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THE LATEST KNOWLEDGE ON THE BURIAL RITE OF THE PEOPLE OF THE NITRA GROUP

ABSTRACT — *The author reviews the latest knowledge on the burial rite of the Nitra Group people. He proceeds from the results of systematical rescue investigations realized in the years 1982—1987 by Nitra-based Archaeological Institute of the Slovak Academy of Sciences at burial places of the investigated period. 603 new graves of the Nitra group were discovered. The author follows the individual phenomena of the funeral rite, many of them hitherto not known from Nitra group burial sites. He is concerned first of all with special structures and arrangements of the graves and grave pits, such as posts placed at the corners of the pit and wooden revetment of the walls (Mýtina Nová Ves, gr. 206, 262), rectangular or square gullies framing the grave (Jelšovce, gr. 444, 526). Individuals of higher social status (chieftains and shamans) were buried in such graves. Further peculiarities of the burial rite are graves with individuals laying in supine position, with their knees apart and heels together, in so-called frog position (Jelšovce, gr. 444), and symbolic graves. In this category of graves, grave No. 6 in Mýtina Nová Ves was extraordinary — there was a goat or a sheep buried in it, together with pottery and copper funeral offerings. The entire inventory of the grave, and also the burial rite are identical with the inventory of warrior graves. A new feature has been discovered, namely the habit of placing big vessels into the barrow over the grave, a feature specific of the localities in the valley of the Nitra River. On the other hand the practice of meat offering is unknown in the area of the Nitra group graves. Furthermore, the habit of placing cattle into the graves in one region, and goat and sheep in another is a clear reference to their respective economic resources.*

Various features of the burial rite observed in the burial places of the Nitra group illustrate the importance of the ideas about after-life in the society of those times. Thanks to these ideas and beliefs the deceased and his grave in a common burial ground became the cause and main object of religious ceremonies and rite practices.

KEY WORDS: *Slovakia — Early Bronze Age (Nitra group) — Burial rite — Symbolic graves — Trepanation — Cultic ceremony — Social differentiation.*

Following an extensive research of Nitra group burial places in south-western Slovakia (Branč, Nitra-Čermán, Tyrdošovce, Šala I and Šala II — Vladár 1973; Točík 1979), and in eastern Moravia (Holešov — Ondráček, Šebela 1985) in the nineteen sixties, we saw a certain stagnation in the seventies. Research started with a new vigour in the early 80's, when the Nitra-based Archaeological Institute of the SAS in efforts to find the settlement areas of

the Nitra group discovered a number of until then unknown burial grounds (Jelšovce, Ludanice, part of Mýtina Nová Ves, Alekšince, Šurianky I, II — Bátor 1983; 1984; 1985; 1986). Systematic rescue investigations realized in the years 1982—1987 resulted in the discovery of 603 new graves of the Nitra group, bringing a mass of new information concerning funeral rites and the people who practiced them.

The most striking phenomena observed broadly in the investigations in the recent years were the special constructions and arrangements of graves and grave pits. The grave structure discovered at the Ludanice burial site, part of the village Mýtina Nová Ves (Topolčany District), consisted of four posts originally placed in or near to the corners of a grave pit (g. 206, 262, *Fig. 1*), and wooden revetment of the walls of the pit, and probably also of the ceiling, so that it formed a grave chamber. The posts formed presumably part of the carrying structure of a system covering the grave chamber, although graves with post structure were found only at the burial site of Mýtina Nová Ves. We suppose that they will not remain the only finds of this type in the Nitra culture group. We should mention here e.g. grave No. 31 at Branč with a wooden crypt. We found an evident post-hole in the south-western corner of the grave pit, while the other three corners were broadened (Vladár 1973, 20, *Fig. 9*). The orientation and inventory of graves with special wooden constructions suggests that they were burials of men of extraordinary status, of chieftains or shamans. It is well illustrated by the inventory of grave No. 262, that yielding besides pottery, silex arrow heads, bone

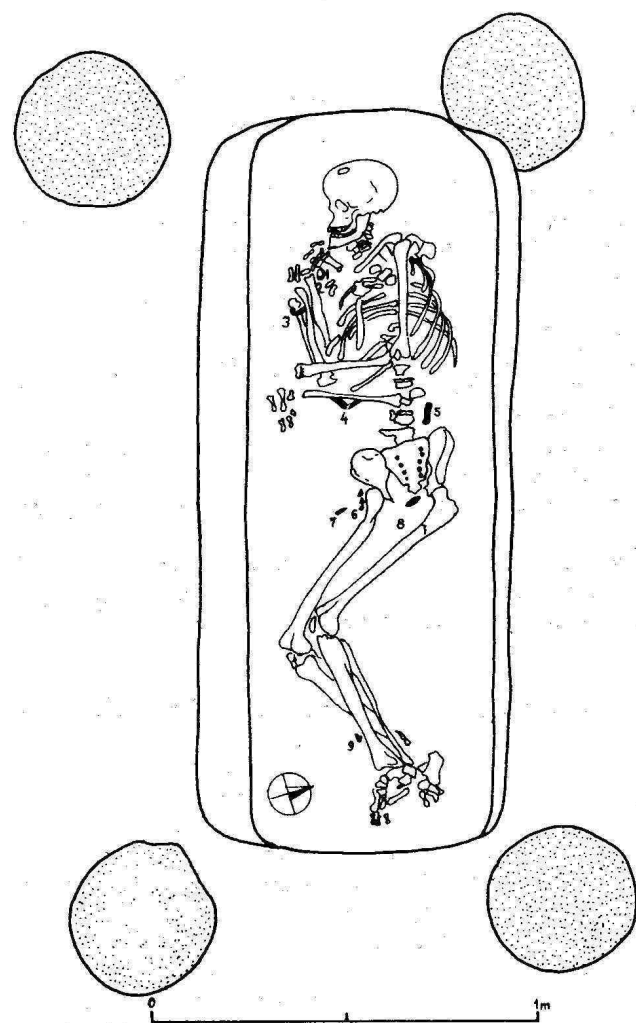


FIGURE 1. Mýtina Nová Ves, Topolčany District, Ground plane of grave 206/87. Drawn by J. Urbanec.

artifacts also claws from a bear paw — the latter may be regarded as remains of a chief's regalia or shaman's insignia.

Another unique feature, so far known only from the burial ground at Jelšovce is a gully of rectangular-to-almost-square form (gr. 526) framing the grave. The gullies were originally filled with logs joined in the corners. The question is whether they served to keep the clay of the grave mound, or they formed a wooden chamber, built around four corner posts, and covered. The second possibility is supported by two graves belonging to Madarovce culture which were sunk later to the north-eastern part of grave 526, probably into the burial barrow, still visible at that time. Grave 526 contained a male and a female, each of them placed in a separate grave pit. The male was oriented W-E, the female E-W.

At the Jelšovce burial site occasionally stones were used for arranging the grave pit. In grave 525 a flat stone was placed behind the skull, upright, along the shorter wall of the grave pit. At the feet there was "a wall" formed by quarry stones. Such stone revetments of graves were known long ago

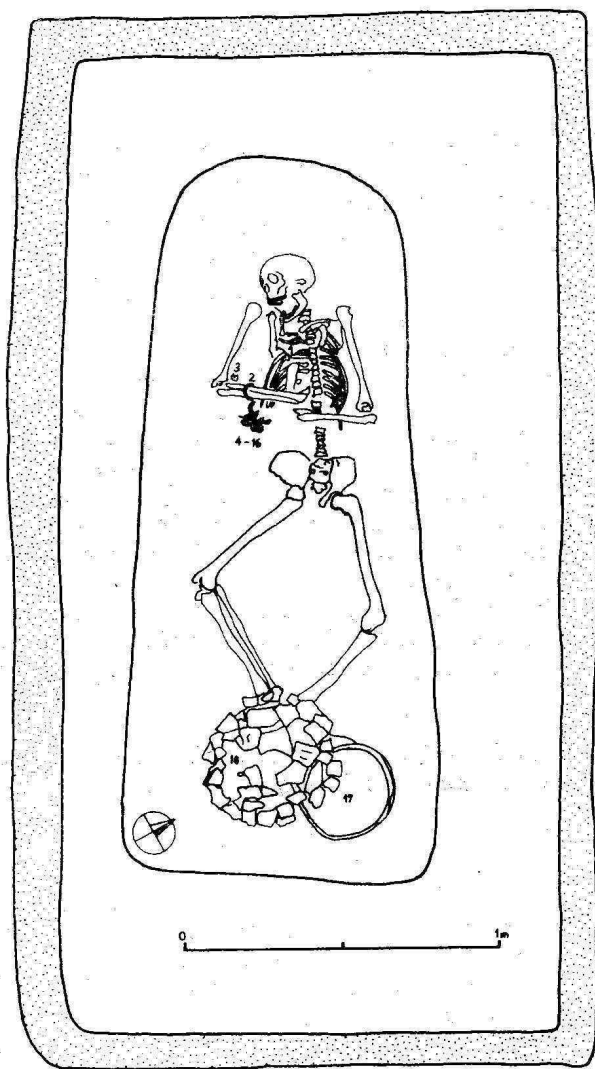


FIGURE 2. Jelšovce, Nitra District, Ground plane of grave 444/85. Drawn by J. Urbanec.

at Brezová pod Bradlom (Valáštan 1922, p. 121) and lately at Miškovice, Kroměříž District), (Chybová 1984).

A special category is formed by graves containing the skeletons of individuals buried in supine position, with their legs in so-called rhomboid position, i.e. with their knees apart and held together ("frog-position") (*Fig. 2*). In the burial places of the Nitra group they have appeared in three cases so far (Šala I, gr. 2, Šala II, gr. 7, Jelšovce, gr. 444). All three are male graves, with rich warrior-hunting inventory (a dagger, arrow heads, bone whistles), in one case with traces of a special construction framing the grave (Jelšovce, gr. 444). Occasionally we come across skeletons in the so-called frog position also in the Košťany group (Košice, gr. 143) in eastern Slovakia (Pástor 1969), but they are more frequent in the group of east Slovakian barrows. The origin of this way of burying must be looked for, as pointed out by V. Budinský-Krička (1967, p. 331–332) in the area of the south Russian steppes and ochre graves. According to their inventory the three above-mentioned graves are dated to the early phase of the Nitra group and they can be regarded as a material evidence of the penetration of east European influences at the beginning of the Bronze Age, both in the superstructure and also in the material basis of the groups of the late corded cultural complex of the Early Bronze Age.

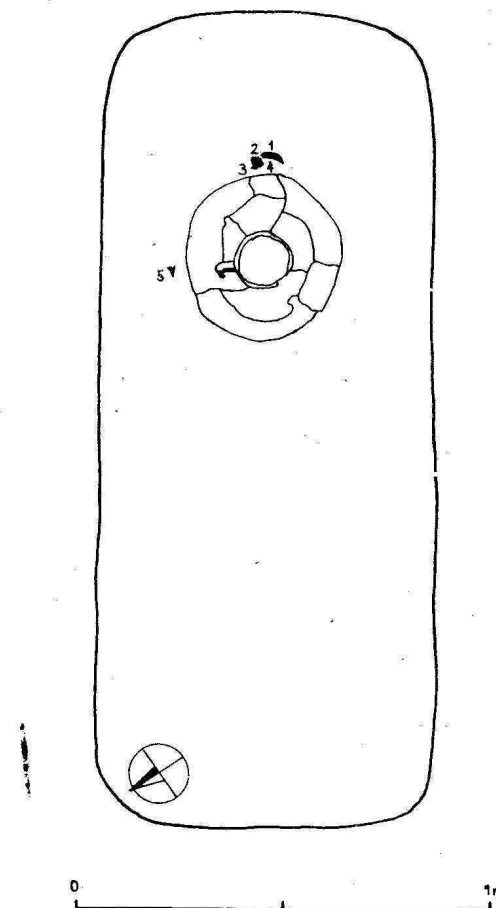


FIGURE 3. Mýtina Nová Ves, Topolčany District, Ground plane of grave 116/85. Drawn by J. Urbanec.

Side by side with the graves of regularly buried individuals appear also empty burials in the burial places of the Nitra group; the latter do not contain any human remains, they hold only grave offerings. They are evidently symbolical graves, serving for individuals whose bodies were not available for burial for some reason (e.g. they died far from their settlement, got drowned and were not found, torn to pieces by wild animals, etc.). The composition of funeral offerings (besides pottery appear silex arrow heads, silex raw material, willowleaf knife and sheet metal-mounting) indicate that we have to do with male burials, with burials of warriors and hunters (*Fig. 3*) (Mýtina Nová Ves, gr. 116, 117, 201; Holešov, gr. 365; Tvrdšovce, gr. 23). Significant is also the situation of funeral offerings — in the middle of the grave pit or at its eastern wall, i.e. in the usual places, where they appear in genuine male graves. The size of these symbolic graves also speaks for the correctness of our presumption, as their length varies between 200–216 cm, the width between 70–105 cm, and the depth is between 70–140 cm. They were in all cases large-size, regular grave pits.

All the above-mentioned facts have been confirmed by the finds in grave 6, at the Ludanice burial ground (part Mýtina Nová Ves) where a goat or sheep was buried. The skeleton of the animal was found lying on its right side, with its head oriented to the west, and the hind part of the body to the east, in the middle part of a normal-size grave pit. The funeral offerings (of copper?) were placed right on the skeleton in functional position: an awl, an earring, a dagger and a Cyprus pin. At the eastern wall of the grave pit there was a big amphora-like vessel, with its filling containing and arrow-head made of jasper. The grave inventory and the funeral rite do not differ of typical warriors' and hunters' graves. The whole situation indicates that we have to do with a symbolic burial in which the sheep represented the deceased individual whose mortal remains could not have been buried for some of the above-mentioned reasons. Empty (symbolic) graves appear in the early phase of the Nitra group and in the transitional Nitra-Únětice phase, i.e. in transition periods with frequent armed conflicts between clans and tribes. This fact is well reflected by numerous traces of acts of violence and of injuries, first of all on skulls of individuals buried in the mentioned chronological periods. On the skulls we can see traces of blows and cuts, e.g. on male skulls in graves 55 and 56 at Branč (Hanulík 1970), or traces of a blow with a dull object on the skull of a child from grave 39 at Mýtina Nová Ves (*Fig. 4*). Our opinion is also supported by regularly outlined circular or oblong depressions of 3–4 cm in diameter on male skulls in graves 29 (*Fig. 5*) and 206 at Mýtina Nová Ves, (*Fig. 6*), and on the skull of an old man at Příkazy (Wankel 1889, 98), with traces of 3 blows.

Alongside with holes knocked into the skull appear also trepanation-like holes in the burial place at Mýtina Nová Ves. E.g. in grave 342 an unfinished rhomboid-shaped trepanation hole was found in a female skull (*Fig. 7*). In grave 49 a child skull was

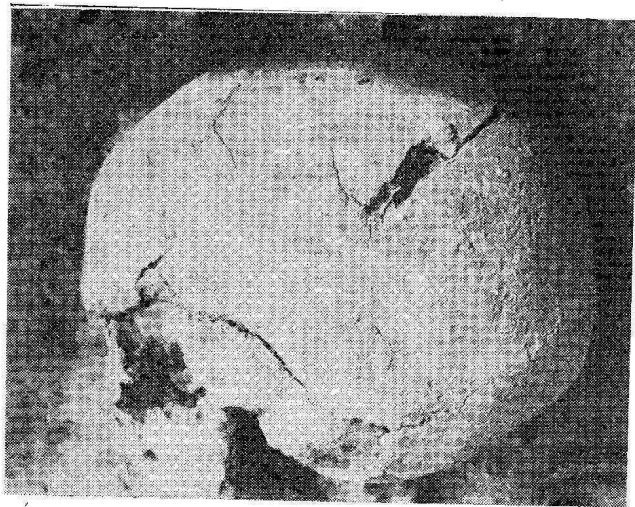


FIGURE 4. Detail of a child skull with a cut on the parietal bone — grave 39/84. Photo by J. Bátora.

Moravia, we can find funeral offerings in the form of meat (cattle ribs). Surprising is their full absence in graves of such extensive burial sites as Výčapy-Opatovce (306 graves), Jelšovce (311), and Mýtina



FIGURE 6. Mýtina Nová Ves, Topolčany District. Male skull (skeleton B) with a hole broken into the parietal bone and another into the frontal bone — grave 29/84. Photo by J. Bátora.

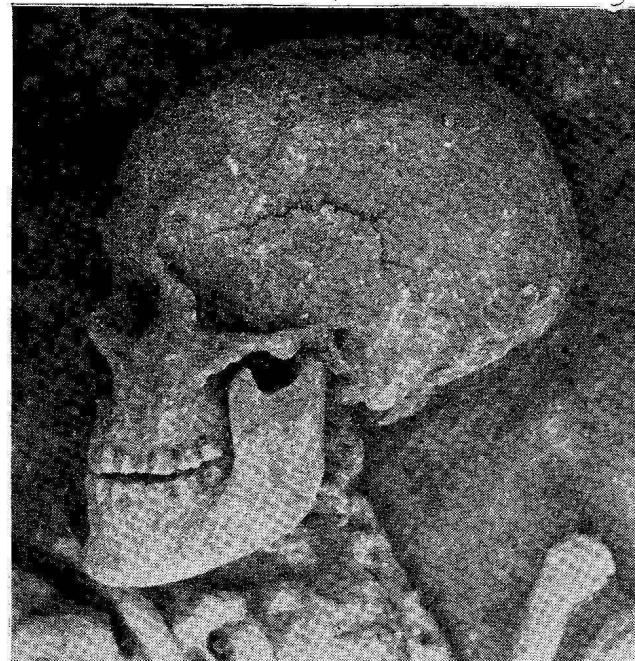


FIGURE 5. Mýtina Nová Ves, Topolčany District. Male skull (skeleton A) with a circular depression on the parietal bone — grave 29/84. Photo by J. Bátora.

found with a regular circular opening of about 0.6 mm in diameter and a male skull from grave No. 226 had 3 irregular holes. The situation of skull injuries indicates that they are most probably injuries sustained in fight, casting some light on the way of fighting. The find of a silex arrow-head shot between the ribs on the right side of the rib-cage in male grave 436 at the Jelšovce burial place is very probably the result of an armed encounter.

In Nitra group burial places in the area south of the town of Nitra, along the lower reaches of the Nitra River, in the Danubian Lowland and in eastern



FIGURE 7. Mýtina Nová Ves, Topolčany District. A female skull with unfinished trepanation on the parietal bone — grave 342/88. Photo by J. Bátora.

Nová Ves (up to now 271 graves), situated north of the town of Nitra, along middle course of the Nitra River and in the surrounding hills. The localities of the middle Nitra River basin yielded mainly animal bones in vessels, or close beneath them, in the barrow piled up over the grave (Jelšovce, gr. 587; Mýtina Nová Ves, gr. 91, 228). According to these finds we can conclude that only small ungulates, sheep or goats were bred in the Early Bronze Age. The spread and importance of goat and sheep breeding is documented by finds of leg bones of these animals in Jelšovce gr. 607 and 610, and also in the above mentioned grave 6 at Mýtina Nová Ves, where a sheep or a goat was buried together with other funeral offerings. On the contrary, the importance of cattle breeding in the region south of the town of Nitra and in the valley of the Morava River was documented by a large number of graves containing cattle ribs and skulls (Holešov burial site gr. 407—5 pieces, graves 294 and 55 — by one piece each — Ondráček, Šebela 1985).

An interesting ritual structure in object No. 507 was found in Jelšovce. It was situated near graves No. 558 and 559 and contained besides bone beads also bones of piglets and of pigs. It seems that these food supplies near graves No. 558 (of a male) and No. 559 (of a female) were remains of a funeral ritual feast held during the burial of the man and woman in the two above graves. The two graves were separated only by a 20 cm thick partition. Several such double burials have been recorded in this part of the burial ground.

We would like to mention also the custom of placing entire vessels into the barrow over the grave. While in Nitra group burial grounds in the west, i.e. in eastern Moravia and in the valley of the Váh River no such vessels have been found in the barrows, it is a characteristic feature of the localities in the valley of the Nitra River. Altogether 28 such graves have been found, namely in Mýtina Nová Ves (12 graves), Jelšovce (7) and in Branč — four barrows or grave-fillings with intact vessels, and further 5 with vessels damaged on clearing away the earth during modern construction activities (Vladár 1973, p. 93, 94, Fig. 71).

In most cases the vessels were placed in the barrow above the grave, and when the wooden ceiling of the grave chamber decayed and caved in, they got into the fill of the grave. This is well documented by the situation in grave 31 at Branč (Vladár 1973, p. 20—21), and in grave 262 at Mýtina Nová Ves. In both cases we have to do with men of high standing, as indicated by the special construction of the grave chamber.

The find of a vessel above the grave points to a small barrow. The original height or size of these barrows can be assessed from its distance from other graves. (Mýtina Nová Ves grave 262; Branč graves 31, 194, 195, 301; Jelšovce graves 444, 526, 585; Výčapy-Opatovce grave 26; Tvrdšovce graves 45, 46, 48).

The above custom is best represented in the oldest horizon of Nitra group graves usually containing big double-coned vessels with corded decoration

on the neck and shoulders (Jelšovce, grave 24; Mýtina Nová Ves, graves 85, 91, 209, 222, 224, 262; Branč, grave 301; Tvrdšovce, grave 45, 46). It is less frequent at the transition from the final part of the early period of the Nitra group to the beginnings of the classical phase (Jelšovce, graves 444, 526, 585; Branč graves 31, 194, 195), and fades out in the Nitra-Únětice phase (Mýtina Nová Ves, grave 207; Kapince, grave 6). In exceptional cases the barrow above the grave contained two (Branč, grave 195) or three (Jelšovce, grave 567) vessels. Interestingly, they are not those big, amphora-like vessels, in both cases we have to do with smaller pot-like vessels and with a bowl.

Another typical feature of the burial rite of the beginning of the Bronze Age is the sprinkling of the dead with ochre of brick-red hue. It was found already at the burial grounds of the Chlopice-Veselé culture (Veselé, graves 18, 27), probably also at the locality Sady near Uherské Hradiště (graves 1, 6), and more frequently in graves of the early and classical phases of the Nitra group. This is well documented by the situation at burial sites in Branč, Nitra-Čermán, Výčapy-Opatovce, Jelšovce, Mýtina Nová Ves and Čachtice, where the colouring material occurs most frequently in the fill of the graves. The use of red pigment is most characteristic of the burials of males with hunter-warrior inventory (Branč, graves 32, 55, 88, 182; Jelšovce, grave 444; Mýtina Nová Ves, graves 206, 262). It is less frequent in the graves of females (Branč, graves 41, 160; Výčapy-Opatovce, grave 160) and of children (Výčapy-Opatovce, grave 248; Čachtice, grave 8). Its presence in the graves of the Chlopice-Veselé culture and of the Nitra group may be connected with the influence of the east European region (Vladár 1973, p. 126).

The individual features observed at the burial grounds of the Nitra group document the important role of the after-life conceptions and ideas of the society of those times. They had caused that the deceased and his grave at the burial ground became the main focus of religious rituals and cultic practices. It has been confirmed by various observations that this ideological superstructure was influenced more and more by the social conditions prevailing in the patriarchal society of the period. We should mention here namely the internal differentiating trends, demonstrating the extraordinary status of some individuals even after their death. The extensive burial grounds of the Nitra group, some of them comprising 300—500 buried individuals, with a stabilized skeletal burial rite illustrate the existence of firmly determined conceptions and ideas of after-life, forming the basis of the burial ceremonies and customs of the period.

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