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Holy or Cursed? Some Reflections on Anomalies in Early Medieval Burials

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Abstract: *On the territory of Poland numerous medieval necropolises have been excavated and investigated. In this occasion, we have selected the examples in which some “anomalies” in regard to the burial rite have been noticed, the position of the deceased, as well as certain doings related to some superstitions and fear that their power could harm the living.*

Key words: *Poland, medieval necropolises, pagan atavisms, superstition*

The introduction of Christianity in Europe caused the gradual unification of funerary practices. In the area of Poland, changes to burial customs were the main indicative of the process of Christianization. From the turn of the 10th and the beginning of the 11th centuries., some standardization of funerary ceremonies occurred despite the still existing variety of burial customs. One of the rules was to place pit graves on an east-west axis. Initially, there was a differentiation of the body’s position with regard to the dead person’s sex. Men were buried with their heads oriented towards the east and women with their heads oriented towards the west. The western orientation is considered as the proper one, while the eastern as a relic of pagan times. Without going into too much detail, suffice to say that the eastern orientation is not a deviation, however its “anachronistic” character might be debatable¹.

Another pattern shows that dead bodies were placed horizontally on their back with their arms along the body. It was common mainly in the circle of the western church. Although liturgy claims that the right position was to place a dead body is with its arms crossed *ad modum crucis*, this is not borne out by archeological sources. The pattern

¹ A. Koperkiewicz, *Związek płci z orientacją grobu we wczesnym średniowieczu na przykładzie cmentarzyska w Daniłowie Małym, w woj. Podlaskim* [Connection of the dead person’s sex and the orientation of their grave in the Early Middle Ages, with examples found in the cemetery in Daniłowo Małe, in Podlaskie voivodeship] [in:] *Kobieta – Śmierć – Mężczyzna*, „Funeralia Lednickie” [Woman – Death – Man “Funerary meetings in Lednica”], vol. 5, ed. W. Dzieduszycki, J. Wrzesiński, Poznań 2003, pp. 307-324.

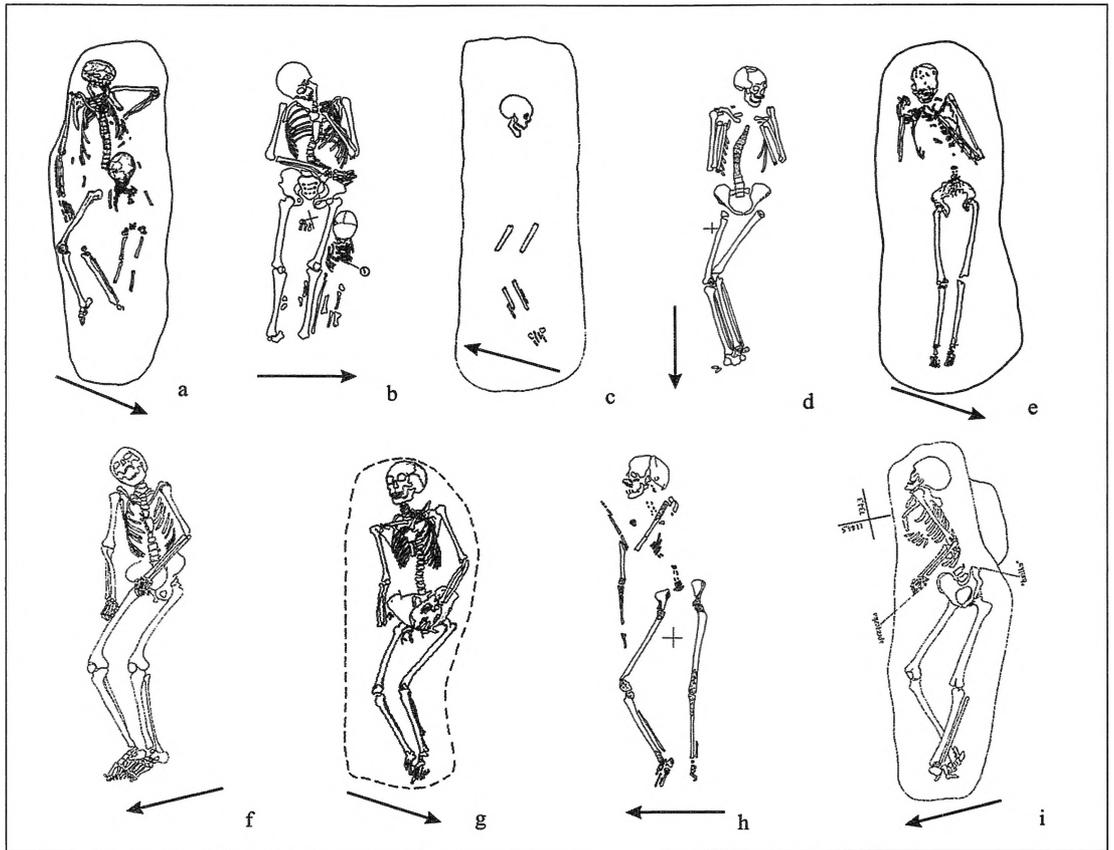


Fig. 1. Examples of untypical burials with bodies resting on their “right sides” found in chosen cemeteries in Poland: a – Daniłowo Małe, site 379; b – Czarna Wielka, grave 184; c – Brodnica Szabda-Cegielnia, grave 7; d – Kałdus, grave 14, e – Daniłowo Małe, site 258; f – Kałdus, grave 376, g – Daniłowo Małe, site 296; h – Kałdus, grave 54; i – Kałdus, grave 367 (acc. to A. Koperkiewicz, *Praktyki pogrzebowe*..[Funerary practices...], fig. 68).

of the crossed arms originated from Saint Ambrose,² who lived in the 4th century, and who was buried in this position. According to Professor E. Dąbrowska the pattern of crossed arms was not common, and initially it was only obligatory in monasteries.³ This hypothesis is supported by archeology. Most of the dead buried in the western circle of Christianity were found with their bodies lying on their backs but their arms

² Saint Ambrose was a lawyer and the author of many works about asceticism and morality. He died in 397 (J. Marecki, L. Rotter, *Jak czytać wizerunki świętych. Leksykon atrybutów i symboli hagiograficznych*, [How to read images of saints. Lexicone of hagiographic attributes and symbols] Kraków 2009, p. 64.)

³ E. Dąbrowska, *Liturgia śmierci, a archeologia: uwagi o wyborze miejsca pochowania, orientacji, ułożenie ciała i jego ubiorze w średniowiecznej Europie łacińskiej* [Relation between liturgy of death and archeology: observations about the choice of place, orientation and body’s position and attire during inhumation, in Latin early medieval Europe] [in:] *Id., Groby, relikwie i insygnia. Studia z dziejów mentalności średniowiecznej* [Graves, relicts and insygnia. Study of the early medieval mentality], Warszawa 2008, pp. 102-103.

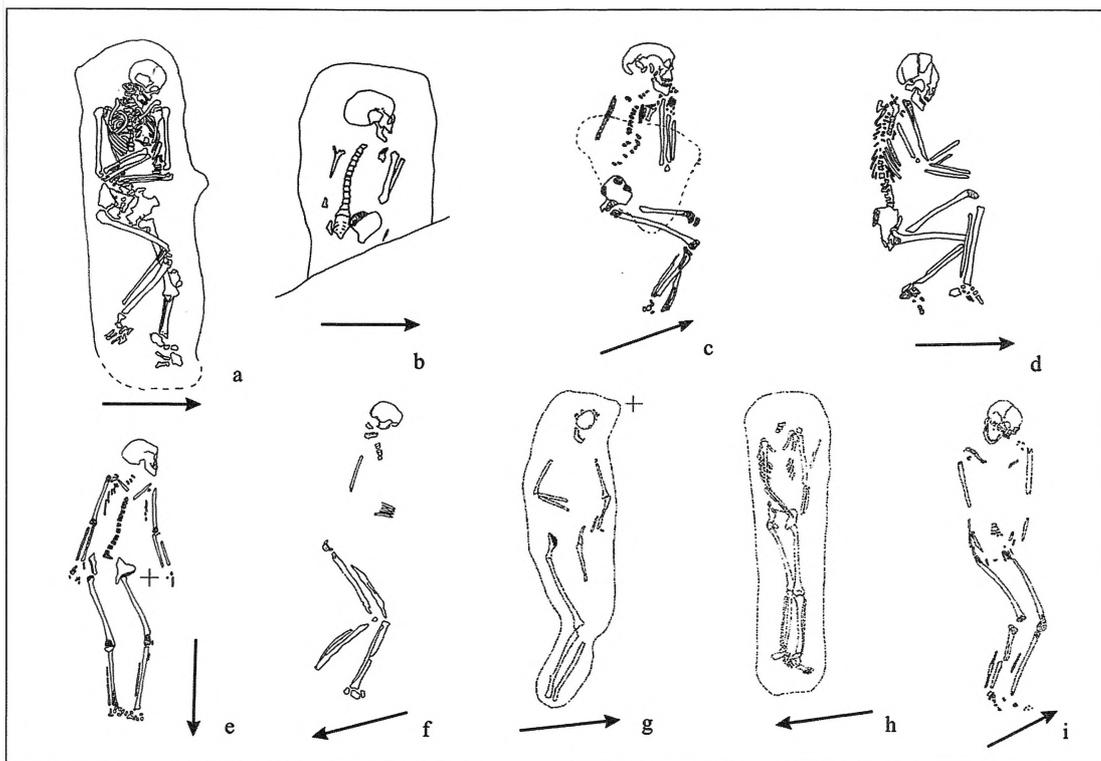


Fig. 2. Examples of untypical burials with bodies resting on their “left sides” found in chosen cemeteries of north-eastern Poland: a – Czarna Wielka, grave 175; b-and – Kałdus (b – grave 26, c – grave 4, d – grave 64, e – grave 61, f – grave 215, g – grave 319, h – grave 387, and – grave 408) (acc A. Koperkiewicz, *Praktyki pogrzebowe...* [Funerary practices...],., fig. 69; V. Stawska, J. Bojarski, W. Chudziak, *op. cit.*, fig. 29).

not crossed. According to the Eastern Church such burial was wrong. In Rus, crossed arms were reserved exclusively for the higher clergy. It is not sure, however, if such a burial position was used in the case of all people who were baptized, or if it was a form of a prize for accomplishing all worldly duties before death.⁴

Thus, how should untypical patterns of burial practice be identified? It seems that deviations concerning the pattern of the body’s orientation are the most crucial ones, and the main criterion should be any deviation from the horizontal position. Practices such as amputation of the limbs or head, binding of the body, or covering it with a stone should be treated as exceptional.⁵ Although untypical orientation of bodies was rare, it

⁴ E. Dąbrowska, *Liturgia śmierci ...* [Liturgy of death...], pp. 102, 103.

⁵ M. Miśkiewicz, *Cmentarzysko wczesnośredniowieczne w Złotej Pińczowskiej, pow. Pińczów* [Early medieval cemetery in Złota Pińczowska, powiat of Pińczów], „Rozprawy Zespołu Badań nad Polskim Średniowieczem Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego i Politechniki Warszawskiej” [Discussions of the Polish Middle Ages Research Team of the University of Warsaw and Warsaw University of Technology], vol. 4, 1967, pp. 95-139; H. Zoll-Adamikowa, *Wczesnośredniowieczne cmentarzyska szkieletowe Małopolski* [Early medieval inhumation cemeteries of Małopolska], part 2, *Analiza* [Analysis], Wrocław-Warszawa-Kraków-Gdańsk 1971, pp. 50-54.

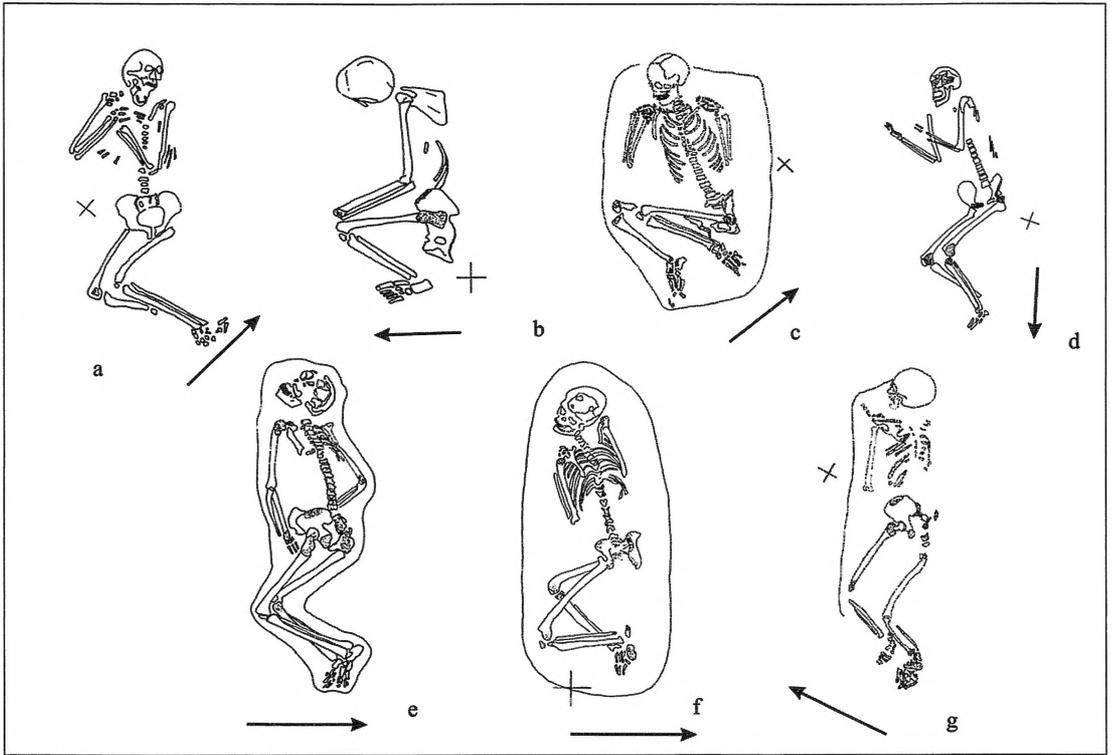


Fig. 3. Examples of untypical burials in cemetery in Kaldus, voivodeship of Chełmno (station 4) with bodies resting „on their right side with strongly bent legs”, a – grave 31, b – grób 41, c – grave 380, d – grave 65, e – grave 159, f – grave 164, g – grave 383 (acc. A. Koperkiewicz, *Praktyki pogrzebowe...* [Funerary practices...], fig. 70; V. Stawska, J. Bojarski, W. Chudziak, *op. cit.*, fig. 29).

shows characteristic features which are repetitive.⁶ One thing that all these deviations have in common is a flexed position of the body. The first group of such untypical burials can be characterized by the following features: slightly bent legs and the body lying either on its right or its left side (fig. 1-2). In such cases, the position of the arms may vary, and is of little significance. However, there is a visible tendency which shows that the hands were situated near the shoulders and the jaw bone. The second group of untypical funerary customs is when the body is lying on its side in the flexed position. The third group comprises skeletons lying in accidental prone positions, with their faces to the ground. It becomes clear that the pattern of the position of the arms and hands in cases of untypical inhumations did not depend on the region or period that they came from. In each case, hands were placed near shoulders (fig. 3).

References to the phenomenon of such untypical graves had already been made in the old literature. During the first attempts to understand early medieval burials,

⁶ A. Koperkiewicz, *Mowa umarłych – przekaz zawarty w sposobie ułożenia ciała na przykładzie cmentarzysk wczesnośredniowiecznych z Polski północno-wschodniej* [Language of the dead - the meaning behind positions of inhumated bodies found on early medieval cemeteries of north-eastern Poland], *Studia Gdańskie* [Gdańsk Studies] (in print).

attention was drawn to the rare cases of finds of untypical burials. Only a few such cases were known at that time.⁷ However, such deviations became constant and repetitive feature in burial practices in early medieval cemeteries in Poland. This phenomenon cannot be attributed to any specific area.⁸ Currently in Poland, around thirty such graves are registered in over twenty early mediaeval necropolises. They were found both in cemeteries located within and outside churchyards.⁹ It can be concluded that the occurrence of such an insignificant number of untypical graves in early medieval necropolises can also be treated as kind of a rule. Anomalies in burials are described as “anti-vampirical burials” or “anti-vampirical practices”.¹⁰ According to A. Brückner, the term „vampire” appeared in the Slavic language as late (“*folk people do not know vampires*”), as in the 17th century¹¹. In Europe people commonly believed in ghouls (strigas - coming out of their graves and drinking blood), and in ways in which they can be defeated (cutting off demons’ heads, nailing them to the ground with an aspen stake). However, L. Moszyński claims that water nymphs, goblins and strigas in Slavic culture had been borrowed from neighboring cultures. Vampires and werewolves, on the other hand, have a Proto-Slavic origin.¹² Ethnographic sources confirm that there was a vast collection of beliefs and superstitions about vampires.¹³ In some cases these beliefs and the archeological findings complement one another. Therefore, it should be of no surprise that this topic has been so intriguing. It seems that one issue, however, is being omitted which definitely throws a different light on this topic.

I am quite skeptical about possibility of finding graves of vampires in early medieval cemeteries. I agree with those researchers who link some anomalies with rational

⁷ M. Miśkiewicz, *op. cit.*, pp. 147, 157; H. Zoll-Adamikowa, *op. cit.*, pp. 52-54.

⁸ Lt M. Ł. Stanaszek, *Praktyki antywampiryczne w XI wieku stosowane na terenie cmentarzyska szkieletowego na Wzgórzu Świętojakubskim w Sandomierzu* [Anti-vampirical practices of the 11th century found in inhumation cemetery on Saint James’s Hill in Sandomierz], „Biuletyn Antropologiczny” [Anthropological Bulletin], vol. 2, 1998, pp. 18-31.

⁹ J. Wrześniński, *Misa brązowa z cmentarzyska w Dziekanowicach – próba interpretacji* [The bronze bowl from the cemetery in Dziekanowice - attempts at interpretation], „Studia Lednickie” [Lednica Studies], vol. 6, 2000, p. 197, table 1; P. Żydok, *Wczesnośredniowieczne pochówki antywampiryczne* [Early medieval anti-vampirical burials], [in:] *Hereditatem Cognoscere. Studia i szkice dedykowane Profesor Marii Miśkiewicz* [Hereditatem Cognoscere. Studies and Sketches dedicated to Professor Maria Miśkiewicz], ed. Z. Kobyliński, Warszawa 2004, pp. 46-48, 51, table 2.

¹⁰ Ł. M. Stanaszek, *op. cit.*; M. Miśkiewicz, *Gesty i emocje człowieka wczesnego średniowiecza* [Gestures and emotions of early medieval people], „Z otchłani wieków” [Out of the abyss of the centuries], R 57, No. 1-2, (2002), p. 98; P. Żydok, *op. cit.*

¹¹ A. Brückner, *Mitologia Słowiańska i polska* [Polish and Slavic mythology], Warszawa 1985, pp. 279-283.

¹² An important remark made by this author concerning studies of the Proto-Slavic religion “*Many scholars include demonology and magic into the scope of these studies. It doesn’t matter that this a different aspect of spiritual life, it is a common practice to use the names of ghosts or wizards, known from contemporary ethnographic studies, in the Proto-Slavic context.*” L. Moszyński, *Przedchrześcijańskie Pomorze* [Pre-Christian Pomerania], [in:] *Christianity in Pomerania in the 10th-20th centuries*, ed. J. Borzyszkowski, Gdańsk 2001, p. 21.

¹³ K. Moszyński, *Kultura Ludowa Słowian* [Folk Culture of the Slavic people], vol. 2, Warszawa 1934, p. 663

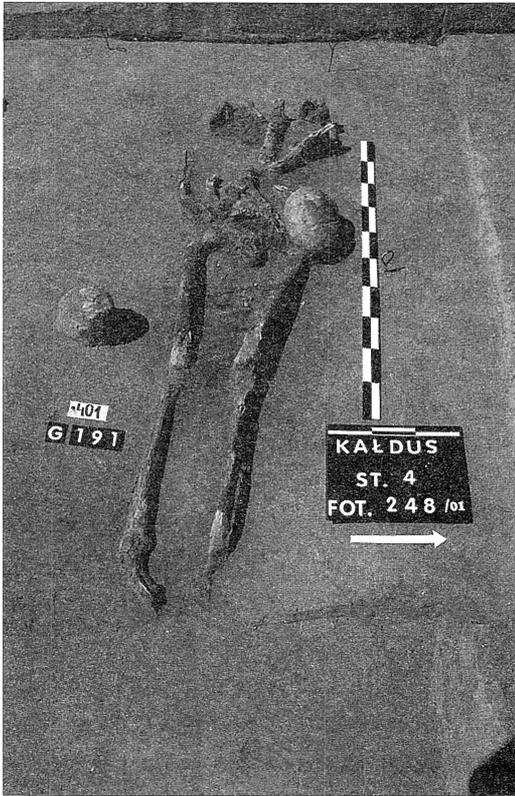


Fig. 4. Grave 191 from cemetery in Kaldus, voivodeship of. Chełmno (station 4), fot. M. Weinkauff (acc. J. Bojarski, W. Chudziak, A. Drozd, A. Koperkiewicz, T. Kozłowski, V. Stawska, *op. cit.*, fot. 36).

circumstances that could have caused deaths of the buried (e.g. flexed body position resulting from sudden death). The presence of sharp steel objects, signs of decapitation, can be treated as the immediate cause of death. Careful examination of the archeological context allows us to provide explanation to many seemingly untypical body positions. Lack of the skull or its displacement might have been caused by a secondary disturbance of the grave or by the displacement of the bones.¹⁴

It has been assumed in the literature on the subject that for a burial to be identified as “vampirical” a number of conditions have to be met.¹⁵ “*The occurrence of several arguments is no always as convincing as the occurrence of only one argument, but a very strong one*”¹⁶. One strong argument is convincing only when the stratigraphic context of the grave has been thoroughly examined and anthropological research has been carried out. An illustration of the skull from Piotrków pierced by a long nail, has for years been used as

evidence to prove that a beliefs in vampires did exist.¹⁷ However, this was a common form of punishment in medieval times, as it was to expose dead bodies of criminals to public view as a warning. In medieval times, metal cages with convicts were exposed at city squares and on church towers. It can be proved that such practices existed.¹⁸ It was, as can be guessed, a form of prevention.

In cases of some untypical graves, rational explanations can be provided, although sometimes attempts to give rational arguments fail. Unusual treatment of dead bodies was practiced in many cultures and time periods.¹⁹ Identification of deviations from the

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 186.

¹⁵ H. Zoll-Adamikowa, *op. cit.*, p. 52; M. Stanaszek, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

¹⁶ P. Żydok, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

¹⁷ K. Moszyński *op. cit.*, p. 663, fig. 17; J. Kolbuszewski, *Cmentarze* [Cemeteries], Wrocław 1996.

¹⁸ Koszyce in Slovakia, or the tower of Münster Cathedral .

¹⁹ Lt U. Narożna-Szamałek, *Pochówek szkieletowy kobiety na cmentarzysku ludności kultury lużyckiej w Lachmirowicach nad Gopłem* [Inhumation of a woman in a cemetery of a population of

norm requires defining the norms of a “typical burial ceremony”, typical for a given area, period of time and culture.²⁰ It gives a basis for identifying abnormal features in a more precise way. Professor H. Zoll-Adamikowa claimed that for burial practice to be called abnormal and to be connected with magical practices, at least several codependences must co-exist.²¹ Among such untypical practices the following can be listed:

- a) untypical body position - prone position, side position, flexed legs, complex “gesticulation” of the hands,
- b) exceptional treatment of the corpse - amputation of limbs, nailing limbs to planks, decapitation and placing the head not in the correct anatomical order, binding of the corpse, piercing of the bodies with sharp objects, using lumps of clay, burning the body,
- c) covering the body with a stone,
- d) stuffing the body’s mouth (with lumps of clay, coins, stones),
- e) untypical orientation of the body (north-south orientation and any deviations from the typical east-west orientation),
- f) absence of funerary equipment,
- g) peripheral situation of the grave.

The features listed above were present in several dozen cases of graves which were discovered in the north-eastern Poland that were analyzed.²² What is interesting is that most of the skeletons found in the untypical graves had exceptionally well preserved bones. Some of the graves can certainly be dated back to later periods than to Early Middle Ages. This leads us to another issue. Some of the old cemeteries could have been re-used as a place of inhumation of people who passed away experiencing unnatural forms of death (suicides, people who drowned, miscarried babies). An observation has been made, that the untypical graves in Daniłowo Małe (an old cemetery) were the youngest (fig. 5). The same was discovered in Kałdus (fig. 6),²³ and in Sandomierz, which has been analyzed many times in relation to “vampirical” graves. Although the cemetery in Sandomierz is dated back to the 11th century, the untypical graves were

Lusatian Culture from Lachmirowice near Lake Gopło, [in:] *Czarownice...[Witches...]*, pp. 87-90; T. Skorupka, *Atypowe pochówki na cmentarzysku w Kowalewku* [Unusual inhumations on the cemetery in Kowalewko], [in:] *Czarownice...[Witches...]*, pp. 91-99; M. Miśkiewicz, *Gesty i emocje...[Gestures and emotions...]*, pp. 92-100.

²⁰ P. Żydok, *op. cit.*, pp. 42-43.

²¹ M. Miśkiewicz, *Wczesnośredniowieczny obrządek pogrzebowy na płaskich cmentarzyskach szkieletowych w Polsce* [Early medieval burial practice in flat inhumation cemeteries in Poland], „Materiały Wczesnośredniowieczne” [Early medieval materials], vol. 6, 1969, pp. 247, 257; H. Zoll-Adamikowa, *op. cit.*, p. 52; Lt. M. Stanaszek, *op. cit.*, p. 22, table 1.

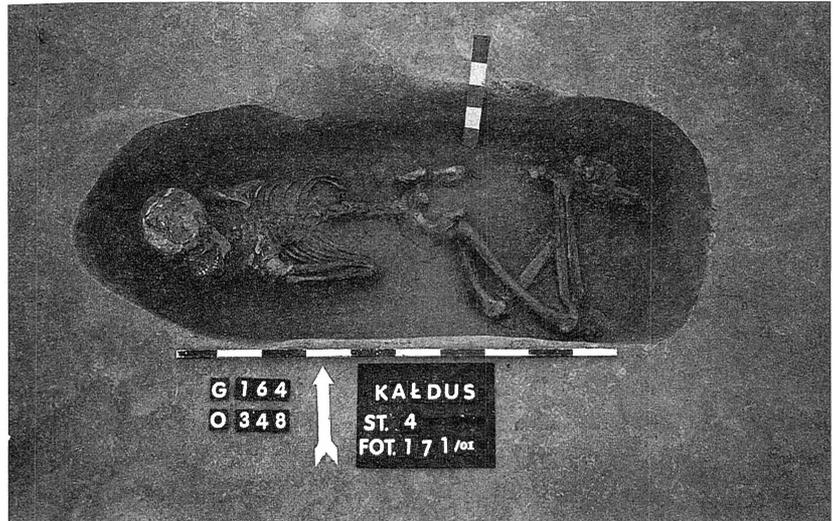
²² A. Koperkiewicz, *Praktyki pogrzebowe z początku II tys. n.e. na północno-wschodniej rubieży Słowiańszczyzny Zachodniej* [Burial practices from the beginning of the second century A.D. on the north-eastern boarder of Slavdom] (typescript of the PhD thesis from the archives of the Institute of Archeology of the Nicolaus Copernicus University, Toruń 2005).

²³ *Ibidem*, *op. cit.*, pp. 215-221.

Fig. 5. Untypical inhumation (site 296) from cemetery in Daniłowo Małe, voivodeship of Łapy, fot. A. Koperkiewicz (acc. archive materials of Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw)



Fig. 6. One of the untypical burials on the cemetery in Kaldus voivodeship of Chełmno (station. 4), fot. A. Koperkiewicz (acc. materials from the archives of Institute of Archeology of the Nicolas Copernicus University in Toruń) IA UMK



placed in older graves, dating back to the Early Middle Ages.²⁴ The fact that the bones were really well preserved may indicate that those untypical graves could come even from the modern period.

It is disputable whether the use of anti-vampirical practices in Early Middle Ages was a continuation of pagan beliefs.²⁵ Before Christianization such practices had been unknown, they appeared as soon as the practice of inhumation became common.²⁶ After that, untypical graves could be found in cemeteries located both near and outside

²⁴ J. Gąssowski, *Materiały do osadnictwa wczesnośredniowiecznego Sandomierszczyzny* [Materials on early medieval settlement in Sandomierszczyzna], „Materiały Wczesnośredniowieczne” [Early medieval materials], vol. 6, 1969, p. 420; Ł. M. Stanaszek, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

²⁵ Ł. M. Stanaszek, *op. cit.*, p. 27; *Id.*, *Pochówki wampirów w Polsce wczesnopiastowskiej* [Burials of vampires in Poland of the Early Piasts], „Archeologia Żywa” [Living archeology], 1999, z. 2, p. 40.

²⁶ M. Miśkiewicz, *Gesty i emocje...* [Gestures and emotions...], p. 98.



Fig. 7. Drawing from the manuscript of prayerbook of Hildegard of Bingen, “Blessed are those who mourn” they are portrayed in a typical “gesture of mourning”, face resting in their hands, their legs bent and crossed, the 12th century. (acc. J.-C. Schmitt, *Gest... [Gesture...]*, p. 174).



Fig. 8. Drawing from the manuscript of prayerbook of Hildegard of Bingen, “Blessed are the poor in spirit”. The figures kneel and have no clothes on, the 12th century. (acc. J.-C. Schmitt, *Gest... [Gesture...]*, p. 173).

churches. This fact can lead us to a conclusion that they wouldn't have been accepted in church cemeteries if they had been pagan graves.

We associate the term “vampirical graves” with characters of Bram Stoker's novels, which in fact, distorts the true meaning it had in the Early Middle Ages. It is more appropriate to associate the dead people buried in flexed positions with bad and rejected beings. In many mythologies, we can find demonic creatures which were characterized by some kind of physical malformation.²⁷ Iconographic sources confirm that such stereotypes existed in the Middle Ages. Bad people (sinners) are portrayed as ugly,

²⁷ K. Moszyński, *op. cit.*, p. 624.



Fig. 9. One of the untypical burias on the cemetery in Kałdus voievodship of Chełmno (station. 4), grave 380, fot. P. Biarda (acc. materials from the archives of Institute of Archeology of the Nicolas Copernicus University in Toruń).

distorted and convulsive creatures.²⁸ In relation to the concept of a body being a reflection of the human soul, these malformations reflected the dissonance which could be described by the words of Saint Ambrose “*movements of our bodies reflect what is happening in our souls*”.²⁹ Illustrations from the manuscripts of Saint Hildegard’s of Bingen are very suggestive. Saint Hildegard was a German mystic, visionary and medic who lived in the 12th century. Visualizations of eight blessings are paired with corresponding images of eight curses (which came totally from the illustrator’s imagination). Images of the cursed, which are located at the bottom of the picture strongly contrast with images of the blessed. The collection of sinners consists of people “cursed because of their pride”, “cursed because of their wrath”, “cursed because of their wrongdoings”, “cursed because of their parsimony”, “cursed because of the wrong treatment of others”, “cursed because of their love for feud” and “the cursed tormentors”. This

whole list has no theological support. It cannot be linked to any passage of Scripture. This is a unique iconographic work which has a significant meaning for our attempts to understand some of funerary practices of the Early Middle Ages, particularly in terms of “the gesticulation - body language” of the dead³⁰. Harmonious images of good and blessed people are contrasted with the aggressive nature of sinners, who are portrayed in many different ways. The sinners are making compulsive gestures, they are keeping their arms away from their bodies, their legs are bent and their bodies are twisted, their heads and torsos are not placed in the same line as their feet and their arms are crossed

²⁸ J.-C. Schmitt, *Gest w średniowiecznej Europie* [Gesture in Medieval Europe], Warszawa 2006, p. 340; cf. M. Miśkiewicz, *Gesty i emocje...* [Gestures and emotions...]

²⁹ J.-C. Schmitt, *Gest...* [Gesture...], *op. cit.*, p. 12.

³⁰ A. Koperkiewicz, *Mowa umarłych...* [Language of the dead...], *op.cit.*

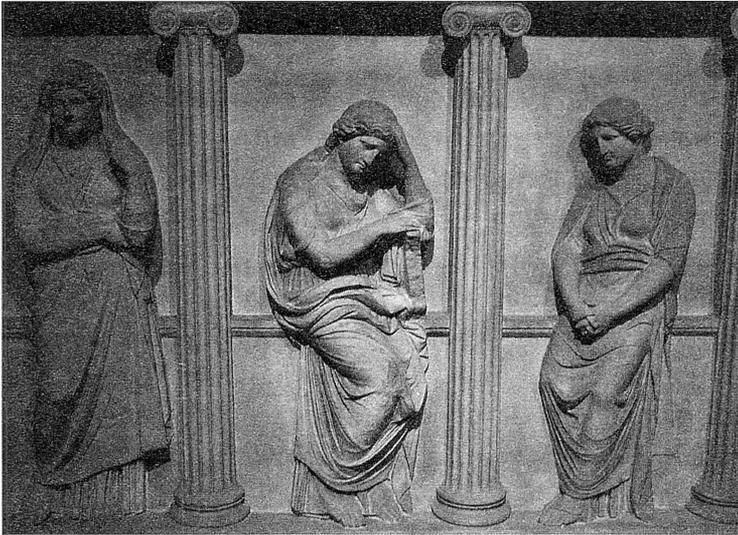


Fig. 10. The Sidonian Sarcophagus, Istanbul Archeological Museum, the 4th century B.C., fot. W. Brillowski.



Fig. 11. „Foolish Virgins” – decoration of the Golden Gate in Malbork Castle (Poland), characteristic gesture of despair, the 14th century., fot. A. Koperkiewicz.

as if they were begging for help.³¹ The sinners are one step away from those possessed by demons. All the above mentioned gestures can be found in the untypical graves (fig. 1-3). One thing has to be kept in mind, however. Expression of repentance and grief can lead to salvation. Therefore, some of the ugly creatures may convey a positive message. There is a striking resemblance between the perception of “the blessed who are, who mourn, and who are poor in spirit” (fig. 7-8) to the previously described, repetitive position in which bodies were buried in untypical graves i.e. flexed position, crossed legs and hands placed near the chin!³² (fig. 6, 8).

Ways of expressing emotions with gestures may vary depending on cultural, chronological and geographical differences. However, as Professor M. Miśkiewicz points out “*there are certain universal behaviors and emotions which influence people*

³¹ J.-C. Schmitt, *op. cit.*, p. 164-181.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 174, fig. 13.2.

as biological and social beings".³³ Among such gestures is a gesture of sadness, which was known in ancient Egyptian art and which was portrayed on a Sarcophagus from Sidon dating to the 4th century B.C. (fig. 10). Medieval art presented this emotion in exactly the same way.³⁴ One of such examples is the *porta aurea* of the Castle of the Teutonic Order in Malbork depicting evangelical Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins. The Foolish Virgins symbolize all those rejected during the Judgment Day.³⁵ They are presented in a dramatic pose in which their sorrow is stressed by "a mourning gesture" of their heads resting in their hands (fig.11).

However, returning to the point in question. We are talking about the Middle Ages, and it seems that while discussing vampirical traits, it is often forgotten that in those times there was a special kind of religious devotion, and penitential gestures were quite common. These proportions should be reversed. While investigating Christian cemeteries, it should first of all be analyzed whether any abnormalities are in accordance with Christian eschatological vision. Only then should a rational explanation for such deviations be sought. After that, issues of chronology should be addressed. This is mainly because some of the old cemeteries, considered as lying in "pagan lands" might have been utilized as the place of burial for those who died a "bad death"³⁶. Only after having considered all the above mentioned issues would I suggest examining the "vampirical" motifs and the whole background of folk beliefs³⁷. We should bear in mind that research into demons are only of a secondary nature. It may be a result of the imaginary mixture of Slavic demonology and the Christian perception of condemned souls, combined with the discovery of the "horrific" graves. Because some of the old inhumation practices could not have been explained as being due to insufficient knowledge, people believed in, and were afraid of "the living corpse".

Let us finally assume that there were no vampires in the Early Middle Ages. Let us also assume that the cemeteries and the burial practices of that time, were influenced by Christian religion and its churchmen, regardless of how powerful this Christian influence was. Would any deviations from the accepted norms have been possible in such an "atmosphere"? The concept of "good" and "bad" death certainly existed at that time. It can be presumed that ordinary burials were reserved for those who had "a good death". For Christians it meant reunion with God and fulfillment of the holy sacraments etc. In case of the untypical graves we should assume it was the other way round.

³³ M. Miśkiewicz, *Gesty i emocje...*[Gestures and emotions...], p. 92.

³⁴ Mourners portrayed on the Gniezno Doors, make similar gestures (M. Morelowski, *Drzwi gnieźnieńskie a sztuka obca i rodzima* [The Gniezno Doors in relation to the national and foreign culture], [in:] *Drzwi Gnieźnieńskie* [The Gniezno Doors], ed. M. Walicki, vol. 1, Wrocław 1956, p. 61, fig. 9-10). Miniatures from the so-called Codex Aureus Gnesnensis, are very interesting examples. Raised finger, in this case, warns from travelling. Bent figures catch viewer's attention, they probably personify dangers. The figures are naked, they crouch their legs are crossed, one of the figures is resting its head in its hand (M. Miśkiewicz, *Gesty i emocje...*[Gestures and emotions.....], p. 95, fig. 4).

³⁵ B. Jakubowska, Golden Gate in Malbork, Malbork 1986, p. 46.

³⁶ B. Uspienski, Cult of Saint Nicholas in Rus, Lublin 1985, pp. 126, 212-213.

³⁷ See reference 20.

A different orientation or position of the body could have indicated (to the living?) that the person had been a wrongdoer, a demon but also someone who is begging the Creator for mercy. Untypical position of the dead body, therefore, can indicate many different things. It is not evidence for demonic character but for great religious devotion. It can manifest great humility, it can symbolize Christian repentance, or the gesture of “the last chance”. One of the examples of the act of repentance can be found in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. In their famous trip to Inferno, Dante and Virgil, visit the deepest pits and they meet the sinners in following circles of Hell. Another place they visit is Purgatory, which is represented as a Mountain. The mountain has seven terraces, corresponding to the seven deadly sins. To be saved, sinners had to receive forgiveness for their sins and to wash off their blames. In Dante’s Purgatory one of the sinners who is given a second chance is the miser lying **with his face down to the ground**. By doing so, he covers his greediness and earthly ambitions.³⁸

As the historical sources confirm, the wealthy and the rulers were known for their predilection for eccentric inhumations, e.g. the son of Richard the Lion Heart, Richard II, wanted to be buried under...a drainpipe. Several centuries before, Pepin the Short († 768), the father of the emperor Charlemagne, demanded to be buried **in a prone position, with his face to the ground, because he wanted to redeem his father’s sins**.³⁹ Let us take a look at Jan Długosz’s *Chronicles* which describe events for year 1008. Here we have Pope Sylvester II at death’s door. When he was young he left the monastery and he sold his soul to the devil for a promise that all his dreams would come true. We follow a classic story of fulfilling all his earthly ambitions, which has its finale with his elevation to the papal throne. Satan uses a trick to get Sylvester’s soul. However, “*hearing devils’ rumble, he construed that death was coming, he sighed and moaned. And although he was the most depraved of all men, he had faith in God’s mercy so he revealed his crime and commanded that all his limbs which served devil should be amputated, and that his dead torso should be buried in a place to which animals take it and in which they leave it*”.⁴⁰ This is yet another example of a medieval eccentric who inflicts a fancy penalty upon himself. His idea for a such burial is indicative of his humbleness, repentance and his need for the remission of his sins. In the end, this idea turns out to be effective. Historians would probably be able to give more of such examples. But would not such inhumations be classified, according to the previously listed definitions, as “vampirical” if they were discovered by an archeologist?

Such legends depict how medieval people perceived and understood matters of life and death. In the Middle Ages there were many ways to pray which depended

³⁸ M. Kerrigan, *Historia śmierci* [History of death], Warszawa 2009, p. 95.

³⁹ G. Faber, *Merowingowie i Karolingowie* [The Merovingian and Carolingian Dynasties], Warszawa 1994, p. 145; M. Ragon, *Pogrzeb – widowisko* [Funeral – a show], [in:] *Wymiary śmierci* [Dimensions of death], ed. S. Rosiek, Gdańsk 2003, p. 331.

⁴⁰ Jan Długosz, *Roczniki czyli Kroniki Sławnego Królestwa Polskiego, księga druga* [Chronicles of the Famous Kingdom of Poland, book two], Warszawa 1964, p. 336.

on situation, place and intention. Only in case of bas-reliefs on tombs, which portrayed the dead with their hands folded for prayer, it is agreed that the posture is one of waiting for resurrection. Other examples were not so clear and they were also interpreted as symbols of a request for the prayers of the living.⁴¹ For Pope Gregory I, his aunt, praying with her elbows and knees on the ground “to torment her body at the same time”, was an authority. Medieval flagellants, who were announcing black death, slept on the ground in positions which represented the sins they had committed. Lechers and gluttons slept on their backs, while others took accidental positions on the ground. Unusual positions were not reserved only for sinners, but also for mystics who withered themselves in prayers. Flagellants’ performances were aimed at giving lessons in morality and the remission of sins.⁴²

To sum up, a typical flexed, prone position, characteristic for early medieval “vampirical” inhumations, is more likely to be an example of: a/ a person rejected by God, b/ one of the forms of Christian penitential prayer position. Prayer that is important, especially in the moment of death. Therefore, it is probably religious devotion and the need to become redeemed, rather than pagan beliefs in demons, that inspired at least some of the so called “anti-vampirical practices”. It was not fear of the dead person but care for him and his life. Were they holy or cursed, then?

⁴¹ J.-C. Schmitt, *Duchy. Żywi i umarli w społeczeństwie średniowiecznym* [Ghosts, the dead and the living in the medieval society], Gdańsk 2002, p. 211.

⁴² *Ibidem*, *Gest...* [Gesture], pp. 321-341.

Свети или проколнати? Некои согледувања на аномалии во раносредновековни погребувања

Резимé

Како заклучок, типичната згрчена положба, карактеристична за раносредновековните „вамписки„ погребувања најверојатно претставува пример на: а) личност отфрлена од Господ, б) една од формите на христијанската покајаничка молитвена положба. Молитва која е значајна, особено во моментот на смртта. Следствено, тоа се должи повеќе на религиозната посветеност и потребата да се биде спасен, отколку на паганските верувања во демони кои инспирирале некои од таканаречените „анти-вамписки“ дејства. Не се работи за страв од покојникот, туку за грижа за него и неговиот живот. Тогаш, дали тие биле свети или проколнати?