

Coins from the Early-Medieval Burial Ground at Modlnica, Site no. 5, gm. Wielka Wieś, Cracow County

The early-medieval burial ground at Modlnica, Krakow County (site no. 5) is where 89 skeletal burials were discovered, all dating from the latter half of the eleventh to the first quarter of the twelfth century. These were unearthed in the course of rescue excavations conducted under the direction of the Krakow Team for Excavations on Motorways in 2008.

This necropolis is a non-churchyard-type burial ground, which are also called “row” or “village” burial grounds in scholarly literature. Such burial sites are marked by the presence of many pre-Christian practices, e.g., diverse orientations of the burials, furnishing the graves with tools, weapons, food, and various “magical” objects, as well as traces of anti-vampirical rites.

So-called funeral fittings have been found in the 46 of the burials; these include ornaments, parts of garments, household ware, and arms.

Medieval coins constitute a separate group of burial gifts totalling 19 specimens. These were found in 13 graves, generally one coin per grave, but one grave contained a hoard of 6 coins. Within the area of the burial ground, at the probing site A, a much-corroded copper coin, dating from the modern era, was found as well. In all probability, it is a crown *szeląg* of King John II Casimir Vasa (1648–1668).

In most cases, the coins were found where the hand of the interred person would have rested, from which it may be inferred that those coins would have been placed into the hand of the deceased at the time of the interment. Alternatively, they may have been placed inside a little sack tied to the belt.

The most numerous group of coins are Saxon *cross* pennies (*saskie denary krzyżowe*), totalling 16 specimens. One of the fragmentarily surviving coins is possibly a tenth- or eleventh-century Saxon penny (Otto-Adelaide type). Of all the specimens found within the burial ground, the only one of Polish origin is a ducal penny (*denar*) of Bolesław the Bold (1069–1076).

One of the more noteworthy burials containing coins is grave no. 6210. It belonged to a grown-up man, who was furnished with 6 cross pennies: 2 specimens are complete, while 4 have survived only in fragments. The coins were accompanied with a small-sized pat of silver, with clearly discernible traces of cutting and incisions at the rim. No other early-medieval burial in the territory of Lesser Poland has contained as many coins.

To date we know only a handful of examples of multiple silver artefacts found in early-medieval burials in the territory of Poland: at Grajewo-Prostki, Gorzysławice, Niemcza, Tańsk-Przedborów, Goleniów, and Kałdus.

Arguably, assemblages of this type should be interpreted as nothing more than the “obol of the dead,” especially if they have been found in the same locations within the graves as the single coins, i.e., in or very near the dead man’s hand. In turn, the differences in quantity may have been due to a different approach to these sort of burial offerings; in this particular case, they would have been quite obviously dictated by the giver’s material affluence.