

## THE SICKLES IN GRAVES DURING THE PERIOD OF EARLY MIDDLE AGES FROM THE TERRITORY OF SLOVAKIA

During the Middle Ages, in the area of Carpathian Basin, there was an interesting phenomenon used in burial rite – a tradition to bury a man with a sickle. From the researched material from the 6<sup>th</sup> up to the 12<sup>th</sup> century, 85 pieces of sickles dating back to the second half of 7<sup>th</sup> up to the second third of 10<sup>th</sup> century were excavated in the territory of Slovakia as a part of grave goods. The character of the burial places, or graves with the sickles is varied. But from the standpoint of researching a function of the sickle in grave, it is important to study constituent indications, which separately, but mainly in connection with another ones, create a certain picture which help to solve a question about a function of the sickle in grave.

### Signs of the Burial Sites and Graves Containing the Sickles

All sickles found in Slovakia are from skeletal graves, while almost 93% were excavated on flat burial places. Seldom, this tool also occurred in burial mound dated to the end of 8<sup>th</sup> up to the 9<sup>th</sup> centuries (7% of the sickles in graves). Great rareness is a sickle from Borovce, because it is the only one excavated in niche grave podmola type.<sup>1</sup>

Nearly all sickles were found in graves of individual (95.3%). But they were also discovered in double burials in flat burial places in locality Obid grave no. 120<sup>2</sup>, in Veľký Cetín grave no. 6<sup>3</sup>, and in burial mound no. 6 in Veľké Hoste.<sup>4</sup> Almost every time, in one grave there was one sickle. The exception was equestrian grave no. 115 in Čataj containing fragments of two sickles under the soles of the dead.<sup>5</sup>

A group of sickles dated to the second half of 7<sup>th</sup> up to the second third of 10<sup>th</sup> century was excavated in 39 burial places. 44 pieces of sickles dated to the period of The Avar Khaganate were found in graves situated in 16 burial places. And from the period of Great Moravia, 30 sickles in 14 burial places were discovered. In 9 burial places dated to the 10<sup>th</sup> up to the beginning of 11th centuries, 11 graves containing sickles were excavated. In spite of the fact that the number of sickles is different in each burial place, it is important to express this indication by the total number of graves on concrete burial site to the number of graves containing a sickle. As a result, we will come to very small number of graves containing a sickle from one burial site (in average from 0.2 to 5%). This is similar for all three periods.

In these three periods, there are only few such burial places where we can found more than 4 graves with sickle. In these cases, it is possible to study disperse of graves with sickles in a concrete burial place. The graves containing a sickle are situated diversely in the burial place, without any cumulation of them.

### Grave Orientation

In case of studying the technique of burying the dead together with a sickle, the grave orientation, or better to say the orientation of the dead in the grave, is also very important. Generally, most frequently used orientation of these graves is W-E (West-East), and its deviations, mainly NW-SE, but also WNW-ESE or SW-NE. Sporadically, we can see the orientation NNW-SSE or WSW-ENE. The opposite orientation E-W (East-West) occurs only in few cases and it is together with its deviations NE-SW, ENE-WSW, SE-NW, and ESE-WNW. Generally, the orientation of the graves containing sickles is not different than the prevailing orientation of graves on the burial sites dated to these periods.

During the time of The Avar Khaganate, besides the predominant WNW orientation of these graves, the most frequent orientation is the opposite one and some of its deviations. During the Great

<sup>1</sup> A verbal information offered by Mrs. Staššíková.

<sup>2</sup> A verbal information offered by Zábajník.

<sup>3</sup> Matej Ruttkay, Jaroslava Ruttkayová, *Záchranné výskumy vo Veľkom Cetíne. Archeologické výskumy a nálezy na Slovensku (AVANS)*, 1998, p. 142.

<sup>4</sup> Jozef Porubský, *Slovanský mohylník vo Veľkých Hostiach, okr. Bánovce nad Bebravou*, in *Slovenská Archeológia*, 3, 1955, p. 223.

<sup>5</sup> Jozef Zábajník, *Zur Problematik der "byzantinischen" Gürtelbeschlüge aus Čataj, Slowakei*, in *Die Awaren am Rand der byzantinischen Welt*, Innsbruck, 2000, p. 330.

Moravian period, the main orientation of graves with sickle was slightly moved to south. But withal, there are also graves oriented reversely, which are also moved to south. During the 10<sup>th</sup> century, a considerable change happened. It is also displayed by prevailing number of graves with sickles oriented from W-E up to NW-SE.

The sickles found in reversely oriented graves are mostly exceptions, and it is necessary to assess them only in borders of a given burial place. Generally, their aim was not to emphasize more the rarity of these graves; what is finally indicated in disunity of burying to graves with opposite, better to say predominant orientation.

### **A Position of the Sickle in Grave**

The other indication which can help in finding out the function of the sickle in grave is its position, or setting in grave. In most cases, the sickle was situated on the body of the dead, either unbroken or just its fragment. These cases stand for 88.4% of graves with sickles. We have met just with few exceptions (11.6%), when a sickle was not put on the body of the dead, or it did not touch the body.

From 85 sickles excavated in graves, we were able to identify its precise location in 72 cases, it means in 85%. The sickle was put on different parts of the body in grave (near skull, around upper extremities, on the thorax and around it, in the part of pelvis, on lower extremities, around soles), while in one position, the sickle can be oriented and situated on the right/left side or in the middle of the body of the dead.

During The Avar Khaganate period, the sickles were put on different parts of the body of the dead, from the skull down to the feet. But the most sickles were found in the part of pelvis, smaller number of them were on the lower extremities. This phenomenon continued also during the Great Moravian period, while more than 60% of these tools were put on the pelvis, or better to say on the abdomen part of the dead. After the fall of Great Moravia, there was a change in locating sickles into a grave. It was preferred to put it on the lower extremities, or better on the upper part of the trunk, and not on the pelvis as it was before.

From the found results, it is evident that a sickle is mostly put around the pelvis or on the lower extremities, while position of the sickle is not determined by the age, sex or social status of the dead.

### **Sex of the Dead in Grave Containing a Sickle**

To find out a function of a sickle in a grave, it is also important to study a sex of the dead. This phenomenon can be evaluated in case of 51 dead, what stands for 60% of the sickles found in graves. We can do so on the basis of anthropological analysis or according to grave goods.

During The Avar Khaganate period, the number of male graves with sickles is higher than female ones. In the time of the Great Moravia, there is a change – the number of female graves containing the sickle was increased, but on the other hand, male ones decreased. During after Great Moravian period, female graves with sickles were prevailing, and what is more, their number was increased in comparison with the male ones.

The sickles were excavated both in male and female graves. Generally, their rate is almost similar during all studied periods, that is why the indication of sex cannot be considered as a determining one in case of function of the sickle in grave.

### **Age of the Dead in Grave with the Sickle**

In 66 cases, what means 77.6%, the adults are buried in graves where a sickle was found. Another 4.7% of these graves belonged to not mature individuals and in other 17.7% of graves, it is not possible to ascertain the age of the dead.

The sickle as an additional tool was given to graves of all age categories – from children up to the oldest people. Therefore, this habit is not determined by the age. But more often, it can be found in graves of adults than in those of children.

Besides child grave in Želovce<sup>6</sup> dated to The Avar Khaganate period, the only children's graves excavated are from the 10<sup>th</sup> century in Rovinka<sup>7</sup>, in Bešeňov<sup>8</sup>, and in Malé Kosihy.<sup>9</sup> All

<sup>6</sup> Zlata Čilinská, *Frühmittelalterliches Gräberfeld in Želovce*, Bratislava, 1973, p. 93.

children's graves containing the sickles are oriented to W-E or its deviations, while the sickles were put on different parts of the bodies of the children. In these cases we are mostly speaking about grain sickles. But in child grave in Rovinka, here, much smaller sickle than the other ones was excavated.<sup>10</sup>

### Grave Goods

During The Avar Khaganate period, together with sickles, people put into graves other goods of everyday life, weapons, components of belt, jewels, and sporadically other tools. The sickles can be found in graves containing different grave goods. In most cases, it was excavated in below-average equipped graves (46.4%) and in average equipped ones (43.9%). In above-average equipped graves, a sickle occurred rarely (9.7%).

The graves dated to other periods cannot be divided in such groups as graves from The Avar Khaganate period, because of their small number, which can distort the results of the analysis. However, we can speak above following results.

Grave goods dated to Great Moravian period are very diverse. The sickles were mostly excavated in graves containing different tools of everyday life, e.g. whetstones, strike stones, sharpening steels, buckets, pots, whorls. Sometimes, also jewels or components of dress like glass beads, earrings, pendants, and buttons occurred in these graves. Another group of graves is the one containing together the sickle and weapons. Still another is a group of graves containing just few additional goods, or the graves where beside the sickle was just one tool as e.g. knife or some vessel. And finally, we distinguish a bit smaller groups of graves containing the sickle and jewels.

During after Great Moravian period, half of all excavated graves contained sickles together with jewels and dress components, while tools of everyday life were on decline. In this time, a lot of graves did not contain any other tool, just the sickle. This is the first time we are meeting this phenomenon. During the previous periods, graves with the sickle had always contained minimally one other subject. It is interesting, that in spite of the decline of additional objects from graves, a sickle was still present in graves.

Grave goods present in these graves were so varied and not unified, that it is not possible to suppose any connection in putting some kind of tool into grave together with the sickle. Moreover, according to the analysis of materials from these graves dated to The Avar Khaganate period, it is evident that the sickles were put into graves together with equipment of different value.

### A Characteristic of the Sickles Found in Graves

The sickles excavated in graves are in most cases (42.2%) complete, or better to say fragments of the whole sickles are found. The sickles with their tiny fraction broken, e.g. a part of spike or arrowhead, represent smaller group (31.3%). Next group (12%) is formed by the sickles, from which a larger fragment was excavated in the grave, e.g. larger part of a blade, or a blade with adhering part of spike. A small fragment of the sickle found in grave forms the group of 14.5%. From my research we can see, that there is no dependency between the condition of intactness of the object and its location in grave. At the same time, any kind of dependency between this indication and the sex, or age of the dead does not exist. From these reasons, we can suppose that the sickles were put into graves in good condition, probably as objects, which can be used, or as slightly broken sharp tools, which can be remolded, or repaired in case of a need. In spite of the fact, that the sickles occur just sporadically in the burial sites, a condition of their intactness indicates their important role in grave goods.

In 8 cases, we can see remnants of a textile on the sickles, or better to say remnants of some cloth preserved on a blade of the subject. In some cases, a textile was found on a wrinkle of the blade, it means on the functional part of the subject; in other cases on the whole blade of the sickle. As far as we would like to define the function of the sickle in grave, it is very important to take this sign into consideration. Therefore, it is necessary to find out whether the remnants of a textile are from the dress of the dead, or they are from cloth in which the sickle was wrapped up. In case, that the cloth was used as a protective covering, the sickle can be understood as a symbolic remedy against vampires.

<sup>7</sup> Viera Němejcová-Pavúková, *Belobrské pohrebisko v Rovinke, okres Bratislava-Vidiek*, in *Archeologické Rozhledy*, 14, 1962, p. 657.

<sup>8</sup> Ľudmila Kraskovská, *Výskum v Bešeňovej roku 1950*, in *Slovenská Archeológia*, 6, 1958, p. 426.

<sup>9</sup> Milan Hanuliak, *Malé Kosihy I. Pohrebisko z 10.- 11. storočia*, Nitra, 1994, p. 118.

<sup>10</sup> Viera Němejcová-Pavúková, *op. cit.*, fig. 225: 3.

### The function of the Sickle in Grave

Different character of burial places and graves containing the sickles gives us a question above the function of this tool in grave. A lot of archeologists were dealing with this problem in the past, and their opinions are different.

The opinions, that a sickle was a working tool put into grave represent the first group. This tool reflected a profession of the dead, or better to say his social status. According to M. Beranová<sup>11</sup>, a sickle expressed a relationship towards a land, some kind of connection with agriculture. Ľ. Krakovská maintains the opinion that this agricultural tool given to the grave demonstrated the occupation of the inhabitants, or it was an attribute of the profession of the dead.<sup>12</sup>

The other group of opinions is the one presenting the function of the sickle in grave as a weapon. The sickle was understood as a military symbol of Avars and Hungarians, as a weapon of warrior. Gy. László<sup>13</sup> mentioned this idea as first. Those excavated graves in Čakajovce, which contained the sickles, M. Rejholcová<sup>14</sup> considers as the warrior's ones, so the sickles were parts of the warrior gear.

Another very interesting opinion about the function of the sickle in grave is its magic and ritual function, or in other words against vampire function. According to the part of the body of the dead on which a sickle was put, I. Erdélyi presupposes that the sickles put on the abdomen part of the dead had against vampire function. He understands a habit to put a sickle into a grave as a local one, Slavic or Avar, and he does not exclude a possibility, that they had extended this habit to old Hungarians.<sup>15</sup> Also R. Müller inclines to the opinion that this subject had rather magical function in grave, it was connected with the superstitions of the inhabitants.<sup>16</sup> Both A. Točík and S. Tettamanti have the similar opinion.<sup>17</sup>

The authors, who understand a function of the sickle as a magical tool, or as a tool used against vampires, grounded on very interesting ethnographical parameters and results. On the basis of ethnographical researches, P. Somogyi found out, that different iron subjects, also the sickle, were put on the abdomen or thorax of the dead. But these subjects were buried with the dead only in special cases, whereas they had different magical functions. Sometimes, they were used to save original state of the body of dead – “the body would not become swollen”; the other times, they forestalled the dead to return among alive people, so they were used as “weapons against bad ghosts”.<sup>18</sup> In the opinion of the author, the last function was preserved mainly in the region of Transylvania, upper Tisza River, around Hódmezővásárhely, in Danubian region. And according to it, this habit falls into the deep history.<sup>19</sup> Á. Csizsár asserts that also sharp parts of the iron tools such as knife, sickle, etc. could be used against bad ghosts.<sup>20</sup> Because of iron fragments, e.g. sickle or knife, in the graves, Ľ. Krakovská concludes that only broken tools were given into the graves, so their meaning was symbolical.<sup>21</sup>

According to the analysis of all attributes of the sickle found in grave and their mutual connection, I suppose that this subject did not symbolize the profession of the dead. My hypothesis is fortified by several indications.

Vast majority of all burial places with excavations of sickles is situated in lowlands, near the rivers. So we can suppose that they belonged to agricultural societies. In spite of that, the number of found sickles on each burial site does not represent presupposed number of peasants in one society.

Besides this, mainly in the sites and hoards dated to the 9<sup>th</sup> century, we can find other different agricultural tools. But apart from few exceptions, they were not given to the graves. In case that in one

<sup>11</sup> Marie Beranová, *Slovanské žňové nástroje v 6.- 12. století*, in *Památky Archeologické*, 48, 1957, p. 14.

<sup>12</sup> Ludmila Kraskovská, *Slovansko-avarské pohrebisko pri Záhorskej Bystrici*, Bratislava, 1972, p. 82.

<sup>13</sup> Gyula László, *Adatok a koronázási jogar régészeti megvilágosításához*, in *Emlékkönyv Szent István király halálának kilencszázadik évfordulóján*. 3. kötet, Budapest, 1938, p. 529.

<sup>14</sup> Mária Rejholcová, *Pohrebisko v Čakajovciach (9.-12. storočie)*. Analýza, Nitra, 1995, p. 49.

<sup>15</sup> István Erdélyi, *Avarkori sarlók a Kárpát-medencében*, in *Ethnographia*, 86, 1975, p. 153.

<sup>16</sup> Róbert Müller, *A mezőgazdasági vaseszközök Magyarországon a késővaskortól a törökök végéig*, in *Zalai Gyűjtemény*, 19, 1982, p. 481.

<sup>17</sup> Anton Točík, *Velkomoravský železný depot z Čeboviec*, in *Študijné Zvesti Archeologického Ústavu Slovenskej Akadémie Vied*, Nitra, 20, 1983, p. 211; Sarlotta Tettamanti, *Temetkezési szokások a X.-XI. században a Kárpát-medencében*, in *Studia Comitatus*, 3, 1975, p. 110.

<sup>18</sup> P. Somogyi, *A Kárpát-medencei sarlós temetkezési szokás eredete*, in *Archeologia Értesítő*, 1982, p. 191.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>20</sup> Á. Csizsár, *A hazajáró lélek*, in *Jósa András Múzeumi Évkönyve*, Nyíregyháza, 8-9, 1965/66, p. 181.

<sup>21</sup> Ludmila Kraskovská, *Výskum v Bešeňovej roku 1950*, in *Slovenská Archeológia*, 6, 1958, p. 432.

grave we will find more tools which will reflect the profession of the dead (agricultural tools, or tools of one craft), we can these subjects understand as a symbol of a profession of the dead.

Against this supposed function also stands the fact that the sickle can be occasionally found in warrior's graves, or in graves containing over standard grave goods reflecting higher social status of the dead, so s/he cannot be a peasant.

Some authors maintain the opinion that a sickle found in the part of pelvis symbolizes a profession of the dead, and it is related to agriculture. This opinion is strengthened by the fact that most of the sickles set on the pelvis were given as a complete, function subject into grave. However, complete, not broken sickle was also found on other parts of the dead body – mostly on the lower extremities. In case that this concrete setting of the sickle in grave symbolized the agricultural profession, there had to be a change of symbolism of this subject in grave during the 10<sup>th</sup> century. It is so because in after Great Moravian period, the putting of a sickle on the lower, or upper extremities in stead of pelvis, prevailed.

According to the above-mentioned assumptions, we can suppose that the function of the sickle in grave was not to symbolize the profession of the dead.

Also, a function of the sickle as a weapon, so as a part of warrior's equipment, is not very probable. The warrior's graves containing the sickle occur just sporadically, and moreover the sickles in warrior's graves represent just a small part of the total group of sickles found in graves.

Provided that the sickle was used as a weapon, it had to be given into grave as a complete, almost unbroken subject. In spite of the fact that vast majority of the sickles are in good condition, the fragments of them found in graves could not fulfil this function. That is why we had to select the complete sickles which should be used as weapons, and the fragments of these subjects found in other graves with different function.

Moreover, contrary to this presupposed function stands the fact that the sickles were excavated both in male and female graves approximately in similar number, and occasionally in children's graves. From these reasons, the sickle cannot be used as a weapon.

According to acquired results, we can assume that the most probable function of the sickle found in grave was its magical – ritual function, which was somehow related to superstitions, or with activities against vampires.

This hypothesis is based on the fact, that the sickles were found both in male and female graves in approximately similar number, also occasionally in children's graves, without any difference in age or social status of the dead people.

Here, the setting of the sickle in grave is very important. The vast majority of the sickles were put over some part of the body, so they were touching the body of the dead. It instigates us in hypothesis that these sharp subjects were used to prevent the physical movement of the dead. In case that the dead would try to rise up from the grave and come back to alive, the sickle put on his/her abdomen, thorax, over the feet or hands would slash him/her. Prevailing number of sickles put in the part of abdomen, or pelvis or put upper on the thorax and over the hands can be connected with the initial movement of the dead, and hence from the lying position up to sitting one. The sickles put over the lower extremities or under the soles represent a prevention of escape. In case of sickles excavated near the skull we cannot find out whether they were originally put on the skull or near it.

In connection with the anti-vampirical activities, it is important to mention the warrior's graves. In my opinion, the sickles in graves were not used as weapons, but they could be used as ritual subjects preventing the return of the dead. As far as we excavated only few warriors' graves containing sickles, I suppose that in these types of graves without a sickle some other weapons, or their parts put into graves, could be used for a ritual purpose.

Besides this, the sickle could have also other ritual or more general magic-ritual function to which the activities against vampires could not belong. As evidence we can mention the fact, that in most cases the complete or just subtly broken sickles were put into graves. And in the world of alive, they could realize their original function as agricultural tools made of very important and precious material. In spite of that, they were put into the graves. This fact stands for important, magical function of the sickle. But according to accessible materials, we cannot identify it in more details.