

ESSAYS, REVIEWS AND POLEMICS

FASCICULI ARCHAEOLOGIAE HISTORICAE
FASC. XXXIII, PL ISSN 0860-0007
DOI 10.23858/FAH33.2020.016

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A FEW REFLECTIONS ON SUICIDE AND PROFANE DEATH FROM NOT ONLY AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE MARGINS OF PAWEŁ DUMA'S BOOK, *PROFANE DEATH IN BURIAL PRACTICES OF A PRE-INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY. A STUDY FROM SILESIA*

Keywords: Medieval Period, Modern Period, profane death, suicide, burial rites, postfuneral interferences

Received: 24.01.2020 **Accepted:** 10.02.2020


Citation: Skóra K. 2020. *A Few Reflections on Suicide and Profane Death from not only an Archaeological Perspective on the Margins of Paweł Duma's Book, 'Profane Death in Burial Practices of a Pre-Industrial Society. A Study from Silesia'*. "Fasciculi Archaeologiae Historicae" 33, 217-225, DOI 10.23858/FAH33.2020.016

A book by Paweł Duma which discusses profane death in pre-industrial times was published in 2019. Duma is not only a consistent, but also a successful author who does research into legal archaeology. He can be considered as such due to the fact that he is personally involved in archaeological excavations on sites of a specific category, and specifically medieval and modern public execution sites in Silesia. The level of research into this field, namely legal archaeology¹ in Poland would be erratic and apparently little advanced if it was not for achievements in this field by scholars, mainly from Silesia. Their research concentrates on the archaeology of execution sites in the Late Middle Ages and modern times.² To a much lesser degree the problem has been subject to research in Greater Poland, Pomerania³ or other parts of Poland.

However, the dissertation by Paweł Duma deals with a different aspect, namely burial practices relevant to profane death. The author concentrates on Silesia between

the 15th and the beginning of the 19th century, but he expanded the region by including Upper Lusatia and Kłodzko County. A total of 235 pages include chapters (eight main body ones as well as an introduction and conclusion which discuss space, i.e. cemeteries (Chapter 1: *Valorisation of cemetery space*), execution sites (gallows) and executed bodies (Chapter 3: *Executed bodies and execution sites*) as well as a specific category of the dead, i.e. suicides (Chapter 2: *Suicide*), criminals and puerperae (women who died in childbirth), (Chapter 4: *Women who died in childbirth*), unbaptised children (Chapter 5: *Unbaptised children*) and other groups of people in breach of the established order (Chapter 6: *Other groups in breach of the established order*). A further chapter concerns the matter of the "living dead" (Chapter 7: *The 'living dead' and related apotropaics*) including the reasons for causing damage, preventive measures undertaken against such dead, including executions. The last chapter is an analysis of archaeological evidence for the plague in the past (Chapter 8: *Time of the plague – exceptional situation*), discusses research into cemeteries or searching for people who were accused of bringing about the plague.

Undoubtedly, an accomplished combination of the skills of an archaeologist and a historian is an asset of this short, but a very interesting work. Knowledge about decisions taken by judicial bodies and the

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¹ Maisel 1982.

² E.g. Wojtucki 2009; Wojtucki 2014.

³ E.g. Rozenkranz 1993. On the stage of the research process – cf. Wojtucki 2014, 13-14, with references.

way the “profane” dead were treated is complemented by research in archives (an important contribution by Paweł Duma into the investigation of the cases of profane death in archives and town chronicles in Wrocław, Jelenia Góra, Legnica and Zielona Góra). These sources are also helpful while considering the perception of the “other” dead. Some of them proved useful mainly for doing research into the phenomenon of suicide death.⁴ The author has already successfully dealt with the issue.⁵

Chapter 2 is devoted to suicide and suicides. In it, the author explains the plight of this category of people before the industrial revolution emphasising transformations in views on self-annihilation over centuries. In doing so, he by no means limits himself to the region of Silesia. Some liberalisation in social attitudes is considered to have started in Europe at the beginning of the 16th century.⁶ Ethical attitude was to be extended to people whose death was caused by their mental illness or insanity (provided it was confirmed by witnesses or such was the decision taken by the executioner who carried out a post-mortem).⁷ In that case permission was granted for burial on consecrated church ground.⁸ Undoubtedly, it was a gateway used by families who used it out of concern for the after-death of their family members. They are dated quite early, i.e. to the times when synods and confessors’ handbooks (*libri poenitentiales*) set the norms for how that category of deceased sinners should be dealt with. It is worth noting that one of the very first written records concerning concealing suicide refers to as early as the 4th century. Bishop Timothy of Alexandria (dec. 384) ordered a detailed investigation and analysis of the reasons of a suicide before a decision to abandon a service (*pro-sphora*) was taken. One of the reasons for the recommended inquiry was the concealing of the fact by the family. When suicide was the result of loss of sanity, holding a service was not forbidden. A service was denied to those who committed suicide for loss of honour, invectives, insults or libel.⁹ The idea was one of the

answers given by the bishop in connection with a synod session in Constantinople in 381 AD (“Timothy’s Canons”)¹⁰ which were thereafter included in the Code of Canon Law (Canon 14).¹¹ The canon referred to here proves a humanitarian approach to all those suffering from a mental condition. In the first centuries also those whose death was considered to be the result of madness and being possessed by the devil were excused. An indication to some external power relieved from responsibility for their own deeds, prayers for the dead were allowed.¹² In time, indication of the devil as the driving force while taking a decision to put an end to life meant damnation. Those, whose soul was possessed by evil spirits had no chance to be buried in a cemetery. It was recommended that they be buried at a distance from Christians. Decisions taken during synods had an obvious influence on different treatment of suicides at the level of burial practices and their inclusions into the category of dangerous deceased (although this relationship is subject to discussion). Synods convened by the Franks, Visigoths, or Suebians (Orlean, Braga, Auxerre, Toledo) organising their states on the ruins of the Roman empire, who were heading in the direction of national conversion¹³ clearly formulated the principles of excluding those who killed themselves using “iron, poison, jumping from a height, hanging or any other violent way”.¹⁴ According to G. Minois, after the period of the first four centuries when Christians confronted dilemmas paradoxically it was the reign of the barbarians that brought about a definite prohibition of voluntary death in Western Europe.¹⁵

The opinion that the disapproval of suicide death by Christians was taken from Plato might sound a bit

however, he did it as a result of influence exercised by other men, or somehow otherwise as a result of paying too little attention to circumstances, and no offering ought to be made in his behalf. It is incumbent, therefore, upon the Clergyman in any case to investigate the matter accurately, in order to avoid incurring judgment.

¹⁰ Cf. Duma 2019, 15.

¹¹ Hołasek 2018, 145-146.

¹² Cf. *Discipulus Umbriensium*, cap. X: De vexatis diabulo, 1: *Si homo vexatus est a diabulo et nescit aliquid nisi ubique discurrere, et occidit semetipsum, quacunque causa potest ut oretur pro eo, si ante religiosus errat.* (8/9th century); *Paenitentiale Merseburgense*, cap. 121: *Si homo vexatus est a diabolo et escit quid faciat, et vexans se ipsum occidit, licet ut oretur pro eo.*

¹³ Cf. Dumézil 2005 on the stages and process of conversion in barbarian kingdoms.

¹⁴ *Item placuit, ut hi, qui sibi ipsis, aut per ferrum, aut per venenum, aut per praecipitium, aut suspendium, vel quolibet modo « violentam » inferunt mortem, nulla pro illis in oblatione commemoratio fiat, neque cum psalmis ad sepulturam eorum cadavera deducantur: multi enim sibi hoc per ignotantiam usurpauerunt. Similiter & de his placuit, qui pro suis sceleribus puniuntur. Synodus Bracaraensis prima, c. XVI.*

¹⁵ Minois 1999, 31.

⁴ Recently on the question of differences between the conditions and the way of storing archive files in case of a suicide death in Austria and Sweden in modern times – Luef and Miettinen 2012, 106.

⁵ Duma 2010b; Duma 2010c; Duma 2010d; Duma 2011.

⁶ Duma 2019, 14.

⁷ Wojtucki 2014, 265-266.

⁸ Cf. also Luer and Miettinen 2012, 109.

⁹ Canon 14. *Question:* If anyone having no control of himself lays violent hands on himself or hurls himself to destruction, whether an offering ought to be made for him or not?

Answer: The Clergyman ought to discern in his behalf whether he was actually and truly out of his mind when he did it. For oftentimes those who are interested in the victim and want to have him accorded an offering and a prayer in his behalf will deliberately lie and assert that he had no control of himself. Sometimes,

too general¹⁶ (Subchapter 2.1. *Differences in religious denominations and legal bases for punishment of suicides*, pp. 15-16). In the case of Plato's ideas¹⁷ regarding how people committing suicide should be treated we have no evidence they were put into practice by the Greek community.¹⁸ Anonymous burial outside *polis* was meant to be punishment for escaping into death out of indolence and cowardice. Undoubtedly, this problem is much subtler. From a long standing perspective a much greater significance in this respect could be attached to an almost universal fear brought about by violent death and a traditional way of managing fear of the soul of the prematurely deceased. Of course Plato's ideas were not strange to Christianity, however, it was Saint Augustine who played a major role in spreading the condemnation of suicides. Opinions which were formulated at that time in the first three books of "The City of God", which were published in 412, shortly after they had been written,¹⁹ gained the status of an official position of the Church on the matter. The bishop based the interpretation in force on the fifth commandment: *Thou shalt not kill*. Hence he used the basic element of Christian credo (Wj 20,13) complemented with the words of Jesus (Mt 5, 21-22). Regius, the Bishop of Hippo, was to face also the opinion about the lack of prohibition of suicide formulated *expressis verbis* in the Bible. Before Augustine published the idea the opinion of the Church Fathers on suicide was not unambiguous either, i.e. Origen, Clement of Alexandria, Bede the Venerable even allowed the possibility of considering the end of Christ's life as a voluntary sacrifice of life.²⁰ In turn, death in a situation of threat of rape was justified by Eusebius, John Chrysostom or Hieronymus²¹. Hence "from the very beginning [...] there was no universal view on this category of people".²²

However, there are plenty of factors which could indicate that in fact in the German world, at least until the time of Christianity, taking life away could have no evil connotations, irrespective of reason (self-sacrifice, slavery, lost war or old age).²³ Ancient authors (both Greek and Roman) would sometimes even write about considering the act of suicide (mainly by hanging) as an honour in the community of this group of barbarians.

The analysis of ancient and early medieval sources indicates that suicide committed by warriors following a lost battle or prisoners of war did not make the Germans a community which was unique in this respect. Such type of behaviour was noted among the Celts or Romans. Suicides committed by the old in the community of an early Germanic people (here an example of the Heruli described by Procopius of Caesarea who disapproved of them)²⁴ or later, in Nordic communities in the North²⁵ is also more like a literary *opinio communis* than a fact.²⁶ Alexander Murray was also under its influence attributing a 'rank of established institutions' to old people who committed suicide and calling this custom *Old Age Pension*²⁷ also among the Visigoths in the 3rd century, which is a misconception²⁸ spread in the literature on the subject.²⁹

Nevertheless, even if certain conditions (loss of agency, vital forces, diseases and tiredness of life) would make the elderly give up on life (there are specific examples in sagas which date back to the period between the 13th and the 15th centuries), they should be considered in terms of individually motivated decisions. It was not a social norm, and definitely not one which would rank as a ritual.³⁰

In subchapter (2.2. *Place of death – profane space*, pp. 16-19) Duma explains the basis of the preconception about a profane character of committing a suicide and ritual consequences arising therefrom (houses excluded from use, ground considered barren) and popular "preventive" measures which were taken (throwing the corpse of a suicide through the roof, a hole in a wall or a window). The custom of demolishing a house either in whole or in part was on the one hand some sort of punishment which referred to the concept of legal

²⁴ Procopius, *History of the Wars*, cap. VI, 14, 2-5.

²⁵ The basis for the issue analysed here is *Gautreks Saga* (chapters 1-2), i.e. a 13th century compilation of earlier texts which refer to, as it is assumed, an earlier tradition. However, the custom observed by one of the families which the saga tells (Trathnigg 1936, 101; Jakobsson 2011, 288) cannot be considered a factual one (Milroy 1968, 210). Hence it cannot be excluded that northern sagas were formed under the influence of texts by ancient authors, where the motif of a voluntary death of old men was not rare (Milroy 1968, 213-216).

²⁶ Nedoma 2005, 133.

²⁷ Murray 2000, 565-566.

²⁸ Murray 2000, 566.

²⁹ Its source is work by É. Durkheim (1897, 234) in which the author, citing A. Bierre de Boismont (1856, 23), wrote: *Les Goths croyaient de même que ceux qui meurent de mort naturelle sont destinés à croupir éternellement dans des antres remplis d'animaux venimeux. Sur les limites des terres des Wisigoths, il y avait un rocher élevé, dit La Roche des Aïeux, du haut duquel les vieillards se précipitaient quand ils étaient las de la vie*. Anyway, Bierre de Boismont (1856, 23) himself even identifies Visigoths with Hyperboreans.

³⁰ On this subject also Nedoma 2005, 133-134.

¹⁶ Duma 2019, 15.

¹⁷ Plato, *Laws*, IX, 873d: *they shall be buried in those borders of the twelve districts which are barren and nameless, without note, and with neither headstone nor name to indicate the tombs*.

¹⁸ On the treatment of suicide corpses in Greece – cf. Garrison 1991.

¹⁹ Drzewiecka 2012, 146.

²⁰ Zwoliński 2017, 352; Gorzkowski 2019, 34.

²¹ Zwoliński 2017, 350-351.

²² Cf. Duma 2019, 15.

²³ Cf. Duma 2019, 15.

symbolism which came from the Middle Ages, but, as the author aptly notes, there was such a practice because nobody wanted to live in such a house so the house was demolished.³¹ Duma also points to a remote tradition of social repression of this kind against people condemned to social oblivion, breaking bonds and exclusion from human community – the outlaws.³² It is true that similar practices are confirmed by Greek sources (here suicide by hanging and demolishing the roof in reaction to desecrating).³³ Much later and “culturally” closer Nordic sagas mentioned by Duma (but younger than the 10th century)³⁴ also note such cases. Taking the bodies out through a hole in a wall of a house concerned only those who were feared. It was a kind of protection against transformation into *draugr*.³⁵ The protection was to be ensured by closing eyes, nose and ears of the deceased, but also taking the body of the deceased through a hole made in southern wall of the house.³⁶ The widespread popularity of this practice among European community in the Middle Ages and later³⁷ proves it was a long standing tradition. Research into folklore confirm it was popular not only in Slavic countries³⁸, but also in Scandinavia (Denmark, Norway). In the North evidence of such a kind was preserved in literature, but there are also holes for corpses, *liklúker*, which survived in old, but still existing buildings. Taking the body of the deceased though some “other” way out might probably ensure the dead would be prevented from coming back and entering home. It can not be excluded that the tradition is not contemporary to written versions of sagas.³⁹

As time went by, that folk measure became one of the elements of treating dead bodies of those who gave up on life. The executioner who was appointed to clear the body of the suicide would throw it through a window or an assigned hole in a wall or roof.⁴⁰ It is a perfect example of how traditional imagery permeates decisions by legal bodies.

The characteristic way in which suicides were treated in cities described Subchapter 2.3. *Suicides in cities* (p. 19-20) indicates a research problem worth studying

³¹ Duma 2019, 18.

³² In case of outlaws it meant primarily the burning of a house, but also a continuous plundering their possessions by the community – Zaremska 1993, 22-23; Modzelewski 2005.

³³ Cf. Garrison 1991, 7.

³⁴ Duma 2019, 17.

³⁵ Jakobsson 2011, 296.

³⁶ *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar*, 58. Cf. also Kanerva 2013a, 211-215; Kanerva 2013b, 113-114; Kanerva 2015, 59.

³⁷ E.g. Wuttke 1869, 444.

³⁸ Examples from territories inhabited by Slavic tribes, Fischer 1921, 259-270; Biegeleisen 1930, 100, also 145, 147, 250.

³⁹ Cf. Eriksen 2013, 193-194.

⁴⁰ Examples from Silesia, Wojtucki 2014, 275-276.

in the future: a comparison of customs in urban and rural environment. The latter, generally more conservative in judgements and traditional in views and opinions would observe former customs connected with the so called bad death for a long time. Differences can also be seen in the access to the tools of judicial punishment. Villages and small towns would not opt for employing executioners on a permanent basis, be it for financial reasons or due to a smaller crime rate.⁴¹ Even in cases of suicides the executioner would be called to quite remote locations. It so happened that critical situations were managed by local communities by using traditional methods, which was condemned by judicial bodies. Due to financial considerations the executioner (each service he rendered was against payment) made sure he was not forestalled in the intervention and that the body was not cleared or buried.⁴²

Differences between the town and the country could show in the “access” to space which would accept “unworthy” corpse. There are confirmed cases of burials in places where a suicide was found (they would be done more often in a rural environment) but also temporary burials. Exhumation would be carried out no sooner than after the award was announced. Hence the corpse would wait for weeks.⁴³

Moreover, a further research problem arises, namely to find out whether, and if possible at all, there were differences in treatment of the body of a suicide due to the way they took their life away in the sources which date back to that time period. The analysis of ancient sources proves that the hanged were treated with a particular contempt. That social contempt was noted primarily in ancient Rome.⁴⁴ From contemporary perspective it is difficult to say how it was formed. In all available European statistics the use of a rope for the purpose of doing away with life remained the prevailing method. Later influence of the dissemination of the image of King Judas as a hangman strengthened the perception of the end of Judas as a repulsive act. Zbigniew Mikołajko wrote: *The alleged death of Judas as a traitor by hanging created to be the most ominous figure of Christendom, a certain type of “Antichrist” and a denial of all human dignity*

⁴¹ On the other hand, source documents confirm levying an annual fee for an executioner (it applied to e.g. certain towns in Lesser Poland). Agreements were signed with master executioners or their superiors. An executioner residing in a town also rendered services in smaller neighbouring country towns. As a result, their activity in satellite centres can sometimes be less documented, cf. Wojtucki 2014, 34-35, 54-55, 177, 186, 188, 192.

⁴² Examples from Silesia, including an executioner’s reaction to cutting off and burying some woman suicide by a peasant – Wojtucki 2014, 277.

⁴³ Duma 2019, 19.

⁴⁴ Grisé 1982, 107-109.

and human righteousness sometime between 70 AD and the 4th century AD, would become a paradigm of all disgraceful death, its very core.⁴⁵ Presumably, this type of death as no other was connected with evil forces. The hanging traitor of Jesus Christ was often depicted in the company of devils. They would escort his soul leaving the corpse through ripped guts.

Of importance is also the fact that research into peasant community from the point of view of their customs and beliefs poses some difficulties for a historian of early modern times. What poses a problem is the identification of the real voice of the folk in the legal source documents from the period unless they are clearly marked as citations in narration. Nevertheless, statements by witnesses tend to abound with information about former practices and the mindset of a community.⁴⁶

From archaeological perspective the identification of burials of suicides in a field is a highly problematic issue (2.4. *Significance of crossroads and boundaries for burials*, pp. 20-22). Crossroads and boundaries were spaces which in local beliefs might as well have been assigned to the burial of a suicide,⁴⁷ but other profane deceased would be buried here as well: criminals and victims of murders. Out of other non-apparent spaces the custom of burying a suicide in a windthrow could be mentioned.⁴⁸ On the one hand, such space had some magical associations and properties which would protect the community against the unwanted deceased; on the other hand, as a place considered to be in the power of evil forces was an ideal one where the soul of a suicide could be given away. Anyway, it already belonged there.

The tradition of burials at crossroads and boundaries of country towns in Silesia is confirmed by sources dating back to as early as the 18th century while in other parts of Europe a similar custom is noted also in the next century.⁴⁹ The dating of the beginning of the period seems difficult, a late medieval period is often pointed to⁵⁰, and occasionally it refers to earlier centuries in some parts of Europe.⁵¹

⁴⁵ Mikolejko 2012, 134-135.

⁴⁶ Luef and Miettinen 2012; Cf. also Wojtucki 2014, 264, footnote 1869 – in certain situations witnesses were chosen from the elderly.

⁴⁷ Halliday 2010.

⁴⁸ Biegeleisen 1930, 100.

⁴⁹ E.g. in England a suicide was buried at crossroads (the so called Oram's Grave in the parish of Maddington (Wiltshire) in 1849 although such a practice was officially prohibited by British parliament in 1823 – Reynolds 2009, 216; Harte 2011, 264.

⁵⁰ The earliest documented case of burial at crossroads in England dates back to 1510 – Halliday 1997. Cf. also MacDonald and Murphy 1993, 15, 44-45; Harte 2011, 278. In turn, A. Murray gives an example of the 13th and 14th written sources for the territory of Germany, Murray 2000, 46.

⁵¹ E.g. Reynolds 2002; Reynolds 2009, 52.

Subchapter 2.5 is to answer the question posed in the title: *Executions of suicides — prevention or punishment?* (pp. 22-24). Examples collected in Silesia indicate that only some punishments for criminals were also inflicted on suicides. It is not surprising considering the status of a suicide as a murderer in itself. In a situation when taking life away was an act committed after a crime (in contemporary suicidal nomenclature many cases could be classified as extended suicide) such a deed was punished more severely. Some sentences given for such guilt give an impression of “double punishment”.⁵²

In extreme cases the corpse of the suicide was annihilated by cremation and scattering the remains. In case of suicides who were not guilty of any other crime punishment was inflicted on the corpse more due to the really felt fear of the dead who in the public opinion was especially dangerous. It seems that decapitation, staking or possibly putting the corpse in a wooden barrel were most common ones. As Duma⁵³ aptly notes the latter might have been due to some practical considerations, i.e. the corpse which was found was rotting away.

Subchapter 2.6. *Beliefs and magical practices associated with suicide death* (pp. 24-26) presents beliefs and practices which represented two contradictory aspects of the same phenomenon. The first one was a profane corpse which was considered a taboo. People⁵⁴ or objects became profane by being in contact with them. Efforts were made in case of objects (rope, knife, a piece of beam⁵⁵) to bury them with the deceased. Deathbed and planks which were used to transport the corpse were destroyed. Duma considers such a custom to be a kind of amends. It seems, however, that it was coins that had such a value as they were used in modern times as apotropaic means. Stones placed in the place where the suicide was buried were also a preventive measure. All these measures were to neutralise the power of the dead. Exceptions from the customary scenario could bring about unwanted adverse weather conditions. For this reason the community made sure the suicide was not buried on consecrated ground.⁵⁶ Not so long ago, in folk tradition the ground had the

⁵² For a suicide who was guilty death of his wife and child: punishment by wheeling; for suicide throwing into a barrel, Duma 2019, 22.

⁵³ Duma 2019, 23.

⁵⁴ It is especially interesting from the perspective of a social perception of the function of an executioner and cases when an executioner and his family were refused an honourable burial. On Silesia, disgrace, separate status of the executioner and sometimes attempts to regain honour and citizens' rights, cf. Wojtucki 2014.

⁵⁵ Duma 2019, 25.

⁵⁶ Duma 2019, 24-25.

power to do justice.⁵⁷ That folk belief is perpetuated in one of the 13th century *exempla*.⁵⁸ Hence it comes as no surprise that attempts at more liberal treatment of the matter of burial by lay or ecclesiastical authorities ended up in social protests.⁵⁹

The other aspect, which represents a different approach, is connected with ascribing supernatural powers to taboo objects and were a source of impurity. The rope was of particular significance in folk medicine,⁶⁰ but so had also elements of garment or touching the corpse of the suicide.⁶¹ Similarly, some universal similarities of folk beliefs can be noted: the hangman's rope as some sort of medicine and apotropaion was used already in ancient times.⁶²

From an archaeological perspective of special importance is the issue of the possibility of identification of the burial of suicides. We have many criteria identified on the basis of historical sources or modern folklore. They include, primarily, the way the corpse was treated, the choice of the burial site and the arrangement of the grave pit. However, from the point of view of archaeology they can prove to be insufficient, because suicides "shared customs" with other categories of the dead who died a profane death. Burial outside a cemetery, at crossroads, boundaries, decapitation pressing with stones do not unequivocally mean that we deal with a person who took their life away (victims of murders, the plague). This level of difficulty of associating the place of discovery of a corpse with the category of an "outlaw" shows in the compilation of court notes from Bamberg (from 1540 to 1611) concerning 98 cases of suicide. Said people were buried not only at crossroads, execution sites under gallows, unconsecrated ground next to unbaptised children, but also on a burial site of Gypsies who had been murdered earlier.⁶³ Sources even give evidence of a confirmed case of a burial of a suicide in a cemetery where those who died of cholera were buried (*sic!*).⁶⁴

Acts of dehonoration performed against suicides analogous to other convicts poses an additional cognitive problem. Although it is sometimes assumed that suicides were probably laid in prone position and people suspected of being vampires were often cremated after

they were decapitated,⁶⁵ however, this generalisation concerning modern Silesia and Lusatia would need to be objectivised on the basis comparison of source material in macroscale. Generally, it seems that attempts on microscale, a combination of archaeological discoveries and court sources could be successful.

Identification of burials of suicides within a necropolis subject to research poses similar problems. As the author aptly notes,⁶⁶ unfortunately, the ground outside the wall is rarely subject to research. Cases of large-scale research covering the whole area are more frequent in cases of early medieval burial grounds. We have few written sources which refer to this period, and as regards the location of the graves of suicides in that period, at least with regard to Polish land, we do not have much to say. It can only be assumed that in row cemeteries suicides were buried together with other dead, however, the border zone of the cemetery could have been the preferred one. Their symbolic exclusion from the community of the dead was a gradual process, along the development of a network of parishes and Christianisation of the community.⁶⁷ Depending on the region of Europe the process was different. Exclusion of suicides from burial in a cemetery was actually a gradual process. However, the definite demand for such a prohibition appeared no earlier than in the 15th century. It was mainly the urban environment that put forward such a demand considering quite a moderate attitude of its clergy.⁶⁸ In contrast to non-baptised children, the relationship between laymen and clergy was clearly reversed. The pressure to exercise canonical law with regard to suicides kept growing; some priestly leniency of clergymen often met with social disapproval. Exhumations of buried suicides in consecrated ground and their relocation outside the cemetery occurred especially in the Late Middle Ages. The fear might have been caused by a belief in their relationship with evil forces or heresy as their deed was clearly a trespass against God.⁶⁹

Considering the issue in time in the context of Polish land is controversial, not only because the level of research into early medieval necropolises. It happens that due to lack of grave goods which have the value of dating burials (anyway, lack of grave goods is considered to be one of distinctive features of people who lived on the margin of society) it can be concluded that

⁵⁷ Cf. Masłowska 2012, 131-132.

⁵⁸ *Sermones vulgares* CLXXVII (fo. 122), version in Herolt (Disciplus), Promptuarium.

⁵⁹ Examples from Silesia, Württemberg – Duma 2019, 24-25, from Sweden, Luef and Miettinen 2012, 111.

⁶⁰ Duma 2019, 25; cf. also e.g. Davis and Matteoni 2017, 69.

⁶¹ Davis and Matteoni 2017, 39.

⁶² Examples in Grisé 1982, 144-145.

⁶³ Dietz 1926, 172 – after Wojtucki 2014, 266.

⁶⁴ Wojtucki 2014, 267.

⁶⁵ Wojtucki 2014, 281.

⁶⁶ Duma 2019.

⁶⁷ Reynolds, who dates the practice of burying suicides in a "heathen burial place", on borders or in an "execution cemetery" is of a similar opinion with reference to excavations dating back to the Anglo-Saxon period, Reynolds 2009.

⁶⁸ Schmitz-Esser 2016, 493.

⁶⁹ Schmitz-Esser 2016, 493.

the burial took place after the necropolis was no longer in use. Not much is known about enclosing cemeteries at that time.

Entries in West European sources dating back to 6th or the 11th centuries give evidence that suicides were buried away from Christians.⁷⁰ It proves that recommendations made by synods and confessors who would recurrently remind about the necessity of a different treatment of suicides were put into practice.⁷¹

Burials of suicides remain one of the most troublesome to be differentiated among the deviant burial. They are difficult to identify in archaeological material if we do not have relevant pathological data of bones or a context which could be interpreted in an unambiguous way that would have a reference in written sources.⁷² Different ways of taking one's own life are also an obstacle – not all methods leave traces on bones, and in case of traces which are left it is difficult to conclude whether they were sustained due to one's own intention, a third party action or an accident.⁷³ The same doubts could be faced at the moment a dead body is

found – was it some fortuitous event or a wilful act, such as drowning or fall from a height. Of little help can be the discovery of a tool used to take one's life away. It was not a common practice, but it is difficult to state whether the murder weapon was at stake. Theoretically, the fact that the suicide was put into the grave in the garment worn at the time of death could be of help. The aspect of wearing clothes (everyday clothes, funeral clothes, lack of clothes) is difficult to analyse using archaeological methods due to the fact that clothes are not preserved in the ground and a comparison on the basis of a metal object is not always possible.⁷⁴ Hence on this matter we are left to sheer conjecture. From archaeological perspective it is difficult to find a relationship between the way death was caused and burial. The support of anthropology could be decisive, however, not always an answer to all questions that arise can be found. Therefore, the book by Paweł Duma should be appreciated as it provides a lot of new information which is helpful in archaeological research into the issue of suicide burial and other profane death.

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⁷⁰ *HF* IV, 39: *Veruntamen ad monasterium Chrononensim delatus, sepulturae mundatus, sed non iuxta Christianorum cadavera positus, sed missarum solemnina non meruit; quod non ab alia nisi ob iniuriam episcopi haec evenisse probantur*. E.g. Schmitz-Esser 2016, 492.

⁷¹ E.g. another canon passed in Nîmes (*Concilium Nemausense* IV), during synod convened in 1284.

⁷² Which is possible in some special cases both with reference to the description of the grave and the place where the body was buried, e.g. Wojtucki 2014, 243.

⁷³ While hanging for a long time can leave some distinct traces on the skeleton, studies on the contemporary hanged (including suicides) prove that in only 8% of cases the hyoid bone (in the throat) is broken, while the fracture of cervical vertebrae is found 'only when a substantial drop is involved in the hanging', Ubelaker 1992, 1219.

⁷⁴ Cf. e.g. observations by Reynolds 2009, 52.

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