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TWO DOUBLE CORONATIONS?

Sources do not explicitly confirm that Bolesław was crowned together with his son Mieszko II in 1025, but the ceremony may indeed have been a double one – a formula possibly repeated again after Bolesław's death.

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The year 2025 marks the 1000th anniversary of the royal coronation of Bolesław the Brave – an event uncontested by anyone, not even by his most fervent enemies in his times. This moment deserves recognition as the true culmination of Poland's "dual millennium" celebrations: the thousand-year anniversary of the founding of the Polish state and of its Christianization. While those anniversaries were commemorated back in 1966, with lasting scholarly interest that still bears fruit today, it was Bolesław's victories in 1018 and his coronation in 1025 that marked the height of the first Piast monarchy. Honoring this coronation would thus be a fitting close to the millennium cycle. Next year, we may also begin to reflect on the decline of that early Polish kingdom.

Today, as we celebrate the millennium of Bolesław's momentous coronation, it is worth considering the reasons why it took place specifically in the year 1025. The explanation most commonly found in Polish historiography and textbooks goes as follows:

"In July 1024, Emperor Henry II died (...) two months later, a new king was elected – Conrad II, the first ruler of the new Salian dynasty (...) that same year, Pope Benedict VIII, who had been closely associated with Henry II, also

passed away. (...) We can assume that the Duke of Poland took advantage of the confusion caused by the changes on both the papal and imperial thrones."

Moreover, according to the late Kraków-based medievalist Stanisław Szczur, "The royal crown granted [Poland and Bolesław the Brave] sovereignty in the medieval sense of the word." This reasoning is essentially like that found in the contemporary *Annals of Quedlinburg*:

"Bolesław, Duke of Poland, having learned of the death of the exalted Emperor Henry, was uplifted in spirit and so thoroughly flooded his innards with the poison of pride that he recklessly dared to anoint and crown himself. For this presumptuous boldness of spirit, he was soon met with divine vengeance, for he quickly succumbed to the grim sentence of death."

The chronicler Wipo, in his *Gesta Chuonradi imperatoris*, is not quite so unequivocally propagandistic: "The Slav Bolesław (...) acquired the royal insignia and royal title to the detriment of King Conrad [who was not yet Holy Roman Emperor at the time], but his audacity was overshadowed by sudden death."

To summarize: Emperor Henry II – Bolesław's greatest enemy – died in 1024, creating an opportunity for the Polish ruler to finally realize his political ambitions and, by placing a royal crown on his head, conclusively seal the work of building the Polish state. There is undoubtedly much merit to this view, widely accepted in Polish historiography, and the moment for such an act was certainly highly favorable. However, it



is worth questioning whether this was the sole cause of the events in question, and to consider other motivations as well.

The Royal Hierarchy

Firstly, I believe that the title of *rex* “king” in Latin Central and Eastern Europe at the time was not an expression of sovereignty, but rather a symbol of participation in a hierarchical power structure headed, since the time of Charlemagne, by the Holy Roman Emperor. Of course, a *rex* occupied a very high position in this hierarchy (one not available to just anyone – certainly not yet to Mieszko I), but it still implied subordination to the emperor. However, this issue was viewed differently in Scandinavia and England, where rulers were indeed “kings” in the old, pagan, and in some sense Merovingian manner – much like Poland’s Mieszko I before his baptism (which was the first and last time the chronicler Widukind referred to him as a “king”). Rus’, for its part, oriented itself toward a completely different and at the time even mightier emperor – the Byzantine one.

Secondly, I believe – broadly following Johannes Fried (and several other earlier historians) – that Bolesław the Brave had already considered himself

a “king” ever since the Congress of Gniezno in the year 1000. We know that he then unquestionably obtained an important royal prerogative, and a copy of the Holy Lance (i.e. the Lance of St. Maurice) was brought to Poland, which would suggest royal investiture. Moreover, around the year 1018 (prior to 1025!), he may even have minted coins on which he styled himself as *rex*. However, one must agree with the opponents of this thesis, who claim that Bolesław’s royal “coronation” in 1000 differed in some way from accepted norms – though such a departure would hardly be shocking under Otto III, a ruler inclined toward innovation.

Nevertheless, in my view, Bolesław’s war with Henry was primarily a struggle over the Polish ruler’s royal rank – over his position within the western imperial structures. This is supported, for example, by the fact that Bolesław’s son, Mieszko II, was married into the imperial family during a brief pause in hostilities in 1013. In any case, the year 1018 was clearly one of Bolesław’s greatest triumphs. That year he made peace with Henry II, now emperor, and received military support for his campaign against Kyiv. The decisions Bolesław made in Kyiv after its capture (with the help of the imperial military contingent) show that he felt exceptionally confident. First, ignoring his recently wed German wife, he ostentatiously seduced

The coronation of Bolesław the Brave by Otto III in the year 1000, woodcut from *Chronica Polonorum*, Maciej Miechowita (1519)

Predslava, sister of Grand Prince Yaroslav the Wise, in full view of the German troops – an act more of political dominance than of rape. Then, he sent envoys to BOTH emperors – the Western and Eastern ones (Henry II, as Western Emperor, was but a paltry, barbaric imitation, and from the perspective of Kyiv the Polish ruler could surely perceive that well) as well as to Yaroslav, the latter mainly for negotiations. Finally, he brought back to Poland an extraordinarily rich and diverse trove of spoils.

Why then did he not have himself crowned upon returning from the Kyiv campaign? At that time, I believe, he had both the material means and sufficient freedom of action vis-à-vis Henry – something he had made especially clear in Kyiv. But I suspect that he did not feel the need: he continued to rule confidently, consistently considering himself a king, as beautifully reflected in Gallus Anonymus' *Chronicle* (and in subsequent Polish sources), which unambigu-

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ously recognize him as king from the time of the Congress of Gniezno onward. And Bolesław himself, after 1018, seemed no longer to care at all about Henry's opinion on the matter. What's more, it seems that both leaders – Bolesław and Henry – at that point neither needed nor wanted to wage another war.

Before 1025

So what, then, changed for Bolesław shortly before 1025 – aside from the death of Henry in 1024 (admittedly no small event)? Unfortunately, we can no longer rely on the most important contemporary source. In 1018, amid military victories, Bolesław suffered a historiographical setback: Thietmar of Merseburg died. Though the chronicler disliked – perhaps even hated – the Polish ruler, it was precisely this animosity that led him to record Bolesław's actions in exceptional (if biased) detail for his time. After Thietmar's death, the sources become fragmented, taking us back in some respects to the patchy documentation of Mieszko I's early reign. Still, we do know some facts and can cautiously infer others.

Notably, Bolesław died just two months after his coronation. The few surviving sources express clear surprise. The *Annals of Quedlinburg* frame it with propagandistic clarity: he was justly punished for the sin of arrogance. Wipo is more restrained – he doesn't blame Bolesław's arrogance for his death, but notes that it was "overshadowed" by it. Either way, a sense of astonishment remains: a bold coronation, followed swiftly by an unexpected death. The question is – unexpected for whom? For Bolesław himself?

It is hard to lend much weight to Gallus Anonymus' account that Bolesław, sensing his end, summoned his nobles and warned them about Poland's future – this is more likely a literary device rather than a historical report. More attention should be given to a passage in the *Primary Chronicle*, which describes Bolesław during the 1018 battle by the Bug River. The voivode Błud is said to have taunted him: "I'll drive my spear through your fat belly," and the chronicler adds: "For Bolesław was large and so heavy he could barely sit on a horse, but he was wise." If this reflects his actual appearance – which seems plausible – it's likely his health declined in the years that followed.

Born around 967, Bolesław was not yet an old man – but such obesity, in medical terms, would place him among those at risk of premature death. His entourage, especially those outside his closest circle, might not have known this, but the ruler himself may have sensed that the end was near. And that may have prompted him, above all, to settle the matter of succession to the throne.

Bolesław had clearly been concerned for some time with ensuring a peaceful and orderly succession of power. The sources leave little doubt that he regarded his son Mieszko – born of Emnilda – as his successor, rather than Mieszko's older half-brother Bezprym or his own younger full brother Otto. Already during the war with Henry II, Mieszko began to appear as a trusted commander leading his father's troops. More importantly, it was Mieszko who, in 1013, married into the family of the Piasts' adversary – who soon after became Holy Roman Emperor. At the very time he was still engaged in military operations, Bolesław turned to matrimonial diplomacy in the style of Vladimir the Great. He sought to link his own dynasty to the imperial family, strengthening his family's claim to rule – particularly that branch which would now be kin to the emperor. In doing so, he marked Mieszko as his chosen successor (though the first sign of this may already have been the child's being named after his grandfather). In a similar manner, according to the noted medievalist Andrzej Poppe, Vladimir the Great had tried to bind the Rurikids to the Byzantine imperial house by designating Boris and Gleb – sons of a *porphyrogenita* – as his successors. In both Poland and Rus', this strategy ended poorly for the great fathers' chosen sons.

There is no doubt that from at least 1013 onward, Mieszko II was the clear heir. One might even speculate that it was he who led the embassy Bolesław sent from Kyiv to the Byzantine emperor – though this cannot be proven and is not easily presented as plausible. Nonetheless, the Greek language, which Duchess Matilda credited Mieszko II with knowing in her famous dedication, need not have been learned in the monastery to which some scholars have claimed the heir to the throne was “sent.” For example, the Norwegian king Harald Hardrada learned Greek while serving in the Varangian Guard, the elite Byzantine imperial bodyguard. If Mieszko had indeed traveled to Constantinople, he might have had a similar experience – but let’s not go too far. What is certain is that Mieszko was the designated heir, and there are likely more reasons to support that view than can be conclusively demonstrated.

The Double Coronation

Since the times of Charlemagne, one effective way to mark succession clearly and ceremonially was through a double coronation. The reigning king would be crowned a second time – the purpose being not repetition for its own sake, but the simultaneous formal designation of a successor, with the placing of the crown and the rite of anointing. (For a reigning monarch, a second anointing may not have been required, though it remained possible.) The heir, crowned and anointed alongside the reigning ruler, also became a king from that moment onward – though his reign would not actually begin until later. Some scholars, including Jerzy Strzelczyk, have long considered the possibility that for Bolesław the Brave and Mieszko II, “the coronations of father and son were carried out simultaneously.”

None of the sources we possess explicitly state that Bolesław was crowned alongside his son. However, some condemn Mieszko’s boldness in the same breath as they criticize Bolesław’s own audacity during his coronation. At the same time, no record points to a specific moment of Mieszko II’s coronation, even though all agree that after 1025 he held royal rank. Nothing underscores this more than the fact that just a few years later, he was stripped of that rank and forced to return the royal insignia. A notable exception was the Holy Lance of St. Maurice, which remained in Poland and is still kept in Kraków. Perhaps it belonged to the regalia of an earlier coronation ceremony? Strikingly, both Wipo and the *Annals of Quedlinburg*, after commenting with scorn on Bolesław’s coronation and his sudden death, immediately speak with similar derision (but without details) of his son as well. To Matilda, Mieszko II was a reigning king in full glory, and she ordered that he be portrayed as such in a miniature. However, she does

not tell us under what circumstances he was crowned, because that information was of no relevance to her. What mattered was that he *had* been.

The remaining question is this: was he crowned alongside his father, or first with his father and then a second time alone, or perhaps only once after his father’s death? In my view, he was crowned twice – and that both times it was a double coronation. First, Mieszko II was crowned together with his father, and after Bolesław’s death, he was crowned again, this time with his wife. That would explain why Rycheza retained the title *regina* even after Mieszko was stripped of his crown. If events in 1025 moved quickly, two ceremonies may have taken place that same year – resulting in four coronations: first Bolesław and Mieszko together, then, after Bolesław’s death, Mieszko again, now with Rycheza. Alternatively, this second ceremony may have occurred in 1026.

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One thing is clear: despite the contradictions and tensions that would erupt with terrifying force in the Piast dynasty in the 1030s, the succession of power immediately following Bolesław’s death in 1025 proceeded remarkably smoothly. There is no indication that Mieszko encountered any internal resistance at the time. In the Teutonic outcry commenting on Bolesław’s coronation from afar (and, implicitly, on that of his equally audacious son), one can hear outrage – but no denial of the legitimacy of the act. This seems to indicate that Bolesław had well prepared the way for his son’s accession, and to me it further supports the notion of a double coronation of Bolesław and Mieszko in 1025.

What actually happened? That we do not and will never know. Thietmar had been in his grave for years by 1025, but even when he was still in good health back in 1000, he did not relay everything honestly. One thing, however, remains certain: the Piast monarchy, which began as a pagan kingdom, had by Bolesław the Brave’s coronation and anointing in 1025 become a realm ruled by a fully Christian monarch – whatever the event’s exact formula may have been. ■

Further reading:

Stupecki L.P., A Crown on a King’s Head: Royal Titles and Royal Sovereignty in the Tenth- and Eleventh-Century Poland and Scandinavia, in: *Aspects of Royal Power in Medieval Scandinavia*, J. Morawiec, R. Boryślowski eds., Katowice 2018: 139–145.

Stupecki L.P., Realpolitik, Sexual Abuse, a German Wife and a Beautiful Russian Concubine: Bolesław the Great in Kiev in 1018, in: *Ostmitteleuropäische Friedensschlüsse zwischen Mittelalter und Gegenwart: Zum 45. Geburtstag von Christian Lübke*, M. Hardt, M. Wołoszyn eds., Dresden 2021: 29–42.