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THE MEDIAEVAL CEMETERY AT 6 BOKŠTO ST. – THE ORTHODOX COMMUNITY'S SOCIAL ARENA IN VILNIUS

ABSTRACT

Each burial site is a reflection of the community that left it; thus the burial rite features allow assumptions to be made about the society, its social structure, its distribution of power, the social status and economic situation of the deceased, and possible gender and age differences. The Bokšto St. inhumation cemetery, which dates to the last third of the 13th – early 15th centuries, is unique in the context of mediaeval Vilnius due to being a Christian cemetery that appeared while Lithuania was still a pagan country. It is primarily a place where the Orthodox community could demonstrate its religious affiliation in pagan Vilnius by burying its dead in accord-

ance with its own traditions. This cemetery also reflects the community's internal features and was a place where its members could interact, i.e. a social arena. Therefore, investigation of the cemetery's various elements and its burial rites allows for hypotheses to be made not only about the community's religious affiliation but also about its social structure, its connections, cultural environment and distribution of power, as well as allowing one to talk about past traditions and rituals. The wealth of assembled information makes it possible to examine this cemetery as a place that reflects the traditions of not only death but also of life.

Keywords: mediaeval Vilnius, Christianity, funeral rites, community, social arena

Introduction

Each burial site reflects the community that left it. Its analysis can provide diverse information about the people buried there. It can be said that burial rites encompass the entire cycle of human life and memory. Increasingly, various burial sites are no longer just described by emphasizing the burial rite and especially the grave goods, the aim instead being to refer to the rite to provide broader conclusions about the society in question, its social structure, distribution of power, and even more elusive things, like feelings. As noted by researcher Heinrich Härke (2001), a cemetery can be seen as a place for the disposal of the

dead, but also as a place of memory, rituals, emotions, property, perception of mortality, etc.¹

It is thought that a burial site's investigation can reveal the attitude towards the living and the dead, the in- and out-group, culture and nature, order and chaos, the present and the future.² Although archaeology does not directly reflect former liturgy, or does so only slightly, the study of various burial rite aspects allows one to make assumptions about the deceased's social status, economic situation, and possible gender and age-related characteristics. Once the deep significance of burial rite traditions for mediaeval communities is understood, their study becomes even more important. First of all, the burial rites demonstrate

¹ Härke 2001, 11–19.

² Nilsson Stutz 2015, 2.

faith and rituals. Secondly, burial sites are a reflection of the society and thus many works that investigate cemeteries use the terms 'social arena' and 'social mirror' to describe them.³ Of course, one cannot state that burials directly reflect the social organization of the community, as this would be an oversimplified model.⁴ Therefore, as in every other instance where a burial site is investigated, it is important to include every possible context the analysis.

A study can become even more informative when the analyzed site is somehow exceptional. The inhumation cemetery discovered at 6 Bokšto St. bears such a distinction in the context of mediaeval Vilnius. Dating to the last third of the 13th – early 15th centuries, it is ascribable to the Orthodox community living in Vilnius. Thus, it was a Christian cemetery founded when Lithuania was still a pagan country (its official Catholic baptism occurring in 1387) where cremation burials prevailed. All the excavation material from this cemetery is presented in a book by the authors of this article.⁵ We came across the concept of 'social arena' while writing the monograph. However, at that time we did not yet develop this concept, as we paid more attention in the book to the presentation of the material itself, the historical context and various issues of burial rites in Lithuania (transition from cremation to inhumation). Yet the idea of analyzing the cemetery as a reflection of society was not forgotten. This is how this article was born.

Due to the exceptional historical circumstances, the analysis of the Bokšto St. cemetery may reveal not only various internal features of its community but also, due to the cemetery's very presence in a pagan city, the community's uniqueness and otherness. The question arises as to how the people who buried their dead there viewed this cemetery. Was it a place for them to demonstrate their faith? Or their strength, economic power, social status, gender, age, or other differences? This article will, therefore, examine the Bokšto St. cemetery in two ways: from an external and an internal perspective. First as a place where the Orthodox community could demonstrate its religious faith in pagan Vilnius by burying their members in accordance with their own traditions, then as a reflection of the community's internal features, a place where its members interacted, i.e. a social arena. Thus, the investigation of the cemetery's various elements and its burial rites allows for hypotheses to be made not only about the community's religious affiliation but also about its social structure, its connections, the cultural environment, and the distribution of power as well as allowing for a discussion of past traditions, rituals, etc.

The sources and state of the research

The state of the research into the Orthodox community in 13th–14th-century Vilnius and its burial rites is currently shaped by several factors. The first one is the lack of historical data. The earliest stage in Vilnius's founding and development, as well as this entire period in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania generally, is poorly covered in written sources. For example, while Vilnius was first mentioned in 1323 in the letters of the Grand Duke Gediminas of Lithuania,⁶ the first mention of Civitas Rutenica, its Orthodox suburb, appeared only in 1383 in Wigand of Marburg's *Chronica nova Prutenica*.⁷ More detailed knowledge about Vilnius's early Orthodox community, especially its burial rites and the special features of everyday life, has not survived. It should be noted that until the beginning of the archaeological research at this location in 2005, nothing was known about any cemetery on Bokšto St.

A second problem affecting the state of the research is more subjective. Lithuanian historiography often emphasizes that Lithuania was the last pagan country in Europe. It is no coincidence, therefore, that the greater attention focused on the pagan legacy perhaps diverts attention somewhat from the life of the country's Christian immigrants. While historians have broadly investigated these topics,⁸ they focus more on the political history and Christianity's spread than on daily life and especially burial rites.

In addition, even works dedicated to the investigation of burial rites and specific cemeteries usually focus on the cemetery material and various features of the burial rites in them, only rarely examining a site from a social perspective, thereby reflecting the social structure, social relationships, rituals, etc. of the community that left it. The study of these aspects is usually limited to an age and gender group analysis and a study of the grave goods. The 2018 book by archaeologist Mindaugas Bertašius on the long-term investigation of the Iron Age cemetery in Marvelė, Kaunas District, should be mentioned as an exception in this regard.⁹ Unlike most works that publish cemetery research material, it provides a deeper assessment of the social issues and an analysis of the Marvelė community's cultural environment, social relationships, etc.

Due to the lack of similar literature for our topic, we will primarily rely directly on the research material in analyzing the Bokšto St. burial site from a social perspective. This object has been extremely well studied, the investigation's entire history and material having

³ E.g. Härke 2001, 11–19.

⁴ This position is criticized in historiography, cf. Williams 2007, 5.

⁵ Jonaitis, Kaplūnaitė 2020.

⁶ Gedimino laiškai 2003, 47.

⁷ Marburgietis 1999, 185.

⁸ Baronas 2000; 2010; 2014; Baronas, Rowell 2015.

⁹ Bertašius 2018.

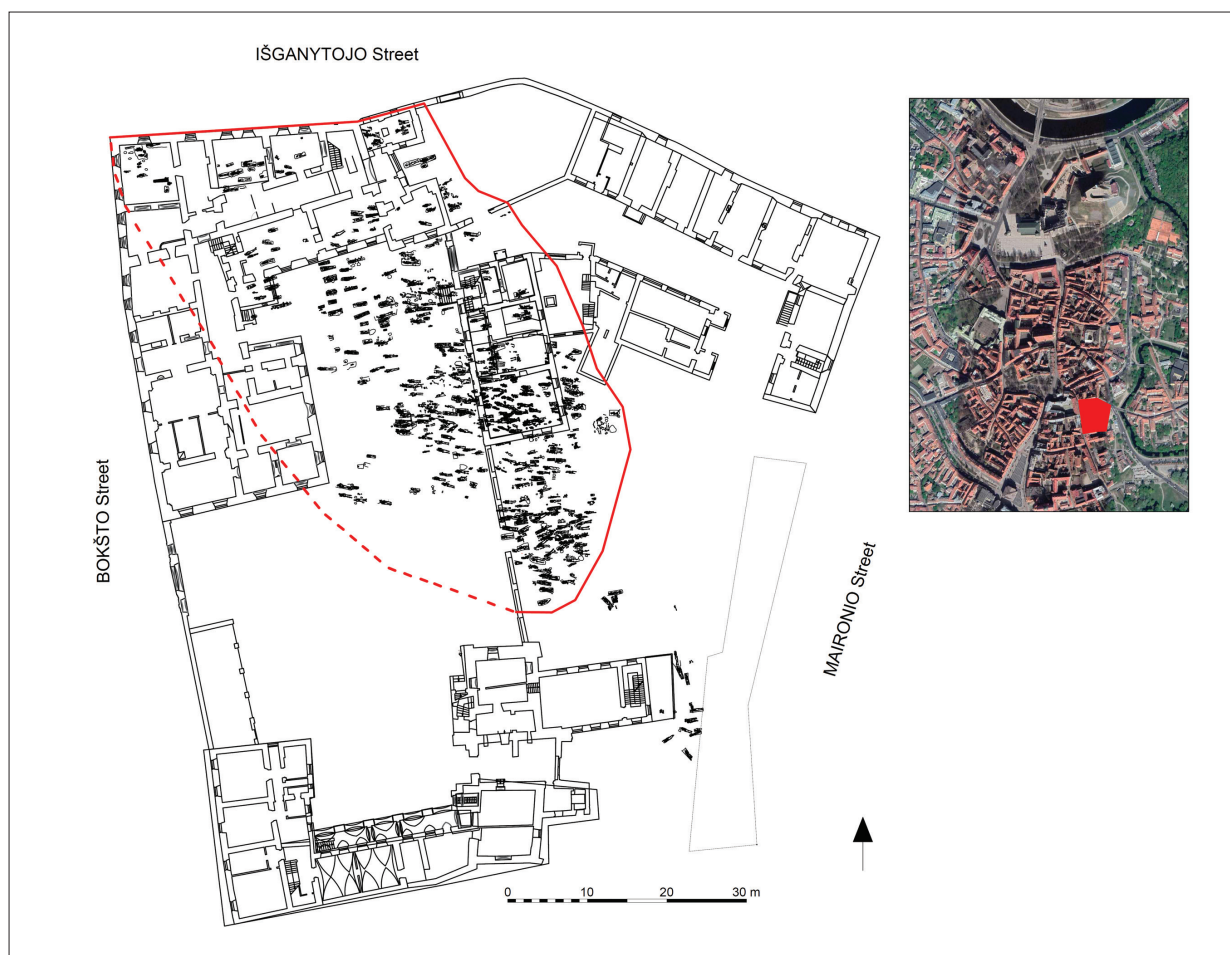


Fig. 1. The cemetery on Bokšto Street in Vilnius with its conjectured boundaries marked in red (Google Earth Pro map of Vilnius modified by I. Kaplūnaitė).

been presented in a monograph by the present authors.¹⁰ The wealth of assembled information allows us to examine this cemetery as a place that reflects the traditions of not only death but also of life.

The old cemetery at 6 Bokšto St. in Vilnius

In 2005 a previously unknown mediaeval burial site was discovered in the eastern part of the present-day Vilnius Old Town (Fig. 1). Archaeological excavations were carried out there intermittently until late 2014.¹¹ During that period, the old cemetery was almost com-

pletely excavated and various interdisciplinary studies were conducted, all of the material being published.¹² Below are some key research points.

A total area of 7,000 m² was excavated, the cemetery occupying roughly 2,500 m² of it.¹³ Rich, 1.5–7 m thick, 14th–20th-century layers with abundant finds and the remnants of structures from various periods were excavated above the cemetery. The burials, 533 in all, discovered in the old cemetery reflect all the traditional features of Christian burial rites: east–west-oriented inhumations (head to the west); grave goods consisting of jewellery but no weapons or tools; and burials in wooden coffins and/or coffin-imitating structures, often on several horizons, one above another (Fig. 2).

¹⁰ Jonaitis, Kaplūnaitė 2020.

¹¹ In 2005 a field evaluation was conducted there (Sarcevičius 2006), preceded by excavations in 2006–2007, 2009–2011, 2012, and 2014 (Jonaitis 2009; 2018; Kaplūnaitė 2014; 2016).

¹² Jonaitis, Kaplūnaitė 2020.

¹³ Jonaitis, Kaplūnaitė 2020, 122.



Fig. 2. A moment in the investigation of the Bokšto St. cemetery. Building 3, room 5 (photo taken from the north by R. Jonaitis).

The cemetery is distinguished by sparse but exceptionally ornate grave goods, i.e. skillfully made jewellery, most of which is typical of Slavs rather than Lithuanians, but with some local features. This jewellery reflects both cultural influences and immigration, while its presence shows the spread of fashion. Of the discovered artefacts, the 21 chaplets (headdress accessories in the form of diadems, made of metal plates, sometimes with beads), the majority of them silver and gilded, stand out for their ornateness¹⁴ (Figs 3–6), as do the various types of rings: bands, signet rings, and those with a braided head, glass stones, wide heads, or a channel head¹⁵ (Fig. 7). Until the 13th century, the chaplet tradition was unknown in Lithuania. Such ornate 13th–14th-century chaplets have been discovered in Lithuania primarily in the Kernavė-Kriveikiškis¹⁶ and Vilnius's Bokšto St. urban cemeteries.¹⁷ The tradition of making chaplets and the fashion of wearing them probably arrived in Lithuanian territory from the lands of Galicia and Volhynia together with the first Orthodox Christians.¹⁸ Later, after the introduction of Christianity, they spread throughout ethnic Lithuania (but only items of inferior quality). Rings with glass stones, six of which were found in the Bokšto St. cemetery, also stand out for their unique production. Similar items have been found in the Kernavė-Kriveikiškis cem-



Fig. 3. Chaplet (silver and tin alloy, gilded). Grave no. 15 (photos by A. Blažys).

etery¹⁹ and at least one is known from Jatvingian cemeteries.²⁰ Rings of this type are local production, i.e. local jewellery characteristic of east Lithuania.²¹ According to Gintautas Vėlius, who excavated the Kernavė-Kriveikiškis cemetery, the artisan who made these rings was familiar with the Slavic 'school' of jewellery-making.²² He is likely to have not been a local.

The Bokšto St. cemetery dates to the last third of the 13th – early 15th centuries, as evidenced by the material as a whole, the stratigraphy, and the radiocarbon data.²³ Thus, it began to be used at least a century before Lithuania's official Catholic baptism in 1387. Based on

¹⁴ Jonaitis, Kaplūnaitė 2020, 205.

¹⁵ Jonaitis, Kaplūnaitė 2020, 229.

¹⁶ Kernavė-Kriveikiškis and Vilnius's Bokšto St. cemeteries are often compared due to the similarity of their material. The Kriveikiškis cemetery in Kernavė, Lithuania's first capital, is slightly earlier than the Bokšto St. cemetery but also has inhumations, predominantly east–west-oriented. Kernavė's researchers posit that these are Jatvingian burials (Luchtanas, Vėlius 1996; Vėlius 2005; 2009), other researchers – that they could

be Orthodox Christian burials (Zabiela 1998; Dubonis 2009; Jonaitis, Kaplūnaitė 2020).

¹⁷ Jonaitis, Kaplūnaitė 2020, 216.

¹⁸ Jonaitis, Kaplūnaitė 2020, 216.

¹⁹ Vėlius 2005.

²⁰ Kviatkovskaja 1998.

²¹ Jonaitis, Kaplūnaitė 2020, 232.

²² Vėlius 2005, 73.

²³ 27 samples were dated (Jonaitis, Kaplūnaitė 2020, 261–268).



Fig. 4. Chaplet (silver and tin alloy, gilded). Grave no. 58 (photos by A. Blažys).

the knowledge from historical sources and information provided by archaeological material, it is thought that Vilnius's Orthodox community, which had its own suburb, called *Civitas Ruthenica* in the written sources, buried its dead there. This community was located in the eastern part of present-day Vilnius Old Town, by the roads leading to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania's eastern Ruthenian lands.²⁴ The Ruthenians, like the pagans, were vassals of the grand dukes. In addition, some of those buried in the cemetery may have been Vilnius-born descendants of immigrants, still others – local pagans who had adopted the Orthodox faith.

The Orthodox community in pagan Vilnius

To better understand the Bokšto St. cemetery, it is important to explore Vilnius's Orthodox community in



Fig. 5. Chaplet (silver, gilded). Grave no. 106 (photos by A. Blažys, I. Kaplūnaitė).

more detail, paying special attention to the circumstances under which it emerged and how the city's other, pagan residents saw it, questions an archaeological analysis and the historical context can shed some light on.

During the period under discussion, Lithuania lay between two branches of Christianity: Catholic in the West and Orthodox in the East. Its relationship with the Catholics, particularly with the Teutonic Order seated in Poland, was far from friendly. The Crusaders and their

²⁴ The part of Vilnius inhabited by Orthodox Christians is presented in detail in the dissertation of one of the authors of this monograph (Jonaitis 2013).



Fig. 6. Chaplet (silver, gilded; glass beads). Grave no. 428 (photo by A. Blažys).

northern branch, the Brothers of the Sword, were inclined to 'baptise' pagans with 'fire and sword'.²⁵ Meanwhile, some Ruthenians had become vassals of Lithuania's grand dukes when lands inhabited by Orthodox Christians were annexed during the southeast expansion of the second half of the 13th century.²⁶ Favourable conditions for immigrants to settle had always existed, especially in newly forming cities, but Lithuania encouraged even greater immigration from the second half of the 13th century after the urban development processes picked up.

Although it has been emphasized that at the state level, Lithuania's grand dukes primarily sought Catholic baptism, Orthodoxy perhaps being seen by them as the less attractive religion of their conquered subjects,²⁷ nevertheless, it is thought that the latter denomination was viewed more favourably by ordinary denizens.²⁸ For example, in the mid-14th century Orthodox priest Nestor was free to perform his rites in the presence of the ruler and in the city itself.²⁹ What is more, the oldest stratum of Lithuanian Christian terms is said to consist of borrowings from Ruthenian.³⁰ Nevertheless, it must be pointed out that Orthodox Christians did not come to Vilnius due to the country's Christianization (just as Catholics were not invited for that reason). The settling of Christians in pagan Vilnius should be connected with the need to raise the state's economy, trade, and military capability levels, not the spread of faith.³¹

In the last decades of the 13th and first decades of the 14th centuries, Vilnius became hugely attractive for settlers. The closeness of the grand duke's court must have been especially enticing for Ruthenian merchants and artisans due to the new opportunities it offered them. The rulers themselves were definitely interested in the presence of skilled craftsmen and the possibility of easy access to luxury goods, quality and innovation having probably always been in greatest demand in the immediate vicinity



Fig. 7. Examples of rings from the Bokšto St. Cemetery: 1 – grave no. 21 (silver, gilded); 2–3 – grave no. 58 (silver); 4 – grave no. 76 (silver); 5 – grave no. 92 (silver, enamel); 6 – grave no. 106 (silver) (photos by A. Baltėnas).

²⁵ In fact, the peaceful Catholic missions, their activities in the still pagan country, and the heightened need for Catholics as skilled workers and long-distance trade representatives have recently been stressed ever more heavily (e.g. Baronas *et al.* 2011, 290).

²⁶ Already circa the 12th century some of the Slavic colonized lands (Vaukavysk, Slonim, Novogrudok) had been annexed by

Lithuania. Lithuania's grand dukes continued this tradition in the 13th–14th centuries (Baronas, Rowell 2015, 150–158).

²⁷ Baronas, Rowell 2015, 149–174.

²⁸ Nikžentaitis 1996, 18–26.

²⁹ Baronas 2004, 162.

³⁰ Gudavičius 1999, 187.

³¹ Jonaitis, Kaplūnaitė 2020, 284.

of a ruler. Alongside the chance for profit, less desirable reasons, such as captivity, must have also existed.³² In addition, given the situation at the time and the constant demand for military forces, it is understandable that warriors were needed,³³ creating another potential reason to settle in Vilnius: possible service in the grand duke's army.³⁴ Nevertheless, the most desirable immigrant element, like in many cities, must have admittedly been merchants and craftsmen who brought with them goods and know-how.³⁵

As is typical for a city, Vilnius had been a multicultural entity from the very beginning. Lithuania's grand dukes understood the benefits of immigrants for the city's economic and trade situation, regardless of their religion, and therefore invited them to the developing Vilnius and the surrounding areas.³⁶ In order for Christians to go to a foreign city, however, they needed certain security guarantees and the opportunity to profess their faith, which was a vital part of everyday mediaeval life.

It is possible to talk about mediaeval Vilnius as an auspicious place in this last regard. The city allowed several different communities to live partly together, partly separately: the zoning of territories has been noticeable in Vilnius from the very beginning of its development, the topographic situation being very favourable for this (Fig. 8). At the turn of the 14th century, the zoning had already taken place, allowing the co-existence of three communities: pagan, Orthodox, and Catholic. Such a co-habitation by members of different faiths in a single city is distinctive of not just Vilnius, but also, and especially, of border areas. It can be said that Central and Eastern Europeans have always lived with the idea of a diversity of religious rituals³⁷ as they were forced to learn to maintain ties with people of different faiths.

In the case of Vilnius, as well as the whole of Lithuania, as was already mentioned, Christians were not desired as missionaries or spreaders of religion.³⁸ Nor did they settle there as colonists.³⁹ It can be said that the case of Vilnius was more like a situation of a mixed city being created, where no exceptional communities existed, all of them participating in the city's life. Other examples of this can be seen in Polish cities like Kraków, where Poles lived beside Germans and Jews,⁴⁰ and Lviv (Ukraine), inhabited by Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Muslims (Tatars), and



Fig. 8. Vilnius's 14th-century zones: 1 – Gediminas Hill (or the Upper Castle); 2 – The Crooked Castle (or Curvum Castrum); 3 – The Lower Castle (including the earliest Catholic mission); 4 – Pagans; 5 – Civitas Rutenica; 6 – German Town (Google Earth Pro Map modified by I. Kaplūnaitė).

Jews.⁴¹ It should be noted, however, that a Christian denomination was already established in Poland, Hungary, and Ukraine, while Vilnius was still ruled by pagan grand dukes at that time. This situation must have led to a slightly different relationship between the three communities and affected the situation in the city.

Due to this coexistence of three religions, mediaeval Vilnius is often considered a tolerant city. No archaeological data or historical sources suggest any conflicts occurred between these communities in pagan Vilnius. One cannot talk about any fortification of the Christian-inhabited area or a need on the part of the groups to defend themselves from one another. While it can be noted

³² Baronas 2004, 163.

³³ The Lithuanian rulers' bid to supply their military forces was successful (Baronas 2014, 59).

³⁴ Jonaitis, Kaplūnaitė 2020, 285.

³⁵ Jonaitis, Kaplūnaitė 2020, 285

³⁶ Cf. e.g. the letters of the Grand Duke Gediminas of Lithuania, in which he invites Westerners to Vilnius (Gedimino laiškai 2003).

³⁷ Crăciun, Fulton 2011, 11.

³⁸ This situation was more common in the Scandinavian countries (e.g. Urbańczyk 2003).

³⁹ Unlike in present-day Latvia (known as Livonia), which was occupied by the Teutonic Order (Selart 2009).

⁴⁰ For more on the multinational nature of mediaeval Polish cities, see Sowina 2007.

⁴¹ Hrytsak 2000, 50.

that no conflicts have been recorded between the communities, nor have any signs of friendship. One can assume that tolerance and a more pragmatic approach prevailed.

That one Christian community, the Orthodox, was able to freely profess their faith in the still pagan city is also shown by the material in the Bokšto St. cemetery. As was previously mentioned, the cemetery is distinguished by all the features of Christian burial rites.⁴²

The cemetery as a 'social mirror' of the community

By burying their dead in the cemetery in accordance with their traditions, members of the Orthodox community were able to express their adherence to the Christian faith which separated them from the pagans. But an analysis of the various burial rite features, elements, grave structures, cemetery layout, and the geography shows not only their religious beliefs but also the community's special internal features, social organization, social relationships, and even family institutions, etc. For example, it has been noted in historiography that if men were buried separately from the women in a cemetery, the situation of men and women was likely to have been very unequal in that community.⁴³ In such cases, the position of women was generally low. In addition, complex grave good placement traditions are thought to be more characteristic of societies with an unstable social hierarchy.⁴⁴ Thus, in order to follow the reflections of social organization at a burial site, it is necessary to examine both the burial rite features in a broad sense and the location and interrelationships of the burials.

However, even when examining a cemetery as a community's social arena, a place of activity, one cannot stray far from the religious aspect, since religion influenced mediaeval burial rite traditions as well as everyday life to an exceptional extent. As noted, although the immortality of the soul was emphasized, a large proportion of believers were enthralled by the literal vision of the body's resurrection,⁴⁵ which left its mark on funeral rituals and on preparing the body for eternal life. A direct, visible continuum existed between the body in the grave and the soul in the purgatory,⁴⁶ the burial ritual and body's preparation being an attempt to preserve the

gender, social, and other differences for all eternity.⁴⁷ The Christian worldview modified the older burial customs. For example, while earlier traditions focused on luxurious grave structures and grave goods, Christianity burial rites stressed modesty and simplicity. Thus, in analyzing Christian burials, it is important to note that the absence of grave goods or their modesty no longer speaks to a person's social position or family wealth, the simplicity of a grave's structure even perhaps symbolizing the societally desirable trait of great faith. Nevertheless, even where the burial rites had been simplified and equalized, other ways were sought to emphasize a person's uniqueness and legacy. A church cemetery's structure is thought to reflect the community's social relations.⁴⁸ For example, people of higher status are buried closer to the church. Thus, a burial site can often be examined as a place where social and/or political power is demonstrated through various symbols.⁴⁹ Other burial rite features can also provide knowledge about the community's social structure, ties, and age group differences.

A cemetery, then, can be considered the place a community consciously designated for the 'disposal' of the dead⁵⁰ but in addition to this practical purpose, it also had a symbolic and social significance – and for that reason was an integral part of the landscape. In some traditions, burial sites were hidden from outside eyes, in others they were more on display. Christianity is characterized by a 'closer' relationship between the living and the dead.⁵¹ In cities, a cemetery's location can show where the urban centre/periphery was during the time it was used and what the directions of growth were. For Christianity, as for most other religions, the presence of water near the burial site was significant, and cemeteries were often established on hills at picturesque locations.

Therefore, the Bokšto St. cemetery must be assessed in the whole context of Vilnius by taking into account the city's topography. It was found that the cemetery's location and boundaries were greatly influenced by the natural conditions and terrain. The investigated plot is on the east side of present-day Vilnius Old Town, on one of the terraces in the upper part of the amphitheatre.⁵² The cemetery is located in a picturesque area in a square right next to the top of the steep slopes of River Vilnia, just 40–70 m west of the current riverbed.⁵³ Its location on Bokšto St. is also significant in respect to the city

⁴² Jonaitis, Kaplūnaitė 2020, 111–192; Kaplūnaitė 2021, 85–92.

⁴³ Härke 2001, 26.

⁴⁴ Härke 2001, 24–25.

⁴⁵ Bynum 1995, xviii.

⁴⁶ Gilchrist 2015.

⁴⁷ Bynum thoroughly examines bodily resurrection and Western Christianity's attitude to it (Bynum 1995).

⁴⁸ Jonsson 2009, 119.

⁴⁹ Härke 2001, 9.

⁵⁰ Härke 2001, 11.

⁵¹ Zadora-Rio 2003, 7.

⁵² For more information on Vilnius's historical landscape, see Morkūnaitė 2010.

⁵³ During the period of the cemetery's use the river was even closer, flowing at the site of present-day Maironis Street (cf. Valionienė 2019, 276–297, figs 30–40).

itself. The burial site began to be used during the founding of Vilnius in the last decades of the 13th century. Initially, it was on the city's periphery, about 600 m southeast of the castle grounds, but within a few decades the city was approaching it. Nevertheless, from the very beginning the castle grounds and the so-called *Curvum Castrum*, the earliest inhabited parts of Vilnius, enjoyed easy access to the burial site⁵⁴ via one of the city's earliest streets, which intersected both local and intercity roads.⁵⁵ This placement allows one to hypothesize about the Orthodox community's situation in the city. The cemetery's location was chosen to be convenient, scenic, and allowing for sufficiently easy expansion. There is no reason to talk about any need to hide the cemetery from unfriendly eyes, which seems to demonstrate that no hostile attitude existed towards the city's Orthodox Christians, who were able to freely demonstrate their faith.

When investigating a community that once used a cemetery, great emphasis is often placed on the religious building. The social status, property, sex, and age of the interred individuals is judged on the basis of the geography of the graves, i.e. their place in relation to the building (inside it or in the adjacent graveyard and in the latter case on which side of it).⁵⁶ But this poses a problem in our case because no building was found in the Bokšto St. cemetery and perhaps none ever existed.⁵⁷ It is, therefore, impossible to study the community's social structure like in churchyard cemeteries, i.e. by considering a grave's location relative to the temple, or to say which part of the cemetery could have been symbolically considered more prestigious. It is possible, however, to study the relationships between the graves, i.e. their position in respect to one another, which allows for discussing possible differences in social status, gender, and age as well as the principle of family burials.

An analysis of the cemetery's layout identified the highest burial intensity in the central and southeast parts (Fig. 1), where the burials were very close to one another, and even occurring one above another. This concentration should be associated with the cemetery's likely earliest parts. On the periphery, meanwhile, the numbers decline and the distances between graves grow greater. In the Kernavė-Kriveikiškis cemetery, a certain regularity was established: the closer to the cemetery's centre,

the older the buried individuals.⁵⁸ According to Vėlius, who investigated the Kriveikiškis cemetery, its central part could have been understood as the prerogative of the community's more deserving elderly members.⁵⁹ However, no such regularity has been established on Bokšto St.: children, infant, and even newborn burials have been found near adults throughout the cemetery. Thus, it is impossible to speak about a more pronounced differentiation of the community according to the age of the deceased, or at least about reflections of such a distribution in the burial layout.

Another element that emerged in the layout of the Bokšto St. cemetery is the presence of some north-south-oriented rows of graves (Fig. 1), numbering from a few burials to a dozen or even several dozen. As these rows have an almost identical direction and run parallel to one another, the cemetery must have had a common system and been at least somewhat planned, which suggests that it was regulated and supervised, with gaps, i.e. passages or tracks, left between the graves. In addition, the presence of these neat rows attests that some sort of marking existed on the ground's surface.⁶⁰ In fact, there are instances where the burials disturbed one another. We think that this may have occurred due to the site's relatively long use (at least 150 years) and the resulting lack of space, or, for example, the desire to bury relatives nearby, like in modern cemeteries.

Further examination of this cemetery's reflection of social structure requires a discussion of multiple burials in the same pit or gravesite. Graves were repeatedly found that contained two (in some cases three) individuals, sometimes with a layer of soil between the burials, showing that they had been made at different times, and sometimes with the burials almost directly above one another, other times with a greater offset and a only partial overlapping. Instances were also identified where the remains lay side-by-side, presumably in the same grave, or a group of several burials lay beside and/or atop one another. Most of such multiple burials were found in the oldest part of the cemetery.

The cemetery has many instances where the remains of two or more individuals are very close to one another, i.e. next to each other at the same or different depths, but without disturbing one another. In other words, the

⁵⁴ Cf. Valionienė 2019, 152–155.

⁵⁵ For a reconstruction of the road network, see Valionienė 2019, 93–102, 150–155.

⁵⁶ For example, in churchyard cemeteries grave concentrations are usually found in more 'prestigious' locations (Dawes, Magilton 1980, 10).

⁵⁷ It has been speculated that the cemetery may have been beside the Orthodox Church of the Nativity, but no excavation has

found any trace of it; it is possible that the cemetery did not belong to a specific church and the cemetery plot was consecrated due to its adjacency to other nearby churches (Jonaitis, Kaplūnaitė 2020, 109–110).

⁵⁸ Vėlius 2005, 34.

⁵⁹ Vėlius 2005, 34.

⁶⁰ Conversely, if a chaotic arrangement is seen, no permanent signs probably existed on the ground's surface (Kenzler 2015, 155).



Fig. 9. A group of graves: no. 235. Adolescent (15–18 years of age); no. 244. Child (6–10); no. 245. Child (5–9); no. 246. Male (30–39); no. 256. Child (4–6) (photo by I. Kaplūnaitė).

nearby grave must have been known and an effort been made not to disturb it. Their analysis in terms of age and sex revealed no regularities, i.e. the individuals were the same or different sexes and of various age group combinations. We assume that such graves could contain a whole family or several of its members (Fig. 9), like in modern cemeteries. Such burials can be considered a reflection of kinship and family organization where the dead of one immediate or extended family are buried at one gravesite. An example from this cemetery is a group of four burials (nos 213, 214, 215 and 222) that was found in one probable gravesite: a 30–39-year-old male, 15–20 cm above his abdomen the bones of a newborn, to his right and at a similar depth a female slightly over the age of 50, and above her a 30–39-year-old female. Since their DNA was not tested, it can only be hypothesized that a family: a husband, a wife, an infant, and an elderly woman, perhaps the mother of one of the spouses, had been interred there in a single gravesite.

The cemetery has graves where the bones of a second person, usually a child or newborn, are found beside the primary occupant (Fig. 10). The hypothesis in such cases is that this little member of the community was buried together with a parent (or grandparent?). In at least some cases, this could perhaps be a mother who died in childbirth and her newborn. Children, possibly siblings, have also been found buried together in such double graves.

Burial in the same grave pit or gravesite not only reflects the institution of the family or reveals strong kin-

ship ties, but is also associated with the Christian burial. The desire to be buried only in consecrated ground leads to a lack of space, especially in cities, and results in burials on several horizons.⁶¹ Thus, it must be acknowledged that the identification of family burials can sometimes be questionable as the burials in the cemetery were fairly dense and so at least some could have simply accidentally ended up near one another. Conversely, close relatives might not have been buried close together. DNA testing would be needed for a more in-depth analysis.

The understanding of the community behind a burial site is supplemented by an analysis of child burials, of which the Bokšto St. cemetery has a large number (totalling 26% of all the burials): various-aged children up to age 14, infants, and even newborns. It has been noted that these are scattered throughout the cemetery, so the assumption was made that minors were buried beside their parents or other loved ones. It is also especially important that such burials are identical to those of adults, at least in respect to archaeologically detectable elements.⁶² This implies that the investigated community adhered to the Christian burial rite principle that children, especially older ones, are considered full members of the community.

Another notable feature of mediaeval cemeteries is a concentration of child burials, often on one side of the churchyard.⁶³ The Bokšto St. cemetery also has several more or less concentrated groups of such child burials. However, in every case adult burials occur among these

⁶¹ Buko 2008, 398.

⁶² The funeral liturgy, which is not reflected in the archaeological material, could have differed.

⁶³ For example, it was noted that in mediaeval England the western part of a church or churchyard was more often allocated for child burials (Gilchrist 2012, 206).



Fig. 10. Burials nos 405 (infant) and 408 (adult male) (photo by R. Jonaitis).

graves, so it is impossible to say that the child burial groups are spatially separated. These concentrations are perhaps connected with simultaneous deaths or the burial of close relatives.

Several remote burial concentrations provided interesting insights into the life of the community that left the cemetery. A short distance from the cemetery's main area, which is located at the top of a slope, another 17 burials were discovered on the slope itself and even below it. These mostly contained individuals over the age of 40 and therefore already quite mature. Many of them have been diagnosed with various fractures, bruises, inflammations, and extremely poor teeth.⁶⁴ It is hypothesized that these people were deliberately buried on one side as outcasts, e.g. suicides, criminals, and the unbaptised. It is known that Christian tradition forbade the burying of criminals in churchyards and community cemeteries, other places having been designated for their burial.⁶⁵ Such people are, in some cases recorded throughout Christian Europe, buried in a kneeling position with their hands bound and with their heads cut off.⁶⁶ It must be said that the burials we discuss bear the same burial rite features as those in the main part, the principal difference being their more remote location and that some lack an east-west orientation.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, the assumption cannot be rejected that these individuals had, for some reason, been pushed out of the community, their more remote burial site being an expression of that.

Grave goods are distinguished in archaeology as one of the most frequently investigated elements in terms of the status of the dead. But, as has already been mentioned, they are no longer a major source of information in Christian burial rites, because the placement of grave goods is not typical of this religion. Here, the grave goods are usually only ornaments, devotional items, and dress accessories. Grave goods were discovered in 53 of the 537 burials in the Bokšto St. cemetery, i.e. in 10% of cases. Jewellery predominated: chaplet (diadem) plates, earrings, temple ornaments (Fig. 11), necklaces, bracelets, and various types of rings. As mentioned above, some of the finds are quite exceptional and of good quality. Most of the chaplets are made of gilded silver and tin alloy (Figs 3–6). The rings are usually made of silver (Figs 7: 2–6), one was gilded (Fig. 7: 1). Some of the jewellery has analogues in material from Lithuania, Ukraine, Belarus and Russia, while others are unique. For example, no analogue was found for the ring (grave no. 21) which was made of silver, gilded by amalgam (Fig. 7: 1).

Jewellery items were the main finds in female burials. Only three small knives, symbolic keys, and a key for a cylinder lock were additionally found in the burials of women of all ages. It needs to be noted that knives were typical only of female burials in the Bokšto St. cemetery. Symbolically, a knife, a sharp object, could have been intended to protect the dead (or protect oneself from the dead?). The custom of burying an unbaptized child

⁶⁴ For the bioarchaeological investigation of the remains, see the appendix written by Kozakaitė, Brindzaitė, Miliauskienė, and Jankauskas in the Bokšto St. cemetery monograph (Jonaitis, Kaplūnaitė, 2020, 494–535).

⁶⁵ Riisøy 2015, 52.

⁶⁶ Riisøy 2015, 52.

⁶⁷ Eight burials were oriented N–S, three S–N, two NW–SE, and one SW–NE (Jonaitis, Kaplūnaitė 2020, 169).



Fig. 11. Temple ornament (silver, gilded). Grave no. 179 (photo by A. Blažys).

with a knife in order to protect him/her from evil was established in an Orthodox cemetery in SE Estonia.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, both there and in the Bokšto St. cemetery, women were more often buried with knives.⁶⁹ Such knives were small, being most likely used in everyday activities and in the home.

After analyzing the grave goods discovered in the Bokšto St. cemetery, another rule became clear: jewellery (rings and chaplets) predominate in the burials of adult women, even those who were already quite mature⁷⁰ (often over 40 or even 50 years of age). Ornaments are, in their turn, more often discovered in female child burials, which allows one to speculate that not only was the status of a girl, an expectant mother, important to the community that buried their dead in the cemetery, so, too, was that of an already mature woman. Only seven grave good finds were discovered in male burials: rings, belt elements, pouch remnants, and a brooch fragment. This should probably be associated with the community's religious affiliation: weapons and tools no longer being placed in Christian graves. It must be said that, like in the female burials, almost all of the males buried with the finds are older, aged 35–45. Perhaps the presence of grave goods in their burials can be associated with a better social or pecuniary status? The finds, however, are too rare to support such an assumption. As for the child burials, it should be noted that both crosses found in the cemetery were in the graves of small children. Perhaps the crosses could be understood as additional protection for the smallest and weakest individuals, the newly baptized?

The analysis of the distribution of grave goods in the cemetery has shown them to be slightly more common in its earliest, central part, the grave goods in the peripheral burials being found in smaller numbers and dating to the post-mid-14th century period. Although some of the burials with jewellery are more closely concentrated, this is likely to be a demonstration of chronology rather than social differences or economic status, namely of jewellery being more common in chronologically earlier graves. In addition, burials of individuals of both sexes without any grave goods are found beside the richer burials with grave goods.

The investigation of other burial rite elements did not reveal any obvious manifestations of social status or power in the cemetery. It must be emphasized once again that all of the burial rite features traditionally associated with Christianity predominate here: east–west-oriented grave pit burials in an extended position with the hands usually on the chest or abdomen, few grave goods, and sometimes several burial horizons. In some cases, wooden constructions were used: planks, not fastened with nails, but placed around, above, and under the body.⁷¹

Therefore, in summarizing the Bokšto St. cemetery data, it can be said that it was extremely difficult to identify possible manifestations of social status, power, and wealth, as no clear-cut features identified the burials of more affluent individuals who were perhaps more influential in the community's daily life. The necropolis contains no crypts (the appearance of which is more characteristic of a later period, the 15th century) or luxuriously furnished graves, graves with wooden structures being common throughout the cemetery and typical of both sexes of all ages. The investigation was complicated by the cemetery's lack of an established connection with any religious building. Thus, it is impossible to talk about elite graves or more prestigious locations. It should be emphasized that the burials display regularity in respect to gender or age group, male and female burials being evenly distributed throughout, found side by side and also together with child burials. All in all, no noticeable differences occurred between the sexes and age groups, at least in the choice of grave location.

The burial analysis was supplemented by anthropological data, which established that the adult-child ratio in the Bokšto St. cemetery corresponds to the classical mortality model structure, where children comprise about a third of all deaths and the male-female ratio is close to 1:1.⁷² It can be said that the community corresponds

⁶⁸ Mägi 2002, 132.

⁶⁹ Four females: three adult and one adolescent of indeterminate age were interred with knives (Jonaitis, Kaplūnaitė 2020, 252, tab. 3).

⁷⁰ A total of 26 rings, 12 chaplets, and three earrings were found in female burials (Jonaitis, Kaplūnaitė 2020, 252, tab. 3).

⁷¹ Traces of planks were discovered in about a quarter of the burials (Jonaitis, Kaplūnaitė 2020, 146).

⁷² Jonaitis, Kaplūnaitė 2020, Appendix 2, 500.

to the traditional notions of mediaeval urban life: many of the studied individuals showed signs of malnutrition (anemia, scurvy), various infectious diseases, poor oral hygiene, trauma, fractures, and even violent incidents.⁷³

This situation allows for the assumption to be made that the community that buried its dead in the cemetery may have been fairly homogeneous in societal terms. While some graves stand out for their uniquely high-quality jewellery finds, they are not distinguished by any other burial features, burial material or location within the cemetery. Therefore, there is not enough data to talk about possible 'elite' graves. Perhaps burials with such finds may be associated with richer burghers. However, their number is very small.

There was also no clear demonstration of economic power. Therefore, one can probably talk about a group of ordinary citizens, united by one faith, and with minor social stratification. As is known from the historical context, the Orthodox Christians who settled in early Vilnius must have been mostly ordinary people and craftsmen, which is reflected in the Bokšto St. cemetery.

Conclusion

The Bokšto St. Cemetery was a Christian burial site in Vilnius where the Orthodox community in this pagan city was able to express its religious faith by burying its dead in accordance with this religion's traditions. In examining the cemetery as a reflection of this community, it must be stated that it is this religious affiliation that is the most pronounced element: the analysis revealed almost none more prominent differences in social and economic status, gender, and age. The burial site reflects a community of ordinary citizens and is characterized by a rather unified burial style, in which differences are not readily obvious. Several female graves with high-quality jewellery – rings and gilded silver chaplets – could be associated rather with richer burghers than nobility. Individuals of different genders and ages were buried side by side and so the principle of family burial was probably employed.

Of course, the status differences may have been more pronounced during the funeral, perhaps having been reflected in the liturgy or the ceremony itself. However, without written sources, it is impossible to talk about

such elements as preparing the body for eternal life, saying goodbye to the dead in the home, praying, escorting the body to the cemetery, etc. Archaeology is able to reflect only that part of the former traditions that has left physical traces.

Nevertheless, some insights can be made about the community that buried its dead in the Bokšto St. cemetery and its traditions. It was determined that the cemetery's archaeologically visible burial rite features and elements are very similar in the burials of individuals of all ages and genders. The same burial orientation was identified and the same grave elements were found. Thus, the burial of the dead used the same tradition, following at least some of the same rituals that were uniform for men, women, adolescents, and children. In addition, not only child but also infant and newborn burials are archaeologically indistinct from adult burials, a feature primarily associated with Christian traditions. It should also be noted that the relatively richer burials (where jewellery was found) do not differ in their construction from any of the others, i.e. it was not established that burials containing grave goods are exceptional in any other way. All of this suggests that burial construction in the community in question did not depend on the status of the deceased (or his/her relatives), a situation reflecting the attitude introduced by Christianity where the modesty of a grave symbolizes great faith rather than great poverty. On the other hand, it is possible to speculate that the community that buried its dead here was fairly uniform in its composition and status, even if, judging by the exclusive jewellery, it may have included several more affluent burgher families.

The uniformity of the burial rite tradition as well as the orderliness of the cemetery's layout (rows of graves with a fairly precise orientation) allow for the assumption to be made that burial there was regulated, with someone supervising the cemetery and the burial procedures. In the absence of written sources containing information about the first Christian cemeteries in Vilnius, it is impossible to identify things not reflected in archaeology, e.g. the relationships between the families buried in the cemetery, whether they cooperated in conducting burials, who oversaw the burial arrangements, etc. It is, however, known that Vilnius had Orthodox churches and priests who may have ensured that a uniform funeral liturgy was followed.⁷⁴

⁷³ Jonaitis, Kaplūnaitė 2020, Appendix 2, 494–535.

⁷⁴ In Poland the clergy have been obligated since the 13th century to participate in the burial process and to oversee the observance of the ritual (Buko 2008, 399).

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