

# Children's burials within the space of a church and a cemetery in the 16<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> century in Kuyavia and the Vistula Pomerania

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Archaeological and anthropological investigations are bringing more and more information and knowledge about the living conditions and lesions appearing in the historical populations. The analyses of children's bone relics of particular populations are exceptionally useful in this respect. The article discusses selected examples of children's burials from Toruń, Płonkowo and Gniew, Poland, excavated within churches and in cemeteries. The place of eternal rest depended on the social class of a family. Children were buried both in the central parts of the churches, in the aisles, or brick crypts. Unfortunately only in a few cases it was possible to establish these children's identity and religion.

KEYWORDS: death, children, church, cemetery, modern period

Archaeological excavations conducted in cemeteries and churches provide very rich information concerning the funeral traditions, history of material culture, and costume. Anthropological analyses of bone relics make it possible to reconstruct the living conditions, describe diseases and traumas which had affected the people of the time. In the people living 100 years ago, not to mention the Middle Ages, every infection usually ended with death (Kozłowski 2012: 13). Children, being weaker and younger, were the most endangered with various mortal infections. Their burials can be found in different parts of the cemetery and the church itself. Will the material, excavated in three particular sites, deliver sufficient information to define the exact child burial locations? Do the grave goods from children's burials differ significantly from those given to the adults? Can we speak about rich and poor burials, basing on the analyses of grave goods? Is it possible, basing on bone analyses, to determine the causes of death in every case?

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The archaeological excavations in the church of The Holy Virgin Mary in Toruń took place between 1982 and 1983. The presbytery revealed the Czapski Crypt, and the nave included several secondary burials. Anna and Zuzanna Majerman's relics were deposited over the bodies of the people who died 40 and 50 years later. This was because of the fact that during the construction of a brick crypt in the church presbytery (about 1724), the bodies buried earlier were put to a collective grave in the nave (Grupa 2005: 20–21).

The excavations conducted in the churchyard of the Płonkowo parish church<sup>1</sup>, Rojewo commune, provided significant information as to where burials around the village church and the local cemetery were precisely located. The wooden church built after 1764 by the Dąbski Family was burnt down by the Nazi youth combat troop in October 1939. After the war, the communist authorities did not give permission to reconstruct the church. In the early 1970s a new church was erected close to the parsonage. As the new church was built in another location, it was possible to carry out the excavations during which the remains of the old cemetery were detected and the three stages of the historical church functioning over 600 years ago were established (Grupa 2007: 314; 2009: 42–46).

Another archaeological site explored in detail was situated in the still functioning Gothic church in Gniew and the area around it, which has been used as a cemetery since the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Gniew is located at the place where the Wierzyca river flows into to the Vistula, and these are the two most important rivers of Gdańsk Pomerania (Bohdan-Choińska 1999: 43). The location was favourable for the economic development of the settlement, which became a town in 1297, and also to its neighbourhood. We still do not fully appreciate to what extent the efficient river port enhanced the affluence and development of the town. The archaeological excavations conducted in the town since 1975 (Bohdan-Choińska 1998: 23–57) and inside the church since 2009<sup>2</sup> yielded a considerable amount of information which has allowed us to determine the spatial, economic, and cultural transformation of the discussed area.

In the course of excavations conducted inside the church of the Assumption of the Holy Virgin Mary<sup>3</sup> in Toruń, in the so called Czapski crypt, the relics of two infants were identified among the 22 excavated skeletons. The information concerning the deceased buried in the crypt is recorded in the *Metrica Mortuorum*, which is an appendix to the Toruń Bernardines' Chronicles (*Kronika Bernardynów...*; Grupa 2005: 105),

<sup>1</sup> Research conducted by Małgorzata Grupa between 2006–2011.

<sup>2</sup> The research was conducted by Małgorzata Grupa and Anna Drażkowska. Studies and analyses of excavated material are partly possible thanks to financial means of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, within the National Program of Humanities Development. Anna Drażkowska is the grant executor and Małgorzata Grupa is one of the co-partners.

<sup>3</sup> Between 1982–1983 the church was conducting works on heating insulation. Archaeological supervision was carried on by the Laboratory of Historical Monuments Conservation in Toruń (Grupa 2005: 15).

however, the children's burials are not mentioned in it. Similar was the case of the two girls' burials situated in the nave. In this instance, however, the coffins were equipped with metal boards with names, surnames, and dates of death. Seven month old Anna Majerman died in Poznań on 1<sup>st</sup> August, 1619, but due to the persecution of the Protestants there, she was buried in Toruń. Zuzanna Majerman died in 1623 in Toruń and may have been buried at the side of her sister Anna (Friedelówna 1999: 94; Grupa 2005: 54). The burials of the Catholic children from the Czapski crypt, as well as of those two small sisters, were placed in the central part of the church, i.e., the presbytery. The Majerman sisters were removed from the presbytery to a common grave in the nave after the church had been reclaimed by the Catholics after the Tumult of Thorn. The sisters were identified only on the basis of the coffin plates as the register of the Old Town Evangelical religious community from 1616–1735 does not mention Anna or Zuzanna (*Registr*, sygn. 21; Grupa 2005: 102). This is quite surprising as it was necessary to obtain the Town Council's permission for any funeral and burial within the walls of the Toruń churches. On the other hand, the other children's bone relics from this crypt must have belonged to some Catholic noble families, who had right to be buried there<sup>4</sup>. The *Metrica Mortuorum* of the Toruń Bernardines' Chronicles not only give no information concerning the babies, but also does not report the burial of Józef Czapski, who died in 1764. The other Czapski Family members, i.e., Tomasz († 1746), Józef († 1749), and Elżbieta († 1762) Józef's wife († 1764) are listed in that register (Grupa 2005, 105). It may mean that the church authorities were not very careful in keeping the registers of the dead.

The Majerman sisters were dressed for their last journey in silk robes, which were constructed in a very simple way. Pieces of fabrics were creased at the necks and the sleeves were sewn on with the use of basting stitches; the dresses had no back parts. Such garments are known only from the archaeological sources; there are no mentions about them in the written sources. Despite their simplified forms, these robes were examples of rich grave goods, since according to the sumptuary law, burials in silk were prohibited. The crypt, the area around it, and the trench in the nave included grave wreaths of various sizes, made on bast bases, with silk threads with metal braiding originally imitating gold, remains of natural flowers. Wreaths of this type were placed in graves of children from rich families, young maids and bachelors, while poorer burials were probably decorated with meadow flowers and herbs, which unfortunately did not leave any signs. Due to the limitations in the archaeological research in that church, we were not able to define the range of the children's burials. We can only state that children of wealthy families were buried under the church floor or in the crypt together with the adults.

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<sup>4</sup> The crypt also housed the relics of: Piwnicki, Kuniewicz, Łochocki, Roźniewski, Rościszewski and others (Grupa 2005: 105).

Much more information was obtained during the excavations in Płonkowo. The children's burials were placed all over the whole burial area. During the excavations in the 2011 season, the archaeologists recorded many more child burials in the eastern part of the graveyard. The death registers from Płonkowo showed clearly that it was the original section designed for children's burials. The analyses concerned the years 1745–1754, when 264 persons, including 163 children, were buried in the cemetery, 125 of whom were deposited in its eastern sector<sup>5</sup>.

Children bone relics were reported in every part of the church. Inside the church, at least five layers of burials were excavated under the floor, which means that the space under the floor was not emptied (as it was done in towns) to room the next coffins, but the new ones were placed on the chests already standing there<sup>6</sup>. Adult burials were mixed up with the children's ones. The same situation was reported in the cemetery.

Rich grave goods were discovered only in the children's burials found inside the church. Trench 2/06 contained a child's skull with the signs of brass pins fastening an undefined ornament around a bonnet, the existence of which we can only presume (it could have been a decorative band or plants: flowers, green branches). In other cases the interpretation was impossible due to lack of visible signs. The deceased of higher social status were mainly found in the crypt burials.

The Christian religion required to bury the dead in sacred places and the natural consequence of that rule was the church funeral and obedience to a set of regulations (Grupa 2005: 28). The Christian liturgy emphasized closeness to godliness and that depended on the family financial status and the social group the deceased belonged to (Lam 1921: 33–36; Bystron 1976: 98–102; Kizik 1998: 18; 2001b: 43–47). The members of nobility were buried in various parts of the church or in brick crypts, according to their financial situation, the members of the lower social groups were buried in the cemetery. Children's burials differed, but only in the grave goods. Rich graves registered more green colouring on the bones, which were the most often signs of metal laces decorating bonnets and rims of grave gowns, traces of metal pins fixing various ornaments: bowknots or artificial and natural flowers (Grupa *et al.* 2015a; 2015b). However, basing on such uncertain evidence, it is difficult to state, if it was a child of a noble, burgher or peasant origin. Those representatives of the lower classes who had some financial means tried to equal with the élites, at least facing death and God.

Like in Płonkowo, the results of archaeological excavations in the church and the cemetery in Gniew were confronted with historical anthropology and bioarchaeology.

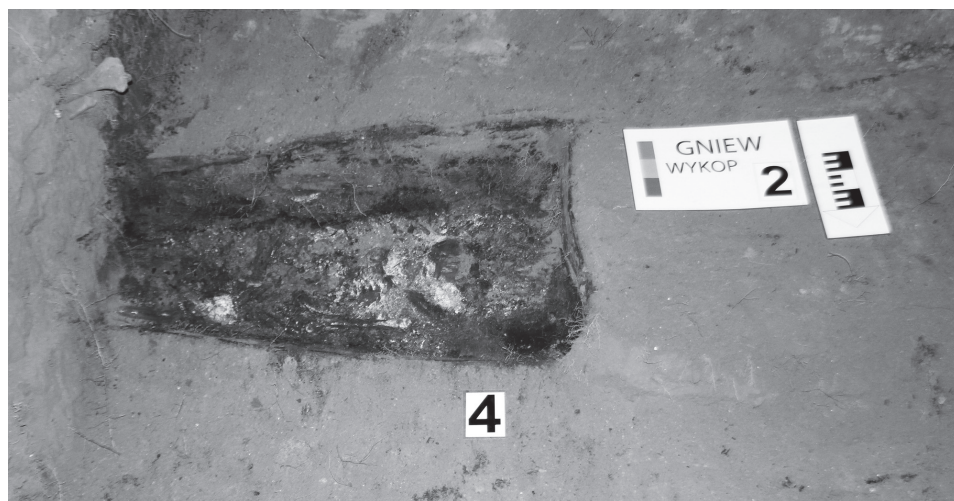
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<sup>5</sup> I would like to express my gratitude to W. Nowosad for the analysis of the historical records referring to Płonkowo and delivering the information before the completion of this paper.

<sup>6</sup> In the majority of cases it was difficult to identify the outlines of respective burial pits, because every new one destroyed the former one. Sometimes we were able to detect the outline of the coffin. If the chest had been made of fresh resin wood, it was frequently possible to find mineralized resin brown in colour around bone relics. On the basis of these signs we could define the average coffin size.

These data were used to reconstruct the demographical structure of Gniew population and establish the interactions between the human group, the cultural system, and the natural environment in which Gniew community lived.

That burials also included many children's skeletons, reported both under the church floor, in brick crypts, and in the cemetery. No separate children's burial sectors were recorded because the place of eternal rest depended on their parents' status and property. The crypt located in St. Catherine's chapel contained burials of two small children, exceptionally richly equipped<sup>7</sup>. Silk grave robes were decorated on all the surfaces with artificial flowers (Fig. 1) and metal ornaments, e.g., bobbin lace<sup>8</sup>. The children were deposited in the crypt together with the adults. Their coffins were placed on an earlier one with the date 1680. It may have been the crypt of one family. The collapse of the brick ceiling at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century must have stopped its exploitation.



**Fig. 1.** Child burial in N aisle, with wreaths and artificial flowers. Gniew, trench 2, burial 4. Photo by D. Grupa

<sup>7</sup> Using the expression 'exceptionally rich' is deliberate, because the riches and variety of grave equipment in Gniew, both in the case of adults and children is very surprising for the researchers as far as the quality and quantity of those objects are concerned.

<sup>8</sup> Bobbin laces were manufactured of many various threads: linen, cotton, silk with metal wrap (silver or gold). Woolen bobbins were interlaced in some order to create a pattern and a designed motif. Part of those laces were false, because the metal wrap was made of an alloy with copper predominance, which yielded green color after the corrosion of metal elements. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century these types of lace were already defined as gold, silver or false. In the majority of excavated material we have to do with false laces (Lefebvre 1888).

The other children's burials from the church also contained decorative elements made of brass wire imitating gold items. These were tiny works of art, probably manufactured by Gdańsk craftsmen (Grupa *et al.* 2014: 133–142). These artefacts originally imitated gold, but after three hundred years of being deposited in the ground, the big admixture of copper left green traces, hence we know that many objects were falsified<sup>9</sup>.

The intense trade contacts with various regions of Poland and Europe brought, besides increased affluence, also some undesirable diseases, such as, e.g., syphilis, caused by interpersonal contacts. Congenital syphilis, in which the spirochete bacteria from mother's organism penetrate the child's body in the womb, inducing characteristic morphological features such as, e.g., damage in the teeth, is also reported in the bone material.

In the children's mandibles excavated from the cemetery ossuaries, teeth of the 'mulberry' type were identified. In the cases of congenital syphilis, permanent molars have crowns resembling the mulberry in the shape and fracture, with numerous small nodules on the enamel surface (Aufderheide and Rodriguez-Martin 1998). Syphilis must have occurred among the population of Gniew and the neighbouring areas, and the skeletons with signs of that disease were excavated in the cemetery and in St. Nicolas church (Grupa *et al.* 2013: 140).

Already in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century it was commonly understood that this disease was transmitted by sexual intercourse. The quick transmission and spreading of the spirochete bacterium must have been caused by brothels functioning in the developing town centre, prostitution, very often casual, and generally: laxity, characteristic for the Enlightenment period. In the first place it was the disease of the social elites, noblemen, and magnates, the more mobile, active, groups with wide social contacts and frequently susceptible to new fashions coming from Western Europe. Syphilis affected even, and may be first of all, the crowned heads<sup>10</sup>.

The signs of infectious diseases recorded in the bone material from the mediaeval villages and towns suggest that people living there were highly endangered with

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<sup>9</sup> The majority of brass artefacts, such as pins, medals, crosses, bobbin laces and wire, undergo complete decomposition. It is a result of activity of sulfur and oxygen, which are components of water and the soil. These products firstly weaken the surface of the artefact and then penetrate the internal structure of the alloy. The appearance of corrosion cells can be caused by differences in oxygen concentrations and pH values or salt concentration (Shreir ed. 1966: 274–275). There are additional soil corrosion reactions and fungi and bacteria activities (microbiological corrosion), which accelerate corrosion processes in the soil (Grupa 2013: 133).

<sup>10</sup> Syphilis as the cause of death is attributed to English Henry VIII Tudor, Moscow Ivan the Terrible, the Polish king John Olbracht, his brother Alexander, Pope Julius II, Alexander VI, and his son Cesare Borgia, who had sexual intercourses till his death with numerous lovers and casual prostitutes, wearing a mask on his face covering detestable deformations (Besala 2007: 218). It is hard to define how many children were born with congenital syphilis, because only permanent teeth reveal readable signs of the disease and the majority of children affected with it must have died in their infancy.



pathogenic microbiological factors. The density of population, low level of hygiene, and poverty were favourable factors and conditions for the development of diseases. This picture is compatible with the vision of mediaeval towns and the life of their inhabitants emerging from the studies conducted by historians and historical epidemiologists (Jankowski 1990).

Children's bones bear also the traces of systemic problems, e.g., rickets (a deficiency of Vitamin D). Several of the tibiae of the Gniew children who died at the age *infans* I registered changes indicating rickets active at the moment of death (Grupa *et al.* 2015a: 153). The children of noble families had rather limited contact with the sun and fresh air, which was related with the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries fashion for pale faces. Hence, rickets appeared in wealthy families and increased together with a child's growth and development.

The increasing frequency of periostitis at the area of the Vistula Pomerania and Kuyavia is clearly readable starting from the early Middle Ages, i.e., the second half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, until 19<sup>th</sup> century. The tibiae of the children coming from urban settlements were characterized with a higher frequency of inflammation than those from the rustic areas. Periostitis and chronic bone inflammations are treated as general indicators of the populations being endangered with various types of infections (microbiological purity of the environment), but also as markers of general health and living conditions (Krajewska 2011: 60–62; Kozłowski and Krajewska 2012: 42–43).

The investigations conducted in the churches and cemeteries allow to gain a broader view on the living conditions in the past. Paleoepidemiology focuses mainly on tracing the lesions occurring in the historical populations and studying the relations between diseases and various natural and cultural factors, as well as on preparing their quantitative descriptions. Therefore, the studies conducted by the archaeologists, historians, historians of art, demographers and anthropologists can yield a great amount of new information and children's burials are one of the most significant elements of this riddle. The analysis of the sources and constructing hypotheses are only a means for interpreting these diverse phenomena. Collecting and explaining them step by step brings us closer to creating an interpretation of the historical reality.

Childbirth was a critical moment for both the mother and the baby. Much depended on God's favour and the skills of the local midwife. Any complication could bring death to the mother and the neonate (Kizik 2001a: 141). Hence, such a high rate of mortality of babies and women in childbed. The next critical moment arrived with the childhood diseases, which also claimed many victims, populating the cemeteries and church crypts with children's graves. Unfortunately, not all the diseases can be recorded since the bones reflect only the chronic ones.

The sources presented above did not allow to spot the special areas designed children's burials, because only Płonkowo gave the example of a clearly outlined child zone (part of the burials belong to adult individuals), therefore it is impossible to state that

in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries the investigated cemeteries had separate child burial quarters. The problem requires further systematic studies and analyses.

Many social groups are deeply convinced that in the historical times there existed special children's sections in cemeteries. However, it seems that in this case the 19<sup>th</sup> century traditions are extrapolated onto the earlier periods. The research performed in Toruń, Płonkowo and Gniew (Fig. 2) has not yielded any evidence of the existence of such special quarters in the church and cemetery spaces.



Fig. 2. Child's coffin situated on an adult's coffin. Photo by D. Grupa.

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