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Signs from the 9th Century, Inspired by Greek Letters, Found on the Vistula*

Znaki z IX wieku, inspirowane literami greckimi, znalezione nad Wisłą

ABSTRACT

In 1986 during the archaeological excavations by the Institute of Archaeology of the University of Warsaw directed by professor Jerzy Gąssowski at the site of Podebłocie, three small fragmentary objects of clay were found. On these so-called 'tablets' there are signs which are similar to the letters of Greek alphabet (ill. 2,3,4). Finds of that kind, unexpected in that area, excited a lot of interest of Polish mediaevalists.

Key words: Podebłocie, Greek alphabet, 9th century

STRESZCZENIE

W 1986 r. podczas wykopalisk archeologicznych prowadzonych przez Instytut Archeologii Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego pod kierownictwem profesora Jerzego Gąssowskiego w miejscowości Podebłocie znaleziono trzy małe, fragmentaryczne przedmioty z gliny. Na tych tak zwanych „tabliczkach” znajdują się znaki podobne do liter alfabetu greckiego (il. 2,3,4). Znaleziska tego rodzaju, nieoczekiwane w tej okolicy, wzbudziły duże zainteresowanie polskich mediewistów.

* The following remarks are a concise communiqué. The topic of this brief paper was until now discussed almost exclusively in Polish publications and it is our aim to bring the matter to the attention of foreign academic readers. The authors, Dr Ewa Marczak Łukaszewicz, archaeologist and Prof. Dr Adam Łukaszewicz, historian and papyrologist, are members of the Faculty of Archaeology, University of Warsaw.

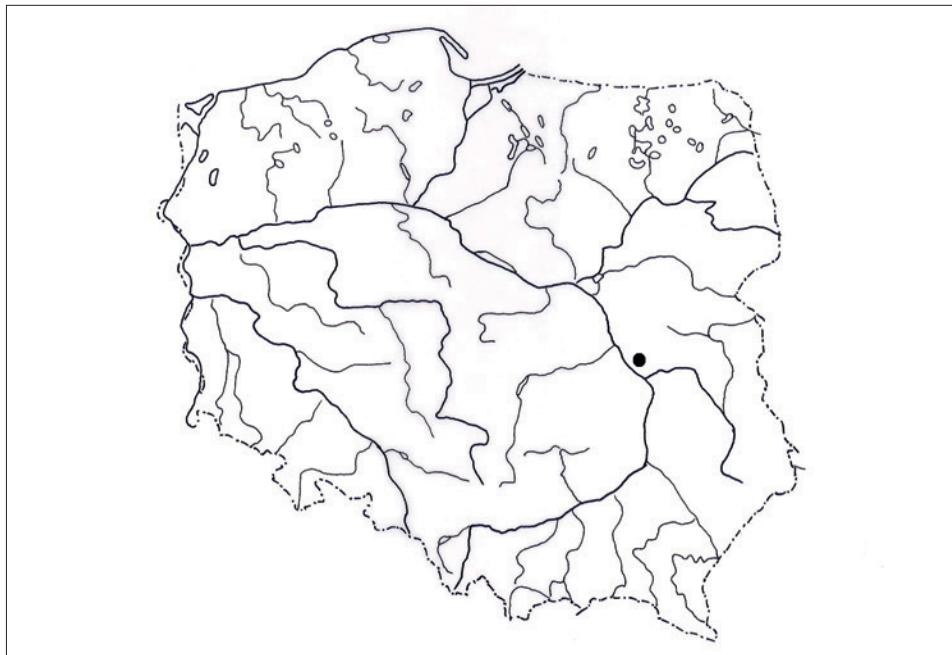
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Słowa kluczowe: Podebłocie, alfabet grecki, IX wiek

Podebłocie is a small village in the district of Garwolin, voivodship (province) of Mazovia, situated about 100 km south from Warsaw, on the right (eastern) bank of the Vistula River. In this location there are remnants of an early medieval settlement complex including a hillfort, three settlements and a cemetery with mounds covering crematory burials. The stratigraphy, radiocarbon data and the sequence of significant cultural changes discernible in the archaeological material allowed the identification of two main chronological phases of the occupation of the complex¹. Phase I is dated to the period from the 7th/8th to the early 10th century. Phase II was the period from the early 10th to the 11th/12th century and is characterized by a slow decline of the site, which was followed by the abandonment of the whole complex.

Beyond any doubt, the tablets belong to the phase I of the site occupation. The 'tablets' were discovered at the western settlement. That settlement has a regular plan. Each farmyard included a sunken-floored hut with a cluster of adjacent small subsidiary structures. The finds under discussion

¹ Podebłocie has been mentioned as an example of a successful application of radiocarbon (C14) and other modern dating methods to medieval sites, see: M. Dulinicz, W.A. Moszczyński, *Die ältere slawische Besiedlung des Mittleren Weichsellaufs im Lichte der naturwissenschaftlichen Datierungen. Der Burg-Siedlungskomplex in Podebłocie*, in: *The Early Slavic Settlement in Central Europe in the Light of New Dating Evidence*, eds. M. Dulinicz, S. Moździoch, Wrocław 2013, pp. 64–67.



Map 1. Location of Podebłocie

came from one of such huts². They were found in a context different from average, including fragments of clay recipients with solar ornament³.

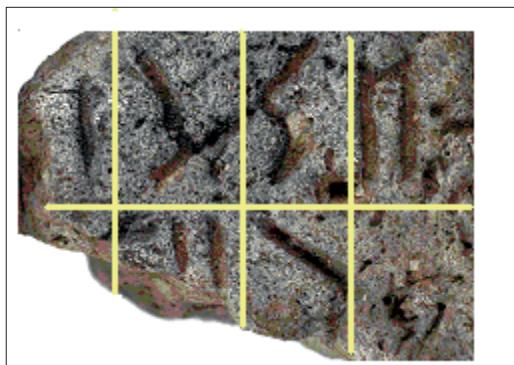
In 1995, on the initiative of the discoverers, these inscribed objects were subject to a tool mark examination at the Department of Mechanoscopy of the Central Laboratory for Criminal Investigations of the Police Headquarters in Warsaw in order to elucidate the method and circumstances of the engraving of the signs. The analysis confirmed the obvious observation that the signs could not result from an incidental contact e.g. with plants and were carved intentionally in fresh clay before baking. The carvings were made with a hard instrument and the *ductus* of the tool could be determined⁴.

Ewa Marczak (now: Ewa Łukaszewicz) pointed to the fact that the intentional character of the signs is also visible in their regular disposition on the surface of the best preserved 'tablet' (ill. 1). The „text” contains

² E. Marczak, *Wczesnośredniowieczna osada przygrodowa (stanowisko 3) na tle zespołu osadniczego*, Warszawa 2014, pp. 200–220, 451–457 (inedited manuscript of PhD dissertation).

³ *Ibidem*, pp. 278–284.

⁴ B. Rydz, *Ekspertyza Centralnego Laboratorium Kryminalistycznego Komendy Głównej Policji trzech zabytków z Podebłocia*, Warszawa 1995 (manuscript, inedited).



Ill. 1. Layout of the signs on the 'tablet' inv. no. Pb/3/86/94, drawn by E. Marczak

two regular lines with an even distance between the signs. The signs in the lower line are placed exactly under the signs of the upper line⁵.

The mineralogical and petrographical analysis carried out in 1998 in the Academy of Mining and Metallurgy in Cracow has shown that one of the 'tablets' (ill. 2, inv. no. Pb/3/86/73) was made of a different clay with fine grain and well baked, typical for the Mediterranean areas. Two other objects (ill. 3, 4, inv. nos. Pb/3/86/93 and Pb/3/86/94) are made of a local material⁶.

The interpretation of the signs incised on the clay fragments from Podebłocie as an intentional script was evident to the excavators immediately after the discovery. The archaeologists in the field recognized also the possibly Christian character of the signs. This observation was soon confirmed by professors of the Faculty of History of the University of Warsaw, Zbigniew Borkowski and Tadeusz Wasilewski⁷. Later commentaries by Tomasz Płociennik⁸ and Adam Łukaszewicz⁹ corroborated that interpretation.

⁵ E. Marczak, *Wczesnośredniowieczna*, pp. 396–397.

⁶ M. Pawlikowski, *Wyniki analiz mineralogiczno-petrograficznych ceramiki ze stanowiska w Podebłociu, gmina Trojanów, Kraków 1998* (manuscript, inedited).

⁷ T. Wasilewski, *Sensacja archeologiczna nad Wisłą. Odczytywanie tajemnicy*, "Kultura" 1987, 4, 1, p. 4. According to T. Wasilewski the text on the table reads IXCN for Ι(ησοῦς) Χ(ριστός) Ν(ικᾶ) = *Christus vincit*. For the use of νικᾶ in ancient acclamations cf. A. Cameron, *Porphyrius the Charioteer*, Oxford 1973, pp. 76–80; Z. Borkowski, *Inscriptions des factions à Alexandrie, Alexandrie II*, Varsovie 1982, p. 76.

⁸ T. Płociennik, *Inskrypcje na „tabliczkach” z Podebłocia, „Świątowit. Nowa seria”* 1999, 1 (42), fasc. B, pp. 197–199.

⁹ A. Łukaszewicz, *Dwadzieścia lat później. O tabliczkach z Podebłocia*, in: *Przez granice czasu. Księga jubileuszowa poświęcona Profesorowi Jerzemu Gałłowskiemu*, eds. A. Buko, W. Dyczko, Pułtusk 2008, pp. 263–268.

Poland has no epigraphic evidence from the pre-Christian period of its history. Professor Henryk Samsonowicz declared that the discovery is an important contribution to the early history of medieval Poland¹⁰. Various hypotheses as to the hand that wrote the signs appeared, including a proposal of the authorship of a Christian prisoner brought from abroad¹¹.

The publicity around these 'Christian' finds provoked also negative comments from a few scholars who opposed the very idea of these signs as an intentional writing. Some proposed incidental imprints of plants (!) and refused to accept the documentary value of these unusual sources. All these objections were unsubstantiated (see above)¹².

A scholar attempted an alternative explanation, and recognized in the contents of the 'tablets' a Central-Asiatic script. The text supposedly contains an encouragement to an unfair financial operation (!)¹³.

Some authors treated the date of the 'tablets' with a high degree of liberty. A commentator interpreted the Greek signs as a trace of a possible influence from the Kiev Rus. In that version which is entirely hypothetical, the date of the objects was shifted to the early 11th century in order to attribute the signs to someone who was supposedly brought to the area by the troops of Bolesław the Valiant in 1018 from Kiev, that was already a Christian centre since 988¹⁴. The clay objects from Podebłocie were also understood as fragments of a kind of *enkolpia* or pectoral crosses with Greek *signa Christi*.

There is no indication that the 'tablets' are fragments of *enkolpia*. The date of these items (phase I, from the beginning of the 8th century to the end of the 9th century/beginning of the 10th century) is earlier than the official evangelization of both Poland (966) and the Kiev Rus (988).

¹⁰ H. Samsonowicz, *Sensacja archeologiczna nad Wisłą. Problem nadal otwarty*, „Kultura” 1987, 15, p. 7.

¹¹ J. Bieniek, *Sensacja archeologiczna nad Wisłą. Ręka jeńca?*, „Kultura” 1987, 15, p. 7.

¹² See: E. Marczak, “Tabliczki” z Podebłocia: nie rozwiązana zagadka, in: *Studia z dziejów cywilizacji*, ed. A. Buko, Warszawa 1998, pp. 93–102; eadem, “Tabliczki” z Podebłocia. Rozwiązywanie jednej z największych zagadek polskiej archeologii, “Archeologia Żywa” 2000, 99, 4 (13), pp. 13–16; an overview of the discovery can be found in the manual of early medieval archaeology of Poland by A. Buko, *Archeologia Polski wczesnośredniowiecznej. Odkrycia-hipotezy-interpretacje*, Warszawa 2005, pp. 157–163, ill. 24–26. (an edition in English: A. Buko, *The Archaeology of Early Medieval Poland. Discoveries-Hypotheses-Interpretations*, Leiden–Boston 2007, chapter Eight: The Earliest Medieval Script In Poland?, pp. 167–174).

¹³ E. Tryjarski, *Sensacja archeologiczna nad Wisłą. Ręka pogańska ze Wschodu?*, “Kultura” 1987, 12, 1, p. 7; idem, Wokół sensacji archeologicznej nad Wisłą, “Kultura” 1987, 13, p. 7.

¹⁴ L. Bednarczuk, *Tabliczki z Podebłocia w świetle inskrypcji greckich na Rusi Kijowskiej*, “*Studia Wschodniosłowiańskie*” 2014, 14, pp. 143–150.

The common motif which appears on all items under discussion is the sign X. The combination with an I and H and also with an altered sigma, points to the *signa Christi* as the essential element of these 'texts'¹⁵.

The *verso* of the 'tablets' bears no signs.

1. (= ill. 2), inv. no. Pb/3/86/73

4.7 cm x 2.7 cm, thickness 1,2–1,5 cm



Ill. 2. 'Tablet' (inv. no. Pb/3/86/73). Phot. M. Bogacki, M. Dąbski

On this 'tablet' the signs are shallow and the surface is damaged. However, this item also contains the X in a lower central position. Perhaps the writer attempted to produce a sign well known in Christian epigraphy, being a ligature of two letters I and X for Ἰησοῦς Χριστός, but this is not certain. The rest of the traces seems to include two parallel lines || (or an attempted H?) above the X, a CI on the right side, a double vertical line (or an H) in the lower line to the right of X and some more traces difficult to identify. The contents tend to be symmetrical and therefore somehow parallel to the remaining two items. The piece is probably incomplete.

An interesting feature of the items no. 2 and 3 is the possibility of reading the 'text' when turned upside down. The 'correct' position of the 'tablets' is unknown. However, there are two possible ways of reading:

2. (= ill. 3), inv. no. Pb/3/86/93

4 cm x 3.2 cm, thickness c. 2,5 cm

Position A:

IXCI

¹⁵ For the abbreviated forms see: L. Traube, *Nomina sacra. Versuch einer Geschichte der christlichen Kürzung*, München 1907.



III. 3. 'Tablet' (inv. no. Pb/3/86/93). Phot. M. Bogacki, M. Dąbski

XI

If we turn the „tablet” vertically, we obtain the following configuration of signs:

Position B:

IX

ICXI

3. (= ill. 4), inv. no. Pb/3/86/94

7 cm x 7.5 cm, thickness c. 3 cm

Position A:

IXCH

<II>

Position B:

<II>

HCXI

The unusual shape of the *sigma* makes possible reading that letter when turned vertically. While IX is a standard abbreviation of the *nomen sacrum* of Jesus, XI is uncommon unless we suppose a confusion with XP.

Both IXCI and IXCH have as central element the *nomen sacrum* XC. The I is an obvious abbreviation for Ἰησοῦς. The second I in the item no. 2 is apparently unnecessary, but was probably added for the sake of symmetry and for the quasi-palindromic reading. In the item no. 3, the final I is substituted by an approximate H. It seems that the writer was not unaware of the phonetic value of H as equivalent of I. In position B, if we admit a possibility of a confusion of the final I with a P, we would perhaps obtain a XP.

A strange element on the ‘tablet’ no. 3 is a symmetrical composition which can be interpreted as two *iotas* and two *sigmas*, perhaps an unusual sign for IC=Ἰησοῦς.



Ill. 4. 'Tablet' (inv. no. Pb/3/86/94). Phot. M. Gmur

The unconventional shape of some letters is not necessarily a proof that the writer was completely illiterate and only imitated a pattern in a maladroit way. However, he was certainly not experienced in writing.

What was the original purpose of these strange 'ostraca' from the Vistula region?

The idea of pectoral crosses or *enkolpia* in clay must be rejected. The most probable function of the 'tablets' was the role of portable amulets¹⁶. The presence of the *Signa Christi* in an approximate version must not

¹⁶ There are no parallels from the area of today's Poland. However, from other territories there are numerous examples of magical use of *nomina sacra*, including also graffiti and graphic symbols with crosses and Christian abbreviations. See e.g. A. Łukaszewicz, *Christlicher Fluchtext (Notiuncula ad P. Vindob. G 16685)*, "Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik" 1988, 73, pp. 61–62; A. Łajtar, J. van der Vliet, *Empowering the dead. The texts from a medieval funerary complex in Dongola*, Warsaw 2017, pp. 21–76; cf. A. Łukaszewicz, *A Travesty of Signa Christi Reconsidered*, in: *Nubia et Oriens Christianus. Festschrift für C. Detlef G. Müller zum 60. Geburtstag*, Köln 1988 (Bibliotheca Nubica I), pp. 29–32. Unpublished portable amulets on pottery fragments from Late Roman Egypt are known to the present writer.

surprise and is not necessarily a testimony of an early evangelization or adherence of local inhabitants to Christian religion. The premature interpretations of Podebłocie as a Christian community in pre-Christian Poland must be regarded with extreme caution. The presence of Christian symbols in a presumably non-Christian milieu is probably only a testimony of the recognition of a protective value of Christian symbols and a piece of evidence implying contacts with the sphere of Byzantine influence, including Moravia and the Illyrian and Danube regions. The hut in which the items under discussion were found was apparently inhabited by a man whose status was higher than average, perhaps a local sorcerer or a medicine-man.

To these observations a contemporaneous parallel must be added, as suggested by Tomasz Płociennik in his important contribution to the study of the 'tablets' from Podebłocie¹⁷. On the back of an *enkolpion* from Vel'ká Mača (Slovakia, 2nd half of the 9th century) there is a text HCXC running from right to left, very similar to the inscriptions from Podebłocie¹⁸. This parallel does not mean that the „tablets” are fragments of a clay *enkolpion*.

Further research may perhaps bring more parallels to the 'tablets'. The purpose of the present paper is not to provide an exhaustive commentary before research is completed, but only to introduce these finds to specialized readers outside Poland.

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¹⁷ T. Płociennik, *op. cit.*, pp. 197–199.

¹⁸ Cf. the bibliographical reference given by Płociennik at p. 198 n. 8; cf. his plate 71.3.

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