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FROM PAGANISM TO CHRISTIANITY

BURIAL RITES DURING THE TRANSITION PERIOD

Edited by Rytis Jonaitis, Irma Kaplūnaitė

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Reviewers:

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Contents

- 7 Preface
- 10 Pratarinė

I. BETWEEN PAGANISM AND CHRISTIANITY

Rytis Jonaitis

- 17 Christians in a Pagan Environment. Medieval Urban Cemeteries in Lithuania in the 13th and Early 15th Centuries
- 39 Krikščionys pagoniškoje aplinkoje. XIII–XV a. pr. miestietiški Viduramžių kapinynai Lietuvoje

Irma Kaplūnaitė

- 41 The Earliest Catholic Burial Sites in Medieval Vilnius
- 65 Ankstyviausios katalikų laidojimo vietos Viduramžių Vilniuje

Dmytro Bibikov

- 67 Between Paganism and Christianity: The Rite of Partial Cremation in the South of Old Rus'
- 87 Tarp pagonybės ir krikščionybės: dalinė mirusiųjų kremacija pietų Rusijoje

Marius Ščavinskas

- 89 Pagan Customs in Christian Burial Grounds? Written Sources from the 12th to the 16th Century and their Possible Interpretation
- 101 Pagoniški papročiai krikščioniškuose senkapiuose? XII–XVI a. rašytiniai šaltiniai ir jų galima interpretacija

II. BURIAL RITES

Mikalai Plavinski

- 105 The Main Phases in the Development of the Burial Rites of the Late First Millennium to Early Second Millennium Slavic Population of the Upper Viliya (Neris) Region
- 129 Pagrindiniai Neries aukštupio slavų populiacijos laidojimo papročių vystymosi etapai vėlyvajame I m. e. tūkstantmetyje – pirmuosiuose II tūkstantmečio amžiuose

Sławomir Wadył, Elżbieta Jaskulska

- 131 Living with the Dead: Unique Burial Rituals of Early Medieval Society in Pasyń (Northeast Poland)
- 143 Gyventi su mirusiais: išskirtiniai laidojimo papročiai Ankstyvųjų viduramžių Pasyńo (šiaurės rytų Lenkija) bendruomenėje

**Bartłomiej Bartecki, Beata Borowska, Tomasz Dzieńkowski,
Irka Hajdas, Anna Hyrchała, Marcin Wołoszyn**

- 145 Early medieval inhumation cemeteries in Gródek-Volyn'. Research status and future perspectives
- 171 Ankstyvųjų viduramžių inhumacijos kapinynai Grudeke–Voluinėje. Tyrimų būklė ir perspektyvos

III. GRAVE GOODS

Roberts Spirģis

- 175 Materials from Children's Burials from the Ogresgala Čabas Cemetery in the Context of the Spread of Christianity to the Lower Daugava Area in the 11th to 13th Centuries
- 201 Ogresgalos Čabo kapinyno vaikų kapų medžiaga krikščionybės plėtros Dauguvos žemupio XI–XIII a. kontekste

Viktoryia Makouskaya

- 203 Some Features of Children's Grave Goods from the Polack Land from the End of the Tenth to the 12th Century
- 223 Kai kurie X a. pabaigos – XII a. vaikų įkapių Polocko žemėje bruožai

IV. CEMETERY INVESTIGATIONS

Ludwika Jończyk

- 227 The Last Yotvingian Pagans. The Case of the Mosiężysko Cemetery in Northeast Poland
- 251 Paskutiniai jotvingių pagonys. Šiaurės rytų Lenkijos Mosiężysko kapinyno atvejis

Justinas Račas

- 253 The Excavations of the 15th to 17th-Century Punžionys Burial Site in 2017 and 2018
- 273 XV–XVII a. Punžionių kapinyno tyrinėjimai 2017–2018 metais

Roman Shiroukhov, Vyacheslav Baranov, Vsevolod Ivakin,

Ben Krause-Kyora, John Meadows, Khurram Saleem, Ulrich Schuermann

- 275 Baltic Migrants in Ukraine? A Comparative Laboratory Study of the Late Viking Age Ostriv Cemetery
- 299 Baltų migrantai Ukrainoje? Lyginamasis laboratorinis vėlyvojo vikingų laikotarpio Ostrivo kapinyno tyrimas

Oleksandra Kozak

- 301 The Anthropology of the 11th-Century Ostriv Cemetery on the River Ros' in Ukraine: The Effects of Migration
- 323 Antropologiniai XI a. Ostrivo kapinyno prie Rosės (Ukraina) duomenys: migracijos poveikis

Living with the Dead: Unique Burial Rituals of Early Medieval Society in Pasym (Northeast Poland)

Sławomir Wadył

Faculty of Archaeology, University of Warsaw, Poland
s.wadył@uw.edu.pl, ORCID: 0000-0002-1609-5222

Elżbieta Jaskulska

Faculty of Archaeology, University of Warsaw, Poland
ejaskulska@uw.edu.pl, ORCID: 0000-0001-8786-5602

The funeral rite in the Masurian Lakeland in the early Middle Ages is still a mystery. Until the turn of seventh and eighth century, this area was inhabited by people of the Olsztyn group, who practised cremation. However, there are no recognised late eighth to tenth-century burial grounds. Recent research at the stronghold in Pasym revealed evidence of unique burial rituals. An analysis of the distribution of human remains indicates that they were found mainly within dwellings. The osteological analysis suggests that the minimal number of individuals calculated is deficient, at two individuals only. This interpretation is improbable due to the dispersed nature of the findings.

The authors argue that the discovered human remains are testimonies of unknown burial rituals. A parallel discovery was made during excavations of the stronghold at Szestno-Czarny Las, where some bone deposits were unearthed. Are the described discoveries evidence of a change in funeral rituals by abandoning necropolises with individual graves in favour of scattering the remains within settlements, perhaps keeping the remains of the dead within dwellings? The authors suggest an alternative interpretation. The bone fragments are not numerous, but relatively large in size, suggesting that only a small sample of the significantly sized remains was collected (or preserved) and kept within the settlement. Interestingly, similar procedures could have been used for burned and unburned remains. The problem of what happened to the rest of the remains left after the cremation, and whether they are archaeologically attainable, is unresolved.

Keywords: Early Middle Ages, West Balt Circle, stronghold, burial rituals, cremains.

Introduction

Death rituals are well documented throughout history in various regions of the world. Practices concerning death have changed throughout human history. Much of what we know about history comes from examining and interpreting human remains, and how they

were treated. It always had a symbolic meaning, and the rituals were associated with beliefs.

The funeral rite in the Masurian Lakeland in the early Middle Ages is still a mystery. At the beginning of the Early Middle Ages, the area was inhabited by

people of the Olsztyn group of the West Balt Circle, which was established and characterised based on funeral sites.¹ Until recently, the demise of the Olsztyn group had been ascribed to the latter half of the seventh century. However, there is now evidence that some cremation cemeteries remained in use until the early eighth century. Nevertheless, there are no recognised late eighth to tenth-century burial grounds in the area discussed.

Recent research at the stronghold in Pasym, located on an extensive peninsula surrounded by the waters of Lake Kalwa (Fig. 1: a), revealed evidence of unique burial rituals. Interest in the stronghold at Pasym was first aroused in the 1880s thanks to work carried out at the site by Hans von Boenigk and Georg Bujack, the chairman of the Prussian Antiquities Society (Altertumsgesellschaft Prussia) in Königsberg. Large-scale excavations were carried out there in the 1960s, and initial reports pointed to the great importance of this site. Therefore, it was re-examined between 2016 and 2021, producing sensational results.

Materials and methods

Osteological analysis of bone fragments from the Pasym site covered mostly animal remains. However, within the collected material, a small amount of burned, highly oxidised fragments were separated, and underwent close examination by an osteologist

specialising in cremation burial analysis (E.J.), who confirmed that some of them represent human remains. Furthermore, the inspection of unburned elements during zooarchaeological analysis by Dr Anna Gręzak indicated the presence of a small amount of human remains.

As a result, one of the authors (E.J.) analysed both unburned and exposed to fire human remains. Due to the fragmentary status of the remains, all identified human bones were weighed; detailed information on the fragments is available in Table 1. A total of four unburned human bone fragments were identified in four samples of animal remains, with a weight of 8.5 grams. In the case of burned fragments, 38 elements recognised as human remains were recorded, with a total weight of 73.8 grams. A detailed list of morphologically identified human bone fragments is presented in Table 2. Groups containing burnt remains are characterised by a very low number of fragments recognised as probably human, which in no way corresponds to the typical weight for a single burial of an adult from Poland, ranging from 350 to 1150 grams.²

The analysed remains were all excavated on site, and the analysis was of a purely laboratory character. In the case of unburnt remains, the examination focused on anatomical identification, along with an attempt to determine age-at-death based on individual fragments. When analysing the cremation remains, the method previously published by one of the study's authors (E.J.) was used.³

- 1 W. Nowakowski, *The Mysterious Barbarians of Mazuria: The Riddle of Olsztyn Group*, *Neglected Barbarians*, ed. Florin Curta, Turnhout, 2010, pp. 31–52; R. Mirosław, *The Olsztyn Group in the early medieval archaeology of the Baltic Region: the cemetery at Leleszki*, Leiden-Boston, 2019; A. Bitner-Wróblewska, *The Balt Neighbours – the Olsztyn Group*, *The Migration Period between the Oder and the Vistula*, ed. A. Bursche, J. Hines, A. Zapolska, Leiden-Boston, 2020, pp. 689–730.
- 2 J. Piontek, *Metodyka antropologicznych badań materiałów kostnych z grobów ciałałopalnych*, *Materiały z konferencji konserwatorstwa archeologicznego zorganizowanych przez Ośrodek Ochrony Dziedzictwa Archeologicznego, Jurata (8–20 V 2005 r.), Wigry (28–30 IX 2005 r.), Krynica (30 XI – 3 XII 2005 r.)*, 2007, p. 64.
- 3 E. Jaskulska, *Analysis of Human Cremains*, Warsaw, 2020, online: <http://www.archo.uw.edu.pl/cremainsworkshop/manual.html>.

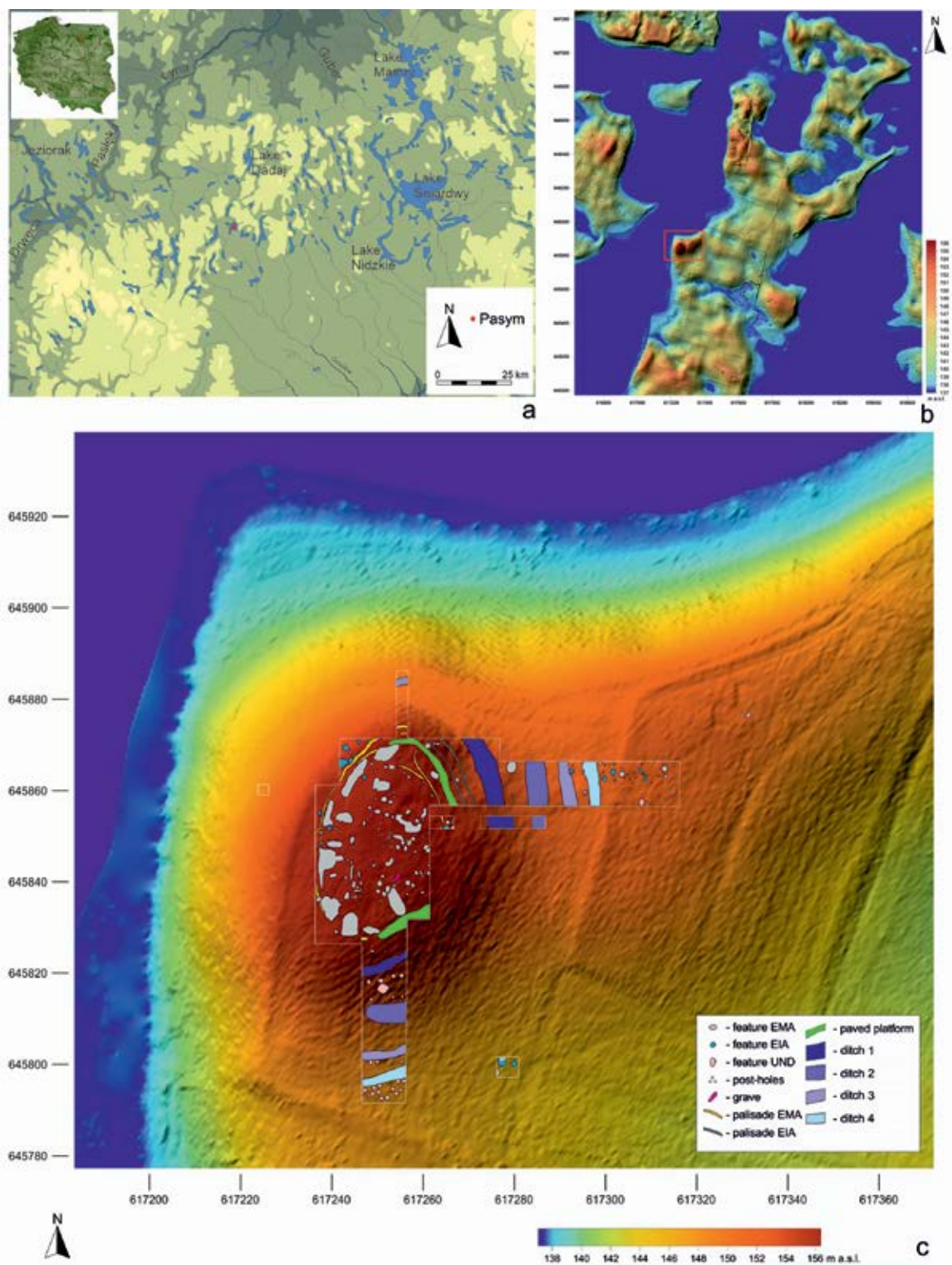


Fig. 1. a – map showing the location of Pasy; b – a digital elevation model of the Ostrów peninsula; c – a detailed plan of features and fortification structures. Drawn by S. Wadył.

Table 1. Information on identified human remains bone fragments from Pasym settlement

Inv. no.	Feature no.	Morphological identification	no. of fragments	bodyside
Unburned human bone fragments				
60/2016	Feat. 3	occipital squama	1	n.a.
69/2018	Feat. 4 quarter D	permanent upper molar	1	left
105/2017	Feat. 7	maxilla with tooth sockets of I2-M1	1	left
211/2016	—	scapula	1	right
Burned human bone fragments				
2/2018	—	humerus/femur/tibia shaft fragment	2	
3/2018	—	cranial vault fragment	5	?
3/2018	—	humerus/femur/tibia shaft fragment	1	?
3/2018	—	cranial vault fragment	4	?
4/2018	—	humerus/femur/tibia shaft fragment	1	?
4/2018	—	cranial vault fragment	1	?
5/2018	—	mandible: coronoid process	1	right
5/2018	—	humerus/femur/tibia shaft fragment	2	?
6/2018	Feat. 20	radius/ulna/fibula shaft fragment	1	?
6/2018	Feat. 20	temporal bone: sigmoid sulcus	1	right
6/2018	Feat. 20	cranial vault fragment	1	?
7/2018	Feat. 4 quarter B	humerus/femur/tibia shaft fragment	3	?
8/2018	—	parietal bone	1	?
8/2018	—	humerus/femur/tibia shaft fragment	1	?
9/2018	—	cranial vault fragment	1	?
11/2018	Feat. 20	tibia: diaphysis	2	?
11/2018	Feat. 20	humerus/femur/tibia shaft fragment	1	?
11/2018	Feat. 20	rib: shaft	3	?
12/2018	—	cranial vault fragment	1	?
12/2018	—	humerus/femur/tibia shaft fragment	1	?
18/2018	Feat. 4 quarter C	humerus/femur/tibia shaft fragment	1	?
232/2016	—	femur: neck	3	right

Table 2. Determined age-at-death of the individual remains from the Pasy site

Inv. no.	Feature no.	Age-at-death	Method
Unburned human bone fragments			
60/2016	Feat. 3	>55 y.o.	Partially fused lambdoid suture (Piontek 1996)
69/2018	Feat. 4 quarter D	30–50 y.o.	Dental wear (Lovejoy 1985 after: White, Black, Folkens 2011)
105/2017	Feat. 7	>12 y.o.	Dental development (Ubelaker 1999 after: White, Black, Folkens 2011)
211/2016	—	<17–22 y.o.*	Unfused medial border of the scapula (Schaefer et al. 2009)
Burned human bone fragments			
3/2018	—	middle adult (27–35 y.o.)	barely fused suture from endocranium (White, Black, Folkens 2011)
5/2018	—	adult >12 y.o.	Size
6/2018	Feat. 20	adult >12 y.o.	Size
8/2018	—	middle adult (27–35 y.o.)	barely fused suture from endocranium (White, Black, Folkens 2011)
12/2018	—	middle adult (27–35 y.o.)	completely fused suture from endocranium (White, Black, Folkens 2011)

* The characteristics of the tissue and some morphological features suggest that the age was much younger than the upper limit of 17–22 years indicated in the table, well under 6 y.o. Unfortunately, the fragmented nature does not allow measurements to be carried out that would allow a more precise assessment of age.

Results

The analysis of the distribution of human remains indicates that they were mainly found in dwellings. A large concentration of bones was discovered in the western part of the slope's edge descending towards the lake, and single remains in ditch 1 on the eastern slope of the stronghold (Fig. 2).

The osteological analysis indicates that the minimal number of individuals calculated is extremely low, at two individuals only, as all fragments of adult

or indeterminate age bones could have theoretically belonged to one individual, and only an unburned scapula belongs to a child of a young age (see Table 2). This interpretation is improbable, due to the dispersed nature of the finds. None of the preserved elements allowed the establishment of the sex of the individuals. Only one palaeopathological change was observed, a substantial caries cavity in a permanent upper molar.

As was mentioned in the introduction, the human remains identified do not represent the complete

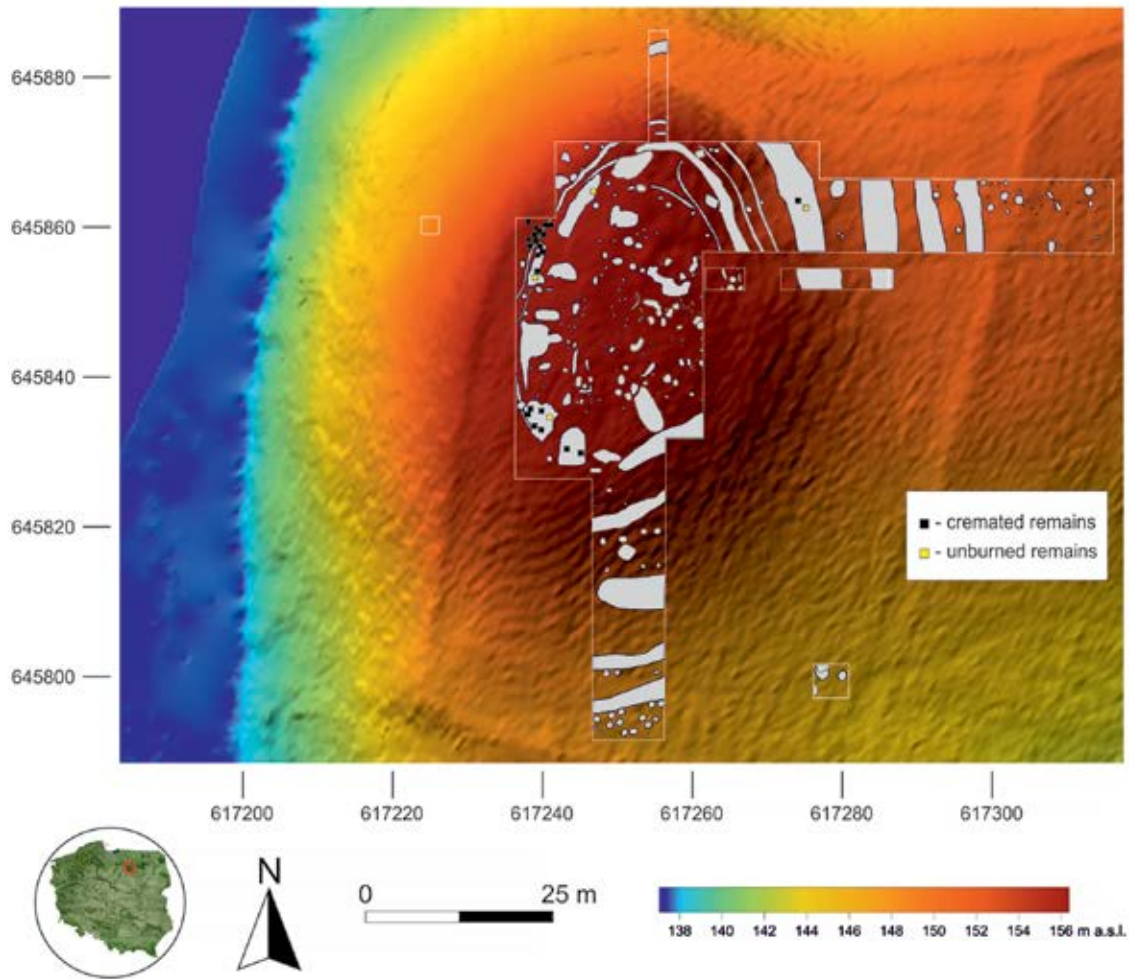


Fig. 2. Plan showing the location of cremated and unburned remains. Drawn by S. Wadył.

remains of even one individual. In the case of unburned bone fragments, they come from single elements, and the total weight of burned remains amounts to less than 74 grams, which is not even close to the typical weights observed in the study of cremation burials in Poland.⁴ Available experimental

data indicate that the weight of a burnt skeleton should, according to various sources, be 876 to 3784 grams,⁵ or 1050–5379 grams.⁶ Studies of the fragmentation of burned human remains show that they are dominated by fragments of a relatively short length, up to four centimetres; only in three samples

4 J. Piontek, *Metodyka antropologicznych badań materiałów kostnych z grobów ciałałpalnych*.

5 M. W. Warren, W. R. Maples, *The Anthropometry of Contemporary Commercial Cremation*, *Journal of Forensic Sciences* 42, no. 3, 1997, pp. 417–23.

6 W. M. Bass, R. L. Jantz, *Cremation Weights in East Tennessee*, *Journal of Forensic Sciences* 49, no. 5, 2004, pp. 901–904.

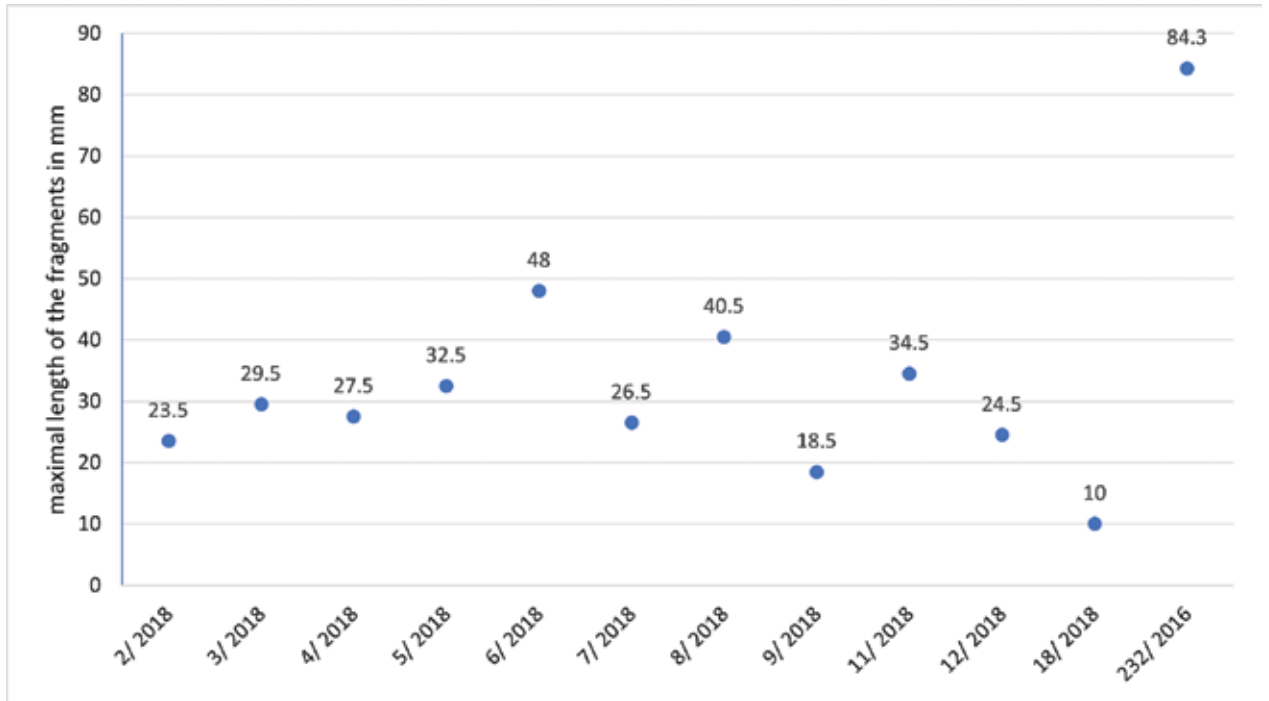


Fig. 3. Maximal length of the burned human remains from the Pasy site.

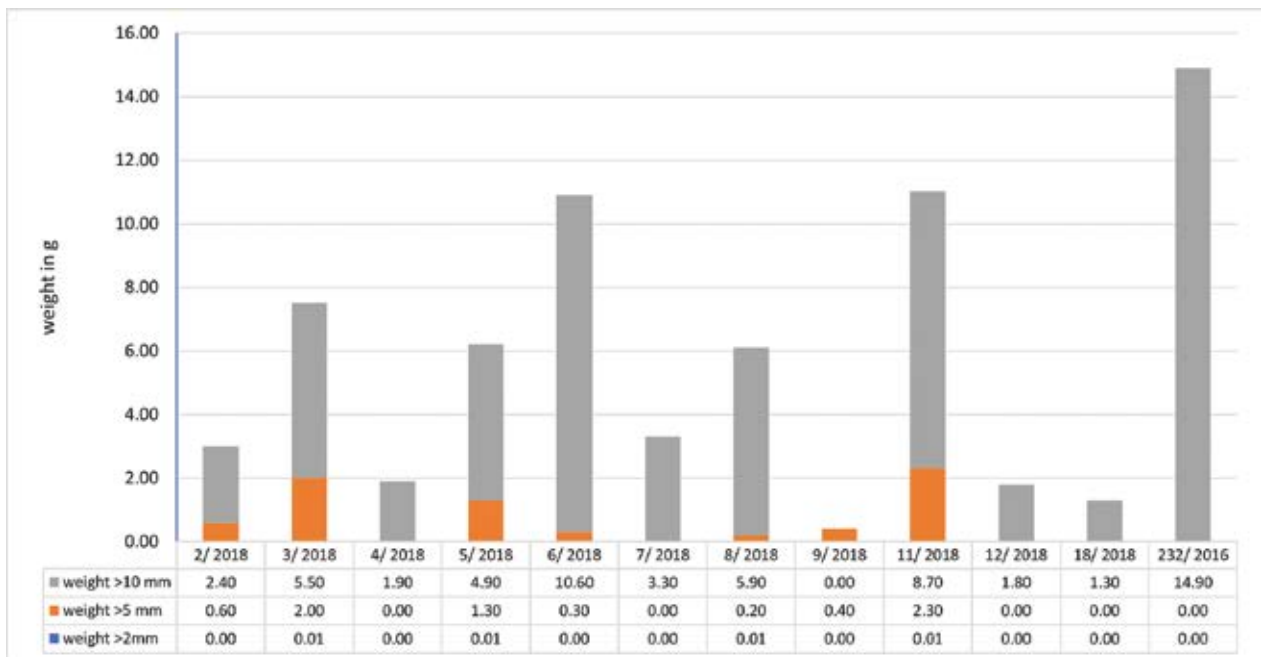


Fig. 4. Fragmentation of the burned human remains from the Pasy site.

are there much larger fragments (inv. no. 6/18; bone 232/16) (see Figs. 3 and 4). The analysis of the degree of fragmentation showed that there are practically no small fragments (size two to five millimetres, or 0.1% of the total material), a relatively small number of medium-sized elements (size five to ten millimetres, or 12.4% of the total material), and the majority of remains consist of elements of the largest fraction (size >10 millimetres, or 87.6% of the total material). In the context of the observed maximum dimensions of the fragments, the analysis of the degree of fragmentation deviates from the previously observed patterns. It did not, however, improve the level of morphological identification. The rate of the weight of the identified elements to the total weight of the findings, calculated according to Gonçalves (RAI),⁷ was estimated at 38.38%.

The analysis of the oxidation level of burned bone fragments is typically based on changes in the colour of the burned remains. According to the method of colour typology adopted in the analysis,⁸ black colouration indicates the initial stages of bone oxidation with a pyre temperature range of 300° to 600°C. This colour gradually changes to white, indicating complete oxidation at temperatures reaching at least 800°C. The fragments analysed were characterised by a surprising variety of colours. In the case of most finds from Poland, elements with a uniform white colour of the bone, well oxidised, dominate, but in samples from Pasym, charred fragments were

observed more often than those with a blue-grey colour.

Discussion. New death rituals

Rituals and ceremonies are always associated with religion, as communities follow traditionally prescribed movements in the event of a loss of life. Obviously, many issues related to ideas of the afterlife and associated rituals are unknown to us, but we can try to interpret the discovered relics of funeral rites.

What do the human remains discovered at Pasym testify to? We believe that these are testimonies of unknown burial rituals. Are there any similar discoveries from other sites in the West Balt Circle? Surprisingly, during the research in the 1960s, burnt human remains were found on the plateau of the stronghold;⁹ however, it has not been studied and analysed. A few decades later, Wojciech Wróblewski considered that as evidence of the scattering of remains within the settlement.¹⁰ A parallel discovery has been made during excavations of the stronghold at Szestno-Czarny Las, where in trench IV, among the stones forming the cobblestone foundation of the house, deposits of human remains were discovered.¹¹

Twelve deposits of bones (burials?) and several dozen bones that did not form a concentration were unearthed. Each of the deposits contained the remains of probably one individual: in most of them

7 D. Gonçalves, *The Value of Quantitative Analysis for the Bioanthropological Research of Burned Human Skeletal Remains*, PhD dissertation, University of Coimbra, 2011, p. 67.

8 J. L. Holden, P. P. Phakey, J. G. Clement, Scanning Electron Microscope Observations of Incinerated Human Femoral Bone: A Case Study, *Forensic Science International* 74, no. 1–2, 1995, pp. 17–28; J. L. Holden, P. P. Phakey, J. G. Clement, Scanning Electron Microscope Observations of Heat-Treated Human Bone, *Forensic Science International* 74, no. 1–2, 1995, pp. 29–45.

9 R. Odoj, Wyniki badań grodziska z VI–VIII w. n.e. w Pasymiu, pow. Szczytno, a problemy kultury mazurskiej, *Rocznik Olsztyński* 7, 1968, p. 130.

10 W. Wróblewski, Ossa cremata. Obrządek pogrzebowy Galindów we wczesnym średniowieczu w świetle znalezisk na grodzisku w Szestnie-Czarnym lesie, *Światowit* 2(43), fasc. B, 2001, p. 279.

11 W. Wróblewski, Ossa cremata. Obrządek pogrzebowy Galindów we wczesnym średniowieczu w świetle znalezisk na grodzisku w Szestnie-Czarnym lesie; M. Sabaciński, Materiał osteologiczny ze stanowiska Szestno III „Czarny Las” jako źródło informacji o pruskim stosie pogrzebowym, *Światowit* 4(45), fasc. B, 2002, pp. 205–28; M. Sabaciński, Bałtyjski kult głów (?) na podstawie materiału z grodziska w Szestnie „Czarnym Lesie”, *Archeologia Polski* 50, no. 1–2, 2005, p. 81.

(the author does not specify the exact number), the human remains represented different levels of oxidation, suggesting a variable, relatively short duration of heat exposure during cremation. The bone deposits found in the stronghold were referred to as 'Czarny Las burials'. They are interpreted as a testimony to the custom of keeping ancestors' remains within households/settlements.¹²

It is also unclear if the findings should be categorised as burials, or just forms of bone deposits of unknown purpose. Some researchers have already pointed out this problem. According to M. Sabaciński, the burnt remains of the dead (it is difficult to say in what form, maybe in urns?) were stored for some time in households, and they were undoubtedly not deposited in the ground. Such rituals would explain the occurrence of unburnt skull bones, long bones and animal bones in the context of these burials. Therefore, between the moment of cremation and the time of deposition in the ground, the remains of other individuals and animals could have been added to the bone deposit.¹³

However, the lack of a necropolis from this period presents an obstacle to further interpretation. Cremation cemeteries have been discovered in several places in the Masurian Lakeland (Cerkiewnik, Olsztyn county, Dobrzyki, Iława county, Prasłity, Olsztyn county, Nowe Bagienice, Mrągowo county¹⁴),

but none can be dated to the period before the 11th century.¹⁵ This can be partly explained by the poor state of archaeological research. This argument, however, cannot fully explain such a small number of uncovered cemeteries. Until recently, in the literature, the lands of the Prussian interior were referred to as a zone without archaeologically perceptible Early Medieval cemeteries.¹⁶

The Szestno-Czarny Las stronghold is younger than the Pasy stronghold, as it was inhabited at the turn of the tenth and 11th centuries, but it is still the only well-recognised parallel to the Pasy stronghold in this regard. Finds of human remains from outside the grave contexts come from a few more sites. These are discoveries from the settlement at Dudka (Giżycko county), the settlement at Jeziorko (Giżycko county), and the stronghold at Jegliniec (Suwałki county).¹⁷

Are the described discoveries a change in funeral rituals visible in the abandonment of necropolises with individual graves in favour of scattering the remains within settlements, perhaps keeping the remains of the dead within dwellings? W. Wróblewski, who defined 'Czarny Las burials', proposed several possible ways of inspiration for the described cultural change, assuming the influence of early Slavic culture as the most probable.¹⁸ In fact, during the research into early Slavic strongholds similar to the site in Pasy, burnt human remains have been discovered.

- 12 W. Wróblewski, *Ossa cremata. Obrządek pogrzebowy Galindów we wczesnym średniowieczu w świetle znalezisk na grodzisku w Szestnie-Czarnym lesie*; M. Sabaciński, *Materiał osteologiczny ze stanowiska Szestno III "Czarny Las" jako źródło informacji o pruskim stosie pogrzebowym*.
- 13 M. Sabaciński, *Bałtyjski kult głów (?) na podstawie materiału z grodziska w Szestnie "Czarnym Lesie"*, p. 87.
- 14 The results of the research in Prasłity and Nowe Bagienice have not yet been published. Preliminary results of the research were presented at the 3rd Warmia and Mazury Report Session in 2018 in Giżycko.
- 15 W. Ziemińska-Odojowa, *Materiały do cmentarzyska wczesnośredniowiecznego ze stanowiska XI w. w Cerkiewniku, gm. Dobre Miasto, Zeszyty Muzeum Warmii i Mazur. Archeologia* 1, 1992, pp. 111–149, U. Kobylińska, Z. Kobyliński, D. Wach, *Wczesnośredniowieczne cmentarzysko pruskie w Dobrzykach, st. XXXVIII, gm. Zalewo, woj. warmińsko-mazurskie, Warmińsko-Mazurski Biuletyn Konserwatorski* 2, 2000, pp. 12–76.
- 16 W. Wróblewski, *Ziemia pruskie i jaćwieskie w okresie plemiennym (VII/VIII–XII/XIII wieku), Stan i potrzeby badań nad wczesnym średniowieczem w Polsce – 15 lat później*, ed. W. Chudziak, S. Moździoch, Toruń-Wrocław, 2006, pp. 291–293.
- 17 M. Sabaciński, *Bałtyjski kult głów (?) na podstawie materiału z grodziska w Szestnie "Czarnym Lesie"*, p. 95.
- 18 W. Wróblewski, *Ossa cremata. Obrządek pogrzebowy Galindów we wczesnym średniowieczu w świetle znalezisk na grodzisku w Szestnie-Czarnym lesie*, pp. 279–280.

Marek Dulinicz referred to them as ‘places that gave rise to power’.¹⁹ Burnt human remains found in cultural deposits are one of the shared traits of these centres.

This is the main line of interpretation. However, the character of the bone remains discovered at Pasym makes it necessary to suggest an alternative interpretation. Unfortunately, the different methodology used during the analysis of the previous materials does not allow for an easy comparison of the amount of remains analysed and the fragmentation of the burned bones. It should be noted, though, that the meagre amount of human remains found at Pasym (both unburned and burned) does not allow us to recognise the deposits as burials or the remains of the fire victims (an interpretation mentioned in Wróblewski’s publication²⁰). The fragments are not numerous, but relatively large in size, suggesting that only a small sample of significant size remains was collected (or preserved) and kept within the settlement. Interestingly, similar procedures could have been used for burned and unburned remains. The reasoning and probable ritual connotations of this custom are unclear, and several possible hypotheses could explain the origin of the bone deposits found within the settlement. The question remains what happened to the rest of the remains left after the cremation, and whether they are archaeologically attainable.

It is worth noting that there are some interesting but not fully explained findings related to Early Medieval cremation from the northeast part of Poland. An analysis of the burned human remains from the Yotvingian site at Szurpiły site 8 (‘Mosiężysko’), dated to the 13th century, yielded an interesting observation: only a small amount of highly fragmented burnt remains was collected, with a low rate of identification equalling 9.52%.²¹ The analysed cremated remains at the Early Medieval Slavic hillfort at Zbucz St 3, dated to the ninth to the 11th century, were also highly fragmented, with a low identification rate of 20.27%. However, the most interesting observation was the complete lack of skull fragments within the analysed elements, suggesting an intentional selection and probable head removal before the cremation.²² This clearly shows the possibility of complicated and yet not uncovered cremation rituals present in the Early Medieval period in the northeast part of Poland.

Acknowledgements

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19 M. Dulinicz, *Miejsca, które rodzą władzę (najstarsze grody słowiańskie na wschód od Wisły)*, *Człowiek, sacrum, środowisko. Miejsca kultu we wczesnym średniowieczu*, ed. S. Moździoch, Wrocław, 2000, p. 85.

20 Wróblewski, *Ossa cremata. Obrządek pogrzebowy Galindów we wczesnym średniowieczu w świetle znalezisk na grodzisku w Szestnie-Czarnym lesie*, p. 276.

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Gyventi su mirusiais: išskirtiniai laidojimo papročiai Ankstyvųjų viduramžių Pasymo (šiaurės rytų Lenkija) bendruomenėje

Sławomir Wadył, Elżbieta Jaskulska

Laidosena Mozūrijos ežerono teritorijoje Ankstyvaisiais viduramžiais išlieka paslaptimi. Iki VII–VIII a. joje gyveno Olštyno kultūros žmonės, kurie praktikavo kremaciją. Tačiau iki šiol nebuvo žinoma laidojimo vietų, kurios galėtų būti datuojamos vėlyvuojū VIII–X a. Neseniai atlikti tyrimai Pasymo (*lenk.* Pasym) tvirtovėje, stūksančioje pusiasalyje, apsuptame Kalvos (*Kalwa*) ežero, atskleidė unikalios laidojimo tradicijos pėdsakus. Per 2016–2018 ir 2021 m. vykdytus kasinėjimus rasta tiek nedegintų, tiek apdegusių žmonių palaikų. Nustatyta, kad daugiausia jų buvo palaidota gyvenamuosiuose pastatuose. Daug kaulų aptikta vakariniame piliakalnio šlaito pakraštyje, kuris leidžiasi ežero link, o rytiniame šlaite – tik pavienių.

Osteologiniai tyrimai rodo, kad tik du individai – nepakankamas skaičius tirti, nes interpretacija nepatikima dėl pernelyg didelio radinių išsibarstymo. Straipsnio autoriai

teigia: palaikai liudija dar nežinomus laidojimo ritualus. Analogiška situacija buvo kasinėjant Šestno-Čarny Laso (*Szestno-Czarny Las*) tvirtovę, kur taip pat rasta žmonių kaulų koncentracijų. Taigi galbūt pastarieji atradimai liudija laidosenos pokyčius: atsisakyta individualių kapų nekropolių ir pereita prie palaikų išsklaidymo gyvenvietėse, laidojant žmonių būstuose?

Autoriai siūlo alternatyvų paaiškinimą. Kaulų fragmentų nedaug, tačiau jie palyginti dideli, todėl galima manyti, kad surinkta (arba išsaugota) ir gyvenvietėje laikyta tik nedidelė, bet reikšmingo dydžio palaikų dalis. Įdomu, kad panaši procedūra taikyta turbūt tiek degintiems, tiek nedegintiems palaikams. Neišspręsti klausimai, kas nutiko su kremuotaisiais, kurie nebuvo palaidoti gyvenamosiose vietose, ir ar galima jų buvimo vietą atsekti archeologiniais metodais?