

THE MEANING OF WEAPONS AS GRAVE GOODS: EXAMPLES FROM TWO SOUTHWEST FINNISH CRUSADE PERIOD CEMETERIES

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Abstract

The various ways of interpreting the meaning of battle-axes and swords as grave goods are discussed. Two Finnish Crusade Period (1050–1200AD) inhumation cemeteries (Kirkkomäki in Turku and Rikalanmäki in Halikko) are presented as a case study. Both swords and battle-axes in these cemeteries had several meanings: they were effective weapons, but also important symbols of the wealth and status of their owners and community. They also had other symbolic and magical dimensions, which were important in the burial ritual.

Key words: weapon, sword, battle-axe, Crusade Period, Late Iron Age, grave goods.

Introduction

Artefacts can have various functions: practical, aesthetic, magic, protective, etc. When interpreting artefacts as grave goods and part of a burial ritual, several aspects should be kept in mind. The artefacts could have been possessions of the deceased, and in that way they can reflect his/her role or status. On the other hand, it is always important to note that it was the living who acted in the burial ritual. Even if it is hard to verify what choices were made by the community that buried the deceased, it is important to ask what they wanted to express (eg Jensen, Højlund Nielsen 1997, p.34f.; Parker Pearson 2003, p.83ff.). Was the purpose, for example, to express status, wealth, the role of the deceased in real life, some ideal state, or the status of the family or kin? The funeral is as much a ceremony for the mourners as it is for the dead, and one purpose was to heal the rupture that was caused by a person's death. There is an idealising element in the funerary rite: the way in which a person was buried does not necessarily reflect the life of the deceased but the impact of the death (Hakenbeck 2004, p.50). Grave goods could also be gifts and thereby related to the relationship between the survivors and the donor (King 2004; Mäntylä 2005b, p.148ff.). Every artefact which was placed in the grave was an active choice by people carrying out the burial. The symbolic meaning of artefacts was an important aspect of these choices (Mäntylä 2005a; 2005b).

The interpretation of symbols is made difficult by their ambiguity. The same object or combination of objects may have a different meaning in a different context (Pader 1982, pp.20 and 35). In other words, one ob-

ject can have several different symbolic meanings, and several different objects can share the same symbolic meaning. Because of that, various forms of similarity and difference in context are important in interpretations (Hodder 1987, p.6ff.; Shanks, Hodder 1995, p.14f.). Since different beliefs and magical properties have been associated with so many artefacts (knives, axes, fire-steels, coins, beads, etc) repeatedly found in graves, it would actually be possible to ask whether artefacts in burial contexts were ever solely what they were in a practical function.

In this article I will discuss the various ways of interpreting the meaning, especially symbolic meaning, of the battle-axes and swords occurring as grave goods in the Late Iron Age in southwest Finland. The starting point for the interpretations is that when comparing cemeteries, a lot of differences in burial customs can be noticed, especially regarding the grave goods, and even in cemeteries situated very near each other (eg Mäntylä 2005a, p.124f.). Whether or not a sword or a battle-axe was chosen as grave goods in the Late Iron Age was presumably affected by the sum of numerous factors. At least the following considerations may have applied: 1) Christianization – the general decrease of grave goods; 2) a decrease in the deposition of weapons in graves for other reasons near the end of the Iron Age; 3) the local weapon tradition – the significance of the sword or the battle-axe in the weaponry; 4) local symbolic meanings – the internal symbolic codes of the society, relating to different weapon types and weapons in general. These meanings may also have changed over time. There have been regional and local differences regarding the number of weapons and the weapon combinations in graves, as well as the number



Fig. 1. The locations of Turku/Kirkkomäki and Halikko/Rikalanmäki cemeteries in southwest Finland. Both cemeteries are situated in river valleys of southwest Finland: Kirkkomäki on the bank of the River Aurajoki, and Rikalanmäki on the bank of the River Halikonjoki.

of weapon burials. The various forms of weaponry, especially when used as grave goods, most probably reflect a range of local values, traditions and symbolism.

Rikalanmäki and Kirkkomäki cemeteries

The Late Iron Age inhumation cemeteries of Kirkkomäki in Turku and Rikalanmäki in Halikko (Fig. 1) were chosen as a case study in analysing the meaning of weapons within a community using a certain cemetery. These cemeteries can both be dated, on the basis of artefacts (eg coins, see Talvio 2002, pp.168 and 174-176), to the 11th and 12th centuries. Most of the graves belong to the last Iron Age period in Finland, the Crusade Period. In southwest Finland this dates from circa 1050 to around the year 1200. The Crusade Period was a period of transition, as Christianity started to strongly influence the burial customs. The first step was the change from cremation to inhumation. This happened in the area of Finland proper at the beginning of the 11th century. During the same time, the number of grave goods started to decline, and finally they disappeared totally. Anyway, there are cemeteries, such as Rikalanmäki and Kirkkomäki, with richly furnished graves as late as the 12th century. Especially the quantity of weapons in these cemeteries is exceptional for the Crusade Period, when weapons as grave goods were becoming rarer as a result of Christian influences.

The unfurnished Christian burial custom was already partly in use in the surrounding areas of Kirkkomäki and Rikalanmäki. Christianization was a long process and the transition to the Christian burial custom took place at a different rate (Purhonen 1998, p.135ff.). It can be assumed that changes happened even farm by farm. In the Crusade Period, the old beliefs and the new Christian faith acted side by side, and old customs and beliefs remained in use long after the adoption of Christianity.

The main part of the Rikalanmäki inhumation cemetery area was excavated by archaeologist Jorma Leppäaho in 1950–1951 and 1953 (Fig. 2). Unfortunately, part of the cemetery had been severely damaged during construction work before the excavation. The total number of burials is not known exactly, but according to the excavation report, 44 graves were observed. There are 19 or 20 male burials in Rikalanmäki, and no less than 14 graves contained weapons. In ten graves there was a sword, which is more than in any Finnish Crusade Period cemetery. In addition, two swords have been found as stray finds on the hill. Also nine spearheads and three broad-bladed battle-axes occur in the graves or as stray finds. Ten of the Rikalanmäki swords have a disk- or wheel-shaped pommel. In Finland approximately 40 examples of such swords have been found (Tomanterä 1978, p.23). It is important to note that the swords with wheel pommels in the 11th and 12th century burials in Halikko did alter the dating of this weapon type. Generally, the popularity of this pommel type has been associated with the 13th century and onwards, ie

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Fig. 2. Excavations taking place at Rikalanmäki in 1950 (photograph: the archive of A. Nummela).

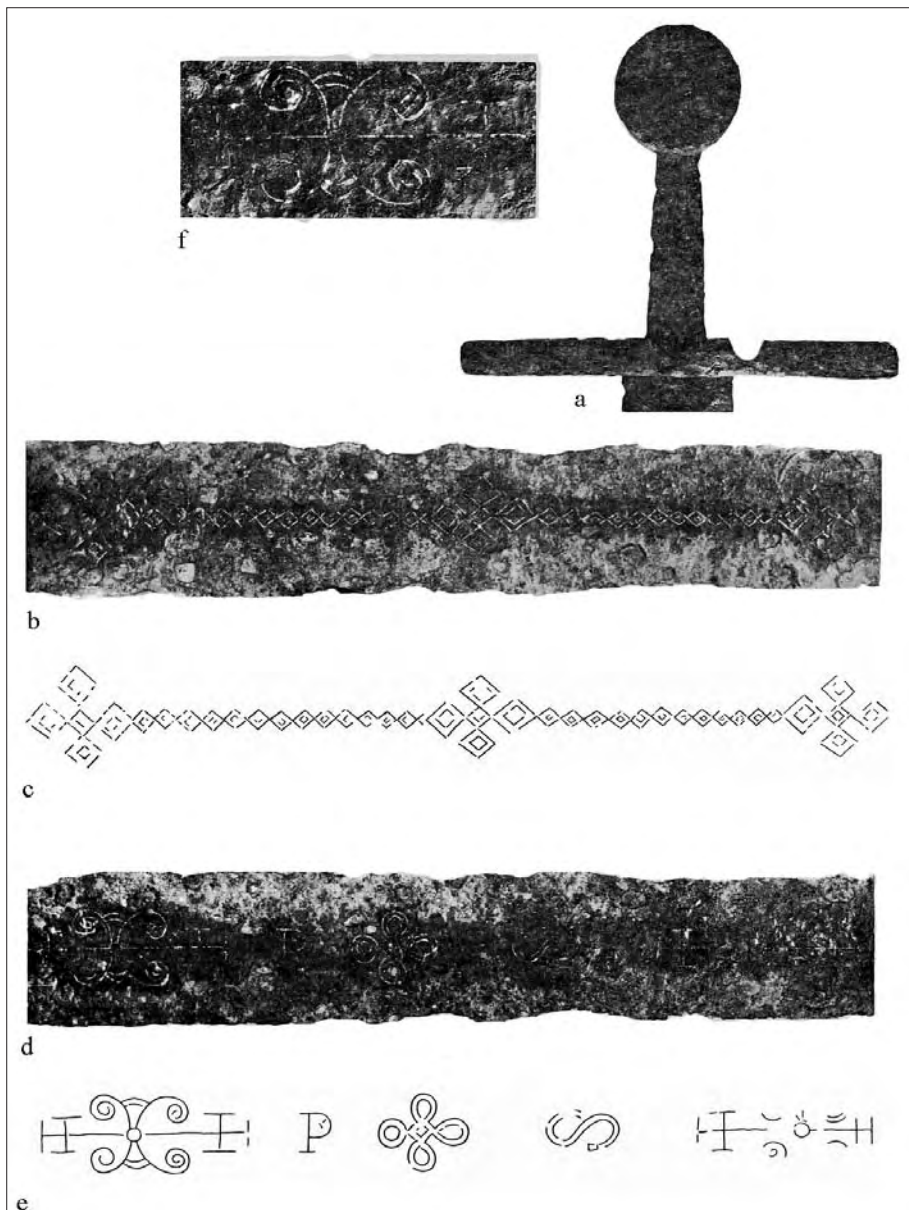


Fig. 3. Sword from Rikalanmäki grave 25. Jorma Leppäaho never published the Rikalanmäki excavation results, or the finds, with a few exceptions. He was specially interested in Iron Age weapons, and parts of his studies were published in 1964 after his death. He focused particularly on the inlaid inscriptions on the blades of swords, and was the first archaeologist to use x-ray photography (photograph: Leppäaho 1964, Tafel 25).



Fig. 4. Battle-axes and spearheads from Kirkkomäki cemetery (photograph: M. Puhakka/Turku Provincial Museum).

the later Middle Ages (Oakeshott 1960, p.224f.; 1991, pp.6-7, 37 and 57; Peirce 2002, p.134).

All of the swords from Rikalanmäki contain inlaid inscriptions and decorations, for example, letters, groups of letters, plant motifs and cross-motifs (Fig. 3). One interesting feature is the hand symbols near the tip of the blade, which has been observed on three of the Rikalanmäki swords. These Hand of God figures, with two fingers raised in blessing, occur just in a few swords in the whole of Europe. Within the Christian Church, hand-symbols have a symbolic protective meaning, but they could also refer to some production centre. The same symbol can also be seen in art during the period 1000–1200 (Tomanterä 1978, p.42f.; Oakeshott 1991, pp.28 and 51). Also, the name of the smith or some production centre occurs. The most interesting sword, a so-called Gicelin-sword, was found in grave 30. On one side of the blade is the text GICELIN ME FECIT (“Gicelin made me”), and on the opposite side the text IN NOMINE DOMINI (“In the name of God”). In Finland, Gicelin-swords have been found at just one other site, Marikkovaara in Rovaniemi, in the northern part of the country (Leppäaho 1964, p.58f.; Tomanterä 1978, p.31f.; Peirce 2002, p.134f.). The Rikalanmäki sword is the only one with silver-inlaid inscriptions; the others have iron inlays. Gicelin-swords are also rare in the whole of Europe (eg Oakeshott 1960, p.212ff., 1991, p.57ff.; Tomanterä 1978, p.31f. and references).

In the inhumation cemetery at Kirkkomäki, several excavations have been carried out during the 20th century, the largest in 1991–1992. The number of investigated graves is 43, but the area was not totally excavated.

In Kirkkomäki, there were 16 male burials, and altogether 13 graves contained weapons. Altogether, two swords and nine spearheads occur in the graves, but the cemetery of Kirkkomäki is interesting from the point of view of battle-axes (Plate VI: 1). Seven graves – six adult male and one boy child – contained a battle-axe. This broad-bladed battle-axe type is known as type M in the classification by the Norwegian archaeologist Jan Petersen (1919, p.46), and dated to the Late Iron Age. All the M-type axe-graves in Kirkkomäki date from the Crusade Period. The shape of the shaft of one M-type axe found in grave 37 was clearly visible during the excavations (Plate VI: 1). The find was exceptional, because the shafts are not usually preserved in the Finnish soil. The axe was on top of the deceased, and the shaft reached over the shins of the deceased. Its length was approximately 108 centimetres.

By the end of the Iron Age, Rikalanmäki as well as Kirkkomäki, together with their surrounding cemeteries and settlements, were wealthy local settlement areas, and probably some kind of power centres. Judging from the finds, the individuals buried in these cemeteries were wealthy people, painstakingly equipped for their journey to the other side. The community had the possibility of acquiring valuable imports, which indicates contacts far outside their own river valley, both with other communities on the Finnish coast as well as abroad.

Swords and M-type axes as weapons and status artefacts

Swords and M-type axes had, of course, a practical function; they were effective and specialized weapons. Neither the swords from Rikalanmäki nor the axes from Kirkkomäki are luxury artefacts but weapons for use (Fig. 5). The number of swords in Rikalanmäki has in the previous research been explained as indicating specially restless and violent times in the Halikko area, and the swordsmen as forming an armed retinue of the chief (Hirviluoto 1992, pp.108 and 125-126). Where

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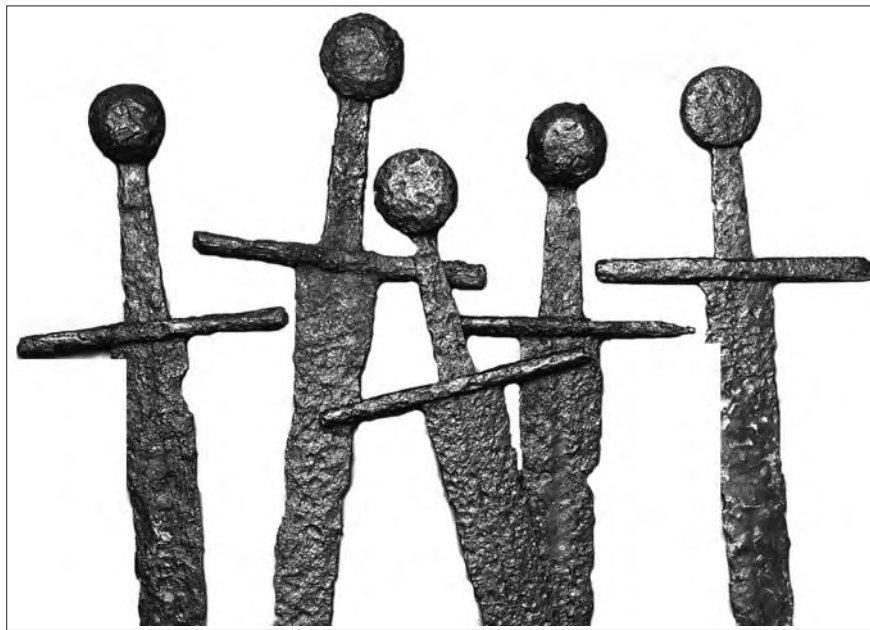


Fig. 5. Swords from Rikalanmäki cemetery (photograph: Esa Suominen/the municipality of Halikko).

there are weapons, there is, of course, the possibility of violence, and thus the Rikalanmäki swords might have been used in battles. On the other hand, the frequency of weapon burials is not always directly and simply related to warfare, but can be interpreted more as a reflection of internal tensions (Näsman 1994, p.22ff.). Furthermore, we cannot assume that every man with a sword or another weapon was a warrior, especially a professional warrior without other tasks or roles (cf Creutz 2003, p.222ff.). It has, for example, been suggested that with swords and weapons one could also try to give the impression of being a warrior, and in that way a powerful man (Jakobsson 1992, p.85 and 112). The problem with Rikalanmäki is also the fact that there are so many swords in the graves. It could be assumed that the swords in violent times would be in better use with the living. Swords as grave goods could have had more societal and symbolic dimensions than to indicate the person's activities in his lifetime. Violence cannot in my opinion be solely an explanation for swords and M-type axes occurring in the burial material.

Swords are not very common in Finnish Crusade Period burials, and it has been assumed that axes replaced them as status weapons (eg Lehtosalo-Hilander 2000, p.192). The significance of the M-type axe as a weapon would, therefore, appear to be greater during the Crusade Period than before. On the other hand, several explanations have been suggested for the absence of swords from cemeteries: a change in battle habits favouring the axe, the import of swords suddenly becoming more difficult, etc. It has also been assumed that the phenomenon could have been part of the reorganiza-

tion of society, when the old leaders with swords as attributes were replaced by a new kind of administration, ie the control of the Swedish king and the Catholic Church (Purhonen 1998, p.133). Anyway, there are exceptions, for example the cemetery of Rikalanmäki and cemeteries in Karelia, in which swords still occur around the beginning of the 13th century. In Rikalanmäki all the swords date to a short period and are found in almost every second male grave. Because of that, they are not weapons which belonged only to single chiefs or leaders of the kin (cf Le-

htosalo-Hilander 1982, p.49).

In addition to a utilitarian function, weapons, especially swords, have been renowned as symbols of power and social position, ie status symbols. The status value of the axe has been questioned, but that is not the case with the sword, which has been seen as the weapon of noblemen, chieftains, or heads of families. However, both swords and axes occur in rich graves, and they were given as gifts between high-ranking people, and used as ceremonial artefacts and as a symbol of power. They were also given names when, for example, they were associated with a notable person or event, and various kinds of beliefs and stories have been related to both (eg Oakeshott 1960, p.150ff., 154, 1991, p.14ff.; Purhonen 1996, p.122; Zeiten 1997, p.17; Lidén 1999, p.50 and 216ff.; Siddorn 2003, p.69ff.; Mäntylä 2005a, p.118ff. and references). On the basis of that, I suggest that both swords and battle-axes were equally powerful status artefacts.

Weapons are not found in every grave or cemetery. It is certain that every man could not afford to have swords imported from Central Europe. The sword in itself implies a certain degree of wealth or status (Lehtosalo-Hilander 1982, p.49). Most likely, the individuals buried in the Kirkkomäki and Rikalanmäki cemeteries represent only part of the population of the area, the wealthiest part, probably living at the main farm (cf Pihlman 2004). People using these cemeteries already had a certain social position and they wanted to express it using, for example, weapons as status artefacts.

Also, changes in livelihood and the economy are reflected in religion (and thus burial rituals), since these

are clearly related. It has been suggested that the change in burial customs in some Crusade Period cemeteries would not only be connected with Christianity, but also with the busy trade relations around the turn of the 11th century (Koivisto 1991, p.176ff.; Mäntylä 2005a, p.124f.). Both of the cemeteries discussed in this article were situated in areas regarded as important local centres of trade. The societies burying people in Rikalanmäki and Kirkkomäki grew wealthier with trade, and with a new inhumation burial custom it was maybe more possible to demonstrate the wealth and power of the individual and family. That could be one reason why the cremation burial custom and level-ground cemeteries with a more collective character were rejected. At Kirkkomäki and Rikalanmäki, weapons gained an important symbolic value in the new burial custom.

Other symbolic dimensions

Status artefacts symbolize social position and power, but that is not necessarily their only symbolic dimension. They could have been chosen as status artefacts because of some other specific symbolic content. The Iron Age myths and beliefs probably did not form a uniform religion, but cults were in large part related to individual farms or families (Salo 1997, p.122f.). Therefore, the swords or the M-type axes may also have had a special meaning for only some local group within society.

Valuable imported swords in Rikalanmäki expressed the status of their owners, power and wealth. They also had an important role in the burial ritual. The swords, especially old ones, had mystical powers, and even the appearance of a sword, with its sharp and shining blade, may have been considered mystical (Siddorn 2003, p.69ff.). There are many sagas, legends and beliefs concerning swords in Scandinavia and Europe. There is also verse in Finnish folk poetry where dead ancestors with swords are called on to help the living (Hirviluoto 1992, p.108; Purhonen 1996, p.126). Maybe swords were placed in graves in the belief that their power could help even after the deaths of their owners. It is likely that some special rituals were also associated with them.

In the popular tradition of Finland, as well as in neighbouring regions, the axe has been connected with magic ceremonies and powers, such as controlling the forces of nature, fertility, cattle magic, or protecting the deceased. Similar beliefs are associated with other sharp objects, for example, knives and nails, and with various metals (Talve 1979, p.212; Selirand 1989, p.108). Axes have also been seen as a powerful sign against evil and

sickness, which would ensure healing and perhaps also fertility (Jankuhn, Beck 1973, p.567f.). It could be interpreted that the M-type axe was also connected with this broader axe-related symbolism. As a generalization, the axe is the weapon, and/or tool, which was the last to be given up in Finland in the transition to an unfurnished burial custom (Mäntylä 2005a, p.121f.). Battle-axes would therefore not necessarily be in the grave simply in the function of a weapon, but also as an object connected with magic features. Their important “role” in the burial ritual was the reason why axes remained as grave goods for so long.

The Crusade Period was a period of crisis for societies based on old social structures and beliefs. Rich grave goods with weapons, amulets and other magical features in Rikalanmäki and Kirkkomäki could, in the Crusade Period context, be interpreted as a survival strategy and a way of expressing and strengthening the group identity. Richly furnished burials may indicate a social crisis, in which the position of old rulers was threatened (Pihlman 1990, p.267f. and references). People resorted to magic, amulets and other symbols in situations where they were uncertain of their ability to control their surroundings and its events, and when they were worried and scared for their future and health (cf Zeiten 1997, pp.1 and 45). People also wanted to protect individuals crucial to the welfare and success of the family, even after their deaths.

To summarize, the swords and the M-type axes discussed in this article were weapons, possibly used in conflicts, but also important symbols of the wealth and status of their owners and community. In addition, they had specific symbolic and magic dimensions which were crucial in the burial ritual, and because of that they remained as grave goods for so long, despite Christian influences.

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GINKLŲ KAIP ĮKAPIŲ PRASMĖ: PAVYZDŽIAI IŠ DVIEJŲ PIETVAKARINIŲ SUOMIJOS KRYŽIUOČIŲ LAIKOTARPIO KAPINYŲ

Sari Mäntylä

Santrauka

Straipsnyje aptariamos įvairios kovos kirvių ir kalavių, kaip įkapių, interpretavimo reikšmės, ypač

jų simbolinė prasmė. Lyginant kapinynų medžiagą, laidojimo papročiuose pastebima daugybė skirtumų. Vietinės vertybės, tradicijos ir simbolizmas turbūt dažniausiai atsispindi įvairiose ginkluotės formose, ypač jei ji buvo naudojama kaip įkapės (3–5 pav.; VI: 1 iliustr.). Šiame straipsnyje nagrinėjami Suomijos vėlyvojo geležies amžiaus Kirkkomäki (Turku mieste) ir Rikalanmäki (Halikko vietovėje) kapinynai su griautiniais kapais (1; 2 pav.). Abiejuose kapinyuose buvo rasta išskirtinai daug ginklų. Tai yra išimtinis Suomijos kryžiuočių periodo (1050–1200 m.) bruožas, nes ginklai dėl krikščionybės įtakos tuo metu darėsi reti. Manoma, kad šiuose kapinyuose rasti kalavijai ir kovos kirviai gali turėti keletą prasmių: jie gali būti efektyvūs ginklai, galbūt naudoti sprendžiant konfliktus. Tačiau prievarta nėra vienintelis paaiškinimas, kodėl M tipo kirvių ir kalavijų yra randama tarp kitų kapo radinių. Ginklų dažnumas kapuose ne visada yra tiesiogiai ir tikrai susijęs su karu. Be to, mes negalime manyti, kad visi vyrai, palaidoti su kalavijais ar kitais ginklais, buvo kariai. Ginklai taip pat buvo svarbus jų turėtojų turtingumo ir socialinio statuso visuomenėje simbolis.

Abu straipsnyje aptariami kapinynai yra srityse, kurios buvo dideli vietinės prekybos centrai. Ginklai, matyt, turėjo svarbią simbolinę reikšmę laidojant mirusiuosius, kad pademonstruotų turtingumą, nes Rikalanmäki ir Kirkkomäki kapinyuose palaidoti bendruomenės žmonės buvo turtingi dėl intensyvesnės prekybos. Kalavijai ir kovos kirviai taip pat turėjo kitą simbolinį ir maginį bruožą, kuris buvo svarbus laidojimo papročių atžvilgiu. Kalavijai turėjo mistinės jėgos, o kirviai buvo galingas ženklas, ginantis nuo blogio ir ligų. Šie ginklai vietinių bendruomenių buvo pasirinkti dėl jų specifiškumo kaip socialinį statusą liudijantys dirbiniai. Šios simbolinės reikšmės taip pat buvo priežastis, kad kalavijai ir kovos peiliai, nepaisant krikščioniškosios kultūros spaudimo, kapuose liko kaip įkapės.

VI

WEAPONS:
THEIR
SIGNIFI-
CANCE AND
SYMBOLISM