

All roads lead to... Masłomęcz. The cosmopolitanism and uniqueness of the Goth community of the late Roman Period Hrubieszów Basin in the light of fine-scale multidisciplinary analysis.

Hrubieszów Basin, a geographic mesoregion in the very East of Poland, at the Ukrainian border, constitutes a notably rich assemblage of Roman Period archaeological sites associated with the Wielbark culture, and particularly with the Goths. The group of Goths inhabiting the eastern part of the Hrubieszów Basin between the late 2nd and late 4th century was named “Masłomęcz group” after the village in which arguably its most significant sites were excavated. The richness of knowledge on this community – a result of several decades of intense archaeological research conducted in the area – revealed its cultural as well as, seemingly, ethnic richness and diversity. Even despite the quite limited recognition of the group’s settlements, the well-researched and described burial sites of the Masłomęcz group has painted a truly kaleidoscopic picture of this complex community.

The funerary rites practiced within the Masłomęcz group encompass both cremation and inhumation, each taking a wide range of forms. Burial grounds constitute large cemeteries of several hundred burials arranged according to strict rules and augmented by stone circles and other construction significance of which surely extended beyond funerary practices, as well as small cemeteries and isolated burial mounds. Grave goods and practices range from typically Gothic through Sarmatian, Baltic to mix of diverse cultural influences as well as such of which analogues are not found elsewhere. The buried remains were often dismembered, exhumated and relocated between graves and/or completely removed from the cemetery. All the revealed diversity gave rise to an immensity of research questions concerning the Masłomęcz group. Although a great number of these has been answered thanks to the monumental effort of archaeologists, anthropologists and historians, many, particularly these which surpass the capabilities of the respective disciplines, still remain unresolved.

This project aims at addressing some of these by application of the recent developments in molecular biology; specifically in the field of ancient genomics, which focuses on retrieving genetic information from centuries- and millennia-old organic material. Provided good preservation state of DNA in the material, which seems to be the case for the skeletal remains from Masłomęcz group according to our pilot study, ancient genomics methods enable determination of biological features and relationships among the studied individuals on a range of levels. The planned DNA extraction and analysis for possibly exhaustively sampled skeletal remains associated with the Masłomęcz group is expected to provide insight into, among others,:

- The level of genetic closeness, due to shared ancestry, of the Masłomęcz group to other coeval, preceding and following ancient populations from the region as well as the level of population continuity towards present times.
- Identification of the most probable source population from which the Goth’s expansion to Central Europe and further began.
- The rules governing the layout of cemeteries, including kin relations among the buried persons as well as the dismembered skeletal fragments found in many graves, distribution depending on sex (even for morphologically non-diagnostic remains, such as infants), localness etc. within and between cemeteries and burial types.
- Whether the persons buried with grave goods or funerary practices typical of other cultures (e.g. women burials identified as Sarmatian) or generally atypical (e.g. laid on their stomachs) were locals who had adopted external customs or were for some reason treated differently by the community, or were they incomers from geographically and/or culturally external groups.
- The level of connectivity and people exchange between particular communities within the Masłomęcz group that utilized separate burial grounds.
- Reconstruction of the family trees of at least a part of the individuals, as by analyzing a large number of individuals we expect to find several familial relationships among them.

Our project should undoubtedly enrich the knowledge and understanding of the Masłomęcz group, and Goths in general, and also provide a rare detailed glimpse into the way ancient societies outside the well-documented Mediterranean cultural circles, or at least some of them, were structured and operated.