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w Warszawie



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MARTIN JEŽEK

TOUCHSTONES FROM EARLY MEDIEVAL BURIALS IN THE COLLECTION OF THE STATE ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM IN WARSAW

KAMIENIE PROBIERCZE Z WCZESNOŚREDNIOWIECZNYCH GROBÓW W ZBIORACH
PAŃSTWOWEGO MUZEUM ARCHEOLOGICZNEGO W WARSZAWIE

Introduction

European archaeology collections contain hundreds of thousands of stone artefacts from the Early Middle Ages classified as whetstones. Oblong artefacts, mostly with a right-angled cross-section and often with a hole on one end, are among them. For the purpose of studying these artefacts, we utilised the electron microanalysis method combined with surface observations of the objects using a scanning electron microscope (SEM). Traces of non-ferrous metals, including precious metals, are preserved on the surface of numerous such artefacts. This leads us to interpret these objects as touchstones, tools for determining the value of metal (M. Ježek, J. Zavřel 2010; 2011), an essential equipment for anyone who came in contact with precious metal in the Early Middle Ages.

Touchstones are found in settlement layers at strongholds, in their suburbia, and especially in trade and production agglomerations (see M. Ježek, J. Zavřel 2011, p. 132–137; M. Ježek 2012, p. 37–41). Touchstones are also found relatively often among grave goods. Their occurrence in manifestly elite burials can be interpreted as a symbol of the social standing of the deceased. However, there are numerous cases in Europe in which the deceased was buried with only an inconspicuous stone, perhaps along with a knife; traces of precious metals have also been preserved on certain touchstones from these graves from rural burial grounds (M. Ježek, J. Zavřel 2011, p. 148; M. Ježek, A. Krzyszowski, J. Zavřel, in press). Although the presence of this type of artefact in the grave is nothing more than a reflection of the choice of the survivors from a range of symbols used at the moment

of bidding final farewell, the potential testimony on the social standing of the deceased cannot be denied.

The main complication in making a positive identification (proofed by chemical microanalysis) of touchstones among archaeological finds is related to their actual use in the distant past: prior to each test, it was necessary to remove the traces left on the touchstone from the previous test. Centuries ago, touchstones were cleaned with salty water, wax, they were also sanded. Of course, it is difficult to reconstruct the methods of cleaning archaeological finds from the 19th–20th centuries today. We note different stages of the survival of traces of metal in different parts of Europe; the reason can lie in the Early Middle Ages or in the times of the post-excavation procedures. However, for the discussion “whetstones or touchstones”, there is important that sharpening of iron tools leaves far heavier traces than tests of the quality of a potentially valuable object. Therefore, if a chemical microanalysis on a stone artefact with the characteristic form and raw material does not reveal streaks of iron, the object is not a whetstone.

The first step in our study of objects identified as whetstones in the collections of the State Archaeological Museum in Warsaw (Państwowe Muzeum Archeologiczne w Warszawie) involved the selection of several stone artefacts from early medieval rural burial grounds in Masovia, Ermland and Mazuria and the historically border of Lesser Poland and Masovia. None of the artefacts were observed in the SEM on all four sides. Although the findings presented above (M. Ježek, T. Płociński 2013) cannot be regarded as exhaustive, they are sufficient for classifying the artefacts.



Fig. 1. Stone artefacts from the early medieval graves at Pokrzywnica Wielka (PW), Łączyno Stare (LS), Korzybie Małe (KM), Tańsk-Przedbory (TP), Samborzec (S) and Końskie (Koń). See the figure for grave numbering. Photo Roman Sofuß
 Ryc. 1. Przedmioty kamienne z wczesnośredniowiecznych grobów z Pokrzywnicy Wielkiej (PW), Łączyna Starego (LS), Korzybia Małego (KM), Tańska-Przedborów (TP), Samborca (S) i Końskich (Koń). Numeracja grobów na rycinie.
 Fot. Roman Sofuß

Sites, burials and stones

Of the total number of 22 inhumation burials with stone lining at Pokrzywnica Wielka in Nidzica County (L. Rauhut, L. Długopolska 1972), five contained swords, five were furnished with lances, three graves produced silver rings, three graves had bronze bowls, and coins or fragments thereof were found in three others. Two of

the burials equipped with bronze bowls also contained weapons: grave No. 15 was furnished with a spear, grave No. 16 with a lance. Like the key from grave No. 6, the aforementioned spear was the only one found at this burial ground. Pails were found in only two burials (Nos. 8 and 13), whereas knives were common grave goods. The burials date to around the first half of the 12th century.

Five burials contained stone artefacts assumed to be whetstones: graves Nos. 6, 12, 13, 15 and 26. Four were made of red schist, the other (grave No. 12) from grey schist. Concerning the other finds from these graves, grave No. 6 contained a sword, a lance, a knife and a fire steel. Grave No. 12 also contained a knife, a fire steel and a spindle whorl; grave No. 13 contained a silver ring and a pail. A bronze bowl (cracked and repaired), a spear tip, a knife and half of a silver coin were found in grave No. 15. Grave No. 26 was also furnished with a bronze bowl as well as a small iron “chisel” and a knife.

Therefore, with the exception of grave No. 12, grave goods make it possible to ascribe burials containing stone artefacts with a shape characteristic for touchstones to members of the local elite. Despite the poor condition of the skeletal remains at this burial ground, an anthropological analysis made it possible to identify several burials of young individuals, including grave No. 12 (*infans II*) and grave No. 15 (*infans I*). During terrain work the individual in grave No. 6, whose remains could not be subjected to a subsequent anthropological analysis, was classified only roughly as “not older than 14–16 years” (L. Rauhut, L. Długopolska 1972, p. 343). None of the graves with the characteristic stone artefact were classified as female. However, we also see that no other local burials with weapons or jewellery contained a “whetstone”; the same was true for the only local grave with spurs (without any other artefacts).

Traces of precious metals were found on all of five stone artefacts from this burial ground. All of them had traces of silver, while the stones from graves Nos. 6 and 12 also had traces of an alloy of gold, silver and copper. The stone from grave No. 15 (*infans I*), which was the only one at the local burial ground to contain a spear (along with a bronze bowl and a coin fragment), bears, in addition to silver, also traces of tests of an object made of silver with an admixture of copper, and three other objects: the first made from copper, the second from lead and the third from tin. No traces of iron were found on any of the stones.

Łączyno Stare (at present, Stare Łączyno) in Mława County is one of the burial grounds also featuring stone-lined graves. Artefacts interpreted as whetstones were found in five (Nos. 7, 21, 24/25, 36 and 41) of the 65 early medieval graves, which contained 76 burials (L. Rauhut, L. Długopolska 1973). Four lance tips were found in three graves at the local burial ground – one in grave No. 21 and two in grave No. 24/25. Arrowheads were found in eight graves, i.a. graves Nos. 7 and 21. No other weapons were found at this burial ground. Like the majority of graves at the burial ground, all three of the aforementioned graves with stone artefacts also contained a knife, including graves Nos. 36 and 41. The remaining two “whetstones” came from these burials.

The human remains in grave No. 21 (*adultus*), grave No. 36 (*maturus*) and grave No. 41 (*maturus*) were anthropologically identified as male; the furnishings in grave No. 7 were used to identify the deceased also as male. One of the individuals buried in grave No. 24/25 could not be anthropologically identified (24), whereas the second (25) was deemed likely a female in the *iuvenis* age group. The stone artefact in question was resting between the legs of this skeleton. However, the burial contained no artefacts that would suggest the female gender of this individual, and two spear tips, each by the right shoulder of the buried individual, testify rather to the male gender of both of the deceased. This grave is dated to the earliest phase of burial, to the period around the turn of the 12th century; the four other graves are dated to the 12th century.

Traces of non-ferrous metals were detected on all of five stone artefacts from this burial ground. Grains of silver were determined on the stones from grave Nos. 21 and 36. Traces of lead were also found on the stone from grave No. 21; this element was also present on the stones from grave Nos. 7 and 41. Traces of tin with an admixture of lead were found on the stone from grave No. 25. No streaks of iron were recorded on any of the stones.

The Tańsk-Przedbory burial ground in Mława County is located only several hundred metres from the Łączyno Stare burial ground. A total of 38 inhumation burials were uncovered at the site. Two stone artefacts classified as “whetstones” were found: one, made from sandstone, in burial No. 17, the second, made from grey schist, in burial No. 37/38 (L. Rauhut, L. Długopolska 1974).

Both burials belong to a group of five local graves with the largest stone lining and the deepest grave pits. A total of three lance tips were found at this burial ground, two in graves Nos. 17 and 37/38. Both burials also contained a knife (like the majority of the local graves there) and a pail; grave No. 37/38 likewise produced silver jewellery with exceptionally luxurious craftsmanship as well as other valuables, including imports from Russia.

An adult was laid to rest in grave No. 17, and all of the listed objects in burial No. 37/38, including the lance, were resting by one of the two skeletons in this grave. While in one part of the article the remains No. 37 are ascribed to an older woman (next to an older man without furnishing; L. Rauhut, L. Długopolska 1974, p. 421–422) by an anthropologist, elsewhere we read that the “whetstone” lay by the male skeleton (L. Rauhut, L. Długopolska 1974, p. 432). Due to the presence of the lance tip (and other furnishings) in the burial No. 37, a mistake in the anthropological determination can not be excluded. We suppose in this grave lay a male; however, the “whetstone” was found between both the craniums in the burial No. 37/38 (with a knife). Regarded as two of the oldest at the

local burial ground, burials Nos. 17 and 37/38 are dated to around the middle or second half of the 11th century.

An analysis of the stone artefact from burial No. 37/38 revealed numerous linear streaks of lead, but no traces of iron.

At *Korzybie Małe* (at present, Korzybie) in Płoński County (which L. Rauhut [1971, p. 514] identifies as *Korzybie Duże*), only single “whetstone” was found among approximately 20 documented graves from a total number estimated to be around 150. Grave No. 6 contained no other goods, and the other graves at this burial ground were also furnished very modestly: no objects from precious or non-ferrous metals were found, and the only evidence of weapons, albeit uncertain, is a single lance tip.

A grain of silver with a minor amount of copper was detected on the stone artefact from grave No. 6; no traces of iron were found.

Only one “whetstone” was found at the burial ground in *Końskie* in Koński County, where more than 171 inhumation graves were uncovered, including burials with weapons and jewellery. This artefact was in clearly the richest grave (No. 170), which was furnished, among other items, with a sword (Petersen X-type) having a hilt decorated with silver and copper, two spears, a pickaxe and spurs (J. Gąssowski 1952, p. 152–155, pl. XIV). Only three other burials at the site contained comparable furnishings. The body of an adult male was buried in grave No. 170 (J. Dąbski 1952, p. 189). The burial ground was used around the second half of the 11th century and at the beginning of the 12th century.

While the stone artefact from grave No. 170 bears traces of lead, the presence of iron was not detected.

The 68 graves uncovered at the burial ground at *Samborzec* in Sandomierz County produced a single “whetstone” only, which was accompanied by a knife. According to the description of the situation, the knife was laying directly on top of the stone artefact, which likely explains why visible traces of rust are present on one side of the stone. Unlike other graves at this site, this burial (No. 72) contained no other goods. Found in the other graves were beads, rings, temple rings, pails, knives and numerous other artefacts, including several coin fragments (J. Bartys 1936).

Traces of lead were present on the stone artefact from grave No. 72; no traces of iron were found.

Conclusion

For our first analyses were from the collection of the State Archaeological Museum in Warsaw selected stone artefacts from graves whose furnishings suggest burials of members of the local elite as well as several similar artefacts from graves without noteworthy goods. The

identification of traces of precious metals on a number of the studied stone artefacts and the absence of traces of iron leads us to believe that these archaeological finds are touchstones. Nevertheless, it would be misleading to try to deduce the frequency of tests on precious metals from randomly preserved and recorded streaks on touchstones. What is important is the occurrence of the actual tool for testing the value of metal. The relatively frequent occurrence of these artefacts in early medieval rural settings documents the widespread availability of precious metal and is a strong argument in favour of the revision of existing opinions on social stratification in early medieval society.

The touchstones presented in this article have been thoroughly cleaned. Obvious lines created by streaks of metal were found only on a stone from *Tańsk-Przedbory* (grave No. 37/38). On all of other stones were detected only grains of precious and non-ferrous metals ranging in maximal size of dozens of micrometres. Although we are unable to establish whether this image is the result of the cleaning of the objects in the Early Middle Ages or following archaeological excavations, we must emphasize the necessity for caution in cleaning new finds of similar artefacts.

Tests of objects made of silver are the most frequent in the analysed assemblage, including of silver with a small amount of copper. Numerous traces of lead were detected, sporadically also traces of tin and copper. Both traces of (similar, or identical) alloy of gold, copper and silver were detected, on two different stones from *Pokrzywnica Wielka* (graves Nos. 6 and 12: see M. Jeżek, T. Płociński 2013). Both stone artefacts with traces of gold alloys (and also with traces of silver) come from the burials of young individuals, likely *infans II*. Traces of tests on at least five objects from various metals, including silver, were identified on a touchstone from another children’s grave (No. 15) uncovered at *Pokrzywnica Wielka*. This is as unsurprising in an *infans I* burial as the presence of a lance and a bronze bowl. As in other cases of finds of touchstones, weights, weapons and spurs in children’s graves, we also regard these artefacts as symbols of unfulfilled social status (see M. Jeżek 2012, p. 31–32). The burial ground in *Pokrzywnica Wielka* is also exceptional for reasons other than for finds that provide testimony on the local elite – especially for the occurrence of weapons. Traces of precious metals occur on all five touchstones from this site. Four of total five stones from this burial ground were made from a relatively unusual (among touchstones between lower Elbe River and Masovia) red raw material (cf. M. Jeżek, J. Závřel 2011, p. 128, fig. 8:1).

The majority of the presented touchstones were found in an area around the waist or hips of the buried individual. One touchstone, however, was found lying at the skull of an adult individual (*Tańsk-Przedbory*, grave

No. 37/38), another between the calves of the deceased (Łączyno Stare, grave No. 36); both these specimens feature a hole for hanging. Also cases of children's graves with touchstones laid at the waist confirm that the placement of such artefacts in the grave did not reflect the reality of the deceased individual's life. As a symbol, the touchstone filled a function in the burial rite whichever position it was laid in, whether it was visibly placed or put in a sac, as can be assumed for the specimens without a hole for hanging and which were found in the area around the waist or hips. The archaeological terrain record depends on the free will of the survivors and making assumptions about the differences in the position of the touchstone in the burial rite would be as erroneous as drawing clear conclusions about the presence or absence of tools intended for determining the value of precious metals without taking into consideration other grave goods.

In a comparison with other parts of Europe, a prominent trait of the analysed assemblage of metal traces on selected stone artefacts from the collection of the State Archaeological Museum in Warsaw is the relatively low amount of alloys. The majority of preserved traces of metal are composed of a single element. Brass, a metal

that occurs commonly on touchstones, was found on none of the examined stones. The presented assemblage differs in this regard from the existing samples from other parts of Europe, including other parts of Poland. However, general conclusions cannot be drawn from these findings under the current state of research; each new analysis can change the situation. The collections at the State Archaeological Museum in Warsaw contain at least dozens of additional touchstones. The depositories of archaeological institutions in Poland include several thousand candidates for reclassification among finds from the Early Middle Ages designated as "whetstones."

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STRESZCZENIE

Częstymi elementami wyposażenia grobowych z okresu wczesnośredniowiecznego są przedmioty kamienne, które powszechnie uznaje się za oselki. Użycie mikroskopu elektronowego pozwoliło na wielu z nich zidentyfikować ślady metali nieżelaznych, w tym metali szlachetnych. Przedmioty te służyć zatem musiały jako kamienie probiercze. Obecność takich przedmiotów w wyposażeniach grobowych jest wskaźnikiem pozycji społecznej zmarłego. Taka interpretacja kamieni probierczych ma szczególne znaczenie w wypadkach, w których w grobie nie znaleziono innych przedmiotów mogących wskazać status społeczny osoby w nim pochowanej. Obecność kamieni probierczych w grobach dziecięcych uznajemy za przejaw niespełnionych nadziei rodziców.

W porównaniu z innymi tego rodzaju znaleziskami z Europy, analizowane przedmioty z zbiorów Państwowego Muzeum Archeo-

logicznego w Warszawie różnią się między innymi nieobecnością śladów mosiądzu. Obecny stan badań nie pozwala na ostateczne wyjaśnienie tego faktu, tym bardziej, że każda nowa analiza może zmienić ten stan rzeczy. Liczne ślady metali szlachetnych stwierdzono na przedmiotach znalezionych na cmentarzysku w Pokrzywnicy Wielkiej, pow. nidzicki, leżącej na północnych rubieżach Mazowsza, podobnie jak na niektórych kamieniach probierczych z dwóch innych stanowisk z północnego Mazowsza: Łączyna Starego, pow. przasnyski, i z Korzybia Małego, pow. płoński. Na pozostałych analizowanych przedmiotach stwierdzono ślady testowania przedmiotów wykonanych z innych metali nieżelaznych.

tłum. Tomasz Cymbalak

WYKAZ SKRÓTÓW TYTUŁÓW CZASOPISM I WYDAWNICTW WIELOTOMOWYCH

ABBREVIATIONS OF PERIODICALS' AND SERIAL PUBLICATIONS' TITLES

AAC	– „Acta Archaeologica Carpathica”, Kraków
AAHung.	– „Acta Archaeologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae”, Budapest
AFB	– „Arbeits- und Forschungsberichte zur sächsischen Bodendenkmalpflege”, Berlin (Stuttgart)
Amtl. Ber.	– „Amtlicher Bericht über die Verwaltung der naturgeschichtlichen, vorgeschichtlichen und volkskundlichen Sammlungen des Westpreußischen Provinzial-Museums für das Jahr ...”, Danzig
APolski	– „Archeologia Polski”, Warszawa
APS	– „Archeologia Polski Środkowowschodniej”, Lublin (wcześniej: Lublin-Chełm-Zamość)
AR	– „Archeologické rozhledy”, Praha
B.A.R. Int. Series	– British Archaeological Reports, International Series, Oxford
BerRGK	– „Bericht der Römisch-Germanischen Kommission”, Frankfurt a.M.-Berlin
BJahr.	– „Bonner Jahrbücher”, Köln/Bonn
BMJ	– „Bodendenkmalpflege in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern”, Lübstorf (wcześniej: „Bodendenkmalpflege in Mecklenburg. Jahrbuch ...”, Schwerin/Rostock/Berlin)
CRFB	– Corpus der römischen Funde im europäischen Barbaricum
FAP	– „Fontes Archaeologici Posnanienses” (wcześniej: „Fontes Praehistorici”), Poznań
Inf.Arch.	– „Informator Archeologiczny. Badania rok ...”, Warszawa
InvArch.	– „Inventaria Archaeologica, Pologne”, Warszawa-Łódź
JmV	– „Jahresschrift für mitteldeutsche Vorgeschichte”, Halle/Saale
JRGZM	– „Jahrbuch des Römisch-Germanischen Zentralmuseums Mainz”, Mainz
KHKM	– „Kwartalnik Historii Kultury Materialnej”, Warszawa
KSIA	– Kratkie soobšeniâ Instituta arheologii Akademii nauk SSSR (Краткие сообщения Института археологии Академии наук СССР), Moskva
MIA	– Materialy i issledovaniâ po arheologii SSSR (Материалы и исследования по археологии СССР), Moskva
MatArch.	– „Materiały Archeologiczne”, Kraków
MS	– „Materiały Starożytne”, Warszawa
MSiW	– „Materiały Starożytne i Wczesnośredniowieczne”, Warszawa
MSROA	– „Materiały i Sprawozdania Rzeszowskiego Ośrodka Archeologicznego”, Rzeszów-Krosno-Sandomierz-Tarnów (-Przemysł/Tarnobrzeg)
MZP	– „Materiały Zachodniopomorskie”, Szczecin
PA	– „Památky archeologické” (wcześniej: „Památky archeologické a místopisné”), Praha
PArch.	– „Przegląd Archeologiczny”, Poznań
PMMAE	– „Prace i Materiały Muzeum Archeologicznego i Etnograficznego w Łodzi. Seria Archeologiczna”, Łódź
PomAnt	– „Pomorania Antiqua”, Gdańsk
Prahistoria ziem polskich	– <i>Prahistoria ziem polskich</i> , tom I: <i>Paleolit i mezolit</i> (red. W. Chmielewski, W. Hensel), Wrocław-Warszawa-Kraków-Gdańsk 1975; tom II: <i>Neolit</i> (red. W. Hensel, T. Wiślański), Wrocław-Warszawa-Kraków-Gdańsk 1979; tom III: <i>Wczesna epoka brązu</i> (red. A. Gardawski, J. Kowalczyk), Wrocław-Warszawa-Kraków-Gdańsk 1978; tom IV: <i>Od środkowej epoki brązu do środkowego okresu lateńskiego</i> (red. J. Dąbrowski, Z. Rajewski), Wrocław-Warszawa-Kraków-Gdańsk 1979; tom V: <i>Późny okres lateński i okres rzymski</i> (red. J. Wielowiejski), Wrocław-Warszawa-Kraków-Gdańsk 1981
Prussia	– „Sitzungsberichte der Altertumsgesellschaft Prussia” (później: „Prussia. Zeitschrift für Heimatkunde”), Königsberg i.Pr.
PZ	– „Praehistorische Zeitschrift”, Berlin-New York
RArch.	– „Recherches Archéologiques”, Kraków
RB	– „Rocznik Białostocki”, Białystok
RO	– „Rocznik Olsztyński”, Olsztyn
SJahr.	– „Saalburg Jahrbuch”, Berlin-New York
SlA	– „Slovenská archeológia”, Bratislava
SovArch	– „Sovetskaâ Arheologia” (Советская археология), Moskva
SprArch.	– „Sprawozdania Archeologiczne”, Kraków
SprPMA	– „Sprawozdania P.M.A.”, Warszawa
WA	– „Wiadomości Archeologiczne”, Warszawa
ZNUJ	– „Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego”, Kraków
ZOW	– „Z otchłani wieków”, Warszawa

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