

# First Bear Claw Finds in Weapon Graves of the 6<sup>th</sup>/First Half of the 7<sup>th</sup> Century on the Kaliningrad Peninsula

## ABSTRACT

The authors discuss the first bear claw finds from recently investigated Late Migration period cremation graves on the Kaliningrad Peninsula, the former settlement area of the West Balt tribes of the *Aestii* of historical sources. Size and construction of the graves and composition and richness of their inventories, accompanying several horse burials, point to the high social status of the dead. Unique in the local context are numerous bear claws in the burials. Analogies in both male and female graves in Scandinavia and Central Europe are often verifiably interpreted as the remains of bear skins, while their placement in the burials probably has its origin in a Germanic warrior milieu. Most described burials contained weapons, which allow interpreting them as male warrior graves, while one belonged, according to the grave goods, to a woman. Presence of a bear skin in a grave is thus not necessarily always a reflection of warrior rituals but rather a symbol of a high social status.

## KEYWORDS

West Balts / former East Prussia / Kaliningrad / Sambian Peninsula / Late Migration period / Dark Ages / *Aestii* / weapon graves / horse burials / bear claws (bear skins)

## Description and Discussion of Finds

For a long time, the territory of the former German province of East Prussia was considered one of the archaeologically best-investigated regions of pre-World War II Europe. First and foremost, this assertion is true for funerary monuments, both for the whole territory of the province as well as for one of its most archaeologically rich and interesting regions: the Sambian Peninsula (historical Sambia and

the present-day Kaliningrad Peninsula). The study of the peninsula in the pre-World War II research period can justifiably be called a »necropolis archaeology«: while the burial mounds of the Bronze Age and Early Iron Age attracted the attention of researchers by the very fact of their prominent presence in the landscape<sup>1</sup>, the flat burial sites of the Roman Age – »the Late Pagan period«<sup>2</sup> – were famous for their numer-

**1** The burial mounds were destroyed in huge numbers for many reasons: through ploughing by farmers and land owners, by treasure hunters in search of precious metals, just out of curiosity by the first »serious« archaeologists in the process of their academic investigations and, finally and probably most intensively, by stonecutters, who used the stone structures of funerary Bronze Age constructions as man-made stone deposits. In the latter case, stone elements of the burial mounds were subsequently used as paving material for roads and as construction material for bridges, vi-

aducts and other infrastructural objects, many of which were built in the province in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

**2** The term »Late Pagan Time« (German: *spätheidnische Zeit*) was widely used in local pre-World War II East Prussian archaeology and stands for the time span between the end of the Viking period and the beginning of the Teutonic Order expansion into the lands of the Old Prussians (11<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries AD). The time span in question is also referred to as phase H of the local chronology (Engel 1931, 314).

ous, rich and characteristic grave goods<sup>3</sup>. Indeed, the excavations conducted by East Prussian scholars on the necropolises yielded archaeological material that formed the basis of the early typologies of local categories of finds and the chronological system of local antiquities created by the renowned East Prussian archaeologist, Otto Tischler (Tischler/Kemke 1902); the latter has generally remained valid (for the region in question as well as for some of the neighbouring European regions) until the present day.

It is evident that, in spite of the considerable amount of the, mostly high quality, research performed, it has so far only been possible to discover and investigate a relatively small number of archaeological sites, i. e. funerary complexes. The reasons for this are both the high concentration of the burial sites overall on the peninsula and their considerable sizes. Burial sites could easily remain in continuous use for a thousand years and even longer, reaching four-digit numbers of burials per site<sup>4</sup>. Thus, while paying tribute to the more than 150 years of archaeological investigations on the peninsula, one should consider all the limiting factors of especially the early research phase and not blindly trust previously made conclusions without proper verification. Indeed, many richly decorated luxurious archaeological objects without analogues among the pre-World War II finds have been discovered at the burial sites on the peninsula during recent years. These artefacts, whose existence in fact contradicts the previously existing hypothesis on the egalitarian structure of the *Aestii* society, shed, *inter alia*, new light on the historical and social processes that took place in Sambia in the Dark Ages.

The most interesting research questions about the history of the Kaliningrad Peninsula are those concerning the interaction of the *Aestii* (the local population, who were of predominantly Baltic origin and were direct ancestors of the medieval Old Prussians) with the Germanic peoples during the Roman Age, the Migration period, the so-called »Dark Ages« (the 6<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> centuries AD), and the Viking Age as well as the corresponding influence of Germanic traditions on the development of the local culture on the whole and its warrior aspects in particular. The peculiarities of the warrior traditions of Central and Northern Europe in that turbulent time are known

to us from several sources – archaeological, pictorial and literary (the latter in the form of epic poems and heroic sagas).

One of the most striking and widely covered manifestations of the warrior traditions of Scandinavia in the medieval and modern specialised literature is the existence of male warrior societies devoted to the pagan god of the underworld and warriors, Wotan/Odin (Von See 1961; Wamers 2009; Sturluson 2011, 10. 57–58. 67; Kirkinen 2017, 4; Sundqvist 2023). Their members are said to have chosen bears or wolves as their totem animals and symbolically wore the skins of these predators (the *berserkir* and *ulfheðnar* of the sagas, respectively). Identical or very similar traditions were widespread in the warrior milieu on the continent, as is evidenced by, *inter alia*, the steadily growing number of bear claw finds in the contemporary warrior graves in Central and Northern Europe in recent years. A high number of claw finds from the Dark Ages, i. e. the Vendel period (7<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> centuries AD), is documented especially for Scandinavia and particularly for the burials in modern Sweden and on the island of Gotland (Beermann 2016, 44. 49. 52; Wamers 2009, 10; Lindholm/Ljungkvist 2023, 391–392). Although local archaeological material as well as some of the Old Prussian legends (Grunau 1876) that have been written down in the Middle Ages bear witness to the presence of Germanic people on the Sambian Peninsula during the Dark Ages, it has not been possible to discover any archaeological proof of the existence of cults connected with the above-mentioned warrior traditions until recently.

Taking into account the late conversion of Sambia's population to Christianity (which started only in the second half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century with the invasion of the Old Prussian lands by the Teutonic Order) and the corresponding late spread of writing, archaeological sites remain the single source of information on the Dark Ages in the region. Literary sources comparable to the heroic epic of the Germanic people of Central and Northern Europe simply do not exist (at least they are currently not known) for the territory in question.

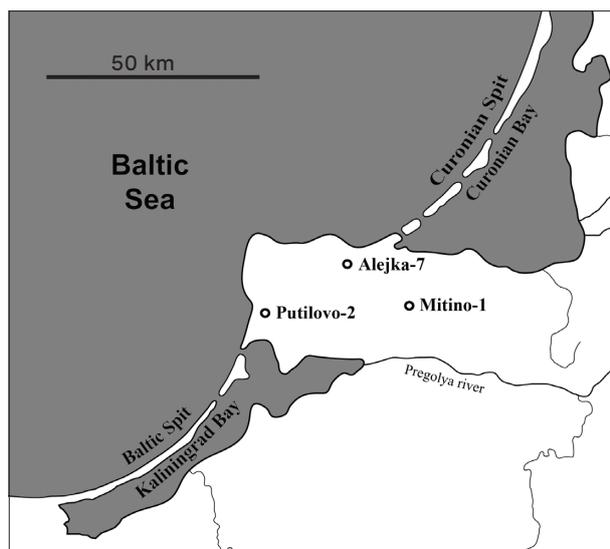
Until recently, no archaeological finds that could testify to the existence of a bear cult on the Kaliningrad Peninsula from the Roman Age to the Dark Ages were known to scholars; even finds of amulets

<sup>3</sup> The rich and numerous grave goods of the Sambian funerary complexes played a bad joke on the investigation of the local prehistoric settlement sites insofar as only minor attention was paid to the latter until quite recently.

<sup>4</sup> These calculations are based on the comparative analysis of the results of pre-World War II and modern archaeological excavations (see for example Prassolow/Skvorzov 2016).

made out of single bear teeth or claws seem not to be represented in the local archaeological material<sup>5</sup>. At the same time, the results of the comparative analysis of descriptions of the same grave inventories in the pre-World War II period and in modern times suggest that the absence of certain finds in the old reports and specialised literature probably does not necessarily reflect the objective historical reality but merely the former quality of archeological material inspection and/or its documentation, which has been repeatedly referenced in previous publications (Prasolov 2013, 85–86; Prassolow 2013, 94–96; 2018, 128–129).

In the context of the cultural phenomenon discussed in this article, the above-described situation (the absence of bear claw finds) has changed only recently due to the large-scale archaeological excavations performed at a number of large, flat burial sites in the Zelenogradskij district (former German Kreis Fischhausen) of the Kaliningrad region of Russia. Brown bear (*Ursus arctos*) claw finds came to light in seven burials (fig. 1): burial complex<sup>6</sup> №16–25 of the

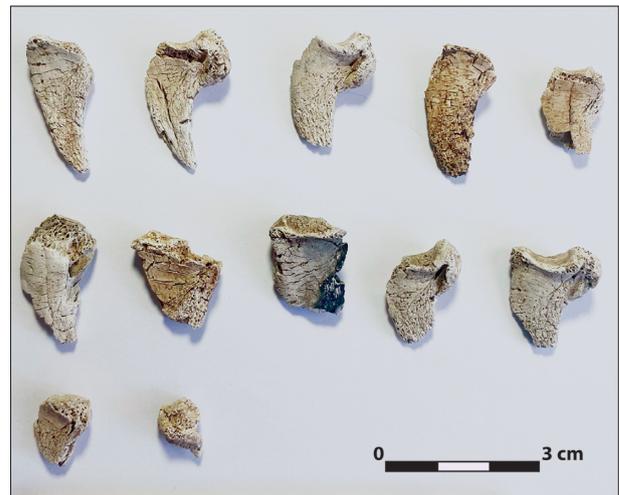


**Fig. 1** Burial sites with bear claw finds on the Kaliningrad Peninsula. – (Graphics J. Prassolow).

Mitino-1 burial site (formerly Stantau; excavations in 2015), graves №258 and №X-22 of the Alejka-7 burial site (formerly Skarr Wald[?], excavations in

2016/2017), as well as in graves №444, 685, 726 and 787 at the Putilovo-2 burial site (formerly Gauten; excavations in 2021/2022; see Skvorcov 2016, as well as K. Skvorcov’s personal archive, respectively).

Bear claws, i. e. first phalanges, numbering from two to 12 (12 claws were found in grave X-22 at the burial site of Alejka-7; see fig. 2) have so far been found in the above-listed weapon graves dated to the 6<sup>th</sup> until the beginning of the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD<sup>7</sup> (period E of the local antiquities’ chronology after Engel 1931, 314).



**Fig. 2** Bear claws (phalanges) from the inventory of grave №X-22 at the Alejka-7 burial site. – (Photo K. Skvorcov).

An important peculiarity of these finds is that none of them demonstrates traces of processing, while all of them reveal traces of fire.

The remains of wooden box-chambers measuring about 1.0 m × 1.5 m, rare in the local archaeological context and most likely made of planks, were found in all the graves in question. These chambers originally contained the calcified bone fragments of the buried person, which are mostly poorly separated from the remnants of the funeral pyre and only partially washed. As indicated by the composition of the grave inventories, nearly all the burials probably belong to men, with a single currently known exception (Putilovo-2 burial site, grave №787). The quality and value of the grave goods as well as the

<sup>5</sup> A traditional importance of the bear in the system of religious and cultic beliefs of the Prussians in the later period up to the Middle Ages is evidenced, for example, by numerous finds of bear claw amulets in burials of the 13<sup>th</sup>–15<sup>th</sup> centuries in the territory to the east of Sambia (Valuev et al. 2021)

<sup>6</sup> By »burial«, we mean here a human cremation and by »burial complex« a human cremation and an accompanying grave with a horse skeleton (see further details below in text).

<sup>7</sup> While no evidence for a local bear population is known in the time period in question for the territory of modern Denmark, southern Sweden and Gotland (Beermann 2016, 53. 73–74), brown bears should have been present on the Sambian Peninsula up to the High Middle Ages, in the Romnicka Forest, further to the east of the peninsula – perhaps even up to the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Tautorat 1983, 23). It thus seems logical to assume that the discussed bear claws originally belonged to animals from a local population. So far, however, we have no reliable scientific proof for this assumption.

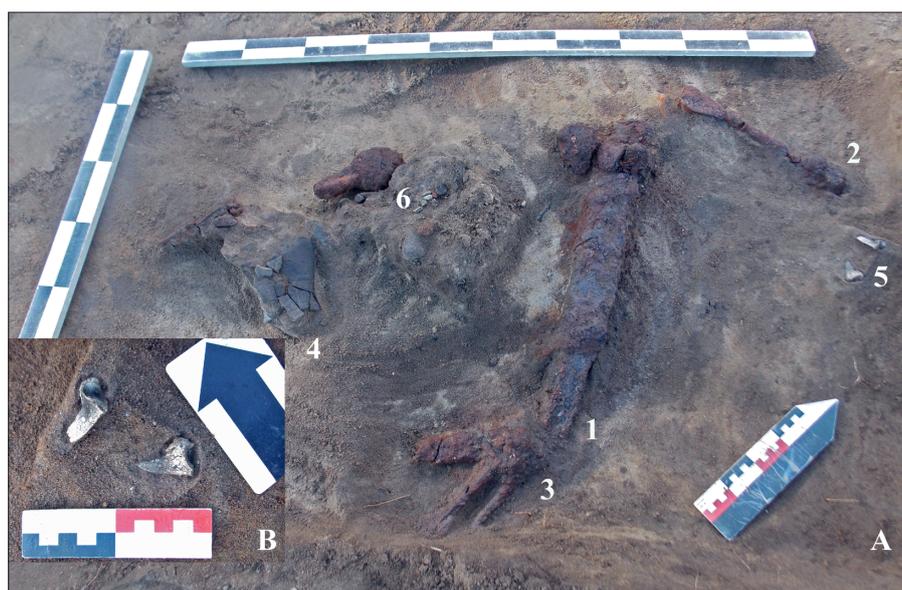
construction of the graves allow us to characterise these burial complexes as belonging to people of high social status.

The latter assumption is also supported by the dimensions of the burials, which are two to three times larger than contemporary »ordinary« graves, as well as by the placement of weapons in the burials (figs 3-4). In the considered period of time, weapons were only rarely placed in male graves on the Kaliningrad Peninsula. According to the results of the statistical analysis of archaeological excavations that have been conducted in recent years at large flat burial sites, weapons were present in only approximately 10% of the Dark Age male burials (Skvorcov 2023, 101).

Until recently, the reason for this lack of weapons in the graves (in contrast, Roman Age and Migration period *Aestii* male burials contain numerous weapons) was seen in the assumed general decline of the Sambian-Natangian culture in the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD (Skvorcov 2010, 190) and in a significant decrease in the living standards of its bearers (and even their subordination to another cultural group of Western Balts; see Skvorcov 2010, 197). However, the discoveries of rich Dark Age *Aestii* burials in the last few years should rather be interpreted as an indication of a so far insufficiently investigated re-organisation of *Aestii* society, which took place in the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD and is also reflected in the burial rites, i. e. in the composition of grave inventories.



**Fig. 3** Grave №258 at the Alejka-7 burial site with a single-edged sword as an element of its inventory. – (Photo K. Skvorcov).



**Fig. 4** Grave №726 at the Putilovo-2 burial site. **A** 1 single-edged sword. – 2–3. 6 spearheads. – 4 fragmented ceramic vessel. – 5 pair of bear claws. – **B** detail: enlarged picture of bear claws. – (Photos K. Skvorcov).

At the moment, it seems most likely that once the anthropological, i. e. archaeozoological, analysis is applied to calcified bones from further burials with weapons, the number of identified complexes with bear claw finds will increase as well (Kirkinen 2017, 14). It also seems promising to perform a new analysis of the burials with weapons that have already been studied in previous years. Undoubtedly, the fact that almost all of the currently known burials of interest are represented by cremations<sup>8</sup> significantly complicates the analysis of the archaeological and osteological material available to us.

The above-mentioned *Aestii* burials with bear claws comprised the following weapons: single-edged swords (one or, less often, two sword finds in a burial) with a T-shaped cross-section of the blade (often called »scramasaxes« in the publications devoted to local antiquities; e. g. Kazanskij et al. 2017, 31. 34–35; Kazanskij 2020, 142; 2021, 85–86. 92–93. 95) and remnants of wooden and/or leather sheaths decorated with ornamented silver foil, as well as spearheads (one to three finds in a grave). Elements of equestrian equipment such as iron plate spurs were found in a number of the examined burials with bear claws.

The analysis of the funerary inventories allows us to draw a conclusion about their specific unifying elements: much of the jewellery (mostly silver [less often gold] votive bracelets and neck rings; see fig. 5) and some of the costume elements (*fibulae*) placed in the burial were often made exclusively for the

funerary rite, which is indicated by their physical parameters and the absence of use-wear traces with the simultaneous presence of rough traces of primary jewellery processing. All these features are characteristic for items that were votive elements of the Dark Age grave inventories in Sambia. Among further grave goods, ceramic vessels containing the remains of food and drink should be mentioned; some of this pottery seems to have been made specifically to be placed directly into the grave.

In addition, the burials under consideration often contained drinking horns (obviously derived from aurochs [*Bos primigenius*]), decorated with ornamented pressed silver sheets (for their provenience see Gimbutas 1963, 146; Kazakevičius 1993, 136; Skvorcov 2023, 51. 150) and in some cases provided with decorative silver tips.

The human cremation burials themselves were accompanied, according to the local funerary tradition of that time, by horse inhumation graves, which were placed to the west of, or beneath, the human graves (Kazanskij/Mastykova 2021, 269–270; Skvorcov 2010, 191). While in the 6<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> centuries AD horse graves accompanied the cremations of almost all free male members of the *Aestii* society, the number of the sacrificed animals itself could vary and indicate the social status of the buried person (Kazanskij/Mastykova 2021, 275). An ordinary burial complex usually included one horse burial, but in the case of the complexes under consideration the



**Fig. 5** Gold votive bracelets and a silver neck ring from graves №258 (a) and X-22 (b) at the Alejka-7 burial site. – (Photo K. Skvorcov).

**8** The rite of cremation was widespread in the territory of the Kaliningrad Peninsula from the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> century AD (officially, until the forced conversion of the Old Prussians to Christianity and the official ban on

non-Christian rites, including funeral rites, in the 13<sup>th</sup> century AD, but in reality much longer).

high social status of the deceased was emphasised by the presence of two to four (!) sacrificed horses (many of them with saddles) with richly decorated harnesses (fig. 6). Elements of these harnesses represent either imports from the settlement area of the Germanic peoples in Europe (from Italy in the south to Scandinavia in the north) or alternatively derivatives of such items made in the Baltic Sea region close to the *Aestii* settlement area (fig. 7).

It is indicative that the only one out of the altogether seven burials with bear claws that was not accompanied by a horse burial reveals further unique features (grave №787 at the Putilovo-2 burial site). Judging by the analysis of the grave inventory (which included three chain-linked disc-shaped bronze *fibulae* with silver trimming, a pair of silver bracelets, glass paste beads and a horn comb), it belonged to a woman<sup>9</sup>. The grave also contained two



**Fig. 6** Remains of horse burials from funeral complex №685 at the Putilovo-2 burial site. **1-2** skulls of two of the three buried horses. – **3** wooden saddle covered with ornated silver foil. – (Photo K. Skvorcov).



**Fig. 7** Elements of the horse bridle from burial №X-22 at the Alejka-7 burial site. – Silver, gold, bronze, almandine, iron. – (Photos K. Skvorcov).

<sup>9</sup> Unlike the strongly expressed »masculine character« of the relevant Roman Age burials, finds of bear skins in the burials are not restricted to male graves in the Migration and Merovingian periods (and well into the

Viking Age). In fact, these finds are almost equally distributed between male and female burials (Wamers 2009, 12; Grimm 2013, 291; 2023, 533. 535-536; Lindholm/Ljungkvist 2023, 393).

drinking horns, which were provided with richly decorated fittings of gold and silver foil unique in the local context as well as with horn tips (fig. 8). What attracts additional attention is the fact that,

contrary to other burial complexes with bear claws, the box-chamber with the grave goods was not found in the northern or central, but in the southern sector of the grave pit.



**Fig. 8** Two drinking horns (1-2) from grave №787 at the Putilovo-2 burial site. – Silver, gold, bronze. – (Photo K. Skvorcov).

## Conclusions

The above-described results of the analysis of the seven funerary complexes in question allow us to identify them as burials of members of an *Aestii* upper class that generally meet the requirements of group 1b of the classification of East Germanic elite burials (see Bierbrauer 1989, 60–61).

Here, however, we will neither go into detail as far as the reconstruction of the structure of *Aestii* society is concerned, nor perform a comparative analysis of the recently revealed burials of the West Balt upper class members with that of the Germanic cultural milieu. Instead, we take a closer look at the bear phalanges and the circumstances of their placement into the burials in question, which are unusual in the local archaeological context.

An important peculiarity of these finds is that none of them demonstrates traces of processing, which makes it less probable that they were used as pendants, amulets or decorative elements<sup>10</sup>. On the other hand, all reveal traces of fire. This observation

allows us to assume with great probability that the claws were placed together with the deceased on the funeral pyre and thus exposed to fire<sup>11</sup>. This could have happened in two ways: either the claws were part of a whole bear skin or alternatively only the bear paws were placed on the funeral pyre.

The analysis of Central and Northern European inhumations with bear claws makes it, in certain cases, possible to distinguish between burials that contained complete bear skins and those in which only the bear paws (the number of which could vary as well) were laid in the grave according to the *pars pro toto* rite (Grimm 2023, 32). For the cremations of the Kaliningrad Peninsula, such differentiation is unfortunately, *per definitionem*, not possible. While reconstructing this aspect of the funerary rite, the following considerations should be taken into consideration: in case of bear paws, further paw bones should have survived the high temperatures of the pyre. However, there are currently no indications

<sup>10</sup> This observation corresponds with the results of the archaeological analysis of contemporary Scandinavian graves with bear claw finds, which are interpreted as evidence of bear skins in the burials (Lindhölm/Ljungkvist 2016, 8).

<sup>11</sup> E. Wamers (2009, 8) comes to similar conclusions when discussing bear claw finds in Germanic cremation graves of the pre-Roman as well as the Roman Age.

of their presence in the burials (admittedly, some of the bone material from the cremations has so far not been identified). Additionally, it cannot be excluded that some of the bones were either completely consumed on the pyre or were not transferred to the grave. Whatever the case may be, in the face of the objective lack of further bear paw bones in a burial, the hypothesis of bear skin placement currently seems to be the most probable. Also, the number of the claw finds can serve as an additional indication: in general, the higher the number of claw finds in the burial, the higher the probability that a complete bear skin was placed with the dead on the funeral pyre. Unfortunately, and contrary to the observations on inhumations in Scandinavia (Petré 1980, 6–8; Grimm 2013, 279. 281. 283–284; 2023, 33–34), the local cremation rite does not allow to judge how exactly the bear skin was used in the burial, i. e. whether the deceased was placed on it or was instead covered by it during the cremation (for similar observations on the Roman Age cremations in the Elbe Germanic area see Wamers 2009, 8. 12–13). Nor can the possibility that the bear skin had already been used as (ritual?) clothing during the life of the dead person be excluded. At the same time, the traces of fire on the bear phalanges exclude the possibility, demonstrated in the case of comparable cremations in Northern Europe, that an unburned bear skin was used to wrap a container (organic box, ceramic vessel, etc.) that held cremated human bones before the latter was placed in the grave (Grimm 2013, 283–285; 2023, 538 tab. 1).

The identification of the deceased in the grave №787 at the Putilovo-2 burial site as a woman, according to the grave inventory with jewellery but

without weapons, allows us to interpret the placement of a bear skin in the grave more broadly than in the cases of other burials under consideration here – and not as a reflection of warrior cult rituals, which probably originated in the Germanic cultural milieu. Instead, the bear skin should be seen rather as a symbol of high social status that is clearly not necessarily related to the membership in any warrior society<sup>12</sup>. Similar conclusions were drawn on the basis of comparable material from Germanic burials dated to the first centuries AD (Petré 1980, 9; Wamers 2009, 10; Grimm 2013, 292; Oehrl 2013, 312–313; Lindholm/Ljungkvist 2023, 393), although bear claw finds appear there in both elite and non-elite contexts, particularly during the Migration Period (Lindholm/Ljungkvist 2016, 8. 10. 12).

The peculiarities of the phenomenon of bear skin placement in the graves in the local ethno-cultural context are a subject of future research. However, it is already obvious that the deceased in the burials with bear claw finds belonged to the high strata of Dark Age *Aestii* society. The burials in question, along with similar funerary complexes discovered in the last years (Skvorcov 2023), make it possible to conclude that, contrary to views on this topic which were widespread until recently, the local *Aestii* society, similar to contemporary Germanic peoples, had a hierarchical and not an egalitarian structure. It thus remains possible (and, from the point of view of the authors, very probable) that further field investigations will lead to the discovery of contemporary burials of an even higher social level (comparable to that of group 1a of the above-mentioned classification of V. Bierbrauer [1989, 55–60]) than the burials with bear claws that are discussed here.

<sup>12</sup> Depending on the various characteristics of the funerary complexes as well as their historical and cultural, i. e. geographical, context, bear claw (skin) finds in the burials can be interpreted in different ways, which

has been the subject of scientific discussions (see Petré 1980, 10. 12–13; Grimm 2013, 278; Oehrl 2013, 297, with references; Lindholm/Ljungkvist 2016, 10).

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