

# WARRIOR BURIALS WITH KNIVES-DAGGERS: SOCIO-CULTURAL ASPECTS OF RESEARCH. A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF EARLY MIGRATION PERIOD WARRIOR GRAVES IN THE SAMBIAN-NATANGIAN GROUP AREA (THE KALININGRAD REGION OF RUSSIA)

JAROSLAW A. PRASSOLOW

## Abstract

The author presents some of his recent results and observations made within the framework of a research project devoted to a comparative typo-chronological analysis of Migration Period knives-daggers in the basin of the Baltic Sea, and to the study of socio-historical tendencies and events marked by the appearance of these artefacts. The intensification of field research in the region in recent years, as well as the rediscovery of parts of the former Prussia-Museum's collection and regained access to the archives of prewar researchers, has allowed the author to back up the study with an unprecedentedly high number of knife-dagger finds and relevant burial complexes.

Key words: Kaliningrad region, Sambian-Natangian Group, West Balts, Prussia-Museum, knives-daggers, *balteus Vidgiriai*, social status, ethnocultural background.

## History of the research

Knives-daggers (referred to as *Dolchmesser* in prewar German literature) represent one of the most spectacular and highly specialised forms of Migration Period weapon in the southeast region of the Baltic Sea basin. Indeed, finds of these artefacts are known almost exclusively from the territory of modern west Lithuania and the Kaliningrad region of Russia (both are parts of the former German province of East Prussia) (Šimėnas 1996, pp.64-66; Kulakov, Skvortsov 2000, Fig. 5). In terms of Migration Period archaeology, these finds have been made almost exclusively in the distribution area of the West Lithuanian Group, the Lower Neman Group and the Central Lithuanian Group of West Balt Culture, in Samogitia and the area of the Sambian-Natangian Group<sup>1</sup> (SNG) of West Balt Culture, respectively (Šimėnas 1996, p.41; Kulakov, Skvortsov 2000, p.41; Prassolow 2012, Fig. 21).

<sup>1</sup> The Sambian-Natangian Group is usually referred to in postwar West European archaeological literature as Dollkeim-Kovrovo culture (Nowakowski 1996, pp.13-14). But the first name seems to be more neutral, and at the same time more precise; it also has a long tradition, being used already at the beginning of the 20th century.

The first illustrated publication of a number of knife-dagger variants had already appeared in the 1880s in the photographic record of an exhibition of Prehistoric archaeological finds in Germany (Fig. 1).

Since their first mention in literature and up to 1945, numerous finds of knives-daggers were made in the former German province of East Prussia (with the southern part of modern Lithuania being part of the province at that time), and published in the context of male grave inventory descriptions, dated to the Periods C-D.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, no attempts were made in the prewar research period to perform a comparative analysis of knives-daggers, or to develop their typology, or to date them more precisely; nor was any comprehensive catalogue of knives-daggers compiled.

The next phase in the investigation of knives-daggers began after a long break, and was marked by the appearance of pioneering publications by Lithuanian archaeologists on this topic (Kazakevičius 1988; Šimėnas 1992; 1996; 2006). The first catalogue of knives-daggers (Šimėnas 1996) included both older

<sup>2</sup> According to the chronological scheme developed by O. Tischler, and thereafter modified by H. Kemke (Tischler, Kemke 1902, p.10ff).

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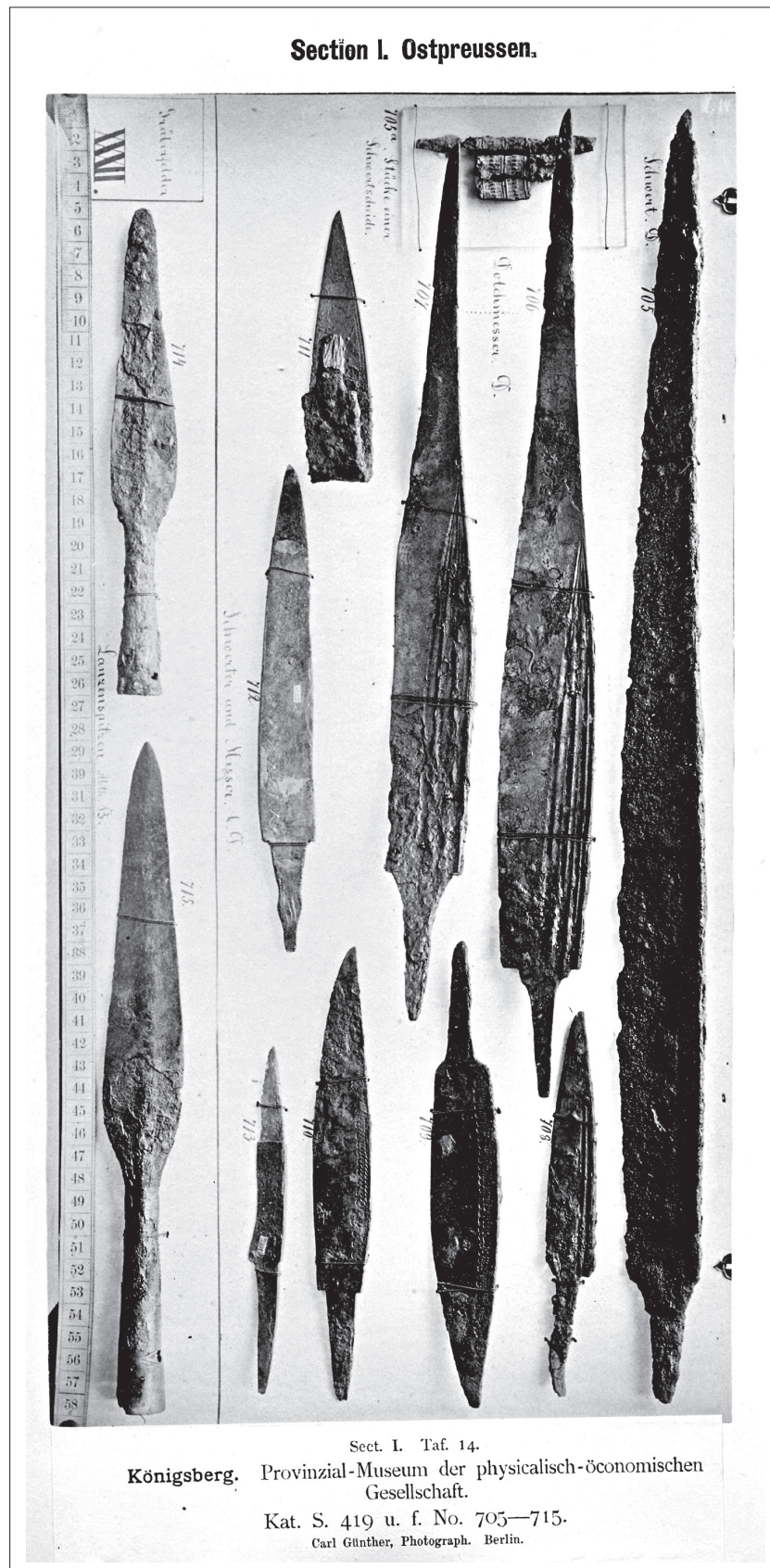


Fig. 1. Characteristic knife-dagger finds in the book of the exhibition of Prehistoric archaeological finds in Germany, the 'Berlin Album' (Günther, Voss, 1880, Taf. XIV, S. 419-420). Original interpretation and dating of the finds as follows: 705 sword (period D), burial site Tengen; 706, 707 knives-daggers (period D), burial site Dollkeim; 708-713 knives (periods C and D).

German finds, known exclusively from prewar papers and archives, and finds made after 1945 in the territory of Lithuania (the northern part of the former East Prussia) and in the Kaliningrad region of Russia (the central part of the former East Prussia). In the last decade of the 20th century, the first analytical publications devoted to a further specific artefact, Early Migration Period shoulder strap types, believed to have been used to carry knives-daggers, also appeared in Lithuanian archaeological literature (Šimėnas, Gleiznienė 1990; Astrauskas *et al.* 1999). Richly adorned with metal parts, leather belts were identified as shoulder straps<sup>3</sup> due to their *in situ* position in male graves across the remnants of the skeletons or near the skulls (Šimėnas 1996, Fig. 22), and were given the name *baltei Vidgiriai* after the burial site of Vidgiriai (Šilutė district, Lower Neman Group), where they were found for the first time (Šimėnas 1992, p.99; Astrauskas *et al.* 1999, p.119; Kulakov, Skvortsov 2000, p.45).

The authors of the above-mentioned Lithuanian publications performed the first comparative analysis of knives-daggers, as well as of shoulder straps (*baltei Vidgiriai*), in the history of research, and made preliminary conclusions concerning the origin of these two artefacts, and subsequently about the ethnocultural background and the social status of their owners. It was assumed that knives-daggers appeared as a result of the merging of provincial Roman, Germanic and nomadic weaponry traditions on the borders of the Roman world (the provinces of Pannonia and Noricum) in the middle of the fifth century. Thereupon, they should have been imported in their already developed 'classic' form to the southeast shores of the Baltic Sea by groups of incoming warriors who were either intruders or Balts returning to their homeland at the end of the 'Hunnic Wars'<sup>4</sup> (Šimėnas 1992, p.100).

Similar foreign roots (although the local production of the artefacts in question was not completely excluded by the authors) were also assumed in the case of the

<sup>3</sup> The total number of *baltei Vidgiriai* finds in the six burial sites in Lithuania was estimated in 1999 as at least 15 (max 22) (Astrauskas *et al.* 1999, p.144). The actual number of Lithuanian examples should have grown since then, insofar as at least 12 burial sites with shoulder strap finds were already known in 2009 (Bliujienė, Butkus 2009, Fig. 4).

<sup>4</sup> M. Kazanski, however, pointed out the differences in the construction of the knives-daggers and the Middle European *scramasaxes* of the Hunnic Wars period in one of his recent publications. He cautiously assumes that some Danish knife forms could have been the prototypes of the knives-daggers of the West Balts (Kazanski 2012, p.121).

*baltei Vidgiriai*, as long as the latter seemed to have no direct prototypes in the archaeological material of the West Balts, and featured some technological innovations believed to be uncharacteristic of locally produced contemporary adornments (Šimėnas 1990, p.74; Astrauskas *et al.* 1999, p.141). Besides this, both the construction of the relevant warrior graves<sup>5</sup> and the partially reconstructable burial rites have special traits that were untypical of the local population, but had close analogies in southwest regions of Europe, as well as in the contemporary nomadic world (Šimėnas 1996, p.61). Finally, it has been assumed that knives-daggers and shoulder straps comprised a functional complex, and were worn by professional warriors, as is indicated (in the case of the Lithuanian material) by the extraordinary richness of their corresponding graves (Šimėnas 1996, pp.63, 71; Astrauskas *et al.* 1999, p.144).

As a conclusion of this short overview of the Lithuanian publications, it should be noted that the opposite point of view also started being expressed more frequently in recent publications: some Lithuanian researchers believe that both knives-daggers and *baltei Vidgiriai* are not only local products, but also have prototypes in the antiquities of the West Balts (Bertašius 2007; Jovaiša 2007; Jovaiša 2007a; E. Jovaiša, private communication).

Obviously impressed by the research results of the above-mentioned investigators, their Russian colleagues published a number of short articles devoted, inter alia, to the postwar finds of knives-daggers in the Kaliningrad region of Russia (the former SNG area) (Kulakov, Skvortsov 2000; Kulakov 2006; Kulakov 2008, etc).<sup>6</sup> It should be mentioned, however, that the Russian researchers were considerably limited in their investigations by the low number of postwar knife-dagger finds in the Kaliningrad region, as well as by the almost complete disappearance at the end of the Second World War of the whole collection of prewar archaeological finds preserved in the famous Prussia-Museum in Königsberg (Reich, Menghin 2008; Reich 2009). Even less was known about *baltei Vidgiriai*: up till this time, only a single (!) shoulder strap find had been published for the whole former SNG territory (Astrauskas *et al.* 1999, p.135).

Nonetheless, Russian archaeologists came to conclusions that were similar to those of their Lithuanian col-

<sup>5</sup> That is, warrior graves with knives-daggers and/or with *baltei Vidgiriai*.

<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, no knives-daggers catalogue, which might serve as a material basis for further comparative analysis of the grave complexes, was provided in any of these Russian publications either.

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leagues, and went even further in the development of their ideas (Kulakov, Skvortsov 2000, pp.41-43; Kulakov 2006, p.63). For instance, they considered Roman *gladii*, along with the knives of the Germanic population in the Elbe basin, to be prototypes of knives-daggers, while the location of the final development of the latter was sought by the authors far away from the shores of the Baltic Sea, between the Danube and the Tisza. Besides this, researchers from Kaliningrad believed that numerous indications of a high social status, as well as the foreign ethnocultural origins of the knife-dagger owners, were also revealed in the relevant grave inventories in the former SNG area (Kulakov, Skvortsov 2000, pp.42-43).

To sum up, it should be stressed that, until now, knives-daggers have been seen as standardised weapons (Kulakov, Skvortsov 2000, pp.42, 48, Fig. 10), insofar as neither German, Lithuanian nor Russian researchers have had to develop their typology or trace a diachronic change in their parameters.

The rather poor abovementioned research situation in the former SNG area changed in the 1990s with the re-discovery of parts of the Prussia-Museum's collection in Berlin and Kaliningrad (Adlung *et al.* 2005; Reich, Menghin 2008; Valuev 2008; Reich 2009), and with the regained access to the private archives of prewar East Prussia researchers. The research situation has also improved thanks to the considerably increased number of knife-dagger finds in recent years. For the first time in the history of the archaeological investigation of SNG antiquities, it has become possible to perform a comparative analysis of a considerable number of knives-daggers in the context of corresponding grave inventories and archival materials, while at the same time using modern archaeological approaches and natural scientific methods of research (Prassolow 2010; 2012; Prassolov 2010b).

### Research data sources

A large number of prewar artefacts, as well as the relevant archival documents used in the actual research projects, come from the former Prussia-Museum, and are now preserved in Berlin's Museum of Ancient and Early History,<sup>7</sup> in the Kaliningrad Regional Museum of History and Art (KOIHM),<sup>8</sup> and in the Olsz-

tyn Museum of Warmia and Masuria.<sup>9</sup> Also, essential information on knives-daggers and corresponding grave inventories can be found in the private papers of famous East Prussia researchers, such as Rudolf Grenz, Herbert Jankuhn and Carl Engel<sup>10</sup> (all three archives are preserved in the Archaeological Museum of Schleswig-Holstein<sup>11</sup>), Marta Schmiedehelm (a private collection preserved in the Institute of History at Tallinn University<sup>12</sup>), Felix Jakobson (in the Latvian National Historical Museum<sup>13</sup>), in the Card catalogue of O. Tischler in Olsztyn (in the Museum of Warmia and Masuria), and in the archive of M. Jahn (in the Institute of Archaeology of Warsaw University<sup>14</sup>). Postwar knife-dagger finds from the former SNG area were investigated by the author in the Kaliningrad Regional Museum of History and Art, while the relevant excavation reports are preserved in the archive of the Archaeological Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences (IA RAN) in Moscow.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, similar artefacts and grave complexes in the territory of modern Lithuania have been inspected by the author in the Lithuanian National Museum in Vilnius,<sup>16</sup> in the Historical Museum of Lithuania Minor in Klaipeda,<sup>17</sup> and in the Vytautas the Great War Museum in Kaunas.<sup>18</sup> Relevant excavation reports are kept in the archive of the Lithuanian Institute of History<sup>19</sup> of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences.<sup>20</sup>

The research performed resulted in the development of the first database of knives-daggers and relevant grave goods in the history of investigations into the SNG area. Within the framework of the study, a subsequent versatile comparative analysis of the total number of 212 knives-daggers and the inventories of 58 properly

<sup>9</sup> Muzeum Warmii i Mazur, Olsztyn, Poland.

<sup>10</sup> The far larger (although less important for the actual study) part of the C. Engel archive is preserved in Marburg, in the Herder-Institut für historische Ostmitteleuropaforschung.

<sup>11</sup> Archäologisches Landesmuseum, Schloss Gottorf, Schleswig, Germany.

<sup>12</sup> Tallinna Ülikooli Ajaloo Instituut, Tallinn, Estonia.

<sup>13</sup> Latvijas Nacionālais Vēstures Muzejs, Rīga, Latvia.

<sup>14</sup> Instytut Archeologii Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warsaw, Poland.

<sup>15</sup> Institut Arkheologii Rossijskoi Akademii Nauk, Moscow, Russia.

<sup>16</sup> Lietuvos nacionalinis muziejus, Vilnius, Lithuania.

<sup>17</sup> Mažosios Lietuvos istorijos muziejus, Klaipėda, Lithuania.

<sup>18</sup> Vytauto Didžiojo karo muziejus, Kaunas, Lithuania.

<sup>19</sup> Lietuvos Istorijos institutas, Vilnius, Lithuania.

<sup>20</sup> It should be mentioned, however, that the investigation of the, to a large extent already published, archaeological Lithuanian material had only a peripheral meaning within the framework of the actual project, insofar as the relevant Lithuanian finds were used primarily for a comparative analysis with the material from the SNG area.

<sup>7</sup> Museum für Vor- und Frühgeschichte, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Schloss Charlottenburg, Berlin, Germany.

<sup>8</sup> Kaliningradskii oblastnoi istoriko-khudozhestvennyi muzei, Kaliningrad, Russia.

documented grave complexes from this database has been performed.<sup>21</sup> Although the use of modern natural scientific methods of investigation of knives-daggers led to interesting and partially unexpected results *per se*, the author would first, however, like to draw attention to the socio-historical aspects of the actual study.

### Knives-daggers: their typology, dating and place of origin

Until now, knives-daggers have been referred to as a specific and apparently homogeneous<sup>22</sup> type of single-edged weapon of multicultural origin, traditionally believed to have been imported to the region of research from southern and Central Europe (Kulakov, Skvortsov 2000, pp.42, 48). However, the results of a recent study of relevant Late Roman/Early Migration Period male/warrior burials testify to quite a different historical reality. Indeed, instead of having almost standardised parameters, knives-daggers from the SNG area differ not only in size but also in the scale of expression of the characteristic features of the 'classic' exemplars. The observed heterogeneity in the knife-dagger pool led to the actualisation of the existing knife-dagger definition. At the same time, several types, i.e. several stages in the development of the knife-dagger, as well as their transitional forms, could be identified in local archaeological material (Fig. 2).

The results of a comparative analysis of grave inventories show that the '[*Kampf-*] *Messer mit krummem Rücken*' ([fighting] knives with curved backs), which are frequently found alongside other weapons in male graves from approximately B2-C1a and well into the period D (Jovaiša 2007, Fig. 9, 13; Prassolow 2009, p.267; Prassolov 2010a, p.129), probably represent the local knife-dagger prototype (Type 0). Although the influence of the weapons and the military traditions of other cultures on the development of the single-edged weapons of the West Balts cannot and should not be excluded, no evidence of any intense foreign impact on the development of knives-daggers in the SNG area can be traced so far in local archaeological material.

<sup>21</sup> The remaining knives-daggers are either stray finds or, far more often, artefacts with no up-to-date preserved data on their original grave and inventory composition context.

<sup>22</sup> This, in reality erroneous impression, can arise from a definition in literature that is rather general by modern-day standards. This definition, formulated for the first time in 1988 by V. Kazakevičius (1988, p.85), and later modified by V. Šimėnas (1992, p.96ff; 1996, p.29), was precise enough to distinguish knives-daggers from the other edged weapons of the time, but is not detailed enough to distinguish the currently known knife-dagger types/variants.

The blades of the Roman Period SNG knives in question almost always bear different engravings, as well as stamped ornamentation: one of the most recurring patterns of the Late Roman Period comprises two or three narrow engraved lines running parallel to each other along the back of the knife, from the tang and almost to the very point of the blade (Type 0). In the second half, that is, at the end of the fourth century AD, the ratio of the ornamental zone to the overall length of the blade starts to decrease, while the ratio of the blade section below the 'break point' on the back to the total blade length increases. The engraved lines of typologically, and also chronologically, later examples run together approximately at the height of the 'break point' of the knife's back, and herewith form an ornamental zone, similar to the shape of the blade itself (Type 1, variant a).

At the next step of typological development, the overall length of the knife-dagger increases significantly, and so does the lower blade section, which at the same time becomes narrower (Type 1, variant b). Also, the width of the originally finely engraved ornamental lines increases: the latter turn into broader 'blood grooves' hammered into the blade's surface. In approximately the 420s AD, knives-daggers acquire their 'classic' appearance (Type 2, variant a), which is also represented by the largest number of currently known artefacts of this kind. This chronological phase of knife-dagger development is obviously also marked by the appearance of two further special forms. One of them (Type 2, variant b) seems to have the same shape as the 'classic' exemplars, but lacks the 'blood grooves'. Another (Type 2, variant c) is represented by knives-daggers that seem to be miniatures of full-length weapons. As these two special variants are represented by just a few exemplars, the majority of which are unfortunately stray finds, both their precise dating and their function remain uncertain. However, it can so far be cautiously assumed that examples of Type 2b are just low-quality copies of the 'classic' representatives of Type 2a. The miniature examples of Type 2c possibly come from the graves of prematurely deceased young individuals, and presumably served as status or gender symbols. However, at least one of these miniature knives-daggers is said to have been found in a warrior burial along with full-length exemplars: so the possibility cannot completely be excluded that we are dealing in this case with a knife that was decorated in the same manner as longer ones for aesthetic reasons. Whether these hypotheses are true should be shown by future research.

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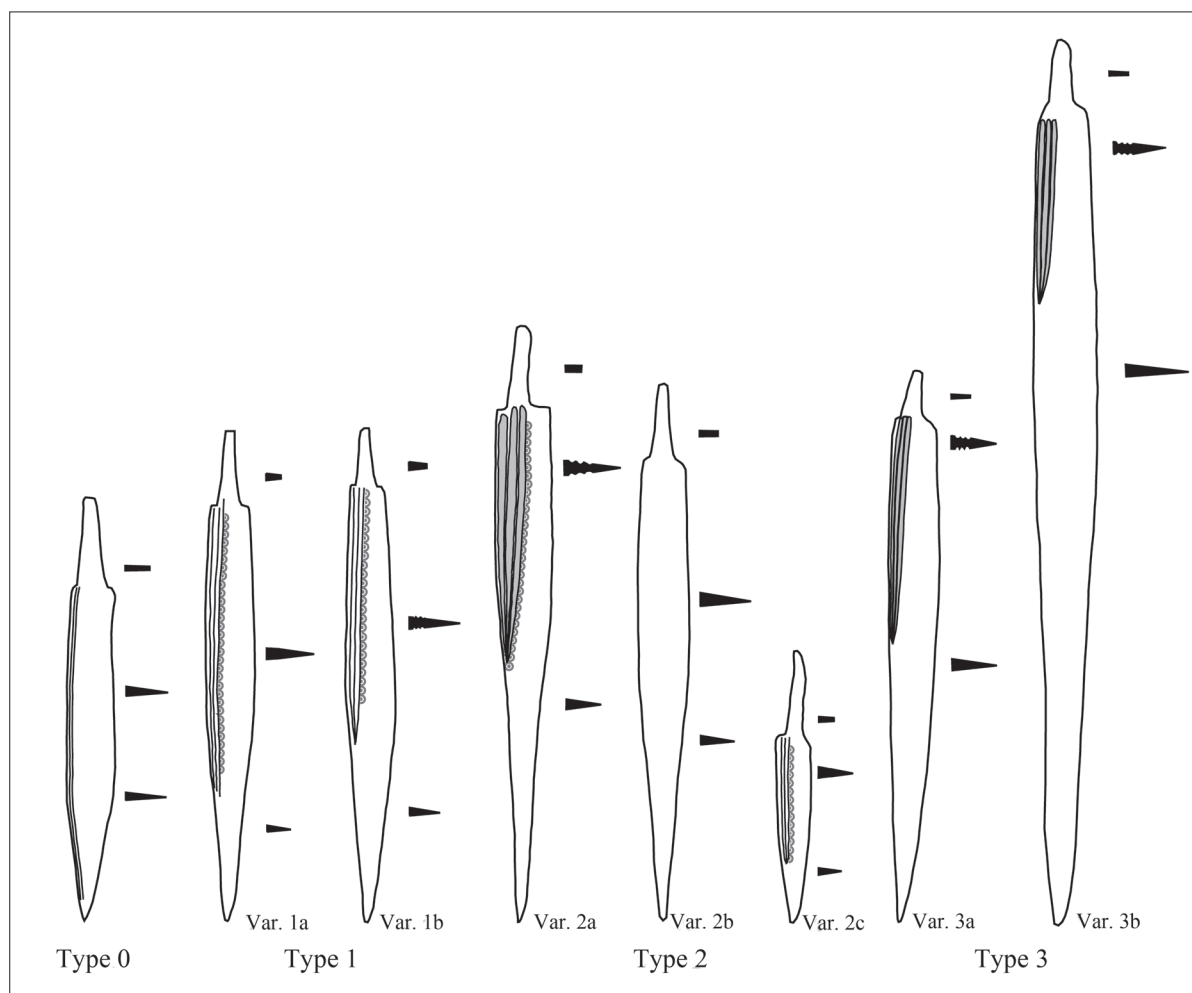


Fig. 2. A schematic depiction of knife-dagger typology (drawn by the author).

The last phase of knife-dagger development coincides with the transition from the Early Migration Period to the Late Migration Period. The decorated zone becomes considerably shorter and narrower; in some of the examples it is preserved only in a rudimental form. Again, two variants can be distinguished within Type 3. The knives-daggers of Type 3, variant a, still have a length that is comparable to that of the 'classic' exemplars, while the sword-like examples of Type 3, variant b have a considerable length and width, and probably represent typological prototypes of local Late Migration Period axes. This morphological development of the blades should have proceeded very swiftly, insofar as only very few examples of Type 3 are currently known. Already in the second quarter of the sixth century AD, knives-daggers seemed to go out of use. It is noteworthy that no break in the weapon tradition, i.e. an abrupt appearance of bladed weapons of a principally new kind, is mirrored in the archaeological material from the middle of the fifth century AD. Knives-daggers thus represent (at least for the SNG territory) a

local weapon form, of which the development had already started at the end of the fourth and the beginning of the fifth century: early forms of knives-daggers appear in the archaeological material long before the end of the 'Hunnic Wars'. Therefore, the presence of knives-daggers in graves cannot testify *per se* to the foreign ethnocultural provenance of the buried.

The chronological stratification of knives-daggers that has been achieved is not only an important weaponological result. As will be shown later, it also plays an important role in the interpretation of corresponding burials in their socio-historical context.

### Baltei Vidgiriai shoulder straps

Shoulder straps of *balteus Vidgiriai* type are traditionally believed to be contemporaries of knives-daggers, and to have been used to carry the latter. These arte-

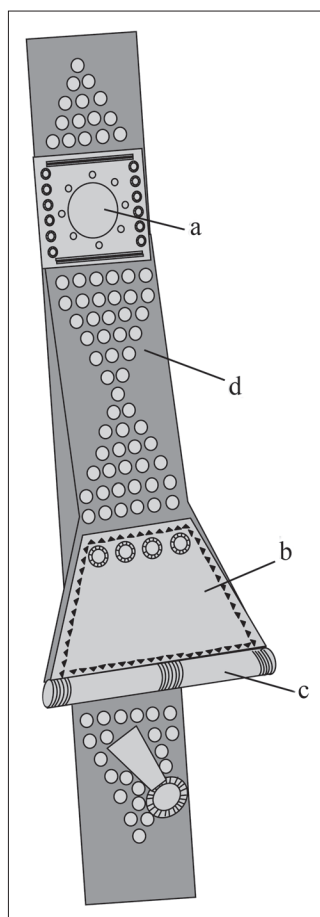


Fig. 3. The front of a *balteus Vidgiriiai*, a generalised representation: a-d the most frequently found metal (bronze or silver) details (drawn by the author, according to published data [Astrauskas *et al.* 1999] and personal observations).

facts are frequently referred to in literature as further evidence of the foreign ethnocultural origins of warriors buried with knives-daggers, insofar as no shoulder strap prototypes that are similar in construction, comparably rich and adorned with metal elements are known from the older archaeological material of the region (Fig. 3). Also, the quality of these items is often said to be too fine for local artisans, while some of the production techniques used (such as *niello* and fire-gilding) are believed to have been unknown to the West Balts at that time.

Although the last argument concerning specific techniques seems to be true, the other statements should be revised. Artefacts of very fine quality (such as fibulae, belt buckles and belt ends) are frequently found in the SNG area in graves from the Late Roman Period as well as from the Early Roman Period. There is no doubt that local artisans were skilled enough to

produce the adorned metal details of *baltei Vidgiriiai*. It is quite possible, though, that the appearance of the *balteus Vidgiriiai* was inspired by the shoulder straps of the Roman world (Prasolov, forthcoming).

Far more significant in the context of the discussion is the assumption that knives-daggers and *baltei Vidgiriiai* once comprised a functional complex. This hypothesis is also based on observations made on grave inventories from the burial site at Vidgiriiai in Lithuania (Šimėnas 1996, Fig. 22), and has been accepted without any serious verification for the SNG area. However, the results of the recent research project do not confirm this assumption. Up to now, none of the currently known local knife-dagger finds (up to 212)<sup>23</sup> have been made together with *baltei Vidgiriiai* in the SNG area. Similarly, in none of the warrior graves

<sup>23</sup> Until recently, the total number of known knife-dagger finds in the whole Baltic Sea basin was cautiously estimated as merely 60 (Šimėnas 1996, p.41).

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with shoulder straps of the type referred to (currently 24 finds in the SNG area already)<sup>24</sup> has a single knife-dagger been found. A subsequent additional analysis of warrior grave inventories in museums and archives in Lithuania has shown that in this territory too *baltei Vidgiriai* have only been found together with knives-daggers in exceptional cases! Instead, *baltei Vidgiriai* are frequently found in male graves in both areas, together with (fighting) knives that are typologically older than knives-daggers (Astrauskas 1999; Prassolow 2012, p.178; Prassolow, forthcoming). A typological analysis of the grave inventories allows us to date the earliest burials with *baltei Vidgiriai* already to the end of the fourth century AD, that is, the Late Roman Period and Early Migration Period. These artefacts thus appear to be older than the first 'classic' knives-daggers (subtype 2). There is currently no direct archaeological evidence for the SNG area that knives-daggers and *baltei Vidgiriai* were used together, i.e. in the same period of time and belonging to the same people. Obviously, knives-daggers were carried by the majority of SNG warriors on organic shoulder straps that were unadorned with metal parts,<sup>25</sup> or on the belt. Alternatively, *baltei Vidgiriai* were intentionally, for whatever reason, never put in graves together with knives-daggers.<sup>26</sup> Whichever of these hypotheses is true, current archaeological ob-

<sup>24</sup> Until now, only a minor number (max six) of *baltei Vidgiriai* finds in the SNG area were mentioned in passing in postwar Soviet/Russian and Lithuanian literature (Astrauskas *et al.* 1999, p.135; Kulakov, Skvortsov 2000, pp.44-45; Skvorzov 2007, pp.123, 128; Taf. 16, 28.11, 30), which is why the subject remained almost completely uninvestigated. A study of shoulder strap finds in the SNG area has become one of the significant 'by-products' of the current knife-dagger research project. This study showed that, although numerous shoulder strap elements have been discovered throughout the history of archaeological investigations in the region, they have remained unidentified as such. An analysis of prewar and postwar publications and, foremost, of the Prussia-Museum's collection, has resulted in the rediscovery of metal parts from at least 15 shoulder straps that have only been identified as such recently, and a total of at least 21 artefacts known in the area up to 2011 (Prassolow 2012, p.178; Prassolow, forthcoming). The number of shoulder strap finds further increased during the last two years, due to the progression of archaeological field research (excavations and surveys) in the Kaliningrad region.

<sup>25</sup> The possibility that some of the numerous iron buckles, frequently found in male graves, are in fact parts of such shoulder straps is rather high.

<sup>26</sup> However, it should be mentioned in this context that the composition of the grave inventories, as well as the composition of weapon sets in the burials, could have been strongly ritualised, and thus probably do not reflect the Prehistoric reality. The almost complete absence of bows, arrowheads, axes and shield elements in local Migration Period male graves strongly suggests the existence of certain selection rules for grave goods. Indeed, it hardly

seems possible that these otherwise widespread weapons were not used in the SNG area.

### The origin and social status of knife-dagger owners

Important observations concerning the ethnocultural background, status and social role of former owners of knives-daggers can be made based on the warrior grave inventories. An idea that is popular in archaeological literature of the last two decades, that graves with knives-daggers are, as a rule, the rich burials of allochthonous warriors with a high social status, is based almost exclusively on the investigation results of such graves in the territory of modern Lithuania. However, a thorough comparative analysis of the relevant archaeological material performed within the framework of the actual study shows that, at least in the case of the former SNG area, this concept should be revised.

First, contrary to archaeological observations made in the basin of the River Nemunas, no change in burial rites is recorded in the case of Early Migration Period graves with knives-daggers in the SNG area. These cremation graves have the same construction as other local male burials of the Late Roman Age and Early Migration Period, and reveal no special or additional principal features that could be interpreted as indicators of the influence of foreign culture. Secondly, it seems to be a reasonable expectation that an intrusion, that is, the return of a group of warriors from far away lands, should be followed by the appearance of numerous imported material goods in their burials which are untypical of local archaeology. However, the total number of imports in SNG burials with knives-daggers is amazingly low: in fact, only 12 out of altogether 58 properly analysed documented burial complexes contained items that could be viewed as imports<sup>27</sup> (Prassolow 2012, Tab. IX). In general, the number of such objects correlates with the average ratio of imports to local products in contemporary graves in the SNG area, and, judging by this, should probably be associated with the trading activities of the local population.

Thirdly, it has been repeatedly postulated in publications in recent years that graves with knives-daggers represent burials of mounted 'professional warriors',

seems possible that these otherwise widespread weapons were not used in the SNG area.

<sup>27</sup> Also within this small group, many objects were already antique at the time of their deposition in the burials, and as such can hardly serve as solid confirmation of the foreign background of their last owners.



‘retainers’ and ‘war veterans’, and as such are characterised by the general richness of the grave inventories (Šimėnas 1992, p.100; Kulakov, Skvortsov 2000, pp.47-48; Kulakov 2012, p.42). However, graves with knives-daggers investigated in the SNG area contained almost no unusually valuable or luxury goods. The overall ‘richness’ of these burials is comparable to other contemporary male graves. In fact, local graves with knives-daggers can be divided into at least four major groups (with subgroups) by the presence or absence of accompanying horse burials, plus the quality and quantity of the burial goods, and so on (Prassolow 2012, p.190ff; Prassolov, forthcoming). It is notable that the differences between the groups seem to be quite considerable: while some graves with knives-daggers are accompanied by horse burials and contain numerous silver and bronze objects, only ceramics are found in the poorest male graves of this kind. However, even the inventories of the richest graves with knives-daggers contain no real high-status objects: gold items have so far only been found in a single and rather special case, which is not necessarily characteristic of the SNG burials in question.<sup>28</sup>

On the whole, there is currently no archaeological evidence that SNG graves with knives-daggers reflect the existence of a certain social stratum, that is, that these graves are, by definition, the burials of professional warriors with a high social status and an alien (ethno) cultural background. Instead, the new research results suggest, inter alia, that knives-daggers were probably a popular ‘people’s weapon’, which can be found in most Early Migration Period male graves of free members of the local SNG culture (Prassolow 2012, p.193).

## Results and conclusions

The most significant findings to emerge from this study are as follows:

1. For the first time in the research history of the former SNG area, a complex search for knife-dagger finds has been performed in a broad range of various sources of data (publications, museum archives and collections, and personal collections). This approach has resulted in a significant increase in the number of currently known knife-dagger finds, as well as corresponding grave complexes and burial sites (up to 212 finds from 39

<sup>28</sup> It still remains unclear whether the graves at the burial site of Warnikam, where these gold objects come from, contain the remnants of local SNG society members, or, alternatively, if they should be seen as burials of people of foreign origin (Kulakov 2007, p.341; Skvortsov 2010, p.197, as well as personal communication).

burial sites altogether). It is noteworthy that a large number of these knives-daggers have been rediscovered in the collection and archives of the former Königsberg Prussia-Museum. The collected data was thereupon used for the development of the first knife-dagger database, which in its turn served as a basis for a subsequent versatile analysis of knives-daggers.

2. A thorough comparative analysis of these finds and relevant grave inventories has finally enabled the actualisation of the existing knife-dagger definition, the development of a knife-dagger typology with three main types and numerous variants, and the definition of their chronological frames. It has also been shown that all stages of the diachronic development (from local prototypes to the latest knife-dagger forms) in the SNG area took place locally, and started as early as the end of the fourth century. No appearance of principally new weapon forms in the period of the Hunnic Wars could be registered in the investigated archaeological material.
3. Contrary to the data for the Lithuanian region, no shoulder straps of the *balteus Vidgiriai* type were found in SNG graves with knives-daggers, and vice versa. There is thus no direct evidence that these two artefacts form a functional complex in the SNG area, as was assumed before. *Baltei Vidgiriai* are instead often found in graves together with knives with curved backs, which represent local typological prototypes of knives-daggers. It has been demonstrated that shoulder straps of *balteus Vidgiriai* type were already in use at the end of the Late Roman Period, and are thus older than the ‘classic’ knives-daggers.
4. The traditional view of graves with knives-daggers as almost necessarily rich burials of professional warriors with an a priori high social status is not supported by the archaeological material inspected. Instead, burials with knives-daggers can be divided into at least four main groups (with subgroups) by the richness of their inventories. The results of a comparative analysis demonstrate that knives-daggers were not an elite weapon of a small retinue group, but rather a widespread ‘people’s weapon’ of the free male members of the local SNG community.
5. An unexpectedly low number of imported grave goods have been found in SNG graves with knives-daggers. Taking this into account, as well

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as the other above-mentioned observations, there are currently no indications of a foreign ethnocultural background of the buried individuals.

6. While the above statements are true for the SNG area, the archaeological material from the territory of modern Lithuania so far witnesses a rather different socio-historical development in the latter territory. Thus, it seems erroneous to equate knife-dagger owners in these two knife-dagger distribution areas.

### Future research possibilities

In spite of the fact that principally new data has been gained within the framework of the actual research project, a final assessment of the status of the knife-dagger owner within Prehistoric SNG society can only be made with the complete investigation/reconstruction of its structure, that is, its hierarchy. Unfortunately, the prerequisites for making a thorough comparative analysis are currently missing, as, until now, not a single (!) burial site in the former SNG area has been fully excavated. Once this has been done, it will finally be possible to compare the composition and the richness of grave inventories that include knives-daggers with the graves of other members of society. Subsequently, it will be important to define the ratio of burials with knives-daggers to male graves with (and without) weapons, as well as to the rest of the burials in the burial ground. Last but not least, the possibility of whether the graves in question form (a) separate zone(s) within the burial site structure should be examined.

In fact, future investigations into the role and the position of knife-dagger owners in local society should focus not only on the actual subject of research, but rather on the study of burial sites in all their complexity, and, in the long run, on a thorough and comprehensive study of local Prehistoric society. Once these aspects have been studied to their full extent, the research problem of knife-dagger distribution in the whole southeast region of the basin of the Baltic Sea can be addressed again. Although the total number of known knives-daggers has grown significantly in recent years (from about 60 finds in the whole Baltic Sea basin (Šimėnas 1996, p.41) to at least 164<sup>29</sup> finds in

<sup>29</sup> Additional 46 knife-dagger finds are currently preserved in the MVF in Berlin. Due to their poor state of preservation and documentation, it is not clear whether some of them are in fact identical to some of the 164 finds known from the publications and archives, or if they represent completely different artefacts that are not known from any preserved records.

well-documented grave complexes in at least 39 burial sites only in the former East Prussia (Prassolow 2012, p.121), the borders of the distributional gap between the concentration of knife-dagger finds in the former SNG area and the finds in the territory of modern Lithuania have remained almost unchanged (Šimėnas 1996, p.41). In spite of the similarities between the contemporaneous burials in question in both areas, the differences between them appear to be too important to be solely of a geographical nature. Thus, it is obviously erroneous to equate the archaeological complexes of these two archaeological regions, and to transfer the research results made in one area to the archaeological monuments in the other without adequate examination. The owners of knives-daggers in the SNG area and those buried in the territory of modern Lithuania can hardly be seen as members of one warrior community, controlling two geographically separate regions. Instead, we are probably dealing with the archaeological reflection of two contemporaneous but rather different socio-historical realities. The nature and the intensity of connections between knife-dagger owners in both regions should be studied in detail in the future.

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### Abbreviation

Arch. Baltica – *Archaeologia Baltica* (Vilnius since 1995, Klaipėda since 2006)

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Jaroslav A. Prassolow  
Centre for Baltic and Scandinavian Archaeology  
Stiftung Schleswig-Holsteinische Landesmuseen  
Schloss Gottorf  
D-24837 Schleswig  
E-mail: jaroslav.prassolow@schloss-gottorf.de

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## KARIŲ PALAIDOJIMAI SU KOVOS PEILIAIS – SOCIOKULTŪRINIAI TYRIMŲ ASPEKTAI. ANKSTYVOJO TAUTŲ KRAUSTYMOŠI KARIŲ KAPŲ LYGINAMOJI ANALIZĖ SAMBIJOS-NOTANGIJOS GRUPĖS REGIONE (KALININGRADO SRITIS, RUSIJA)

JAROSLAW A. PRASSOLOW

reikia pažymėti, kad daugelis klausimų, susijusių su kovos peiliais ir perpečėmis, lieka neatsakyti.

Vertė Audronė Bliujienė

### Santrauka

Kovos peiliai (vok. Dolchmesser) – vieni iš įspūdingiausių ir specifinių tautų kraustymosi periodo ginklų formų – labiausiai paplitę pietryčių Baltijos jūros regione. Ypač daug šių ginklų randama Vakarų Lietuvoje ir Kaliningrado regione (1, 2 pav.). Deja, kovos peiliai yra mažiausiai tyrinėti Vakarų baltų kultūrų radiniai. Šiuo metu labiausiai paplitusi hipotezė apie šių ginklų kilmę ir jų šeiminių socialinį statusą remiasi panašių ginklų, randamų Lietuvoje, tyrimais. Kadangi daugumos šio pobūdžio radinių, saugotų „Prūsijos“ muziejuje Karaliaučiuje, likimas po Antrojo pasaulinio karo buvo neaiškus, o kovos peilių buvo beveik nerandama Kaliningrado regione vykdomų tyrinėjimų metu, todėl buvo remtasi Lietuvos archeologinės medžiagos tyrimų rezultatais. Šiuo metu kovos peilių tyrimų daugėja, nes buvo atrasta dauguma „Prūsijos“ muziejaus radinių. Tai leidžia palyginti prieškarinio ir pokario metais atliktus tyrimus ir suformuluotas išvadas. Dabartiniai tyrimai rodo, kad buvusios išvados apie kovos peilius ir perpečes (baltei Vidgiriai), kurie, kaip iki šiol manyta, sudarė vieną susijusį kompleksą, bent jau Sembos-Notangos kultūrinėje grupėje, turi būti iš esmės revizuotos. Toks pat tyrimas turi būti atliktas ir asmenų, turėjusių kovos peilius ir perpečes, socialinio statuso atžvilgiu. Taigi, tyrinėjant kovos peilius ir perpečes buvo nustatyta, kad baltei Vidgiriai buvo naudojamos jau vėlyvojo romėniškojo laikotarpio pabaigoje, tai yra anksčiau, nei pasirodė „klasikiniai“ kovos peiliai. Taigi egzistuojantys įsitikinimai, kad kovos peilių randama tik turtinguose kapuose arba kad šie peiliai priklausė profesionaliems kariams, *a priori* turintiems aukštą socialinį statusą visuomenėje, negali būti pagrįsta archeologine medžiaga. Palyginus visus atliktų tyrimų rezultatus atrodo, kad kovos peiliai Sembos-Notangos kultūroje buvo eilinio laisvo žmogaus ginklas. Taip pat