

EXPANSION AND ELITES

Exhibition at
the Museum of the Origins
of the Polish State



The social elites of the region known as Pomerelia (or Vistula Pomerania) helped shape the first Polish state – leaving behind impressive chamber graves that still speak of their power, wealth, and connections.

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The traditional world of the Western Slavs, who inhabited the lands between the Elbe and the Bug, was built around an egalitarian society with minimal social stratification. The core of this society consisted of free individuals engaged in agriculture and animal husbandry, organized into local territorial-neighborhood communities. These communities collaborated across many aspects of life, including public works projects – evidenced by the construction of strongholds and wooden bridges leading to settlement centers located on lake islands. Overall, this was an autarkic system based on a largely collective and self-sufficient economy.

The situation was somewhat different along the Baltic coast, where emerging trade and craft centers became part of a far-reaching network of commercial and communication routes. Written sources point to the formation of a leadership elite within these local communities, referred to using such Latin terms such as *primates*, *principes*, or *meliores*. The existence of this group, and the privileges it enjoyed due to its elevated social standing, is one reason why anthropologists describe this form of political organization as a *chiefdom* – a stage that often precedes the formation of full-fledged states.

Power in motion

Archaeologically, the presence of such elites is usually taken to be indicated by numerous finds of spurs, typically with a distinctive inward-facing hook used to fasten them to boots. While spurs were widely recognized symbols of the knightly class throughout “Latin” Europe, in the Western Slavic context they carried a somewhat different meaning, but still clearly signified social prestige and elevated status. These items have been discovered at key stronghold sites in

Greater Poland, Silesia, and Pomerania, dated to the eighth to tenth centuries, highlighting the importance of mounted warriors and horses – valued not only for their practical use, but also for their mythic and sacred associations. Still, both written and archaeological sources present a picture of a society with limited social hierarchy. Within the framework of military democracy, however, the leaders or chiefs of local communities – connected to a budding aristocracy – undoubtedly gained influence. This situation changed fundamentally with the emergence of state-building processes that increasingly centralized power.

Among the Western Slavs, such developments gradually took hold during the ninth and tenth centuries, first in the Morava River basin (Great Moravia), then in the Bohemian Basin (Bohemia), and eventually in the Warta River basin (the early Piast state). These emerging political entities were characterized by dynastic monopolies on power, clear divisions between rulers and ruled, and a system of tributes and levies used to support the administrative apparatus. One of their defining features was aggressive territorial expansion. In the case of the Piast dynasty, this expansion transformed their initial domain – originally confined to a small region around Gniezno – into a vast state encompassing all of Greater Poland with Kuyavia, the Lubusz Land, what is now known as Central Poland, and the Chełmno Land. In time, it grew to also include Silesia, Lesser Poland, and Pomerania. To create the *regnum* of Bolesław the Brave and Mieszko II, which stretched across such an extensive territory, the Piast autocracy had to push beyond the catchment areas of the Oder and Warta rivers and expand into the Vistula basin. This process was accompanied by profound social, cultural, economic, and religious transformations – changes that were reflected in the increasingly stratified structure of society in the early medieval Polish lands.

Armed warriors

The power of the Piast dynasty rested on contingents of well-trained warriors. Their status is described in the account of the Jewish merchant Ibrahim ibn Yaqub, preserved in the writings of the Arab scholar



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Fig. 1
One of the chamber graves
discovered at the cemetery
in Kałdus, in Chełmno Land

al-Bakri: “He [Mieszko I] has three thousand armored horsemen divided [into] units, and a hundred of them are worth as much as ten hundred of other [warriors]. He provides these men with clothing, horses, weapons, and everything they need.” In another version of this account, written down by the Arab historian al-Qazwini, the equipment is listed slightly differently: “Horses, saddles, bridles, weapons, and everything they need.” This famous early description of the origins of Poland, much analyzed by historians and archaeologists, highlights how vital well-armed, loyal, and exceptionally well-provisioned warriors

were to the effective exercise of power in this period. It was these warriors who made possible the Piasts’ territorial expansion and the establishment of strongholds beyond the Gniezno heartland. From among their ranks emerged the administrative apparatus and a new class of new nobles, who rose to prominence and wealth.

Exerting pressure and asserting dominance over local communities drawn into the Piast sphere of influence required not only verbal persuasion but also the use of force. Thus, professional armament – primarily swords, spears, and axes – along with the use of horses for mounted travel and related modern riding equipment, not only provided the Piast warriors with great military capability but also gave them the mobility necessary to cover the long distances between key centers of power and maintain control over the surrounding territories. One of the methods used to impose and consolidate ducal authority in annexed regions was the construction of strongholds and the collection of taxes, levies, and tributes. This required communication and coordination across wide areas. It is also worth noting that privileged positions within the system of rule were occupied by the clergy, as well as merchants and skilled craftsmen – many of whom were likely of foreign origin.

The territorial expansion of the Piasts and the formation of elites within their state can be traced primarily through archaeological sources. Significant social differentiation among the population can be observed, for instance, along the communication and settlement corridor of the lower Vistula, which ran from the Gniezno region through Eastern Pomerania towards the Baltic Sea and Prussian territory. One of the material attestations pointing to the emergence of Piast-linked elites in this region – especially during the reign of Bolesław the Brave – is the discovery of chamber graves at inhumation cemeteries near strongholds in Cieple, Kałdus, and Pień (Fig. 1). Their locations are no coincidence: these strongholds are thought to have served as political, administrative, and religious centers of Piast power. They were situated at strategic points in Eastern Pomerania – both along major long-distance trade routes following the course of the Vistula and at important river crossings.

Chamber graves were monumental funerary structures composed of a central wooden construction resembling a house. In some cases – such as in Pień – they may have consisted merely of large log-built chests. Due to their form and central placement within cemeteries, these graves clearly stood out in the necropolis landscape, especially when contrasted with the numerous standard burials documented at Cieple and Kałdus. Some may have been covered with burial mounds or enclosed by special fences. One remarkable example is a child’s grave from Pień, surrounded by a double ditch forming a nearly square outline. This

feature resembles the enclosed graves of this type known from the cemetery at Bodzia in Kuyavia.

Chamber graves tell a story

The high status of the individuals buried in chamber graves is confirmed by the grave goods buried alongside them, which included both locally produced luxury items and, significantly, imports from Western Europe and the East – particularly from Rus’ and Byzantium. The richest finds come from four adult male graves discovered at the cemetery in Cieple. Their elevated social rank and professional function are reflected in the weapons and riding equipment placed in their graves.

Each burial contained an almost identical set of military gear, consisting of a sword and a spear, along with horse tack and riding accessories such as ornately decorated spurs, stirrups, buckles, and bits (Fig. 2). This assemblage is highly unusual in the context of the Polish lands, and metallurgical and typological-comparative analyses have shown that the objects were produced in various regions of Europe. The grave goods also included wooden buckets with metal fittings and bronze bowls. However, the roles of these men likely extended well beyond the military, as indicated by merchant scales, sets of weights, and touchstones used to test the quality of precious metals found in two of the graves. In some burials, silver coins were also discovered, providing evidence for the growing custom of placing so-called *obols of the dead* in graves during this period.

When discussing the Cieple graves in the context of the social elites emerging at the time, mention must also be made of the burial of a woman interred with an exceptionally ornate necklace fastened with silver clasps. It was composed of 25 beads made of carnelian and rock crystal, along with various beads of glass, gold, and silver, two silver amulet-case pendants (so-called *kaptorgi*), and an Arabic dirham.

Rich grave goods

Equally rich grave goods were found in chamber graves at Kałdus and Pień. Although these sites did not yield any graves of “armed horsemen” – a key difference from the necropolis at Cieple – there is no doubt that the assemblages testify to the high status of the individuals buried there. Especially notable at Kałdus is the chamber grave of an adult male dressed in an elegant silk garment, with sleeves adorned with appliques made of gold thread. The grave also contained a bronze bowl, a bucket clad in decorative metal sheeting, and a unique wooden plate with gilded bronze fittings forming the shape of a cross (Fig. 3). These fittings were richly decorated with motifs referencing the Peridexion tree, a mythical plant known from



Fig. 2
A richly decorated bronze spur discovered in one of the chamber graves at the Cieple cemetery (from: S. Wadył, ed. *Cieple: Elitarna nekropola wczesnośredniowieczna na Pomorzu Wschodnim* [Cieple: An Elite Early Medieval Necropolis in Eastern Pomerania], Gdańsk 2019)

medieval bestiaries. A bronze bowl and a bucket were also found in a double grave containing the remains of a man and a woman. Among the grave goods was a necklace composed of silver amulet cases (*kaptorgi*) and semi-precious stones. Another chamber grave, belonging to a man, contained a sword with the inscription *Ulfberht*, likely produced in the Rhine region.

The chamber graves at Pień – eleven in total – belonged to an adult man, two women, and seven children. These graves contained a rich variety of items, including temple rings, earrings, and necklaces fastened with silver clasps, made of semi-precious stones, silver beads, and ornamented amulet cases (Fig. 4). One of the graves also contained

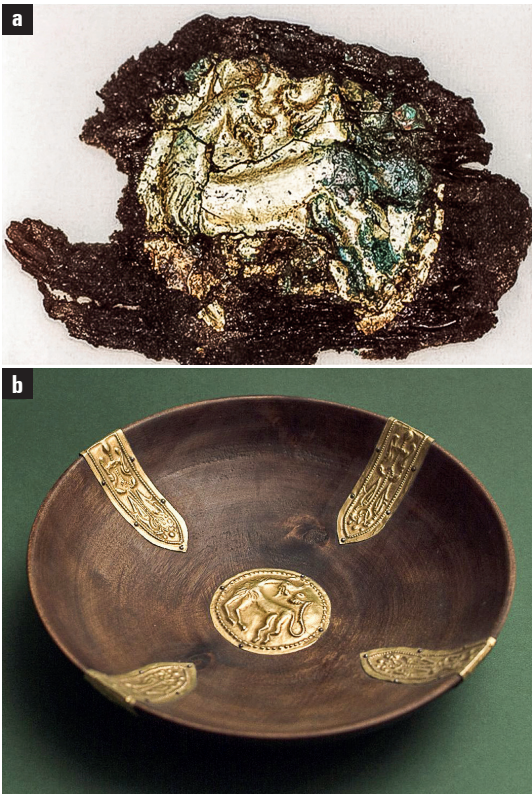
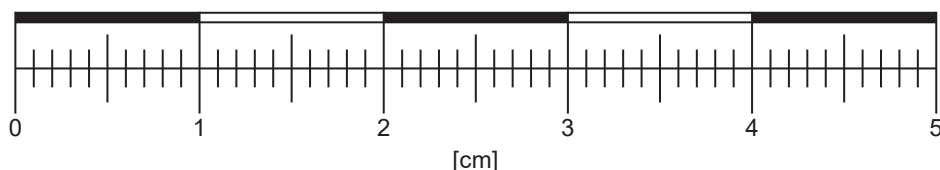


Fig. 3
a) Gilded bronze plaque depicting a dragon
b) Reconstruction of a wooden plate with metal appliques

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Fig. 4

A silver amulet case (*kaptarga*) decorated with granulation and filigree, discovered in one of the chamber graves at Pień in the Chełmno region (after *The Early Medieval and Early Modern Cemetery at Pień*, ed. D. Poliński, Toruń 2020)



a touchstone, a bronze bowl, a bucket, a richly decorated axe, and a piece of silk fabric. A particularly exceptional item is a necklace made of 400 lapis lazuli beads – a semi-precious stone rarely found in early medieval Poland and likely imported from the East. Other remarkable finds include an iron axe from a man's grave, elaborately decorated using the damascening technique, and a metal-clad bucket featuring embossed Christian imagery with symbolic depictions of a bird and a dragon, between which appears the Hand of God.

All these luxury items found in monumental graves suggest that, in the last quarter of the tenth century and the first half of the eleventh, a social elite had emerged in the lower Vistula region with functional ties to the Piast dynasty. The individuals belonging to this elite likely took part in the management of stronghold centers located in this part of the ducal domain (for example, the stronghold at Chełmno, whose remains are now in the village of Kałdus) and in maintaining control over the main long-distance trade route running along the Vistula River. Their lifestyle and group identity likely contrasted with the cultural traits of the rest of the former kinship- and neighborhood-based communities, whose members remained generally free people, but who – within the new socio-political reality – became obliged to perform various services for the duke. It is to this elite that we should link the spread of silver in Chełmno in the last quarter of the tenth century and the first half of the eleventh – appearing in the form of coins, jewelry, and silver scrap – and the related phenomenon of hoarding this precious metal.

Questions on origins

When discussing the Vistula-region elites of this period, one cannot overlook the issue of their ethnic origins. In recent years, this topic has sparked considerable controversy – particularly in response to suggestions by some scholars that individuals buried in chamber graves may have arrived in Polish lands from Scandinavia. Setting aside the strictly methodological aspects of this debate, it is important to emphasize that neither the form of the chamber graves nor the origins of the grave goods can be taken as definitive evidence of the ethnic identity of the individuals buried in them. The construction of monumental graves by elites was a transregional custom, and the movement of luxury goods took place in many directions. On this basis alone, it is not possible to determine whether the deceased interred in Cieple, Pień, and Kałdus were of Scandinavian or Slavic descent.

The origins of the custom of constructing chamber graves along the lower Vistula, and of equipping them with specific sets of grave goods, also remain an open question. This practice should likely be viewed as a form of emblematic style, signaling ethnic identity understood as a socio-cultural construct. Paleogenetic studies of skeletons from the Cieple cemetery indicate a high proportion of individuals with haplogroups characteristic of north-western and northern Europe (including present-day Denmark). It is therefore possible that in this case, influences came from that direction, brought by people migrating from those regions – a population highly valued by the Piasts for their skills and expertise. ■