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ALLEGED BURIAL MOUNDS FROM THE LATE ROMAN PERIOD
AT LEŚNICTWO SACHAREWO SITE 3, BIAŁOWIEŻA PRIMEVAL FOREST

ABSTRACT

The article presents results of excavations carried out at an alleged barrow cemetery located in the western part of the Białowieża Primeval Forest, Poland. The site, discovered in 1996 and verified in 2016, consists of 10 mounds. In 2017, the first excavations were carried out when the mound no. 3, with a diameter of *c.* 9 m and a relative height of *c.* 0.7 m, located on the northern edge of the site, was chosen for research. In the mound 39 potsherds were found. The scarcity of ceramic material and the high degree of its fragmentation make the stylistic analysis difficult. The technological and stylistic features of the discussed pottery are typical for ceramics from a wide timespan, ranging from the Pre-Roman Period to the Late Roman Period. Their precise dating and cultural affiliation are difficult to determine due not only to the small size of the collection but also to the lack of well-dated comparative materials from the

Białowieża Forest and its surroundings. A ¹⁴C analysis of charcoal obtained from the embankment of the mound yielded an approximation which fits between the second half of the 3rd century and the early 6th century. The cultural situation of north-eastern Poland in the Pre-Roman and Roman periods remains insufficiently recognised. Excavations carried out over the past dozen years have revealed many settlements related to the local culture group of the Hatched Pottery Culture and the Wielbark Culture, with some influences flowing from the post-Zarubintsy circle. In the course of the excavations, no human bones were found which would unambiguously confirm the sepulchral function of the mound. The Sacharewo mound is a part of a wider category of objects known from throughout the Białowieża Forest in which no bones were discovered but only fragments of clay vessels or charcoal layers.

Keywords: cemetery, mounds, Roman Period, Białowieża Primeval Forest, Wielbark culture, post-Zarubintsy culture

Leśnictwo Sacharewo Site 3 is located in compartment 413A of the Białowieża Forest, in the bifurcation of the Leśna Prawa River and an unnamed creek (Fig. 1). It is located c. 300 m south-east of the Sacharewo forester's lodge. The site consists of ten earth mounds located within an area of c. 1 ha (Figs 1.3, 2). The features are scattered over the length of c. 145 m and do not create a clear layout. The particular mounds are located at a distance of 10 to 45 m from each other. Their diameters range from 7 to 12 m and heights from 0.3 to 1.0 m (Figs 2–4). There are no circular trenches or stone structures visible on the surface. Only at the eastern edge of the furthest mound no. 7 a large pit was recorded.

The described site, as a cluster of eight mounds, was documented for the first time in 1996, when an inventory of mounds located in the Białowieża Primeval Forest was drawn.¹ In 2015, this area was included in a field survey of the Polish Archaeological Record (in Polish: *Archeologiczne Zdjęcie Polski – AZP*), as a result of which the ninth mound was discovered.² Re-verification of the site was performed in the autumn of 2016,³ during an expedition of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw carried out as a part of the project 'Inventory of Cultural Heritage of the Białowieża Primeval Forest'.⁴ In four mounds (nos 2, 3, 5, and 7), drillings were carried out with a geological drill. On their basis, it was found that the mounds were made of light-brown-yellow sand and did not have stone mantles or clear charcoal layers. In 2017, to the east of the mound no. 3, one more low mound (no. 10), covered with dense vegetation, was recorded.

The excavation, led by D. Krasnodębski, was carried out in September and October 2017 as a part of the project 'Cultural and Natural Heritage of the Białowieża Primeval Forest' implemented by the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw in cooperation with the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw.⁵ The mound no. 3, with a diameter of c. 9 m and a relative height of c. 0.7 m, located on the northern edge of the site, was chosen for research (Fig. 2). Its choice was decided based on the availability of the area, i.e. the lack of trees growing on the entire mound. In the north-western quarter of the object, a trench of 5 × 5 m has been marked out.

After the removal of the plant litter and modern humus (Layer 1), the shape of the mound was exposed. It

was made of light-brown-yellow sand (Layers 2 and 3) with individual charcoals. This layer was about 0.6 m thick (Figs 5, 6.1–2). On the basis of its range, it can be assumed that the original diameter of the mound was c. 8 m. On its bottom, there were thin layers (c. 0.1 m thick) with numerous ferruginous precipitations: light-brown and light-grey sand (Layer 9) and spotted light-brown sand (Layer 11). The large amount of charcoals present in Layer 9 indicates that organic material was burned at this point. Below them, a horizon of buried soil formed of light-brown-yellow sand (Layer 12) with a thickness of c. 0.2 m was revealed. At the edge of the mound, this layer was removed. In this place, as well as on the slope of the mound, there was light grey sand (Layer 6), which can be interpreted as a slope-wash brought down from the upper part of the mound.

Directly under Layers 6 and 12, there was light-yellow natural sand (Layer 7) containing numerous clusters of stones with diameters of up to c. 0.25 m. A geological consultation confirmed the non-anthropogenic provenance of these 'pavements' and their relation with the post-glacial basin.⁶ At the border of the original mound range, under the slope-wash layer no. 6, a post-hole was discovered (feature no. 14). The feature was c. 0.20–0.25 m in diameter and c. 0.1 m deep (Fig. 6.1). It was filled with light-brown sand (Layer 13).

As a result of the research, 39 potsherds were obtained. Most of them were found inside the mound (Layers 2 and 3 – 22 fragments) and in the slope-wash deposits located on the edge of the mound (Layer 6 – 10 fragments). The modern humus (Layer 1) yielded three potsherds, whereas the buried soil (Layers 9, 11, and 12) – four potsherds. The set is dominated by parts of bodies (32 fragments), with only six fragments classified as rims and one as a bottom (Fig. 7).

The pottery is characterised by a high degree of fragmentation⁷ and erosion. The largest share in the collection constitute potsherds of size category II with the length of 2 to 5 cm – 33 sherds (about 85%). Category III included six small fragments up to 2 cm long. There were no specimens of size category I, i.e. of a length of more than 5 cm. Traces of erosion were recorded on the surfaces of 29 potsherds (74%). On the walls of two of them, traces of secondary burning are visible. On the surface of the same number of fragments, there were traces of use in the form of residues of burned substances, probably of organic origin.

¹ Oszmiański 1996, no. 57.

² Siemaszko 2015, AZP site no. 46-91/3.

³ The research was financed by the General Directorate of State Forests in Warsaw.

⁴ Krasnodębski, Olczak 2017, 5–63.

⁵ The project is financed by the National Science Centre, Ministry of Science and Higher Education – UMO-2016/20/W/H/33/0059. Its leader is Prof. dr hab. P. Urbańczyk.

⁶ Scientific consultation with M. Stepaniuk, PhD.

⁷ The degree of vessel fragmentation was determined using a simplified version of A. Buko's method developed for early medieval ceramics (Buko 1990, 235).

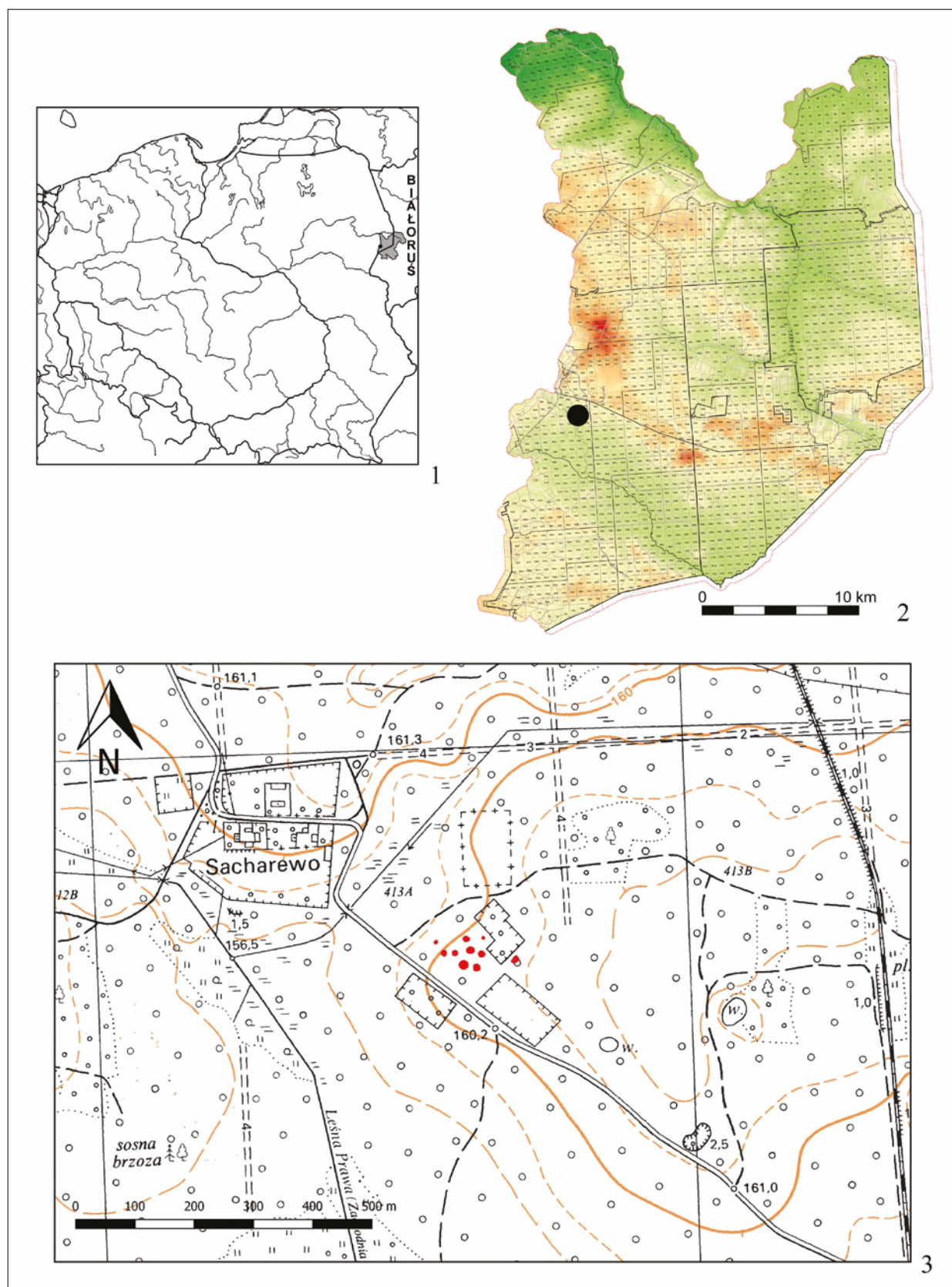


Fig. 1. Białowieża Forest (compartment 413A), Leśnictwo Sacharewo Site 3. Location of the research area: 1. Situational sketch with an indication of the Białowieża Forest area; 2. Location of the site on the map of the Białowieża Forest (map source: IBL in Sękocin Stary); 3. Situational plan of the site (on the basis of a 1:10 000 map). Compiled by M. Jakubczak and K. Niedziółka.

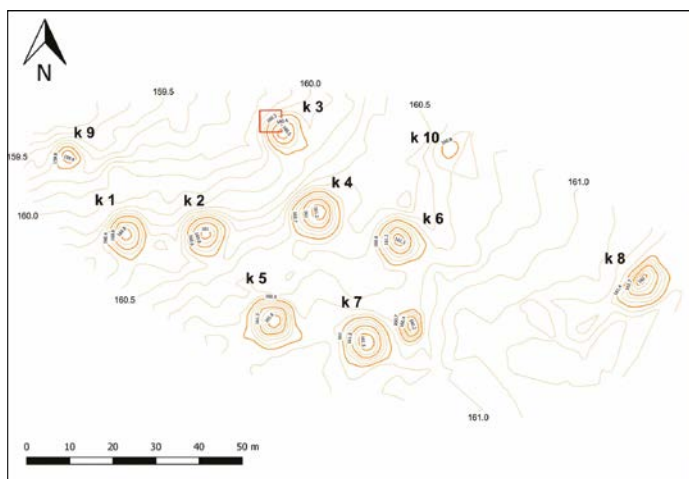


Fig. 2. Białowieża Forest (compartment 413A), Leśnictwo Sacharewo Site 3. A contour plan of the site. Drawing by M. Jakubczak and K. Niedziółka.

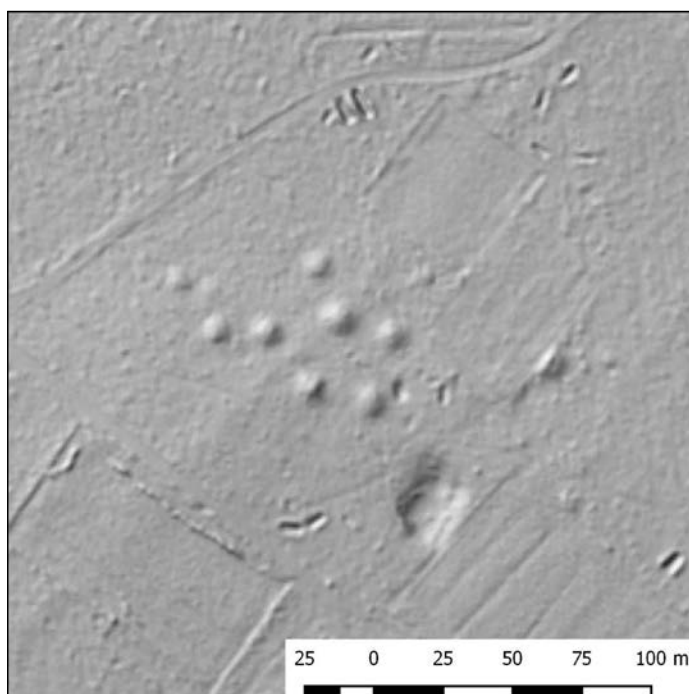


Fig. 3. Białowieża Forest, Leśnictwo Sacharewo Site 3. LiDAR view, source: Head Office of Geodesy and Cartography.

Ferruginous clays, most probably obtained from local glacial deposits,⁸ were used for the vessels. An analysis of the chemical composition indicates significant homogeneity of the pottery fabric.⁹ In all the analysed samples high content of iron trioxide and a low proportion

of calcium oxide were found, which indicates the use of desalinated clay, presumably as a result of weathering. These parameters are similar to the results of the chemical composition analysis of vessels from other prehistoric sites located in the Białowieża Forest.¹⁰

⁸ The ground in this area was formed during the middle and late Warta Glaciation stages (Krzywicki 2010, 142–144; Krzywicki, Pielach 2010).

⁹ The analysis of the seven samples (CL19875–19881) was conducted by E. Pawlicka at the Central Bio-Archaeometric Laboratory of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology, Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw. A scanning microscope VEGA TS5135MM by TESCAN and an X-ray fluorescence

spectrometer PGT PRISM 2000 by Princeton Gamma-Tech Inc. were used in combination with the Spirit software and the digital AVALON 8000. The results were discussed in Olczak 2018.

¹⁰ The results of the analyses are kept in the Central Bio-Archaeometry Laboratory of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw.

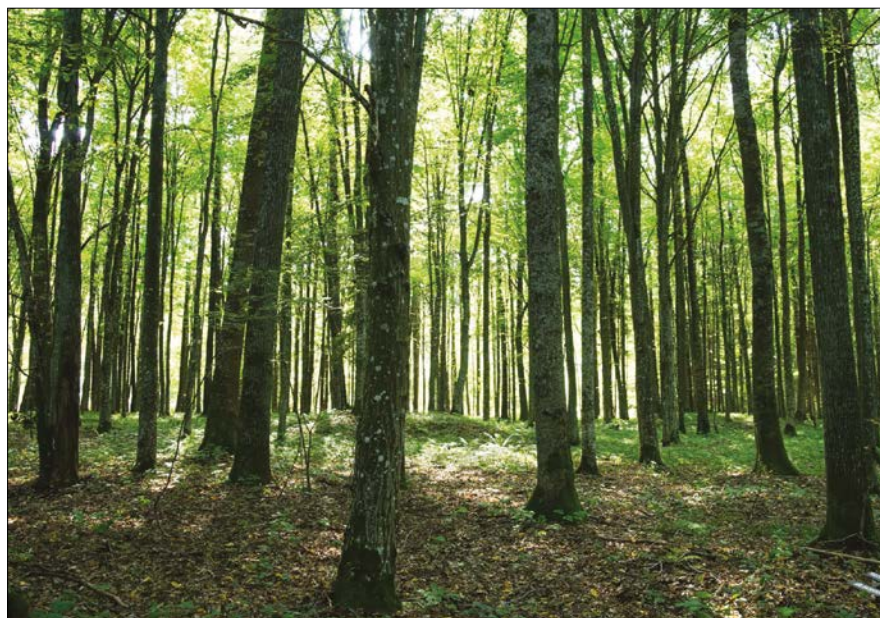


Fig. 4. Białowieża Forest (compartment 413A), Leśnictwo Sacharewo Site 3. General view of the site from the north (September 2017). Photo by J. Mizerka.



Fig. 5. Białowieża Forest (compartment 413A), Leśnictwo Sacharewo Site 3, the mound no. 3. Excavations after removing Layer 6 – visible mound bank (Layer 3). Photo by D. Krasnodębski.

On the basis of a microscopic photography analysis, it can be assumed that a weakly-sanded clay, tempered with crushed stone, probably granite, was used in the production of the vast majority of the vessels (Fig. 8.1–2). Only in the case of one potsherd a large amount of sand was noted in the fabric, which was either added as a temper or was a natural inclusion in the clay (Fig. 8.3). In the tempering material white quartz prevails, while the grains with pink or dark pink colour (probably feldspar) and mica are less common. The granulometry of the temper varies. Three groups of temper sizes were separated: a) fine-grained – with the grain diameter below 0.1 cm (five fragments); b) medium-

grained – with the grain diameter between 0.1 and 0.2 cm (24 fragments); c) coarse – with the grain diameter above 0.2 cm (10 fragments). In the last group, the size of the grains usually does not exceed 0.3 cm, and large rock fragments (0.5–0.8 cm in diameter) were found only in a few sherds, which attests to the careful preparation of the fabric.

The colour of the sherds' external surfaces is usually orange, less often brown, dark brown, or black, which proves that the firing conditions varied. Most fragments originate from vessels fired in an atmosphere characterised – at least at the final stage of this process – by free access of oxygen, but the presence of a small number of

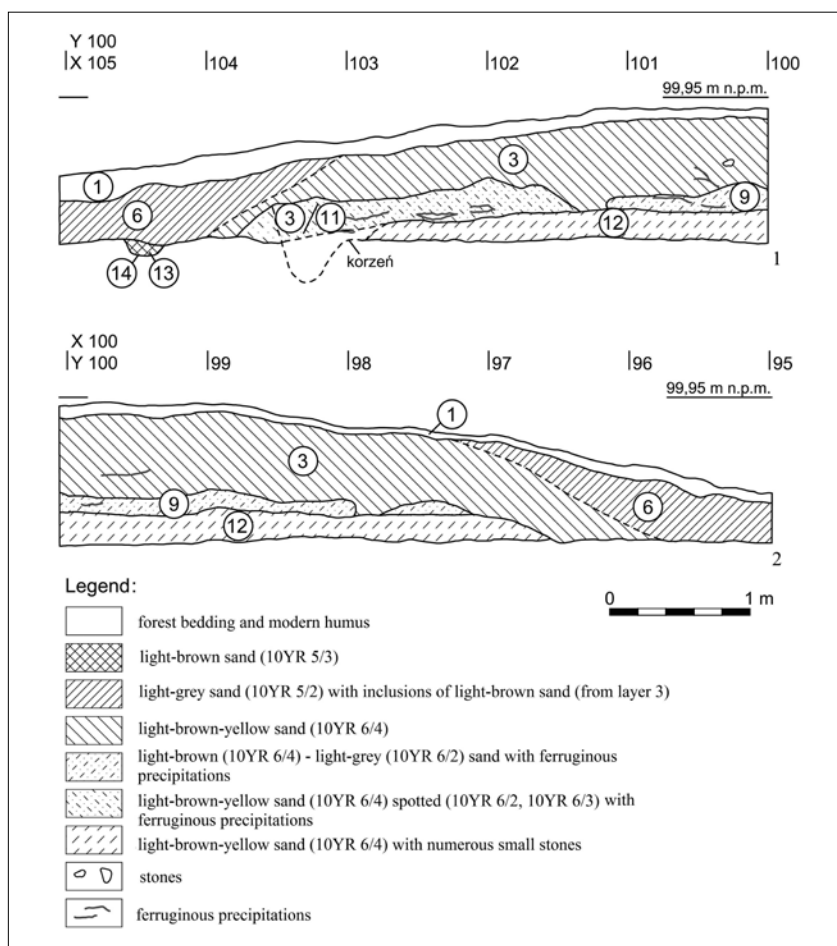


Fig. 6. Białowieża Forest (compartment 413A), Leśnictwo Sacharewo Site 3, the mound no. 3. Eastern (1) and southern (2) section of the trench. Drawing by Z. Tragarz.

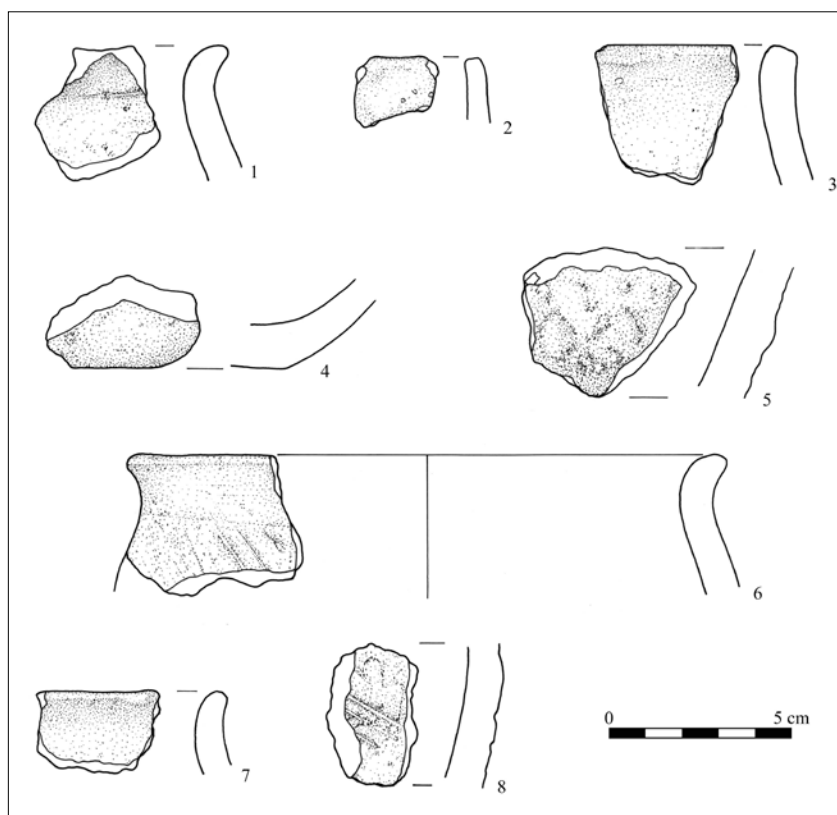


Fig. 7. Białowieża Forest (compartment 413A), Leśnictwo Sacharewo Site 3, the mound no. 3. Selection of ceramics: 1-4. Layer 3; 5-8. Layer 6. Drawing by G. Nowakowska and H. Olczak.

specimens of black colour and uniform sections may indicate the use of firing in the reduction atmosphere too. The higher frequency of the multi-coloured cross sections than of the single colour ones is clearly visible.

In the discussed collection, hand-made vessels characterised by different ways of finishing the external surface can be distinguished. The largest group consists of potsherds with roughened surface (Fig. 7.5, 8). It consists of 18 sherds, which constitutes *c.* 48% of all the classified material. Their outer surface, most often of an orange colour, was probably covered with a solution of runny clay, sometimes with the addition of crushed stone. In a few cases, irregular lines are visible on the ceramic walls, and these were probably created as a result of processing with a sharp tool, for example a comb or a so-called wisp (Fig. 7.8). The inner surfaces of the vessels were usually dark brown or black (two-coloured cross sections), usually carefully smoothed and sometimes even polished. A moderately-grained, or rarely coarse, temper was added to the clay. The majority of the roughened sherds originate from thick-walled vessels with wall thickness measuring from 0.8 to 1.3 cm.

Potsherds with slightly smoothed (rough) surfaces constitute *c.* 29% of the total (11 fragments; Fig. 7.1–3, 6, 7). Some of them bear visible traces of processing with a so-called wisp, comb, or burin (Fig. 7.1, 6). The sherds vary in terms of their surface colour (from orange to black) and cross sections' colour (different types, with a predominance of multi-coloured). A single fragment is characterised by a fine-grained, while the rest by medium and coarse-grained, temper. The thickness of the walls measures between 0.5 and 0.9 cm.

The smallest group consists of fragments with carefully smoothed or polished outer surfaces (eight sherds – 21%, Fig. 7.4). Most of them originate from fine ware of thin to medium wall thickness measuring 0.5–0.8 cm and in the near-bottom part 1.2 cm. In general, they are black or dark brown, which indicates the preference for firing in – or close to – the reduction atmosphere. The ceramic fabric contains additions of fine or medium-grained crushed stone. There are two fragments of orange colour and medium and coarse temper originating from thick-walled vessel 0.9–1.0 cm thick.

The scarcity of the ceramic material and the high degree of its fragmentation make the stylistic analysis impossible. The discussed collection contains fragments of fine pottery with carefully smoothed or polished surfaces, as well as the so-called kitchenware with roughened or

smoothed walls. More characteristic are three fragments of the vessel's upper parts with everted rims and rounded or slightly bevelled edges (Fig. 7.6–7). One of them is a part of a medium-sized pot *c.* 14–18 cm in diameter (Fig. 7.6). Another fragment is characterised by a nearly vertical neck and diagonally cut-off rim (Fig. 7.3). Another fragment is a part of a vessel with an inverted upper part and possibly ovoid or hemispherical shape (Fig. 7.2). The only found bottom fragment originates from fine ware and is 1.1 cm thick (Fig. 7.4). On its bottom side, crushed stone with a granulation of *c.* 0.15 cm is preserved. There are some decorated vessel fragments in the collection, and the lines visible on some of them should be treated as one of the methods of surface finishing (Fig. 7.8).

The technological and stylistic features of the discussed vessels are typical for pottery from a wide range of time, including the Pre-Roman Period and the Roman Period. Indication of their precise dating and determination of their cultural affiliation are difficult due not only to the small size of the collection but also to the lack of well-dated comparative materials from the Białowieża Forest and its surroundings.

The cultural situation in this part of north-eastern Poland in the Pre-Roman and Roman periods remains poorly recognised.¹¹ Excavations carried out over the past dozen years in this area have revealed many settlements related to the local culture group of the Hatched Pottery Culture, which most probably lasted until the beginning of the Late Roman Period.¹² A settlement of this cultural circle has also been registered in the Białowieża Forest.¹³ In the Late Roman Period, this area was within the range of the Wielbark Culture settlement. Several sites, mainly burial grounds of the so-called Cecele Phase, are scattered on the edge of the Białowieża Forest, including the localities of Kutowa, Kotłówka, Kuraszewo, and Szczyty-Dzięciołowo.¹⁴ The remains of settlements and the burial grounds of the Wielbark Culture are also known from several sites in the Białowieża Forest.¹⁵ In recent years, much attention has also been paid to influences flowing from the post-Zarubintsy circle.¹⁶ The nearest site from which the materials of this culture originate is Kutowa, located less than 20 km to the north-west of Sacharewo.¹⁷

A serious problem is still the lack of well-identified settlements and published ceramic materials from that period, which makes any comparative studies practically impossible. Considering that in the discussed collection there are no potsherds with a hatched surface, there is no

¹¹ Andrzejowski 1999; Dąbrowska 2008.

¹² For further literature, see Olczak 2009.

¹³ Olczak *et al.* 2018.

¹⁴ Jażdżewski 1939; Jaskanis 1963; 1970; 2012.

¹⁵ Dzierżykray-Rogalski, Jaskanis 1961; Krasnodębski *et al.* 2008.

¹⁶ Andrzejowski 1999, 32–37, 41–47; for further literature, see Dąbrowska 2004.

¹⁷ Andrzejowski 1999, 42; Jaskanis 2012, 137, 181.

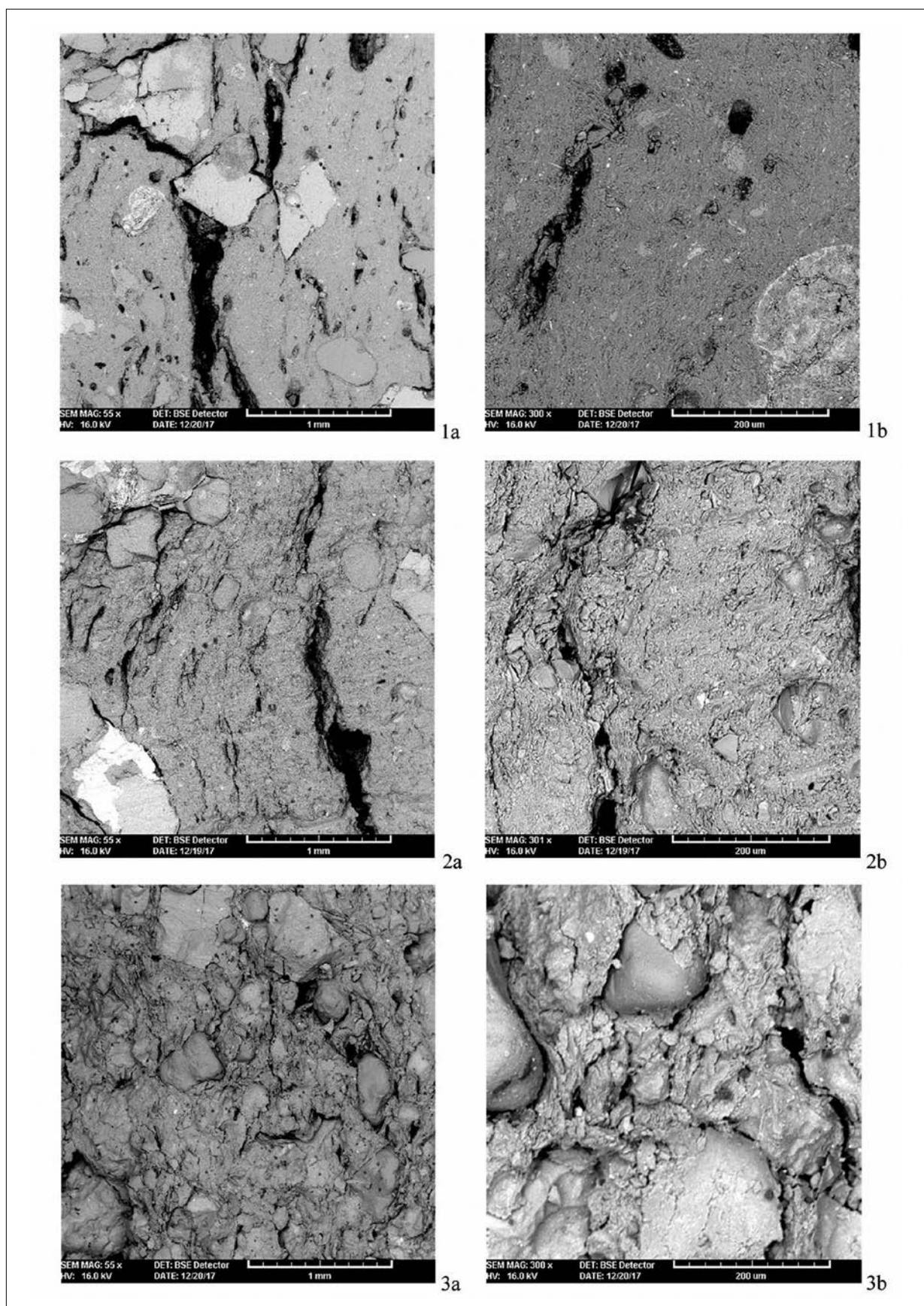


Fig. 8. Białowieża Forest (compartment 413A), Leśnictwo Sacharewo Site 3, the mound no. 3. Microscopic photography of ceramic microsections: 1. CL19879; 2. CL19876; 3. CL19880. Photos by E. Pawlicka.

Tab. 1. Results of a radiocarbon analysis of charcoal.

Sample	¹⁴ C age (BP)	Calibrated age (68.2%)	Calibrated age (95.4%)	Lab. code
1	1655±30	AD 352 (13.1%) AD 367 AD 380 (55.1%) AD 421	AD 262 (2.0%) AD 277 AD 328 (87.9%) AD 431 AD 492 (5.6%) AD 530	Poz-96964
2	1600±30	AD 411 (18.4%) AD 435 AD 452 (11.6%) AD 471 AD 487 (38.2%) AD 534	AD 399 (95.4%) AD 539	Poz-99169
3	1567±25	AD 430 (55.3%) AD 493 AD 511 (5.7%) AD 518 AD 529 (7.2%) AD 537	AD 421 (95.4%) AD 550	MKL-A3872

evidence for its connection with the local group of the Hatched Pottery Culture.¹⁸ There were also no explicit references to the Wielbark Culture pottery; although in this case, again, the small size of the collection and the lack of characteristic sherds made it difficult to reach any final conclusions. The technological features of the studied pottery, mainly the method of surface finishing (irregular lines applied with a wisp, burin, or comb) but also the shape of the upper parts of the best-preserved vessels, may indicate some references to the pottery of the post-Zarubintsy circle.¹⁹ The pottery from Sacharewo cannot be considered a typical material of this culture because of the lack of such features as incisions on the edges of the rims or a comb ornament, which are typical both for vessels from the Podlasie area²⁰ and Belarusian Polesie.²¹ Among the sites located at the edge of the Białowieża Forest, stylistically and technologically similar pottery, also without clear attributes allowing its cultural identification, was found at the settlement in Szczyty-Dzięciołowo, Site 1, Bielski Podlaski district.²²

In general, at this stage of research, the pottery from the discussed site can be dated to the Roman Period. Thanks to the ¹⁴C analysis of a charcoal sample taken from the mound, it was possible to narrow down the

chronology of the site to the Late Roman Period. With the obtained result of 1655±30 BP, the calibrated age of the sample ranges from the second half of the 3rd century to the early 6th century, with the highest probability for the time-period between the 4th century and the first quarter of the 5th century (Tab. 1).²³ An analysis of two other samples, taken from the bottom of the mound, yielded slightly younger radiocarbon age: 1600±30 BP²⁴ and 1567±25 BP.²⁵ After the calibration, dates ranging from the turn of the 4th and 5th centuries to the second quarter of the 6th century and from the second quarter of the 5th century to the mid-6th century were obtained.²⁶

The excavations at Leśnictwo Sacharewo Site 3 are a contribution to understanding the settlement of the Białowieża Forest. Partial exploration of one of the ten earth mounds, however, does not allow to clearly determine the site's chronology and function. It was found that the mound had been erected directly on the ground which had earlier been cleared, with its vegetation burned away. The lack of buried soil around the mounds indicates that it was built from the material collected in the immediate vicinity. As a result of the research, no bone fragments were found that could unambiguously confirm the sepulchral function of the mound. The poor state of preservation of the vessels and the spatial distribution of

¹⁸ In the case of the best-recognised Podlasie sites of this cultural circle, the share of hatched surface pottery is usually at least a dozen or so percent (see Olczak 2009, Fig. 1).

¹⁹ We would like to thank Dr V. Belavec for this suggestion.

²⁰ See *i.a.* Andrzejowski 1999, Fig. 12.2–7.

²¹ Belavec 2016, *cf.* Figs 3 and 6.

²² Olczak 2015.

²³ Dating was conducted at the Poznań Radiocarbon Laboratory (Laboratory code Poz-96964). After the calibration, the ranges obtained with a probability of 68.2% were 352 AD (13.1%) 367 AD, 380 AD (55.1%) 421 AD; and with a probability of 95.4% – 262 AD (2.0%) 277 AD, 328 AD (87.9%) 431 AD, 492 AD (5.6%) 530 AD.

²⁴ The analysis was conducted at the Poznań Radiocarbon Laboratory (Laboratory code Poz-99169). After the calibration, the ranges obtained with a probability of 68.2% were 411 AD (18.4%) 435 AD, 452 AD (11.6%) 471 AD, and 487 AD (38.2%) 534 AD; and with a probability of 95.4% – 399 AD–539 AD.

²⁵ Dating has been conducted at the Absolute Dating Laboratory in Cianowice Małe (Laboratory code MKL-A3872). After the calibration, the ranges obtained with a probability of 68.2% were 430 AD (55.3%) 493 AD, 511 AD (5.7%) 518 AD, 529 AD (7.2%) 537 AD; and with a probability of 95.4% – 421 AD–550 AD.

²⁶ Krasnodębski *et al.* 2018.

the pottery fragments allows for the assumption that the discovered ceramic materials were not directly related to the time of the mound's construction but were found in a secondary context. However, it is also possible that some fragments could have been intentionally deposited in the mound. This is indicated by a relatively large number of sherds obtained from it in comparison with the small number of findings originating from the buried soil. In the vicinity of the site, no settlement has been discovered so far from which the ceramic material could have reached the mound.

The Sacharewo mound is one of many constructions of this type known from the Białowieża Forest. Two other similar features have been excavated at Leśnictwo Postołowo Sites 4 and 5 by the researchers from the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology of the Polish Academy of Sciences. Like the Sacharewo mound, these other two mounds also contained no human bones but only fragments of clay vessels.²⁷ From the first mound, which is c. 0.5–0.7 m high, approximately 100 pieces of pottery were obtained. Besides these, on the edge of the mound and in a small pit dug under it, the remains of two vessels were discovered. Based on the ¹⁴C analyses, the mound should probably be dated to the period between the 3rd century and the beginning of the 6th century.²⁸ From the second site, where a mound c. 1 m high was partially excavated, originate several fragments of prehistoric ceramics and a fragmentarily preserved pottery vessel from the early phase of the Early Middle Ages. The vessel was discovered at the bottom of a shallow ditch surrounding the mound. Radiocarbon dating²⁹ indicates that the mound was probably erected in the period

between the end of the 3rd and the beginning of the 6th century. During the initial phase of this period, the areas of eastern Mazowsze and Podlasie were under the influence of the Wielbark Culture. What is important, one of the grave-forms characteristic for this culture were stone and earth mounds containing cremation or inhumation burials.³⁰ However, in the light of the information obtained during the study of the mound in Sacharewo, it seems unlikely that these mounds could be associated with the graves of the Rostółki type.³¹

In some mounds investigated in the Białowieża Primeval Forest, no archaeological materials were discovered at all, except for charcoal. These included several mounds excavated at the beginning of the 20th century by Alfred Götze³² and in the 1960s and 1970s by Tadeusz Żurowski³³ and Irena Górka.³⁴ So far, no convincing hypothesis has been formulated about their function and chronology. It is worth mentioning that in 2016 radiocarbon analyses were carried out for some mounds which had not been excavated. The results of the dating of four objects located in different parts of the Białowieża Forest point to the Roman Period, perchance to the turn of Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages.³⁵

Based on the results of the investigation of one of the ten earth mounds located at Site 3 in Leśnictwo Sacharewo, it can be concluded that with the current state of research it is difficult to determine the function and chronology of the site. Dating the mounds to the Late Roman Period is hypothetical. The alleged sepulchral function of the investigated mound has also not been confirmed, which may be the result of excavating only one quadrant of this object.

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²⁷ Krasnołębski, Olczak 2016.

²⁸ Laboratory codes Poz-87563 and Poz-87566.

²⁹ Laboratory codes Poz-87564 and Poz-87567.

³⁰ Cieśliński 2014, 50.

³¹ Cieśliński 2014, 66.

³² Götze 1929, 525, 531, 541.

³³ Żurowski 1963.

³⁴ Górka 1973; 1976, 117–128.

³⁵ These are the mounds located at the sites of Leśnictwo Krynoczek Site 3 (compartment 387C, D), Leśnictwo Łączyń Site 8 (compartment 41D), and Leśnictwo Olchówka Site 3 (compartment 49B). The analyses were carried out at the Poznań Radiocarbon Laboratory (Laboratory codes Poz-9871, Poz-88867, Poz-88877, and Poz-88883).

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