

VI. WEAPONS: THEIR SIGNIFICANCE AND SYMBOLISM

WEAPONS IN IRON AGE WOMEN'S GRAVES

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Abstract

Female graves, which contain a wholly unfeminine or male-related grave inventory, and not only a single item, are discussed in this paper. The main intention is not to describe in great detail these graves, but rather, by removing them from the context, to approach them as possible archaeological evidence of cross-dressing. Drawing on different historical parallels, a tentative explanation is suggested following two supposed inspirations for cross-dressing: cross-dressing by military consideration, and cross-dressing by cultural consideration.

Key words: women warriors, cross-dressing, Iron Age, Lithuania.

Introduction

In 1997 and 1998, I excavated the Roman Period burial mound cemetery near Vaineikiai village. Several graves were furnished with a male-related inventory, composed of grave goods such as axes and spearheads. Accordingly, these graves were attributed to male individuals (Figs. 1-3). **The conclusion of anthropologists**, however, was different. They sexed these individuals as females. Initially, I did not pay attention to this discrepancy, supposing it was a result of accidental methodical discordance.

But later I found it was worth discussing in the light of the widespread phenomenon of cross-dressing. By the term “cross-dressing” I imply graves with skeletons that, according to the criteria of physical anthropology, have the traits of one sex, yet are associated with grave goods linked culturally with the opposite gender. Female graves, which contain a wholly unfeminine or male-related grave inventory, and not only a single item, will be discussed. My intention is not to describe in great detail these graves, but rather, by removing them from the context, to approach them as possible archaeological evidence of cross-dressing. Drawing on different historical parallels, a tentative explanation is suggested following two supposed inspirations for cross-dressing: cross-dressing by military consideration, and cross-dressing by cultural consideration.

A man or a woman?

Comparative research on archaeological and anthropological data from the Iron Age skeleton graves was car-

ried out in order to find how common this phenomenon is among Lithuanian archaeological material. The research comprises about 1,000 anthropologically examined inhumations from 74 localities and makes up 70% of all the skeletal collection from the Iron Age which is stored in the Faculty of Anatomy and Histology of Vilnius University.

When looking at archaeological evidence, 35% of graves were furnished with male-related artefacts, 32% individuals were buried with female grave goods, and 33% were attributed to individuals of indeterminate sex (this relates only to mature individuals). Comparing archaeological evidence with anthropological conclusions, the scenario is different. First of all, the number of individuals with determined sex (and age) increased at the expense of archaeologically undetermined individuals (50% male, 43% female, 6.5% indeterminate). Secondly, some males and females appeared to be individuals of the opposite sex and a different age. In turn, more than half of the anthropologically undetermined individuals were sexed by the grave goods that they had been furnished with.

So which kind of evidence do we have to trust? Archaeological sex determination, or sexing of individuals by artefacts over anthropological sex, is more common and has a long tradition in (not only) Lithuanian archaeology. Furthermore, the attitude towards the results of anthropological analysis is biased: when archaeological and anthropological determinations differ, the decisive word belongs to the former; however, when a grave lacks gender-related objects, one tends to be reliant on the anthropological data.

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Fig. 1. Grave 3 *in situ* from Vaineikiai barrow 2. Anthropologically female, age 20–25 (photograph by Simniškytė).

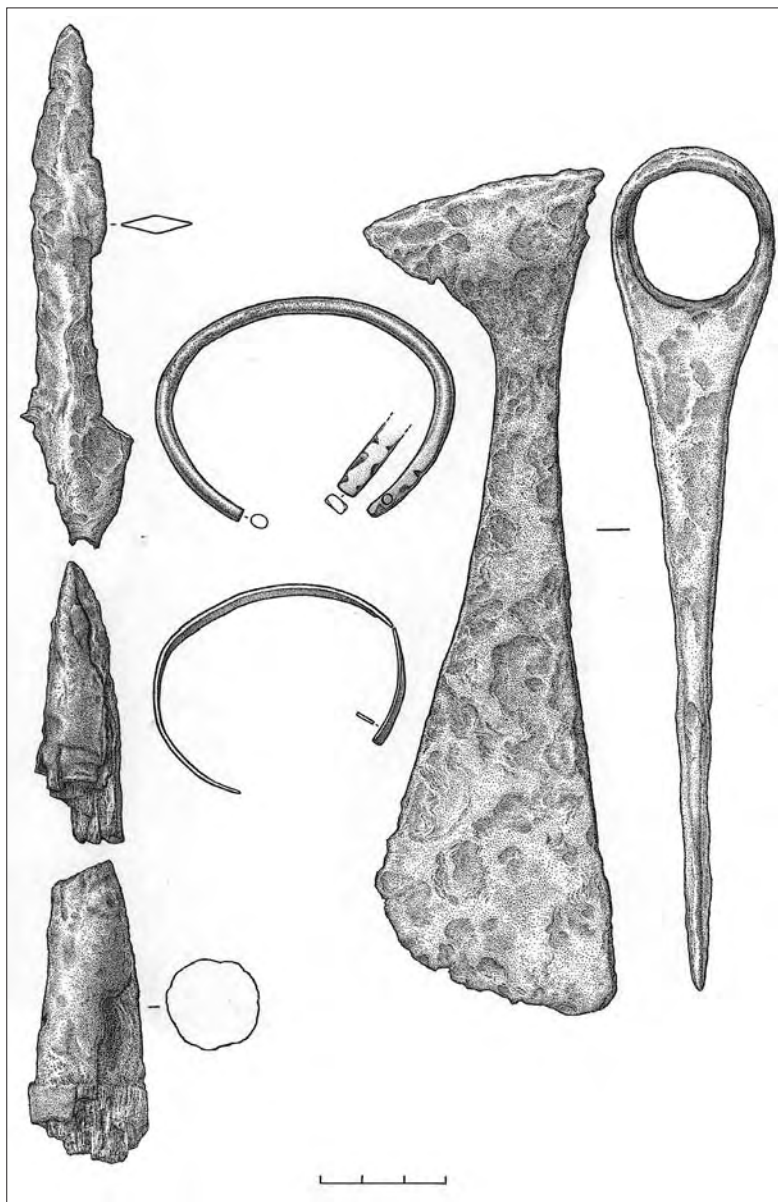


Fig. 2. Grave inventory from Vaineikiai barrow 2, grave 3 (iron spearhead; bronze bracelets and iron axe) (drawn by I. Maciukaitė).

Earlier, only skulls were arbitrarily selected, and this, along with the lack of other well-preserved bone material, is one of the main shortcomings of anthropological sexing. Nonetheless, methods have become more accurate, since investigations have been carried out on the sex of the deceased not only by the skulls, but also by pelvis characteristics, as well as the remaining bone material. Besides, some of the graves were looked through thoroughly several times. Sex polarization, based on labour division and biological sexing, is not perfect when considering the socio-cultural context. Discussions about a third gender or transgender started not very long ago, but evidence of it is very long established. All these are reasons not to dismiss the reliability of anthropological sex determination.

one should not forget that, historically, women who have participated in combat usually did so disguised as men. Openly female warriors were very rare (Goldstein 2001). Cross-dressing into a military appearance occurred under various circumstances and motives. This was necessary, while serving as a soldier in otherwise all-male armies, for protecting or disguising their identity in dangerous circumstances, for seeking more rights and liberties, or for other purposes. Some women believed in the military cause, being more or less adventuresses, others joined only to remain close to their husbands or boyfriends, or because of filial love or motherly devotion.

Cross-dressing might also have been a result of approaching danger. It was recorded in the oldest chronicles by Duisburg:

As a result of this research, about 30 graves of females furnished in a not-feminine way were established. Skeletal material is sometimes well preserved, sometimes not. Consequently, we must admit some rate of anthropological sexing error for some of them, given that they were determined to a different level of certainty. However, if at least one of these individuals is really a female, this phenomenon is worth discussing in more depth.

The majority of graves were from the Roman Iron Age and Migration Period, when inhumation prevailed throughout Lithuania. Among them, one grave from Kalniškiai cemetery was excavated by Vytautas Kazakevičius (Figs. 4 and 5). Half of the graves were found in the biggest excavated cemetery in central Lithuania, Marvelė cemetery. Some graves were from later periods and could be dated to the eighth to 12th centuries.

Cross-dressing by military consideration

The deceased were buried in a masculine way, including not only the grave goods, but also their position within the grave or the orientation of the deceased. Thus these female graves look absolutely like burials of men-warriors. Although these occasions occur rarely in archaeology,

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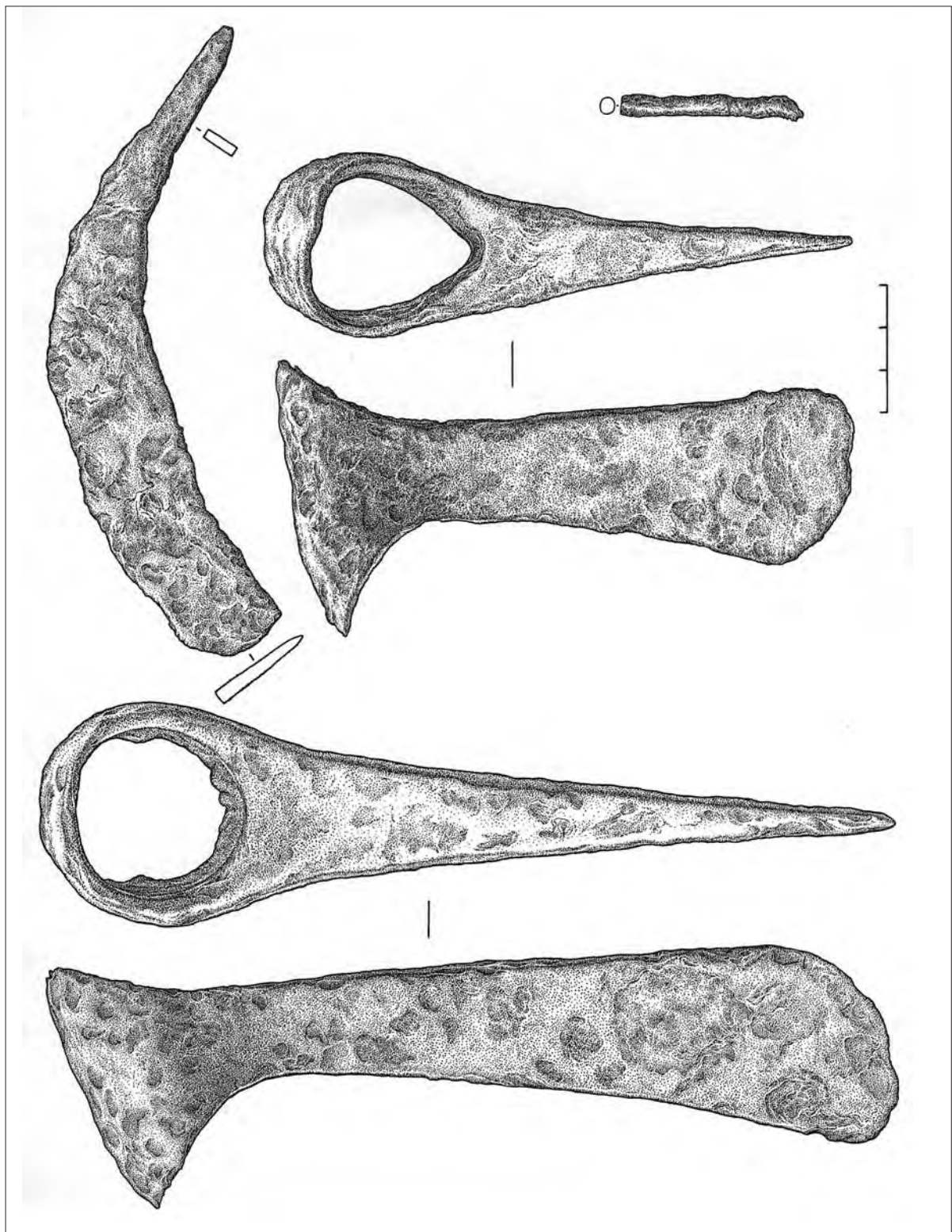


Fig. 3. Grave inventory from Vaineikiai barrow 1, grave 1 (iron axes, iron sickle, fragment of iron pin?). Anthropologically female (?), age 30–50 (drawn by I. Maciukaitė).

“Seeing this, the women [of Elbling] laying aside feminine adornment, put on a male frame of mind, girded swords upon the thigh and ascended the battlements, comporting themselves so manfully for their defence, that nowhere was the weakness of their sex apparent” (Dusburgietis 1985, p.119, quoted in Mažeika 1998).

This tale by Peter Duisburg might be accepted as anecdotal and inventional for the sake of showing the superiority of Christianity over paganism (Christian women were stronger than pagan men!). However, the elements of cross-dressing should be approached as not purely fictional. In small frontier towns protected by garrisons of a few Teutonic Knights there is

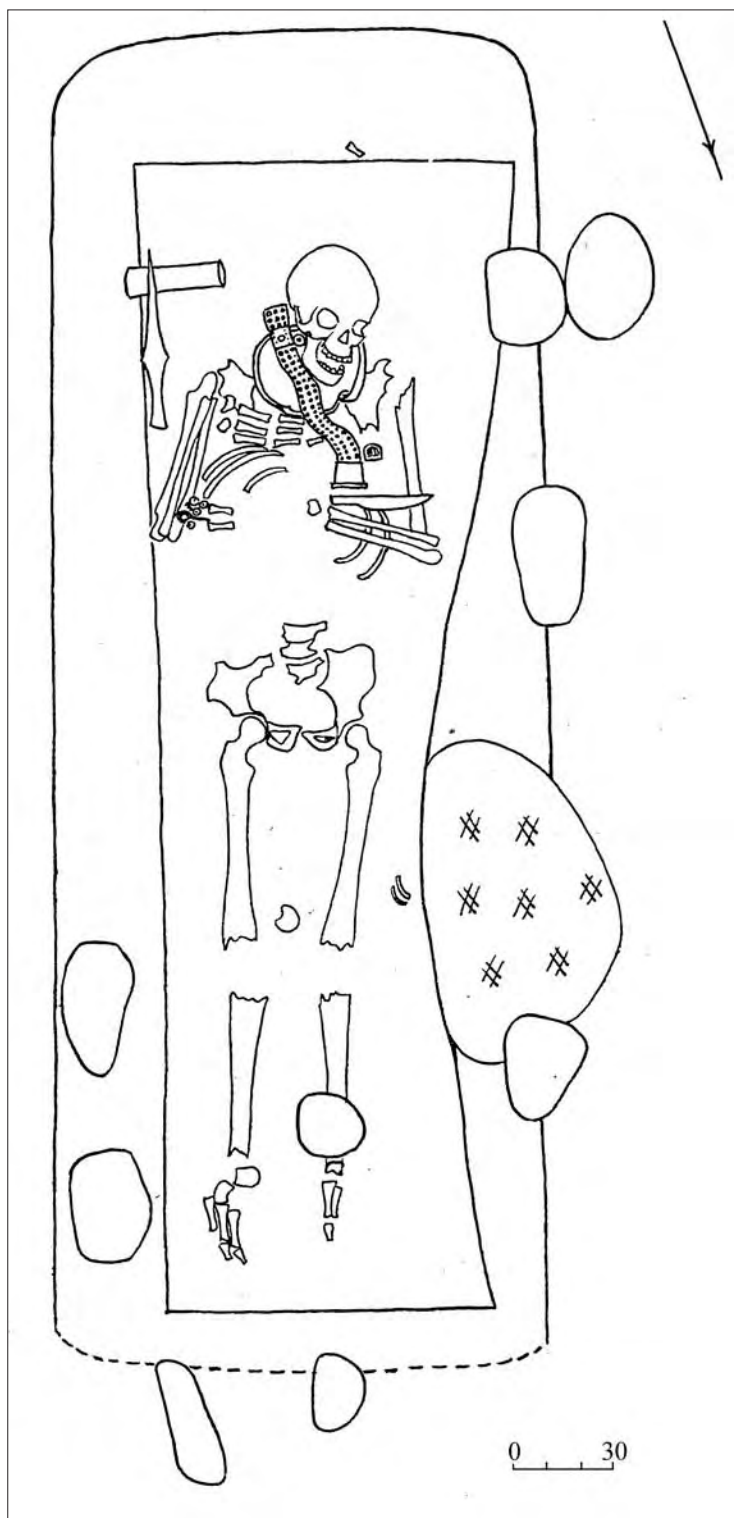


Fig. 4. Grave 13 from Kalniškiai cemetery. Anthropologically female (?), age 35–40 (after V. Kazakevičius; Archive of the Lithuanian History Institute, 11688).

no reason not to believe that they were not protected by the remaining people, including women, when the knights made raids into surrounding territory, taking the townsmen with them as auxiliaries and leaving the castle town undefended (Mažeika 1998, p.234). Redressing was necessary, not only to feel comfortable

during combat, but also to *mislead and frighten the assaulters*, in this case disguising themselves as men during the absence of real men. Henry of Livonia also recorded the role of women in the defence of a town (LK 1991, p.67; Mažeika 1998, p.235). Though he did not mention cross-dressing, it might have been performed as well. Village defence by women alone is well known from ethnographic examples as well (Hollimon 2001, p.187).

The name of Amazons has survived through the ages as a generic term for women with some sense of virility. So-called Scythian Amazonian burials on the Russian and Ukraine steppes contained arrowheads of various types, iron points of spears, darts and sometimes swords; further, the female skeletons exhibit physical evidence of violence (Gilchrist 1999, p.67; Guliaev 2003, p.115). However, apart from the above-mentioned, the skeletons were furnished with purely female objects (bronze mirror, iron awl, some ornaments).

Though women's burials containing weapons were rare, they are sporadically known from different countries (Lehtosalo-Hilander 1982, p.36f.; Mägi 2002, p.77ff. and 131f.; Kastholm Hansen, Lauritsen 2003; Vaškevičiūtė 2006), while archaeological evidence of total cross-dressing is insignificant since it can be established only under certain circumstances.

Two burials at the Roman military cemetery at Brougham (Great Britain) were burned on a pyre with horses and fittings from sword scabbards. Both were provided with other goods, such as a silver bowl, ivory object, glass vessel, etc, which indicated that the individuals were cavalry officers. After anthropological examination, they appeared to be probably females in their 20s and 30s (Cool 2005).

In Dover-Buckland burials from around 400 to 600 AD containing grave goods not corresponding to the osteological sex determination were excavated. Three females among them were buried with spears, and one with a shield boss (Gilchrist 1999, Fig. 4.1). The same was true in West Heselton, where osteology determined that three weapon burials with spears were female (Lucy 1997, p.159).

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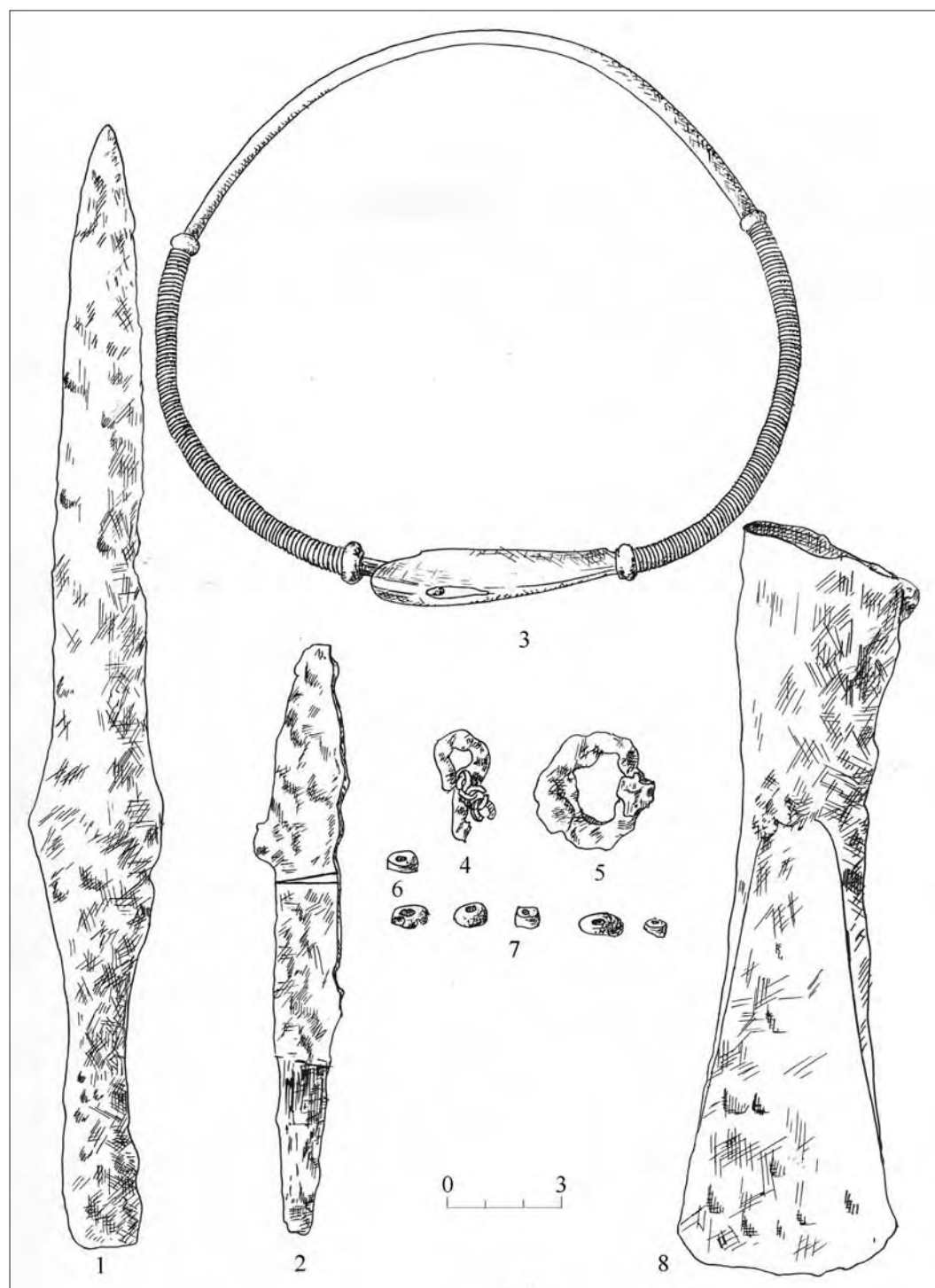


Fig. 5. Grave inventory from Kalniškiai cemetery grave 13: 1 spearhead; 2 knife; 3 neck-ring; 4 pin; 5 buckle; 6, 7 beads; 8 axe (1, 2, 4, 5 and 8 iron; 3 bronze; 6, 7 amber) (after V. Kazakevičius; Archive of the Lithuanian History Institute, 11739).

“Masculine” items in female graves are explained as evidence of gifts (Šnore 1996, p.123, see also Langdon 2005, p.11), secondary utilization of objects which lost their primary function (eg Härke 1990; Halsall 1996, p.7f.; Gilchrist 1999, p 69), double graves with female and male burials mixed together, or even transvestite (the princess of Vix is the famous example) (Gilchrist 1999, p.70).

A functional attitude is also proposed, eg “woman-trader” (Stalsberg 1991), “woman-moulder” (Golubeva 1984; Vaškevičiūtė 2000), “woman-hunter” (Dommasnes 1982, p.77). The subsequent question is whether these archaeological examples indicate warfare activity. The explanation of woman-warrior is more credible when we look at female graves which contain a wholly unfeminine or male-related grave inventory, not only a single item. However, some scholars have suggested that there is no necessary connection

between the weapon-burial rite and the actual experience of fighting. Obviously, weapons are associated with warfare, but they might bring a slightly different connotation and symbolize other things as well: legal status, social status, etc (Härke 1990; Stoodley 2000, p.467; Kastholm Hansen, Lauritsen 2003; Langdon 2005, p.5). In Estonia, for example, a spear or javelin in female graves is explained as a sign that marks the borderline between this world and the Beyond (Mägi 2002, p.78 and p.131f.). The custom of fastening coffins with spearheads has been recorded in Finnish archaeological material (Wickholm 2006). Military activity sometimes tends to be doubted even for the Amazons or other mythical female heroines-warriors when considering their appearance and behaviour. It is proposed that both their weaponry (bow and arrows) and fighting style are more common to hunters than to warriors.

Thus, the military and manlike appearance of females is hard to explain unambiguously. As we are talking about burials, we should not forget the ideological filter. Military activity could be one, but not the only, interpretation.

Cross-dressing by cultural consideration

Sometimes these “unusual” items are explained as a “husband’s symbol” (Randsborg 1984, p.152), which declares the family position (ie the status of the male) rather than indicating evidence of powerful women with autonomy and property (Czarnecka 1990, p.109; Edwards 1995; Halsall 1996; Strömberg 1998).

However, the special status of a deceased is also assumed (Halsall 1996; Langdon 2005, p.4f.; Carol 1993, p.368). It is acquired under certain circumstances, eg during the absence of a virtual agent (in this case a male individual) (Dommasnes 1982, p.83; Pawleta 2003).

There is a big group of stories from different countries describing women-warriors, named “maiden warriors”, “shield maidens” etc: “There were once women in Denmark who dressed themselves to look like men and spent almost every minute cultivating soldiers’ skills ...” (Saxo Grammaticus, *History of the Danes*, seventh book, quoted in Clover 1986, p.35).

Being a woman-warrior means a woman who repudiates marriage, dresses and arms at least for a time as a man, and enrolls in martial life, ie she repudiates her femaleness by taking on the appearance, behaviour and name of a male (Clover 1986, p.36f.).

In explaining the woman-warrior, however, the military perspective is of secondary importance. The primary and the central message is that cross-dressing helps to

mask a gap within a patrimonial line. The principle of male inheritance was so powerful that when it necessarily passed through the female, she had to become a functional son (Clover 1986, p.39). This concerns not only valuables and land, but also ancestral spirit and emphatically “male” qualities. A female can inherit all these qualities, which have to be passed down from dead ancestors (fathers) to unborn sons, only disguised as a man.

Stories about cross-dressers, “maiden warriors”, have been classified as fantasy because they were for the most part found in “fictional” sources, such as the Old Icelandic sagas. However, a collective fantasy has much to tell us about the society that produced it. Moreover, the above-mentioned interpretation concerning woman’s inheritance role finds confirmation in more reliable sources, such as the earliest Icelandic legal codex (*Grágás*) or Norwegian Gulaqing Law. Drawing on them and other historical parallels, it becomes clear that the main prerequisite for a female in order to become a surrogate son and be involved in the line of inheritance was “to be the only child of a dead man”. Thus, when a male inheritor was absent the law institutionalised the female exceptions and guaranteed “a son” status to a certain woman (Clover 1986, p.45ff.; 1993, p.369 and 370).

In the Balkans, when a family lacks a male heir, it is not uncommon for a daughter to dress in men’s clothes, take on his duties and be treated as a male by her family (Clover 1986, p.43ff.; Gilchrist 1999, p.58).

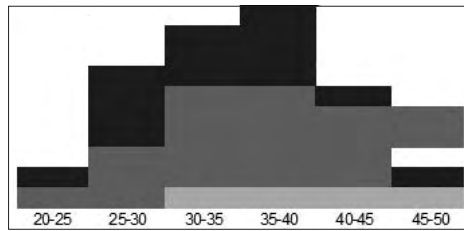
Another leading point is the duration of cross-dressing, which was only temporary. After some time, a woman usually returned to her womanly lifestyle: “... ceases to fight after having grown weary of being out with a band of Vikings, and she returns home to do fine work with her hands” (*Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* in Norrman 2000, p.381).

The majority of narrative memory and historical documents guarantee “son” status to a young woman who is unmarried and has no children. When she finally marries, however, her special status ceases and she becomes, in the eye of the law and the eye of the public “a woman like other women” (Clover 1993, p.369f.). In Baltic territory, according to the Christburg Treaty, being single is an important precondition to be on a list of land inheritors (Gudavičius 2002, p.104f.).

It is assumed that cross-dressing into a military appearance is more common to young women – virgin – in the liminal period between adolescence and womanhood (Edwards 1995, p.252f.; Norrman 2000, p.381). The lack of awareness of their own sexuality contributes to their not having found their “gender-identity” and being

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somewhere between genders or transgender (Norrman 2000).

A direct application of these explanations to archaeological evidence is not always possible. None of these buried females were young enough to put them into the 15 to 20 age group. The majority of the women were 25 to 40 years old (see diagram). Previously, it was maintained that Scythian Amazons in southern Russia and Ukraine were young virgins, but lately it has become apparent that they also included childbearing women (Terenozkin, Iljinskaja 1983, p.179; Guliaev 2003, p.115).

Ages of females buried with a male-related inventory

Carol Clover has speculated that some of these women could have realized the undesirable thing that “to marry would mean that her father’s wergild would become forfeit to her kinsmen and her patrimony subject to a husband’s control” (Clover 1986, p.47) and this made them reluctant to marry. It would be a rational, profitable and deeply modern solution. However, it is barely credible for the ancient past.

The absence of man is extremely difficult or, rather, impossible to prove. The graves of female warriors *per se* do not prove that no male heir existed. One of the excavated barrows with one woman-warrior in Vaineikiiai contained six graves, two unidentified, the other four all female. Another mound, however, contained deceased of both sexes.

Nevertheless, the extension of women’s responsibilities because of the men’s absence had been declared long ago (Dommasnes 1982, p.81ff.; Stalsberg 1991). Women, however, have been assumed to play an active role in their own female sphere, ie economic and domestic areas during the temporary absence of man.

Cross-dressing reveals a different role, when a female enters the field of male activity. Cross-dressing might have been performed due to the permanent absence of a man when a woman became the only provider and defender of a family, undertaking the responsibility and obligations which were normally carried out by a man. It was a result not of independent and even challenging

decisions made by a woman, but as a necessity implied by society. The woman did not herself choose the male role, but she is, by custom and circumstance, chosen for it. This is not the female volition but the power of the patrilineal principle in a male-dominated society.

Translated by A. Siminiškytė, revised by Jos Stratford

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Received: 15 January 2007; Revised: 5 September 2007

GINKLAI GELEŽIES AMŽIAUS MOTERŲ KAPUOSE

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Santrauka

Straipsnyje nagrinėjami galimi kultūrinės lyties pakeitimo, arba „persirengimo“, atvejai Lietuvos kapų medžiagoje. Tyrimo objektu pasirinkti tie kapai, kurių

inventorius niekuo nesiskiria nuo vyrų kapų, tačiau antropologinė medžiaga priskirta moterims. Palyginus archeologines ir antropologines išvadas, iširta maždaug 30 „vyriška maniera“ įrengtų moterų kapų su ginklais.

Vienos lyties radiniai priešingos lyties kapuose archeologinėje literatūroje interpretuojami įvairiai. Straipsnyje trumpai aptariamos kelios tokių palaidojimų atsiradimo priežastys: tiesioginė moterų veikla karinė ir kultūrinės (paprotinės) tradicijos.

Moterys „karės“ – plačiai paplitęs, istoriniuose, mitologiniuose, literatūriniuose šaltiniuose dažnas reiškinys. Karinėje sferoje dalyvavusios moterys vaizduojamos „apsimetusios“ vyrais, t. y. persirengusios, nedemonstruojančios savo moteriškumo. Tai buvo daroma patogumo, saugumo sumetimais, taip pat siekiant apgauti priešą ar sulaužant egzistuojančias normas.

Archeologinių paralelių nėra labai daug. Netgi vadinamosios skitų „amazonės“ buvo palaidotos su mišriu (vyrams bei moterims būdingu) inventoriumi. „Moteriška maniera“ įrengti moterų kapai su viena ar keliomis vyrams būdingomis įkapėmis archeologijoje pasitaiko santykinai dažnai. Tačiau vargu ar šie vyriški atributai yra esminiai moters veiklos apibrėžime ir gali būti interpretuojami kaip moters-karės priklausiniai. Moterų karių kapai labiau tiktų vadinti straipsnyje aptariamus „vyriškų“ atributų gausius moterų kapus. Tačiau ginklai – neabejotinai karinės sferos požymiai – nebūtinai reiškia vien tik karinę praktiką. Neneigtinos ir kitos – socialinė, teisinė, prestižo ir kt. – ginklų reikšmės.

Vienos lyties inventorius priešingos lyties kape simbolizuoja specifinį statusą, kuris yra įgyjamas tam tikromis aplinkybėmis. Vienoje iš jų moters-karės įvaizdis siejamas su materialinių ar dvasinių vertybių paveldėjimo (perėmimo) tradicijomis. Vyriškosios linijos paveldėjimo sistemoje moteris eliminuota. Tačiau nesant vyriškosios lyties įpėdinio, paveldėtoja tampa moteris. Tai padaryti galima tik apgaunant tradicijas ir persirengiant arba apsimitant vyru. „Funkcionaliu sūnumi“ tapti galėjo tik laikinai ir tik netekėjusi bei vaikų neturinti dukra. Jai ištekėjus, vertybės pereinavo jos vyrui ir sūnums.

Moters vaidmens iškilimas išvykus vyrui – archeologinėje literatūroje seniai išvirtinęs, nors praktikoje sunkiai įrodomas teiginys. Be to, Lietuvos „amazonės“ buvo subrendusios moterys. Todėl straipsnyje pateikiamos vyro vaidmens ir išvaizdos perėmimo interpretacijos turėtų būti vertinamos ne tiesiogiai, o tik kaip galimos gairės. Vis dėlto kapų medžiagoje matomas „lyties pakeitimas“ byloja, jog tam tikromis aplinkybėmis moteriai būdavo leista „įžengti į vyriškąją sferą“, ir tai vykdavo ne jos pačios noru, bet buvo tradicijų ir visuomenės suformuota pareiga.

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