

Fundraising Goes Online

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Our team of archeologists working in the Chodelka River Valley turned to the Internet to help solve the problem of funding for our ongoing research. We hoped for 5,000 zlotys, yet raised over 11,000! The experience shows that crowdfunding may offer a viable option for other Polish research projects

The Chodelka Valley is an exceptional site for scholars of Poland's early middle ages, in particular the tribal period (7th-10th centuries). In this beautiful valley, running for around 15 km up to the river's outlet into the Vistula, the remains of four major settlements can be found alongside numerous smaller ones, kurgan burial grounds, and linear earthworks. This gives us the rare opportunity to study entire settlement complexes and the interconnections between their elements, such as any strongholds, outlying villages, burial grounds, and fortifications. We may even be able to reconstruct the road network and delimit the far reaches or boundaries of the settlements. For archeologists, these are very favorable conditions to work in.

The majestic fortified settlement at Chodlik is one of the largest in the Małopolska region. It is likely to have been an extremely important point on the map of early-medieval Slavic tribes long before the Polish state was founded. Crucially, until recently we were not aware of any burial grounds associated with the extensive settlements in the Chodelka Valley. Our research has changed all that.

The Chodlik Archeological Mission, which the present author has the honor of leading, is a study expedition operating under the patronage of the PAS Institute of Archeology and Ethnology. We are also carrying out some projects on behalf of or in collaboration with the Warsaw branch of the Scientific Association of Polish Archeologists. We started working in the region in 2010, when we discovered an extensive kurgan burial site in a forest bordering on Chodlik, dating back to the early middle ages. After three excavation seasons, we know we have found one of the most interesting and unusual burial sites from the period. Generally, the graves left behind by Slavic tribes are not especially elaborate. Yet the first three kurgans we investigated contained the remains of men who had been cremated and interred alongside horse remains

and elements of horse harnesses, making the discovery unique on the European scale.

We have been working at the site for the last four years. We obtained a grant from the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, allowing us to conduct a LIDAR aerial scan of the area. This led to the discovery of more previously unknown kurgan burial sites, and a mysterious 500 meter-long embankment hidden deep in the forest. Its surface was scattered with fragments of clay vessels and an early-medieval axe. We are also conducting excavations at the main Chodlik settlement, including documentation work.

Our mission also includes preserving damaged and endangered archeological sites in Chodlik and across the region. So far, we have saved two early-medieval sites at a farmstead near the main Chodlik settlement from sand quarrying. In the nearby village of Trzciniec, we excavated a burial urn dating back to the Bronze age, associated with the Lusatian culture.

Unfortunately our research and conservation activities are limited due to a lack of funds. Research grants are one possible solution, but while the Ministry did support the aerial scans, it is far more difficult to secure funding for archeological digs. Obtaining a ministerial grant from the Polish National Science Centre's funds is much more difficult. The application process is extremely complex, and the number of projects that receive financial support remains very low. This is why we are always on the lookout for patrons and private sponsors. During the 2012-2013 season, we received modest funds from the company PGE Dystrybucja S.A., but unfortunately that collaboration was short-lived.



Burial urn excavated in the village of Trzciniec. Axe dating back to the early middle ages, discovered in the embankment at Chodlik





The Chodelka River Valley is a true archeological treasure-trove. Almost every dune in the sandy area is a fascinating excavation site. Archeologists continue to find extensive evidence of settlements from the Neolithic, Bronze age, the period of Roman influence, and the early middle ages. One of the local villages, Trzciniac, gave its name to a major archeological culture of the early Bronze age. However, a significant number of sites have been damaged beyond repair as sand has been collected from the dunes for industrial purposes or to build railway line embankments. What was one of the most extensive burial sites of the "Trzciniac culture" in Trzciniac was irrevocably lost when it was removed to construct a narrow-gauge railway line in the 1950s

We are lucky to have the support of the local council, which has provided us with an excellent base at a former primary school in Chodlik. Our research would be impossible without it.

Having had to cover some of the costs from our own pockets during the last season gave us the idea to try out crowdfunding. Turning to social media to raise funds for scientific research is an established tradition in the United States and Western Europe, although it is still in very early stages in Poland (where business projects and cultural initiatives are more popular in the crowdfunding realm). We decided to challenge the status quo.

We chose the Polish platform PolakPotrafi.pl (<http://polakpotrafi.pl/projekt/cmentarzysko-dawnych-slowian>) and set the goal of raising a minimum of 5,000 zlotys to allow for the analysis and conservation of materials collected during the season. We were absolutely delighted with the public's response - we raised 11,172 zlotys in just a month. This will support our conservation work and expert analysis of materials, and moreover allow us to start the next season without having to worry about practical issues such as paying for fuel to travel to the site. It's not a lot of money, but it is sufficient to enable us to continue working on a limited scale. In the meantime, we are seeking a strategic partner who will support us on a longer-term basis. We are also of course trying hard to secure grants from the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage and the National Science Centre.

The success of our crowdfunding campaign is mainly due to our efforts to attract broader public attention to our research, through ongoing media outreach. People will naturally not be very eager to support research meant to be "consumed" only by a very narrow group of specialists.

Our Archeological Mission therefore strives very hard to engage in extensive popularization and educational activities, aiming to demonstrate that science is not just limited to dusty libraries or sterile laboratories, but can be accessible to everyone. And as it turns out, this approach can truly pay off. ■



Archiwum. Misji Archeologicznej w Chodliku (4)