

The last look of the dead man on a lake... - eschatological beliefs of Mrągowo Lake District inhabitants (from the first centuries AD to the end of Antiquity) and their connections with the natural environment

The region of Warmia and Masuria, poetically known as the *Atlantis of the North*, is an underappreciated source for the study and cognizance of Barbaric societies in the first centuries AD. This lack results from the state of research of archaeological sites: widely explored before the Second World War, but unfortunately nowadays mainly relying on the legacy of archaeologists-amateurs from museums in Königsberg and Berlin. Despite numerous excavations held in the end of 19th and in the beginning of 20th centuries, and information about acquisitions of large amount of artifacts, our current knowledge about people living in these region is incomplete. Until recently, the only source of information about the former inhabitants of today's north-eastern Poland were cemeteries, at the center of researches interest. Also, post-war excavations had focused mainly on archaeological materials, ignoring their symbolic aspects, which are an inseparable part of every human life – now or in past. Particularly underrecognized is the *sacrum* sphere, connected with their surrounding world: nature.

The main aim of the proposed project is the identification of funeral practises of communities inhabiting the region of the Mrągowo Lake District, during the Roman and Migration Period (1st – 8th century AD), and their relations with environment. The chosen location for their ancestor worship was determined specifically by its proximity to the reservoir lake, as well as the flora and fauna available. This issue will be elaborated on the basis of three selected microregions, in which necropolises are located – in Samławki, Miętkie and Kosewo, associated with the Bogaczewo Culture and the Olsztyn Group communities.

Implementation of the project will entail analysis of all organic remains from the previous seasons of fieldwork and archaeological excavations, carried out on these cemeteries, enriched with new finds from two additional necropolises. Beyond the expected artifacts in burials (fragments of vessels, human bones or personal belongings), plants remains, which until now have rarely been sampled from the graves where the deceased were cremated, will be collected. The use of the latest documentation techniques (drone photography as a base for 3D recreation) and the full-time assistance of archaeobotanist, will allow to document potential rituals associated with the natural environment. This approach will allow to determine the location of the cremation process, what types and species of woods were used for funeral pyres, and whether the pits, where human remains or vessels (used as urns) were deposited, and whether they were filled with seeds or entire plants. Physicochemical studies, focused on analysis of fat residues in the walls of the clay vessels, can potentially indicate equipment of dead person, the practice along food and beverages - and which ones - for the journey to the afterlife, for instance. The analysis of tree and grass pollens, collected from the sediments of nearby lakes, is a key element in the reconstruction of the inhabitants living environment. It will serve as a point of comparison with the flora occurring in certain periods in individual cemeteries. This series of analysis will also, in turn, allow to determine how human activities in Antiquity impacted the local landscape. The chronology and the specific periods of anthropopressure will be done using radiocarbon dating (AMS ¹⁴C).

Spatial analyses will furthermore refine these studies, as it will integrate the hydrology and topography of the surroundings of the necropolises. To this end, a sonar will be used (to determine the depth and the shape of the lakes' bottoms close to the cemeteries), complemented by a digital terrain modeling of the area, from a laser scanner. All data will be collected in an extensive database, in order to effectively integrate and compare with former East Prussian archives kept by Polish and foreign institutions. Comprehensive research on single burials, entire cemeteries and even the whole regions will allow to identify specific features of the funeral rite and related beliefs in specific chronological periods. The analysis will be performed using geo-informatic methods (GIS), and the resulting visualizations and simulations will make it possible to recognise other necropolises established by Balts populations. Such process is also an opportunity to enable future protection and conservations of the sites.

Studies on natural conditions were mainly used only in the context of settlements surroundings and were not usually applied to sepulchral sites. Such multi-faceted reconnaissance has not been carried out in cemeteries in the Mrągowo Lake District yet. The research proposed in the project will not only be limited to enriching the collections of artifacts and their traditional archaeological analysis, but will also enable the reconstruction of cults practiced by the Balts during the funeral ceremony. The results of these studies will be presented to a wide audience in Poland and abroad, through participation in conferences and publications in journals, related to the discussed periods and the wider topic of landscape archaeology.