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Tino Leleković

## IS IT A BATTLE KNIFE? THE PROBLEMS OF INTERPRETATION OF THE ROMAN KNIFE FROM SISCIA (SE CEMETERY)

Tino Leleković  
Hrvatska akademija znanosti i umjetnosti  
Odsjek za arheologiju  
Ante Kovačića 5  
HR-10000 Zagreb  
CROATIA  
lelekovic@gmail.com

Roman town of Siscia is an important site for Croatian archaeology, because this was the first Roman settlement in Southern Pannonia. The Romans occupied this locality in 35 BCE by conquering the native settlement of Segestica. During that same year, a legionary camp was built in Siscia, where a military garrison stayed most probably until the age of the Flavians.<sup>1</sup> The area surrounding the camp was organized as *civitas Colapianorum*, most probably governed by a prefect in the camp. By relocating the military to the Danube bank and emptying out the camp, Vespasian formed a colony on site and it encompassed the entire *civitas peregrina* at the time.

The colony itself most probably encompassed the area of the camp and canabae which were formed beside it. Large part of the colonists were imperial fleet veterans, mostly recruited in Illyricum. András Mócsy believes that they were placed in Siscia because of two reasons. The first was the emperor expressing gratitude for their allegiance by assigning them land in their native place, while the second was of economic nature exclusively. Siscia is located on the river of Sava, which is one of the main transport routes in the Southern Pannonia. The river should have played a key role in linking limes with the Northern Adriatic, which is why the river

should have been secured and the level of transportation in it should have been increased. András Mócsy believes that Vespasian solved this by colonizing veterans from the imperial fleets, who should have started shipping on the river. By strengthening transportation through the Sava, Siscia gained additional importance, because it is located on a natural junction of multiple river and land routes. It is thus not surprising that it developed quickly into a large city and centre of crafts and trade.<sup>2</sup> Siscia played an important role in limes supplying, because it was a large metallurgic centre from which large amounts of iron, iron weapons and tools were exported.<sup>3</sup> Siscia reached its peak when a mint was formed during the age of Gallienus, and its political peak happened during the age of Diocletian, by making it the center of Savia province. The city was most probably abandoned at some point in the 6th to 7th century. But the exact moment when it happened is still an open issue.

Considering the rich history of the city, a surprisingly small number of graves and gravestones was found. Existence of four cemeteries was determined. The northern one formed by the road towards Buševac site (*Ad fines*), from which the road branched out towards Emona and Andautonia. The south-western necropo-

<sup>1</sup> RADMAN-LIVAJA 2010, 190.

<sup>2</sup> MÓCSY 1974., 112.-114., 135.

<sup>3</sup> DURMAN 1992, 126-127.



Fig. 1. Roman site of Siscia (red - settlement, yellow - necropolis, white square - position of find). (Author T. Leleković)

lis was formed by the road towards Senia. The south-eastern necropolis formed by the road that led to Syrmium. The eastern necropolis formed between the city walls and the river of Sava and it might have developed by the local road connecting some kind of a smaller settlement on the Sava bank with the city. Only a small portion of intact graves was found. In the last 20 years, several excavations have been conducted, which discovered parts of the necropolis, but none of them were published, so it is impossible to have insight into those finds. Around 250 graves were found in the Sisak area, including *sarcophagi* that were being collected for almost two centuries. It is likely that a major part of the burials was found during various utility and construction work, but documentation on those finds does not exist.

Research conducted in 2008 in the area of the southwestern necropolis covered the area of 900 square meters.<sup>4</sup> This excavation determined four stages of the site. The earliest stage was made out of objects that preceded the necropolis, while the remaining three stages were composed out of graves and grave constructions. The first burial horizon was composed of fourteen cremation graves which were found in dispersed across a fenced rectangular area grouped into uneven groups. The second stage was made out of remnants of graves placed in the characteristic cists made of bricks, tombs and stone urnes. Tombs with sarcophagi and one child's skeletal grave can be attributed to the third stage. Grave 15, in which the knife with the silver chape was found, was located in the oldest burial horizon.

<sup>4</sup> LELEKOVIĆ 2008a.



Fig. 2. Graves 15, 10, 13, 21, photo. (Author T. Leleković)



Fig. 3. Grave 15 photo. (Author T. Leleković)

Due to the fact that grave 15 was partly destroyed by the tomb 10, the iron knife was broken in three parts. Only half of the blade was found within the burial. Its original appearance and dimensions cannot be determined because the end of the handle was not preserved, but judging by similar items, it had to have been between 35 and 40 centimeters long. The knife has a flat handle 18 mm wide. It is broken, so its length of 78 mm is not original. The blade is pointed and its back is curved. It is 53 mm wide and 3 mm thick. Its cutting edge forms a straight line 253 mm long, almost completely preserved. The cutting edge and the back of knife are parallel to a point, after which the blade gradually tapers and forms a tip. This type of knife is very similar to the Dolenz type ME114 which he calls dagger-like knife (*Dolchartige Griffangelmesser*). The knife was deposited with the scabbard, out of which only the chape was preserved. The chape is made of a single silver plate, brazed on the front side while the back side is flat and undecorated. The chape is 68 mm long and on the upper side it is 42 mm wide. The tip of the chape ends with a tab which is curved around the silver ring that was a part of a suspension system. Such a chape was found in Novo Mesto, but it was made out of bronze plate and it had two horizontal bolts, which is not the case with the knife from Sisak. The tip was broken, so it couldn't be compared to the Sisak find.

The grave 15, besides the knife, also included four small jugs and two oil factory lamps. In addition, the grave had a construction made of *tegulae* and the bones were deposited in a stone urn, which is extraordinary within that burial horizon. The ceramic lamps that were found, type Loeschcke X, clearly dates the graves to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. According to the discovered burial items, both the first and the second stage of the necropolis can be dated back to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. Graves of both those stages are furnished with practically identical ceramic jugs and factory lamps type Loeschcke X. Lack of metal objects is significant for both stages, so finds crafted out of bronze and iron, including money, were found only as an exception.

The first and second burial horizons are clearly distinguished by ritual. The first stage is characterized by cremation graves in earth holes of quadrangular or oval shape, into which the cremated remains were placed in an urn or fabric and laid to the bottom, and were then covered with a thick layer of coal and soot. This was a custom of depositing the pyre remnants, which is not present in the second stage. The graves in the second stage were all laid in regular cists made of bricks, and did not entail the pyre remnants. Due to differences in the ritual, but also due to the fact that some of the graves in cists destroyed earlier graves, I am more prone to date the graves with pyre remnants back to the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, while the graves without pyre remnants would date back to the middle or the second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century.



Fig. 4. Knife *in situ* photo. (Author T. Leleković)

Ceramic jugs found in the grave 15 are very similar in dimension, form and fabric to the other jugs found in graves of the first two stages of the necropolis. Such jugs were already found during the excavation on the south-eastern necropolis of Siscia, where they are equally dated back to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. In the previous work regarding Roman cemeteries in Pannonia from that time, such jugs are very rare. Although it is not stated whether they come from a burial context, Olga Brukner presented one example of such a jug dating it back to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century.<sup>5</sup> A similar jug was found in Novo Mesto in the Ljubljanska cesta position, but it was not precisely dated.<sup>6</sup> The most similar examples have been found in the necropolis in Nijmegen - Hatert, where they are also dated to the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century.<sup>7</sup>

Who were the people buried in the group, or who was the man buried with the knife? According to the information extracted from the written sources, material

<sup>5</sup> BRUKNER 1981., 44., T 140/77.

<sup>6</sup> BOŽIĆ 2008., T 14/4.

<sup>7</sup> HAALBOS 1990., 89.



Fig. 5. Knife after reasturation. (Author T. Leleković)

culture of three groups of people should be differentiated in Siscia. One group were people who came from Rome and Italy who were accustomed to Roman way of life, and were thus buried the way it was common in the centre of the Empire. The second group were Romanized natives whose graves had both Roman and local Pannonian features, while the third group should be natives who preserved their original culture. Until now, such a small amount of graves is collected, so it is not possible to determine local and Roman elements of the burial rites. However, these newer finds are starting to form basis for that shortcoming to be corrected.

Three basic kinds of cremation graves have already been described: earth tombs with pyre remnants, clay-encased graves and graves in stone urns. Other cremation graves discovered in the area of Sisak, with some exceptions, can be put into one of those three typological groups. So far, around 200 cremation graves have been found through archaeological excavations. There is no documentation available for those which were found accidentally, while grave goods from those burials were mostly taken away, so the approximate number cannot be determined. In addition to the research in 2008 (there were three archaeological excavations in the north-western necropolis in 2008), there were two more excavations in the northern necropolis, while a series of excavations was conducted in the south-eastern cemetery in the 1950s.



Fig. 6. Chape made of silver plate. (Author T. Leleković)

The results of the excavation in the northern necropolis weren't published, but I have information that both excavations revealed cremation graves laid in simple holes filled with the pyre remnants.<sup>8</sup> The only excavation whose results were made public was that from 1954 when almost 150 cremation graves were discovered in the south-western necropolis. Documentation was in such a condition that today it is not possible to date precisely most of the graves, or separate them into possible burial horizons. The publishing reveals that the excavation discovered graves in simple holes with pyre remnants, graves in cists and graves in stone urns, and that the grave goods date back to 2<sup>nd</sup> century and first half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century.<sup>9</sup>

Due to a small number of published finds, at this point it is not possible to separate native elements of ritual from the Roman elements. Finds from the south-western necropolis make way for various assumptions which definitely need to be evaluated through publishing new finds. Graves in cists and stone urns have been typical for the area of northern Italy since the period of late Republic, so that their occurrence in the area of south-western Pannonia is always linked to Roman settlers. In this part of the province, they were found exclusively in urban necropolises and on necropolises of smaller settlements which were settled by veterans and traders of Italic lineage.<sup>10</sup> In the Croatian part of south-eastern Pannonia, over 100 cremation graves have been found, while clay-construction graves are exceptions and mostly date back to late 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, graves in simple oval or quadrangular earth holes are the most common form of burial in the area of central Croatia from the beginning of the 1<sup>st</sup> to the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century.

<sup>8</sup> I would like to thank to Ivana Miletić Čakširan and Iskra Bačani.

<sup>9</sup> WIEWEGH 2003.

<sup>10</sup> GREGL 1997, 25-26.

Graves such as these are prevalent in all excavated cremation cemeteries in the Croatian part of Pannonia Superior.<sup>11</sup> Except for the cultural differences, the chronological relation between the two grave shapes remains unknown. It is obvious they were formed in different periods in the south-western necropolis of Siscia. However, the level of research up to now does not open the possibility of determining whether these were two developmental stages which show gradual Romanization of the local population, meaning that the two generations from which the older used burial rites closer to the native element with less influence of the Romans, while the next generation fully accepted Roman customs. Or, these were cemeteries of two different groups, with the younger one, in which Romanized settlers were buried, destroyed the older native group. The difficulty in disentangling this issue can be seen in the fact that very few graves from the 1<sup>st</sup> century were found in central Croatia, most of which were published with a wide range of dating them back to the middle of the 1<sup>st</sup> century to the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century.<sup>12</sup> That is why the course of changes in the grave cult is not yet known, same as the gradual course of Romanization of burial customs in this part of Pannonia is also not known.

Further research of burial customs in the south-western Pannonia can be substantiated by inspecting the usage of knives in furnishing graves, or by posing a question of whether laying a large knife into a grave could be seen as a remnant of pre-Roman burial customs. Depositing large battle knives in graves is a known custom typical for Celts. A fair example of such a custom is a grave from the turn of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century into the 2<sup>nd</sup>, from Dobova in Slovenia (which is fairly close to Siscia).<sup>13</sup> The custom of depositing the knife into graves probably continued deeply into the 1<sup>st</sup> century, which can be seen in the example of northern Italy, where the custom of depositing the knife into graves of men continued even after that part was integrated into the Roman state.<sup>14</sup> Similar examples can be seen in Wederath-Belginum.<sup>15</sup> Nava necropolis shows that knives were a common item deposited in the graves, and they were found there in the period from the late

<sup>11</sup> Still unpublished research conducted in the Ban Jelačić Square and the Divalt Street in Osijek were taken into consideration here, as well as grave finds published in GORICKE-LUKIĆ 2000.

<sup>12</sup> GREGL 1997, 24.

<sup>13</sup> GREGL 1997, GREGL 2008., KUŠAN ŠPALJ - NEMETH-ERLICH 2007.199.-201.

<sup>14</sup> BOŽIĆ 1991, 472., 474.

<sup>15</sup> ARSLAN 1978, 84.

<sup>15</sup> CORDIE-HACKENBERG - HAFNER 1997, Plate 545.

Republic to the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. The precise reason as to why the knives were deposited in graves is not clear, although it is speculated that this was most probably a tool which should have symbolized the sacrifice of animals, or an item that should have had an apotropaic role.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, final conclusions cannot be made, because the Angera site example shows that depositing knives cannot always be interpreted as an extension to the Celtic tradition, because knives were found in that necropolis from the Flavian and Antoninian period, while none were found in the earliest graves.<sup>17</sup>

What was the function of this knife? What is its symbolic value? The dagger-like knives of this type are suitable both for cutting and stabbing. They are used in hunting and for slaughtering animals for both ritual and domestic purposes. These kinds of knives were also used as battle knives. Remains of the suspension system propose that it was carried as tool in hunting, or as a part of military equipment. The luxury scabbard in which it was laid in grave, suggests that the latter interpretation is more possible.<sup>18</sup> Fighting knives have a long and rich tradition in the Balkans, so they were used in the late Iron Age from the Black Sea to the Alps and the Adriatic. It is necessary to emphasize that some examples were decorated with various images, so it should be taken into consideration that such knives had a symbolic value and were used in sacrifice rituals as well.<sup>19</sup>

Focusing on the area of south-western Pannonia, knives, similar to those from Siscia, are not found in graves. One similar example is a dagger made of iron found on Ljubljanska cesta in Novo Mesto, which resembles the Sisak knife because of its size, and the appearance of its chape.<sup>20</sup> There was also a grave in Bosiljevo (central Croatia) where a knife 34 centimeters in length was found, and it could also be tied to the knife in Sisak.<sup>21</sup> Weapons were not commonly found in the cremation graves of southern Pannonia in the period of the early Empire. Fine example of laying a

knife with the deceased is a grave in Ilok, in which a gladius was found,<sup>22</sup> but graves from Osijek can also be mentioned here, because a javelin and a spear were found there.<sup>23</sup> Those graves can most likely be dated back to the second half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, but they clearly point to the fact that the custom of depositing weapons is present in the southern Pannonia. The issue of interpreting Ilok and Osijek finds is in the fact that there is no way of knowing whether these were local soldiers - aristocrats, or soldiers from other parts of the Empire who happened to die there while serving or living as settled veterans.

To conclude, the grave with a dagger-like knife represents the first find in which a grave good in Siscia that can be interpreted as a part of military equipment was found. Although knives of large dimensions could have had different purpose and different symbolic value, I am more prone to believe that this was actually military equipment, and not a utilitarian object, because of its dimensions and the type of the scabbard in which it was deposited. Even as such, it could have had a symbolic value as an object used in sacrifice or an object with apotropaic purpose. However, the biggest question is whether this was a burial of a Romanized native or an Italic settler. Considering the fact that the shape of the grave, to the best of our current knowledge, can be tied to the native customs, it is not impossible to imagine that a veteran of the imperial fleet, who died at the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, was buried there by his kin together with the knife in order to express his veteran status. This was definitely a person who was a part of the community with deep roots in the Pannonian area, but some of the Roman customs were adopted and included in the burial rites. In any case, further questioning of such an interpretation requires new finds and new research which we hope to see in the future.

<sup>23</sup> LELEKOVIĆ 2008b, 46.

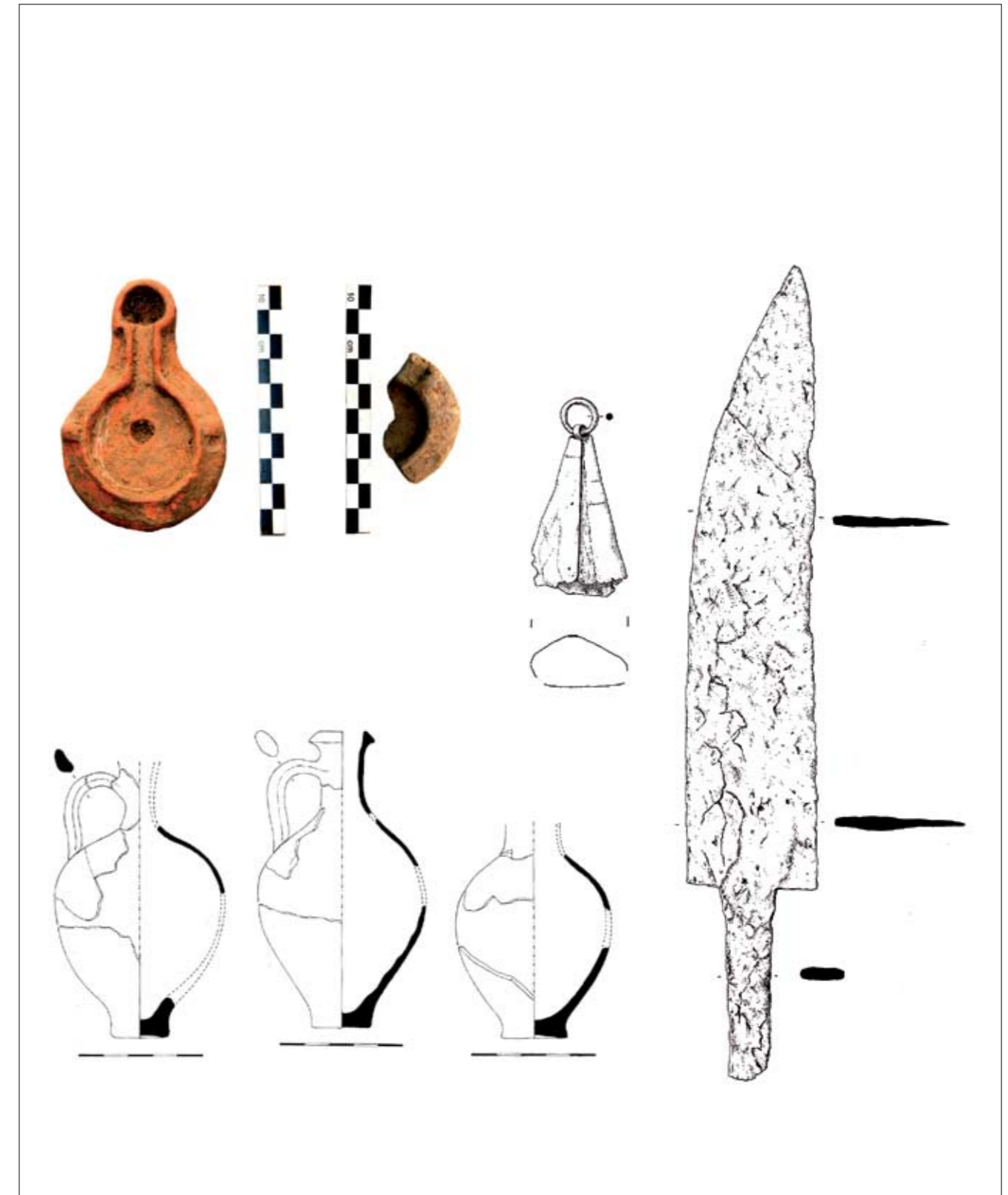


Table 1. Finds from grave 15. (Author T. Leleković)

<sup>16</sup> PASSI PITCHER 2001., 258-259.

<sup>17</sup> ANGERA ROMANA, 567.

<sup>18</sup> DOLENZ 1998.

<sup>19</sup> RUSTOIU 2007, 67.-82.

<sup>20</sup> BOŽIĆ 2008, T 9/2.

<sup>21</sup> GREGL 1997, 56.

<sup>22</sup> TOMIČIĆ - DIZDAR 2007, 40; DIZDAR 2010.

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Bartosz Kontny

# OUTSIDE INFLUENCE OR LOCAL DEVELOPMENT? SEAXES FROM THE CEMETERIES OF THE BALT TRIBES IN NORTHERN POLAND (THE ELBLĄG GROUP)

Bartosz Kontny  
University of Warsaw  
Institute of Archaeology  
Krakowskie Przedmieście 26/28  
00-927 Warszawa  
POLAND  
bartosz.kontny@uw.edu.pl

Although covering a small area, the Elbląg group seems to be the one of the most important cultural unit attributed to the West Balt cultural circle. It is situated in the northern part of Poland and its archaeological sites are located along the edge of the Elbląg Upland, between the mouth of the Pasłęka River and the southern edge of 'Drużno Bay', reconstructed in the form in which it may have existed in Late Antiquity (Fig. 1). This concentration was called the Elbląg group by Jerzy Okulicz and attributed to the West Balt cultural circle.<sup>1</sup> This name has been generally accepted by scholars, although there are opinions that this group was subordinated to a cultural unit from the Sambian-Natangian area referred to by Wojciech Nowakowski as the Dollkeim-Kovrovo culture<sup>2</sup> or indicating the mixed,

Balt-German-Scandinavian character of the culture of that area, resulting in its lack of independent character.<sup>3</sup> There have even been suggestions to exclude it from the West Balt circle,<sup>4</sup> although these definitely seem premature. The Elbląg group was formed several dozen years after the Wielbark culture population deserted its cemeteries situated on the eastern side of the Vistula Delta. This occurred, it would appear, in the final stage of Phase D and the onset of Phase E (i.e., the late fifth and early sixth centuries), as a result of a thus-far not completely explained process of symbiosis between interregional and 'Sambian' elements (i.e., horse graves, pottery forms, personal ornaments but also weapons). The Elbląg group was formed as the eastern peripheries of the Vistula Delta were taken

<sup>1</sup> OKULICZ 1973, 471; OKULICZ 1989, 89-90.

<sup>2</sup> NOWAKOWSKI 1996, 96-97; BITNER-WRÓBLEWSKA 2001, 21-25, 132.

<sup>3</sup> BITNER-WRÓBLEWSKA 2008a, 109.

<sup>4</sup> BITNER-WRÓBLEWSKA 2010, 148, 150.