

EARLY SLAVS IN THE SOUTHWEST BALTIC REGION: INITIAL INVESTIGATIONS IN DOBROPOLE PYRZYCKIE (POLAND)

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Abstract

Important but up to now more or less unsolved questions of early Medieval archaeology focus on the date and the process of Slavonisation in the southwest Baltic area. The state of knowledge in various regions of northeast Germany and Poland lead to partly different research reviews, which in some cases even expressed opposing opinions. There are only a few absolute dates available indicating that the beginning of the Slavonic settlement can be dated to the late seventh and early eighth centuries, but how this process of slavonisation can be explained is still unknown. Did a new Slavonic community migrate into a devastated landscape, or was there a change of identity into a Slavonic way of life connected with continuous Germanic settlement?

New interdisciplinary investigations of late Germanic and the earliest Slavonic settlements in northwest Poland focus on these questions. The aim of the research project is to obtain new references for continuities or discontinuities in the history of the settlement and the use of the landscape in the area of Pyrzyce, Western Pomerania, to explain processes of change from the sixth to the eighth century.

Key words: Early Slavs, Dobropole Pyrzyckie, Germany, Poland, Baltic Sea, Slavonisation, migration, settlement archaeology, dendrochronology.

Introduction

The knowledge of early Slavonic culture in wide parts of the southwest Baltic area (northeast Germany, Poland) is quite different and currently widely debated (Biermann *et al.* 1999; Brather 1996, p.14ff; Dulinicz 2001; 2006; Godłowski 1979; Gringmuth-Dallmer 1996; Herrmann 1999; Kaczanowski 2005; Leube 1995; Parczewski 1993; 2003; 2005; Schneeweiß 2003, p.71ff). This discussion about the Slavonisation of the Baltic area is mainly caused by different opinions concerning the development and the process of distribution of early Slavonic culture.

There is little doubt that early Slavonic culture developed primarily from Kiev culture in the fifth century AD in the central and left bank Dnepr region (Parczewski 1993, p.131ff; Oblomskij, Terpilovskij 2003; Terpilovskij 2004) (Fig. 1). In this area, three closely interconnected archaeological cultures emerged (Prague-Korchak, Penkovka and Kolochin cultures), of which Prague-Korchak culture subsequently spread very fast over wide parts of Central and Eastern Europe. Sukow-Dziedzice-group probably then emerged out of this culture along the southwest Baltic Sea shore, but the chronology and the distribution of this cultural phenomenon are still not very comprehensible (Parczewski 1993, p.137ff).

Absolute dates

Important indications for understanding the chronology and the distribution of Slavonic culture are absolute data (Fig. 2). West of the River Oder, many dendrochronological dates of early Slavonic settlement complexes are known, dating from the mid-to-late seventh and mostly eighth centuries AD (Dulinicz 2006, p.39ff). The Slavonic settlement was therefore assumed to start during that time or shortly before, but about 100 to 150 years after the migration of the former Germanic population. East of the River Oder, the picture is completely different: from northern Poland, no absolute dates are known currently between the sixth and the early ninth centuries, except for a few radiocarbon dates which usually show quite a wide range of dating (Dulinicz 2006, p.51ff). Therefore, an opposing interpretation of data has emerged: most Polish scholars dated the start of the Slavonic settlement in present-day Poland to the sixth century AD, without a settlement hiatus between Germanic and Slavonic settlers (Hensel 1973; Kostrzewski 1961; Makiewicz 2005a). This interpretation was also equivalent to the idea of an autochthon development of Slavonic culture out of the late Germanic population, which should be confirmed by similar pottery, as well as by anthropological and even historical sources (Leciejewicz 2002; 2008; Makiewicz 2005a; 2005b; 2005c; Nalepa 2007; Piontek 2006). Thanks to new investigations, the inter-

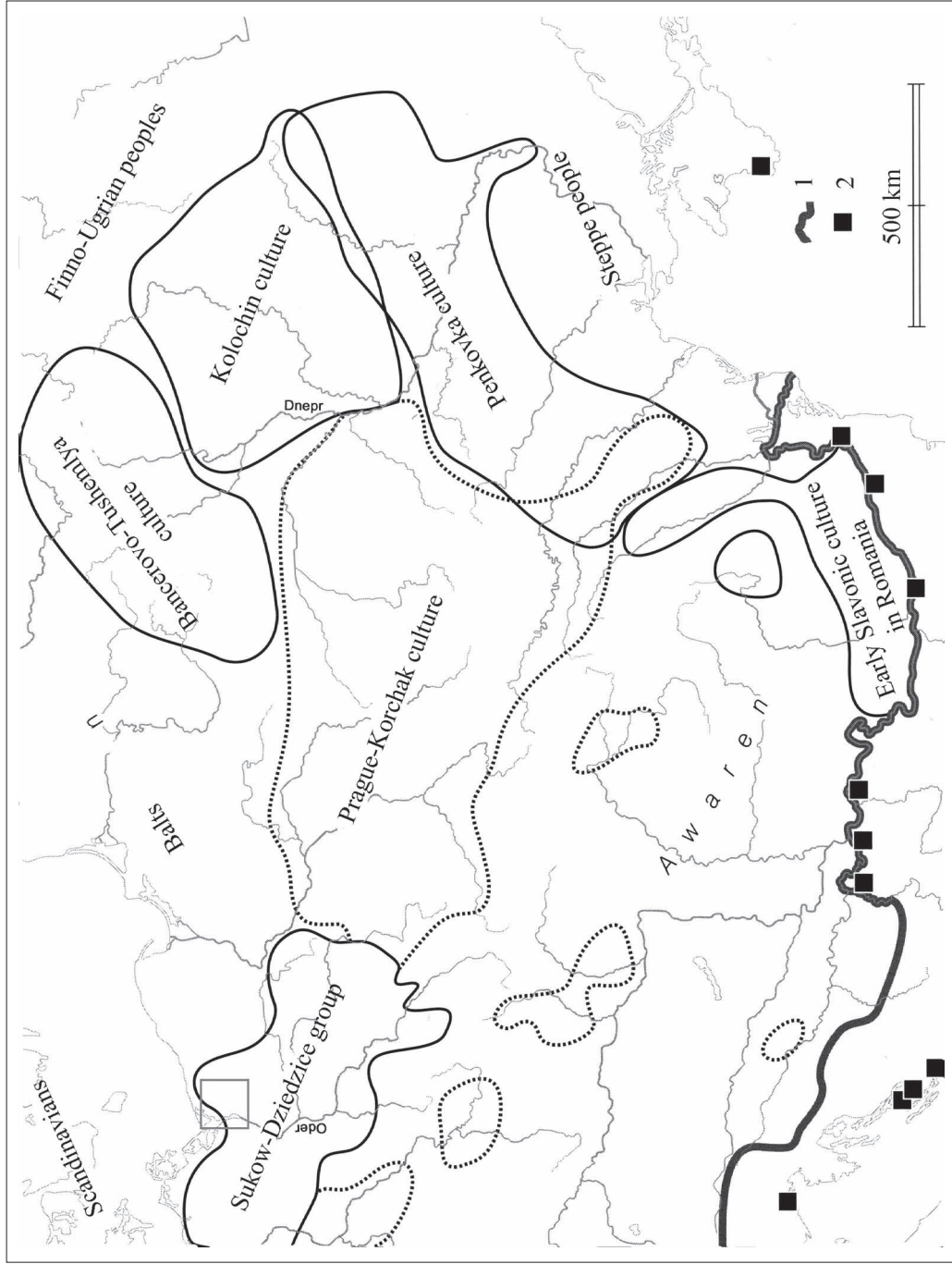


Fig. 1. The distribution of archaeological cultures in Central and Eastern Europe at the end of the sixth and the beginning of the seventh centuries AD. The study area to be discussed is marked a quadrangular square: 1 the border of the Byzantine Empire; 2 important early Byzantine centres (Dulnicz 2006, 18, Fig. 3).

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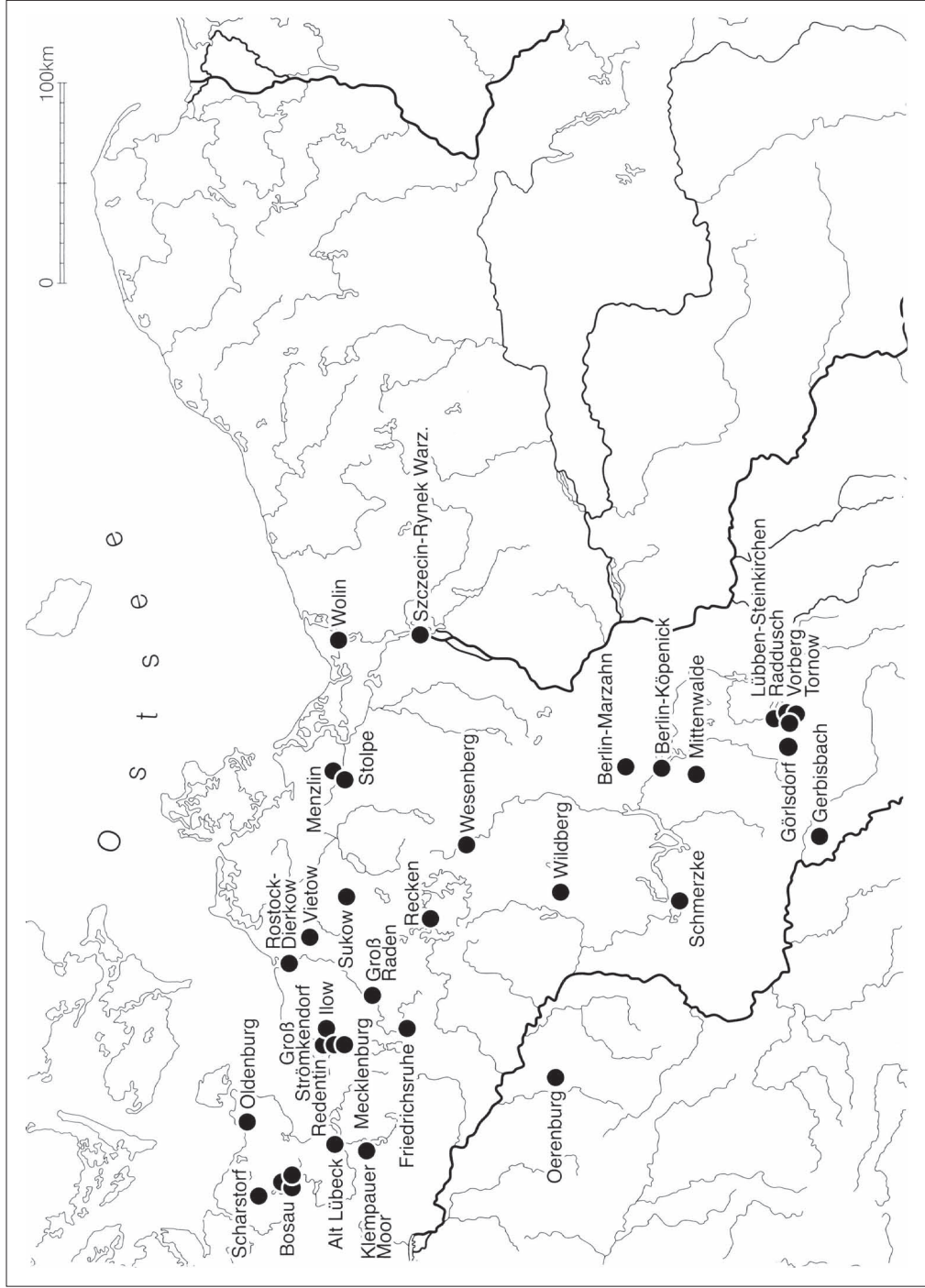


Fig. 2. Sites with dendrochronologically dated evidence from the end of the sixth century to the first half of the ninth century AD (Dulinicz 2006, 48, Fig. 5).

pretation has slowly been changing for several years to an allochthon development of Slavonic culture, which will be postulated especially by Marek Dulinicz and Michał Parczewski (Dulinicz 2001; 2006; Parczewski 1993; 2003; 2005). This change of interpretation is caused by the fact that the similarities of all features of early Slavonic culture on both sides of the River Oder are too equal, and therefore different datings of these features are unlikely.

The process of allochthon Slavonisation

Also under discussion is the process of the spread of Slavonic culture. From an archaeological point of view, a migration of Slavonic settlers into mostly deserted landscapes is assumed (allochthon development) (Biermann *et al.* 1999, p.236; Brather 1996, p.14ff; Dulinicz 2006; Godłowski 1976, p.70ff; 1979; 1980; 1989; 1999; Herrmann 1996; 1999; Herrmann, Heußner 1991; Heußner, Westphal 1996; Parczewski 2003; 2005; Schoknecht 2001, p.514). Contacts with a Germanic residual population are not yet proven, but seem to be probable in a few regions (Schneeweiß 2007). Another model will be discussed by historians, especially by Walter Pohl (Pohl 1988, p.94ff; 2008a, p.23f; 2008b, p.340ff), who favours a more cultural model, namely the distribution of a Slavonic 'way of life', which means an adoption of Slavonic traits by the former Germanic population. In his opinion, a strongly agrarian lifestyle, the easy development of new cultivated areas, and a decentralised, largely egalitarian social organisation, characterised this highly flexible model of life that became an attractive alternative to hierarchical societies like the Avars, Germans and Romans. Parts of these societies, like soldiers and farmers, could have therefore adapted this way of life: they became Slavs, not in an ethnic, but in a cultural meaning (Pohl 1988, p.95). This may explain why the Slavonisation of large parts of East and Central Europe needed only a relatively short time: a homogenous Slavonic population did not migrate into depopulated regions, but a cultural model was transferred and adapted. In particular, the assimilation of the Germanic population which was left in the wake of migration, or even Germanic soldiers who returned to their homeland, is conceivable in this context. They may have come into contact with Slavic life, for example in the Danube region, where Slavonic settlers have been proven since the sixth century AD, adapted it and implemented it into their home region. Only after the emergence and consolidation of social and settlement patterns could ethno-political federations, such as Abodrites, Wilzen or Heveller, be developed, which appeared in written

sources from the eighth century AD as tribes and tribal organisations (Brather 2004, p.236ff, p.254f).

Archaeology can so far describe these cultural and very dynamic processes of change, but cannot sufficiently explain them (Brather 2004, p.250). Thus, possible Slavonic migrations are difficult to prove by archaeological evidence; usually it is just possible to detect 'follow developments' (Brather 2004, p.254). It is therefore not clear at present to what extent a residual Germanic population may have been assimilated and Slavonised, or if people of different ethnic backgrounds joined a Slavonic migration and came into contact with the Slavonic way of life. Or is it even a combination of both? What is obvious is that the Slavonisation, as we see it now, should be considered an extensive cultural (social, economic and religious) overprinting of the original identity, which is also confirmed by historical sources (Pohl 2008b, p.340).

For this reason, a concept of the Slavonisation of the southwest Baltic Sea region has not yet been presented in Medieval archaeology (Brather 2004, p.238). Such an approach can only be developed with the involvement of scientific methods, because only they allow access to the historic environment and the lifestyle and behaviour of the population at that time. The detection of migration and mobility of people, especially through multi-element isotopic analysis (strontium, lead, oxygen), may significantly improve the level of knowledge of the Slavonisation of large parts of Central and Eastern Europe. This approach allows for the distinction between 'native' and 'foreign', and thus possible evidence of a residual population (native) or an immigrant population (foreign) (Tütken *et al.* 2008). Several other methods, like dendrochronology, archaeozoology, pollen analysis or ceramic analysis, should also be taken into account, to indicate continuities or discontinuities.

Early Slavs in the Pyrzyce region

To develop and test new approaches in Slavonic archaeology, initial investigations were conducted by the Roman-Germanic Commission and the National Museum Szczecin, within Pyrzyce, southeast of Szczecin, in Western Pomerania, Poland. The aims of these investigations are to archive new references regarding the dates and the causes of settlement decline during late-Germanic times, as well as the dates and conditions of early Slavonic settlement. Moreover, it is necessary to clarify the role of mobility and migration for the Slavonisation of Central and Eastern Europe: to what extent the expansion of Slavonic culture was carried out by the migration of the Slavonic gentes, or by the Slavonisation of the residual population.

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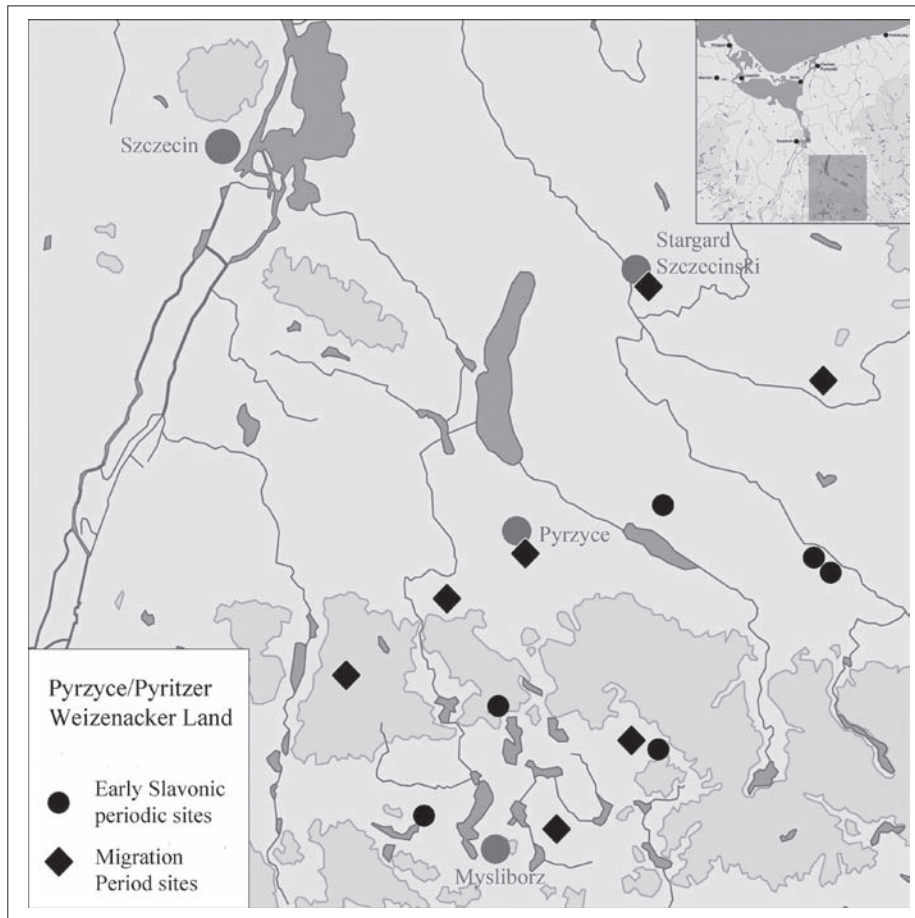


Fig. 3. The distribution of sites dating from the Migration Period (rhombus) and early Slavonic period (circle) in Pyrzyce/Pyritz Weizenacker (map by S. Messal).

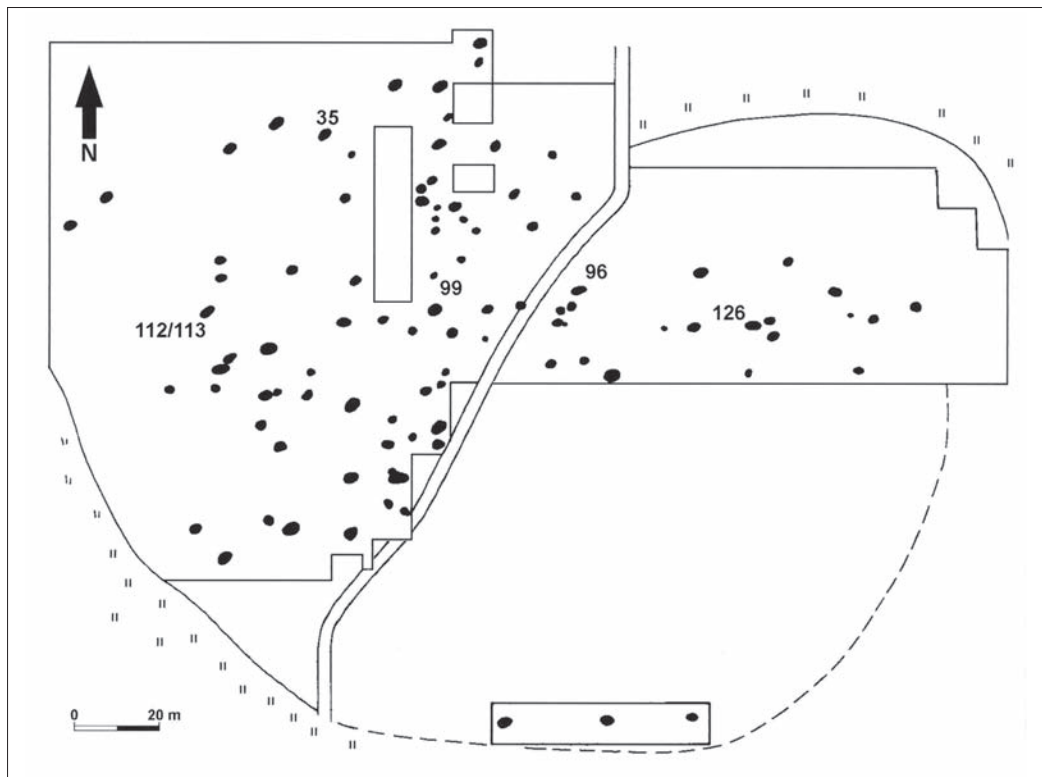


Fig. 4. Dziędzice: excavation plan of the early Slavonic settlement site (Porzeziński 1980, 121, Fig. 6.7).

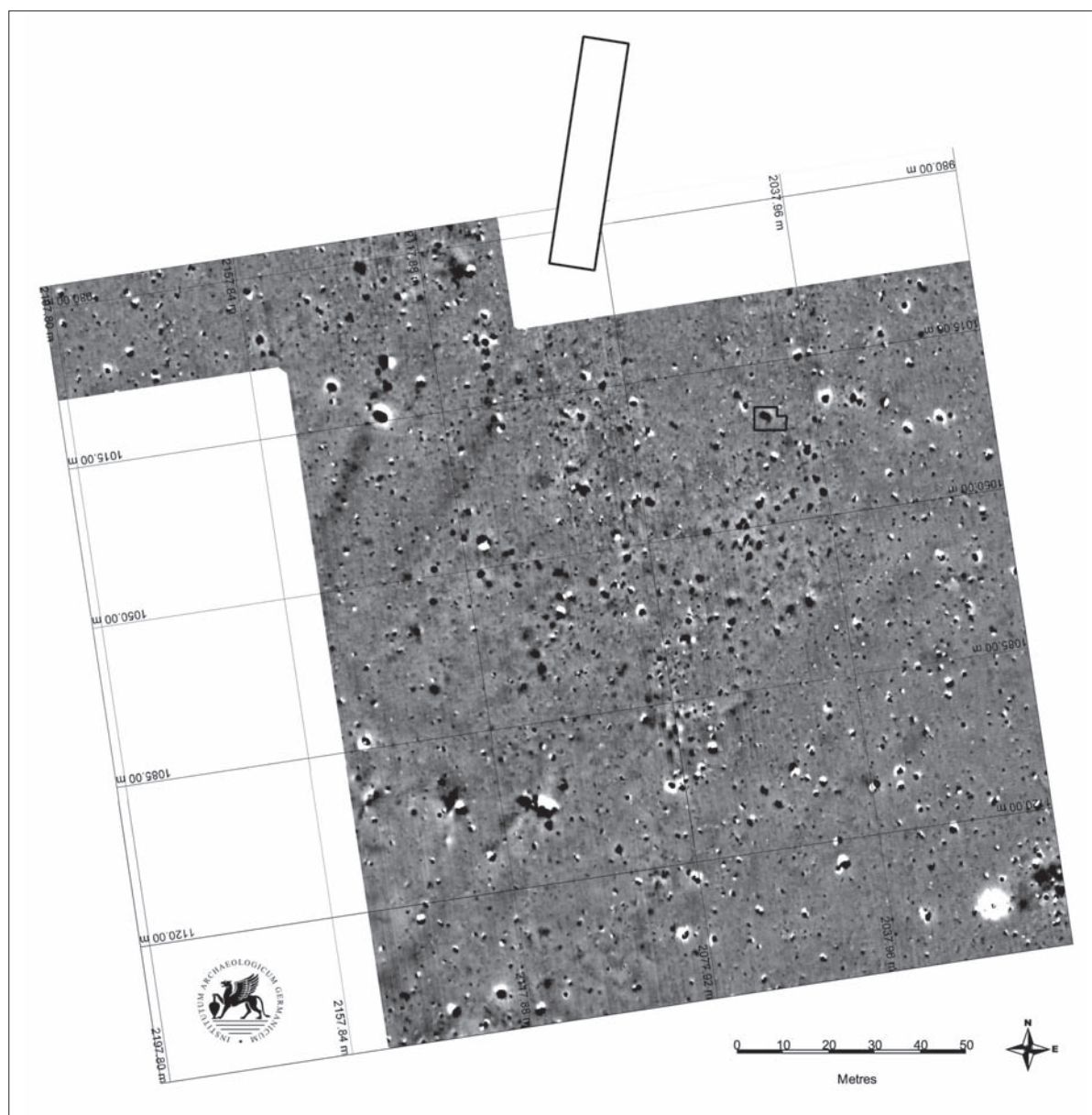


Fig. 5. Dobropole Pyrzyckie: the results of the geomagnetic survey (-10/+10 nT) and the location of excavation trenches (by S. Messal).

The very fertile region around Pyrzyce, also called Pyrzytzer Weizenacker, was chosen because of its favourable conditions for obtaining the required information. In this area, numerous sites are known from the Late Roman and Migration Period (fourth to sixth centuries AD) up to the early Middle Ages, which are very suitable for settlement and landscape studies within a closed micro-region (Fig. 3). In addition, the archaeological record from this region can be addressed as well. During the 1960s, the first investigations in the 50-by-40-kilometre-wide region were conducted by the National Museum in Szczecin. At that time, the early Slavonic settlements of Dziejzice and Derczewo were excavated (Fig. 4) (Porzeziński 1969; 1972; 1975a; 1975b; 1980). Since the late 1970s, extensive

surface surveys, as part of a nationwide registration of archaeological sites (Archeologiczne Zdjęcie Polski), were also carried out.

In 2010, initial geomagnetic surveys and test excavations were conducted in order to verify the potential of the archaeological source material. Magnetometer surveys were carried out at six settlement sites; the total investigated area was eight acres. In Suchań, the magnetometer survey revealed the remains of a Roman Iron Age farmstead, consisting of pit houses, ovens and furnaces. Also, several concentrations of possible post-holes could be detected, which probably indicate former locations of buildings. Within the Slavonic sites (Dziejzice, Moskorzyn, Strąpie, Dobropole Pyrzyckie 10 and 12), numerous traces of former settlement

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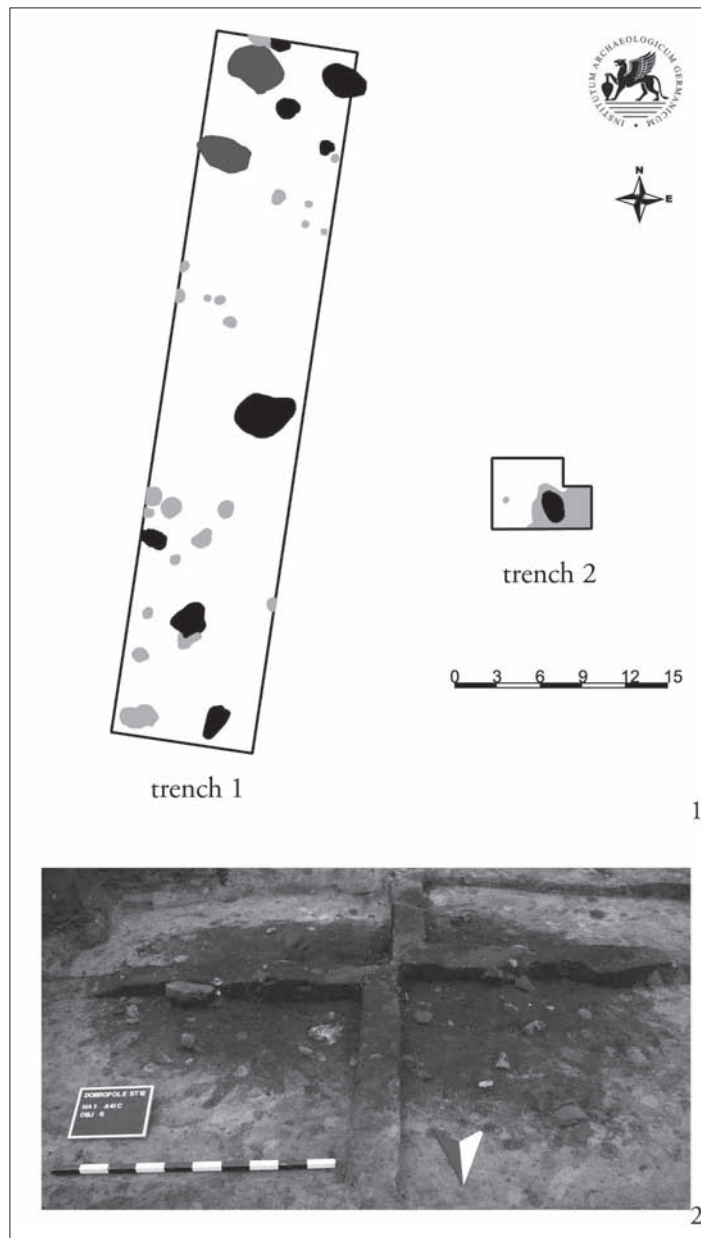


Fig. 6. Dobropole Pyrzyckie. 1 Excavation plan (black: Slavonic objects; dark grey: Pre-Roman Iron Age objects; light grey: undated objects); 2 oval settlement pit (graphic and photo by S. Messal).

activities could be recognised. Most of the detected anomalies can be interpreted as settlement pits of oval shape, which are common features in early Slavonic settlements in the southwest Baltic region. The most comprehensive insights into the extent and structure of an early Slavonic settlement were provided by the geomagnetic survey at the Dobropole Pyrzyckie site (Fig. 5). Located on a small promontory in the Mała Ina river valley, the settlement was detected by a large amount of early Slavonic pottery covering an area of about one hectare. This settlement area was completely covered by the geomagnetic survey; in total 2.5 hectares were investigated. The survey resulted in the documentation of an 80-by-80-metre area, in which a

massive cluster-shaped accumulation of anomalies, interpreted as settlement pits, could be detected. The two to three-metre-long and up to two-metre-wide objects are arranged irregularly, a clear settlement pattern is not recognisable. But since these anomalies are comparable in size and arrangement to excavated settlement pits in Dziedzice (Fig. 4), an interpretation as a settlement site is highly likely.

To verify these survey results in Dobropole Pyrzyckie, a small-scale test excavation was conducted in the summer of 2010. Besides, the preservation of the objects, the conditions for the conservation of wood (especially close to the river), and the date of the structures should also be clarified. Due to the late harvest, it was unfor-

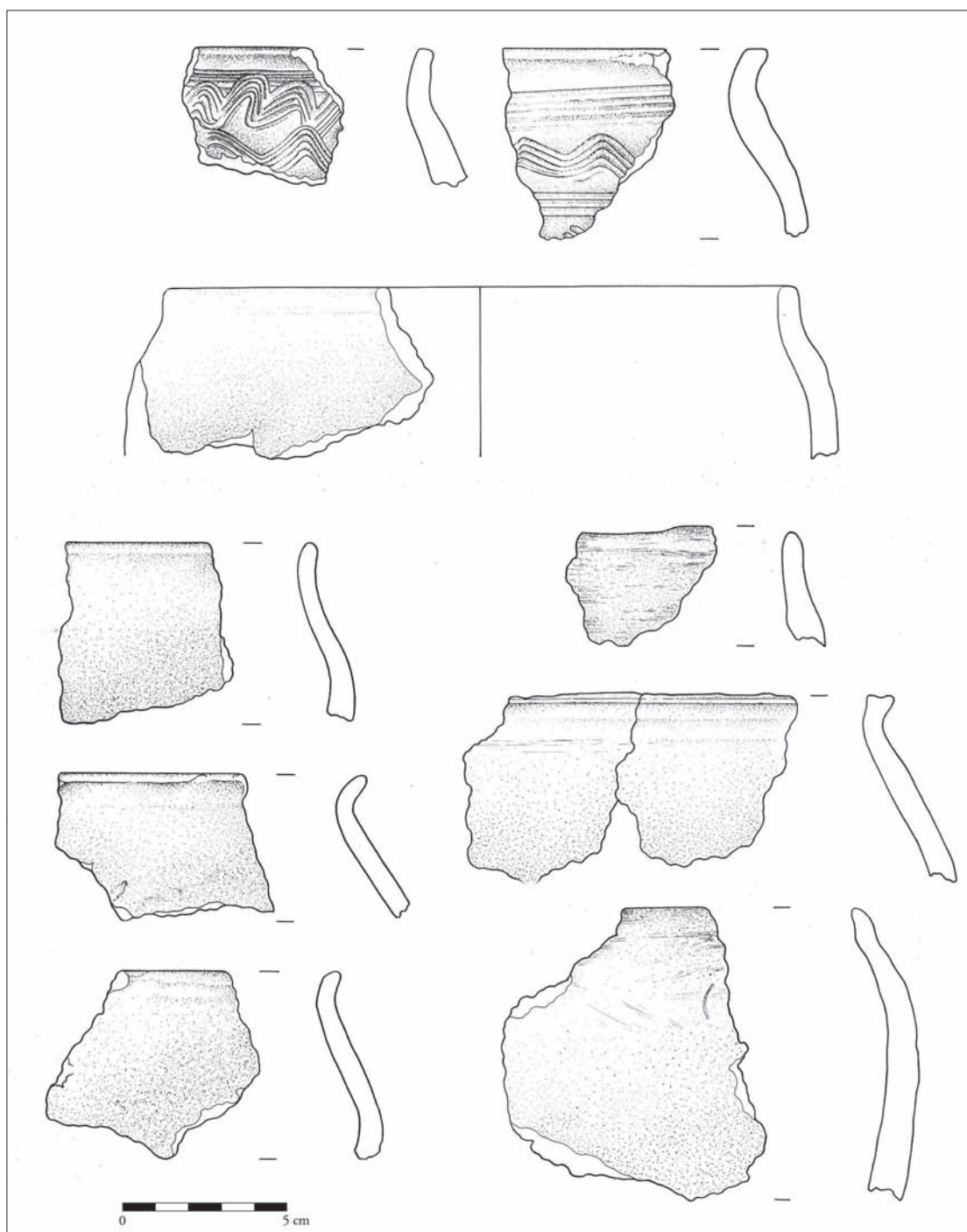


Fig. 7. Dobropole Pyrzyckie: handmade and undecorated Slavonic pottery from object 37 (drawing by I. Sukiennicka).

tunately only possible to open a ten-by-50-metre-long trench S1 north of the surveyed area. Only a small test trench (S2, five by five metres) was excavated within the investigated area by magnetometer. Nevertheless, in both trenches, several objects were detected and dated to the Slavonic period (Fig. 6.1). Within trench S1, two large oval pits (Fig. 6.2), indicating the location of former buildings, as well as at least three bag-

shaped storage pits, could be documented. The pottery consists mostly of handmade and undecorated material, but also a few decorated pieces (Fig. 7.1-2). This indicates an already more developed stage within the early Slavonic period (eighth century AD).

Trench S2 was conducted to verify the results of the geomagnetic survey. Therefore, the trench covered the spot of an east-west orientated anomaly, which was

interpreted as a settlement pit (Fig. 5). Due to the excavation, this interpretation proved to be correct, as a 2.5-by-one-metre pit of oval shape could be documented (Fig. 6.1). For this reason, an interpretation of similar anomalies within the surveyed area as settlement pits is highly likely. The ceramic inventory consists of only handmade and undecorated shards, and points to an early Slavonic date.

In summary, after the initial studies in Dobropole Pyrzyckie, some first results can be stated. On a sandy promontory close to the River Mała Ina, a settlement from the early Slavonic period existed (the object in S2), which in later times (the transition from the early to the middle Slavonic period) shifted to higher areas of the promontory (the objects in S1). This is also confirmed by the decorated pottery which was found uphill. Although currently no absolute date is provided, an early stage within the early Slavonic period may be argued. Because of these preliminary results, the Dobropole Pyrzyckie site should be understood as a key site for the forthcoming research into the Pyrzyce region, since the site has revealed the potential to clarify numerous questions mentioned above regarding the Slavonisation of the southwest Baltic area. Extensive investigations in the coming years are therefore planned, especially in the lowland areas; a major focus should be placed on the extraction of structural timbers (wells, and so on) to obtain absolute datings by dendrochronology.

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III

FOOTMARKS
OF THE
EVERYDAY
LIFE OF
SOCIETIES
IN EARLY
URBAN
SETTLEMENTS
AND CITIES

PIETVAKARIŲ BALTIJOS REGIONO ANKSTYVIEJI SLAVAI: PIRMINIAI TYRIMAI DOBROPOLE PYŻYCKE (LENKIJA)

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Santrauka

Svarbus, bet kol kas iki galo neišspręstas, yra ankstyvosios viduramžių archeologijos klausimas, fokusuojamas į Pietvakarių Baltijos arealo slavavimo procesą ir jo datavimą (1–7 pav.). Skirtingų Šiaurės vakarų Vokietijos ir Lenkijos regionų ištyrimo būklė lėmė iš dalies skirtingus tyrimų vertinimus, kurie kartais virsdavo net priešingomis nuomonėmis. Yra vos kelios abejonių nekeliančios datos, patvirtinančios, kad ankstyviausios slavų gyvenvietės įkurtos VII a. pabaigoje – VIII a. pradžioje. Bet kaip paaiškinti patį slavavimo procesą, vis dar neaišku. Ar naujųjų „slavų“ bendruomenės migravo į nusiaubtą teritoriją, ar slavų gyvenimo būdas sujungė germanų gyvenviečių gyventojus?

Nauji tarpdalykiniai Pietvakarių Lenkijos vėlyvųjų germanų ir ankstyviausių slavų gyvenviečių tyrimai buvo koncentruoti kaip tik į šiuos klausimus. Šio tyrimų projekto tikslas – gauti naujos informacijos apie gyvenviečių naudojimo tęstinumą arba pertrūkį ir, remiantis Pyžycės (Pyrzycke) apylinkių Vakarų Pomeranijoje pavyzdžiu, paaiškinti permainų nuo VI iki VIII amžiaus procesus. Pirmieji darbai Dobropole Pyžycke (geomagnetiniai ir archeologiniai tyrimai) jau atlikti, bet kol kas dar nėra absoliučių datų. Tolesniais tyrimais bus mėginama rasti statytinės medienos liekanų (sienojų, šulinių ar pan.), kad būtų galima gauti absoliučias datas, taikant dendrochronologinį metodą.

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