

# Horse Burials in Lithuania

**ALGIRDAS VARNAS**

Most researchers agree that domestic horses arrived in Europe with the Indo-European tribes, whose spiritual beliefs seemed to include a particular respect for horses. This belief is most clearly illustrated by the practise of including complete horses or parts of horses in human burials. This tradition is well known in most European countries, where it differed in form and content in different regions at different times.

These horse burials are known in the East Baltic, where domestic horses appeared toward the end of the second millennium BC, and horses were used for riding from the 8th to 7th centuries BC onward. This tradition was particularly wide-spread among the Baltic tribes. At present, approximately 100 sites with over 1700 of these graves have been excavated in Lithuania alone, and a great number of artefacts associated with horses have been found here as well.

In the Eastern Baltic, the earliest known graves with horse remains come from East Lithuania, at the Middle Neolithic settlement of Kretuonas. Two male graves (55 years old) contain horse teeth placed on the breast and near the head. The teeth were unworked and were not used as pendants. There are a total of 6 graves, all dating from the mid-3rd millennium BC and belonging to the Narva Culture. Horse bones have been discovered in various other strata at the site as well. It appears that these were domestic horses, but this cannot be definitely established as this is the only known site with such early horse remains.

The earliest known grave with unquestionably domestic horse remains is from the Kivisaare cemetery in Estonia (associated with the Corded-Ware Culture). Remains of a horse and cow were found in a single grave there, dating from the end of the second millennium BC.

Graves of the same period, containing fragments of horse teeth or jaws have been found in the Kivutkalnu cemetery and in the later Reznēs, Kalniešu and Vejstūru barrows from the lower Dauguva river region in Latvia. These finds date from the first half of the first millennium BC, and also belong to the Corded-Ware Culture. Many researchers believe that horse teeth from these graves are connected with horse worship, and are the remains of sacrificial offerings.

About the 5th century BC, a new burial rite involving horses appears. At the Kveciai barrow (West Lithuania) a horse skull and fragments of hoof and leg bones were discovered in the exterior stone circle. This is the earliest burial of this type known in the East Baltic.

During the first centuries AD, burial monuments were numerous throughout the Baltic, stylistic differences between the monuments have been used to define

ethno-cultural regions, and gave rise to tribal names mentioned in later written sources. The number of graves with horses also increased at this time, though they are still not numerous. All complete and partial horses discovered in these kinds of graves are from West Lithuania. Riding equipment, such as bits, special adornments for bridles, and in some cases spurs (in male graves) have been found. The earliest of these graves date from the 1st and 2nd centuries, though the majority belong to the 3rd to 4th centuries.

Similar graves with horses are known in the Sambia Peninsula in the territory of the Prussian tribes. They are also rare, but increased in number during the 3rd to 4th centuries when their distribution spread to include areas to the east and south-east of the Sambia Peninsula. In J. Jaskanis' opinion some of these graves belong to horse breeders (Jaskanis J. 1968. P. 106).

In the 5th to 6th centuries, other ethno-cultural regions developed with their own territorial communities and elite leaders. Temporary tribal units may have already been in existence. In this period, so-called "royal graves" appeared in various places throughout Lithuania (though, they were not characteristic of a particular ethno-cultural region). A horse is usually found in such male graves. One of the richest of these graves was discovered in Taurapilis (East Lithuania), and dated from the late 5th to early 6th centuries AD. This male grave contained a brass bow-shape brooch, a silver ring, an axe, a double-edged sword with silver-gilt scabbard bindings, gilt belt-buckles, two spearheads, a drinking horn, pincers, a whetstone, spurs and a shield binding. A horse without equipment was laid alongside the deceased. The "royal" barrow is surrounded by barrows containing the burials of less wealthy soldiers with horses. These graves are not numerous, and testify to the exceptional status of these men in the society. Similar graves are known among the Prussian tribes, for example, in the Szwajcaria burial-ground in North-eastern Poland. Here, however, they occur earlier than in Lithuania, dating to the 3rd to 4th centuries AD.

Other horse graves worth mentioning are those from the Vidgiriai cemetery (Lower Nemunas), dating to the 5th to 8th centuries. Here, three human graves each contained horse skulls with bits and the remains of bridles, and amber beads used to adorn the mane. Two graves yielded remains of horse hide. Interestingly, the grave pits of this cemetery were stepped, and in rare cases they were lined with clay. Evidently, this was a non-local rite. Some of the findings have much in common with the cemeteries of the Lower Nemunas and Central Lithuania during the same period. On other hand, there are an abundance of finds from the Black Sea coast, the Middle Danube and the Gotland Islands that have no analogues in Lithuania. Thus, it appears that during the Migration Period, small groups of nomads (in this case, Avarians?) moved into the central region of the Baltic. The graves of the above-mentioned cemetery suggest that the local inhabitants lived in peace with the new-comers. The new-comers skill in riding and horse-breeding led to innovations in local horse-breeding.

The north-west of Lithuania was inhabited by the Curonians. From the 7th century until the introduction of Christianity in this territory at the end of the 14th century, the dead were buried without horses, though graves contained riding equipment. The equipment was perhaps a symbolic representation of a horse. Only from the 9th century onward do items of Scandinavian import, including riding equipment, appear in the graves.

No graves with horses were found in the north of Lithuania, which was occupied by the Semigallians and Selonians (the latter inhabited part of Latvia as well). In a few rare cases, male graves from this area had bits or spurs. Thus, horse graves did not spread to the more northerly Baltic tribes.

The Samogitian tribe had a different burial tradition. From the 7th to 12th centuries, male graves (and frequently youth graves also) contained a horse head or in rare cases horse legs, either at the edge of the pit or above the coffin. These are interpreted as ritual horses burials or horse sacrifices, though there is no unanimous opinion on this question.

In Eastern Lithuania and part of North-west Byelorussia, burial grounds became more wide-spread from the 5th century onward. Complete or cremated horse remains were included with human male burials in barrows, or were buried in their own barrows. In the 7th to 12th centuries, graves containing horses were usually situated in a separate burial-ground. Frequently, simple items of riding equipment, brooches, stirrups, iron bells etc. are found near the horse skeletons. The most common find is a sickle, used for cutting the fodder. The above-mentioned barrows likely belonged to the Lithuanian tribe.

From the beginning of the second millennium AD, cremated males were buried with inhumed horse remains in central Lithuania. A total of over 1000 such graves are known, some cemeteries containing around 300. It appears that horse burials generally located in a separate part of the cemetery. The horses were buried with splendid equipment: iron bits of various forms, brass or bone crosses, iron bells, and brass spirals. Coloured bands, and glass and amber beads adorned loose flowing manes. In rare cases, the neck was adorned with a brass necklace. Brass rings, similar to bracelets, were often found on the upper portion of the legs, and massive spirals were used to tie up their tails.

Pagan practises such as burying the dead along with a horse disappeared with the arrival of Christianity. Lithuania became officially Christian in 1387, but shortly before this time, great Dukes of Lithuania were given pagan burials and were cremated with their horses, Algirdas in 1377 and Kęstutis in 1382.

These are the principle features of burial practises involving horses in the Baltic countries. Many problems remain unsolved because of the wide variety of these rites in this small territory. For example, in the west of Lithuania, there are a few graves in which the dead were buried according to Prussian rites, when the human male was laid on top of the horse in a single pit, or a stuffed horse was placed with the deceased.

In central Lithuania different rites existed, dating from the 12th century AD. Grave pits varied in size and contained various parts of the horse: skull, teeth, lower leg bones and hooves, complete legs, and so on. Various items of riding equipment are consistently found in such graves. Sometimes the bottom of the pit was covered with juniper branches, and only the horse head and bridle were included. In one case, a grave contained only a horse's muzzle, which had been cut off, with a bit between its teeth.

## References

Jaskanis J. Pochówki z końmi na cmentarzyskach protojaczewskich z okresu rzymskiego I wędrowek ludów // Rocznik Białostocki. T. VIII. Białystok. 1968, 77-109.

# Kapai su žirgais Lietuvoje

**ALGIRDAS VARNAS**

## **Santrauka**

Daugelio tyrinėtojų nuomone, naminis arklys Europoje pasirodo kartu su indo-europiečių gentimis. Rytiniame Pabaltijyje naminiai arkliai išplinta I tūkst. pr. Kr. pradžioje, o nuo VIII-VII a. pr. Kr. jais pradeda ir joti. Paskutinių prieškristinių amžių kapuose Lietuvoje retkarčiais aptinkama ir žirgo liekanų. Šiuo metu Lietuvoje iš 100 radimviečių žinoma per 1700 įvairių kapų su žirgais.

Seniausi kapai su žirgais aptinkami Lietuvos vakarinėje dalyje ir Sambijos pusiasalyje, iš kur III-IV a. po Kr. jie plinta vakarų ir pietvakarių kryptimi. Vėlesniais laikais atskiruose baltų etnokultūriniuose regionuose įsivyravo skirtingi laidojimo su žirgu papročiai. Antai, VII-XII a. Žemaitijoje mirusiajam virš karsto arba greta jo buvo įdedama žirgo galva, kartais dar ir kojos. Rytinėje Lietuvoje (dalinai ir šiaurės vakarų Baltarusijoje) nuo IV a. pilkapyje greta mirusiojo kartais laidodavo visą žirgą. Nuo VII-VIII a. čia paplitus mirusiųjų deginimo papročiu, buvo deginami ir žirgai, tik jie dažniausiai laidojami atskirame pilkapyje. Centrinėje Lietuvoje nuo X a. nedeginti žirgai laidojami atskiroje duobėje ar net atskiroje kapinyne dalyje. Kuršių, žiemgalių bei sėlių apgyventoje teritorijoje mirusieji su žirgu nebuvo laidojami. Paprotys laidoti mirusį žmogų su žirgu išnyksta XIV a. pabaigoje, Lietuvoje įvedus krikščionybę.

*Algirdas Varnas  
Department of Archaeology,  
Lithuanian Institute of History,  
Kražių str. 5, LT-2001 Vilnius  
Lithuania*