

The formation of a warrior elite during the Middle Iron Age in Lithuania

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Weapons found in archaeological excavations in Lithuania have been studied for some time. Those from the Iron Age (5th cent. B.C – 13th cent. A.D.), for example, are now easily classified by a standard typology and chronology (Volkaitė-Kulikauskienė 1981; Michelbertas 1986; Kazakevičius 1988). To date, however, no one has analysed the nature of military organisation during the Iron Age in Lithuania, and the social status of the warrior.

As early as the Old Iron Age (1st-4th cent. A.D.), mounted warriors had important social status in the Baltic region. This is indicated by the burial equipment of both the warrior and his mount. Richly equipped burials of mounted warriors have been found at Aukštakiemiai, Šernai (both in Klaipėda district), Lazdininkai, Padvariai (both in Kretinga district), Maudžiorai (Kelmė district), Vaitiekūnai (Radviliškis district) and other burial grounds. Horse teeth, and fragments of jaws and other horse bones were recovered from burials at Gintarai, Kurmaičiai (both in Kretinga district), Šernai, and Stragnai (both in Klaipėda district). Finally, remains of horses, either buried together with their masters, or buried separately, are known from the cemeteries of Dauglaukis (Tauragė district), Rūdaičiai, Pryšmančiai (both in Kretinga district) and Palanga. All of this suggests that mounted warriors participated with foot soldiers in the military conflicts of the Old Iron Age. In addition, the burials show that all men, irrespective of their social status, had the right to bear arms at this time (Vaitkunskienė 1989).

By the Middle Iron Age (5th-8th cent.) the situation had changed somewhat. In the early part of this period, Baltic tribes – Curonians, Scalvians, Samogitians, Semigallians, and Lithuanians – began to evolve administrative and territorial organisations. Warfare was stimulated primarily by competition for political power and for good agricultural land. Yet, the military role played by “ordinary” members of Baltic society began to decrease, while that of “professional” soldiers became more prominent. This trend is clearly evident in the archeological record of the 5th-6th centuries.

In this paper, I review the archaeological material from Pagrybis cemetery (Šilalė district), dating to the early Middle Iron Age (5th-6th cent.), in search of evidence of a warrior elite, i. e. the emergence of regional military commanders and their warrior-followers. At the same time, other important socio-economic indicators in the burial data are also noted (see Fig. 1 in Preface for site location).

Burial Differentiation by Sex

Excavation of the Pagrybis cemetery during 1980-82 was undertaken by the archaeological expedition "Žemaitija" headed by the author, and sponsored by the Lithuanian History Institute. A total of 217 graves were excavated, and were dated to the 5th-6th centuries. Age identification of Pagrybis skeletal material was kindly provided by Dr. G. Česnys. The excavation reports are on file at the Institute of Lithuanian History, and artefacts are stored in the Museum of Lithuanian History and Ethnography. Preliminary reports of the excavations are available (Vaitkunskienė 1982; 1984).

An important pattern at the Pagrybis burial field was that male and female graves were oriented to opposing directions. That is, males were buried with their heads oriented either to the north or east, while the heads of women were placed to the south or west. There were only a few exceptions to this custom (Fig. 1).

The practise of burying males and females in opposite directions is known from other cemeteries in Lithuania: at Sargėnai, Veršvai (both in Kaunas), Eiguliai II (Kaunas district), Jauneikiai, Stungiai (both in Joniškis district), Vidgiriai (Šilutė district), and Žviliai (Šilalė district). These cemeteries date to the early-to-mid first millennium and belong to different Baltic tribes — the Samogitians, Semigallians, and Scalvians. We may conclude, therefore, that the custom of burying males and females in opposite directions is not an ethnic indicator. It is more likely that the practise reflects the different social status of men and women in Baltic society.

This is supported by major differences in burial goods for males and females. The traditional ornament for a male was a brooch, while women wore two large pins, joined by little chains. Only female burials were furnished with bracelets and head-dress garlands. Rings were also common. Other jewelry, such as iron pins and single amber beads or pendants were found in the graves of both sexes. The pins had a utilitarian function, while amber artifacts are associated with high social or ritual status.

Artefacts of silver were scarce at the Pagrybis cemetery. All items made

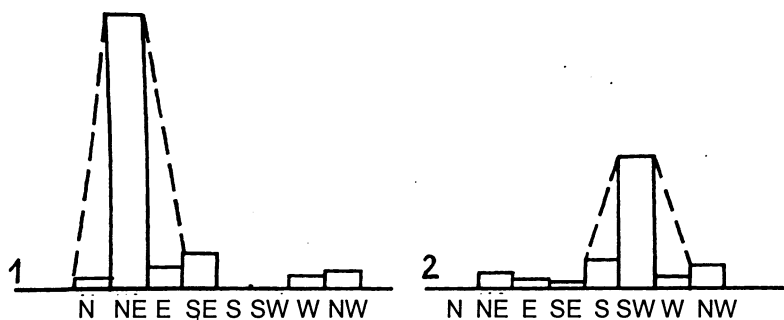


Fig. 1. Distribution showing burial orientation by cardinal direction: 1 - males, 2 - females. Pagrybis cemetery.

1 pav. Kiekybinis laidojimų krypčių santykis (pagal pasaulio šalis): 1 - vyrų orientavimo schema, 2 - moterų orientavimo schema. Pagrybio kapinynas.

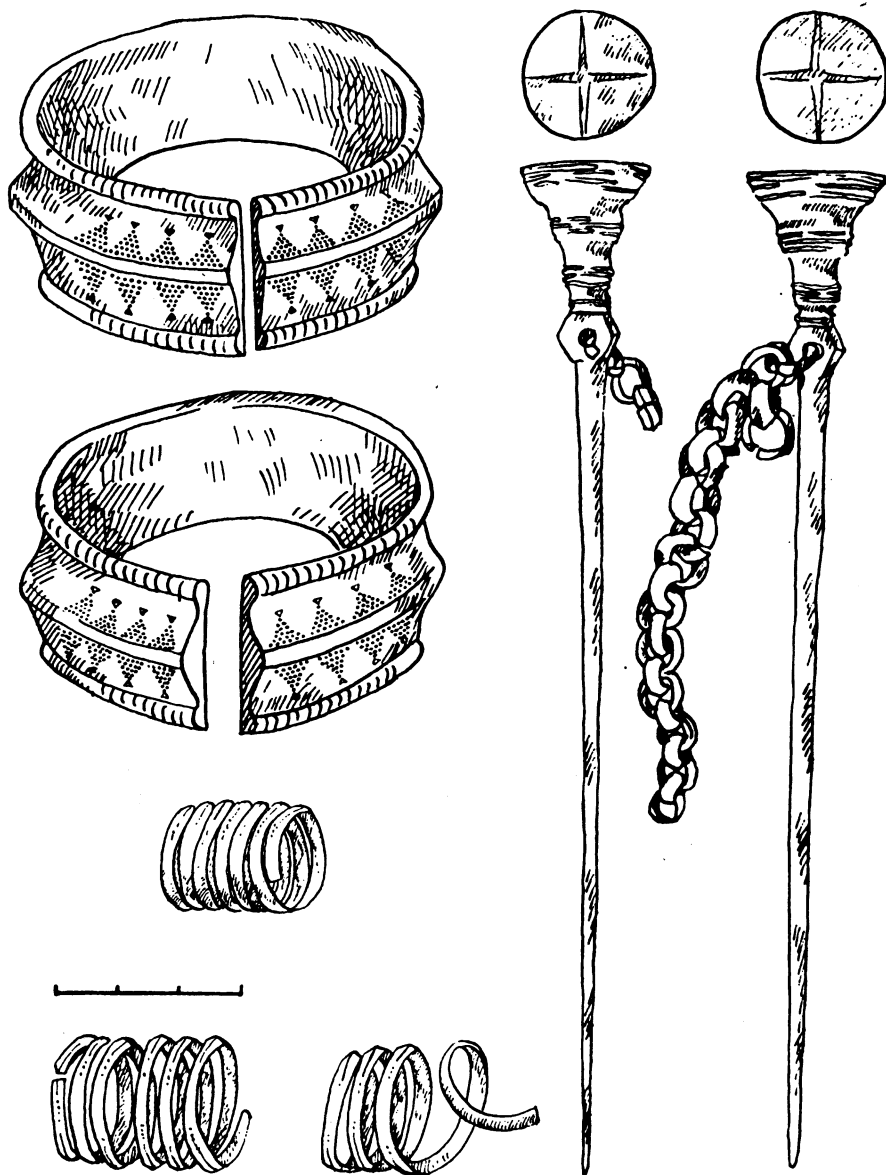


Fig. 2. A set of female bronze ornaments. Grave 39, Pagrybis.

2 pav. Moters žalvarinių papuošalų komplektas. Moters kapas Nr. 39, Pagrybis.

of silver were found in male graves, with individuals of different ages. Bronze ornaments were also distributed among males of different ages. Typical of young female burials was a complex consisting of two bracelets, two pins with chains, and a head-dress garland with a bronze spiral (Fig. 2). Bronze ornaments in the graves of older women (over 40 years of age) were rare. An exception to this was the burial of a 50 to 55 year old woman (Grave 35), in which the two traditional pins were found, as well as two head-dress garlands and part of a third head-dress garland (a bronze spiral). Because only iron pins and bronze rings were found in the graves of other elderly women, one can assume that this particular female belonged to the Pagrybis elite.

Tools such as spindles, awls, and sickles represent burial goods that commonly accompanied women (Fig. 3). We can therefore conclude that household activities were the main occupation of women. That major differences existed in the physical activities of men and women in 5th-6th century Lithuania is also evidenced by human osteological remains (see Jankauskas 1984).

Burials of Adult Males

On the basis of burial goods, male graves at Pagrybis can be divided into four groups. The first group (Fig. 4:1) consists of men of different ages (30-55 years old) buried with numerous weapons. The graves often included one or two

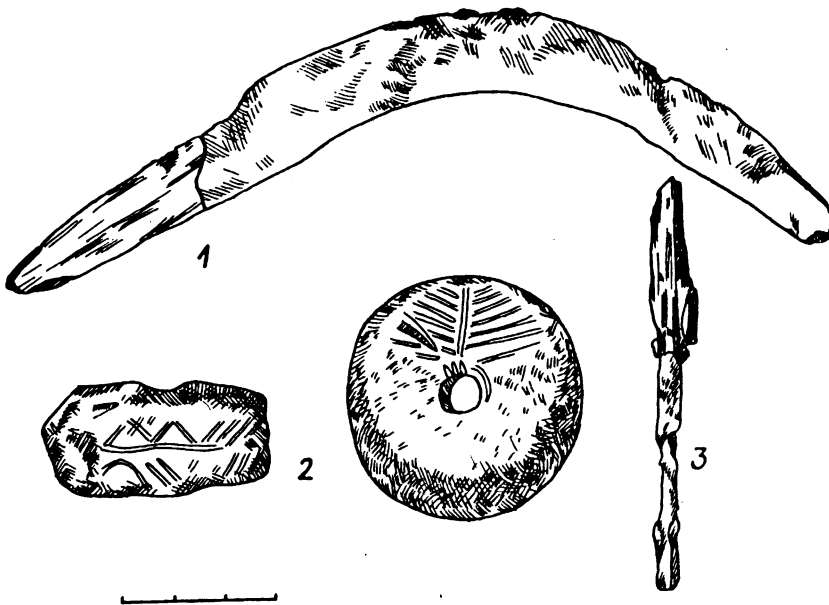


Fig. 3. Female tools: 1 – Iron sickle; 2 – stone spindle whorl; 3 – iron awl. Grave 197, Pagrybis.

3 pav. Tradiciniai moters darbo įrankiai: 1 – geležinis pjautuvėlis; 2 – akmeninis verpstukas; 3 – geležinė yla. Moters kapas Nr. 197, Pagrybis.

amber bead-amulets, several rings and sometimes a neck-ring. They sometimes included the bronze bindings of belts. During associated funeral rites, a horse sacrifice always took place, and the head and lower limbs of the horse were placed in the burial.

The second group consists of graves (Fig. 4: 2), in which men are buried in the style of mounted warriors, but without associated horse sacrifice. Instead of horse parts, a bridle or cheek bits were placed in their graves. And, in place of a sword, they were furnished only with a battle-knife. Their ornaments were similar to those of the first group, with the exception of the neck-ring. The absence of neck-rings in this group is best explained by the prestige role of the neck ring, i.e. it was an ornament worn only by elite warriors. This is well documented for German, Celtic and Slavic warrior societies during the early Iron Age in northern Europe.

The third group is represented by men of different ages (30-55 years or older) who were buried with only a few weapons. Usually, this consisted of only one or two spears and sometimes an axe (Fig. 4: 3). The burials contained no equipment associated with either a rider or a horse. Typically, the burial goods consisted of a bronze ring and an iron pin with an occasional amber bead. A belt with a metal buckle was placed on the man's chest or his legs, together with a knife. An occasional burial held a fibula.

The fourth group consists of graves of males 20-55 year of age or older,

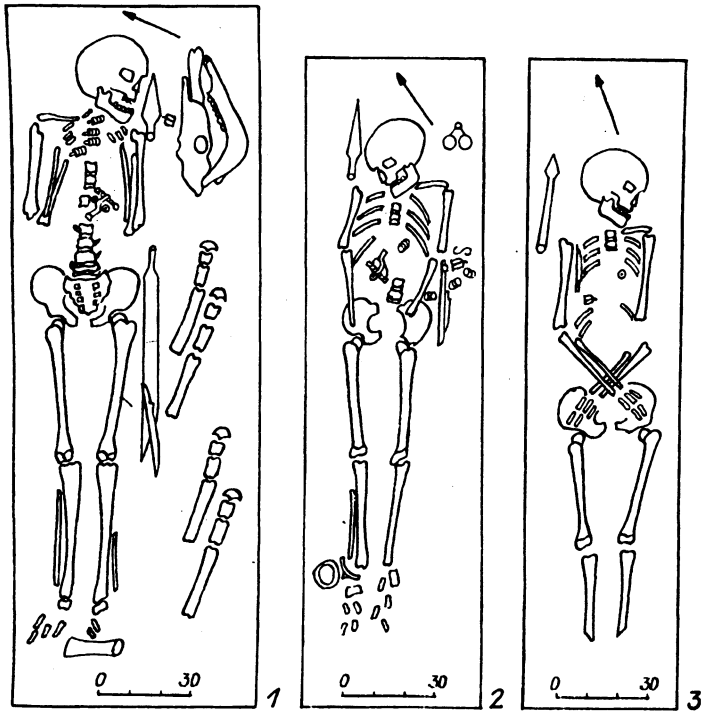


Fig. 4. Male burials: Group 1 (Grave 193); Group 2 (Grave 184); Group 3 (Grave 213).

4 pav. Vyru kapai: 1 grupė (kapas Nr. 193); 2 grupė (k. Nr. 184); 3 grupė (k. Nr. 213).

buried without battle weapons. Grave goods included a household knife, iron pins, and bronze rings. One exception was that of a 20-25 year old man whose clothing had been pinned together with bronze ornaments – a fibula and two pins without chains. The pins were unexpected, because they were almost exclusively associated with female burials at Pagrybis.

In sum, analysis of male grave goods indicates that 48.8% of Pagrybis male burials were in the style of mounted warriors (Groups 1 and 2). The remaining male burials (51.2%) did not feature a weapon (or held only a spear or an axe) and contained neither the remains of a horse, nor the equipment of a rider (Groups 3 and 4). This suggests that the individuals in Groups 3 and 4 were not active in warfare. They were probably specialists in other economic activities – farming, food processing, and craft production.

Female Sacrifice

Of particular interest at Pagrybis is Grave 62, in which a 30-35 year old man and a 20-25 year old woman were buried facing each other, and holding hands. A one-edged sword (of which only a fragment remains) was found at the left side of the man. The burial gave the impression of having been disturbed, and it is likely that not all of the burial goods have survived. Two spiral bronze rings were found near the sword. Placed on the man's chest was a silver neck-ring, with a bronze ring attached by a chain (perhaps a talisman or a gift of a friend?). Near his head were the remains of a belt with bronze buckle and bindings; next to them was a spearpoint. Its position indicates that the spear had been along the right side of the warrior.

The female burial did not have many metal ornaments. Only a bronze pin, an iron knife and a bronze spiral or ring fragment were found near the head. This, and other evidence presented below, suggests that the female was a sacrificed slave.

In northern Europe, a pagan burial ritual involving female sacrifice is documented by several historical records. In the 10th century, for example, the Arab traveller Achmed Ibn-Fadlan visited eastern Europe and left an eyewitness account of the burial ceremony of a nobleman. He wrote that one of the women in the nobleman's retinue decided to accompany her master into the afterlife, and described how she was sacrificed (Kovalevskij 1956). Before her death, the girl gave her bracelets to the woman assigned to kill her. All other ornaments were given to friends, who assisted in her final preparations.

It is not unreasonable to propose that the male and female in Grave 62, who were clearly buried at the same time, represent a similar case of a master and his sacrificed attendant. The burial goods of the male (i.e. the sword and silver neck-ring) testify that he came from the ruling class of tribal or feudal society. Accordingly, he had the right to have an attendant sacrificed at his funeral. Does the woman represent a slave? It is worth noting that she was buried in a different way from her female contemporaries at Pagrybis. Her clothing was not decorated by the traditional bronze ornaments worn by young women. She had no amber amulets or traditional tools, such as a spindle whorl

or awl. (The few goods placed near her head may not represent personal property, but gifts). The placement of a spear between the woman and the warrior may be a symbolic border indicating that the two individuals belonged to different social strata.

The fact that the two individuals were buried holding each other's hands suggests that the woman decided to follow the man into the afterlife. One may speculate that such a decision was prompted by fear of living alone, without a male protector. The chronicle of Henrikas Latvis (Jurginis 1991), for example, documents the reluctance of Baltic women to part with husbands who were killed during a war. In this case, the women committed suicide after the rout of Duke Žvelgaitis' army in 1205. Although the event took place many centuries after the Pagrybis burial, Baltic burial rites are known to reflect a long and conservative tradition.

Burials of Boys

Several of the Pagrybis men were buried together with children. Grave 200 is partially destroyed, but the southeast part of the grave remains undisturbed. Here, between the thigh bones of an armed male (in an area about 7 x 10cm) were the burned bones of a child and a child's bronze ornaments: a brooch, a pin, a ring, and a little neck-ring. The neck-ring is partially melted. It would appear that some of the child's ornaments and his cremated bones were gathered up in a cloth, which was afterwards pinned by a brooch and a pin. A spear was placed next to this bundle, of which only a small iron head was left. The dimensions of the ornaments and the remains of the bones are clearly those of a child, probably a boy.

According to funerary traditions of Baltic tribes, it was permitted for the head of a family to cremate his child, or a servant, after they were sacrificed to their gods. This was done, however, only on rare occasions (Batūra 1985).

A child was also found in the group burial of three males (Grave 165). Although the grave is heavily damaged, there remains some undisturbed skeletal material. It was not difficult, therefore, to establish that the three men lay side by side, with their heads to the northeast. One of them was 20-25 years old, another about 40-45 years old, and the third about 30-35 years of age. The small child was found on the outstretched right hand of the third man. The infant was in a sleeping position.

The tendency to bury children, primarily boys (e.g. Grave 200) in adult male graves, suggests the existence of a patrilineal society. As inheritors of family wealth, boys could be buried with weapons, and prepared for the journey to the underworld in the fashion of mature man. For example, Grave 55 held a 10 year old child accompanied by a sacrificed horse (head and legs), in a manner similar to the previously described first group of mounted warriors. An iron bit was found between the horse's teeth. The child's clothing was decorated with bronze and silver ornaments, including a bronze neck-ring — a high-status item usually found only in the graves of warriors with swords. A silver brooch was on his chest. His clothes had been bound with a belt, which

was clasped by a bronze buckle and decorated with a bronze binding. In addition, bronze rings, a knife, and an axe were found in the grave. (Knives and axes, as everyday tools, were customary in male burials at Pagrybis).

The graves of other boys held fewer burial goods. A knife was placed at the left side of some boys, in a similar way to the battle-knives or swords in the graves of adult males. These knives are rather big and sometimes are even longer than their adult counterparts. For example, the child's grave No. 41 contained a knife 30cm in length. In comparison to the small size of the deceased, it is obvious that the burial knife was meant to be an imposing weapon.

Even some infants were buried with weapons. Grave 116 contained a child wrapped up in cloth, which was bound by a little belt in two places. The belt had a bronze binding, covered with silver plating. The bundle is fastened by a bronze brooch and an iron pin. A spear lay at the right side of the child, and a knife at his left side. The hands of the child wore a bronze bracelet and a bronze ring.

In sum, several children (perhaps sons?) were buried in the graves of men (perhaps fathers?); and several boys were buried in the same manner as adult men — with weapons, horse offerings and rich burial furnishings. All of this suggests that the Pagrybis community regarded male children as inheritors of family property.

Warrior Elite

The burial data at Pagrybis provide some insight into the division of labor and social ranking within the community. At this time, great economic and political changes were taking place in northern Europe. Territorial tribal unions had appeared. The level of agriculture, cattle-breeding, trades and crafts had sufficiently evolved to allow the concentration of wealth in some communities. This inequality of wealth stimulated intertribal quarrels and predatory wars. Evidence of this can be found in the defensive fortifications of settlements, the emergence of small, well defended hill-forts (Daugudis 1982), new battle tactics such as the use of the battle horse, and the proliferation of weapons allowed by the local production of swords (Vaitkunskienė 1988). In this tense, troubled environment, it was inevitable that tribal male hierarchy would evolve into a military aristocracy, i.e. a troop of elite mounted warriors led by a regional commander.

The privileged position of this warrior elite is illustrated by the custom, in some communities, of burying rider-warriors in a separate section of the cemetery. An example of a warrior burial of very high status, or a "ducal" grave, can be found in the western area of the Taurapolis burial mounds (Utena district). Buried here, with his horse, is a 40-50 year-old commander (Tautavičius 1981). In addition to grave goods of local manufacture — an axe, a knife, two spearheads, a whetstone, pincets, spurs, bronze and silver ornaments, and remains of a shield — there are also items imported from southern Europe and the Danubian basin. They include a long double-bladed sword in a beautiful sheath with silver and gold bindings; a horn for drinking, decorated with silver plate; and an amulet in the form of a cylinder-shaped stone bead, with a

splendid silver covering on one side. In addition, the grave contained three silver ornamented gilt belt-buckles, other ornamented belt-buckles, and one iron buckle decorated with garnets, and covered in gold.

Graves of several mounted warriors, no doubt the commander's attendants, were positioned around the "ducal" grave. They contained many weapons: spearheads, battle-axes, knives and shields, as well as high status ornaments such as silver neck-rings. The men were buried together with their horses.

In the eastern section of the Taurapolis burial mounds, other males were buried in smaller mounds. The burial goods of these man were much simpler, and horses were not found in their graves. We may assume, therefore, that males of common status were buried in this part of cemetery. The western part of the cemetery was reserved for the warrior elite.

Social ranking is thus evident among Lithuanian males during the 5th-6th centuries. This ranking is most striking within specific burial rituals, introduced by groups of elite mounted warrior and their regional commanders. Social stratification is also denoted by special items of high status found in the burials of the warriors and their leaders.

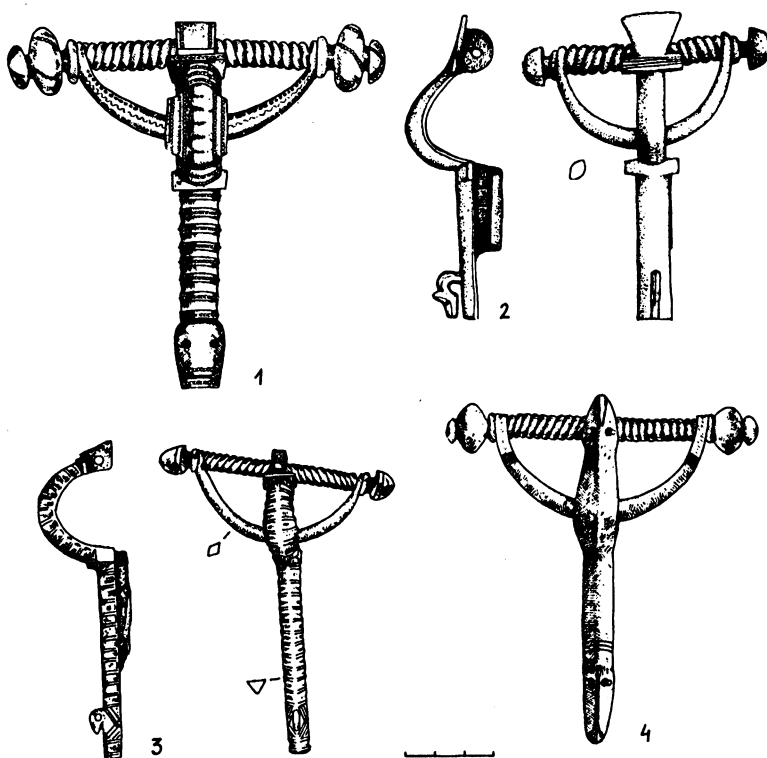


Fig. 5. Bronze crossbow brooches: 1 – Plinkaigalis, Kėdainiai District; 2, 3 – Pagrybis, Šilalė District; 4 – Jurgaičiai, Šilutė District. All 5th-7th cent. A.D.

5 pav. Žalvarinės segės: 1 – Plinkaigalis; 2, 3 – Pagrybis; 4 – Jurgaičiai. Visi V-VII a.

Zoomorphic Symbolism

At Pagrybis, some of the burial goods of the mounted warriors were ornamented in a zoomorphic style. The majority of these items are brooches, used to fasten large pieces of clothing (Fig. 5). The hallmark of the zoomorphic decoration is the head of an animal. The zoomorphic detail is usually very stylized, sometimes almost geometric. In this case, one can only speculate as to what type of animal was intended to be pictured by the ancient artist. It is clear, however, that certain brooches are decorated with the heads of horses or birds (Fig. 5: 2, 3).

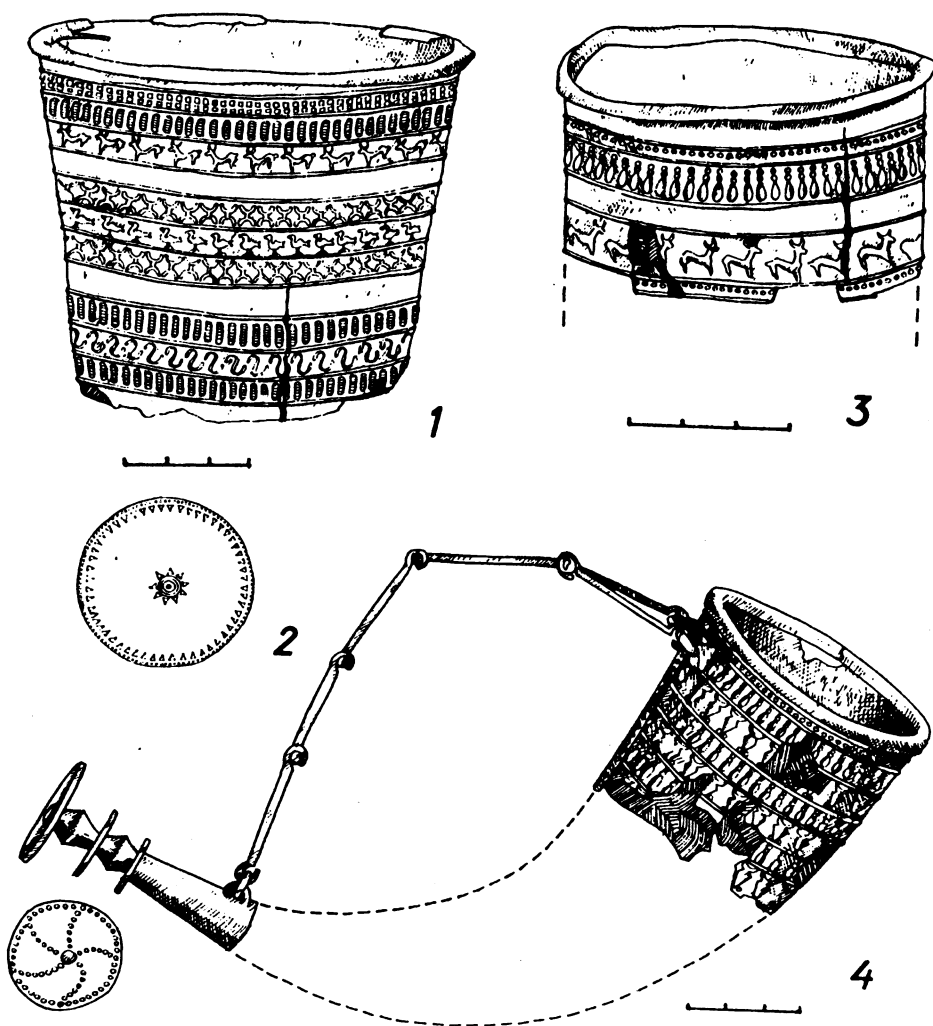


Fig. 6. Silver-plated bronze bindings of drinking horns: 1, 2 – Plinkaigalis, Kėdainiai District; 3 – Rubokai, Šilutė District; 4 – Pašušvys, Kėdainiai District. All 5th-6th cent. A.D.

6 pav. Geriamojo rago žalvariniai apkalai padengti sidabro plokštele: 1, 2 – Plinkaigalis; 3 – Rubokai; 4 – Pašušvys. Visi V-VI a.

More rarely found are zoomorphic items of another type: metal details of belts and bracelets. Their decorations sometimes feature the elements of a horse – its head and hooves (Nakaitė 1991, Fig. 4; 3; 7). Elsewhere in Lithuania, representations of wild beasts, waterfowl and reptiles predominate in silver plating decoration found on drinking horns (Kazakevičius 1987).

Artefacts in the zoomorphic style began to spread throughout Lithuania during the 5th-6th centuries, i.e. at a time when the political boundaries of tribal unions were being established. The actual number of such artefacts, however, is relatively small. This has led some archaeologists (cf. Kazakevičius 1981; 1983) to assert that objects with zoomorphic motifs are not characteristic of indigenous Baltic art, and that they represent imports to Lithuania from other lands, primarily Scandinavia. This view is currently under debate, on the basis of comparative data from mythology and folklore (Vaitkunskienė 1987; Nakaitė 1991).

In support of an indigenous zoomorphic tradition, it should be noted that art, mythology, and religion were interrelated in the world-view of the archaic Baltic communities (Vėlius 1983). Here, various animals were associated with different beliefs and with sorcery. It is probable, therefore, that zoomorphic motifs served a magical function. This is apparent in the silver bindings of drinking horns, decorated with images of wild beasts, waterfowl, reptiles, water signs, and schematic figures of worshippers (Fig. 6). The composition of these motifs has been interpreted to symbolise the cosmos, i.e. a tripartite division of three worlds: heaven, earth, and the underworld (Nakaitė 1991).

Zoomorphic images sometimes relate to only one zone of the trinomial world (Fig. 6: 3), or, instead of the depiction of the entire figure of an animal, only a part of it is pictured. This method of representation represents the magical principle *pars pro toto* (a part, instead of the totality). The concept is well known in the traditional decorative arts of village-level communities throughout the world.

Zoomorphic symbols in Baltic mythology and religion appear to have had a magical function. We can therefore assume that artefacts in zoomorphic style provided a special status to their owners. This is particularly evident when individuals are buried with drinking horns, decorated with zoomorphic motifs. Among many tribal societies in northern Europe, drinking horns were reserved for heroes and were associated with power and vital natural forces. Figures and statues of Old Prussian gods were sometimes decorated with drinking horns. All of this suggests that the inclusion of a drinking horn as a burial good, especially one decorated with magic zoomorphic symbols, symbolised the power of the deceased individual within his community.

Ideological support for ruling elites often takes the form of an associated religion or cult, which helps establish special power to the ruling group. It seems likely that at this time in Lithuanian history, during the transition from a primitive communal system to a hierarchical society, objects decorated by magical symbols — primarily mythological animal entities — were the ritual attributes of a mounted warrior elite.

Conclusions

At the 5th-6th century Pagrybis cemetery, burial orientation and types of grave goods reflect differences in gender and social status. Based on the quantity of burial goods, and the presence or absence of weapons, burials of adult males can be classified into four groups. About 49% of the male burials (Groups 1 and 2) represent mounted warriors equipped with numerous weapons, and sometimes an associated horse sacrifice. One of these mounted warriors may have been buried with a sacrificed female slave. Several graves of adult males included boys (their sons?), who often had large battle-knives or other warrior-associated burial goods. This suggests that family wealth was inherited through the male side, perhaps indicating a patrilineal society.

The evidence of warrior hierarchisation displayed at the Pagrybis burial ground is visible at other Middle Iron Age burials in Lithuania. The most striking example is that of the rich "ducal" grave at Taurapilis (Tautavičius 1981).

Brooches, drinking horns and other objects ornamented in a zoomorphic style are occasionally found in the burials of mounted warriors. Some analysts (cf. Kazakevičius 1981) have proposed that these objects are Scandinavian imports. In my opinion, a more probable explanation is that the zoomorphic items represent mythological animals, associated with an indigenous Baltic religious tradition. The warrior elite exploited these symbols to provide themselves with an ideological base of support, and to take advantage of their attributed amulet power.

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Kariaunų susidarymas Lietuvoje

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Santrauka

Problema tiriama remiantis archeologiniais duomenimis, sukauptais 1980-1982 metais kasinėjant Pagrybio kapinyną. Jį paliko žemdirbių bendruomenės, V-VI a. gyvenusios vakarinėje istorinės Žemaitijos dalyje, konkrečiau – Šilalės rajono žemėse. Nustatyta, kad toms bendruomenėms būdinga ištisa lyčių opozicinė sistema, kurioje pirmenybė buvo atitekusį vyrams. Tačiau ir tarp vyrų akivaizdi socialinė gradacija. Antai viena dalis vyrų (48,8%) į pomirtinį pasaulį buvo išlydėti kaip kariai raiteliai. Kai kurie jų palaidoti dar ir su kalaviju, sidabrine antkakle, žirgo auka ar net su numarinta moterimi – verge (k. 62). Kita dalis vyrų (51,2%) palaidoti arba visai be ginklų, arba su ietimi ar kirviu. Jų kapuose nėra nei žirgo aukų, nei raitelio ar žirgo aprangos reikmenų. Spėjama, kad šie vyrai užsiėmė ne karine, o ekonomine veikla: rūpinosi ūkiu, drabužiais, maistu ir pan.

Socialinę gradaciją dar paryškina tokios vyrų įkapės, kaip zoomorfinio stiliaus daiktai, rasti karių raitelių kapuose. Kadangi gyvūnai baltų mitologijoje, folklore – svarbūs personažai, apgaubti tikėjimais, prietarais, burtais, tai seka išvada, kad daiktai su zoomorfinėmis detalėmis galėjo turėti magišką paskirtį. Galimas daiktas, kad sakraliniais simboliais ornamentuoti dirbiniai buvo karių raitelių atributas, liudijantis karvedžio ir jo karinės palydos – kariaunos – narių ypatingą statusą žemdirbių bendruomenėje.