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## The Saint Benedict Cross or the Saint Benedict Medal Based on a Find from Archaeological Research in Gniew (Pomerania Province)

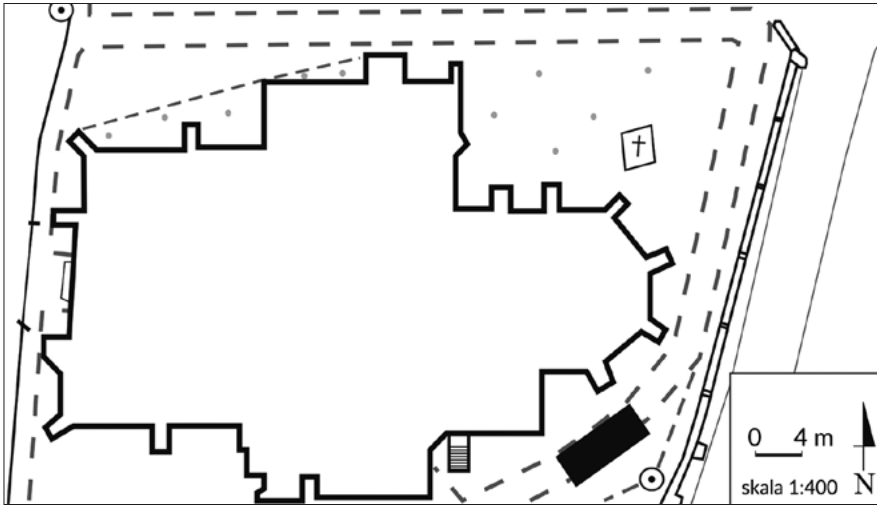
### Preliminary issues

In 2015, during archaeological research conducted around the church in Gniew (Pomerania Province), a small fragment of a metal plate was found. After it was cleaned as part of restoration it turned out to be a cross. The excavation was located outside, near the wall of the chancel of the Church of St. Nicholas (Fig. 1). The research conducted confirmed the conclusions drawn in previous years, i.e. that the church grounds had been used as a graveyard. The fact that the graveyard had been used for a long time was proved by numerous burials, overlapping grave pits and ossuaries<sup>1</sup>.

Devotional items have been long connected with the Christian tradition. They include crucifixes, medals, scapulars, and prayer ropes. The fact that they are found during excavations in churches and graveyards may indicate that they were highly popular in the Late Middle Ages and the Modern Era. We know of crucifixes and other devotional items found during archaeological research conducted in churches and graveyards in such places as: Maniowy in Podhale (Chudzińska 1998), Lubiąż (Białobłocki 1991/1992: 161–185), Trzemeszno (Wiewióra 1995: 433–442), Toruń (Grupa 2005: 20–21; Kwiatkowski 2005: 31–39; Stawarz 2014: 20), Strzelno (Sulkowska-Tuszyńska 2006), Pułtusk (Kołyżsko 2007:

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1 Ossuaries are places where human remains were gathered after earlier burials in the graveyard and the church had been emptied (Grupa et al. 2015b: 16–18; Kozłowski, Grupa 2019: 38–49).



**Fig. 1.** Gniew; the layout of the Church of St. Nicholas, with the location of excavation 3/15 (marked with a black rectangle) (prepared by J. Michalik, the layout as published in: Grupa et al. 2015b: Fig. 2).

65–111), Lublin (Niedźwiadek et al. 2015: 71–82), Płonkovo (Grupa et al. 2015a: 40, 46), Sandomierz (Rostkowska 1996: 405–414), Gliwice (Furmanek, Michnik 2004: 399–420), Warsaw (Dąbrowska 2012: 331–354), Wrocław (Pankiewicz, Witkowski 2012: 49–68; Wojcieszak 2012: 58–103), Częstochowa (Młodkowska-Przepiórowska 2018: 207–245), Szczuczyn (Dudziński et al. 2015: 56–57, 74–75; 2017: 50, 52, 62), and, in this particular case, Gniew (Niedźwiadek et al. 2015: 98; Grupa, Warecka 2017: 31–42; Michalik 2018: 60–67; Pawikowski 2018: 69–75).

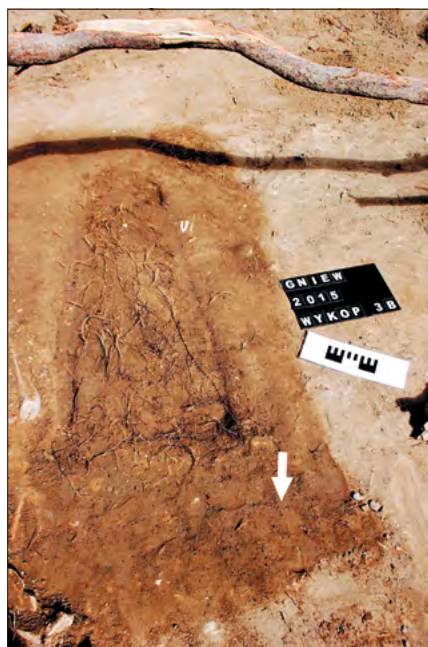
The aim of the work was to determine the state of research into the symbolism of St. Benedict and then to describe it on an example of the cross found in Gniew. Thus, the paper discusses issues relating to nomenclature, symbolism, full forms of abbreviations, the life of Saint Benedict of Nursia, and his cult after his death. One of the most important works on the Saint Benedict medal is the work from 1862 by Prosper Guèranger<sup>2</sup>, an abbot of Solesmes, also called the restorer of the French Benedictines. This work is frequently cited in descriptions of devotional objects with symbols of Saint Benedict, just like the cross from Gniew.

Metal devotional objects, most of which were medals or crosses, were typically worn on textile ribbons or strings around the neck. When worn like that, they were not exposed to others, probably constituting a private sphere of piety. They

2 The work mentioned is *Essai Sur L'origine, La Signification Et Les Privilèges De La Médaille Ou Croix De St Benoit* published in Poitiers in 1862.

were also sewn on to scapulars (Grupa et al. 2015b: 134; Niedźwiadek et al. 2015: 102) or worn threaded on a belt<sup>3</sup>, which can sometimes be seen in iconographic representations from the Late Middle Ages and the Modern Era (Pisarczyk 1979: 1226; Kołyszko 2013: 236).

### The archaeological context



**Fig. 2.** Gniew, excavation 3/15; an outline of an excavation with a child's coffin, with the place where the cross was found marked with an arrow (photograph by D. Grupa).

The cross found in the excavation no. 3/2015 at a depth of approx. 1 m, was located in a layer of ground being a backfill of a cut made over a child's coffin (Fig. 2). In this case, it can be presumed that gravediggers digging a hole for the coffin disturbed and exposed the remains of earlier burials, which is why the cross was found in a heap of ground used to backfill the grave. Approx. 20 cm above the cross there was a fragment of a grave garland which could come from the same grave as the cross. Moreover, small fragments of human bones were found in the ground that had covered the child's coffin. Possibly, gravediggers later exhumed burials from that place (most probably because of the limited space in the graveyard) and moved the bones to one of the ossuaries located in the graveyard, perhaps the nearest one, at the eastern wall of the church chancel (Kozłowski, Grupa 2019: 46).

### The state of preservation of the artefact

The cross has not been preserved whole (Fig. 3, 4). It is difficult to determine whether the missing loop and two fragments of the horizontal bar were damaged when it was used by its owner or as a result of corrosion taking place after it had been deposited in the ground. The cross is 2.4 cm long, with the remaining part

3 Monks would sometimes attach them to a rope, a rosary or a chaplet on a belt (*Medalik...* 2017: 43).



**Fig. 3.** Gniezno; the obverse of the cross of St. Benedict (photograph and prepared by J. Michalik).



**Fig. 4.** Budapest; a cross devoted to St. Ulrich (*Treasures...* 2017: 164).

of the loop not exceeding 0.2 cm. In width, the preserved part is approx. 2.5 cm (Fig. 3, 4). Despite damage to the cross, it was possible to identify it, however, some of the letters could not be read as they had been worn away or because large fragments of the plate were missing.

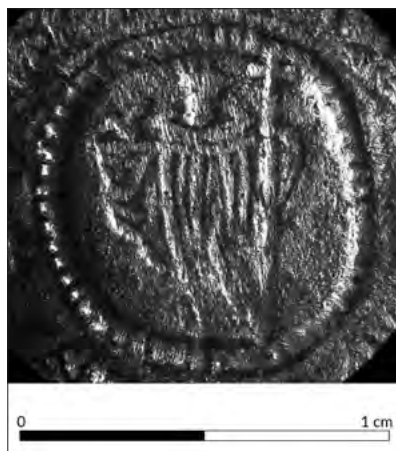
### Nomenclature problems

It is puzzling that the plate found in excavation 3/15 in Gniezno greatly resembles both a cross and a medal (in the shape of a dodecagon). Identical devotional items are called by Barbara Chudzińska medals and crosses interchangeably (Chudzińska 1998: 30, Table VI; 2008: 288), however, she also advances a thesis that these could be pendants in the shape of a knight's cross (Chudzińska 1998: 30). On the other hand Kornel Białobłocki treats them as crosses (which, considering their shape, seems logical), and this is why this term will be used in this paper.

In the literature, it is assumed that characteristic crosses with arms of equal length can only be associated with the figure of Saint Benedict and his prayer, and with the blessing of Saint Zacharias. However, a cross of the same shape found in Budapest changes the perception of this artefact. It was identified as the cross of Saint Ulrich (Fig. 5). It differs from the cross of Saint Benedict in iconography and inscriptions. Its main part is probably a representation of a scene from the life of Saint Ulrich, with inscriptions concerning the saint underneath (*Treasures...* 2017: 164, Cat. no. 444). Perhaps its owner went on a pilgrimage to Augsburg and lost it on the way or a Budapest citizen had obtained and lost it



**Fig. 5.** Gniew; the reverse of the cross of St. Benedict (prepared by J. Michalik).



**Fig. 6.** Gniew; a detail from the reverse of the cross of St. Benedict (photograph by J. Michalik).

earlier. According to B. Chudzińska, the cross of Saint Benedict is derived from the cross of Saint Ulrich. It refers to a knight's cross with arms of equal length that widen at the end<sup>4</sup> (Chudzińska 1998: 30).

### Full forms of abbreviations and the symbolism of the cross

The obverse of the cross found in Gniew depicts two knight's crosses, one inscribed within the other (Fig. 4). Between them, there are letters, out of which we can read: '[CSP]B [CS]SML NDMD', which will be explained later. Firstly, we should consider the symbolism of the Saint Benedict Cross.

Apart from the obvious symbolism of the cross in Christianity, it also played an important role in the life of Saint Benedict. According to *Dialogues* by Saint Gregory the Great,

Taking counsel together, they [monks at Vicovaro] agreed to poison his wine: which being done, and the glass wherein that wine was, according to the custom, offered to the Abbot to bless, he, putting forth his hand, made the sign of the cross, and straightway the glass, that was held far off, broke in pieces, as though the sign of the cross had been a stone thrown against it.

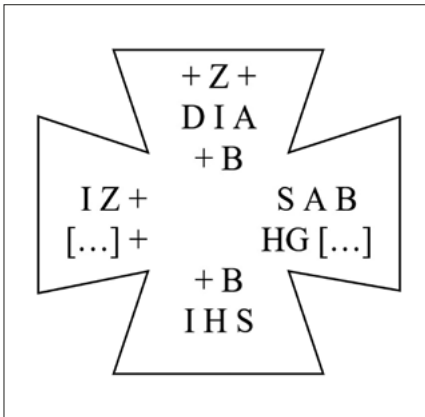
4 In the case of the cross from Budapest it is difficult to determine details as authors, apart from naming the saint and publishing a photograph of the artefact, do not provide any further information about it, and there were a few saints carrying that name in the Middle Ages.

This is the story most frequently quoted when describing the Saint Benedict Cross as one of its origin stories (Guèranger 1869: 7–8; Grzegorz Wielki 2000: 136; Hiżycki 2011: 14–15).

Knowing one of the motives for using the cross to create items devoted to Saint Benedict, one can move on to reading the letters inscribed on it. As it was already noted, these were the first letters of words of a popular prayer, proving the significance of the cross in Christianity, which was to protect against evil human deeds provoked by Satan. The meaning of the prayer and its translation into Polish can be found both in the works of Paweł Szczaniecki (2016) and of K. Białobłocki (1991/1992), which Szczaniecki used as his source. However, one of the oldest translations is the one by Prosper Guèranger (1869: 42–44) and this will be used in the following discussion.

The prayer should be read starting with letters placed between the cross arms: [C(rux) s(ancti) P(atris)] B(enedicti) – the Cross of Holy Father Benedict. Then, in the vertical line of the cross: [C(rux) s(akra)] s(it) M(ihi) L(ux) – Let the Holy Cross be my light. And in the horizontal line: N(on) D(raco) s(it) M(ihi) D(ux) – May the dragon never be my overlord! The second line can be seen on the rim of the cross, starting with the monogram of Christ: [IHS (the monogram of Christ) v(ade) R(etro) s(atana), N(unquam) s(uade) M(ihi) v(ana) s(unt) M(ala) Q(uae) L(ibas), I(pse) v(enena) B(ibas)] – Begone, Satan! Never tempt me with your vanities! What you offer me is evil. Drink your poisons yourself (Guèranger 1869: 42–44).

P. Guèranger (1869) suggests that these words were spoken by Saint Benedict – the first line during the bodily temptation he felt, which he overcame with



**Fig. 7.** Gniew; the arrangement of letters of the blessing of St. Zacharias on the cross (prepared by J. Michalik).



**Fig. 8.** A cholera cross put up in Sztum (Pomeranian Voivodeship, Poland) as protection against SARS-CoV-2 (photograph by A. Michalik).



the sign of the cross<sup>5</sup>. The second line concerns the already mentioned story when he was given poison in a glass which he destroyed by making the sign of the cross over it.

On the reverse of the medal, there is only one knight's cross; in the middle of it there is a pearl surround, with the image of Saint Benedict inside (Fig. 4). The outline of the figure has been worn away but one can see a figure with a crozier in the left hand and an indistinct item in the other hand, probably a stick<sup>6</sup> (Fig. 6). On the arms of the cross, there are letters forming the blessing of Saint Zacharias (Fig. 7).

The blessing of Saint Zacharias is closely related to the cross of Caravaca, also called a cholera cross, a plague cross, or the cross of St. Zacharias. Pope Zacharias was a Benedictine monk. In 752, he published the life of Saint Benedict written in Greek by Gregory the Great (Szczeniecki 2016: 54). Initially, abbreviations of the blessing of Saint Zacharias were placed on a long copper cross that was to protect against the cholera epidemic<sup>7</sup> and other plagues (Szczeniecki 2016: 54; Pawikowski 2018: 71).

The alleged author of the Polish translation of the blessing of Saint Zacharias was Fr Roman (Amand) Zawadzki from Tyniec, and the translation consisted in adjusting Polish words to Latin letters from the cross (Szczeniecki 2016: 64–65). In the paper, the prayer has been considerably shortened, but the whole text in Polish is quoted by P. Szczeniecki in *Szkic o pochodzeniu i łaskach medalika albo krzyża św. Benedykta* (2016).

The blessing of Zacharias (as written in the original) (Szczeniecki 2016: 65–71) reads as follows:

+ (Crux – Krzyżu Chrystusów zbaw mię. / O Cross of Christ, save me.);

Z(elus – Żarliwość domu twego niech mię uwolni. / May zeal for your house free me.);

+ (Crux – Krzyż zwycięża, krzyż panuje, krzyż rozkazuje [...] / The Cross conquers; the Cross reigns; the Cross rules [...]);

D(eus – Dajże to [...] Boże mój, żebym ja i to miejsce było uwolnione od powietrza tego. / God, my God, drive this plague away from me, and from this place, and free me.);

5 The story was already described by Gregory the Great in his *Dialogues*, which concerned the events from the sixth century (Grzegorz Wielki 2000: 135).

6 According to the legend of Saint Benedict, he used the stick to chase away the devil who interrupted the prayer of a monk (Seibert 2007: 47).

7 It is worth mentioning a cross of Caravaca drawn in ink on paper, found in the collection of the Jagiellonian Library (Karawaka, ref. no. I. 10. 997–189/1). It can be inferred that it was to be used as a protection amulet (the drawing was signed “contra pestem, contra praestigia”, which can be translated as “against the plague, against sorcery” (Szczeniecki 2016: 64), according to P. Szczeniecki, crosses and medals served the same function.

I(n manus – Jezu [...] w ręce Twoje polecam ducha mego, serce i ciało moje. / Jesus [...] / In your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit, my heart, and my body.);

A(nte – Anizeli stworzył Bóg niebo i ziemię [...] On mocny jest wybawić mię od powietrza tego. / Before heaven and earth God was; and God is able to liberate me from this plague.);

+ (Crux – Krzyż Chrystusów mocny jest odpędzić zarazy, powietrza z miejsca tego i od ciała mego. / The Cross of Christ will expel the plague from this place and from my body.);

B(onum – Barzo jest rzecz dobra, oczekiwać w milczeniu ratunku Boskiego, aby odpędził zarazę ode mnie nędznego. / It is good to wait for the help of God in silence, that he may drive away this plague from me.);

I(nclinabo – Ja naklonię serce moje do usprawiedliwienia Twojego [...] / I will incline my heart to performing your just deeds [...]);

Z(elavi – Z wielką żarliwością zapaliłem się nieubożne [...] w Tobie samym ufność miałem. / I had zeal on occasion of the wicked [...] I have hoped in you.);

+ (Crux – Krzyż Chrystusów odpędza czartów i powietrze zepsowane niech wyżenie. / The Cross of Christ puts demons to flight; corrupt air; and drives away the plague.);

S(alus – Słusznie, zbawieniem twoim sam jestem, [...] wzywaj Mnie, Ja wysłucham i cię i wybawię od powietrza tego. / I am your Salvation [...] cry out to me, and I will hear you, and I will liberate you from this plague.);

A(byssus – Azaś przepaść przepaści nie wzywa i w szumie głosu Twego odpędziłeś czarty i od zarazy powietrza uwolniłeś mię. / Abyss calls to abyss, and you have expelled demons by your voice; liberate me from this plague.);

B(eatus – Błogosławiony mąż, który ufa w Panu i nie obrócił oczu w próżność [...] / Blessed the man who hopes in the Lord, and does not look upon vanities [...]);

+ (Crux – Krzyż Chrystusów [...] niech odpędzi z miejsca tego czarta i zepsowane powietrze i zarazę od ciała mego. / May the Cross of Christ [...] expel from this place the demon, and corrupt air, and plague from my body.);

Z(elus – Żarliwość czci Boskiej strawiła mię pierwej [...] wybaw mię od tej zarazy powietrza złego. / May zeal for the honour of God convert me before I die [...] save me from this plague.);

+ (Crucis – Krzyża świętego znak uwolni [...] od powietrza tych, którzy Mu ufają. / May sign of the Cross free [...] those who trust in him from the plague.);

H(aeccine – Hej! Także to Panu oddajecie ludzie głupi i bezrozumni? [...] którzy w Nim ufają nie będą zawstydzeni. / Will this foolish people return to the Lord? [...] for whoever trusts in him will not be confounded.);

G(utturi – Gardłu memu i do ust moich przyschnie język, jeżeli Cię wielbić nie będę [...] Zbaw mię, Boże mój, z zarazy tej powietrza [...] / If I will not praise you, let my tongue stick to my throat and to my jaws [...] liberate me and this place, O God, from this plague [...]);

F(actae – Firmament ziemski wszystek pokryty był ciemnością podczas śmierci Twojej, Panie, Boże mój. [...] Niechaj ustąpi powietrze zaraźliwe ode mnie do ciemności zewnętrznych.



/ At your death, O Lord, darkness fell over the whole earth. [...] may the corrupt air depart from me into the outer darkness.);

+ (Crux – Krzyżu Chrystusów, broń nas i odpędź zarazę powietrza z miejsca tego [...] / Defend us, O Cross of Christ, and expel from this place the plague [...]);

B(eatus – Błogosławion, który nie obrócił oczu swoich na marności, dnia złego wybawi go Pan. Panie mój, ufalem Tobie, uwolnij mię od tej zarazy powietrza. / Blessed is he who does not look upon vanities, and false extravagances; on the day of evil the Lord will free him. Lord, I have trusted in you; free me from this plague.);

F(actus – Fortecą stałeś się, Boże, bom w Tobie położył nadzieję moje. Uwolnij mię od tej zarazy powietrza. / God has become my refuge; because I have trusted in you, free me from this plague);

R(espice – Racz wejrzyć na mię, Panie, Boże [...] od tej zarazy powietrza racz mię uwolnić. / Look upon me, O Lord my God [...] free me from this plague.);

S(alus – Stałeś się, Panie, Zbawieniem moim. Uzdrów mię, a będę uzdrowień, zbaw mię, a będę zbawion. / You are my Salvation: heal me, and I will be healed; save me, and I will be saved.);

A(men.);

IHS (the monogram of Christ);

MRA (the Marian monogram).

The blessing was closely related to the protection against cholera, which in the Modern Era wreaked havoc not only in Europe but also on other continents. The cholera epidemic left its mark on many aspects of the everyday life including devotional items, which was reflected by, among others, the appearance of crosses devoted to protection against the epidemic (e.g. cholera crosses – crosses of Caravaca), and prayers frequently inscribed on devotional items.

However, devotional items worn for protection against infection were used not only in the case of cholera. Between the Middle Ages and the nineteenth century there were also other diseases, such as pox, flu, typhoid fever, spotted fever, dysentery, and the most dangerous one – the plague. Epidemics were frequently described as bad (foul) air<sup>8</sup>, which later made it difficult to identify the specific disease. Frequent epidemics in modern Europe resulted in considerable demographic, economic, and cultural changes. Thus, the everyday social life changed dramatically because of epidemics (Pękacka-Falkowska 2009: 6).

In many cases, the reasons for epidemics and the routes of transmission to new victims were not known. People tried all kinds of treatment, however, most of them were ineffective on account of a severe and rapid course of the disease ending in

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8 It was believed that foul air could get inside the body through skin pores (Grupa, Grupa, Nowak 2018: 112).

death. Doctors at the time were helpless in the face of epidemics taking a heavier and heavier toll (Zajączkowski 2017: 27). As the scientific methods of treatment were ineffective, both those infected and healthy tried to protect themselves by whatever means available, including supernatural items such as magical amulets, health stones, and pomanders with herbs. What mattered to Catholics in these difficult moments was the intercession of the saints, which was reflected in wearing devotional items with their images and prayers (Pękacka-Falkowska 2009: 106–107).

The plague became a myth, appearing out of nowhere, meting out sentences and punishments, and then disappearing as soon as it appeared. This was frequently accompanied by an idealised image of the world of old, compared with the present, often apocalyptic, state of affairs (Sznajderman 2020: 22). Another theory formulated at the time equated the epidemics with the punishment imposed by God, who sent the disease to places inhabited by sinners, with the only medicines being contrition, prayer, and atonement (Pękacka-Falkowska 2009: 17). However, this does not only refer to the Church as in folk tales and myths epidemics are also sent as punishment for shedding the blood of a family member, stealing relics from the church or desecrating a grave. As was aptly noted by Monika Sznajderman: *the plague has always been a sanction for the violation of the national, religious, or tribal law* (Sznajderman 2020: 24).

The fear of a deadly disease gave rise to social unrest. According to a conspiracy theory spreading among people, the disease was brought about on purpose to destroy lower social classes as they suffered the most (Zajączkowski 2017: 27). On other occasions, the outbreak of the epidemic was blamed on the poor, the underclass or people of different religions (usually Jews), skin colour or professions connected with unpleasant smells (e.g. tanners, furriers, dyers) (Pękacka-Falkowska 2009: 6; Sznajderman 2020: 30). Even though during each epidemic people felt the need to find a scapegoat, the disease attacked everyone alike, regardless of their social class, religion and wealth (Szczeniecki 2016: 71). Over centuries, for this reason and because of general fear, many rebellions and protests occurred, and in France this was one of the reasons behind the revolution (Zajączkowski 2017: 27). In some cases, cities struck by epidemics descended into chaos. The accompanying sense of impunity led to a number of burglaries, thefts, and trade in the property of the epidemic's victims, mostly clothes and bedlinen. Punishments for such offences were severe (Pękacka-Falkowska 2009: 66–67; Karpiński 2014: 375). People felt completely defenceless, which is why they resorted to anything that could ease their suffering, including prayers of intercession to saints depicted on medals and crosses – Saint Benedict, Saint Ulrich – and on crosses of Caravaca (Szczeniecki 2016: 71).

It is worth noting some positive effects of prayers to saints for protection or the relieving of symptoms. In his work *O cholery indyjskiej epidemicznej* (*On the*

*Indian epidemic cholera*) of 1831, Wilhelm Malcz lists factors that increased the probability of contracting cholera including failure to satisfy the basic needs, overcrowded living conditions, malnutrition, overwork as well as stress and fear of being ill (Malcz 1831: 66–70). Pinning one's hopes on being protected against the disease by devotional items calmed the faithful down, at the same time seemingly slowing down or eliminating one of the main (as was thought at the time) factors that could 'attract' cholera.

Even today it is important to ensure the sense of security in the case of diseases and epidemics. Devotional items are still manufactured and epidemic crosses are still erected to protect communities against fatal diseases (e.g. infection with 2019-nCoV virus) and other inconveniences (Fig. 8).

Most probably because of the already mentioned faith in the protective properties of prayers on crosses and medals (treated as a kind of amulets) of Saint Benedict and the blessing of Saint Zacharias, at the end of the seventeenth century these two forms merged, and so the medal/cross included letters from the prayer of Saint Benedict on one side, and the prayer of Saint Zacharias on the other (Szczeniecki 2016: 55). It is curious that the figure of Saint Benedict was placed on the side of the cross with the blessing of pope Zacharias. P. Guèranger criticised such medals:

Thus, you need to be careful about some of the medals [of Saint Benedict] struck in Germany, [...] on which an amulet based on the so-called medal of Saint Zacharias is placed. This medal has nothing to do with the Saint Benedict Medal (Guèranger 1869: 172–173).

The main accusation was lack of the image of Saint Benedict on the side with letters being the shortened form of his prayer. He also criticised the use of letters in the blessing as they do not correspond with individual words but whole sentences, which he believed made the whole cross incoherent (Guèranger 1869: 173). According to the source indicated, devotional items were manufactured in different places of Europe and modified in each of the regions individually.

### **The life and the cult of Saint Benedict**

Having learnt the symbolism of the medal of Saint Benedict, we should now consider it from the perspective of the life of the saint. There are two basic sources related to Saint Benedict: his life written by Gregory the Great and *The Rule* (Grzegorz Wielki 2000; Hiżycki 2011: 8). *The Rule* was known in Poland from the eighteenth century from the manuscript kept in the Cistercian abbey in Kamieniec Ząbkowicki, and today it can be found in the Wrocław University Library (Szczeniecki 2019: 29). However, it only contains the thoughts of Saint Benedict and recommendations other monks should follow, which resulted from the austere

life of monks<sup>9</sup> in Benedict's times. He resigned from many practices and instead recommended shaping the spirit through obedience and humility, so that each monk following his *Rule* would ultimately become a blessed man (Hiżycki 2011: 9–10). The life written by Gregory the Great is problematic for a different reason: Saint Gregory presents Benedict as a miracle-worker and describes his life in the context of biblical events (Hiżycki 2011: 9).

Saint Benedict was born in 480 in Norcia, into a landowning family. He lived in a time of unrest. When he went to Rome to study, he saw the moral corruption of the society and chose the life of a hermit living in a cave. Around 529, he decided to settle on Monte Cassino together with his followers and to build a church and a monastery (Szczeniecki 1976: 228). Soon, the Benedictine Order was founded there; it is considered to be one of the oldest Western orders (Seibert 2007: 47). Benedict died in 547 at the age of 67. He was a cult figure already at the time of his death, however, as the Benedictine Order spread, he was more and more glorified (Szczeniecki 1976: 228).

The first representations of Saint Benedict are the thirteenth-century frescos from the Basilica of Saint Ermet in Rome (Wiewióra 1995: 436). From the sixteenth century onwards, he was presented in Italy as a middle-aged man with a beard and white hair. However, this image only became popular in other parts of Europe in the baroque art (Seibert 2007: 47).

In the territory Poland, it is difficult to assess the popularity of Saint Benedict's teachings. One of the oldest sources is the sermon of Nicholas of Błonie from the reign of Władysław II Jagiełło. It is known from the oldest Polish incunables, including some from 1494 (Szczeniecki 2019: 23). Unfortunately, in the turbulent history of our country, the Benedictine literature was nearly lost. The first preserved information comes from the Świętokrzyskie abbey, where Nicholas of Koźmin lived at the close of the Middle Ages. His life includes two mentions of Saint Benedict. As a fervent monk, he strictly followed *The Rule* (Szczeniecki 2019: 24). At the time, all written sources concerning Saint Benedict were kept in the Świętokrzyska Library, including a few copies of *The Rule*, the second book of *Dialogues* by Saint Gregory (copied by the already mentioned Nicholas of Koźmin), commentaries to his works, legends, and even a poetic version of *The Rule of Saint Benedict* (Szczeniecki 2019: 24). Other information was provided by chronicler Jan Długosz. He discussed Benedictine issues, which – considering the scarcity of sources on the cult of Saint Benedict in Poland – is of great significance. The chronicler was interested in the monastic life, however, he spoke harshly of the Benedictines. According to Długosz, Benedictine monks of old had pursued the hermit's ideal, but those contemporary to him forsook the former values.

9 This can be exemplified by many days of fast or sleep deprivation (Hiżycki 2011: 9).

He accused them of being isolated from people and of limiting the contemplative lifestyle (Szczeniecki 2019: 25–26).

The first information about the symbol of the cross of Saint Benedict, as it is depicted on devotional items, dates back to the Middle Ages. Naturally, as there are no preserved written sources, it is impossible to determine when the medal of Saint Benedict was first used (Guéranger 1869: 46).

In the European sources, one of the first mentions of the cross can be found in an account of a witch trial that took place in 1647 in Nattremberg in Bavaria. The interrogated witches allegedly said that they had not been able to use their powers against the abbey in Metten as on its walls were crosses with letters still known today from the medal of Saint Benedict (Guéranger 1869: 47; Szczeniecki 2016: 39). The Benedictine monks from the abbey no longer remembered what these letters meant. The mysterious abbreviations were only deciphered after an Evangelion written in 1415 had been found<sup>10</sup>. One of the drawings in it was supposed to depict Saint Benedict holding a staff with a cross on which the mysterious letters were explained (Guéranger 1869: 48). Thus, it can be concluded that the lines from the medal of Saint Benedict were known as early as at the beginning of the fifteenth century.

The first written sources concerning the medal with the prayer of Saint Benedict come from an information leaflet dated to 1664. It depicts Saint Benedict in a gesture of benediction and a medal with a characteristic cross and letters. As we can learn from the leaflet, at that time devotional items connected with Saint Benedict were made of any metal, and the German name for the medal was 'phennig', while in Poland it was simply called 'metal' (Szczeniecki 2016: 33–34).

Another crucial work on the symbolism of Saint Benedict was the already mentioned study by Prosper Guéranger from 1862. It was very well received in the former territory of Poland, and the text translated into Polish had as many as ten editions in Warsaw, Cracow, and Lviv over fifteen years (Szczeniecki 2016: 44–46). The study has not lost any of its value and it is still reissued, with the latest edition coming from 2018<sup>11</sup>.

In the past, it was commonly believed that the medal of Saint Benedict had special powers as it was able to ward off diseases, evil spirits, and devil's temptations (Szczeniecki 1976: 229). Guéranger distinguished their different forms, such as healing the soul, healing the body, the change of the course of events, and casting out demons<sup>12</sup> (Hawryłeczko 2018: 19).

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10 This was probably one of the versions of the Paupers' Bible (Guéranger 1869: 48).

11 The book is still published today. In Polish, it is published by Tyniec Wydawnictwo Benedyktynów, with an additional preface by G. Hawryłeczko.

12 Guéranger devoted a considerable part of his work *Szkic o pochodzeniu...* to stories of different people who supposedly experienced miracles through the medal of Saint Benedict (Guéranger 1869: 61–138).

Great popularity of medals of Saint Benedict and the fact that they were treated as talismans<sup>13</sup> could not go unnoticed by the Church. The medal was well received by the Holy See despite problems with deciphering the letters (which aroused suspicions about sorcery<sup>14</sup>). Pope Benedict XIV, having thoroughly examined the symbolism of the cross of Saint Benedict, gave his approval. On March 12, 1742, he issued a breve sanctioning the formula of the blessing and granting indulgences to those who wore it<sup>15</sup> (Guèranger 1869: 139; Szczaniecki 2016: 42–43).

A high demand for devotional items among the faithful required a properly optimised manufacturing process. Crosses, medals, and other metal devotional items were typically cast or imprinted on both sides of a plate, with items devoted to Saint Benedict being mostly struck. The cross of Saint Benedict from Gniew was also struck, which is proved by some elements unevenly pressed due to the material being moved and by uneven cuts. Such issues, contrary to appearances, are quite common in archaeological material (Chudzińska 1998: 15), and so is the case here. One can see that the cross die was moved a few millimetres, which allows to assume that it was mass produced, as mass production sometimes resulted in small defects. However, the presence of the artefact in the cemetery may indicate that even such items were successfully sold.

In the case of medals/crosses of Saint Benedict, one of the controversial issues is the place of their manufacturing. It is difficult to identify workshops producing such devotional items due to limited research and high anonymity of such centres (Chudzińska 1998: 15). However, on account of great popularity of devotional items connected with the cult of Saint Benedict and frequent mistakes in inscriptions, it is presumed that they were produced by secular workshops that tried to maintain strictly determined types of representations on the plates (Chudzińska 1998: 32). On the other hand K. Białobłocki places them in the main Benedictine centres, in Italy and Austria (Białobłocki 1991/1992: 179). Perhaps both these versions are true, particularly if one considers the already mentioned Guèranger's account of 'unoriginal' medals of Saint Benedict from Germany. Thus, it can be assumed that due to great popularity of devotional items connected with Saint Benedict, they were produced close to large Benedictine centres regardless of the country. However, further research is necessary to formulate final conclusions.

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13 For example, in Pelplin, the medal of Saint Benedict was placed on the cathedral tower to protect it against thunder (Szczaniecki 2016: 42; Liedtke 1932: 257–259).

14 Such suspicions were spread by, among others, Jean-Baptiste Thiers in his *Treaty of Superstitions* (Guèranger 1869: 139).

15 More than 224 years later, during the Second Vatican Council on October 24, 1964, pope Paul VI named Saint Benedict patron saint of Europe (Hiżycki 2011: 67–70).



Saint Benedict medals and crucifixes are known from many inventories of artefacts compiled during research conducted in graveyards, mostly from the Modern Era. Saint Benedict crosses similar to the one found in Gniew were excavated in, for example, Maniowy in Podhale (Chudzińska 1998: Table v1), Lubiń near Kościan (Białobłocki 1991/1992: Fig. 2), and Toruń (Stawarz 2014: 20, 22). The most popular medals are oval and hexagonal or octagonal, with an image of Saint Benedict on the obverse and a cross with the prayer of Saint Benedict on the reverse. Such medals were found in the already mentioned places and in Lubiąż (Witkowski 1990: Fig. 26), during research in a monastery complex in Trzemeszno (Wiewióra 1995: 433), at Collegium Gostomianum in Sandomierz (Rostkowska 1996: 405–406), in the churches of St. George and St. Michael in Wawel (Chudzińska 1998: 32), in the cemetery in Gliwice (Furmanek, Michnik 2004: 412, Fig. 2:1, 2), in the graveyard at the Church of St. Barbara in the Old Town in Częstochowa (Młodkowska-Przepiórowska 2018: 218–220), in Gdańsk (Trawicka 2007: 58–59), in Chojnice (Kołyško 2008), and in the grounds of the graveyard at the Church of St. Matthias in Wrocław (Wachowski 2010: 168–169). Similar medals devoted to Saint Benedict were also found at the Church of St. Joseph in Pułtusk during clearance of the Wessel chapel (Kołyško 2007: 68). It is worth mentioning an oral account given by Józef Gawel, who was a gravedigger in Tyniec for many years. He said that medals of Saint Benedict were found at burials (Szczaniecki 2016: 82).

In European countries, these medals are known from, for example, the historic material obtained from the Church of St. George in Prague in the Czech Republic (Borkovský 1975: Fig. 91:5), the monastery graveyard in Krašna in Slovakia (Polla 1986: 196, Table xxvi:5, 9), and the territory of Baden in Germany (Faßbinder 1993: 222–223).

## Conclusions

Equipping the dead, sometimes at their request, with different devotional items including crosses, medals, rosaries, reliquaries, and scapulars, was connected with the confession of faith, proof of devotion, and protection of the soul (Grupa et al. 2015b: 29–30). This resulted from a Christian view that death is only a ‘momentary sleep’ until the Judgement Day (Grupa et al. 2015b: 27). Saint Benedict medals and crosses in the grave did not always mean that the buried person was a monk. The saint was even considered a patron of the lay dead and was supposed to protect them after death (Szczaniecki 2016: 81). This is related to the so-called good death (*Ars Moriendi*), when the dead is lying on the deathbed among their relatives<sup>16</sup> (sometimes even having accepted their fate and planned their funeral) (Chrościcki

<sup>16</sup> A good death was perceived the same by both Catholics and Protestants (Grupa 2005: 28).

1974: 64; Grupa 2005: 28). The need to die well resulted from the high death rate at the time, with death taking a heavy toll due to hunger, war, epidemics, or natural disasters. Unlike today, one of the rarest causes of death was old age (Grupa et al. 2014: 13). The cult of Saint Benedict as a patron of the happy death started with the revelations of Saint Gertrude, who lived in the fourteenth century. She was supposed to be promised good, happy death for all who prayed to Saint Benedict and reminded him of his own death: it is said that he died standing and praying in an oratory (Szczeniecki 2016: 83).

Based on the information quoted in the paper, it can be said that the artefact found during archaeological research in Gniew is a cross despite the fact that it resembles medals and despite the different terms used in the literature. What also matters is the long and unique history of this small cross struck on a thin plate. Despite the three and a half centuries that have passed since the first information about the medal appeared, and the six centuries since the first mention of its symbolism, it is still very popular among Christians. Most probably, information about the miracles happening thanks to it are no longer the main reason why it is worn but it can be a kind of an amulet protecting against evil. Despite rather scarce literature on Saint Benedict devotional items found at archaeological sites, one should expect that as research progresses, doubts about the manufacturing places or more detailed relationships between the appearance of crosses and medals will be dispelled.

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## Summary

### The Saint Benedict Cross or the Saint Benedict Medal Based on a Find from Archaeological Research in Gniew (Pomerania Province)

In 2015, during archaeological research conducted around the church in Gniew (Pomerania Province), a small fragment of a metal plate was found. After it was cleaned as part of restoration it turned out to be a cross. The excavation was located outside, near the chancel wall. Research conducted there confirmed the conclusions drawn in previous years, i.e. that the church grounds had been used as a graveyard. The fact that the graveyard had been used for a long time was proved by numerous burials, overlapping grave pits and ossuaries, meaning places where human remains were gathered after earlier burials in the graveyard and the church had been emptied.

Devotional items, including medals, crucifixes, scapulars, and prayer ropes, have been long connected with the Christian tradition. The fact that they are found during excavations in churches and graveyards may indicate that they were popular in Late Middle Ages and in the Modern Era.

Unfortunately, the cross has not been preserved whole. It is difficult to determine whether the missing loop and two fragments of the horizontal bar were damaged

when it was used by its owner or as a result of corrosion taking place after it had been deposited in the ground.

The first written sources concerning the medal itself come from an information leaflet dated to 1664. It depicts Saint Benedict in a gesture of benediction and a medal with a characteristic cross and letters. One of the most important works on the Saint Benedict Medal is the work by Prosper Guéranger from 1862.

Saint Benedict medals and crucifixes are also known from many inventories of artefacts compiled during research conducted in graveyards, mostly from the Modern Era. Saint Benedict crosses in a form resembling a knight's cross were found in, among others, Maniowy in Podhale, Gliwice, Lubiń near Kościan, Wrocław, and Częstochowa.

Despite the three and a half centuries that have passed since the first information about the medal appeared, and the six centuries since the first mention of its symbolism, it is still very popular among Christians. Most probably, information about the miracles happening thanks to it are no longer the main reason why it is worn but it can be a kind of an amulet protecting against evil. Despite rather scarce literature on Saint Benedict devotional items found at archaeological sites, one should expect that as research progresses, doubts about the manufacturing places or more detailed relationships between the appearance of crosses and medals will be dispelled.

**Keywords:** archaeology, modern era, Gniew, devotional items, cross, St. Benedict, Benedictine monks, St. Zacharias, the cross of Saint Zacharias, epidemics

## Streszczenie

**Krzyżyk czy medalik św. Benedykta na podstawie znaleziska z badań archeologicznych w Gniewie (woj. pomorskie)**

W 2015 r., podczas badań archeologicznych wokół kościoła w Gniewie (woj. pomorskie), znaleziono drobny fragment blaszki, która po oczyszczeniu w czasie zabiegów konserwatorskich okazała się być krzyżykiem. Wykop zlokalizowany był na zewnątrz, niedaleko ściany prezbiterium. Badania w tym miejscu potwierdziły wnioski wysunięte w poprzednich latach badań, że teren wokół kościoła użytkowany był jako cmentarz. O długim użytkowaniu cmentarza świadczyły licznie odkryte pochówki, przecinające się jamy grobowe i ossuaria, czyli miejsca w których gromadzono szczątki ludzkie po oczyszczeniu z wcześniejszych pochówków z obszaru cmentarza i kościoła.

Dewocjonalia, czyli między innymi medaliki, krzyżyki, szkaplerze czy sznury modlitewne, są związane z religią chrześcijańską długą tradycją. Ich znaleziska podczas badań wykopaliskowych w kościołach i na cmentarzyskach mogą świadczyć, że były one popularne wśród społeczeństw późnego średniowiecza i nowożytności.

Niestety, krzyżyk nie zachował się w całości. Trudno jest ustalić czy brakujące uszko oraz fragmenty dwóch belek uległy uszkodzeniu w czasie jego użytkowania przez właściciela, czy też stało się to przez procesy korozyjne po zdeponowaniu w ziemi.



Pierwsze źródła pisane o samym medaliku pochodzą z ulotki informacyjnej datowanej na 1664 r. Przedstawia ona świętego Benedykta z gestem błogosławieństwa i medalik z charakterystycznym krzyżem i literami. Jedną z najważniejszych prac o medaliku świętego Benedykta jest dzieło z roku 1862, autorstwa Prospera Guèranger'a.

Medaliki i krzyżyki św. Benedykta są także znane z wielu inwentarzy zabytków z badań cmentarzysk, głównie z okresu nowożytności. Krzyżyki św. Benedykta w formie zbliżonej do krzyża kawalerskiego zostały odnalezione między innymi w Maniowach na Podhalu, Gliwicach, Lubiniu pod Kościanem, Wrocławiu czy Częstochowie.

Mimo upływu ponad trzech i pół wieku od pojawienia się pierwszej informacji o medaliku, a ponad sześciu od pierwszej wzmianki o jego symbolice, to nadal medalik cieszy się dużą popularnością wśród chrześcijan. Zapewne informacje o cudach, jakie dzieją się za jego pośrednictwem, nie są już głównym motywem osób go noszących, tak może stanowić on swego rodzaju amulet, który ma chronić noszącego przed złem. Pomimo nadal dość skromnej literatury odnośnie do dewocjonaliów św. Benedykta pozyskanych ze stanowisk archeologicznych, należy liczyć, że wraz z postępem badań zostaną rozwiązane niejasności odnośnie do miejsc produkcji, czy też bardziej szczegółowych zależności w wyglądzie między samymi krzyżykami i medalikami.

**Słowa kluczowe:** archeologia, nowożytność, Gniew, dewocjonaalia, krzyżyk, św. Benedykt, benedyktyni, św. Zachariasz, karawaka, epidemia cholery

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