

# FINDINGS OF SADDLES FROM ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS IN PRUSSIAN CEMETERY ALEIKA-3 IN SAMLAND. (PRELIMINARY PUBLICATION)

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## Abstract

Burials of riders accompanied by horses are of special significance for the Prussian antiquities. This mass tradition roots back to the early Roman time and existed, slightly modified, in this area till Prussia was conquered by the Teutonic Order in the 13th century. In other words, this tradition existed in the Baltic region for over 1000 years. A horse takes an outstanding position in the Baltic mythology similarly to that of other Indo-European peoples. Numerous documents prove the important role that a horse played in Ancient Prussians' life.

Wooden saddles were found in three horse graves in Aleika-3 cemetery. Two saddles were preserved in the form of wooden fragments with carved images, which were covered with polychromatic pictures (yellow, red, brown, and black colours were used in the painting). Rear saddle arch found in the grave 521 is painted with solar rosettes, but the main accent of the saddle arch is two horses galloping to symbol of the World Tree or anthropomorphic figure in the centre of the composition. The unique artefacts found in Aleika-3 burial ground provide principally new information for understanding the details of burial ceremony and daily life of the medieval Prussians.

Key words: saddles, horses, figural art, Prussians riders, Aleika-3 in Samland, Baltic region.

Over a hundred-year long history of archaeological research at the Prussian territory provides materials from over 100 cemeteries. A total of more than 400 equine burial grounds dated the sixth thirteen centuries was found at these sites. Probably the quantity of equine burials corresponds to biggest part of all male burials in the archaeological records of this period.

As a rule, this period burials consist of two levels: the upper level contains cremated human with various artefacts (ceramic vessels, ornaments and armament), while the lower level holds burial of one or several (one to three) non-cremated horses with details of bridle, various type bit, stirrup, bells and etc. The finds are almost completely represented by metal things and seldom by leather belt fragments saturated with metal salts. Besides there are finds of cheek-pieces made of horn and bone.

As known local soils are especially aggressive and highly acid, and therefore bones are often not preserved in many burial grounds. Artefacts of organic materials and even metals are poorly preserved.

As a rule we can conclude that horses were placed in the grave with full gear. Position of various details (e.g. pendants, plates, buckles, stirrups, bridle bits, etc.) proves this. This leads us to the conclusion that when buried a horse also had a saddle on, which was usually made of organic materials.

For instance, some metal artefacts (plates and binding) can be interpreted as saddle details. Finds from the following sites are examples of such artefacts: Povarovka (former Grebitten) burial ground, digs under G.N. Pronin's supervision (Pronin *et al.* 2006), Kovrovo (former Dollkeim) burial ground, digs under V.I. Kulakov's supervision (2007), and at some other sites.

Such finds provide for discussions of saddle presence and its decorations but give no information about saddle construction and size. Until now not a single saddle or large fragments of a saddle have been found in the Prussian area. Thus, no information has been available in regards to design or types of saddles, which ancient Prussians had in the early Middle Ages and through the Teutonic Order's arrival in the 13th century. To make the situation even worse, no details iconographic materials (pictures of Prussians saddle) were available from that time.

Aleika-3 cemetery (former Jaugehnen in Samland) is located in the northern part of Kaliningrad peninsular, about 2 km to the east of Romanovo settlement (former Pobetten, in Samland), now it is Zelenogradsky district of Kaliningrad region.

Aleika-3 burial ground is located at the gentle slope of the height, the left bank of the Aleika River. This site was unfamiliar to the German archaeologists in the pre-war period. Archaeological digs commenced in 2005 at this site. In 2005–2008 the Sambian archaeological

VII

IMAGES  
OF THE HORSE  
IN ANCIENT  
ART



Fig. 1. Burial A-521, saddle details *in situ*, Aleika-3 cemetery (photograph by Skvortsov).

expedition of the Institute of Archaeology (the Russian Academy of Science) researched 4600 m<sup>2</sup> where 554 burials were located. 517 burials are from the second – to early fifth centuries and 37 complexes were dated as of the 11th–12th centuries.

The graves dated to the 11–12th centuries are located 60 meters to the north of the part of the cemetery dated to the Roman Period at the bottom of the hill. In 2006 when this area was examined during ploughing of the field located to the north of the height where the burial ground is, an area of more modern cremations was revealed; its size is from 40 to 50 meters. When examining this area various items were collected (fragments of penannular fibulae of various types, iron spear and javelins) which were dated end of the 11th–12th centuries. In 2006 a pad of 100 square meters was excavated where 34 burials of late the 11th – early 12th centuries were researched.

All burials were made in round or oval pits; the upper level has remnants of cremated bones of one or several people while the lower level of the pit contains equine burials. The materials found in these burials are typical for burial grounds of the early medieval Prussians. The inventory from the upper levels of the burials had traces of thermal exposure from burial fire and is represented by ceramic vessels made at the potter's wheel; iron spear and javelins; iron knives and spurs; numerous weights for scales made of bronze and iron; iron and bronze buckles for belts; iron plates, bronze

fibulae, bronze finger-rings, iron fragments of combs made of horn.

In the lower level, in horse burials various iron stirrups, ring bits and bits with falcate cheek-pieces, iron belly-band buckles, numerous plates and horse bridle pendants made of tin, jingles made of bronze, tin and iron were found. The lower levels of the burial places in these sites were covered with clay and located at the level of natural ground water table; in other words horse burial was covered with clay built up when digging a grave; due to this fact items of organic materials (wood and leather) were preserved.

These unique environmental conditions provided for organic artefacts preservation. In three burials the following was found: vessels (wooden and made of bast (bark), wooden tools (perhaps for weaving), and fragments of leathern belts including those with numerous tin plates.

Wooden saddles were found in three burials (Fig. 1). One complete wooden saddle covered with leather was also found. Two saddles were preserved in the form of wooden fragments with carved images, which were covered with polychromatic composition (Plate VIII.3). Yellow, red, brown, and black colours were used in the paint saddle arch. The picture at the rear arch (rear vertical detail of a saddle) was well preserved. We can see three circles (perhaps solar rosettes / solar signs) at the front side of this detail. The rear portion of this detail shows a complex composition: a master depicted

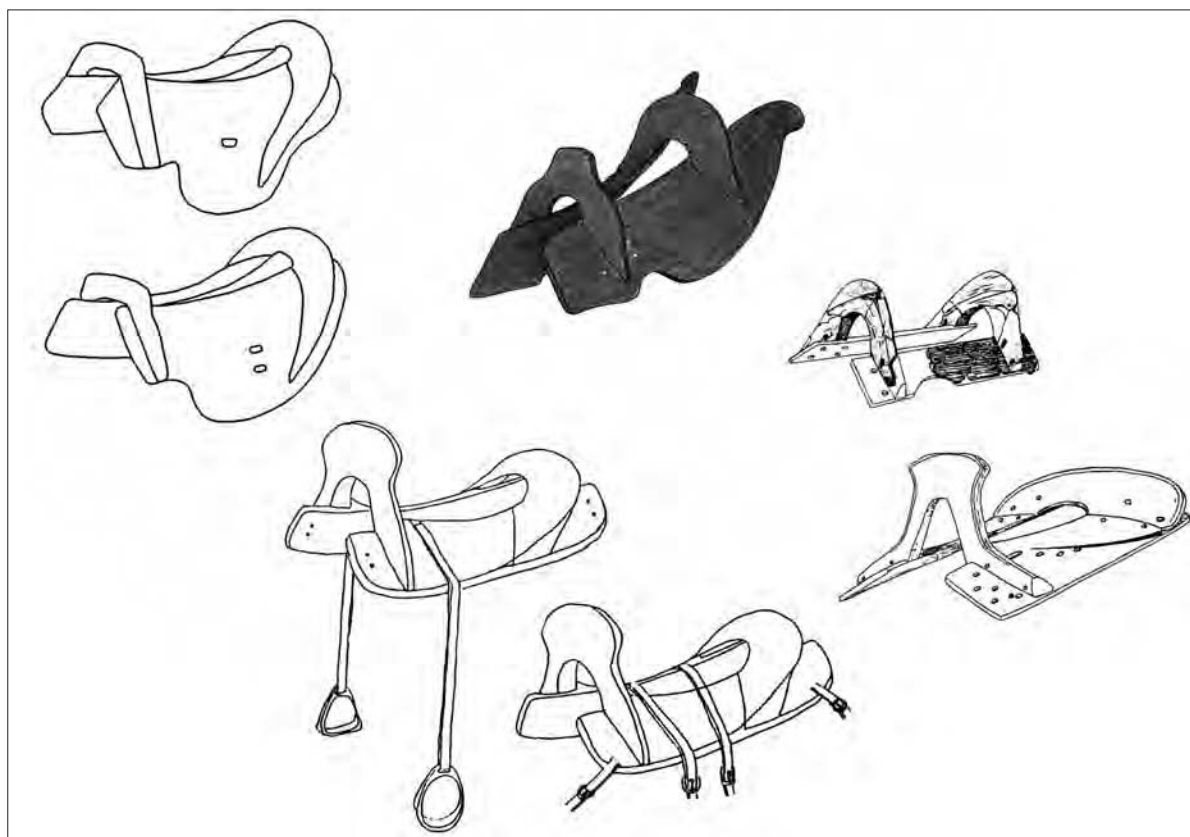


Fig. 2. Saddle from burial A-521 and saddles dated the first third of the second millennium AC from the archeological excavations cemeteries and settlements in Europe (A schematic drawing by Khokhlov).

a symbol of the World Tree or anthropomorphic figure in the centre of this composition; two horses galloping from two sides to the central figure (Plate VII.3). Analogous compositions can be found in folk art of various European peoples in 1-2 millennium AC.

The finds of the Prussian saddles from Aleika-3 burials described above can be viewed as a separate link in the evolutionary chain of saddles typical of the European agricultural peoples and saddles typical of nomad tribes (Fig. 2). Probably the Aleika-3 items got straight high pommels from the former and figured intricately-shaped saddle-trees from the latter.

The significance of these finds pertains to the fact that these wooden saddles and vessels are the first ones found in burial grounds of the medieval Prussians.

The unique artefacts found in Aleika-3 burial ground in 2007 provide principally new information for understanding the details of burial ceremony and daily life of the medieval Prussians and present unique examples of folk painting art and wooden utensils.

#### Brief catalogue of Aleika-3 graves with saddles

**Burial A-502.** One saddle was found in the two-level burial of a rider and a horse A-502. In the lower

level fragments of a wooden saddle were identified on the fragments of horse bones. Saddle-tree details and leather fragments which covered those wooden details are preserved. In addition remains of wooden front and rear pommels (front and rear vertical wooden parts) not covered with leather were revealed. The preserved parts of wooden pommels have remainders of polychromic (multicoloured) geometric ornament in red and black colours against white (yellow?) background (Accurate dimensions of the artefacts can be provided only after the restoration is complete). Fragments of a leather belt with an iron buckle were found under the saddle, and the following was found near the saddle: two iron stirrups, numerous bronze rivets, bronze and tin jingles, bridle plates, an iron bell. The horse skull was in the bucket made of tree bark, a wooden knife for weaving was nearby.

**Burial A-520.** In the two-level burial A-520 the lower level (horse burial) contained saddle fragments including wooden saddle-tree fragments covered with leather, fragments of a wooden front pommel and almost complete wooden rear pommel covered with polychromic subject paintings. The front portion of this detail depicts three circles (probably – solar rosettes). The rear portion of this detail shows a complex composition: a symbol of the World Tree or anthropomorphic figure is depicted in the centre of this composition with two

horses galloping to the figure from two sides. Yellow, red, brown and black colours were used in the painting.

The following was found near the saddle: felt (woollen) horsecloth remains, an iron buckle, fragments of iron stirrup, fragments of leathern bridle belts with tin plates, iron bit with falcate cheek-pieces, bronze jingles, fragments of other bronze items and a wooden flask made at lathe.

**Burial A-521.** In the two-level burial ground A-521 at the lower level (horse burial) a wooden saddle with figured intricately shaped saddle-trees (with fragments of leathern upholstery preserved) and wooden pommel fragments were found near horse bones fragments. Fragments of felt (woollen) horse-cloth or sweat-cloth were found under the saddle. Fragments of iron stirrup, fragments of ceramic vessel, tin plates for harness belts and bronze bells were found nearby.

Currently these artefacts are in restoration in the Moscow Kremlin museum and museum of Gottorf castle in Schleswig (Germany). Upon restoration completion more detailed information will be available regarding these items.

Translated by Maria Khokhlova

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Received: 12 June 2009; Revised: 18 June 2009  
Accepted: 22 June 2009

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## BALNAI IŠ ALEIKOS 3-IOJO (BUVĖS JAUGEHNEN) KAPINYNO SAMBIJOS PUSIASALYJE (PRELIMINARŪS REZULTATAI)

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