

TUMULI WITH CIRCULAR DITCH AND THE RITUAL SCENARIO AMONG CORDED WARE CULTURE SOCIETIES ON THE NORTH EUROPEAN PLAIN

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ABSTRACT

In the literature on the subject, the opinion is predominant that the construction of Corded Ware Culture (CWC) tumuli was connected with a single event, namely: the burial of a person. The supposition that all actions, including digging a grave, depositing the body, digging a ditch and raising a tumulus, were made during one ceremony, is still commonly accepted.

In the last few years, however, in the area under investigation several new finds were unearthed which seem to be contradictory to the opinions mentioned above. This turns our attention to a new more complex explanation. Moreover, we can also use these new finds to reinterpret old data.

In this paper the authors intend to analyze certain Corded Ware Culture graves from the North European Lowland. In the next step, the reconstruction of individual ritual scenarios for each of them will be presented. The analysis shows that a round ditch or a tumulus were often merely individual stages in a long lasting process: in short, a very complex ritual scenario.

In the literature on the subject, the opinion predominates that the building of a tumulus among Corded Ware Culture (CWC) societies was connected with a single event only, namely the burial of a person. The supposition that all actions, that is, digging a grave, laying down a body, digging a ditch, building a wooden palisade and raising a tumulus, were done during one ceremony is still the most popular.¹ From this central premise others follow; to give a single example, the treatment of the discovery of a lone ditch (without the remains of a tumulus) as a result of a post-depositional destruction of the tumulus or explaining the absence of any traces of a palisade in the ditch by its complete post-depositional mineralization.

However, in the last years a few new finds have been reported on the North European Plain, which seem to contradict the opinions mentioned above. They turn our attention to a new and more complex explanation. Moreover, we can use the new finds to reinterpret the old information as well.

In this paper, the authors analyze specific examples of CWC burial sites on the North European Plain, in an attempt to reveal a radically different picture of the sepulchral activity of CWC societies by

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1. Machnik 1979, p. 337-338.

reconstructing individual ritual sequences (scenarios). The analysis shows that the presence of a circular ditch with a palisade or a tumulus on a site was only one element of a cycle of rituals which took place over a considerable length of time. The very act of burial was, according to such scenarios, only one of the significant episodes.

TUMULUS (*KURGAN*), DITCH AND PALISADE – SYMBOLISM

Of the symbolism of *kurgan*, a holy mountain by means of which the spirits of the dead may ascend to heaven, we will not speak much here. In this volume a lot is written on this subject.

The *ditch*, however, is another matter, but even in this case its symbolism is quite transparent; it is symbolic of a natural barrier (a river) that often divides the world of the living from that of the dead, especially in Indo-European mythology.² Thus, we deal in this case not with the separating of a sacred space from a regular one but rather with isolating the deceased from the world of the living with a ritual barrier. The ditch, therefore, is a measure to protect the living against the dangerous influences of the dead.³

A *palisade* is another structural element frequently encountered in CWC graves. As a rule, a palisade causes the ditch to go out of use and stratigraphic data show that it is never later than a tumulus, where there is one. Thus, it must have been built at the same time as the *kurgan*. Its construction has, of course, certain practical significance: the presence of a ditch at the time when a *kurgan* is being built is a technical hindrance, whereas a palisade – quite on the contrary – supports the construction. There is no doubt, however, that the emergence of the palisade must have had some deeper reasons. Whereas the ditch defended the living against the evil powers of the dead, the palisade stressed the inaccessibility of the world of the dead to those still living. If this was so, then, between the digging of a ditch and the erection of a palisade, there must have taken place a radical change in the status of the deceased. A dangerous spectre was becoming a distant and happy ancestor.

Let us move to some examples.

Case study: Hijken (Holland)

In Hijken,⁴ we encounter the remains of a *kurgan* encircled by a ditch and traces of a palisade on its bottom (*fig. 1 A*). The space delineated by the ditch is practically all taken up by a grave. This can be interpreted as following the relatively simple ritual scenario: a body was laid in the grave; it was separated from the living with a ditch to isolate the grave itself. Next, after some time, a change in the deceased's status took place, which culminated in the construction of a palisade (a full re-interpretation of the barrier) and the building of a *kurgan* (providing the deceased with a means of communication with the other world).

Case study: Pałecznicza (southern Poland)

Let us move to our second example from Pałecznicza.⁵ Everything is as in Hijken, except for the fact that there is a lot of free space inside the ditch (*fig. 1 B*). This space must have had its significance. Hence, we have time (necessary for transforming the deceased from a dangerous to a good being) and space (a

2. Kempński 1993, p. 403.

3. For this kind of interpretation see Alex Gibson **to be completed by author**.

4. Furholt 2003, p. 225, pl. 202.

5. Włodarczak 2006, table XLIIIA.

lot of free space inside the circular ditch); the only mystery is what filled the “space-time continuum”. We must be dealing here with rituals that took place in the space enclosed by the ditch. They had the form of remembrance but above all they must have been related to the transformation.

The next example may shed more light on this mystery.

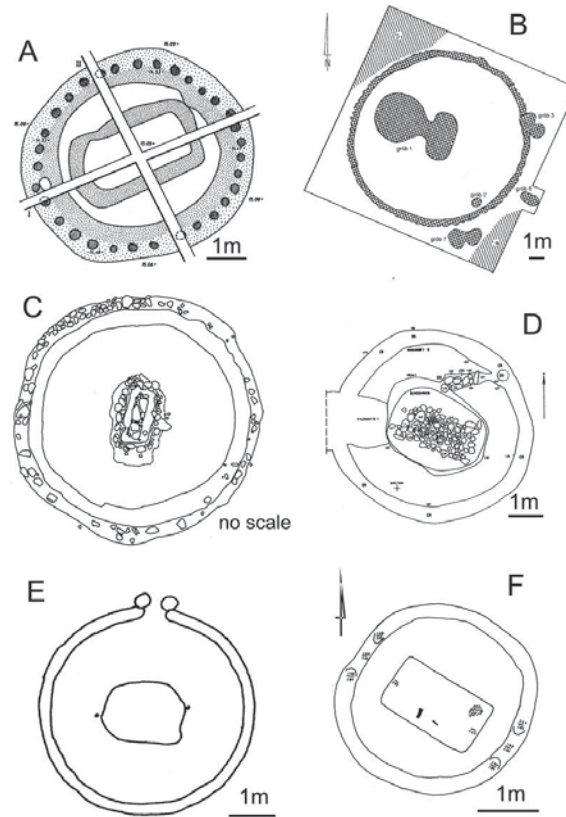


Fig. 1 – A: Hijken, Holland (Furholt 2003, p. 225, pl. 202). B: Pałecznica, southern Poland (Włodarczak 2006, Table XLIIIA). C: Veldbaek, Jutland (Furholt 2003, p. 239, pl. 249). D: Vester Nebel, Jutland (Furholt 2003, p. 240, pl. 250). E: Atting-Ringkamp, southern Germany (Furholt 2003, p. 215, pl. 116). F: Gabøl, Jutland (Furholt 2003, p. 233, pl. 223).

Case study: Veldbaek (Jutland)

The grave in Veldbaek⁶ illustrates another possibility: a timber palisade is replaced by a stone wall (fig. 1 C). In this case it may be assumed that substituting one material for another (stone for timber) did not represent any significant change of meaning. A stone wall, likewise a timber palisade, denied the living access to the happy world of the dead who acquired the status of ancestors. In this context, the “entrance” was the tumulus or a “holy mount” closed inside.

6. Furholt 2003, p. 239, pl. 249.

Case study: Vester Nebel (Jutland)

In Vester Nebel⁷ there is a break in the ditch – probably an entrance (*fig. 1 D*). Hence, it was possible to overcome the barrier of a ditch for some important ritual reasons. As part of the rituals mentioned earlier, an entry was ceremonially made into the sacred space (*i.e.* dangerous) to leave it in a ritual (*i.e.* safe) way after completing the appropriate rituals.

Case study: Atting-Ringkamp (southern Germany)

The break was at times given prominence by adding other structural elements as can be seen in Atting-Ringkamp.⁸ These were most probably two posts, although it is not entirely impossible that they supported a third one (a lintel), making the whole structure look like a door frame or a gate to another space (*fig. 1 E*).

Case study: Gabøl (Jutland)

The situation may be even more complex as is shown by the example from Gabøl,⁹ where one can see two openings in the ditch lying opposite one another, suggestive of “entrance” and “exit” (*fig. 1 F*). Hence, it can be suggested that whereas Vester Nebel is indicative of a ritual consisting in “entering” the sacred space, Gabøl reveals a ritual of “passing” through the sacred space in some kind of a ceremonial procession. This may imply an entirely different ritual principle, not necessarily referring to the “transformation” of a deceased into an ancestor. The procession passes across individual circles for affirmative rather than apotropaic reasons.

Comment

The structure becoming ever more complex, which is patently shown in the excavation records, does not have to indicate at all the expansion of the same ritual scenario. Quite on the contrary, we can face radically different ritual situations hidden behind similar finds. This is clearly illustrated by the suggested interpretations of the finds from Atting-Ringkamp and Gabøl. However, there are more complex cases with regard to finds as well.

Case study: Ciechrz (Kujawy, central Poland)

Let’s move to a grave in Ciechrz.¹⁰ What we deal here with is a number of transformations of a ritual place, with various versions of reconstruction being possible (*fig. 2 A*).

The most plausible versions are as follows:

1. Digging of a grave pit (*fig. 2 A: A60*). The pit walls could have been lined with timber held in place by single stones, including a fragment of a quern.

7. Furholt 2003, p. 240, pl. 250.

8. Furholt 2003, p. 215, pl. 116.

9. Furholt 2003, p. 233, pl. 223.

10. Czembreszuk 2000, p. 431-432, fig. 4.

2. Building of a heavy structure around (and over?) the pit, which could have consisted of either four (fig. 2 A: A61, A62, A64, A89) very thick logs or boulders (menhirs?). In both cases, it is possible that the four upright elements supported a kind of a heavy roof.

3. Construction of an “entrance” to the grave pit from the north-east (fig. 2 A: A87, A88).

4. Depositing the body of a single adult individual in the grave. The body is crouched on the left side with the head directed towards the entrance (*i.e.* north-east). The grave goods consisted of a partly retouched flint flake and two vessels. Only the flake was found *in situ* (next to the deceased’s back).

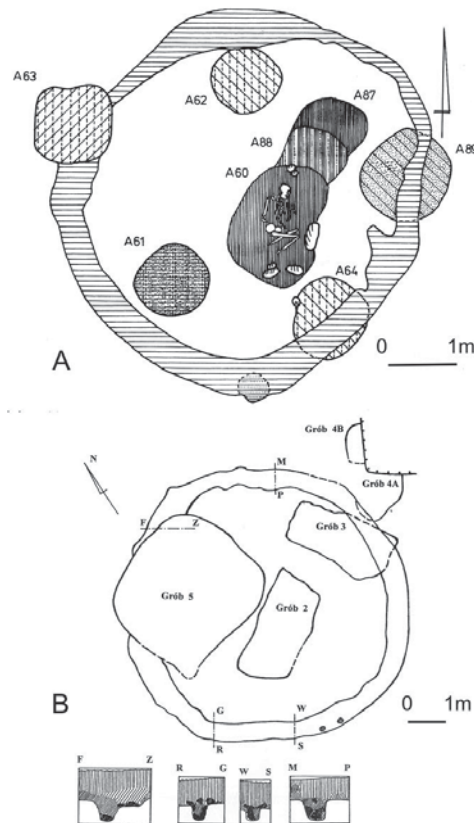


Fig. 2 – A: Ciechrz, Kujawy (Czebreszuk 2000, p. 431-432, fig. 4). B: Prorva, Belarus (Krywalciewicz 2007).

5. Only after the structure had been destroyed, hence after a long time, a circular ditch was dug of 560cm in diameter. There was no palisade inside. The grave is off-centre, which may indicate that the original structure was so badly damaged that the builders did not know where exactly the grave pit was. This, in turn, may argue rather in favour of a timber structure than its stone alternative. It could have been covered originally with a thin layer of earth. The earth was taken from a place located nearby where a settlement of a Globular Amphora culture population had stood as strata directly above the grave contained numerous pottery fragments of the culture. Once the timber had rotted away, the whole structure collapsed forming a small mound that was later surrounded by a ditch.

6. In Ciechrz, the ditch was not changed into a palisade (soil conditions are good enough in this place to preserve some traces of it). In this situation, therefore, there is no telling whether a *kurgan* was eventually built over the remains of the grave, in the space within the ditch.

This example shows consistent attempts to create a ritual place despite clear problems (for example with identifying earlier rituals actions) following transformations resulting from the lapse of time. However, we personally would not undertake to reconstruct the ritual significance of individual stages. It cannot be

excluded, either, that in the hypothetical scenario inscribed in the sequence in Ciechrz, there were phases of discontinuity.

Case study: Prorva (Belarus)

The last example involves an even more complicated scenario in which there are clear breaks calling for some explanation. This is a cemetery of the Middle Dnieper culture at Prorva.¹¹ Its history is long and complicated, from 2500 till 1700 B.C.

In total 22 graves have been explored there, most of them cremations. Quite late in the history of the cemetery, *ca* 1850 B.C., in its highest place, a grave pit was located which was later surrounded by a circular ditch.¹² In the pit, cremated human remains were laid (of indeterminate age and sex) (*fig. 2 B*). The delineation of “sacred space” by digging a ditch was also an act of introducing a new organization of space to the cemetery, as the hitherto prevailing organization had not entirely reflected the existing order. This is evidenced by the fact that the ditch damaged grave no.3 (2400-2200 B.C.), which is at least 350 years older. In the space so marked out, a burial was placed (grave 2). The analysis of profile stratigraphy at the site has excluded the existence of any *kurgan*-type mound over grave 2. In the course of its successive use, the cemetery’s new organization was yet again invalidated. This was done by constructing grave 5, which disturbed the arrangement with the circular ditch.

Therefore, the appearance of a ditch in Prorva comes very late in both absolute and relative chronologies (one of the last stages in the use of the cemetery). This feature shows that the rite of digging a circular ditch was known also in the circle of the CWC, on “flat” cemeteries.¹³ What is more, it does not appear there, contrary to expectations, as a sign creating a new ritual place. Equally important is the fact that the cemetery was used for a very long time, which – when one considers the number of uncovered graves – indicates that a new burial was a rare occurrence. This can mean that traces of earlier graves were obliterated and, consequently, new ones were superimposed on them. Nevertheless, people must have periodically returned to the place.

CONCLUSIONS

In our opinion, there is no doubt that CWC circle societies had an extensive repertoire of ritual scenarios. In Table 1, we have placed side by side two “ideal” sequences of ritual actions of the ones discussed earlier: scenario A – the least complex, and scenario B – the most complex.

It must be stressed, however, that, in their staging, a limited repertoire of actions was used. Among them, apart from the grave pit, there are such elements as digging a circular ditch, building a tumulus, and erecting a circular palisade. There is, however, circumstantial evidence that their ritual meaning was not the same everywhere.

One more comment is appropriate here: can we be by no means certain that all the scenarios were complete or finite. Actually, it is very unlikely that it was so. But even this fact can be used to support our initial contention. Surely, full sequences of such incomplete instances would present to us an even more complex picture.

11. Krywalcewicz 2007.

12. Krywalcewicz 2007, p. 15-18, table 8.

13. See examples in Bohemia and Moravia, *e.g.* Peška 2004, fig. 4 and 5.

Scenario A (a kurgan with a single burial forming the whole cemetery)	Scenario B (a kurgan of multiple use being an element of a larger cemetery)
	Older (preceding) ritual activity on the site
Digging and reinforcing the grave pit	Digging and reinforcing the grave pit
Digging a circular ditch (<i>i.e.</i> the division of space into the sacred and the profane)	Digging a circular ditch (<i>i.e.</i> the division of space into the sacred and the profane), sometimes provided with an entrance or an entrance and exit
	Making an entry to the grave
Burying the deceased together with grave goods	Burying the deceased together with grave goods
	Multiple use of the grave: – single burial (replacing older remains with those of the recently deceased) – multiple burial (adding successive bodies)
	Remembrance rituals, libations (as shown by fragments of CWC vessels found “in the tumulus” – this is a frequent piece of information to be found in reports on kurgan excavations), sacrifices (pits containing animal bones or unattached bone finds), processions (to a specific grave: situation of a ditch with an “entrance”) or more complex processions across several circles (situations with an “entrance” and “exit”).
Building a kurgan (closing a cemetery) and surrounding it with a palisade (the final closing of the sacred space)	Burying other dead people in the “sacred circle”
	Building a kurgan (closing a cemetery) and surrounding it with a palisade (the final closing of the sacred space)
	Placing younger graves in the kurgan mound (successive phases of ritual activity on the site)

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