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HOW COOPERATION BETWEEN ARCHAEOLOGISTS AND ART CONSERVATORS HELPS US DISCOVER MORE INFORMATION: ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS AT THE JEWISH CEMETERY ON OKOPOWA STREET IN WARSAW

Abstract

The article concerns archaeological research in plot 1 at the Jewish cemetery at 49/51 Okopowa Street in Warsaw (Wola necropolis). Thanks to simultaneous archaeological works and tombstone conservation, it is possible to examine the underground parts of the matzevot. Archaeologists present at the removal of matzevot for conservation have the opportunity to document the profiles of burial pits created during the demolition of tombstones. The information obtained in this way is very valuable in reconstructing the ways in which tombstones were made and decorated. Traces of polychromies are often preserved in the lower part of the matzevot covered with soil. Such observations are not possible during archaeological research, which is carried out at shallow depths, as recommended by the Rabbinical Commission for Jewish Cemeteries in Poland.

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KEYWORDS

- Jewish cemetery
- excavations
- Judaism
- Okopowa street (Wola) necropolis
- conservation
- tombstones

INTRODUCTION

Limitations due to the compliance with Jewish law make it necessary to work in close cooperation with other specialists working at Jewish cemeteries in order to study burial customs in Jewish culture. A good example of such symbiosis is the work in the Jewish Cemetery at 49/51 Okopowa Street in Warsaw. It is only through close cooperation with conservators working on the protection and conservation of monuments that we can discover more. Like every cemetery, this Jewish necropolis has its own unique history and characteristics.

JEWISH CEMETERY AT OKOPOWA STREET

The Jewish cemetery, opened in 1806 in Warsaw at the end of the former Gęsia Street,

was established on a nearly rectangular plan of approximately 180×100 m¹ and was divided into two quarters: the men's quarter (plot 1) and the women's quarter (plot 2).² As the number of Jewish inhabitants in Warsaw grew, the cemetery was expanded several times (today it covers an area of approximately 33.6 hectares). In the second half of the 19th century, as a result of protests by progressive Jews, a new division of the burial plot was introduced: a conservative quarter, a regular quarter for Jews who did not identify as orthodox or assimilationists, a progressive quarter, and a children's quarter.³

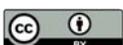
The state of preservation of the entire cemetery, including plot 1, varies. The greatest damage

¹ Bergman and Jagielski 1990, 9-18.

² Married and single men, maidens, married women, and those who died in childbirth were buried separately, Schipper 1938, 96.

³ Żołnierczyk 2019, 221-232.

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occurred during World War II, when the most severe vandalism and looting took place, primarily during the ‘Easter pogrom’ in 1940, later when the buildings in the utility part of the cemetery and the synagogue were blown up in 1943, and finally during the defence of the Wola district cemeteries (6–11 August 1944) at the time of the Warsaw Uprising.⁴ Unfortunately, the condition of the cemetery was (and still is) affected not only by the war, but also by the densely growing trees, whose root systems destroy the burial chambers and whose trunks and breaking branches damage the monuments. Planting trees at the cemetery began in 1851.⁵ However, despite its turbulent history,⁶ in most places the cemetery has retained its original layout.

The eastern and central parts of the studied area have survived almost intact, with the only damage being the bullet marks visible on the monuments. In the north-western part of the surveyed area, a deep hole was dug for a mass grave during World War II, destroying the 19th century burials located there. Today, there are no matzevot or other stone memorial elements in the area of the mass grave and the adjacent area to the south. The southern part of the surveyed area has, apart from a few exceptions, has retained the original layout of the gravestones.

Fig. 1. Warsaw, Wola necropolis. Two types of gravestones: grave no. 429 – a stele with a type one monolithic block, grave no. 428 – an intermediate form between the monolithic type and stone box type. Grave no. 428 – state after conservation. Photo: M. Sugalska.



⁴ Bartoszewski 2004, 73.

⁵ Schiper 1938, 97.

⁶ Wiczorek n.d.

The area of plot 1, covered by the archaeological research, is delimited on the south by an external brick wall, while the northern end is marked by a contemporary pavement separating this part of the cemetery from plots 9 and 10. The western boundary is formed by the Mausoleum of Jewish Fighters for Poland's Independence,⁷ while the eastern boundary is formed by a low transverse wall. It separated the area intended for burials from the space adjacent to Lubomirski's trenches, incorporated into the cemetery before 1848.⁸

The graves in the respective burial plots are oriented according to the east-west line and placed in rows running north to south. According to the magistrate's order of 1851, 8 square cubits (or ells) were allocated per grave.⁹ As the cemetery was filling rapidly and lacked space for new burials, individual graves were placed very close to each other, often not maintaining the obligatory rule of keeping a six *tefachim* (handbreadths)¹⁰ distance between them.

TYPES OF TOMBSTONES

The Okopowa Street cemetery, like other metropolitan cemeteries, is an example of exceptional Jewish art. In Central and Eastern Europe, tombstone sculpture flourished from the 16th century onwards and became increasingly diverse and unconventional, with a rich range of symbolic motifs.¹¹ The assimilationist movement (*haskala*) that was spreading in Europe, including Poland, at the end of the 19th century had a great impact on social and religious life, including funerary rites and gravestone art. This led to the emergence of monuments that referred in style and ornamental motifs to those known from Christian cemeteries. Many of them have decoration that imitates elements characteristic of ancient Egyptian art or Moorish art. These trends are also visible in the sepulchral art in the area of plot 1.¹²

The Wola necropolis, like every Jewish cemetery, also has its own specificity and characteristic style of tombstones, which represent the majority of the known types.

The most common type of tombstone in plot 1 is the headstone stele. This term in the text will be used interchangeably with ‘matzevah’, understood

⁷ For a plan of the surveyed area with the results of the work, see the article by Lenarczyk and Kowarska 2023.

⁸ A hearse building, cemetery offices, and a grand synagogue with a pre-burial house were built on this plot, Zieliński 2011, 155.

⁹ Schiper 1938, 96-97.

¹⁰ Six *tefachim* is a distance of about 60 cm, Bis and Więckowski 2017, 111-112.

¹¹ Krajewska 1989b, 45-59.

¹² Krajewska 1989a, 27-44.



Fig. 2. Warsaw, Wola necropolis. A stone box type tombstone. Photo: M. Sugalska.

as a vertical stone or cast-iron slab, dug into the ground on the eastern side of a grave pit.¹³ The tombstones in the Wola cemetery have various forms of crowning (or coping), which take the shape of an arch or a rectangle, rarely of a triangle. In the upper part of the stele, there is a relief decoration, sometimes with an inscription consisting of two Hebrew letters ‘pe’ and ‘nun’, meaning an abbreviation of the Hebrew expression ‘here rests’. A part of the stele is occupied by the proper ledger with an inscription field, usually in Hebrew (on progressive/assimilationists’ monuments also in Polish, German, and even Russian). The inscription letters are mostly written in concave relief. The less frequent convex letters are characteristic of the older style of matzevah decoration, occurring until the mid-19th century. The inscription field is bounded on both sides by semi-columns, pilasters, or a decorative border. The lowest part of the matzevah, a plinth visible above ground level, usually features a motif of a brick wall with a two-door gate, geometric, floral, and zoomorphic designs, including fantastic beasts, and sometimes an inscription. In the 19th century, monuments made of cast iron started to appear on Okopowa Street.

An ornamental stele with a monolithic block¹⁴ is a type of tombstone in which a stone or concrete elongated block is attached to the stele, with a semicircular or rectangular coping, placed over the entire burial chamber (Fig. 1). Its function was

to protect the grave area from above and to support the standing slab bound together with an iron anchor. Such elements have been used since the 16th century. This is why the shapes, dimensions, and designs of this type of tombstone vary. In plot 1, there is only one type of tombstone in the form of a vertical stele attached to a plain undecorated stone block with a uniform cross-section over its entire length.¹⁵

Stone box graves in plot 1 usually consist of a stone foundation on which stands a high, oblong, rectangular stone box covered with a flat slab and a high stele with an inscription on the eastern side. The sides of the box are sometimes decorated with carved circular pseudo-handles. These monuments often have decorated iron fences (Fig. 1).

Monuments with the above-mentioned tombstone structure are an intermediate form between the stele-shaped tombstones with a monolithic block and the stone box type. The visual effect is similar to that of the monolithic block, but the monolithic block is replaced by two rectangular plates that form a support for the coping, usually in the form of a half-cylinder. The shorter end of the block is crowned with a lower stele, as in the stone box types,¹⁶ which was probably intended to protect the free space created by such a structure (in a few cases they have an inscription) (Fig. 2).

¹³ The word ‘matzevah’ has a broader meaning and means simply ‘monument’, see: Rozmus 2005, 35, 38.

¹⁴ Trzciński 2018, 47-55.

¹⁵ The typology published by A. Trzciński most closely reflects the types of tombstones found in the Wola necropolis, and I will refer to it in this study, Trzciński 2018, 47-59. For information on other types of tombstones see: Krajewska 1989a, 27-32.

¹⁶ Trzciński 2018, 52-53.

Fig. 3. Warsaw,
Wola necropolis.
Photo: M. Sugalska



In plot 1, there are also non-traditional tombstones, which have small architectural and sculptural forms: an obelisk, a near-perpendicular tombstone, a free-standing column, often a broken, full-body sculpture in the shape of a broken trunk or felled tree, and a vase or urn standing on a pedestal or column.¹⁷

More elaborate in architectural form are the *ohels*, i.e., rectangular buildings erected over the graves of *tzadikim* and rabbis to protect and distinguish the grave. The *ohel* created a space where visitors to the tomb could pray, leave *kwitlech* or light candles.¹⁸ There are four *ohels* in the surveyed area of plot 1, the most ornate of which is Ber Sonnenberg's *ohel* from 1822 with bas-reliefs on the longer walls of the building.¹⁹ Although Ber Sonnenberg was a secular person, the chapel built over his grave to commemorate his achievements was called an '*ohel*' by Ignacy Schiper, marking the word with inverted commas.²⁰ Other *ohels* belong to the first Chief Rabbi of Warsaw, Shlomo Zalman Lipszyc, dated 1839,²¹ the rabbi of Warsaw's Praga district, Jeshua Mushkat,²² dated 1866, and the *tzadik* of Serock, Aharon Katzenelenbogen, dated 1926.

¹⁷ Trzeciński 2018, 57-58.

¹⁸ Bielawski n.d., 97-98.

¹⁹ Nowogórski and Kowalska 2000, 277-288.

²⁰ Schiper 1938, 118.

²¹ Bielawski n.d., 105.

²² Zieliński 2011, 153-157.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WORKS AND RENOVATION OF TOMBSTONES

The aim of the archaeological investigations in the area of historic plot 1, carried out by Szymon Lenarczyk's company Wykop na Poziomie in cooperation with the Faculty of Archaeology of the University of Warsaw, on behalf of the Cultural Heritage Foundation (Fundacja Dziedzictwa Kulturowego), was to thoroughly survey this part of the site and expose the historic ground level.²³ The work was carried out in accordance with the regulations on the protection of cultural heritage and Jewish religious law. The excavation methods followed the guidelines of the Rabbinical Commission for Jewish Cemeteries in Poland and were carried out under the close supervision of its representative.

*... According to Jewish tradition and law, the human body is sacred even after death and remains so until the Day of Judgement. Therefore, the bones of those who have passed away remain sacred and inviolable. Tradition says that the soul and the body remain connected even after death, so if one violates the bones here on earth, the peace of the soul in heaven is also violated. (...) Judaism explicitly prohibits interfering with the structure of the earth in Jewish cemeteries because of the danger of disturbing the bones of the dead. Consequently, only non-invasive methods of research are compatible with Jewish tradition. (...) Archaeological research is permitted only in exceptional cases, in consultation with the Commission and under the rabbinical supervision of a delegated Commission employee.*²⁴

The constraints of conforming to the guidelines of the Rabbinical Commission for Cemeteries do not allow us to obtain information on the construction and possible variety of forms of burial chambers. The lowest parts of the tombstones, which – as these parts are buried underground – conceal the well-preserved polychromes, are also rarely accessible for research.

Before the archaeological work began, the area of plot 1 was overgrown with tall grass and low bushes. For this reason, the work started with removing the foliage and raking up leaves and broken branches. Then, after a preliminary survey of the site, permission was obtained to remove about 10 to 20 centimetres of soil, which is how much humus was usually deposited up to the ceiling of the burial chambers. Once this was removed, it was discovered that some of the graves had a burial chamber

²³ See: Cultural Heritage Foundation Project.

²⁴ Rabbinical Commission for Cemeteries, Commission's Guidelines for the Protection of Jewish Cemeteries in Poland.



Fig. 4. Warsaw, Wola necropolis. Grave No. 428 – conservation work, visible sandstone foundation supporting stone kerbs on which a half-cylinder slab will be placed.
Photo: D. Pisarski.

ceiling lined with bricks. In no case was the use of planks for shoring the burial chamber observed at this level as attested in many Jewish cemeteries, e.g. in Węgrów, Wyszogród, Maków Mazowiecki, Krasiczyn, and Warsaw's Bródno district.²⁵

In most cases, the outline of the burial chamber has been lined with the shorter sides of the bricks facing each other (the so-called header face) and the matzevah, while the end of the burial chamber is accentuated by the brick(s) laid perpendicularly to the longer sides (Fig. 3). Less frequently, bricks are laid facing each other with their longer sides (the so-called stretcher face) in relation to each other and to the matzevah. In a few cases, the centre of the resulting chamber is lined with bricks, presumably to reinforce the ceiling of the chamber, on which a rectangular stone slab was sometimes placed.

From the outset, the investigations on plot 1 demonstrated the scale of the destruction, so a rescue programme was developed for the oldest and most damaged or endangered tombstones.²⁶ A thorough restoration and conservation of the selected monuments sometimes requires intervention in the soil. In such cases, damaged monuments are excavated and the area is cleared and reinforced for the resetting of the restored tombstones. By participating in conservation work, we have the only opportunity to look deeper without disturbing human remains.



Fig. 5. Warsaw, Wola necropolis. The 'floor' of grave no. 428.
Photo: M. Sugalska.

GRAVES NO. 428 (1843) AND NO. 427 (1847)

The extensive damage to tombstone no. 428 in the form of a broken matzevah lying next to it and a shattered stone pedestal collapsed into the centre of the burial chamber required rapid conservation intervention. The restoration of the entire site (Figs. 1 and 7) required a deeper intervention in the ground. In order to remove all the stone

²⁵ Bis and Więckowski 2017, 113.

²⁶ The restoration work on plot 1 is being carried out by: Font-Art Damian Pisarski.

Fig. 6. Warsaw, Wola necropolis. Visible side wall of grave chamber no. 427 and part of the 'floor' of grave no. 428. Photo: M. Sugalska.



Fig. 7. Warsaw, Wola necropolis. Grave no. 428 – a matzevah after conservation. Photo: M. Sugalska.



elements, the soil had to be removed to a depth of approximately 50 cm. At this level, after cleaning the excavation trench, a carefully laid brick 'floor' measuring approximately 80×160 cm was discovered. The eastern part, where the matzevah is placed, consists of two parallel rows of bricks (stretcher face), and is located 5 cm lower than the western part. In the western part, the outline of the pit was lined with bricks with shorter sides

(headers) facing each other, forming a casing. The centre was filled with brick rubble, tightly filled with lime mortar (Fig. 4). Assuming that the grave should have a depth of between 6 and 8 *te-fachim*,²⁷ i.e. about 60–80 cm, it can be assumed with certainty that this is the ceiling of the burial chamber containing the remains of the deceased. Above this brick 'floor' was a layer of sand about 10 cm thick, on which was laid a horizontal slab of sandstone also about 10 cm thick (Fig. 5). The slab supported a structure of an intermediate form, consisting of two rectangular stone kerbs along the longer sides of the chamber and a smaller slab enclosing the space to the west, on which rested a half-cylinder coping. The vertical stele was set on a separate, larger carefully shaped plinth.

When cleaning the trench we discovered that on the south side, grave no. 428 closely adjoined grave no. 427 from 1847. This provided us with a view of the side wall of the chamber of grave no. 427, which shows different features. The chamber was lined with at least 5 layers of bricks, laid with their shorter sides (header faces) towards each other, in a Flemish bond. On top of these, just below a thin layer of litter, was a horizontally laid stone slab. The matzevah was dug into a depth of approximately 60 cm and its sides that were buried in the ground have not been thoroughly dressed and bear chisel marks (Fig. 6).

²⁷ Bis and Więckowski 2017, 112.



Fig. 8. Warsaw, Wola necropolis. Graves 683, 684, and 685 – the state before the start of the investigations.
Photo: M. Sugalska.

GRAVES NO. 683 (1831), NO. 684 (1835), AND NO. 685 (1839)

Graves nos. 683, 684, and 685 are located in the western part of the studied area and their state of preservation was poor. They all had broken matzevot, with 1/3–1/4 of their height preserved *in situ* (Fig. 8). During the archaeological work, the shattered elements were removed from the surface of the chambers so as to obtain information about their construction. In the case of all three graves, a stone slab, or a fragment thereof, was overlying an undetermined brick structure. When removing 10 cm of soil from the area in front of the face of the matzevot, we discovered fragments of yellow polychrome on the matzevah belonging to grave no. 685. The plinth of this matzevah is divided into two parts. The visible fragment of the upper part consists of three panels and the central panel bears an inscription with the date of death and a wish for eternal life, and the surrounding cymatium, a fragment of which was previously buried below the surface of the ground, has retained its intense yellow colour (Fig. 9). During the conservation work, i.e., the unearthing of the entire matzevah, the second part of the plinth decorated with a bas-relief in the form of five bannisters was discovered, which retained a white polychrome and the space between them an intense blue colour (Fig. 10). Below ground, the matzevah of grave no. 683 retained its two-part plinth. Its upper part is divided into three sections – the middle one is decorated with three fully preserved bannisters and two are preserved only partly. The side panels are



Fig. 9. Warsaw, Wola necropolis. Grave no. 685 – fragments of yellow polychrome on the plinth.
Photo: M. Sugalska.



Fig. 10. Warsaw, Wola necropolis. Grave no. 685 – polychromed lower part of the plinth.
Photo: M. Sugalska.

in the form of rectangular pedestals for the bases of Doric columns. The lower part of the plinth in the form of a brick wall has preserved polychrome

Fig. 11. Warsaw, Wola necropolis. Plinth of grave no. 683. Photo: M. Sugalska.



in green and black (Fig. 11). After cleaning the resulting section of the burial chambers, we obtained information about their construction. Grave no. 685 has three layers of bricks covering the entire (?) space of the chamber, with another stone slab placed on top of an approximately 5 cm layer of sand. The neighbouring grave no. 684 has a slightly different structure: four layers of bricks along the outline, with their headers facing the matzevah, and in the free space, inside the chamber, there is brick and stone rubble. A stone slab was placed directly on top of the bricks. Grave no. 683 had only two layers of bricks along the outline, overlaid by a fragment of a stone slab (removed in preparation for the dismantling of the matzevah). Below the brick foundations was yellow sand without visible pits or cuts (Fig. 12). An analogous situation was observed in other parts of the cemetery.

Fig. 12. Warsaw, Wola necropolis. Eastern profiles of the burial chambers of graves nos. 683, 684, and 685. Photo: M. Sugalska.



Two further examples of monuments selected for conservation are single matzevot.²⁸ The preparation for conservation consisted only of digging the matzevot up from the east and removing them from the ground. After removing and cleaning the matzevot, we gained access to the eastern sections of the burial chambers.

GRAVE NO. 20 (1817) (FIGS. 13 AND 14)

In this case, the burial chamber has no brick framing and there are no visible remains of wooden structures.

GRAVE NO. 433 (1847) (FIG. 15)

The burial chamber has bricks only in the ceiling section. From the top, the entire space of the burial chamber was lined with two layers of bricks, each layer consisting of three rows of bricks laid with their shorter sides (headers) to the matzevah; below, the chamber pit was secured with two layers of bricks laid only along the outline.

GRAVE NO. 289 (1836)

This is an example of a matzevah with elaborate and polychrome architectural decoration referring to the appearance of the temple façade. The area where grave no. 289 is located is characterised by more destruction, with all the matzevot and monuments in the area largely damaged. It is difficult to determine today whether this is the result of the activity of the densely growing trees or the result of warfare. For the most part, the matzevot in this area have been preserved up to 1/3–1/2 of their original height (Fig. 16), while the rest

²⁸ The conservation is taking place at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, where the matzevot are still located.

of the broken fragments lay buried in the ground next to the graves. The archaeological work was limited only to the removal of the overlying litter on the stone rubble. The selection of grave no. 289 for conservation involved the removal of most of the stone elements and the excavation of the lowest part of the matzevah. The pedestal of this matzevah is richly decorated with floral motifs, while the cornice and architrave are finished with a cymatium. The body shows a convex inscription field delimited by pilasters and semi-columns in Doric style. The plinth is divided into two parts – the upper part contains five panels decorated with floral and geometric motifs (this part was intended to remain above ground) and the excavated lower part of the plinth is decorated with a motif of a wall with buttresses. Carved in the middle of the wall is a gate with a semicircular top passing into pilasters on either side. The right door has a rectangular keyhole lock (Fig. 17).²⁹ The polychrome is preserved only in the part of the plinth that until now was buried underground: the colour red on the brick wall and on the dividing line of the gate, green on the door, and black on the lock. The uniqueness of this matzevah is evident not only in the preserved polychromes but also in the use of the door motif. The gate motif (sometimes with a padlock) is a common decorative motif on Jewish graves, as evidenced here in the Warsaw cemetery on Okopowa Street. It is usually found below the epitaph in the above-ground part of the plinth or on the reverse side



Fig. 13. Warsaw, Wola necropolis. Grave no. 20 – the removal of a matzevah. Photo: M. Sugalska.

of the gravestone.³⁰ In this case, however, the door was intentionally buried below the surface of the ground, as appears to be evidenced by the unfinished sides of the matzevah up to the height of the rustication on the pedestal, and by irregular streaks and splashes of paint on the undressed lower section of the plinth and the lower section of the back



Fig. 14. Warsaw, Wola necropolis. Grave no. 20 – eastern profile of the chamber. Photo: M. Sugalska.

²⁹ Kurczyński 2022, 72.

³⁰ Krajewska 1989b, 55.

Fig. 15. Warsaw, Wola necropolis. Grave no. 20 – eastern profile of the chamber. Photo: M. Sugalska.



Fig. 16. Warsaw, Wola necropolis. Grave no. 289 – state of preservation before conservation work. Photo: M. Sugalska.



of the matzevah. After conservation, the matzevah of grave no. 289 was deliberately buried so that the polychrome elements remain above ground.

GRAVE NO. 846 (1831)

An interesting example of a completely different form of matzevah is that placed on grave no. 846 in plot 9. It was made of natural fieldstone, which was smoothed only on the side intended for inscriptions.³¹ It is an example that relates in style

³¹ In plot 1 there is also a matzevah of this shape, which also dates from 1831. In the case of plot 1, the grave has a smaller, undressed stone enclosing the burial chamber, the

to the oldest matzevot. Although it was not selected for conservation, its interesting ornamentation and polychrome were discovered thanks to the conservation and construction work carried out during the erection of a new memorial to the two 1942 mass graves on the west side of the monument. As can be seen in the photograph (Fig. 18), the top part of the stone covered with green lichen protruded

ceiling of which has been secured with three parallel rows of bricks. Unfortunately, we will not find out whether grave no. 846 also had such a structure. The area to the west of the matzevah was destroyed during the digging of the pits for the mass grave in 1942.

above ground level, while its lighter part below was cleaned off during the archaeological survey (approximately 15 cm), and the lowest part with visible polychrome was discovered during work on the construction of the memorial. Raspberry-coloured dye is preserved on the bases of the columns, fragments of blue polychrome on the columns, and white colour on the stylobate. The middle step of the crepidoma is filled with raspberry colour and painted ornamentation in the form of black dots, while the lowest step is decorated with alternating black and raspberry dots.

SUMMARY

In the course of the research work, questions arise that we cannot answer unequivocally: do burials where no bricks were found at the exposed level not have a brick chamber and correspond to a more modest, traditional burial form? Or, in such cases, is the burial, and thus the brick chamber, placed much deeper underground? Or do they have other forms of chamber protection, such as boards placed at a much deeper level?

Unfortunately, due to the guidelines prohibiting us from exceeding the designated depth of exploration, this cannot be checked. At this point, only during conservation work is it possible to verify the above-mentioned research questions. We can hope that thanks to the cooperation between archaeologists and art conservators our knowledge about the forms of burials, decorative techniques, and the colouring of gravestones will increase with each joint research.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.



Fig. 17. Warsaw, Wola necropolis. Grave no. 289 – the matzevah after its removal from the ground. Photo: M. Sugalska.



Fig. 18. Warsaw, Wola necropolis. Grave no. 846. Photo: M. Sugalska.

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A Task and a Challenge for Several Generations of Researchers. Some Remarks on “The Legal and Research Challenges of Jewish Archaeology” by Dariusz Rozmus (“Prawne i badawcze wyzwania archeologii żydowskiej”). Oficyna Wydawnicza Humanitas. Sosnowiec 2022)

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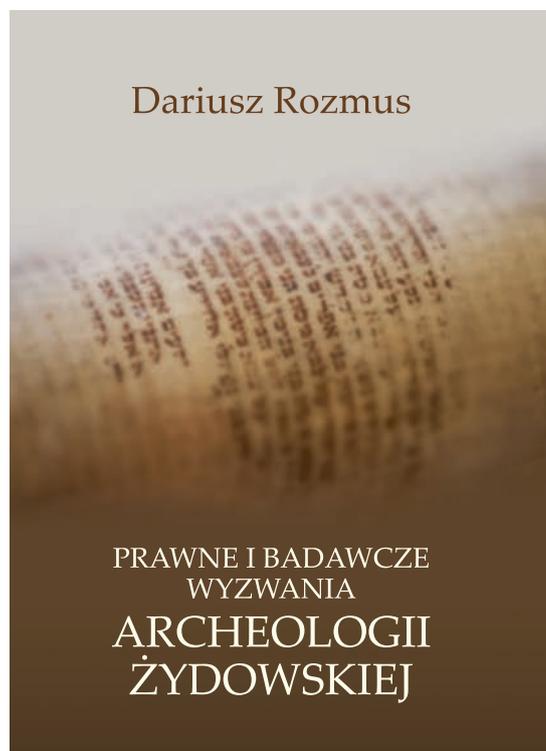
**A TASK AND A CHALLENGE FOR SEVERAL GENERATIONS OF RESEARCHERS. SOME REMARKS ON
THE LEGAL AND RESEARCH CHALLENGES OF JEWISH ARCHAEOLOGY BY DARIUSZ ROZMUS
(PRAWNE I BADAWCZE WYZWANIA ARCHEOLOGII ŻYDOWSKIEJ.
OFICYNA WYDAWNICZA HUMANITAS. SOSNOWIEC 2022)**

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*Archaeology cannot be a panacea for transience. Its effects only bring back the crumbs of shattered history, which are also valuable; thanks to them we can keep the memory alive and as a warning and protect these shreds of our history from being forgotten forever,*¹ writes Dariusz Rozmus in his latest publication. This researcher, mentor, and caretaker of Jewish cemeteries on the border of Upper Silesia and Lesser Poland, is well-known not only in academic circles but also among community members fighting to preserve Jewish heritage in Poland. He recently shared his vast theoretical and practical knowledge of the methodology and methods of discovering and preserving traces of Jewish presence in the territory of Poland.

Dariusz Rozmus's book is a sort of manual, but also a must-have for those who see the need to search for remnants of Jewish culture using methods and tools drawn from archaeology and its related fields. It consists of eight chapters. The first one deals with what the author has been researching for years – the burial sites of Jewish inhabitants of Polish lands over the centuries (*Cmentarze żydowskie. Historia badań oraz przykłady działań praktycznych*). In that chapter, the author presents



the origins of the founding of Jewish cemeteries and their architectural principles dictated by the religious and practical requirements of the Jewish community. For this researcher-practitioner, each cemetery is a separate creation that should

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¹ Rozmus 2022, 136.

be treated individually because, as he repeatedly emphasises, each cemetery – although created according to religiously standardised principles – is architecturally and visually different. The author dedicated one subsection of the first chapter to those elements of religious and customary law that can be used to protect Jewish cemeteries as historic sites (or even – according to archaeological categories – as burial sites) as well as artefacts, primarily, gravestones that may be displaced or often reused. Chapter 1 concludes with examples of practical measures for the preservation of Jewish cemeteries. The author describes various initiatives, governmental programmes, and social projects related to the preservation not only of cemeteries but also of monuments and artefacts from the dismantling of abandoned Jewish cemeteries. On this occasion, the author – drawing from his own experience as a heritage protection practitioner, advises where and how the finds can be displayed in order to follow the rules of Judaism.

The second chapter of the book, titled *Sepulchral art – a rich variety of research possibilities* (*Sztuka sepulchralna – bogactwo możliwości badawczych*), is dedicated to the broadly understood artistic creation of gravestones, treated by Dariusz Rozmus as a still insufficiently researched branch of Jewish culture. The author highlights the great importance of this field of research, stating that: *Jewish cemeteries located in Poland are perhaps the largest concentration of Jewish stone reliefs in the world. Jewish sepulchral art, in my opinion, achieved its unique character in central and eastern Europe from the 17th century until the period of World War I (not World War II!), and in some places until the 1920s. It developed to such an extent that it became recognisable as [stylised] Egyptian, Greco-Roman or Romanesque art. To analyse it, one needs a combined knowledge of history, history of art, and ethnography, including Jewish ethnography, or to work with people who have such knowledge.*²

For the author, a matzevah – being a medium of artistic value – can be treated as a unique cultural artefact, a product of traditional Jewish stonemasonry. This is because it is characterised not only by symbolism but also by its ‘intricacy,’ which can be understood both literally and metaphorically. According to Rozmus, tombstone painting is another not fully recognised phenomenon of sepulchral art, about which little is still known. The author tries to find reasons why the symbolism (message) of matzevot in cemeteries, even closely located to

each other, can vary greatly and testify to the different aesthetic preferences of various individuals in decorating their tombstones. Here he refers to the results of research conducted on 20th-century cemeteries in Czeladź and Chrzanów located not far from each other. What conclusions does he draw? *We can try to explain such big differences between the stylistics of the Jewish cemeteries in Chrzanów and Czeladź in the reception of the symbols of books, a bookcase, as well as a candlestick and a crown by the fact that [following the so-called partitions of Poland] these towns were incorporated to two different states [i.e., Czeladź became part of the territory controlled by Russia and Chrzanów belonged to Austrian Galicia]. The problem is that from 1918 until the Shoah, both towns were again located in one [Polish] state, writes Rozmus. Contacts within the Jewish communities were only partly constrained by the reality of the partitions. Of course, a kind of cemetery conservatism may have encouraged the petrification of earlier customs. But was this the only reason?*³ For the author, the inability to answer this question only proves how much interdisciplinary research is still needed – the results of which could open up new fields of interpretation of the evident stylistic differences between the cemeteries.

Another issue that the author deals with in Chapter 2 and describes as still poorly recognised topic in the period up to the 19th century, is the manufacturing of matzevot (by stonemasons guilds) and the authorship of their ornamentation. The author poses the question of whether these were Jewish craftsmen or local Christian (folk) craftsmen, as evidenced by the motifs appearing on the matzevot taken from Polish folk art (for instance, rosettes). However, in all probability, concludes Dariusz Rozmus, *despite the absence of stonemasonry from the list of acceptable professions for Jews, it can be assumed that traditional matzevot, and especially the inscriptions on them, were made by local Jewish craftsmen called in Yiddish matzevah-kricers or matzevah-schlegers belonging to the funeral brotherhood (Hebrew: chevra kadisha). Thus, tombstone making was not seen as a profession, but as a religious function.*⁴ It was not until the 19th century that Jewish stonemasonry workshops emerged, often working for non-Jewish customers. The author suggests that in order to be able to comprehensively answer the question concerning the makers of matzevot we need to examine traditional tombstones created in

² Rozmus 2022, 55.

³ Rozmus 2022, 98

⁴ Rozmus 2022, 102.

the period up to the middle of the 19th century and situated in small provincial cemeteries.

In second chapter, the author also gave the readers a catalogue of practical guidelines on comprehensive recording of a cemetery and identifying sepulchral features specific to such a site. These include: making a typology of gravestones and systematising them, as well as listing the frequency of symbolic motifs and the style of ornamentation. All this will help not only to establish the aesthetic preferences of the members of the community but gradually answer important questions for historians about the causes of mortality, the dominant professions among the members of the community or their financial status.

Chapter III, titled *Archaeology in Jewish Cemeteries (Archeologia na cmentarzach żydowskich)*, seems to be the most interesting and helpful in understanding the author's key research demand (repeated on many occasions) – i.e., including archaeology in the study of Jewish cultural heritage. Dariusz Rozmus argues that it was the work of researchers specialising in biblical archaeology that made us realise how diverse and rich Jewish culture was in antiquity and at the dawn of the early Middle Ages. Thanks to their discoveries, we are already aware of how close Greco-Roman aesthetics and ancient Judaic culture became over time and how much they drew from each other. The development of archaeological research in Egypt, Palestine, and other Middle Eastern countries has resulted in the emergence of 'oriental' trends in European art, including the architecture of Jewish synagogues, and wider Jewish art, including sepulchral art, throughout the world over the past 200 years. The author thus appeals: *Treating Jewish archaeology as a separate branch of the archaeology of the Polish (and not only) Middle Ages and Polish modern times is an urgent need for Polish archaeology.*⁵ Dariusz Rozmus is aware that only the methods used by archaeologists will make it possible for us to see what is not visible to the naked eye – evidence of the oldest traces of Jewish presence in Polish lands. Archaeological excavations will allow us to gain knowledge on many elements related to the oldest burials in the Judaic tradition: rites, funeral customs, and types and forms of burials. According to the author, this will make it easier to classify and record the oldest Jewish cemeteries. While in Western Europe such research-oriented excavations are carried out, in Poland excavations at Jewish cemeteries are only of rescue archaeology nature, necessitated by human activity (new

investment projects, construction work) or forces of nature (e.g. floods). However, the author makes a clear distinction between archaeological work and archaeological research *sensu stricto*. While in his opinion, the first is limited to finding artefacts, without further analysis or classification, the intention of the latter is not only to protect heritage but also to preserve and protect human remains. This type of exploration also yields material in the form of artefacts belonging to the Jewish culture. Rozmus writes: *Paradoxically, archaeological research can save a Jewish cemetery (after all, archaeological methods are by definition destructive), and not only in a practical sense. One such case is Węgrów, where archaeological excavations were carried out only to the level of the layers where bones could be expected. Once these were found, the exploration was not continued; the dead stayed in their graves. A development project that was to be built on the site did not receive planning permission.*⁶ However, at the same time the author (also out of concern for the integrity of cemeteries) calls for intensified research of a non-invasive nature, such as the use of archival aerial photographs and modern geophysical methods to locate burials. And in such activities, archaeologists can show their competence.

Chapter 4 of the book discusses issues of the legal protection of Jewish cemeteries in Poland (*Zagadnienia ochrony prawnej cmentarzy żydowskich*). According to the author, Polish law does not secure the inviolability of all Jewish cemeteries located in the territory of Poland. This is due to problems with the ownership of the land on which they are located. The religious principle of the inviolability of cemeteries is reflected in the Act of 20 February 1997 on the Relationship of the State to the Jewish Religious Communities in the Republic of Poland and applies to the cemeteries owned by Jewish communities. However, the majority of cemeteries are owned by the State or the local government, and sometimes are even privately owned, and the supervision of Jewish communes over them is only informal. The legislator ensures their protection by prohibiting their disposal and their use for other purposes. However, this applies only to those necropolises that have not previously been used for other purposes. The author therefore states that such sites should be recognised as cultural heritage sites in the form of archaeological sites – cemeteries, which should further ensure their legal protection by making them subject to the provisions of the Polish Monuments Protection and Care

⁵ Rozmus 2022, 136.

⁶ Rozmus 2022, 157.

Act 2003 (*Ustawa z dnia 23 lipca 2003 r. o ochronie zabytków i opiece nad zabytkami*): *Often, the chronology of ancient Jewish cemeteries, going back hundreds of years, clearly indicates their actual legal archaeological character, which stems from the essence of the matter and not just from the law. Moreover, the richly decorated ancient tombstones are undoubtedly exceptional monuments. Jewish cemeteries should therefore be included in the register of monuments. Besides, for old necropolises it becomes obvious, let us repeat again, that they should be assigned to archaeological categories classified as burial sites, which seems entirely logical and – what is more – necessary.*⁷

In the same chapter, the author also discusses the origins of the integrity of graves as a result of religious law, since until the 18th century, in the Jewish community religious law (or *halacha*) regulated most matters that today are subject to provisions of civil and criminal law. In addition, the author addresses the terminology concerning cemeteries, burial and mourning customs, ritual contamination, and the location of Jewish cemeteries, and includes guidelines from the Rabbinical Commission for cleaning up Jewish cemeteries.

Chapter V (*Synagogi*) discusses the topic of synagogues and, more specifically, archaeological excavations that have resulted in the discovery of the remains of such buildings. According to the author, although many synagogues have already been excavated, this applies mainly to buildings from the modern period, whereas the ancient and medieval ones still pose a challenge for researchers. Studies on synagogues are not limited to architecture but also include research on the internal decoration of the synagogues and its evolution, especially the evolution of the *bimah*. According to Rozmus, *it is worth mentioning that both in Poland and abroad the research on synagogues is carried out by local museums. This demonstrates, on the one hand, the need to recognise the remains of local heritage, which is also relevant to local area development plans (usually historic old town centres), and, on the other hand, the evident need to know and remember the histories that exist in local communities*⁸. The author discusses this topic giving his readers examples of archaeological research on several wooden and brick synagogues in Kalisz, Cieszyn, Skoczów, Oświęcim, and Olkusz. At the same time, Dariusz Rozmus points out that the research on synagogues in Poland is still at the beginning of the road, even though the

largest number of synagogues in the world has been built on Polish lands.

Chapter 6 (*Dzielnice żydowskie i osadnictwo pozamiejskie – kilka uwag*) of the book deals with the archaeology of Jewish settlement in towns (so-called Jewish quarters) and in the countryside, which, in the author's opinion, is an important element in preserving Jewish heritage. Determining and locating such settlement sites can be based, among other things, on the analysis of animal bone material. The complete absence of pig bones may indicate their exclusion from the diet, clearly indicating specific food preferences and the preservation of *kosher* laws. Here, the author uses the example of the effects of excavations carried out in the old Jewish quarter in Oxford. Other evidence indicating a location of Jewish settlement at a particular site can be artefacts, for instance, specific motifs found on pottery recovered through excavation, such as the star motif. However, Dariusz Rozmus also cautioned that while the presence of such evidence may suggest that such objects belonged to the Jews (i.e., the unearthed artefacts were lost and abandoned, at least in part, by people from a Jewish community), only under very specific conditions, when examining modern material can we strictly attribute it to the Jewish population.

Chapter 7 (*Olkusz i tajemnice początków górnictwa i hutnictwa kruszcowego*) is of an especially regional character, as it discusses the effects of archaeological work carried out in Olkusz, the author's home town, which he chose not only as a personal preference but also because in his opinion, *by using the example of Olkusz we can surprisingly make an almost holistic inquiry*.⁹ Thus, Dariusz Rozmus briefly describes the history of the town, starting with the beginnings of ore mining and metallurgy, confirmed by archaeological research, discusses the etymology of the town's name and controversies related to that topic (i.e., whether the name originated from Old Polish or Hebrew), about Jewish involvement in silver and lead trade, and about the effects of archaeological works carried out a few years ago at the site of the Olkusz synagogue, i.e. finding fragments of pottery, glass, but also building materials, thanks to which it was possible to date its origins.

While most of the content of this chapter can be considered compatible with the rest of the publication and in line with its main theme, there are also some superfluous topics, such as, for example, detailed deliberations on the etymology of the word *kilof* (mattock) to which the author devotes

⁷ Rozmus 2022, 163.

⁸ Rozmus 2022, 191.

⁹ Rozmus 2022, 253.

a considerable amount of space. Admittedly, he believes that an analysis of the word in question *is important for a correct description of mutual relations between the Jewish and Christian communities (not only Polish) in former Poland*,¹⁰ but in my opinion, this is absolutely not a convincing argument.

In the final, eighth chapter (*Zabytki luźne – kilka uwag*) of the book, the author makes a few remarks about chance finds and artefacts found without an archaeological context. There are all sorts of artefacts related to Jewish settlement obtained as a result of various kinds of work and intentional searches. The author dedicates quite a lot of space in the book to metal detectorists and the problems associated with them stating that: *Currently, there are no legal solutions that satisfy all the parties of this conflict of interest, i.e. the metal detectorists and the authorities responsible for enforcing the law on this issue, i.e. conservators, archaeologists, museum professionals, etc. One possibility is cooperation between metal detectorists and archaeologists based on trust. This is only that much and so much.*¹¹ He illustrates this problem using an analysis of two artefacts as an example. The first one is a 19th-century bronze, probably gilded, medallion with Hebrew inscriptions discovered in the Sosnowiec-Zagórze area, the exact provenance of which still remains a mystery. The second artefact is an undated lead Hanukkah spinner (*dreidel*) of an unknown provenance, which the author obtained from a metal detectorist. For the author, these two examples demonstrate that there are still many different traces of the Jewish presence in Poland that can be found virtually everywhere. Therefore, it is important to facilitate discovering more of such artefacts to increase their numbers (and thus our knowledge of the Jewish heritage in Poland) and cooperation with various communities (including metal detectorists) is an essential part of this process.

Dariusz Rozmus's book is an excellent guide for those readers who are passionate about Jewish heritage and archaeological research. In order to provide them with comprehensive knowledge on the subject, the author – and this is extremely valuable – lists a wealth of publications on the subject, both basic and specialist (e.g., instructions on how to conduct research on Jewish cemeteries), as well as websites where one can find information on Jewish cultural and historical monuments and databases. Another great advantage of the book is the rich

iconography, including photographs of clean-up work on Jewish cemeteries, archaeological work, artefacts, and religious objects, as well as drawings of inventory work and plans of excavation sites.

Rozmus's book is also one big manifesto for a broader inclusion of archaeological research in the work of preserving traces of Jewish presence in Polish lands. According to the author, the publication is *a development of the theses and presentation of the issue of the so-called Jewish archaeology, which I consider to be important and necessary in the system of archaeological research and in the process of preparing adepts of archaeology for their future work in this profession.*¹² It is therefore yet another clear call of this author for the creation of a separate, interdisciplinary field of research – a 'Jewish archaeology'.

According to the author, this new branch of archaeology would investigate (drawing on the methodological assumptions of biblical archaeology) evidence of Jewish settlement in the territory of Poland and the various material remains associated with it (cemeteries, synagogues, mikvahs). The author understands its interdisciplinarity as the combination of the research carried out by historians, Judaists, Hebraists, biblical scholars, art historians, architects, archivists, archaeologists, conservators, ethnographers, sociologists, and other scholars. In his opinion, case studies published by historians and scholars dealing with regional studies can provide a starting point, to be further developed by researchers representing other disciplines. At the same time, such an interdisciplinary approach can also create a context for already profiled research. Rozmus also recognises the problem of our fragmentary knowledge – while metropolitan cemeteries have been the subject of many publications and conferences, provincial cemeteries are still understudied and lack publications. He is in favour of publishing complete monographs on Jewish cemeteries, not only discussing their history but also taking into account the results of palaeographic and epigraphic work and documentation. Another of his research demands is the creation of a catalogue of sepulchral art motifs. With such a compilation, the heritage of folk Jewish art would be saved and research on the stylistic diversity of Jewish cemeteries in Poland would be initiated. In order to fully protect Jewish cemeteries from destruction, Rozmus also demands that Jewish cemeteries be treated as archaeological sites and that they be placed on the list of heritage sites protected by law.

¹⁰ Rozmus 2022, 282.

¹¹ Rozmus 2022, 291

¹² Rozmus 2022, 11.

Finally, a few words of criticism. I do not understand why the author reduces most titles to the phrase 'introductory remarks.' This is an unnecessary form of reassurance against... Well, against what, exactly? Or, perhaps, it is a reference to how little we still know about the past of Polish Jews, a hidden message suggesting that there is much to be done in this area and there are still many challenges for the researchers.

When reading Dariusz Rozmus's book, one can sometimes get the impression that the author loses the flow, which is the result of an excess of knowledge he wants to pass on to the reader. Hence the chaos of issues, numerous unnecessary repetitions, broken threads, lack of a leading thought and, most importantly, fluency in communicating the message. Perhaps another publication in the form of a dictionary or a lexicon of terms, would be easier for the reader? I leave this idea to the author for his consideration.

Having read Dariusz Rozmus's work, I strongly support the author's call to do everything we

can to preserve as much evidence as possible of the Jewish presence in our country. I also urge everyone to support his appeal expressed in the following words: *I believe that Polish archaeology is ripe for the separation of a new and very promising branch of it, at the core of which will be equally biblical archaeology, medieval archaeology, modern archaeology, so-called war archaeology and, in a sense, even the industrial archaeology. Jewish archaeology, as a separate branch of archaeology, [...] will also owe much to history, history of art, and numismatics. It can also be treated as archaeology sensu stricto, i.e. as a branch of the broadly defined historical sciences, based on the clear principle of interdisciplinarity.*¹³

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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¹³ Rozmus 2022, 13.

