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MONUMENTAL STRUCTURES FROM BOLESŁAW'S ERA

Mieszko I's baptism marked the start of Christianization and the development of stone architecture in Poland. The establishment of the archbishopric in Gniezno, with bishoprics in Poznań, Kraków, Wrocław and Kołobrzeg, bolstered the early Polish state's foundations.

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The baptism of Mieszko I, Poland's first historical ruler, was a key moment in the emergence of monumental architecture in the Piast state. It marked the beginning of a long process of Christianizing the population and opened the way for the transfer of various forms of Christian art, including stone architecture. Equally important was the establishment in 1000 of the archbishopric in Gniezno, in tandem with four bishoprics – in Poznań, Kraków, Wrocław, and Kołobrzeg. It was a Christian ruler's duty to found churches and monasteries, where saintly relics and celebrating the liturgy would ensure prosperity for both ruler and subjects. Just as vital was creating a new framework for exercising power – now transformed in line with Christian doctrine.

At the same time, the lack of native stone-building traditions meant that new structures commissioned by the duke/king or his consort had to be carried out by craftsmen brought in from abroad. With Christianity came master-builders skilled in designing and erecting stone edifices, arriving from distant regions to the lands along the Warta, Oder, and Vistula. Their

work survives only in fragments uncovered through archaeological and architectural research – none remains intact. No records preserve their names or origins. Their legacy lies solely in the forms of the residences and churches they built – insofar as these can be reconstructed. Today, interdisciplinary analysis is helping us retrace their inspirations and ties to foreign artistic traditions – with ninth- to eleventh-century European architecture offering the broader context for identifying the origins and transmission of these forms into the early Piast realm.

Stone structures

The architecture of the early Piast realm was marked by a distinctive building technique. Walls were constructed from stone material shaped into long but low slabs. These were either laid across the full width of the wall or arranged to form two faces – interior and exterior – with the center filled with rubble and mortar. In the Greater Poland region, builders primarily used so-called Jotnian sandstone and granitoids; in the Lesser Poland region, sandstones and calcareous sandstones were common. A characteristic feature of these walls was the frequent use of gypsum and lime mortars with minimal additives. It is worth noting that gypsum mortar was used in only two other regions in Europe: Saxony and what is now Switzerland.

By the reign of Bolesław the Brave, stone buildings commissioned by Mieszko I already existed. Research



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over the past few decades has identified remains of residences – *palatia* – that can confidently be linked to this ruler. The term derives from the Palatine Hill – the site of the mythical first Latin settlement and the birthplace of Rome. During the Roman imperial era, an extensive complex of imperial residences was built there. The name of this “seat of power” gave rise to the term for royal residences in nearly every European language. Yet in the early Middle Ages, a monarch was a ruler in constant motion – this was the only way to effectively govern his territory. For this reason, numerous residences were built along the route of his travels, where he and his large retinue could stay for a time.

Principal Seats of Power

In the core territory of the Piast realm in Greater Poland, a group of major strongholds existed, each likely serving distinct but complementary functions. In his *Gesta principum Polonorum*, the chronicler Gallus Anonymus recorded that in Bolesław’s time the *sedes regni principales* – the principal seats of the ruler – were Poznań, Gniezno, Giecz, and Włocławek. Among these, the best-preserved remains are found in Poznań, where the *palatium* has been thoroughly studied. In Gniezno, only fragments of walls have been uncovered that may have belonged to a residence. In Włocławek, no such structure has yet been located. In Giecz, the foundations of a *palatium* were

uncovered back in the 1950s – those of a building that, although planned, was never constructed. Later research showed that these foundations were older than originally assumed, with construction likely beginning no later than the end of the tenth century. It is difficult to date the site precisely enough to attribute the investment to either Mieszko I or Bolesław the Brave. It’s also worth noting that as early as the nineteenth century, masonry remains were discovered on Ostrów Lednicki (an island on Lake Lednica), initially interpreted as a church. Decades of later research showed that this was a residential complex, which Gallus Anonymus did not mention – although it was almost certainly expanded with an upper floor in the time of Bolesław the Brave. The *palatia* at Poznań and Ostrów Lednicki, as well as the remains in Gniezno, can be dated to the second half of the tenth century, and likely also served Bolesław and his son, Mieszko II Lambert. From Bolesław’s reign we also have the remains of a *palatium* in Przemyśl, associated with his 1018 campaign against Kievan Rus – though it remains unclear whether the building was constructed before or after his return from Kyiv.

A distinctive feature of early *palatia* in Polish lands is their composition. In all known examples, we see a close connection between a rectangular representative building containing an *alua* (large hall) and a chapel built on a so-called central plan – that is, a symmetrical or regular layout. In the design at Giecz and in the *palatia* at Ostrów Lednicki and

Ruins of the palatium and chapel from the tenth century on Ostrów Lednicki island

Przemyśl, this connection was strictly axial. The form of Piast *palatia* was generally modeled on Carolingian and Ottonian royal residences built in ninth- and tenth-century Europe. However, they show significant individual traits, suggesting that the Piasts did not simply copy models from Saxony or other parts of the Holy Roman Empire. The chapels themselves also differed in form. In the design at Giecz, the plan was for a rotunda (a circular chapel) with niches in the thick walls. At Ostrów Lednicki, the chapel had a Greek-cross plan with a circular ambulatory and a tower at the crossing; in Poznań, it was a single-nave building with a semicircular apse on the east; and in Przemyśl, a rotunda with one apse (Fig. 1). Each of these had a different layout, unlike German palace chapels which (with the exception of Werla) were rectangular buildings with a single apse.

The Piast *palatia* are described as residential complexes because they included additional sacred buildings. Palace chapels served only the ruler and his entourage, so separate churches were built nearby for the wider population. One confirmed example is the rectangular church at the Lednica stronghold, erected alongside the *palatium* under Mieszko I and expanded under Bolesław. Recent research suggests similar churches may have stood near the *palatia* in Poznań (beneath today's cathedral) and in Giecz. The form of the Gniezno palatium remains unknown, and no confirmed site or layout has been found for the

first *palatium* in Kraków – though one must have existed in Bolesław's time. In sum, early Piast residential complexes, though partly inspired by Ottonian models, display notable individuality and architectural variation within a shared framework.

Cathedrals

The Congress of Gniezno and the creation of an independent ecclesiastical structure in Piast territory made it necessary to found episcopal churches – cathedrals – in the strongholds that became diocesan seats. The best-documented archaeologically is the cathedral in Poznań. After the destruction of WWII, extensive excavations were undertaken, followed more recently by analytical re-evaluations. These studies revealed that the church was about 45 meters long and had a symmetrical layout, with matching eastern and western terminations, each with side annexes and towers (Fig. 2). It was a two-chancel basilica, featuring a crypt at the eastern end supported by four pillars. In the nave were two structures once interpreted as the tombs of Mieszko and Bolesław the Brave. However, recent analyses suggest the larger one may have been a *confessio* – a chamber for the relics of a prominent saint. Construction likely began in the 990s, meaning the church was granted cathedral status either upon completion or shortly before, sometime after the year 1000. Its architectural model drew on Rhineland and Saxon examples, especially the imperial Saxon abbey in Memleben, whose abbot, Unger, likely became Poznań's first bishop.

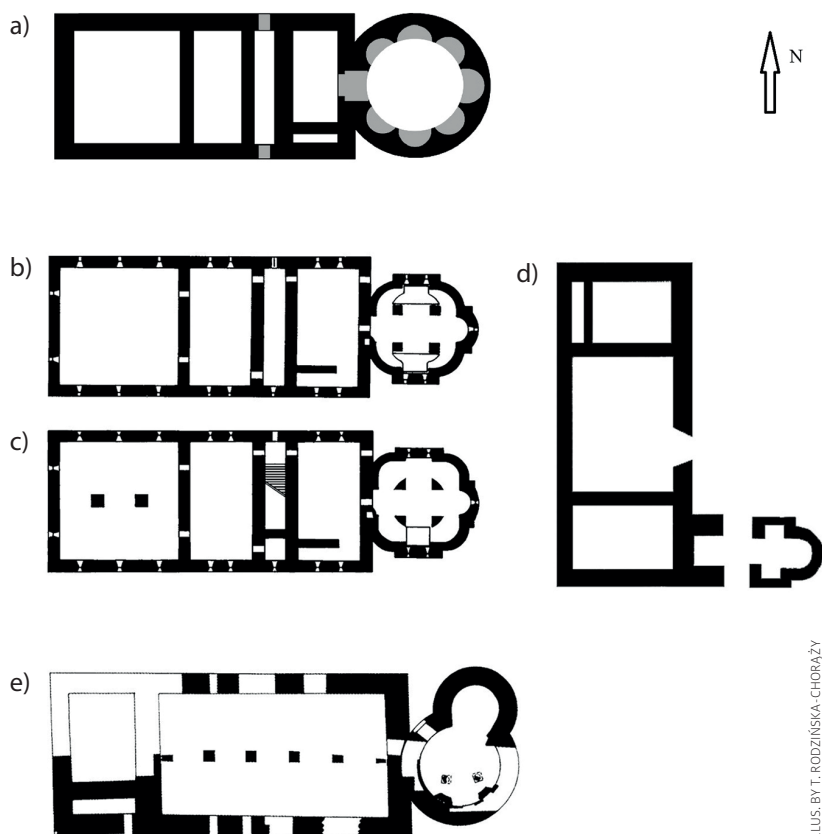
As for the cathedral in Gniezno, it may have been preceded by a small rotunda, though the remains are too fragmentary to reconstruct its exact form. According to tradition, this was where the body of St. Adalbert was originally laid to rest. The rotunda was later replaced by a three-aisled basilica with three apses at the eastern end. It was likely this structure that contemporary sources refer to when mentioning the golden altar donated by Emperor Otto III in the year 1000, the fire of 1018, the coronation of Bolesław in 1025, and the plundering of Adalbert's relics by the Czech duke Bretislav in 1038. The form of the Gniezno cathedral reflected southern architectural traditions, particularly those associated with the so-called First Romanesque style.

The Kraków cathedral and stronghold

We know somewhat less about the cathedral in Kraków. Only fragments of the eastern section and short stretches of the side aisles have survived, allowing us to conclude only that it was also a basilica – with a transept and three apses at the eastern end. However,

Fig. 1

- Early Piast-era *palatia*:
a) plan of the Giecz complex,
b, c) Ostrów Lednicki – phase “c” from the time of Bolesław the Brave,
d) Poznań,
e) Przemyśl



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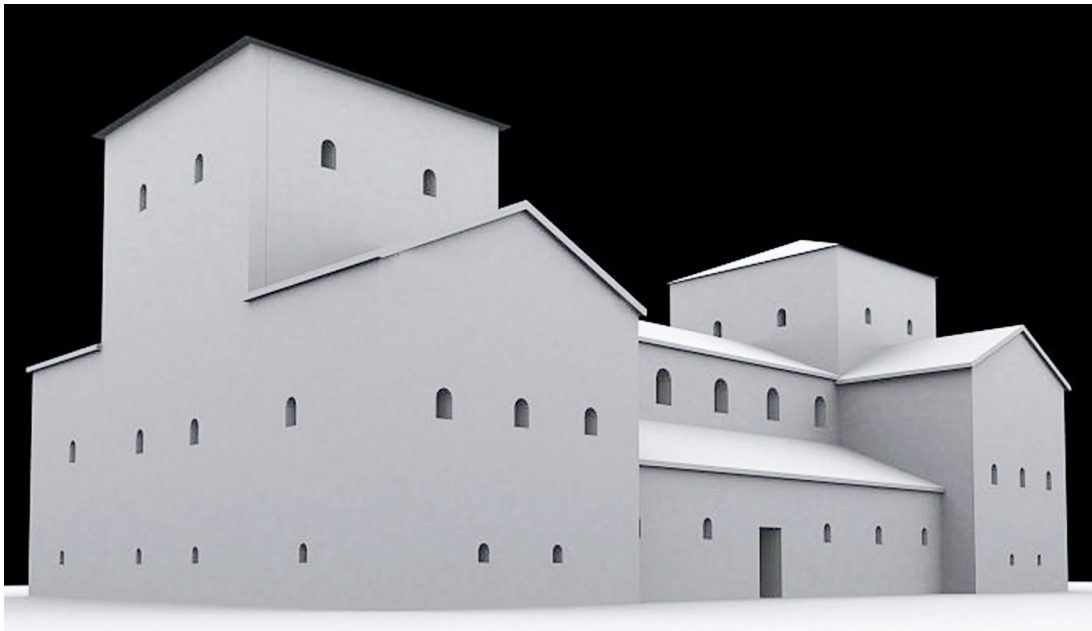


Fig. 2
Poznań cathedral around
the year 1000
(reconstruction
by A. Bukowska)

Fig. 3
Kraków, Wawel
– best-preserved section
of the four-apsed rotunda
(of the Blessed Virgin Mary
and Saints Felix and
Adauctus)

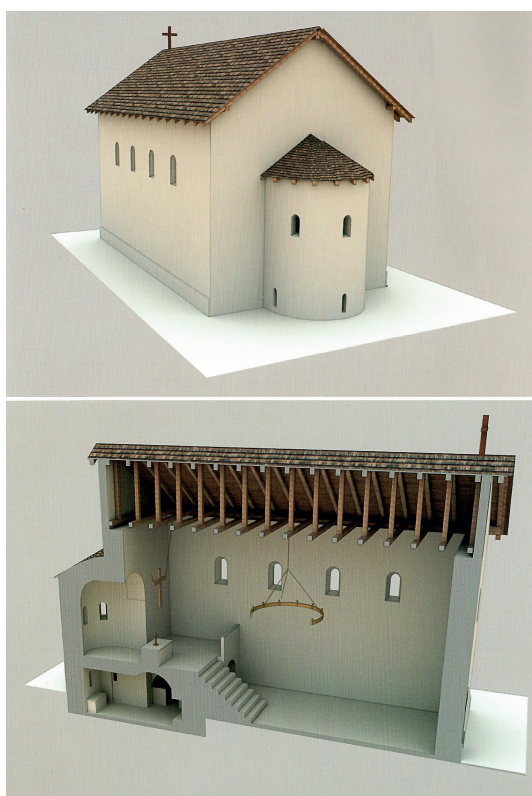
we do not know the shape of its western end or its full length, which was probably around 40–45 meters. We have even less data on the cathedral in Wrocław, whose remains are extremely fragmentary. We can say that it was a church with an eastern apse adjoining the transept, but we cannot reconstruct either the length or width of the nave. Nor do we know whether construction of a cathedral in Kołobrzeg was ever begun.

The earliest buildings in the Kraków stronghold also pose a complex problem. In addition to the modest remains of the cathedral, we can mention the so-called quadrilateral building with a corridor, located beneath the northwestern corner of the arcaded courtyard on Wawel Hill. It is possible that this structure formed part of the original residential complex. Built using slab construction techniques, it was accompanied by a rotunda with four apses and a crypt (Fig. 3), a two-apsed rotunda (known as “Church B”), a single-apsed rotunda near the Kościuszko Bastion, and remnants of masonry beneath the later Basilica of St. Gereon. Sections of slab-built walls discovered along the western and southern defensive embankments have been interpreted as the remains of masonry gates leading into the stronghold. In other places, deep excavations have revealed layers of poured flooring (possibly forming pavements or construction platforms), but the limited scope of the work has so far made it impossible to associate them with specific buildings. Because the stratigraphy is difficult to interpret, we cannot currently narrow the dating of these structures to the reign of Bolesław the Brave alone. What is certain is that they were built sometime between the final decade of the tenth and roughly the mid-eleventh century. It appears likely that the rotunda near the Kościuszko Bastion, Church B, and



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Fig. 4
Giecz, single-nave church
with crypt – structure
and longitudinal section
(reconstruction by
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the remains beneath St. Gereon's Basilica date from the time the cathedral was under construction. Another rotunda was discovered outside the stronghold, on Lasota Hill, beneath the later church of St. Benedict. While there is no clear evidence linking it directly to Bolesław's reign, it belongs to the group of early central-plan churches in Poland dated to the first half of the 11th century.

Monastic churches

An important aspect of ducal activity involved founding monasteries, which served a range of purposes – from missionary work to dynastic functions (in the Holy Roman Empire, such institutions were called *Reichskloster*). Female monastic communities played a particularly significant role, often led by abbesses who were related to the ruler – sisters, daughters, or widows of reigning monarchs. Sparse written sources inform us that one such monastery was founded in the Piast realm by St. Adalbert, before he set off on his fatal mission to the Prussians. Another is believed to have been located in Międzyrzecz – though the scholarly debate over this site remains unresolved. Sources also mention a *hermitage* (a monastic institution with an eremitic character) founded by Bolesław the Brave, to which Emperor Otto III, at the Polish ruler's request, sent monks from the renowned hermitage of Pereum in Italy. Together with their Polish brethren, they were martyred in the year 1003 and were later

canonized as saints associated with Poland. The location of the Hermitage of the Five Martyred Brothers remains unknown, and no remains of the monastery have yet been found. Until recently, it was assumed that the entire complex was built of wood. However, a close analysis of *The Life of the Five Brothers* – written shortly after their deaths by St. Bruno of Querfurt – suggests that the church at the hermitage may have been made of stone, and that the martyrs' grave was placed in the nave. We know that after their deaths, the hermit monastery grew and likely remained active until the 1040s. Locating the remains of these monasteries remains a major challenge for Polish archaeology and art history.

The Life of the Five Brothers also mentions a group of nuns who arrived with Bishop Unger for the martyrs' funeral. It is presumed, therefore, that their convent was located somewhere within the Diocese of Poznań or in Gniezno. There are some indications supporting the hypothesis that a women's congregation may have been established in Giecz, near the church found in the northern part of the stronghold described by Gallus Anonymus. This church was 22 meters long – half the length of the Poznań cathedral, but twice as long as most other early Piast ecclesiastical buildings. It was a single-nave structure with an apse at the eastern end and one exceptional feature – a crypt, over which stood an elevated presbytery, accessed by a wide staircase aligned with the nave (Fig. 4). The form of the crypt recalls ninth-century Carolingian crypts, but shows especially close resemblance to a group of crypts from churches in northern Italy built between the eighth and early eleventh centuries. In fact, most of the single-nave churches with crypts discovered in Italy belonged to female monastic communities. The Giecz church was likely built around the turn of the tenth and eleventh centuries, or in the first quarter of the eleventh – and was probably founded by Bolesław the Brave. Its size and architectural form indicate that it played a special role in the Piast state. This invites the hypothesis that it was a monastic church – possibly of a women's congregation – under the special protection of the ruler. In this context, an interesting detail appears in Thietmar's Chronicle, which notes that Bolesław's daughter served as an abbess in a monastery – unfortunately, the chronicler does not say where.

Although still only partially understood, the monumental architecture of Bolesław the Brave's reign demonstrates the ruler's far-reaching ambitions – as well as the considerable resources of his treasury. Both the residential complexes and the cathedrals, along with the church at Giecz, show that artistic inspirations were drawn from many different regions. In this sense, the architecture of the time combined, simultaneously, multiple currents from both the western and southern parts of Europe. ■