

# Slavic Journeys to the Otherworld. Remarks on the Eschatology of Early Medieval Pomeranians

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*Many obstacles appear in attempts at explore and reconstruct the pagan rituals and beliefs of early medieval Pomeranians. This is not only due to the lack of written accounts referring to such practices, but also because of the various problems with unravelling the meaning and content of the archaeological evidence. Today, it is often difficult to determine how certain places or objects were perceived by past societies and with what symbolism they had been imbued. The burial finds are equally problematic since, while excavating cemeteries, we discover only the final result of the complex funerary process, i.e. the grave. Therefore, a question arises as to whether the material remains found at cemeteries could allow for revealing such abstract and subtle matters as eschatological beliefs. In an attempt to reconstruct the Slavic vision of the Otherworld, this paper will examine in detail the notions of the soul (spirit) and the meaning of grave-goods.*

**Keywords:** Slavs, Pomeranians, Early Middle Ages, funerary practices, soul and spirit, grave-goods.

## Death

Various beliefs concerning death and dying are deeply rooted in human consciousness and belong to the most archaic cultural phenomena. In every society, the sphere of beliefs and eschatological concepts is regarded as the oldest and most basic form of religious expression (Potkowski 1973: 7). Practically every mythological system known today regards death as a process of initiation, transition or human transformation. Mythological accounts also emphasise its uniqueness and ability to mirror all other forms of existence (Trzciński 2006: 40). Death is not perceived as a void, but rather as an alternative form of being that enables different forms of ‘dialogue’ between the living and the dead. Almost always and everywhere, death is equated with (re)birth, dreaming or travel (Thomas 1991: 5). Human attitudes towards the dead are based on four premises. The first is the ‘transition from the state of being alive to the state of being dead, i.e. “dying”’ (Bonowska 2008). The second premise concerns the annihilating force, whose various forms or apparitions are usually the creation of human fantasy. The third is usually associated with the otherworldly domain and its particular setting in space and time. The fourth has three aspects: first, the deceased; then the transcendent element in the form of a spirit or ghost that, although invisible, may be sensed by the living; and finally the attention is drawn to what may be called a *mara*, or revenant with demonic powers enabling it to return to the

world of the living in a supernatural form. In conclusion, it may be argued that in archaic societies death was regarded as an alternative state of existence. Therefore, the funeral did not mark the end, but rather the beginning of a new journey towards another world (e.g. Oestigaard 1999: 358).

### **Duch/dusza – Spirit/Soul**

We are unable to determine whether the early medieval Slavs knew about the concept of the soul before the introduction of Christianity in their lands. What we do know, however, is that they must have had some beliefs concerning the Otherworld and the post-mortem existence of their dead. The first textual accounts concerning traditional Slavic beliefs about the soul are known from the High Middle Ages. According to these beliefs the human soul was conceived as being similar to a living person. It could walk, sit, eat, drink, leave footprints or handprints, breastfeed orphans and have sexual intercourse with the living. Although the souls were invisible for the living, they occupied part of their space. Therefore, people had to be wary not to poke them, step on them or splash them with slop (Moszyński 1967: 586). Such perceptions of the human soul, which stood in glaring contrast to the official Christian eschatology, to some extent had to have resulted from pagan beliefs.

Linguistic evidence implies that the early medieval Slavs may have shared a belief in some form of spirit or soul. In discussing these notions, various scholars point towards the word *nav/nawie*. This term is sometimes seen as being of pre-Slavic origin, and it is derived from Pre-Indo-European cultural heritage and refers to ‘death’ or ‘corpse’. It holds similar meaning in some of the contemporary Slavic languages (Dźwigoł 2004: 159), although in various (but not all) languages of the Slavs one may observe a shift in its meaning, whereby it refers to the sphere of demonology. For example, in eastern Polish dialects there are various names for *rusalki*, forest or water demons: *mawki*, *mauki*, *nawki*, *miawki*, *mauki*, *mavky*, *niavky*, *majki*. Another term for the spirits of the ancestors, which is also attributed an ancient origin, is *lalka* (*lelka*, *lątka*) (Szyjewski 2003: 79; Zielina 2011: 95).<sup>1</sup> It is noteworthy that after death the human soul went to the land of the dead, whose name is reconstructed as *Nawia* or *Lala*.

How did the Slavs imagine their post-mortem existence? The evidence presented above implies a kind of ambivalence; sources mention a transcendent form of the dead, but (as suggested by the archaeological evidence, i.e. furnished burials) there is a belief in some sort of physical embodiment. The easiest explanation would be to derive each of these beliefs from the ways in which the human remains were treated at Slavic funerals, which involved either cremation or inhumation. At first glance, the ontological meanings that are attributed to the results of cremation on a funeral pyre seem to imply a belief in a spirit without bodily form, even some sort of metempsychosis. In the inhumation graves,

<sup>1</sup> Anthropomorphic figures, such as dolls, are sometimes also regarded as representations of the dead. Such figures are relatively frequently discovered during ethnographic studies (Jurkowski 1998: 35) and they were employed for various magic practices throughout the Slavic area (Biegeleisen 1929: 224; Matczakowa 1963: 134-135; Lehr 2003: 151). Russian fairy-tales are also noteworthy in this context, since they sometimes describe wooden dolls that symbolized dead ancestors or guardian spirits of the family (Dolińska 1990). Furthermore, the original meaning of scarecrows is occasionally seen in this way (Bielenia 2013: 12). Perhaps some anthropomorphic representations, in the form of dolls, could be regarded as a reminiscence of early medieval cult-figurines? I discuss this notion in more detail elsewhere (Kajkowski in press).

however, we observe grave-goods, which may signal the various needs or desires of the deceased. Therefore, a question arises whether the custom of inhuming the dead brought some changes to the previous pagan eschatological views? This idea is not supported by the Arabic written accounts that refer predominantly to the East Slavic areas (ibn Rosteh, ibn Fadlan, al-Masudi) (Zoll-Adamikowa 1975: 284) in which numerous goods that are cremated with the deceased are mentioned. Interestingly, these goods are similar to those deposited in inhumation graves (cf. Williams 2001: 195). This information seems to suggest that the early medieval Slavs believed in a non-corporeal form of existence after death. However, in the afterlife, the deceased had needs similar to those which they had in life. A change (or prolongation) may have concerned only the very nature of the 'journey'. While the burning of the dead on a funeral pyre probably resulted in an immediate transfer to the Otherworld (van Gennepe 2006: 166; Gräslund 1994: 19; Meaney 2003: 238; Kursite 2005: 767),<sup>2</sup> the interment of the body was likely to be associated with beliefs regarding the very form of the burial, i.e. the Slavs may have believed that along with the decomposition of the body, the objects that accompanied the deceased also decomposed. Of course, it is impossible to verify this hypothesis due to the nature of the available sources. It is worth adding, however, that in the beliefs of many societies, the deceased was not considered as 'truly dead' until the moment of complete decomposition of his body (Kerrigan 2009: 9).

### The Gift

Various goods deposited with the dead in the grave pit are among the most important pieces of evidence that confirm the belief in afterlife among pagan societies (e.g. Woźny 2005: 17). However, when funerary materials are carefully analysed we face a serious dilemma: how can we interpret the objects buried with the deceased? Some of the portable objects that are discovered in the grave are part of the deceased person's costume, others have nothing to do with clothing and were placed in the grave to serve a special purpose. While this is not the place to discuss these phenomena (see Rębkowski 2007: 96, 141 with further references), it is vital to pose an important question: what was the meaning of such practices? In most cases, it is assumed that grave goods were 'given' to the dead who were believed to continue their existence in the Otherworld and who needed various everyday objects there. Other interpretations are also possible, however (Biegeleisen 1929: 181). It is sometimes assumed that the objects deposited with the dead had three basic purposes: to satisfy the needs of the deceased, to protect the living from the undesired 'activity' of the dead, and finally the deposition of grave goods may have been the result of various social or economic relations (Miśkiewicz 1969: 244), including aspects associated with creating 'memories' about the dead, manifesting their prestige as well as the prestige of those who buried them. In our considerations, the first of these three purposes is the most significant. According to Kolbuszewski (1985: 36), among the

<sup>2</sup> In his account, Ibn Fadlan mentions that this is how the act of cremation was understood by the Rus (Montgomery 2000). In academic literature, one may also encounter a theory according to which the act of cremation was a way to protect the living from the return of the dead in a corporeal form (Bylina 1992: 10-11). This notion is, of course, associated with the fear of revenants, but its actual genesis is very difficult to determine. It may perhaps be connected with the reception of Christian eschatological ideas referring to the resurrection of the dead. However, it is also possible that it has no connection whatsoever with the introduction of inhumation practices among the Western Slavs. This problem has been extensively discussed elsewhere (e.g. Rębkowski 2007: 99).

objects deposited with the dead one may list those that were only associated with the post-mortem existence of the dead, but also symbolic objects with magic qualities that were used by the dead to communicate with a god or other divine being. The latter had some connection with metaphysical forms of communication with the Otherworld. Both types of objects are discovered during archaeological excavations conducted at early medieval Pomeranian cemeteries.

Assuming that at least part of the grave goods was associated with some form of post-mortem existence, let us now consider what this existence may have been like. It is difficult to determine whether the Pomeranians shared a belief in the so-called 'living-dead', who continued their 'life' in a corporeal form.<sup>3</sup> Apart from folkloristic accounts, there are no other sources that would confirm such belief. Moreover, it must be added that the evidence recorded by ethnographers usually refers to people who had a particular social status and who had been perceived as having demonic qualities. It is noteworthy that both the cremated and inhumed individuals had the same 'needs'. This may be confirmed by the practice of furnishing both cremation and inhumation burials with similar objects. The abandonment of cremation may have led to the belief that some of the dead were dangerous for the living (Bylina 1993: 75).

In discussing these matters, we must also acknowledge the fact that we generally cannot be certain whether a particular object was deposited with the dead because it belonged to them in life or whether the object only played a role in ritual practices associated with eschatological beliefs. However, bearing in mind that each of these two variants came as a direct result of intentional actions (perhaps representing the last will of the dying or simply funerary traditions) (Härke 1992: 23), it must be noted that every object placed in the grave, through the very act of its deposition, acquired special qualities that need not necessarily reflect its original function.

The latest research suggests that the idea of furnishing the dead with various objects intensifies with the increasing popularity of inhumation rites. Before the 10<sup>th</sup> century, this practice was very rare indeed. Therefore, furnishing the dead with objects is sometimes regarded as a 'reflection of eschatological beliefs typical for Christianity' (Sikora 2011: 130, footnote 8).<sup>4</sup> This interpretation is also supported by the fact that the Church tolerated such funerary behaviour.<sup>5</sup> However, among the items that are found in inhumation graves are also those that were clearly associated with traditional beliefs or magic practices (Dąbrowska 2008a: 104).<sup>6</sup> The latter are of particular importance in our attempts at reconstructing pagan eschatological beliefs.

<sup>3</sup> According to some scholars, this may be suggested by the occurrence of the so-called 'atypical' or 'anti-vampire' burials at early medieval Pomeranian cemeteries. Recently, however, new interpretations of these phenomena have been suggested and which offer alternative and more cautious ways of understanding their meanings (e.g. Gardela, Kajkowski 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Perhaps the increasing number of furnished burials may be interpreted as a way of manifesting pagan religious ideas and challenging the newly introduced Christian ideology and eschatological beliefs.

<sup>5</sup> This also includes furnished burials of Christian clergy (Krumphanzlová 1971: 425; Leciejewicz 2006: 104).

<sup>6</sup> These include vessels, buckets containing food, food deposited without any containers, eggs, amulets or belemnites. Another problem concerns mundane objects (especially tools) and the meanings which they may have acquired in a funerary context. This notion has recently been discussed elsewhere (Kajkowski, Szczepanik in press). It is worth noting that given the sedentary and agrarian lifestyle of Slavic societies and the assumption that the objects deposited with the dead were intended to help them to continue their life and learned profession in the Otherworld the number of such mundane objects is strikingly low. All this implies

Most scholars agree that among the finds that have connotations with pagan beliefs are various ceramic or wooden vessels. It seems that they functioned as containers for food and drink and were deposited to satisfy the basic needs of the dead during their journey to the Otherworld (Kordala 2006: 194; Kurasiński, Skóra 2012: 63).<sup>7</sup> Such a role for vessels is supported by specialist studies of their contents, which revealed that they contained meat, dairy products, grains and honey (Rajewski 1937: 83; Buska, Wrzesiński 1996: 345-346)<sup>8</sup>, but also various beverages (e.g. Kajkowski 2013: 242-244). Recently, a new interpretation was put forward by Kurasiński and Skóra (2012: 60), who argued that the remains of charcoal found in some of the vessels may suggest that they had been used to ritually cleanse the burial pit.<sup>9</sup>

Although traces of food are also found in buckets (Pawlak, Pawlak 2007: 76, 84; Kurasiński, Skóra 2012: 59),<sup>10</sup> the vessels deposited in graves are predominantly made from clay. For some time now, whether these vessels were originally used in everyday life or whether they were made specifically for ritual practices has been a matter of debate. This notion requires further extensive research (see Kurasiński, Skóra 2012: 63-64, with references). In the light of latest studies, it seems that the vessels deposited in grave-pits did not possess any special characteristics, which could confirm their strictly sepulchral usage (Janowski, Kurasiński 2008: 74-77). However, it is worth reminding once again that when an object had been placed in the grave pit its meanings changed immediately, and it acquired symbolic qualities.

At Pomeranian cemeteries, usually only one vessel is found within the grave pit, but in some instances several vessels have been discovered. It is likely that their exact placement within the grave pit was sanctioned by some religious norms; the vessels were often discovered standing at the feet of the deceased and rarely by the head (Miśkiewicz 1969: 249).<sup>11</sup>

Among the grave goods are also coins, which some scholars associate with pagan eschatology. In their opinion, the deposition of coins reflects the concept of Charon's obol. While for the majority of scholars the vessels with or without food, eggs, rattles or other kinds of amulets are associated with traditional beliefs, the notion of Charon's obol

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that we must seek to interpret at least some of these objects in more nuanced ways and not necessarily as items used purely for mundane purposes.

<sup>7</sup> According to other interpretations they may have been a gift for the dead or an offering for the gods; all this seems to imply some kind of complex eschatological concept. In recent works, scholars have noted the problem of the relatively infrequent occurrence of vessels in graves (e.g. Janowski, Kurasiński 2008: 76, footnote 105). There have also been attempts at interpreting the roles of vessels in relation to sex and age of the deceased (Żorż 2007) and with regard to the vessels' size and content (Zoll-Adamikowa 1971: 112).

<sup>8</sup> The symbolism of grain, perceived as being connected with the concept of resurrection, has also been associated with such beliefs (Woźny 2005: 34, 167).

<sup>9</sup> An alternative theory suggests that the charcoal remains found in vessels were used in 'mummification' processes (Dąbrowska 2008a: 104). In contrast, in Anglo-Saxon scholarship charcoal remains are often understood as having been used to absorb decomposition fluids. On related notions, see Wrzesińska, Wrzesiński 2002.

<sup>10</sup> According to some scholars, buckets can be interpreted as symbols of status and prestige of the deceased. They are often found in lavishly furnished graves (Skalski 1995: 95). The latest research results suggest that the role of buckets in graves may have been the same as that of the ceramic vessels.

<sup>11</sup> This also leads us to consider the ways of perceiving the otherworldly existence of the dead and implies that they were believed to acquire some non-corporeal form. It seems that the people responsible for the funeral ceremony were fully aware of the fact that the deceased, placed in a tight pit or coffin or wrapped in a shroud would be physically incapable of reaching a vessel placed at the feet.

is not so straightforward to explain and requires more attention. Undoubtedly, the coins found in the hand or mouth of the deceased were placed there purposefully and with a symbolic intention in mind. The question is to what extent can we perceive this custom as being of ancient Slavic origin and not as an adaptation of foreign rites? The custom of furnishing the dead with coins first occurred in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries in Moravia (Miechowicz 2010: 332). The dating of the oldest coins found in the basin of Odra and Vistula Rivers suggest that the custom appeared in this area not earlier than in the last decades of the 10<sup>th</sup> century (Szcurek 1995: 79). According to Stanisław Suchodolski, similar practices were first performed in Greater Poland and Silesia and perhaps in some parts of Western Pomerania (Kara 2002: 77). The most popular theory that attempts to explain the meaning of placing coins in graves is one that identifies this practice as being a Slavic variant of Charon's obole, i.e. a form of payment for the journey to the world of the dead (Suchodolski 1998: 496). Moreover, in folkloristic accounts, the motif of giving money is strictly associated with the notions of crossing a bridge or sea. The deceased received a coin (sometimes substituted with a different object, however), which was placed in the hand, mouth or beneath the left armpit (Fischer 1921: 173). Interestingly, this exactly parallels the placement of coins in early medieval graves at Pomeranian cemeteries. Such reasoning, which refers to Greek myths, inspires some scholars to search for similar mythological motifs in the Indo-European heritage, including that of the Slavs. As a result, some attempts have been made to identify Charon with Weles (e.g. Bylina 1993: 81; Bednarczuk 1996: 29; Szyjewski 2003: 48), a deity known from East Slavic sources, but perhaps also from other parts of the Slavic world, including Pomerania (Szyjewski 2003: 57; see also Kajkowski 2012: 38 footnote 69).

Seeing the custom of depositing coins in graves as being associated with traditional Slavic pagan eschatology may be problematic. This is mainly due to the chronology of the coins found in early medieval graves in Pomerania. As mentioned above, this custom first appears in the second half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, and from then onwards it increases significantly in other areas of the West Slavic lands (Szcurek 1995: 85). This fact may be interpreted in two ways. The first notion that ought to be taken into consideration is the increasing popularity of using coins as means of exchange. In this case, however, the coin would have to be substituted by some other object, which in earlier times played the role of an obol. At the current state of research, however, it is unfortunately not possible to verify this hypothesis.<sup>12</sup> The second theory is that perhaps the use of coins results from adapting some non-Slavic customs. In the academic literature, it has been observed that the custom of depositing coins in graves occurs simultaneously with the processes of conversion or Christianisation of various regions of the West Slavic area. In the course of time, this custom becomes very popular and reaches its apogee in the 12<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> centuries (i.e. the moment when Christianity is well grounded in these lands) and continues to be performed until the early modern times (Kajkowski, Szczepanik 2012: 34). In this context, it is significant to note the fact that the early medieval textual accounts do not condemn this practice (Dąbrowska 2008b: 169), but unfortunately they also do not provide any explanations of its meaning. There have also been some attempts at attributing to it a strictly Christian symbolism – i.e. the striking of coins with the phrase *tributum Petri*,

<sup>12</sup> Perhaps some hints could be found in folk customs where a loaf of bread was placed in the coffin (or below the neck or on the chest) as a means of payment for the journey to the Otherworld (Kubiak, Kubiak 1981: 97, 103; Landowski 2007: 186).

where St. Peter appears in the role of Charon (di Nola 2006: 268)<sup>13</sup>. This fact seems to suggest indirectly that the custom of placing obols in graves may have been adapted to the needs of Christian eschatology<sup>14</sup> and that it reached early medieval Pomerania under these influences. If interpreted in this way, the pagan genesis of the custom is very clear, but it is difficult to associate it with the traditional beliefs of Pomeranians (or Slavs, in general). Therefore, in the light of the available sources, it seems that the idea of the obol cannot be taken into consideration in attempts at reconstructing traditional eschatological beliefs among the Slavs. However, the figure of Charon (treated, of course, only figuratively, as a certain mythical motif of Indo-European origin), as a carrier of souls, deserves further attention. As mentioned above, the Slavic equivalent of Charon is *Weles/Wołos*.<sup>15</sup> According to linguistic analyses, in Slavic beliefs, he was a god to whom all human souls went after death. His domain was located in a field (or meadow) far in the West, behind the water that separated the world of the living from the world of the dead (*Nawia*) (Łuczynski 2012: 173). This intriguing notion leads us now to consider the vision of Slavic afterlife.

### The Otherworld

We know very little about the Slavic land of the dead. I have already mentioned that the words *nav/nawie*, known from textual accounts, referred to dead people or their ghosts and occasionally (in later times) malevolent spirits. The late medieval textual accounts from the Czech area confirm that *Navia* was the name of the land of the dead among the Western Slavs. ‘To go to *Navia*’ meant to die and ‘to prepare someone for *Nav*’, meant to kill (Bylina 1993: 15). In his chronicle, Thietmar (I, 14) noted that the Slavs believed that ‘everything ends with corporeal death’. According to the late medieval and folkloristic accounts, it may be deduced that the land of the dead (at least from time to time) must have been a grim, dark and cold place, since one of the most important customs on All Souls’ Day was to light fires in order to lighten the gravely darkness and to provide warmth for the dead (Kubiak, Kubiak 1981: 40; Mietz 2008: 126)<sup>16</sup>. It appears that this vision of the Otherworld may have resulted from archetypal perception of the pagans as non-Christians, and therefore – in the Christian imagination – the only place to which they could go after death was some grim and dark version of Hell (Deptuła 2001: 36-37). According to Andrzej Szyjewski, the Slavs ‘originally did not distinguish Heaven from Hell, there was only one “otherworld” which surrounded “our world”, known as *Wyraj, Raj, Irij*. It was located somewhere behind the waters (especially the Milky Way) in the form of an abyss which pulled one inside by means of a vortex’ (Szyjewski 2003: 77). One theory that seeks to explain the etymology of the word *Wyraj/Raj* derives it from the Slavic linguistic roots and associates it with the pre-Slavic \**rajъ* (to swim) and \**gajъ* explaining it as a ‘ritualised part of earthly space, separated by water, a place where the souls reside’

<sup>13</sup> It is sometimes believed that a coin of this type, or a different one but with Christian symbolism, may have been regarded as an equivalent of the host (Urbańczyk 2012: 282).

<sup>14</sup> It was probably adapted from Antique beliefs, from which the Christians took numerous inspirations (Lebeuf 2003: 109).

<sup>15</sup> Similar competences are also attributed to other, more or less authentic, Slavic deities: *Zcerenboh* from *Rügen*, the Pomeranian *Triglav* or Polanian *Nyja* (Bylina 1995: 16).

<sup>16</sup> Sometimes fire-steels and fire-steel pendants are also interpreted in this way. Apart from a strictly magic function, they are also attributed the capacity to lighten the otherworldly darkness (Kurasiński, Skóra 2012: 55-56).

(Rytter 1989: 258). Along with such interpretations, it is worth noting that a significant number of early medieval cemeteries in Pomerania were located within forests or groves (Zoll-Adamikowa 2000: 214-215). Therefore, assuming that language may preserve some concepts associated with past beliefs, we may, in this case, observe a form of physical manifestation of a mythical motif associated with how the Otherworld was perceived.

The arguments presented above lead us to one of the eschatological theories regarding Indo-European beliefs, according to which the Otherworld is located on an island (Kajkowski 2012). This notion is characteristic, especially for coastal or insular societies (Tokariew 1969: 180), and the early medieval Pomeranians could certainly be regarded as such. In such beliefs water, often in the form of a river, played a very important role, as an element that separated the world of the living from the *orbis exterior*. Since we do not have any specific information about Slavic pre-Christian religion or mythology, we are forced to refer to Scandinavian beliefs. According to the Old Norse written accounts the river *Gjöll* separated the world of the living from the world of the dead, while the river *Þund* surrounded the hall of the fallen warriors – *Valhöll* (Simek 2006: 111, 332). Such an understanding of the running water is probably connected with the symbolism of passing. The river is also a mythical ‘road’ which leads directly into the Otherworld. A similar way of perceiving water may also be encountered in ethnographic accounts. In order to help the soul of the deceased to pass into the chthonic world, wooden planks were placed on either side of a running stream or river. Interestingly, we know from medieval sources that there existed a custom of making ritual pastries for *nav*. These pastries had the form of ‘bridges’ and it is likely that their form may have referred some mythical bridge above the river that separated the world of the living from that of the dead (Bylina 1993: 179, footnote 56). The motif of water as a symbolic border is also confirmed by boat burials, which have been noted in the Slavic coastal area at the Baltic Sea (Kobyliński 1988: 109; Huttu 1998: 9-10; Biermann 2008: 41). In Pomerania, such graves were discovered, among others, in Góra Chełmska near Koszalin, but also in Cedynia, Świelubie and in Rusinowo (Duczko 2006: 203; Rębkowski 2007: 139; Kuczkowski 2008). The discoveries of rivets found at early medieval cemeteries could also suggest that boat burials (or burials involving parts of boats) occurred there (Müller-Wille 1968-1969: 25-26). Such rivets were discovered at early medieval cemeteries in Wzgórze Wisielców and Wzgórze Młynówka in Wolin (Stubenrauch 1898: 113, 118). In this context, it is worth recalling a range of theories that see the boat-shaped objects as being associated with the sphere of pagan eschatological beliefs (Kobyliński 1988: 113; Sanmark 2004: 114)<sup>17</sup>.

Another issue worth considering is the potential attribution of such boat-burials to Scandinavian immigrants who may have been buried in the area of Pomerania. It must be noted, however, that such a form of burial does not have to immediately suggest Scandinavian ethnicity of the deceased. It might also imply that some attractive eschatological ideas were adapted by the Slavs from the North. From the Czech area, there is a myth, according to which an otherworldly deity lived beyond the sea and the only way to get there was by passing a great bridge or by getting there by boat (Cetwiński, Derwich 1987: 89). Similar beliefs may have also functioned in Pomeranian folklore, because there is a tale of an enchanted island (Otherworld) that one could reach by crossing the Baltic Sea

<sup>17</sup> It is interesting that the word *nav* has sometimes (perhaps intuitively) been derived from sailing, or to be more exact from navigating a boat towards the Otherworld (Ralston 1872: 326).

(Kalinowski 2009: 233). Perhaps some reminiscences of such ancient beliefs, where water was associated with the chthonic world, may also be found in various forms of midsummer folk customs (in Polish *Sobótka*), noted in Cassubia and Kociewie. One form of divination, which was performed at that time, involved releasing wooden boats (or small pieces of wood) on water with a fire lit on them. Interestingly, the fire had to be lit only with the use of a fire-steel<sup>18</sup> (this ensured the holiness of the fire). Such a boat was then pushed off to the lake to light it (Landowski 2007: 138), but perhaps also to provide warmth for the dead.

According to some scholars, the belief in the existence of the land of the dead ‘behind a river’ may also be confirmed by the spatial location of the early medieval cemeteries. In some instances, these were practically and symbolically separated from human settlements by a river (Kotowicz 2007). This is indeed true for the Pomeranian cemeteries. However, based on the available data, it is difficult to argue whether this was a common and deliberately practiced custom in that area (see Sikora 2010: 374). This notion requires further research.

In the studies on Slavic eschatology, the Otherworld is sometimes located within a mythical pasture, which is also attributed an Indo-European genesis (Łuczyński 2012: 173). ‘Due to the undefined nature of its condition and the inability to distinguish the green colour, the pasture becomes a place of pulsating, invisible life, but at the same time represents a pre-cosmic void and land of the dead, in which the category of time is absent. The pasture, therefore, is a representation of a land that is no longer earthly, completely divine nor infernal. It is an Otherworld, a place between and at the border, through which it is possible to communicate with the sacred’ (Czapiga 2009: 23; translated from Polish by Kamil Kajkowski). A possible hint that may allow for perceiving the pasture as a place where the spirits resided is a fragment from Thietmar’s chronicle referring to the Polabian Radogoszcz (Rethra). According to this account, somewhere outside the temple (and probably outside the stronghold walls) was an oracular place. As Thietmar writes, a divination ritual that involved the use of lots took place in a grassy area. ‘The priests took out their lots from a pit, and after the completion of the ceremony they put them back there again and covered them with turf’ (Modzelewski 2004: 149-150). In many cultures, the motif of digging a pit is interpreted in the context of mediation with the Otherworld(s) (Adamowski 1999: 111; Bliujienė 2010: 136). It seems that the ritual practices noted by the chronicler should also be interpreted in this light. Furthermore, in Norse mythology, a pasture was located near Valhöll, the abode of the dead (Morawiec 2009). In modern Cassubia, terms such as *zieliński*, *zelonã*, *zelonka* and *muravski*, *muravska* (all referring to ‘grassy’ areas) are defined as ‘equivalent of death or cemetery’ (Dźwigoł 2004: 31). Imagining the Otherworld as a ‘divine pasture’ may also be reflected in the symbolic (in a structuralist sense) meaning of cattle and its attributes – fur and hair – in European folklore and prehistoric funerary practices it is a derivative of the ‘basic myth’. This leads us once again to considering the notion of funerary gifts and the frequent associations of spindle-whorls with the cultic and ritual role of animal fur and weaving (Kowalski 1988: 124; Kajkowski, Szczepanik 2014). These aspects are also closely related to the chthonic god Weles.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> An attempt at explaining the role of these objects in funerary practices has been made elsewhere (Kajkowski, Szczepanik 2014).

<sup>19</sup> In this context, it may be worth highlighting the fact that in numerous mythologies around the world hair is identified with grass (Banek 2010: 36). In his chronicle, Thietmar includes a brief mention about a ritual

After the analysis conducted above, it seems that the archetypal vision of the world of the dead among the Pomeranians may be reconstructed as a physically and symbolically demarcated space that may have had the form of an island. The island could be associated with chaos (chthonic powers), but also with an 'earthly' manifestation of the mythical Primal-Earth and creative powers: the beginning and rebirth. In such context, the island would be a place particularly susceptible to the transcendent powers, including the presence of the souls of the dead. In most instances, the islands were places covered with trees. According to some scholars, the Slavs may have believed that among the trees was a pasture in which the spirits of the dead (in the form of cattle) were grazed by Weles. Alternatively, the souls of the dead may have departed to such islands in the form of birds (Szyjewski 2003: 76).

The last notion that ought to be considered while exploring the eschatological beliefs of the Pomeranians is the very journey to the Otherworld. I have already mentioned bridges and boats, by means of which the deceased were able to cross the water and travel to the land of the dead. In many mythologies, it was also possible to reach the Otherworld with the help of animals. Some scholars (using ethnographic sources) ascribe the role of *psychopompos* to horses. According to folk beliefs, these animals are capable of predicting death by acknowledging or sensing its 'presence'. Horses also play a role in folk beliefs of 'aquatic' nature, and in these beliefs they are often associated with the 'water spirit'. Throwing a horse's skull into the water or burying it was often seen as a sacrifice for the 'water spirit' (see Uspieński 1985). Skeletal remains of such animals are sometimes found during archaeological excavations at early medieval sites in Poland (e.g. Żółte, Kałdus, Pień, Dziekanowice, Gromice, Górzycy, Jordanowo), and they are interpreted either as animal-burials or sacrifices. Horses (especially black ones) were connected with darkness and chthonic deities, which obviously leads to connotations with death.<sup>20</sup> Such animals embodied the spirit that 'transported' people to the land of the dead (Kobielus 2002: 144). However, in Pomerania, no horse burials have been found at early medieval cemeteries. The only traces of horse remains from this area were discovered at strongholds or settlements; such finds are usually interpreted as intentional deposits. Some strongholds or settlement sites also included burials of other animals, such as dog, pig, sheep or cow (for more details see Kuczkowski, Kajkowski 2012).

The spirits/souls of the dead were sometimes also imagined as birds. This is implied by one of the representations on the famous 'Gniezno Doors' from the Gniezno Cathedral (Gniezno was one of the major strongholds in early medieval Poland and a very important religious centre of the early Piast state). Birds also appear in folk beliefs in which they sometimes have the ability to predict death. In some instances, they are also directly connected with the ghosts of the dead (Gładyszowa 1960: 79; Korolenko 2006: 15)<sup>21</sup>. Assuming that in the beliefs of the Pomeranians the ghost or soul of the dead could

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of establishing a truce between the tribe of Lutici and Henry II. This pact was directed against Poland, and it resulted in the pagans offering locks of hair and straws of grass (Thietmar VI, 25). We may attempt to interpret this ritual as a form of oath whose guarantor was a Polabian chthonic deity (e.g. Rosik 2000: 132; Pleszczyński 2008: 63, footnote 253). According to Grimm, the act of giving hair was a symbolic gesture of giving oneself into slavery if the rules of the arrangement were not fulfilled (Grimm 1899: 147).

<sup>20</sup> A black horse was an attribute of the Pomeranian god Triglav who is regarded as a chthonic deity and sometimes identified with Weles.

<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, also in Christian art, especially in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, souls and ghosts were represented as birds (Schmitt 2002: 180).

acquire an ornitomorph form, we may attempt at providing a new interpretation of archaeological finds in the shape of a miniature horse with a bird figure on top of them. To my knowledge, two finds of this kind have been discovered, one of which was found in Pomerania (Budzistowo). It is possible, however, that there may have been more such finds, but unfortunately they did not survive to present times. Both items were made from metal, which may also allow for interpreting them in the light of past beliefs; I have previously discussed this notion in one of my articles (Kajkowski 2014). It is difficult to say whether other zoomorphic representations of birds (often interpreted as jewelry or amulets) could also be perceived in similar way. Such artifacts have been discovered in Szczecin, Wolin and Rudawy (Rulewicz 1958: 326; Skorupka 2008: 57, 69).

Another notion that ought to be examined in this context is the presence of eggs, or their shells in grave-pits at Pomeranian (or, more broadly, Slavic) early medieval cemeteries.<sup>22</sup> In the academic literature, their symbolic meaning is often believed to have been associated with aspects of resurrection or protection (e.g. Gräslund 1994a: 203; Kaczmarek 1998: 558; Walerczuk 2007: 50; Mianecki 2010: 176-177; Wierciński 2010: 78). Additionally, the 'creative' role of eggs was allegedly also strengthened by their ornamentation, whereby the ornaments sometimes resembled religious symbols, e.g. swastikas, diagonal crosses or triquetras. Interestingly, these symbols are attributed the same meanings in folk culture (Wolski, Dowgird 1890). In some parts of the East Slavic area, names of decorated eggs have been preserved and these directly refer to alleged pagan gods, e.g. *Mokosz*, *Żywia*, *Biereginia*, etc. (Pełka 1980: 50). In this context, it is also worth noting the ritual customs, observable in folklore, according to which eggshells thrown into the river were to flow directly to the land of the dead (Masłowska, Niebrzegowska 1999: 329). There are also other beliefs according to which the dead ancestors, at various times of the year, were to reappear on the surface of the water in boats shaped like egg-shells (Bylina 1992: 16). This notion perfectly corresponds with the hypothesis associating some of the early medieval representations of boats (i.e. miniature wooden boats) with magic practices or religious symbolism. It is worth asking whether the symbolism of an egg (plain or decorated) placed in an early medieval grave could be related to pagan eschatology? This intriguing notion still requires extensive research.

Furthermore, dogs may sometimes have connotations with the Otherworld. Their role in many mythologies is that of a guide, which led the souls of the dead (Derwich, Cetwiński 1987: 195; Kobieliński 2002: 258; Menache 1997: 24; Kovačič 2013: 199-211). Dogs also had various other roles to fulfill and these often involved their presence in a liminal sphere, between the land of the living and that of the dead. The chthonic nature of dogs is also confirmed by their role as guardians of cattle herds,<sup>23</sup> which again leads us to the previously discussed concept of the Otherworld in the form of a pasture or meadow. The special relation between dogs and Otherworld is also confirmed in ethnographic accounts. The dog was an animal that enabled people to 'look into' the land of the dead (e.g. Fischer 1932: 26, 35; 1934: 221). Dogs, as animals with mediatory characteristics, were also supposed to consume the eggs left at the graveside as well as other remains of food that was deposited there for the dead (Moszyński 1929-1930: 258-259).

<sup>22</sup> This custom was very long-lasting and it is recorded in Polish folklore as late as the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Gawełek 1911: 26-27).

<sup>23</sup> Once again, this leads us to the figure of Weles, this time as a 'god of cattle' or in his role as the protector of animals (e.g. Uspieński 1985; Łuczyński 2012: 173-174).

Is it possible to argue that dogs were perceived in a similar way among the early medieval Pomeranians? The only dog-grave known to us today was found at the stronghold in Kałdus near Chełmno. The animal was accompanied by a large piece of clay vessel (Błędowski, Chudziak, Kaźmierczak 2009: 270). Yet another dog skeleton was also found in the same locality, but this one was discovered outside the stronghold rampart (the stronghold has been dated from the second half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century to the start of the 12<sup>th</sup> century). It is interesting to note that the dog's skeleton was discovered alongside the remains of horses (Chudziak 2003: 107). Another dog's skeleton was also found in one of the pits at the early medieval stronghold in Chmielno near Kartuzy (Łuka 1937: 34). A question arises how should we interpret the burial of a complete animal within the area of a stronghold or settlement, i.e. outside specially designated funerary space? Do such acts signal a burial in a strict sense? Are they associated with religion or magic? Alternatively, perhaps they did not have any special meanings at all and were just a matter of convenience?

Dog bones deposited in early medieval funerary spaces are known from Góra Chełmska near Koszalin. They were placed inside a ceramic vessel that was found in one of the hearths. Interestingly, the animal remains bore traces of intentional cleaving. It seems that this feature (the hearth and the vessel) formed part of a much larger sacral complex with a very rich symbolism and particular spatial arrangement (Kuczkowski 2008: 69).

A unique discovery from Lesser Poland is also noteworthy. At an early medieval cemetery in Stradów, a burial site for a child was discovered that was combined with a pit containing several dog skeletons. Due to the incomplete publication of this find, it is, unfortunately, unclear whether this peculiar feature was intentionally associated with the human burial or not (Rogoziński-Goszczyńska 1964: 349; Zoll-Adamikowa 1966: 98-99). Osteological remains of three dogs have also been found in Grzybów (Staszów commune) in a pit also containing a human foetus. The grave was dated to the 14<sup>th</sup> century (Garbacz 1992: 218). It is difficult to determine whether the deposition of animals in these unusual burials was an act reflecting pagan beliefs, which were still within among the formally converted society, or whether the dogs were perhaps symbolically used to excommunicate the unbaptized children.

Because the archaeological sources are so scarce, it is difficult to provide an interpretation of the presence of dog burials at sepulchral sites. The rarity of such burials on the southern coast of the Baltic, compared to their relatively frequent occurrence in some parts of Scandinavia (e.g. Gardela 2012), leads some scholars to suggest that the custom was of a foreign, Northern European provenance.

The only dog-burial known from Pomerania has been discovered at Góra Chełmska. In this context, the dog is interpreted as a guardian of the Otherworld or as its symbolic manifestation (Kuczkowski 2008: 69). As such, the dog would be a Slavic equivalent of Cerberus, an archetypical dog responsible for protecting the entrance to the chthonic world. The belief in the existence of such animal is confirmed in numerous Indo-European myths (Kowalski 2011: 84). In Slavic beliefs, its name is reconstructed as *Sobol*, *Simargł*. The character known as Medea from Slovenian folklore may also be associated with such concepts (Kowalski 2011: 84; Čausidis 1999, s. 291; Kropej 1998, s. 162). A character with similar characteristics (a guardian of the entrance to the Otherworld) also occurs in Pomeranian legends (Knoop 2008: 22).

## Conclusion

Although some scholars have previously argued that the eschatological beliefs of early medieval Pomeranians (or Western Slavs in general) were 'bland' and obscure (Deptuła 2001: 25) compared with those of their pagan or Christian neighbours, my analysis and reassessment of available sources leads to different, more nuanced conclusions. As we have seen traces of such beliefs may be found and reconstructed by carefully examining the archaeological evidence and various aspects of folk culture. We must remember, however, that many of the interpretations and hypotheses offered above still require further diligent studies.

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**Słowiańskie wędrówki w zaświaty.  
Kilka uwag na temat eschatologii wczesnośredniowiecznych Pomorzan**

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Badania nad pogańską obrzędowością wczesnośredniowiecznych społeczności pomorskich natrafiają na wiele trudności. Wynika to nie tylko z braku źródeł pisanych które zawierałyby opisy konkretnych zachowań ludzkich w obecności elementów sakralnych. Osobnym problemem pozostaje interpretacja znalezisk archeologicznych. Współcześnie nie zawsze jesteśmy w stanie określić jakie miejsca i jakie przedmioty mogły być waloryzowane w kontekście myślenia symbolicznego. Trudno bowiem zakładać, że w myśleniu wspólnot tradycyjnych funkcjonował ścisły (we współczesnym rozumowaniu) podział na sferę sacrum i profanum. Wydaje się, że mniej wątpliwości przynosi interpretacja znalezisk o charakterze sepulkralnym. Jest to jednak wrażenie pozorne. W przypadku cmentarzysk archeolog ma bowiem do czynienia już tylko z finalnym aktem obrzędowości pogrzebowej jakim jest grób. Powstaje pytanie czy na podstawie materialnych korelatów związanych z miejscami pochowku zmarłych przodków można rekonstruować tak abstrakcyjne w swym wymiarze pojęcie jak wierzenia eschatologiczne. Taką próbę w oparciu o źródła archeologiczne podejmuje autor niniejszego tekstu, skupiać się na kilku aspektach wierzeń i obrzędowości pogańskiej: duszy (duchu), darze grobowym i jego znaczeniu w postrzeganiu świata pozagrobowego oraz wizji zaświatów.