



The necropolises of “Cherna–Sihleanu” type: are they biritual and what in fact does biritualism mean?

Vladimir Staykov ^a

^a Department of Medieval Archaeology, National Archaeological Institute with Museum, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, 2 Saborna Str., 1000 Sofia, Bulgaria; vladimir_st_staykov@abv.bg

ABSTRACT

The paper reviews a group of five Early Medieval necropolises on the territories of modern-day Northeast Bulgaria and Southeast Romania, which demonstrate some intriguing features. Although the predominant burial rite is cremation, in some rare cases, when the deceased is a child, the remains are only inhumated, without incineration. A definition of site-type is attempted based on the evidence from the “Cherna–Sihleanu” necropolises and the five sites are distinguished from other synchronous biritual cemeteries in the area. The analysis of the burial ritual in those sites, as well as other biritual cemeteries poses the questions what does biritualism mean in general, when should a certain necropolis be defined as biritual and what kinds of biritualism are to be observed in the archaeological record. Some assumptions are made about the factors and conditions leading to the situation we see in the “Cherna–Sihleanu” group and examples are given of analogous sites, where an “atypical” biritualism is documented.

KEYWORDS

Early Middle Age, necropolises, biritualism, children burials, inhumation, cremation

Introduction:

Biritualism on the Lower Danube in the Early Middle Ages

For more than five decades the archaeological research on the Lower Danube area, concentrated on the culture of the First Bulgarian State had resulted in the discovery and, in some cases, excavation of many necropolises of the communities inhabiting the land generally locked between the Balkan Mountain and the Carpathians. Although there was a concerning stagnation in the field, expressed mainly by the lack of publications, in recent years that tendency is steadily changing – some sites like Balchik (Doncheva-Petkova et al. 2016), Varbyane (Rashev, Stoyanova 2017) and Nikolovo (Hristova 2015) are being published and some intriguing and important studies dealing with this topic have been brought to light (Doncheva-Petkova, 2017, 2020; Staykov 2020 etc.) Two main burial rites – inhumation and cremation – are documented at c. 40 sites. A thorough characteristic of all those biritual cemeteries would be a too complicated task. It is practically impossible to point out two identical necropolises where all elements of the burial rite are the same. The variety concerns all elements of the rite – the burial practice itself (cremation or inhumation), the orientation of graves with inhumated bodies, the grave constructions, the presence/absence of grave goods, remains of burial feast, skeletons of sacrificed animal, etc. It is also not possible to define spatial

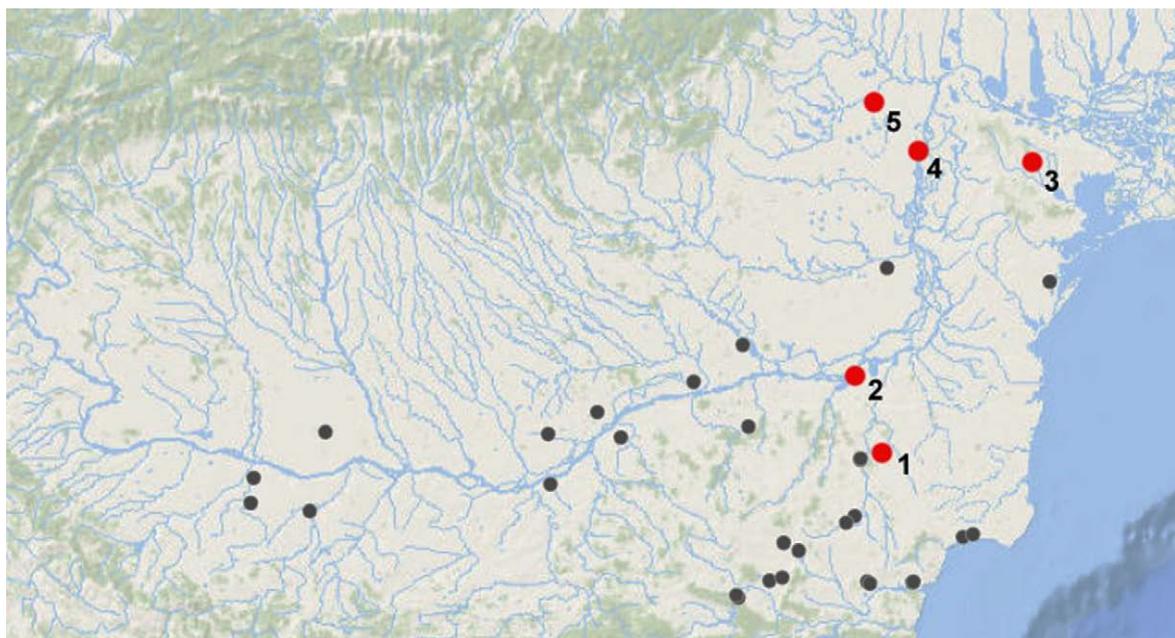


Fig. 1. Map of the biritual necropolises on the Lower Danube; in red – the group “Cherna – Sihleanu”: 1. Cherna; 2. Canlia; 3. Nalbant; 4. Tichilești; 5. Sihleanu

Обр. 1. Карта на биритуалните некрополи по Долен Дунав: в червено – групата „Черна – Сихлян“: 1. Черна; 2. Канлия; 3. Налбант; 4. Тикилец; 5. Сихлян

particularities, having in mind that sites located in immediate proximity demonstrate significant differences, which is clearly visible in some ‘pairs’ of sites¹ like, for instance, Bdintsi and Karamanite, Cherna and Hitovo (no matter which of the sites near Hitovo is chosen), Varna 1 and Varna 2, etc. The cremations in Bdintsi are more than twice the number of inhumations, the typical orientation is head to the north and, in some cases, there are niches in the area of the deceased’s feet (Vazharova 1976, 141–167; Vážarova 1979). On the other hand, in the necropolis of Karamanite, less than 6 km away, the significantly dominating rite is inhumation, normally with head to the west and no graves with niches are known from the site (Rashev, Krasiljnikov 2007, 95–102). In Cherna more of the inhumations are oriented to the west (Vasilchin 1989, 198–213), while in Hitovo the preferred direction is east (Yotov 1997, 155–171). Despite that necropolis 1 and 2 in Varna are in close proximity nowadays, there are so many differences between the two that is difficult to encompass this variability (for Varna 1 – Dimitrov 1976, 107–124; for Varna 2 – Kuzev 1980, 259–263).

Biritual cemeteries: problems of the interpretation

The distinctions and the variations regarding all elements of the burial ritual are the reason why no study to this moment could present the picture of the “typical biritual necropolis”. Often as a typical example is considered the first uncovered biritual cemetery near Novi Pazar, published by S. Stanchev and S. Ivanov in the distant 1958. Therefore, burial grounds like Karamanite, Topola or Izvoru, for instance, which are obviously different from the one near Novi Pazar, should be regarded as “atypical”, as something extraordinary.

At the same time, however, the archaeological literature in Bulgaria shows an unexpected and

1 The grouping of necropolises in pairs is based only on their geographical location and it is made here only for the purposes of the current study, which requires the comparison of burial rite’s elements in cemeteries, located closely to one another.

The necropolises of “Cherna–Sihleanu” type: are they biritual and what in fact does ...

№	Site	Number of urn cremations	Number of pit cremations	Number of inhumations	Percent inhumations from all graves	Orientation of the inhumations
1.	Cherna	8	6	7	33.3%	W, E
2.	Canlia	7	0	3	30%	E, W
3.	Nalbant	126	11	4	5.6%	N, S
4.	Tichilești	96	0	1	1%	N/A
5.	Sihleanu	69	3	5	3.9%	E
	All	306	20	20	5.8%	

Table 1. Burial rites in the cemeteries from the “Cherna – Sihleanu” type
Таблица 1. Погребални практики в некрополите от типа „Черна – Сихляну“

unexplainable unanimity regarding all these necropolises, namely, no matter what the specific features of each site are, the documented biritualism means that the cemeteries belong to the Bulgars! This axiomatic statement is to some extent a result of another one, also more or less accepted as a canonical – the other group of necropolises where cremation is the only documented rite, is typical evidence of Slavic population. Regardless of the predominant ritual, of the presence/absence of grave inventory, the differences of the grave construction or the orientation, even if only a few inhumations are discovered, this is regarded as a categorical evidence for Bulgar population (Fiedler 1992, 307).

This traditional opinion for dichotomy of ethnic and cultural affiliation of the population on the Lower Danube is so problematic by itself, that it could be the topic of several different studies. However, in the current paper I would like to pay attention to a small group of necropolises, standing out from all other biritual complexes in the area, as well as to raise the intriguing questions they provoke.

The “Cherna–Sihleanu” group: specifics of the rite and interpretation

The group consists of five necropolises – three of them are located on the right bank of the Danube River, and the other two – on the left bank. All five are situated to the east of the modern-day towns of Silistra and Calaras, in that part of the Danube valley where the river changes its direction and flows to the north. Only one of these cemeteries – the one near the village of Cherna, is located in Bulgaria, while the other four – Sihleanu, Nalbant, Canlia and Tichilești, are in modern-day Romania (fig. 1).

It should be acknowledged, that these complexes are not among the largest or the most representative of the cemeteries along the Lower Danube – the total number of graves, excavated in all five sites is 346. Most of them – 141, are explored in the cemetery near Nalbant (Simion 1971b), while barely 10 originate from the site near Canlia (Harhoiu 1972). It is noteworthy that the necropolises are not fully excavated, which it seems is the case for most of the sites in the Lower Danube region. Nevertheless, the data yielded from this not particularly large, but also not too small number of graves, gives us the basics for some interesting observations.

Perhaps the most characteristic feature of the five cemeteries is the significant domination of cremation as the burial rite (Table 1).

Unlike the situation that can be observed in most of the biritual necropolises, the cremations here are predominantly in burial urns, while pit cremations, where the bones are laid directly into the ground or in a stone or brick cassette, could be regarded as exceptions. In Nalbant the urn cremations are 126, and the non-urn are only 11. In Sihleanu (Harțuche, Anastasiu 1980) an insignificant

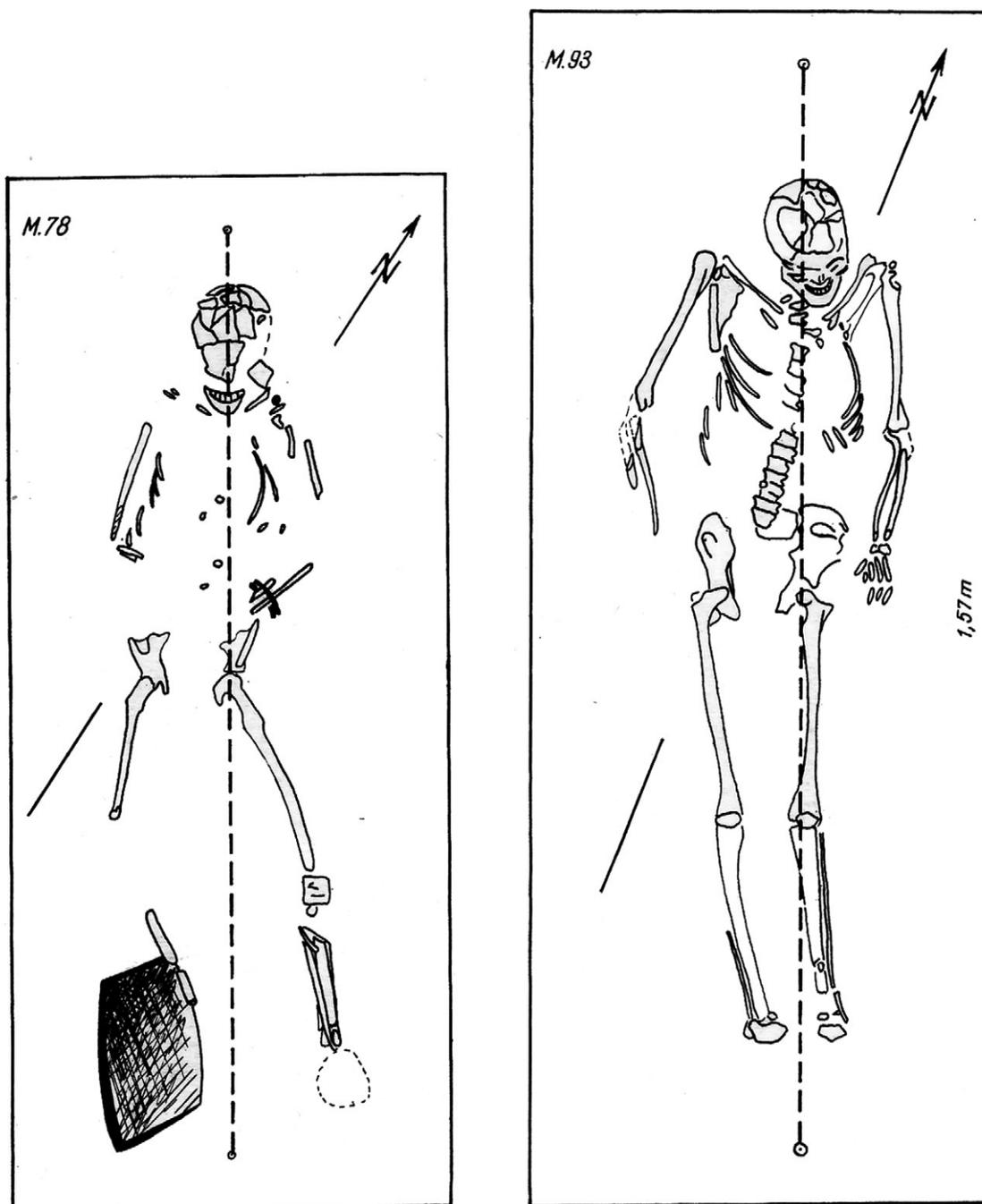


Fig. 2. Inhumation graves from the necropolis near Nalbant (after Simion 1971a, 242, Pl. XI, 3, 4)
 Обр. 2. Гробове с инхумация от некропола при Налбант (по Simion 1971a, Pl. XI, 3, 4)

number of three pit cremations are documented, while in Tichilești (Harțuche 1980; Luca, Măndescu 2001, 87) and Canlia all cremations appear to be in urns. Slightly more even is the distribution of the two cremation variants in Cherna (Vasilchin 1989) where the urn cremations are eight – almost equal to those without urns, which are six.

The other main burial ritual – the inhumation, appears significantly seldom in those necropolises. In Nalbant from the total number of 141 graves, in only four cases the deceased is buried without incinerating the remains. In Tichilești only one out of the 97 excavated graves is an inhumation,

The necropolises of “Cherna–Sihleanu” type: are they biritual and what in fact does ...

in Sihleanu there are five inhumations out of 77 graves, in Cherna – seven out of 21 graves, and in Canlia – three out of 10 graves. Overall, that makes 20 graves, or 5,8 % of all 346 grave complexes, in which the ritual is inhumation. That is a rather unusual situation, compared to what is commonly observed in the biritual necropolises – at majority of the sites, the most preferable rite is inhumation, while those where both rituals are relatively evenly observed, or the ones where cremation is predominant, do not appear too often. Even cemeteries with prevailing cremation, have substantial number of inhumations, too. In the large necropolis near Bdintsi, for example, there are 215 cremations, compared to the 101 inhumations excavated (Fiedler 1992, 485), in Balchik the cremations are 119, and the inhumations – 87 (Doncheva-Petkova et al. 2016, 12), while in Varna 1 there are 44 cremations and 17 inhumations uncovered (Grigorov 2006, 48, Tablica 1). It seems that although with much smaller number of uncovered graves, as a percentage, the only site which comes close to the “typical” biritual necropolises is the one near Cherna.

However, all five sites discussed here show a rather intriguing feature unusual for the other biritual cemeteries. The total of 20 inhumations from all five necropolises are children. Due to the vague publication of the site near Nalbant, it is not clear whether this site may be an exception, although having in mind the other specifics of this cemetery (see below) it would be rather surprising if those four inhumation graves hold the remains of adults. It appears, that only two of the inhumations have been illustrated (Simion 1971a, fig. 1). The first one has no scale, the second has the number “1.57 m” on the side – I believe this is not the length of the skeleton, but the dotted line, used in the sketch (fig. 2). The statement of Ivan Vasilchin that Grave 15 from the Cherna necropolis contains a fully grown individual is unconvincing given the fact that the entirely preserved skeleton had a length of barely 1.15 m (Vasilchin 1989, 202).

It is easy to notice the diverse orientation of the bodies in the inhumation graves from all five sites. In Nalbant there are two documented variations – head to the north and to the south (Simion 1971b, 231–232), in Cherna four individuals are laid with heads to the west, and two – with heads to the east (Vasilchin 1989, 200), in Canlia the three inhumations show two variations– to the east and to the west (Harhoiu 1972, 568). The only exception is to some extent the necropolis near Sihleanu, where in all five cases the head is to the east (Luca, Măndescu 2001, 55). There is no data available regarding the single inhumation grave from Tichilești, where only the skull of the buried child is preserved (Fiedler 1992, 425; Luca, Măndescu 2001, 87).

All graves – cremations and inhumations – lack significant amount of inventory, which makes it even more difficult to propose either chronological or cultural interpretation.

The small number of datable finds – namely the urns from the sites and two earrings with a pendant made from hollow spheres or the so-called “Saltovo” type found in Cherna (Vasilchin 1989, 206, obr. 3), point to the period between the beginning of the 8th and the middle of the 9th century AD (fig. 3.1, 2). The remaining finds are typical for the Early Medieval period and cannot be precisely dated – iron knives, nails, small buckles, burnt flint and steel, amorphous items with undeterminable functions, etc.

To sum up the burial rites from the necropolises in question- the urn cremations are predominant. Significantly smaller is the number of cremations where the burnt remains are directly deposited in a pit or in a cassette made of stone slabs, as well as the number of inhumations. The latter are only known in some cases, when children are being buried with no particular orientation. Grave furnishing is not common consisting predominantly of adornments, iron knives and other metal items deformed during the time in the cremation pyre. Therefore, the most numerous finds from all five cemeteries are the ceramic pots used as burial urns. In the necropolis of Nalbant (fig. 3.3) three types of urns are present – vessels made by hand or on a slow potter’s wheel using coarse non-refined clay and according to G. Simion belonging to the type Prague/Monteoru; vessels made on a slow potter’s



Fig. 3. Grave inventory from the sites of “Cherna – Sihleanu” type: 1. Earrings from the necropolis near Cherna (Vasilchin 1989, 206, obr. 3); 2. Burial urn from the necropolis near Canlia (Harhoiu 1972, 574, fig. 7.4); 3. Burial urns from the necropolis near Nalbant (after Simion 1971b, 141, fig. 1)

Обр. 3. Гробен инвентар от некрополите тип „Черна – Сихляну“: 1. Обеци от некропола при с. Черна (Василчин 1989, 206, обр. 3); 2. Урна от некропола при с. Канлия (Harhoiu 1972, 574, fig. 7.4); 3. Урни от некропола при с. Налбант (по Simion 1971b, 141, fig. 1)

wheel, of sandy clay, decorated with incised lines, as well as pots made of well refined clay, decorated with polished lines, again produced on a slow potter’s wheel (Simion 1971b, 235). In Cherna (Vasilchin 1989, 202) and Canlia (Harhoiu 1972, 567) urns from the latter two types are documented – made of sandy clay with incised decoration and of refined clay with polished stripes.

For the purposes of the current research, I would refer to the group of five necropolises as “Cherna–Sihleanu” type. Naturally, it is at this stage only a working term, which main purpose is to underline the fact that these sites are easily distinguishable from both the “typical” burial necropolises and the “typical” cremation cemeteries. Obviously, it is not a territorially differentiated group, bearing in mind the significant distance between the sites, as well as the other types of necropolises discovered in the same region. It would be also premature to make a cultural, ethnic, religious or other identification based only on what we know about the sites.

The necropolises of “Cherna–Sihleanu” type: are they biritual and what in fact does ...

Thus far the five sites in question have never been reviewed together as parts of a common group – a rather perplexing fact, given all the similarities of the burial rite that are documented in each of them. The necropolis near Cherna is traditionally defined as “biritual, pagan, early-Bulgarian” and with features that according to its excavator I. Vasilchin are similar to the cemetery near Bdintsi and sites No. 1 and 3 near Devnya (Vasilchin 1989, 198, 200). This is a rather confusing statement by Vasilchin, since there are hardly any features of the burial rite which could bring together Bdintsi or any of the two cemeteries near Devnya. The village of Hitovo with two other Early Medieval biritual necropolises (Yotov 1997) is only 11 km to the west of Cherna. Both sites are quite intriguing, and with unusual characteristics, however, they have barely anything in common with the burial ground at Cherna and the specific features documented by Ivan Vasilchin.

The necropolis at Canlia is also published as “biritual”. The excavator Radu Harhoiu suggests that there are visible traits of a “local, specific for Dobrudzha, variation of the Balkan–Carpathian culture” (Harhoiu 1972, 575). The tradition of ethno-cultural definitions made by the Romanian scholars from the not-so-distant past are already widely discussed and in no need of repetition in the current study – after all this is not the aim of this work.

The interpretation of the necropolis near Nalbant by its researcher Gavriela Simion is rather vague. It is not explicitly stated that the complex is biritual, although the fact that he has uncovered and discussed both cremation and inhumation graves gives us reason to believe that Simion defines the site at Nalbant exactly as such (Simion 1971b, 223). G. Simion offers internal chronology of the graves, which demonstrates two disturbing decisions on his part. Firstly, he has no problem to easily date graves with practically no inventory, and secondly, he seems quite unsure about the date and interpretation of the inhumation graves². In the end, there is no satisfactory answer either to the question of the precise date of the cemetery, or of its characteristics.

In the short report and sole publication of the site near Sihleanu (Harțuche, Anastasiu 1980, 108–109), its researchers N. Harțuche and F. Anastasiu omit the inhumation graves and discuss only the cremations, therefore they probably view the necropolis as a single-ritual one. Two other scholars – C. Luca and D. Măndescu, discuss the inhumations in a summarizing study published in 2001, which probably means that the cemetery is regarded as biritual (Luca, Măndescu 2001, 86). The relatively unknown necropolis near Tichilești is considered as cremation-only, although the presence of a grave with inhumation is noted (Luca, Măndescu 2001, 87).

A major research problem is the marginalisation of some of these sites in the studies of the early medieval burial complexes on the Lower Danube. This concerns to the greatest extent the cemeteries near Sihleanu and Tichilești, which it should be underlined, remain unpublished regardless the significant number of excavated graves – 77 and 97, respectively. The little we know about these sites is mainly a result of the sporadic mentions they get in overviews and generally concerns information about the burial rite, but without any details that could help us with their interpretation. Whether detailed or not, there are some publications of the other three necropolises. Nevertheless, Cherna and Canlia traditionally do not attract research attention, probably due to the small number of graves in those sites. This circumstance is taken into account in the current study as well – the number of uncovered graves is indeed insufficient, which would make the categorical acceptance or denial of any hypothesis too risky. However, the information we have about the “Cherna–Sihleanu” group provides ground for some analysis. It shows that the same features constantly reappear in sev-

2 G. Simion acknowledges, that the non-urn cremations (without any inventory) are connected to “Romano-Slavic population” and dates those graves particularly early, in the 6th-7th century AD. Regarding the inhumations, he states that they could belong to communities of different origin, inhabiting the area in different time segments in the period between the 7th and the 10th centuries AD... (Simion 1971b, 247)

eral different sites, in more than 350 discovered graves in total, and thus it is less likely such pattern to be a coincidence and would be more logical those elements of the rite to be something intentional, something specific and normal for these cemeteries.

Discussion

How should the necropolises of the “Cherna–Sihleanu” type be defined? As biritual cemeteries, or as sites with only one practice of cremating the dead? The answer, even if paradoxical, is most likely “both”! It is possible the people who used the cemeteries in question to be “monoritual” in essence and practicing cremation. Such a tradition was possible to break away from in some particular cases, regarding some distinct members of the group. In our case – the sites of “Cherna–Sihleanu” type, it is obvious that the community members broke the traditional burial rite in the burial of some children.

It is, of course, not a novelty that large part of the inhumations in the biritual necropolises is, in fact, children graves. That is the case in Topola, Balchik, Bdintsi, etc. Such strictly kept connection between inhumation and children, like the one we see in the “Cherna–Sihleanu” group, though, is nowhere to be found. In one of the preliminary publications of the necropolis near Topola is reported, that ca. 63% of the inhumations, or at least from those, discovered until 1997, are graves of children (Angelova et al. 1997, 143). Approximately the same is the percent in Balchik and Bdintsi, where the children inhumations make about 61% of all graves with this rite (Vazharova 1976, 143–167), as well as Hitovo 2 (58%; Yotov 1997, 156–161). In comparison, even if we assume, that all inhumation graves in Nalbant are of adults, it means that in 80% of the cases in all cemeteries from the “Cherna–Sihleanu” type, the buried individual is a child. If my assumption is correct and the inhumations at Nalbant are also children, that will increase the percent to 100.

It needs to be highlighted that the observable preference for inhumation in cases when the deceased is a child has been noticed by some scholars throughout the years. The most popular interpretation concerns the necropolis at Topola – given the fact that barely 14% of the cremation graves contain the remains of a child, the researchers make an assumption that there should be some kind of maturational requirement for certain individual to be cremated (Angelova et al. 1997, 144–145). Yet, 14% of all the cremations in the case of a large cemetery like Topola means 29 graves, which is not a small number of exclusions. The same is also applicable in the opposite direction – 84 adults are buried according to the inhumation rite, which means that most probably it is a result of a deliberate, personal choice between the two variations “usual” for the community. To summarize, in Topola there is a large enough number of graves both with inhumation and cremation, each rite is used for individuals in different age groups, so it could be assumed that undoubtedly this necropolis is evidence for a biritual community. A comparable situation is to be observed in the other two given examples – the sites near Balchik and Bdintsi.

The case of the „Cherna–Sihleanu“ sites is rather different. The one ritual – on this occasion the inhumation, is documented in an insignificant number of graves, with the only (partial) exception being the cemetery at Cherna, where one third of the burials contain bodies laid in the ground without incineration. Like in the other four sites, there is a clearly documented age differentiation. The inhumation is the rite which, for some reason, is an option only when a child is being buried. There is no information as to whether anthropological analyses have been made on the cremated bone remains, so it is not possible to determine if the opposite statement is true – whether the incineration of the body is used only when the deceased is an adult, thus it is best to avoid making such assumptions. However, the situation regarding the inhumation graves speaks for itself.

It would be completely acceptable to describe the necropolises of the „Cherna–Sihleanu“ type

The necropolises of “Cherna–Sihleanu” type: are they biritual and what in fact does ...

as biritual burial grounds belonging to a single-ritual communities. It is not necessary for such a definition to be perceived as an oxymoron – the mono-ritualism of these people is expressed by the different status of the two practices in the communities. If in a “typical” biritual necropolis (whatever it is meant by the common use of this term) like Bdintsi, for instance, the members of the community have the option to choose inhumation or cremation, at the cemeteries from the “Cherna–Sihleanu” type the ritual appears not to be optional – the body should be incinerated. In fairly seldom occasions, due to reasons that, at this stage, are nothing but speculative, when a child leaves this world the ritual of inhumation is preferred. Thus, the necropolis could be totally correctly defined as “biritual” – though this would be right only from our modern point of view as archaeologists, but not as regards the beliefs and traditions of the Early Medieval community.

This is the appropriate place to mention certain observation shared by different scholars. In almost every historical period in different areas around the world and in different stages of human development, for the people who traditionally use cremation, this is not the only practice documented in their burial ground and depending on various conditions, there are other recorded burial rites (see: Lucas 1996; Williams 2015). Fairly often those deviations are observed exactly in children’s burials (Buckberry 2000) when the individual probably has not passed some initiation ritual, some certain age or maybe they lacked the required social or communal status.

This direction of thoughts leads us to another interesting problem that has enjoyed less attention by scholars – the question what exactly is biritualism? Moreover, what criteria should a certain necropolis fulfil to be defined as biritual? When should a certain community be described as biritual and when – mono-ritual with some exceptions?

The Slovakian archaeologist Eduard Krekovič suggests systematization according to which biritualism could be divided into three types: 1) proper biritualism, where both burial rites are documented in a large enough number of occasions and appear during the whole period of development of the cemetery/community; 2) temporary biritualism – when the dichotomy is characteristic only for a certain phase from the necropolis’ development; 3) partial biritualism – when one of the rites is documented in an insignificant number of graves (Krekovič 2004, 295). According to this classification, the sites from the “Cherna–Sihleanu” group should be put into the last category.

The question when a certain necropolis should be regarded as biritual and when – as single-ritual with special cases, got its answer some paragraphs earlier: the main characteristic of a biritual community should be the parity of both rites. Such parity could be assumed when both inhumation and cremation are documented in significant numbers throughout the burial ground, when both rites are practiced in the same space, and lastly, the graves with the two rites should be synchronous. Among the Lower Danube sites, these criteria are met at cemeteries like Topola, Balchik, Bdintsi, Kyulevcha, Izvoru, etc.

The sites of the type “Dolni Lukovit–Galiche” in modern-day Northwest Bulgaria, traditionally considered to be biritual, are not only inappropriate examples of “typical” sites but it would be completely reasonable to exclude those necropolises from the biritual group. The spatial differentiation between inhumations and cremations probably betokens separate sites, certainly utilised by different population elements in a heterogenic setting, using roughly the same burial space, but still with a clear separation of the two rites. Given the absence of stratigraphic superpositions, as well as finds that could be precisely dated, at this stage it is hard to determine whether both rituals are practiced at the same time (Staykov 2019, 306–307).

As regards to the communities that used the “typical”/proper necropolises, whether the body is incinerated or simply buried into the ground depends on conditions present “right here, right now” – the temporary popularity of one rite or another, personal or family preferences or maybe something else. This is a demonstration of proper biritualism. The social-economic factor is also not to

be neglected – cremating the deceased is a time, labour and, most importantly, resources consuming process, which is most probably beyond the social abilities of large part of the medieval communities. On the one hand, this could lead to the acceptance of cremation as a demonstration of higher social status, while on the other hand the inhumation could become a subject of “sacralization”. So burying the deceased will not be seen as a violation of the community’s traditions and logically, this would be applied to the greatest extent in the burials of children who in this period too often leave this world prematurely.

Other examples of partial “biritualism”

The most obvious trait of the inhumations discovered in the sites from „Cherna–Sihleanu” type – the juvenile age of the individuals, is also the most logical criterion for executing a different ritual. This does not present a precedent because almost identical situation is to be observed in roughly the same period in some necropolises from the so-called group “Mediaş” in an area not too far from the Lower Danube basin, namely in Transylvania. The current study is not the place to dwell on the number of problems these sites pose, including their general interpretation, the proposed date and even the documented burial rites. However, some of the cemeteries can be used as examples for intriguing features regarding the presented rituals. Firstly, let us review the situation at Ocna Sibiului: in this relatively large necropolis cremation, and more precisely urn cremation is predominant. There are 120 excavated incinerations in urns, and 15 inhumations respectively, which makes barely 12.5 percent of all discovered graves. At least 12 of these inhumation graves contain the remains of children placed in the pit in most cases with head to the east. The exclusions are a few graves, where the deceased is an adult female, located close to each other in the north-western periphery of the burial space (Protase 2005, 11-40; Pl. XXVIII). Similar situation, although on a smaller scale, is described in the necropolis of Boarta where from the 37 graves discovered there 35 are urn cremations and two inhumations, containing remains of children (Țiplic 2002–2003, 10–11), and also in Mediaş (13 urn cremations and 3 inhumations; Horedt 1965, 7–25).

There are some obvious similarities between those sites and the necropolises from the „Cherna–Sihleanu“ type at the Lower Danube. Nevertheless, it would not be correct to say that all cemeteries from the “Mediaş” group are analogous to the latter as the sites in Transylvania demonstrate rather various features. In Berghin (Țiplic 2002–2003, 10) and Bratei (Zaharia 1977), for instance, the inhumations are much more numerous and have diverse characteristics regarding the age and sex of the buried individuals; in other necropolises, like for example Dăbâca (Țiplic 2002–2003, 11), Turdaş (Hica, Blăjan 1973, 641) and Uioara de Jos (Țiplic 2002–2003, 13) there are no inhumations discovered at all.

Despite those variations, the traditionally accepted opinion is that the “Mediaş” group is a testimony for the presence of „Slavic” communities which dominate the area of Transylvania in the Early Middle Ages (Horedt 1986, 59; Tiplic 2002–2003, 15). At the same time, identical sites like the „Cherna–Sihleanu“ cemeteries are interpreted in rather different ways – as “protobulgarian” (Cherna), as a “specific for Dobrudzha, variation of the Balkan-Carpathian culture” (Canlia), as a community emerging after the mixing of Slavs and “autochthonous Romanized” population (Nalbant), etc. Such ethnic definitions are categorically not the aim of the current paper, which is why they will be left aside at this point. What matters here is that non-proper biritualism, like the one documented in „Cherna–Sihleanu“ sites, is not totally unknown phenomenon.

When “partial” biritualism is discussed, it should be mentioned that different variation of the latter is observed in the early medieval period in north-western direction, in the Carpathian basin. A change of the traditional burial ritual is documented, although quite rare, along the Middle Danube

The necropolises of “Cherna–Sihleanu” type: are they biritual and what in fact does ...

and mainly on the territory of modern-day Slovakia. Here the opposite situation is to be seen – together with the large number of inhumation graves there are some cases of incineration. Prominent examples of this are sites like the necropolis at Záhorská Bystrica where 254 inhumation graves are discovered and the cremations are only eight (Kraskovská 1972), the sites near Čatai (222 inhumations and five cremations; Chropovský, Hromada 1991, 44) and especially near Želovce where among the 867 graves with inhumated remains just three cremations are uncovered (Čilinská 1973). Whatever the reason for this poorly attested biritualism – social diversity, special treatment of foreigners, some type of punishment or other, the archaeologically documented situation is different from the one in the “Cherna – Sihleanu” necropolises. And although it is possible one or more of those factors to be responsible for the situation, observable in the necropolises of “Cherna – Sihleanu” type, it would be a hardly defensible thesis.

Conclusions

It is plausible the five cemeteries of “Cherna–Sihleanu” type to have been left by groups of people, practicing partial, age-bound biritualism, although the commonly used ritual in those communities is the cremation in urn. The reasons for such dichotomy could be either eschatological, economic, social or other, including a combination of different factors (Rebay-Salisbury 2012, 15). Which interpretation is correct is a question that cannot be answered only with the help of archaeological methods. In this case it is more important, that we could identify some communities inside the borders, or at least in the area of cultural influence, of the Bulgarian state along the Lower Danube where certain individuals – in all cases children, are treated differently after they pass away. It is not possible to describe these communities as a single, large people group given the great distance between the sites and the diversity of burial practices documented in other necropolises from the same region. It would be more appropriate if we acknowledge the presence of different communities showing closeness in their culture, with common, or at least similar to some extent, beliefs and understandings about the dead and the afterlife.

Other important questions that the current paper aims to raise concern the essence of biritualism, the different kinds of biritualism that can be observed, the potential for these variations to be distinguished using the methods of the archaeology and the possibility among the numerous burial grounds in the Lower Danube basin, and beyond, to find other similar sites where the biritualism is of “uncommon” type, testifying to the presence of some distinct features and heterogeneity of the living population. In any case, biritualism is not so simple and unambiguous phenomenon as traditionally believed and it categorically needs to be thoroughly studied.

References

- Angelova, S., Doncheva-Petkova, L., Daskalov, M. 1997. Dvuobryadniyat rannosrednovekoven nekropol pri s. Topola, Kavarnenska obshtina. *Problemi na prabalgarskata istoria i kultura* 3. Shumen: izdatelstvo “Slavcho Nikolov i &”, 141–154 (in Bulgarian).
- Buckberry, J. 2000. Missing, Presumed Buried? Bone Diagenesis and the Under-Representation of Anglo-Saxon Children. *Assemblage*, 5. Available at: <https://assemblagejournal.wordpress.com/2000s/issue-5/> (05.12.2021)
- Chropovský, B., Hromada, J. 1991. Tretia Sezóna Obnoveného Výskumu Kostrového Pohrebiska zo 7.–8. storočia v Čataji. *Archeologické výskumy a nálezy na Slovensku v roku 1989*. Nitra, 44.

- Čilinská, Z. 1973. Frühmittelalterliches Gräberfeld in Želovce. Chropovský (ed.) *Archaeologica Slovaca – Catalogi Instituti Archaeologici Nitrensis Academiae Scientiarum Slovacae*, Tomus V. Bratislava: Vydateľstvo Slovenskej Akadémie Vied.
- Dimitrov, D. Il. 1976. Dvubreden rannobalgarski nekropol pri Varna. *Preslav* 2, 107–124 (in Bulgarian).
- Doncheva-Petkova, L. 2017. Ezicheskite nekropoli ot kraia na VII – 60-te godini na IX v. na teritoria na Balgaria. In Daskalov, M., Goryanova, S., Raycheva, M., Grozdanova, G. (eds) *Ezicheska Balgaria. Vlast i obshtestvo*. Sofia: NAIM–BAN, 27–40 (in Bulgarian).
- Doncheva-Petkova, L., Apostolov, K., Ruseva, V. 2016. *Prabalgarskiat nekropol pri Balchik*. Sofia: Izdatelstvo na BAN “Prof. Marin Drinov” (in Bulgarian).
- Fiedler, U. 1992. *Studien zu Gräberfeldern des 6. bis 9. Jahrhunderts an der unteren Donau*. Bonn: Dr. Rudolf Habelt GmbH.
- Grigorov, V. 2006. Orientacia na grobovete v starobalgarskite dvubredni nekropoli na Dolen Dunav. *Arheologia* 1–4, 47–64 (in Bulgarian).
- Harhoiu, R. 1972. Cîteva observații asupra necropolei birituală de la Canlia, Județul, Constanța. *Pontica* V, 565–576.
- Harțuche, N. 1980. La chronique des fouilles archéologiques du dép. Brâila, 1968 – 1979. *Istros* I, 355–368.
- Harțuche, N., Anastasiu, F. 1980. Săpăturile arheologice de la Sihleanu, Comuna Scorțaru Nou, Județul Brâila. *Istros* I, 93–109.
- Hica, I., Blăjan, M. 1973. Un cimitir de incineratie din sec. VIII la Turdas (jud. Alba). *Acta Musei Napocensis* X, 641–652.
- Horedt, K. 1965. Un cimitir din sec. IX – X e. n. la Mediaș. *Studia Universitatis Babeș- Bolyai, serie Historia*, II. Cluj-Napoca, 7–25.
- Horedt, K. 1986. *Siebenbürgen im Frühmittelalter*. *Antiquitas* 28. Bonn: Dr. Rudolf Habelt GmbH.
- Hristova, M. 2015. Ezicheskite grobove ot srednovekovnia nekropol pri Nikolovo, Rusensko. *Arheologia* 1–2, 104–114 (in Bulgarian).
- Kraskovská, Ľ. 1972. *Slovansko-Avarské Pohrebisko pri Záhorskej Bystrici*. *Fontes* 1. Bratislava: Vydateľstvo Osveta, N. P., Martin, pre Slovenské národné múzeum.
- Krekovič, E. 2004. Prečo biritualita? *Studijne zvesti. Archeologického Ústavu Slovenskej Akadémie Vied* 36, 293–295.
- Kuzev, A. 1980. Rannesrednevekovi nekropolj pod Varnoy. In Chropovský, B. (ed.) *Rapports du IIIe Congrès International d’Archéologie Slave* 2. Bratislava, 259–263 (in Russian).
- Luca, C., Măndescu, D. 2001. *Rituri și ritualuri funerare în spațiul extracarpatic în secolele VIII–X*. Brâila: Muzeul Brăilei, Editura Istros.
- Lucas, G. 1996. Of death and debt: a history of the body in Neolithic and Early Bronze Age Yorkshire. *Journal of European Archaeology* 4, 99–118.
- Protase, D. 2005. *Cimitirul slav de la Ocna Sibiului (sec. VIII-IX)*. București: Editura Economică.
- Rashev, R., Krasiljnikov, K. 2007. Nekropolat pri Karamainte. *Problemi na prabalgarskata istoria i kultura* 4.2, 95–102 (in Bulgarian).
- Rashev, R., Stoyanova, H. 2017. Rannosrednovekoven dvubreden nekropol pri s. Varbyane, Shumenska oblast. *Izvestia na Istoricheskiya muzei – Shumen* 17, 31–62. (in Bulgarian).
- Rebay-Salisbury, K. 2012. Inhumation and Cremation: how burial practices are linked to beliefs. In Sørensen, M.L.S., Rebay-Salisbury, K. (eds) *Embodied Knowledge: Historical Perspectives on*

The necropolises of “Cherna–Sihleanu” type: are they biritual and what in fact does ...

Technology and Belief. Oxford: Oxbow, 15–26.

Simion, G. 1971a. Necropola din perioada de trecere la feudalism de a Nalbant (județul Tulcea). *Sesiunea de comunicari științifice a muzeelor de istorie 1964*, vol. 2, 131–143.

Simion, G. 1971b. Necropola feudal-timpurie de la Nalbant (Județul Tulcea). *Peuce Serie Veche*. II, 221–248.

Staykov, V. 2019. Bulgars, slavs, avars. On the early medieval necropolises in Northwestern Bulgaria and the population that used them. *Bulgarian e-Journal of Archaeology*, Supplementum 7, 303–314. Available at: <https://be-ja.org/index.php/supplements/issue/view/23> (05.12.2021)

Staykov, V. 2020. *Etno-kulturni vrazki po Dolen i Sreden Dunav prez Rannoto srednovekovie, 7-9 v. (po danni na nekropolite)*. Avtoreferat kam disertacionen trud. Sofia (in Bulgarian).

Țiplic, I. M. 2002-2003. Necropolele de tip Mediaș din Transilvania. *Acta Musei Napocensis* 39–40, II, 9–24.

Vasilchin, I. 1989. Dvuobryaden ezicheski rannobalgarski nekropol pri s. Cherna, Tolbuhinski okrag. In Rashev R. (red.) *Problemi na prabalgarskata istoria i kultura. Vtora mezhdunarodna sreshta po prabalgarska arheologia*. Shumen: Izdatelstvo na Balgarskata academia na naukite, 198–213 (in Bulgarian).

Vazharova, Zh. 1976. *Slavyani I prabalgari (po danni na nekropolite ot VI – XI v. na teritoriata na Balgaria)*. Sofia: Izdatelstvo na BAN (in Bulgarian).

Vážarova, Ž 1979. Zur Frage der Etnogenese und der materiellen Kultur des bulgarischen Volkes. Zwei Nekropolen aus Nordostbulgarien. *Izvestia na arheologicheskia institut*, XXXV, 5–30.

Williams, H. 2015. Towards an archaeology of cremation. In Schmidt, C.W., Symes, S. (eds) *The Analysis of Burned Human Remains*. London: Academic Press. 239–269.

Yotov, V. 1997. Rannosrednovekovnite nekropoli v s. Hitovo № 2 i № 3 (novi danni). *Problemi na prabalgarskata istoria i kultura*, 3, 155–171 (in Bulgarian).

Zaharia, E. 1977. *Populația Românească în Transilvania în secolele VII–VIII (Cimitirul nr. 2 de la Bratei)*. București: Editura academiiei Republicii Socialiste România.

Некрополите от типа „Черна–Сихляну“ – биритуални ли са и какво всъщност означава биритуализъм?

Владимир Стайков

(резюме)

За изминалите повече от пет десетилетия, археологическите проучвания в долнодунавския ареал, концентрирани върху културата на Дунавска България, доведоха до разкриването и (в повечето случаи) поне частичното проучване на десетки некрополи от ранносредновековната епоха. При повечето от тях (около 40) се наблюдава практикуване на два основни обряда – инхумация и кремация. Настоящото изследване обръща внимание на няколко конкретни некропола, твърде силно различаващи се от всички други двубредни комплекси, и на въпросите, които те пораждат.

Става дума за пет некропола – три на десния и два на левия бряг на Дунав. Само един

от тези некрополи – този при с. Черна, попада в днешните български земи, докато останалите четири – Сихляну, Налбант, Канлия и Тикилещ – са в границите на днешна Румъния (обр. 1). Безспорно е, че това не са най-големите и представителни комплекси по Долен Дунав – общият брой на проучените гробове във всички тях е 346. От най-големия от петте некропола, този при Налбант, са известни 141 гроба, докато от най-малкия при с. Канлия са проучени едва 10.

Най-характерната черта на петте некропола е тоталната доминация на гробовете с кремация, извършвана в урна пред безурновите такива и инхумациите (таблица 1). В Налбант урновите кремации са 126, а безурновите – 11. В Сихляну са документирани едва три безурнови кремации, докато в Тикилещ и Канлия при всички гробове е засвидетелствано полагане на останките в урна. Малко по-равномерно са разпределени двата варианта на погребване в Черна, където на 8 урнови кремации се противопоставят 6 безурнови.

Трупополагането от друга страна се среща доста по-рядко. В Налбант (обр. 2) от всички 141 гроба инхумациите са едва 4. В Тикилещ само при един от общо 97 гроба е засвидетелстван обредът на трупополагане, в Сихляну инхумациите са 5 от 77, в Черна – 7 от 21, а в Канлия – 3 от 10 гроба. Погледнато общо, от 346 гроба инхумациите са 20 (или 5,8% от всички). Това е твърде нетипично в сравнение с традиционно наблюдаваната ситуация при двубредните некрополи, където дори в паметниците с преобладаващо трупозгаряне, доминацията не е толкова силно изразена.

Друга специфика, нехарактерна за останалите двубредни некрополи се изразява в това, че при всички 20 инхумации в петте некропола погребаните са деца.

Прави впечатление твърде разнообразната ориентация, която е засвидетелствана при гробовете с трупополагане – налице са различни вариации, като само в Сихляну е документирана единствено източна ориентация. Гробовете – както тези с инхумация, така и кремациите – са подчертано бедни откъм инвентар, което затруднява допълнително интерпретацията, била тя хронологическа или културна. Малкото датирани находки изглежда говорят за дата в рамките на VIII и първата половина на IX в. (обр. 3).

Проучвателите на петте паметника показват известни колебания що се отнася до интерпретацията им: Черна е смятан за „двубреден езически раннобългарски“, за Канлия се казва, че показва черти на „локален, добруджански вариант на балкано-карпатската култура“, от Сихляну и Тикилещ се коментират само кремациите, а подчертано неясна остава ситуацията в Налбант, дори след публикацията на Г. Симион.

Смятам, че некрополите от типа „Черна – Сихляну“ трябва да бъдат приемани като двубредни некрополи на еднобредни общности. Съвсем не е нужно едно такова определение да бъде възприемано като оксиморон – моноритуализмът на тези общности се изразява в това, че двата обряда не са равнопоставени. По всичко изглежда, че традиционният обред, практикуван от тези малки групи население е урновата кремация, но в някои редки случаи, при погребване на деца, се прибегва до нарушение на тази традиция и тялото се полага в гробната яма без да се кремира. Логично е да се предположи, че тези изключителни случаи свидетелстват за някакви възрастови ограничения при кремацията – необходима възраст на индивида за изгаряне на тялото, инициационен ритуал и пр., Причините, разбира се, може и да са други – по-особен социален статут на починалите, различно третиране на чужденците, „наказание“, есхатологични представи и т.н. Предвид пълното обвързване на инхумациите с деца, обаче, тези други варианти са твърде трудно доказуеми.

Наблюдението, че често при погребване на деца се прибегва до инхумация не е ново в археологическата книжнина. От друга страна процентът на детски гробове сред всички инхумации в даден некропол е около 60–65 (както е документирано в Топола, Балчик, Бдинци, например), докато в „Черна – Сихляну“ той вероятно е 100 (би могло да намалее до 80%, но

The necropolises of “Cherna–Sihleanu” type: are they biritual and what in fact does ...

публикацията на некропола при Налбант и инхумациите в него не дава достатъчно информация по този въпрос).

Долнодунавският басейн не е единственият регион, в който през Ранното средновековие се наблюдава такъв „частичен“ биритуализъм – подобна е ситуацията и в някои гробове от т.нар. група „Медиаш“ в Трансилвания. Тотална доминация на урновите кремации и отделни случаи на инхумиране на деца са засвидетелствани в некрополите при Окна Сибиулуй, Боарта и Медиаш, например. Типични примери за „нетипичен“ биритуализъм са и някои паметници от Карпатския басейн, и по-специално днешна Словакия, в некрополи като Желовце, Захорска Бистрица и Чатай. Там, обаче, се наблюдава противоположната ситуация – на огромен брой инхумации са противопоставят кремации, изброими на пръстите на ръката.

В заключение може да се каже, че настоящата работа има два основни резултата: първо – идентификацията на няколко микро-общности по Долен Дунав, в границите на (или поне в сферата на влияние на) Българската държава, които макар и да практикуват кремиране на мъртвите, понякога нарушават традицията и инхумират починалите деца; и второ – изважда на преден план въпросите що е то биритуализъм, могат ли да се разграничат различни видове биритуализъм и кога даден некропол следва да бъде определен като двуобреден?