HORSES FROM TWO BURIALS IN SAMLAND AND NATANGEN (SECOND CENTURY, KALININGRADSKAIA PROVINCE, RUSSIA)

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Abstract

Single and double-horse burials of second century AD from Samland and Natangen (Kaliningrad region, Russia) are described. All horses were in the good riding age. They bear constitutional similarities with horses from later burials in Germany, Latvia, Lithuania and Scandinavia. Despite their small size, horses were used as riding and most likely were buried with proprietors as afterlife mediators or servants.

Key words: horse, burial, Roman time, age, constitution, Kaliningrad region.

Introduction

The practice of horse burial has been present elsewhere in continental Europe for about a thousand years prior to its first appearance in archaeological records in the area of Baltic tribes, in Sambia and Natangia in particular. It is known from Hallstatt period (800–600 BC) onwards (Graeslund 1980, p.48; Shenk 2002, p.3) and beautifully described in Homer’s Iliada (Homer 1924, p.163ff). And if for Greek and Roman world we have rich written evidences on burial tradition and physical appearance of horses (see Hyland, 1990, p.189ff for further literature on the subject), such an information on Imperial outskirts and adjacent areas, populated by Celtic, Germanic and Slavic tribes is more than scarce (works by Caesar (100–44 BC), Strabo (63/64 BC – ca. AD 24), Ibn Fadlan (tenth century), Peter von Duisburg (? – 1326) contain only hints of information). Thus, only archaeology can provide us with the main bulk of data on the subject.

Fig. 2. Bones available for study (shown shaded): "northern skeleton" (A), "southern skeleton" (B) from Berezovka and skeleton from Schosseinoe (C).
Materials and methods

Skeletons of three horses, uncovered by the crew of Samland-Natangen Archaeological Expedition of Russian Academy of Sciences led by K.N. Skvortsov, from two burials, have been investigated. Two skeletons of double burial had been unearthed in 2004 near settlement Berezovka (former Groß Ottenhagen); the third of a single burial has been discovered in 2007 near settlement Schosseinoe (former Dorf Warten, Kreis Königsberg) (Fig. 1). First two skeletons are dated back to the second half of second century AD, while the third comes from the first half of the same century.

Due to the poor condition of bones, coupled with problems of storage, only a handful of complete bones have been presented for our research (Fig. 2). This, however, was enough to characterize age, sex and stature of horses in question. Age has been determined by tooth wear, especially that of incisors (Levine 1982, p.91ff; Muyllle, Lauwers 1999, p.634ff; da Silva et al. 2003, p.103ff). To prove the age determination we also used data on time of epiphyses and apophyses closure. Sex determination was mainly based on presence or absence of canines. However, for “southern horse” in double burial, dental row of which was not available for research in its entirety, morphological features of pelvis, such as shapes of tuberculum pubicum dorsale and ramus acetabularis ossis pubis, were taken into consideration. The withers height and constitution have been determined by methods of Vladimir Vitt (1952, p.172ff) and Veniamin Tsalkin (1971, p.178ff) (table). All measurements have been done according to Angela von den Driesch (1976, p.92 fig. 44a,b). Anatomical terms follow Nomina Anatomica Veterinaria (2005).

Results and Discussion

Double burial. Both skeletons were lying in an oval pit, approximately north-west – south-east oriented (Fig. 3) and covered with so-called ‘stone pavement’ above. Cremations of suggested slave and proprietor have been found nearby to the west. Horse skeleton from the southern part of pit (South skeleton – SS) belongs to the stallion of 3.5–4 years. Its withers height – 129–131 cm – attributes the stallion to the Vitt’s category “undersized”. Diaphysis index (14.40) characterizes it

Fig. 3. Double burial from Berezovka (former Groß Ottenhagen): NS – “northern skeleton”, SS – “southern skeleton”. Arrow shows preserved metal elements of bridle (photograph by Skvortsov).
as a thin-legged according to Tsalkin (1971, p.178ff). Still having a snuffle in its mouth, SS lies on its right side with head turned backwards over the left side. In the contrast with SS, the north skeleton (NS) lies almost on the belly (with some tilt to the left side), with hind limbs crouched under the croup and the head well above the rest of the body. NS belongs to the stallion of an equal age with SS. Its withers height, 126–128 cm (“short”) and middle-leggedness (diaphysis index – 15.60) make it a bit smaller but more stumpy than SS. Skeletons of both horses do not show obvious traces of mortal wounds.

Single burial contains the complete skeleton of 8–10-years old stallion (Fig. 4), buried close to the inhumation of the supposed proprietor. Short, according to its withers height (121–123 cm), the stallion has thick legs (diaphysis index – 17.90). It lies on its right side with flexed legs. As in the case of double burial, horse skeleton does not show any traces, which could clarify the cause of animal’s death. A twist in thoracic section of vertebral column is obviously postmortem (Fig. 4, see arrow mark).

It is still known little on the native early stock of Europe (Hyland 1994, p.3). Besides the possibility of having several independent cases of local domestications (Vila et al. 2001, p.474ff), horses could be traded or acquired during wars and migrations. In general, Germanic horses have been considered smaller, than Roman. Julius Caesar reports on them as ‘inferior’ even in comparison with Gallic horses. Archaeological data finely support this opinion. Although it is mainly based on material from older burials, as it has been mentioned above, it appears that little has been changed in Germanic and Baltic stocks for over centuries. Horses from double burial are equal with some from the sixth to the twelfth centuries’ burials of Latvia and Germany, whereas the stallion from single burial nicely fits into Latvia-Central Lithuania group of sixth-twelfth

![Fig. 4. Horse burial from Schosseinoe (former Dorf Warten Kreis Königsberg). Arrow shows a postmortem twist in the thoracic region of vertebral column (photograph by Skvortsov).](image)

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<th>Table 1. Measurements of equestrian long bones, used in calculations of withers height and estimation of constitution</th>
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Horses from Two Burials in Samland and Natangen (Second Century, Kalinin-gradskaia Province, Russia)

centuries (Fig. 5). All three stallions are undoubtedly riding horses despite their size. As two slender-legged horses form double burial can be considered best fitted for riding (southern skeleton still has some element of riding harness – Fig. 3), the stallion from a single burial, despite its thick legs, is also good for this purpose. Thick legs do not preclude the horse from being a good military companion. Publius Flavius Vegetius Renatus (the fourth – fifth century) among horses, best suited for military purposes, named Hunnish, which were short with “gaunt belly and big bones”. Age of the buried horses support the idea that we deal here with riding horses, which were in use before inhumation. Two horses from double burial just entered the age of riding, which starts approximately after the end of third year of equestrian life, whereas this period for single-burial stallion has not ended yet. Most of the horses from Roman Period and Early Medieval burials are stallions and fit into age-span between 3.5-10 years (Bertašius, Daugnora 2001, p.393 fig. 9; von Babo 2004, p.138 table 25). We can only speculate on causes of death of buried stallions, as they do not show any suggestive traces on the bones. Aside from the chance of wounds made solely to soft tissues, there is still a high possibility, that these horses have been buried alive. This practice, when exhausted horse is forced to the pit, was not unusual among Greeks, Romans and Scandinavians (see Bertašius, Daugnora 2001 for further literature on the subject). The fact, that harnessed not partitioned horses were buried with their possible proprietors, rejects the hypothesis of ritual food offering for deceased. Most likely, horses in question were either the part of wealth, buried with proprietors and destined to serve them in afterlife, or mediators, which would bring them to the heaven (Valhalla and etc.).

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