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After the Ice Age

Settlements, subsistence and social development
in the Mesolithic of Central Europe

Nach der Eiszeit

Siedlungen, Subsistenz und soziale Entwicklung
im Mesolithikum Mitteleuropas

Après la période glaciaire

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Central Switzerland in the Central European Mesolithic

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1. Introduction

Switzerland consists of three main geographic areas, the Alps, the Swiss Plateau and the Jurassic Range. In the literature for the period concerned these areas are either connected with larger central European cultural groups or only partly included in the studies (Kozłowski 1975; Rozoy 1978; Thévenin 1995).

Due to research traditions, the Jura and western Switzerland have a large number of excavated and partly published Mesolithic assemblages (Bandi 1963; Crotti 1995; Crotti/Pignat 1983; 1986; Egloff 1965; 1967; Hofmann-Wyss 1978; Jagher 1989; Nielsen 1986; 1991; Pignat/Winiger 1998; Pousaz et al. 1991), while the situation for central and eastern Switzerland and the Alps is less satisfying.

Within the framework of a recently finished project, the Preneolithic settlement of central Switzerland has been analysed (Nielsen 1992; in prep.).

The area of research, the cantons of Lucerne and Zug, comprises approximately 1600 km² and is situated on the Plateau between the northern fringe of the Alps and the Jurassic Range. The highest point is 1407 m, the lowest 434 m a. s. l. Typical for the landscape are sandstone and moraine hills, numerous river valleys, lakes and mires.

66 sites have so far delivered Early Mesolithic, 42 sites Late Mesolithic artefacts. Of all these known sites only two Early and one Late Mesolithic site have so far been excavated. Numerous test excavations undertaken during the last 10 years yielded – due to the intense farming – no well-preserved cultural layers.

The well-known bog of Wauwilermoos has so far yielded about half of the approximately 200 Preneolithic sites known in central Switzerland (Nielsen 1996; 2004).

The sites are situated on moraine hills and on the shores of the former lakes. 38 sites have yielded artefacts from the Early Mesolithic (Fig. 1), 25 from the Late Mesolithic (Fig. 2), the rest are Palaeolithic.

This concentration of sites is mainly due to the intense work of local amateur archaeologists and of professional archaeologists, and does not necessarily reflect

the true settlement pattern of the Preneolithic inhabitants of central Switzerland. In the Early Postglacial period the area, which comprises bigger and smaller lakes with numerous inlets and islands, rivers, creeks and sandstone hills, must have been extremely rich in resources, and thus very attractive to the Prehistoric hunter-gatherers. There are no local flint sources and the flint used in the Mesolithic of the area is according to the analysis of Jehanne Affolter, mainly brought from outcrops located 20 to 50 km away.

In the last decade numerous new sites have been found outside the bog of Wauwilermoos, due to the work of one single amateur archaeologist. All areas of central Switzerland seem to have been settled by the Mesolithic population.

2. Early Mesolithic

Older Early Mesolithic

Typical of the older Early Mesolithic of central Switzerland is a very high percentage of oblique retouched points. In some assemblages they are even the only microlithic type represented. Further microliths are triangles, points with and without a retouched base, and a few narrow trapezes and crescents. Scrapers are rather well represented, whereas burins apparently were rare in this period. This is in contrast to the previous Late Palaeolithic period, where burins are dominant in all assemblages of the central and eastern Swiss plain.

Younger Early Mesolithic

Assemblages comprising microliths of the younger part of the Early Mesolithic, such as extremely scalene triangles and Tardenoisian points, are remarkably scarce in central Switzerland.

The Early Mesolithic of Switzerland is considered (Kozłowski 1975) as belonging to the huge Beuron-Concy-culture which comprises the area between the Elbe, the Danube, the Swiss Alps and western France.

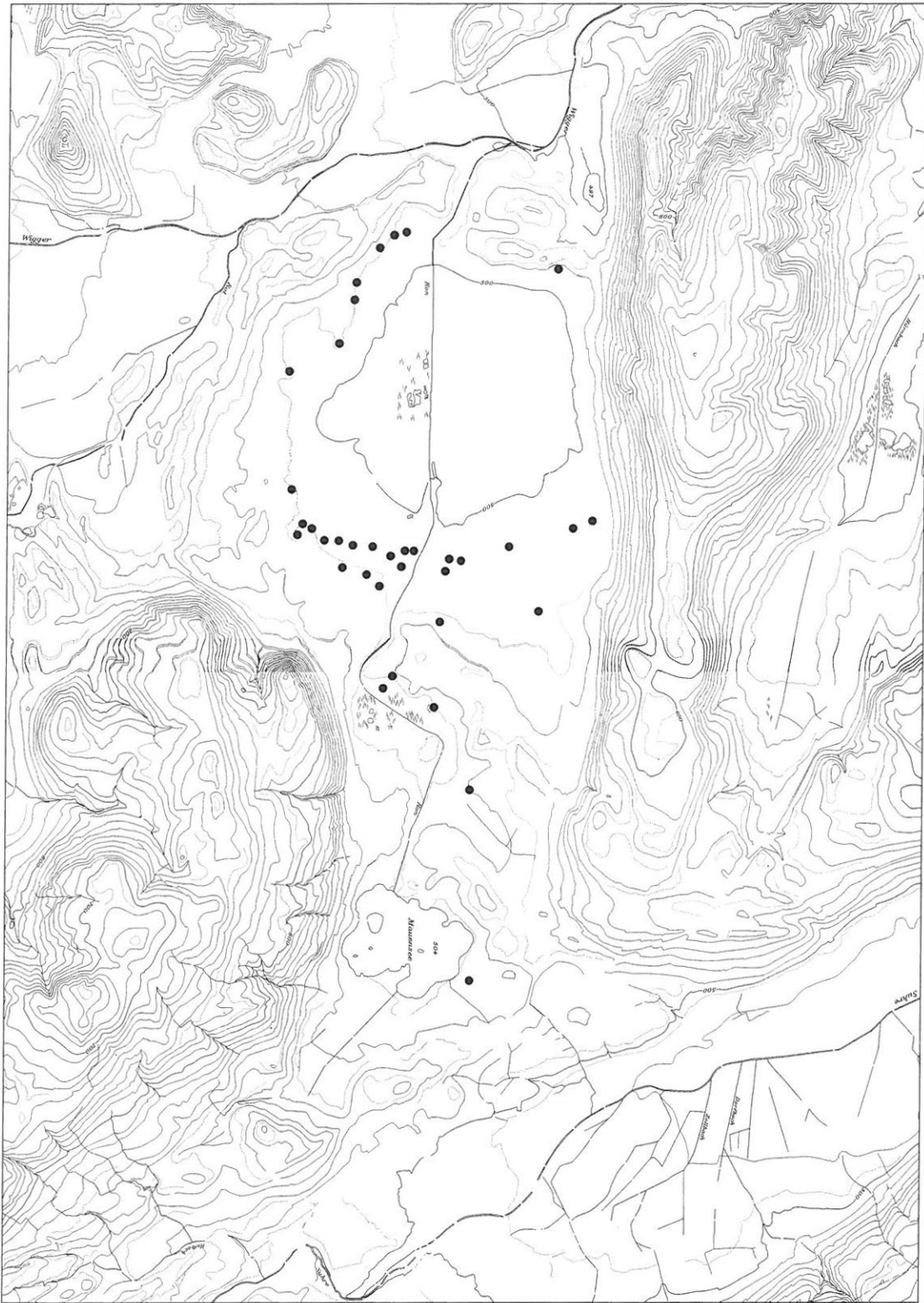


Figure 1: Distribution of Early Mesolithic sites at Wauwilermoos.

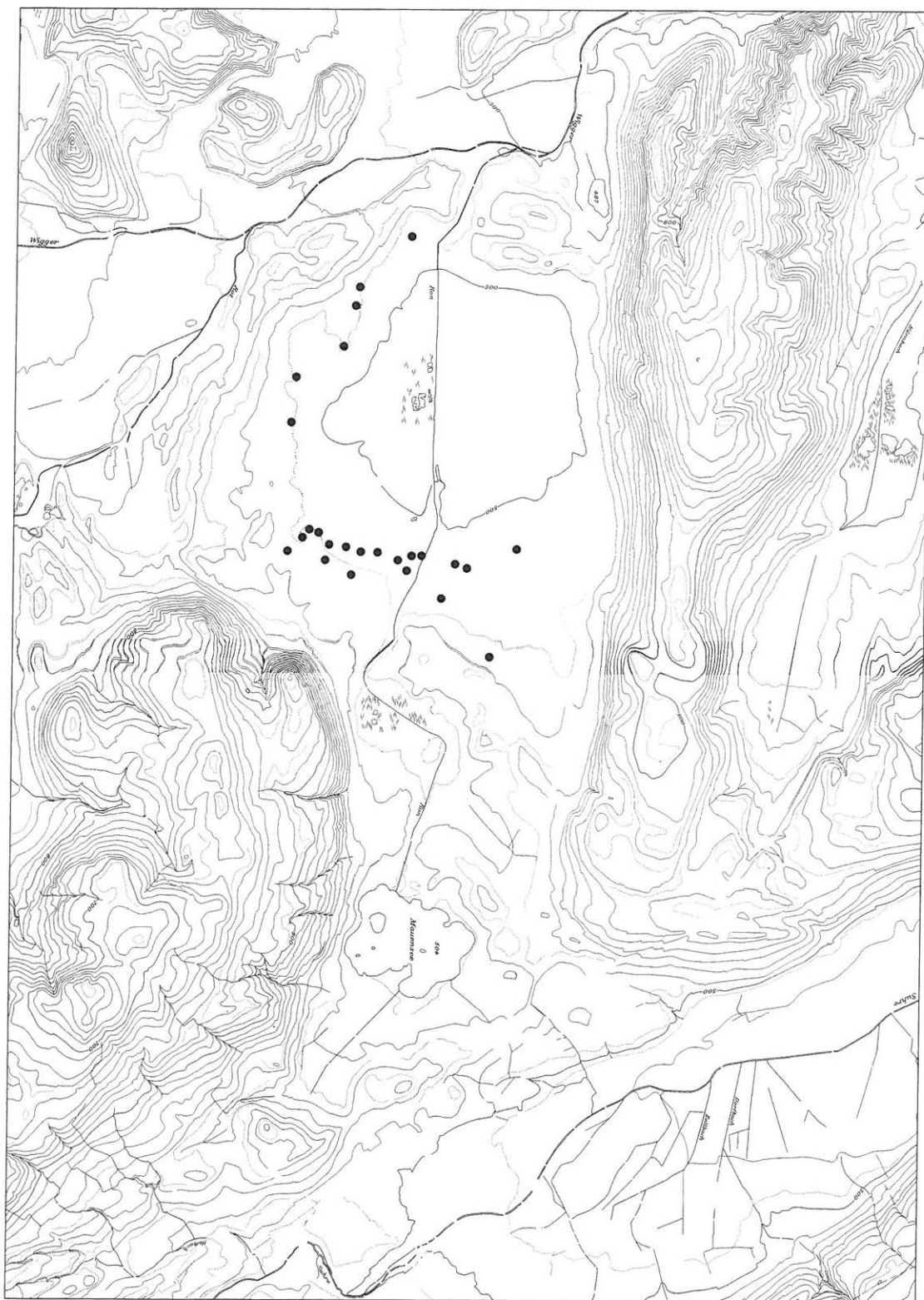


Figure 2: Distribution of Late Mesolithic sites at Wauwilermoos.

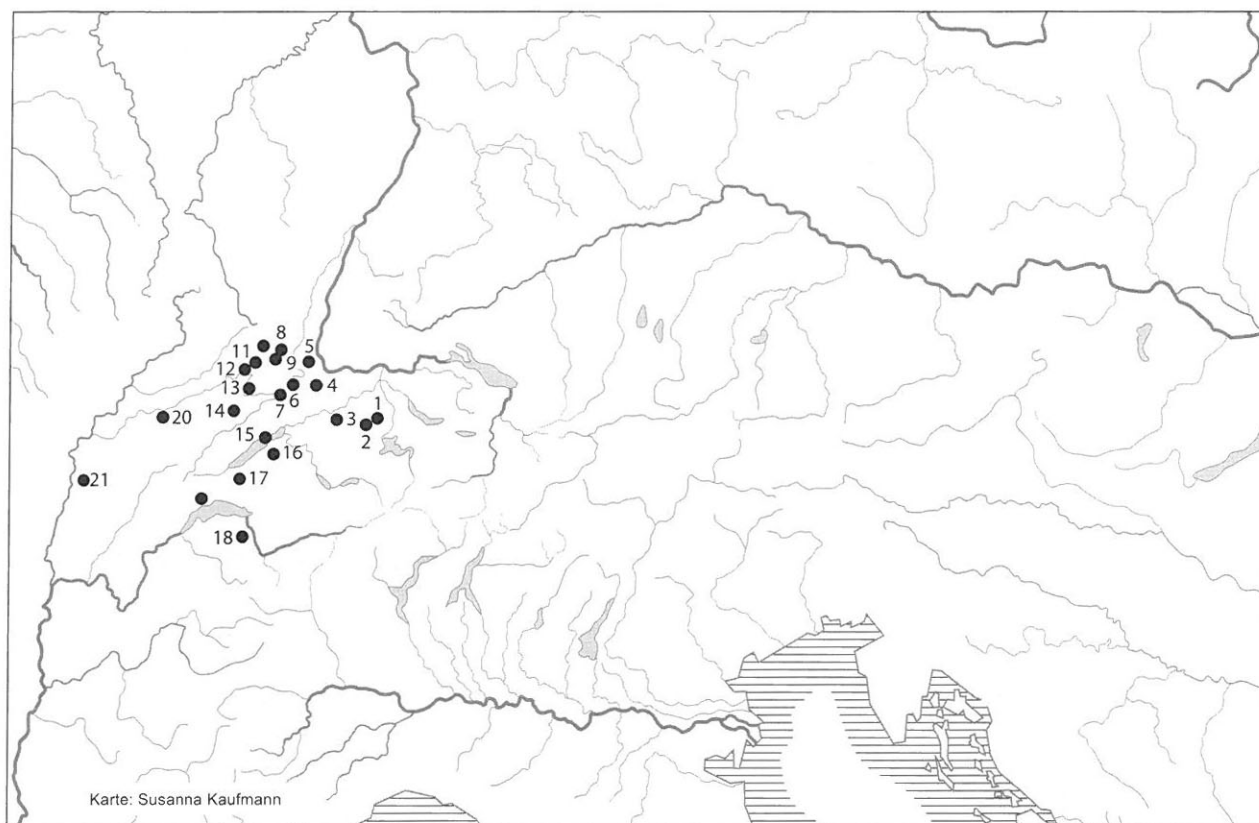


Figure 3: Distribution of Tardenoisian points in Central Europe.

Others (Thévenin 1995) consider the Early Mesolithic of western Switzerland as belonging to a smaller group comprising the French and Swiss Jura, the western Plateau and a part of the northern Alps. Central and eastern Switzerland is not part of this study, due to the lack of published assemblages.

The analysis of the Early Mesolithic assemblages of central Switzerland shows cultural influences from different neighbouring areas. The question therefore arises if the area can be attributed to one of the large cultural groups, if it constitutes a group of its own or if the large groups with well-defined content and borders actually exist or not.

To study this question, the distribution of a number of microlith types in southern central Europe which partly also have been found in and around central Switzerland was analysed. Only neighbouring areas were included in the study.

1. Oblique retouched points are very frequent in all assemblages of the older Early Mesolithic of central Switzerland. Sites with high percentages of this type of microlithic point are found as far as to the eastern shore of Lake Neuchâtel, in the French Jura and in southwestern Germany, but they rarely are as frequent as in central Switzerland.

Oblique retouched points with a retouched basis are mainly found in southern Germany, in the older as

well as in the younger Early Mesolithic. A few finds are known from central Switzerland, but in the western part of central Europe they seem to be absent.

2. Elongated narrow trapezes are typical for southwestern Germany and are, with the exception of the site of Gampelen, Jänet 3 on the eastern shore of Lake Neuchâtel (Nielsen 1991), rarely found on the Swiss Plateau and Jura. In central Switzerland only one such find is known.

3. Narrow Sauveterre points have their main distribution in southern France and along the Rhone into western Switzerland. These points are hardly seen in other parts of Switzerland or in southwestern Germany. The occurrence in Austria and Bavaria can probably be explained by the influence from the southern Alps (Schäfer 1998).

4. Tardenoisian points clearly have a western distribution in central Europe and are found in the Jurassic Area and (rarely) in central Switzerland as well (Fig. 3). There are no examples from southern Germany, and the situation in eastern Switzerland is not yet known.

5. Bipoints are found in the western part of central Europe, thus in western Switzerland and the Jurassic area. There are no finds in central Switzerland or in southwestern Germany.

6. Broad triangular points with a concave basis are frequent in the younger Early Mesolithic of southwestern

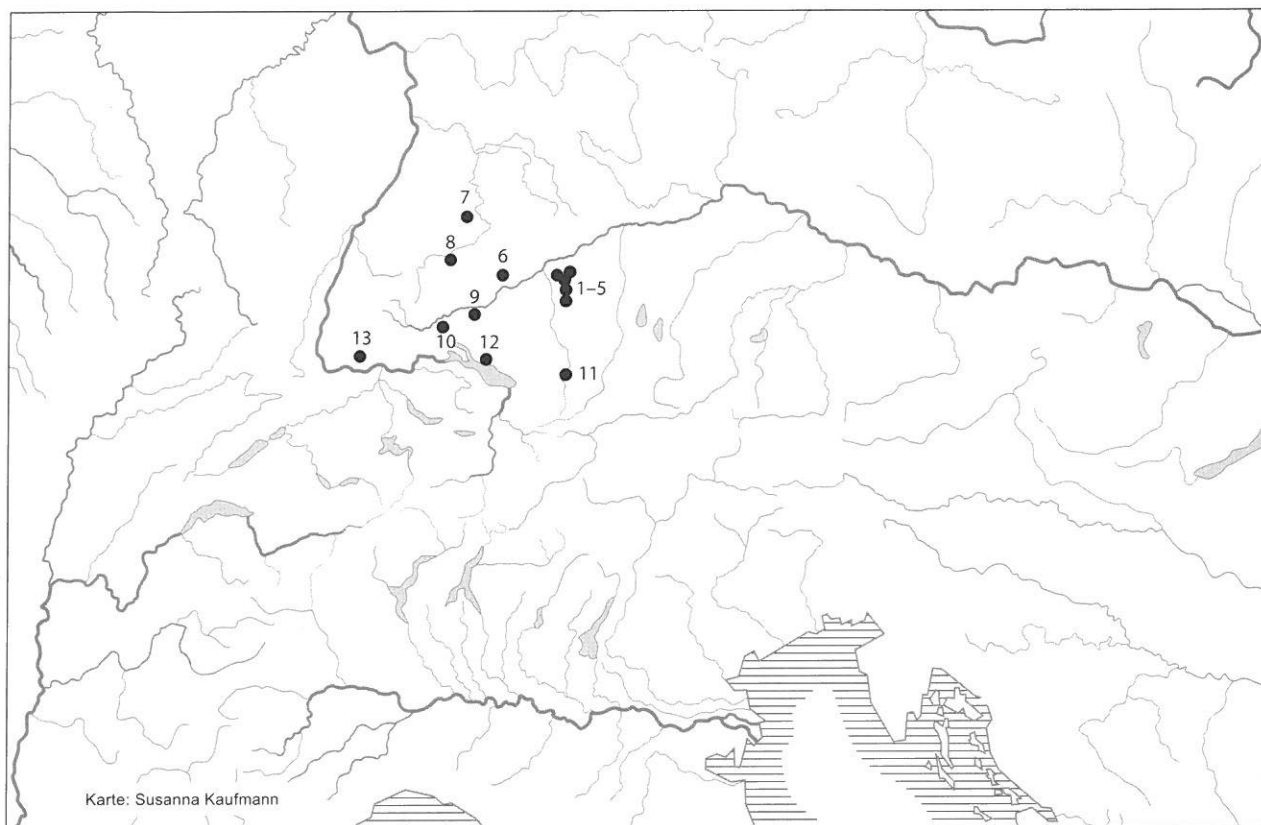


Figure 4: Distribution of broad points in Central Europe.

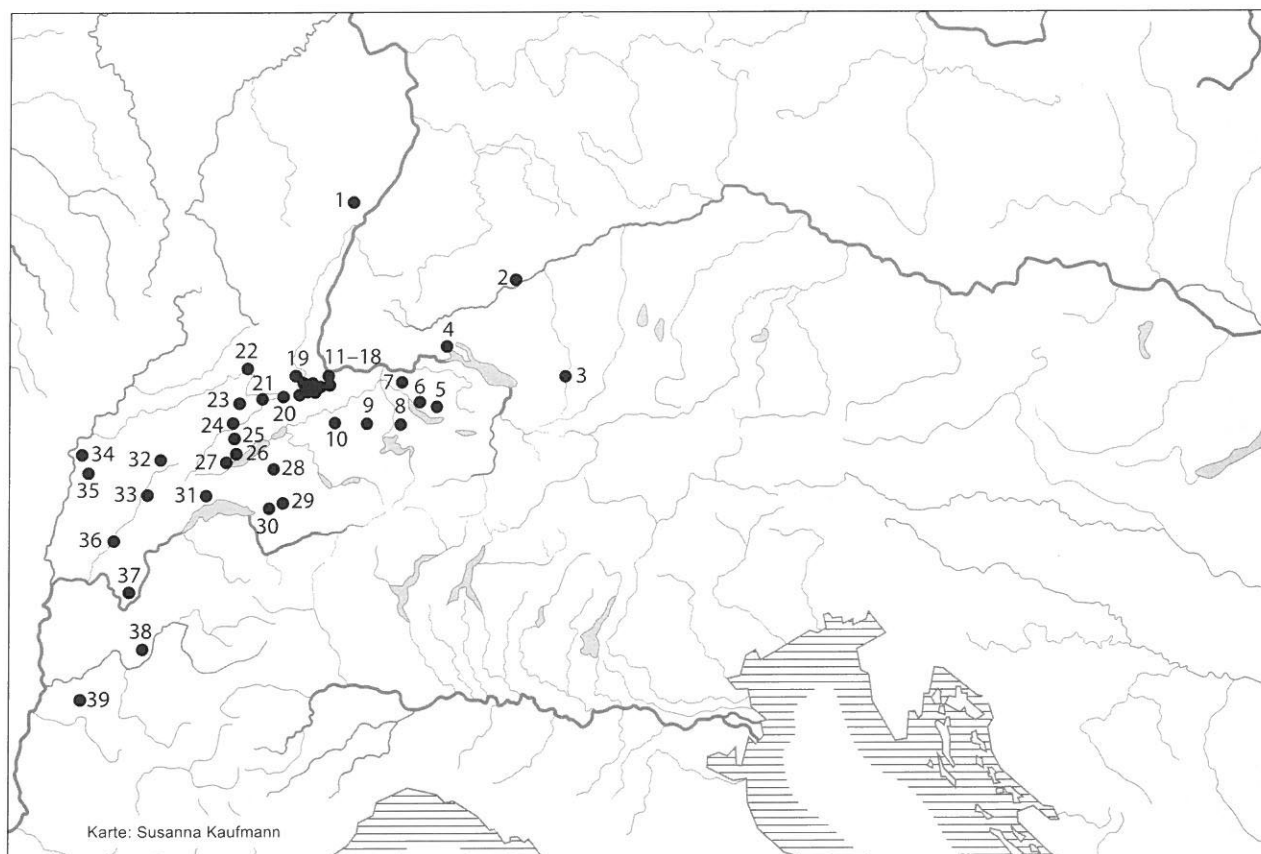


Figure 5: Distribution of Montbani-blades in Central Europe.

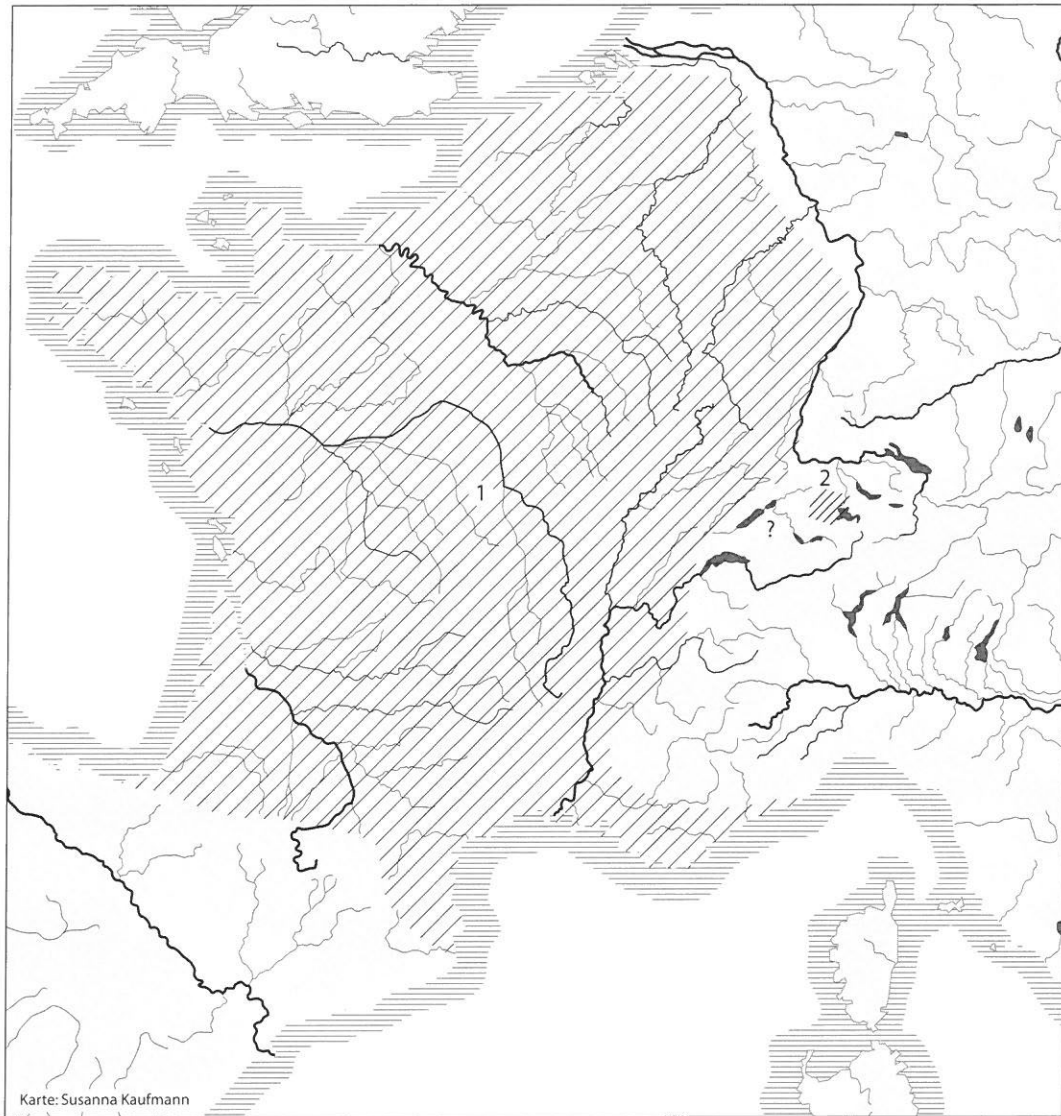


Figure 6: Distribution of Trapezes with a flat reverse retouch (RIP retouch) in Central Europe.

Germany, and seem to be missing in western Switzerland, Jura and in eastern France (Fig. 4). In central Switzerland one point is known from one site.

3. Late Mesolithic/Early Neolithic

Characteristic of the Late Mesolithic and the earliest Neolithic of central Switzerland is a large number of notched blades ("Montbani type") and different types of trapezes and points. Furthermore, a harpoon and adzes of deer antler can be mentioned.

As mentioned, Montbani blades are frequent in all sites of the Late Mesolithic and earliest Neolithic. The easternmost similar assemblage is situated on the northern shore of Lake Constance (Fig. 5). Identical assemblages

are found in eastern Switzerland and in the Prealps also. The situation in the adjacent part of Austria is not yet known. The Late Mesolithic of southwestern Germany seems to comprise only a few proper Montbani-blades or often even none at all.

1. Trapezes with a flat reverse retouch (RIP retouch), and different triangular points, developed from the trapeze, are typical for the later part of the younger Late Mesolithic and for the earliest Neolithic as well (Fig. 6). They are found in major parts of western Europe, west and south of the Rhine and central Switzerland seem to constitute the easternmost distribution of this type of microlith (Löhr 1994).

2. Bavans points are found in central Switzerland as well as in the Jurassic area and parts of eastern France, but apparently not in southern Germany (Jaccottey 1997).

Central Switzerland is in these periods thus closely related to the Jurassic Range, eastern France and western Switzerland. The typological analysis and the analysis of the distribution of various microlithic types are important to understand the cultural relations of the Swiss Mesolithic.

4. Conclusion

In the Early Mesolithic, each assemblage has its own character. The transition between the cultural groups is gradual, and the greater the distance between the sites is, the more distinct the typological and statistical differences are. The proposed huge cultural groups

probably did not exist. In the Early Mesolithic of central Europe, each area has its local group and each site shows influences from its neighbouring areas. In this period, central Switzerland differs clearly from the neighbouring areas.

In the Late Mesolithic and the Early Neolithic, the entire Swiss area north of the Alpine ridge and the adjacent eastern France seem to belong to the same group and typological differences are not perceivable. The assemblages of the Rhone area and of southern Germany, however, differ clearly from this part of central Europe. In these periods central Switzerland seem to be part of a larger cultural area, comprising the Jurassic Range, eastern France, western Switzerland and the northern Alps.

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