HORSE GRAVES, SACRIFICE, AND THE PERFORMERS OF PUBLIC RITUALS

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Abstract

Abundance of horse graves and very expressive horse-offering rituals are well known in the Central region of Lithuania. But principally the new material has been obtained after the investigations of burial ground in Marvelė. Horse graves are usually found separate from human graves, composing special parts of "horse graveyards" in the cemeteries. Arrangement of these parts with horse graves are related to local micro-landscape. The natural and cultural elements with memory signs embody the environmental cosmology and are involved into the mythology. The horse burial places suggest the ceremonies of public displays. The horse becomes a contributor which helps to cross the border between mythological spaces.

Key words: micro-landscape, horse graves, memory signs, ritual, performance.

Preface

A big amount of horse bones that are found in burial grounds is quite characteristic for the Baltic territories. Horse burials in this area have been known since the Roman period (first-fourth century: e.g. Piątkowska-Małecka 2000, p.188; Nowakowski 2003, p.53; Banytė-Rowell 2007, p.138f). In the Viking Age they were most characteristic for Prussians and population of central Lithuania. Some burial grounds were investigated during the few last decades. But principally new material was obtained through the investigations of the newly discovered burial ground of Marvelė in Kaunas. During 1991-2007 there were investigated about 250 horse graves with ca. 300 individuals (Bertašius 2009). Horse burials dated back to the eight-eleventh century characterize the Central Lithuanian region most significantly. Horse graves are usually found separate from human graves making thus the special parts in the burial ground. It seems they are composing separate "horse graveyards" in the definite area. Usually there is quite difficult to reconstruct the original layout of the graveyard. However we can rebuilt three separate local "horse graveyards" in the Marvelė. Unfortunately we do not have the similar material from the other Central Lithuanian burial grounds with horse graves, as a result of different circumstances the original layout of the graveyard mostly is not reproducible. The location of these "horse grave yards" varies in respect to human graves and they are arranged in different ways related to micro-landscape. This micro-landscape is the main area where the cultural events and rituals took place. It is the subject of public space.

Public space in the graveyard

Prehistoric cemetery could be considered as a special ritual place for socially important events. The social practicing – burial rituals, performances and funeral services – could be interpreted as carrier of special meanings, which might form a basis of collective memory (Bertašius 2006, p.69).

Prehistoric society was closely connected with the world of death. Sometimes sparse historical sources tell us about social events near or in an extent of graveyard. Information concerning social practicing mostly starts up from the late Iron Age or Early Medieval times. Let's take for illustration the example from eight century about the place for meetings of Saxon local council (*goding, gogericht*) – "on the hilltop", "on the sandy mound" or "near the graveyard" and the like (Modzelewski 2004, p.328). It seems, that the similar local dealings were conducting in Lithuania, too. The local communal court – *kuopos teismas*, derives from prehistoric times and quite familiar to 16th century historical sources in Lithuanian juridical relations (Jurginis 1978, p.51). The meeting place for these events depends very much on peculiarities of cultural landscape, it could be "the sanctuary near the oak-wood grove" or "the sanctuary near the burial ground" (outside barrow, etc: e.g. Modzelewski 2004, p.332). Some ideas we have been finding in the chronicle of Tietmar, when he is relating about offering place of Scandinavians (Kronika Thietmara 2005, p.12): "they were used to gather together every nine year in January and sacrifice 99 people and the same number of horses". The situation is difficult for research, because of quite sparse archaeological material closely connected with

graveyards findings outside the graves. In this situation a more extensively investigated area gives more suitable information. The situation becomes more evident if we are operating with the object of long time-span.

Developed societies like ancient Egypt or Near Eastern civilizations usually had structured public space defined by monumental architecture. In this case every member of society in every day life was deeply engaged in this "monumental space". Meanwhile we have almost no experimental data about deliberately shaped public space in the Barbarian society of Central and North Europe. Some interesting interpretations were made investigating cosmology of North Europe by Ch.Westerdahl. The native cosmology was based on illiterate "ideology" expressed by oral tradition, language and the application of all senses (Westerdahl 2009; cf. Westerdahl article in this volume). The background of the cosmology is a contrast between different landmarks like the sea and the coastal elements. We can transform or adapt this cosmology including the local natural or cultural elements what are making contrasts or dividing lines in the landscape. It could be the big river or lake ("great water"), the river-valley and natural hills (oppositions like low versus high, water – land, plane – hilly, light – shady as the main factor), or hill-forts, slopes with forests and water pounds or bogs[1], conspicuous trees and likewise. In this case the perception is based on a human ecology and partly preserved or archaeologically reconstructed topographical environment. And this daily experienced environment was an important factor in a cognitive system which must incorporate all senses, seeing, hearing, feeling and smelling (Westerdahl 2009). Another important factor of the environmental cosmology (the term borrowed from Ch.Westerdahl) was the sun. It is clear that an important part in this cosmology is devoted to the sun (e.g. Jovaiša 1989, about mortuary practice depending on the sun movement during the year). The sun was observed every day and night rising out of and descending into this ambivalent world. People were influenced by their environment, their adaptation
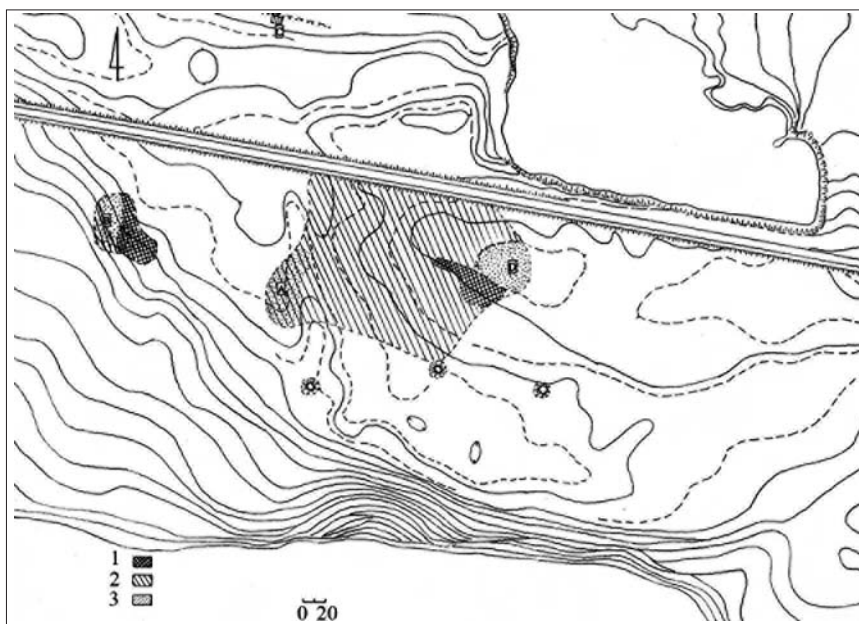

Fig. 1. Territory of the graveyard covers circa 6-7 hectares area. Altogether graves are dated to second-twelfth centuries. Situation of horse graves: 1 horse graves; 2 human inhumations; 3 human cremations (after Bertašius 2002, p.78 fig.26).

to it and to other people based on their daily experienced environment.

Micro-landscape and memory signs

Marvelė in Central Lithuania, as the biggest archaeologically investigated Lithuanian prehistoric object is going to be discussed here. The object provides the abundance of different types of graves (inhumations, cremations and a big variety of horse graves) as well as suggests some plausible interpretations for social events too. The cemetery consists of several parts that are joined by natural micro-landscape (Fig.1). The graves cover the area round 3 hectares (about 7.5 acres). But the whole territory of graveyard which includes the empty spaces between the grave groups, covers the area circa 6–7 hectares with quite unequal micro-landscape. Only a part of it could be restored archaeologically, sometimes it is completely impossible to trace the natural historical landscape in the details. Shortly we can distinguish at least four separate groups – some kind of fields with historical signs (memory signs). Two of them include the separate groups of horse graves (B and D). It seems that varied details of micro-landscape were used to delineate the local public space (barrows with stone setting, ravines, rivulets and ponds, trees, relief of surface, paths and likewise). Each field of graves has definite area in the micro-landscape with special memory signs, thus creating the cognitive micro-environment. Of course, only few of them could be recognized during the archaeological research. Whereas, in the ancient times, during the funeral much more small local memory signs could

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[1] Compare entirely the bog finds – well known sacral offerings throughout the North Europe.

Fig. 2. Location of Marvelė graveyard near the confluence of two biggest regional rivers (photograph by Bertašius).

be used in the landscape. They were like memory "storage" signs and generated the particular story of a family, kin, village or tribe. During the long span of using this graveyard the "memory field" generates particular social practices with the rituals and ceremonies, understandable for everybody in the society. This "long story", told by our ancestors using the graves and close surroundings around the graves is nearly the only witness of our ancestors imaginative past. In this microlandscape we are recognizing the special burial rituals, processions and performances at the grave, different funeral services and individual or group expression. "Memory signs" located in the graveyard time after time reminded about the story. The prevailing rituals like cremations, universal horse offering in the located area, handling of material culture and local memory signs created a repository of accumulated memory.

Discussing the public space and public ritual with special performances worth of referencing is the role of the sun. The sun could be best observed while rising out or descending into the water (a lake, a river, the sea). Marvelė's situation in the lower part of river-valley shows quite relevant location between the confluence of two biggest regional rivers in the East and lower watery river part in the West (Fig. 2). The next biggest

Central Lithuanian graveyard Veršvai with abundance of horse graves is situated across the river, opposite to Marvelė, in the same position. In this connection the data of archaeological investigations is especially noteworthy – these two cemeteries revealed a big number of buried horses, nearly 500 horse skeletons generally were identified during archaeological excavations (Bertašius 2009; unpublished material from Veršvai: Puzinas 1941, p.28; Navickaitė 1958, p.83). In the Baltic and Northern mythology the horse is often depicted as the sun-carrier. Thus we are recognizing the special place for the graveyard, the place closely connected with the sun-rise and the sunset, equally with big water and strong stream. It could be the reliable explanation why the same place was used for the graveyard so long time, even 12 centuries! Considering the subject of horse graves, the horse offering ritual was practiced since sixth to 12th century (Bertašius 2002, p.169ff). We can associate it with ritual activity and archaeological excavations revealed information about the long and expressive ceremony of which burial was a part. This ceremony was apparently intended to be seen by participants at the funerary or commemoration events. Here we can recognize not the individual but communal mortuary practice. Particular shift in emphasis from identity of the individual to identity of the

Fig. 3. Horse grave with complete horse skeleton. The horse's head is located in a deeper part of a pit, the croup has been noted higher that the head, quite close to the former burial surface (photograph by A. Astrauskas).
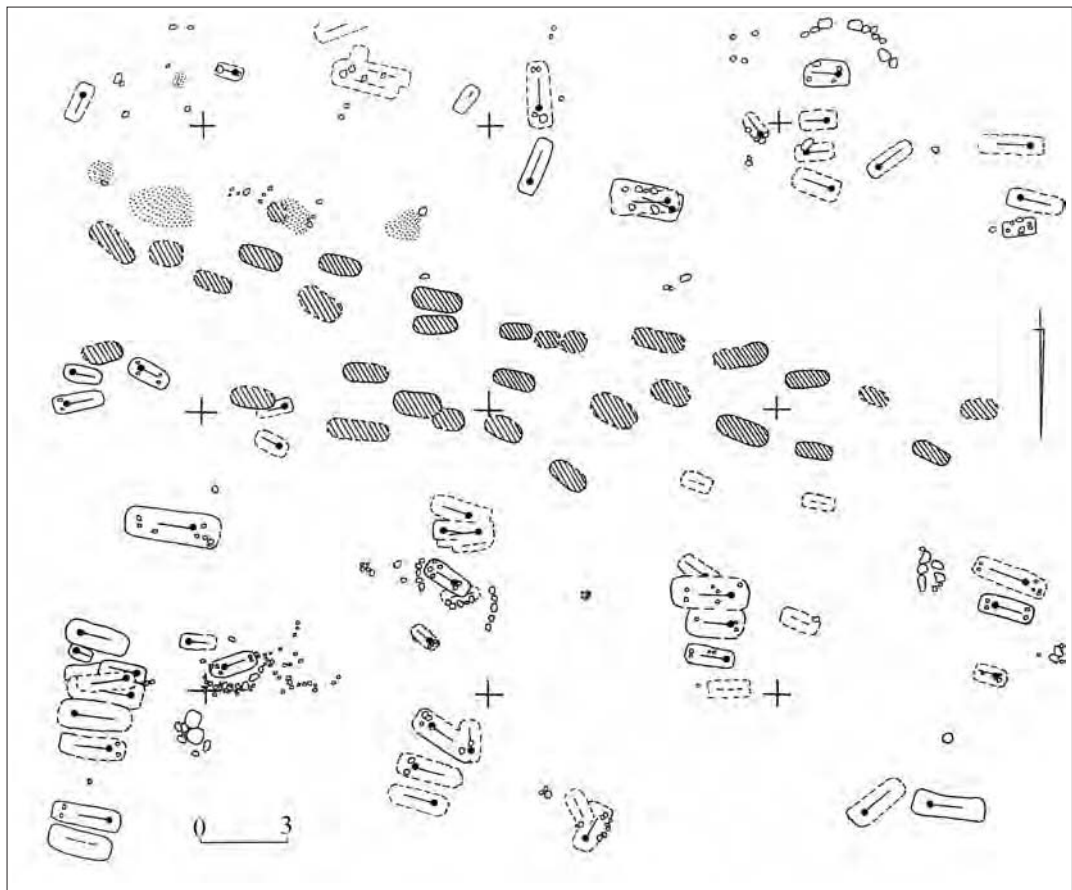

Fig. 4. Horse graves (lined ovals) in two or three rows situated between inhumation and cremation burials (after Bertašius 2002, p.198 fig.93).

community gave new ways to establish and communicate their corporate identities (Wells 2001, p.84). Only deeply penetrated historical and social memory with straight memory "sticks" like micro-landscape (hills, rivulets and ponds), sacral fireplaces, repeatable performances and other events could preserve this place from generation to generation. But that are mostly the steady signs in the landscape. Much more of different signs were used by every generation, family, group, village society – they changed slowly from generation to generation.

The horse offering ritual

The western orientation of the horse burials confirms the belief that the world of the dead is in the West, where the sun sets and a horse escorts the dead to Eternity. In the burial the croup (hind quarter) of many horses has been noticed to be higher than the head. It was predetermined by the irregular (oblique) shape of the pit – its bottom gradually slants in the western direction and the western slope is absolutely steep. The shape of the pit is directly associated with the funeral process. When burying a horse its head is always located in a deeper part of a pit and a horse skeleton is nearly always west-northwest oriented, with the croup 0.05-0.6 m higher that the head, quite close to the former burial surface (Fig. 3). By means of reins and bridle bits it is possible to place a live horse in a position that prevents it from climbing out. Horse skeletons were found on their stomachs, with their legs tightly pressed, the head under the breastbone (*sternum*) indicating that they were probably buried alive. The described situation suggests the idea of performing some kind of ritual, as only an exhausted horse could be forced into the pit. Moreover, the standardized, precise and wide spread burial ritual argues in presence of the specially trained partners in this ritual, - those, who are proficient in controlling the whole performance. In the central part of the graveyard (Fig. 4) there are two – three rows of horse graves situated between inhumations. They are set up towards the top of elevation, in the highest part of the graveyard. Thus a kind of scene for the ritual is made.

Next group of the horse graves is situated on the plane downhill, it seems they are situated in a small valley with the horse graves on the border, in a shape of a half-bow, making some sort of amphitheatre, with the supposed beholders on the upper part of the slope (Fig. 5). Moreover, lonely stone pavement measuring ca. 2x3 m (Fig. 6) in the lower part of this small valley were found as well. It looks like a special place for a ritual, maybe a public killing place as one of the possible interpretations could be suggested, or something else, anyhow it is closely related to the horse graves.

The data of archaeological investigations and scarce historical references testifies to a complicated bloody burying ritual at the grave, and a sacrificial meal (feast) as well. Evidently the sacrifices were linked to important occasions that helped to emphasize the cultural identity of the local society. These horse graves could be interpreted as deposits of special value. The open, exposed horse burial places as well as the big quantity of buried animals suggest that the ceremonies of which these deposits were part were public displays rather than private offerings (e.g. Wells 2001, p.93).

Amongst many societies there is a rather common attitude to Eternity: the world of dead is separated from the living world by the sea which the deceased must sail across (Anuczin' 1890, p.179). Herewith, a horse was one of the substantial sacred animals which escorts the dead to Eternity and was coherent more with mythological World than with every day life. In the ancient Lithuanian world-view the mythological lord of the Underworld *Velnias* (= the devil) is most often acting with different parts of the horse skeleton, like the horse shank, horse hoof or rib (e.g. Vėlius 1983, p.105). It seems that the other burial group which is distinguished by ritual offering of separate horse parts relates with this idea. Such graves are distinguished by isolated area with scattered horse remains (Fig. 7). The burials with scattered horse remains usually contain a skull, a neck, leg bones and fragments, sometimes with the signs of chopping evident on the bone surface (Bertašius 2009). The areas where this type of grave is concentrated in separate sections of cemetery testify to simultaneity and distinctly original tradition. Such a manner of burial testifies to the presence of funeral rituals, maybe a long complicated ritual by the grave, with protagonists (main actor) and supernumerary's. We will never be able to reveal the details of this bloody ritual, but relying on the historical sources we could try to reconstruct a few glimpses. The famous Arabian traveler and envoy, Ibn Fadhlan, who attended a Viking funeral on his travel, describes a ritual of horse offering in the report of his travels along the river Volga. Osteoarchaeological investigations of Marvelė's graves correspond to this report, where remains of two individuals have been found. It is interesting to note that the graves containing the remains of two horses included the bones of dogs as well. Therefore, it is possible to drawn an important comparison with Fadlan's impressions from a Viking funeral: "… a dog was brought, chopped into two (parts) and thrown… Two horses were taken…, then chopped with swords"[2], all of that was left as food for a buried individual (Kovalevskij 1956). Eating horse meat was part of the sacrificial meal that took place near the grave. It is unknown whether the

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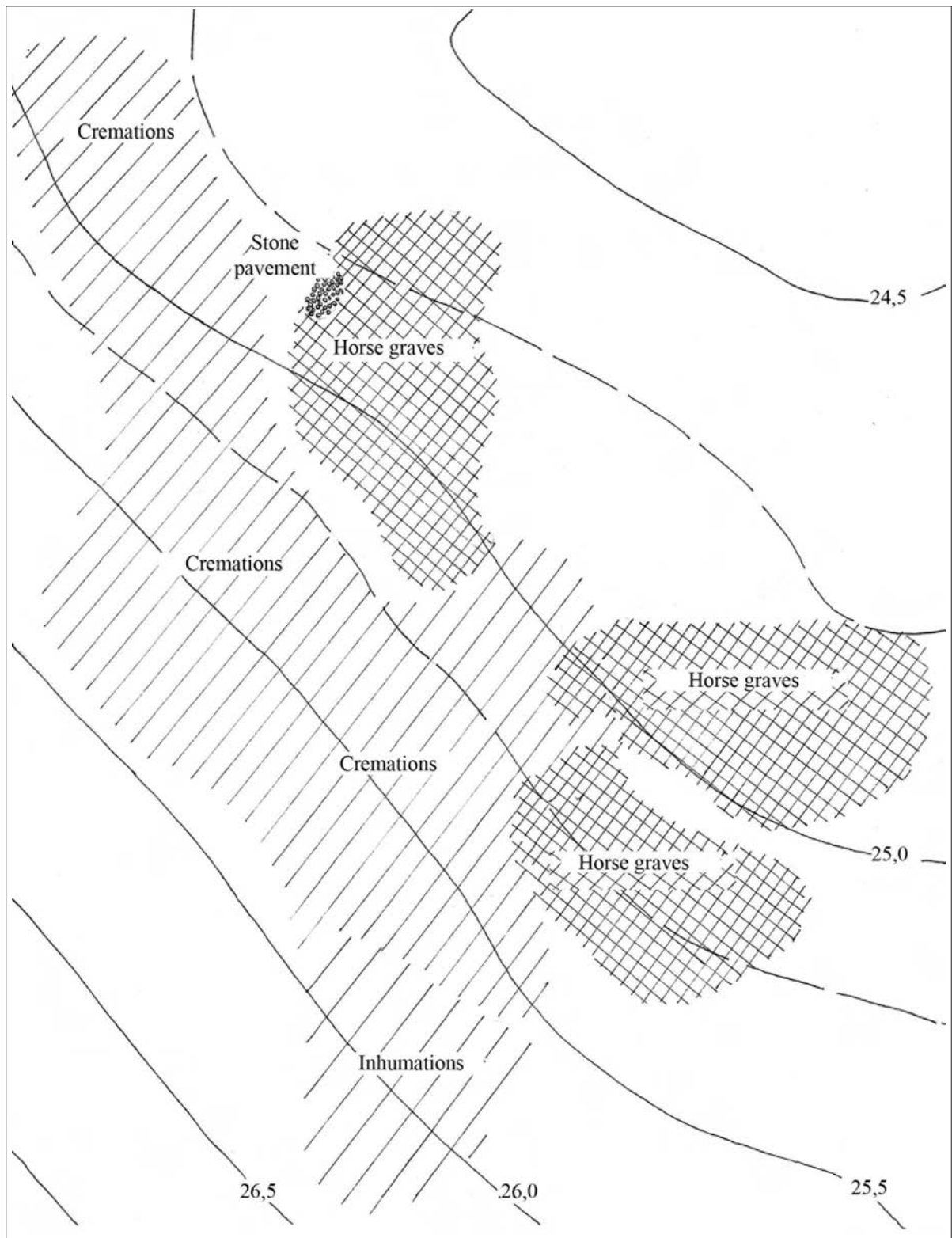[2] Free translation from Russian made by author.

Fig. 5. The horse graves seem are making some sort of amphitheatre, with the supposed beholders on the upper part of the slope.

Fig. 6. Stone pavement in the lower part of the small valley (photograph by A. Astrauskas).
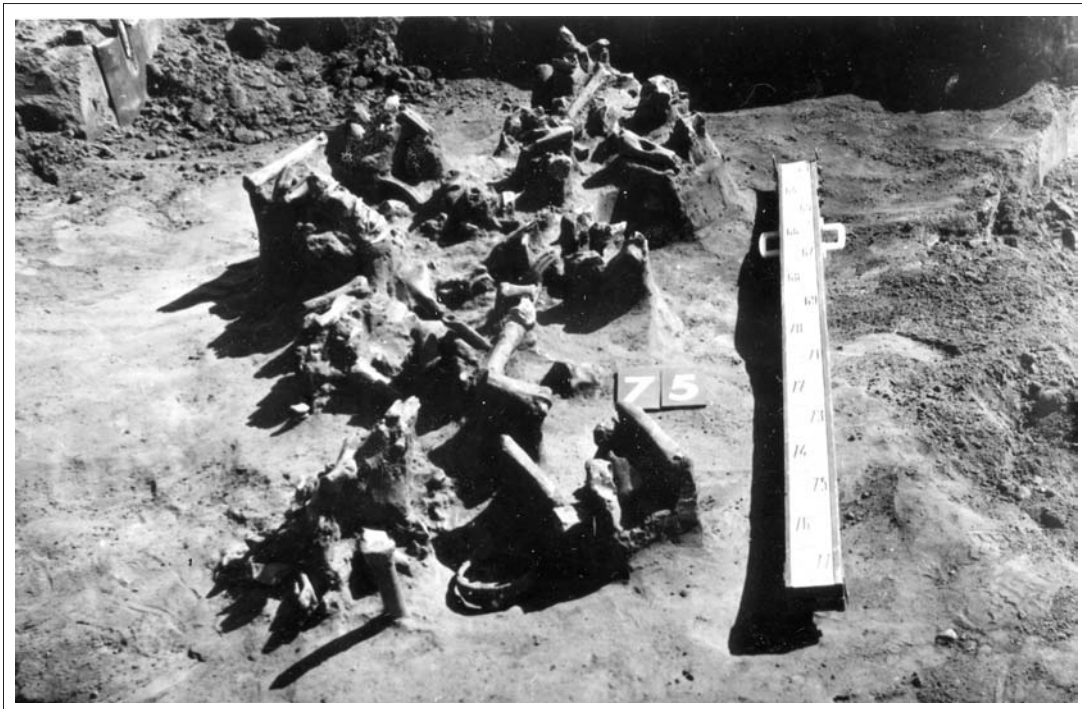

Fig. 7. Horse grave with scattered horse skeleton (photograph by Bertašius).

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sacrifice was personally offered for recollection of the deceased, or if it was an institutionalized offering that happened methodically. Herewith there could be traced one more aspect of public event, as ritual of temporal dying which happens during the shift of two states, for example during the initiation (e.g. Lotman 2004, p.276ff). It is used to associate the temporal dying with flesh laceration, body chopping or flesh eating.

Thus quite close semantic relations could be traced between the horse and the Sun among many of prehistoric tribes, cf. by Celts, Greeks, Germans, Balts – both the Sun and the horse – are getting to the Underworld. One old Lithuanian song tells about the Sun which travels mounted on the horseback in the boat (Golan 1993, p.51). Hence the association of the horse the sun, the boat, the World of Eternity is quite expressive. These examples are quite indicative for a horse as a main instrument constructing the public space. The horse becomes a contributor which helps to cross the border between two different mythological spaces.

Conclusions

One important aspect of *public space* and *public performance* was a phenomenon of competition, usually among leading families or competing groups. They are manifested in family attitude, or group attitude, when either of them was seeking to display its status. The substantial social structures like warrior's retinue manifested according to a certain ritual, the form of graves to develop some specific burial features and the graves becomes more formalized, the ritual itself are performed in the special places. Ritualized behavior is an important criterion distinguishing the group.

Community has used special small area for arrangement of different events. It could be the plane downhill (slope) in the river valley making some type of *amphitheatre,* where the graveyard (or a part of it) was arranged. It could be a *smooth elevation* in the main part of graveyard, where the site for social events with particular equipment (like pits, fireplaces, ditches and other) and performance with horse offering ritual were arranged.

All these arrangements are archaeologically identifiable, but who knows if the wooden constructions were made on the surface of the graveyard, or if the natural trees were growing in the area.

The objects in the micro-landscape and the objects used by partners in the social event, steadily repeated rituals provided communities with a common set of symbols.

These symbols helped to create cultural boundaries between different groups.

Author's English revised by Vilmantė Liubinienė

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ŽIRGŲ KAPAI – AUKOS IR ATLIKĖJAI VIEŠAJAME RITUALE

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Santrauka

Baltų kraštams būdingi gausūs žirgų kapai. Dauguma šių kapų tyrinėta paskutiniais XX a. dešimtmečiais. Vien Marvelės kapinyne ištirta apie 250 tokių kapų (1 pav.). Jie charakteringiausi Vidurio Lietuvos regione.

Priešistorinėje bendruomenėje laidojimo vietos pasižymėjo ypatinga ritualine svarba, nes jų aplinkoje vykę ritualai įgydavo daugialypių socialinių prasmių. Čia realizuota ir simbolinė jungtis tarp gyvųjų bei mirusiųjų pasaulių. Labai kuklūs istoriniai duomenys apie kuopinį teismą Lietuvoje ar senųjų saksų bendruomenės tarybos susirinkimų vietos ypatybes patvirtina šių vietų, kaip viešosios erdvės, svarbą. Vis dėlto išlikę labai mažai duomenų apie tam tikru būdu organizuotą ir aktualizuotą viešąją erdvę, kurioje kiekvienas mikrolandšafto elementas įgyja svarbą bendruomenės mitologinėje sąrangoje. Čia reikšmingais atminties ženklais ir – pajungiant dalyvių jausmus – viešojo ritualo dalyviais gali tapti medžiai, pilkapiai ir kapai, laukai, kalvos, šlaitai, pelkės, akmenys ir kt. aplinkos objektai (2 pav.). Labai svarbus vaidmuo šioje erdvėje skiriamas Saulei, kaip reikšmingai mitinių prasmių perteikėjai.

Gausūs Marvelės kapinyno žirgų kapai ir labai skirtingas jų išdėstymas kapinyno mikrolandšafte (4, 5 pav.) teikia galimybę ieškoti žirgų aukojimo ritualo prasmių ir perteikia subtilų paviršiaus reljefo išnaudojimą tas prasmes kuriant. Tam padeda ir aukojamo gyvulio kūno padėtis (3, 7 pav.), kapo duobės forma ir tarpusavio išdėstymas, kapų grupių vietos parinkimas ir santykis su aplinka, taip pat įvairiausios smulkios tyrimų metu atskleidžiamos detalės (duobės, ugniavietės, akmenys, takai ir kt.). Ritualas remiasi aplinkoje (erdvėje) ir laiko tėkmėje pasikartojančiomis detalėmis. Toks gausiomis aplinkos ir sudėtingo veiksmo detalėmis paremtas ritualas, kurdamas specifinius atminties ženklus mikrolandšafte ir ritualo atlikimo metu, stiprino kolektyvinę atmintį, padėjusią bendruomenei išlaikyti istorinę tradiciją. Nagrinėdami atskiras kapo įrangos detales mes galime atpažinti baltų mitologinių būtybių išraiškos elementus (7 pav.).

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