

# INTERPRETING TAURAPILIS PREHISTORIC SITE: A LANDSCAPE REVEALING POWER?

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## Abstract

In this article, some new approaches to Taurapolis prehistoric site, situated in the Utena district in Lithuania, are proposed. As a projection of a *taurus* horn on the ground in a water form, Lake Tauragnas was the principal factor shaping the particular prehistoric space and determining its status. In this way also, the origins of the Taurapolis Central Place, dated to the fifth or sixth centuries, are explained.

Key words: landscape archaeology, Iron Age, *taurus* (*Bos primigenius*), East Lithuanian Barrow Culture.

Each prehistoric site has a unique history, often little known to modern society. Archaeologists have an opportunity to identify reflections of this history during excavations. Unfortunately, even their results provide answers to only some questions concerning the historic role of one or another site, or the motivation behind such a role. This is the case with the Taurapolis prehistoric site, which in our textbooks is referred to as a burial site of a “duke” of the fifth to sixth centuries AD.

In 1970 an exceptionally rich inhumation grave was found in Taurapolis barrow 5: for the dead man of 40–50 years of age, a two-edged sword with silver gilt scabbard mountings richly decorated with chip-carving, a drinking horn with silver mountings, a silver ring, some silver buckles, a silver gilt amulet, and a number of other arms and jewellery made of iron and bronze had been placed in the grave. The same grave, along with the body of the man, contained the skeleton of a young horse (Fig. 1, 2). This barrow, with a diameter of around 13 metres, was situated in the centre of the western part of Taurapolis burial mound group.

The grave of Taurapolis barrow 5 stands out among hundreds of other excavated barrows of East Lithuania as it holds an impressive set of burial items. In his community, this person was distinguished by the position of chief (and perhaps of priest), and his wealth (Tautavičius 1981, p.31). We are able to add that the Taurapolis “Duke” does represent one particular population group of tall and thick set people, which is known in the East Baltic region at that time.

During the last centuries, Taurapolis (along with neighbouring Tauragnai) has not differed from other rural locations. Therefore, in this article I would like to look for an explanation of Taurapolis’ significance in prehistory, and focus on the surroundings of this particular place.

The relation between archaeological sites and bodies of water (like lakes and rivers) in East Lithuania is so obvious that it does not require any proof. A number of hill-forts of Striated Ware Culture (from the first millennium BC to the first centuries AD) and barrow groups of East Lithuanian Barrow Culture (third to 12th centuries) are characteristic elements of lake shores. The lakes, however, with their special toponymics and folklore, still lack the attention of researchers. Even a brief glance at this field makes it obvious that it has a unique logic of perception of the surroundings, based on ancient mythology and religion. There is a geographical vocabulary (the names of peninsulas, bays, straits and other parts of lakes) and a world of ancient mythology rich in subjects (passed on in the form of legends, tales and beliefs). In our case, it is important because Taurapolis stands on the shore of Lake Tauragnas, and most of this article will be devoted to their interrelation.

The name of Lake Tauragnas, along with the names of Tauragnai settlement and Taurapolis hill-fort located by the lake, have been documented in written sources since the 13th century in various forms: *Thowraggen* (1261), *Taurage* (1375), *Tauroginie* (1387), *Tarogin* (1387), etc (according to Būga 1959, p.636; Vanagas 1981, p.341ff.). Thus, the authenticity of the lake name *Taūragnas* is beyond any doubt.

The classic etymology of this place name is based on the similarity of the lake’s shape to a horn or horns of a *taurus* (*Bos primigenius*) (Fig. 3). The place name *Taūragnas* derives from *\*Taurag-ina-s*, which is obviously related to *taūragė* “a taurus horn” (“cornu ūri”) (Būga 1958, p.377; also cf *taurė* “a drinking vessel” – LKŽ 1991, p.1018ff.). Attempts to consider *Tauragnas* as a name with a zoological meaning (cf *Tauraginis* Lake “the lake on a cape where used to be Taurus” – Vanagas 1981, p.342) rather than the name of a con-figurative meaning are flimsy to say the least. The correlation between the shape of the lake and *taurus* horns

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is so obvious that (rewording the arguments of opponents) one does not need to take to the air in a plane to make it certain. The lake itself is distinguished by its depth. Its greatest depth of 60 metres is a record in present-day Lithuania. Legends have it that church bells have been sunk in Tauragnas (there is a figurative expression of sacredness) and, according to beliefs, the lake does not freeze in winter until it receives a live sacrifice (!).

After this introduction I will focus on *Taurapilis*. It fits here, not only because it is the name of a magnificent hill-fort on the shore of Lake Tauragnas. The name of Taurapilis can be considered a shortened variant of the name “Castle of Tauragnas [Lake]”. It is the site of Tauragnai Castle mentioned some times in written sources of the 14th and 15th centuries (Baubonis, Zabiela 2005, p.270). See for comparison names of similar origins: *Merkenpil* “Castle of Merkys [River]” (1377), *Nawen-pil* “Castle of Nava [Lake]” (1381), *Parssenpil* “Castle of Paršas [Lake]” (1387) etc.

Taurapilis hill-fort is the dominant element of a complex of archaeological objects of the same name in a visual, mythological and historical sense. It is a point in the landscape visible from many locations around the lake and referred to in numerous legends (the hill is most often considered the place of an ancient church). Archaeological and historical data suggests that Tauragnai settlement originated at Taurapilis. Apparently, this was the place of the first church (if it actually was built in Tauragnai before 1433, when, during an attack by the Livonian Order’s army, the wooden castle of Taurapilis was burnt and was not rebuilt).

Nowadays, Taurapilis hill-fort has a 90-metre-long and 16-metre-wide trapezium-shaped plateau, and steep slopes 13 to 14 metres high. From inland it is surrounded by a ditch, which is 220 metres long, 25 metres wide and four metres deep. Beyond the ditch there is an open settlement. Based on stray finds (extensive excavations of the site have not been conducted yet), the hill-fort and the settlement have been dated back to



Fig. 1. The excavation of Taurapilis barrow 5 in 1970 (photograph by A. Tautavičius).



Fig. 2. The grave of Taurapilis barrow 5 (photograph by A. Tautavičius).

the first millennium AD and the first half of the second millennium (see Baubonis, Zabiela 2005, p.270).

The small distance (only 0.5km) between the hill-fort and a group of Taurapilis barrows (where the grave of the Taurapilis “Duke” was discovered) allows us to consider the hill-fort the residence of the people buried in the barrows. (Compare the similar distance between hill-forts and the East Lithuanian barrows of the fifth and sixth centuries in Karališkiai [Molėtai district], Lavariškės [Trakai district], Maisiejūnai [Kaišiadorys district] and in nearby Tauragnai [Utena district].

The existence of Central Places (where one or more social functions were concentrated) in the Baltic Sea region during the Migration Period does not presently give grounds for any substantial doubts, although the research in the Baltics is still taking its first steps.



Fig. 3. A *taurus* (*Bos primigenius*) skull in the Museum of Wrocław University (© Muzeum Przyrodnicze Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego).

The grave of the Taurapilis “Duke” enables us to consider the complex of Taurapilis archaeological sites from the second half of the fifth and the sixth centuries (the hill-fort and barrows; Fig. 4) one of the Central Places of that period. I would like to note in this article that it can hardly be perceived without first identifying the mythological meaning of its surroundings. It is difficult to describe the site the way it used to be in the prehistoric period, but we have every reason to suppose that a *taurus* (bull) was the central mythological figure of this site.

This wild animal (which finally disappeared from our lands in the 17th century), as well as its relatives the ox and cow in Indo-European mythology, is directly associated with sovereignty, ie the achievement of the highest authority (usually upon hunting down a *taurus*) or its loss. The horns of a hunted bull become a symbol of recognised (divine and agreed by people) sovereignty, and usually it is emphasised declaratively: eg Grand Duke Gediminas (1316–1341) had gilded

drinking horns made and used them for special occasions (cf also the drinking horn found in the grave of the Taurapilis “Duke”); a priest of the goddess Diana in Rome attached the horns of a cow to the entrance to the Temple of Diana, etc.

There is information suggesting that a *taurus* hide might have been used for making another item reflecting the status of a person, namely the belt. During a trip to Lithuania at the beginning of the 16th century, the Austrian writer and diplomat Sigismund Herberstein saw in the palace of Grand Duke Sigismund Augustus a hunted *taurus* with a piece of hide flayed on its forehead (!). As a gift from Sigismund Augustus’ mother Queen Bona, Herberstein received two belts made of *taurus* leather, which were said to relieve labour pains when worn on the waist (Herberstein 2001, p.394ff.).

The establishment of the Central Place in Taurapilis, on a bend in a lake shaped like a *taurus* horn, is a declaration of the power and sovereignty agreed by the people and, most importantly, recognised by the gods. In

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this context, the discovery of the grave of the “Duke” in a seemingly ordinary barrow of East Lithuania is quite understandable and might even be consistent. It should be noted that the graves of the Taurapilis “Duke” and his army (armed horsemen) of the same period were located in the western part of the barrows and graves of the rest of the community, in the eastern section. Thus, it illustrates clearly the social stratification of the Taurapilis inhabitants.

The question how extensive the authority of the Taurapilis hypothetical “Duke” was, due to the minor significance of the region, still remains unanswered. Naturally, we can focus on at least three neighbours of Taurapilis in the fifth and sixth centuries, forming a triangle, with Lake Tauragnas and Taurapilis in the middle. These are: Tauragnai hill-fort and the site of destroyed barrows (here finds including weaponry from the fifth and sixth centuries have been discovered (in the west), Sėlė hill-fort and the site of destroyed barrows (in the east), and Šeimatis barrows with a cult site (in the north) (Fig. 5). The location of the latter on the opposite shore of Lake Tauragnas can be seen very well from Taurapilis. A “family” of stones considered to be people turned into stones have remained here. Legends have it that before the introduction of Christianity the “family” was located in the fields of Taurapilis (!), but later went to the Šeimatis woods. The father stone, called Mokas (from the word *mokyti* “to teach”), and the son stone, Mokiukas (“son of Mokas”) were famous for helping neighbouring people during hard years of war and famine, ie they provided the necessary advice and teaching (see Vaitkevičius 2006, p.442ff.).

Thus, the picture of Taurapilis Central Place is more or less full: we have identified the political and religious power closely related to Lake Tauragnas, ie the projection of *taurus* horns on the ground in a water form (which also provides additional new applications, as, for example, *Tauragnas* can also be perceived as an extremely deep horn filled with liquid or a body of water with a new moon shape, etc. Lake Tauragnas, which until now had been only a natural element of the surroundings, becomes a factor shaping the prehistoric space itself and determining the status of a certain place. The data provided shows that learning the

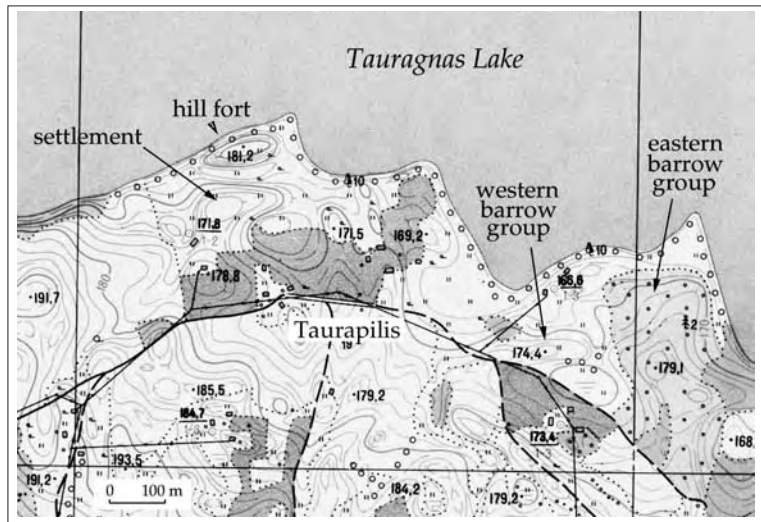


Fig. 4. The complex of Taurapilis archaeological monuments.

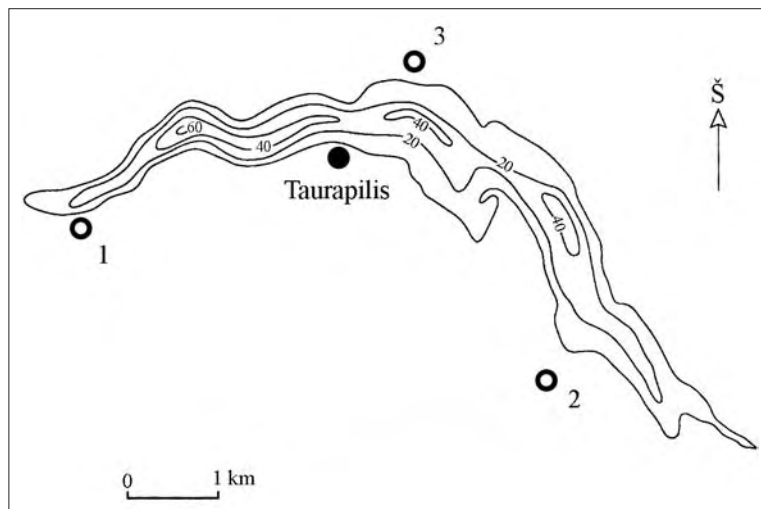


Fig. 5. Lake Tauragnas and the archaeological sites surrounding Taurapilis: 1 Tauragnai hill-fort and the site of destroyed barrows; 2 Sėlė hill-fort and the site of destroyed barrows; 3 Šeimatis barrow groups and cult site.

mythology of prehistoric landscapes is a significant link in modern archaeology and we should analyse it extensively.

Translated by Lina Guobienė

#### Abbreviation

LKŽ, 1991 – *Lietuvių kalbos žodynas*, vol. 15. Vilnius: Mokslas.

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## INTERPRETUOJANT TAURAPILĮ: KRAŠTOVAIZDIS, REPREZENTUOJANTIS GALIĄ?

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### Santrauka

Kunigaikščio kapas teikia pagrindą V a. antrosios pusės – VI a. Taurapilio archeologijos paminklų kompleksą (piliakalnį ir du pilkapynus) laikyti viena iš to meto centrinių vietų (1–2; 4 pav.). Tačiau straipsnyje pirmą kartą prabilta apie tai, kad jos suvokti neįmanoma be tenykščiame kraštovaizdyje glūdinčių mitologijos reikšmių tyrimų (3; 5 pav.).

Dėmesys visų pirma atkreiptas į Taūragno ežerą. Klasikinė šio hidronimo etimologija pagrįsta ežero formos panašumu į tauro ragą (taūragė „tauro ragas“ → \*Taurag-ina-s → Taūragnas). Tauras, mūsų kraštuose prieš kelis šimtmečius išnykęs laukinis galvijus, kaip ir jo giminaičiai jautis ir karvė, mitologijoje yra tiesiogiai susijęs su suverenumo sfera – aukščiausios valdžios įgijimu arba praradimu. Sumedžiotą tauro ragą mituose ir istorijoje tampa dieviškojo ir žmonių pripažinto suverenumo simboliu. Tokiame kontekste Taurapilio kunigaikščio kapo atradimas iš pirmo žvilgsnio eiliniame Rytų Lietuvos pilkapyje yra suprantamas ir net dėsningas – suverenumo, taigi ir valdžios, kodas glūdi Taurapilio kraštovaizdyje ir akivaizdžiai byloja, jog ši vieta savaime yra ypatinga. Galima spėti, jog apie tai V–VI a. Taurapilio gyventojai ne tik žinojo, bet ir savaip naudojosi, tuo galbūt grįsdami savo politinį ir (arba) socialinį dominavimą.

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