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The Sacred Status of the Sword in Early Medieval Warrior Burials

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Abstract. *The article examines the sword as a sacralized object in the burial rites of early medieval Scandinavia and Eastern Europe, particularly in the territory of Rus'. Through an analysis of archaeological materials, the study reveals the complex interplay between the social, military, and religious roles of bladed weaponry. Particular attention is paid to animistic perceptions of the sword as a sentient object, capable of accompanying a warrior into the afterlife and serving as a mediator between the world of the living and the post-mortem realm. The sword also embodies the martial ideal and the sacral model of death in battle.*

The aim of the research is to analyze the sword as a sacralized element of the funerary ritual, functioning as a symbolic and ritual mediator between the earthly world and the beyond, and to clarify the specifics of the reception and transformation of Scandinavian burial models within the Eastern European cultural context.



The objectives of the article include: analyzing ritual practices associated with the use of swords in Scandinavian and Eastern European burials; interpreting symbolic actions involving bladed weapons (specifically intentional breaking, bending, and vertical placement) in light of animistic beliefs; as well as identifying how Scandinavian models were locally adapted and culturally transformed within the funerary traditions of Rus'.

The research methodology is based on the analysis of archaeological materials from burial sites—specifically swords, their forms, placement, and orientation—combined with a comparison to mythological concepts of Valhalla and Ragnarök. A comparative-historical approach is combined with the analysis of ritual symbolism to interpret the sword as a multidimensional cultural and sacred phenomenon.

The results demonstrate that in Early Medieval society, the sword held a dual status: it functioned both as a marker of social identity and as a sacred instrument facilitating the transition to the afterlife. Deliberate blade damage and symbolic substitution reflect animistic conceptions of weaponry. The dissemination of these practices in Eastern Europe illustrates the profound influence of Scandinavian warrior culture, its capacity to integrate with local traditions, and its pivotal role in shaping unique regional burial paradigms.

Keywords: *funerary ritual, interdisciplinary research, Middle Ages, Rus', sword, Viking Age, weaponology.*

Сакральний статус меча у воїнських похованнях раннього середньовіччя

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Анотація: *Стаття присвячена дослідженню меча як сакралізованого об'єкта у поховальних обрядах ранньосередньовічної Скандинавії та Східної Європи, зокрема на території Русі. Аналіз археологічних матеріалів дозволяє розкрити складну взаємодію між соціальною, військовою та релігійною роллю клинкової зброї. Особлива увага приділяється анімістичним уявленням про меч як одухотворений предмет, здатний супроводжувати воїна у потойбіччі та виконувати функцію посередника між світом живих і загробним існуванням, а також матеріалізувати воїнський ідеал та сакральну модель смерті у бою.*

Метою дослідження є аналіз меча як сакралізованого елемента поховального ритуалу, що виконує функцію символічного та ритуального медіатора між світом живих і потойбіччям, а також з'ясування особливостей рецепції та трансформації скандинавських поховальних моделей у східноєвропейському культурному контексті.

Завданнями статті є: аналіз ритуальних практик, пов'язаних із використанням меча у похованнях Скандинавії та Східної Європи; інтерпретація символічних дій із клинковою зброєю (зокрема навмисного ламання, згинання та вертикального встановлення) у світлі анімістичних уявлень; а також виявлення процесів локальної адаптації та культурної трансформації скандинавських моделей у поховальних традиціях Русі.

Методологія дослідження спирається на аналіз археологічних матеріалів поховальних пам'яток (а саме мечів, їх форму, місце розташування та положення) у поєднанні з їх зіставленням із міфологічними уявленнями про Вальгаллу та Рагнар'юк. Використано порівняльно-історичний підхід, аналіз ритуальної символіки та інтерпретацію меча як культурного та сакрального феномену.

Результати дослідження показують, що меч у ранньосередньовічному суспільстві мав подвійний статус: з одного боку, він слугував маркером



соціальної ідентичності та воїнського престижу, з іншого - сакральним інструментом переходу до потойбічного світу. Навмисне пошкодження клинка, його нестандартне розміщення та символічне заміщення відображають анімістичні уявлення про одухотвореність зброї. Поширення таких ритуальних практик у Східній Європі демонструє глибокий вплив скандинавської воїнської культури, її здатність інтегруватися з місцевими традиціями поховання та формувати унікальні культурні моделі.

Ключові слова: доба вікінгів, зброезнавство, меч, міждисциплінарні дослідження, поховальний обряд, Русь, Середньовіччя, ритуальна символіка.

Problem Statement. The funerary rituals of the Early Medieval period serve as primary sources for reconstructing the worldview, social hierarchies, and ideological orientations of the populations of Northern and Eastern Europe. Burial complexes not only represent notions of death and the afterlife but also reflect the symbolic mechanisms of transition between different spheres of existence [13, pp. 21–24; 7, p. 230-250]. In this context, bladed weapons – specifically the sword – acquire particular significance. In the warrior cultures of the Viking Age Scandinavia and Early Rus', especially during the pre-Christian period, the sword transcended its utilitarian combat function, acting as a vessel for sacred meanings and ritual practices [5, p. 12-14]. Animistic perceptions of weaponry led to the understanding of the sword as a distinct subject of ritual action, capable of accompanying the deceased into the afterlife and serving as both a protector and a mediator between worlds [10, p. 24]. Thus, funerary practices involving the sword should be viewed not merely as markers of social status, but as the materialization of sacralized models of warrior death and postmortem existence. [3, p. 229-232].

Analysis of Recent Studies and Publications. The issue of the symbolic and ritual meaning of weapons in burial practices has served as a specific object of scholarly attention. In archaeological and historical scholarship, considerable



attention has been devoted to the role of weapons within ritual contexts, as well as to their associations with warrior ideology and conceptions of the afterlife. The Scandinavian aspect of this topic has been addressed in studies by: H. Williams; N. Price; L. Gardeła; H. L. Aannestad; U. Moilanen; S. Brunning; D. Sayer, E. Sebo, K. Hughes and J. Lund [1; 8; 11; 18; 19; 23; 27; 33]. Researchers such as A. Stalsberg, B. Costello and F. Androshchuk have considered not only Scandinavia but also the territory of Rus', analyzing mutual cultural influences within this context [2; 3; 9; 31]. The ritual significance of weapons specifically on the territory of Rus' is explored in the works of D. Avdusin, A. Kirpichnikov, O. Vasiuta and O. Motsia [5; 15; 20; 21; 32]. These scholars have variously treated the sword as an element of burial «inventory», a marker of social status, or a defining attribute of the military elite. Concurrently, a growing body of research emphasizes the sacralization and personification of bladed weapons, as well as their integration into complex magical-ritual practices, suggesting profound semantic layers beyond mere utilitarian or status-based functions and requires further research on this topic.

Identification of previously unresolved aspects of the overall problem.

Despite an extensive body of literature, the interpretation of the sword specifically as a ritual mediator between the worlds of the living and the dead remains underdeveloped. In most instances, scholarly attention has focused on the typology of burial complexes or the socio-political interpretation of weaponry, while its symbolic status within the funerary rite and its link to beliefs regarding a warrior's postmortem fate remain only partially explored. Furthermore, the cultural synthesis of Scandinavian and Eastern European traditions concerning the sacralization of the sword in funerary practices requires more profound study [13, pp. 22–30].

The purpose of this article is to analyze the sword as a sacralized object within the funerary ritual, functioning as a symbolic and ritual mediator between the world of the living and the afterlife. The main objectives of the study are: to identify the



cultural and religious foundations of the sword's sacralization within the military environment; to determine the role of bladed weapons in the structure of the funerary rite; and to interpret funerary practices involving the sword in the context of beliefs regarding the warrior ideal and postmortem existence in Scandinavian and Old Rus' societies.

Presentation of the core research findings. In contemporary studies of bladed weapons, an increasingly prominent approach views the sword not only as an element of military equipment but also as a complex cultural symbol. A consistent proponent of this approach is F. Androshchuk, who moves away from narrowly typological and military-technical interpretations, treating the sword as a multidimensional phenomenon that integrates material, social, and sacred characteristics [2, pp. 18–24].

Based on the analysis of archaeological materials from Scandinavia, the Baltic region, and Eastern Europe, the researcher demonstrates that the sword in early medieval society was closely associated with concepts of honor, power, and the warrior's personal identity. It served as a form of "calling card" within the military community, acting as a marker of social status and elite affiliation [2, pp. 45–49; 3, pp. 229, 241].

The high technological complexity of blade manufacture, combined with their limited availability and considerable cost, contributed to the sacralization of the sword [18, pp. 51–53]. In early medieval Scandinavia, the sword was perceived not merely as a combat weapon but as an object endowed with its own "life force" and individual qualities, reflecting animistic beliefs in the "ensoulment" of weaponry. The personification of swords—manifested through the bestowing of names, hereditary status, and sacred functions—attests to a belief in their capacity to influence a warrior's fate and act as a mediator between humans and the supernatural [3, pp. 137–140; 27, pp. 13–15].



Within the context of funerary rites, the sacred status of the sword necessitated specific ritual handling. Androshchuk convincingly interprets the deliberate bending or breaking of a blade as an act of symbolic "termination of the object's life cycle," mirroring the death of its owner [1, pp. 56–60]. Such "killing" of the sword did not imply devaluation; on the contrary, it emphasized the weapon's vital role in the transition to the afterlife [10, p. 241; 18, pp. 58–60; 21, pp. 52–54].

Another significant phenomenon is the symbolic substitution of the blade, where only the scabbard or hilt components are deposited in the burial [20, pp. 29, 32]. A representative case is Mound No. 110 of the Shestovytsia archaeological complex (Shestovytsia village, Chernihiv region), where only fragments of the scabbard were discovered in association with the deceased, while the sword itself was absent from the burial [7, pp. 132–134]. According to Androshchuk, in certain instances, a functional sacrificial sword was replaced by its symbolic representation. This reflects a strategic balance between the sacred necessity of incorporating the weapon into the ritual and its high material value [2, pp. 61–62].

In the Scandinavian mythological tradition, the death of a warrior was perceived not as an end, but as a transition to a distinct form of existence in the afterlife – Valhalla [11, pp. 17–19]. Valhalla (Old Norse Valhǫll – 'hall of the slain') was envisioned in the archaic Norse worldview as the festive hall of the god Odin, where warriors fallen in battle and chosen by the Valkyries would gather. There, the fallen continued their existence in a state of eternal feasting alongside the gods, preparing for the final battle of Ragnarök [29, pp. 339–340]. Ragnarök (*Old Norse Ragnarøk* – "fate of the gods") represents the "cosmic" catastrophe during which the gods perish and the ordered world is destroyed, only to be subsequently renewed. These motifs served an ideological function, sacralizing death in combat and establishing a model of honorable warrior demise [17, pp. 303–304; 23, pp. 120–125]. In this context, the sword functioned not only as an attribute of social status



and elite military affiliation but also as a sacred instrument of transition, facilitating the warrior's passage from the world of the living into the supernatural realm [10, pp. 235–238; 18, p. 60]. Through ritual actions involving bladed weapons – deliberate breaking, bending, vertical insertion into the funerary pyre, or symbolic substitution – the sword was withdrawn from profane use and integrated into the sacred dimension of the funerary rite. Thus, it acted as a mediator between different planes of existence, bridging the earthly identity of the deceased with their new status in the afterlife [3, pp. 263–268; 4, pp. 65–72; 12, pp. 74–78]. This interpretation, based on the synthesis of archaeological evidence with written sources, is further corroborated by studies of vertically positioned and deliberately deformed weapons in 9th–10th-century burials [2, pp. 55–60; 22, pp. 307–314]. A vivid example is provided by the findings described in the 2025 archaeological report on the necropolis at Viby/Norrtna (near Köping, Sweden). During the excavations, archaeologists discovered two Viking Age swords that had been vertically placed in the burial. Such a specific positioning of the weapons may indicate sacral symbolism [28].

Compared to Scandinavian warriors, for whom the central concept was Valhalla and initiation into the cult of Odin, Slavic warriors operated within a more localized and animistic model of the afterlife [11, pp. 118–120]. While for Scandinavians death in battle guaranteed entry into the "hall of the slain," Slavic traditions emphasized a symbolic connection with ancestors, ritual purification, and the maintenance of balance between the realms of the living and the dead [14, pp. 125–128]. In both cultures, the sword functioned as a mediator and guide; however, in Scandinavia, it was closely tied to specific mythological narratives and divine individualization. In contrast, within Slavic contexts, the sword's sacrality manifested primarily through animistic beliefs and its role in communal ancestral rites [25, pp. 120–125; 29, pp. 338–339].



Studies of the Birka burials demonstrate the practice of vertically placing bladed weapons within cremation remains, alongside the systematic deliberate bending and breaking of blades [4, p. 412]. In the archaeological research of Holger Arbman (1943), several illustrative examples can be highlighted: “Burial Bj 842 – The sword lay beside the left thigh of the deceased... it was intentionally bent in the middle of the blade at an obtuse angle. This damage was inflicted prior to its placement in the grave” [4, p. 315]; “Burial Bj 750 – The blade of the sword was not merely bent but twisted several times (the so-called ‘snail effect’), rendering it completely unusable for combat” [4, p. 270]. A. Gräslund emphasized that such actions were not the result of accidental damage, but rather a deliberate and ritually motivated act [12, p. 76].

A. Nordberg concluded that thrusting a sword into the funeral pyre could symbolize the dedication of the deceased to Odin – the god of war, death, and the warrior afterlife [22, pp. 21–22]. In this interpretation, the sword acts as a sacred mediator, providing the warrior with access to Valhalla.

A comparative analysis of Scandinavian and Eastern European burial complexes indicates the dissemination of a shared ideological model alongside the bearers of Scandinavian military culture. Within this framework, bladed weapons played a pivotal role as a sacralized component of the warrior funerary ritual [2, pp. 247–252]. This model was not limited to the mechanical transfer of ritual forms; rather, it underwent localized adaptation within different cultural environments, merging with indigenous traditions and regional funerary practices. Consequently, Eastern European sites reveal both direct parallels with Scandinavian complexes and transformed, reduced, or symbolic manifestations of ritual weapon handling [21, p. 57].

Informative in this context are the materials from the Pre-Ladoga region (Kochkurkina, 1989), which served as a primary transit zone for the eastward



dissemination of Scandinavian ideological and funerary models. Within this area, both stray finds of vertically placed swords and burials containing deliberately deformed blades have been recorded, demonstrating a direct inheritance of Scandinavian ritual practices. Specifically, in Kurgan CXVI near the village of Vakhrushevo, a sword with a blade bent into a semicircle was placed directly onto a cluster of calcined bones. This clearly indicates the intentional nature of the damage and its deliberate integration into the funerary ritual structure [16, pp. 138–141].

A similar combination of blade deformation with cremation rites is also present on the territory of Ukraine. Particularly illustrative are the materials from the Shestovytsia burial ground, where bent swords in cremations and deliberately broken sabers in inhumation burials. [7, pp. 30–35; 16, pp. 149–152]. In mound No. 61, the sword lay to the left of the deceased and was intentionally broken into three parts, with the middle fragment of the blade placed over the hilt, which may indicate a ritual nature of the weapon's damage [7, pp. 25–26]. Another illustrative example is mound No. 42, where the sword blade was bent almost in half; the metal cracked at the bend, but the overall integrity of the weapon was preserved [15, p. 55; 26, pp. 56–57]. In analyzing these practices, a promising direction for future research lies in examining a broader set of materials from the Kyiv region and other parts of Chernihiv Oblast. In particular, special attention could be paid to the contexts of weapon finds at key sites such as Liubech and Dobrianka [24, pp. 24–27; 30]. Although direct evidence of the “killing of the weapon” ritual in these locations remains a matter of debate, further study of hillforts in this context is critically important.

For the early Slavic population, the prevailing funerary tradition did not systematically include weaponry in graves. Both cremation and inhumation burials are dominated by complexes lacking military equipment, reflecting a distinct model of beliefs regarding death, social status, and the afterlife [7, pp. 23–28]. In this



context, the emergence of burial complexes containing swords, combat knives, or sabers appears as a marked anomaly that cannot be explained by the internal evolution of local rituals. The non-standard placement of bladed weapons, their deliberate damage, or symbolic representation through isolated elements indicates the adoption of an external ritual model with a clearly defined ideological significance.

The most plausible interpretation links the dissemination of such practices to the penetration of Scandinavian military retinue culture into Eastern Europe. For the bearers of this culture, bladed weapons served as a pivotal marker of social status and warrior identity [2, pp. 142–155; 6, pp. 110–114; 21, pp. 55–57]. Along with the material components of weaponry, the corresponding funerary ritual was introduced, in which the sword acted as a sacralized object and an integral element of beliefs concerning warrior death and the afterlife [7]. The high social and ideological prestige of this elite group facilitated the integration of specific Scandinavian ritual elements into the local environment, where they underwent transformation and merged with autochthonous burial traditions. This intercultural interaction explains the limited yet consistent spread of "special" weapon-bearing burial complexes within the early Slavic milieu as a result of deliberate cultural contact rather than random or isolated phenomena [3, pp. 43–50].

Conclusions

In Early Medieval warrior culture, the sword was not limited to its utilitarian function as a weapon but acquired a complex sacred significance. It served as a central element of the funerary ritual, around which a system of ritual actions was organized, symbolizing the warrior's transition from the world of the living to the realm of the afterlife [3, pp. 227–235; 7, pp. 29, 32]. The deliberate damage to the blade, its non-standard placement, vertical installation, or symbolic substitution with individual components of the hilt or scabbard functioned as rites of ritual



transformation, ensuring sacralized communication between life and postmortem existence [2, pp. 55–60; 22, pp. 307–314].

In the Scandinavian tradition, this transition was closely associated with the concept of Valhalla and dedication to Odin, where the sword became not only a symbol of social status but also a sacred guide to the afterlife. The sword epitomized a specific warrior ideal: honorable death in battle, immortal glory, and inclusion in the "cosmic" order of Valhalla, preparing the deceased for the final battle of Ragnarök [17, pp. 303–304; 23, pp. 120–125; 29, pp. 339–340].

The dissemination of these ritual practices throughout Eastern Europe indicates the profound ideological influence of Scandinavian military culture and its capacity to integrate with local traditions. Funerary complexes in the Pre-Ladoga region – most notably Kurgan CXVI, where a sword was bent into a semicircle – alongside data from the Shestovytsia cemetery (Mounds №42, №61, and №110), where cremations featuring bent swords and the symbolic representation of weaponry through scabbard components are documented, demonstrate the direct adaptation of Scandinavian ritual models within the Eastern European context of Early Rus' [7, pp. 30–35; 16, pp. 149–152].

Thus, in the funerary rituals of the Early Medieval period, the sword performed a dual function: it served both as a marker of social identity and warrior status, and as a sacred instrument of transition to the afterlife. This dual role underscores the complexity of Early Medieval warrior culture, in which material artifacts were inextricably intertwined with ritual and ideological practices. In this context, death and postmortem existence were understood as integrated elements of the society's cultural code.

The prospects for further research lie in deepening the interpretation of the sword not only as an archaeological artifact but also as a multidimensional symbol within the framework of the early medieval worldview. Particularly significant is the



expansion of comparative research focused on juxtaposing burial practices across various regions of Europe in order to identify both shared features and regional variations in the ritual use of weapons. Equally relevant is the clarification of the semantics of specific ritual actions associated with the sword. Continued attention to the interaction between local and borrowed traditions will allow for a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of cultural adaptation and the transformation of martial ideals in early medieval society.

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