



## Changing the Face of Landscape: Reflections on Deserted Medieval Villages, the Founding of Cities and Early Industrialization in the German Low Mountain Ranges.

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In 2004 the Archaeological Board of Hesse started an interdisciplinary research project on the matter of changes and continuity of cultural landscapes in the Central German low mountain ranges. It is carried out in cooperation with the Commission on Archaeological Regional Research in Hesse, the Hessian State Archives in Darmstadt and a number of universities and/or research institutions.<sup>1</sup>

The survey is concentrated on the former county of Solms-Laubach, which is located in the German federal state of Hesse. The small city of Laubach, from which the county's name is derived from, lies in the eastern part of the district of Giessen. Nowadays this region can be characterized in general as a more or less rural structured landscape. While the western bounds of Laubach have to be described as an agrarian desert, in which only a few, unique elements of the historical cultural landscape can be found today, the eastern part of it is extensively covered with wood – the so called Laubach forest. In this area numerous single elements and grown structures of the historical cultural landscape are preserved until today. This allows us to gain a differentiated insight into the medieval or later cultural landscapes of the county of Solms-Laubach.

### **The valley of the Seenbach and the Laubach forest**

Laubach forest is localized at the eastern edge of the lower Vogelsberg at its transition to the higher Vogelsberg, a central Hessian mountain range of volcanic origin. Localized between the very fertile Giessen basin and the Hessian low mountain region it can be characterized as a transition area in many ways. Following current climate data an annual mean temperature of 8-9°C (46,4-48,2°F), an average precipitation of approximately 800-900 mm (31,5-35,5 in.), several brooks as well as numerous springs guaranteed a sufficient period of time for growing agricultural crops and no water shortage.

Loess soils of different ages and sparsely pseudogleyed para-brown earth are to be found all around in Laubach forest, although in some areas the upper soil layers contain loess in small quantities only.<sup>2</sup> Moreover the slopes of the Seenbach-valley show typical solifluction processes. Sediments that have been eroded from upper hillside areas can be found in mixed-up soil layers (colluvium) which predominantly occur at the foot of the slopes or in concave curved hillside sections. Additionally one can find a dovetailing of colluvial layers with fluvial deposits of the Seenbach.

The Seenbach rises next to the Petershainer farmstead which is lying on an altitude of approximately 525 m (574,5 yd.) above sea-level and runs through the narrow valley in western direction. It passes the Oberseen farmyard, the foot of the Winter Hill (450 m / 492,5 yd.) and the Baumkirchen Hill (420 m / 459,5 yd.), it flows through the Kreuzseen ground and leaves the valley next to the village Freienseen on an altitude of 280 m

<sup>1</sup> This public-private-partnership project is sponsored by the federal state of Hesse, the Fritz Thyssen foundation, Cologne, the district of Giessen, the city of Laubach, the family of counts of Solms-Laubach, the Baumkirchen or Blasius society of Laubach as well as regional companies.

The following academics and scientists have been / are engaged in the project: Prof. Dr. Kurt W. Alt (Anthropology, University of Mainz), Dr. Holger Berwinkel (Medieval History, University of Marburg – nowadays: Saxon State Archives, Dresden), Prof. Dr. Guus Borger (Geography, University of Amsterdam), Norbert Buthmann M.A. (Geophysics, PzP GbR Marburg), Marion Demmel (Anthropology, Senckenberg Museum, Frankfurt a. M.), Prof. Dr. Andreas Dix (Historical Geography, University of Bonn – nowadays: University of Bamberg), Prof. Dr. Claus Dobiak (Archaeology, University of Marburg / Commission on Archaeological Regional Research in Hesse), Carmen Friedrich (Anthropology, University of Mainz), Jochen Hermel M.A. (Historical Geography, University of Bonn), Johanna Kranzbühler M.A. (Anthropology, University of Mainz), Prof. Dr. Angela Kreuz (Archaeobotany, Archaeological Board of Hesse, Wiesbaden), Dr. Peter Kühn (Geology, University of Giessen – nowadays: University of Tübingen), Dr. Thomas Lux (Medieval History / Hessian State Archives, Darmstadt), PD Dr. Dirk Meier (Archäology, University of Giessen), Lars Möller (geology, University of Giessen), Flemming Nauck (Geology, University of Marburg), Dr. Gabriele Recker M.A. (History of Cartography, University of Bonn), Dr. Udo Recker M.A. (Medieval Archaeology, Archaeological Board of Hesse, Wiesbaden / Commission on Archaeological Regional Research in Hesse), Christoph Röder (Archaeology, Archaeological Board of Hesse, Wiesbaden), Prof. Dr. Walter Erhart Rumpf (Geodetics, University of applied science, Frankfurt a. M.), Dr. Claudia Tappert M.A. (Archaeology, University of Marburg – nowadays: Regional Museum of Lower Saxony, Hannover), Dr. Markus Tarasconi (Geophysics, Geotechnisches Büro Dr. Tarasconi, Fürth), Dr. Thorsten Westphal (Dendrochronology, University of Frankfurt a.M. – nowadays: Römisch Germanische Kommission, Frankfurt a. M.), Benno Zickgraf M.A. (Geophysics, PzP GbR Marburg). Further research will be done into numismatics, historical climatology, palaeobotany as well as palynology.

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<sup>2</sup> Dobiak et. al. 2005; Recker/Röder/Tappert 2006b.

above sea-level. Furthermore a number of small brooks like the Lippe in the north and the Horloff in the south are of significant importance for the colonization of Laubach forest.

The Carolingian Renaissance had a formative influence on the land use in the area investigated: The present-day dense woodland may give the impression of an unspoiled nature, but Laubach forest has been colonized at the latest in the 8<sup>th</sup> century and was intensively used within the following centuries. According to archaeological finds the first settlements within Laubach forest had been erected around the year 800 A.D. Laubach itself is first mentioned in 786 as part of the initial property of the abbey of Hersfeld. However regional studies show that the majority of settlements in Laubach forest were deserted by the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. This is why most of the aforementioned colluvial as well as fluvial layers date back in the historic periods between the 8<sup>th</sup> and the 16<sup>th</sup> century in which the quantity of lumbering grew constantly so that the wood was consequently repressed. Only a small village named Sorgenlos is a remarkable exception. It was founded by Thuringian charcoal-burners coming from the area of Suhl approximately in 1740.

Under the directive of Hersfeld Abbey the regional extension was consequently pressed forward, so that a closed territory had been developed by the High Middle Ages. From the 13<sup>th</sup>/14<sup>th</sup> century onwards the territorial affiliation of Laubach forest changed for several times. In early 1341 the area was sold to Mainz but the houses of Butzbach and Lich, both originating from the Falkenstein lineage, claimed to have a first refusal. Both houses succeeded with it and so Laubach and the surrounding area came into their common possession at end of 1341. At the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century the territory belonged to the counts of Solms. From 1432 onwards it was administered exclusively by the counts of Solms-Lich. In the course of the division of the house of Solms-Lich in 1548 the county of Solms-Laubach was established. So the counts of Solms-Laubach represented the sovereignty until the end of the so called Old Empire in 1806.

The early medieval regional extension in Laubach forest was accompanied by colonization, increasing deforestation and cultivation. Our knowledge of the course of events is based on a small quantity of findings of Carolingian pottery found next to deserted medieval villages and on the banks of the Seenbach. Additionally one can draw conclusions from similar proceedings in comparative areas. So the following scenario can be assumed:

The Carolingian settlement started in form of detached farmsteads scattered over the Laubach area. An increasing number of dispersed settlements led to local accumulations. While some of the farmsteads were deserted other settlements expanded constantly. In the course of time hamlets and even small villages were developed out of the cleared woodlands. Furthermore different manners of agricultural and economic land use shaped the landscape. Farmers structured the landscape in a way it would be of more use for their needs. They cleared more and more woodlands; they constructed field-terraces, curbed rivers and dug canals in order to irrigate their land or to benefit from water power. Finally the former woodland had been completely transformed into an open landscape. In the sequel the open landscape again interacted with several external influences. Changes within economy and cultivation led to several adaptations and renewed alterations in the following centuries.

The maximum density of settlements in Laubach forest was reached in the late 14<sup>th</sup> and early 15<sup>th</sup> century. From that period onwards the regional expansion suffered severe setbacks. More than 50 percent of all villages were abandoned. On the one hand one can grasp the deserted medieval villages in the area but on the other hand in most of the cases a conclusive explanation is lacking in. Laubach had been awarded with its freedom of the city in 1404. In the case of comparable settlements the strictly pursued heightening of the number of inhabitants resulted in an abandonment and devastation of small villages surrounding the newly founded city. The aspect of getting the freedom of a city<sup>3</sup> might be one essential reason in the case of Laubach and the former inhabitants of deserted villages located in the surroundings of the new town as well as in Laubach forest too. But one has to question this monocausal explanation because it does not reflect on political and social conditions in general, it does not take into account the potential consequences of the medieval climate change ("little ice-age"), it does not take care of adaptive difficulties and it disregards the influences of bad harvests or vermin and parasites as well as the effects of malnutrition or diseases.

It is worth mentioning that parts of the legal status of former inhabitants of deserted villages often remained in kind of special communities within the municipalities. Nevertheless as free citizens the former dependents acquired a much improved legal status. They established themselves in quarters with their own local councils. In the case of Laubach we know of the existence of at least three of such communities: Baumkirchen, Kreuzseen and Ruthartshausen. Although their members lived in Laubach, they kept on cultivating the fields lying within the boundaries of their deserted villages.

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<sup>3</sup> "Stadtluft macht frei" – principle whereby a serf became a freeman if he stayed in a city for a year and a day

While we cannot find traces of the Kreuzseen and Ruthartshausen communities anymore, the Baumkirchen community is represented by the so-called "Baumkircher oder Blasiusgesellschaft zu Laubach e.V." until today.<sup>4</sup>

### **Baumkirchen**

The deserted village Baumkirchen is located east of Laubach-Freienseen. In the literal sense Baumkirchen means "church in the woods". Until the 14<sup>th</sup> century Baumkirchen had been known as Baumseen, which can be translated as "brook in the woods". As set out later the change of the place name may be of importance in view of dating the village-church.

Although the village is of Carolingian origin the oldest known written source referring to Baumkirchen dates back into the 14<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>5</sup> In this title-deed dated June 24<sup>th</sup> 1322 a donation that had been made to the abbey of Arnsburg was concluded. Baumkirchen is mentioned as "Baymminsehinde". There is no further description of the village to be found in the legal document, but reference is made to a mill which was located in the centre of Baumkirchen ("molendino in medio villae posito") at that time. This mill may correspond in one way or another with the so-called Höresmühle, which still exists today. The Höresmühle is located on the northern bank of the Seenbach and has been used as a mill until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Further documents allow a closer look at the inhabitants of Baumkirchen and aspects of their everyday life. We get to know a number of families, their properties, earnings and transactions as well as several field-names. Unfortunately it is not possible to reconstruct the whole medieval parish land of Baumkirchen and some of its plots.

As far as we know Baumkirchen was left by its inhabitants in the first two decades of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Most of the farmers went to Laubach and formed the above mentioned Baumkirchen community. According to records of the 16<sup>th</sup> century as well as land registers of 1790, 1857 and 1958/59 the community's properties and privileges were left to the descendants of the new citizens all the time until the midst of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. With the reparcelling of parts of the agricultural land of Laubach at the end of the 1950s the former bounds of the deserted medieval village of Baumkirchen were finally deleted. In order to find a legal way to preserve these traditional structures the "Baumkircher oder Blasiusgesellschaft zu Laubach e.V." obtained possession of this property.

The contemporary Höresmühle is based on a baroque construction. Remnants of the medieval mill mentioned in the source of the 14<sup>th</sup> century could not be found. It is possible that the medieval remains were destroyed at the time the baroque mill had been built. Besides the Höresmühle another three mills are located on the banks of the Seenbach. Weirs, mill races as well as mill-ponds are well preserved. These relics of the technical use of water are part of the remarkable culture-landscape of the Seenbach valley.

The remains of the former church and the accompanying cemetery are located north of the Höresmühle. In 2002 the church and the graveyard were prospected by means of geoelectrical measuring.<sup>6</sup> The readings are easily to interpret. The churchyard was separated from the non-ecclesiastical buildings of the village by a rhombic wall. Within the centre of the burial ground a hall church with an affiliated apse could be made out. Furthermore some anomalies point to the remains of additional constructions inside of the churchyard.

Excavations carried out in the years 2004-06 mainly confirmed the readings. The builder of the church had used basalt quarrystones of local origin, which had been plastered at times. Altogether nave and apse had a length of about 18 m (19,7 yd.), whereas the width of the nave was approximately 9 m (9,85 yd.). On the basis of the large quantity of construction-materials found during the excavations it is suspected that the church did not serve as a quarry after its conveyance. However, this is not astonishing since the basalt used was of local origin. It cropped out at several places within Laubach forest. In contrast the slate used as roofing must have been very expensive because of the fact that it was not available locally. The low quantity of roof-slate found during the excavations may indicate that it had been removed from the churchyard and used a second time. Some accurately chased ledges and broken peaces of a painted church window show proof of the high quality fittings of the church. At the time the inhabitants left Baumkirchen the church was not demolished. Regular services were held in the church for a number of centuries, although it became dilapidated at least in the 16<sup>th</sup>/17<sup>th</sup> century. This tradition stopped in the 18<sup>th</sup>/19<sup>th</sup> century but was revived in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nowadays a mess is said on February 3<sup>rd</sup> of each year – the commemoration day of saint Blasius.

The wall of the graveyard is preserved up to an height of 80 cm (31,5 in.). It surrounds a densely occupied necropolis with at least nine burial layers and the remains of three non-ecclesiastical buildings. One of the

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<sup>4</sup> Berwinkel 2006; Blechschmidt/Buttmann/Zickgraf 2003; Dietz 1996; Dobiak et. al. 2005; Matthaei 1879; Recker/Röder/Tappert 2006b; Schmeckenbecher 1907; Schulze/Uhlig 1982; Stotz 1996; Volk 1940; Wagner 1854/65.

<sup>5</sup> Battenberg 1981/86, Battenberg 1997, Berwinkel 2006, Demandt 1980, Dietz 1985, Dobiak et. al. 2005, Recker/Röder/Tappert 2006b, Stotz 1992, Volk 1940, Wagner 1854/65.

<sup>6</sup> Blechschmidt/Buttmann/Zickgraf 2003, Recker/Röder/Tappert 2006b, Recker/Röder 2007b.

non-ecclesiastical buildings can be described as a smithy, a second one was used as a storage building or a stable. Nearly 50 percent of the cemetery could be excavated. The anthropological examinations of the skeletons are carried out at the Institute of Anthropology at the University of Mainz.<sup>7</sup> According to <sup>14</sup>C / AMS tests<sup>8</sup> of human long-bones originating from the foundation of the church as well as a second sample from a burial that had been disturbed by the ditch of the southern foundation the church had been built in the middle of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. This is about two hundred years earlier than the change of the place name may have suggested it.

An area of more than 8 ha (19,8 acres) north and south of the Seenbach was prospected by means of geoelectrical and geomagnetic measuring.<sup>9</sup> The combination of both measurement technologies as well as an archaeological survey helped to localize at least eight medieval farmsteads. Three of them – all located on the southern bank of the Seenbach – were excavated within the last three years.

Each of the farmsteads was protected by a ditch covered with stones. Those ditches fenced off the farmsteads and protected them from the intermittently emergence of surface-water. The farmsteads had a timber-framed main building as well as adjacent buildings that were used in many different ways. The surroundings of the main buildings had been paved with shingles. Without any exception these buildings could be heated. The kitchen of one of the main buildings was heated by an open fire as well as a tiled stove. In the backyards of the farmsteads several crafts were carried on. According to the pottery found within a smithy and a hearth both workshops can be dated into the late 11<sup>th</sup> / early 12<sup>th</sup> century.

In the first quarter of the 15<sup>th</sup> century most of the farmsteads burned down. According to the findings of the archaeological excavations this was not the result of a fire catastrophe. There are convincing indications that most of the houses and workshops had been cleared out before they were intentionally burned down. It is noteworthy that the inhabitants of Baumkirchen destroyed their houses before they left the village in order to settle down in Laubach.

### **(Early-)Modern economic history of the Laubach forest**

With regard to Laubach forest the decline of Baumkirchen is only one single component of an intensive process at the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The bounds of deserted medieval villages were more and more cultivated extensively. Field-terraces became overgrown by trees again and arable land was transformed into pasture land. Only the mills remained as places of constancy. Along the banks of the Horloff, Lippe, Seenbach and Wetter several mills produced flour and oil.

As a severe consequence of the constantly growing late medieval and early modern energy requirements a new and drastic transformation of the landscape can be observed in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. As a result of the manufacture of glass, the production of charcoal and the smelting of ore the stock of timber shrank dramatically in Laubach forest.

The Halgarten glasswork is the oldest known glass production site in Laubach forest up to now. It was established in 1607 and fostered trade relations with middlemen in the Rhineland and the Netherlands. Another four modern glassworks could be localized in the area.

Relics of medieval and later charcoal burning are spread over the whole area of Laubach forest. They are historic witnesses of the increasing demand of energy. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century the counts of Solms founded the predecessor of the later Friedrichshütte, an iron and steel works which had the first blast furnace in the region. The Friedrichshütte can be regarded as the nucleus of Buderus and Römheld, two famous companies from the early days of the heavy industry in Germany. An 18<sup>th</sup> century contract between Buderus and the Baumkirchen community allows us to gain an insight look into the industrialisation of the area. The deserted village Sorgenlos, which means “carefree” or “light-hearted”, marks the climax of charcoal burning in the area. It had been founded by Thuringian charcoal-burners coming from the area of Suhl in 1740. The village existed only for a few decades.

Today the former county of Somls-Laubach is dominated by rural landscape again. Nevertheless this area served as an economic basis for the heavy industry in modern times. The research project on the contrary developments and their varied effects on the cultural landscape in the Laubach area is not yet completed. However it is already recognizable that the area on the one hand follows national and even Pan-European developments, on the other hand local peculiarities need a more varied contemplation.

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<sup>7</sup> The examinations are carried out by Johanna Kranzbühler and Carmen Friedrich, Institute of Anthropology, University of Mainz.

<sup>8</sup> Tpq 1160, Radiocarbon Accelerator Unit, Oxford University (OxA-16545, OxA-16586).

<sup>9</sup> Dobiak et. al. 2005, Recker/Röder/Tappert 2006b.

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