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LAYING WASTE IN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES. THE PROBLEMS OF DAMAGE TO HISTORICAL SACRED OBJECTS AS A RESULT OF HUMAN ACTIVITY

Abstract: Excavation works conducted in archaeological sites deliver a great deal of information concerning the material and spiritual culture of past populations. In many instances, for example in settlements and towns, researchers find all kinds of rubbish dumps connected with everyday human activity, which are a rich cognitive source for archaeologists. However, in many cases, before reaching cultural layers, archaeologists have to dig through recent layers disrupting the cognitive value of a site. Cult places, which have an important spiritual role in the life of local societies, like spaces serving for centuries as cemeteries should be exceptions from that rule, but rarely are so. All archaeological explorations conducted in crypts start with clearing work to remove rubbish deposited inside. Depending on easy access to crypts situated beneath church floors, the rubbish includes objects intentionally deposited there by people or collected by wild animals having taken shelter there. Every intrusion affects the microclimate of the interior; collected rubbish also has a destructive character, leading to decay processes. Intensive micro-organic development and internal damp also affects the condition of the church walls standing above the crypt.

Keywords: waste, crypt, church, cult places, excavation

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Archaeological research conducted in various kinds of site enables us to learn more about the material and spiritual culture of particular societies. In many cases, having completed excavations, a decision is taken to make them accessible to the public, protecting at the same time existing relics. Sometimes they are architectural elements which have been preserved, such as the ducal residence in Ostrów Lednicki, Wielkopolskie voivodeship¹ or the remains of the Teutonic Order's castle in Toruń, Kujawsko-Pomorskie voivodeship.² As museum objects, they are under strict protection and their condition is monitored, which allows the area to be kept

clean and repairs to be made, if necessary. In general, the same actions should be undertaken in case of churches used for sacral purposes for hundreds of years. Many of them have still been being used as cult places for local societies and very often they are not treated equally with other archaeological sites, and as a consequence full control has not been maintained over these objects and various man-made waste has accumulated within their walls.

On the other hand, in many cases before conservation and large restoration work, the objects are archaeologically explored, revealing excavated relics of old floors, earthen graves and brick crypts, e.g. Gniew, Szczuczyn, Piaseczno (Fig. 1). In case of the latter, used for hundreds of years, we can observe the most substantial damages caused by human thoughtlessness. Accessible ventilation holes or free entrance (Fig. 2) inside has led to littering and destroying the interiors.³

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¹ The island has been inscribed on the list of historical monuments (Monitor Polski 1994, no. 50, pos. 421).

² The castle, along with the old and new city, has been inscribed on the list of monuments (Monitor Polski 1994, no. 50, pos. 422).

³ Grupa 2018, 33.



Fig. 1. Gniezno. The vault of the crypt beneath the floor of St. Anne's chapel. Photo D. Grupa.



Fig. 2. Szczuczyn uncovered entrances to the crypts. Photo D. Grupa.

Objects of that kind are often tourist attractions or religious pilgrimage destinations and generate the flow of thousands of visitors. People thoughtlessly litter them, leaving various rubbish everywhere. Because of different historical disruptions over the course of centuries, many of these structures are still being restored to recreate their faded beauty. Before starting archaeological excavations, researchers are forced to remove all kinds of waste left by 20th century populations first (Fig. 3), before they start proper

digging.⁴ This phenomenon is not new, and during our work, we frequently find construction elements from earlier structures, graves of historical populations living nearby and items irrelevant to the sacral character of the subject of our study.⁵

⁴ Dudziński et al. 2013, 14.

⁵ Grupa et al. 2015a, 15.



Fig. 3. Szczuczyn. Back of the crypt. Photo M. Nowak.



Fig. 4. Płonkovo. Foundations of the destroyed church. Photo D. Grupa.

In many examples, apart from objects closely related to burial practices, we find artefacts from the everyday life of the deceased, which help us to understand better changes which took place in towns and villages. They are always sensational and generate significant tourism development in the region, and possibilities to obtain funds for further exploration work or to influence a sense of local identity between present and past communities (e.g. Gniew, Piaseczno, Płonkovo and Szczuczyn). In theory, these are only positive effects

and the final effect should surprise and delight parishioners, tourists and other people who might not necessarily have been interested in archaeological sites previously (e.g. Płonkovo).⁶ However, as usual, reality is far from theory. It turns out that for centuries during which various communities function in a given area, they may have a destructive impact on architectural monuments

⁶ Grupa et al. 2015b, 11.



Fig. 5. Gnień. Interior of the crypt. Photo D. Grupa.



Fig. 6. Gnień. Signs of animal claws on coffins and holes in the planks gnawed by martens. Photo D. Grupa.

and their behaviour may be far from respectful to religious sites. This can be illustrated best by the cases of all kinds of crypts situated under churches floors. Sometimes they are excavated by accident, such as the crypt under the floor of St. Anne's chapel in the Church of St. Nicholas in Gnień,⁷ and sometimes they are well known and located inside churches, such as that of the

Name of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Szczuczyn,⁸ the Nativity of Our Lady in Piaseczno⁹ or the Matropolitan Basilica of St. John the Baptist in Warsaw.¹⁰ There are also casual finds on the sites of churches that no longer stand, such as at Płonkowo (Fig. 4). Before detailed

⁷ Grupa et al. 2015a, 12, Fig. 1.

⁸ Grupa et al. 2014, 7, Fig. 2.

⁹ Błyskosz 2018, 11. The same inscription on the vaults of the church and the crypt.

¹⁰ Grupa 2010, 91.



Fig. 7. Szczuczyn. Passage between two crypts connected to the ventilation shaft. Photo M. Nowak.



Fig. 8. Szczuczyn. Entrance to the crypt under the benches on the right side of the central nave. Photo M. Majorek.

exploration, archaeologists usually do inventory work inside studied objects, finding surprising artefacts or signs of human or other natural activity, which has had a negative impact on the site.

This destructive activity can be illustrated by the case of the crypt beneath St. Anne's chapel in St. Nicholas' Church in Gniew. When the archaeological team entered the crypt they saw piles of rubbish, consisting of objects coming mainly from the 19th and 20th centuries (Fig. 5). Although the entrance was blocked from

inside the building by rubbish that had entered the crypt from outside. The southern wall of St. Anne's chapel has a ventilation opening which served as a waste-disposal vent used by local people. Clearing the object, we realized that animals formed an additional destructive element, as the site was inhabited by a family of martens, which for generations brought inside all kinds of food and objects stolen from local yards. The archaeologists found crisp packets, pieces of newspapers, the remains of bird and small rodents, which were the base



Fig. 9. Szczuczyn. Interior of the third crypt with ventilation shaft in the centre. Photo M. Majorek.



Fig. 10. Warsaw. Outside of the grave niche. Photo D. Grupa.



Fig. 11. Warsaw. Grave niche filled with garbage collected over the years inside the crypt. Photo D. Grupa.

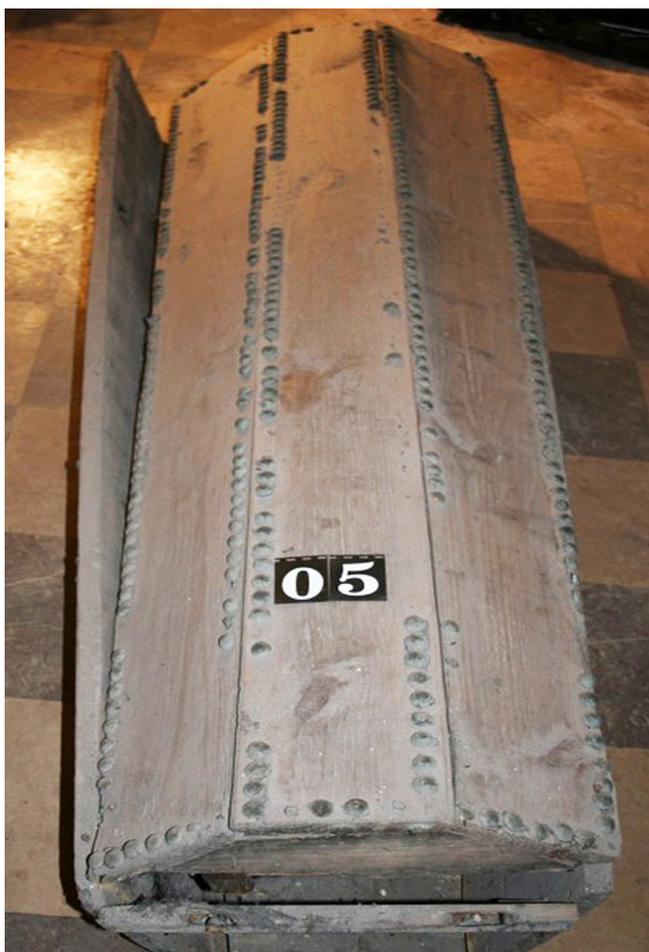


Fig. 12. Warsaw. Closed coffin no. 5. Photo D. Grupa.



Fig. 13. Warsaw. Human remains, burial clothes, and garbage in coffin no. 5. Photo D. Grupa.

of the martens' diet, and even a bicycle pump. After more detailed examination it turned out that coffin lids were also damaged by rodents, which made their dens inside (Fig. 6). The lids also had signs of animal claws and part of the planks was gnawed by vermin. Martens and other predators, and litter entered the crypt via the ventilation hole.

In case of popular historical objects with free entrance to the crypts or underground spaces, the situation is similar, and most of the destruction is done by visitors (Piaseczno and Szczuczyn). Another example can be the location of crypts under the Church of the Name of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Szczuczyn. Two entrances were protected only by wooden covers which allowed for easy access inside (Fig. 2) During cleaning works ten 120 litre rubbish bags were removed from the crypt, containing cans, bottles, and other debris thrown inside (Fig. 7). Due to their unique character, the crypts were open to the public many times, being visited by tourists, and lay and clergy officials. Negative human activity was depicted clearly here. The specific microclimate inside the crypts caused the majority of coffins to contain mummified remains of the people entombed there,

elements of grave clothes, paper pictures of saints, and other objects made of organic materials. In the course of exploration, the team excavated not only silk grave attire, but also leather, woollen and linen objects (while the latter rarely appear in archaeological sites due to quick degradation). In the past, various wars from the 18th century caused much destruction inside churches and crypts, and graves were despoiled, thereby causing additional negative impact on the microclimate inside, changes in which hastened the degradation of mummified remains and other organic material. Under the pews to the right of the church nave, the entrance to the next crypt was revealed (Fig. 8). In contrast to the other two crypts, there was no mummification of the corpses, but easy access to the ventilation shaft allowed local residents to get rid of unwanted bottles and cans (Fig. 9).

Sometimes damage can be hardly visible, as in the case of a crypt in the Metropolitan Basilica of St. John the Baptist in Warsaw (Figs. 10 and 11). During restoration work inside the building a decision was taken to conserve objects and grave clothes remaining inside coffins from the crypt. Opening the coffins, it turned out



Fig. 14. Piaseczno. Opening of the crypt under the chancel. Photo M. Nowak.



Fig. 15. Piaseczno. Entrance and interior of the crypt. Photo M. Nowak.

that a part of burials had been moved to other chests (Fig. 12), and their interiors were filled with objects not connected with the deceased (Fig. 13). Mostly these were of 20th-century origin, such as public transport tickets, pieces of newspapers, cigarette ends, and even condoms).

In July 2016 the authorities made a decision to open (Fig. 14) the entrance to a crypt located under the chancel of the Church of the Nativity of Our Lady in Piaseczno. It is impossible to establish, when the crypt had been opened the last time before that, as the entrance had been blocked up with a tombstone and sealed with



Fig. 16. Piaseczno. Garbage from ventilation shaft after removal of the coffins. Photo D. Grupa.



Fig. 17. Piaseczno. Original level of the crypt discovered after removing coffins, garbage and soil. Photo D. Grupa.

plaster. According to local inhabitants, in the 20th century the crypt was often visited by children playing truant from school. Because they were small enough to get through the ventilation hole, children would hide inside from local school teachers. The ventilation opening was partly bricked up in the 1980s at the request of the parish priest. Having opened the crypt, archaeologists found some of the coffins destroyed, while others were cleaned and put against the walls (Fig. 15). Protecting the interior from microorganisms, inventory and classification works

started, thanks to which we were able to restore some of the coffins to their complete form. Removing rubbish layers we also saw that other burials were placed directly on other layers of waste brought by people and animals (Fig. 16). The interior was very damp, and mould developed much, destroying the objects. The damage was generated by closing parts of the ventilation hole and raising the ground level around the church outside, which created a kind of a gutter, allowing rainwater inside the crypt, penetrating brick walls. Removing



Fig. 18. Płonkowo. Entrance from the outside to the crypt blown up by Nazis during World War II. Photo D. Grupa.

some of the layers of dirt, we found a fragment of white-washed pugging, marking the original level of the crypt. During many years of intrusion into the crypt, the floor level rose about 40 cm, covering the foundation stones, and this led to free water penetration inside the walls (Fig. 17). Next biocides were sprayed inside and the entrance was closed again for 12 months, after which period the following works were planned.

The remains of churches in Płonkowo is another interesting archaeological site, situated in a tiny hamlet not far from Toruń. Archaeological exploration conducted in 2006, 2007 and 2010 revealed and localized the remains of at least three wooden churches, which were connected closely with a nearby estate. The last historical church was destroyed during the War in 1939. The parish priest, Blessed Marian Skrzypczak was murdered, and two weeks later the last wooden 18th-century church was burnt. The team of archaeologists excavated crypts from inside the church and one which had an entrance from outside. Exploration of that destroyed room brought evidence that the church was not only burnt, but the crypt interior was blown up (Fig. 18) by the Germans.¹¹

Cult centres are not only important elements of our history, but also important indicators of urban and rural topography, closely connected with cultural transformation phenomena concerning nearby and

more distant areas in the space of the last hundreds of years.¹² Their presence has considerable influence on the sense of belonging and roots of local people, and tourism development in the region. According to present regulatory requirements, they should be protected and available for visitors to learn more about the place, which fact is obvious from the point of view of archaeologists and historians. However, taking into account the level of destruction inside and outside these objects, we should consider how to educate the general public to prevent devastation of our historical heritage.

Information gathered during research conducted in the sites discussed above allows us to understand better certain processes occurring in local communities recurring over the centuries in various places of worship. The accidental or deliberate deposition of rubbish and animal remains within the walls of existing churches in Gniez, Piaseczno and Szczuczyn or those destroyed like the church in Płonkowo, allows archaeologists to be better prepared for it in new sites. Thanks to this, better logistic and substantive preparation is possible before the next research begins. It should be noted that animal remains in churches may mislead researchers, and therefore it is very important to analyse not only the materials collected, but also local customs related to burial practices.

¹¹ Grupa et al. 2015b, 11.

¹² Dudziński et al. 2017, 8.

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Streszczenie

Śmiecie na stanowiskach archeologicznych.

Problem niszczenia historycznych obiektów sakralnych w wyniku działalności człowieka

Rozpoczęcie prac wykopaliskowych w obrębie obiektów sakralnych poprzedzone jest zazwyczaj pracami porządkowymi, mającymi na celu usunięcie śmieci z badanych przestrzeni, np. krypt. W trakcie porządkowania odkrywa się nie tylko przedmioty związane z obrzędowością (np. dewocjonalia), ale także dość licznie te ze sfery profanum – śmiecie. Są one interesującym źródłem informacji o historii danego miejsca. Nagromadzenie śmieci, szczególnie często obserwowane w kryptach czy podziemiach, ma też negatywny wpływ na stopień zachowania substancji zabytkowej – przyczyniają się one np. do uszkodzeń struktury murów. W artykule zostały opisane problemy konserwatorskie, wynikające z działalności człowieka (niewłaściwie przeprowadzone prace porządkowe, gromadzenie w wymienionych miejscach śmieci, np. potłuczonych butelek lub puszek po piwie, zalegających pod otworami wentylacyjnymi; pługowanie pochówków w czasie działań wojennych), ale będące także wynikiem innych czynników (np. legowiska kun w trumnach). Zagadnienie to zilustrowano obserwacjami własnymi autora, poczynionymi w kryptach – pod kaplicą św. Anny w kościele pw. św. Mikołaja w Gniewie, w kościele pw. Imienia NMP w Szczuczynie, w kościele pw. Narodzenia NMP w Piasecznie oraz w Bazylice archikatedralnej św. Jana Chrzciciela w Warszawie.