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POLAND'S CITES OF A THOUSAND YEARS

As we admire the impressive historic landmarks found in many Polish cities, we may occasionally wonder: When and why was a city founded in this particular spot? Other places, lacking spectacular monuments today, may have been urban sites that witnessed the very birth of the Polish state.

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Which modern Polish cities can be said to remember the times of Bolesław the Brave? Surprisingly, there are quite a few of them. Note, however, that referring to these places as “cities” in the context of a thousand years ago is only partly appropriate. In reality, these were urban stronghold

centers that fulfilled a variety of roles – political, administrative, military, commercial, and religious. They typically included a fortified stronghold (*gród*) at the core plus adjacent settlements (*podgródzie*), together enclosed by defensive ramparts, along with nearby open villages and peripheral cemeteries.

Archaeological research shows that some of these centers, active during the reign of Bolesław the Brave, played a key role in consolidating his state – and some have retained their importance to this day. However, not all strongholds from that era evolved into towns. For instance, Giecz and Ostrów Lednicki in Greater Poland – both major strongholds in Bolesław’s time – are today little more than rural features in the historic landscape. Other once-prominent centers, such as Kruszwica, also lost their significance in later centuries. In some cases, the core of a Piast-era center – such as Kalisz-Zawodzie – ceased to serve its former functions when a medieval city was later re-founded in a different location. Over time, these old strongholds became historical monuments, and today, reconstructed, they serve as tourist attractions (Fig. 1). In this anniversary year of Bolesław’s coronation, therefore, let us review both the better- and lesser-known “millennial cities.”

Millennial cities: Origins and clustering

So far, 47 cities in the Polish lands have been identified as having at least 1,000 years of history. The largest number of these – fully one-third – are situated in the Greater Poland region, the cradle of the Piast dynasty. In other regions, their numbers are relatively lower, though their distribution is far from even (see Fig. 2). Along the Baltic coast, the oldest cities appear in two

Fig. 1
A reconstructed section
of the Piast stronghold
in Kalisz-Zawodzie



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zones: Western and Eastern Pomerania (though the latter has fewer). A similar pattern is seen in Lesser Poland, where the region around Kraków stands out for its limited urbanization in this early period. On the map of medieval Poland, therefore, one can also see broad swaths of territory devoid of any urban centers – particularly in large parts of Pomerania, southern Mazovia, Podlasie, and the foothill regions of southern Poland.

The origins of Poland's earliest cities varied. In areas newly incorporated into the first Piasts' realm, urban stronghold centers were either built from scratch (e.g. Sandomierz) or expanded from earlier centers (e.g. Kraków). Sometimes, as in the case of Góra Lecha in Gniezno, an early Piast-era center was deliberately situated on a former pagan sacred site.

Some of these cities have remained important to this very day, while others have faded from view. In the Baltic zone, Szczecin and Gdańsk have preserved their high status. Poznań (Fig. 3) and Bydgoszcz continue to be major centers in Greater Poland and Kuyavia;

Kraków and Lublin in Lesser Poland; and Wrocław and Opole in Silesia. Notably, not a single metropolis, in the modern sense of the word, emerged during the medieval period in Mazovia. A good example of a city that experienced a "rise" at the expense of a neighbor is Lublin, which initially remained in the shadow of Sandomierz. The latter – listed by Gallus Anonymus in the twelfth century among the chief centers of the early Polish state, alongside Wolin, Płock, Kalisz, Kołobrzeg, Kruszwica, Gniezno, Zawichost, Wiślica, and Niemcza – eventually lost its prominence. There is also a group of cities whose contributions to 1,000 years of Polish statehood are largely forgotten today. These include Bnin (now within the city limits of Kórnik), Nakło, Śrem, and Pyrzyce.

Some cities owed their early prominence to a strategic position near the state's frontier. When that border shifted, they lost their political and economic significance. In Greater Poland, this fate befell Pszczew, Ujście, Nakło, Chełmno, and Międzyrzecz. We should also mention Kalisz – by some accounts, the

Fig. 2
Polish cities known to have a thousand-year history. Black circles indicate urban stronghold centers whose origins are well-supported by archaeological sources; white circles mark those requiring further verification (after A. Buko)

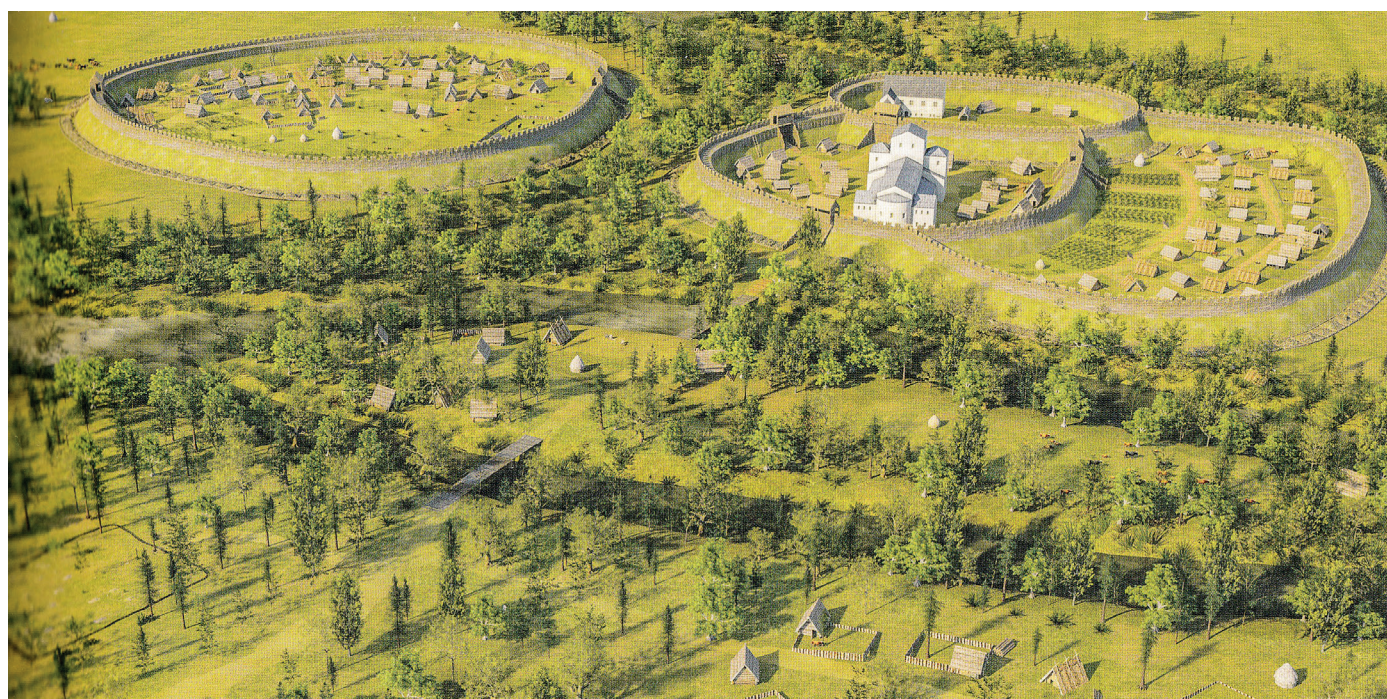


Fig. 3
Poznań in the time
of Bolesław the Brave:
an attempted reconstruction
(after H. Kóčka-Krenz)

oldest city in Poland. According to certain interpretations of a passage by Ptolemy, the 2nd-century Roman geographer, who refers to a place called *Kalisia* along the Amber Road, the city's origins could reach back nearly two millennia!

On the Baltic: Two distinct zones of early urbanization

In the case of settlements on the Baltic Sea, their emergence and prosperity were driven by the extensive zone of trade surrounding the Baltic Sea. Wolin – the “city of twelve gates,” as the tenth-century Jewish traveler Ibrahim ibn Yaqub called it – was still a fishing village in the eighth century. But a century later, it had grown into a major trading emporium, located on routes leading east toward Prussia and Novgorod, and westward toward Hedeby (Haithabu) and Starigard (Oldenburg). The tenth century was a time of great prosperity for Wolin, when it gained new districts and a rebuilt port equipped with extensive storage facilities. Wolin remained significant until the second half of the eleventh century, when neighboring Kamień and Szczecin began to rise in prominence. Initially, Kamień developed in the shadow of Wolin – first as a port and fishing village, and later as a stronghold integrated into the strategic system of its more powerful neighbor. By the twelfth century, however, Kamień had become the seat of the Duchy of Pomerania (1124) and later of a bishopric (1176).

In Szczecin, the beginnings of settlement in what is now the city date back to the seventh or mid-eighth

century. By the ninth, a fortified settlement surrounded by earth-and-timber ramparts had emerged here, undergoing significant reconstruction by the end of the century. In the time of Mieszko I and Bolesław the Brave, the site functioned as a well-organized and strategically important Piast base for military raids toward the Polabian Slavs. The origins of Kołobrzeg, meanwhile, are tied to the exploitation of salt springs there – though the earliest stronghold complex on the Parsęta River arose in what is now Kołobrzeg-Budziszewo, around four kilometers from the modern city center. Its importance among the leading Polish cities of the day was underscored by the founding of a bishopric there in the year 1000 – one of the four created during the Gniezno Summit. As for inland Pomeranian centers like Białogard, Pyrzyce, and Starogard, they began to take shape as tribal stronghold centers as early as the ninth century. Over time, they were incorporated into and rebuilt by the first Piast rulers.

Eastern Pomerania saw urbanization on a considerably smaller scale. Research shows that before the rise of the Gdańsk stronghold, the area was home to open settlements. The largest of these – a fishing village – likely emerged in the ninth century in what is now the Święty Wojciech (“St. Adalbert”) district of Gdańsk. Dendrochronological dating from a building discovered beneath the current city hall shows that the wood used in its construction came from a tree felled in the year 932. The emergence of a central Piast stronghold in this location – one from which St. Adalbert set out on his final mission to pagan Prussia in 997 – coincided with the decline of earlier tribal strongholds in places such as Sopot and Gdynia-Oksywie.

A puzzling case is that of Puck. The prevailing view was that the settlement only emerged in the thirteenth century. However, archaeological finds from both the Puck Bay area and the site beneath the Teutonic castle include evidence of ancient port embankments, boat wrecks, and other materials that can be dated as early as the ninth century. The earliest Puck, therefore, still remains to be discovered.

Mazovia: An important region without a metropolis

Much remains uncertain about Mazovia's earliest urban centers. The beginnings of Płock – the region's most prominent city – are surprisingly late compared to others, dating only to the late tenth or even early eleventh century, during the reign of Bolesław the Brave. Meanwhile, in nearby Płońsk – which never rose to metropolitan status – archaeologists have uncovered fortifications dating to the 970s, the time of Mieszko I. Even older is the stronghold in Nasielsk, which developed continuously from the mid-ninth century onward. Włocławek's history, by contrast, is well documented in written sources: it is mentioned in Gallus Anonymus's chronicle as one of the principal Piast centers. In the case of Ciechanów, the castellany stronghold appears late in written records – only between 1113 and 1124. However, it is highly likely that a settlement complex began to form in the valley of the Łydynia River as early as the late tenth century, thanks to the trade routes crossing the area – one heading toward the Prussians, the other toward Kievan Rus'. The same dating applies to the beginnings of Sierpc. While the castellany stronghold there is first mentioned in the so-called Mogilno forgery of 1065, numerous evidence of earlier settlement has been found within the bounds of the present-day town. That same forged document also names Wyszogród in 1065. Thus, there are many cities in the region with a thousand-year tradition – yet not one developed into a true metropolis.

Lesser Poland: Urbanization in the east, one supercity in the west

The Lesser Poland region followed a different pattern of early urbanization. In the eastern part, there are at least five early urban centers (Sandomierz, Opatów, Zawichost, Lublin, and Przemyśl), and the dynamics of their emergence resembled those of Greater Poland. These were all founded during the time of the first Piasts, while earlier tribal strongholds rapidly declined, often without any continuity of concentrated settlement. In Przemyśl – located on the eastern frontier of the Piast realm – Bolesław the Brave

commissioned a monumental palatial complex. The intense urbanization of eastern Lesser Poland was likely a strategic effort to secure these lands against the territorial expansion of Rus'.

The situation in western Lesser Poland was very different. A thousand years ago, there were at most two urban centers there: Kraków and Wiślica. The former belongs to the select group of Polish cities that emerged as early as the 9th century – and it is the only one in Lesser Poland with such early origins. By the time of the early Piast state, Kraków was already a European-scale metropolis, unmatched by any other city under Bolesław's rule. Interestingly, after the Piasts took over Kraków, they maintained the high status of Wawel – formerly the dominant tribal center of the Vistulans. Wiślica presents a different case: here, archaeologists have uncovered remains of two strongholds. One (by the Nida River) represents older tribal traditions, while the other (in the center of the present town) was established by the early Piasts. Wiślica also preserves spectacular archaeological evidence of Poland's early history – rotundas, palatial structures, and remnants of the first churches. A thousand years later, Kraków remains a European metropolis, while Wiślica stands as a monument to Poland's millennium of statehood.

Silesia: Numerous traces of early urbanization

Silesia ranks second after Greater Poland in the number and importance of early urban centers. Many of these were borderland strongholds, whose location drove their development. They stood near river crossings and major trade routes connecting Silesia with Greater Poland (e.g., Milicz), Lesser Poland (Racibórz), Bohemia (Strzegom, Legnica), and the German Empire (Bolesławiec, Krosno Odrzańskie). In the heart of the region, the early Piasts established two key central strongholds: Wrocław and Opole – both of which have retained their high status to this day.

Much we still don't know

Identifying the earliest urban phase of Polish cities remains an exceptionally difficult task. Modern development often obstructs archaeological exploration, and many towns contain protected historical centers from later periods, where excavation is restricted. The picture of Poland's oldest cities presented here is therefore based on interpreting often ambiguous evidence and incomplete data. As research progresses and new discoveries emerge, the map of early Piast urbanization will continue to be revised and updated. ■