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BOLESŁAW REFLECTED IN CONTEMPORARY SOURCES

Bolesław the Brave, the second historical ruler of the Piast dynasty, was a multifaceted figure. Early medieval authors portrayed him from various perspectives – ranging from the gushing praise of Bruno of Querfurt to the stern criticism of Thietmar of Merseburg.

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No other early Polish ruler was written about as extensively by early medieval authors as Bolesław the Brave. Yet those writings do not depict this exceptional ruler from a single angle – e.g. through the prism of his military exploits or battlefield courage, as might be suggested by his epithet *Chrobry* (meaning the “valiant” or “brave”). Rather, the picture of Bolesław that emerges from the earliest sources is multifaceted. The traits attributed to him were often shaped by the worldview and political leanings – or even prejudices – of the authors themselves. The real Bolesław, his true character and actions, must be carefully unearthed from beneath layers of literary stylization through close source analysis and comparison with other contemporary accounts.

The earliest account of Bolesław the Brave comes from the pen of Bruno of Querfurt, a German cleric and religious figure born into a Saxon noble family. Bruno met the Piast ruler in person, having resided in Poland from around the year 1005 until 1009, when he set off on a mission to the Yotvingians (a pagan Prussian people inhabiting the area of present-day Podlasie).

Bruno’s portrait of Bolesław is strikingly positive. The future martyr spared no praise for the Polish ruler, highlighting both his character and his religious

commitment. He referred to Bolesław as “the mother of God’s servants.” He also wrote that Bolesław alone, among all contemporary rulers, was worthy to receive Saint Adalbert and to send him forth on the mission that brought him the martyr’s palm. Bruno moreover emphasized Bolesław’s role in founding a monastery for the Italian monks who had arrived in Międzyrzecz in the year 1000 to evangelize the local population – and possibly to begin missionary work among the Baltic Slavs. Three of those monks, along with two Poles, were later killed in a robbery. They were canonized and are remembered as the Five Martyred Brothers. The Saxon author was impressed that after capturing the murderers, Bolesław did not have them executed but instead ordered that they work for the monastery as penance for their crime.

In his famous letter to the German ruler Henry II – written in an effort to persuade the Holy Roman Emperor to end the war against Poland and make peace with Bolesław – Bruno stressed that the Polish duke “loves mercy,” and added: “I feel for him a loyalty and heartfelt friendship [...] I love him as my own soul and more than my life.”

A different perspective

A very different portrait of the Polish ruler was presented by Thietmar, Bishop of Merseburg, in his famous chronicle written between 1012 and 1018. Here, praiseworthy mentions are rare – they include, for instance, references to the harsh punishments meted out in Poland for breaking the fast (such as having one’s teeth knocked out) or for marital infidelity. Thietmar also notes that the Polish duke had the Church’s

penitential regulations on sins and penance read to him, and if he believed he had done wrong, he would perform acts of atonement.

But overall, Thietmar portrays Bolesław the Brave as a “roaring lion with a trailing tail” – or essentially, in biblical poetics, as the devil himself. The reason for this strongly negative assessment was Bolesław’s open defiance of the political order championed by Thietmar’s beloved ruler, the German king (and later emperor) Henry II (1002–1024). According to Henry’s vision, the role of the Slavs was to submit completely to German authority and to pay tribute. He, along with many among the German elite, regarded the Slavs – as contemporary texts attest – as a subordinate kind of people who should be ruled by their “betters,” as Thietmar put it. It is worth noting, especially in light of some modern theories suggesting that the Piasts may have been of foreign origin, that all sources contemporary with Bolesław consistently identified him and his father – and indeed the entire dynasty – as Slavs.

Bolesław and Otto III

Bolesław firmly resisted any treatment of himself and his people as inferior, instead appealing to the vision of Henry II’s predecessor, Otto III (983–1002). He had established the church province in Gniezno and intended to make the Polish ruler a king, so that the Kingdom of Poland could become a part of his empire – on equal footing alongside other kingdoms of similar standing. Otto, a deeply religious man, had pursued a political strategy that, while carefully planned, was guided by respect and friendship toward Bolesław. However, Otto had lived only 22 years and died under unclear circumstances. His successor may have shared his religious convictions (piety being regarded at the time as the chief virtue for a king), but his views on the Slavs were much closer to those of Thietmar.

At the 1002 assembly of the imperial elite, which Bolesław attended, an attempt was made on his life. He was saved with great difficulty by his German allies. Thietmar believed that Henry II had nothing to do with the assassination attempt. Bolesław thought otherwise. A war broke out that dragged on, with interruptions, until 1018. Thietmar placed the blame for the bloodshed entirely on Bolesław, and in his view, all signs of the Polish ruler’s piety were insincere. The chronicler sees Bolesław as a corrupt, duplicitous man driven by ill will. It was supposedly due to his innate moral failings that he feasted while his own warriors were fighting and dying in his name. His abduction of Predslava, the sister of Prince Yaroslav the Wise, from captured Kiev in 1018 and making her his concubine was attributed to the Polish ruler’s lust. Significantly, however, the chronicler did not dwell much on this episode. He knew full well that the Kievan prince had earlier refused Bolesław’s request to marry Predslava



PUBLIC DOMAIN, WIKIMEDIA COMMONS: OTTO III, HOLY ROMAN EMPEROR.JPG

and had himself imprisoned Bolesław’s unnamed daughter, the wife of another Rurikid, Sviatopolk. By the customs of the time, Bolesław’s conduct therefore would not have been considered unjustified.

This example makes clear Thietmar’s bias and shows that he tailored his narrative to what his audience would accept. After all, chroniclers wrote for their contemporaries and sought their approval. In the case of this dark portrayal of Bolesław, that approval was not easy to obtain. The Polish ruler, despite being the target of fierce opposition, had many allies in his enemy’s camp. The chronicler himself noted this in multiple places, claiming it was due to bribery. In truth, however, Thietmar was unwilling to admit that in Saxony – the most important province of the Holy Roman Empire at the time – Henry II’s anti-Polish policies were deeply unpopular. All the more so because Henry II sought an alliance with the pagan Lutici, fiercely warlike Slavs from the Baltic region who were enemies of the Saxons.

Only the heavy defeats suffered by Henry II’s forces in Poland led to a shift, however slight, in the chronicler’s stance. He praised the persistent, heroic

Miniature from the Gospel Book of Otto III, ca. 1000. Manuscript from Reichenau Abbey, now in the Bavarian State Library in Munich (C1m 4453, fol. 23v)

defense of Niemcza by Bolesław's subjects in 1017, including the placing of crosses on the city's ramparts. He also wrote about the outrage felt by the Saxons at the fact that the Lutici were sacrificing Polish captives to their gods. Thietmar further reported with visible dismay that many of Henry's pagan allies drowned while crossing the Oder River – an event considered a bad omen. Finally, the chronicler noted that after his victory, Bolesław not only rejoiced in a worldly fashion, but also “rejoiced in the Lord.”

Praise for Wisdom and Piety

So much for Thietmar. Let us now turn to an important Ruthenian source – exceptional in that it contains a rare description of Bolesław's physical appearance. While recounting his 1018 campaign against Kiev, the anonymous author of the Primary Chronicle wrote that Bolesław “was large and heavy, so much so that a horse could barely carry him, but he was prudent.” This final remark is immediately illustrated with an episode in which the Polish ruler, despite his considerable size, was the first to plunge on horseback into the waters of the Bug River, leading a charge that shattered the Ruthenian forces and their Scandinavian allies.

Confirmation of Bolesław's widespread reputation for piety comes from a dedicatory letter written by Duchess Matilda of Lorraine, attached to a liturgical codex she sent to Mieszko II (Bolesław's son and successor) after the year 1025. Therein, the recipient's father is described as “the wellspring and first beginning of the holy Catholic and Apostolic faith. For such as the holy preachers could not bend with words, he did subdue with iron, gathering unto the Supper of the Lord the barbarous and most savage nations.”

We know little for certain about Bolesław's missionary wars. The reference may pertain to his conflicts with the Lutici and Pomeranians, who after 1002 had cast off Polish overlordship and returned to paganism. It is also possible that news had reached Lorraine of retaliatory actions taken by Bolesław after the murder of missionaries departing from his realm under his protection – namely, Saint Adalbert, killed by the Prussians in April 997, as well as Saint Bruno of Querfurt, slain with 18 companions by the Yotvingians near the upper Narew River sometime between February and March of 1009.

Today, we view warfare – especially aggressive warfare – with considerable distaste. But back in the times these opinions were written, a ruler who refused to wage war was seen as slothful. Hence Matilda's praise of Bolesław's campaigns, all the more so since they were pursued in the name of spreading the faith. Her praise for Bolesław's piety underscores the fact that, in the eyes of the Lotharingian duchess, the Polish ruler was a model king.

This was likewise the view of Poland's earliest chronicler, Gallus Anonymus, writing more than eighty years later. Despite his foreign origins (his exact provenance remains uncertain), the monk Gallus recorded the opinions of the Polish elite of his time. With the exception of Bolesław Wrymouth – at whose court he wrote between 1112 and 1116 – no other Polish ruler received as much attention in his chronicle as Bolesław the Brave.

In Gallus's account, the Polish king ruled over both Bohemia with Moravia and the lands of Rus'. He was said to have driven iron stakes into the river Saale in Lusatia to mark the borders of his realm. He subdued the pagan Lutici, Pomeranians, and Prussians. In addition to his military accomplishments (Gallus consistently referred to him as “king”), the chronicler emphasized the king's magnificence and wealth, as well as that of his people. This, Gallus claimed, was why Otto III, while visiting Gniezno, gave him his own crown and – with papal approval – established the archbishopric. According to the chronicle, Bolesław actively promoted the development of the Church in his realm. At the same time, he was equally committed to the prosperity of his subjects and to delivering justice fairly – irrespective of the rank or influence of the parties involved.

Numerous praises from Gallus Anonymus could be cited here, touching on nearly every major aspect of royal rule at the time. Yet these should be seen as part of the chronicle's stylization. What matters most is that Gallus fashioned Bolesław's portrait into a kind of mirror of virtues – holding him up as an exemplar in which later Piast rulers were meant to see their reflection, adjusting their behavior to match that of their ideal forefather.

In closing, let us attempt to answer the question: What qualities of Bolesław the Brave emerge from the conjunction of these stylized portraits? Undoubtedly, as the Ruthenian chronicle notes, Poland's first crowned king was prudent. He managed to defeat the strongest army in Europe at the time, even though his own forces were far smaller. The fact that he achieved this with the help of German allies does not diminish the high regard for his military and political skill. The founding of the Gniezno metropolitan province and the construction of a Church administrative network confirm that Bolesław deliberately chose the only ideological path that gave his state a chance at survival and growth.

Lastly, the coronation of Bolesław, together with his son and daughter-in-law – held, I have no doubt, on the very same Easter Sunday in 1025 – did not ultimately secure Mieszko II's grip on power. But it did leave a lasting mark on the memory of a nascent nation and gave it the belief that it was no lesser than the other European communities ruled by kings. ■

Further reading:

A. Pleszczyński,
Bolesław Chrobry
– Princes Poloniae
(volume to appear in Polish
in autumn 2025).