

SŁAWOMIR WADYL
(TORUŃ)

THE SACRED SPHERE OF PRUSSIAN LIFE IN THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

Prussian culture in the early Middle Ages

Current debates of the genesis of Prussians is dominated with two hypotheses. Developed in the 1950s by a German archaeologist, Kilian,¹ and supported by a group of Lithuanian, Latvian, and Russian researchers, the first one assumes that the Balts were the autochthons inhabiting the Baltic region as early as in the late Bronze Age and proves this fact with the existence of Rzucewo culture (2000-1800 BC).² Commonly accepted by Polish researchers, the other hypothesis assumes that the ancestors of Prussians arrived in the Baltic region as late as in the sixth and the fifth centuries BC and came from central Ruthenia where the archaeological culture of Milograd can be found. The latter hypothesis treats the culture of western Baltic barrows as the first trace confirming Balts' presence in the region.³ Some authors are trying to reconcile both

¹ Lothar KILIAN, *Haffkünstenkultur und Ursprung der Balten*, Bonn 1955; Lothar KILIAN, *Zu Herkunft und Sprache der Prussen*, Bonn 1980; Lothar KILIAN, *Mittelrussland-Urheimat der Balten?*, Dieburg 1988.

² Vladimir KULAKOV, *Prussi (V–XIII v.)*, Moskva 1994, p.6.

³ Jerzy OKULICZ, 'Problemy pochodzenia Białtów i Słowian w świetle źródeł archeologicznych i językoznawczych', *Rocznik Białostocki* 15 (1991), 109–143; Łucja OKULICZ-KOZARYN, *Dzieje Prusów*, Wrocław 1997, pp.43–44.

hypotheses,⁴ whereas others present them as two separate concepts. The scholars specializing in Prussian studies are convinced that the continuous history of the region can be traced at least from the time of the migrations of peoples until the early Middle Ages.⁵

The condition of early medieval Prussian culture closely corresponds with the information about the region presented in the sources of the period. It was the early Middle Ages that saw the establishment of three distinct cultures. The first one covered the very area inhabited by Prussians who expanded from their habitation to the right bank of the Lower Vistula, which led to the establishment of Ermeland (Polish: Warmia), Pomesania, and Pogesania. Occupied by Masurians, the second area corresponds to that of medieval Galindia. The third culture included the territory of Yotvingia. Consequently, it can be assumed that the seventh century marked the formation of a cultural division which was to last in Prussia for ages.⁶

Until as late as the ninth century, various sources described Prussians as the Aesti. Included into Alfred the Great's translation of Orosius' *Histories*, Wulfstan of Hedeby's account provides a detailed description of the area inhabited by this people (the Aesti Weonland)⁷ and separated from the Slavic lands by the River Vistula.⁸ It was Wulfstan who used the name 'Prussians' for the first time. For some time the names 'Aesti' and 'Prussians' might have been used interchangeably.⁹ Around the middle of the ninth century the latter term was used by the so-called Bavarian Geographer: '*Bruzi plus est undique quam de Enisa ad Rhenum*'.¹⁰ Abraham ben Jacob's account of 965 states that Borussia, both the territory and the people,

⁴ Jan POWIERSKI, *Stosunki polsko-pruskie do 1230 r. ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem roli Pomorza Gdańskiego*, Toruń 1968, pp.12–13.

⁵ OKULICZ 1991; OKULICZ-KOZARYN 1997, 44; Wojciech NOWAKOWSKI, 'Korzenie Prusów. Stan i możliwości badań nad dziejami plemion Bałtyjskich w starożytności i początkach średniowiecza', *Pruthenia* 1 (2006), 8–19.

⁶ NOWAKOWSKI 2006, 34.

⁷ Gerard LABUDA, *Źródła skandynawskie i anglosaskie do dziejów Słowiańszczyzny*, Warszawa 1961, p.89.

⁸ LABUDA 1961, 85.

⁹ Jan POWIERSKI, 'Najdawniejsze nazwy etniczne z terenu Prus i niektórych obszarów sąsiednich', *Komunikaty Mazursko-Warmińskie* 2 (1965), 30.

¹⁰ Henryk ŁOWMIANŃSKI, *Studia nad dziejami Słowiańszczyzny, Polski i Rusi w wiekach średnich*, Poznań 1986, p.112; Krzysztof Tomasz Witczak, 'Dwa studia nad Geografem bawarskim', *Roczniki Historyczne* 59 (1993), 5–6.

was situated at the Baltic Sea (the Ocean) and bordered with the land of Mieszko I in the north and with Ruthenia in the east.¹¹ *Dagome iudex* (991) also situates Prussians in this region: ‘*a primo latere longum Mare, fine Pruzze usque ad in locum, qui dicitur Russe*’.¹²

In the Teutonic historiography, the name Prussia denoted the regions between the River Vistula and the River Neman and encompassed the following tribal lands: Culmerland with Löbauland (Chełmno Land and Lubawa Land), Pomesania, Pogesania, Ermeland, Natangia, Skalovia, Sambia, Nadruvia, Galindia, Sudovia (Yotvingia), and Bartia. Culmerland had Slavic character. Recent literature assumes that it was included into the Piast state at the end of the tenth century and had the town of Kałdus as its administrative and economic centre.¹³

Taking into account the area inhabited by Prussians, the ethnonym refers probably to a multiethnic unit that consisted of several tribes.¹⁴ However, it is difficult to accept Długokęcki’s concept of the formation of a tribal community following the establishment of a trade emporium in Truso.¹⁵

¹¹ Tadeusz KOWALSKI (ed.), ‘Relacja Ibrahima Ibn Jakuba z podróży do krajów słowiańskich w przekazie Al-Bekriego’, *Monumenta Poloniae Historia. Seria Nowa*, Kraków 1946, I, pp.50, 92; Henryk ŁOWMIĄŃSKI, ‘Stosunki polsko-pruskie za pierwszych Piastów’, in Henryk ŁOWMIĄŃSKI, *Prusy–Litwa–Krzyżacy*, Warszawa 1989, pp.121–122.

¹² Brygida KÜRBIŚ, ‘“Dagome iudex” – studium krytyczne’, in Kazimierz Tymieniecki (ed.), *Początki państwa polskiego*, Poznań 1962, I.394–395.

¹³ Wojciech CHUDZIAK, *Wczesnośredniowieczna przestrzeń sakralna in Culmine na Pomorzu Nadwiślańskim, Mons Sancti Laurenti*, I, Toruń 2003; Wojciech CHUDZIAK, ‘Problem chrystianizacji ziemi chełmińskiej w świetle źródeł archeologicznych’, in Sławomir Moździoch (ed.), *Człowiek, sacrum i środowisko. Miejsce kultu we wczesnym średniowieczu. IV Spotkania Bytomskie*, Wrocław 2000, pp.127–135; Andrzej RADZIMIŃSKI, ‘Geneza oraz ukształtowanie się organizacji kościelnej (1206–1409)’, in Marian BISKUP *et al.* (eds.), *Państwo zakonu krzyżackiego w Prusach. Władza i społeczeństwo*, Warszawa 2008, p.143.

¹⁴ Wiesław DŁUGOKĘCKI, ‘Uwagi o genezie i rozwoju wczesnośredniowiecznych Prus do początków XIII wieku’, *Pruthenia 2* (2006), 12.

¹⁵ Długokęcki 2006, 12–13; The issue of the situation of Truso was eventually resolved upon the discovery of a craft, trade, and port settlement in Janów Pomorski (former Hansdorf) in 1982. It is assumed that Truso was inhabited by Prussians, Slavs, and Scandinavians. Cf. Marek Franciszek Jagodziński, ‘Rejon ujścia Wisły we wczesnym średniowieczu. Struktura zasiedlenia i stosunki etniczne’, in Marek Franciszek Jagodziński (ed.), *Pogranicze polsko-pruskie w czasach św. Wojciecha. Materiały z konferencji, Elbląg 18–19 września 1997 r.*, Elbląg 1999, pp.35–79 (the publication contains further references). It seems that Truso functioned as a self-sufficient trading emporium and an early town. At that time (the ninth century)

Until the twelfth century, the name Prussia did not mean the area of Yotvingia and probably even that of Galindia. Powierski implies that it was easy to extend the meaning of the name and call these lands 'Prussia' due to a striking similarity between the languages and the inclusion of these areas into the monastic state of the Teutonic Knights.¹⁶ The sense of the very name Prussia has not been clarified as for most researchers it does not refer to a territory but to a feature of a people.¹⁷ Taking into account the politics and culture of this part of Eastern and Central Europe in the tenth and eleventh centuries, the assumption that Prussia means 'a people that is constantly growing in power' seems justified.¹⁸

Due to inconsistencies found in various sources, it is difficult to classify the territorial divisions.¹⁹ Apart from the bigger tribal unions, smaller ones, called fields (Prussian: *pulka*),²⁰ can be distinguished. Fields varied in respect of surface but were inhabited by an average of 1, 000 people. The units that were smaller than tribes but bigger than fields were called lands (e.g. Deynowe in Yotvingia) and would normally consist of several fields.²¹ Specialist literature leads to the assumption that early medieval Prussia had a three-level settlement and territorial structure, i.e. tribe-land-field.

Although Prussians formed a multitribal union which consisted of several tribes,²² the rules of its functioning remain unclear. Presented by Wulfstan of Hedeby in the late ninth century, the description of the

similar trade and craft centres functioned on both the Scandinavian and the Slavic coasts of the Baltic Sea. Similar towns included Wolin, Haithabu or Ribe. To learn more about early towns, see, e.g. Herbert Jankuhn, *Haithabu. Ein Handelsplatz der Wikingerzeit*, Neumünster 1976 (the publication contains further references).

¹⁶ Jan POWIERSKI, 'Prusowie, Prusy', in Janusz TRUPINDA (ed.), *Prussica*, Malbork 2004, I.123.

¹⁷ Jürgen UDOLPH, 'Pruzzen', in *Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde*, Berlin/York 2003, XXIII.534–536.

¹⁸ DŁUGOKĘCKI 2006, 19.

¹⁹ Sources often use the term *terra land* to describe a tribal territory, a land, or a field.

²⁰ This Ruthenian term was used later in Lithuania.

²¹ Henryk ŁOWMIAŃSKI, 'Geografia polityczna Bałtów w dobie plemiennej', *Lituanoslawica Posnaniensia. Studia historica 1* (1986), 12–24; Grzegorz BIAŁUŃSKI, 'Pruskie związki terytorialno-osadnicze w dorzeczu środkowej Łyny w XIII wieku', *Komunikaty Mazursko-Warmińskie 1* (2004), 3–5.

²² It shall be assumed that there were nine tribal lands (Pomesania, Pogesania, Emerland, Natangia, Sambia, Nadruvia, Skalovia, Sudovia (Yotvingia), Galindia, and Bartia).

Prussian political regime implies that it consisted of various political fractions and lacked strong power centres.²³ The social structure of Prussians was described in two sources, at the end of the ninth and the thirteenth centuries, respectively. According to Wulfstan, the Aesti society consisted of rulers (*cyning*), nobles (*ricostan*), paupers (*unspedigan*), and slaves (*peowan*), whereas Peter of Dusburg mentions in his chronicle the nobles (*nobiles*) and the commons (*communis populus, ignobilis*).²⁴ Even though the latter author did not list the slaves, the existence of such a social group is unquestionable. Researchers follow Dusburg and their views on the social structure of Prussians focus on the dual division into the nobles and the commons, excluding the slaves.

Peter of Dusburg reported the existence of a man called *Kriwe* who lived at a place called *Romowe*.²⁵ It is highly probable that the name *Kriwe* did not denote a lay person but a priest and referred to the staff (*krivule* in Lithuanian) which symbolized the office and served to call assemblies.²⁶ *Kriwe's* political role also resulted from the fact that before making an important political decision, Prussians would cast lots which were later interpreted by the priest.²⁷ However, the traces of a theocratic multi-tribal union are scarce.

In the tribal period, the supreme authority was the assembly – a gathering of people entitled to make binding decisions on various territorial structures. In the Prussian language the assembly was referred to as the *wayde*. Acting as a court, it was probably this body that decided to banish Saint Adalbert from the country.²⁸ Most descriptions of the assemblies held in the thirteenth century refer to war councils (Prussian: *kariowaite*).²⁹

²³ LABUDA 1961, 85.

²⁴ LABUDA 1961, 69–70, 85–86; DUSBURG III, 5.

²⁵ The situation of *Romowe* remains controversial. Cf. Jan POWIERSKI, *Prusowie, Mazowsze i sprowadzenie krzyżaków do Polski*, Malbork 2003, 1.275–280; according to this scholar, *Romowe* was situated at the point where the River Rominta entered the River Pissa.

²⁶ This role was ascribed to the staff by DŁUGOKĘCKI (2006, 32–33). The counterargument is that no other sources describe the Prussian tribal assemblies directly.

²⁷ Karol MODZELEWSKI, *Barbarzyńska Europa*, Warszawa 2004, p.393; Leszek SŁUPECKI, *Wyrocznie i wróżby pogańskich Skandynawów. Studium do dziejów przeznaczenia ludów indoeuropejskich*, Warszawa 1998, pp.103–104, 117–119.

²⁸ Stanisław MIELCZARSKI, *Misja pruska św. Wojciecha*, Gdańsk 1967, pp.100–105.

²⁹ DŁUGOKĘCKI 2006, 35.

Sources dating back to this period enable analyses of the ruling class among various Prussian tribes, some of which would call their rulers *dux*, *princeps*, *rex*, *dominus* or *capitaneus*.

The sacred sphere

So far, specialist literature has rarely and insufficiently discussed the topics of the sacred sphere and the sites and objects of pagan cult in Prussia.³⁰ The Prussian religious system has not been analysed thoroughly either and is subject of dispute among researchers. The topic of religious beliefs has often been discussed within broader considerations on the history of this people.³¹ Some scholars question polytheism, claiming that the Prussian religion was still at the stage of polidoxo, i.e. the cult of sky and nature connected with the belief in ancestral spirits, magic, and demons. Szafrński suggested that Balts' convictions existed at many levels and compared them to Slavs' beliefs, which were distinguished by animistic and manistic features, primitive polytheism, and a narrow range of cult forms.³² This

³⁰ It is worth mentioning two articles by Mirosław HOFFMANN who discusses holy groves and sacrificial stones (Mirosław HOFFMANN, 'Miejsca i obiekty kultu pogańskich Prusów', in Jacek WRZESIŃSKI (ed.), *Czarownice. II Funeralia Lednickie*, Wrocław/Sobótka 2000, pp.151–167) or stone Prussian *babas* in the context of transition from paganism to Christianity (Mirosław HOFFMANN, 'The Prussian Transition from Paganism to Christianity: Material Relicts of the Transformation of Beliefs', in Jerzy GĄSSOWSKI (ed.), *Christianisation of the Baltic Region*, Pułtusk 2004, pp.65–74). Only the issue of anthropomorphic stone sculptures has been subject to frequent discussions among researchers, e.g. Grzegorz BIAŁUŃSKI and Jerzy Marek ŁAPO (eds.), *Pruskie baby kamienne. Fenomen kulturowy czy europejska codzienność?*, Olsztyn 2007, (the publication contains references).

³¹ OKULICZ-KOZARYN 1996, 212–215; Gerard LABUDA, 'Religia pogańskich Prusów', in *Historia Pomorza*, Poznań 1969, I.1.332–333; Aleksander BRÜCKNER, *Starożytna Litwa. Ludy i bogi. Szkice historyczne i mitologiczne*, Olsztyn 1979, p.43; cf. the review in Jan POWIERSKI, 'Wznowiony Brückner', *Komunikaty Mazursko-Warmińskie* 4 (1980), 581; Włodzimierz SZAFRAŃSKI, 'Ze studiów nad wierzeniami Bałtów', *Acta Baltico-Slavica* 6 (1969), 223–226; Włodzimierz SZAFRAŃSKI, *Religie Bliskiego Wschodu i dawnej Europy*, Warszawa 1981, pp.251–265.

³² The only well-dated source containing information about the Prussian mythology is the Treaty of Christburg of 7th February 1249. In the Treaty, Prussians promised they would not make offerings to an idol called Curche, whose image they would create and venerate as God every year after harvest, or to other gods who did not create heaven and earth, irrespective of their names (*Preussisches Urkundenbuch*, Rudolf PHILIPPI and Carl Peter WOELKY (eds.), Königsberg

scholar observed instances of animism in the cult of the powers of nature, which included the belief in numerous hosts of spirits of various ranks.

Sources often mention woods and groves as the main cult sites. It was the Treaty of Christburg (mod. Dzierzgoń, Poland) of 1249 that obliged Prussians to erect a certain number of churches to prove that they valued prayers and offerings at churches more than those said and made in the woods.³³ Drafted in the same period, *Descriptiones terrarium* mentions that 'Those Prussians venerate in particular woods as gods'.³⁴ Peter of Dusburg confirmed the existence of holy groves where wood was not chopped, soil was not ploughed, game was not hunted, and which no unauthorised person dared to enter. The chronicler seemed to perceive woods as the dwelling places of deities as he added that Prussians venerated the sun, the moon, and the stars as well as birds and other animals.³⁵ In his annals, Jan Długosz wrote that people did not dare to remove fallen trees from holy groves³⁶ which were named *alkā*, *alkas* or *medis* and, probably, *ramaŕwan*.³⁷

1882, I.1. 16). The source mentions gods (*dii*), which could imply the existence of polytheism in Prussia. However, this assumption may be wrong as *dii* is a translation of the Prussian word *deiwai*, meaning both gods and demons (see Henryk ŁOWMIAŃKI, 'Elementy indoeuropejskie w religii Bałtów', in Marian BISKUP (ed.), *Ars Historica. Prace z dziejów powszechnych i Polski*, Poznań 1976, pp.147–148). Despite that many researches studied Curche and described her extensively, the nature of this goddess has not been clearly defined, cf. recent publications: Grzegorz BIAŁUŃSKI, 'Bogini Kurko – główny kult Galindii', *Komunikaty Mazursko-Warmińskie* 1 (1993), 3–10; Jan POWIERSKI, 'Bogini Kurkō i niektóre aspekty społeczno-gospodarcze wierzeń pruskich', *Bydgoskie Towarzystwo Naukowe. Prace Komisji historii* 11 (1975), reprint in Jan POWIERSKI, *Prussica*, Malbork 2004, I. The above publications contain references to older literature. Apart from Curche, other gods were mentioned in 1418 and the whole pantheon was presented as late as in modern sources. The publications on the beliefs of Prussians were collected in Andrzej MIERZYŃSKI, *Źródła do dziejów mitologii literwskiej*, Warszawa 1982–6, I–II and Wilhelm MANNHARDT, *Letto-Preussische Götterlehre*, Riga 1936.

³³ PUB, 218, p.16.

³⁴ Karol GÓRSKI, 'Descriptiones terrarum (Nowo odkryte źródło do dziejów Prus w XIII w.)', *Zapiski Historyczne* 1 (1981), 8.

³⁵ Dusburg III, 5. Por. Grzegorz BIAŁUŃSKI, 'Las w wierzeniach Prusów i Jaćwingów', *Feste Boyen. Pismo Towarzystwa Miłośników Twierdzy Boyen* 1 (2002), 31–42; LABUDA 1969, 332–333; Heinrich Crome, 'Die Religion der Alten Preussen', *Altpreussen Vierteljahresschrift für Vorgeschichte und Volkskunde* 4:2 (1939), 51–53.

³⁶ Johannes DŁUGOSI, *Annales seu Cronice inclitii Regni Poloniae*, XIII, p.160.

³⁷ Jerzy SUCHOCKI, *Mitologia bałtyjska*, Warszawa 1991, p.303; The term *Romowe* is supposed to derive from this word; see Mikkel KLUSSIS, *Bazowy słownik polsko-pruski dla dalszego odrodzenia leksyki*, 1998–9, p.162.

An analysis of sources suggests that the Prussian religious system was based on the cult of nature, atmospheric phenomena, and certain animals.³⁸ In fact, all nature was permeated with magic. Taking the above into consideration, we will analyse pagan cult sites and objects, taking archaeology and settlement as a frame of reference. In this context, we need to remember that the assessment and interpretation of cult sites and objects is extremely difficult and complex. In order to describe the function of cult sites or objects, it is essential to know the context in which they were used.³⁹ A frequent problem with interpreting these objects is the shortage of precise dating,⁴⁰ which results from the lack of excavations at some sites.

The first category of cult objects are the holy groves. The sites denoted with this name include Sambian groves in former Caymen, Osterovo (former Osterau) and Romanovo (former Pobethen) as well as in Mamowo in the area of the Vistula Lagoon.⁴¹ Described as a holy grove by Peter of Dusburg, the wood near former Pobethen⁴² was cut down as early as at the beginning of the fourteenth century. It needs to be mentioned that 'holy grove' denoted three localities in Eastern Prussia (Heiligenwalde), one in Pomesania (Święty Gaj upon the River Dzierzgoń), and two in Sambia (Molodeckoje and Ushakovo).⁴³

The decisive factor in choosing a holy grove could be an unusual shape of a tree which would become the centre of such a site and a proof of the presence of a supernatural power. Such atypical shapes were found in trees with branches that grew into the trunk or were splintered but joined at the ends, or in trees with unusual growths.⁴⁴ An example of such a strange tree was the oak in *Romowe* described by Peter of Dusburg. It

³⁸ The horse played a very important role in the Prussian religious system, especially in burial ceremonies. This issue will be discussed more extensively further in the paper.

³⁹ HOFFMANN 2000, 152.

⁴⁰ These objects may be described as early medieval ones.

⁴¹ Emil HOLLACK, *Erläuterungen zur vorgeschichtlichen Übersichtskarte von Ostpreussen*, Glogau/Berlin 1908, pp.57, 214.

⁴² The original name of Pobethen, known as Pubetin in older sources, was Pubitai and meant 'the land of sunset'. See Oscar SCHLICHT, *Das westliche Samland. Ein Heimatbuch des Kreises Fischhausen*, Dresden 1922, II, pp.214–216.

⁴³ HOFFMANN 2000, 152.

⁴⁴ BIAŁUŃSKI 2002, 35; Cf. OKULICZ-KOZARYN 1997, 328–329; BRÜCKNER 1979, 45.

symbolized three parts of the universe: the underworld, the earth, and heaven.⁴⁵

The cult site in Długi Kąt (German: Klarheim) near Pisz was classified by Gaerte of the Prussian Museum in Königsberg. The site was surrounded with 80–100 centimetre-long stones, forming a circle with the diameter of 20 metres. The central part of the circle contained the trunk of a several hundred year old fir tree with the circumference of 300 centimetres. In the close vicinity, north-east of the fir tree, a flat stone was laid on smaller stones.⁴⁶ Called Pogański Sąd (German: Heidengericht) by the local people, the place was situated at the top of a forested hill at the foot of which a stream flowed north and west. A flat cemetery and numerous barrows were found nearby.⁴⁷

Over twenty cult objects referred to as sacrificial stones were found in Prussia.⁴⁸ Special attention shall be drawn to the sacrificial stone of Borisovo (former Kraussen in the Sambian Peninsula), discovered during archaeological rescue research. 250 centimetre-wide and 350 centimetre-long, the boulder was surrounded with ten stones with the diameter of about 100 centimetres. The space between the stones was filled with smaller rocks (Fig. 1), whereas fire residues in the form of jet black cinders were found west of the boulder. A Prussian cemetery was found in Uzołowoje, a place close to the object.⁴⁹

A large granite block was found in the northern part of the cemetery in Dubrovka (former Regehenen) in Sambia.⁵⁰ Fire residues and remains of clay vessels were found near and under the rock. Adjacent to the western edge of the block was a 40 × 60 centimetre construction, composed of

⁴⁵ SUCHOCKI 1991, 118–119.

⁴⁶ Wilhelm GAERTE, 'Die „Kultstätte“ von Klarheim, Kr. Johannesburg', *Sitzungsberichte der Altertumsgesellschaft Prussia* 26 (1926), 319–320.

⁴⁷ Wolfgang GRONAU, 'Kultstätten bei Ostpreussischen Gräberfeld', *Nachrichtenblatt für deutsche Vorzeit* 14 (1938), 139–141.

⁴⁸ A complete study of the so-called sacrificial stones can be found in HOFFMANN 2000, 153–157. Special attention should be drawn to the objects which were discovered during excavations and contextualized.

⁴⁹ GRONAU 1938, 140–141. See Jan JASKANIS, 'Cmentarzyska kultury zachodniobałtyjskiej z okresu rzymskiego. Materiały do badań nad obrzędkiem pogrzebowym', *Materiały Starożytne i Wczesnośredniowieczne* 4 (1977), 335.

⁵⁰ GRONAU 1938, 141.

upright stones and filled with white sand. An even bigger (30 × 60 × 70 centimetres) boulder was found north of the block. It was supported with three smaller stones and 30 fragments of clay vessels were found underneath the construction (Fig. 2). The situation of this place – near a water body and at the edge of a necropolis – leads to the conclusion that it is a relic of a sacrificial stone or another cult object.⁵¹ During excavations at the cemetery in Kretowiny (in Pogesania) researchers found a saddle-shaped boulder, jutting 60 centimetres out of the ground. The boulder was surrounded with stones under which black soil with traces of fire residues and charcoals were found.⁵² Over twenty so-called sacrificial stones were discovered in the area of Prussia. Most of them have been described in specialist literature, whereas others have been referred to only laconically. In several cases, they were contextualized in terms of archaeology and settlement. The fact that sacrificial stones were often found near cemeteries and settlements supports the opinion that they were the cult sites for pagan Prussians.

A special category of Prussian cult objects are the anthropomorphic stone statues known as the Prussian *babas* (Fig. 4 and 5). Deriving from Slavic languages, the term *baba* existed in the modern era in the steppes of Ukraine and Asia. Some statues have the shape of a woman with well-shaped breasts, whereas others represent men, usually armed ones.⁵³ The stone statues can be found in five Prussian regions: Galindia, Bartia, Natangia, Pomesania, and Sasinia.⁵⁴ Despite a hundred and several dozen years of research into such historical objects, it is impossible to unambiguously interpret the role and meaning of stone statues in the Prussian beliefs. Recently, Łapo suggested that the term ‘stone *baba*’ shall refer to early medieval anthropomorphic statues presenting men who had moustaches and beards and many of whom were armed and held drinking horns in their right hand.⁵⁵ Paradoxically, in the language of steppe Turkic peoples, the word *baba* meant an ancestor. Later, the word was adopted in the Slavic languages

⁵¹ JASKANIS 1977, 239–240.

⁵² GRONAU 1938, 141.

⁵³ Jerzy Marek ŁAPO, ‘Corpus pruskich bab kamiennych – możliwości poznania’, in BIAŁUŃSKI and ŁAPO 2007, 7.

⁵⁴ Mirosław HOFFMANN, ‘Pruskie baby kamienne. Dzieje badań i prób interpretacji’, in BIAŁUŃSKI and ŁAPO 2007, 26.

⁵⁵ ŁAPO 2007, 7–8.

and the Slavic form became accepted in the academic jargon, e.g. *Steinbaben* in German.⁵⁶

Despite many publications and attempts at explaining the phenomenon of Prussian stone *babas*, the chronology of their origin has been discovered only recently. A breakthrough in this research was the discovery of the *baba* of Poganowo in August 2007. It was the first time such a historical object had been found *in situ* and within its original context. The statue was discovered by Wyczółkowski during his research at excavation site number four in Poganowo, initially dated at the ninth or tenth century. The anthropomorphic boulder constituted a part of a cult complex that consisted of a circle surrounding a small mound close to which several hundred animal bones were found. Nearby was a rectangular hearth consisting of two layers of stones covered with clay, an additional proof of that the complex served cult purposes.⁵⁷ Consequently, the discovery of Poganowo sheds new light on the dating of stone *babas* and confirms their relation with the sphere of cult and beliefs. The fact that the Prussian *babas* originated between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries is also confirmed by the presentations of various parts of weapons, including different forms of swords and helmets.⁵⁸

As the deceased played an unprecedented role in the sphere of cult, it is necessary to discuss burial customs in pre-Teutonic Prussia.⁵⁹ The

⁵⁶ Wolfgang LA BAUME, 'Bildsteine des Frühen Mittelalters aus Ost- und Westpreussen', *Blätter für deutsche Vorgeschichte* 5 (1927), 6.

⁵⁷ Mariusz WYCZÓLKOWSKI, 'Poganowo. Nowy głos w dyskusji', a paper delivered on 4th October 2007 during a conference on the Prussian stone *babas*, entitled 'Pruskie baby kamienne. Fenomen kulturowy czy europejska codzienność?' Source: ŁAPO 2007, 13. The discovery from Poganowo was published recently by Mariusz WYCZÓLKOWSKI, 'Baba" kamienna z Poganowa. Wczesnośredniowieczne miejsce kultu Prusów' in Anna BITNER-WRÓBLEWSKA and Grażyna IWANOWSKA (eds.), *Baltowie i ich sąsiedzi. Marian Kaczyński in memoriam*, Warszawa 2009, pp.605–631.

⁵⁸ Krzysztof RYBKA, 'Uzbrojenie Prusów w świetle badań nad antropomorficznymi rzeźbami kamiennymi zwanymi babami', in BIAŁUŃSKI and ŁAPO 2007, 53–55.

⁵⁹ The lack of any confirmation about early-medieval burial sites in some regions of Prussia constitutes a major problem. We know about the burial sites in the so-called Prussian belt, which encompassed the coastline of the Baltic Sea, especially the areas of Sambia, Skalovia, Natangia Ermland, and Pogesania. Examples include the burial sites in Elbląg-Żytno (Robert DORR, 'Das Vorgeschichtliche Gräberfeld von Benkenstein-Freiwalde, Kr. Elbing (700–1150 r. Chr.)', *Sitttelungen des Copernicus Vereins für Wissenschaften und Kunst zu Thorn* 22 (1914), 2–26; Bruno EHRLICH, 'Das Gräberfeld von Benkenstein-Freiwalde', *Elbinger Jahrbuch* 1 (1920), 178–203). However, little do we know about the burial sites in

discoveries of Cerkiewnik include one of the most interesting sepulchral objects connected with the cult of the deceased. Within a cremation cemetery, dated at the first half of the eleventh century, an oval object measuring 370 × 170 × 25 centimetres was discovered. The object was filled with black and grey stone, charcoals, animal bones and burnt remains of a man at the *maturus-senilis* age. Many clay vessels, an iron fish-hook, a bronze necklace, and an iron knife were found during the exploration of the object.⁶⁰ Another distinctive object in Cerkiewnik is an 80-centimetre deep pit with the diameter of 170 centimetres. The sepulchre was filled with a jet black substance containing many charcoals and burnt bones of one person. Moreover, a collection of horse bones and pottery was found within the sepulchral pit. Cremated human and horse remains were dug into the pyre and covered with soil.⁶¹ These objects should be treated as the relics of a pyre⁶² – a place where the human body was cremated together with livestock, which most frequently included a horse and other domestic animals. It is significant that no new pyres were lit in the place of the old ones.

A good example of a frequently used pyre is another object found in Cerkiewnik. This oval measures 540 × 350 × 25 centimetres and is filled with a black substance containing residues of burnt wood. Supposedly, the pyre was situated in the south-eastern part of the cemetery. The bottoms of

the areas of Bartia, Galindia, Nadruvia or Yotvingia. Exceptions are the burial sites situated between Goldap and Olecko in Degicie, Stacze, and Żytkiejmy (Carl ENGEL, 'Das jüngste heidnische Zeitalter in Masuren', *Prussia* 33 (1939), 41–57). These regions are referred to as an 'area without archaeologically confirmed early-medieval burial sites' (Wojciech WRÓBLEWSKI, 'Ziemie pruskie i jaćwieskie w okresie plemiennym (VII/VIII–XII/XIII wieku)', in Wojciech CHUDZIAK and Sławomir MOŹDZIOCH (eds.), *Stan i potrzeby badań nad wczesnym średniowieczem w Polsce – 15 lat później*, Toruń/Wrocław 2006, pp.291–293). However, it seems that these territories have not been thoroughly examined from the archaeological point of view.

⁶⁰ Włodzimiera ZIEMIŃSKA-ODOJ, 'Materiały do cmentarzyska wczesnośredniowiecznego ze stanowiska XI w. w Cerkiewniku, gm. Dobre Miasto', *Zeszyty Muzeum Warmii i Mazur. Archeologia* 1 (1992), 114–119.

⁶¹ Beata DĘBOWSKA, 'Wczesnośredniowieczne cmentarzysko w Cerkiewniku', *Warmińsko-Mazurski Biuletyn konserwatorski* 3 (2001), 11–12.

⁶² To find out more about pyres, see: Helena ZOLL-ADAMIKOWA, *Wczesnośredniowieczne cmentarzyska ciałopalne Słowian na terenie Polski, II, Analiza, wnioski*, Wrocław/Warszawa/Kraków/Gdańsk 1979, p.50.

two sepulchral pits were discovered under a layer of fire residues. The first pit contained burnt bones of a man and an unburnt bone of a child, whereas the other contained burnt bones of a woman. The layout of these sepulchral pits implies that the burials were connected with offering sacrifices to gods. After the offering had been made, the pyre could be reused, which is confirmed with numerous bone remains that can be found among the fire residues.⁶³

Until the beginning of the ninth century, sepulchres used to be richly equipped, most often with various types of crossbow-shaped and shield-shaped clasps, bronze pins, as well as glass and amber beads. Drinking horns inlaid with sheets of ornamented silver and everyday articles, such as whorls, iron knives and arms, were also placed in sepulchral pits.⁶⁴

In the first millennium after Christ, male inhumations were connected with horse-skeleton burials in most body-burning cemeteries.⁶⁵ In the majority of cases, only one animal was buried in a sepulchre.⁶⁶ Horse burials accompanying male inhumations might have played a symbolic role in cult and magic as the horse has always been highly valued for its numerous emblematic features. In many cultures, it represented the chthonic, the lunar, and the solar elements.⁶⁷ It is probable that the Balts perceived the horse as a symbol of vitality and harvest. The offerings left in the sepulchres support the thesis that it was a chthonic animal. According to the comparative materials provided by religious studies, this meant that the horse led the soul on its way to the beyond; therefore, the purpose of burying the deceased

⁶³ DĘBOWSKA 2001, 9–10.

⁶⁴ Marek Franciszek JAGODZIŃSKI, 'Osadnictwo między Wisłą a Pasłęką we wczesnym średniowieczu, Komentarz do katalogu stanowisk', in Przemysław URBAŃCZYK (ed.), *Adalbertus. Wyniki badań programu badań interdyscyplinarnych*, Warszawa 1998, pp.167–168.

⁶⁵ Joanna PIATKOWSKA-MAŁECKA, 'Pochówki końskie na obszarze Polski północno-wschodniej w I tysiącleciu n.e.', *Światowit* 2 (2000), fasc. B, 186–197; Jan JASKANIS, 'Human Burials with Horses in Prussia and Sudovia', *Acta Baltico-Slavica* 4 (1966), 29–65; Jan JASKANIS, *Obrządek pogrzebowy zachodnich Baltów (I–V n.e.)*, Wrocław/Warszawa/Kraków/Gdańsk 1974, pp.248–250.

⁶⁶ An exception to this rule is the burial site in Tumiany, containing seven graves with one horse buried in each, seven graves with two horses buried in each, and one grave with three horses buried inside; see: Tadeusz BARANOWSKI, 'Pochówki koni z Tumian w woj. Olsztyńskim', *Archeologia Polski* 41:1–2 (1996), 70–72.

⁶⁷ Władysław KOPALIŃSKI, *Słownik symboli*, Warszawa 1990, pp.157–161; Mircea ELIADE, *Traktat o historii religii*, Warszawa 1966, pp. 96, 106–107.

with horses was to make the posthumous journey easier for the person who died.⁶⁸

Surprisingly, after the turn of the eighth and the ninth centuries, most sepulchral pits were poorly equipped and horse burials were not practised in some areas. This can be explained with changes in burial rites. Very poor equipment of sepulchral pits (the remains of pyres and burnt human bones were found together with fragments of pottery) and a considerable decrease in the number of horse burials are especially significant for that period.⁶⁹ However, poorer sepulchral equipment shall not be identified with Prussians' material impoverishment.

Based on the analysis of sepulchral materials, the picture of burial rites in the said period is confirmed in the extremely informative description of burial ceremonies presented in Wulfstan's account.⁷⁰ Thus, the custom of burning a Prussian was completed with long funeral ceremonies whose extent depended on the affluence of the deceased.

The Aesti have the following custom: when someone dies, their body lies unburnt in their house for a month or sometimes two; kings and nobles lie even longer, proportionally to their affluence [...] While the deceased is lying in the house, the family and friends drink and celebrate until he or she is burnt.⁷¹

Wulfstan shared some important information: 'The Aesti have the custom that every deceased person, irrespective of their social position, is burnt. If they do not burn a part of the body, they have to offer great propitiatory prayers and sacrifices.'⁷² Thus, the funeral ceremony consisted of several stages: the feast and the party, the inheritance race, and the act of burning and inhumating the deceased.

In early medieval cemeteries, usually those situated in Sambia, the remnants of stone constructions, such as cobbles or bases (e.g. in Laptau

⁶⁸ ELIADE 1966, 137, 141.

⁶⁹ JAGODZIŃSKI 1998, 177.

⁷⁰ LABUDA 1961, 85–86.

⁷¹ LABUDA 1961, 85.

⁷² LABUDA 1961, 85.

or Schuditten), can be found.⁷³ A different ritual was practised in early medieval Galindia. The research into the cultural layers of a courtyard at the site in Szestno helped to discover human remains buried among the cobbles which constituted the foundations of the house. Czarny Las-type burials⁷⁴ – collective body-burning graves or partial burials (when skulls or their parts were left unburnt) in open and defensive settlements – are connected with changes in burial rites (Fig. 5).⁷⁵

The end of the early Middle Ages at sepulchral sites was marked with the burials of skeletons arranged in rows; however, graves were still richly equipped, even in the areas where the burnt bodies were earlier inhumated in poorly equipped sepulchres. The custom of equipping the sepulchres richly was kept until the late Middle Ages.⁷⁶ It is significant that body-burning inhumations were not abandoned but continued until the fifteenth century.⁷⁷ Examples of that include the cemetery in Równina Dolna, used from mid-thirteenth until the end of the fifteenth century, and that in Nadrowo, used from 1255 until the seventeenth century.⁷⁸

The above study of numerous issues concerning the sacred sphere of Prussian life in the early Middle Ages has emphasized that scholars have

⁷³ Cf. Adalbert BEZZENBERGER, 'Gräberfeld bei Laptau', *Prussia* 23 (1914), 157–180; Adalbert BEZZENBERGER, 'Gräberfeld vorschiedenen Perioden bei Schuditen, Kr. Fischhausen', *Prussia* 22 (1909), 44–63.

⁷⁴ This term refers to the name of the Szestno-Czarny Las site in Mrągowo district where burnt human remains were found within 'pavement D'. An exhaustive definition has not been formulated yet. The reason for that may be a lack of findings that would be strictly analogous to those from Szestno.

⁷⁵ Wojciech WRÓBLEWSKI, 'Ossa cremata. Obrządek pogrzebowy Galindów we wczesnym średniowieczu w świetle znalezisk na grodzisku w Szestnie-Czarnym lesie', *Światowit* 2 (2000), fasc. B, 268–281. See also Marcin SABACIŃSKI, 'Materiał osteologiczny z Szestna-Czarnego lasu, stan. 2 jako źródło informacji o pruskim stosie pogrzebowym', *Światowit* 4 (2002), fasc. B, 206–207; Marcin SABACIŃSKI, 'Bałtyjski kult głów (?) na podstawie materiału z grodziska w Szestnie „Czarnym Lesie”', *Archeologia Polski* 50:1–2 (2005), 81–97.

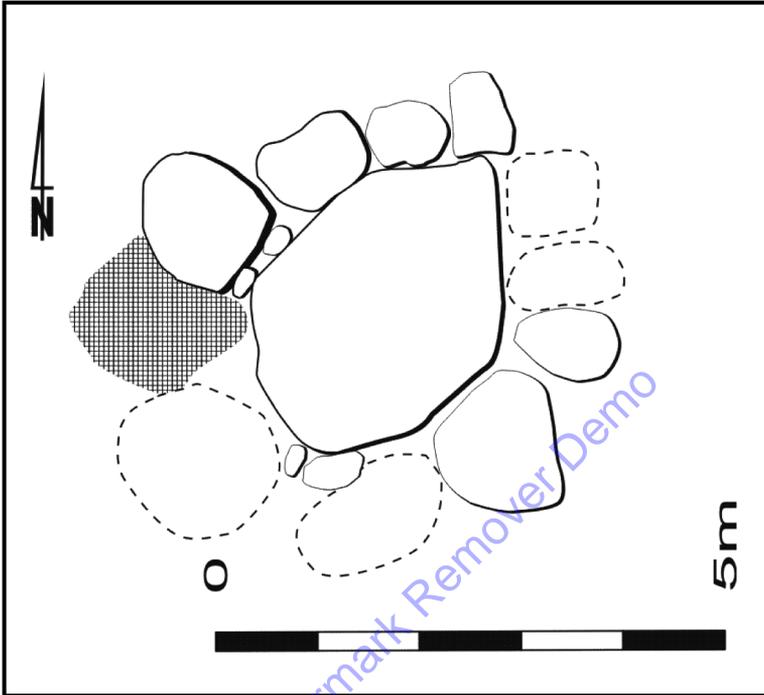
⁷⁶ Romuald ODOJ, 'Dzieje Prusów do czasów krzyżackich', *Komunikaty Mazursko-Warmińskie* 1 (1970), 58.

⁷⁷ Romuald ODOJ, 'Sprawozdanie z prac wykopaliskowych przeprowadzonych w Równinie Dolnej, pow. Kętrzyn w 1956 i 1957 r.', *Rocznik Olsztyński* 1 (1958), 117–156.

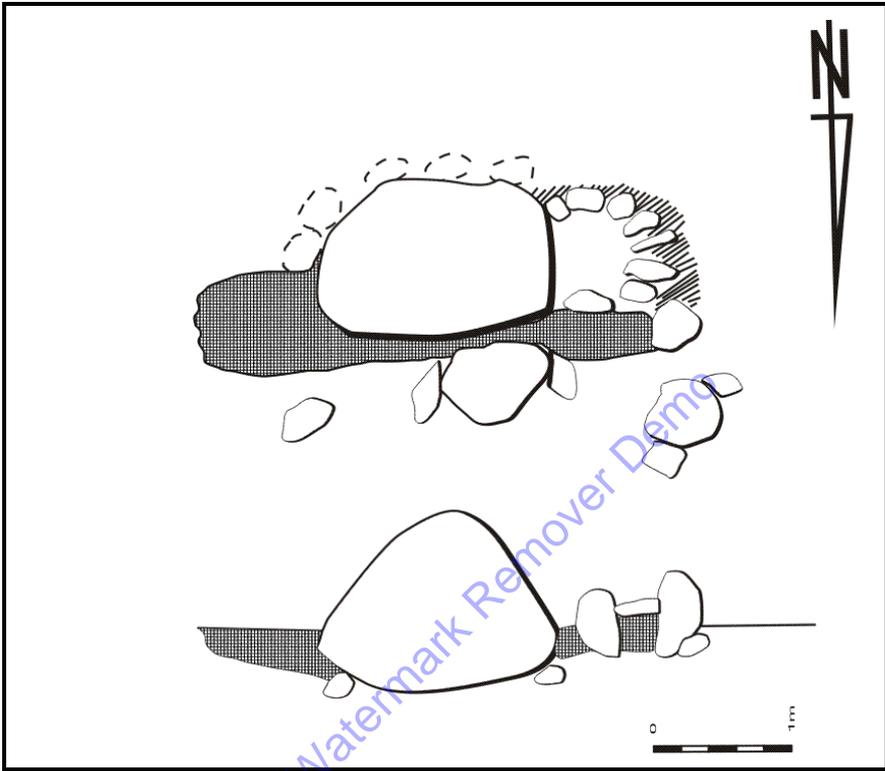
⁷⁸ Anatolij Voluev, 'Alt-Wehlau – "pogańskie" cmentarzysko na obszarze chrześcijańskich Prus w świetle badań archeologicznych', in Mirosław HOFFMANN and Jarosław SOBIERAJ (eds.), *Archeologia ziem pruskich. Nieznane zbiory i materiały archiwalne*, Olsztyn 1999, pp.397–400.

rarely dealt with the issues of the sacred sphere and the religious system in Prussia. It has also demonstrated that the Prussian religious system was based on the cult of nature and atmospheric phenomena. In respect of the Prussian sacred objects, the study has demonstrated that anthropomorphic stone statues, known as the Prussian *babas*, constituted a special category among Prussian cult objects. As the cult of ancestors played an important role in Prussian society, the issues of burial rituals have been discussed extensively. In conclusion, it must be admitted that the questions concerning the Prussian sacred sphere are complex and diverse and that many aspects connected with Prussian beliefs and customs require further detailed and interdisciplinary studies.

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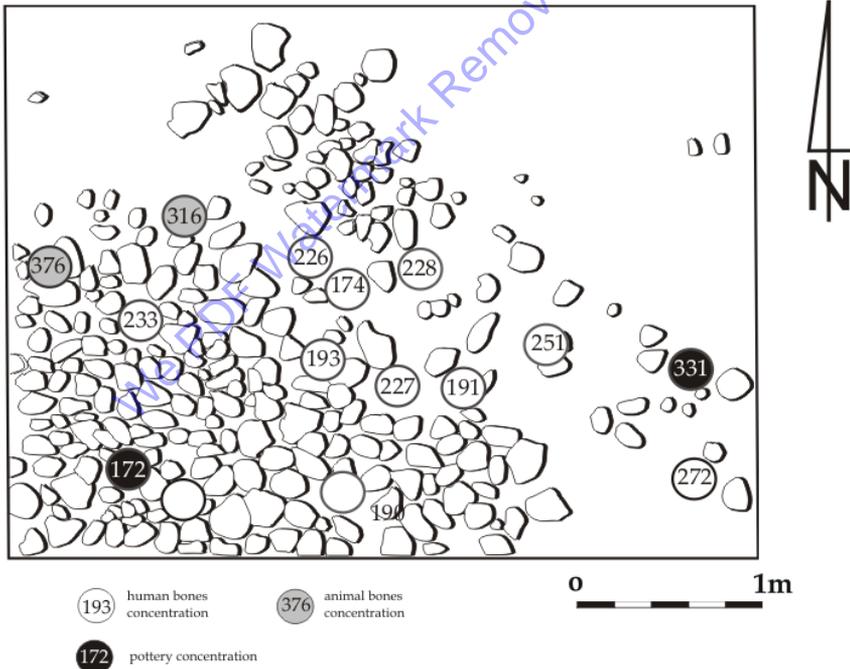
1. The sacrificial stone of Borisovo, after GRONAU 1938, 40



2. Dubrovka. Granite boulder surrounded with smaller stones. After GRONAU 1938, 40



3. The Prussian babas. A – Nipkowo; B – Barciany; C, D – Bartoszyce; E – Mózgowo; F – Pogranicznaje; G – Gołdowo-Jędrychowo; H – Dzierzgoń; I – Susz; J – Poganowo, K – Bratian; L – Prątnica; M – Jelitki. After RYBKA 2007, 56



4. The Bratian baba located in the courtyard of Toruń Town Hall
5. Szestno III-Czarny Las. Excavation plan with Czarny Las-type burials marked with white, grey, and black numbered circles. After SABACINSKI 2002, 209