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EXAMINING THE LAYOUT TENDENCIES OF EAST LITHUANIAN BARROWS

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The article briefly presents and discusses the layout tendencies of East Lithuanian barrows dated to the 3rd–12th cc. The geographical location of barrow cemeteries and barrow layout in them indicate that barrow cemeteries are mostly arranged in a (1) linear or (2) cluster form. Some factors that possibly affected these configurations are discussed. An assumption is made that barrow layout may in a particular way correspond to the settlement's structure.

Key words: barrow cemetery, East Lithuanian Barrow Culture.

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Introduction

This article focuses on barrows of East Lithuanian Barrow Culture. The latter has been a subject of scientific examination since the late 19th c. (Покровский 1899; Таутавичюс 1966; Лухтан & Ушинскас 1988; Nowakowski 1995, 76–80). A wide range of barrow cemeteries covers the eastern part of Lithuania and the western territory of Belarus. The number of currently identified barrow cemeteries of the 3rd–12th/13th cc. in this area is well over 400, with at least 6,400 barrows in total (LAA 1977, 12; Dakanis 1987; Мядзведзеў 1999, 384–385; Kurila 2005). The density of barrow cemeteries significantly varies: only a single barrow has remained in some places, whereas in others their number amounts to several hundreds (up to 640 in Gedžiūnėliai, Ignalina distr.). Usually a barrow cemetery consists of some dozen burial mounds.

In barrows, both inhumation and cremation graves are found. The difference is based first of all on chronologically different processes within the culture. The prevalent inhumation rite in the early stage of East Lithuanian Barrow Culture was replaced by cremation since the mid-5th c. Later, from ca. 8th c., in barrows also horse burials

appear. Barrows devoted to horses sometimes constitute compact groups slightly separated from human barrows.

Materials

Despite the fact that barrows within the limits of one group usually are distributed rather regularly, such a distribution has not yet been closely analysed. Once the problem was discussed by Valdemaras Šimėnas in a kind of a seminar, but no published material appeared (pers. comm., June 2006). The aim of the present research was to highlight the supposed regularity in the tendencies of location of barrow cemeteries and especially of barrow layout in them.

I started with analysis of the topographic maps of around 130 barrow cemeteries, drawn to the scale 1:10 000. Later I have examined over 130 detail drawings of barrows in groups (some of them were the same and some from different sites). These drawings to the scale 1:500 were prepared after 1980 by geographer Tadas Šidiškis. It accounts for approximately 1/3 of the entirety of the data which, irrespective of rare instances of inaccuracy, provide quite an elaborate illustration of tendencies in barrow layout. Un-

fortunately, the situation with the mapping of East Lithuanian barrows in the territory of Belarus is still remarkably worse; in this case I was forced to refer to some published schemes (cf. Звярыга 2005, Fig. 27) as well as to personal observations on the spot.

As a result of the undertaken analysis, tendencies of the location of barrow cemeteries are more or less clear. Barrow groups are often located in moraine regions and show relations with hillforts and open settlements in the early stage of the culture (in the 3rd–mid-5th cc.) (Maisiejūnai, Migonys, Moša, etc.). Newly (since the 5th c.) established East Lithuanian barrow cemeteries are quite often situated in sandy areas and usually had no direct relation with dwelling or defence sites (Pabarė, Pamusys, Vyžiai, etc.). Maybe the most constant elements in the environs of barrow cemeteries of the 3rd–12th/13th cc. are water bodies such as rivers, lakes and wetlands: burial sites were established on river terraces, lakeshores, nearby swamps and marshes. Furthermore, local legends used to connect barrows with the above-mentioned water bodies: barrows were regarded as burials of soldiers whose treasures (as usual golden money) were hidden in lakes or wetlands nearby. Mythological research of such a motif proves that souls of the dead are still figuratively expressed by the images of *fire*, *gold*, and *blood* (Vaitkevičienė 2001, 35–61). These parallels became even more significant given the fact that the legends of such content are mostly associated with barrows of the 5th–12th/13th cc. where *cremations* have been discovered.

Moreover, couples of barrow cemeteries within one or several kilometres often form a kind of ranges located in a certain direction. Such ranges are identified not only on the banks of rivers, but also on lake shores, along hill ridges and roads (Antaniškės, Ardiškis, Mūrininkai, Pavajuonis-Rėkučiai) (fig. 1). As for the layout of barrows inside the groups, in general barrow cemeteries are arranged according to a linear or cluster scheme.

The **linear** layout of barrow groups in the landscape is a fairly characteristic phenomenon of East Lithuanian Barrow Culture (fig. 2). The distances among burial mounds in linear barrow cemeteries are often larger than in cluster ones, and the ranges of burial mounds are usually less numerous, the number of barrows rarely being over 20 or 30. There are cases when lines are formed by a few isolated “segments” of barrows or there are remaining two or more lines of barrows stretching in one barrow cemetery in different directions.

Usually roads are the elements of landscape, with which the direction of barrow cemeteries as well as of isolated barrows arranged in lines is correlated (Ardiškis, Dailidės, Paduobė, etc.; cf. Tilley 1994, 105). Naturally, this assumption is plausible only where a road or traces of an old road have remained near the barrows. Identifying a mutual link between the roads and East Lithuanian barrows, I tend to consider it a new field of research – not just a mere coincidence.

One more explanation of the linear layout of barrow cemeteries is possible. Perhaps this layout was sometimes affected by the stretch direction of rivers or rivulets as well. For instance, large ranges of barrow cemeteries and barrows in them are clustered at the Žeimena River (the right tributary of the Neris; Paduobė, Sudota, Šaltaliūnė) and at the Dysna River (the left tributary of the Daugava; Dvarkščius, Garšvinė, Gedžiūnai). The location of barrow cemeteries at the Neris River provides some more knowledge in this case: several barrow cemeteries are situated within a short distance from principal river shoals (the river upwards; Ašmenec, Karmazinai, Grabjolai, etc.). This kind of link between a river and burial sites located nearby could be very likely described as mythological. The local folklore clearly gives the code for understanding the mythical meaning of the shoals. Their rocks are considered bewitched participants of bridal processions (see

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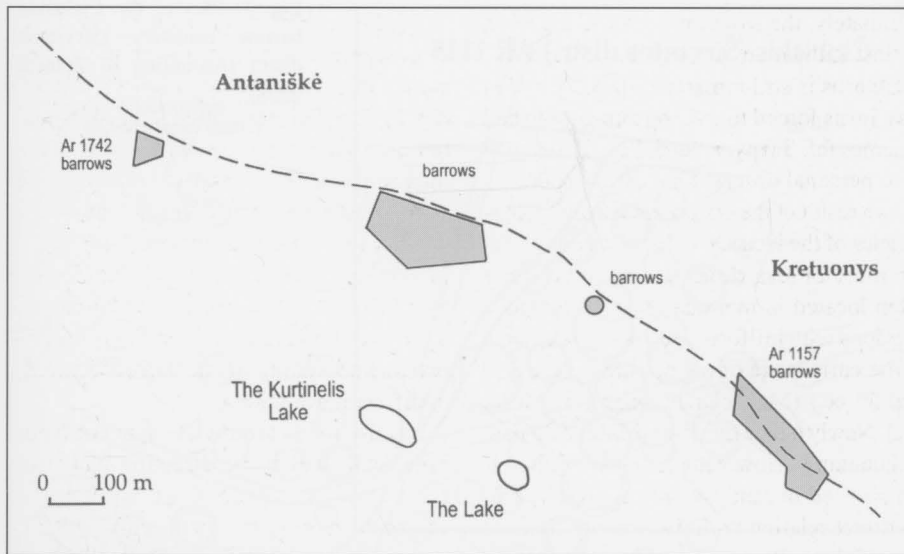


Fig. 1. Location of the Antaniškės and Kretuonys (Švenčionys distr.) barrow cemeteries. Drawn by author, 2005.

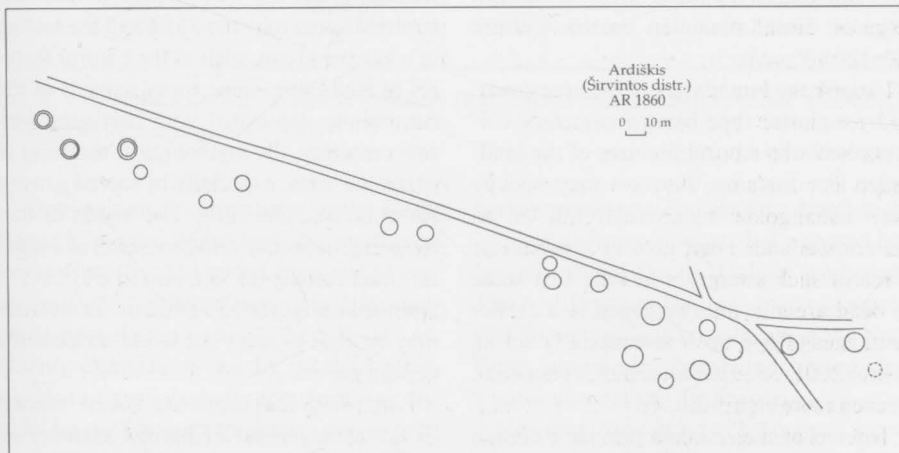


Fig. 2. Plan of the Ardiškis barrow cemetery (Širvintos distr.). Drawn by author according to T. Šidiškis' measurements in 1999.

Piasecka et al. 2005, 228–229). The transitional meaning of the wedding-like rite of passage is known worldwide. Hereby, the Neris River appears as a path leading to the beyond; its water and rocks are like a purging medium for souls wishing to become clean (Vaitkevičius 2006, 87).

In general, the geographical location of **cluster** type barrow cemeteries is similar to

that of linear type barrow cemeteries. Sometimes both types of cemeteries are found situated close to each other (Ardiškis and Dailidės, Dieveniškės and Senieji Miežionys, Rusių Ragas and Čiobiškis, etc.; fig. 3). However, cluster type barrow cemeteries are much more compact than linear type ones. As a rule, the distances among the burial mounds are relatively small the-

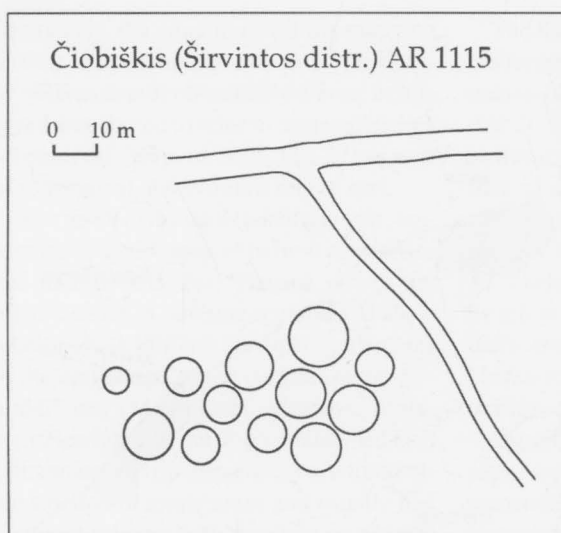


Fig. 3. Plan of the Čiobiškis barrow cemetery (Širvintos distr.) (According to Zabiela 2005).

re. Often barrows even share the same ditches always surrounding them in the last stage of East Lithuanian Barrow Culture (8th–12th/13th cc.).

Usually the boundaries of the area covered by a cluster type barrow cemetery correlate with the natural features of the landscape. For instance, barrows may occupy the whole top of a particular hill or, on the contrary, an exact area of a particular lowland. It is important to note that some of barrow cemeteries arranged in a cluster form might have been intentionally set up at the crossroads (Rūsteikiai, Kleboniškaiai, Drabužninkai, etc.) (fig. 4).

The archaeological data provide a certain reason to suppose that the linear layout of the barrows is a bit more characteristic of the early stage while the cluster type – to later stages (from the mid-5th c.) of East Lithuanian Barrow Culture (the 3rd – mid-5th cc.).

Discussion

The layout of barrows in groups is usually considered to be merely a result of the gradual development of a barrow cemetery. Without challenging the significance of

the development of the barrow cemetery through centuries, I would like to note that several factors may have affected the setting of a barrow group, such as the natural features of landscape, some social aspects of the community connected with particular barrow cemetery, the mythological meaning of particular sites, especially of sacred groves, water bodies, and hills. The layout of barrows in groups may also be a result of a regular ritual activity (cf. Garwood 1991, 15–17), and the configuration of barrow cemeteries may be used to study the world outlook of a certain period.

Regarding the supposed social aspects in the arrangement of barrow cemeteries, one should mention the Taurapolis barrow cemetery (Utena distr.). Results of archaeological excavations indicate that the linear layout of the barrows in this case was probably imposed by the social status of the person buried in the centre of this burial site (in barrow No 5). Because of the exceptionally rich assemblage found here and dated to the mid-5th c., the above-mentioned person is usually called the Duke of Taurapolis. His burial mound from east and west was surrounded by burial mounds of armed horsemen (Tautavičius 1981).

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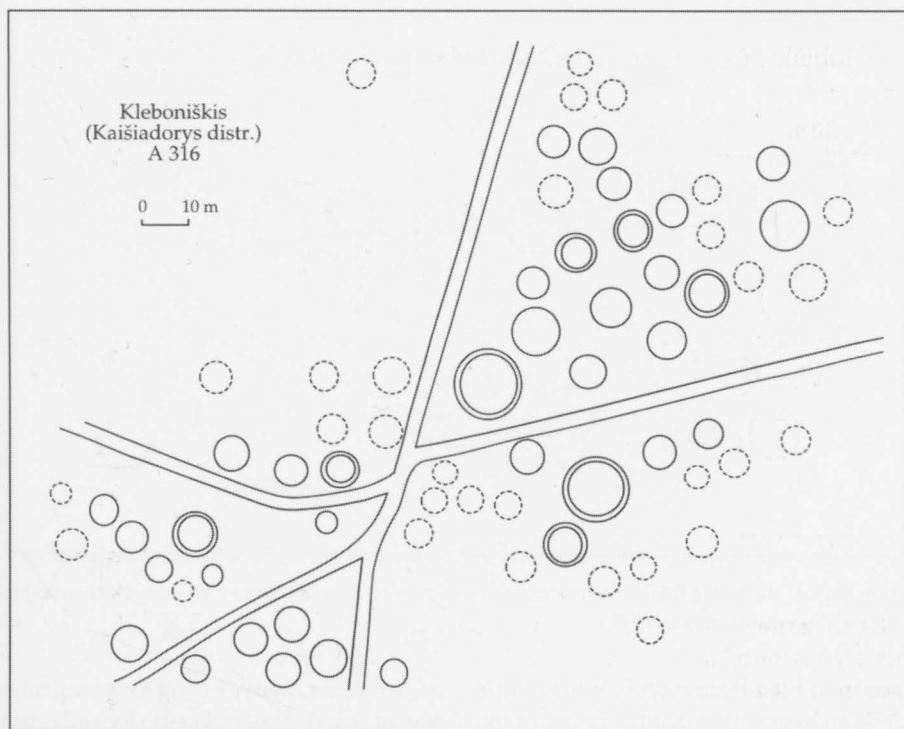


Fig. 4. Plan of the Klebonišiai barrow cemetery (Kaišiadorys distr.). Drawn by author according to T. Šidiškis' measurements in 2002.

Archaeological excavations in the Rusių Ragas (Širvintos distr.) barrow cemetery of linear type (fig. 5) yielded 8 burials (2 cremations and 6 inhumations) of horses, their equipment dating back to the 10th–11th cc. During excavations nearby (in the Čiobiškis cluster type barrow cemetery, see fig. 3), at least 23 human cremation graves with burial items of the same period were found (Zabiela 2005). This, so far exceptional, case illustrates that the difference in arranging the neighbouring barrow cemeteries was possibly based on different approaches to humans and horses (sacrificed animals). Moreover, the linear layout of the Rusių Ragas barrows might reflect the real order of horses and horsemen in the warfare.

There are different ways of how sacred places could influence the layout of barrow cemeteries. For instance, a compact group of 16 burial mounds in the Vindziuliškės

barrow cemetery (Kaišiadorys distr.) in the form of a cluster is located at a sacred hollow still called Devils' Hollow (on its top). The Ardiškis and Dailidės barrow cemeteries (Širvintos distr.) stretch along the Neris River, supposedly regarded in this region as a particular path to the beyond.

However, the setting of barrows at the roads, noted among both types of barrow cemeteries, is of particular interest. It is very likely a natural and rational solution, as the road to the cemetery is a must nowadays as well. But the road affecting the linear development of barrow cemetery schemes and quite often emerging in cluster type barrow cemeteries is more than a mere possibility of movement. It definitely emerges as a factor banding and / or separating the living and the dead, the dwelling and the burial sites. Such a situation and the peculiarities of burial customs in East Lithuania (a barrow is

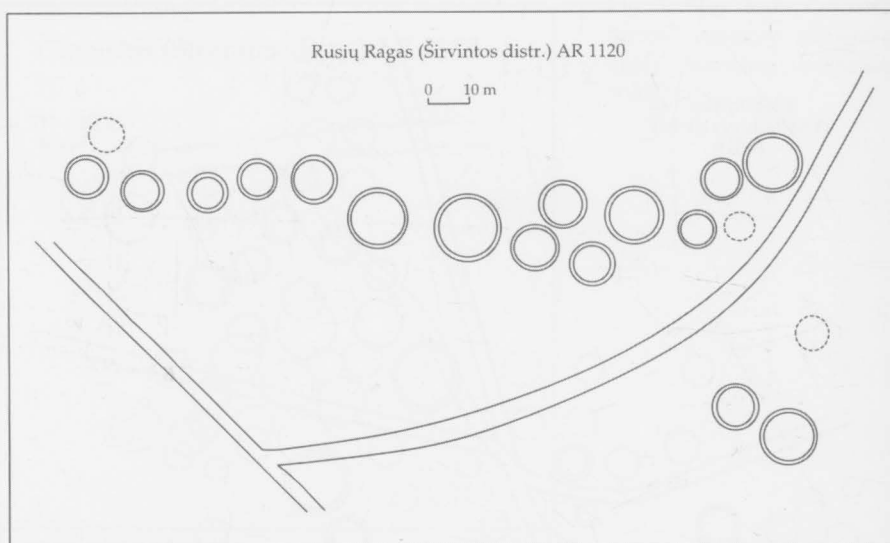


Fig. 5. Plan of the Rusių Ragas barrow cemetery (Širvintos district). Drawn by author according to T. Šidiškis' measurements in 1999.

considered a family grave, see Kurila 2002) enable an assumption that the layout of the residence of the deceased, represented by the configuration of the group of barrows, would more or less repeat the layout of the settlement of the deceased when alive.

It is difficult to ascertain whether barrow layout exactly reflects the structure of a settlement or the relationships within a particular community. Settlements of East Lithuanian Barrow Culture are still a "white spot" in archaeology (a relatively large area of an open settlement (1.2 ha) dating back to the 4th/5th–9th cc. has been excavated only in Zasvyr–Miadel distr., Belarus).

An additional possibility to compare the layout of barrows and farmsteads is provided by data on old historical villages with their primary layout not affected by land reforms. The majority of them consist of the so-called villages of noblemen and a few individually developed villages, where in the 16th–20th cc. no state land reforms were undertaken (Butkevičius 1971, 35–41; cf. Žulkus 1998) (figs. 6, 7). The first type of settlements represents groups of rather remote farmsteads separated by water bodies

or groves but always bound by a particular road or even some of them (historically such settlements were called *laukas* 'field'). The second type of settlements represents villages or groups of farmsteads built in a kind of a cluster (historically called *kiemas* 'yard'). Evidently these two forms of settlements had been influenced by social relationships for centuries: the first form emphasizes the individuality, independent single families or kin, and the second form stresses a collective and in particular grouped families.

Supposedly, a similar picture in this case might be drawn by examining barrow layout. The linear layout is more characteristic of barrows that yielded single graves, while cluster barrows usually yielded a couple of graves.

Conclusions

Although the present examination of East Lithuanian barrow cemeteries is of preliminary character, it is obvious that a certain layout of barrows (of linear or cluster type) is more than a mere result of the development

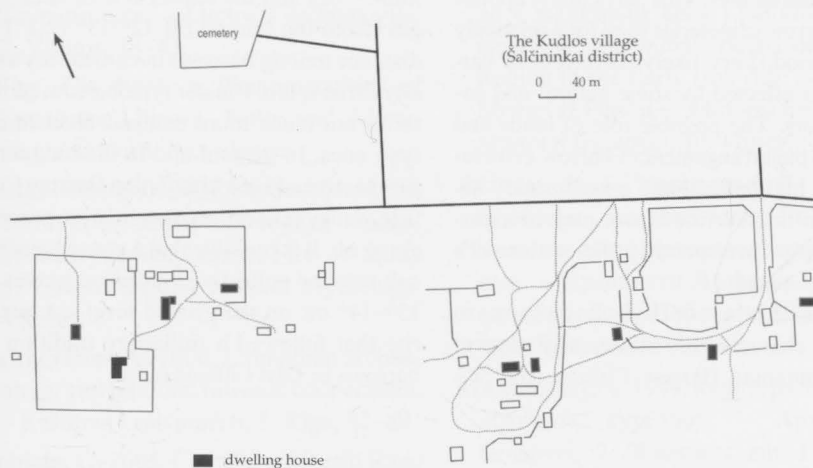


Fig. 6. Scheme of Kudlos village (Šalčininkai distr.) (According to Butkevičius 1971).



Fig. 7. Scheme of Dubininkas village (Varėna distr.) based on plan drawn in 1856: a) farmsteads; b) arable; c) meadows; d) wetland; e) sandy area (according to Šešelgis 1988).

of these burial sites. This particularly applies to the barrow cemeteries used for a relatively short period. Very likely the layout of barrows was affected by some natural and social factors. The possible role of roads and rivers in the arrangement of barrow cemeteries was highlighted, and a preliminary assumption that barrow layout may in a particular way correspond to the settlement's structure is made.

The linear layout of the barrows seems to be more characteristic of the early stage of East Lithuanian Barrow Culture (the 3rd–

mid-5th cc.) and the cluster one of later stages (from the mid-5th till 12th/13th cc.). The distance among barrows in cemeteries usually differs, too. Cluster type barrow cemeteries are much more compact than linear type ones. In general and in the long-term perspective of East Lithuanian Barrow Culture, it may reflect the consolidation process going on. It is possible that a consequent result was the collective cremation graves of 13th–14th cc. on the ground level – a burial rite that followed a millenary tradition of barrows in East Lithuania.

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