

# Horse burials of Samland, Natangen and adjacent areas in context of antique and medieval symbolic culture

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Although the practice of burying horses or a horseman with his mount has been present in continental Europe since Halstatt period (800 BC–600 BC), it made its appearance in the area of Baltic tribes much later (Gräslund, 1980; Shenk, 2002; Zinoviev, 2009). Greeks and Romans left for their region the rich written evidences on burial traditions and ritual meaning of the horse as offering (Hyland, 1990). This is not the case for the Imperial outskirts and areas, populated by Celtic, Germanic and Slavic tribes. Famous works by Ceasar (100–44 BC), Strabo (63/64 BC – ca. AD 24), Ibn Fadlan (Xth AD), Peter von Dusburg (?–1326) contain only scarce information on the use of horses in funeral ceremonies of the mentioned tribes. The major source of information on horse burials for the region is thus archaeological excavations. By making ‘snapshots’ of particular burials they finally outline the general picture of appearance, evolution and dawn of cultic equestrian burials. Numerous works on horse burials, connected rituals and horse physical appearance, exist for the area of Baltic tribes and adjacent territories (Hollack, 1908; Heym, 1938; Müller-Wille, 1970/1971; Oexle, 1984; Amberger, Kokabi, 1985; Benecke, 1985, 2002; Daugnora, 1994, 1996, 1997; Hyland, 1994; Wilbers-Rost, 1994; Nowakowski, 1996; Bertašius, Daugnora, 2001; Shenk, 2002; Brandt, Lund, 2004; Juškaitis, 2004; von Babo, 2004; Kulakov, 1987, 2001, 2005 a, 2007; Zinoviev, 2009; Bertašius, 2009; Bliujienė, Butkus, 2009; Bliujienė, Steponaitis, 2009; Karczewzka et al., 2009; Kontny, 2009; Kontny et al., 2009; Kurila, 2009; Maldre, Luik, 2009; Nowakowski, 2009; Reich, 2009; Skvortsov, 2009; Wyczolowski, Makowiecki, 2009). The history of tribes inhabiting Samland and Natangen is very complex (Kulakov, 1989, 1991, 1993, 1994/1995, 1995, 2003, 2005 a, etc.). By combining data, provided in aforementioned works with written sources, I will try to make only a co-

herent grouping of cultic equestrian burials in Samland, Natangen and adjacent areas in context of their possible symbolic culture. Reconstruction of their timely evolution in relation to the ethnic and social history of the region is the task of the other study.

## MATERIALS

Horse burials of Samland and Natangen have received much less attention of specialists than those of adjacent regions (Lithuania, Germany). The following classification is based primarily on written and oral communications of archaeologists, who recorded horse burials in the region of interest over the last several decades (Kulakov, 1980 a, b, 1986, 1990, 1992, 1999, 2001, 2002, 2004, 2005 a, c, 2007; Kulakov, Vityaz', 2001; Kulakov, Tyurin, 2005) as well as on our own investigations (Zinoviev, 2009).

## GROUPS OF HORSE BURIALS

Known since the period of Roman influence (2<sup>nd</sup>–4<sup>th</sup> centuries AD) (Jaskanis, 1966, 1974; Kulakov, 2007; Zinoviev, 2009), horse burials in Samland and Natangen (Fig. 1), likewise in adjacent regions can be classified on the basis of the character of equestrian remains. In our classification I will mainly follow that proposed by Bertašius and Daugnora (2001).

### Type 1. Whole horse burials

This is the most frequent type of horse burials for the entire Europe. Single (Fig. 2, A), less frequently two (Fig. 2, B) and rarely three horses are buried in a tight pit to the west from the human inhumation or on the bottom of it (Kulakov, 2007; Zinoviev, 2009). Bridle bits often associated with skeletons as well as the absence of mutilation traces suggest the practice of bury-



Fig. 1. Historical Samland and Natangen on the map of modern Kaliningrad region (Russian Federation). Arrows indicate locations of archaeological sites, horse skeletons from which have been studied by the author.

*1 pav. Istorinė Semba ir Notanga dabartiniame Kaliningrado srities (Rusijos Federacija) žemėlapyje. Rodyklė žymi archeologinius paminklus su arklių griaučiais, tyrinėtus straipsnio autoriaus*

ing horses alive. The tightness of the pit, when horse (horses) were forced there with legs flexed under the stomach, has made the escape of still living animal impossible. Literature sources support the idea of this ritual. Vulfstan's stories in King Alfred's edition of Orosius' History of the World (9<sup>th</sup> century) and even later works (13–14 centuries)<sup>1</sup> such as those by von Dusburg record the habit of Prussians and Lithuanians to 'run the horses off their feet to such an extent, that the animals can hardly keep stand'. Then they could be easily stuffed into the pit. The ritual character of such a burial is also supported by a special position of the horse in the pit. The head of it is frequently positioned in a special niche lower (Bertašius, Daugnora, 2001) or higher of the croup level (von Babo, 2004). There seems to be no actual preferences to the age of buried or sacrificed animals. They range from 3.5 to 10 years old individuals, older ones frequently showing pathological changes in the skeleton (Bertašius, Daugnora, 2001; von Babo, 2004; Zinoviev, 2009). The preference, however, is traceable in the sex of animals – most of them are stallions, highly praised as riding animals in European tradition (Hyland, 1994). The entirety of the buried horses indicates that they have not been used for food in ritual purposes. Some of these animals, though, might have been stubbed to death with an aim of blood-letting. Tools for blood-letting in a form of spike have been reported from a number of burials in Baltic region (Kulakov, Tyurin, 2005). Such a manner of death would hardly have

been swift, again shown more ceremonial rather practical goal of the tradition (Shenk, 2002).

### Type 2. Head or head with forelegs horse burial

Appearing somewhat later than the previous type (around 5<sup>th</sup> century AD), equine head and head with forelegs burial are reported for Samland and Natangen (Kulakov, 1999, 2007). This type of burial is known for the entire Baltic region (Müller-Wille, 1970/1971; Oexle, 1984) and in some burial grounds of Lithuania constitutes 14–15 % of all horse graves (Bertašius, Daugnora, 2001) (Fig. 3). Presence in the burial equine parts, often with the skin (Kulakov, 1999, 2003), which define the horse, shows almost definite sacrificial character of this type of burial. There are no direct literature sources for this type of burial for Samland and Natangen, but historical works for adjacent regions contains some clues to the ritual. Besides the report of Adam of Bremen of horse sacrifice in Sweden, when heads were cut from the bodies of sacrificial animals and men, a Moorish Arab Ibrahim At-Tartushi presents an interesting account. On his visit of Danish town Hedeby he witnessed the habit of placing sacrificial beasts on the pole as an offering to god. Often the body was eaten, thus only head and legs were places on the pole. Shenk (2002) reports, that 'this may not be the only possible reason for the practice. The act of putting just the horse head on a pole is mentioned in some Icelandic sagas (Egil's Saga and Vatnsd la Saga), where it serves as a symbol of insult and is referred to as a *niðstang*, or "pole of shame". Travelers of the Viking period also write of a custom in southern Russia where the horse's skin, feet and head were placed on a pole over the grave of a dead man' (Klindt-Jensen, 1957).

<sup>1</sup> The habit of Prussians to bury horses with the deceased is also mentioned in the Treaty of Christburg in 1249 (Konratiev, 1959).

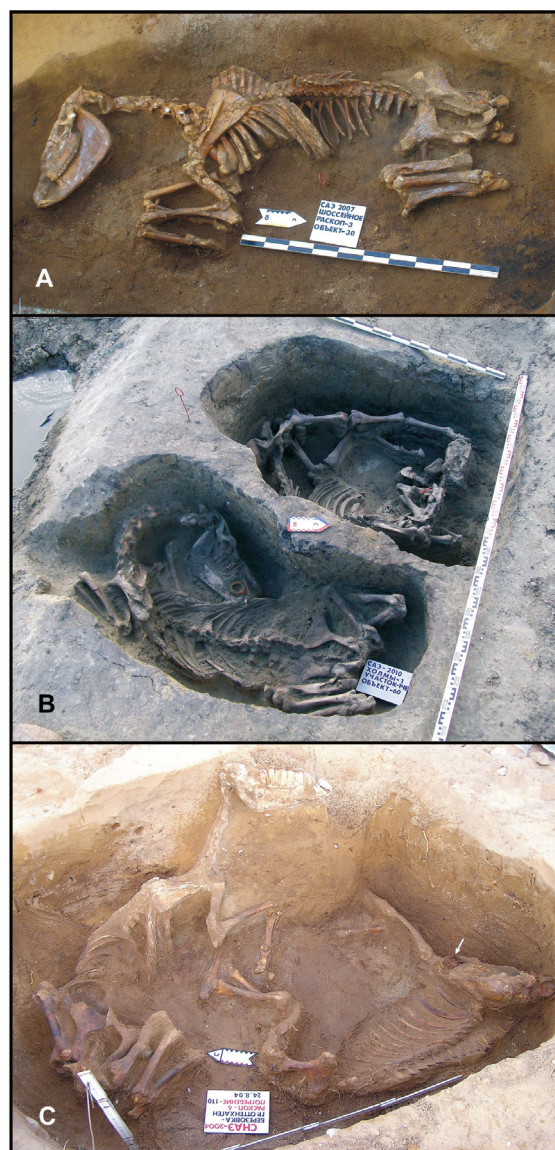


Fig. 2. **Single and double horse burials.** 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD: **A** – Schosseinyi (Dorf Warten Kreis Königsberg); **C** – Berezovka (Groß Ottenhagen), white arrow shows bridle bit. Photos courtesy K. Skvortsov. 12<sup>th</sup> century AC: **B** – Kholmy (Mülsen). Photo courtesy R. Shiroukhov.

2 pav. Viengubi ir dvigubi arklių kapai. II amžius: **A** – Schosseinyi (Dorf Warten, Kreis Königsberg), **C** – Berezovka (Groß Ottenhagen), baltos rodyklės rodo žąslus. K. Skvortsov nuotrauka. XII amžius: **B** – Kholmy (Mülsen). R. Shiroukhov nuotrauka

### Type 3. Scattered horse remains (including burned) in burial

Reported for Samland and Natangen (Skvortsov, pers. comm.), this type of horse burials is better described for Lithuania (Bertašius, Daugnora, 2001), old Prus-

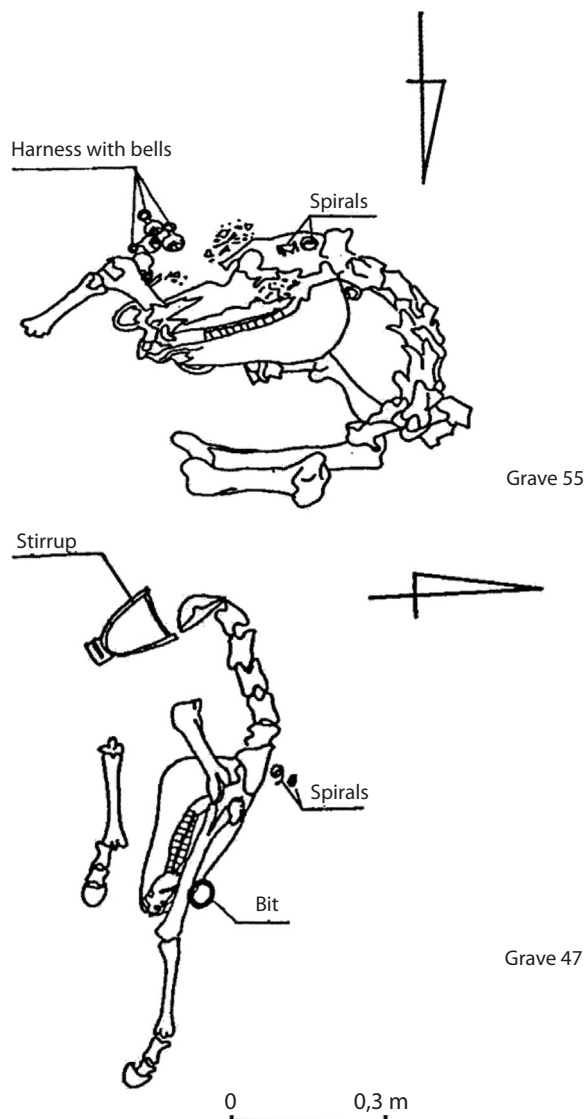


Fig. 3. **Examples of the type 2 horse burials** (head with forelegs). Marvelė burial ground, Lithuania. After Bertašius, Daugnora (2001).

3 pav. Antrojo tipo arklių kapų pavyzdžiai (galva ir galūnės). Marvelės kapinynas, Lietuva. Pagal Bertašius, Daugnora (2001)

sian burial grounds (Hollack, 1908) and north of Russia (Golubeva, 1981). Here we clearly have a sacrificial tradition, when horses were chopped into pieces as ritual offering (Fig. 4). Was this offering consumed by the participants of the ritual or destined as food for the buried individual or gods is not always clear.



Fig. 4. Scattered horse remains from the grave No. 164. Marvelė burial ground, Lithuania. After Bertašius, Daugnora (2001).

4 pav. Išsklaidyti arklio palaikai iš kapo Nr. 164. Marvelės kapinynas, Lietuva. Pagal Bertašius, Daugnora (2001)

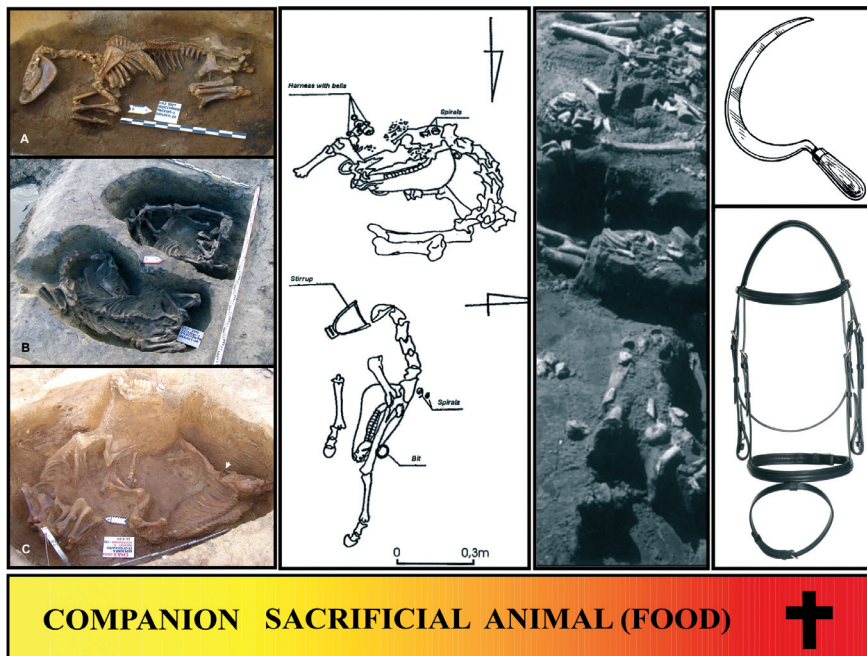


Fig. 5. A scale bar of horse burials according to their proposed ritual meaning.

5 pav. Spėjama arklių kapų ritualinė reikšmė

This offering was often accompanied by the sacrificial chopping of other animals, such as dogs, goats and chicken. Arabic traveler Ibn Fadlan nicely described this tradition. He reports as an eyewitness, that the funeral of noble Rus was accompanied among others by chopping with swords of one dog and two horses. All of them, along with the boat, slave girl and other belongings were burned and secured under the barrow.

#### **Type 4. Burial with no horse bones**

This type of burial, when grave contains no horse bones, but bridle bits and/or sickle appears late in the region and traditionally linked to the onset of Christianity in the region around the turn of the millennium (Juškaitis, 2004; Kulakov, 2007). So far this type is not known from Samland and Natangen, but found in neighboring Lithuania (Bertašius, Daugnora, 2001).

## **DISCUSSION**

Horse burials and horse sacrifice is not unique to the region and even to Europe. They have been venerated since their early domestication (Schenk, 2002). As sacrificial animals, riding and war companions they entered in culture of many societies. That is totally useless to define exact meaning one or another type of horse burial for each particular society over the period of almost two millennia. Horses may have served various ideological functions; externally similar graves in different societies might have meant different ritual and spiritual backgrounds. However, among this variability a certain time-ritual tendency is detectable in how the horses may have been killed and how their bodies were thereafter handled (Shenk, 2002). The imaginary line starts with graves of the Type 1, where the entire horse (-s) were placed. The frequent proximity of human grave suggest that here we have a burial ritual when riders companion follows his master into the afterlife. Whether the horse should bring the master to the Kingdom of Dead (Valhalla etc.), or should it be a gift to gods for accepting the master is not clear. The only is certain, the horse (-s) were destined to follow their proprietor and somehow serve him in the afterlife. Good example of this ritual comes from the adjacent Scandinavia, where ship burials of the nobility are often accompanied by several standing horses (Brøgger, Shetelig

1951; Turville-Petre, 1964). Types 2 and 3 contain only parts of animals. Both of types suggest ritual consuming of horses (flesh, blood or even intestines) during some sort of the ceremonial feast (Hagberg, 1967). The identity of individual horse was preserved only in the type 2 when the head and head with forelegs and skin represented the entire animal. Horse remains of the type 3 are not closely associated with human burials. Dismembered, they were able neither to bring the buried to the Kingdom of the Dead, nor to serve him in the afterlife. Horses along with the proprietor and other sacrificial animals were often burned. In this case the flame served as a mediator between other world and ours (as in aforementioned report of Ahmad Ibn Fadlan). And finally the type 4 shows the onset of the Christianity in the region, when the Pagan tradition of burying horses was substituted by placing the symbolic items, such as bridle bits and sickle, in the grave or close to it.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

A good companion, since the early time of domestication the horse has been treated as ritual and sacrificial animal. Either destined to follow the proprietor to the afterlife as a mediator or part of valuable property, or serving as food during the ceremonial funeral feast, horse deeply entered in antique and medieval culture of tribes, living in Samland, Natangen and adjacent areas. Even with the incursion of Christianity the ritual role of the horse has been preserved by the compromise modification of the initial burial tradition.

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## ARKLIŲ KAPAI SEMBOJE, NOTANGOJE IR GRETIMOSE SRITYSE ANTIKOS IR VIDURAMŽIŲ SIMBOLINĖS KULTŪROS KONTEKSTE

Andriej V. Zinovjev

### Santrauka

Žemyninėje Europoje tradicija laidoti arklius (žirgus) turi giliausias istorines šaknis, tačiau apie arklius, jų laidoseną Semboje, Notangoje ir gretimose srityse žinoma mažai. Amžininkai (Cezaris, Strabonas, Ibn Fadlanas, Petras Dusburgietis) liudijimų paliko nedaug. Dėl to pagrindinis informacijos šaltinis yra archeologinių tyrimų medžiaga. Tyrimų duomenys leidžia atkurti Baltijos regiono arklių kapų tipus, atsižvelgiant į etninę

ir socialinę regiono istoriją. Arklių kapai, atsiradę II–IV m. e. amžiais, gali būti skirstomi į keturis pagrindinius tipus.

I tipas. Viso arklio kapas. Šis tipas labiausiai paplitęs minėtame regione. Kape būdavo laidojama vienas, rečiau du ir ypač retais atvejais trys arkliai. Arkliai daugiausia aptinkami po palaidotus žmogumi arba į vakarus nuo jo. Kamanų ir prievartinės mirties pėdsakų nebuvimas ant griaučių leidžia

teigti, kad arkliai būdavo laidojami gyvi. Jie būdavo įspraudžiami į siaurą duobę, su palenktomis po pilvu kojomis ir atsukta atgal arba į šoną galva, ji kartais būdavo dedama į specialią nišą. Amžininkai (Vulfstanas, Petras Dusburgietis) aprašo panašų paprotį prūsų ir lietuvių žemėse, kai nuvarytą arklį įvarydavo į ankštą duobę ir palaidodavo gyvą. Palaidotų arklių amžius būna nuo 3,5 iki 10 ir daugiau metų, tačiau lytis paprastai viena, t. y. su mirusiuoju būdavo laidojami patinai – eržilai. Kartais prieš laidojant arkliui būdavo nuleidžiamas kraujas – tai liudija specialūs instrumentai, aptikti kai kuriuose arklių kapuose.

II tipas. Galvos arba galvos ir priekinių galūnių laidojimas atsiranda šiek tiek vėliau, apie V m. e. amžių. Arklio kūno dalys, kartais kartu su oda, rodo šių palaidojimų ritualinį pobūdį ir galimą arklio mėsos valgymą. Tiesa, amžininkų liudijimų apie laidoseną aptariamame regione nėra, tačiau Ibrahimas At-Tartušis ir kai kurie vikingų laikotarpio keliautojai mini panašią laidojimo tradiciją Danijoje ir Rusios pietuose.

III tipas. Kūno dalies palaidojimai, dažnai apdege, žino-

mi daugiausia Lietuvos teritorijoje. Šiuo atveju auka būdavo sukapojama ir, tikriausiai, būdavo valgoma laidotuvių metu. Panaši laidojimo tradicija yra aprašyta Ibn Fadlano, dalyvausio žymaus ruso laidotuvėse žemutiniame Pavolgyje.

IV tipas. Kapų be arklių kol kas aptikta tik Lietuvos teritorijoje. Arklį šiuo atveju simbolizuoja kamanos ir pjautuvas. Tokie kapai šiame regione atsiranda kartu su krikščionybės įvedimu.

Mes niekada tiksliai nesužinosime, kokią prasmę arklių kapams kiekvienu konkrečiu atveju teikė baltų genčių atstovai. Tačiau, remiantis anksčiau pateiktais duomenimis, galima spėti, kad I tipas yra palaidojimas aukos, kai arklys turėjo lydėti ar netgi nešti mirusįjį į pomirtinį pasaulį. II ir III tipai, kur laidotos tik arklių kūno dalys, yra ritualiniai aukojimai. Arkliai, kaip matyti, jau negalėjo nešti mirusiojo į pomirtinį pasaulį. IV tipas atsirado dėl draudimų priėmus krikščionybę. Draudimas laidoti arklius kartu su žmonėmis buvo „apeitas“, t. y. gyvulus pakeistas simboliniais elementais – kamanų dalimis ir pjautuvu.

Iš rusų kalbos vertė *Mykolas Michelbertas*

*Įteikta 2010 m. spalio mėn.*