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IN SEARCH OF THE ORIGINS OF EARLY MODERN STELAE CEMETERIES IN THE PODLASKIE VOIVODESHIP

ABSTRACT

The stela cemeteries from the territory of the Podlaskie Voivodeship constitute a unique funerary phenomenon of the early modern period on the borderland between the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. They are characterized by upright stelae made of glacial erratic stones, accompanied in some cases by stone grave constructions. This article seeks to outline the origins of these cemeteries by comparative analysis and analogies with medieval cemeteries with stone en-

surances, urban burial sites (Suraz, Vilnius), and the so-called stone graves from the territories of Lithuania, Belarus, and Russia. It also presents new archaeological data that suggest possible continuities and transformations in grave forms. The comparative approach adopted here situates the stelae cemeteries within local funerary heritage while, at the same time, linking them to a broader circle of funerary phenomena across Eastern and North-Eastern Europe.

Keywords: stone graves, Podlachia, Polish-Lithuanian-Belarusian borderland, early modern period, funerary archaeology

The phenomenon of stelae cemeteries¹ is attested in the lands of the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, where it is distinguished by a characteristic grave form consisting of an upright stele, sometimes accompanied by a stone structure encircling or covering the burial. The stelae were made of glacial erratic boulders, which were shaped to produce a single flat surface sometimes bearing an engraved cross or, more rarely, other signs and dates. In addition to stelae, individual stone crosses are also found at these sites.²

Within the cultural landscape, these cemeteries were typically situated outside consecrated grounds, often on small elevations near early modern villages (Figs. 1–2).

In some cases, traces of earthwork ramparts surrounding the burial area are still visible.

The sites discussed are located primarily in Poland, particularly in the eastern part of the present-day Podlaskie Voivodeship (Fig. 1), and beyond Poland's borders in southern Lithuania and northern Belarus (Fig. 2). Outside Poland, they are commonly referred to as 'stone graves'³ and are generally dated from the 14th–18th centuries,⁴ or – though this remains a matter of debate – even from the 11th to 17th centuries.⁵ Within Poland, the stelae cemeteries are dated to the early modern period, more precisely from the 16th century to the mid-19th century.

¹ In the regions of Podlachia and Belarus, these sites are locally known as Mogilki.

² Lepionka 2019; Lepionka *et al.* 2020; Lepionka 2020. The term *stelae cemeteries*, their characteristic features, and their geographical distribution will be presented in detail in a separate, comprehensive article, which is currently in preparation.

³ The term *žalnik* is also found in the literature. For a discussion of the choice of terminology and its justification, see footnote no. 11 in Plavinskij 2017, 340–341.

⁴ Čaraŭko 2018.

⁵ The early dating proposed by A. Kviatkovskaja (Kviatkovskaja 1998) remains a matter of debate. The community of Belarusian archaeologists has drawn attention to the manner in which the artefacts were published and to their contextual interpretation. I would like to thank Dr Wadzim Beliaevets and Dr Mikalai Plavinski for providing this information.



Fig. 1. Stelae cemetery in the village of Harkawicze, Szudziałowo Commune, Podlaskie Voivodeship, Poland (photo by Jan Jaskanis, 1969. Archives of the Archaeology Department of the Podlaskie Museum in Białystok).



Fig. 2. Stelae cemetery in the village of Studenka (Barysaw District, Minsk Region, Belarus), originally captioned "Cemetery of those fallen in battle near the village of Studenka" in the album *Views of the Napoleonic Campaign, Russian Empire* (cat. no. LOT 10337, no. 127). Photo by Sergey Prokudin-Gorsky, 1912, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C. 20540 USA (access: <https://www.loc.gov/item/2018680084/>).

Before 2017, only a few scholars had addressed the topic of stela cemeteries, although researchers investigating medieval cemeteries in Mazovia and Podlachia had mentioned them in discussions concerning burials with stone enclosures.⁶ An archaeological excavation was also conducted at Załuki, site 1, in Gródek commune, Podlaskie Voivodeship, yet the complete results of this investigation have never been published.⁷

This article aims to present research hypotheses concerning the origins of stela cemeteries from the perspective of early modern archaeology, while drawing upon the work of medievalists studying north-eastern Central Europe, namely eastern Poland, Lithuania, and Belarus. To identify relevant clues, attention should be directed towards the specific features of the funerary rite characteristic of these sites, namely: the use of an upright stone as a grave marker, and the presence of stones engraved with crosses as part of the grave construction. The arrangement of human remains within the graves is not discussed here, as it is largely uniform in Christian burials and lies beyond the scope of this study.

Stelae Cemeteries and Cemeteries with Stone Enclosures

Cemeteries with stone enclosures provide the most direct point of reference in the search for the predecessors of stela cemeteries. Both share a key feature of the funerary rite – the extensive use of stone as a construction material for graves. Katarzyna Skrzyńska proposed a possible relationship between these phenomena in her 2022 paper on Podlachian cemeteries containing graves with stone enclosures.⁸ In that study, the author suggested that the cemeteries she examined may have either evolved into or served as inspiration for stela cemeteries. A comparable conclusion was reached by Lechosław Rauhut,⁹ who, in his typology of Mazovian graves, cautiously distinguished type IV, closely related to type III, i.e., graves without casing. Cemeteries corresponding to this type were identified in Podlachia (Jarwież Mała, site 1, Suchowola commune; Zabiele, site 1, Jaświły commune; Kruszyniany, site 1, Krynki commune; Nowowola, site 3, Janów commune; Plebanowce, site 1, Sokółka commune; Bieniowce, site 1, Nowy Dwór commune). Today, all of these sites can be classified as stela cemeteries.¹⁰

Similarly, though even more cautiously, Michał Dzik discussed stone constructions found at late medieval cemeteries. He cited 14 unexcavated stela cemeteries and identified several examples suggesting possible connections with medieval burial grounds.¹¹ Dzik noted that, at some cemeteries with stone enclosures, exceptionally large stones were found within the gable walls, possibly projecting above the ground surface, similar to the stone graves of Belarus (discussed later in this paper).¹² He also referred to the research of Mikołaj Awenarius at Czarna Wielka, site 1, where a stone engraved with a cross was discovered within the enclosure of a grave located at the edge of the site.¹³

Cemeteries in Selected Medieval Settlement Centres and Towns versus Stelae Cemeteries

Another avenue in the investigation of the origins of stela cemeteries is offered by burial grounds discovered in present-day urban areas. However, finds of stone grave constructions in such contexts are exceedingly rare. Among the examples relevant to this issue, two sites are particularly noteworthy: Suraz (Poland) and Vilnius (Lithuania).

Excavations at Suraz, site 2, commenced in 1970 following the discovery of a stone slab while digging the cellar near the medieval stronghold¹⁴ (Fig. 3:2). The research revealed that most of the site represented a surface-disturbed medieval cemetery dated from the mid-12th to the late 13th century. A few earlier graves, from the 1st half of the 12th century, as well as later ones from the 14th to early 15th centuries,¹⁵ were also recorded. Of the 78 graves uncovered, 28 were equipped with stone constructions, primarily composed of small pebbles placed within the grave pit boundaries and near the head of the deceased.¹⁶

Of particular significance are three graves with stone slabs located on the eastern edge of the cemetery (graves 7, 48, and 47)¹⁷ (Fig. 3). The discovery of the slab from grave 7, during the aforementioned earthworks, prompted systematic investigation (Fig. 3:2). This slab is a massive and carefully worked granite piece bearing a small Latin-type cross. Similar slabs, albeit less precisely crafted, were found in graves 47 and 48¹⁸ (Figs. 3:4,

⁶ Rauhut 1971; Dzik 2011, 2015.

⁷ Karwowska 1994.

⁸ Skrzyńska 2023, 123. The paper by Katarzyna Skrzyńska served as an inspiration for the present article, for which I would like to express my sincere gratitude as a researcher of stela cemeteries.

⁹ Rauhut 1971.

¹⁰ Rauhut 1971, 457.

¹¹ Dzik 2011, 296–297.

¹² Kviatkovskaja 1998; Dzik 2011, 300.

¹³ Dzik 2011, 299.

¹⁴ Bienkowska 2005a, 121.

¹⁵ Olczak *et al.* 2024, 179.

¹⁶ Olczak *et al.* 2024, 35, 52.

¹⁷ Olczak *et al.* 2024, 37.

¹⁸ Olczak *et al.* 2024, 55.

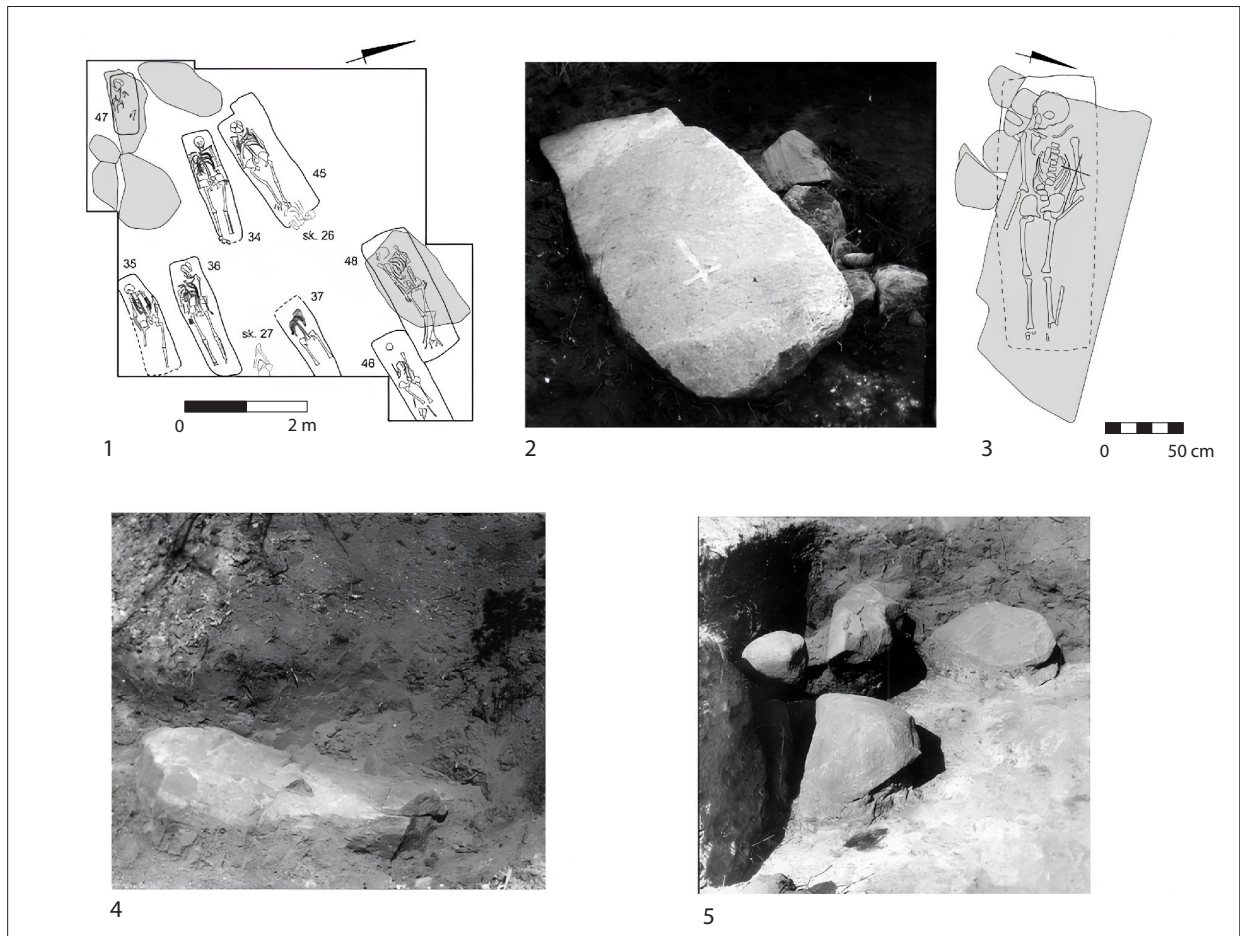


Fig. 3. Suraz, site 2, local commune, Podlaskie Voivodeship: 1 – Trench VI with graves no. 47 and 48; 2 – slab from grave 7; 3 – drawing of grave 7; 4 – slab from grave 48; 5 – slabs and stones from grave 47; (after: Olczak *et al.* 2024, compiled by H. Lepionka).

5). Owing to their position, the slabs were interpreted as coverings placed over the graves and were not associated with later stelae cemeteries.¹⁹ Researchers have suggested that the distinct construction of these burials may indicate high social status, and in the case of grave 7, possibly a clerical rank. They linked these examples to the so-called sub-slab graves known from western Ukraine.²⁰ Radiocarbon analysis provided intriguing insights into the possible origins of stelae cemeteries. Grave 47 was dated, with a 95.4% probability, to AD 881–1151. The results were considered anomalous, perhaps due to a reservoir effect, which could have been caused by a fish-based diet; however, isotopic analysis did not indicate such a dietary pattern among the individuals from the cemetery. The skeleton from grave 47 was not subjected to isotopic

testing, and its chronology, based on grave goods, was established as the 1st half of the 12th century.²¹

The findings from Suraz, site 2, merit further consideration. The cemetery was discovered during domestic construction works and had long been affected by subsequent urban development. It is therefore possible that the slab was repositioned horizontally at a later date.²² Notably, despite the slab's finely finished upper face, its lower edges were left irregular, suggesting that it might originally have stood upright. The researchers' categorical rejection of any link with stela cemeteries appears premature – particularly given the proximity of the Bojary, site 1, cemetery (Turośń Kościelna commune), where analogous stelae – some fallen, others standing *in situ* – have been recorded (Figs. 4:4–6; 6).

¹⁹ Olczak *et al.* 2024, 55.

²⁰ Olczak *et al.* 2024, 55, 185.

²¹ Olczak *et al.* 2024, 175–176.

²² The photograph published in the site monograph (Olczak *et al.* 2024, 10, Fig. I.2) bears an incorrect caption dating it to the summer of 1969, whereas, based on the Podlaskie Museum negative

collection, it in fact documents the excavation conducted in 1970. Other negatives from the same fieldwork show the same team members during the cleaning of the slab. According to the excavation diary of Krystyna Bieńkowska (MPB, archival no. S-101), the investigations commenced on 15 October 1970.

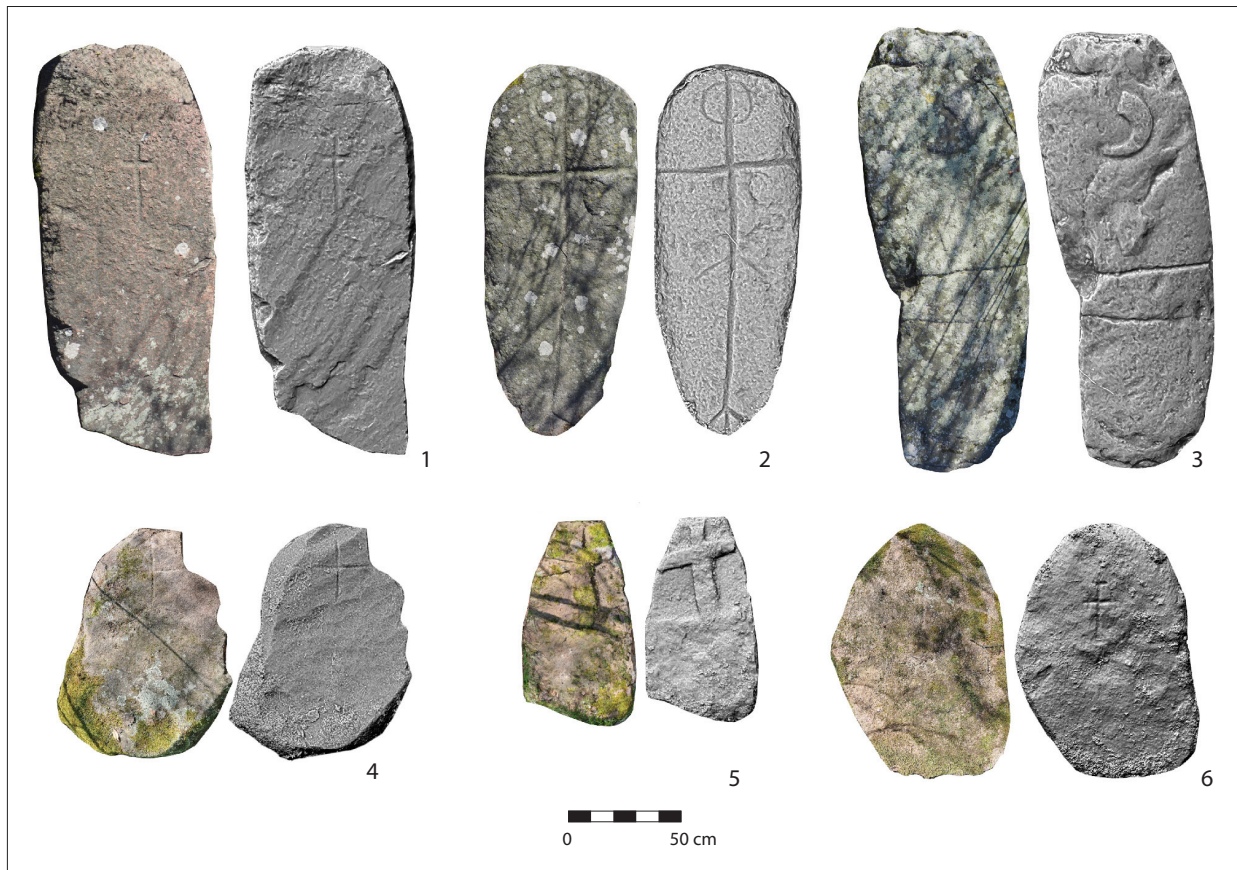


Fig. 4. Stone slabs found in Suraż and stelae from Bojary: 1 – slab from grave 7 at site 2 with a Latin cross engraving; 2 – slab (?) from site 31 with a cross featuring a circle at the top, a horizontal bar below the arms, and an elaborate base; 3 – slab from site 31(?) with a horn engraving; 4–6 – stone stelae with various types of crosses from the stelae cemetery in Bojary, Łapy Commune, Podlaskie Voivodeship (compiled by H. Lepionka).

Further evidence comes from additional discoveries at Suraż. During the interwar period, human remains and twelve stone slabs were found on the property of Waław Łupiński, located on Mostowa Street. Most of the slabs were subsequently reused as building material, and only two are currently preserved in the Litwińczuk Archaeological and Ethnographic Museum in Suraż (Fig. 4:2–3). The site, designated no. 31, has been interpreted as “possibly the cemetery of St Spas Church.”²³ The church was mentioned in the town inventories of 1562 and 1570, in relation to the exemption of the priest Herman from paying royal rent. After that date, no further

references to the church exist; a 1773 visitation report merely notes a plot marking the former location of the building. In 1937, a gravestone slab described as “from an Old Slavic grave” was documented there, and photographic evidence²⁴ supports this interpretation (Figs. 4:2, 5). In the same vicinity, a Catholic hospital cemetery mentioned in the 1562 inventory was also situated.²⁵ In 2001, the installation of a sewer line beneath the pavement revealed six graves without grave goods or coffins, all of which were destroyed during the works.²⁶

A further example comes from the late medieval Bokšto cemetery in Vilnius,²⁷ excavated in 2005.

²³ The dating of the site remains uncertain. The KESA record assigns it to the late Middle Ages, whereas Lech Pawlata proposes a chronology corresponding to the period of the church’s existence, that is, from the mid-16th to the 2nd half of the 18th century (Pawlata 2008, 139). Subsequently, however, the preserved slabs were dated to the 19th century, an entirely erroneous interpretation based on a misleading comparison with the com-

pletely different stelae from the cemetery at Bieniowce (Pawlata 2008, 164).

²⁴ Stański 1937, 34.

²⁵ Maroszek 1995, 45–46.

²⁶ Krasnodębski 2002.

²⁷ Jonaitis, Kaplūnaitė 2020.



Fig. 5. Slab (?) from site 31 in Suraz – the presumed cemetery of St Spas Church (photo by J. Jodkowski; after: Stafiński 1937, 33).

According to the authors, this site served as a burial ground for Orthodox immigrants and the earliest Christian converts, possibly even predating the official Christianization of Lithuania.²⁸ The cemetery, dated to the 13th–15th centuries, is one of the few known early Christian burial sites in the region.²⁹ Excavations uncovered 136 graves containing stones, several of which exhibited stone constructions similar to those recorded at Suraz, site 2.³⁰ Among them, one burial (grave 226) displayed a structure typical for a stela cemetery. The grave contained the remains of a 40–49-year-old man, lacking both grave goods and coffin remains. It was located in the northern part of the cemetery, within trench 19. The stone construction consisted of an upright stele (30×10×15 cm) and two rows of stones flanking the grave pit. Two larger stones were positioned at the feet of the skeleton: one on the south-eastern side (30×40×15 cm) and another on the north-eastern side (55×48×18 cm). Radiocarbon analysis dated the burial to AD 1341–1396, with a probability of 95.4%.³¹

Resemblance between Stelae Cemeteries and Stone Graves – A Preliminary Comparison

The so-called stone graves constitute a phenomenon with a long research tradition, dating back to the early history of archaeology in Poland, Lithuania, Belarus, and Russia.³² In the literature, they have been described under various terms, from *žalniks* to stone barrows, though stone graves appear to be the most appropriate designation.³³ Their chronological range is broad – from the 11th–15th centuries in Russia³⁴ to the 14th–18th centuries in Belarus (Fig. 7).³⁵ Cemeteries referred to by this term represent a wide and not yet fully defined category. They are characterized by stone constructions in the form of oval pavements covering the grave, both with and without stelae (Fig. 5:2–5). It is plausible that their development proceeded in two phases: an initial stage featuring graves without stelae, followed by a later phase in which stelae were added.³⁶ Stone graves occur

²⁸ Jonaitis, Kaplūnaitė 2020, 569.

²⁹ Jonaitis, Kaplūnaitė 2020, 569.

³⁰ Jonaitis, Kaplūnaitė 2020, 152–166.

³¹ Jonaitis, Kaplūnaitė 2020, 420.

³² Szukiewicz 1899, 1902; Kviatkovskaja 1998.

³³ Plavinskij 2017, 340.

³⁴ Valk 2012.

³⁵ Čaraūko 2018.

³⁶ Kviatkovskaja 1998, 42–66.



Fig. 6. Bojary, site 1: A – SVF analysis of the digital terrain model of the site with the location of stelae; B – orthophotomap of the site with the location of stelae; 1, 2 – fallen and standing stelae (numbering corresponds to that on the map; compiled by H. Lepionka).

throughout northern Belarus and extend in a continuous belt towards Pskov and Lake Ladoga.³⁷

In terms of appearance, these burials are strikingly similar to stela cemeteries and, in my view, should be regarded as part of the same phenomenon. A detailed comparative analysis of the two, however, lies beyond the scope of this article and warrants a separate, comprehensive investigation.

Discussion

The review undertaken indicates that the emergence of stone grave constructions across Eastern Europe was both extensive and complex, with its origins frequently linked to the period of the adoption and consolidation of Christianity during the late Middle Ages. Across

various types of archaeological sites, certain formal elements can be observed that display similarities to later stela cemeteries. At medieval cemeteries, these features are most often upright headstones, occasionally bearing carved crosses, which may suggest the gradual formation of the tradition of marking graves with a single, dominant stele.

In the case of funerary phenomena associated with cemeteries containing stone enclosures and the graves from Suraz, it may be assumed that the tradition of erecting stelae began as early as the 13th–14th centuries in the area of present-day Podlachia. However, this practice appears to have been interrupted or discontinued at some stage, probably as a result of the unstable political and settlement conditions prevailing in the region at that time. Such grave constructions subsequently

³⁷ Kviatkovskaja 1998, 26–37; Čaraŭko 2018, 124; Bel'skij 2012.

³⁸ Dzik 2011.

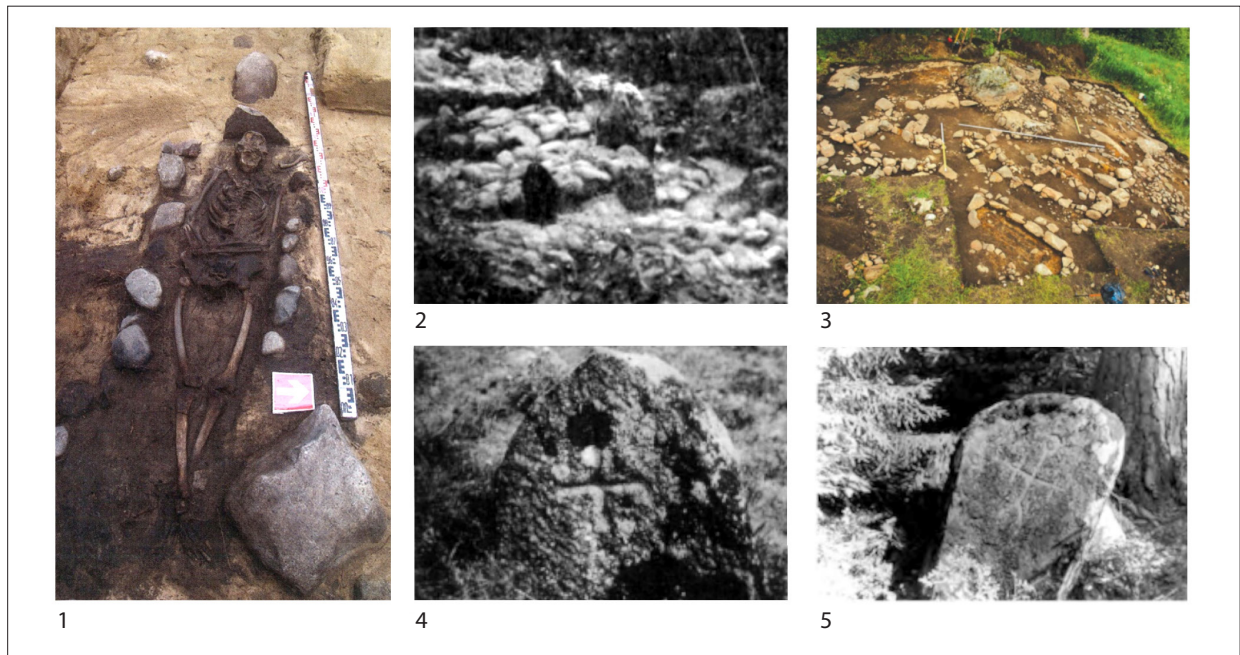


Fig. 7. Stone graves from the territories of Lithuania, Belarus, and Russia: 1 – grave 226 from the cemetery at Bokšto Street, Vilnius, Lithuania (after: Jonaitis, Kaplūnaitė 2020, Fig. 62); 2 – stone graves in the village of Novoselki, Vawkavysk District, Grodno Region, Belarus (after: Kviatkovskaja 1998, 33); 3 – stone grave constructions from the Kalmistomäki cemetery, Lahdenpohja District, Republic of Karelia (after: Belsky 2012, 223); 4 – stele with cross engraving in a stone grave in the village of Minevshchina, Vawkavysk District, Grodno Region, Belarus (after: Kviatkovskaja, 1998, 34); 5 – stele with cross engraving from the cemetery in Garavec, Barysaw District, Minsk Region (after: Plavinski 2017, 352; compiled by H. Lepionka).

ceased to appear.³⁸ In this context, it is worth considering factors such as the struggle for control over Podlachia between the Duchy of Mazovia, the Teutonic Order, and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.³⁹ The borderland character of the region and the fluidity of its settlement patterns may have hindered the establishment of lasting funerary traditions. It should also be emphasized that from this period, particularly from the fourteenth century onwards, only a limited number of burial sites are known from the territory of modern Podlachia, which further complicates the reconstruction of local transformations in funerary practices.

The situation appears markedly different in present-day Belarus and Russia, where the transition from pagan burials to Christian cemeteries followed a more continuous and comprehensible trajectory. In this context, the so-called stone graves stand out as distinctive constructions of varied form. Their most characteristic feature is the use of large, unworked or only partially worked stones, often arranged in groups or rows. The form and archaeological context of these monuments suggest that the stone graves may represent the di-

rect predecessors of stela cemeteries. This hypothesis is supported both by formal arguments – such as the shape and positioning of the stones – and by historical considerations, including evidence of population movements from eastern territories into Podlachia during the 15th and 16th centuries.⁴⁰ Settlers arriving from the regions of modern Belarus occupied areas where stela cemeteries later functioned, plausibly bringing with them specific burial traditions.

Particularly noteworthy in this regard is a grave no. 226 from Vilnius, dated to an exceptionally early period. Were this grave discovered within a typical stela cemetery, it would not differ significantly from known examples of this type. However, its context and dating have the potential to substantially alter our understanding of stela cemeteries. The results imply that the currently accepted chronology, based primarily on numismatic evidence and written sources, may, in fact, be too late. Consequently, the uncritical acceptance of existing dating should be reconsidered, and the possibility acknowledged that a number of these sites possess a much earlier origin than previously assumed.

³⁹ Wiśniewski 1977; Kowalczyk-Heyman 2013.

⁴⁰ Wiśniewski 1967; 1977.

Because of the above considerations, three working hypotheses concerning the genesis of stela cemeteries may be proposed, all of which require further verification:

Western variant – stela cemeteries developed as a continuation of medieval traditions of stone-built graves, particularly those featuring stone enclosures, as exemplified by the sites at Suraz.

Eastern variant – stela cemeteries represent the final stage in the evolution of stone graves, funerary forms of pagan-Christian origin that functioned east of Podlachia, whose development was influenced by regional processes of Christianization and the persistence of folk traditions.

Polygenetic variant – The form of stela cemeteries emerged as the result of multiple, parallel traditions – both western and eastern. The common denominator of these traditions was the adoption of Christianity and the associated need for a durable, stone grave marker, while remaining deeply rooted in forms that had already developed during the Middle Ages.

Conclusions

Stela cemeteries should therefore be regarded not as an isolated cultural phenomenon, but as the result of long-term, multi-layered funerary processes occurring within the cultural borderland of Poland, Lithuania, and Belarus. Their origins appear to be multi-causal, encompassing both chronological and spatial dimensions.

Considering the proposed variants of origin – western, eastern, and polygenetic – it becomes necessary to reconsider the typological and chronological frameworks currently applied to this category of sites. Further interdisciplinary research, integrating archaeological, anthropological, and historical approaches, is required to reconstruct both local and supra-local trajectories in the development of stone-built grave forms.

Comparative studies involving present-day Lithuania, Belarus, and possibly Ukraine may be of particular significance, as phenomena related to stela cemeteries appear to have emerged there earlier and in more diverse forms.

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