

**Prof. Tomasz Jasiński**

is a medieval historian specializing in the history of Central Europe during the Middle Ages. He has published over 200 works, including several books, and co-edited 1,250 medieval documents related to Greater Poland. He has served as Dean of the Faculty of History at Adam Mickiewicz University and as Vice-President of the Poznań Society of Friends of Learning. From 2007 to 2023, he directed the Kórnik Library of the Polish Academy of Sciences. His research focuses on medieval studies, auxiliary sciences of history, and Neo-Latin literature.

tomasz.jasinski@amu.edu.pl

ON THE ALLEGED CORONATION IN THE YEAR 1000

Old chronicles of Polish history describe the coronation of Bolesław the Brave as a moment of great glory and might – but historical research tells a more complex story.

Tomasz Jasiński

Faculty of History
Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań

The reign of Bolesław the Brave (992–1025) has traditionally been seen as a period of uninterrupted success in Polish history. This narrative began with the *Chronica Polonorum* – Poland’s earliest historical chronicle, written in the early twelfth century by an anonymous monk known as Gallus Anonymus. According to this view, Poland under Bolesław rose to the status of a major Central European power, only for that position to be squandered by his son and successor, Mieszko II (1025–1034). While historians today still recognize the significance of Bolesław’s reign and coronation, many now question whether the political crisis that followed his death may have stemmed from Bolesław’s own overexploitation of the state.

Another important question concerns the specific year of Bolesław’s coronation. Before we turn a critical eye to the traditional story that it took place during the Congress of Gniezno in the year 1000, it is worth briefly reviewing his life and career, as well as the early history of the state he ruled – one that would be elevated from a duchy to the rank of a kingdom in 1025.

Advances in historical research methods over the past 25 years – particularly in dendrochronology (tree-ring dating) – have transformed our understanding of the Polish state’s origins. It now appears that the state is much younger than previously believed. In the late ninth and early tenth century, a major civilizational shift took place in the region of Greater

Poland. Around the year 940, in a territory bordered largely by the Warta and Węlna rivers, a proto-state began to be formed by the Slavic tribe known as the Polanians. It first appears in written sources around 963, during a time of significant crisis – one ultimately overcome by Poland’s first historically documented ruler, Mieszko I.

Mieszko I forged an alliance with the Czech duke Boleslav the Cruel by marrying his daughter Dobrava in 965 and accepting baptism the following year. In 967, their son Bolesław was born – later known by the epithet *Chrobry*, meaning “the brave” or “the valiant.” When Bolesław was ten, his mother died, and in 980 his father Mieszko married Oda – a former nun (!) and daughter of Theodoric, Margrave of the Northern March. In 984, Mieszko arranged a marriage between Bolesław and the daughter of Rikdag, Margrave of Meissen. After Rikdag’s death, Bolesław’s first wife was dismissed, and – almost certainly at Mieszko’s direction – he married an unnamed Hungarian princess in 986. She too was soon dismissed, for reasons unknown. However, Bolesław kept the son born from that marriage, Bezprym, who would later, in the early 1030s, briefly depose his younger half-brother (Mieszko II). In 988, Bolesław married Emnilda, the daughter of a Slavic prince from the region of Milsko and Lusatia.

Beginning most likely around the time of his first marriage, Bolesław took up residence – on his father’s orders – in the land of another Slavic tribe, the Visutlans, centered in Kraków. Shortly before his death, Mieszko I – certainly at Oda’s instigation – placed his realm, then known as the Gniezno state, under the protection of the Holy See. This act, known as *Dagome iudex*, was intended to secure the succession rights of Mieszko’s two underage sons from his second



ROMAN PUGHALSKI, POLONA



SYLWIA PIOWAR

Photo 1:
Gniezno, monument
to Bolesław the Brave
(before 1939)

Photo 2:
Gniezno, reconstructed
monument to Bolesław
the Brave after World War II

marriage: Mieszko and Lambert. However, soon after Mieszko's death, Bolesław expelled his stepmother and half-brothers from Poland and seized control of the entire realm

The Pivotal Year 1000

One of Bolesław's most important achievements as duke was organizing the Congress of Gniezno in the year 1000, an event attended by Holy Roman Emperor Otto III, who came to pay tribute to the recently martyred Saint Adalbert (*Wojciech*). At the gathering, Bolesław secured the creation of an independent metropolitan province with its seat in Gniezno – free from German (particularly Magdeburgian) authority. The new province included three subordinate bishoprics: Kraków, Wrocław, and Kołobrzeg. This was a major success, as until then, both Silesia and the lands of the Vistulans – territories earlier conquered by Mieszko I – had fallen under the jurisdiction of the Czech and indirectly the German Church (specifically the Archbishopric of Mainz).

Despite the importance of the event, however, no coronation of Bolesław took place during the Congress of Gniezno (more on this below), and his efforts to attain a royal crown were later interrupted by the deaths of Otto III and Pope Sylvester II. Tensions with Germany soon escalated, as the new emperor, Henry II, feared the growing power of Bolesław's state. All evidence suggests that Henry himself attempted – unsuccessfully – to have the Polish duke assassinated during the Merseburg assembly in 1002. In response, Bolesław launched military campaigns that turned into a long Polish-German war, eventually concluded in early 1018 with the Peace of Bautzen, which was favorable to Poland.

Throughout his reign, Henry II pressured successive popes to withhold approval for Bolesław's coronation. An opportunity to secure papal consent only arose briefly after Henry's death in 1024, during a period of political instability. Bolesław was finally crowned the following year, as confirmed by German sources.

However, some Polish and German scholars, including the renowned historian Johannes Fried, maintain that Otto III had already crowned Bolesław during the gathering in Gniezno. This interpretation is based on the aforementioned *Chronica Polonorum* by Gallus Anonymus. It is important to note, however, that Gallus reached this conclusion through his own reasoning, not from any contemporary source that explicitly mentions a coronation in the year 1000.

Chronicles vs. Facts²

How, then, did Gallus Anonymus come to make this error? When he was writing his chronicle, it was widely accepted that Bolesław the Brave had been a king – yet no contemporary sources actually confirmed this. The *Annals of the Kraków Cathedral Chapter*, a 1267 copy of a now-lost earlier chronicle (*Annales regni Polonorum deperditi*), does refer to the death of a "King Bolesław." However, a parallel entry in an older manuscript from the 1120s makes no mention of any royal title: but if Bolesław had indeed been referred to as "king" in the original, it seems unlikely that the earlier version would have omitted it. It is far more plausible, therefore, that the royal title was added in the later, thirteenth-century copy. Moreover, neither version contains any other reference to a coronation.

When Gallus Anonymus composed his *Chronica Polonorum* between 1113 and 1116, he had virtually no

access to written sources predating the collapse of the Polish state after the invasion led by Duke Břetislav in 1038. The only exception was the now-lost *Life of Saint Adalbert*, which Gallus explicitly references: “as can be read in more detail in the book about the martyrdom of the Saint [Adalbert].” That hagiographic work described not only the bishop’s death but also Emperor Otto III’s pilgrimage to his tomb.

Unfortunately, Gallus did not quote the *Life* directly. Instead, he paraphrased it – making it difficult to tease apart what he borrowed from the original from what he added or expanded upon himself. Still, skillful historians are sometimes able to make this distinction, aided by Gallus’s distinctive writing style. Scholars have long observed, for example, that his account of the Gniezno summit has an unusual rhythm – likely the result of his incorporating material from the earlier *Life of Saint Adalbert*.

Some of the details recorded by Gallus Anonymus suggest that the lost *Life of Saint Adalbert* was written almost immediately after the Congress of Gniezno. One clue is the vivid description of a colorful military parade of heavily armed cavalry and shield-bearing infantry that Bolesław organized to welcome Emperor Otto III. Gallus, relying on the now-lost text, provides an exact count of the troops, a level of detail that strongly suggests the *Life* was written soon after the event.

Intriguingly, upon scrutiny, the seemingly arbitrary numbers given turn out to follow a striking pattern: 13 cavalry units and 13 infantry legions, with each cavalry unit consisting of 300 men and each legion of 1,000. Multiplied out, that yields 3,900 cavalry and 13,000 infantry, making 16,900 men in total. The square root of that number is 130, or 13×10 . Whoever “choreographed” this parade must have been highly numerate – and, as we’ll see, it was quite possibly the author of the lost *Life of Saint Adalbert*.

Another hint that the *Life* was written around the time of the Gniezno summit is the unusual title *frater et cooperator* (“brother and co-worker”) used in the text to describe Bolesław. This phrase would be difficult to interpret if not for a similar expression used by Otto III in his official documents during the same pilgrimage. While in Gniezno, the emperor staged a symbolic religious performance in which he took on the title of Saint Paul and granted Bolesław a role modeled on leaders of the early Christian communities of the apostolic Church.

The Coronation According to Gallus...

Let’s get back to the alleged coronation of the Polish duke during the Congress of Gniezno. According to the now-lost source cited by Gallus Anonymus, during

the gathering, Otto III removed his imperial diadem and placed it on Bolesław’s head. But it is clear that this crown must have returned to its rightful owner shortly afterward. Such a symbolic gesture cannot be considered a true coronation – a coronation was a solemn religious rite conducted by an archbishop, who would anoint the new king with holy oil, consecrating him as God’s chosen one (*Christus* in Latin).

No such ceremony took place in Gniezno in the year 1000 – as is confirmed by the silence of a key contemporary source: the *Chronicle of Bishop Thietmar of Merseburg*. Gallus, convinced that Bolesław must have been crowned (on the grounds that he was remembered as a king), but having no source that explicitly stated when or where such a coronation occurred, ultimately concluded that Otto’s gesture during the Congress of Gniezno must have been the coronation itself.

...and According to Modern Scholarship

We now know this interpretation is incorrect. It’s worth considering who the intended audience of the hastily composed *Life of Saint Adalbert* may have been, and what its purpose was. The message of that hagiographic work is clear: the author – emphasizing the point at least twice – claimed that Emperor Otto III regarded Bolesław the Brave as a ruler worthy of a royal crown.

The likely target of this message was the pope, who alone had the authority to sanction a royal coronation. The anonymous author of the *Life*, along with his patron – Bolesław – clearly hoped that Pope Sylvester II, after reading the text, would approve the Polish duke’s coronation. The inclusion of precise numerical details about the military parade was likely intentional; the author may have known that Sylvester II, a noted mathematician, would be attuned to the symbolic use of numbers.

Bolesław’s actual coronation is confirmed by several German sources dated to the year 1025. The most detailed account appears in the *Annals of Quedlinburg*, though these remained unknown until the seventeenth century. These reliable – though not always favorable – sources were unavailable to Gallus Anonymus and to later chroniclers such as Master Vincentius (Kadłubek) and Jan Długosz, who followed Gallus’s version and elaborated upon it. As a result, all three perpetuated the mistaken belief that Bolesław was crowned during the Congress of Gniezno.

This interpretation has been revived and defended by some modern scholars, most notably the aforementioned German historian Johannes Fried. But in light of the clear and consistent testimony found in early eleventh-century annals, such arguments are difficult to sustain. ■