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# FROM PAGANISM TO CHRISTIANITY

**BURIAL RITES DURING THE TRANSITION PERIOD**

**Edited by Rytis Jonaitis, Irma Kaplūnaitė**

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# The Earliest Catholic Burial Sites in Medieval Vilnius

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*The Catholic community in Vilnius began to form at the turn of the 14th century, almost a century before the country's official Catholic baptism. The location of the city's oldest Catholic cemetery has yet to be determined. In the territory of the Vilnius castles, the earliest graves are associated with the Church of St Anne, which was built after the 1387 baptism. A Catholic cemetery must have existed in the present-day Old Town near the Church of St Nicholas as its associated churchyard has been recorded in Jogaila's privilege of 1387. Accumulations of human bones have also been found during archaeological excavations near the parish Church of St John. After 1387, a cemetery operated next to the Franciscan church and monastery. This paper presents an overview of the likely locations for the 14th-century burial sites, where the first members of the Catholic community in Vilnius might have buried their dead. The study makes use of the few written sources available and discusses the archaeological evidence.*

**Keywords:** Medieval Vilnius, burial features, burial sites, Catholics.

## Introduction

After Lithuania officially adopted Catholicism in 1387, there was a noticeable increase in the number of Catholic settlers in Vilnius. More information about Catholic cemeteries becomes available with the increasing number of churches and churchyards at the end of the 14th century. However, the historical context shows that the first Christians settled in Vilnius as early as the end of the 13th or the beginning

of the 14th century, together with the foundation and growth of the city. That is, almost 100 years before the official Catholic baptism of the country. Vilnius became home to both Orthodox and Catholic Christian communities. The earliest Orthodox burial ground in the city has been found in today's Bokšto Street; it dates from the last third of the 13th century to the beginning of the 15th century. The Catholics

settled in Vilnius at a similar time or a little later than the Orthodox, but it is not yet known where the deceased of this community were buried in the years before 1387.

One of the characteristics of Catholicism was that the place of burial was usually located near buildings of worship, i.e. in the churchyards of churches and monasteries. The search for the earliest Catholic burials must, therefore, include the location of the first religious buildings. It is known that Catholic churches were established in Vilnius before the end of the 14th century, as evidenced by the letters of the Grand Duke of Lithuania Gediminas to the Westerners in 1323–1324 and the privilege of Grand Duke Jogaila to the Bishop of Vilnius in 1387. However, identifying Catholic burials from the period before baptism is problematic because the exact location of the first Catholic church (or churches) in Vilnius is not known.

Another issue in the search for the earliest burial site is the place of residence of the Catholic community in pagan Vilnius. In the Christian tradition, burial grounds are located close to the living, i.e. near residential areas. Therefore, it is likely that if the settlement of the community is found, the church and a burial site could be discovered nearby. Again, this is a very complicated issue. More information about the Catholic residential area is only available from the end of the 14th century, when a separate district, the so-called German Town, was established in the western part of the city. The earliest location of the community, therefore, remains a matter of debate.

Written sources are of little help in this study because knowledge of Catholic life in the city before the baptism in 1387 is scarce. Historiography is largely based on limited written sources. As such, considerably more is known about the Catholics after

the baptism, about the political history of their presence in the town (especially the attempts to baptise), the circumstances of the baptism of 1387, and the later establishment of religious institutions. To answer the question of where the first Catholic cemeteries might have been located in the period before the baptism, it is, therefore, necessary to look for more information from other sources, especially archaeological investigations. Fortunately, the Old Town of Vilnius has been relatively well-researched archaeologically.

This article deals with the places where the first members of the Catholic community in pagan Vilnius would have buried their dead. Since Catholic burials are often located in churchyards, the location of the first churches will also be analysed for this purpose. Furthermore, the question of the earliest Catholic settlements will be raised. In the absence of written sources, the study will focus on the archaeological material.

### **Historiography and the state of research**

Vilnius has been recognised as a Catholic city since the year 1387 when its official baptism took place. However, written sources that could shed light on the life of Catholic believers in Vilnius, are very scarce. The first known record indicating the Catholic presence in Vilnius is a 1298 treaty between Grand Duke Vytenis of Lithuania (1295–1316) and the citizens of Riga, in which Vytenis vaguely promises to undertake baptism. Unfortunately, the text of the treaty itself has not survived, and the fact of its existence is known only from the complaint released by Riga citizens on 30 March 1298 against the crimes of the Teutonic Knights.<sup>1</sup> Another source is the letters of Grand Duke Gediminas (1316–1341), written in

1 *Gedimino laiškai. Chartularium Lithuaniae res gestas magni ducis Gedeminne illustrans*, Vilnius, 2003, pp. 14–15.

1323–1324, inviting Westerners to settle in Vilnius. Notably, the letters refer to the Catholic (Dominican and Franciscan) churches that already existed in the city.<sup>2</sup> This suggests that there must have been a cemetery next to them. However, since the letters do not specify the location of the churches, this has led to confusion in later scholarly literature: the Church of St Nicholas, which still stands in the western part of the Old Town of Vilnius, has been identified as the church mentioned in Gediminas' letters. As we shall see below, however, St Nicholas' church was built after Gediminas wrote his letters. It is mentioned in Jogaila's privilege of 1387 and is located in the German Town,<sup>3</sup> not in the castle area.

Another document as important as the letters is the report by the papal legates (3 November 1324) regarding their mission to Grand Duke Gediminas of Lithuania. The document mentions the Franciscans, their church and a hospice (*hospicium*)<sup>4</sup> in Vilnius. Although the exact location is not specified, the report gives the impression that the buildings in question were located near the ruler's manor. Later written sources and archaeological evidence indicate that the area mentioned by the legates was located at the southwestern foot of Gediminas Hill.

Another document that provides information about the Catholics in Vilnius is the privilege of Jogaila, the Grand Duke of Lithuania, to the Bishop of Vilnius, dated 17 February 1387 (that is, the year of the official baptism of Lithuania). It describes the part of the city to be given to the bishop: *'The part of the city to be granted is divided on one side by a road leading from the castle of Vilnius directly uphill past*

*the right side of the house of Čėškus, a townsman of Vilnius, passing by the house of the Friars Minor, and by a road on the other side of the house of that same Čėškus, situated at the rampart and the churchyard of St Nicholas' church. The territory to be granted continues and extends on the left side to the road leading to Trakai Castle...'*<sup>5</sup> The privilege mentions two objects related to the Catholic part of the town – the Franciscan House and the Church of St Nicholas (the first known record of the latter). Significantly, it mentions the churchyard of the church, where the cemetery was to be located.

There are also other sources related to the Catholic community of Vilnius. The earliest of these are the foundation acts and documents of churches built after the baptism,<sup>6</sup> as well as texts recording the grants given to the Franciscans in the 15th century,<sup>7</sup> and so forth.

There are no other early sources that would point to Catholic cemeteries dated to the period before the baptism. Perhaps this is the reason why early Catholic cemeteries in Vilnius have been neglected in historiography. In the absence of written sources, studies usually focus on the period after baptism. It is noted that the Catholic cemetery in the area of the present Old Town must have been located near the Church of St Nicholas. However, in-depth investigations have not been carried out. The history of the Catholic community in the city is also poorly researched. The historiography mentions the German Town that was inhabited by Catholics, however, the information is limited to the statement that it was a part of the town inhabited by German merchants

2 *Gedimino laiškai*, p. 47.

3 In addition to this name, the terms 'Latin Town', 'In Arena' ('Na Piaskach'), and 'Smėlynė', are also used.

4 *Gedimino laiškai*, pp. 183–190.

5 *Lietuvos TSR istorijos šaltiniai*. T. 1, *Feodalinis laikotarpis*, Vilnius, 1955, p. 58.

6 For more details, see V. Drėma, *Vilniaus bažnyčios*, Vilnius, 2008.

7 For more details, see S. Rowell, *Winning the living by remembering the dead?, Tarp istorijos ir būtovės. Studijos prof. Edvardo Gudavičiaus 70-mečiui*, ed. A. Bumblauskas, R. Petrauskas, Vilnius, 1999, pp. 87–121; S. C. Rowell, *Pranciškų (konventualų) ordino įsitvirtinimas Lietuvoje XV a.: Vilniaus pavyzdys, Pirmieji pranciškų žingsniai Lietuvoje XIII–XVIII a.*, ed. D. Baronas, Vilnius, 2006, pp. 32–53.



and craftsmen. The historiography includes some discussions on the possible location of the first church, which is relevant to this study because, according to the Christian tradition, a cemetery would have been located nearby. Furthermore, the location of the church would also point to the residential area of the Catholics. However, the research is complicated by the fact that the first church has been searched for in several completely different places in Vilnius.

Michał Baliński, who was the first to hypothesise the chronology of the establishment of Catholicism in Vilnius, in his 'History of the City of Vilnius' (1836–1837), dates the construction of the Franciscan church to the reign of Grand Duke Gediminas and argues that it could have been located on the site of the Church of the Brothers Hospitallers (the Holy Cross).<sup>8</sup> Józef Ignacy Kraszewski, on the other hand, stated in his works on the history of Vilnius (1838, 1840) that the first church in Vilnius was the Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary (of which the construction was begun only after 1341).<sup>9</sup> Historiography from the second half of the 19th century and the end of the 20th century is largely based on the hypothesis that the earliest Franciscan church mentioned in the letters of Grand Duke Gediminas was the Church of St Nicholas.<sup>10</sup> The works of the Polish researcher M. Kosman are noteworthy: he argues that there was a Catholic church in Vilnius

as early as 1298 and that two Franciscans worked in the office of Grand Duke Vytenis.<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, the exact location of the church was not specified.

New hypotheses were established at the end of the 20th century following the incorporation of archaeological data into the studies. First, the work of Liudvikas Dzikas, written in 1990 (unpublished), in which the author examines the archaeological data from excavations carried out in various parts of the Old Town of Vilnius. It is noteworthy that the author dated the Church of St Nicholas to a later period, i.e. to the second half of the 14th century. He also associates the settlement of the neighbouring German Town with the construction of St Nicholas' church.<sup>12</sup> The work of the archaeologists G. Vaitkevičius and K. Katalynas should also be noted.<sup>13</sup> Of particular importance is G. Vaitkevičius' observation that the first Catholic (Franciscan) church in Vilnius could have been built on the site of the current cathedral.<sup>14</sup> In the historiography of the second half of the 20th century, a hypothesis was put forward arguing that a cathedral stood on the site of the present cathedral during the reign of King Mindaugas.<sup>15</sup> However, this hypothesis was refuted by G. Vaitkevičius.<sup>16</sup>

With the growing amount of archaeological evidence, the 21st century witnessed the beginning of a dialogue between historians and archaeologists. For example, the historians D. Baronas, A. Dubonis

8 M. Balinskis, *Vilniaus miesto istorija*, Vilnius, 2007, p. 23, 27.

9 J. I. Kraszewski, *Wilno. Od początków jego do roku 1750 przez ego*, T. 1, Wilno, 1840, p. 42.

10 V. G. Vasilevskij, Ocherk" istorii goroda Vil'ny, *Pamjatniki russkoj stariny v" zapadnyh" gubernijah imperii. Vypusk" pjatyj*, Peterburg", 1872, p. 11; B. Fronckevich, *Kratkoe opisanie r.-k. kostelov g. Vil'ny, Trudy devjatogo arheologičeskago s"ezda v" Vil'ne 1893*, Moskva, 1893, p. 207; W. Semkowicz, *Hanul, namiestnik wileński (1382–1387)*, i jego ród, *Ateneum Wileńskie*, R. VII, Z. 1–2, 1930, p. 4; M. Limanowski, *Najstarsze Wilno, Wilno i ziemia Wileńska*, T. 1, Wilno, 1930, p. 134; J. Ochmański, *Biskupstwo wileńskie w średniowieczu*, Poznań, 1972, p. 58; T. M. Trajdos, *Kościół katolicki na ziemiach Ruskich korony i Litwy za panowania Władysława II Jagiełły (1386–1434)*, T. I, Wrocław, 1983, p. 29; *Vilniaus architektūra*, ed. A. Jankevičienė et al., Vilnius, 1985, p. 7; *Lietuvos architektūros istorija*, T. 1, ed. J. Minkevičius, Vilnius, 1987, p. 121.

11 M. Kosman, *Drogi zaniku pogaństwa u Bałtów*, Wrocław, 1976, p. 17.

12 L. Dzikas, *Vilniaus senamiesčio raida archeologijos duomenimis (iki XVIII a.)*. Part I. Text, VAA, f. 1019, ap. 11, b. 4405, pp. 54–55.

13 For instance, K. Katalynas, *Vilniaus plėtra XIV – XVII a.*, Vilnius, 2006; G. Vaitkevičius, *Vilniaus įkūrimas*. T. 1, *Vilniaus sąsiuviniai*, Vilnius, 2010.

14 G. Vaitkevičius, *Vilniaus įkūrimas*, p. 60.

15 For instance, N. Kitkauskas, A. Lisanka, *Nauji duomenys apie viduramžių Vilniaus katedrą, Kultūros barai*, Nr. 5, 1986, p. 56; N. Kitkauskas, *Vilniaus pilys. Statyba ir architektūra*, Vilnius, 1989, p. 99.

16 G. Vaitkevičius, *Ankstyvasis Vilnius: įrodomumo vingiai, Kultūros paminklai* 7, 2000, p. 179.

and R. Petrauskas – the authors of *Lietuvos Istorija* (History of Lithuania) (Vol. 3) – not only use the data from written sources but also rely on the conclusions provided by archaeologists. They claim that the first Franciscan church was located on the site of the present cathedral and that a German Catholic community was founded next to it in the first quarter of the 14th century.<sup>17</sup>

The research by the historian Stephen Christopher Rowell into the history of the Franciscans in Vilnius (1999, 2006) is also significant. In his 2006 study, the author draws on data collected by archaeologists and points out that during the reign of Grand Duke Gediminas, the Church of St Nicholas had not yet been built. The Franciscans probably had a chapel in their hospice.<sup>18</sup> S.C. Rowell's remark that this space was in use until 1369 is also noteworthy (*ibid.*).

The most comprehensive work to date on Catholics in early Vilnius is the doctoral thesis defended by the author of this article in 2015.<sup>19</sup> It analyses the settlement of Catholics in the city, the chronology, circumstances and development of this process. The study also deals with the question of the location of the Catholic community, and thus of the first church and its development. Admittedly, Catholic cemeteries in the period before baptism are not studied in the 2015 thesis.

The question of the earliest Catholic church in Vilnius has also been the focus of research by Oksana Valionienė (2017). In her article, the author analyses and compares the arguments of a number of researchers about the first temple in the Lithuanian capital and what information it can provide about the

urban environment of medieval Vilnius. She agrees with G. Vaitkevičius that the theories of Mindaugas' Cathedral and the 'Temple of Perkūnas' can be dismissed, while the so-called 'Square Building' can be attributed to the Franciscan mission.<sup>20</sup> In her 2019 monograph, the author also focuses on the Church of St Anne and St Barbara in the Lower Castle, where burial took place after the baptism.<sup>21</sup>

Studies regarding the earliest Christian cemeteries can benefit greatly from archaeological evidence. However, to determine where the first Catholics buried their deceased, it is necessary to assess the conditions and circumstances of their establishment within pagan Vilnius, which undoubtedly had an impact on the location of the community, their places of worship and burial sites.

### Catholics in early Vilnius

The emergence of the Catholic faith in Vilnius was no accident. Multiculturalism and the coexistence of diverse groups of people are a characteristic of Medieval cities. Therefore, when looking for the reasons for the arrival of Catholics in Vilnius, the development of the city must be recognised as an important factor. The emergence of the Catholic community in Vilnius was in the interest of the rulers, the need to boost the economy of the growing city and to attract craftsmen and workers, as well as innovations brought by the settlers.<sup>22</sup> It is also no coincidence that the Franciscan monks were invited to the city, as they were in demand in the dukes' offices as secretaries,

17 D. Baronas, A. Dubonis, R. Petrauskas, *Lietuvos istorija*. T. 3, XIII a. – 1385 m. Valstybės iškilimas tarp Rytų ir Vakarų, Vilnius, 2011, pp. 290, 325.

18 S. Rowell, Pranciškonų (konventualų) ordino įsitvirtinimas Lietuvoje ..., p. 34.

19 I. Kaplūnaitė, Vilniaus miesto katalikiškoji dalis XIV–XVI amžiaus pradžioje, doctoral dissertation, Klaipėda, 2015.

20 O. Valionienė, Pirmosios Vilniaus šventyklos tyrimų problema, *Lietuvos istorijos metraštis* 2017/1, 2017, p. 15.

21 O. Valionienė, *Viduramžių Vilniaus erdvės evoliucija (XIII a. vidury – XVI a. pirmas ketvirtis)*, Vilnius, 2019, pp. 111–113.

22 For instance, the court required skilled workforce and aimed to ensure an efficient provision of military force (D. Baronas, Christians in late pagan, and pagans in early christian Lithuania: the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, *Lithuanian Historical Studies* 19 (2014), p.59.

scribes and translators.<sup>23</sup> It is noteworthy that although the relationship between pagan Lithuania and Catholicism was often hostile (constant battles with the Order of the Teutonic Knights), the interest in peaceful migration is evident in the activities of the Grand Dukes (evidenced by the invitations sent to Westerners).

Another aspect is Catholic Christianisation. In both Western Europe and Scandinavia, the process of Christianisation was usually supported by the ruler.<sup>24</sup> Political and economic motives were important, as baptism provided rulers with powerful new allies, stimulated trade relations and gave access to goods and contacts that could not be accessed in other ways.<sup>25</sup> However, Lithuania's situation was unique in this respect: we know of the martyrdoms of Franciscan monks in 1341 and 1369<sup>26</sup> and of Orthodox martyrs in 1347. So, the appearance of Christians in Vilnius can be associated with the need to improve the economy, trade and warfare, rather than to spread the faith.

The arrival of the first Catholics in Vilnius can be traced to the very beginning of the city's foundation in the late 13th century. In earlier historiography, a hypothesis was raised suggesting that there was a Cathedral of Mindaugas standing in Vilnius,<sup>27</sup> as such predating the arrival of Catholics. However, this claim has now been rejected.<sup>28</sup> Traces of Catholics appear only in the last decade of the 13th century, with the visit of Grand Duke Vytenis' envoys to Riga

in 1298, presumably to recruit Franciscan monks for an existing church in Vilnius.<sup>29</sup> Sources suggest that Vytenis maintained good relations with Archbishop Frederick von Pernstein and allowed him to train monks for service in Lithuania. According to S.C. Rowell, Vytenis' contacts with the archbishop in 1305 were based on the alliance formed in 1298; in 1312, Vytenis invited two Franciscans to lead the Catholic Church in Novogrudok.<sup>30</sup>

The establishment of Catholics in Vilnius at the end of the 13th century or in the first decades of the 14th century is also confirmed by archaeological data. Archaeological evidence indicates that the southwestern foot of Gediminas Hill developed as a Catholic space during the first two decades of the 14th century. This is evidenced by the visible influence of the Livonian Order on household pottery and building techniques.<sup>31</sup> In this particular location, the Franciscan mission, the ruler's office and masonry buildings were probably erected in the first half of the 14th century.<sup>32</sup> A masonry church was located in the area surrounding the later large enclosure (the construction of which probably began in the mid-14th century); the rest of the Catholic community, such as the masons and jewellers who worked for the ruler, were also living here.<sup>33</sup>

In the early years of its foundation, the Catholic community was very small.<sup>34</sup> A more concentrated Catholic settlement in the city can be traced back to

23 S. C. Rowell, *Iš viduramžių ūkų kylanti Lietuva*, Vilnius, 2001, p. 78.

24 For more details, see A. Sanmark, The role of secular rulers in the conversion of Sweden, *The cross goes north. Processes of conversion in Northern Europe, AD 300–1300*, ed. M. Carver, York, 2003, p. 551.

25 Th. DuBois, *Sanctity in the North. Saints, lives and cults in medieval Scandinavia*, Toronto, 2008, p. 5.

26 D. Baronas provides a thorough analysis of these martyrdoms, their causes and circumstances (D. Baronas, *Vilniaus pranciškonų kankiniai ir jų kultas XIV–XX a.*, Vilnius, 2010).

27 N. Kitkauskas, *Vilniaus pilys*, p. 124.

28 For more detail, see A. Sanmark, The role of secular rulers in the conversion of Sweden, *The cross goes north. Processes of conversion in Northern Europe, AD 300–1300*, ed. M. Carver, York, 2003, p. 551.

29 M. Kosman, *Drogi zaniku pogaństwa u Bałtów*, p. 17; G. Vaitkevičius, *Vilniaus įkūrimas*, p. 61.

30 S. C. Rowell, *Iš viduramžių ūkų kylanti*, pp. 62–63.

31 G. Vaitkevičius, *Vilniaus įkūrimas*, p. 61.

32 G. Rackevičius, LDK valdovų rūmų ir Vilniaus pilies teritorijos tyrimai 2002–2009 metais, *Lietuvos pilys* 5, 2009, p. 47.

33 For more detail, see I. Kaplūnaitė, Vilniaus miesto katalikiškoji dalis ..., pp. 42–46.

34 A. Nikžentaitis, *Ikikrikščioniška Lietuvos visuomenė XIII–XIV a.*, habilitation thesis, Vilnius, 1999, p. 29.

later centuries, with Jogaila becoming the Grand Duke of Lithuania in 1377. The second half of the 14th century saw political, social and economic changes in Vilnius that had a significant impact on the Catholic community. These included population growth, changes in the defensive system (the construction of a large enclosure at the foot of the southwestern slope of Gediminas Hill), and the economic situation (opportunities for trade with a wider market, the rise of craftsmanship). All these factors led to the settlement of the western part of today's Old Town of Vilnius. The emergence of the German Town can be seen as a result of Jogaila's policy: he allocated an area for the arriving German (mainly Livonian) merchants and craftsmen and granted permission for a church to be built there. Archaeological evidence suggests that a Catholic suburb was established in the western part of the Old Town of Vilnius around 1370–1380.<sup>35</sup> The area of about six hectares was quickly and densely settled, followed by the construction of the Catholic Church of St Nicholas.<sup>36</sup> From then on, the Catholic part of the city began to expand and flourish.

Thus, even before the official baptism in 1387, a Catholic settlement can be detected in the western part of the Old Town of Vilnius, whose denominational affiliation is indicated by the presence of the Church of St Nicholas. This period probably also saw the establishment of the churchyard near the Church of St Nicholas. However, the question remains as to where the Catholics of Vilnius buried their dead for

almost a century before the construction of St Nicholas' Church.

### Location of Catholic burial sites

The changes brought about by Christianity were reflected not only in funerary traditions but also in the choice of location for burial. While some features are typical of different periods – such as placing burial sites in scenic locations, often on hills and near water<sup>37</sup> – other aspects of Christian burial differed from those of the earlier period. Early Christian burials were commonly placed away from residential areas.<sup>38</sup> However, from the end of the seventh century (earlier in major centres from the sixth century), the topography of burial sites changed. During the late Middle Ages, the practice of burial in churchyards spread across Europe, leading to the establishment of urban cemeteries within cities rather than outside them.<sup>39</sup> As is noted in historiography, only a few generations ago death was always close – the mortality rate was much higher and people always lived with the idea that death can come at any time.<sup>40</sup> This is why during the Middle Ages, unlike today, cemeteries were often located in the heart of the city and served as an open and versatile space.<sup>41</sup> The church itself would have been an important meeting spot and even a place of trade during Medieval times. Some German towns, for example, were built around churches and their

35 The Catholic part of the city and its formation are discussed in detail in the author's dissertation (I. Kaplūnaitė, *Vilniaus miesto katalikiškoji dalis ...*).

36 I. Kaplūnaitė, *Vilniaus miesto katalikiškoji dalis ...*, pp. 60–66.

37 The choice of a scenic location for funerary monuments is a common human trait. For example, most late medieval burial grounds, as well as 13th and 14th century cremation burials, are located on hills near water. (G. Petrauskas, *Laidosena viduramžių Lietuvoje: mirusiųjų deginimo paprotys*, doctoral thesis, Vilnius, 2017, p. 54).

38 H. Härke, *Cemeteries as places of power, Topographies of power in the Early Middle Ages* (The Transformation of the Roman World, 6), ed. M. de Jong, F. Theuvs, Leiden, Boston and Cologne, 2001, p. 3.

39 G. Fisher, *Cemeteries and burials, Medieval Archaeology. An encyclopedia*, ed. P. J. Crabtree, New York, 2001, p. 48.

40 R. van Oosten, R. Schats, Preface, *The Urban Graveyard. Archaeological Perspectives*, ed. R.M.R van Oosten, R. Schats, K. Fast, N. Arts & H.M.P. Bouwmeester, Leiden, 2018, p. 7.

41 K. M. Boivin, *Two-Story Charnel-House Chapels and the Space of Death in the Medieval City, Picturing Death: 1200–1600. Brill's Studies in Intellectual History*, ed. S. Perkinson, N. Turel, Leiden, 2020, p. 79.

adjoining cemeteries.<sup>42</sup> A similar situation is reflected in the history of the Church of St Nicholas, with the German town developing around it.

Christian cemeteries were rarely built on land that was not owned by someone. The land on which these cemeteries were built was usually overseen by ecclesiastical institutions and monastic orders. However, cemeteries could also be owned by a community.<sup>43</sup> It should be noted that in urban areas some cemeteries were located next to places of worship, while others were not. However, the former situation is more common. According to historiographical data, parish churches were almost always accompanied by cemeteries.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, the first Catholic cemeteries in Vilnius should be looked for near a church. Churches, in turn, are to be searched for near residential areas, within the boundaries of the city at the time. In the case of Vilnius, however, this pattern is influenced by the fact that the city was pagan during the period in question. All this must be kept in mind when seeking the earliest Catholic burial sites in Vilnius.

The most reasonable claim at present seems to be that the first Catholics settled at the southwestern foot of Gediminas Hill. This is supported by archaeological data as well as written sources – the report of the papal envoys<sup>45</sup> testifies, albeit indirectly, to the presence of the first Franciscan church and mission in the vicinity of the ruler's manor. Therefore, looking for a Catholic burial place here, at or near the foot of the hill seems most logical.

The southwestern foot of Gediminas Hill is a small area of about 1.7 hectares (Fig. 1). The topography of the site is unique – the foot of the hill is

situated on a promontory, surrounded to the north, west and south by the River Vilnia, creating a favourable defensive position.<sup>46</sup> The Vilnia was also a source of drinking water and food. Furthermore, only a few hundred metres to the east stood the ruler's castle, providing both security and a market. In addition, the roads to Livonia, Rūdininkai, Medininkai<sup>47</sup> and Dubingiai crossed at the foot of the hill. It was an isolated area, suitable for the settlement of a small Catholic community in pagan Vilnius. The earliest traces of masonry in Vilnius were discovered at the southwestern foot of Gediminas Hill.<sup>48</sup> It is worth recalling the connection between religious buildings and residential areas, which were often located in close proximity during the Middle Ages. The settling of the foot of Gediminas Hill can be linked to the construction of the masonry church, which was completed around 1320 and is mentioned in the letters of Grand Duke Gediminas.

However, locating the first church and its associated burial ground is a problematic quest. Even though it is agreed that a church must have stood at the foot of Gediminas Hill, historical sources do not provide definite evidence. Archaeological investigations, on the other hand, have revealed several possible locations for the church. Firstly, fragments of a square building were found in the basement of the present Cathedral Basilica. It has also been suggested that fragments of another building found further east could also be a church.

Furthermore, according to some researchers, St Anne's Chapel for the Franciscan Mission was built on the site of the Lower Castle around 1323. This chapel may have stood on the site of the later

42 G. Fisher, *Cemeteries and burials*, p. 48.

43 H. Härke, *Cemeteries as places of power*, p. 2.

44 J. Schofield, A. Vince, *Medieval towns. The archaeology of British towns in their European setting*, London, 2003, p. 187.

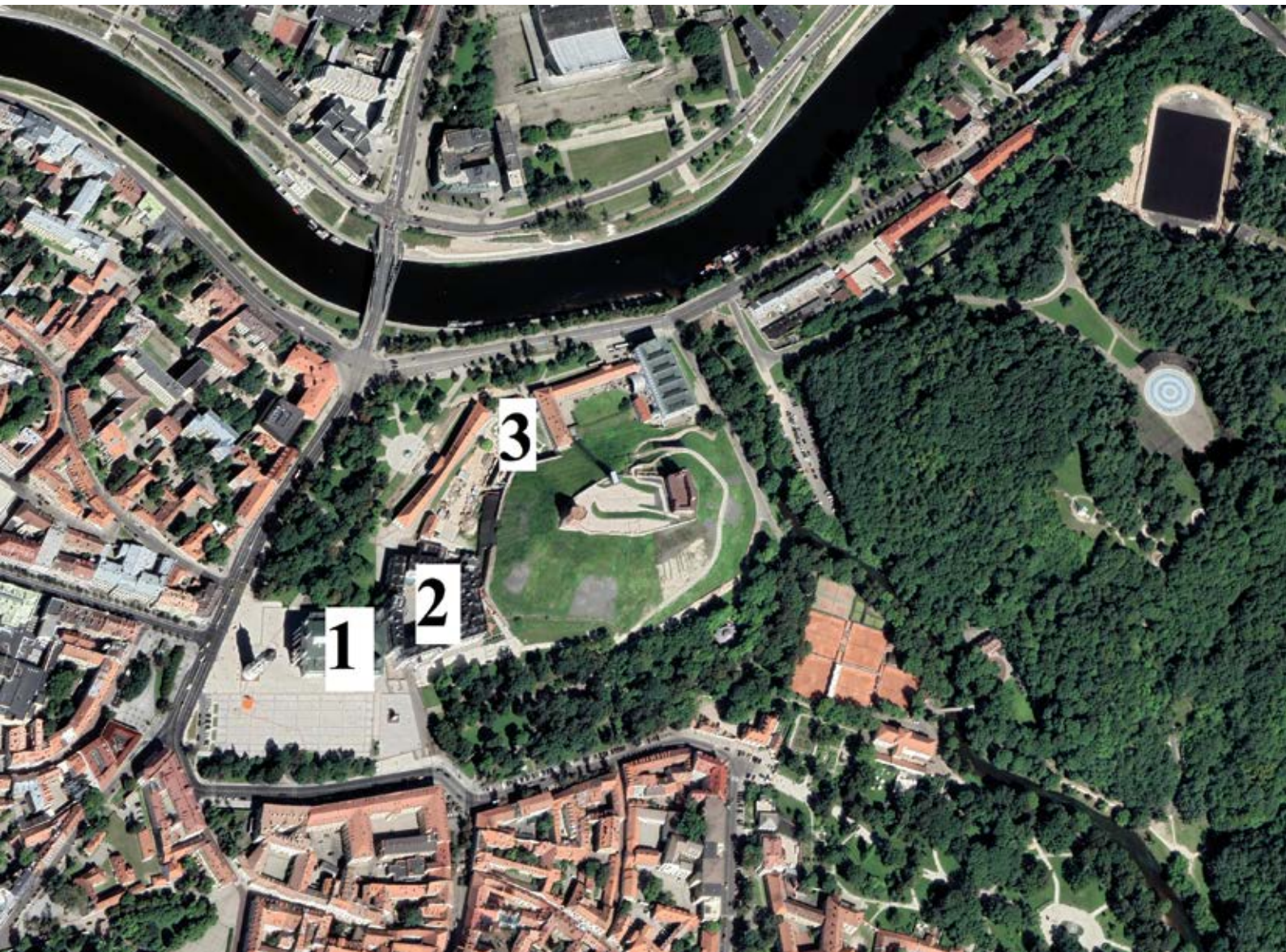
45 See *Gedimino laiškai*, pp. 183–190.

46 N. Kitkauskas, *Vilniaus pilys*, p. 92.

47 G. Vaitkevičius, *Vilniaus įkūrimas*, pp. 94–95.

48 Finds included bricks, roof and floor tiles (G. Vaitkevičius, *Vilniaus įkūrimas*, p. 61).





**Fig. 1.** The southwestern foot of Gediminas Hill. Plan of Vilnius on Google Earth, additional information by I. Kaplūnaitė.

- 1) The location of the 'square building';
- 2) The location of the 'M2' building;
- 3) The location of the Church of St Anne and St Barbara.

church of St Anne and St Barbara. All these hypotheses will be discussed below.

The most probable location of the first church is at the southwestern foot of Gediminas Hill, under the present cathedral. Fragments of a square building were found during archaeological excavations in the cathedral's basement; its layout is typical of missionary churches of the 13th and 14th centuries<sup>49</sup> (Fig. 1: 1). For some time, two opinions circulated in the historiography: one version associating the 'squire building' with the cathedral built for the baptism of Mindaugas (1251),<sup>50</sup> while the other held that it was built after the baptism of Lithuania in 1387.<sup>51</sup> However, the hypothesis that the discovered masonry structure is the remains of a church from the first quarter of the 14th century is now accepted as the most feasible explanation. The foundation pit of this building was dug into the so-called 'Horizon E', dated to the period between 1313 and 1328.<sup>52</sup> In this horizon, masonry debris (bricks, floor tiles and fragments of glazed roof tiles) was found. Chronologically, this coincides with the reference in the letter of Grand Duke Gediminas of 25 January 1323 to the '*new church that was built a few years ago*'.<sup>53</sup>

Eduardas Remecas also agrees that the first Franciscan church was located somewhere near the ruler's manor.<sup>54</sup> However, he does not associate the

Franciscan church with a square building but identifies it with the fragment of 'building M2'<sup>55</sup> (Fig. 1: 2). It should be noted, however, that 'building M2' does not conform to one of the basic canons of the Catholic Church: the east-west orientation.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, the plan of the building is unlike any other of its kind. It is more likely to be associated with the premises of a Franciscan mission, such as a chancery or a hospice than with a church.

Another suggestion was put forward by O. Valionienė, who rightly rejects E. Remecas' arguments about 'building M2' and admits that it is the square building that can be associated with the church mentioned in Gediminas' letters, both in terms of its chronology and spatial parameters.<sup>57</sup> According to O. Valionienė, a wooden church could have been built on the site of the present cathedral in 1320–1321, while the square building was erected on the same site in 1326–1328 during the reconstruction of the castle.<sup>58</sup> The hypothesis that the square building was built on the site of a slightly earlier wooden church is based on the discovery of two graves under the eastern wall of the building that predates the masonry structure.<sup>59</sup> In this case, it is reasonable to assume that the graves are the earliest known burials in the area. It should be noted that Albertas Lisanka, who led the excavations, considered these burials to be

49 R. Jonaitis, O. Valionienė. Srednevekovaja arhitektura Vil'njusa v kontekste kul'turnyh vlijanij". Arheologija i istorija Pskova i Pskovskoj zemli, 51, 2006, pp. 265–266.

50 N. Kitkauskas, *Vilniaus pilys*, 124.

51 For more detail, see D. Baronas, *Vilniaus pranciškonų kankiniai*, pp. 75–76.

52 G. Vaitkevičius, *Vilniaus įkūrimas*, p. 60.

53 *Gedimino laišakai*, pp. 183–190.

54 E. Remecas, Vilniaus gaisro datavimo problematika: ar tikrai Vilniaus pilis sunaikino 1419 m. gaisras?, *Lietuvos pilys* 6, 2010, pp. 82–84.

55 E. Remecas, Vilniaus gaisro datavimo problematika ..., p. 84.

56 Traditionally, at least until the 16th century, Christian churches were oriented east-west, with the altar in the eastern part (A. Snodgrass, *Architecture, time and eternity: studies in the stellar and temporal symbolism of traditional buildings*, T. 2, New Delhi, 1990, 323).

57 O. Valionienė, Pirmosios Vilniaus šventyklos tyrimų ..., p. 18.

58 O. Valionienė, Vilniaus erdvinė raidos struktūra viduramžiais, doctoral thesis, Vilnius, 2015, p. 156; O. Valionienė, Pirmosios Vilniaus šventyklos tyrimų ..., p. 18.

59 O. Valionienė, Pirmosios Vilniaus šventyklos tyrimų ..., p. 18.

pagan.<sup>60</sup> Notably, the remains were not cremated, the better-preserved burial was oriented east-west (judging by the position of the feet), and no grave goods accompanied the burials. Thus, it is more likely that these graves belong to a Christian tradition rather than pagan. Unfortunately, only two such burials were investigated. They were also very fragmented, so no further conclusions can be drawn in this case.

It is also worth discussing the hypothesis of the existence of another church that may have stood at the southwestern foot of Gediminas Hill during the first quarter of the 14th century. In addition to the church that existed on the site of today's cathedral, there may have been another Catholic place of worship during that period. Vladas Drėma, in his 1991 work *Dingęs Vilnius* (Lost Vilnius), identifies a Catholic church from the time of Grand Duke Gediminas (1323) in the castle area and indicates that it was a small chapel of St Anne, built for a Franciscan mission.<sup>61</sup> It is unclear from the text exactly where this chapel stood and whether it refers to the later Church of St Anne and St Barbara (Fig. 1: 3). According to historical and architectural research, the wooden church of St Anne and St Barbara was built at the end of the 14th century, possibly around 1390.<sup>62</sup> Further, Adolfas Tautavičius suggests that based on archaeological evidence, the late 14th or early 15th-century masonry church of St Anne was built on an earlier burial ground. This would indicate that if there was a cemetery, a wooden church or chapel did stand here before the later masonry structure.<sup>63</sup>

However, it should be noted that Adolfas Tautavičius dates the wooden church to the period after the official baptism.<sup>64</sup>

The area around St Anne's Church, and even beneath its foundations, did in fact contain inhumation burials (Fig. 2). A. Tautavičius noted that the burial ground at this site may have been as large as 40 x 50 metres. In total, about 60 well-preserved graves and a large number of disarticulated human remains were found here.<sup>65</sup> The deceased were buried inside or without coffins, facing west, southwest and north-west. No grave goods accompanied the burials. As A. Tautavičius points out, the cemetery was probably used by Franciscans.<sup>66</sup> The chronology of burials in the cemetery is extensive: the earliest graves date back to the end of the 14th or the beginning of the 15th century, while the latest group of graves date back to the second half of the 17th century or even the beginning of the 18th century.<sup>67</sup>

Summing up the material gathered so far, it seems most logical that the early Catholic community buried their dead close to their place of residence – at the southwestern foot of Gediminas Hill, near a church. However, it is not possible to confirm this statement, at least for the time being. The dating of the earliest burials at the foot of the hill is uncertain, no artefacts have been found there, and no radiocarbon dating has been carried out. In addition, the study is complicated by the fact that the castle territory has always been used for residential purposes and has undergone constant construction,

60 A. Lisanka, 1984–1988 m. Vilniaus Katedroje vykdytų archeologinių tyrimų ataskaita. Šiaurinės navos brėžiniai. II dalis, LIIR, f. 1. b. 1937, brėž. Nr. 1, kapas Nr. 7; A. Lisanka, Paveikslų galerija Vilniuje. Rūšių sutvarkymas ir pritaikymas lankymui. Perkūno šventyklos laikot. tirti šurfai su apeiginiais židiniais ar jų žymėmis. III dalis, LIIR, f. 1. b. 1941, drawing no. 20.

61 V. Drėma, *Dingęs Vilnius*, Vilnius, 1991, p. 17.

62 R. Firkovičius, Kulto pastatai ir jų vietos Vilniaus mieste. Katalikų bažnyčių istorijos apybraižos (XIII–XX a.). Istoriniai tyrimai. T. 2, LIIR, f. 1. b. 5563, p. 60; V. Drėma, *Vilniaus bažnyčios*, p. 695; V. Levandauskas, *Lietuvos mūro statyba*, Kaunas, 2012, p. 392.

63 A. Tautavičius, Archeologiniai kasinėjimai Vilniaus žemutinės pilies teritorijoje 1957–1958 m., *Lietuvos TSR Mokslų akademijos darbai, serija A*, 1(6), 1959, pp. 120–121.

64 A. Tautavičius, Archeologiniai kasinėjimai Vilniaus žemutinės ..., p. 122.

65 A. Tautavičius, Archeologiniai kasinėjimai Vilniaus žemutinės ..., p. 122.

66 A. Tautavičius, Archeologiniai kasinėjimai Vilniaus žemutinės ..., pp. 122–123.

67 O. Valionienė, *Viduramžių Vilniaus erdvės evoliucija*, pp. 111–112.





**Fig. 2.** A working shot of excavations at the Church of St Anne and St Barbara.  
After A. Tautavičius, 1959, 123.

reconstruction and other earth-moving works, which may have destroyed traces of burial grounds.

Continuing the search for Catholic burial sites in pagan Vilnius, it is worth noting that the Catholics did not always reside in one place. From the 1370s, the location of their final resting place was also moved, leaving the territory of the castles for the Old Town. To locate the burials, it is first necessary to determine where in the city the cultural layer of this period – as well as any signs of settlement – has been found, and whether there are any indications of what might

have been a cemetery. Such clues are mainly human bones, which would have been discovered during archaeological investigations. The pagan Lithuanians probably still cremated their dead at that time and the so-called Šventaragis Valley in Vilnius is regarded as their place of burial dating from the 14th century. According to the historian Marius Ščavinskas, following Maciej Strykowski, today's Tilto Street – the area of the cannon foundry – was the place for venerating the dead (a forest used to grow there), and the place where the cathedral stands today was the

site of a temple or an idol dedicated to Perkūnas.<sup>68</sup> However, this is more of a legendary burial ground as no cremation graves have been found in Vilnius.<sup>69</sup> Thus, a definite pagan burial site or sites in Vilnius remain unknown.

The situation is completely different with regard to the cemetery of the Orthodox community in Vilnius. Their place of burial has been identified in the eastern part of the city, in today's Bokšto Street. This cemetery has been fully investigated; the context and the knowledge gained, allow us to date it from the last decades of the 13th century to the beginning of the 15th century. The cemetery is attributed to Orthodox Christians, both newcomers and local people who had been baptised.<sup>70</sup> The question has been raised as to whether a small Catholic community in the early stages of its development might also have been buried there. In the absence of a Catholic cemetery, would this have been a better option than burial in unconsecrated ground? This idea is still very much a hypothesis. Investigations in Bokšto Street did not reveal any concentration of graves that could be linked to Catholics, nor is its existence mentioned in written sources. Moreover, for a long time, there was a fairly clear division between Catholic and Orthodox areas of the city, which can be followed today along Pilies Street, with Christians of the Eastern tradition expanding eastwards and those of the Western tradition westwards.<sup>71</sup> Thus, a Catholic cemetery of the

second half of the 14th century should be sought in the western part of Vilnius, where the establishment of the German Town began at that time.

In the eastern part of the town, which is associated with the Ruthenian town of Civitas Rutenica, human activity can be traced back to the first half of the 14th century. Archaeological research shows that elsewhere in the Old Town the population was still very sparse in the first half of the 14th century, as higher concentrations of finds were only found along the main roads leading from the castle area to the east and west.<sup>72</sup> Some slightly more pronounced concentrations of human activity can be found in the present-day area around the Church of St Johns, Universiteto Street and the adjacent Šv. Ignoto Street. Excavations in these areas have yielded finds such as pottery dating back to the second and third quarters of the 14th century.<sup>73</sup> Such finds are expected because the area around today's Church of St Johns, for example, is suitable for living: the ground is at an even level, it is close to the ruler's manor, near a crossroads, with bodies of water close by (Fig. 3: 1). The crossroads mentioned above was an important element in the area as one of the roads led east to the Crooked City, while the other went south to Medininkai. However, this particular area is mostly associated with the pagans and Lithuanian neophytes rather than the Catholic community, especially in the period before the official baptism. The very first

68 M. Ščavinskas, *Kristus prieš Belialą. I tomas. Lietuvių anapusinio pasaulio vaizdinių christianizacija Viduramžiais*, Klaipėda, 2021, p. 242.

69 For more on the archaeological investigations at Tiltos Street, on a possible pagan burial site, see I. Kaplūnaitė, R. Jonaitis, Vilnius's Tiltos Street: Legends and Archaeological data, *Archaeologia Baltica* 29, 2022, pp. 8–22.

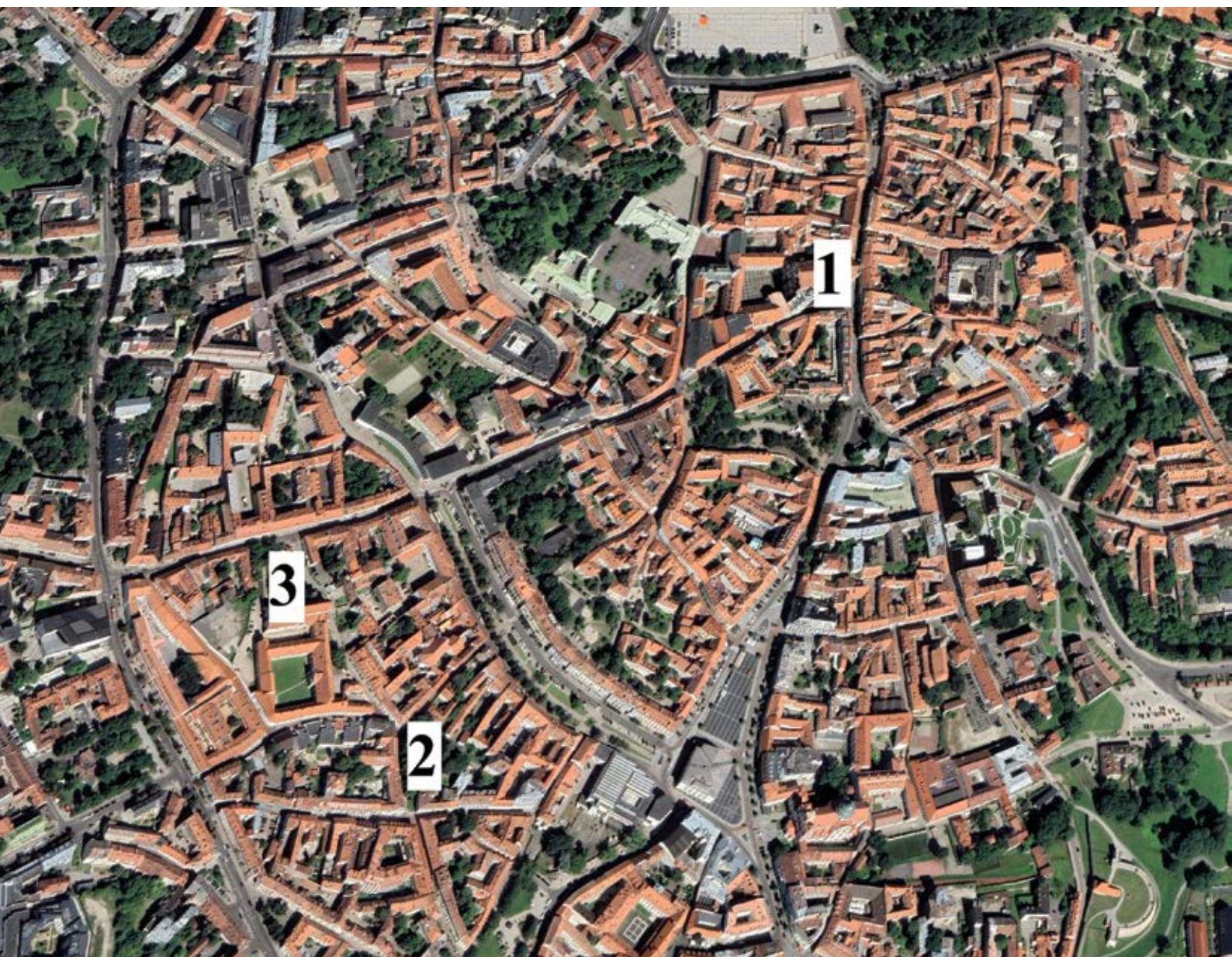
70 R. Jonaitis, I. Kaplūnaitė, *Senkapis Vilniuje, Bokšto gatvėje. XIII–XV a. laidosenos Lietuvoje bruožai*, Vilnius, 2020.

71 For more detail, see I. Kaplūnaitė, Between Greeks and Latins: Pilies Street in Medieval Vilnius, *Athens Journal of History*, 8, 2022, pp. 191–214.

72 I. Kaplūnaitė, Vilniaus miesto katalikiškoji dalis ..., pp. 54–55.

73 Pottery sherds recovered during archaeological excavations: D. Luchtanienė, Vilniaus senjojo miesto vietos (1610 K1), Šv. Ignoto g. 9 Vilniaus mieste archeologinių tyrinėjimų 2002 metais ataskaita, LIIR, f. 1, b. 3972, priedas Nr. 13, lentelė Nr. 15; L. Dzikas, VVU kiemuose vykdytų mechanizuotų žemės kasimo darbų archeologinės priežiūros ir fiksacijos ataskaita, LIIR, f. 1, b. 649; A. Lisanka, 1976–1977 m. Vilniaus m. Universiteto kiemuose vykdytų inžinerinių-geologinių žemės darbų archeologinės priežiūros ir fiksacijos ataskaita, LIIR, f. 1, b. 722; A. Kuzmickas, Archeologiniai tyrimai Vilniuje, Pilies g. 24. Ataskaita. T. 1, LIIR, f. 1, b. 2404.





**Fig. 3.** The western part of Vilnius' Old Town. Plan of Vilnius on Google Earth, additional information by I. Kaplūnaitė.

- 1) The surrounding area of the Church of St Johns;
- 2) The location of the Church of St Nicholas;
- 3) The surrounding area of the Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Franciscan monastery.

parish church of Vilnius, known as the Church of St Johns, was built in this area to celebrate the official baptism.<sup>74</sup>

The Church of St Johns had its own cemetery. The exact location of the cemetery is not known and no complete burials have been found. However, there were disturbed human bones recovered during archaeological excavations in the area near Šv. Jono and Pilies streets.<sup>75</sup> It is believed that there may have been a small Christian cemetery near the Church of St Johns, the chronology of which has not been established.<sup>76</sup> The question remains whether these graves could have been built before the baptism of 1387. Archaeological investigations have shown that the cultural layer here only dates back to the late 14th or 15th century, with some isolated finds dating to an earlier period.<sup>77</sup> Thus, the bones found probably came from the cemetery of the Church of St Johns and date from the period after the official baptism, when the construction of the church began.

No traces of burial sites have been identified in parts of Vilnius' Old Town that contained find spots with the earliest pottery. Extensive excavations have been carried out on the site of the present-day Presidential Palace, the former Bishop's Palace (see below). This area was even mentioned in the Bychowiec Chronicle as the site of the earliest Franciscan monastery.<sup>78</sup> However, the cultural layer on the site dates back only to the 15th century (although the later layers contain finds from the third quarter

of the 14th century).<sup>79</sup> Archaeological excavations have not revealed any evidence of a burial ground; not even disturbed bones have been found here. Moreover, considering the archaeological evidence and the data on the natural environment of the site, it seems that human activity around the Bishop's Palace during the third quarter of the 14th century could only have been occasional. The site itself is unsuitable for daily activities, being a wet, marshy lowland. Pottery from the third quarter of the 14th century may have been brought in with the soil after 1387 when the extremely low ground level was raised.

In the 1370s, a Catholic suburb began to develop in the western part of the city, the so-called German Town, located around the church of St Nicholas (Fig. 3: 2). With the construction of this church, we can begin to consider the existence of a Catholic cemetery in the area of the present Old Town. As mentioned above, churches were usually accompanied by a churchyard that housed a burial ground. Although the first written record of the churchyard of St Nicholas is the 1387 privilege of Grand Duke Jogaila, another hypothesis suggests that the church was built earlier, meaning that Catholics could have started burying their deceased here even before the official baptism. The fact that the church was built before 1387 is indicated by the text of the privilege itself, which mentions an existing church. In the Middle Ages, the construction of a masonry church would have been a lengthy process, depending on

74 V. Drėma, *Vilniaus Šv. Jono bažnyčia*, Vilnius, 1997, pp. 4–6.

75 See I. Jučienė, Vilnius, Gorkio 21 / B. Sruogos 12 šiluminė trasa. Žemės kasimo darbų archeologinės priežiūros ataskaita, LIIR, f. 1, b. 569, p. 6; S. Aleksandravičius, Vilniaus senjojo miesto su priemiesčiais vietoje (25504), Šv. Jonų bažnyčios varpinės (26849) rūsyje ir jos aplinkoje, Pilies g. 21 / Šv. Jono g. 12, Vilniuje 2009 metais atliktų archeologinių tyrinėjimų ataskaita, LIIR, f. 1, b. 5386, p. 9.

76 L. Dzikas, Vilniaus Universiteto teritorijos archeologiniai radiniai, *Muziejai ir paminklai*, T. 6, 1984, p. 49.

77 S. Aleksandravičius, Vilniaus senjojo miesto su priemiesčiais ..., p. 4.

78 *Lietuvos metraštinis: Bychovco kronika*, Vilnius, 1971, p. 77.

79 K. Katalynas, D. Luchtanienė, Žvalgomieji archeologiniai tyrimai (žvalgomosios perkasos Nr. 1, 2) Vilniuje, Reprerentacinių rūmų ansamblio teritorijoje (AtR–45) 1997 m. Ataskaita, LIIR, f. 1, b. 2848; D. Luchtanienė, Archeologiniai tyrimai (plotai 18 ir 19) Vilniuje, Reprerentacinių rūmų ansamblio teritorijoje (AtR–45) 1998 metais. Ataskaita. Tyrimų aprašymas ir priedai, LIIR, f. 1, b. 3231–3234; R. Žukovskis, Vilniaus reprerentacinio statinių komplekso (G277K) teritorijos, S. Daukanto a. 3, Universiteto g. 6, Totorių g. 28 Vilniaus m. archeologinių tyrinėjimų (tirti plotai 27A–C), atliktų 2008 m., mokslinė ataskaita, ARMA, b. 454c.



the preparation of materials, labour and financial circumstances. Churches were built over a period ranging from a few years to several hundred years.<sup>80</sup> For example, the Church of Sts Peter and Paul in Vilnius was begun in 1666, the main construction work was completed in 1675, but the finishing works continued until 1687.<sup>81</sup> The mention of the Church of St Nicholas in 1387 indicates that it must have been built earlier, probably with the foundation of the German Town around 1370.<sup>82</sup>

There have indeed been attempts in historiography to date the construction of this church to an earlier period. Often, without any evidence, it has been linked to the Catholic merchants and craftsmen who settled in Vilnius during the reign of Grand Duke Gediminas and has been called the oldest Lithuanian church.<sup>83</sup> Although early literature dates the construction of the masonry church to the second half of the 14th century,<sup>84</sup> it has been suggested that the original church of St Nicholas may have been wooden before the Gothic church was built.<sup>85</sup> However, excavations of the church have not revealed any traces of an earlier wooden construction.<sup>86</sup> The dating of the masonry church to the second half of the 14th century is based on the results of the analysis of the fabric of the bricks<sup>87</sup> and the markings found on them.<sup>88</sup>

The founder of St Nicholas' Church is believed to be the Livonian German Hanulas.<sup>89</sup> The foundation probably took place around 1392, when Hanulas was about to leave Lithuania.<sup>90</sup> However, the donation refers only to a land plot and not to the financing of the construction of the church. However, as Hanulas played an important role during this period – he was a local government official for the Grand Duke of Lithuania in Vilnius from 1382 to 1387<sup>91</sup> – and was a man of merit to Jogaila, he probably had sufficient funds and influence to finance the construction of the church. In addition, the town's Catholics were also able to support the work both financially and with labour.

Returning to the question of a cemetery at St Nicholas', the data obtained from the archaeological investigations can provide more information about the burials in the churchyard of St Nicholas. It must be admitted, however, that archaeological excavations of the area had been very limited. In 1954, the top of the 1.5-metre-thick cultural layer in the area of the church was removed mechanically; the bones disturbed by this work were dumped in a pit next to the foundation of the church.<sup>92</sup> As a result, a more precise dating of the burials that existed there and of the original archaeological situation remains a problematic issue. Subsequent excavations in the

80 L. E. Neagley, *Disciplined Exuberance: The Parish Church of Saint-Maclou and Late Gothic Architecture in Rouen*, Pennsylvania, 1998, p. 21.

81 S. Samalavičius, *Vilniaus miestiečiai ir miestų kultūra XVII–XVIII amžiuose*, Vilnius, 2013, p. 175.

82 I. Kaplūnaitė, *Vilniaus miesto katalikiškoji dalis ...*, pp. 60–62.

83 For instance, see V. Drėma, *Dingęs Vilnius*, p. 271; V. Šiaudinis, *Vilniaus maldos namai*, Vilnius, 2001, p. 12; V. Petkus, *Vilniaus Šv. Mikalojaus bažnyčia*, Vilnius, 2004, p. 14.

84 *Vilniaus architektūra*, p. 13.

85 See R. Firkovičius, *Kulto pastatai ir jų vietos Vilniaus mieste. Katalikų bažnyčių ir vienuolynų istorijos apybraižos (XIII–XX a.)*, Istoriniai tyrimai. T. 1, LIIR, f. 1, b. 5033, p. 39; V. Drėma, *Vilniaus bažnyčios*, p. 584.

86 V. Petkus, *Vilniaus Šv. Mikalojaus bažnyčia*, p. 15.

87 V. Levandauskas, *Lietuvos mūro statyba*, p. 390.

88 S. Sarcevičius, R. Taraškevičius, *Vilniaus Šv. Mikalojaus bažnyčios plytos – nuo jų ženklinių iki geocheminių sąsajų*, *Archaeologia Lituana*, Nr. 16, 2015, pp. 49–66.

89 R. Firkovičius, *Kulto pastatai ir jų vietos ...*, T. 1, p. 40.

90 R. Firkovičius, *Kulto pastatai ir jų vietos ...*, T. 1, p. 40.

91 V. Drėma, *Dingęs Vilnius*, p. 27.

92 V. Daminaitis, 1997 m. Vilniuje, Šv. Mikalojaus bažnyčios šventoriuje vykdytų archeologijos tyrimų ataskaita, LIIR, f. 1, b. 2978, p. 3–5.



**Fig. 4.** A working shot of excavations in the churchyard of the Church of St Nicholas.  
After V. Daminaitis, 1998, 46, Fig. 11.

churchyard have revealed mainly disturbed burials: in 1988 the remains of about 30 individuals were found, and in 1997 the disturbed remains of about 50 individuals were examined, including some burials in a slightly better state of preservation (Fig. 4).<sup>93</sup> The burials examined in 1997 (test pits 7–10) contained the remains of both males and females; the orientation of the burials varied, with some oriented west-east (such as burials 2 and 3 in test pits 7, 1 and 8–9).<sup>94</sup> It has been determined that the graves were placed

on several levels. As no grave goods were found, the dating was determined based on the stratigraphy and artefacts recovered from other layers: the earliest burials thus date from the 15th century, while the latest date from the 17th century.<sup>95</sup>

It is clear that the investigation at the Church of St Nicholas was not thorough and provided only fragmentary information: in most cases the natural ground level was not reached, no datable material was found in the burials, and the earliest cultural layers

93 L. Dzikas, *Šv. Mikalojaus bažnyčios šventoriuje tiesių inžinerinių trasų archeologinės priežiūros ataskaita*, LIIR, f. 1, b. 1386, p. 1; V. Daminaitis, 1997 m. Vilniuje, *Šv. Mikalojaus bažnyčios ...*, p. 3–12.

94 V. Daminaitis, 1997 m. Vilniuje, *Šv. Mikalojaus bažnyčios ...*, p. 7–9, drawings nos. 5, 6, 8.

95 V. Daminaitis, 1997 m. Vilniuje, *Šv. Mikalojaus bažnyčios ...*

have not survived. It can only be assumed that the Catholics who settled in the western part of Vilnius buried their dead in the churchyard of St Nicholas'. At present, however, there is insufficient data to establish a more precise chronology.

A hypothesis has been raised suggesting that a cemetery may have existed in the area near the later Franciscan monastery and the Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary from as early as the middle of the 14th century (or even in its first half) (Fig. 3: 3).<sup>96</sup> This hypothesis was based on the discovery of Christian graves that were cut into by the late 14th-century chapel and, therefore, the burials are thought to date from an earlier period as well.<sup>97</sup> Archaeological investigations continued for several years, during which a large number of both complete and disturbed burials were investigated (Fig. 5). In 1994, six graves and the remains of 107 individuals were discovered;<sup>98</sup> in the same year, further investigations led to the discovery of 13 more graves and several crypts;<sup>99</sup> the excavations of 1996 uncovered one grave,<sup>100</sup> 27 in 1997,<sup>101</sup> eight graves and the remains of 391 individuals in 2010,<sup>102</sup> and a further 70 graves and the remains of 873 individuals in 2011.<sup>105</sup> The graves contained the remains of men, women and children, which means that the deceased buried here were not only monks but also townspeople. The deceased were buried in several horizons, in different

directions, and mostly without any grave goods. However, some of the burials contained coins, jewellery and various items of clothing.<sup>104</sup> Excavations have also revealed the remains of coffins, including wood and nails.

The head of the 1997 excavations, Andrius Vaicekauskas, suggests that the earliest burial horizon dates from the first or second quarter of the 15th century, and the latest to the first or second quarter of the 17th century.<sup>105</sup> This chronology is based on stratigraphy, artefacts and coins. The first archaeological traces of settlement in this area are dated to the third or fourth quarter of the 15th century; in addition, burials were found to cut into the cultural layer dated to the second half of the 14th century.<sup>106</sup> The investigations have yielded a large record of various types of masonry, including those associated with the first phase of the construction of the church at the end of the 14th century.<sup>107</sup>

The most recent excavations near the church were carried out in the summer of 2023 (led by Vida Šimanauskienė). Unfortunately, the excavation report was not yet published at the time of writing this paper, so the information provided personally by V. Šimanauskienė will be used in the discussion. It is known that several burials from the 14th century were discovered during the excavations, as well as the remains of a wooden building from that period.

96 L. Girlevičius, *Gynybiniai įrenginiai XIV–XVIII a. Vilniuje*, doctoral thesis, Vilnius, 2008, p. 51.

97 Cf. L. Girlevičius, *Gynybiniai įrenginiai XIV–XVIII a. ...*, p. 51.

98 A. Vaicekauskas, *Archeologinių tyrinėjimų Trakų g-vėje 9, Pranciškonų bažnyčios šventoriuje*, ataskaita, LIIR, f. 1, b. 2346, p. 32.

99 S. Sarcevičius, 1996 m. Vilniuje, Pranciškonų bažnyčios viduje ir šventoriuje, Trakų gt. Nr. 9, vykdytų archeologinių tyrimų ataskaita, LIIR, f. 1, b. 2595, p. 16.

100 A. Vaicekauskas, 1997 m. Vilniuje, Trakų g. 9, vykdytų archeologijos tyrimų ataskaita, LIIR, f. 1, b. 2938, p. 24.

101 A. Vaicekauskas, 1997 m. Vilniuje, Trakų g. 9, vykdytų archeologijos tyrimų ataskaita, LIIR, f. 1, b. 2938, p. 24.

102 R. Žukovskis, *Šv. Mergelės Marijos ėmimo į dangų (pranciškonų) bažnyčios teritorijoje (Trakų g. 9/1, Vilniuje) 2010 metais atliktų archeologinių tyrinėjimų ataskaita*, LIIR, f. 1, b. 5497, p. 15.

103 R. Žukovskis, *Vilniaus senjojo miesto su priemiesčiais (25504) Švč. Mergelės Marijos ėmimo į dangų bažnyčios (25024) aplinkos*, Trakų g. 9/1, Vilniaus m., archeologinių tyrinėjimų 2011 metais ataskaita, LIIR, f. 1, b. 5871, p. 40–41.

104 A. Vaicekauskas, 1997 m. Vilniuje, Trakų g. 9 ..., p. 5–17; R. Žukovskis, *Šv. Mergelės Marijos ėmimo ...*, p. 15; R. Žukovskis, *Vilniaus senjojo miesto su priemiesčiais ...*, p. 40.

105 A. Vaicekauskas, 1997 m. Vilniuje, Trakų g. 9 ..., p. 20.

106 G. Vaitkevičius, *Buv. pranciškonų vienuolyno Vilniuje, Kretingos 3/6, Trakų 9/1, Kėdainių 8/4 teritorijos archeologiniai tyrimai*, ataskaita, LIIR, f. 1, b. 1420.

107 R. Žukovskis, *Vilniaus senjojo miesto su priemiesčiais ...*, p. 40.



**Fig. 5.** Burials uncovered in the grounds of the Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. After R. Žukovskis, 2011, 29, Fig. 61.

Regrettably, the radiocarbon method cannot be used to specify the dating because the 14th century falls within the so-called calibration plateau, a century-long flattening of the calibration curve, which covers the period from 1295 to 1400. As a result, the dates obtained by the radiocarbon method indicate the first half of the 14th century and the second half of the 14th century with equal confidence. In this case, it is necessary to take into account the context, the

stratigraphy and the artefacts recovered from the burials. However, it seems that the cemetery was established here after the official baptism, with the building of the Church of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary and the monastery, together with the growth of the Catholic community in the city and the activities of the Polish clergy.<sup>108</sup> Of course, we cannot exclude the possibility that the site of the future Franciscan church was the home of the Friars Minor mentioned

<sup>108</sup> The Grand Duchy of Lithuania was baptised through Poland, so the inhabitants of the new monastery must have come from there.



in the privilege of 1387 (the beginnings of a monastery?). The first burials could have taken place before the baptism and continued after the construction of the church and monastery. For the time being, however, this idea remains a hypothesis.

## Conclusion

The discussion of Catholic burials in Vilnius is possible only for the period when the first Catholic churches were built. This is because Catholics buried their deceased in churchyards, so discoveries of burials are usually made in areas adjacent to churches. However, there is no doubt that the Catholics who settled in the city almost 100 years before the official baptism in 1387 had a place to bury their dead. Identifying such places is made very difficult by the fact that there is no written record of a Catholic cemetery in 14th-century Vilnius, and even the place of residence of the early Catholic community is disputed. The location of the first Catholic church in the city has yet to be determined. Another problem lies in that extensive constructions and reconstructions may have destroyed the earliest cemetery. All this means that we can only hypothesise about the presence and the location of a Catholic cemetery in pagan Vilnius.

Based on systematised archaeological data and scarce written sources, the most likely place for the earliest Catholic burial in Vilnius is the southwestern foot of Gediminas Hill. It was here that the first Catholic believers in Vilnius settled at the end of the 13th or beginning of the 14th century, and it was here that the earliest Franciscan church, mentioned in the letters of Grand Duke Gediminas, must have stood. Following the medieval practice of locating cemeteries next to churches, while the latter were built in residential areas or even in their centres, the earliest burials are likely to be found here. Although written sources are scarce, archaeological evidence

suggests that a church may have stood at the southwestern foot of Gediminas Hill during the reign of Grand Duke Gediminas. The remains of masonry associated with the church and burials have also been found during excavations. However, the material is very fragmentary and the dating of burials is uncertain; some are thought to date from after the official baptism, while others survive only in fragments and their chronology remains unclear. On the whole, the evidence suggests that the first Catholic burials were in the area at the foot of the hill. It should be noted that the city was still pagan at the time, so it would probably have been unsafe and impractical to locate a Catholic cemetery away from the ruler's manor and the protection it provided.

The continuity of funerary practices can also be traced at the southwestern foot of Gediminas Hill. It persisted after the official baptism, so it can be assumed that a cemetery must have existed near the Church of St Anne and St Barbara. Archaeological evidence adds to this theory, as it does not indicate the presence of any other burial ground in the town during the first half of the 14th century that could be associated with Catholics (unlike the Orthodox burial ground in Bokšto Street). There are some indications of settlement in the Old Town of Vilnius from this period, but no burial sites have been identified during archaeological excavations.

The second half of the 14th century (more precisely the 1370s) marks a new phase in the search for a Catholic cemetery. At that time, the number of Catholics in the city was growing, new areas were being settled, the German Town was founded, and the construction of St Nicholas' Church was underway. Archaeologists were looking to find another burial ground in today's Old Town, in the western part of the city. The privilege granted by Grand Duke Jogaila in 1387 refers to an already existing Church of St Nicholas and its churchyard. Archaeological evidence confirms that burials did take place here

as a large number of complete and disturbed burials were found during excavations. Unfortunately, the investigations at the Church of St Nicholas and its surroundings were limited: the cultural layers were disturbed, and although some burials were found, they did not contain any artefacts; also, no radio-carbon dating was carried out.

After the official baptism in 1387, the construction of churches, monasteries and cemeteries began on a massive scale. Cemeteries were established near the Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Church of St Johns. Other cemeteries were still in use, such as those near the Church of St Anne and St Barbara at the foot of Gediminas

Hill, and the Church of St Nicholas. It must be noted, however, that their chronology remains unresolved. The question of dating is especially disputed in the case of burials discovered near the Franciscan Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the monastery. Although extensive archaeological investigations have been carried out in the past, the question of dating remains open, particularly in terms of the earliest phase of the burials. The fact that most of the remains uncovered during excavations have been reburied does not help the situation. It is hoped that further archaeological investigations or a re-evaluation of known data will provide more clarity in the future.

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## Ankstyviausios katalikų laidojimo vietos Viduramžių Vilniuje

**Irma Kaplūnaitė**

1387 m. Lietuvai oficialiai priėmus katalikišką krikštą, intensyvėjo šio tikėjimo atstovų kūrimasis Vilniuje. Būtent nuo XIV a. pab. atsiranda daugiau žinių apie katalikų kapines, kai gausėja bažnyčių ir laidojama jų šventoriuose. Tačiau istorinis kontekstas rodo, kad pirmieji krikščionys Vilniuje apsigyveno dar XIII a. pab. ar XIV a. pr., kuriantis ir augant miestui. Kyla klausimas, kur jau bent 100 metų iki oficialaus 1387 m. krikšto kūrėsi katalikai laidojo savo mirusiuosius. Tokių vietų identifikavimą labai apsunkina tai, kad rašytiniuose šaltiniuose nėra duomenų apie katalikų kapines XIV a. Vilniuje ir net pati ankstyvosios katalikų bendruomenės gyvenamoji vieta kelia klausimų. Iki šiol nėra tiksliai nustatyta pirmosios katalikų bažnyčios mieste vieta.

Remiantis susistemintais archeologinių tyrimų duomenimis ir kuklia rašytinių šaltinių informacija labiausiai tikėtina ankstyviausia katalikų laidojimo vieta Vilniuje – Gedimino kalno pietvakarinė papėdė. Būtent čia XIII a. pab. ar XIV a. pr. apsigyveno pirmieji katalikų bendruomenės atstovai Vilniuje, čia turėjo stovėti ankstyviausia pranciškonų bažnyčia. Archeologinių tyrimų metu rasta ir mūrų liekanų, kurios sietinos su šia bažnyčia, ir kapų. Tiesa, medžiaga labai fragmentiška, kapų datavimas nepatikslingas. Vis dėlto duomenų visuma leidžia spėti pirmuosius katalikus laidojus būtent papėdės teritorijoje. Pastebimas ir laidojimo papėdėje tęstinumas. Jis vyko / tęsėsi ir po krikšto priėmimo, kai jau galima be abejonės kalbėti apie kapines prie Šv. Onos ir šv. Barboros bažnyčios.

Naujas katalikų laidojimo vietos paieškos etapas – XIV a. II p., o tiksliau – amžiaus 8 dešimtmetis. Tuo metu auga šio tikėjimo atstovų skaičius mieste, prasideda naujų teritorijų įsisavinimas, kuriasi Vokiečių miestas, statoma Šv. Mikalojaus bažnyčia. Nuo tada dar vienos laidojimo vietos vis dar pagoniškame mieste reikia ieškoti jau dabartinio senamiesčio teritorijoje, jo vakarinėje dalyje. Tuo labiau, kad 1387 m. Ldk Jogailos privilegijoje minima jau esanti Šv. Mikalojaus bažnyčia ir jos šventorius. Laidojimą šioje vietoje patvirtina ir archeologiniai duomenys – tyrimų metu aptiktas nemažas skaičius kapų ir suardytų palaidojimų.

Po oficialaus 1387 m. krikšto Vilniuje prasideda masinė bažnyčių statyba, vienuolynų kūrimas, prie jų įrengiamos ir kapinės. Atsiranda Šv. Jonų, Švč. Mergelės Marijos ėmimo į dangų bažnyčios kapinės, laidojama prie Šv. Onos ir šv. Barboros bažnyčios Gedimino kalno papėdėje, veikia kapinės Šv. Mikalojaus bažnyčios aplinkoje. Tačiau reikia pažymėti, kad chronologijos klausimas tebelieka neišspręstas. Ypač daug klausimų kelia pranciškonų Švč. Mergelės Marijos ėmimo į dangų bažnyčios ir pranciškonų vienuolyno aplinkoje aptikti kapai. Nors čia vykdyti gausūs archeologiniai tyrimai, vis dėlto kapų datavimas labai neaiškus, ypač, be abejo, kalbant apie apatinę ribą; o tyrimų metu aptikti palaikai dažniausiai jau yra perlaidoti. Belieka tikėtis, kad ateityje daugiau aiškumo įneš nauji archeologiniai tyrimai ar naujas sukauptos medžiagos įvertinimas.