

Boundaries in Death: Deviant Burials and Mortuary Practices of Slavic Cultural Origin

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Abstract

The goal of this presentation is to analyze the ways in which beliefs surrounding death and mortuary practices were changed in the Medieval period by the introduction of Christianity to Slavic cultures—focusing primarily on Poland and atypical burials. Firstly, understanding pre-Christian Slavic beliefs and cultural practices while focusing on mortuary practices gives critical context to post-Christian beliefs. We will be looking at pre-Christian death practices and standard burials post introduction to establish what was culturally typical so that we may then delve into what constitutes an atypical burial. We will also be discussing the religio-cultural changes caused by Christianity and the ways in which these changes provide insight into how that evolving belief system influenced what constituted deaths deemed deviant and their corresponding burials. Superstition, religion, and societal boundaries are ever present pieces of these deviant deaths. Understanding these deaths help us understand life and culture in medieval Poland.

Background

Pre-Christian Poland was a pagan culture that cremated their dead and buried their ashes in urns and pottery vessels. There is evidence of shifts towards burial practices in Scandinavian burials found in Poland before the unification of Poland under its first king Mieszko I, and the introduction of Christianity—due to trade and cultural interaction between the Slavic tribes and Scandinavians and these did influence some pre-Christian burials through the introduction of burial and grave goods accompanying the bodies in the 6th-7th centuries. However, the cultural shift in mortuary practices from cremation to burial lies in the unification of Poland and the conversion to Christianity in the 9th century. The 7th-11th centuries hold a wide variety of examples of burials during this transitional time. The standard Christian burial practice was to bury the dead in the supine position with the head facing East or West. Atypical burials fall outside this standard burial practice and have a wide variety of types and reasons behind them. From judicially based burials to reasons rooted in pre-Christian pagan folk belief each atypical burial is unique and should be analyzed as such.

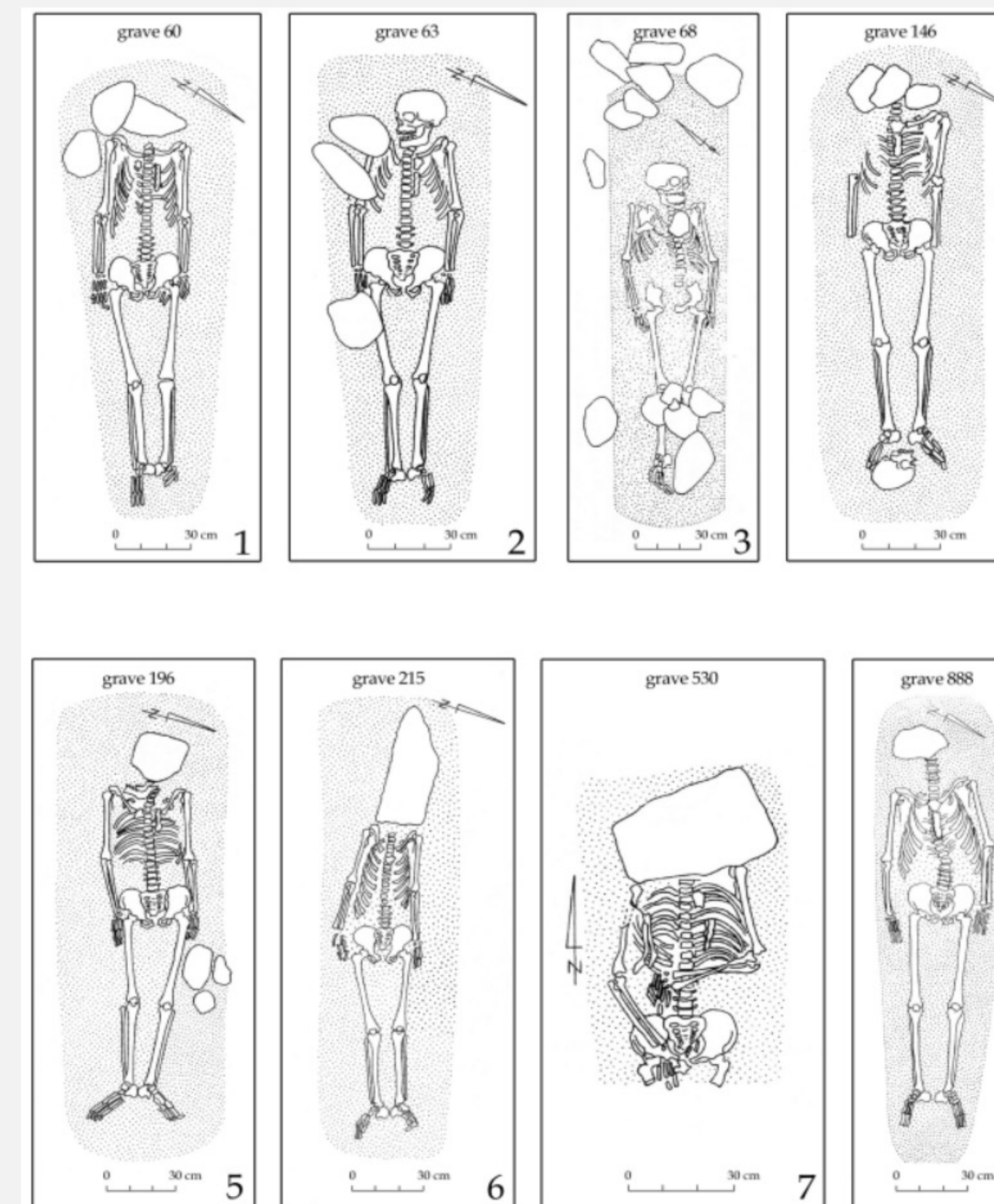
Atypical Burial Definition & Categories

Edeltraud Aspöck (2008, 17) “ [...] the minimal definition of “deviant burials” that most archaeologists would agree to is that they are burials different from the normative burial ritual of the respective period, region and/or cemetery. These differences may occur in body position or treatment, location or construction of the grave or types of grave goods.”

Quote pulled from Gardela 2015, *Vampire Burials in Medieval Poland*

Leszek Gardela pulls from Zydok's (2004, 44) work to form a list of the categories of atypical burials that have been found in Poland and other Slavic regions;

- Decapitated burials (sometimes with the skull placed between the legs)
- Perforated/pierced skulls (with a sharp instrument, perhaps an iron nail)
- Knives, stakes or other sharp objects stuck in the body
- Stones, clay or coins in the mouth of the deceased
- Prone burials
- Stoned burials (large stones placed directly on the body)
- Flexed burials (fetal position)
- Burials of individuals with cut off or broken limbs
- Burials in marginal areas
- Lack of grave goods
- Unusual orientation of the grave
- Partial cremation
- Reopened burials

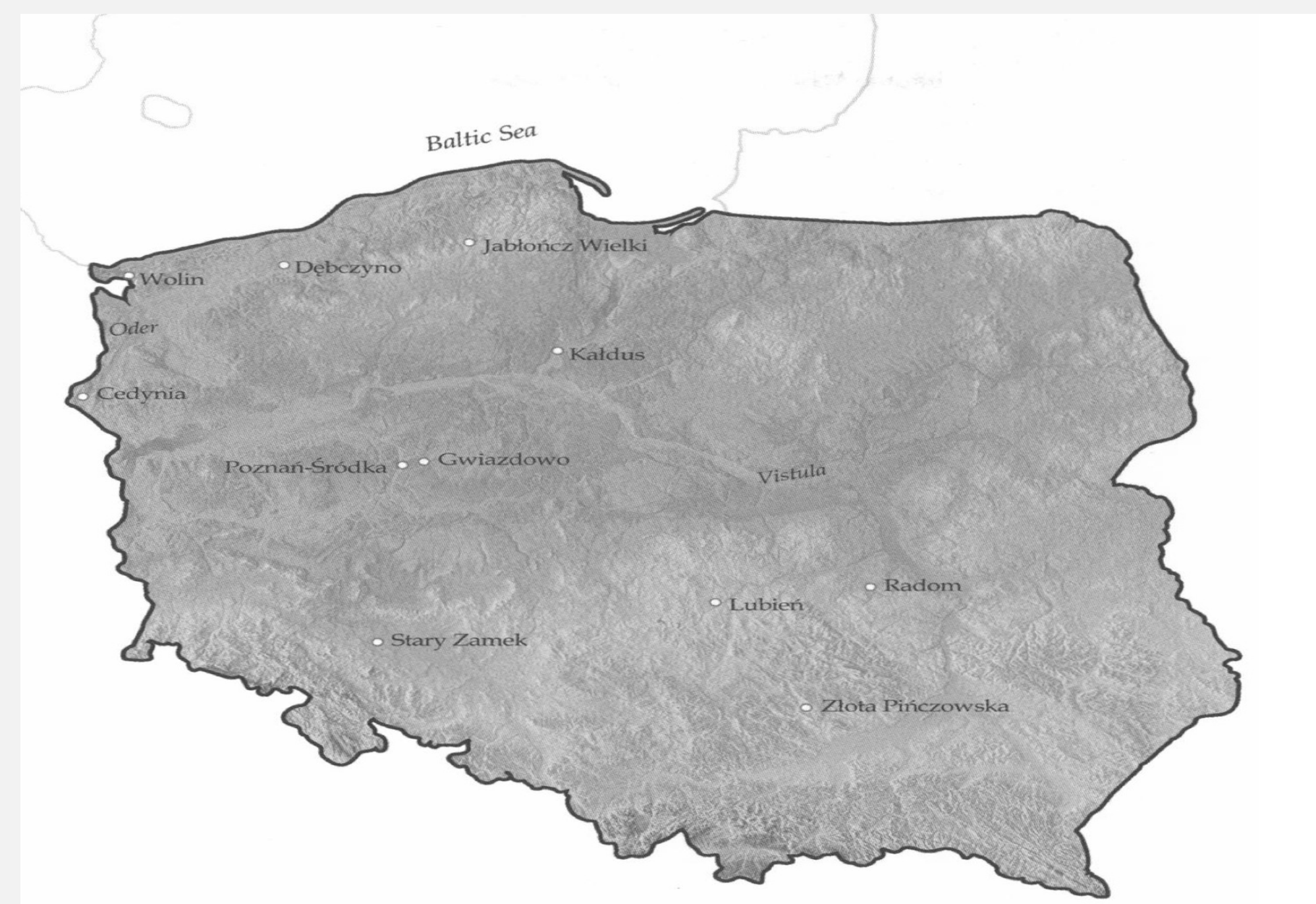


“Selection of graves from Cedyňa with stones placed directly on the deceased or where stones substitute for the head. Reproduced after Porzeziński 2008, 24, 27–28, 30–32, 35.”
Gardela, 2015 *Vampire Burials in Medieval Poland: An Overview of Past Controversies and Recent Reevaluations*



Artistic reconstruction of grave 146 from the cemetery in Cedyňa. Illustration by Mirosław Kuźma. Commissioned by Leszek Gardela. © Leszek Gardela and Mirosław Kuźma, 2015

Gardela, 2015 *Vampire Burials in Medieval Poland: An Overview of Past Controversies and Recent Reevaluations*



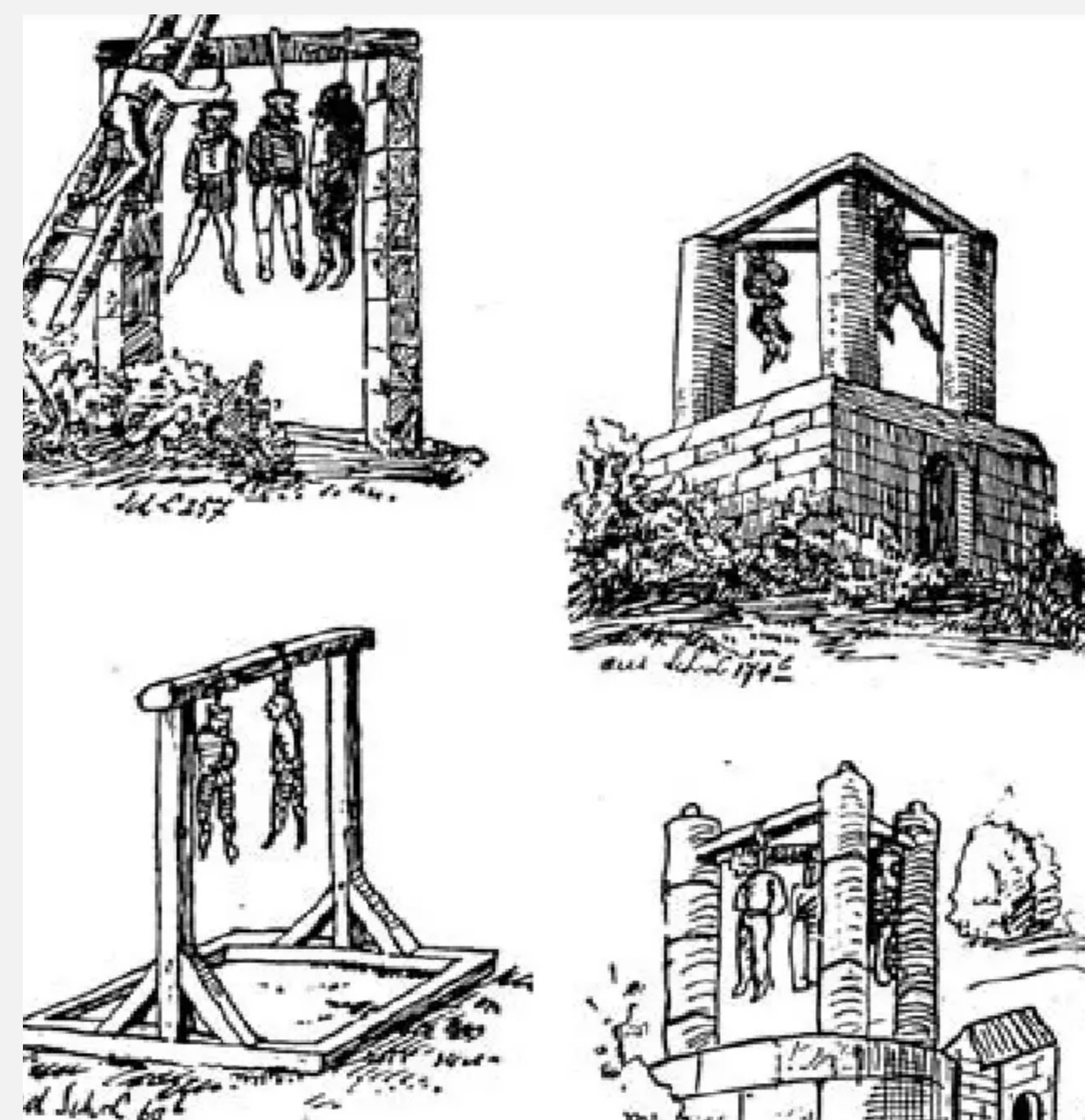
“Map of Poland with the locations of archaeological sites including deviant burials mentioned in this article (map by Leszek Gardela)”

Gardela & Kajkowski 2013, *Vampires, criminals or slaves? Reinterpreting ‘deviant burials’ in early medieval Poland*

This map provides an excellent source of the distribution of atypical burials from the Medieval period in Poland

Analysis

Atypical or ‘Deviant’ burials from the Medieval age in Poland are the result of a unique mix of pagan belief, the transition towards a Christian kingdom, and capital punishment. Many of the examples we have of burials that have been deemed ‘anti-vampire’ upon discovery categorically have the same characteristics as burials that were the result of execution—folk belief and superstitious practices of making sure that the dead ‘stay dead’ after burial have a great amount of overlap with ways in which the corpse of the executed were treated. Prone burials could be to make sure the revenant couldn’t dig themselves out of their grave or it could have been carelessness and disrespect of the body of an executed criminal dumped into their final resting place. Decapitation of the corpse and burying the skull separately could be measures to kill a Striga and prevent it from preying on the community or it could be the result of the head of a convict being displayed as a warning against future crime that was buried with or separately from the rest of the body after the head had rotted beyond the ability for display. Partial cremation could be leftover practices from the pagan era of Poland. These burials have multiple angles to view them from. Culture, religion, and superstition intersect to provide a glimpse into the shifting Medieval period.

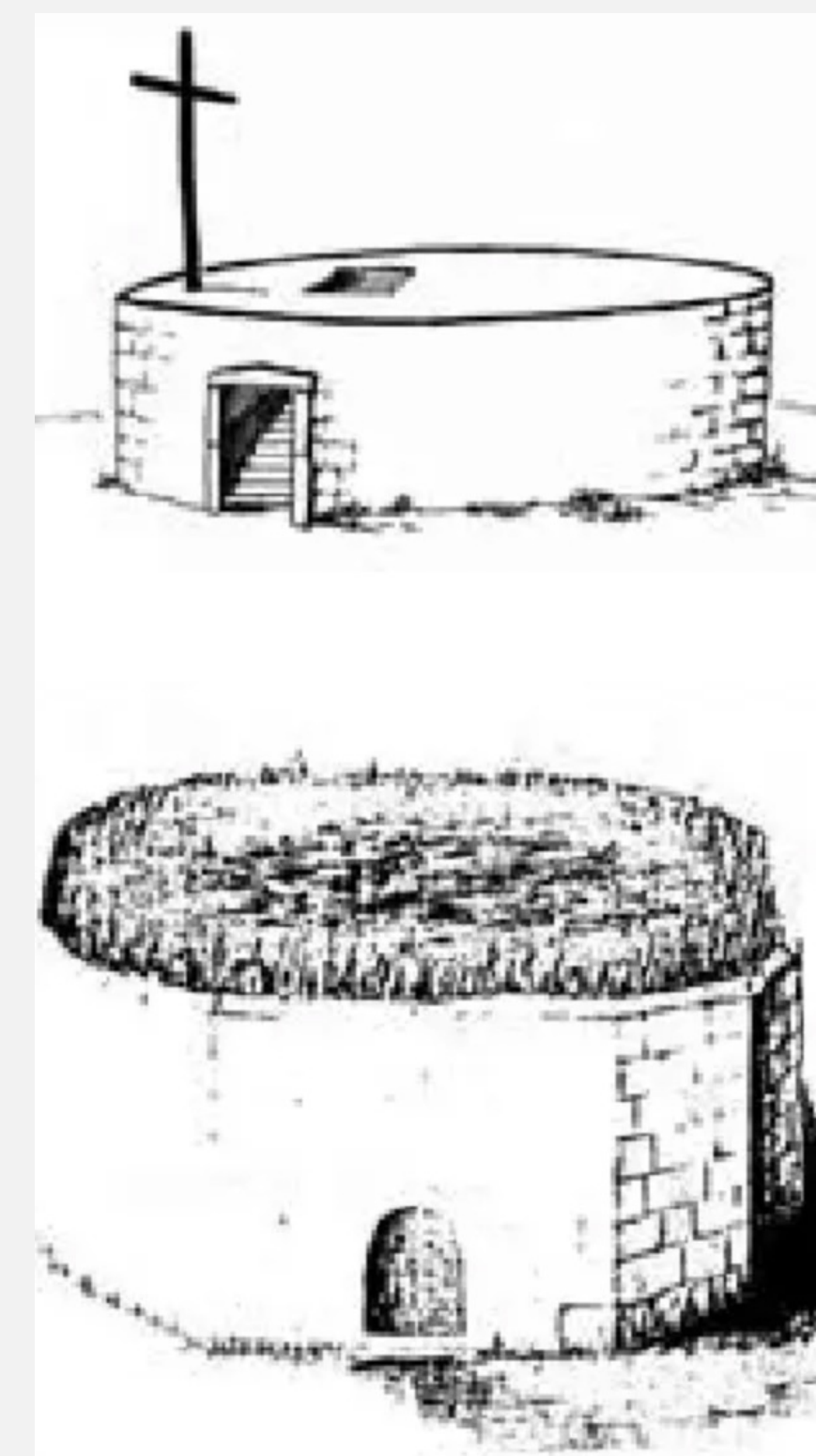


Places of Judicial Execution: Rabenstein & Gallows

“According to U. Kühn, it was an object made in a form a brick round or square platform with an entrance on which executions were carried out (155). The name of this object is basically untranslatable, and its origin should be seen from the real ravens pecking corpses of convicts left on the execution wheels, as well as this object was a place of their existence—Stein oder Ort wo die Rabenhausen (stone or place where the ravens dwell). Hence this stone scaffold can literally be called “raven stone”—Rabenstein. From Raben, reb, clearing = Rabe, and the noun Stein was used to mean a brick building (156). Fig. No. 34”

The Gallows (as seen on the left) and the Rabenstein (as seen on the right) were important pieces of Medieval justice in Poland. Convicts were publicly executed and often public left to rot as a warning against crime and sin. The connection between religion and justice was often blurry—the connection between burial practices of the dishonored dead in capital punishment and burial of the dead in cases of fear of the supernatural even more so.

Quote and pictures pulled from Wojtucki 2009, *Public places of execution in Lower Silesia from the 15th to the mid-19th century*



Citations

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(ask to see printed copy of continued citations)