

From the Great Poland to the Little Poland: the ruling Piast dynasty and the processes of creating the regions

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Sandomierz; 9th–11th centuries; political centre; state formation; material culture

Introduction

In the dynastic legend of the ruling Piast family preserved in the oldest chronicle of Polish history (written in the early 12th century by the so-called Gall Anonym), the beginnings of the Polish state go back to at least the second half of the ninth century – and so to the times of the predecessors of Mieszko the First – the first historic ruler of Poland (Galli, I, 1). As a consequence, although Poland came to the notice of its European contemporaries only after its conversion to Christianity in 966, in the opinion of many investigators the period from the end of the eighth to the beginning of the tenth centuries was regarded as the last stage of the creation of the state.

The latest results of archaeological investigations show a new scenario of events relating to the beginning of the Polish State. Firstly – the traces of a catastrophe affecting the tribal centers are noted, such as general traces of fire and desertion. These traces have been documented in many places in Great Poland. Secondly – the replacement of the zone of construction of the parts of the region defended from the south-west in the eighth to ninth centuries and in northwest Great Poland about the middle of the tenth century. Thirdly – these events were accompanied by the considerable demographic changes: the desertion of former ‘tribal’ territories, and the forced population of northeastern – ‘Piast’ areas of the region. In the light of new investigations one can suggest that in some areas there was a notable depopulation, which lasted many decades (Kurnatowska 2000).

Since the mid of the 10th century in Great Poland, an enormous investment boom is ob-

served through archaeological and dendro-chronological data. As a result, dozens of strongholds were erected in the region under first Piasts ruling, which as a consequence, caused very deep deforestation of the region – confirmed by the new environmental data (see Krąpiec 1998; Tobolski 2001). During two generations the core of Gniezno State (*Civitas Schinesghe*), was accomplished around 960.

On the Polish territory there was another rivalry region, where evidence of early state organization are recognized; I mean the Little Poland (Małopolska) region well known from archaeological and written sources (let us note the characteristic ending with ‘Polska’ – Poland – similarly to ‘Wielkopolska’ – Great Poland). But what is surprising for many scholars, Little Poland, well organized on political and economical levels, lost its historical chance before the rising of the Polish state.

The 9th century in Little Poland: from prosperity to catastrophe

Little Poland with Cracow – its main urban political and administrative center, in the late tribal period (9th century) was, according to many scholars, on the highest level of political and economic development of the whole Polish land. Throughout Little Poland were running the main commercial routes of inter-regional and international range in the 9th century. The whole region was also rich in many natural resources (including minerals and salt salines) and high quality loess soils suitable for agriculture.

In the late 9th century the first political organization known as ‘Vislane State’, was ruled by

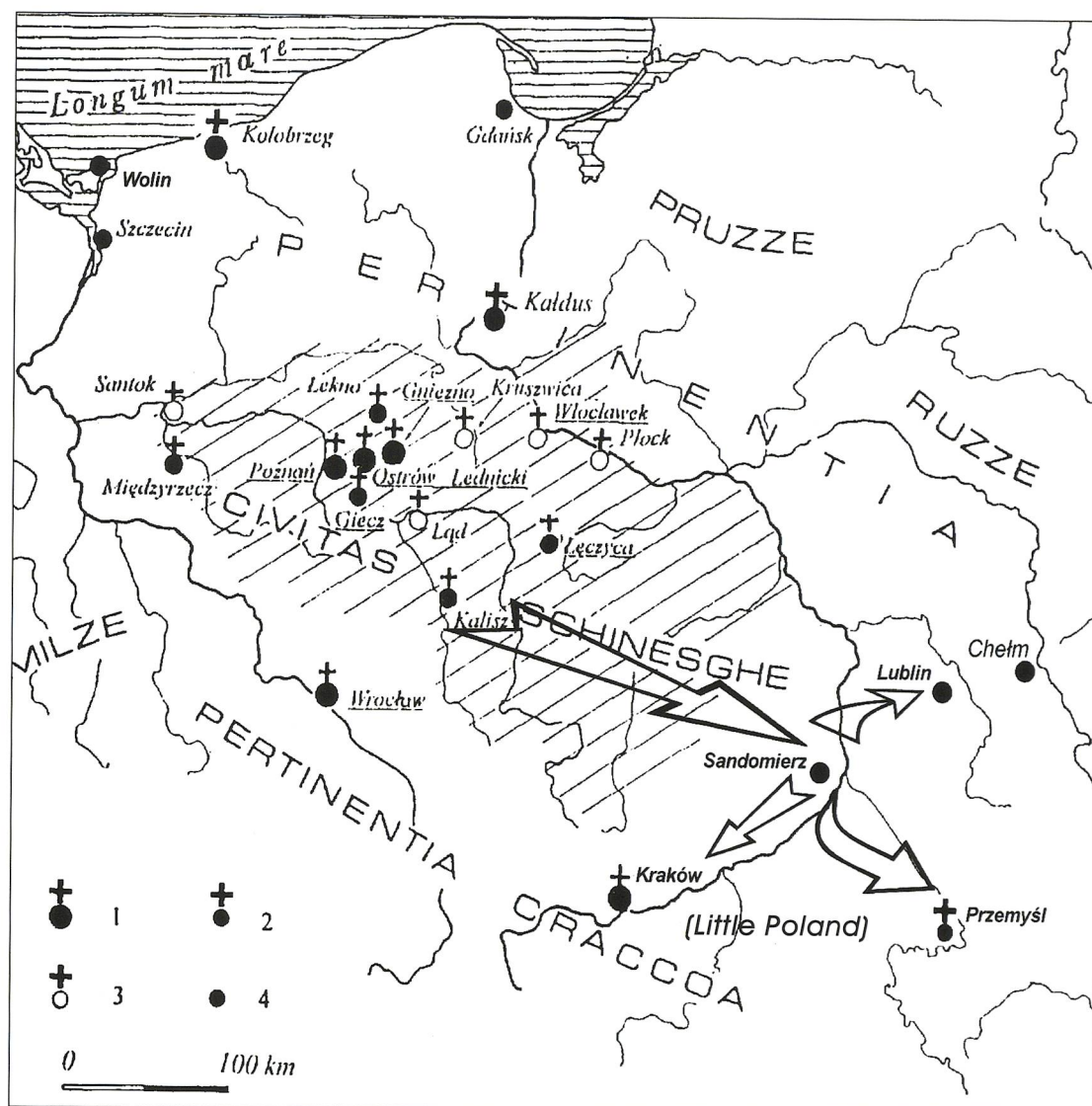


Fig. 1: Early Piast's state (Civitas Schinesghe) and Little Poland in the late 10th–early 11th centuries: 1 church confirmed by written sources (or archaeological evidence) sited in the central places of the state; 2 other churches (or chapels) confirmed by written sources or archaeological evidence; 3 presumed sacral monument; 4 stronghold (after Z. Kurnatowska, completed by the author).

a prince (described by the chronicler as “pagan” and “very powerful”) which is confirmed by written sources (Ciruli, 11). But what is surprising is that the idea of State consolidation was born not here, but in Great Poland which was not so rich, and not so well organized.

There are two important factors responsible for this situation. First – Little Poland never was a unified territory and with a single cultural tradition. The basic division between Cracow (in the west) and Sandomierz (in the east) provinces (since 12th century principedoms), was fundamental from the beginning (Buko 1998, 53). More specifically, the political status of the whole eastern periphery of Little (Labuda 1988, 264–293).

The Piast's rulers in Little Poland in the light of archaeological evidence: making the region and its main political centers

After the middle of the 10th century, a particularly suitable moment to the Piast's rulers to extend their domain from Great Poland towards the south matured. Their homeland (Great Poland) was at this time politically and materially consolidated. Religious conversion from paganism to Christianity in 966 offered to the prince Mieszko political and religious rights to conquest surrounding pagan territories, then incorporate them into his new-born state.

But Cracow – the biggest medieval early urban center on the whole Polish territory was under Přemyslid's dominance. Probably due to this fact, the Piast rulers created in the same region (150 km to the east of Cracow) Sandomierz – a competitive "their own" political center in the east of region (fig. 1) which rapidly achieved the highest political range of 'sedes regni principalis' (the central place of the kingdom).

There are three independent groups of archaeological evidence showing the direct links between Great Poland area and Sandomierz itself observed through its material culture from the late 10th to the 11th centuries. The first one relates to a massive number of pottery (over 30% of total number of finds) with characteristic sharp shoulders, produced with high content of ferrous clay (the producer refused to use white clays – very popular in Little Poland). Their appearance in Sandomierz in the late 10th century corresponds with the rapid growth of the oldest early urban settlement. Therefore, it is very probable that together with the incomers following Piast warriors, builders of early Sandomierz as merchants, clergymen and administrators, many craftsmen, including potters with their native tradition came to Sandomierz Upland – what can be recognised through style and fabric of many pots preserved in layers of the oldest medieval town (Buko 1981, 189–195).

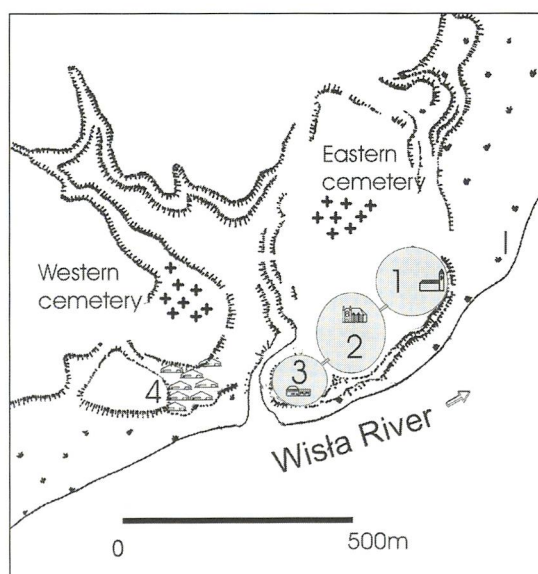
Another interesting data come from analyses of 178 graves from St. Jacob's Hill (the oldest Sandomierz cemetery) dated to the late 10th to the 11th centuries. The differentiation of

the cemetery into north and south areas corresponds not only as suggested before with quality and quantity of grave goods – as showed by J. Gąsowski (Gąsowski 1968, 432), but also, as results from anthropological investigations (see Rysiewski (1991 [1992]) that two different populations are buried in the same place: in the southern part the local inhabitants, but in the northern immigrants from Great Poland.

The last group of evidence relates to the latest investigations of fortified power centers from the area under investigation. In the area of Sandomierz in the 10th century many changes occurred, the mechanisms of which are a reflection of the violent and dramatic process of state-formation that are under archaeological observations. The burnt remains of the stronghold at Podgórze near Zawichost and further to the east on the Old Town Hill at Lublin, the abandoned settlement complexes at Złota near Sandomierz, are witnesses to dramatic events which occurred in this tribal territory at the threshold of history, at the period of formation of the Polish state. Similarly to Great Poland, the main political and administrative centres were relocated after the middle of the tenth century. Instead of the tribal stronghold at Zawichost-Podgórze and the defended settlement at Złota, the Sandomierz *sedes regni principalis* appears.

The foundation of Sandomierz was therefore part of a strategic plan of the building of the Polish state and extending it into Little Poland. The newly built town (fig. 2) was sited in an area relatively easy to take over – on the political periphery occupied by the small tribe of the borderland located between Vislane, Lendzane, Mazowszane and Polane, but at the same time, at a strategically important point. The ease of annexation of this territory resulted not only from the military potential of the Gniezno state, but, to no less degree, from the weakness of the neighboring tribal alliances. Lendzane on the east were dominated by the Kiev Rus rulers and they paid them in this time a tribute. However, Vislane with their main center Cracow – on the west, were dominated by the Přemyslid's rulers. With the founding of Sandomierz – a center of such importance – the Piasts created an unrepeatable chance for gaining full control (along the San river valley) over Lendzane tribal territory and further a field – the whole frontier region (Buko 1998, 81–84).

Fig. 2: Schematic layout of 11th century Sandomierz: 1 B Gostomianum suburb with stronghold defences and St Peter's church; 2 B Cathedral suburb with stronghold defences and Blessed Virgin Mary collegiate church; 3 B stronghold chapel; 4 B area of dense open settlement on St. Jacob Hill.



Sandomierz *sedes regni principalis* and other centers

The rising of Sandomierz in the late 10th century was the first step of incorporation of Little Poland to the Gniezno State. According to archaeological data, one can suppose that building Sandomierz, the Piast rulers projected a foundation for two other centres on the eastern borderland of Poland: sited to the N-E from Sandomierz Lublin (Rozwółka 1997) and Przemyśl – in the south-east border area of Poland. The last one was probably planned by the first Piasts as a political symbol of their permanent and stable presence on the south-eastern edge of the newly built country. That is why in Przemyśl, on the Caste Hill, the monumental relicts of architecture were found: a palatium with rotunda church (fig. 3) from the early 11th century (Sosnowska 1992).

An archaeological enigma remains still the beginnings of Chelm – the capital of Galitch-Wolyn principedom from the Daniel Romanowitch times (before mid 13th century). The mysterious translocation of early medieval settlement in the late 10th century from place called Bielawin to the Cathedral Hill (cf. Ruszkowska 1990), shows a pattern similar to first Piast activities in the time of state formation. Does it mean that this early urban centre was founded similarly to Sandomierz Przemyśl and Lublin by the prince Mieszko – the Polish first historical ruler? This question is under discussion through the latest archaeological investigations (Buko/Dzięnkowski/Gołub 2001).

How Piast rulers organized Little Poland

Regardless of many gaps in our knowledge let us try to reconstruct a scenario of political events in Little Poland in the last quarter of the 10th century. The foundation of Piast domain in this region became Sandomierz – created as the main political center (*sedes regni principalis*) in this part of Poland. Together with the rising of the town, two other important centers appeared on the eastern periphery of Piast's domain: Lublin and Przemyśl. The main reason of their presence was to keep under control the old tribal territories of Lendzane and to protect the newly created state against Kiev Rus rulers on the south-eastern border. The

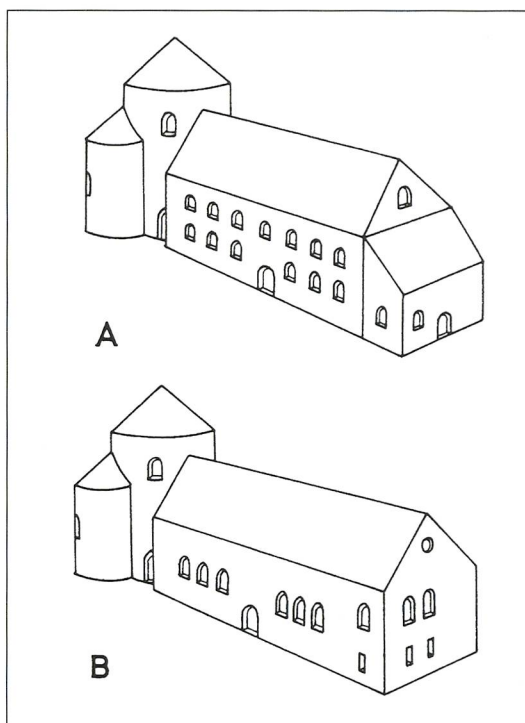


Fig. 3: Two possible reconstructions (based on archaeological evidence) of the rotunda-palatium complex in Przemyśl built by Boleslav the Brave (early 11th century).

military support for such a strategy offered, as the author believes, the system of mysterious (because unidentified till now) strongholds (because unidentified till now) strongholds known from the written sources as 'Červen Strongholds'; they were situated, as many scholars believe, somewhere between Chelm and Przemyśl.

The beginning of the process dates back beyond the year 981 when, according to the Volynian Chronicle (Latopis, 980–983), Vladimir of Kiev took Przemyśl and so-called 'Červen strongholds' from the 'Lachs' (Lendzane?). To the west, behind this first line of military forts, Lublin and Sandomierz were growing. This newly built system of Piast political power became solid only for a short period – confirmed by a short mention in a chronicle dated to 981 on military achievements of prince Vladimir of Kiev (as mentioned above).

Final remarks

The role of Little Poland in the beginning of the Polish state, regardless of many recent achievements, remains difficult to define. Let us remember: only in this part of Poland are traces of penetration of nomads such as Avars, Khazars, Petchengs and Magyars confirmed by archaeological evidence. Only here examples of architectural remains without analogies in this part of Europe – as the famous tetrakon-

chos in Zawichost (Tabaczyński 2000) or the mysterious tower with a small chapel on the 5th floor – remaining very much in the Byzantine style of eremite monasteries – are preserved in Stołpie near Chelm (Buko 2000, 157–158). Chelm itself – one of the most prestigious urban centers in south-east Poland – came before the middle of the 13th century of Rus Galitch-Volyn principedom under ruling of Daniel Romanovitch. Hence, on the cathedral Hill in Chelm, the monumental ruins of a palatium – one of the biggest on the whole Polish land, built in Byzantine (?) tradition are physically present under the soil (cf. Buko/Dzieńkowski/Gołub 2001). The material culture of Sandomierz – the main center in this part of the region under archaeological investigation, shows us a good example of cohabitation of cultural patterns characteristic for Rus-Byzantine culture and relating to West European tradition (Buko 1998, 127).

Finally, many questions not resolved yet by archaeologists and historians relate to the beginnings of Cracow – one of the biggest towns of 10th-century Europe, recognized in the mid of 10th century as one of the biggest Bohemian (!) urban centers by medieval chronicler Ybrahim ibn Jaqub. The quantity of architectural remains from the late 10th to the 11th century on Wawel Hill in Kraków is enormous and show remains of ideological patterns of spatial organization recognized in Akwizgran (Michałowski 1993, 87).

Contrary to main urban centers of Little Poland discussed above, we have no archaeological evidence of the violent military action which could relate to the incorporation of Cracow to the Piast state. According to the archaeological data and the written sources we can only suppose that the first step in creation of the new political order in Little Poland by

the Piast rulers was the occupation of Sandomierz Upland and the development in this part of Poland of a new political and administrative center. At the same time, some other early urban centers appeared, such as Lublin, Przemyśl and perhaps – Chelm, sited near the border with the Kiev Rus state. Hence, the beginnings of all of them in the late 10th century could be treated as a political act of a ruling dynasty. Such action involved, contrary to the western side of the region, notable urbanizations in southeastern Poland.

The newly built structure discussed above formed, as I believe, the foundation to taking away Cracow from the Czech hands. Contrary to the areas of eastern Little Poland, this action carried out probably in 989 was relatively peaceful; there is no archaeological evidence of catastrophes in the older tribal centers, including Cracow itself, growing without traces of interruption almost since the 9th century (Radwański 1975). Maybe Cracow with its vicinities was too well organized and economically well prospered. Significant symbols of its importance in the late tribal period are the monumental barrows of Krak and Wanda (princes graves?) with their beginnings going down to the late 8th century (Słupecki 1998). The Piast rulers, contrary to other territories of Polish land, not only accepted in this case “not their” old tribal centers of Vislane (including Cracow – the biggest one). But, what is also surprising – in the Cracow area, they refused to build (contrary to Sandomierz Upland) the new built early urban centers – symbols of their sovereignty – so characteristic also to other regions of Poland.

After the Břetyslav invasion to Poland in 1039, Kraków became for centuries the historical capital of Poland. The Piast's ‘mission’ – from Great Poland to Little Poland – was accomplished.

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