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Pagan graves at the medieval cemetery of Nikolovo, Ruse region (Abstract)

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The cemetery of Nikolovo provides the opportunity to clarify some issues that are still disputed in Bulgarian archaeology such as the chronology of the pagan necropoleis and the change of the burial practices after the conversion to Christianity. The aim of this paper is to present and introduce into scholarly circulation the graves that are more or less securely dated to the Pagan Period. For this purpose, criteria are established for distinguishing pagan from Christian graves. Thus, 86 out of a total of 204 graves excavated at Nikolovo have been identified as pagan. They are discussed in two 'classical' groups: cremation and inhumation burials.

The cremation graves (31) are shallow. In terms of location, they are clustered in the western part of the cemetery, with a higher concentration in the southwestern part. They are interspersed among inhumation graves, as is the case at all excavated bi-ritual cemeteries. Depending on the burial feature, two almost equal subgroups could be distinguished: urn and pit graves.

The total number of the inhumation graves that could be considered pagan is 54. They are also clustered in the western part of the cemetery, and they appear along with Christian graves in the central part. The bodies were laid in supine position with

extended legs, while there is a considerable variety of positions of the arms. The orientations of the graves are extremely diverse. The small share of graves with animal bones and traces of funerary meals suggest that this practice was already dying out when the cemetery of Nikolovo appeared. The observations on the location and associated finds of the inhumation graves allow for distinguishing two phases.

The cemetery of Nikolovo near Ruse provides the opportunity to trace the changes that occurred after the Christianization. The analysis of the burial practices and associated finds allows for distinguishing two phases in the Pagan Period. The emergence of the cemetery should be dated to the very end of 8th or early 9th century.

The characteristics of Nikolovo cemetery have parallels at a number of bi-ritual necropoleis in Northeastern Bulgaria and Walachia. Comparing the associated finds of the two groups of graves at this interesting cemetery, pagan and Christian, would enable tracing the changes in its composition. Their identification and introduction into scholarly circulation would help creating a more detailed chronology of the material culture of the First Bulgarian Kingdom.

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