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SELECTED DETERMINANTS OF SOCIAL POSITION AND ELITISM IN ARCHAEOLOGICAL STUDIES OF THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

ABSTRACT

Issues related to luxury relics such as silk textiles were associated in most early medieval discoveries with the movement of Viking groups from north to south and back. These priceless relics were found on burial grounds, and their owners undoubtedly belonged to the economic elite of the population. Parallel anthropological studies

were carried out to see if this elitism is corroborated by individual morphological characteristics of the deceased persons. However, no significant differences defining the elitism of the studied individuals were uncovered. It is the grave furnishings – silk fabrics in particular – that are the most important element in this regard.

Keywords: silk, textiles, Middle Ages, social position, elites

It is extremely difficult to define univocally social elitism as a term, because determinants of belonging to the social elite are not always clear and they change over time. On the one hand, they may belong to the material sphere: exceptional wealth, which can be depicted in preserved artefacts, and is readable in archaeological material. On the other hand, they may be absolutely elusive and not appear on a cultural level, like spiritual values, associated frequently with transcendence and religion (e.g. being a man of God), and personal character features – corresponding with education level, abilities and unique experience possessed but also inherited, where elitism is a consequence of birth in a defined social group.

In archaeology and historical anthropology elitism is difficult to trace, it can only be inferred indirectly. It can be assumed, for instance, that it is manifested by an exposed burial location and/or some peculiarities of the burial ceremony and grave goods. Sometimes we

find indicators of morphological skeleton characteristics evidencing better economic conditions of progressive ontogenetic development during the childhood of a certain individual – in particular when compared to the expression level of the same properties in other population representatives, regarded as average ones. These features include body height and proportions (read from the length of long limb bones), sexual dimorphism¹ and absence of phenotypic skeletal stress markers.² While positioning a person on a historical social gradient, we can also look at some bone survival modifications, like the biomechanical skeleton burden, being a result of predominant forms of physical professional activities.³ Death at an advanced age can also be evidence that this particular individual's life passed in relatively safe and favorable conditions, or at least not in ones negative for his or her health.⁴ All these criteria, however, require a reference to the realities of the period, life

¹ Kozak 1998, 6–7.

² Kozłowski 2012, 14.

³ Kozłowski 1999, 79; Molleson 2007, 6; M. Grupa, Kozłowski 2009, 183.

⁴ Kozak 1998, 7.

environment, particular population features and properties of the biocultural system in which a studied individual had been living.

Our diagnosis may also be influenced by interpretative mistakes regarding the artefacts excavated in graves, which can concern their eschatological meaning, function, origin and even the defining material they were made of, but can also consist in ignoring their existence completely by a modern researcher.

The research carried out in the last century in the areas of early mediaeval fortified settlements and cemeteries has provided sources on the basis of which it is possible to attempt a narrative. These findings are supplemented by a small number of written sources of very varying reliability.⁵ However, let us leave the evaluation and interpretation of written sources to historians.

The article presents some qualitative and quantitative aspects of early mediaeval silk textiles excavated in Polish territories. We concentrate on examples coming from selected cemeteries situated in Vistulan Pomerania – two graves from Kaldus/Culmine (10th–13th c.) and a site located on the opposite bank of the Vistula, in Gruczno (12th–14th c.) (Fig. 1). Evaluating and analyzing the excavated material, the archaeologists concentrated mainly on discussing the unique and exceptionally expensive silk artefacts found in the graves, which due to their delicate and fragile character rarely preserved in earthen burials. Indeed, there is no doubt that due to their high price⁶ and luxurious character, possessing and using silk textiles can signify economic elitism and exceptional wealth. A feature of our research, however, is that we examined both textile and osteological material coming from those sites.

Silk appeared in Poland at the turn of the 11th century,⁷ initially as clothing accessories, in the form of bands and lining for finishing clothes edges and head ornaments. Three centuries later, the originally popular woolen and linen robes and cloaks were replaced among members the highest social class – rulers and courtiers

– by ones made of silk. A silk robe was an explicit symbol of the wealth and power possessed. This continued throughout the ages, hence silk was excavated in the rulers' burials from different periods.⁸

Silk textile fragments were, then, discovered next to metal and glass artefacts and wooden relics of grave framings, but were not always correctly identified, which in consequence falsified the interpretation of grave contents and obscured the exclusiveness of the finds. Most of the textile fragments were found on female skulls and were about 2 cm wide. By the 1980s, some of them were directly interpreted as 'linen',⁹ the others were identified as samite, fabric weaved with golden thread.¹⁰ These bands occurred most often with temple rings, called 'czółko'.¹¹

An example of a silk temple ring was excavated in Gruczno in grave 247 (Fig. 2) in burial ground 1, dating from the 12th century.¹² In a burial of an adult woman, on the scale of the frontal bone – in its middle part, a little above the frontal eminence – fragments of textile (silk band fragments with a geometrical pattern depicting a griffon) have preserved (Fig. 3c). It should be remarked that the grave was exceptionally richly equipped, which suggested an attribution to a representative of the highest local social circle. Apart from the temple ring mentioned above, the grave also contained: a knife, two other temple rings, a bead, a ring, and an unidentified metal object.¹³ We can also remark that in Gruczno relics of silk were likewise excavated in a younger burial place from the 13th–14th century, in a grave of an adult person (Fig. 3d) (burial ground 2, grave 921). Unfortunately, the bones of the dead deposited in those graves have not preserved in a good condition, which was an obstacle in their detailed anthropological analysis. However, the excavated bones are not distinguished by any particular features. Therefore, if the bones had been excavated without rich material equipment, and, above all, if the silk had not been correctly interpreted, the skeletons would not have been attributed to a representative of the elite.

⁵ Ibn Rosteh 1977; Ibn Fadlan 1985; Frankopan 2015. It was the Vikings who mostly imported luxury goods into northern Europe. For more on the prices of silk fabrics, slaves and dirham treasures, see the following publications: Rybakov 1948, 339–340; Lewicki 1956; Duczko 2006; M. Grupa 2009a; 2018; Adamczyk 2018.

⁶ A 2-cm-wide band made of silk with a pattern of metal thread cost more or less as much as an iron helmet, chain armour and a sword with a belt (Crowfoot, Chadwick Hawkes 1967, 59, 62; M. Grupa 2009a, 218).

⁷ Although the silk found in the Wolin stratification is said to date to the 9th century, the authors believe that this hypothesis should be approached with great caution. Current research on Wolin will perhaps verify the earlier findings.

⁸ Turska 1989; M. Grupa 2009b.

⁹ Boguwolski, Hyss 2005, 21; Bojarski 2020, 408. Flax textiles preserve exceptionally rarely in earthen deposits. In our climatic zone they usually decompose within 5–10 years (M. Grupa 2009a, 220).

¹⁰ Bender *et al.* 1957, 169–189; Belniak *et al.* 1961; Rauhut 1956, 78–81; Kóčka-Krenz 1993, 41.

¹¹ Temple rings and 'czółko' were common female headdresses in the Slavic region (Kóčka-Krenz 1993, 42). Their different sizes and types are being excavated practically all around Central Europe, starting with Balkan Peninsula (Croatia, Bosnia, Herzegovina) and finishing with Estonia and Latvia (Nowosad *et al.* 2018, 82).

¹² M. Grupa 2009a, 215.

¹³ Boguwolski, Hyss 2005, 21.

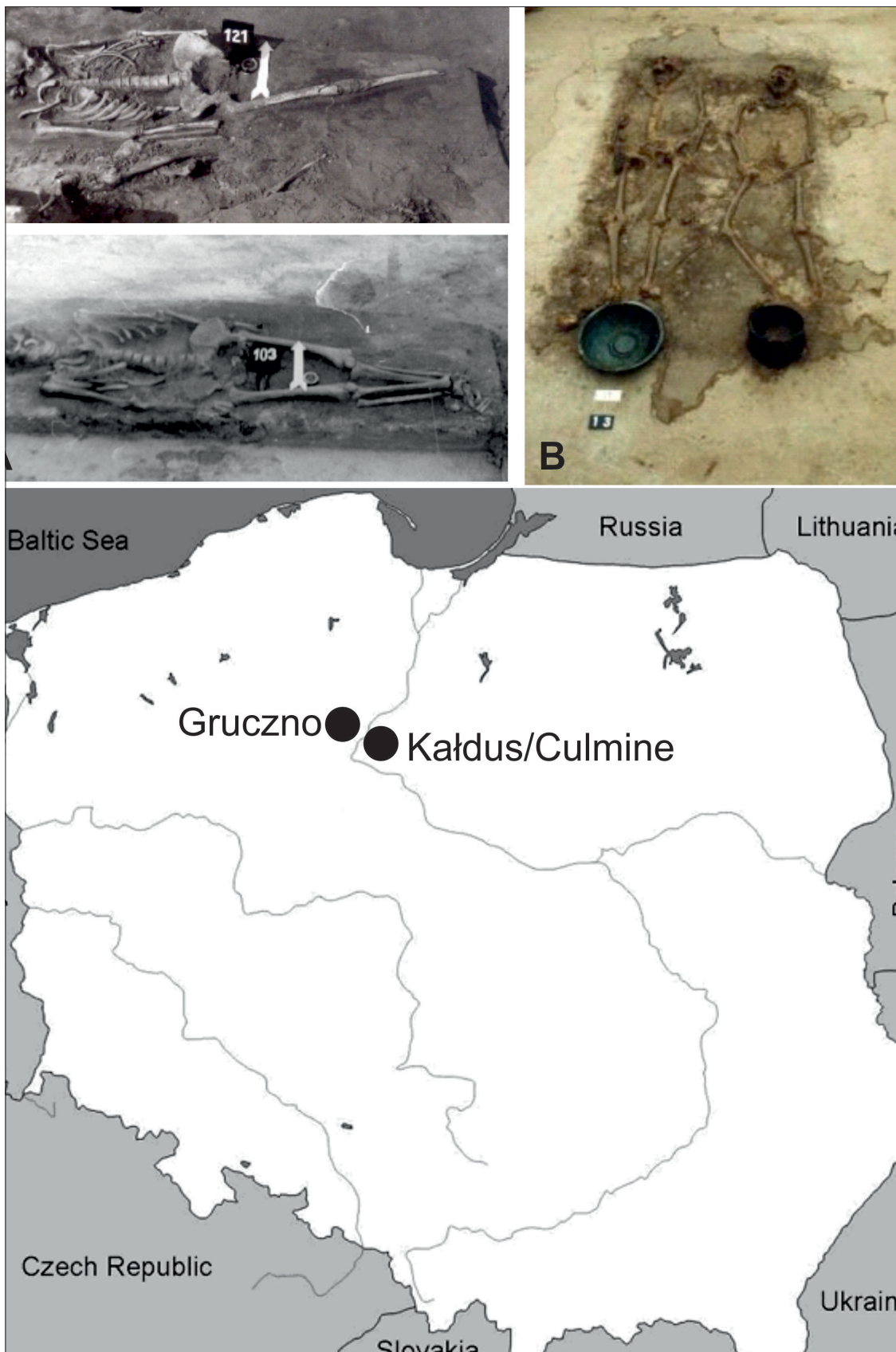


Fig. 1. Location of Gruczno and Kałdus on the map of Poland: A – burials in Gruczno (photo by A. Florkowski); B – double richly furnished grave in Kałdus/Culmine (archives of UMK).

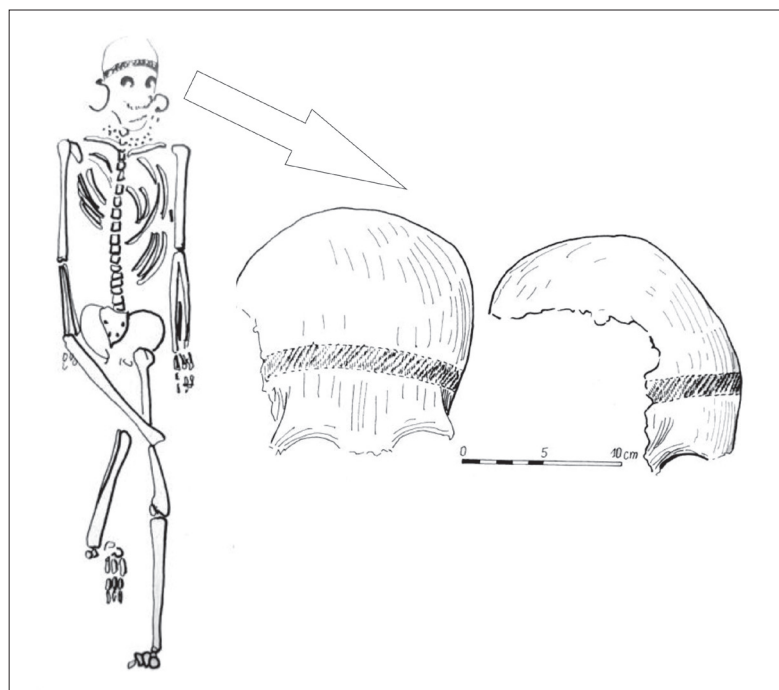


Fig. 2. Skeleton of an adult woman from grave 247 at the cemetery in Gruczno (site 1). Relics of a silk band on the frontal skull bone (after Boguwolski and Hyss 2005).

Fragments of silk were also excavated in the cemetery in Kałdus (sites 1, 2, and 4), in Vistulan Pomerania. The graves are dated to the 10th to 11th century.¹⁴ Burials containing identified silk textiles include: grave 90/98, belonging to a female who died at the age 22–35 (Figs 4, 5); grave 87/01, being a burial of a young woman (25–30 years old at the moment of death); grave 272/01, belonging to a female of similar age as in grave 290 (Fig. 3b). Grave 76 (site 4), of an adult individual of unidentified sex, apart from four fragments of a silk band (with relics of metal braid readable only under a microscope), also contained a processed flint and an iron knife. Textile bands excavated outside graves belong to very rare finds. In the Kałdus settlement (site 2), a 10-mm-wide band rolled up tightly (Fig. 3a) was excavated, which could have been used as the lining of a neck opening or sleeves or as a temple ring. In the case of Kałdus, grave 90/98 mentioned above is particularly interesting because it contained not only a silk band with a pattern usual in Europe (insects – namely, butterflies – Fig. 3f) but also 1,252 glass beads and one made of crystal, two temple rings, a bronze tin, a nail, a ring and an iron knife in a case¹⁵ with bronze fittings. The beads' composition

around the skull suggests that they had been used as headdresses. In contrast, the ones situated under the mandible could have been a necklace accentuating the husband's wealth, as beads and strings were not only ornaments but also manifestations of the family fortune.

It must be stated, however, that taking osteological criteria into account, it is impossible to observe any significant morphological features of the elite character in those individuals. On the other hand, the examined bones did not bear any signs of pathological characteristics resulting from nourishment deficiency, traumas during the lifetime or chronic diseases. These facts may correspond with elite character, but not necessarily so. The age of death can also be classified as average for this population.

Analyses of temple rings excavated in Poland and bands originating from Scandinavia indicate two basic techniques of their manufacturing – using reed and tablet looms (both techniques known in Europe since prehistoric times).¹⁶ Examining early mediaeval finds, we can see both techniques used simultaneously in one object. Bands from Brześć Kujawski,¹⁷ Gdańsk,¹⁸ Gruczno,¹⁹ Kałdus,²⁰ Pień,²¹ Czekanów,²² and Gródek Nadbużny²³ were made that way²⁴ and the used weave was called *samitum*.²⁵

¹⁴ Chudziak 2010; Bojarski 2020.

¹⁵ Unfortunately, the leather was destroyed completely.

¹⁶ M. Grupa 2012, 153–157.

¹⁷ Moszczyński 1990, 131–135.

¹⁸ Kamińska, Nahlik 1958, 106–111.

¹⁹ M. Grupa 2009a, 215.

²⁰ M. Grupa 2006, 141–143; 2007a, 108–111; 2007b, 276–278; Bojarski *et al.* 2010, 462, 466, 494, 529.

²¹ Janowski 2015, 105; M. Grupa 2018, 249; 2020, 367–375.

²² Zawadzka-Antosik 2003, 329.

²³ Cybulska *et al.* 2018, 743.

²⁴ M. Grupa 2012, 155.

²⁵ Maik 1988, 86; 1991, 69; M. Grupa 2006: 141; 2007a, 109–110.

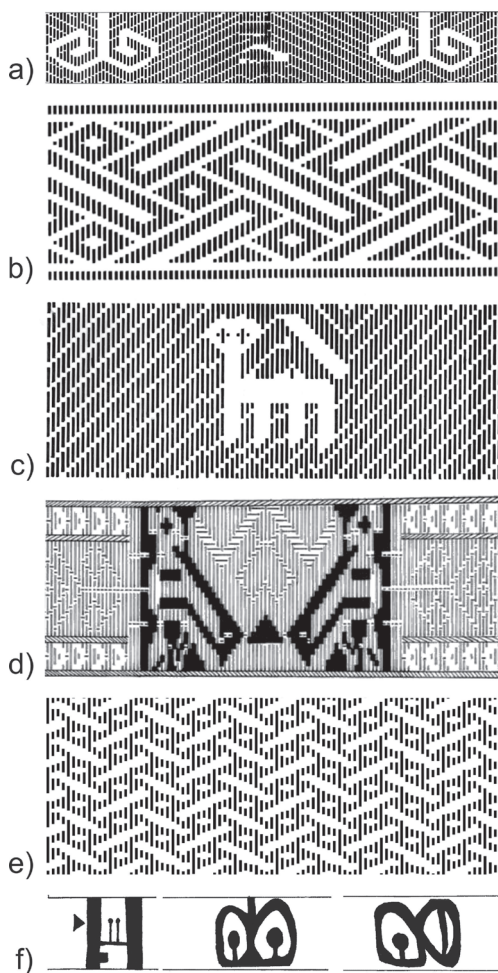


Fig. 3. Registry of decorative patterns on early mediaeval bands: a, b, f – Kałdus; c, d – Gruczno; e – Pień (drawing by M. Grupa, D. Grupa).

The *samitum* weave usually had the second weft as the one shaping a pattern on a tape, and the pattern itself varied from a simple geometrical one (Figs 3b, e) to images of different stylized animals: griffons (Figs 3a, c, d) and butterflies (Fig. 3f), or unidentified patterns.²⁶ Besides woven bands, the researchers also found silk

²⁶ M. Grupa 2006, 141–143; 2007a, 108–111; 2007b, 276–278; 2009a, 215. Publications concerning the material from Niewiarowo-Sochy and Złota Sandomierska include the descriptions: ‘a belt of samite’ and ‘textile with a gold thread’. Most probably they were textiles with ornament shaped with an additional weft or warp with metal braiding.

²⁷ Gutkowska-Rychlewska 1968, 270; Bartkiewicz 1979, 14–15.

²⁸ Chudziakowa 1972, 152–153.

²⁹ In Płonkowo the researchers did not excavate any textiles or signs thereof, but two skulls were found with brass plate ap-



Fig. 4. Kałdus, skull from grave 90/98 with silk temple band *in situ* (archives of UMK).

fragments with embroidery made with silk thread. The earliest examples in the Polish lands were reported in Gródek Nadbużny. One of them had embroidery made with golden thread, representing branches with leaves separated by arcades. The other had a basic motif of colourful circles surrounded by a border of winding branches. The ornament was embroidered on silk textile lined with leather, 3.7 cm wide.²⁷ Bartkiewicz supposes that it could have been a collar-necklace, but also a headdress of a temple ring type. In its construction, the band resembled the relics of a temple ring excavated in the burial place in Skrwilno,²⁸ but instead of embroidery, that band had brass-plate floral appliques. The headdresses from Płonkowo²⁹ might have been manufactured similarly.³⁰

At a site at Czekanowo, Sokołów Podlaski Powiat/District (site 1, so-called Turkish graves), explored in 1983, a female grave (died aged 25–30) contained textile fragments resting on the left clavicle and cervical vertebrae.³¹ Two silk fragments sewn together, sized 4.2 × 9.3 cm (diagonal weave, rows) and 4.2 × 1.7 cm (plain 1/1 weave), were lined with a 1.8-cm-wide silk band,³² called *samitum* in the publication. The textiles situated inside were

pliques, in the middle of which there were holes for an ellipsoid link to a small tin pendant; a similar find was also recorded in Skrwilno (Nowosad *et al.* 2018, 82–83).

³⁰ Nowosad *et al.* 2018, 83.

³¹ Zawadzka-Antosik 2003, 327–333.

³² Zawadzka-Antosik informs us that it is a pure double textile, with double warp, but not if it is a fragment cut from a bigger piece or a separate band (if a warp is mentioned, it means that the weaving edge is known) which resembles bands with geometrical pattern excavated in Kałdus (M. Grupa 2007a, 108–110).

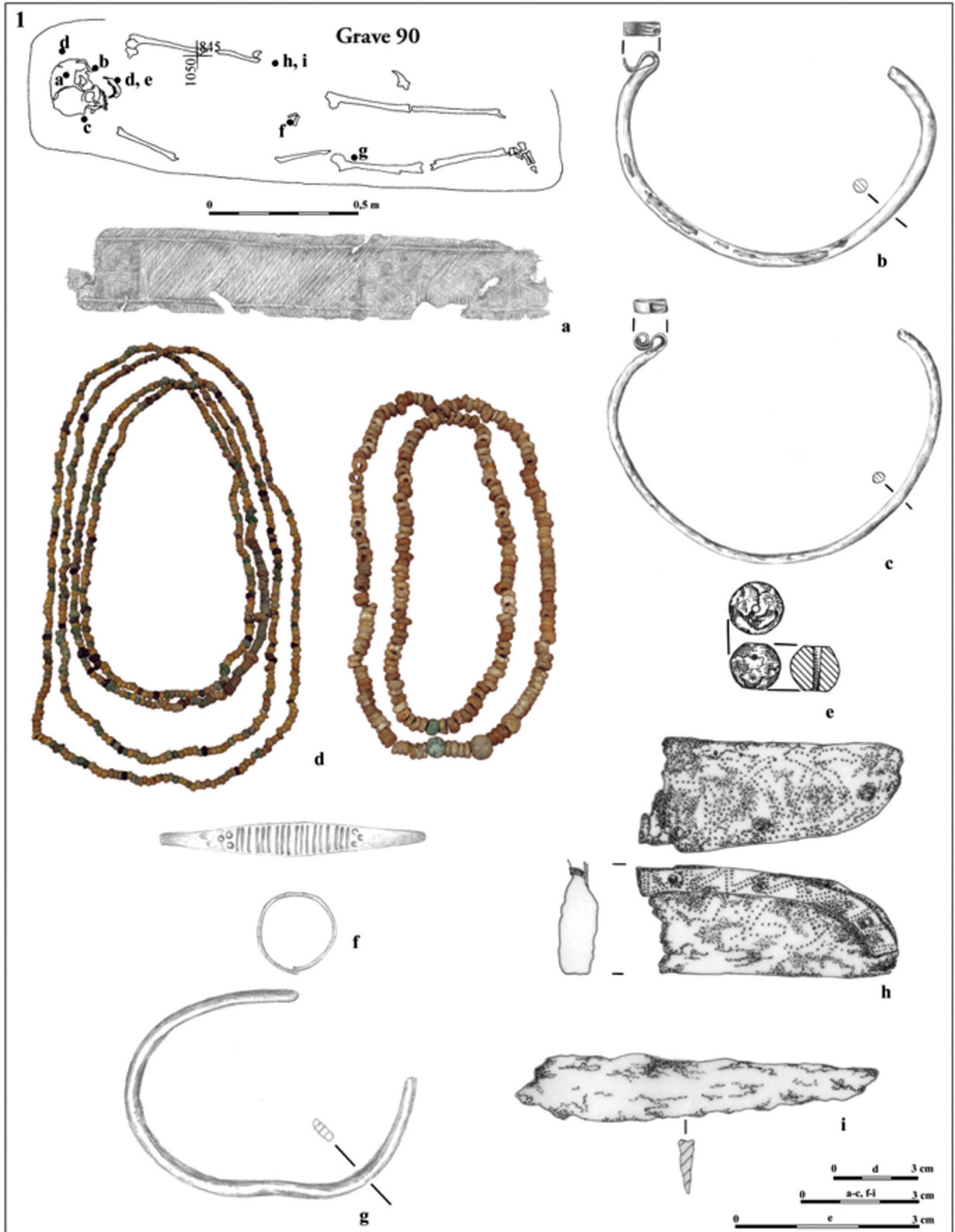


Fig. 5. Equipment of grave 90/98: a – silk temple band with a ‘butterflies’ ornament; b, c – temple rings; d – bead strings; e – bead of crystal; f – ring; g – bronze wire; h – leather case fitting; i – a fragment of an iron knife (archives of UMK).

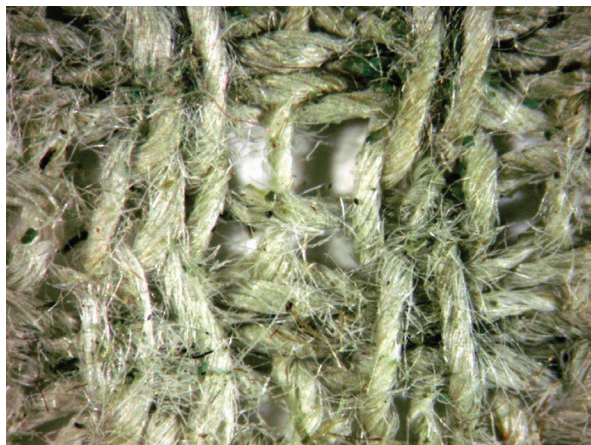


Fig. 6. Pień, a close-up of a long interweaving shaping a pattern (photo by D. Grupa).

additionally embroidered using silk thread with a metal braid. The whole structure was placed on a piece of birch bark, and the most probably bronze buttons must have been stitched along the rim, since they were found in the textile's closest vicinity. A similar structure – textile appliques on birch bark – was found in Stara Riazáń,³³ where this element was called a collar. The grave in Stara Riazáń is dated to the 12th century and is classified as a ducal grave.

A textile fragment excavated in Gdańsk-Oliwa, in a grave dating from the 13th century, can be interpreted similarly. Here the ornament was also shaped using thread with a metal braid,³⁴ but it is difficult to establish if it was a separate band or a cut textile fragment.

Not all bands were used as temple rings or lining of clothes rims. Near the pelvis of a dead child from the cemetery in Pień near Bydgoszcz, a band with geometrical ornament reminding rhomboid patterns from Kałdus was excavated (Fig. 3e). The band's both ends were fitted with gilded tins, decorated with small spherical bells. These types of bells were usually fixed to various belts, textile or leather, but the band from Pień belongs to exceptionally luxurious grave goods. The child may have been dressed in a big linen robe reaching at least its ankles and the silk belt with golden ornament was a particularly elegant and expensive accessory. The male grave from the same site (grave 15) contained on the bottom of a bronze bowl a piece of silk textile in plain 1/1 weave. Microscope analyses revealed a very delicate pattern created by longer interlaces – two neighbouring warp threads were drawn

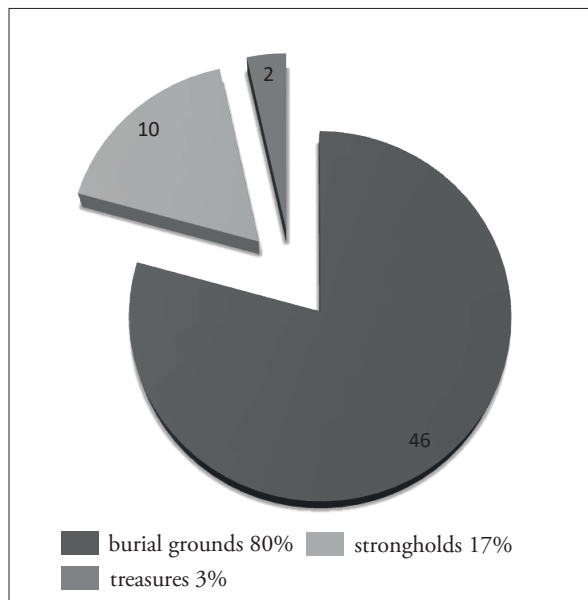


Fig. 7. Character of the early mediaeval site/deposit in which relics of silk fabrics were excavated (compiled by M. Grupa, T. Kozłowski).

through five threads of weft (Fig. 6). Despite its rich and varied furnishings, which included an iron axe tinctured with silver and copper, a wooden bucket with iron bands, a wooden scoop, perhaps a wooden plate, a whetstone made of phyllite, and an iron knife,³⁵ it should be noted that it was the silk fabric that was its most valuable item.³⁶

Silk merchants also reached 11th-century Wrocław, where 7 fragments of this fabric were found in a pagan temple. In this case, they were also fabrics with very different weaves (1/1, 3/1, combined) and different thread densities per 1 cm.³⁷

It should also be added that apart from the material from burial grounds, silk textiles were excavated at the stronghold sites, as well: in Opole, Gdańsk, and Wolin (Fig. 7).³⁸ The treasures, containing, among other elements, Arabic coins, sometimes jewellery, and textiles, belong to unique finds. This coexistence of silk and items of substantial worth in the same deposits evidences that the value of silk textiles was high and they were accumulated and protected like gold and precious jewels. We can quote here examples of treasures from Olbrachtówek and Sokołowo,³⁹ which unequivocally indicate a high value of the silk textiles brought to the territory of present Poland.

³³ Zawadzka-Antosik 2003, 329.

³⁴ Maik 1988, 86.

³⁵ Janowski 2015, 105.

³⁶ M. Grupa 2018: 249; 2020, 369–372, 379.

³⁷ Maik 2007, 192–194.

³⁸ Kamińska, Nahlik 1958; Maik 1986; 1988; 1991.

³⁹ D. Grupa 2013, 304; D. Grupa, M. Grupa 2014; M. Grupa 2014, 132–133. Similar artifacts were excavated not only in Poland. In Lõhavere, Estonia, a container of birch bark was unearthed, containing weaving tools (tablets), double-balanced scale made of bronze, jewellery as well as textiles: woolen, linen and silk. Silk items included a 1-cm-wide band, tablet-woven

They consisted of silk fragments of various sizes with plain 1/1 weave, hidden together with coins in ceramic vessels.

There is no doubt that silk textile relics have a significant if not the key meaning for defining social status. They might be treated as an indicator of belonging to the economic elite and this was probably the case even in the early Middle Ages. This refers in particular to burials, which deliver the majority of that type of archaeological material. As excavation data indicate, silks can also accompany other archaeological objects, although much more rarely.

To sum up, we must take into account that elitism cannot always be confirmed by methods like the anthropological study of preserved bone relics. High social sta-

tus being manifested in material resources, like silk clothing, does not have to correspond with osteological determinants of above-average living conditions. Therefore, grave goods including silk fabrics have an exceptional research value. These delicate relics should be paid particular attention during fieldwork and, later on, laboratory examinations. Taking into account the quality of excavated textiles and the variety of ornaments, we can state that early mediaeval burial rites emphasized the social position of the deceased person, which also underlined the distinction and privileges of representatives of the highest class. That was the way of shaping 'court fashion', which probably existed also in the early mediaeval communities of Kałdus and Gruczno.

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in a geometrical (zigzag) pattern, shaped with additional weft with metal braiding, in a samitum weave. Another piece looks like a rectangular applique decorated with embroidery made of

thread with metal braid, while the third one was plain (Laul, Tamla 2014, 45–49).

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