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THE BURIAL RITE IN THE WEST BOHEMIAN BARROW REGION IN THE BRONZE AGE

ABSTRACT — *From the Middle Bronze Age to the beginning of the La Tène period south-western Bohemia was characterized by ethnic continuity and by an uninterrupted cultural development with continuous transitions comprising the following cultures: the Barrow culture of the Middle Bronze Age (Reinecke BzB-C) — the Milavče culture (BzD-HaA) — the Nynice group (HaB) — the Hallstatt Tumulus culture (HaC-D) — the early La Tène culture (LtA). Almost the entire span of time mentioned above was characterized by barrow burials, with cremation burials prevailing; skeletal burials appear in limited numbers at the beginning and towards the end of this period, spanning more than one thousand years — in the Tumulus culture of the Middle Bronze Age and in the Late Hallstatt period to the early La Tène graves. (Besides a number of recently excavated graves we obtain safe data on the type and mode of burials from the Plzeň region, in the beginning of the 20th century carefully excavated and described by F. X. Franc. The group comprises 241 prevalingly barrow graves with 370 find assemblages and burials — Franc 1890; 1906).*

KEY WORDS: *South-west Bohemia — Middle Bronze Age Tumulus culture — Milaveč and Nynice groups (1500 — 800 B.C.) — Barrow and flat graves — Cremation and skeletal burials.*

In the Tumulus culture of the Middle Bronze Age one barrow often covered several burials, both cremation and skeletal burials, side by side. Out of 139 excavated barrows F. X. Franc found in 48 barrows 128 burials. Starting with the earliest period of the Tumulus culture both skeletal and cremation burials were used. This is proved by a cremation burial in a pit, in a settlement of transition horizon A2/B1 in Meclov-Březí and cremation and skeletal graves of the Early Tumulus stage (Čujanová—Jílková 1967, 412; 1971, 685). Birituality lasted till the youngest stage of the Tumulus culture and disappeared only in the following Tumulus—Milavče horizon (Čujanová—Jílková 1977, 111). As regards cremation burials, the cremation proper never took place in the area of the barrow (the fireplaces found in the barrows containing cremation and skeletal burials cannot be regarded as remains of cremation

pyres) and only a part of the bone fragments were buried. Inside the barrow they were put on the original ground level and were dispersed among the grave goods, never in the vessel, and as demonstrated by anthropological analyses they sometimes belonged to several individuals (Čujanová—Jílková 1964, 19—20; 1977, 85).

Skeletal burials appeared rarely. But we should take into account that the soil of western Bohemia disintegrates the bones so perfectly that they sometimes appear only as dark stripes of soil disappearing after drying. As a rule only parts of the skull, namely teeth, the long bones and bones in contact with bronze objects have been preserved (F. X. Franc listed preserved fragments of bones in 30 burials out of 219, and at least in 10 others he determined the position of the skeleton according to the anatomical siting of the grave goods in rich burials —

namely of metal ornaments of the garment, jewels, weapons). Besides the situation of the inventory (Čtrnáct 1950, 371) the presence of a disintegrated skeleton may be determined today by analysing the phosphate content of the soil. We may rightly presume that this method would increase the number of skeletal burials in graves where no burial has been found (in Franc's researches full three quarters — 166 burials), i.e. those, in which the lack of metal grave goods made it impossible to determine the situation of the disintegrated skeleton. Therefore the disintegration of skeletal remains should be regarded as a more probable cause of the absence of burials than the presumed symbolic graves — cenotaphs (Stloukal 1968, 333). But we cannot fully dismiss the damaging and robbing of burials — as related by Franc — on putting in the ground further burials, namely those belonging to contemporary or younger cultures. We should therefore take into account that the number of skeletal burials was much higher than hitherto believed. The orientation of skeletons placed on an even floor in supine position, with the limbs stretched is not uniform. V. Čtrnáct judges from the position of the head from west through north to east — always facing south — that it followed the orbit of the sun. E. Čujanová judges from the composition of the grave goods in rich funerals that the skeletal burial in the early and middle stage of the Tumulus culture was a privilege of women, while men — in her view — were usually cremated. In the younger period this proportion reversed, prevailed skeletal burials of males with weapons (Čujanová—Jílková 1977, 106, 111). The material culture and burial customs of the Milavče culture in the early period of the Urnfield cultures build upon the Barrow culture. Burials are still covered with a barrow, but in the younger period appear also flat urnfield graves. They appear mostly in territories hitherto not settled, on the north-eastern and eastern fringe of the settled region (Šaldová 1965, 3—4, 91). After a transitory biritual period we have exclusively cremation burials and the mode of putting the remains in the grave changes with the chronological development of the inventory (Rybová—Šaldová 1958, 407, 410, Fig. 50). One of the characteristic features of the transitory Tumulus-Milavče horizon, coinciding with the rise of a new culture, is the dispersion of charred bones over a comparatively large elongated space, corresponding roughly to the area needed for the burial of a non-cremated body; we can regard it as an after-effect of the tradition of skeletal burials of the Tumulus culture. The pottery was added to these burials smashed, in the form of scattered sherds, or their agglomerations (Čtrnáct 1950, 373; Šaldová 1976, 490, 492). In the developed Milavče culture we can see a transition from not too numerous graves with bones placed in small pits to the prevailing urn burials. The big urn originally placed on the same level as the other vessels, in the youngest period was partially sunk into the ground and was covered with a dish or with a flat stone. The bones in these vessels are in most cases larger fragments, and they are more numerous than in the previous or following periods. Nevertheless in the Milavče culture also

appear graves without any burial (in the excavations realized by Franc: 19 out of 55 burials).

The picture of the uniform cremation rite of the Milavče culture is changing with the new finds — the ritual flat skeletal burials with the inventory of Old-to-Middle stage from Radčice near Plzeň (D. Baštová), and from Brdo near Manětín (O. Kytlicová). Their existence there has a similar unique position as the rare ritual skeletal burials in the central and north Bohemian Knovíz culture (Hrala 1973, 122; Bouzek—Koutecký 1980, 406) and also in the adjacent related Urnfield cultures in the south-west, namely in Upper and Central Franconia (Hennig 1970, 21, 24).

In the younger period of the Urnfield culture — in the Nynice group — alongside with changes in the material culture and in the way of building the settlements (fortified hill settlement) changes also the form of the grave, but the cremation rite remains. Burial customs can be followed only in two known burial sites — in Nynice and in Radčice (D. Baštová). At the Nynice burial ground with its 64 excavated graves we can see to a certain degree a parallelism of changes in the shape of the grave and in the chronological development of the inventory. The barrow grave of the previous periods is replaced by a flat grave, but its most frequent shape had been derived from the barrow structure. Characteristic of the older phase of the burial site are burials outlined by partial circular stone lining and by a shallow dish-shaped pit, the grave proper (31). The original cover of clay or stones did not exceed the circumference outlined by the stones. Related with the above graves are the graves in the form of a small pit covered with a single large flat stone (9) and graves with inventory of younger phase, placed on level, in the soil without external marking (12), or under a larger heap of stones (4); 8 graves were disturbed by later interference (Šaldová 1965, 68—74, 94).

The cremation did not take place inside the grave, but its remains together with charcoal fragments from the pyre were filled into one or more vessels already prepared in the grave, together with the grave goods and were scattered in its surrounding (34), dumped into the pit (15) or were simply spilled over the whole area of the grave (10); no bones were found in the five disturbed graves. 45 burials were determined anthropologically (besides 14 non-determinable and 5 disintegrated, namely 5 males, 7 females, 6 children or adolescents, 4 females or children and 23 adult individuals). Compared with the Milavče burials very conspicuous is the small, almost negligible amount of small crushed bone fragments (78.3 % of them below 50 g), their small dimensions (90 %) and in most cases their perfect, almost chalky cremation (70 %). J. Chochol concludes from these facts that only a part of the cremated skeleton was buried, perhaps only a symbolic part (Chochol 1969, 628, 636). But instead of the theory of symbolic burials I am rather inclined to support the view of M. Stloukal that the amount of bones depended namely on the care with which they were collected from the pyre, but also on the

quality of cremation and on the effect of the soil in which they were buried (Stloukal 1968, 333, 334).

In the group of anthropologically determined burials the remains of males were more often filled into a single vessel, or were dumped into a grave in bare soil. The remains of females were put into several vessels, and into graves with circular lining. The bones of children were filled both into vessels or put into pits; the bones in pit graves belonged to adult individuals. But the small number of determined burials makes it impossible to draw general conclusions. Another factor making it difficult to draw such conclusions is the fact that the arrangement of the grave and the mode of burial depend to a certain extent on the chronological development. We can state only that the burials of males, females and children appear all over the area of the burial ground, so do also urn and pit burials of various external arrangement. Neither can be recognised any system in allotting the individual grave sites according to their inventory with regards to the time phases (Šaldová 1965, Fig. 50—52; 1969, 644).

Alongside with the cultural and ethnic continuity of the West Bohemian barrow region from the Bronze Age to the beginning of the La Tène period we have a continuity also in the burial rite. A characteristic feature of the period spanning from the Early and Late Hallstatt Tumulus culture till the beginning of the early La Tène period was the burying of the dead under barrows, and towards the end of the period also into flat graves, alongside with cremation burials in urns and also into small pits. Very few skeletal burials have been found from the period (in Franc's excavations 14 out of 96) while the contemporary adjacent and related cultures — the Central Bohemian and Bavarian — changed to the burial of non-cremated bodies.

As far as non-ritual burials of incomplete skeletons in settlement pits and the anthropophagy connected with them are concerned, found in the related Knovíz culture in North-Western and Central Bohemia (Bouzek-Koutecký 1980), traces of such practices have not been discovered neither in the West Bohemian Tumulus culture, nor in the Milavče culture. One of the reasons may be the fact that so far no larger settlement complexes have been excavated in the area; another not negligible factor, making it difficult to find skeletons even at settlements, is the above-mentioned aggressive character of the soil, causing disintegration of the non-cremated bones. However, a cremation burial in a pit at a settlement of the pre-barrow horizon shows that there were burials at the settlements from the very beginning of the cultural development of the Bronze Age. The recently discovered ritual skeletal burials belonging to Milavče culture also suggest that these special Bronze Age burial practices, i.e. the non-ritual skeletal burials at the settlements connected with anthropophagy may have existed also in South-Western Bohemia.

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