011

In the eighth and ninth centuries, dozens of large strongholds were built in Mecklenburg and Pomerania, in Ostholstein, Northern Brandenburg and Northern Great Poland (Fig. 1), called “large strongholds of the Karolingian Age” (Brather 1998), or strongholds of the Feldberg type, after the ringfort of the same name close to Woldegk in Eastern Mecklenburg (Schuldt 1956, 55; Herrmann 1968, 153, 164–174; 1969b). One may call these

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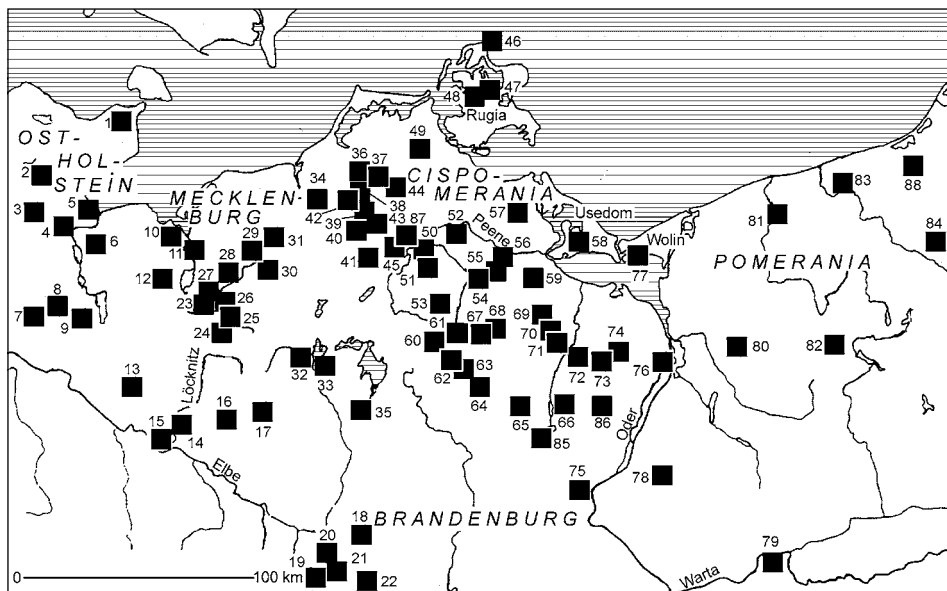


Fig. 1. Map of the unquestionable and potential Feldberg Strongholds east of River Elbe in Ostholstein, Mecklenburg, Cispomerania, Northern Brandenburg and Western Pomerania (modified after Brather 1996, 191, 379–383 fig. 139; 1998, 117 fig. 2; furthermore after Herrmann 1968, 153 fig. 24; Herrmann, Donat 1973; 1979; Struve 1981). 1 — Oldenburg (Holstein); 2 — Bosau-„Bischofswarder“; 3 — Prons-torf-Strenglin; 4 — Alt Lübeck; 5 — Ratekau-Pansdorf; 6 — Lockwisch; 7 — Sirksfelde; 8 — Hammer; 9 — Horst-Neuhorst, „Oldenburg“; 10 — Groß Woltersdorf; 11 — Mecklenburg; 12 — Böken; 13 — Menkendorf; 14 — Lenzersilge; 15 — Lenzen, „Neuehaus“; 16 — Stavenow; 17 — Wolfshagen-Horst; 18 — Wildberg; 19 — Gülpe; 20 — Kietz; 21 — Lochow; 22 — Berge; 23 — Basthorst; 24 — Friedrich-sruhe; 25 — Dabel; 26 — Sternberger Burg; 27 — Wendorf; 28 — Groß Görnow; 29 — Schlemmin; 30 — Langensee; 31 — Werle; 32 — Fahrenhorst; 33 — Zislow; 34 — Fresendorf; 35 — Kieve; 36 — Sem-low-Camitz; 37 — Kaveltsdorf; 38 — Marlow; 39 — Kucksdorf; 40 — Liepen; 41 — Sukow; 42 — Schulen-berg; 43 — Neu Nieköhr/Walkendorf; 44 — Tribsees; 45 — Dargun; 46 — Putgarten, Kap Arkona; 47 — Ralswiek, „Fluchtburg“; 48 — Bergen, „Rugard“; 49 — Zimkendorf; 50 — Vorwerk; 51 — Gan-schendorf; 52 — Tutow; 53 — Wildberg; 54 — Klempenow; 55 — Krien; 56 — Grütow; 57 — Wran-gelsburg/Forst Jägerhof; 58 — Mellenthin; 59 — Schwerinsburg; 60 — Penzlin; 61 — Neubrandenburg, „Ravensburg“; 62 — Lieps, „Bacherswall“; 63 — Quadenschönfeld; 64 — Feldberg; 65 — Naugarten; 66 — Drense; 67 — Glienke; 68 — Jatzke; 69 — Forst Rothemühl; 70 — Klein Luckow; 71 — Stolzenburg; 72 — Fahrenwalde; 73 — Löcknitz; 74 — Plöwen; 75 — Stolpe; 76 — Szczecin; 77 — Lubin; 78 — Swob-nica; 79 — Santok; 80 — Maszewo; 81 — Kędrzyno; 82 — Drawsko Pom.; 83 — Bardy; 84 — Bobolice; 85 — Potzlow; 86 — Schmölln; 87 — Beestland; 88 — Kretomino

strongholds the most important representatives of early fortifications in the North-Western Slavic territory. They developed only in the wider hinterland of the Baltic coast with its early economic peak in the eighth/ninth centuries, which was a result of Slavic-Scandinavian trade and concentrated at the so-called *emporía*. This resulted not only in appearance of fine ceramics also called Feldberg type (Fig. 2)<sup>1</sup>, brought to the rise of professional crafts

<sup>1</sup> First time mentioned as Feldberg type by R. Beltz in 1922 (Schuchhardt 1926, 58).

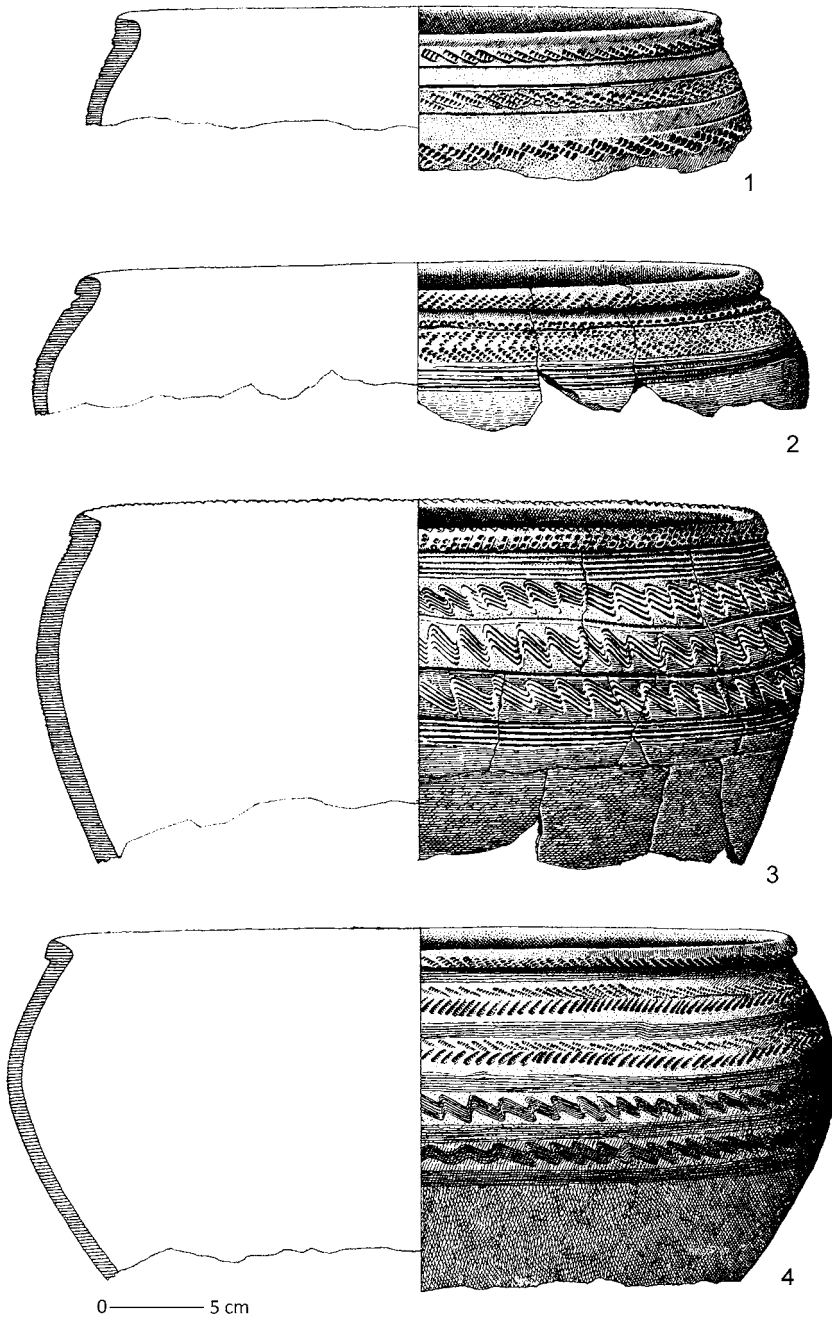


Fig. 2. Feldberg pottery from the Ravensburg near Neubrandenburg (after Schoknecht 1971, 266; fig. 206)

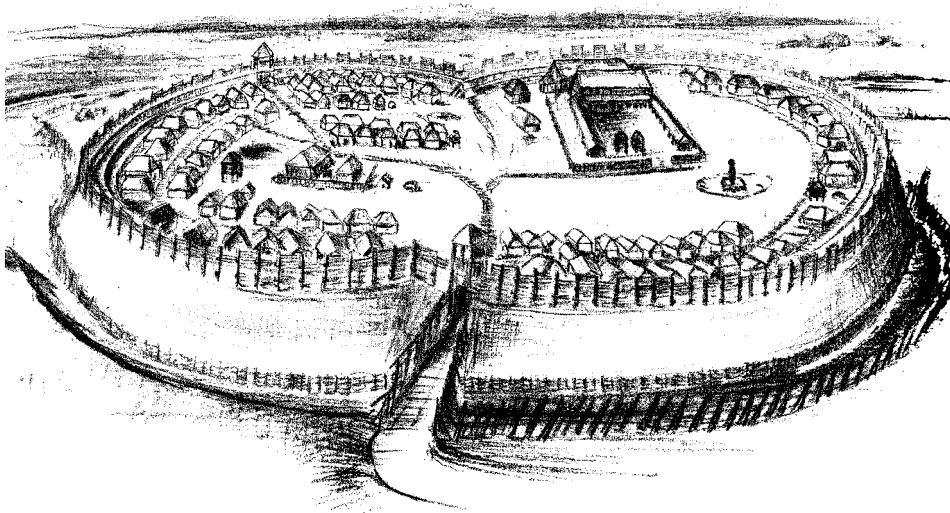


Fig. 3. Reconstruction of the Oldenburg in Ostholstein in the early ninth century (drawing K. W. Struve, after Müller-Wille 1991, 120; fig. 12)

and far-distance trade connections but also to a strong socio-political development with large tribal powers<sup>2</sup>.

The heyday of these strongholds was the ninth century. In the late ninth and the first half of the tenth century most of them were given up. They were replaced by small lowland ringforts – like Tornow or Groß Raden – which are typical for the middle-Slavic period in the vast region between Elbe and Bug between 850 and 950<sup>3</sup>. Not seldomly the small ringforts were built at the sites of the older large strongholds<sup>4</sup>. Only a few of them – for instance Oldenburg in Ostholstein (Fig. 3), Mecklenburg near Wismar (Fig. 4), or Drense in the Uckermark (Fig. 5)<sup>5</sup> – kept their political and military significance from the eight until the twelfth or thirteenth centuries. Being the residences of princes and tribal centres, these long used strongholds were generally places of high political and symbolic significance.

The first Feldberg strongholds were erected in the middle of the eight century. The 1,2 km long bridge of Sukow in Mecklenburg, dendochronologically dated to this period

<sup>2</sup> See at last Biermann 2006a; 2006b, 16; 2010, with further literature.

<sup>3</sup> Herrmann 1966; Schuldt 1985a; to the chronology of these strongholds: Herrmann/Heußner 1991; Henning 1998; Biermann 2000; to the general development: Kempke 1999b, 118 ff.; Biermann 2006a; 2006b; for Polish Pomerania: Łosiński 1969; 1982, 96 ff.; 1995, 73 f.

<sup>4</sup> For instance in Dargun (Herrmann 1968, 194 fig. 33a); Forst Jägerhof (Herrmann 1968, 194 fig. 33f; *idem*, Donat 1979, 43/35), Neu-Nieköhr/Walkendorf (Schuldt 1967), Wolfshagen-Horst (Herrmann 1968, 194 fig. 33f; *idem*, Donat 1973, 12/26) and Kieve (Herrmann, Donat 1979, 58/26).

<sup>5</sup> Oldenburg in Holstein: Müller-Wille 1991; Gabriel 1991; Ruchhöft 2008, 45 f.; Mecklenburg near Wismar: Donat 1984; 2000; Ruchhöft 2008, 37, 43 ff.; Drense in the Uckermark: Schmidt 1992.



Fig. 4. Mecklenburg near Wismar, trench through the rampart (background) and settlement layers and building structures from the eighth/ninth to the fourteenth century (after Donat 1984, pl. 2:a)

and rather leading to a ringfort on the island than to an open settlement<sup>6</sup>, probably marks the beginnings of this fortification type and in general the establishment of strongholds in the Northwest-Slavic area<sup>7</sup>. Very early dendrochronological data — 711 and 716 (exact dates) — were determined on two samples of wood from the outer bailey of Wildberg near Neuruppin<sup>8</sup>. Nevertheless, it cannot be decided whether these dates point at an open settlement or to the stronghold, probably the latter may be the case. Other dendrochronological dates are known from Friedrichsruhe in Westmecklenburg (late eighth century and

<sup>6</sup> See for the bridge: Schuldt 1964; for the question of stronghold or settlement: Dulinicz 2006, 246; Herrmann 2008, 147; Ruchhöft 2008, 41.

<sup>7</sup> The bridge (Schuldt 1964) delivered „round/after“-dates from 591–672 and a first „+/-10“ — date of 693, but crucial are the later dendrodates (round/after 721, 722, 724, 747) coming from the same building phase (see Herrmann/Heußner 1991, 265 f.; Donat 2001, 218; Henning 2002, 139; 2004, 133).

<sup>8</sup> On the feature: Grebe 1970, 150 ff.; 1976, 184 ff. fig. 12; to the dating: Dulinicz 2006, 41, 353.



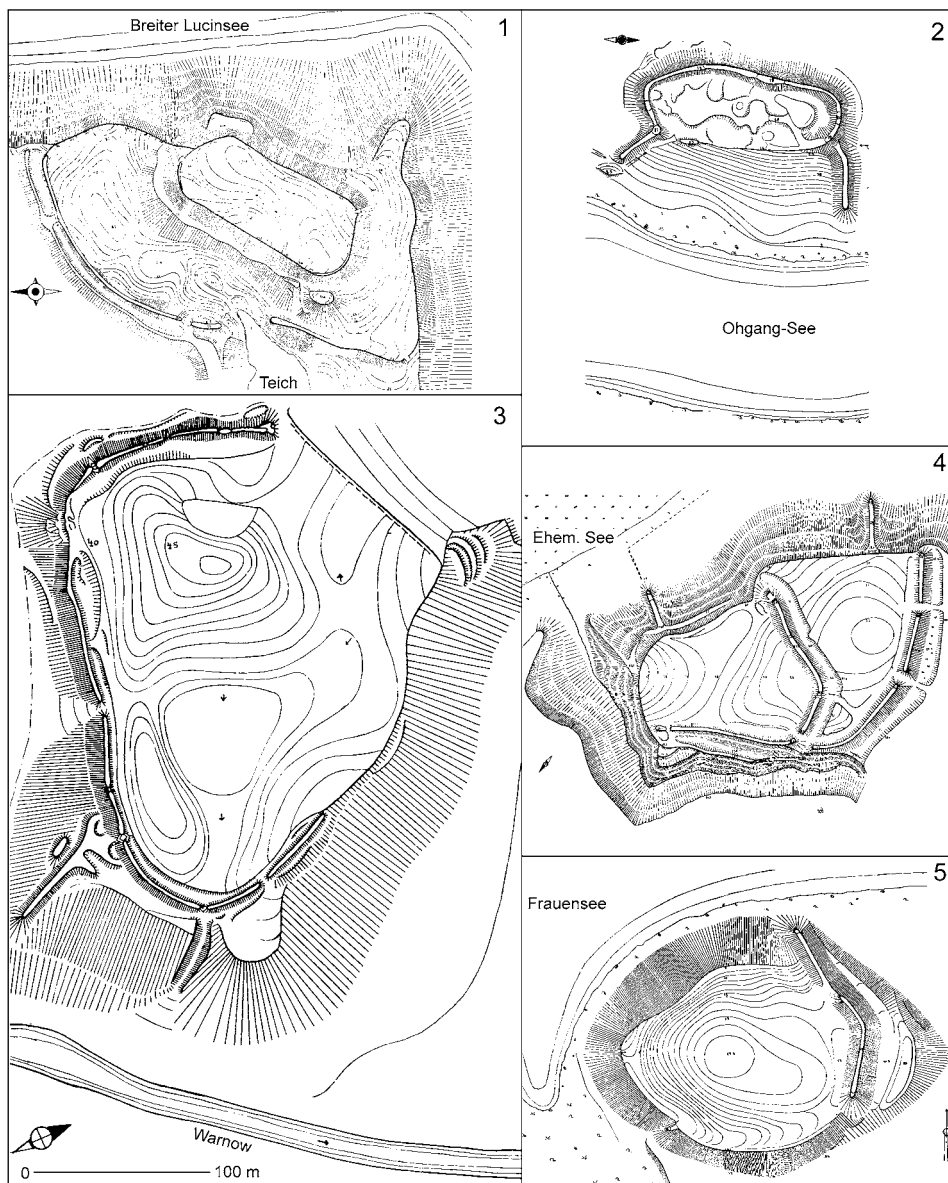


Fig. 6. Plans of Feldberg hill strongholds. 1 Feldberg; 2 Klein Luckow; 3 Groß Görnow; 4 Quadenschönfeld; 5 Weberin-Basthorst (modified after Bastian 1957, fig. 138–140, 142, 143)

around 800)<sup>9</sup>, Ilow (ca 840)<sup>10</sup>, from the early phase of Alt Lübeck (817–819)<sup>11</sup>, from Bosau, “Bischofswarder” (mainly first half of the ninth century)<sup>12</sup>, from Oldenburg in Holstein (ninth century; Gabriel, Kempke 1991, 146) as well as from Lenzersilge in Prignitz (approximately 820–860; Biermann *et al.* 2009, 39). With its relatively small size (80–90m), the latter ringfort already shows an advanced stage of the Feldberg type construction, but still the pottery represents exclusively the Feldberg and Sukow types.

The not too large stronghold of Glienke near Neubrandenburg (65 to 70 m in diameter) is dated by tree-rings from the 870ies to the first half of tenth century (Messal 2005; 2007), but there are at least two older rampart phases without any samples of wood; the stronghold delivered mainly Feldberg, but also Menkendorf ceramics. Probably it was built in the first half of ninth century. The stronghold of Löcknitz, also with some Feldberg sherds, but dated by dendrochronology to ca. 900 (Ruchhöft 2008, 33), must rather be affiliated to the small ringforts of the middle Slavic period. The same holds for the small-scale ringfort of Brenz near Ludwigslust (Bahlke 1958), where mainly Feldberg type sherds were found. Little ringforts with Feldberg ceramics are not surprising. Because the Feldberg type pottery was used until the decades around 900, it still appears at some of the small ringforts from the second half of the ninth century, even if in decreasing amounts.

The Feldberg strongholds are characterized by their large size of often several hectares; the smallest — like Kieve or Lenzersilge — are 80 to 90 m in external diameter, the largest — for instance Forst Rothemühl, Groß Görnow, Tutow and Dargun — up to 300 m (Fig. 6)<sup>13</sup>. It must be assumed that the larger strongholds are generally the older ones, and that the smaller ones are the younger exponents of this fortification type. Moreover, these ringforts have strong wood-earth-ramparts with chest and crossed logs constructions (normally in combination) (Fig. 7–10), one or more gates and sometimes stone packages at the rampart fronts; these packages (Fig. 11)<sup>14</sup> have been interpreted as a typical building manner of the *Welatabi*/Wiltians, the “Wiltian stone construction technique”<sup>15</sup>. But it must be emphasized that quite similar stone packages are known also from other areas and other

<sup>9</sup> Jöns/Messal 2007; to the older dendrochronological dates: Herrmann/Heußner 1991, 270.

<sup>10</sup> A first “round/after” — date is 734, but because of other dendrochronological dates in the same context the building was considerably later, ca 840; Henning 2002, 139; Dulnicz 2006, 247; Brather 2006, 49; Ruchhöft 2008, 47.

<sup>11</sup> To the stronghold: Neugebauer 1964/65, 181–206, 212 ff.; 1975; Kempke 1988, 9 ff.; Fehring 1992, 236 ff.; dendrochronological dates: Herrmann/Heußner 1991, 268; Dulnicz 2006, 247.

<sup>12</sup> Gebers 1986, 64–71, 95 ff.; Hinz 1996, 17–24; there are some “round/after” — dates from the eighth century, see Herrmann/Heußner 1991, 270 f.; Dulnicz 2006, 246; Ruchhöft 2008, 41.

<sup>13</sup> Kieve: Herrmann, Donat 1979, 58/26; Lenzersilge: Biermann *et al.* 2009, 39; Forst Rothemühl: Herrmann, Donat 1979, 51/18; Groß Görnow: Schuldt 1985b; Tutow: Herrmann, Donat 1979, 47/70; Dargun: Herrmann, Donat 1979, 46/11.

<sup>14</sup> In impressive form observed for instance in Liepen (Schuldt 1962), Groß Görnow (Schuldt 1985b, 316, fig. 7) and Feldberg itself (Schuchhardt 1926, 52 f. tab. VIII.b; Herrmann 1969b).

<sup>15</sup> Herrmann 1967, 207–213; 1968, 50 f.; 1985, 202 f.; 1989b, 327.

types of strongholds in the West-Slavic area, whereas not all ringforts in the Wiltian area show these constructional elements. So this was not a Wiltian speciality (Brather 1998).

Usually the strongholds are provided with deep and wide ditches. Many are located on hills (Fig. 6). Therefore this group of ringforts sometimes is called “Feldberg hill strongholds” or “Wiltian large hill strongholds” (Herrmann 1969b; 1985, 200). But a number of them were also erected in the lowlands (Fig. 12)<sup>16</sup>. As a rule, the fortifications fit very well the natural environment (Fig. 6)<sup>17</sup>. A minority of these strongholds consists of several parts, often a main stronghold and one or more outer baileys, built at once or in different phases (Fig. 6:1, 4; 12)<sup>18</sup>. The ramparts of some hill strongholds led into the adjoining valley to incorporate a part of the lowland or the shore of a lake into the fortification (Fig. 6:2–4). Water supply was there provided by wells, springs or cisterns<sup>19</sup>. In the strongholds built in the lowlands, wells delivered the water necessary for people, livestock and fire protection<sup>20</sup>. For their ramparts, several hillforts use older fortifications from prehistoric times, mainly from the early Iron Age Lusatian culture (Fig. 13)<sup>21</sup>. Only very few have been excavated in a large scale so that many questions concerning these impressive strongholds cannot be answered yet.

The definition and terminology of the Feldberg strongholds are — as already emphasized — diverging. The specification made by J. Herrmann as “Feldberg hill strongholds”<sup>22</sup> does not seem to be accurate because not seldomly they are found in the lowlands; S. Brather

<sup>16</sup> For instance the “Bacherswall” in the Lieps near Neubrandenburg (Hollnagel 1965; Schmidt 1984, 14), Fahrenhorst near Lübz (Herrmann, Donat 1973, 14/13), Langensee (Herrmann, Donat 1973, 17/49), “Alte Burg” Sukow (Schuldt 1964), Tutow (Herrmann 1968, 166, fig. 28d; Herrmann, Donat 1979, 47/70), Krien (Schoknecht 1972), Vorwerk (Herrmann, Donat 1979, 47/88), Neu Nieköhr/Walkendorf (Schuldt 1967, 14), Ravensburg near Neubrandenburg (Schoknecht 1971; 1974; Herrmann, Donat 1979, 50/139) and Ilow in Western Mecklenburg (Ruchhöft 2008, 41, 47); see also Schuldt 1956, 55.

<sup>17</sup> Herrmann 1985, 192, 202; Brather 1998, 117; Ruchhöft 2008, 36; Biermann 2010.

<sup>18</sup> For example Dargun (Herrmann, Donat 1979, 46/11), Forst Rothemühl (Herrmann, Donat 1979, 51/18), Quadenschönfeld (Herrmann, Donat 1979, 56/109), Wildberg near Altentreptow (Herrmann 1968, 166, fig. 28k; Herrmann, Donat 1979, 48/87), Grüttow (Schoknecht 1972, 193 ff.), Ravensburg near Neubrandenburg (Schoknecht 1971; 1974) and Zislow (Hackbarth 1961; Schoknecht 1991, 93); in general: Brather 1998, 117 f.

<sup>19</sup> For example Groß Görnow (Bastian 1957, 169 ff. fig. 142; Herrmann, Donat 1973, 15/8; Schuldt 1985b), Mellenthin (Herrmann 1968, 166 fig. 28h; Herrmann, Donat 1979, 44/86), Feldberg (Bastian 1957; Herrmann 1969b), Quadenschönfeld (Bastian 1957, 161 ff. fig. 139), Klein Luckow (Bastian 1957, 158 ff. fig. 138; Herrmann, Donat 1979, 57/22), Fahrenwalde (Herrmann, Donat 1979, 52/39 fig. 74) and Janow near Anklam (author’s visit).

<sup>20</sup> Known for example from Neu Nieköhr/Walkendorf (Schuldt 1967, 11 f. fig. 4), Lenzen-Neuehaus and Lenzersilge (Biermann *et al.* 2009, 39 f.).

<sup>21</sup> This seems to be the case in Dargun (Herrmann, Donat 1979, 46/11), Wolfshagen-Horst (Herrmann, Donat 1973, 12/26), Swobnica near Gryfino (Szafranski 1960), perhaps Schlemmin near Bützow (Herrmann, Donat 1973, 138) and Forst Jägerhof (Herrmann, Donat 1979, 43/35); Zislow was built at the place of an open Bronze Age settlement (Hackbarth 1961; Schoknecht 1991, 93).

<sup>22</sup> Herrmann 1968, 41, 153; 1985, 200 f.; he called even the stronghold of Vorwerk a “Wiltian hill stronghold” although this stronghold is positioned in the lowlands (Herrmann 1969a, 194 f.).





Fig. 8. Kavelsdorf near Bad Sülze, the stronghold from the south (photography by the author)

(1996; 1998) used the existence of Feldberg type pottery as a main criterion for his classification of these fortifications. Accordingly he spoke of “strongholds with Feldberg type ceramics”. However, because partly this pottery appears in very small numbers still at small ringforts of the Tornow type, this definition does not seem to be convincing. So it is not surprising that Brather summarised very different kinds of strongholds, with the result that no homogeneous Feldberg stronghold group exists. F. Ruchhöft (2008, 40 ff.) differentiates the here discussed forts into “early central strongholds”, “Feldberg strongholds”, “early nobility strongholds” and “large tribal or ducal strongholds”, but on the basis of uncertain assumptions and by transferring the political meaning of some places, recorded in the tenth, eleventh or twelfth centuries, to preceding times. In some cases this is plausible but can obstruct our view on the principal stronghold type.

Hence, we tend to a generalising definition. All strongholds which reach a certain size (at least *ca.* 90 m external diameter), whose shape was adapted to the natural topography and which produced considerable amounts of Feldberg type ceramics (according to the chronology of the particular stronghold together with Sukow or with Menkendorf type pottery) should be called Feldberg strongholds. There are fluent transitions to the middle-



Fig. 11. Feldberg, stone packet at the front of the rampart, excavation 1922 (after Schuchhardt 1926, pl. VIII:b)

Slavic small lowland ringforts, of course, but this reflects the historical conditions<sup>23</sup>. This definition may perhaps not accurately fit the situation on Rugia, because there Feldberg ceramics does not play a prominent role, and by several aspects the stronghold development on this island follows its own rules. Because of this there is the question whether it is possible to call strongholds like “Jaromarsburg” on Arkona cape (Fig. 14), “Schlossberg” Ralswiek and “Rugard” at Bergen in their early phases Feldberg type strongholds<sup>24</sup>. But the main problem with these and other Rugian strongholds is the unknown dating of their early phases (see at last Biermann 2006b, 19 f.).

There are different opinions about the function of these ringforts. They range from refuges<sup>25</sup>, people’s or tribal strongholds (“Volksburgen”/“Stammesburgen”) in the sense of

<sup>23</sup> A good example for this smooth transition is the stronghold of Scharstorf, which was used according to tree-ring dates from ca 840 to ca 900 and which produced large amounts of Sukow ceramics (in addition to less numbers of Feldberg, Menkendorf and other pottery types), but represents a classical small lowland ringfort of the middle Slavic period (see Meier 1990).

<sup>24</sup> Arkona: Herrmann, Donat 1979, 41/272; “Schlossberg” (also: „Schlottberg“) Ralswiek: Herrmann, Donat 1979, 41/292; Herrmann 1998, 147 ff.; “Rugard” at Bergen: Herrmann, Donat 1979, 41/9.

<sup>25</sup> Herrmann 1968, 169, for Sukow, but according to this author this place should have been an exception beneath the Feldberg strongholds; more general: Kempke 1999b, 119.

cooperatively built fortifications of social or ethnic groups<sup>26</sup>, garrisons and short-term used military bases<sup>27</sup>, erected perhaps as defence works in reaction of the Frankish expansion in the late eight century and independent of the tribal social hierarchy, to residences of a more or less complex social élite — chieftains, princely or even royal seats. Furthermore, the strongholds were sometimes connected to sacral functions. It is also unclear which economic role these places took over, and we do not know exactly the character of their relation to the contemporary sea trading places (*emporía*).

Sunken huts, settlement features like storage pits and cultural layers (Fig. 4, 15), often large amounts of finds like ceramics, small finds of everyday life context such as spindle whorls, whetstones, bone bodkins *etc.*, as well as animal bones show that the Feldberg type strongholds were intensively settled by large groups of people. As a rule, the building and settlement use was concentrated in the back area of the ramparts, while the inner courtyards were sparsely built or free of settlement at all<sup>28</sup>. In some cases there were rows of long-oval, sometimes ditch-like pits with fire places as relicts of buildings parallel to the inner fronts of the ramparts (Fig. 16, 17)<sup>29</sup>. According to J. Herrmann (1969b, 42 ff., 64), in Feldberg the whole stronghold was filled with such barracks-like sunken hut rows (Fig. 18).

There are no arguments supporting the assumption that the people used the strongholds only in times of war. The archaeological sources rather indicate a steady occupation of the fortifications. The hypothesis of refuges, in the sense of normally unsettled forts used only in times of emergency, must be generally ruled out for the Feldberg strongholds, as proven by their rich finds and features<sup>30</sup>. The strongholds in fact were important elements of the settlement landscape, as large, populous settlement sites<sup>31</sup>. Indeed, their huge dimensions and the large empty spaces indicate that the fortifications were also supposed to take up people from the surroundings in the case of danger (Herrmann 1968, 170). Moreover, they needed them in the case of an attack. Such large strongholds can successfully be defended only with many warriors. In this respect, apart from several functions they also served as refuges.

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<sup>26</sup> See for these terms Schuchhardt 1931, 1, 232; Herrmann 1969b, 64 f.; 1989b, 314; Brather 2001, 125; 2006, 40, 42, with discussion and further literature.

<sup>27</sup> Henning 2002, 144; see Brather 2006, 44, 49 ff., with further literature.

<sup>28</sup> Fine examples for this building coverage pattern are Sternberger Burg (Schuldt 1983), Groß Görnow (Schuldt 1985b) and Lenzen-Neuehaus (Biermann/Gossler 2009), in Polish Pomerania for instance Bady (Łosiński 1969, 74; 1982, 122).

<sup>29</sup> For instance in Sukow (Schuldt 1964, 237), Sternberger Burg (Schuldt 1983, 109, 113 fig. 11, 15), Groß Görnow (Schuldt 1985b, 318 ff. fig. 10, 11, 12), Zislow (Schoknecht 1991, 94 f.), Feldberg (Herrmann 1969b, 42 ff., 64), Lenzersilge (Biermann/Gossler 2009), Wildberg near Neuruppin (Grebe 1970; 1976), perhaps in Hohennauen (Bünnig/Grebe 1987, 82 ff.; Grebe 1991, 177 f.), Reitwein (Herrmann 1969b, 64), Oldenburg in Holstein (Kempke 1999a, 49) and Golańcz Pomorski (Dulnicz 2006, 315 f.).

<sup>30</sup> An exception is perhaps the „Schlossberg“ from Ralswiek because of the very few finds and the special connection with the Ralswiek *emporium* (see Herrmann 1998, 147 ff.; Biermann 2006b, 19).

<sup>31</sup> The estimation of J. Herrmann (1969b, 64; 1989b, 314) that in strongholds like Feldberg would have lived constantly from 600 to 1200 people, however, is not confirmed by the archaeological features and findings and seems, hence, clearly excessive.

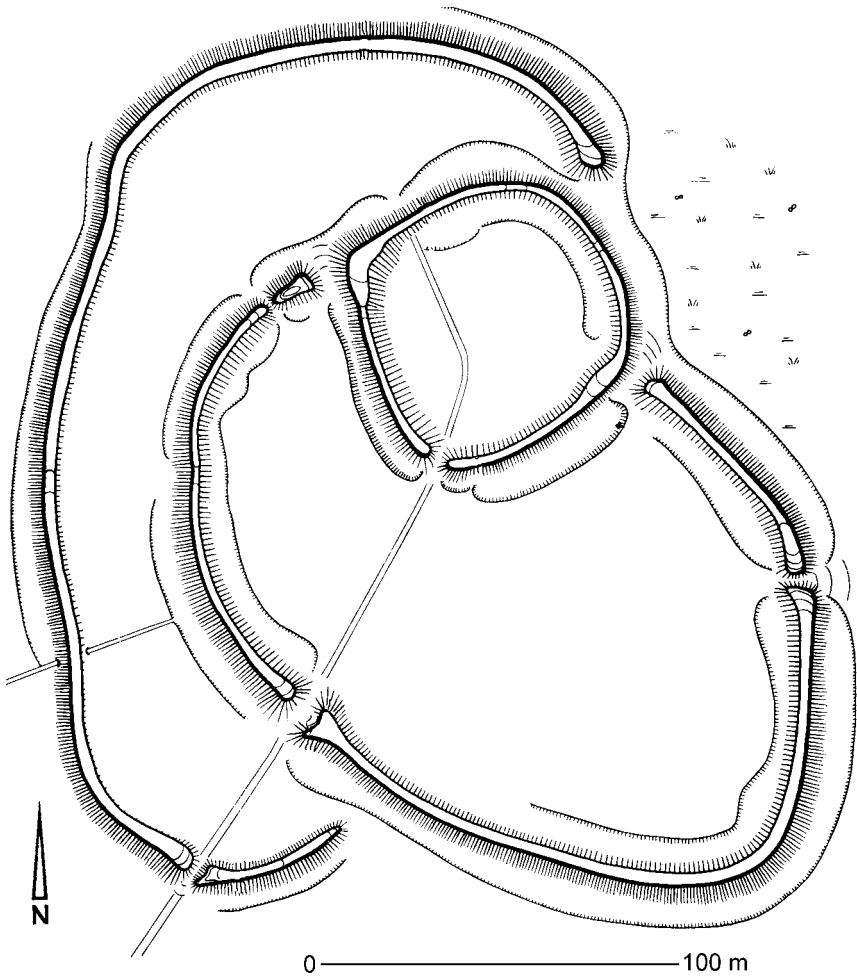


Fig 12. Ravensburg near Neubrandenburg, plan of the multipartite lowland stronghold (modified after Schoknecht 1974, 241; fig. 2)

In my opinion, the hypothesis that social groups built such strongholds on their own, without a chieftain's organization, is not convincing<sup>32</sup>. In the course of history most fortifications owe their establishment to manorial initiative, and just the immense size and strength of the strongholds of the Feldberg type make it unlikely that they are an exception. In my opinion, the enormous size of the strongholds rather indicates the strength of

<sup>32</sup> This hypothesis points out beneath others J. Herrmann, for instance on Feldberg: „Feldberg is not a stronghold from an élite, but a real people's stronghold, a tribal stronghold” (Herrmann 1969b, 64 f. [citate]; 1989b, 314 ff.); critically as well Brather 2001, 124.

their rulers, the tribal élites, and the complexity of the socio-political hierarchy of the Slavic groups in the hinterland of the Baltic in the eight and ninth centuries.

The archaeological finds indicate that the strongholds were the seats of élites. Spurs are often found (Fig. 19)<sup>33</sup>, weapons such as spear heads and axes<sup>34</sup> and other élitist property<sup>35</sup> which served as emblems of a privileged social group. We are hardly informed about their residences. In Oldenburg it was possible to excavate a large hall complex, interpreted as a residence area and the result of an *imitatio imperii* phenomenon (Fig. 3). The model for this outstanding post building structure is said to be Charlemagne's palatinate hall at Paderborn (Gabriel 1986; 1988). In the case of the multi-partite strongholds, the main fortifications may have served as the seats of the chieftains and their retinue, but there are no excavations to prove this hypothesis. A special log building of 6 x 12 m ground area with a large cellar pit was found in Feldberg (Fig. 18), located on a prominent place in hill top position in the fortress and fortified by an own flat ditch, but it was interpreted as a temple (Herrmann 1969b, 46 ff. fig. 16–20; 1989a, 235).

Particularly the written sources support the interpretation of the strongholds as the seats of tribal élites. We know the ringforts in the territories, where chronicles reveal an early political development with tribal organisation led by princes and subordinated chief-

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<sup>33</sup> Hook spurs in Drense (Schmidt 1992, 51) and Krien (Schoknecht 1983, 360 fig. 6), three spurs, an arrow head and the fragment of a stirrup from Sternberger Burg (Schuldt 1983, 137 ff. fig. 37, 39), two spurs from Klempenow (Ulrich 2004, 36; 2008, 174), a spur from Küsserow (Ulrich 2004, 36), several spurs (beneath them hook spurs) from the older phases (eighth and ninth century) from Oldenburg in Holstein (Gabriel 1988, 110 ff.; Gabriel, Kempke 1991, 145), a late Carolingian rivetted plate spur from the older phase in Mecklenburg (Donat 1984, 58 ff. fig. 29:1), a spur of unknown type from the "Wenzelsburg" near Neuzelle (Herrmann 1968, 50), three hook spurs and a rivetted plate spur from Friedland in Mecklenburg (Stange 1997, 417 ff.), a rivetted plate spur from Arkona (Stange 1997, 240), another spur probably from Feldberg (Herrmann 1969b, 56), in Polish Pomerania two hook spurs from Kędrzyno (one from the outer bailey settlement, one from the stronghold; Łosiński 1969, 75, fig. 10; Dulnicz 2006, 316 f.), more from Drawsko Pomorski (Olczak, Siuchniński 1966, 20 ff. fig. 13; Dulnicz 2006, 313) and Szczecin (Dulnicz 2006, 323), a hook and a rivetted plate spur from Ostrowiec Sławiński and the same from Radacz near Szczecinek (plus two spur fragments) (Dulnicz 2006, 320) and one spur from Recz near Choszczno (Dulnicz 2006, 321).

<sup>34</sup> For example a spear head from "Bacherswall" in the Lieps lake near Neubrandenburg (Hollnagel 1965, 259; Schmidt 1984, 72), two of them in Wildberg (Herrmann/Donat 1979, 48/87), axe heads in Ravensburg (Herrmann, Donat 1979, 50/139) and Friedland (Stange 1997, 421 f.); a sword from ninth or first half of tenth century in Friedrichsruhe (Dulnicz 2006, 358); arrow heads in Fressendorf (Herrmann, Donat 1973, 5/7), Basthorst (Herrmann, Donat 1973, 8/6; Schuldt 1985b, 325), Sukow (Schuldt 1964, 233 f. fig. 148), Klempenow (Ulrich 2004; 2008, 173 f. fig. 3), Radacz (Dulnicz 2006, 320) and "Bacherswall" (Hollnagel 1965, 259), a sword pommel of Klempenow (Ulrich 2008, 174), arrow heads from Kędrzyno, a battle axe and arrow heads from Bardy (Łosiński 1969, 75 ff. fig. 10, 14, 15).

<sup>35</sup> A strap end and a glass bead from Klempenow (Ulrich 2004, 37), an iron strap end from Fahrenwalde (Herrmann 1968, 41 f. Fig. 3e; Herrmann, Donat 1979, 52/39), several strap ends, imported horse and weapon equipment as well as ornaments and jewellery from Oldenburg (Gabriel 1988, 116 ff.), an silver-incrusted fitting from Friedland (Stange 1997, 421 f.), an Avarian strap end of the horse equipment from Klempenow (Ulrich 2008, 173 fig. 3), a bracelet and an earring from Lenzersilge (Biermann/Gossler 2009), glass and amber beads several combs, beads and bronze items from Santok (Zamelska-Monczak 2004, 13) etc.





Fig. 15. Neu-Nieköhr/Walkendorf near Teterow, trench through the settlement layers of eighth to thirteenth century behind the rampart of the stronghold (after Schuldt 1967, pl. 23)

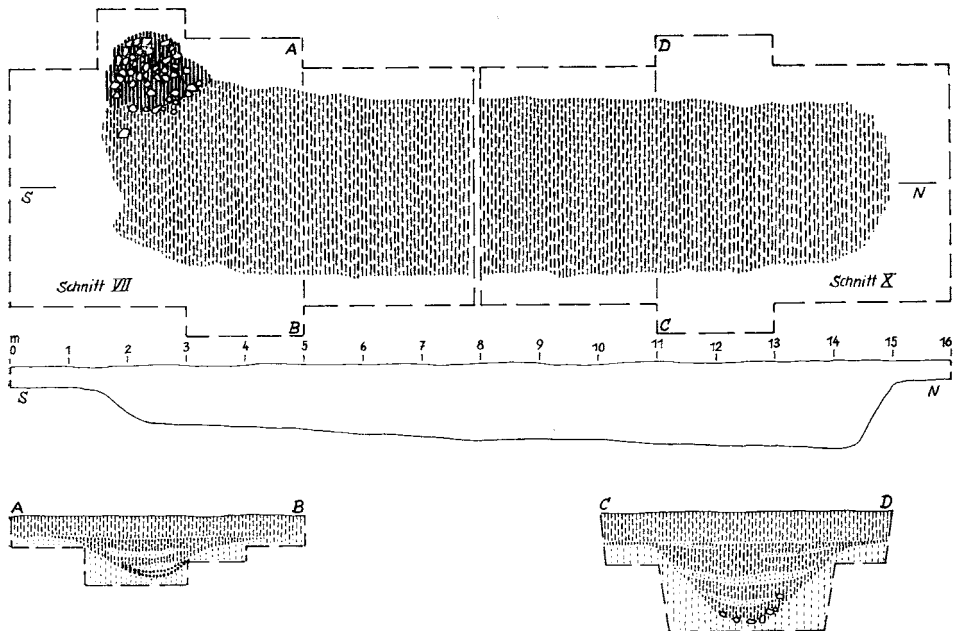


Fig. 16. Sternberger Burg, Western Mecklenburg, plan and profiles of a long-oval settlement ditch with fireplace behind the rampart of the Feldberg stronghold (after Schuldt 1983, 113; fig. 15)



tains, first of all with the Wilts and Abodrites. The most important here is the information on Charlemagne's campaign against the Wilts in 789, probably to conquer the Slavs allied with the Saxons. He led an army up to the river Peene where a Wiltian ruler called Dragowit, mentioned as *rex*, came to the front of his *civitas*. More *reguli*, whom Dragowit exceeded due to genteel descent, reputation and age, did the same<sup>36</sup>. Surely the *Civitas Dragowiti* was a stronghold of the Feldberg type<sup>37</sup>, and the minor chieftains were the rulers of other Feldberg type fortifications. Later we learn about Dragowit's successors Liub, Milegost and Cealadrag, acting on the top of a complex social hierarchy with further, inferior leaders (Herrmann 1985, 252–277). In the late eight and early ninth centuries we hear — like with the Wilts — of Abodrite rulers, too. From the ninth century they acted as a kind of overall rulers (“Samtherrschaft”) (Fritze 1960), covering several minor tribal rules. The relations between the Abodrite rulers and the Frankish Empire were close (Ernst 1976, 154–171; Zernack 1967, 216 f.). It may not be accidental that the Feldberg strongholds emerged in areas where we hear of complex tribal chiefdom systems since the late eight century. These rulers were the principals of the Feldberg strongholds.

The chiefs of the Wilts, Abodrites and neighbouring tribes might have established the strongholds to strengthen and exercise their power on their subjects, also as military instruments in the power struggles of the élites within the tribes. Of course they were also helpful in case of attacks by external enemies. This is illustrated by the Dragowit-episode of 789. Nevertheless, there is no reason to interpret these forts primarily as Slavic defensive works against the Frankish expansion, used only for a short time and widely independent of the tribal social hierarchies. In my opinion, this hypothesis by J. Henning (2002, 144) and S. Brather (2006, 44, 49 ff.) is not plausible. The long time of use of the strongholds, often with several renovations, the erection of dozens of strongholds over 150 years (from the middle of the eight to the late ninth century) in a large West-Slavic area, their intensive use for settlement purposes and the many elitist finds rather indicate that the Feldberg strongholds are primarily an archaeological expression of the political organisation of the tribal groups concerned.

The abandonment of most Feldberg strongholds in the decades around 900 can also be explained by changes of the social and political conditions of the Slavs in the hinterland of the Baltic Sea. At that time the big reigns of the Wilts, Abodrites and their neighbouring tribes experienced a time of crisis, the large tribal powers lost their strength. It came at times to a political fragmentation — instead of the advanced, large-scale effective ruling systems of the second half of the eight and ninth centuries there were more and more short-living reigns. Perhaps a process — using the ideas of M. Sahlins (1963) — leading

<sup>36</sup> Einhard, 789, p. 85, 87; Ernst 1976, 95–99, 140–151; Dralle 1981, 87–96; Ruchhöft 2008, 66, 77.

<sup>37</sup> Perhaps the stronghold of Vorwerk near Demmin; Herrmann 1969a; Kempke 1999a, 45; 1999b, 119; Ruchhöft 2008, 97 f.; M. Dulinić (2006, 245) proposed on the contrary that the *Civitas Dragowiti* could have been a sea-trading place, perhaps Menzlin-Görke at the river Peene near Anklam.

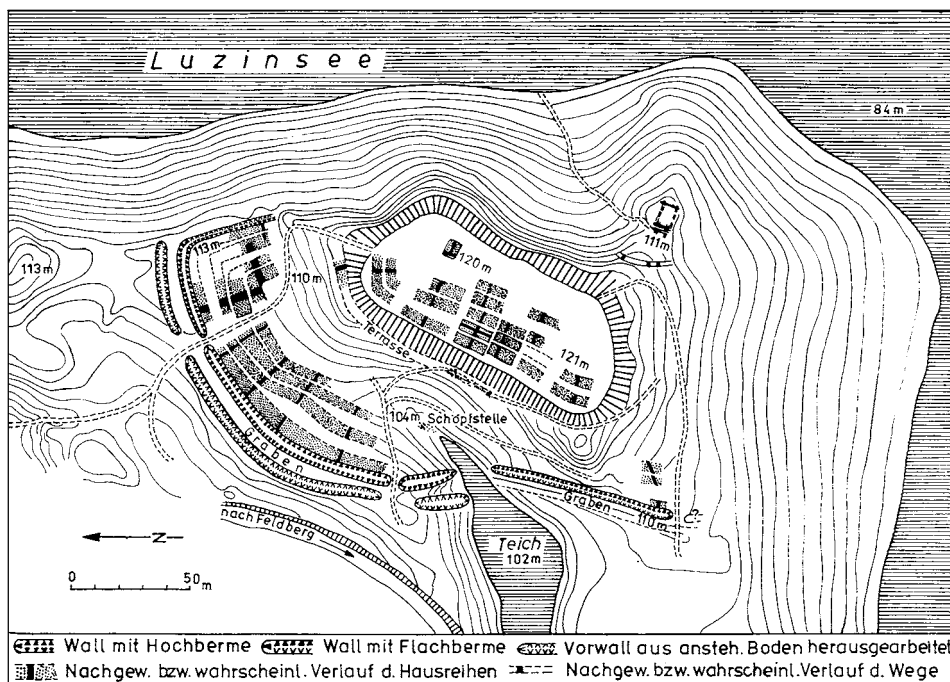


Fig. 18. Feldberg, plan of the stronghold with schematic reconstruction of fortification and building structures (after Herrmann 1985, 168; fig. 71)

from a “chief” to a “big man” system. These small rulers established the numerous small ringforts which developed in Mecklenburg, Pomerania and wide regions of the West-Slavic area. The Feldberg strongholds could not be sustained anymore under such political conditions, they were given up and deserted. Not coincidentally we also observe in the same period drastic changes of the Baltic Sea commercial network and a „collapse of the system of trading places“ (Callmer 1994, 66 ff.). Many of the sea trading places were given up or lost their economic significance. So, external factors are responsible neither for the origin nor for the decline of the Feldberg strongholds. They reflect rather social and political processes within the northern Slavic tribal areas (see Biermann 2006a; 2006b).

Repeatedly the Feldberg strongholds have been interpreted as economic centres, for example the Mecklenburg near Wismar as the Emporium Reric mentioned in the early ninth century<sup>38</sup> or – in Polish Pomerania – the Feldberg strongholds in the Parsęta river area, especially the stronghold of Bardy near Kołobrzeg as the central point of an emporium-like settlement agglomeration (Łosiński 1969; 1995, 71 ff.). Indeed some of the Feldberg strongholds, particularly their outer baileys, have produced relics of crafts and trade, for

<sup>38</sup> Herrmann 1968, 19; critically: Donat 1984, 107.

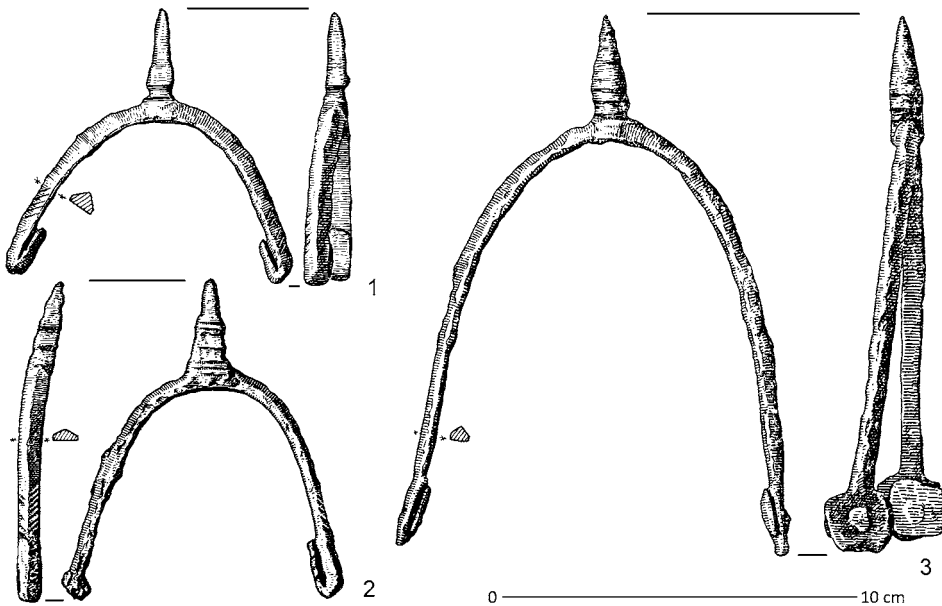


Fig. 19. Sternberger Burg, three spurs from the stronghold (after Schuldt 1983, 137; fig. 37)

example Friedrichsruhe in Western Mecklenburg with its production of glass objects, iron and non-ferrous metal work and antler carving<sup>39</sup>. Several Carolingian imports from the western settlement and from the stronghold of Alt Lübeck – Frisian shell-breeze ceramics (Muschelgruskeramik), a fragment of a Tating jug, Mayen Basalt mill stones and different ornaments – show „a remarkable, but not first-rate significance in the far trade system of the ninth century“ (Fehring 1992, 236). Also in Oldenburg in Holstein many Carolingian imports, often luxury items and trade goods, were found (Gabriel 1988). In Bosau-“Bischofswarder” findings in pits and cultural layers indicate comb-making, smithery and bronze work; W. Gebers assumes a “supra-local significance” of the stronghold “by supplying the surrounding settlements with craft products” (Gebers 1986, 64–71, 95 [cite]; Hinz 1996, 17–24). In Klempenow in Cispomerania a number of silver dirhams were found (Ulrich 2008, 171 f.), and as well as at several strongholds in Pomerania east of the Oder river, beneath them Radacz (Dulnicz 2006, 320 f.), Bardy and Kędrzyno; from there we also know Scandinavian and Frankish imports (Łosiński 1969, 60 f.; 1995, 71). In Kędrzyno, also a blacksmith’s workshop – with hundreds of slags – and relics of bronze casting were excavated. In Bardy a bronze-coated weight (Łosiński 1969, 65, 77 fig. 13) and a casting mould, crucibles and blast pipes indicating metallurgy from Radacz are known (Dulnicz

<sup>39</sup> Jöns/Messal 2007; see the contributions of S. Messal under [www.elbslawen.de](http://www.elbslawen.de).

2006, 320 f.). In Kretomino near Koszalin were found several fictile blast pipes from iron-production furnaces (Skrzypek 2006, 62 fig. 6). Almost all strongholds delivered traces of bone and antler treatment as well as iron work and smithery. Nevertheless, comb-making as an evidence of market-oriented high-standard crafts is absent as a rule. Bosau is an absolute exception. This documents the rather low economic relevance of the Feldberg strongholds. Sometimes they — or their settlement agglomerations — had central functions for their hinterlands, but did not have the supraregional significance of the simultaneously existing sea trading places (see Biermann 2008). For these places the rulers in the Feldberg strongholds probably played a role as suppliers, with food, natural produce (particularly small animal furs), various craft products and slaves, which were won in conflicts between hostile groups. From the emporia they were sold to Scandinavia and to the East. In particular the mentioned Dirham findings in some strongholds can point to slave-trade. Slave-chains were found, too, in the strongholds from Neu Nieköhr/Walkendorf and Santok, but within younger cultural layers (Henning 1992, 425).

These economic centres, the *Emporia*, of the Slavic period are as a rule open settlements without Feldberg strongholds. These are mostly some kilometres away. The sea trading places, as we may conclude from this geographical situation, were probably outside of the tribal organisation based on the strongholds. This privilege was probably granted to them because in the form of duties and general economic stimulations the rulers benefited from the existence of the *Emporia*<sup>40</sup>. The relation of the Feldberg ringforts to the simultaneously existing sea trading places became clear above all in Menzlin and the stronghold of Grütto, about six km south west of the emporium. The ten Dirham and numerous Frankish imports found in Grütto are probably the results of contributions and commercial relations between the chiefs in the strongholds and the inhabitants of the sea trading places<sup>41</sup>. Also in Bardy, where on the graveyard (on the fields of Świłubie) the funerals of Scandinavian women were recorded, we can recognize such relations. The graves may less indicate that in Bardy existed a kind of a stronghold-trading place with Scandinavian inhabitants (Łosiński 1995, 72 f.), but rather that Scandinavians from a nearby *emporium*<sup>42</sup> married people of the Slavic tribal élite in the stronghold. This would underline the interpretation of the Feldberg strongholds as residences of the rulers.

A sacral function may have come along with the political meaning of the Feldberg strongholds. Nevertheless, archaeological evidence for such a supposed role of the forts is weak. Feldberg itself was interpreted by C. Schuchhardt (1926, 25 ff.) as a temple stronghold, the famous Rethra, but this is impossible according to the chronology. The assumed temple in Feldberg (Herrmann 1969b) is arguable in its interpretation. The first phase of

<sup>40</sup> More detailed: Biermann 2006b, 17 f., with further literature.

<sup>41</sup> See for the stronghold Schoknecht 1972, 193 ff.; Herrmann, Donat 1979, 49/62; for the finds Jöns 2006, 100.

<sup>42</sup> Perhaps in Kołobrzeg-Budzistowo; see for this place, later an important castle-town, at last Leciejewicz, Rębkowski 2007.

Oldenburg in Holstein, traditionally dated to the seventh or eighth century, was allegedly a fortified pagan sanctuary (Gabriel 1991, 76 ff. fig. 11), but there is no reason to assume such a function, too. In Arkona it is not clear whether the early stronghold (from the eighth or ninth century) had already any religious significance (Kempke 1999b, 118).

If the strongholds were the seats of élites, they were not only instruments of power interests in the tribal areas and of defence against military aggression by neighbours or aggressors from abroad, but also symbols of power – a representative élitist architecture to impress the coevals. Where can we look for the models of the strongholds which developed in an economically and politically simple environment without previous traditions of fortification? In two areas we know forts which are in many respects similar to the Feldberg strongholds. In the Frankish Empire and in the south of Poland. Both areas could have exerted influence<sup>43</sup>, however, these are difficult to reconstruct in detail. But we can rule out the older hypothesis, above all represented by J. Herrmann, that the tradition of these strongholds was brought by a Slavic “Feldberg” immigrant group from the northern Carpathian mountain foothills<sup>44</sup> at the beginning of the seventh century. The chronology of the strongholds in Mecklenburg and Pomerania as well as that of Little Poland and Southern Silesia – where also strongholds were not erected before the late eighth century (see Poleski 2004a, 152; 2004b, 13 ff.; Jaworski 2005) – contradicts this concept. The Feldberg strongholds were rather the result of a socio-political development in the hinterland of the Baltic coast, referring to the economic development in the eighth century. The Slavic people immigrating into these areas in the second half of the seventh century were characterized by the Sukow culture. They did not build strongholds (Dulinicz 2006).

The Feldberg strongholds were in this respect elite residences and seats, instruments and symbols of power, but also places constantly settled by large groups of people and important elements of the settlement landscape in terms of size, economic and political functions. Besides, they offered protection to large numbers of people in case or threat of war and at the same time needed these people for efficient defence. In this context they are outstanding monuments of the early socio-political organisation of the Slavic tribes in the hinterland of the Baltic coast.

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<sup>43</sup> For the large strongholds in Little Poland and Silesia see Poleski 2004a; 2004b; Jaworski 2005; for Frankish and Saxon hillforts: von Uslar 1964; Brachmann 1993; Western influences point out S. Brather (1998, 122, 130; 2001, 124) and T. Kempke (1999a, 46).

<sup>44</sup> Herrmann 1968, 41 ff., 69 ff.; 1969b, 63; 1989a, 234 f.; 1989b; critically: Brather 2001, 123.

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**Fig. 5.** Drense near Prenzlau, panorama of the main stronghold from the West. (photography by the author)



Fig. 7. Beestland near Demmin, ditch and rampart of the Feldberg stronghold (photography by the author)



Fig. 9. Lenzen-Neuehaus in the Prignitz, rampart of the stronghold from the north (photography by the author)





Fig. 10. Lenzen-Neuehaus, trench through the rampart and the adjoining settlement layers in 2006 (photography by the author)



Fig. 13. Dargun, Lusatian culture and Feldberg stronghold, rampart (photography by the author)



Fig. 14. Jaromarsburg on Cape Arkona, Rugia, panorama of the rampart from the west (photography by the author)



Fig. 17. Lenzersilge in the Prignitz, profile through a long-oval settlement ditch with relics of a fireplace behind the rampart of the Feldberg stronghold (photography by the author)