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ON CROSSES, SHRINES, AND CHOLERA CEMETERIES IN THE PARISHES OF MIERZYN AND ROZPRZA, ŁÓDZKIE VOIVODESHIP (POLAND)

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to illustrate the material remains of epidemics that affected two parishes in the centre of Poland in the 18th and 19th centuries. The paper will present the preliminary results of research in archives (metrical books) compared with both the accounts of descendants of families who died as a result of the epidemics and prospecting with non-invasive methods (LIDAR).

Keywords: cholera, epidemic cemetery, central Poland, Mierzyn, Rozprza, modern times, non-invasive prospection techniques

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Introduction

Epidemics have been a permanent feature of human history from the earliest times to the present day. In many parts of Poland, traces of them have remained in the form of crosses and shrines erected by inhabitants over the centuries to commemorate these difficult periods. The memory of epidemic cemeteries (called 'cholera cemeteries' since the 19th century),¹ unless they are marked by some material form of commemoration, is quickly erased. This is usually facilitated by their peripheral location in relation to the buildings of the time, among fields and forests, 'under statues' (i.e. by existing shrines), far from human settlements.²

The titular problem will be presented on the basis of research conducted in two neighbouring Roman Catholic parishes in central Poland – Mierzyn and Rozprza, in the Piotrków Trybunalski District. The article will characterise the epidemic cemeteries and the course

of the epidemic on the basis of an analysis of metrical books and documents found in the parish archives in Mierzyn. Complementary sources are interviews conducted with residents of individual villages in the area, some of whom are direct descendants of people who died in the 19th century as a result of the epidemic.

Epidemics in the 18th-19th centuries in the parish of Mierzyn

Over the centuries, epidemics of cholera, smallpox, bubonic plague, influenza, typhus, leprosy, and diphtheria decimated the population of Europe.³ The plague wreaked havoc on the Polish population in the 17th and early 18th centuries. It was no different in the parish of Mierzyn, where a significant increase in deaths was evident in the 18th century. At that time the plague epidemic was spread by the army, which passed through the Polish lands during the Northern War (1700-1721), among others.⁴ This is confirmed by the chronicles of the Bernardine and Jesuit monasteries in Piotrków

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¹ Cholera first came to world attention in 1817. In 1831, it crossed the south-eastern border of the Russian Empire and reached Poland, Janicka 2021. On the epidemics of cholera in other European countries, cf. Svoboda 2004; Roberts and Cox 2003.

² Cf. Wyżga 2014, 452.

³ Gładkowska-Rzeczycka 2008.

⁴ At the beginning of the 18th century, a plague pandemic reached the Commonwealth during this war; it was accompanied by typhoid fever, smallpox, spotted typhus, and dysentery, Danowska 2017, 26.



Trybunalski.⁵ The worst years in terms of mortality, however, were 1736 and 1737, when there were 51 and 166 deaths, respectively, in the whole parish of Mierzyn. This compares with 16 and 34 deaths, respectively, in the non-epidemic years of 1738 and 1735 (Table 1). So what calamity happened in 1736-37?

Franciszek Zader, parish priest of Mierzyn and dean of Piotrków, when compiling a registry of births in the 18th century on the basis of the metrical books of that period, wrote that it was ‘a hard year, with rain, famine and bad winds’.⁶ The same is confirmed by the mentioned Bernardine and Jesuit chronicles. B. Baranowski described that time in the ‘Dzieje Piotrkowa Tryb.’ (History of Piotrków Tryb.): ‘*The years 1736-1737 were a period of crop failure and famine. In 1736 torrential rain falling during the vegetation period caused a famine in the Piotrków area. This was exacerbated the following year by another crop failure. A poorly nourished population was susceptible to various diseases, which determined the increase in mortality rates*’.⁷

Table 1. Number of deaths in the parish of Mierzyn in the 18th century – selected years.

Year	N
1709	26
1710	43
1711	13
1717	10
1718	29
1719	4
1736	51
1737	166
1738	16
1748	17
1749	26
1750	5
1769	10
1770	22
1771	6
1793	33
1794	40
1795	38

The epidemics which affected the village and parish of Mierzyn until the 20th century are commemorated by three crosses located in the very centre, at the crossroads leading from Mierzyn to Tomawa and from

⁵ Baranowski 1989, 160.

⁶ *Registry of births of the parish of Mierzyn in the years 1719-1821* compiled by priest Franciszek Zader. Parish archive in Mierzyn, p. 3.

⁷ Baranowski 1989, 160.

Lubień to Gorzkowice. We know that they were erected during the cholera epidemic, but unfortunately the parish archive does not record when exactly this took place. Similar crosses and shrines were erected in many regions of Poland. Built on the borders of villages, they were supposed to stop the disease from crossing the border of human settlements. These crosses and shrines are also a manifestation of the piety of the inhabitants, who often saw the plague as a divine punishment for the sins of the people.

The archival search shows that epidemics occurred in this parish several times in the 19th century. There is evidence that cholera (*Vibrio cholerae*) attacked the parish community of Mierzyn in 1832, 1845, 1847, 1855, 1866, and 1873. In the Mierzyn parish, the epidemic of 1873 wreaked the most havoc, with 202 burials taking place – the highest number of recorded parish deaths in one year for the entire 19th century. The 1873 epidemic caused 66 deaths in Szczepanowice (the greatest number of any village in the parish), 33 deaths in Mierzyn, and 20 in Tomawa. At that time three wooden crosses were erected in the centre of Mierzyn, which in recent years have been replaced with metal ones. The following table contains selected years of the 19th century with the corresponding number of deaths in Mierzyn parish.

Table 2. Number of deaths in Mierzyn parish in the 19th century (selected years).

Year	N
1824	46
1826	58
1831	62
1832	117
1833	90
1844	67
1845	96
1846	81
1847	133
1848	100
1854	95
1855	146
1856	84
1865	65
1866	125
1867	55
1872	80
1873	202
1874	75
1880	65
1889	104
1890	103
1898	111
1899	137



Fig. 1. Three wooden crosses erected in Mierzyn, Piotrków Trybunalski District during the epidemic (?), as photographed in the 1940s.



Fig. 2. Tomawa, Piotrków Trybunalski District. A metal cross at a cholera cemetery. Photo K. Skóra.

Each epidemic resulted in the deaths of many people. Children and the elderly were particularly at risk. It sometimes happened that most or all the members of a family died. In 1845, Mateusz Dębski, then a blacksmith from Mierzyn, buried probably all his household members. Over the span of just two days in August, he lost his son Felicjan, age 7, his daughters Eleonora,

age 8, Antonina, age 9, and Salomea, age 2, as well as his wife Joanna, age 41, and two other people with whom he shared his modest cottage: his fosterling Ludwik, age 19, and Łucja Pawlikowska, a *komornica*,⁸ age 56.⁹ Looking

⁸ In Polish: landless peasant living in someone else's household.

⁹ Baranowska 2018, 44.



Fig. 3. Tomawa, Piotrków Trybunalski District. A wooden pillar shrine at a cholera cemetery. Photo K. Skóra.

through death records from the epidemic years, one can find many such examples in every village.

Epidemic cemeteries in Szczepanowice and Tomawa

The victims of the plague (or ‘miasma’) were usually buried outside the parish cemetery. Less frequently, a separate plot was assigned within an existing Roman Catholic necropolis (e.g. Jeżów, Brzeziny District). As a rule, cemeteries were located in forest or wilderness areas. Their size was determined by the number of deaths and the forecast of future deaths based on past experience. Rural epidemic cemeteries are generally small and, in the case of the eponymous cemeteries, nowadays very damaged.¹⁰

Dying because of an epidemic led to social exclusion and burial outside normal cemeteries. The state of medical knowledge at the time influenced the thinking of local communities, as it was believed that it would be possible to contract infection from the dead if they were buried within the settlement or village.¹¹ Burials

were carried out quickly, without the usual funeral ceremony, for safety reasons. These burials were therefore considered undignified and ‘unchristian’ by society. This created fear and these cemeteries were perceived as dangerous places. Cholera cemeteries, as special places in the rural landscape, were inhabited by demonic beings in the light of folk imagination.¹²

Shortly after the Second World War, priests from the parish of Mierzyn mentioned in official documents the preserved cemeteries where the cholera dead were buried, namely in Szczepanowice, near the border of the Cieszanowice estate, and in Tomawa ‘in the junipers’¹³ on the so-called Piaskowe Góry (Sand Mountains).¹⁴

A metal cross (Fig. 2) and an old, heavily leaning wooden pillar shrine (Fig. 3) still stand in Tomawa on the site of the former cholera cemetery. This place is located in the forest, on the left side, several meters

¹² Ignas 2018, 25, 71.

¹³ Perhaps the location is no coincidence – according to 18th century recommendations, juniper wood, vinegar, and sulphur were used to disinfect quarantine sites, Vigarello 1997, 99; Danowska 2017, 30.

¹⁴ *Description of the parish of Mierzyn in 1946*, 4.

¹⁰ Ciesielska 2008, 126-127.

¹¹ Ciesielska 2008, 127.

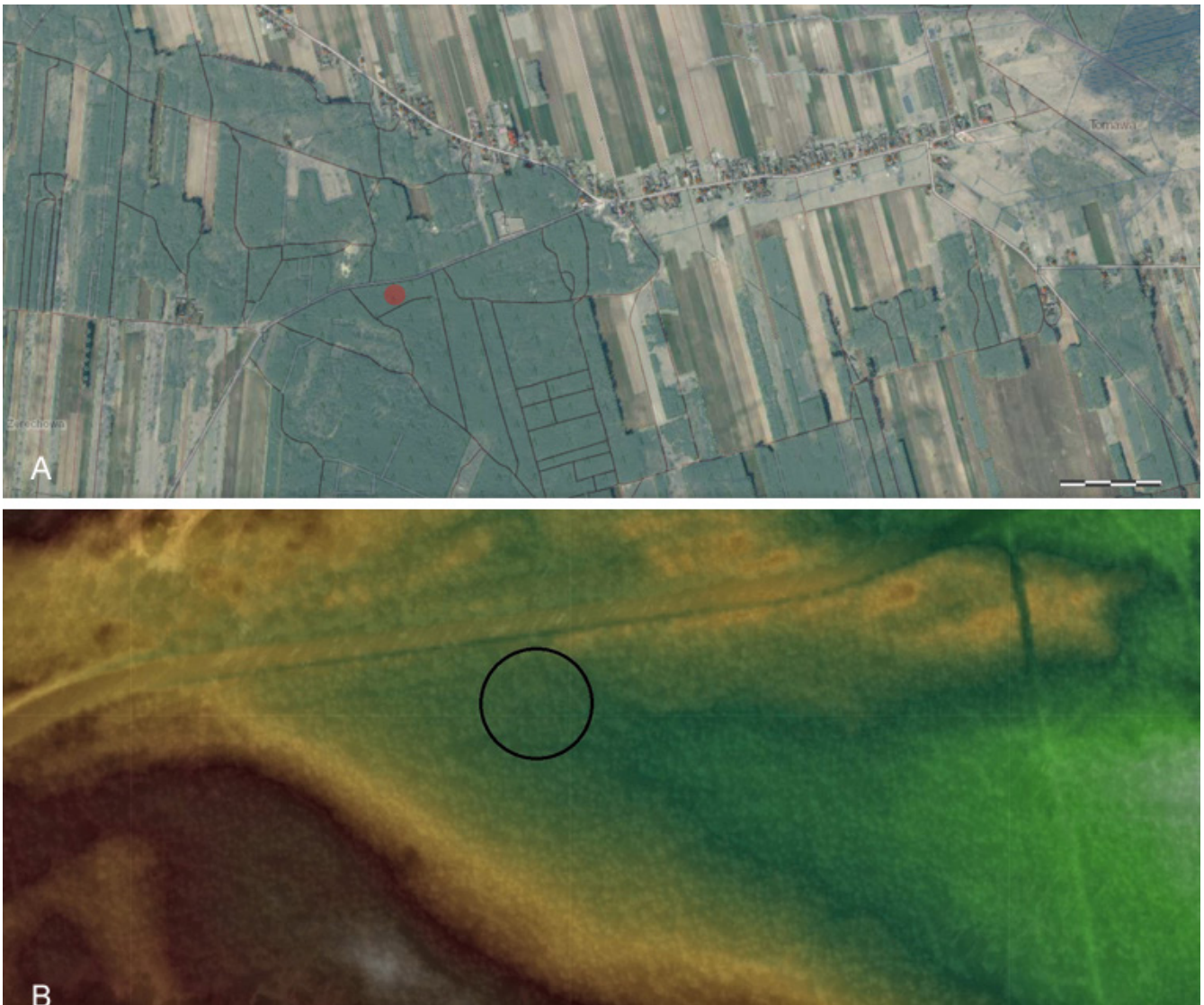


Fig. 4. Tomawa, Piotrków Trybunalski District: a – location of old cholera cemetery; b – location of alleged cemetery on LIDAR visualisation based on ALS (Airborne Laser Scanning) data of Head Office of Geodesy and Cartography (CODGIK). Prepared by K. Skóra.

from the road leading towards Żerechowa. The local community still remembers it as evidenced by lighting candles and decorating with artificial flowers.¹⁵

The non-invasive field survey did not reveal a clear trace of a cemetery boundary in the form of an earth or stone embankment. The outline of the cemetery is faintly visible, however, on the *Light Detection and Ranging* (LIDAR) visualisation (Fig. 4). Perhaps it is approximately a 10×25 m rectangle. This supposition would require field verification by invasive methods (sounding, auger). Archaeological verification would also allow the whole area of the cemetery to be surrounded with protection – this matter is important because the areas in the nearest vicinity are being exploited as gravel deposits.

¹⁵ The location of the cemetery was indicated in 2017 by inhabitant S. Dobrysiewicz from Tomawa.

The second cholera cemetery is located on the edge of the forest in the vicinity of Szczepanowice village. A visitor can easily notice the slightly raised ground level and small hill on which a chapel with a metal cross stands (Fig. 5). This shrine was founded in 1918 by the parish priest Antoni Christoph (†1933), who rendered great service to the parish of Mierzyn. He probably wanted to commemorate the end of World War I and, I believe, to replace the old cross at the cholera cemetery by erecting a new shrine. The inscriptions visible on the pedestal are very valuable, showing the dates of the burials at this place – 1866 and 1873. A few metres away there is another shrine, wooden, on a tree (Fig. 6). Numerous candles and flowers prove that local inhabitants remember the cemetery and take care of it.

For many years the cemetery has been under the care of Zbigniew Owczarek, an inhabitant of Szczepanowice.



Fig. 5. Szczepanowice, Piotrków Trybunalski District. A shrine founded by the priest Antoni Christoph in 1918 at the site of a cholera cemetery. Photo K. Skóra.



Fig. 6. Szczepanowice, Piotrków Trybunalski District. A wooden shrine founded by local people. Photo K. Skóra.

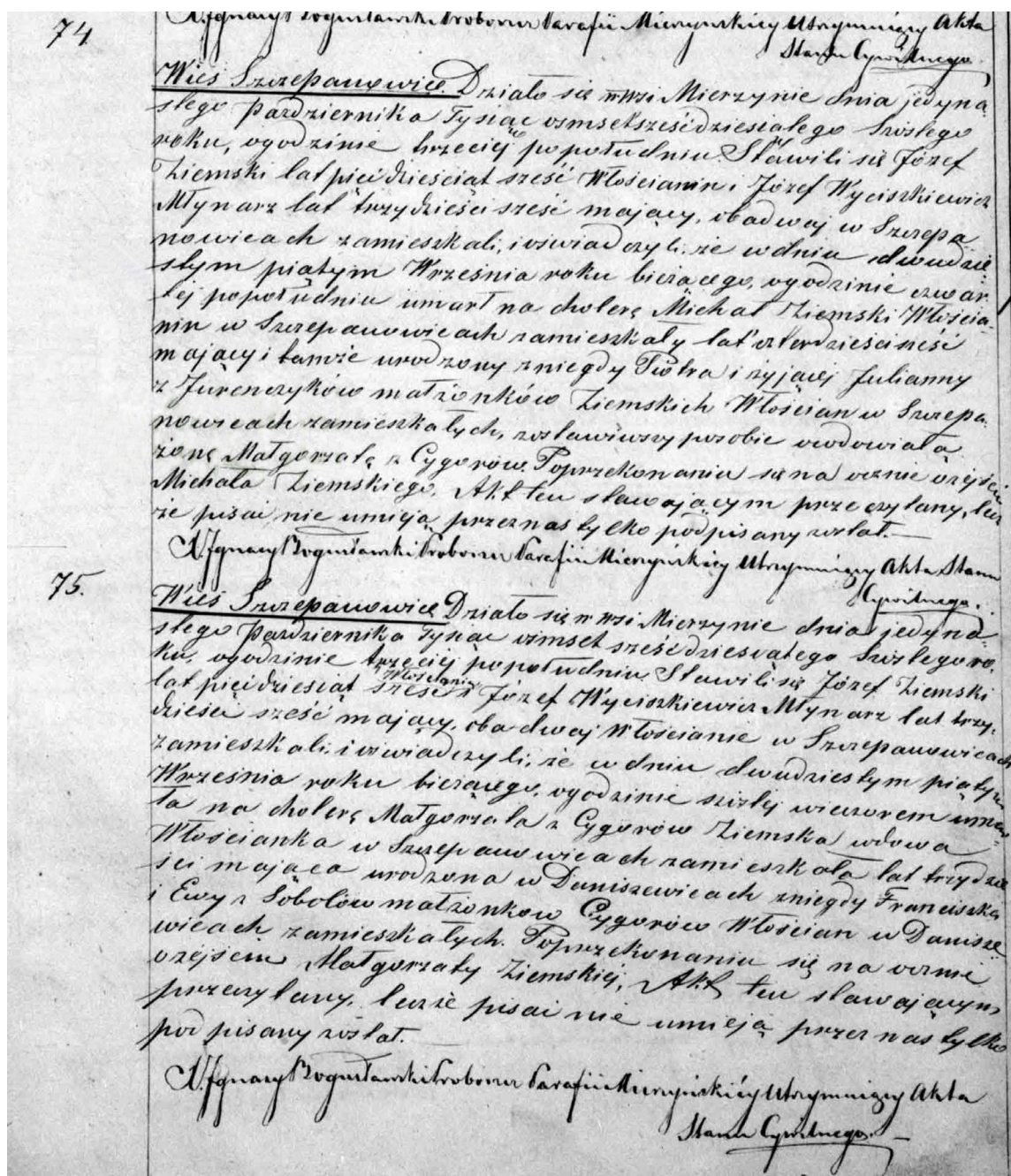


Fig. 7. Death certificates no. 74 and 75 from 1866 of Szczepanowice inhabitants who died of cholera. Metric books of the parish of Mierzyn.

According to his account, based on stories passed down in his family through successive generations, the inhabitants of Szczepanowice and the neighbouring village of Bujnice, situated in the parish of Gorzkowice, were buried here. Among those buried in 1866 is his great-great-grandfather, Łukasz Owczarek, the village mayor at the time, who 'after returning from the field he fell down and never got up again'. This story is still passed on in the Owczarek family today.¹⁶ It can easily be confirmed

by analysing death certificates from that period. Łukasz's father, Florian, also died of cholera a few days before him.¹⁷

Cholera appeared in Szczepanowice in September 1866 and lasted until November 1866. Its first victim in the village was Józef Maras, a peasant. Out of 39 people who died that year, 31 were cholera victims.¹⁸ The plague of 1873 was far greater. In the whole

¹⁶ Oral report from an inhabitant of Szczepanowice – Z. Owczarek. Interview in 2021.

¹⁷ Metric books of Mierzyn parish: death certificate no. 76, death certificate no. 78 from 1866.

¹⁸ Metric books of Mierzyn parish, Death certificates of Szczepanowice village from 1866.

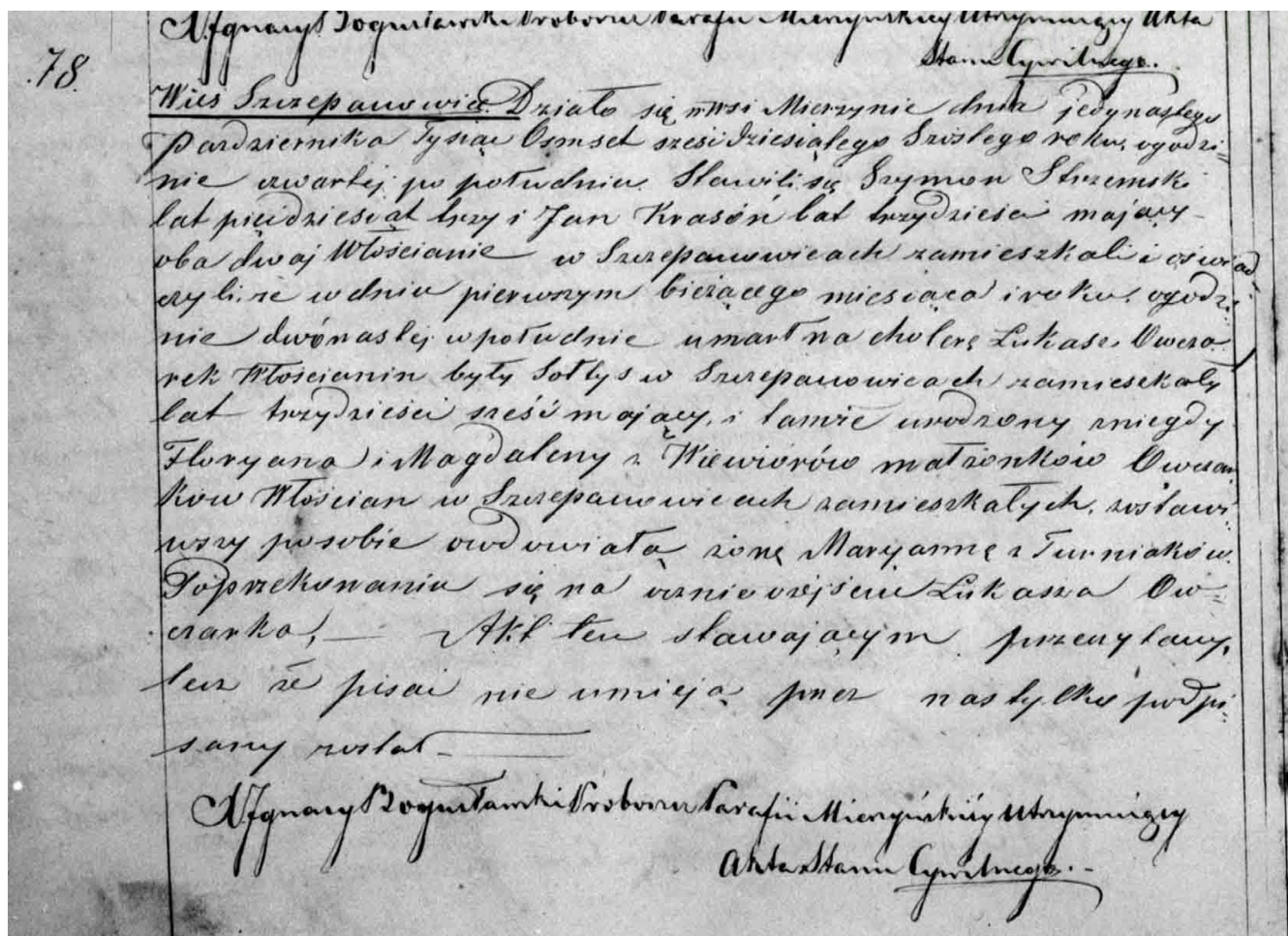


Fig. 8. Death certificate number 78 from 1866 of Łukasz Owczarek with the cause of death listed. *Metric books of the parish of Mierzyn.*

parish 202 people died – 57 in Szczepanowice alone.¹⁹ The then parish priest of Mierzyn, one Bogusławski (who administered the parish from 1835 to 1882), did not write the causes of death in the death register of 1873. However, it is known that such a high number of deaths was caused by an epidemic. This is evidenced by a whole series of deaths from one village at approximately the same time, not infrequently within a single family (Figs. 7 and 8). The case of the entire Ladra family from Szczepanowice is indisputable proof of this.²⁰

According to my calculations over a hundred inhabitants from the parishes of Mierzyn and Gorzkowice rest in this cemetery. It is likely that inhabitants of other religions (such as Evangelicals) who died of cholera were also buried in this place. This issue still requires archival research. The cemetery in Szczepanowice is perfectly visible on LIDAR visualisation (Fig. 9). It is rectangular in shape and measures approximately

35×16 m. In total, it occupies an area of approximately 5.5 acres. It was surrounded by an earthwork now almost imperceptible. A height difference analysis (LIDAR) shows that it is now no more than approx. 15-20 cm high. The vegetation cover makes it invisible. Little is known about the depth at which the dead were buried. Probably general recommendations were attempted to be followed. In the 18th century the dead had to be buried in graves 3 to 6 feet deep.²¹ Anti-plague ordinances dictated that the dead should be buried deep enough that they could not be dug up by wild animals or stray dogs, which could risk spreading the infection further.²² To disinfect the bodies, they were sprinkled with quicklime or lye. Wooden stakes were laid on top. Sometimes it was also customary to bury the dead with their mouths filled with fresh bread or bread moistened in warm water.²³

¹⁹ *Metric books of Mierzyn parish*, death certificates of Szczepanowice village from 1873.

²⁰ *Metric books of Mierzyn parish*, death certificate no. 50, 51, 57, and 62.

²¹ Srogosz 1997, 36-37, 41, 105.

²² Karpiński 2014, 372.

²³ Karpiński 2014, 373.



Fig. 9. Szczepanowice, Piotrków Trybunalski District. a – location of the cholera cemetery; b – location of the cemetery on the LIDAR visualisation based on ALS (Airborne Laser Scanning) data of Head Office of Geodesy and Cartography (CODGIK). Prepared by K. Skóra.

An epidemic shrine and cemetery (?) in the village of Bagno

In the neighbouring parish of Rozprza, near the small village of Bagno, by a forest track, there is a chapel with the inscription ‘A memorial to those who died of cholera in August 1852 in the Bagno settlement’. It is difficult to say when it was built. It could have been just after 1852 or much later (Fig. 10). Its silhouette is insufficiently characteristic to determine the time of its erection.

In August 1852, the first entries appear in the death register of the parish of Rozprza, indicating that cholera cases appeared in the parish. This is also supported by data (Table 3). It is clear that the number of deaths rose

between 1852 and 1855,²⁴ a period when the higher mortality rate was not only directly caused by the cholera epidemic, but also by the poorer health of the population that survived the epidemic.

Over the course of a few days, the tiny settlement of Bagno (or rather the surrounding wilderness) lost many of its inhabitants. Between 6 and 10 August 1852 the following people died: Jan Gorgoń, *komornik*²⁵ (68 years old), his wife Marianna née Szczepańska (64 years old) and daughter Franciszka Pardel (40 years old), *komornica*, widow (died 16 August), Walenty Woźniak (35 years old), *komornik*, Paweł

²⁴ Metrical books of the parish of Rozprza from the 19th century.

²⁵ In Polish: landless peasant living in someone else’s household.

Tyczka (28 years old), *komornik*, and his daughter Elżbieta (6 years old).²⁶ The number of inhabitants of Bagno definitely decreased.

Table 3. Number of deaths in Rozprza parish in the years 1850-1857.

Year	N
1850	63
1851	68
1852	93
1853	97
1854	111
1855	183
1856	80
1857	84

There is no information on where the inhabitants who died at that time were buried. If the number of deaths was not high, the dead were buried within the cemetery in use.²⁷ An increase in the number of deaths meant a decision to designate a separate burial place. It is also difficult to establish the rules that were applied to burial during the plague. However, the question of whether to bury the dead in coffins or without, in single or mass graves, depended on many factors. While at the beginning of a plague victims were usually buried in coffins, an increase in deaths changed this principle: several dead people were placed in one coffin, or buried directly in the ground, in linen bags or naked.²⁸

The shrine in the village of Bagno was erected a few hundred metres to the south-east of the present buildings. The terrain is elevated in relation to the settlements concentrated in the river valley. Such a location of the shrine could indicate that a cholera grave is located nearby. The shrine was not marked on the maps of the 19th century. The area is now overgrown with forest. On LIDAR visualisation no terrain form which could be identified with the cemetery was found (Fig. 11). On the other hand, a strong degradation of the surrounding area is visible from the area. Gravel is being excavated immediately adjacent to the shrine and to the south of it. Assuming that the cemetery is located in this area, steps should be taken to prevent devastation of this site.

The plague which reached Bagno in August 1852 first appeared in the Kingdom of Poland three months



Fig. 10. Bagno, Piotrków Trybunalski District. A shrine erected in memory of cholera victims in 1852. Photo K. Skóra.

earlier in May 1852, not far from the places under discussion – in Złoczew in the Sieradz district. By June it had reached Zgierz and Kalisz. By September, 46,000 people had contracted the disease, 20,000 of whom had died.²⁹ Priests in individual parishes were informed about the first symptoms of cholera and how to protect themselves against it, using instructions from the Medical Council. In larger villages, rooms were to be set up to gather the sick, so that they could be treated by feldshers. The treatment of the poorest inhabitants was to be free. In the same year, a book was published entitled ‘O środkach zaradczych w epidemii cholery w roku 1852 w Królestwie Polskim przedsiębranych, z dołączeniem wiadomości lekarskich i statystycznych’ (‘On remedial measures in the cholera epidemic of 1852 in the Kingdom of Poland undertaken, with appended medical and statistical information’), which was a kind of instruction manual for stopping the disease. Despite this, mortality was high among the poorest rural communities.

²⁶ Metrical books of the parish of Rozprza from the 19th century, death certificate no. 52-56, and 62.

²⁷ Karpiński 2014, 370.

²⁸ Karpiński 2014, 371.

²⁹ *O środkach zaradczych w epidemii cholery*, 24-25.

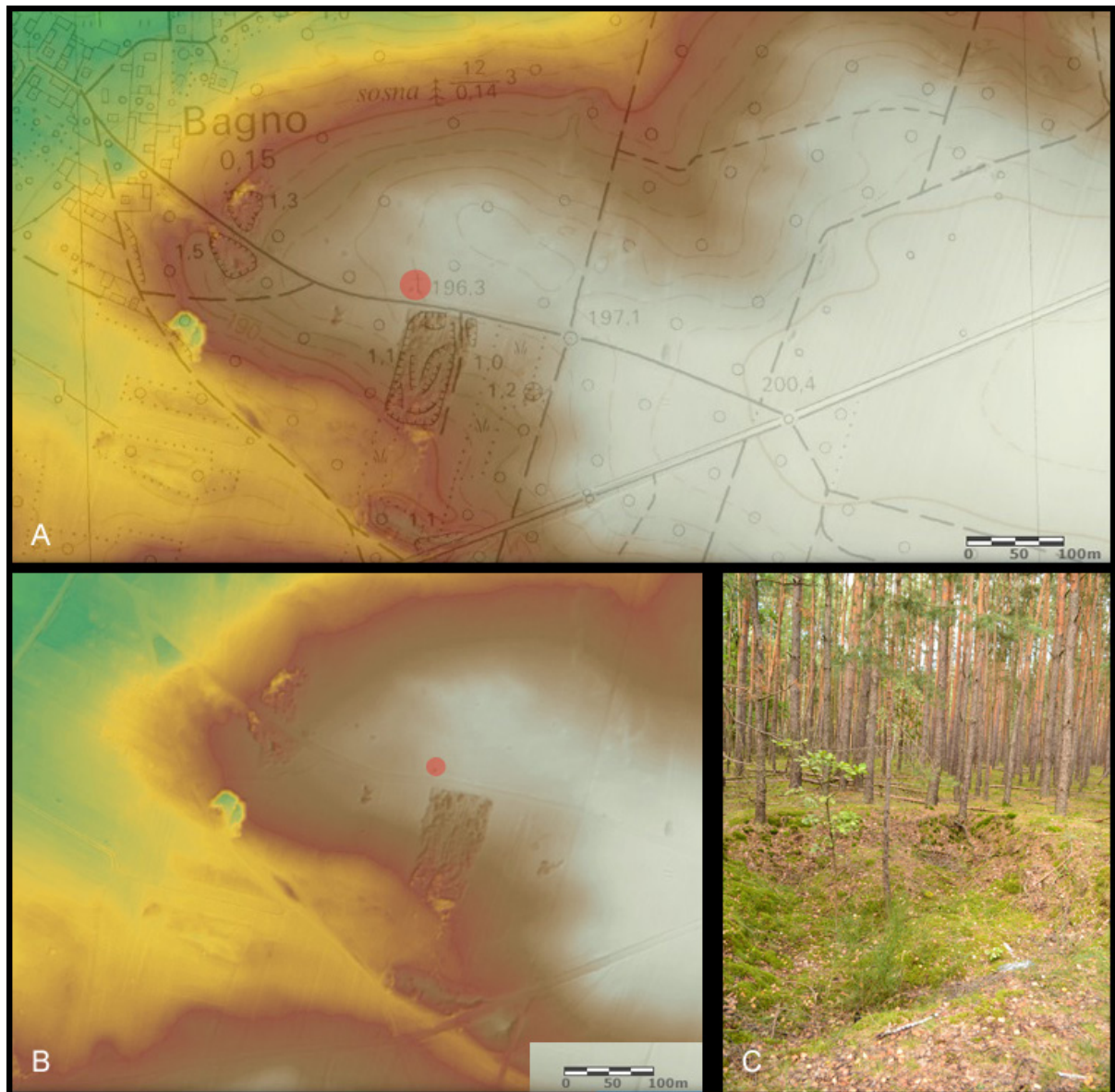


Fig. 11. Bagno, Piotrków Trybunalski District. Areas around the shrine on LIDAR visualisation. Based on ALS (Airborne Laser Scanning) data from the Head Office of Geodesy and Cartography (CODGIK). Prepared by K. Skóra.

Conclusion

The above examples of ‘epidemic’ sites where the dead were buried, which have survived to our times, testify that in the memory of many generations of the local community, events related to the dying out of the inhabitants through various epidemics have left a strong mark. They are an important testimony to local history. The way in which these events are remembered is a separate issue—stories passed down through generations can be distorted. From an archaeological-historical perspective, it is therefore important to register such sites and document them properly (location, area occupied, method of fencing, etc.).³⁰

³⁰ On the possibilities of archaeological investigations of epidemic cemeteries cf. e.g. Blanchard and Georges 2007; Souquet-Leroy et al. 2012; Fornaciari 2017.

It is necessary to collect the accounts of the local population and verify them. As these graves are not listed in the register of historical monuments, they are not protected by law.³¹ They last only as long as local people remember them. Often it is single individuals who take care of them, make small repairs, and prevent them from overgrowing. The disappearance of a wooden cross or a shrine on a tree may mean the end of the tradition of a place and, in the long run, the irreversible destruction of the cemetery.

³¹ Example of a destroyed cholera cemetery in Bagnówka near Białystok. Cf. Domanowska 2010; Ostaszewski 2015, 135.

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