

Grave wreaths in archaeological research

Marcin Nowak^a

Grave wreaths are regarded as elements of grave equipment and their history dates back to the Antiquity. The constructions of grave wreaths and their symbolic significance have evolved in the space of centuries, together with the changes in beliefs and religions. The last stage of modification was their adoption and transformation by the Christian religion, which initially treated them with reserve, before finally accepting their presence. From the 16th century onwards, wreaths and decorations called ‘grave crowns’ became indispensable elements of funeral ceremonies at children’s, youth and unmarried young persons’ burials. They were bearers of strong symbolic messages and took varied material forms, unfortunately not always clearly readable during archaeological excavations. Besides the artefacts plaited of plants, explorations also reveal elaborate constructions of metal wires, silk textile, glass beads and other materials. The excavations conducted in St. Nicolas’ church in Gniew yielded a number of wreath relics made of textiles and metal, uncovered both in crypt burials and the ones deposited under the church floor. Subjected to detailed analyses, they allow to obtain more information and organise the knowledge about the burial ceremonies and traditions of burying young community representatives, as well as trace the development of various crafts of the past.

KEY-WORDS: archaeology, funeral ceremony, grave wreaths, Gniew

INTRODUCTION

Death is an inevitable part of every man’s life. It is caused by various factors such as: old age (natural death), diseases, accidents, or wars. The further back we go into the past, the shorter life spans we observe, mainly caused by the lack of personal hygiene but also by the limited, low level medical care. Mortality took its toll among women at childbirth, newborn babies and children (Kizik 1998: 22–24). The *pompa funebris*, i.e., the luxurious funeral ceremonies, was obligatory both for children and adults. Archaeological excavations frequently register the situations when an adolescent was put into grave in the national Polish costume (Drażkowska 2005: 30), while ethnographers indicate that burial ceremonies of unmarried people often resembled a wedding (Fischer 1921: 296–300).

^a Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, Institute of Archaeology, 44/48 Szosa Bydgoska St., 87-100 Toruń, Poland; nowak.m23@onet.eu

St. Nicolas' church in Gniew and its surrounding graveyard, enclosed by walls from four sides, have been excavated since 2009. The burials uncovered there date between the Middle Ages and the modern times and are the source of information about the population of the area, burial rites, and supra-regional contacts. These rich finds consisting of relics of grave clothes, footwear, rosaries, medals, crosses and coffins contain also the remnants of grave wreaths.

THE PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

The aim of this study is to present a detailed description of the grave wreaths discovered during the archaeological excavations in St. Nicholas' church. The macroscopic and microscopic analyses were used to determine how these artefacts were used; they were also compared with similar specimens discovered in central and northern Poland and in north-western Germany. Their historical and symbolic meaning allows a better understanding of the funerary wreath, which was a very important element of children's burials.

THE STATE OF RESEARCH

Archaeological excavations conducted at cemeteries yield various kinds of artefacts. Apart from the human remains, these sites are perfect sources of information about the past, owing to the grave goods deposited in the burial, which can shed light on the age, social and financial status of the deceased. In the case of prehistoric burials, the knowledge on the religion and burial rites is mainly constructed on the basis of pre-suppositions and comparative analyses. The later periods, connected with Christianity, give much more possibilities. It is possible to look for the reasons of and processes accompanying various phenomena thanks to works of interdisciplinary character, which can lead the researchers to solutions of various problems. The grave goods mentioned above can be studied focusing on their various aspects and in accordance with particular spheres of interests. The classification of artefacts as regards their function, material and the quality of manufacturing, economy, stylistics, and symbolic aspects is a step towards finding an answer to the research questions. This paper concerns a selection of finds other than garments, devotional objects, details of coffin decorations, namely the big and small wreaths as well as grave crowns, which belong to the most mysterious elements of grave goods in children's burials of the modern period.

Grave wreaths and grave crowns have been the subject of studies conducted from the beginning of the twentieth century by, i.a., ethnologists from Germany (Lauffer 1916: 225–246; Lippok, 2011: 113). In the 1990s the wreaths caught the attention of the

archaeologists (Lippok and Müller-Pfeifruck 2009: 269–270). The archaeological artefacts of this type were recorded in significant numbers in the burials located both in the churches and in the churchyard necropolises in north-eastern Germany. It should be noted that part of these sources are also ecclesial votive offerings. The researchers concentrated primarily on the areas of Brandenburg, Berlin, and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern where 285 such artefacts were found (Lippok and Müller-Pfeifruck 2009: 272, 274, 283–291). The analyses of them allowed to identify and define three types of the head ‘coverings’ directly related to the young age of the deceased, i.e., crowns, diadems and bonnets (Lippok and Müller-Pfeifruck 2009: 269–270).

So far, this type of artefacts has been reported from some Polish churches: St. Nicolas’ in Gniew¹, the Assumption of the Holy Virgin Mary’s in Toruń (Drażkowska 2006), St. James’ church in Toruń (Cicha 2011), St. Catherine’s church in Służewo village (Petrycka 2003) and St. John’s and the Holy Trinity’s churches in Gdańsk (Drażkowska 2007). The issues of burial ceremonies and wreaths have been analysed by university students in their Bachelors’ and Masters’ dissertations (Romanowska 2007; Chołodowska 2009).

HISTORICAL OUTLINE AND SYMBOLIC MEANING

Going back to the origins of the phenomenon seems to be a proper step in understanding the reasons and significance of the occurrence of the wreaths in burials. The tradition of equipping the dead with wreaths first appeared in the Antiquity. A number of studies on burial rites indicate that in Classical Greece the dead were given decorations of plaited plants. The deceased, wrapped in a shroud, was displayed to the public and his head was decorated with myrtle flowers (Chrościcki 1974: 14). In Ancient Rome similar practices were observed. The deceased’s head was dressed with a wreath or a crown, a so-called *corona funebri*, and the body was displayed in an atrium until the funeral. Offerings of flowers were placed on graves on commemorative days of birth and death (Chrościcki 1974: 17–24). All these rites accompanied the burials of most of the members of Ancient communities. Depending on the social status, e.g., among the patricians, particular elements may have been more luxurious than among the lower classes. It is worth mentioning that that both in Greece and Rome, wreaths were placed only on the graves of adults and served not only as a head decoration, they were first of all of symbolic significance. A wreath meant: fertility, eternity and virginity. It was a prize given to the Olympic winners and to Roman

¹ Archaeological excavations have been conducted in Gniew temple since 2009, supervised by Małgorzata Grupa from the Institute of Archaeology of the NCU in Toruń. At present all the material is being analysed in collaboration with the author of this article (Grupa *et al.* 2013, 133–142; Majorek and Grupa 2013).

military victors. Sacrificial animals were also decorated with them. In all these cases, the one decorated with a wreath was supposed to be distinguished by favours of gods (Biedermann 2001: 401). The dead equipped with them were placed under the divine care and given protection in afterlife (Kopaliński 2006: 463).

Spreading around Europe, Christianity initially had a very negative attitude towards the discussed phenomenon, however, the origins of this attitude are unknown. The Church banned the practice of placing wreaths on the heads of the deceased, treating them as signs of pagan rites (Labuda 1983: 230). Apostasy may have been reported in various parts of the Christian world, yet, e.g., Gregory of Nyssa, who lived at the end of the 4th century, did not see any connection between paganism, i.e., evil, and the wreaths placed in burials (Petrycka 2003: 22). The tradition and symbolic meaning of a wreath made of flowers began to function in the early mediaeval Poland in the times of Mieszko I when, as Kosmas reports, his wife Dobrawa being ‘a middle aged woman’ caused a storm of negative comments putting a wreath: a symbol of virginity, on her head (*Kosmas* 1968: 149; Petrycka 2003: 18).

The growth of popularity of that custom can be observed in the 16th century and it had become so well established that it had to be regulated by law. The rules began to appear in the 17th century, defining the number and types of the wreaths which were allowed. The Szczecin Ordination from 1671 made using natural flowers obligatory. In winter time it was of course allowed to manufacture wreaths of green silk, which today can be helpful to some extent in defining the season of a child’s death. Both Szczecin and Gdańsk rules from 1681 suggest that in accordance with the existing tradition only one wreath should be used for the funeral purposes (Kizik 1998: 89). The 1722 Toruń Revision indicates that a wreath was an indispensable element of young boys’ and maidens’ burials (Grupa 2005: 32; Majorek and Grupa 2013).

In the discussed period wreaths appear on the heads of the girls’ represented on coffin portraits where they are depicted as plain plaited decorations of green branches. Unlike, e.g., clothes or hair style, which are sufficiently realistic and detailed, wreaths are shown rather in a simplified form, merely signalling their existence (Romanowska 2007: 122). Possibly, they served to indicate the unmarried state and virtue of the portrayed person.

GRAVE WREATHS

Archaeological excavations carried out at various sites from the modern period have yielded a number of grave wreaths’ relics. This subject, often raised by ethnologists and archaeologists from Western Europe already in the early twentieth century (Lauffer 1916: 225–246; Lippok 2011: 113), is becoming an area of increased interest of the Polish researchers.

The examination of the excavated wreaths indicates first and foremost a variety of the used materials and the forms of the respective elements. Many factors causing these differences can be mentioned, including, e.g., the age of the deceased and the financial status of the deceased's family. Nevertheless, studies on the development of the wreath forms and attempts at a chronological systematization of particular patterns require a wide-ranging work on the source material supported by the dating of the bone remains and grave goods.

The organic or inorganic matter decompose to different degrees depending on the conditions in which they are deposited. For this reason, the most commonly recorded artefacts are the remnants of grave wreaths and the so-called 'green twigs' made of metal wire and silk fibre or fabrics that preserve the best after being deposited in ground graves and in the crypts.

A grave wreath is composed of two main elements: the ring and the additional decorations. We are able to distinguish at least three types of the ring:

- of wooden slats (Fig. 1.1, Fig. 1.2) or branches, bent into a circle²;
- of a single twisted cord;
- of several wires twisted together.

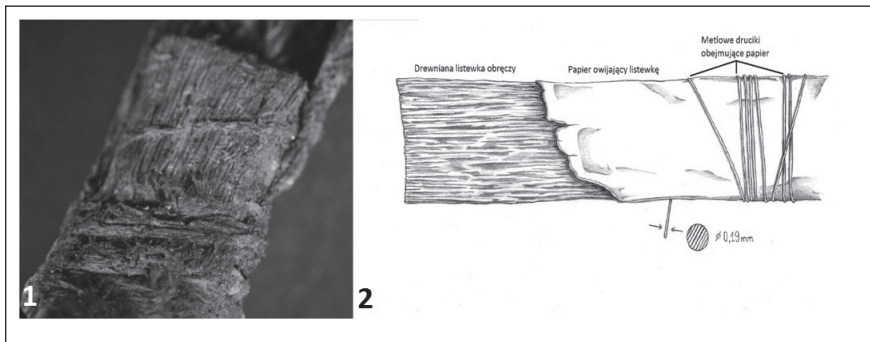


Fig. 1. Wooden strip – a wreath ring: 1. Microscope picture of a ring with silk wrap, additionally strengthened with thread, which could also serve for fastening flowers. Photo by M. Nowak; 2. scheme of a ring construction consisting of a wooden strip wrapped around with paper, braided with copper wire. Drawing by M. Nowak

² Wooden slats were excavated in burials situated in the church yard at St. James church in Toruń (Chołodowska 2009, 20–22; and in the presbytery of the Assumption of the Holy Virgin Mary church in Toruń (Romanowska 2007: 120–127). Using plant branches or slats is confirmed by finds from the presbytery and northern crypt of St. Nicolas church in Gnień (Majorek and Grupa 2013).

Some constructions also used iron wires or bands (Majorek and Grupa 2013). That frame was covered with various materials, e.g.:

- silk thread in metal wrap (the graveyard of St. James church in Toruń);
- paper or silk fabric (Fig. 1.1, Fig. 2).

The frame prepared that way served as a support for various elements made of wire, silk textile, lacquer ware, glass beads, pearls or metal coins. On natural wreaths of fresh flowers, apart from leaved branches, field, meadow or garden flowers were fastened. The second category in which most of the elements were made of wire and silk fabric, natural flowers may have also been used (Lippok and Müller-Pfeiffruck 2009: 274–277; Lippok 2011: 116–117).



Fig. 2. Microscope picture of a wooden ring wrapped around with silk textile. Photo by M. Nowak

WREATH FINDS IN GNIEW

The excavations conducted in 2009 concentrated on the burial crypt of St. Nicolas' church, located in St. Ann's chapel, on the southern side. The exploration yielded a significant number of finds representing the investigated category. So far two sets of them have been analysed. One was composed of the remains of objects interpreted as artificial flowers similar in their form to the Protestant 'green branches' (the church was in the Protestants' hands between 1557–1596). The other one, consisting mainly of tint fragments, was identified as a grave wreath and its construction will be presented in greater detail below.

The artefact inv. no. 18/09 is an excellent example of wreaths deposited with dead children and unmarried persons. Its base was a ring made of several thin metal wire

sections, twisted together and shaped into a circle (Fig. 3). It is not clear how both ends were fixed together, because these parts of the wreath have not been preserved. The metal frame was made from flexible wires, probably composed of an alloy of

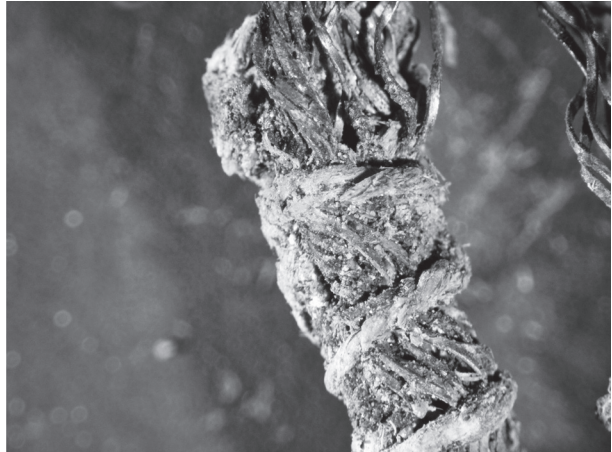


Fig. 3. Microscope picture of a ring in form of a twig, made of thin copper wire. Photo by M. Nowak

copper and tin, which is easy to bend. Unfortunately, we have only fragments of the item at our disposal – in one of them silk fabric with 1/1 weave was reported, at present brown-orange in colour which is probably the result of iron corrosion. The ring may have been wrapped with brown or green textile³. The ring prepared that way was next wound round with thin wire which was the base for fixing the decorative elements, such as small wires formed into springs (Fig. 6). They were made of wire with a diameter between 0.15 and 0.2 mm and were used to manufacture three decorative elements: the most numerous were stylized buds of small springs attached to both of the base, their middle part was wrapped two-three times around the ring and their ends protruded in different directions, and other variations of this form (one was made of 5 wire sections wrapped round the base twice and making a spring of the shorter ends. The other wire parts were used to make bigger springs).

The wire served also as a kind of a plant stem and the whole element resembles branches with five leaves. There are also fully shaped leaves on thick branches of 5 long wires with springs being $\frac{2}{5}$ of all the wire length. They are wrapped around in the middle and their ends form twisted stalks. Using double wire for every leaf we obtain an effect of a big branch. The shorter ends wound round the ring were finished with

³ As municipal regulations inform (Kizik 1998: 89).

small springs. Artificial flowers were placed between them. They were made of copper wire twisted around the ring, but fastened directly to the base branch under the silk textile with a small loop in the upper part. The remains of paper preserved under this loop (Fig. 4), which covered the whole stem, are at present green and green-blue (it was probably their original colour).

Fragments of silk used to make a stylized flower form were placed there. Four items of this type were found, two of which were still situated in their original locations. The flower petals' edges are 'fringed' (Fig. 5) and for that reason the flowers are interpreted as carnations. The composition is completed with glass beads (Fig. 6). Due to their poor state of preservation, it is impossible to establish the number of these

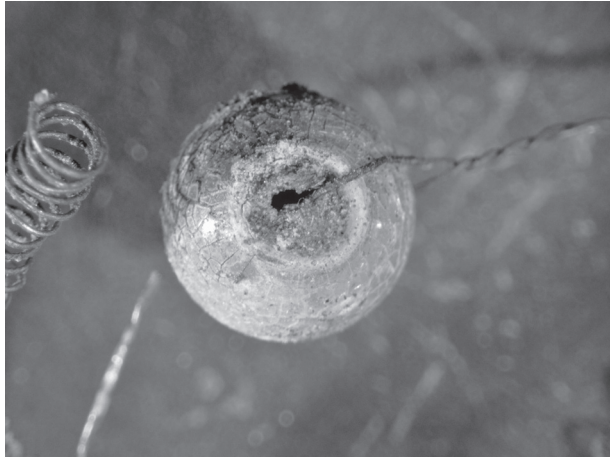


Fig. 4. Microscope picture of a stem made of twisted wire wrapped around with paper, being a constructive element of artificial flowers and served for fixing glass beads. Photo by M. Nowak



Fig. 5. Microscope picture of silk fabric creating a stylized flower. Photo by M. Nowak

Fig. 6. Microscope picture of a glass bead with a clearly distinguished loop finishing wire fixing it to the wreath. On the left – a fragment of a spring being a main decorative element of the construction. Photo by M. Nowak



elements. At the time of discovery, the wreath had one pearl bead, fixed with a loop of twisted wire. The wire was covered with paper imitating a plant branch and the bead was placed below the ring line. Artificial flowers were fastened in the same way, therefore it cannot be established if all the loops directed downwards were designed for beads or for artificial silk flowers. The detailed analysis of the artefact has made it possible to reconstruct it in the iconographical form (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7. Drawing reconstruction of a grave wreath. Drawn by M. Nowak

CONCLUSIONS

The tradition of placing wreaths in graves went a long way from the Antiquity and evolved into elaborate forms owing to the Christian significance transition into symbolizing virginity, innocence and celibacy. However, it should be noted that even if there is no direct connection between the Greek and Roman grave wreaths and the finds from the modern period, there are some visible similarities in their symbolism, as well as the way of celebrating the funeral.

The artefacts might have been produced in haberdasher workshops cooperating with the ones manufacturing wire as the construction base. The artefacts can be called grave crowns because of their gilded or copper wires, imitating gold and giving an impression of luxury (Lippok 2011: 114, 116–117). We should have in mind the 17th and 18th century production capacity of the monastic centres, which in this period were engaged producing religious artefacts using metal wires (Lippok and Müller-Pfeiffruck 2009: 280).

Comparative analyses of the finds point to significant regional differences between northern and central Poland. The artefact presented above, discovered in a church in Gniew is delicate and light in form and was decorated with silk and paper, which could have been dyed green to imitate natural plants.

St. James's church in Toruń delivered wreaths made in a different way. Their elements are more solid, having been made of thick silk thread in metal wrapping, which made its parts much bigger (Chołodowska 2009). The Assumption of the Holy Virgin Mary's church in Toruń revealed wreaths, the construction of which was based mainly on wooden strip and silk cords in metal wrap. Thanks to better post-deposition conditions, it was possible to find remains of natural plants, the stems of which were preserved among the leaves made from the rings (Romanowska 2007). This underlines the diversity of wreaths from Toruń, which were probably made following similar patterns in a local workshop.

Constructions similar to the finds from Gniew were excavated in Gdańsk churches, where small wires and silk textiles with varied weaves were used for making branches and artificial flowers (Drażkowska 2007). Similar forms were discovered also in north-eastern Germany. The grave wreaths found in Rostock and Pritzen (Lippok and Müller-Pfeiffruck 2009: 271–278) resemble the relics from Gniew and the churches of Gdańsk. This suggests the use of common patterns and techniques of manufacturing and may indicate that there existed contacts and shared channels of distribution of the discussed category of products from particular production centres. At the same time the form of grave wreaths does not differ considerably from those of the crowns (Neu-Brandenburg) or decorative bonnets (Bützow) recorded in the archaeological sites (Lippok 2011: 118, 120).

Archaeology brings more and more artefacts of the discussed type, therefore a new direction of research must also be followed in order to answer such questions, as, e.g., whether artificial flowers and wreaths of metal wire and thread can be treated as indicators of the season in which the deceased was buried, in what way were the burial regulations broken, whether the burial forms resulted from fashion and if these finds define the deceased's and his family religion. The wreaths were equally richly decorated, regardless of the place of burial within a temple⁴.

Finding answers to all these questions will require much work, both at the sites and in the archaeological laboratories, and will require support from the historical-ethnological sources studies.

REFERENCES

- Biedermann, H. 2001. *Leksykon symboli*. Warszawa.
- Cicha, A. 2011. *Wieniec (...) został dla mnie upleciony. Pochówki w wiankach z cmentarza przy kościele św. Jakuba w Toruniu*. In M. Rybicka (ed.), *Obraz struktury społecznej w świetle źródeł archeologicznych w pradziejach i średniowieczu, 189–197*. Rzeszów.
- Chołodowska, E.J. 2009. *Wianki z grobów przy kościele św. Jakuba w Toruniu. Charakterystyka i symbolika (badania archeologiczne w 2008 roku)*. Unpublished MA dissertation. Institute of Archaeology, Nicolaus Copernicus University. Toruń.
- Chrościcki, J.A. 1974. *Pompa funebris. Z dziejów kultury staropolskiej*. Warszawa.
- Drażkowska, A. 2005. Wyposażenie XVII- i XVIII-wiecznych grobów dziecięcych zlokalizowanych wewnątrz kościołów. In M. Opęchowski and A. Łazowski (eds), *Nekropolie, kirkuty, cmentarze. Materiały konferencyjne*, 19–40. Szczecin.
- Drażkowska, A. 2006. Wianki wydobyte z krypty grobowej w kościele p.w. Wniebowzięcia Najświętszej Marii Panny w Toruniu. *Rocznik Toruński* 33: 209–217.
- Drażkowska, A. 2007. *Kwiaty i wianki elementem wyposażenia grobowego osiemnastowiecznych pochówków na podstawie znalezisk z kościoła św. Jana i z kościoła św. Trójcy w Gdańsku*. In G. Nawrońska (ed.), *XV Sesja Pomorzoznawcza*, 491–496. Elbląg.
- Fischer, A. 1921. *Zwyczaj pogrzebowe ludu polskiego*. Lwów.
- Grupa, M. 2005. *Ubiór mieszczan i szlachty z XVI–XVIII w. z kościoła p.w. Wniebowzięcia Najświętszej Marii Panny w Toruniu*. Toruń.
- Grupa, M., Krajewska, M., Majorek, M. and Kozłowski, T. 2013. The influence of trade contacts on grave equipment of Gniew community in 14th–18th century. *Geology, Geophysics and Environment* 39 (2): 133–142.
- Kizik, E. 1998. *Śmierć w mieście hanzeatyckim w XVI–XVIII w. Studium z nowożytniej kultury funeralnej*. Gdańsk.
- Kopaliński, W. 2006. *Słownik symboli*. Warszawa.
- Kosmas, M. 1968. *Kronika Czechów*. Warszawa.

⁴ Author's observation. Finds from St. Nicolas church in Gniew indicate similar stylistic and material features, regardless of the place of their excavation (the crypt or under the floor).

- Labuda, A. 1983. Liturgia pogrzebu w Polsce do wydania Rytułu Piotrowskiego. *Textus et Studia* 14. Warszawa.
- Lauffer, O. 1916. Der volkskundliche Gebrauch der Totenkronen in Deutschland. *Zeitschrift für Volkskunde* 26: 225–246.
- Lippok, J. and Müller-Pfeiffruck, S. 2009. ‚Die Krone habt ihr mir bereit‘. Totenkronen als Gegenstand interdisziplinärer Forschungen. *Ethnographisch-Archäologische Zeitschrift* 50 (1–2): 269–293.
- Lippok, J. 2011. Corona Funeris. Zur Problematik neuzeitlicher Totenkronen ausarchäologischer Sicht. *Mitteilungen der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Archäologie des Mittelalters und der Neuzeit* 23 (1): 113–124.
- Majorek, M. and Grupa, D. 2013. Malowane czy obijane – oznaka mody czy potrzeby na przykładzie trumien z krypt kościoła w Szczuczynie. In M. Grupa and T. Dudziński (eds), *Tajemnice szczuczynskich krypt*, 69–81. Grajewo.
- Petrycka, A. 2003. Umrzec w wianku. Próba interpretacji pochówków z wiankami. *Kwartalnik Historii Kultury Materialnej* 51 (1): 17–26.
- Romanowska, L. 2007. *Pochówki nowożytnie z kościoła p.w Najświętszej Marii Panny w Toruniu (badania z lat 1982–83)*. Unpublished MA dissertation. Institute of Archaeology, Nicolaus Copernicus University. Toruń.

received: 13.05.2014
accepted: 30.11.2015