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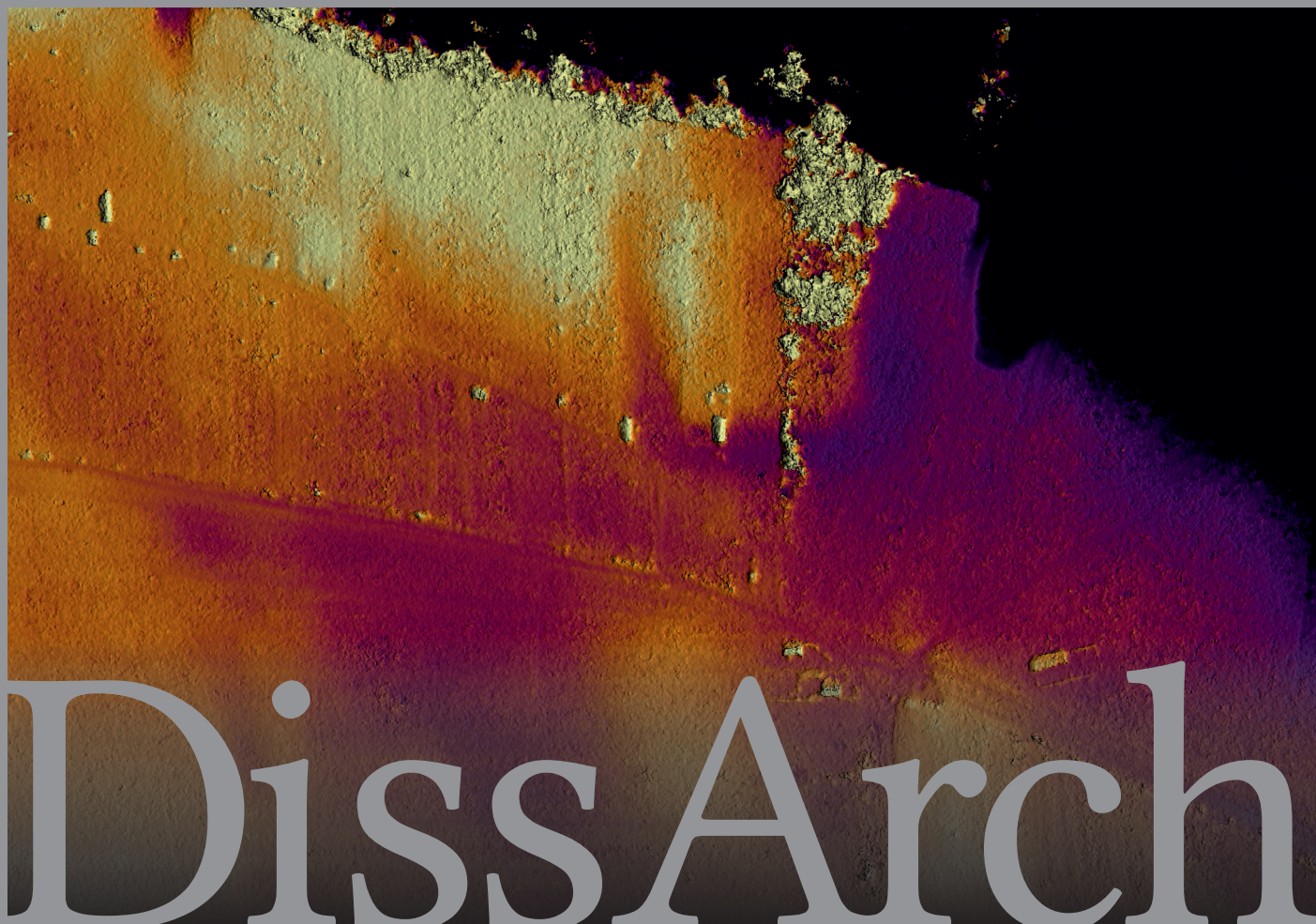

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Cultural connections between the Eastern European steppe region and the Carpathian Basin in the 5th–7th centuries AD

The origin of the Early Avar Period population of the Trans-Tisza region

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Abstract: Extended, completed review of the theses of the PhD dissertation completed under the supervision of Tivadar Vida and submitted to the Archaeological Doctoral Programme, Doctoral School of History, ELTE Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, in 2023.

The dissertation's primary objective was to investigate the origins of the population that settled in the Trans-Tisza region in the 6th–7th centuries AD. According to prior studies, these populations, unlike the 'Inner Asian Avars', may have arrived in the Carpathian Basin from the Eastern European steppe. My research focused on burial practices, comparing the graves discovered in the two regions using quantitative and qualitative methods. The dissertation also includes a comprehensive presentation and analysis of the East European steppe material from the second half of the 5th to the middle third of the 7th century AD.

Keywords: Trans-Tisza region, Eastern European steppe, Early Avar Period, burial rites, migration

Introduction

The multi-ethnic character of the population of the Carpathian Basin in the Early Avar Period has long been studied. In addition to communities with connections to Inner Asia, which may be referred to as 'Avar' for convenience, groups of Merovingian and Late Antique origins and 'nomadic' groups from the steppes of Eastern Europe could be identified. The legacy of the latter has been examined in detail by Dezső Csallány and later by Gábor Lőrinczy. They pointed out that the burial rituals of these 'nomads' differed the most from the funerary practice of other people in the Avar Khaganate. The 'nomadic' rite was characterised by a predominance of NE–SW and E–W orientations, while W–E and N–S oriented graves were extremely rare. In addition to simple shaft graves, graves with shoulders along the long sides, graves with a sidewall niche, and graves with an end wall shaft are also frequent in their record. Animal offerings, generally separated in the grave from the deceased, can be considered common. Most typically, only the skulls and leg bones of horses, cattle, and small ruminants were buried, implying that originally, only the flayed skin or hide of the animal was laid in the grave. Complete horse skeletons, on the other hand, are highly uncommon. Pottery vessels and the most popular meat dish, sheep rump, were always placed near the skull (Fig. 1). The two researchers also highlighted the prevalence of of the so-called mask-decorated or heraldic belt fittings.[1]

1 Csallány 1934, 211; Csallány 1939, 132–133; Lőrinczy 1992a, 165; Lőrinczy 1998, 344.

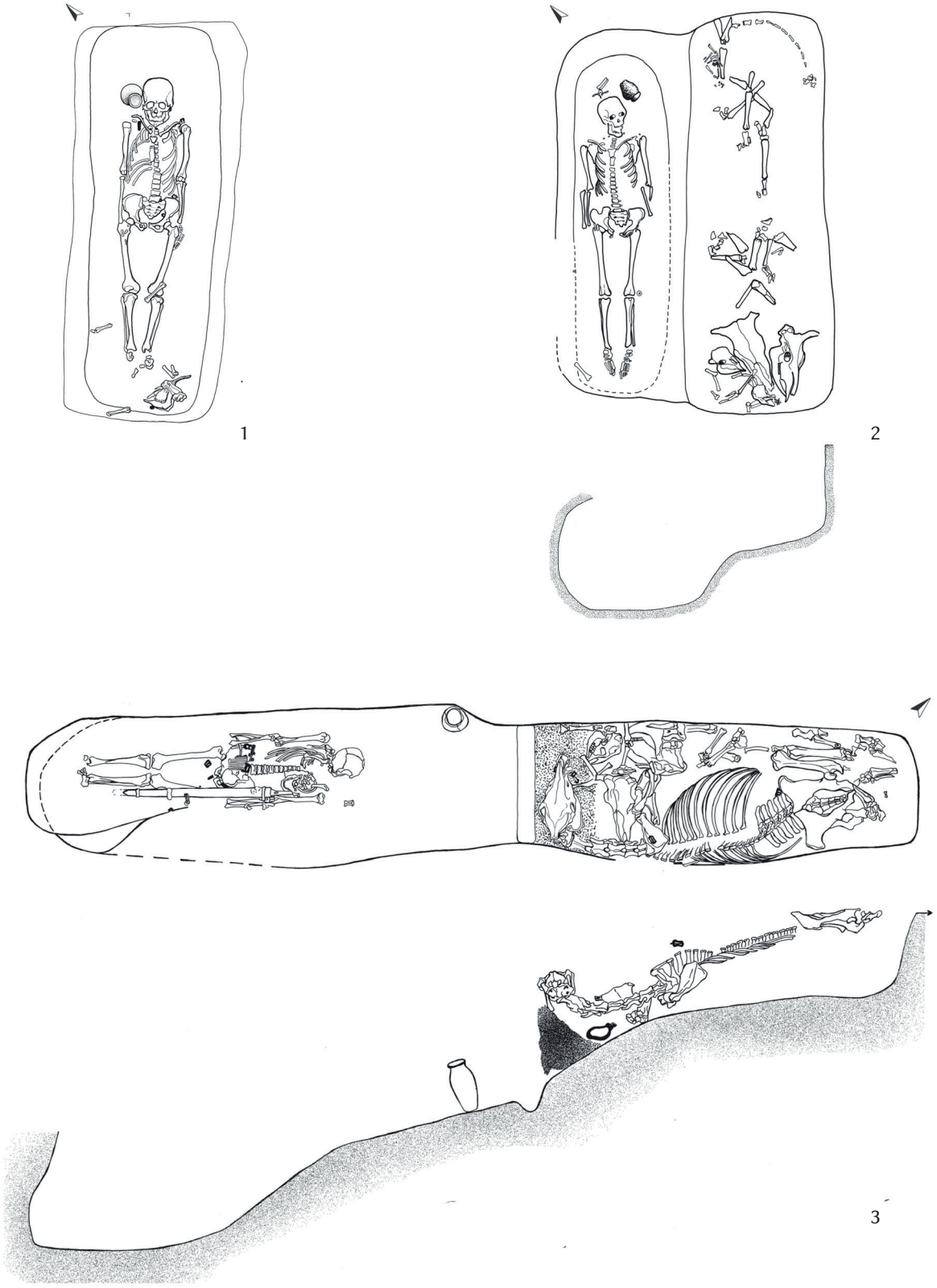


Fig. 1. Typical burials of the Trans-Tisza Region from Szegvár-Oromdűlő. 1 – Grave 165, 2 – Grave 130, 3 – Grave 100 (after Lőrinczy 2020)

The idea of this group's Eastern European steppe origin appeared first in the works of Dezső Csallány, although Péter Somogyi elaborated on it later.[2] More recently, the Eastern European connections of an increasing number of burial rite elements have been discovered.[3] In my dissertation, I sought to answer the question of how far the Early Avar Period population of the Trans-Tisza region can be traced back in the archaeological record of the steppe and how the environment of the Carpathian Basin influenced the material culture and ideology of this group. I paid particular attention to specifying the extent to which the internal transformation affected the burial customs of this group. Therefore, I concentrated on two regions: the Carpathian Basin and the Eastern European steppe zone. I examined 1,015 graves from Hungary and the surrounding areas and studied burials, sacrificial assemblages, and stray finds from a hundred different sites in Russia, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan.[4] The periods in focus were in Eastern Europe between the second half of the 5th and the second third of the 7th century AD and in the Carpathian Basin between AD 568 and the last third of the 7th century AD, i.e. most of the Early Avar Period. I attempted to outline similarities and variations in burial practices using quantitative, statistical, and qualitative methods. Since the material culture of the two regions was affected by different influences, I performed a detailed comparative analysis of the object types, focusing solely on the record of the Eastern European steppe.[5]

Theoretical background

The dissertation discusses migration and ethnic identification. The latter is a highly controversial topic; in recent decades, particularly in German archaeology, many have voiced concerns about whether the ethnicities mentioned in written sources can be identified by archaeological means.[6] Some critics of the so-called 'Freiburg school' argue that this trend does not consider the results of post-processual archaeology.[7] The concept of *habitus*, developed by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, can be useful in studying ethnicity. *Habitus* is the part of *doxa* (the ideas, beliefs, and practices accepted by the society) internalised by the individual, i.e. it is a personal behavioural pattern emerging from it.[8] Seeing culture as an open system, the model focuses on the actions rather than the drives behind them and, most importantly, on change, which can occur slowly, almost imperceptibly, or radically.[9]

The *habitus* theory has been successfully applied in the research on migration. As a new, unfamiliar environment represents potential risks for the community, shared knowledge, the basis of group identity, becomes especially crucial.[10] Simultaneously, adapting to changing circumstances may be critical for the survival of the community. Stefan Burmeister believes that material culture patterns can be used to confirm migrations and classifies cultural segments into two categories, external and internal, based on their function in expressing identity. The *habitus* concept can be used to interpret the internal domain. The heritage of the communities in motion was a kind of community

2 Csallány 1934, 211–212; Somogyi 1987, 149.

3 Gulyás 2015.

4 The investigation of the 7th-century AD elite, also known as the so-called Mala Pereshchepina circle, was not the subject of the dissertation because a relatively new detailed analysis is available on the topic (Komar 2006), and it is not really relevant to our main questions and, thus, a detailed analysis of the related find group would have stretched the framework of this work.

5 As the Eastern European absolute chronology is extremely controversial, I omitted the more precise dating of individual object types.

6 Brather 2004.

7 Curta 2007; Curta 2011.

8 Bourdieu 1977.

9 Nilsson Stutz 2013, 5–7.

10 Naum 2012, 94–95.

awareness: a body of knowledge passed down through generations, remaining unchanged or only changing slowly in the process. On the other hand, the external domain is that of all interactions with the environment. As the survival of a community has been heavily influenced by their relationship with their neighbours, it was critical to embrace signals expressing diverse positions of common people and the elite in the regional hierarchy.[11] Most burial customs belong to the internal domain; only a few elements of the funerary rite, such as the offering of complete horse skeletons, are displays for the outside world.[12] In contrast, most grave finds are elements of social representation. Creolisation, i.e. cultural development through the amalgamation of diverse elements in a heterogenous population, occurs, even if only to a limited extent, in the multi-ethnic 6th–7th-century AD Avar Khaganate, as reflected by the unification in specific segments of the material culture, including weaponry and belt sets.[13]

Burial customs, like rites of passage in general, help to strengthen the bonds within the community.[14] The various funerary rituals practised in the Trans-Tisza Region in the Early Avar Period may indicate that funerals were particularly important events for the communities, and the related series of actions was influenced heavily by the traditions passed down through generations.[15] Therefore, I concentrated my dissertation on burial traditions rather than material culture.

The Early Avar Period population of Eastern European steppe origin

Our knowledge of the Early Avar Period population of Eastern European origin of the Carpathian Basin has improved significantly due to recent studies. One of the most intriguing results is that such groups did not settle only in the Trans-Tisza Region, but similar graves can also be found in south-eastern Transdanubia (Fig. 2). Their communities continued existing cemeteries at Szekszárd-Bogyiszlói út and Kölked-Feketekapu site B, while the cemetery at Babarc-Mérnöskégi telep was most likely established by communities moving there from the Trans-Tisza Region.[16] As a result, the previously used term 'the Early Avar Period population of the Trans-Tisza Region' is, in my opinion, no longer acceptable.

Latest excavation results allow for specifying the burial practices characteristic of the population of Eastern European steppe origin. Previous studies highlighted the presence of isolated burials and the vast number of cemeteries with only a few graves.[17] Recently, more and more so-called 'low-intensity burial grounds' have come to light where the few burials were scattered tens if not hundreds, of meters apart (Fig. 3).[18] In the last decade, two sites with circular trenches or ditches consisting of straight sections around certain graves were unearthed (Fig. 4.1–2).[19] The using of improved excavation methods led to the discovery of pits between the graves in some cemeteries, containing, in addition to animal bones and potsherds, small metal finds, including jewellery items and tools. As these sites usually do not contain contemporary settlement features, the pits and their assemblages may be understood as a kind of funerary offering.[20]

11 Burmeister 2000, 542.

12 Gulyás 2021a, 141.

13 For the process of creolisation, see Fahlander 2007; Stockhammer 2013.

14 van Gennep 1960.

15 Gulyás 2021a, 141–142.

16 Gulyás 2023; Gallina et al. 2022a.

17 Lőrinczy 1996, 184–185.

18 Lőrinczy – Rácz 2014, 166–167; Cseh – Varga 2017, 459, 2. tábla A; Gáll 2017, 230, Pl. 4.

19 Benedek – Marcsik 2017, 382–384; Gallina et al. 2022b, 313.

20 Madaras 2004, 341; Benedek – Marcsik 2017, 385–386; Gallina et al. 2022b, 308–313.

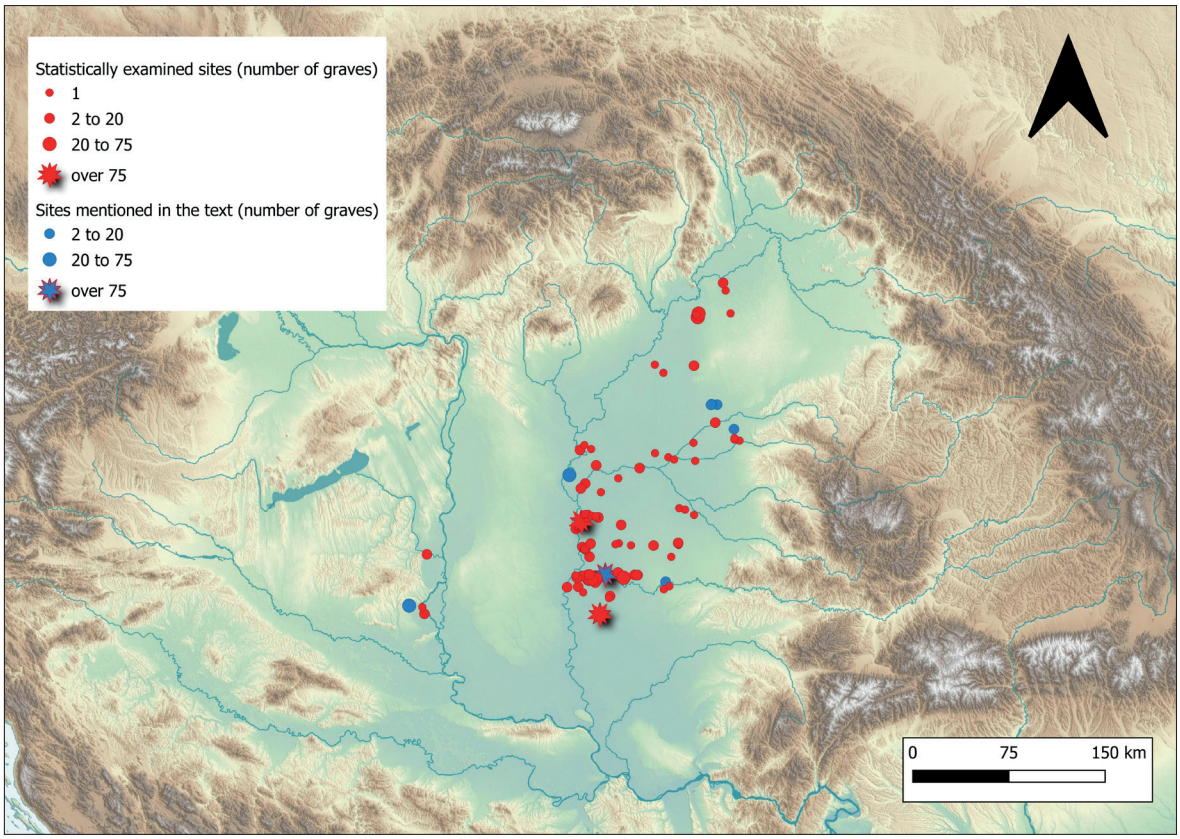


Fig. 2. Distribution of Pontic steppe-style burials in the Carpathian Basin

In connection with Szegvár-Oromdűlő, Gábor Lőrinczy hypothesised—based on the amount of soil removed from the grave pits with a sidewall niche or an end wall shaft and the considerable distance between some graves—that originally, some graves may have had small mounds above them.[21] Due to a significant increase in case numbers, we also got a more accurate picture today of the structure of the graves with a sidewall niche or an end wall shaft. More and more unusual graves with an end wall shaft have been discovered where the shaft was constructed at the opposite end of the grave than common, and the corpse was slotted in head-first.[22] The structure of the graves with a sidewall niche is fixed, as the niche was always dug into the left side of the main shaft.[23]

While previous research emphasised the spatial separation of the deceased and the animal offering within the grave as a trait characteristic of the funerary practice of communities of Eastern European steppe origin, recently, an increasing number of burials have been discovered in which the flayed sheepskin was put immediately by the head or feet of the interred (Fig. 1.1).[24] The lack of spatial separation was also presumed in the case of flayed horses in a few cases; however, the only conclusive evidence thus far is the isolated burial at Biharkeresztes-Lencséshát (Fig. 5.1).[25] While previous research focused mainly on burials with partial animal offerings, a critical analysis of burials, including complete horse skeletons, has recently been carried out (Fig. 6.3–4).[26] Burials with dog remains have also been listed, although their comprehensive analysis has yet to be completed

21 Lőrinczy 2017, 156.

22 Cseh – Varga 2017, 451.

23 Lőrinczy 2017, 143–144. For the exceptions, see Lőrinczy 2022, 36.

24 Gulyás – Lőrinczy 2020.

25 Lőrinczy 2015, 159.

26 Gulyás et al. 2021a.

(Fig. 7.2–3).[27] The classification based on the relative position of the horse harness within the grave is a new component in the analysis of horse burials, reflecting the increasing number of recently discovered graves where the stirrups and the horse bit were in a non-functional position.[28] Another result of this increase has been the realisation that sheep rump was a common food offering (Fig. 8.2). Its occurrences were rarely documented in earlier excavations, and little attention was paid to collecting and identifying animal bones in the first half of the 20th century.[29]

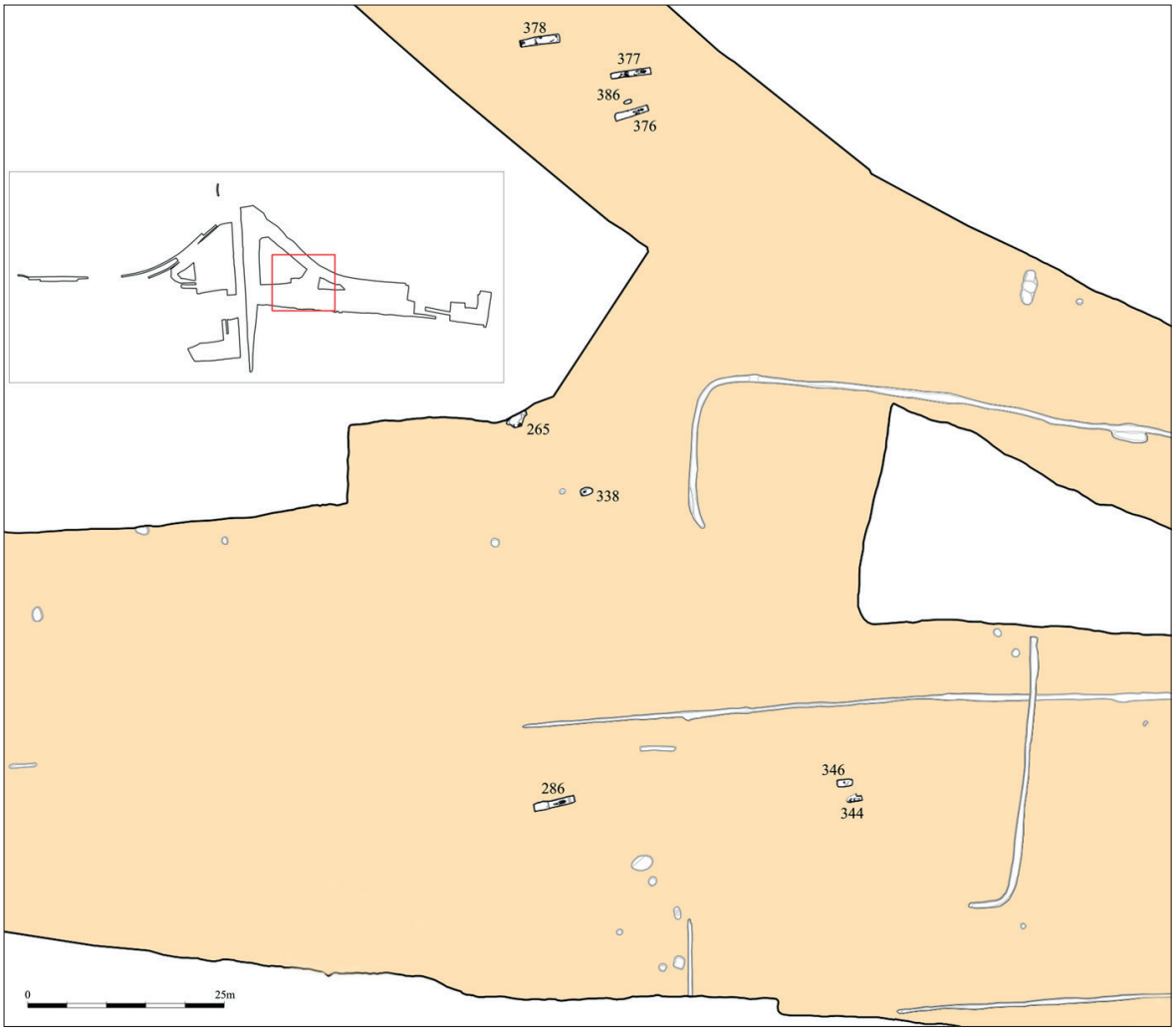


Fig. 3. Apátfalva-Nagyút-dűlő, a 'low-intensity burial ground' in the Trans-Tisza Region (after Cseh – Varga 2017)

Traditionally, Early Avar Period communities of eastern European steppe origin have been identified by their specific burial customs; however, several object types can also be exclusively or mostly associated with them. One of these is Deszk-type pendants, which are known solely from the Maros Valley and Szegvár-Oromdűlő (Fig. 9.1).[30] Likewise, Hajdúszoboszló-type pendants are distinctive to the Trans-Tisza Region, with only one exception known from eastern Transdanubia (Fig. 9.2–5).[31] Although mask-decorated belt fittings are known from the entire Carpathian Basin in

27 Balogh 2015, 46–48.

28 Lőrinczy – Straub 2005a, 140–141; Lőrinczy – Rácz 2014, 174–175.

29 Gulyás et al. 2019.

30 Lőrinczy 1991, 136–137; Balogh 2018, 27, Fig. 2.3–4.

31 Garam 2001, 39–40.

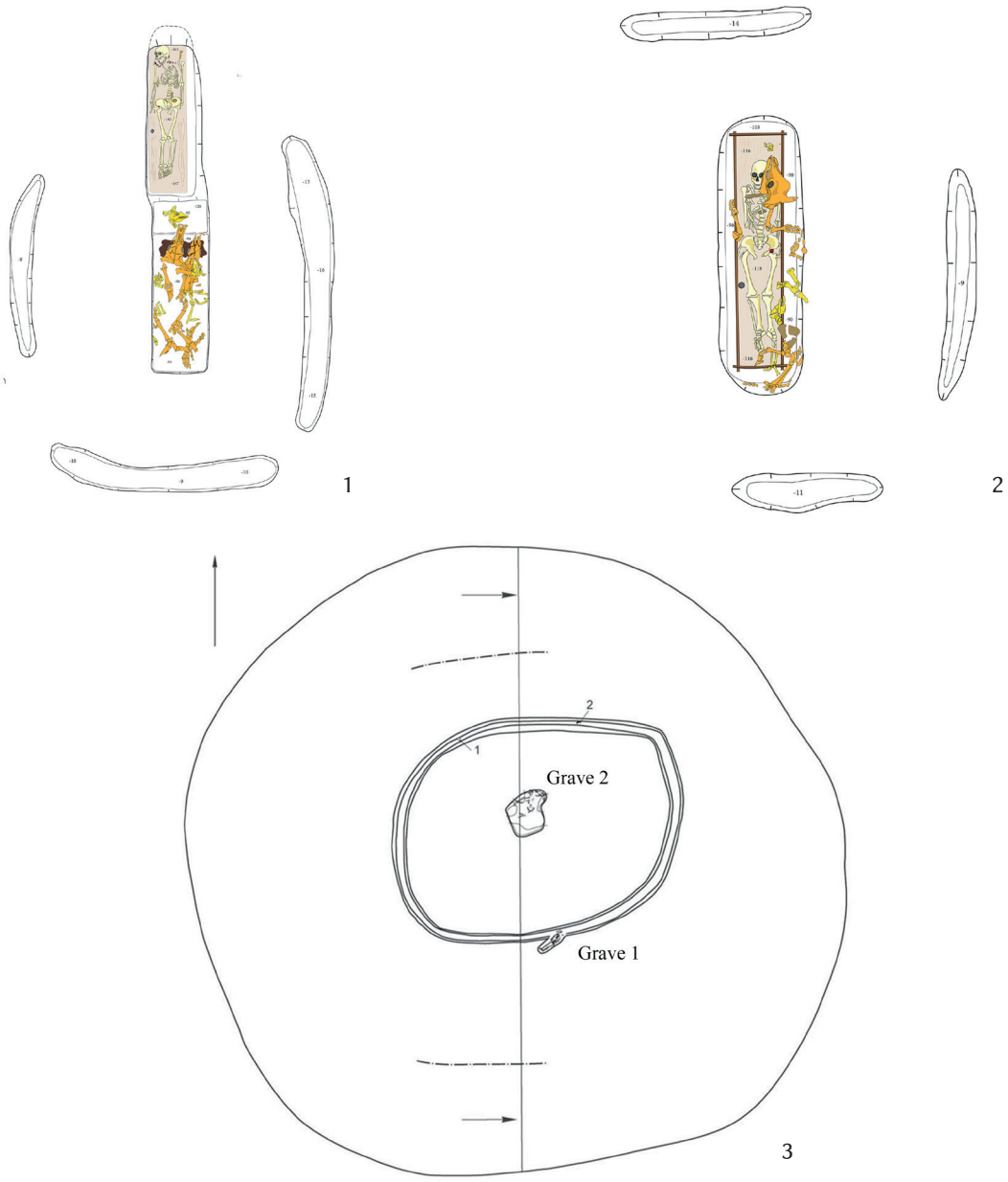


Fig. 4. Burials with perimeter ditches. 1 – Grave 24 of Kövegy-Nagy-földek, 2 – Grave 12 of Kövegy-Nagy-földek, 3 – Mound 4 at Lebedi–IV (1–2 – after Benedek – Marcsik 2017, 3 – after Skarbovenko – Lifanov 2012)

the Early Avar Period, they have only been found in burials of people of Eastern European origin decorating horse harnesses or footwear (Fig. 9.7–11).[32] The isolated burial at Szentes-Lapistó and Grave 33 of Szegvár-Oromdűlő contained, besides the usual elements of horse harness, chain mail fragments which, based on their position within the grave and Eastern European analogies, could have been attached to the front side of the saddle (Fig. 9.13).[33] Finally, funnel-necked vessels with paint run patterns on their shoulder should also be mentioned as characteristic of the Trans-Tisza Region (Fig. 10.1–2).[34]

32 Balogh 2004, 255. For a reconstruction of the findings from Szentes-Lapistó, see Gulyás 2021b, 155. For the footwear, see Lőrinczy 1991, 138–141.

33 Gulyás 2021b.

34 Vida 2022, 516.

Szegvár-type earrings with pyramid pendants (Fig. 9.6) and toilet utensils, primarily slotted spoons (Fig. 9.10), are common additions to burials of females on the sites studied but also occur in the record of other Early Avar Period groups in the Carpathian Basin.[35] Graves of males contain more frequently double-edged swords without crossguards than in the 'Meroving' and 'Avar' communities.[36]

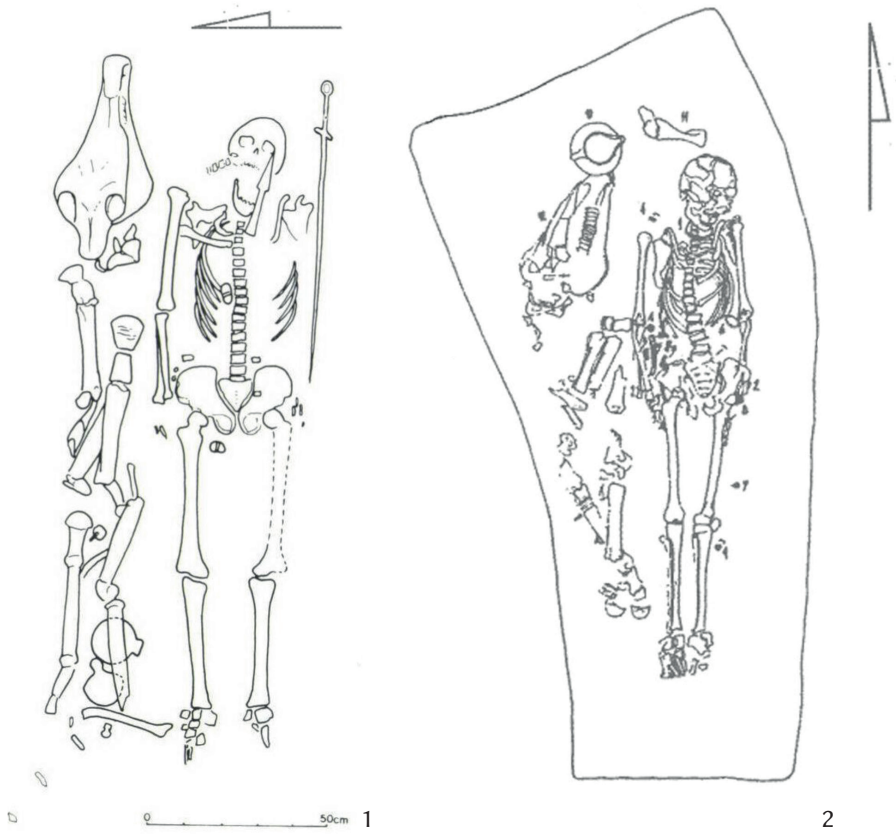


Fig. 5. Horse hides not separated in the grave from the deceased. 1 – Biharkeresztes-Lencséshát, 2 – Grave 1 of Mound 8 at Staronizhesteblievsky (1: after Mesterházy 1987; 2: after Atavin 1996)

Having been heavily influenced by its environment, the material culture of the group under study is a blend of numerous components. The best analogies of certain object types and rites are known from Inner Asia. These are possibly linked with the Avars, but some could also be known in the Eastern European steppe. Such a custom is, for example, the placing of rows of lamellae in the grave, which István Bóna interpreted as an eastern element in the Avar culture (Fig. 11.1),[37] and certain carved antler object types, such as girth fasteners (Fig. 11.4–5) and baton or whip ends, the latter popular in Transdanubia in the 6th–7th centuries AD (Fig. 11.2–3).[38] Stirrups, a type of good chronological value according to Gábor Lőrinczy, were far less common in graves of this region. Lőrinczy believes they were added to graves from the beginning of the 7th century AD as a result of an external, most likely 'Avar' influence.[39]

35 Balogh 2014, 106–107; Lőrinczy – Straub 2005b, 135.

36 Csiky 2016, 164.

37 Bóna 1979, 45.

38 For their distribution in the Trans-Tisza region, see Ranisavljev 2007, Tab. 36.1; Lőrinczy 2020, 419, 55. kép 3. Based on the funerary rite, Grave 350 of Szekszárd-Bogyiszlói út was also established by a community of eastern European steppe origin; it contained a baton end (Rosner 1999, 190, Taf. 24.13).

39 Lőrinczy 1996, 185; Lőrinczy 2017, 161. Stirrups are very rare in 6th–7th-century burials in the Eastern European steppe (Khrissimov 2014).

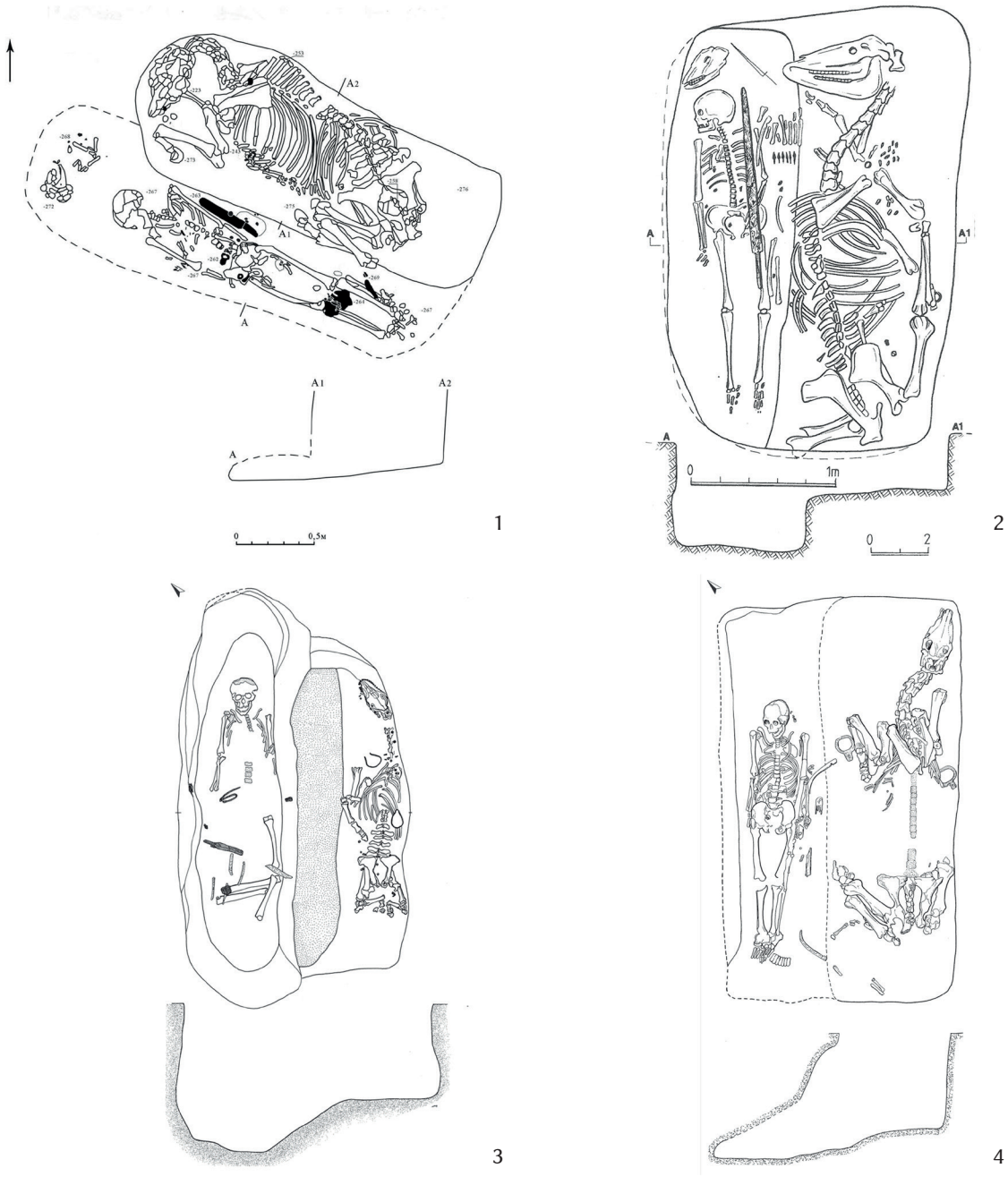


Fig. 6. Burials with complete horse skeletons. 1 – Grave 6 of Mound 1 at Greki–I, 2 – Grave 5 of Mound 12 at Portovoe, 3 – Grave 333 of Szegvár-Oromdűlő, 4 – Grave 930 of Szegvár-Oromdűlő (after Gulyás et al. 2021a)

The persistence of Gepids in the Avar Period in the Tisza Region is corroborated by both written and archaeological evidence.[40] However, only a few object types in the burials of communities of eastern European steppe origin indicate contact between the two groups. An exceptional example is the shield boss discovered in a burial at Szentes-Derekegyházi oldal (Fig. 12.3).[41] Similarly, combs are associated with Avar Period 'Germans'; such artefacts were found in only five graves (Fig. 12.1–2).[42] Besides, 7th-century AD graves may, including some of the ones in focus, contain several

40 Kiss 2015, 199, 216–244.

41 Csallány 1939, 2. tábla 18.

42 Lőrinczy 2022, 113–114.

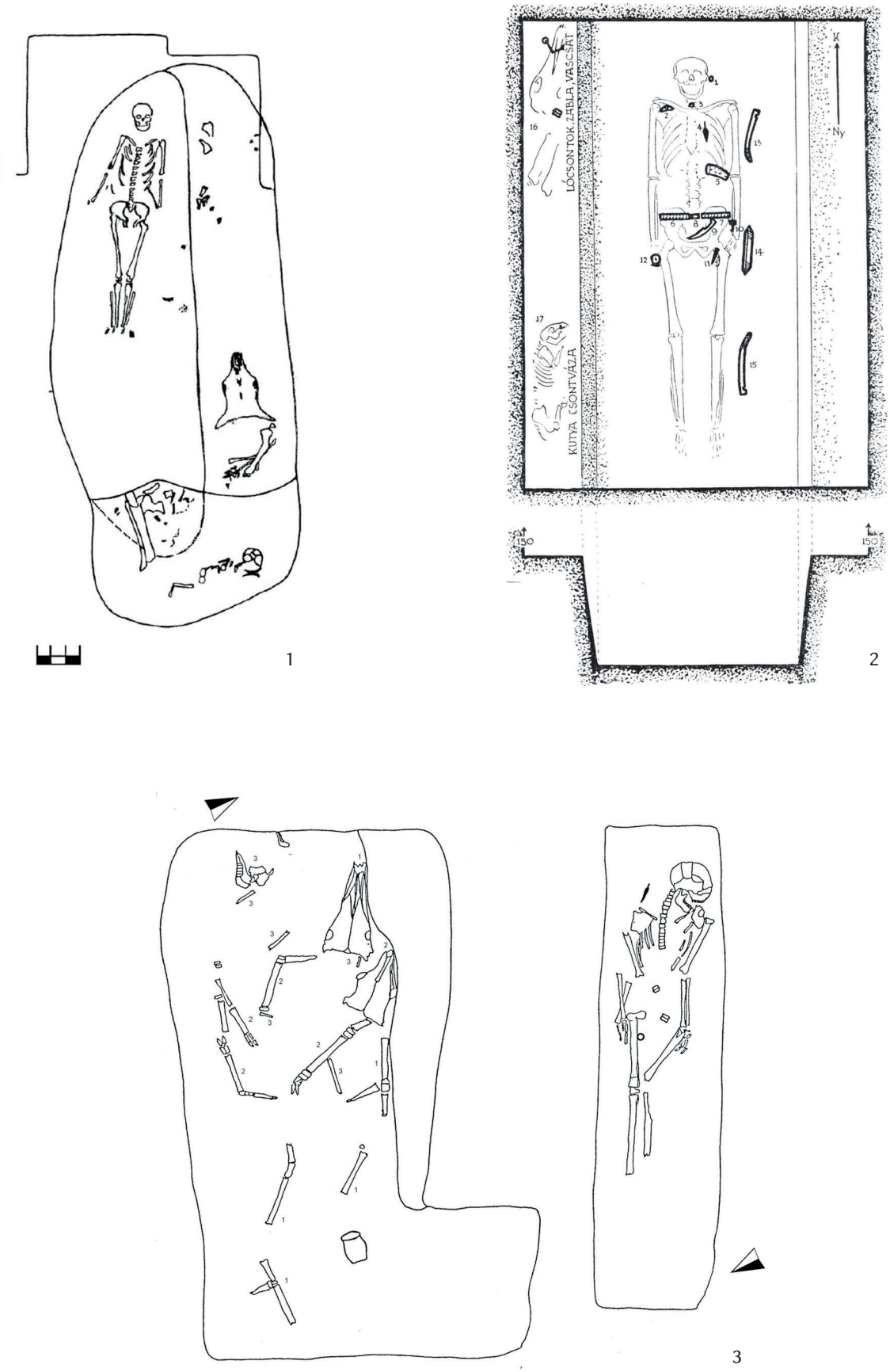


Fig. 7. Dog remains in graves. 1 – Grave 2 of Mound 6 at Prepolovenka, 2 – Grave 8 of Mokrin (reconstruction), 3 – Grave 7 of Öcsöd–MRT 96a (1 – after Bogachev 2011; Balogh 2015, 3 – after Madaras 2004)

objects of Merovingian or northern Italian origin, including an Eastern Alpine belt set in Grave 81 of Szegvár-Oromdűlő and its close analogy in Grave 10 of Zamárdi-Réti-földek (Fig. 12.4).[43] Finally, separate horse graves should be mentioned from the cemeteries of Szőreg A and Kiszombor-Tanyahalmi-dűlő.[44] As such animal burials are especially common in eastern Transdanubian sites with Merovingian ties, the origin of the custom is most likely to be found in that cultural circle.[45]

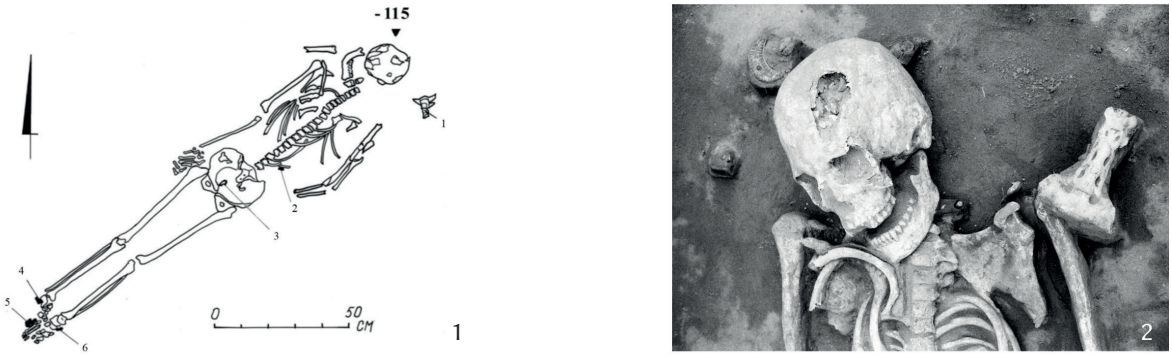


Fig. 8. Sheep rump meat offerings. 1 – Grave 14 of Mound 2 at Abinsk–3, 2 – Grave 171 of Szegvár-Oromdűlő (1 – after Kondrashev et al. 2017, 2 – after Gulyás et al. 2019)

Objects of Byzantine origin in burials of communities of Eastern European steppe origin could have reached the Carpathian Basin as merchandise, gifts, or spoils. The most significant source in this respect is the altogether 36 coins recovered from the burials under study.[46] Besides, an amphora from Tiszavasvári-Eszenyi-telek could be identified as type LR1b (Fig. 13.1), frequent in Byzantine fortresses by the Lower Danube and mostly used for transporting wine.[47] Several bone or antler pouch fasteners with circle-dot patterns (Fig. 13.4) and Pápa-type metal pouch buckles (Fig. 13.5–6) are known from the Körös–Maros Region; both were widespread in the area of the Black and Mediterranean seas.[48] Sucidava-type buckles, usually connected with the troops protecting the Danube *limes*, are amongst the most common Byzantine clothing accessories.[49] Two specimens are known from the Maros Valley: one from Grave 25 of Deszk G (Fig. 13.2) and another, a stray find from Pecica (then Pécska, now in Arad County, Romania).[50] The Byzantine origin of the belt fittings from Grave 60 of Klárafalva B has been suggested based on ornamentation and the design of the suspension loops (Fig. 13.3).[51] Reused Byzantine objects in graves are a different group. The lid of a Byzantine bronze lamp was discovered near the left forearm of the deceased in Grave 72 of Szegvár-Oromdűlő (Fig. 13.9).[52] The gold scabbard fittings of the Kunágota sword were made of plates decorated with Dionysiac scenes that originally belonged to a wooden chest.[53] Several graves of the communities of Eastern European steppe origin contained a cross-shaped pendant, including

43 Lőrinczy – Straub 2005a, 143–145.

44 Balogh 2016, 55.

45 Balogh 2016, 55–56.

46 Gulyás et al. 2019, 123, Tab. 1; Somogyi 2020, 544, Abb. 18; Gallina et al. 2022a, 21–22.

47 Gulyás – Lőrinczy 2018, 104.

48 Tobias 2011, 280; Madgearu 2003.

49 Gavritukhin 2009, 153.

50 Garam 2001, 95.

51 Garam 2001, 124–130.

52 Lőrinczy 2022, 32.

53 Bollók – Szenthe 2018.

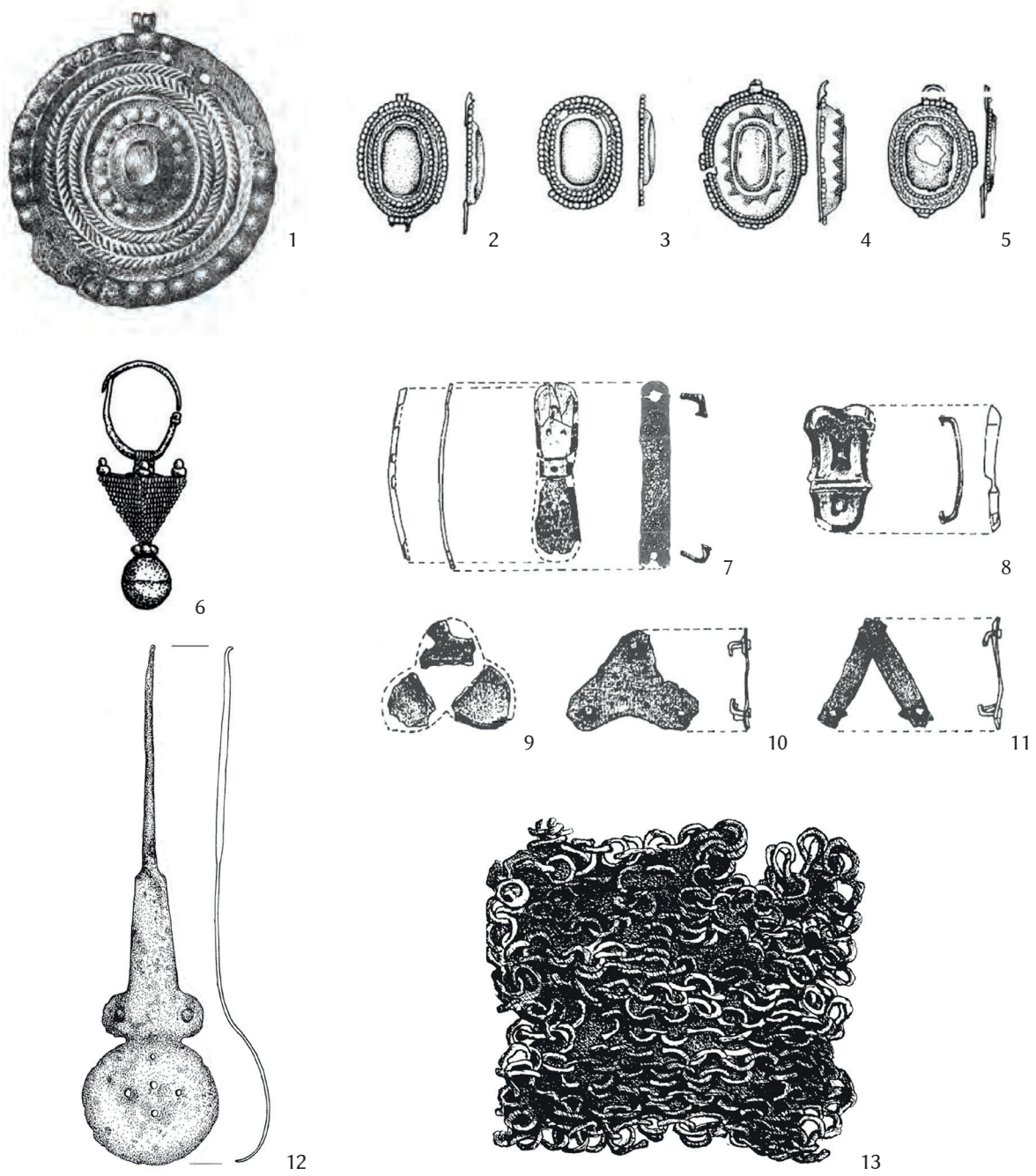


Fig. 9. Typical grave goods in Pontic steppe-style graves. 1– Grave 16 of Deszk H, 2–5, 7–11 – Grave 1 of Szegvár-Oromdűlő, 6 – Grave 24 in Deszk T, 12 – Grave 692 of Szegvár-Oromdűlő, 13 – Grave 33 of Szegvár-Oromdűlő (1 – after Lőrinczy 2022, 2–5 – after Garam 2001, 6 – after Balogh 2014, 7–11 – after Lőrinczy 1991, 12–13 – after Lőrinczy 2020)

Grave 37 of Deszk G, Grave 8 of Székkutas-Kápolnadűlő, Grave 33 of Makó-Mikócsa-halom, Grave 2 of Mindszent-Szegvári út, Szőlőspart, and Feature 30 of Babarc-Mérnökségi telep (Fig. 13.7–8).[54] In my opinion, it is no longer possible to determine to what extent these reflect the actual religious beliefs of the deceased.[55]

54 Garam 2001, 57–58; Balogh 2018, 28, Fig. 3; Haraszti – Bede 2018, 57, 3. tábla 2; Gallina et al. 2022a, 19.

55 According to Ivan Bugarski, who analysed the issue in depth, the meaning of a cross is mainly determined by the context (Bugarski 2009).

According to the current academic consensus, groups of Eastern European steppe origin arrived in the Carpathian Basin with 'Inner Asian Avars' around the 560s AD. The archaeological record of the first generation is difficult to define. Gábor Lőrinczy assigned to this earliest horizon burials with items adapted from the Eastern or Merovingian, particularly Gepid, material culture,[56] while Erwin Gáll outlined an early grave horizon based solely on radiocarbon dates.[57] Based on some recently published radiocarbon data, a few graves of Szegvár-Oromdűlő were assigned to the 6th century AD, while in some cases, Gábor Lőrinczy questioned the reliability of the measurements.[58]

Most burials in the Trans-Tisza Region could be dated to the second quarter of the 7th century AD,[59] corroborated by a massive number of Heraclius *solidi* discovered in the related assemblages.[60] From that time, communities of Eastern European steppe origin gained ground in areas—e.g., north of the Körös River and eastern Transdanubia—where they had been scarcely present or completely unknown before. Gábor Lőrinczy links their spread with the structural transformation that occurred following the defeat in Constantinople in AD 626.[61] Parallel with these processes, communities with burials slightly dissimilar to the classic 'Szegvár–Deszk-type' graves appeared in the Trans-Tisza Region: the predominant orientation was W–E or N–S and no grave had a sidewall niche or contained a cut-flayed horse hide. Although the related assemblages contained Early Avar-type artefacts, Lívia Bende assigned these graves to the second half of the Avar Period based on some dissimilarities of the funerary rite.[62]

Fig. 10. Vessel with paint run decoration. 1 – Grave 870 of Szegvár-Oromdűlő, 2 – Grave 717 of Szegvár-Oromdűlő, 3 – Grave 5 of Mound 4 at Tuguluk–3 (1–2 –after Vida 2022, 3 – after Lyakhov – Myachin 2010)

56 Lőrinczy 2017, 160–161; Lőrinczy 2022, 243.

57 Gáll – Mărginean 2020; Mărginean – Gáll 2022. However, the burials they examined were poor, often without grave goods, and therefore cannot be used to refine the chronology of Early Avar finds.

58 Cf. Lőrinczy – Siklósi 2022, 689, 1. táblázat. Based on the find material, Gábor Lőrinczy dated Grave 33 to the second quarter of the 7th century AD (Lőrinczy – Siklósi 2022, 671–672).

59 Partly because research has traditionally linked some object types with the first generations.

60 Cf. Gulyás et al. 2019, 123, Tab. 1.

61 Lőrinczy 1998, 351–355; Lőrinczy – Somogyi 2018, 240–241.

62 Bende 2017, 10. However, this theory did not become popular among the researchers.

Previously, sites with E–W and NE–SW predominance in grave orientation in the Trans-Tisza Region were assigned to the Early Avar Period. Recent cemetery analyses have slightly modified this picture. Large bead pendant earrings, a melon-seed-shaped bead with a bronze tube, and an imitation of a *miliarensis* of Constans II, minted in AD 648–651/2, have been discovered in Grave 3 of Szegvár-Sápoldal, which was dated, based on the grave finds and radiocarbon analysis, to the last third of the 7th century AD.[63] The last grave horizon of the Szegvár-Oromdűlő cemetery could be dated approximately to the AD 640–670s. Gábor Lőrinczy assigned the individuals buried with belt sets with pseudo-buckles or round mounts, underlining the general impoverishment characterising the coeval graves of females.[64] Two graves in Tiszakürt-Zsilke-tanya contained large bead pendant earrings and three other burials melon seed-shaped beads, based on which the cemetery part was roughly coeval with Szegvár-Sápoldal.[65]

The cemeteries at Szarvas-Grexa-téglagyár and Székkutas-Kápolnadűlő, established probably in the first half of the 7th century AD, remained in use until the end of the Avar Period. A similar cemetery was started somewhat later at Pitvaros-Víztározó. Lívia Bende believed, based on the graves with an end wall shaft, pottery vessels by the skull, and sheep rump food offerings, that the cemetery was used mainly by the descendants of a local community of eastern European steppe origin; Gábor Lőrinczy added that later immigration of new groups could not be ruled out either.[66]

The Eastern European steppe between the second half of the 5th and the second third of the 7th centuries AD

To specify the origins of the groups from the Eastern European steppe that settled in the Carpathian Basin, one must examine the early medieval archaeological record of the steppe east of the Carpathians. To this end, I examined 108 graves from 82 sites in an area of about 1.1 million km^2 between the Southern Bug River and the Ural Mountains.[67] The lack of early medieval graves can be explained by the fact that Soviet-era research focused mostly on burial mounds, while in recent years, an increasing number of graves without kurgans have been discovered.[68] The scarcity of experts on the subject in Ukraine and Russia is also a problem, greatly hindering the chronological and cultural assessment of new findings. N–S, less frequently NE–SW oriented graves with a sidewall niche were created in the Eastern European steppe region since the late Sarmatian Period; therefore, if a particular grave does not contain finds characteristic of the early Middle Ages, archaeological methods alone are insufficient for specifying its dating. Oleksy Komar suggested that the low number of find assemblages from the 5th–7th centuries AD is due, amongst others, to the negative effect of unfavourable climatic conditions.[69] The numbers seem to corroborate his theory: in the northern Pontic Region, about 3,500 graves are known from the Scythian Period, while only 1,200 from the Middle Sarmatian Period and about 1,300 from the 11th–13th centuries AD.[70]

63 Lőrinczy 2018, 55–59, 78.

64 Lőrinczy 2022, 279.

65 Gulyás et al. 2023, 409.

66 Lőrinczy 2016, 169; Bende 2017, 322.

67 Besides, Grave 1 of Mound 6 at Glinoe-'Dot' by the lower course of the Dniester River, five graves from Serbin, and a burial from Udarny in the Kuban Region were published after this manuscript had been completed (Krasnoperov et al. 2022; Sokolov – Gulyás 2023a; Sokolov – Gulyás 2023b).

68 Just a few examples: Bezuglov – Parusimov 2013, 256; Ishaev – Smolyak 2017, 160; Sokolov – Gulyás 2023a, 33–35.

69 Komar 2008a.

70 Komar 2008b, 125.

Research on the Eastern European steppe has generally divided the period in focus into two phases: the 'post-Hun' Period or Shipovo horizon between the second half of the 5th and the mid-6th century AD, characterised by the persistence of Hun Period traits (diadems, scale-patterned saddle-fittings) and the appearance of Mediterranean-style imports,[71] and the horizon of Sivashivka-type burials (after Ruslan Orlov) representing the time between the second half of the 6th and the middle third of the 7th century AD, the flagship finds of which are mask-decorated fittings appearing on belts, footwear, and horse harnesses.[72] Russian, Ukrainian, and Hungarian researchers have opposing views on the chronological position of the Sivashivka-type find assemblages. Oleksy Komar believes that similarities in some areas (the Caucasus, Crimea, and the Carpathian Basin) are uncertain due to the great distances involved, and has built a chronology based primarily on coin-dated graves and structural deposits of the Mala Pereshchepina circle, only including analogies from the Mediterranean and the Carpathian Basin when a particular artefact did not have a precisely dated analogy in the steppe region. As these assemblages contain mainly *solidi* minted in the second third of the 7th century AD, most burials of the Mala Pereshchepina circle were dated between the mid-7th and the early 8th century AD.[73] However, some rich steppe find assemblages are votive offerings, while others come from burials which contain items accumulated over a long time and, thus, cannot be dated precisely. Therefore, the coins in these assemblages can be considered relevant chronological anchors in only a few cases.

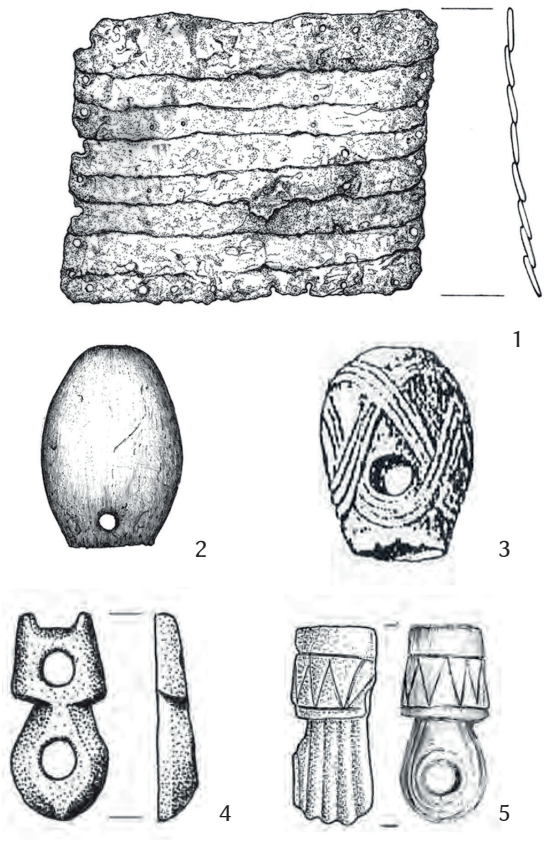


Fig. 11. Object types of 'Inner Asian Avar' provenance in Pontic steppe-style graves. 1 – Grave 33 of Szegvár-Oromdűlő, 2 – Grave 90 of Szegvár-Oromdűlő, 3 – Grave 350 of Szekszárd-Bogyiszlói út, 4 – Hódmezővásárhely-Szárazér-dűlő, 5 – Grave 65 of Szegvár-Oromdűlő (1–2, 4–5 – after Lőrinczy 2020, 3 – after Rosner 1999)

Unlike Komar's method and system, another chronology, by Péter Somogyi, is widely accepted throughout Central Europe. He dated the Sivashivka-type burials to the mid-6th and the early 7th centuries AD based on coin-dated graves with mask-decorated fittings.[74] Florin Curta established a relative chronological sequence based on the seriation of 27 assemblages,[75] and cross-dated each

71 Kazansky 2020.

72 Ruslan Orlov used the term 'Sivashivka culture' (Orlov 1985). The burials listed here, together with the rich assemblages of the Mala Pereshchepina circle, are referred to by Oleksy Komar as the Pereshchepina Culture (Komar 2006).

73 Komar 2006, 92–125. Oleksy Komar distinguished the burials dated to the second half of the 6th and the beginning of the 7th century AD, containing mainly Byzantine import objects, separately from the rest under the term "Sukhanove horizon" (Komar 2008a).

74 Somogyi 1987, 146. Later, he determined the upper chronological limit of the group in the second third of the 7th century AD (Somogyi 1997, 106).

75 Curta 2008, 154.

grave based on Byzantine, Avar, and Eastern European analogies of the items in their assemblages to specify their dating.[76]

There are arguments favouring and against both dating methods, although Péter Somogyi's approach seems more reliable. As almost all coin-dated assemblages in the Carpathian Basin, the Balkans, and the Crimea support a 6th and early 7th–century AD dating, it is unlikely that similar graves in the steppe are 50–80 years younger.[77] However, reliable and precise chronological data is required for specifying the dating of particular find groups. Only a few coin-dated burials are known from the steppe region; therefore, conducting as many radiocarbon analyses as possible in the future would be pivotal. Only Grave 1 of Mound 6 of Glinoe 'Dot' has been examined thus far, and the results dated it to the second half of the 6th century AD.[78]

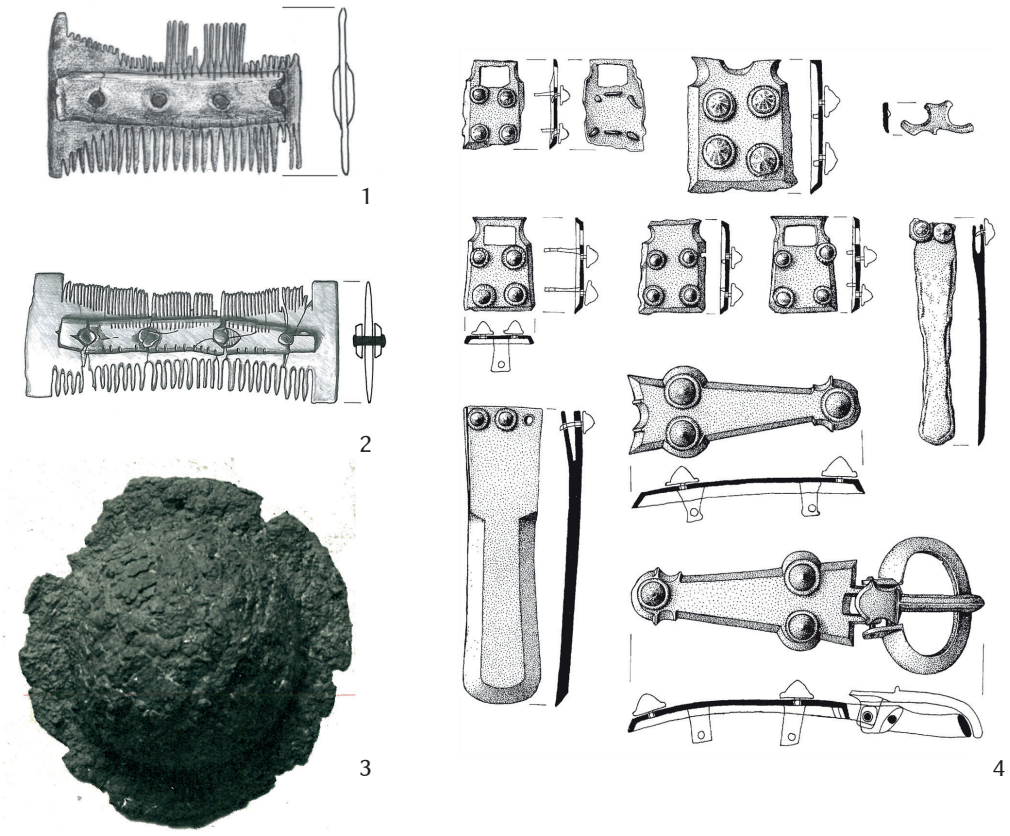


Fig. 12. Object types of 'western' provenance in Pontic steppe-style graves. 1 – Grave 1 of Szegvár-Oromdűlő, 2 – Grave 9 of Kövegy-Nagy-földek, 3 – Szentes-Derekegyházi-oldal, 4 – Grave 81 of Szegvár-Oromdűlő (1, 4 – after Lőrinczy 2020, 2 – after Benedek – Marcsik 2017, 3 – after Csallány 1939b)

Russian researchers see the graves I examined as representing multiple 6th–7th-century cultural units besides the circle of Sivashivka-type graves. Yevgeny Kruglov outlined the circle of the so-called Avilovka-type burials, located mostly in the Volga Region, while Grave 2 of Tagansky by the middle course of the Don River has also been assigned there lately.[79] In contrast to the Sivashivka circle, N–S orientation and folded animal skins at the feet of the deceased are more frequent amongst Avilovka-type burials (Fig. 14). Yevgeny Kruglov dated the circle between the end of the

76 Curta 2019, 55–56.

77 Ambroz 1971.

78 Cf. Krasnoperov et al. 2022, 205, Ris. 6.

79 Lifanov 2020, 226.

Fig. 13. Object types of Byzantine provenance in Pontic steppe-style graves. 1 – Tiszavasvári-Eszenyi-telek, 2– Grave 25 of Deszk G, 3 – Grave 60 of Klárafalva B, 4 – Hódmezővásárhely-Szárazér-dűlő, 5 – Grave 16 of Deszk Sz, 6 – Grave 1 of Kunszentmárton-Habranyi telep, 7 – Grave 37 of Deszk G, 8 – Grave 33 of Makó-Mikócsa-halom, 9 – Grave 72 of Szegvár-Oromdűlő (1 – after Gulyás – Lőrinczy 2018, 2, 5–6 – after Garam 2001, 3, 4, 9 – Lőrinczy 2020, 7–8 – Balogh 2018)

7th and the early 9th century AD.[80] The so-called Vostochny Malai-type burials have also been identified as a separate group, characterised by the W–E and NW–SE orientation, graves with a sidewall niche, and complete horse skeletons as animal offerings in the grave (Fig. 6.1, Fig. 32.1). By the lavish grave goods, such as swords and belt sets, the burials of this group could be identified as those of the local elite.[81]

The 108 burials analysed were not dispersed evenly across the Eastern European steppe, but most were located in the valleys of large rivers, including the Southern Bug, the Dnieper, the Don, and the Volga. This scatter, however, may reflect a current state of research, as the largest excavations

80 Kruglov 1990, 47–50.

81 Komar 2013, 680. Oleksy Komar also included the Üçtəpə grave here; however, Bálint Csanád showed that the person buried there probably did not belong to the steppe cultural circle (Bálint 1992, 367–368).

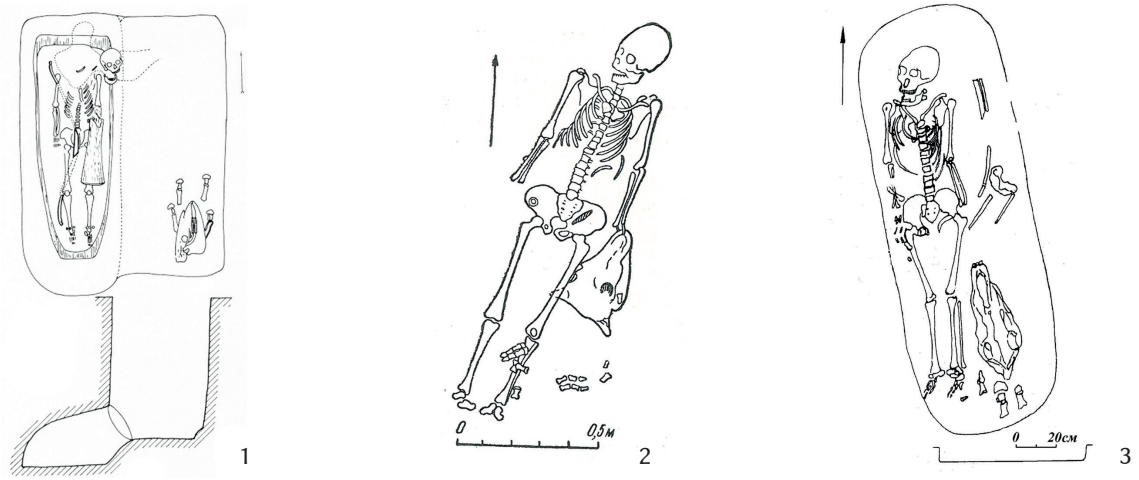


Fig. 14. Avilovka-type burials. 1 – Mound 1 at Avilovka, 2 – Grave 1 of Politotdel'skoe, 3 – Grave 2 of Tagansky (1 – after Bálint 1989, 2 – after Smirnov 1959, 3 – after Tsibyn 2016)

were conducted in relation to the construction of huge water reservoirs during Soviet times. To obtain a more accurate picture of the inhabitation pattern—as far as one may draw consequences about that from only a hundred graves—it is worth investigating the location of the sites using geo-informatical methods. To this end, I have set buffer zones of 25, 50, 75, and 100 km along the major rivers and the Azov and Black Sea coasts and examined how many sites fell in each zone (Fig. 15). The results show that more than half of the sites are within the 100-km buffer zones, evenly dispersed within the 75 km zone, and decline in number only in the 76–100 km zones. When looking at large rivers, the bulk of sites are found in the 0–25 km zone, while their number is reduced in the 26–50 km zone and is negligible farther than that. At the same time, only 38% of all graves are located near large rivers. While the current picture is somewhat distorted due to the low case number, it is expected to change and become more reliable with the numbers increasing when the areas of smaller rivers are included in the study.

I believe all this implies that the coastline played a role in choosing a temporary dwelling place, primarily due to the good conditions for livestock farming. It is known from Byzantine sources that Byzantine trade ships plied along the Black Sea coast.[82] Byzantine objects in the graves and the abundance of sites near estuaries, which provided ideal harbours, indicate trading contacts with steppe groups. Sites of steppe character seem to be missing completely from the Cimmerian Bosporus, indicating that pastoral groups respected the borders of Late Antique settlements, i.e. a peaceful living together of diverse communities.[83] The proximity of major rivers may have been important for communication with distant regions; there are written records noting the role of steppe peoples in river trade.[84]

However, this method cannot explain the location of some sites. The interpretation of the sites on the eastern side of the Ural Mountains is currently unclear. The burials discovered north of the Caucasus are most likely connected with a trade route along the mountains' foothills. Burials in the forest-steppe zone form a special group. Two graves included Byzantine coins: a *solidus* of Heraclius and Heraclius Constans, respectively, minted in AD 616–625, was brought to light in Grave 24 of Yosipivka, while Grave 1 of Mound 1 at Zhuravlikha contained another *solidus* issued by Constans II in AD 645–646.[85] Based on these coins, the related burials represent the youngest grave horizon of the Sivashivka circle, implying perhaps that a part of the population migrated northwards.

82 Curta 2008, 149–150.

83 At the same time, we also have data on armed conflicts (cf. Gulyás – Strokov 2022).

84 Curta 2019, 35.

85 Somogyi 2008, 108, no. 67, 109.

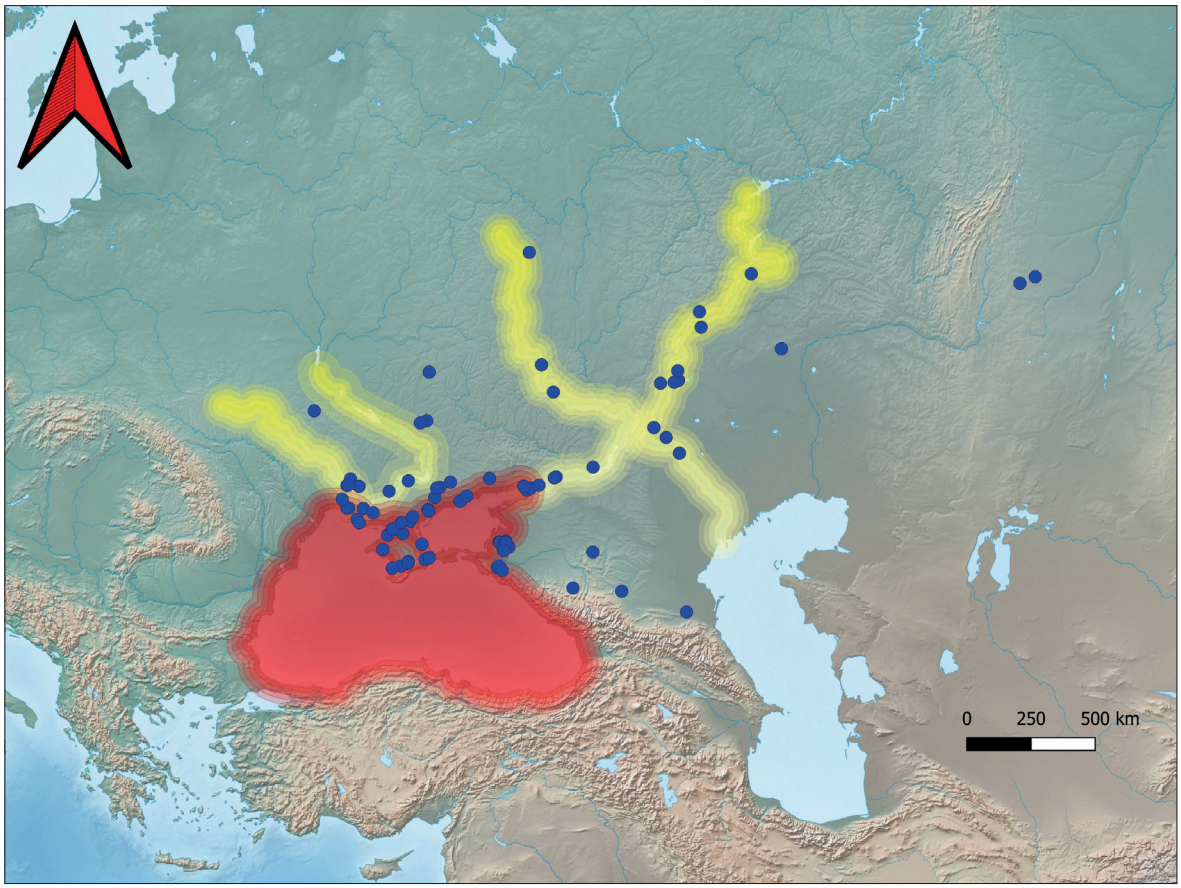


Fig. 15. Distribution of the examined sites and the buffer zones along the major rivers and the coastal zone of the Black Sea and Sea of Azov

As only 25 of the 108 graves have undergone anthropological analysis, the demographic evaluation of the studied steppe burials is pretty difficult. The series included twelve men, five women, and six children.[86] Looking at the whole series from an archaeological point of view, gender could not be determined in 25 cases from the meagre grave find assemblages, while 22% of the remaining 83 graves belonged to women and 11% to children. The preponderance of men (67%) reflects a bias in research methodology: in most cases, gender was determined based on belts and footwear mounts, which are generally grave goods of males. Only two-thirds of the fourteen artificially deformed skulls were examined by an anthropologist.[87] Most of these were discovered near or east of the Volga River; they could be dated mainly to the 'post-Hun' Period, with only the Ilovatka burial containing mask-decorated fittings.[88]

Apart from burials, I was primarily interested in find assemblages of ritual deposits. Altogether, eight are known from the steppe zone, mainly the Volga Region, with several recent discoveries in the northern Pontic region. All were created on top of mounds, sometimes with stone structures built on top of them. All of the finds feature burn marks, on account of which research previously interpreted them as cremation burials.[89] The items were scattered in the mounds, except for Mound 35

86 While the deceased in Grave 2 of Mound 66 at Tsarev (Kruglov 2013) and Grave 1 of Mound 111 at Berezhnovka II (Sinitsyn 1960, 106–107) were identified as women, they had grave goods typical of males.

87 Balabanova 2005, 65, Tab. 1; Komar 2008a, 110–111; Kazansky 2020, 96.

88 Smirnov 1959, 218–220.

89 Fodor 2016.

at Liventsovsky VII, where they were possibly wrapped in textiles (Fig. 16) and in the so-called Tsarsky Kurgan, where they were deposited wrapped in a piece of chainmail.[90] Every assemblage included horse harness fittings, mainly mounts and weaponry, and shoe and belt buckles. The body of the mounds usually contained pottery fragments and burnt animal bones.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Gyula Kisléghi Nagy collected several Early Avar Period artefacts from Mound IX at Dudeştii Vechi-Bucova Pusta (then Óbesenyő, now Timiş County, Romania). Neither the findings nor his survey drawings survived, but based on the description, he found a spearhead, lamellae, a spindle-whorl, belt(?) fittings, and a fragmented knife. Gyula Kisléghi Nagy noted in his field diary that he only found human and animal teeth and small bone fragments.[91] Although the interpretation of the assemblage is highly hypothetical due to the incomplete documentation, both find circumstances and the composition of the find assemblage suggest that the feature may also be the remains of a ritual deposit, akin to those in the Eastern European steppe.

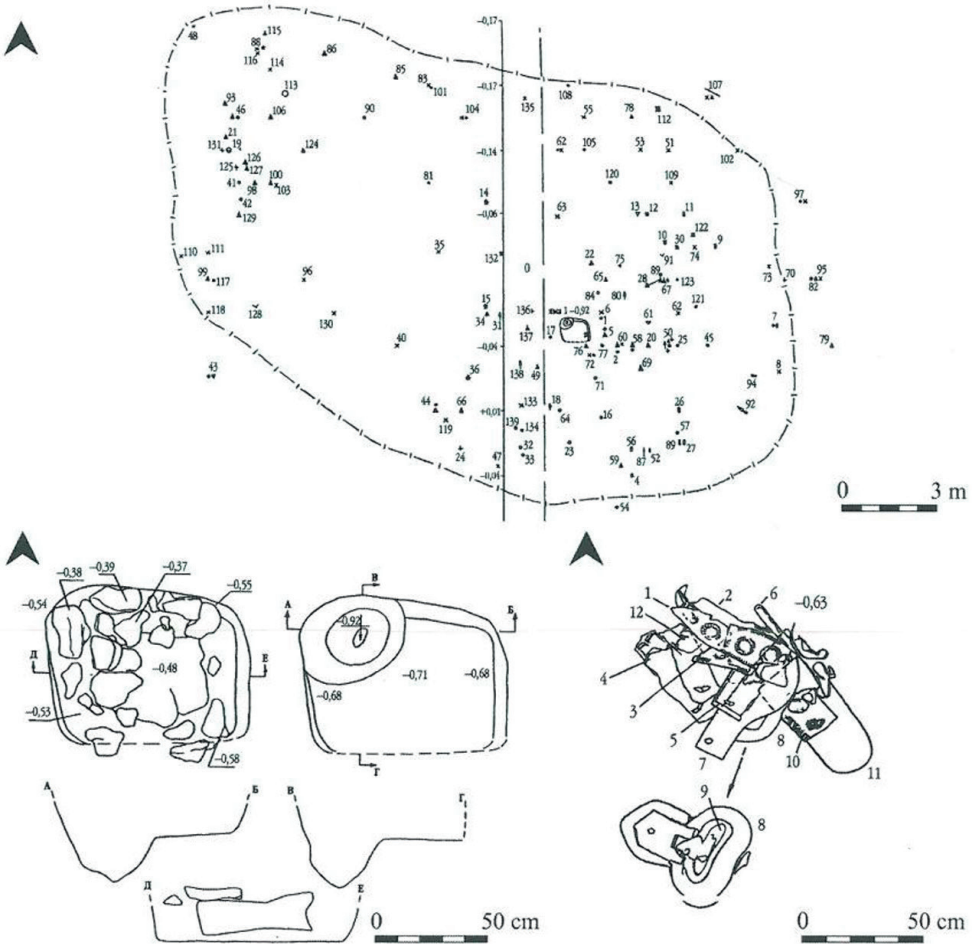


Fig. 16. 'Ritual deposit' from Mound 35 at Liventsovsky IX (after Bezuglov – Ilyukov 2007)

The comprehensive analysis of burials and remains of ritual deposits outlines a picture of communities with extensive trade and social networks, most importantly with Late Antique cities of the Cimmerian Bosporus. Decades of research have revealed that life in most of the settlements on the Kerch and Taman peninsulas did not end with the arrival of the Huns but continued uninterrupted

90 Bezulgov – Iliukov 2007, 28, 42, Ris. 3.2; Atavin 1996, 231.

91 Kisléghi Nagy 2010, 129–130.

until the late 6th century AD—not only in big cities like Bosporus (now Kerch) or Phanagoria but also in minor fortifications.[92] Based on written sources, the most important settlements were under Hun control at the beginning of the 6th century AD, while later, the area came under Byzantine rule.[93]

The northern and northeastern coastal zones of the Black Sea had a distinct material culture in the 'post-Hun' Period, with artefact types (e.g., the so-called nomadic mirrors (Fig. 17.1–2) and anthropomorphic amulets [Fig. 17.5–8]) which also appear in steppe burials.[94] Such artefacts spread along riverine trade routes to the Volga–Ural region and even further to the area of the Dzhetyasar Culture by the middle reaches of the Syr-Darya River.[95] Besides, the glass- and gemstone-inlaid disc brooches from Grave 586 of Neyzats and a isolated burial at Novopokrovka were probably made in workshops in Bosporus (Fig. 17.3–4).[96] In reverse, steppe influences can also be found in the record of Bosporus: the best analogies to the tripartite diadem from a crypt on Mount Mithridates in Kerch are known from Grave 3 of Mound 4 at Verkhnepogromnoe, Mound 2 at Shipovo, and the easternmost one in Mound 19 at Kanattas in central Kazakhstan.[97] Except for Kerch, cemeteries dating to the mid or second half of the 6th century AD are extremely rare in the territory of the former Bosporan Kingdom and, thus, analogies to the finds of Sivashivka-type burials are also scarce. As for mask-decorated mounts, single pieces are known from the area, but no complete belt sets.[98] The steppe influence is most noticeable in armament. A bone arrowhead, antler plates of a compound bow, and a lamellar helmet were discovered in a room in the Ilich fortress in the north-western corner of the Taman Peninsula (Fig. 18); the best analogy to the latter is known from a burial chamber excavated in Gospitalnaia Ulica in Kerch in 1891.[99]

Tanais, a Late Antique city located in the delta of the Don River, was destroyed in the mid-3rd century AD, and a Barbarian settlement was established in its place in the 4th century AD.[100] Many types of objects of steppe origin are known from its territory: a bronze die with the picture of a face for making harness mounts, similar to which have mainly been found in 'post-Hun' commemorative deposits (Fig. 19.1);[101] an antler buckle found in the upper layer of one of the late dwellings (Fig. 19.2);[102] and antler plates of a Turkic–Khazar-type bow from the ditch surrounding the settlement (Fig. 19.3).[103] 'Post-Hun' Period assemblages have also been recovered from the immediate vicinity of Tanais. The most significant are two graves, usually associated with the steppe elite, discovered in Morskoy Chulek.[104] Besides, an assemblage of stray finds, including a gold earring, a solidus of Emperor Zenon, issued in AD 476–491 (Fig. 20.2), and antique mask-decorated belt fittings from Belovode, most likely the remains of an early burial, must be mentioned.[105] Grave 39 at Dugino X on an island in the delta of the Don River had a sidewall niche and contained the flayed skin of a sheep and

92 Gulyás – Strokov 2022, 194–197.
93 Curta 2019, 44.
94 Kazansky 2020, 110–111.
95 Mastykova 2020.
96 Gulyás – Strokov 2022, 201.
97 Gulyás – Strokov 2022, 201.
98 Gulyás – Strokov 2022, 197.
99 Gulyás – Strokov 2022, 203–205.
100 Ullrich 2018, 155.
101 Bezuglov – Yatsenko 1999.
102 Ullrich 2018, 77, Abb. 110.11.
103 Kruglov 2005, 75.
104 Kazansky 2020, 123.
105 Gulyás et al. 2021b.

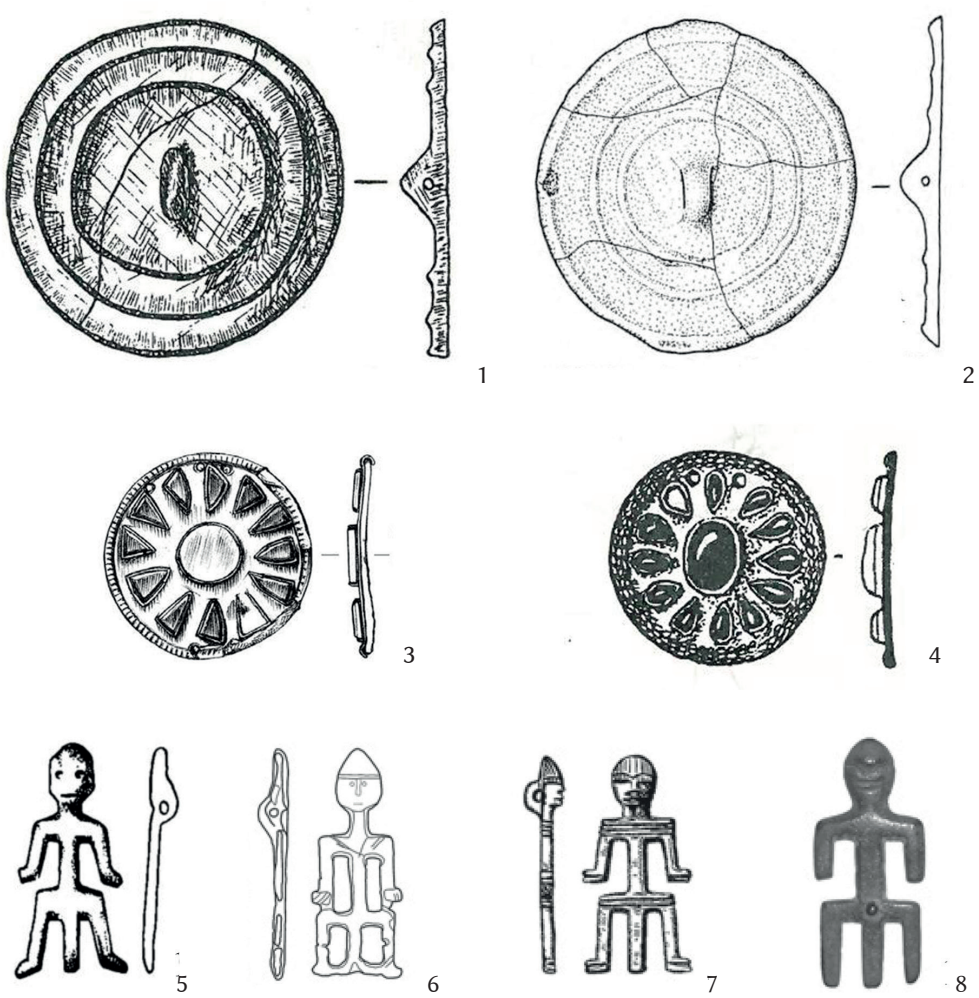


Fig. 17. Object types reflecting alleged Bosporan influence in steppe graves. 1, 4 – Novopokrovka, 2 – Pukhyakovsky Khutor, 3 – Grave 586 of Neyzats, 5 – Ayvazovske, 6 – Oleshkivski Piski, 7 – Bilosarayska kosa, 8 – Filipovskaya stanitsa (1, 4 – after Ajbabin 2011, 2 – after Bezuglov – Parusimov 2013, 3 – after Khrapunov – Kazanski 2016, 5 – after Kruglikova 1957, 6–8 – after Gavritukhin et al. 2022)

a vessel placed next to a child.[106] Rich graves younger than the second half of the 6th century AD can be found in the Don Valley east of Tanais, indicating a possible shift of the local centre of power.[107]

Two main fields of interaction between Eastern European steppe communities and Byzantium in the early Middle Ages have been outlined. The only evidence of that in the Black Sea's north-western coast, north of the Lower Danube region, is a grave at Glinoe and several coin finds, albeit written sources suggest that the region was inhabited in the 6th century AD.[108] The area surrounding Chersonesos in south-eastern Crimea was first under Roman and, subsequently, Byzantine rule. Its northern border was the Alma River, on the right bank of which, at Vilino, a steppe-style burial was discovered.[109] The related grave find assemblage contains several types associated with the Byzantine army. Besides, Sucidava-type buckles have been discovered in three graves in the region

106 Prokofiev 2014, 300–302.

107 E.g., Grave 12 at Matyukhin Bugor (Ishaev – Smolyak 2017) or the isolated burial at Pukhlyakovsky Khutor (Bezuglov – Parusimov 2013).

108 Krasnoperov et al. 2022; Curta 2008, 173, Fig. 8. Florin Curta also mentioned a burial from Colibaşi in the region, but no more information is available about that (Curta 2008, 159).

109 Loboda 2001.

(Fig. 20.3).[110] Sadovets–Pleven-type belt fittings, according to Oleksy Komar, are mask-decorated belt fittings with a complicated curved openwork pattern; only a single specimen is known from a steppe context, from Grave 1 of Mound 3 at Sheliukhi (Fig. 20.4).[111] An LR1A-type amphora was found at the feet of the deceased in Grave 4 of Mound 1 at Izobilne (Fig. 20.1). This variant originated from the Eastern Mediterranean and spread primarily along the northern coast of the Black Sea.[112] A horse burial in Madara, northeastern Bulgaria, deserves special attention. The N–S-oriented grave was dug into a prehistoric mound, and the skull and extremities of a horse were lying above the deceased, whose belt was decorated with inlaid oval mounts and gold strap ends adorned with granulations (Fig. 21).[113] While Uwe Fiedler believes that the find assemblage from the end of the 6th century AD belonged to an Ogur chief who lost his life during a military campaign against Byzantium,[114] Florin Curta interpreted the feature as the grave of a person who could have been the leader of an eastern mercenary group in Byzantine service.[115]

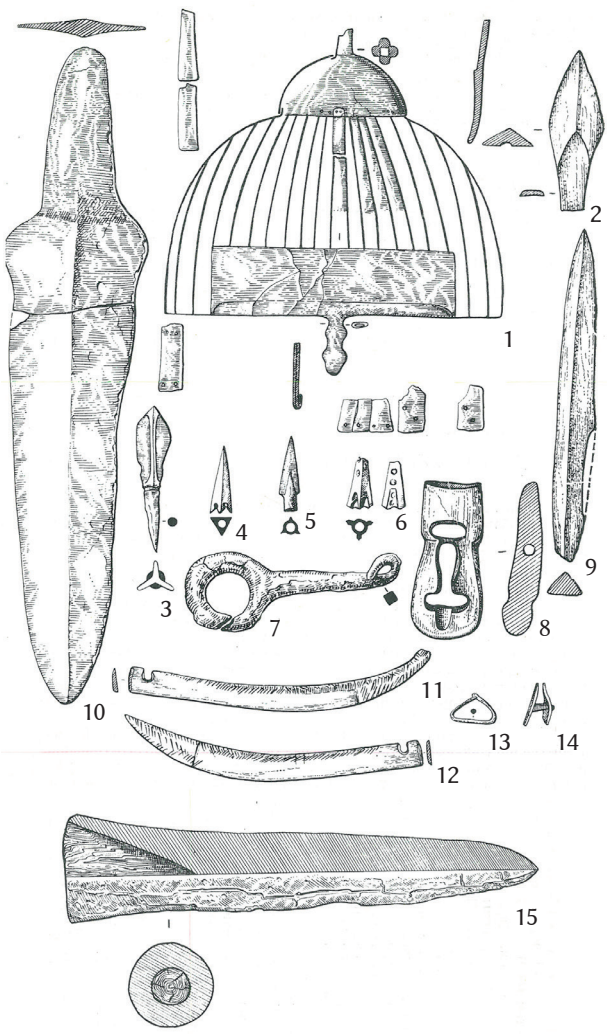


Fig. 18. Weapon finds from Ilich fortress (after Nikolaeva 1986)

The communities—mainly descendants of the local late Iron Age population[116]—inhabiting the lands south of the Kuban River, east of Krasnodar, and the north-eastern coastal zone of the Black Sea around the modern cities of Novorossiysk and Gelendzhik in the early Middle Ages can be linked with the cultural circle of the so-called Pashkovsky–Karpovka-type cemeteries. In addition to elements of the local material culture, the graves of the elite comprise a series of items used for social representation in steppe communities. For example, skeletal remains of a cut-flayed horse were found above those of an infant in Grave 11 of Gorodskoy 3. The related horse harness included a pair of loop-eyed stirrups and round decorative bronze mounts. The small boy's belt was adorned with pressed, pseudo-granulated strap ends (Fig. 22).[117] In Grave 110 of the Varnavinskoe 3 cemetery, a single-edged sword and helmet were placed next to the deceased,[118] who

110 Komar 2008a, 101.
111 Komar 2008a, 102.
112 Curta 2021, 87.
113 Fiedler 1992, 320, 321, Abb. 113.
114 Fiedler 1997, 135.
115 Curta 2008, 176.
116 Mastykova et al. 2016, 99–100.
117 Sazonov 2009.
118 Sukhanov – Sviridov 2018, 118–120.

once wore, following steppe traditions, a single gold crescent-shaped earring in his left ear.[119] Grave 11 in Meshoko included a stirrup, antler quiver plates with tendril patterns (a variant unknown in the steppe zone but frequent in the record of the Carpathian Basin), and the remains of a bow, all reflecting a strong steppe influence (Fig. 23).[120] Neither burial comprised local insignia of rank, indicating that individuals of steppe origin led the community or that the local elite went through complete acculturation regarding status representation.

Similar processes took place in the northern Caucasus. As mentioned, more steppe-style burials have been discovered next to said region in recent years. This may explain why the 'northern' ways of social representation spread among Alans and other local peoples. For example, a larger piece of lamellar armour and the antler plates of a compound bow were discovered in a cist at Ostry Mys-2 (Fig. 24.1–17).[121] The record of the Klin-Yar III cemetery, a part of it associated with the elite of the Kislovodsk Basin, includes swords with P-shaped suspension loops, seaxes with, U-shaped chape ornamented with stylised bird heads, antler plates of steppe-type bows, and chainmail-decorated saddles (Fig. 24.18–34).[122] Aside from some traits in the material culture, certain burial traditions show similarities to the steppe way. Although the location is known mainly for its catacomb graves, several burials with a sidewall niche were also unearthed there. For example, Mound 876 at Zilgi held a NNE–SSW oriented grave with a sidewall niche and the remains of a young (*Inf. I*) girl.[123] Several complete horse skeletons or the remains of flayed horse skins were discovered in the *dromoi* of the catacombs at Klin-Yar.[124] In the Baytal Chapkan cemetery, flayed horse hides were laid between the graves.[125]

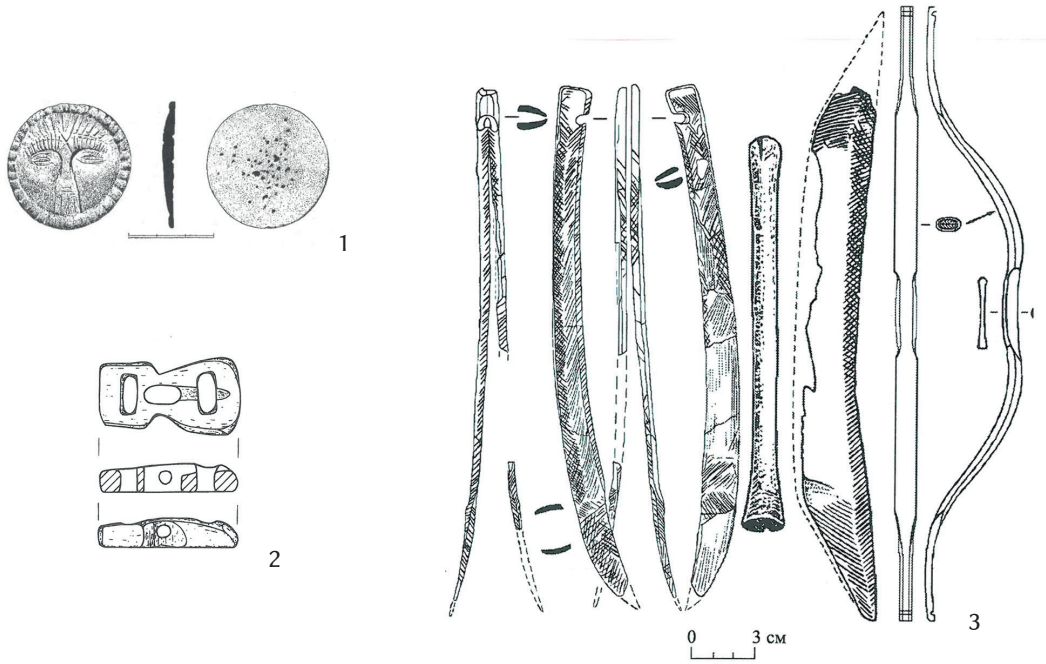


Fig. 19. Objects with steppe provenance in Tanais. 1 – Copper die for a horse harness mount, 2 – antler girth buckle, 3 – compound bow (1 – after Bezuglov – Yatsenko 1999, 2 – after Ullrich 2018, 3 – Kruglov 2005)

119 See Gulyás et al. 2021b, 157 for analogies amongst the steppe burials.

120 Ditler 1995, 153–154, 237, Tab. 39.3.

121 Runich 1977, 254–277.

122 Cf. Belinskij – Härke 2018, 244, Fig. 60.28; 283, Fig. 99.78; 301, Fig. 118.61; 315, Fig. 132.

123 Korobov et al. 2021, 175.

124 Härke 2018, 29–32.

125 Minaeva 1956, 259–261.

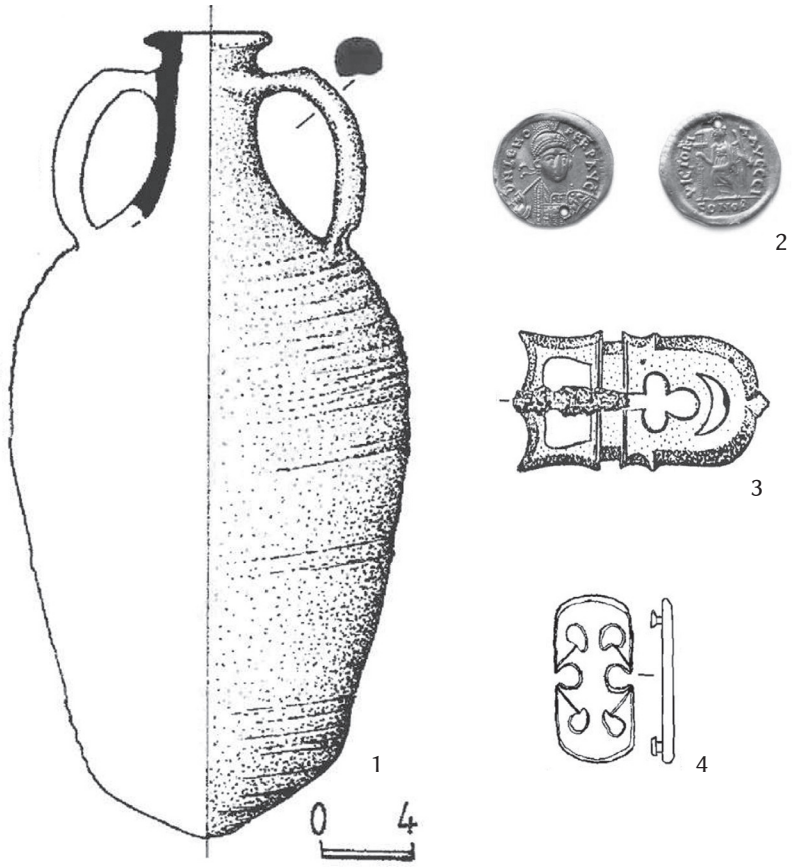


Fig. 20. Byzantine objects in steppe graves. 1 – Grave 4 of Mound 1 at Izobilne, 2 – Belovod'e, 3 – Grave 1 of Mound 22 at Mala Ternivka, 4 – Grave 1 of Mound 3 at Shelyuhi (1 – after Ajbabin 2011, 2 – after Gulyás et al. 2021b, 3 – after Komar et al. 2006, 4 – after Komar 2008a)

The upper course of the Don River and the Middle Oka Region were most likely connected to the steppe by the fur trade, as suggested by the steppe burial near Artsybashevo, which supports this idea.[126] The cultural circle of the cemeteries in the Ryazan–Oka Region (from now on referred to as the Ryazan–Oka Culture) existed between the 1st and the middle or the third quarter of the 7th century AD.[127] Southern influence was present there from the 'post-Hun' Period, primarily in weapons and horse harnesses. For example, the find assemblage of Grave 55 of Zarechye contained horse harness buckles with a triangular mount plate and a B-shaped frame with hemispherical mounts.[128] Anthropo- and zoomorphic saddle mounts could also be dated to the second half of the 6th and second third of the 7th century AD. Two Ryazan–Oka Culture burials held such mounts, one in the cemetery of Kurman and the other at Borok II excavated in 1990; this latter assemblage also included a belt decorated with pseudo-buckles.[129] Belt sets with different kinds of mask-decorated belt fittings can be conditionally classified as steppe influence. Such pieces are known, for example, from burials at Borok II excavated in 1990 and 1991. The belt mounts are not the only finds in two graves to connect them with the steppe region: each contained a sword with P-shaped suspension loops and a horse harness. In addition, the assemblage found in 1990 included omega-shaped brooches, the so-called '*syulgams*' typical of the local elite.[130] The finds from Grave 95 of Borok II can be divided into two

126 Akhmedov 2010, 14.

127 Akhmedov 2010, 16.

128 Akhmedov 1997, 262–263

129 Akhmedov 2018, 510–512.

130 Akhmedov – Gavrilov 2017, 29–30.

groups. The sword with P-shaped suspension loops, the mask-decorated belt fittings, and the horse gear (including a pair of loop-eyed stirrups) reflect nomadic patterns of social representation, while the cruciform and omega-shaped brooches are characteristic of the local elite (Fig. 25).[131] It seems that the local aristocracy adopted a model of status representation which relied mainly on weapons and horse harnesses. However, steppe elements did not replace local ones (e.g., omega- and cross-shaped brooches), like in the Pashkovsky–Karpovka-type cemeteries, but were used alongside them.

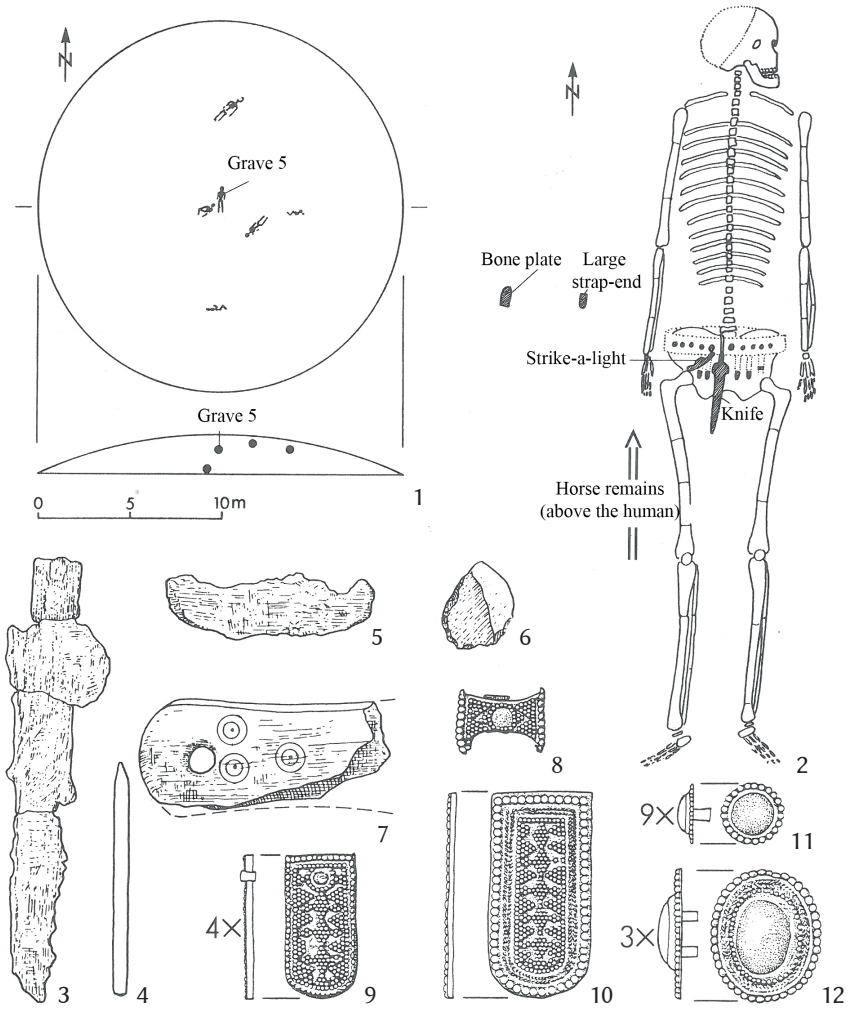


Fig. 21. Reconstruction and grave goods of the Madara burial (after Fiedler 1992)

Russian archaeologists discovered various archaeological cultures between the middle course of the Volga River and the western side of the Ural Mountains; of these, the so-called Turbasli–Imenkovo cultural unit, incorporating the Turbasli Culture and the inhumation graves of the Imenkovo Culture, is the most important for the research of contacts with the steppe region.[132] The burials of this complex are mainly N–S oriented. Most are simple shaft graves, but those with sidewall niches have also been reported. Several graves contained a flayed skin or hide with the skull and leg bones of the horse or cattle, by their position folded and placed by the feet of the deceased.[133] Komintern 2, with both cremation and inhumation burials, is one of the most prominent sites in the region. Flayed animals seem to have been part of the local funerary rite; men were given horse, and women, cattle

131 Akhmedov 2016, 225–228.

132 Kazakov 1996.

133 Sungatov 1998, 89–98.

hides. Besides, steppe connections are reflected by, e.g., scale-patterned saddle mounts (Fig. 26).[134] The fortified settlement of Ufa 2 by the Belaya River was the region's most important commercial centre in the Early Middle Ages. The local, Uralic, and Central Asian pottery forms outlined an extensive connection network maintained by the inhabitants.[135] Based on the antler bow plates and bone girth buckles found in the settlement, locals could have adopted certain elements of the steppe lifestyle.[136] The burial vault discovered in Ufa during the construction of the Baskhir Medical Institute in 1936 is unparalleled in the region. It contained a temple pendant with glass inlay and filigree decoration, Shamsi–Morskoy Chulek-type rings, and Hajdszoboszló-type pendants, the best analogies to which are known from the richest 6th-century AD burials of females, such as Morskoi Chulek or Novopokrovka (Fig. 27).[137]

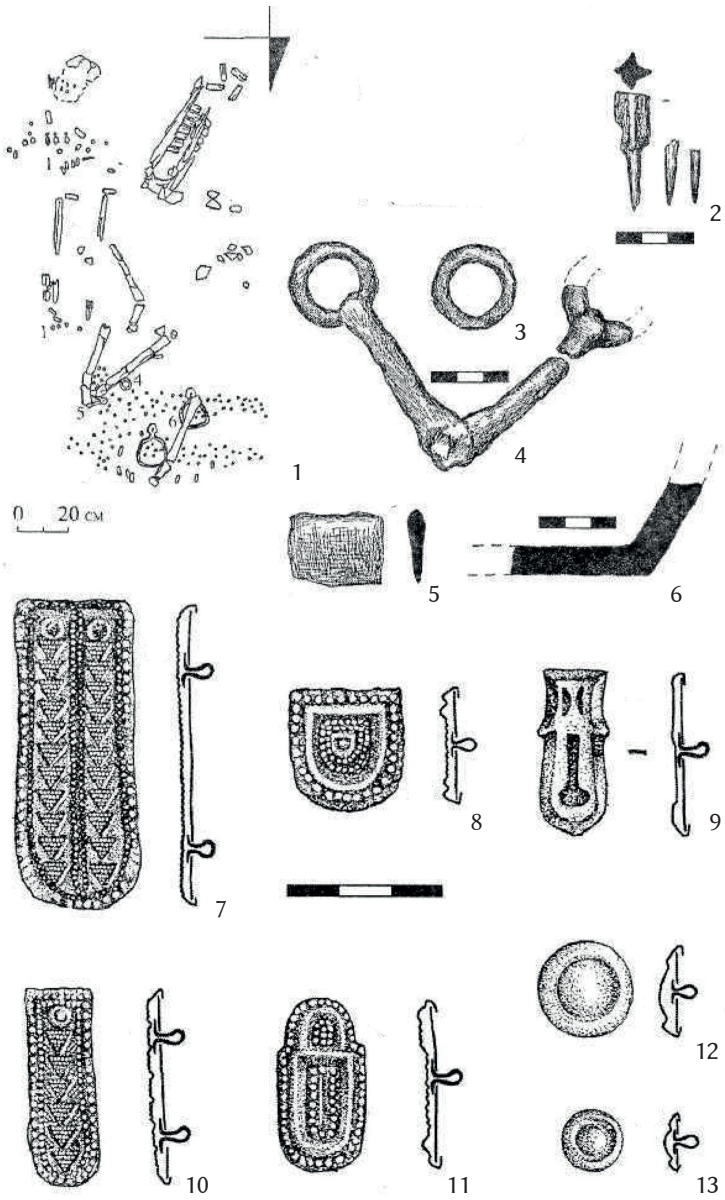


Fig. 22. Grave 11 of Gorodskoy (Sazonov 2009)

134 Kazakov 2021.

135 Sungatov 2018a.

136 Ruslanova – Ruslanov 2018, 209–210, Ris. 14–15, 213, Ris. 18.

137 Sungatov 2018b, 149–150.

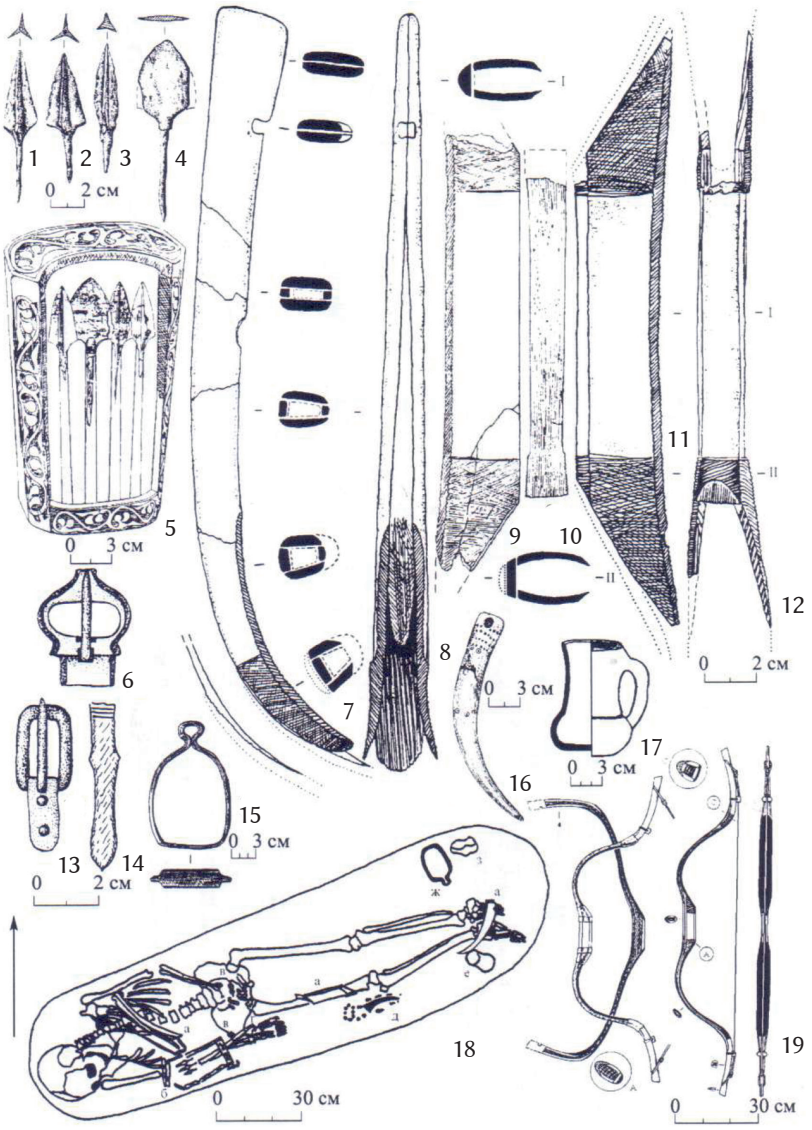


Fig. 23. Grave 11 of Meshoko (after Kruglov 2005)

Strong steppe influence can also be detected in the area of the Kushnarenkovo Culture in the western foregrounds of the Ural Mountains. The cemetery of Taktalachuk consisted of N–S oriented pit graves, of which one contained a flayed horse hide; besides, some antler bow plates in Graves 115 and 175 and a buckle with a B-shaped frame in Grave 330 represent connections with the steppe region.[138] Finally, the kurgan excavated on the outskirts of Novo-Bikkino should be mentioned, where the skull and lower leg bones of a horse, antler bow plates, and horse gear were found in a separate pit next to the grave (Fig. 28).[139] Based on these examples, typical elements of the steppe-style status representation of males were present in the Turbasli–Imenkovo cultural unit and Kushnarenkovo Cultures. However, some steppe-like elements in the local funerary practice—N–S orientation, flayed animal hides in the graves, and (less often) graves with a sidewall niche or pots next to the skull—indicate that the related communities may have had a closer relationship with the steppe world. It cannot be ruled out even that some southern communities moved to the area between the Volga River and the Ural Mountains in the 'post-Hun' Period.

138 Kazakov 1981.

139 Mazhitov 1981, 18.

The Dzhetyasar and Otrar–Karatau Cultures emerged along the Syr-Darya River, while the Kaunchi Culture around the Tashkent oasis in Central Asia. All three, especially the first two, are characterised by a strong steppe influence. Urban settlements surrounded by large cemeteries dominated the area of the Dzhetyasar Culture. Archaeological evidence—burial mounds with simple shaft graves and those with a sidewall niche—suggests that nomadic populations settled there in multiple waves from the 4th century AD.[140] The orientation of these graves is generally N–S, with minor deviations towards the west or the east. Bovine remains are also recorded from the area of the Dzhetyasar Culture: nine graves contained bull or cow skulls, and leg and sometimes pelvic bones (Fig. 29).[141] The find material of the steppe-style graves also has close Central Asian connections.[142] For example, analogies to the heart-shaped pendants from Morskoi Chulek have only been found in Altynasar in Grave 389 of Cemetery 4r and Grave 460 of Cemetery 4o.[143] A few anthropomorphic amulets are also known from the culture and Central Asia, but, compared to Eastern European pieces, the phallic traits on these are less pronounced.[144] Moreover, many antler bow plates are known from sites of the Dzhetyasar Culture, and some are similar to the Ogur–Savir and Turkic–Khazar types widespread in the steppe region.[145] Black paint run patterns adorned the side of the pottery vessel in Grave 5 of Mound 4 at Tuguluk III, north of the Caucasus (Fig. 10.3);[146] vessels decorated this way are known from a vast area, including the Trans-Tisza Region and Central Asia.[147]

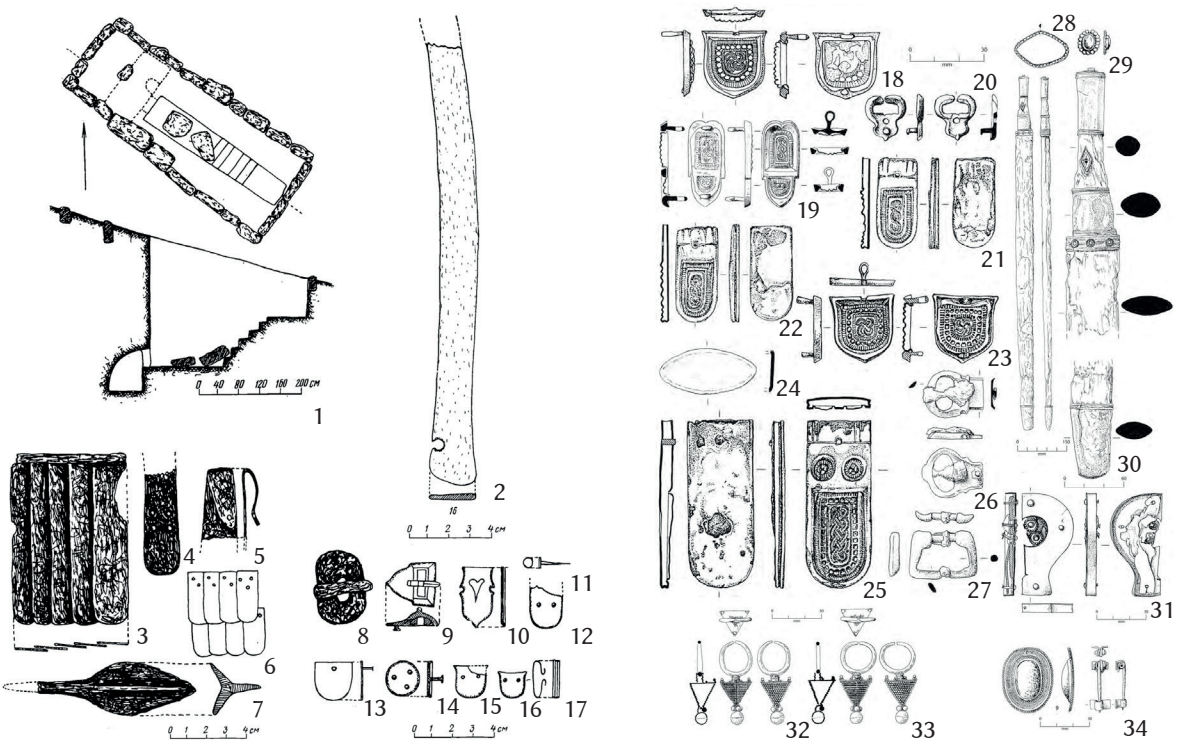


Fig. 24. 1–17 – Crypt of Ostry Mys 2, 18–34 – selected finds of Grave 360 of Klin-Yar (1–17 – after Runich 1977, 18–34 – after Belinskij – Härke 2018)

140 Levina 1996, 9–31; Zhivkov – Manova 2015, 34–35.

141 Levina 1996, 34–35, 120.

142 For the last overview of the topic, see Mastykova 2018.

143 Levina 1996, 216.

144 Gavritukhin et al. 2022, 202–205.

145 Kruglov 2005, 78–79.

146 Lyakhov – Myachin 2010, 226.

147 Vida 1999, 123.

Recently, 5th–6th-century AD burials were discovered on the eastern coast of the Caspian Sea. The graves in the cemetery of Karakabak 10 were N–S or E–W oriented. Some had a sidewall niche and bones of flayed animals in the main shaft, akin to the analysed steppe burials (Fig. 30).[148] A sheep rump had been placed close to the left shoulder of the deceased in Grave 10.[149] The close connection with the steppe, reflected by the funerary rite and the grave goods, indicates that in the post-Hun Period, the region was inhabited by groups with a cultural background identical or very similar to the steppe communities of Eastern Europe. However, this hypothesis requires further investigation.

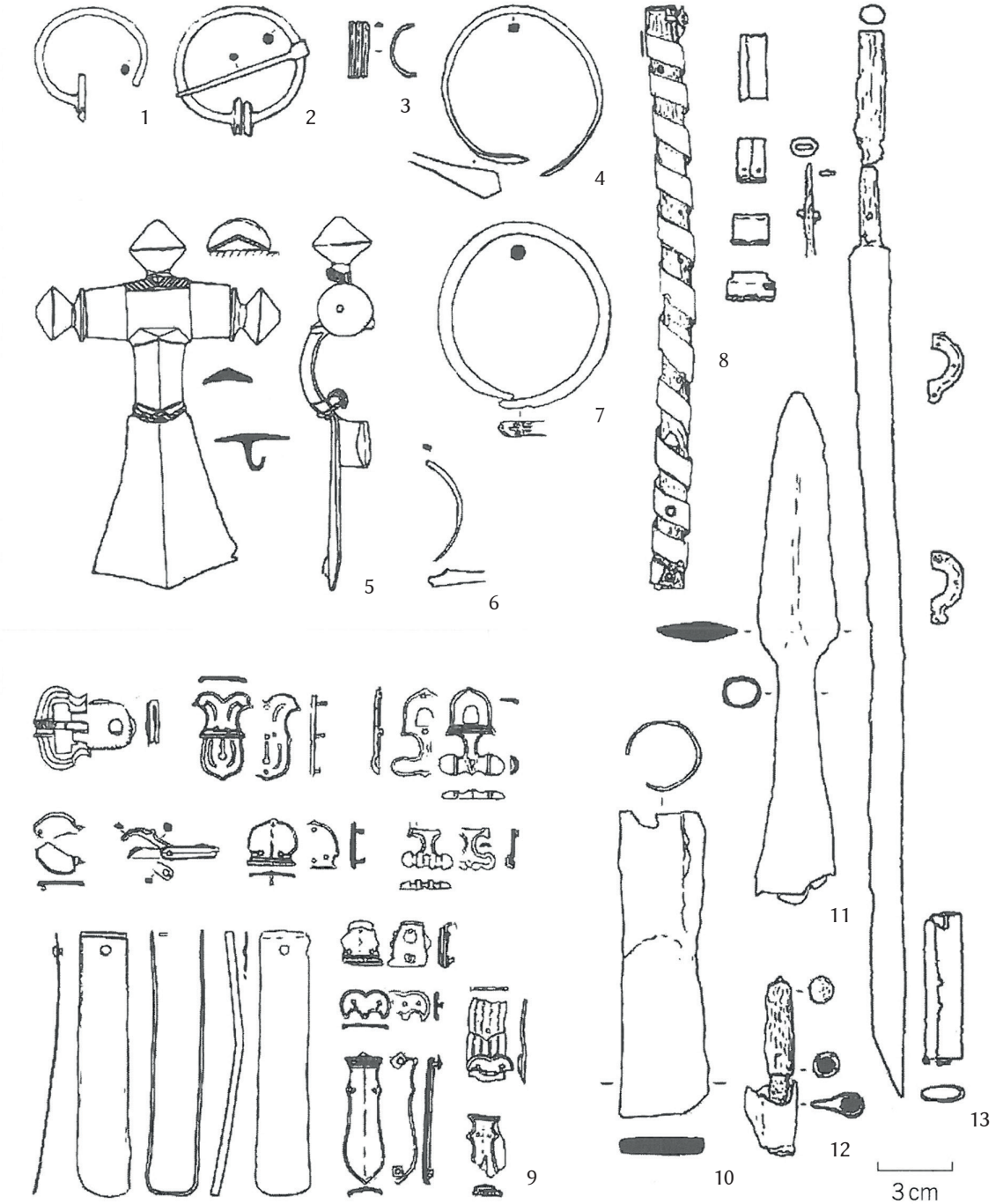


Fig. 25. Selected finds of Grave 95 of Borok II (after Akhmedov 2016)

148 Astafiev – Bogdanov 2020a, 189.

149 Astafiev – Bogdanov 2020a, 183, Ris. 3.

Since the 1980s, Soviet and post-Soviet research has focused on the Inner Asian connections of artefacts from the Eastern European steppe. Although Anatoly Ambroz drew attention to the Mongolian analogies of the memorial complex of Voznesenka,[150] only a few artefact types originating certainly from Inner Asia are known today. Oleksy Komar identified eleven artefact types and elements of burial tradition; however, his results require a more thorough examination.[151] Although horse gear elements—girth buckles and fasteners—are present in Turkic burials, such equipment was widespread over a way too large area for these specimens to be linked directly with Inner Asia.[152] Recently, a so-called 'Uibat-type' battle knife was found in Serbin; its analogies are known from the Altai Mountains and Tuva.[153]

Burial customs in the Carpathian Basin and the Eastern European steppe

To what degree can the groups of steppe origin, settled in the Carpathian Basin, be linked to the Eastern European steppe region based on funerary practice? This was a key question of the dissertation. In the analysis carried out in seeking an answer, I made use of both qualitative and quantitative methods and cited, where necessary, analogies from other periods and regions. As a result, a more complex image outlined of the Eastern European links of the studied Carpathian Basin archaeological record than the ones yielded by previous attempts.

Similarly to the steppe region, isolated burials and 'low-intensity burial grounds' predominated in the Carpathian Basin. Serbin-1 could be interpreted as a 'low-intensity burial ground' with five graves at a considerable distance.[154] At the same time, the graves of the mature man and the three children buried in Ryabivka 3 were only 5 m or less apart.[155] Three kurgans at Mala Ternivka each contained an Early Medieval grave but, in the lack of a published cemetery map, there is no information about the distance between them.[156] The mounds at Lebedi IV and Khristoforivka held two graves each.[157]

Thanks partially to development-led archaeology more and more burials without a kurgan have been unearthed lately in Ukraine and Russia. As a result, 'moundless' graves make slightly less than a fifth of all known early medieval burials today. This burial custom seems to have been relatively common in 'post-Hun' times,[158] while among Sivashivka-type graves, those without a mound used to be characteristic mainly of the forest-steppe region and the Crimea, while the Serbin cemetery is the first of this kind by the eastern coast of the Sea of Azov.[159]

Ditches surrounding graves have generally been associated with the renewal of old mounds or the construction of new ones.[160] Ditches were discovered around an early medieval grave in Mound 1 at Vostochny Malai II, Mound 3 of Sivashivka, and Mound 4 Lebedi IV in Eastern Europe (Fig. 4.3).[161] The ditches in the first two cases were circular, while the last was rectangular with rounded corners.

150 Ambroz 1982.

151 Komar et al. 2006, 365–366.

152 For analogies in Turkic graves, see Kubarev 2017, 201–206.

153 Sokolov – Gulyás 2023b, 289.

154 Cf. Sokolov – Gulyás 2023a, 32, Fig. 2.

155 Oblomsky – Terpilovsky 1993, 167.

156 Komar et al. 2006, 335–345. Ruslan Orlov mentions three more graves which have not been published (cf. Orlov 1985, 100, Tab. 5).

157 Skarbovenko – Lifanov 2012, 24–25; Prihodnyuk – Fomenko 2003, 113–114.

158 Kazansky 2020, 93.

159 Komar 2013, 713; Sokolov – Gulyás 2023a; Sokolov – Gulyás 2023b.

160 See Türk 2014, 138 with more literature.

161 Limberis – Marchenko 2011, 420–421; Komar et al. 2006, 245; Skarbovenko – Lifanov 2012, 24–25.

The ditches in Malai and Lebedi contained animal remains. It must be noted that the area around the graves the ditches in Eastern Europe delimit are bigger than in the Carpathian Basin, indicating that the mounds possibly erected in the steppe region were generally larger.

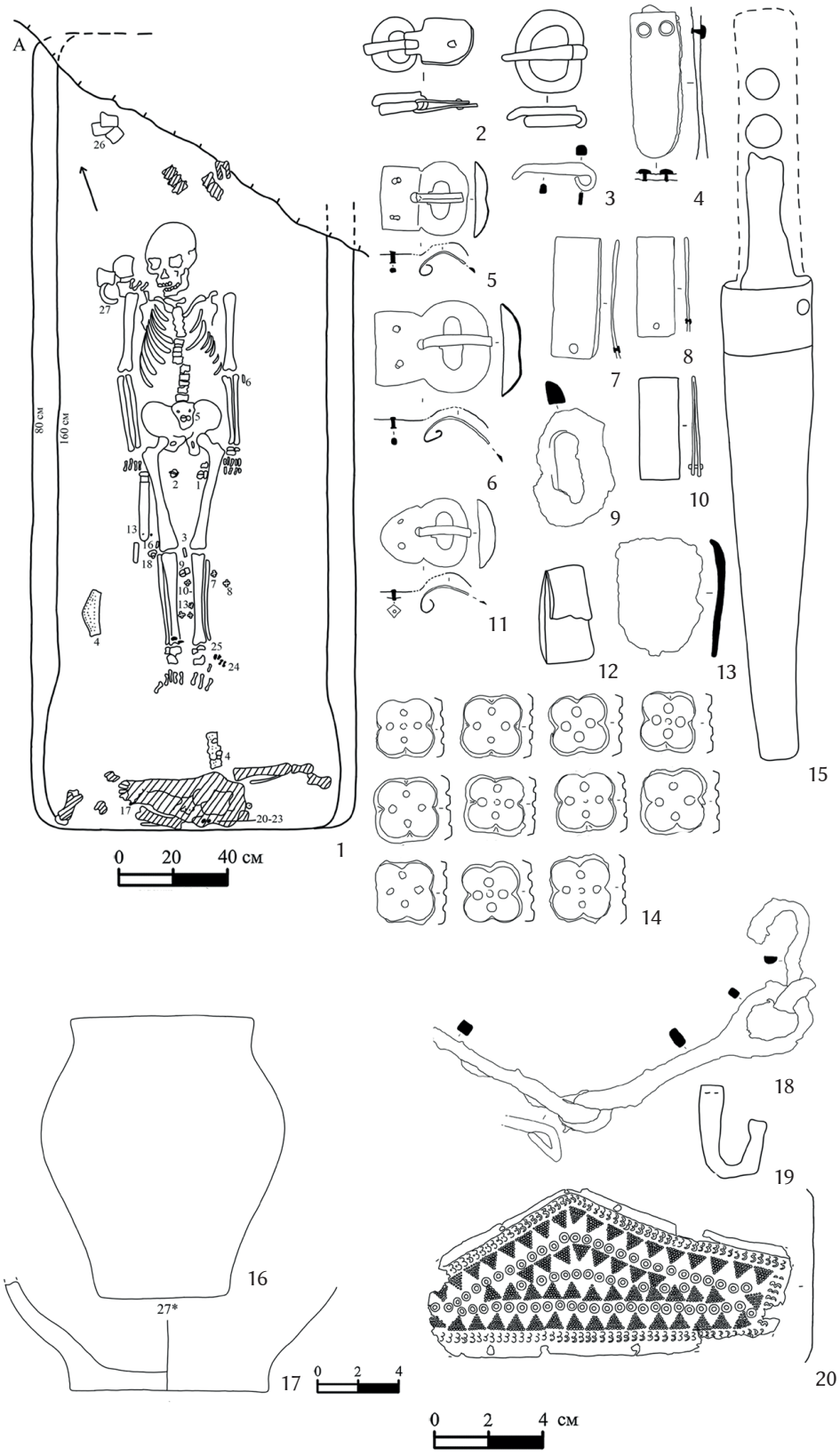


Fig. 26. Grave 46 of Komintern II (after Kazakov 2021)

Bronze Age or Scythian mounds in the Eastern European steppe were frequently reused as burial grounds.[162] While the practice can be traced back to the Hun Period, most examples date from the 6th–7th centuries AD.[163] Previously, Szentes-Lapistó was the only grave in the Carpathian Basin thought to have been dug into the mantle of a prehistoric mound.[164] A horse burial was found in the neolithic *tell* of Szeghalom-Kovácshalom,[165] akin to Mound 6 of Dudeştii Vechi-Bucova Pusta in Romania.[166] It is not known whether the creators of these graves were aware that the *tell*s were man-made when they chose them for the burials, but they surely paid some attention to relics of the past, as indicated by the polished stone axe and other Neolithic objects in a goldsmith's grave unearthed at Kisújszállás.[167]

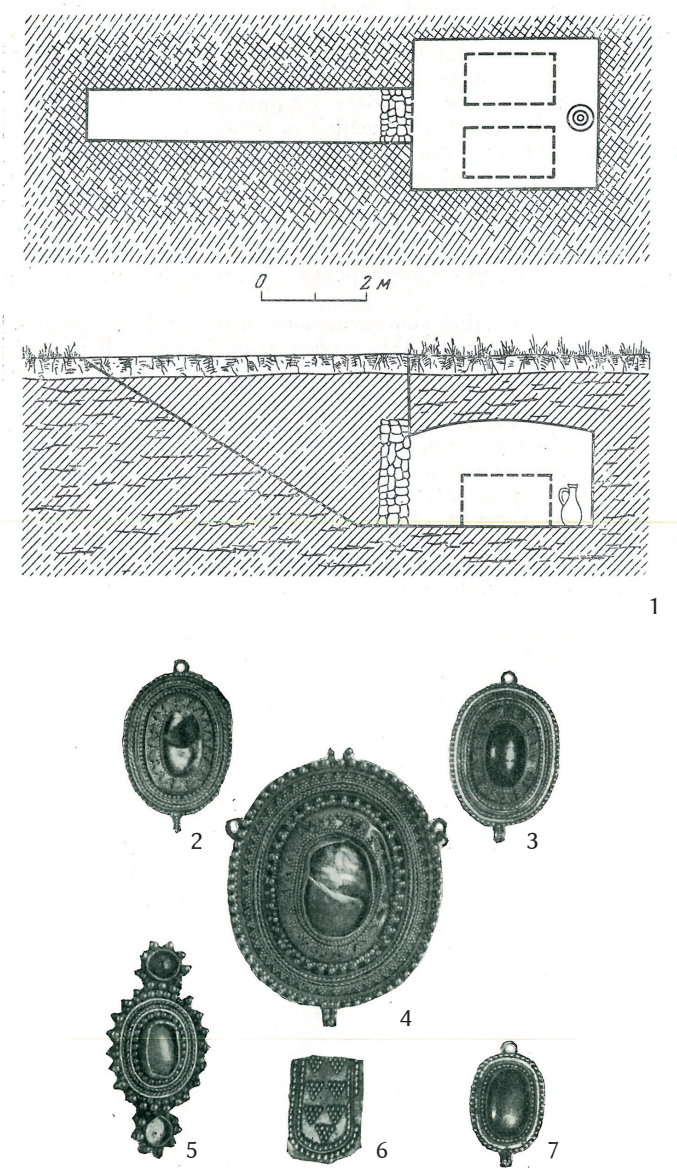


Fig. 27. Crypt from Ufa (after Akhmerov 1970)

162 Rashev 2007, 70.

163 E.g., Grave 2 of Mound 8 at Kubey (Zasetskaya 1994, 193).

164 Lőrinczy 1992b, 120, Anm. 39.

165 Szeghalmy 1913, 140–141.

166 Kisléghi Nagy 1911, 163.

167 Rácz 2014, 164.

During the Soviet era, the topsoil layer on excavations was usually removed by hand, which in many cases made it possible for archaeologists to observe and record the traces of ritual actions around the graves. A burnt spot with the fragments of two or three vessels and silver belt mounts was documented near the Early Medieval burial in Mound 3 at Ilovatka;[168] an amphora and a horse skull were found in Mound 8 at Bogachevka;[169] and five sherds from an amphora and a wheel-turned bowl were found among the stones in Mound 2 at Molochnoe.[170] A horse bit and iron girth buckles were recovered from a separate pit next to an Early Medieval burial in Mound XIV at Dymovka; however, as the grave was unearthed in the 19th century and the objects did not survive, one cannot tell for sure whether they really belonged to the burial.[171] The mantle of the mound at Vostochny Malai and the perimeter ditch contained the remains of thirteen horses, two cattle, a horse bit, sherds of a grey pot, and two cauldrons.[172]

About one in ten burials were oriented W–E or NW–SE. Graves oriented this way first appeared in the 'post-Hun' Period, and their number only arose modestly in the next period.[173] One of the key characteristics of the Vostochny Malai-type burials, described by Oleksy Komar, is NW–SE orientation (Fig. 6.1, Fig. 32.1).[174] N–S orientation became typical in the Eastern European steppe from the Late Sarmatian Period, having been dominant especially in the Hun Period[175] and gradually losing ground from the mid-6th century AD (when almost every fourth grave was still oriented this way). Oleksy Komar linked N–S orientation with various Bulgarian tribes.[176]

Graves with a sidewall niche are very common in the record of the Eastern European steppe; approximately a third of the examined graves were of this type. Contrary to earlier hypotheses, such graves may be everywhere in the Eastern European steppe.[177] Their structure is practically identical to those in the Carpathian Basin; the sidewall niche is usually on the northern side of E–W-oriented graves and on the western side of the N–S-oriented ones. There are only a few outliers, e.g., Grave 3 of Mound 24 at Mala Ternivka.[178] The cemeteries of Derecske-Bikás-dűlő and Szegvár-Oromdűlő in the Carpathian Basin, respectively, contained a single grave of this type each.[179]

Previously, the understanding of how the grave type with an end wall shaft had developed was largely determined by the lack of analogies from the Early Avar Period of the Eurasian steppe.[180] In this respect, Grave 12 of Mound 7 at Khristoforivka in the Southern Bug Region is a unique feature: the shaft for the human body was built at the shorter, eastern end of the main shaft but their axes did not align (Fig. 31.1).[181] Thus, this grave may represent a transition between graves with a sidewall niche and those with an end wall shaft. Similar graves with an end wall shaft in the Carpathian Basin are only known from the cemetery of Makó-Mikócsa-halom.[182]

168 Smirnov 1959, 220.

169 Gening – Korpusova 1989, 4–5.

170 Gavrilov – Toshchev 2014, 56.

171 Aybabin 1985, 197.

172 Limberis – Marchenko 2011, 420–421.

173 Kazansky 2020, 93–94; Komar et al. 2006, 362, Ris. 50. Of all the sites published in the last ten years, Grave 39 of Dugino X was oriented to WNW (Prokofiev 2014, 300–302).

174 Komar 2013, 684.

175 Moshkova 2009, 93; Zasetskaya 1994, 198–199, Pril. 2.

176 Komar et al. 2006, 369.

177 According to Péter Somogyi's earlier assumption, these are only typical of the Volga Region (Somogyi 1987, 145).

178 Komar et al. 2006, 344, Ris. 44.1.

179 Hága 2021, 16, 6. kép; Lőrinczy 2020, 230. kép 1.

180 Bálint 1993, 221.

181 Prihodnyuk – Fomenko 2003, 111, Fig. 2.1.

182 Balogh 2017, 56.

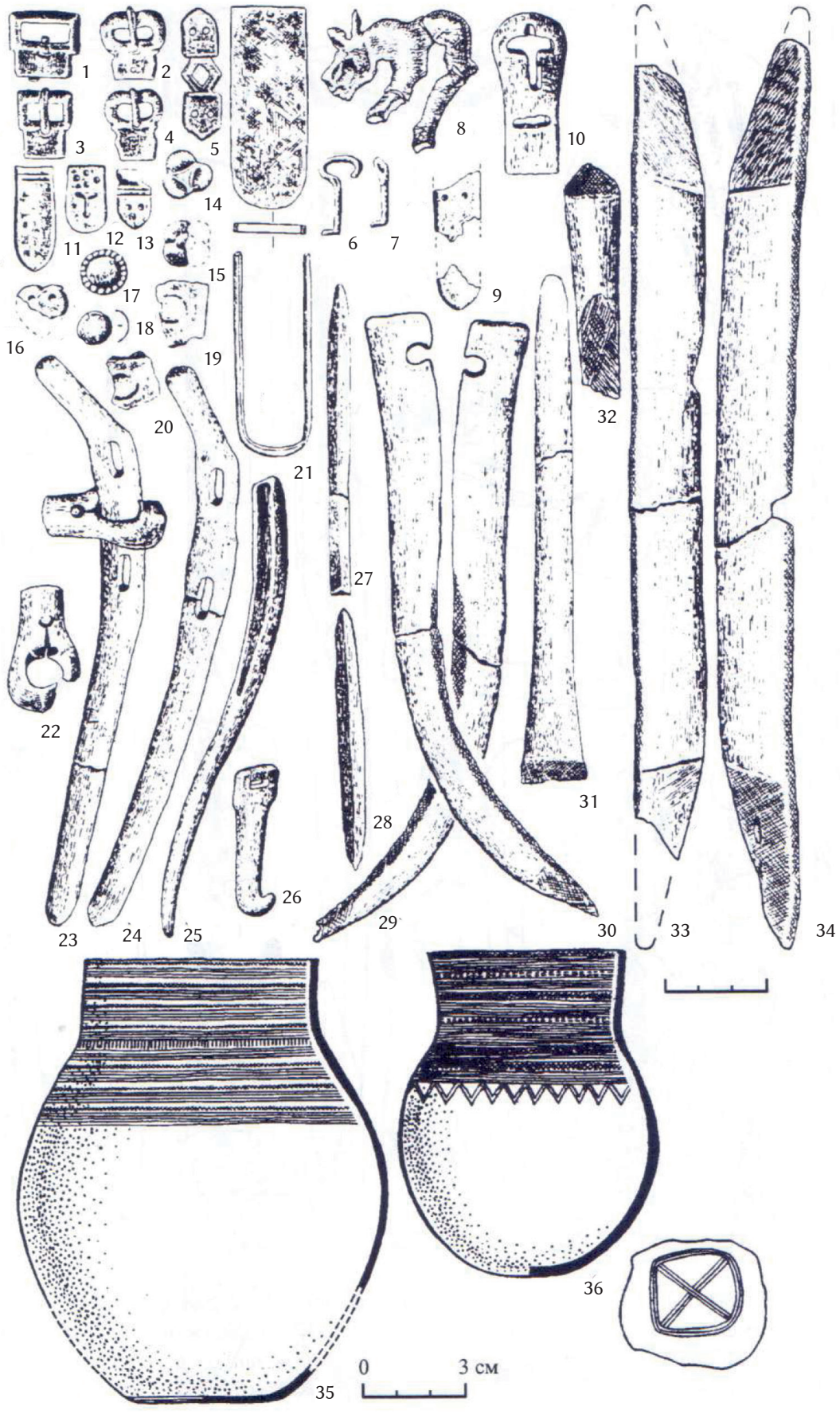


Fig. 28. Burial from Novo-Bikkino (after Kruglov 2005)

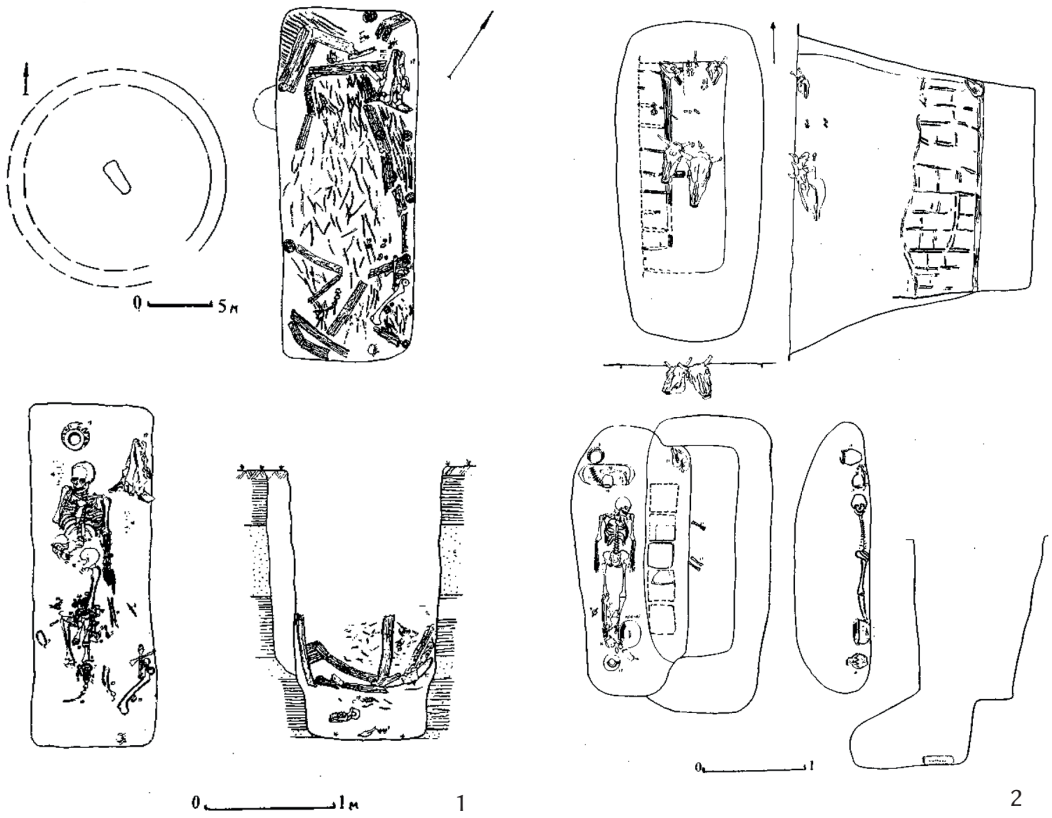


Fig. 29. 'Nomadic' graves from the Altynasar cemetery. 1 – Grave 488, 2 – Grave 266 (after Levina 1996)

The climatic conditions of the Carpathian Basin are not favourable for the survival of wooden burial beds and structures. The coffin in the lavish horse burial at Derecske-Bikás-dűlő was placed on a spread-out lamellar armour (Fig. 32.2).[183] The same phenomenon was also documented in Grave 12 of Mound 1 at Vostochny Malai–II in the Kuban Region (Fig. 32.1).[184] The identical grave form and the complete horse skeleton in the main shaft also link the two burials.

The leg bones of a dog in anatomical order were found on the ledge in Grave 2 of Mound 6 at Prepolovenka (Fig. 7.1).[185] Dog remains are also known from Grave 1 of Mound 6 in Glinoe 'Dot'. The archaeologists unearthing the feature believe that the body of the decapitated animal, found in a layer above the grave, was left behind by grave robbers.[186] Both whole and incomplete dog skeletons were observed in graves in the Carpathian Basin, mostly in the Maros Valley, with a few occurrences near Kevermes and Öcsöd in the north.[187] Their interpretation is unclear: according to some, they could have been status markers, but they were frequently added to poor graves, which contradicts this theory.[188] This also holds for the two burials in the Eastern European steppe.

Complete horse skeletons are known from seven graves in Eastern Europe.[189] All but one of these were lavishly furinshed burials with weapons and belt sets, implying that the custom was associat-

183 Hága 2021, 16, 6. kép.

184 Limberis – Marchenko 2011, 422, Ris. 4.

185 The publication describes them as wolf remains (Bogachev 2011, 223).

186 Krasnoperov et al. 2022, 184.

187 Balogh 2015, 46–48.

188 Balogh 2015, 48. Grave 7 of Öcsöd-MRT 96a is particularly poor (Madaras 2004, 340).

189 Gulyás et al. 2021a, 289, Tab. 3. Grave 3 in Ryabivka-3 contained the remains of a horse cut in half (Oblomsky – Terpilovsky 1993, 170).

Fig. 30. Burials from the Karakabak cemetery. 1–12 – Grave 2, 2–18 – Grave 1 (after Astafiev – Bogdanov 2020a)

ed with individuals of high social status (Fig. 6.1–2). In the Carpathian Basin, 44 graves with Eastern European steppe traditions contained complete horse skeletons.[190] Gábor Lőrinczy suggested earlier that the custom of interring complete horses is an Avar influence;[191] however, the burials containing them do not differ in any other respect from other Pontic steppe-style graves in the Carpathian Basin; therefore, one may better see social rather than cultural agents at work behind this custom.

In the steppe region, flayed horses were first added to graves during the Hun Period (Fig. 33.1–2); only three graves containing this kind of offering are known from the end of the 4th and the mid-5th century AD.[192] The rite is common amongst Sivashivka-type burials, occurring in more than a third of the known graves. Most animals were separated from the deceased in the grave.[193] The only well-documented exception is Grave 1 of Mound 8 at Staronizhesteblievskaya (Fig. 5.2), where the horse remains were on the right side of the deceased.[194] A single burial with such an arrangement, the isolated grave from Biharkeresztes-Lencséshát, is known from the Carpathian Basin (Fig. 5.1).[195]

Horse burials with the horse harness not in a functional position are also known from Eastern Europe. The horse bit in Grave 2 of Mound 66 at Tsarev was placed on the ledge along a long wall, slightly away from the horse's skull (Fig. 34.1).[196] Grave 12 of Mound 1 at Verkhnepogromnoe had ledges along both long walls of the grave pit. While the horse remains were placed on the level of the ledges above the deceased, the horse bit was laid by his left forearm.[197] Also, the horse gear in Grave

190 Gulyás et al. 2021a, 285.
191 Lőrinczy – Somogyi 2018, 241.
192 Zasetskaya 1994, 19–21.
193 Rashev 2007, 94.
194 Atavin 1996, 230.
195 Lőrinczy 2015, 159.
196 Kruglov 2013, 104.
197 Shilov 1975, 45–47.

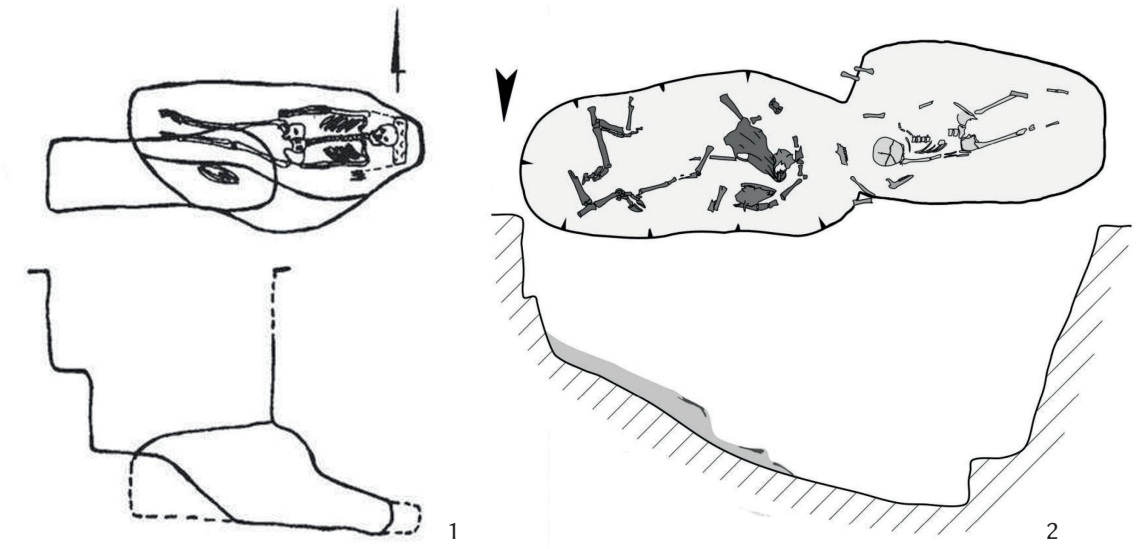


Fig. 31. Grave with an end wall shaft from Eastern Europe and its analogy from the Carpathian Basin. 1 – Grave 12 of Mound 7 at Khristoforivka, 2 – Feature 136 of Makó-Mikócsa-halom (1 – after Prihodnyuk – Fomenko 2003, 2 – Balogh 2017)

12 of Matyukhin Bugor was not on the horse but in a pile at the mouth of the sidewall niche.[198] The stirrup in Grave 11 of Mound 1 at Kovalivka was found east of the horse skull (Fig. 34.2).[199]

Three burials with flayed cattle remains are known from the Eastern European steppe; all were found east of the Volga River and belong to the 'post-Hun' Period (Fig. 35.1).[200] The custom in the region can be traced back to the Hun Period.[201] Cattles are typical animal offerings in burials of females in Eastern Europe. This pattern can also be seen in the Carpathian Basin.[202] Besides, partial cattle offerings are also known from Central Asia. A cattle head, leg bones, and some ribs were discovered in the main shaft of a N–S oriented grave in Kurgan 1 at Karatobe II in north-western Kazakhstan (Fig. 35.2).[203] The skull and limbs, the first cervical vertebrae, a thigh bone, and two ribs were discovered in Grave 2 of Karakabak (Fig. 35.3).[204] The skulls and leg bones of a horse and a cattle were discovered on the left side of the human remains in the triple burial in Mound 19 at Kanattas in central Kazakhstan.[205] Several similar burials have been found in the distribution area of the Dzhetyasar Culture (Fig. 29); e.g., the skulls and leg bones of two animals were discovered in Grave 266 in Altynasar.[206]

In the Eastern European steppe region, the skull and extremities of a sheep or goat were not separated from the deceased in the grave in thirteen cases.[207] In graves with a sidewall niche, the remains were in the niches, while in simple shaft graves, on the level of the skeleton behind the skull or at the feet of the deceased (Fig. 36). This type of animal offering occurred regardless of the sex and age

198 Ishaev – Smolyak 2017, 163, Ris. 3.

199 Somogyi 1997, 106.

200 Smirnov 1959, 303–304; Bogachev 2011, 223; Kostyukov 1995, 154.

201 Zasetskaya 1994, 185.

202 Gulyás 2023, 166.

203 Botalov 2013, 66, 67, Ris. 10.

204 Astafiev – Bogdanov 2020a, 182–183.

205 Kadyrbaev 1959, 180–181.

206 Levina 1996, 106.

207 Gulyás – Lőrinczy 2020, 186; Sokolov – Gulyás 2023a, 42; Sokolov – Gulyás 2023b, 285.

at death of the deceased. Previously, most such graves in the Carpathian Basin were known from Szegvár-Oromdűlő, but recently, seven occurrences were reported from Tiszakürt-Zsilke-tanya.[208]

Only Andrei Atavin and Ivan Sinitsyn paid special attention to the flaying technique, observing the same cut-flaying method in the burials on the eastern coast of the Azov Sea and a grave in Mound 111 at Berezhnovka II[209] that appears in Early Avar graves in the Carpathian Basin (the leg bones were not severed at the joints, but the shin bones were chopped in two). The illustrations in their articles show that this technique was quite widespread throughout the steppe, including, e.g., Grave 2 of Mound 2 at Sivashske (Fig. 37.1), grave in Mound 5 at Lebedi IV (Fig. 37.2) or grave 12 in Serbin 1.[210] Recent analyses have revealed that not only horses but also small ruminants—e.g., the sheep in Grave 39 in Dugino X and Grave 14 in Serbin 1—were flayed this way.[211]

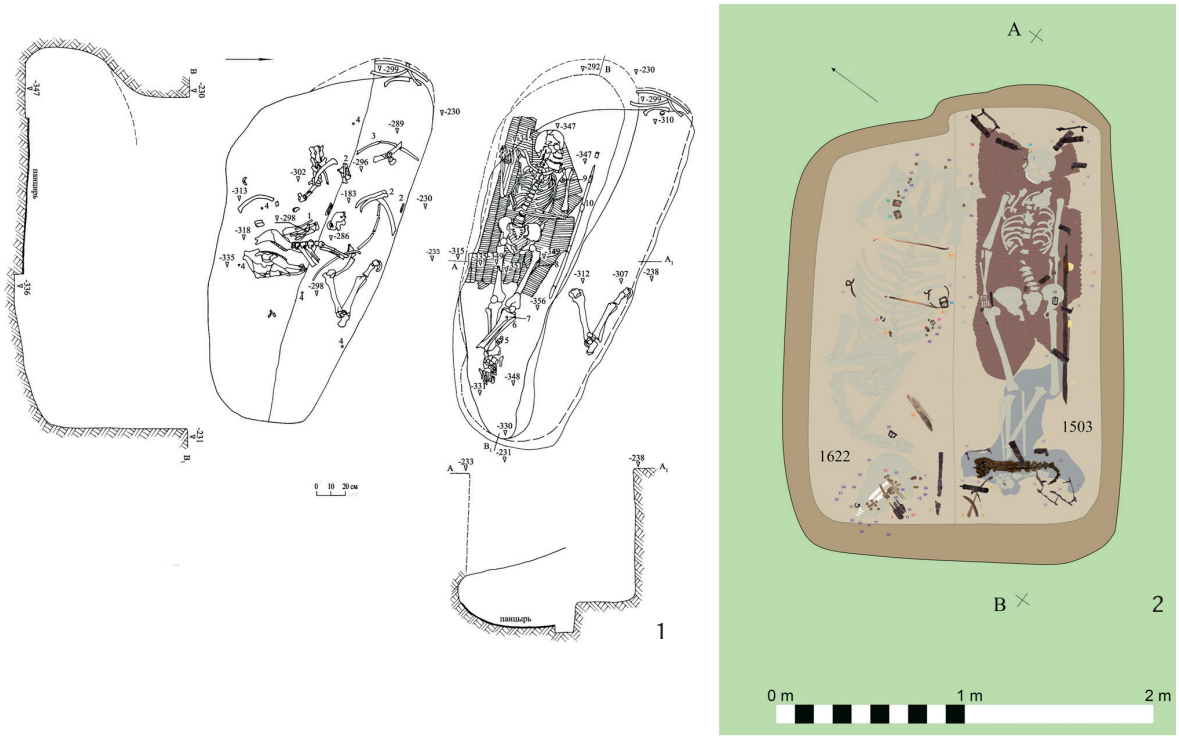


Fig. 32. Lamellar armour spread under the deceased. 1 – Grave 12 of Mound 1 at Vostochny Malai, 2 – Derecske-Bikás-dűlő (1 – after Limberis – Marchenko 2011, 2 – after Hága 2021)

Sheep rumps were discovered in seven of the examined burials, two from the 'post-Hun' Period, the rest from a 6th–7th-century AD context. The position of the meat dish in the grave was fixed: in five cases, the rump was placed next to the head (Fig. 8.1), in one case, next to the left upper arm, and in one grave, to the level of the horse. In the latter two cases, the remains of a wooden plate were observed under the bones.[212] The rite first emerged in Eastern Europe in the Hun Period (e.g., Grave 793 in Üllő 9 in the Carpathian Basin (Fig. 33.2) and Grave 3 of Mound 12 at Leninsk 3 in the Volga Region).[213]

208 Gulyás et al. 2023, 354.

209 Atavin 1996, 209; Sinitsyn 1960, 106.

210 Komar et al. 2006, 311, Ris. 30; Skarbovenko – Lifanov 2012, 40, Ris. 6; Sokolov – Gulyás 2023a, 44.

211 Prokofiev 2014, 301, Ris. 118, 5; Sokolov – Gulyás 2023a, 44.

212 Gulyás et al. 2019, 119–120.

213 Kulcsár 2018, 384; Zasetskaya 1994, 185–186.

In addition to the similarities mentioned above, substantial differences may be seen between the burial customs of the analysed communities in the Carpathian Basin and the Eastern European steppe. No analogies to the burials with flayed camel skins in the Ural Mountains or sidewall niches closed with stone slabs are known from the West, which may be explained by differences in climatic and geological conditions.[214] The scarcity of flayed cattle skins in the northern Pontic Region, in my opinion, is due to the low number of graves of females. The fact that only one grave with an end wall shaft has ever been found in Eastern Europe is probably due to nothing else but the unfavourable research situation and the lack of observations. However, some burial customs in the communities of steppe origin in the Carpathian Basin have emerged as a result of interactions with various groups. Graves with posthole structures, for example, were frequent in communities with Merovingian ties in eastern Transdanubia.[215] While previously, István Bóna traced the origins of iron-clasped coffins back to Inner Asia,[216] it is more likely that they represent a local influence in the cemeteries of the Trans-Tisza Region, as such coffins were common in the Gepid Period (Fig. 32.2).[217] As for food offerings, the most conspicuous phenomenon in Eastern Europe is the absence of pork as a meat dish. Pork meat offerings are also rare in steppe-style burials in the Carpathian Basin, and their presence may be connected with settling down.[218]

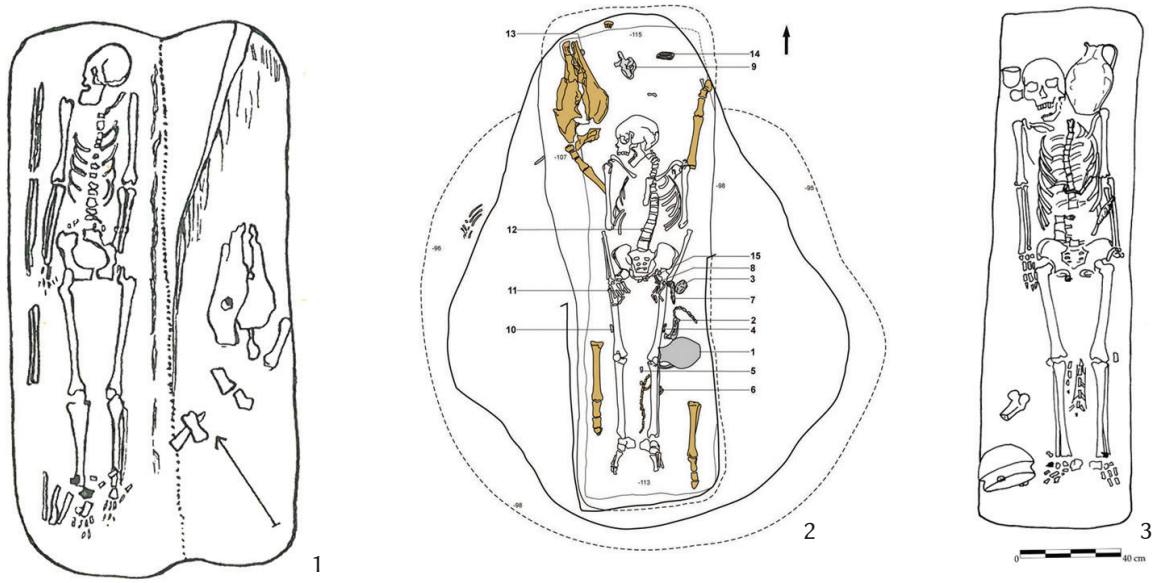


Fig. 33. Hun burials in Eastern and Central Europe. 1 – Grave 2 of Mound 36 at Pokrovsk, 2 – Grave 793 at Üllő 9, 3 – Árpás (1 – after Zasetskaya 1994, 2 – after Kulcsár 2018, 3 – after Tomka 2001)

I believe that the presented analogies provide ample evidence of the close relationship between the two groups, although the exact nature of that remains unclear. As Sivashivka-type burials are roughly contemporary with Early Avar ones, they cannot be considered a predecessor of the phenomena in the examined Carpathian Basin archaeological record. In this regard, 'post-Hun' Period graves require special investigation, albeit the small number of documented burials currently prevents one from taking general conclusions. However, some of the analysed rites first emerged in the Hun Period: that record holds the oldest known N–S (and, in a few cases, NE–SW) directed graves,

214 Gulyás 2021a, 143.
215 Balogh 2016, 44–45.
216 Bóna 1979, 14–15.
217 Bóna – Nagy 2002, 82–89.
218 Gulyás et al. 2023, 359.

some graves with a sidewall niche and others with ledges, flayed horse and cattle hides, typically buried separately from the deceased, and several burials with vessels near the skull (Fig. 33.1).[219] Identifying the record of Huns in Central Europe is difficult, and only a few burials could indisputably be attributed to them.[220] However, several burials have recently come to light, which reflect a burial rite closely related to the steppe region. Burials with flayed horse hides are reported from sites at Arzignano in northern Italy, Üllő in central Hungary, and Sângeorgiu de Mureş in Transylvania (Mureş County, Romania).[221] Sheep rumps were placed close to the deceased in Üllő and Árpás (Fig. 33.2–3).[222] This evidence attests to a continuity of rite between the end of the 4th and the middle third of the 7th century AD.[223] As the number of steppe burials excavated under controlled circumstances is pretty low, one cannot tell whether the currently available archaeological material is suitable for drawing general conclusions.

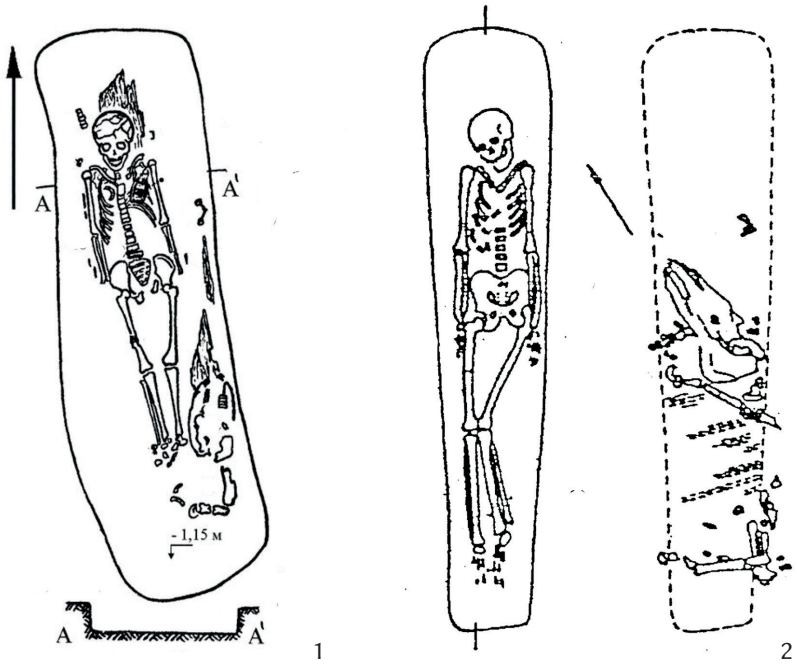


Fig. 34. Horse equipment in a non-functional position. 1 – Grave 2 of Mound 66 at Tsarev, 2 – Grave 11 of Mound 1 at Kovalivka (1 – after Kruglov 2013, 2 – after Somogyi 1997)

Statistical methods were employed for assessing the relevance of and specifying the groups previously distinguished in the Eastern European and Carpathian Basin record by archaeological methods. In the Eastern European record, the three graves classified as Vostochny Malai-type burials (Grave 12 of Mound 1 at Vostochny Malai–II, Grace 6 of Mound 1 at Greki–I, and Grave 3 of Mound 5 at Vinogradnoe) had been created according to practically identical rites and form a closed group. Besides, these sites are relatively close to each other, raising the possibility that the mourners had personal connections. This burial rite is clearly distinct from that of the other two groups, which, albeit could stem from a different cultural background, seems rather a way of social representation characteristic of the Sea of Azov Region.

219 For an overview of the burial rites of the Hun Period, see Zasetskaya 1994, 16–23.

220 Tejral 2011, 330.

221 Possenti 2011, 431; Dobos et. al 2021, 329; Kulcsár 2018, 381–384.

222 Kulcsár 2018, 384; Tomka 2001, 163.

223 Aleksandr Ajbabin came to the same conclusion (Ajbabin 2011, 88).

Correspondence analysis revealed no significant difference between Avilovka- and Sivashivka-type burials, the dissimilarities showing in minor details which were not analysed by statistical means, like the folding of the hides. N–S orientation, graves with a sidewall niche, and folded animal hides placed by the feet of the deceased are present in two larger areas: the Volga–Ural Region (the cemeteries of the Turbasli–Imenkovo cultural unit and the Kushnarenkovo Culture) and Central Asia (the Dzhetyasar Culture and the nomadic burials of Central and Western Kazakhstan). Avilovka-type burials were substantially more similar to these groups than Sivashivka-type graves. This resemblance might also be explained by geographical proximity, as Avilovka-type burials are prevalent east of the Don, primarily in the Volga Region. However, further enquiry is required to clarify the

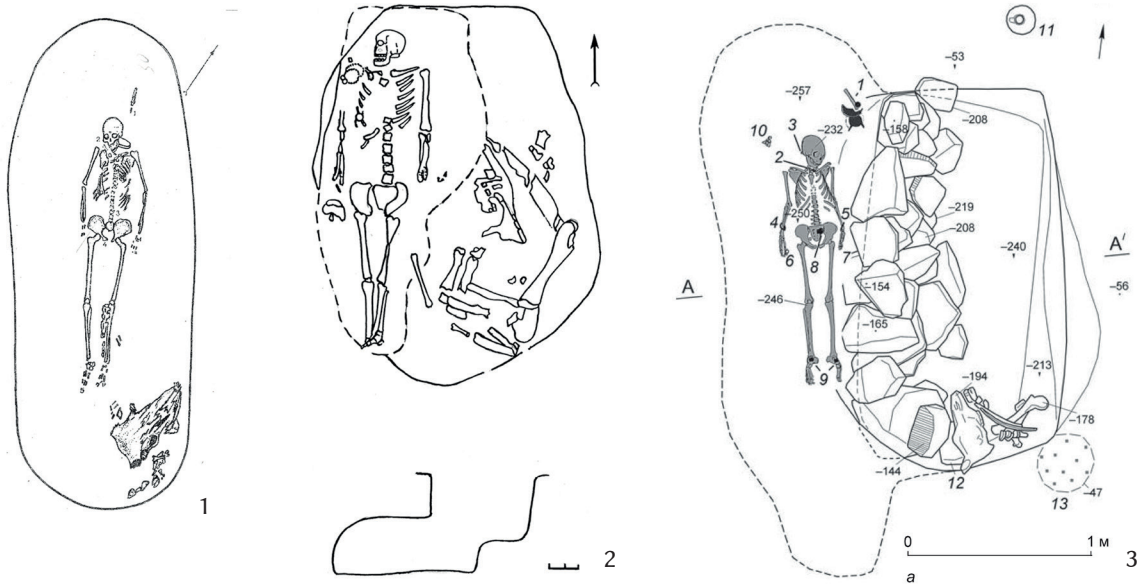


Fig. 35. Burials with cattle remains in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. 1 – Mound 5 at Kamenny Ambar 5, 2 – Mound 1 at Karatobe II, 3 – Grave 2 at Karakabak (1 – after Kostyukov 1995, 2 – after Botalov 2013, 3 – after Astafiev – Bogdanov 2020b)

picture.

Cluster analysis distinguished two groups of nearly the same size amongst Sivashivka-type burials. Group 1 is characterised by NE–SW directing of the graves, flayed horse skeletons, and the frequent addition of pottery vessels. E–W and N–S orientation, on the other hand, predominated in Group 2, where half of the graves had a sidewall niche, one in four contained the skull and leg bones of horses, and one in five that of small ruminants, while vessels were placed in every fourth grave on average. Differences in time and space can also be seen between the two groups, but one may speak about tendencies rather than exclusivity here: the burials of Group 2 could be dated to the 6th century AD and include most 'post-Hun' burials and the most archaic of the Sivashivka-type burials, while Group 1 may be confidently dated to the end of the 6th and the 7th centuries AD. Most early sites lay near the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov, while the graves in the forest-steppe zone, with one exception, belong to the first group.

Cluster analysis classified the 1,015 burials from the Carpathian Basin included in the study into eleven categories. As four comprised burials with incomplete data, only seven could be regarded as 'real' (Tab. 1). Cluster A is characterised by E–W orientation and simple shaft graves distributed evenly between the Körös and Aranka Rivers. Graves of this group contain fewer animal remains than the average, and children are overrepresented amongst the age groups.

Graves of Cluster B are characterised by W–E orientation, a predominance of simple grave forms, and a low occurrence of animal offerings. At least some people buried in these graves arrived in the

Trans-Tisza Region from other parts of the Carpathian Basin. Graves of this cluster concentrate in the Nyíri-Mezőség Region and the western half of the area between the Körös, Tisza, and Maros Rivers. The main defining characteristic of this cluster is graves with a W–E orientation that counts as 'reversed' within some sites.

With 345 graves, Cluster C is the largest. It is distinguished by an abundance of graves with an end wall shaft and animal offerings. The typical orientations are E–W and NE–SW. Graves of this cluster are scattered primarily along the Tisza and Maros Rivers, with a particular concentration in the Szegvár-Oromdűlő cemetery. The graves classified here are generally better furnished than the average, implying that the emergence of the cluster is a result of internal economic and social development.

The orientation of half of the burials in Cluster D is unknown, while the other half are N–S oriented. The most common grave type is the simple shaft grave. Graves of this cluster are poor in items and contain no vessel at all, but the occurrence of flayed horses is remarkably high. Burials of this cluster have been found beside the Trans-Tisza region in the cemeteries of Kölked-Feketekapu B

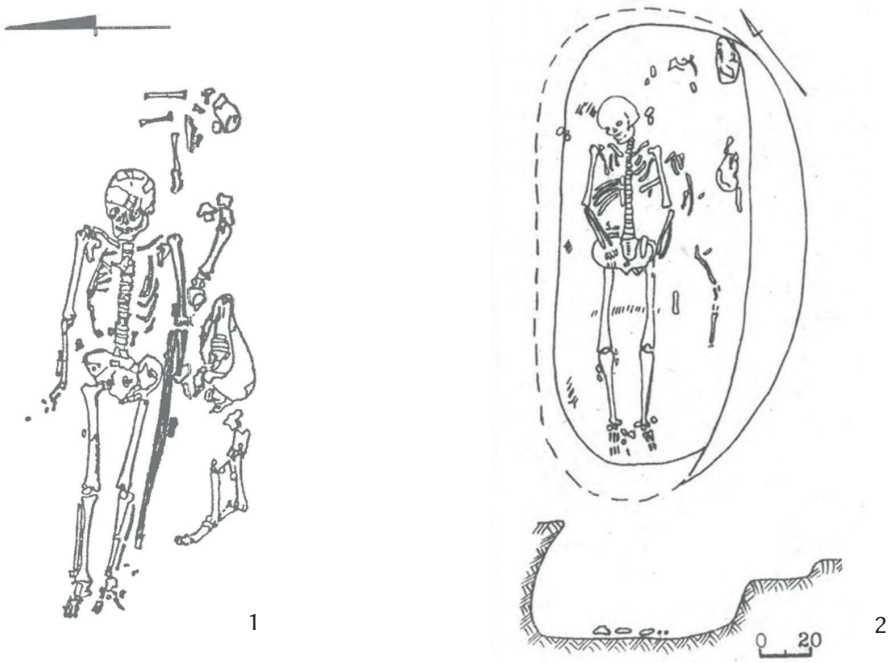


Fig. 36. Sheep skins placed in the grave unseparated from the deceased. 1 – Grave 2 of Mound 29 at Chapaevsky, 2 – Grave 12 of Mound 8 at Bogachevka (1 – after Atavin 1996, 2 – after Gulyás – Lőrinczy 2020)

and Szekszárd-Bogyiszlói út in south-east Transdanubia.

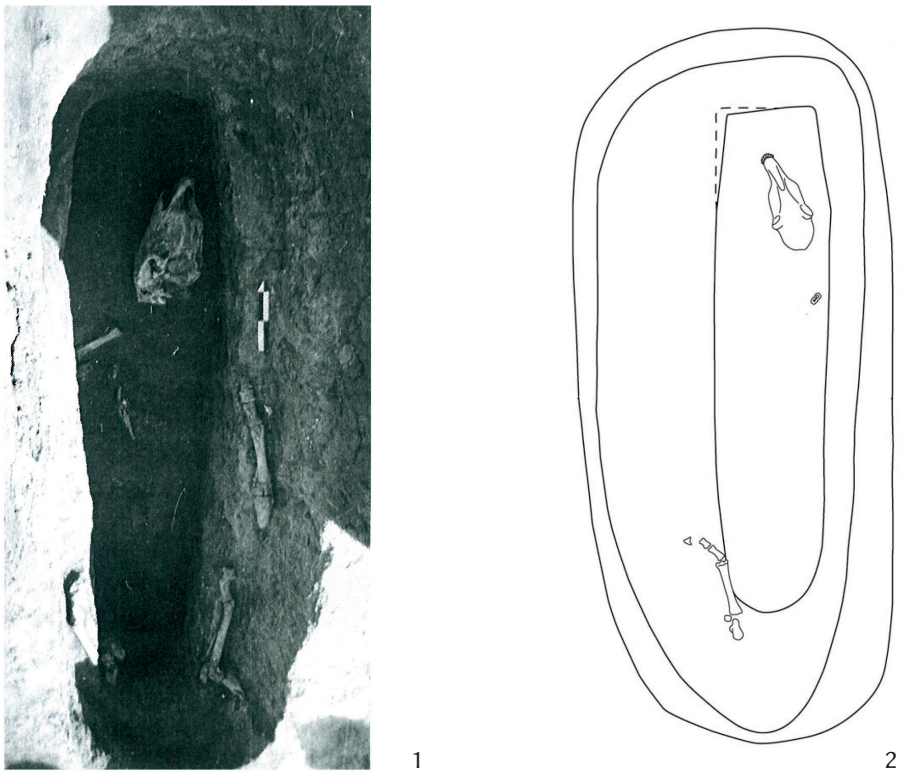
Cluster E is characterised by NE–SW orientation and a widespread use of graves with a sidewall niche. Most graves containing a complete horse were classified here, but the occurrence rate of flayed horses and small ruminants is also higher than the average, just like that of sheep dish offerings and pots. Most burials of this cluster are concentrating near the Tisza and the Száraz-ér rivers.

NE–SW orienting of graves is also common in Cluster G, but most burials there are simple shaft graves, and animal offerings are rare. Over half of the graves are of children, adolescents, and the poor. Save for a few exceptions, all burials of this cluster are known from along the Tisza River and the lands between the Maros and Aranka Rivers.

Cluster I is characterised by N–S or NE–SW-oriented graves with an end wall shaft, in which animal offerings are substantially less common than in Cluster C. Graves of this cluster—mostly those

of males, with considerably fewer women and children—are scattered by the estuaries of the Maros, Körös, and Tisza Rivers.

Graves of these clusters may appear together within a site; in this respect, only the cemeteries of Kiszombor B and Szentes-Donát are homogenous, all graves belonging to Cluster A. Two main categories could be determined based on the distribution of graves by cluster within the sites; one can be subdivided into two subgroups. Clusters B, D, and I mix in the cemeteries of the first main category. Clusters A, G and I dominate the first subgroup of the second main category and clusters A and C the other. Each group is present to varying degrees in every region. Cluster B predominates the area near the Körös River, while clusters D and I south-eastern Transdanubia. Cluster



1 2

Fig. 37. Bone-cut flayed horse remains. 1 – Grave 2 of Mound 2 at Sivashske, 2 – Mound 5 at Lebedi IV (1 – after Komar et al. 2006, 2 – after Skarbovenko – Lifanov 2012)

A is prevalent in the lands between the Körös, Tisza, and Maros rivers, whereas cluster C in the cemeteries at Szegvár-Oromdűlő, Kövegy-Nagy-földek, and Deszk L.

The seven Carpathian Basin clusters and the two groups of Sivashivka-type burials were compared using cluster analysis (Fig. 38). Due to the significant number of graves with an end wall shaft and a large amount of animal offerings, Cluster C is the farthest away from the Eastern European material in general, corroborating my hypothesis that the ritual practices reflected by younger burials in the Maros Valley and at Szegvár-Oromdűlő evolved locally.[224] Group 1 of the Sivashivka-type burials is the most closely related to Cluster G, characterised by NE–SW orientation, a predominance of simple shaft graves, and a high proportion of pottery vessels. Graves of Cluster G are mostly of children and less affluent adults. Groups like these, closer to the periphery of society, are often more conservative in material culture and ideology, which may explain the similarity.[225] Cluster E (characterised

224 Lőrinczy 2022, 275.

225 Burmeister 2000, 542.

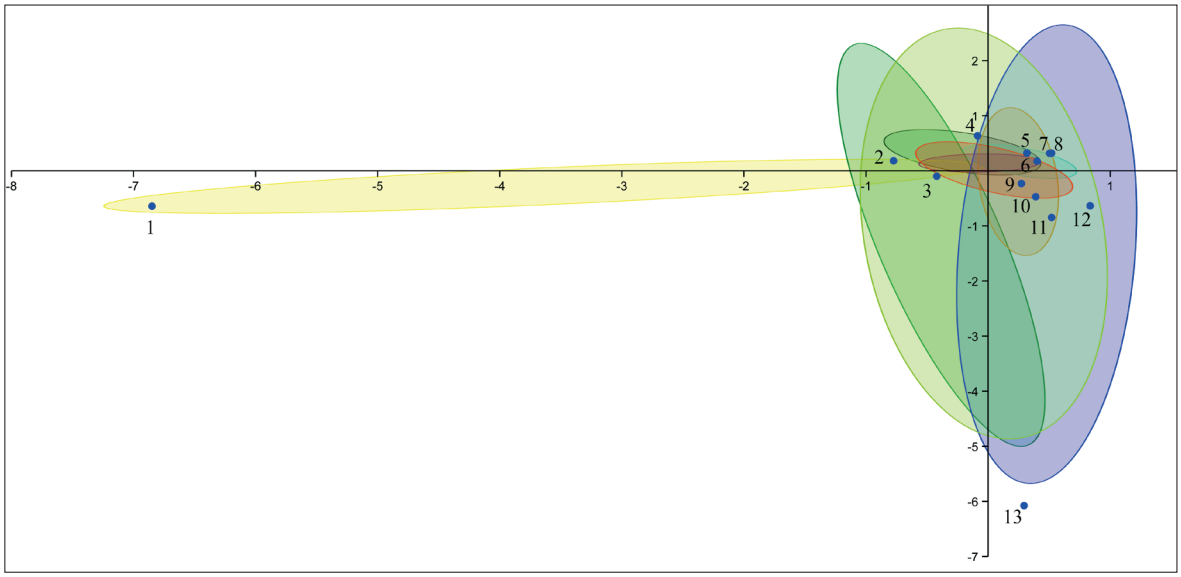


Fig. 38. Correspondence analysis chart of clusters from the Carpathian Basin and the two Sivashivka-type burial groups. Cluster A – black, Cluster B – yellow, Cluster C – yellow, Cluster D – green, Cluster E – orange, Cluster G – purple, Cluster I – blue, Group 1 of Sivashivka-type burials – red, Group 2 of Sivashivka-type burials – light green. 1 – W–E orientation, 2 – simple shaft graves, 3 – vessels, 4 – E–W orientation, 5 – graves with flayed sheepskins, 6 – NE–SW orientation, 7 – graves with flayed cattle skins, 8 – graves with the remains of at least two animals, 9 – graves with horse hides, 10 – graves with a sidewall niche, 11 – burials with complete horse skeletons, 12 – graves with an end wall shaft, 13 – N–S orientation

Tab. 1. Prevalence of funerary practices in different clusters (in percentages)

Cluster	Number of graves	NW–SE orientation	E–W orientation	W–E orientation	N–S orientation	Shaft grave	Graves with a sidewall niche	Graves with an end wall shafts	Complete horse skeletons	Horse hides	Cattle hides	Sheep skins	More than one animal offering	Vessel
'A'	308	0	100	0	0	73.1	0	12	0.7	9.7	10.7	16.9	0	19.5
'B'	54	0	0	100	0	74.1	5.6	1.9	1.9	3.7	3.7	11.1	1.9	27.8
'C'	345	44.6	52.5	0	0.3	43.2	16.8	38.8	3.2	33.9	72.5	90.7	94.2	20
'D'	44	0	0	0	56.8	97.7	0	0	0	18.2	2.3	11.4	4.5	0
'E'	64	45.3	37.5	0	9.4	0	98.4	0	7.8	25	20.3	35.9	4.7	34.4
'G'	76	100	0	0	0	81.6	0	0	1.3	7.9	18.4	0	5.3	32.9
'I'	70	37.1	0	1.4	44.3	0	0	92.9	4.3	14.3	12.9	10	1.4	21.4

by NE–SW orientation, graves with a sidewall niche, and complete horse offerings) is largely associated with Group 2 of the Sivashivka-type burials. According to the correspondence analysis, Group 1 of the Sivashivka-type burials may also be linked with some burials in clusters C and A.

Summary

Between the mid-5th and the second third of the 7th century AD, communities with a funerary practice stemming from the nomadic material of the Hun Period in Central and Eastern Europe were scattered in the Eastern European steppe, establishing their cemeteries in the coastal areas of the Black Sea and Sea of Azov and the valleys of major rivers. The distribution of the available find assemblages in the period in focus is not even: four times as many burials belong between the second half of the 6th and the second third of the 7th century AD than in the period before that.[226]

Despite the small case number, the related communities may have played an important role in the trade and communication system of Eastern Europe, as attested by the presence of objects of steppe origin in the neighbouring areas, such as the Pashkovsky–Karpovka-type and Alanian cemeteries in the north Caucasus south of the steppe and the cemeteries of the Ryazan–Oka Region in the northern forest belt. The steppe influence in these burials is most clearly manifesting in the representation of the elite: rich graves, in many cases, contain horse harnesses and weaponry instead of local status markers. In return, the material culture of steppe peoples was affected the most first by the cities of the Bosporus and then, from the mid-6th century AD on, Byzantium. The nature of the two influences differed fundamentally: while the former transformed women's fashion, Constantinople was the main source of objects to be interpreted as military accessories (buckles and belt fittings).

The communities in the Carpathian Basin, the focus of this study, were groups from this cultural milieu. According to the current academic consensus, the first groups appeared in the Carpathian Basin at the time of the arrival of the first Avars, a theory recently confirmed by more radiocarbon data.[227] The oldest burials are known from Szegvár-Oromdűlő and the Maros Valley—but one must remember that this picture merely represents the current state of research. A comparison of the burial practices of communities in the Carpathian Basin and Eastern Europe outlined two archaic groups, one characterised by NE–SW orientation, the prevalence of simple shaft graves, and pots placed by the skull, and another, including a large number of NE–SW oriented graves with a sidewall niche, flayed horse and sheep remains, and a relatively high proportion of complete horses.

Previous research saw the record of the Early Avar Period population of the Trans-Tisza Region in the following funerary rite elements: NE–SW or E–W orientation, a high number of graves with a sidewall niche and, particularly, graves with an end wall shaft, and a large number of animal offerings.[228] This roughly corresponds to Cluster C, the distribution of which is restricted to Szegvár-Oromdűlő and the Maros Valley. In terms of grave goods, these burials are 'richer' than the other clusters, the expensive funerary rite implying better economic conditions of the related communities. No similar burials are known from Eastern Europe yet; however, as in Szegvár-Oromdűlő, several burials which radiocarbon dating determined as early belonged to this cluster, it cannot be ruled out that that way of funerary representation also has steppe origins.

Save for the cemeteries of Szekszárd-Bogyiszlói út and Kölked-Feketekapu B, the studied communities of steppe origin are linked by a relative homogeneity, in contrast to the highly varied cultural background typical of the large cemeteries of Eastern Transdanubia, which is not present in the

226 The two groups, separated artificially, overlap in time, and the classification of some graves may vary by researcher.

227 Lőrinczy 1998, 351; Gáll – Mărginean 2020.

228 Csallány 1939, 132–134; Lőrinczy 1998, 344.

Trans-Tisza Region. That does not necessarily imply that all those buried in the Trans-Tisza Region had their ancestors in Eastern Europe; clarifying that and determining what proportion of the population may have originated in Eastern Europe requires further archaeogenetical research.[229]

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