

BOLESŁAW'S CONQUESTS IN LEGEND AND REALITY



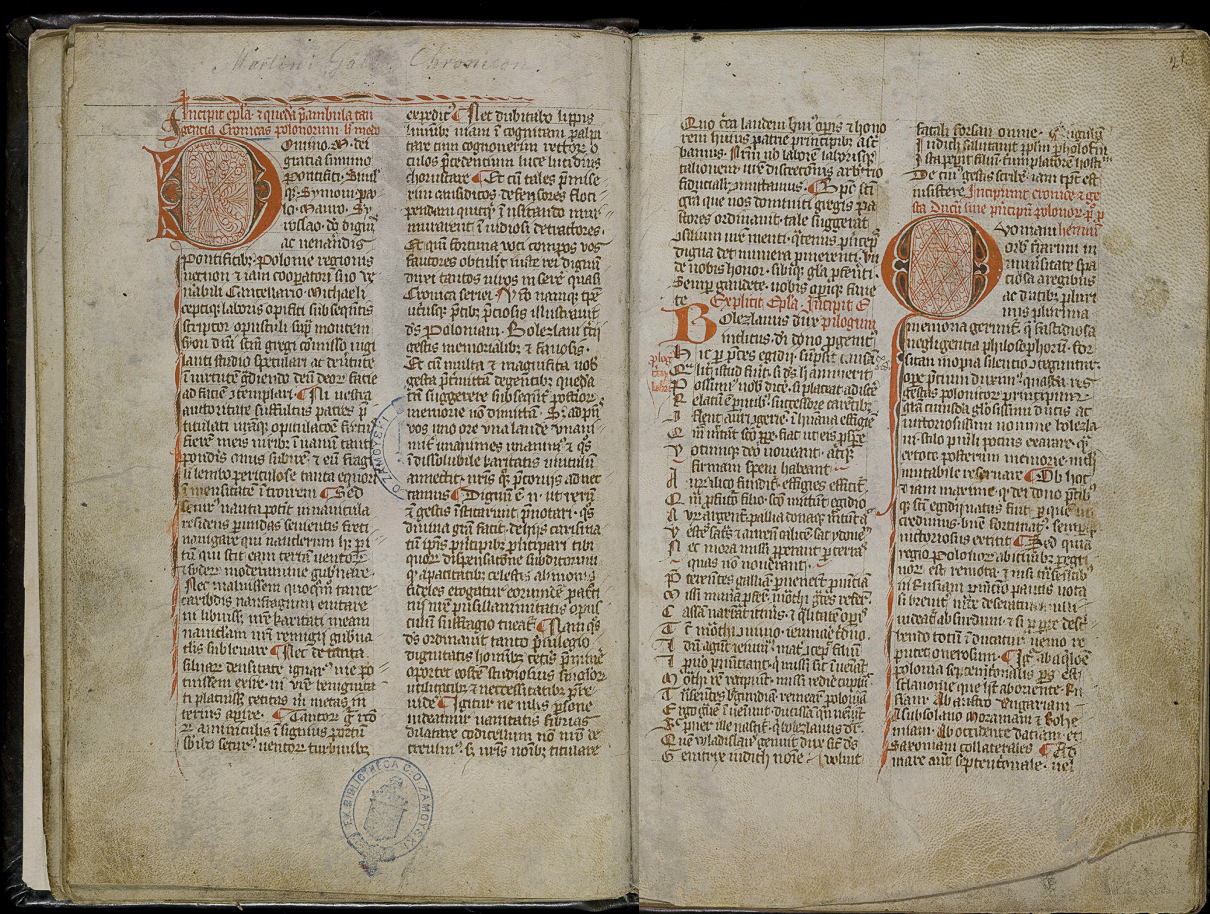
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Did not he conquer Moravia and Bohemia and win the seat of the duchy in Prague (...), was it not he who time and again defeated the Hungarians in battle and made himself master of all their lands as far as the Danube? The indomitable Saxons were not a match for his valor: hence in the middle of their country an iron boundary sign in the River Saale marked Poland's boundaries. (...) [W]hen Selencia, Pomorania, and Prussia persisted in their perfidy he crushed them, and when they converted he strengthened them in their faith, indeed he established through the pope many churches and bishops there.

Galus Anonymous, I, 6, trans. P. W. Knoll & F. Schaer (CEUP, 2003)



The Beginning of Gallus Anonymus' Chronicle in the Zamoyksi Manuscript

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Wydział Nauk Historycznych i Pedagogicznych
Uniwersytet WrocławskiAleksander Lesser
(1814–1884), Portrait
of Master Vincent
in clerical dress, based on
an engraving or painting

The image of iron pillars driven into the bed of the River Saale on the orders of Bolesław the Brave – deep in what is now Germany – has for centuries fueled dreams of Polish might. At the heart of this mythologized vision of the Piast monarchy's borders lies the account written by father of Polish historiography, known only as *Gallus Anonymus*, in the early twelfth century. According to his chronicle, quoted above, Bolesław staked out the frontier of his kingdom with an iron boundary or iron boundary post (*meta ferrea* in Latin) in the River Saale. Around the turn of the twelfth century, another prominent Polish

chronicler, Master Vincent (*Wincenty Kadłubek*), developed this image further, describing an iron column driven into that same river. Crucially, in both his version and Gallus's, the river runs through the middle of Saxon territory – serving as a symbolic axis that holds the land together.

The now-iconic image of Chrobry's iron pillars – further popularized by paintings from Franciszek Smuglewicz and Józef Peszka more than two centuries ago – depicts the Saxon realm divided, with its eastern part falling under Piast rule. Kadłubek's account (and likely Gallus's as well), however, suggests a much broader claim. A column placed in the center of the land implies full domination; in other words: whoever controls the center, controls everything. Gallus Anonymus applied the same idea to Bolesław's rule over the lands of Rus' – most strikingly symbolized by his entrance into Kyiv in 1018.

Truth in legend?

According to Gallus' chronicle, Bolesław struck the Golden Gate of Kyiv with his sword, leaving a mark to show he had claimed the heart of the land. That gesture was further sealed by his proposed union with the Ruthenian princess Predslava – whose hand had earlier been denied him. Modern historians hasten to point out that the famed Golden Gate did not yet exist in Kyiv at that time. But legends follow their own logic – and often tell us more about the times in which they emerged than about the events they purport to describe. This particular story also became part of the legend of *Szczerbiec*, the coronation sword of Polish kings from the fourteenth century onward. Its name – meaning “Notched” – according to legend comes from a dent left by that symbolic blow to the gates of Kyiv.

Kyiv was not the first capital of a neighboring state to fall to Bolesław. As early as 1003, he had intervened in a power struggle among his Czech relatives, the Přemyslids. He initially supported Boleslav III the Red but soon betrayed him – blinding him and taking the throne in Prague for himself. He lost it the following year, driven out by the city's rebellious inhabitants, and was eventually expelled from Bohemia altogether by the forces of the German ruler (and Holy Roman Emperor) Henry II. For more than seventy years, the Přemyslids had acknowledged the overlordship of German rulers (more precisely, the East Frankish kings), but Bolesław had no intention of continuing this feudal subservience, instead opting for confrontation with Henry II.

Henry II had risen to power after the death of his cousin Otto III (d. 1002), with whom Bolesław the Brave had had excellent relations as an important partner in the *renovatio imperii Romanorum* (renewal of the Roman Empire). In this political agenda, the



countries of Central Europe, referred to as *Sclavinia* (the Slavic lands), were treated as equals to the provinces of the ancient Roman Empire: *Italia* (Rome), *Gallia*, and *Germania*. The Polish ruler emerged as the leader of *Sclavinia*, as clearly demonstrated during the famous Congress of Gniezno in the year 1000. Otto III arrived there on a pilgrimage to the tomb of St. Adalbert, and during his stay, he established an archbishopric. He is also said (Gallus emphasizes this) to have elevated Bolesław above other dukes.

The chronicler mentions that Otto presented Bolesław with the Spear of St. Maurice, a specially crafted symbol of authority containing a relic taken from the imperial Holy Lance of the same name. In doing so, Otto III effectively shared with the Polish duke the authority over the community of Christian monarchies centered around Rome. The emperor is also said to have placed a diadem on his host's head in Gniezno, although the interpretation of this gesture as a coronation remains contested. A coronation Bolesław did undoubtedly attain a quarter-century later. In any case, his political stature had risen significantly during the reign of Otto III – something Henry II could not accept.

What was Bolesław truly like?

Indeed, in the summer of 1002, Bolesław traveled to Merseburg, where, at a congress convened by Henry II, he established ties with the new ruler and secured confirmation of his recent conquests of Lusatia and the Milceni lands (*Milsko*) – territories previously under Saxon control. However, on his way back from the meeting – apparently unbeknownst to Henry – Bolesław and his entourage were ambushed. He narrowly escaped with his life but lost many companions. On his return to Poland, he burned one of the strongholds under Saxon rule. This touched off a series of clashes between the two rulers, fought in 1002–1005, 1007–1013, and 1015–1018.

During the first of these wars, the earlier-mentioned Czech episode took place, described in detail by the chronicler Thietmar of Merseburg (d. 1018). Thietmar portrayed Bolesław as a vain braggart, reportedly mocking Henry II's approaching army by saying they crawled after him like frogs in the mud. In this case, pride did indeed come before a fall: Bolesław lost Prague. But it was hardly a disaster. While he was forced to sign a peace treaty in 1005 after Henry's next expedition reached deep into Poland, as far as Poznań, Bolesław did not lose his throne. Importantly, he also managed to hold onto Moravia until the end of his reign, and he likely extended his authority over the territory of present-day Slovakia – historically known as Upper Hungary – for several years. Thus, by controlling Moravia, Bolesław's influence reached as far as the Danube.

Established fact vs conjecture

Military engagements in the west and south were not conducive to strengthening the Polish monarchy's influence along the Baltic coast. Bolesław's father, Mieszko I (d. 992), had already secured access to the sea by holding strongholds along the Parsęta River and controlling territory eastward from there, extending to the lands near the lower Vistula bordering Prussia. In the year 1000, Bolesław ensured that a bishopric subordinate to Gniezno was established in Kołobrzeg (more precisely: in "Kołobrzeg Salt"). The fate of its bishop, Reinbern – who likely accompanied Bolesław in Bohemia in 1004 and later, around 1013, went in his daughter's entourage to Rus', where he died – has often been cited as (speculative!) evidence that the Church in Kołobrzeg collapsed early on, and hence that Bolesław lost control of the coastal region.

In reality, however, much of this is guesswork. Reinbern's presence at the ruler's side and his diplomatic missions do not necessarily mean that his bishopric had already ceased to function. Even less can we conclude on this basis alone that Piast rule over the Baltic had ended. That might not have happened until the crisis of the Piast monarchy in the 1030s. Returning to Bolesław's time, it is worth recalling that in 1007, envoys of the Liutizi came to Henry II to report on Bolesław's plans to draw them into a war against Germany. Notably, they are said to have arrived from a city recorded as *Livilni*, most likely today's Wolin.

In twentieth-century scholarship, the prevailing view became that Mieszko I had already incorporated this populous and wealthy city into Poland, but in light of current research, it is safer to say that it had come under the early Piasts' sphere of political influence. In any case – according to the key account of Thietmar of Merseburg – by the year 1007, the people of Wolin presented themselves as outside Bolesław's control and aligned with the Liutizi, who, though still pagan, once again appeared as allies of Henry II in his wars with Poland.

At the start of that second war, which broke out in 1007, Bolesław seized the initiative and launched a western campaign that reached the vicinity of Magdeburg. This, in a sense, corresponds with Gallus Anonymus' account of an iron-stake-marked boundary on the Saale River – which flows into the Elbe near that region. Naturally, this campaign cannot be taken as proof that Bolesław's borders were extended that far west. However, he did succeed in occupying Lusatia on a lasting basis during this phase of the conflict. It is also possible – though this remains a hypothesis – that he later legalized this possession, together with the Milceni lands, by accepting them as a fief as part of an agreement ending this stage of the wars.

Under that agreement, concluded in Merseburg the summer of 1013, Bolesław paid homage to Henry II

and, in return, received a long-coveted *beneficium* – most likely a fiefdom, but what it actually encompassed remains a matter of speculative historical debate. At the same Merseburg gathering, Bolesław also received a notable honor: he carried the sword in the procession to the church, placing him – within the ceremonial world of imperial ritual – among the highest-ranking figures beneath the ruler of the Empire himself.

Note, however, that Henry had not yet been crowned Roman Emperor at that time; he would undertake his coronation journey to Rome the following year. Bolesław not only failed to attend the event, but also declined to send military support – an omission that sparked the third and final phase of his conflict with Henry. Upon returning from Rome as emperor, Henry summoned Bolesław to his court to explain himself. This time, however, there were no honors awaiting Bolesław in exchange for submission – and perhaps that is why he consistently avoided appearing before the emperor. His actions made it clear that he did not regard himself as merely one of

the Milceni lands, and possibly other territories he had been expected to forfeit as a disloyal vassal. Moreover, according to contemporary annals, Bolesław declared that the lands supposedly granted to him as a fief were in fact his rightful property. There is no doubt that, while he did not deny the Roman Empire's supremacy among Christian monarchies, he had no intention of accepting a diminished status – especially not compared to the recognition he had received under Otto III. Lacking that same respect from Henry, Bolesław secured his position on the international stage through *realpolitik* – primarily through force.

Just a few months later, in 1018, Bolesław launched his well-known expedition to Kyiv, supported in part by Saxon troops. There, he installed his son-in-law Sviatopolk on the throne of Rus'. From the captured city, he sent gifts to Emperor Henry (according to Thietmar). But even more intriguing is Thietmar's other remark: Bolesław also reportedly sent an embassy to the eastern Roman emperor in Constantinople, offering friendly relations and threatening uncompromising hostility in the event of refusal. Although Bolesław did not stay in Kyiv for long – leaving amid rising tensions with his son-in-law and the city's inhabitants – the mere fact of its conquest, and especially the embassy to Constantinople, reveal the truly international scope of his political ambitions.

Coronation

Bolesław was the first Polish ruler to receive the royal crown and anointment, shortly before his death in 1025. This is confirmed by several near-contemporary German sources that were hostile to him – their authors considered the act illegal, which paradoxically strengthens the credibility of this early testimony confirming that a coronation took place in Poland. According to Gallus Anonymus, however, Bolesław the Great had already been granted kingly status a quarter of a century earlier by Otto III during the Congress of Gniezno. In the broader context of Gallus's chronicle, this royal status rested on certain ideological foundations: from its earliest beginnings, Poland is consistently presented in Gallus's narrative as having always been a kingdom.

This portrayal aligns in part with the tradition of Piast rule even before the baptism of Mieszko I and the integration of the Polish state into the Ottonian imperial order. In fact, the Old Slavic term for a ruler – *knędz* or *kniaź* – shares a common Indo-European root (*kn*) with the Lithuanian *kunigas*, the German *König*, and the English *king*. From the perspective of their own subjects, then, the early Piasts were in effect “kings” (although Polish *książę* later came to be considered to rank as a “duke” or “prince”). The notion of kingship as being inseparably linked to coronation and holy anointment was part of a newer process of

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the empire's vassal dukes. He aspired to something greater. Tellingly, around this time he began minting coins bearing the royal title *rex* (king).

When negotiations and long-distance overtures proved fruitless, the matter was settled by war. The key moment came in the summer of 1017, when Henry, allied with the Czechs and the pagan Liutizi, launched a campaign against Poland. His forces failed to cross the Oder and eventually became bogged down at Niemcza. The fortress held out, and Bolesław, monitoring the situation from Wrocław, received word of the defenders' success. Henry's army, ravaged by disease, retreated through Bohemia. Peace was ultimately negotiated by envoys and concluded in late January 1018 in Budziszyn (Bautzen), which was under Bolesław's control. Thietmar of Merseburg, commenting at the time, noted that it was not the agreement that should have been achieved, merely the best that could be.

Henry had failed to achieve his objectives. Bolesław did not appear before him, nor did he renew any potential vassal ties. He retained control of Lusatia and

sacralizing rulership, which solidified only in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

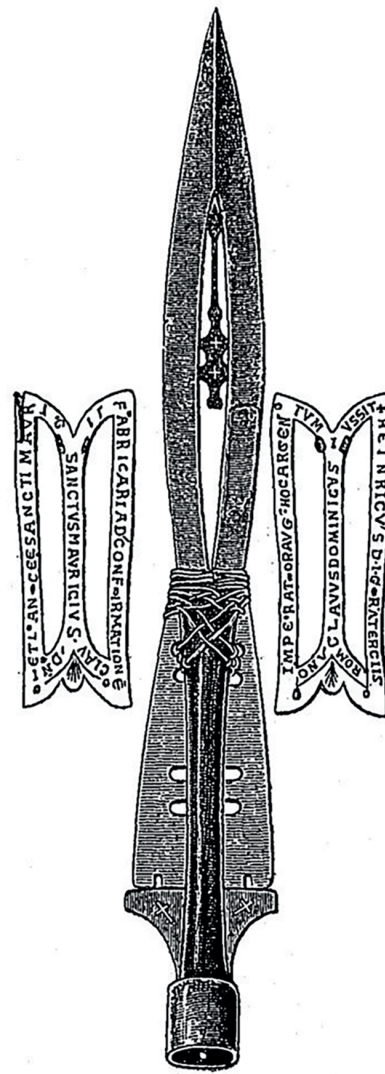
Bolesław the Great

Gallus Anonymus' vision of Bolesław's monarchy is marked by idealism – not in the colloquial sense, but in the precise – almost Platonic – meaning of the term. It presents an idea (and ideal) of monarchy, one to be realized by the central figure of Poland's first chronicle and, at the same time, its intended recipient: the third Bolesław in Polish history, known as Bolesław the Wrymouth. One must also keep in mind the literary conventions of medieval historiography, in which depictions of the distant past were, by design, cloaked in legend – in this case, the legend of a “golden age” of Bolesław the Great.

The vast reach of Bolesław's kingdom is, in Gallus's historical depiction, largely tied to the scale of his military campaigns, which gave him either temporary dominion or momentary presence on the remote frontiers of this “inkpot empire.” It is tempting to look for kernels of historical truth in such episodes, later magnified in legend. But this is a line of thinking typical of the nineteenth century, when stories of this kind were treated from a positivist perspective as little more than pitiable fictions. Today, historical methodology has long since moved beyond those early positivist roots, encouraging us instead to focus on the motives behind the sources (*causa scribendi*) when interpreting their content. From this perspective, the matter becomes clearer. The legendary “golden age” of Bolesław served as a powerful symbol of the Polish state's potential for expansion – an aspiration in Gallus's own time, but one that could be viewed as grounded in historical memory, given that Bolesław's actual military campaigns had proven the feasibility of such conquests.

Returning to the legendary material referenced at the start of these reflections, we must still consider the puzzling case of “Selencia”, cited above by Gallus as neighbors of the Pomeranians. Selencia is hypothetically to be identified with a region of Polabian Slavdom, most often the lands of the Liutizi, and so there is at least a partial historical foundation for the legend, due to Bolesław's campaigns against tribes in that area. However, a greater source of inspiration for the mention of Selencia likely came from the northern policies of Bolesław the Wrymouth, Gallus's contemporary, for whom the chronicler sought to provide a legendary precedent, obviously one tinged with myth.

The same applies to the references to the Prussians. Raids against them – especially for plunder – were almost routine for the early Piast state, as they provided a source of revenue. But in the context of Gallus's account, particularly the ecclesiastical one, his depictions of Bolesław's “successes” seem rather exaggerated. It becomes clear, then, that searching



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The Holy Lance of Saint Maurice, according to Fernand de Mély, 1904. The lance is preserved in the Imperial Treasury at the Hofburg Palace

for proverbial “grains of truth” in legend is often unfounded. Yet this is not surprising, especially in light of another, more intriguing line of association. Gallus Anonymus introduces (likely through association with the name of the Prussian tribe known as the Sasins) the striking idea that the Prussians descended from certain Saxons – specifically, from Saxons who fled the conquest of Charlemagne. This narrative thread connects to Gallus's mention of Bolesław's rule over the Saxons in the land along the Saale River, and more broadly, it frames the Polish ruler's conquests as a continuation of Charlemagne's imperial mission.

However, later generations did not adopt this “Carolingian” interpretation of Bolesław's greatness. The grand scale of his conquests was instead recast by Master Vincent into the tradition of the “early Polish” Lechitic Empire. In the fifteenth century, Jan Długosz echoed this in his monumental *Annals or Chronicles of the Famous Kingdom of Poland*, praising Bolesław the Brave as the second most important father of the Polish homeland – after the mythical founder Lech. ■