

Investigations at the Užpelkiai Cemetery

AUDRONĖ BLIUJIENĖ

The Užpelkiai cemetery in the Kretinga district, Western Lithuania was excavated over a period of 9 years. The cemetery is set on an east-west oriented seaside hill. Local oral tradition maintains that it used to be surrounded by marsh, making it difficult to access, but what was once marsh is now meadow (Fig. 1). The Užpelkiai cemetery is situated on the west bank of the Žiba stream (a tributary of the Šventoji River). Just half a kilometre north-east of the cemetery there used to be a small lake, Jakiškė, where locals used to fish at the turn of the century. A few major land-reclamations have changed the landscape enormously¹. The greatest damage to the cemetery was caused between 1928-1930, when the construction of a country road and field drains disturbed the cemetery hill. Though archaeologists had been aware of the burials since 1935, the cemetery continued to be ploughed until 1985. Even though the majority of the excavated burials were seriously disturbed, they contained numerous isolated finds.



Fig. 1. The Užpelkiai cemetery (the Kretinga district). North-eastern view. *Photographs, except for No. 15, by Audronė Bliujienė*

¹ Personal communication by Juozas Balšaitis, the son of one of the landlords of the cemetery territory.

Over the 9 years of the project, an area of 1500 m² was excavated, revealing 85 human burials, 6 ritual horse burials, and the remains of 3 flat-topped barrows. Most of the human burials are from the 4th to 6th centuries AD, or the very beginning of the 7th century, while the horse burials are ascribed to the 5th to 6th centuries. Some burials from the period of the 7th to 12th centuries were detected. The remains of the barrows date back to the Bronze Age or early Iron Age.

Given its chronology, the changes in burial ritual, and the relatively large number of burials available for study, the Užpelkiai cemetery has the potential to provide great insights into the prehistory of the Lithuanian coast. Burial methods are of particular interest.

As mentioned above, the material from the cemetery is ascribed to 3 chronological periods. The earliest finds are the flat-topped barrows. Remains of 3 destroyed barrows inside stone circles 3-5 m in diameter were discovered. The stones are fairly large (e.g. 56 x 47 x 34 cm; 64 x 40 x 26 cm; 76 x 48 x 49 cm; 45 x 29 x 41 cm). The circles are arranged irregularly, generally on uneven ground. The stone circles of two barrows were contiguous. During construction, the stones were set in depressions 15-30 cm below the ground surface. The inside of the stone circles is filled with a mixture of sand and ash, charcoal particles, and layers of charred wood. The base of one barrow was sprinkled with charcoal, and a depression was found at the bottom of another. This depression measured 206 x 135 cm, was 7-10 cm deep, and was filled with dark grey sand and charcoal. However, neither burials nor artefacts dating to the period of construction, were detected in barrows. Therefore, the only way to date them is by analogues or radiocarbon. On the basis of the material from other Lithuanian coastal barrows (Egliškiai, Kurmaičiai, Padvariai, Kveciai, Sūdėnai – all in the Kretinga district), these flat-topped barrows could be ascribed to the late Bronze Age, placing them between the 5th century BC and the 1st century AD. Radiocarbon dates on charcoal from the barrows produced dates in the late Old Bronze Age/early New Bronze Age (1116 BC) and the beginning of the Early Iron Age (407 BC)².

At the turn of the first century AD or even earlier, the Užpelkiai cemetery ceased to be used as a burial place. From then until the 4th century, littoral winds caused sand to drift and flattened the barrow mounds. Only in the 4th century or the late 3rd did the Užpelkiai cemetery again come into use.

From the beginning of our era up until the late 6th or early 7th century, the Lithuanian coast (bordered by the Šilutė region in the south, the upper Jūra in the south-east, and the Salanta River and Lake Plateliai in the north-east) is regarded as a single cultural region with the tradition of burial inside stone circles (Tautavičius 1977:10). Funeral rites did not include cremation, and the graves of inhumed individuals were placed inside stone circles.

The Užpelkiai cemetery burials from the 4th to the early 7th centuries are also ascribed to this cultural tradition. During this period, burials were introduced on the southern slope of the cemetery. In the 5th to 6th centuries this practise covered the entire central part where the earlier barrows were located. At this time, human and ritual horse burials were dug into the flat-topped barrows (Fig. 2).

² Research was carried out in the radiachemical laboratory of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences. The dates were calibrated by Vyngandas Juodagalvis (National Museum of Lithuania).

The stone circles around the barrows were often dismantled and used to create circles around more recent inhumations. Sometimes individual stones were used to mark burials.

The majority of the excavated burials belong to the 4th to early 7th centuries (81 out of 85). The finds, the arrangement of the cemetery, and what these indicate about burial rites are most interesting. When the cemetery came into use again in the 4th century, the people used to prepare or "bless" the hill before burying individuals. A circle of 11 huge stones (79 x 59 x 36 cm; 64 x 46 x 42 cm, etc.) positioned approximately in the centre of the cemetery was apparently constructed for this purpose. The stone circle measures 4.75 m on its north-south axis, and 3.90 m on its east-west axis. The stones are arranged so that they are oriented to the east; the direction of sunrise. The stones are carefully placed on a levelled base (Figs. 3 and 4). Some stones are shaped to fit the pattern. Every stone has its fixed position and direction. The continuity of the circle is broken in the south-east, the south, the north, the north-east, and the north-west. The north-eastern and south-eastern sections are reinforced with a 6-12 cm thick clay layer. In part of the south-western section, yellow sand serves a similar purpose. The stones in the north-eastern section are set into this clay layer. In the south-west, the stones are supported by a clay layer covering their outer

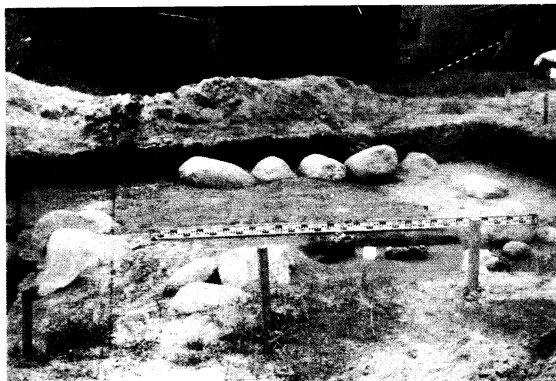


Fig. 2. Symbolic horse burial No.3 inside a stone circle of a flat barrow from the late 5th - early 6th centuries



Fig. 3. Stone circle - grove site during excavation in the summer of 1991

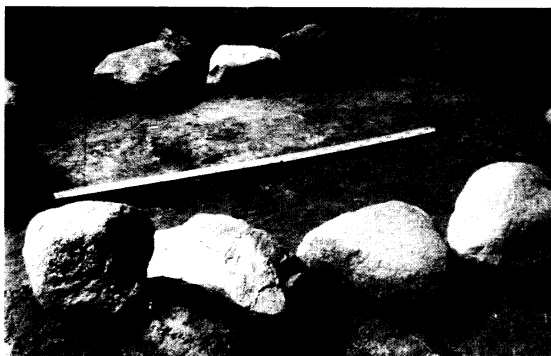


Fig. 4. Stone circle - grove site during the research in the summer of 1991. In the foreground, second from the right, a stone reinforced with clay on its outer surface

surface, and by smaller stones (Fig. 4). The clay reinforcement attests to the fact that the stone circle was in use over a long period. A large pit feature was noted extending around the north-east, north-west, and south-west of the circle. It was filled with irregularly shaped particles of charred wood, soot, ash, small stones, and sand (Figs. 3 and 4). The inner surface of the stones was heavily burnt, implying that fire was frequently used inside the circle. Fires were repeatedly put out with sand and later rekindled. The accumulated charcoal from the fireplace was gathered and dumped on the northern barrow. During excavation of the inner part of the circle and the depression feature, particles of tiny iron artefacts were found, as well as 3 shards of a small pot together with the pointed part of a damaged bronze pin. These items, like fragments of earlier cups or other artefacts, are isolated finds. When the stone circle ceased to be used, it was buried under a layer of stones and sand. Unlike the flat-topped barrows, the stone circle contained no burials. Radiocarbon dates on a burnt tree from the upper layer just outside the circle do not go back very far (1214 AD, 1298 AD)³, and probably indicate the last decades of the stone circle tradition. Charred wood particles from the ritual site were probably brought there during ploughing of the cemetery.

There are no burials for 2-2.5 m south of the stone circle. The nearest detected burials from the 4th to 5th centuries are arranged in a round. To the south and south-east, the stone circle is surrounded by a grouping of child burials (burials No. 62-64, 47-48, 70). A similar burial arrangement was found at the cemeteries of Rūdaičiai (Michelbert 1968:74) and Tūbausiai (Rimantienė 1969:189), both of which are in the Kretinga district, and at Dauglaukis (Jovaiša 1991:14) in the Tauragė district near Nemunas delta). South-east of the circle a female burial (No.49) with numerous grave goods was discovered. To the north and north-east, burials of rich men, knights and their horses were found. These burials were dug into the mounds of the flat-topped barrows. The western and north-western parts of the cemetery are damaged.

The arrangement of the Užpelkiai stone circle suggests that it functioned as a ritual site. Charcoal from within the circle was probably used in the preparation of the various graves. Burial rites and commemoration of the dead were probably also practised in this place. The souls of the ancestors might have been fed and offered fire. They might have been asked to bless household and agricultural chores, and to gain the favour of the gods during important yearly celebrations: Ilgės, Christmas Eve, Easter, Jurginės, etc. Some of these yearly rituals would have been practised in cemeteries. Therefore, it was both practical and necessary to have a ritual site at the cemetery. As has been mentioned above, the ritual site might have been used for the ritual preparation or “blessing” of the hill.

The Užpelkiai ritual site resembles the ritual site at the Dauglaukis cemetery which was used for commemoration of the dead, including the use of fire and the sprinkling of live coals. The central parts of both cemeteries are also similar (Jovaiša 1993:35). Both cemeteries are set on natural east-west oriented hills. The arrangement of the Užpelkiai ritual site is reminiscent which dates from the middle of the 1st millennium A. D. The Užpelkiai ritual site resembles some features of the Latvian Lazdinai barrow in the Cesu district which dates from the middle of

³ Research was conducted in the radioisotope laboratory, Lithuanian Institute of Geology. Dates were calibrated by Vygandas Juodagalvis.

the 1st millennium AD. The *barrow* is circled by stones (and holes) reinforced with clay (Apals 1989:16-22). Monuments on the Lazdinai hill are laid out to observe solar and lunar eclipses (Kletnieks 1989:22-28). The regular movements of celestial bodies helped humans to create a calendar system, i.e. calendars of the sun and the moon which regulated the rhythm of life. In this way, people established the timing of annual festivities when offerings were made to the gods and the ancestors.

However, it should be pointed out that the Užpelkiai ritual site cannot be equated with the well-known constructions of the Lithuanian cult places in Kurmaičiai (the late 1st millennium BC to the 3rd-4th century AD), and Imbarė (the early 1st millennium BC), both in the Kretinga district, and the Bačkininkėliai hill-forts (the early 1st millennium BC) of the Prienai district, Southern Lithuania.

In the 4th to 6th centuries, the people of Užpelkiai marked the boundaries of the cemetery on the southern and northern slopes. On the southern slope of the hill, marking the southern boundary of the cemetery, a hole 110 x 100 cm and 30-40 cm deep was found containing charcoal, soot and ash. The finds also included several ornaments: a bronze bracelet with thickened terminals, a spiral ring, and two crook-like iron pins. No bones of buried individuals were found during excavation of this feature. There does not appear to be any link between this hole and the prevailing burial rite of the period – burials in rectangular graves surrounded by stone circles. This feature indicates that in the 5th to 6th centuries, Užpelkian funerals were regarded as a sacrifice to the forefathers.

Another hole was found on the northern slope of the cemetery inside a circle of small stones. It measured 170 x 125 cm, and was 22-55 cm deep. This feature contained charcoal, ash, and more than 1500 potsherds. It was established that the potsherds belonged to 6 large coarse-surfaced household pots. Both their outer and inner surfaces showed signs of heavy burning. This ceramic type dates to the 4th to 6th centuries (Tautavičius, Grigalavičienė 1975: 24-25). Since no occupation layer was encountered on the north slope, this feature should be related to burials rites: commemoration of the dead, offerings to the forefathers, and supplying food for the souls of the dead. Moreover, the hole marks the northern border of the cemetery; no burials were found further north.

Archaeologists often detect the remains of bonfires, charcoal-filled pits, and hearths – ritual sites which are not directly associated with burials. In some cases, animal or bird bones are found together with charcoal as well. Bonfire remains of this type were first encountered in the Baitai cemetery of the Klaipėda district, dating to the 3rd to 4th centuries (Banytė 1990:72-74). There is also a ritual site adjacent to the Dauglaukis cemetery in the Tauragė district (Malonaitis 1995 : 25 - 27). Fireplace ritual sites were found in the 5th to 6th century Pagrybis cemetery in the Šilalė district, Western Lithuania, but they are ascribed to the 14th to 16th centuries (Vaitkunskienė 1988:167-174). Altar pits were encountered in the Ažurgiriai cemetery in the Utena district, Eastern Lithuania, which dates from the late 14th to 17th century (Urbanavičius 1978:215). Similar findings have been made in other Lithuanian cemeteries as well.

Commemoration of the dead, supplying food for their souls and an ancestor cult are also documented in early written sources. One of the most reliable and beautiful texts on this theme was presented by a Polish historian Jonas Długošas (1415-1480). He speaks of a 15th century custom in Western Lithuania to tend

family fireplaces where the deceased used to be cremated, and their souls offered food. Vessels of oak bark were placed near such fireplaces. They used to be filled with food similar to cottage cheese. Also, fireplaces used to be sprinkled with mead in the belief that the souls would come and drink it at night (Jurginis and Šidlauskas 1983:45).

In the 4th to 6th centuries, graves were 220-240 x 80-90 cm in size, 40-125 cm deep, rectangular with round angles or simply round. Grave pits of children are smaller and fit their height. Because of acid littoral soils, bones of buried individuals are not preserved. Teeth, however, prove to be more resistant to destructive processes. Therefore, teeth are valuable archaeological findings. Odontological research permits the determination not only age of the buried individual, but the sex as well⁴.

Some 4th century graves are located inside non-contiguous stone circles. The number of stones ranges from 6 to 16. Dead individuals were buried at a depth of 20-30 cm. Stones from barrows were used in the majority of the stone circles surrounding burials. Most of the stones used to encircle burials are engraved with fine holes.

The 5th and 6th century graves were marked by stone piles or single stones. Often, they were dug into barrow mounds and thus the barrow stone circles were also used for the graves. In some cases, extremely large stones were placed on the feet of buried individuals (burials No.18, 49). In the fill of all the graves, often at the bottom of the pits, charcoal, burnt plants (No.59 - 60), layers of charred wood (No.59), and small holes filled with charcoal (No.67, 69) are found. In one case, at the foot of child's grave No.67, a hollow, sooty, cleared stone flake was discovered, 10 cm from the other burial items in a hole 30 cm in diameter. The flake was supported by a smaller stone. It is possible that a fire was made near the hole, and rituals performed. Traces of ritual fire were noted in all of the excavated areas. The finds included isolated pieces of charcoal, small holes filled with charcoal, and complete and broken cups and pots which do not relate to any concrete graves. As well, the outer surface some cups is burnt and sooty which implies their brief exposure to fire. It is believed that charred wood and live coals used to be taken from the cemetery-ritual site where a fire used to be kindled for every funeral.

A number of the deceased were buried in coffins. Remains of several hollowed-out log coffins were detected. As the skeletons of the buried individuals did not remain, the direction and posture in which they were buried were established according to the arrangement of the burial goods. No consistent burial direction was noted, though the majority of burials, including males, females and children were buried with their heads facing north. The deviation to the north-east ranges between 10° and 50° (two burial tendencies can be distinguished one at 30° and another at 50°). Burials facing north-west are less numerous, with 330° the prevailing orientation. Males were buried exclusively in a northerly direction, while female burials faced east, south-east, and south-west.

Burying the dead oriented to the north is a tradition characteristic of the Lithuanian coast in the 1st to 7th centuries. However, it is difficult to determine the

⁴ Odontological research was carried out by associated professor of Department of Anatomy, Histology and Antropology, the Faculty of Medicine at Vilnius University Rimas Jankauskas and assistant of this Department Arūnas Barkus.

reason for such practice. It can be speculated that the Alfa star of Ursa Minor was a guiding star, a symbol of luck for the living and for the deceased (Jovaiša, 1993 : 38). Pagan beliefs often encompass an afterlife where the dead retain the age, sex, and social position they had in life.

Six ritual horse burials were unearthed in the Užpelkiai cemetery. Horse burials No.1 - 4 were dug into the mounds of the flat-topped barrows (Fig. 2). The grave pits measure 165-250 x 120-160 cm, and are 45-145 cm deep. These pits were dug through the charcoal layer lying underneath the barrows, and either completely (horse burial No.1) or partially (horse burial No. 3) destroyed this layer. In some cases, stone circles around the barrows were disturbed (horse burials No. 2, 4). The grave pits of horse burials are aligned north-south. Horses, like men, are buried with their heads pointing north. *Only ritual body parts of horses were underground* the head, or just the teeth, parts of the spine and ribs, and the legs. In the north end of each burial lies the skull, or just the teeth, the remains of the spine and ribs are in the centre, and the legs lie in the southern end (Fig. 5). The horses range in age from 2 to 2.5 years⁵. In some cases, horse teeth were also found in human male burials (burials No.61, 65, 76). This characteristic is also noted in other Lithuanian coastal cemeteries such as Baitai (Banytė 1992:72).

It was believed that the performance of funeral rites would ensure the horse a successful journey into the afterlife. Horses were buried along with bridle bits with a jointed mouthpiece. Other parts of bridles were also encountered, including miron buckles of various sizes, and brass mountings. Some horse graves also contained pieces of crude amber, probably used as amulets.

In several cases, men were buried with complete horses (burials No.59 - 61; 65 - 66; 81, 83). These knights' burials are richer in grave goods. Parts of shoulder straps, spurs and sashes for



Fig. 5. Symbolic horse burial from the late 5th - early 6th centuries

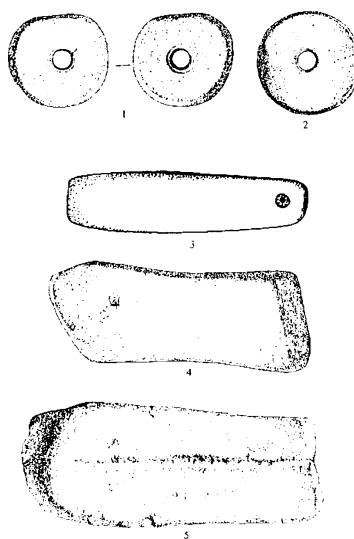


Fig. 6. Spindles: 1 - burial No.82; 2 - burial No.71. Whetstones: 3 - burial No.37; 4 - burial No.83; 5 - burial No.50. Pictures by Virgilijus Truklickas. Illustrations for the press Nos. 6 - 17 prepared by Vilma Štaraitė

⁵ The age of the horses was determined by Dr.Linas Daugnora (the Lithuanian Veterinary Academy).

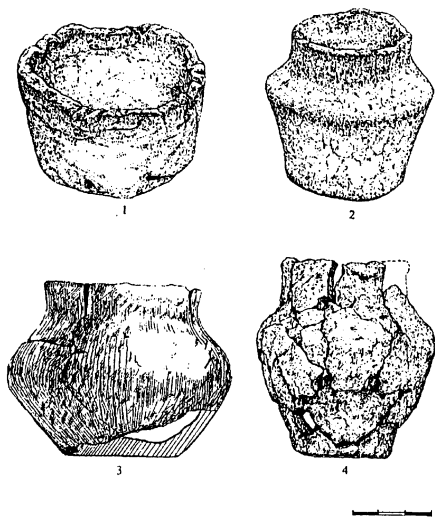


Fig. 7. Modelled small clay cups: 1 - burial No. 71; 2 - burial No.76;3 - burial No. 55; 4 - burial No. 82

fastening them, various bronze buckles, bridle bindings, etc. were also found in these graves.

The graves from the 4th through 6th centuries were heavily disturbed, and therefore contained few grave goods, only 4 or 5 items in each. A very small number of graves contained more numerous grave goods or items of silver. Among the 4th to 6th century graves, 6 graves entirely without goods were found.

The inhabitants of Užpelkiai used to dress the dead in clothes with matching brass ornaments; additional grave goods were included as well. In the middle of 16th century Motiejus Strijkovskis (1547-1586) and Jonas Lasickis (1533-1599) described funeral rites of Western Lithuania. Both authors stressed that the deceased were always dressed in their best clothes by their neighbours. A man was girdled with a sword or an axe, and the end of a scarf was knotted around some money and placed in the grave. Women were given threads and a needle so that they could stitch up torn material in the next life. The grave goods also included bread with salt and a vessel of beer to save the soul from hunger and thirst (Jurginis, Šidlauskas 1983:71). The funeral rites must have been very similar in Užpelkiai, with the addition of indispensable working tools, weapons, and ornaments.

At Užpelkiai, males were buried with a scythe, an axe, 1 to 2 (or even 3) spearheads, a knife, a riding bit, and a whetstone (Fig. 6: 3-5) placed near their head. They were buried wearing a belt as indicated by the iron and bronze buckles which are encountered (Fig. 9). There are limited ornaments in the graves, including crossbow-shaped brooches used to fasten clothes (Fig. 10: 1-3), spiral rings and

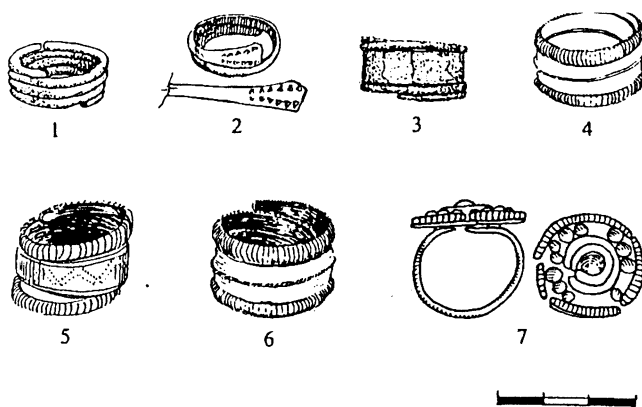


Fig. 8. Bronze rings: 1 - burial No.31; 2 - accidental finding; 3 - burial No.68; 4,6 - burial No.40; 5 - burial No.39; 7 - burial No.33

and rings with a flared front, and bracelets with thickened terminals (Fig. 11: 1, 6). Often, 1-2 amber beads fastened to pin and sash terminals were placed on men's chests (Fig. 12).

Female graves contained a birch-bark box where some of the following items were placed: a spiral ring, or one with a flared front (Fig. 8: 1, 3), a stone spindle (Fig. 6: 1, 2), a

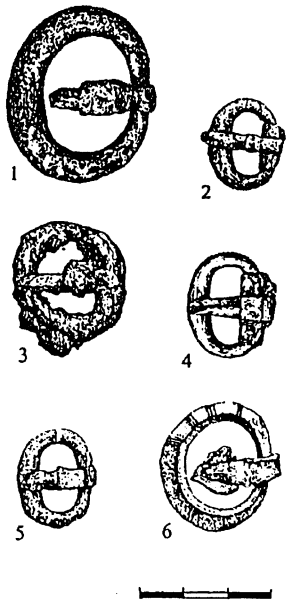


Fig. 9. Iron and bronze buckles: 1-2, 4-5 - isolated finds; 3 - burial No.83; 6 - burial No.78

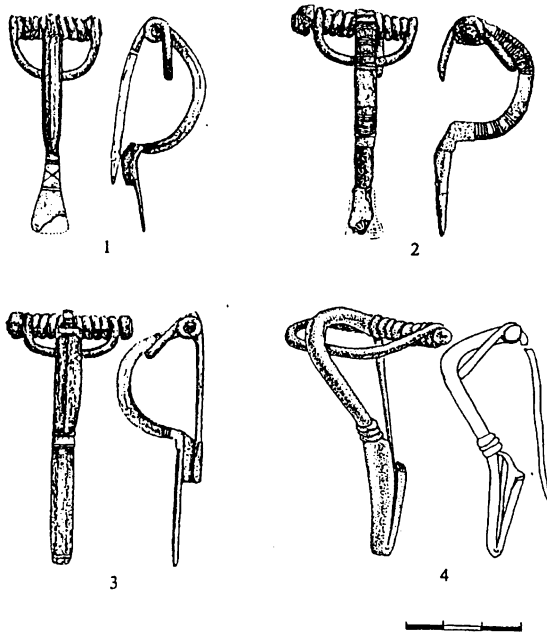


Fig. 10. Crossbow-shaped bronze brooches: 1 - burial No.76; 2 - burial No.66; 3 - burial No.69; 4 - burial No.58

small clay cup (Fig. 7: 1, 2), an iron needle or an awl. The small cups probably served as drinking vessels, as did the horns which are found occasionally.

Among other Lithuanian coastal cemeteries of the period, the Užpelkiai cemetery is unique for its large collection of variously shaped amber beads (Fig. 12). Amber beads, various pendants, and unworked amber constitute almost one third of all artefacts found in the cemetery. The most unique amber beads are those in the form of a compressed sphere or a truncated biconical shape, found mostly in female and child burials (Fig. 12: 1-3; 8-10; 13: 1-3). Also, beads of the so-called Basonian type (Tempelmann-Mączynska 1985, Fig. 68), characteristic of the Western Baltic, can be distinguished. They served as amulets and are generally found in male graves (No.1, 30, 60) or as isolated items (Fig. 12: 4-7, 11-23).

Beads from women's and children's graves were probably strung to

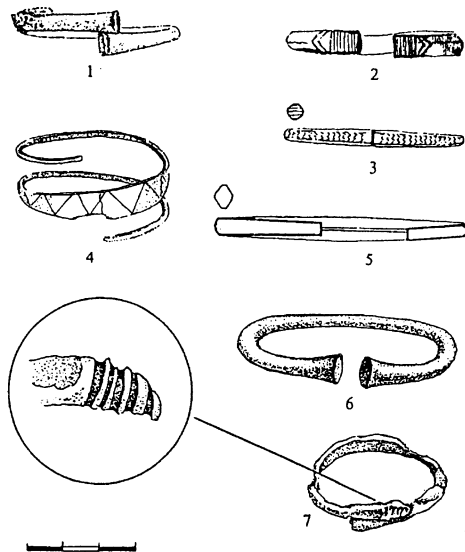


Fig. 11. Bracelets: 1 - burial No.63; 2 - burial No.51; 3 - burial No.80; 4 - burial No.47; 5 - burial No.46; 6 - burial No.31; 7 - burial No.29

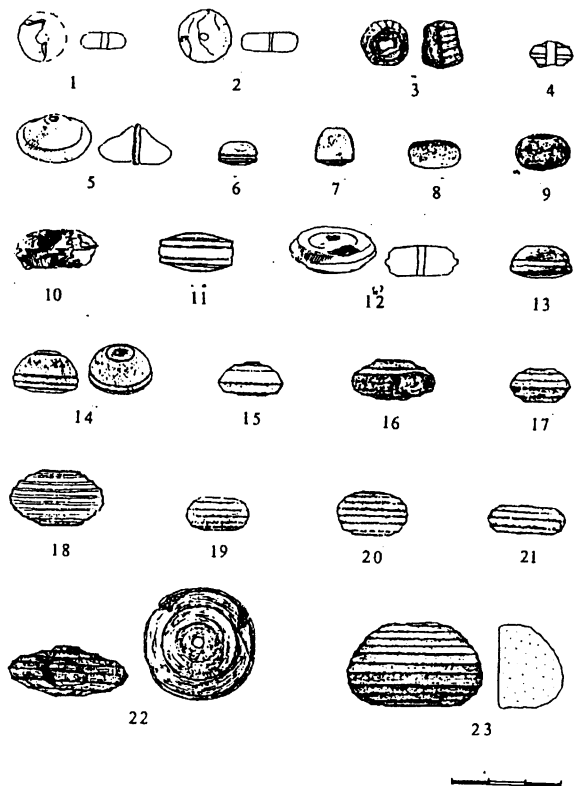


Fig. 12. Amber beads: 1 - burial No.31; 2-3, 5-10, 12-23 - loose finds; 4 - burial No.48; 11 - burial No.43

form strings of beads (Fig. 13). Amber was also used for the production of pendants (Fig. 13: 3). In female, child, as well as male graves, 1 or 2 amber beads were fastened to crook-shaped pins as amulets.

Women used to wear amulets of crude amber fastened to sashes in the belief that this would ward off disaster (burial No. 84). The pieces of unworked amber are of particular interest. Most of them were placed in burials as amulets (e.g. male burial No. 66). Others, however, could have been intended as raw material for a master of amber processing (hence the large number of lathed beads (Fig. 12.)). For instance male burials (No. 16) contained, among other items, crude amber.

A greater number of ornaments is found in the female graves. Several different types of necklaces were found: necklaces with a key-shaped clasp, or those with coiled wire terminals and a clasp (Fig. 14, 15 : 1).

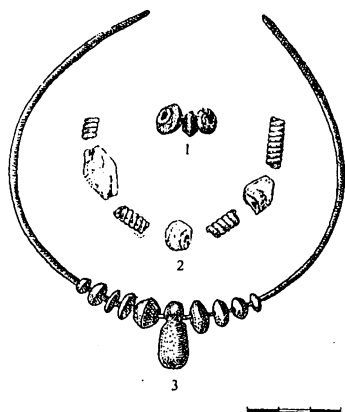


Fig. 13. Strings of beads: 1 - burial No.62; 2 - burial No.77; 3 - burial No.43

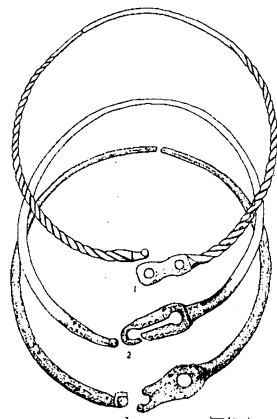


Fig. 14. Necklaces: 1 - burial No.84; 2 - burial No.49; 3 - burial No.76

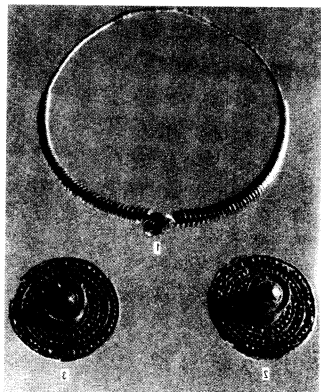


Fig. 15. 1 - necklaces; 2-3 - pin heads, burial No. 19 (photo by Antanas Lukšėnas)

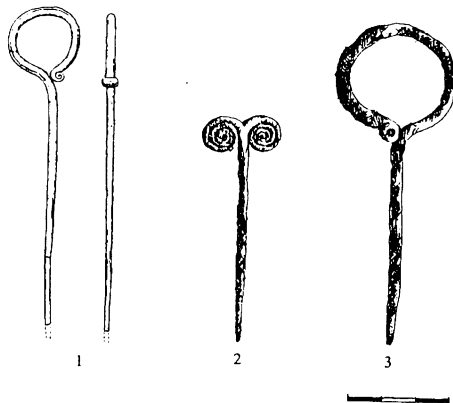


Fig. 16. Pins: 1 - burial No.80; 2-3 - burial No.49

Women and children used to fasten their clothes with simple iron crook-shaped pins, sometimes also found in bronze in the women's graves (Fig. 16: 1, 3). Female graves also contain such items as: crossbow-shaped brooches with a bent foot (Fig. 10 : 4), bracelets with thickened terminals and sash-like bracelets with a semicircular cross-section, spiral rings and rings with a flared-front, and various spirals and decorated rings (Fig. 8: 1-7). Some of the ornaments are of really fine quality: beautiful pins with a round head and a "tutulus" (Fig. 15: 2-3), and pins with snail-shaped terminals at the head (Fig. 16: 2). Strings of beads are usually made of 2-5 differently shaped amber beads and 2-4 brass spirals (Fig. 13:2). Occasionally, strings of amber and glass beads have been recovered. An original string of amber beads and a drop-shaped amber pendant were found in child burial No.43, which probably contained a boy (Fig. 14: 3)⁶.

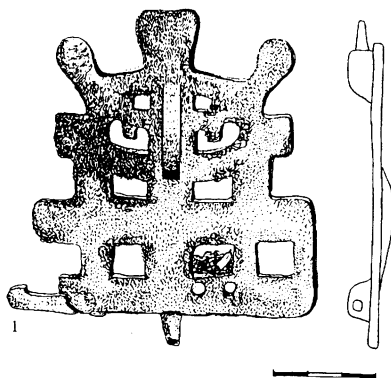


Fig. 17. Ladder brooch. Burial No.39

The prevailing opinion in Lithuania today is that the Curonian culture was formed during the 6th century. Unfortunately, the archaeological material is too scarce to reflect the whole period (Žulkus 1996:3). The link between the 1st to 4th and 5th to 7th century the coastal stone circle culture and the established Curonian burials from the 8th to 12th centuries remains, as yet, unestablished.

In the late 8th to 12th centuries, the eastern part of the cemetery again came into use (on the site of the 4th to 6th century burials). Researchers have recovered 3 seriously disturbed inhumation burials from the late 8th to 10th centuries, a single cremation from the 11th to 12th centuries, and numerous items from destroyed burials (Fig. 8: 2, 4-6). The burials of the later period are ascribed to the Curonians.

⁶ Odontological research was conducted by R. Jankauskas and A. Barkus.

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Užpelkių kapinyno tyrinėjimai

AUDRONĖ BLIUJIENĖ

Santrauka

Užpelkių kapinynas (Kretingos r.) įrengtas neaukštoje, bet gerai pajūrio žemumoje išsiskiriančioje kalvelėje.

Per 9 tyrinėjimų metus ištirta 1500 m², rasti 85 žmonių kapai, 6 simboliniai žirgų kapai bei 3 suplokštėjusių pilkapių liekanos. Dauguma kapų priklauso IV-VI a. ar pačiai VII a. pr., žirgų kapai – V-VI a. Rasta keletas VIII a. pab. – XI a. kapų. Pilkapių liekanos siekia žalvario amžių – ankstyvojo geležies amžiaus pradžią. Pilkapiuose kapų ir radinių, susijusių su jų supylimo laiku nerasta. Beveik

kapinyno kalvelės centre aptiktas 11 didelių akmenų vainikas. Jis orientuotas šiaurės-pietų, rytų-vakarų kryptimi. Kai kurie akmenys apskaldyti suteikiant jiems norimą formą ir kad geriau prisišlietų vienas prie kito, be to, jie sutvirtinti moliu. Kiekvieno iš 11 akmenų pozicija bei kryptis vainike individuali ir apskaičiuota. Vainiko centre ilgą laiką kūrenta ugnis. Šiame vainike palaidojimo nerasta. Užpelkių akmenų vainiko paskirtis, remiantis jo sąranga, matyt yra kapinyno apeigų vieta – alkavietė. Matyt, iš alkavietėje kūrenamos ugnies buvo imami degėsiai mirusiųjų kapų duobėms paruošti. Gali būti, kad prie alkavietės buvo atliekamos apeigos laidojant mirusiuosius ir juos paminint. Užpelkiškiai, IV-VI a. laidoję šioje kalvelėje, neapsiribojo vien centrine alkaviete. Jie pietiniame (rasta duobė, užpildyta degėsiais ir V-VI a. papuošalais) ir šiauriniame (aptikta duobė, užpildyta sudaužytais, stambiai grublėtu paviršiumi puodais) šlaituose pažymėjo kapinyno teritoriją.

IV-VI a. mirusieji laidoti nedeginti, stačiakampėse suapvalintais kampais ar apvaliose kapo duobėse.

Dalį IV a. kapų supa nesusijungiantys akmenų vainikai. Visų kapų sampiluose, dažnai ir kapo duobės dugnuose randami pavieniai degėsiai, sudegę augalai, degėsių sluoksnėliai, jais užpildytos duobutės. Dalis mirusiųjų laidoti karsuose. Jų griaučiai sudūlėję, todėl laidojimo kryptis ir padėtis kape nustatyti pagal įkapių išsidėstymą. Pastovios laidojimo krypties nėra. Vyrus, moteris ir vaikus stengiasi laidoti galva į šiaurę.

Užpelkių kapinyne rasti 6 simboliniai žirgų kapai (galva, dantys, kojos, stuburo dalys). Kapai Nr. 1-4 įkasti į suplokštėjusių pilkapių sampilus. Žirgai laidoti atskirose nei vyrai kapo duobėse, po vieną. Jų kapo duobės 165-250, 120-1630 cm dydžio ir 45-145 cm gylio. Žirgai palaidoti galva į šiaurę, t.y. ta pačia kryptimi, kaip ir vyrai, kuriems skirti šie žirgai.

IV-VI a. mirusieji laidoti su ne itin gausiomis įkapėmis. Mirusiojo vyro galvos srityje randama dalgių, kirvių, peilių, 1-2 (ar net 3) ietigaliai, taip pat žąslai, galastuvai, miniatiūriniai puodeliai. Moterims prie galvos, kartais į tošinę dėžutę sudėdavo įvijinį ar praplatinta priekine dalimi žiedą, akmeninį verpstuką, miniatiūrinį puodelį, geležinę adatą ar ylą.

Vyrų kapuose papuošalų randame nedaug. Tai lankinės segės, įvijiniai ir praplatinta priekine dalimi žiedai, storagalės apyrankės. Dažnai vyrų kapuose aptinkama ant krūtinės ar prie smeigtukų bei juostų galų pririšti 1-2 gintaro karoliukai.

Užpelkių kapinynas iš kitų to paties laiko pajūrio Lietuvos kapinynų išsiskiria įvairių formų gintaro karolių gausa. Beveik trečdalis visų kapinyne rastų dirbinių yra gintaro karoliai, įvairūs kabučiai, gintaro žaliava. Karoliai moterų ir vaikų kapuose suverti į vėrinčius. Ne tik moterų bei vaikų, bet ir vyrų, kapuose 1-2 gintaro karoliukai, kaip amuletai, pririšami prie lazdelinių smeigtukų. Neįprastos formos, neapdirbto gintaro gabalus, kaip amuletus saugotojus, moterys nešiojo pririštus prie juostų.

Moterų kapuose randama daugiau papuošalų: antkaklių, dažniausiai raktos skylutės formos kilpele ar viela apvyniotais galais su kilpele ir kabliuku, lazdelinių smeigtukų, lankinių segių lenkta kojele, storagalių bei juostinių pusapvalio skersinio pjūvio apyrankių, įvijinių ir praplatinta priekine dalimi žiedų ir įvairių įvijų ar net žiedas su akute. Moterų kapuose kartais aptinkama puošnių žalvarinių lazdelinių smeigtukų.

VIII a. pab. - XII a. rytinėje kapinyno dalyje iš dalies IV-VI a. kapų vietoje vėl pradėta laidoti. Rasti 3 labai apardyti VIII a. pab. - X a. nedegintų mirusiųjų kapai, vienas degintinis XI-XII a. kapas ir nemažai radinių iš suardytų kapų. Vėlyvieji Užpelkių kapinyno kapai – kuršių palikimas.

*Dr. Audronė Bliujienė
Art Museum of Lithuania,
Bokšto 5/Didžioji 4, Vilnius
LT-2001 Lithuania*