

# Man in the Ancient Forest

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## **Białowieża forest has survived to the modern day retaining a broad diversity of animal and plant species, while at the same time hosting a centuries-old human presence**

Research on the historical links between man and Białowieża forest was launched in 2003, in the spirit of what is called environmental history – a discipline that first emerged in the US and Western Europe over 30 years ago. Its aim is to understand the manner in which human beings have influenced the natural environment and the consequences of that impact. Owing to its interdiscipli-

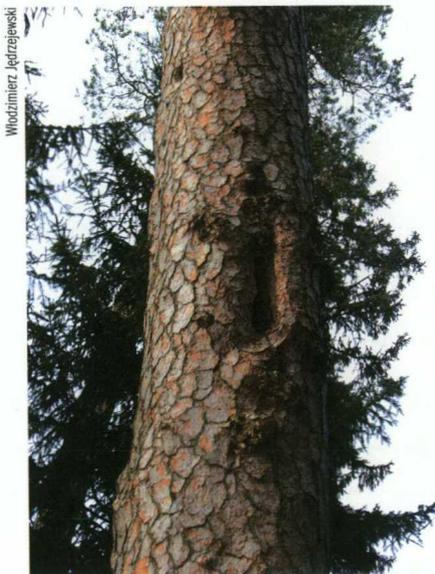
nary character, environmental history harnesses various research methods applied in history, archeology, geography, biology, ecology, and other life sciences. Our team's research on Białowieża forest has combined biological, paleoecological, historical, and archeological approaches, embracing natural analyses, field excavations, plus queries undertaken at archives, museum collections and libraries in Poland, Germany, Belarus and Lithuania. This first stage of the project encompassed the period ending in 1800, when new methods of managing and exploiting Białowieża forest were introduced once the area came under Russian Empire administration after the third partition of Poland.

### **Man on the margin**

Throughout the whole period studied the scope of human exploitation in Białowieża forest remained small, with deforested areas accounting for 5–10% until the end of the 18th century. The rest of the area remained covered with dense woods, albeit modified by man to varying degrees.

In ancient times – contrary to prior beliefs – Białowieża forest was not wholly uninhabited. Our investigations discovered the traces of settlements and a cemetery, proving that between the 1st century BC and 5th century AD the forest was the site of settlements displaying combined influences of the hatched pottery and Przeworsk cultures, subsequently the Wielbark culture. One of our most interesting discoveries involved traces of a settlement from the 1st century BC – 1st/2nd century AD on the Berezowo Glade, including the remains of a primitive smelting furnace used for smelting iron from bog iron ores, iron artifacts, pottery, cattle and deer bones. The people inhabiting the forest 2000 years ago, therefore, not only hunted and reared animals, but also influenced the environment by locally excavating ores and burning charcoal necessary for iron smelting. After ancient times, however, there was an interruption in human settlement, enabling the forest to regenerate.

The Early Middle Ages in Białowieża forest have so far been a mysterious period for scholars. Field surveys launched in the 1970s recorded around 800 tumuli from the 10th–13th century. That suggested great anthropogenic pressure on the environment, although no material objects were discovered in the barrows studied. The methods we applied during our investigations (soil chemical composition analysis, charcoal species identification, radiocarbon dating) led us to conclude that a majority of tumuli were in fact traces of modern-era forest production (i.e. from the 17th–19th century).



**Traditional beekeeping lasted in Białowieża forest until the late 19th century. Such overgrown beehive openings are an increasingly rare sight in today's Białowieża National Park**



Dariusz Krasnodębski

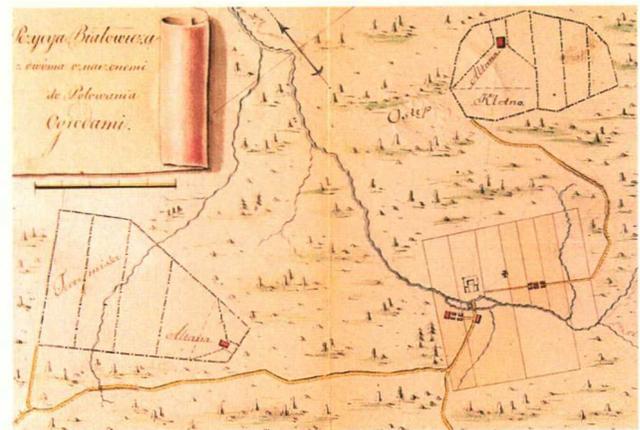
**These hunting manor stove remains date back to the latter 16th century – King Stefan Batory himself might have relaxed by their warmth after a bison hunt**

In fact the Early Middle Ages is the period which has left the fewest traces of human presence in the forest. So far researchers have identified four groups of tumuli concealing cremation burials (from the 8th–9th century) or unburnt skeletons (from the 11th–12th century). They have also discovered another type of a cemetery – inhumation burials dating back to the second half of the 11th century under a stone pavement on a natural hill in the Zamczysko range.

### The king goes hunting

From the 14th to the end of the 18th century, Białowieża forest was a royal forest serving Polish kings as a hunting ground. Special services were assigned to protect the areas intended for game hunting. During that period, Białowieża forest was the site of royal manors and accompanying settlements. Our work discovered the remains of a manor dating back to the second half of the 16th century in the Stara Białowieża range, and a Vasa manor from the first half of the 17th century, already known from written records, located within today's Palace Park in Białowieża.

The protection of the royal forest did not exclude reasonable exploitation of its resources. Sixteenth-century records describe how individuals were granted special royal permission to scythe the hay in river valleys and on glades, install beehives in pine trees, collect honey and wax, build dams and fish in forest rivers. At the end of the 17th century, in turn, lease contracts permitted certain people to produce pitch, wood tar, and potash. All these activities probably had a great impact on the Białowieża Forest environment. However, great (and successful) efforts were also made to prevent the exploitation of the forest from colliding with the protection of its most precious game, European bison, or with the forest's core role as a royal hunting ground. Fortunately, owing to its exceptional status, Białowieża



Cartographic Collection, Central Archives of Historical Records

**Starting from Jagiellonian times, kings hunted Białowieża forest in so-called “hunting gardens,” where game was rounded up before the king's arrival. This map by M. Polchowski from 1784 shows two such gardens where King Stanisław August Poniatowski would hunt**

forest did not share the fate of the neighboring areas – Kamieniec, Tokary, Puzyce or Narewka forests – which have “survived” only on the pages of old documents. This exceptionality greatly motivates further research into Białowieża forest's environmental history. ■

#### Further reading:

- Krasnodębski D., Samojlik T., Olczak H., Jędrzejewska B. (2005). Cmentarzysko wczesnośredniowieczne w Uroczysku Zamczysko w Puszczy Białowieżskiej [Early Mediaeval Cemetery in the Zamczysko Range, Białowieża Primeval Forest]. *Sprawozdania Archeologiczne*, 57, 555–583.
- Samojlik T. (2006). Łowy i inne pobyty królów polskich i wielkich książąt litewskich w Puszczy Białowieżskiej w XV–XVI wieku [Hunts and Stays of Kings of Poland and Grand Dukes of Lithuania in Białowieża Primeval Forest in the 15th–16th c.]. *Kwartalnik Historii Kultury Materialnej*, 54 (3–4), 293–305.