

EGGSHELLS IN A JUVENILE BURIAL FROM AVAR CEMETERY IN CROATIA

Zrinka Premužić¹, Petra Rajić Šikanjić¹, Anita Rapan Papeša²

¹Institute for Anthropological Research, Zagreb; ²Municipal Museum of Vinkovci, Vinkovci

Archaeological excavations of early mediaeval period sites in continental Croatia are extremely rare. One of such sites is an Avar period cemetery located near Castle Khuen-Belasi in the village Nuštar in Eastern Croatia. In the fall of 2011 a rescue archaeological research was carried out during which a cemetery with 196 burials was excavated. Based on various grave goods the cemetery can be dated to the 8th and the beginning of 9th century, which places it in Late Avar Period.

One of the most interesting finds from this cemetery are fragments of eggshells. They were discovered in only one burial, Grave 44, with skeletal remains of three juveniles.



Grave 44 is situated in the centre of the cemetery. Its rectangular pit, construction, W-E orientation and remaining grave goods do not differ from the rest of the cemetery. Grave construction consisted of horizontally laid beams which held some kind of roof made of planks. Square pits were dug around the head and the legs of the deceased, representing remains of funeral bed or bier.

During archaeological excavation complete skeletons of two juveniles were documented. Both skeletons were in an extended position on their backs, with hands at the sides of the body. Skeleton A was placed on the right, south side while skeleton B was on the left, north side of the grave. Grave goods associated with skeleton A were ceramic vessel, glass beads, bronze ring and metal fragment. Grave goods associated with skeleton B were bronze ring, two bronze undecorated earrings and several fragments of eggshell. Three complete eggs were positioned above the pelvis and upper legs.



Anthropological analysis of the skeletal remains revealed presence of three juveniles (with skeleton C not being identified during excavation). Age at death was estimated based on fusion of primary ossification centres, degree of dental development and length of long bone diaphyses (Scheuer and Black, 2004). Skeleton A was aged 4-5 years, Skeleton B 1-2 years and Skeleton C 0-6 months.

Macroscopic analysis of eggshell fragments was performed at the Croatian Natural History Museum (by Dr. Srećko Leiner). All eggshell fragments are white, and 0.3 mm thick. Based on macroscopic characteristics, eggshells belong to a small to medium-size wild bird. However, specific species of the bird was not determined.

Eggs in mortuary records are commonly interpreted as symbols of fertility and/or rebirth appearing in many cultures and different time periods (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 2007). They are commonly recovered from Avar cemeteries, including Croatia (Balogh 2010, Šmalcelj 1981, Vinski-Gasparini and Ercegović 1958). Despite this fact, eggshells were never analysed so their purpose, as food offering or symbol, remains unclear. Interpretation is additionally complicated by their presence in both adult and juvenile graves.

Features of the Nuštar burial suggest that in this case egg presents a symbol of rebirth, especially considering that children are under 5 years of age. Based on archaeological documentation, position of the eggs can not be clearly associated with any of the bodies, making it impossible to determine who they belonged to. Currently no further conclusions can be made but future cases and analyses should provide answers to these interesting questions.

REFERENCES:

- Balogh C. 2010. A Felgyő, Ürmös-tanyai avar kori temető / The Avar Cemetery at Felgyő, Ürmös-Tanya, A Móra Ferenc Múzeum Évkönyve, Monumenta Archaeologica 1, 185–381.
- Chevalier J., Gheerbrant A. 2007. Rječnik simbola. Zagreb, Kulturno informativni centar / Naklada Jesenski Turk.
- Scheuer L., Black S. 2004. The Juvenile Skeleton. London, Elsevier Academic Press.
- Šmalcelj, M. 1981. Stari Jankovci - Gatina (općina Vinkovci) - avaroslavenska nekropola, Arheološki pregled 22, 142-143.
- Vinski-Gasparini K., Ercegović S. 1958. Ranosrednjovjekovno groblje u Brodskom Drenovcu, Vjesnik Arheološkog muzeja u Zagrebu 3, 129–161.