

# ■ The past in the present

## The case of the ancient stone rings in Pomerania, Poland

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The aim of this text is to analyse the social significance of archaeological / heritage sites for different audiences in contemporary Poland. The essay shall refer to the stone circle archaeological and nature reserves in Pomerania, a very specific type of monument on display in the open air. There has been much discussion, mostly amongst archaeologists, about the origin of these prehistoric stones and their intended function. Apart from the scientific debate there is another, ongoing public discussion, proving how important the stone circles are to many people not connected professionally with the distant past.

The stone circles (*Kamienne Kręgi*), along with the burial mounds that can also be seen there, date back to the period of Roman influence and were discovered in Pomerania, Poland, more precisely, in the Kashubian and Krajeński Lakelands, extending to the Koszalin region in the Central Lakelands, hence, to the west of the Vistula river. The best-known have been discovered in Węsiory (*Gmina Sulęczy*no), Odry (*Gmina Czersk*), Leśno (*Gmina Brusy*) und Grzybnica (*Gmina Manowo*), amongst others. There used to be many other stone circles located in forests, as archives and oral testimonies show, but many of them were destroyed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as local people used the stones in the construction of roads and buildings (Wołagiewicz 1977, 11). Those which survived were excavated archaeologically and today, after having been reconstructed, are part of “The Stone Circles” nature and archaeological reserves which are open to the public.

The stone circles are usually round. They consist of massive boulders or rock pieces, up to 1.7 meters high, separated by spaces measuring several meters wide, sometimes connected by smaller stones, the whole structure being 10 to 40 meters

in diameter (fig. 1). In the middle of the circles one to four stelae were placed, and sometimes a single grave. Apart from stone circles, graves and kurgans have also been found on these sites. In the case of kurgans, the grave was usually covered with stones and soil, and they were surrounded by a circle made of larger stones. A kurgan grave could include one to several individual burials (both cremation and inhumation).

Archaeologists have linked the stone circles to the Wielbark culture population and date back to the 1<sup>st</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD. They are interpreted as cemeteries, sites where ritual ceremonies took place or where tribal meetings or clan “tings” (assemblies or courts) were held, although often all these three interpretations intersect. The graves, located within the circle, are thought to be sacrificial burials. According to the legend quoted in “The Origin and Deeds of the Goths” by the 6<sup>th</sup> century Gothic historian Jordanes, the ancestors of this Germanic tribe, arrived from Scandinavia in three boats and landed on the South Baltic shores. Supposedly, they conquered the native people of the region, and later continued their migration toward the Black Sea, as excavations and written sources can prove.

The preservation of these sites is in accordance with the guidelines on the *in situ* preservation of archaeological and / or heritage sites. Due to the fact that a variety of rare mosses and lichens grow on the stones themselves, they are particularly valuable areas in terms of the natural environment. As such, they constitute important heritage sites and tourist attractions of the Pomerania region today. But one may ask whether this is where the story of these monuments ends? Have their meaning and significance stayed constant through time? Or has our perception of them al-



tered along with changing social attitudes to the past, past remains and heritage in general? Do they serve the same goals as they did decades ago?

### ■ Past meanings

The interpretation of past phenomena among archaeologists, and consequently, the meaning of the past and its remains, has not always stayed constant. This is also true in the case of these particular monument sites. Agreement on their dating was never reached. At the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century some archaeologists linked them to the Neolithic monumental religion and therefore they date back to the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC, others claimed that they are connected with the Wielbark culture of the 1<sup>st</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD. Nowadays, as already mentioned, archaeologists unanimously agree that they date back to the period of Roman influence. Moreover, there was also no agreement as to the ethnic identity of their builders. Polish archaeologist Józef Kostrzewski claimed in the 1930 s that they were Slavic cemeteries from the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries AD, and later used by the Goths. During the Second World War the Gothic origins of circles were presented by Nazi propaganda as proof that German tribes were long-standing inhabitants of the Pomeranian region (Breske et al. 2006, 16–19). Since World War II until today archaeologists have usually agreed that these places should be linked to the Goths and Gepids (e.g. Wołagiewicz 1977;

Walenta 2006, 86), although ethnic interpretation of archaeological cultures has recently come into heavy criticism. There was also no consensus on their interpretation and the possible function of which they could have served in the past. As mentioned above, archaeologists have interpreted the stone circles as cemeteries, ritual or cult places, a kind of sanctuary or places for tribal meetings, namely Scandinavian “tings” (see above). Alternative interpretations also exist – as early as 1916, on the basis of topographical measurements of the stone circles in Odry, Polish astronomer and amateur archaeologist Paul Stephan claimed they reflected an astronomical observation, seeing them as a form of prehistoric calendar.

### ■ Contemporaneous meanings

Apart from the archaeological interpretations a whole range of different opinions and ideas of how these sites could be used exists. Nowadays, as in the past, stone circles attract the attention not only of archaeologists, but they also exist in a local folklore. Shrouded in mystery and magic, they are believed to be sacred spots, haunted by the ghosts of ancestors, or are surrounded by legends and folktales of people turned to stone (Walenta 2006). Such folklore can be seen as the result of the local population attempting to make sense of the landscape and the remains of the past it contains over many, many years. The stone circles have also inspired different artists:





2 | Tourist visiting stone circles in Grzybnica, 2008.

painters, poets, photographers and writers. For example, Węsiory village is the setting for “Mister Automobile and the treasure of Athanaric” by the famous writer Zbigniew Nienacki (1929–1994). It is a series of adventures based on prehistorical mysteries surrounding this site, connected not only to discoveries of “archaeological treasures”, but also to protecting this treasure from thieves. However, the true proliferation of interpretations and different meanings the stone circles have for a range of people and agencies has come to light only recently. In short, postmodern times brought about radical changes, and also the meaning and significance of the past have changed. The Polish sociologist Piotr T. Kwiatkowski argues that the increase in people’s interest in the past nowadays in Poland as indeed elsewhere has been caused by several factors (Kwiatkowski 2008, 39–40). According to Kwiatkowski they include:

- an increase in the significance of memory in public life in recent decades;
- the postmodern privatisation of the past which depends on the creation of individualised views of the past privatisation of the past;
- people’s growing conviction about the possibilities of direct or unmediated contact with the past through personal and mainly sensory experience of it;
- the commercialisation of the past, in other words the commercialisation transformation of the past and its remains into a commodity, which is obtained, used and consumed by people for

different purposes. We can also add to these points the massive interest of the general public in heritage and in the past as a consequence of the moral, social and identity crisis experienced over the past few decades. It can be stated that they reflect the radical changes the postmodern era brought about into attitudes towards the past and its significance in people’s lives.

Consequently, different factors emerge as far as the meaning, significance and attitudes to the past are concerned. This is also true of the stone circles which nowadays can be seen as an arena of coexistence and a place where different interests and attitudes of different people, groups of people and agencies converge. These shall be analysed in the following.

■ Archaeologists and heritage / museum managers: As already mentioned, stone circles are places of scientific interest for archaeologists and museum / heritage managers. They are nature and archaeological reserves, protected as heritage sites by law and managed by local museums and other archaeological / heritage institutions. There is obviously an ethos of preservation and scientific interpretation of these sites. Visitors to these reserves can walk around the stone circles, read the information boards provided by archaeologists about the history of the research and archaeological interpretation of these sites (fig. 2). Moreover, archaeologists usually agree that the stone circles should be promoted as local tourist attractions.

3 | A poster announcing the "The Goths at the stone circles" festival in Grzybnica, 2011.



■ **Tourist attractions:** Stone circles constitute an important tourist attraction of the Pomeranian region. Some sites charge entrance fees, visitors can buy postcards, leaflets, brochures, souvenirs, etc. Although for many people who visit it is an apparently passive process of consumption, similar to the variety of practices that take place at many tourist sites such as wandering around, taking photographs, and so on, for others it not a process that is received passively. Visitors to the area often comment on its aesthetic value. Many people are enchanted by the aura or the magic of these monuments and their mysterious location. For example, in the visitor's book in Grzybnica one can read a following entry: "What a wonderful place! The magical mist rising between the trees sends shivers up my spine and I feel that I have experienced something really special" (Sylvia, Poznań). Moreover, archaeological festivals are organised on or nearby the reserves in an attempt to make them more appealing to tourists and increase visitor numbers. One such example is "The Goths at the stone circles" in Grzybnica (fig. 3). These festivals are organised in cooperation with research institutions, local authority bodies and historical reenactment groups and aim to popularise these sites and facilitate education about the past and history of a region in an entertaining and attractive way.

■ **Local councils:** Such activities are also supported by local government. They use local heritage to promote these sites and try to develop local tourism and attract visitors. Stone circles thus

serve as an icon in the promotion of the region of Pomerania in Poland and abroad, and are a good example of how such monuments can be used in promoting tourism, in marketing the local heritage and the economic value of heritage / archaeological sites.

■ **Local communities:** Stone circles are also important for local people. They are rather proud of the fact that stone circles constitute their own heritage. Therefore, local residents are concerned with their present fate and the state of preservation, they look after the sites, keep them tidy, etc. What is symptomatic for such heritage sites in the contemporary world today is the fact that they trigger many local initiatives focused around them. One example which clearly illustrates this aspect is the "Węsiory Village Society" organises many historical events that refer to local history and folktales, such as open air concerts and an open air theatrical performance "The Enchanted Circles of The Goths". Moreover, a kind of archaeological festival called "The Feast of the Goths" is held annually in the reconstructed prehistoric "Village of the Goths" as are many other initiatives aimed at enriching the cultural identity of local inhabitants, especially young people. The stone circles then constitute an important factor in constructing and maintaining the identity of local communities, remind them of their origins and encourage a sense of belonging.

■ **Stone circles as foci of identity:** Stone circles that represent an enormous time span can also serve as an emotional focus not only for collective, mainly local, but also for individual identities. Among them those inspired by the ideology of New Age or neopaganism predominate, and many visitors invoke tribal rituals or resurrect forgotten traditions. They are good examples of the emergence of new religious movements, the current return to pre-Christian traditions and maintaining a link with the ancestors of these lands. For example, Rob Darken, the leader of pagan black metal band Graveland, states in an interview: "Each year I visit the stone circles in the northern part of Poland. [...] I pay homage to the true Gods of these lands there". Moreover, in a song called "Into death's arms" we can find another direct connection to the stone circles: "Here among tumulus and stone circles / our fate is bound / our heritage and spiritual identity / hidden deep in the earth / Reach hidden heritage / and restore ancient power and glory...". Thus, this somewhat imagined past is becoming a crucial element in the issue of identity, although in this particular case along with rejecting Christian traditions really dangerous connotations to racist ideas can be observed.

■ **Alternative discourses:** Many people who visit stone circles are attracted by the mystery and atmosphere which surrounds them. Many of them claim that stone circles are sacred places



and embody the magical powers of nature (see, e.g., Hall 2007, 220–289). A number of people can prove the existence of the earth's force fields by direct experience. Dowzers who visit the sites say the circles are strong energy sources and furthermore claim the stone circles could have functioned in prehistoric times as signposts directing people to such sources of energy. The dowzers usually employ various kinds of rods and measuring devices. According to these somewhat esoteric approaches, stone circles were built at locations where magnetic and electrical fields are stronger. There is a connection here to the famous ley-lines, which are energy paths between powerful points on Earth. There is also a widespread belief that stone circles are sites where one can sense the underlying powers of nature. The current belief amongst dowzers is that the stone circles are a source of unidentified energy which has a positive effect on the human psyche and body, and that these sites have healing powers: many people do in fact visit the circles for this very reason. Some people visit these places specifically to “charge themselves up with energy” or to find help in healing from emotional, mental or even physical disturbances (fig. 4). Other pilgrims to the stones believe they resemble the constellations of stars, namely that of Taurus (Odry), or that the stone circle in Węsiory village is a model of the Pleiades star cluster and according to this version, stone circles were once landing sites for alien civilisations. There are also the somewhat

mystical approaches of people who claim that some kind of ancient message is encoded within the stone circles and through mystical experiences they can decode this message and save the world from the final Armageddon.

An important role here is played by the “Stone Circle Research Society”, founded in Gdynia in 1998, whose members are enchanted with the Węsiory circles, in particular the effect the energy of this area has. The society's supporters visit Węsiory, which they regard as a sacred site, gather there on particular dates throughout the year to celebrate the summer or winter solstices and other pagan feasts such as Samhain or Beltane. During such gatherings they usually make offerings to gods, ancestors and the powers of Nature, but also “tune into the energy” or toss the runes to make wishes. They also organise different symposia about stone circles and other issues connected with them. Additionally, they take care of the site in Węsiory, keep it tidy, make sure the stones are not moved and so on. They also attach leaflets to official boards, trees or sections of the fence with information about how tourists should behave in these sacred places, with warnings that stones must not be removed, or with alternative interpretations, especially concerning the energy or spiritual properties of particular circles. I am aware of only one example, namely that of Węsiory, where there is a joint official information board with archaeological interpretation and information provided by this society. Usually these leaflets are removed.



4 | People standing inside stone circles and “tuning into the energy” in Grzybnica, 2008.

## ■ Stone circles as contested spaces

As we can see, stone circles are an arena for the manifestation of different attitudes and contested interpretations, indicating the variety of ways people engage with the past. The stone circles therefore may be termed as “heterotopic”, a term coined by Michel Foucault to describe spaces where meaning is created, contested and negotiated by a variety of agencies. Yet stone circles are dominated by the archaeological interpretation of these sites along with scientific discourse and the preservation ethos. Such kind of vision is further legitimated and strengthened by the information boards provided on these sites. Any alternative accounts are considered superstitious or esoteric because scientific discourse tends to disapprove of any such affinities. To give an example: the Archaeological Museum in Gdańsk organised a conference in 1997 in Sulęczyń that was aimed at the integration of people interested in stone circles, not only archaeologists but also nonprofessionals. In the published post-conference book, we come across the rather arrogant attitudes of some archaeologists towards any alternative interpretations (quoted in Paner 1997, 21): “The stone circles in Węsiory, or wherever, as a source of radiation and any other supernatural power, well – let’s leave all that for the enthusiasts to believe and treat them with an indulgent smile, as yet another manifestation of belief in supernatural forces”. Such attitudes of many archaeologists to these alternative discourses have not changed much today. Moreover, people holding any alternative attitudes (non-scientific) towards these sites are considered by archaeologists and heritage managers as doing more harm than good to stone circles.

Thus, there is an obvious clash between these visions and attitudes on many levels that seems to relate mainly to the meaning and function of archaeological monuments in the past and in the present. Archaeologists can define and interpret past meanings of these monuments, but they cannot solely determine their relevance to people in the present day and their contemporary significance. By rejecting any alternative discourse archaeologists not only enforce one scientific vision of the past along with the preservation ethos, but also negate any differing attitudes to the past that people can have and the motifs that lie behind them. By doing so archaeologists reject the notion that the past can be used (or misused) differently or that it may play an important role in a number of social and personal issues crucial for people today such as identity, spirituality, sociality and so on. It is not the intention of this essay to suggest that some alternative approaches should hold a privileged position

over archaeological or other approaches, nor that all interpretations are equally good or desirable (e.g. racist ones). However, it is to stress in this context that archaeological interpretation and attitudes are only one issue on the heritage agenda. If archaeological heritage is defined by the “European Convention on the Protection of the Archaeological Heritage” (1992) as “a source of the European collective memory” (article 1), as a common good to which each party undertakes “to promote public access to important elements of its archaeological heritage, especially sites, and encourage the display to the public of suitable selections of archaeological objects” (article 9, ii), a need exists to recognise its multi-dimensional value, not only as a source of knowledge available to scientists or as places in need of protection for future generations, but also as an element of collective ownership that should serve the needs of the living.

It is neither an easy nor sometimes even a possible task to find a balance between different versions and interpretations of stone circles and the approaches to them. However, although it may sound like tautology, it seems that in this case a kind of dialogue between different parties is necessary. In this respect, one can refer to the notion of dialogue as defined by Mikhail Bakhtin. For Bakhtin, dialogue which occurs only through engagement with another invites us to understand the other’s specificity as fully as possible. An active dialogue requires a society of speakers and listeners who addresses some issues in expectation of receiving a response. The key concepts of dialogue are heteroglossia and polyphony. Heteroglossia should be understood as a multiple-voiced language, which is a language of different social groups as professionals, nonprofessionals, etc., and polyphony as the existence of many different voices. Generally, the idea is that dialogue moves forward to a consensus, but the goal that Bakhtin endorses is not a consensus. On the contrary, dialogue escapes a definite finalisation by existing on the threshold of several interacting viewpoints and it is their separateness and irreducible standpoints that are essential to the dialogue. Even when they agree, as they may, they do so from different perspectives and different senses of the world.

## ■ Concluding remarks

To sum up, looking at the issue from such a perspective, the acceptance of the difference of opinions and approaches to stone circles – although we know that not all of them are equally good – is the first step in putting into practice the concept of archaeological heritage as something that must be protected and preserved,

but also as something that exists primarily in the present, being a common good shared by all people. It is a moral, ethical imperative which cannot be evaded. Stone circles as a focal point for the collective *imaginarium* provide the arena for the manifestation of various types of behaviour and different interpretations. Such sites may be significant not only from a scientific point of view but are important to many people for other reasons: some may have purely pragmatic reasons (local councils), others aesthetic (tourists) and yet others spiritual (dowisers, *esotericists*). What the idea of a dialogue in this context suggests is that archaeologists must not reject alternative interpretations as fringe, but try to respond to them dialogically in order to create mutual understanding and respect. As such, it has implications not only for the archaeological interpretations of these sites, but for heritage / archaeological sites management, accessibility and preservation issues.

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## ■ Die Vergangenheit als Teil der Gegenwart

### Überlegungen am Beispiel der Steinkreise in Pommern (Polen).

Der Beitrag untersucht die Bedeutung prähistorischer Denkmäler für verschiedene Gesellschaftsgruppen im postmodernen Polen am Beispiel der Grabhügel und Steinkreise (*Kamienne Kręgi*), die z.B. in Węsiory (*Gmina Sulęczyno*), Odry (*Gmina Czersk*), Leśno (*Gmina Brusy*) und Grzybnica (*Gmina Manowo*) im Gelände erhalten sind. Die Anlagen werden in die Römische Kaiserzeit datiert und mit der Bevölkerung der Wielbark-Kultur verbunden. Es gibt unterschiedliche Überlegungen zur Entstehung der Monumente. Die meisten Archäologen interpretieren sie als Bestattungsplätze und Orte für Zusammenkünfte oder Gerichtsverhandlungen – vergleichbar den skandinavischen Thingstätten. Einzelgräber, die im Inneren der Steinkreise freigelegt wurden, können als archäologischer Nachweis von Menschenopfern gedeutet werden.

Die heute als Natur- und Bodendenkmäler geschützten pommerschen Steinkreise sind in der Bevölkerung allgemein bekannt. Der vorliegende Beitrag untersucht, wie sie wahrgenommen und von verschiedenen Gesellschaftsgruppen gedeutet und genutzt werden. Dabei stellen die archäologischen Interpretationen und Vorgaben nur einen möglichen Zugang dar.

Aufgrund der enorm langen Nutzungsphase spielen die Steinkreise bei der Entwicklung individueller und kollektiver Identitäten eine Rolle. In diesem Zusammenhang ist an Begriffe wie Ideologie, Nostalgie, Tourismus, Abenteuer bis hin zu magischen Naturkräften zu denken, die sich in den unterschiedlichen Interpretationen, z.B. von Archäologen, den Anhängern der New-Age-Bewegung, von Neuheiden, Archäo-astronomen, Touristen, Anwohnern und den örtlichen bzw. regionalen Behörden, widerspiegeln. Der Beitrag zeigt, in welchen unterschiedlichen Bereichen Bedeutung entsteht, dennoch wird die Vielfalt möglicher Interpretationen von den meisten offiziellen Stellen bestritten und abgelehnt. Archäologen interessieren sich normalerweise nicht sehr für diese als nebensächlich oder exzentrisch eingestuften Auslegungen. Um hier einen Schritt weiter zu kommen, verweist der Beitrag auf das Dialogismus-Konzept von Michail Bachtin. Unterschiedliche Ansätze erweitern nicht nur unser Verständnis von der Bedeutung der Vergangenheit, sondern haben auch weit reichende Folgen für unser Konzept von Denkmalpflege. Die Archäologie sollte solche anderen Interpretationen nicht einfach abtun, sondern mit ihren Vertretern in einen Dialog treten.

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