

Kalniškiai Burial Ground: Investigation, Results, Prospects

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Cemeteries stand out as an important source of information about the prehistoric cultures of the Baltic. They reflect the way of life of the prehistoric community, its customs, beliefs, aspects of the material culture and, potentially, ethnic distinctions. Therefore, each cemetery that is investigated adds to our knowledge, which is far from exhaustive enough to appease our curiosity about the past.

The object of my research over the last 9 years has been the burial ground of Kalniškiai. This paper presents a preliminary review of the burial customs and some aspects of the material culture of the Kalniškiai population.

Geographical Setting

The burial ground of Kalniškiai, Raseiniai district, Ariogala parish is situated on the second terrace on the *west side* bank of the Dubysa river. It is small hillock, framed by unnamed streams on the north, south and east (Fig. 1). On the western side, the hillock slopes down gradually and disappears completely. The present terrain gives no clue whether the hillock was isolated somehow during prehistoric times. The nearest archeological monument, a hillfort, is situated about 200 meters to the north of the cemetery, on the other side of the stream (Fig. 2).

Background

The Kalniškiai burial ground has been known to archaeologists since 1935-1937, when a farmstead was built on the southern part of its territory. Human bones, as well as bronze and iron artefacts were uncovered when potato pits were dug. The finds were taken to the Kaunas Cultural Museum of Vytautas the Great (KVDKM, 686:1-8, 730:1-3, 1010, 1104, 1105:1-8) and Kėdainiai Local Museum (KKM, 129:1-16, 150, 151, 162, 163, 165-172, 178, 179, 292, 301). These isolated finds from the Kalniškiai burial ground were presented in archaeological papers written before and during the war (Puzinas 1938:255, pav. 58:4, 59:1, 62:1, 6; Alseikaitė-Gimbutienė 1946: 179, 187), and in post-war period publications (LLM 1958: pav. 278, 448; 1966:85; Kulikauskas, Kulikauskienė, Tautavičius 1961: 540).

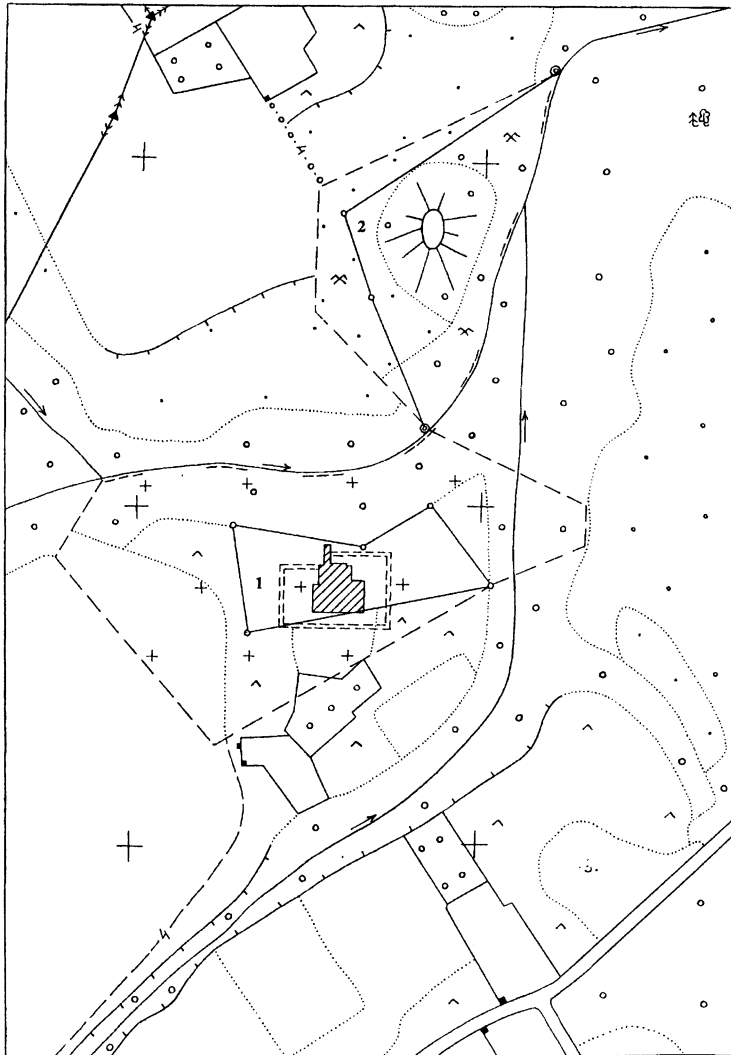


Fig. 1. Location map of the Migration period Kalniškiai burial ground: 1) burial ground, 2) hillfort

The state of preservation of the cemetery remained unknown until 1985, when I commenced investigation of the site. The work continued during the period of 1989-1996 and will be undertaken again in the near future. Over the nine research seasons, an area of 2350 m² was excavated, revealing 170 inhumation and 12 cremation burials from the 4th to 6th centuries AD (Fig. 3).

Though the burial ground has not yet been fully investigated, some features specifically characteristic of this site can be singled out and interpreted. Some of the present observations and conclusions may well change after an exhaustive investigation of the burial ground is completed, therefore I will not go into a thorough analysis of the available material and will confine my remarks to items that should not be subject to major changes in the future. I will therefore touch



Fig. 2. Bažavalė hillfort "Barsukalnis"

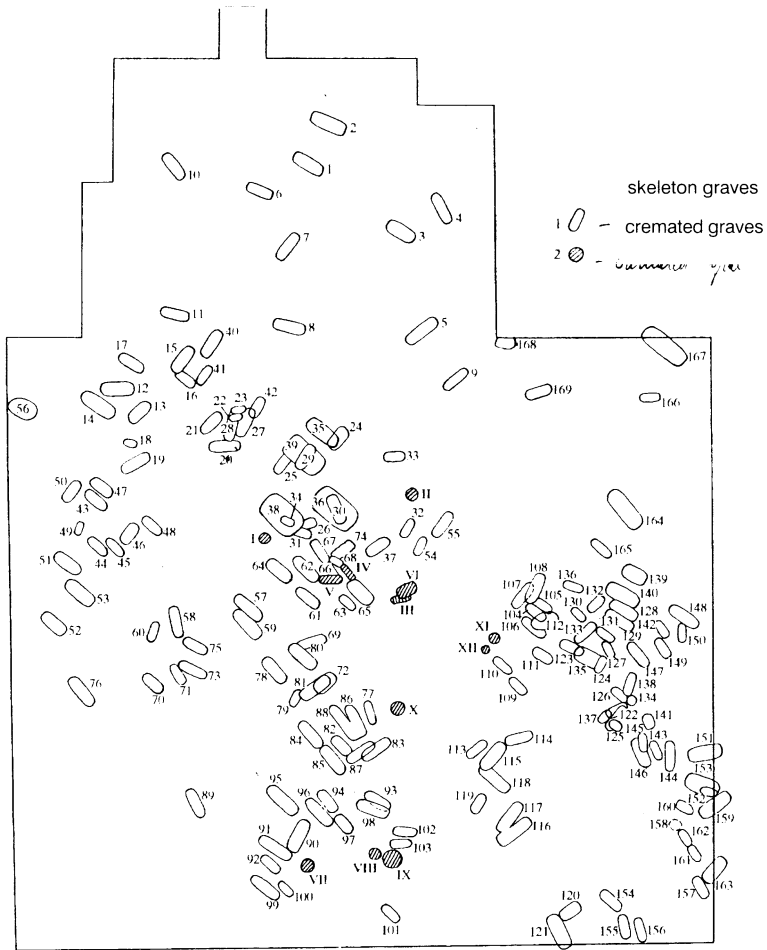


Fig. 3. Part of the excavated area at Kalniškiiai burial ground

on the basic burial characteristics and artefacts which can be related to the ethnic background of the people buried in the cemetery.

Burial Rites

Burial rites consist of several parts, the most important of which are: 1) the ritual itself and 2) the material goods involved. The ritual part of the funeral involves customs, conventions and rites, developed in a certain territory over a long period of time. *General traits* can be noticed in the territories of *tribal unions* or even in territories occupied by distinct tribes. At the same time, minor differences are seen between communities in much smaller areas. The material portion of funeral and burial customs involves the presentation of diverse everyday articles to those who have crossed the threshold separating the dead and the living. The two parts are closely connected and reflect the cycle of customs and rituals characteristic of the funeral.

1. The Ritual Element

The ritual part is manifested primarily in the way the dead are buried. At Kalniškiai, this means inhumation and cremation, with inhumations dominating (93.5 to

6.5 %). This is a trait common to the Migration period cemeteries of the so-called Central Lithuanian ethnocultural area (Kazakevičius 1993). Preparations for the final ritual included digging and arranging of the pit, and "purification" by fire. Individuals were buried in long rectangular or occasionally trapezoidal pits. The size of the pit depended on the size of the coffin and the height of the individual. Large pits were dug for adults and smaller ones for children. The edges of the pit were sometimes daubed with clay to prevent the sandy bank from sliding.

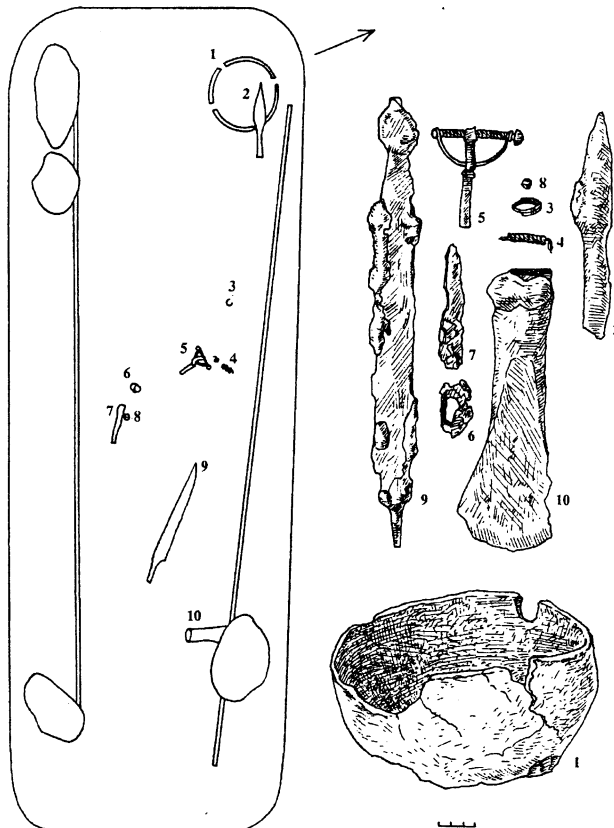


Fig. 4. Traces of a coffin in grave 51 and grave goods

Traces of such daubing were found in two graves (Nos. 64 and 87). Similar use of clay at the pit-edges was observed in Marvelė at the Kaunas cemetery, where there were 40 grave pits with clay reinforcement (Astrauskas 1996:93). Traces of "purification" by fire – charred wood particles and ash were best seen in the fill of 6 graves (No 78, 80, 81, 112, 121, 140). The depth of the pits must have been incidental, and would have varied with the seasons: deeper pits were dug in summer, more shallow ones in winter. The buried individuals were placed in either rectangular or trapezoidal plank coffins (Fig. 4).

Traces of coffins were found in 24.1 % of the graves. There were no differences in terms of sex or age for the coffin burials, they contained the remains of men, women and children, though men prevailed. The dominance of males may be a chance occurrence, but such is the data at present. The size of the coffins usually corresponds to the age and height of the buried individual. It should be emphasized

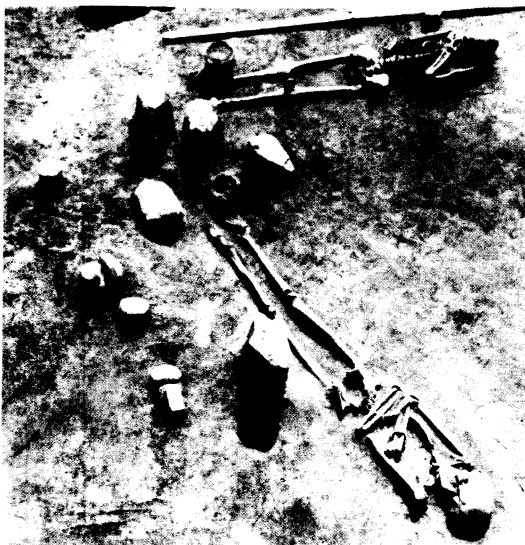


Fig. 5. Skeletons of the men in graves 20 and 21

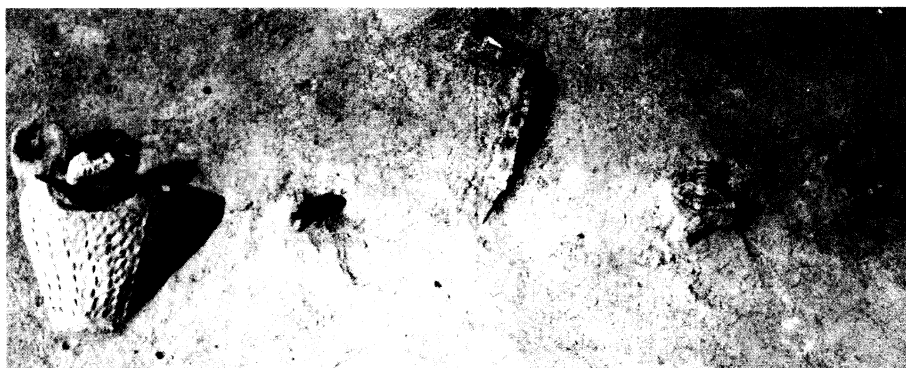


Fig. 6. Grave goods in situ in grave 127

that the skeletons are in very different states of preservation. In some graves, the bones are ideal for anthropological studies (Fig. 5), while in other cases they are poorly preserved or hardly noticeable, or are not preserved at all (Fig. 6). In rare cases, two individuals are found in one grave or even in one coffin. In grave 47, for instance, skeletons of two individuals were found placed side by side with their heads pointing, a man facing north-west, and a probable woman pointing south-east. A very interesting case was found in grave 5, where two young men, who had probably *perished* were buried. One of them was 19-20, and the other was 20-25



Fig. 7. Double burial in grave 5. Skeletons of two young men in situ

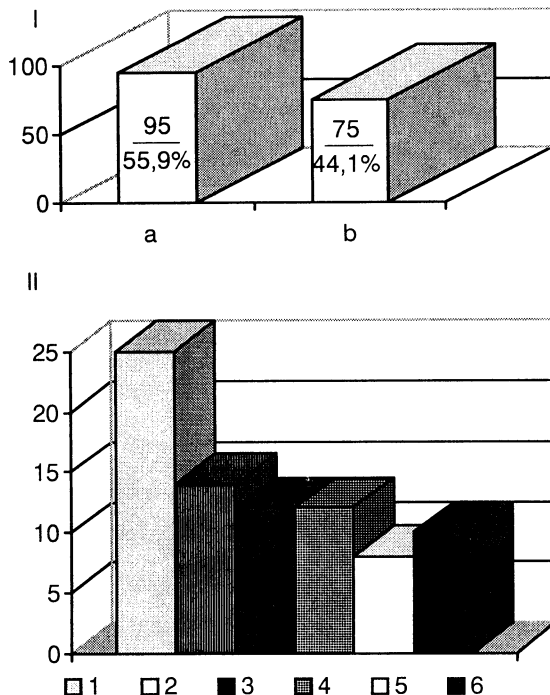


Fig. 8. Graves with stones and stone constructions in Kalniškiiai cemetery: Ia – graves without a stones, Ib – graves with a stones; II – variations in number of stones per grave in the Kalniškiiai cemetery. 1 – one stone per grave, 2 – two stones per grave, 3 – three stones per grave, 4 – four stones per grave, 5 – five stones per grave, 6 – stone settings.

years old. They were buried in a pit measuring 260x76 cm and 110 cm deep, in a single narrow coffin measuring 240x50 cm. They were placed one above the other, with their heads oriented in different directions, one to the north-east, and one to the south-west (Fig. 7).

Stone constructions, which must have symbolized the dwelling space of the dead, are found at the bottom of burial pits. Some of them are quite intricate, and others are just single stones. Stones and stone constructions were found in the bottom of 75 graves (44.1 %)(Fig. 8:I). Six distinct variations in the use of stone in graves can be distinguished in the cemetery (Fig. 8:II).

The orientation of buried individuals is a ritual element treated by archaeologists as one of the most important ethnical indices of a cemetery. Alignment of the body at Kalniškiiai was determined by the individual's sex. A study of the burial orientation showed that men and women were oriented in opposite directions: men's heads pointed to the north-west, with seasonal deviations to the west and south-west, while women were most often buried with their heads to the south-east, with seasonal deviations to east and north-east (Fig. 9). Children were buried with the same orientation as adults of their sex. I shall compare these data with burial directions in other Lithuanian cemeteries of the some period, including

Plinkaigalis in the Kėdainiai district, Kairėnėliai in the Radviliškis district, Pagrybis in in the Šilalė district, Sauginiai, in the Šiauliai district and Bandužiai, Klaipėda. Both similarities and differences, can be observed in the orientation of burials from these sites. The inhabitants of Plinkaigalis and Kairėnėliai, for instance, buried their dead in directions analogous to those found in Kalniškiai. Men had their heads to the west, north-west, and south-west, women to the east, south-east, and north-east. The orientation in Pagrybis cemetery was slightly different: men were usually buried with a north-eastern orientation, women with a south-western one (Vaitkunskienė 1995: 70-72), i.e. diametrically opposite to Kalniškiai cemetery. In Bandužiai, the orientation

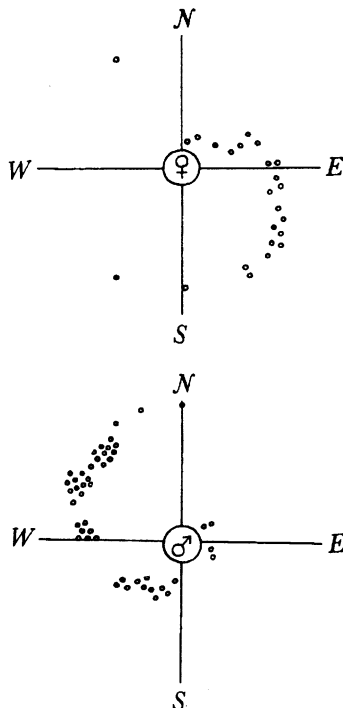


Fig. 9. Diagrams of orientation of interment

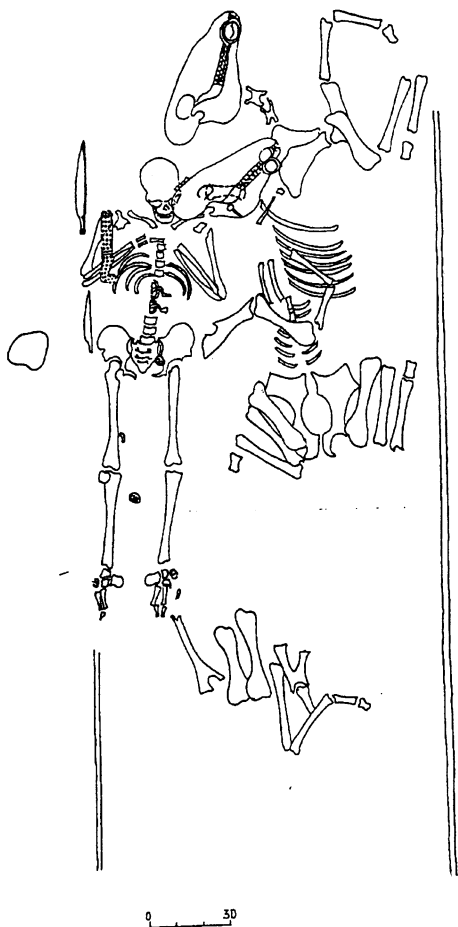


Fig. 10. Man and horse grave No 39

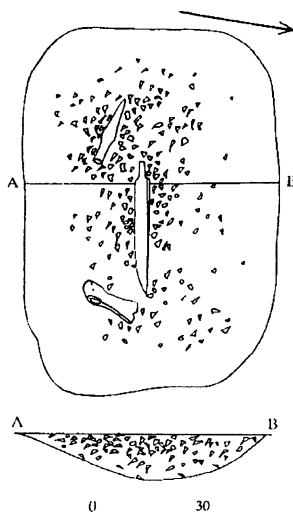


Fig. 11. Cremated grave XII in the Kalniškiai burial ground

is as follows: men faced north-west, north-east, and north, women north-west, west, and south-east (Stankus 1995:10). We should, however, be very careful with the interpretation of burial characteristics of the latter cemetery, as only 17 graves from the 5th to 6th century were found there, and the statistical reliability is therefore low. These data suggest that the Kalniškiai, Plinkaigalis, and Kairėnėliai cemeteries belong to the same ethnocultural area, and that the other cemeteries should be attributed to another cultural area.

A specific feature of Kalniškiai burial ground were male burials which included horses. The male skeletons of inhumation graves No. 36, 39, 139 and 140 were accompanied by the skeletons of horses. In grave No. 39, for instance, two horse skeletons were found (Fig. 10). The burial pit of grave 62 was large enough to contain both a human individual and a horse, but osteological remains there were completely destroyed, and only two iron buckles were preserved. This burial rite may have come to the Kalniškiai area from the Scalvonia ethnocultural, located to the south-west of the Central Lithuanian ethnocultural area.

The group of 12 cremation graves (65%) reflects the development of the world view of the Kalniškiai people. Dead individuals were burned on a ritual fire and their bones, collected from the fire, were taken to the cemetery and buried in a shallow, round or oval pit together with grave goods (Fig. 11). In some cases stones were used to line the grave.

2. The Material Element

Material goods found in the graves at Kalniškiai are characteristic of all the 5th to 6th century burial sites of Lithuania. They include the use of fine clothing decorated with numerous metal ornaments for buried individuals of both sexes, and the placement of work tools in both men's and women's graves, and of weapons in men's graves. However, some differences in the types of artefacts, and the way in

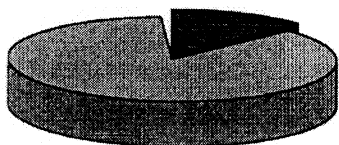


Fig. 12. Kalniškiai burial ground graves: 1) with ceramics, 2) without ceramics

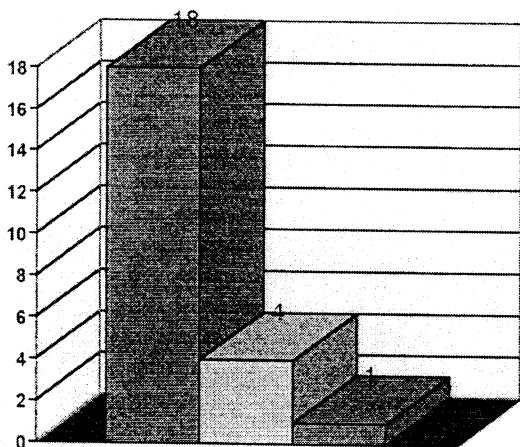


Fig. 13. Ceramics position in the Kalniškiai burial ground graves: 1) at the feet, 2) at the head, 3) unknown position

which they were worn, can be observed. The most numerous finds from the Kalniškiai burial ground were ornaments of various types, including headbands, necklaces, individual amber beads, strings of amber beads, brooches, pins, bracelets and rings. The dominant tools are socketed axes, axes with a narrow blade and a blunt end, and knives. There are also occasional specimens of awls and spindle wheels. A unique feature of the Kalniškiai burial ground is the ceramics found in graves (Fig. 12). They consist of medium-sized clay pots, which are found at the head or feet of adult individuals of both sexes. Eighteen of the 23 pots were found at the feet, and 4 at the head of buried individuals. The position of one pot remains unknown due to the absence of osteological material and another grave goods (Fig. 13). This custom is unknown in any other Lithuanian cemetery of the Migration period.

In summarising the burial customs and some aspects of the material culture of the cemetery, it should be noted that Kalniškiai cemetery is located on the border between the territories of two prehistoric Baltic tribes: aukštaičiai (uplanders) and žemaičiai (lowlanders or Samogitians). These territories are still the subject of heated debate among archaeologists. At this stage, I am hesitant to determine which of the two tribes was responsible for the creation of the site. However, funeral customs and some aspects of the material culture show that it could have been an upland Lithuanian community with a vivid admixture of Samogitian and perhaps Scalvonian ethnic influences. The ethnic affiliation of the Kalniškiai burial ground, thus remains an object of discussion.

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Kalniškių kapynas: tyrimai, rezultatai, perspektyvos

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Santrauka

Baltų genčių kultūrai tyrinėti svarbūs yra laidojimo paminklai. Juose atsispindi priešistorinės bendruomenės gyvenimo būdas, papročiai, tikėjimai, materialinės kultūros bruožai, pagaliau etninis išskirtinumas. Todėl kiekvieno kapyno tyrinėjimai papildo praeities pažinimą.

Pastarųjų devynerių metų autoriaus tyrinėjimų objektas buvo Kalniškių kapynas, kuriame atidengti 182 kapai: 170 griautinių ir 12 degintinių. Straipsnyje trumpai supažindinama su šio kapyno išskirtiniais bruožais tarp kitų Lietuvos archeologijos paminklų. Apibūdinama geografinė aplinka, kapyno laidosenos pagrindiniai bruožai ir materialinės kultūros dirbiniai, kuriuos galima susieti su kapyną palikusių žmonių etnine istorija.

Apibendrinus Kalniškių kapyno laidoseną ir kai kuriuos materialinės kultūros bruožus, nustatyta, kad šis paminklas yra ant dviejų baltų genčių – aukštaičių ir žemaičių teritorijų ribos, dėl kurių archeologai karštai ginčijasi. Galutinai nuspręsti, kokios genties žmonės paliko šį archeologijos paminklą, dar negalima, tačiau laidosena ir kai kurie materialinės kultūros bruožai rodo, kad tai galėjo būti aukštaičių bendruomenė su ryškia žemaičių etnoso priemaiša. Galutinio žodžio dar netarė ir antropologai. Taigi etninė Kalniškių kapyno priklausomybė tebėra diskusijų objektas.

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