

Absolute chronology of burials and loose human bones from the hunter-gatherer Stone Age sites Dudka and Szczepanki in Masuria (NE-Poland)

The project aim is to establish the absolute chronology of the complex and diversified burial rites practiced at the hunter-gatherer Stone Age sites - Dudka and Szczepanki in Masuria. Both sites are located on the islands of the former lake Staświn and were occupied from the Late Palaeolithic to the end of the Neolithic, so almost from the glacier retreat to the end of the Stone Age.

At Dudka site the main cemetery was uncovered with at least 29 graves and 114 deceased. Very diversified burial customs were practiced there. Some of the dead were buried in anatomical position, mostly sitting. However, much more numerous are secondary burials, i.e. the bones of deceased which were exhumed from another place, called temporary burial, and carried to the grave at cemetery after the body decomposition. Almost half of the deceased at the cemetery were cremated. There are also cases of burials, which were disturbed and some bones or whole skeletons of the dead were taken purposely out. In comparison, at Szczepanki site only two burials of small babies were uncovered, one of them was placed on the side and the second on its back. At both sites possible remnants of temporary burials were uncovered which are small lost human bones. There are also bones (mostly skulls) which were probably kept at the camp as possible memorabilia of the ancestors and relatives.

Graves and other traces of funeral rites and ancestor cult came probably from the whole time span of the sites' occupation, but there are only a couple of radiocarbon dates for burials, which confirmed their exact age. It is a serious gap in the studies of funeral rites of this hunter-gatherer community. It is the more important, since the cemetery at Dudka is a unique one on the European Plain because of diversified burial practices. The most exceptional are especially the secondary and cremation burials. Such practices are known from the other Stone Age hunter-gather sites, but Dudka is the only one where they are so numerous.

The aim of the project is to achieve large series of radiocarbon dates, which will indicate the exact age of the given burials and human remains. Samples for that purpose must be taken directly from human bones, also from cremated ones. In result, it could be estimated how long the cemetery at Dudka was used for funeral purposes. It is supposed that it was uniquely long tradition of using the same place for funerals in the Stone Age. Radiocarbon dates will make possible the analysis of changes in the burial custom in the time. The most important in this matter are multi-step burial rites which consist of the temporal burial for the time of body decomposition and later deposit of selected bones in the final grave at the cemetery. Such custom seems to have local roots and was implied for a large part of the local hunters' community. The question is when such practices appeared and when were they the most common and significant. Another problem which should be solved is whether different ways of the treatment of the dead are the results of changing traditions or such differences had rather a social and religious nature, such as a special role and status of the deceased and their belonging to a particular clan or family. The general effect of the project will be better understanding of the rites and beliefs of the Stone Age hunters as well as of many other socio-cultural aspects, which are manifested by specific attitude to the deceased and their cult.