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NEW EARLY MEDIEVAL CEMETERY IN SUWAŁKI-SZWAJCARIA

ABSTRACT

The paper presents the discovery of a previously unknown early medieval site in Suwałki-Szwajcaria, most likely a plough-damaged Yatvingian cemetery. The find was initiated by artifacts handed to the Regional Heritage Protection Office in Suwałki by a chance finder and subsequently examined by the State Archaeological Museum in Warsaw. Field verification in 2025 confirmed the presence of ornaments and horse-riding equipment on the site, including a penannular brooch with star-shaped terminals, a bracelet fragment with a zoomorphic head, a cross-shaped strap distributor, and a large D-shaped buckle. These objects are characteristic of Yatvingian se-

pulchral contexts and reveal close analogies with finds from Krukówek, Żytkiejmy, and the Szczeberka River cemeteries, as well as Baltic material from the 11th to 13th centuries. The discovery is particularly significant given the scarcity of well-documented Yatvingian necropolises. Until now, Suwałki-Szwajcaria was known primarily for its Roman Period and Migration Period barrow cemetery, linked with the Sudovian Culture. If further research confirms the sepulchral character of the new site, it will establish this locality as an important early medieval Yatvingian cemetery, marking a major contribution to the study of Baltic funerary practices.

Keywords: Suwałki-Szwajcaria, cemetery, Yatvingia, early Middle Ages

The topic of early medieval funerary practices has long been closely connected with the scholarly interests of Professor Joanna Kalaga. This includes Baltic cemeteries, particularly those of the Prussians and the Yatvingians. The distinguished jubilarian has always followed reports on new discoveries in this field with great attention and interest – especially as, until quite recently, very little was known about early medieval necropolises of the Prussians and Yatvingians. Fortunately, over the past several decades, there has been a significant increase in sepulchral material, particularly from the territory of historical Yatvingia.

At the beginning of 2025, Ms. Julia Siemaszko-Dziub, a representative of the Regional Heritage Protection Office in Suwałki, approached the Balts Archaeology Department of the State Archaeological Museum in Warsaw with a request for assistance in identifying several objects delivered to the office by a chance finder. Leaving aside several modern copper-alloy items of little scholarly value, two fragments of early medieval bronze ornaments – a bracelet and a brooch – stood out. The character and state of preservation of these artifacts suggested that they may have originated from a destroyed Yatvingian cemetery. The finder indicated

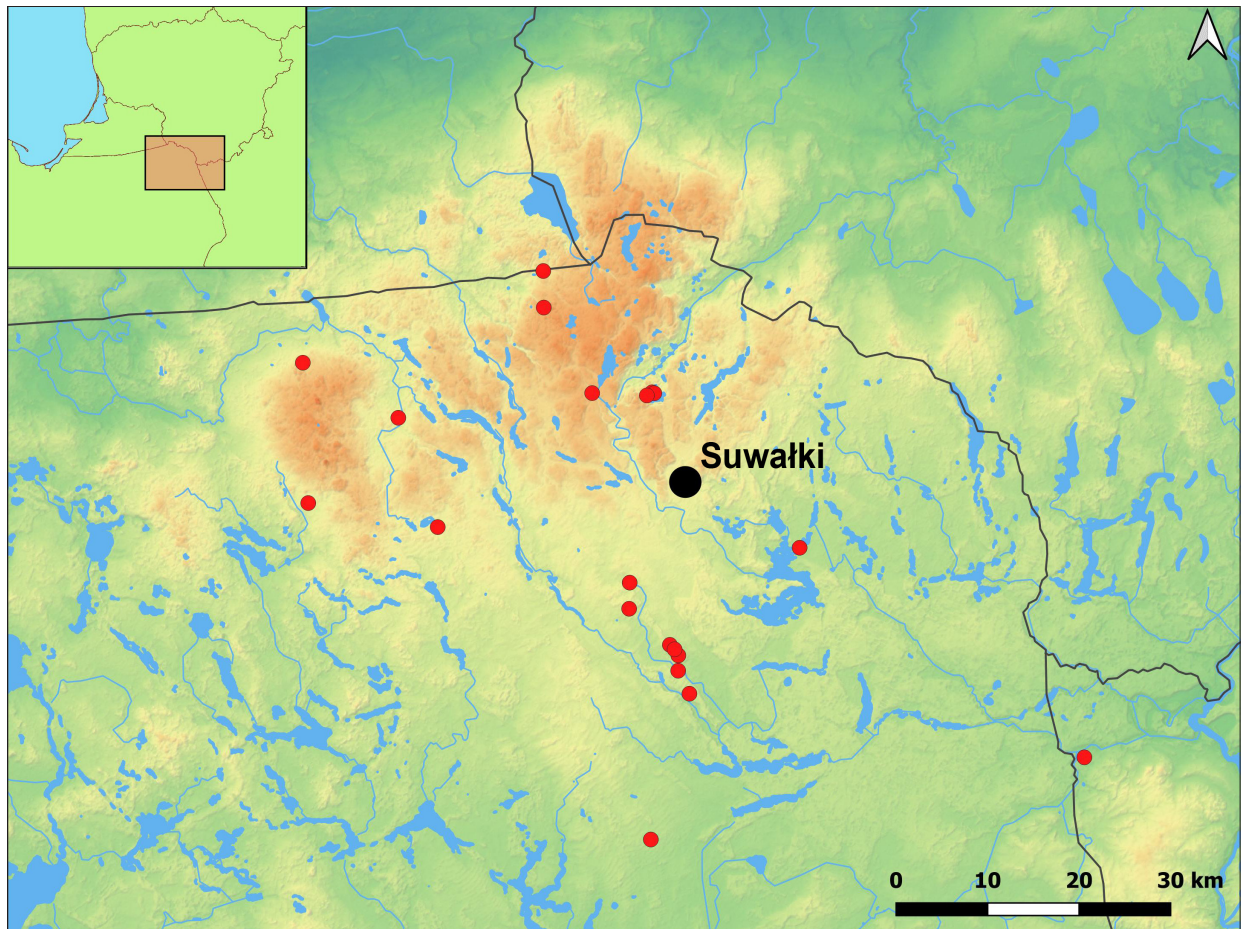


Fig. 1. The site at Suwałki-Szwajcaria, Suwałki District in the context of Yatvingian burial grounds (compiled by M. Engel).

that the objects had been discovered on a plot of land located in the northern part of Suwałki, within the area of the now-defunct settlement known as Szwajcaria.

The first attempt to verify the presumed site, undertaken by the local heritage authorities, did not yield positive results. The main obstacle was a dense young pine forest that made surface surveys impossible. A second inspection, carried out in March 2025 in cooperation with staff of the Balts Archaeology Department, confirmed the finder's report. Several artifacts were discovered on the surface of a field adjacent to the forest, providing unambiguous evidence for the existence of a plough-damaged early medieval site – most likely a cemetery. The location lies in the vicinity of the Suwałki bypass, approximately four kilometers north of the town center (Fig. 1).

The newly identified site is situated in a picturesque setting on the edge of a plateau bordering a glacially carved trough (Fig. 2). The lowest sections of this landform are filled with water. At present, a small lake lies some 13 meters below the site; it is heavily silted and almost completely overgrown. The surface of the presumed cemetery is nearly flat, with only its northern and western margins sloping steeply toward the dying water basin.

The area of the site can at present only be estimated on the basis of the distribution of the few finds recovered, covering a maximum of 0.5 hectares (Fig. 2). Confirmation of these observations, and a definitive determination of whether the location indeed represents another Yatvingian cemetery, can only be achieved through further fieldwork, preferably systematic excavations.

The assemblage from the site comprises fragments of ornaments and horse-riding equipment made of copper alloy, as well as an iron belt buckle.

The first object submitted by the finder was a brooch, of which part of the ribbed bow has survived (Fig. 3:1). This allows it to be classified as either a penannular or ring-shaped fibula. Given its slightly oval form, the former option seems more plausible. Thus, we may be dealing with a penannular brooch with star-shaped terminals. Traces of a hinged construction visible on the bow indicate that it belongs to the variant with terminals joined by a transverse bar.

The second artefact from Suwałki-Szwajcaria is a fragment of a bracelet bow, ending in a stylised animal head (Fig. 3:2). During the field survey, further items were recovered: a cross-shaped strap distributor, probably from a horse

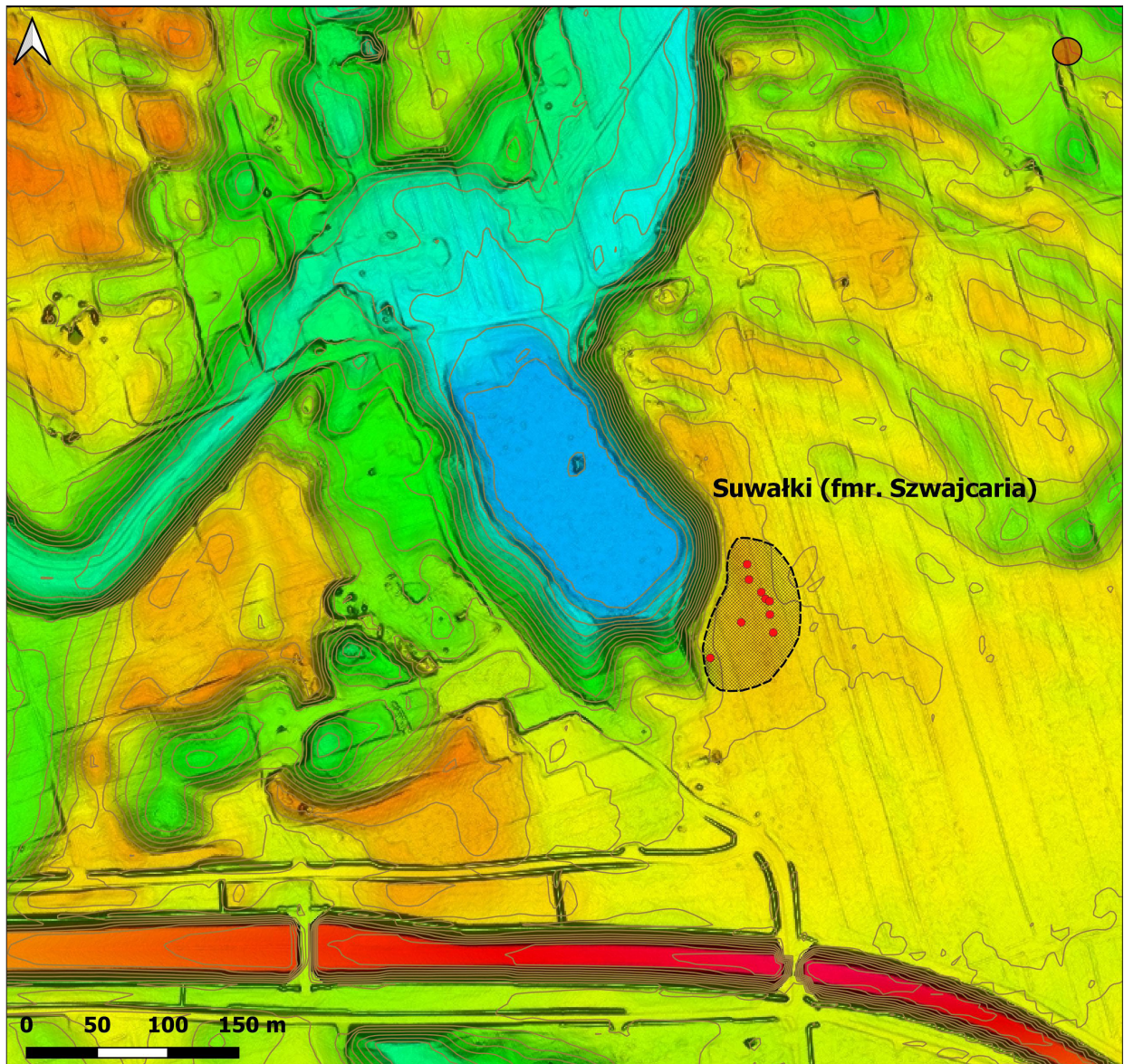


Fig. 2. The presumed extent of the Suwałki-Szwajcaria site based on field verification (compiled by M. Engel).

harness (Fig. 3:4); a large D-shaped buckle (Fig. 3:3); and two completely melted copper-alloy objects.

Penannular brooches with star-shaped terminals joined by a transverse bar and a ribbed bow are increasingly encountered within the territory of historical Yatvingia.¹ The most impressive specimen so far is a fibula overlaid with decorated silver foil from Gawrych Ruda, Suwałki commune.² Another example, without the pin preserved, was found on the surface of set-

tlement site no. 4 in Szurpiły (Jeleniewo commune). Further fragments of similar ornaments have been registered within the Szurpiły settlement complex, including one from the same settlement and another from the slopes of the hillfort on Castle Mountain, site no. 3.³ Comparable finds include two fibula fragments from the cemetery at Niemcowizna, site no. 1 (Suwałki commune).⁴ Ornaments of this type are also known from burial complexes in the valley of the Szczeberka River.⁵

¹ Engel 2020a, 155.

² Engel 2015, 17; Engel 2020a, 155. The artifact discovered by an accidental finder and subsequently transferred to the District Museum in Suwałki.

³ Engel 2020a, 153, Fig. 64, pl. XVII:1.

⁴ Jończyk 2015, 240, Fig. 8b, h.

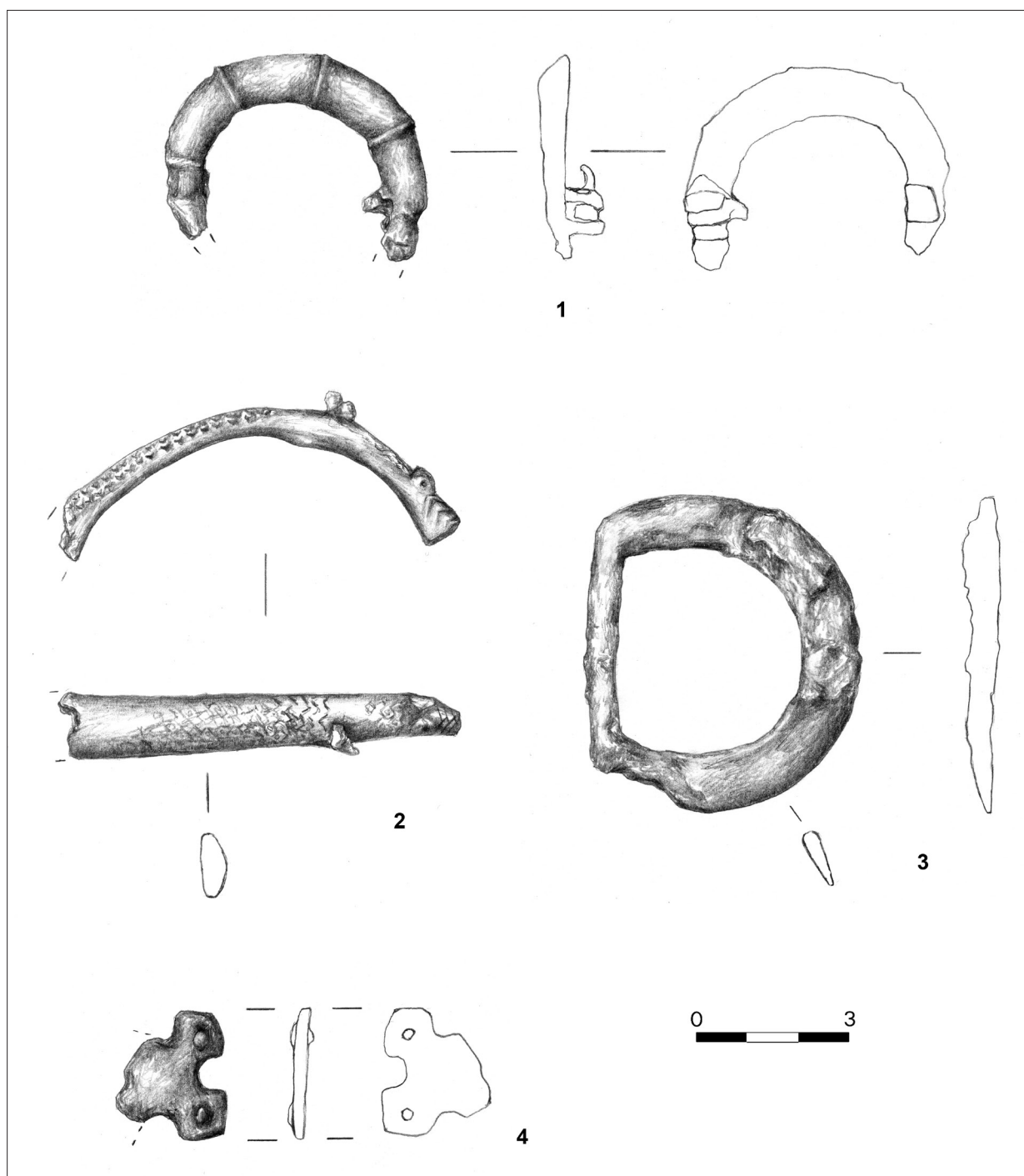


Fig. 3. Artefacts from the Suwałki-Szwajcaria site: 1, 2, 4 – copper alloy; 3 – iron (drawing by R. Maskowicz-Sikorowska).

The largest concentration of fibulae of this variant, with hinged construction, comes from the cemetery at Krukówek, site no. 1 (Raczki commune).⁶ Two examples were deposited as grave goods in cremation burials: one, in feature 1/IV/18, was associated with a type IV spearhead (after Andrzej Nadolski), an iron belt buckle, a knife, and a copper alloy penannular fibula with thickening terminals.⁷ Another fibula fragment was found in burial 4/20, accompanied by chain mail fragments, elements of *Totenkrone* necklaces, a bracelet fragment, a clay spindle whorl, and numerous pottery sherds.⁸ Several further fragments were recovered from the site surface at Krukówek.⁹

In German scholarship, penannular brooches with star-shaped terminals, ribbed bows, transverse bars, and hinged construction were regarded as typical of the Sambian–Natangian cultural sphere.¹⁰ They have been found in cemetery complexes dated to the 11th–12th centuries, for example in et (Groß Friedrichsberg) and Klinecova (Irzekapinis I).¹¹ A comparable number of these fibulae is known from the Curonian settlement area along the Lithuanian and Latvian coast, also from 11th–12th-century cemeteries.¹² Beyond the Baltic settlement zone, such fibulae occur in Scandinavia and in Rus'. On Gotland, they have been assigned to type 3b of penannular brooches with ribbed bows (*mit Querrippen*) and dated from the late 11th to the early 13th century.¹³ In Rus', they have been found, for instance, in Hrodna and Vaŭkavysk, where – as with penannular fibulae with thickening terminals – they are considered imports.¹⁴

The bracelet fragment discovered at the site in Suwałki-Szwajcaria (Fig. 3:2) represents the most common type known from the territory of historical Yatvingia, characterised by terminals shaped as stylised animal heads. These ornaments were made from metal rods (usually copper-alloy) of varying cross-sections. Their bows were decorated with a range of geometric

motifs. The degree of stylisation of the animal heads – probably intended to represent fantastic creatures, most likely dragons – varies considerably.

Fragments of such bracelets have been found, among others, within the settlement complex at Szurpiły, at the hillfort in Jegliniec (Szypliszki commune), and at settlement site no. 2 in Konikowo (Gołdap commune).¹⁵ Bracelets with animal-head terminals also formed part of grave inventories in Yatvingian cemeteries. Complete specimens or fragments have been documented at Żytkiejmy (Gołdap commune), Krukówek, and at the site cluster along the Szczeberka River.¹⁶

Under Scandinavian influence, bracelets with zoomorphic terminals appeared among the Curonians in the late 10th century. The earliest specimens were massive ornaments featuring highly naturalistic animal depictions. In the later period (11th–13th centuries), more schematic examples spread across the entire Lithuanian–Latvian area, as well as western Rus', where they remained in use until the 13th century.¹⁷

An especially noteworthy artefact from the assemblage is a fragment of a strap distributor, most likely belonging to a horse harness (Fig. 3:4). The object is cross-shaped, made of two copper-alloy plates fastened together with rivets set in its arms. This specimen represents variant II of cross-shaped strap distributors according to Norbert Goßler's typology – namely, fittings in the form of a Greek cross with rhomboid arms.¹⁸

Several analogies to this object are known from Yatvingian territory. These include two copper-alloy fittings from the cemetery at Krukówek¹⁹ and one iron specimen from the cemetery at Żytkiejmy.²⁰ Centrally placed bosses characterise the Krukówek examples. All these strap distributors were designed with four rivets to secure leather straps.

Variant II strap distributors are attested in Germany, Scandinavia, Rus', and the Baltic lands during the Viking

⁵ Lewoc *et al.* 2024, 363, Fig. 4.

⁶ Unfortunately, most of them originate from illegal searches and are visible only in photographic materials confiscated by the police and made available to the District Museum in Suwałki.

⁷ Engel 2023, 15–16, 20. Unpublished materials held in the collections of the District Museum in Suwałki.

⁸ Unpublished materials held in the collections of the District Museum in Suwałki.

⁹ Unpublished materials held in the collections of the District Museum in Suwałki.

¹⁰ Engel, La Baume 1937, 129, Fig. 43c.

¹¹ Gaerte 1929, Fig. 264g; Kulakov 1990, 73, 76–78, pls. XXXV–XXXVI, LIII:1, LIV, LXIII.

¹² Volkaitė-Kulikauskienė 1970, 165; LA 1974, pl. 48:13; LAA 1978, map 34; Bluijienė 1999, 128.

¹³ Thunmark-Nylén 1998, pl. 98:3–4; Thunmark-Nylén 2006, 101, 109, 112.

¹⁴ Voronin 1954, 167, Fig. 89:1; Lysenka 2000, 440, Fig. 128:5.

¹⁵ Engel 2020a, 154, 156, 191, 197, 201–202; Iwanowska 2022, 117.

¹⁶ Engel 2020a, 156; Lewoc *et al.* 2024, 363, Fig. 4.

¹⁷ Sergeeva 1981, 30, Fig. 1.

¹⁸ Goßler 2011, 52.

¹⁹ One of the fittings was found by illegal treasure hunters and seized by the police. The second artifact was discovered on the surface of the site during field verification. Both strap distributors are held in the collections of the District Museum in Suwałki.

²⁰ Engel 2020b, 74, Fig. 9:1–2. A lost artifact, published in the article by Engel 1939, 54, Fig. 7:e.

Age (primarily the 10th century).²¹ On the southeastern Baltic coast, they remained in use into the 11th and 12th centuries.²² The closest territorial analogies to the Yatvingian fittings come from Sambian cemeteries, for example, Klincovka-Irzekapinis.²³

The only iron object from the Suwałki-Szwajcaria site is a large D-shaped buckle (Fig. 3:3), most likely part of a horse harness or a man's belt. Buckles of this shape are common across the Baltic, Western Slavic, Rus', and Scandinavian territories.²⁴ They are frequently associated with saddles, forming sets with stirrups (stirrup leathers) or with girth straps.²⁵ Large D-shaped buckles were also used on men's belts and straps intended for suspending swords.²⁶

Such artefacts are known from Yatvingian lands in sepulchral contexts. Several specimens are preserved in archival photographs of finds from the Żytkiejmy cemetery.²⁷ D-shaped buckles have also been documented at sites along the Szczeberka River.²⁸ However, the largest number of analogous artefacts comes from Krukówek, though these are mostly surface finds²⁹ or objects recov-

ered from illegal searches and subsequently confiscated by the police.³⁰ Like comparable specimens from neighbouring regions, Yatvingian buckles of this type can only be broadly dated to the early Middle Ages.³¹

The discovery of an early medieval site within the bounds of the former village of Szwajcaria (today incorporated into Suwałki) constitutes one of the most significant achievements of Baltic archaeology in recent years. Until now, the name of this locality was associated almost exclusively with the famous barrow cemetery of the Roman Period and the Migration Period, excavated during the Yatvingian Comprehensive Expedition in the 1950s and 1960s.³² That necropolis, however, represents the Sudovian Culture and cannot be linked with early medieval Yatvingia – although, in the local consciousness of Suwałki inhabitants, it has often been perceived in precisely this way.³³

The authors of the present paper therefore hope that, should the sepulchral character of the most recent finds be confirmed, the Suwałki-Szwajcaria locality will at last be rightly associated also with a Yatvingian cemetery.

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²¹ Goßler 2011, 85–86.

²² Kulikauskienė, Rimantienė 1966, 10, 148, 150, Figs. 103, 105, 171, 174.

²³ Kulakov 1999, 247, Fig. 42.

²⁴ Gardęła et al. 2019, 158–159.

²⁵ Arbman 1943, 242–244, 379–380, pls. 22, 26:3; Nadolski et al. 1959, 62, pl. I; Goßler 2011, 44, 56, pls. 18:384.4, 21:393.A.4; Kulakov 2016, 55, 69, 80, figs. 35, 46, 59; Sikora et al. 2017, 260, Fig. 4:143; Gardęła et al. 2019, 158, Fig. 45:4a–b.

²⁶ Fingerlin 1971, Fig. 173; Wachowski 1984, 19; Gardęła et al. 2019, 158.

²⁷ Engel 2020b, Fig. 4.

²⁸ Lewoc et al. 2024, Fig. 4

²⁹ Unpublished materials from the excavations of the District Museum in Suwałki and the State Archaeological Museum. The field documentation and artifacts are housed in the collections of the District Museum in Suwałki

³⁰ Engel 2020b, 74. The materials were formally deposited by the police in the archives of the District Museum in Suwałki.

³¹ Gardęła et al. 2019, 159.

³² Jaskanis 2013.

³³ Engel 2024, 221–223.

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