

**Book review:** Leszek Gardęła. *Bad Death in the Early Middle Ages. Atypical Burials from Poland in a Comparative Perspective*. Rzeszów: Instytut Archeologii UR, 2017. *Collectio Archaeologica Ressoviensis* 36, 288 pages., ISBN 9788365627162

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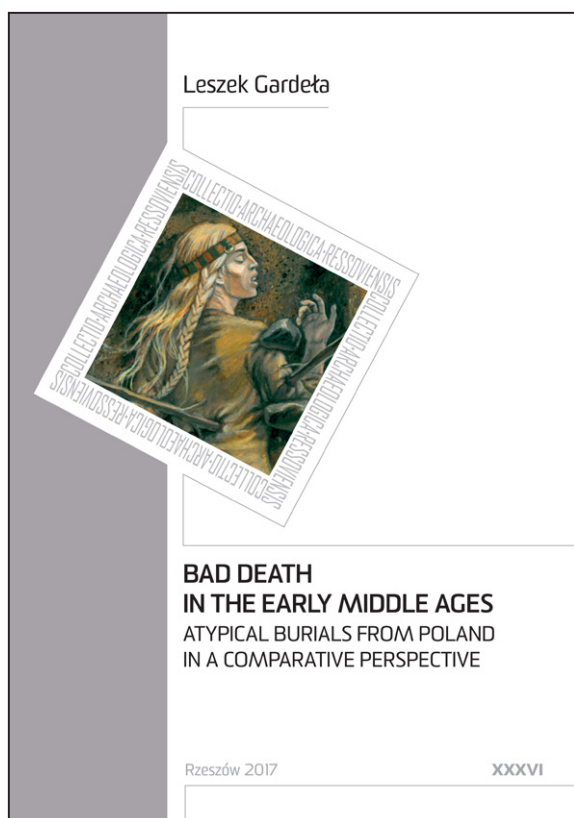
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The newly-published monograph by Leszek Gardęła comes at an exciting moment for the archaeological study of mortuary behavior, especially when unusual and somewhat sensational discoveries are challenging our understandings of its manifestations. The findings of deviant (also referred to as irregular, non-normative, special etc.) burials is not something new in itself. However, following some influential contributions (Aspöck 1998; Reynolds 2009; 2013), the available methods and interpretations are being challenged and improved, sometimes starting from the very basic level of identifying this multi-faceted phenomenon. From mainly English-speaking inquires, now the interest is intensifying across the continent from Scandinavia (Toplak 2016) to France (Vivas 2012) or the Balkans. Yet, Central European researchers prove to be particularly prone to tackle the problem with the debate contrasting judicial and religious explanations (Duma 2010; Mackova 2010; Gardęła, Kąkowski 2013; Kaznakov 2013; Vargha 2017; Kovats 2018). In this sense, the book by Gardęła is already an important work presenting a systematic and detailed contribution based on the current archaeological record from Poland between the tenth and thirteenth century.

The book consists of eight chapters in English, two of them serving as introduction and conclusion and a summary in Polish. Chapters 4 to 7 contain the analysis of individual atypical burials and are complemented by a catalogue. The volume has a very high printing standard and is filled with multiple high-quality photos, maps and drawings, which significantly contribute to the comprehension of the work. The graphic reconstructions made in cooperation with the artist Miroslaw Kuzma are noteworthy and the reader is promised a reflective account on their scientific and experiential value to be published elsewhere. The bibliography used is very detailed and diverse, to an extent reflecting the author's personal experience and research interests in the Northern Europe.

The introductory chapter outlines the approach to be taken throughout the rest of the book. Most importantly, it follows the German terminological preference for atypical burials instead of deviant, for instance. This is a safe choice as it emphasizes the difficulty linking material remains (*atypical burials*) with moral concepts (*bad death*) and perhaps even more importantly, lacks the uncomfortable connotations of the very word deviant. Nonetheless, this decreases the explanatory value of the term by denying it formal link to the theoretical background coming from anthropology and social sciences. Arguably, the



Обр. 1. Корица на книгата  
Fig. 1. Cover of the book

negative evaluations in either the past or present are the most characteristic feature of the phenomenon. The impossibility to recognize any similar burial trends in cremations is very indicative. It is worth entertaining the idea how non-normative funerary activities should be approached outside the Christian milieu.

The following chapter 2 provides an insight into the Slavic way of death. The logical first step is to describe the achievements of funerary archaeology in Poland, which is useful for everyone interested in the archaeology of the region. For his purposes, Gardęta outlines some trends constituting the 'typical' against which any irregularities are examined. Then, the cosmological beliefs of Slavs are discussed by using iconographic and textual evidence. Significant space is given to the discussion of some controversial objects with artistic value like the statue from Zbrucz used to contemplate on Slavic mythology and pre-Christian world-view. The author is very cautious regarding ideas of the Otherworld and points out that both multiple domains for the dead or regional differences in the belief systems may have influenced the death rite.

It is chapter 3, titled "The Search for Vampires in Poland", that begins to discuss in details the multiple problems with the one-sided focus on the anti-vampire explanations imposed by vague ethnographic parallels. One curious aspect is the brief demonstration of the tense, even competing relationship between academic and media representations on archaeological themes. As his example of Gliwice clearly shows, although recent public attention focuses on the vampire narrative, archaeologists have uncritically embraced such labels much earlier. This situation will be very familiar for practitioners all over Eastern Europe, where the Polish example was often used in the literature. For instance, in Bulgaria this happens at least since Пейо Гатев (1985) described some funerary evidence from Kovachevo as anti-vampire rituals explicitly referring to Poland. In a way, this piece states

the antithesis that the book aims to overcome and the alternative legal explanation is put forward.

The next four analytical chapters discuss the four types of atypical burials, namely prone (face-down) burials, decapitations, stoning and reopened graves. The categories are more or less corresponding to what we can observe across Europe. The chapters follow similar and clear structure starting with the Polish graves, which are then contextualized by the Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon situation and finally, an interpretation is offered. Gardęła's work should be praised for its sound methodology, based on Reynolds' approach, and its critical assessment of impressive body of primary data. This careful analysis provides the main arguments for him to often promote law enforcement explanations rather than anti-vampire rituals.

Some burial contexts indeed prove difficult to categorize: e.g. many stoned burials cannot be easily ascribed to either execution or attempts to prevent a revenant from rising in the past. At moments the writing may appear to fall into the same trap as those it criticizes and to be too one-sided in its criticism. Overall, the author urges to carefully consider possible taphonomic factors with examples of grave disturbances and possible stone executions demonstrating the necessity for applying archaeothanatological and anthropological methods already in the field.

It would have been beneficial to see more site-based contextual surveys demonstrating how different the atypical burials are from the rest. Only occasionally, the author was hinting at the longer chronology and continuity of practice in execution sites, which could certainly strengthen the case for evolving judicial culture and its territoriality. These are all minor flaws and surely open the way for future research.

To conclude, the monograph by Leszek Gardęła is an important contribution and very effective summary of the state of research on atypical burials in Poland. For anyone interested in the mortuary archaeology of medieval Europe, it will provide plenty of comparative material and observations to consider.

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