

Populus Masoviae Medi Aevi and the puzzle of the century: who was buried in the stone-setting graves in medieval Mazovia? Popular science summary of the project

For 140 years one of the great mysteries of the Middle Ages in Polish lands has been the question of ethnic origins of people living in Mazovia region and buried their deceased in specific cemeteries with graves in the so-called stone settings. They are characterised by a peculiar form of burials, unparalleled in Polish territories outside Mazovia. Their distinguishing feature are the stone structures of the graves, visible to this day on the surface. They have the form of settings made from large stones around the edges of the grave, often filled inside with smaller stones. Such cemeteries, appearing around the second half of the 11th century, are most often regarded as burial places of at least a formally Christianized population.

Who were the alleged "first" Mazovian Christians? Unfortunately, the discussion on this subject has not yet led to unambiguous conclusions. Some advocate the local origin of this population, while others suggest that people of foreign origin were buried in these graves. Of particular interest in this context is the view that the founders of these cemeteries were Varangian-Rus' warriors who came to Mazovia in the first half of the 11th century with Yaroslav the Wise, in order to pacify Mieclaw - the self-proclaimed ruler of the district, refusing to recognize the authority of Polish prince Casimir the Restorer. After the successful completion of the task, it was postulated that they stayed in Mazovia and settled in the zone of its northern and eastern borderland, in order to provide these areas with military protection.

Meanwhile, the problem is much more complex, and attempts to verify the hypotheses of the local or foreign origin of the deceased by means of traditional archaeological research methods have been unsuccessful. For this reason, the idea has arisen to verify the problem based on the use of new quality methods of interdisciplinary research. Investigations with application of palaeogenetic and isotopic analyses will help to show from where the population using these cemeteries came. On the other hand, anthropological studies will enable the assessment of physical characteristics of the analysed populations and its transformation over time. The study of the diet of the analysed populations will have a similar character, this should reveal the eating habits of people buried in these cemeteries. The task of archaeologists will be to determine the cultural features of the studied populations. This will enable the establishing of the chronological stratification of the examined cemeteries and the separation of their older and younger parts, including the sectors where the first generation graves probably were located. An important part in this will be played by radiocarbon dating, which will verify the inferences made by archaeologists.

The proposed method of interdisciplinary research will be used on the presented scale for the first time in Poland. Its scientific potential is, in our opinion, of a universal nature. Therefore, it may serve other comprehensive ethnogenetic studies, undertaken both in relation to individual cemeteries, as well as their groups, in any geographical, cultural and chronological space chosen by the researchers.

The research matter presented above provokes not only long-lasting scientific interest, but also found a social resonance. This opinion is evidenced by documentaries on the Mazovian graves in stone settings and mysteries they hide produced for a wider audience and available on the internet (e.g.: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qV_kMuZA8WY).