

THE ROMAN PERIOD SINGLE-EDGED SWORD FROM THE SZURPIŁY SETTLEMENT (SUWAŁKI REGION, POLAND)

LUDWIKA SAWICKA

Abstract

The find of a fragment of a single-edged sword at the Szurpiły settlement near Suwałki (northeastern Poland) is the main subject of the paper. An attempt to establish the uncertain find circumstances is made, and its meaning for chronological and cultural research of the Suwałki region in the Early Roman Period is considered.

Key words: Szurpiły, Suwalki region, single-edged sword, Early Roman Period.

Find circumstances

Recent research on the prehistory of Baltic peoples has focused on studying archive data. Finds and archives from the *Prussia Museum* discovered in Berlin and Kaliningrad have opened up new possibilities to researchers (cf von Carnap-Bornheim, Ibsen, Valujew 2005; Nowakowski, Lemke 2003). New resources have also been enlarged by the records of archaeologists connected before the Second World War with the Königsberg centre. Most of the materials retrieved for further analysis come from the research done before the war in the area of the former *Ostpreußen*; however, as can be seen on the basis of a fibula from Suchodół (Bitner-Wróblewska 2001, pp.44-45), we may still encounter data referring to finds from the Suwałki region. It appears that not only the legacy of the *Prussia Museum* can provide fascinating finds which have not been known so far. At the beginning of 2006, during clean-up work in the storage rooms of the Institute of Archaeology at Warsaw University, a small collection of finds was discovered. They came from the field research conducted in the late 1950s and early 1960s by Tadeusz Żurowski at various archaeological sites at Szurpiły, in the Suwałki region (Fig. 1). Apart from a few bags of bones from barrows at site 2 in Szurpiły, numerous items of pottery from “Targowisko”, located a few kilometres to the northeast of the cemetery, were also found. Among these finds, there was also a fragment of a single-edged iron sword (Fig. 2).

The find is very well preserved. It consists of the hilt, a part of the blade and the upper locket of the scabbard. The blade is not embellished, it is six centimetres wide, and the length of the preserved part reaches 13 centimetres. The tang curves from the blade one-sidedly, and is ten centimetres long. At the end there are two rivets, one of which is six millimetres in diameter and has an

irregular circular head. The head of the other rivet, four millimetres in diameter, is placed under an iron plate attached over it, and is invisible. The shoulder of the blade is clung by the locket of the scabbard, made of a rectangular four-centimetre-wide plate. At the level of the base of the tang there is a typical semicircular indentation in the locket. The locket was attached to the scabbard with three pairs of rivets approximately four to five millimetres in diameter, invisible from the outside. The width of the blade and the massiveness of the hilt allow us to classify the find as the M. Biborski D/2 type, dated to phase B₂¹ (Biborski 1978, pp.124–128). A few places on the blade, the forge and on the hilt bear traces of some black tar-like substance. It is difficult to determine when and why it appeared on the sword.

The vague circumstances of the discovery of the item make it very difficult to establish the exact context of the sword. The register note attached to it informs us briefly that it is a fragment of an iron sword and that it was found during the field survey at “Targowisko” in 1965. “Targowisko” is now the name of the settlement at site 4 in Szurpiły, a part of a bigger settlement complex (Okulicz-Kozaryn 1993) whose most important element is the settlement at Góra Zamkowa (Szurpiły, site 3). Until recently “Targowisko” was the name of the whole hamlet, consisting of a few farmhouses located within the aforementioned complex. The finds of T. Żurowski at the place called “Targowisko” also include some earthenware. It remains uncertain whether it was collected at the same place as the sword in question because it is difficult to determine what Żurowski interpreted as “Targowisko”. The ceramic assemblage constitutes quite a big collection of fragments of wheel-thrown vessels, so-called grey pottery. There were no

¹ The possibility of dating it to the beginning of phase C_{1a} was also considered, but new research shows that there is no reason to keep this presumption. I am very grateful to Dr Bartosz Kontny for this information.

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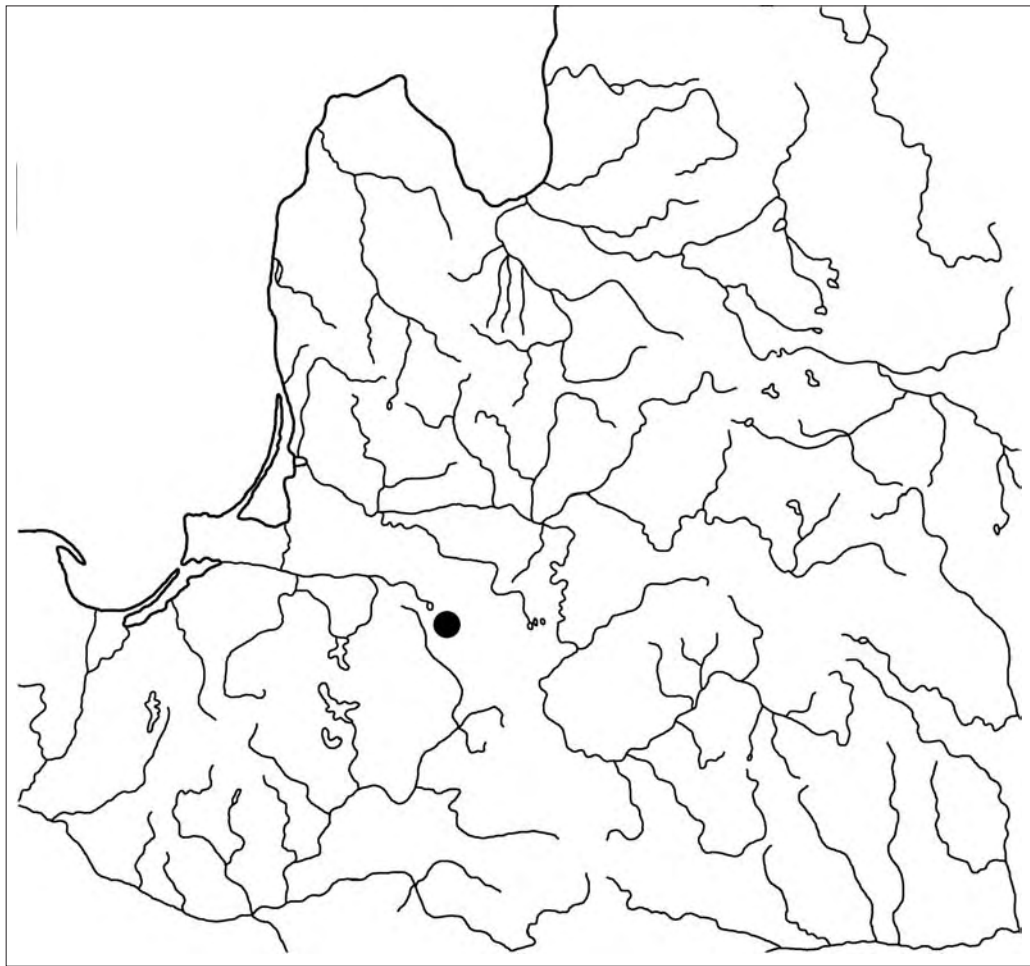


Fig. 1. The location of Szurpiły (drawing by Sawicka).

finds of this kind at the site 4 settlement, presently called “Targowisko”, which is dated to the Early Middle Ages. Thus, whatever Żurowski called “Targowisko” does not comply with the present terminology.

Chronology

Thus we can only conjecture the context of the finding of the single-edged sword from the Szurpiły settlement. Dating it to the younger phase of the Early Roman Period allows us to classify it into an older settlement horizon connected to Stroked Ware Culture (*Strichkeramikultur*). The beginning of this horizon is dated to the turn of the third and second century BC, its end falls at the end of the second century AD, which means that in Szurpiły this one undisturbed phase covers the Early Iron Age and Early Roman Period. During this horizon there was a complex of sites at Szurpiły (Fig. 3). Its centre was located at the hill-fort at Góra Zamkowa (Okulicz-Kozaryn 1993, p.140). At that time it was inhabited and surrounded by a double palisade fence, strengthened by stones. In the hearth of one of the dwelling-houses, traces of craftsman’s activities, casting moulds and pieces of bronze decorations, were

found. Still, as far as the settlement structure is concerned, the applied fortification system corresponds well to similar arrangements known from the areas of Stroked Ware Culture (Grigalavičienė 1995, pp.40-64). Undoubtedly, the pottery corpus dating from the same phase of the settlement also indicates connections to this culture, poorly examined in contemporary Poland (cf Bitner-Wróblewska 1994, p.227; Nowakowski 1995, pp.75-76). Despite the fact that the fortifications and houses in the interior of the hill-fort of Góra Zamkowa had been destroyed twice, settlement continued there until the end of the Early Roman Period, ie until the second century AD, flourishing at the end of this period (Okulicz-Kozaryn 1993, p.140). A number of finds can be linked to this phase. Firstly, an iron spur with big knobs corresponding to Ginalski group A, which should be dated to the end of the Late Pre-Roman Period (Ginalski 1991, p.55). An earlier find is a profiled belt-end fitting, characteristic of the Early Roman Period (Madyda 1977, p.381). Further, fragments of three pins originate in the same settlement phase: two of them are of B. Beckmann type A (Beckmann 1969, p.108, Fig. 1:A). One of the type A pins is made of iron and has a well-preserved head and part of a shaft, the

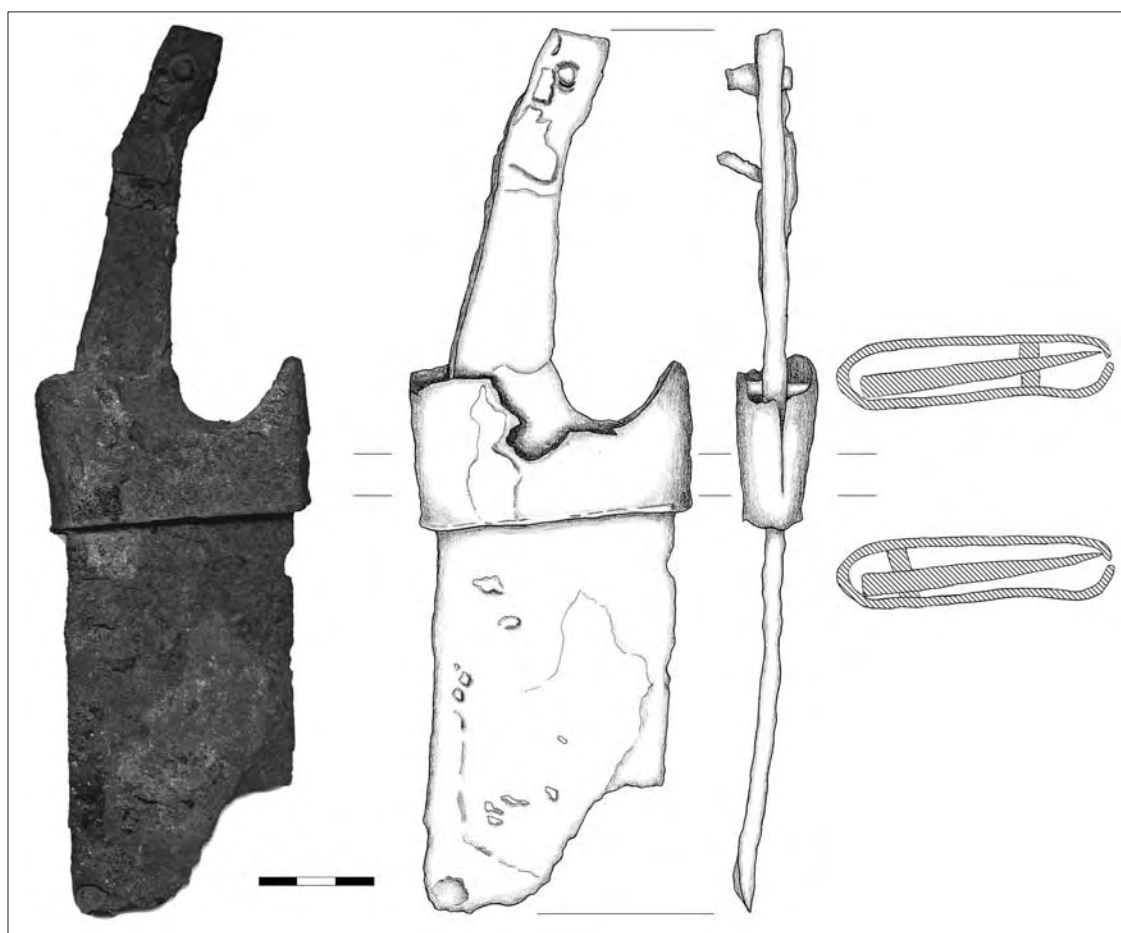


Fig. 2. The single-edged sword from Szurpiły (iron; drawing and photograph by Sawicka).

second one, cast in bronze, has a well-retained shaft but its head is missing, so it can be evaluated as A type only by looking at its base. A-type pins should be dated to an older phase of the Early Roman Period or the beginning of the Late Roman Period (Juga 2003, p.70). The third pin has an ornamented biconical head with a hole, and belongs to B. Beckmann type L, characteristic of the end of the Early Roman Period and of the Late Roman Period (Beckmann 1969, p.111, Fig. 1:L). At the same time, there were a few settlements in the nearby area. In addition to the fortified settlement at Góra Zamkowa, there were three settlements dated to the Early Iron Age (Szurpiły sites 10 and 13, Wodziłki site 1) within the Szurpiły complex known from the field-walking survey.

It is difficult to determine the exact place of finding of the sword in question. It can only be evaluated as a find coming from Szurpiły, and linked to an older horizon of its settlement embracing the Early Iron Age and the Early Roman Period. We can only suppose that it was found on one of the open settlements, because if Żurowski had found it on the hill-fort he would have mentioned this fact.

Szurpiły: cultural dependence and interactions

No matter where exactly the sword was found, it allows us to consider the cultural connections of this area in the time in question. As was already mentioned, the older settlement horizon in Szurpiły, connected with the Early Iron Age and Early Roman Period, seems to be one undisturbed phase, while in the other regions of West Balt lands we can easily distinguish the Early Iron Age and the time after Christ (cf Okulicz 1973). At Szurpiły the rhythm of cultural development appears to be quite different and rather similar to process known from Stroked Ware Culture (cf Luchtanas 1992, pp.74-79; 2001; Grigalavičienė 1995, p.239). The Suwałki region is very difficult to determine in the period we are interested in (Bitner-Wróblewska 1994, p.227). West Balt Barrow Culture, covering Early Iron Age Mazury and Samland, never reached so far to the east. Only single sites are located between the Ełk and Lega rivers (Ł. Okulicz 1970, map). The subsequent Bogaczewo Culture, at the end of the Early Roman Period, also did not cross the Gołdapa and Lega rivers (Engel *et al.* 2006, Fig. 2). Next, Stroked Ware Culture,

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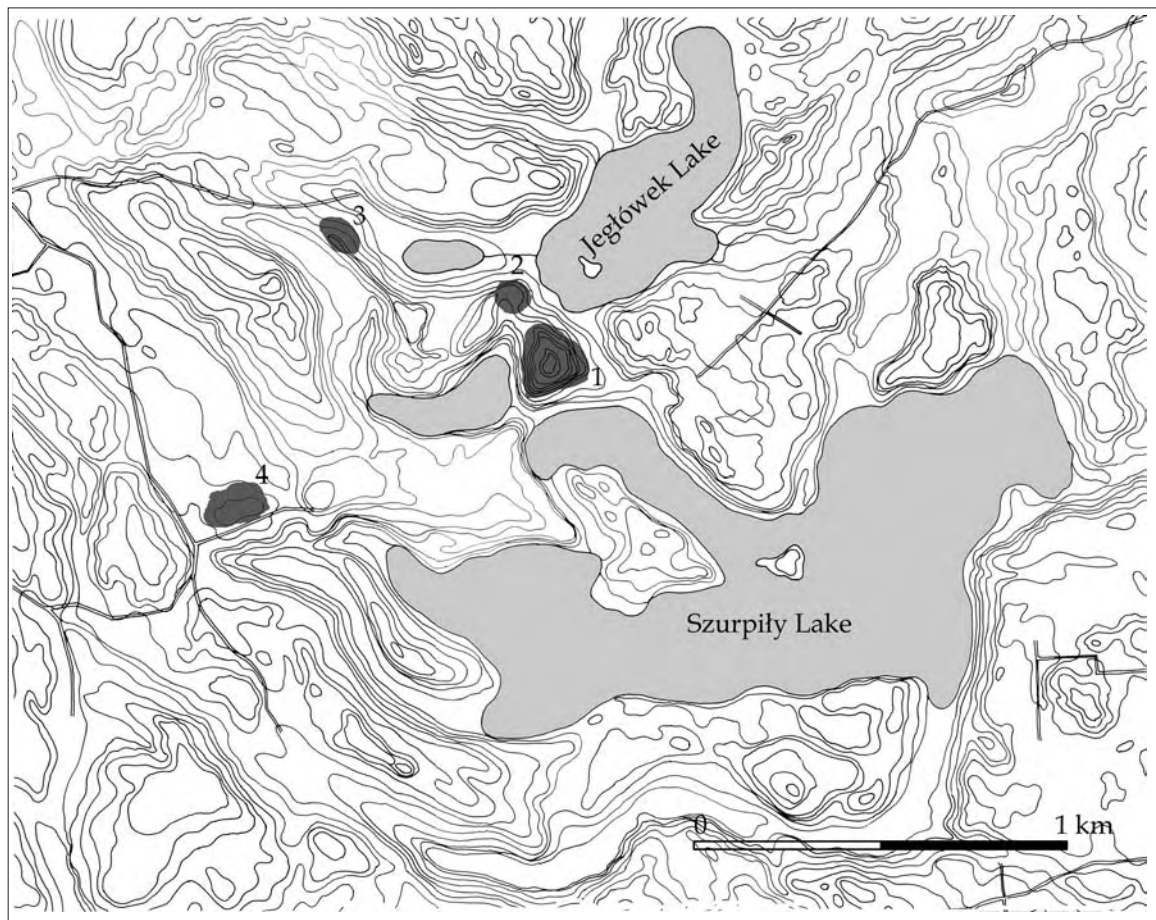


Fig. 3. The Early Iron Age and Early Roman Period settlement horizon at Szurpiły: 1 Góra Zamkowa hill-fort; 2–4 open settlements (drawing by Sawicka).

covering the Early Iron Age and partly the Early Roman Period area of a significant part of modern Lithuania and north Belarus, in principle reached up to the River Nemunas. To the west of this river are located single sites referring to this culture but characterized by local distinctions (Grigalavičienė 1995, Fig. 143).

The most rudimentary indicator which should be taken into consideration when one tries to define the cultural character of Szurpiły complex in its older horizon remains the finds. The ornaments known from the bronze craftsman's dwelling-house resemble finds from Mazury and Samland dated to the third and second century BC (Okulicz-Kozaryn 1993, p.140). The structure of the built-up area and the fortification system correspond with similar sites of Stroked Ware Culture. Also, the pottery found on the hill-fort undoubtedly indicates connections with this culture, but this is not reason enough to automatically identify the Szurpiły complex with it. An additional component making the issue more complicated is the fact that some kinds of artefacts, including potsherds of pottery with imitations of faceted rims, and, first of all, the presented fragment of a sword, confirm long-term connections with distant Przeworsk Culture.

The finding of the sword at Szurpiły is quite unusual for several reasons. There are no other finds of weapons from the Suwałki region dated to the time in question. Also, for other West Balt areas, the sword is quite an untypical kind of artefact (cf W. Nowakowski's paper in this volume). But the most important thing is that it is another proof of the existence of settlements in the Suwałki region during the Early Roman Period. It also seems that one can quite precisely observe here the moment of cultural transformation of this area. At the instant when the population of Szurpiły for several centuries died out, representatives of an utterly different culture, connected with Bogaczewo Culture's expansion, appear at a distance of several kilometres. If it was a chronologically linear change, or if both populations interacted with each other for some time, and if we have evidence of the seizure of the Suwałki region at the turn of Early and Late Roman Period "with fire and – *nomen omen* – the sword", we can say only after further investigations.

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ROMĖNIŠKOJO LAIKOTARPIO VIENAŠMENIS KALAVIJAS IŠ ŠURPILŲ GYVENVIETĖS (SUVALKŲ REGIONAS, LENKIJA)

Ludwika Sawicka

Santrauka

2007 m. pradžioje tvarkant Varšuvos universiteto Archeologijos instituto Archeologijos saugyklos rinkinius, buvo rasta nedidelė radinių kolekcija, kurią surinko inžinierius Tadeusz Żurowski. 6-ojo dešimtmečio pabaigoje – 7-ojo pradžioje T. Żurowski vykdė žvalgomojus tyrinėjimus Šurpilų (Suvalkų apskritis) apylinkėse. Jose yra žinomas gyvenviečių, datuojamų ankstyvojo geležies amžiaus antrąja puse – XIII a., kompleksas (1 pav.). Tvarkant minėtą rinkinį buvo rastas iki tol nežinotas fragmentas vienašmenio geležinio kalavijo, kurio išliko tik rankena su viršutine geležtės dalimi ir makščių apkalais (2 pav.). Geležtės plotis bei rankenos masyvumas leidžia rastąjį kalavijo fragmentą skirti D/2 tipui, pagal M. Biborskio tipologiją, ir jį datuoti B2 periodu. Dėl duomenų stokos sunku nustatyti tiksliai šio kalavijo radimo vietą. Tačiau jo tipologija (D/2 tipas) rodo, kad radinys yra susijęs su ankstyviausiuoju Šurpilų gyvenviečių horizontu, kuris greičiausiai priklauso brūkšniuotosios keramikos kultūros periferinei zonai. Šiuo laikotarpiu Šurpiluose buvo gyvenamas Zamkowa Góra piliakalnis ir trys atvirojo tipo gyvenvietės netoliese (3 pav.).

Tai pirmas ankstyvojo romėniškojo laikotarpio kalavijas, žinomas iš Suvalkų regiono. Ankstyvuojų romėniškojo laikotarpio vakarų baltų gentims, kaip ir brūkšniuotosios keramikos kultūros atstovams, kalavijai nebuvo būdingi. Vis dėlto svarbiausia, kad aptariamasis vienašmenis kalavijas leidžia svarstyti apie ankstyvojo romėniškojo laikotarpio Suvalkų regiono kultūrinę priklausomybę ir jo ryšius su brūkšniuotosios keramikos kultūros, Bogačevo ir Pševorsko kultūrų žmonėmis.

Lietuviškai parašė Ludwika Sawicka

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