

THE SUBJECT OF BATTLE-KNIFE ORIGIN IN CENTRAL LITHUANIA

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Abstract

The battle-knife is quite a familiar weapon in Lithuanian archaeological material. The functional characteristics are more important than the length of knife for making decisions about the battle-knife. By appreciating the archaeological material from Marvelė cemetery (central Lithuania), we can observe the process of change in the form of the battle-knife during the Late Roman Period.

Key words: battle-knife, function, weapon, Marvelė.

A definition of the question

The question of the battle-knife and its origin is not quite new in Lithuanian archaeological discourse. The first detailed publications appeared some decades ago (Kazakevičius 1981, Vaitkunskienė 1988). However, the appearance and spread of these artefacts merits more attention and detailed consideration.

The battle-knife is quite a well-known weapon in Lithuanian archaeological material. According to Kazakevičius (1988, 1993) and Michelbertas (Michelbertas 1986, p. 163), in Lithuania this type of weapon has been known since the third century, or since the second century (Tautavičius 1996). More numerous battle-knives are in the archaeological sites in Western and central Lithuania. But, talking about the Roman Period, these weapons are rather rare, usually a knife 25 to 28 centimetres long is appreciable as a battle-knife (Michelbertas 1986, p.162). A similar characteristic is applied to battle-knives dated to the Migration Period: a weapon of 25 to 50 centimetres length is called a battle-knife, and a longer weapon is regarded as a sword (Kazakevičius 1988). Accepting that scheme, Lithuanian archaeologists also look to other authorities (Salmo 1938, describes the battle-knife as longer than 20 centimetres; Mandel describes it more as a 25-centimetre-long knife, cf Mandel 1977). But not everybody agrees with this description. Tautavičius notes that any longer knife could be used as a battle-knife anyway (Tautavičius 1996, p.137). Moreover, some of them have quite heavy blades, and were not fit for everyday work. A knife with a blade and a thick back was more fitted for stabbing or hitting, it was helpful in a case when the usual way was impossible (Wagner 1969, p.91). The discussion is not finished yet. Discussing the metric system right here, the situation from the Middle Ages could be recalled. Considering the measurements used in the Middle Ages, Antanas

Gurevičius (1989) noticed that no definite measurements were used, the main standard was man, who was a “measurement of all things”. Thus the method of distinguishing battle-knives based on the length of the blade is quite technical (formal), as if our ancestors used the same metric system. This problem, the need for not a formal but more a functional analysis, has been noticed in archaeological literature already (Vaitkunskienė 1989, p.58). Considering the length of the blade, this rhetorical question becomes more relevant comparing it to the weaponry context. Particularly when we know that the weapon like a sax (this weapon was refined on martial manners), differs in length, and specimens are known with a blade even less than 18 to 20 centimetres in length (Nørgård Jorgensen 1999, p.46). A functional analysis with special regard to the social structure of a particular society could be acceptable in discussing the question. In the general opinion, the contextual analysis of grave items and set of weaponry in a selected grave could reveal the social state of the deceased. But the big variety of weapon sets in the graves and the changes in the variety of a weapon’s composition over time and geographical scale reveal a more cultic cause of weaponry sets than a social one (cf Steuer 1982, p.193).

The chronology and distribution of battle-knives

Thereby, the functional characteristics are more important than the length of a knife for making a decision whether it is a battle-knife or not a battle-knife. But then the next question emerges: what features could be applied for a battle weapon? As other archaeologists have noticed, a special blade form made to stab is characteristic of the battle-knife. This is the main feature of battle-knives with so-called “blood grooves”. These specialized weapons are with quite a short tang, along

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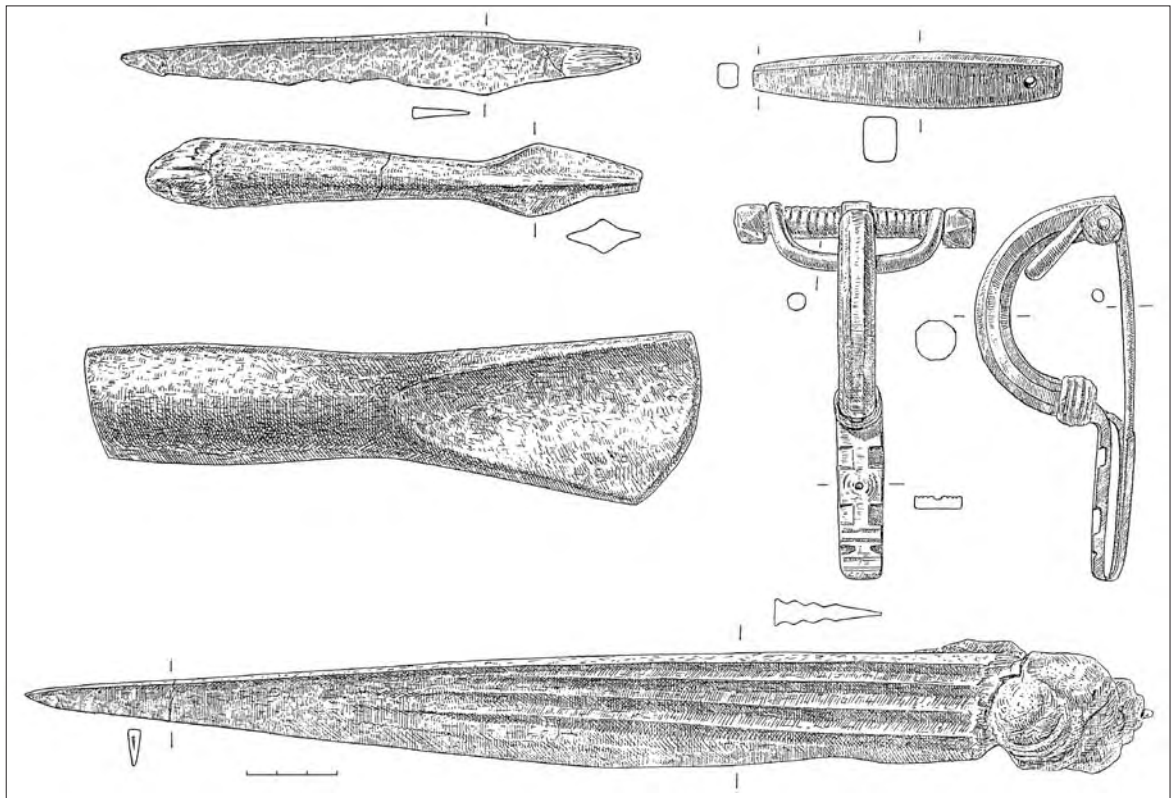


Fig. 1. Specialized battle-knife from Marvelė grave 337 (iron, bronze and stone; in the custody of VDKM 2479:318; after Bertašius 2005, drawings by V. Laužadienė).

the dull side of the blade run two or three grooves (Fig. 1). They are dated to phase E of the Migration Period. According to Šimėnas, the distribution of sites with that type of battle-knife extends along a coastal zone from Elbląg to the north as far as Liepāja (Grobiņa in the Viking Age) and along the bank of the River Nemunas up to Kaunas and in the central Lithuanian region (Šimėnas 1996, Table 1). The appearance of these battle-knife daggers coincides with social changes in the region and reflects the same socio-cultural pattern of life. But before the appearance of these daggers, we are noticing some “introductory” processes of usage of battle-knives.

Considering the functional characteristics of the battle-knife, it is worth pointing out the full complement of weaponry in the grave. Some coincidence of several weapons in the grave of phases D–E (Migration Period) is quite understandable, at this time some uniformity in warrior worship could be identified (Bertašius 2002, pp.37-39). But could it be noticed by analyzing material of the Late Roman Period?

Two types of knives are known in Lithuanian archaeological material since the Roman Period. Knives with a straight tang are more familiar amongst grave goods, knives with a hooked tang are less known, but not rare in the archaeological material (Michelbertas 1986).

Analyzing the material from Marvelė¹, we are dealing with rich archaeological material dated to the Roman Period, and we can observe some types of knife with a hooked tang. In certain times this knife becomes longer and takes the shape of a standardized 19.5 to 20.5 centimetre length (Fig. 2; grave 1119 from Marvelė cemetery; other similar graves 94, 186). Most findings are associated with other weapons in the grave (spearhead, axe). It could be regarded as an attempt to find a new weapon using an older form of ordinary knife with a hooked tang. These artefacts are dated to the C_{1b}–C₂ phase of the Roman Period (it could be referenced to other findings for dating, like neck-rings, pins, or to be specific, features of grave arrangements, like clay walls near the human remains: cf Bertašius 2005). Of course, it must be emphasized that the number of cases are too few to make reliable inferences. It can be appreciated only as a remark, and needs more detailed investigation. One more point: if the length of the blade usually represents the time, and older specimens are shorter and younger ones are longer (presumably a reference to the study of the Merovingian sax by W. Hübener, 1988), we can assume that some shorter knives could

¹ Currently the biggest excavated cemetery in Lithuania. Situated in Kaunas, near the confluence of the two biggest Lithuanian rivers, about 200km from the Baltic Sea; investigated during 1991–2006, excavations continuing, total grave number about 1,500, ca 700 burials dated to Roman period.

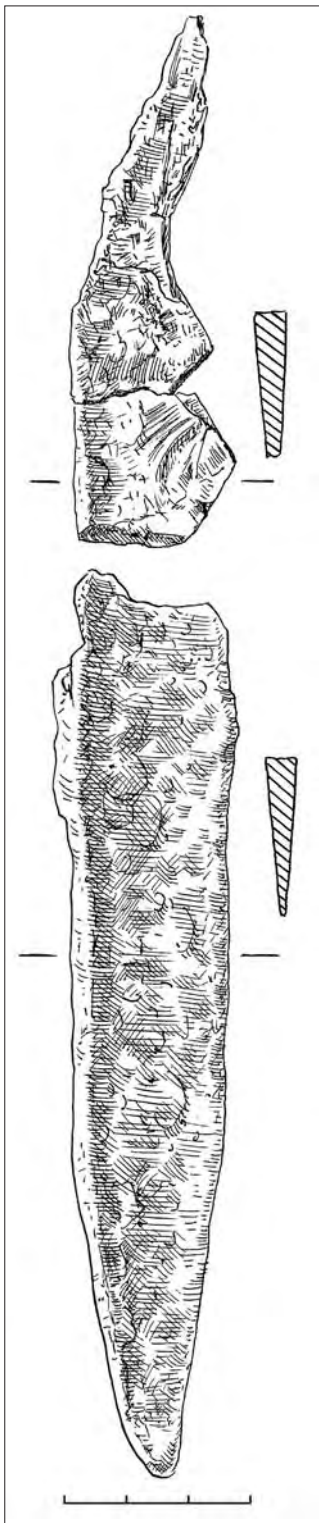


Fig. 2. Battle-knife from Marvelė grave 1119 (iron; in the custody of VDKM; after Bertašius 1999; drawings by V. Laužadienė).

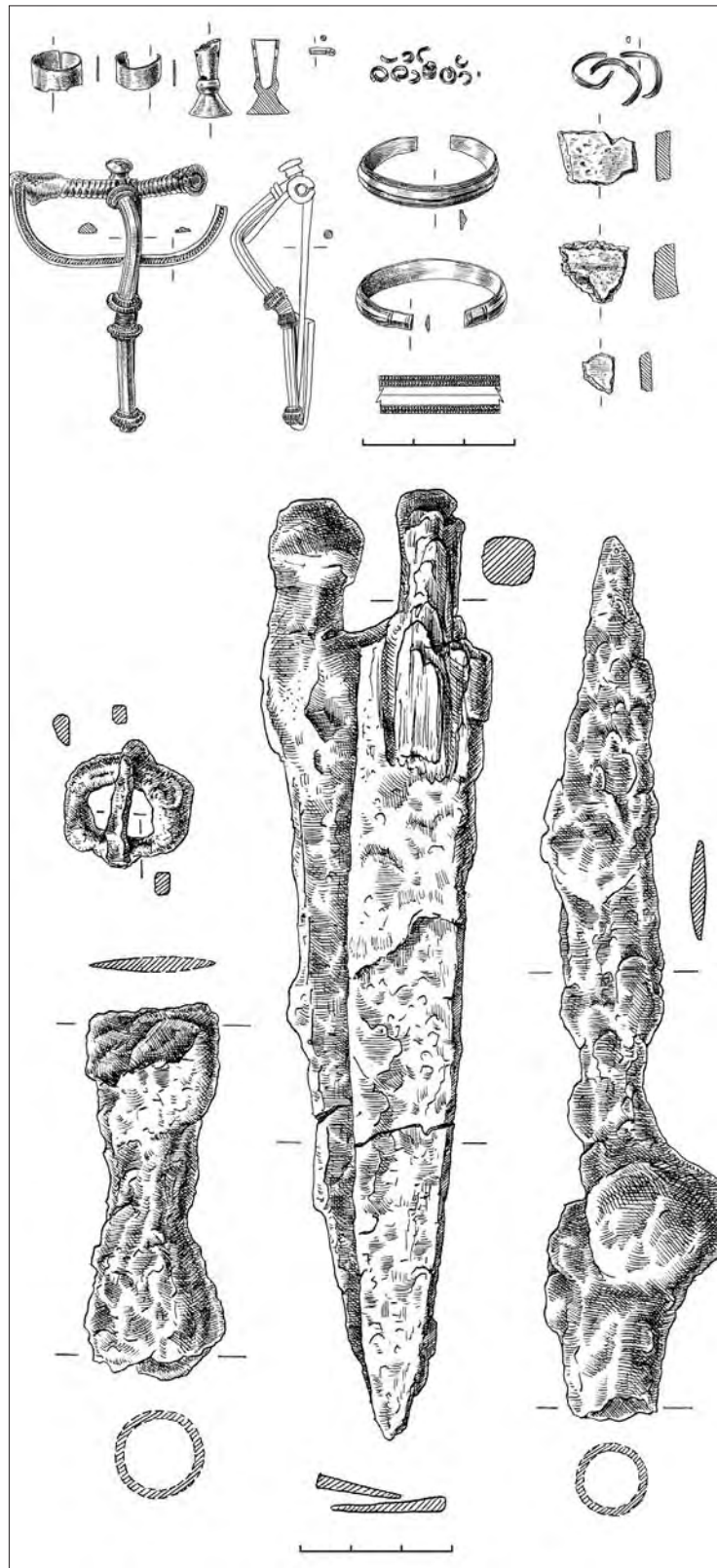


Fig. 3. Grave goods from Marvelė grave 1302 (bronze and iron; in the custody of VDKM; after Bertašius 2002; drawings by V. Laužadienė).

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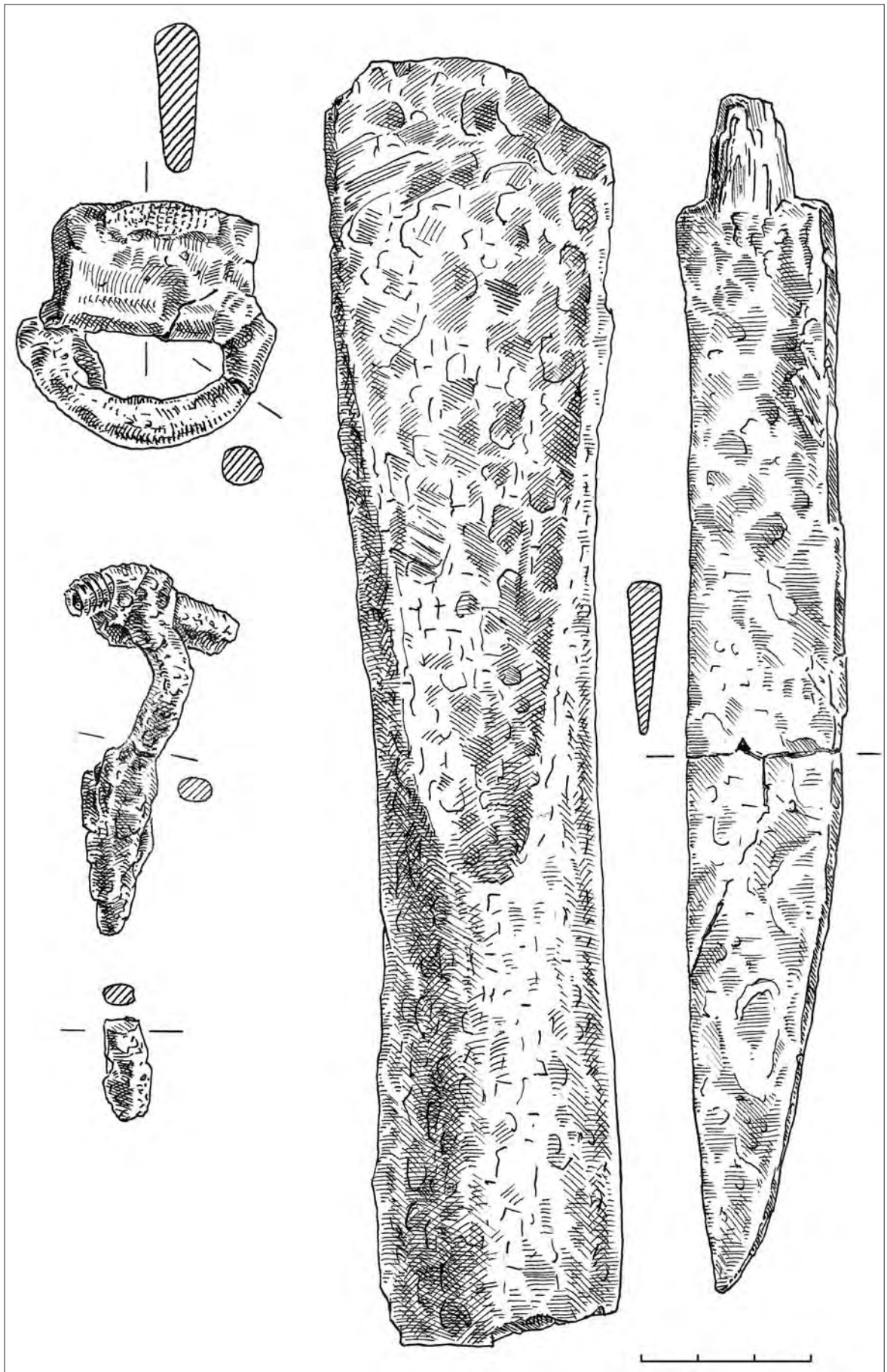


Fig. 4. Grave goods from Marvelė grave 1324 (iron; in the custody of VDKM; after Bertašius 2006; drawings by V. Laužadienė).

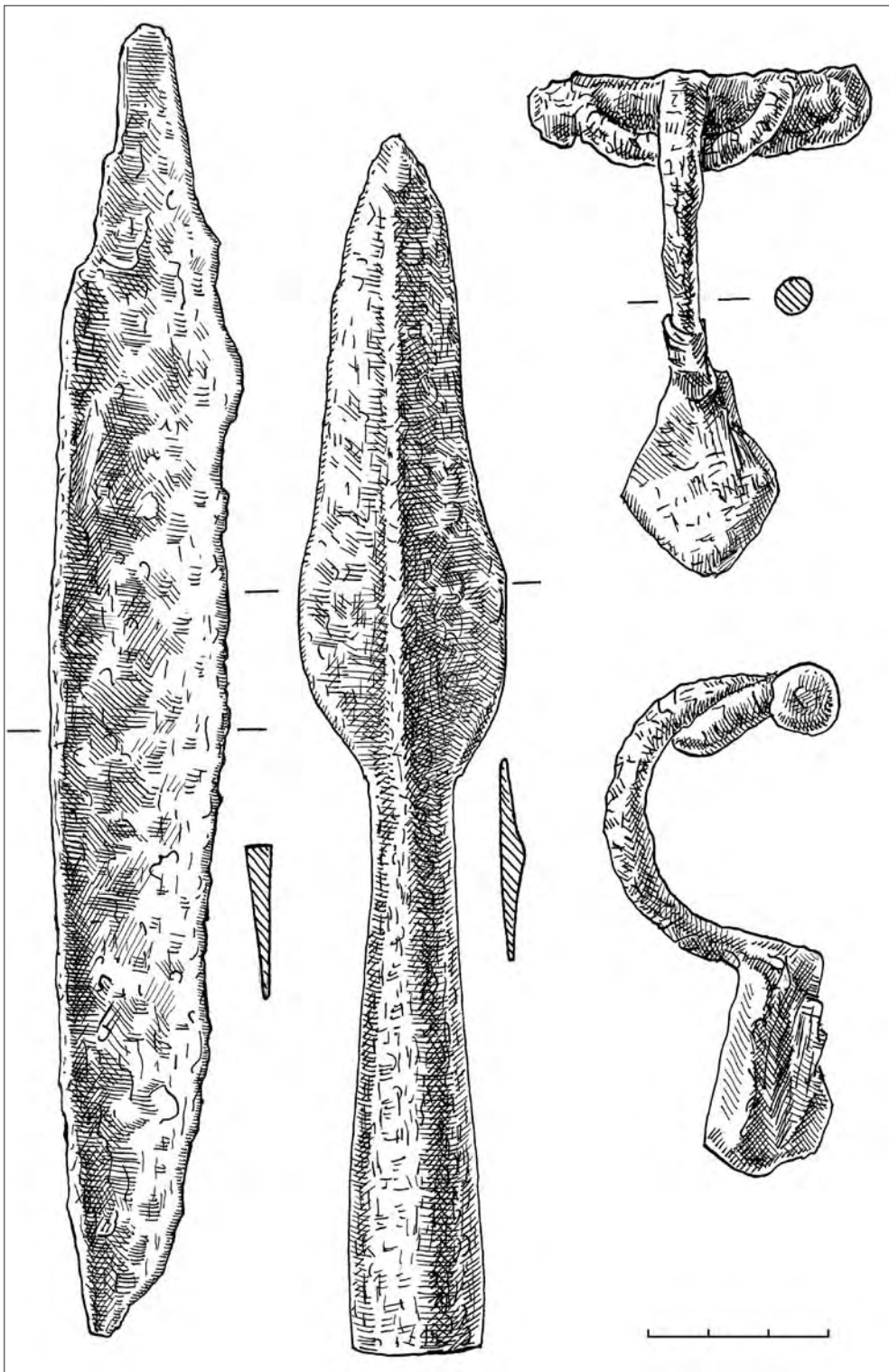


Fig. 5. Grave goods from Marvelé grave 1212 (iron; in the custody of VDKM; after Bertašius 2001; drawings by V. Laužadienė).

be battle-knives as well, and dated to the Roman Period.

But there is more material of this type. Let us pay attention to quite specific knives, by the shape it seems they are knives used for stabbing (Fig. 3: grave 1302 from Marvelé cemetery, or the similar grave 1298). Some of them are graves in a stone circle (Fig. 4: grave

1324, or the similar grave 1218). According to material from other similar graves in Marvelé cemetery, the tradition to make a small narrow stone circle could be dated to the C_2-C_3 phase of the Late Roman Period. Thus, these graves are preliminarily dated to the C_2-C_3 phase of the Late Roman Period. In all listed cases, we can see a quite well-formed weapon with a strong blade and a thick back. The full complement of differ-

ent types of weapons in the graves attracts our attention, too. Usually in these graves we find an axe and a spearhead with knife, hence the more complete warrior equipment characteristic of that time. But the next question emerges: practically nobody in Lithuania has completely analyzed the set of warrior equipment common to that time. The battle-knife as part of the warrior equipment of a bit earlier (phase B₂/C₁-C_{1a}, or the second half of the second and the beginning of the third century) was used by the Bogaczewo peoples, who lived in the Salet Lake region in Poland. One of their characteristics is the use of battle-knives and spears as a warriors' symbol (Nowakowski 1995; Karczewski 1999). There is some data about connections between Bogaczewo and central Lithuanian regions (Bertašius, forthcoming). Depending on this data, we can perceive some possible influence from the south (probably Bogaczewo Culture) introducing the battle-knife in the everyday life of the central Lithuanian population. But there is no direct evidentiary material about possible newcomers: usually the graves with a battle-knife consist of ordinary central Lithuanian artefacts (fibulae and neck-rings, or pins). A new tradition could be comprehensible as partly arisen inside central Lithuanian culture, and partly imitated from its southern neighbours.

The next attempt to introduce the battle-knife could be related to phase D (370–450, or even C₃-D). With that phase could be associated a major number of weapon graves. From that time, we know quite a typical form of battle-knife (Fig. 5: Grave 1212 from Marvelė, or similar graves 1213, 278, 300, 301, 324, 298, 329, 304 and 334). Now the battle-knife is always associated with full and characteristic warrior equipment for that time. The equipment besides the battle-knife consists of an axe, one (sometimes, but quite rarely, two) spearhead, one (or sometimes two) fibula and a strap buckle. The same pattern of warrior equipment was found at Plinkaigalis, mostly these graves were dated to phase D/E. But it seems that the complete set of that type of warrior equipment was not identified in Plinkaigalis (the next most famous central Lithuanian cemetery, with graves dated to the Migration Period; cf Kazakevičius 1993). The axe and fibula are the more usual supplement in graves at Plinkaigalis. In other central Lithuanian cemeteries, we do not have such numerous material as when we compare the two earlier mentioned cemeteries (Marvelė and Plinkaigalis). But this phase is a period of rapid growth of battle-knife practices in Lithuania, with extreme popularity then in central Lithuania (Kazakevičius 1993, p. 75). In my opinion, this is the reason to talk about a special military social structure in the society of the region, characteristic of that period.

The next stage in introducing the battle-knife could be associated with the appearance of the dagger battle-knife with “blood grooves” on the blade. These special weapons well suited to stabbing are very common for old Prussian graves in the Samland Peninsula and extend along a coastal zone from Elbląg to Liepāja, sporadically they appear in central Lithuania at Plinkaigalis, Marvelė and Pašušvys. Usually they are dated to D/E – E phase. Their not very high popularity in central Lithuania could be explainable by the higher status of these weapons, possibly they were used by members of a high social status in society.

Discussion

Thus, discussing the question of weaponry with special regard to the battle-knife and its origin, in my opinion we must look at other characteristics than formal ones, like the length of the blade. For example, the complex of warrior equipment, “warrior symbolic”, in other words, the function of a certain thing, must be appreciated. Hence, earlier Kazakevičius was right in suggesting the quite early and local provenance of the battle-knife (1981, 1988).

Translated by the author

Abbreviation

VDKM – Vytautas the Great War Museum in Kaunas, Department of Archaeology

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KOVOS PEILIŲ KILMĖS VIDURIO LIETUVOJE KLAUSIMAS

Mindaugas Bertašius

Santrauka

Kovos peilių kilmės klausimas lietuviškoje archeologinėje literatūroje buvo aptarinėjamas epizodiškai. Apibūdinant kovos peilius gana dažnai argumentuojama formaliais kriterijais (pvz., kovos peilis, jei ginklo ilgis viršija 20 cm, ar pan.), pamirštant, kad priešistoriniais laikais tokia matų sistema neegzistavo. Ieškant atsakymo pasitelkta gausi Marvelės kapinyno medžiaga (kapinynas yra Kauno miesto teritorijoje). Aiškėja, kad svarbiomis charakteristikomis tampa ginklo funkcinės ypatybės bei ginkluotės kompleksiskumo klausimas. Remiantis tyrimų medžiaga galima pagrįsti, kad jau romėniškojo laikotarpio C1b–C2 fazėje (arba periode) kai kurie peiliai įgyja kovos peiliui būdingų bruožų. Kiek vėliau šie peiliai įgauna formą, gerai tinkančią dūriui ar smūgiui atlikti (romėniškojo laikotarpio C2–C3 fazė). Galutinai kovos peiliai įsitvirtina Vidurio Lietuvos ginkluotėje, pereinant iš romėniškojo į tautų kraustymosi laikotarpį D–D/E fazėje. Remiantis Marvelės ir Plinkaigalio kapinynų duomenimis, tuo laikotarpiu jau galime išžvelgti susiformavusią stiprią socialinę grupę. Jos militaristines aspiracijas atskleidė išraiškingas ginkluotės kompleksas kape.