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Settlement and landscape history of the Northern Franconian Jura during the Bronze and Iron Ages

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This paper describes the results of initial archaeological and geoarchaeological fieldwork in the Northern Franconian Jura between the cities of Bayreuth and Bamberg. Our research aims at the reconstruction of settlement patterns and strategies of land use during the Metal Ages (Bronze Age and Iron Age) in the catchment area of the river Weismain. The project is designed as a case study for research into the settlement and landscape history of a rural region of the Central German Uplands during the last two millennia before our era.

During the Bronze Age and Iron Age (about 2.100 BC to 30 BC), the Northern Franconian Jura must have been densely populated, as evidenced by numerous burial monuments, prominent hillforts like the Staffelberg, and ritual places on the Jurassic plateau. However, little is known about small rural settlements and hamlets which would have accounted for most of the settlement activity in the region. Thus, we lack the most important element for understanding the cultural history and development of the region as well as the consequences of human impact on the landscape. This impact must have induced changes in vegetation and subsequent erosion processes, leading to the formation of geoarchives like colluvial layers. During our initial fieldwork we identified such colluvial layers in depressions on the Jurassic plateau or at footslope positions. As radiocarbon datings of charcoal fragments showed, some of them date from the Metal Ages. The type is wood of these charcoal fragments is oak, which recently only occurs sporadically in mixed forests with beeches. The quantification of the shift of sediments from the plateau to the valleys will be the next important step of geoarchaeological research. Thus, investigations both on the plateau and in the river valleys will accompany archaeological survey. Apart from landscape reconstruction, they will also provide information on the state of preservation and the conditions for identifying archaeological features.

Our analysis of archaeological sources and geoarchives aims at developing a regional prehistoric land use model. GIS-based data analysis allows for a differentiation between open land with settlement locations and agricultural/pastoral areas on the one hand, and woodland areas of different kinds on the other hand. Regional settlement patterns and their development are in the focus of the archaeological survey, which provides data on the size and structure of settlement sites (farmsteads, hamlets, villages) in the respective periods, their spatial settings, as well as their correlation to burial monuments, hillforts, and ritual places. The results from our model region will finally be compared to settlement data from lowland regions and valleys in order to obtain a broader perspective on Bronze Age and Iron Age highland and lowland settlement strategies.