

FELL INTO AN ETERNAL SLEEP

Finding the Human Skeleton in the La Tène Dwelling from Bratislava-Devín, Záhřady Site¹

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The finds of human remain in settlement features from the La Tène period are rare, especially cases when we can interpret these finds as proof of ritual activities. One of them represents archaeological research of the La Tène settlement with 38 archaeological features situated in the Záhřady site, located southeast of the urban area of Bratislava in the city part Devín. The article is evaluated the burial context in feature no. 74, which represents a common La Tène dwelling, where skeletal remains of a man were found. It aims to reconstruct several aspects connected to properties, existence, destruction, and secondary usage through the method of inverse transformation. Based on interim results, are created hypotheses focusing on the interpretation of such behaviour. Can we join these activities with intramural burial or its only proof of disposal of the dead? Interpretation goes further when taking in count presents of the charcoal layer, which may indicate more deep activities connected with cremation rituals. Those questions are discussed in the context of central European archaeology and the need for rethinking some old conclusions is emerged.

Keywords: Slovakia, La Tène Period, settlement burial, ritual activities.

INTRODUCTION

During the years 2014 and 2015, Archeologická Agentúra, s. r. o.² carried out rescue excavation in the Záhřady site, located southeast of the urban area of Bratislava in the city part Devín (Fig. 1). There were two cremation graves from the Kalenderberg Group (Bielichová *et al.* 2020; Bodoriková *et al.* 2019) and settlements from the Late Hallstatt period and from the Middle to the Late La Tène period (Chmelo *et al.* 2015). In this article, our attention is focused on the La Tène settlement, of which 38³ excavated archaeological features were examined. One interesting finding assemblage was found in one of the La Tène features. It was feature 74, which most likely had residential character, but skeletal remains of a man were found inside.

Find assemblage

Feature 74 was captured in the northern part of the La Tène settlement area on a slight terrain plane spanning from NW to SE. From a constructional

point of view, the structure represented a common La Tène dwelling in lowland settlements (Březinová/Hečková 1994, 79–81; the second group of huts

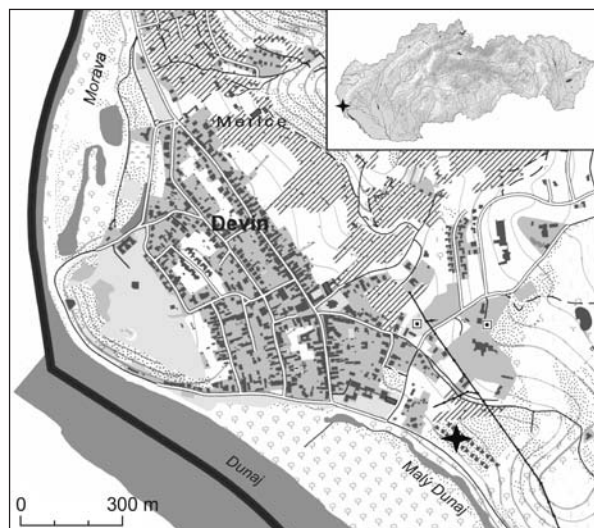


Fig. 1. Bratislava-Devín. Location of the researched Záhřady site (<https://www.geoportal.sk/>).

¹ This work was supported by grant of VEGA 1/0680/16 'Archaeology of death. Burial practices in the Late Prehistory to Protohistory in the territory of Slovakia'.

² Our thanks belong to the management of the company, namely Mgr. Bohuslav Šebesta, PhD., and PhDr. Mgr. František Žák Matyasowszky, PhD.

³ Another 10 features can most likely be assigned to La Tène settlement based on horizontal stratigraphy. Excavation of the La Tène settlement is currently being processed and will be published.

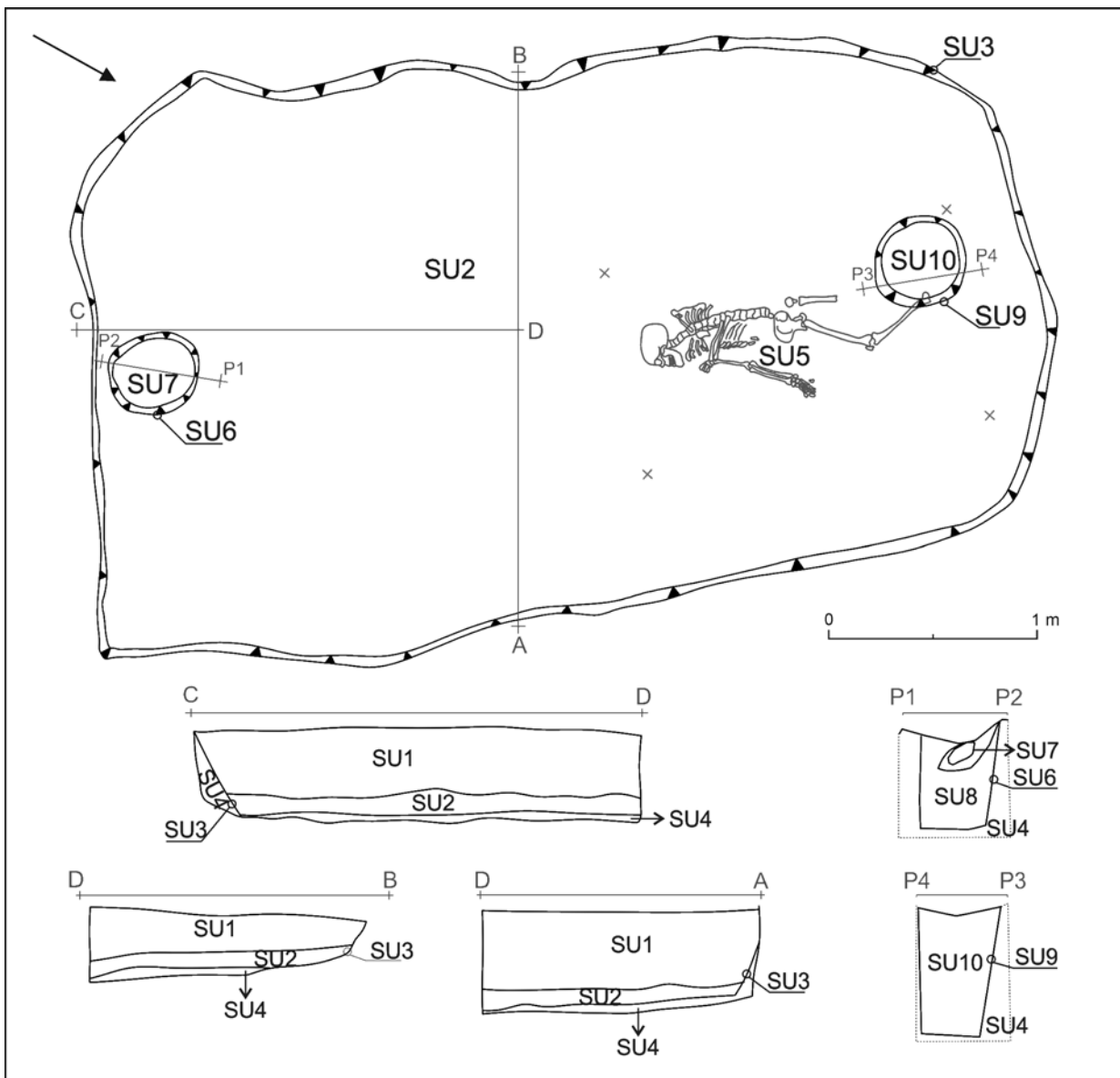


Fig. 2. Bratislava-Devín, Záhrady site. Plan of feature 74 with burial context (created according to *Chmelo et al. 2015*, 287–289, fig. 19–21).

according to *Březinová 2006*, 16; pit-houses of group 'b' according to *Kuzmová 1980*, 318). The sunken part, discovered during excavation, had a square floor plan with dimensions 460 × 250 cm. Besides the filling, the feature contained a stratigraphic unit (SU2) composed of burnt charcoal (Fig. 2), which was located directly above the loess subsoil. During the La Tène period, plank floors occur mainly in a mountain environment (*Pieta 2008*, 94), but in this situation, the layer records probably the destruction of the building. The floor was distinguished only by stratigraphic interface with loess subsoil. The use of clay as a floor covering typical for La Tène dwellings (*Horváth 2014*, 73) was not documented.

According to the sunken part and proportions of a gable roof, the internal space had minimal dimensions of 550 × 340 cm.

During lowering of inner layers of the feature, in its northern half on the long central axis, the human skeleton was found in a depth of 60 cm below the terrain level above the burnt charcoal layer (SU2). The orientation of the entire feature 74 and skeletal remains was SE – NW. The body lay on its back with a slight tilt on the right hip. The left hand was bent at the elbow and placed on the left shoulder. In contrast, the right hand was loosely placed along the body. Also, the lower right limb was slightly bent. The skull was placed on the southeast side and



Fig. 3. Bratislava-Devín, Záhrady site. 3D visualisation of archaeological reconstruction of primary usage feature 74 as a dwelling (QR online 3D model).

was faced toward the east, respectively northeast. No signs of violent death were found on the bones. After the removal of human bones, two post-holes were found in the middle of the shorter walls.

RECONSTRUCTION

Throughout the analysis of excavated contexts, several aspects connected to properties, existence, and destruction, as well as secondary use, can be evaluated. The reconstruction represents the process of inverse transformation (Neustupný 2007, 75), by which we are trying to get to the moment of exit transformation (germ. *sterbendes Gut*; Eggers 1959, 258–262).

Existence and destruction of the structure

During archaeological excavation, inside feature 74, movable archaeological finds were found. There were 67 pottery fragments and two metallic objects – a bronze link from the chain belt and a fragment of the iron fibula. The majority of pottery fragments were accumulated in the northern half of the feature, while the above-mentioned metallic objects were in the northwest part, in the same area as human remains. Because we do not have exact positional information and depth of finds, we can only assume they come from inside filling SU1 or layer SU2.

We base the reconstruction of the dwelling mainly on stratigraphic observations. The origin and use of the building are documented by the excavation of lowered part (SU3) and by foundations of

load-bearing columns that supported the roof (SU6 and SU9). No remains of floor or interior parts have been preserved, as well as no material sources were documenting active use of structure gathered from the bottom level (Fig. 3). Considering the shortage of evidence, it is impossible to determine with certainty the function of the structure. To some extent, the absence of a hearth, a bench along with one of longer walls, wooden floor, or primary waste from the bottom level questions the household function (cf. Kuzmová 1980, 320, 321; Neustupný/Venclová 1996, 43). For our situation, the destruction of the dwelling is more important. Considering the relatively small number of pottery (cf. Březinová 2000) and the absence of primary waste, resp. waste *de facto*, we can assume that even though the layer full of burnt charcoal suggests structure fire and its collapse, it could not happen suddenly and unexpectedly. The more likely explanation would be the abandonment of the dwelling and its recycling within the life cycle of dwellings of La Tène settlements. We do not encounter the evidence of intentional burning down of a dwelling in La Tène period (Březinová 2006, 9–18), and thus the motive for these acts, which could endanger nearest buildings, is unknown. It could be connected to the secondary use of the structure, which did not have to be its result, but the cause.

Secondary use of the feature

After the feature stopped fulfilling its primary function (of the dwelling?), the exit transformation (Neustupný 2007, 51) began about which we know

very little. We can say for sure that the feature was not destroyed gradually. Neither it was gradually covered also with a settlement layer or secondary waste (Kuna/Němcová 2012, 173–175). After removing load-bearing columns from post-holes, empty space was filled by interior remains (SU8 and SU10), but no layer was created at the bottom level. Approximately 10 cm thick layer (SU2) full of small charcoal, which creates the bottom level of the feature, represents burning down of the feature. In the period after the destruction of the dwelling, when feature 74 represented an unused waste pit filled with burnt remains, secondary use of the feature occurs. It represents the placement of the human remains in the northern half of the lowered part of the feature. The time that has passed since destruction up until deposition of the human remains is unknown. Based on the sharp stratigraphic interface between the charcoal layer (SU2) and the inside filling of the feature (SU1), we can assume that it was a short period during which gradual filling of the feature did not happen. Deposition of the human remains on its own can be understood as an intentional activity rather than a random placement or deposition in situ within catastrophic destruction of the dwelling. That is explained by the stratigraphic record when the human remains (SU5) are in direct contact with the charcoal layer (SU2) and at the same time lie in superposition with the post-hole (SU9). Also, no additional indications of digging were found in the near vicinity of the human remains (Fig. 2). The latest filling (SU1) forms a homogeneous part, surrounding human remains as well as the entire space of the lowered part of the feature (Fig 4). Besides the stratigraphic record, the taphonomy processes are also important, evaluated mainly by *anthropologie de terrain* (Černý 1995; Duday et al. 1990). Looking at the human cadaver (Fig. 2), we can see deposition on the back with a slight tilt of the right side. The absence of the right upper limb bones and parts of the left lower limb is caused mainly by the method of excavation rather than taphonomy processes. The presence of labile articulations (for example phalanxes of hand) and followed anatomical position of the bones confirms primary burial, which had to follow in a short time after the death of the buried (Prokeš 2007, 17). The process by which the positional transformation was carried out (Nilsson Stutz 2006, 221) shows decomposition in the secondary hollow space. This fact confirms the absence of a grave-pit as well as other construction near the remains. At the same time, it defines the process of depositing as a short-term event, which had to be followed by filling the feature. Considering the relative dating of the inside filling (SU1) at the end of stage LTC1 it is possible to synchronise these events with each other.

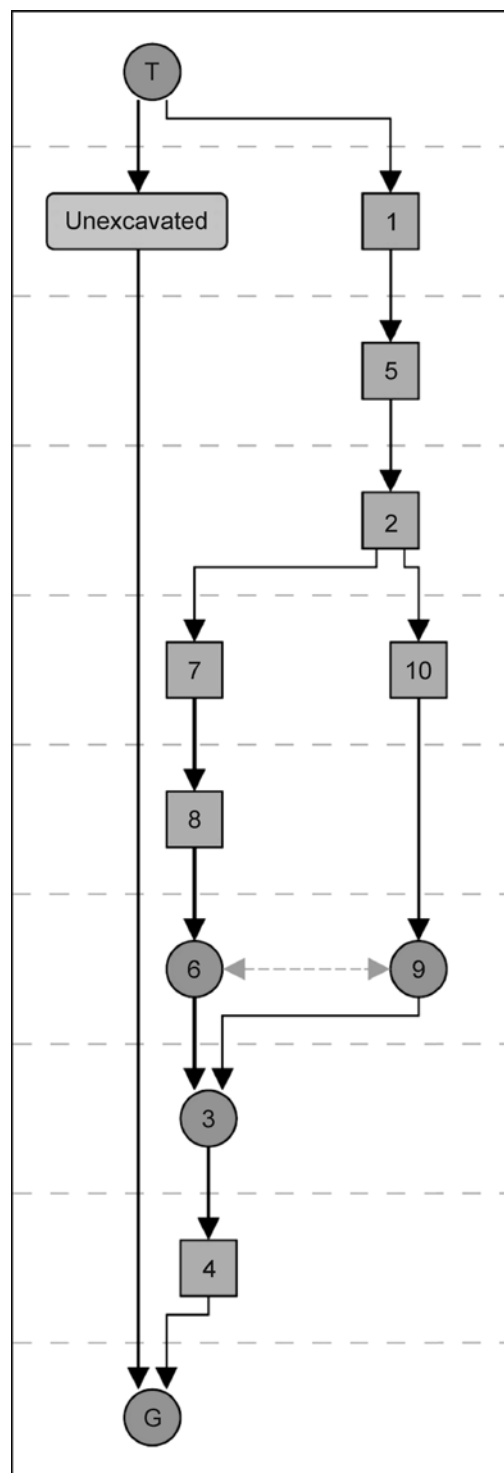


Fig. 4. Bratislava-Devín, Záhřady site, feature 74. Harris matrix of stratigraphic units. 1 – dark brown, sandy-clay filling admixture of small charcoals, rarely daub; 2 – greyish brown sandy-clay layer with many small charcoals; 3 – trench of feature no. 74; 4 – bright yellow sandy layer bedrock; 5 – human remains; 6 – trench of post-hole no. 80; 7 – brown clay filling with charcoals and sand; 8 – sandy-clay, yellow-brown filling with charcoals; 9 – trench of post-hole no. 79; 10 – sandy-clay, yellow-brown filling with charcoals and daub; T – top surface; G – interface to geology.

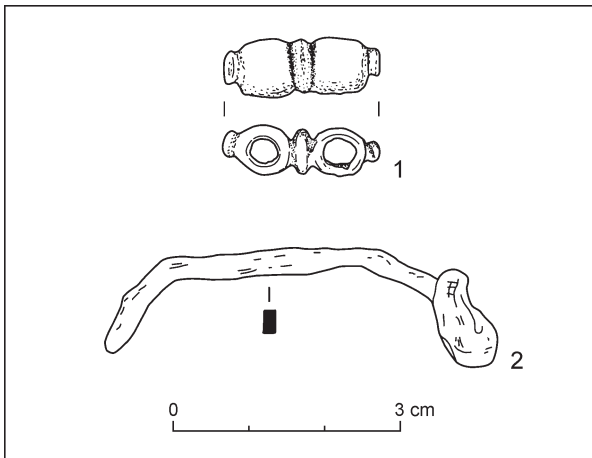


Fig. 5. Bratislava-Devín, Záhrady site, feature 74. Metal objects (drawing by E. Šebestová, D. Repka).

Dating of the feature

Artefacts found inside filling are important for the dating of the feature. For pottery, the greatest importance is in S-shaped profiled wheel-made bowls. Their out curved edge is characterised by conical cutting, which creates a roof-like shape. Bowls shaped like this appear in the Early and Middle La Tène period (compare *Březinová et al. 2015*, 259, 261, 262, pl. 1: 2, 5, 6; 3: 6, 7; 4: 5; *Čambal 2011*, 89, 90, pl. II: 1, 2, 5, 7, 9, 12, 14a; III: 14). Numerous representations in the feature have wheel-made situlas with rounded edges and with an addition of graphite. But these are present during a longer period from Early (*Březinová et al. 2015*; *Čambal 2011*) till Late La Tène period (type I/1b according to *Čambal 2004*, 16).

The dating of the feature is possible due to the pair of metallic objects, mainly by bronze rod link formed by a pair of rings from the chain belt (Fig. 5). The rings are separated by a slight boss. One button-like knob is located at the end of both sides. Based on the type of classification of mentioned link (type Gk-J, resp. variant Gk-J-AXa according to *Bujna 2011*, 100–105, fig. 42), it is possible to reconstruct the overall shape of the belt. Chain belt composed of bronze moulded rod links, which linked massive bronze rings of circular cross-section. Origin of the belt can be searched in the west Celtic environment, specifically in the territory of present-day Switzerland (e.g. *Kaenel 1990*, 131, 436, 437, 441, fig. 65; pl. 70; 71; 75; *Tanner 1980*, pl. 26; 29; 46; 63; 89; 84), Germany (*Krämer 1985*, pl. 39) or the Czech Republic (*Bujna 2011*, 104, 105), where it appears in the Middle La Tène period (stage LTC1). In Slovakia, belts

of this type are known from grave 741 at the burial ground of Holiare (*Benedik/Vlček/Ambros 1957*, 96, 189, fig. 28: 11–14; pl. XXXVII: 3–5) and from the Celtic sacrificial ground in Trenčianske Teplice (*Pieta 2000*, fig. 8: 23–25), dated similarly in stage LTC1, resp. its end.

The second metallic object is the fragment of iron fibula most likely to type with a strapped foot (MLT-scheme) with an internal cord and frame-shaped bow. Its better dating is impossible due to the absence of significant parts in the particular foot. Fibula with a strapped foot appears during a long period from the Middle to Late La Tène period (*Čambal 2017*, 87–89).

For the dating of the feature, the horizontal stratigraphy is also important, which supports the assumption of the existence of structure in the early settlement phase. With surrounding La Tène dwellings (features no. 81, 85, 86, 88), the feature in the perimeter 20 m is in respect with other dwellings, which indicates the existence of enclosed space-defining areas of individual households. What seems different is immediate proximity with the production area (features no. 10, 13, 15–18, 33, 39), which is later⁴ than feature 74. Mutual disposition considering different dating points out usage of the inner area of the settlement rather than anything else.

Identity of the buried

The anthropologic analysis found out that skeletal remains found in feature 74 most likely belonged to a male around 25 to 29 years old. His body height reached only 151.89 cm (*Kolena 2015*, 353–359). The average height of adult Celtic men in the central European area was much higher. Based on skeletal remains from Celtic burial ground in the central European area, we can conclude that most males reached a height in a span around 160 to 180 cm. Women were slightly shorter, at the level of 140 to 165 cm (e.g. *Benadik/Vlček/Ambros 1957*, 258, 259; *Jakab 2016*, 128–130, tab. 12; 13; fig. 8; *Waldhauser 1999*, 136). Besides abnormally low height, the man found in feature 74 suffered from strong neck pain. The pain was caused by blockage of vertebrae in the cervical area of the spine. It also caused reduced mobility of the neck as well as increased muscle weakness. The above-mentioned condition could have been the result of congenital disease. Such disease caused incredible handicap in performing any physical activity (*Kolena 2015*, 353–359).

⁴ Excavation of the La Tène settlement is currently being processed and will be published.

INTERPRETATION

The absence of signs of violence suggests that the individual died of a natural cause. The death during sudden destruction of the dwelling can be ruled out as well, which is supported by archaeological find assemblage, whereas lower limbs partially interfered into the space of post-hole. These means that it was no longer standing when the man, resp. his body got into the dwelling. After the destruction of the dwelling in stage LTC1, the life in the settlement does not end but continues, which is supported by construction and usage of other dwellings, as well as farm and production buildings in its vicinity. Based on the presented facts, we present several hypotheses that describe the causes of such a specific context.

Disposal of the dead

Presents situation when human remains are non-ceremonially placed into settlement feature, without the presence of grave equipment and other adjustments of inner space. In our case, it would be disposed of the deceased into the space of the destroyed structure of feature 74. In the given situation, this act would mean the easiest method to 'get rid of' a human cadaver. The reasons for this activity can be connected to the lower social status of the individual caused by abnormally low height with reduced mobility. Which to a large extent, is suggested by mentioned reconstruction of the identity of the buried. For hygienic reasons, the removal of the destroyed structure in the emerging production was a logical solution.

Intramural burial

In prehistoric archaeology, finds of human remains in settlement features (*Pankowská/Monik 2017*) or in waste pits and ditches (*Jelínek 2007*) are not uncommon. Understanding the practical side, it can also be about forms of burial that respected specific procedure of burial rites (*Šumberová/Valentová 2011, 246*). In this case, the excavated situation in feature 74 would present the burial rite of a specific individual, which reflects a gradual change of forms of burial rite, observed in burial grounds (*Haruštiak 2009, 154–157*) with its ritual expression. Inhumation burial rite with an absence of grave goods and additional work spent on burial structure may reflect the adaptation of burial ceremonies to new trends.

Burial as a part of rituals

The previous hypothesis draws a parallel between burial rites in burial grounds and settlements. Is it possible to explore a continuation of ritual processes associated with death in a settlement area? From prehistory, we know that finds from settlements may as well present liminal places, notably boundaries and entrances (*Brück 2006, 302*). Is the charcoal layer under the deceased a remain of symbolic cremation pyre or just proves the destruction of the structure? The ritual activity before the actual remains deposition might be a part of burial practices in the form of modification of the burial object's inner space.

DISCUSSION

We can come across settlement burials/depositions of human remains in different sites, not only in Slovakia (*Repka 2014, 40, fig. 9; Šefčáková 2012, 491–493; 2014, 190–193, 196, 197*) but basically throughout the whole known Celtic world (e.g. *Čížmár 2000; Holodňák 2015; Lange 1983; Trebsche 2013; Waldhauser 1999, 39–41; 2010; Waldhauser u. AG 1993, 313–315*). In many cases, the position of individuals found in settlements features differs from those we know in similar burial grounds. That is the case of the presented find from Devín. In the case of full inhumation remains in anatomical position, lateral is most common, alternatively also with bent lower limbs. There are also known cases of a prone position called 'sitting position' (*Lamb 2018*). Certain similarities can be seen even in the find assemblage, at least as far as stratigraphy is concerned. Some individuals were not placed directly at the bottom of a feature or the floor level, but either at the burnt or charcoal layers. The above-mentioned situation was discovered in one of the dwellings from the end of the Middle La Tène period, at the hillfort from Závist in central Bohemia (*Motýková/Drda/Rybová 1978, 102–104, fig. 23*). A child's skeleton was found above the layer of fire destroyed dwelling from the Middle La Tène period also in Bánov near Nové Zámky (*Pavúk 1964, 324, 325*). However, more detailed finding circumstances are not known.

In the case of finds in Devín, burning down of the entire structure is unlikely, mainly due to the context of surrounding structures or the absence of burnt remains of daub within the space of the feature. The presence of the ash layer in the feature is often associated with its burning down (compare features VI and XI from Komjatice-Kňazova jama: *Horváth 2014, 73, 74*). The second interpretative option can be recycling of the part of the dwelling and

burning of unusable components. While in early prehistory, these processes are documented (*Bickle 2013*, 169–172) in the La Tène period, this question of the structures' life cycle remains unanswered (*Pieta 2008*, 69–71).

The presence of human remains in settlement features is often connected to the destruction horizon (individual phases) of a settlement, such as at mentioned hillfort from Závist. The destruction of the building with the buried individual from the Middle La Tène period is followed by another settlement phase (*Motyková/Drda/Rybová 1978*, 104). In the case of another Czech site Soběsuky, there were 16 individuals buried in settlement features. A minimal part is dated back to the beginning of the Early La Tène period (stage LTBI). The above-mentioned is put into a relationship with an early stage of settlement, caused by the arrival of a new population during Celtic historical migration at the beginning of the 4th c. BC (*Holodňák 2015*, 8). Similarly, in site Soběsuky, findings of human individuals are interpreted from La Tène settlement in Moravian Mutěnice (*Čížmár 2000*, 81–84, 88). Numerous evidences from the territory of Slovakia are connected to later historical events. Specifically, during the first half of the 1st c. BC, when power intervention of Dacians into the area of the Central Danube region was documented. These include finds from several locations in the space of Bratislava oppidum (*Repka 2014*, 40; with other literature; *Šefčíková 2014*, 190–193). The analysed finds from feature 74 in Devín are related to an early phase of settlement. After its destruction at the end of stage LTC1, life in the settlement does not end but continues till the end of the Late La Tène period.

On some of the previously mentioned human skeletal remains were found traces of violent death. In a certain context, those would point out the violent destruction of (certain phase) the settlement. From our point of view, the absence of these traces, as shown in finds of the individual from feature 74 in Devín, is more important. In given cases, it is possible to consider ritual practices. This includes finds from Závist, Mutěnice, and the part from the Bratislava oppidum. For example, four individuals without traces of (fatal) injury were placed on burnt timbering in a storage pit on the Panská street no. 19–21. Interestingly, the male remains without a head were placed in the pit together with a female skull. Free placement of the bodies indicates that the deceased was thrown into the pit already dead (*Šefčíková 2012*, 491, 492). Posthumously placed remains of well-build male were found, most likely in a storage pit dug directly in a dwelling on the Main Square (Hlavné námestie) no. 8 (*Šefčíková 2012*, 492). In the Late La Tène period P. Jud interprets a pres-

ence of human bones in settlements and oppida as a result and a final phase of multistage burials, as evidenced by finds from Basel-Gasfabrik settlement (*Jud 2008*, 147–160). A good example is the oppidum of Manching. There were found over 5 000 human bones and parts of skeletons (*Hahn 1999*, 137). The crucial fact is that human bones are related to several ritual practices different for isolated bones, inhumation remains, and separate skulls (*Sievers 2003*, 103). In the Devín case, only partial inhumations deposited in pits and ditches are similar, very often buried in abnormal positions (*Sievers 2003*, 101, fig. 107). In the same situation, there is no clear evidence of restriction to specific sex or age groups (*Lange 1983*, 7). If these finds indicate an exceptional treatment of the dead, it can be evidence of burials of individuals with special social status.

An interesting finding situation was discovered in the lower part of nearby Devín hill. The destroyed stone feature with five damaged human skeletons has been carried out (*Pieta 2008*, 182). Initially, they were associated with the destruction of local settlement at the beginning of the second decade of the 1st c. BC. However, the analysis of osteological material revealed that part of it was boiled. Based on the analysis, ritual practices need to be considered (*Pieta 2008*, 182).

The evidence of ritual practices in settlement contexts offers a different view on the existence of the charcoal layer in feature 74. Unless it represents the destruction of the previous structure or method of recycling during settlement existence, it may be directly connected to the burial of human remains and thus reflect a certain ritual activity. In this context, the importance is in processes, which are ongoing in different settlement areas. Those are presented by gradual change of burial rite at burial grounds when cremation was culminating at the end of stage LTC1 (*Bujna 2004*, 326) associated with an easement of specific practices (*Haruštiak 2009*, 156) and an inventory simplification (*Pieta 2008*, 283). These are related to increasingly dominant activities associated with cremation as a ritual transformation (see *Oestigaard 1999*, 345–364). These activities are most notably documented at the end of burial activities, or when archaeology no longer has the evidence of use of burial grounds, such as finds from the 1st of May Square (Námestie 1. mája) in Nitra (*Pieta 1993*, 53–55). Interpretation of recorded context would in this sense represent a symbolic pyre without a cremation of the body. Considering the absence of traces of burning in the excavated feature 74, the alternative is a relocation of embers from a different source and the creation of significant visual perception (*Williams 2004*, 271–277) associated with the burial of a unique individual.



Fig. 6. Bratislava-Devín, Záhrady site. 3D visualisation of archaeological reconstruction of secondary usage feature 74 with inhumation burial (QR online 3D model).

CONCLUSION

Interpretation of the occurrence of human remains in the settlement area is often a complex issue. It is mainly affected by documentation of all find circumstances directly in the field. Only in this case, it is possible to relevantly reconstruct the reasons that led to these practices. Unfortunately, we often encounter the opposite or the absence of a more detailed analysis. One of the paper's objectives was to show a possible approach to the analysis and evaluation of these specific finds. The placement

of the male individual in the feature 74 in La Tène settlement in Bratislava-Devín can be identified as a burial through reconstruction of find context, even though he was in the destroyed dwelling (Fig. 6). Based on find circumstances, we ruled out a direct connection with a process of its destruction. Besides, no signs of 'violent' death were found on the bones. Ritual reasons are also confirmed by the presence of the buried of lower stature with a physical disability and the presence of charcoal layer, on which he was placed and is not connected probably with the destruction of the structure.

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Manuscript accepted 25. 6. 2021

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