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Wood in modern funerary culture based on selected archaeological sites

Burying the dead in wooden coffins on hallowed ground and with funeral ceremonies have been taking place in Poland since the 13th century. Throughout the centuries the burial rituals have evolved, the exequies we still know today appeared as well as the shape of coffins began to change from simple forms to more complex ones. Identification of the wood used for coffin production is quite rarely discussed. Favorable environmental conditions in earthen graves and crypts enable the wood to preserve well enough to analyze it which is an important part of the research on funerary culture. The aim of the thesis is to indicate the cognitive possibilities of xylological analyzes in the study of coffins from crypts and cemeteries of the modern period. The focus was both on the analysis of the wood used in the coffin production as well as, although to a lesser extent, on wooden objects laid in it with the deceased.

At the beginning of the thesis the crafts that were linked to the coffin and its elements production were listed. The descriptions were divided into urban and non-urban zones as coffin production varied depending on local guilds quantity and the wealth of residents. A carpentry workshop with its assortment should be considered as the only permanent element for all areas. The full process of coffin building is also described as it was associated with certain customs and superstitions. The next chapter is devoted to discussion about spiritual aspects associated with wood. The subject of trees' connection to religious elements all over the world (Europe, the Middle and Far East as well as North America) is raised. The purpose of such an extensive list is to indicate that regardless of places on earth and civilizations, trees and wood have always aroused admiration in mankind. That resulted in creation of a huge number of beliefs and symbols which can be interpreted similarly. Further chapter describes the archaeological sites from which coffin wood samples were collected from. Each of the analyzed coffins was described based on the site's archaeological documentation. The order on the sites' list is based on the quantity of the samples taken and it is listed from the largest to the least. Therefore, the research on the crypts of the Name of the Most Holy Virgin Mary church in Szczuczyn, earth burials from the cemetery churchyard of the Saint Nicholas church in Gniew, the crypt of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary church in Piaseczno near Gniew, northern crypt of the Holy Trinity church in Radzyń Podlaski and the crypt under the church of St. Exaltation of the Cross Saint in Łuków were described one by one. The

following chapters constitute the main element of the research - the xylological analysis along with methodology and preparation of wood for further sampling are described. Individual types and species of trees (Scots pine, oak, linden, birch, alder, poplar, maple, elm and common ash) were represented and described in terms of micro- and macroscopic characteristics. The results were also compared in laid adults, clergy and children categories. It was noted that not only coffins but also joints, strips that covered the boards joints, legs and supports were made of wood. Sometimes inside the box there were also planed board shavings deposited. Other wooden objects found in burials were also analyzed, such as sticks - measuring sticks, devotional items (rope beads used in praying beads, crosses, prayer book cover reinforcements, grave wreath hoops) and wooden shoe elements (heels and nails).

All research results as well as possible interpretations were summarized in the last chapter. Wood sample markings made it possible to indicate which factors could have decided on the selection of wood used through funeral ceremony as well as in to a lesser extent devotional and footwear items. Albeit analysis did not show any regional dependencies apart from the fact that each type of wood was rather common material, the selection of wood was influenced by wood properties such as ease of processing, profiling and cutting of decorative elements. A factor that could also have a large impact on the selection of the wood for the coffin making was the social status of the deceased person and in a lesser sense their age or gender. Ethnographic translations only partially cover the research results presented in the thesis, but ethnographers collected their information through specific communities, often very distant from the sites mentioned. However, confirmation of the truthfulness of these translations is obtained by examining the shavings and partially measuring sticks from the coffins. In the case of the devotional items the material that had good properties in production of small items had been used. The usage of more valuable, sometimes of exotic origin, material is less often noticed. Similarly, the analysis markings of the nails seen on the wood and heels allow us to conclude that the footwear placed in the coffins with the deceased was not prepared solely for funeral purposes but was made in a way that allows them to be used.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Jakob Gehlke". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'J' and 'G'.