

OBJECTS WITH CHRISTIAN SYMBOLISM IN CHILDREN'S GRAVES IN WESTERN RUS' AND THE POLISH-RUTHENIAN BORDERLAND (11TH-13TH CENTURIES) AS AN INDICATOR OF CULTURAL DIFFERENTIATION

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Abstract. This article examines the spread of Christianity as reflected in children's burial practices, with particular focus on the deposition of objects bearing Christian symbolism. The study analyses these practices in comparison with adult burials in western Rus' and the Polish-Ruthenian borderland between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries. The analysis is based on material from thirteen cemeteries located in the Polack region, as well as in Podlasie and eastern Masovia, and is contextualised through comparative evidence from both Rus' and early medieval Poland. The results reveal two distinct patterns. In Rus', devotional objects occur predominantly in the graves of young children (*infans* I), whereas in early medieval Poland they are more commonly associated with adult burials and only occasionally with older children (*infans* II). In Podlasie and eastern Masovia, both patterns are present.

Keywords: Christianisation, Polish-Ruthenian borderland, devotional items, inhumation burials, archaeology of childhood.

Introduction

In medieval societies, where everyday life was governed by religious norms, the transmission of faith and tradition to new generations was of fundamental importance. The ways in which children were introduced into religious life – such as the age at baptism, rules governing the wearing of religious symbols, and practices associated with equipping deceased children for their “final journey” – could, however, vary depending on confession. The aim of this study is to assess the impact of the spread of Christianity on children's grave goods and to identify

differences in the inclusion of objects with Christian symbolism in the burials of children and adults in western Rus' and the Polish-Ruthenian borderland between the 11th and 13th centuries.

The study area encompasses part of western Rus' (the territories of northern and western Belarus) as well as Podlasie and eastern Mazovia.

A brief overview of the discussion on evidence of Christianisation reflected in grave goods

The period between the 11th and 13th centuries, following the Christianisation of Eastern Europe, is characterised by the widespread use of various types of pendants, including crosses, icons, amulets depicting saints, as well as pendants in the form of miniature objects and zoomorphic or ornithomorphic pendants. In the archaeology of Rus' and early medieval Poland, discussion about the meaning of certain types of pendants began in the second half of the 19th century, but active scholarly debate on this topic has continued since the mid-twentieth century.

One of the most uncompromising positions among Soviet archaeologists was taken by Academician B. Rybakov. In his 1932 study on the Radimichs, he rejected the interpretation of even crosses as Christian symbols in the 11th-12th centuries, referring to the practice of wearing several such pendants together with beads in a single necklace. He argued that crosses began to function as devotional items only from the 13th-14th centuries (Rybakov 1932, p. 126). In his later works, particularly in "Paganism of Old Rus'", Rybakov attributed specific meanings to nearly all types of early medieval amulets known from the territory of Rus'. For example, spoons were interpreted as symbols of prosperity, keys as symbols of the protection of material property, and axe pendants as symbols of the cult of Perun (Rybakov 1987, pp. 543, 546; 1951, pp. 400-404), among others. These interpretations were partly based on Slavic folklore and partly on Rybakov's own intuition, and were largely speculative in nature. Nevertheless, they became deeply embedded in the archaeology of Rus' for decades and were repeatedly reproduced in the works of other scholars (Uspienskaya 1967, p. 88; Ryabinin 1988, p. 55). Zoomorphic pendants were likewise regarded in Soviet archaeology as objects of pagan cult; for example, V. Sedov associated the wearing of one type of such pendant by the Krivichs with an "ancient Baltic cult of the horse" (Sedov 1968, p. 156).

A different approach to this category of sources was adopted in the same period by H. Zoll-Adamikowa. While recognising the transition to inhumation burial as the principal indicator of Christianisation, she cautiously suggested that certain grave goods, such as kaptorgas or coins, might also have had Christian meaning (Zoll-Adamikowa 1971, pp. 98, 118). She further observed that the "beast" motifs present on some types of amulets find analogies in Western European ecclesiastical

art. At the time, this was a pioneering idea that has since been corroborated by later research.

Since the 1990s, a number of studies have addressed the Christianisation of Rus' and the Polish-Ruthenian borderland on the basis of archaeological evidence (Makarov 1991; Wołoszyn 2001; Żółkowska 2010). However, these studies have generally focused only on artefacts whose interpretation as Christian symbols is not controversial – crosses, icons, and medallions depicting saints – while other categories of pendants continued to be viewed as objects of pagan cult.

While in Scandinavian archaeology as early as the 1940s O. Almgren suggested that keys and key-shaped amulets from the cemetery at Birka symbolised the Keys of St Peter (Gräslund 1997, p. 320), in the archaeology of Central-Eastern Europe hypotheses concerning the Christian meaning of certain types of amulets traditionally regarded as pagan began to appear only in the early 2000s. Thus, the Russian scholar A. Musin proposed a Christian interpretation of zoomorphic pendants and miniature object pendants, arguing that they may have “expressed certain superstitious ideas within the emerging ecclesiastical worldview” (Musin 2002, p. 192). A similar view was expressed by A. Koperkiewicz, who noted that “among the entire assemblage of objects found in early medieval burials, virtually every item has its counterpart in Christian symbolism” (Koperkiewicz 2005, p. 284).

In recent decades, the corpus of Eastern European artefacts interpreted as Christian has expanded. Lunulas have been interpreted as symbols of the Virgin Mary (Hamaiko 2008, p. 333; Khamayko 2012, pp. 13-14), zoomorphic pendants have been identified with the leucrota known from early medieval bestiaries (Spirgis 2014, p. 407), and spoon-shaped pendants with communion spoons (Spirgis, Sobolev and Kuznetsova 2022, p. 278).

It should be emphasised, however, that the interpretation of pendant types lacking explicit Christian symbols – such as crosses, depictions of saints, or religious inscriptions – as devotional items has not gained wide acceptance in Polish archaeology. In a recent comprehensive study of Christianisation in the Polish-Ruthenian borderland, only crosses and pendants with saintly images were interpreted as devotional objects, while other categories of pendants were described as “objects with pagan symbolic connotations” (Skrzyńska 2019, p. 278). The co-occurrence of crosses with zoomorphic pendants or miniature tools within the same necklaces is often interpreted as evidence of religious syncretism, understood as a fusion of pagan worldviews with the symbolism of the new religion (Bojarski 2020, p. 76; Szczepanik 2023, p. 286). The concept of dual faith or religious syncretism dominated interpretations of the religious situation of the 11th-12th centuries in Soviet archaeology (Hamaiko 2007, pp. 89-90) and also influenced Polish academic discourse of the period (Lepówna 1981, pp. 195-196). In this sense, contemporary interpretations can be linked to a long-standing historiographical tradition. Moreover, some scholars suggest that early medieval crosses made

of non-metallic materials may have functioned as objects of traditional Slavic protective magic (Wawrzeniuk 2016, p. 135; Kajkowski 2016, pp. 443–444).

In contemporary Polish interpretations of devotional items found in graves, the thesis frequently appears that the inclusion of such objects in elite burials primarily served to demonstrate high social status and affiliation with the social elite rather than Christian faith (for a detailed discussion, see Brather 2012, p. 338). The conclusions of F. Androshchuk, who analysed 10th-century chamber graves in Rus', are often used as a close parallel for the Polish territories (Buko 2019, p. 299; Bojarski 2020, p. 96). It should be noted, however, that chamber graves represent the highest social strata before and shortly after the official baptism of Rus', and the author did not exclude connections between some of the individuals buried there and Byzantium, nor their possible conversion to Christianity. His argument referred mainly to elite female burials containing devotional pendants, while suggesting that men buried in chamber graves may already have been Christians (Androshchuk 2011, p. 85). Thus, while emphasising the role of Christian symbols as indicators of elite status, the author did not exclude the Christianisation of the elites, but rather stressed that in 10th-century Rus' conversion to Christianity was itself a marker of high social status (Androshchuk 2011, p. 81). Applying interpretations developed for the highest social strata of 10th-century Rus' to burials from the Polish-Ruthenian borderland or other regions dating to the late 11th–13th centuries and representing different burial types raises certain methodological concerns.

According to researchers of early medieval Poland, in addition to crosses and pendants depicting saints, devotional functions may also have been fulfilled by kaptorgas (Szyber 2010, p. 53), rings bearing crosses or religious inscriptions (Bojarski 2020, p. 77; Rebkowski 2023, p. 277), and coins, primarily cross deniers (Zoll-Adamikowa 1971, p. 118; Bojarski 2020, p. 85).

The issue of the impact of Christianisation on children's burial practices is not entirely new in archaeological research. In Central and Eastern Europe, several studies have approached this topic in two distinct ways. Some focused on the "visibility" of children in Christian cemeteries compared to pre-Christian burial grounds, noting an increase in the number of child burials and a standardisation of their burial rite in relation to adult practices after Christianisation (Romanowicz 2016, p. 139; Curta and Koval 2018, p. 111).

Other studies addressed the presence of specific artefacts in children's graves as indicators of their affiliation with Christian communities. Based on the analysis of cemeteries in northern Rus' (the Lake Beloe region), N. Makarov observed that crosses occurred mainly in women's and children's graves, interpreting their presence in children's burials as a response to the need for special protection associated with high child mortality (Makarov 1991, p. 16). Similar conclusions were reached by J. Bojarski in his analysis of devotional items in burials of individuals of different sexes and age groups from cemeteries in the Chełmno–Dobrzyń region.

It is noteworthy that in this study devotional objects occurred primarily in graves of adult women and only rarely in burials of older children (*infans II*; 3 out of 33 analysed graves) (Bojarski 2020, p. 78). These differences are of key importance for the interpretation presented in the following sections of this article.

In a comparable study covering a broader area, including Rus' and Scandinavia, M. Wołoszyn reported that within the territory of present-day Belarus only 14% of 14 analysed child burials contained crosses (Wołoszyn 2003, p. 88). It should be noted, however, that these statistics were based on a single publication (Bashkov 2000) cataloguing early medieval crosses and encolpia from Belarus. As will be shown later in this article, a broader dataset compiled from multiple sources and incorporating recent research reveals a somewhat different pattern.

Characteristics of children's graves in western Rus' and the Polish-Ruthenian borderland furnished with objects bearing Christian symbolism

Within the analysed area, 13 cemeteries with a total of 29 children's burials furnished with devotional items are known (table 1). As shown on the map (Fig. 1), within the territory of present-day Belarus such burials are currently recorded only in its northern part, corresponding to the historical Polack principality (hereafter: the Polack land). At cemeteries located both in the Neman and the Bug river basins, no children's graves furnished with devotional items have so far been identified. It should be noted, however, that only few adult burials with crosses from the graves with stone-surroundings in the Neman basin have been documented (Kviatkovskaya 1998, pp. 80, 82). These graves have uncertain chronology and can most likely be dated later than the 13th century; therefore, they are excluded from the present analysis. The absence of burials furnished with devotional items in south-western Belarus should most probably be explained by the relatively poor state of archaeological investigation in this area rather than by an actual cultural phenomenon. In the analysed region, the following objects bearing Christian symbolism occur in children's graves: crosses and ornaments in the form of an encircled cross, lunulas, zoomorphic pendants, ceramic eggs (*pisanki*), and bird eggs¹.

The distribution of burials furnished with devotional items across different age groups (Fig. 2) indicates that the Polack land on the one hand, and Podlasie together with eastern Mazovia on the other, display different tendencies in the inclusion of devotional items in adult and children's graves. In the Polack land, burials of the youngest children (up to 7 years of age) clearly predominate, while

¹ A discussion of the meaning, possible functions, and symbolism of eggs and egg-shaped objects in the early Middle Ages is not included here, as these issues have been examined in detail in several recent studies (Szmoniewski 2023; Makouskaya 2024; Kurasiński 2024).

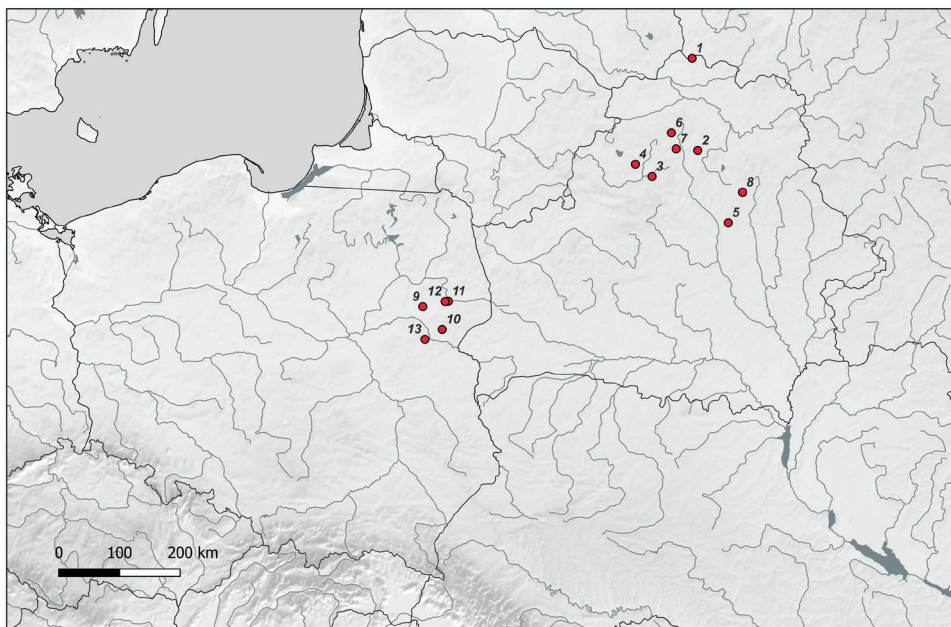


Fig. 1. Map of cemeteries with child burials furnished with Christian symbolic objects in the territories of western and northern Belarus, Podlasie, and eastern Mazovia (image by V. Makouskaya): 1 – Dzianisienki, 2 – Zviazda, 3 – Kamiena-1, 4 – Naŭry I, 5 – Charčyčy, 6 – Skrabianiec, 7 – Biruli, 8 – Navinka, 9 – Święck, 10 – Czarna Wielka, 11 – Suraż, 12 – Daniłowo Małe, 13 – Czekanów

graves of adults and older children furnished with devotional items are very rare. In contrast, at cemeteries in Podlasie and Mazovia adult burials clearly dominate, and the number of older children is roughly comparable to that of younger ones.

Devotional items in children's graves from the Polack land are not very diverse and include only crosses, ornaments bearing the cross symbol, and lunulas. All these artefacts functioned as pendants or ornaments sewn onto clothing and thus formed part of the deceased's attire at burial. The limited diversity of objects bearing Christian symbolism is not confined to children's graves. In adult burials from other cemeteries in this region, other categories of devotional items also occur only rarely, whereas cultural layers of strongholds from the Rus' period yield a wide range of artefacts, such as crosses, zoomorphic pendants, miniature object pendants, ceramic glazed eggs, and others (Eremeev 2015, pp. 511-513; Levko et al. 2012, photo 7, 19, 21, 22, 24; Levko 2014, pp. 496, 502; Semenchuk 2001, p. 301). The discrepancy between finds from graves and settlement sites may be explained by the absence of a widespread tradition of placing devotional items in graves.

It is noteworthy that within the territory of present-day Belarus burials furnished with objects of a devotional character from the 11th-13th centuries, both of children

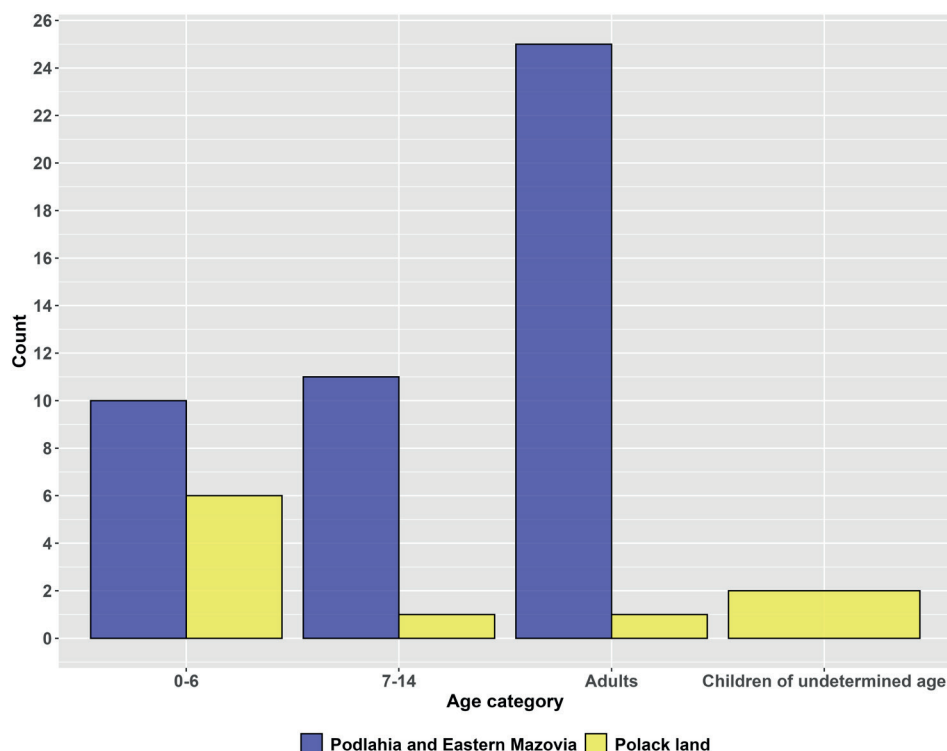


Fig. 2. Number of graves of individuals from different age categories furnished with Christian symbolic objects from the studied cemeteries of the Polack land and the Polish-Ruthenian borderland (image by V. Makouskaya)

and adults, are known exclusively from barrow cemeteries. At contemporary churchyard cemeteries located near or within strongholds, no burials furnished with devotional items have so far been identified. With regard to the location and character of these barrow cemeteries, it should be emphasised that they either belonged to local rural administrative centres or were situated in the vicinity of strongholds. These cemeteries thus served communities that must have been baptised after the inhabitants of strongholds but, unlike the latter, probably did not yet have a priest permanently supervising burial practices.

Given the small number of graves furnished with objects bearing Christian symbolism at barrow cemeteries, the analysis of their position within cemetery planigraphy does not allow for statistically reliable conclusions; therefore, this issue will not be addressed further.

In the Polack land, children's burials furnished with devotional items are dated from the first half of the 11th century to the beginning or first half of the 12th century. This chronology corresponds well with N. Makarov's concept of the first generations of Christians who demonstrated their faith, among other ways, by placing

Table 1. Cemeteries with child burials furnished with Christian symbolic objects on the territories of the Polack land, Podlania and eastern Mazovia

Cemetery	Location	Type	Number of children's burials with Christian objects	Number of adult's burials with Christian objects	Items with Christian symbolism	Chronology of the children's burials with Christian objects	Literature
Dzianisienki	Viciebsk Region, Belarus	Barrow cemetery	1	0	Cross	First half of the 12th century	Sergeeva 1996
Zviazda	Viciebsk Region, Belarus	Barrow cemetery	1	0	Cross	First half of the 11th century	Vojtechovič 2019
Kamienka-1	Minsk Region, Belarus	Barrow cemetery	1	0	Cross	Second half of the 11th century – beginning of the 12th century	Makovskaa 2022
Natry I	Minsk Region, Belarus	Barrow cemetery	1	0	Cross	Second half of the 11th century	Rábcevič, Plavinskij 1988
Charčyčy	Minsk Region, Belarus	Barrow cemetery	1	1	Cross	11th century	Rábcevič, Plavinskij 2000; 2002
Skrabianiec	Viciebsk Region, Belarus	Barrow cemetery	1	0	Lunula, encircled cross	Second half of the 11th century	-
Biruli	Viciebsk Region, Belarus	Barrow cemetery	1	0	Lunula	Second half of the 12th century	Vajcáchovič 2011
Navinka	Viciebsk Region, Belarus	Barrow cemetery	2	0	Lunula	11th – early 12th century	Sergeeva 1973
Świętek	Podlaskie Voivodeship, Poland	Churchyard cemetery	10	22	Cross, lunula, encircled cross, zoomorphic pendant	12th – mid-13th century	Jaskanis 2008

Czama Wielka	Podlaskie Voivodeship, Poland	Cemetery with stone structures	3	1	Cross, encircled cross, ceramic egg	Second half of the 12th – 13th century	Bieńkowska et al. 2013
Suraz	Podlaskie Voivodeship, Poland	Churchyard cemetery	1	0	Cross	Second half of the 13th century	Oleżak et al. 2024
Danilowo Małe	Podlaskie Voivodeship, Poland	Cemetery with stone structures	1	2	Cross, lunula, encircled cross, ceramic egg	Second half of the 12th century – early 13th century	Koperkiewicz 2004; Koperkiewicz, Krasnodębski 2006; Koperkiewicz 2011
Czekanów	Mazowieckie Voivodeship, Poland	Cemetery with stone structures	6	5	Cross, lunula, encircled cross, egg	mid-11th century – early 13th century	Zawadzka-Antosik 1982

Table 2. Cemeteries with child burials furnished with Christian symbolic objects from Rus' and early medieval Poland, used for comparison

Cemetery	Location	Type	Number of children's burials with Christian objects	Number of adult's burials with Christian objects	Items with Christian symbolism in the graves of adults and children	Items with Christian symbolism in children's graves	Chronology of the cemetery	Literature
Rus'								
Berezovetskiy	Tver Region, Russian Federation	Barrow cemetery	1	7	Lunula, coin	Coin	Second half of the 10th–12th century	Uspenskaa 1993
Uschod	Mahilioŭ Region, Belarus	Barrow cemetery	2	1	Cross, lunula, coin	Lunula, coin	Second half of the 10th–12th century	Marzaliuk 2017
Gnezdilovo	Vladimir Region, Russian Federation	Barrow and flat cemetery	1	1	Coin pendant, lunula	Lunula	11th – beginning of the 12th century	Makarov et al. 2021
Eliseevichi	Bryansk Region, Russian Federation	Barrow cemetery	1	0	Cross	Cross	11th–12th century	Šinakov et al. 2011
Minino II	Vologda Region, Russian Federation	Flat cemetery	6	7	Cross, encircled cross, icon pendant, coin pendant, lunula, zoomorphic pendant, ceramic egg	Cross, icon pendant, coin pendant, lunula, ceramic egg	11th–13th century	Makarov 2009
Lozova 1a	Temopil Region, Ukraine	Flat cemetery	1	0	Cross	Cross	12th–13th century	Âhodinska 2018
Novoselki-2	Moscow Region, Russian Federation	Barrow cemetery	1	1	Cross, lunula	Lunula	mid-12th – mid-13th century	Zoc, Gol'eva 2016
Czeremno stan.3	Lublin Voivodship, Poland	Churchyard cemetery	1	0	Cross	Cross	mid-13th century	Pawleta 2016

Pień	Poland					Kuyavian-Pomeranian Voivodeship	Flat cemetery	1		2		Kaptorga	Kaptorga	Kaptorga	Second half of the 10th century – first half of the 11th century	Karykowska, Poliński 2020
Dziekano-wice						Greater Poland Voivodeship	Flat cemetery	17		76		Cross, coin, ceramic egg, key, kaptorga, object decorated with a cross motif	Cross, coin, ceramic egg, key, kaptorga, strap divider decorated with a cross motif	Ceramic egg, kaptorga, coin, strap divider decorated with a cross motif	Mid-10th – late 12th century	Wrzesiński, 2022
Cieple						Pomeranian Voivodeship	Flat cemetery	2		5		Pendant decorated with a cross motif, coin, reliquary plaque, pendant depicting saints	Pendant depicting saints, coin	Pendant depicting saints, coin	11th – mid-12th century	Wadył 2019
Opole Nowa Wieś Królewska						Opole Voivodeship	Flat cemetery	1		0		Ceramic egg	Ceramic egg	Ceramic egg	11 th -12th century	Wachowski 1975
Goryslawice						Świętokrzyskie Voivodeship	Flat cemetery	2		6		Lunula, coin	Lunula, coin	coin	Second half of the 11th century	Zoll-Adamikowa 1966
Brześć Kujawski						Kuyavian-Pomeranian Voivodeship	Flat cemetery	7		4		Pendant decorated with a cross, kaptorga, coin, ceramic egg, egg	Pendant decorated with a cross, kaptorga, coin, ceramic egg, egg	Coin, ceramic egg, egg	Mid-11th century – early 12th century	Kaszewska, Kaszewski 1971
Lubiń						Lesser Poland Voivodeship	Flat cemetery	7		13		Kaptorga, ring decorated with a cross, coin	Kaptorga, ring decorated with a cross, coin	Coin	11th – second half of the 12th century	Kurasiński, Skóra 2012
Sandomierz Kamień Plebański						Świętokrzyskie Voivodeship	Flat cemetery	1		0		Egg	Egg	Egg	11 th -12th century	Florek 2016
Giecz 4						Greater Poland Voivodeship	Flat cemetery	9		15		Kaptorga, coin, egg	Kaptorga, coin, egg	Coin, egg	Second half of the 10th century – early 13th century	Indycka 2021

[Continuation of Table 2]

Kaldus, stan. 4	Kuyavian-Pomeranian Voivodeship	Churchyard cemetery	7	22	Cross, kaptorga, coin pendant, coin, object decorated with a Christian motif	Coin pendant, coin, cross	End of the 10th–12th century	Chudziak 2010
Radom, stan. 4	Masovian Voivodeship	Flat cemetery	1	8	Kaptorga, key, coin	Coin	End of the 11th–12th century	Kurasinski, Skóra 2016
Złota Pinezowska	Świętokrzyskie Voivodeship	Flat cemetery	3	2	Ring decorated with a cross, egg	Egg	Mid-11th – mid-13th century	Miśkiewicz 1967
Giech 10	Greater Poland Voivodeship	Flat cemetery	5	11	Coin, egg	Coin, egg	11th century	Miciak, Agnew 2021
Gruczno	Kuyavian-Pomeranian Voivodeship	Churchyard cemetery	1	8	Cross, encircled cross, ring, pendant and diadem decorated with a cross, object decorated with a Christian motif	Diadem decorated with a cross	Mid-11th century – second half of the 13th century	Boguwolski et al. 2005
Cedynia, stan. 2A	West Pomeranian Voivodeship	Flat cemetery	3	1	Kaptorga, coin pendant, ceramic egg	Kaptorga, coin pendant, ceramic egg	Late 11th – mid-14th century	Porzeziński 2006
Kaldus, stan. 1	Kuyavian-Pomeranian Voivodeship	Churchyard cemetery	1	2	Kaptorga, object decorated with a cross motif, ceramic egg	Ceramic egg	12th – mid-13th century	Chudziak 2006
Czersk	Masovian Voivodeship	Churchyard cemetery	0	7	Encircled cross, lunula, ring decorated with a cross	-	12th – mid-13th century	Bronicka-Rauhut 1998
Wilanów Oranzeria	Masovian Voivodeship	Churchyard cemetery	0	3	Ring decorated with a cross	-	13th – mid-14th century	Solecki 2018



Fig. 3. Types of objects with Christian symbolism found in children's graves from the territories of the Polack land, Podlasie, and eastern Mazovia: 1 – ceramic egg (after Bieńkowska et al., 2014); 2 – lunula (after Sergeeva 1974); 3 – encircled cross (after Jaskanis 2008); 4, 5 – crosses (after Bieńkowska et al. 2014); 6 – zoomorphic pendant (after Spirgis 2014)

devotional items in burials (Makarov 2009, p. 113). The age of children buried with objects bearing Christian symbolism ranges from approximately 1.5 to 8-9 years, suggesting that they likely belonged to the first generations baptised in infancy. For various reasons, precisely such children were often equipped with devotional items for their “final journey”. This may be related to the concern of relatives and the community for members who were perceived as too young to cope independently in the afterlife and therefore required additional “means of protection”. Particularly noteworthy in this context are two multiple burials containing a small child and an adult – barrow 1 at the cemetery in Dzianisienki (Sergeeva 1996, pp. 43, 87) and grave 184/184a at the cemetery in Czarna Wielka (Bieńkowska et al. 2013, pp. 88, 219) – where it was the children, rather than the adults, who were buried with crosses.

As a confessionally homogeneous region of Rus', the Polack land displays a uniform approach to furnishing the dead with devotional items. In contrast, Podlasie and eastern Mazovia present a more complex picture, with individual cemeteries revealing different tendencies. This is particularly evident in the two cemeteries with the largest number of graves: the cemetery with stone-surrounded graves at Czekanów², where objects bearing Christian symbolism occur in graves of younger children, and the churchyard cemetery at Świątek, where such objects are found almost exclusively in burials of adults and older children (Fig. 4). It should be stressed that these differences are not directly dependent on cemetery

² I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the staff of the Department of Medieval and Post-Medieval Archaeology of the State Archaeological Museum in Warsaw for providing access to the artefact records from the unpublished cemetery in Czekanów.

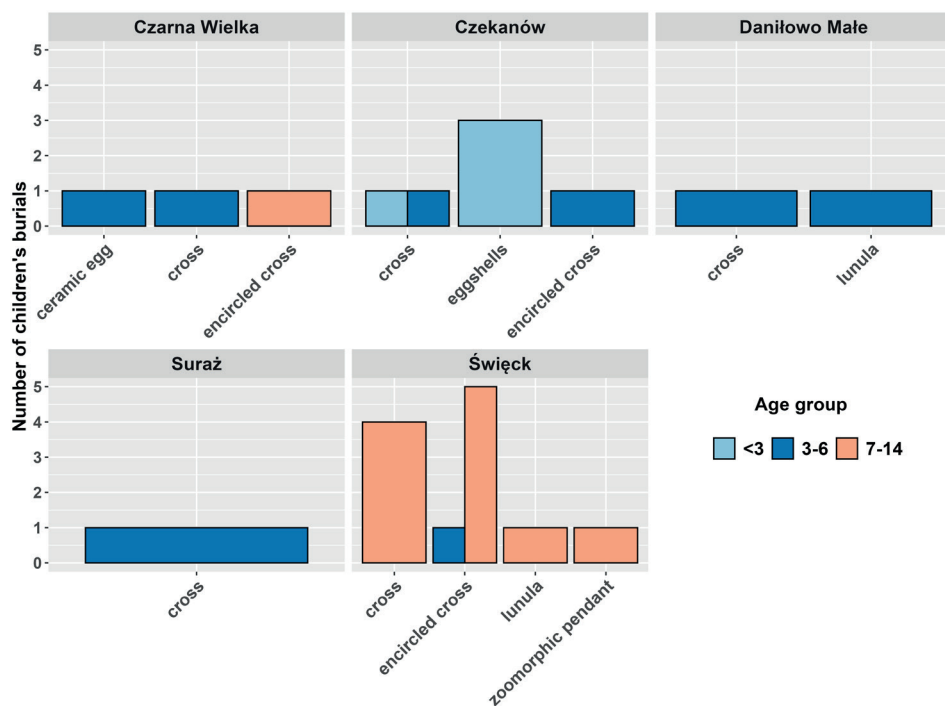


Fig. 4. Distribution of Christian symbolic objects in children's graves of different age groups at cemeteries in Podlasie and eastern Mazovia (image by V. Makouskaya)

type. For example, in contrast to the situation at Święck, at the churchyard cemetery in Suraż the only burial furnished with devotional items was that of a young child (*infans I*) (Olczak et al. 2024, pp. 212, 245) (Fig. 4).

Extensively investigated cemeteries in Podlasie and eastern Mazovia provide a larger number of children's graves furnished with devotional items, particularly at the necropolises in Czarna Wielka, Czekanów, and Święck (table 1). The range of objects occurring in children's graves is also more diverse than in the Polack land and includes pendants with the cross symbol, lunulas³, zoomorphic pendants, ceramic eggs, and eggshells (table 2). All these artefacts were also placed in adult graves in this region. At the cemetery in Święck, however, another category of objects bearing Christian symbolism is present – rings with the sign of the cross – which occur exclusively in adult burials (e.g. graves 103, 115, 435) (Jaskanis 2008, pp. 539, 540, 599). Such rings are very rare in western Rus' and, as will be shown later in the article, occur much more frequently within the territory of the

³ At the cemetery in Czarna Wielka, grave 163 (*infans I*) contained an amulet made of an animal tooth, centrally perforated so that when suspended it resembled a lunula (Dzik 2014, p. 207). As the function of this object remains uncertain, it has not been included among artefacts interpreted as Christian in character.

Piast state. Among the analysed cemeteries of Rus' and the Polish-Ruthenian borderland, rings with the cross symbol are known only from Święck.

As in the Polack land, in all children's burials pendants were located in the chest or neck area and formed part of necklaces. Eggs and ceramic glazed eggs were usually found near the feet of the deceased children (Zawadzka-Antosik 1982, p. 47; Dzik 2014, p. 206). At the analysed cemeteries, eggs were found exclusively in graves of younger children up to 7 years of age, a pattern not limited to the Polish-Ruthenian borderland. At other early medieval Polish cemeteries, eggs in children's burials were likewise typically placed in graves of small children (Kuraśński 2024, p. 11).

The number of children's graves furnished with devotional items and the extent of archaeological investigation allow discussion of grave planigraphy only for the cemeteries at Święck and Czarna Wielka. At Święck, burials of older children with devotional items were dispersed, mostly in the eastern part of the cemetery, and did not form clear clusters. Particular attention is drawn to the only burial of a younger child furnished with an object of a sacred character – a pendant in the form of an encircled cross – which was the only grave good. This grave is located next to the southern wall of the church, close to its altar area (Fig. 5). Such placement, combined with the exceptional nature of the grave good for a small child, may suggest that the child came from a wealthy or influential family capable of providing enhanced protection in the afterlife.

Children's graves furnished with devotional items at the cemetery in Czarna Wielka are located in various parts of the necropolis among burials lacking stone constructions.

Chronology also deserves attention. With the exception of the cemetery at Czekanów, children's burials furnished with devotional items appear in the 12th century or its second half, at a time when in the Polack land and in Rus' more generally the practice of furnishing graves with such objects was already disappearing. The later appearance of devotional items in the borderland also corresponds to the later arrival of Christianity compared to other regions of Rus' and the Piast state, as reflected in the later introduction of inhumation burial, which according to various authors appears in this area from the second half of the 11th century but becomes widespread in the 12th century (Skrzyńska 2019, p. 279; Dzik 2014, p. 183). This phenomenon may to some extent indicate the direction of the spread of Byzantine Christianity, but due to the lack of stronger evidence it remains a hypothesis and cannot serve as a basis for definitive conclusions.

In summary, the following characteristics can be emphasised with regard to children's burials furnished with devotional items in the Polack land, Podlasie, and eastern Mazovia:

- in the Polack land, children's burials with objects bearing Christian symbolism appear in the first half of the 11th century and are dominated by graves of young children up to 7 years of age;

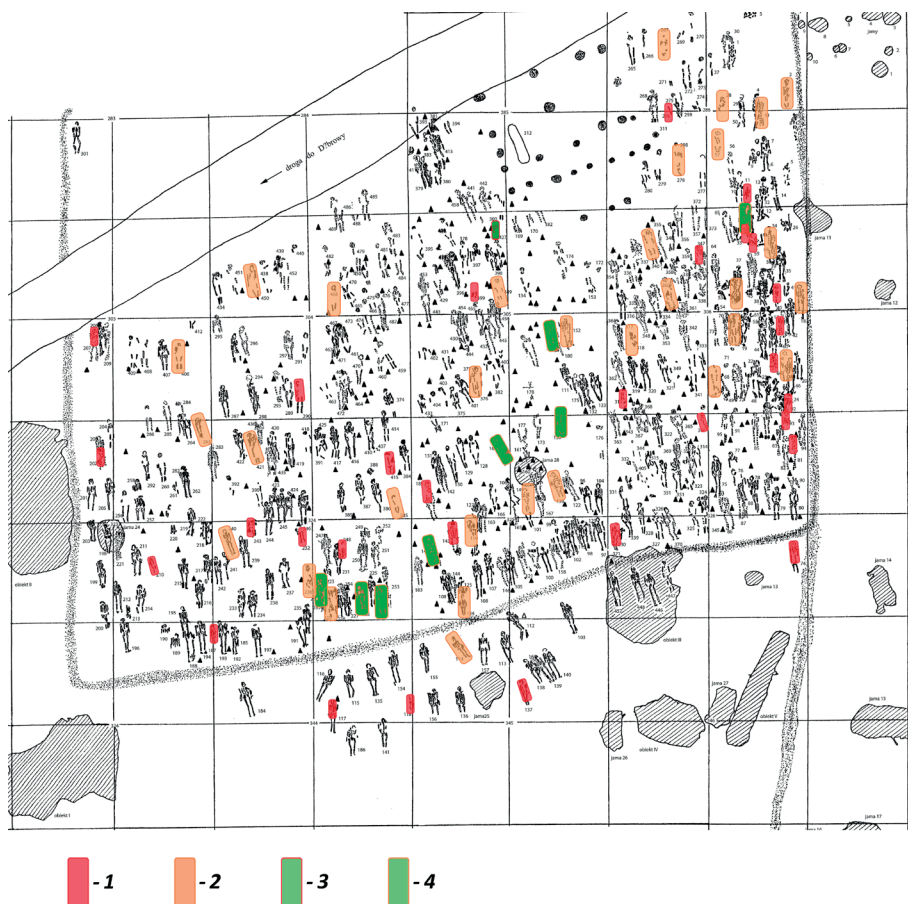


Fig. 5. Planigraphy of child graves with Christian objects at the churchyard cemetery in Święck (plan of the cemetery after D. Jaskanis (2008) with additions by V. Makouskaya): 1 – *infans I*, 2 – *infans II*, 3 – *infans I* with Christian objects, 4 – *infans II* with Christian objects

– in Podlasie and eastern Mazovia, with the exception of the cemetery at Czekanów, devotional items in children's graves appear later – from the 12th century or its second half – and the assemblages are more diverse;

– at cemeteries of the Polish-Ruthenian borderland, tendencies in furnishing deceased children with objects of a sacred character are not uniform: at Suraż, Czarna Wielka, and Czekanów burials of children up to 7 years of age predominate, whereas at Święck adult burials and those of older children prevail.

In order to identify the factors underlying differences in the furnishing of children's graves with devotional items – whether chronological, confessional, or related to cemetery type – it is necessary to consider this phenomenon within a broader contextual framework.

Child burials furnished with devotional objects at cemeteries in Rus' and early medieval Poland

For the purpose of comparison, data were compiled from 11 cemeteries in Rus' and 19 cemeteries in Poland, whose chronology falls between the second half of the tenth century and the end of the thirteenth century⁴ (Fig. 6; table 3).

When referring to the territory of Rus', it is important to note that the vast majority of devotional objects have been recovered from settlement contexts. The fact that such objects are rarely found in cemeteries has usually been explained either by the absence of a tradition of placing such objects in graves (Makarov 1991, p. 19) or by a prohibition against including devotional items in burials (Spirgis 2024, p. 194).

This situation is well illustrated by the complex at Drysviaty (Viciebsk region, Belarus), where a wide variety of devotional objects was found in the settlement area, while none were recorded in the cemetery (Semianchuk 2001, p. 301). A similar pattern can be observed in the Suzdal land in Russia, where recent investigations using metal detectors have revealed a significant number of cross pendants in settlement contexts, often showing traces of wear, whereas such finds in cemetery contexts can be described as exceptionally rare (Makarov and Zaitseva 2020, p. 348; Zaitseva 2023, p. 373). However, archaeological evidence from cemeteries indicates that even if some form of prohibition existed, it may not have been strictly applied in the case of small children's burials.

Evidence from nine cemeteries in Rus' shows that the practice of furnishing children's graves with devotional objects closely resembles the situation observed in the Polack land. Objects bearing Christian symbolism occur relatively rarely in burials overall, while child graves constitute a significant proportion of such finds⁵

⁴ For the purposes of this study, only well-published cemeteries were selected, namely those that contained children's burials, devotional items, and anthropological assessments of the buried individuals, and that represented different parts of the region of interest. I am fully aware that other cemeteries meeting these criteria may have existed in the territories of medieval Rus' and medieval Poland but remain unpublished or were not taken into account in this article due to the space limitations of the article. It is worth noting that despite the large number of excavated cemeteries in the territory of Rus', detailed publications containing full grave descriptions with anthropological determinations of sex and age remain limited. Therefore, the selection of cemeteries for comparative analysis was not straightforward, particularly given the rarity of devotional objects in burial contexts. The number of cemeteries from the territory of Poland was also limited in order to avoid a significant imbalance in the material analyzed. Therefore, the selection of cemeteries for comparison is to some extent arbitrary.

⁵ Among the cemeteries of Rus', the Berezovetskoe cemetery represents a particularly distinctive case. Although the site has been relatively well investigated (139 barrows excavated), the published study (Uspenskaya 1993) does not include anthropological assessments of the buried individuals. Determinations of sex and age were based on grave goods and skeletal length, which suggests that the number of child burials furnished with devotional objects at this cemetery may in fact be underestimated.

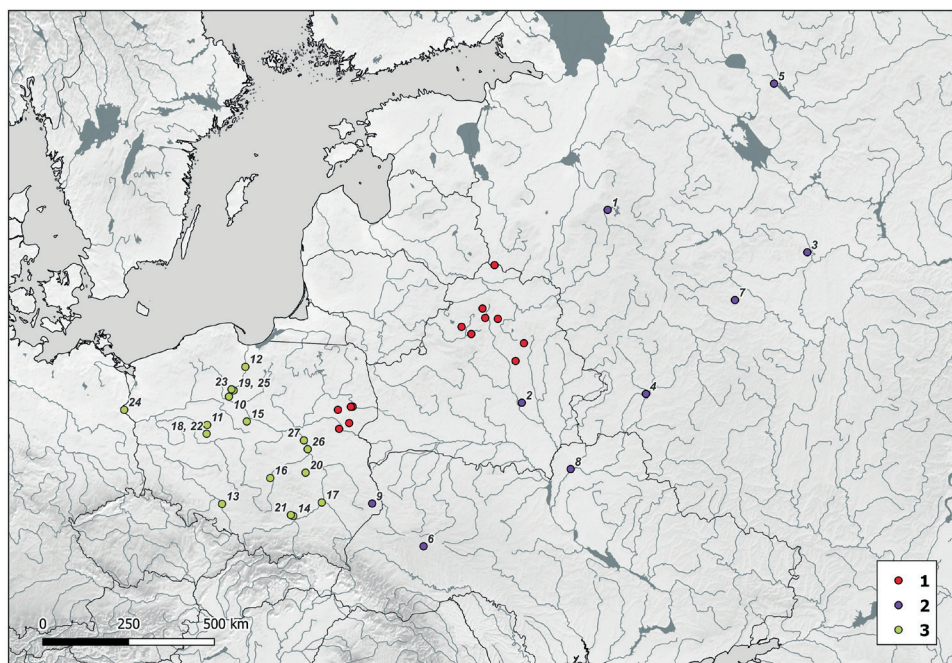


Fig. 6. Cemeteries with child burials furnished with Christian symbolic objects from Rus' and early medieval Poland, used for comparison (image by V. Makouskaya)

- 1 – cemeteries of Polack land, Podlasie, and eastern Mazovia.
 2 – cemeteries of Ruś: 1) Berezovetskiy, 2) Uschod, 3) Gnezdilovo, 4) Eliseevichi, 5) Minino II, 6) Lozova 1a, 7) Novoselki-2, 8) Chernihiv, 9) Czermno, stan. 3.
 3 – cemeteries of Poland: 10) Pień, 11) Dziekanowice, 12) Ciepłe, 13) Opole Nowa Wieś Królewska, 14) Goryslawice, 15) Brześć Kujawski, 16) Lubień, 17) Sandomierz Kamień Plebański; 18) Giecz 4, 19) Kaldus, stan. 4; 20) Radom; 21) Złota Pińczowska; 22) Giecz 10; 23) Gruczno; 24) Cedynia, stan. 2A, 25) Kaldus, stan. 1, 26) Czersk, 27) Wilanów Oranżeria

(Fig. 7). Devotional items are most frequently recorded in the graves of very young children, occurring decisively more often than in those of older children (11 versus 4 graves). Moreover, at several cemeteries only single graves furnished with devotional objects have been identified so far, and these invariably belong to younger children (the cemeteries at Eliseevichi, Lozovaya 1a, and in the vicinity of Chernihiv⁶) (Shinakov et al. 2011, p. 71; Yahodyns'ka 2018, p. 227; Sytiy 2013, p. 148).

It is worth noting that at churchyard cemeteries associated with the largest stronghold centres, such as Kyiv and Chernihiv, as well as at the smaller centre of Navahrudak, objects with Christian symbolism are either entirely absent from graves or

⁶ This concerns the cemetery situated along 9 Sichenia Street in Chernihiv, located beyond the defensive fortifications of the contemporary stronghold (Sytiy 2013, p. 20).

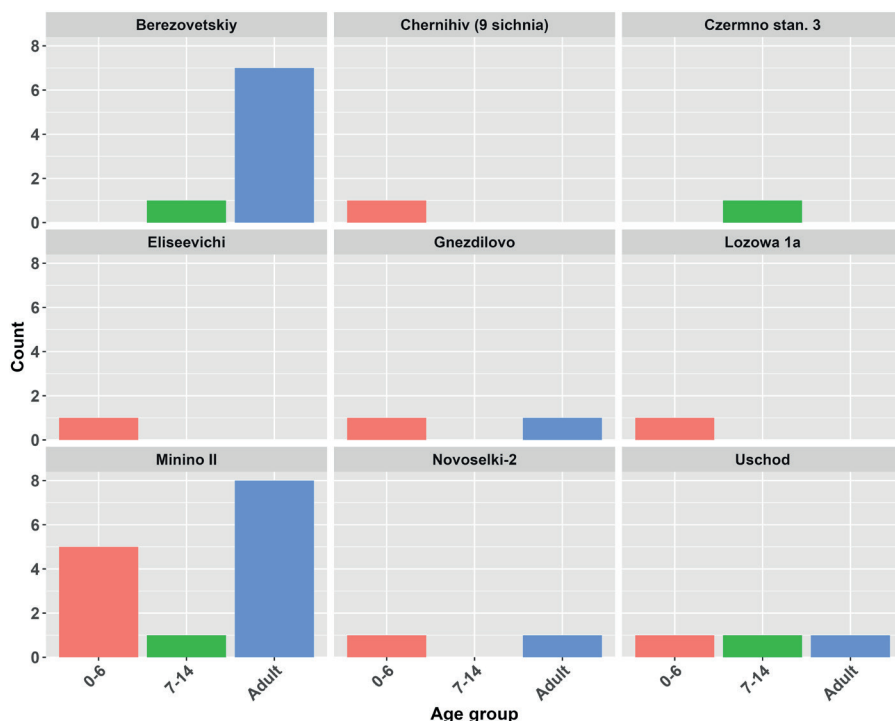


Fig. 7. Number of graves of individuals from different age categories furnished with Christian symbolic objects from cemeteries of Ruś (image by V. Makouskaya)

or are restricted to a few adult burials⁷ (Ivakin 2008, pp. 133, 136; Ivakin 2012, p. 633; Ivakin 2015, p. 38; Sytiy 2013, p. 148; Beletsky et al. 2020, p. 471-503).

The range of artefacts recorded at the cemeteries under consideration is more diverse than that observed at sites with child burials in the Polack land. In children's graves, crosses, lunulas, coins, icons, and ceramic eggs have been documented (table 3).

The situation at early medieval Polish cemeteries is more varied; nevertheless, at almost all sites adult burials furnished with objects bearing Christian symbolism clearly predominate (Fig. 8). This pattern is particularly evident at churchyard cemeteries, which are marked in red in the diagram (Fig. 8). At the chronologically latest cemeteries in Czersk and Wilanów, no child grave containing objects with Christian symbolism has been recorded. At the remaining sites, with the

⁷ Considering the cemetery near the Czeremo stronghold (site 3), it is important to note that several cross pendants were found there during the 2010-2011 fieldwork (Chudzińska and Wołoszyn 2024, p. 315-342) and may originate from ploughed-out graves. Therefore, it cannot be excluded that the finds from the child's grave were not the only example of devotional objects at this cemetery.

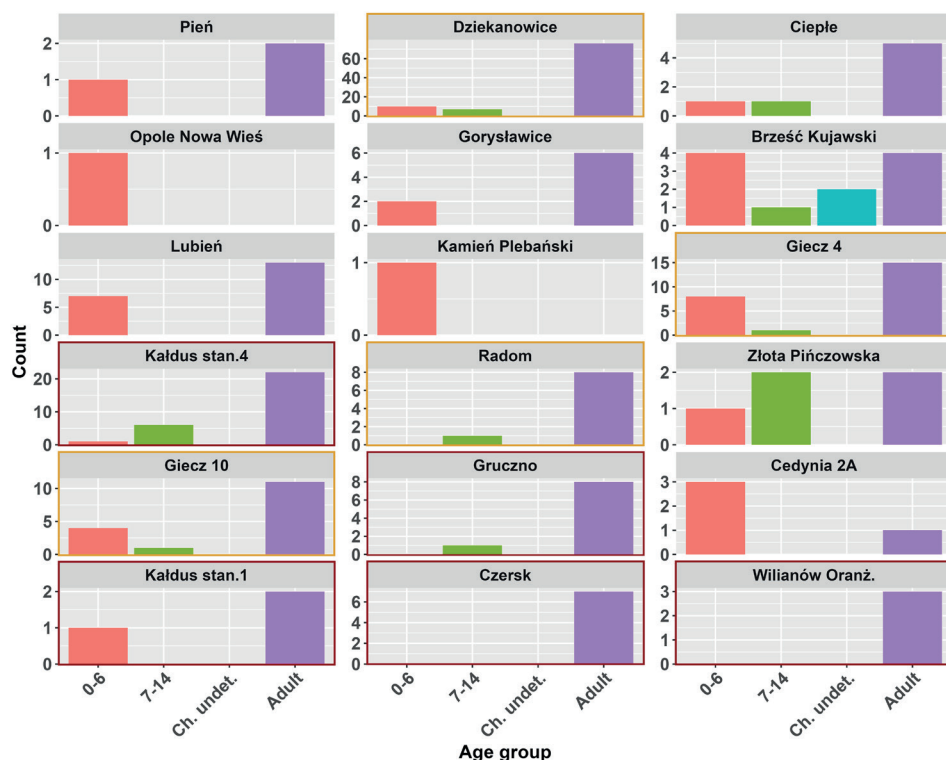


Fig. 8. Number of graves of individuals from different age categories furnished with Christian symbolic objects from cemeteries of Poland (red frame – churchyard cemeteries, orange frame – cemeteries located within large settlement centers with churches, “Ch. undet.” – child of undetermined age). Image by V. Makouskaya

exception of Kaldus site 1, adult burials or those of adults together with older children predominate.

The cemeteries marked in orange were not located directly adjacent to churches but were situated within large settlement centres that also included sacred buildings. At such sites, despite the dominance of adult graves, the proportion of child burials furnished with objects of a sacral character remains relatively high. However, it is important to examine the categories of artefacts present in children’s graves in these cemeteries more closely.

The assemblage of Christian objects differs from that observed in the Polish-Ruthenian borderland. Devotional items of eastern provenance are very rare; instead, grave goods include rings and other costume elements and accessories bearing the sign of the cross, reliquaries, decorated bronze bowls, kaptorgas, coins with a symbol of cross, and pendants made from such coins. In contrast, the most frequently occurring Christian-related objects in the graves of young children are bird eggs and ceramic eggs, which were also characteristic of child burials at borderland

cemeteries, as well as coins produced on a mass scale. Pendants with Christian symbolism, costume elements, and accessories bearing the sign of the cross were not placed in the graves of very young children at these cemeteries.

These features are characteristic of child burials at non-churchyard cemeteries in Opole, Goryslawice, Brześć Kujawski, Lubień, Kamień Plebański, and Giecz (sites 4 and 10) (fig. 8). Exceptionally, single kaptorgas were found in the graves of young children at three cemeteries – Pień, Cedynia, and Dziekanowice – while at the cemetery in Ciepłe one child grave contained a pendant probably bearing saintly images (table 3). Chronologically, these cemeteries belong to the earliest phases of the spread of Christianity in Greater Poland and Pomerania, and they undoubtedly served as burial grounds for members of the social elites and their families.

Discussion and conclusions

In archaeological studies addressing the issue of distinguishing zones of influence of the Byzantine and Latin Churches in the Polish-Ruthenian borderland, both cemetery types and devotional objects have been identified as potential archaeological indicators of such zones. Barrow cemeteries are commonly regarded as markers of the Orthodox sphere (Zoll-Adamikowa 1996, p. 90; Kalaga 2018, p. 139; Skrzyńska 2019, p. 278). There is also a hypothesis according to which graves with stone constructions in the basins of the Bug and upper Narew rivers may reflect the influence of the Latin Church (Dzik 2014, p. 190). With regard to artefacts, it is worth recalling the thesis put forward by M. Wołoszyn, who linked the distribution of devotional items of Rus' provenance with the Orthodox zone and suggested that the spread of such objects delineated confessional boundaries (Wołoszyn 2001, p. 40).

It is, however, worth considering to what extent it is possible to speak of clearly defined confessional borders in the case of the Polish-Ruthenian borderland. Archaeological research to date confirms the heterogeneous character of this territory, where within the same settlement clusters two types of cemeteries could function simultaneously (Kalaga 2018, p. 141), or where artefacts characteristic of the material culture of both Eastern and Western Slavs could occur within the grave assemblages of certain cemetery types (Buko 2019, pp. 298-299). A similar situation can also be observed in the placement of devotional objects of different provenance at the churchyard cemetery in Święck.

Among the cemeteries of Rus' and those of the Polish-Ruthenian borderland, the Polack land stands out for the particularly modest range of objects bearing Christian symbolism found in graves. At present, this phenomenon is difficult to explain by any factor other than regional characteristics of funerary furnishing in the Polack land, where pendants appear to have been relatively rare. To date,

no ceramic eggs have been recorded at cemeteries across the entire territory of present-day Belarus; nevertheless, the possibility that bird eggs were placed in graves in this region cannot be entirely excluded. The absence of egg remains in graves may be explained by the predominance of barrow cemeteries among the investigated sites and by the limited exploration of other cemetery types. In barrows, most often constructed of sand, organic remains are rarely preserved.

Both Latin and Byzantine churchyard cemeteries are characterised by an almost complete absence of graves of young children furnished with objects bearing Christian symbolism, including eggs and ceramic eggs, which are attested at other categories of cemeteries. At such sites, devotional objects occur infrequently and are confined mainly to burials of adults and older children. This pattern may be explained by the earlier disappearing of the custom of furnishing the dead with any grave goods, including objects of devotional character, precisely at cemeteries located directly next to ecclesiastical buildings, where burials were likely supervised by clergy. The absence of devotional objects in the graves of young children at churchyard cemeteries may also be related to the specific organisation and functioning of such necropolises, notably the limited burial space, which resulted in the formation of multi-layered graves, where earlier burials were often disturbed or destroyed by later ones. Graves of small children were particularly prone to such destruction, which explains why their number at churchyard cemeteries is usually very low.

A fundamental difference between Byzantine and Latin Christian traditions in the practice of furnishing children with devotional objects becomes apparent primarily at non-churchyard cemeteries. Cemeteries of Rus' display a clear tendency to equip primarily young children with devotional objects, whereas early medieval Polish cemeteries tend to furnish adults and older children. In this respect, the Polish-Ruthenian borderland displays both patterns. Here it is useful to recall Wołoszyn's thesis that the spread of devotional items of eastern provenance within the territory of Poland marks confessional boundaries and is restricted exclusively to the Orthodox zone (Wołoszyn 2001, p. 40). At all borderland cemeteries discussed in this article, such objects occur to a greater or lesser extent. The question remains, however, whether all these cemeteries can be classified as belonging to Orthodox communities. In this regard, the cemetery at Święck raises the most doubts.

First, this interpretation is contradicted by written sources attesting the existence, during the period when the necropolis was in use, of a castellany in Święck subordinate to the bishop of Płock (Jaskanis 2008, p. 28). On the basis of written evidence and archaeological research, K. Skrzyńska has identified Catholic churches functioning in the Polish-Ruthenian borderland during the period under discussion at Święck, Grodzisk on the Liwiec River, and Stara Łomża⁸, while Orthodox

⁸ There is also a hypothesis that a Catholic centre functioned in Drohiczyn in the mid-thirteenth century (after the town was taken by Konrad of Mazovia), allegedly established for the Knights

churches (cerkiew) are attested at Bielsk, Mielnik, and Drohiczyn (Skrzyńska 2019, pp. 274, 276).

Objects of eastern provenance also occur at churchyard cemeteries located west of Święck, for example at Czersk, which certainly cannot be classified as a cemetery of an Orthodox population. At both necropolises, alongside eastern artefacts, the deceased were also furnished with devotional objects characteristic of Latin cemeteries, such as rings bearing the sign of the cross. A similar situation can be observed at the churchyard cemetery in Gruczno in Pomerania, which stands out for its eastern origin grave goods: as at Święck and Czersk, devotional objects of clearly eastern provenance occurred there together with rings bearing the sign of the cross. With the exception of a single burial, these artefacts were found in graves of adults and older children (Bojarski et al. 2024, pp. 98-103). Both written and archaeological sources indicate that the presence of objects of eastern origin cannot serve as a basis for classifying the cemetery at Święck as an Orthodox churchyard necropolis.

The situation appears somewhat different at the churchyard cemetery in Suraz. The only burial at this site furnished with devotional objects – cross-shaped pendants – was grave 47, belonging to a young child buried beneath a stone slab. Despite early radiocarbon dating suggesting that this burial was created before the mid-twelfth century, the authors of the site report allow for the possibility that all three slab-covered graves at this cemetery should be dated to the second half of the thirteenth century, that is, to the period following the incorporation of Suraz into the Halych–Volhynian Rus' (Olczak et al. 2024, pp. 174, 178). This could indicate that the child was buried according to the Byzantine rite.

A Byzantine tradition of furnishing children's graves with devotional objects is clearly demonstrated by the non-churchyard cemeteries at Czarna Wielka and Czekanów. One of the authors of the study of the Czarna Wielka necropolis, M. Dzik, suggests that this cemetery may be associated with an Orthodox community and links the appearance of graves without stone constructions to a subsequent phase of Christianisation (Dzik 2014, p. 228). As noted above, child burials furnished with devotional objects were recorded precisely within the group of graves lacking stone constructions. The furnishing of the deceased with devotional items of eastern provenance, combined with the predominance of young children among those burials, may therefore constitute an argument for associating these cemeteries with Orthodox populations.

This hypothesis may be further supported by studies of child burials dated to the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries at another site characterised by the interpenetration of traditions and confessions between Rus' and neighbouring territories – the Livonian cemetery at Ogresgala Čabas. At this site, devotional objects

Templar (Skrzyńska 2019, p. 274). However, the existence of a Catholic place of worship in Drohiczyn has not yet been confirmed by archaeological research.

such as crosses, pendants made from Western European coins, and pendants depicting a bull's head were found predominantly in the graves of children aged from 1.5 years, while crosses were placed exclusively in the graves of somewhat older children, from the age of four. On the basis of the practice of furnishing children's graves with devotional objects, R. Spirgis concluded that the population using this cemetery had adopted Christianity in its Byzantine form (Spirgis 2024, p. 195). It is worth noting that at the thoroughly investigated Livonian cemetery of Salaspils Laukskola a similar pattern has been observed: pendants were found in 55% of child burials, 54% of female burials, and 32% of male burials (Kurisoo 2021, p. 234-236).

A few remarks should also be devoted to the tendency to place devotional objects in the graves of individuals of both sexes. In newly Christianised regions, researchers have observed a consistent pattern over the centuries following conversion: among burials furnished with devotional objects, female graves clearly outnumber male ones (Wołoszyn 2003, p. 88; Androshchuk 2011, p. 81; Bojarski 2020, p. 95). A similar tendency can also be observed at the cemeteries of western Rus' and the Polish-Ruthenian borderland analysed in this article. This pattern is often explained by the assumption that in the initial period of Christianisation women adopted the new religion more readily and earlier than men, thus playing a significant role in its spread within local communities (Gräslund 1997, p. 325; Wołoszyn 2003, p. 88; Bojarski 2020, p. 97). It should be noted, however, that this interpretation is not uncontroversial, as accessories and ornaments – including devotional pendants – were generally more characteristic of early medieval female than male accessories. Consequently, the predominance of devotional objects in female graves may primarily reflect contemporary dress traditions. Accepting this interpretation could nevertheless point to the mechanisms of transmission of religious tradition within the family – at least in the case of Byzantine Christianity – during the first centuries after conversion, before the establishment of stable parish networks, namely from mother to young child, especially given that women were largely responsible for the upbringing of the youngest members of society.

In conclusion, it may be stated that neither the distribution of devotional objects of eastern character nor funerary rite alone constitutes a definite indicator of confessional zones; rather, they point to an area of contact and interaction, involving the movement of ideas, people, and objects. However, when combined with an analysis of the occurrence of devotional objects in the graves of adults and children, these factors may serve as a tool for identifying differences between Latin and Byzantine Christianity in the eleventh to thirteenth centuries in borderland regions.

In the case of the Polish-Ruthenian borderland, we are not dealing with borders *sensu stricto*, understood as linear and clearly defined entities (Janeczek 2011, pp. 11-12), but rather with a border zone in which the influences of the Church and the Orthodox Church intersected and where followers of both confessions may

have coexisted for some time, affecting the use of devotional objects. The churchyard cemetery at Świątek, functioning in an area probably surrounded by Orthodox settlement centres, may serve as an example of such coexistence. The role of the church at Świątek is also emphasised by D. Jaskanis, who describes it as a missionary centre extending to the eastern edge of Mazovia (Jaskanis 2008, p. 262).

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