

## SUMMARY

### POLAND'S DIFFICULT BEGINNINGS

The author of the present book is an archaeologist who has been trying to substantiate his underground findings by information extracted from library shelves. Unfortunately, contemporary historians, archaeologists, art historians, linguists and numismatists all speak different "languages". This makes communication difficult, as a result of which researchers are reluctant to explore fields dominated by other disciplines that study the past in a different manner.

One of the problems hindering the interdisciplinary debate is the typical archaeological conviction that expanding databases improves our understanding of past reality. In addition, more and more scholars specialize in increasingly narrow fields and react negatively to "trespassers", especially if they undermine the well-rooted traditions. However, I believe that there is no other way to make progress than to take account of the necessary criticism.

In Chapter 2 (*Together or separately?*) I strongly support an interdisciplinary approach to the study of the Polish Early Middle Ages. It may sound like a truism but the cooperation between archaeologists and historians has been usually limited to the mutual borrowing of ready-made interpretations used to support hypotheses arrived at earlier. This reflects the traditional separation of the material culture within the studies of the past. The way out of this deadlock leads through the reference to and application of general anthropological knowledge with special attention to be devoted to the achievements of historical anthropology. Unfortunately, such a stance does not enjoy support among Polish academics, who usually treat the historical and the archaeological approaches to the Early Middle Ages separately, which results in visions limited either to the material or the verbal evidence of the social reality.

Chapter 3 (*The origins of Early Medieval states as an interdisciplinary problem*) deals with one of the obvious targets of the proposed interdisciplinary research, i.e. the early history of statehood in Central Europe. Available literature is immense but the factual foundations are rather weak, which results in interpretations being supplemented with imagination. The well-established evolutionistic approaches have been questioned mostly by archaeologists who implement the ever-growing archaeological databases. This, however, requires the development of theoretical concepts reaching beyond the schemes of common sense reasoning. The achievements of political and ethnohistorical anthropology too should be of great value here, especially in answering a long series of the still difficult questions.

*Early states in Central-Eastern and Northern Europe* are dealt with in Chapter 4 which offers a broad background for the arguments presented further on in the book. It contains a presentation of the earliest history of the Polish state as compared with the processes that took place around it. Such a regional perspective is obviously necessary to understand and

explain many "national" processes that cannot be reduced to a series of crucial events suggested by the written sources. Similarly, there is a need to devote more attention to confronting the still preferred deterministic explanation, which refers to some general mechanisms of the socio-political development, with the acknowledgement of the role of contingency and the interests of individuals. Hence the suggestion to avoid discussing the national perspectives of the Czechs, Poles, Ruthenians, Swedes or Hungarians and to replace them with studies of dynastic interests of the Premyslids, Piasts, Rurikids, Skjoldungs or Arpads whose actions eventually resulted in the creation of political nations.

In Chapter 5 (*From a "tribe" to the state*) I try to persuade Polish scholars to leave behind the deeply-rooted concept of a strictly tribal organization of the populations that inhabited lands located between the Baltic Sea and the mountains before 966 when our first historical monarch, Mieszko I, was baptized. Very vague written evidence as well as lack of archaeological evidence, which would demonstrate the existence of distinct regions of different material cultures, suggest that we should abandon the very useful but unsubstantiated vision of a political organization of increasing complexity where territorial aggregation is the main mechanism. This is an opportunity to finally remove the commonly accepted tribes of *Polanie* and *Wislanie* from the maps of the Polish lands in the pre-state period. These two "tribes", which are so important to our national consciousness, seem to be rather late creations of Polish historiography and, therefore, their place is on a library shelf alongside other mythical figures. The search for clear-cut divisions during the Polish Early Middle Ages may be replaced with a vision of a relatively uniform ethnohistorical region that was undoubtedly ethnically varied and politically dynamic but not to the extent that would allow external (archaeological, historical or linguistic) identification of any stable ethnopolitical territorial organizations.

The still prevailing, generally evolutionistic presentation of the history of important political-economic centres pales when confronted with the available information, a view argued for in Chapter 6 (*From a stronghold to a town*). The traditional vision of their gradual development from "tribal" strongholds to centres organized by the early states and later to charter towns is not convincing anymore. I try to explain this by pointing to structural differences in various phases. As a result, the misleading continuity of using the same sites is broken into a series of differently manifested results of changing political and economic circumstances. The archaeologically reconstructed history of the former Mazovian capital in Czersk is used as an example of such a "paroxysmal" (hi)story. A similar trend towards abandoning continuities in favour of structural changes has been recently observed in other countries where "towns" are treated as results of political strategies of investing in the socio-political infrastructure rather than just demographic-economic agglomerations.

Another bone of contention emerges from the dispute over the meaning of the silver "treasures" deposited in Poland around the turn of the 1<sup>st</sup> and the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennia - Chapter 7 (*From magic to the market economy*). Here the disagreement results from very different visions of the mentality of people living in the Early Middle Ages. It is a debate between those who analyze the findings using mainly economic (or even market-based) categories

and adherents of the concept that the economy was only one of many aspects of the Early Medieval reality, which also included "irrational" behaviour, e.g. magic and symbolic actions. Hence the suggestion of a confrontation between *homo oeconomicus* and *homo symbolicus*, which has potential consequences for research that has been effectively monopolized by numismatists who concentrate obsessively on exchange rates, purchasing power, prices, taxes, etc.

Chapter 8 (*From Piast to Mieszko*) deals with the dynastic legend of the Piasts, which is recorded in the first Polish chronicle written during the third decade of the 12<sup>th</sup> century by a monk traditionally called Gallus Anonymus. Most Polish medievalists have probably commented on this short story at one point or another and much paper has been used to argue for its (in)credibility. While not aspiring to join this complex discussion, I would nevertheless like to point out a possible unorthodox interpretation. Leaving aside all details (e.g. names, place-names and dialogues), one may recognize a very good description of territorial state formation by a family determined to achieve and sustain their paramount status. Its similarity to anthropological reconstructions adds a new dimension to the discussion of the origins of the Polish state.

Questions referring to the age, size and borders are typical for any discussion of early states. Unfortunately, the vagueness of available sources results in endless debates on the delimitation of the states over which reigned our two first rulers, i.e. Mieszko I (?-992) and Bolesław Chrobry [Boleslaus the Brave] (992-1025). Of special interest is the south-western border which provokes contradictory opinions of Polish, Czech and German scholars (Chapter 9 - *Silesia in the early Piast state*). I have tried to analyze the available historical, architectural and archaeological material without giving in to "patriotic" emotions. My conclusions point to the existence of an inter-state region which effectively kept its relative independence despite periods of growing domination by one of the three neighbours. Such a concept may seem hardly acceptable to scholars who cannot imagine such an undefined geopolitical situation.

Another controversy is caused by the stubborn search for *The first capitals of the Piasts* (Chapter 10). Historians gave Mieszko I and his son several centres designated to be their permanent seats. It is not easy to choose between the two main candidates, i.e. Gniezno and Poznań, especially given the fact that there are other towns just as eager to bask in this glory. My conclusion will once again disappoint all those who explore the Middle Ages looking for structures typical for much later times. The personalistic type of political power as well as logistical constraints forced those early rulers to travel "permanently" all over their domains in order to defuse tensions and assert their political supremacy. Therefore, the search for the capital should be considered a rather hopeless endeavour.

When discussing the earliest Polish history, one cannot ignore the crucial date of March 1000 AD when Emperor Otto III paid Bolesław Chrobry an unprecedented visit. This event traditionally called the *Gniezno Summit* (Chapter 11) provided the young state with an independent archbishopric and confirmed political independence of the Piasts whose power had been steadily growing over the years. The reasons, details and direct results of this

meeting of two powerful and visionary rulers are not obvious despite rather good coverage by written sources. Both monarchs seemed to promote their personal and dynastic interests that did not easily match. Controversies led to unclear tensions and hasty decisions which had far-reaching consequences. In order to understand these nuances, it is necessary to sketch a continental panorama of Otto III's imperial strategy in which Bolesław had a leading role to play. Unfortunately, the premature death of the Emperor in 1002 put an end to the stabilization of this new geopolitical structure in Central Europe where a belt of German allies was created, stretching from Venice to the Baltic Sea.

The last Chapter 12 (*And this is Poland*) focuses on the discussion about the very delicate problem of the origins of "Poland" and the "Poles". I find traditional concepts rather dubious, as they trace these names to the ancient past when the centre of the Polish lands was allegedly inhabited by "Polanie" whose tribal organization was a foundation upon which the Piasts built their state. Polish historiography *en bloc* ignores the sheer fact that there is not a single credible source that would mention this important "tribe". In my view, our national choronym and ethnonym appeared both as late as c. 1000 when they were "invented" with the aim of allowing detailed identification of the new political structure that had taken a stable foothold in Central Europe. In addition, it seems that this initiative originated abroad and was only later accepted by Bolesław Chrobry, though in a distorted form, which during the High Middle Ages was explained by the early historians who simply invented the "Polanie".

\*

The present book demonstrates the interpretational potential offered by interdisciplinary criticism of the current state of our knowledge of the pre-state and early-state period of the land between the Baltic Sea and the Carpathian and Sudeten mountains. The results of such discussions strongly suggest that we are still far from establishing a clear vision of what happened during that time. We definitely need to expand the theoretical foundations of our studies of the period, which should help us to reinterpret many of the deeply-rooted concepts that do not hold up to contemporary criticism. At the same time, it seems necessary to turn again to the original sources but without the baggage of the earlier convictions.