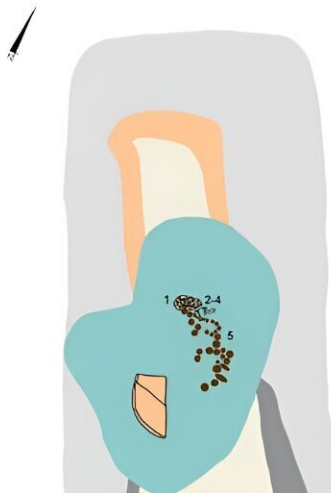


New analysis sheds light on mystery of turtle remains found in a Roman Iron Age grave in Poland

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Czarnówko, grave 963: 1 – pond turtle; 2–4 copper alloy brooches; 5–7 – necklace of amber beads and pendants. Credit: Drawing: M. Benysek, K. Skóra, photography: M. Górski, in *Prähistorische Zeitschrift*.

The remains of a European pond turtle found in an ancient grave in northern Poland could shed new light on the Wielbark culture, a Roman Iron Age culture associated with Gothic and other Germanic peoples who lived in the Barbaricum (that is, outside the Roman Empire) between the 1st and 5th century AD.

In a paper published in [*Praehistorische Zeitschrift*](#), Kalina Skóra of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology at the Polish Academy of Sciences analyzes the remains—discovered in 2010 in a cemetery in Czarnówko—in terms of the post-burial disturbance of the grave and in relation to other turtle finds from the central and eastern European Barbaricum.

The remains are those of a European pond turtle (*Emys orbicularis*), a species of medium-sized freshwater turtle, found today in much of Europe. In the Roman Period, northern Poland would have provided a favorable habitat and the find indicates the kind of climatic conditions experienced in the area at that time as pond turtles require dry, [warm summers](#) to breed.

Pond turtles are rarely found at cemeteries in the central and eastern European Barbaricum, and this one was the first to be unearthed at the Czarnówko site. The remains were found in a secondary (or 'robber') trench, a type of pit created when a grave is opened for a variety of reasons, such as the removal of grave goods from the deceased or widespread post-burial practices. At Czarnówko, about 90% of the inhumation graves have been disturbed.

While there is no evidence that turtles were eaten or were used in burial practices, it is known that they were sometimes kept as pets. Skóra notes that the turtle seemed to be near the skull of a child in a grave. It could have been placed there deliberately as part of the burial ritual or been moved there when the grave was disturbed. However, as secondary

trenches often stayed unfilled for some time, it's also possible that the turtle walked into the trench to hibernate or fell in accidentally and was unable to escape.

"The analysis in this article clearly indicates that in most cases pond turtles entered the burial pits at some time after burial," Skóra concludes.

"Certainly, the [pond](#) turtle should be removed from the list of animal gifts involved in the rituals of the Wielbark culture, unless clear evidence of this should emerge. The same conclusion applies to other graves from the central and eastern Barbaricum. It is hardly a coincidental association that in all archaeologically recorded cases, the turtle remains were found in graves opened some time after burial, that is with traces of post-funeral interference."

More information: Kalina Skóra, Opening graves and turtles. The pond turtle (*Emys orbicularis* L.) from the cemetery of the Wielbark Culture in Czarnówko and the question of post-funeral interferences in the past, *Praehistorische Zeitschrift* (2023). [DOI: 10.1515/pz-2023-2023](https://doi.org/10.1515/pz-2023-2023)

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