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Excavations of the Crypts of St. Dominic's Church in Płock as Part of the Project "At the Intersection of Faiths and Cultures – Research on the History of St. Dominic's Church in Płock" – Report

Badania krypt kościoła pw. Św. Dominika w Płocku w ramach projektu „At the intersection of faiths and cultures – research on history of St. Dominic's Church in Płock” – raport

Abstract: The post-Dominican St. Dominic's Church in Płock is one of the oldest sacral buildings in the city. Together with the adjacent monastery, it bears witness to the functioning of the so-called "Górki" community, comprising three denominations: Catholics, Protestants, and the Orthodox. The Romanesque complex was erected no later than the third decade of the thirteenth century, and it held significance on the map of medieval and modern Płock. The buildings themselves have undergone little change over the centuries, making the church and monastery locations with great research potential. Regrettably, the building has not yet been subjected to comprehensive archaeological research, preceded by a source query. Rectifying this situation was the primary goal of the project "At the Intersection of Faiths and Cultures – Research on the History of St. Dominic's Church in Płock" funded by the "Grants4NCUStudents" budget. As part

of it, a research team from the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń conducted preliminary archaeological research of the crypts under St. Dominic's Church in 2022. During a series of field trips, numerous boreholes were made in the crypt space as well as in the cellars under the east wing of the monastery. The backfill of the northern entrance hole was also cleared. The preliminary work facilitated further exploration of the strata undisturbed during the cleaning work carried out in the crypt in the twentieth century. The research led to the discovery of the remains of approximately 120 people, with the bones of 16 people deposited in an ossuary made of a wooden box. Artefacts of material culture were also recovered, which allowed to date the moment and sequence of changes occurring in the crypts. The results of the conducted research enabled the precise development of a further research strategy for the post-Dominican complex in Płock.

Keywords: crypts, Płock, monastery, ossuary, Dominican Order, protestants, orthodox

For almost eight centuries, St. Dominic's Church in Płock has been an integral element of the panorama of the Tumskie Hill. This church is accompanied by the monastery complex of the Dominican Order¹, established no later than the 1330s. Despite its early chronology and significant role in the development of the city, this building can be considered the least archaeologically recognised monument in Płock. A step towards changing this situation is taken by students and doctoral students from the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, under the supervision of Prof. UMK, Dr hab. Małgorzata Grupa, in the form of the project "At the Intersection of Faiths and Cultures – Research on the History of St. Dominic's Church in Płock" funded through the "Grants4NCUStudents" competition.

The history of the Dominican complex

From the beginning of its history, Płock was a centre whose development was stimulated by the presence of religious orders. By the end of the Middle Ages, there were four congregations in the town and its immediate vicinity: Benedictines, Norbertines, Dominican Sisters, and Dominicans. The latter had two convents in the city – the older one at St. Dominic's Church and the younger at the Church of St. Trinity. The foundation of the younger monastery should be associated with Princess Aleksandra, the wife of Duke Siemowit IV and sister of Władysław II Jagiełło. During the construction of the new monastery, located within the boundaries of the dynamically developing town of the Casimir III the Great location, the older monastery had been operating outside the city walls for 150 years (Skoczyński 2019: 70–71, 76).

Bringing the Dominicans to Płock is associated with the figure of Konrad I of Masovia. In the first half of the thirteenth century, these monks arrived in the then capital of Masovia. The prince allocated land for their seat on the outskirts of the city's first location and founded the first church, consecrated no later than 1234. This date is attested only in the chronicle of Jan Długosz, which is why historians have repeatedly questioned it (Skoczyński 2019: 40–41). Since the foundation act has been lost, it is assumed that the Preacher Brothers could have been brought to the city already in the preceding decade, potentially placing Płock among the convents on the basis of which the Polish Dominican Province was established in 1228. The theory proposed by Jerzy Kłoczowski suggests that Jan Długosz, when mentioning the Płock Dominicans, may have referred to the consecration of the church, and not the date of their arrival in the city or the initiation of the

1 The common name for the Order of Preachers, i.e. the Dominicans (Latino: *Ordo Fratrum Praedicatorum*).

construction of the temple (Kłoczowski 1956: 291–293). This theory is also related to the canonisation of St. Dominic Guzmán in 1234, the same year mentioned by the chronicler as the commencement of the activities of the Płock preachers. It is also worth considering the political context that could have influenced the bringing of monks to Masovia. In the 1330s, there was a conflict between Konrad I of Masovia and Henry the Bearded, making it an unfavourable time for funding new temples and monasteries in Płock, a city with an already extensive sacral network. Pursuing this line of thought, attention can be drawn to information in the papal bull of 1232 (the year of negotiations between the feuding dukes), where Pope Gregory IX urges the Czech Dominicans to support the Christianisation mission of Prussia by relocating to Masovia (Stawski 2008: 198–209).

The newly erected complex held significance on the map of Płock as early as 1237, as it is mentioned in the foundation act granted to Konrad I by Bishop Piotr:

[...] at the request of the aforementioned Duke Konrad, who, with the common consent and unanimous will of his sons, namely Bolesław, Duke of Masovia, and his younger ones, i.e. Siemowit and Siemomysł, granted the square between the Church of Wojśława and St. Dominic's Church with the old town as hereditary right to Płock guests and their successors for eternal possession, with this form of freedom and with our certification.

The same document states that the western border of the location is marked by graves *along the road leading to Czerwińsk*, which can be identified with the Dominican church cemetery (*Zbiór...* 1975: no. 9).

In architectural terms, St. Dominic's Church follows a typical mendicant layout, with a rectangular, single-space nave and an elongated, rectangularly closed presbytery (Bukowska 2011: 153; Polak 2011: 323–324; Szyma 2011: 283). The body of the temple itself seems to share many characteristics with the post-Dominican Church of St. James in Sandomierz. This resemblance can be considered another factor indicating that the temple in Płock is part of the group of the oldest Dominican foundations. As revealed by successive architectural research conducted by Andrzej Tomaszewski, Ryszard Cendrowski, and Artur F.K. Wołosz, the present temple extensively incorporates the walls of the medieval church (Skoczyński 2019: 152). To the south, the sacristy adjoins the presbytery, which is the oldest intact element of the original temple. The vault of this room is likely the oldest surviving cross-rib covering in Masovia, with its archaic form suggesting a very early dating (Pastewka 2018: 29). The original Romanesque layout is also related to the architectural elements discovered by R. Cendrowski, adjacent to the temple wall, which may be remnants of the Romanesque cloisters (Cendrowski 1992: 24–26).

The conclusions drawn from the described architectural inventories, clearly indicating a connection between the present body of the church and the original layout, seem to be in contradiction with the historical evidence of catastrophes that plagued the temple in its early years of operation. The original layout suffered devastation as early as 1243 during the Prussian invasion; however, all damages were quickly repaired. Almost 200 years later, in 1436, the church burnt down for the first time, which led to the reconstruction of the external façade and interior design of the temple, adapting the form to the prevailing trends of that time. Subsequent superiors of the convent continued with renovation efforts. Unfortunately, this chapter in the history of the church had a dramatic finale – in 1590, the church burnt down again. The reconstruction following this event imparted a modern character to the building, which the temple has retained to this day (Skoczyński 2019: 159).

The state of research

St. Dominic's Church is an example of a monument whose complicated ownership status and administrators unfavourable to scientific work effectively hindered the empirical understanding of the temple's history. In terms of architecture, the only systematic fieldwork on the church walls was carried out in 1968 by Andrzej Tomaszewski (1968: 2–6). A group of students, guided by him, measured the walls of the temple, analysed the masonry, and reconstructed the original windows and entrances on the northern façade based on wall reconstructions. It was also determined that originally the gable of the presbytery had three window openings (Pastewka 2018: 26). A re-analysis of the complex was carried out between 1984 and 1997 by A. Wołosz, who stated that the body of the temple was crowned with triangular gables from the west and east (Wołosz 1998: 106). In the 1990s, archaeological research led by R. Cendrowski in the monastery courtyard revealed remnants of arcades visible on the temple wall. During these excavations, several burials dating from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century were unearthed. The cemetery ceased to be used when cloisters adjacent to the southern wall of the church were constructed (Cendrowski 1992: 15–16, 24). Unfortunately, these were the only archaeological works conducted in the post-Dominican complex to date. The last phase of research on the history of the monastery buildings involved architectural investigations under the management of the Orthodox parish. The outcome of M. Pastewka's work in 2018 included detailed documentation of the monastery walls, along with a chronological analysis of the walls and the changes occurring within them (Pastewka 2018: 372–386).

Archaeological research in the Crypt of St. Dominic's Church

The archaeological works carried out in 2022 in the basement of St. Dominic's Church were part of the project "At the Intersection of Faiths and Cultures – Research on the History of St. Dominic's Church in Płock", implemented under the Grants4NCUSudents programme. As part of the initiative by a group of students from the Nicolaus Copernicus University, preliminary archaeological and archival work was planned to facilitate the identification of changes that occurred in the basement of the post-Dominican temple at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the buildings were transferred from the hands of the order of preachers to the Protestant community and the Orthodox. The discovery of burials from such a late period would provide insights into whether the current state of the crypt is the result of twentieth-century changes and cleanup. For this purpose, a number of boreholes and surveys were planned, along with the identification of sources in the archives of the Protestant parish and the Diocese of Płock. Unfortunately, the query preceding the entry of archaeologists into the crypt did not yield the expected results. The diocesan archives lacked sources that could clarify the history of the monastery's decline as Dominican churches were not visited by diocesan bishops. On the other hand, sources from the time of the partitions refer only to administrative matters, focusing on ownership issues and changes in the architecture of the monastery wings.

Archaeological research was conducted during three field trips. The first, which took place in January, focused on the initial exploration of the crypt space under the church. It extends from the choir to the top of the presbytery, spanning a length of 42 metres. Its width varies: at the entrances situated in the corners between the choir and the walls of the nave, it aligns with the width of the church walls (15 metres), narrowing to 6 metres in the first chamber and 4.7 metres in the second room and in the section beneath the presbytery. The unobstructed entrance to the crypt is located in the southern corner of the nave.

During the one-day work, the condition of the crypts was documented photographically (Fig. 1, Fig. 2.) and drawn, the necessary measurements were taken, and the loose historical and bone materials resting on the threshing floor surface were inventoried. In the proximity of the stairs leading to the crypt, floor tiles from the chancel of the church were stored. Along the northern wall, remnants of coffins were found, along with remains of window joinery of undetermined origin. The second entrance hole and the first, counting from the west, ventilation hole were covered with earth mixed with rubble. Along the southern walls of the crypt, small mounds of loose earth were piled, under which lay individual bones that had been cleared away in the previous decade by the parish administrator.



Fig. 1. Part of the crypt under the presbytery – general view (photograph by J. Gawroński).



Fig. 2. Southern entrance to the crypt (photograph by J. Gawroński).



Fig. 3. Layers of the backfill during exploration: a – after uncovering layers of rubble with the remains of building material, b – during further exploration (photograph by K. Jasiak).

In the initial phase of the work, a number of test boreholes were made along the axis line of the central nave and chancel. The layers revealed during drilling exhibited an unexpected form – they had a very compact, debris-free structure. Due to the challenges encountered during exploration, drilling was halted after reaching a depth of 60 cm. In the south-western corners of the two segments of the under-aisle part of the crypt, two 1 x 1 m survey excavations were opened. The objective was to determine the depth of the crypt's foundation. They reach only 30 cm into the threshing floor, which made archaeologists examining the underground space question whether the layers of the crypt, despite a significant amount of deposited soil, might be devoid of historical materials.

During the next research trip in February, the focus was on exploring the backfill in the northern entrance to the crypt. Measured from the north wall of the crypt, it was 6.5 metres long and 2.6 metres wide. From a length of 2 metres, it reached the vault of the crypt, indicating that the total volume of the embankment was approximately 25 m³. Due to the unique nature of the site and the material constituting the heap, its examination was a time-consuming process. Over five days of work, all rubble and sand deposits were removed. Simultaneously, all surplus materials, along with human and animal bones, were inventoried. The profile of the heap was documented continuously, leading to the conclusion that it was intentionally created during cleaning or renovation works (Fig. 3). After cleaning the entrance and fully removing the backfill, it was observed that the exposed surface consisted of undisturbed strata of a different nature than the entire crypt floor. This indicated the necessity for further exploration in this area.



Fig. 4. Examples of relics obtained during the research: a – soles of children's shoes, b – scapular relics, c – brass school button – “Provincial School” (as the current Stanisław Małachowski High School was called in the years 1815–1837), d – belt buckle (photograph by M. Dobek).

The nature of the movable finds from the layers of the heap allows for an approximate determination of the time when the backfill of the entrance hole was created in the 1950s and 1960s. This conclusion was made possible by the discovery of coins from the times of the Polish People's Republic. During the exploration, human remains belonging to over a hundred individuals were found, along with artefacts such as leather goods, a few metal artefacts, fragments of fabrics (Fig. 4), Gothic bricks, and remnants of coffins. The historical material was properly secured: all remnants of floor bricks and fittings were stored, while other movable artefacts were transported to the Laboratory of Documentation, Conservation and Gathering of Archaeological Artefacts at the Institute of Archaeology of the Nicolaus Copernicus University.

During the February visit, a number of survey boreholes were made in the basement under the east wing of the monastery. Analysis revealed that the secondary strata extended more than 70 cm into the threshing floor, which contradicts the height of the crypt under the church and prompted archaeologists to further explore the strata located in the vaults under the presbytery of the temple. Previous work in church crypts in Poland has shown that the underground space has always been at least 2 metres high (Grupa et al. 2015: 13; Grupa 2018: 33), allowing for trouble-free funeral ceremonies. For instance, research in the crypts of the Church of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross in Łuków revealed that the original usable level of the crypt was 1 metre below the contemporary threshing floor. However, by 2019, the height of the crypt was only 1.2 metres (Michalik et al. 2020: 234).

Simultaneously with the work conducted at the entrance to the crypt, a new survey excavation was made under the presbytery, which was planned perpendicular to its walls, covering the entire width of the crypt.

In the first week of May 2022, the next stage of work commenced. This time, the plan was to explore the strata discovered under the explored backfill of the northern entrance to the crypt (Fig. 5). The structure of the strata allowed for a systematic exploration. It was composed of grey-black sand with a small admixture of fine brick rubble. After initial cleaning of the surface, an object measuring 1.30 x 1.00 metres became distinctly visible. It was filled with dark brown earth mixed with a significant amount of bone material (Fig. 6a, 6b). At a depth of 1 metre, the outline of a chest was uncovered. The wood from which the chest was made was in poor condition. However, it became possible to take samples for species analysis, revealing that the structure was made of softwood boards, nailed together with small iron nails. After removing the deposits and excavating the bone remains, the negative of the chest's boards remained clearly visible, enabling the reconstruction of the dimensions of its bottom. The inventory of human bones indicated that the remains of 16 people were deposited in the chest. This object is a typical example of a small ossuary, the creation of which can be associated with



Fig. 5. The cleaned northern entrance hole with a visible excavation during exploration (photograph by M. Dobek).

changes and cleaning carried out in the burial crypt or the church cemetery. Similar deposits resulting from this type of work were found, for instance, in the crypts of the Church of St. Nicholas in Gnień (Grupa et al. 2015: 13–17, 149–158; Kozłowski, Grupa 2019: 35–43) and in Piaseczno (Dudziński et al. 2020: 246–247). The outline of the pit in which the chest was placed extends under the foundation of the western wall of the crypt. This suggests that the ossuary predates the current walls, implying that these do not belong to the original structure of the crypt.

Simultaneously with the work on the entrance hole, the exploration of the crypt floor in the section under the presbytery continued. However, the excavation of the trench was stopped after reaching a depth of 40 cm due to the extremely compact nature of the strata, making further excavation impossible.

At that time, it was also decided to investigate whether there were other rooms behind the walls of the underground structure. Witness accounts suggested the existence of a burial space under the floor of the sacristy. It was

therefore decided to drill in the southern wall of the crypt, in the section under the presbytery. However, boreholes reaching 60 cm into the wall did not reveal the presence of any voids or additional walls.

At the same time, analyses of the acquired bone material were carried out (Fig. 7). The discovered bones were inventoried and categorised based on their structure. Due to the limited scope and budget of the work, it was decided to handle this material in two ways: the remains without visible changes were counted and catalogued. Meanwhile, the remains exhibiting signs of changes resulting from pathological and developmental disorders were transported to the Institute of Archaeology of the Nicolaus Copernicus University for further analysis.

The collection of acquired artefacts consists mainly of leather products (elements of leather shoes, fragments of belts and sheaths) and textiles (remains of a scapular, fragments of textile shoes), along with a few devotional items and elements of temple equipment. The secured and analysed historical material forms a collection that merits discussion in a separate scientific publication.



Fig. 6. Excavation during exploration: a – outline of an ossuary filled with human remains; b – negative of the chest (photograph by M. Dobek).



Fig. 7. Inventory of bone remains at the site (photograph by M. Dobek).

Summary and research postulates

The works conducted in 2022 successfully achieved the primary objectives of the project “At the Intersection of Faiths and Cultures – Research on the History of St. Dominic’s Church in Płock”. Initial assessment of changes and the current state of preservation of the crypts was made. It was determined that the underground walls under the church floor have been reconstructed, with their dating significantly deviating from the chronology of the temple walls, as evidenced not only by their structure and unusually low height, but also by an object discovered in the layers of the threshing floor resembling an ossuary. The gable wall on the side of the presbytery was identified as the oldest and the only one chronologically consistent with the body of the church. Analyses conducted during the preservation of clothing items (fabrics and leather goods) led to the conclusion that the most recent burials could date back to the nineteenth century, suggesting the possibility of individuals of Protestant faith being interred in the crypt. It should be noted, however, that this is hypothesis assumes that the material constituting the backfill of the crypt entrance is entirely from it and not, for example, debris deposited during the cleaning of the cemetery and the church surroundings. As a result of the work, the second, northern descent to the crypt was cleared, and, upon uncovering the entrance slab located under the floor, it will be able to serve

its utility function again. The unusually hard-compacted threshing floor requires further investigation. Based on a comparison of its height with the height of the barren land in the ossuary object and the depth of layers in the vaults under the east wing, it can be argued that these layers were deposited secondarily and did not constitute the original threshing floor of the crypt.

Based on the conducted work, the following scheme for further research is proposed:

- The need to continue the study of the crypt in order to identify the function of the threshing floor layers, as well as to determine whether there are older usable layers beneath them;
- Opening of excavations in areas offering significant cognitive potential: in the vicinity of the northern entrance opening and along the eastern gable wall of the presbytery;
- Verification of the existence of the crypt under the sacristy;
- Archaeological exploration of the underground space under the western wing of the monastery complex;
- Performing detailed micro- and macroscopic architectural studies of the crypt, determining the chronology of the walls and any redevelopment that has occurred;
- Verification of the findings of the research conducted in the 1990s by R. Cendrowski in the courtyard of the monastery, as well as further exploration of the space within the monastery courtyard.

Comprehensive architectural research of the entire post-Dominican complex is also key to discovering the history of the changes taking place in the "Górki" area.

The work conducted as part of the project "At the Intersection of Faiths and Cultures – Research on the History of St. Dominic's Church in Płock" underscores the importance of an interdisciplinary approach in the context of church research. It is only by combining archaeological and architectural research, along with a source query, that we can fully harness the research potential latent in structures akin to St. Dominic's Church in Płock.

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Streszczenie

Podominański kościół pw. św. Dominika w Płocku to jeden z najstarszych obiektów sakralnych miasta. Wraz z przylegającym do niego klasztorem stanowi świadectwo funkcjonowania na obszarze tzw. „Górek” społeczności trzech wyznań: katolików, protestantów i wiernych prawosławnych. Romański kompleks wzniesiony został najpóźniej

w trzeciej dekadzie XIII w. i stanowił istotny punkt na mapie średniowiecznego i nowożytnego Płocka. Sama zabudowa ulegała na przestrzeni wieków niewielkim zmianom, stąd też kościół i klasztor to miejsca o dużym potencjale badawczym. Niestety, dotychczas obiekt nie doczekał się kompleksowych badań archeologicznych, poprzedzonych kwerendą źródłową. Zmiana takiego stanu rzeczy stanowiła główne założenie projektu „At the intersection of faiths and cultures – research on history of St. Dominic's Church in Płock”, finansowanego z budżetu „Grants4NCUStudents”. W ramach niego zespół badawczy z toruńskiego UMK przeprowadził w 2022 r. wstępne badania archeologiczne krypt pod kościołem św. Dominika. Podczas cyklu wyjazdów terenowych wykonano szereg odwiertów w przestrzeni krypty, a także w piwnicach pod wschodnim skrzydłem klasztornym. Oczyszczono także zasypisko północnego otworu wejściowego. Prace wstępne umożliwiły prowadzenie dalszej eksploracji nawarstwień nienaruszonych podczas prac porządkowych mających miejsce w krypcie w XX w. Podczas trwania badań odkryto łącznie szczątki ok. 120 osób, z czego kości 16 osób zdeponowano w ossuarium wykonanym w drewnianej skrzyni. Pozyskano również zabytki kultury materialnej, które pozwoliły na wydatowanie momentu i kolejności zmian zachodzących w kryptach. Rezultaty prowadzonych badań umożliwiły precyzyjne opracowanie dalszej strategii badawczej dla płockiego kompleksu poddominikańskiego.

Słowa kluczowe: krypty, Płock, klasztor, ossuarium, dominikanie, protestanci, prawosławni

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