

BARROW OF THE YAMNAYA CULTURE IN ŽABALJ, DISTRICT OF SOUTH BAČKA, SERBIA

Paweł Jarosz

Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology, Polish Academy of Sciences,
Kraków, Poland

Jovan Koledin

Museum of Vojvodina, Novi Sad, Serbia

Michał Podsiadło

Dolmen S.C., Kraków, Poland

Piotr Włodarczak

Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology, Polish Academy of Sciences,
Kraków, Poland

e-mail: wlodarczak.piotr@gmail.com | Preliminary report

Received: 22. 4. 2021. | UDC: 903.5"636/637"(497.113)

Accepted: 9. 6. 2021. | 903.5:393"636/637"(497.113)
902.2(497.113)"2017/2018"

Abstract: *Polish-Serbian excavations of barrows at Šajkaš and Žabalj yielded the first comprehensive data concerning the burial rites of the Yamnaya culture in Vojvodina. The Mediso-va Humka barrow in Žabalj, researched in 2017–2018, was raised in two phases. Two graves were discovered in the barrow, both dated within 2800–2600 BCE. These were typical Yamnaya culture burials, with good analogies in the eastern European zone. Grave 4 is the first example of burying mixed and incomplete human remains in Vojvodina (among others, long bones were missing), a ritual known from Yamnaya barrows in the north-western Pontic area.*

Keywords: *barrows, Yamnaya culture, Vojvodina, Eneolithic, funeral rite*

The archaeological research of barrows situated near the place where the Tisa flows into the Danube, in the Šajkaška region, southern Bačka, Republic of Serbia, was carried out in 2016–2018 within the framework of the project “The Danubian route of Yamnaya culture” (National Science Centre, Kraków, Poland, no. 2015/17/B/HS3/01327) in cooperation with the Vojvodina Museum in Novi Sad. The goal was to investigate the stratigraphy of barrows from the turn of the Eneolithic and Early Bronze Age and to collect materials allowing for biological characteristics of the Yamnaya population from the as yet sparsely researched region of Vojvodina. As the area in question is the westernmost boundary of the

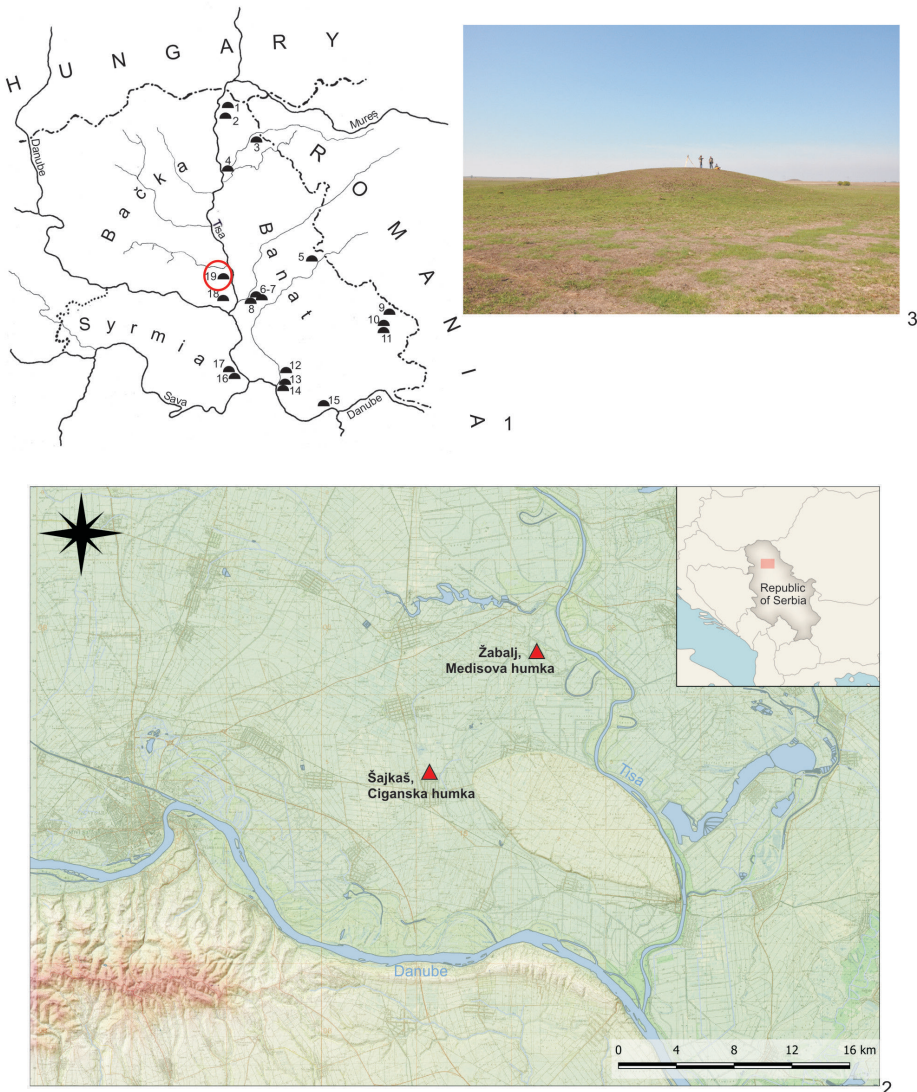


Fig. 1. Location of the Medisova Humka barrow in Žabalj: 1 – position against other investigated barrows in Vojvodina (in the red box), 2 – barrows explored by the Polish-Serbian expedition in the Šajkaška region, 3 – view of the barrow prior to the excavations, with Jurišina Humka (one of the largest barrows in the region) in the foreground. Drawing by R. Skrzyniecki, photo: P. Włodarczak

Сл. 1. Локација Медисове хумке у Жабљу: 1 – положај у односу на друге истражене хумке у Војводини (у црвеном оквиру), 2 – хумке које је истражила пољско-српска екипа у Шајкашкој области, 3 – поглед на хумку пре ископавања, са Јуришином хумком (једна од највећих хумки у овој области) у првом плану. Цртеж: Р. Скршињецки, фотографија: П. Влодарчак

Eurasian steppes, it therefore played a highly important role in the migrations of nomadic populations of eastern European origin, including Yamnaya groups in the 4th/3rd millennium BCE (Heyd 2011). Until recently, the Yamnaya culture in Vojvodina was known from a few barrows excavated in the Banat region (Fig. 1, 1). The subject of the fieldworks presented in this paper were, for the first time, barrows situated in Bačka, which means on the right bank of the Tisa River (Fig. 1, 2). A distinct concentration of barrows was identified in the Šajkaška region. Their locations, shapes, and dimensions suggest their Eneolithic or Early Bronze Age date (Medović 1998).

In 2016, excavations were carried out at the Ciganska Humka barrow in the village of Šajkaš (Bugaj *et al.* 2018; Koledin *et al.* 2020), and in 2017–2018 a barrow known as Medisova Humka was explored in Žabalj in South Bačka District (Fig. 1, 3). The latter was part of a barrow cluster, which also included, among others, Jurišina Humka – a large barrow, with 55 m in diameter and 6 m high, now under strict protection as a nature reserve (Stojšić, Kovačev 2011). Medisova Humka is situated on the Tisa floodplain, 2.5 km west of the present-day riverbed. The area is covered with humic vertisol soils and has been used as pasture for many years. The barrow had approximately 40 m in diameter and was 3.2 m high, with a relatively well-preserved mound. The only traces of damage are those connected with the construction of military trenches in the southern part of the mound and with artillery shelling in the autumn of 1944. At that time, the barrow was included into the system of fortifications created by Hungarian and German troops to prevent the Red Army from crossing the Tisa (Fig. 2:1). The name Medisova Humka only appears on a First Military Survey Map of the Hungarian Kingdom/Habsburg Empire from 1782–1785 (<https://maps.arcanum.com/en/map/firstsurvey-hungary>).

The barrow was built in two stages, each of them connected with a single Yamnaya culture burial (Fig. 2, 2:3). The older barrow was raised over grave 4. It had ca 20 m in diameter and was approximately 2 m high. The mound was built from relatively homogenous dark-brown soil (humus), and its basis was marked by a well-discernible layer of buried humus, some 30–40 cm thick. Next, grave 1 was dug into its north-eastern part, and the barrow was enlarged both in height (over 3 m) and diameter (to approx. 40 m). The overbuilt mound was erected from soil of slightly lighter colour. It contained single fragments of pottery from the turn of the Eneolithic and Early Bronze Age, and two flint artefacts. Numerous shells and splinters from WWII times were recorded as well. In addition, seven round settlement pits and one small fireplace were dug into the mound in the modern period.

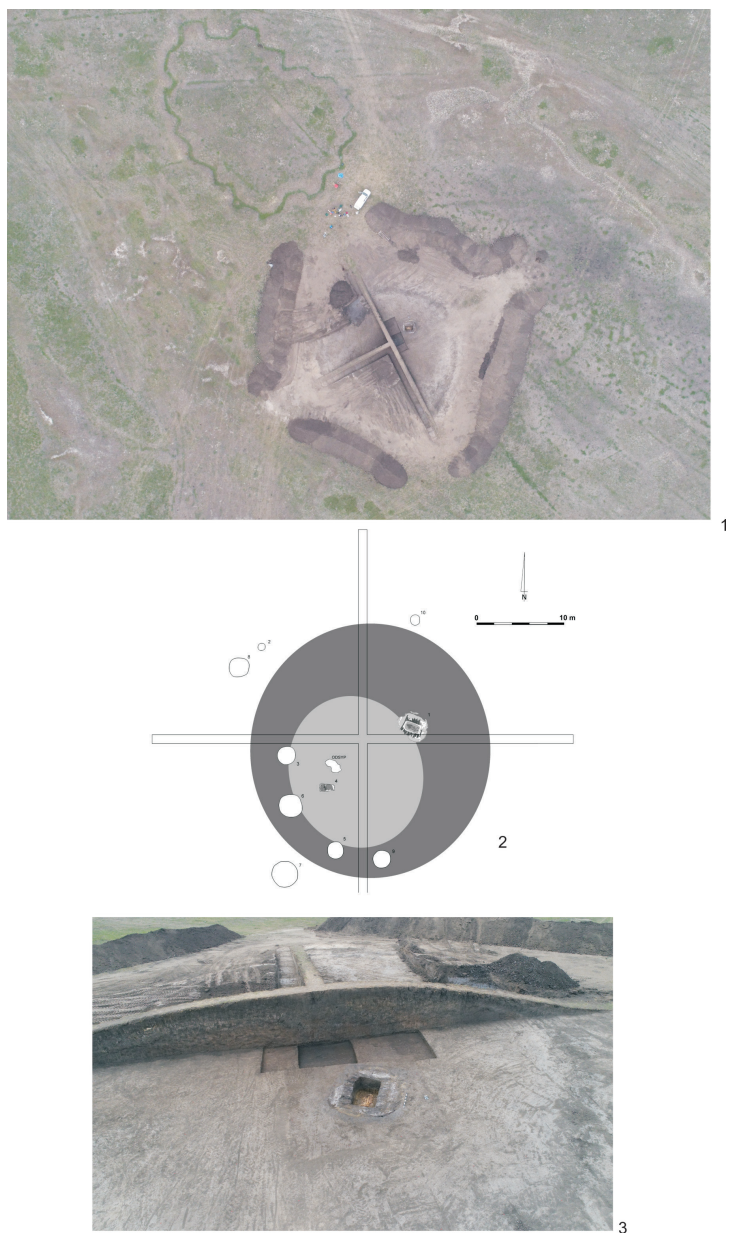


Fig. 2. Żabalj, Medisova Humka: 1 – general view of the barrow during the exploration and a WWII military trench, 2 – plan of the barrow, 3 – grave 1 against the barrow’s profile. Photo: P. Włodarczak, drawing by M. Podsiadło

Сл. 2. Жабаљ, Медисова хумка: 1 – општи изглед хумке током истраживања и војни ров из Другог светског рата, 2 – план хумке, 3 – гроб 1, насупрот профилу хумке. Фотографија: П. Влодарчак, цртеж: М. Подсјадло

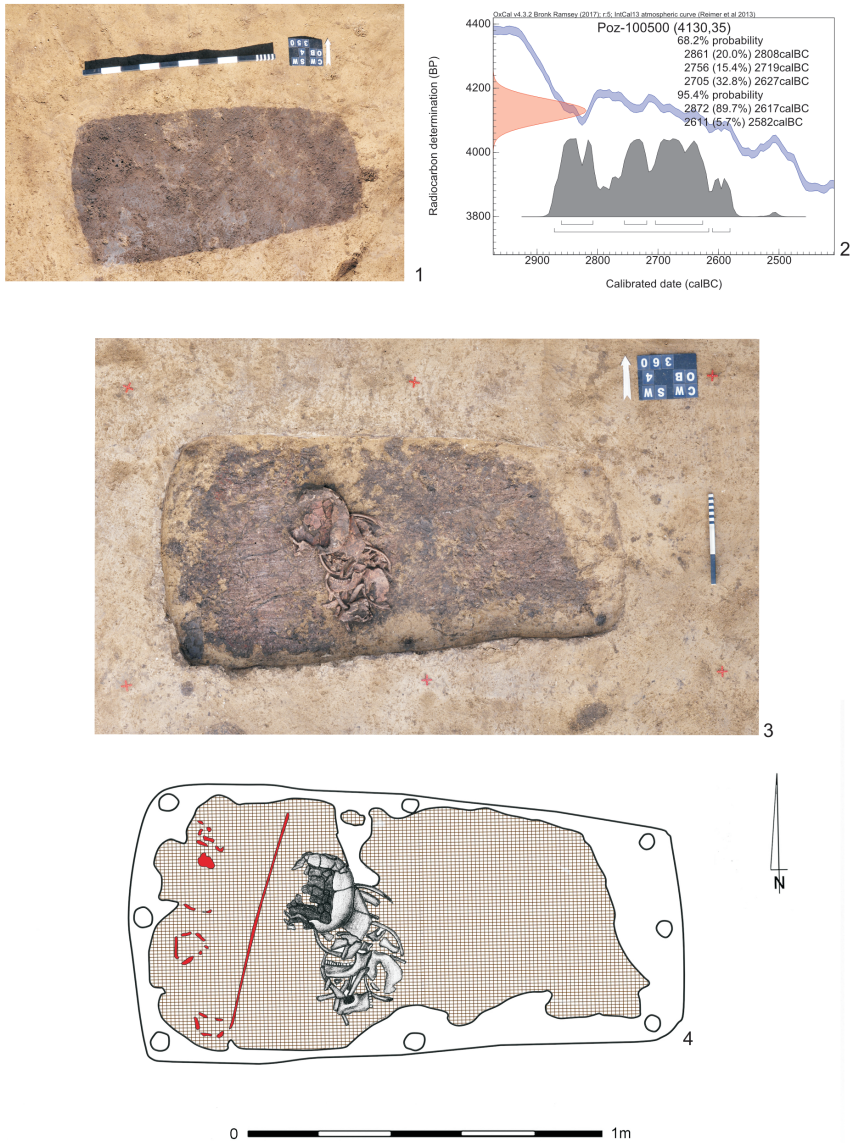


Fig. 3. Źabalj, Medisova Humka, grave 4: 1 – ceiling level, 2 – AMS dating of the bones from the burial (Oxcal v4.3.2, Bronk Ramsey 2017), 3, 4 – level of the burial.

Photo and drawing by M. Podsiadło

Сл. 3. Жабаљ, Медисова хумка, гроб 4: 1 – ниво свода, 2 – АМС датовање костију из гроба (Oxcal v4.3.2, Bronk Ramsey 2017), 3, 4 – ниво гроба.

Фотографија и цртеж: М. Подсјадло

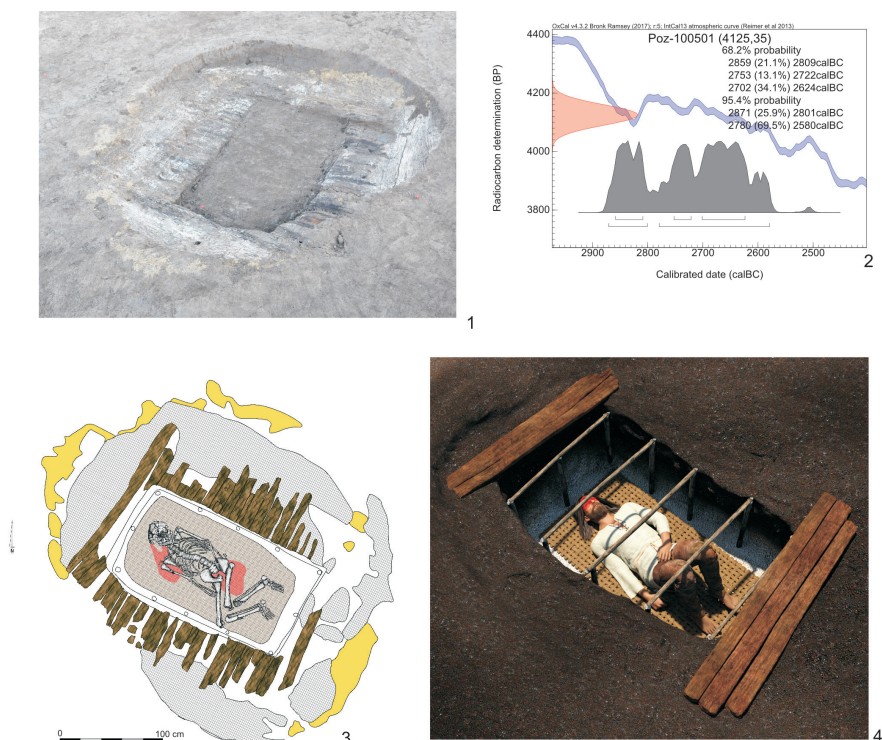


Fig. 4. Žabalj, Medisova Humka, grave 1: 1 – ceiling level, 2 – AMS dating of the bones from the burial (Oxcal v4.3.2, Bronk Ramsey 2017), 3 – level of the burial, 4 – reconstruction of the burial. Photo and drawing by M. Podsiadło

Сл. 4. Жабалъ, Медисова хумка, гроб 1: 1 – ниво свода, 2 – АМС датовање костију из гроба (Oxcal v4.3.2, Bronk Ramsey 2017), 3 – ниво гроба, 4 – реконструкција гроба. Фотографија и цртеж: М. Подсјадло

Grave 4, connected with the older barrow, was a regular rectangular pit, 160 x 80 cm in size, dug into the original ground level (Fig. 3). To the north of the pit, a heap of yellow soil was recorded, originating from the digging of the grave cut. Recorded at the grave's bottom there were traces of eight stakes driven symmetrically into the ground around the pit, and remains of a rectangular mat on which the burial was placed. Traces of red pigment (ochre?) were also identified within the mat. The remains of a male individual, approx. 40 years old (the anthropological analysis was performed by Mario Novak from the University of Zagreb), were found lying mixed and incomplete in the central part of the pit (among others, bones of the limbs were missing). No grave goods were found.



Fig. 5. Žabalj, Medisova Humka, grave 1. Photo M. Podsiadło

Сл. 5. Жабаљ, Медисова хумка, гроб 1. Фотографија: М. Подсјадло

Grave 1 was connected with the more recent mound, which greatly increased the barrow's height and diameter (Fig. 4). Its more recent stratigraphic position is evidenced by the fact that certain elements of the construction of grave 1 rested on the heap of yellow soil, formed while digging grave 4. The grave chamber was rectangular, with regular vertical walls, 190 x 110 cm in plan and 80 cm deep. At the original ground level, it was covered with a structure consisting of twenty-three transversal timbers (probably oak) and a mat (Fig. 5). The covering structure was much larger than the grave chamber itself and it extended over an area of 360 x 290 cm. At the bottom, arranged symmetrically around the edge of the pit, there were traces of twelve small stakes, approx. 5 cm in diameter – analogical to those from grave 4. A poorly preserved skeleton of an adult male individual, over 40 years of age, was lying on its back, with legs contracted and moved to the right side (the knees originally pointed upwards). The stature of the deceased was calculated as 175.2 cm. His body was laid on a rectangular mat of 160 x 95 cm, made from an undetermined organic material (Fig. 4:3; 5). Small lumps of orange-yellow ochre were found by the skull and humeral bones of the deceased.

Both graves are linked to the classic phase of the Yamnaya culture, which is also confirmed by their similar radiocarbon dates – 2858–2525 BC (68.3%, Oxcal Calibration Program v4.4.4 Bronk Ramsey /2021/) (Fig. 3:2; 4:2). In both cases, the construction of the grave chamber involved wooden stakes placed by the walls. This trait is characteristic of graves from the older and classic Yamnaya phases, often recorded in the North Pontic area and also known from barrows in the Danube basin, including graves from Vojlovica (Jovanović 1975) and Pančevo–Livade (Đorđević, Đorđević 2016), both in Banat. However, Medisova Humka is the first example of burying mixed and incomplete human remains in Vojvodina (among others, long bones were missing), a ritual known from Yamnaya barrows in the north-western Pontic area (e.g., Agulnikov, Popovich 2010).

The research in Žabalj uncovered burials which reveal clear connections with the allochthonous burial rites of the Yamnaya culture, finding close analogies in the north-western Pontic area. At the same time, it demonstrated that – as in other regions – Vojvodina barrows are multi-phase structures. Thus, migrations of nomadic populations along the Danube and the Tisa were connected with the spread of a certain vision of burial rites, encompassing the manner of establishing barrow cemeteries, the form of the grave, the manner of body deposition and its orientation, and using a red pigment.

REFERENCES

- Agulnikov, S., Popovich, S.** 2010. Obriad demembratsii v yamnoy kulture prutodniestrovskogo mezhduretchia. In: *Problemy okhrany i izucheniya pamiatnikov arheologii stepnoy zony vostochnoy Evropy*, 324–349. Lugansk.
- Bugaj, U., Włodarczak, P., Jarosz, P., Koledin, J., Podsiadlo, M.** 2018. Istraživaniye eneolitskog kurgana u Šajkašu, opština Titel. *Гласник Српског археолошког друштва* 34: 7–22.
- Đorđević, J., Đorđević, V.** 2016. *Livade kod Pančeva. Srednovjekovna crkva i nekropola na eneolitskoj humci*. Pančevo: Narodni Muzej Pančevo.
- Heyd, V.** 2011. Yamnaya groups and tumuli west of the Black Sea. In: *Ancestral Landscapes. Burial mounds in the Copper and Bronze Ages (Central and Eastern Europe–Balkans–Adriatic–Aegean, 4th–2nd millennium B.C.)*, ed. E. Borgn, S. Müller Celka, Travaux Maison Orient 58, 535–556. Lyon: Maison Orient.
- Jovanović, B.** 1975. Тумули степске културе гробова јама у Подунављу. *Старинар* 26: 9–24.
- Koledin, J., Bugaj, U., Jarosz, P., Novak, M., Przybyła, M.M., Podsiadlo, M., Szczepanek, A., Spašić, M., Włodarczak, P.** 2020. First archaeological investigations of barrows in the Bačka region and the question of the Eneolithic / Early Bronze Age barrows in Vojvodina. *Praehistorische Zeitschrift* 95(2), 350–375. <https://doi.org/10.1515/pz-2020-0003>.

Medović, P. 1998. Die Geländebegehungen im Raum um das Titeler Plateau 1965 und 1969. In: *Das plateau von Titel und die Šajkaška. Archäologische und naturwissenschaftliche Beiträge zu einer Kulturlandschaft*, ed. B. Hänsel, P. Medović, *Prähistorische Archäologie in Südosteuropa* 13, 41–140. Kiel: VML Marie Leidorf.

Stojšić, V., Kovačev, N. 2011. *Spomenik prirode „Jurišina humka” (usklađivanje sa Zakonom o zaštiti prirode)*. Novi Sad: Pokrajinski zavod za zaštitu prirode.

Павел Јарош

Институт за археологију и етнологију,
Пољска академија наука, Краков, Пољска

Јован Коледин

Музеј Војводине, Нови Сад, Србија

Михал Подсејadlo

Долмен С. Ц., Краков, Пољска

Пјотр Влодарчак

Институт за археологију и етнологију,
Пољска академија наука, Краков, Пољска

**ХУМКА ЈАМНАЈА КУЛТУРЕ У ЖАБЉУ,
ЈУЖНОБАЧКИ ОКРУГ, СРБИЈА**

Кључне речи: *Јамнаја култура, Војводина, енеолит, погребни обред*

Пољско-српска истраживања хумки у околини Шајкаша и Жабља дала су прве свеобухватне податке о обредима сахрањивања Јамнаја културе у Војводини. „Медисова хумка”, истражена у 2017–2018, подигнута је у две фазе. У њој су откривене две гробнице, обе датиране 2800–2600 година п. н. е. Припадају типичним обредима сахрањивања Јамнаја културе, са добрим аналогијама у источноевропској зони. Гроб бр. 4 из Жабља је први пример сахрањивања мешовитих и непотпуних људских остатака у Војводини (између осталог недостајале су дуге кости). Овакав ритуал је познат из хумки Јамнаја културе у северозападном понтском региону.