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## CULTURAL MONOLITH OR MOSAIC OF DIVERSITY? A CONTRIBUTION TO THE STUDY OF FUNERARY PRACTICES ON THE SOUTH-WESTERN FRINGE OF OLD PRUSSIAN TERRITORY<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

For many years, research on the funerary practices of early medieval Old Prussians has focused almost exclusively on evidence from the Sambian Peninsula. Recent discoveries, however, have provided a wealth of new data that enabled the first comprehensive analyses of Yatvingian burial customs. The present article reviews the current state of knowledge concerning early medieval cemeteries in the south-western Old Prussian lands, i.e., in Pomesania. Published studies and archival records pertaining to eight burial sites were collated and examined.

The analysis indicates that cremation was the prevailing rite, performed in two principal types of pit graves: standard circular pits and large, several-metre-long fea-

tures. Occasional inhumations are most likely linked to the process of Christianization. Cemeteries were almost invariably established near water. Recurrent characteristics include stone constructions, a relative paucity of metal grave goods, and frequent evidence for food offerings, indicated by small, wide-mouthed vessels and burnt animal bones.

The study demonstrates that early medieval Old Prussian mortuary practices were quite diverse. In each region where sources permit meaningful analysis, Sambia, Yatvingia, and Pomesania, the burial rite, while sharing several fundamental traits such as cremation and the presence of collective graves, displays distinctive regional features.

**Keywords:** Old Prussians, early medieval period, funerary rites, cremation, Pomesania

For many years, reconstructions of early medieval Old Prussian funerary customs have been based almost exclusively on archaeological evidence from the Sambian Peninsula. This focus results from several factors, the most significant of which is the pronounced imbalance in the number of recorded sites (Fig. 1).<sup>2</sup> The disparity concerns every category of site, but is most striking in the case of burials. Although Sambia occupies only ca.

8 per cent of the entire Old Prussian territory, roughly 31 per cent of all Old Prussian archaeological sites are located there, and fully one-half of these are cemeteries.

Not only are Sambian sites the most numerous; they are also the best studied.<sup>3</sup> Although a comprehensive synthesis of Sambian archaeology in the early Middle Ages is still lacking, the available, if scattered, data permit several general observations. Sambian cemeteries are rich: they

<sup>1</sup> Funerary practices in early medieval societies have long been among Professor Joanna Kalaga's research interests, and I have had the good fortune of working under her supervision on my doctoral dissertation concerning the Yatvingian cemetery at Szurpiły. I hope that this article, examining burial customs from a quite different corner of Prussia, will prove a stimulating read for Professor Kalaga.

<sup>2</sup> The map compiles all documented sites that can be dated to the period between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. A complete

catalogue of Old Prussian sites from this era is currently being prepared by the author. The map presented in this article may undergo minor adjustments before final publication, but these will not affect any information essential to the discussion here.

<sup>3</sup> Heydeck 1890; Hollack 1893; 1908a, 172–187; 1914; Bezenberger 1914; Kulakov 1990; Pronin *et al.* 2006; Wróblewski 2006; Kulakov 2007; 2016; Chylińska-Frühboes 2024, 376–93; Jahn, Ibsen 2024.

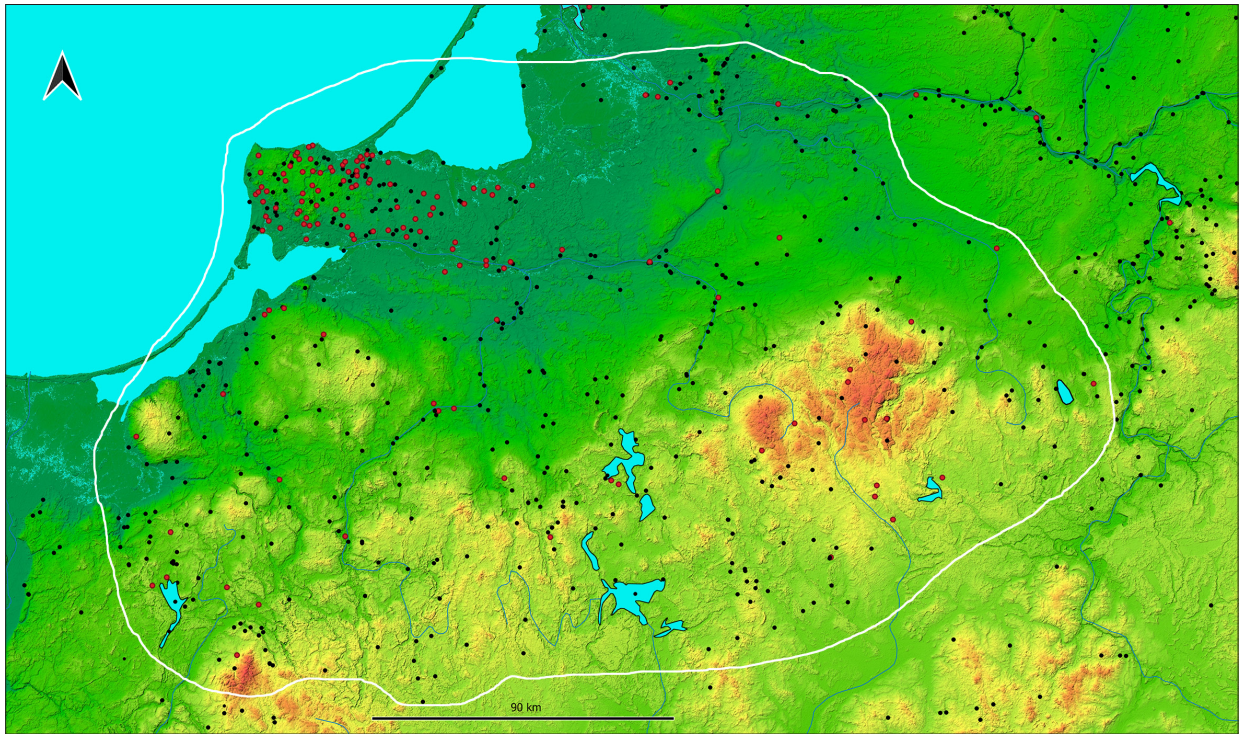


Fig. 1. Sites dated to the 10<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> centuries. The outline marks the approximate extent of Prussian lands (compiled by L. Jończyk).

usually contain several hundred human and horse burials furnished with numerous dress fittings, weapons, equestrian gear, ornaments, tools, and ceramic vessels. Almost all graves are cremation pits, yet they display considerable internal diversity. One common form is the joint burial of human and horse remains: an unburnt horse was laid in the grave pit first, with the cremated human remains deposited above it. Both man and animal were interred together with grave goods. Another category is the so-called *Aschenplatz* burial. The term, employed by German researchers before the Second World War but never formally defined, denotes collective burials extraordinarily rich in grave goods, primarily weapons and riding equipment. One of the most detailed descriptions appears in Otto Tischler's report on the cemetery at Gross Friedrichsberg (Königsberg district, now within the city limits of Kaliningrad).<sup>4</sup> He mentions a layer of ash (*Aschen-Schicht*) containing scattered burned bones and assorted artefacts belonging to a warrior-merchant, as well as complete ceramic vessels. Comparable *Aschenplatz*-type features have also been documented in modern excavations.<sup>5</sup>

The scale of Sambian wealth is illustrated by the fact that the Berlin *Prussia Sammlung*, the surviving por-

tion of the former *Prussia Museum* collections, contains more than 1,300 stirrups;<sup>6</sup> the original assemblage must have been even larger, since part of it was lost during the Second World War.

Elsewhere in Prussia, the situation is quite different: cemeteries constitute barely 10 per cent of all known sites, the majority being hillforts, followed by settlements. Burial grounds are few and poorly understood. As recently as twenty years ago, archaeologists believed that 'interior' Old Prussians disposed of their dead in ways undetectable by archaeological methods.<sup>7</sup> Only relatively recently, thanks to the large-scale use of metal detectors, have cemeteries begun to be discovered in Yatvingia. It has now become clear that the Yatvingians cremated their dead and either left the entire pyre deposit in situ or transferred it intact to the place of burial. What survives today are shallow scatters of burnt human bone, grave goods, and charcoal lying just beneath the surface. In most cases, these elements are mixed, and only occasionally can a single individual burial be isolated. Excavations at the cemeteries of Szurpiły (Suwałki district), Krukówek (Suwałki district), and Pijawne Polskie (Augustów district), complemented by surface surveys at Niemcowizna (Suwałki district) and Cigoniškiai (Alytus

<sup>4</sup> Tischler 1890, 31.

<sup>5</sup> Kulakov 2016, 56–59; 2020, 228–35.

<sup>6</sup> Goßler 2013, 110.

<sup>7</sup> Wróblewski 2006, 221.

district), have proved pivotal for the study of Yatvingian mortuary practice.<sup>8</sup>

These investigations have prompted a re-evaluation of discoveries made between the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and the 1980s and have allowed a synthesis of current knowledge of Yatvingian burial rites.<sup>9</sup> Flat cremation grounds predominate. Grave forms are likewise varied. Better-preserved, recently studied sites contain both very small, extremely shallow pits and larger yet still shallow pits in which discernible clusters of burnt bones and artefacts are haphazardly mixed. At the most poorly preserved sites, or those excavated without the specific methodology required for such cemeteries, only large artefact clusters have been recorded, scattered chaotically across the surface and uppermost soil layers. Because the remains had originally been deposited in exceptionally shallow features, perhaps even directly on the ground, the archaeological context was particularly vulnerable to destruction. At some sites, burials are accompanied by stone constructions (cobblings, stone circles or less regular concentrations), while at others no stone structures have been recorded. Another common trait is the treatment of grave goods: alongside items preserved intact, many objects were deliberately damaged (cut, bent, or broken) and bear traces of secondary burning, presumably on the pyre. In contrast to Sambian cemeteries, horse burials have not yet been identified in this region, save for a single ambiguous reference to a horse grave at Babki-Żelazki (Gołdap district);<sup>10</sup> nevertheless, items of equestrian gear, including bits and saddlery (stirrups), are found.

Armed with this background, we may now turn to the fragmentary information concerning burial sites situated on the south-western fringes of Old Prussian territory (Fig. 2). The cluster of sites in this border zone corresponds to the historical region of Pomesania.<sup>11</sup> Six cemeteries are known from this area (Fig. 2:2–6, 8). Two additional sites (Fig. 2:1, 7) lie beyond Pomesania proper and should most likely be attributed to the Pogezanians,<sup>12</sup> yet they have been included here because of several observable similarities.

For two cemeteries, Cerkiewnik and Dobrzyki, the situation is relatively comfortable: both sites have been investigated in modern times, properly docu-

mented and published.<sup>13</sup> Each lies close to water. At Dobrzyki (Fig. 2:2), the burial ground was established on the southern slope of a moraine hill whose foot is flanked by marshy terrain. The cemetery at Cerkiewnik occupies the crest of a NW–SE-trending moraine ridge; a marshy depression extends to the north, and some 400 m farther on the southern shore of Lake Limajno begins.

The site at Dobrzyki consists of two zones separated by a ca. 80 m gap devoid of finds. Features in the northern part (nos 3, 5, 7, 9, 36, and 38) are mainly of a settlement character. All of them yielded numerous animal bones bearing butchery marks, pottery sherds, and daub fragments. Human bones occurred only in two features and were always unburnt: a single fragment in feature 3, and two fragments in feature 7, the latter identified as parts of a newborn's lower leg.<sup>14</sup> This northern zone belongs to the earliest occupational phase, lasting from an imprecise starting point down to the 10<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Identifiable burials are confined to the southern zone. If we adopt an arbitrary definition of a sepulchral feature as one containing at least ten fragments of human bone, twenty-one such features meet the criterion (nos 18, 20, 22, 24, 46, 50, 61, 101, 103, 107, 111, 113, 119, 121, 123, 125, 127, 129, 135, 141, and 144).<sup>15</sup> All are cremation graves. Unique on an Old Prussian-wide scale is grave 111, where an inhumation burial of a woman was laid beneath the burnt deposit.

The burial zone is conspicuously later than the northern part. Only three graves (61, 103, 123) overlap chronologically with the northern zone, being dated to the 10<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> centuries. One grave (125) belongs to the 11<sup>th</sup>–mid-13<sup>th</sup> centuries; three more to the 12<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> centuries; whereas fully twelve graves (18, 20, 22, 24, 46, 101, 107, 111, 113, 119, 127, and 141) fall within the latest occupational phase, i.e., the 13<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Within this group, the dimensions of the features are striking. The only feature 144 is a small, circular pit 36 cm in diameter. All others are markedly larger. The smallest measures 150 × 80 cm; several approach two metres in length and 100–150 cm in width (nos 24, 46, 113, 129). A second cluster ranges between two and three metres long and 56–210 cm wide (nos 22, 50, 61, 101, 103, 111, 121, 123, 125, 127, 135, 141). The largest features exceed three metres in length and 100–240 cm

<sup>8</sup> Jończyk 2012; 2025; Žemantauskaitė, Fediajevas 2018; Engel M., Siemaszko 2019; Engel M. 2020, 59–62; Lewoc *et al.* 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Jończyk 2024.

<sup>10</sup> Gaerte 1933, 13; Engel C., la Baume 1937, 274; Engel C. 1939, 53.

<sup>11</sup> Szczepański 2019a, 24–41.

<sup>12</sup> In the case of Sporthenen, an attribution to Warmia could also be considered; however, a detailed examination of this issue lies beyond the scope of the present paper.

<sup>13</sup> Kobylńska *et al.* 2000; Dębowska 2001; Koperkewicz 2012, 116–118.

<sup>14</sup> Kobylńska *et al.* 2000, 25, 27–28.

<sup>15</sup> Kobylńska *et al.* 2000, 30–52. Seventy burnt human bones were also found in layer no. 53, which was not fully exposed and therefore not recorded as a separate archaeological feature (Kobylńska *et al.* 2000: 36–37). This poses interpretative difficulties, and for that reason the unit has been excluded from the present analysis.



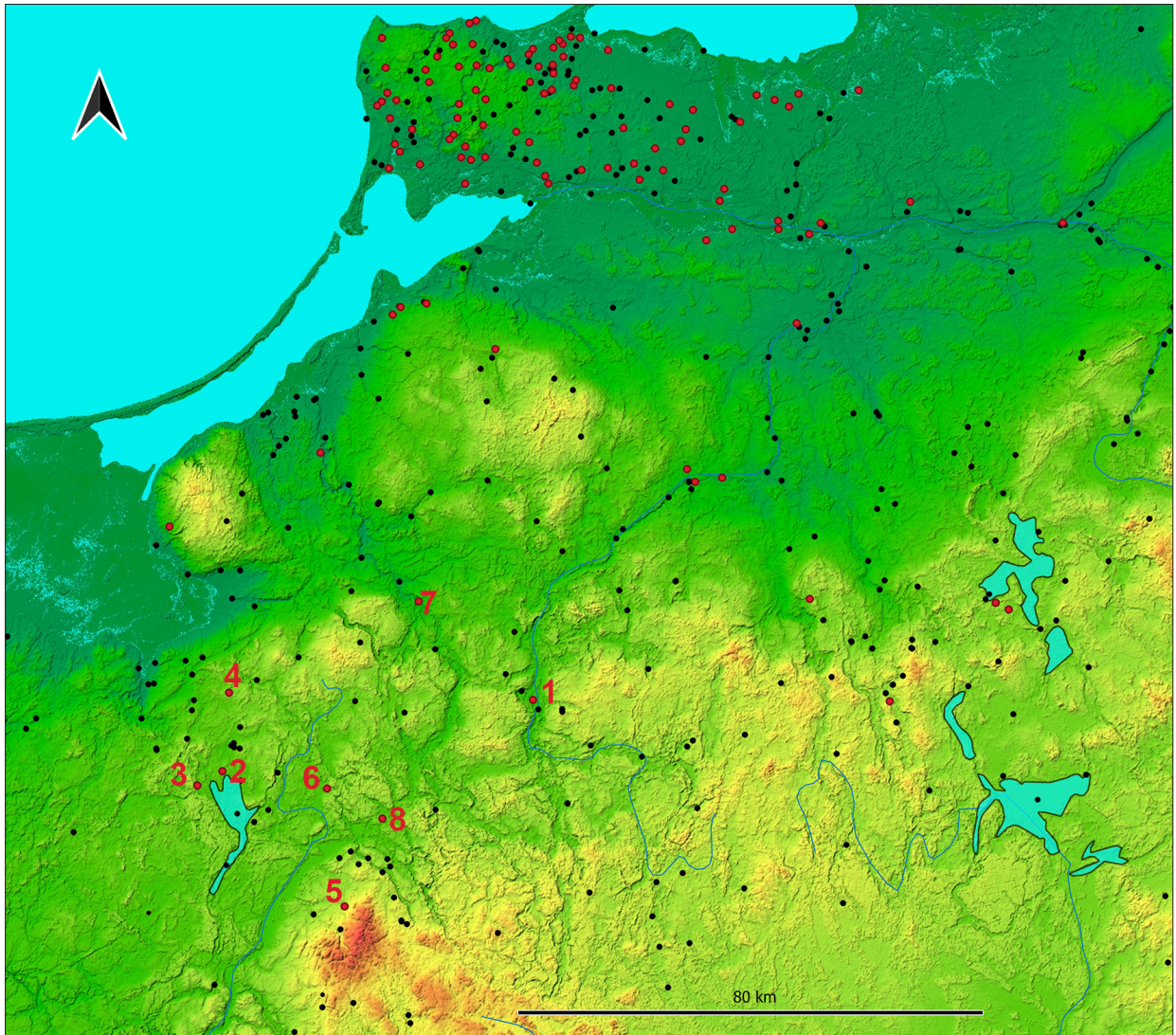


Fig. 2. Location of the cemeteries (marked with red dots): 1. Cerkiewnik, 2. Dobrzyki, 3. Jerzwałd, 4. Kreki, 5. Naprom, 6. Prinzwald, 7. Sporthenen, 8. Warlity Wielkie (compiled by L. Jończyk).

in width (nos 18, 20, 119). Three of these were visible only as the thill of a feature in the humus (22, 101, 103); two were less than 20 cm deep (107, 144); seven ranged from 20 to 50 cm thick (50, 119, 121, 125, 129, 135, 141); and another seven were 58–73 cm thick (20, 24, 61, 111, 113, 123, 127). Interpreting thickness is problematic, however, because heavy ploughing has badly truncated the site, and the preserved depths may not reflect the original dug-in depths. Most fills contained charcoal or soil of varying grey hues, plausibly the remains of ash.

Given these large dimensions, one might ask whether some of these are *in situ* cremation deposits, i.e., pyres burnt on the cemetery surface. At the Yatvingian cemetery of Mosiężysko in Szurpiły, burnt remains appear to have been left on the ground surface.<sup>16</sup> The Dobrzyki features differ in form, yet the practice of cremating the body on the cemetery itself and leaving the remains in place could have been shared by different Old Prussian groups. Supporting this idea is the fact that the largest pits are precisely the double burials (18, 20, 50).<sup>17</sup> Against

<sup>16</sup> Jończyk 2025, 153–154.

<sup>17</sup> This reasoning is based on the assumption that the two individuals interred in a double grave had been cremated simultaneously.



it, however, stands the relatively small quantity of bone in most features. Whether this is due to preservation or to deliberate removal of bones from the pyre cannot yet be decided.<sup>18</sup> Present data allow only tentative hypotheses that await verification.

Eight of the twenty-one graves contained stones, usually laid on the thill (50, 107, 121, 123, 125). In grave 111 a stone layer separated the cremation deposit from the underlying inhumation.

A further aspect deserving discussion is the orientation of the features. For fifteen graves at Dobrzyki orientation could be recorded. Two axes clearly dominate: SW–NE (20, 107, 111, 113, 119, 123, 135) and the opposite SE–NW (18, 24, 46, 121, 125, 127, 129). Only grave 22 lies E–W, while features 50 and 144 are circular. Looking at sex determinations, SE–NW seems preferred for female graves (24, 121, 125), whereas SW–NE predominates among male burials (20, 113, 119), noting that grave 20 contained an adult male together with a child under seven. The evidence is fragmentary and does not permit firm conclusions. These observations should therefore be treated as a working hypothesis only. A supporting parallel is that opposite head orientations for men and women are attested among the Žemaitijan and Semigallian inhumation cemeteries, although there are the graves themselves were aligned along a single axis, the inversion applying only to the corpse.<sup>19</sup>

At Cerkiewnik (Fig. 2:1), the entire cemetery lies along a SE–NW line, reflecting the orientation of the landform on which it was founded. A total of forty-one cremation burials were excavated. Two graves stand out from the prevailing pattern of simple urn-less cremation pits, graves 3 and 7. Feature 3, measuring 5.40 × 3.50 m and c. 25 cm thick, was interpreted as a pyre site where the deceased interred in the cemetery had been burnt; beneath it, two burials were uncovered. Feature 7 was regarded as an *in situ* cremation grave.<sup>20</sup> The site, dated from the late tenth to the second half of the eleventh century, therefore overlaps with the earlier occupational phase of the cemetery at Dobrzyki.

Both cemeteries contain double burials, usually comprising an adult and a child (graves 20, 50, and 61 at Dobrzyki; 3a, 5, 11, 29, 31, and 36 at Cerkiewnik). They also show a strikingly high proportion of children

and juveniles. At Cerkiewnik, only two graves yielded the remains of individuals older than thirty.<sup>21</sup>

In twenty-one burials in Cerkiewnik the burnt human bones were accompanied by burnt animal remains. In three cases (graves 7, 15, 16), the animal was a horse buried together with its owner (graves 15 and 16 contained women; the sex of the individual in grave 7 is unknown).<sup>22</sup> In the remaining graves, the animal bones are mainly pig and goat/sheep. The author interpreted these as traces of funeral feasts, the mourners 'sharing food with the deceased by throwing portions onto the pyre'.<sup>23</sup> An equally plausible explanation, however, is that the animal bones formed part of the grave inventory: food offerings cremated together with the deceased. At both cemeteries, fragments of pottery show secondary burning.<sup>24</sup> A similar situation occurs at the Mosiężysko cemetery in Szurpiły, where ca. 12 per cent of roughly 10,000 pottery fragments exhibit secondary heat exposure. Physicochemical analyses of ten samples demonstrated that all tested sherds, whether macroscopic burning traces were visible, had been secondarily burnt on the funeral pyre. It therefore appears that the traces of foodstuffs found at the cemetery should be regarded as part of the grave goods accompanying the deceased, not vessels used by the mourners.<sup>25</sup>

Far less is known about the remaining cemeteries in the region. Only scraps of information survive from the investigations carried out in the 1930s by Carl Engel, whose contributions to early medieval Old Prussian archaeology are considerable, at Kreki and Naprom (both Ostróda district, previously: Kröken, Kr. Mohrunge, Gross Nappern, Kr. Osterode).<sup>26</sup> The Kreki cemetery (Fig. 2:4) was excavated in 1930, 1931, and 1935. Several excavation photographs are preserved in Rudolf Grenz's archive at the Schloss Gottorf Museum (Schleswig). A catalogue card with artefacts from Kreki has been preserved in the Inventory Books of the former Prussia Museum; however, the accompanying description is largely illegible.<sup>27</sup> A laconic caption states that early medieval cremation burials were discovered there, together with inhumations from the Teutonic Order period, indicating use in the 12<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> centuries. Rich grave goods in the form of partly or wholly unburnt bones of domestic fowl were recorded. Moreover, several large

<sup>18</sup> This is one of the hypotheses put forward to explain both the small quantity and the extreme fragmentation of human bones on the Mosiężysko cemetery at Szurpiły (Jończyk 2025, 78). Such a practice could also account for the occurrence of burnt bone fragments in settlement layers (Jaskulska 2022, 310–311).

<sup>19</sup> Kazakevičius 2007, 376, 387.

<sup>20</sup> Dębowska 2001, 9–12, 21.

<sup>21</sup> Dębowska 2001, 13.

<sup>22</sup> Horse burials accompanying female graves are also attested at other Old Prussian cemeteries (Engel C. 1939, 42).

<sup>23</sup> Dębowska 2001, 22.

<sup>24</sup> Kobylńska, Kobylński *et al.* 2000, 36, 49, 52; Dębowska 2001, 19.

<sup>25</sup> Jończyk, Daszkiewicz, 475, tab. 2, Fig. 23.

<sup>26</sup> Engel C. 1931, 10–11; Wadył 2016; Szczepański 2019a, 25–26; 2019b, 178–179.

<sup>27</sup> Bitner-Wróblewska *et al.* 2008, 164–65, Pl. CXCI; Digital copies of archival materials in the Faculty of Archaeology, University of Warsaw.

*Aschenplatz*-type features were uncovered, irregularly oval pits packed with 'greasy' burnt matter. Together with the description of an *Aschenplatz* at Gross Friedrichsberg, this is the most detailed insight we possess into what pre-war German scholars meant by the term *Aschenplatz*. The Kreki *Aschenplatz*-type pits measured 5–6 m in diameter and 1–1.5 m thick; their fills contained abundant charcoal, burnt bones, and whole or fragmentary pottery vessels, leading Carl Engel to interpret them as collective burials. Metal finds were few, only a spearhead being explicitly mentioned. Photographs show the tops of cremation graves marked by single stones or cobbles (Fig. 3:1, 2). The plan of one *Aschenplatz*-type feature suggests it was only partially excavated (Fig. 3:5), and its photographed edge profile (Fig. 3:4) This set of photographs also includes one more image, showing an unsigned profile of the feature (Fig. 3:3). Two further photographs depict four vessels from the several *Aschenplatz*-type features at Kreki (Fig. 4:1, 2). These are small, profiled pots with wide mouths and lips straight or slightly everted; one has a cylindrical neck. All are decorated with encircling grooves. The inventory card indicates that a spindle whorl and an iron knife were discovered at Site 1 (the remainder of the note is unreadable). Both drawings on the card are very poorly preserved (Fig. 4:3). On the reverse of the same card, a clearly executed drawing of the arms of a balance scale has survived (Fig. 4:4), accompanied by an annotation indicating that it derives from investigations conducted by Carl Engel on 14 April 1930. Below this, there is a further, very poorly legible note referring to Carl Engel's excavations in July 1931 and mentioning "4 finds [...]" from these investigations. This may refer to four vessels whose photographs are preserved in Schleswig; however, the surviving information is too fragmentary to allow any definitive conclusions. Information about the pan balance from Kreki was mentioned in the literature.<sup>28</sup>

Seweryn Szczepański's historical and toponymic analysis greatly narrows the area in which this site should be sought; if his reasoning is correct, the cemetery ought to lie at the northern edge of the modern village, near the small Brzeźnica stream.<sup>29</sup>

The Naprom cemetery is the southernmost early medieval Old Prussian burial ground (Fig. 2:5). Strictly speaking, there were two burial sites at Naprom about 1.4 km apart. One was probed in 1931, the other in 1933. Rudolf Grenz's archive preserves two photographs, a type-written copy of Carl Engel's brief handwritten report (Appendix), and several newspaper clippings; the Prussia-Archiv of the Museum für Vor- und Frühgeschichte

in Berlin holds millimetre-paper drawings of the barrow and the grave discovered within it (Fig. 5 and 6). Much of this material has now been published;<sup>30</sup> thanks to the surviving descriptions, the exact locations are known.

The first site lies on the south-western slope of a moraine hill; a small, unnamed stream flows about 700 m beyond the hill's foot. In June 1931, Carl Engel excavated there two cremation graves. The first was covered by an irregular cobbling 1.70 × 1.20 m, oriented N–S, 35–55 cm thick and including quite large boulders (up to 60 × 50 × 40 cm). Burnt sherds of early medieval pottery lay above and between the stones. Beneath the north-western corner of the cobbling was a 60 × 45 cm feature with burnt filling 10–30 cm thick but devoid of finds; beneath the south-western corner was a 60 cm-diameter burnt lens c. 30 cm thick containing cremated bones and early medieval sherds. The landowner, a Mr Opalka, claimed to have earlier found some bronze objects nearby, which are now lost. About 2 m to the north, Engel located a second burial: an object c. 60 cm below the surface, already disturbed, c. 20 cm thick, with cremated bones and pottery fragments. Engel expected more graves in the vicinity. According to Opalka, a stone barrow or cairn had formerly stood near the excavated graves but had been removed when a barn was built at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1933, Engel returned to Naprom to investigate the spot where Opalka said the dismantled barrow had stood. The Berlin drawings are labelled 'Barrow A (Brick-kiln)'. On Messtischblatt 1089 (Peterswalde), a brick-kiln is marked closer to the village of Gross Nappern, c. 1.4 km north of the 1931 graves. At the site of the demolished mound, Engel uncovered a pit 3.50 × 2.00 m, up to 1 m deep, aligned E–W. Its fill included a multi-layered, carefully laid cobbling (photographed and reproduced in the drawings; Fig. 5 and 6). Between the stones were pottery sherds; beneath them, a burnt layer with cremated bones. Under the cobbling lay wooden remains identified by Engel as a *Baumsarg* – a hollowed-out log coffin. Two photographs from Grenz's archive show the plan and profile of the cobbling, captioned *Frühordenszeitliches Hügelgrab* (early-Order-period barrow), matching the drawings kept in Berlin.<sup>31</sup>

In 1874, Johannes Heydeck was asked by the Royal Forestry Officer Schmiedell to verify putative archaeological sites near Lake Jeziorak. During that survey, he recorded a system of earthen ramparts in the forest on the north-western shore of Lake Płaskie (Jerzwałd, site 23; Iława district). Near the ramparts, he discovered a cremation cemetery (Fig. 2:3). While levelling the ground

<sup>28</sup> la Baume, Wilczek 1940, 41.

<sup>29</sup> Szczepański 2019b, 178.

<sup>30</sup> Wadył 2016.

<sup>31</sup> Wadył 2016, Fig. 2.





Fig. 3. Plans and profiles of archaeological features in Kreki. 1 – Cobble structures covering graves 3 (front left) and 4 (rear right). View from the southwest. 2 – Plans of graves 6 (foreground) and 5 (background). View from the south. 3 – Unlabelled profile. 4 – Edge profile of an *Aschenplatz* 5 – *Aschenplatz*; (photo by Carl Engel 11.04.1930. Source: Rudolf Grenz's archive, Museum Schloß Gottorf in Schleswig).

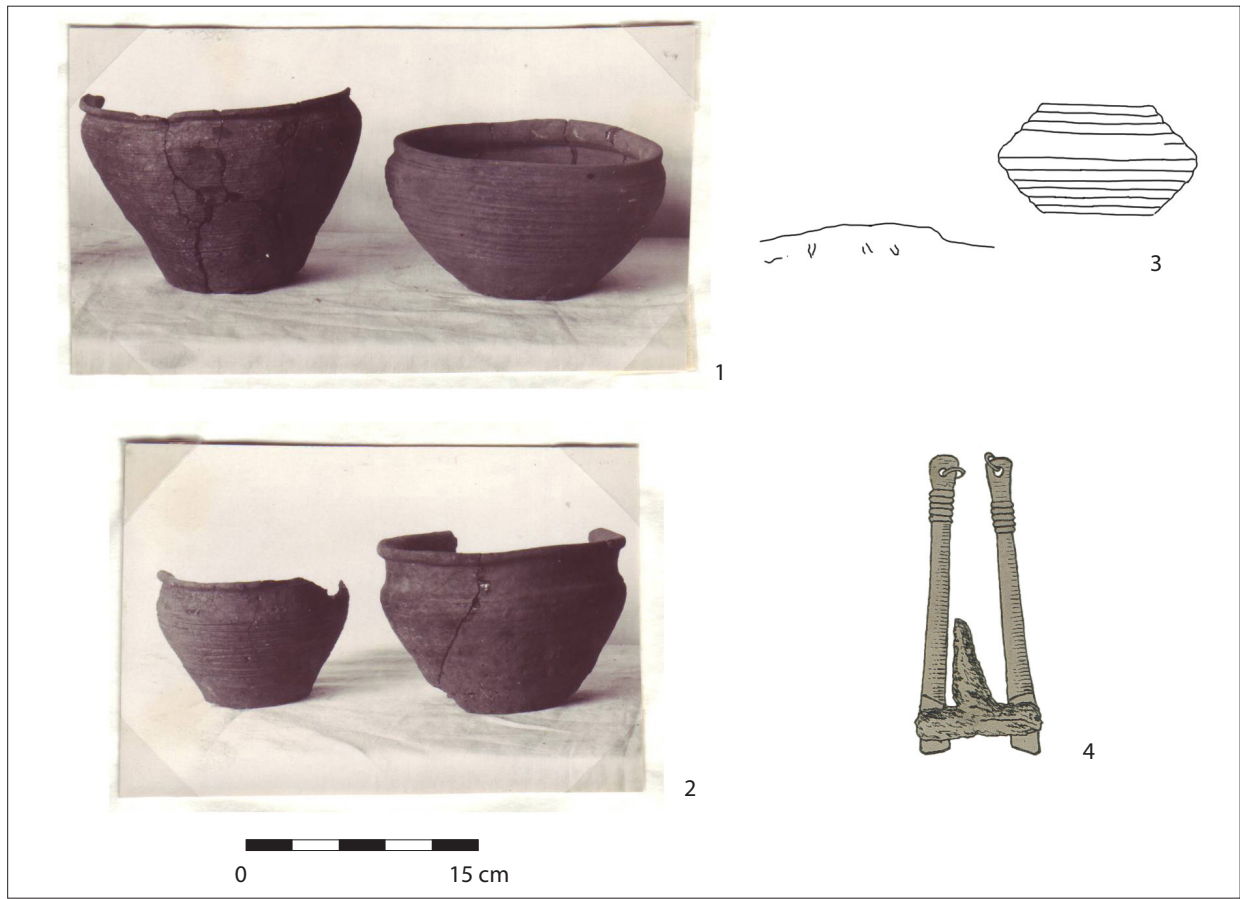


Fig. 4. Finds from the *Aschenplatz in Kreki*: 1, 2 – vessels, Rudolf Grenz's archive, Museum Schloß Gottorf in Schleswig; 3 – spindle whorls and knife (a tracing from the original); 4 – pan balance; 3 and 4 without a scale (after: Bitner-Wróblewska 2008, Pl. CXCI and digital copies of archival materials in the Faculty of Archaeology, University of Warsaw).

for tree seedlings, burnt human bones, an arrowhead, and wheel-made pottery sherds were brought to the surface.<sup>32</sup> Among the cremated remains, Heydeck identified fragments of skulls. His enthusiastic recommendation for a systematic excavation was finally followed up in 2015, when a joint expedition of the Museum of Warmia and Masuria (Olsztyn) and the Olsztyn branch of the Polish Association of Archaeologists conducted trial trenches.<sup>33</sup> A considerable assemblage of high-status metal objects was recovered (including sword-chape mounts, balance weights, dirham cut-fragments, spurs, spearheads, and an enkolpion), pointing to the presence of a trading settlement. Within its limits a 10<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> century urn cremation burial was found, together with a large feature containing charcoal, burnt human bones, pottery sherds, and fragments of silver ornaments. These results

are highly promising, and it is to be hoped that the research will be continued.

The remaining three cemeteries of this region are known only from single-sentence entries in Emil Hollack's 1908 catalogue of East Prussian sites. Under Prinzwald, we read of 'a late-pagan cremation cemetery'. A small jar-shaped vessel from the site was kept at the secondary school (*Gymnasium*) in Osterode.<sup>34</sup> In Warglitten, Hollack noted a late-pagan cremation cemetery in the apiary of the manor estate.<sup>35</sup> A third entry, under Sporthenen, is labelled not *Gräberfeld* but *Gräberfeldfund*, a subtle difference that Hollack does not explain. The find consisted of a vessel and a knife, then housed in the Prussia Museum, and was dated to 'Spät-H', i.e., about the 13<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Heydeck 1874, 15–16.

<sup>33</sup> Kępiński, Zieliński 2015; Martyka, Hoffmann 2015; Szczepański 2019a, 29.

<sup>34</sup> Hollack 1908b, 123.

<sup>35</sup> Hollack 1908b, 173.

<sup>36</sup> Hollack 1908b, 154.



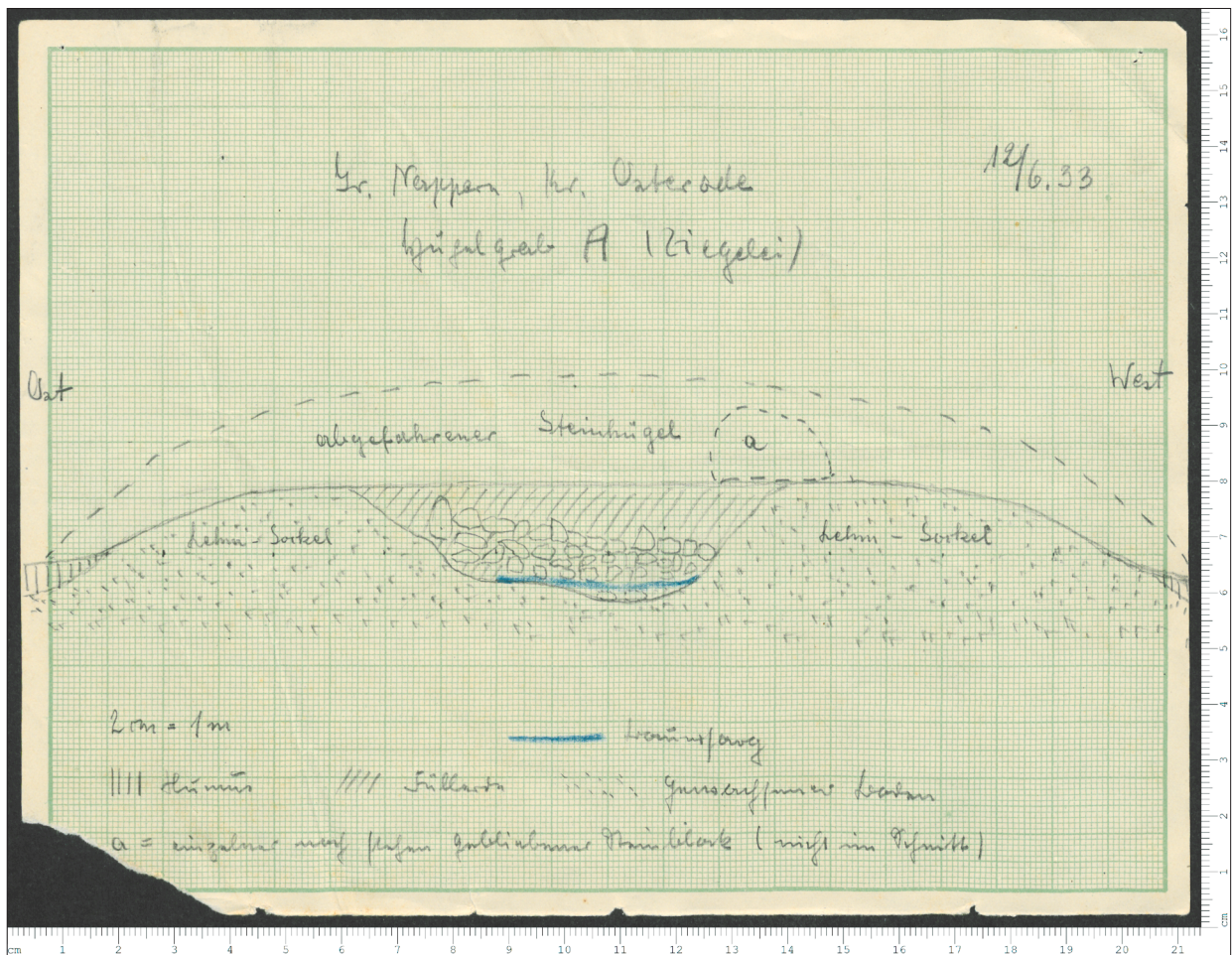


Fig. 5. Profile of the burial mound in Naprom (source: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum für Vor- und Frühgeschichte, PM-A 480, Bd. 1).

Prinzwald is a large forested tract north of Ostróda, today called the Lasy Taborskie. Warglitten corresponds to modern Warlity Wielkie (Ostróda district), while the village of Sporthenen, c. 1 km north-west of today's Stolno (Ostróda district), no longer exists.

A great aid is Hollack's accompanying map, on which site locations are plotted quite precisely. It indicates that the Prinzwald cemetery should be sought on the eastern shore of Lake Ilińskie (Jelonek), presently within the village of Tarda (Ostróda district; Fig. 2:6). Before the Second World War, a railway line from Ostróda to Morag, opened in 1909 (one year after Hollack's catalogue appeared), crossed this area; the archaeological discoveries may have been made during its construction, which narrows the search area further. That Hollack had only just heard of the site is suggested by the absence of a chronological letter on the map (see below).

For Warlity Wielkie (Fig. 2:8), a little more information survives in the Berlin Prussia-Archiv.<sup>37</sup> Several handwritten notes are preserved. The earliest records show that on 15 December 1900, Emil Hollack applied to the district office for permission to excavate within the manor apiary. Another note from 1921 reports finds of unspecified 'urn sherds' (*Urnerscherben*) in the manor garden. A third note states that sherds from Warlity Wielkie, found on 25 July 1928, had been sent to the Prussia Museum; an annotation dates them to the Middle Ages and post-medieval period. A sketch pinpoints the find spot on the south bank of Lake Szlag Wielki, showing that these sherds did not come from an early medieval cemetery. The latest note contains a typewritten query asking whether the location of the cemetery mentioned in Emil Hollack's catalogue is known. A handwritten marginal remark on the left states that this is an adden-

<sup>37</sup> file PM-A 618, vol. 1.



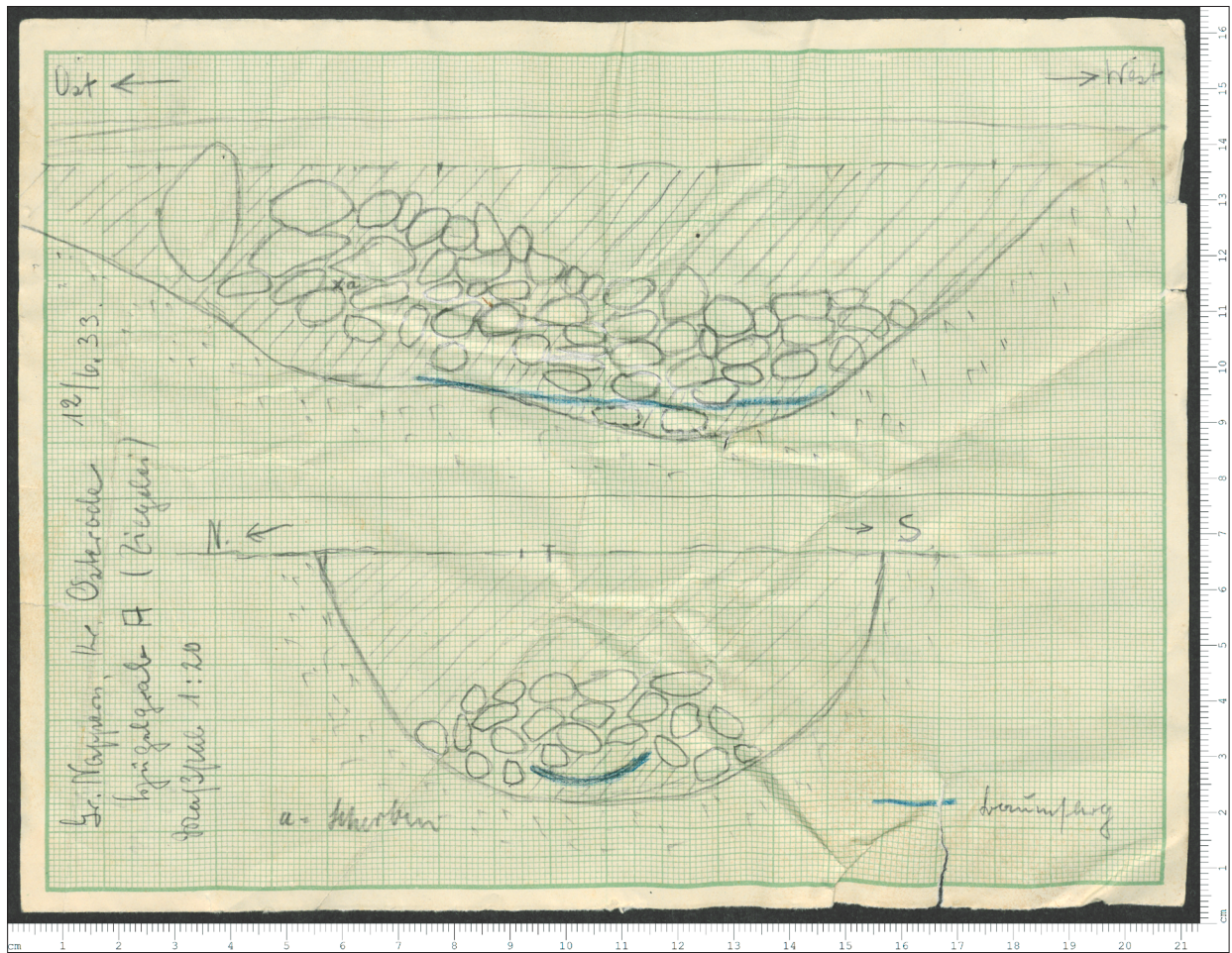


Fig. 6. Profiles of the sub-mound grave in Naprom (source: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum für Vor- und Frühgeschichte, PM-A 480, Bd. 1).

dum to Dr Baumhauer's<sup>38</sup> report of 4 October 1937. A handwritten reply explains that the museum only holds some skull fragments from Warlity Wielkie, apparently from a plague or cholera cemetery, with no find spot plan. It follows that Hollack alone possessed reliable information about the early medieval cemetery, and that his data were already lost by the late 1930s. His projected excavation evidently never took place.

From Hollack's map, the Warlity Wielkie site can be located on the north bank of an unnamed stream flowing out of Lake Szelaż Wielki towards Lake Pauzeńskie, west of the ponds currently located there (constructed in 1980) and belonging to the Ostróda Fish Farm.

No additional information survives on the Sportthenen cemetery beyond Hollack's brief note. In the addendum at the end of his catalogue, he explains that

the letter H, indicating the chronology of this site, is missing from the map; the dating was established only after the map had gone to press.<sup>39</sup> The same may explain the absence of a chronological letter for Prinzwald (Tarda), although here Hollack gives no comment. His map places the Sportthenen site in a meander of the River Pasłęka, within the modern village of Pawełki (Ostróda district).

What, then, can be said? Current evidence shows that on the south-western fringe of Old Prussian territory the dead were cremated, their remains buried in two principal forms of pit: 'classical' round features (the majority of burials at Cerkiewnik, grave 144 at Dobrzyki, the Kreki burials, and the flat grave at Naprom), and extensive shallow features (most graves at Dobrzyki, feature 7 at Cerkiewnik, the *Aschenplatz*-type graves at Kreki,

<sup>38</sup> It is possible that this is the same Dr Baumhauer, *Studienrat*, who accompanied Carl Engel during the excavations at Naprom (Wadył 2016: 4).

<sup>39</sup> Hollack 1908b, 196.



the sub-barrow grave at Naprom-Brick-kiln, and perhaps also the Jerzwałd burial). The latter group is internally diverse. A few are circular (features 24 and 50 at Dobrzyki; grave 7 at Cerkiewnik), but far more are elongated. Two are outstandingly large: feature 3 at Cerkiewnik (5.40 × 3.50 m) and the *Aschenplatz*-type grave at Kreki (5–6 m across). Although we cannot be sure that the Cerkiewnik feature belongs to the *Aschenplatz* category, the possibility is attractive. Mariusz Wyczółkowski has already drawn attention to its parallels with *Alt Käbelich*-type burials, a view that was also shared by Arkadiusz Koperkiewicz.<sup>40</sup> How to interpret the numerous graves measuring roughly 2–3.5 m (many at Dobrzyki; the Naprom-Brick-kiln) remains open: they may represent single *in situ* cremations, whereas the larger *Aschenplatz*-type graves could mark repeated cremations at the same spot, yet this remains a fragile hypothesis.

The few inhumations observed at Dobrzyki and Kreki belong to the latest phases (13<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> centuries) and are probably linked to Christianization under the Teutonic Order. In Sambia and Nadrovia, we have precedents of long-used cremation cemeteries where the final phase inhumations appear (e.g., Pr. Arnau, Königsberg district, Viehof, Labiau district, Wittkampen, Stallupönen district, and Zohpen, Wehlau district).<sup>41</sup> A similar process may account for the skeletal burials at Kreki. Grave 111 at Dobrzyki, a double cremation/inhumation burial, could be due to other, less transparent factors, though Christian influence cannot be ruled out. It is worth noting that most features discussed here, which can be dated more narrowly than ‘early medieval’ belong to the final occupation phase (12<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> centuries).

A frequently recurring feature is the location of cemeteries near bodies of water: lakes, rivers, or wetlands. All the sites described above are in such proximity, except for Naprom. Another common, though not obligatory, feature is the presence of stone structures (cobbles or single stones), which have been recorded at Dobrzyki, Kreki, and Naprom. Grave inventories share further similarities. The paucity of metal objects is striking; only a few were found at Cerkiewnik and Dobrzyki, very few at Kreki (only a spearhead and a pan balance are mentioned), and a knife at Sporthenen. Against this background, the spur from grave 7 at Cerkiewnik, representing a rare elite type, is remarkable. Comparable spurs are known from Lutomiersk (Pabianice district), Wrocław, and Ciepłe (Tczew district) in Poland and from Kumačëvo (Zelenogradsk district) in Sambia.<sup>42</sup> They

have a West Slavic origin, hence the Cerkiewnik find indicates contacts with western neighbours. A universal element of grave goods is pottery. Across reconstructable forms, small wide-mouthed vessels predominate; they are attested at Dobrzyki, Cerkiewnik, Kreki, and Prinzwald (Tarda), and appear to be characteristic of Old Prussian cemeteries, with parallels at Szurpiły, in Sambia and near Elbląg.<sup>43</sup> Another shared feature is burnt animal bones, recorded in Cerkiewnik, in the earlier graves at Dobrzyki and in Kreki. The features containing animal bones from these first two sites are dated to the poorly represented early phase (10<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> centuries).

Unique traits, besides the already discussed grave 111 at Dobrzyki, include the human–horse burials at Cerkiewnik and the sub-barrow grave at Naprom with a log coffin. Entirely *sui generis* is the Jerzwałd cemetery.

A broader comparison with what we know about Yatvingian burial customs shows several overlaps: cremation, occasional collective burials, and sometimes stone constructions. The location of the Dobrzyki cemetery adjacent to a contemporary settlement, and the Jerzwałd burials within a settlement mirror the situation at Mosięzysko, Szurpiły. The consistent orientation of a dozen graves at Dobrzyki (SW–NE and SE–NW) and of the whole Cerkiewnik cemetery (including feature 3) along SE–NW likewise finds analogies at Szurpiły and other Old Prussian burial sites.<sup>44</sup>

The foregoing considerations suggest that early medieval Old Prussian funerary rites were far from uniform. In every region where we possess enough evidence for analysis, Sambia, Yatvingia, and Pomesania, what appears is a common basis (cremation and collective burials) overlaid by distinctive local traits. The source base remains small, and the observations offered here are preliminary hypotheses. What is beyond doubt is that further research, especially fieldwork, is essential.

In spring 2025, a reconnaissance by the Faculty of Archaeology, University of Warsaw (headed by the present author, with the kind participation of Karolina Szczygieł of the National Heritage Board and FAUW students) revisited the cemeteries discussed above. In the clearing west of the fishponds at Warlity Wielkie, molehills yielded eroded pottery sherds, some certainly early medieval. At the spot where Carl Engel uncovered two stone-covered flat burials at Naprom, two tiny fragments of burnt human bone were found, together with piles of stones cleared from the field. The cemeteries at Dobrzyki, Kreki, and Naprom, lying in intensively culti-

<sup>40</sup> Wyczółkowski 2002; Koperkiewicz 2012, 116.

<sup>41</sup> Hollack 1893, 27; Heym 1938; Podzuweit 1940, 64; Engel C., *Pr. Arnau*.

<sup>42</sup> Wadył, Skvorcov 2018 and earlier literature there.

<sup>43</sup> Dorr 1914, pl. IV:1-3; Antoniewicz 1955; Pronin *et al.* 2006, Fig. 11.

<sup>44</sup> Jończyk 2025, 168.

vated arable land, have probably suffered severe destruction. The prospects are more hopeful at Warlity Wielkie and Prinzwald (Tarda). Pinpointing these sites precisely

and placing them under legal protection is an immediate goal of ongoing work.

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## APPENDIX

Typescript copy in Rudolf Grenz's archive:

*Peterswalde, richtiger Groß-Nappern (abändern!)  
Kr. Osterode. Besitzer Opalka.*

*17.6.1931.*

*Gräberfeld (spätheidnisch)*

*Eintragung Meßtischblatt 1089*

*Probegrabung 17.6.1931:*

*Grab 1: 3 m westsüdwestlich des Feldweges, 60 m süd-südöstlich Punkt 170,5, auf dem Wege entlang gemessen.*

*Von –35 cm bis –55 cm, unregelmäßige Steinpackung von 1,7 m N–S und 1,2 m O–W aus z.T. recht großen Blöcken bis zu 0,6 x 0,5 x 0,4 m.*

*Unter ihrem NW-Rand flache schwache Brandgrube bis –0,65 m von 0,6 x 0,45 m Durchmesser, in der nichts. Über und zwischen der Steinpackung Burgwallscherben.*

*An ihren SW-Rand anschließend tiefschwarze Brandgrube von 0,6 m Durchmesser zwischen –0,4 und –0,7 m; darin zerstreuter Leichenbrand und Burgwallscherben (zum Teil Drehscheibenarbeit, Wellen- und Ringrillen-Ornament).*

*Also spätheidnisches Gräberfeld mit Brandgrubenbestattung.*

*Besitzer erzählt, daß er auch einige Bronzestücke fand, die aber verloren gingen.*

*Auch auf dem Abhang nach Louisenthal zu und im ONO anschließenden Acker sowie unter dem Feldweg sollen noch zahlreiche Gräber liegen. Früher soll hier auch ein aus Steinen geschütteter Hügel ("Steinkalotte") gelegen haben, der aber schon vor 25 Jahren zum Bau einer Scheune abgefahren wurde.*

*Grab 2: Etwa 2 m nördlich des Grabes 1 eine zweite, schon stark gestörte Brandgrube mit Scherben und Leichenbrand in –0,6 bis –0,8 m.*

*Carl Engel, Fahrt in die Kreise Heilsberg und Osterode. 16–20.6.1931. Handschriftlich im Nachlaß C. Engel (17.6.1931). Am Ende des Berichts eine Notiz: "Besitzer Opalka erhält M. 10. – Entschädigung und Fundprämie!"*