RITUAL SKELETAL GRAVES AT THE LATE BRONZE AGE URFIELD 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 Kruví 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 burials in Bohemia was reliably proved. This casts a new light on the problem of ritual inhumations of the Kruví culture.

KEY WORDS: Brdo near Manětín — Ritual skeleton grave — Cremation grave — Kruví culture — Mířevice culture — Urnfield culture.

The Brdo locality is situated in an area forming the transition between the west Bohemian Mířevice culture and the Kruví culture of central and northwestern Bohemia, up to now yielding only sporadic finds of flat urn burials (Plášť, Vražní, Lhota near Neholště, Selčová 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 Urfield period were excavated, spanning from a period from Bronze Age D to the later phase of Hallstatt A. The reprieved cremation burials in urns, greatly varying in the arrangement of the grave and its marking with posts (holes). Around 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-calcareous 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 (Fig. 83A, B).

Grave No. 29 (160—170 by 110 cm) oriented W—E had its longer side 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), sunk 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 (86 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.
Graves No. 75 orientated NW—SE, also without burial goods, formed by a rectangular pit (104 by 41cm) with a stone stela along one of the shorter sides. The skeletal character of the burial is bas evident in view of the missing findings; no phosphate analysis has been performed.

Grave No. 78 orientated 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 (216 by 65cm) there were postholes, marking the grave plan of a hut with a saddle roof measuring 370 by 140 cm. At the eastern shorter wall there was an amphora, a cup, and a dish.

Within the area of the grave a number of graves there was a deep feature of rectangular ground-plan, with postholes along its longer walls and with a large single stone along the 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 Hrodo, most of them appear to have covered child burials. The spatial butt-like grave ("Tobtenhaus", 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 offering consisted 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 grave do not differ from the 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 Hrodo can be dated to the formation period of the necropolis.

In the first comprehensive treatment of the Knovíz skeletal burials V. Sprunj (1959) stated, that out of the 150 then known cases ritual skeletal burials constituted a size 10%. Thanks to recent finds the number of skeletal burials found in various pits in living sites has increased; it is not the case of ritual skeletal burials (Bouzek 1963, 67, note 44; Bouzek—Koutek 1980). Special attention was paid to a group of five graves with stone lining ("cit-graves"), forming the basis for a historic interpretation (Bouzek 1981: Holubice, Kopisty, Lovonic, Zatec—Urchovka, Zatec-waterocks "Am Kell").

Only the seemingly ritual grave in Zatec "Am Kell" differs from the graves with stone lining by its large grave chamber, which being high (1.1m) by its rich equipment with pottery and bronze artifacts. It has links with other similarly arranged cremation graves from the surrounding regions (Bouzek—Masek, Ceradice—Kytírová 1988). The rest of the above mentioned group of five skeletal graves reminds of the usual structural arrangement of ritual urn graves. It is comparable not only to the skeletal graves at Brdo, but also to ritual skeletal graves without stone lining (Mladoziv, Deveníky, Chrudín—Sprunj 1959; Bělova—Bouzek 1962; Kytírová 1958), and even to some ritual inhumations in the tox in the so-called settlement pits (three graves in Prague—Hluboka, Ústí nad Labem Vížmík Sprunj 1959, 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 various ornamental objects of bronze (bracelets, armlets, necklaces). Only the burial of Beaubois and the graves in the Urnfield period, namely in its earlier phase, ritual skeletal burials appear over most of the territory of the western and central Europe. With the Iron Central Europe, in a belt covering Hessen and Rhineland, through Boden-Württemberg, Bavaria, up to the Black sea 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.d. graves fully lined with stones and covered with stone plates (Agile 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-easterm Bavaria, also adjoining the Bohemian territory. These graves always appear on cemeteries along with similarly arranged cremation burials. Sometimes, there are also skeletal graves appearing in a similar way; they either lack the stone pavement (Gundelsheim, graves Nr. 9, 10—Hennig 1980, 115, 121, Abb. 86, a, b), or even the stone lining 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 Hrodo can be dated to the formation period of the necropolis.

The presence of the Knovíz skeletal sites 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 skeletal graves of the neighbouring east-Bavarian region, the only differ-