

(Un)Usual Neolithic and Early Eneolithic mortuary practices in the area of the North Carpathian Basin

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ABSTRACT – *On the basis of the characteristics of Neolithic and Early Eneolithic mortuary practices in the area of North Carpathian Basin it can be argued that the existence of graveyards is an isolated phenomenon. Various rituals were involved in disposing of the dead. In this article, we focus on (un)usual burials which are singled out into two major categories: cremation and inhumation. Special emphasis is given to cremation as a mortuary practice: arguments for cremation; interpretation possibilities; examples of the use of fire and noticed phenomenon.*

IZVLEČEK – *S pomočjo značilnih neolitskih in eneolitskih pogrebnih praks v severnem delu Karpat-ske kotline sklepamo, da so pokopališča izoliran pojav. S pokopi so bili povezani različni rituali. V članku predstavljamo (ne)običajne pokope, ki sodijo v dve glavni kategoriji: sežig in pokop trupel. Poseben poudarek je namenjen sežiganju kot pogrebni praksi: argumentom, interpretacijam in izbranim primerom.*

KEY WORDS – *Neolithic; Early Eneolithic; North Carpathian Basin; mortuary practices; cremation burials; inhumation graves*

Introduction

Human remains provide a valuable source of information from the past and offer plenty of important knowledge. It is evident from research of burial rites that prehistoric populations did not share any single burial rite. It is possible to talk about predominant form of rite in optimal case. It is also uncertain what can be considered a burial rite and what is not directly related to it, e.g. post-mortal manipulations and cult acts.

From the beginning of the Neolithic, we meet various forms of burials in the North Carpathian Basin e.g. graveyards, isolated graves or group of graves within or outside settlements, isolated settlement burials, burials inside various settlement features, isolated parts of human skeletons, cremations and

cave burials. In order to simplify the situation, the article is divided into two parts; the first part focuses on cremation and cult practices associated with fire. In the second part, we focus on the skeletal remains of the examined area, with the main emphasis on curious, interesting, extraordinary graves/funerals. At the same time, we have to admit the subjective approach to the selection.

Chronologically defined, our themes concern the Neolithic (Linneer Pottery culture – 15 sites, Želiezovce group – 18 sites, Lengyel culture – 21 sites, Tisza culture – 3 sites, Bükk culture – 5 sites) and early Eneolithic (Epilengyel – Ludanice group – 43 sites, Tiszapolgar culture – 4 sites and Bodrogkeresztur culture – 2 sites) with burials/skeletons in the northern part

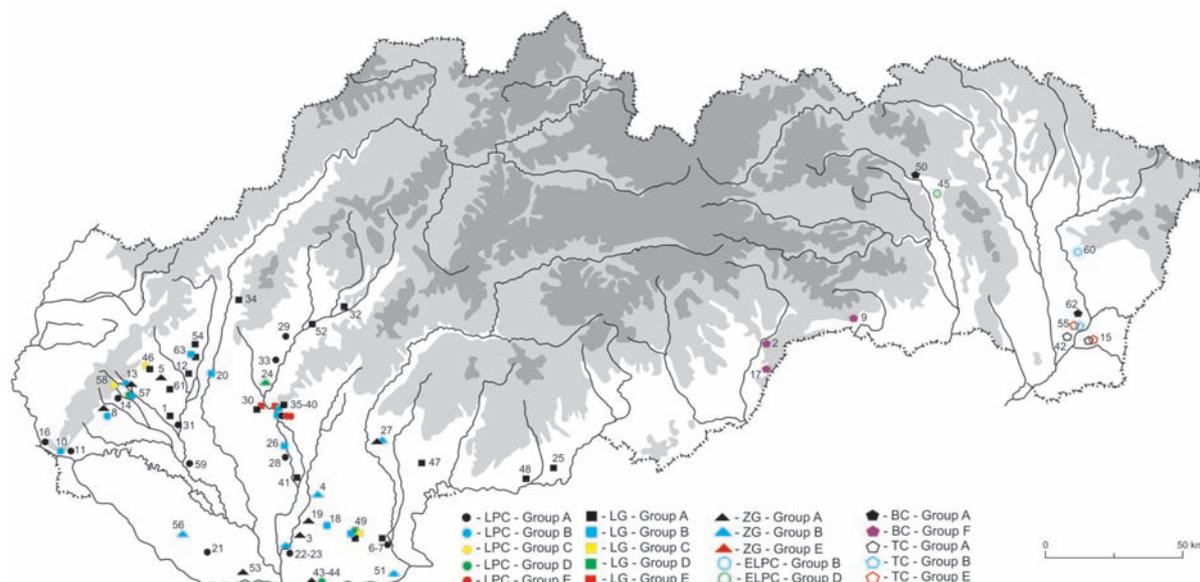


Fig. 1. Neolithic burial sites in Slovakia. 1. Abrahám; 2. Ardovska cave; 3. Bajč 'Medzi kanálmi'; 4. Bešeňov; 5. Biely Kostol; 6. Biňa; 7. Biňa 'Berek'; 8. Blatné; 9. Bobkova cave; 10. Bratislava-Mlynská dolina; 11. Bratislava-Trnávka; 12. Bučany; 13. Čífer Pác; 14. Čataj; 15. Čičarovce; 16. Devín; 17. Domica (cave); 18. Dubník – Bundáš; 19. Dvory nad Žitavou; 20. Hlohovec; 21. Holiare; 22. Hurbanovo-Bohatá; 23. Hurbanovo-Bacherov majer; 24. Jelšovce; 25. Kiarov; 26. Komjatice 'Tomášove'; 27. Levice; 28. Lipová-Ondrochov; 29. Ludanice; 30. Lužianky; 31. Malá Mača; 32. Malé Kršteňany; 33. Malé Zálužie; 34. Moravany nad Váhom; 35. Nitra – Dolné Krškany; 36. Nitra – Chrenová; 37. Nitra – Klokočina (Šúdol); 38. Nitra – Mikov dvor; 39. Nitra – Mlynárce; 40. Nitra – Priemyslová ulica; 41. Nitriansky Hrádok; 42. Oborín; 43. Patince 'Čierny hon'; 44. Patince 'Teplica'; 45. Prešov – Šarišské lúky; 46. Ružindol-Borová; 47. Santovka; 48. Slovenské Ďarmoty; 49. Svodín; 50. Šarišské Michal'any; 51. Štúrovo; 52. Topolčany; 53. Veľké Kosihy-Okánikovo; 54. Veľké Kostol'any; 55. Veľké Raškovec; 56. Veľký Meder; 57. Veľký Grob; 58. Višňuk; 59. Vozokany; 60. Zálužice (Malé Zálužice); 61. Zeleneč; 62. Zemplínske Kopčany; 63. Žlkovce. Abbreviation: ZG – Želiezovce group; LG – Lengyel culture; LPC – Linear Pottery culture; ELPC – Eastern Linear Pottery culture; TC – Tisza culture; BC – Bükk culture; A – graveyard; isolated grave/group of graves (graveyard?); B – skeleton inside settlement object; C – skeleton inside ditch; D – burial in dwelling context; E – cremation; F – cave burial.

of the Carpathian Basin (territory of Slovakia). All the sites known in the examined area are shown in the maps (Figs. 1 and 2).

Cremation

In cremation, the body of the deceased is burned. Most of the body is burnt during the cremation process, leaving only a few pounds of bone fragments. The bodies of small children and infants produce very little in the way of 'ashes', as ashes are composed of bone, and young people have softer bones, largely cartilage. Often these fragments are processed into a fine powder, which has led to cremated remains being called ashes.

The main arguments for choosing cremation are: 1. Cremation is recognised as the most hygienic method of disposing of the dead; 2. Problems with space to bury the dead; 3. Ashes in urns are safe from vandalism and can be kept wherever the bereaved wish, even in the home.

Fire was part and parcel of the life of Neolithic people. They used its power and effects in everyday life and during rituals or ceremonies. Thus it was employed in the mortuary practices of Neolithic communities.

Archaeological finds provide evidence of several moments of fire utilization during a funeral. We can follow its traces at grave pits or directly inside of them as well as on the remains of the dead. Graves with the piously buried remains of cremated individuals belong to a special group.

One of the main criteria for identifying a cremation grave is the occurrence of the cremated body parts of individuals (remains of burnt pieces of bones or ash) inside the grave pit. Often there are articles found claiming that the described find is a cremation grave, with no closer evidence to support such statements. Also, the occurrence of anthropologic material in the grave is often not supported with evidence. However, this fact is related to the finding cir-

cumstances of individual units. The oldest evidence of cremation rites in the Carpathian Basin is from the Mesolithic period. It was documented in its southern part at the site of the Lepenski Vir culture in Vlasac (Srejović 1972). Other finds show only isolated instances of cremation e.g. Starčevo – Körös – Criş culture complex.

Cremation in northern Carpathian Basin contains elements of a mortuary rite evidenced in Linear Pottery culture (Abbreviation: LPC). However, cremation is very rare here, and only new research has shown that the minor presence of cremation graves can be related to the state of research. More cremation graves have been explored at the bi-ritual burial site in Kralice na Hané in central Moravia. Cremated remains were placed in a pit or a vessel (urn). The remains of grave equipment were often affected by the heat of the funeral pyre. Šmíd (2008.251, 257) points out that finds of hooped hand-axes affected by the strong heat of a funeral pyre can indicate potential burial sites. Especially in the case of older finds, information about grave units remains supposition, with no reliable evidence.

Cremation was probably also used at the burial site at Kleinhadersdorf in Austria (Neugebauer-Maresch 1992.5; Lenneis, Neugebauer and Ruttkay 1995.49), and at Nitra-Priemyslová Street site in Slovakia (Pavúk 1972.39). Cremation rites were also practised to a limited extent in the Protolengyel period. However, the graves of Lužianky group present the oldest evidence of cremation in the area of Slovakia. Grave 1/1956 from eponymous site at Lužianky can be considered as a definite cremation grave. Following information from Novotný (1962.271), the vessels were placed in a circle around a centrally positioned large pitcher located slightly above the other vessels. Besides the pottery, eight pieces of animal ribs, with a bead placed underneath in the clay, were found in the eastern part of the grave. Burnt bones were freely dispersed among the pottery at the bottom of the grave pit. In the case of the other two cremation graves from the Lužianky group (Nitra – Mlynárce grave 8 and 11; Novotný 1962.155), cremation is not entirely certain.

Different forms of treatment of the dead can be considered in the period of the Early Eneolithic (Epilen-

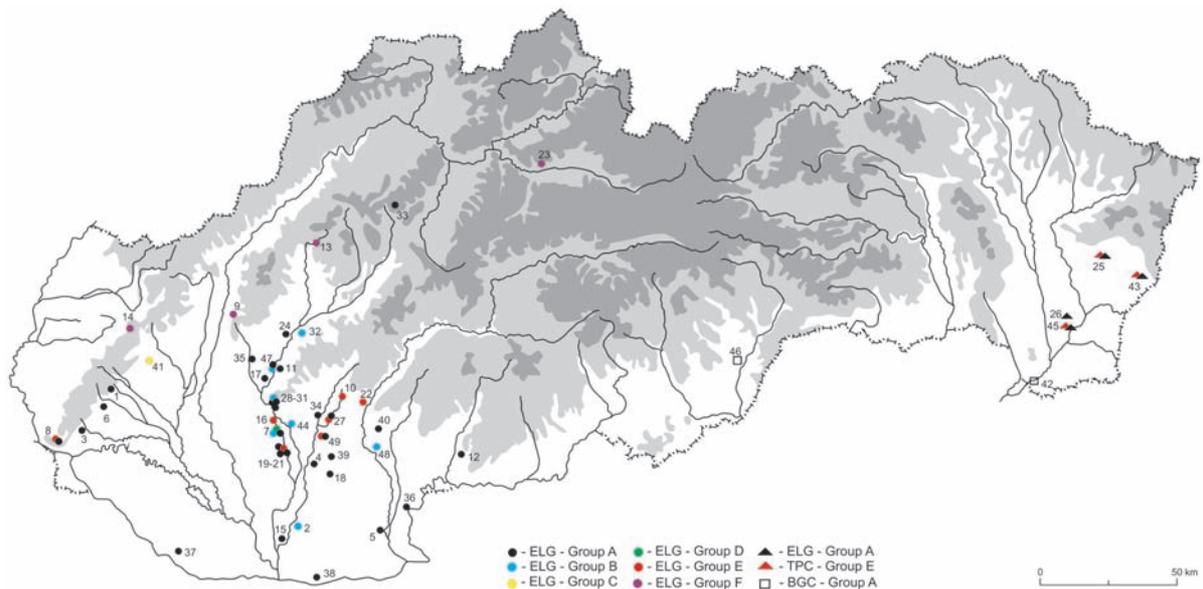


Fig. 2. Early Eneolithic burial sites in Slovakia. 1. Báhoň; 2. Bajč-Vlkanovo ‘Ragoňa’; 3. Bernolákovo; 4. Bešeňov; 5. Biňa; 6. Blatné; 7. Branč; 8. Bratislava-Dúbravka; 9. Čertova pec; 10. Čierne Kl’áčany; 11. Dolné Lefantovce; 12. Dudince; 13. Dúpná diera; 14. Dzeravá Skala; 15. Hurbanovo-Bohatá; 16. Ivánka pri Nitre; 17. Jelšovce; 18. Kolta; 19. Komjatice – Homoky; 20. Komjatice – Homolka; 21. Komjatice – Legionárske; 22. Kozárovce; 23. Liskovská cave; 24. Ludanice; 25. Lúčky; 26. Malé Raškovce; 27. Nevidzany; 28. Nitra – Leningradská ulica; 29. Nitra – Martinský vrch; 30. Nitra – Mlynárce ‘Sony’; 31. Nitra – Štúrova ulica; 32. Nitrianska Streda; 33. Nitrianské Pravno; 34. Nová Ves nad Žitavou; 35. Nové Sady – Čab Sila; 36. Pastovce; 37. Pastúchy; 38. Patince ‘Čierny hon’; 39. Podhájska – Svätuša; 40. Podlužany; 41. Ružindol-Borová; 42. Streda nad Bodrogom; 43. Tibava; 44. Veľký Cetín; 45. Veľké Raškovce; 46. Včelince; 47. Výčapy Opatovce; 48. Vyšné nad Hronom; 49. Vráble. Abbreviation: ELG – Epilengyel (Ludanice group); TPC – Tiszapolgar culture; BGC – Bodrogkeresztur culture; A – graveyard; isolated grave/group of graves (graveyard?); B – skeleton inside settlement object; C – skeleton inside ditch; D – burial in dwelling context; E – cremation; F – cave burial.

gyel) throughout the western and north-western parts of Carpathian Basin. For example, in western Slovakia, there have been only a small number of grave or skeleton finds compared to settlements during this period. Use of cremation is represented at Komjatice-Homoky and Čierne Kl'ačany (Točík 1978. 248; Veliáčik 1974.107).

Isolated finds as semi-burnt fragments of human bones deposited below and inside the pots indicate cremation burials at Bratislava-Dúbravka and Ivánka near Nitra (Farkaš and Novotný 1993.64; Ruttkayová 1997.162) and at Nevidzany- Dolné Šelero vce (Bátora 1982.435–436). Especially the unit from Nevidzany could present an evidence of bi-ritual way of burials. There were inside an inhumation grave remains of burnt bones placed inside a vessel together with other pottery grave goods by the legs of the deceased (Bátora 1976.25–26).

Traces of fire found on human skeletons can be the result of unfinished cremation. This could be due to insufficient knowledge of cremation technology or inconsistency of the bereaved carrying out the cremation. Another alternative cause of the traces of fire found on skeletons is that a fire was lit close to, or on, the corpse. Thus traces of great heat could also occur on skeletal parts of body. In such case, mourners had to reckon with damaging the corpse. The body was sometimes placed directly into the fireplace: Vel'ký Grob (Steklá 1956.708); Liskovská jaskyňa (Struhár and Soják 2009.47, 48).

The same type of find was made in the settlement of Vyšné nad Hronom in southern Slovakia. Four human skeletons with traces of fire and damaged upper limbs were found lying under a burned layer of daub

inside a settlement pit of the Protolengyel culture. Also, more secondarily burnt vessels, clay weights, clay whorls and two bone needles were discovered inside the filling (Pieta, Konečná and Trgína 1991. 81).

What is interesting is the fact that traces of fire on skeletons are not recorded in regular graves from this period. Obviously, there was no reason to apply the power of fire to bodies in cases of piously inhumed – not cremated – individuals.

Traces of fire inside a grave strengthen the idea of the purifying power of fire, whether we consider the practical or spiritual character of the activity. It is, however, very rare in the area of the Carpathian Basin. Burning inside a grave was recorded, for example, at Suplacu de Barcău-Corău I (Suplac group, Ignat 1998.117) and Pilismarót-Basaharc (Bodrogkeresztur culture, Bognár-Kutzián 1963.361).

A find from the Early Neolithic (Tisza culture) site at Čičarovce (Vizdal 1980.14–35) has a special meaning. In addition to settlement units, a pit (A/76) was documented that differed from the other pits in depth (220cm). Four layers and interlayers were discovered inside it, with each layer containing the remains of ritual burials (Fig. 3). There was also a 'cult' fire discovered beside each skeleton. The fragmented grave goods – the fragmentariness of the pottery, split or fractured animal or human bones – suggests intentional damage.

Inhumation

The oldest Neolithic burials come from the Early LPC in western Slovakia. Two children's graves from Čičarovce

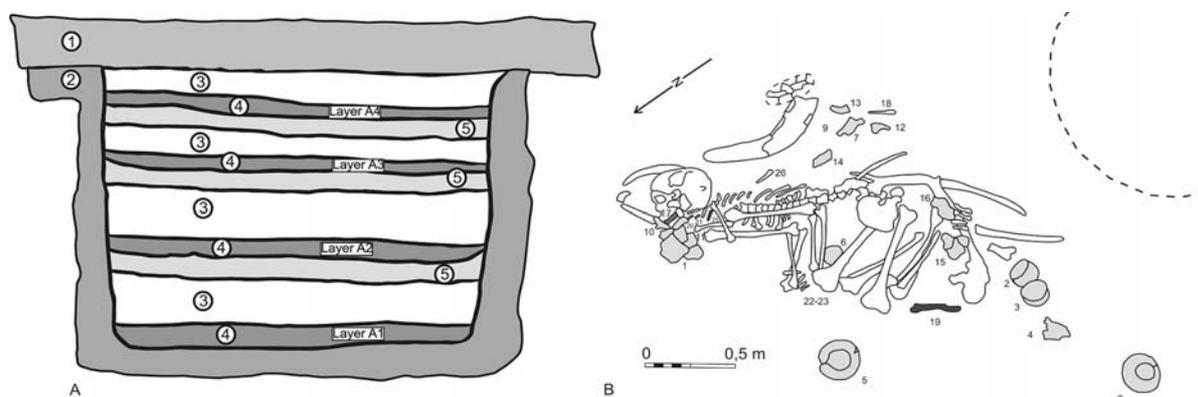


Fig. 3. Čičarovce, Trebišov district. A – Tisza culture pit A/76 with four layers and interlayers; in each layer remains of ritual burials were found: 1. plough layer; 2. native soil; 3. filled interlayers; 4. layers with cultic burials; 5. priming layers; B – ritual burial in layer A4 from pit A/76: 1–16 – pottery; 17. miniature stone axe; 18. hooped hand axe; 19. stone axe; 20., 21. blades; 22., 23. scrapers; 26. awl from bird bone (adopted from Vizdal 1980.Fig. 4, 5).

taj (Pavúk 1976.178), a flexed child's skeleton from a settlement pit in Bratislava-Mlynská dolina (Egyházy-Jurovská and Farkaš 1993.19) and three burials with variously oriented skeletons in flexed position from Bína (Točík et al. 1970.26–27) were identified in that period. A find of a man's skeleton in a settlement object at Malé Zálužice – which is dated to the Szatmar group and the beginning of the Eastern LPC – is among the oldest finds from eastern Slovakia (Vizdal 1992).

Since the beginning of the LPC we can recognize several burial practices. The first is comprised of graveyards. In this context, it is necessary to distinguish between intramural and extramural graveyards. Both are characteristic of Neolithic and Eneolithic, when groups of graves were placed within settlements and subsequently removed out of the settlement territory. In some cases, the graves were part of a bigger graveyard which was located in the vicinity of the settlement and continuous (in some cases periodical) settlement in the course of the time caused mutual disturbance, such as at the Neolithic settlements at Lužianky (Novotný 1962), Svodín (Němejcová-Pavúková 1986), Santovka (Pavúk 1994a.169) and Šarišské Michal'any (Šiška 1995.38). There is an interesting case of eleven inhumation graves near five settlement pits at the Čičarovce site in eastern Slovakia (Vizdal 1980.50–75, 90, 95). A neighbouring cremation in a vessel was found in one skeletal grave and, inside two settlement pits, there were isolated human skulls deposited. However, the most important find is a cult object/shaft with burial superposition of four individuals, mentioned above in the section on cremation. There is evidence of the superposition of buried remains also at the Epilengyel settlement at Bajč-Ragoňa (Točík 1978.240). Inside a cultural object (pit with a circular ground plan) have been found the first discoveries, two bowls and a vase in fragments, at a depth of 73cm. Under that, at 88–120cm depth, six unbroken vessels were found, beneath which lay two skeletons of adult individuals in flexed positions. Sterile brown filling continued until a flat floor at a depth of 273 cm. Approximately 20 cm above the floor four skeletons were located (adult woman and a man, juvenile individual and a child) in a flexed position (Fig. 4).

The existence of extramural graveyards in the Neolithic in the studied area was proved at Nitra – Priemyslová Street (76 graves; Pavúk 1972) and in the Early Eneolithic at Tibava (41 graves; Šiška 1964) and Veľké Raškovce (44 graves; Šiška 1963.215–217; Vizdal 1977). According to the occurrence of

grave groups, a graveyard is also supposed at the Neolithic sites Nitra-Mlynárce (Plesl 1952), Nitra-Mikov dvor (min. 7 graves; Březinová 1999), Holiare (Barta and Willvonseder 1934.6), and Lipová-On-drochov (Točík 1981.303).

Intramural burials mostly occurred in the Early Eneolithic period: Branč (17 graves; Lichardus and Vladár 1964), Jelšovce (22 graves; Pavúk and Bátor 1995), Výchapy-Opatovce (8 graves; Porubský 1955; Nevizánsky 1985b). There are individual graves or groups of graves from several sites whose affiliation is uncertain. However, these present regular burials in grave pits, where the deceased were laid in flexed or stretched position on their right or left side, with hands usually in front of the face. These deceased were equipped with grave goods on their last journey. Stone covers for grave pits were found at Epilengyel sites at Malé Kršteňany (Vlček and Bárta 1950.337–340), Blatné (Pavúk 1978.192–195) and Nitrianske Pravno (Nevizánsky 1985a.75); at the last of these sites the stones were also positioned on the skeleton. This practice might be related to burial rites of the Funnel Beaker culture, where stone-packed graves are common (Šmíd 2004). Other indications of outside grave marking are absent. The exception is a child's grave inside the area of LPC settlement

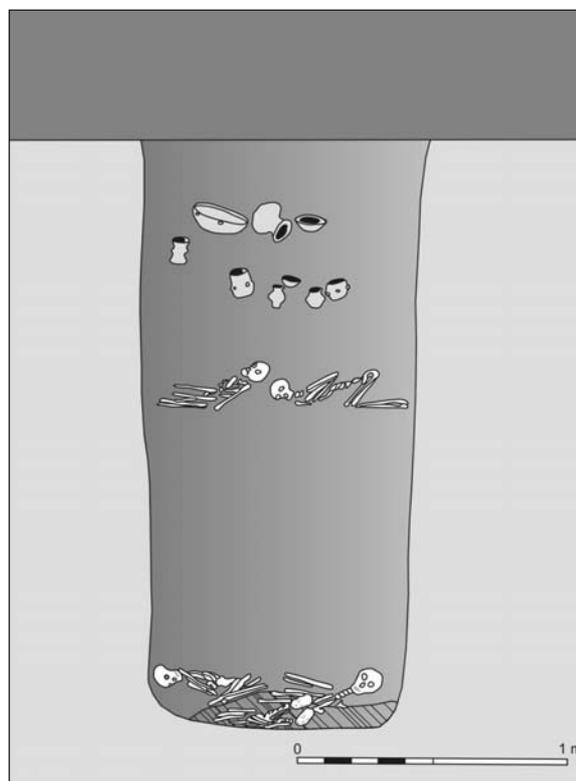


Fig. 4. Bajč-Ragoňa, Komárno district. Epilengyel site-Ludanice group. Cultic shaft with pots and six individuals (adopted from Točík 1978.Fig. 4, 5).

in Bratislava Mlynská dolina (*Egyházy-Jurovská and Farkaš 1993.19*), where traces of six post holes were detected around the grave. In this case also, a stone block covered the torso of the skeleton. Following this case, we move on to the second group of finds, which contains solitary skeletons inside settlement objects/units. It is important to distinguish between regular burials inside a settlement pits and putting of some individuals inside objects. So long as the human skeletons were found laying piously in settlement objects and mostly with some grave goods, they were probably regularly buried, whereby a pit originally serving purposes other than burial was used. There is a good example of such a burial in the settlement unit of the Želiezovce group in Levice (*Samuel 2007.173–174*), which contained the skeleton of a 40-year-old woman placed in a flexed position on her left side, with her head facing north, two vessels placed beside her legs, and the shells of a necklace on her chest and neck. This type of accessory/jewellery is not rare. It also appeared in object 92 in the settlement unit of LPC and Želiezovce group site in Štúrovo (*Pavúk 1994b.96*). There was a skeleton of a 40–50-year-old woman found in flexed position on her right side, with numerous freshwater shells located around and below her (Fig. 5). Several bone fragments from more human individuals approximately 15–30-years-old were discovered in the upper layer of the pit filling. The river shells were also found between both layers of the pit filling. Bones from the upper layer have traces of burning, splitting and carving.

An interesting child burial was discovered in the settlement unit at Branč (*Lichardus and Vladár 1964*). The skeleton was in a straight position, facing the bottom of a rectangular floor plan pit which had rounded corners and walls narrowing towards the bottom. The legs of the skeleton were located on the bevelled pit wall (Fig. 6). No grave goods were detected; however, there were fragments of vessels inside the pit filling. Also, a find from the Želiezovce group site in Cifer-Pác can be considered a non-regular burial (*Kolník 1978.132*). An extremely flexed skeleton lay on its left side inside a settlement unit facing north-east. It originally had its hands tied behind its back (Fig. 7). Perhaps one vessel, an unfinished stone tool and a bone awl can be

considered as grave goods. Another interesting find that is considered a demonstration of cult practices comes from the same settlement. A double grave of markedly flexed young individuals (probably a woman and a man) lying side by side, with faces turned away from each other, was found inside a pit of irregular elliptic shape (Fig. 8). Evidently, the dead were tied together at the waist and sole. Above their heads, a conical bowl with decoration reminiscent of ideograms and one spherical bowl were located (*Kolník 1980.170*).

Finds of isolated bones inside settlement units, often with traces of violent interferences are also not classified as ritual burials. These are frequently finds of isolated skulls, e.g. in two settlement objects from the Tisza culture site in Čičarovce (*Vizdal 1980.90, 95*) or the LPC settlement unit in Blatné, where the skull was surrounded (covered) with stones and fragments of some bigger vessels (*Pavúk 1980.208*). A settlement unit at the Želiezovce group site in Bajč yielded a great quantity of different human bones: jaws, neurocranium – the upper portion of the skull – braincase, thigh, facial skeleton, frontal bone etc. (*Vondráková 1991.107*). Anthropological analysis revealed that the fractures of these bones are mostly authentic and their surfaces prove they were fractured when they contained organic material. An os frontale from object 459 in Bajč even contained traces of intentional interference by means of a slashing or cutting tool – the evidence of anthropophagy, perhaps? There is another example in the case of the

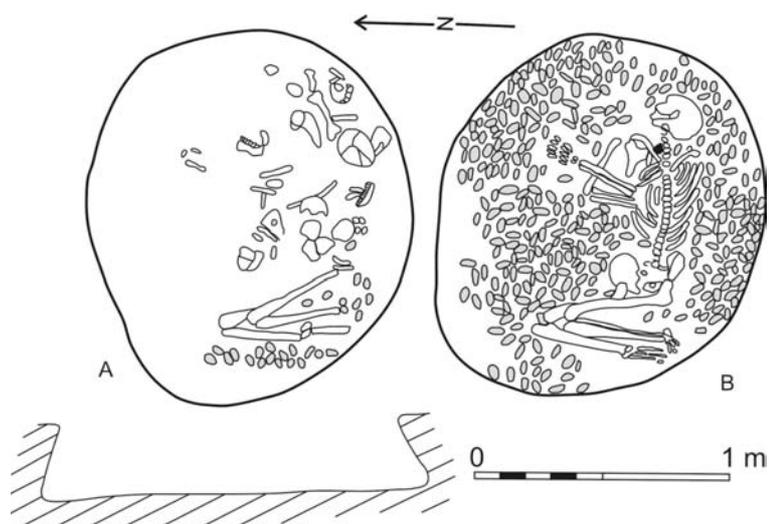


Fig. 5. Štúrovo, Nové Zámky district. Linear Pottery culture and Želiezovce group site. Object 92. A – upper layer of pit filling with several bone fragments and freshwater shells; B – skeleton of a 40–50 year old woman in flexed position on her right side with freshwater shells located around and below (after Pavúk 1994a.Fig. 39, 5 a, b).

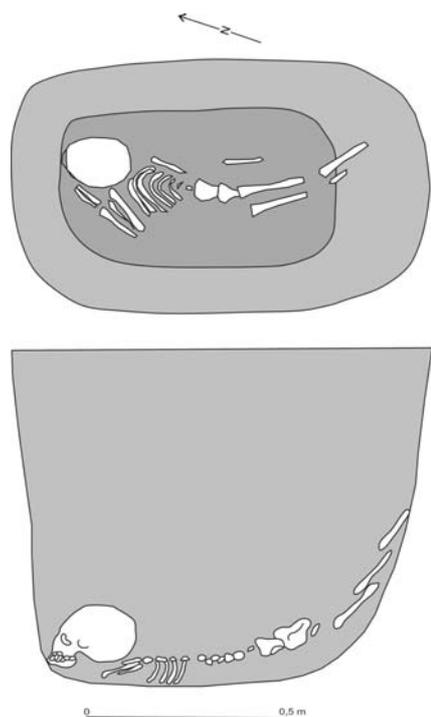


Fig. 6. Branč, Nitra district. Epilengyel site-Ludanice group. Child's skeleton in settlement unit in straight position facing the bottom of pit with legs located on the bevelled pit wall (after Lichardus and Vladár 1964.Grave 271).

incomplete bone remains of three women discovered in unit 750/79 of a Lengyel culture site in Svodín, where traces of healed fractures were documented for two women (Němejcová-Pavúková 1998.40, 42).

Evidence of some isolated bones found in the settlements could be evidence of various post-mortual manipulations. Some of these could be part of ritual acts. Likewise, the damaged skeletons found in graves or inside objects are considered a result of ritual activities. Ritual encroachment on graves is assumed when grave fitting is removed. Such interventions can also be explained as anti-vampire. On the other hand, the removal of skulls (or other bones) from the grave after the decomposition of soft tissue could be explained as a manifestation of respect, of an ancestor cult. There is, perhaps, an exception in the case of a find from a Bükk culture site in Šarišské Michal'any, where human bones with traces of cutting, scratching and cooking were found in layers as well as settlement units (Šiška 1995). It is possible to consider cannibalism in this case!

Also the placing/throwing of the human body together with isolated human bones indicates ritual activity, which differs from 'classic' graves. A single skull

was found, for example, together with the skeleton of an 8–9 years old child in one out of 76 graves at Nitra – Priemyslova Street (Pavúk 1972.8), and the cranial arch of an adult (probably a woman) was located in a settlement unit near a child's skeleton in Bratislava – Mlynska dolina (Egyházy-Jurovská and Farkaš 1993.19). Both examples belong to LPC.

A discovery from Blatné is very interesting (Pavúk 1978.192–195; 1980.208). A partly damaged Želiezovce group storage pit, with a circular floor plan with flat floor contained two skeletons, a newborn and an 8–15 month child, found when removing pottery fragments. By the south-west edge of the pit, a child's skeleton was found in an unnatural, badly flexed position. The skull was laid on its rear side, facing up. By the eastern edge of the pit, the skeleton of a small dog was discovered, stretched and lying on its right side. A fragment of a child's skull was found beside its hind legs. In the northern part, another skeleton of a child was uncovered surrounded by fragments of sole bones from an adult. A small decorated amphora was situated next to this child's skull. Another skeleton in the pit was positioned on its left side, with strongly decomposed ribs and limbs in a flexed position. Westwards of the skeleton, another fragment of child's skull was found. All the isolated bones of children and adult individuals bore traces of pre mortal injuries and of burning. The preserved individual bones in particular appear to have been perfectly boiled. It is possible to consider this act as proof of violent interference, cannibalism or scalping. Although a burial rite



Fig. 7. Cífer Pác, Trnava district. Želiezovce group site. Strongly flexed skeleton on its left side inside a settlement unit facing north-eastwards with hands originally tied behind its back (adopted from Kolník 1978.pit 239).

in the middle Neolithic was not fully established, certain rules were already adhered to. This allows us to assume that the main aim of activities leading to the creation of find situations was primarily not for the purposes of a funeral itself. A dog, as well as children, could be sacrificed, fitting food, or some kind of companion.

The skeletons of children were usually interred within settlement boundaries. For example, at the Epilengyel settlement in Branč, out of seventeen graves, twelve were those of children (*Lichardus and Vladár 1964.101, 102*). The inhumation of deceased children refers to some emotional attitude of their relatives. The presence of grave goods can reflect a certain notional social status of inhumed child. For example, at the LBK graveyard at Nitra-Priemyslová Street, from out of twenty-two children (under 15-years-old) eleven were buried without accessories. Seven children were buried in graves with one vessel and one other article (*e.g. bone bracelet, stone pad etc.*). Also, pieces of graphite were found between the child's left hand fingers in grave no. 5 (*Pavúk 1972.8, 75*). There are several richly furnished children's graves known from the Lengyel culture site in Svodín. The richest child's (Infans III) grave - no. 112/80 - contained two painted anthropomorphic vessels, several ordinary vessels, a clay altar, several hundred spondylus shell pearls from a necklace, belt and bracelets. Some were originally sewn on a headwear or other head decoration (*Němejcová-Pavúková 1986.145, 146*). Besides regular graves also burials inside settlement units come from Svodín. For example finding from the pit no. 337 is interesting. There is the skeleton buried inside the object in a very specific, so-called frog position. Was the position intended to express some already unknown spiritual meaning? The skeleton was that of a young individual with a badly healed fracture which had created some kind of third joint at the forearm (Fig. 9). It was probably because of this defect that the person was separated from the community. This might reflect the unusual way it had been interred (*Němejcová-Pavúková 1986.150*).

Another special group of disrespectful laid human remains is presented by findings at Lengyel settlements with a circular enclosure (Ružindol-Borová, Svodín) and with enclosed ditches (Vištuk). In the ditch of the circular enclosure in Ružindol-Borová, traces of pre-mortal violence (most often, blows to the head, arm and forearm) were found on most of the twenty-eight individuals identified (seventeen belong to the Lengyel culture - phase I and ten to

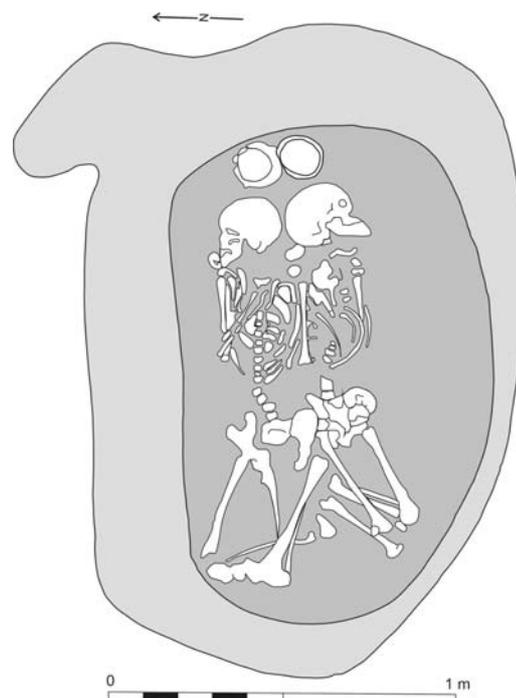


Fig. 8. Cífer Pác, Trnava district. Želiezovce group site. Double grave of considerably flexed young individuals (probably a woman and a man) lying next to each other with faces turned away; they were evidently tied together at the waist and soles (adopted from Jakab 1993.Fig. 4).

the Ludanice group - Epilengyel). The number of persons that could be found in the whole ditch is estimated up to 130 (*Němejcová-Pavúková 1997. 115-119*). Also, numerous traces of animal bites were detected on the bones of both men and women of different ages. Apparently, the dead bodies were thrown into the ditch and left uncovered for some time and therefore exposed to the impact of the environment. It is possible that the inhabitants were attacked and thrown into the ditch, which remained open for some time. A discovery from Svodín presents a different situation. The skeletons of two children without accessories were found 200cm deep in the filling near the exterior wall of the circular enclosure inner ditch. There were no traces of a grave pit (*Němejcová-Pavúková 1995.47*). According to the find situation, we can suppose that the bodies reached the ditch during its continuous back-filling with soil.

There is so far one isolated discovery of a young woman's skeletal remains (18-22 years) and of a girl (Infant II) lying together in a trench at the LPC site in Vištuk. Traces of violent interference have been preserved on some of the bones, which incurred probably sometime after death (post-mortal injuries). It is impossible to interpret this context as the re-

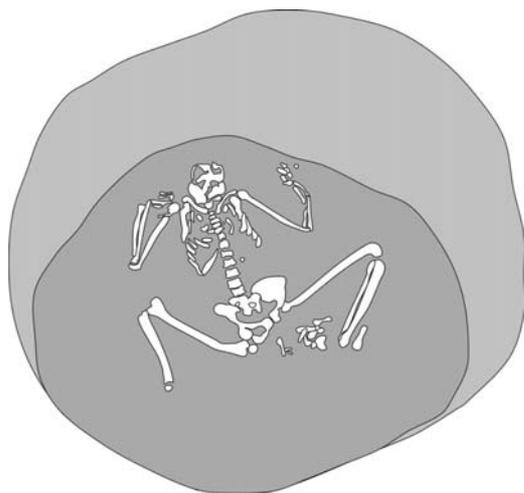


Fig. 9. Svodín, Nové Zámky district. Lengyel culture site. Young individual in frog position with badly healed fracture at forearm in settlement unit No. 337 (adopted from Němejcová-Pavúková 1986.Fig. 10).

main of a Neolithic fenced settlement, because of the unclear terrain situation (Farkaš and Ševčáková 2003.177–182). In Neolithic ditches, it is important to recognize not only profane, but also the symbolic function of spatial division into outer (wild, dangerous) and inner (secure) area. In such contexts, funerals in ditches can be considered as a type of temporary zone between this world and the world to come. Skeletons inside ditches of circular enclosures reflect the effort to be as close as possible to sacral zone. Skeletons thrown into ditches, or isolated bones, are not only evidence of war, but also of human sacrifice, even a certain form of burial rite.

Occasionally, human skeletons also appear in dwelling contexts at some Neolithic settlements. There is one good example from the Želiezovce group site at Jelšovce (Bátora 1999), where the skeletons of two women were found in the foundation trench of a house (Fig. 10). Skeleton A was lying in the lower, narrower part of the western half of a trench, positioned on its back. Because of the narrow space, it was pushed inside the trench and the pelvis was deformed by the pressure. Three round vessels lay over its skull. Skeleton B was positioned on its left side in the eastern part of the trench, with no other finds. The age of the women is estimated at within 30–40, and some pathological changes such as paradontosis, tartar, caries and cysts, arthritis and a sharply delimited cavity on a thighbone were noted. Pre-mortal injuries occurred

in the form of defects and traces of punches to the jaw-bones. Finally, skeleton A suffered from a broken jaw.

It is questionable whether burials in a dwelling context (inside and outside) can be interpreted as building sacrifices, or simply as an individual form of ritual burial. Undoubtedly, certain forms of sacrifice existed and were highly likely performed. For example, at the Epilengyel settlement in Branč the graves were situated close to the corners of dwellings, supporting a theory of building sacrifice (Vladár and Lichardus 1968.328). In this context, a group of children's graves located under the floors of dwellings at the Lengyel settlement in Svodín is interesting (Němejcová-Pavúková 1995.122). Likewise, the find of a strongly flexed skeleton found under the post hole of a long house of the LPC site in Patince 'Teplica' (Cheben 1989.70).

Different types of sacrifice occurred in Branč, too. These include e.g. a find of an undamaged spondylus shell bracelet under a post hole at the north-eastern corner of dwelling 13, or a completely preserved clay model of a dwelling together with pottery fragments in the same position at dwelling 17 (Vladár 1969.506–508).

Burial inside dwellings, with skeletons placed inside ovens and near fireplaces, constitutes a special category of interment. Interment in ovens or near fireplaces symbolises the domesticity. At an LPC and Želiezovce group site in Vel'ký Grob, a skeleton was positioned in the fireplace and covered with a thick layer of burnt soil (Steklá 1956.708). In Prešov-Šarišské Lúky (Eastern LPC) at the north-eastern corner of a large settlement object a demolished clay fireplace was discovered, among it with dispersed parts of human limbs and a jaw (Šiška 1976.84).

Human remains found in caves comprise a separate group, which is perhaps mostly linked with cults and

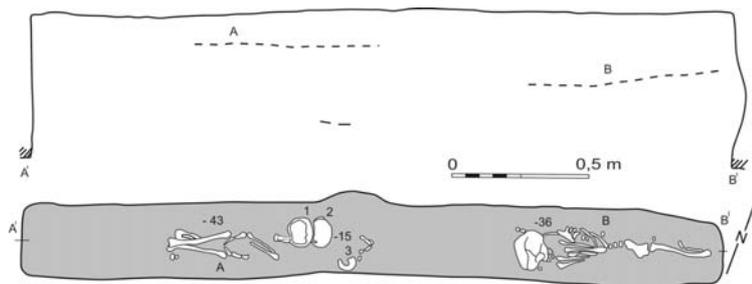


Fig. 10. Jelšovce, Nitra district. Želiezovce group site. Skeletons of two women in foundation trench of a house (after Bátora 1999. Fig. 2).

rituals. In the Neolithic, this special category occurs in the cases of three Bükk culture caves (Domica, Ardovska and Bobková cave), and in the early Eneolithic, in four Epilengyel caves (Čertova pec, Dúpna Diera, Dzeravá Skala and Liskovská jaskyňa). Mostly human skeletal remains occurred dispersed; however, there is also evidence of both isolated (Dzeravá Skala) and mass burials of mostly young individuals (Dúpna Diera). The Liskovska cave is a special example of this phenomenon (Struhár and Soják 2009, 47, 48). Evidence of a particular ceremony has been found inside. A large accumulation of human bones was located at a fireplace in a small low niche (Fig. 11). The fireplace was tiled with bigger stone blocks. In the fire layer under the bones, a small spiral decoration made of copper wire was placed. The whole object was separated from the larger corridor by some kind of stone wall. The unit analysis has shown that it can be related to cultic district-charnel-houses (Struhár 1999). At least sixteen people were buried here, six of them young; the remainder were adults between 20 and 40 years of age. Three of them could have been up to 50 years old, one even 60 years (Jakab 1999). Intentional cuts were noted on the diaphysis of a thigh-bone. Probably only isolated bones, and not the whole bodies of the deceased were po-

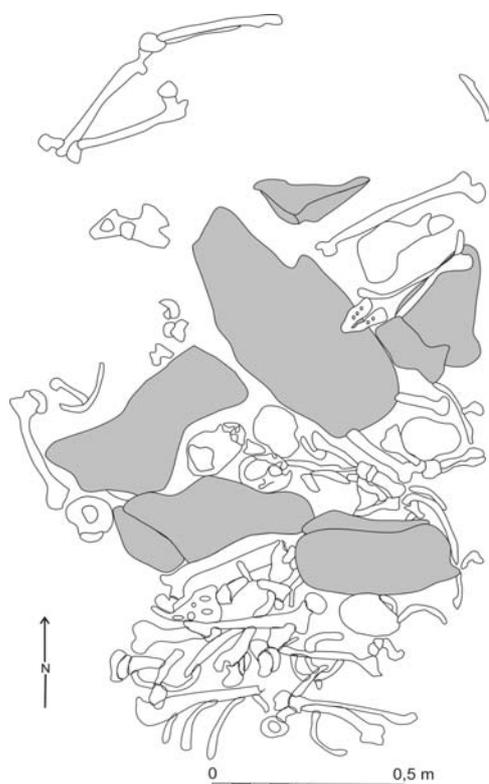


Fig. 11. Liskovská Cave, Ružomberok district. Epilengyel-Ludanice group site. Cult burial in a small low cave niche with the bones of sixteen individuals (after Struhár 1999, Fig. 2).

sitioned in the niche. These were originally laid at some other location where they decayed naturally. After the decay and separation of soft tissue from the bones, the remains were collected and moved to the place of their eternal rest. Also, animal bones of various species were positioned inside the object: grouse, goose, hawk, rabbit, wild boar, polecat and sheep/goat. So far, it is not clear whether this object was created as a result of a single action, or used as a cult site over a longer period as a depository for the bones of the deceased. Traces of viridescent impregnation on the skulls and bones prove the presence of copper jewellery and decorations gracing the clothing and bodies of the inhumed. It is interesting that before the bone remains were placed in the niche, a fire was lit and the bones were placed in smouldering ash. Most probably so-called purification – cleaning the place intended as a sepulchre. The division of the sacred area from the other cave areas probably served to prevent the return of the deceased; however, on the other hand, it was also for the undisturbed (peaceful) rest of the dead. An isolated burial area was also documented in Dupna diera cave, where the area with bones (supposedly secondary burial) was separated from the residential area by dry-stone wall (Barta 1983, 22).

Finally, it is necessary to remark that besides the group of funerals mentioned, the burial of animals intact constitutes a special category. Entire animal skeletons are often placed along with a human individual. There is a good example in grave 3/71 at the Lengyel site in Svodín, where the complete skeleton of a dog was located at the feet of a flexed human lying on his right side with hands in front of his chin (Němejcová-Pavúková 1982, 201–202; 1986, 148). There are also examples of separate burials of animals. The grave of a small young dog (*Canis familiaris palustris*) in a cultural pit at the LPC site in Hurbanovo-Bacherov majer is the oldest evidence (Ambros and Novotný 1953, 447–450). It is possible that since the Neolithic, the dog has played a significant role in human life, and perhaps we can also consider its role as a guide of the deceased in the kingdom of the dead.

Conclusion

The knowledge of the mortuary practices of the period studied depends on detailed study of all remains presented by archaeological findings. Although some remains were burnt and other traces of fire are evident, it is difficult to explain the connection between burial practice and open fire. One of the possibilities

is its purifying power. It enables separation of the soul from the body, and purification after the body is damaged, so it can carry on living in the other world. At the same time, it prevents the dead from returning to the world of the living. Despite the strong faith in magical powers of the Neolithic communities that was unconditionally expressed in both religious and mortuary practices, we cannot exclude the practical level of the activity. The following reasons can be taken into consideration: hygiene, transport simplification or reduction of spatial requirements for graves. In this case, we cannot forget another aspect of the cremation process that is increased demands for cremation, *i.e.* a greater effort to build a funeral pyre, as well as the longer duration of burial ceremony. Purification and the destructive power of fire can also be very closely associated as well.

In the case of cremation of the dead, the low number of cremation graves is specific. However, the low number show that the cremation rite does not have to be related to the preservation of the graves themselves (*e.g.* because they are more shallow *etc.*). We have to reflect moreover on other ways of treating human buried remains: keeping remains in urns, whereby these became part of life of the bereaved; dispersal of ash in the air, water or at a ritual site; *etc.* Ethnographic sources prove that some South tribes in America perform so-called endocannibalism (practice of eating dead members of community) and burning of bones makes them easier to dissolve. Sometimes this act is linked with other ritual activities, *e.g.* in the case of the death of a chieftain, his body is burnt and the ash is mixed in a drink. Differentiation based on age, sex or status within a society may be one of the reasons of cremation.

Apart from sanitary and other practical considerations, the site of burial can be determined by religious and socio-cultural considerations. Thus in some traditions, especially with an animistic logic, the remains of the dead are 'banished' for fear their spirits would harm the living if too close; others keep remains close to help surviving generations.

In this contribution, we tried to enumerate all possible funeral types present in the observed area in the Neolithic and early Eneolithic. The analysis of the mortuary practices demonstrates that burial in a graveyard was only one of a number of various practices. Some burials were located in temporarily unoccupied sections of settlements, within settlement units or in dwelling spaces. The particular ritual elements differ, implying that factors of a concrete nature had a leading role. The same holds for burials in caverns. It is also possible that some of the dead were exposed or their grave reopened after a requisite period after funeral, and the bones or skull moved and buried individually, or used in various ritual forms of ancestor cult.

Since we titled the article '(un)usual burials...', we still owe an answer, if there is one, to the question of where the 'usual' graves are? As an answer, we can accept the explanation that the burials were not inhumations and did not leave archaeological traces, or there are many graveyards that have remained undiscovered. It is difficult to say what the criteria for the choice of one or other mortuary practice might have been. It is beyond doubt that most of the cases cannot be defined as 'exceptions', as its practice shows they were standard mortuary practices.

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