

A grave with belt mounts (second half of the 6th century AD) near Rupkite, Chirpan region

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In the summer and fall of 2004, the excavations at site №. 8 along the Trakia Highway were completed. The site is situated ca. 220-250 m away from the fortress on the Kaleto hill near the village of Rupkite, Chirpan region, identified by the Bulgarian-German team excavating there in 1981-1991 with the ancient Karasura. Part of an early Byzantine cemetery was found in the excavated area. Almost a quarter of the burials yielded grave goods, which date the cemetery to the second half of the 6th century AD. Burial № 12 is the most remarkable since a belt decoration was found in situ there for the first time in Thrace; it has a few parallels in Bulgaria, fact important enough to provoke this preliminary report. The burial contained a skeleton of a man, ca. 40 years of age, who have had well developed muscles and have been ca. 167 cm (classified as „tall“). The belt decoration was found around the waist and the pelvis of the skeleton (fig. 1).

The belt decoration consists of 2 belt buckles (fig. 2 1-2), 6 strap-ends (fig. 2 3-8), 2 loops (fig. 2 9-10), 3 appliqués (fig. 2 11-13) and a spindle-shaped gadget for hooking (fig. 2 14). A small purse with an iron piece, flint (figs. 3 2-3; 4) and a knife (fig. 3 4) was hanged to the left.

The metal parts of the belt were cast of bronze (except for one of the loops, which was cut from a plate - fig. 2 10); they were attached to the leather strap by rivets and prickles. The only exceptions is the small belt buckle (fig. 2 2), which had lugs cast together with the main body.

The archaeological context of this find allowed a complete graphic reconstruction of the belt and the additional elements (fig. 4).

The big belt buckle (fig. 2 1), a strap-end (fig. 2 3) and a loop (fig. 2 9) were used to fasten the main strap around the waist. The small belt buckle (fig. 2 2), a strap-end (fig. 2 4) and a loop (fig. 2 10) belonged to the leather purse. The small strap-ends (fig. 2 5-8) were put on additional straps hanging from the belt, ca.

20 cm long. Three of the strap-ends were hanging to the right and another one to the left of the buckles. Three of them are completely identical (though there is no reason to think that they were cast in the same mold); the fourth one differs (fig. 2 8). They were probably attached to the main straps with a couple of copper hobnails (fig. 3 1) and the rest were arranged in couples on the back of the belt. The belt was ca. 4.5-5 cm wide and at both ends (at the belt buckle and the strap-end) narrowed to ca. 1.5 cm.

There are no dating problems: a 16 numii bronze coin was found in a leather purse in burial № 2, in a close proximity to burial № 12. This coin was minted between 538 and 542 AD and bear traces of barbarian counterstrike on the avers. This dating is confirmed by similar finds from cemeteries in northern Dobruja at Beroe (Piatra Frecei) and Calatis (Mangalia), as well as in the Crimea at Suuk-su. The belt decorations from Sadovets and Plochata, near Pleven date back to the same period.

This was the second cemetery of the Karasura population; the first one was found during the excavations of the so-called Basilica 2 (extra muros). The fact that in the second cemetery, were buried individuals who beyond any doubt have been warriors, raises the question about their origins and the role they played at a place quite distant from the boundaries of the Empire. Some of the funeral features - the steady deviation to the south of the grave pits, the meat and the pottery vessels in the graves, the charcoal on the bottom and in the filling of the grave pit give reason to assume that the rules of the Christian burial were not very strictly observed. The inhabitants of „Kaleto“ (or some of them?) were to a certain extent „alien“ to the Christian tradition in the Byzantine Empire. If this is true, we could assume that there is an indication for a federative „foreign and semibarbarian“ population, settled to guard this strategic place in Thrace, the fork of the main road to Adrianople (and Constantinople) and Anchialo (the Black Sea coast).