Archaeologia Historica Polona
vol. 32, 2024–2025, pp. 163–191, ISSN 1425–3534, DOI: 10.12775/AHP.2024-2025.006

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The village of Stare Miasto/*Alt Stadt* as the first location of Dąbrówno?

Abstract. The village of Stare Miasto (German: *Altstadt*) is situated in the Warmian-Masurian Voivodeship, Ostróda district, approximately 5 km northwest of Dąbrówno. Historically, this was the territory of Sasinia, an Old Prussian land conquered by the Teutonic Order in the second half of the 13th century.

On the upland, along the northwestern shore of Lake Dąbrowa Mała, there is a site locally known as Zamkowa Góra/Castle Hill. It is an archaeological complex formerly regarded as an early medieval hillfort that had never been subjected to any broader research. Historians associated this location with the construction of a Teutonic Order fortress – the castle of Ilgen/Ylienburg, first mentioned in 1316. The later name of Dąbrówno (German: *Gilgenburg*), a town built on the nearby isthmus between Lake Dąbrowa Duża and Lake Dąbrowa Mała, was believed to have derived from this site. The connection between the two settlements was underscored by maintaining the designation Stare Miasto/Old Town for the village, the mill, and the estate. Some researchers outright suggested that, as in many analogous cases, this was the site of the first urban settlement. Between 2022 and 2025, as part of research into the urbanisation process of the Galindia Wilderness, a series of archaeological studies including non-invasive surveys and trial excavations were conducted. The results revealed the linearly extending upland platform adjacent to the earthwork fortifications of the small stronghold to hold a regular pattern of geophysical anomalies interpreted as relics of plot-based burgages with a central square. Based on the artefacts recovered during the fieldwork, the complex was dated to the turn of the 15th century. Remains of burnt structures and a skeletal cemetery were also discovered, likely indicating a church. The form of the settlement and the character of the finds show a striking resemblance to the archaeologically confirmed first settlement of Barczewo on the Stare Miasto hill in Barczewko near Olsztyn. The results of this research provided grounds for a hypothesis that Zamkowa Góra in Stare Miasto should be identified as the first settlement of the present-day Dąbrówno (*Ylienburg,* meaning, "The Long Stronghold" in Old Prussian/German) and that the site should be associated with the phenomenon of deserted medieval urban settlements of the Teutonic Order in Prussia.

Keywords: archaeology, Middle Ages, Teutonic Order, Old Town, Dąbrówno/*Gilgenburg*, non-invasive archaeology.

Introduction

The village of Stare Miasto, Dąbrówno commune, lies in the Masurian Lake District in the mesoregion of the Lubawa Garb, where the nearby Wel River has its source (Kondracki 2011, pp. 96–97). The archaeological site (Stare Miasto/*Altstadt*/Old Town, Zamkowa Góra/Castle Hill, site 1) is located along the northwestern shore of Lake Dąbrowa Mała, extending across the summit of post-glacial elevations (Fig. 1).

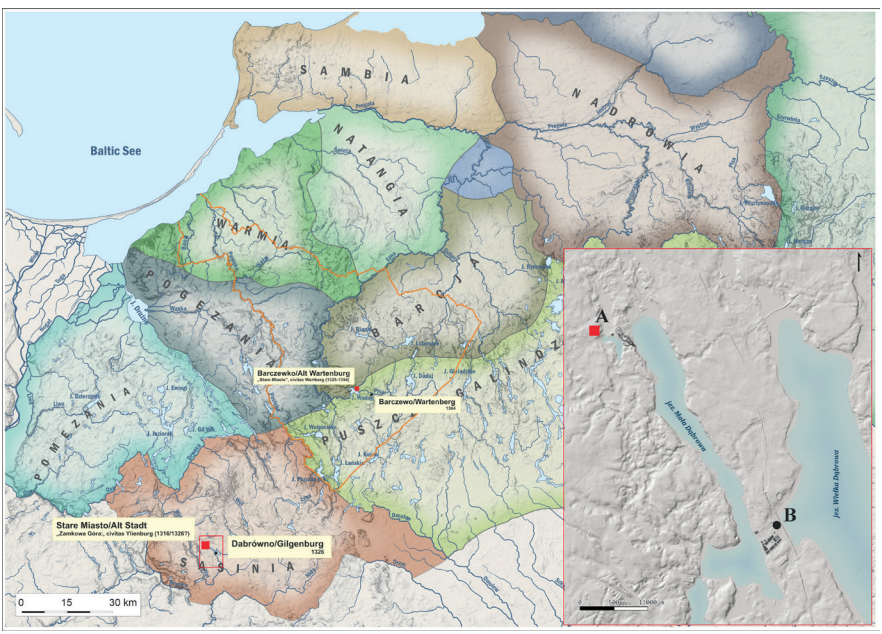


Fig. 1. Old Town, Dąbrówno municipality. Location of the Castle Hill – site against the backdrop of Prussian tribal territories, in the context of the twin site Barczewko in Warmia. A – Old Town, original location *Ylienburg*, B – Dąbrówno/Gilgenburg (developed by M. Sobiech, P. Wroniecki, A. Koperkiewicz)

In the records, it is classified as an "early medieval hillfort-castle", which carries certain consequences described in the scholarly literature (Poliński 2018)[1]. Before the Second World War, the site belonged to the Stare Miasto estate and was known to the Masurian population as Zamkowa Góra /Castle Hill. Legends handed down

[1] In this case, the consequence of using the term "hillfort" was the loss of awareness of the site's significance for the town's history and an incorrect determination of the extent of conservation protection. This poses a threat to the preservation of such places for future generations (Koperkiewicz 2023).

from one generation to another were associated with this location (Bork-Jakobi 1964, pp. 12–16). The oldest town chronicles, referencing historical sources and the etymology of place names, emphasise the mutual relationship between the two settlements – the village of Stare Miasto and the current town of Dąbrówno (Bock 1820, p. 25; *Kronika* 2003, pp. 37–41). For a long time, the scholarly literature had proposed the hypothesis that Zamkowa Góra in Stare Miasto conceals the remains of the first foundation of the town of Dąbrówno; however, this hypothesis had never been archaeologically tested.

As early as the 1950s, a major research project on the Grunwald battlefield was initiated. The archaeological investigations of present-day Dąbrówno itself served as a kind of postscript to this topic, becoming the flagship project of the Łódź archaeological centre (Odoj 1961; Strzyż 2010). The destruction of the small town of Dąbrówno on the evening of 13 July 1410 by the forces of King Jagiełło became the prelude to the battle fought two days later, which ended in the crushing defeat of the Teutonic Order (Kwiatkowski 2010, pp. 358–384). Professor Tadeusz Poklewski-Koziełł, who directed the archaeological work at Dąbrówno in the 1980s and 1990s, made a number of important determinations, including establishing the chronology of the earliest buildings, the period of construction of masonry fortifications, and challenging the possibility that the medieval Teutonic Order castle was located within the town's defences (Poklewski-Koziełł 1998, pp. 81–84). This last conclusion failed to gain any traction in the scholarly literature, and the question of the castle's location became even more convoluted[2]. Scholars' interest focused on the history of the small town itself and its role in the Grunwald campaign. In these studies, the question of the historical nuances of the town's origins was not addressed. Following the chronicle of Peter of Dusburg, the year 1326 was accepted as the founding date of the town in its present location (Świętosławski 1996; Poklewski-Koziełł 1998; Maik 1996; 2002; Strzyż 2010; Grabarczyk 2011).

The first historical person associated with Dąbrówno is Berengar von Mellingen, a high-ranking official of the Teutonic Order from Thuringia. He is mentioned as a prosecutor (*provisor domus in Ilienburg*) in 1316 (Dorna 2012, p. 121; Heckmann 2020, p. 420). The key historical source is the chronicle of Peter of Dusburg, which

[2] Professor T. Poklewski's conclusion contributed to the hypothesis that the former watchtower *Ilgenburg/Gellensburg* on Zamkowa Góra in Stare Miasto may have been preserved as the seat of the Teutonic Order official until the turn of the 15th century (Koperkiewicz 2023). In the light of current research at Stare Miasto, this appears far less probable. At the same time, the ongoing work necessitates the systematisation of knowledge concerning the origins of Dąbrówno and the problem of the castle's location, given the complete confusion in the literature regarding the conflation of places, events, and archaeological sites (Schmidt 1921, pp. 6–9; Maye 1926; Dehio, Gall 1952, pp. 266–267; Kalinowski 1958; Dąbrowski 1961, p. 356; Paprocki 1961, pp. 113–114; Czubiel, Domagała 1969, pp. 112–115; Guerquin 1984, p. 141; Czubiel 1986, pp. 11–14; Kajzer *et al.* 2001; Herrmann 2007, pp. 436–438; Jackiewicz-Garniec, Garniec 2006, pp. 87–101; Knyżewski 2018, p. 267; Herrmann 2019, p. 177; Koperkiewicz 2023; Swat, Wilczyński 2025).

explicitly links the foundation of the town with the *castrum Ylienburg*. The founding of Dąbrówno took place in 1326; the Teutonic Order chronicler records that the commander of the Commandery of Dzierzgoń (German: *Komturei Christburg*), Luther of Brunswick, placed a town beside the castle of Dąbrówno – *Et frater Lutherus filius illustris Ducis de Brunswig Commendator Christburg civitatem circa Castrum Ylienburg locaverunt* (*Dusburg* 1679, p. 410; *Dusburg* 2004, p. 234; Maye 1926, pp. 7–15).

Where exactly was this Ylienburg castle located and is the place the same as Ilienburg?

The aim of the research undertaken between 2022 and 2025 was to determine the function and the actual extent of the Zamkowa Góra/Castle Hill complex using an integrated programme of non-invasive and trial-trench methods. The reference point for the project was the parallel research on the first location of Barczewo in Barczewko (Koperkiewicz 2025a; Biermann *et al.* 2025) that demonstrated the enormous informational potential hidden within deserted medieval urban foundations as sites that serve as veritable time capsules of the earliest phases of urbanisation in this part of Europe.

The main research questions concern the following issues:

- Are we dealing with the remains of a chartered town at the Zamkowa Góra/Castle Hill site?
- Does Peter of Dusburg's account of the founding of Dąbrówno refer literally to the establishment of the first castle Ylienburg and a town at Stare Miasto at the Zamkowa Góra/Castle Hill site?
- Was the original settlement destroyed and the town was moved to its present-day location, and if so, what were the circumstances and the chronology of these events?
- During the 1410 Grunwald campaign, was the Teutonic Order official still based at the stronghold in its original location at the Zamkowa Góra/Castle Hill site in Stare Miasto?

Method

An integrated set of desk-based and field methods was employed, encompassing both non-invasive techniques and trial excavations. Desk-based analyses included a review of historical and cartographic sources, analysis of a digital terrain model based on airborne laser scanning data (ALS/LiDAR data from the GUGiK/ISOK resource), and interpretation of archival archaeological materials (Wroniecki 2018).

Field surveys included magnetic gradiometry prospection (fluxgate gradiometer), surface surveys with planimetric recording of metal finds, and underwater prospection using side-scan sonar (Prejs 2023; Koperkiewicz 2025b). Trial trenches were opened on selected parts of the site. The methodological premise was data integration – geophysical anomalies indicated excavation locations, and the trench results verified the interpretation of the magnetic echograms. Finally, the results were georeferenced onto a prepared terrain topography model. Data were processed, analysed, and archived using GIS software.

Historical context and state of research

The site lies within the historical territory of Old Prussian Sasinia (Fig. 1) which was relatively late separated from Galindia. In the Teutonic Order period, Sasinia was understood as the area between the rivers Działdówka, Brynica, the upper Drwęca, Pasłęka, Omulew, and the upper Orzyc (Powierski 2004, pp. 155–156; Białuński 2009, pp. 289–320). Sometimes Sasinia was perceived as part of Galindia, and the 14th-century Teutonic Order chronicler Peter of Dusburg only knew the latter term (Białuński 2014, p. 24). Around the mid-13th century Galindia was still largely inhabited. Depopulation may have occurred later, in connection with the Yotvingian raids between 1267 and 1273, although it was probably not a total depopulation but rather the devastation of large settlement areas (Powierski 2001, pp. 43–59). An echo of early settlement events may be the mention in Peter of Dusburg's chronicle of an attempt to found "a certain town in Galindia" garrisoned by many brethren, which was supposed to have taken place even before the first Prussian uprising in 1242. The chronicle's editor, Max Toeppen, believed this referred to *Wartenberg* (Barczewko), which in the light of current knowledge must be ruled out. Grzegorz Białuński did not question the authenticity of the reference but challenged the dating of this event – he argued that it could not have taken place before the conquest of Galindia in 1268, and that favourable conditions arose closer to the beginning of the 14th century (Sikorski 2010, pp. 94–95; Białuński 2014, pp. 21–26).

The resumption of large-scale settlement activity was only possible from the 1320s (Krollmann 1923, pp. 76–79). In a reference by Caspar Hennenberger concerning a Lithuanian raid on Galindia and Sasinia, the destruction of the settlement in Leszcz was recorded around 1311–1321. Due to the close proximity of that centre to Stare Miasto, the destruction of the watchtower *Ylienburg* was also attributed to the Lithuanians, but these are only hypotheses (Koperkiewicz, Szczepański 2025, p. 10). There are no reliable accounts concerning the circumstances of any destruction of the settlement. Researchers generally agreed that this "first house" (managed by the mentioned earlier Berenger, 1316) may have been an adaptation of a Prussian

(Sasinian) hillfort on the shore of Lake Dąbrowa Mała and was a type of small watch-tower of the Wildhaus variety. The location of this structure (*domus in Ilienburg)* was identified with the present Zamkowa Góra/Castle Hill in Stare Miasto.

Evidence for the takeover, rather than destruction, of the hillfort by the Teutonic Order Knights was said to include the preservation of the Prussian name: *Ilienburg* (1316), *Ylienburg* (1326), *Ilgenburg* (1397). The oldest German forms Ilien and Ilgen were believed to derive from the Prussian word *ilgis* meaning "long" (Kowalski 1954, p. 99; Michels 1996, p. 26). The original name should therefore be understood as "The Long Stronghold". Later evolutions of the name include *Lilienburg*, *Liliopolis*, *Dambrowno*, *Gylgembork*, and ultimately *Gilgenburg*. This last, historically established form was also derived from the designation Gellensburg Castle, referring to the name of the legendary Prussian prince Gellens, whose fortress the Teutonic Order Knights allegedly captured during the second Prussian uprising (Dąbrowski 1961/1962, p. 343; *Kronika* 2003, pp. 37–41). Grzegorz Białuński approaches these accounts with caution, seeing in them a "*quasi*-scholarly" attempt at etymological explanation by historians of the second half of the 18th century; in his view, the convergence of the terms Gellensburg and Gilgenburg may have been a reference to Galindia (Białuński 2014, p. 25). In the Chronica of the Battle and in Annales of Jan Długosz, Dąbrówno appears in its Polish form, referencing the names of Lakes Dąbrowa (Mała and Duża), between which the present town was located (*Cronica* 1911, p. 3; *Długosz* 1982, p. 83).

As early as the 18th century, Chrystian Bock linked Stare Miasto with the former castrum, arguing that elements of a fortified castle are visible, and the village bears the telling name Stare Miasto/Old Town – analogous to Old Toruń or Old Dzierzgoń – though he simultaneously cautioned that it cannot be stated with complete certainty whether the town mentioned in sources in 1326 is identical with the present village, since "in today's village of Stare Miasto there is not the slightest trace of the former town" (*Kronika* 2003, p. 41). Helmut Meye, drawing on Bock's chronicle, likewise ruled out the possibility of the settlement's relocation (Meye 1926, pp. 7–11; 2001, p. 14). Grzegorz Białuński, however, suggested that the name Stare Miasto could derive from a tradition of continuity of settlement on an earlier hillfort and/or the first foundation of Dąbrówno (Białuński 2014, pp. 24–25). Grzegorz Białuński conjectured that the "certain town in the Galindia Wilderness" unnamed by Peter of Dusburg might have been none other than *Ylienburg*. He also noted that the chronicler, when later mentioning the founding of Dąbrówno in 1326, literally places the town beside the castle without specifying the location of Ylienburg Castle. He therefore admitted the possibility of the settlement's relocation (which the sources did not record) to the present site of Dąbrówno from the Zamkowa Góra/Castle Hill (Białuński 2014, pp. 21–26).

The village of Stare Miasto itself appears in sources in the early15th century and an important reference concerns the losses it suffered as a result of the so-called

Hunger War of 1414. From it we learn of the existence of a church which, according to the damage register, was said to have sustained losses amounting to 50 marks (Möllenberg 1912, p. 90).

Pre-war researchers, including Carl Engel, described the defensive complex at Stare Miasto as a type of fortified castle with a tongue-shaped plan, comprising a main castle and a bailey with two ramparts on a long, narrow ridge[3]. In the opinion of Helmut Meye, the remains of the structures on the Zamkowa Góra/Castle Hill should be classified as a *Wildhaus* – a small watchtower-stronghold protecting the frontiers of the Great Wilderness during the intensive colonisation period (Meye 1926, pp. 7–11; 2001, p. 14).

Between 1958 and 1960, as part of the Social Committee for Grunwald Commemorations, reconnaissance of archaeological sites in the vicinity of the battlefield was also conducted. One of the locations was the "hillfort" at Stare Miasto, where an imprecisely defined area of the site was inspected (Odoj 1961, p. 217).

In present Dąbrówno investigations of a motte (site II) on the northwestern outskirts (at the border of the medieval urban settlement) were carried out. Its period of use was determined as 1326–1410, situated between the historical dates of the town's founding and destruction before Grunwald[4]. Attention was drawn to the need for more extensive investigations, including in the town itself and at the castle, as well as the archaeological potential of Stare Miasto (Dąbrowski 1961/1962, p. 351). Later field inspections on the stronghold in Stare Miasto, given limited access and tree cover, yielded little more than the location of isolated pottery fragments (Hoffmann, Mackiewicz 2004, pp. 20–21). It was only between 2022 and 2025, within the framework of the Barczewko project, that initiation systematic research could be undertaken (Koperkiewicz 2023).

Topography

The oldest cartographic depiction of the Dąbrówno area is found on Samuel Suchodolec's map of 1705, where the village of Stare Miasto appears, although unfortunately the location of the Zamkowa Góra/Castle Hill site itself is obscured by text (Fig. 2). A far more precise representation of the topography is contained in Friedrich Leopold Reichsfreiherr von Schrötter's map of 1796–1802. It details the entire moraine hill complex with the label Zamkowa Góra (German: *Schlossberg*). The site constituted a landscape dominant, and the steep slopes were emphasised

[3] Rudolf Grenz, Archive in Schleswig, Zentralkatalog der Uhr- und frühgeschichtlichen Funde von Ostpreussen, 25. Kr. Osterode (typescript). Access courtesy of Dr Roman Shiroukhov.

[4] Investigations of the motte in Dąbrówno, including recent ones, did not yield a definitive answer regarding its role in the town's defence system and rather ruled out a potential link with the castle's location (Swat, Wilczyński 2025).



Fig. 2. The Old Town on historical maps. A – S. Suchodolec, 1705 (based on GStA PK, XX. HA, D 10040); B – F.L. Schrötter, 1796–1802 (based on Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Map Department, Kart. N 1020–59); C – enlargement of Schrötter's map showing the village of Old Town, Castle Hill, and the mill (developed by A. Koperkiewicz)

by shading. To the west beyond the floodplain, we see the buildings of the village described as *Altstadt odr. Staremiasto*. To the north-east, above a stream flowing into Lake Dąbrowa Mała, there is a mill – *Altstadter Muhle* (Fig. 2).

Although these are already modern cartographic sources, they perfectly capture the logic of land use during the oldest settlement phase.

The comprehensive concept of past utilisation of the entire complex was recognised by Johannes Guise in his early 19th-century sketch, which uses the designation Gellenburg Castle. Guise marks the entirety of the upland as the remains of Gellenburg, not merely the most heavily fortified south-eastern section (Fig. 3).

After the Second World War, at the initiative of Jerzy Antoniewicz (who probably was not aware of the archival documentation), only the eastern part of the complex was given legal protection. This resulted in the heritage listing of only a smaller, incomplete portion of the complex. The first research step was an analysis of the topography and the systematisation of terminology within the Zamkowa Góra complex, which is clearly a multi-component settlement (Fig. 4).

The digital terrain model (DTM from ALS/LiDAR data), precisely rendering the topographic layout, reveals a spatially ordered and planned structure of an elongated *plateau* form extending along the western shore of the lake. The most distinct and regular part is the fortified area associated with component I ("small stronghold/castle" – an area of 600 square metres and 100 square metres inside the rampart) and component II ("suburbium/bailey" – area 1000 m^2). The whole has a trapezoidal form, with a base width ca 50 m and with a central axis measuring 110 m along the NW–SE line. Between components I and II there is a depression

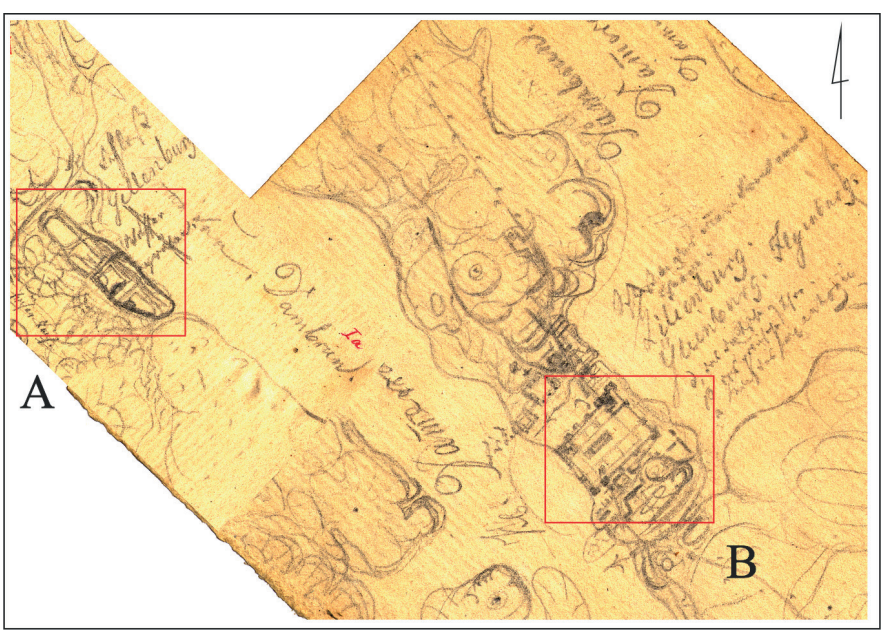


Fig. 3. Old Town on J. Guise's sketch. A – the village of Alt Stadt and Castle Hill – *Gellenburg* with the line of fortifications emphasized and the cemetery hill indicated; B – Dąbrówno (*Gligenburg*) and the record of historical names (*Lielienburg*, *Ylienburg*, *Ilgenburg* (after Guise 1826–1828; developed by A. Koperkiewicz)

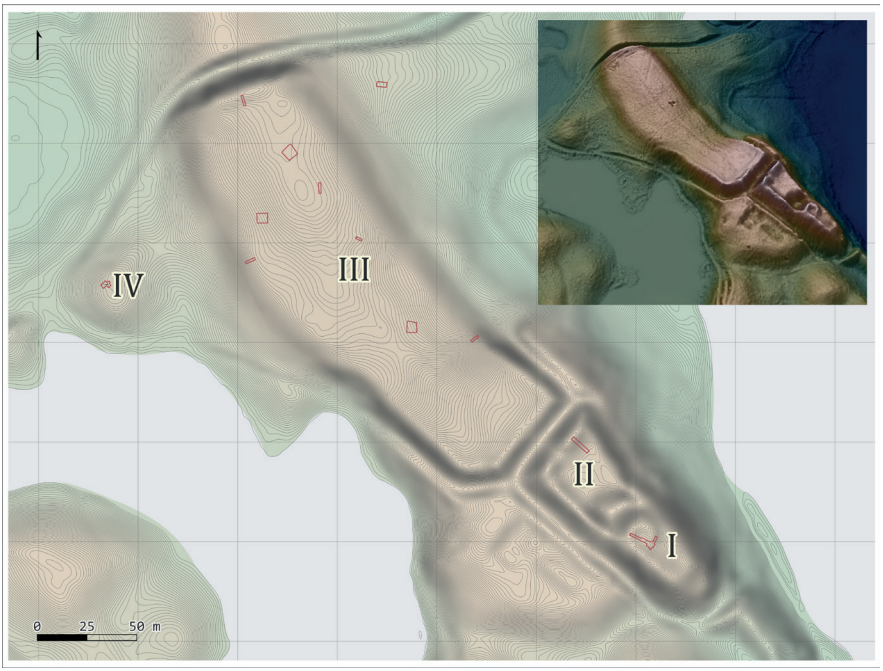


Fig. 4. Contour map and topographic model of the site and its identified elements: I – stronghold/castle, II – outer bailey/forecastle, III – settlement/pre-location, IV – church(?)/cemetery (developed by P. Wroniecki)

approximately 5 m deep that cuts off the central part of the complex. The ring of the rampart is clearly visible, as is the deep moat separating both components and the massive NW rampart with a central lowering interpreted as a gateway. Very steep scarps descend toward the waters of Lake Dąbrowa Mała, situated approximately 20 m below. To the south, a semicircular rampart (breastwork?) adjoins the stronghold, approached by a gently sloping platform towards the lake.

The third part of the complex (component III – settlement, remains of the first city) extends along the ridge to the NW and measures approximately 230 by 60 m. The total area is approximately 1.5 hectares. It takes the form of an initially regular quadrilateral with a truncated corner on the SW side. Further on, the surface drops slightly, transitioning gently into a plateau whose slopes are rounded by erosion and agricultural activity. On the NW side, the terrain form is closed by a small embankment with a steep slope towards a ravine. In the western part of the complex, a small, separate hillock (component IV) is discernible, which – as fieldwork in 2025 demonstrated – corresponds to the location of a cemetery, presumably around a church.

Below the fortifications from the southwestern side, we see an anthropogenically transformed area from where the soil for profiling was probably obtained.

The interpretation of the DTM topography image from the SE perspective effectively organises the entire composition of the site. At the NW closure of the elevation, LiDAR suggests the presence of a transverse terrain obstacle (rampart/embankment) running roughly perpendicular to the axis of the complex and closing off the access zone from the north. In the broader landscape context, there is a contrast between the elongated, anthropogenic form of Zamkowa Góra/Castle Hill and the moraine relief of the Lubawa Garb, with local depressions and wetlands (Fig. 1).

Analysis of geophysical data

The magnetic surveys conducted in the autumn of 2025 proved groundbreaking in identifying traces of the town's foundation. The survey results overlaid on the terrain model reveal an exceptionally dense and, at the same time, well-ordered assemblage of anomalies on the *plateau* of component III. This is one of those cases where the building plan is legible almost immediately (Fig. 5).

Apart from modern disturbances resulting from agricultural work and electricity poles, in the central part it is possible to distinguish clusters of anomalies with

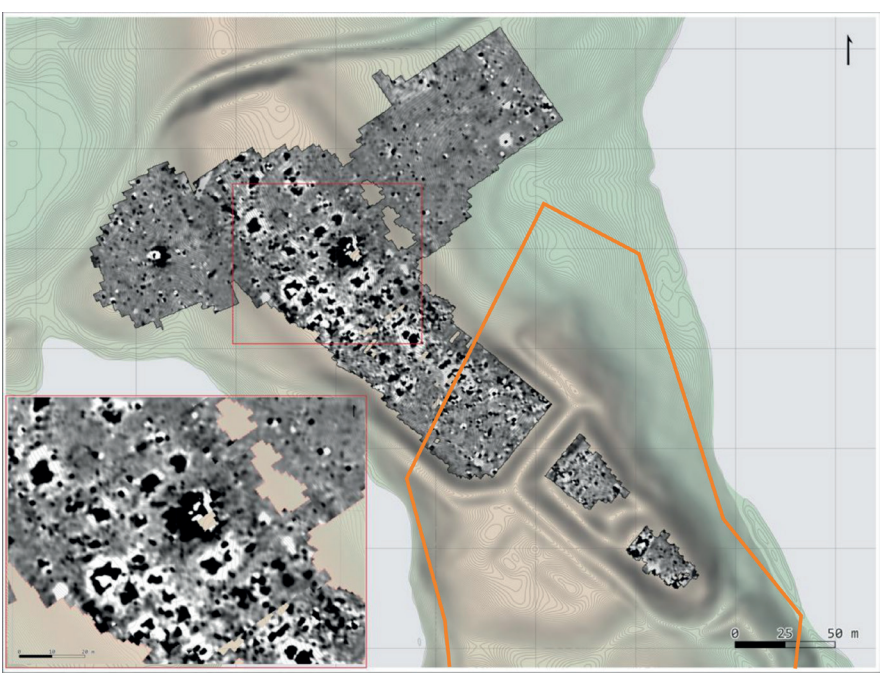


Fig. 5. Old Town, commune of Dąbrówno, site I, Castle Hill. Planigraphy of geophysical anomalies with a regular layout of buildings in the central part, orange line – protected are (developed by P. Wroniecki)

near-rectangular shapes, consistent in dimensions and arranged in regular bands along the NW–SE axis. This pattern is reminiscent of plot-based settlement with rows of houses facing communication routes. Within this field, a zone clearly devoid of anomalies can also be identified, measuring approximately 35 by 35 m, tentatively interpreted as a public space – a "square/market" (Fig. 5). In the first part of the site, within the ramparts of the "hillfort", we can see a strong anomaly, perhaps a basement of the structure (Fig. 5).

The character and arrangement of the anomalies are consistent with the scenario of the destruction of the timber buildings (including timber-framed structures) and the secondary infilling of sunken features: cellars, post-holes, and storage pits. The magnetic method registers both burnt material (clay, daub, charcoal) and concentrations of iron and craft waste. Features filled with rubble and post-fire deposits reflect the underground remains of buildings. Based on the anomaly map, areas for trial trenches were selected with positive verification results (Fig. 6).

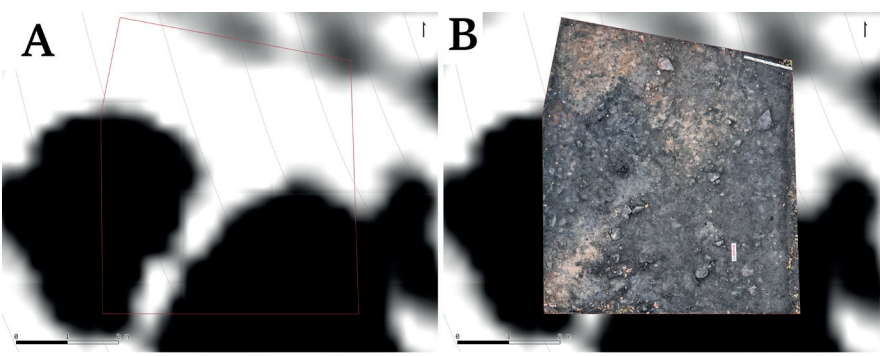


Fig. 6. Old Town, commune of Dąbrówno, site I, Castle Hill. Excavation trench. A – geophysical anomaly, B – archaeological exposure of the upper part of a feature interpreted as a smithy (developed by M. Marczewski and P. Wroniecki)

Analysis of data from surface surveys and trial excavations

On the accessible area of components I and II, metal-detector prospection, geophysical surveys, and trial-trench reconnaissance were carried out in 2022–2023. The significant quantity and quality of artefacts recovered during several days of fieldwork was surprising (Koperkiewicz 2023). The greatest concentration of finds occurred in the area of the "small stronghold" (component I) and on the eastern slopes descending to the lake. These were numerous medieval objects – crossbow bolt heads, a stamped axe blade, a sword cross-guard, a horse curry-comb, horseshoes, boat clamps, a multitude of heavy construction nails, and grey stoneware ceramics. Within the ramparts of the stronghold, in the context of conflagration

layers, a bracteate from the mid-14th century was found. This was an argument (still weak) revising the view that the watchtower was destroyed by Lithuanians as early as the 1320s. In the cross-section of the rampart closing component II ("bailey") from the north, faint remains of timber are visible, possibly from a structural framework (Fig. 7).

In July 2025, trial excavations of the stronghold (component I) were carried out. The aim was to investigate the character of the geophysical anomaly and to obtain materials for dendrochronological dating. In a small trench at the summit, the presence of a burnt layer and remnants of a burnt timber-framed wall (tower ?) with a layer of fired clay approximately 0.5 m thick were identified (Fig. 8). The too-small area investigated prevents an unequivocal determination of whether there was a cellar beneath the building, as geophysical data might suggest. No remains of masonry architecture were found. Several hundred artefacts were recovered from the conflagration layer – mainly ceramics, iron nails, and animal bones. Three crossbow bolt heads, a silver bracteate coin of the Shield with Cross type (minted ca. 1308–1318), and a fragment of a ceramic net weight were distinguished. The fortifications within the "stronghold" and "bailey" require open-area excavation. The form and character of the remains clearly indicate a small Teutonic Order foundation (the whole complex looks monumental). Such objects are far better known in the Chełmno Land, but even there the state of their investigation is minimal. They are sometimes called transitional castles, characteristic of Teutonic Order construction in the 13th century. In many cases, such timber-and-earth structures were built upon the remains of early medieval hillforts (Wasik 2016, p. 237). We

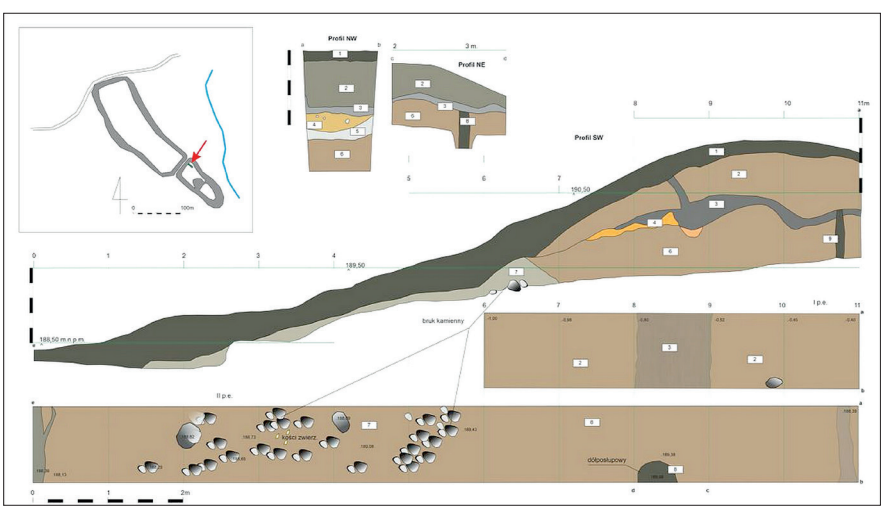


Fig. 7. Old Town, commune of Dąbrówno, site I, Castle Hill. Cross-section of the northern rampart of the "outer bailey" (developed by A. Koperkiewicz)

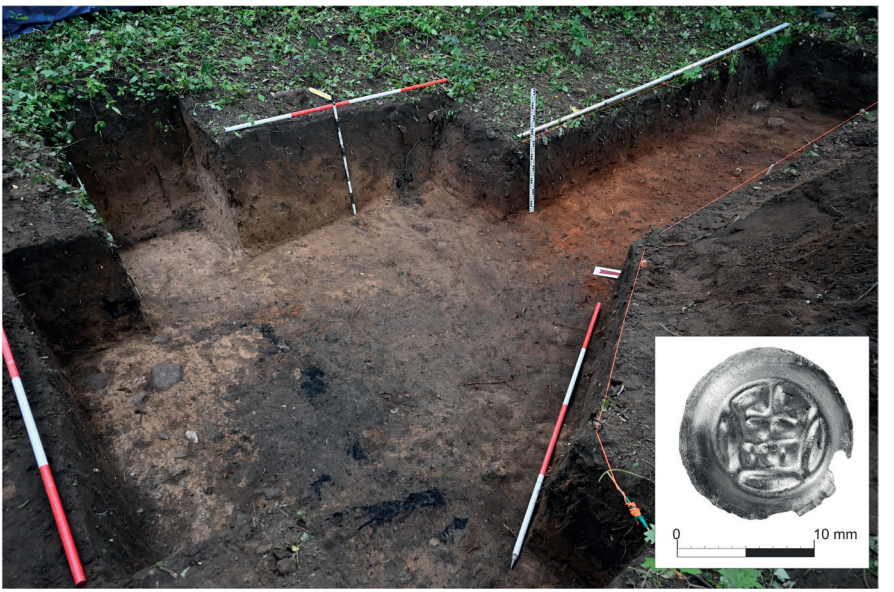


Fig. 8. Old Town, commune of Dąbrówno, site I, Castle Hill. Excavation on the "small stronghold" (part I) with the remains of a burnt structure during the 2025 test excavations and a coin dated 1337–1345 discovered in the 2023 burnt layers (photo by A. Koperkiewicz)

know, however, that this type of fortified structures could also be used much later, e.g., Pień (Poliński 2013). In our case, a basis for such a scenario is provided by the terrain itself, historical sources, and tradition. Nonetheless, the only archaeological confirmation so far consists of isolated pre-Teutonic Order pottery fragments found in the rampart fill of the stronghold (Koperkiewicz 2023).

In the autumn of 2025, a series of trial trenches verifying geophysical anomalies was conducted on the upland area (component III) (Fig. 9). The greater part of the terrain designated for investigation (approximately 70%) had been ploughed and sown with winter crops. The soil was in places clayey, very heavy, and saturated with moisture. Ploughing contributed to the exposure of a greater quantity of metal objects in the topsoil. The quantity and quality of artefacts recovered during several days of fieldwork was considerable. The distribution of finds across the upland area (component III) can be described as uniform, with concentrations in the vicinity of the excavated areas (trenches 3, 6, 8, 11).

Ceramic material occurred in very large concentrations, particularly in trench 6, even before the full excavation of the feature. Distinguished artefacts constituted approximately 30% of the total assemblage (Fig. 10).

The majority of metal objects were iron items: various types of forged nails (bretnals, hufnals), semi-finished products in the process of forging, belt buckles, crossbow bolt and arrow heads, hooks, knife fragments, a spur buckle, a spur

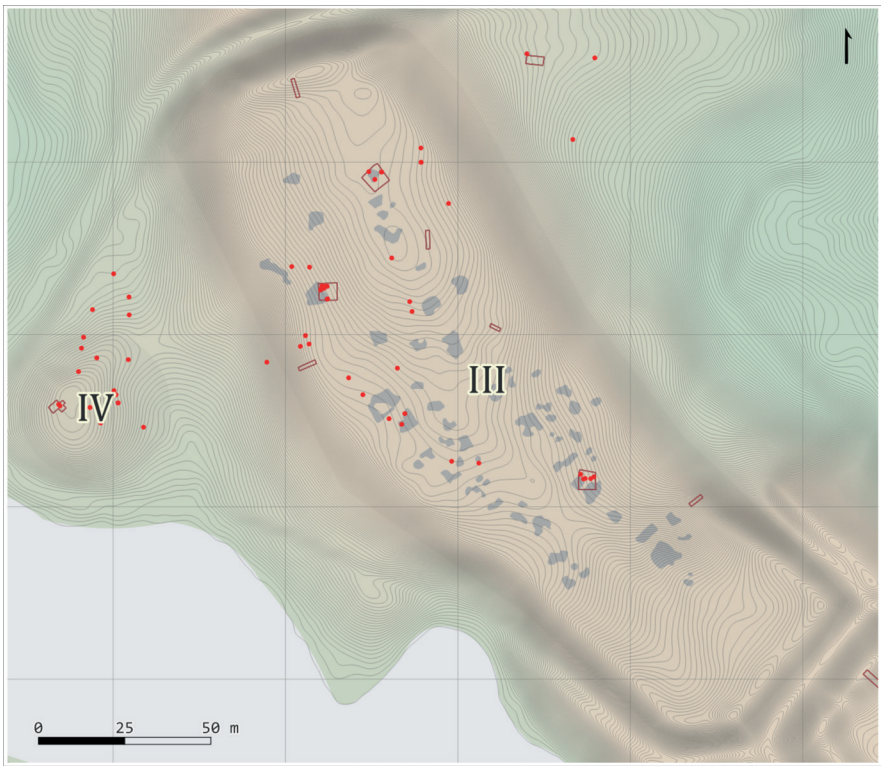


Fig. 9. Old Town, commune of Dąbrówno, site I, Castle Hill. Location of test trenches and artefacts against a background of geophysical anomalies (remains of medieval settlement). From the western side (IV), a hill with a skeletal burial ground (developed by P. Wroniecki)

fragment with a small rowel, horseshoe fragments, and boat clamps. The particularly high concentration of slag, iron sinter, and tool fragments within trench 6 suggests that this is the remains of a medieval smithy. Artefacts of copper and its alloys were represented by belt buckles, bronze dress brooches (an openwork brooch and a fragment of a star-shaped one), two rings with incised ornament, clothing and belt appliques, and a lead textile seal. A particularly interesting find was a rectangular copper plaquette measuring approximately 5.0 × 3.5 cm, with two holes and a motif of an isosceles Latin cross. This was presumably a knight's belt fitting. Among the numismatic finds, a silver bracteate pfennig of the Shield with Cross type from the emission of c. 1307/8–1317/1318 was identified. The oldest, though contextually unrelated, coin was a Roman silver denarius from the reign of Antoninus Pius (AD 138–161). Other, few coins dated to the early modern period.

The vast majority of the recovered ceramics is wheel-thrown so-called grey stoneware, fired in a reducing atmosphere. Standard forms are represented, that is,

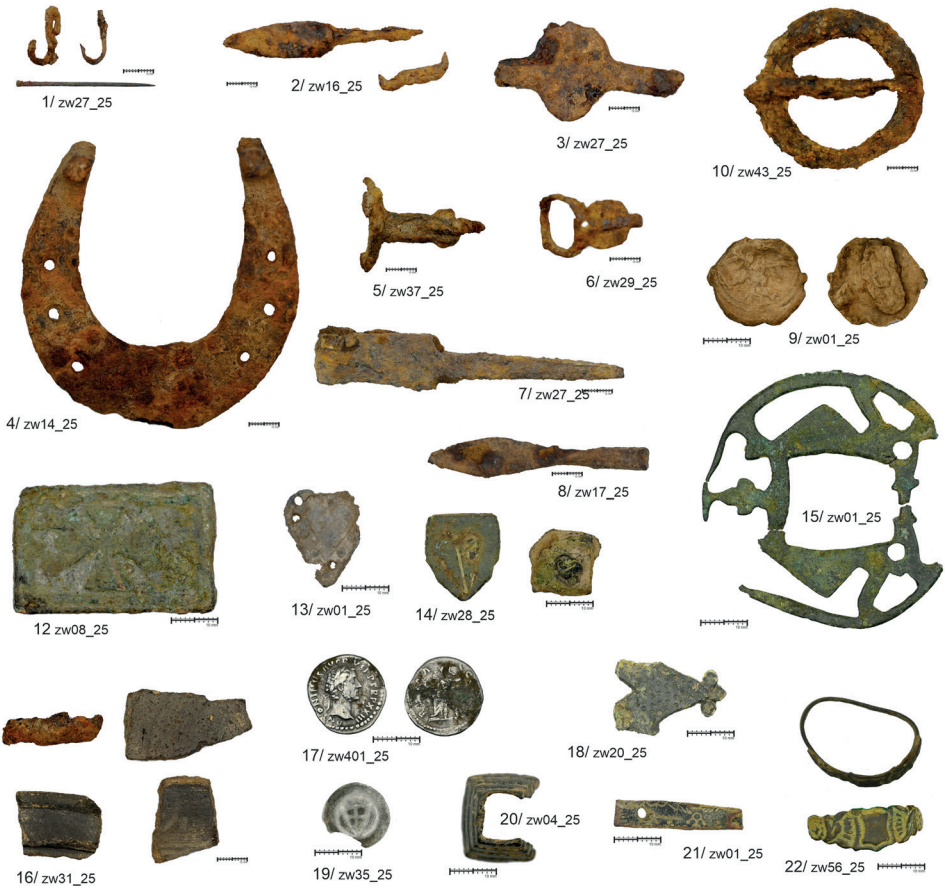


Fig. 10. Old Town, commune of Dąbrówno, site I, Castle Hill. Selected artefacts recovered during surface survey within the medieval complex: III (small settlement) and IV (burial ground) (photo by A. Koperkiewicz)

lids, pots, jugs, and bowls. The vessel surfaces bear ornamental motifs typical of the period – stamped impressions with geometric patterns and roulette marks. The vessels were generally very well fired, many of them thin-walled. The material points to the turn of the 15th century and the early 15th century. The entire artefactual assemblage can be characterised as typical of chartered medieval settlement.

An important element of the research was the uncovering of a cemetery on the slopes of a small hill in the western part of the investigated area (component IV). In trial trench 8, a human skeleton was exposed shallowly beneath the surface in anatomical position, with the head oriented to the west and the hands folded on the chest. Between the bones and in the immediate vicinity lay 3 fragments of medieval



Fig. 11. Old Town, commune of Dąbrówno, site I, Castle Hill, trench no. 8. A medieval human skeleton uncovered near the presumed location of the church (photo A. Koperkiewicz)

pottery and a piece of nail (Fig. 11). On the cleaned surface and in the profiles, traces of other grave cuts were observed. The character of the surface finds in the surroundings confirms the cemetery's location. Along the entire slope band, from the north, east, and south, fragments of human bones, belt buckles, and bronze dress brooches were found. These were clearly grave goods. A nearly complete openwork brooch and a fragment of a star-shaped brooch arm with an ocular ornament find parallels at the cemeteries in Gierdawy, Równina Dolna, Bezławki, and Barczewko (Goshler, Jahn 2013, p. 278; Koperkiewicz 2020a, p. 218). Pottery fragments found alongside the skeleton fit the pattern of a funerary ritual element observed at such necropolises (Koperkiewicz 2020b).

The identification of the cemetery's location raises the question of the church's position. Cemeteries usually indicate their location, since burial grounds were organised only around churches set somewhat apart from the central part of the town's buildings. It is very rare for such remains to be identified in the field (Biermann *et al.* 2025). Here, the chance of pinpointing the church's location appears

significant due to the limited area of the hillock. This would perhaps be the church mentioned in the sources as having suffered during the Hunger War (Möllenberg 1912, p. 90). Its subsequent fate is unknown. A noteworthy detail from Schrötter's map is that some sort of building is marked at this location. This is an area absolutely designated for rescue-verification excavations (Fig. 2: c).

Interpretation

The archaeological site of Zamkowa Góra/Castle Hill in the present-day village of Stare Miasto constitutes a compact medieval settlement complex with an area of approximately 2.8 hectares. In the SE part, it is a fortified area (components I and II); on the plateau in the NW part lie the remains of a medieval townlet (component III); and on the slopes of the hill in the western part – a medieval cemetery (component IV), originally most likely situated around a wooden church. If so, it would not be a typical model of an urban settlement where the church is integrated into the space close to the market square and the embankments (Biermann *et al.* 2025).

The geophysical anomalies are arranged linearly in two rows along the edge of the upland. These were cellars and sunken features beneath the timber buildings. The cellar remains contain remnants of burnt daub and charred structures. One such location was identified as the remains of a medieval smithy. In the central part of the elevation, the anomalies are arranged on a regular quadrilateral plan of approximately 35–40 m, open on the NE side. The spatial layout of the complex is measured and ordered.

On the surface and in the excavation trenches, objects typical of mid-14th-century settlement are found: iron nails and bars, iron slag, knives, buckles and spur fragments, horseshoes, boat clamps, arrow and crossbow bolt heads, and belt appliques of copper alloys. These are still not precise chronological indicators. Ceramic material occurs mainly where building remains are found; the latest series based on technology can be dated to even the early 15th century. The linear layout of the entire complex – from the fortified part to the long settlement platform – and the regular distribution of anomalies (remains of two rows of buildings) makes the designation *Ilgenburg* ("The Long Stronghold") almost literal in the field. If the interpretation of the research results is correct, Stare Miasto should be identified as the first urban foundation of Dąbrówno, organised alongside the remains of the stronghold known as *castrum Ylienburg*. The toponymy of Dąbrówno signalled in written sources finds its full justification here.

Discussion – the phenomenon of deserted town foundations

The urbanisation of medieval Europe completely transformed social structures, as well as the natural and cultural landscape. This process, initiated in Western Europe in the 12th century, culminated in the 13th century and covered the Prussian lands still in the 14th century, using the models of Magdeburg and Lübeck. The legal instruments developed in Magdeburg were transferred by the Teutonic Order to the new territory of Prussia, where the legislative template was provided by the privileges of Toruń and Chełmno. The political order within the urban commune was shaped by legal privilege. The authority of the city founder was the guarantor of respect for the law. In the case of Prussia, this was the corporation of the Teutonic Order and the bishops independent of it (Maleszka 2024, pp. 627, 631).

The first generations of settlers left behind a recurring phenomenon of "old towns" – abandoned or translocated urban foundations that we should consistently call "former town sites" (Polish: *mieściska*, German: *Stadwöstung*). Such sites have been identified in Hesse and Lower Saxony like Nienover, Landsberg, in Brandenburg like Freyenstein (Schenk 2009; Stephann 2010; Biermann, Schenk 2014; Biermann 2025). The reasons for the abandonment of these settlements included natural disasters, wars, invasions, proprietorial vicissitudes, the emergence of competing centres, and other events.

In recent years, thanks to the widespread application of non-invasive techniques, an entire series of deserted foundations (first locations then translocated) has been identified across Poland (Fig. 12)[5].

Over the past decade, research on the Warmian site of Barczewko has demonstrated the enormous informational potential of such sites (Biermann *et al.* 2025; Koperkiewicz 2025). An example of the effectiveness of these methods in forested conditions is Stolzenberg/Sławoborze, discovered in 2025 (Krzepkowski *et al.* 2021). The settlement history and terrain form of Stare Miasto near Dąbrówno are strikingly similar to the site at Barczewko near Olsztyn (Fig. 13).

Both complexes are small, not exceeding two hectares in area. They utilise the existing topography, and the buildings are entirely of timber construction. The dominant building material is oak. At Barczewko, analysis of the growth-ring series from charcoal samples made it possible to construct a dendrochronological scale reaching back to the 12th century. Several samples from Dąbrówno extend this chronology. The dense ring pattern in both cases is characteristic of trees from primeval forest (Elzanowska 2026).

[5] Examples of sites investigated comprehensively or by trial excavation: Stare Szamotuły, Dzwonowo, Nowa Nieszawa, Stary Rypin, Stary Toruń, and Starogród/Chełmno (*Późnośredniowieczny kompleks* 2016; *Dzwonowo* 2017; Wroniecki 2018, p. 99; Wroniecki *et al.* 2019, pp. 73–90; Wiewióra 2020, pp. 127–131; Poliński 2024).

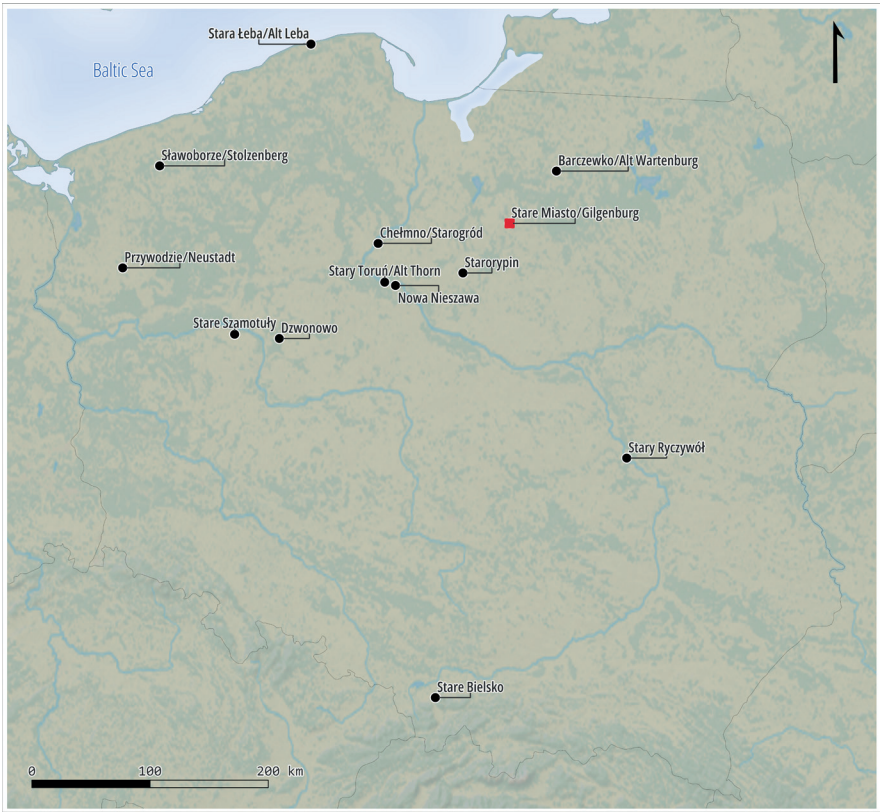


Fig. 12. "Old Towns" map – lost medieval first urban locations (before translocation) in Poland in light of archaeological verification (developed by P. Wroniecki)

In the case of Barczewko, relocation was forced by a cataclysm. The building of the colony began with the use of a bridgehead at a naturally defensible site, a former Prussian hillfort (site I – Romowa Góra on the Pisa River). The first urban centre (*castrum Wartberg*) was established under its protection. After a catastrophic raid in 1354, the urban foundation at Barczewko was relocated in 1364. Despite certain similarities (orientation, the church's position relative to the market square), it is an entirely different complex, realised comprehensively together with a masonry castle integrated into the defensive circuit (Biermann *et al.* 2025). The situation is similar in Dąbrówno (where the castle question remains unresolved), where the town on the isthmus between the lakes represents a classic development of the medieval Teutonic Order town model.

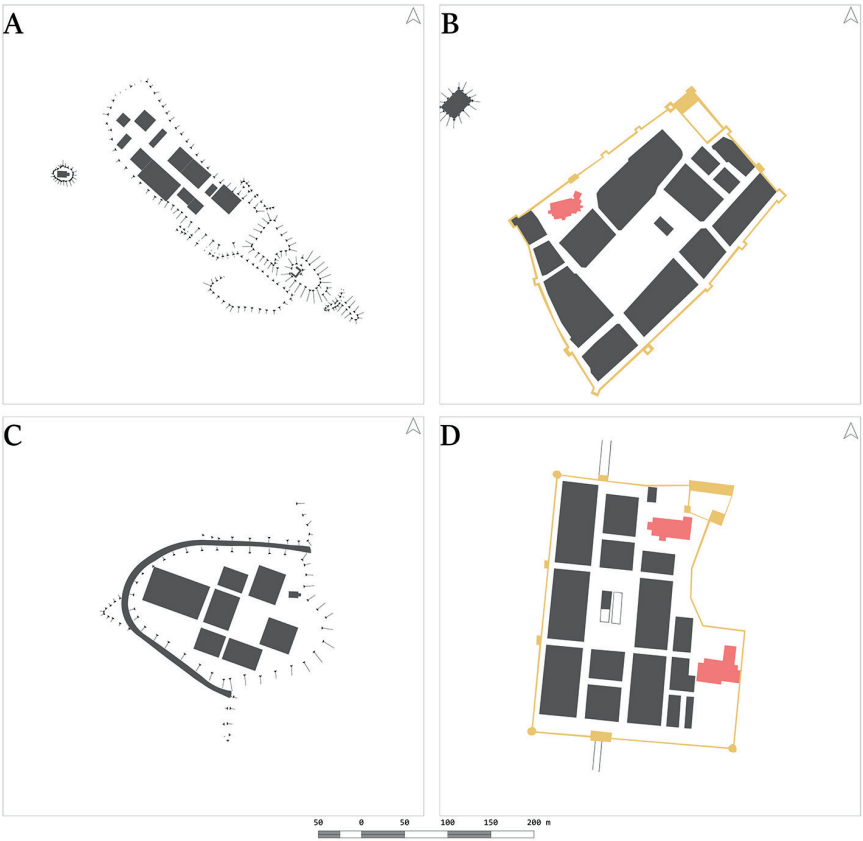


Fig. 13. Comparison of settlement layouts. A – Old Town (*Alt Stadt*), Castle Hill hill 1316/1326 (?); B – Dąbrówno/*Gligenburg* 1326; C – Barczewko (*Alt Wartenburg*), Stare Miasto hill ca. 1325–1354; D – Barczewo/*Wartenberg* 1364 (developed by P. Wroniecki)

The settlement model of first generation

The examples of both sites (Castle Hill and present-day Dąbrówno) allow the presentation of a hypothetical scenario for the settlement process. The main features of such foundations comprise a concentration of buildings within a small area, an adaptation of existing and naturally defensible terrain forms, an absence of masonry architecture with instead timber (framed) construction, timber-and-earth fortifications, weak "fencing" of the "town's" perimeter, the laying out of a central square or main street and planned plot division, the temporariness of solutions, and the absence of developed cultural layers. Such sites represent – to borrow medical terminology – a prenatal state, or the germination of a town: the first stage in the

organisation of an urban community. We may speak also – referring to the origins of Toruń and Chełmno – posit that the earliest centres were "fortified camps" (*Ziemia chełmińska* 1961, p. 23).

These were well-considered foundations, measured out and spatially ordered according to the rules of the town construction. Organised residential and economic infrastructure was needed, along with a centre integrating the entire commune (a market square?) for commercial and judicial purposes. This may be why the geophysical image reveals regular rectangular market squares. The logical complement of the whole was the sacral zone with a church and cemetery. Historians emphasise that the foundation charter was the seal of a completed, successful investment. The privilege was usually issued sometime after the arrival of the pioneers, allowing the community to consolidate and achieve a stable development path. Hoever different it was and for example Toruń and Chełmno have privileges at the very beginning. At the "prenatal" stage of development, there may not yet have been a legal act, although the basic features characteristic of an urban organism had been already formed – plot division, a central place (a market/*mercatorium*), economic infrastructure (bathhouses, breweries, smithies), a church with a cemetery, and a mill. The first generation of settlers thus built the framework, thereby preparing the conditions for the next generation's existence.

As settlement development intensified, the area of the first town (called "Old" in commemoration) could be absorbed by the new one or become part of a village. In both cases cited here, but also applying to Old Toruń, for example, the later village arises next to, rather than literally atop, the ruins of the first foundation. In Stare Miasto, the village buildings extend far beyond Zamkowa Góra, on which the cemetery and church appear to have been retained. This is visible in Schrötter's map. In Barczewko, the absence of secondary construction is explained by the perception of the Stare Miasto hill as sacrum belonging to cemeteries. Here too, a developed village requires far more open terrain than the point-concentrated and topographically inconvenient so-called transitional town.

The question of the 1410 Grunwald Campaign

The presence of mid-14th-century coin in the conflagration layers of component I of Zamkowa Góra calls for caution regarding the older hypothesis that the settlement was destroyed by a Lithuanian raid in the 1320s. It could equally well have happened much later, but we do not know. Given the presence on the surface of a fairly significant (though not massive) quantity of militaria and evidently late ceramics, the possible role of Zamkowa Góra during the Grunwald campaign of 1410 also needed to be considered. The concept of Jagiełło's army's march proposed by Professor Sven Ekhdal assumes that the army, bypassing Dąbrówno from the

west, encamped on the fields of Wierzbica, from where on the evening of 13 July it launched an assault on the town (Grabarczyk 2011, p. 14; Kwiatkowski 2015, pp. 37–41; Ekhdal 2018, pp. 245–246). Under such a scenario, the troops would have had to pass through the village of Stare Miasto, and Zamkowa Góra would have been noticed as an ideal campsite at the very least. Historical sources are silent on the matter, and the surface material is too limited a sample to attribute a direct connection to military operations[6]. We recall that the church in Stare Miasto sustained damage four years later yet survived. Did it thus survive the battle of 1410, or was it destroyed and rebuilt by 1414? At this stage of research, the hypothesis that the village suffered during the events of the 13th July 1410 can be treated as one of several unconfirmed scenarios.

Conclusions

The results of the conducted research allow the statement that the Zamkowa Góra/Castle Hill in Stare Miasto constitutes a compact medieval settlement complex whose spatial layout – a fortified stronghold/castle (components I and II), a townlet with regular plot-based settlement (component III), and a cemetery with a church (component IV) – corresponds to the model of a small urban centre location in Teutonic Order Prussia.

The site shows a striking resemblance to the archaeologically confirmed first location of Barczewo in Barczewko. The form of the complex, the character of the finds (grey stoneware, bracteates, militaria, utilitarian objects), and their chronology (14th/early 15th century) unambiguously point to chartered settlement. Stare Miasto should most likely be identified as the first urban foundation of Dąbrówno, organised alongside the remains of the watchtower *castrum Ylienburg* ("The Long Stronghold"). The toponymy of Dąbrówno signalled in written sources finds full justification in the light of the conducted research.

Taking Peter of Dusburg's account literally and comparing it with the research results, there are grounds to believe that the complex of remains at Stare Miasto is the first town Dąbrówno (German: *Gilgenburg*). At the current stage of research, it cannot be definitively stated whether the foundation charter was issued literally for this site (to which we are inclined) or already for the town in its present location. Dendrochronology of the buildings in today's Dąbrówno indicates that the oldest building was erected there in 1328. Masonry construction, including the town walls, was not undertaken until the mid-14th century (Poklewski-Koziełł

[6] We are, however, aware that the intensity of metal finds in a given area can vary. This is evidenced, for instance, by the history of searches on the Grunwald fields (Ekhdal 2018, pp. 257–258). A prospection involving a large group of searchers organised on the fields of Wierzbica and Stare Miasto likewise failed to produce results that would help establish the army's route of march (Górecki 2025, p. 68).

1998; Maik 2002, pp. 236–239). The coexistence of both localisation at the same time need not be mutually exclusive, but one became village and the other a town where it exists to this day.

It is very likely that the first castle of Dąbrówno was the *castrum Ylienburg* on Zamkowa Góra, mentioned in a document from 1316. It was presumably a small timber-and-earth complex with some form of tower building at the summit of the upland. The scale of earthworks around it appears impressive, yet the whole gives the impression of an unfinished investment. This applies above all to the regular shaping of embankments in the southern part of the plateau (component III), as if the construction of a proper castle had been planned here. Given the scale of works at Stare Miasto and the research at Dąbrówno ruling out the existence of a castle along the north-western line of town walls, the scenario of the Teutonic Order official being seated at his original location on Zamkowa Góra appeared attractive. However, the investigations of the stronghold (admittedly still on a small scale) seem to argue against the presence of any more substantial building there (component I). The remains are disproportionately small relative to the scale of the fortifications themselves[7].

After the development of today's town on the isthmus between Lakes Dąbrowa Wielka and Dąbrowa Mała, the original location of the Old Town (Stare Maisto/*Altstadt*) became a village. Craft workshops may have continued to operate at the site of the first foundation. There are indeed burning layers present and structures here specific to a sudden event, but at the current stage of research we cannot unequivocally place this event in time. This question can certainly be resolved in the future by dendrochronology.

The site not only fits within the phenomenon of deserted medieval foundations in Teutonic Order Prussia, but is also consistent with the broad European context of research on the phenomenon of urbanization. The village near the site of the town's original foundation received the commemorative adjective *Alt*/*Stary* (Old) in its name, sometimes maintaining the continued use of the cemetery and church.

The original structure of the pre-location if it hasn't melted into the later structure of the city, constitutes a historical time capsule. These are the oldest phases of urban settlement (without subsequent disruptions), documenting the

[7] It seems that despite Professor T. Poklewski's authoritative statement regarding the absence of a castle within Dąbrówno's town walls (completely at odds with strong tradition, cartography, and the inventory from the late 1950s), the last word has not yet been said on this matter. The entire area of the presumed castle location (later the Finckenstein palace) should be investigated using currently available techniques, above all geophysics. Analysing the similarities between the early foundations of Old Towns (Barczewko/*Wartberg* – Stare Miasto/*Ylienburg*), it is worth noting the plans of the developed (relocated?) proper towns of Barczewo and Dąbrówno. Assuming, as tradition held, that in Dąbrówno a modest masonry official's house stood within the corner of the town walls, this is the same composition as in Barczewo (Fig. 12).

difficult beginnings determined by practical considerations (Biermann 2025, pp. 27, 38).

Sites such as Stare Miasto near Dąbrówno constitute a priceless and hitherto underappreciated resource of historical wealth, serving as a driving force for scholarly research and requiring urgent conservation protection. These are historical time capsules and natural museums set in still preserved natural surroundings and ancient landscapes.

Surface reconnaissance and trial excavations at Stare Miasto were conducted in 2023–2024 in connection with the National Science Centre project under the Opus 21 programme (2021/41/B/HS3/01694) entitled, "Barczewko – a history written in fire. The medieval lost town and the urbanisation of the Galindia Wilderness, 2022–2024". In the autumn of 2025, by decision of the Provincial Conservator of Monuments in Olsztyn, minimally invasive verification research was carried out on private land, outside the existing area of the heritage register listing. Research directed by Dr Arkadiusz Koperkiewicz (Institute of Archaeology, University of Gdańsk) with a field team comprising – Grzegorz Chojnowski, Michał Duchliński, Maciej Marczewski, Kamil Niedźwiecki, Andrzej Młynarczyk, Piotr Wroniecki, Radosław Zając[8].

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Abbreviations

AHP – Archaeologia Historica Polona

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