CHAPTER TWELVE

RURAL LANDSCAPES

1. Off the beaten track

The rural settlements of the early state period in Poland have not been the subject of any separate, let alone long-term, research projects. This is despite the fact that every year hundreds of features are excavated at Early Medieval open settlements. These works are usually of rescue character and thus limited to recording the features threatened with destruction by intensive agricultural activities. The relative lack of interest in rural settlements has also other reasons. Unlike in the urban centers, where the forms and kinds of the archaeological evidence are diversified and much richer in quality and quantity, at the rural sites spectacular discoveries are quite rare. For centuries the material culture of rural inhabitants was traditional in form and rather uniform.

Scattered in the landscape, Early Medieval rural settlements are difficult to identify. Many of them, most often located in arable fields, become known to the archaeologists when the process of their destruction is reaching its end. On rural sites as a rule, unless preserved by later deposits which bury them, there are no continuous archaeological layers under the topsoil. Redeposited elements of such layers, together with their cultural content are usually found mixed in the modern arable soil. Only the bases of deeper features have any chance to survive till our time. Others, including any traces of buildings constructed on ancient ground surfaces, and those ground surfaces themselves are inevitably destroyed by the seasonal rural activities, including the deep plowing. It often happens that the only material trace of a settlement are the destroyed elements of the features remaining on the surface. Unlike the urban centers, rural settlements, especially the ones composed of scattered homesteads, did not have a compact structure. Therefore isolated single features are uncovered more often than their complexes; in order to achieve the latter, open area excavations should be conducted. In Poland they are, however, quite recent and in effect really have their beginning due to the program of building the motorways begun in the 1990s.
Unlike in western Europe, in Poland there have been no programs for investigating the rural settlements in the context of the transformations they underwent throughout the centuries. Hence analyses tend to be focused on selected kinds of structures (habitation, agricultural), and only in rare cases on their broader settlement context. In fact, in the countryside of the early state period (as in modern times), not only villages are important but also their surroundings, such as the arable fields and their old divisions, communication routes, cemeteries or churches. All these elements remained in definite relationships (spatial, functional, chronological) with each other so each of them can only be analyzed in the context of the other ones. Such holistic investigations of landscapes have been very slow to develop in Poland.

Another problem which the archaeologists have not been able to tackle for many years is the chronology of the finds. Unlike urban centers which differ in their culture and the status (and sometimes ethnicity) of their inhabitants with a rapid penetration of new trends and ideas, time had a different character in villages. Here it is not the moment at which new products appeared and the changes in material culture which characterize rural life, but stability of socio-cultural systems, durability and invariability of settlement structures, these are the characteristic feature of many Medieval settlements. Rural time-scales were regulated by the repeated natural phenomena. It had a cyclical character and its elements were determined by the daily chores of the household and smallholding, especially the work in the fields. It was to these rhythms which people adjusted their daily lives. This enhanced the stabilization or even petrification not only of settlement patterns but also of the elements of material culture. In rural areas more often than in urban ones we can observe Braudel’s *longue durée* in action which was reflected in comparable (in age, gender, number, diseases, etc.) features of the dead in rural cemeteries, both ancient and

---

1. The topic of the research of this category of evidence has been discussed by few authors. Their analyses are usually minor contributions and concern the general problems of investigating Early Medieval villages (e.g., Rajewski 1957; Hensel 1964), their morphology (e.g., Szulc 1988) and selected aspect of regional studies (e.g., Młynarska-Kaletynowa 1967; Kunysz 1966; Rozwalka 1999). A separate group are syntheses covering specific aspects (cf. Podwińska 1971; Dowiat ed. 1985). A valuable publication for the archaeologists dealing with the problems of the Early Medieval village is the monograph by the historian Karol Modzelewski (2000) devoted to the economic organization of the Piast state. An overview of the research problems is presented by S. Moździoch (1997).