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## SPATIAL USE AND STRUCTURE OF FORTIFICATIONS OF THE EARLY MEDIEVAL STRONGHOLD AT PASYM IN THE MASURIAN LAKE- LAND

**Abstract:** The stronghold at Pasyń is located on an extensive peninsula surrounded by the waters of Lake Kalwa in the southern part of the Olsztyn Lakeland. During the recent investigations in the stronghold, archaeologists discovered relics of residential buildings and evidence of a complex system of stronghold fortifications, which is the main issue discussed in this article. The stronghold's defences covered a 36-metre-long stretch and included rampart, a cobbled platform and four dry ditches encircling the entire hill. Such fortifications have no close parallels in the areas inhabited by the West Balts during that era of the Middle Ages. The plateau of the stronghold measures 46×35 m. Archaeologists discovered remains of dwellings on the eastern edge of the plateau, while there was no evidence of such structures in the central part of the stronghold, only more or less regular sets of post holes and small refuse pits. In the north-eastern part of the plateau, in the vicinity of the cobbled platform, a small building containing a grain store was discovered. The beginnings of the Pasyń stronghold can be traced to the late 7<sup>th</sup> century and all available evidence indicates that it is the only site of this type in the Masurian Lakeland with such an early provenance. It is worth noting that the origins of the stronghold can be synchronised with the appearance of the first early Slavic strongholds, in particular the earliest phases of features discovered in Szeligi (Płock District, Poland), Haćki (Bielsk District, Poland), and Zymne (Volodymyr Region, Ukraine).

**Keywords:** Early Middle Ages, stronghold, West Balt Circle, fortifications, dwellings

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### Introduction

The stronghold at Pasyń is located in the south of the Olsztyn Lakeland, a part of the Masurian Lakeland microregion (Fig. 1). The site is situated on an extensive peninsula surrounded by the waters of Lake Kalwa (Fig. 2). The stronghold's setting in the landscape is quite idiosyncratic, as it occupies an exposed landform on a micro-regional scale, but one that lies in an isolated location at the regional level. It is notable that good use was made of the site's natural defensive advantages. Due to its characteristic shape resembling

a truncated cone, it used to be called the 'Round Mountain' (*Okrągła Góra*).<sup>1</sup>

The results of the first excavations (1880) at Pasyń were presented in summary form. No site records survive, and the exact location of the excavated trenches cannot be determined. Plans, records, and site logbooks from the 1960s excavations are held at the Museum of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn. Analysis of these materials has enabled us to trace the course of these excavation works and to ascertain the stratigraphy of the area examined. Most of the data we have comes from excavations carried out in 2016–2018 and

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<sup>1</sup> *Runder Berg*; Bujack 1888; Hollack 1908, 110; Odoj 1968.



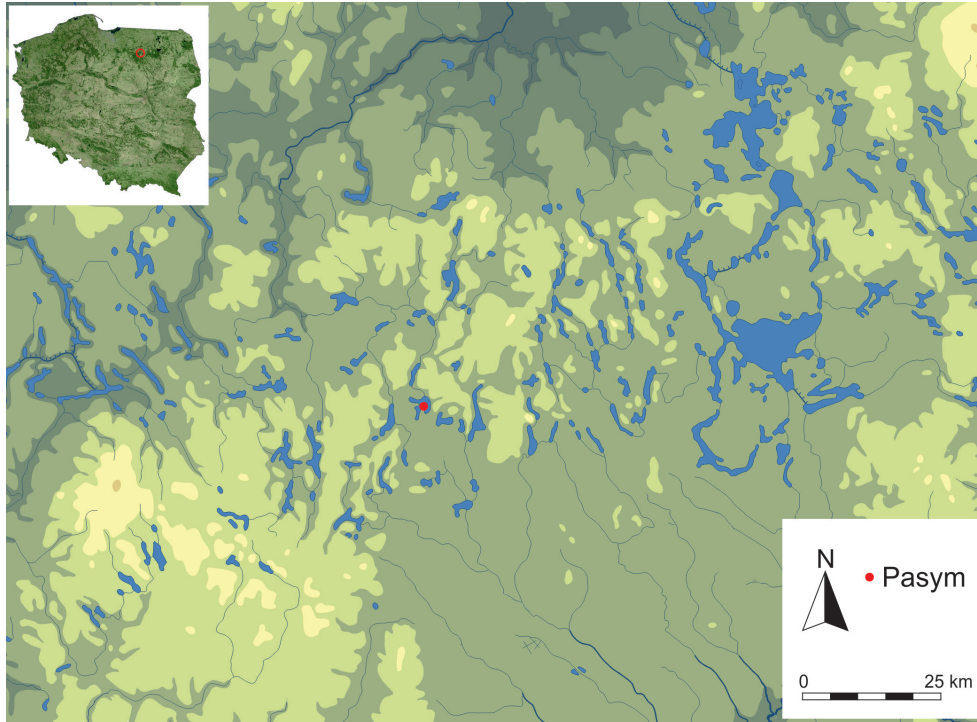


Fig. 1. Location of the stronghold in Pasym. Graphic design: S. Wadył.

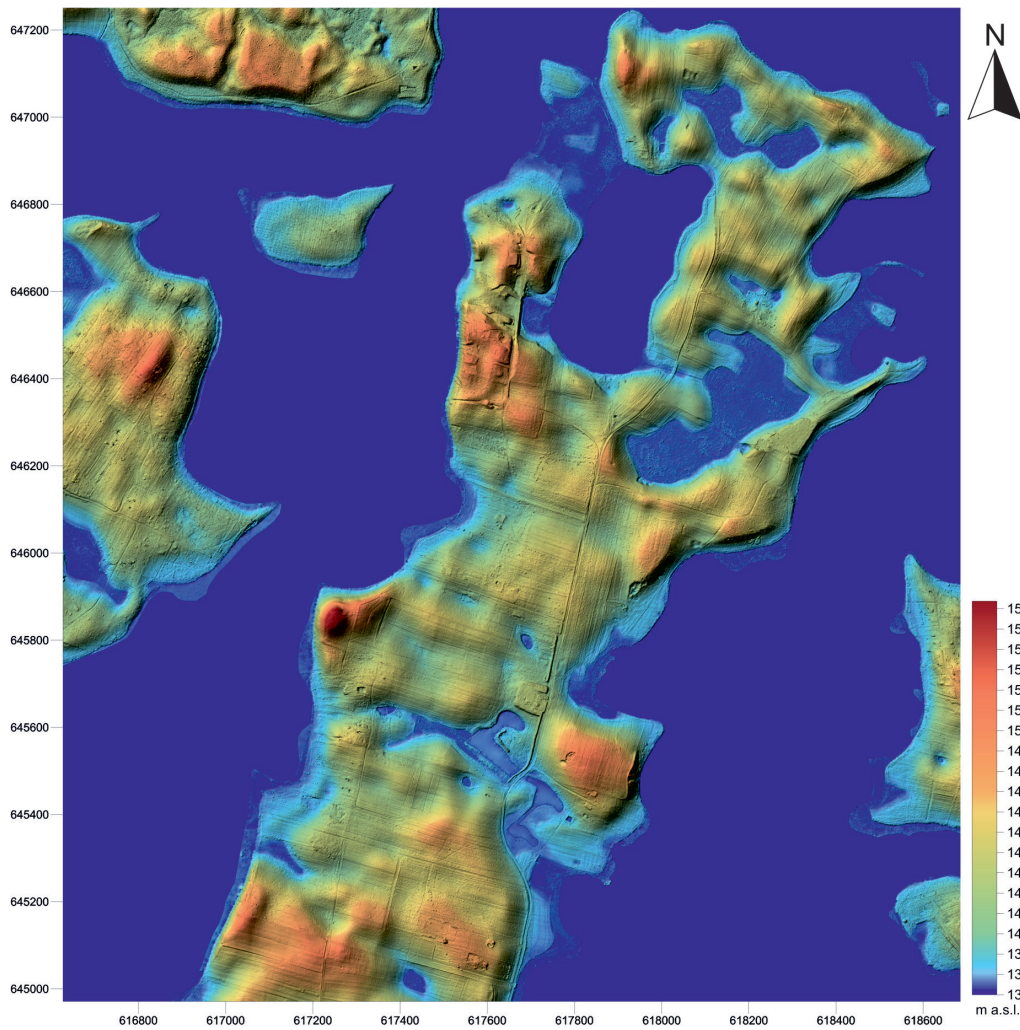


Fig. 2. Digital elevation model of the Ostrów peninsula. Graphic design: S. Wadył.

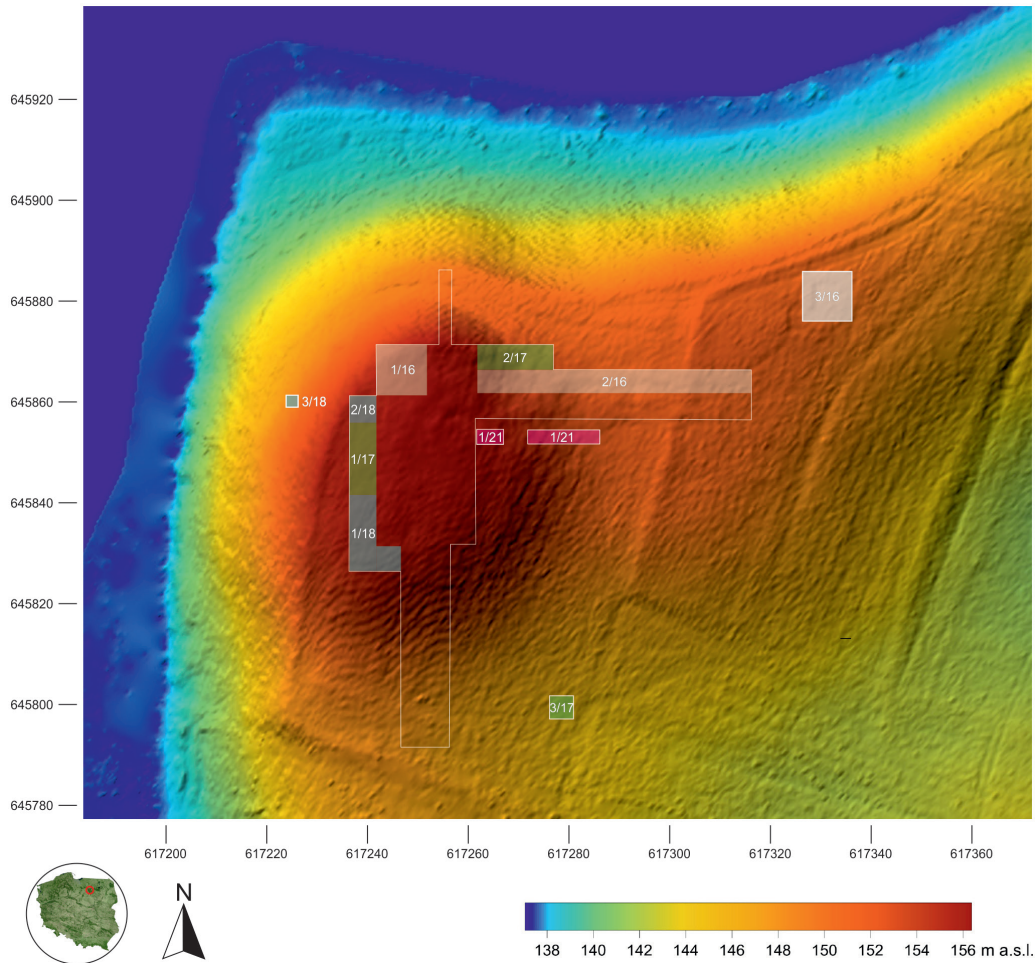


Fig. 3. Extent of excavations carried out on the stronghold. The area without numbering was excavated in the 1960s.  
Graphic design: S. Wadył.

2021. To date a total area of 2290 m<sup>2</sup> has been investigated (Fig. 3).

During the Migration Period the area of the Masurian Lakeland was occupied by the people of the so-called ‘Olsztyn Group’ (previously referred to as the *masurgermanische Kultur*) with origins reaching back to the Roman Period.<sup>2</sup> The fall of this cultural entity used to be dated to the second half of the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Presently, we possess evidence that at least some of the ‘Olsztyn Group’ necropolis survived at least until the beginning of the 8<sup>th</sup> century. New research provides evidence that settlements associated with the Olsztyn Group founded in the 7<sup>th</sup> century existed possibly even until the 9<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> The emergence of strongholds added a new element to the cultural picture.

During the recent research of the stronghold, relics of residential buildings and evidence of a complex system of stronghold’s fortifications were discovered

(Fig. 4). In this article, I would like to focus on the problem of spatial use and the analysis of the structure of the fortifications.

#### Fortification features

The stronghold’s defences covered a 36-metre-long stretch, including a rampart, which originally enclosed the central space on the peninsula side, a cobbled platform, and four dry ditches encircling the entire hill (Fig. 4). Because the materials obtained from the ditch fills do not allow for chronological stratification, it is not certain whether all ditches were dug and used simultaneously. From the lakeside in the west, no rampart was built (probably due to the lack of space and the steep slopes of the elevation) but there was a structure in the form of a palisade. Relics of this type of fortification were found on the edge of the hillfort plateau. The discovered powerful fortification system has no close analogies in other areas inhabited by the West Balts at that time.

Relics of the alleged rampart were unearthed in trench 2/16 and trench 2/17 (Fig. 4). The rampart has

<sup>2</sup> Nowakowski 2010; Rudnicki 2018; Bitner-Wróblewska 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Nowakowski 2004; Szymański 2013; Nowakowski 2020.

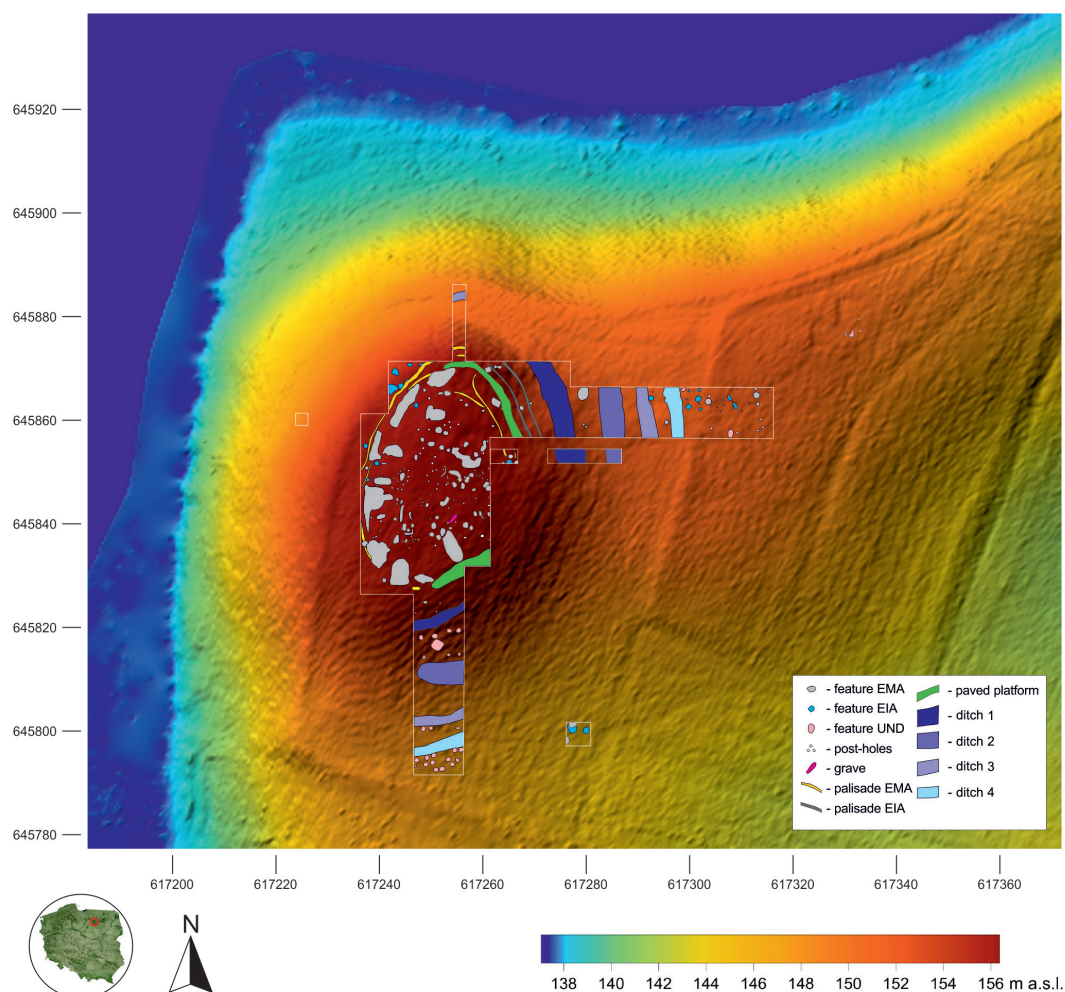


Fig. 4. Detailed plan of features and fortification structures. Graphic design: S. Wadył.

been badly damaged by agricultural activities, and only its base is still discernible. It was most probably of earthen construction. The space between the edge of the stone-paved platform and the upper border of ditch 1 stretched over a distance of 7.5 m, which is an important premise for determining the maximum width of the presumed rampart. One-metre-thick strata of sandy material lying above ditch 1 are probably the building material forming the discussed element of the fortification. Below the rampart there were relics of a double palisade related to the functioning of a fortified settlement of the West Balt Barrow Culture.

The rampart was separated from the stronghold's interior by a shallow ditch overlaid by a circular cobbled surface (Fig. 5). This created a kind of paved platform that served as a communication route located on the edge of the plateau.

The first of the ditches was dug at the foot of the rampart. It was unearthed on the southern and eastern slopes of the hill. Like the others, it surrounded the hill on the peninsula side. It was 4 to 5.5 m

wide on the eastern slope and from 2 to 2.5 m wide on the southern slope. The difference in height between the top of the ditch and its bottom was 2 m (Fig. 6). In many places its fill was over 1 m thick. Ditch 1 was characterised by an unusual accumulation of artefacts. Two samples taken from ditch 1 deposits were selected for radiocarbon dating, which indicated that the ditch fill was formed between 772 and 900 CE. The second ditch was located 5 m east and south of ditch 1. It was up to 6.5 m wide on the eastern slope and up to 5.5 m wide on the southern slope. It was c. 1 m thick. The third ditch lay to the southeast of ditch 2, with an empty space 2.5–3 m wide between the two. It was of modest dimensions, with a width of 2–3 m on the eastern slope and of 2–2.5 m on the southern slope. The fill of ditch 3 was 1.2 m thick. The last of the ditches was 2.5–3 m away from ditch 3. It was by far the smallest one, measuring 1.8 m wide and no more than 0.5 m deep.

The remains of palisades were discovered along the west and north-west edge of Round Mountain (Fig. 4). One structure was recorded along the entire



Fig. 5. Trench 2/16, Are 25, quarter C. Plan view of stone platform. Photo: S. Wadył.



Fig. 6. Trench 2/16, Are 26, quarter C. North profile of ditch 1. Photo: S. Wadył.

length of the hill's perimeter and there were also several shorter sections. The main palisade was about 0.3 m wide, and U-shaped in cross-section. The preserved thickness was 0.25–0.4 m. Perhaps a continuation of the described fortification is one of the ditches exposed on the edge of the northern slope, as well as a similar structure unearthed on the southern slope. In several sections, shorter palisade remains were also uncovered, located near dwellings. In trench 1/16, a ditch 0.25–0.3 m wide and up to 0.3 m deep was uncovered between features 3 and 5. In trench 1/17 a ditch was unearthed that connected feature 7 with feature 9. It had a width of 0.25–0.3 m and was 3 m long. It had a U-shaped profile and its

thickness was 0.3 m. In none of the described cases, signs of the destruction of features by ditches – remains of the palisade – were noticed, therefore it should be assumed that they functioned simultaneously. Their chronology is furthermore determined by the early medieval artefacts discovered in their fills. They may have been fences marking the boundaries of individual homesteads. Fences similar to the features described above (narrow ditches) were unearthed at the eastern edge of the plateau, but there is no basis for dating them, nor are there any indications of their connection with either a fortification function or with dwellings.

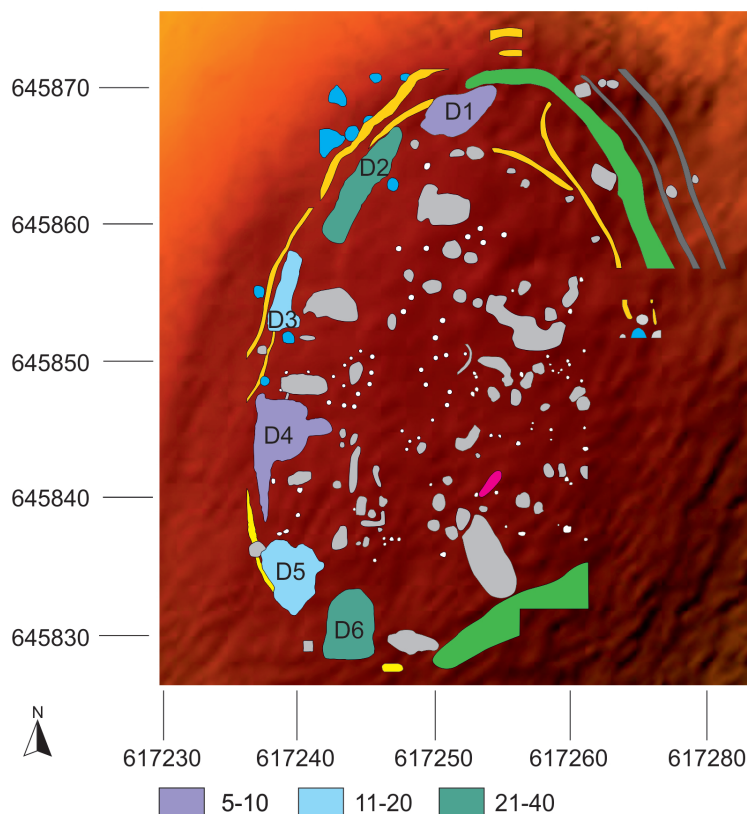


Fig. 7. Identified dwellings with quantitative differentiation of the content of the daub discovered within them. Graphic design: S. Wadył.

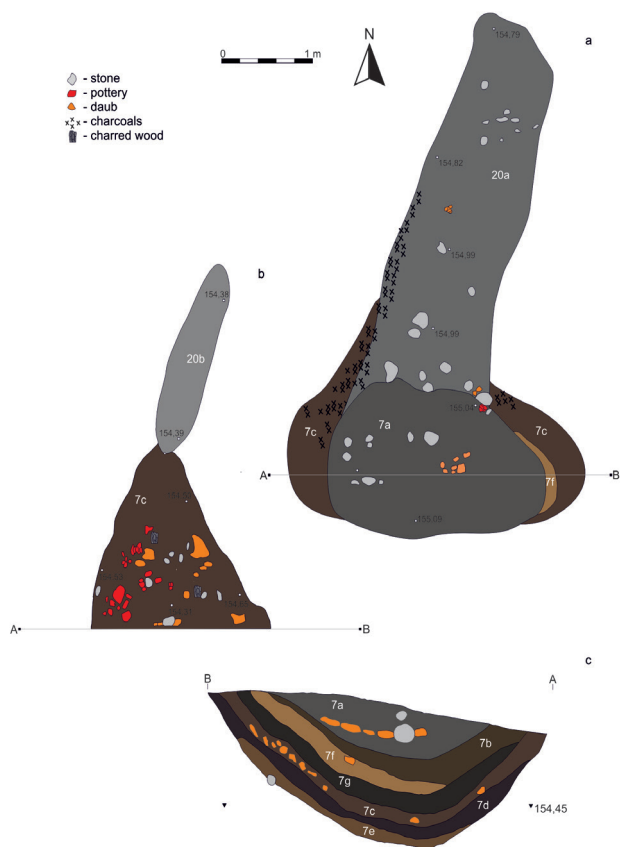


Fig. 8. Trench 1/17. Plan views (a, b) and profile (c) of feature 7. Drawn: S. Wadył.

### Buildings and layout of stronghold interior

In the 1960s, almost 70% of the stronghold plateau was excavated. At that time, the remains of major features were not discovered, so that until recently it was difficult to say anything certain about the layout of the settlement, especially the dwellings. A major change in the issue raised is the discoveries of 2016-18, when the focus of the research was to explore the edge zone of the Round Mountain stronghold.

The plateau of the stronghold measures 46×35 m. On the eastern edge of the plateau, the remains of dwellings were discovered. Archaeologists discovered remains of dwellings on the eastern edge of the plateau, while there was no evidence of such structures in the central part of the stronghold, only a more or less regular set of post holes and small refuse pits.

The remains of six dwellings (D1–D6) were discovered near the eastern perimeter of the plateau (Fig. 7). Feature 3 uncovered in trench 1/16 was marked with the number D1. The number D2 was assigned to the feature revealed in trench 1/16. The number D3 marked feature 7, together with a workshop (feature 20) unearthed in trench 1/17 and trench 2/18 (Fig. 8). The next number (D4) has been assigned to feature 9 uncovered in trenches 1/17 and 1/18 (Figs. 10 and 11). Feature 4 excavated in trench 1/18 was labelled as hut D5, while feature 13 discovered in trench 1/18 was labelled as hut D6. These were

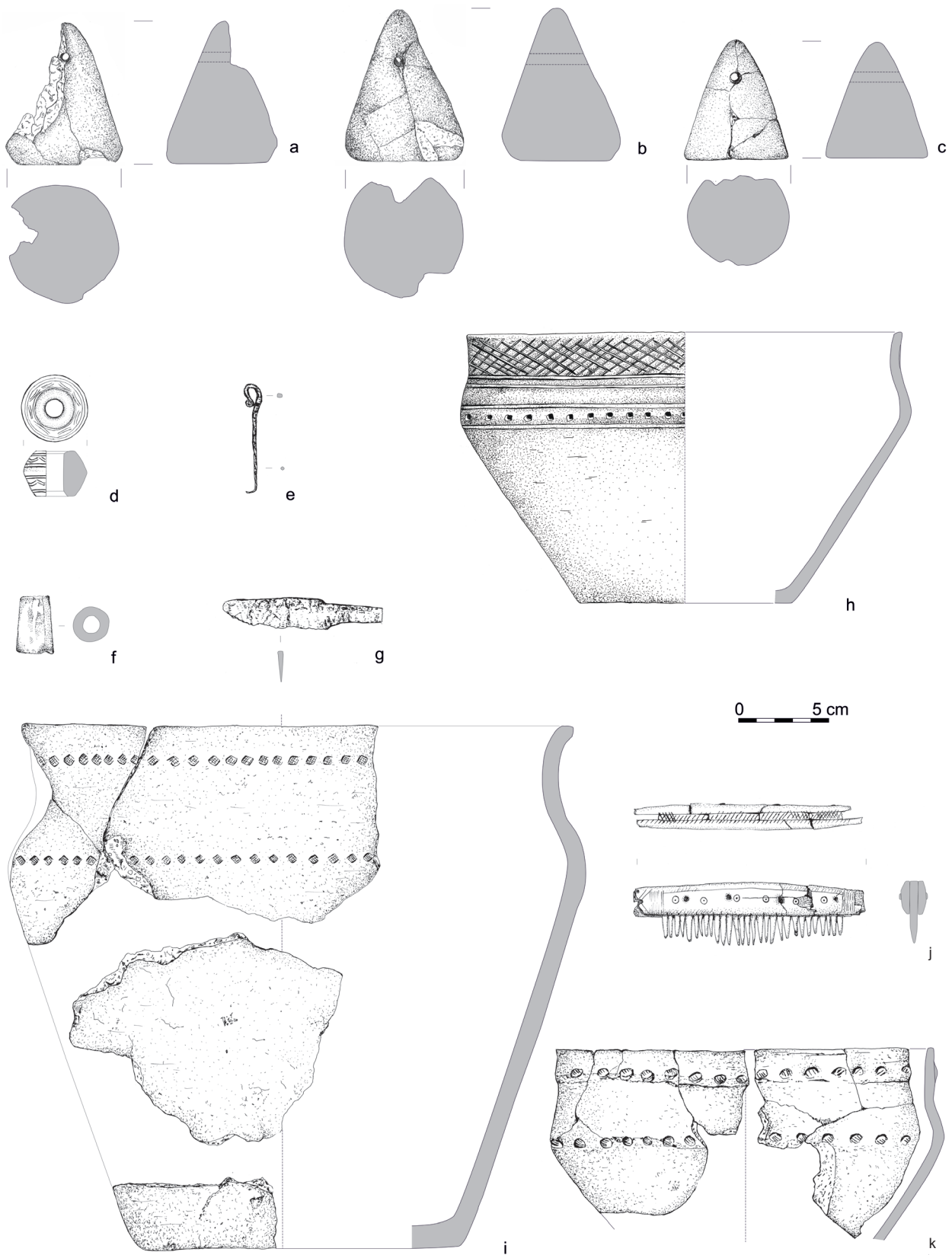


Fig. 9. Selected artefacts from feature 7. a–d, h, k – clay, e, g – iron, f – antler, j – antler, iron. Drawn: D. Żak-Boryszko.

divided into two groups: 1) those of large, regular shape – to which buildings D4, D5, and D6 were classified; 2) and those which were smaller and had more irregular ground plans – namely, buildings D1, D2, and D3.

The D1 dwelling was 8.5 m long and 2–2.75 m wide. It had an elongated oval shape. At the lower level, a division into three pits was observed. The building area was 17.5 m<sup>2</sup>. The D2 dwelling had a length of 5.25 m and a maximum width of 2.75 m. It had an elongated, irregularly shaped ground plan. The building area was 12.65 m<sup>2</sup>. The D3 dwelling consisted of two parts – the first with a trapezoidal and the second with a rectangular ground plan. The dimensions of the trapezoidal part were 2.6×2.5 m, the dimensions of the second part were 3×1.2 m. It was the smallest of the unearthened dwellings. Its total area was 9.6 m<sup>2</sup>. The D4 dwelling was characterised by a regular rectangular shape with a separate entrance and a hearth. It had dimensions of 4.5 m by nearly 4 m. Two pits were outlined on the lower level. The described building is related to pit 4, which is rectangular in shape and measures 3.2×1.4 m. The built-up area of building D4 excluding pit 4 was 19.9 m<sup>2</sup>. The D5 dwelling had a regular, approximately rectangular shape with a semi-oval part on the northwest side. It was 5.5 m long and about 5 m wide. Two pits appeared on the lower level. The built-up area was 17.2 m<sup>2</sup>. The last of the analysed features (D6) also had a regular shape, similar to a rectangle with a semi-oval part on the north side. Its dimensions were 5×3.8 m. Its building area was 16.1 m<sup>2</sup>.

As the upper strata had been damaged, it was difficult to determine the structural details of these houses. Only pit 4, associated with building D4, was found to contain postholes, indicating that it was of post-built construction. None of the main buildings (huts) had postholes, however, which probably indicates that they were log-built. Numerous lumps of daub were found inside these dwellings (Fig. 7), evidencing the remains of walls and floors. Evidence recorded in buildings D1, D3, D4, and D5 showed that they had been divided into several parts. The buildings themselves were probably partially sunk into the ground. In the building D4, it was possible to identify the entrance, which was located on the eastern side. In the lower part of the described part of the building, a clay threshing floor was uncovered. In the same building, near the southwest corner, a destroyed hearth was discovered. Presumably, the described dwellings together with the accompanying pits formed individual homesteads. They were separated by fences identified in several sections on the edge of the plateau, as well as stone walls. The remains of such a wall were discovered in the context of the D4 dwelling. During the exploration of the D4 dwelling in its northeast part, an interesting structure was discovered

– an oval basin with a diameter of 1.5 m, built of an 8–10 cm layer of clay. It is probably a remnant of storage space, perhaps drying food. Some other economic purposes of the described structure cannot be ruled out.

As well as their obvious residential use, these buildings undoubtedly served as work spaces. It is easiest to attribute a function to the elongated part of building D3, which represents the remains of a weaving workshop. In its context c. 20 loom weights were discovered (Fig. 9). It is likely that the warp-weighted loom was smaller than the 2.5 m dimensions of that part of the building. It was not possible to ascribe a specific craft or trade to the remaining buildings. The tools, antler blanks, and items associated with jewellery making recovered from these buildings show that the people who lived in them carried out a variety of tasks.

Feature 54, uncovered in trench 2/16, is worthy of note. It had a shape similar to a rectangle with dimensions of 3×2 m. In the plan, the corner of the building was outlined as a burnt layer. A very large number of charred cereals was discovered in the corner of the feature, which proves that there was a storehouse for food there. Due to its relatively small size and the small number and not very high quality of the artefacts obtained from its fill, it should be excluded that it is a relic of a residential building.

None of the larger dwellings were discovered in the central part of the stronghold (Fig. 7). This area was probably kept free from buildings of this type. The only features recorded there were small refuse pits and numerous postholes. It is highly likely that this was a public space. A small pit was discovered near the D4 dwelling, around which there was a system of nine post-holes forming an oval structure, which was probably related to the D4 dwelling. Exactly in the middle of the plateau, a similar structure formed by 10 post-holes was unearthened. It was 2.5×3 m in size. The other post-holes did not form any clear patterns, so it is difficult to say whether there could have been a building with public features there.

### **The Pasym stronghold at the dawn of the early Middle Ages**

The dwellings discovered in Pasym were inhabited for a relatively long time – according to the results of radiocarbon analyses, this period could be about 150 years and in the range of 700–900 CE. Huge amounts of artefacts were discovered in each of the dwellings – mainly potsherds, animal remains, and less numerous small finds (e.g., Figs. 9 and 11). The clear disproportion in the amount of pottery and animal bones discovered in the discussed features is astonishing (Table 1).



Table 1. Quantitative differentiation of the content of artefacts discovered within dwellings D1–D6.

| Dwelling | Feature | Potsherds | Animal bones | Small finds | Daub |
|----------|---------|-----------|--------------|-------------|------|
| D1       | 3/16    | 861       | 997          | 14          | 5    |
| D2       | 5/16    | 629       | 2186         | 7           | 40   |
| D2       | 7+20/17 | 1353      | 1895         | 58          | 13   |
| D4       | 9/17    | 1923      | 6287         | 39          | 5    |
| D5       | 4/18    | 528       | 4463         | 13          | 12   |
| D6       | 13/18   | 568       | 4055         | 18          | 30   |

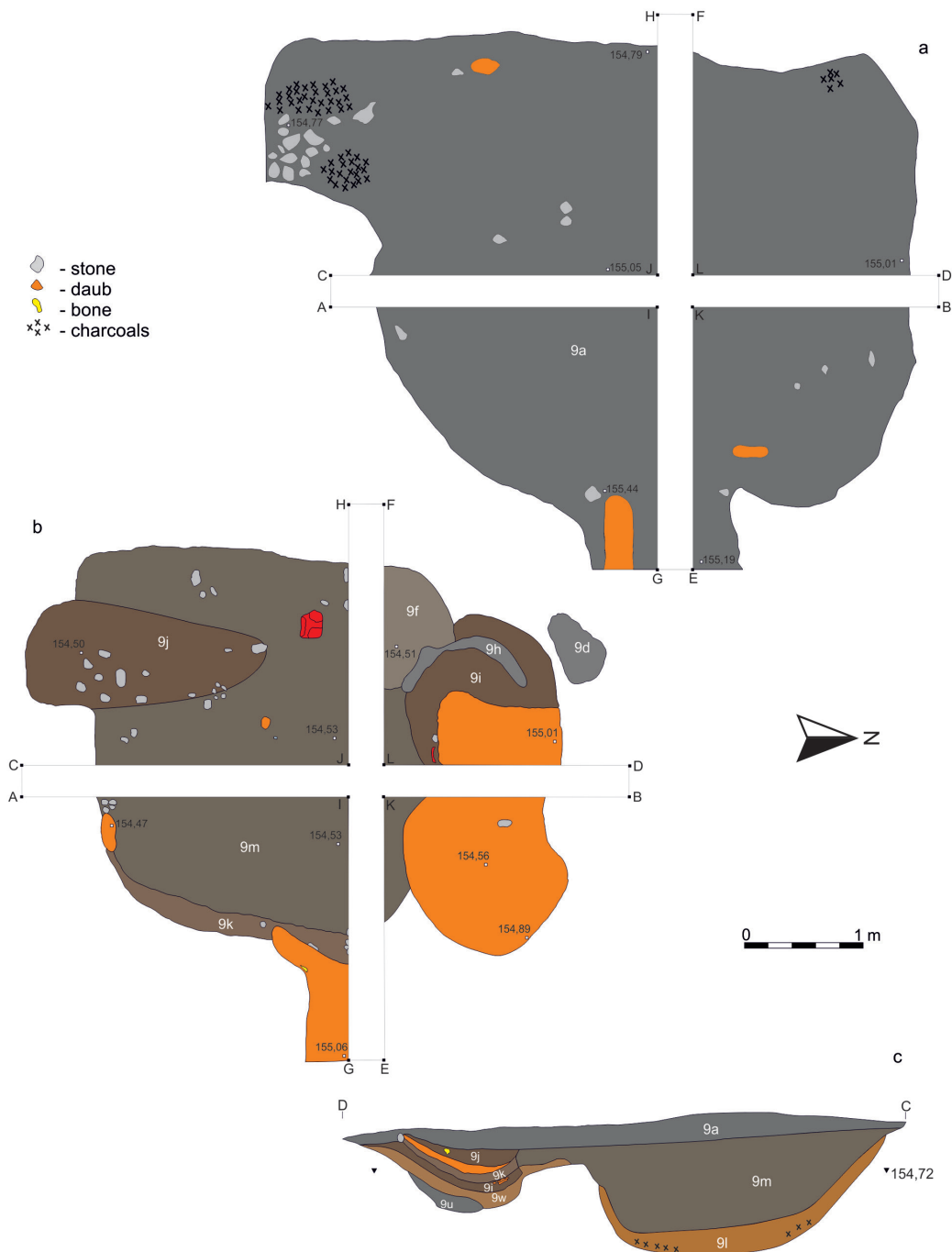


Fig. 10. Trench 1/17. Plan views and profile of feature 9. Graphic design: S. Wadyl.

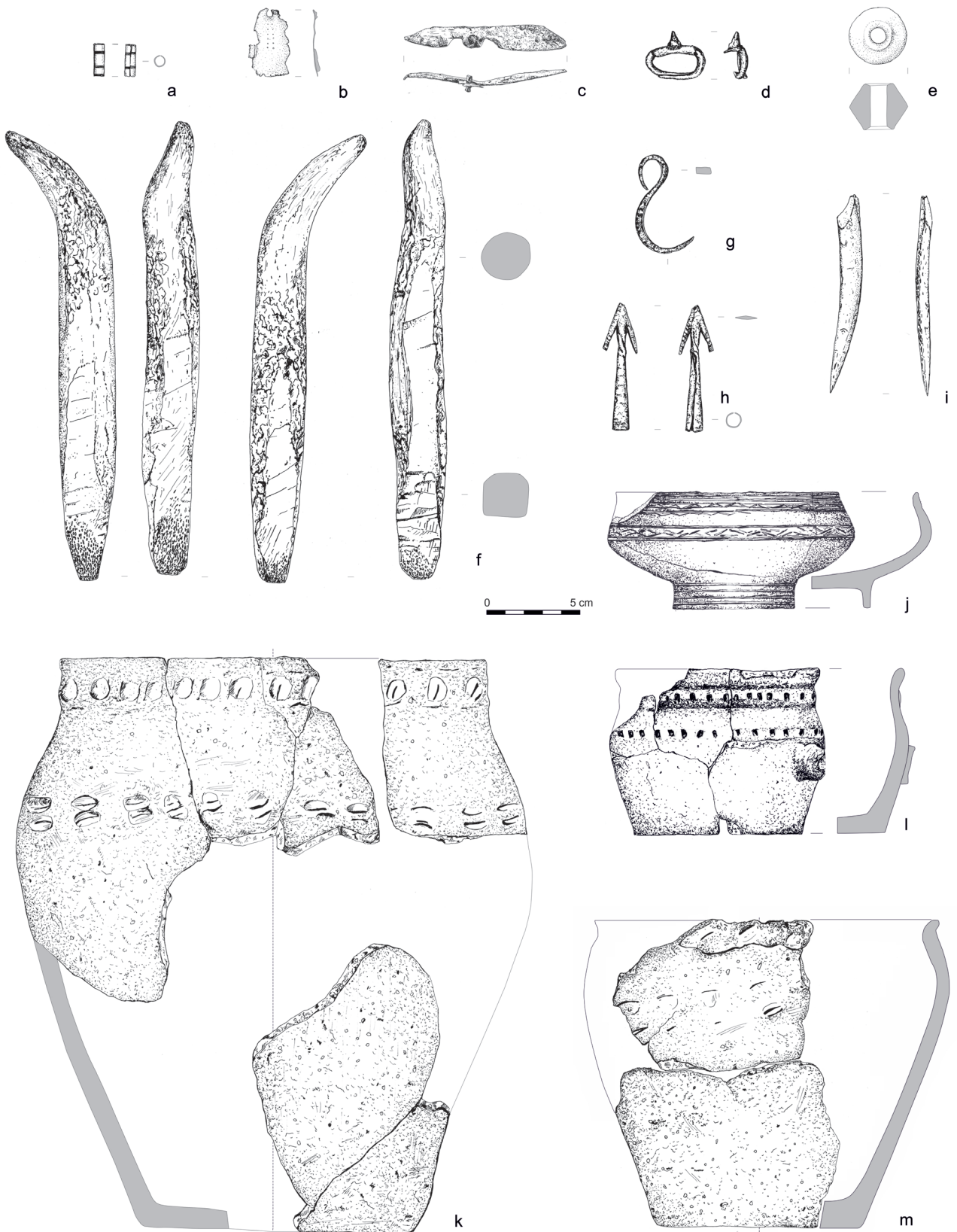


Fig. 11. Selected artefacts from feature 9. a, b – copper alloy, c, d, g, h – iron, e, j–m – clay, f, i – antler. Drawn: D. Żak-Boryszko.

As of now, the stronghold in Pasym is the only stronghold attributed to the Olsztyn Group which was still occupied in the Early Medieval period. The site is characterised by unusually rich archaeological material and the complexity of its fortifications, which have no analogies even outside the West Baltic region. The latest excavation results show that the first use of Round Mountain stronghold dates from the latter half of the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Some of the artefacts discovered at the site clearly point to a connection with Olsztyn Group communities. There are strong indications that materials associated with the terminal phase of the Olsztyn Group and the beginning of the early medieval period form a single horizon. Fresh data concerning settlement on the Ostrów peninsula has been provided by the results of palynological analysis. Palynological indicators of agricultural activity date from 750–900 CE. With the exception of this one period of 750–900 CE, there is no evidence of crop cultivation at this site until around 1150 CE.

During the late migration period, open settlements were the norm in this region, and they were

usually situated on fairly small hills near lakes. Un-defended settlements were also the most common type of early medieval settlement. The beginnings of the Pasym stronghold can be traced to the second half of the 7<sup>th</sup> century, and all available evidence indicates that it is the only site of this type in the Masurian Lakeland that is of such an early date. It is worth noting that the origins of the stronghold can be connected with the appearance of the first early Slavic strongholds, in particular the earliest phases of the features discovered at Szeligi (Płock District), Haćki (Bielsk District), and Zymne (Volodomyr Region). Current research shows that other defended settlements began to appear in Prussia during the 9<sup>th</sup>–10<sup>th</sup> centuries. The emergence of the idea of the stronghold in the West Baltic sphere is an intriguing phenomenon: during the 6<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> centuries a group of strongholds was built in the area delimited by the rivers Vistula, Dnieper, and Daugava, and it is they that may have inspired the hilltop settlement at Pasym. Marek Dulinicz referred to them as the ‘places that gave rise to power’<sup>4</sup> – focal centres of supralocal significance.

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<sup>4</sup> Dulinicz 2000, 85.