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# Human sacrifice and body rituals in Lithuania in the Bronze Age

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## Abstract

Human sacrifice and other religious rituals with human body were practised in different European regions and at different time periods. The article examines religious rituals associated with human bodies practiced in Lithuania in the Bronze Age. Two types of data were distinguished. The first type – human bodies were accidentally discovered in peat bogs. Four bog bodies were found in Turlojiškė site, South-west Lithuania and accidentally in some other peat bog sites of South Lithuania. The second one – human skulls discovered in four settlement sites in different parts of Lithuania. It is argued that these findings were associated with human sacrifice and religious rituals with human bodies. Near some skulls, pendants from animal teeth and nails, amber and bone artefacts were found. Some bone pendants have an image of human face. All pendants are small, between 3,5 and 5,5 cm long. It is argued that pendants–amulets with a human face are symbols of ancestors.

Keywords: Lithuania, Bronze Age, Turlojiškė site, sacrifice, religious rituals, ancestor cult.

## 12.1 Introduction

Human sacrifice and other religious rituals, associated with human body were practiced at different times and in different regions. In northern and western Europe huge amounts of human bodies dated to the Bronze and Early Iron Age have been found mostly in wetlands. They were interpreted as evidence of sacrifice (Glob 1969; Joy 2011: 410).

Cases of sacrifice are also mentioned by some Roman authors. In his description of German rites in the 1st century AD Tacitus offered a particular interpretation of human sacrifice evidence. He wrote, that ‘Punishment corresponded to the crime: traitors and deserters were hanged on trees; cowards, the fainthearted and the disgraced were drowned in mud puddles with a bunch of twigs thrown over their heads’ (Tacitas 1972: 11). We believe that this ‘drowning in mud puddles’ was actual human sacrifice which is evidenced by numerous archaeological data recovered in this area.

Until recent times very little was known about human sacrifice and other rituals associated with human bodies in the East Baltic Region. Moreover, quite recently, about 40–30 years ago we had heated discussions whether people were sacrificed in Lithuania or not. Some even claimed that Baltic



Figure 12.1. The location of sites mentioned in the text. Ellipse – the location of sites where human skulls separated from bodies were found. Rectangular – the location of site where sacrificed bodies were found. Map A. Merkevičius & L. Remeikaitė.

people were very peaceful and did not practice sacrifice of people, not like Germanic, Celtic or other nations from Northern and Western Europe. This opinion was also backed by the famous Lithuanian historian Juozas Jurginis (1976: 19).

A closer examination of some archaeological evidence revealed that even before World War II and after the War human remains were found accidentally in some peat bogs during the peat cutting works. In 1930 in South-western Lithuania, at Turlojiškė peat bog, a human skeleton was found (Žilinskas 1931). After the War, more such findings came to light in this place (Rimantienė 1996: 203). However, it was only in 1998 that remains of 2 supposedly sacrificed bodies were found in Turlojiškė peat bog during the excavations (Merkevičius 2000: 44–46).

Besides human remains my attention also was drawn to another type of material sources found in Lithuania during archaeological investigations. Four archaeological settlements preliminary dated to the Bronze Age which were excavated in various parts of Lithuania revealed single human skulls or parts of them, separated from rest of the bodies (Fig. 12.1). Other parts of the bodies were not found. Some investigators have interpreted these findings as peculiar graves (Girininkas 1993: 224).

The aim of this article is to submit available evidence and provide some interpretations about bog bodies, or sacrificed people, and about human skulls separated from the rest of the bodies and placed in settlement sites in Lithuania dated to the Bronze Age.

## 12.2 Materials – human sacrifice

Sacrifice could be defined as ritual killing of people and animal for the purpose to venerate supernatural beings (Insoll 2011: 151–165). We have strong evidence about human sacrifice in two former water bodies in Lithuania.

### 12.2.1 Kaupiškiai

This site is located in a peat bog of South-western Lithuania. In the process of peat cutting works in 1933, a human skeleton was found at the depth of approximately 2 meters (State Archaeological Commission 69, 94; Mūsų Rytojus 1933: 72).

### 12.2.2 Turlojiškė

Turlojiškė archaeological complex is located in a South-western part of Lithuania. The group of settlements, sacrificial, burial, and other type of archaeological sites were discovered during excavations and accidentally in a large peaty area on the right bank of the River Kirsna. Five settlement sites dating to the period from early 2nd millennium BC to the middle of the 1st millennium BC were discovered in this archaeological complex. Seven inhumations were found, four of them discovered at the bottom of a peat bog layer. Two skeletons were found accidentally (before World War II, in 1930, and after World War II, in 1949). Another five individuals were discovered during archaeological investigations in 1996, 1998 and 1999 (Merkevičius 2012: 12–16).

In the 1930 a human skull without the mandible was accidentally found in this peat bog, close to the River Kirsna (Žilinskas 1931). A paleoanthropological analysis determined that the skull belonged to a 35–40 years old male (Česnys, 2001: 4–6). The skull was dated to the end of the second millennium BC (Antanaitis-Jacobs & Girininkas 2002: 17).

In 1949 during peat cutting works another well preserved human skeleton was accidentally found. After paleoanthropological analyses it was determined that the skeleton belonged to a 25–30 years old male. There were three impressed fractures on his skull vault (Fig. 12.2). The first fracture was an elliptic impression (45 x 2 mm), the second fracture was an oval impression measuring 35 x 30 mm, and the third fracture was an elongated defect (28 x 9 mm). The analyses suggest that all of these impressions were left by a blunt, hard instrument. Moreover, these blows could have been the cause of death (Jankauskas 1995: 12, 15). The skeleton was dated to the end of the second millennium BC (Antanaitis-Jacobs & Girininkas 2002: 17).

In the 1998 during archaeological excavations at this site two well preserved skeletons were found on the bottom of a peat bog layer, more than one metre deep (Merkevičius 2000: 44–45). Paleoanthropological analyses showed that both skeletons were male. The first one was 25–30 years old, the second one was 20–25 years old. On the skull vault of the second individual three fractures made by three blows with a blunt object were very visible (Jankauskas & Urbanavičius 2000: 600). Near the first individual a Lunula type copper pendant, two wooden ritual sticks and a black-colour stone of unknown function was found. One of the sticks had three notches. The other one resembled a human body and had burnt ends. Close to the second individual a flint



Figure 12.2. The skull from the Turlojiškės archaeological site found in 1949. (According to Jankauskas 1995, Fig. 1.)

arrowhead was found (Merkevičius 2000: 44–45). The rest of excavated bodies were inhumated graves.

## 12.3 Materials – body rituals

In a four excavated (Guogai-Piliuona, Šventoji, Kretuonas, Turlojiškės) and in some unexcavated sites human skulls or parts of them were found inside of these settlements. It is clear, that human heads were separated from rest of the bodies and placed inside of the settlement sites. All these findings were preliminary dated to the Bronze Age. One can interpret all these findings as cases of religious rituals associated with human bodies.

### 12.3.1 Guogai-Piliuona

The site is located in Central Lithuania. In 1955–1956 a hillfort and settlement of Guogai-Piliuona were excavated and in the depth of 375 cm, under rampart of the hillfort, a human skull and a neck vertebra was found. The hillfort was used from the beginning of the first millennium AD (Navickaitė 1959: 91–100).

### 12.3.2 Šventoji

This site is located in North-western Lithuania (on the Baltic Sea coast). In Šventoji 23rd settlement site three mandibles were discovered, two well-preserved and just a fragment of the third one. Paleo-anthropological analyses revealed that the first one belonged to a 30–35 years old female and the second one belonged to a 6–7 years old child (Rimantienė 1979: 148).

### 12.3.3 Kretuonas

The site is located in East Lithuania. During archaeological excavations in the 1987–1991 of the Kretuonas settlement I, fourteen human skulls or parts of them were discovered, deposited in small pits of 45–60 cm in diameter and 50–70 cm deep, some under the house floor, inside the territory of settlement or even inside of some houses. Near some skulls, pendants from animal teeth and nails or amber and bone pendants were found. Some bone pendants have an image of human face. All of them were small, between 3,5 and 5,5 cm long (Girininkas 1993: 224–233).

### 12.3.4 Turlojiškė

Three human skulls or some skull pieces were discovered in the same archaeological complex as sacrificed bodies in 1996, 2002 and 2003 during the archaeological investigations. In 1996 four parts of a human skull vault were discovered (Merkevičius 1998: 27). In 2002 a part of a human skull was found (Merkevičius 2005a: 13). And, in 2003 a human skull was found in another settlement site of this complex (Merkevičius 2005b: 19).

## 12.4 Data interpretation

### 12.4.1 Human sacrifice

The territory of Lithuania is quite far away from regions in western and northern Europe where huge amounts of bog bodies were discovered in wetlands. This fact and a small amount of available material rise the doubts about suggested interpretation of revealed skeletons. As some archaeologist still claimed that these findings are not sacrifices but ordinary graves, or in the case of placement these people into the water bodies, the possible interpretation was put forward, that they could be victims of crime, but not sacrificed in the Prehistoric time, the new additional arguments were needed. Attention was paid to the injuries on skull vaults. The individual found accidentally in 1949, as well as the second individual discovered in 1998, both had three injuries on the skull vaults.

The three notches had a ritual stick found close to one of the skeletons. It is obvious, that the same number on both persons and the stick is not accidental. Some ritual performance was executed before the placement of persons and artefacts into the water. The other stick resembled a human body had burned ends. The fire rituals were practised frequently in different regions and at the different times, also in Lithuania. One can add Lunula type copper pendant discovered near the found body. These data lead to an assumption of ritual character of the found material.

It is noteworthy to stress, that a written source from the 10th–11th century AD mentions a Czech archbishop, the missionary Adalbert who was murdered by the Prussians. He was killed with a hammer used to hack stones. This was a doubtless ritual massacre (Usačiovaitė 2002: 63). Though this reference belongs to a much later period, some religious rituals remained unchanged for a long period of time.

The other two skeletons, discovered in Turlojiškė on the bottom of peat bog layer, did not have injuries of this character, which raises a natural question: how they were killed before putting them into the water?

Evidence obtained from other European Regions revealed, that they had ropes around their necks indicating that they were strangled (Glob 1969). It leads to an assumption that such practice was also possible in Turlojiškė.

The second and most essential argument is the finding context of these individuals. All human remains were found in a peat bogs suggesting that they had been thrown into the water of former lakes. The placement of human bodies into the water with ritual artefacts seems could close the discussion on interpretation of these findings. Individuals found in a peat bogs of North and West Europe were referred to as sacrificed 'bog people'. So, it could be the same case in Lithuania as well, because in the Bronze Age the Baltic people commonly were buried in burial mounds or in flat cemeteries rather than in water bodies (Grigalavičienė 1995: 64–95).

### 12.4.2 Body rituals

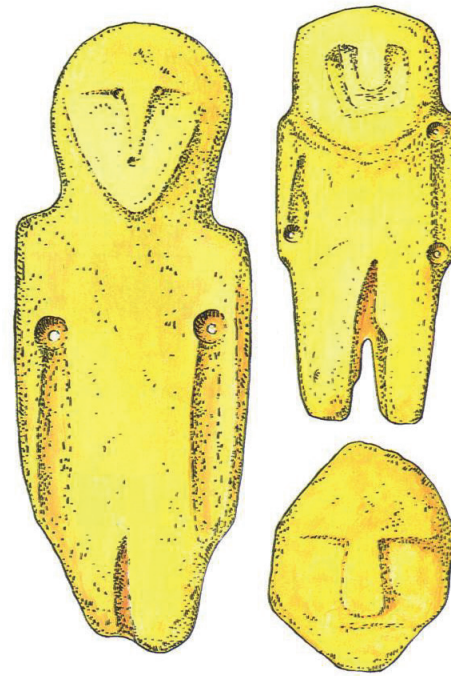
According to some authors, skulls found in settlement sites near hearths are Early Metal period graves (Girininkas 1993: 224). Girininkas has argued, that important members of the tribe were buried in this manner: leaders, priests or others respected members of the tribe. Pendants–amulets with a human face found close to such findings are interpreted as symbols of ancestors (Girininkas 2009: 246–247). As mentioned before, such burial tradition did not exist in Lithuania in the Bronze Age and also in the whole Baltic Region. Head separation from the body and placement in settlement site could be interpreted as a religious ritual.



Figure 12.3. Amber pendants with human images from the Juodkrantė hoard. (According to Rimantienė 1995, Fig. 144.)

One can raise a question, why these people started to separate human heads from rest of the body? And what does it mean?

Pendants–amulets with a human head or face and other small human figurines and images found in Lithuania could be a possible answer. At the very end of the Stone Age and in the beginning of the Bronze Age in Lithuania human images became quite popular. Such images were found in different contexts, as hoards, or in settlement sites, or as grave goods. Moreover, they were depicted in different ways: on pots, as wooden sculptures, amber or bone pendants, bronze figurines, etc. Some of these human images were just heads, not a whole body. For example, the Juodkrantė hoard comprised amber pendants with human figurines depicting the whole body and others only the head (Klebs 1882) (Fig. 12.3). At that time



the head could be viewed as the main part of the body and the symbol of the entire person. In some occasions, they did not need the whole body and used only a head as the symbol of a human being for pendants–amulets. It is understandable, that part of the body – the head – was enough to represent the whole body as well. There are still some questions about separated human bodies, because no other parts of the bodies apart from the skulls have been found in settlement sites yet.

The popularity of human image in the Bronze Age could be interpreted as a manifestation of the ancestors' cult. Bone pendants with human faces could be symbols of ancestors. They could be used as protection of individuals in lifetime, while after the death they were placed close to the separated human head.

## 12.5 Conclusions

Human skeletons, found in Turlojiškė peat bog, and accidentally in some other sites in Lithuania have to be interpreted as human sacrifices, not ordinary graves. Sacrifice of people or ritual killing and placement in water bodies was practiced as we see not only in West and North Europe, but also in the East Baltic Region. We still have very little evidence about this side of human life because of lack research of wetland sites in the Region. These available data are evidence that in Lithuania like in the Northern and Western Europe, people were sacrificed and placed in water bodies in the Bronze Age.

Human skulls found at some archaeological settlement sites: Guogai-Piliuona, Šventoji, Kretuonas and Turlojiškės could be interpreted as cases of religious rituals associated with human bodies. This habit is known also from other European Regions at different times.

At the very end of the Stone Age and in the beginning of the Bronze Age in Lithuania human images become quite popular symbol. In some cases, just human head were depicted and became most probably a symbol of the entire human being.

The separation of human head from the rest of the body and its placement inside of the settlement site could be interpreted as one of the ritual ceremonies of the Bronze Age, possible to protect a house, settlement and a people of the community.

The use of human image in different ways and at different contexts supports the hypothesis of the presence of the cult of ancestors.

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