Eduard Krekovič

GENDER IDENTITY AND POTTERY: THE SIZE OF URNS IN CREMATION CEMETERIES

It is well known that gender identity can manifest itself in mortuary practices. A couple of years ago I decided to test the hypothesis that men's, women's, and children's urns differ in size. At three Germanic cemeteries in southwestern Slovakia[1] I found that men's urns tended to be slightly larger than women's urns, while children's urns tended to be smaller than men's or women's.

I then attempted to apply the same criteria at selected cemeteries within the territory of the Roman Empire. Although I initially intended to study cemeteries only in Pannonia, I found an inadequate number of appropriate sites there. For that reason I looked for further sites in the western Roman provinces, and in the end I chose two cemeteries from *Pannonia* (Rusovce[2] and Solymár[3]), two from *Raetia* (Ergolding[4] and Kempten[5]), and two from *Germania* (Rottweil[6] and Heidelberg[7]) (**fig. 1**).

In general it can be stated that there exist very few appropriate cemeteries. The difficulty in acquiring data was influenced by the following factors:

1. An insufficient quantity of reliable anthropological analysis – which in the case of cremations is understandable.
2. A small quantity of urn graves.
3. An insufficiency of well-preserved urns – dimensions were often difficult to determine due to their fragmentary character.
4. A small number of children's graves – this is a generally known phenomenon; moreover, in certain cemeteries some of the children were buried through inhumation.

Cemeteries

Table 1 lists the cemeteries where the research was carried out. Often they are sites with a high number of graves – several hundred or even a thousand – but only a small portion of those are urn graves.

Of these, about 45% were generally usable for analysis. The cemetery at Kempten is noteworthy in this respect, since 66.7% of its urn graves were usable for analysis. In addition, not all sites contain a sufficient number of children's graves, so possible comparisons between children's graves and individual adult graves would not be very representative (this was the case in Ergolding and Rottweil). In the case of Rusovce, also due to the small number of graves, I compared adult graves, without gender differentiation, with children's graves. It is interesting to note that in anthropologically analyzed graves women outnumbered men in all cases. In spite of the small quantity of data, all cemeteries displayed the same tendencies, suggesting that the data obtained were not random.

I worked on the assumption that the bereaved would consider a large urn to be one that was sufficiently tall and wide. For that reason I employed a so-called **size-index** as a criterion for determining the size of urns according to the sum of the vessel's greatest height and width. I considered only ceramic urns in the shape of pots, which represented an absolute majority of vessels in these graves. Occasionally other shapes could be found, such as bowls and jugs, but I did not work with these. **Table 2** depicts average size-indexes at different cemeteries for each gender, given in centimeters.

They reveal a rather distinct tendency for the average size of men's urns to be larger than that of women's urns, and for both of these to be larger than children's. I speak of tendencies, because this was not true in every case – sometimes a man's urn was relatively small, while a woman's urn could be large. In some cases even children's urns were relatively large. **Table 3** depicts size-indexes for the largest and smallest urns of each gender at different cemeteries. These numbers represent extreme cases, which sometimes deviated markedly from the average. The largest children's urns were larger than the smallest men's and women's urns. In every cemetery but Heidelberg, the largest urn found was male.

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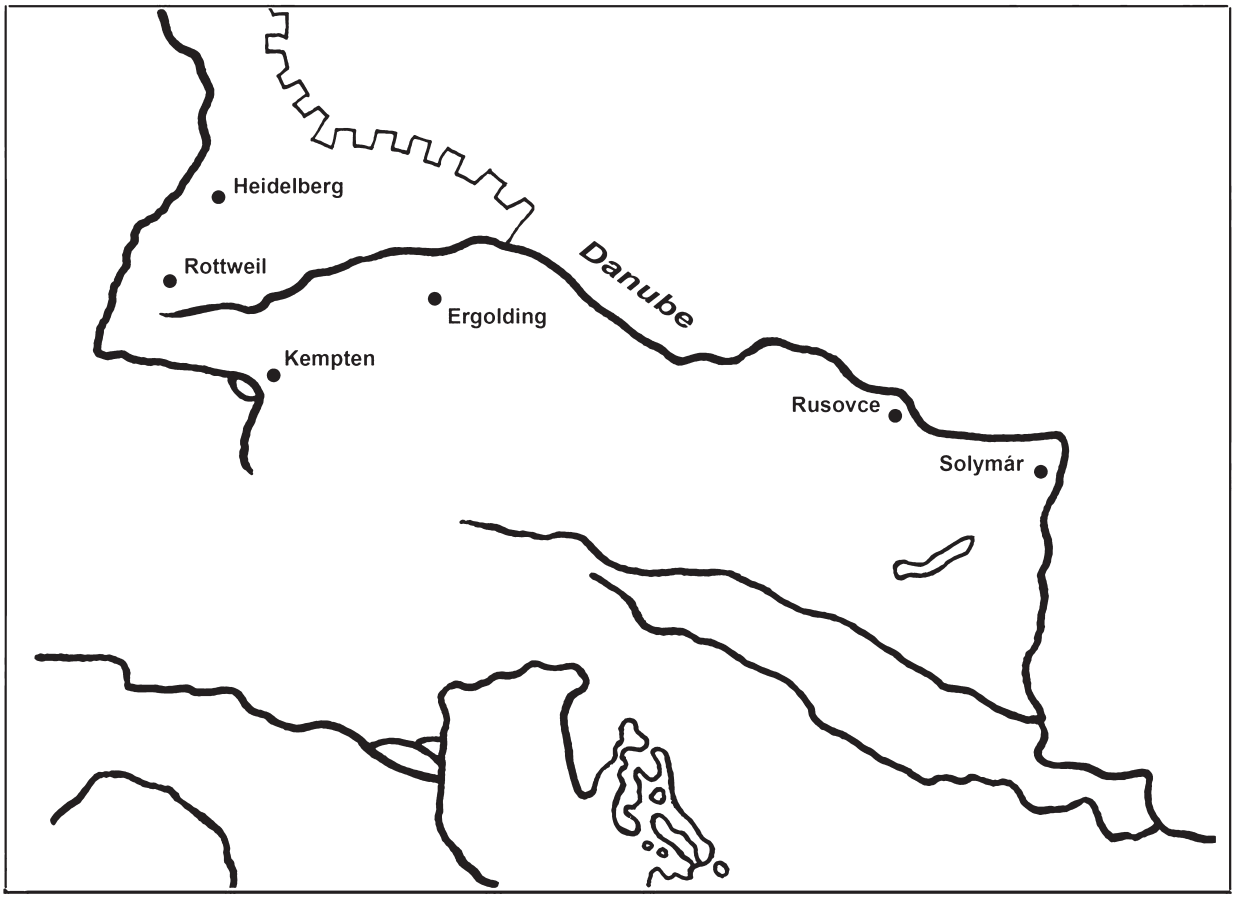

Fig. 1. Map of the Rhine-Danube region, showing the sites mentioned in the text.

Exceptions can be interpreted in the following ways:
– an error might have been made in determining gender by an anthropologist, which in cremation graves is understandable;
– overall body size might have played a role in choosing urns, without regard for gender;
– sometimes there may simply have been no urn available in the appropriate size.

It is also interesting that if we sort the range of urn sizes according to gender, the order of cemeteries is the same – those sites with the largest average men's urns also contained the largest average women's and children's urns. The site with the largest urns was Heidelberg, while at the opposite end of the range was Solymár, with the smallest urns.

Conclusion

As was the case with Germanic cemeteries, Roman cemeteries also indicated that it might be possible to relate urn size to the gender of the individual interred. This rule may not have been rigorously applied in the archeological record, since exceptions to it can be found. In the social sciences it is rare to find laws with 100 percent applicability, and difficult-to-interpret deviations will always be found. In this case too what we have is most likely a non-binding cultural norm, which could be shared with other cultures in various time periods. In order to confirm the hypothesis, however, further analysis will be necessary.

krekovic@fphil.uniba.sk

	urn graves	used graves	men	women	adults	children
Rusovce	31	14 (45,1%)	–	3	5	6
Solymár	73	21 (28,8%)	4	11	2	4
Kempten	147	98 (66,7%)	20	29	23	26
Ergolding	38	18 (47,3%)	8	10	–	–
Rottweil	104	42 (40,4%)	20	22	–	–
Heidelberg	102	34 (33,3%)	5	15	30	4

Table 1. Breakdown by number of the urn-burials in the cemeteries studied.

	men	women	adults	children
Rusovce	–	–	44,2	36,5
Solymár	47,2	38,4	41,4	33,5
Kempten	49,8	43,5	46,1	35,6
Ergolding	54,5	45,8	–	–
Rottweil	48,7	45,2	–	–
Heidelberg	55	51,3	49,9	40

Table 2. Average size-index for each category in each cemetery.

	men	women	children
Rusovce	–	46,5 – 33	42,5 – 26,8
Solymár	57,1 – 42	49,5 – 30,5	43,3 – 23,1
Kempten	70,4 – 37,5	60,3 – 29,6	47,2 – 18,1
Ergolding	60,6 – 41,4	55,5 – 33,3	–
Rottweil	64,4 – 30,8	58 – 28,4	–
Heidelberg	65,6 – 42	66,9 – 37,2	57,3 – 19,7

Table 3. Range of size-index for each category in each cemetery.