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WARRIORS IN THIS WORLD AND THE AFTERLIFE PRZEWORSK CULTURE GRAVES CONTAINING WEAPONS

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Archaeological finds from cemeteries constitute a vast, albeit not entirely objective, source of information. Contrary to finds from settlements, objects found in grave units were put there by people who purposefully administered burials. These objects provide information not only about the deceased, their social position and a status in the group which organised the burial rites, but also some hints concerning beliefs and ideas about the afterlife. A specific set of objects may provide information on social status, wealth or personal prestige, and the function or occupation of the deceased. It also indirectly conveys information about the beliefs of the society which organised the funeral. The possibility of error or misinterpretation is always present, because scholars attempt to portray the reality of immaterial phenomena and ideas based on relics of physical culture. It should always be recalled that cemeteries yield a biased image due to the burial rites. Not all things used or worn by living people were deposited in graves. Some of them were destroyed or omitted during cremation, and some were forbidden by some form of taboo.¹ On the other hand, not all things found in graves were the personal belongings of the deceased. Some items were deposited in graves to serve a symbolic, magical (apotropaic) function. Some also ended up there accidentally.

¹ Weapons and tools in the Wielbark culture, which during the Roman era encompassed the northern and eastern parts of Poland.

In the pre-Roman and Roman periods, cremation was the prevailing burial rite, although inhumation graves were not that rare in *Germania libera*. According to complex experimental studies,² burning on the pyre results in random destruction of objects deposited on the pyre, i.e., which part of them preserved, and in what condition and their condition varied. Some sort of selection of burned goods should also not be discounted. Most likely not all personal belongings and funeral gifts burned on the pyre were placed in the grave pit. The small amount of burned bones found in graves can provide some evidence. According to experiments, a burned human skeleton should weight approximately 2.5 kg,³ but much less was found in graves. Additionally, incomplete finds, e.g. a scabbard without a sword, a lock without its key, suggest that some choice – deliberate or accidental – was made on the grave goods which were actually deposited in graves.⁴ This is also the case for weapons. The set of arms used by a warrior during his lifetime may have differed (more or less) from the set of arms found in his grave.⁵

² BECKER et al. 2005, 162.

³ PIONTEK 1976, 261.

⁴ CZARNECKA 1990, 16; BECKER et al. 2006, 140.

⁵ KONTNY 2003, 113; BOCHNAK 2006; BEMMANN 2007, 81.

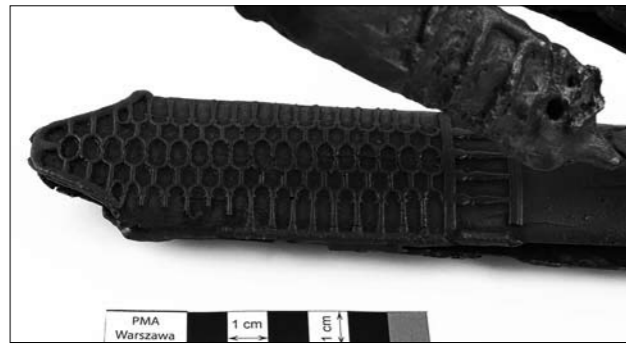


Fig. 2. Kamieńczyk, distr. Wyszaków, grave 301, iron, photo by R. Sofuß.

The Przeworsk culture, however, is a privileged field of study based on the sepulchral materials which were the result of burial customs. Cremation graves, with or without urns (pit graves), prevail in Przeworsk culture cemeteries: inhumation graves are extremely rare.⁶ The burial rite, which required the placement of numerous different goods in graves, including weaponry, was rooted in Celtic tradition, and was adopted, to various extents, from the Celts by the majority of the 'Free Germany' (*Germania libera*) cultures of the pre-Roman- and Roman periods. Among them, the Przeworsk culture is an outstanding phenomenon with the highest percentage of graves containing full sets of weaponry and other grave goods. Cemeteries of that culture yielded an extraordinarily large number of richly supplied graves with many different kinds of grave goods, not only personal adornment but also tools, weapons and pottery. This helped chronological studies, but also allowed an attempt to reconstruct the "living culture". The main indicators of men's graves are weapons, sometimes tools (e.g. smithery implements) and some specific types of items of everyday use, such as razor blades. Graves with more or less complete sets of weapons, including spears or lances, shields, and, less often, swords, are interpreted as warrior graves. The amount and variety of the weapons found facilitate a cautious attempt to reconstruct the relevant combat technique (cavalry or infantry, i.e., mounted or foot soldiers)⁷ and also the social status of the buried warrior or his position in the military hierarchy of the group which conducted the burial. In warrior societies, weapons were a status symbol, and their number, quality and appearance were very important.

The typical set of weaponry in pre-Roman (second and first centuries BC) Przeworsk-culture graves consists of, most often, a spearhead, or (rarely) two spearheads,

⁶ CZARNECKA 2003.

⁷ KONTNY 2002; 2008.

a shield boss, and very rarely a shield grip, which indicates that mostly wooden grips without metal (iron or bronze) mountings were used.⁸ Swords were rare. There were two main kinds of swords used. The most common were double-edged long swords stemming from the Celtic tradition (or imported from the Celts). They were usually found together with scabbards/iron sheaths (of Celtic origin) often decorated with S-shaped details (phase A2) or decorated with separate



Fig. 3. Oblin, distr. Garwolin, grave 282, iron, photo by T. Bochnak.

plates with fine *opus interasile* ornaments (Celtic imports) (Fig. 2), or a simple grid pattern (most probably of local origin) in phase A3 (Fig. 3).⁹

⁸ KONTNY 2002; BOCHNAK 2005.

⁹ CZARNECKA 2002; BOCHNAK - CZARNECKA 2006, 25-27.

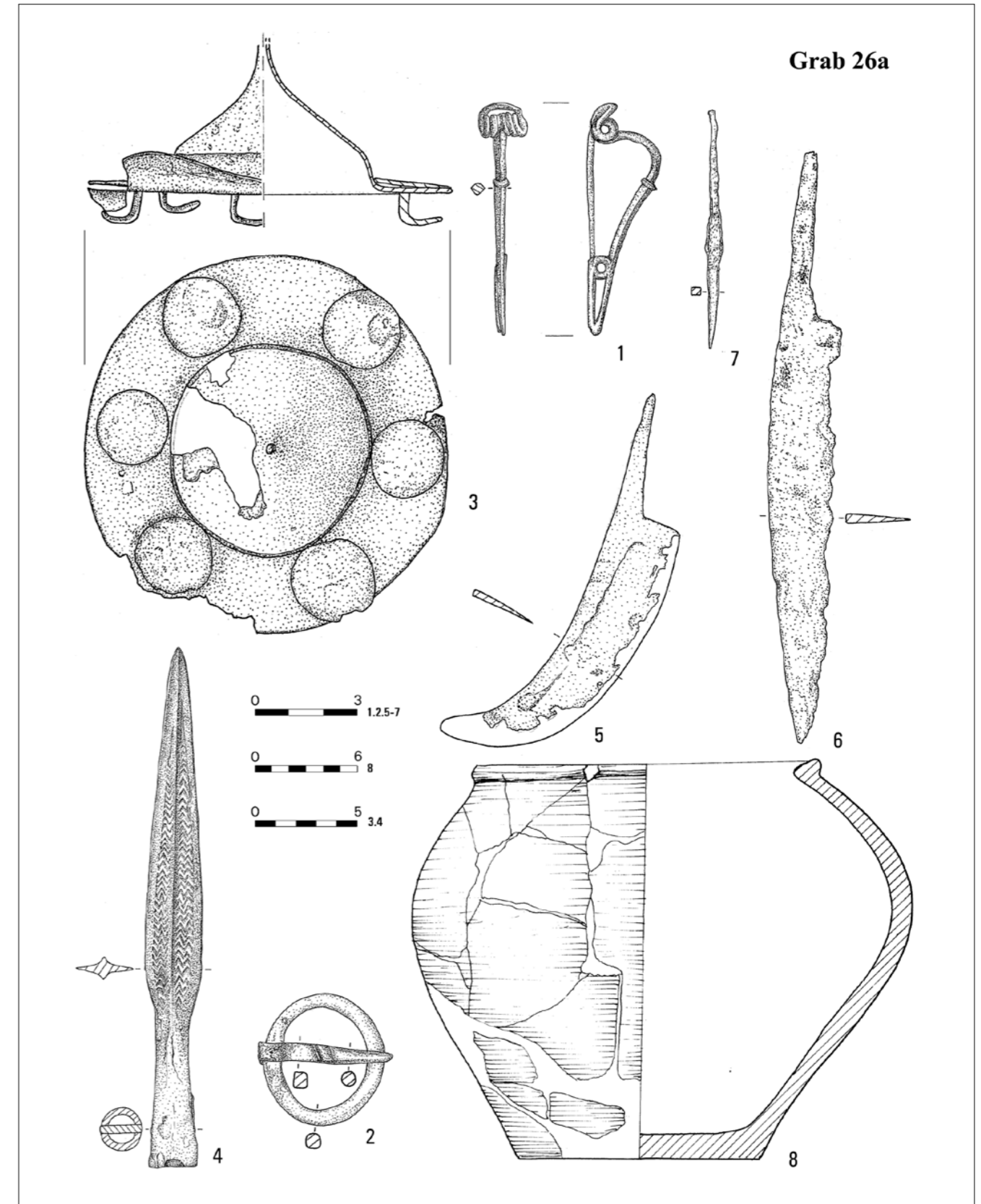


Fig. 1. Oblin, distr. Garwolin, grave 26a, iron (CZARNECKA 2007, pl. XXII).

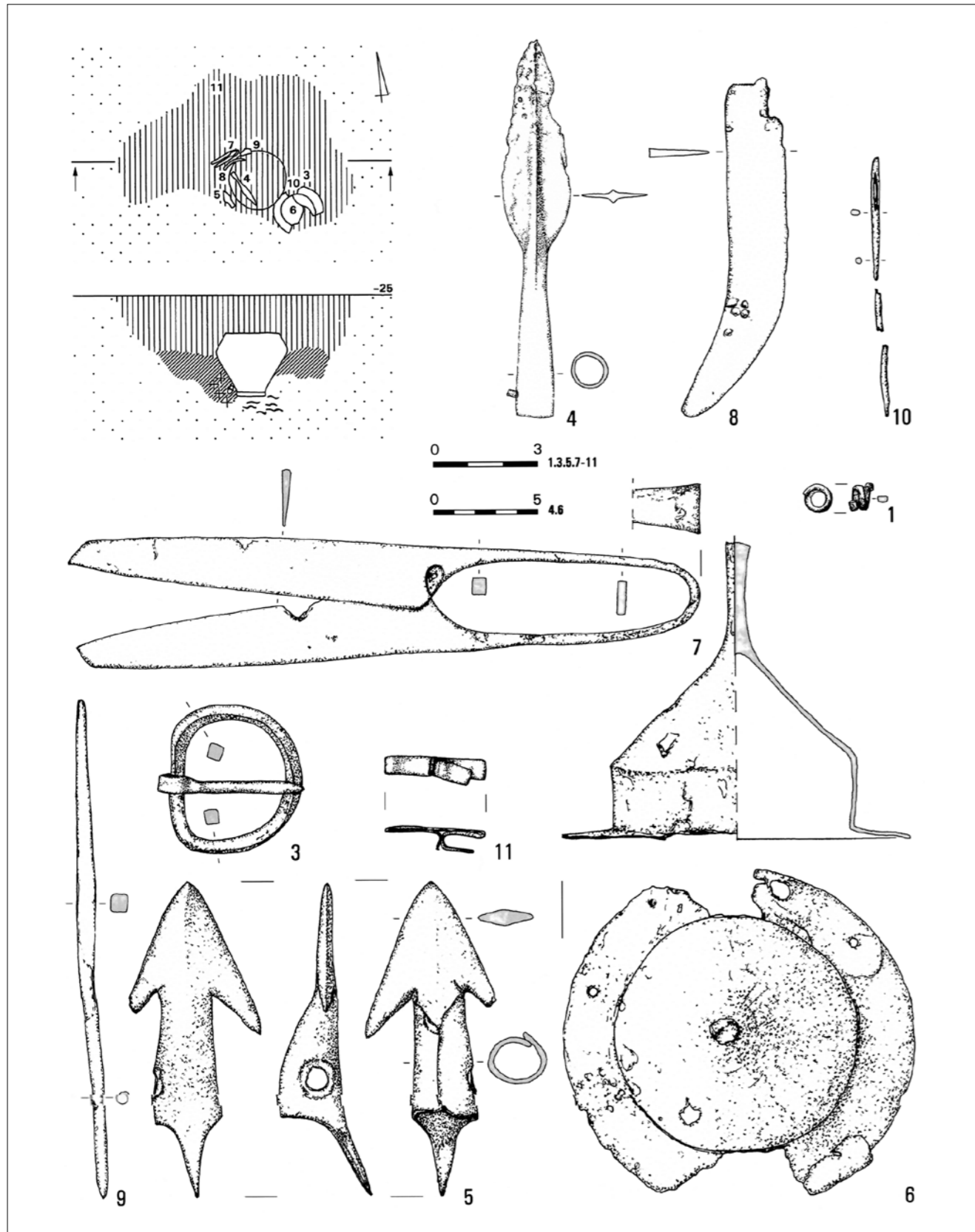


Fig. 6. Oblin, distr. Garwolin, grave 222, iron (CZARNECKA 2007, pl. CXCI).



Fig. 7. Oblin, distr. Garwolin, grave 45a, photo by K. Czarnecka.

from early medieval sources, is rather unconvincing.¹⁷ A similar magically protective function may also be assigned to strips of chain mail, often with miniature shields and tools attached, found in women's and children's graves of the early Roman period. In these cases, fragments of military gear (chain mail) serve as an amulet.¹⁸

Most objects were destroyed before being deposited in graves.¹⁹ Swords and spearheads were usually bent (once or twice), sometimes even broken. Shield bosses were flattened and disfigured. Edges or points of spearheads and, rarely, swords were also intentionally blunted. Some of this damage must have been done after burning on a pyre, because sometimes the spearhead sockets were flattened and the shield bosses disfigured in such a way that would have been possible only after removal of the wooden elements; moreover it was easier to destroy iron that was dehardened by fire.

The reasons why the weaponry had to be destroyed are rather complex and difficult to explain with any certainty. Perhaps it was a some manner of re-enactment of a last battle? Generally, it is believed that the destruction of weaponry was a sort of ritual "killing" so as to enable them to accompany their owners to the netherworld. Numerous different objects, such as tools and even ornaments, brooches were destroyed prior to placement in a grave, but weaponry was the most often and most severely damaged, which suggests that the purpose was to prevent it from being used by the deceased against survivors (the idea of the dead returning and being a threat to the living – their relatives – is

¹⁷ BOCHNAK 2010. However, some authors cite selected written sources i.e. Cassius Dio, LXX1, with information about the bodies of armed women found on the battlefield during the Marcomanic Wars. Unfortunately, this part of the great work of Cassius Dio is missing, and known only from medieval, Byzantine, quotations (WIPSYCKA-BRAVO 2001, 83), so it must be treated with great caution.

¹⁸ CZARNECKA 1994.

¹⁹ CZARNECKA - KONTNY 2009.

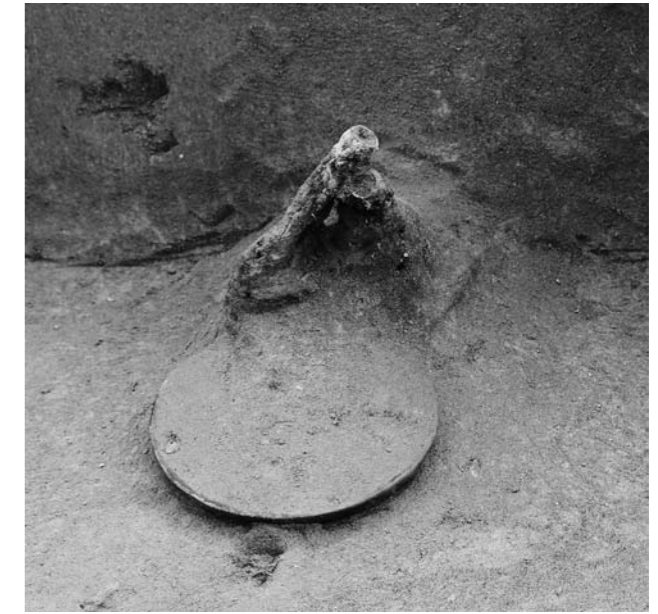


Fig. 8. Czersk, distr. Piaseczno, grave 79, photo by A. Wiśniewska.

well known from later Germanic tradition, and can be confirmed to an extent in the Roman-era cemeteries by the so-called *Sonderbestattungen*, special, unusual burials).²⁰ The late Roman-era (phase D) inhumation graves from Żerniki Wielkie (ehem. Gross Sürding), Wrocław district, may serve as an example. In some graves the skull was cut off and placed by the feet of the body.²¹

A more practical reason for this destruction should not be excluded: it is much easier to place bent or broken swords in urns or small pits. It seems, however, that this interpretation does not explain the rather numerous finds of twisted swords in very large (up to 2 m long) pre-Roman grave pits.

It must be recalled that the same ritual act may have more than one interpretation, e.g. destruction of the sword may be explained at the most primitive level: to prevent the dead from using it against the living; a more sophisticated explanation would be to "kill" the sword, to release its soul so that it could reach the netherworld, because in this world everything is opposite and damaged and incomplete things belong to it. Finally, the ritual may also be understood as a way of making the weapon "sacred", fit for religious or symbolic purposes.²² Perhaps a clear sign of the exclusion of this object from the use of the living was needed?

²⁰ TEMPELMANN-MĄCZYŃSKA 1989.

²¹ ZOTZ 1935, 44, fig. 36, tabl. IX.

²² CZARNECKA 1990, 85.

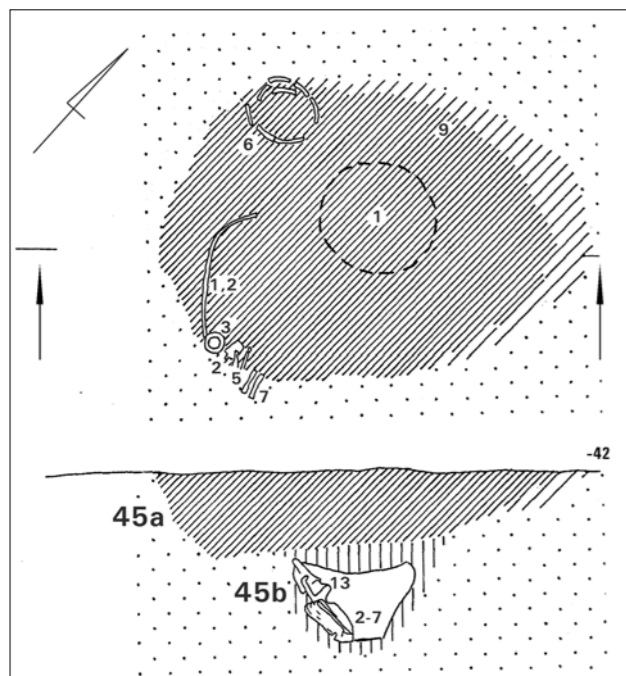


Fig. 9. Oblin, distr. Garwolin, grave 45a and 45b, sketch by K. Czarnecka.

Usually there were no clearly divided zones for men's and women's graves in Przeworsk culture cemeteries. They were most likely organised as family groups. Sometimes, however, a specific site was chosen for a specific group. At the cemetery in Oblin, five vast pit graves were placed parallelly at its southern edge.²³ All of them were dated to phase A3 and they contained similar rich complete sets of weaponry: swords in decorated scabbards, spearheads and shield-bosses. One of them contained a single-edged sword of local provenance (the others were probably Celtic imports), but with a richly decorated scabbard featuring a bronze open work application. It would appear that these were graves of retinue-members, who perhaps fell in the same battle or war.²⁴

²³ CZARNECKA 1999, 167; CZARNECKA 2007a, tabl. CCLXXXVI:1.

²⁴ A similar interpretation of a quite interesting recently excavated small cemetery of elite warriors (a retinue?) in Mutin, at the River Szym in Ukraine is made by R. Terpilovskiy (TERPILOVSKIY 2010, 145). A group of about 12 warriors was buried with very rich equipment, including swords in scabbards with *opus interasile* decoration, and single-edged swords, (Celtic?) helmets, spurs, shield bosses and lanceheads together with bronze vessels and small items such as belt clasps and brooches, dated to phase A3 of the pre-Roman period. These unusual – for central Ukraine – finds show the potent influences of Celtic culture, but also the Przeworsk culture (the aforementioned Oblin cemetery). Some elements may be linked to the Jastorf circle or even Scandinavian weapons.

Various ritual practices of disturbing graves, e.g. the “reopening” of graves some time after the funeral, are known from the Roman era, mostly from the Wielbark and Černiahow culture (both connected with the historical Goths) cemeteries.²⁵ The possibility of such rituals being practiced by neighbouring cultures, including the Przeworsk culture, should not be discounted. They can only be ascertained with greater difficulty due to the prevailing burial custom: cremation. Any disturbance of the skeleton can be seen more easily than in an urn or pit grave. Some traces of plunderers disturbing the original grave can, however, be discerned. Not all such acts should be seen as mere theft to obtain valuables. Such incursion into a burial pit may have also had some sort of ritual, symbolic or social meaning.

A very interesting example of similar practices may be the rather unusual stratification of graves 45a and 45b from the Przeworsk culture cemetery in Oblin, distr. Garwolin.²⁶ A grave of a rich warrior, containing an immense quantity of weapons and other valuable objects and dated to phase B2, was deliberately placed under the grave of a warrior from the pre-Roman Period, phase A3. The time span between these two funerals is about 150 years. Both graves were richly furnished with outstanding sets of weaponry: the older grave with a sword in a decorated scabbard, two lanceheads and a shield boss with grip (a rarely found item from that time). The later burial was extremely rich: an imported sword with inlaid ornamentation, 5 lanceheads, a harpoon, a shield boss with grip, a silver inlaid brooch and belt buckles, and many other items, among them melted glass most probably from a glass vessel. The depositing “in” or “beneath” the earlier grave was not accidental, but rather deliberate. The fill of the older grave was carefully removed and replaced – there are no traces of disturbance of the grave fill in the pit. The most likely interpretation is that a great warrior or important military leader had to be placed in the grave of great warrior of the past, a local hero probably, whose grave site was still remembered after 150 years (Fig. 9).²⁷

A weapon was a marker of rank in this militarily orientated society. There is nothing unusual in the fact that the best, most distinguished warriors or chiefs were honoured with an outstanding set of weapons:

²⁵ KOKOWSKI 1992, ŻÓRAWKA 2007, 467; KONTNY 2008, 108.

²⁶ CZARNECKA 2007a, 21, tabl. XLV - L.

²⁷ CZARNECKA 1999, 167, 169.



Fig. 10. Łęg Piekarski, distr. Turek, grave 2, photo by R. Sofuß.

more than one spearhead, shield, or even sword. It is, however, very difficult to establish if weaponry was doubled or if it was an extended set of weaponry used by one warrior.²⁸ It depends on the combat technique. Two or more spearheads are thought to be the gear of a single individual. In the Przeworsk culture during the early Roman period, a common set of weaponry encompassed a long lancehead and a smaller, often barbed, spearhead. This is a good example for the full gear complement, as these two items were used for different purposes in practice: different ways of fighting (one for throwing, another in close combat).²⁹ Two shields can have some practical meaning, as shields were easily damaged in battle.³⁰ Two nearly identical double-edged swords (as in the case of grave 4 from Korytnica, distr. Jędrzejów,³¹ must be interpreted as dou-

²⁸ CZARNECKA 2007b.

²⁹ KONTNY 2008, 111.

³⁰ Two shield bosses were found in graves not only from the pre-Roman period (e.g. Oblin, distr. Garwolin, grave 65, CZARNECKA 2007a, pl. LXIX; or Ciecierzyn, distr. Kluczbork, grave 8, MARTYNIAK, PASTWIŃSKI, PAZDA 1997, pl. X) but also from the early Roman period (e.g. Czersk, distr. Piaseczno, grave 7, unpublished, State Archaeological Museum inventory number IV-10485).

³¹ CZARNECKA 2007b, 51.

bled weapons, because they in fact may function only in the same way. The additional sword or spear could be a valuable heirloom, or important war trophy, which, placed in a grave, was supposed to stress the prestige and status of the deceased. Double- and single-edged swords³² are two kinds of weaponry used for different fighting techniques. Long, double-edged swords were the most effective when fighting on horseback, while shorter, single-edged swords were infantry weapons. Such extended sets of swords are not known from the Przeworsk culture cemeteries. The large, long-blade knives sometimes found with military gear may have fulfilled this function (e.g. Sandomierz-Krakówka, distr. Sandomierz).³³ A somewhat similar situation was observed at the newly-discovered cemetery in Czersk, distr. Piaseczno, south of Warsaw.³⁴ Grave 98 contained only the blade (the upper part with its handle is broken off) of single-edged sword in addition to a

³² Such assemblages are known from the Oksywie culture e.g. Troszyn, distr. Kamień (MACHAJEWSKI 2006, 86, 87, fig. 9 - 15) or Rządź, distr. Grudziądz (CZARNECKA 2007 b, 53, fig. 4).

³³ KOKOWSKI, ŚCIBIÓR 1990. Pl. 385(4):13.

³⁴ Unpublished, excavation in 2010, by this author, State Archaeological Museum, inventory number IV-10485.

whole, bent double-edged sword with preserved antler knob, and other items: a shield boss and grip, lance heads, whetstone and so forth. This not practical, but only symbolic function of the broken blade confirms that the grave inventory could not be treated as a mere reflection of “*Lebende Kultur*”.

As noted above, outstanding warriors or warlords were distinguished by the outstanding weaponry in their graves. But the lack of weapons in otherwise very rich burials may have some meaning and point to some important conclusions as a distinctive feature of a specific social category. The so-called chieftain graves (*Fürstengräber*), both from the early Roman period (the so-called Lubieszewo/Lübsow type) and late Roman period (so-called Zakrzów-Hassleben-Leuna type) constitute an “international” or “intercultural” phenomenon in *Germania libera*, Barbaricum. They differed from the “egalitarian” remainder of the population in burial rites (inhumation versus the standard, prevailing cremation), monumental grave forms (a large stone or wooden chamber, often covered with a barrow), outstanding wealth – a considerable amount of imported bronze and glass vessels, gold and silver ornaments in international styles – and a lack of weaponry (Fig. 10). The last feature is unexpected, and should have some social and ritual meaning. In these strongly militarised societies, where free warriors were the basic social group, weapons were status symbols, and their quality and also appearance were very important. This specific feature has opened a still lasting discussion concerning possible interpretations. These graves were treated as burials of priests, “druids” or foreign elites, but such an interpretation has been rejected by more recent scholarship.³⁵

Besides the typical *Fürstengräber* of the Lubieszewo horizon, rich and weaponless, there was a group of graves equal to the *Fürstengräber* mentioned above in richness of its goods (gold and silver ornaments, imported vessels). The difference is in the burial rite (cremation) and the presence of often spectacular, outstanding weaponry, in the grave inventory.³⁶ A good example is the grave from Sandomierz-Krakówka, distr. Sandomierz,³⁷ furnished with a full set of weapons (sword, shield, lance- and spearhead, large (battle) knife, bronze spurs) and imported bronze vessels and silver, gilded decorative mountings, or grave 22

from Witaszewice, distr. Łęczycza,³⁸ with chain mail, a spur and bronze vessels. The most characteristic finds of that sort, outside the Przeworsk culture area, are graves from Hagenow in Mecklemburg.³⁹ In these very rich burials, besides the gold and silver ornaments and imported Roman vessels, helmets and chain mail were also found, which are quite unique in Barbaricum: a clear sign of the prestige and privileged social status of the deceased.

This clear distinction between the various types of the “chieftain graves”, i.e., with and without weapons, may correspond to the description made by Tacitus in *Germania* in which he distinguished kings – *reges*, and military leaders – *duces*.⁴⁰ So it may be assumed that the typical Lubieszewo-type princely graves constitute burials of *reges*. Their attributes were not weaponry but other prestige items and magical or symbolic objects reflecting the sacral functions of these kings. The rich furnished graves with outstanding weaponry may have been burials of *duces*, military leaders, also with high prestige and power, based more on military successes and personal charisma.⁴¹

When attempting to interpret sepulchral material, it must always be remembered that the world of the dead – cemeteries – are not a direct representation of the world of the living and what we see is a picture filtered by beliefs, rituals and customs. The Wielbark culture serves as a good example: long a northern and eastern neighbour of the Przeworsk culture, it was associated with the historical Goths. The burial rites, funeral customs, of that culture strictly forbade the placement of iron items, weapons above all, in graves. The cemeteries of that culture contained no swords, shield elements, or lance- and spearheads. Yet it is obvious, that the people used military equipment. The specific burial rite of the Przeworsk culture, which required placement of a vast quantity of goods, especially weapons, in graves, created a unique possibility to attempt a reconstruction of social structure, combat techniques and even beliefs (the netherworld), of the people buried in these cemeteries.

The placement of weapons in graves had some meaning, while the lack thereof had some (other) meaning as well.

³⁵ KASZEWSKA 1971, pl. 167.

³⁶ VOSS 2005, 2007.

⁴⁰ *Reges ex nobilitate, duces ex virtute sumunt* Tac. Germ. 7

⁴¹ CZARNECKA 2004, 117.

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