

Review of Magdalena Szubska doctoral dissertation „*Na pograniczu kultur – cmentarzysko w Równinie Dolnej stan. III z okresu wpływów rzymskich i wędrówek ludów*”. Doctoral thesis will be defending in Kardynała Stefana Wyszyńskiego University, Faculty of Historical Sciences Institute of Archaeology

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The dissertation "On the Border of Cultures – Cemetery in the Równina Dolna Site III from the Time of Roman Influences and the Migration Periods" by Magdalena Szubska consists of three volumes. In the first volume, the textual part of the dissertation (197 pages, 39 figures, and 5 tables) is divided into 8 chapters with subsections discussing the general cultural situation of the region during the Roman and Migration periods, the geographical environment and landscape of Równina Sępolska during the fairly long period of time from the mid of the 1st to the first quarter of 6th century. The discussion of the cultural situation includes both archaeological evidence and the written sources of antiquity. The dissertation is accompanied by an extensive list of references used (pp. 389–426). This is a testimony to the author's aim to integrate the analysed burial site into the context of the Baltic cultures, therefore a short survey of the Baltic lands was given. This introductory chapter deals with the complex history of this cemetery research, the poorly preserved documentation, and an understanding of the methodology and methods used. Between 1993, 1995, and 2003, the Równina Dolna cemetery site III investigated a vast area of 0.455 ha and discovered 1059 archaeological structures dating from the mid-1st century – the first quarter of the 6th century. The doctoral dissertation analyses 351 cremation human graves in urns and without urns (pits cremations), and 76 horse inhumation graves. It is the comprehensive analysis of these graves that is the axis of this doctoral dissertation, around which the aim, the objectives, the theses for defending, and the novelty of the dissertation topic is revolved.

All the material is described according to the archaeological principles: the funeral customs and the grave sets which are linked to grave plans, drawings, and photographs of each of the finds. Particularly detailed analysis of the human cremation grave sets (jewellery, household items, weapons, tools, etc.) and horse-riding gear (bridle bits, bridles, scissors, etc.). Profound descriptions of 351 people's cremation graves (the shape and depth of the grave pit, the occurrence of unsophisticated stone structures, etc.). Where possible, the sex and age of the

buried people were determined on the basis of anthropological studies and, to some extent, on the basis of the grave sets (Fig. 24; Table 4). The single human inhumation grave is indicated as a result of the influence of the Wielbark culture. The burials of the horses have been carefully described in terms of their funeral customs and their grave sets. The incompleteness of horse skeletons also are mentioned (graves 18, 56, 84, 132B, 171, 183, 186, 278, 286, 325B, 536, 615, 670, 671, 682, 690, 691, 708, 722, 727, etc.). However, it remains unclear whether the lack of horse bones is only evidence of the destruction of the graves or the deterioration of the bones, or whether there may have been other reasons, related to beliefs, that could have led to the burial of a horse that was not complete, in other words, there is a lack of interpretation.

The last two chapters 7 and 8 of the textual part of the doctoral dissertation are devoted to the analysis of the development of the Równina Dolna site III cemetery and its chronology, and of course Volume I end with conclusions. Volume 2 is intended as a catalog of all the graves, archaeological structures (objects), and stray finds. Volume 3 contains 163 plates with grave pits plans, finds drawings, and photographs.

As the aim of the doctoral dissertation was to publish as much of the cemetery archaeological excavations material as possible, the content of the dissertation is focused on the implementation of this aim. Therefore, the cemetery Równina Dolna III site (*Untter-Plehen* in German) site carried out by German researchers, and the history of the research started in 1993 and ended in 2002. However, the author of the dissertation notes and discusses the problems related to the archaeological investigations carried out two decades ago with regard to the general fixation of the former (research reports, plans, and drawings, museum inventory cards: *Inwentar zabytków wydzielonych*, Fig. 12 & 13), poor research diaries from 1995–1998 and the former research methodology (part of the top layer was removed mechanically), and is at least partly related to the disturbance of the burial site by sand excavation, land reclamation, and other destructive factors.

Therefore, the fundamental problem that the author of this dissertation had to deal with was the creation of a main research plan for the cemetery, based on the documentation of past research and to a certain extent reconstructing the archaeological research carried out two decades ago. It is understandable that without a general plan of the cemetery, it is impossible to understand the chronological development and funeral customs of the cemetery. This complex task has been accomplished on the basis of the documentation from 1995 to 2003 in the GIS

coordinate system (p. 41). The plan localized the disturbed southeastern and southern parts of the cemetery, the layout of the areas and fixed the position of human cremation and horses inhumation graves, and the position of archaeological structures and stones (Fig. 7). Another problem, as can be understood, is the insufficient quality of the diaries and other documentation, and the lack of anthropological and zooarchaeological analysis of the bones made during the research. Only the anthropological analyses carried out in 2000, 2001, and 2002 have survived (Table 4). The incomplete and scattered shards of ceramics and flint artefacts were a major problem for the dissertation author.

As for the aim of this doctoral dissertation, it is stated that "the further aims of the dissertation are to try to establish the cultural affiliation of the inhabitants who buried the dead at this site and to fill the gap in the research of the periphery zone" (p. 8). However, in fact, there should be only one aim, whereas there may be several objectives to achieve the goal, and these are clearly highlighted.

In the cemetery analyses the used methods are based on traditional archaeological methods: analysis, comparison, reconstruction, and interpretation of archaeological and osteological material. Elements of several theoretical approaches were used. One of them is particularly important in the analysis of burial monuments, which raises the question of how it is possible to reconstruct a former living culture on the basis of a former (dead) culture and to try to analyse the community which buried its tribesmen in the cemetery and under study on the basis of this analysis (according to K. Skóra *Struktura społeczna ludności kultury wielbarskiej*. Łódź, 2015). However, this reference is somewhat declarative, as these aspects are not explored in Chapter 7. Although the excellent analysis of the archaeological material carried out by the author of the dissertation makes it possible to do so in detail. It should be stated that on the basis of the reconstructed general plan of the cemetery (Fig. 8), a series of thematically different plans have been drawn up, which allow us to understand the development of the cemetery, the distribution of bit with joined mouthpieces and bit with three-joined mouthpieces, and buckles, and other parts of the horse's gear, distribution cremated graves by their shape, the distribution of the dead by sex, etc.

According to Magdalena Szubska, the dissertation focuses on the characterization of the cultural fringe of Dollkeim/Kovrovo as Równina Dolna site III (the area, territory situated at the border or far from the centre and the border as a social and cultural contact situated in space,

according to Sadowski 1995, p. 13), taking into account the distance from its centre on the Sambian Peninsula (or Samland). To highlight dissertation used the territorial and material or archaeological evidence aspects of the culture. First of all, she searched for links, analogies, and parallels with the main sites of the Dollkeim/Kovrovo culture and the Bogaczewo (*kultura bogaczewska*) and thus the Sudovian (*kultura sudowska*) cultures, as well as with the Olsztyńska and Elbląska cultural groups of the Migration period. It should be noted that the usage of this theoretical approach is only more pronounced in the conclusions (p. 195). However, the author of this dissertation did not pay due attention to the cemeteries of Western Lithuania (men's graves with horses), the Lower Nemunas River (men's graves with horses, the spread of the cremation custom), Central Lithuania (the development of the cremation customs and the spread of horse inhumations and their connections with human the concept of “on the border of cultures”, the author of the graves) and the cemeteries of the Migration period of Samogitia (graves of men with horses). The Równina Dolna site III cemetery, as a peripheral burial monument of the Dollkeim/Kovrovo culture, also reveals multiple contacts with the cultural areas to the north as well borderland cultures. In this case, the peripherality of the Równina Dolna site III burial ground and its location on the territorial and cultural periphery even better reflects the spread of the human cremation customs and burying horses with humans in a northeastern direction, i.e. the areas inhabited by the Sudovian's in the Trans-Nemunas (*Litwa zanemenska* in Polish) region and southeast Lithuania. In other words, this deeper analysis of the custom could have allowed the author of the dissertation to present a much broader picture of the significance of the diverse contacts between lands of the Baltis for horse burial customs, and to see the commonalities and differences between the customs.

The first chapter, "Cultural background" (*Tło kulturowe*), states in a few sentences the presence of Western Lithuania, the Lower Nemunas, and Central Lithuania in the space of Baltic cultures. According to the Polish historiographical tradition, the cultural area of barrow cemeteries is named as the litewsko-lotewska kultura kurhanów (Fig. 2). This description fits only to the Roman period (periods B1a–C3–C3). The Lithuanian historiographical tradition refers as the area of Samogitian and northern Lithuania and southern Latvia culture of the barrow cemeteries because this cultural area was regionally and culturally quite distinct from the very beginning of its formation (Michelbertas 1986, p. 54–68; Radiņš 2007, pp. 168–170). During the

period of the Migration period, this area is referred to as the Samogitian (Žemaitija) cemeteries (Tautavičius 1996, pp. 64–73, Fig. 1).

Undoubtedly, horses played an important role in the beliefs of Balts lands communities. In the Równina Dolna site III burial ground, since as many as 76 graves of horses were found, the author of the dissertation, on the one hand, on the basis of the general plan of the cemetery, has to analyse the chronological development of the horse graves, that is, the constant increase of such graves from the initial stage of the development of the cemetery in the middle of the first century AD to the first quarter of the 6th century AD. The horse gear and chronology investigated at Równina Dolna site III cemetery correspond to the development of the Dolkeim/Kovrovo culture. On the other hand, it was observed connection between human burial and horse graves was observed, as in as many as twenty horse graves it was recorded that human cremation graves were dug in horse graves (p. 175). However, there is not clear enough if these human cremations were specially dug in horses' graves, or if these cremation graves just talking to us about the development of the cemetery space. Dollkeim/Kovrovo culture of the Roman period, as Szubska points out in the text of her dissertation, as well as other authors, the graves of unburnt horses are found next to the human. The same funeral custom is to bury the deceased male beside the horse even during the initial stages of the Migration period. Besides this, there is no clear correlation between the human grave goods set and the anthropologically investigated cremated human bones and established deceased individuals' sex and age. According to the anthropological analyses of cremated human bones, three graves were likely to have contained males, two graves contained females (juvenis and adaltus age) and three graves contained infans II aged. Around horse grave 225 is a small group of human graves making a small concentration. In a few cases, simple constructions of several stones were found over the horse graves (Fig. 28). The above aspects of horse funeral customs are described in detail, but what is lacking for well-done analyses of the archaeological evidence is interpretations of what were connections between human and horses, the stone structures or concentrations of people around the horse grave, etc., may indicate. Most of the horse graves date back to the period of the Migration period, and in this chronological period, the same trends of horse graves can be seen throughout the whole of the land of the Balts. The evidence from Central Lithuania allows us to build up the hypothesis of when and why horse graves started to move away from humans.

We discuss the links with the Lithuanian archaeological situation in the fields of jewellery, weapons, drinking horn decoration, horse gear, etc., as well as in the types of artefacts, their decoration, and chronology. However, it should be noted that the author mentioned bindings of drinking horn orifice decorated with stamped horned animals (*bydlo rogate*) found in the cemetery of the Równina Dolna site III, in human cremation grave 803, Plinkaigalis (Kėdainiai district), graves 61 and 332 and Rubokai (Šilutė district), grave 39, in the light of recent research link these animals to horses (see Skvorzov and Pesch 2011). This new interpretation is based on U-shaped “horns” on the heads of the horned four-legged animals and another characteristic of the horse's features.

These comments said in the Magdalena Szubska doctoral dissertation review do not detract from the value of this work. On the contrary, they may help her to see the Baltic lands in a wider context in future investigations and to formulate new research questions. Magdalena Szubska has done a titanic job in carefully analysing and, in many cases, reconstructing the archaeological material of the Równina Dolna site III cemetery piece by piece. The striking and careful analysis and the many cases reconstructed from a little-known region and a hitherto more widely unknown cemetery will be interesting to scholars and prehistory lovers who are involved and are interested in the investigation of Baltic lands.

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