Vampire Burials in Medieval Poland

An Overview of Past Controversies and Recent Reevaluations

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Abstract

This paper examines the history of research on medieval deviant burials discovered in the area of Poland. The problem of unusual funerary practices (e.g. decapitations, prone burials or covering the corpses with stones) was acknowledged by Polish archaeologists already in the early decades of the 20th century, but for a long time it remained on the fringes of mainstream academic debates. Considerable changes occurred in the 1970s when deviant burials started to be treated as a separate group and interpreted as representing "anti-vampire practices". Over the next few years the tendency to perceive the dead buried in deviant graves as "vampires" dominated the academic discourse, with very few attempts at offering alternative explanations. Recently, the sensationalist interpretations of deviant burials have also permeated into (inter)national media, leading the general public to misinformation about Poland's past and the mentalities of its medieval societies. The main objective of this paper is to critically explore the inspirations and contexts in which the "vampiric" interpretations first came to light. An attempt will also be made to propose alternative ways of understanding deviant burial phenomena in Polish medieval archaeology.

Introduction

Deviant burials from various cultural milieus continue to attract increased attention from historians, archaeologists and folklorists worldwide (e.g. Murphy 2008; Reynolds 2009; Barber 2010; Gardeła & Kajkowski 2013a; 2013b with further references). Depending on the region, cultural context or chronological period they acquire different forms and are variously defined, but as Edeltraud Aspöck (2008, 17) has recently observed:

> […] the minimal definition of "deviant burials" that most archaeologists would agree to is that they are burials different from the normative burial ritual of the respective period, region and/or cemetery. These differences may occur in body position or treatment, location or construction of the grave or types of grave goods.

Due to the rather sensational nature of such phenomena – often linked with the fear of the

living dead – archaeological examples of deviant burials have also been frequently presented in various media such as the television, press and internet. In 2013 the discovery of over a dozen decapitated skeletons at a cemetery in Gliwice (Silesia, Poland) received unparalleled public attention. The visually striking photographs of headless human remains quickly appeared in mainstream (inter)national news all around the world, spreading from Poland to as far as South America. The highly problematic term "vampire" has been used in numerous media releases concerning this remarkable site and ultimately led the general public to believe that medieval and early modern Poland was utterly saturated with the fear of animated corpses rising from their graves to haunt and hurt the living. Although alternative interpretations of deviant burials from Gliwice have been offered by some specialists, they have all been overshadowed by the more sensationalist views. The strong possibility that instead of being a "vampire cemetery" the site could have served as a special place for the execution and subsequent interment of criminals appeared much less attractive to journalists commenting on the excavations (see critique in Gardeła forthcoming). It is remarkable that although nearly three years have passed since its discovery, the materials from Gliwice still remain unpublished and they are known only from press releases, most of which revolve around the highly problematic "vampire" theme.

The interpretation of Polish deviant burials as belonging to "vampires" did not begin with the excavations in Gliwice, however, and its origin may be traced to the mid-20th century. This paper will explore the complicated and often controversial history of research and reception of early and late medieval deviant burials in Poland, with a particular focus on how and under what influences their interpretations have developed over time. It is hoped that by providing a thorough and critical overview of these issues the previously advocated one-sided views of Polish deviant burials will be challenged and subject to considerable revisions.

History of research on deviant burials in Poland

Funerary archaeology and various aspects of death and dying attracted the interest of Polish ethnographers, antiquarians and early archaeologists already in the late 19th century (see further details in Miśkiewicz 1969 with references). Nevertheless, as may be inferred from the available archival materials and academic literature, the first consciously recorded archaeological discoveries of the so-called deviant burials in Poland occurred a few decades later, at the beginning of the 20th century. Unfortunately, the early publications from the 1930s and 1960s do not offer much detail and there were practically no attempts at placing such phenomena in a wider comparative context. Usually, all we have from those times is limited to rather laconic free-text descriptions of the alignment of the bodies and accompanying grave goods. This information is sometimes supplemented by very general anthropological details regarding the sex and age of the deceased. Despite the various shortcomings, especially with regard to the quality of field documentation (e.g. lack of plans or photographs) and interpretation, these early discoveries cannot be completely neglected in the ongoing studies of unusual funerary phenomena in early medieval Poland (10th–13th century). Below, by adopting a historiographical approach, we shall take a closer look at some of the major 20th-century publications that mentioned different types of deviant burials and examine how they were initially described and interpreted.

It must be noted that the following discussion will focus only on inhumation

graves, since these are the only types of burials in the area of medieval Poland that tend to display deviant characteristics (on deviant burials in other Slavic areas see, for example, Hanuliak 1995; 1999 with references). As regards cremation graves, there are no archaeologically identifiable traces that would allow us today to distinguish among them any "deviant" characteristics, and therefore they will not be considered here at all.

Inhumation practices were introduced in Poland in the late 10th century (after the introduction of Christianity) and soon they completely erased previously dominating funerary rites involving the cremation of the dead (for overviews of inhumation graves see Rajewski 1937; Miśkiewicz 1969; Zoll-Adamikowa 1971; Wachowski 1975; on cremations see Kostrzewski 1960; Zoll-Adamikowa 1975; 1979). Typical inhumation practices in Poland involved burying the dead in a supine position with the heads to the east or west. Some of the dead may have been interred in shrouds, others in boxes/coffins or wooden chambers. The graves were occasionally furnished with objects such as jewellery, weapons or various utensils, for example clay and wooden vessels, whetstones, spindles, needles and other things. With regard to their external structures, most of the inhumation graves were flat and very few instances of earthen mounds are known. In some regions, however, inhumation graves may have been marked on the surface by stones or various wooden constructions (e.g. fences).

1930s–1960s: First discoveries of early medieval deviant burials in Poland

Among the earliest mentions of early medieval deviant burials is that of grave no. 2 from Gwiazdowo in Greater Poland (Rajewski 1937, 33, 54, 69). The grave included skeletal remains of a young woman who was buried in a prone position and aligned S-N with her face directed towards the west. Interestingly, the woman had three head adornments made of lead (so-called "temple-rings", a typical Slavic female ornament) as well as a bronze finger-ring and a silver (?) ring. Her grave also included a knife in a leather scabbard decorated with bronze foil. Apart from black-and-white illustrations of the finds, no drawing or photograph of this grave has ever been published. This is very unfortunate, since the grave from Gwiazdowo is one of very few prone burials of females discovered in the Polish lands and also the only deviant burial with such lavish furnishings (other female prone burials are known from Stary Zamek in Silesia and from Świelubie in Pomerania – see Gardeła 2011a for detailed discussion). Despite the fact that the grave from Gwiazdowo displayed very peculiar characteristics, Rajewski refrained from providing any comments on why the woman had been buried in such an unusual way. This approach reflects the general spirit of early 20th-century Polish archaeology which, following the culture-historical trends, focused predominantly on description and cultural classification of the discovered material and almost completely ignored deeper considerations of ritual phenomena.

Wider interest in early medieval deviant burials and some attempts at their interpretation began to appear nearly two decades later in the 1950s. Of particular importance for our discussions are the publications of scholars such as Jerzy Gąssowski (1950) and Bonifacy Zielonka (1957; 1958). It is worth highlighting that Gąssowski (1950) was the first Polish archaeologist ever to use the word "vampire" in connection with an early medieval grave. The grave in question was discovered at an early medieval cemetery in Radom in Masovia and contained skeletal remains of an adult man who had been buried on his left side (almost in a prone position) with his face directed towards the ground (Fig. 1). Upon burial the

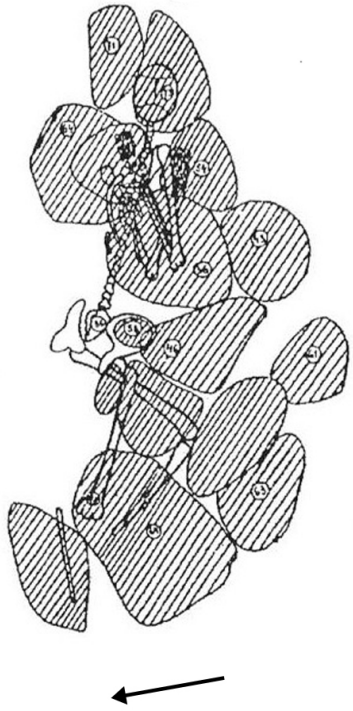

Fig. 1. Grave 47 from Radom: a man buried on the side and covered with large stones. Redrawn after Gąssowski 1950, plate 76.

body was additionally covered with as many as 16 mid-sized and large stones, each weighing around 20–30 kg. In his discussion Gąssowski (1950, 322) speculated about the reasons that may have led to such an unusual form of interment. He suggested that these complex and laborious burial rituals could have been intended to protect the living against a "vampire". Alternatively, as Gąssowski (1950, 322) wrote, the grave may have contained the remains of a convict. He did not expand these interpretations any further, however.

Several years later, Bonifacy Zielonka (1957; 1958) discussed a number of deviant burials more extensively in two of his works, most notably in a paper published in the popular-archaeology journal *Z Otchłani Wieków.* In this article, Zielonka (1957) described a range of graves that he had excavated in Bodzanowo and Adolfin in the region of Kuyavia in Central Poland. Among the graves discovered in Adofin was that of a man whose head had been decapitated and placed between his legs. Interestingly, Zielonka made a remark that upon excavation one of his physical workers called it the grave of a *strzyga* – this term has various meanings and may refer to a revenant or witch (for further details see, for example, Kolczyński 2003 with references). It should be highlighted that Zielonka was one of the first Polish archaeologists who not only described deviant burials in more detail, but also tried to interpret them in the context of ethnographic sources. In the article (Zielonka 1957, 21–22) he referred to an interesting and previously unknown textual account called *Casus de strigis* which describes an event that took place in 1674 in Lesser Poland (see also Stanaszek 1998, 24). According to *Casus de strigis* a local community was threatened by a man who rose from his grave and became a revenant that drank human blood. In order to defeat this creature, a priest told his people to reopen the grave and turn the body face-down. Unfortunately, this did not solve the problem and the revenant continued to cause trouble. The grave was therefore dug up again and the man's head was cut off. In this context it is worth observing that similar textual accounts about dealing with malevolent revenants are also recorded in the works of various Polish folklorists (e.g. Moszyński 1967; Pełka 1987; Bylina 1992; 1999). These accounts imply that the belief in living dead prevailed in some regions of Poland until as late as the 19th or even 20th century. It should be emphasised, however, that although Zielonka seems to have been vividly interested in the notion of deviant burials and Slavic folklore, in his articles he never labelled them as belonging to "vampires" specifically.

From the 1960s onwards, during the intensified period of excavations of early medieval sites (resulting from the so-called

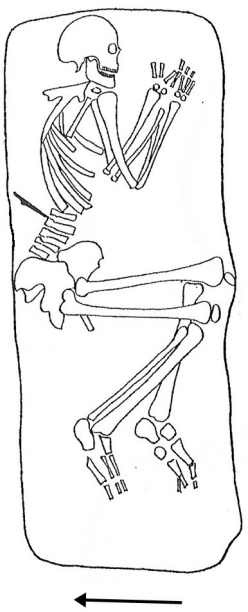

Fig. 2. Grave 3 from Złota Pińczowska: a man buried on the side with an iron knife stuck in his spine. Redrawn after Miśkiewicz 1967, 98.

"Millennial Project" forming part of the celebrations of the millennium of the Polish state – e.g. Kobyliński 2015, 226), Polish archaeologists found further traces of mortuary behaviour which deviated considerably from the normative treatment of the dead. These practices involved interring the corpses in a prone position, laying or throwing stones on them or cutting their heads off, but other variants have also been recorded (such as covering the bodies with clay, piercing them with stakes or other sharp objects etc.). Initially, such puzzling finds were very difficult to interpret and early scholars only mentioned them briefly in their publications, without attempting to offer any detailed commentary about their possible meanings (e.g. Wojtasik 1968, 207). One example, including some attempts at preliminary interpretation, is the publication of an early medieval cemetery from Złota Pińczowska in southern Poland that contained several graves with unusual characteristics. Among them was grave no. 3 of an adult man who had been buried on his side with flexed legs and had a knife stuck in his spine (Miśkiewicz 1967, 96, 98, 129) (Fig. 2). Miśkiewicz suggested that the man may have been tied and that this practice could be "associated with the belief in revenants" (1967, 129; in her work Miśkiewicz used the Polish word *upiory* to refer to revenants). She also added that the manner of burial may reflect fear of the "revenge of the dead" (Miśkiewicz 1967, 138).

1970s: Establishing the term "anti-vampire burial"

A considerable interpretative breakthrough in the archaeological understanding of early medieval deviant burials occurred in the 1970s with the release of Helena Zoll-Adamikowa's (1971) major monograph on inhumation graves in Lesser Poland. Her authoritative work introduced the attractive, yet highly problematic, term "anti-vampire burial" as a label for unusual mortuary practices that occurred at Polish cemeteries from the studied area (Lesser Poland) in the period between the 11th and 13th centuries. However, a careful reading of Zoll-Adamikowa's work shows that she was rather careful in applying this term and did not consider every single grave that displayed deviant characteristics as belonging to a potential vampire. This nuanced and fairly critical approach is well exemplified in her discussion of prone burials, where she argued that such instances may also be associated with individuals who died in a plague and were thrown into the grave-pit during a quick and careless burial. Likewise, in Zoll-Adamikowa's view, partial cremation of the bones need not imply that someone wanted to burn a potential vampire, but could simply result from the buried individual's tragic death in a fire. Despite Zoll-Adamikowa's reservations, the term "anti-vampire burial" (generally, but not necessarily correctly, regarded as

a synonym for what elsewhere in Europe is known as "atypical", "unusual" or "deviant burial") has become widely accepted in early medieval funerary archaeology in Poland and has remained practically unchallenged for over two decades. The reasons for this may be sought in the prominent position which Zoll-Adamikowa had in Polish archaeology and also the fact that her monograph was one of the most extensive synthesizing works on early medieval funerary practices (albeit limited only to Lesser Poland) which quickly became a cornerstone for any further research into these matters.

In this context it is noteworthy that in 1971 Eleonora and Zdzisław Kaszewscy published their report on the important early medieval cemetery in Brześć Kujawski. The site was dated to mid-11th to 12th century and located in Kuyavia in Central Poland – an area that lay outside the scope of Zoll-Adamikowa's earlier analyses. The cemetery comprised 152 graves including several burials that displayed deviant characteristics. Of particular interest is grave no. 43 in which a wooden stake was found on the deceased person's chest (Kaszewscy 1971, 425) (Fig. 3). The stake was interpreted as something that pierced the body and held down a potential vampire. Another grave (no. 164) belonged to an individual with tied limbs, and in the Kaszewscy (1971, 426) opinion such a peculiar treatment of the corpse reflects fear of the local community that the person would rise from the grave. Interestingly, in their discussion of another grave, which belonged to a woman whose left hand had been cut off, they suggested that this injury may have resulted from some form of punishment (Kaszewscy 1971, 368, 426). The Kaszewscy did not elaborate on these burials any further, and it is fair to say that most of their "interpretations" served simply as throwaway comments. What is interesting to observe, however, is that they acknowledged the existence of different types of unusual burials and tried to interpret each of them individually, instead of automatically labelling them all as belonging to one group of "anti-vampire" burials.

Despite the fact that since the 1950s deviant burials began to be noticed more frequently at early medieval sites in Poland,

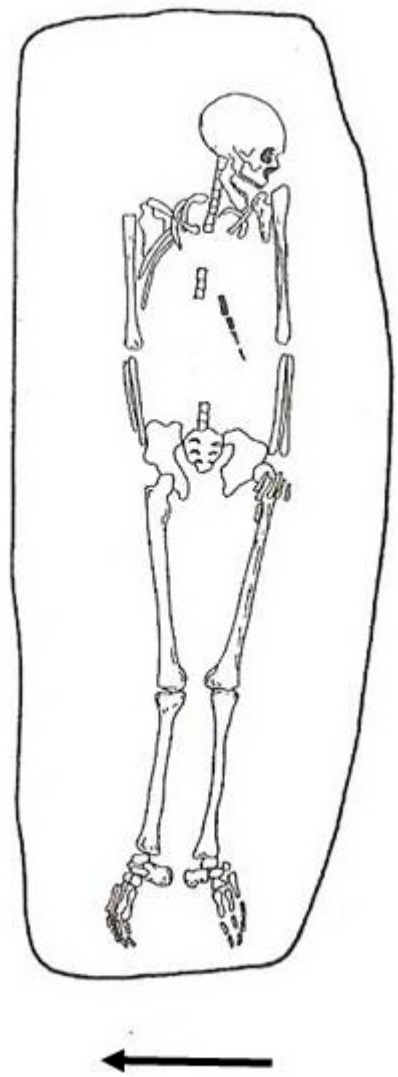

Fig. 3. Grave 43 from Brześć Kujawski: a man with a stake on (or in) his chest. Redrawn after Kaszewscy 1971, 405.

wider debates on their possible meanings (with the exception of Zoll-Adamikowa's work) were practically non-existent in Polish archaeological publications. This is not only a matter of sweeping an uneasy topic under the carpet, but also a reflection of the current trends in archaeological research. Before the 1990s in Poland there was little interest in aspects of ritual, cult and religion in past societies (but see Urbańczyk 1947; Łowmiański 1979; Brückner 1980; Gieysztor 1982), and these issues remained on the fringes of mainstream debates which focused predominantly on "grand topics" such as ethnicity, migration, settlement or typological and functional classifications of artefacts. It is undoubted that for some scholars (especially archaeologists) of that time discussing the problem of revenants in the early Middle Ages would simply have been regarded as unscientific. This situation began to improve in later years along with the gradual development of processual and post-processual approaches and the wider acknowledgement of anthropological theory and history of religions in archaeological studies.

1990s–2000: First syntheses of early medieval deviant burials in Poland

After over sixty years since the first recorded discoveries of early medieval deviant burials in Poland, and various initial attempts at interpreting their meanings, the first scholar who sought to embrace the problem in its totality was Łukasz Maurycy Stanaszek (1998; 1999; 2000; 2001). In a series of articles Stanaszek aimed at presenting unusual funerary practices in the light of the internationally known phenomenon of "vampirism", and in his works we may find a much broader scope and more nuanced understanding of the topic than that demonstrated by his predecessors, who used the label "vampire" merely as a throwaway interpretation. While discussing the different deviant burials from Poland, on several occasions Stanaszek referred to the well-known dissertation on ghosts, vampires and demons by Dom Augustin Calmet and displayed some awareness of other international works on the notion of the living dead and unusual funerary practices in different cultural milieus. It is noteworthy, however, that he did not reference any of the classic studies by, for example, Dudley Wright (2001[1914]), Montague Summers (2005[1929]; 2001[1961]) or Jan Louis Perkowski (1976; 1989; 2006) which are regarded as important cornerstones in vampire research. Despite these shortcomings, Stanaszek's works instigated a considerable breakthrough in Polish early medieval archaeology and they are still frequently quoted today.

In addition to an unpublished MA thesis (Stanaszek 2000), wholly devoted to the problem of "vampirism" in medieval Poland, among Stanaszek's more detailed studies of deviant burials was a paper concerning "anti-vampire" practices observed at the 11th-century cemetery in Sandomierz in Lesser Poland. In this work Stanaszek (1998) discussed each of the unusual graves in detail and provided a range of references to antique and late medieval sources that relate different encounters with the living dead. Moreover, like some of his predecessors (e.g. Miśkiewicz 1969), throughout the article he also drew on examples from Slavic ethnography. Most importantly, however, Stanaszek took under his scrutiny anthropological and palaeopathological analyses of skeletal materials from the site and paid attention to more details than merely the sex and age of the deceased as was usually done before. Altogether, this was the first comprehensive and multidisciplinary attempt to examine early medieval deviant burials from the area of Poland. According to Stanaszek (1998, 21) among the deviant graves from Sandomierz were, for example, two graves (nos. 10 and 26) with missing heads/skulls and sharp objects

in close contact with the skeletal remains (knife between the ribs in grave no. 10 and an arrowhead stuck in the spine in grave no. 26), a grave of a "dwarf" (no. 44) and three cases of men buried in a prone position (graves no. 9 and 90). With regard to grave no. 9, which contained three individuals (two of which lay in a prone position), Stanaszek (1998, 23; following earlier arguments of Zoll-Adamikowa 1971, 53) argued that it may have belonged to people who died in a plague, but he also considered it probable that the grave expressed fear of revenants.

Although it may be inferred from Stanaszek's works that he favoured the "vampiric" interpretation of deviant burials above all other possibilities (e.g. seeing them as belonging to criminals, suicides or victims of plagues, for example), his works have certainly shown the scale and diversity of these practices in early medieval Poland. By collecting and assessing a large body of material he provided a good starting point for further diligent inquiries into the subject. Altogether, Stanaszek's publications certainly play an important role in the studies of deviant burials in this part of Europe, but nonetheless some of his proposed interpretations must be taken with caution.

Having now reviewed the major developments in the approaches to unusual funerary phenomena, the next section will demonstrate and comment on different variants of deviant burials in Polish archaeology. We shall begin by summarizing some of the latest discussions on deviant burials at early medieval cemeteries dated between the 10th and the 13th centuries. This will be followed by a brief presentation of how similar practices continued in late medieval and early modern times.

Variants of deviant burials in early medieval Poland

Despite the fact that Stanaszek's main study of anti-vampire burials (in the form of an MA thesis written in the year 2000) was never officially published, very similar views to those expressed therein were soon presented in an article by Przemysław Żydok (2004). In this study Żydok provided a comprehensive list of different types of graves that past scholars regarded as belonging to potential vampires. The most frequently discovered variants of deviant burials in early medieval Poland (i.e. dating from late 10th to 13th centuries) include prone burials, decapitated burials and burials with stones on the deceased. Among other examples of deviant burials Żydok (2004, 44) has also included:

- Perforated/pierced skulls (with a sharp instrument, perhaps an iron nail)
- Knives, stakes or other sharp objects stuck in the body
- Stones, clay or coins in the mouth of the deceased
- Flexed burials
- Burials of individuals with cut-off or broken limbs
- Burials in marginal areas
- Burials lacking grave goods
- Burials with an unusual orientation
- Partly cremated burials
- Reopened burials

Over the last several years prone burials and stoned burials have been extensively discussed in several of my papers (Gardeła 2011a; 2011b; 2012a). The problem of decapitation has recently been explored in a range of works by Kamil Kajkowski (2013; 2014) and atypical burials of children (belonging to different categories) have been discussed in a separate study by Gardeła and Duma (2013).

While the different categories of deviant

burials listed above certainly display some special characteristics, caution is advised in interpreting all of them as belonging to potential revenants. The finding of sharp objects stuck in the skeletal remains may not necessarily result from attempts at holding the dead down in their graves, but also from wounds that they may have suffered in combat. This alternative interpretation is especially valid for cases of arrowheads stuck in the skeleton. Cut-off or broken limbs can also relate to some circumstances that occurred during the life of a certain individual, as a result of an unfortunate accident or perhaps some form of punishment (e.g. theft) and need not represent an attempt at "immobilizing" the dead in their graves, as has sometimes been suggested in discussions of anti-vampire practices. Burials in marginal areas may indeed point to some form of social exclusion, but they can likewise simply reflect the gradual development of the cemetery and the filling of its space. Quite naturally, each cemetery will have graves on its margins, but they do not have to convey any special meanings. The lack of grave goods, although sometimes regarded as deviant, is hardly unusual in early medieval Poland. Numerous early medieval graves from this area do not contain any grave goods at all and there are so many of them that regarding them as belonging to revenants is a serious methodological mistake. Unusual orientation of graves can indeed imply a special status of the deceased or perhaps that they came from a different social, religious or ethnic background. Alternatively, aligning the dead in an unusual way (i.e. along the N-S axis, where most burials are aligned W-E) may in some instances reflect lack of other possibilities of digging the grave at a particular site. This may result, for example, from clusters of other graves in the same spot, trees, roots, stones and other obstructive natural features. Partial cremation of the bodies can perhaps suggest some form of apotropaic practices or the desire to "send" the dead to the otherworld more quickly, but traces of burning on the skeletal remains can also result from death in a fire or other (not necessarily ritual) acts conducted at the cemetery. Therefore, as in other cases discussed above, caution is advised in interpreting them. Reopened burials in early medieval Poland have only recently received increased scholarly attention and it is clear that they are a very complex funerary phenomenon (Gardeła *et al*. 2014). The meanings behind reopened burials may relate to the fear of revenants, and this is indeed attested in various medieval and later ethnographic accounts (e.g. Wright (2001[1914]); Summers (2005[1929]; 2001[1961]), but different interpretational variants are also possible – for example adding other individuals to the same grave (e.g. members of the family), making space for subsequent burials at the same site, (re)using parts of the deceased persons bodies/skeletons in magic or cult and other.

As can be seen from the discussion above, the different variants of deviant burials can be interpreted in various ways, especially if we start to look at them from a broader perspective and with the employment of comparative evidence. Early medieval deviant burials from Poland can clearly be divided into a range of groups as has been done before, but it does not mean that they all held the same meaning and only represented fear of revenants. The practices reviewed herewith did not cease in the 13th century and continued in later centuries. In order to provide a wider scope for the present debates we shall also devote some space to discussing their nature, context and possible meanings.

Remarks on deviant burials in late medieval Poland

Unfortunately, late medieval burials from the area of Poland, which date from the 14th century onwards, have not received as much attention as those from the early Middle Ages. The vast majority of late medieval graves are found at churchyard cemeteries and they very sporadically contain any grave goods (e.g. Pytlak 2009). Moreover, at such sites, very few of them display deviant characteristics. However, as the studies of Paweł Duma (2010) and Daniel Wojtucki (2009; 2014) have shown, the late Middle Ages was a period when special and official places of public execution began to emerge on a wider scale (a case which is generally not attested for the early Middle Ages in Poland, i.e. before the 13th century). This was associated with the development of towns and the gradual sophistication of legal culture. Individuals who committed serious crimes were punished at especially designated execution sites (e.g. gallows), often located in well-exposed areas, clearly visible in the landscape (for example on hilltops or close to main roads). Upon entering the medieval town, the sight of such execution places would have served as a grim reminder and a preventive measure against committing unlawful deeds. It is at these execution sites that we often find traces of deviant funerary behaviour – e.g. decapitations, prone burials or burials covered with stones. The human remains discovered at such places are often incomplete, which may result from animal activity, theft of body parts (for example to use them in magic practices) or other post-depositional processes. In many cases deviant burials at execution sites have little to do with the fear of revenants and they simply reflect the manner of killing the convict and their rather careless burial. However, we should also remember that in the medieval imagination execution sites were regarded as very numinous places where one could encounter the supernatural (Wojtucki 2009; Duma 2010 with references).

In this context it must also be noted that over the last decade or so a new sub-discipline, which may be labelled as "legal archaeology", has begun to develop in Poland. A special research society called "Stowarzyszenie Ochrony i Badań Zabytków Prawa" (Society for Protection and Research of Legal Monuments) orchestrates various excavations at execution sites and publishes its own journal entitled *Pomniki Dawnego Prawa* (Monuments of Past Law) which discusses various aspects of medieval and early modern judicial practices (e.g. methods and instruments of punishment), folkloristic beliefs associated with criminals and places related to the broadly understood legal culture. All these developments are also having a considerable impact on the academic perception of early medieval funerary practices and especially burials which have previously been regarded as representing fear of "vampires". Today, an increasing number of scholars seek to interpret some of these burials as resulting from the exercise of law. At the same time, however, certain acts (such as covering the bodies with large stones, burying the corpses face-down or placing the head between the legs) may have alluded to more archaic beliefs in the living dead. Given the various methodological and interpretational problems and in order to avoid simplifications, it is clear that each case of a deviant burial (early or late medieval) has to be approached individually and analysed from as many angles as possible. All of these new perspectives are gradually being introduced in the latest studies that we shall briefly review below.

Latest advances in the studies of deviant burials in Poland

In the first decade of the 21st century the problem of deviant burials was discussed on several occasions by a number of Polish archaeologists (e.g. Wrzesiński 2000; Żydok 2004; Porzeziński 2008; Wyrwa 2008), some of whom gradually began to question the previously proposed "vampire" interpretations. It is noteworthy that the problem of unusual funerary practices was also the subject of several international symposia organized in Poland over the last 15 years. The first conference completely devoted to deviant burials was organized by Jacek Wrzesiński (2000) as part of archaeological and anthropological workshops *Funeralia Lednickie* that take place annually in Lednica. Deviant burials have also been the topic of a special volume of the journal *Acta Archaeologica Lodziensia* (Skóra & Kurasiński 2010) entitled "Wymiary inności. Nietypowe zjawiska w obrzędowości pogrzebowej od pradziejów po czasy nowożytne" (Facets of Otherness. Unusual Funerary Practices from Prehistory to Modern Times). Similar issues are also regularly discussed at the *International Interdisciplinary Meetings: Motifs through the Ages* held at the West-Cassubian Museum in Bytów, Poland (Gardeła & Kajkowski 2013b; Gardeła *et al*. 2014).

Inspired by these revisionist approaches, today's scholars who examine the notion of deviant burials certainly approach them in a more critical and open-minded way and their latest studies apply a broad spectrum of interdisciplinary methods and theories. As noted above, particularly valuable in such endeavours are the ongoing excavations at late medieval and early modern execution sites as well as studies on legal records kept in Polish archives. As a result, unusual burials are now beginning to be interpreted not only in the light of apotropaic practices associated with the fear of revenants, but also in a judicial perspective, for example as belonging to criminals, suicides or other social deviants. Increased attention has also been devoted to exploring the meanings of gestures and positions in which the deceased were laid to rest (e.g. Koperkiewicz 2010). It has been suggested, for example, that some of the graves previously regarded as belonging to revenants or vampires may have in fact been burials of people who expressed post-mortem atonement through an unusual form of interment. Let us take a closer look at some of the major changes that have begun to occur in Polish studies on deviant burials over the last several years.

Deviant burials in a judicial perspective

Among the cornerstones of currently ongoing studies on deviant burials as well as medieval and early modern execution sites in Poland is the work of Daniel Wojtucki (2009) entitled "Publiczne miejsca straceń na Dolnym Śląsku od XV do połowy XIX wieku" (Public Execution Sites in Lower Silesia from the 15th to mid-19th Century). Although the chronological scope of the book concerns the late Middle Ages and early modern times in Poland, the material presented by Wojtucki has important implications for analyses of deviant burials from other cultural milieus. Based on archival materials and folkloristic accounts, but also recent excavations of execution sites, Wojtucki (2009, 211–213) has convincingly demonstrated that the unusual manner of burying the dead need not only result from fear of revenants, but simply from careless funerary practices and various acts intended to humiliate and condemn the convicts. Embracing the wider judicial context of such burial practices and the veracity of their possible interpretations can also be very refreshing in the studies of earlier historical periods. For example, these inspiring ideas have recently been employed in an article published by Gardeła and

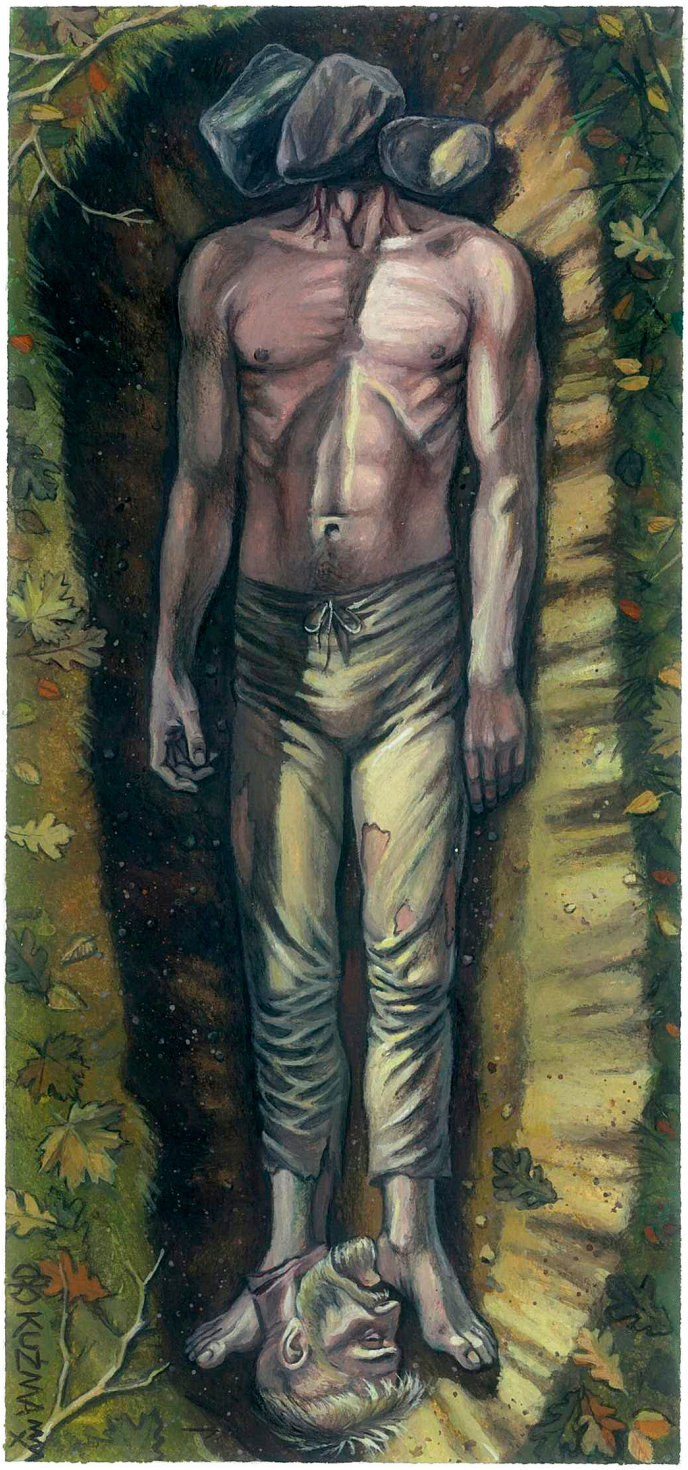

Fig. 4. Artistic reconstruction of grave 146 from the cemetery in Cedynia. Illustration by Mirosław Kuźma. Commissioned by Leszek Gardeła. © Leszek Gardeła and Mirosław Kuźma.

Kajkowski (2013a). Their study has shown that despite the scarcity of textual sources about the treatment of criminals in early medieval Poland (e.g. Maisel 1982; Gołdyn 2006), much information can still be inferred by reassessing the archaeological evidence and through the application of comparative and retrospective methods of academic inquiry.

Another important work dealing specifically with deviant burials from the late Middle Ages and early modern times was published by Paweł Duma (2010) and entitled "Grób alienata. Pochówki dzieci nieochrzczonych, samobójców i skazańców w późnym średniowieczu i dobie wczesnonowożytnej" (Grave of the Alienated. Burials of Unbaptized Children, Suicides and Convicts in the Late Middle Ages and Early Modern Times). The methods employed in Duma's monograph, involving a skilful combination of textual and archaeological material, enable us to throw new light on previously disregarded or understudied problems in Polish funerary archaeology. Duma is critical of earlier studies on the so-called anti-vampire burials and rightly argues that they may have resulted from various circumstances, not necessarily fear of the dead. An important innovation in Duma's work is the wider acknowledgment and interpretation of unusual burials of children, for example in ceramic vessels, a topic which has previously received little interest in this part of Europe. The notion of atypical child burials in early and late medieval Poland has been further explored in a recent article by Gardeła and Duma (2013).

Contextualizing and visualizing deviant burials

My interest in early medieval funerary archaeology has recently led me to conduct detailed analyses of selected categories of deviant burials from early medieval Poland. In particular, I have discussed prone burials (Gardeła 2011a; 2012a) and burials with large stones lying directly on the cadavers (Gardeła 2011b; 2012b). In these studies I argued for the multivalence of such practices and refrained from perceiving them only as methods of preventing the dead from rising. In my analyses, I have also made extensive use of comparative materials, especially from Viking Age Scandinavia (e.g. Gardeła 2012b; 2013a; 2013b) and Anglo-Saxon England (Reynolds 2009).

It is worth noting that over the last several years in a range of my works I have also explored new methods of presenting past burials with the use of visual art (e.g. Gardeła & Kuźma 2012; Gardeła & Kajkowski 2015). By collaborating with the Polish artist Mirosław Kuźma I have commissioned a range of full-colour reconstructions of early medieval graves that display deviant characteristics. Among the Polish reconstructions is, for example, grave no. 146 discovered at an early medieval cemetery in Cedynia in Western Pomerania (Malinowska-Łazarczyk 1982, 38; Porzeziński 2008, 28) (Fig. 4). According to the cemetery report, the deceased buried in this grave had his head placed between his feet and above the man's neck (where the head would normally be) lay three mid-sized stones. The interpretation of this grave is difficult and several variants are possible. It may be regarded as belonging to a criminal or perhaps an individual whom the local community considered as a potential revenant. It is also worth noting that this is not the only grave from this site where the head was substituted by stones (Fig. 5), which may imply some local practice. Perhaps the heads were removed and attached to some external structures (posts?) which stood on the surface of the cemetery, serving as a form of warning against committing crimes for anyone passing by? The Cedynia cemetery was located on one of the highest hills in the area, which would make the decapitated heads perfectly visible from afar. Unfortunately, the original

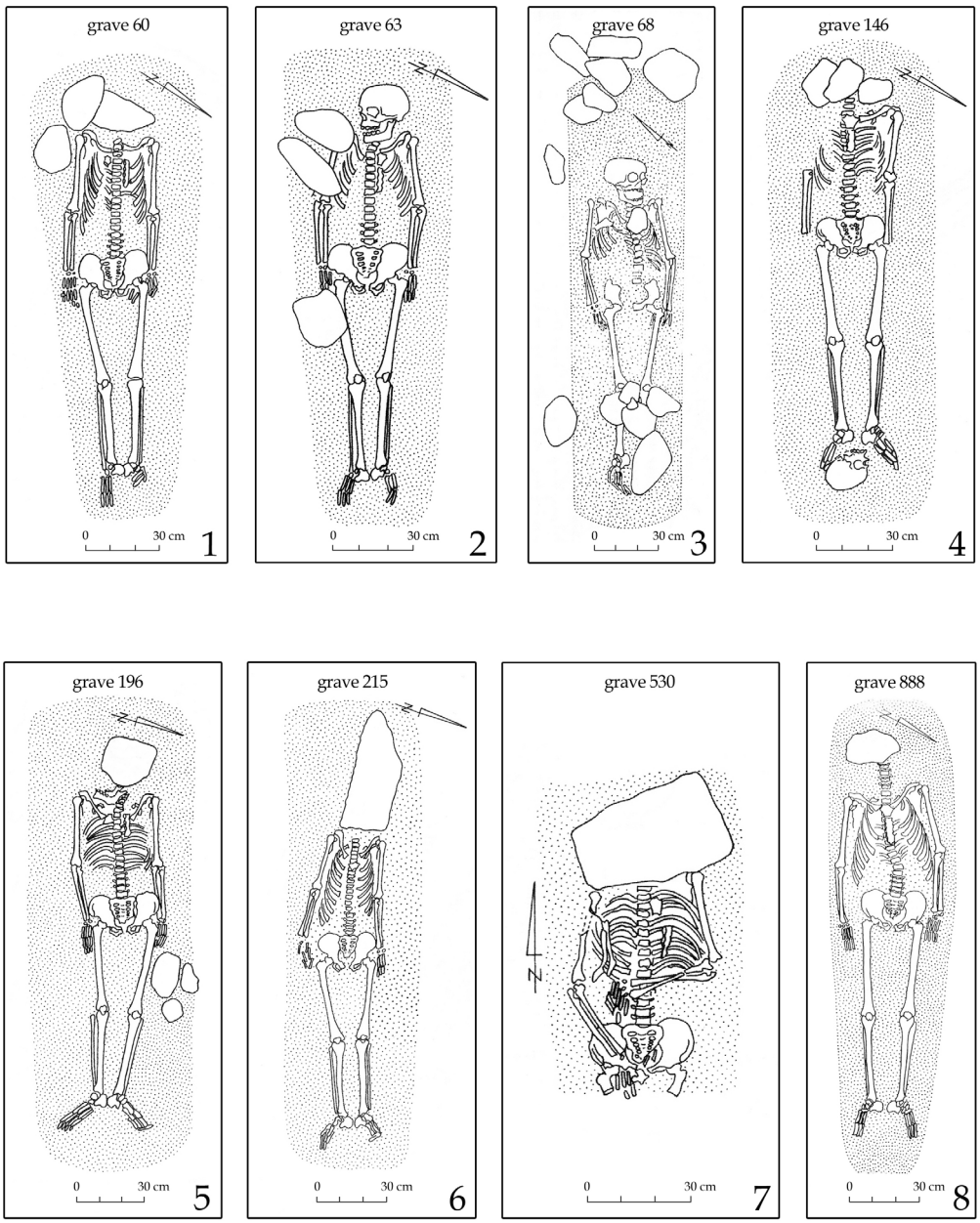

Fig. 5. Selection of graves from Cedynia with stones placed directly on the deceased or where stones substitute for the head. Reproduced after Porzeziński 2008, 24, 27–28, 30–32, 35.

documentation from excavations conducted at this site, including the discussed grave, is far from perfect and the available photographs as well as descriptions of particular graves do not allow for very sophisticated interpretations – many of them are incomplete, imprecise or even inaccurate, which significantly hampers future debates.

Pathological analyses of deviant burials

In addition to the above it is also worth noting that some deviant burials from Poland have recently been subject to detailed pathological analyses. A number of scholars have observed that in medieval societies various mental or physical characteristics may have been important factors leading to perceiving certain individuals as potentially dangerous in life and/or after death (see papers in Murphy 2008). With regard to Poland among such characteristics Łukasz Maurycy Stanaszek (1999; 2007) listed, for example, various mental impairments, kyphosis (hunchback), gigantism, dwarfism, having two rows of teeth, hairy palms or joined eyebrows.

In her recent study Magdalena Domicela Matczak (2014) speculated as to whether various illnesses which early medieval people had suffered from may have led to their special post-mortem treatment. Her analysis was based on sites 1 and 4 from Kałdus (Pomerania, Poland) where the typical treatment of the dead involved inhumation in a supine position along the W-E axis. From among 790 graves Matczak (2014, 439–440) distinguished 15 graves which, following earlier classifications, have been labelled as anti-vampire graves. They are dated between the fourth quarter of the 10th century and the first half of the 13th century. Matczak (2014, 441) conclude that although the so-called anti-vampire graves from Kałdus contained individuals with various pathological changes (i.e. broken bones or decapitations, cancer and tumours) these pathologies were not as severe as in the case of individuals interred in a normative way (e.g. with leprosy, trepanation, amputation). The study has also shown that within the spatial arrangement of the cemetery it is impossible to distinguish any clear concentrations of anti-vampire graves or of normative graves containing individuals with various pathologies. It may be highlighted, however, that one of the so-called anti-vampire graves (grave 256/01) was located in the marginal area of the cemetery (Matczak 2014, 442–444). This grave included two individuals, a male and a female, both of which were decapitated (pre- or post-mortem). In conclusion, it is clear from Matczak's study that the non-normative treatment of the dead did not result from the different pathologies these individuals had suffered from. Of course we cannot exclude the possibility that they had some other special characteristics or mental impairments, but at present these cannot be inferred from the available osteological materials (Matczak 2014, 450).

Despite considerable advancements in the understanding of deviant burials among some Polish archaeologists and historians, it still remains difficult to overcome the deeply rooted stereotype of such burials as belonging to "vampires" (this also applies to discussions about similar issues with journalists). As we shall see below, not only the interpretation of deviant burials as reflecting fear of revenants can be called into question, but also the very label "anti-vampire" burial appears to be highly problematic.

Contesting "vampires" in early medieval Poland

As we have seen in the previous sections of this paper, deviant burials in early and late medieval Poland have usually been labelled as belonging to vampires. Although the term "vampire" has been enthusiastically used by different scholars, a wider examination of its etymology suggests that it may not necessarily be an appropriate label for revenants in the early medieval period (on the meaning of

the word "vampire" see, for example, Wilson 1985; Dundes 1998).

According to Kolczyński (2003, 222) the etymology of the Polish word *upiór* (or *upir*, *upier*, *upierzyca*) as well as *wampir* (*wąpir*, *wąpierz*, *wypiór*, *łupirz*) remains unclear. Similar variants occur in Belarussian (*upar*, *vupar*), Ukrainian (*upir*, *upyr*, *opyr*, *vopyr*) and Russian (*upir*, *upyr*). Some scholars, like Brückner (1980, 280–284), suggested that the etymology of the word *upiór* is Slavic (originating somewhere in the Balkans) and that its initial variant was *wąpir*, which in later times transformed to *upir* among the Serbs, Russians and Czechs (Kolczyński 2003, 222). In Brückner's view the suffix *-pir* or *-pyr* could be connected with the act of "flying". An alternative interpretation sees the word **opir* as being associated with the word *piriti* which among Serbo-Croatians is supposed to refer to blowing or bloating (Moszyński 1967, 616–617). In the context of our discussions, it must be explicitly stated that until the 18th century the word *upiór* was unknown in Poland, and revenants were known under the names *strzyga* or *wieszczyca* (Simonides 1984, 71; 1989, 272; Kolczyński 2003, 223). The word *wampir* and its variants does, however, appear in place names such as Wąpierz, Wyąpyrz and Wampior which date to late medieval times (Kolczyński 2003, 223). Interestingly, Kolczyński also argued that in some academic works the word *wampir* is believed to come from Turkish *uber*, which means sorcerer. The word *wampir* was adopted in a range of Western and Northern European languages in the 17th and 18th centuries and remained in use until present times in forms such as *vampir*, *vampyr*, *vampire*, *vampiro* etc.

In general, the available ethnographic sources imply that the living dead in Slavic beliefs could have had a plethora of forms and names (e.g. *latawiec*, *utopiec*, *topielec, wodnik* – see Kolczyński 2003, 226–227). The physical appearance of such beings also differed considerably and they may have become revenants as a result of various circumstances. Therefore, labelling Polish deviant burials, especially from the early medieval period, as belonging to "vampires" specifically is not only a terminological, but also a factual mistake. In the current state of research we simply do not know under which name (if any at all) the revenants functioned in the language and imagination of the early medieval Slavs. What we can argue for, however, is that some (but not all) of these deviant burials indeed expressed popular fear that the dead would rise from the graves to cause some form of physical or mental harm to the living society.

Conclusions and future research perspectives

This article serves as an overview of past and present studies of deviant burials in medieval Poland. As I have shown, this topic has been present in Polish archaeology since the early 20th century, but for a long time deviant burials have been interpreted in a very simplistic way and predominantly seen in the context of "vampirism". Only recently, with the application of new methods of academic enquiry and increased willingness to collaborate with representatives of other disciplines (e.g. history, cultural and physical anthropology, religious studies and folkloristics) are we beginning to embrace the multiplicity of meanings which similar funerary practices may have held. As has been shown, particularly valuable are comparative studies in the field of legal archaeology and especially the ongoing excavations at medieval or early modern execution sites coupled with detailed examinations of archival legal records and folklore. These previously disregarded sources hold great and exciting potential for nuancing our understanding of the medieval

world and the mentalities of its inhabitants, both in Poland and beyond.

No comprehensive study of early and late medieval deviant burials has been published so far, but I am currently working on a major research project that will seek to fill this gap. The project will re-examine and contextualize all categories of burials previously regarded as "deviant" (or anti-vampire) from the territory of Poland that date between the late 10th and the 13th century. It will draw on already published cemetery reports, archival materials (photographs, drawings, excavation reports and diaries) and personal communication with the excavators of important sites where such graves have recently been found. Moreover, the project will also incorporate results of new osteological analyses and include a range of specially commissioned artistic reconstructions of selected graves. Simultaneously, a video documentary and a radio story on the subject of Polish deviant burials are also being prepared. The full results of this project will be published in an English-language monograph in 2017.

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