

# **The Structure and Complexity of Corded Ware Mortuary Practices; a bi-ritual communal burial at Slany (Bohemia) and its social significance**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Recent excavations at Slany in Central Bohemia have produced evidence of a Late Neolithic (resp. Late Eneolithic) Corded Ware communal burial. Within this article, it is argued that in Corded Ware funerary practices, specifically in cemeteries containing single burials, great attention was paid to the symbolic expression of individuality. The expression of status and power in burial rites reflects the possible diversification of the social role of the sexes in the Corded Ware society. It could also be considered as a reflection of the social differentiation between members of the society including even children, suggesting a patriarchal society in which men possessed considerable economic and social power. The explanation of such social differentiation may be sought within the development of the division of labour between men and women, probably caused by progressive changes in the system of agriculture and food production (for example, the introduction of ploughing implements and team, cf. Neustupny, 1967).

The grave excavated at Slany included two male inhumation burials associated with possible 'symbols of power', a battle axe and flint knives. Both skeletons were buried in a position typical for male burials (on their right side, head orientated to the west). In another part of the grave pit there was a communal cremation burial which was surrounded by mainly 'female' artefacts (such as a shell bead necklace, shell decorations and egg-shaped pot, found exclusively within female burials). The two different ways of burial may reflect the different social positions within family and society. This grave is unique within Late Neolithic (resp. Late Eneolithic) Europe for several reasons:

- It is the first evidence of cremation burials within the Bohemian group of Corded Ware cemeteries.
- This is probably the first grave including both cremation and inhumation burials from the Corded Ware period.
- There are a total of 3 inhumations and at least 4 cremated persons buried.
- The incredibly high number of pottery finds in this grave (23 pots) gives us an opportunity to re-examine the chronology of the Corded Ware period based on typological studies of pottery.

The analysis of such an unusual burial context suggests several possibilities of interpretation.

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## Introduction

This paper is an interim report detailing the results of the excavations at Slany in Central Bohemia up to 1995. Because the processing and analysis of finds is still in progress, this is only the first presentation of some amazing results and preliminary interpretations. Therefore any discussion, suggestions and co-operation will be more than welcome.

## Corded Ware Mortuary Practices

In the first half of the 3rd millennium BC, some regions of Europe shared common elements of material culture, as well as similar ways of disposing of their dead. Vast areas of Central, Northern and Eastern Europe were connected by a certain uniformity of material culture, represented in a special range of symbolic, prestige funeral goods. The various cultural groups of this period have different names in different regions of Europe: Corded Ware, Single-grave culture, Battle-Axe culture, Pit-grave culture or Ochre-grave culture.

Corded Ware cemeteries in Central Europe consist mainly of single inhumation burials in contracted positions. Communal burials are rare, represented mainly by the dual 'antipode' burials. There are only a very small number of graves including more than two persons, such as the grave at Obrnice in the district of Most (Koutecky and Muska 1979). Female burials are usually placed on the left side, orientated with the head in the east. For male burials the typical orientation is to the west, with the body placed on the right side. As a result of this practice, all burials of both sexes face to the south. This may have a certain symbolic significance relating to the location of some cemeteries within the landscape. A common location of Corded Ware cemeteries is on the edge of terraces or slopes, mostly orientated to the south-east (Turek 1996). This may represent some ritual commitment to the direction of sunrise. Possible evidence for such a cult might be seen in the shell disc amulets with decorations of double crosses in a circle; these may be interpreted as symbols of the solar wheel. The same motif also appears on some of the V-perforated buttons of the subsequent Bell Beaker period. One of the apparently highly symbolic elements within the Corded Ware burial rite is the position of the buried person's arms. (see Figure 1)

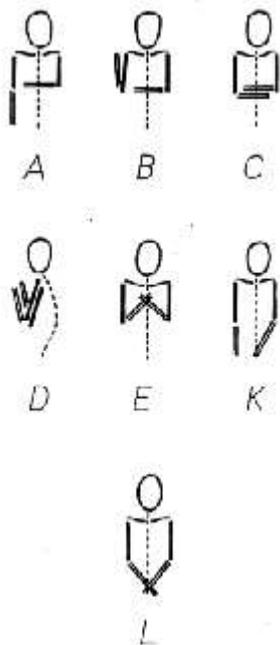


Figure 1. The scheme of the arm positions of the Corded Ware burials. Positions A to L are ordered approximately to the frequency of their use.

Unfortunately, the analysis of Corded Ware burial rites (Turek 1990) did not suggest that this was related to distinctions between sex or age groups, nor did it appear to be related to the presence/absence of grave goods. Although this may well relate to an alternative social category/identity, given our currently limited knowledge of the Corded Ware period, the meaning of arm position is unfortunately impossible to explain.

Male and female burials are also accompanied by different funeral artefacts. Female burials are assembled with necklaces made of perforated animal teeth (see Havel 1981, 70 for evidence for use of wolf, dog, wild cat and fox teeth in the context of Corded Ware burial), as well as imitation teeth made from bone. Necklaces were also made from small perforated circular discs of fresh water shell (*Margaritana margaritifera* and *Margaritana auricula*). Another artefact appearing in female graves is the already mentioned shell 'solar' disc symbol. Although most discs are made of shell, an exception is the imitation of a decorated shell ornament from Hrivice (Central Bohemia) which is made of copper (Moucha 1981), a very rare material in this period. Some female hair ornaments, as well as some tools in male graves were also made from copper. Supernatural significance may well have been attached to some of these copper artefacts in the Late Stone Age (Kuna 1989). The pottery assemblage commonly found in female burials consists of large Amphora storage vessels and ovoid pots.

Male burial assemblages may well reflect the social power that accumulated in men's hands, through weapons such as battle-axes or mace heads. In male graves, tools are represented by flint knives or flat axes of rock, with crudely worked surfaces but polished cutting edges. Copper tools were rarely found in male graves. The funerary pottery attributed to males display a range of distinctive shapes – beakers or jugs, which are decorated with cord impression or herring-bone motif.

The symbolic expression of the male and female phenomenon in burial rites probably reflects different social roles for each sex within society. The evidence for the Corded Ware burial rite may also be considered as a reflection of social diversification between members of society, including children. Excavations have revealed that some children's burials are accompanied by stone tools or weapons of clearly symbolic significance, which may well be anticipating their social roles as adults. Within a patriarchal society, men played a decisive role, and consequently possessed both economic and social superiority. This fact probably reflects itself in children's burials too, by way of symbolism. In some particular cases, we have evidence for the burials of very young boys (six months to six years old), accompanied by hammer axes or mace heads. Because other male child burials of this age do not include any of these symbolic artefacts, it can be argued that this group of sub-adult male burials may represent socially favoured individuals of some sort. They could, for example, be first-born sons, potential heirs of social status within a family or tribe. Such social differentiation is probably a result of change in the system of agriculture and food production, namely the introduction of ploughing implements and teams.

The inhumation method of burial was exclusively used in the Bohemian Corded Ware group. There was no evidence of cremations in the Bohemian group and until the 1995 excavations at Slany, only a few sites with evidence of cremation burial were recorded within the neighbouring Moravian group of Corded Ware. They are, however, prevalent in the contemporary Kosihy-Caka-Mako group in south-western Slovakia and north-western Hungary. Similar observations were made for the subsequent Bell Beaker period. The frequency of use of the cremation method decreases in a north-western direction from the area of the Carpathian Basin, through central Bohemia (about eight percent cf. Havel 1978, 100) and north-western Bohemia (less than four percent, cf. Turek 1995, 125), to central Germany, where there is very little evidence for this type of burial.

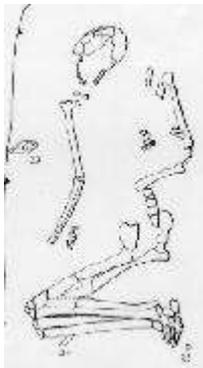
Some of the Corded Ware grave pits were found in the middle of circular ditches (i.e. the cemetery at Cachovice, Neustupny and Smrz 1989). It is possible to presume these ditches were marking the circumference of a barrow; most of the Corded Ware graves were probably

originally covered with a burial mound. However, these barrows were subsequently destroyed by ploughing from the Middle Ages to the modern era in most of the agricultural areas of the Czech republic. These circular ditches alone do not seem to provide evidence of any special social position of the person buried within them. A regularly discussed question is whether the Corded Ware burials were placed within some sort of burial chamber or placed in the grave pit and covered with soil. Taphonomic studies of skeletons and pottery goods in the Corded Ware period suggests both methods were used.

### The Communal Burial at Slany

The excavations on the Slany bypass in 1995 produced some amazing results. Five graves were excavated as part of what was probably a much larger cemetery. The excavated graves were distributed along the edge of a terrace, above the south orientated slope, following a shallow valley with a dry stream bed. This stream was marked on the first military maps at the end of the 18th century as a running water course. Following this terrace for about 900 m in an easterly direction, another Corded Ware burial was previously found within the urban area of Slany (V. Moucha pers. comm). This corresponds with earlier observations about the location of Corded Ware cemeteries being in lines on terraces along water courses (Koutecky and Muska 1979).

The most important burial context was grave number 1/95 (see figure 2). The bottom of the pit had been sunk up to 25 cm into the clay subsoil and covered by 30-40 cm of ploughzone soil. The burial chamber was of a rectangular shape, 3.4 m long and 1.6 m wide. The space inside the grave was divided into two halves, the western half with two inhumation burials and the eastern one containing the collective cremation burial.



[Figure 2](#): Slany, grave number 1/95. Nos. 1-22 represent pottery finds, no.23 the battle-axe, no.24-30 the flint artefacts and no.31 the shell ornament. [Click on image to enlarge to full-size.](#)

In between those two groups of burials was a child's inhumation burial, placed next to the wall of the grave pit. Twenty three pottery artefacts were found within the grave, most of them accumulated along the eastern part of the southern wall, adjacent to the pile of cremated human remains. The majority of the pottery finds, as well as the human remains, appeared to be found *in situ*, and were remarkably intact. The only parts of the grave pit which had been disturbed were the north-western and south-eastern corners; the latter corner was slightly damaged by a water-pipe trench but it had not disturbed human remains nor grave goods. The area of the north-western corner was probably disturbed by earlier ploughing, which had destroyed the skull and left arm of one of the skeletons. Another possible disturbance of the context might have been rodent activity, suggested by dislocated fragments of pottery scattered along the western part of the southern wall.

According to V. Cerny's anthropological examination, the person buried next to the southern wall of the grave pit was probably a man aged about 30-40 years old (*pers. comm.*). The position of the skeleton, lain on the right hand side of the body, head orientated to the west,

may support this interpretation. He was buried without pottery and the only artefacts in the grave were a faceted battle-axe placed in front of his chest, a flint knife found under his right shin just below the knee and a small flint scraper behind his feet. This burial thus belongs to the 'aceramic' group of male burials mainly accompanied by a battle-axe, axe or a flint implement. The body was buried in a contracted position, on the right side, with arms almost in position A (right arm stretched along the body, left arm bent at the elbow and crossing the body).

In the case of the second inhumation, it was only possible to infer the sex of the individual from their burial position and artefactual assemblage; burial on the right side with the head orientated to the west, as well as the massive flint knife found next to its knees, suggests it was a second male. This body also seems to have been buried in a contracted position but because of plough damage to the skull and the left arm, it is difficult to reconstruct the original position of the arms; positions A, B and C are all possible. Fragments of a damaged pottery bowl were also found in this area, next to the western wall of the grave.

Next to the legs of the northern inhumation there were also two miniature cups. It is difficult to determine whether these two cups belong to the adult inhumation, or if they were connected with the neighbouring context of the child burial. It is also debatable whether or not the massive flint knife and another tiny flint flake belong to the inhumation of the adult person, or to the sub-adult burial (the confusion may arise from the secondary reopening of the grave).

From the child inhumation, only fragments of one long bone were preserved, found next to a cluster of three pots (see figure 3); a beaker with the decoration of cord impression on the neck, a jug, and a small amphora vessel with two handles and corded decoration.



[Figure 3](#): Slany, grave number 1/95. Vessels associated with the child's inhumation burial ([See figure two, nos. 1-3](#)). *Click on image to enlarge to full-size.*

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It seems that this burial may provide evidence of the re-opening and secondary use of this burial chamber; the missing feet of the neighbouring inhumation may also have resulted from such a re-opening.

In the north-eastern corner of the grave, there were three vessels: two pots with handles and a large amphora storage vessel. It is probable that these vessels were an assemblage for the cremation burial in the south-eastern quadrant of the grave. The cremation burial was spread over an area about 1.0 x 0.9 m. The layer of cremated human remains was up to 15 cm thick. The remains were not placed in any vessel and the pottery vessels located in a line along the southern wall of the grave were probably placed in the grave just before the piling up of the cremated human remains. These vessels did not contain any human remains and they were not used as urns. Unfortunately, not all of the pottery finds have been reconstructed to date. However, the appearance of some typically 'female' pottery artefacts, such the amphora or ovoid pots, suggests the presence of a woman in the cremation burial.

According to anthropological analysis by S. Leach and J. Bekvalac (*pers. comm.*), it is possible to establish a minimum number of four people buried within this multiple cremation. The presence of both adult and sub-adult bones was noted, as well as cremated bones of sheep or goat. The total weight of 8.245g of bone fragments recovered above 1mm in size could suggest that an even higher number of individuals were cremated. The morphology of the fragments suggests that the bodies were not defleshed before cremation. Within the area of the deposit, some spatial clustering is indicated, suggesting a deliberate bias towards the collection and burial of cranial bones. It is presumed that all the human bodies were cremated together on the same funerary pyre. Within the cremation deposit were also found two artefacts: a non-diagnostic flint flake and a fragment of a small cup, whose discolouration and material structure suggested their presence within the funeral pyre during the cremation, as part of the 'rite of passage'.

Another amazing discovery was made during the reconstruction of the western-most vessel associated with the cremation deposit at the west face of the pit. Inside this decorated jug there were more than thirty perforated shell beads, originally part of a necklace, and at the bottom six flint implements. This is the first record of the deposition of funeral offerings inside a vessel from the burials of the Bohemian Corded Ware group.

### **The Grave Goods**

Unfortunately, not all of the artefacts found in the communal burial at Slany have been reconstructed as yet, though some important finds have already been discovered within the pottery assemblage. Most of the pottery from the cremation pyre seems to be of Late Corded Ware origin (find group III within the conventional typological system, see Buchvaldek 1966; 1967, 87-93; 1986, 105-107). However, one pot, found among the cluster of vessels associated with the children's burial, can be classified as typologically earlier (finds group II) and might be evidence of curation. The chronological significance of these typological groups has not been satisfactorily determined.

The decoration on the jug found next to the deposit of cremated human remains by the southern wall was very unusual. The main motif of engraved 'herring-bone' decoration has only been recorded on amphorae storage vessels up to the present day in Bohemia. The shape of this jug seems to be similar to the jugs of the Letonice type (Moravian group of Corded Ware) or to the Nagyrev jugs of the Balkan type (Buchvaldek 1976, Fig. 8:1, 4). Another jug, the shape of which suggested south-eastern origins, was found in between the cremation burial and the skeleton placed next to the southern wall. This jug also seems to have a relation to the Nagyrev jugs of the Balkan type. However, its decoration of vertical moulded slashed-cordons is similar to that of the smooth moulded cordons on the Moravian jugs of the Drevohostice type (Buchvaldek 1976, Fig. 8:6, 7). This method of decoration is very rare within the Bohemian group of Corded Ware (e.g. jugs from Prague Bubeneč, Buchvaldek, Havel and Kovarik 1991, 179, III, A:2 or 180, III, H:1). The moulded slashed-cordon was used as a pottery decoration in the preceding Rivnac period.

This jug also contained shell beads from a necklace and a collection of six flaked implements. These implements were produced for various purposes, and were made of four different kinds of raw material. Besides one flake of indefinite shape, there was a sickle blade, two knives, a scraper-like blade and a drill. The sickle blade appears to bear the traces of residue from crop-cutting activities and also has evidence of secondary usage as a pointed tool. Only one artefact was made from locally-derived material – quartzite from the area of the Ceske

Stredohori highlands about 50 km north of the site. There are no natural sources of flint in Bohemia and most of the material used for the production of the prehistoric flake industry was imported, mainly from the northern neighbourhood of the Czech Lands. Three artefacts were made of so-called Baltic flint of Polish origin and another from Bavarian flint (so-called 'plattensilex'). This raw material was common in Bohemia in the earlier 'Stichbandkeramik' and Lengyel periods. However, in the Corded Ware period it was very rare. There has only been one artefact made from Bavarian flint recorded within Corded Ware contexts in Bohemia. The other flaked artefacts found within this burial context were also made of Baltic flint. These were two flint knives found with both adult inhumations (discussed above). The scraper found with the skeleton located in the southern area of the grave pit was made of local quartzite. In contrast, only one flint flake, a fragment of another sickle blade, was found on top of the cremated remains, its structure altered by the effects of the fire from the cremation pyre.

In summary, it seems that production of the flint tools within the Corded Ware period in Bohemia was more dependent on imports from the northern region (in contrast to the Earlier Neolithic TRB Culture which appears to have been more dependent on Bavarian sources).

### **The Social Significance of the Slany Communal Burial**

An explanation of the significance of the communal burial at Slany is possible only within the context of the more common funerary practices of the Corded Ware period in the region under study. Evidence for social stratification may be found in the small number of 'rich' Corded Ware burials in the region, which may be divided into two categories.

The first of these are single burials with exceptionally rich funerary assemblages. This category is represented in Bohemia by female burials with large collections of perforated animal teeth and necklaces made of shell beads – Praha 8-Cimice, (Havel 1981, 67-71) or Konobrze, in the district of Most (Dobes and Buchvaldek 1993, 206, obr. 10). A similar female burial with rich necklaces and five vessels was found in Moravia at Marefy, in the district of Vyskov (Chleborad 1934, 8-12). Rich male burials were recorded in Moravia, at Hostice-Heroltice, in the district of Vyskov (Ondracek 1966), assembled with eight vessels and several stone artefacts, or at Drazovice-Letonice, in the district of Vyskov (Chleborad 1934, 23-27), where in grave VI a male burial was located with twenty one vessels, a battle-axe and several copper and flint tools. The second category of rich burials are communal burials as in the case of the Slany cemetery. This category is also represented by the grave at Trebusice in the district of Kladno (Stocky 1926, 175) which contained five inhumations in the 'female' position and one in the 'male' position. Another communal burial was discovered at Bylany in the district of Kolin (Pic 1899, obr. 5) which included two or four inhumations, two of them in the 'male' position. Another grave with one inhumation in the 'male' position and two inhumations (adult and sub-adult) in 'female' positions was excavated at Chrastany in the district of Praha-zapad (Vavra 1981, 73-79). A grave with three male inhumations was found at Obrnice in the district of Most (Koutecky and Muska 1979, 12-18). A similar communal burial with four inhumations has recently been discovered in Moravia, at Urcice in the district of Prostejov (Cizmar and Smid 1996, grave No. 12).

### **Conclusion**

None of the Slany burials are as richly furnished as the examples discussed above, but what is certain is that the communal burial represents a particular variety of funerary practice (ritual)

rather than evidence of some specific event (clash, disease). As has been argued, great importance was placed on the expression of individuality in death through inhumation (compared with the cremated individuals) and upon differences between the sexes, in the funerary practices of the Corded Ware Period. This symbolic differentiation between sex/age groups should not be simply read as evidence of social stratification within a complex society; it may well refer to other aspects of social identity. The Corded Ware funerary practices are more likely a symbolic reflection of the division of labour within the family and the contrasting social roles of men, women and children. The individuality expressed within the context of a single burial is thus indicative of someone's association with a particular social category.

The composition of the Corded Ware funeral assemblages seems to be quite uniform, and also the number of items within the assemblage only rarely exceeds a certain amount (average number of artefacts in graves of adult male is 3.7, in graves of adult female it is 3.4 and in child graves 2.7). However, some social differentiation may be expressed in the contrast between complete inhumation and cremation; it is possible then to interpret Slany as the burial of three key individuals (at least two male and one child) around whom funereal ritual was focused. These individuals were possibly men of social standing, around whom the cremations of others were inserted at a later date. As such, the communal burial at Slany belongs to a Corded Ware burial tradition in which social identity, not just status, was represented.

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