CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE EARLIEST MONASTIC COMPLEXES

1. The earliest monasteries and archaeology

Archaeology plays a particularly important role in the research on the earliest monastic complexes. There are several groups of problems which are addressed by this work. The first concerns the origins of the earliest monasteries in Polish lands; due to the scarcity of written sources this evidence can be obtained through the study of the stratification surviving in the ground and of the finds associated with them, including the datable ones. Archaeological excavations combined with the analyses of the preserved architectural remains permits us to draw conclusions about the time of origin, layout as well as trends and dynamics of changes which these structures underwent during their existence.

Another subject of interest are the burials found within the monasteries. Archaeologists pay attention to several particularly important features. The first is the place where the graves were located, this could be within the monastic church but also the zone around it, the cloisters, or the cemetery located near the monastery. In the case of the monastic church it is equally important where the burial is located (chancel, crypt, aisle), its form (burial made directly in the soil, in a wooden chamber or a stone casing), elements of the burial rite such as the presence or lack of grave goods, their specific features (presence of attributes of secular or sacral authority or the lack of them), mutual relations of the burials, their number (single burials or concentrations) and many other things.¹ This is important because in monasteries more than in other places one should expect both burials of lay people and clergymen of varying social status. Both monks, including the abbots, were buried there as well as the lay people directly or indirectly connected with the monastery. In the last mentioned case these were both the people offering various services and rich donors, including the personages of the highest rank such as the prince and the members of his family.

¹ For more on this issue cf.: Derwich (ed.) 1997.
Archaeologists are also interested in the auxiliary structures in monasteries such as remains of workshops which functioned when the monastery was being built and the ones producing various goods in its service area. Also the settlements of the servants, whose lives and everyday work were subordinated to the rhythm of life of the monastic communities, were important. Due to all these reasons the earliest monastery complexes have been the subject of archaeological investigations. For the earliest stages of the development of the state there are relatively few such structures in Polish lands and the majority has been already investigated.

In the period after the Second World War there have been two stages of increased interest in monastic structures. The first one concerns the period of the Millennium excavations when the leading post-monastic complexes, including the ones going back to the times of the early Piasts were the subject of interest of archaeologists, historians and historians of architecture. The investigations of varying scope did not, however, bring clear answers to the issues connected with the origins of monastic foundations. In the 1980s and later on, research was taken up again, especially in the complexes which are crucial for studying the origins of the Polish monastic movement. Their results have brought much new information, sometimes completely changing the existing opinions about the origins of the monastic congregations in Polish lands. Several examples illustrating the complexity of the research are presented below. They concern the earliest congregations in Polish lands, that is the Benedictines and the Cistercians.

2. At the threshold of Christianization: the first Benedictine abbeys

The first monastic foundations in Polish lands were congregations of monks of the order called the Benedictines (established in the 6th century in Italy by Benedict of Nursia). The earliest history of the Benedictines in Poland is still the subject of debates and analyses. It used to be assumed that their missionary activeness might have begun even as early as the 9th century. This idea, however, has not been confirmed by the archaeological evidence. Now it is believed that they came to

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2 In this part of the chapter was used information about the Benedictines and their architecture taken from general studies, especially: Świechowski 1963, 2000b; Zachwatowicz 1971; Kanior 2002.