

Christianisation of children's death in Western Pomerania

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Christianity was adopted in Western Pomerania at the beginning of the 12th century. The new religion with its practices and beliefs brought many social and cultural changes to people's lives. A missionary, St. Otto of Bamberg, taught about the new habits, also the funerary practices. The influence of Christianisation on the burial rites in Western Pomerania is clearly visible in the archaeological material, and therefore also the children's graves. There are four excavated cemeteries that show us the scale of the changes. Two come from the period just before the arrival of formal Christianity: Wolin-Młynówka and Uznam-Am Hain, and two are connected with Otto's mission: Lubin and Uznam-Priesterstrasse. The main differences consist in the higher percentage of children's graves, clear east-west orientation of the skeletons and the absence of the cremation graves in Christian cemeteries. Thus the differences are subtle and connected mostly with the 'adult' Christianity.

KEY-WORDS: Christianisation, Western Pomerania, Middle Ages, children's graves

INTRODUCTION

There is a lot of evidence that the history of childhood in the Middle Ages was rich and varied (see Ariés 1995: 25–57; Bidon and Lett 1997; Willemsen 1998; Delimata 2004; Lohrke 2004; Orme 2009). During the whole medieval period Christian religion was rising and not only adults were part of its success. Church, from its early times, took children under its protection and treated them as an essential part of the Christian society (see Lett 1997: 41–60). Children must have been also a very important part of the cultural change in the early Middle Ages that became part of the Western Pomeranian history as in the early 12th century this region became formally Christianized.

The spreading of the new religion with its practices and beliefs during the early Middle Ages brought about many social and cultural changes in the Western

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Pomeranian's lives. For quite a long time this region remained outside the European Christian world. But it is almost certain that the Christian religion was not entirely new for the people living there. At least the then elites were familiar with some of the Christian traditions, as they had close trade relations with the people professing this faith. In contrast to the practised cremation burial tradition, inhumation appeared there far before the formal Christianisation, i.e., during the 9th–11th centuries. It is seen as an influence of the Christian funerary practices (see Malinowska-Łazarczyk 1995; Rębkowski 2007: 155–156).

The successful Christianisation mission took place in 1124–1128. It was a great work of Bishop Otto of Bamberg. He travelled to Western Pomerania twice and finally founded eleven churches in the main strongholds and early towns of the region. Soon after three *vitas* were written and the Bishop was declared a saint (Rosik 2010: 511–532).

Although inhumation had been known in Western Pomerania earlier, there are essential differences between the burials in the graveyards used before Bishop Otto's missions and those situated around the churches he had founded. Inhumation was the first priority, but also a rule was imposed to bury people in the consecrated ground near the church and limit the grave goods to the basic equipment without any gifts (Rębkowski 2007: 91).

This paper is intended as a contribution to the ongoing debate about the influence of Christianisation on the funerary practices in Western Pomerania, with particular attention being paid to children's graves. The case studies examined here come from the northern area of the region, from two islands: Wolin and Uznam, where we have excavated some burial grounds connected with the topic. Wolin-Młynówka and Uznam-Am Hain were used just before the Christianisation (Rębkowski 2007: 124). I treat them as pre-Christian ones, as they were used before the formal adoption of Christianity in Western Pomerania. Lubin (on the Wolin Island) and Uznam-Priesterstrasse are in turn closely connected with the mission carried out by Bishop Otto (Rębkowski 2007: 38–39; 2011: 107). These two are clearly Christian ones. The data regarding original excavators' interpretations of the osteological materials have been taken into consideration. The information about children's age at death is provided with the use of the anthropological terminology referring to various age groups such as *infans* I (from 0 to 6–7 years) and *infans* II (from 6–7 to 12–14 years).

The primary aim of this study is to examine the major changes in burying the youngest and answer the question how close they are to the known norms. For this purpose I suggest to compare the children's graves from two consecutive periods separated by the historical event that transformed the formally accepted way of burying people. The observations made on this basis may expose even the subtle signs connected with the children's role in the discussed society. I hope that this perspective will broaden the current research paths and provoke new discussion.

CHILDREN'S GRAVES BEFORE BISHOP OTTO'S MISSION

'Młynówka' ('Mill') is a hill located a few hundred metres to the north of the town of Wolin. In 1953–1959 and in 1969 a birthing ground from the Early Middle Ages was excavated there. The cemetery is dated to the 10th–12th century (Wojtasik 1968: 221). Its discontinuation seems to be connected with the Christianisation (1124/1125), which resulted in building two churches in Wolin with at least one adjacent cemetery (Wojtasik 1968: 227; Rębkowski 2007: 120).

The second graveyard from those times which we have taken into consideration is located in Usedom. Usedom-'Am Hain' is situated on the north-eastern edge of the Usedom settlement and covers the period from the turn of the 10th/11th to the beginning of the 12th century. Its discontinuation is also related with the 1128 mission of St. Otto when a church with the new cemetery was built there (Rębkowski 2007: 37–39).

In Wolin-Młynówka out of the 316 discovered graves, 206 were inhumation burials (Wojtasik 1968: 205; Wojtasik 1970: 309). In this group 38 belonged to children, which makes a proportion of 18% of all the inhumation graves. In the Am Hain cemetery 197 graves were found, 195 of which were inhumation burials which included 21 children's graves (that makes only 11%) (Biermann 2009: 187–200). The biological age of the children was anthropologically specified only for Młynówka and only for 25 skeletons: 20 children were *infans* I and 5, *infans* II. The rest of them, as well as all the Am Hain skeletons are known only as 'child skeletons'.

The outlines of burial pits in both cemeteries do not show any tendencies when it comes to children's burials. They are usually difficult to read and if they are visible, they usually have the shape of an elongated oval or rectangle, often with rounded corners. The burial pits differ clearly in size, as they were adjusted to the size of the body of the deceased.

Most of the children's graves represent the simplest form in which the dead child was buried directly in the ground, in a pit without any structures. In only two cases we can suspect that the body was placed in a coffin. This is evidenced by the streaks of wood and iron nails discovered in the burial pit (Grave 251 in Młynówka and Grave 107 in Am Hain). Most of the children were buried in the supine position. The exceptions are the skeletons of Wolin-Młynówka, Graves 98 and 304, both resting on the right side with slightly bent legs.

The orientations of children's as well as adults' skeletons varied considerably both in Młynówka and Am Hain (Wojtasik 1968: 209–210, 1969: 309; Biermann 2009: 25–26). In Am Hain children were buried along all the possible axes: west – east (four graves), south – north (one grave), north-west – south-east (three graves), north-north-west – south-south-east (four graves), east-north-east – west-south-west (two graves), north-east – south-west (five graves). Also the orientation of the body in relation to the cardinal directions was diverse. But it can be noted that there was a greater

tendency to adopt the north and west direction (Biermann 2009: 25). Młynówka is slightly different, yet there is still a large diversity of the orientations of the bodies. However, whereas the graves of adults had mainly the eastern orientation (with the head to the east) with its deviations to the north or south (55%), in children's burials it was clearly predominant (81%). Children's burials had the western orientation much less frequently than the adults' ones (19% and 33%, respectively). The orientations to the south and north, less common among the adults, in children's graves did not occur at all. It is difficult to say if the children were intentionally treated differently in the rite used by the Wolin community and whether the western orientations were the result of the influence of Christianity (see Wojtasik 1968: 210).

In Am Hain only one child burial had equipment: a necklace of glass and rhinestone beads (Grave 168). More, but still only seven children's skeletons discovered in Młynówka had any grave goods. They included mainly knives (Graves 164, 251, 260, 327) as well as a bell-shaped bronze pendant and a flint arrowhead (Grave 144), glass beads (Grave 183), and a temple ring (a typical Slavic head ornament, Grave 220). The presence of pottery is problematic as only one grave is certain to have been equipped with pottery, namely a small vessel lodged at the feet of a child (Grave 220). In this case we can consider it as a grave gift. In other cases small sherds were discovered in the pits (Graves 131, 132, 138, 141, 144, 183, 187, 194, 236, 251, 259, 260, 298, 310, 327). We should agree with J. Wojtasik (1968: 179) who suggests that ceramic sherds discovered in the burial pits are related to the existence of the cemetery, and some of them come from the equipment, while the other ones are connected with such burial practices as the wakes.

CHILDREN'S GRAVES IN THE CEMETERIES CONNECTED WITH THE CHRISTIANISATION MISSION

In recent years two cemeteries closely related to the Christianisation mission carried by St. Otto have been excavated in Western Pomerania. The first is the inhumation burial ground in modern Priesterstrasse in Usedom, probably associated with the church founded by Otto in this place (Rębkowski 2007: 37–39; Biermann 2009: 40–53). It is dated back to the 12th – the 1st half of the 13th century. The other one is in Lubin, on the Island of Wolin. There is a churchyard inhumation cemetery connected with the church founded by Bishop Otto in the Lubin stronghold (Rębkowski 2011: 103–108). It is dated back to the 12th – the end of the 13th century.

In the cemetery in Priesterstrasse in Usedom a total of 196 graves were discovered, 47 of which belonged to children (24%) (Biermann 2009: 203–218). A larger percentage of children, however, was registered in Lubin where 41 skeletons were uncovered during the excavation seasons of 2008–2011, eleven of which belonged to children (27%).

The biological age of the children in the Priesterstrasse cemetery was 31 *infans* I individuals (66%), and 15 *infans* II individuals (32%). For one skeleton of a child there was not specified biological age. In Lubin ten skeletons belonged to the children who died at the age *infans* I, and only one to a child who died at the age *infans* II¹.

The sex of the children's skeletons discovered in Lublin and Priesterstrasse has been determined. In Lubin the DNA testing² allowed to determine four skeletons as female (three at the age of *infans* I and one at the age of *infans* II) and two, as male (both aged *infans* I). The anthropological studies of skeletons from Priesterstrasse (Freder and Niemitz 2009: 221–222) show a similar ratio: 19 female (14 aged *infans* I and five at the age of *infans* II) and nine male (five aged *infans* I and four aged *infans* II).

Again, the outlines of the burial pits do not show any tendencies. They are usually difficult to read and their shapes resemble elongated ovals or rectangles with rounded corners. Burial pits differ in size as they are connected with the size of the child's body. The shapes of the burial pits do not indicate any relation with the sex of the buried child.

Most of the children's graves represent the simplest form where the dead child was buried directly in the ground without any external and internal structures. However, the increased use of wooden coffins for burying children strongly coincided with the Christianisation in Western Pomerania. In Lubin crumbling remnants of wood and iron nails were found in five pits (45%), and in fifteen, in Priesterstrasse (32%). Such remains are interpreted as traces of wooden coffins or frames (cf. Miśkiewicz 1969: 246; Kordala, 2006: 120–121; Rębkowski 2007: 139). Burying the dead in all kinds of wooden constructions, especially coffins, was becoming more and more popular with time and deepening Christianisation (the 12th and 13th centuries; Miśkiewicz 1969: 246; Kordala, 2006: 121, Rębkowski 2007: 92).

All the children were buried in supine position. The few skeletons of newborn children with preserved leg bones were deposited in a hunched position with bent legs. This points to the fact that they died before they learned to walk. The legs of the rest of the skeletons of children and young adults are straight. The hands were arranged along the trunk or folded on the pelvis, analogically to the skeletons of the adults.

Body orientation in Lublin and Priesterstrasse is with no exceptions western, with the head to the west (with minor variations to the south or north) and the face towards the east (Biermann 2009: 44–45), which is clearly related to the Christian tradition of burying the dead.

The deceased children were occasionally equipped with grave goods placed in different locations within the burial pits. The equipment of the children's graves in Lublin

¹ Anthropological analysis has been conducted by I. Teul from Department of Anatomy, Pomeranian Medical University in Szczecin.

² The DNA analysis has been carried out by A. Ossowski, G. Zielińska and M. Kuś from Department of Forensic Genetics, Pomeranian Medical University in Szczecin.

was poor. Only three out of eleven graves had any grave goods. Perhaps the burial of a child aged 0–1 years (Grave 9) should be connected with the amber cross. One small glass bead was discovered at the skull of another infant (Grave 41). It was probably originally sewn on to a cap or bonnet. The last of the children's graves containing equipment is one that belonged to the girl aged 5–6 years (Grave 19) whose skeleton was discovered with a ring on the right hand and a stone spindle whorl within the pit.

Only a little more, namely, eight children's graves were equipped in Priesterstrasse. The equipment comprised coins (in the mouth: Grave 39 and near the hand: Grave 60), necklaces of glass beads (Graves 52, 63, 92, 183), temple rings (Grave 52) and a knife (Grave 145).

CHRISTIANISATION OF CHILDREN'S DEATH

Death as well as the burial rites associated with it are a social event. The death of every member of society affects all those who were in any relationship with him. Children are a specific social group. The death of a child is the most painful for its parents. Even in a world where child mortality was so high, the death of a child was not necessarily an easier experience (see Rosik 2004: 116). Certainly it was the more difficult the older the child was and the more individual characteristics it had gained in the process of becoming an active member of the society (cf. Pawleta 2003: 71).

The attitude to the buried children should be visible in the burial rites. Hypothetically one can assume two paths of behaviour and approaches visible in the material remains. On the one hand, the 'purity' of the applied practices may indicate a particular concern for the proper treatment of the deceased, for making sure that in accordance with the accepted eschatological beliefs he would achieve the desired fate after death. On the other hand derogation from the 'pure' ritual may indicate a particularly emotional attitude, a reflection of certain personal characteristics, of the life before death. It seems that these two attitudes should be particularly visible during the historical 'breakthrough', the revolutionary 'change', which the appearance of formal Christianity undoubtedly was. Such a significant transformation, which involved also the changes in the funeral practices, required making conscious decisions regarding all the events associated with the burial of the deceased person.

The most general issue is the presence of children's skeletons in cemeteries. Infant mortality in the Middle Ages, and even in modern times, was constantly substantial and oscillated between 30% and 50% (see, e.g., Modrzewska 1958: 65–67; Zoll-Adamikowa 1971: 27–28; Florkowski 1974: 245–246; Wrzesińska and Wrzesiński 2000: 141; Delimata 2004: 51–53; also Piontek and Mucha 1983: 100–101). Generally it was higher among children aged *infans* I (until 7 years old) than *infans* II (7–12/14 years). This

relatively high mortality of children is a consequence of the unsatisfactory medieval sanitation and medical knowledge which were insufficient to cope with the threats to life and health of children (see Delimata 2004: 114–121). This high early mortality rate is rarely reflected by the real percentage of excavated children's skeletons, which usually reaches a maximum of 30%. The natural causes of this situation have been extensively studied (cf. Pawleta 2003: 75).

The skeletons of the youngest members of the community are also underrepresented at the discussed cemeteries. In Wolin-Młynówka they comprised 18% of the inhumation graves; the cemetery Am Hain had only 11%; Priesterstrasse, 24%; Lubin, 27%. As it can be seen in the cemeteries used in the pre-Christian times children are more underrepresented than in those from the period just after Christianisation. Although the difference is small, one can ask if this could be somehow connected with the new religion. In my opinion this may be a sign of how quickly the children became recognised by the first priests as the significant members of society who may be used to strengthen and preserve the new religion. Their incorporation into the Christian world as equal members is probably a subtle evidence of the awareness of the children's importance in this process.

As we know, only baptized members of society could be buried in a Christian cemetery. Baptism was thus an important rite of passage which changed the child's status in the Christian world (van Gennepe 2006). Moreover, until the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) it was not only recommended that children should be baptised as soon as possible, because of their high mortality, but also given other ritual sacraments soon afterwards, still during their childhood (DeMolen 2004: 79–80). The children who died before receiving the first-mentioned sacrament, could not be buried in a consecrated space. The church had no obligations towards them because they were not its members (Delimata 2004: 122–124). Consequently, the unbaptised children were buried in pigsties, in the fields, at the crossroads, and also near the roadside crosses (see Gardela and Duma 2013).

Children always play different parts within their families and the whole community. Their main role is to provide continuity. However, the continuity of a community depends not only on its biological renewal or economic survival but also on the transmission of the cultural and social norms and customs (Katajala-Peltomaa and Vuolanto 2011: 82). At such turning points as changing the religious beliefs and the practices connected with them, children are the most profitable investment. They are the easiest part of society to convince and if they are educated early, they do not see it as such a big change as the adults who earlier on had lived in different circumstances. The knowledge about religious beliefs can be carried easily from child to child (Konner 2010: 661, 669–674). And then they provide a good chance to preserve the new traditions. Perhaps the increased percentage of children's burials at the early Christian

cemeteries in Western Pomerania should be taken as a sign of how strongly the first priests seemed to realize that. Christening and socialization of children in the Christian way of life seems to be the simplest way to achieve sustainability of the introduced changes.

It is clear that Christianisation of the children's death was tantamount to the Christianisation of the funeral practices in Western Pomerania as a whole. The Christian burial rites for children at least initially proceeded in the same way as those of adults and a separate funeral liturgy for children appeared in medieval Europe very late (Delimata 2004: 123). Thus, it is clear why there are no real differences between the Christian burials of children and adults.

The features characterizing a Christianised person's grave are still a subject of a broader discussion. So far the following traits of such burials as: inhumation, the east-west orientation with the head towards the west and lack of the grave goods, have been generally agreed upon (see Zoll-Adamikowa 1988; Rębkowski 2007: 91; Janowski 2015: 82–83). The differences between the Pagan and Christian children's burials, however, are quite subtle. The biggest change is seen in the orientation of the body of the deceased, which after Christianisation was no longer random and became fixed as that along the east-west axis with the head to the west. The second element differentiating the hypothetical Pagan burials from the Christian ones is the presence or absence of grave goods. In this case the situation is quite peculiar, because in all four analysed cemeteries, grave goods in children's burials are quite rare. The percentage of children with evident grave goods is comparable in both types of the analysed cemeteries.

The death of a child inevitably infringes on the self-identity of the parent and other adult carers. The data from the early medieval cemeteries which functioned at the turning point of the Western Pomerania history clearly indicate that even if children in that period were treated like 'small adults', as Ph. Ariès wanted (1995: 28), it does not mean that they were irrelevant. Christianising the children's life and death was part of a long-term vision. It was an aspect of building a new society where the following generations experienced a different environment from that in which their parents and grandparents had grown up (see Greenfield 2000: 72; Katajala-Peltomaa and Vuolanto 2011: 83; Konner 2010: 624, 637, 661).

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