

Another find of a bread loaf idol from northern Lower Austria and the *Lavatera thuringiaca* L.

Další náález chlebového idolu ze severní části Dolního Rakouska a *Lavatera thuringiaca* L.

– Gerhard Trnka* –

KEYWORDS

Early Bronze Age – Věteřov culture – bread loaf idol – Lower Austria – Experiment

ABSTRACT

From October 2024 to March 2025, the Archaeological Museum Frankfurt am Main hosted a special exhibition showcasing nearly all the Early and Middle Bronze Age bread loaf idols, presented within their distribution and cultural context. Previous exhibitions on this topic have taken place in Cavriana in northern Italy in 2010 and in Manching in Upper Bavaria (Germany) in 2011. However, new bread loaf idols are continually being discovered, including those from private collections. One such example is a surface find from a settlement of the Věteřov culture at Niederfellabrunn in northern Lower Austria. This fragmentary idol, previously unpublished, was found in 1996. The article investigates whether the 'radial' impressions interrupting the lines on the artefact could be negatives of fruits of *Lavatera thuringiaca* L. (Garden tree-mallow) or other mallow plants (e.g. *Malva sylvestris* – wild mallow). We know of around 20 finds of bread loaf idols from eastern Austria alone, a figure which contrasts starkly with the limited finds from (southern) Moravia (only four). The article presents an analysis of ceramics and other finds from Niederfellabrunn, including a fragment of a decorated bowl and a jug fragment, supporting the dating of the site and a fragment of a bread loaf idol to the late Early Bronze Age.

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1. Introduction

North of Vienna in the Weinviertel region in northeastern Lower Austria, there lies the municipality of Niederfellabrunn, where the master baker Rupert Labschütz found a bread loaf idol in addition to many archaeological finds, which has remained unpublished until now. The find spot is located west of Niederfellabrunn in the 'Rosenäcker' field and yielded numerous surface finds, predominantly Bronze Age ceramics, various stone tools (grinding stones, grinding plates), burnt clay fragments, animal bones, etc., the fragmented bread loaf idol (Fig. 1: 2), discovered in 1996, being the outstanding find. The article aims to present a previously unpublished find of a fragmented bread loaf idol from Niederfellabrunn. The idol is described in detail, typologically analysed, and placed within the cultural context of the Věteřov culture, which is dated to the transitional period between the Early and Middle Bronze Age (Bronze Age stages A2–B1).

A further focus is on the investigation of the idol's decorative patterns. The hypothesis is put forward that the 'radial' impressions on the surface could potentially represent negatives of fruits of *Lavatera thuringiaca* L. (Garden tree-mallow) (Hajnalová 1999) or other mallow plants. To verify this assumption, the author conducts experimental studies and investigates the technical possibilities for creating such impressions.

The article also compares the distribution of bread loaf idols in Lower Austria (20 known specimens) and south Moravia (only four specimens). This imbalance raises questions regarding cultural interactions, trade networks, and possible differences in the archaeological research approaches of the two regions.

Finally, suggestions for future research are formulated. These include detailed analyses of the surface finds from Niederfellabrunn, experimental investigations into materials and manufacturing techniques, geochemical analyses of raw materials, and archaeobotanical studies. These approaches aim to help better understand the technological development and cultural significance of the bread loaf idols and to shed light on their ritual or symbolic character.

2. Description of a bread loaf idol from Niederfellabrunn

The artefact was discovered in 1996 and has an elongated shape with one rounded end and similarly shaped sides. The clay was fired dark brown and is grit-tempered. The front side ('display side') bears three obliquely running deep grooves, which were incised from the back to the front, and each show three 'radial' impressions/imprints with a central 'puncture'. At the break edge, another groove with the remnant of a similar impression is discernible, indicating that at least four such decorative patterns were present. No traces of any potential incrustation are discernible. Preserved length 6.05 cm, width 3.93 cm, thickness 1.65 cm, (residual) weight 42.2 grams (Fig. 1: 2).

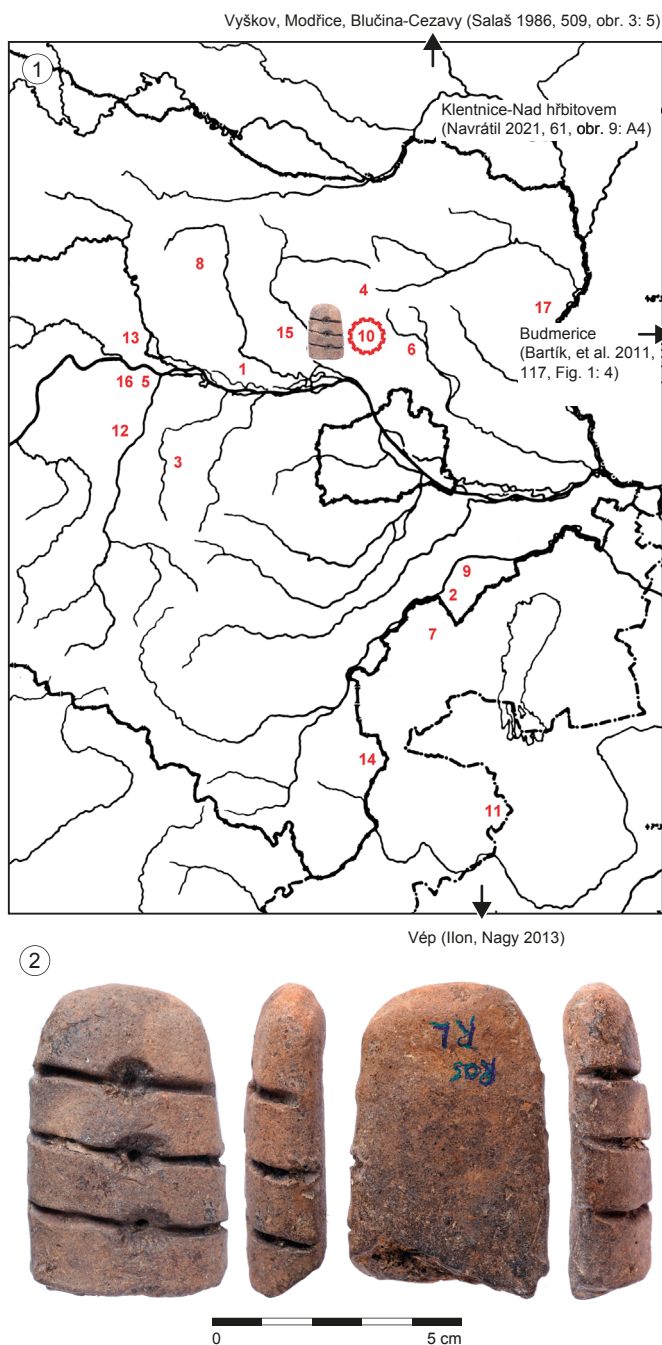


Fig. 1. 1 – Distribution map of the loaf of bread idols in east Austria (Lower Austria and Burgenland) – list of sites see in Chapter 6; 2 – loaf of bread idol from Niederfellabrunn – Rosenäcker (Labschütz collection). Graphic, photo by G. Trnka.

Obr. 1. 1 – Mapa rozšíření chlebových idolů ve východním Rakousku (Dolní Rakousko a Burgenland) – seznam lokalit viz kapitola 6; 2 – chlebový idol z Niederfellabrunnu – Rosenäcker (sbírka Labschütz). Grafika, foto G. Trnka.

3. Dating of the bread loaf idol from Niederfellabrunn

Since it is a surface find, the chronological position of our piece can nevertheless readily be assigned to a late Early Bronze Age to early Middle Bronze Age framework (Bronze Age stages A2–B1 according to Central European terminology), as numerous relevant studies demonstrate. In east Austria, as well as in south Moravia, southwest Slovakia, and northwest Hungary, this is evidenced by the Věteřov and Maďarovce, Wieselburg-Gáta cultures, the Litzenkeramik, the Transdanubian Incrusted Pottery and Vátya cultures, extending into the beginning of the Middle Bronze Age / Tumulus culture (most recently, David 2016; 2024; 2025; Ilon 2024, 33–34; Trnka 2025).

4. The bread loaf idol from Niederfellabrunn and *Lavatera thuringiaca* L.

According to the current state of research (most recently, Trnka in print), we know of 19 (confirmed) to 20 specimens from eastern Austria (Lower Austria and Burgenland), of which 17 (confirmed) or 18 originate from eastern Lower Austria (Fig. 1: 1). Some of these, like the Niederfellabrunn specimen, exhibit these typical ‘radial impressions’ – also referred to as ‘rosette-shaped patterns’ (David 2025, 52). These so-called negatives (Trnka 1992, Fig. 3: 1) are a frequently occurring decorative motif on Middle Danubian and Carpathian bread loaf idols (Carafa 2012, Group 1, 63–95); however, they can also occur south of the Alps, in the central German region (Schunke, Filipp 2022) as far as Romania (Şandor-Chicideanu 2002; 2003). Despite the fragmented condition of the Niederfellabrunn bread loaf idol, at least four grooves running along the display side are provided with these characteristic impressions. The highest number of *Lavatera* negatives is documented on a bread loaf idol from Riekofen in the Upper Palatinate (Bavaria), featuring eight(!) symmetrically arranged impressions in the shape of a pentagon (David 2025, 54).

Eva Hajnalová (Nitra), based on the bread loaf idols from Veselé and Nitriansky Hrádok – two settlements of the late Early to early Middle Bronze Age Maďarovce culture in southwest Slovakia – notably identified these impressions as those of the disc-shaped fruit of *Lavatera thuringiaca* L. (Garden tree-mallow; Hajnalová 1999). This schizocarp consists of nine to fifteen mericarps, which break apart into angular seeds upon ripening. The spine-shaped appendage in the center of the fruit is the base of the stylar column, which then appears as a negative impression of the remnant of the stylar column base in the imprint (Fig. 2).

Lavatera thuringiaca L. belongs to the widespread family Malvaceae (Mallow family) with numerous representatives such as Common Mallow (*Malva sylvestris* – also known as Cheeseweed), Dwarf Mallow (*Malva neglecta*), Hollyhock Mallow (*Malva alcea*), Common Hollyhock (*Alcea rosea*), Marsh-mallow (*Althaea officinalis*), etc., some of which are also used as medicinal plants.

5. Experiments with the fruit of *Lavatera thuringiaca* L.

To my knowledge, it has not been attempted experimentally to create impressions using one of these fruits before. I undertook this using pottery clay (so-called ‘Stober’ clay) from Burgenland (Fig. 2). As the results show, the characteristics of this clay mass, which is too fine-grained and too plastic, cannot be transferred to a prehistoric clay. Additionally, when dry, the fruit already disintegrates when pressed into the clay, or at the latest when attempting to remove it, whereby the impression or negative can also be smudged (Fig. 2: 2). This experience raises the question of whether the fruits might have been left on/in the bread loaf idol until the firing process?

The use of Common Mallow (*Malva sylvestris*) would also be an option, but then the central spine-shaped appendage, which is absent in this fruit, would have to be subsequently replaced by a puncture; furthermore, *Malva sylvestris* has more mericarps than *Lavatera thuringiaca* L. (Fig. 2: 3). To decide this individually, detailed investigations (3D scanning) and further experiments would need to be conducted.

Since it can be assumed that the clay raw material of the bread loaf idols, as well as that of the ceramics, originates from local deposits (Bartík et al. 2011, 117), the plant location of *Lavatera thuringiaca* L. should largely coincide with the utilised clay deposits. Regarding the bread loaf idol from the Maďarovce settlement

at Budmerice in southwest Slovakia: ‘The ceramic paste, especially the added temper made of metamorphic rocks, mostly phyllites, corresponds to the thick-walled ceramics from the same find spot. This means that the bread loaf idol from Budmerice was produced on-site’ (Bartík et al. 2011, 117).

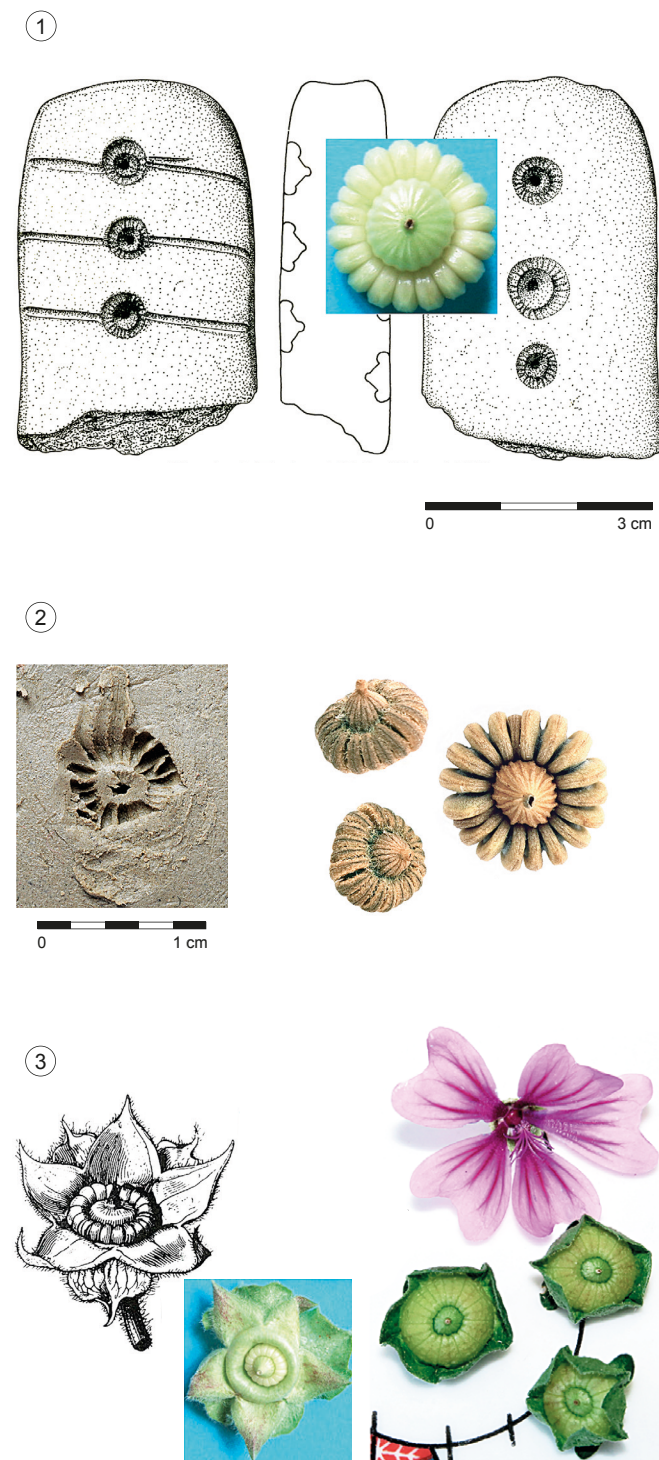


Fig. 2. 1 – Loaf of bread idol from Absdorf (after Trnka 1982, Fig. 10: 1) and young (blue-green) fruit of *Lavatera thuringiaca* L. (Garden tree-mallow); 2 – dry fruits with imprint in the Stober clay; 3 – *Malva sylvestris* (Wild mallow, Common mallow) – flower and fruits. Graphic, photo by G. Trnka.

Obr. 2. 1 – Chlebový idol z Absdorfu (podle Trnka 1982, obr. 10: 1) a mladý (modrozelený) plod *Lavatera thuringiaca* L. (slézovec durynský); 2 – suché plody s otiskem v hlině typu „Stober“; 3 – *Malva sylvestris* (sléz lesní, sléz obecný) – květ a plody. Grafika, foto G. Trnka.

6. On the bread loaf idols in east Austria and south Moravia

According to our current state of knowledge, a total of 20 bread loaf idols are known from east Austria (Fig. 1: 1):

- 1 Absdorf-Scheibenberg
- 2 Au am Leithagebirge-Kindergarten
- 3 Böheimkirchen-Hochfeld (2)
- 4 Ernstbrunn-Steinberg
- 5 Franzhausen I – grave 205
- 6 Gaweinstal-Pfarrbreiten
- 7 Großhöflein-Föllik
- 8 Maissau-Ost (?)
- 9 Mannersdorf am Leithagebirge-Reinthal
- 10 Niederhollabrunn-In der Sulz
- 11 Nikitsch-Stuk
- 12 Obermarnau-Traunleiten
- 13 Schiltern-Burgstall bei Kronsegg
- 14 Schwarzenbach-Burg
- 15 Unterhautzenhal-Leimgrube
- 16 Unterwölbling-Gietelfeld
- 17 Waidendorf-Buhuberg (3)

This number stands in stark contrast to the limited evidence of only four bread loaf idols from (south) Moravia. Of these, two have been published so far: Blučina-Cezavy (Salaš 1986, 508, Abb. 3/5; 2014, 15, Fig. 11) and Klentnice-Nad hřbitovem (Navrátil 2021, 61, obr. 9: A4). Two bread loaf idols from Drnovice u Vyškova (Vyškov District) and Modřice (Brno-Country District) have not yet been presented (personal communication from David Parma on 19 March 2025). The reasons for this strikingly low number are unclear and should not solely be attributed to a research gap?

7. Surface finds from the Niederfellabrunn-Rosenacker site

The extensive assemblage of finds from the bread loaf idol site has not yet been thoroughly examined, and processing it would appear worthwhile. Two ceramic forms should be highlighted, which are consistent with the presumed chronological position of the Niederfellabrunn bread loaf idol (Bronze Age stages A2–B1 – see above).

These are the fragment of a bowl with an inwardly thickened and decorated rim (Fig. 3: 1, 2) and a jug fragment (Fig. 3: 3).

The bowl with a ‘horizontally wiped and partly inwardly thickened and sharply carinated rim, which can also be decorated (e.g. with dot-filled triangles)’, is characteristic of the Věteřov culture (Neugebauer 1977, 70, Fig. 8: 35, Plate 15: 3; 1979, 36, Fig. 3 E, top right; Podborský a kol. 1993, 268, Fig. 166: 9). The rim is flared outwards, and the base has lobe-shaped feet, although these are no longer present on our piece due to the missing base area. These rim forms and decorations trace back to the Bell Beaker heritage of the Early Bronze Age cultures and can be confused with those of the Bell Beaker culture (Benkovský-Pivovarová 2009). Otherwise, this (rim) decoration with dot-filled triangles is a known motif in the (developed) Early Bronze Age.

In some cases, such bowls are also known from sites with bread loaf idols, without there being an intrinsic connection (e.g. Böheimkirchen and Blučina in the Věteřov area). This includes, on the one hand, the Únětice-Věteřov period hillfort Blučina-Cezavy in south Moravia with such bowls (Tihelka 1960, 50–54, Fig. 13: 5; 1961, 79, Plate 5: 3; 1962, Plate 8: 13, Plate 9: 11 and 16) and the bread loaf idol (Salaš 1986, 508, obr. 3: 5), and on the other hand, the late Early Bronze Age hillfort of the southern Věteřov culture at Hochfeld near Böheimkirchen, where these



Fig. 3. Niederfellabrunn – Rosenäcker. Surface finds (Labschütz Collection). Photo by G. Trnka.

Obr. 3. Niederfellabrunn – Rosenäcker. Povrchové nálezy (sbírka Labschütz). Foto G. Trnka.

Věteřov bowls occur in several variants (Schneider 2021, Volume II, 'Bowls with wide and decorated rim lip [Group 6]', Type Plate 22, bottom – Type Plate 23, top). The two bread loaf idols from this site are well-known (Trnka 1982, 66, Fig. 10: 2, 3).

Far to the 'west', we find a similarly decorated bowl, like the one from Niederfellabrunn, from Freisinger Domberg (Bankus 2004, 128, Fig. 19, middle bottom, Plate 123: 5 and book cover) in Upper Bavaria (Southern Germany), from whence a half-preserved bread loaf idol originates (Bankus 2004, 208, Plate 13/23 and Plate 238/2; David 2025, 52). Here too, the objects, being isolated finds, lack any stratigraphic context or association. The pottery from this hillfort shows connections to the Middle Danubian region with Věteřov and (presumably) Mad'arovce influences.

The jug fragment (Fig. 3: 3) is also to be dated to the late Early Bronze Age and the transition to the Middle Bronze Age (Bronze Age stages A2–B1) and shows similarities with Mad'arovce jugs. As many as 28 such vessels originate from a ceramic deposit at Gáň east of Bratislava in southwest Slovakia (Holmová, Takács 2015, Fig. 3), which belongs to the 'classical' phase of the Mad'arovce culture (Bronze Age A2 – late).

8. Conclusion

The discovery of the bread loaf idol from Niederfellabrunn in northern Lower Austria represents a significant contribution to the understanding of the Early Bronze Age and the Věteřov culture. This fragmentary artefact, although only partially preserved, provides valuable information about the decorative patterns and techniques used during this period. In particular, the impressions, which possibly originate from the fruits of *Lavatera thuringiaca* L. and other mallow plants, suggest potential ritual or symbolic meanings that these decorations held for the culture of the time.

Research into the provenance and typology of bread loaf idols reveals the diversity and breadth of these artefacts in eastern Austria, while simultaneously pointing to the striking scarcity of similar finds from south Moravia, which raises questions about potential cultural interactions and exchange between these regions. In this regard, the interdependence between regional cultures is an important aspect for understanding the dynamics of settlement and trade networks during the transition period from the Early to the Middle Bronze Age.

Future research should include more detailed analyses of the surface finds from Niederfellabrunn, as well as experimental studies to investigate and test hypotheses about the use of stone raw materials and the contexts in which the bread loaf idols were produced. The combination of these aspects with geochemical and archaeobotanical studies could contribute to a deeper synthesis and an emphasis on the cultural essence and technological progress during this fascinating historical period.

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Resumé

Článek představuje nově objevený, dosud nepublikovaný fragment chlebového idolu, nalezený v roce 1996 u Niederfellabrunnu v severní části Dolního Rakouska. Jedná se o povrchový náleze ze sídliště věteřovské kultury s doklady osídlení ze závěru starší až počátku střední doby bronzové (stupně doby bronzové A2–B1). Předmětem článku je popis, datování a analýza artefaktu. Důležitým aspektem je výzkum radiálních otisků, zdobících idol. Představena je hypotéza, že by se mohlo jednat o negativy plodů *Lavatera thuringiaca* L. (slézovec durynský) nebo jiných rostlin z čeledi slézovitých. Autor k ověření této hypotézy provedl experiment. Dále je ve studii sledována distribuce chlebových idolů na sídlištích starší doby bronzové, přičemž je zdůrazněn významný rozdíl mezi vyšším počtem nálezů ve východním Rakousku ve srovnání s jižní Moravou. Je uvedena stručná charakteristika dalších archeologických artefaktů z lokality, která pomáhá poskytnout podpůrné důkazy pro datování idolu. Navrženy jsou také plány pro další výzkum, zahrnující detailní analýzu nálezů, experimentální archeologii a geochemické či archeobotanické analýzy, jež budou potřebné k pochopení řady technologických aspektů výroby těchto předmětů.

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