

The Early Europeanization of Poland: archaeological discoveries in Bodzia

Secrets of a Warrior's Tomb



ANDRZEJ BUKO

Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology
Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw
buko@iaepan.edu.pl

Prof. Andrzej Buko, Director of the PAS Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology, is an archaeologist specializing in the early Middle Ages and focusing on ethnic and cultural borders in the context of the formation of Central European states.

PAS archaeologists have discovered an extraordinary necropolis in central Poland. It indicates that Duke (and later King) Bolesław Chrobry's knights came from extremely diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds: Slavic, Scandinavian, Varangian-Ruthenian, and Khazar

The discovery made in the village of Bodzia near Włocławek is unique in post-war archaeological excavations conducted in Poland: the burial ground, dating back to the foundation of the Polish state at the turn of the 11th century, is one of very few discovered so far in the region. It holds tombs of a small elite group including individuals with Slavic, Scandinavian and nomadic features with roots in Western (broadly the Baltic region), Varangian (Kiev-Rus), and Khazar cultures. Although it has long been known that Poland was home to migrant groups at the time, this is the first time that evidence of this has been so clear and on such a major scale.

The discovery of the burial ground was largely accidental, as it came about during major motorway construction work. Numerous sites dating back to different eras and periods were found along the projected route. However, this necropolis stands out from among the discoveries documented by the Rescue Team from the PAS Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology, led by Dr. Iwona Sobkowiak-Tabaka.

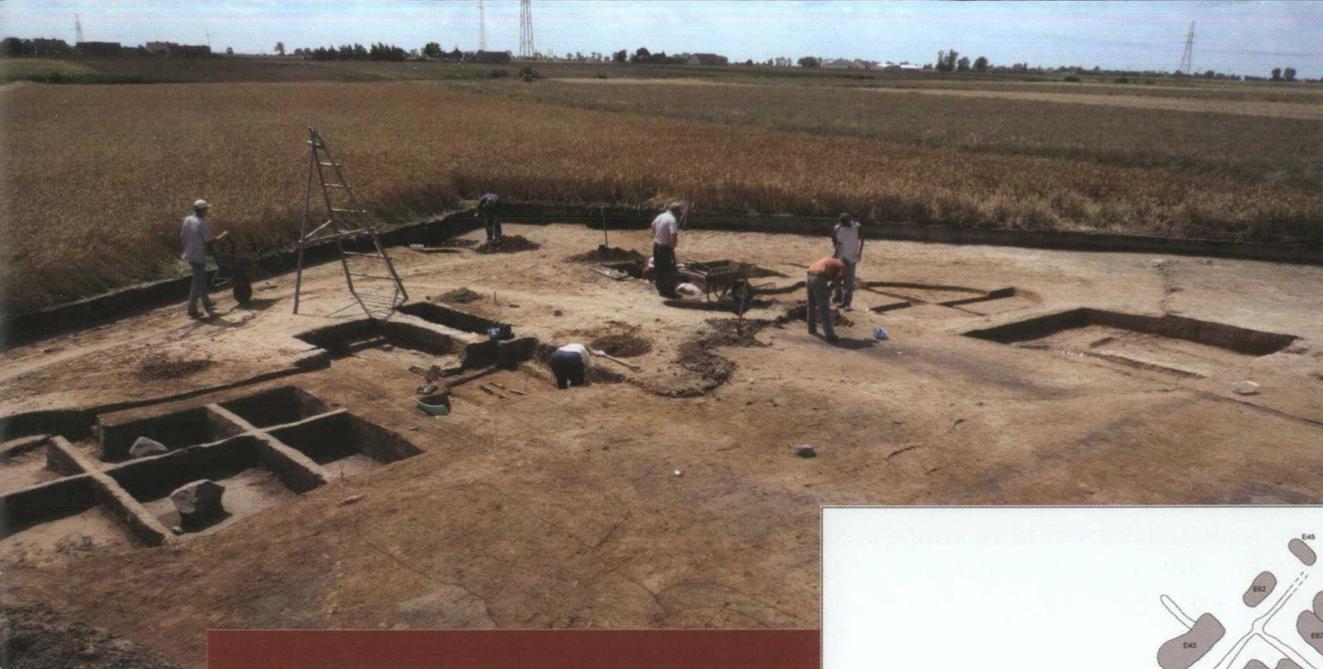
Looking north and east

Almost everything here is remarkable, starting from the chamber-like construction of some graves, found commonly in North-Eastern Europe (Scandinavia), as well as chambers with annexes (niches) typical of the nomadic Khazar culture. The distinctive, ordered rows of the cemetery, marked by fences not found in Europe during the 10th and 11th centuries, are worthy of particular note. The skeletons are arranged in the north-facing position, even though it was not standard at the time. The quality of grave-goods found in the graves is also exceptional. The abundance of coins found with the remains is unsurpassed, and their positioning is also unusual. As a whole, the burial site is the only one of its kind in Europe.

The layout of the necropolis reveals four rows of graves where the majority of the individuals are buried, mainly along the north-south axis. Analysis reveals that the main axis was formed by the graves and the first-line perimeters starting from the northern side. Thirteen burial chambers have been identified so far, with a further six beyond the boundary of the perimeters but included in the same phase found on the western and northern sides. It is possible that vertical poles (stelae?) were placed in the corners of the perimeters to mark individual quarters. Burial rites were conducted within their boundaries, with no more than three individuals usually buried per quarter.

Burials in the next row of the cemetery have several distinguishing features. The grave chambers are of different shapes and sizes, and none of the fences are rectangular; the chambers are smaller and located along the eastern and western edges of the row. Chambers with niches, absent from the first row, are particularly notable, as they are linked with the traditions and customs of the nomadic Khazars.

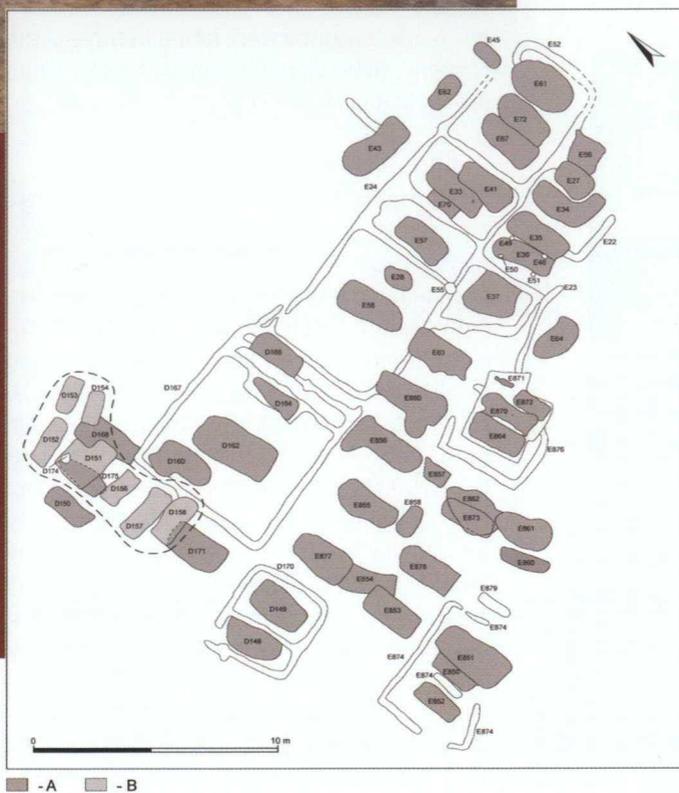
In the third row, on the eastern side, a group of graves stands out within the burial



S. Groniek



M. Jurdziecka



P. Stejnoga

Above: exploration at the burial ground in Bodzia, 2009. Right: some of the findings from the tombs, including a silver *kaptorga* bearing an eagle, silver jewelry, and a bronze bell. Below: bronze balance scale

fences, gradually expanded to accommodate the dead. Central position in this part of necropolis is taken by the tomb of a young warrior (25-30 years old) buried with a sword and appliqué belt finished with Prince Sviatopolk's dynastic bident topped with a cross. The remains of two women were interred alongside the warrior; the third one was buried below him. Many extremely valuable objects were found alongside the remains, including a silver container (*kaptorga*) decorated with an eagle. As the three were buried together, they were most likely related to one another; this is supported by results of an analysis of strontium isotopes in their tooth enamel.

In the fourth row, the main position is taken by a large, rectangular burial chamber holding the remains of an adult man, with a padlock found alongside the body. The remains of a leather belt and an iron knife suggest that he was likely to have been a warrior. Four coins originating from the British Isles (Canute the Great) have been found next to him.

Thousand year old illnesses

The remains of a total of fifty individuals have been found within the cemetery's four rows. They include 12 men, 18 women and 11 children; in the remaining nine cases, it has been impossible to determine the individuals' sex. 74% of those buried were adults, and just 26% were under 15 years old. The majority were aged between 40 and 50, although none of the individuals were likely to have been over 60.

The research conducted on the burial site suggests that it was used by a small community, where the average life expectancy did not exceed 30 years of age. Although this may seem young, it is not unusual for the Polish lands of the period. The average heights have been estimated at 168cm for men and 152cm for women; once again, they can be described as typical, although for men the value is near the upper boundary for this

Plan of the Bodzia burial ground with its distinctive fences around burial chambers. On the left (marked with a paler background and a dashed line), later graves dating back to the 12th century (I. Sobkowiak-Tabaka, M. Kara)

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characteristic, and near the lower boundary for women. Anthropological studies of the skeletons from Bodzia reveal signs of pathologies typical for that time, such as tooth decay, periodontal inflammation, hypoplasia, visible changes and deformations on the vertebrae, signs of cancer, and many others. Traces of mechanical trauma were found in three of the remains; some were the cause of death, while others had clearly healed.

Christians or pagans?

The most striking feature of the Bodzia necropolis is its spatial arrangement featuring rows of burial chambers, most surrounded by fences, which do not have an equivalent in Poland and Europe. The north-south orientation of the majority of the dead is also unusual for the turn of the 11th century, even though the position had been used between 6th-8th centuries, in particular in the Merovingian milieu, including in Scandinavian Europe. The reasons why this pagan tradition, unknown in the early Middle Ages in Poland, revived in Bodzia almost two centuries after its decline in Europe remain a mystery. This is surprising, since the burial site is located in a central part of a country that had been Christian for at least a generation, near Włocławek, one of the main centers of the state of Bolesław Chrobry (Boleslav the Brave). There is a clear conflict between the requirements of the Christian faith, which state that the dead be buried in the east-west direction, and the cultivation of old pagan rites, unfamiliar in central Europe, in the centre of a Christian state.

Another curious feature of the cemetery is the variation in size and shape of the burial chambers, some of which were timbered with wooden planks or covered with wooden roofs. These types of constructions are more commonly associated with funeral rites among Scandinavian and Rus-Varangian cultures. Some of the remains had also been arranged in the embrional position. This custom, alien in Mediaeval Poland, was deeply rooted in funeral rites of Europe's eastern and northern reaches. It is especially prominent in the 9th-century burial site in Birka in Sweden.

The discovery of wooden coffins with iron fittings in Bodzia is unique in Poland.

Some of the coffins were wrapped with linen fabric, another distinctive element of burial rites of the period. Although caskets were known, they were mainly used in the Scandinavian and Varangian and Kiev-Rus regions. A century earlier they were used by inhabitants of Great Moravia. Around one-third of the individuals found in Bodzia were deposited in them.

Offerings for the final journey

The variety and wealth of burial offerings found in almost 80% of the tombs, regardless of the deceased's age and sex, are also notable. The abundance of coins found by the remains is particularly striking. It is one of largest collections in Europe, with 67 complete coins and fragments originating from a single small burial site. A tomb of a woman buried together with a young warrior was found to have been showered with coins, with 16 items found near the upper part of her body. All the coins found in the cemetery are dated between 980-1034.

It is striking that the women found in Bodzia were buried with ornaments and jewelry typical of Slavic culture, and yet isotope studies reveal that the women weren't necessarily native to the local area. Silver beads decorated by granulation are reminiscent of jewelry from the southern reaches of Moravian, Czech, and Volhynian regions. The silver trapezoid-shaped containers for talismans or relics are richly decorated, depicting images such as an eagle without talons, a motif unique on the European scale. Some other unusual items found with the dead include a padlock and metal fittings of caskets, and a Scandinavian-style knife found in the tomb of a child.

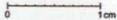
In contrast, very few finds are directly linked with Christian symbols, with the exception of a Maltese-shaped cross placed in the mouth of one of the women, and a fragment of an iron rivet with a cross cut into the head. It is possible that the *kap-torgas* found in two tombs were used as reliquaries. However, it is difficult to judge the degree with which these finds can be described as being specifically Christian.

The low number of religious symbols given the burial site's location near Włocławek, a central location of a Piast country, is one of the site's greatest mysteries.



M. Osiaǳcz

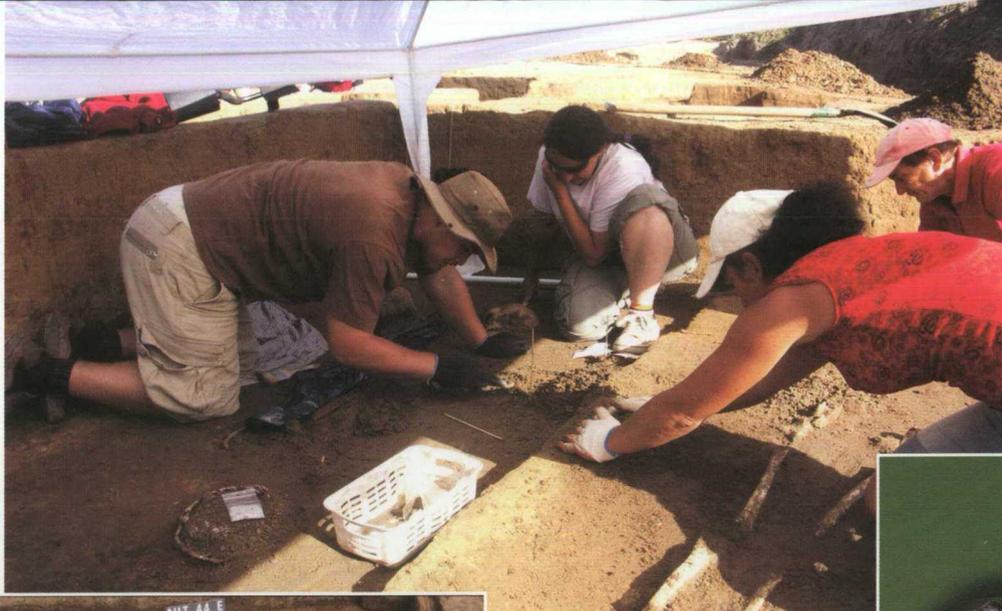
Bronze tip of a belt found in the tomb of a young warrior, bearing a bident – the dynastic symbol of Sviatopelk, son-in-law of Bolesław Chrobry



M. Osiaǳcz



Coin of Canute the Great from the early 11th century



S. Groniek



Tomb of a warrior with a sword, and the remains of a young woman placed on wooden bier. Above: exploration of the tomb

Leaders and warriors

Who were the people buried in Bodzia, and what was their function in the structure of the first Piast country? In one case (in the third row of the cemetery), it is extremely likely that the young warrior buried there had close links with Sviatopolk, Chrobry's son-in-law. He was clearly a high-ranking individual, as shown by the previously mentioned belt, the ceremonial sword encrusted with silver, and by the skeleton being placed in a sitting position (?), accompanied by the bodies of two young women, both with ample grave goods; one woman was placed in the burial chamber below him, with the other next to them. The warrior may have been a relative or friend from the circles of Chrobry's highest-ranking knights, who found shelter at his court after their unsuccessful attempt at installing Sviatopolk on the Kiev throne in 1018.

A man buried in the second row of the cemetery, with a distinctive ceremonial oak mace, was likely to have been one of the leaders, as was another interred in the largest burial chamber in the first row. Many signs indicate that his was the first body to have been buried within the cemetery.

As well as the likely leaders, another distinctive group is that of warriors. They

include a man buried in the first row of the cemetery in a richly-endowed chamber, bearing a long knife resembling a Viking *langsax*, unseen elsewhere in Poland. In the next row, a large burial chamber without a fence was found to contain the remains of a man with a pickaxe typical of Eastern nomadic tribes. The majority of burials remain anonymous, although the form and position of their tombs and the quality offerings within them are clear evidence of their high social rank.



P. Stejneger

Ceremonial sword, encrusted with silver, found in the tomb of the young warrior

Early elites

The findings at the Bodzia burial ground pose a major challenge to archaeologists and historians of the Middle Ages; they also provide a source of new information on the complex mechanisms of the formation of the first Piast state, and its social structure including the role played by people originating from all over Europe. They were mainly warriors and merchants – people involved with warfare and trade. As was the case in other countries of the era, they remained at the service of the rulers, forming the origins of the new, exclusive “European” society. This is the most likely explanation of the high numbers of their remains interred in the Bodzia cemetery. The discovery also produces a new qualitative basis of research relative to the forms of funeral rites in the early Piast state, as well as the mobility of European peoples at the turn of the 11th century. ■

Further reading:

Bodzia: New Quality of Cemeteries from the Late Viking Age. Buko A. (Ed.). Brill, Leiden-Boston (in preparation).