

Bogumiła Wolska¹

(Review) Joanna Zagórska-Telega, *Obrządek pogrzebowy ludności kultury przeworskiej nadlisswarciańskiego regionu osadniczego w młodszym i późnym okresie rzymskim* (= *Opera Archaeologiae Iagellonicae* 4). Kraków 2019: Uniwersytet Jagielloński Instytut Archeologii, Towarzystwo Wydawnicze „Historia Iagellonica”, 282 pp.

The discoveries made in the Liswarta basin have been of special importance for research on the archaeology of the Roman Period in Poland. The uniqueness of this region, which probably results from numerous years of fieldwork, is manifested by the diversity of sepulchral features of the Przeworsk culture communities, and also by several items uncovered in them. The analysis of such material from Opatów 1 – the largest and fully excavated cemetery of those people located in the area discussed – constituted the background for the relative chronology of the Roman and the Early Migration Period in the Polish lands (Godłowski 1970). The author of the presented book has also made a significant contribution to those studies (Zagórska-Telega 2000; 2015; Madyda-Legutko *et al.* 2002; 2006; 2015).

The monograph deserves attention for two reasons. Firstly, the regional funeral rites of the Przeworsk culture population had never been examined on such a scale before. It is the first publication to present such a wide array of burial activities and is based on a comparative analysis of a number of cemeteries (including the well-known necropolis in Opatów). Secondly, the study is interdisciplinary and unusual in terms of the methodology that involves archaeological, anthropological, archaeozoological and archaeobotanical interpretations. The need for such a comprehensive research had long existed in the scientific community, therefore the book was eagerly awaited and eventually very well received.

The publication consists of the author's short foreword, thirteen chapters, thirteen lists, an extensive bibliography and a summary in English. The layout was thoroughly

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planned, which makes the contents coherent and logical. The graphic part includes 121 figures. Most of it is digitalized archaeological documentation concerning sepulchral features and plans of the necropolises, the rest are graphs and maps. Unfortunately, their poor quality diminishes the book's aesthetic value. Luckily, this does not affect its substantive value.

The first chapter is divided into three subchapters. The first of these (1.1) presents the main goal and the scope of the research that includes an overview of five cemeteries of the Przeworsk culture communities: Opatów, site 1, Mokra, site 8, Rybno, site 1, Walenczów, site 10 and Żabieniec, site 1, Kłobuck district. The author also justifies her own investigation by defining a need for a complex study of the funeral rites of the population in question, which is represented by the varied grave materials from the Liswarta region. The reasoning behind this approach can be found in the next subchapter (1.2) that describes the history of the archaeological excavation in that area. The last subchapter (1.3) presents the database used for the analysis. It includes cremation burials of various forms, the so-called "proper graves", as well as sepulchral features that played an important role in the funerary rituals. At the end of the chapter, the cognitive value of the data is objectively assessed, illustrating difficulties encountered during the research, *e.g.* inconsistent field documentation.

An extensive review of the literature on the funeral customs of the Przeworsk culture population are presented in Chapter 2. From it, one can easily perceive a certain stagnation in this area of study in the last two decades. Most of the sources did not apply the comparative and multidisciplinary approaches, which were employed for the analysis of the materials from the Liswarta region. Moreover, the author points out certain terminological inconsistencies regarding the nomenclature of sepulchral features that have appeared in the archaeological publications. The issue is of special importance and requires standardization.

The significance of the natural sciences in the study of the population was emphasized in Chapter 3. The discussion revolves mainly around the anthropological, archaeozoological and palaeobotanical expertise that is usually implemented to study the material from cremation graves. The research possibilities of those methods, as well as their historical background are also briefly described (though limited to work done in Poland). It should be noticed that the current state of knowledge in general offers a more insightful analysis than the presented one. It can be achieved, among others, through anthropological examination of the bone taphonomy, which for example can allow one to infer about the temperature and duration of cremation (Ellingham *et al.* 2015).

The crucial part of the book begins in Chapter 4. The first subchapter (4.1.) presents the classification of sepulchral features that were involved in the investigation. The 'proper graves' contains pit, urn and urnless burials (the latter involving containers made of organic substances) – all of them are separated into two further groups, depending on the presence or the absence of pyre remains. Cenotaphs, *bustum* type graves and barrows also belong to this category. The other group consists of ditch- and layer features, cremation

layers and pyre sites, also called *ustrina*. It is worth emphasizing that this synthetic division is the first one that meets the criteria of the modern archaeological documentation. It can certainly be considered as a proposal for the aforementioned standardization. The next two subchapters (4.2., 4.3.) confirm the usefulness of this classification by applying it to the analysis of the funeral features discovered in the Liswarta basin. All of them were also carefully examined in terms of the pit size (large, medium and small), location of urns or burned remains, placement of grave contents, as well as the position of stones or stelae. Although no general rules were established (with the exception of pits containing ceramic vessels, which were probably dug to match the urn size), the approach itself and the conclusions are definitely noteworthy.

So far, the subject of double and collective burials of the Przeworsk culture community has been raised in three papers (Czarnecka 1990, 91-96; Wiśniewska 1999, 55-146; Szczepanek 2013, 85-91). These observations have recently been enriched by the study of materials from the Liswarta region (Chapter 5). Particular attention is paid to the results of the examination of double graves in which an adult, usually a woman, and a child were buried together. Frequently, it was estimated that the child died at an age between 2 and 5 years old. This information allowed the author to challenge the common opinion about high maternal mortality rates. Instead, she puts forward other interpretations of this phenomenon, explaining it as an accidental and simultaneous death of two people as a consequence of 'weaning stress' – a negative side-effect of separating a child from the mother's milk. These remarks have led to a revision of the previous understanding of that occurrence that had persisted in the archaeological literature for many years.

The overview at the beginning of Chapter 6 focuses on the various kinds of artefacts that can usually be found in the graves of the Przeworsk culture population. The author also discusses some 'models' of arranging the items that were probably determined by sex, age and even the social status of the deceased. In subchapter 6.1. these matters are thoroughly analysed based on the material from the Liswarta area, using an interesting examination scheme divided according to the aforementioned 'models'. It is possible to observe certain tendencies regarding the contents of the graves and how they changed over time, especially in the C1b phase of the Younger Roman Period. From the perspective of archaeological studies, such a method of interpreting objects from the burial context is relatively rare, even though it may provide some references about past rituals, which is well proven in this part of the book.

The analysis of the animal bones from the cemetery in Opatów, site 1, has already been published several times, including a text co-authored by J. Zagórska-Telega (Madyda-Legutko and Zagórska-Telega 2006). Chapter 7 presents the conclusions drawn from those papers, supplemented with new data and also extended by the archaeozoological report of material from the necropolis in Mokra, site 8. The research has shown that in most sepulchral features the majority of animal bones found belonged to domesticated rather than wild animals. Also, no regularities concerning their occurrence in graves were observed.

However, there is a subtle disproportion between the two analysed cemeteries. Based on that observation, the author puts forward a concept about the regional differentiation of the funeral customs of the Przeworsk culture communities, during which deliberately selected animals were gifted or consumed. This opinion is supported by the results of studies from other funeral sites, which also demonstrate a high diversity of the animal species. This is a significant observation that certainly requires further careful investigation.

Palaeobotanical remains discovered in cremation graves consist mainly of charcoal, which is probably the remnants of funeral pyres. Such material, obtained from the necropolises located in the Liswarta region, is discussed in Chapter 7. The research showed a significant dominance of the *Pinus sylvestris* (Scots pine), with a negligible presence of other species. These results stand in contrast to other studies carried out on pyre debris from the Roman Period cemeteries, which has demonstrated a much greater diversity. According to the author, the observed discrepancy is not related strictly to funeral customs, as commonly believed. She proposes a more plausible explanation that the people were merely practical and used those kinds of wood that were easily accessible. Even though the opinion sounds reasonable, there are no references to the environmental conditions of this region in the period in question that could support such a point of view.

Chapter 9 presents a paleodemographic study of burned human remains from the cemeteries in Opatów, site 1, and Mokra, site 8. Analyses of the former have already been published (see, among others, Szczepanek 2015). In most cases, the results match the demographic structure of the Przeworsk culture population, *e.g.* in terms of the age proportions or the average family size. However, the palaeodietary research presented at the end of this chapter raises numerous reservations. The investigation concerned the elemental composition of the burned human remains (odontological samples) from Opatów, site 1, on the basis of which the diet was estimated. Apart from dietary factors, the chemistry of bones depends on a number of factors, such as metabolism, possible illnesses, age at death as well as changes in the *post mortem* period. All these factors may significantly affect the final elemental composition of a human skeleton. This is why this method, similarly to the isotope studies of light elements (DeNiro *et al.* 1985), should not be applied to determine the diet of cremated people.

The location of the Przeworsk culture population cemeteries from the Liswarta basin (Chapter 10) corresponds to the commonly known scheme. They were usually placed on hills, near a watercourse and close to a settlement. The differences observed during the research are limited to the direction of the spatial development and the position of a pyre. However, no crucial irregularities were observed in the layout of such places (10.2). This Chapter is a suitable supplement to the earlier essential papers about this issue by K. Gołdowski (1970) and T. Dąbrowska (2007).

Chapter 11 is a subjective attempt, albeit a reasonable one (and one supported by literature and historical sources) to reconstruct a cremation funeral rite. The author discusses each hypothetical stage of this event, from washing and dressing the deceased to

burying their burned remains in the grave. Such a vivid visualization of the potential customs depicts their complexity, and also the multitude of details that are still not very well known in contemporary research. Currently, some of the funeral activities can be determined by applying bioarchaeological and physico-chemical analyses (see Nikita 2021). Such an approach is the future of these studies.

All the data gathered during the investigation was discussed based on the general knowledge about the funeral rites of the Przeworsk culture communities from the Younger and the Late Roman Period (Chapter 12). This very detailed study has revealed that, contrary to some convictions, the Liswarta basin does not differ significantly (with some exceptions) from other areas. It should be noted that this region is distinguished by varied sepulchral features, involving almost all known types that are characteristic for the discussed population. This is why it can be considered as an accurate reflection of the burial customs of the entire Przeworsk culture people. The main part of the monograph is closed with some concluding remarks (Chapter 13) that objectively summarize the most important points.

It is not an exaggeration to state that the book may serve as a methodological model for further regional research projects of this type, which are eagerly awaited. It should also be underlined that its value is definitely not limited to the single area discussed. It is actually quite universal, as some of the proposals included in the publication constitute a significant step forward in the Polish archaeological studies of funeral sites. Finally, one should also recognize the vast and comprehensive knowledge of the author, which is definitely confirmed by her presented work.

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