

## Pułtusk, an example of a sovereign stronghold of the bishops of Płock

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*Stronghold; settlement; bishop; castellany; document*

Because no document survives which gives the original extent and original structure of the Płock diocese endowed by Bolesław II the Bold, probably in 1076, it is recreated on the basis of thirteenth century documents. The diocese contained the lands in Mazovia on the right bank of the Vistula (Żebrowski 1994, 133). Initially in the possession of the bishopric was the large Pułtusk castellany, lands settled by the Bużan tribe, extending over an area of about 2000 square kilometres between the Narew, the territories around Nur and the Bug. These were forested lands with a predominance of free inhabitants (Łowmiański 1985, 359–361) (fig. 1). Before the conducting of archaeological investigations in the 1970s and 1980s on the Castle Hill and in the town at Pułtusk, there was the opinion in the literature that there was a stronghold here which had arisen in the tenth century (Gieysztor 1994, 107). But Pułtusk is not mentioned by name in any eleventh or twelfth century source (Kowalczyk 1994, 377; 380) and investigations of the oldest settlement show that the earliest date that can be assigned to it is the first half of the twelfth century (Gołembnik/Pela 1987, 46). It was the time when the diocese was under the care of the capable bishop Aleksander of Malonne (1129–1156) (Pacuski 1997, 15; Gieysztor 1994, 118). The bishop, working in cooperation and with the approval of both dukes Bolesław III the Wry-Mouth as well as Bolesław IV the Curly began the settlement of the eastern margins of his lands (Pacuski 1998, 159). The archaeological traces of the first settlement in Pułtusk of the twelfth century were uncovered in the south part of the island, surrounded by the waters of the Narew and its tributaries, surrounded by forests and swamps

(fig. 2: 1). It was an open settlement of sunken-floored huts (Gołembnik/Pela 1987, 46). The finds show that this was an agricultural settlement rearing cattle and using pottery which according to A. Gołembnik shows an advanced technology and is typical of that from Mazovia stronghold centres of this period. The clay is well prepared and tempered, the vessels are carefully turned and fired. They are of large capacity, a slim form with the rim curving out, a short conical neck, and with elaborate decoration. The vessels are dark beige and light brown in colour (Gołembnik 1987, 190). The first parish in Pułtusk was probably founded at the end of the twelfth century (Żebrowski 1994, 151). From documents of the thirteenth century we learn that the church was dedicated to Mary Magdalene (Łowmiański 358, n. 832). The remains of what was probably the first church on the island – a large rectangular wooden structure surrounded by a cemetery – was discovered on the eastern edge of an open settlement (Mierosławski 1995, 8) (fig. 2: 2). The period in which this settlement existed was a time of the growth of the bishopric and the organization of the lands of the diocese. In the creation of the property holdings of the bishops an especially significant role is occupied by the estate complexes known in the written sources from the beginning of the thirteenth century by the term *castellania episcopalis* or *castellania ecclesiae*. In the literature, the stronghold-territorial units which formed the organisational basis of the Piast state in the eleventh or twelfth century are known as estate-castellanies. With time, the castellanies in the church possession developed into stronghold territorial institutions of management of episcopal properties of special status. At the

beginning of the thirteenth century, four such castellanies in the lands of the Płock diocese made up two thirds of the bishop's possessions (Modzelewski 1980, 219–221).

The first inventory of the properties of this diocese has survived in a later copy, incorporated within a document issued by Duke Konrad I of Mazovia (Łowmiański 1985, 355). Although there is some debate over the authenticity and of the date of its creation, it is a valuable source concerning the state of the properties of the diocese before the beginning of the thirteenth century (Pacuski 1998, 154; Kowalczyk 1994, 376; Modzelewski 1980, 225). Four estate-castellanies are described in the first of the five parts in which the inventory is divided (Łowmiański 1985, 358–361). The largest is the Pułtusk castellany with its 63 settlements on both banks of the Narew, followed by the Brańsk castellany (9 settlements), then Brok (19 settlements) and lying furthest to the east the Święck castellany (42 settlements) (Łowmiański 1985, 359; 361; Modzelewski 1980, 221) (fig. 1). The probable reason for the compilation of this inventory on the orders of bishop Gunter (1227–1232) could have been the Prussian and Jaćwież invasions which caused the depopulation of huge areas of north-east Mazovia (Łowmiański 1985, 357; Pacuski 1997, 19). There is also an opinion that the document was created before the disturbances in Mazovia caused by the killing of the Voievoda Krytstyn in 1217 by the order of duke Konrad I (Pacuski 1998, 154). In the light of the archaeological discoveries, one of the consequences of the destruction was the burning of the open settlement on the island and the decision to build a new stronghold at Pułtusk. We do not know the exact date of the beginning of this work, but it probably took place between 1230 and 1232 (Gaśowski et al. 2000, 160).

Bishop Gunter died in Vienna on January 24, 1232 (CDMas., 312) on his way home from Rome where he had obtained confirmation of his diocese's possessions by Pope (Żebrowski 1994, 142). There is an original Papal Bull of January 27, 1232 issued by Gregory IX (CDMas., 278; 299; 320) which confirms the privileges, obtained by the bishops of Płock from Konrad I, including the freedom of the subjects of the bishop from the obligations of ducal law. In its text there is a mention that the people known as *ascripticii* are not obliged to

build strongholds (*castra*) for the duke but only strongholds in the ruined possessions of the Church (CDMas., 278; 302; Grzybowski 1997, 60; 62; fn 2,65).

The archaeological excavations have shown that the building of the stronghold at Pułtusk was begun with the levelling of the ruins of the burnt settlement and covering them with sand taken from the digging of a ditch which was to define the south-east end of the island (fig. 2: 4). A platform 2–3 m high, with dimensions of 60 x 90 m, was created some 5 m above the river Narew. Archaeological investigations have not located any traces of defences of earth or timber. On the south, for a short stretch the huts came up to the edge of the plateau, and the empty space along the eastern edge was built up in the middle of the thirteenth century (Mierosławski 1995, 11). Some northern and western defences on the ditch side were destroyed by the later walls of the castle (Gołembnik 1987, 160). The plan laid out at the beginning of the stronghold – three streets (designated by the archaeologists as eastern, central and northern) radiating from a point by its northern edge where there was

Fig. 1: Woods, forests and sites in Mazovia in the 11th, 12th century (by K. Lewartowski, based on Gieysztor 1994, figs. on pages 87; 95).



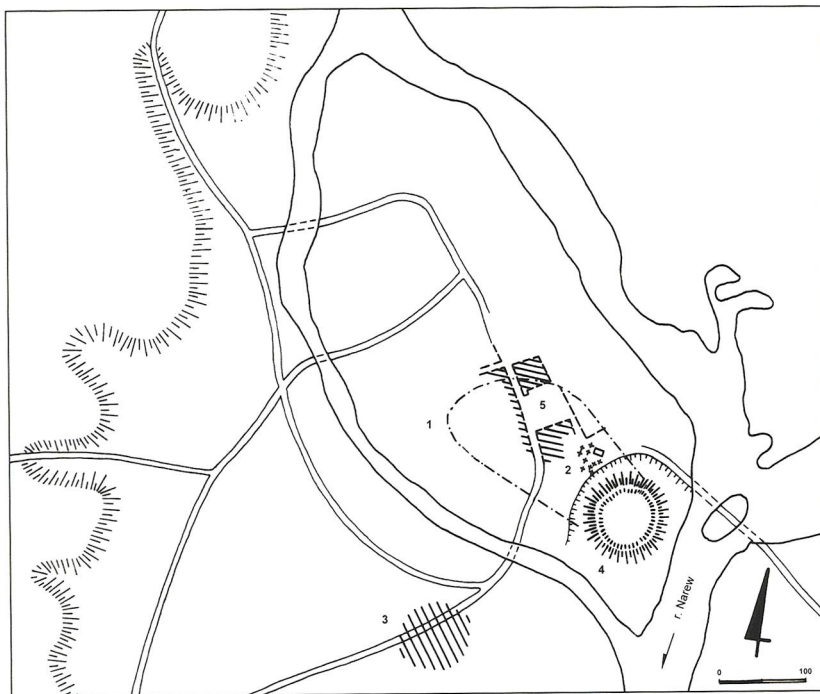


Fig. 2: The archaeological sites on the island at Pułtusk: 1 the estimate extent of the first open settlement, the first half of the 12th century; 2 the church surrounded by a cemetery, the end of the 12th, 13th–15th century; 3 an open settlement in “The Old Town”, the 12th–13th, 15th century; 4 the plateau and a ditch, the first quarter of the 13th century; the marketplace, the 14th–15th century (by Z. Polak, based on Pela 1992, fig. 7).

probably a gate – did not change even to its end (Mierosławski 1995, 11). The first huts (level 0) stood by the line of the eastern street which had not yet received its first surfacing (fig. 3).

The burnt settlement on the island was not rebuilt (Mierosławski/Pela 1989, 2), but on the basis of the examination of mass finds (pottery, animal bones), we know that its inhabitants – if they survived – did not move to the new stronghold. It turns out that the pottery found in the first layers of the new stronghold is different from that of the open settlement. The vessels are mainly large containers, very primitively produced hand-made, with a variety of admixtures in the clay and probably varying firing temperature. The coarseness is evident, the pots differ from the twelfth century pottery both in form and technology (Gołębniak 1987, 190). A place where they could have moved is another settlement located on the south side of the island, in a place today called “Old Town” (fig. 2: 3). Archaeologically poorly investigated traces of the settlement here can be dated back to the second half of the twelfth century and lasting at least to the middle of the thirteenth century and then again in the fifteenth (Pela 2000, 27). It is still impossible to determine whether or not it was here that we should envisage the open market settlement contemporary with the stronghold on the island.

The investigation of the animal bones from the lowest levels of the stronghold show that the bones of wild fauna, pig and horse are dominant – animals easily caught and reared or brought by the settlers. The number of cattle bones grew very slowly. (Mierosławski 1995, 8; Gołębniak 1987, 194). It means that the bishop could have brought some new settlers to this place. The written sources contain a record saying that around 1230 the Bużane were obliged to pay a normal tithe according to stooks of corn rather than in squirrel skins (CDMas., nr 267; 291; Łowmiański 1985, 359; 361).

It is possible to reconstruct the route of the bishop from Płock, through Mąkolin the rural manor (Pacuski 1998, 155, n. 36, 37). In the stronghold, which fulfilled an administrative function over the territory of the bishop’s properties in the Pułtusk castellany (Kowalczyk 1994, 378), there was probably some great seat of the bishop or his representative, who in written sources was called *miles de Poltovsk* (NKMaz.II 1989, 30), in the central, not excavated part of the stronghold. Traces of these structures may be discerned in two massive beams preserved in one of the courtyard fences. (Mierosławski 1995, 68). So far only the northeast edge of the stronghold has been archaeologically examined, the surroundings of the eastern street (60 m), and the central and northern streets (25 m each) (Mierosławski 1995, 12–13). Houses which occupied 30–50% of the plots along these streets were nearly always rebuilt on the same spot (Mierosławski 1995, 15) (fig. 3).

It has been possible to reconstruct 152 households, in which the basic element was the house constructed of tree trunks. Its walls were always of log (corner-joint) construction with the purlin roof. Ancilliary structures were built not only of frame construction, but also upright-and-stump and fence constructions. Two types of buildings developed from the simple log hut have been differentiated: houses with a frontal vestibule which developed from a single hut with a frontal veranda, and two-room houses with a central passageway created by joining two neighbouring huts with the vestibule. Only seventeen such structures have been reconstructed. From the beginning, all these forms of house and types of construction occurred alongside one another (Mierosławski 1995, 82–85).

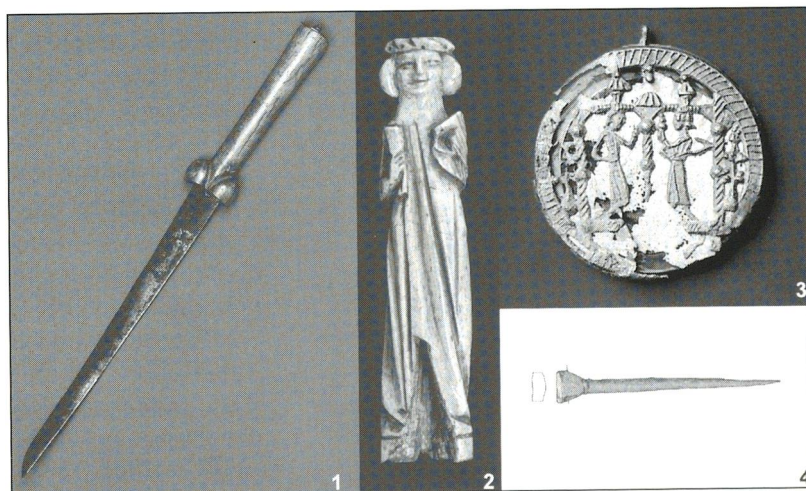
The houses had an estimated life of 15–25 years, which was longer than that of the street surfaces – reckoned as about 7–9 years, so in the 140-year span of the existence of the stronghold, the surface of the eastern street had sixteen resurfacings and each of these levels was contemporary with 14 to 26 newly built or standing houses. The levels of each of these street surfaces (0–16) have been used as the basis of the phasing of the stronghold (Mierosławski 1995, 57, fig. 5–21). The observation that the lowest thick trunks at the base of many houses had frequently been reused has allowed the recognition of the causes of the differences between the archaeological dates and those obtained by dendrochronology. The differences were smaller in the lower levels and greater for the higher and younger levels. All of the samples came from the reused beams of the foundations, it seems that as the stronghold got older such timbers were in use for a longer time (Gaśkowski et al. 2000, 160–161).

Pieces of rubble, found in the layers of level 8 which were laid down after the conflagration caused by the Lithuanian attack which destroyed Mazovia before 1302 (Suchodolska, 1994, 192) could be the remains of the building of a brick tower which accompanied the rebuilding of the huts (Gołembnik 1987, 172). It is probably this structure which the chronicler Jan Długosz mentions using the terms *castrum et oppidum episcopi Ploczensis* in his account of the events of 1368 (Długosz 1978, 337). The hypothesis that a tower was constructed – as the first element of the later episcopal residence – during the stronghold period, giving it certain defensive reinforcement from the west side, would explain why (despite several Lithuanian attacks in the period 1326–40 (Suchodolska 1994, 200; 205) the stronghold was not burnt down at that time.

Among the finds of tools and other objects showing that mainly farmers and craftsmen lived in the excavated region (Polak 1988, 136), there were few finds suggestive of the privileged status of some of the inhabitants. By the junction of the streets where a smithy was usually located (clear remains in level 5), there was found a kidney-dagger (level 16 – fig. 4: 1), the antler hilt of a falconer's knife (level 8 – fig. 4: 2), and also an antler stylus for writing on wax tablets (level 13 – fig. 4: 4) (Gołembnik 1987, 188; Rębkowski 1998, 279).



Fig. 3: The stronghold in Pułtusk. Level 1, huts along the eastern street, the second quarter of the 13th century. Level XV, three streets, the third quarter of the 14th century. The antler workshop (X) in the eastern street (by Z. Polak, based on Mierosławski 1995, figs. 6, 20).



Further down the eastern street in a small detached hut (fig. 3: 1) with many antler offcuts and unfinished products around, there was an antler workshop (level 12–16) (Polak 1988, 136). On the western edge of the central street, at the beginning of the stronghold, somebody lost a pewter pilgrim badge (level 1 – fig. 4: 3), and in the hut which was built here later (level 2) there was one of the two sets of folding scales (the second was found in level 14) (Polak, 1988, 137). At the opposite end of this street, in layers around a hut burnt in the fire

Fig. 4: 1 A kidney-dagger with a characteristically-shaped antler hilt; 2 the antler hilt of a falconer's knife in the form of a long-haired individual with a pleated robe; 3 a pewter pilgrim badge; 4 the antler stylus (Regional Museum of Pułtusk. Photo by M. Dąbski).

of level 7 was found a silk scarf with golden thread woven into it, as used by married woman (Przygońska 1984, 10). In spring 1368 the Lithuanians, led by prince Kiejstut arrived at Pułtusk. The chronicler Długosz describes the event thus: "AD 1368. The Lithuanians (...) suddenly appear near Pułtusk (...). The town has no defences and is swiftly captured, as are those inside and all their belongings. The castle's (*castrum*) defence strengthened by those who have sought refuge in it, but the Lithuanians pile pine trunks against the castle walls and set fire to them. Those inside can do nothing to prevent the flames spreading, and the castle and all

inside it are burned" (Długosz 1997, 319). This catastrophe allowed the realisation of the plan to divide the bishop's residence from the town buildings. The former inhabitants of the stronghold could have moved into new houses built around the newly-planned marketplace of the town which was founded precisely at that time and situated in the middle of the island (Pela 1992, 353; 357) (fig. 2: 5).

Based on a translation by Paul Barford

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#### Abbreviations

CDMas. – *Codex Diplomaticus et commemorationum Masoviae generalis* (cf. Kochanowski 1919).  
 NKMaz.II – *Nowy kodeks dyplomatyczny Mazowsza. Cz. II* (cf. Sułkowska-Kuraś 1989).

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