

■ **CHRISTIAN COINS IN PAGAN GRAVES?**
■ **ARTEFACTS, TEXTS AND RESEARCH TRADITIONS** ■

■ **Romas Jarockis** ■

In this paper, research will concentrate on coins from 14th to 17th century burials in Lithuania, which is one of the pagan relicts, according to wide-spread opinion. A comparison between medieval or post-medieval burials will be made, and the wide-ranging theory concerning "confronting pagan relicts" will be discussed. The principal aim is to demonstrate that burial coins of the Middle Ages and post-medieval times can be interpreted as adopted by the local population as a reaction to Christian ideology and coin-based economic relations.

Key words: historical archaeology, burial coins, mentality, monetarisation, Christianization, East Baltic, Lithuania, 1400–1800 AD.

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Introduction

It is universally accepted that archaeology should be divided in two parts: prehistoric and historical archaeology. The border between these two branches separates periods with or without writing, and is differently established in different parts of the world (Orser & Fagan 1995, 6 ff; Andrén 1998, 1 ff, fig. 1). Historical archaeology in the East Baltic coincides with the beginning of the Middle Ages at the edge of the 12th century and in the 13th century. This was a time when a huge amount of written sources appear describing historical events and people who used to live in this part of modern Europe at that time.

The rise of the Middle Ages is the subject of a huge volume of scientific research. A whole series of scientific disciplines such as art history, anthropology, philology, geography, ethnology, etc., with their different methods of analysis and procedures for examining sources, have been combined to solve this problem. Medieval historians and archaeologists with their source material – texts and artefacts – play an especially important role in this.

Historical and archaeological sources dif-

fer in their origin and possibilities of interpretation. Archaeological material provides a great deal of valuable information for interpretation concerning processes that have occurred in the past. Most historical sources are specially constructed and, in many cases, were recorded prior to the conclusion of the processes or phenomena that took place. They are event-related, i.e. created to describe a specific event or events, and are generally connected with the ruling elite (Austin 1990, 12).

The assumption that archaeological artefacts and historical texts are equal witnesses of a people's past is becoming ever more established among many European archaeologists investigating the Middle Ages (Andrén 1998, 35). These kinds of sources can be mutually co-ordinated, although it is essential to keep a certain distance between them, for example unmatched archaeological material should not be interpreted on the basis of historical sources alone, nor should archaeological material be specially selected to illustrate historical texts. Archaeology should be used to find "otherness" we do not know from the written sources (Austin 1990, 33).

In reading the Baltic archaeological literature regarding Christian expansion, one of the main research topics is the corpus of so-called pagan relics. Each burial mode that does not fit with the Christian tradition or the medieval European burial rite is considered to be a specific remnant of paganism. Archaeological data from burials is frequently interpreted through medieval and post-medieval descriptions of native pagan beliefs, as well as 19th and 20th century ethnological data (Urbanavičius 1966, 105 ff; Valk 1995, 149 ff). At the same time, when looking for the explanation of why Christianity was established in this part of the Baltic region through such a long and complicated process, conclusions are often drawn that stress factors of ideological-religious (pagan – Christian) and ethnic-cultural (native – foreign) confrontation (Mugurēvičs 1990, 175 ff; Valk 1995, 132; 1999, 109).

In this paper, research will concentrate on coins from 14th to 17th century burials in Lithuania, which according to widespread opinion is one of the pagan relicts. A comparison between medieval or post-medieval burials will be made, and the wide-ranging theories concerning “confronting pagan relicts” will be discussed. The principal aim is to show that burial coins of the Middle Ages and post-medieval times can be interpreted as having been adopted by the local population as a reaction to Christian ideology and coin-based economic relations.

Christianization and burial coins

It is universally accepted when researching burial customs that general cultural, ideological or religious changes in society become very tangible. Consequently, archaeological material found in cemeteries from transitional periods can be variously used as one of the basic sources for

studying the mentality (way of thinking) of people from the past.

The end of 12th century Christian expansion in the eastern Baltic area reflects the following archaeological traits: a change in burial pattern (inhumation graves became universally common); uniform burial orientation (the dead were oriented east to west); and also additional grave goods (the assemblages of weapons, tools and ornaments formerly abundantly found in prehistoric burials gradually shifted to contain costume details, small personal and household items as well as coins in medieval graves), (Urbanavičius 1966, 105 ff; LA 1974, 297 ff, Valk 1995, 70 ff; 1999, 137 ff).

Similar burial rites are known from graves dating from the period of the transition to Christianity in neighbouring regions. Coins are often found as part of burial inventories in north-western Russia, dated AD 900–1000 (Ravdina 1988). Numerous coins have also been found in Viking Age – early medieval cemeteries in eastern parts of Sweden (Gräslund 1967, 175 ff; Staecker 1999, 291–321). The ritual of placing coins in graves is considered to be a result of Byzantine influence in Scandinavia (Gräslund 1967, 193).

The Grand Duchy of Lithuania only began to issue its own small denomination coins in the 1380's (Gudavičius 1991, 24 f; Ivanauskas & Balčius 1994). At the same time, when the country was converted to the Christian religion, coins immediately appear as grave goods in graves (Urbanavičius 1967, 61 ff).

Up to 1990, according to statistics presented by Eugenijus Svetikas (1995), more than 5000 coins dating from the 14th to the 17th centuries have been found in 182 cemeteries in the present territory of Lithuania. Only 19.7% of all burials, i.e. 1194 graves dated to the 14th to 17th centuries contained coins. Over and above these statistics, the author distinguishes 2010 graves (33.1%) containing additional

grave goods – weapons, tools, potsherds, bird bones, etc. (Svetikas 1995, tab. 2.), (fig. 1).

Taken together, if coins and grave goods can be considered without exception as “pagan relicts” (they were found in a little more than half of the statistically analysed burials), it would have to be acknowledged that pagan elements are not commonly discernible. More than 47% of cemeteries belonging to the period in question do not have exceptional grave goods, and can be interpreted as being classically Christian. In comparison, the high percentage of burials containing additional grave goods may be a result of the comparatively late Christianization of Lithuania (the official date is AD 1387). For example, in southern Estonia, where conversion took place some 150 years earlier, the number of graves containing additional grave goods from the same period reaches only 1/3 of the total burial count (Valk 1999, 74).

Mentality and monetary economy

In discussing the dating of burials, which is basically determined from supporting numismatic material, it is clear that coins dated to the mid-15th and even early 16th centuries are rarely found in graves. The essential turning point occurred in the second half of the 16th century. According to the statistics mentioned above, up to 37% of all burials containing coins found in Lithuania belong to this period. There is an abundance of coins in 17th century burials compared to the previous period (Svetikas 1995, tab. 2), (fig. 2). This increase in the 16th to 17th centuries is noticeable in the Latvian and Estonian cemeteries that were investigated (LA 1974, 298; Valk 1999, fig. 50).

The statistics show that the number of burials containing only a few coins is quite high. From 1 to 3 coins were found

14th-17th century grave statistics

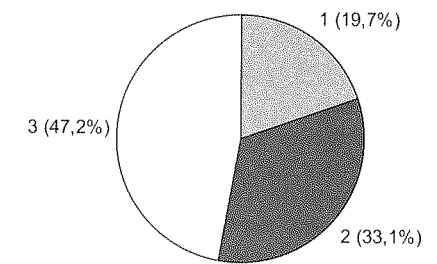


Fig. 1. 1- graves with coins, 2- graves with additional grave goods, 3- graves without coins and additional goods. (Source: Svetikas 1995, tab. 2)

in almost 80% of all analysed burials in Lithuania. A similar quantity of graves with a few coins is noted among the medieval and post-medieval burials investigated in the rest of the East Baltic (LA 1974, 298; Valk 1995, 145).

According to the statistics presented by Svetikas, the position of coins in burials varies. However, two areas of coin concentration can generally be discerned in particular graves, i.e. near the head and in the area of the waist or pelvis, where respectively 33% and 41% of all coins were found. It is also important to note that some 22% of all analysed coins together with purse remnants were detected in these areas too.

In considering the sudden increase in quantities of burial coins, it should not be forgotten that, according to historical sources, the value of money began to fall in the second half of the 16th century. The number of coins in individual burials increased greatly at this time, despite a significant decrease in purchasing power (Urbanavičius 1967, 72). This indication of inflation can be verified by a comparative chronological analysis of coins found in 17th-century burials and treasure hoards. 17th-century cemeteries contain a

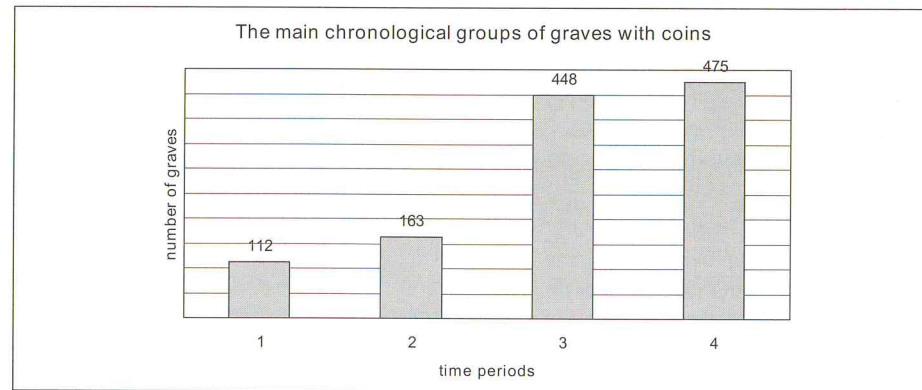


Fig. 2. 1- ca. 1387–1450, 2- ca. 1450–1550, 3- ca. 1550–1590, 4- ca. 1590–1700. (Source: Svetikas 1995, tab. 2)

great deal more 16th-century coins than do treasure hoards from the same period: 17th-century hoards contain no more than 5% of 16th-century coins, while the numismatic material taken for analysis from the two investigated rural cemeteries showed that the amount of 16th-century coins in 17th-century graves is as much as 17% (Varnas & Ivanauskas 1987, 35). From an economic perspective, it can be concluded that the placement of old and non-functional coins in graves suggests they were not necessary for general circulation. Due to either a change of ruler or the diminishing value of money, no-one used small change. Since these coins were not needed in this period, they faded out by being “buried” (Senapėdis 1987, 43).

In analysing the numismatic material in burials, researchers frequently take into account a high number of defective and forged coins removed from circulation. This suggests that coins in burials were simply symbols of monetary value. Beyond the issues mentioned above, the purely symbolic meaning of coin placement in graves is confirmed by coin characteristics such as narrow coin scale, poor copper-plating and small nominal value. Consequently, the conclusion is that “placing coins in graves for the dead is a specific monetary transaction with only one-sided participation where consumer inter-



Fig. 3. Lithuanian half-groat, minted ca. 1390. Scale 1:1. (After Ivanauskas 2001, fig. 12)

ests can be traced” (Varnas & Ivanauskas 1987, 35).

As another example, child burials contained noticeably smaller numbers of coins than adult burials. In a more precise calculation, analysing archaeological material from two post-medieval rural cemeteries, it becomes clear that coins were mostly found in adult female burials. On the basis of this hypothesis – i.e. if coins were placed in 100% of female graves, then coins would be placed in every second male grave, every third infant grave and every seventh child grave (Varnas & Ivanauskas 1987, 35).

Coin topography

Coin findings in the cultural layers of both medieval towns and rural churches are successfully used as archaeological sour-

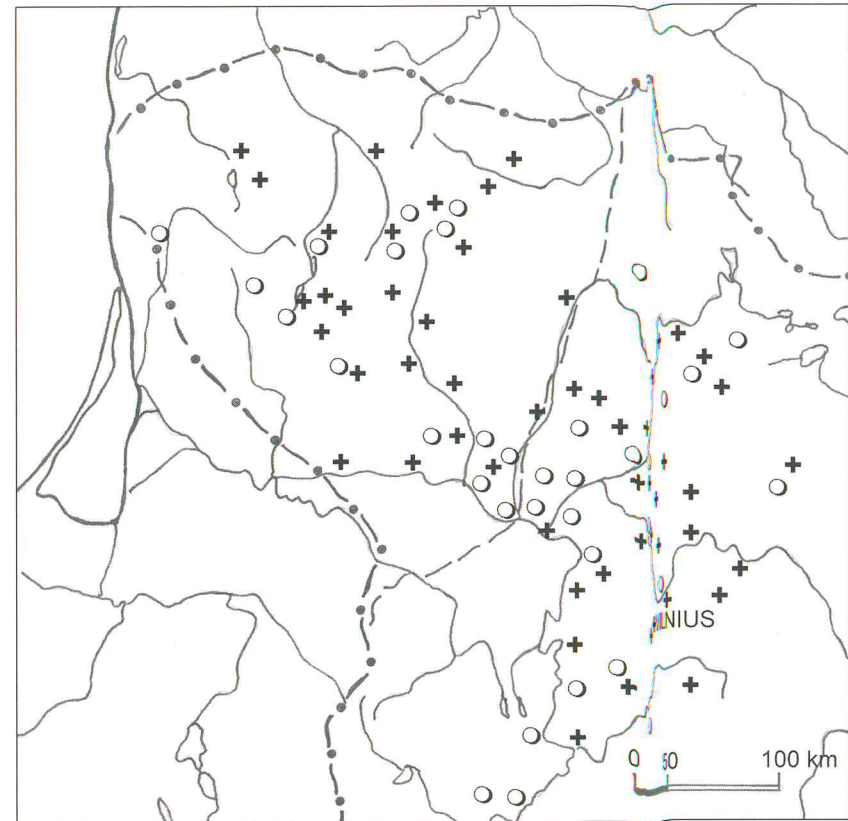


Fig. 4. Distribution map of the 15th-century churches and cemeteries where the first Lithuanian coins, dated ca. 1387–1495, were found.

- · - · - state border of Grand Duchy of Lithuania, ca. 1430;
 - - - border between Vilnius and Samogitian bishoprics;
 + - churches founded within limits of modern Lithuania, ca. 1387;
 O - cemeteries where the first Lithuanian coins dated ca. 1387–1495 were found.
 (Sources: Kviklys 1982; 1983; 1984; 1985; Ivanauskas 2001)

ces for the study of the development of coin currency – monetarisation – in medieval society (Klackenberg 1989; 1992; Schia 1989). A similar research model could be applied, with possibly even greater success, in the interpretation of the numismatic material found in medieval and post-medieval cemeteries in Lithuania.

Although heated discussion continues concerning the precision of coin dating (Svetikas 1995, 117; Ivanauskas 1996, 36), as mentioned above, it is accepted that the minting of the first Lithuanian coins, of which there were 4 types, began in the

Grand Duchy of Lithuania at the end of the 14th century (findings of these types were mainly in treasure hoards; however, approx. 350 pieces came from burials at the end of the 14th and the 15th centuries (Ivanauskas 2001).

From an archaeological point of view, it is very important that the appearance of coins is explained by a change in burials, i.e. coins are mostly found in areas where Christianity was adopted where cremation, practised in many parts of the country until conversion, (Urbanavičius 1967,

62). In this case, the regional spread of the first Lithuanian coins offers the well-founded conclusion that the spread of Christianity and the monetarisation of medieval society in Lithuania occurred simultaneously (Ivanauskas 2000, 47ff.).

The first phase of Christianization in state and society took place in East Lithuania (Vilnius bishopric was founded here in 1387) and completed in the western part of country by establishing the Samogitian bishopric in 1417 (Lietuvos 1998, 139 ff, 174). The distribution map of the location of burial coins and the first parish churches (fig. 4) shows that, with a few exceptions, both are grouped mainly on a south-east to north-west axis, i.e. the main direction of the Christianisation process as mentioned above.

From a centre-periphery perspective, it is evident that coins in early Christian cemeteries appear in peripheral parishes. The most dense concentrations of burial coins are in central Lithuania, and run from here up the Nemunas River to the south and along the Dubysa and Šventoji rivers, as mentioned above, mainly to the north-east and north-west, while burial coins in the core area of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, where the state capital Vilnius and most of the parish churches were situated, are almost entirely non-existent. On the other hand, this is the very region with the richest treasures, containing the first Lithuanian coins.

Conclusions

On the one hand, the presence of written sources is a great advantage for historical archaeology. On the other hand, however,

it is a great risk for archaeological research to become a passive illustration of historical texts or even to be used for ideological-political purposes.

Research opinion about burial coins as "confronting pagan relicts" is part of a research tradition that should conditionally be called "resistance theory". This theory consists of interpretations about ideological-religious and ethnic-cultural conflicts between indigenous peoples in East Baltic and Christian Europe in the Middle Ages as being more or less common for archaeological research in all three Baltic countries. This research tradition could perhaps have originated from the national awakening movements in the second half of the 19th century, and was used for building a scientific basis to ground national identity and consolidate the Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian nations in the 1930's.

Coins in 14th-century graves in present-day Lithuanian territory reappeared again after about a thousand years, and this cannot be explained as a continued pagan custom. More probably, Christian ideology interwoven with Byzantine Orthodox Church ritual tradition (locally improvised version of the *tributum Petri*) and the introduction of European coin-based market relations caused newly converted local people to place coins in graves.

The adoption of Christianity and the monetarisation of medieval society in Lithuania occurred simultaneously. The distribution of the first Lithuanian coin finds and the geography of 14th-15th-century churches shows the direction of the spread of Christianity, and possibly the routes whereby the newly issued small nominal coins circulated.

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**FROM AESTII TO ESTI.
CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE WESTERN
LITHUANIAN GROUP AND THE AREA OF
DISTRIBUTION OF TARAND-GRAVES**

Rasa Banytė-Rowell and Anna Bitner-Wróblewska

The name *Aestii* was first used by Tacitus to describe the peoples dwelling on the amber coast of the Baltic Sea. As the centuries passed, this name was transformed into *Haistii* and *Esti* (*Eistr*, *Eistir*) in the Middle Ages. The question arises as to whether the ethnonym and/or the peoples to which it refers moved along the coast of the sea. The present authors wish to compare the written sources with archaeological data and look for any possible connections between the areas of distribution of the western Lithuanian stone-circle-graves and the *tarand*-graves. It turns out that there are a significant number of similarities both in *sacrum* and *profanum*. Lithuanian graves with stone constructions are very reminiscent of the *tarand*-enclosures from the Finnic environment. There are also elements of the costume that are common to both areas, such as open-work brooches and rosette pins/brooches, as well as several examples of mutual connections (snake-headed finger rings, fibulae A.133 and imitations thereof).

Key words: Western Lithuanian stone-circle graves, *tarand*-graves, *Aestii*, similarities in *sacrum* and *profanum*.

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Introduction

"Culture and material culture", the subject of the first Baltic Archaeological Seminar (BASE), devotes its attention to a central problem of archaeology, namely how we interpret past material culture. Among different aspects of the study of people and societies in the past, the problem of ethnic identity remains a key focus of archaeological interest (see Shennan 1989; 1991). As we enter the twenty-first century we have almost abandoned the peccadilloes typical of archaeology in the first half of the twentieth century, whereby archaeology was understood not as means of exploring the pre-history of an area but as a study of the proto-history of the ancestors of a certain ethnic group, which was believed to have created the 'state' that lat-

er came to stand on that territory. Today political circumstances no longer require us to exaggerate or deliberately underestimate the contribution of "alien" influences on culture in the eastern Baltic region.

The authors of this article have chosen induction as a method to obtain a general picture of connections in the region in question, comparing archaeological evidence with the ethnic information about *Aesti*, *Esti* and *Eistir* to be found in the written historical sources (fig. 1).

The name *Aesti* [*Aestiorum gentes*] was first mentioned by Tacitus in "Germania" (1st century AD) to describe the peoples dwelling along the amber coast of the Baltic Sea (Tacitus, *Germania*, 45: 2–4). They have been identified as the inhabitants of Samland and the western Lithuanian coast (Kunkel 1943, col. 1815; Okulicz 1986,