

A EUROPEAN RULER



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Bolesław the Brave, the first crowned king of Poland, was a remarkable ruler of European stature.

His policies involved extensive international engagement, including alliances with Emperor Otto III and military campaigns in Rus and Bohemia.

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During the reigns of Mieszko I (ca. 962–992) and Bolesław the Brave (992–1025), the most powerful state in Western Europe was the German realm. It was ruled by kings of the Saxon dynasty, who had subdued the German tribes and brought peace to the realm. However, their ambitions stretched further. They expanded into Slavic-settled areas beyond the Elbe, brought northern and central Italy under their control, seized Rome, and imposed their will on the papacy. By receiving the imperial crown from the pope, they assumed the mantle of successors to the Roman emperors.

Within this political framework, the Church was strengthened, and intellectual culture experienced a revival after the collapse that had followed the breakup of the Carolingian Empire. Bishops were now appointed from among clergy worthy of the office, Benedictine monasteries flourished with spiritual life, and cathedral and monastic schools emerged as some of the best in Europe at the time. Much of this was made possible by the intervention of the Holy Roman Emperors – as the German rulers were known – or at the very least, carried out under their patronage. The emerging Polish state found itself face to face with this eastward-expanding power and had to make considerable efforts to preserve its independence. In this context, the policies of the early Piasts shifted – depending on the circumstances – between confrontation, compromise, and even alliance.

The reign of Bolesław the Brave illustrates this dynamic particularly well. The early years of his rule coincided with a shift in German policy. The young Holy Roman Emperor Otto III (983–1002) formed an alliance with the Piast prince, hoping that – with

Bolesław's help – he could bring the Slavic tribes of the Elbe region back into submission. These tribes had cast off German rule a decade earlier. Bolesław took part in a joint military expedition aimed at reasserting control.

However, the reorientation of German policy under Otto III, crowned emperor in 996, had deeper roots. He aspired to revive the Roman Empire – though this idea, never fully defined, contained at least two major components. First, it envisioned Rome as the actual capital of the empire, a place where the emperor would reside permanently. Until then, the Ottonian rulers had only visited the Eternal City infrequently and stayed for short periods. Second, the concept had a distinctly religious dimension. In Otto III's vision, the renewal of the Roman Empire was to be, above all, a renewal of the Church – one in which he would serve as its supreme head, with the pope subordinate to him. A key element of this renewal was the mission to convert pagans. One event that significantly shaped Otto's political and spiritual thinking was the death of his friend Adalbert in Prussia. The emperor believed that the missionary's martyrdom had brought him divine grace.

The Role of Saint Adalbert

Adalbert (956–997) came from a powerful Czech family, nearly princely in status. He was related by blood or marriage to the Ottonian dynasty, though the exact nature of these ties is unclear. He was educated in Magdeburg, at one of the finest schools in Europe at the time. He became bishop of Prague but resigned from the position due to conflicts with his diocesans. He then traveled to Rome and took monastic vows at the monastery of Saints Boniface and Alexius on the Aventine Hill. Later he embarked on a mission to Prussia to convert the pagans there to Christianity.

Adalbert belonged to the close circle surrounding Bolesław the Brave. His brother Soběslav was an ally and companion-in-arms of the Polish duke, and Adalbert himself met Bolesław while on his way to convert the pagan Prussians. Bolesław received him warmly

and assigned him an armed escort to accompany him to the Prussian border. After Adalbert was killed by the Baltic Prussians on his proselytizing mission, duke ransomed the martyr's body and had it buried in Gniezno.

These events proved to be momentous. In the year 1000, Otto III traveled to Gniezno on a pilgrimage to the tomb of Saint Adalbert. He placed the martyr's remains in the altar with his own hands – a gesture signifying that ultimate authority in this place rested with him, the emperor. He established a church province in Poland with its seat in Gniezno, elevated Bolesław to the rank of imperial collaborator and friend of the Roman people, and presented him with a replica of the Holy Lance – the most important symbol of royal power among the Ottonians. The Gniezno Summit was a direct expression of the ideology behind the renewal of the Roman Empire. The emperor came to Gniezno as a missionary, modeling himself on Saint Paul, the Apostle to the Nations. He entrusted Bolesław with part of this mission, and the new archbishopric was established as the institutional tool needed to carry it out.

Bolesław and the Emperors

Otto III and Bolesław put together joint plans for a missionary campaign among the Polabian Slavs, with the evangelizers meant to be hermits whom the Polish ruler had settled near the western border of his realm. With the emperor's help, they had come from Italy, where they had been disciples of Saint Romuald (c. 951–1027), one of the great monastic reformers of the time. Romuald taught that salvation required a radical renunciation of the world and criticized monks who lived together in communities, arguing that such a life did not truly separate them from worldly concerns. He saw *eremitism* – the solitary life of a hermit – as the only true path to spiritual fulfillment. Romuald's ideas deeply impressed Otto III's inner circle; some of them even followed the revered monk into the wilderness. Otto himself was among his greatest admirers. Filled with religious zeal, the emperor dreamed of abdicating and retreating into monastic life. He intended to join the hermits in Poland, but his premature death cut those plans short. Bolesław the Brave also had ties to Romuald. It is known that he gave one of his sons – most likely Bezprym – over to the monk to be raised in religious life.

After Otto III's death, Henry II (1002–1024) ascended the German throne. Although not his son, he belonged to the same dynasty. Nevertheless, he rejected his predecessor's political vision. He had little interest in Rome and focused instead on Germany's internal and external security. He saw Bolesław not as a partner but as a threat, and his reign was marked by frequent wars with the Piast state. These conflicts

ended only with the Peace of Bautzen in 1018, which included a kind of alliance – Henry sent military support for Bolesław's expedition to Kiev.

Valuable information about the early phase of these conflicts comes from Bruno of Querfurt (c. 974–1009). The son of a Saxon noble, Bruno was educated in Magdeburg and became a cathedral canon before joining the royal chapel of Otto III. Inspired by the martyrdom of Saint Adalbert, he entered the same monastery on the Aventine Hill in Rome where Adalbert himself had once taken his vows. After meeting Romuald, Bruno followed him into hermitage. Yet Bruno's ultimate goal was missionary martyrdom. He pushed for the dispatch of hermits to Poland and intended to join them – but eventually carried out evangelizing missions among other peoples.

Bruno was killed while preaching in the borderlands between Rus' and the Yotvingians, one of the Prussian tribes. He was a man so deeply devoted to God that only martyrdom could satisfy his spiritual hunger. In early 1009, Bruno sent a letter to Henry II, urging him to abandon his plans for war against Poland. He did not hesitate to declare that he loved Bolesław with all his heart. Moreover, he described him as an exemplary Christian ruler – a worthy successor to Constantine the Great and Charlemagne, the two monarchs whom the Middle Ages revered as the greatest of all.

The Consequences of Bolesław's Coronation

After Henry II's death, Bolesław seized the opportunity and had himself crowned king in 1025, an act that provoked protests in Germany. Through this coronation, he claimed the highest rank within the hierarchy of Christian rulers: kingship, second only to the emperor. Other motivations can also be inferred. The coronation, which included anointing with holy oils, was a sacred rite intended to invoke God's blessing on the monarch and, by extension, ensure the prosperity of his reign. Bolesław was not only a shrewd political actor within German-dominated Europe; he also absorbed and engaged with the political thought of his Western neighbors. This was not merely a matter of cynical calculation. Bolesław took Christianity seriously – seriously enough to follow the theological debates taking place within the Western Church and to respond to them critically. One example will illustrate this well.

At the time, Lent in the Catholic Church began – just as it does today – on Ash Wednesday, the Wednesday before the sixth Sunday prior to Easter. But during Bolesław's reign, there was an ongoing debate about whether Lent should instead begin on Septuagesima, the ninth Sunday before Easter. The



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Polish side drew its own conclusions from the debate, imposing a strict ban on eating meat starting from Septuagesima – under penalty of severe punishment. This was a practice unknown elsewhere in Europe.

It is fair to conclude that, in light of the evidence presented, Boleslaw deserves to be remembered as a truly European ruler. This is not simply because he pursued an ambitious political agenda that extended from Rome and Aachen to Kiev – although even Henry II acknowledged his status by agreeing to the marriage of Boleslaw's son, Mieszko II, to Richeza, the granddaughter of Emperor Otto II. More importantly, Boleslaw played a role in the project of renewing the Roman Empire – an initiative that was, in the fullest sense, European.

Boleslaw's stature was recognized far beyond Poland's borders – even as far as Aquitaine. There, the monk, chronicler, and hagiographer Ademar of Chabannes recorded in his chronicle that Otto III had presented Boleslaw with a golden throne – the very one Charlemagne had sat on in his tomb. Even if the story is not factually accurate, it reflects the great esteem in which Boleslaw was held by distant observers. Moreover, there is another important aspect. Boleslaw maintained close ties with the Empire's spiritual and intellectual elite – relationships that were deeply valued on both sides. This is most evident in the case of Bruno of Querfurt, a writer, religious thinker, and political philosopher, who held Boleslaw in the highest regard. ■

Map of Europe
in the year 1000