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RITUAL SKELETAL GRAVES AT THE LATE BRONZE AGE URNFIELD CEMETERY AT BRDO NEAR MANĚTÍN, PLZEŇ-NORTH DISTRICT

ABSTRACT — *Ritual skeletal burials, sometimes covered and lined with stones, appear only occasionally in the territory of the Knovíz culture. In exceptional cases their connection with contemporary cemeteries, with cremation burials, cannot be excluded. It was only during the excavation of the cemetery at Brdo near Manětín that the existence of ritual cemeteries in Bohemia was reliably proved. This casts a new light on the problem of ritual inhumations of the Knovíz culture.*

KEY WORDS: *Brdo near Manětín — Ritual skeleton grave — Cremation grave — Knovíz culture — Milavče culture — Urnfield culture.*

The Brdo locality is situated in an area forming the transition between the west Bohemian Milavče culture and the Knovíz culture of central and north-western Bohemia, up to now yielding only sporadic finds of flat urn burials (Pláně, Vrážné, Lhotka near Nekmír—Šaldová 1965, 3). An incidentally excavated grave of this type in Brdo had become the starting point for a systematic research. In an area of about 40—50 by 150 m 85 graves, in general belonging to the early Urnfield period were excavated, spanning from a period from Bronze Age D to the later phase of Hallstatt A. The prevailed cremation burials in urns, greatly varying in the arrangement of the grave and its marking with posts (holes). Among them there were several pit graves with dispersed cremation remains; five graves contained skeletal burials. The skeletal graves appeared exclusively in the western part of the cemetery being dispersed among the usual cremations. In view of the non-calcerous character of the soil in the locality unburnt bones have not been preserved. The presence of a skeleton burial was hence indicated by the arrangement of the grave as well as by a detailed phosphate analysis

with samples taken in several layers in a 10 by 10 cm grid (ing. Soudný).

Grave No. 25 (160—170 by 110 cm) oriented W—E had its longer sides lined with stones, disposed at regular intervals. At the shorter (eastern) side there was an amphora and a dish; a bronze pin lay obliquely at the centre. The phosphate analysis was positive.

Grave No. 68 oriented W—E was formed by a regular rectangular stone cist consisting of worked slate plates (of 75 by 60 cm), sunken into the subsoil and covered by a large plate and by a heap of stones. The cist was partitioned into two areas of equal size; the southern, containing originally the burial was paved with stones, the northern contained two vessels. The phosphate analysis yielded positive results for the southern area.

Grave No. 72 oriented SWS—NEN was covered by a large slate plate of rectangular shape (88 by 60 cm). The shallow grave pit contained no burial offerings; there were traces of wood, and the walls were partially lined with slate fragments. The phosphate analysis was positive.

Grave No. 75 oriented NW—SE, also without burial goods, formed by a rectangular pit (94 by 41 cm) with a stone stela along one of the shorter sides. The skeletal character of the burial is less evident in view of the missing offerings; no phosphate analysis has been performed.

Grave No. 78 oriented W—E, was covered with four large flat stones, placed at regular intervals in the centre of the grave. Along the circumference of the grave pit (216 by 65 cm) there were postholes, marking the ground-plan of a hut with a saddle roof measuring 370 by 140 cm. At the shorter eastern wall there was an amphora, a cup, and a dish.

Within the agglomeration of the skeletal graves there was a deep feature of rectangular ground-plan, with postholes along its longer walls and with a single large stone at its shorter western wall. It looked like a grave pit (W—E orientation) prepared for an adult. As the object lacks any finds and no phosphate analysis has been made, there is no positive proof that it was a skeletal burial.

According to the dimensions of the graves excavated at Brdo, most of them appear to have covered child burials. The spacious hut-like grave ("Totenhaus", Nr. 78) was an exception. Most graves were oriented W—E. Their characteristic feature is the lining of grave pits with stones; their arrangement, however, was individual in each of the graves. The ceramic offerings consist of 2—3 vessels. In one case the grave evidently contained no grave goods. Bronze appeared in a single case. As to their contents the graves do not differ from the urn graves of the same cemetery, but in some of the latter the number of vessels and bronze finds was larger than in the skeletal burials. According to a preliminary assessment the skeletal graves from Brdo can be dated to the foundation period of the necropolis.

In the first comprehensive treatment of the Knovíz skeletal burials V. Spurný (1950) stated, that out of the 150 then known cases ritual skeletal burials constituted a mere 10 %. Thanks to recent finds the number of skeletal burials found in various pits in living sites has greatly increased, which is not the case of ritual skeletal burials (Bouzek 1963, 67, note 44; Bouzek—Koutecký 1980). Special attention was paid to a group of five graves with stone lining ("cist-graves"), forming the basis for a historic interpretation (Bouzek 1981: Holubice, Kopisty, Lovosice, Žatec—Černovka, Žatec—waterworks— "Am Keil").

Only the seemingly biritual grave in Žatec "Am Keil" differs from the graves with stone lining by its large grave chamber, stones heaped over it, and by its rich equipment with pottery and bronze artifacts. It has links with other similarly arranged cremation graves from the surroundings of Žatec (Žatec—Macerka, Čeradice — Kytlicová 1988). The rest of the above mentioned group of five skeletal graves reminds of the usual structure and equipment found in urn graves. It is comparable not only to the skeletal graves at Brdo, but also to some ritual skeletal graves without stone lining (Máslovice, Drevníky, Chrástany—Spurný 1950; Bezděka—Bouzek 1962; Kytlicová 1988), and even to some ritual inhumations

in the so-called settlement pits (three graves in Prague—Hloubětín, Velké Přílepy — Spurný 1950, 16, notes 35—37). There is no substantial difference in the equipment with bronze artifacts in all above mentioned groups of ritual skeletal burials; most frequent are bronze pins, knives, and also personal ornaments of bronze (bracelets, armlets, necklaces), indicating that burials of females prevail.

In the Urnfield period, namely in its earlier phase, ritual skeletal burials appear over most of the territory in the western and northern part of Central Europe, in a belt covering Hessen and Rhineland, through Baden—Württemberg, Bavaria, up to the Saale basin and the region along the middle course of the Elbe River (according to a survey by Müller—Karpe 1980, 245, 254 sq., 267, 272). As to the frequency of their occurrence, equipment and arrangement there are well perceptible local differences. Characteristic of the Saale basin in Saxony (in the vicinity of Bohemia) are the so-called "Steinpackungsgräber", i.e. graves fully lined with stones and covered with stone plates (Agde 1935, 193). At the same time the so-called "Steinsetzungsgräber", i.e. graves with stone lining and pavement (Hennig 1970, 23), are most frequent in north-eastern Bavaria, also adjoining the Bohemian territory. These graves always appear on cemeteries alongside with similarly arranged cremation burials. Sometimes, there are also skeletal graves arranged in a different way; they either lack the stone pavement (Gundelsheim, graves Nr. 9, 10 — Hennig 1980, 115, 121, Abb. 16a, b), or the stone arrangement is fully missing (Gundelsheim, graves No. 3, 4, 6 — o.c. 116); some of them have spacious burial chambers with stones heaped over them (Mommendorf, grave No. 6 — o.c. 105); still others consist of stone cists (Schönbrunn — o.c. 125). From Franconia we know two finds of so-called "Totenhäuser" (Houses of the Dead). A further "Totenhaus" was discovered in the Saale region (Behringersdorfer-Forst, grave No. 12, Henfenfeld. Sendelbacher Weg, Rumpin — Hennig 1970/71, 26, note 14; Vollrath 1961/62, 66 sq., Taf. 8, 44). These graves contain posthole structures; the first of them, according to its dimensions, is a direct analogy of grave No. 78 from Brdo. The earliest east-Bavarian graves of the Bronze Age D period had W—E orientation, the N—S orientation appears later. This makes evident their connection with the skeletal graves in Brdo, oriented W—E and dated to the beginning of the Urnfield period (Br D). Their relation to East-Bavaria is underlined by the similar structure of the graves, and also by the fact that a closely related development of pottery and bronze inventory is well documented in the two neighbouring regions. The unique character of the biritual Brdo necropolis in the Bohemian territory has been probably caused by the fact that Knovíz cemeteries have not been investigated in sufficient detail. It cannot be ruled out that some of the incidentally discovered skeletal graves also come from contemporary urn cemeteries (Holubice, Žatec—Černovka, Drevníky, Třebušice).

In conclusion we can say that the skeleton burial rite was practiced, along with cremation, in

the region of the Knovíz and perhaps also Milavče culture. The presence of the skeleton rite there is in line with the fact that the two Bohemian cultural groups belonged to the sphere of Urnfield cultures north of the Alps. The arrangement of the graves is very close to that of the skeleton graves of the neighbouring east-Bavarian region, the only difference being that they represent a clear minority in the Bohemian cemeteries. The relative poorness of most Knovíz-type ritual skeletal graves and the local character of their inventory exclude the possibility that they cover individuals of western origin. In view of the fact that ritual skeleton burials appear from the early phase of the Urnfield period (Brdo, Kopisty), it remains to be answered what is the share of the preceding Tumulus culture in these burial customs: towards the close of the Middle Bronze Age we see a renaissance of the skeleton rite, many graves are lined with stones and are paved, or they are enclosed in a stone cist (Jílková 1961, 200; Čujanová—Jílková 1975, 74; Beneš 1959, 5 sq.; Plesl 1965, 501 sq.).

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