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Disturbing the dead. Archaeothanatological analysis of the stone age burials at Zvejnieki, Latvia (excavated 2006–2009)

Liv Nilsson Stutz^{a,*}, Lars Larsson^b^a Department of Anthropology, Emory University, 1557 Dickey Drive, Atlanta, GA 30322, USA^b Department of Archaeology and Ancient History, LUX, Box 192, 22100 Lund, Sweden

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ABSTRACT

The Zvejnieki burial ground in northern Latvia is one of the largest concentrations of burials from the Mesolithic and Neolithic in Northern Europe. The 308 burials, dominated by primary inhumation, excavated in the 1960s and 1970s have become important references for understanding the hunter-gatherer mortuary practices in the region. Recent excavations, implementing a taphonomy-focused archaeothanatological protocol revealed 26 additional burials. The analysis confirmed important aspects of the patterns already observed at the site, such as primary inhumation, multiple depositions, and the occasional practice of wrapping the body before disposal. The analysis also revealed previously ignored patterns of systematic disturbance. By focusing on the disarticulated remains and on establishing the sequence of disturbances, the study concluded that the disturbance of older burials must be understood not as accidental but as an integral and meaningful part of the mortuary practices that can be tied to a concern with permanence of places in the landscape at the transition to increasing sedentism among the Neolithic populations in the Eastern Baltic.

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1. Introduction

The Zvejnieki archaeological complex, with settlement remains and burials from approximately 7500–2600 cal BC, is one of the largest burial sites of hunter-gatherer-fishers in Northern Europe. The site is located on a gravel ridge that at the time formed an island in the palaeolake Burtnieks (Eberhards, 2006) in what is today Northern Latvia (Fig. 1a and 1b).

The site has been known since the mid-19th century (Ebert, 1913), and was excavated on a large scale in the 1960s and 1970s under the direction of Professor Francis Zagorskis (Zagorskis, 1987, Zagorskis, 2004). These excavations revealed Mesolithic and Neolithic settlements as well as 308 burials, making it one of the largest Stone Age burial grounds in Northern Europe. The mortuary practices at the sites were dominated by individual primary burial, but contained several simultaneous depositions of up to six individuals. The burials were also characterized by remarkable preservation and often by rich burial goods (Zagorskis, 2004). The site was first dated using typology, and the chronology was later confirmed with a series of radiocarbon dates (Zagorska, 2006) that were part of a larger cross-disciplinary research project revisiting the materials and documentation from the old excavations (Larsson and Zagorska, 2006).

The cross-disciplinary re-study of the Zvejnieki material (Larsson and Zagorska, 2006) showed the potential in returning to the site with new methodologies and perspectives. In 2005 a team directed by Lars Larsson (Lund University), Ilga Zagorska and Valdis Bērziņš (University of Latvia) returned to Zvejnieki to answer questions regarding the chronology of the burials, the temporal relationships between the settlements and the burials, and the mortuary practices (which is where archaeothanatology became a significant component to the research). The excavations were concentrated to the Middle Neolithic part of the cemetery (5300–4300 BP, or 4100–2900 cal BC) — an area that had remained undisturbed and unexcavated because of its location beneath a now abandoned house construction, and also resulted in the identification of a new Mesolithic settlement area (Nilsson Stutz et al., 2008; Nilsson Stutz et al., 2013), and a better understanding of the Neolithic settlements around the river Rūja (Bērziņš, 2008; Bērziņš and Zagorska, 2010).

Archaeothanatology is an approach to the excavation of human remains developed in France during the 1970s and 1980s. It is taphonomically-based and cross-disciplinary, combining archaeological analysis with knowledge of biology about how the human body decomposes after death. In the field, the approach relies on detailed excavation: all the remains are carefully uncovered and maximally exposed, and their exact position is mapped and photographed, in order to allow for a detailed analysis of the sequences of disarticulation, disturbance etc. (for a more detailed description of the approach, see Duday et al., 1990, Duday, 2009, Nilsson Stutz, 2003). While the approach is

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: lstutz@emory.edu (L. Nilsson Stutz), lars.larsson@ark.lu.se (L. Larsson).

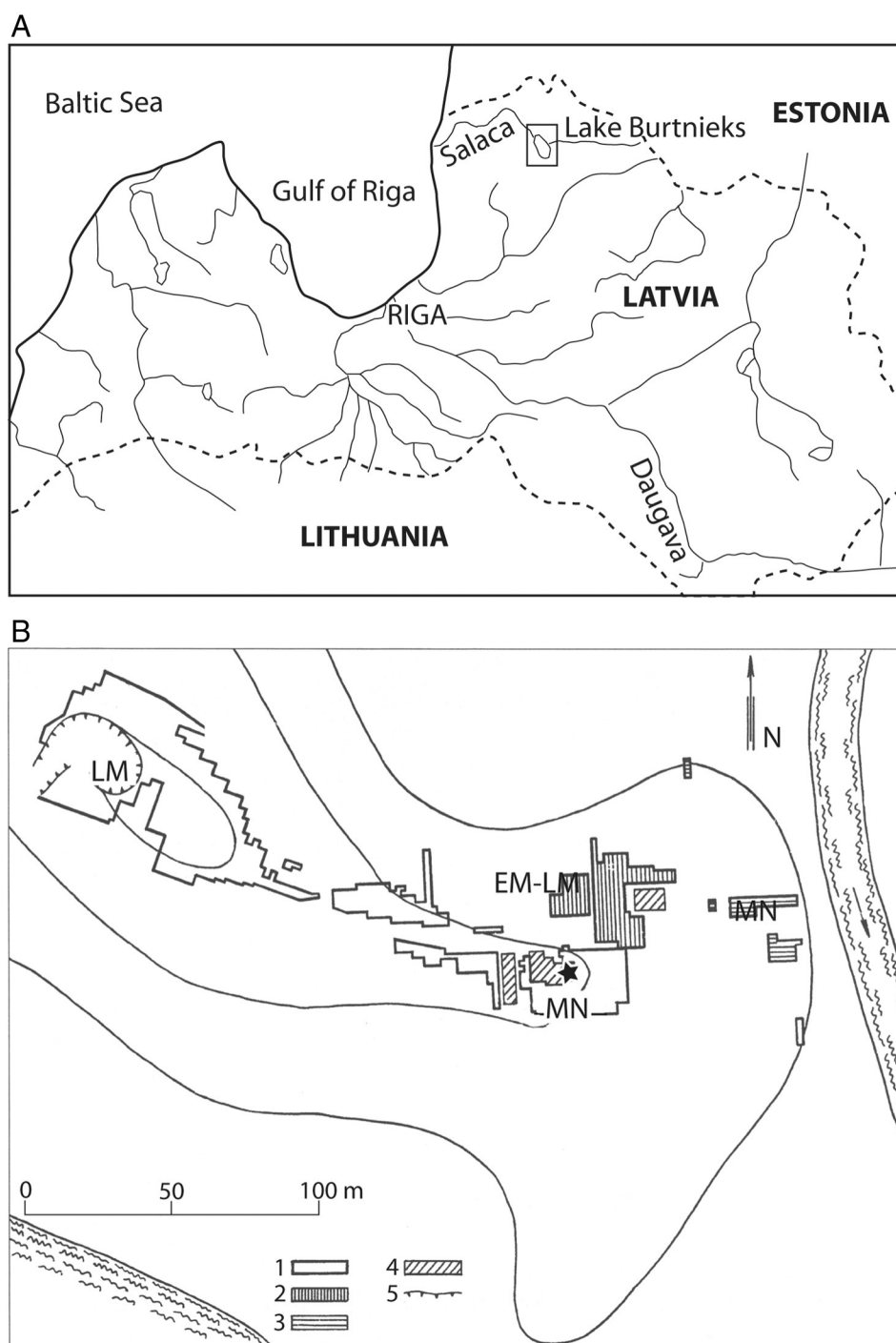


Fig. 1. a. Geographical location of Lake Burtnieks in Northern Latvia. b. Plan of the excavation by Zagorskis. 1) first group of burials; 2) transitional group of burials; 3) second group of burials (Middle Neolithic); 4) Zvejnieki II settlement site (Middle Neolithic); 5) Zvejnieki I settlement site (Late Mesolithic). The star marks the area of the new excavation in the Middle Neolithic area of the cemetery. After Zagorska, 2006.

time-consuming, it also opens up a whole new range of possibilities for the analysis. The goal is a detailed reconstruction of the mortuary practices, and especially the handling of the body (including how it was placed in the grave, if it was wrapped or placed in a coffin, if it was manipulated during or after decomposition). The potential for an archaeothanatological protocol at Zvejnieki had already been established by a study of the old documents focusing on detecting evidence for wrapping of the body (Nilsson Stutz, 2006). While the

documentation from the previous excavations in many ways is remarkable, it became equally clear that the potential for new information with more recent excavation and documentation methods would benefit the knowledge about this site. For the excavation seasons 2006–2009 an archaeothanatological protocol was applied to the excavation and analysis in order to maximize the information available about these unique burials. The new excavations revealed 26 burials. The majority of these were excavated with an archaeothanatological approach (except burials

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