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IN THE GROUND OR IN THE BASKET? BURIAL WRAPPINGS FROM THE STONE AGE HUNTERS' CEMETERY AT DUDKA, MASURIA, NE-POLAND*

Abstract: Dudka site is located on the island of former lake Staświn in the Masurian Lakeland, NE-Poland. At least 18 graves with 79 individuals were uncovered at the Dudka cemetery. Some of burials were probably interred in different kinds of containers. One primary burial was possibly wrapped. Most of sitting burials indicate that the decomposition of soft tissue took place in empty space of a grave pit. So, graves were not filled with a sediment just after burial, but they were probably variously covered from the top. Secondary burials from three graves were put into a pit in a container, most probably a basket. In each case the basket was different in shape — rectangular, oval and rounded with a partition in the middle — and contained different numbers of bones from varying numbers of individuals.

Key words: burial rites, taphonomy, Mesolithic, Para-Neolithic, NE-Poland

Introduction

In the Mesolithic and Para-Neolithic, the dead are known to have been buried in different "wrappings" or grave constructions of organic materials. It is, however, only sporadically that any remains of timber or bark survive to this day. The few finds of this nature are known from the Mszano site in Poland and from Scandinavian sites: Korsør Nor, Møllegabet and Vedbæk Gøngehusvej in Denmark and Skateholm in Sweden.[1]

That the body was wrapped or interred in some other inflexible container can be inferred from the position of the skeleton. If the body is placed in the grave without any permanent wrapping and the grave pit is immediately filled in, the skeleton remains basically unaltered. The reason is that the empty space created in the process of decomposition of soft tissue is gradually filled with sediment, which stabilises the layout of the bones. If, however, the body is tightly wrapped, the wrapping puts pressure on the body that makes the bones turn or collapse inwards into the empty spaces created through the decomposition of the soft tissue. In cases where a coffin is used, on the other hand, bones may fall outwards, outside the limits of the body, as far as the walls of the coffin allow. The decomposition of the body inside the permanent wrapping, which creates an empty

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[1] Bugajska 2014, pp. 6–11.

space around the body, causes anatomical joints to disintegrate — with small bones of the hands and feet or ribs move downwards within the wrapping. The "wall effect" is also visible, as bones rest on the edges of the coffin. It is also possible that the grave pit was not filled in after the burial, but merely covered on top with some sort of construction. In that case, the decomposition takes place similarly like in the coffin, but the movements of bones and distortion of the anatomical layout may be much larger, especially in case of bodies buried in a sitting position. If the pit is filled in, the sitting position is basically maintained, while in an empty pit the body collapses completely and its anatomical layout is severely disturbed. The presence of wrappings may also apply to secondary burials. In this case it is important whether the bones fill the entire grave pit or just a part thereof, how tightly they are packed together and whether the "wall effect" is discernible.[2]

Dudka cemetery — general information

The Dudka site is located on the island of the former lake Staświn in the Great Masurian Lakes region of north-east Poland [Fig. 1]. The cemetery was located in the southern section of the island, between two encampment zones: the "eastern bay" and the "southern promontory". Habitation on the island lasted from the Late Paleolithic to the end of the Neolithic, but the cemetery was used only in the Mesolithic and Para-Neolithic.[3] At least 18 graves have been found there, containing

Fig. 1. Location of the Dudka site (W. Gumiński)

[2] Nilsson 1998; 2005–2006; Nilsson-Stutz 2006.
[3] Gumiński 1999; 2014, p. 122.

the remains of at least 79 individuals [Fig. 2]. The cemetery contained the remains of just 12 primary burials, mostly in a squatting-sitting position, though two individuals were laid on their backs with legs raised up and one on right side in contracted position. Secondary burials (both cremations and inhumations) are found in most graves.[4] In six graves they were added to sitting burials and a further nine contained only secondary deposits of human remains [Fig. 2].

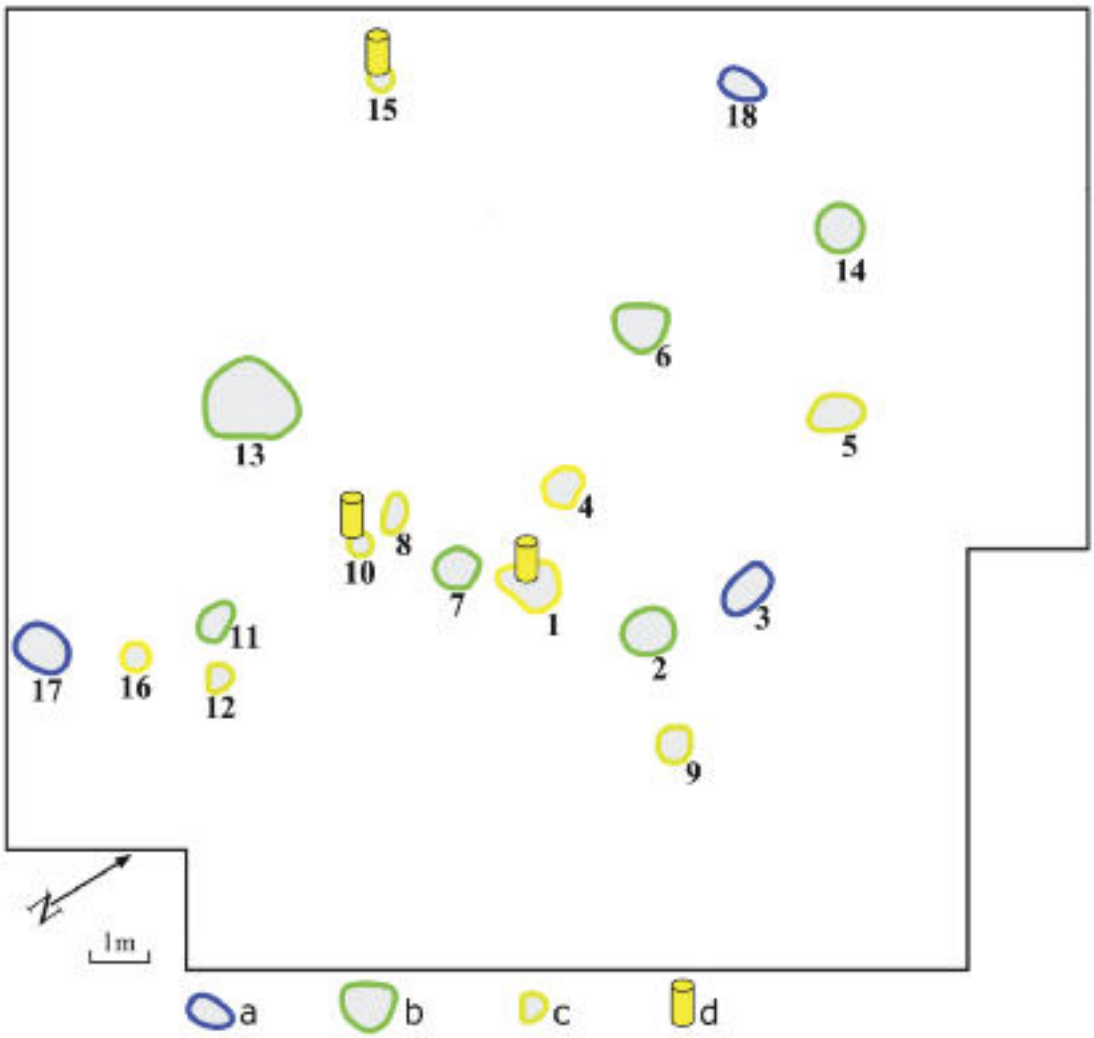

Fig. 2. Plan of Dudka cemetery: a – graves with primary burials lying on side or back
b – graves with burials in sitting position
c – graves containing only secondary burials, inhumations or cremations
d – secondary burials in baskets
(K. Bugajska)

[4] Gumiński 2014, p. 123, table 1.

Wrappings of primary burials

Of all the primary burials, it is probably only the child from the VI-18 grave that was wrapped. It was lying on its back with legs pulled up and its knees pressed against the chest [Fig. 3]. Hand and feet bones as well as those of the chest fell to the bottom of the pit. Some of them find themselves between the child's legs, which testifies to the presence of an empty space in this place at the time of soft tissue decomposition. Ribs partially protrude from the chest, especially on the left. None of them is, however, outside the left humerus. Bones of the skull have come apart at the seams. The frontal bone has moved inside in relation to the occiput [Fig. 3]. On that basis it may be inferred that the child was buried in some sort of wrapping, which on the one hand created a barrier, causing the skeleton to collapse inwards (eg. the skull), while on the other hand leaving a gap that allowed small bones to move about. The wrapping of the body may have been necessary to maintain its unusual position, especially for the legs.

Nearly all the Dudka sitting burials point to a smaller or greater degree to decomposition in the empty space of a grave pit. In this case one should speak not so much of a wrapping, as of some kind of construction inside the grave, which secured the grave pit and prevented accumulation of sediment inside it.

Fig. 3. Dudka, grave VI-18, child burial lying on back
with legs pressed against chest
(photo W. Gumiński)

One example of body decomposition in an empty pit is the VI-6 grave, where a young female was interred in a squatting-sitting position with her feet crossed. The burial was disturbed already in the Stone Age, when some of the long bones and the mandible were removed. The bone layout in the lower part of the grave pit testifies to the primary position of the body and decomposition in an empty space. At the bottom of a small round pit, the bones of the pelvis were found in an undisturbed anatomical position with the last lumbar vertebrae spiking upwards from the pelvis and resting against the wall of the pit. It must, however, be added that the metatarsal bones and phalanges of the right foot were missing and must have been removed when the burial was disturbed. The chest, i.e. ribs and spine, collapsed forwards, partly maintaining anatomical connections [Fig. 4]. The shoulders also collapsed forwards, as can be seen from the placing of collarbones and probably also of the left humerus visible in the photograph [Fig. 4]. The placing of the skull and the other long bones results from a secondary placement in the upper part of the grave. The grave was not filled in after the burial of the woman. At the time it was disturbed, the pit must have been nearly empty, as can be seen from the absence of traces of digging. Thanks to that the skull and long bones, which were probably placed vertically, could be easily removed without disturbing the layout of the rest of the skeleton in the lower part of the pit. The small bones of both hands and the aforementioned bones of the right foot were also presumably removed. It cannot, however, be ruled out that the bottom of the pit was partially filled with sediment, at least on the northern side, facing the left foot, which additionally preserved the layout of the bones.

Fig. 4. Dudka, grave VI-6, sitting burial of young female, lower part of grave pit. Thorax bones — ribs, vertebrae, collar bone and left humerus — collapsed forwards. Pelvis together with lower part of spine placed vertically (photo W. Gumiński)

Another example is that of the sitting male burial at grave VI-14. The man was sitting with crossed legs, knees outwards. The tibiae were lying parallel, one on top the other, so that one foot was touching the knee of the other leg [Fig. 5a]. The skull fell face down to the right foot [Fig. 5a]. The upper vertebrae were dragged down by the skull and separated from the rest of the spine. The right shoulder also collapsed forwards [Fig. 5a]. The rest of the thorax, on the other hand, i.e. the ribs and lower vertebrae, collapsed leftwards along with the left shoulder, probably at a somewhat later date than the skull [Fig. 5b]. It is interesting that another individual's skull was found by the deceased's left side. It cannot be ruled out that it was placed there in some sort of an organic container, against which the sitting body leaned. After the container's decomposition, the bones of the thorax may have collapsed into the resulting empty space.

Fig. 5. Dudka, grave VI-14, burial of man sitting with crossed legs:
a – sight of skeleton en face; skull and right shoulder bones collapsed forward
b – sight of skeleton from back, chest collapsed sideways
(photo W. Gumiński)

The grave VI-2 contained three sitting burials, each in a slightly different position [Fig. 6]. The first to be deposited to the pit was an adult male — individual C — and it was probably some time before the other ones, because his skeleton layout was disturbed to the highest degree [Fig. 6]. The bones of both upper limbs and the left tibia of individual C fell to the bottom of the pit. The right arm fell off or was torn out of the shoulder joint and lay, bent at the elbow, at the bottom of the grave pit directly under the skeleton of a second man (individual A). The bones of the left arm and the left tibia were, on the other hand, crammed under his own pelvis (individual C), which probably resulted at the time of the deposition of the other burials [Fig. 6]. A child (individual B) was leaned against the femur of individual C, but this must have taken place after the man's left tibia fell to the bottom of the pit with the knee turned inwards [Fig. 6]. That indicates that the grave pit was not filled in immediately after one of the men was laid down there (individual C) and that the other deceased were added at a later date, when body of individual C had already undergone partial decomposition. Adding new interments caused further distortions in the anatomical layout of individual C, but did not require digging.

The skull of individual C turned base upwards and together with the chest collapsed forwards onto the legs of the second man (individual A) [Fig. 6]. This indicates an empty space in the southern part of the grave pit even after successive burials, or at least that of individual A.

Anatomical layout of the second male skeleton (individual A) has undergone no major distortions [Fig. 6], although in this case, too, the skull, upper thorax and right shoulder collapsed leftwards. In addition, the skull disconnected from the spine and rotated face downwards. This indicates that the thorax bones did not just fall down into an empty space left over by the decay of soft tissues in the abdominal cavity, but some of them fell outwards in the direction of individual C [Fig. 7]. This in turn testifies to the presence of empty space in this part of the pit. It seems very probable that upper thorax and skull of individual A collapsed later than in the case of the individual C. The distortions of individual A is smaller than in the case of individual C; it is probable that the grave pit (its lower part?) was already at least partially filled with sediment.

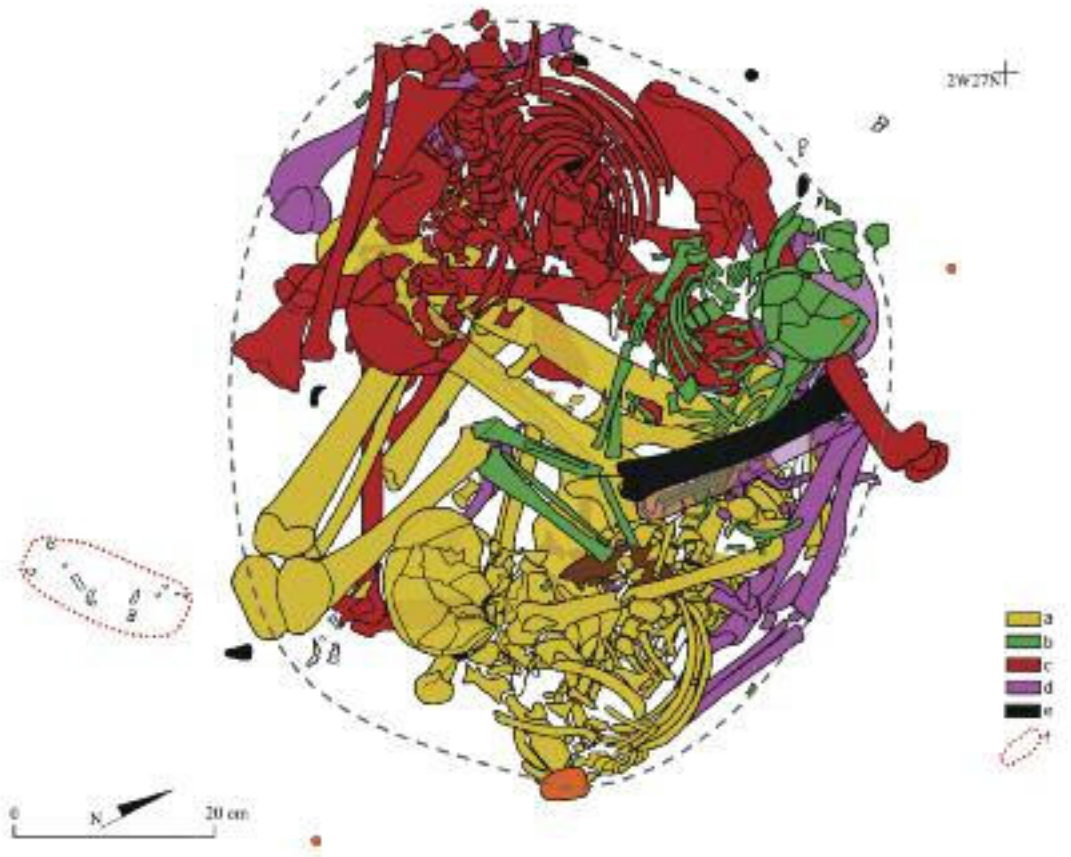

Fig. 6. Dudka, grave VI-2, collective grave with three sitting burials:
a – individual A (young male)
b – individual B (child); c – individual C (young male)
d – individual D (female), secondary burial
e – grave goods
f – cluster of burnt human bones
(W. Gumiński, K. Bugajska)

Fig. 7. Dudka, grave VI-2, view from above on collapsed chests and skulls of two adult males — individual C on left, A on right — and child between them (photo W. Gumiński)

The child was interred in the grave last. Its skull rested against individual C's femur and most of the skeleton was lying on individual A's right leg [Fig. 6]. It is possible that the child was burried at the same time as individual A. The man's skeleton fails to show any indication of later intrusion, while his right leg was placed in an unusual position — tightly bent and placed horizontally with the foot next to the abdominal cavity, not vertically with the knee facing upwards, as was the case with the left leg [Fig. 6]. Such positioning of the leg may have resulted from preparations for the child's burial. The child's skeleton is almost completely preserved in anatomical order, however, minor bones of the hands and feet and three long bones of the left leg and forearm fell down, mainly in the empty space resulting from soft tissue decomposition in the abdominal cavity of individual A [Fig. 6]. The child's thorax and skull, on the other hand, remained in their original position [Figs. 6–7]. This indicates fairly rapid sedimentation in place of the decaying soft tissue. This could be the result of several factors. The child was placed in a semi-sitting position with its head leaning on individual C's femur [Fig. 7]. Such placement prevented the skull and thorax from collapsing forwards, as happened with the both men. The child was also at the highest spot in the grave pit [Fig. 6] and the area around its body filled in at the most rapid pace. It cannot be ruled out that the child was deposited in the pit at a later date than individual A and the pit was filled in immediately after.

Another sitting burial, for which decomposition in the empty space is probable, is a child from grave VI-11. The child's thorax collapsed completely to the pit's bottom. The skull also fell down, but was displaced to the right and front in relation to the bones of thorax and probably turned face downwards as well [Fig. 8]. The long bones of upper and lower extremities were lying flat on the bottom [Fig. 8]. It is difficult to say if the legs, were previously placed with knees upwards and collapsed later or they were already laid flat with knees outwards.

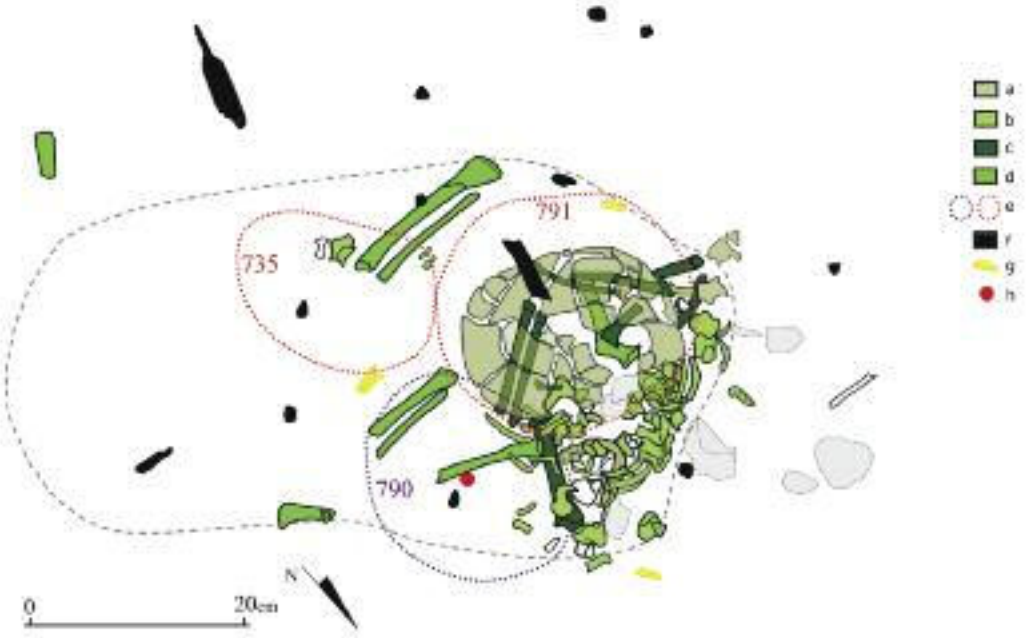

Fig. 8. Dudka, grave VI-11, burial of small child in sitting position:
a – skull; b – chest; c – arms; d – legs; e – cluster of burnt human bones; f – grave goods
g – belemnites; h – lump of ochre (W. Gumiński, K. Bugajska)

A man at grave VI-7 was deposited in a similar position. His thorax and left shoulder collapsed downwards and rightwards [Fig. 9]. The skull fell face down, dragging with it cervical vertebrae, which came off the rest of the spine [Fig. 9]. The skull rests on the left leg, which prevented further rotation. Bones of the limbs did not display much dislocation [Fig. 9]. The grave pit was probably not filled in immediately after the burial, which allowed for the skull to fall forward. Sediment, however, found its way into the pit rapidly enough to relatively quickly stabilise the position of limb and lower thorax bones.

Fig. 9. Dudka, grave VI-7, burial of elderly male in sitting-squatting position,
skull collapsed forwards, bones of left shoulder and upper thorax
collapsed downwards and leftwards (photo W. Gumiński)

Wrapping of secondary burials

Nine graves contained only secondary burials, both cremations and inhumations. Only in three of them, VI-1, VI-10 and VI-15, bones were interred in some sort of container [Fig. 2].

At grave VI-1 the bones of three individuals were found, including three skulls and two post-cranial skeletons. The grave pit, in its upper part in particular, had a large circumference and was surrounded by stones on two sides, south and north. At each level the human remains take up only a part of the pit and the "wall effect" is particularly visible on the west side [Fig. 10] — some of the long bones are in a vertical or nearly vertical position. That indicates that the bones were laid to the grave in a fairly rigid container, probably a quadrangular basket of ca. 40 × 30 × 30 cm.

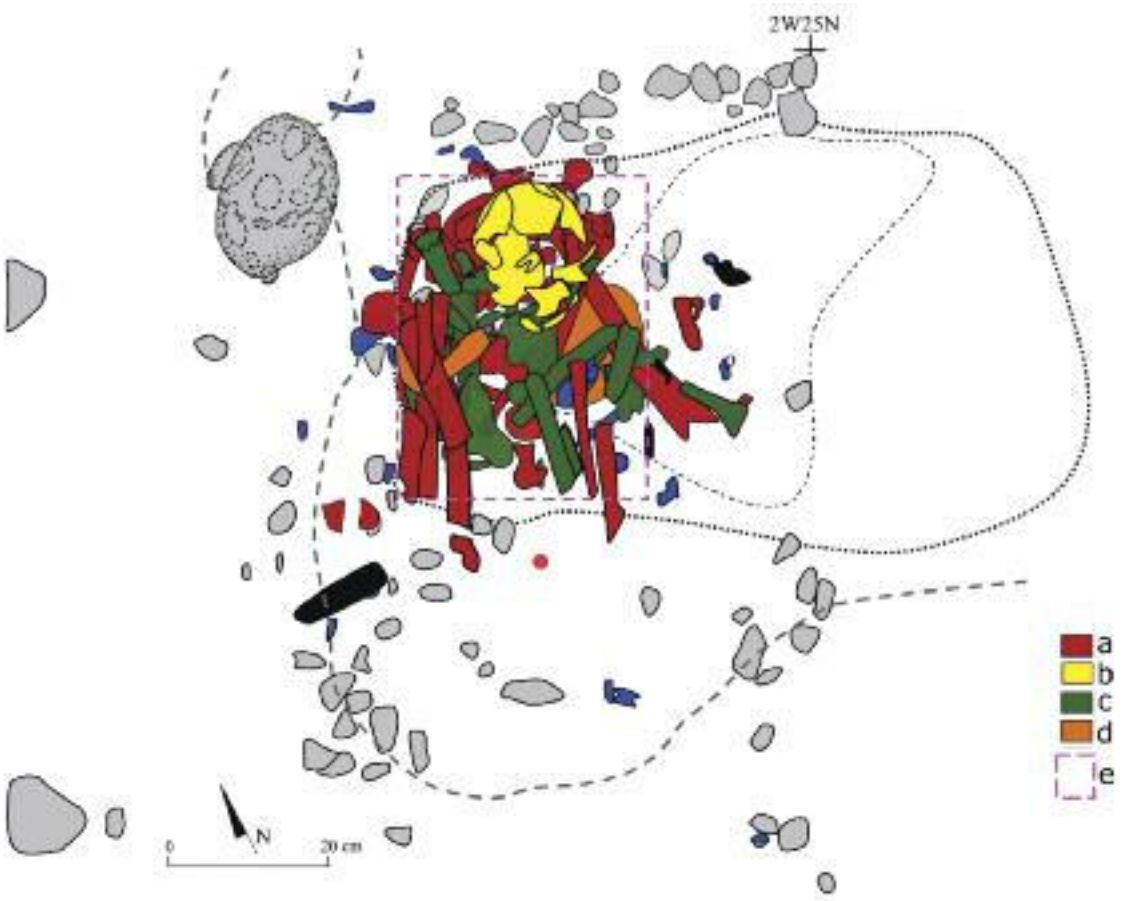

Fig. 10. Dudka, collective grave VI-1, secondary burial of three individuals in quadrangular basket:
a – individual A (male)
b – individual B (female skull)
c – female postcranial skeleton, individual C?
d – individual C (female), skull and mandible
e – outline of container
(W. Gumiński, K. Bugajska)

The grave VI-10 contained a secondary female burial. The skeleton was incomplete, missing among others, the skull and selected long bones. The remains were tightly clustered on a very limited area with fragmented long bones and one part of spine placed vertically [Fig. 11]. Such bone placement suggests they were probably inside a basket with dimensions of 20 × 30 × 30 cm. It is worth noting that some of the bones maintain their anatomical connections, including several cervical vertebrae, the ulna and radius, the calcaneus and the talus of one foot and the metatarsal bones of the other [Fig. 11]. The remains may have been taken from the temporary burial place, when the soft tissue was not completely decomposed. The bones were presumably placed directly in the container used later for deposition in the grave since repackaging would have damaged anatomical connections between bones, especially metatarsal or forearm bones.

Fig. 11. Dudka, grave VI-10, secondary female burial in basket.
Green arrows point to bones found in anatomical order:
top left – radius and ulna
bottom left – metatarsus
middle – calcaneus and talus
right – fragment of spine
(W. Gumiński, K. Bugajska)

Grave VI-15 contained the remains of two men and a dog. The dog bones and the burnt skeleton of one man (individual A) make a tight cluster [Fig. 12], thus they must have been deposited in a small round basket (?) of circumference and height ca. 20 cm. The bones of the dog and the man take up exactly half the space and do not intermix [Fig. 12], suggesting two compartments. The second man (individual B) is represented merely by several unburnt bones, which were most likely not deposited in a container. Forearm bones stuck out perpendicularly between the tightly packed dog bones and the wall of the grave pit [Fig. 12], suggesting they were inserted next to the basket. At the very bottom of the pit were found proximal fragments of the femurs and pelvis of male B, which were deposited right in the middle of the pit underneath both the burnt human bones (individual A), and dog bones. It is thus likely that the remains of individual B were deposited first, followed by the basket with the dog and individual A.

Fig. 12. Dudka, grave VI-15, cremation burial of young man (individual A)
and secondary burial of dog in one basket with compartments (?):
a – view from above
b – view from behind, green arrow points to forearm bones of individual B (young male)
(W. Gumiński, K. Bugajska)

Discussion and summary

Some of the burials at the Dudka cemetery were deposited in wrappings or containers of various kinds. One of the lying primary burials (grave VI-18) was probably wrapped, which may have been necessary to maintain its unusual position — with legs pressed to its chest.

In nearly every grave (VI-13 is the exception), where sitting burials were deposited, the body's decomposition took place in an empty grave pit. That indicates that the graves were not immediately filled in after a burial, but they were probably covered with some kind of lids or constructions. It must be noted that each of the burials indicated a different degree of decomposition in the empty space. The graves may thus have been covered in a different manner each time, using different materials, e.g. logs, tree branches, planks, wicker, bark or leather. Rigidity and durability of such a lid or container determined the speed of sediment seeping into the grave pit. The stage of skeleton disarticulation resulted also from the exact position of the bodies and its relation to the pit walls, since at least some of the bones may have kept one another in place even after soft tissue decomposition. At Dudka, leaving grave pits unfilled was justified, because there were mostly collective graves to which some new individuals were added after a time, as in grave VI-2, or sitting burials were disturbed in order to take out selected bones of particular deceased, as at grave VI-6.

Also interesting are the examples of secondary burials interred in baskets. Each of the containers had a slightly different shape and size, but each was presumably filled to the brim with bones. The example of the female burial at grave VI-10, where anatomical connections between particular bones have survived, indicates that remains were put in the basket at the place of the temporary burial and carried in the same container to the cemetery and finally deposited in it. The remaining bones were presumably left at the place of the temporary burial or they may have been carried (in another container?) to a encampment and kept there. It is, however, important that not all secondary burials were deposited in containers. In the other graves, the bones fill basically the entire space of the grave pit. They thus must have been thrown directly into the pit or deposited in a soft, perishable wrapping, such as a sack. It is possible the deciding factor for using a container (basket?) was the distance the bones were to travel. Taking into account earlier suggestions that some of the Dudka burials were brought there from surrounding islands and encampments,[5] it may be surmised that the remains deposited in baskets were brought in from outside Dudka island.

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[5] Gumiński 2014; Gumiński, Bugajska 2015.

Streszczenie

Do ziemi czy do kosza?
Opakowania pochówków na cmentarzysku łowców z epoki kamienia w Dudce na Mazurach (Polska północno-wschodnia)

Stanowisko Dudka położone jest na wyspie nieistniejącego już jeziora Staświn w Krainie Wielkich Jezior Mazurskich [Fig. 1]. Na cmentarzysku odkryto przynajmniej 18 grobów, z których pochodzi minimum 79 osobników [Fig. 2]. Niektóre pochówki składano w różnego rodzaju opakowaniach.

Jeden z pochówków pierwotnych, grób VI-18, został prawdopodobnie owinięty. Dziecko leżało na plecach z nogami zadartymi na klatkę piersiową. O jego owinięciu świadczy przemieszczenie się żeber na zewnątrz, przemieszczenie się drobnych kości na dno między nogi oraz rozsunięcie się kości czołowej i potylicznej. Owinięcie dziecka mogło być niezbędne dla zachowania jego nietypowej pozycji [Fig. 3].

Prawie w każdym grobie (z wyjątkiem VI-13), w którym zostały złożone pochówki siedzące, rozkład ciała przebiegał w pustej przestrzeni jamy grobowej [Fig. 2]. Ciała zmarłych nie były więc od razu zasypywane, ale w jakiś sposób zabezpieczano jamę grobową od góry. Pochówki wskazują na różny stopień rozkładu w pustej przestrzeni. Zabezpieczanie jam grobowych mogło być więc wykonywane na różne sposoby.

Grób VI-6 zawierał pochówek młodej kobiety, który naruszono jeszcze w epoce kamienia. Na dnie jamy leżały kości stóp, miednica i ostatnie kręgi lędźwiowe w nienaruszonym układzie anatomicznym. Klatka piersiowa zapadła się do przodu, ale kości zachowały anatomiczne powiązania między sobą [Fig. 4]. W momencie naruszenia grób mógł być tylko częściowo wypełniony sedymentem, ponieważ brak śladów wkopu, a kości długie i czaszka zostały wyjęte bez naruszania reszty szkieletu.

Z grobu VI-14 pochodzi pochówek mężczyzny siedzącego „po turecku". Czaszka i kręgi szyjne opadły do przodu na prawą stopę [Fig. 5a]. Kości klatki piersiowej oraz lewe ramię zapadły się z kolei na lewo [Fig. 5b]. Przy lewym boku zmarłego leżała czaszka innego osobnika, która mogła być złożona w organicznym pojemniku. Po jego rozłożeniu się kości klatki piersiowej siedzącego mężczyzny mogły wpaść w powstałą tam pustą przestrzeń.

W grobie VI-2 znajdowały się trzy pochówki siedzące, dwóch mężczyzn i dziecka, każdy ułożony w nieco inny sposób [Fig. 6]. Jako pierwszy do jamy grobowej trafił osobnik C i to prawdopodobnie jakiś czas przed pozostałymi zmarłymi. Układ anatomiczny tego szkieletu został zaburzony w największym stopniu. Najpierw na dno jamy opadły kości kończyn, które później, kiedy dokładano kolejnych zmarłych, zostały dodatkowo przesunięte [Fig. 6]. Czaszka osobnika C obróciła się podstawą do góry i razem z klatką piersiową zapadła się do przodu na nogi osobnika A [Fig. 6]. Pusta przestrzeń w tej części jamy pozostawała jeszcze po złożeniu osobnika A, gdyż jego czaszka, górna część klatki piersiowej i prawe ramię zapadły się na lewo w stronę osobnika C [Fig. 7]. Dziecko (osobnik B) złożono do jamy jako ostatnie. Jego szkielet prawie w całości zachowuje pierwotne ułożenie, jedynie drobne kości kończyn opadły w dół, głównie w rejon jamy brzusznej osobnika A [Fig. 6]. Niewielkie przemieszczenia kości dziecka świadczą o dość szybkim wypełnianiu sedymentem tego miejsca, ale częściowo wynikają też z jego półleżącej pozycji [Fig. 6].

Kolejny pochówek siedzący to dziecko z grobu VI-11. Jego klatka piersiowa, kości ramienne i prawdopodobnie kości nóg zapadły się na dno jamy. Czaszka opadła na prawo i obróciła się twarzą do dołu [Fig. 8]. W podobny sposób został ułożony mężczyzna w grobie VI-7. Jego klatka piersiowa zapadła się na prawą stronę, a czaszka do przodu twarzą w dół, pociągając za sobą kręgi szyjne [Fig. 9]. Sedyment dostał się jednak do jamy na tyle szybko, że ułożenie kości kończyn i dolnej części klatki piersiowej pozostało prawie niezaburzone.

W dziewięciu grobach zdeponowano wyłącznie pochówki wtórne, a w trzech z nich szczątki złożono w jakimś pojemniku [Fig. 2]. W grobie VI-1 kości trzech osobników zajmowały tylko niewielką, prostokątną część jamy, a część kości długich ustawiona była pionowo. Umieszczono je zapewne w czworokątnym koszu, który miał ok. 40 × 30 cm w obrysie i ok. 30 cm wysokości [Fig. 10]. W grobie VI-10 kości kobiety tworzyły ścisłe skupisko o owalnym zarysie (20 × 30 cm) i wysokości ok. 30 cm, złożono je zatem zapewne w koszu. Część kości zachowywała anatomiczne powiązania, kosz musiał więc posłużyć do transportu szczątków z miejsca tymczasowego pochówku [Fig. 11]. Trzeci przykład to grób VI-15, gdzie kości psa i przepalony szkielet mężczyzny (osobnik A) tworzą zwarte skupisko i zajmują dokładnie po połowie jamy, musiały być więc zdeponowane w niewielkim koszu o średnicy i wysokości ok. 20 cm, z przegrodą pośrodku [Fig. 12].

Zabezpieczanie grobów z pochówkami siedzącymi jakimiś pokrywami ułatwiało późniejsze manipulacje ze szkieletami i wyciąganie części kości, natomiast umieszczanie pochówków wtórnych w pojemnikach wynikało zapewne z transportu kości z odleglejszych obozowisk na cmentarzysko główne w Dudce.

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