

# THE GROBIŅA COMPLEX OF DWELLING LOCATIONS AND BURIAL SITES, AND RELATED QUESTIONS

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## Abstract

The Grobiņa archaeological complex includes multiple Curonian and Scandinavian first millennium burial sites, dwellings and hill-forts. Until now, more extensive research has been carried out on the Scandinavian barrow and flat burial fields, and on a small scale on the Curonian burial grounds; but less attention has been paid to examining dwellings. Excavation materials have only been partly publicised. During the latest research, the habitation period of the hill-fort has been determined, and the dwelling areas on both banks of the River Ālande have been determined and specified. Multiple issues have been overviewed in relation to Grobiņa archaeological site complex: the population in the Grobiņa region during the middle and latter part of the first millennium; and the interaction between Curonian and Scandinavian cultures.

Key words: Grobiņa archaeological heritage complex, barrow fields, flat burial grounds, hill-fort, settlement, Scandinavians, Curonians.

Grobiņa is internationally known as a landing site of Scandinavian settlers during the seventh to ninth centuries. In modern-day Grobiņa and in its close vicinity, there are multiple monuments: a Gotlandian flat burial ground by the Smukumi home (now Rudzukalni), and Swedish barrow fields in Priediena (in literature, known as Priediens II, Priedulājs, Pastorāts and Mācītājmuīža), and by the Porāni (Pūrāni) home. The Grobiņa archaeological heritage complex also includes the burial sites of local Curonian inhabitants: Priediena ancient burial ground (also known as Priediens I), and Atkalni ancient burial ground. The complex also includes dwellings: the Skābāržkalns hill-fort and settlements (Plate IV. 1).

Archaeological research into Grobiņa Scandinavian burial grounds began at the end of the 19th century, but the first extensive research was carried out in 1929 and 1930, led by Francis Balodis and Birger Nerman (Nerman 1958). Further research into the Scandinavian burial grounds during later years was carried out by Peteris Stepiņš (Stepiņš 1951), Jolanta Daiga (Daiga 1957), Valery Petrenko and Jānis Asaris (1984–1989; Ozere 1984; Asaris 1985; Asaris *et al.* 1986; Petrenko 1986; 1987; 1988a; 1988b; 1990), examining a total of 100 flat burial sites and around 110 barrow burial sites.

The flat burial grounds at Smukumi, with Gotlandian settler burials, are located on the southwest outskirts of Grobiņa, on the left bank of the River Ālande. On starting the excavations in 1929, B. Nerman ascertained that the largest part of the burial ground had been destroyed by gravel pits. The periphery of the burial ground left for archaeological excavations is in

the northern and southern parts of the gravel pits. The distance between them reaches 600 metres, showing that the ancient burial ground covered a significant area. Nerman indicated that the burials in the undamaged parts of the burial ground were distributed very densely in groups. He has calculated that there could have been around 1,000 burials in the whole burial ground (Nerman 1931, p.197; 1958, p.180). Today, the area of the burial ground is built on. It is possible that burials have been preserved on the eastern periphery, which is also evidenced by the research by V. Petrenko (1990, p.125)

The Priediena Scandinavian barrow burial sites cover an area of five hectares on the eastern outskirts of Grobiņa, on the right bank of the River Ālande. Nerman counted at least 430 barrows (Nerman 1958, pp.6, 180). V. Petrenko, unlike Nerman, who only examined the central part of the barrows, carried out excavations over vast areas. He succeeded in determining burials of which the barrows had not been preserved. According to Petrenko, the Priediena burial ground could have contained at least 2,000 barrows (Petrenko, Urtāns 1995, p.11). To this day, a large part of the necropolis has been preserved; part of the territory is built on.

In the Porāni (Pūrāni) Scandinavian barrow ancient burial ground, which is located 1.5 kilometres north of Grobiņa, Nerman counted around 50 barrows (Nerman 1958, p.8). The burial ground was extensively damaged during the Second World War and by gravel pits.

Therefore, the total count of Scandinavian burials located at Grobiņa could reach around 3,000. They are dated to the period from the year 650 to 850. If we

assume that the estimates of V. Petrenko about the number of burials are well founded, then these are the largest Scandinavian burial grounds on the east coast of the Baltic Sea.

According to calculations by the palaeodemographer Gunita Zariņa on the population that left around 3,000 burials over a period of 200 years, the local population at one time would have been around 300 to 500 individuals, about half of whom were adolescents up to the age of 15 (in conditions whereby life expectancy at birth was 22.2 years) (Zariņa 2009, pp.32, 72 and 74).

With such a large number of burials and the respective population size, a logical question arises regarding the location of the settlement and its size. During previous studies, multiple hypotheses have been made about the location and the nature of the settlement.

B. Nerman considered that in the middle of the seventh century, a Swedish military order arrived in Courland, and conquered the territories around Grobiņa. According to him, the first settlement was founded on the hill-fort. The soldiers were followed by Gotlandian merchants and their families; the settlement grew fast and soon reached the size of a city (Nerman 1958, pp.181-182). According to him, the settlement would have been very large. The Scandinavians inhabited the hill-fort, the area next to it, and the left bank of the River Ālande. Nerman called this area to the north-west of the Smukumi burial field 'black earth' (Nerman 1958, pp.11-12). This is presumed to be the place between the current Bārta and Nīca roads, to the west of Grobiņa (Plate IV.1). This assumption was proven by test excavations by Jānis Sudmalis and Pēteris Stepiņš in 1950 on the left bank of the River Ālande at the approximate place Nerman had indicated. During the test excavations, a cultural layer around one metre thick was uncovered; the findings included a piece of a key, dated to the second half of the seventh century, a stone cylindrical yarn spindle pulley, pieces of pottery, and the remains of a house's hearth (Fig. 1.3-4) (AO 4471:10-14).

During Nerman's research in 1929 and 1930, small excavations were carried out on the Grobiņa (Skābāržkalns) hill-fort, uncovering an area of 24 square metres in the central part of the hill-fort's plane. It was determined that the thickness of the cultural layer reaches 1.2 metres, and is related to the Scandinavian habitation period, which is evidenced by the find of a characteristic eighth-century arrowhead (Nerman 1958, pp.8-10, 81-84, 180-181, Fig.13, Plates 58-60). In the second half of the 1920s, there was a prevailing opinion that the hill-fort was inhabited only from the ninth to the 13th century (LPA 1974, p.183; Kurši senatnē 2008, p.53).

During the 1980s, V. Petrenko expressed the opinion that it was incorrect to talk about Scandinavian conquests; it was more likely that there was a prolonged process of Scandinavian and Gotlandian migration. In Courland they formed a vast settlement on the banks of the River Ālande together with the local population. However, Petrenko did not specify the location of the settlement. On examining the barrows in Priediena burial field, the remains of a settlement were found at its southwest border with a cultural layer of 0.3 to 0.6 metres (Petrenko 1990, p.122). However, the findings do not allow us to attribute it clearly to the period of use of the burial ground.

The most recent research in Grobiņa, via cooperation between Latvian archaeologists and specialists from the Centre for Baltic and Scandinavian Archaeology (Schleswig), has provided new knowledge about the location and possible period of the settlement. It has been determined that a pronounced dark cultural layer, which contains coal, pieces of pottery, pieces of plaster and burnt rock, can be found in a vast area on both banks of the River Ālande. The possible settlement (or settlements) on the right bank of the Ālande includes a hill-fort, a bank elevation, where a stone castle and a cemetery were later built, city buildings to the north of present-day Saules St, and the area to the east of the hill-fort between Saules St and the river (Plate IV.2). To the east of the hill-fort, a 0.6-metre-thick cultural layer was found using a geological probe; to the north-east of the hill-fort, near the cemetery, it is at least two metres thick.

Even on the left bank of the River Ālande, the area of the settlement was large. It includes the territory north of the Smukumi ancient burial grounds between the Nīca and Bārta roads. In this area, the cultural layer has been completely destroyed by buildings. In the zone between the Bārta road and the river, in the area of present-day Dzirnavu St, a cultural layer of 0.6 metres was found (Plate IV.2). The total area where a cultural layer was ascertained takes up around 20 hectares. It must be noted that almost all of the area of the layer has been disturbed, the ground relief has been partially changed, and gravel has been moved in some places.

Currently, until further research has been done, it is too early to draw any conclusions about whether the area mentioned was inhabited at the same time, or if an ethnic division can be determined (such an assumption is possible when we remember that the Gotlandian and Swedish burial grounds are located on opposite banks of the river). It is also not safe to draw conclusions on the occupation of the settlement's inhabitants, nor on the Curonian and Scandinavian relationship. However, it is possible to say that in the seventh century

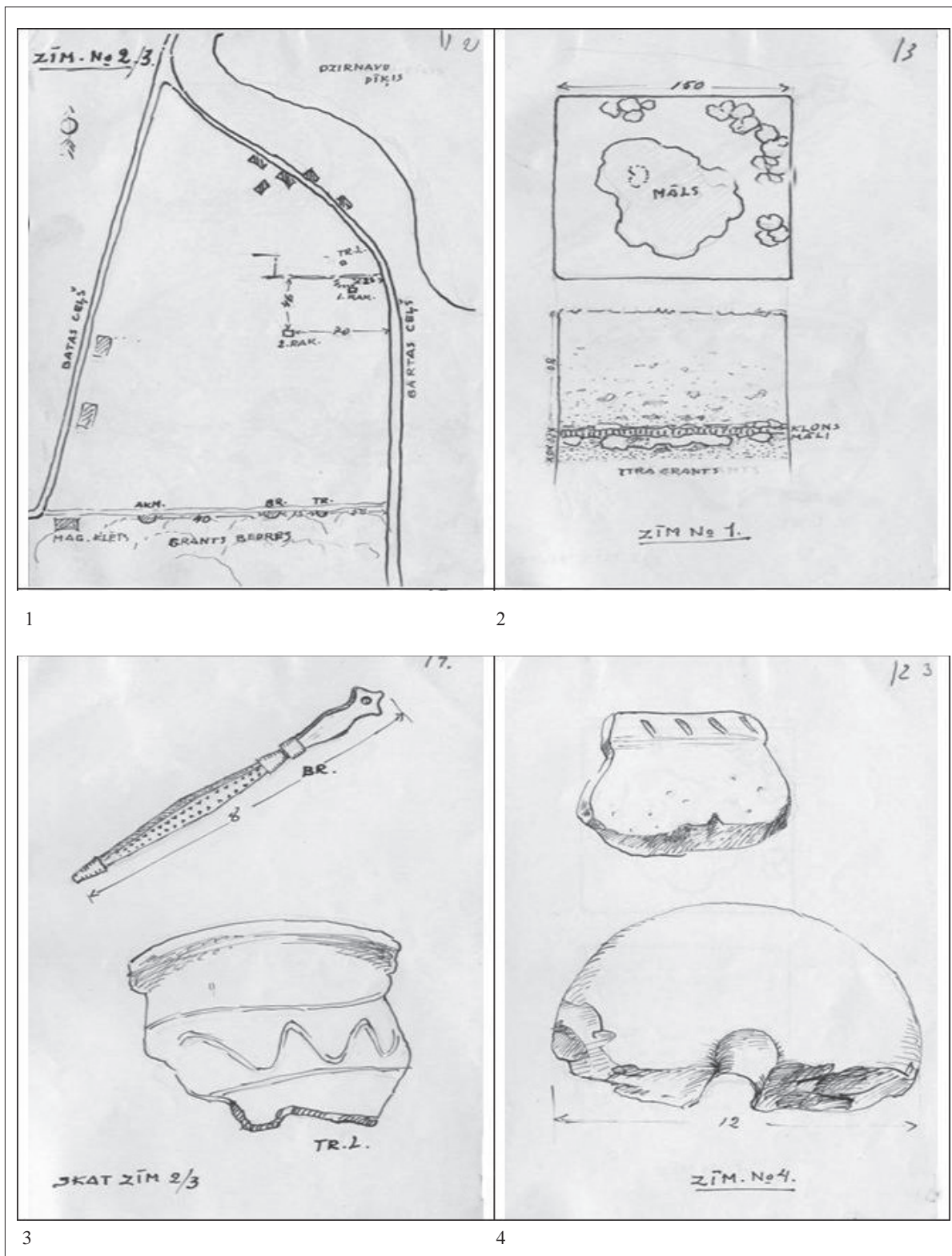


Fig. 1. Survey excavations in the settlement area carried out by J. Sudmalis and P. Stepiņš in 1950 (A 4471:10-14): 1a sketch of the site of excavations; 2a house's hearth and section; 3-4 finds: a piece of a key, a cylindrical yarn spindle whorl, pieces of pottery.



centuries (Fig. 2).<sup>1</sup> A pronounced dark layer was found at a depth of one to 1.2 metres: this can be attributed to the seventh and eighth centuries. According to findings and written sources, the hill-fort existed until the 13th century. Presumably, the upper homogenous layer formed as a result of ploughing, and is attributed to the last period of the hill-fort's habitation.

Of course, such drilling does not give us answers to the question about the ethnicity of the hill-fort's inhabitants. However, it is safe to assert that the oldest inhabitants were not Scandinavians, but Curonians, whose burial grounds are found north of the Priediens barrow fields (Priediena I) and by the Atkalni home (Fig. 3.1, 7). In the Curonian Priediens I and Atkalni burial grounds, the deceased were buried over a long period of time; furthermore, two periods can be distinguished: the third to the seventh century, and the tenth to the 13th century. According to estimates by P. Stepīņš, the area of the Curonian burial ground (Priediens I) covered about two hectares (Stepīņš 1970, p.36), but only a tenth of it has been explored. By using the same calculation methodology which was used in relation to Scandinavian burial sites, it is possible that until the seventh century the Grobiņa area was inhabited by a community of 70 to 90 people. Such a population size corresponds with the overall picture of Latvian Iron Age demographics (Zariņa 2009, p.75).

However, there were changes in the Curonian culture around the seventh century. In the seventh century, their burial ritual changed: stone rings were no longer made around burials (Tautavičius 1996, p.74ff), which during the second to the sixth century was one of the most characteristic features in Curonian-populated territory. During the seventh century in southwest Courland, old burial sites were no longer used: Vērgale Ošenieki, Grobiņa Priediens I and Atkalni, Rucava Ģeistauti and Kalnurbāni. Even in the western part of Lithuania (the Klaipėda region), which is considered to be the base territory of Curonian culture, relatively few burial sites are known dating from the fifth to the seventh centuries (Žulkus 2000, p.99). It is possible that the local population of southwest Courland declined due to climate deterioration. That and the search for new markets could have caused the Scandinavian migration to the eastern part of the Baltic Sea. Vladas Žulkus has expressed the idea that at the end of the Great Migration period, Scandinavian colonies similar to Grobiņa could be found in other places in Kurzeme

as well (Žulkus 2000, p.104). This assumption is yet to be confirmed.

Presumably, the Curonians did not leave the Grobiņa region on the arrival of the Scandinavians. This is shown by both stray finds of Curonian artefacts and artefacts characteristic of the Curonians in Gotlandian and Swedish burials: neck-rings wreathed from three wires, with a loop and a spike at the end (Smukumi, burials III and IX), spiral-bracelets (Smukumi, burials XI and 28), and a spiral-ring with an expanded middle winding (Smukumi, XI) (Plate V.3). Multiple Scandinavian burials contained bronze spirals. Two of the burials (Smukumi, burial 30; Priediens, fourth barrow; for this, see Daiga 1957) contained miniature clay containers characteristic of Curonian burials. During the excavations by V. Petrenko, a typical Scandinavian cancerous fibula was found with decoration characteristic of the Balts. The artefact was dated to the end of the seventh or the beginning of the eighth century (Asaris *et al.* 1986, p.32, Fig. 6.1).

Burial traditions characteristic of the Curonians have been found in Scandinavian burial fields. In 1957, in Priediena burial site, a barrow was examined, and at its centre two grave pits were found characteristic of inhumation graves. J. Daiga thought that these were symbolic burials of a male and a female. The female burial contained two bracelets with club-shaped ends, which are characteristic of the Curonians in the fifth and the sixth centuries, but worn until the ninth century (Kurši senatnē 2008, p.94). Similar bracelets have been found in fifth and sixth-century burial sites in Rucava Ģeistauti, Vērgale Ošenieki, Curonian Priediena burial grounds, as well as in Palanga ninth-century burial grounds (Kuršiai 2009, p.164ff). In both female and male graves, penannular fibulae with rolled-up ends, characteristic of the Scandinavians, were found. Also, inhumation (even if symbolic in this case) indicates the impact of Curonian traditions. In both burials, 62 textile fragments were found. These were two fabrics woven with different techniques, 2/2 twill and diamond twill. The fabrics are woven from very fine wool. According to the evaluation by the textile researcher Irita Žeiere, the fabric was not made locally. This same barrow had a third burial, a cremation grave, which is characteristic of Priediena barrow burial sites, fields and is synchronous with the aforementioned (Daiga 1957).

V. Petrenko has also examined the barrow with two inhumation graves, the given inventory of which was of Scandinavian origin: bronze pots, belts decorated with bronze bindings, spearheads, bone combs, shield rivets, and clay pottery (Petrenko 1990, p.120f).

It is possible that another peculiarity can be related to the impact of the Curonians; this was determined dur-

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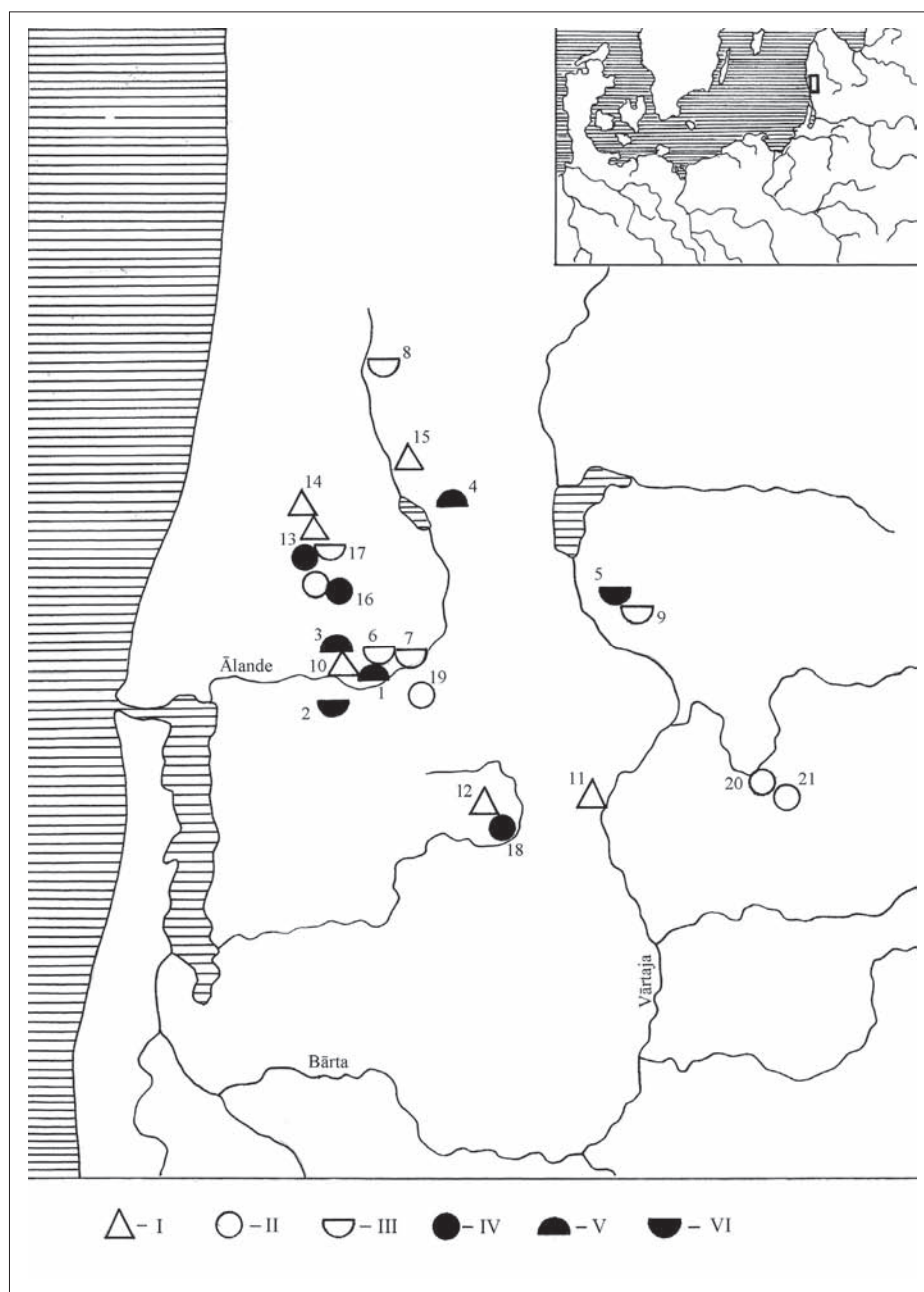


Fig. 3. Archaeological sites and stray finds in Grobiņa and its surroundings: I the hill-fort; II Curonian stray finds; III Curonian burial grounds; IV Scandinavian stray finds; V Scandinavian barrow fields; VI Scandinavian flat burial grounds.

1 Priediena Scandinavian barrow field; 2 Smukumi Scandinavian flat burial ground; 3 Porāni Scandinavian barrow field; 4 Tāšu Jāči Scandinavian barrow field; 5 Durbes Sauslauki Scandinavian flat burial ground; 6 Priediena Curonian burial ground; 7 Atkalni Curonian burial ground; 8 Vērgales Ošenieki Curonian burial ground; 9 Durbes Dīri; 10 Grobiņa hill-fort (Skābāržkalns); 11 Vārtāja hill-fort; 12 Gaviezes Elku kalns hill-fort; 13 Kalnamļu (Mātru) hill-fort; 14 Medzes hill-fort; 15 Tāšu (Vitku) hill-fort; 16 Medzes Strautiņi; 17 Medzes Kapsēde; 18 Gaviezes Saļas; 19 Grobiņas Iļģi; 20 Bunka manor; 21 Bunkas Kalniņi.

ing the excavations by J. Daiga in 1957, in Priediena ancient burial grounds. Remains of cremations and burnt artefacts were placed on top of a layer of white sand (Daiga 1957). A similar phenomenon has been recorded in the not-so-far Vērgale Ošenieki Curonian ancient burial grounds (Virse 2002, p.197). It should be noted that coins were found in the burial examined by J. Daiga, the first instance of this in Scandinavian burial sites in Grobiņa: fragments of two Arab dirhams, which allow us to date the burial as no earlier than the middle of the ninth century.

On evaluating the impact of Scandinavian culture on Curonian culture, it must be noted that, until now, very little was known about stray finds from seventh to ninth-century Curonian monuments and artefacts in southwest Courland (Fig. 3).

Outside Grobiņa, within a radius of about 20 kilometres, there are more Scandinavian burial sites known: Porāni and Jāči barrow burial grounds, the flat burial ground at Remesi (Iļģi) by the Sauslauki cemetery, and possibly also Gaviezes Saļās. Stray finds of Scandinavian artefacts have been recorded in Medze (Plate V.2; Fig. 3, 14).

In Scandinavian archaeological sites outside Grobiņa, archaeological excavations have only been carried out in Porāni and Jāči ancient burial grounds (Šturms 1936; Nerman 1958, pp.77-80; Lūsēns 2002; Lūsēns 2004, pp.29-32). These are relatively small burial sites. The number of barrows in Porāni is estimated at around 50 (Nerman 1958, p.8); but at Jāči, Mārtiņš Lūsēns has registered 48 barrows, indicating that the initial number was certainly higher (Lūsēns 2002). The dating of both monuments does not differ much from the dating of Scandinavian burial sites in Grobiņa. M. Lūsēns has expressed his assumption that the communities outside Grobiņa continued to exist until the second half of the ninth century, which is also proven by <sup>14</sup>C analyses (Lūsēns 2004, p.32). Presumably, these burials were left by small farming communities. It must be noted that there are no known settlements for these burial sites. The small amount of researched burials does not allow us to draw conclusions about the communities' contacts with the local Curonian population.

The current level of research suggests contact between the Curonians and the Scandinavians, as well as a certain cultural interaction, but it cannot be considered as very active or significant. Recorded evidence can chronologically be attributed to the latter stage of the Vendel period (700–800) and the beginning of the Vikings (800–850). The evaluation of these processes requires the research of settlements, especially at the Grobiņa hill-fort and its settlement, or, more correctly, settlements. There are multiple opinions about the na-

ture of this settlement. The settlement on Grobiņa hill-fort has been evaluated both as a military support point (Nerman 1958, p.181) and a significant Scandinavian centre for trade with Slavic lands (Daiga 1957). V. Petrenko has expressed the idea of a multi-ethnic agrarian city, similar to Haitabu, Birka or Staraya Ladoga, indicating that it was a significant centre for crafts and trade, and that Grobiņa was included in a general Baltic Sea communication network (Petrenko, Urtāns 1995, p.19). According to the evaluation by Mateus Bogucki, the inhabitants of Grobiņa during the seventh to the ninth centuries mainly maintained contact with their lands of origin in Gotland and the middle of Sweden, which is indicated by finds in the burials. The fact that the burials lack coins, objects from other European regions, scales and weights, also indicates that Grobiņa should not be considered a distant-trade centre, but should be seen as a Scandinavian colony (Bogucki 2006, pp.99, 102). Also, there is little proof of trade relations with the local inhabitants. Curonian and Scandinavian relations became more active only towards the end of the ninth century, as is indicated by Arab dirham deposit finds near Grobiņa (Urtāns 1977, p.100); however, they more than likely point to Curonian trading activities.

The fact that Grobiņa was an important centre cannot be denied. This is shown by the considerable number of burials, and therefore also the number of inhabitants. Grobiņa was the exit point of Scandinavian colonisation, which is shown by the Gotlandian and Swedish burial sites near Grobiņa. Current research results suggest that in the middle of the seventh century, southwest Courland, or at least the Grobiņa region, was rather sparsely populated. It is possible that the Curonians populated territories deeper inland during this time, where there are more hill-forts: Medze and Kalnmaļi (Mātru) hill-fort, Tāšu (Vitku) hill-fort, Gavieze Elku hill-fort, Vārtāja hill-fort, and others. Some of the hill-forts mentioned (Medze, Kalnmaļi, Vārtāja) had settlements beside them; however, only the Vārtāja hill-fort settlement has been archaeologically explored. Findings in the open dwellings allow us to deduce that the settlement was inhabited from the fifth century until the 13th century (Stepiņš 1964, p.17). Sadly, the small amount of research does not allow us to answer the question whether Vārtāja hill-fort and settlement were inhabited during the whole period, or what the population density was during the seventh to the ninth centuries.

Another unsolved problem must be mentioned: when and why did the Scandinavian colony in Grobiņa cease to exist? Most publications repeat the assumption of B. Nerman about the Curonian rebellion, which is related to the end of Swedish burials around the year

800. However, burials in Gotlandian burial grounds continued until 850. In 855, the Swedish King Olof invaded Courland, and completely plundered and burned Seeburg-Grobiņa hill-fort (Nerman 1958, p.198; Bogucki 2006, p.97). However, neither the excavations of 1929 and 1930 of the hill-fort, nor the geological probing in 2010 and 2011, could fix a layer of burning that would support this assumption. Presumably, more clarification could be made after more extensive research on the Grobiņa hill-fort.

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### Abbreviations

A, KPM – Latvian National Museum of History, Archaeological Section, Collections, Riga  
AA, AO – Latvian National Museum of History, Archaeological Section, Archive, Riga  
APL – Arheologu pētījumi Latvijā ... gadā. Rīga: Zinātne, 2000  
RT – Zinātniskās atskaites sesijas referātu tēzes par arheologu, antropologu un etnogrāfu ... gada pētījumu rezultātiem. Rīga: Zinātne, 1959–1971  
VI AA – LU Latvian Institute of History, Archive, Riga  
ZASM – Zinātniskās atskaites sesijas materiāli par arheologu, antropologu un etnogrāfu darbu ... gada pētījumu rezultātiem. Rīga: Zinātne, 1972–1998

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## GYVENVIEČIŪ IR KAPINYNŪ KOMPLEKSAS GRUOBINIOJE IR SU TUO SUSIJĒ KLAUSIMAI

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### Santrauka

Gruobinioje (latv. Grobiņa) ir jos apylinkēse yra daug skandinaviškų paminklų – gotlandiečių plokštiniis kapinynas netoli Smukumi (dab. Rudzukalni) ir išėivii iš Vidurio Švedijios, švedų (latv. sveiju) pilkapynas Priediens vietovėje (literatūroje žinomas kaip Priediens II / Priedulajs / Pastorats / Macitaj muiža) ir Pōrāni (Pūrāni) vietovėje. Gruobinios archeologijos paminklų komplekse taip pat yra kuršių kapinynų: kapinynai Priediens (žinomas kaip Priediens I) ir Atkalni vietovēse. Komplekse taip pat yra Skābaržkalns piliakalnis ir gyvenvietēs (1–3 pav.; IV–V iliustr.).

Archeologiniams tyrimams Gruobinioje vadovavo Fr. Balodis ir B. Neršanas (1929–1930), P. Stepinš (1951; 1969), J. Daiga (1957), V. Petrenko ir J. Asaris (1984–1989) bei I. Virse (Ozere) (1984–1995). Iki šiol ištirta 210 skandinaviškų ir 30 kuršiškų kapų, datuojamų III–VII a. ir X–XIII a. po Kr. B. Nermano ir V. Petrenkos manymu, šioje vietoje turētų būti maždaug 3000 skandinaviškų kapų. Gyventojų, kurie per maždaug 200 m. laikotarpį galėjo palikti tiek kapų, turėjo būti nuo 300 iki 500 individų, kurių pusę sudarė nepilnamečiai iki 15 metų amžiaus.

Pastarųjų metų tyrimai Gruobinioje davė naujų duomenų apie spėjamą gyvenvietēs vietą ir jos chronologiją. Gyvenvietēs kultūrinis sluoksnis buvo aptiktas ant piliakalnio ir abiejose Alanda upelio krantuose, daugiau kaip 20 ha plote. Gyvenvietēs kultūrinio sluoksnio storis – nuo 0,3–0,6. Kultūrinio sluoksnio storis piliakalnyje siekė 2 m. C14 analizės rezultatai leidžia manyti, kad piliakalnis buvo apgyvendintas V amžiuje. VII a. viduryje pietvakarinis Kuršas buvo palyginti retai apgyventas, o kuršiai dab. Gruobinios apylinkių nebuvo visiškai apleidę. Dabartinis mokslas nustatė kontaktus tarp kuršių ir skandinavų, taip pat tam tikrus kultūrinius ryšius, kurie nebuvo itin glaudūs. Tai matyti iš

archeologinės laidojimo medžiagos – kuršių pavienių dirbinių skandinaviškuose kapuose ir nedidelio kiekio skandinaviškų radinių, aptiktų už Gruobinios ribų.

Skandinavų atsiradimą Gruobinios apylinkēse, šių apylinkių apgyvendinimo intensyvumą, skandinavų kolonijų pabaigą ir kt. iki šiol lieka svarbūs. Į juos gali atsakyti tik didelio masto moksliniai tyrimai Gruobinioje ir jos apylinkēse.

Vertė Romas Jarockis