

# ‘Symbolically Overloaded’ Burials: Early Fourth-Millennium BC Hunter-Fisher-Gatherer Mortuary Practices from North-Eastern Europe

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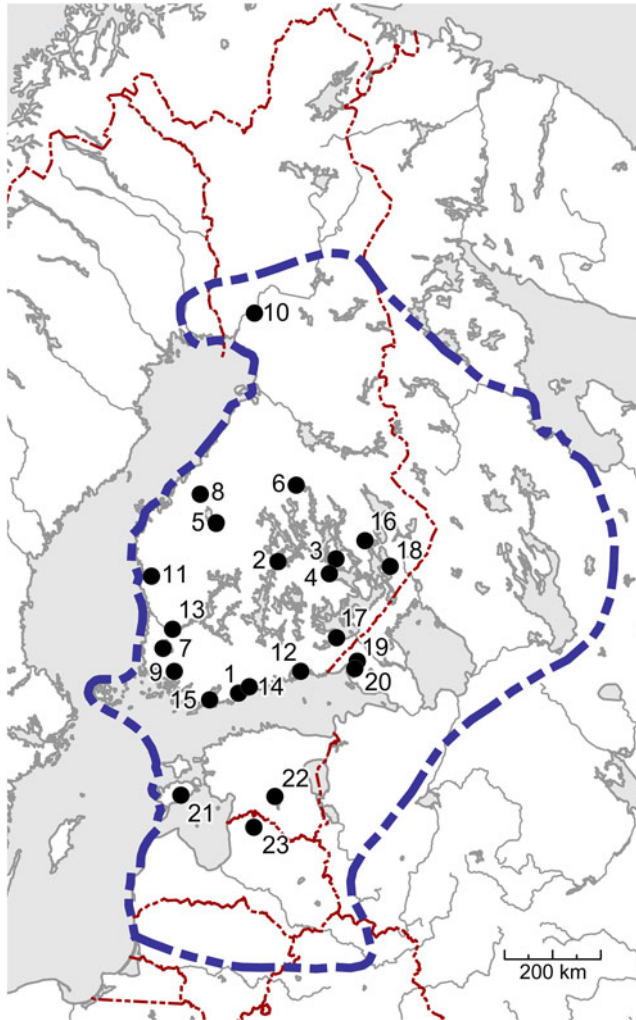
*At the beginning of the fourth millennium BC, the Typical Comb Ware culture (TCW) emerged in north-eastern Europe. One of its characteristics is a wealth of ‘amber’ or ‘ochre’ graves and mortuary practices. This article concerns the graves’ key elements, their distribution and frequency, and their relationship to the TCW phenomenon. The analysis of seventy-seven graves from twenty-three sites suggests that TCW graves are a materialization of a complex set of practices in which visual aspects (colours, contrasts, and combinations of materials) and performance play significant roles. Given the small number and distribution of graves, these practices were reserved for particular people and/or occasions, and the tradition only lasted for a few centuries. Interpreted from the perspective of identity production and sociocultural networks, these graves and associated practices are defined as ‘symbolically overloaded’, with buried bodies and activities intended to be seen.*

**Keywords:** hunter–fisher–gatherers, mortuary practices, Typical Comb Ware culture, north-eastern Europe, visibility, performance

## INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the fourth millennium BC a new cultural phenomenon emerged in north-eastern Europe and the eastern Baltic area. The Typical Comb Ware culture (TCW hereafter) is characterized by a conspicuous material culture, often symbolized by comb-and-pit ornamented ceramics. The TCW is the westernmost part

of a wider Comb Ware Complex that stretched from the Baltic Sea to the Urals in the Middle Holocene (see e.g. Europaeus-Äyräpää, 1930; Jaanits, 1959; Zagorskis, 1967; Oshibkina, 1996). The distribution of the TCW extended from northern Finland and north-western Russia to Lithuania and northern Belarus (Figure 1), and dates approximately to the first half of the fourth millennium BC



**Figure 1.** Distribution of Typical Comb Ware (after Nordqvist, 2018) and location of sites analysed in this article: 1: Bosmalm; 2: Hartikka; 3: Holopainen; 4: Kanava; 5: Kangas; 6: Kariabo; 7: Kolmhaara; 8: Kotikangas; 9: Kukkarkoski 1; 10: Laajamaa 1; 11: Lappfjärd-Björnåsen; 12: Nikeli; 13: Pispä; 14: Stenkulla; 15: Säterigatan; 16: Sätös; 17: Vaateranta; 18: Vihi 1; 19: Häyrynmäki; 20: Sommee; 21: Kõljala; 22: Valma; 23: Zvejnieki.

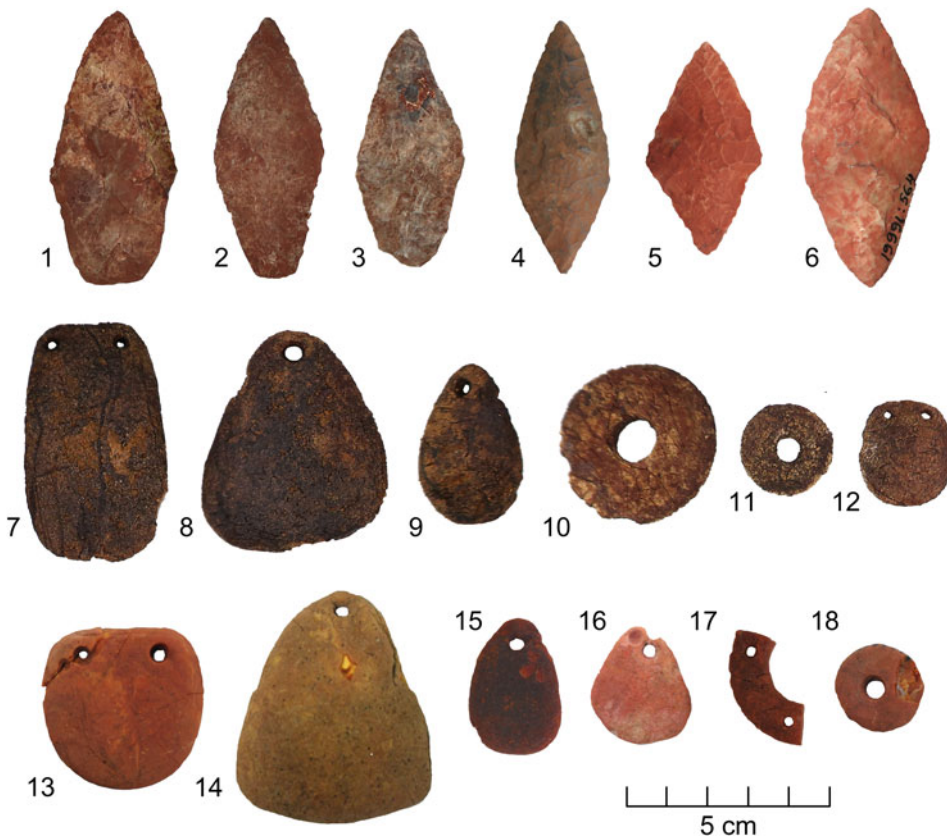
(Nordqvist, 2018; Pesonen, 2021). Because of many new elements appearing in the archaeological record, the spread of the TCW has been associated with population movements (e.g. Zagorskis, 1967; Meinander, 1984), a view recently supported by the first aDNA studies in the Baltic States (Jones et al., 2017; Saag et al., 2017; Mathieson et al., 2018; Mitnik et al., 2018). In addition to distinctive

pottery and other rich material culture, the TCW saw new settlement patterns in some areas and engagement in long-distance exchange networks (e.g. Mökkönen, 2011; Nordqvist, 2024). Despite versatile techno-economic and sociocultural diversification, livelihoods continued to be based on hunting, fishing, and gathering.

The TCW is known for its rich ‘amber’ or ‘ochre’ graves (Zagorska, 2001, 2006;

Ahola, 2019), mostly located in Finland. Many such graves were also found in the Zvejnieki cemetery in northern Latvia while only a few burials are known in Estonia and north-western Russia. The descriptors ‘amber’ and ‘ochre’ echo the two key elements customarily associated with TCW graves: the presence of amber ornaments regularly accompanied by other characteristic artefacts (Figure 2) and the extensive use of ochre. National research traditions, however, tend to view

material from different perspectives. The Finnish tradition, perhaps because of the absence of skeletal material due to poor organic preservation (see Ahola et al., 2016), places an emphasis on ochre (Ahola, 2019: 15), while Latvian research does not give it so much prominence. The latter tradition highlights other qualities of visually impressive multiple burials, occasionally accompanied by additional deposits (Macāne & Zagorska, 2017). These characteristics have received minimal attention



**Figure 2.** Flint bifaces (1–6) and amber ornaments (7–18) are the most common grave goods in TCW graves. Bifaces, 1–3: Zvejnieki (VI93:387, VI93:388, VI93:386); 4: Kolmhaara (KM 14717:14); 5: Kangas (KM 29906:2015); 6: Kukkarkoski 1 (KM 19991:564). Amber, 7–12: Zvejnieki (VI93:556, VI93:577, VI93:589, VI93:748, VI93:761, VI93:752); 13 and 16: Kangas (KM 29906:2052, KM 29906:2009); 14: Kukkarkoski 1 (KM 19272:392); 15 and 17: Kanava (KM 33288:18, KM 33288:5); 18 Lappfjärd-Björnåsen (KM 26222:1). By permission of the Department of Archaeology, National History Museum of Latvia (VI) and the National Museum of Finland/Finnish Heritage Agency (KM).

in Finland despite being present in burial features (Ahola, 2019: 44–45). Indeed, the TCW material culture of death has never been studied in all its complexity although there are many publications dealing separately with Finnish and Latvian materials (Edgren, 1959, 1966; Luho, 1961; Torvinen, 1979; Zagorskis, 1987, 2004; Miettinen, 1992a and b; Halinen, 1997; Zagorska, 2001; Katiskoski, 2004; Larsson & Zagorska, 2006; Nilsson Stutz et al., 2013; Ahola, 2015). We lack an adequate material-based analysis and a synthetic review that would probe potential similarities and dissimilarities in TCW mortuary practices and explore the possible reasons for their emergence and spread beyond the traditionally employed notions of status and prestige.

Our aim in this study is to address these issues by collating data from all potential TCW graves from north-eastern Europe and to focus on these ‘amber-and-ochre’ graves. We address the following questions. What are the key elements of the TCW graves and mortuary practices? What is the geographical and temporal distribution and frequency of these graves and practices? How is this prominent set of burial practices and the materials used linked to wider trends noted in early fourth-millennium BC north-eastern Europe and what does this say about the ways people perceived and communicated with the world? Our fourth and final goal is to make the TCW funerary material culture, previously published in several languages in various regional media, better known to scholars outside north-eastern Europe.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research material consists of TCW graves (i.e. interments with one or more individuals) and additional deposits known from north-eastern Europe, that is, Finland, north-western Russia, Estonia,

and Latvia (no TCW graves are known in Lithuania or Belarus). The data were collected from publications and unpublished excavation reports. If necessary, the original finds were investigated in person at the National History Museum of Latvia (Riga) and the Nautelankoski Museum (Lieto, Finland). Previous analyses of the collections of the National Museum of Finland (Helsinki) were also used. The data are available in the accompanying online [Supplementary Material](#).

The main criterion for a ‘TCW grave’ is a particular archaeological material culture and burial practice. Radiocarbon determinations serve only as secondary evidence. This is because there are currently few  $^{14}\text{C}$  dates from TCW graves and direct dating of human bone is affected by dietary reservoir effects with significant uncertainties (see Meadows et al., 2016, 2018 and below). Accordingly, the material culture takes precedence over radiocarbon determinations in conflicting situations. Furthermore, since more than eighty per cent of the available material is unsuitable not only for  $^{14}\text{C}$  dating but also for other currently available laboratory methods, including aDNA analysis, owing to poor preservation, archaeological analysis of the material culture and context is the only way to gain insights into these burials and the people behind them.

The TCW funerary material culture contains certain features and sets of objects that delimit a recognizable pool of TCW graves (but see discussion below). The most common element is amber: pendants, beads, rings, discs, and buttons (Figure 2, nos. 7–18; Edgren, 1966; Torvinen, 1979; Zagorskis, 1987; Zagorska, 2001). Amber buttons with V-shaped perforations are, however, related to contexts other than the TCW (see Loze, 2004; Rimantienė, 2005) and thus all graves with such items are excluded from the present material. Other diagnostic TCW artefacts include large

flint bifaces (points) (Figure 2, nos. 1–6), slate ring ornaments and their fragments, and occasional TCW pottery vessels and sherds.

Since organic materials are unevenly preserved, no antler or bone tools can be considered typical of TCW graves. The same applies to body postures and placement: even if all graves bar one (Vaateranta grave D) can be interpreted as inhumations, most remains are decayed. The TCW graves are often oval or rectangular pits located in or near a TCW settlement and may or may not contain ochre or cultural layers from the settlement site. Nevertheless, since such soils are also present in graves from other periods (Zagorskis, 1987: 89; Ahola, 2019: 43–46), they cannot be used as typo-chronological markers without additional evidence.

Burials (individuals) lacking typical material culture were considered as TCW graves only if they were closely associated with another TCW grave. These individuals were found in the same pits, above, below, or next to clearly defined TCW graves (but are not intrusive to them) and can be viewed as broadly contemporaneous burials (for example, Zvejnieki, individuals 258–61 in a multiple burial). These graves are indicated with a question mark in the Supplementary Material. On the other hand, we did not include individual inhumation-sized ochre features without bones or clear grave goods from several Finnish burial sites (Hartikka, Kangas, Kukarkoski 1, Pispä, and Vaateranta). Although these features are located among clearly defined TCW graves, they cannot be securely linked with this burial tradition. In addition, graves with overlapping radiocarbon dates but no direct physical association or typical TCW material culture are excluded at Zvejnieki (e.g. graves 226, 282–84). These graves, similar to the inhumation-sized ochre features, may represent temporally close or even overlapping, but different,

mortuary practices (cf. Zagorska, 2006: 102–03; Tõrv, 2018) or reflect problems of absolute dating.

In addition to human interments, data on additional deposits are presented in the Supplementary Material. Often referred to as ‘votive deposits’ or ‘offerings’, we prefer the more neutral term ‘additional deposits’, as the function or functions of these depositional acts remain unknown. At Zvejnieki, concentrations of amber, flint, and bone artefacts embedded in intensive ochre or other cultural soil near or within the TCW graves were classified as additional deposits (after Zagorska, 2001). In the Finnish material, small pits (too small even for the burial of an infant) filled with ochre and/or artefacts and located adjacent to a TCW grave were accepted as additional deposits. Unlike in earlier research (Ahola, 2017, 2019), a distinction was made between artefacts associated with the buried body (i.e. at burial level) and those deposited above or below it: the latter two are categorized as additional deposits.

## TCW GRAVES, ADDITIONAL DEPOSITS, AND THEIR MATERIALS

### Burying the dead

Our research included seventy-seven TCW graves from twenty-three sites (Figure 1). Geographically, most of these sites (sixty-one graves, twenty sites) are located north of the Gulf of Finland, while the southernmost site is situated in northern Latvia. The connection between the TCW graves and settlement sites is strong and only one burial (Kõljala) is not associated with known settlement remains. Most of the sites contain a single grave or a few graves, but larger concentrations of graves are also known. We do not know whether inhumation took place during the active use of settlement sites or after their

abandonment. Be this as it may, the proximity and manipulation of material remains from human (settlement) activity—whether from the living community or past generations—seem to play a significant role in TCW mortuary practices (Nilsson Stutz et al., 2013; Larsson, 2017; Ahola, 2019).

The graves contain adults and subadults, male and female, interred in both single and multiple burials (see Supplementary Material). No human bones were preserved in most graves; the data on the age-at-death are patchy and the sex of only thirty individuals has been determined, including five cases of genetic sexing (for methods and analyses, see Zagorskis, 1987, 2004; Ahola et al., 2016; Tõrv, 2018). At the better-preserved sites in Estonia and Latvia, nearly two-thirds of the graves (ten out of sixteen) are double or collective burials. In Finland and Russia, multiple burials are fewer (thirteen out of sixty-one graves). However, since the number of individuals in a burial is determined here on the basis of clear burial features (soil colouration), this figure should be treated with caution. Indeed, in only three cases (Kanava grave 2003, Vaateranta graves 14 and D) do actual human remains from more than one individual attest to the presence of multiple burials.

Where data are available, the bodies have mainly been interred in an extended supine position ( $n = 27$ ); other burial positions (e.g. extended on the side, prone, or human remains in non-anatomical order) are less common. Curiously, these ‘odd’ positions only occur in multiple burials; as for the only cremation grave in our data (Vaateranta grave D), it also contains the remains of several individuals (see Supplementary Material). Overall, given the limited data, it is not possible to distinguish age- or sex-specific patterns in TCW burials.

## The material culture of death

Despite the relatively large number of graves studied here, much of the data are associated with just a few sites. Only the Zvejnieki and Vaateranta sites include more than ten graves, while the Pispa, Kukkarkoski 1, Hartikka, Kolmhaara, and Sätös sites each have four or more graves. The largest quantity of grave goods is also associated with these sites. Zvejnieki is exceptional, with more than 650 finds, followed by Vaateranta (over 280), Kukkarkoski 1 (over 180), and Kolmhaara (over 110), while all other sites have fewer than fifty finds. The number of finds given excludes TCW pottery sherds, since their fragmentary nature makes their quantification difficult. Similarly, the number of grave goods per grave varies. In approximately fifty cases it is between one and ten, while the maximum values (over 100) are explained either by the presence of flint and quartz debitage (Vaateranta graves 2 and D) and/or amber and other ornaments (Zvejnieki graves 220–25 and 316–17, the latter with over 360 items). One grave (Zvejnieki 252) contained no grave goods but an additional deposit at burial level (see below). Often, the material is too small for reliable statistical analysis; amber and flint, well preserved everywhere, are the dominant raw materials.

Flint is the most common lithic material (present in fifty-six of the seventy-seven graves and six additional deposits) and oval and rhomboid bifaces (also called arrowheads or spearheads or points) are the most numerous flint artefacts (in twenty-nine graves and five additional deposits). Other formal tools are mostly scrapers, but knives and retouched pieces are also present. In some graves, flakes or blades and their fragments are numerous. In a few cases (Kolmhaara grave 1, Vaateranta grave 2, Pispa grave XIV, and

Zvejnieki grave 207), flint flakes were clearly concentrated at the burial level (Figure 3). Furthermore, the additional deposits in graves 207 and 211 at Zvejnieki contained concentrations of flint flakes, mostly knapped from one nodule. In other words, flint flakes were deliberately placed in the grave and do not represent settlement debris brought in when the burial pit was being backfilled. The connection between these flint items and the burial event is reinforced by their proximity to the deceased and the ochre staining of these samples.

The use of quartz is more modest (attested in fifteen graves) and, apart from a few formal artefacts and cores, consists of debitage. However, quartz is not necessarily merely part of a fill derived from settlement material; the rock crystal scraper, flake, and two unmodified crystals deposited in graves 3, 9, and 12 at Vaateranta and rock crystal flakes in graves 1 and 1a at Kukarkoski emphasize the intention and meaning associated with these shiny and translucent objects.

Other stone artefacts are less numerous. Whetstones constitute the largest group of

tools, present in nine graves and one additional deposit (Figure 4). These items have been largely overlooked in previous studies but, unlike many other forager funerary assemblages, whetstones appear to be part of the TCW ‘ritual kit’. They are often made of sandstone, have a bar-like or roundish shape and are intensely ochre-coloured. Like flint bifaces, whetstones are associated with the head or upper torso in a grave, but occasionally also with the pelvis and legs (Zagorskis, 1987: 73; Katiskoski, 2004: 106).

The next group of stone tools consists of axes/adzes (found in four graves), followed by other tools and flakes (in seven graves). Nevertheless, the largest group of ground stone items consists of ornaments, rings, and pendants (recovered from fifteen graves). Similar ornaments are made of other raw materials, especially amber (altogether in forty-one graves). Amber pendants of various shapes and sizes are numerous. Large, flat and elongated or oval pendants with one, two, or occasionally multiple perforations are the most common, but smaller oval- or drop-shaped pendants as well as round and tubular



**Figure 3.** Ochre-coloured flint flakes found in a concentration in grave 1 at Kolmhaara (KM 14717:24). By permission of the National Museum of Finland/Finnish Heritage Agency (KM).



**Figure 4.** Whetstones from TCW burials and deposits at Zvejnieki (1, 3–5: grave 207, deposit VI93:452; grave 213 VI93:533–534; grave 221 VI93:604; grave 264 VI93:725) and Kukkaroski 1 (2: grave 1a KM 19727:141). By permission of the Department of Archaeology, National History Museum of Latvia (VI) and the National Museum of Finland/ Finnish Heritage Agency (KM).

beads and buttons, rings, and discs are regularly found (see e.g. Edgren, 1966; Torvinen, 1979; Miettinen, 1992a and b; Zagorska, 2001 for overviews). They were probably used as pendants and as adornments for dress, garments, and body wrappings and can be found in various arrangements and associated with all parts of the body from head to toe. In some fifteen cases (including burials at Hartikka, Kolmhaara, Pispa, Vaateranta, and Zvejnieki), amber rings or discs were discovered in the eye sockets of the deceased while the head or face was covered with red or blue clay, suggesting the presence of a death mask (Zagorskis, 1987: 93; Zagorska, 2001: 112; Katiskoski, 2004; Edgren, 2006; Ahola, 2017). In at least one case in Finland (Kolmhaara), amber and clay were also found elsewhere in the grave, possibly representing a ‘clay container’ in which amber ornaments had been pressed into soft ochre-mixed clay (Figure 5). The multiple ways of positioning amber—decorating the body or containers individually or as part of composite items—emphasize the importance, but

perhaps also the diverse meanings, of this material.

Bone and antler artefacts were found only in one grave in Finland (preservation bias) but were present in seventy-five per cent of the graves and in three additional deposits in the Baltic States; their number is therefore underrepresented considering the total amount of finds. Most bone and antler artefacts come from Zvejnieki and consist of tools (found in eight graves) such as awls, harpoons, fishhooks, knives, and adzes that are relatively common in boreal hunter-gatherer burials, as are ornaments such as tubular beads and figurines (recovered from four graves) (Figure 6). Some osseous artefacts, however, are unique to the TCW graves (at Zvejnieki) including bone rings and pendants, antler maces, and metapodial elk bones with holes.

In contrast to earlier hunter-gatherer graves (see Macãne, 2022), animal teeth do not play an important role in the TCW funerary material culture. Only twenty teeth from seven graves are included in the material, in contrast to the thousands





**Figure 5.** Unburnt clay stained with ochre from the Kolmhaara grave I viewed from two sides. Note the impressions on both sides. These impressions fit an amber ring fragment (KM 14717:7) and a fragmented amber disc (KM 14717:4) from the same grave. As small fragments of amber were found within the clay outside the impressions, it is likely that all other amber ornaments (KM 14717:5, 6, 8) discovered next to the clay were also pressed into it. By permission of the National Museum of Finland/Finnish Heritage Agency (KM).

of pendants made from teeth and dated to other periods. Acknowledging the constraints of the limited material, approximately half of the teeth belong to carnivores, which also constitutes a difference from previous herbivore-dominated sets (Macāne, 2022: 288). Furthermore, the non-carnivore teeth mostly belong to beaver, which, with one exception, appear exclusively in TCW contexts at Zvejnieki

(in four burials and three additional deposits; Macāne, 2022: 230, fig. 7.5).

Figurines are occasionally present and are made of different raw materials: flint at Kukarkoski, amber at Kukarkoski and Valma, bone at Valma and Zvejnieki, and clay at Sätös and Zvejnieki. They often depict animals but also people and are paralleled among TCW material recovered in non-grave contexts. Copper rings from Zvejnieki 277 are the oldest metal finds in Latvia, and therefore unique, but reflect the general diversification and exploration of the material world during the fourth millennium BC (see Herva et al., 2014, 2017; Mökkönen et al., 2017a). The small tubular beads made of fossilized sea lilies (crinoids) found in Zvejnieki 316–17 (Macāne, 2020) represent another similarly unique raw material category in the TCW burial context.

Complete or partial TCW vessels are found in six graves at Bosmalm, Kukarkoski 1, Laajamaa 1, Sätös, Vaateranta, and Zvejnieki. In addition, pottery sherds were recorded at five further sites. As noted previously (Edgren, 1982; Ahola, 2017: 207–08), the pottery recovered from graves is often anomalous (miniature or unfinished vessels), partial (only the bottom part or rim sherds of one or more vessels are present), or treated in a special manner (e.g. placed upside down). Pottery sherds may have been used to line the walls of the burial pit but may only be represented by individual pieces at burial level.

### Additional deposits

We recorded a total of thirteen additional deposits at six sites (see Supplementary Material). Of the deposits retained for examination, two were located above the burial level (Hartikka grave 5 and Bosmalm grave 1) while in three cases one



**Figure 6.** Bone and antler artefacts preserved at Zvejnieki. 1–2: awls made from elk metacarpals (from grave 317 (2007/448) and grave 264 (VI93:726) respectively) are found quite regularly in hunter–fisher–gatherer burials; 3–6: beaver teeth (3: grave 201 (VI93:400); 4: grave 211 (VI93:471); 5: grave 252, deposit (VI93:703); 6: grave 207, deposit (VI93:441)) are found virtually only in TCW graves; 7: the bone pendants (from grave 317 (2009/1028, 1035, 1018, 1021, 1030, 1017, 1008, 1020)) also appear unique and were found together with beads of fossilized sea lilies (not illustrated). By permission of the Department of Archaeology, National History Museum of Latvia (VI).

or more small pits were dug below the grave (Bosmalm grave 1, Vaateranta graves 3 and 10). In addition, seven deposits were made at the burial level or in additional pits next to the graves (Zvejnieki graves 207, 211 and 252; Kolmhaara grave 1; Holopainen grave 1). Additional deposits are not common in hunter–fisher–gatherer graves of earlier periods and have their closest parallels in the deposits (or ‘hoards’) associated with the Volosovo mortuary culture of the mid to late fourth millennium BC in central Russia (see

Kostyleva & Utkin, 2010; Macāne et al., 2019).

A common feature of these deposits is the abundant use of ochre. The finds made in them partially follow the trends exhibited by grave goods but also shows differences (see Supplementary Material). Flint bifaces and debitage are also dominant in the additional deposits. In one case, the deposit included a whetstone. On the other hand, the almost complete absence of amber (only five items in two deposits) clearly differentiates additional deposits

from burial assemblages and suggests that amber was more strongly associated with living or dead bodies. Regional deviations may partly reflect local traditions but also preservation conditions: bone and antler objects are found in all deposits in Latvia, while the number of pottery sherds and whole vessels is high in Finland.

### Dating

Research on the absolute chronology of the TCW varies greatly across its distribution area, but in general the emergence of the TCW dates to between 3900 and 3800 BC. Determining the end date is more difficult as the transition between the TCW and subsequent phases is not clear in many areas; nevertheless, a boundary can be drawn at approximately 3500 BC (see Nordqvist, 2018; Pesonen, 2021 for Finland; Tarasov et al., 2017 for north-western Russia; Kriiska, 2020 for Estonia; Piličiauskas et al., 2019 for Lithuania).

Eighteen TCW graves included in this study were dated (see Supplementary Material). Most of the dates were obtained directly from the bones of the inhumed but, aside from Zvejnieki grave 201 and Vaateranta grave D, all the dates are either older or only overlap with the beginning of the TCW period. In other words, the dates obtained on human bones are generally too old because of the consumption of  $^{14}\text{C}$ -depleted aquatic resources. Using stable dietary isotopes of carbon and nitrogen, modelled corrections have been obtained for some graves (at Zvejnieki the estimated freshwater reservoir effect applied for Lake Burtnieks is  $750 \pm 50$  radiocarbon years and the resulting uncertainties in human freshwater reservoir effect  $> \pm 100$  radiocarbon years; Meadows et al., 2016, 2018; for Kõljala, see also Tõrv, 2018). Although the corrected dates

may be more accurate, they result in very broad age estimates that occasionally still appear old compared to the typo-chronological age.

Paired dates of terrestrial, non-human bones from two graves at Zvejnieki (burial 208, a cervid tooth, and burial 317, an awl of elk bone) indicate that the probable age of these interments is between 3800 and 3500 cal BC. Looking at the context dates of wood, bark, and birch bark tar lumps from the Finnish burials, the median values are similar—between 3800 and 3600 cal BC (excluding clearly deviant dates; see Supplementary Material). Thus, it appears that the TCW graves date to a short period of just a few centuries after 3800 BC, consistent with the dating of the TCW itself. The lack of reliable dates makes it impossible, however, to establish an internal chronology of the graves or their individual features, or to identify other possibly contemporary or parallel (TCW) burial traditions.

## DISCUSSION

### ‘Symbolically overloaded’ burials

Our analysis indicates that TCW graves are a materialization of a complex set of practices in which visibility (colours, contrasts, and combinations), performance, manifestation of communication, and social identity play a key role. Indeed, although many artefact types found in the TCW graves, i.e. personal ornaments and ordinary tools, also follow traditions present in earlier forager graves in the region (Zagorskis, 1987, 2004; Zagorska, 2006; Tõrv, 2018; Ahola, 2019; Macāne, 2022), there is a clear change in raw materials, when the previously dominant osseous material is largely replaced by colourful and non-local materials and artefacts. The latter are made of flint (Carboniferous and Cretaceous, originating

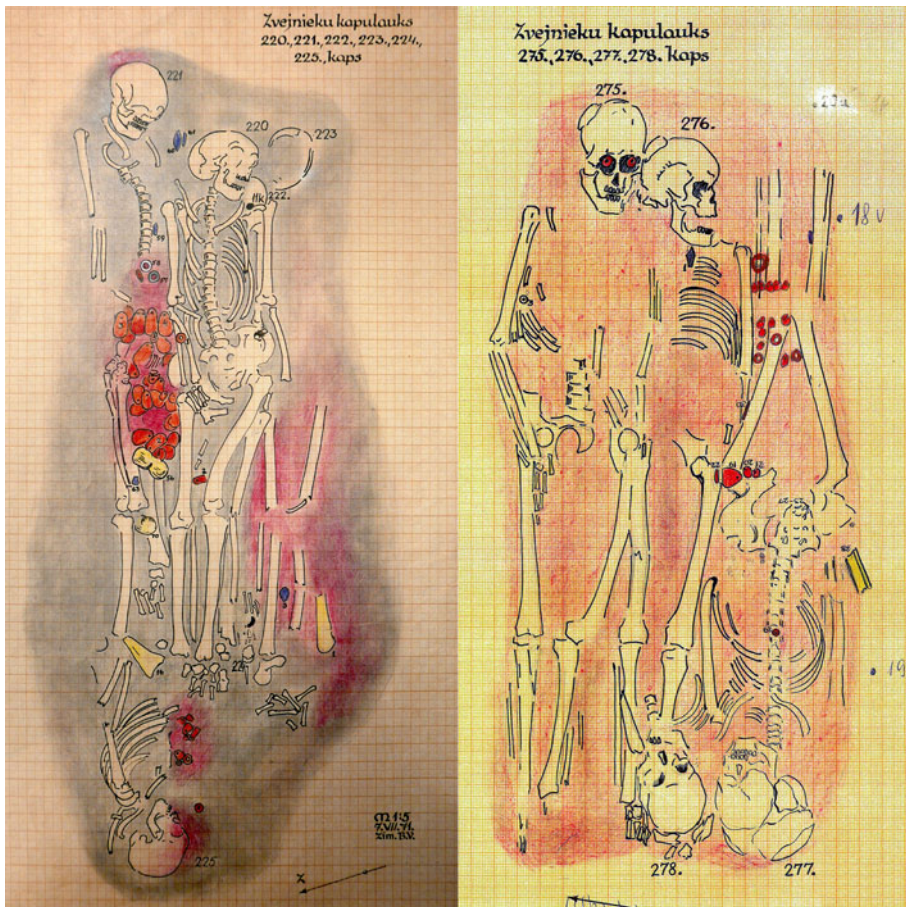
in central Russia or southern Lithuania and Belarus, respectively) and amber (from coastal Latvia and Lithuania), but examples also include slate and copper ornaments and tools (from Finland, north-western Russia) or Crinoid beads (from the Estonian Islands?). These materials testify to the wide-ranging transport and exchange of goods between different areas. Such evidence of symbolically charged communication of social identity and material manifestation of group membership and belonging (networks) characterize the TCW period in other contexts too (see Herva et al., 2014, 2017; Mökkönen et al., 2017a; Ahola et al., 2022).

Importantly, many of these materials are sensorially appealing. In addition to the intensely red-coloured ochre commonly used in hunter-fisher-gatherer interments, the TCW communities intentionally placed artefacts made of colourful, translucent, or light-reflective materials in the graves and decorated the pit itself with black soil or pottery sherds. Simultaneously, associated activities such as making additional deposits, carefully positioning the dead bodies in various entangled and layered arrangements, or sometimes covering the facial region with colourful clay and placing amber rings or buttons over the eyes and on and around the head, suggest that these practices were clearly meant to be seen. Changes are also visible in the human-animal relationships displayed in the graves. The decreasing importance of animal teeth, especially those of herbivores, and the introduction of beavers not only in the form of teeth but also as figurines (at Valma) reflect definite changes in the ritual sphere, previously dominated by elks and other ungulates (see Lahelma, 2008 and Mantere, 2023 for rock art and portable art). Although we cannot fully understand the meaning of these acts, the novel practices conveyed new cosmological

considerations emerging in the region, new ideologies in which visibility and performance played a greater role than before.

Overall, we find it appropriate to define the TCW graves as 'symbolically overloaded'. We chose this expression to highlight the TCW's excessive use of material signals (Figure 7). At the same time, defining TCW graves as 'symbolically overloaded' may create a circular argument. Is this concept merely an artefact of our classification criteria and the typo-chronological dating used, or can there be TCW graves without such a distinctive material culture? The number of 'symbolically overloaded' TCW graves is admittedly small compared with the duration and geographical scale of the phenomenon, and there must have been other ways of burying or handling human remains during this period. Some of these practices may be completely invisible archaeologically, and assigning a cultural affiliation to burials devoid of human remains, material culture, or radiocarbon determinations is impossible. While the question is valid, we nevertheless maintain that the 'symbolically overloaded burials' represent a clear set of practices: burials that were made only occasionally, perhaps just for certain people or for a particular reason.

In this respect, Vaateranta grave D, a cremation of at least three people, is a significant departure from the other graves and shows that human cadavers could be treated in different ways in the 'symbolically overloaded' TCW graves. More importantly, this grave blurs the boundary between a 'burial' and a 'deposit' as its properties are closer to those of the latter. Perhaps we should not make such a clear division between these categories and instead talk about 'intentional depositional acts' in which different kinds of materials (including human remains) are buried in certain locations according to specific rules (see Baires & Baltus, 2017).



**Figure 7.** Two examples of ‘symbolically overloaded’ graves from Zvejnieki. Graves 220–25 and 275–78 contain several individuals and illustrate many other typical features of the TCW burial ritual: heavy use of ochre, clay-plastered skulls, and rich grave goods with various non-local items. Drawing by permission of B. Vaska/the Institute of Latvian History, University of Latvia.

### Mobility and performance

When the symbolism of graves is unpacked, it is worth noting that in many areas the arrival of the TCW is connected with population movements. The first aDNA results reported from the Baltic States suggest that individuals associated with the Comb Ware culture, including the five Zvejnieki individuals (numbers 207, 221, 224, 261, and 278) discussed in this article, have a stronger association with Eastern Hunter-Gatherer genetic

ancestry compared with previous, more Western Hunter-Gatherer-like populations (Jones et al., 2017; Mathieson et al., 2018; see also Saag et al., 2017; Mitnik et al., 2018). Therefore, the emergence of TCW in the Baltic States is linked with genetic input, presumed to have originated in the (north-)east. While there is no osteological material further north, sharp changes in material culture are attributed to migration in southern Finland (Mökkönen et al., 2017b; Nordqvist, 2018: 101–02). Be that as it may, the scale

and mechanisms of this population flow are currently unknown in all areas.

Most TCW graves are located north of the Gulf of Finland in an area where the TCW material culture is traditionally described as very strong (e.g. Meinander, 1984). This may suggest that the burials were intended primarily to establish and manipulate social relationships within particular TCW communities or with the surrounding other-than-human world rather than with human ‘outsiders’. On the other hand, Zvejnieki, for example, had been in use for thousands of years by the early fourth millennium BC; thus, it is plausible that an incoming population buried their dead (and other items) in this particular location in order to live in or use the resources of the region (see Ahola, 2020). At the same time, it may be significant that the ‘symbolically overloaded burials’ cluster tightly in an area of only 15 × 20 m in the eastern part of the almost 300 m-long cemetery, thus underlining the interconnectedness of these ritual depositions.

Although the TCW communities clearly emphasized their interconnectedness, their performative depositional acts may not have been strictly exclusive but also open to other communities or individuals. The introduction of novel ritual practices and connected beliefs can also take place as broadly participatory actions, which can be promoted, for example, as a way for participants to gain access to new supernatural powers (Baltus & Wilson, 2019). From this perspective, the focus would not be on direct territorial claims (and therefore the practices need not take place, for example, in border areas) but rather on expressing the fact that power is in the hands of individuals who have access to this esoteric knowledge, i.e. in the hands of the people conducting these rituals. In this type of power acquisition, the visibility and visibility of the actions

play crucial roles and excessive symbolism provides a means to an end.

## CONCLUSIONS

Our compilation of and analysis of TCW graves from north-eastern Europe provide several new insights into this phenomenon. To the long-known features of TCW burial assemblages—amber ornaments and flint bifaces—we can now add whetstones, bone awls, beaver incisors, and flint flake concentrations. In addition, the tradition of making additional deposits near, below, or above the graves has proven to be a relatively common phenomenon. The intentional use of appealing and colourful (non-local) materials and their combinations testifies that visibility and symbolism were at the heart of these performative depositional acts. This clearly distinguishes these interments from the preceding hunter–fisher–gatherer graves in the region, which are often characterized by single burials furnished with items made of osseous materials. Acknowledging the possible biases caused by varying preservation conditions, the TCW material culture of death seems quite uniform in the area studied. Some differences, however, probably reflect local traditions, such as the more common use of pottery in burials in Finland.

Even though our definition of a ‘TCW grave’ is exclusive and normative, the manner in which the ‘symbolically overloaded burials’ were performed appears to have been quite strictly defined in material terms. At the same time, such burials are rare and only undertaken for certain people in specific situations and/or at particular places. Thus ‘symbolically overloaded burials’ cannot be viewed as the normative way of disposing of the dead but should be seen as a materialization of excessive symbolism, strong manifestations

of belonging, identity, and relationships, highlighted through performances in which bodies, artefacts, and connected activities were obviously meant to be seen before or during the event. Given that the emergence of the TCW represents population movements, the changing burial practices are considered to relate to the introduction by newcomers of novel ways of perceiving and communicating with (and to) the world and its inhabitants. An evaluation of the radiocarbon dates obtained from these graves shows that this unique phenomenon lasted only a few centuries in north-eastern Europe, from approximately 3800 to 3500 BC.

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#### SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

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## Des sépultures « symboliquement surchargées » : pratiques funéraires des chasseurs-cueilleurs-pêcheurs du début du IV<sup>e</sup> millénaire av. J.-C. dans le nord-est de l'Europe

*La culture de la céramique au peigne typique ('Typical Comb Ware' ou TCW) émergea dans le nord-est de l'Europe au début du IV<sup>e</sup> millénaire av. J.-C. Elle se distingue, entre autres aspects, par de nombreuses pratiques funéraires et sépultures contenant de l'ambre et de l'ocre. Cet article concerne les traits essentiels, la distribution, la fréquence et les rapports que ces pratiques funéraires entretenaient avec le phénomène TCW. L'analyse de soixante-dix-sept sépultures provenant de vingt-trois sites indique que les sépultures TCW représentent une matérialisation d'un ensemble complexe de pratiques dans lesquelles les aspects visuels (couleurs, contrastes et combinaisons de divers matériaux) et performatifs jouaient un rôle important. Le nombre restreint de ces sépultures et leur distribution démontrent qu'elles étaient réservées à certaines personnes et/ou occasions, et que la tradition n'a perduré que pendant quelques siècles. Vu sous l'angle de la création de l'identité et des réseaux socioculturels, les auteurs définissent les sépultures TCW et les pratiques connexes comme « symboliquement surchargées », c'est-à-dire que les dépouilles des défunts et les activités associées étaient destinées à être vues. Translation by Madeleine Hummler*

*Most clés:* chasseurs-cueilleurs-pêcheurs, pratiques funéraires, culture de la céramique au peigne typique (Typical Comb Ware culture), nord-est de l'Europe, visibilité, performance

## **,'Symbolisch überlastete' Gräber: Grabsitten der Jäger-Fischer-Sammler im frühen 4. Jahrtausend v. Chr. in Nordosteuropa**

*Am Anfang des 4. Jahrtausends v. Chr. erschien die typische kammkeramische (Typical Comb Ware, TCW) Kultur in Nordosteuropa. Eine der Charakteristiken dieser Kultur ist eine Vielzahl von ‚Bernstein-‘ und ‚Ocker-Gräber‘ und dazugehörige Grabsitten. Die Hauptelemente dieser Gräber, ihre Verteilung, Häufigkeit und Verhältnis zur typischen kammkeramischen Kultur werden in diesem Artikel behandelt. Die Analyse von siebenundsiebzig Gräber aus dreiundzwanzig Stätten zeigt, dass die TCW-Gräber eine Materialisierung einer komplexen Anzahl von Bräuchen ist, wo die Sichtbarkeit (von Farben, Kontrast und Materialkombinationen) und die Vorstellung eine wichtige Rolle spielt. Angesichts der geringen Zahl und Verbreitung der TCW-Gräber, waren diese Grabsitten wahrscheinlich für bestimmte Personen und/oder Angelegenheiten reserviert; dazu dauerte die Tradition nur wenige Jahrhunderte. Aus der Sicht der Identitätsbildung und Erschaffung von sozio-kulturellen Netzwerken werden diese Gräber und dazugehörenden Sitten als ‚symbolisch überlastet‘ betrachtet, indem die Leichen und die damit verbundenen Aktivitäten sichtbar sein sollten. Translation by Madeleine Hummler*

*Stichworte:* Jäger-Fischer-Sammler, Grabsitten, typische kammkeramische Kultur (Typical Comb Ware culture), Nordosteuropa, Sichtbarkeit, Vorstellung