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An analysis of the origin of an early medieval group of individuals from Gródek based on the analysis of stable oxygen isotopes



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ABSTRACT

In the early Middle Ages, the region of the Cherven Towns, which is now located on both sides of the Polish–Ukrainian border, was fiercely contested by Slavs in the process of forming their early states. The main objective of the present study was to investigate the homogeneity of an early medieval population uncovered in that region, in the town of Gródek on the Bug River, by screening for non-local individuals. The origin of the studied skeletons was ascertained using analysis of oxygen isotopes in the phosphates isolated from bone tissue. In this paper, the isotope ratios obtained for samples collected from 62 human skeletons were compared to the background $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ (in precipitation water) from the regions of Kraków (south-eastern Poland), Lviv (western Ukraine), Brest (western Belarus), and Gródek, as well as to the ratios determined for the animals coexisting with the studied population. Proportions of oxygen isotopes obtained for all the studied individuals were found to be similar to those for the precipitation water and animals, which indicates the absence of bone fragments of individuals originating in other regions.

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S T R E S Z C Z E N I E

Tereny dawnych Grodów Czerwieńskich, które obecnie znajdują się na pograniczu Polski i Ukrainy, w początkach wieków średnich były przedmiotem rywalizacji Słowian formujących w tym czasie namiastki swojej państwowości. Nadrzędnym celem niniejszych badań było sprawdzenie jednorodności wczesnośredniowiecznej grupy, odnalezionej na stanowisku archeologicznym w Gródku nad Bugiem (w średniowieczu teren przynależący do Grodów Czerwieńskich), pod względem potencjalnych osobników pochodzenia nie lokalnego. Metodą wykorzystaną do ustalenia pochodzenia badanych osobników była analiza składu izotopowego tlenu w wyizolowanych fosforanach tkanki kostnej. W niniejszym opracowaniu, koncentrację izotopową tlenu otrzymaną dla próbek pobranych z 62 szkieletów ludzkich odniesiono do wartości $\delta^{18}O$ tła środowiskowego, które stanowiły woda opadowa (regiony: Kraków (Płd-wsch. Polska), Lwów (Zach.Ukraina), Brześć [Zach. Białoruś] oraz Gródek) a także równocześnie zwierzęta współwystępujące z badana populacją. Wyniki niniejszych badań wskazują, że koncentracje izotopów tlenu uzyskane dla wszystkich badanych osobników zawierały się w wyznaczonym zakresie środowiskowym tak wody środowiskowej jak i analizowanej fauny, co może świadczyć o tym, że wśród analizowanych szczątków ludzkich nie było prawdopodobnie osobników pochodzenia nielokalnego przynajmniej w zakresie rozpatrywanych makroregionów.

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Introduction

In the early Middle Ages, Central and Eastern Europe saw the emergence of the foundations of many modern nations and their division into eastern Slavs (today's Belarusians, Russians and Ukrainians) and western Slavs (the Czechs, Poles, Slovaks, and Polabian Slavs). The proximity of Gródek and the Cherven Towns to the Polish-Ukrainian border gives rise to the question as to the ethnic character of this region in the early Middle Ages. It is difficult to conclusively ascertain the political status of the land along the middle Bug River prior to the formation of the Polish state as defined by the adoption of Christianity in 966 and the Christianization of Kievan Ruś in 988/989. The area was probably inhabited by the Lendians; however, some sources also mention the Buzhan, Dulebe, and Volhynian tribes ([Wołoszyn, 2012](#)).

According to historical data, the area under discussion most probably belonged to a region demarcated by a group of strongholds collectively known as the Cherven Towns (old East Slavic *grady chervenske*). This term has derived from the oldest Ruthenian chronicle, "The Tale of Bygone Years". The Cherven Towns were contested by Poland and Kievan Ruś ([Franklin and Shepard, 1996](#)): in 981, the region was subjugated by Vladimir the Great, a Kievan prince (981–1015), and in 1018 it was conquered by the Polish king Bolesław Chrobry (992–1025). In 1031, the Cherven Towns once again came under Ruthenian rule. In the mid-14th century, Casimir the Great (Polish king, 1333–1370) incorporated the lands along the river Bug into Poland, including the Cherven Towns as well as present day south-western Ukraine as far as Podolia.

The intricate and dynamic history of Poland's borderlands continues to be the subject of ethnological, historical, archaeological, and anthropological studies. It should be stressed that the ethnic interpretation of archaeological finds, which involves ascribing specific man-made items to ethnic groups, tribes, or nations, is now conducted with much greater caution than several decades ago. Indeed, this research area remains hotly debated by archaeologists ([Brather, 2004](#); [Curta, 2011](#); [Pohl, 2013](#)). The main goal of an anthropologist's work is to obtain as much knowledge as possible about

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