Introduction

As gender archaeology has moved the archaeology of children and childhood to the forefront (e.g., Lillehammer 1989; Kamp 2001), the paucity of investigation and analysis of fetal and neonatal remains and their place and role in society has been highlighted. Whether attributed to poor preservation or absence from communal cemeteries, less is known about fetal identity and the social treatment of perinates and their place and role in society has been highlighted. Whether attributed to childhood to the forefront (e.g., Lillehammer 1989; Kamp 2001), the purpose of this paper is to examine and situate fetal identity within a particular cultural group by examining and comparing the funerary treatment of perinates with those of older infants and young children.

Beyond causes related to preservation and excavation, many researchers have considered the lack of perinatal remains a function of culture, especially as it relates to selective burial practices. There are numerous cultural reasons why perinates may not be included in a general community cemetery, including issues of “personhood” or ontology, belief systems, economic factors, religious beliefs, social policies, and infanticide (Scott, 1999; Saunders 2008, Orme 2001). It is precisely these cultural factors, ontology in particular, that may also account for a perinate burial’s inclusion in a community cemetery. Some societies viewed the perinatal period as a separate and distinct phase of infancy (Scott 1999). Whether this separate period was seen as distinct from older infants and young children depends on the culture in question and may be determined from the mortuary context. In some situations, infants were excluded from and “considered a stranger” to society, requiring specific admission and recognition to the larger social group at culturally predetermined ages or stages, including naming the child (Scott 1999). In other cultures, perinates were viewed as full members of society regardless of their age at death. This may be particularly true in societies with Christian belief systems in which the idea of souls was applicable to all human lives including perinates, equating these youngest individuals with Christian belief systems in which the idea of souls was applicable to all human lives including perinates, equating these youngest individuals with Christian belief systems in which the idea of souls was applicable to all human lives including perinates, equating these youngest individuals with Christian belief systems in which the idea of souls was applicable to all human lives including perinates, equating these youngest individuals with Christian belief systems in which the idea of souls was applicable to all human lives including perinates, equating these youngest individuals with Christian belief systems in which the idea of souls was applicable to all human lives including perinates, equating these youngest individuals with Christian belief systems in which the idea of souls was applicable to all human lives including perinates, equating these youngest individuals with Christian belief systems in which the idea of souls was applicable to all human lives including perinates, equating these youngest individuals with Christian belief systems in which the idea of souls was applicable to all human lives including perinates, equating these youngest individuals with Christian belief systems in which the idea of souls was applicable to all human lives including perinates, equating these youngest individuals with Christian belief systems in which the idea of souls was applicable to all human lives including perinates, equating these youngest individuals with Christian belief systems in which the idea of souls was applicable to all human lives including perinates, equating these youngest individuals with.

The Study

The intention of this study is to examine the mortuary context of perinates and older infants and young children in order to learn more about fetal identity. We test the hypothesis that if fetal identity in a post-medieval Polish community was distinguished from that of older infants and young children, then perinates would be buried in a separate location, would be buried with different grave goods or without grave inclusions, would not be buried in coffins, or would be clustered in a separate part in the cemetery.

The Drawsko Site

The settlement of Drawsko is located in the Noteć River Valley of west-central Poland (Wyrwa 2005). The site was established during the Middle Ages and was continuously occupied through the modern era. During the 17th-19th centuries, a cemetery was established on the eastern edge of the settlement (designated Drawsko 1). Drawsko 1 was initially excavated in 1929, with follow-up excavations in 2002-2003 (Wyrwa 2005). Systematic excavation began in 2008 and more than 200 human skeletal remains have been recovered. The inhabitants of Drawsko during the 17th and 18th centuries were predominately farmers who likely practiced Christianity, as the country of Poland was converted from paganism in the 10th century (Manteuffel 1982).

Methods

A sample of 47 subadult remains was included in this study. Age-at-death and gestational age estimates were calculated using standard anthropological protocol. Sex was not determined for any remains due to the difficulty of assigning sex to pre-pubescent remains (Saunders 2008). The term, “perinate,” refers to those individuals that are 28 weeks in utero – seven postnatal days. “Post-neonate” designates those aged between seven postnatal days and one year, while “young child” refers to those between one and three years of age.

The burials were examined for their mortuary context, including coffin use, burial orientation, material associations, and burial location. The presence of a coffin was identified by a clear coffin outline noted during excavation, remains of the wooden caskets, and/or the presence of associated coffin hardware, such as nails. Burial orientation was determined at the time of excavation and was recorded according to cardinal planes. Burial location was also recorded during excavation and was examined within excavation gridlines established in the cemetery. Material associations and grave goods at Drawsko 1 include metal pins, flints, items of personal adornment, and copper coins. The latter artifact is significant for its association with protection of the dead and the cultural belief that coins were anti-vampiristic (Perkowski 1976; Barber 1988).

Non-parametric statistical tests were employed to compare the burial treatment features (i.e., coffins, artifacts, coins) among the three age groups (Fisher’s exact, p<0.05). Burial orientation and location were visually examined from the Drawsko site maps.

Results

• Of the 47 individuals: 15 perinates, 15 post-neonates, 17 young children
• No statistical difference for coffin use
• No statistical difference for inclusion of burial goods, including copper coins
• All individuals buried with cranium to west (face pointing east) and feet to east.
• No clustering of perinatal remains (see site map above).

Discussion and Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that perinates were treated no differently that post-neonates and older children in this cemetery. Since coffin use, grave goods, grave location, and grave orientation were all similar among the remains, it can be concluded that perinates were viewed similarly to older infants. In other words, the people of Drawsko did not consider premature babies to be something different from older infants and children. Their similar mortuary treatment is not unexpected, as Drawsko was a Christian community that would have likely viewed all humans, regardless of age, as having souls and being worthy of proper funerary rites.

References Cited


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