



Ewa Lisowska 

A kind of magic: a vessel with a unique swastika motif from Jelenia Góra (SW Poland) and early medieval Slavic magical rites

ABSTRACT

The paper discusses a unique find: an early medieval vessel with an incised swastika motif deposited as a foundation offering under a house in Jelenia Góra-Grabary (SE Poland, Sudety Mountains). Swastikas on vessel bodies were uncommon in the Early Middle Ages, although throughout the centuries this symbol has been regarded as magical and associated with the solar cult.

KEYWORDS

ceramic vessel, swastika motif, early middle ages, Sudety Mountains



I. INTRODUCTION

The swastika motif was popular in various archaeological cultures worldwide (Wilson 1896; Tarunin 2009). Compared to other symbols, however, it was not particularly prominent in Slavic craftsmanship (Volodarec-Urbanovič 2018). The motif's magic symbolism makes artefacts featuring such decoration essential for understanding the material evidence of the processes occurring in the relationship between man, the sacred, and the profane.

The paper discusses a foundation offering discovered under a house floor in Jelenia Góra (SW Poland, Sudetes), a 9th–10th century site. The offering was a ceramic vessel featuring an incised swastika motif on the upper part of its body. Its context indicates that it served an apotropaic purpose which has not so far been recorded in the Slavic cultural zone in the 9th and 10th centuries.

The Slavic tribes inhabiting central and eastern Europe between the 6th and 10th centuries practised a whole range of local rituals and traditions. Written sources mention seasonal life cycle ceremonies (Gieysztor 1982; Słupecki 1994), while archaeologists frequently record votive deposits and foundation offerings in various forms and contexts. The latter include offerings located under house floors and hillfort walls.

The swastika motif occurred on several categories of Slavic artefacts (e. g. brooches, spindle whorls, belt buckles), mainly in the Prague and Ipotești cultures in the 6th and 7th centuries (Jelínková 2015; Teodor, Stanciu 2009; Volodarec-Urbanovič 2018). At the same time, vessel bodies did not typically bear such decorations, apart from finds from several sites in Romania and Bohemia.

The site in Jelenia Góra-Grabary is all the more significant that it is one of the few excavated early medieval settlements from the tribal period (8th–10th century) in the Sudetes (Jaworski 2005). The early medieval sites in Poland's southwest mountains are generally few and produced scarce evidence.

II. THE SITE IN JELENIA GÓRA-GRABARY AND THE FIND CONTEXT

The early medieval site in Jelenia Góra-Grabary is located in West Sudetes, in the Jelenia Góra Valley, ca. 5 km east of the city centre (Fig. 1). It neighbours an already investigated hillfort from the 9th–10th century (Wrocławski 2001). Both hillforts made a settlement complex surrounded by the Złotucha stream, the right tributary of the Bobr river (Fig. 2). Comprehensive investigations of

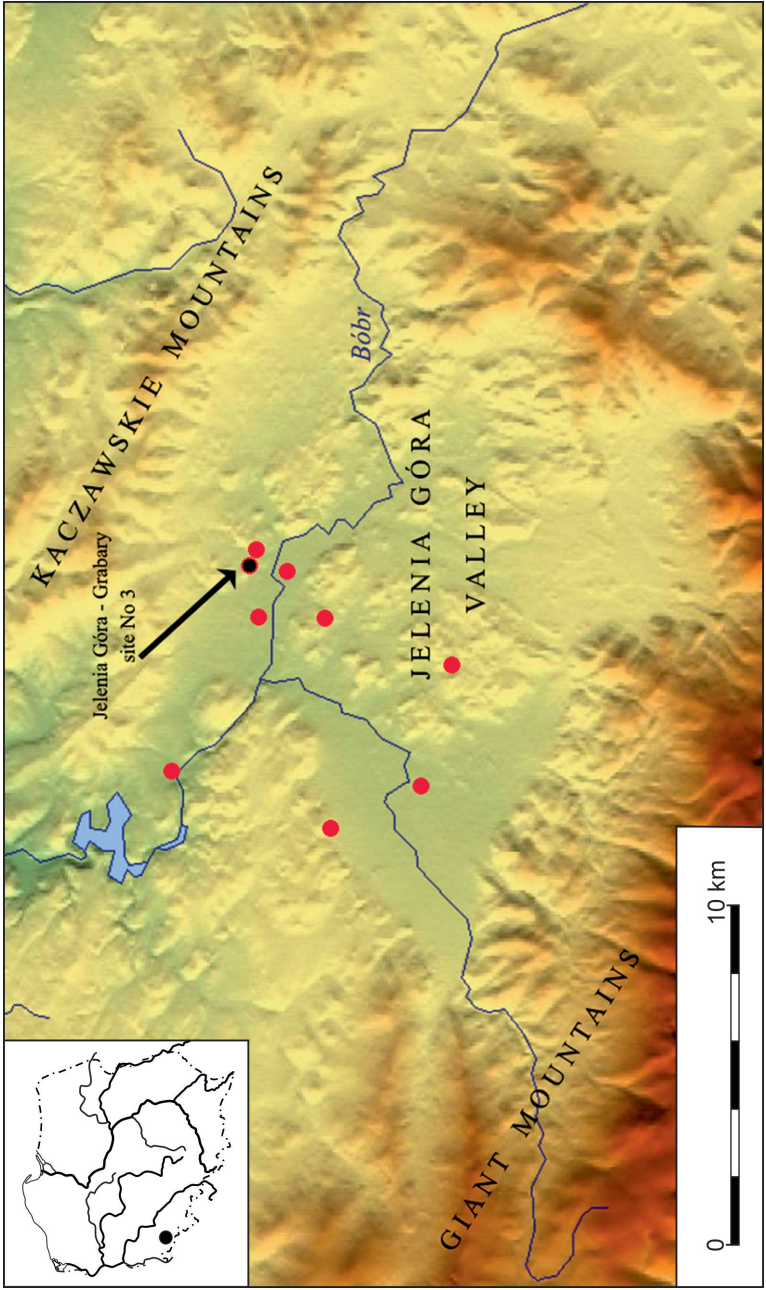


FIG. 1. Location of Jelenia Góra-Grabary, site 3, and the early medieval settlement network in the Jelenia Góra Valley (drawing E. Lisowska, map: OpenStreetMap)

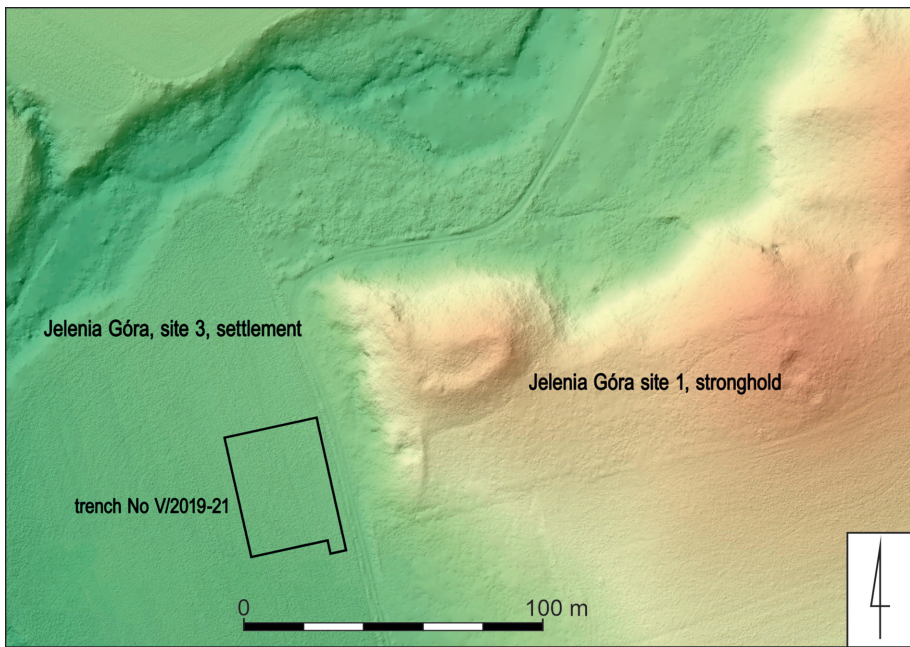


FIG. 2. Location of Jelenia Góra-Grabary, site 1 (stronghold) and site 3 (settlement), marked trench No. V/2019-2021 (drawing E. Lisowska)

the hillfort and the settlement were conducted between 2018 and 2021. After geophysical surveys and digging a few probe trenches in 2018, full-scale excavations at selected spots took place in 2019 and 2021. The excavated area of 12 ares produced 17 archaeological features, including three house remains (Fig. 3). The houses were spread ca. 15 metres from one another and contained heavily fragmented pottery, knives, whetstones, nails, and spindle whorls. In one of the houses (feature 14), a dark, burnt bottom layer contained the site's only almost fully preserved vessel (Fig. 4). It featured an incised swastika and broke into over a dozen pieces, recorded 70 cm below the surface level and 30 cm below the house's ground plan (Fig. 5), under the house main floor. The house's moderate depth is typical of the Sudetic sites. In most places, only the bottom parts of the features were preserved, with original outlines disturbed by ploughing.

The vessel is cream-coloured, 22-centimetre tall, with a rim diameter of 18 cm, a maximum body diameter of 20.75 cm, and a base diameter of 14 cm (Fig. 6). The clockwise swastika with 3 cm and 2.5 cm long arms features

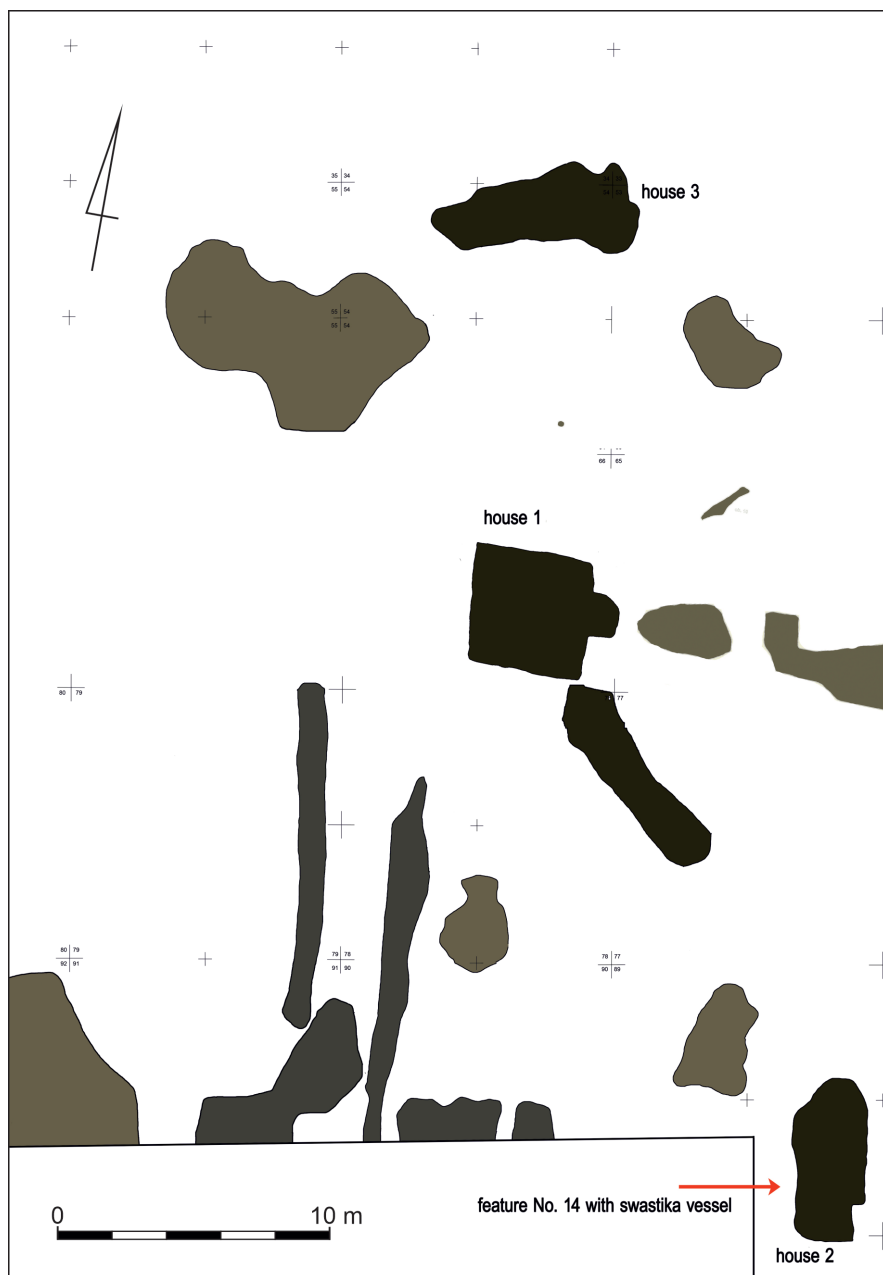


FIG. 3. Distribution of archaeological features within trench No V/2019-2021, dwelling with swastika marked with a red arrow (developed E. Lisowska)

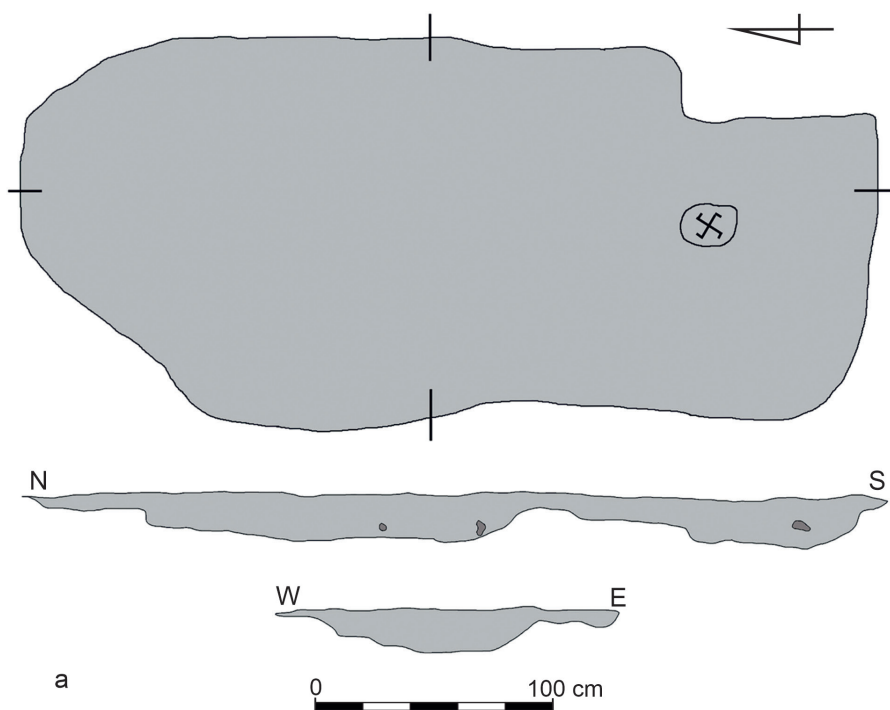


FIG. 4. Feature 14 from Jelenia Góra-Grabary. A) ground plan and cross-sections of the feature with the location of the deposit (developed by E. Lisowska) B) against other features at the site (photo Ł. Melski)



FIG. 5. Vessel with the swastika in situ, August 2021 (photo E. Lisowska)

the body's upper part, 4.5 cm below the rim. The vessel had a maximum volume of 2.2 litres. The clay mass contains fine- and medium-grained temper (ca. 10-12%), including quartz, feldspars and micas. The surface is relatively smooth, and the motif was fashioned in wet clay with a knife or other sharp tool, before firing. Such practices have been observed in other Slavic vessels with cross-derived ornaments, including swastikas (Teodor, Stanciu 2009). In typological terms, the vessel is of the "Silesian smooth type", which was present in SW Poland in the 9th and 10th centuries (Pankiewicz 2012, 97). The site's radiocarbon datings confirm this chronology (Fig. 7).

I interpreted the vessel as a foundation offering for several reasons. First, it was deposited in the lowest part of the house and covered with occupation layers. Second, the vessel features an unusual decorative design with a meaningful, magical symbol. Last, it is the site's only vessel with almost all its fragments preserved. The remaining few thousand tiny pottery sherds collected at the site did not allow for a formal reconstruction of even a single vessel.

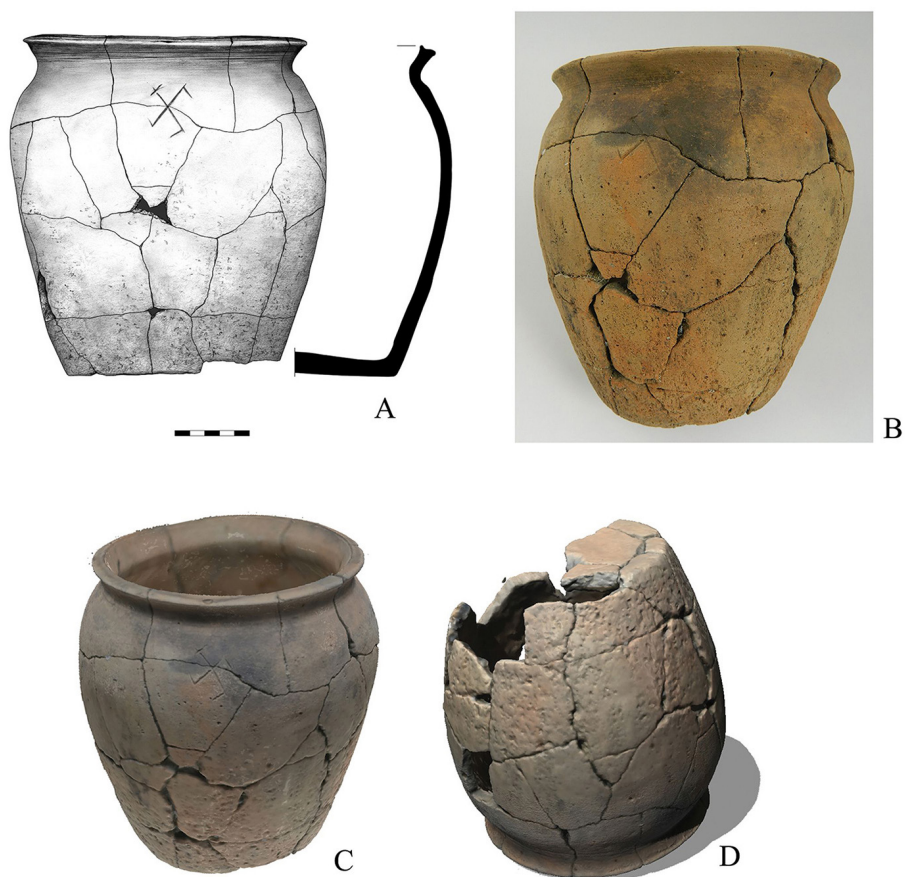


FIG. 6. Plan and cross-sections of the vessel found in Jelenia Góra. A) drawing N. Lenkow; B) photo E. Lisowska; C, D) 3D model of the vessel made with Agisoft Metashape software (by A. Kobyłka)

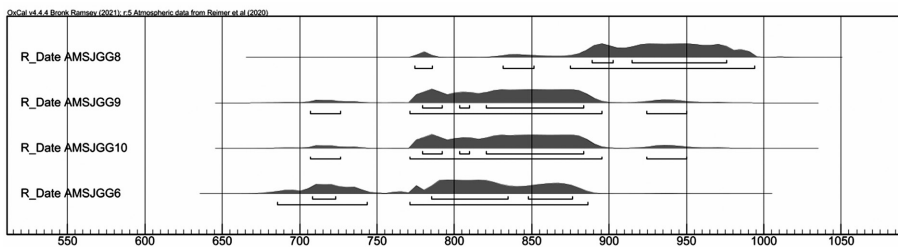


FIG. 7. AMS radiocarbon dating results of charcoral samples from Jelenia Góra – Grabary site. Calibrated with the OxCal v4.2.3. software (49). Produced by M. Furmanek

III. DISCUSSION

The find from Jelenia Góra might be considered in three aspects: as a foundation offering, through studying the use of the swastika symbol among the Slavs, and by analysing the distribution of similar artefacts in central-eastern Europe.

A vessel decorated with a swastika motif deposited under a building immediately brings to mind foundation offerings with an apotropaic function, particularly considering similar deposits from the Slavic cultural zone. Foundation offerings might be defined as ritual-magic deposits made during the construction of defensive, residential, sacral, and communication structures (Curta 2019, 524-527; Kajkowski 2019, 221-222; Merrifield 1987, 116-199; Słupecki 1994). They were meant to sanctify new space and protect it from unwanted external intervention. Among the western Slavs, foundation offerings tended to be horse skulls (Makowiecki *et al.*: 2022), food, vessels, and other small items (Kajkowski 2019, 221-230; 2022; Rabięga 2022; Urbańczyk 2023; Wenska 2015, 280). Pottery is not often found as a foundation offerings. For example ceramic vessels occurred also under construction of the buildings from Opole-Ostrówek, Szczecin, Wrocław – Ostrów Tumski and Żmijowiska (Gediga 2022, 170-171; Moździoch 2000, 182; <https://mnkd.pl/gliniany-garneki-ze-zmijowisk/>), as well as under the ramparts of the strongholds in Bonikowo, Gdańsk, Grzybowo, Spławie, Ślęża and Żlinice (Brzeski *et al.* 2000, 63; Brzostowicz 2016, 64, 69; Domański 2000; Jarzęcka-Stąporek, Kocińska 2013, 533-534; Kaźmierczyk *et al.* 1977, 588). It's worth to notice that these vessels represent common type of pottery, appropriate for their times, without symbolic decoration, such as crosses, swastikas and other.

The only published typological and contextual match for the Jelenia Góra-Grabary find comes from Ostrów Lednicki in Greater Poland. The vessel with a swastika and a circle surrounding a cross was deposited in the house layers dated to the 2nd half of the 10th century (Banaszak, Tabaka 2020). However, the authors did not directly interpret it as a foundation offering. Ostrów Lednicki is a site of extraordinary significance, widely regarded as one of the cradles of the Polish state. Its space harboured both Poland's earliest Christian traditions and the existing pagan heritage (Kara 2009).

To fully understand the uniqueness of the presented find, we shall discuss the presence of vessels with swastikas in the central European Slavic world. The swastika motif is most frequently considered a symbol of good fortune associated with the solar cult and protection against evil forces (Freed, Freed 1980). It is also hypothetically linked to one of the Slavic gods – Svarozhits.

The swastika's symbolic meaning has already received substantial attention from scholars, and discussion thereof reaches far beyond the scope of this paper. Some of the oldest swastika depictions come from Armenia and the Mezhirichi culture in Ukraine, but they occurred in diverse cultural environments throughout time and space (Budda 2001). In the early medieval Slavic tradition, however, these motifs were few and far between, and each new find adds to our understanding of the symbol. At the same time, some scholars interpret swastikas and crosses as carriers of similar symbolic content (Parczewski 2001; Volodarec-Urbanovič 2018). Some artefacts bear both a swastika and a cross symbol (e. g. the find from Ostrów Lednicki), and sometimes various cross variants are combined into a single symbolic group used as a cultural marker (Teodor, Stanciu 2009).

In early medieval east-central Europe, vessel bodies decorated with swastikas occurred in two phases (Fig. 8). First, in cultural contexts dated to the 6th and 7th centuries AD, mostly in Romania. Isolated finds also occurred in Bohemia, Poland and Ukraine. So far, 13 vessels/vessel fragments with swastikas are known from this period. In the area of Poland the oldest Slavic motif of swastika engraved on the bellies of two sherds is known from Ożańsk, site 5, dated back to the early Slavic period (Marek 2017). One of these pieces was found in a sunken hut (No. 395), the second one uncovered in the archaeological feature No. 38 (Marek 2017, 5-7). It's worth to notice that in the Prauge-type Pottery Culture cemetery Přítluky in Moravia, entire vessel with two swastikas on the vessels' body was used as a urn in a grave No. 294 (Jelínková 2015, 134). Such use of urn decorated with swastika and other vessels with different cross variants in Přítluky may indicate the symbolic and ritual meaning of that decoration. The second phase includes finds from the 9th and 10th centuries and is represented by three specimens: from Ostrów Lednicki, Jelenia Góra-Grabary, and Glienke in Germany (Messal 2015, fig. 78.2). The spread of potter's marks in the territory of Poland in the 10th and 11th centuries, however, made swastikas – among the many cross variants – more common. Yet, their chronology, genesis and symbolism were different, however in some cases also can be linked with magical practices (Buko 1982; 2008, 383-393). The swastika shaped potter's mark on the bottoms of the vessels are quite popular, they occur in whole area of Poland, for example in: Sandomierz, Wiślica, Kraków, Giecz and others (Buko 1982; Marek 2017). In the Lower Silesia swastikas on the vessel bottoms are known from the archaeological sites in Bardo (Rodak 2010), Gniewków (Werczyński, Rodak 2012), Grodziszczce (Pankiewicz 2005), Ryczyn (Kramarek 1969) and Wrocław (Kaźmierczyk *et al.* 1976; 1977; 1978; 1979; 1980).

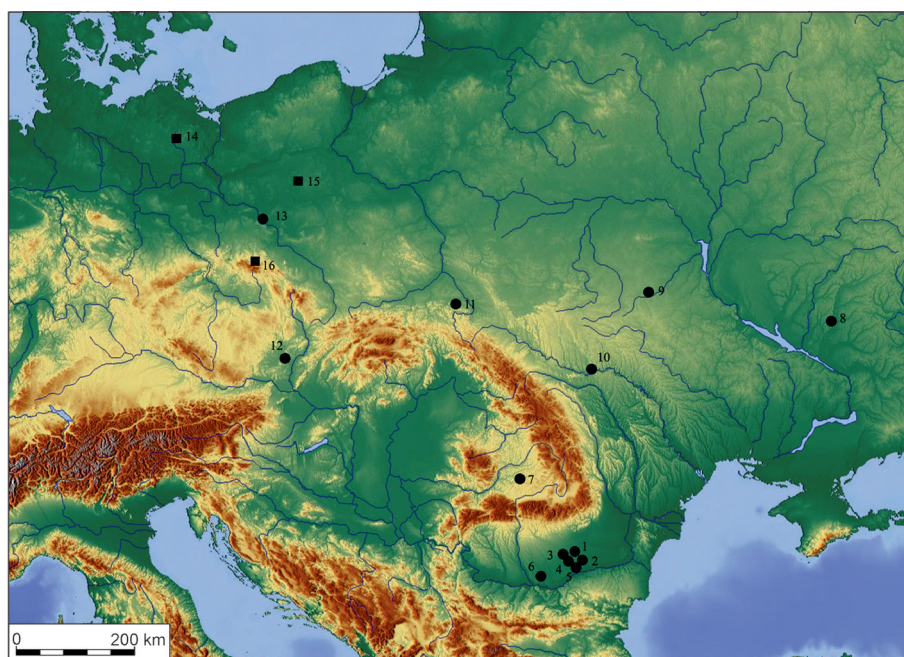


FIG. 8. Distribution of early medieval vessels with swastikas. Dots – 6th-8th century, squares – 9th-10th century: 1) Straulesti-Maitsanesti; 2) Demeroaya-Bukuresht; 3) Baneasa-La Stejar; 4) Churel; 5) Bukuresht-Soldat Givan; 6) Dulchanka I; 7) Bratei 2; 8) Poltava; 9) Teterevka II; 10) Luka-Kavetchina; 11) Ożańsk 5; 12) Přítluky; 13) Żukowice; 14) Glienke; 15) Ostrów Lednicki; 16) Jelenia Góra-Grabary (by E. Lisowska, based on Volodarets-Urbanovich 2018, with further additions; map: OpenStreetMap)

The meaning of the swastika symbol among the Slavs is heavily debated. In some views, it is a pagan magical symbol, in others, it demonstrates the influence of Christian or post-ancient traditions on people descending from these traditions or having direct contact with them (Parczewski 2001; Terpilovskij, Volodarets-Urbanovich 2022). In the light of the present – relatively modest – source data, we might accept all of these concepts and interpret swastikas as universal symbols, present in the pagan traditions and adopted by the Christians.

The find from Jelenia Góra is material evidence of a ritual with clearly pagan roots, a ritual performed to protect the household and bring luck, perhaps also to worship the sun and/or Svarozhits. The find originates from a period preceding (with a few exceptions) the spread of Christianity in Poland, that is

mid-9th to the mid-10th century. The archaeological evidence does not support the idea that the inhabitants of Jelenia Góra were anything other than pagan Slavs. At the same time, some other places in southern Poland demonstrate the influences from the former Great Moravia, including elements of the Christian tradition (Jaworski 2014).

IV. CONCLUSION

The discussed vessel with a swastika symbol is one of three such specimens recorded in the west Slavic area in the 9th and 10th centuries. The site from Jelenia Góra-Grabary is the only known place where such a vessel served as a foundation offering. It is material evidence of Slavic magical, apotropaic practices, possibly also connected to the solar cult and/or other ceremonies. The find reopens the debate on the roots and changes in the Slavic symbolic system, also in the context of the swastika, which in the past century was hated by millions of people and deprived of its original sacredness.

REFERENCES

- Banaszak D., Tabaka A. 2020. *Ślady wierzeń pogańskich na przykładzie znalezisk z Ostrowa Lednickiego*, *Slavia Antiqua* 59, 117–134.
- Brzeski O., Kurnatowska Z., Tuszyński M. 2000. *Dziesięciolecie badań wykopaliskowych grodziska w Grzybowie, gm. Września, woj. poznańskie*, *Wielkopolskie Studia Archeologiczne* 5, 55–72.
- Brzostowicz M. 2016. *Zagadnienia z dziejów i kultury mieszkańców grodu*, [in:] *Grodzisko wczesnośredniowieczne w Sławiu, woj. Wielkopolskie. Wyniki badań archeologicznych*, M. Brzostowicz (ed.), Muzeum Archeologiczne w Poznaniu, Poznań, 64–87.
- Budda F. 2001. *Swastyka w dziejach cywilizacji*, Toruń.
- Buko A. 1982. *Czytelność znaków garncarskich a zagadnienie ich funkcji*, *Archeologia Polski* 27, z. 1, 79–109.
- Buko A. 2008. *The Archaeology of Early Medieval Poland. Discoveries-Hypotheses-Interpretations*, Leiden–Boston.
- Curta F. 2019. *Eastern Europe in the Middle Ages (500-1300)*, Leiden–Boston.
- Domański G. 2000. *Ślązański zespół osadniczy i kultowy we wczesnym średniowieczu*, [in:] *Człowiek, Sacrum, Środowisko. Miejsca kultu we wczesnym średniowieczu. Spotkania Bytomskie* 4, S. Moździoch (ed.), Wrocław, 99–110.

- Freed S.A., Freed R. S. 1980. *Swastika: a new symbolic interpretation*, Rice Institute Pamphlet - Rice University Studies, 66, no. 1 (1980) Rice University.
- Gediga B. 2022. *Gród wczesnośredniowieczny na Ostrówku w Opolu*. Synteza, Instytut Archeologii i Etnologii PAN, Warszawa–Wrocław.
- Gieysztor A. 1982. *Mitologia Słowian*. Warszawa.
- Jarzęcka-Stąporek J., Kocińska M. 2013. *Gród i krzyżacki zamek w świetle badań na stanowisku 1 przy ul. Grodzkiej 10-11 w Gdańsku*, [in:] *XVII Sesja Pomorzoznawcza*, vol. 2: *Od późnego średniowiecza do czasów nowożytnych*, H. Paner, M. Fudziński (eds.), 531–546.
- Jaworski K. 2005. *Grody w Sudetach (VIII – X w.)*. Wrocław.
- Jaworski K. 2014. *Christian Great Moravia and Silesian lands at the turn of the 9th and 10th centuries*, [in:] *1150 Years Since the Arrival of Thesalloniki Brothers in Great Moravia*, P. Kouřil et al. (eds.), Brno: The Institute of Archaeology of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, 172–181.
- Jelínková D. 2015. *K izučennû kul'tury s keramikoj pražského tipa na territorii Moravii: formirovanie i osobennosti* [On the problem of Prague-Type Pottery Culture in Moravia: the origins and specifics], *Stratum plus* No 5/2015, 117–150.
- Kajkowski K. 2019. *Obrzędowość religijna Pomorzan we wczesnym średniowieczu*. Studium Archeologiczne, Wrocław.
- Kajkowski K. 2022. *Ofiara zakładzinowa w świecie wczesnośredniowiecznych wyobrażeń zachodniosłowiańskich (na przykładzie odkryć z ziem polskich)*, [in:] *W świecie bogów, ludzi i zwierząt. Studia ofiarowane Profesorowi Leszkowi Pawłowi Słupcekiemu*, M. Dzik, R. Gogosz, J. Morawiec, L. Poniewozik (eds.), Rzeszów, 407–433.
- Kara M. 2009. *Najstarsze państwo Piastów – rezultat przełomu czy kontynuacji? Studium archeologiczne*. Poznań.
- Kaźmierczyk J., Macewicz K., Wuszkán S. 1977. *Studia i materiały do osadnictwa Opolszczyzny wczesnośredniowiecznej*, Opole.
- Kaźmierczyk J., Kramarek J., Lasota C. 1976. *Badania na Ostrowie Tumskim we Wrocławiu w 1974 roku*, *Silesia Antiqua* 18, 177–225.
- Kaźmierczyk J., Kramarek J., Lasota C. 1977. *Badania na Ostrowie Tumskim we Wrocławiu w 1975 roku*, *Silesia Antiqua* 19, 181–240.
- Kaźmierczyk J., Kramarek J., Lasota C. 1978. *Badania na Ostrowie Tumskim we Wrocławiu w 1976 roku*, *Silesia Antiqua* 20, 121–167.
- Kaźmierczyk J., Kramarek J., Lasota C. 1979. *Badania na Ostrowie Tumskim we Wrocławiu w 1977 roku*, *Silesia Antiqua* 21, 119–182.
- Kaźmierczyk J., Kramarek J., Lasota C. 1980. *Badania na Ostrowie Tumskim we Wrocławiu w 1978 roku*, *Silesia Antiqua* 22, 71–158.
- Kramarek J. 1969. *Wczesnośredniowieczne grodziska ryczyńskie na Śląsku*, Wrocław.
- Makowiecki D., Chudziak W., Szczepanik P., Janeczek M., Pasicka E. 2022. *Horses in the Early Medieval (10th–13th c.) Religious Rituals of Slavs in Polish Areas—An Archaeozoological, Archaeological and Historical Overview*, *Animals* 12, 2282.
- Marek E. A. 2017. *Remarks on the sing oft he swatika on pottery from Ożański site*, *Archeologia Polona* 55, 5–16.

- Massal S. 2015. *Glienke. Eine slawische Burg des 9. und 10 Jahrhunderts im östlichen Mecklenburg*, Frühmittelalterliche Archäologie zwischen Ostsee und Mittelmeer 5, Wiesbaden.
- Merrifield D. R. 1987. *The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic*, New York.
- Moździoch S. 2000. *Archeologiczne ślady kultu pogańskiego na Śląsku wczesnośredniowiecznym*, [w:] *Człowiek, Sacrum, Środowisko. Miejsca kultu we wczesnym średniowieczu. Spotkania Bytomskie IV*, S. Moździoch (ed.), Instytut Archeologii i Etnologii PAN, Wrocław, 155–194.
- Pankiewicz A. 2005. *Grodziszczce. Wczesnośredniowieczne grodzisko plemienne na Przedgórzu Sudeckim*, Studia Archeologiczne 37, Wrocław.
- Pankiewicz A. 2012. *Relacje kulturowe południowego Śląska i północnych Moraw i Czech w IX-X wieku w świetle źródeł ceramicznych*, Acta Universitatis Wratislaviensis 3372, Wrocław.
- Parczewski M. 2001. *Ornament czy symbol kultu? Znak krzyża na naczyniach wczesnosłowiańskich*, [in:] *Dzieje Podkarpacia. Początki chrześcijaństwa w Małopolsce*, J. Garncarski (ed.), Krosno, 15–21.
- Rabiega K. 2022. *Znaczenie ofiar zakładzinowych u wczesnośredniowiecznych Słowian. Analiza wybranych znalezisk archeologicznych z terenu dzisiejszych ziem polskich*, [in:] *Pierwszy Kongres Archeologii Polskiej, tom 2. Interpretacje kultury symbolicznej w badaniach archeologicznych*, J. Wawrzeniuk, J. Woźny (eds.), Stowarzyszenie Naukowe Archeologów Polskich, Wydawnictwo Fundacji Archeologicznej, Warszawa-Poznań-Zielona Góra, 150–165.
- Rodak S. 2010. *Ceramika naczyniowa z grodziska kasztelańskiego w Bardzie, pow. ząbkowicki, stanowisko 1*, Silesia Antiqua 46, 103–119.
- Słupecki L. 1994. *Slavonic Pagan Sanctuaries*. Warsaw: Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology, Polish Academy of Sciences.
- Tarunin A. V. 2009. *Sakral'nyy simvol. Istoriya svastiki* [Sacral symbol. A history of swastika], Moskov.
- Teodor E., Stanciu I. 2009. *About crosses on wet clay as a cultural marker*, Ephemeris Napocensis 19, 129–155.
- Terpilovskij R. V., Volodarets-Urbanovich Y. V. 2022. *Solyarnyy simvol v zhizni drevnikh slavyan* [Solar Symbol in the Life of the Ancient Slavs]. *Stratum plus* 4/2022, 93–110.
- Urbańczyk P. 2023. *Co wiemy o przedchrześcijańskich wierzeniach wczesnośredniowiecznych mieszkańców dorzeczy Odry i Wisły?*, Historia Slavorum Occidentis 13 (3), 68–96.
- Volodarets-Urbanovich Y. V. 2018. *Svastika u slavyan (po materialam arkeologicheskikh kul'tur vtoroy poloviny I tys. n.e.)* [Swastika from the Slavs (based on archaeological materials of the second half of the 1st millennium AD)], *Revista Arheologică*, serie nouă, 14 (2), 27–50.
- Wenska I. 2015. *Sacrifices among the Slavs: Between Archeological Evidence and 19th Century Folklore*. *Analecta Archaeologica Ressoviensia* 10, 271–312.
- Werczyński D., Rodak S. 2012. *Wczesnośredniowieczna ceramika z grodziska w Gniewkowie, pow. świdnicki*, Śląskie Sprawozdania Archeologiczne 54, 185–206.

- Wilson T. 1896. *The swastika, the earliest known symbol, and its migrations; with observations on the migration of certain industries in prehistoric times*, Washington.
- Wrocławski T. 2001. *Rozpoznawcze badania archeologiczne na grodzisku w Jeleniej Górze – Grabarach, stan. 1*, Skarbiec Duchy Gór. Pismo poświęcone ochronie środowiska naturalnego, zabytków i dorobku kulturowego Kotliny Jeleniogórskiej 3 (19), 14.

Websites:

<https://mnkd.pl/gliniany-garnek-ze-zmijowisk/> [access 04.12.2024]

ADDRESS OF THE AUTHOR

Ewa Lisowska

Institute of Archaeology

University of Wrocław

Szewska 48, 50-139 Wrocław, Poland

ewa.lisowska@uwr.edu.pl

ORCID 0000-0002-0444-9513

