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The Morphology of Cemeteries of Abandoned Villages in the Polish Part of Former East Prussia: Boundaries and Spatial Forms of Burial Grounds

Morfologia cmentarzy opuszczonych miejscowości z polskiej części dawnych Prus Wschodnich: granice i formy przestrzenne założeń

Abstract: The article discusses selected issues concerning the morphology of cemeteries of completely depopulated rural settlement units located in the part of East Prussia that was incorporated into Poland in 1945. The boundaries and spatial forms of the cemeteries were analysed and interpreted. These are actually the best-preserved components of the landscape of these historical burial places. The basic source material used in the study for the identification and preliminary analysis of the boundaries and shapes of the cemeteries were the sheets of the *Topographische Karte Messtischblatt* map from the 1920s–1940s and orthophotomaps showing

the current land cover. Detailed analyses were performed using altitude measurement data from airborne laser scanning (resource of the Central Office of Geodesy and Cartography). The research results show clear differences in the size and shape of cemeteries belonging to specific types of settlement units. The preserved relics testify to the different ways of organising burial places at single-manor estates, where family cemeteries functioned, and those established in villages. The results of the analysis also indicate the characteristic features of the contemporary landscape of former Evangelical cemeteries, facilitating their field identification.

Keywords: landscape memory, Masuria, deserted villages, cultural heritage, landscape studies, historical geography

Introduction

There are more than 3,000 cemeteries in the Polish part of East Prussia, covering Warmia, Masuria, and historical fragments of Bartia and Powiśle (Myga-Piątek 2013: 21). A considerable number of them are connected with the Protestant denomination, which dominated in the area as it had been a part of the German

state for a few centuries. The turbulent history of the twentieth century, mostly connected with two world wars and their socio-political and economic consequences, marked this area in a special way. Most of all, it changed its state affiliation. East Prussia ceased to exist and its southern part was incorporated into Poland. Intense migration movements, including particularly civilians fleeing at the end of the Second World War and later displacement of German and Masurian populations, resulted in a complete exchange of the population in the area. During these changes, hundreds of villages were completely depopulated, many of them permanently. Today, in the Polish part of former East Prussia, there are 788 rural settlement units that were abandoned between 1945 and 2019. They include both villages and smaller settlements as well as former manors, home farms, forester's lodges, and mill villages. The degree of their destruction varies, however, they constitute material traces of the settlement network of both nineteenth-century landed estates and settlements founded by the Order of Teutonic Knights during the medieval colonisation of the local forests. Places of burial can be found in 149 of these villages, which constitutes a significant part of the material memory of their landscape¹. Their physical structures, such as graves and other commemorative objects, internal layouts, and intentionally arranged greenery form a landscape record storing information about local Evangelical communities that established and used them. Each of these sites is a closed, individually organised structure, the present form of which is a product of the influence of local sociocultural conditions and environmental factors. These cemeteries, however, share some morphological and physiognomic features, such as similar architectural aesthetics of landscape interiors, with the common denominator being ascetic tombstones and greenery turning them into shaded gardens of memory. The internal structures of the sites, however, got intensively degraded over decades. The appearance of, among others, self-seeding plants as a result of plant succession or felling as part of forest economy effectively contributed to the blurring of the layout and character of the original greenery. A similar effect was produced by gradual deposition of organic matter which, along with anthropogenic devastation, is among the main factors of decomposition and destruction of the aboveground fabric of cemeteries.

Some of the most permanent elements of Evangelical cemeteries in the area studied are the markings of boundaries of burial areas. Clear separation of the cemetery from its surroundings was one of the key principles of its organisation. This is why partially preserved boundaries are still very characteristic elements distinguishing nineteenth- and twentieth-century graveyards in the landscape of depopulated rural settlement units in former East Prussia. Analysis of their

1 This term is understood as defined in: U. Myga-Piątek (2015: 35).

structures provides new information about the operation of villages in the past and changes taking place there after depopulation.

The Purpose, scope, and theoretical basis of the paper

The paper discusses selected issues concerning the morphology of cemeteries of abandoned rural settlement units located in the Polish section of former East Prussia. The main research objective was to extend knowledge of landscape structures of depopulated villages in the area explored through diagnosis of the morphology of their cemeteries (their boundaries and spatial forms). This issue is of significance not only from the perspective of the development of research into the landscape effects of breaking the continuity of settlement, but also due to the small number of Polish studies focusing on Protestant funeral rites² (cf. Poliński 2018: 289). Analyses of individual aboveground elements of historical Evangelical cemeteries may provide auxiliary material for, for example, archaeological research concerning reconstruction of modern-era Protestant funeral rites. Most monographs on cemeteries in the area in question published to date are descriptive works devoted to the history and cultural heritage of objects (e.g. Knercer 2006; Kudrzycki 2009) and the issue of their protection and preservation (e.g. Jasiński 1993; Chłosta 2011; Długozima et al. 2015; Grabowski 2019; Majewska et al. 2019). Most specialist studies deal with the flora of cemeteries (e.g. Żurkowska 2000; Hołdyński, Żurkowska 2001; Płoszaj-Witkowska, Leoniak 2010; Majgier 2012; Majgier, Rahmonov 2013), with only a few offering more extensive analyses of the landscape context of the functioning of historical places of burial (e.g. Żurkowska 2008; Ruszczycka 2015; Długozima 2016).

As part of the research problem of the morphology of cemeteries of depopulated settlement units, the following detailed objectives were set:

- Identification, analysis, and interpretation of the relics of cemetery boundaries having their own field forms;
- Determination of the state of preservation of the cemetery boundaries;
- Analysis and interpretation of the spatial forms of cemeteries.

These issues were addressed within the real (material) perspective of landscape studies, shared by studies in the field of historical geography and those undertaken today in the field of archaeology of the contemporary past. The narrative was constructed

² Studies in this respect worth mentioning include non-invasive, probing research carried out in the cemetery of a depopulated Lower Silesian village of Tormersdorf, where detailed analyses were performed on aboveground relics of the cemetery as well as some of the burials, offering some insights into funeral rites as well intra-population diversity and the pre-mortem biological condition of the buried people (cf. Szczurowski et al. 2020).

based on the concept of landscape memory referring to non-anthropocentric directions and ways of conducting analyses that arise within the new humanities (Domańska 2006; 2008: 27–60). Granting the landscape the right to have its own memory is tantamount to granting it some kind of agency that can be possessed by non-human elements of reality (cf. Domańska 2008). Elements constituting the cultural landscape, such as man-made and physiographic structures, do not store information in a passive way. As a result of processes moderated by people as well as processes taking place for reasons beyond their control, intentionally coded contents undergoing changes that are independent of people are subject to selection, modification, and destruction. The material memory of the landscape is thus shaped equally by human and non-human factors that determine what a given space “remembers” and what we can “read” from it as observers (cf. Myga-Piątek 2015). This approach determined the direction of analyses, focusing on the observation and interpretation of the material structure of the landscape, or in this particular case – cemeteries and their place in space. The scarcity of written sources or other archival materials that would provide more information about the establishment and operation of cemeteries in rural settlement units in East Prussia forces us to adopt a perspective other than the one built upon the traditional historical narrative. On the other hand, “giving voice” to material components of the landscape, through exploration of the spatial contexts of their arrangement within the geographical environment and their morphological features, allows to draw conclusions about social and cultural aspects of the functioning of the cemetery space. Adopting a research perspective focused on the material dimension of the existence of objects in the landscape assumes more than just getting to know their physical characteristics. Quantification, generalisation, and then interpretation of the research results also provide an insight into selected cultural and social aspects of the historical and present functioning of cemeteries in space (Majewska 2020).

Researchers concerned with the issue of Evangelical cemeteries are familiar with this approach. The necessity to rely on the “material traces of the past, the landscape signs” in the face of broken generational continuity and traditional social bonds is discussed by Iwona Liżewska (2008: 5) in the introduction to Tekla Żurkowska’s book devoted to Evangelical cemeteries in the Masurian Landscape Park. Protestant cemeteries, as “mute witnesses to the past”, remind of the people buried in them, who are now “nameless, unknown, and stranger to us, contemporaries”, but who used to shape the surrounding landscape, which is emphasised by Rev. Marcin Kotas (2018: 8), who wrote about Evangelical cemeteries in Greater Poland. On the other hand, Joanna Wałkowska (2017) locates studies on the functioning of Protestant cemeteries in the landscape within the perspective of the landscape archaeology, exploring particularly issues concerning processes that take place in the context of limitation or cessation of anthropopressure.

Materials and methods

Preliminary identification of the spatial forms of cemeteries of depopulated villages was made based on analysis of the contents of the sheets of the *Topographische Karte Messtischblatt 1:25 000* map, published in the 1920s–1940s. Analysis of the tree cover was performed based on coloured orthophotomaps from the Central Office of Geodesy and Cartography (Geoportal; data valid as of: 2017–2019). Detailed studies concerning the presence of cemetery boundaries with their own field forms in the contemporary landscape were carried out using detailed measurement data on the lie of the land (ready DTM models from the Central Office of Geodesy and Cartography available free of charge on the Geoportal website – www.geoportal.gov.pl).

The analysis effects include cartographic, schematic, and drawing studies, which most precisely reflect the essence of the research results. To describe the morphological features of selected objects (their spatial forms and physical properties of their boundaries), ready altitude measurement data from airborne laser scanning were used, performed under the ISOK project (IT system for protecting the country against extraordinary threats). The data made available to the Author by the Central Office of Geodesy and Cartography in the form of point clouds (in the LAS 1.2 format) were then transformed into DTM (Digital Terrain Models) in the TIN form³ using techniques and algorithms revealing the physical features of objects that are of significance from the perspective of the analysis performed.

Results and discussion

The Relics of cemetery boundaries

Clear separation of the burial area from its surroundings is one of the most important rules of cemetery organisation (Kolbuszewski 1996; Rugg 2000: 261). The boundary in the form of a fence, the lie of the land, and/or greenery is a material and definitive line distinguishing *sacrum* from *profanum* (Długozima 2014: 8). In the case of small rural Evangelical cemeteries, the boundary line determined the organisation of their space. It had an effect on the burial layout and indicated places of special significance, such as the centre, sometimes being the location of grander family plots or a tomb chapel.

³ TIN – a type of object in GIS visualisation, combining raster and vector characteristics; reproduction of the surface in the form of a triangular grid (irregular triangles with attributes ascribed to their vertices).

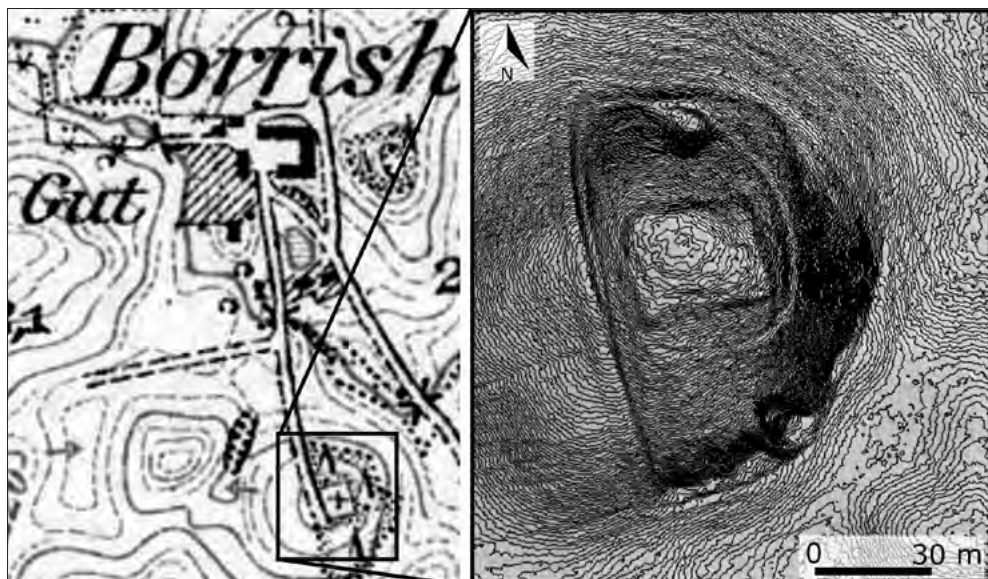


Fig. 1. Relics of a cemetery of a former Borrishof estate (Olecko District). The site is regular in plan and situated on a local hill: a contour plan (contour interval: 0.15 m) and a fragment of the Topographische Karte Messtischblatt map, sheet 18100, Kowahlen (own work based on the LAS 1.2. point cloud data – TIN model, sheet: N-34-69-D-b-I-4-I, GUGIK).

The places of Evangelical burials located in the Polish section of former East Prussia are usually relatively easy to identify as a large part of them have preserved boundaries in the form of earth berms (sometimes additionally reinforced with stones), ditches, or elevation of the platform created (example: Fig. 1).

Boundaries marked by the lie of the land in the form of a berm or a ditch were common due to both tradition and cultural conditions, and for practical reasons (more about the symbolism of cemetery boundaries cf. Majdecka-Strzeżek 2016: 24–25). Earth berms are also the oldest forms of fencing (cf. Żurkowska 2008: 22), typical not only of Protestant cemeteries (e.g. Jewish cemeteries – cf. Majewska 2017). Most of all, boundaries of this type, only created by the lie of the land, did not generate additional costs when a place of burial was established.

Boundaries fully or partially marked with the lie of the land, positive or negative, were recognised in forty-one (64%) cemeteries located in depopulated single-manor estates and in sixty-three (75.9%) cemeteries in depopulated villages, settlements, colonies, and hamlets (Fig. 2). In many of them, the degree of preservation of the boundaries in the form of earth berms can be described as fragmentary (cf. Fig. 8 – Saraunen).

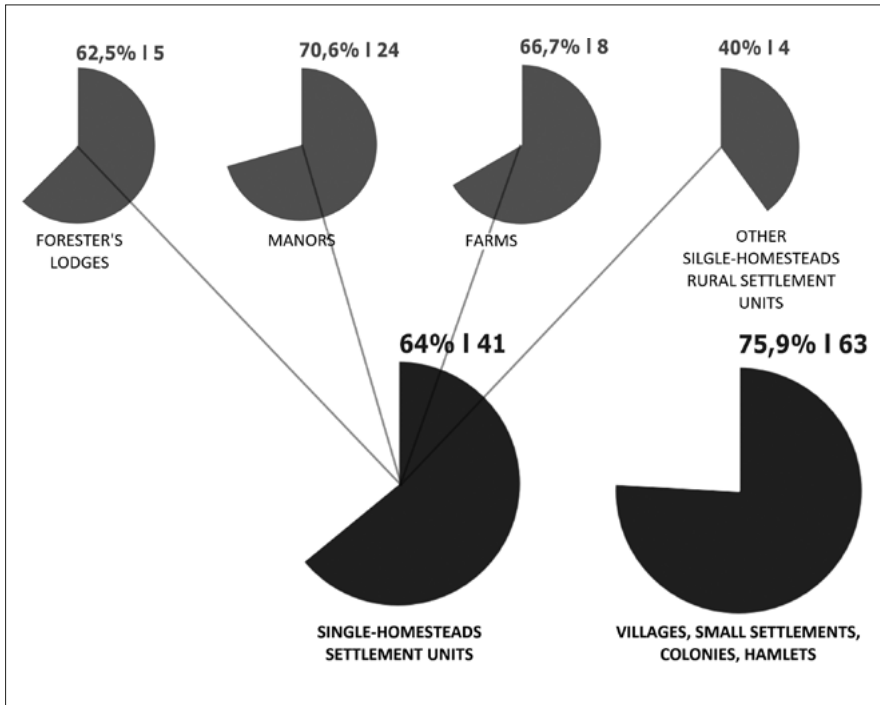


Fig. 2. Cemeteries with boundaries that have their own field forms – the share in the total number of cemeteries of depopulated villages in the Polish part of former East Prussia (own work).

Today, it is difficult to determine which cemeteries were surrounded not only by earth berms but also metal, wooden, or masonry fences⁴ as their relics have only been preserved in a few cases (e.g. Fig. 7). Moreover, their identification remains difficult due to several decades of deposition of organic matter caused by the decomposition of plants, intensive succession of which constantly takes place in these areas. It can only be suspected that some of the smaller cemeteries were separated from their surroundings by wooden or iron fences, just like individual plots, which might explain the lack of clear embankments (cf. e.g. Żurkowska 2008: 22–23).

⁴ The presence of masonry fences around Evangelical cemeteries in the area explored is confirmed not only by the results of field research, but also symbols on topographic maps. The perimeters of some cemeteries are marked with a symbol denoting walls (cf. cemeteries in depopulated villages on the *Topographische Karte Messtischblatt* map from the 1920s–1940s: Kl. Schatten – sheet 1894; Wenden; Robitten – sheet 1688; Canditten; Rotenau – sheet 1699; Goldap).

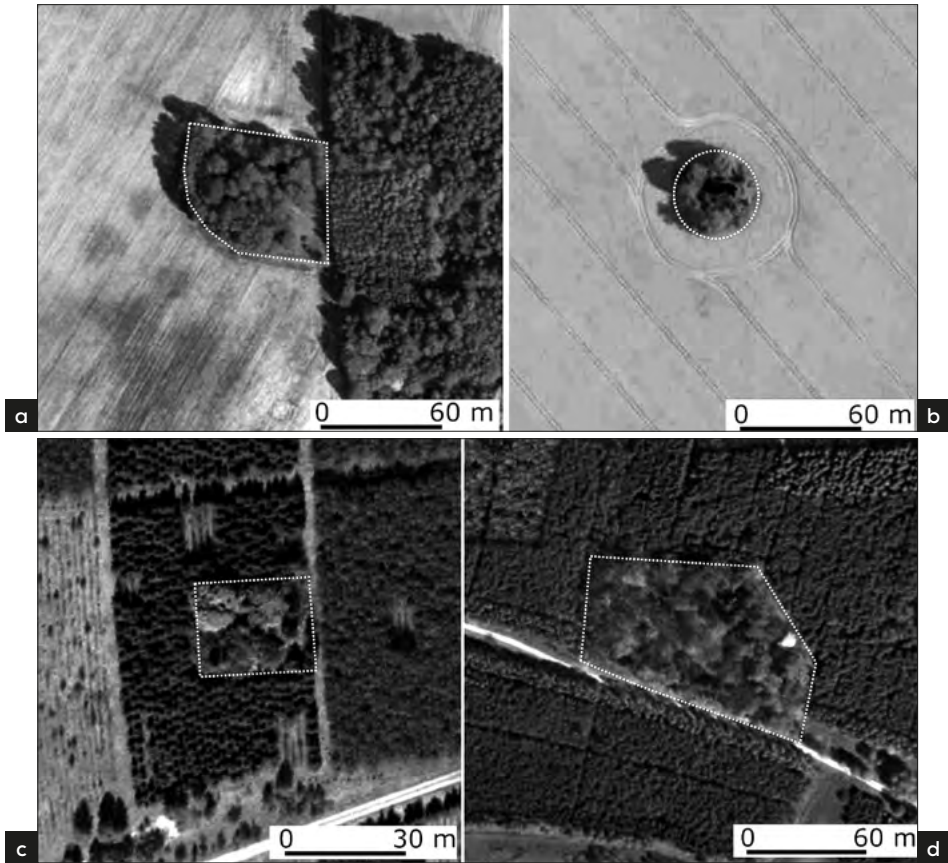


Fig. 3. Examples of cemeteries of depopulated villages constituting separate patches in the landscape structure: **(a)** Birkental (Pisz District); **(b)** Borschenen (Kętrzyn District); **(c)** Ludwigshof (Bartoszyce District); **(d)** Wossau (Kętrzyn District) (own work based on an orthophotomap from the Geoportal website: <http://www.geoportal.gov.pl> [4 IV 2020]).

The cemetery boundary line was also marked with trees and bushes⁵ planted in rows (frequently monospecies), while the vegetation within these grounds often distinguishes them from their surroundings (cf. Fig. 3 – C, D). The historical forest cover is the characteristic enabling identification of objects in the horizontal perspective of landscape observation. This is particularly true for cemeteries constituting islands of tall vegetation surrounded by agricultural land or located

⁵ The boundaries of Christian cemeteries, including the Evangelical ones, were sometimes, by tradition, planted with thorny bushes, so that the souls of the dead could not get outside (Majdecka-Strzeżek 2016: 26).

in forested areas (if the cemetery area has not been transformed into a forest nursery) (examples – Fig. 3 – cemeteries have a different land cover texture, as indicated by aerial photographs).

Trees marking cemetery boundaries were included in cartographic drawings. On the archival sheets of the German map *Topographische Karte Messtischblatt* from the 1920s–1940s, there are cemeteries with perimeters marked with symbols of single rows of tall vegetation (cf. examples in Fig. 4). Today, the cemeteries indicated are distinguished in the landscape by clusters of dense tall vegetation. Interestingly, such practice of marking the boundaries can only be found on sheets concerning sites in the western section of the area explored, even though the perimeters of cemeteries were planted with trees also in other regions of former East Prussia.

Vegetation builds the symbolism and the character of places of burial, referring to the vision of paradise, at the same time emphasising the transience of human life reflected by the plant life cycle (cf. Żurkowska 2008: 25–28; Rutyna 2015: 130). Nearly 97% of all cemeteries in depopulated villages are covered with tall vegetation which, due to constant growth and limited anthropopressure, considerably increased its share in the surface area of individual cemeteries over several decades. The remaining 3% are sites that were transformed into arable land – in these cases, aboveground components of the cemeteries were completely degraded.

Today, most places of burial are covered with trees that do not stand out within the observed horizontal landscape structure (Fig. 5). They are cemeteries located in forests and areas that were subject to planned tree planting or natural vegetation succession, mostly after 1945. Some of the cemeteries, such as the ones that used to belong to forester's lodges and forest settlements, were located in forested areas from the very beginning. After 1945, areas of some of the cemeteries were incorporated into forests as forested land, and forest nurseries were established in them,

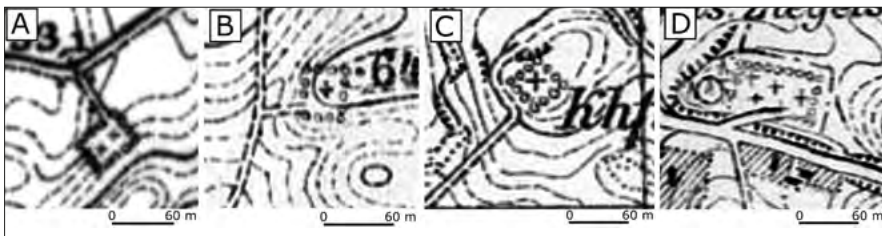


Fig. 4. Cemetery boundaries marked on the *Topographische Karte Messtischblatt* map from the 1920s–1940s with rows of trees: Altmühl, Ilawa District, sheet: (a) 2381 – Freystadt; (b) Gr. Wogenap, Elbląg District, sheet 1782: Cadinen; (c) Karwitten, Elbląg District, sheet 1884: Muhlhausen; (d) Stürmersberg, Kwidzyn District, sheet 2279: Marienwerder (own work).

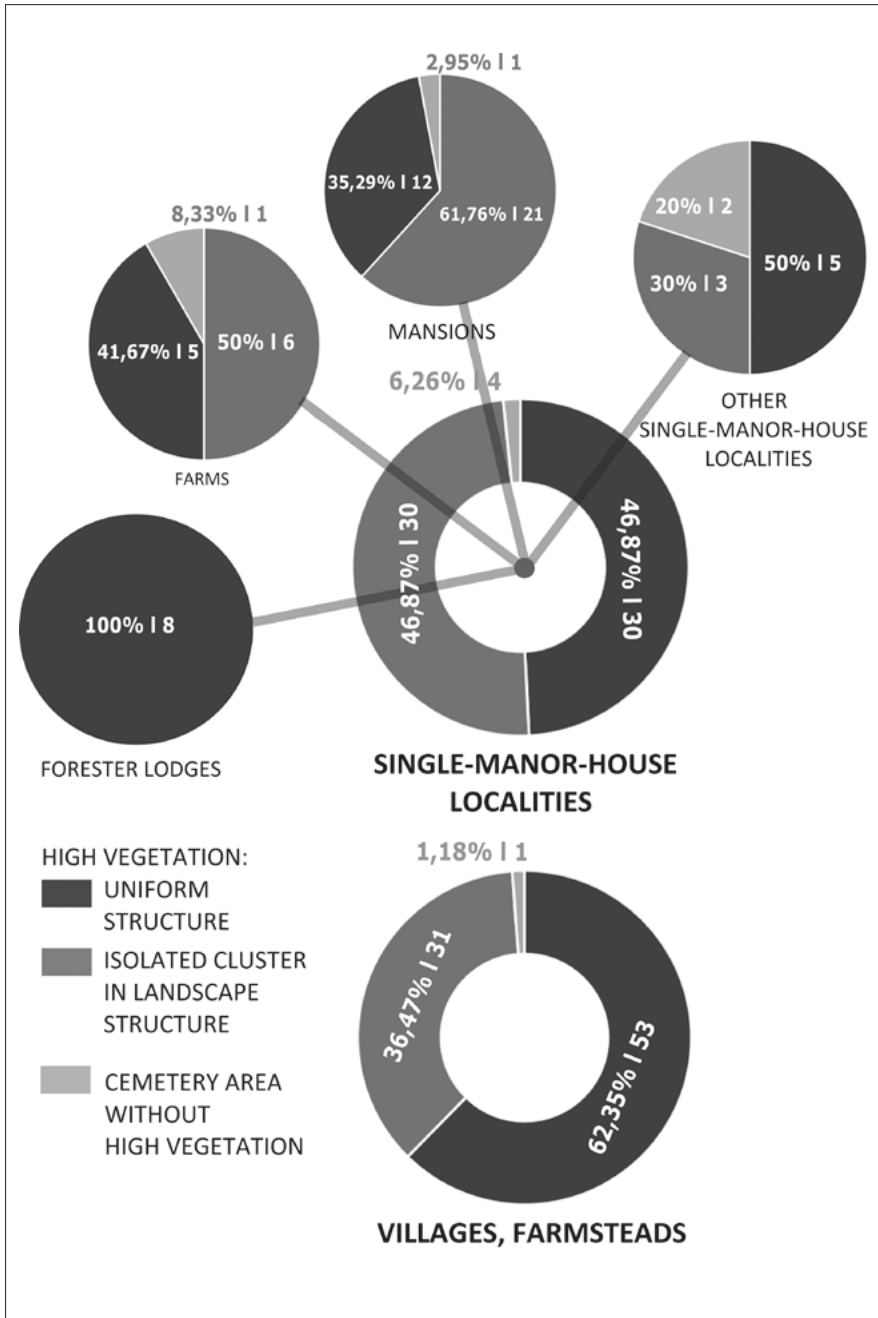


Fig. 5. Tall vegetation cover in cemeteries of depopulated villages – a compilation based on the types of depopulated settlement units (own work).

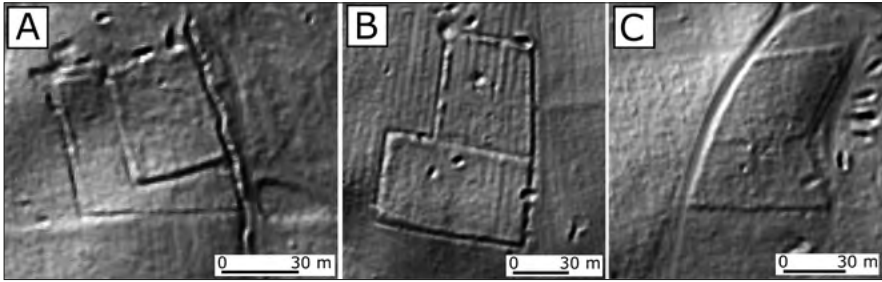


Fig. 6. Examples of the burial area division resulting from the extension of cemeteries in Kotten, Lindensee, and Seebrücken (own work using DTM from the Geoportal website: <http://www.geoportal.gov.pl> [4 IV 2020]).

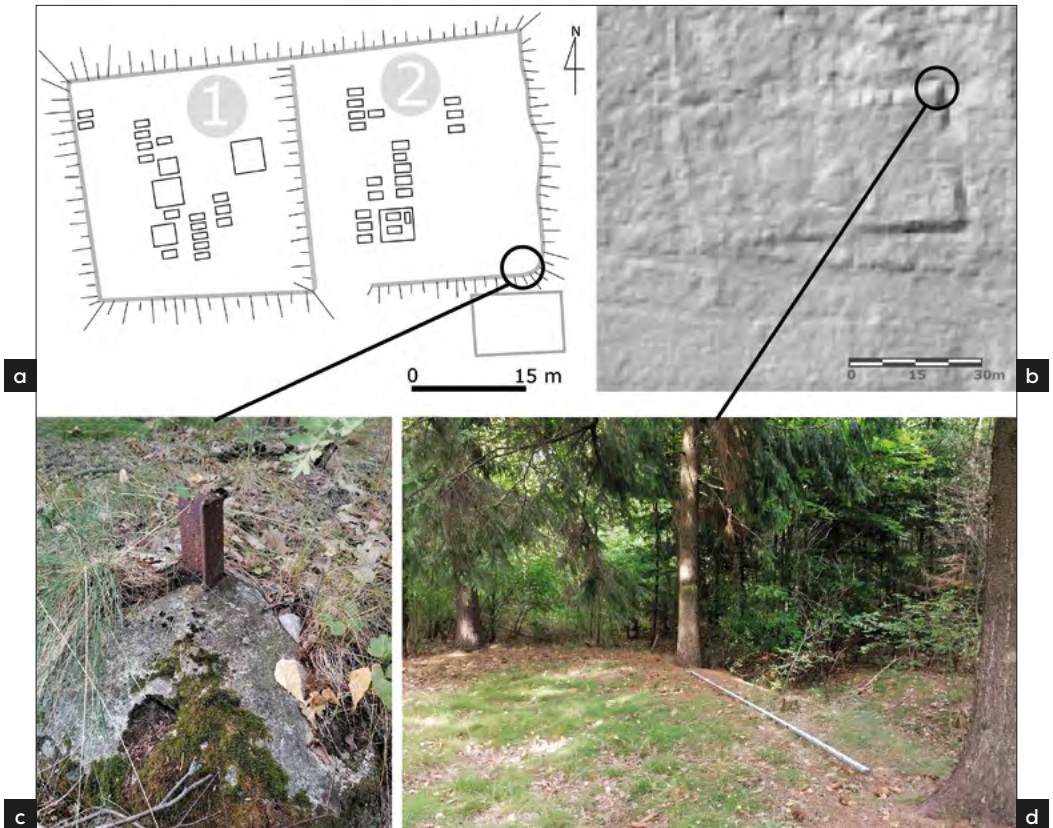


Fig. 7. The damaged boundaries and internal division of the rural cemetery in the depopulated village of Zielasen (Elk Commune); (a) a cemetery plan; (b) the cemetery boundary on the visualisation of the lie of the land (DTM – source: <http://www.geoportal.gov.pl>); (c, d) relics of the perimeter boundary.

completely destroying their aboveground structures. Among single-manor estates, the tree cover of cemeteries more frequently forms separate patches in the landscape structure. Such a spatial arrangement of the tall vegetation is characteristic particularly of smaller cemeteries, previously located at manors and home farms (Fig. 5). In many cases, they were cemeteries with a clear landscape panorama as they were located on hills. This led to the creation of a kind of islands surrounded by fields and meadows, still existing today.

As rural cemeteries were filled up, they were extended, which is proved by the identified forms of the lie of the land. Using digital terrain models, generated based on the ALS data, one can see hollow or convex linear forms within the burial grounds (Fig. 6, 7). When the vegetation is low, earth berms of this kind can also be identified in the field (cf. Majewska 2017: 68). In many cases, however, their absolute height is so small (even less than twenty centimetres) that they would be overlooked during surface prospecting. Material evidence of the spatial development of rural Evangelical cemeteries was identified based on ALS derivatives in six depopulated villages: Bartkenhof, Zielasen, Koslowen, Kotten, Lindensee, and Seebrücken. The last four of the cemeteries listed belonged to larger forest villages that had existed from at least the 1480s, based on the Magdeburg rights (Białuński 2002: 47–48; Majewska 2018: 182, 186). These villages were located near the eastern boundary of the Pisz District, which may explain the similarities in the way the burial grounds were divided into two clear parts (Fig. 6).

Spatial forms of cemeteries

Cemeteries at rural settlement units in East Prussia were mostly established on plans of regular polygons, usually parallelograms: squares and rectangles (a total of 68% sites, with 84% of cemeteries only in single-manor estates) (Fig. 9). This does not differ from general layout characteristics of cemeteries established far from buildings (Majdecka-Strzeżek 2016: 24). Regular sites on a circular plan were very rare (e.g. the artificial earth platform of the Georgenhof cemetery – cf. Majewska 2020). In small settlements, such as forester's lodges and manors, there were virtually no cemeteries of irregular shape. Even those located on nearby hills were artificially formed using additional berms or embankments (example in Fig. 8 – the scope of the necropolis emphasised by partial perimeter embankments and a hillslope undercut).

Deviations from regular geometrical forms usually resulted from the necessity to adjust the scope of the site to the lie of the land. For example, an oval or irregular shape of the cemetery was usually connected with location on top of a hill with a big elevation difference, making it impossible to delineate the borders in any other way. Boundaries in the form of irregular polygons mostly concerned cemeteries

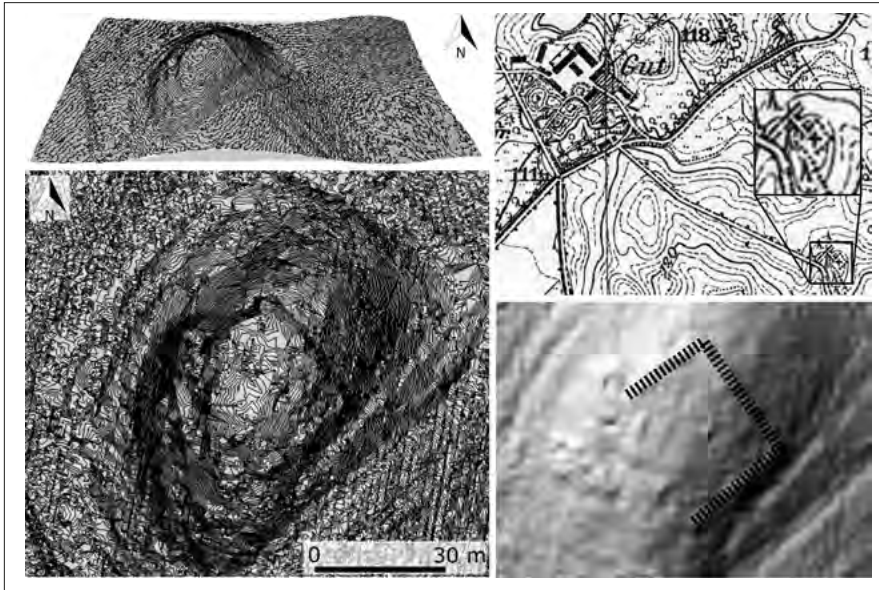


Fig. 8. Relics of a regular cemetery of the former village of Saraunen (Bartoszyce District) located on a hill, with its own field forms: a contour plan (contour interval: 0.05 m) and a 3D model of the lie of the land; a fragment of the Topographische Karte Messtischblatt map, sheet 1788, Landsberg; a simplified course of the visible sections of the boundaries on DTM (own work based on the LAS 1.2. point cloud data – TIN model, sheet: N-34-65-B-b-3-I-3, GUGiK).

located along roads, on the edges of floodplains, and along lake shorelines, while sites located at the crossroads and forks were triangular or trapezoidal⁶.

Cemeteries of larger settlement units, such as villages, settlements, colonies, and hamlets, were rarely square in plan. A larger number of burials determined an elongated, rectangular form or a different shape⁷. The trapezoidal outline of boundaries (Fig. 9) was relatively frequent as, just like parallelogrammatic and quadrilateral (irregular) outlines, it was a modification of the traditional rectangular form adjusted to the rural landscape layout (e.g. cemetery boundaries along the roads), the lie of the land, or nearby physiographic objects (such as a lake shoreline, a river bank, or the edge of a slope).

6 Such a shape of boundaries was also found on elevations (e.g. the cemetery in the village of Buttken).

7 In many cases, a divergence between the cemetery shape shown on a topographic map and the actual boundary outline determined by, for example, the lie of the land was identified. Whenever it was possible to verify the shape, the analysis of cemetery forms took into consideration the actual form.

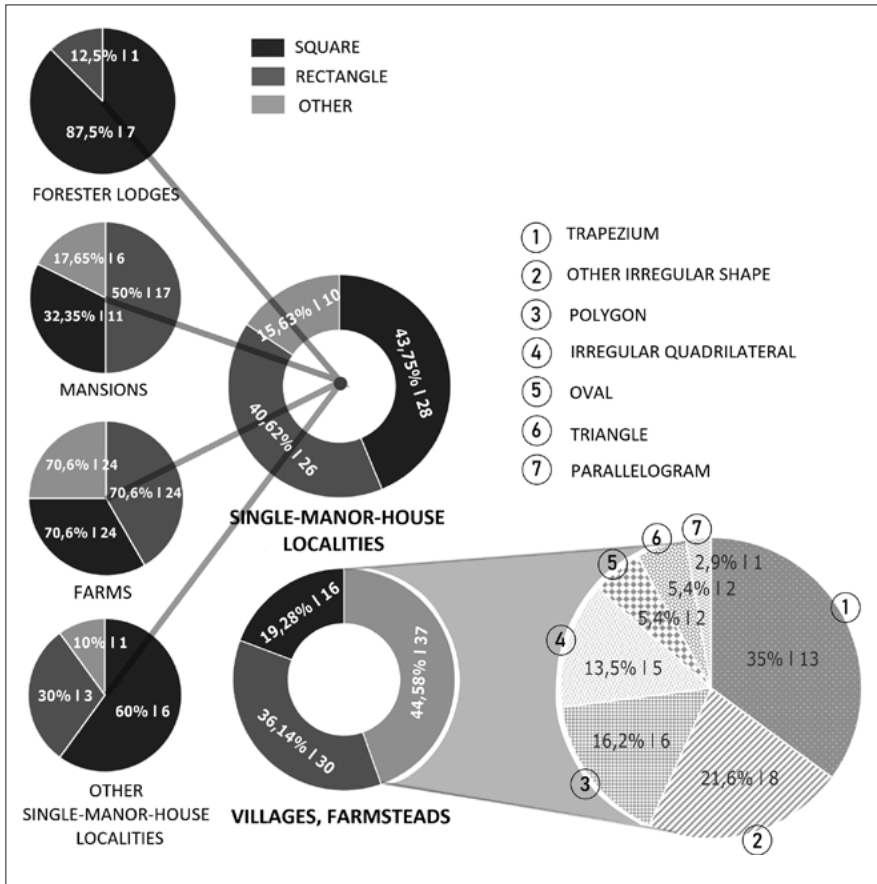


Fig. 9. The shapes of cemeteries of depopulated villages in the Polish part of former East Prussia (own work).

Conclusions

Cemeteries of depopulated villages of Warmia, Masuria, and Powiśle were affected by dramatic events of the Second World War and the post-war period, as a result of which these active burial grounds were transformed into mostly forgotten evidence of the local communities' life. Similarly to human memory, the so-called material memory of the landscape, which is co-created by degrading former cemeteries of abandoned settlement units, gets modified and gradually disappears. Cemetery boundaries are among the few elements that have been preserved to a degree enabling any relatively detailed analysis. Spatial forms and boundaries of cemeteries differ depending on the type of settlement unit they belonged to. The greatest differences can be found between places of burial at former forester's lodges, manors,

and home farms and those located in larger, particularly most populous, villages. The differences mainly result from the surface area of individual cemeteries and whether they were to be places of burial for the whole community or just private sites established for the purposes of family burials.

An insight into the spatial context and morphological features of the sites through detailed altitude measurement data allowed to determine, among others, the origin of individual forms, and so the way the burial grounds were organised. The degrading material traces observed in the landscape are usually the only and the last relics that we can use to explore the events, processes, and people taking part in them. This might be the last moment when we can capture the aboveground structures of the sepulchral heritage of the former East Prussian countryside. At the same time, work documenting the present structure of the landscape provides the basis for further analyses aiming to determine the extent and directions of the transformation of these spaces, taking place over a few decades after the settlement continuity was broken.

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Streszczenie

W artykule omówiono wybrane zagadnienia dotyczące morfologii cmentarzy całkowicie wyludnionych wiejskich jednostek osadniczych znajdujących się w części Prus Wschodnich włączonej do Polski w 1945 r. Analizie i interpretacji poddano granice i formy przestrzenne założeń cmentarnych. Są to właściwie najlepiej zachowane składowe krajobrazy tych historycznych miejsc pochówków. Podstawowym materiałem źródłowym wykorzystanym w studium w celu identyfikacji i wstępnej analizy granic i kształtów cmentarzy były arkusze mapy *Topographische Karte Messtischblatt* z lat 20.–40. XX w. oraz ortofotomapy przedstawiające aktualne pokrycie terenu. Analizy szczegółowe wykonano natomiast z wykorzystaniem wysokościowych danych pomiarowych pochodzących z lotniczego skanowania laserowego (zasób Głównego Urzędu Geodezji i Kartografii). Wyniki badań ukazują wyraźne różnice w wielkości

oraz kształcie cmentarzy przynależących do określonych typów jednostek osadniczych. Zachowane relikty świadczą o odmiennych sposobach organizacji miejsc pochówków przy założeniach jednodworczych, przy których funkcjonowały cmentarze rodowe, a tymi zakładanymi przy wsiach. Rezultaty analizy wskazują również na charakterystyczne cechy współczesnego krajobrazu dawnych ewangelickich cmentarzy, ułatwiając ich terenową identyfikację.

Słowa kluczowe: pamięć krajobrazu, Mazury, wyludnione miejscowości, dziedzictwo kulturowe, studia krajobrazowe, geografia historyczna

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