

**GENIUS LOCI**

**LASZLOVSZKY 60**

edited by  
Dóra Mérai  
and

Ágnes Drosztmér, Kyra Lyublyanovics,  
Judith Rasson, Zsuzsanna Papp Reed,  
András Vadas, Csilla Zatykó



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# Fire and Stone: Placing Flints in Graves in Late Medieval Kaliakra

PETAR PARVANOV\*

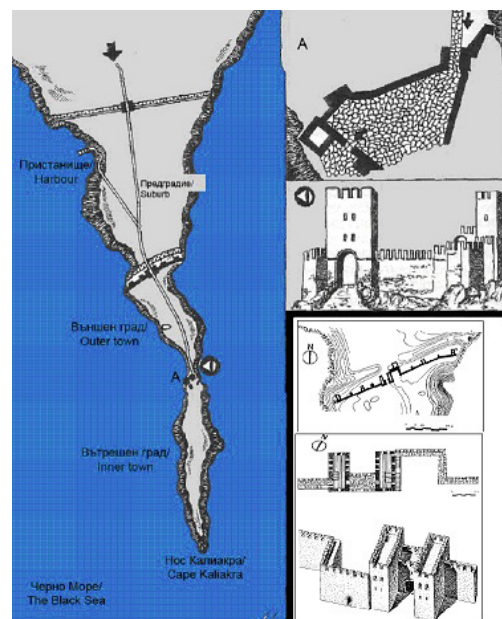


► Fig.1. Kaliakra today (photo by Paige Richmond)

Societies adapt and assign cultural meaning to features from their surrounding environment; such a case is a medieval burial from eastern Bulgaria that incorporated chipped flints as grave goods. It was discovered on Cape Kaliakra on the western Pontic shore, a prominent site of natural beauty and multi-period historical development (Fig. 1). The unusual arrangement of the burials calls the dual definition of the place into question. In other words, a key factor in understanding this unconventional phenomenon is how its geographical location shaped its occurrence within a specific funerary context.

Kaliakra, a narrow piece of land, is connected to the mainland only on the north and rises up to 70 meters above sea level. The vertical limestone

cliffs not only provide excellent shelter for ships and men alike but define the coastal environment and landscape all around. The settlement that developed on the cliff top became a major urban center with an extensive fortification system. The fortifications also played a structural role in urban planning by separating the medieval city into an outer (suburban) town, inner town, and a stronghold on the southernmost end of the cape (Fig. 2). Churchyards were used for burial as well as plots elsewhere. A grave (assigned No. 41/2015) was discovered in a cemetery on the eastern edge of the inner city,<sup>1</sup> one of many burial grounds that have been recorded. In this cemetery 55 graves in several layers had been unearthed by 2017. It is not clear if the depth of the burials can add any meaningful chronological distinction. The excavated section of the cemetery is stratigraphically locked between earlier stone buildings and a lat-



► Fig. 2. General plan and fortification system of late medieval Kaliakra; after Georgi Dzingov [Георги Джингов], *Калиакра. Том 1: Крепостно строителство [Kaliakra, vol. 1: Fortifications]* (Sofia: Marin Drinov, 1998).

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er Ottoman-period structure. Based on the grave goods, mainly jewelry and coins, the cemetery dates to the fourteenth century. With some caution the same relative dating can be accepted for the grave discussed here.

This grave lay on the eastern periphery of the cemetery at 52.5 m above sea level (Fig. 3), oriented west-east with an insignificant deviation to the north, i.e., in accordance with the Christian norm. The grave cuts the wall of an earlier building (No. 1/2014). In fact, the wall of this earlier building was re-used as it constitutes the eastern and northeastern parts of the burial cist. The southern and western sides of the cist are completed with small and medium sized stones. It must be clarified that there is no sign of later disturbance or re-opening of the grave. The skeleton lay in a supine extended position with the arms bent over the abdominal area above the pelvis.<sup>2</sup> The skull was turned to the south, probably as a



► Fig. 3. Kaliakra, grave No. 41/2015 (photo by Elena Vassileva/Yana Dimitrova)

result of decomposition processes. While the small bones of the hands and feet are not visible in the documentation, they were present in anatomical order, but disturbed during excavation.

No grave goods were found except 379 pieces of flint placed along both legs in the eastern part of the grave. Two pieces among them are natural and 220 complete flakes varying in length up to 4 cm, while 32 bear signs of retouch. None of them presented any use-wear traces; the array may come from pre-existing stock, but surely was collected and prepared especially for the funeral rites performed for the individual. The fact that no flints were found beneath the skeleton reveals that they were deposited and arranged around the already laid-out corpse. The selection and careful placement of this assemblage is what makes this grave from Kaliakra an outstanding example in medieval funerary research.

At this point in the research, this grave seems to have no exact parallels, even though single flints are sometimes found in medieval burials around Europe. An interesting analogy is found in grave No. 1/2005 excavated in the outer city of Kaliakra.<sup>3</sup> An adult male was buried in a simple rectangular pit in the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century. Reportedly, 18 flints (but only 9 visible on the drawing!) were placed around the skull in a halo-like arrangement (Fig. 4). Similarly, another grave from Kaliakra had 6 flints around the skull and an unknown number of burials contained flints in the large fifteenth- to seventeenth-century cemetery on nearby Cape Chirakman.<sup>4</sup> The visual imagery of flint assemblages can also be seen in an Ottoman-period cemetery near the village Terziysko in southeastern Bulgaria, where four flints were arranged in a cross-like shape beneath the skeleton of a child. Despite the peculiarity of these cases, in terms of quantity, the closest analogy of the Kaliakra grave (No. 41/2015) is grave No. 8 from the twelfth century rural necropolis in Kovachevo.<sup>5</sup> More than 60 flints were placed on the southern, right-hand, side of the deceased.

From early prehistory, fire was a crucial characteristic defining human attitudes towards flint, a way to start fires. Medieval people appreciated it in their everyday life and cognitive constructs alike. Slavic folklore recognized flints as petrified thunder fallen from the sky. They were often called arrows of Perun, the pre-Christian Slavic



Гроб 1/2005



► Fig. 4. Kaliakra, grave No. 1/2005 (after Boni Petrunova, *Реликвите на Калиакра [The relics of Kaliakra]* (Dobrich: FoliArt, 2014), fig. 22.

deity of skies and lightning.<sup>6</sup> For instance, in the northern Black Sea region it was believed that these arrows opened up the earth where the Devil was hiding and dispelled him from there.<sup>7</sup> Naturally, such divine tools were strong amulets used in low-level magical practices.<sup>8</sup> Such notions are quite similar to the widespread collection of geological-period remains fossilized as flint, like sea urchins, yet they were almost always restricted to household activities, i.e., the realm of the living. Their finders kept them at home for protection against thunder and lightning, a belief perhaps resulting from the fact that they are most commonly visible on the ground after a rain.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the question still remains how the seemingly universal symbolic significance of flint appeared in a mortuary context. Perhaps the fact that the rite preserved in the Kaliakra grave (No. 41/2015) did not use Christian symbolism (the halo and cross) and focused more on framing the limbs was a magical treatment of the grave (or deceased) during the funeral.

While presenting geographical and spatial properties of the find, it is worth considering again the broader setting of the burial ground. In the fourteenth century Kaliakra reached such

prominence that its rulers were able to establish the despotate of Karvuna, an independent polity in the region of Dobruja. The role played by this small principality in the trade network along the shores of the Black Sea and the Danube River probably had not only economic significance, an effect on the greater exposure to ideas as well. Indeed, in the late medieval period around Europe there was a well documented desire to mobilize the occult virtues of some natural objects and, furthermore, to apply them in mortuary context.<sup>10</sup> And yet, the deposition of multiple flints is so far known only from a restricted number of places.

The analogous burials concentrating in communities of the coastal area are much alike considering their geology. Both Chirakman and Kaliakra are part of the same discrete geological area.<sup>11</sup> The limestone of the Karvuna geological formation is an ideal environment for extracting chert cores. Their exploitation may have contributed to underlying local beliefs and flint deposition in death rituals. In these sites, the visual sensation of the surrounding natural landscape might have served as a plausible cognitive factor in the construction of such mental attitudes. Simultaneously, the links to isolated cases on a macro-regional level reveals a certain commonly accepted cultural significance of the material.

Unusual discoveries like this grave from Kaliakra demonstrate that there was and always will be a possibility for culture to deviate from what we know and, if I can paraphrase József Laszlovsky, add irregularity to a clear pattern. In a search for consistency in unpredictable variability, the burial find from Kaliakra can be contextualized in terms of place. This grave had a particular place within the space of funerary activities, the cemetery. The urban community was recreating itself physically and culturally in this burial ground. Kaliakra's geographical location contributed to the emergence of a certain way of thinking, assuming the existence of natural magic in flint, which was, in turn, used in burial practices.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> I am grateful to the principal investigator Elena Vassileva from the National Archaeological Institute with Museum in Sofia for providing me with the information and letting me use it.
- <sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, the limited funding for the field season 2014 prevented any anthropological assessment and the human remains were re-buried before the excavations in 2015, when I joined the team.
- <sup>3</sup> Boni Petrunova, Реликвите на Калиакра [The relics of Kaliakra] (Dobrich: FoliArt, 2014), 26.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>5</sup> Peyo Gatev, Средновековно селище и некропол от 12 век при с. Ковачево, Пазарджишки окръг [A medieval village and cemetery from the twelfth century near Kovachevo, Pazardzhik district] (Sofia: National Archaeological Museum, 1985).
- <sup>6</sup> Patrice Lajoie, *Perun, dieu slave de l'orage: Archaeologie, histoire, folklore* (Paris: Lingva, 2015), 72–73.
- <sup>7</sup> Galina Kabakova, *Contes et légendes d'Ukraine* (Paris: Flies France, 1999), 31.
- <sup>8</sup> Zmago Šmitek, “Kaj raste brez korenja? O kamnih s posebnimi svojstvi na Slovenskem” [What grows without roots? Stones with special characteristics in Slovenia], *Studia Mythologica Slavica* 10 (2007): 188.
- <sup>9</sup> Kenneth Oakley, “Folklore of fossils,” *Antiquity* 39 (1965): 117–125.
- <sup>10</sup> Roberta Gilchrist, “Magic for the Dead? The Archaeology of Magic in Later Medieval Burials,” *Medieval Archaeology* 52 (2008): 135.
- <sup>11</sup> Elena Koleva-Rekalova, “Седиментоложка характеристика на сарматските скали в Североизточна България” [Sedimentological characteristic of the Sarmatian rocks in northeastern Bulgaria], *Review of the Bulgarian Geological Society* 58, no. 1 (1997): 41.