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**‘HOUSES OF GRAVES’ OF CENTRAL-EAST EUROPE:  
ARCHAEOLOGY ABOUT JEWISH FUNERAL RITUALS****Abstract**

This article presents the state of archaeological research on Jewish cemeteries in Central-East Europe, mainly on the basis of excavations conducted in Poland, Czechia, and Lithuania). It presents the possibilities of reconstructing funerary rituals on the basis of archaeological findings: the organisation of the burial space, the dress and equipment of the deceased, the layout of the corpse and the arrangement of the interior of the burial pit. Possibilities for interdisciplinary studies of the funerary customs of the Central European diaspora were studied and further research needs were identified.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Cemeteries are just one testimony to the thousand-year history of the Jews in Central and East Europe. However, due to the annihilation of their cultural heritage during the Shoah, they remain an almost primary testimony. Their significance in a historical and archaeological perspective is contained in Joachim Jacobs’ phrase: ‘Cemeteries always reflect the Jews’ specific living conditions in various locations at different times.’<sup>1</sup> This article will therefore present the current state of archaeological identification of Jewish cemeteries. The key elements of burial rites and the role of the cemetery as a source for the study of Diaspora history will be analysed. A separate analysis will consider the archaeological identification of Jewish and non-Jewish practices of a non-funeral nature that took place in the cemetery, having to do with folk

medicine, demonology, and the prevention of epidemics. In the case of archaeological excavations, we only have information from Poland, Lithuania, and Czechia. In other countries of the region, such research has not been carried out or I have not been able to obtain information about it (Slovakia, Hungary, Ukraine, Belarus).

**HISTORICAL OVERVIEW**

The influx of Jews into central Europe is assumed to have begun during the solidification of state structures in the early Middle Ages and is associated with the functioning of a network of trade routes at that time, linking the western part of the continent with central Asia.<sup>2</sup> The first Jewish colonies in the region were located in Kraków, Estergom, Przemyśl, and Prague (communities in

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<sup>1</sup> Jacobs 2008, 12.

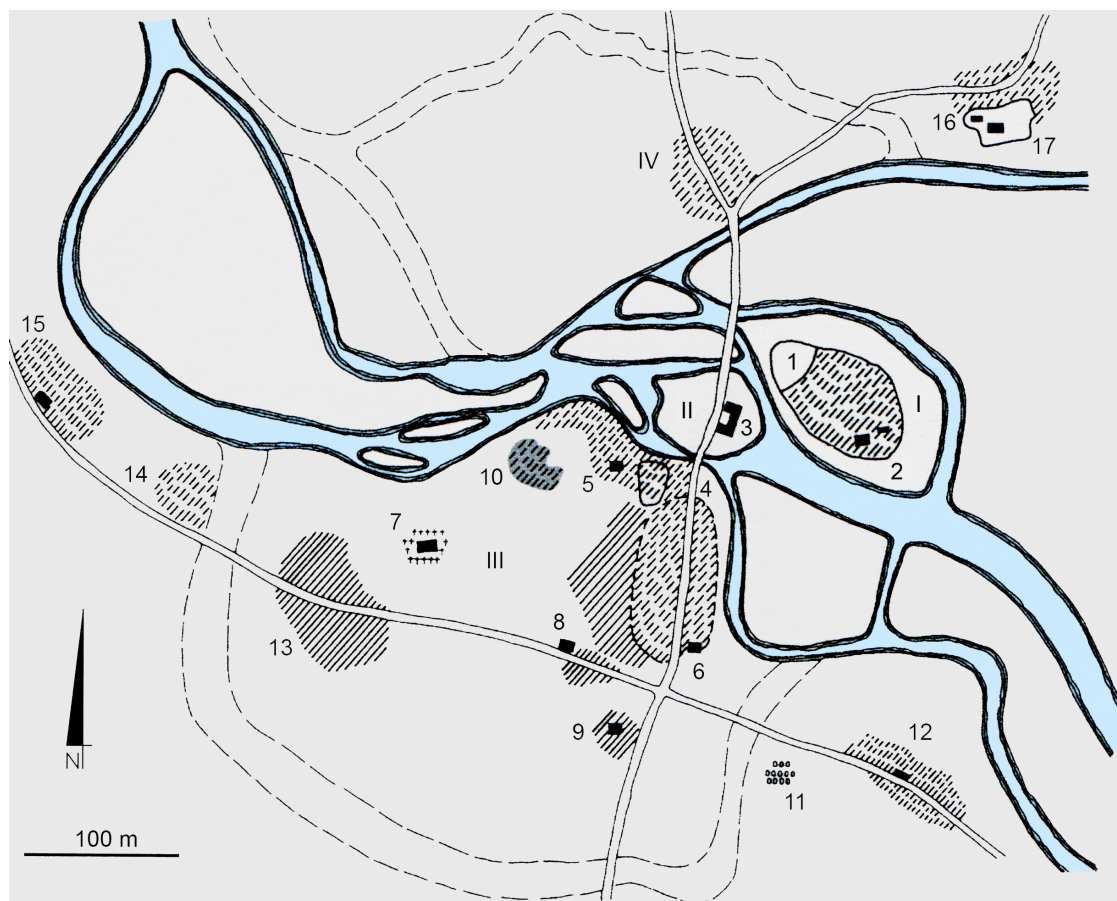
<sup>2</sup> On the presence of the early Israelites in Central Europe, the nature of that presence and its reflection in sources widely, e.g., Zaremska 2004; Zaremska 2005; Zaremska 2010; Witkowski 2011, 89-93; Zaremska 2011; Zaremska 2018.

**KEYWORDS**

- Central-East Europe
- Central-East European diaspora
- Jewish burial rites
- archaeology
- folklore



**Fig. 1.** Wrocław, late 12<sup>th</sup> and first half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. I. Ostrów Tumski (Cathedral Island): 1 – early medieval castle-town, 2 – suburb settlement with cathedral and collegiate church; II. Piasek Island: 3 – Augustinian church and monastery; III. Early urban settlement on the left bank of the Oder: 4 – market, inn, and butcheries, 5 – settlement with rampart, 6–9 – settlements near churches and monasteries, 10 – Jewish settlement, 11 – Jewish cemetery; 12 – Walloon settlement with church, 13 – Old Town, 14 – Sokolniki village, 15 – Szczepin village. IV. Ołbin: 16–17 – churches and monasteries. Source: Piechotkowie 2021.



the mid-11<sup>th</sup> century at the latest).<sup>3</sup> We have no medieval texts describing the circumstances of their establishment.

The next major stages of translocation in Central Europe occurred during the First Crusade (1096–1099). According to Kosmas of Prague, the Jewish community in Prague was one of its victims.

The earliest sources that mention the existence of Jewish communities in Poland date to the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries (Kraków, 1028).<sup>4</sup> This first stage (called ‘pre-Ashkenazic’ by R. Witkowski) refers to the period up to the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century; in the next stage, which lasted until the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the first permanent communities were established.<sup>5</sup> Changes in the map of Jewish settlement are most clearly visible in Silesia, where communities of Jewish town inhabitants can be found as early as the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century in Wrocław (Fig. 1), Bytom, Głogów, and probably also in Legnica, Lwówek, and Świdnica.<sup>6</sup> Jewish religious communities were also established at this time in

Płock (13<sup>th</sup> century),<sup>7</sup> possibly in Kalisz and Gniezno (finds of bracteates with Hebrew inscriptions)<sup>8</sup> and in Poznań (earliest from the 14<sup>th</sup> century).<sup>9</sup> The last stage of the medieval development of Jewish communities fell at the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, connected with the constitution of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Other events occurring in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries (e.g., the Black Death epidemic, the Hussite Revolution), whose repercussions were anti-Semitic attitudes in Europe, also led to fundamental changes in the map of Jewish settlement. The influx of settlers was also conditioned by economic factors. Populations migrated between Western and Central Europe, but shifts also occurred between Central European regions, again a result of the political decisions of those in power.

In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Halich Ruthenia, annexed to Poland by King Casimir the Great and colonised under German law, became a new area of Jewish settlement. Also in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Jews migrated

<sup>3</sup> Zaremska 2005, 24, 28; Witkowski 2011, 94; Kulik and Kalik 2021, 162-166.

<sup>4</sup> Fijałkowski 1993, 8; Zaremska 2018, 477-478.

<sup>5</sup> Witkowski 2011, 88. Another manner of periodisation of Jewish settlement in Poland cf. Kulik and Kalik 2021, 162-166. The caesuras are the First Crusade and the Mongol Invasion (1241).

<sup>6</sup> Witkowski 2011, 110-111.

<sup>7</sup> Witkowski 2011, 102, for further references.

<sup>8</sup> Gorlińska 2015.

<sup>9</sup> According to estimates, by the end of the Middle Ages there were around 5,500 Jews in Poland, with the largest communities – in Poznań, Kraków, and Lviv – having between 500 and 800 members each. The average Jewish community in 15<sup>th</sup>-century Poland was a small settlement inhabited by one or two families, Zaremska 2008.



**Fig. 2.** Oleśnica: A – Medieval synagogue. Photo: K. Skóra; B – Plan of the medieval town with the synagogue and Jewish living quarters marked (yellow). 1 – castle; 2 – parish church; 3 – town hall; 4 – church of St. Mary and St. George; 5 – synagogue; 6 – Jewish gate. Source: Zaremska 2010.

to Lithuania (Brest, Grodno, Trakai) and Ukraine.<sup>10</sup> In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Jews Jewish cemeteries are known.<sup>11</sup> The dynamics of settlement are illustrated by numbers: in Poland at the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century there were 12 communities; in the 15<sup>th</sup> century in the Crown and in Mazovia, there were already more than a hundred. In Bohemia and Moravia, there were 42 colonies in the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century, and a hundred in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>12</sup> After the formation of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1569 (the Union of Lublin), it became the leading centre of the Jewish community of early modern Europe in many respects.

### Cemeteries

According to tradition, the first step in the process of forming a relationship with a new place was to purchase a piece of land for a cemetery (beyt almin, בית עולמין or beyt kvarot, בית קברות). The Judaic hierarchy of religious sites only ranks mikveh (mikvah, מקווה) and synagogue (shul, שול or beyt kneset, בית כנסת) next.

Medieval cemeteries in Central Europe have generally not survived to the present day. The oldest surviving cemeteries are the necropolises in Kraków, by the synagogue called ‘Remu’, founded in 1553,<sup>13</sup> and in Prague, the cemetery between U stareho hřbitova, 17. Listopadu, and Široka streets, founded in the first half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>14</sup> Medieval synagogues are equally poorly represented in the fabric of cities to this

day. In present-day Poland there are only three (in Kraków, Oleśnica, and Świdnica), two of which changed their function as early as the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries after Jews were expelled from the town – the latter two were converted into arsenals, warehouses, or temples of other faiths<sup>15</sup> (Fig. 2).

The oldest Jewish necropolises began to disappear quite early – destruction was already taking place in the Middle Ages.<sup>16</sup> The mechanism of disappearance was similar throughout Central Europe. Cemeteries in the Middle Ages were usually established in ducal town centres or their vicinity (in Hungary they were also established in bishops’ estates).<sup>17</sup> Pogroms and expulsions were accompanied by the destruction of gravestones,<sup>18</sup> and the adoption of a resolution not to tolerate the Jewish population usually meant that the authorities gave permission for the use of gravestones by townspeople for other purposes. Examples of the latter action come from various parts of Europe, e.g., Germany,<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Witkowski 2011, 116; Niemiec 2016; Niemiec 2017.

<sup>16</sup> About the location of the first Jewish cemeteries in Kraków, Buda, Wrocław, and Prague, cf. Zaremska 2005, 79-81.

<sup>17</sup> Zaremska 2005, 38. The community in the smaller towns had to organise the transportation of the dead over various distances. We also know about this from duty statutes, which allowed Jews to transport their dead for free. About the right to transport the dead in the Polish lands in the Statute of Bolesław the Pious of 1264, paragraph 13, cf. Fuks et al. 2012, 45-46. Similarly, in the statutes of Bela IV (1251) and Przemysław Ottokar II (1255), Zaremska 2005, 79; Witkowski 2011, 104-106.

<sup>18</sup> For example, during the Prague tumult during Holy Week 1389, Zaremska 2005, 121-122.

<sup>19</sup> In Cologne, tombstones from the Jewish cemetery after the pogrom of 1349 were also used for various building purposes, Potthoff and Wiehen 2018; Cluse 2018, 148. Other examples of secondary use of gravestones in German lands in the Middle Ages, Stoffels 2012; Härtel 2016; Härtel 2017a, 256-266; Härtel 2017b; Cluse 2018, 148-149, 151; Leenen 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Zaremska 2010, 33; Witkowski 2011, 125-126, 132-133.

<sup>11</sup> Nosonovsky 2009, 241; Nosonovsky 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Zaremska 2005, 35-36.

<sup>13</sup> The first burials took place before the cemetery was officially opened, probably due to a plague. The oldest gravestone dates from 1552, Hońdo 1999, 11, 21.

<sup>14</sup> Fiedler 1992, 133.



**Fig. 3.** Wrocław, Jewish cemetery on Ślężna Street. The largest surviving medieval tombstone in Poland, belonging to Samson, who died on 28 Tevet 5105 (3 January 1345). Photo: K. Skóra.



France,<sup>20</sup> Italy,<sup>21</sup> and Bohemia.<sup>22</sup> In Wrocław, King John of Luxembourg allowed the town authorities or people authorised by the councillors to use matzevot from the first Jewish cemetery<sup>23</sup> to fortify the city walls,<sup>24</sup> which was done in April 1346.<sup>25</sup> This was a breach of the 1315 or 1316 settlement agreement guaranteeing the preservation of cemeteries *ab antiquis temporibus*.<sup>26</sup> The agreement of 1315 ensured that the bodies of their ancestors would never be dug up from the cemetery.<sup>27</sup> However, in 1349, the Jewish population was expelled for the second time from Wrocław (they had been expelled previously in 1226).<sup>28</sup>

<sup>20</sup> In Tours, the Jews were expelled in 1306, and city accounts show that workers were paid between 1359 and 1360 to remove stones from the Jewish cemetery, Lazard 1888, 213. Lazard suggested: *This is a fact that would discourage archaeologists who might be tempted to find it.*

<sup>21</sup> In 1560–1573 the authorities in Rome ordered the use of tombstones for the construction of the city walls, Abrahams 1993, 78; Jacobs 2008, 34–35.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Lieben 1933, 20, fig. 1.

<sup>23</sup> About its location, Witkowski 2011, 112.

<sup>24</sup> For the same purpose, tombstones from the destroyed cemetery in Legnica were allocated on the basis of a decision of 1345, Rosenthal 1960, 11, footnote 49

<sup>25</sup> Stawiarski 2010. For nine days, 50 labourers and nine carters were employed to transport them, Wodziński 1996, 165. Matzevot in the next centuries were found in public buildings, but not in buildings with a fortification function.

<sup>26</sup> Witkowski 2011, 124–125.

<sup>27</sup> Zaremska 2005, 80–81.

<sup>28</sup> Młynarska-Kaletynowa 1986, 51, footnote 184; Wodziński 1996, 39, 165.

The Statute of Kalisz, first adopted for Greater Poland (paragraph 14; 16 August 1264) and later confirmed in the 14<sup>th</sup> century by Casimir the Great for subsequent districts of the kingdom, guaranteed the inviolability of cemeteries to Jews and penalties for their violation.<sup>29</sup> However, this did not make cemeteries invulnerable to destruction during local anti-Jewish riots<sup>30</sup> or warfare, e.g., during the Swedish invasion in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (1655–1660) and the associated rise in anti-Semitic attitudes.

A new phase in the history of cemeteries was marked by a universal decree on the relocation of cemeteries outside the cities issued in 1792,<sup>31</sup> which accelerated the process of abandoning existing necropolises. As a result of sanitary ordinances, cemeteries located in towns were closed and new ones opened outside inhabited areas. This affected all denominations and, for many communities, meant the liquidation of their existing necropolis.<sup>32</sup>

The only material evidence of the first cemeteries are tombstones, which are usually discovered not in their original location. From the territory of Poland, the oldest preserved matzevot come from Silesia; the oldest is a gravestone from Wrocław, dated 1203, belonging to David, son of Sara Shalom.<sup>33</sup> Despite some reservations,<sup>34</sup> it is likely that the stone is of local origin.<sup>35</sup> The Wrocław provenance of Chaim's tombstone from 1246<sup>36</sup> and the local origin of several other stone tombstones from the 13<sup>th</sup> century (Fig. 3) and mainly from the 14<sup>th</sup> century from Wrocław, Świdnica, and Nysa, are not in doubt.<sup>37</sup>

Much more numerous are the surviving tombstones dating from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards.<sup>38</sup> This applies not only to Poland, but also to neighbouring countries: Czechia, Slovakia, Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine.<sup>39</sup> The oldest surviving tombstones

<sup>29</sup> Fijałkowski 1993, 8, 15–17; Fuks et al. 2012, 24–28, 45–46; Bednarek 2020, 38–40. In an act of Grand Duke Vytautas, issued to the Jews of Brest in 1388: *If a Christian desecrates the graves of the Jews, we will punish him and confiscate his property*, Shenderovich and Litin 2017, 138.

<sup>30</sup> E.g., the oldest cemetery in Warsaw, 15/16<sup>th</sup> c., Ringelblum 1932.

<sup>31</sup> Trzciniński 2017, 61.

<sup>32</sup> Kolbuszewski 1996, 185–194.

<sup>33</sup> Wodziński 1996, 167–170. On the number and location of cemeteries in Wrocław, Wodziński 1994.

<sup>34</sup> Wodziński 2004.

<sup>35</sup> H. Zaremska points out the Rhineland influence, without denying the local character of the inscriptions, Zaremska 2018, 491–492.

<sup>36</sup> Wodziński 1996, 171–172.

<sup>37</sup> Wodziński 1996, 172–212; Adamska 2018. The cemetery in Brzeg probably also has medieval origins, Adamska 2018, 4.

<sup>38</sup> Trzciniński and Woronczak 1997; Trzciniński 2007, 19–20, with further references.

<sup>39</sup> Fiedler 1992; Fiedler 1995; Trzciniński 2007, 20–21; Polakovič 2008.



from Czechia date to the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries; they come from Brno, Cheb, Olomouc, Prague, and Znojmo.<sup>40</sup> The oldest surviving matzeva from Buda (Hungary) dates from 1278.<sup>41</sup> The oldest preserved tombstones from Lithuania (Vilkovishk, 1575) and from Ukraine (Busk, Lviv oblast, 1520) date to the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>42</sup> From Belarus, the oldest preserved gravestones are dated to the 17<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>43</sup> and the poor representation of stone tombstones is explained by the use of mainly wooden material, even as late as the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>44</sup> This is caused by geological conditions resulting in a lack of suitable stone raw material;<sup>45</sup> however, the economic factor was also important.<sup>46</sup>

Cemeteries from the early Middle Ages (8<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> centuries) in Western Europe are equally poorly represented. It is assumed that at this time Jews may have been buried in multi-faith cemeteries, perhaps in separate plots, which, like their Christian counterparts, decayed over time.<sup>47</sup> The use of wooden gravestones or the abandonment of above-ground markers (Maimonides' recommendation for pious Jews) is given as justification for the small number of stone gravestones as well.<sup>48</sup> From the 11<sup>th</sup> century onwards, separate Jewish cemeteries began to appear, e.g., in Worms, Mainz, and Speyer.<sup>49</sup>

Jewish cemeteries began to disappear from the cultural landscape of Central Europe on a large scale as a result of the planned destruction resulting from the implementation of Nazi policy from 1933

onwards. The events of the Second World War led to the massive destruction of the above-ground parts of the cemeteries, erasure of their historical substance, and general profanation of the resting places. The next phase of destruction came after 1945, when, in the new post-Stalin socialist reality, the cemeteries became a no-man's-land: tombstones continued to be a source of raw material and the surface of the cemeteries an area for construction projects.<sup>50</sup>

#### ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE FUNERARY RITES OF THE ASHKENAZI DIASPORA IN CENTRAL EUROPE

Few material traces of cemeteries have survived from the first centuries of the Ashkenazi diaspora in Central Europe. With few exceptions, medieval sites have also not been the subject of archaeological and anthropological research. All in all, this means that our knowledge of funerary rites from this period is severely limited, based on data obtained primarily from Czechia: The Jewish Garden cemetery in Prague (1254–1478),<sup>51</sup> and cemetery fragments in Brno, Brno-při Uhelné street (13<sup>th</sup>–mid 15<sup>th</sup> century), and in Prague-Bartolomějská street (9<sup>th</sup>–10<sup>th</sup> century),<sup>52</sup> have been the subject of research. In relation to the Holy Roman Empire between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, the number of Jewish cemeteries is estimated at around 150 – either confirmed in written sources or revealed during archaeological research.<sup>53</sup>

The other Central European cemeteries excavated archaeologically date to the modern period (16<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> centuries). These are mostly sites from Polish lands and in one case from Lithuania (Vilnius, Šnipiškės, Fig. 4).<sup>54</sup> In other countries of the region (Slovakia, Hungary, Ukraine, and Belarus) such research has not been conducted or has not been published. I do not undertake an in-depth analysis of funerary rules, which are known to us from Paweł Fijałkowski's numerous works in relation to Polish lands.<sup>55</sup> Here, generally archaeologically graspable elements of funerary rituals will be presented, being the sum of data obtained during the research of 34 cemeteries (in Poland, Lithuania, and

<sup>40</sup> Lieben 1933; Fiedler 1992; Polakovič 2008. The oldest gravestones surviving in situ date back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century and are found only in Prague and in Kolín nad Labem, Lieben 1933, 21; Steinová 2011, 137.

<sup>41</sup> Zaremska 2005, 79.

<sup>42</sup> Tombstones from several localities dating back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century are known only from literature, Kulik and Kalik 2021, 155. Verification of these findings at the time is generally no longer possible, cf. Trzciński 1999, with reference to Chełm. Gravestones from the cemeteries of Medzhibozh, Satanov, Bukhach, Skala-Podolskaya and Vishevets also have a 16<sup>th</sup>-century metric.

<sup>43</sup> Sygowski 2010; Nosonovsky 2021.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Levy 1923; Sygowski 2010, 291, 298; Jagielski, *Cemeteries*. No monuments of this raw material have survived in Poland, cf. Wodziński 1995, but they are known from museums in Prague, Helsinki, St. Petersburg (<https://news.jeps.ru/novosti/nadgrobie-s-xeppi-edom.html>), and Amsterdam (The Jewish Museum in Amsterdam), and only from a few cemeteries: Uniecz, Bryansk region, Russia, from the 19<sup>th</sup> century and Lenin, near Minsk, Gomel oblast, Belarus from 1904–1936, Trzciński 2017, 81–82, footnote 3; Nosonovsky 2021.

<sup>45</sup> Mainly granite erratic stones were used or old millstones were recycled, Levy 1923; Sygowski 2010, 290, 292–293, 296; Nosonovsky 2021, 957.

<sup>46</sup> Wooden tombstones have undergone destruction over time, but there is also evidence of their use as a source of fuel in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Trzciński 2017, 63, 64.

<sup>47</sup> Goldberg 1989, 39.

<sup>48</sup> Jacobs 2008, 32.

<sup>49</sup> Jacobs 2008, 36–38, 41–42.

<sup>50</sup> E.g., Urban 2006; Baksik 2012; Bednarek 2020; Bielawski 2020.

<sup>51</sup> Wallisová 1998, 141–148; Wallisová 2009, 54–58; Cymbalak et al. 2015.

<sup>52</sup> Divergent opinions on the possibility of linking the cemetery to the Jewish population cf. Borkovský 1948, 463–478; Dragoun 2002; Dragoun 2003; Wallisová 2009, 58; recently in the context of new discoveries, Staňková 2013, 60.

<sup>53</sup> *Germania Judaica*, 207–208; Lämmerhirt 2007, 119; Härtel 2017a, 9.

<sup>54</sup> Žukovski 1998; Žukovski 2000.

<sup>55</sup> Fijałkowski 1989; Fijałkowski 2003; Fijałkowski 2014.

**Fig. 4.** Jewish cemetery in Vilnius, Šnipiškės. A – state before the Second World War; B – current state (2022).

Source: Biblioteka Narodowa, 1916 (A). Photo: K. Skóra (B).



Czechia). The scope of this research, with a few exceptions, was not large.<sup>56</sup>

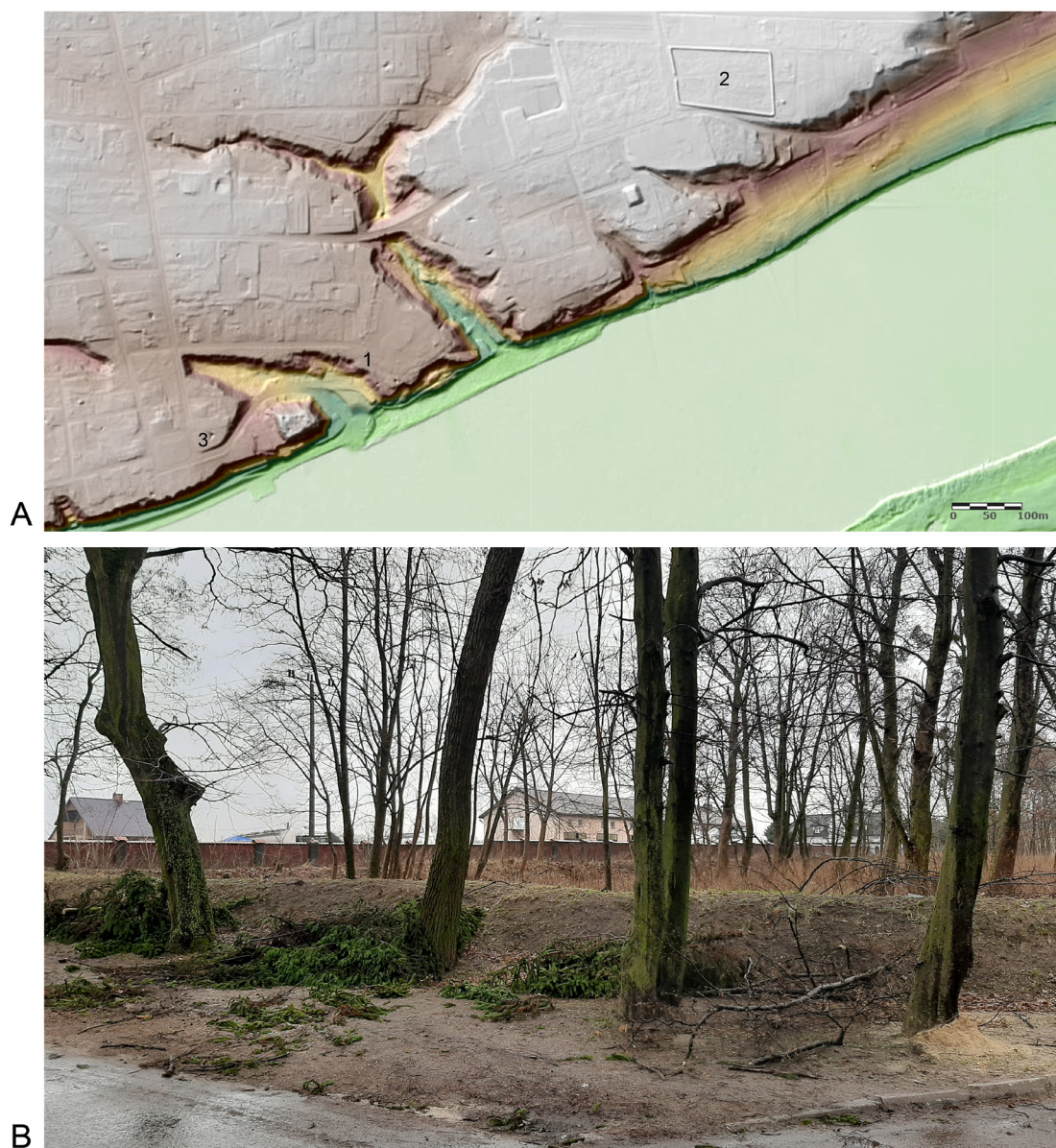
A cemetery, as a place for burying the dead, has to be organised in a way that accords with religious, ritual, and social rules. The grave is the most important element of this space, which also includes tombstones of various forms and raw materials, buildings (pre-burial house, administrative buildings, and outbuildings) and additional infrastructure (wells and various forms of fencing, such as ramparts, walls, ditches, and gates). The layout of the plots, the spatial arrangement, and the topography are also important.

<sup>56</sup> In England, three cemeteries were explored: London (7 graves), Winchester (10 graves), and Jewbury in York (482 graves), Jacobs 2008, 47.

The shape of Judaic funerary practices is determined primarily by the doctrine of physical – not just spiritual – resurrection.<sup>57</sup> This belief influences the location of cemeteries and burials, which are supposed to guarantee the integrity of the grave and the arrangement of the burial pit. The second principle is the equality of the deceased in the face of death, which implies a highly standardised manner of burial as related to dress and the principle of not equipping the deceased with grave goods. This feature of Judaic ritual clearly limits our ability to grasp the variability of burial practices over time. Compounding this is the lack of grave furnishings of dating value, the limitation of the presence of metal elements

<sup>57</sup> Jacobs 2008, 13.





**Fig. 5.** Wyszogród (PL): A – LIDAR visualisation. Location: 1 – defunct old cemetery; 2 – new cemetery; 3 – defunct synagogue. B – rampart surrounding the new Jewish cemetery. Photo and graphic design: K. Skóra.

in costume and the absence of coins. Commonly occurring fragments of vessels or padlocks, however, allow for a broad dating framework.

#### LOCATION OF CEMETERIES

The question of the location of Jewish cemeteries has not been studied in relation to Central Europe as a whole. It is known that cemeteries were sought to be established away from human settlements, which had its origin in biblical texts,<sup>58</sup> places that ensured the integrity of the space and burials.<sup>59</sup> Halakhic rules stipulated a minimum distance of 50 ells from buildings.<sup>60</sup> For this reason, in the Middle Ages, sites were chosen outside city walls,<sup>61</sup>

in areas of low agricultural value, i.e., sandy hills.<sup>62</sup> Over time, cemeteries were located on other terrain forms, e.g., abandoned fortified strongholds or ramparts.<sup>63</sup> Necropolises were established not only on hills or their slopes, but also on the banks of rivers (e.g., Wyszogród, old cemetery – Fig. 5) and lakes.<sup>64</sup> Exceptions, however, did not include

garden located near the Jewish cemetery at that time, Witkowski 2011, 123.

<sup>62</sup> In Kalisz in the 13<sup>th</sup> century an ‘inherited hill’ was ceded for 6 pounds of pepper and 2 pounds of saffron per year for a Jewish cemetery by Rupinius, Fijałkowski 1993, 42; Witkowski 2011, 121.

<sup>63</sup> E.g., a hillfort in Lublin, a medieval hillfort (a rampart) in Biała near Prudnik (before 1621), Rabin 1926, 161; Wodziński 1996, 213-214; Nowakowski 2017, 259-260, fig. 101; Adamska 2018, 15, footnote 93; on the so-called Zawale in Będzin; on an earthen rampart in Bytom, 1730, Majewska n.d., 38; Przybyłok 2014, 179; in Bohemia and Moravia between the lines of fortification walls or on ramparts outside the town walls (Brno, Budyně n. O. Lipník n. B, Osoblaha, Znojmo, Uherský Brod), Fiedler 1992, 34-35.

<sup>64</sup> In today’s Belarus and Ukraine: Nosonovsky 2009, 242; Shenderovich and Litin 2017.

<sup>58</sup> Zaremska 2018, 491.

<sup>59</sup> According to L. Hońdo (2016, 235), there were no land specifications for a cemetery.

<sup>60</sup> Woronczak 1993, 6; Jacobs 2008, 84; Fijałkowski 2014, 93.

<sup>61</sup> E.g., outside the city walls in Kraków (Kawiory), in Kalisz, and in Gniezno; and in Poznań, at the so-called Musza Góra (in 1438 at the latest), Bartosz Born sold his



situations where a cemetery was located close to a synagogue. At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, new sanitary regulations precisely defined guidelines for new cemetery sites, e.g., north or east of the village (Austrian partition), 800 m from houses (Russian partition).<sup>65</sup>

#### PLACING A NEW LAYER OF EARTH

The specifically Jewish custom of covering cemeteries with a new layer of earth is confirmed mainly by various written sources. When there was a lack of space in the cemetery and it was not possible to buy or lease new land, it was decided to add a new layer of earth in which to place the graves.<sup>66</sup> This procedure was based on the principle that the dead should be separated from each other, three hands wide (*tefachim*).<sup>67</sup> This custom has become the subject of archaeological investigation, for example in the case of the Lublin cemetery.<sup>68</sup> In order to follow the principle of adequate separation of the dead, very deep burial pits were also dug, up to 2 m, which allowed two corpses to be buried above each other.<sup>69</sup>

#### ORIENTATION OF THE CORPSE WITH RESPECT TO THE CARDINAL DIRECTIONS

According to Jewish regulations, the deceased should be placed in a grave with the pit located on the W-E axis (head to the west, feet to the east), with the face facing east towards the Holy Land, which in the realities of the Polish lands meant rather a south-eastern direction.<sup>70</sup> In relation to modern cemeteries, a tool to determine whether the rule has been followed is the arrangement of gravestones, provided they are preserved and *in situ*. In their absence, and in relation to defunct medieval necropolises, archaeology has more to say on the subject: it is known that in Worms and Valencia the dead were laid in graves on the N-S axis, facing the synagogue.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>65</sup> In 1846 another law was given, *O grzebaniu ciał zmarłych* [On the Burial of the Bodies of the Dead].

<sup>66</sup> E.g., at Kraków, four layers of earth, Hońdo 2010, 59; Hońdo 2016, 237; Frankfurt am Main, Horovitz 1901, p. XIII; Warszawa, Okopowa, Bednarek 2020, 176; Mikulov, Pacov and Rabštejn n. S, Fiedler 1992, 34; Vitsyebk (Witebsk / וויטעבסק), Mahilev (Mohylew / מאָליעוו), and Rechitsa (Rzeczycza / רעטשיצע), Nosonovsky 2021, 960.

<sup>67</sup> In turn, the distance between gravestones should be no less than one ell, 54 to 73 cm, Rozmus 2015, 102, 104; Hońdo 2016, 237.

<sup>68</sup> In Lublin, a layer 1 m thick was created after the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. For about 50 years, new soil was brought in for this purpose, including from the scattered medieval rampart of the hillfort. The older matzevot were moved to a new level of the cemetery, which served until 1830, Trzeciński 2017, 60, 76.

<sup>69</sup> This took place, for example, in Kraków, Miodowa Street, Hońdo 2016, 239-240.

<sup>70</sup> Majewska n.d., 42.

<sup>71</sup> Jacobs 2008, 57.

The rule of laying the deceased face to the east was generally observed among Ashkenazi Jews in this part of Europe,<sup>72</sup> with some variations probably related to the time of year and the position of the sun. However, there are also clear exceptions to the rule, the origins of which are difficult to explain. At Lutomiersk, a large variation was found (S-N, E-W, NWW-SEE, NW-SE and W-E). In the northern part of the site there are two clusters of graves located on the N-S line: in one the heads of the dead face south, in the other north (Fig. 6).<sup>73</sup> Their peripheral location could be related to the rules of cemetery organisation, i.e., the allocation of separate plots to the side for those who 'deserved' it during their lifetime. Orientation of the deceased with their heads to the south or north has also been archaeologically documented during research in Lublin.<sup>74</sup> (Fig. 7)

#### SPACE DIVISION: MECHICA AND OTHERS

The main principle organising the space of the cemetery was to bury men and women separately. This aspect can be perfectly traced when analysing tombstone inscriptions. In their absence, another source is archaeological and anthropological research. Based on information from the studied modern necropolises, we can conclude that the rule was not always implemented consistently. In the absence of surviving funerary fraternity records<sup>75</sup> and gravestones, it is difficult to verify whether other rules excluding the burial of certain groups of people side by side – priests and Levites, or unmarried persons (maidens and bachelors) – were also followed.<sup>76</sup> Women who died in childbirth and martyrs<sup>77</sup> had a separate status among the dead, as well as the poor or the sick who died in hospital.<sup>78</sup> There was also a tendency to bury young children in specially designated areas.<sup>79</sup> Children born of informal unions, sinners, criminals, and victims of suicide were buried separately.<sup>80</sup> Some were buried under the cemetery fence or in a so-called 'field of shame'.<sup>81</sup> In some cemeteries, places were designated for people of distinguished social standing and

<sup>72</sup> Fijałkowski 2014, 83.

<sup>73</sup> Fijałkowski 2014, 71.

<sup>74</sup> Fijałkowski 2014, fig. 3 and 4.

<sup>75</sup> Memoirs are also a source of information about the division of space in the cemetery. We know from Glikl's diaries that the women who died on the steps of the synagogue in Metz in 1715 were buried side by side. One woman was pregnant, the other five women were postpartum, Glikl 2021, 334-335.

<sup>76</sup> Cf. Trzeciński 2017, 71.

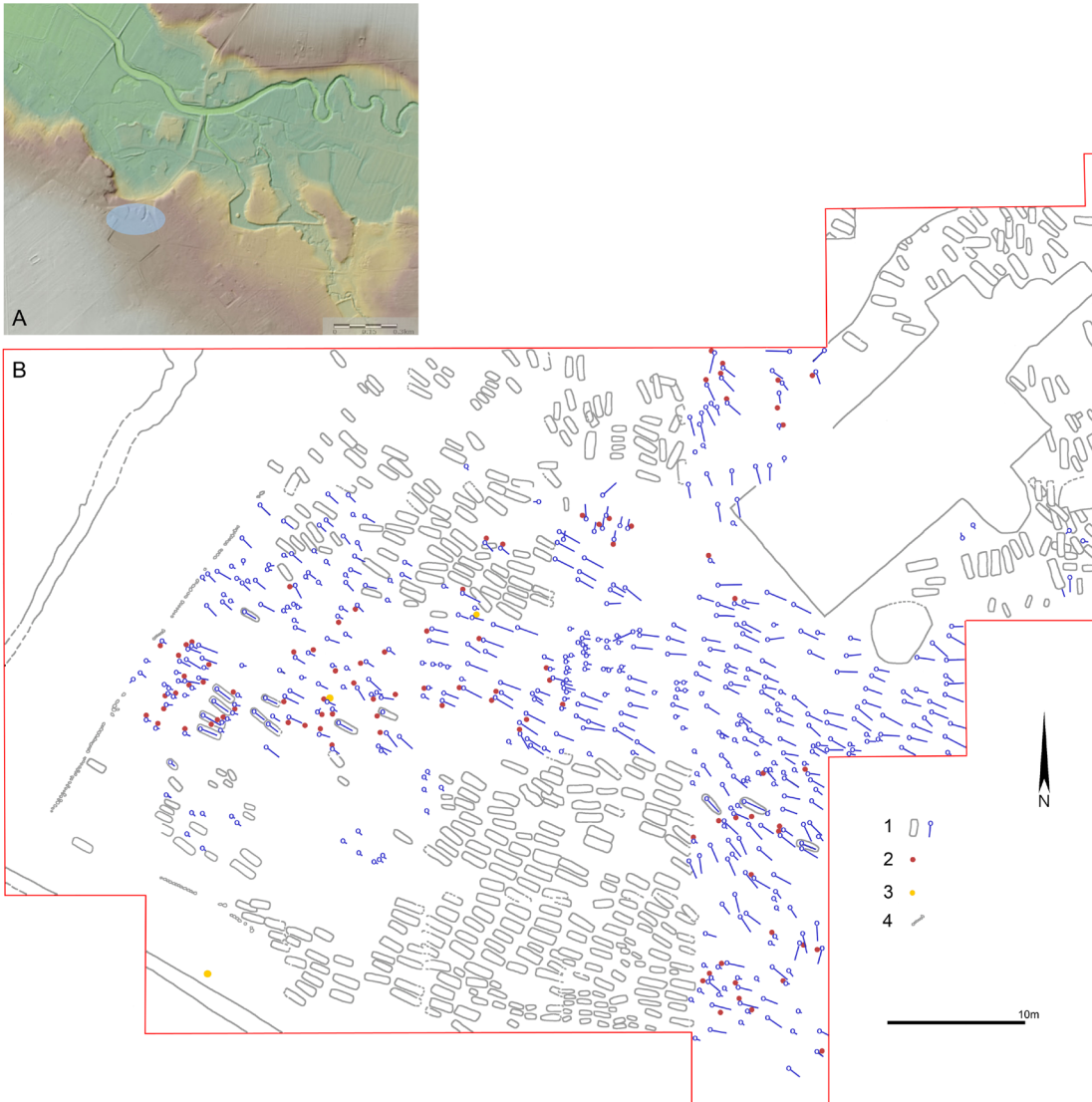
<sup>77</sup> Zaremska 2018, 484.

<sup>78</sup> Frankfurt, Jacobs 2008, 46; Hekdesh quarters in the Remuh cemetery in Kraków, Hońdo 2016, 236-237.

<sup>79</sup> E.g., Kinderberg in Frankfurt, Jacobs 2008, 46.

<sup>80</sup> Nosonovsky 2009, 243.

<sup>81</sup> Jacobs 2008, 46; Rechtman 2017, 135-136.

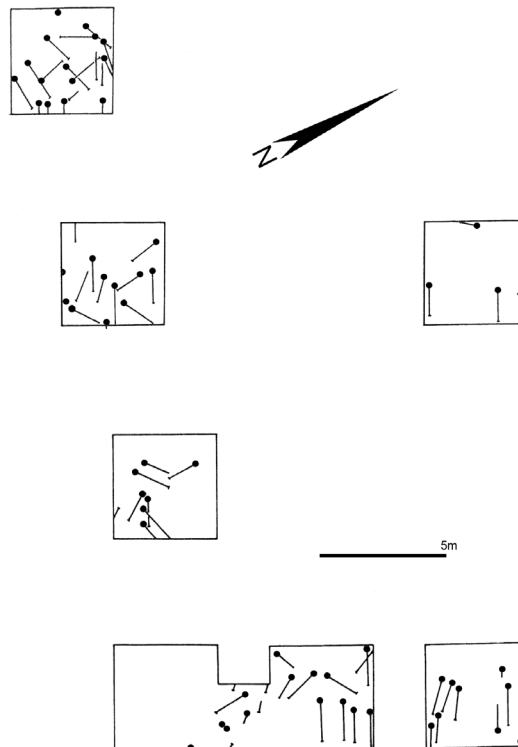


**Fig. 6.** Lutomiersk (PL): A – LIDAR visualisation with the cemetery site marked. Graphic design: K. Skóra; B – Plan of the modern cemetery in Lutomiersk: 1 – grave; 2 – padlock; 3 – coin; 4 – remnant of stone fence. Source: Fijałkowski 2014; graphic design: K. Skóra.

service to the local community.<sup>82</sup> This category is worthy of extensive source analysis, providing a point of reference in the perspective of archaeological studies on the organisation of burial space.

#### SINGLE AND COLLECTIVE BURIALS

The cardinal rule is to bury the dead singly and to keep an appropriate distance between those being buried close together. This distance was to be a hand width (*tefach*). It was permissible to bury children over the burial of an adult according to the principle ‘A minor who can sleep with him while he is alive can be buried with him after his death’, but this is only allowed if they are buried at the same time – if one of them has already been buried, it is forbidden to bury the other one together with him.<sup>83</sup> However, ethnographic accounts from the 19<sup>th</sup> century suggest that burying a child who

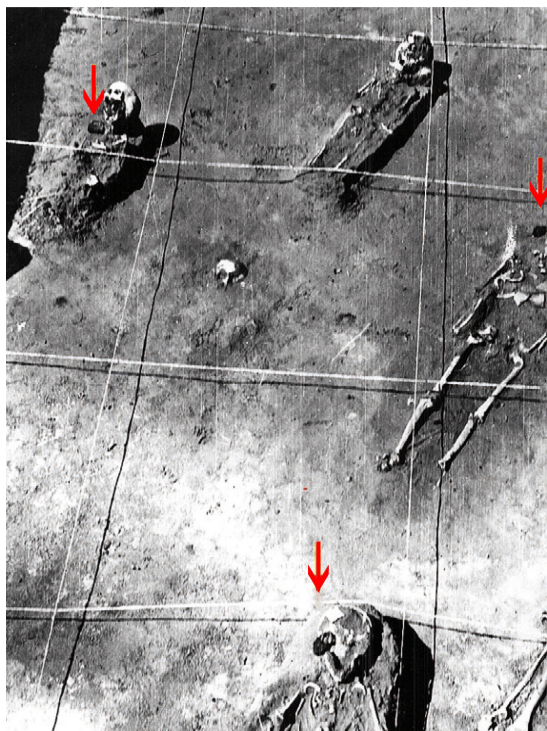


**Fig. 7.** Lublin (PL). Jewish cemetery. Fragment discovered during excavations in 1974. Phase II graves (less than 90 cm). Position of the dead in relation to the cardinal directions. Source: Fijałkowski 2014.

<sup>82</sup> About quarters for rabbis, men of the kohen family, Kaiser 2009, 205; Trzciński 2017, 70; Majewska n.d., 45.

<sup>83</sup> *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch*, §199.

**Fig. 8.** Wyszogród (PL). Part of the cemetery discovered during archaeological excavations. Visible wooden structures and marked location of padlocks. Source: Piotrowski 2017.



died over his grandmother's grave would prevent further deaths of children in the family.<sup>84</sup>

Archaeological research in Prostějov has shown that newborn babies were buried with their mothers.<sup>85</sup> In the modern cemetery of Lutomiensk, cases of joint burial of a child with an adult are rare (Fig. 6). On the other hand, from the medieval cemetery in Prague, there is so far an isolated case of a collective burial of several people (bones of several people, including animal bones, showing traces of fire). This unusual circumstance was caused by the fire in which they died.<sup>86</sup>

#### LAYOUT OF REMAINS

The predominant position found during archaeological investigations is that of the corpse on its back, with the hands along the body. Sometimes the upper limbs are bent, in which case the hands are on the pelvis. Deviations from the rule were rarely found. In Lutomiensk, only in one of about 1,200 graves was the deceased laid in a sideways, contracted position. The arrangement of the corpse was largely determined by its placement in the shroud. In Brześć Kujawski, the skulls were about 10 cm higher than the rest of the skeleton.<sup>87</sup> It is assumed that the heads of the deceased were placed on some kind of cushion.<sup>88</sup> A similar practice was found during the archaeological investigations

of Lutomiensk.<sup>89</sup> There are cases of non-anatomical arrangement of the skeleton in the grave, but it is difficult to assess whether this situation is not the result of postdepositional factors.<sup>90</sup>

#### BURIAL PIT ARRANGEMENT: PLANK SURROUNDS OR COFFINS?

For many centuries, the bodies of the people of eastern Ashkenaz were deposited directly into the ground, in a shroud. This custom, according to some researchers, was said to have originated under the influence of the Kabbalah.<sup>91</sup> Direct contact between the body and the ground was recommended, so as not to block the successful decomposition of the corpse. However, despite this, the body was also secured with three boards, two side boards and one top board. This was to prevent dirt falling on the deceased, 'which would have been a disgrace to him'.<sup>92</sup> While this did not hinder the decomposition of the corpse, from the perspective of the Kabbalistic concept of 'gilgul mehilot', which presupposes the rolling of the corpse underground to the Holy Land (the future site of the resurrection), the planks would have been an obstacle. Remnants of this type of wooden side and upper enclosure are found archaeologically (e.g., Brześć Kujawski, Dobrzyń nad Wisłą). Nails are revealed (e.g., Lublin, Wyszogród), which may have been used to keep the wooden structure stable during the backfilling of the burial pit (Fig. 8).

In some communities, it was accepted to make coffins of persons of special significance, i.e., first-born men and for *kohanim*.<sup>93</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the introduction of new sanitary regulations, attempts were made to introduce them also for funeral activities. In Galicia, the Jewish population was advised to use a coffin for transporting the body and for burial. The effectiveness of these regulations varied. Bodies were still carried to the cemetery on open bier, a plank, or a ladder.<sup>94</sup> The rabbis allowed temporary burials in coffins in times of plague.<sup>95</sup> Coffins tended to become more common in the progressive community in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. These two centuries were a time of numerous epidemics, but also of medical developments that contributed to

<sup>89</sup> Borowska-Strugińska 2005, 236.

<sup>90</sup> Praha, Bartolomějská Street, individual from grave 12a, sometimes identified as having been massacred, Borkovský 1948, 471-472, fig. 8; Dragoun 2002, 239.

<sup>91</sup> Hońdo 2016, 235.

<sup>92</sup> *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch*, §199, 1.

<sup>93</sup> *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch*, §199, 1.

<sup>94</sup> Hońdo 2010, 55-57; Hońdo 2016, 238; Bednarek 2020, 178-179.

<sup>95</sup> An example from the 1915 cholera epidemic in Kalush (Ukraine), *Kalush Memorial Book*.

<sup>84</sup> Biegeleisen 1930, 109.

<sup>85</sup> Holašova 2019.

<sup>86</sup> Wallisová 2011, 277.

<sup>87</sup> Borowska-Strugińska 2005, 236.

<sup>88</sup> Pisarkiewicz 1999; Borowska-Strugińska 2005.





**Fig. 9.** Jewish funeral. Stencil woodcut according to a drawing by Wojciech Grabowski. Engraved by Jan Krajewski, 'Kłosy' 1878.

the understanding of the aetiology of diseases. The presence of lime in the grave pits at the Brześć Kujawski cemetery may be linked to this fact.<sup>96</sup> In this particular case, its use has been linked to a cholera epidemic. However, this has not been confirmed by dating the graves, which would make it possible to link them to subsequent waves of cholera sweeping through Europe from 1830 onwards.

#### FUNERARY GARMENTS: THE SHROUD

There is little information about the funerary dress of Ashkenazi Jews in central Europe obtained archaeologically. We know that the deceased should not be distinguished in any way by symbols of their social status.<sup>97</sup> (Fig. 9) The garment was to be the same for all the deceased: modest, without decoration, made of white linen, sewn without knots, with large stitches (*tachrichim*): a tunic, pants, hood, and belt. Since cutting with scissors was forbidden, the linen was torn for this purpose; the threads were not broken but burned over a candle.<sup>98</sup> Clothing was not allowed to have pockets, as these symbolised wealth. Their absence meant that good deeds were more important.<sup>99</sup> Clothes were not allowed to become torn or stained, and to this end a towel was used to protect the mouth, which was then placed in the tomb.<sup>100</sup> The custom of dressing the dead in *tallit* and *tefillin* made them ready for prayer.<sup>101</sup> Men were buried with the *tallit* they wore in the synagogue, but with the fringes (*tzitzit*) removed. The remains of what was likely a *tallit* have been discovered in the graves of two men in Brześć

Kujawski (the remains of a decorative ribbon and a cloth with bronze threads near the skull).<sup>102</sup> In modern cemeteries, hooks (probably for fastening shrouds) are discovered, less frequently small metal parts of the garment, e.g., buckles (Prostějov,<sup>103</sup> Slavkov u Brna,<sup>104</sup> Prague, The Jewish Garden).<sup>105</sup>

In Lublin (Kalinowszczyzna), the remnants of a cloth containing copper pins and seven coins from the 11<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries were found next to the skull of a 70-year-old woman.<sup>106</sup> If the coins had adorned the head, this would not only be a breach of the rules of funerary dress, but also of the 18<sup>th</sup> century guidelines for the dress of women in this part of the Jewish diaspora.<sup>107</sup> In the Sephardic circle, however, the rules were more liberal in this respect.

It is uncertain whether the remains of headgear from Prague (Bartolomějska Street, 10<sup>th</sup> century) are part of medieval Jewish dress, due to the uncertainty of the ethnic identity of those buried there.<sup>108</sup>

#### GRAVE GOODS

The idea of equality in the face of death was also manifested in not placing grave goods or other items expressing social status in the grave.<sup>109</sup> However, despite this, various categories of items have been revealed during archaeological investigations.

#### COINS

Coins have been discovered in several cemeteries. Apart from the above-mentioned Lublin

<sup>96</sup> According to B. Borowska-Strugińska (2005, 236), lime was found in 10% of the graves.

<sup>97</sup> Blanchard and Georges 2010, 52.

<sup>98</sup> Goldberg-Mulkiewicz 1986, 104; Pakentreger 1987, 41.

<sup>99</sup> Hońdo 2011, 18.

<sup>100</sup> Hońdo 2011, 19.

<sup>101</sup> Fijałkowski 1989, 33.

<sup>102</sup> Pisarkiewicz 1999, 46.

<sup>103</sup> Holašova 2019.

<sup>104</sup> Mikulková 2011.

<sup>105</sup> Wallisová 2009.

<sup>106</sup> Modrzewska 1955.

<sup>107</sup> Aust 2019, 11.

<sup>108</sup> Borkovský 1948; Dragoun 2002.

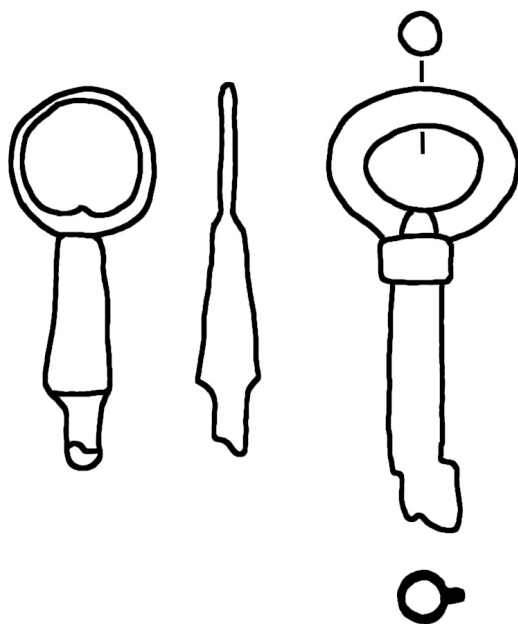
<sup>109</sup> Ehl et al. 1991, 6.



**Fig. 10.** Kazimierz Dolny (PL), Jewish cemetery. Contemporary coins deposited on graves and tombstones. Photo: K. Skóra.



**Fig. 11.** Lutomiersk (PL). Keys as part of grave goods. Source: Fijałkowski 2014.



burial, they have been found in Lutomiersk, Brześć Kujawski (three graves of women and one of a child),<sup>110</sup> and Dobrzyń nad Wisłą, among others. These coins are mainly from the 16<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Most often they occur in the graves of women and children. For this reason, they can be considered as ornaments and amulets, especially the old coins. It is known from ethnographic accounts that old coins were put into children's pillows (when they were 18 months old) as a protection

<sup>110</sup> Borowska-Strugińska 2005, 235.

against charms. Their accidental presence, lost by mourners, must also be considered, but hiding them in a shroud so that the deceased could show charity (*cedaka*) is also conceivable. The presence of coins in cemeteries can have many causes. They are now deposited by visitors to necropolises (at, for example, Joseph Kafka's grave in Prague; graves of *tzaddikim*; the matzevot in the cemetery in Kazimierz Dolny)<sup>111</sup> (Fig. 10). Among the customs also mentioned is the distraction of demons by 'throwing coins in various directions next to the deceased'.<sup>112</sup>

#### KEYS

Keys in Central European cemeteries are rarely recorded. Two keys were found in Lutomiersk (Fig. 11). We have no data on the age and sex of the deceased. A key was also found in Brześć Kujawski in the grave of a 12-month-old child.<sup>113</sup>

The presence of a key in the grave can be explained as a symbolic closure of the period of misfortune that death brought to the family.<sup>114</sup> It is confirmed to have been used as a means of curing

<sup>111</sup> In Polonne (Khmelnyskiy Oblast, Ukraine), every *Rosh Chodesh erev*, a wealthy Jew would wrap coins around the place designated for his own grave next to the two great *tzaddikim* and also distribute them to the poor, Rechtman 2017, 103-104.

<sup>112</sup> Mochalova 2002, 106.

<sup>113</sup> Pisarkiewicz 1999.

<sup>114</sup> Nordmann 1906, 18.

children of various ailments.<sup>115</sup> Keys are known to have been placed in the graves of those who died childless.<sup>116</sup> Keys, like padlocks, are symbols of closure, which were used by the community to stop the tide of deaths during the plague. Placing a large key in the grave of the first person to die of the plague (Horodenka, Ukraine) to 'lock' it behind them is ethnographically attested.<sup>117</sup> Hanging a locked padlock on the door and 'casting away' the key was supposed to protect against the plague.<sup>118</sup> During a cholera epidemic in Łódź in 1894, Rabbi Eliahu Chaim Majzel arrived at the cemetery, saw the dead lying in rows, locked the cemetery gate, stood facing it with the key and shouted: *Enough, I will not let anyone in anymore!*, and the plague stopped.<sup>119</sup>

### KNIVES

Knives have been discovered relatively often during archaeological excavations. One such tool was discovered in grave H38 in Prostějov, in which a woman was buried with a pair of newborn babies.<sup>120</sup> The sex of the babies is not known, so it is difficult to decide whether this was a tool used for circumcision. Another hypothesis is that it was used to cut the umbilical cord. Placing it in the grave would allude to the custom known from Christian cemeteries of placing scissors in the grave of midwives.<sup>121</sup> It is more convincing to consider the presence of a knife in the grave in question in relation to folkloric sources, which report the laying of a cleaver or knife to the bed of the midwife, which is supposed to protect her and the child from 'sheedim' and 'nishtgite', or evil spirits.<sup>122</sup>

Two knives were discovered in a cemetery in Brześć Kujawski, found in the hands of two men (30–40 and 40–50 years old) buried side by side. It is presumed that during their lifetime they had a role associated with ritual slaughter.<sup>123</sup> However, the small knife from the grave of a man from Basel, on the other hand, would be indicative of a *mohel's* profession.<sup>124</sup> A symbolic manifestation of the deceased's profession would have conflicted with the generally applicable rules, but special events in the lifetime of the deceased could have led to their violation. Symbols of profession are just as sporadically

reflected on tombstones (matzeva with a lancet, Yaa-kov Tzvi Witelson, 1924, Warsaw).<sup>125</sup> (Fig. 12)

### CATTLE TEETH

In the modern cemetery in Węgrów, cattle teeth were discovered in grave 31 near the skull of a man.<sup>126</sup> It is presumed that this grave furnishing not found anywhere else may indicate that the deceased was a person engaged in the ritual slaughter of animals, a *shochet*.<sup>127</sup> Their size and position in the grave raises the supposition that they may have been used to obscure the eyes of the deceased. Animal teeth are found extremely rarely in Jewish graves. Goat/sheep teeth were found in several graves in a Jewish cemetery in Seville, Spain. The incisors of these animals were found in various places next to the coffin.<sup>128</sup>

### HORSESHOES

In a cemetery in Prague on Bartolomějska Street (the Jewish origins of which are not entirely certain) two horseshoes were found next to the head of the deceased in a grave (no. 9) dating to the 10<sup>th</sup> century. It is presumed that they were nailed to the underside of the coffin.<sup>129</sup> This finding in a grave context is also very rare in medieval non-Jewish cemeteries,<sup>130</sup> for which reason the meaning of this custom is not fully understood. Proposed interpretations derived from ethnographic sources have a much younger metric.<sup>131</sup> It is difficult to determine when the beliefs or superstitions associated with this accessory became popular, particularly the belief that they were talismans guaranteeing good fortune to the finder. One interpretation is that the horseshoe was to become an emblem of good fortune because of its shape, alluding to the points of the arch into which blood was sprinkled on the doorframes and lintels of houses during the Jewish Passover.<sup>132</sup> In Jewish mystical tradition, the horseshoe hanging down resembles the Hebrew letter 'tav', ט, which represents the qualities of faith and fidelity.<sup>133</sup> Due to their iron raw material (protective role), their attachment to a wooden structure (the tomb as an imitation of a house), and their arched, closing shape, a function of protecting the deceased from

<sup>115</sup> Lew 2021, 165.

<sup>116</sup> Fijałkowski 1989, 37; Fijałkowski 2003, 365.

<sup>117</sup> Tuszewicki 2015, 468.

<sup>118</sup> Segel 1897, 54.

<sup>119</sup> Dekiert n.d., 29; Krul 1954, 91.

<sup>120</sup> Holašova 2019.

<sup>121</sup> Unger 2002, 47.

<sup>122</sup> Lew 2021, 159.

<sup>123</sup> Borowska-Strugińska 2005, 235-236.

<sup>124</sup> Alder and Matt 2010, 33.

<sup>125</sup> Krajewska 2000, 44-45.

<sup>126</sup> Bis and Więckowski 2017, 111, fig. 6.

<sup>127</sup> Bis and Więckowski 2017, 114.

<sup>128</sup> Santa Falcon and Mantero Tocino 1995, 101.

<sup>129</sup> Borkovský 1948, 468, fig. 6; Sláma 1977, 125, fig. 30: 12-13; Dragoun 2002, 238.

<sup>130</sup> Kurasiński 2011; Andrajoć 2015.

<sup>131</sup> On this subject, see: Kurasiński 2011.

<sup>132</sup> Lawrence 1896, 288.

<sup>133</sup> Raskin, n.d.



**Fig. 12.** A *mohel* tombstone. Grave of Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Witelson, Warsaw Cemetery, 1924. Source: Krajewska 2000.



demons or separating the world of the living from the dead is proposed.<sup>134</sup>

At this point, it must be added that horseshoe nails have been found in graves in medieval Jewish cemeteries at Châteauroux (France)<sup>135</sup> and at Winchester (UK).<sup>136</sup> However, it is difficult to determine whether these are deliberate inclusions and, if so, whether they are associated with the same practice as horseshoes. At Winchester (Mews Lane) nails occurred in 8 graves: in 7 singly, and in one grave several. Researchers assume that these nails were deliberate inclusions and had some kind of potency as amulets to protect against evil spirits.<sup>137</sup>

#### **WHOLE VESSELS**

The custom of equipping the dead with vessels, widespread among the Christian population in the early Middle Ages, practically disappeared in the 13<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>138</sup> It only occasionally appeared in the following centuries, up to and including the modern era. In Jewish cemeteries, on the other hand, it is extremely rare – only a few cases of depositing a pot in a grave occur in modern Jewish cemeteries of this part of Ashkenaz. In Vilnius, a pot turned

upside down was found near the limbs of a teenager.<sup>139</sup> The custom of placing an upside-down pot on the grave of the first victim of an epidemic is ethnographically certified.<sup>140</sup>

In Brześć Kujawski, clay pots, bowls, and jugs were found in the graves of men and children. They were placed by the lower limbs of the deceased. It is assumed that in this way their descent from the lineage of the Levites was emphasised.<sup>141</sup> According to ethnographic accounts, it was a practice in the Jewish community to place vessels in the graves of midwives so that they could wash the baby.<sup>142</sup> This had to do with the odium of uncleanness suffered by a woman who died in childbirth.

#### **FRAGMENTS OF VESSELS**

The most common element of Ashkenazi funerary rituals found during archaeological investigations are vessel fragments, used to cover the eyes but also the mouth of the deceased.<sup>143</sup> The origin of this custom dates back to the Middle Ages. Its persistence was remarkable, for it only began to disappear in the 1920s–1930s, as confirmed by the

<sup>134</sup> Kurasiński 2011, 595.

<sup>135</sup> Cf. Blanchard et al. 2022, 217.

<sup>136</sup> Qualmann 2018, 226, 232, 233, 235, Table 5.

<sup>137</sup> Qualmann 2018, 233.

<sup>138</sup> Kurasiński 2018.

<sup>139</sup> Żukovski 1998; Żukovski 2000. On the history of the cemetery, Meilus 2007.

<sup>140</sup> Chajes 1928, 323; Tuszewicki 2015, 468.

<sup>141</sup> Pisarkiewicz 1999, 38.

<sup>142</sup> Tuszewicki 2015, 469.

<sup>143</sup> E.g., Jacobs 2008, 89.

accounts of eyewitnesses (Jews and their Christian neighbours) from various regions of eastern Ashkenaz.<sup>144</sup> At that time, it was still practiced in small towns.

In Central Europe, local variations in this practice regarding material are also noticeable. In Prague, stone slate was used for this purpose.<sup>145</sup> In Brześć Kujawski, obscuring the eyes with brick fragments is recorded.<sup>146</sup> It may have been thought that it was important for the material to be durable and non-transparent.

Usually, the fragments of broken vessels were only given a size suitable to obscure the eyes or mouth. Traces of more precise shaping are also revealed: they were given a quadrangular or possibly oval shape. It is presumed that the fragments may come from vessels that were used during the preparation of the deceased for burial, such as ablution. Being unclean, such vessels could not remain in the world of the living. They were destroyed in the cemetery, which would be confirmed by oral accounts of witnesses obtained in central Poland.<sup>147</sup> However, according to other accounts, they were 'new plates'.<sup>148</sup> No connection is drawn between this custom and any group as defined in terms of gender or age. Much has been written on the origins of the custom.<sup>149</sup> The meaning of the ritual is considered on several levels: both protection of the dead, and the protection of the living by the dead.<sup>150</sup> It is difficult to assess whether it was related to the belief in charms, the evil eye. It is assumed that the deceased had to be protected from the persistence of worldly desires<sup>151</sup> and from looking into the face of God on the day of resurrection. According to interviews, covering the eyes was supposed to help get rid of fear.<sup>152</sup> The living had to be protected from the sight of the dead ('The nether-world and Destruction are never satiated; So the eyes of man are never satiated', Tanakh 27, 20).<sup>153</sup> This is a belief that Jews share with followers of other

religions. Adam Fischer, in *Zwyczajne pogrzebowe ludu polskiego* ('Funeral Customs of the Polish People'), wrote: 'Finally, the Jewish people believe that a dead man who is sorry to leave the world has his eyes open. Having apologised to him, they should be closed so that no one from the household sees him. In the same way, his mouth is closed. Polish Jews place clay shards of dishes over the dead man's eyes and mouth, and give him a wooden fork in his hand to lean on and stand on when the Messiah comes. Among the Jews of Bukovina, fragments of pots are placed on the eyes of the deceased at the time of death, allegedly as a kind of punishment for having seen and desired much while living in the world. Also, such a pot is placed on the mouth of the deceased for the fact that this mouth pronounced much evil and impurity.'<sup>154</sup>

#### **PADLOCKS – A SPECIFIC CUSTOM OF EASTERN ASHKENAZI FUNERARY RITUALS?**

The custom of covering the mouth and eyes has been accompanied for centuries in this part of Europe by the custom of placing a padlock in the grave. It is difficult to assess the exact dating of its origins. The medieval cemeteries examined archaeologically from this period come only from Bohemia, where this custom was not yet present. Based on finds from Poland, it can be assumed that the idea of placing padlocks in the grave was probably initiated at the turn of the Middle Ages. However, this thesis would require verification. In the Middle Ages, the custom of placing padlocks in graves was practised in Christian cemeteries, including church cemeteries. On the other hand, some of the oldest Jewish padlocks from archaeological research probably date from the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>155</sup> The custom certainly flourished in the modern period. Some obstacles to tracing the chronological evolution of this aspect of funerary ritual, however, are the lack of other dating elements in graves, the non-use of absolute dating methods, and the fact that padlocks are chronologically insensitive objects – their forms tended to have little variation over time. Padlocks from Jewish cemeteries

<sup>144</sup> Fijałkowski 2003, 364; Fijałkowski 2014, 89; Wasilewska-Klamka 2012, 98; Narrative by Miron (Mordechai) Morduchowicz from Zoludki, Belarus. <https://shtetlroutes.eu/pl/zoludek-karta-dziedzictwa-kulturowego/>; Story by Tzvi Orenstein, an inhabitant of Wielkie Oczy (PL): <https://shtetlroutes.eu/pl/opowiesc-cwi-orensteina/>.

<sup>145</sup> Wallisová 2002; Wallisová 2009; Cymbalak and Staňková 2014, 96

<sup>146</sup> Pisarkiewicz 1999.

<sup>147</sup> Fijałkowski 2014, 88-89.

<sup>148</sup> Report by Vera Yakovlevna Cupa, Stolin, Belarus. <https://shtetlroutes.eu/pl/stolin-karta-dziedzictwa-kulturowego/>.

<sup>149</sup> E.g., Pisarkiewicz 1999, 35-38; Fijałkowski 2003, 363-364; Fijałkowski 2014, 87-89.

<sup>150</sup> Lew 2021, 141.

<sup>151</sup> Pisarkiewicz 1999, 37; *Tamid*, 32.

<sup>152</sup> Kolatch 1993, 45; Pisarkiewicz 1999, 36.

<sup>153</sup> Pisarkiewicz 1999, 37.

<sup>154</sup> Fischer 1921, 125-126: *Wreszcie lud żydowski wierzy, że nieboszczyk, któremu żal odejść ze świata, ma oczy otwarte. Przeprosiwszy go, należy je przymknąć, aby kogoś z domowników nie wypatrzył. Tak samo przyymyka mu się usta. Polscy Żydzi kładą umarłemu na oczach i ustach gliniane skorupki, a w rękę dają mu drewniane widelki, na których oprze się i w stanie, gdy Mesjasz przyjdzie. U Żydów bukowińskich kładzie się zmarłemu w chwili śmierci na oczy czerepy garnka rzekomo jako rodzaj kary za to, że żyjąc na świecie wiele widział i pragnął. Także na ustach zmarłego kładzie się takież czerep za to, że usta te wiele wymawiały złego i nieczystego.*

<sup>155</sup> E.g., dated with ceramic material, Wyszogród, Piotrowski 1987.



are generally of a simple form without decoration, which is an obstacle to a more accurate chronological attribution. Because of their economic purpose, they were a mass product (for locking the doors of outbuildings, warehouses), only being elaborated by locksmiths in a more exquisite manner (e.g., for locking boxes in town halls, guild chests, archives) in the case of orders related to another, representative function.<sup>156</sup> In general, padlocks rarely bear the characteristics of the style of the period in which they were made. Padlock types from the 15<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries were still being created by village locksmiths and smiths in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>157</sup> In Central Europe, padlocks with a rectangular shape appeared in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. This was also when the key guide appeared on the outside of the lock. The rhombus shape, common in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, finally disappeared in the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when padlocks with a cylindrical shape appeared. The second main group of locks from the 15<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> centuries are triangular specimens. The mechanism of their construction hardly differs from that of rectangular padlocks.<sup>158</sup>

Regardless of the problem of establishing its origins, what needs to be emphasised is the remarkable durability of this tradition. It was still cherished by the Jewish inhabitants of villages and small towns until the Second World War, as confirmed by accounts from, among others, the Kalush Memorial Book (1915, Ukraine)<sup>159</sup> and Minsk (1941, Belarus).<sup>160</sup> According to witness accounts, the padlock that went on the top board was locked by the rabbi, who took the key with him.<sup>161</sup> According to the account of a resident of Szadek (Central Poland) before 1939, the laying of the dead in the grave proceeded as follows: 'When they let him into the grave afterwards, but it wasn't a coffin, but they had already brought four planks with a cart and in this grave they laid one plank on the bottom and on this plank they laid him, and then on the sides again two, and on top of that they laid the fourth. On top of this board they put some kind of shells like from plates or some glass. The Poles explained that they put these shells over his eyes, that he wouldn't look at the world anymore. And then, when they covered him with that fourth board, they threw

a padlock over the board. It was a sign that his life had already closed.'<sup>162</sup>

Archaeological evidence suggests that padlocks were placed in the graves of the dead of both sexes, adults and children. In the case of the latter, there is a tendency to equip the deceased with small ones up to 1-2 cm high. Padlocks are recorded in various places in the grave pit, but they are more likely to be near the top of the skeleton. An effort was probably made to deposit them in the head area. If they did indeed end up on the board covering the deceased, the location recorded during archaeological investigations may vary (the need also to distinguish whether they were carefully placed or rather thrown in). It seems that some of the padlocks are dummies, without a locking mechanism inside, but this may simply be the result of destruction while lying in the ground.

The largest collections of padlocks come from the cemeteries of Lutomiersk (Fig. 13) and Brześć Kujawski, as these necropolises have been examined almost in their entirety. In the case of the former, about 25% of the population was equipped with padlocks, and this percentage is similar in the latter case (about 20%).<sup>163</sup>

Based mainly on archaeological findings, and to a lesser extent on oral accounts, it can be assumed that the custom in the west extends to Mecklenburg (Buckow, here the migration of the Jewish population from the east is considered),<sup>164</sup> and in the east Lithuania (determined by archaeological research),<sup>165</sup> Belarus, and Ukraine (based on written records mentioning the custom of putting a padlock in the grave). The southern border is marked by Slavkov u Brna and Prostějov (Czechia),<sup>166</sup> and to the north by Greater Poland and Kujawy. There are no finds from Pomerania (with the exception of Cedynia) or Prussia (Fig. 14).

The interpretation of this custom has been commented on many times, with references to explanations originating in religious and kabbalistic texts and ethnographic documentation.<sup>167</sup> In the folk

<sup>156</sup> Haisig 1962.

<sup>157</sup> Król 1974, 18-19.

<sup>158</sup> Temesváry 1961.

<sup>159</sup> *Kalush Memorial Book*, 78; *Minsk Memory Book*, 372;

<sup>160</sup> כשנכנסנו למחרת בבוקר לדירת הדוד, נתגלה לעינינו מחזה-וועה שאין בכוחי לתאר. הבאנו את הגופות לקבורה בבית-העלמין, רבנית אחת הניחה מנעול על הקבר, נעלה אותו, ונטלה את המפתח אליה -- לאות שהמוות לא ישתולל עוד בתוכנו. לא הספקנו לקבור את החללים וכבר פתחו עלינו הגרמנים והשוטרים הרוסים ביריות. טענו כלפי הרבנית: מה את סחה לנו מעשיות על אלוהים ועזרת השם! להד"ם! דמנו הפקר

<sup>161</sup> Cf. Fijałkowski 2014, 89-90.

<sup>162</sup> Interview 12 – Wasilewska-Klamka 2012, 98: *Jak go potem wpuścili do grobu, ale nie była to trumna, tylko oni przywieźli już wózkem cztery deski i w tym grobie ułożyli jedną deskę na spód i na tej desce położyli go, no i potem na bokach znów dwie, a na wierzch czwartą kładli. Na tę plachetkę kładli takie skorupki jakby z talerzy, czy jakieś szkło. Polacy to tłumaczyli, że oni mu kładli na oczy te skorupki, że on już na ten świat nie będzie patrzył. No i potem, jak tą czwartą deską nakryli go, to na deskę rzucili kłódkę. To na znak, że jego życie już się zamknęło.*

<sup>163</sup> Pisarkiewicz 1999, 41.

<sup>164</sup> Krügel and Kirsch 2007.

<sup>165</sup> Žukovski 1998; Žukovski 2000.

<sup>166</sup> Čižmář 1999; Mikulková 2011; Holasová 2019.

<sup>167</sup> Cf. Skrok 1991; Piotrowski 1987; Fijałkowski 1989; Fijałkowski 2014; Skóra 2016.





**Fig. 13.** Lutomiersk (PL). Selected padlocks from graves. Photo: J. Słomska-Bolonek.

imagination relating to eschatological images, which remained outside the official scientific and religious mainstream, there was a very strongly developed opposition between open and closed, ordering the relations between the world of the mortal and the world of the dead. The different spheres of the afterlife were supposed to be separated by gates and doors which were locked. The padlock that went into the tomb confirmed the delimitation of the area of life and death. It guaranteed the deceased uninterrupted peace until the resurrection and blocked contact between the two worlds, also acting as an obstacle to demonic entities. Evil spirits accompanied the deceased from the moment of death until the funeral.<sup>168</sup> The soul of the deceased was also seen as dangerous, especially that of a person who died an unnatural death.<sup>169</sup> Philip Bibel described life in the *shtetl* as a primitive existence, with virtually no contact with the outside world, in which knowledge of the world was a mixture of folk beliefs, superstition, gossip, and quotes from the Talmud and Torah. ‘Knowledge’, therefore, was made up of facts and messages from old times,

with magic and mysteries.<sup>170</sup> In this space there was plenty of room for borderline entities. In such a setting, the original meaning given to the custom of laying padlocks a few centuries earlier could take on many different meanings in different areas of Ashkenaz.

The symbol of enclosure and the raw material from which the padlocks were made are two important reference points in the interpretations undertaken. The use of metal (iron or copper) had an anti-demonic significance, for they were ‘products of civilisation’ abhorred by demons.<sup>171</sup> In many cultures the grave is seen as a doorway to another world, an opening in the earth,<sup>172</sup> which has the rank of a judging authority, dispensing justice,<sup>173</sup> and earth from the grave has the ability to cure ailments.

Images of doors and padlocks on gravestones – which are shaped like gates and wickets – confirm this perception. The vicinity of graves was

<sup>170</sup> Bibel 2021, 101.

<sup>171</sup> Dekiert n.d., 26.

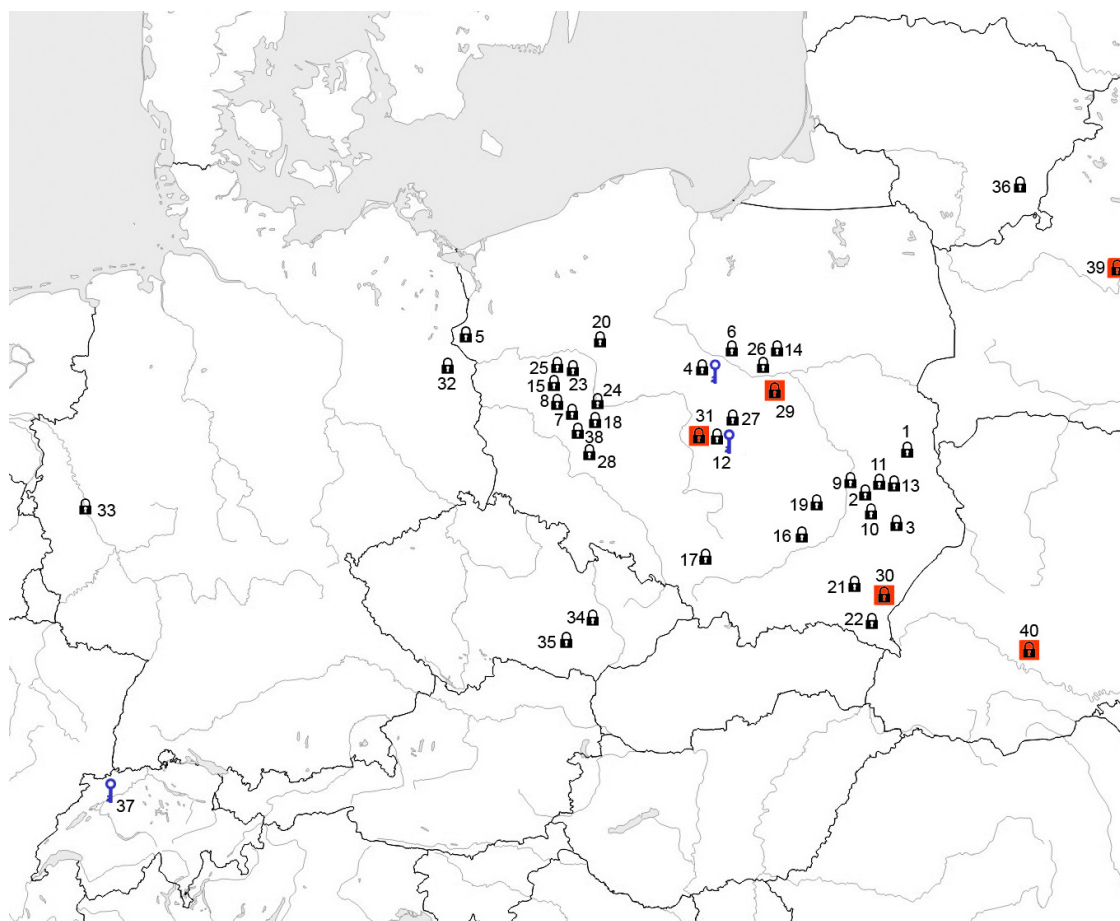
<sup>172</sup> During the epidemic in Krzemieniec in 1866, the laying to rest of the dead rabbi, a righteous man, was supposed to restore the disturbed order of things and end the plague. The rabbi, dying, uttered an ‘incantation’: ‘Do not weep children, the earth will close behind me now.’ This is certainly more of a Hasidic legend than a historical source, Kotik 2018, 296.

<sup>173</sup> Earth, as a rational being, decides whom it may not accept after death, e.g. converts, Biegeleisen 1929, 333.

<sup>168</sup> Kotik 2018, 61; Mochalova 2002, 105.

<sup>169</sup> According to folklorist Henry Lew, the theory of wandering souls (*gilgul*), entering living bodies (*dybbuk*) originated in the late Middle Ages, Lew 2021, 147.

**Fig. 14.** Distribution of padlocks and keys in Jewish cemeteries in the light of archaeological discoveries and accidental finds (black), and custom evidenced by oral relations and memorial books (red).  
 1 – Biała Podlaska;  
 2 – Bełżyce; 3 – Biłgoraj;  
 4 – Brześć Kujawski;  
 5 – Cedynia; 6 – Dobrzyń nad Wisłą; 7 – Górsko (?);  
 8 – Grodzisk Wielkopolski;  
 9 – Kazimierz Dolny;  
 10 – Kraśnik; 11 – Lublin;  
 12 – Lutomiersk;  
 13 – Piaski (?);  
 14 – Płońsk; 15 – Pniewy;  
 16 – Połaniec=Winnica (?);  
 17 – Olkusz;  
 18 – Osieczna;  
 19 – Ostrowiec Świętokrzyski;  
 20 – Rogoźno;  
 21 – Rzeszów; 22 – Sanok;  
 23 – Szamotuły (?);  
 24 – Śrem; 25 – Wronki;  
 26 – Wyszogród;  
 27 – Zgierz; 28 – Rawicz;  
 29 – Sochaczew;  
 30 – Przemyśl;  
 31 – Szadek; 32 – Buckow;  
 33 – Köln; 34 – Prostějov;  
 35 – Slavkov u Brna;  
 36 – Vilnius; 37 – Basel;  
 38 – Leszno; 39 – Minsk;  
 40 – Kalush.  
 Graphic design: K. Skóra.



a place where prayers were likely to be fulfilled, especially those for healing.<sup>174</sup> The grave (or, more correctly, the noble and pious person buried in it) was able to ‘work miracles’.<sup>175</sup> Disease and the deaths caused by the disease were not thought to be the result of poor sanitation or lack of hygiene – rather, they came from God<sup>176</sup> or could be caused by evil powers or persons. The measles epidemic in Krzemieniec, which took many children, was considered to have been brought on by a preacher (*chazan*).<sup>177</sup> In the popular Jewish imagination, doctors were from the beginning associated with the *haskalah* and thus, for traditionalists, with the Christian world and were a potential threat to traditional piety.<sup>178</sup> Henryk Lew, noting the figures to whom the Jewish community went for healing (*tzaddik*, witch doctor/‘baal-shem’, village baba, shepherd), wrote: ‘The least sympathetic to the people are the doctors’.<sup>179</sup>

<sup>174</sup> Bibel 2021, 188-189.

<sup>175</sup> Bibel 2021, 189. A special issue is the belief in the magical-medical properties of cemetery ingredients or buried persons, or objects that have come into contact with them, Biegeleisen 1929, 70.

<sup>176</sup> Kotik 2018, 55.

<sup>177</sup> Kotik 2018, 58-59.

<sup>178</sup> Meir 2020, 92.

<sup>179</sup> Lew 2021, 140.

In memoirs on the history of the Jewish community from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as written down in the memorial books, the padlock appears as an essential funerary accessory. This is because, in the accounts of witnesses, it had the power to stop further deaths. According to an account in the *Minsk Memorial Book*, a rabbi places a padlock on the grave of a murdered person, closes it and takes the key as a sign that ‘death will no longer rage within us’.<sup>180</sup> This is a repetition of the procedure to protect the house from the plague.<sup>181</sup>

**‘THERE WAS ALREADY CHOLERA HERE’ –  
 PADLOCKS AND OTHER ELEMENTS OF EPIDEMIC  
 COUNTERACTION**

The *Kalush Memorial Book* confirms the use of a padlock at the time of burial to stop the plague.<sup>182</sup> In 1915, a cholera epidemic spread through the city, with two or three people dying every day. As medical help was ineffective, the Jews of Kalush ‘began to indulge in idle beliefs and magical means. Some marked their houses with charcoal (...)’ The recollections also include ‘throwing a padlock on one

<sup>180</sup> *Minsk Memorial Book*, 372.

<sup>181</sup> Segel 1897, 54.

<sup>182</sup> Unger 1980, 78.



of the graves of the dead as a sign to shut out the plague'. To prevent the spread of the plague, rabbis allowed the dead to be buried in wooden coffins. 'The most impressive measure, however, turned out to be the wedding of a poor couple, which took place in the cemetery. The wedding procession walked through the streets of the city led by an orchestra of musical instruments. I am not sure if the wedding in the cemetery saved Kalush from the plague, I remember that after one heavy rain the plague passed and the deaths stopped'<sup>183</sup>

The role of padlocks was not limited to ceremonies in the cemetery space. It is also known from ethnographic accounts that Jewish families defended themselves against infection by locking their houses not only with a key, but also with a padlock, and placing an inscription on the door saying 'Cholera was already here'.<sup>184</sup> This item was hung by the door to the midwife's room, which was supposed to be 'a symbol of warding off the sick woman from any evil spirits'.<sup>185</sup>

The list of practices that were used in the face of the raging plague is even longer. Sometimes several remedies were resorted to simultaneously. During the 1771 epidemic in Berdyczów (Ukraine), prayers were recited, the fence around the cemetery was repaired, and a black *chuppah* was erected. When did not help, the *tzaddik* Rebbe Liber undertook to sacrifice himself for the town. He died the same night and the plague receded the next day.<sup>186</sup> Other noted protective measures included wearing rings made of *lulav* or lime phloem,<sup>187</sup> placing a non-Jew at the cemetery gate to say 'There is no place here'<sup>188</sup> or having the part of the town from which the cholera came ploughed over. This last custom was shared by the Jewish and Christian communities.<sup>189</sup> As for customs relating directly to the cemetery space, the draining of water from the local pond secretly and burying the chains of the pond dam in the cemetery was also mentioned in Lublin.<sup>190</sup> The *Israelite* of September 1892 reported: 'The chains from Wendrowski's baths and the ponds from Krauze's mill were mysteriously removed. All this together, we are assured, was buried according to ritual forms in the local Jewish cemetery, with the belief that when the water comes down, it will carry with it

the epidemic... Indeed, the water in the river has fallen tremendously.'<sup>191</sup>

#### BLACK WEDDING

The relatively commonly reported extra-halakhic anti-epidemic procedure is the black wedding, referred to in Yiddish as a *shvarce chasene* (black wedding) or *magejfe chasene* (plague wedding).<sup>192</sup> It was believed that charity, a *mitzvah*, could stop the march of death, and that pairing up in the presence of the dead allowed one to ask God more directly to intervene.<sup>193</sup> An epidemic, in popular consciousness, was an evil spirit, a curse, a punishment for sins. Charity was supposed to resolve the crisis caused by it. It was a matter for the whole community. For this reason, during an epidemic the rabbinate called for the strict observance of certain Jewish ritual and moral precepts. Individuals whose inappropriate (including sexual) behaviour brought misfortune to the community were sought out.<sup>194</sup> Justice was resorted to.

The community or *chevra kadisha*<sup>195</sup> would organise a wedding ceremony in the cemetery for a local bachelor and maiden who were in some way marginalised people – those distinguished by poverty, those who had a congenital or acquired physical defect, or who were orphans (e.g., *kalekhdikeyesoyme*, a round orphan, i.e., without any relatives). Often, these people were either underage or had illegitimate children. These people were often seen as property of the community, as their survival was due to the charity of the official Jewish community. The ritual itself can be seen in the perspective of the laying of a 'scapegoat'. The main actors in this ritual were forced into the marriage. They were surrogate victims of the epidemic and the event itself, in the opinion of the community, had the character of a restorative ritual.<sup>196</sup> On the one hand, this practice was considered a superstition, but it was accepted on the grounds that facilitating the marriage as among the highest forms of charity.<sup>197</sup> Some rabbis took part in it only because of social pressure.

<sup>191</sup> *Izraelita* no. 36 (9 September 1892), p. 306 – after *Izraelita lubelski* 2021, 108.

<sup>192</sup> Referred to often in the literature as 'the cholera wedding', which basically narrows the chronological framework of the custom, Friedhaber 1990; Meir 2020.

<sup>193</sup> Reichman 2021, 18-19.

<sup>194</sup> Meir 2020, 96.

<sup>195</sup> Sometimes it was an individual initiative. In three cases, observers noted that local women were the organisers of the wedding: in Grodno, a group of women (including elders) in 1866 and 'pious women' in 1871; in Kherson, a mother and daughter from the city's Jewish elite, Meir 2020, 98.

<sup>196</sup> Meir 2020, 115.

<sup>197</sup> Meir 2020, 101, 112.

<sup>183</sup> *Kalush Memorial Book*, 78.

<sup>184</sup> Segel 1897, 54; Biegeleisen 1929, 329. On the signs on the doors cf. also Mieszkowski 2020, 139.

<sup>185</sup> Lew 2021, 160-161.

<sup>186</sup> Rechtman 2017, 80-81.

<sup>187</sup> Lew 2021, 136-137; Wysokiński and Wdowiak 2021, 64.

<sup>188</sup> Kotik 2018, 295.

<sup>189</sup> Wysokiński and Wdowiak 2021, 62-63.

<sup>190</sup> Węgrzynek 2011.

It is uncertain how the origins of this custom date. It is assumed that the first black wedding, in Hebrew called even more bluntly *chupat metim*, ‘chuppah among the dead’, took place in 1771. This information comes from the legend and the figure of Rabbi Liber of Berdyczów, recorded during ethnographic expeditions organised by S. An-ski and the Historical and Ethnographic Society in 1912–1914. However, the origin of the custom could perhaps be earlier (17<sup>th</sup> century), linked to the Khmelnytsky uprising in Ukraine and the accompanying pogroms against the Jewish population (1648–1654). According to an account recorded during an ethnographic expedition by S. An-ski, it may have been then that the custom of newlyweds visiting the cemetery first appeared, which alluded to the story of a couple murdered during the pogrom.<sup>198</sup>

Undeniably, however, black weddings were widespread among the Jews of Central and Eastern Europe, especially in the area that until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century was part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and today includes Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine. All surviving accounts – ethnographic, literary, and journalistic – date from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Cholera weddings in the area were said to have taken place at least until 1925,<sup>199</sup> but are still known to have taken place during the Second World War. One of the last in Central Europe took place in the ghetto of Żelechów, where a typhus epidemic had broken out in the spring of 1942.<sup>200</sup> In September, the Germans liquidated the ghetto, deporting the population to the Treblinka extermination camp.<sup>201</sup> During the Holocaust, a black wedding took place in the cemetery in Bazalia (Ukraine) in the same year.<sup>202</sup> It is known from Adam Czerniaków’s memoirs (transcript of 12 February 1942) that a proposal to organise a black wedding was made by the rabbis in the autumn or winter of 1941 in the Warsaw Ghetto to help stop the spread of typhus.<sup>203</sup> After many decades of hiatus, the Covid-19 epidemic caused Orthodox communities to revive the old custom.<sup>204</sup>

It is sometimes assumed that the tradition

of the Black Wedding grew out of Slavic customs and the strong cult of ancestors prevailing among them, of which frequent visits to the dead in the cemetery, sitting at table with the dead (the custom of bringing food, dishes, and spoons to the grave), feasts and dances, and summoning the spirits of the dead were all part of folk beliefs and practices.<sup>205</sup> There are more significant examples in the Polish tradition of fighting epidemics: for example, in Łomża in 1556, during an epidemic, a wedding was held in a Christian church, attended by three dead people in coffins exhumed especially for the occasion. This was, it is thought, to end the period of the plague.<sup>206</sup>

The Jewish community was in some ways hermetic for many centuries, but it was never completely cut off from external cultural impulses. An analysis of ethnographic sources can lead to the conclusion of shared beliefs and superstitions, concerning customs related to death as well. The mutual borrowing of amulets and the use of remedies in times of illness, crises of a different nature affecting individuals, families, and communities is therefore not surprising. One of the first common beliefs confirmed in medieval written sources concerns the magical role of rings, whose ‘benefits’, as some scholars assume, were mutually enjoyed by both Jews and Christians.<sup>207</sup>

In general, Jewish and Slavic funeral rites – and weddings – were remarkably similar. Though local cultural influences are possible,<sup>208</sup> it is known that the Jews in Central and Eastern Europe had their own rich tradition of magical practices and demonic beliefs, either derived from Kabbalistic literature or brought from previously inhabited places in the diaspora. The cemetery and the dead had always played an important role in the Jewish community: prayers at the graves, visits to the cemetery on fast days (in Worms and other Ashkenazi communities the cemetery was circled on fast days), and the custom of inviting an orphaned bride’s deceased parents to the wedding. According to Gliki’s diaries, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century the death dance was part of the artistic programme at a wedding in Kleve.<sup>209</sup> Similar traditions are also recorded in Slavic folklore.<sup>210</sup>

Hasidism, which was born in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Podolia, created ideal con-

<sup>198</sup> Rechtman 2017, 105–106.

<sup>199</sup> Kotik 2018, footnote 639.

<sup>200</sup> Memorial Book of the Community of Żelechów (Żelechów, Poland) / Yisker-bukh fun der Zhelekhover yidisher kehile, fig. on page 225; Szymczak 2009, 232.

<sup>201</sup> Szymczak 2009, 232–233.

<sup>202</sup> Mochalova 2007, 106–107.

<sup>203</sup> *Adama Czerniakowa dziennik getta warszawskiego*, 251 (entry dated February 12, 1942).

<sup>204</sup> Mieszkowski 2020, 139.

<sup>205</sup> Węgrzynek 2011, 59–60.

<sup>206</sup> Levinski 1963, 62.

<sup>207</sup> Kulik and Kalik 2021, 169, with further references. In contrast, the rhetorical nature of this entry in the 13<sup>th</sup> century ‘Life of St. Stanislaus’, Zaremska 2010, 33.

<sup>208</sup> Mochalova 2007, 89–90.

<sup>209</sup> Gliki 2021, 176.

<sup>210</sup> Mochalova 2007, 92, 94.



ditions for the perpetuation of these beliefs. According to H. Węgrzynek, the ritual of the Black Wedding was particularly widespread where Hasidism was of great importance. For this reason, there are no accounts of Black Weddings in northern Lithuania, where Hasidism was weaker.<sup>211</sup> In Meir's view, on the other hand, the ritual had no direct antecedents in Jewish tradition – let alone counterparts in Christian popular practice – but was nevertheless deeply rooted in Jewish religious culture and had a strong internal logic, embedded in long-standing attitudes towards social marginality.<sup>212</sup> The black wedding fits three criteria of liminality: a marginal social group (the margin) plays a central role in a liminal moment (the epidemic) in a liminal space (the cemetery).<sup>213</sup> The newlywed couple – marginal people: physically handicapped, mentally ill, or allegedly possessed by spirits or demons – were suspended halfway between the living and the dead, and could easily be seen as having the power to intercede with the dead on behalf of the living.<sup>214</sup>

From an archaeological point of view, it is significant that the cemetery became the site of ceremonies and also of wedding celebrations, during which dancing took place but also became a place for the consumption of drinks and food. Some drank themselves into unconsciousness (Table 1). In Lublin, during the cholera epidemic of 1892, six or seven such weddings took place in the cemetery.<sup>215</sup> In view of this, broken glass, lost objects (e.g., coins), crockery from the 19<sup>th</sup> and first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and post-consumption remains (animal bones) recorded in the upper layers of cemeteries can be considered as the remains of such celebrations. These are obviously no remains that archaeology will record *en masse*.

### MANIFESTATIONS OF FUNERARY RITUALS IN THE LIGHT OF NON-ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOURCES

Archaeology is undeniably the main source of information on Jewish funerary rituals of the European Diaspora in the Middle Ages. This is determined by the lack of other categories of sources from that time. The situation changes in the following centuries, when *Chevra Kadisha* funeral fraternities begin to appear. The first ones were established in Spain at the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century,

and they became a model for similar funerary associations being organised in Central and Eastern Europe after the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492. One of the first in this region was the brotherhood in Prague, founded in 1564 by Rabbi Eliezer Ashkenazi.<sup>216</sup> From an archaeological point of view, the information contained in the *pinkas* of the confraternities regarding the categories of persons treated separately because of the manner of death (women who died in childbirth, suicides) or immoral behaviour (criminals) is important. This is reflected in the way the cemetery spaces are organised.<sup>217</sup>

Court books are a somewhat less important source of data for research on funerary rituals. Rather, they provide information about exhumations related to trials in which the corpse had evidentiary value.<sup>218</sup> We thus learn about the circumstances in which the rule of inviolability of burial was violated. During the case of a woman accused of killing a child in Kraków in 1877, the court ordered the exhumation of the child. The problem proved to be locating his grave in the cemetery. The caretaker of the cemetery had to admit that he 'cannot point out where this child lies, because they (the Jews) do not have children under 5 as corpses, and therefore they do not bury them separately, but throw them in with other bodies'.<sup>219</sup>

In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, we have new sources of information, which include the diaries of Jews, the recollections of their neighbours, press notes, and fiction. In the case of Polish lands, we also have ethnographic records of Jewish burial customs in the context of folk beliefs.<sup>220</sup> They offer an opportunity to confront folklore with archaeological findings, including the various categories of objects found in burial pits and attempts at interpretation.

There is also a group of objects that have not been discovered during archaeological investigations, but are part of old funerary practices: plaques placed on the graves of *tzaddikim*.

<sup>216</sup> Jacobs 2008, 14, 57; Michałowska-Mycielska 2018, 439. *Prague's Pinkas ha-takanot* was written in 1692.

<sup>217</sup> On the subject of the obligations of brotherhoods, e.g., Michałowska-Mycielska 2008, 143-151; Michałowska-Mycielska 2018.

<sup>218</sup> Exhumations as a result of a judicial order: an example of the exhumation of the corpse of a child 1877 in Kraków, Hońdo 2016, 239. According to Rechtman, it is recorded in the *pinkas* of Starokonstantinov that a Jewish man who died in prison and had been accused of ritual murder was buried by the community with a written request to God to save him from misfortune. The authorities ordered the grave to be opened and the sheet to be brought out, Rechtman 2017, 140.

<sup>219</sup> After Hońdo 2016, 239.

<sup>220</sup> Cf. chapter *Umieranie i śmierć [Dying and death]*. In: Tuszewicki 2015, 446-477, with further references.

<sup>211</sup> Węgrzynek 2011, 62.

<sup>212</sup> Meir 2020, 103.

<sup>213</sup> Meir 2020, 108.

<sup>214</sup> Meir 2020, 108-109. On the meaning of dance in a kabbalistic context, Scholem 1969, 153-157.

<sup>215</sup> Lew 2021, 156.

Table 1. A selection of information about black weddings and other anti-epidemic methods.

Place, date	Circumstances	Description of event	References
Berdyczów, 1771 (UA)	Plague	Prayers, repairing the fence around the cemetery and erecting a black chuppah were performed. None of this helped. The tzaddik, Rebbe Liber, therefore undertook to sacrifice himself for the town. That same night he died, and the next day the plague subsided.	Rechtman 2017, 80-81.
Rymanów, 1831 (PL)	Cholera epidemic	Black wedding of a couple of poor people. The bride fell ill with cholera after the wedding.	Meir 2020, 93-94.
Nowe Miasto nad Pilicą (PL)	Cholera epidemic	In Nowe Miasto nad Pilicą, there was a rumour that local Jews buried a bell and a mill sluice in the cemetery to prevent cholera from descending on Jewish homes and to redirect it, as it were, onto their Christian neighbours.	Meir 2020, 93.
Kraków, 1849 (PL)	Cholera epidemic	To stop cholera, Jews organised the wedding of two poor Jewish couples in Kraków's Jewish cemetery, raising money for the dowries for both couples.	Kafrissen 2020, 7; Meir 2020, 95.
Białystok, 1866 (PL)	Cholera epidemic	During the black wedding: 'The mob ran like wild through the streets of the city, making a great noise.'	Meir 2020, 97, 111.
Berdyczów, 1866 (UA)	Cholera epidemic	Black wedding	Meir 2020, 97.
Kamieniec, 1866 (BY)	Cholera epidemic	Crowds attending a black wedding drank themselves into unconsciousness. In the presence of the entire community, the wedding of a crippled mute woman and a blind man took place in the cemetery in 1866. This remedy was of no avail.	Meir 2020, 97, 111; Kotik 2018, 294-295, footnote 639.
Wilkomierz, 1866 (LT)	Plague	Rings of lulav against epidemics.	Kotik 2018, 294-295, footnote 639.
Cherson, 1866 (UA)	Cholera epidemic	Black wedding	Meir 2020, 97.
Odessa, 1866, 1918 (UA)	Cholera epidemic	Black wedding	Mochalova 2007, 102; Meir 2020, 97.
Dniepr (former Jekaterynosław), 1866 (UA)	Cholera epidemic	The crowds attending the wedding drank themselves into unconsciousness.	Meir 2020, 97.
Betż, Galicja, 1866 (UA)	Cholera epidemic	Black wedding	Meir 2020, 97.
Jerusalem, 1866 (IL)	Plague	Black wedding	Meir 2020, 97.
Grodno, 1866 and 1871 (BY)	Cholera epidemic	Red ribbons on hands against the epidemic. Black wedding: The women involved in organising the wedding in Grodno 'behaved in an unrestrained [hitholelu] manner'.	Meir 2020, 93, 97, 111.
Lublin, 1892 (PL)	Typhoid epidemic	In Lublin during the epidemic: 1) they wore rings made of lulav (palm trees on Sukkot) or red strings on the wrist; 2) four girls were harnessed to a socha and part of the city was ploughed from the side from which the cholera came (from the Biskupice side); 3) the goy at the cemetery gate was to say when a new body was brought in: 'There is no place here'; 4) two weddings in the cemetery on one day; 5) water from the local pond was secretly (and illegally) drained and the chains of the pond dam were buried in the cemetery.	Węgrzynek 2011; Kotik 2018, 295; <i>Gazeta Lubelska</i> , 1 September 1892. <i>Izraelita</i> , 36 (9 September 1892), p. 306; <i>Izraelita</i> , 38 (23 September 1892), p. 325. <a href="https://shtetlroutes.eu/en/moje-szeszcziesiat-lat-zycia-w-wojslawicach-1879-1939/">https://shtetlroutes.eu/en/moje-szeszcziesiat-lat-zycia-w-wojslawicach-1879-1939/</a>
Ryki, 1892 (PL)	Plague	Black wedding	<i>Sefer Riki</i> . 1973, 44.
Opatów (Apt), 1892 (PL)	Plague	Black wedding. The epidemic left the city a few days later.	<a href="http://www.museumoffamilyhistory.com/ce/kirshenblatt/kirshenblatt-black-wedding-wav.htm">http://www.museumoffamilyhistory.com/ce/kirshenblatt/kirshenblatt-black-wedding-wav.htm</a> A szwarce chasene in Apt, Schiller 2011, 37; Węgrzynek 2011.
Szumsk, 1892 (?) (UA)	Cholera epidemic	Women weed the graves and pluck grass from between the gravestones. Psalm 72: 'And may people blossom in the cities like the grass of the field'	Schiller 2011, 37, 38, 39.
Działoszyn, 1894 (PL)	Plague	Black wedding: a lavish party	Meir 2020, 111.



Place, date	Circumstances	Description of event	References
Łomża, 1906 (PL)	Plague	Black wedding of a poor couple.	Schiller 2011, 39.
Radomsko, 1916 (PL)	Typhoid epidemic	Women measured the ground in the cemetery with pieces of white cloth and candle wicks (a symbolic transfer of ownership: taking back the cemetery from the dead, thus forcing them to take action against the plague). 'After the black wedding, the people felt that it was lighter on their hearts, as if a huge burden had been lifted from their backs.'	Schiller 2011, 37, 39.
Lublin, March 1916 (PL)	Plague	A crowd of several thousand people set off for the cemetery wedding celebration. A canopy was erected and the cemetery fence was measured off with a white cloth, which was then handed to the bride. Bed linens and underclothes for the newlyweds were to be sewn from this material. When the measurements were finished, the wedding ceremony was conducted, after which the crowd returned to the town, secure in their belief that they had taken 'the only [possible] step' toward staving off the epidemic.	Węrzynek 2011, 55-56. ( <i>Dziennik Narodowy</i> 55 / March 1916/3)
Szebreszin, 1917 (PL)	Typhoid epidemic	Epidemic recognised as punishment for sins. Women's prayers on ancestral graves to stop the plague. Black wedding – all poor maidens and bachelors were married off.	Bibel 2021, 31-32, 34, 39.
Kraków, 11.10.1918 (PL)	Spanish influenza	Black wedding	Mieszkowski 2020.
Odessa, X.1918; 1922 (UA)	Spanish influenza	Black wedding Two black weddings, including a woman who lost an eye during a pogrom and a man who lost his speech during the war.	Kafrissen 2020, 7-8; Mieszkowski 2020.
New York and Winnipeg, 1918 (USA and CA)	Spanish influenza	Black wedding	Mieszkowski 2020, 141; Kafrissen 2020, 7-8.
Luboml, WWI (UA)	Typhoid epidemic (?)	Black wedding	Meir 2020, 102; Schiller 2011, 37.
Siedlce, WWI (PL)	Typhoid epidemic (?)	Black wedding	Meir 2020, 102.
Oświęcim, WWO (PL)	Typhoid epidemic (?)	Black wedding	Meir 2020, 102.
Żarki, WWI (PL)	Plague	Black wedding	Węrzynek 2011; account by Eli Zborowski
Biłgoraj (PL)	Plague	Black wedding	Węrzynek 2011.
Kamieniec Podolski (UA)	Plague	Black wedding	Węrzynek 2011.
Bazalia, 1942 (UA)	Holocaust	Black wedding	Mochalova 2007, 104-105.
Żelechów, 1942 (PL)	Typhoid epidemic	The wedding at the Jewish cemetery was to be accompanied by the burial of the destroyed holy books from the synagogue. After much searching, a groom was found – Motele, son of Moshe Bejger. The bride was Havel, daughter of Sora and Welwl Judkes, an old maid of over fifty years. The couple agreed to the wedding and the venue on the condition that clothes would be provided for them. They were immediately provided with two pairs of clogs and the Jewish community bought some clothes for them to wear. The couple were then led to the cemetery, where the traditional wedding canopy (the so-called chuppah) was set up. The procession, behind which the destroyed holy books were carried on carts, was accompanied by the rabbi, his children, Torah scholars, and almost all the inhabitants of the Zelech ghetto. Musicians played, but the melody was very bitter. In the cemetery, the books were first buried and then the wedding was performed, with all the rituals observed. The ceremony was conducted by a rabbi. Prayers were said to avert the epidemic, raising at the end the cry of 'mazel tov!' ('good luck, good luck'). The couple was later led to the Wedding Hall at the headquarters of the Jewish Council (Judenrat). Jewish police kept order, and a magnificent party was given. This is how a cemetery wedding was celebrated in Zelechów to save the Jews from typhus.	Schiller 2011, 39.
Bnei Brak, IL, 18.03.2020	Covid-19	Wedding of a pair of orphans.	Barnea 2020; Mieszkowski 2020, 139.

According to Avrom Rechtman's account presenting selected results of the ethnographic expedition from Volhynia and Podolia,<sup>221</sup> not only various types of *kwitlech*, but also bricks/tabs made of baked clay were found in *ohels*. Texts of incantations and prayers were placed on them, then fired in a kiln for seven days and carried to the grave of the *tzaddik*. Two types of them have been recorded, i.e., 'bricks against change of faith' and 'bricks against seduction'. However, the bricks against seduction were broken and the halves were placed on the two graves of the *tzaddikim*.<sup>222</sup> This kind of practice was observed by the expedition of S. An-ski's expedition observed in Berdyczów and Miedzybozh (a brick was found on the grave of the Baal Shem Tov, on the graves of Reb Levi Yitzchok and the Baal Shem Tov and on the grave of Reb Borech).<sup>223</sup>

There are also other categories of objects that were deposited in graves, in times not so distant. According to an inhabitant of Oshmiany (бел. Ашмяны, Belarus) Shatman Anatoly Moiseyevich, during the funeral of his father in 1960, which was the last traditional funeral ceremony in this locality: 'The deceased was sewn with a shirt, pants and a cap (it is called "kipa") made of white cloth. A star (Star of David) made from a vine was placed in his hands. The deceased lay on the floor, covered with hay and was covered with a black cloth. Planks were inserted into the grave, the deceased was laid on the planks and covered with the planks.'<sup>224</sup>

Another source is memorial books (*sefer zikaron, izkor bicher, Memorbücher*)<sup>225</sup> published by surviving countrymen after 1945. Their value, if even the historical content requires a critical approach, is considerable.<sup>226</sup> Rivke Schiller wrote that the memorial books acted 'as a symbolic cemetery – instead of real tombstones, usually destroyed by the German occupiers, and mass graves on which matzevot were never erected.'<sup>227</sup> They are a source of information about burial customs and rituals that relate to a few decades before the Second World War, to the memory of no more than 2–3 generations.

<sup>221</sup> The first *ohels* in Eastern Europe were built during the rise of Hasidism, in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, over the graves of *tzaddikim* rather than rabbis. The current number of surviving buildings is estimated at 147; Bielawski n.d., 102, 113; Trzeciński 2007, 141.

<sup>222</sup> Rechtman 2017, 73-74.

<sup>223</sup> Rechtman 2017; Bielawski n.d., 97.

<sup>224</sup> Quoted for: <https://shtetlroutes.eu/pl/oszmiana-karta-dziedzictwa-kulturowego/>. Translated: K.Skóra.

<sup>225</sup> According to E. Bergman (1997) 526 Memorial Books in Yad Vashem; Adamczyk-Garbowska et al. 2009.

<sup>226</sup> Bergman 1997.

<sup>227</sup> Schiller 2011, 36.

## THE JEWISH CEMETERY AS A PLACE FOR NON-BURIAL PRACTICES

For the Ashkenazi community, the cemetery was a special place – sacred but nevertheless ritually impure. The perception of the cemetery as a magical area has persisted into modern times. One of the foundations on which this perception grew was the belief in the possibility of contact with the dead. It was based on the tripartite division of the human body and soul: the lowest is the analogue of the body, the *nefesh* (resides in the grave until decomposition, suffers for sins after the first judgement), the second is the *ruach* (the animistic aspect, related to emotions and drives, which after 12 months enters the lower garden of Eden). *Neshama* is the intellect, the spiritual element which returns to God, to the higher garden of Eden. The soul (*neshamot*), on the other hand, gathers in the bundle of the living (*ceror ha-chayim*), where it awaits resurrection.<sup>228</sup> According to the Talmud, the soul drifts between earth and heaven for one year after death, continually returning to the grave.<sup>229</sup> After one year, when the body has completely decomposed, the soul finds rest in heaven.<sup>230</sup> However, according to some Kabbalistic sources, there is easier contact with the soul of the deceased next to the grave.<sup>231</sup> It became common in Hasidism to visit the graves of *tzaddikim* (righteous men) and *Hasidim* over which *ohels* (*ohalim*) were erected.<sup>232</sup> The dead were visited on the occasion of anniversaries and holidays; prayers were said at their graves, asking for healing or intercession with God in other matters, and written requests were made.<sup>233</sup> The good deeds of the deceased and their ancestors had

<sup>228</sup> Wodziński 2008; Trzeciński 2017, 193.

<sup>229</sup> Heilman 2001.

<sup>230</sup> Nosonovsky 2009, 242.

<sup>231</sup> On the function of the grave, cf. *Tam był kiedyś mój dom...*, pp. 91, 147, 216, 356-357 (prayers at the graves of relatives, 'good Jews', pious and virtuous women, e.g., *Złota Rojza* from Lvov, from the time of her death in 1637, until the Second World War her grave was a place of visitation and prayer requests).

<sup>232</sup> The Talmud (*Shekalim*, 1:1, *Mo'ed Katan*, 1:2) says that the soul of the deceased lives for a year on the grave and can see and hear everything that happens there. A sign called a *nefesh* (soul) should be placed on the grave to mark the place of ritual impurity and remembrance of the dead. The cemetery can also be visited so that the deceased can ask for mercy for us in heaven (*Ta'anit* 16a). Rabban Gamliel insisted that every Jew, regardless of social standing, should be buried equally modestly. Rabbinic literature mentions more than once that 'no monuments should be built for the righteous, for their words are their memory' (*Bereishit Rabba* 82:10, *Yerushalmi Shekalim* 2:47a, *Mekhilta* 11:7). Tractate Horayot 13b lists reading epitaphs among the activities that lead to memory impairment and distraction from learning. After Nosonovsky 2009, 242, 260, footnote 37; Rechtman 2017, 69-104.

<sup>233</sup> Cf. Rechtman 2017, 66, 195.



the power to influence the fate of the living.<sup>234</sup> The cemetery became a place of refuge during natural disasters, fires, or armed attacks on the townspeople.<sup>235</sup> Perhaps its treatment as a refugium was not just due to its peripheral location, but was counted on for 'supernatural' protection. Victoria Mochalova, comparing Jewish and Christian attitudes to the cemetery space, noted that in both communities the place was considered to have a closed boundary that protects against demons, pestilence, famine, and other misfortunes, and nothing impure is allowed to enter there.<sup>236</sup> It is a zone of magical action and rituals that heal, divert the evil eye, expel the unclean from the village, or allow one to attain wisdom (such as the custom of sleeping on a parent's grave).<sup>237</sup>

Several Judaic non-funeral practices have already been mentioned. To list others and describe them is beyond the scope of this article. Jewish folklore, like Slavic folklore, developed many rituals in which not only the space of the cemetery itself was important, but also the individual smaller elements had their own power. They were realised as remedies in times of the aforementioned epidemics, individual illnesses, and ailments.<sup>238</sup> Objects that came into contact with the deceased or his grave had medicinal power. Probably high on the scale of efficacy stood bones, the acquisition of which required the grave to be disturbed.<sup>239</sup>

One healing practice, applied especially during a child's illness, was the ritual of measuring the cemetery or grave.<sup>240</sup> It was also applied during epidemics (Table 1). Rope or sheets were used, which were then used to make candle wicks or distributed among the poor. Encircling the cemetery symbolised the delimitation of the magical.<sup>241</sup>

Slavic neighbours held the belief that parts of the corpses of people of the Jewish faith had a magical effect. Information about these superstitious beliefs is not only found in ethnographic records, but the daily press and court records are also a source of similar content, proving the enactment of surprising practices. Henryk Biegeleisen gave several examples of actions involving digging up corpses or parts of corpses (e.g., head, hair, bones,

beards), scraping 'something' off a gravestone or using soil from a grave. These pieces were buried in other places, drinks or decoctions were made, and rooms were fumigated with them. More often than not, the remedy was intended to protect people or animals from disease (the practice was especially popular among sheep farmers).<sup>242</sup> Courts in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century not infrequently handed down verdicts for violating a grave in a Jewish cemetery. There were cases of corpses being excavated and used for the purposes of broadly defined 'folk medicine'.<sup>243</sup>

Written sources report exhumations of people suspected of vampirism. After procedures to render the deceased harmless, the corpse was re-buried. Archaeologically, we have no traces of grave-opening, but a story of this kind is said to have happened in Bodzentyn (PL) in 1879. A few days after the funeral, the corpse of a Jewish woman was dug up, her head and hands cut off and the skin removed from her feet so that she could not walk.<sup>244</sup> It can be assumed that the act was committed by the Christian population.

## RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES

In view of the enormity of the destruction of material culture, the cemetery remains one of the most important testimonies to Jewish culture and deserves special conservation protection. City districts and synagogues have disappeared, and 'cemeteries and their fragments are today the most authentic testimony to centuries of Jewish existence' in Europe.<sup>245</sup> It is also often the last functioning institution when a Jewish community disappears. Jewish culture in Europe as a subject of academic study does not have a long metric. The Haskalah has directed the attention of researchers to issues other than theology. With regard to this part of the continent, one of the first issues was folklore and history. The contribution of archaeology to the knowledge of the history of this diaspora zone is relatively the smallest,<sup>246</sup> despite the demands of Jewish historians who raised the need for excavation research even before the Second World War.<sup>247</sup> The Second World War interrupted these plans. The attitude to Jewish cultural heritage in the communities of the post-Yalta order countries changed for decades.

<sup>234</sup> Trzciniński 2017, 200-201.

<sup>235</sup> Cf. Rechtman 2017, 29, 141.

<sup>236</sup> Mochalova 2007, 91.

<sup>237</sup> Mochalova 2007, 91.

<sup>238</sup> Kotik (2021) included in his memoirs information about spells against the evil eye. They were helped by 'bones of dead people', which were used against swelling by scratching the sick person's face with the bones.

<sup>239</sup> A different issue is the violation of graves for reasons of robbery, such as the story in the Gliki diaries, Gliki 2021, 81.

<sup>240</sup> Tuszewicki 2015, 427; Dekiert n.d., 27.

<sup>241</sup> Dekiert n.d., 29.

<sup>242</sup> Biegeleisen 1929, 12, 67, 68, 71, 73, 351, 365; Biegeleisen 1930, 85, 105.

<sup>243</sup> *Kurier Warszawski* no. 117, 18 (29) Mai 1876; Bielawski 2020, 15-16.

<sup>244</sup> Wołczyk 1983; Kolbuszewski 1996, 105; Tokarska-Bakir 2008, 173.

<sup>245</sup> Quoted after Krajewska 1989, 27.

<sup>246</sup> Pisarkiewicz 1998.

<sup>247</sup> Bałaban 1929, 110.

Though our knowledge of the origins of the Jewish Diaspora in Europe is very poor, archaeology offers an opportunity to fill in the historiographical gaps. This is a scientific axiom that should not be subject to value judgement in the scientific community. The role of archaeology, physical anthropology, and molecular biology, especially in the context of researching Jewish cemeteries, is most often reduced by historians (and others) to the level of unjustified destruction,<sup>248</sup> which is not guided by a scientific goal or the protection of relics of the past (after all, such is the value of research before planned investments). The promoted and implemented ban on archaeological research leads to an irreversible loss of historical information. This problem is marginalised in a situation where the idea of the superiority of religion – the halachic principle of the inviolability of the grave over civil law – is accepted, which means that the community's right to the world's cultural heritage is restricted or taken away.<sup>249</sup> Max Polonovski noted that under this influence, there is a self-censorship of the scientific community and public authorities, who see the Jews as a special community, governed by its own internal rules.<sup>250</sup>

Is there, therefore, a way to combine these two different worldviews, which are, after all, not necessarily incompatible: respect for tradition and religion versus scientific cognition? According to Polonovski, 'Archaeological research, with its scientific purpose, perfectly meets the criteria of respect for human remains. It studies them, restores their place in history, tries to correct the myths imposed by the living. Archaeology does not destroy old cemeteries on the basis of the scientific superiority of science over rituals. It is important to remember that archaeologists intervene before construction projects erase the rich layers of information about the past. They are acting for the public good, on behalf of a public that demands the protection of shared knowledge.'<sup>251</sup>

There is a need for an in-depth dialogue between rabbinical authorities, Jewish associations, and the scientific community (archaeologists, biologists). This dialogue should start from a point where the scientific community clarifies the needs of research demands. One of these is the study of Judaic funerary rituals, which is sometimes seen as an eternal monolith of rules applied from antiquity to modern times. From this perspective, it may be worthwhile to have

knowledge of the origins, all the more so because, over the centuries, as archaeological research shows, the Talmudic principles we know have been implemented differently with regard to the dead. Since the Middle Ages, differences have been recorded in the orientation of the corpse and the use of wooden burial constructions, and it is also assumed that in the early Middle Ages the burial space was shared by followers of Christianity and Judaism.

It is also important to identify the influence of other cultures, e.g., with regard to the practice of furnishing the dead and the treatments of folk religiosity, which one can assume may have taken place in the environment of rural settlements and small towns.<sup>252</sup> The next point is the transformations in funeral rituals resulting from the assimilation of the Jewish community in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and in relation to the different socio-political situation of the Jews, who, for example in Poland, found themselves in different annexations after its division.<sup>253</sup> It should not be forgotten that the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century marks the process of departure from the principle of equality before death in the cities. Egalitarianism disappears from the forms of gravestones and the space of cemeteries is organised differently.

We know that there was variation in customs within Ashkenaz, *minhagim*. This is an element worth studying also in terms of the variability of Judaic funerary practices. A stumbling block is the poor archaeological identification of necropolises. The exact location of many medieval cemeteries is not known to us.<sup>254</sup> Nevertheless, it is assumed, after all, that the funerary rites of Ashkenazi Jews in general principles did not undergo rapid changes from the time of their settlement in Central Europe until the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>255</sup> It is assumed that there are variations in certain rites at the level of individual Jewish communities, which, as Leszek Hońdo has pointed out,<sup>256</sup> sometimes lived in isolation, resulting from the adaptation of the rules in force to the realities of time and space. Similarly, Olga Goldberg-Mulkiewicz, writing about mourning rituals and beliefs concerning death, noted that over time, due to the dispersion of Jewish communities and their isolation, the rituals of larger groups began to differ, even though they were based on the philosophical foundations of the Jewish religion and the precepts formed by

<sup>252</sup> E.g., Banasiewicz-Ossowska 2007.

<sup>253</sup> Cała 1989.

<sup>254</sup> Ringelblum 1932, 7, 26, 114; Nekanda-Trepka 2011, 120; Bielawski 2020, 203.

<sup>255</sup> Hońdo 2016, 235.

<sup>256</sup> Hońdo 2016, 235.

<sup>248</sup> Cluse 2018, 146; cf. Bielawski 2020, 153-158.

<sup>249</sup> Polonovski 2010.

<sup>250</sup> Polonovski 2010, 71.

<sup>251</sup> Polonovski 2010.



it. The difficulty is to establish the genesis of these "novelties" in the layer of beliefs; for they have no clear justification in the religious prescriptions.<sup>257</sup> This is a task that, of all scientific disciplines, only archaeology is best able to tackle. Another overarching research problem is studies analysing the distinctiveness and similarities of the Sephardic and Ashkenazic diaspora, not only in the funerary sphere.<sup>258</sup>

We are confronted with the problem of not knowing many aspects of the history of European Jewry due to a lack of written sources. In this situation, material sources, including those from necropolises, are crucial. Research in geophysical, chemical, biological and genetic sciences, which has long been common in archaeology, offers a remarkable spectrum of applications for reconstructing a picture of Jewish life in the past. It is particularly important to establish the history of population migration and the formation of European nations. The basis in this case is mtDNA studies and the study of stable isotopes. The basis is the corresponding small fragments of human skeleton. Without them, the determination of the directions of the Jewish influx into Central European lands in the early and later Middle Ages is likely to remain only a theoretical concept. The cemeteries are, for this reason, the source that is, if not the only one, then the primary one for further study. The influx of Jewish settlers to Central Europe has been considered from three different directions. It was assumed that the migrants came from the East, from the Khazar settlement area between the Black and Caspian Seas.<sup>259</sup> This theory was particularly considered in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but also in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was considered in the case of the Kyiv colony, and to a lesser extent in the case of Hungarian or Polish lands.<sup>260</sup> The possibility of an ethnically mixed population migrating from the Balkan Peninsula was also analysed.<sup>261</sup> The currently accepted theory is that western Ashkenaz settlers arrived in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries from areas between the Rhine and the Meuse, where the main cultural centres of Ashkenazi Jews flourished in the early Middle Ages (Köln and Mainz, 950; Regensburg, 981; Spira, Trier, and Worms, 960).<sup>262</sup> The migration southwards and eastwards from England, Flanders,

and France, which took place in the 15<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>263</sup> is confirmed by sources. It is assumed that the population of this part of Europe most probably originated from the Apennine Peninsula, which they began to leave around 800.<sup>264</sup> However, undertaking this rudimentary research task requires new archaeological discoveries and a comprehensive analysis of archival material using all available methods. We need answers to questions that are crucial to the history of European states. It cannot be denied that it is our common European heritage.

What archaeology discovers is also part of an ancient tradition, the knowledge of which must not be abandoned. The reservoir of customs is not only the culture of the written word. Tradition itself is also subject to change, as the Jewish community of the European Diaspora experienced, for example with regard to Talmudic law.<sup>265</sup> From this perspective, it is worth asking the question of the rank of importance for the contemporary Jewish community of the facts and principles of the millennial timeline. Which of these are more relevant? Are we now facing an increasingly restrictive approach to archaeological research of cemeteries? As recently as the 1990s, rabbinical authorities in France allowed a Jewish cemetery (18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century, Montrouge) to be destroyed in order to build a religious school on the site. The gravestones were placed in the wall of the school as a memorial.<sup>266</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The priority is to protect cemeteries, to document them accurately and comprehensively while respecting the rules in force. The involvement of representatives of various scientific disciplines would guarantee a wide-ranging documentation, with not only a scientific dimension, but the preservation for future generations of a 'text of culture'<sup>267</sup> such as a cemetery in the broadest possible way. Archaeology has many tools at its disposal, including those of a non-invasive nature. They allow the analysis of the cemetery space, its organisation, the change of area and the establishment of boundaries.<sup>268</sup> Archaeological prospecting is used to search for burial sites, such as those of tzaddikim.<sup>269</sup>

<sup>257</sup> Golberg-Mulkiewicz 1986, 103.

<sup>258</sup> Cf. Klein n.d., 10-11.

<sup>259</sup> According to H. Zaremska, this provenance is probable in the case of Jewish newcomers in Kyiv, Zaremska 2005, 29.

<sup>260</sup> On this topic with references to literature Witkowski 2011, 89-91; cf. Zaremska 2010, 28.

<sup>261</sup> Zaremska 2005, 29-30.

<sup>262</sup> Witkowski 2011, 92-93.

<sup>263</sup> Zaremska 2005, 15.

<sup>264</sup> Zaremska 2005, 16, 21.

<sup>265</sup> Cf. Zaremska 2010, 43-44.

<sup>266</sup> Polonovski 2010, 73.

<sup>267</sup> Kolbuszewski 1981; Trzeciński 2010.

<sup>268</sup> E.g., Majewska 2017, 62-63, concerning the cemetery in Żarki (PL).

<sup>269</sup> E.g., Urszula Jedynek's research, the search for the ohel of Tzadik Meir Jechiel Halsztok (d. 1928) from Ostrowiec Świętokrzyski (PL).

Because of the enduring importance of these charismatic figures to the Hasidic world, Orthodox communities also opt for DNA identification.<sup>270</sup>

We should all answer the question of whether the European community, not limited to a select group of researchers of the past, has the right to know its history. Jewish necropolises have never been the same at different times and in different places,<sup>271</sup> and will certainly continue to change in the coming centuries. The goal that should unite everyone is to document in every way one of the

many elements of the world's cultural heritage that has irretrievably passed away. In this situation, it is our duty to take care to save what remains. What is buried in the ground is not eternal either. Dariusz Dekiert wrote, 'When there are no people who could give a testimony, places must speak for them.'<sup>272</sup>

#### DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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<sup>270</sup> DNA testing was carried out during the search for the grave of Tzaddik David Biderman of Lelów (PL), Bielawski n.d., 113.

<sup>271</sup> Jacobs 2008, 12.

<sup>272</sup> Dekiert n.d., 19.



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