

SOCIAL ORGANIZATION OF THE SOCIETY IN THE LATE BRONZE AND EARLY IRON AGES ACCORDING TO THE DATA OF BURIAL SITES FROM NORTH-WEST LITHUANIA

SUMMARY

This paper contains a collection of Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age burial sites in North-western Lithuania and analyses of the predominant burial customs in the region in an attempt to reconstruct some aspects of social organization within communities. One of the Early metal periods – Early Bronze Age – was not included in this work because the only two known burial sites in the region in question do not provide enough statistically significant data for gaining insight into social structure in this period.

North-western part of Lithuania contains 19 burial sites dating to the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages: Auksūdys burial mound, Baubliai burial mounds, Benaičiai graves, Ēgliškiai burial mounds, Gintarai burial mound, Kretingalė burial mounds, Kurmaičiai burial mounds, Kveciai burial mounds, Kvietiniai burial mounds, Maciuičiai graves, Mišeikiai burial mounds, Mosėdžiai burial mounds, Padvariai burial mounds, Rūdaičiai grave, Sūdėnai burial mounds, Šlažiai burial mounds, Šlikiai burial mounds, Toleikiai grave and Žvainiai burial mounds. The most common type of burial during this period is a burial mound, however other types existed concurrently, for example flat graves in various locales, such as next to burial mounds, further from burial mounds and in territories devoid of mounds.

Cremation is the dominant burial custom in Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages, but towards the end of the period the number of inhumations increases. At the moment there are 172 known graves dating to the period in question, and they were used to investigate burial customs and social organization. The majority of graves – 148 – were found in burial mounds, of which 135 were cremations. Only a small portion of graves in the burial mounds dating to the end of the period in question contain inhumation burials – merely 13 have been discovered so far. The remaining 24 cremation burials did not have any surface structures nor were they set in mounds; they are categorised as flat graves. Three burial mounds of this period contained equine remains. It indicates the beginning of the custom to bury horses which becomes widespread in later periods.

Cremation burial data analysis showed that cremations in the burial mounds commonly feature four stone arrangements: stone structure, stone-paved floor, stone circles and half-circles, and “stone

boxes”. Cremations in flat graves commonly have stone circles or half-circles, while stone-paved floor is a rarity. Approximately half of cremated burials were placed in urns with smooth, brushed, coarse or polished surface. Inhumation burials were placed in mounds without stone arrangements. Grave goods are uncommon in cremation burials but they appear more frequently with inhumations. Inhumation burials contain a lot of grave goods that are mostly made of metal. The majority of grave goods are jewellery; there were no weapons and only a few tools.

A variety of burial data was used to examine social structure: grave setting, location within the burial mound and grave goods. The graves are treated not as a direct reflection of social structure but as a source of information affected by a variety of factors, most importantly ideology, that display an altered social status image of the deceased. Cremation and inhumation burials were studied separately, seeing as ideology and burial customs changed during the transition period, and so did the meaning of material culture symbols.

Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age burials reflect dissimilar views towards the dead. It is one possible indicator of differentiated, hierarchic societies existing during the period in question, where the deceased with certain social status had to be buried separately. Individuals of high social status were buried in burial mounds, while people with a lower status were buried outside the burial mound in flat graves. The burial sites in no way indicate the occupation of the deceased or social standing of gender within the community. It is due to the nature of the data sources – mostly burned remains with jewellery as grave goods; there is a distinct lack of osteological investigation of the remains.

Stone arrangements associated with cremation burials are the most notable feature of the individual graves, which is not just a result of time-related burial custom changes. This work presents a hypothesis that stone structures associated with cremation burials are an indicator of social identity and status of the deceased. As inhumations became more prominent, the ideology of communities changed and grave goods became the criteria with which to measure the social identity of the individual.

Burial mounds remain the main type of burial monument through the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages, even when transitioning from cremation to inhumation. Burial mound is a collective burial which indicates the need to associate an individual with a certain social group after death. It is possible that the burial mounds contained the remains of whole families, but this theory can only be proved by further analysing the relationship between each individual buried within a single mound. These burial monuments symbolised not only the high social status of an individual, but also could serve as markers of the community's territory.